Nothing the Same - Book Three

by orchidluv

Summary

Re-working of canon from the summer after graduation through the end of Season 4. The changes continue to effect events, but Buffy still ends up attending UC Sunnydale and Xander's friendship with the community of peaceful demons comes in handy.
Chapter 1

UC Sunnydale was not in Spike’s regular patrol area. On the outskirts of town, in many ways the campus was almost a separate entity from the rest of Sunnydale. Most of the students either lived in the dorms or in student housing close by the park-like campus. “Townies” were looked down on and surprisingly few locals went to school there. Or maybe not surprisingly, when you considered that any human with any sense at all left Sunnydale immediately after high school and never looked back.

But Xander was going to be spending a lot more time in the area than he ever had before and Spike needed to see for himself that it was safe for his Claimed. Xander and the Slayer had grown closer over the summer, hanging out together in a way they never had before as all their other friends left town and they were pretty much the only two left. They’d become close enough friends that Spike had grown closer over the summer, hanging out together in a way they never had before as all their other friends left town and they were pretty much the only two left. They’d become close enough friends that Spike had grown closer over the summer, hanging out together in a way they never had before as all their other friends left town and they were pretty much the only two left. They’d become close enough friends that Spike hadn’t extended his patrols to the college campus long before now.

Xander wasn’t any more fond of the Bronze than Spike was, although for different reasons. Xander had never been comfortable at the Bronze since the night he’d staked his friend there and, until this summer, the only time Xander had gone there after his friend died had been the night the Chaos Mage spiked the candy. The horror of the middle-age orgy he’d witnessed there hadn’t endeared the establishment to his boy. So, if Xander could put up with the place, Spike would keep him company. Fortunately, the Bronze did serve half-decent beer and the pool tables were acceptable. The competition wasn’t up to his standards but then they were human. Nothing gave you an edge like 100 years of practice.

Shaking off his rambling thoughts, Spike brought his attention back to business. He was crouched on a rooftop and watching a nest of vampires inside the building below him after all. It would be bloody embarrassing if he let himself get distracted to the extent of carelessly falling off the roof.

Considering the vapid bitch he was watching through the skylight, Spike regretted not having extended his patrols to the college campus long before now. The prima donna in the room below was giving herself airs because she had a handful of useless minions too stupid to know better taking orders from her. Laired in an old fraternity house on campus, the group were obviously living what they thought was the good life. The lair was a magpie’s nest of tawdry loot: mismatched furniture, a fence’s nightmare of cheap, portable electronics, and piles of useless, broken junk shoved against the walls. Looking down at the group through the skylight - and what kind of morons had a lair with an enormous skylight over the main room? - Spike couldn’t help feeling nostalgic for the days when he and Dru, Angelus and Darla had done this in a style these idiots could never hope to duplicate. It was one thing when you were looting the noble houses of Europe of priceless treasures, the shite this group had filled their lair with wasn’t worth stealing, much less holding on to.

Having seen enough, Spike eased quietly away from the skylight, and moved down the slope of the roof toward the fire escape ladder bolted to the wall of the building. He was tempted to burst through the skylight and drop down into the midst of the vampires below - that sort of thing always made one hell of an impressive entrance. But there wasn’t a clear area below the opening and he couldn’t be certain of landing safely on his feet after a thirty-foot drop onto uneven footing. He’d have to go through the door.
He made up for it by smashing through the front door with a satisfyingly loud explosion of splintered wood. Stepping through the opening, he found the five vampires scrambling to their feet, too surprised by the sudden entrance to even go for a weapon. Useless wankers.

“Who the hell are you?”

That was the blonde, the leader of this little group. She faced him, hands on her hips, in human guise. The front of her long hair was pulled into tiny little braids that stuck up from her head. That almost did cause him to look twice - bloody stupid hairdo.

“Name’s Spike,” he said casually, strolling inside like he owned the place. Which he would in a minute.

The vampires clustered in a group, the four minions shifting so they were behind their leader. Spike eyed them in disgust: these vampires gave minions a bad name. Didn’t even have enough sense to spread out so they would be ready to come at him from all sides. Studying the blonde without seeming too, even as he made a show of idly glancing around the room, Spike realized that she was so young herself she was afraid to give up any power or initiative to her minions. They had all obviously been taught to never do anything without her direct permission. Exactly why he’d forbidden the minions of his Court to turn their victims: vampires younger than fifty or sixty years didn’t know what the hell to do with minions.

“So, are you hoping to impress me, or are you just feeling suicidal?”

Spike gave her a point for that. Arms crossed, foot tapping, she looked irritated but not frightened. He wondered if it was a bluff or if she was too stupid to know who he was. Casually wandering over to the only open area in the cluttered room, Spike answered without looking at her, “Not likely to waste my time trying to impress someone who’s going to be dust in a minute.”

“Well, you’ve really got me shaking in my shoes now. Five to one odds, whatever am I going to do?”

Spike grinned at her sarcastic response. Too bad he had decided to kill her, she might have some potential after all.

“Sunday, that’s… that’s Master Spike,” one of her minions, a girl with frizzy red hair, said nervously.

“Sunday? What the hell kind of name is that?” Spike asked incredulously.

“Oh, I don’t know, Spike. Like I’m worried about the opinion of someone who still thinks the Billy Idol look is in. Being dead doesn’t mean you shouldn’t keep up with the times.”

Spike was on her almost before she finished her sentence, crossing the room in two leaps before any of them gathered their wits enough to react. He knocked the blonde across the room with one vicious blow, then spun to face the minions. He heard the blonde crash against the far wall even as he pulled a stake and dusted the two closest minions: the redhead who’d spoken earlier and a big guy with long greasy blonde hair who looked like he didn’t have two brain cells to rub together. The woman didn’t have time to move before he was yanking the stake out and turning to the male, whose eyes went wide with belated shock as the stake sank deep into his chest and he opened his mouth to say something even as he vanished into dust.

Their ashes were still settling when he wheeled back to the leader who had gotten to her feet with a
scream of fury. She shook herself, shifting to her true face, then rushed at him. Bouncing a little on his toes, Spike judged his timing and leapt up, meeting her charge with a solid boot to the chest. The kick landed true with a satisfying crunch of broken ribs, the jolt of the impact sending them both flying backwards. Spike flipped back to his feet instantly, and saw the two remaining minions running for the door. He threw his stake and got the one in the rear, the dark haired male escaping through the door before Spike could pull another stake.

He turned his attention back to the leader who was slowly climbing to her feet, clinging to the wall for support. She looked furious and terrified, her eyes shifting towards the exit and back to him nervously. “What is your problem?” she asked angrily.

“My problem is that you give vampires a bad name,” Spike said, circling around so he was between her and the door. “My problem is that you're too stupid even to know who I am.”

“Look, if you want the lair, it’s yours,” she said with an outward calm that belied the desperation in her eyes.

“This pit? Not likely,” he said in disgust. “You’ve got a fucking skylight, you moron. We’re vampires, not sorority girls. We don’t sit around braiding each other’s hair. Do you even have sewer access?”

“I’ve been here for almost 20 years,” she said, sounding almost offended that he was criticizing her lair.

She was moving sideways, away from him, sliding along the wall, trying to be subtle about it and failing miserably. Spike rolled his eyes. Might as well be holding up a sign saying “I’m going for a weapon” she was so obvious. He took a step towards her, pivoting on his weight-bearing foot and executing a spin-kick that slammed into her side, doing further damage to already fractured ribs and sending her stumbling to the floor again.

Spike was on her before she could move. Hauling her up by a fist in her hair, he put an end to the embarrassingly unequal fight. “Next time, find out who’s territory you’re in before you set up a lair, you stupid bint,” he snarled, bringing up his other hand and staking her cleanly through the heart.

He yanked the stake back before it dusted with her and said cheerfully to the scattered dust: “oh yeah, there is no next time. Sorry.”

Brushing the ashes off his front, he looked around but his earlier recon had been right - there was nothing worth taking. Sighing, he decided to do a proper job of it and went to search the rest of the house for anything that needed to be dealt with.

Five minutes later, having confirmed there were no other vampires using the lair, nothing worth taking in any of the rooms, and no bodies lying around for the authorities to get in a tiff over, Spike strode out of the old fraternity house. Once outside, he stopped to light a cigarette and survey the area. This was the only nest of vampires he’d found working the campus, the rest of the area around the school seemed surprisingly demon-free, and he judged it was as safe as anywhere in town. Xander would laugh at him for fussing, except of course Spike had no intention of mentioning that he’d added the college campus to the areas in town that got Spike’s personal attention. Let Xander try and prove it.

Taking a last drag and settling his duster on his shoulders, Spike headed out, feeling as ridiculously pleased as ever at the return of his beloved leather coat. Xander had had one of his demon friends repair the coat and Spike hadn’t asked how he’d done it. He suspected magic had been involved since there was no trace of the long tears in the leather left by the Sisterhood of Jhe. He’d been delighted to be able to wear the coat again, having kept it hidden in the back of the closet,
embarrassed by his own sentimentality but unable to part with it even when it was unwearable. Xander had snuck it out and repaired it as a present for him.

Smiling again as he thought of his Claimed’s generosity, Spike decided to call it a night. With college classes starting next week, he’d keep checking the area to make sure no one got ideas about setting up shop in the vacancy he’d just created. Xander would be visiting the campus once the Slayer was living and attending classes there and Spike needed to make his presence felt at this end of town.

Striding rapidly through the quiet night, Spike found himself considering the impact the Slayer’s move would have on his territory. The Slayer would be basing her activities out of her room on campus, instead of out of her mother’s house on the other side of town. It was bound to cause a shift in how and where she patrolled. Sharing her patrols with the demon volunteers had already changed things. Some of the recruits were not limiting themselves to the cemeteries the way the Slayer often did. Plus, the natural competition between the recruits and the Slayer as both sides sought to prove themselves to the other meant there had been no summer lull in patrolling the Hellmouth. Granted, the summer before when the Slayer had blown town altogether had been unusual, but still, the Slayer tended to slack off a bit in summer and that hadn’t happened this year. If anything, the hunting had increased.

It hadn’t affected his Court as much as it might have. The number of vampires on the Hellmouth was still down from the peak it had reached under the Master. When old bat-face had been gathering forces for his attempt to break free of his imprisonment, the number of vampires in town had grown substantially. The numbers had stayed high even after the Master’s death due to the worthless cannon fodder the Master had gathered turning minions willy-nilly just to prove they could, until Spike had taken over as Master and forbidden the members of his Court to turn their victims. The number of vampires had slowly decreased ever since, despite the brief surge when Angelus lost his soul and started turning minions as part of his power play against Spike, and the quality had gone up. Vampires were far less likely to fall victim of the Slayer now as she seemed to mostly stake the newly-risen fledges in the cemeteries. Other varieties of demons had moved into the Hellmouth, filling the void left by the decreasing number of vampires and the Slayer spent more time hunting demons now than vampires.

The demon recruits helping the Slayer were an unknown. Spike hadn’t specifically warned the members of his Court about the changeover, but now that the joint patrols were actively happening and not just something planned for the future, he found himself spending an annoying amount of time worrying at the problem from all angles, trying to decide how to handle it. He needed to make a decision and soon, because someone was going to notice the additional patrols sooner or later.

Shaking his head and once again setting the problem aside for later, Spike found he was almost back to the apartment His long strides had taken him across town as he fretted over the changing power dynamics in town. Even without the changes the summer had brought, the next week might prove interesting. Xander had mentioned that the Slayer was nervous about going to college alone. No one else from their graduating class was going to UC Sunnydale and being the Slayer apparently didn’t prevent you from being a nervous wreck at the prospect of dorms and a strange roommate and a huge, unfamiliar campus. Bit of a laugh, really, that the Slayer was behaving like an ordinary teenage girl facing the unknown, instead of a seasoned warrior who handled the unknown on almost a daily basis.

Joyce had been in a dither for weeks now, half anticipating Buffy’s departure, half dreading it. She’d confided in Spike that part of her was looking forward to being less of a mom and more of a woman, not having to be there for her daughter every day. She’d also admitted to being afraid of being lonely, rattling around in the house all by herself. She’d laughed when Spike had offered to
drag Buffy home by her hair at least twice a week but turned him down, saying they’d work it out without unnecessary hair-dragging. Spike had made a mental note to make sure that he and Xander continued their weekly visits with Joyce. Besides, just because Joyce didn’t want her daughter forced home didn’t mean he couldn’t have a threatening talk with the Slayer about treating her mum right.

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“Wrap it up, kid. You trying to make the rest of us look bad?”

Xander looked up as a friendly hand dropped on his shoulder and grinned. “Nope, just wanted to finish this one last piece.”

He’d heard the foreman closing up the job site and the sound of tools being put away but had been concentrating on nailing the last bits of trim into place, wanting to finish the room before leaving for the night.

He’d discovered that about himself this summer - that he liked to finish what he’d started even if it meant working a little longer. He liked walking through a job-site and seeing the progress the crew had made each day. He’d been with the company for almost two months now, mostly doing general labor, but they were letting him work with the carpenters whenever possible and had promised him the next available journeyman carpenter slot. In the meantime, he was learning a lot of general construction skills that would allow him to expand his own business.

He’d had to cut his hours back so far that he was considering whether he should shut down the business entirely or take on an employee and make it an official business. He’d talked about it with Mr. Olsen and some of his customers and thought the answer was probably to hire and train one of the kids from the demon community. Being part of the community already would relieve the fears of his demon customers, and someone human looking wouldn’t alarm his elderly clients or be unable to do the daytime work that was the main reason his demon clients needed his help to begin with. He had a couple of kids in mind, but what worried him was the paperwork side of things. If he had an employee, he’d have to get a business license and pay taxes and all that official stuff that scared him more than most of the monsters he’d faced.

Spike was encouraging him to hire someone but that was mostly because he didn’t like it that Xander was spending his first hour off work after his day job at his own customers’ houses, getting what work done that he could. Spike had grudgingly accepted that Xander wanted to continue to work, although he knew that Spike would prefer it if he stayed home during the day so he could be with Spike.

Not that Spike would approve of Xander working a night job, of course. There weren’t very many night shift jobs on the Hellmouth. The usual Sunnydale blindness didn’t extend to late night business hours. Even the stupidest employer couldn’t help noticing that night clerks at all-night convenience stores and night-shift food delivery people tended to have fatal accidents or disappear within a week or two. Even the businesses run by demons that catered to demons mostly stayed open only an hour or so past sunset.

Automatically putting his tools away as his thoughts drifted, Xander knew something was going to have to give soon. He wasn’t doing right by either Spike or his customers, not while he was working two jobs. Hauling his tool box and giving the foreman a wave, Xander walked off the site and tossed the tool box into the trunk of Spike’s car, considering. He had to do something like that before he retired. He could be a business owner himself. He knew that he was good at that. He had a few of his customers in mind, but what worried him was the paperwork side of things. If he had an employee, he’d have to get a business license and pay taxes and all that official stuff that scared him more than most of the monsters he’d faced.

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with him while he worked. He’d ask them how difficult it would be to turn his part-time work into a real business.

Decision finally made, Xander felt better. He’d been dithering over this for weeks, scared of how grown up it felt to be considering starting a business officially, worried about taxes and forms and an office and a mailing address and more complications than his life already had. He suspected he’d been making the proverbial mountain out of a molehill, his anxiety making everything worse than it actually was going to be. He had enough business to keep two people going full time and his customers had been incredibly patient. Granted, a lot of them didn’t have a choice but he didn’t want them to have to wait for necessary work because he was the only option and he didn’t have time for them.

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Spike came awake in the darkened apartment, his senses telling him the sun was beginning to dip over the horizon behind the blackout curtains and heavy shutters. He was alone as usual and he sighed. Xander was working too hard, waking at sunrise, just about the time Spike was settling down for the day, and leaving for his construction job. The only good thing about the work was that the early start in the morning meant the job site shut down early. Except Xander didn’t come home. Instead he went to one of his customers’ houses and spent another couple of hours working for them before coming home tired and spending an hour or two with Spike before Spike had to leave on his own nightly business.

Worse than when Xander was in school most days. At least then they had spent late afternoons and early evenings together. Problem was, Xander was so bloody happy, Spike couldn’t make him stay home or even force him to drop one or the other of his jobs. Xander had spent most of his life before Spike, with no one telling him he was special, or needed, or good for anything. Now he had an entire construction crew who liked him and thought he was talented, and joked with him good-naturedly about his long hair and his mysterious significant other who never came by the site like the other girlfriends and wives. He had customers who practically worshipped the ground he walked on because he filled so many needs: handyman, surrogate son and grandson, and a friendly visitor from the outside world all rolled into one.

Xander had filled out over the course of the summer. He was still lean but his shoulders had broadened and his arms were solidly muscled from work. He was darkly tanned from outdoor work and practically glowing with happiness even when he stumbled home almost too tired to stay awake long enough to greet Spike. He was a joy to Spike and a constant source of frustration because he was never bloody there.

Spike would have blown a gasket a long time ago except for the weekends. Xander took Sundays off entirely and they had the kind of long lazy day in bed that Spike had been dreaming about since he and Xander first got together. Xander shut off the cell phone that Spike frequently regretted ever getting for him and the two of them pretended the outside world didn’t exist: sleeping late, watching the telly, making love in the cool, dim apartment, just being together in a way that made Spike feel ridiculously content.

He knew that his Claimed was struggling to find a way to balance his responsibilities, and that he was important to Xander and that Xander loved him. He knew that, but he wasn’t patient by nature and it was hard to let the situation go on when he had the power to stop it. Problem was, stopping it would kill some of the happiness on Xander’s face and Xander had had too much pain in his life for Spike to do that. Stopping it would put limits on Xander and clip his wings.

Gritting his teeth, Spike once again reminded himself that he’d encouraged Xander to become self-
confident and self-reliant and that he wanted that for his Claimed. He’d done needy and clingy and it could get very old, even when you loved the person as much as he’d loved Drusilla. Xander was with Spike because he wanted to be and that was worth a lot.

Checking his watch, Xander decided he had just enough time to make a quick stop by the library before going home. With luck, there would be an email from Oz. The fence job had gone faster than he’d anticipated and Mr. Jenkins had been incredibly helpful, offering to draft up the papers and do all the work to get Xander set up in a real, on-the-books business, with licenses and everything. When Xander had protested, Mr. Jenkins told him he had too much time on his hands and that it would be a public service to give him the chance to dust off his old skills. They’d eventually agreed to trade skill for skill and Xander would do work on the house in exchange for Mr. Jenkins’ help turning his business legitimate.

Walking through the quiet streets to the public library, Xander couldn’t help being amused by the fact that he was using a barter exchange to set himself up in business officially. Mr. Jenkins had assured him it would only take a short time to get everything squared away and that he should start hiring employees. And wasn’t that a wild thought?

The library wasn’t hugely popular in the summer, so he was able to sit down at an available computer and log on immediately, and was pleased to find an email from Oz waiting for him. He hadn’t heard from Oz until nearly a month after he left town after graduation. He’d been worried, knowing what Oz was looking for, but had had no way of contacting the other man himself. Then one day a postcard had arrived at Giles’ apartment - Giles had agreed to let Xander continue to use him as a mailing address since he couldn’t get mail at the factory, for obvious reasons. The postcard had been Oz all over: “Still looking for answers. Doing ok.” but instead of a signature or a mailing address, there had been an email address.

Xander had already set up an email account for himself and, after sending his first reply to Oz, he made sure to check his email at least once a week. Like Xander, Oz was going on-line in public libraries whenever he got the chance, and he began sending Xander emails on a semi-regular basis. To his surprise, Oz proved far more talkative on email than he was by postcard or in person. Mostly stories about people he’d met, but also some surprisingly lyrical descriptions of the places he’d been. Oz was still searching for a way to control the wolf, traveling from one possible source of knowledge to another. He’d talked to tribal shamen, demons, and a New Age guru - who Oz reported was a scam artist and completely useless - and today’s email talked about maybe trying his luck in Asia. Apparently, there were stories of shape shifters in Asia going back thousands of years and Oz was hoping they might have answers to how to stop the change.

Xander felt like kicking himself as he read the email, realizing belatedly that he knew someone who knew a guy who was 400 years old. He felt like an idiot for not thinking of it until now. He should’ve thought of Mr. Olsen’s friend before Oz left town, not almost three months later. He’d go to see Mr. Olsen tomorrow and see if Mr. Olsen would be willing to ask his friend if he knew anything that could help a werewolf.

He sent Oz a short greeting, just saying he was in a rush and would send a longer reply tomorrow - one of the things he liked about email was the fact that you didn’t have to compose long letters to justify the effort of contact. When it just took one click of a mouse to send a note, you could whip out a quick reply and a longer one later when you’d had time to think.

He was doing that a lot with Willow. It was easier talking to her by letter than in person, but he still tended to think more about what he was saying, not just dashing off a two word reply like he
sometimes did with Oz. He wasn’t worried about misunderstandings with Oz - who was taciturn by nature and had bailing on uncomfortable situations down to an art form - the way he was with Willow. His emails with Willow sometimes went through several drafts, trying to make sure there were no careless words that would hurt or be misunderstood.

For now, he logged off without saying anything about his thought to talk to Mr. Olsen, not wanting to get Oz’s hopes up in case nothing came of it. Oz’s emails tended to come in clusters, as if he was staying several days at a time in places, before moving on. Chances were, he would get a message from Xander tomorrow if Xander had any news for him.

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Mr. Olsen had gone one better than asked and taken Xander to meet the half-Teer’ah demon who had been so helpful with information about the Ascension.

Mr. Okolo had been a surprise. If you’d asked him beforehand what he was expecting, Xander would probably have guessed someone small and wrinkled and frail. Mr. Okolo was tall and spare, his erect bearing and deep voice commanding respect effortlessly. He was gracious and welcoming, ushering Xander into his home and serving refreshments with an old-fashioned courtesy that reminded Xander vaguely of movies about the pre-civil war south. At the same time, Mr. Okolo seemed… distant somehow, like he wasn’t really part of this century. Given that he had to have outlived everyone he knew except his own family, that made sense.

And he’d had information. Mr. Olsen had called ahead and explained the problem and Mr. Okolo had contacted his full-blood mother, who was over a thousand years old. She had given him a name which he passed on to Xander.

“Your friend may not like the answers he receives,” he said as Xander looked down at the piece of paper with a name and address written on it in a flowing, elegant script, “but my mother assures me this woman can help him.”

Leaving the house a short time later, Xander asked Mr. Olsen why he’d taken him there instead of just talking to Mr. Okolo himself. Mr. Olsen was unusually serious as he answered. “He’s almost unique, Xander, because of how long he’s lived and the resources he can access through his family. If he decides he likes you, he’s a good friend to have.” His tone becoming lighter, Mr. Olsen added with a gleam of mischief in his eyes: “Besides, I figure you’ll stop thinking of me as being so old, now that you’ve met someone nearly six times my age.”
Chapter 2

Xander logged off the computer and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head and stretching to ease the sore muscles in his back. He’d emailed Oz with the name Mr. Okolo had given him. He’d told Oz where he’d gotten the information and passed on Mr. Okolo’s cryptic remark that Oz might not like the answers he found. He’d done his best to describe the impression Mr. Okolo had left him with: someone who wouldn’t deliberately do harm but who probably didn’t see things the same way that humans did.

He’d hesitated before hitting the send button, wondering if he was doing the right thing, but ultimately decided that it was Oz’s decision whether to use the information or not. The information itself was just a woman’s name and address, it was the source and the circumstances under which he’d received it that made him cautious. In the end, Mr. Olsen’s recommendation carried a lot of weight and Mr. Okolo had been very impressive. From the sound of it, Oz was meeting with a lot of people who came with far fewer guarantees than the woman in Colorado whose address Xander had just sent.

Sighing, Xander stood up and left the library. He missed Oz and hoped he’d return to Sunnydale but he worried that there wasn’t anything here to call Oz back. Oz or anyone else with any sense, he thought grimly. Sunnydale was a good place to be elsewhere from.

Walking home through the late-afternoon sunshine, Xander wondered if the sporadic emails between himself and Oz were enough of a connection to make Oz want to come back someday. Oz was the only one of all the people who’d left town since graduation that Xander still had anything close to a solid connection with - if you could call sporadic emails ‘solid’.

He knew that Willow was emailing Buffy daily, and sometimes several times a day, sharing their mutual excitement and nervousness over their impending college debuts but he and Willow exchanged emails much less frequently and far more cautiously, still gradually getting to know each other again. The tentativeness of their communication was a constant reminder of how far they still had to go before they had anything even close to what their friendship had once been.

Spike had mentioned in passing that Angel had settled in Los Angeles after he’d left town but Xander didn’t really care where Angel had gone, so that didn’t count. Besides, it wasn’t like Angel was keeping in touch with Spike or anything. Apparently, vampires didn’t do that. Once they moved on, they might keep track of where another vampire was, but actually calling them up and chatting was “a human thing” according to Spike. Spike had heard that Angel had set up shop through the demon grapevine - not that Spike called it that - from a demon who’d been in LA recently. Spike had overheard the demon complaining about the unnatural vampire who’d moved to the city and begun killing other vampires and demons. Mentioning it in passing to Xander, Spike had been quietly pleased that his Sire had ended up close enough that he would be able to hear news about him from time to time, and had casually said he might look up “the old bugger” the next time he and Xander went to LA but that was all he’d had to say on the subject.

The only other person he’d heard from since they’d left town was Wesley. Granted, it had only been a couple of weeks - or a couple of months for those who’d left at the beginning of the summer - but it felt like everyone else had gone without looking back.

Before he’d left town, Wesley had promised to keep in touch but Xander had been genuinely surprised when he got the first letter from Wesley. He’d been expecting maybe a postcard at best telling them where Wesley had ended up. Unfortunately, Wesley didn’t have any kind of return address so Xander hadn’t been able to write back, especially since he suspected that Wesley was
lonely. Why else would he write several fairly lengthy letters over the summer, describing his adventures?

In his letters, Wesley sounded terrified and exhilarated in equal measure by his new life. He jokingly referred to himself as a man on a quest but there was apparently some truth behind the self-mockery. Wesley was immersing himself in the fringes of the demon underworld, trying to weigh the merits of his book learning against the reality of the world outside the narrow constraints of the Watchers Council. He’d gone north from Sunnydale all the way to the Canadian border where he’d had a “fascinating” encounter with a Bryjuul demon who had let Wesley question it for hours about its species after Wesley had rescued its nest and the egg inside from the path of a developer’s bulldozer. Wesley had apparently recognized the tiny, frail demon arguing with the construction crew as not being the 10-year old girl it looked like but a member of the reclusive demon sub-group and had intervened to help out.

His last letter had said that he was now back in California, working his way south through the major towns, seeking out the demon communities that often sheltered within the anonymity of cities. Reading the letters, Xander suspected the journey had been good for the Englishman. For someone as smart as Wesley was, and as supposedly well-trained, he was painfully lacking in practical experience. In any case, it didn’t sound like Wesley was planning on returning to Sunnydale any time soon, not to stay anyway.

Which meant that Buffy was still officially without a Watcher, although Xander suspected the Council was taking advantage of Giles’ loyalty, knowing he would never leave Buffy without backup, despite having been fired. So the Council was free to take their own sweet time deciding what to do about the situation. Giles seemed content to let things lie, despite the fact that it meant he was essentially doing the work of a Watcher without being paid for his efforts. Whenever the subject came up, Giles simply said that he had sufficient funds to carry him for now and not to worry about it.

Xander suspected the Council was holding out on making a decision about what to do in hope that Wesley would come to his senses and return to Sunnydale and get them out of the awkward position he’d put them in. Xander was sure they were wrong, based on what he’d read in Wesley’s letters, and he hoped the Council would give in and reinstate Giles, but common sense and the Council weren’t exactly things he usually thought of in the same sentence. Arrogant, know-it-all, and jerks were the words that came to mind when he thought about them. What they would do if they found out about the demons sharing Buffy’s patrol duties, he shuddered to imagine.

Of course, he thought more cheerfully, it would probably give any new Watcher foisted on them a heart attack and that would take care of the new Watcher.

It had only been a couple of weeks ago that the demon community had begun patrolling officially. Sgt. Morgan had required the demon volunteers to train with him for a month before any of them were allowed to take a patrol shift. Between Mr. Olsen, Giles, Sgt. Morgan and Buffy, they’d eventually worked out a rotating schedule of joint patrols. Giles had insisted that every one of the volunteers patrol with Buffy at least once before going out on their own. In the end, they’d agreed that the volunteers had to pass inspection by Sgt. Morgan, Giles, and Buffy before being allowed out on their own.

Xander had been surprised that the demon community was able to enforce that. It wasn’t like anyone who felt like it couldn’t wander the town cemeteries with a stake and a death wish. But he’d learned, in talking to Sgt. Morgan about it, that the group was so used to having to watch out for each other that acting individually against the group’s wishes was somewhere between rare and non-existent. Too many families had obvious differences that couldn’t stand up to even the most
casual scrutiny by the official human world.

“We’re used to thinking about the ramifications of our actions, Xander,” Sgt Morgan explained gently. “If a human teenager shoplifting beer and the police take him home, that’s one thing. For us, if the police show up on our doorsteps, it could mean panic, imprisonment, being driven out of town, or even being killed. We have to keep a low profile and that’s been ingrained in our children since birth.”

“But… patrolling, not exactly with the low profile,” Xander suggested after a moment.

Sgt. Morgan sighed, looking troubled. “I know, which is why we’re being so cautious and making sure the volunteers are prepared. But caution and even necessary paranoia goes against the grain for some of us. Patrolling is a good, reasonably safe outlet for those who have chafed at the restrictions we must live under.” He smiled ruefully at Xander. “The Mayor’s Ascension was the catalyst but it’s something we’ve been talking about for years, Xander, especially since the Slayer arrived in town. It wasn’t a hasty decision to expose ourselves to the Slayer and her Watcher. A handful of humans, like Bob MacNair and yourself, have always known about us, but Slayers are trained from the time they are called that ‘demon’ automatically means dangerous. If we hadn’t been faced with the destruction of the town, we probably would still be arguing about whether it was safe to allow the Slayer to know we were here.” He gestured, spreading both hands in illustration of things expanding out of control.

“Things worked out well at graduation. The Mayor was defeated, casualties were light, and there have been no negative consequences from coming out openly and taking action. That pushed the more conservative members of our group into agreeing to permit volunteers to help patrol the town. If Buffy… moves on,” he said tactfully, “we will still be here to keep a lid on things. Slayers are called all over the world. The next one may be called in China or Africa or New England. If we had gotten organized before she arrived, perhaps the Master might not have tilted the balance in town as much as he did.”

“You knew about him?” Xander asked, surprised.

“Hard to miss the tenfold increase in the vampire population,” Sgt. Morgan answered dryly. “Those of us who are sensitive to the currents of power in town were aware that something was trapped in the Hellmouth.” He smiled a little. “It’s been theorized that that is the reason the Hellmouth is so active right now - having the Master trapped inside it kept the Hellmouth from releasing energy gradually over the last century and it seems to be making up for lost time.” He shrugged. “I don’t know about that, I’m a pretty down-to-earth guy for a demon. I don’t mess with magic and mystical forces when I can avoid it.”

“You and me both,” Xander agreed fervently and decided he didn’t want to know if Sgt. Morgan had meant to make it sound like the Hellmouth was a living thing or if it had just come out that way. It was a creepy thought: that the Hellmouth wasn’t just a natural phenomena - however rare and weird - but somehow alive. Hopefully, it was ‘making up for lost time’ like a temporarily-blocked creek that was sending more water downstream now that the rock was removed. The idea that the Hellmouth was somehow angry and frustrated and acting out over having been plugged up by a vampire for nearly a century was not something he was prepared to deal with.

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As Labor Day approached, Buffy was only patrolling four nights a week and had three nights off, guilt free. There had been no casualties among the demon volunteers in the first couple of weeks they’d been patrolling and Xander was deeply grateful for that. While this turn of events might have come to pass without his friendship with Mr. Olsen, he still felt directly responsible for the
lives being placed at risk and was hoping that their luck would continue to hold. Attending the funerals of those who’d died during the battle against the Mayor had been heartbreaking, he didn’t want to have to go to any more.

Giles was quietly pleased in that British way of his because, in addition to his still informal Watcher duties, he had found a group of colleagues he could share his responsibilities with and had been making friends among the demons he met over the summer, a shared interest in demon studies having been the opening wedge for friends closer to his own age and experience level. He and Joyce Summers, who Xander had originally thought would be close friends given Giles’ surrogate father status in Buffy’s life, had never seemed really comfortable around each other since their shenanigans on band candy night. Fortunately, since Buffy’s dad had gone AWOL from her life ever since he blew off her birthday last year with nothing more than a note, they finally seemed to be getting over their mutual embarrassment about band candy night in their efforts to be there for Buffy.

And boy did she need it. College started next week and Buffy was seriously losing it. You’d think she was moving across country the way she was freaking out over what to pack and whether she would fit in. Xander was getting the brunt of it as Buffy tended to show her eager-to-be-an-adult moods to her mom and Giles and Xander was getting the what-was-I-thinking-and-why-didn’t-I-just-get-a-job-like-you bits. Fortunately, she was consulting via email with Willow about what classes to take, so he didn’t have to deal with that, but he was really looking forward to her actually starting classes and finding out for sure if she liked or hated college. He’d already heard more speculation about what college was going to be like than he could take.

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Hanging up the phone with relief, Xander leaned back against the headboard and considered whether he should just get up or try to go back to sleep.

“Told ya not to answer it, pet.” Spike’s voice was muffled by the pillow he’d pulled over his head when Xander had picked up the phone over his vehement objections.

“I know.”

“Ridiculous that someone who kills people for a living can’t deal with moving across town.”

Xander yanked the pillow away, exposing the sleep rumpled hair and grumpy face of his lover.

“Look who’s talking, Mr. I’m-a-vampire-I-don’t-help-people-move.”

“Damn right I don’t help Slayers move into dorms.”

“How come any time you don’t want to do something, it’s always ‘vampires don’t do that sort of thing’?” Xander asked suspiciously.

Spike smirked at him, which was answer enough.

“Hmmph. I’m going to start using that one next time you want to do something I don’t.” he threatened. “Humans don’t do that,” he sniffed, raising his nose in a way he hoped made him look supercilious and not constipated. “It’s beneath us.”

“I’ll show you beneath,” Spike growled and Xander yelped in surprise as Spike surged up without warning and he found himself abruptly flipped over and straddled by his suddenly very wide-awake vampire.

Spike pinned his arms to the mattress and leaned over him. “Seems like you need a reminder of the
pecking order around here,” he growled, glaring in yellow-eyed threat down at his Claimed.

“Remind away,” Xander agreed happily as Spike ground his hips against him and his cock eagerly rose to the occasion.

Spike shifted his grip from Xander’s wrists to his hair, grabbing two fistfuls and holding him immobile as he licked and nibbled distractingly along his neck, sending little shivers of pleasure through Xander. Arching his head back, Xander gasped as Spike slid needle-sharp fangs into his Claim scar. Spike usually only bit him in the middle of orgasm and the erotic pain of biting had become incredibly arousing for Xander. As the fangs slid deeply into his neck with agonizing slowness, Xander felt Spike close a hand around his erection and begin pumping hard. To his astonishment, he came almost immediately, his orgasm pulsing out across Spike’s hand as Spike drank from him and renewed his Claim.

Still breathing hard, he felt Spike release him and lift his head, his fangs sliding smoothly out of Xander’s flesh. He smiled triumphantly down at Xander and Xander grinned back at him before dragging him down for a kiss.

“You win. I’ll help Buffy move without you.”
Standing one step inside the door with a stack of boxes in his arms, Xander stared around the room in surprise.

"I know, isn’t it great?" Buffy grinned at him and took the boxes he was holding, dropping them carelessly onto the floor.

Unencumbered now, Xander turned around slowly, taking everything in. "Who’d you have to bribe to get a room like this?"

Buffy’s dorm room was big and light-filled and so far beyond what Xander dimly thought of as a typical dorm room that he couldn’t believe it. "Aren’t dorm rooms supposed to be small and cramped so you can immediately begin thinking about moving off campus and out of the administration’s hair? Seriously, two closets? Who designed this room - Cecil B. DeMille? You could house the entire cast of The Ten Commandments in here."

Buffy threw a pillow at him. "Exaggerate much?" He caught it and threw it back at her and she tossed it onto the bed. "Still, it’s way better than I thought it was going to be."

"Any sign of a roomie yet?"

"Nope." She looked around the room, her brow furrowing. "That means it’s ok if I choose my side of the room first, right?"

Xander gave her a pointed look. "You’re asking me? Non-college guy here - I don’t know dorm room etiquette. For what it’s worth - I’d go with first come, first served."

"The classics, huh? Works for me. You willing to do the fetching up from the truck part of this operation? I don’t want it to be too obvious that I can heft way too many boxes at once."

"Just as long as that’s not a ‘Slayer’s don’t carry boxes’ thing."

"What?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "Forget it. I’m happy to be your Sherpa - they’re the ones who haul stuff, right?"

"I think they only do it in the mountains."

"Do stairs count?" When Buffy mock glared at him, he laughed and made a shooing motion with both hands. "Go, choose a side. I’ll bring your stuff up."

"Thanks, Xander."

"Not a problem."

And it wasn’t. Heading back down the stairs to the pick-up he’d borrowed from one of his customers, Xander was enjoying himself. It had taken an hour or so at Buffy’s house while she fussed with last minute details and he loaded up anything she pointed out to him as going. Mrs. Summers had been there, asking Buffy if she’d remembered to pack this doohickey, or had marked that one for storage and generally been as anxious and excited as Buffy. He’d tactfully gone out and
waited by the truck as they said their goodbyes.

Leaning against the truck in the rising heat of the late morning sun, Xander fought back a wave of almost overwhelming envy. He hadn’t seen his own parents since the week after graduation. He’d stopped by their house to see how they were doing and had regretted it almost immediately. His father had looked up from the TV just long enough to warn him against trying to move back in with them, saying that, now that Xander was 18, he’d have to pay rent if he wanted to move back in. His mother had tried to be welcoming, sitting down with him at the kitchen table and asking how he was. But there were so many things he couldn’t talk to her about: Spike, being gay, the Mayor, anything of any importance in his life, that he’d found himself answering in vague generalities. The worst part was, she’d accepted them and hadn’t pressed for any details. Her speech had been just slurred enough to tell him that she was well on her way to being drunk and he’d left after fifteen very uncomfortable minutes. Neither of his parents had asked him to stay.

“Xander? Ready to motor?”

Buffy’s voice had brought him out of his dark thoughts and he shook his head to clear it. “Got everything?”

“Don’t you start. Like I just told mom, I’ll come back for anything I missed. That’s why I’m moving today.”

Buffy had decided to move into the dorm room on Saturday, giving her all weekend to settle in and get to know the campus. Despite having explored the campus a couple of times over the summer, she didn’t know where her classes would be held yet or even which ones she’d be taking. Apparently, final registration for classes was on the first day of school.

Given the traffic in the hallways of the dorm, a lot of kids had made the same decision about when to move in. The dorm rooms were furnished with all the basics, so mostly Xander was moving boxes, although he did take particular care with Buffy’s weapons’ trunk. Dropping it and scattering stakes, axes, crossbows, and bottles of holy water down the stairs was sure to bring unwanted attention. There was a lot of checking each other out going on as people passed each other on the trips up and down and Xander cheerfully did his fair share of it. Stevenson Hall was co-ed and there was a lot of eye candy of both sexes going past him with suitcases, trunks, and armloads of boxes. He was amused to see that he was being checked out by the students as much as he was checking them out. Apparently nothing about him screamed ‘Townie’.

He had all of Buffy’s stuff upstairs in no time and spent the next hour sitting on the bed that Buffy had decided was going to be her roommate’s, watching Buffy put things away and offering unsolicited and usually ignored advice about where they should go.

When the room was pretty much in order and the boxes broken down and carried back down to the truck, seeing the somewhat lost look on her face, Xander took Buffy out for a late lunch. They walked to the edge of campus and found a predictable row of sandwich and burger type restaurants. Choosing one at random, they snagged an empty table in the crowd of students and parents lingering over lunch and sat down with their submarine sandwiches.

“Clearly, you’re not going to starve if the dorm food is inedible,” Xander volunteered after a bite into one of the enormous sandwiches the place served. “This is good.”

Buffy picked at hers half-heartedly and didn’t answer. After a minute, Xander said: “It’s really not that bad. I’m just a phone call away. So’s your mom and Giles. Willow’s on line any time you need her.”
Buffy gave him a quick smile. “I know, and I appreciate it. I’m being silly. I don’t know why it feels like I’m being abandoned.” She picked up her sandwich and took a bite, chewing slowly. Xander suspected a deliberate stall, so he waited her out.

“It’s ridiculous, I’m the one who wanted to go to college. God knows I argued with Wesley about it enough times. I wasn’t even really disappointed that I’m going to Sunnydale U. It’s a good school. I guess I just didn’t expect I would be all alone here. Plus, I have to be secret identity gal all over again, which is weird. It’s been kind of nice this summer, having a bunch of people I can talk to about slaying.”

“That’s why you’re off duty this week,” Xander reminded her. “So you can get used to the college thing without worrying about making up excuses for sneaking out at night and missing all the good parties.”

It wasn’t the reason actually, it was just a side benefit, but he figured Buffy really didn’t need to know that. Something Spike had said had gotten him thinking. After overhearing one of Buffy’s anxious phone calls, Spike had remarked in passing that, if Buffy didn’t pull it together, she wasn’t going to live to mid-terms. Xander had thought hard about everything Spike had told him during their training sessions about how confidence affected performance. The end result of his musings was that he’d gone to Giles and Sgt. Morgan and Mr. Olsen and asked them to take Buffy off patrol entirely the first week of school.

They’d agreed with him and Giles had been particularly grateful. Xander suspected that Giles second guessing himself about coddling his Slayer was the reason Giles hadn’t asked the volunteers to take over for Buffy until she settled down. Xander was just glad he was free to be Buffy’s friend and not responsible for deciding what was best for the Slayer.

They’d presented the idea to Buffy as a gift and a done deal. She’d protested at first but it was clear her protest was for form’s sake and that she’d been grateful that she wouldn’t have to deal with patrolling during her first week of classes.

“Because you’ll undoubtedly have a great deal of homework, as well as needing to spend time getting to know your roommate,” Giles had said glibly and mostly truthfully. “We’ll make similar arrangements during your mid-term and final examinations.”

Reminded of her vacation, Buffy took another bite of her sandwich. “I suppose everyone else is feeling just as disoriented as I am,” she said, like she was trying to convince herself.

“Exactly,” Xander said encouragingly. “It’s not like when you moved here and you were the only new kid in school. Every freshman is new, you’ve got lots of company.”

“Thanks, Coach.” Despite the light tone, Buffy’s eyes were grateful as she applied herself to finishing her sandwich.

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“Harris! You’ve got company.”

Xander stepped out of the nearly completed building in response to the yell and to his surprise saw Buffy waiting for him. Buffy was obviously half-flattered and half-irritated by the attention she was receiving, topped off by a loud wolf-whistle from Greg, who took the code of the construction worker a bit too much to heart.

“Can see why you’ve been keeping that at home, Harris,” one of the guys called down from the
roof and Xander made a buzzer sound.

“Sorry, she’s just a friend. But thank you for playing,” he called back, steering Buffy off to one side of the construction site where there wasn’t any work going on.

“What was that about?” she asked curiously, glancing back at the guys who were still eyeing her halter top and short skirt appreciatively.

“They thought you were my girlfriend.”

“Your girlfriend?”

He shrugged at her surprised look. “Don’t look at me. They all know I’m dating someone, just not who. Construction workers aren’t necessarily known for their tolerance of alternate lifestyles so I haven’t actually mentioned that I’m dating a guy.”

“Not to mention a demon,” Buffy pointed out with an amused look.

“So not going there either,” Xander admitted. “What’s up? Not that it’s not good to see you but shouldn’t you be doing the class thing about now?” Classes had started on Monday and it was only Wednesday. What on earth was Buffy doing here?

“I don’t have any classes this afternoon and I haven’t ever visited you at work and Giles is freaking me out and mom filled my room with boxes and…”

“…and stop. Slow down and back up one. Why is Giles freaking you out?”

“I stopped by his apartment and…” Buffy looked embarrassed and mildly disgusted, like she’d walked in on Giles naked or… oh. He grinned in sudden comprehension.

“You met Olivia, didn’t you?”

“She was wearing his shirt!”

“So?”

“She was wearing only his shirt!”

Xander started laughing, he couldn’t help himself. Buffy smacked him. “You can’t tell me you don’t find that creepy,” she insisted. “He’s old, he’s not supposed to be answering the door in the middle of the day having just gotten out of bed with his hottie.”

“Come on, Buffy. Cut him some slack. She’s gorgeous.”

Buffy glared at him. Ok, that probably hadn’t been the right thing to say. “It’s not like he’s cradle robbing or sleeping around or anything. They’ve known each other for like 20 years.”

“How do you know that?” she asked suspiciously.

“I talked to her. She’s really nice.”

Buffy made a face. “Maybe, but I bet you wouldn’t have sat down for tea and cookies if you’d walked in on them naked,” she said grumpily.

“No, that might have been a bit much,” he acknowledged. Not that the Olivia half of that wasn’t a nice picture… Clearing his throat, he shut down that thought before it took him places he didn’t
want to go. Looking at Buffy more closely, he asked: “Buffy, what’s the what here?”

“I’m killing time until my roommate goes to her afternoon class,” she admitted sheepishly after a minute.

Xander just looked at her, eyebrows raised, and she sighed. “I know, so very lame.”

“I’m sorry she’s getting on your nerves but, much as I hate to say this…”

“You need to get back to work,” Buffy finished for him. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have come to your job.”

“Always good seeing you, but maybe after hours next time?” He felt bad that he couldn’t spend time with her but she really did need to figure out that he was a working person now. “Maybe you could go visit your friend Eddie or study in the library or something until she’s gone.” And when did he turn into a grownup?

“Right. This is me, putting on a better attitude.”

“It looks good on you,” he said loyally.

Buffy was still floundering a little in college, severely disappointed in her relentlessly perky roommate, overwhelmed by the size of the campus and the classes with 100+ students in them, but she’d made a friend or two and it was only her third day. She’d be fine. And he really didn’t want to be fired. “Call me tonight,” he said, wishing there was something he could do for her but not knowing what.

“Will do. Now, don’t you have a job waiting for you?” Buffy smiled up at him and left, picking her way across the dusty ground in her very non-sensible shoes and ignoring the whistles and cat-calls that broke out again.

“Harris!”

“Coming, Chief,” he called, trotting across the site to where he was supposed to be.

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Xander’s cell phone rang and he pulled it out and glanced at the caller ID. It was Buffy. He grimaced and thought about ignoring it but sighed and answered it before it went to voice mail.

“Hey, Buff, what’s up?”

Actually, he didn’t really need to ask. Buffy had begun calling him two and three times a day to complain about her roommate, Kathy. Xander hadn’t met Kathy yet and he was getting really curious about her. No one could be as bad as Buffy made out. Until he met Kathy for himself, he was reserving judgment on whether she really was the most annoying person on earth or if Buffy was seriously losing it. He was kind of leaning towards the Buffy losing it theory himself. The things she was complaining about were incredibly petty: the way Kathy sharpened her pencils and the way she flossed her teeth and the way she borrowed Buffy’s clothes. Granted, Buffy was an only child but so was Xander, it didn’t seem like a good enough excuse for going nuts over trivial stuff. Especially after only five days. Maybe it was a guy thing, but he didn’t remember having problems adjusting to living with Spike. Of course, he admitted with an inward grin, letting Buffy ramble on without really listening, the mind-blowing sex probably had helped ease the transition.

Giles was also becoming worried about the way Buffy was acting. Buffy had reported being
attacked by a demon on campus earlier this week. She hadn’t even been patrolling, just out walking to get away from her roommate. The demon had gotten away, thanks to Kathy following Buffy - which really ought to teach Buffy to come up with better excuses than going out for coffee - didn’t students live on caffeine? - but fortunately Kathy apparently hadn’t seen anything that made her question Buffy’s hastily concocted story of a mugger after her purse. Giles hadn’t recognized the species from Buffy’s description and was looking into what kind of demon it had been, concerned because Buffy had told him she was having strange dreams involving blood and scorpions and some other seriously creepy imagery. Giles thought the dreams might be related to the demon since they had begun the same night she was attacked.

Buffy had run into the demon Wednesday night and by Friday, her complaints about Kathy were escalating to scary new levels. Willow had emailed him from England - Giles was still hopeless about checking his email - reporting that Buffy’s messages had turned into rants about Kathy and she was beginning to be afraid that Buffy might actually hurt Kathy. Xander had emailed her back, letting her know that he and Giles were working on whatever was going on, but neither of them were sure what to do. Xander had suggested Buffy go home for the weekend, but apparently Joyce had filled Buffy’s bedroom with overflow storage from the art gallery and, in any case, Buffy was stubbornly refusing to give up the room to Kathy. Which pretty much meant Xander was talking to her on the phone several times a day and trying to talk her down from the ledge.

Or out of premeditated murder.

Fortunately, he didn’t need to contribute much to the conversations, just making sympathetic noises and saying “uh huh” a lot as Buffy went on and on about Kathy’s latest evil doings. He was tempted to just tell her to get over it and deal already but he was afraid that if she didn’t have someone to vent to she might do something that she’d regret later. Assuming Giles’ theory that Buffy might be possessed wasn’t true. Sighing, knowing Spike was going to be upset, he said: “Buffy, you really need to get out of the dorm for a night. Why don’t Spike and I meet you at the Bronze tomorrow?”

Hanging up, he wondered how he was going to explain this to Spike. Maybe he and Spike could be good cop-bad cop. Spike could tell Buffy to shut up and Xander could be sympathetic.

Might work.

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The fucking Bronze again. The Slayer was beginning to seriously annoy him. She’d spent the first week of school angsting over her classes and her roommate and how overwhelmed she was feeling. Xander had gone above and beyond: comforting her, encouraging her, listening to her as she alternately rhapsodized and complained about college life. She was bloody lucky that the demons had volunteered to take patrol for her for the entire first week of school to let her get adjusted. As off her game as she’d been, a fledge would’ve gotten lucky and taken her out the first night.

Now, when she’d finally made a friend or two and stopped freaking out over how different everything was, Xander had to go and invite her to meet them at the Bronze.

“Where the hell is she?” he groused. “Rude to leave us sitting here.”

Xander laughed at him. “Like you’re Mr. Punctuality.”

“I’m worth waiting for,” Spike reminded him loftily.

“Yeah, you are.” Xander’s answer came in a husky purr and Spike slid a hand into his hair and
pulled him close, kissing him urgently.

“Let’s leave the bloody Slayer and get out of here,” he murmured huskily against Xander’s lips.

“Can’t, sorry.” Xander did look regretful but before Spike could try to convince him, Buffy’s voice sounded from behind them.

“Sorry I’m late, guys, my roommate decided she wanted to tag along.”

Spike looked around curiously, hearing the open hostility in the Slayer’s voice. He felt Xander’s alert attention as he looked over at the slender, dark-haired woman smiling tentatively at them from beside the Slayer.

“Hi, Kathy, right?” Xander was on his feet, hand outstretched, smiling warmly at the woman who smiled back at him.

“Right. And you are?” Oh bloody hell, perky didn’t even begin to cover this one.

“I’m Xander and this is Spike.”

Spike just cocked his head to one side without saying anything, studying her warily.

“Hi, Spike!” she said brightly. “This is just the greatest place. I’m so glad I came along. I don’t know many of the places in town yet. I’m still just trying to find my way around campus.” She giggled and Spike lifted an eyebrow.

“Like the Bronze, do you?” he asked contemptuously.

“So, can I get you two ladies something to drink?” Xander offered hurriedly.

“I’m not old enough to drink,” Kathy giggled again and Spike rolled his eyes in disgust.

“Neither am I,” Xander answered cheerfully. “And sadly, they card here. I was pretty much just offering to get you something of the non-alcoholic variety.”

“Oh, sorry. Silly of me. A coke would be super.”

“One coke coming up. Buff? Anything for you?”

“Just a mocha, thanks, Xander.”

Xander slipped away from the table and Spike kept his eyes on the newcomer. “So, how’s school working out for you?”

Buffy opened her mouth to answer but Spike continued gazing steadily at the roommate, making it clear the question was aimed at her.

“Everything’s just super neat. I can’t get over how friendly almost everyone is.”

Spike was intrigued by the sly glance she shot at Buffy, obviously wanting him to draw the conclusion that Buffy was the exception to her statement.

“Yeah, town’s funny that way. You think everything’s small town friendly, then someone just ups and stabs you through the heart.”

Buffy gave him an “are you kidding me” look and said hastily: “He means stabs metaphorically, of
course."

He smirked at her but didn’t answer as Xander returned with their drinks and an apologetic glance at Spike. Bloody idiotic bartender wouldn’t even let Xander fetch his well-over-age partner a beer. “So, Kathy, tell us about yourself.”

“There’s not much to tell. I’m from Nebraska originally, and this is the furthest I’ve ever been from home. I’ve dreamed of going to college for so long.”

Spike was beginning to understand the hostility the Slayer was broadcasting. Her roommate’s incessant cheeriness was bloody annoying. If she giggled one more time, Spike was going to kill her. Course, it was kind of fun to see the Slayer so riled up.

Xander tried, but even he was having a hard time talking to the Chatty Kathy doll. He was reduced to listening intently to the band and making small talk about the music between numbers. Spike didn’t bother helping him out, having settled down to enjoy the Slayer’s barely contained irritation.

It took a while but it finally seemed to sink in to Kathy that she wasn’t making friends. She finished her drink and stood up. “I should really be getting back to the dorm,” she announced. “Thanks so much for the drink.”

Xander stood with obvious reluctance. “I’ll walk you back.”

Spike lost any lingering sense of amusement at the situation and shot out a staying hand. “No!” Bloody fucking chivalrous instincts were going to get Xander killed one day, he thought wrathfully, not for the first time.

“Spike?” Xander looked confused. “Do you want to come with? I thought you and Buffy might want to… stay and blow off a little steam together,” he hinted.

“That’s actually a really good idea. Are you up for it, Spike? I could really use a good… game of pool,” Buffy finished somewhat lamely for Kathy’s benefit. “But I’m not trusting her with my boy.”

“That’s just Spike’s nickname for Buffy,” Xander said hurriedly to Kathy, whose eyes were sliding back and forth between Buffy and Spike with avid curiosity. “She’s a killer at pool.”

“What are you talking about, Spike?” Buffy’s voice overlapped Xander’s, glaring at Spike for calling her ‘Slayer’ in public.

“She’s not human,” Spike said flatly. “Don’t know what she is, but you’re not going off alone with her, Xander.”

“She’s not?” Xander looked at Kathy in surprise, but not alarm. Typical.

“I knew it!” Buffy exclaimed triumphantly. “I knew there was something off about you.” Vindicated, she glared at Kathy. “What are you and why are you pretending to be human?”

“What are you talking about? You…you’re all crazy.” Kathy started backing away and the Slayer pounced, grabbing her and yanking her to a stop.

“Buffy,” Xander said warningly, “lots of people around.”
“What are you going to do, Buffy?” Kathy hissed, jerking her arm free to the Slayer’s obvious surprise. “Attack me in front of this many witnesses? Prove to everyone that you’re as crazy as I’ve been saying.”

“Guys, how about we take this outside before we scare the natives,” Xander said nervously, looking around at the people who were beginning to watch the furious exchange.

“Let ‘em go, Xander. Could be fun. And if they destroy the place, well - bonus,” Spike put in. Although he spoke lightly, he pulled Xander back from the two women, not wanting him to be in the middle if they got into it.

“Outside works for me. Let’s go, Kathy. It’s share time.” The Slayer sounded gleefully homicidal in a way Spike hadn’t heard her talk before. She grabbed her roommate’s arm and began pulling her towards the door. Spike’s eyes narrowed as he watched the rapid calculation in the other woman’s dark eyes, saw the nearly instantaneous decision not to resist.

“Spike, come on.”

“Not our business, Xander.” Even as he said it, he knew it was useless.

“Of course it is. Something’s up with Buffy, she’s not acting like herself.” Xander gave him one of his ‘this is non-negotiable’ looks and Spike sighed.

“Right. But, pet, you’re not getting in the middle of this. We don’t know anythin’ about the roommate.”

“So, let’s ask.”

Xander strode rapidly for the door and Spike followed. The two women weren’t hard to find, the sound of raised voices led them to the alley behind the club. Listening to them, Spike was dumbfounded to hear them arguing about gum chewing and flossing. What the hell was flossing?

He pulled Xander to a stop and signaled for him to be quiet. The two weren’t fighting yet and people sometimes let things slip in the heat of anger. Xander gave him a dubious look but followed his lead. They eased forward quietly until they could see the women and waited, listening to the escalating argument as the two roommates continued bitching about each other’s annoying personal habits. After a moment, Xander’s tenseness faded and his shoulders began shaking with silent laughter.

Warm breath tickled Spike’s ear as Xander leaned in to breathe almost silently: “You’ll let me know if my ‘obsessive-compulsive pencil fetish’ ever starts to bother you, right?”

“As long as my ‘psychotic only-child inability to share’ doesn’t get your dander up, luv,” he whispered back, equally amused.

Fortunately, the name-calling became something a bit more productive about the time the confrontation turned physical. The roommate backhanded the Slayer across the face and Spike forcibly stopped Xander from intervening as the two women began grappling with each other, the demon screaming something about people looking for her and needing to finish her ritual. Xander stopped struggling against Spike’s hold when he heard that and began listening again. His boy really needed to remember that the Slayer couldn’t be hurt easily. She could take a few blows without Xander playing the knight in shining armor to save her.

“Tonight, when they come looking for me, they'll take you instead of me,” the demon was saying triumphantly when she suddenly screamed in pain and there was a noise that sounded like fabric
tearing.

The Slayer staggered backwards, clutching something in both hands, which she stood staring at in shocked surprise. Xander gasped and Spike saw that the Slayer had torn off the demon’s face - literally. She had a human disguise on and it had been ripped off to reveal pitted orange skin and glowing blue eyes and a nice set of sharp teeth that Spike almost envied.

“You bitch!” the demon spat, as the Slayer dropped the flap of skin with a convulsive shudder. The two started towards each other again when a sudden piercing whistle sliced through the air and both women turned to stare in their direction.

Xander pulled his fingers out of his mouth and ordered: “Both of you, step back and shut up.”

“Stay out of this, Xander,” the Slayer warned. “She’s evil.”

“What makes you think she’s evil?” Xander asked, exasperated. She opened her mouth to answer and Xander held up an imperative hand, interrupting her before she could say anything. “And don’t start with the pencils. That’s weird, not evil.”

“Look at her!”

“News flash, Buffy, she’s a demon. She’s not supposed to look human. It doesn’t automatically make her evil.”

“ Doesn’t automatically make her trustworthy either, luv.”

“See? Even Spike agrees,” the Slayer declared triumphantly.

“It’s not about good and evil, Slayer,” Spike shot back. “It’s about what’s dangerous to you and yours and what’s not.”

“You would see it that way, Spike. It’s simpler for me: she’s evil. I’m an evil fighter. Therefore, I have to kill her.” Despite the simplistic logic the Slayer was spouting, her eyes were gleaming with a rapacious desire to kill. It looked good on her, even if it did make him wary.

“Call me crazy, but why don’t we ask a few questions before making with the homicide.” Xander glared at both of them impartially. Spike was keeping a wary eye on the roommate, it was hard to read those electric blue eyes but they were darting back and forth between the three of them, clearly weighing her options.

“What ritual are you doing?” Xander asked.

“I just wanted to go to college,” the demon began pitifully. “I’ve wanted to go ever since I can remember. I didn’t ask to be put in a room with Miss Psycho Bitch from Hell. I asked for a stable, non-smoker and she’s what I got.” Her eyes shot daggers at Buffy. “She obviously lied on her application.”

“Oh, yeah? I didn’t see you putting ‘demon’ on your application,” Buffy spat.

Xander really should leave these two to their own devices. The resulting cat-fight would probably be worth selling tickets to.

“What ritual are you doing?” Xander prompted.

“I ran away from home and they’re looking for me. I was just trying to hide from them.” Her voice
quavered pathetically and her slender shoulders drooped.

“We can understand that,” Xander said soothingly, even as the Slayer made scoffing noises. “How does the ritual help hide you?”

Xander looked like he was going to be putting an arm around her and patting her back any moment. He’d completely dropped his guard. Spike really was going to kill him when this was over. Falling for a helpless little girl routine, that was just about the oldest trick in the book. He and Xander were going to have a long talk later.

“I borrowed part of Buffy’s soul. My people don’t have souls so when they come looking for me, they wouldn’t realize it was me.” She made big pathetic eyes at Xander.

“Borrowed it without asking,” the Slayer muttered.

Spike had had just about enough of this. “Just borrowed part of her soul, right? So the ritual you have to finish would be - what? Takin’ the rest of it?”

“Not like she’s using it,” the roommate said spitefully, forgetting her poor-little-me act.

“Give it back,” the Slayer demanded.

“I can’t. The transfer is permanent.”

Spike didn’t buy that for a second. Very few magic rituals couldn’t be reversed one way or another. “Killing you might do the trick,” he suggested with a smirk.

“Good idea, Spike,” the Slayer agreed enthusiastically. “I’ll bet if she’s dead my soul reverts to me.”

“And what if you’re wrong?” Xander asked, obviously stunned by her cavalier attitude. “That’s a hell of a chance to take. We should take her to Giles.”

“It’s my soul, I should have the final say,” the Slayer said mutinously.

“No offense, Buffy but, according to Kathy, you’re operating on only about half of a soul right now. And I gotta say, with the way you’ve been acting, you’re about as attractive without a soul as Angel is. So I’m overruling you. No killing until we find out all the options.”

“And just how are you planning on stopping me?”

“Well, I figure reasoning with you is probably out, so me, Spike and Kathy will just have to kick your ass and then work out something.”

“What!”

Spike knew his had been one of the voices in that exclamation. Both the Slayer and her roommate were staring at his boy in stunned surprise and Spike lost it. He started laughing. “Bloody hell, pet. You’re crazier than both of them.”

“Hey, it’s a workable plan,” Xander objected, looking hurt.

A sudden blinding flash of light prevented Spike from answering and he threw up an arm instinctively, shielding his eyes, even as he grabbed Xander with his other arm and pulled him close to his side.
The light faded and in its place was a whirlpool of displaced air, seeming to spiral endlessly even though it appeared only painted on the fabric of the air. Shit! A dimensional portal just like the one Acathla had formed. Spike scrambled back away from it, pulling Xander with him.

The Slayer was staring, frozen in place and the roommate was cowering against the wall, her face pressed to the bricks.

A tall figure in a dark cloak took form within the portal, growing more solid by the second until it was suddenly just there, feet planted solidly on the dirt-encrusted cement of the alleyway, towering above them all. It said something in a language Spike didn’t recognize and the Slayer’s roommate reluctantly turned to face it, responding in the same language, her tone half defiant, half pleading. Another exchange and the new demon lifted a hand, not to strike out but making a purposeful gesture.

“Excuse me? Mr. Really-scary-looking-demon that I so don’t want to piss off?”

To Spike’s disbelief, it was Xander, taking a step toward the demon and raising a tentative hand for attention like he was still back in class in high school.

“Xander…” he growled warningly, pulling his Claimed sharply back to his side.

Typically, Xander ignored his own danger as the 7-foot tall demon turned and growled at him. “She has something that doesn’t belong to her. Not that I’m accusing her of theft or anything,” he added hastily “but you probably noticed she has part of someone else’s soul. I’m sure you don’t want to take that back with you. Plus, it probably smells bad to you or something, right?”

His Claimed was never leaving the lair again for this one.

Spike tightened his grip on Xander’s wrist, pulling Xander fully behind him, ignoring his startled yelp at the sudden movement, as the demon growled something at him. “Back off, he’s mine,” he snarled warningly.

“Spike, I’m negotiating here.”

“Getting yourself killed, more like, luv.”

The demon had turned back to the Slayer’s roommate and there was another heated exchange. To Spike’s disbelief, the roommate said sulkily, in English, “Fine, she can have her stupid soul back. Not like I wanted it anyway.”

She bit into the skin on her finger, tearing it off like a human tugging a glove finger off with their teeth, revealing a long black talon under the human skin. Drawing the claw-like nail down her arm, she dug through the fake human skin and drew blood, using the blood to trace two symbols on her body. As she did, she spoke several incomprehensible phrases, then stepped over to the Slayer, who appeared too astonished to move, and grabbed her head with both hands, using her thumbs to force the Slayer’s mouth open and opening her own mouth wide. A curl of something that looked like white smoke flowed from her mouth into the Slayer’s.

It only took a moment and it was done. The two women staggered apart, the Slayer falling on her butt and then just sat there, blinking in shock. The taller demon growled something and lifted his hand again. Another vortex formed and the two demons vanished inside it.

“Thanks.”
“Bit late, pet.” Spike relaxed as the portal vanished and indulged himself, fishing in his pockets until he found a cigarette and lit up, taking a deep, steadying drag. He’d earned it. Fucking dimensional portals should be outlawed, he thought, as he drew the soothing warmth of the narcotic smoke into his lungs.

“You all right, Buffy?”

“I guess.” She got shakily to her feet and Spike noticed she seemed calmer than she’d been all evening. She gave an all-over body shiver. “At least getting it back was better than the way she took it,” she commented after a moment.

As they left the ally together, the Slayer described the nightmares she’d been having for the last couple of nights: blood poured down an unwilling throat, symbols traced in blood on skin, a scorpion, something being pulled from inside her.

“Sounds like a party Dru and me went to once,” Spike commented, quite factually.
“This is my stop.”

Buffy’s voice broke the long silence. She’d seemed lost in thought since the three of them had left the Bronze and Xander had been hesitant to interrupt her silent musing. Having just found out that your roommate - even one you hated - was a soul-sucking demon had to take some dealing.

“You ok getting back to your dorm?”

Buffy gave him a look. “I’m still the Slayer, Xander. Haven’t lost my touch that much.”

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “Just, you know, soul-sucking, soul-returning, you might not be having your best night.”

“Yeah.” Buffy scrunched her face up at the reminder. “Sorry about the way I’ve been acting. I’m just glad it was Kathy causing me to be no-fun Buffy.”

“Way I figure it, you’re supposed to have a soul. Being without one, even part of one, made you cranky,” Xander said with a grin, although he was a lot more relieved than he let on. It had not been fun being friends with Buffy these past few days.

“Well, in any case, I owe you one.” Buffy gave them both a wave, “see you around.”

“Don’t forget to call Giles when you get to your room and tell him what happened. He’s probably still researching, looking for your demon.”

“Will do,” Buffy promised cheerfully as she walked off.

Xander watched her until she was out of sight, then looked over at Spike. “You’re being awfully quiet. Is something wrong?”

Spike looked at Xander in disbelief. His Claimed was actually asking if something was wrong, as if Xander was completely oblivious to everything he’d done tonight to drive Spike out of his fucking mind.

Knowing he was on the fine edge of losing his temper completely and doing something he would probably regret and Xander might never forgive, Spike gritted his teeth and forced himself to say calmly: “What kind of a demon was that, luv?”

Xander shook his head. “I didn’t recognize the species. Any ideas?”

“No. And that is exactly my point.” When Xander just looked blank, Spike closed his eyes and fought to keep his hands at his sides. “You deliberately put yourself front and center in the middle of a confrontation between the Slayer and a demon you didn’t even recognize, that you knew nothing about except the fact that it was capable of pulling the soul out of a human’s body. Then, when its even larger cousin showed up, you deliberately attracted its attention.” Spike’s voice had risen as he spoke until he was almost shouting. “Xander, you didn’t even have a weapon in your hand, you weren’t in any way prepared to deal with the thing if it attacked you.”

“Spike…”
“No! You’ve bloody well got to stop doing that. You’re going to get yourself killed one of these
days.”

“Spike, she ran away from home to go to school. How dangerous can something be that just wants
to go to college?”

It infuriated him that Xander, far from looking apologetic, was smiling at him with what looked
suspiciously like fond tolerance for Spike’s little foible of worrying about his Claimed.

“You can’t use human logic to predict the reactions of a demon, Xander. We don’t think like
humans. We don’t react to situations like humans do. We don’t follow the same sets of rules.
Maybe a human wouldn’t kill to remain in school but a demon might. Not a vampire, or a Tralk
demon, yeah, but you don’t even know what species it was. It’s not even from this dimension,
goin’ by the fuckin’ portal. Stop treating demons like we’re humans, because we’re not.”

Spike’s own demon had come fully out to play. He glared at Xander, knowing he’d shifted to his
true face. “Xander, my demon is telling me to take you back to the lair and chain you to the bed
and never let you leave again. Not tomorrow, when you’re feeling bad about what you did. Not
next week, when you’ve apologized a thousand times. Not in ten years, when you’ve given in and
stopped even asking for your freedom. Never.”

“You wouldn’t do that.” Despite the calm certainty in Xander’s voice, there was a flicker of unease
in his eyes and Spike knew Xander had finally gotten the message. If Xander pushed too far, Spike
might be forced to do something they’d both regret.

“Love you, Xander. More than you’ll ever know. But I’m a demon. If necessary, I would do that.
If it’s a choice between losing you and keeping you by force, I know which I’ll choose.”

Part of Spike was terrified by what he was saying, that he was revealing too much and Xander
would run. It was something he’d been afraid of all along, ever since he’d admitted to himself just
how important Xander was to him.

This hadn’t been an issue with Drusilla. When Dru had strayed too far in her mad flitting from
whim to whim and his need to possess her had risen up uncontrollably, Spike had simply dragged
her back to the lair, tied her up and beaten her until she’d reaffirmed their bond. Until she
remembered that she belonged to him as much as he belonged to her. Afterwards, lying sprawled
and sated across her slender body, he’d drag his tongue along the lash marks decorating her body,
tasting the blood and the submission until his demon was purring in contentment.

Picturing that with Xander now, Spike fought back the surge of lust and the need to dominate his
Claimed, to teach Xander his place, to get him to bloody obey for once.

Under control again, he met Xander’s wide-eyed stare with one of his own. His jaw tightened as he
saw the hesitation in the brown eyes meeting his and his heart sank. “Xander…” he began, not
wanting to back down but afraid he’d gone too far.

“No, Spike, it’s ok. I understand what you’re saying. It’s just…” Xander’s voice trailed off and he
made a helpless gesture. “I know you’re a demon. I didn’t become friends with you lightly or
without thinking it through.” Unwillingly Spike remembered the nights when he’d waited in angry,
hurt vigil outside Xander’s house for Xander to decide if he could be friends with a vampire and a
shaft of the same pain and resentment he’d felt then went through him again at the reminder. “And
I know you didn’t become friends with me without considering how crazy it is,” he added with a
lopsided smile. “But Spike, I’m human. I don’t think like a demon and I won’t ever think like a
demon. You have to accept that about me. I don’t deliberately put myself in danger… ok,
sometimes I do, but only when it’s necessary.”

“Tonight wasn’t necessary, Xander.” Spike growled.

“It wasn’t dangerous either.”

“You can’t look at a situation after the fact and say: ‘see, it turned out ok, so there wasn’t ever any danger’,“ Spike shot back, exasperated.

“I’m not,” Xander insisted. “Spike, you and Buffy were there. All I did was…”

“Was wave a red flag in front of a 7-foot tall bull and hope he didn’t take offense,” Spike finished for him grimly. “You were lucky, not careful.”

“He was opening a vortex. They were going to leave with part of Buffy’s soul.”

“Her problem, not yours.”

“She’s my friend.”

“She’s the bloody Slayer. It’s her fucking job.”

“You saw what she’s been like these past couple of days. She wasn’t thinking straight. It worked. Nobody got hurt. And I am not losing another friend when I can do something about it.” Xander’s voice broke and Spike felt the anger drain out of him at the raw pain in his Claimed’s voice.

“I love you, Spike. And I’m sorry I can’t be what you want. But I can’t go through that again, not when there’s something I can do to stop it.”

Spike barely realized he’d moved before he found he had Xander in his arms and was holding him tightly, so tightly it had to hurt as he clenched one hand in Xander’s hair and crushed their bodies together. Xander didn’t protest, clinging to Spike like a drowning man to the only hope of rescue. Like he was as terrified of losing Spike as Spike was of losing him.

Xander had lost so many people: the friend he’d staked, the witch, all of the classmates he’d cared about who’d left town over the summer, each one tearing a piece of Xander’s heart out as they left. He’d made new friends but his boy wasn’t one who let go easily or at all. He hadn’t even been able to write the witch off, despite everything she’d done to him, far less the werewolf or the replacement Watcher, all of whom Xander was working to keep in contact with, as if he could will them back into his life by sheer wanting it so.

“You’re everything I want, Xander, except careful,” he said after a long moment. “Careful we can work on. Dead is a bit more of a problem.”

Xander made a sound that might have been a sob or a short bark of laughter. “So says the dead man.”

“Let’s go home, luv.”

He’d increase their training sessions which had slacked off recently because Xander had been so busy and work with Xander on not letting his guard down. That would help appease Spike’s demon and keep the delicate balance they’d been maintaining successfully for so long. He’d meant what he said: he’d keep Xander by force if there was no other way. He just didn’t want that to be his only choice.
Spike hated wasting his time on administrative trivia. That was why a Master had Lieutenants, so they could deal with the piddling shite that wasn’t worthy of the attention of the Master of a territory. It was for that very reason that he only rarely met formally with his Lieutenants. He continued to hold formal Court once a week and expected his Lieutenants to approach him with anything he should be aware of. It was a rare night when he didn’t spend at least a few minutes at the Court and often he was there for a considerable time - sparring, listening, and just generally making his presence felt. An absent Master was a quickly replaced one.

Spike had visited Courts that had endless layers of bureaucracy shielding the Master from unwanted interruptions and he had nothing but contempt for Masters who ran their Courts in that fashion. Sign of a weak Master was all it was. Any minion in the Court was free to approach Spike at any time. Of course, if they bothered him unnecessarily with trivial problems and petty troubles, they learned from their mistake. Or at least the other minions learned from the mistake when they saw the swift, and frequently fatal, punishment that followed the sin of wasting Spike’s time.

It tended to cut down on the number of minions who dared to approach him.

Mostly, they went to his Lieutenants. Anything short of an impending apocalypse tended to make minions worried it wasn’t important enough to bother Spike. Which was as it should be: most minions were too stupid to see a good apocalypse approaching anyway and rarely had any news Spike was interested in. His Lieutenants filtered out the crap and brought anything significant to his attention, which kept Spike well informed about his territory. Being the conduit to Spike gave his Lieutenants a certain degree of power and status of their own, which made being his Lieutenant a desirable position that they enjoyed and worked to earn.

He had five Lieutenants now, having promoted an additional one about a month ago. Arkady was a quiet, reliable vampire, about 60 years old, a dark-skinned woman with close-cropped black hair. She was tall and rangy and one of the best knife fighters Spike had ever known - he’d picked up a trick or two from her himself, watching her in practice bouts with other minions.

She faced him now, having approached him as he’d entered the Court and asked for a moment of his time.

“There are hunters in town, other than the Slayer, Master Spike,” she informed him quietly. “There have been rumors for several weeks now, talk of hunters who patrol the town like the Slayer but who aren’t human, but this past week they have been seen several times by reliable sources.”

Spike had been expecting this ever since the volunteers had begun patrolling just over a month ago. He was actually surprised it had taken this long for anyone to notice. Vampires were mostly killed by other vampires and, much less frequently, by the occasional hunter or Slayer who happened across them. A century ago, that hadn’t been true. Humans had believed in vampires back then and, when they suspected one was in the area, knew where and how to hunt them. Many vampires had met final death at the hands of the family members of their victims, as grief turned to anger and determination to hunt down the killer. Nowadays, humans didn’t believe what was in front of their eyes, preferring to rely on “rational” explanations instead of the truth and, as a result, very few humans became vampire hunters. There was always Slayers, but the world was wide and a vampire could always be somewhere the current Slayer was not.

Having decided to let things lie and deal with it when it arose, Spike answered instinctively, giving a disdainful sniff. “Took people long enough to notice what was happening under their noses.”

Surprise showed on her features and Spike tilted his head, regarded her curiously for so long that
she stiffened and threw her shoulders back, coming to almost military attention before him. Good, she was worried she’d failed him. Until they’d been tested, Spike liked his Lieutenants to always be a little on edge around him.

“What are these ‘rumors’ that have been going around?” he asked silkily, leaving her in doubt as to whether she should have brought them to his attention when she first heard them.

“Just that the Slayer hasn’t been seen as often, that somehow she has recruited others to do her work for her. There has been speculation as to whether it means she is weaker than most Slayers, or stronger,” she reported crisply.

Spike nodded thoughtfully. “Doesn’t mean either,” he answered. “Just means she’s different. What’s the reaction to the new hunters?”

Arkady hesitated, obviously not sure exactly what he meant. “Reaction?”


“I would judge the main reaction in the Court is curiosity,” she said after a short pause. Spike was pleased that she had taken a moment to think before answering. “Although there are rumors that there are a dozen or more hunters, they seem to hunt alone, or in pairs, and only one or two on any given night. They do not concentrate on any species of demon, and certainly not on members of the Court. Instead, they hunt the cemeteries and appear to be doing random patrols, rather than focusing on any particular targets.”

That was Spike’s understanding as well: that the volunteers were doing general patrols and, when necessary, would act as back-up to the Slayer if there was a particular nest or hot spot that needed clearing out. From what Xander said, they had staked a few newly turned fledges and some of the small, scavenger demons that lurked on the fringes of the human areas of town. Humans often mistook the scavengers for stray dogs and cats, but in truth they were savage predators of the weak and accounted for a large number of deaths among the homeless population of larger towns and cities. A number of kills blamed on vampires were actually accountable to the small, vicious creatures, who would swarm the dropped prey and finish it off.

He briefly considered having his Lieutenants spread the word about what was happening, thus relegating it to something too unimportant for the general Court but discarded the idea in favor of controlling the message.

“Not quite business as usual, but nothing to worry about,” he told Arkady. “I’ll mention it to the Court at the next session.” Which was in two days and the Slayer was patrolling this weekend after her week off.

She nodded in acknowledgement. “Yes, Master Spike.”

He let her get three steps and then stopped her with a softly spoken command. “Next time, don’t wait so long before bringing news of organized hunters in the territory to my attention.”

She turned to face him and he crossed his arms over his chest, his gaze disapproving. “If this had been something I wasn’t already aware of, it could have been a problem.” He kept his voice quiet enough that the reprimand wasn’t audible to the nearest minions but his tone was blistering. “I expect more from my Lieutenants than from the average minion. I expect them to be able to think.”

She bowed her head contritely. “It won’t happen again, Master Spike.”

“See that it doesn’t.”
Spike suppressed his smirk until she was on the other side of the room. She’d be all right with a bit of seasoning.

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Xander circled warily, bare feet shifting sideways on the training mats, his hands out from his side, one of them holding a knife with a firm grip. He was watching Spike’s every move, waiting for the rush that was sure to come.

They were using Angel’s mansion again and Spike had re-outfitted the rooms with equipment: tumbling mats, targets, and a variety of weapons. Apparently Angel had not been consulted about Spike using his mansion but he probably knew about it anyway. Given the territorial nature of vampires, it was unlikely that Angel had actually given Spike permission to take over his property, even a building he no longer intended to use.

When Xander asked, Spike had told him in disgust that Angel had bought the house. Unlike Spike’s squatting status in the factory, Angel had the distressingly human tendency to actually buy property. Having learned from his Sire, Darla, how to manage money, vampire-style - meaning extremely long-term investments - Angel did not lack for cash but that wasn’t the point. To Spike’s way of looking at it, it was another thing that vampires didn’t do.

Of course, Spike liked using the mansion as a dojo for all sorts of complicated, vampire reasons. In some obscure way, it was both pissing on his Sire’s turf and a connection with his absent Sire. Plus, the very faults that made Spike deride the house as a living situation for vampires: no tunnel access, big windows everywhere, and in a swank, completely human part of town, meant that it was perfect for occasional use as a place to train. No other demons would covet the empty house and every vampire that had known its location during Angelus’ attempt to take over the Hellmouth had been staked during the war between the two vampires.

Spike had been a bit too firm about insisting they start their workouts sessions again, immediately, and Xander smiled to himself thinking about it. Spike reacted absolutely predictably to Xander being in danger, putting himself in danger, or just because he might be facing danger soon - Spike’s knee jerk reaction was wanting to train Xander, hoping to impart enough of his own skills to help Xander survive.

He didn’t mind. He was big on survival too. Having lived through graduation, which wasn’t as common in Sunnydale as it was in most other towns, he was all for living to reach 30 one day. He enjoyed their workouts and the skills he was learning and it was an unspoken statement of Spike’s love, which Xander was smart enough not to comment on.

Spike feinted and Xander shifted his weight, not committing himself until Spike suddenly pounced from the other direction. He dropped as Spike reached for him, ducking under Spike’s arms and coming up quickly behind him, spinning to face Spike and using the momentum of his turn to power a backhanded blow at Spike’s side. His knife hand was seized in a two-handed grip and Spike twisted with inhuman strength. Xander gritted his teeth as they wrestled silently over the knife, only his own loud breathing disturbing the quiet.

Knowing he was losing the unequal struggle, Xander dropped the knife and wrapped his own arms around Spike’s arm, holding onto him as he let himself fall to the floor, the mats absorbing the shock of landing. Spike was pulled off balance by the unexpected move and Xander brought his legs up, powering them into Spike’s stomach and flipping the vampire over his head to land with a satisfying thump on the mats. Xander rolled clear immediately, even as Spike bounced to his feet in that annoyingly quick way he had. Knowing he wasn’t going to be able to get to his own feet in time, Xander reached out with both hands and jerked hard on the mat Spike was standing on.
Spike cursed and jumped clear as the mat moved underneath his feet. Growling, he launched himself at Xander who was still on the floor but had used the extra second he’d gained to snatch the knife up from the mat where it had fallen and brace himself. As Spike landed squarely on top of him, Xander smacked the handle into Spike’s sternum, hard enough to bruise a human, and said breathlessly: “tag, you’re it.”

Spike smirked down at him. “Not bad, luv. Try not to let your opponent close with you. Always assume that a demon is stronger than you are. Any species aggressive enough to attack you probably is.”

He rose to his feet with the effortless grace that was so much a part of his every movement and put out a hand to help Xander up. Climbing slowly to his feet, Xander saw with relief that Spike had let go of the tension that had been thrumming through him since the start of their session. He’d obviously acquitted himself well enough that Spike had been reminded that Xander might be human but he wasn’t completely helpless.

Stretching his head back and rolling his shoulders until they cracked, Xander smiled as he saw Spike’s hungry gaze go to his neck. “Got time for a hot shower and maybe messing up Angel’s couch before you have to patrol?” he asked.

Spike’s eyes flared yellow and he smirked. “Think I can make time for that, luv.”
Joyce Summers stood up and began gathering the plates off the table.

“I can do that, Mrs. Summers,” Xander offered, half rising from his own chair.

“Don’t be silly, Xander. I’ve got it.” She smiled warmly at him and carried the small stack of dishes out to the kitchen.

“Do you boys want coffee?” she called back into the room over the sound of plates being rinsed.

“Not for me, thanks,” Xander answered. Coffee was emergency caffeine, not something he drank regularly.

“I’m fine, Joyce.”

Spike leaned back in his chair with an air of smug satisfaction, convinced he’d just thoroughly bested Joyce in their argument over the relative merits of two different styles of painting, only one of which Xander had even fleetingly heard of. Despite that, he liked it when Spike and Buffy’s mom went at it in one of their protracted debates over stuff like that. Even when, like tonight, he didn’t have any idea of what they were talking about, he enjoyed listening to the two of them.

Spike sometimes got so engrossed in the argument that he forgot himself and the hard edges of his accent slipped into something more refined, more BBC and less street punk. No one who knew Spike questioned his intelligence but Xander enjoyed these glimpses into the educated person behind Spike’s mask. The Spike who read literature in the privacy of their apartment, who knew about art and poetry, was carefully hidden from most of the world. It said a lot that he was willing to show that side of himself to Mrs. Summers.

And Joyce was in her element during their debates: defending her position vigorously and backing up her arguments with specific examples. Like tonight, she’d named and described a dozen painters that Xander had never even heard of, and was obviously very familiar with their paintings, mentioning specific details in a number of paintings to illustrate a hotly contested point about brush strokes. Unlike Spike, Xander hadn’t really understood the point she was making but it had made him curious to look up the paintings she was talking about and he’d made a mental note to borrow some of her art books one day.

“Why don’t you two move into the living room and I’ll be right with you,” Mrs. Summers suggested and Xander and Spike obediently shifted to the more comfortable furniture in the living room, Spike tugging Xander down to sit next to him on the couch.

Mrs. Summers joined them shortly with a cup of coffee and some pumpkin shaped cookies.

“They’re from the store,” she apologized. “I can never get much done on Halloween night. The doorbell just keeps ringing.”

Which was undoubtedly the reason for the Chinese takeout that they’d eaten for dinner. Mrs. Summers had poured the contents of the boxes into a couple of serving bowls, saying lightly as she set the bowls down on the table for them to serve themselves that she was glad they were close enough to family for her to get away with serving takeout food.

She’d invited them over tonight for a late supper, somewhat spur of the moment when Xander had answered her innocent question about their Halloween plans with an explanation of how vampires viewed the holiday as tacky and, as a result, he and Spike didn’t go out on Halloween. Mrs.
Summers didn’t go out on Halloween either, she’d said, handing Xander the wrench he asked for, confessing that she was hopelessly sentimental about seeing all the little kids in their costumes. It took her back to when Buffy was little, she admitted, when she would make Buffy’s costumes and her father would take her trick-or-treating around the neighborhood. So she stayed home every Halloween with a big bowl of candy and nostalgia.

The net result of that conversation was that Xander had fixed the leaky pipe and Joyce had invited them over for a late dinner, after the trick-or-treaters would be safely off the streets.

Spike had grumbled for show about not going out on Halloween but had caved immediately for Joyce’s sake. “Not like the Slayer’s going to keep her company,” he’d said caustically.

Xander rolled his eyes. “She’s in college. Her mother doesn’t expect her to come home every night. And Halloween is apparently a big deal on campus.”

“Bunch of twits with nothing better to do, dressing up like their betters,” Spike countered, “is not a big deal, it’s embarrassing.”

“Which, I’m sure, is why Buffy didn’t invite you to her dorm’s party,” Xander responded mockingly.

“Like I’d go,” Spike said indignantly.

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The rumors were frustratingly difficult to pin down: a couple of Vulsik demons whispering together in a bar about a close call with something that threw lightning; his newest Lieutenant, possibly overreacting following his lecture about not bringing things to his attention, reporting an overheard conversation between two distraught Drak’taash demons about a missing cub taken from the nest; a general unease hanging over the town, like the feeling of a storm approaching.

Still… Vulsik were unreliable braggarts, always making something out of nothing, and Drak’taash demons were always losing cubs to one thing or another - they were careless parents, leaving their nests unguarded for hours at a time; and the Hellmouth often felt like a storm brewing - the energy ebbed and flowed, sometimes retreating, sometimes crackling in the air almost visibly, so strong that even people normally unable to feel it shifted uneasily and grew irritated for no reason they could explain. There was a possibility that something new was in town, something disrupting the balance but, if so, it was proving irritatingly difficult to locate.

Spike had spent more time than he cared to investigating the rumors, especially the ones pointing towards a new group hunting the town, one that seemed to be preying on demons who ordinarily caused little trouble and steered well clear of conflict. It wasn’t the volunteers helping Buffy - they would never have taken a Drak’taash cub - but whoever they were, they were elusive, if they even really existed.

Spike was inclined to put half the reports down to human hijinks surrounding Halloween. Past experience showed that humans would celebrate with costumed antics for days before and after October 31st, depending on if the holiday fell conveniently on a weekend or not. Still, there were a disquieting number of reports of demons going missing. Either someone was starting a feud or an improbable number of fairly innocuous demons had run into accidental trouble in the past couple of weeks. Without any bodies, it could simply be that the demons had left town for whatever reason but something about the situation felt off to Spike and it annoyed him that he couldn’t pin down whether or not something was even happening or if it was just a string of coincidences and bad luck.
Unable to find any solid evidence of a new presence in town, Spike settled for increasing the number of patrols he was doing. Until he discovered whether the rumors were false or true, he would keep a close eye on his territory.

Tonight, there was a faint taste of chaos magic in the night air, just a hint of acrid bitterness underlying the normal smells, a trace of something off that prickled along his nerves and had sent him tracking down the source. A chaos mage setting up shop in town could possibly explain the rumors - chaos mages were notoriously unpredictable and often caused trouble randomly for the sheer joy of it. Ordinarily, Spike could relate, but not in his Territory.

The chaos energy he was sensing was nothing active from the feel of it, a passive spell more like, magic already worked and done but still lingering in the subject.

Which probably explained the group of four… things tearing the limbs off trees and looking not unlike those ridiculous ape creatures in that dreadful movie Xander was so fond of. Joining the small crowd gathering at a safe distance from the disturbance, Spike cocked his head to one side curiously and settled in to watch the show. Generally, he avoided magic but this promised to be more than a little entertaining.

He was on one of his regular sweeps through the campus. The Slayer complained that there were too many people around to hunt properly but Spike wasn’t really hunting when he made his rounds of the college campus, he was just keeping an eye on things. Xander went up to the campus at least once or twice a week and Spike liked to reassure himself that the area was safe. The Slayer wasn’t nearly as good as Spike was at sensing demons hanging about; her usual technique was the tried and true method of hanging out in unsafe areas acting like bait and waiting for demons to attack her. Worked efficiently enough on the stupider demons and just risen fledges but not so well on the smarter, more experienced, and generally more dangerous ones.

The students around him were shifting nervously and giving off a strong odor of nervousness and fear as the half-naked creatures brandished their tree-limb clubs and settled the dominance issue between them by one of them knocking the others to the ground and standing over them, posturing. That settled, the others scrambled back to their feet and turned their attention to the crowd, who came to their senses and belatedly tried to run.

Spike lit up a cigarette and leaned against a tree, grinning at the show. He hadn’t had any idea the college campus was capable of this kind of entertainment. The creatures looked to be selecting mates from the crowd, cutting women out of the screaming herd and dragging them back to where the leader waited with his own chosen mate. That is, when the half-wits managed to remember what they were doing for long enough to capture a woman successfully.

The things resembled nothing so much as cavemen, Spike decided, his eyes narrowing as he studied them. Scratching and hooting and threatening each other and everyone around them, they clearly had the attention span of particularly stupid insects. One minute, one of them had bashed a girl in the crowd over the head with a club, and the next, they were shoving each other and hooting angrily, oblivious to the fact that the girl’s friends were pulling her to safety.

After watching three of the four finally manage to capture a mate successfully, Spike flicked his cigarette away, and stepped away from his tree.

“Gentlemen, and believe me I use the term in the loosest possible sense, it seems to me that you four are in serious need of a lesson in manners. No true gentleman accosts a lady while half dressed and de-evolved into a Neanderthal.”

As he suspected, the pseudo-cavemen just looked puzzled by his words. Reacting to his approach,
they dropped their victims and waived their makeshift clubs, grunting what he presumed were threats.

This should be fun.

“Come on then,” he told them, almost bouncing on his toes as he waited for their all-too predictable attack. “Don’t have all night.” Actually he did, but he was betting he could take this group of morons out in less than five minutes. A quick glance around and he sighed in disappointment. None of the frightened students looked willing to place wagers on the outcome. Humans took these situations way too seriously.

All four charged him at once, forgetting their moaning, half-conscious prey, swiping at him with their clubs and jabbering incoherently. There was no sense of coordination about their attack and Spike spun around on one foot in a swirl of leather and brought his other leg whipping around to smash into the side of the closest caveman. There was the satisfying crunch of ribs breaking and Spike followed through immediately with a punch to the next one’s jaw before the first one had even hit the ground.

The blow felled the second one and Spike dropped to the ground to avoid a vicious slice at his head with a tree branch. He bounced back to his feet instantly and drove the third one back with a flurry of blows, letting up only long enough to slam a kick backwards into the gut of the fourth who was trying to sneak up on him from behind. A tree branch cracked with stunning force into the side of his head and he was momentarily knocked off balance. Recovering, he snarled, shaking his head to clear it and letting himself slide into his true face.

Dodging another blow, he caught the branch as it descended and found himself wrestling with the caveman as he tried to wrest the branch away. The creatures were stronger than humans, with powerful arms and shoulders, but had the brains of a Laorg demon. Given their strength, the four of them could have caused him some trouble if they’d coordinated their attack. As it was, the two he’d first taken out were down for the count and the last two were rapidly losing their enthusiasm for the fight.

Giving up the struggle over the branch, Spike dropped to the ground and used the branch to jerk the creature towards him and off balance. Too stupid to release the weapon even when it became a liability, it clung to the branch stubbornly, as Spike kicked upwards savagely with both feet and let go of the branch at the same instant, sending the caveman flying over his head to land a good distance away with a satisfying crash. Rolling quickly to his feet, Spike pounced on the fourth caveman before it could retreat and grabbed it by its unkempt hair, yanking its head down hard to meet the knee he brought up to smash into the thing’s jaw.

Dropping the unconscious body to the ground, Spike glanced around. The scattered crowd had stopped running and edged closer to watch the fight. The four cavemen were finished, either unconscious or clutching their wounds. The women they’d collected were being helped to their feet and away and Spike smirked around the field of battle in satisfaction and shook his head, returning to human guise. Three minutes tops was all it had taken.

“Spike?”

Still grinning, he turned to face the Slayer who was pushing her way to the front of the crowd, looking a trifle disgruntled that he’d handled the situation without her.

“Bit late, Slayer,” he said cheerfully. Although far too short, the fight had been fun while it lasted. “Interesting games you kids are getting up to these days. In my day, we were too busy studying to spend time messing around with spells.”
She leaned over to peer at the closest body and her eyebrows drew together in a frown. “These are people?”

“Direct ancestors of yours, no doubt,” he answered flippantly. “Looks like someone decided to get an insider’s perspective on pre-history.”

“Well, given the Dockers and the expensive shoes, I’m guessing these were frat boys. Do you suppose whatever’s wrong will wear off?”

“Dunno, don’t care. My part’s done,” he pointed out. He wasn’t big on clean up. Clean up was for minions.

“You willing to help me get them somewhere a little less conspicuous?” As she spoke, the Slayer pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and hit a number. She tapped a foot impatiently as she waited for an answer.

“Giles, I’ve got four unconscious bodies here. Spike says they have some kind of spell on them.” There was a pause during which Spike could just make out the flurry of questions from the Watcher. “They look like extras from Planet of the Apes - we’re talking seriously hairy and ugly. Should I shove them in the bushes and hope whatever it is wears off, or what?”

Giles obviously didn’t approve of that idea and Buffy idly nudged one of the bodies with her toe. “Fine, Giles. We’ll be here.”

Snapping the phone shut, she looked at Spike. “Giles thinks we should lock them up somewhere until we know if the spell is going to wear off. Give me a hand?”

Rolling his eyes, Spike reached down and grabbed two of the bodies, dragging them across the grass towards the bushes with utter disregard for their injuries. Behind him, the Slayer was doing the same with the other two bodies and Spike was amused to realize she wasn’t being any more careful than he was. “Fine, but I’m not on babysitting duty. Once they’re in the Watcher’s trunk, I’m done with my good deed for the week.” He’d already decided that this was a side-show, nothing to do with the rumors he was tracking down. These creatures weren’t capable of subtlety. If they, or someone else under the same spell, was behind the incidents he was investigating, he would have learned of it the first night they attacked someone. At worst, they were a symptom, but Spike was having second thoughts about the idea that a chaos mage was responsible for the unease in town. Chaos mages generally announced their presence through conspicuous stunts like this one, not in ways that left you in doubt as to whether something was even really happening.

Buffy gave him a surprisingly conspiratorial grin, dropping her two bodies near the bushes and taking up position in front of them in an attempt to block them from view. “I figure Giles has a lot of time on his hands these days. Babysitting sounds right up his alley.”

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“Hey, Xander,” Buffy had picked up the phone just before the machine cut in and answered his greeting, sounding distracted. Again.

He’d thought she was finally getting over that jerk but unfortunately, it sounded like she was moping over him again.

Buffy had been up and down like this for a couple of weeks; one minute partying with her dorm like nothing was bothering her, the next angsting over what was wrong with her that caused people to treat her this way. He’d kind of hoped the disruption caused by the resentful bartender who’d
been home-brewing beer and chaos magic would snap her out of it but she had slipped right back into depression after it was over when she’d seen charm-boy flirting in class with yet another girl.

Spike had suggested slipping the guy some of the magicked beer and Xander had been tempted enough that he was glad that Giles and Buffy had destroyed all of it. And hadn’t that been a fun weekend? Two more beer-swilling groups of cavemen frat boys had been roaming the campus causing serious property damage and minor injuries before Buffy and Giles had backtracked the source of the spell to the campus pub. Giles had been stuck monitoring nearly a dozen Neanderthals for almost two days before they sobered up and changed back into something almost as obnoxious but far less hairy. Fortunately, they remembered exactly what had happened and what they’d done and had sheepishly slunk off, metaphorical tails between their legs. Only one of them had had the nerve to threaten a lawsuit for waking up in a cage, half-naked and very sore. Apparently Giles had simply looked down his nose and pointed out in his most proper British tones that the videotapes he had taken the precaution of filming should answer the question for a jury about whether his actions had been justified or not.

“Did you actually have videotape?” Xander asked, thoroughly amused when Giles told him about it.

“Of course not. Pretentious git didn’t dare ask for proof, just begged me not to ever show anyone the tapes.”

“Pity you didn’t actually take videos, home movie night would have been fun.”

Giles gave him a withering look. “I assure you, the whole distasteful incident was not worth preserving for posterity.” Still, Xander had been sure there was a gleam of humor in the back of Giles’ eyes as he said it.

“Xander?”

Buffy’s questioning tone drew him back to the present and he braced himself for another session of Buffy bemoaning her travesty of a love life.

He shook his head. Buffy had the worst taste in men. Granted, after the monumental fuck-up that had resulted from her one and only night with Angel, he supposed Buffy was entitled to some issues about her sexuality. It wasn’t everyone who could appear on Jerry Springer’s “One Night with Me and My Boyfriend Tried to Destroy the World” themed show - Xander was pretty sure he’d caught Spike watching that very episode last week - but what on earth had made Buffy fall for a guy who, from the sound of it, was shallow, vain, and into carving as many notches in his bedpost as was humanly possible? It was all well and good for the jerk to tell her that it was a one night stand after the fact, but that sure hadn’t been Buffy’s impression when she hopped into the sack with him. It had been hard to see Buffy go from bubbly, glowy happiness to deep depression in the space of a couple of days.

In hindsight, Xander felt kind of bad about some of the things he’d said to Buffy during the Angel/Angelus fiasco. Of course, they hadn’t been friends at the time and she had been equally rude about his relationship with Spike, but he probably hadn’t helped bolster her self-confidence about dating. So, he was trying to be supporto-guy for her now but it wasn’t the easiest thing he’d ever done. Mostly he wanted to tell her to snap out of it: that Parker Abrams was a world-class jerk and she should stop mooning over him, but he had gone with the kinder, gentler “hey, you’re supposed to make mistakes in college and you’ll meet someone who deserves you, and by the way, Parker Abrams is a world-class jerk and you’re worth ten of him.”

Fortunately, he and Spike could be as sarcastic as they liked about Buffy’s taste in men behind her
back without hurting her feelings. Spike had been all for sharing his feelings on the subject with Buffy and it had taken the threat of Joyce to stop him, which Spike was still pouting about, no matter how hard he tried to deny it. Spike wasn’t real big on helping Slayers through relationship-angst. Having had to put up with the Angel and Buffy drama-fest, he seemed to feel he was owed the chance to tell Buffy in loving detail just how thick she’d been to fall for what he referred to as Parker’s “sensitive lad” routine, in which he’d actually gotten Buffy to believe she was seducing him.

“You want to go out with me and Spike tonight?” he offered, when it didn’t sound like Buffy was going to say anything.

“I can’t, I’ve got patrol.” Her voice sounded troubled as she continued. “Xander, something attacked one of my professors last night. She thought it was a wild dog.”

“And?”

“And last night was the night before the full moon,” Buffy prompted and Xander felt his heart sink.

“You think it’s a werewolf?” Werewolves were difficult. They needed to be contained without being killed and without anyone getting bitten. Buffy was better at straight kills than capturing things. Having to hold back often meant she got at least minor injuries and there were no minor injuries with a werewolf. One nip and it was hello hairy chest once a month.

“Probably. There’s no chance it’s Oz, right?”

“No way. First off, Oz would have told us if he was back in town. Second, Oz would never let himself be caught outside during a wolf-moon. Third, just… no.”

“Yeah,” despite her agreement, Buffy sounded relieved. “That’s what I figured.”

“Werewolves aren’t all that uncommon are they?”

“I don’t know. I mean, that creepy werewolf hunter who tried to kill Oz had killed about a dozen, so there’s obviously a few around.” There was quiet on the other end of the line for a moment except for Buffy’s nails tapping on the side of the phone as she thought, then she asked: “The kid who bit Oz, it couldn’t be him, could it?”

“Geordie?” Xander asked, surprised. “No way, he’s like three years old. His wolf is probably the size of a dachshund. Plus, since Oz got bit, I think his parents have been a lot more careful.” He’d always been stunned by the idea that Oz had been bitten by a teething, baby werewolf. He’d never heard the full story about how Oz’s nephew became a werewolf and he wondered again how it had happened. Obviously, the family hadn’t been able to help Oz, that would have been the first place he tried before ever leaving town.

There was a sigh on the other end of the phone. “Werewolves are a lot easier when we know who they are,” Buffy grumbled after a minute.

“Need any help?” he offered.

“It’s ok. I’ll see if Sgt. Morgan can get me a second tranq gun and I’ll take whoever’s the best shot among the volunteers out hunting with me.”

“Ask Sgt. Morgan if he’ll go with you. He’s probably the best shot of anyone we know,” Xander advised. “Plus, I think he likes field work. He doesn’t get to see a lot of it anymore, too busy
training everybody else.”

“Good idea. Maybe we can Bronze it after the full moon is over.”

He could tell that Buffy was already working out hunting strategies in her head and Xander let her go. Hanging up, he was relieved that her distraction had been because of her Slayer duties not because of Parker. He worried sometimes that she still didn’t have a replacement roommate to do the female all-men-are-scam thing with her, but there were some definite advantages to her living alone. Not having a roommate cut down on some of the complications of getting out of the room to patrol and having to hide her weapons in the room. She’d made a lot of friends in both her classes and the dorm now and finally seemed to be getting over the fact that the guy she’d slept with hadn’t been looking for a relationship, just a trophy.

Maybe Buffy should follow Willow’s example and go lesbian. She couldn’t possibly do worse with a woman than with the men she was attracted to, if Angel and Parker were anything to go by.

Which reminded him, he needed to email Willow.

They had been emailing a lot in their mutual concern over Buffy, starting back when Buffy was freaking out over her roommate Kathy and it had them communicating again in a way they hadn’t since before Jesse died. Willow had shared with him that she and Amy were dating, something she hadn’t even told Buffy yet. She said it was easier to tell him because he was a guy and wouldn’t second guess their entire relationship, wondering if Willow was attracted to him, which she was afraid Buffy would do when she found out.

After a long period of indecision, he’d decided to be up front with Willow about his concern over two magic abusers getting together. It just seemed like a bad idea. Willow’s answer had done a lot to put his mind at rest. She’d talked very candidly about what she and Amy had done and about their work with the coven.

Xander hadn’t really been aware of what Amy had gone through during their Sophomore year. It had been right after Jesse died and he was barely attending classes and not taking any interest in what Buffy and Giles were doing at the time. Willow told him now about Amy’s mother switching bodies with her and trying to kill her. Apparently Amy began dabbling in magic soon after her mother disappeared, looking for a way to defend herself if her mother returned and tried something like that again. She’d learned magic on her own, from her mother’s books, and they were full of dark magic. Amy had gotten hooked on the power of dark magic. Like Willow, she had better teachers now, and Willow and she were working together as they wrestled with the ethical issues they both had ignored back in Sunnydale. Amy was still with the coven and she and Willow saw each other only on weekends. Like Willow, Amy had a lot of magical ability and Willow said that the coven was pleased with her progress. She had gone further than Willow into magical abuses and was working hard to cleanse the taint from her magic.

Talking about it had done a lot to dispel his lingering doubts and resentments and Xander decided to just be happy for them. Between Oxford, Amy and the coven, Willow’s life sounded full and happy. She loved school and was being intellectually challenged in a way she never had been before. For pretty much the first time in her life, she wasn’t necessarily the smartest person in the room and, after the first shock, she’d taken it as a challenge and was relishing the need to work hard to keep up in her classes. Amy and she were in the blissful first stages of being in love and Willow was in frequent communication with the coven.

He’d been right about distance making it easier for them. He suspected that, if and when Willow ever came home, he and she could finally be friends again. And that made something inside himself that had never seemed quite whole ever since the rift between himself and Willow feel like
it was finally beginning to heal.
The werewolf hunt had been a bust. With luck, the attack on Buffy’s professor had actually been a wild dog - maybe he was being foolishly optimistic but surely actual wild dogs had to exist somewhere given the number of time they featured in bad movies and where better than Sunnydale for them to hang out? - or, more likely, the wolf had only been out because of a fluke, a cage door giving way or something. In any case, the good news was that there hadn’t been any more attacks reported on the last two nights of the wolf moon.

“The weird thing was, there were a bunch of soldiers around town the last two nights,” Buffy told him, the puzzlement clear in her voice over the phone. “I saw some people dressed exactly like them on campus on Halloween night but I just assumed they were costumes. Now I’m wondering if something is going on. They were toting some serious hardware and prowling around in the woods like they were hunting for something. Sgt. Morgan says it wasn’t anyone from the local base. They don’t do maneuvers in town and these guys looked like they were playing war games.”

“Did they see you?”

“I don’t think so.” He could almost see the frown on her face as she considered. “I had the tranq gun, which isn’t exactly standard issue for students, so I ducked down the moment I saw them and they just kept going right past me.”

Xander chewed his lip for a minute, thinking quickly. “Spike’s been worried that something’s going on. He’s overheard comments about demons going missing and there’s a lot of rumors floating around about something new and dangerous in town. He hasn’t been able to pin anything down though.”

“Why would soldiers be hunting demons?” Buffy’s skepticism was clear.

“Think about it, Buffy. If the government found out about vampires and demons, wouldn’t they try and deal with it without letting anyone know what was going on?”

Buffy groaned. “Oh, God. Admit it, you’re a fan of the X-Files, aren’t you?” she accused.

“Hey, that’s a great show,” Xander protested, letting himself be distracted.

“Xander, it’s just one crazy conspiracy theory after another. And their demons are totally fake looking.”

“Well, sure, to someone who fights the real thing every night. But they aren’t bad for Hollywood.”

“If you tell me Mulder is hot, I’m going to have to hurt you.”

“Mulder’s cool,” he corrected, enjoying the bizarre exchange. It was just like the conversations he and Oz used to have. “Scully is hot.”

Buffy made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a whimper. “Do I have to remind you that you’re gay?”

“Gay doesn’t mean blind. Plus, I’m probably bi, given my Angelina Jolie fetish.”

“Way too much information, Xander.”
Xander grinned. Buffy had bounced back to her usual self, finally putting the Parker Abrams debacle behind her and had been a lot more fun recently. “Getting back to the subject, where were the soldiers?”

“Mostly in the cemeteries but I thought I saw a couple on campus as I was heading out.” Buffy said. “Was the attack on Professor Walsh in the paper? Maybe they were looking for the werewolf,” she said tentatively.

“If they thought it was a wild dog, wouldn’t they just have Animal Control out hunting? That’s kind of what they do, right? I mean, why bring in the military for one dog? Especially since it wasn’t people from the local base?”

“I don’t know - does Animal Control carry weapons? Maybe they thought they needed more firepower and called in the National Guard or something.”

“I’m with Spike - something doesn’t feel right about this. Maybe you guys shouldn’t patrol until we know if something’s up or not,” Xander suggested. “I’m thinking the Slayer and the government should stay as far away from each other as possible.”

“Maybe I’m just having a Mayor flashback but - oh, yeah,” Buffy answered. “I’ve got enough problems ducking students when I’m patrolling without having to hide from a bunch of soldiers playing soldier…or something.”

Xander laughed and could picture the face she was making. “Soldiers playing soldier,” he said with mock solemnity. “I can see where that would worry you.”

“Ok, that sentence didn’t come out quite the way I thought it was going to.”

“I’ll check with Spike and see if he’s found anything concrete,” Xander told her as they hung up.

He wondered if he could convince Spike to stop patrolling his territory for a few days until they figured this out. Probably not, he thought with a sigh. Spike hated not knowing what was going on and not knowing was dangerous for him. He’d explained to Xander more than once how important it was for him to appear to be on top of things at all times. A Master’s Court was always filled with vampires watching for any sign of weakness in the Master, anything they could exploit to better their own position. His Lieutenants were loyal but they were the only ones he could rely on and, if Spike looked weak, likely one or more of his Lieutenants would turn on him if they thought they could defeat him and take over. Power in vampire Courts was a balancing act and the smallest thing could tip the scales against an unprepared Master.

Spike kicked backwards, staggering the second vampire backwards and keeping her from closing as he grappled with the first one. The vampire he was struggling with was big enough to give him trouble, towering over Spike and outweighing him by a considerable amount. He lacked skill though, obviously being used to simply overpowering his opponents with sheer mass. Currently, he was apparently trying to strangle Spike into submission - a ploy that had obviously worked well in his human days and which he hadn’t quite gotten over using.

Well, Spike didn’t need oxygen but he did need to get out of the huge vampire’s grip. A lucky blow from behind by the second vampire, just as Spike was finishing off the one who now lay limply on the floor a few yards away, had sent him crashing into this monster who had seized the opportunity - literally - grabbing Spike into a wrestling hold. Well, the old wrestling axiom about ‘control the head, control the body’ only went so far. Spike managed to work one arm loose and slammed his
fist into the vampire’s groin.

The vampire howled in pain and his grip slackened just enough for Spike to yank himself free. He danced backwards, getting some distance, and spun to face the second vampire who’d regrouped and was already rushing him again. Ducking, Spike pivoted in the same movement and brought one leg around, smashing it into the woman’s back as she passed and sending her sprawling forward into the larger vampire.

The vampire caught her easily, which was a mistake because it gave Spike time to snatch up a wooden pole from where it had fallen earlier and bring it down swiftly at the woman’s unprotected back.

He stopped the blow just as the pole hit flesh and both of his opponents froze, the woman with her back arched in pain as the pole dug into her flesh, the man with an expression of shock on his face and Spike saw the realization dawn that the pole was long enough to go through the woman’s body entirely and straight into his own heart, neatly staking them both in the same instant.

Spike raised a mocking eyebrow and leaned on the pole suggestively for just a second. The woman whimpered as the pole dug deeper and blood spread over the back of her shirt. Sure he’d made his point, Spike let up, pulling the pole free with a swift jerk and tossed it away carelessly.

“Chivalry gets you dead, mate. Next time, let her fall and worry about the enemy. You’ll both live longer.”

“Yes, Master Spike,” the minion said.

Spike had deliberately picked the minion to spar with for two reasons. He was young and holding on to too many human habits and needed to begin thinking like a vampire. And it never hurt Spike’s reputation that he was able to handily defeat the largest vampire in his Court - even an inexperienced one - in a 3-on-1 fight. The minion had the potential to be a powerful vampire one day if he survived his early years.

He’d chosen two female vampires as his other opponents because he’d noticed that the big minion had a tendency to view female vampires as less able to hold their own than males. While it was true that females often had their own ways of hunting, that was because the seduction of female to male was different among humans not because they were weaker. Vampire strength had little to do with the amount of muscles present in the original human body. Granted, an extremely muscular body was always a help, but the preternatural strength of vampires came from their demon not the human shell they inhabited. Human strength was an adjunct to the demon’s, not the other way around.

Lesson imparted, Spike decided to call it quits for the evening. The night was waning and he’d been out patrolling the territory since sundown before returning to the factory an hour ago. Xander would be warm and fragrant in their bed and wouldn’t be leaving for work for another couple of hours.

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He had an office now, and the only thing that kept Xander from completely freaking out about that was the fact that his office was a converted storage shed behind a customer’s house that he mostly used to store his tools. He liked to pretend the small metal desk and filing cabinet weren’t really there, despite having bought them from the thrift store himself, because having office supplies meant he was in business and running his own business still scared the pants off him.
Mr. Jenkins had been better than his word. He’d set up everything and Xander only had to spend about half a day per week at the office - just long enough to schedule jobs and assign one of the three high school kids he had working for him to do the work. He checked every job himself, before and after, both to size it up and then to make sure it had been done properly, which took another eight hours or so, spread out over the week and that was it. Mr. Jenkins did the books and all Xander had to do was save every scrap of paper and keep track of which jobs they went with. Taxes, paychecks, money, all the scary stuff was being handled by Mr. Jenkins. The business wasn’t making any money, just breaking even, but that was fine, now that he was working full time, he thought of the business as almost a community service. A lot of his customers were on fixed incomes and he charged just enough to cover the wages of his three part-time employees.

Two of the kids working for him were from the demon community and the third was a human in the know. He’d had to restrict his employees to kids who were able to pass as humans since a good third of his customers were elderly humans unable to do the upkeep on their houses and didn’t know about demons. His demon customers were mostly the ones with visible differences who couldn’t do outside work for themselves without drawing unwanted attention, which had been the point in hiring Xander in the first place.

Mr. Jenkins was enjoying “keeping his hand in” as he put it, and had confided to Xander that he was negotiating with his wife about doing a little part-time work to stave off his boredom with retirement. “It’s delicate,” he’d admitted with a conspiratorial twinkle, “she has plenty of hobbies to keep her busy and active but they aren’t things I’m interested in. She wants me to relax and enjoy retirement but I miss the challenge of keeping up with the tax code, of finding that one extra deduction for a customer.” His smile broadened and Xander realized he hadn’t been successful in hiding his reaction. “Don’t worry, you’re not the only one. Everyone who’s not an accountant has the same reaction - you all think we’re crazy because we love numbers.” Xander had laughed, sheepishly admitting that was exactly what he’d been thinking.

The best part was: everyone was happy with the new setup. Xander’s customers were getting their work done quicker without having to wait for Xander to have time to do it himself. His employees were happy to be earning money and because they could schedule their hours any way they wanted as long as they got the work done. Xander was grateful that he was still able to help his customers out because he’d really felt he was providing a necessary service and he enjoyed being able to keep in touch with them, since so many had become friends. Spike was ecstatic that Xander had been able to cut back his hours and spend more time with Spike - which Xander was happy about as well.

Whistling cheerfully to himself, he snapped the padlock closed on his office and headed home to Spike.

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Something was definitely up. Spike was sure of it now. Too many of the rumors around town had proven to have a core of truth behind them and a few too many demons had disappeared. Spike had sent minions out asking questions and the reports they brought back were disquieting. Even looking at the reports conservatively to take into account exaggeration, at least 20 demons had gone missing in the last three weeks with no bodies found. There weren’t any known kills that couldn’t be accounted for by backtracking the Slayer and her helpers, plus Spike’s own tally. Spike didn’t dispose of the bodies he left, other than dragging them somewhere they were a bit less conspicuous, relying on the scavengers in town to take care of the corpses, and the Slayer was a lazy grave digger. When she killed a demon she did little more than scratch a shallow layer of dirt over the body, the corpses were easily found by anyone who cared to look. It was harder to tell if vampires were missing because they didn’t leave inconsiderate corpses cluttering up the landscape
but Spike had to assume that some were falling victim to whatever was going on.

What troubled him the most was that this didn’t feel like a demon power struggle. Few demons had the patience or subtlety to be this covert about trying to take over. The Mayor was the only demon Spike could think of who had spent 100 years building up to a takeover and he hadn’t really been a demon. All in all, this felt more like a human operation than a demonic one.

Xander had passed on the Slayer’s news about seeing soldiers around town and Spike had been on the lookout for them ever since without no success. If they were hunting, it wasn’t a regular nightly patrol.

A government agency being behind what was happening made sense in a way that nothing else Spike had theorized did. Governments had the resources to hide bodies where they wouldn’t be found and the motives to go to that kind of trouble. If the government had learned about demons, they wouldn’t want to alarm the general population and consequently would both keep things quiet and hide all traces of what they were doing.

And wasn’t that just a pisser of a thought? That’s all demons needed, the government sticking their noses in and disrupting a perfectly workable balance between predator and prey. If that’s really what was happening, it might be time to leave town. Demons he could fight but the whole fucking army? Those odds were a bit much even for him.

Glancing up at the sky, Spike decided to sweep the college campus on his way home. Maybe he’d take tomorrow night off like Xander had been urging him to. He and his boy deserved a night on the town, it had been awhile since they both relaxed and taken a night off. Xander needed the break too. His boy worked too hard.

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Xander slapped blindly at the alarm clock, switching off the quiet buzz and rolling back over in his usual brief denial of the need to get up.

The main problem with working construction was the early hours. He had to be on the job site by 7 a.m., which meant getting up at 6 every morning. It didn’t help that Spike didn’t have to get up. Dragging yourself out of bed in the mornings while your partner slumbered blissfully on was hard. Granted, Spike had usually only been in bed for an hour or two by the time Xander was getting up but it was hard to remember that when the alarm was blaring in his reluctant ear.

His questing hand didn’t find Spike this time though, and Xander opened sleepy eyes to find the other side of the bed empty. Surprised, he looked at the alarm clock, wondering if he’d set it wrong somehow last night.

6:01 a.m.

Switching on the bedside light, Xander sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Spike?”

There was no answer from the silent apartment and he threw the sheets back and rolled out of bed. Padding into the kitchen, he felt the first faint trace of unease. Spike wasn’t in the apartment. Frowning, he reached for his cell phone and hit the speed dial, then made an annoyed grumble when Spike’s phone rang in the bedroom. Spike had a tendency to regard his cell phone as something he used to get ahold of Xander, not something necessary for Xander to reach him.

Frustrated, he slapped the phone closed and dropped it back onto the counter. It wasn’t the first time he’d woken in the morning and found Spike not there. There had been a few previous
occasions when Spike had misjudged his timing and been trapped by the sun, having to hole up for
the day in whatever shelter he could find - the sewer tunnels, a handy crypt, or something similar.
It was rare though and it always worried Xander when he woke to find Spike gone. For all his
outspoken contempt for vampires who lived like humans, Spike liked his comforts. When he
wasn’t sleeping, he would while away the long daylight hours watching television or reading one
of his surprisingly eclectic collection of books that overflowed the apartment’s bookshelves.
Anyplace that Spike stayed in for any length of time quickly became filled with comfortable items
and things to help stave off boredom.

With no way of contacting Spike, there was nothing Xander could do until dark. He’d learned that
the hard way the first time Spike hadn’t made it home before dawn. After worrying and fretting for
hours, he’d been forced to see that looking for Spike during the middle of the day was not only
likely to be pointless, but was also potentially dangerous. Images of himself opening a crypt door
and the resulting sunlight streaming into areas that had been safely dark had stopped him cold. He
could kill Spike accidentally that way and he had reluctantly forced himself to wait till dark before
doing anything. Sure enough, Spike had come home shortly after sunset, mildly irritated with
himself for letting a fight with a Nyntakhrr demon drag on for so long that he’d had to spend an
uncomfortable night in a crypt. Spike had been surprised to learn that Xander had spent the day
pacing and worrying himself sick.

That had been before they had gotten cell phones, Xander thought grimly. Spike kept everything
else in the world in the pockets of his duster: cigarettes, weapons, balls of twine, the kitchen sink,
you’d think he could remember to take his cell phone so he could call and let Xander know he was
ok. Spike was going to hear a little something about inconsiderate lovers who forgot their damn
cell phones when he got home.
Chapter 7

Xander made it through the day by reminding himself frequently that Spike had always been fine on the other rare occasions when he hadn’t made it home by dawn. He’d lecture Spike about forgetting his cell phone and Spike would make it up to him - preferably with a naked, sweaty apology, and everything would be fine.

He’d called Buffy mid-morning and asked with seeming casualness about patrol last night but it had apparently been routine - one just-rising vamp still waist-deep in the ground and home to study. No soldier sightings, nothing unusual, a quiet night. He’d made an excuse and hung up before Buffy could really get started on how great college was - her recent topic of choice, so he used the excuse of his break ending to cut her off. Ordinarily, he enjoyed listening to her ramble on excitedly about how much she liked her classes, how much better college was than high school, especially her Psychology class. If he hadn’t been sure Buffy was straight, he would almost have suspected she had a crush on her Psych teacher, Maggie Walsh. Buffy quoted her repeatedly and had gone from thinking Professor Walsh was scary and tough to thinking she was the greatest teacher on earth.

Hanging up, he’d been forced to realize again that there was nothing he could do right now. If there was, he wouldn’t be at work trying his best not to let his distraction get himself or anyone else hurt, he’d be out doing it. There was nothing he could do until sunset. If Spike wasn’t home shortly after sunset, well, he’d cross that bridge if he came to it. Hopefully Spike would come home with a hair-raising tale of a narrow escape and they could get to the naked, sweaty apology part of the evening.

If Spike strolled in the door tonight without a care in the world, Xander thought grimly more than once, he was going to kill him.

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Spike didn’t come home at sunset.

During the hour or so of lingering twilight after the sun had slid below the horizon, freeing vampires to move about now that the deadly rays of direct sunlight were gone, Xander had waited tensely in the living room, listening for the sound of Spike’s boots on the stairs, for his greeting at the back door as he came in from the factory side. But there was only silence.

He’d checked the mansion on his lunch break, kicking himself because he hadn’t thought of it sooner. Its non-vampire friendly amenities had made it a perfect place for Spike to hole up once before when he was hurt and Xander had raced across town, terrified he was going to find Spike, badly wounded and suffering in the phone-less building, only to discover the mansion was as deserted as the apartment. He’d run through the rooms, calling for Spike and checking every nook and cranny until he was forced to admit that Spike wasn’t there. Standing in the empty bedroom he’d once shared with Spike, he’d fought for calm, telling himself that he’d known the mansion was a long shot and that Spike would be home as soon as it was dark.

When full dark had fallen outside the windows of the apartment, Xander felt as frozen inside as if it was mid-winter in the arctic instead of a mild fall evening in southern California. Numbly, he reached for his phone and dialed.

“Buffy, are you patrolling tonight?”
Buffy’s voice sounded obscenely cheerful against the quiet of the apartment. “Nope, I’m off. I think Rob’s got patrol tonight. What’s up?”

“I need your help. Spike didn’t come home this morning.”

“This morning?” Buffy’s voice broke off as she obviously converted to vampire hours. “Oh, Xander, I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head furiously, rejecting her sympathy even if she couldn’t see the gesture. “Will you help me look for him?”

“Xander…” she began, the sympathy clear in her voice.

“He’s in trouble, he’s not dead,” he said sharply. “Will you help me or not?”

“Of course, I’ll help. What do you need?”

“Meet me outside the main branch of the library in 30 minutes,” he said. The city library was about halfway between her dorm and the factory.

“I’ll be there.” After a moment, she added: “We’ll find him, Xander.”

He wondered if she knew of how fake her encouragement sounded. He didn’t care, he had calls to make.

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Twenty people were waiting outside the closed building when Xander arrived. He’d called Mr. Olsen and Sgt. Morgan and they’d started a phone tree for him, calling in all the patrol volunteers and a number of others to help him.

Xander had hoped that Spike would come back while he was mobilizing the search party but the apartment had remained worryingly empty. Now he stood at the top of the library steps so everyone could see him.

“Thanks for coming, everyone. I think you all know what’s happening: Spike’s missing and I need help finding him. His regular patrol areas are the cemeteries, the major tunnels, the business district, the college campus, and the demon areas of town. Pretty much everything but a few of the residential areas. It’s a lot of ground to cover.”

Sgt. Morgan stepped up beside him and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “We’ll coordinate our efforts and be able to cover them all. Fifteen minutes of planning while we wait for the others to arrive will save us a lot of wasted effort.”

Xander nodded. He’d known that running around town blindly wasn’t going to get him anywhere and it was a relief to watch Sgt. Morgan go into action: unfurling a gridded town map onto a folding table and distributing flashlights and spare battery packs to people who hadn’t thought to bring their own. The Sergeant drafted helpers and set to work making lists of everyone present and assigning map sections to two-person teams and making sure at least one member of each pair had a cell phone. Teams without cell phones were assigned to the populated areas where they would be able to find a phone to check in on.

Xander watched with stifled impatience, knowing that this was necessary preliminary work but itching to get out and start looking. When everyone had been assigned search areas and done an equipment check, Sgt. Morgan addressed them in his parade-ground voice that easily silenced the
“Remember, people, you are searching for a vampire, not a human. That means you’re checking places a vampire can hole up during daylight hours. Don’t bother with anything not sheltered. Check the crypts if you’re assigned to one of the cemeteries, and basements if you’re in town. Look for signs of forced entry and crypt doors barred from the inside.”

“Don’t call his name when you’re searching,” Xander ordered. “Use his human name: William Pratt. A bunch of people searching, calling the name ‘Spike’, is going to be overheard by vampires from the Court. If they find out he’s missing, they’ll be a war over the territory and that’s the last thing the town needs.” He looked around the group and saw grim understanding on their faces. “Spike will answer if he hears people yelling his human name,” he assured them. Spike would be annoyed - he always acted like his human name was this big, shameful secret - but he’d answer. “And thank you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your help.”

“We’ll find him, Xander,” someone called and there was a general murmur of agreement from the crowd, now nearly 40 strong.

“Everyone know their assigned areas?” Sgt. Morgan asked. “Good. Let’s move out. Everyone checks in every 30 minutes, no exceptions, and stay in your assigned area. If we don’t hear from you, we’re going to assume you’re in trouble and we’ll want to be able to get to you quickly. Report in immediately if you find anything. Remember, people. This is Sunnydale. Be careful.”

The crowd dispersed at Sgt. Morgan’s command and Xander lingered for a moment by Sgt. Morgan’s command table. “Thanks, Sergeant.” Words failed him and he gripped his flashlight convulsively as he struggled for control. “Thank you,” he said again, not knowing how else to express his gratitude.

Sgt. Morgan gave him a confident smile, looking up from organizing his materials, preparing to keep track of the pairs checking in with him. “Just glad I’ve had a lot of practice at this, Xander.”

Buffy moved quietly to his side. “Let’s go, Xander, the sooner we head out, the sooner we find him.”

He nodded, and spun on his heels, heading for their assigned section of town. He wished Buffy and the Sergeant were better liars. Their voices and smiles were confident but their eyes said they thought Spike was dead.

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“Come home with me, Xander. You shouldn’t be at the apartment alone.”

The sky was heavily streaked with pink and yellow and the sun would be up any minute now. The searchers had packed it in after a long, unsuccessful night. Most of them had gone home directly from their assigned sections which had been searched two and three times as Sergeant Morgan rotated the pairs to cover the same ground with fresh eyes and ears. Xander, Buffy and Giles had returned to the command post where Xander had watched silently as the final parties checked in one last time and were sent home.

He’d remained standing there, silent and numb, until Sergeant Morgan packed his equipment, laid a sympathetic hand on Xander’s shoulder, spoke quietly to Giles and Buffy, and left for his own home.

Xander shook his head. “Thanks, Giles, but I just want to go home. I’ll be fine.”
“Mom would love to have you stay at our house,” Buffy offered quietly.

“No!” Realizing that had come out way too sharply, Xander scrubbed his face with both hands, trying to force back the exhaustion of the long, fruitless night. “Sorry. I appreciate it, but I need to be home in case Spike tries to call me.”

He wished he didn’t see the look Buffy and Giles exchanged. They really needed to work on their subtle.

“Xander…” Buffy bit her lip and it was obvious that she’d changed her mind about what she’d started to say. “Spike knows you have your cell phone. He’ll be able to reach you on that.”

“I appreciate it, guys, but I’ll be fine.”

“Xander.” Giles hesitated like Buffy had just done, but he continued on after the briefest pause, “I’m not sure it’s safe for you to remain in the apartment with Spike… away. Like it or not, Spike’s presence is what keeps you safe from the vampires of his Court. If Spike isn’t there, you could be in danger.”

“The other vampires don’t know he’s missing,” Xander answered with more confidence than he really felt.

“You don’t know that. Even if it’s true, you won’t be able to keep his absence hidden for very long.”

Xander refused to meet their worried eyes. “Yeah. I’ve got a backup plan for that.”

“A backup plan? Why don’t I like the sound of that,” Buffy said suspiciously.

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Climbing the apartment stairs wearily after Giles had reluctantly dropped him off, Xander couldn’t help calling Spike’s name as he entered but silence was the only response. Despite the fact that he hadn’t really expected an answer, it was the final crushing blow of the long day and night of worry. He’d been up for almost 24 hours now and he had to get a few hours sleep or he wouldn’t be able to function. And Spike needed him to be thinking and functioning.

Setting the alarm for noon, Xander shucked his shoes and gave up on the rest, falling fully clothed on top of the bed and giving in to desperately needed sleep, grateful that it was Saturday and he wasn’t expected at work.

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He made the call to Los Angeles in the late afternoon. He’d spent the early part of the afternoon answering calls from people asking about Spike but he had no news and they had nothing to offer but unwanted sympathy. It was clear that everyone else was giving Spike up for dead and just waiting for Xander to admit it so they could express their own sorrow and sympathy.

It made him want to scream and only the desperate hope that Spike would call kept him from pitching the phone through the window. Spike had only been missing for a day and a half. The police wouldn’t even take a missing persons report until a human had been gone for 48 hours and people were already writing Spike off as dust.

And that was the problem. Dead vampires disappeared. Their ashes blew away in the breezes that cooled the fall nights, leaving no trace behind, not even a handful of fine-grained ashes to bury in a
blue vase in a park on the edge of town. Nothing. Nothing left behind to help remember a pair of vivid blue eyes that sparkled with wicked laughter, or a trademark smirk, or the way a vampire cocked his head to one side when he was curious or puzzled by something.

“Stop it.” His own voice, loud in the silent apartment, shocked him out of his thoughts. “Knock it off, Xander. Spike will be home soon and he’d be pissed as hell to find you sitting here like a useless, depressed lump.”

Throwing his shoulders back and straightening up defiantly, he fished a scrap of paper out of his pocket and dialed the number he’d gotten from Buffy last night.

“Angel Investigations, we help the hopeless.”

Too worried even to roll his eyes at the pretentious greeting, Xander just said: “I need to talk to Angel.”

“Angel doesn’t usually talk to people on the phone. He’s more an in-person guy. That’s why he has me to screen his calls.” The man had a slight Irish accent and Xander wondered who he was.

“What’s the problem?”

“I need to talk to Angel,” he repeated. “Tell him it’s Xander, he’ll talk to me.”

“Confident, aren’t you?” the man said cheerfully. “I’ll see what he says.”

The phone was set down with a clunk and Xander could hear footsteps moving away. He waited, tapping his fingers nervously, for what seemed like forever.

“Xander?” Angel sounded doubtful, like he didn’t really believe it was Xander on the line.

“Yeah, it’s me. Spike needs your help.”

He thoroughly resented the sigh that carried clearly over the line. “Why are you calling?”

“Because Spike’s missing and can’t call for himself,” he snapped. “I need you to get back here and help find him.”

There was a brief silence before Angel answered. “Missing?”

“He didn’t come home yesterday morning,” Xander told him flatly. “We’ve searched but you’re a vampire, you have a better chance of finding him than anyone else.”

“Xander,” Angel’s voice was surprisingly sympathetic. Sympathetic in a way Xander didn’t want to hear and refused to accept. “You have to face the fact that Spike’s probably dead. When vampires disappear…”

“He’s not dead. I’d know. So stop making excuses and get back here. Your Childe needs you.”

“Xander, I can’t just drop everything. I have people who are depending on me here.”

“Angel, I don’t give a damn what you’re doing or how important you think it is. Get your ass back here now. Spike needs your help.”

“Xander…”

“Angel, you owe me. Never mind what you owe your Childe, you owe me. You kidnapped me and held me prisoner and bit me. You owe me. Now get back here and help find your Childe or so help
me, when this is over, I’m coming to Los Angeles and staking you myself.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Xander knew his desperation had come through clearly and he didn’t care. He clung to the phone, concentrating on getting his breathing under control, and waited. Finally, there was a long sigh.

“All right. I’ll be there by midnight.”

Relief washed over Xander in a wave, until his knees almost buckled and he had to cling to the counter to stay upright. “Thanks, Angel.”

“If he’s alive, we’ll find him.”

“Good, because he’s alive.”

Xander hung up before Angel could say anything else. He knew it wasn’t fair, pulling the guilt card on Angel. It’s not like Angel had known about that ridiculous happiness clause on his curse and it had been Angelus, not Angel, who had kidnapped and terrorized Xander. He didn’t care. He’d do a lot more than that to get Spike back.

Running his fingers over his Claim mark, he wished there was some way he could use the mark to locate Spike. He’d asked Giles this morning as Giles was driving him home if there was any way to find Spike by magic. Giles had reminded him with the careful patience that everyone was starting to treat him with that magic didn’t work well on or around vampires because they were non-living beings and magic was tied to life forces. There were no effective spells that Giles was aware of for locating a particular vampire although he had promised to look into it.

It was another few hours until dark. He couldn’t call out the entire demon community to help him search the same ground all over again. He needed to think of new places to search, something else to do. Not that his friends wouldn’t help, but they would just be humoring him. It always came down to the fact that vampires turned to dust and no one expected to find a body. To them, a missing vampire was a dead vampire. Xander was stubbornly clinging to the hope that Spike had just disappeared, like the rumors Spike had been tracking down, the rumors of mysterious hunters who captured rather than killed.

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“You want me to do what?”

Angel had arrived at the apartment well before midnight and Xander, hearing booted feet climbing the outside stairs, had felt his heart lurch. He’d run for the door and flung it open, forgetting every ingrained rule about safety in Sunnydale, only to have his wild hope sent crashing to the floor at the sight of Angel’s bulky figure climbing the last few steps.

Having asked Angel to come, it wasn’t exactly kosher to slam the door in his face but that was exactly what Xander felt like doing. Gritting his teeth, he reminded himself sternly that it wasn’t Angel’s fault that he wasn’t Spike or that Xander had just returned from more hours of useless searching. So, instead of slamming the door, he stood back from the threshold and invited Angel in. Fortunately, Angel had never been one for pleasantries because Xander so wasn’t in the mood.

Leading the way into the kitchen, he outlined his plan to Angel, who didn’t take it well. In fact, Angel was staring at him like he’d lost his mind. Having had time to think this through, Xander
just repeated calmly: “I want you to stand in for Spike at the Court until we find him.”

Angel’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water and his dumbfounded expression was beginning to tick Xander off. Crossing his arms stubbornly, knowing he was right about this, Xander glared at him.

“You know as well as I do that if Spike doesn’t make an appearance soon, the Court is going to assume something’s happened to him. The first step is probably the minions storming this apartment. Then there’s going to be an all-out fight over who’s going to be the next Master. You need to get down there and take over for Spike before that happens. The last thing this town needs is a vampire turf-war. Who knows what a new Master will do but I doubt they will be as human- and Slayer-friendly as Spike is,” he finished pointedly.

Angel finally seemed to get over his stunned disbelief and was shaking his head. “Xander, vampires don’t babysit each other’s Courts.”

“Vampires don’t have souls or help Slayers either. You and Spike aren’t exactly traditional vampires, so why is this any different?”

“If I take over the Court, the vampires will assume that I’ve dusted Spike and am taking over as his replacement. He won’t be able to step back in and run the Court again, Xander. The Court vampires will know he was defeated and won’t accept him.”

Xander waved a dismissive hand. “We can deal with that when Spike’s back,” he said confidently. Spike could defeat any vampire in the Court. He’d kill every minion there and start all over if he had to. The minions knew that - that Spike was absolutely ruthless when he had to be. They respected that about him. Spike would dust a few troublemakers and be back on top in no time. Xander had no worries about that. “For now, tell them anything you want. Tell them Spike is out of town on business, tell them your doing your Childe a favor while he’s off fighting demons in Florida, tell them he’s questing for the Holy Grail - or whatever vampires quest for. Spike doesn’t let them question him, he just tells them how it is. You can do the same thing.”

He could tell Angel was thinking about it. His eyes shifted away and his brows drew closer together as he scowled, not at Xander but at whatever he was thinking.

“It might work,” he said slowly, obviously disliking the idea. “I thought you wanted me to search for Spike.”

“I do,” Xander said promptly. “We’ve searched the tunnels, the cemeteries, everywhere Spike usually patrols, but we don’t really have anyone who can listen in on the gossip in the demon bars and you have a much better sense of smell than anyone we had on the search teams.” He bit his lip, knowing his anxiety was breaking free of the tight control he’d been keeping it under. “I’m hoping you can find him even if we couldn’t.”

Angel’s face had gone expressionless as Xander spoke. Granted, the vampire didn’t exactly like to give his facial muscles a workout but Xander knew what it meant and he kept talking before Angel could say anything. “Angel, if someone killed Spike, the Court would know about it. If it was a vampire, the one that killed him would have been down there taking over and I’d have been dead before I woke up to learn that Spike hadn’t come home. If it was another kind of demon, the whole town would be talking about it. He’s not just an anonymous vampire, he’s Master of the Territory.”

Angel nodded thoughtfully, and his shoulders straightened slightly as if a burden he didn’t know he was carrying had just quietly slipped off his shoulders. He studied Xander intently for a minute.

“You could be right.”
Xander closed his eyes, almost sagging in relief, grateful beyond words for the slight encouragement. He had been fighting a silent battle against everyone else, everyone who was busily writing Spike off as dead, and having even one person on his side was a relief.

“I’ll do a sweep through town for the next couple of hours. By myself,” he added sternly, but with understanding when Xander opened his mouth to volunteer. “I’ll be able to cover more ground alone.” Which was true. “I’ll be back an hour before dawn and will talk to the Court then. Most of the vampires will recognize me from the fight with the Mayor. That will help. No point in going down now,” he explained, somewhat unnecessarily in Xander’s opinion. “Most of the vampires won’t be at the Court until much closer to dawn. I’ll think of something to tell them while I’m gone. Wait here until I get back.”

Despite his resentment at being given orders, Xander just nodded in agreement. He could use a few hours sleep and, for now, he’d done all he could do. With Angel’s help, Spike would have an intact Court to come back to. If he had to, Xander would take Jose into his confidence, but he wanted to wait until he had no other choice before he took that step. Right now, the less the Court knew, the better.
Consciousness returned slowly, grudgingly, sending complaining bursts of pain through his system. Every sense was screaming at him that the environment was hostile. Even through closed lids he could sense the overly bright light surrounding him, not the deadly yellow of sunlight but a cold, sterile white that felt as dangerous, even if not as instantly fatal. The air was antiseptic and recycled, far removed from anything natural. Sound battered him: metal clanging, the soft whimpering of a child in pain, snarls and growls and harshly barked orders sounding faintly in the far distance.

None of the noises were coming from his immediate proximity and he cracked his eyes open warily, hoping to glimpse his surroundings and gauge the threat level. Even with his eyes open mere slits, he was nearly blinded by the harsh light that seemed to come from all directions. He slammed his lids shut and swore involuntarily. Knowing he’d blown any pretense of continued unconsciousness, he rolled quickly onto his side and pushed himself to his feet, slitting his eyes open cautiously until they adjusted to the light.

What the fuck?

He was in a small room. The floor, the ceiling and three walls were covered in white tiles. The fourth wall was glass, a floor-to-ceiling panel looking out onto an equally white hallway. Moving forward, Spike pressed his hands against the glass, trying to see down the hall. Lightning crackled in the air and he was jolted with enough electricity to throw him back a step or two. Bloody fucking hell, someone wasn’t playing games. That amount of electricity could’ve killed a human.

Electricity. Spike frowned as memory returned.

He’d been doing a sweep of the college campus when he’d heard humans approaching. A small group, three or four, wearing boots and carrying weapons - he could smell the oil they used on the mechanisms. Before he’d even had time to turn around, he’d been hit from behind by something that had sent electricity tearing through his body, dropping him instantly, muscles twitching uncontrollably as he struggled unsuccessfully to stay on his feet. Unconsciousness had swamped him but he thought he’d heard approaching footsteps. Booted feet and a voice saying: “Bag and tag it”.

Waking up here. Wherever the hell that was.

He moved forward again, careful not to come into contact with the glass this time, and looked outside, seeing nothing but the white tiled corridor and a row of identical cells across the wide hall. The cells across the hall were empty but he could hear faints sounds on either side of him: pacing footsteps and a quiet muttering, the soft whimpering he’d heard as he woke up. Cautiously edging closer to the glass, he attempted to see down the length of the hall but he could feel the electricity prickling against his skin and he wasn’t keen on being hit with the full effect again.

He passed one hand cautiously over the glass, experimenting. He could move his hand to within about an eighth of an inch from the glass and then he could feel the static charge building. He stepped away from the glass, backing up three long steps until his shoulders made contact with the rear wall. He took one moment to brace himself, then charged forward, leaping up and delivering a two-footed kick at the glass that had the weight of his entire body behind it.
Pain crashed over him as he was thrown backwards by the electrical field, crashing to the floor and sliding along the cool tiles. Rolling slowly to his feet, he swore bitterly when he saw the glass wall hadn’t even been scratched by his attempt.

There was nothing. No furniture, nothing on the walls, nothing that could be used as a weapon or tool. Not even a bucket for waste - which either meant they knew he wasn’t human or they didn’t expect to keep him here long enough to make a mess.

Whoever ‘they’ were.

Restlessly prowling the limits of the cell, Spike thought furiously. This setup smacked of humans. Demons who were into imprisonment and torture tended to have lairs like Dr. Frankenstein: medieval equipment and lots of old-fashioned cutting implements, or herbs and potions and bubbling cauldrons over open fires. This antiseptic, sterile environment said mad scientist of the human variety. Even from what little he could see from his cell, he could tell the place was huge and probably only recently open for business given the number of empty cells. Everything had the untouched, unused look of a new building. Nothing scratched or dented or stained. No inmates carving their names into the white tiles, no sign of wear from restless pacing.

A line of empty cells across the way, and a half-full facility. Spike suspected he’d just stumbled across the solution to the demon disappearances in town. He could handle anything the demon world threw at him, but this setup made him cautious and, for now, he settled himself to wait, pacing the confines of his cell. He wanted more information about what was going on before he did anything to call attention to himself.

Angel returned as promised as the night was waning, just shaking his head in response to Xander’s anxious questions about whether he’d found anything.

“I’ll go down to the Court from here,” Angel said, not looking enthusiastic. “You should leave, just to be safe.” When Xander looked at him blankly, he explained: “This could go very badly. I don’t want you getting caught in the middle if it turns into a fight.”

Xander felt a pang of guilt for having pretty much forced Angel to do this and opened his mouth to say something - he wasn’t sure what, but Angel cut him off with an upraised hand.

“You were right. Something has to be done about the Court and I’m probably the only one who can. I’m not looking forward to this but it’s not anything I can’t handle.”

Xander let himself accept that; he needed Angel’s help too badly to second guess himself now. “Thanks, Angel. I’ll be back in a couple of hours. There’s human blood in the frig.” He stood there awkwardly for a moment, not sure what to say. Angel looked equally uncomfortable and Xander finally just nodded his head, snagged the keys to Spike’s car and left the apartment.

Driving away without any of Spike’s flair for burning rubber, Xander caught himself wondering if anything would ever be the same again. Hastily shoving that thought away, he signaled and spun the wheel to the left, heading for the Summers’ house. Mrs. Summers would let him park Spike’s car there for awhile, he was sure. He’d figure out what to do next on the way.

Spike was going out of his mind with boredom. The stark white cell offered nothing to distract him from endless fruitless speculation about his captors and their purpose. Humans just didn’t handle
vampires this way. Disbelief and denial were the usual reactions. When that gave way to unwilling belief, fear and disgust followed. Humans in the know killed vampires, even if for most it was a one-time thing before they gladly sank back into their comfortable world of denial. Yeah, a few became obsessed, turned themselves into professional demon hunters and tracked down demonic prey for a few years until they in turn were killed by something bigger and badder than themselves. But demon hunters killed, they didn’t take prisoners.

He’d spent some time wondering if the Watchers’ Council was behind this but, on the whole, he was inclined to rule them out. Not their style. When Watchers’ imprisoned vampires, he’d seen first hand that they did it in the old-fashioned way: chains and dungeons and boarded up manor houses - or as close as they could come. That vampire they’d planned to use to kill the Slayer had been kept in a bricked-up closet in an abandoned building. This high tech, laboratory sterility didn’t fit with what he knew of the Council.

There was a faint mechanical sound and Spike looked up. A small hatch in the ceiling was swinging down and he ducked instinctively as something dropped through the opening.

It was a bag of blood.

Spike stared at it in disbelief for a moment, then looked back up at the closing door. Stretching up with both hands, he closed his fingers on the edge and pulled down hard. There was a moment of struggle, and the smooth movement ground to a halt, the mechanism whining in protest as Spike strained against it, trying to force it back open. He couldn’t get a good grip on it and was forced to let go, dropping back down off his toes as he watched it snap closed. It had been far too small an opening for escape, but right now even property damage would have felt good.

He glanced down at the bag of blood, surprised again to see it was human blood, then shrugged and picked it up. If they were going to feed him, least he could do was keep up his strength so he was ready to kill them when they showed their faces.

“Don't drink it. It's drugged.”

The hoarse whisper came from the cell on his left and Spike dropped the bag in disgust, not even questioning the information. He should’ve known.

“Wonderful. And who are you, mate?”

“I'm a rat. I'm a lab rat, just like the others. They're gonna kill us, you know.” The voice grew a little stronger, but the owner was no less frightened sounding.

“And how are they gonna do that?”

“They starve you. Then when you're ready to bite your own arm, they shoot out one of those packets. You drink, and the next thing, you're gone. And that's when they do the experiments.

“And ‘they’ are? The government? Nazis? A major cosmetics company?” Spike asked absently, his thoughts racing.

“I don’t know. I’ve been lucky, they haven’t come for me yet.”

“Got a brain still, don’t you? What do they look like?” he asked sharply. More than anything, he needed information. If he could get this vampire to pull his head out of his arse, he might be able to learn something useful.
“Xander.”

A hand on his shoulder gave him a gentle shake and he startled awake. He was on the sofa on the Summers’ front porch and the sun was well above the horizon. He must have fallen asleep as he was waiting for Mrs. Summers to wake up. The neighborhood was beginning to stir and Mrs. Summers looked worried as she studied him with concerned eyes. She was wearing a bathrobe and had a folded newspaper held absently in one hand; she must have stepped outside to pick up the paper and seen him lying there.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, seeing he was awake. “Why didn’t you knock?”

“Didn’t want to wake you up.” He shrugged, managing a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, I got here at dawn. I didn’t spend the night out here or anything.” He got to his feet, taking a moment to stretch the kinks out, then asked: “Do you have a few minutes? I don’t want to make you late for work or anything.”

“It’s Sunday,” she pointed out, her eyebrows going up.

“Oh yeah.” He felt stupid for missing the obvious but he was tired.

“What’s wrong, Xander?” she repeated.

His eyes dropped from her steady scrutiny. “Can I leave Spike’s car here for a few days?” he asked, avoiding the issue as if not putting it into words would make it go away. Which was stupid, given how many times he’d said it over the last two days.

“Of course.” Mrs. Summers apparently decided not to push. “Come inside, I was just fixing breakfast.”

He followed her inside, grateful she was letting him off the hook for the moment, and sat down at the kitchen island as she moved from refrigerator to cupboard to stove, beating eggs and frying bacon. The smells awakened his appetite and he realized how long it had been since he’d eaten. As she worked, Mrs. Summers talked lightly about the show she was working on for the gallery and the trip she was taking over Thanksgiving, avoiding any serious topics and carefully not asking any questions. He was grateful that she was willing to wait until he was ready to talk.

Setting two plates down on the island, Mrs. Summers took the chair beside him and Xander ate hungrily. Finally, though, the dishes were stacked in the sink and he couldn’t put off reality any longer. “Spike’s missing,” he told her quietly, turning to face her. “He didn’t come home Friday morning and I haven’t been able to find him.”

Mrs. Summers put a hand to her chest in shock. “Oh, Xander, I’m so sorry. What can I do?”

“I’m not sure what any of us can do,” he said helplessly. “A bunch of us searched all the demon parts of town all night and didn’t find any sign of him. I went out again last night and so did Angel. There’s no sign of him and no sign that anything happened to him, he’s just… gone.”

His voice broke on the last word and Mrs. Summers’ arms were suddenly around him, holding him close. He leaned into her embrace, hugging her back. After a long moment, he pushed back, looking up at her apologetically. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier but I was sure we’d find him and Spike would kill both of us if you’d gone out with the search parties.”

“We’ll talk about you coddling me when we find Spike,” she said, giving him a level look that told him how serious she was. “Now,” she said, “tell me why you think he’s still alive.”
Surprisingly, her brisk tone steadied him. “If he’d been killed by another vampire or demon, the news would be all over town. Anything strong enough to kill him would have to know he’s Master of the Hellmouth and they would be bragging about taking him down. A young, inexperienced demon that didn’t know who he is wouldn’t have been able to kill him. Same with a human hunter: if they’re good enough to kill Spike, we should have heard about them being in town.”

“That makes sense,” Mrs. Summers said thoughtfully. “So, what’s your theory?”

“Spike’s been trying to track down some rumors that have been floating around town about demons going missing. He hasn’t had any success but he thought there was something to them. It wasn’t just talk, an unusual number of demons have disappeared without explanation recently. If something’s happening to other demons, why not vampires? You can’t tell if a vampire’s disappeared because…” he faltered to a stop, unable to complete the sentence.

“Because vampires don’t leave a body,” Mrs. Summers finished for him quietly. “Do you have any idea of what’s behind the disappearances? Has Buffy seen anything unusual?”

“The only thing unusual anyone’s reported is there are a bunch of soldiers who’ve been seen around town a couple of times. A friend on the army base says they aren’t local troops.”

“Sergeant Morgan?”

“You know him?” he asked in surprise.

Mrs. Summers’ smile had more than a touch of mischief. “Buffy has gotten a little better about telling me some of what goes on with her job as the Slayer.” The laugh lines at the corners of her eyes deepened as she continued. “Don’t worry, I suspect she still leaves a lot out.”

“Well, then, yeah, Sergeant Morgan says that none of their soldiers are patrolling the town and definitely not out in force and armed. Buffy said the soldiers looked like they were hunting for something.”

“You think the government is behind the disappearances?” To Xander’s surprise, Mrs. Summers didn’t instantly dismiss the idea. “It’s possible, I suppose. Heaven knows the government has been involved in a lot of shady and downright unethical projects over the years.” She bit her lip and looked at Xander, her eyes darkening with concern. “But, Xander, you have to know that if the government has learned about demons, they have the resources to make sure any bodies aren’t found.”

“I know,” he said grimly. He was achingly aware that that was the most logical answer if the government was involved: that they were killing demons and then disposing the bodies to keep the general public happily ignorant. “But the soldiers Buffy saw have been armed with human weapons - guns and tazer rifles and stuff that doesn’t kill vampires.”

It was weak but it was all he had to go on - bullets didn’t kill vampires and Buffy hadn’t seen any of the soldiers carrying vampire-type weapons: swords or axes or crossbows.

“So, what do we do now?”

He smiled, grateful for the ‘we’, even if he had no intention of letting Mrs. Summers get involved in anything crazy. “The only idea I’ve got right now is to try and find the soldiers and follow them to their base. They have to be stationed somewhere and then the question is: are they bringing prisoners back with them? If so, that’s where Spike is.”

Mrs. Summers looked unhappy. “That sounds dangerous.”
“If it was just soldiers on maneuvers, it’s not a problem and we can forget about them. If they’re based here, something’s up because otherwise the local base would know about them.”

“Wouldn’t Sergeant Morgan know if there was an army unit using Sunnydale as their base, even for temporary maneuvers?”

“He should. That means the mystery soldiers are the only unusual thing anyone’s seen and the most likely cause of the disappearances.” Selfish as it was, reminding himself that other demons had also disappeared was comforting and gave him hope that Spike had just disappeared, not been killed.

“There’s no chance you’ll let me go with you is there?”

“No. This has to be done at night and I won’t risk you getting hurt. That’s the only time the soldiers have been seen.”

“Be careful, Xander. I’ll expect regular calls telling me that you’re ok and what’s happening.”

“Promise.” Xander stood to leave, then hesitated. “Thanks, for everything,” he said inadequately, giving her an impulsive hug. She’d helped him figure out his next step by talking his way through the situation and he was no longer floundering and spinning his wheels. He had a plan now and could hardly wait for nightfall to put it into action.
He hadn’t thought that Angel would be sitting up waiting for him when he got back to the apartment. Actually, he didn’t really know what he’d expected - it wasn’t like Angel could stay upstairs in the third floor rooms with the minions. Even taking one of the second floor rooms reserved for Spike’s Lieutenants would be a problem, given how status conscious vampires were. While Angel was standing in for Spike, he probably really had to stay in the apartment, Xander realized, even if it made both of them uncomfortable.

“How did it go?” he asked. Angel wasn’t showing any obvious signs of injury, which had to be a good sign. He was sitting at the kitchen table and barely even turned his head when Xander walked in. Brooding, Xander thought uncharitably. Angel seemed to feel that the only way he could convince people he had a soul was to spend most of his time acting depressed. He was the polar opposite of Spike, who enjoyed unlife to the hilt, sometimes in ways that squicked Xander but at least Spike was always fun to be around. Unlike Angel, who lurked in the shadows and never seemed part of any group, Spike inhabited his world in a way Angel never did.

“Better than I thought,” Angel said. “A couple of the minions asked questions and I channeled Spike and dusted them. Everyone else decided to accept that Spike was being Spike and had wandered off for a week.”

Xander’s jaw dropped. Had Angel just made a joke? Not to mention knowing about channeling - a new age concept that seemed way too modern for Mr. I-Don’t-Live-in-the-Human-World. “Angel?” he asked suspiciously, one hand going surreptitiously for the stake he always carried as he took a cautious step backwards.

Angel saw the doubt in his face and sighed. “It’s me. I think some of Cordelia’s LA-speak has rubbed off on me.”

“Cordelia?” Off-hand, Xander couldn’t remember Cordy ever talking to Angel. “She’s working for me.”

“Cordelia Chase?” Xander clarified, just to be sure. At Angel’s nod, he repeated incredulously: “Cordelia Chase is working? For you? In what alternate dimension?”

Angel gave him an exasperated look. “We ran into each other while I was on a case and she decided I needed an office manager.” He frowned. “Maybe a keeper,” he admitted. “Actually, I’m not really sure how it happened, but yes, she’s working for me.”

Xander laughed. “That sounds like Cordy. One minute, she’s insulting you and the next, you’re doing whatever she wants.”

And did Angel really just mutter something about him getting that right?

“Getting back to the subject,” Angel said pointedly and Xander’s smile died. “This is just a stopgap measure. It won’t work for long. Now that the Court knows that Spike isn’t here, they’re going to be watching. They’ll accept a short absence, but not anything longer. Vampires just don’t leave their territories and expect to return and still be Master.”

“Spike will be back before then, if we’re lucky,” he said, with more confidence than he was actually feeling.
He filled Angel in about the soldiers and his plan to follow them and find out if they had some sort of base in town. Angel listened silently, his frown growing steadily deeper.

“Clandestine groups don’t generally like being spied on,” he said when Xander was through.

“So, I’ll be careful. If they see me, I’ll just be a dumb local kid out late.”

“You could find yourself a dumb local kid being held in a military stockade,” Angel warned. “I’ll go with you.”

Xander shook his head. “No. If they’re hunting vampires and I’m seen with one, I really will end up in prison. I’m better off on my own. I can wander around, clutching a half-empty beer can, and pretending to be lost if anyone sees me.”

“That will just get you killed the old-fashioned way,” Angel disagreed. “By vampires.”

“I’m not helpless, you know,” Xander snapped. “Spike’s spent a lot of time training me so I can take care of myself.”

Angel opened his mouth to object again but Xander got there first. “Besides, you can do something about that. Can you keep the vampires in the Court off the streets tonight? Ordinarily, none of them would touch me because they know Spike would kill them in ways I don’t even want to think about but I think it would be better if we didn’t give any of them a chance to get any ideas while they think Spike’s out of town.”

Angel looked thoughtful. Or maybe constipated. It was sometimes hard to tell with him. “I can call for an inspection - a demonstration of their skills. That wouldn’t be unreasonable, since I’m not familiar with them and don’t know their strengths and weaknesses.”

“Get the Lieutenants to help you organize it and make sure everyone’s there for at least the first part of the night,” Xander suggested. “I’ll make sure I’m back here by 2 a.m., can you keep them occupied that long?”

Angel nodded absently, looking like he was already working out what hoops he was going to make the minions jump through. After a moment’s silence, Xander guessed the conversation was over.

“Thanks, Angel,” he said quietly. “I’m going to get some sleep. Are you ok on the couch?”

“I’ll be fine.”

It would be politer, he supposed, to offer the guest the bed but Spike would go ballistic if Angel slept in their bed, even with Xander safely in another room. Vampire territoriality trumped Miss Manners every time, otherwise furniture tended to get broken.

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The moron in the next cell didn’t know much, despite having been here for a couple of weeks. He was about the least observant git Spike had ever had the misfortune to question. As Spike had guessed, the place was run by humans. His neighbor had seen Spike and some others brought into the facility by soldiers. He’d seen two types of clothing in the facility: military uniforms and lab coats. Sometimes humans came for a prisoner, and after a great deal of prodding, Spike was able to get the idiot to remember that it would either be a mixed party of soldiers and lab coats or, rarely, just a couple of lab coats who did the fetching. Some of the demons didn’t come back, others came back unconscious and stinking of chemicals but the vampire had never tried to find out what had happened to him.
Pacing agitatedly up and back in front of the glass wall of his cell, Spike made a note to kill the moron as soon as he got the chance. He was giving vampires a bad name, cowering in his cell and not trying to escape or even learn about his surroundings. Not like there was anything else to do except study their captors, trapped in their tiny cells without even room to get a decent pace going. Periodically, humans in white lab coats would walk the length of the corridor, occasionally taking notes on pads of paper as they paused in front of one cell or another. Spike could hear the vampire next to him moving to the rear of his cell every time the humans walked by and smell the fear that rolled off him. If he was human, he’d have been pissing himself, Spike thought in disgust.

His neighbor on the other side was a Klantosh demon. They were impressive looking - enormous, hairy things with huge curving horns - but they weren’t fighters. Unfortunately, he didn’t speak the language, so he couldn’t learn anything useful from it.

He eyed the packet of blood he’d kicked to the corner, wondering if he should empty it and pretend to be drugged. It was a ploy that he’d prefer to save until there were no other options. The idea of lying sprawled on the floor of the enemy camp, faking helplessness, didn’t exactly appeal, especially when he knew so little about what went on here. He’d save that for a last resort and he was nowhere near that level of desperation yet.

When the soldiers came for him, Spike was on his feet at the back of the cell, waiting for them. He’d removed his coat and set it down on the floor while he paced the confines of his cell restlessly, waiting his chance through the long hours. The bright, never-changing white light was throwing off his sense of time and he wasn’t sure how long he’d been here or even if it was day or night - a serious handicap to any escape attempt but one he’d just have to deal with when the time came.

Booted feet strode down the corridor, the steps echoing loudly in the glass and tile world. Not the quiet steps of the slow moving lab coats; these were likely the soldiers. Spike could hear both of his neighbors moving towards the back wall, the vampire whimpering in fear as he retreated to the false safety of the rear of his cell, confirming his guess. He wasn’t suicidal enough to call attention to himself deliberately, but he scooped up his coat in one hand and waited tensely to see if the approaching steps were going to walk past. Either way, they were his first chance to see the enemy face to face. The lab coats were minions, these were the real danger.

Two soldiers stopped outside the glass wall of his cell and he glared at them, letting his features slide into his true face. They stared unemotionally back at him, both holding guns at the ready.

“An armed escort. I’m flattered. Is this the point where I’m supposed to say ‘take me to your leader’?” he said flippantly. “I only ask because I never watch those kind of movies except under duress, so I may have got the timing wrong.”

The soldiers exchanged glances, the taller one looking surprised. The short, stocky one just shook his head and ordered quietly: “Open it.”

The taller one nodded and stepped towards the lock. Spike got ready, his eyes watching carefully as the soldier took a card that was hooked to his uniform shirt and swiped it through the electronic lock on one side of the cell. The soldier immediately jumped back to where his partner waited and Spike continued chattily: “Of course, I could just stick to ‘piss off, wankers’. Nice saying that one, gets the job done every time.”

As he spoke, the lock beeped and the door began to slide open, moving at a smooth, steady pace that was faster than Spike would have preferred. He moved quickly, darting the two steps to the
side wall, drawing the soldiers’ eyes and guns in that direction, so they remained pointed at him through the glass, trying to make it look like he was desperately attempting to shelter behind the thick glass panes.

He’d no sooner reached the side wall then he reversed direction with a speed no human could manage, launching himself at the now fully open door. His left hand, still clutching his duster, came up and he threw the coat ahead of him through the opening. As he’d hoped, the leather opened up, giving him at least the illusion of shelter for one second as he dove through the doorway.

He swept his arms out, hoping to take both of the soldiers down, but only managed to hit one of them. Unfortunately, the taller one had realized what was happening and jumped back as Spike moved. Spike crashed to the floor in a tangle of black leather and flailing limbs, hearing the whoosh of air that said a human had just had the wind knocked out of them. He was grabbing for the soldier’s gun when lightning hit him from behind.

As before, his whole body seized up, muscles twitching uncontrollably, unable even to keep his grip on the gun as he slumped unconscious to the tiles.

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Buffy was waiting for him two blocks from the factory. She was perched on a crumbling concrete wall, looking like she’d been there for a while when Xander left the apartment a half hour before sunset.

“Thought you’d be leaving about now,” she said, jumping down and dusting herself off.

“What are you doing here?” Buffy had long ago accepted that it wouldn’t be a good idea for the Slayer to hang out at the apartment or even to stop by. A Slayer visiting would just not go over well with the Court. Now, Xander quickly urged her away, not waiting for an answer to his question. Buffy went willingly enough, and Xander relaxed when they had moved a couple blocks farther, into a more populated section of the warehouse district where she didn’t stand out quite so obviously.

“Mom called,” Buffy said. “She told me what you were up to. And can I just say: this is not a good plan.”

“You got a better one? ‘Cause this is all I got right now.” Xander couldn’t stop the desperation from showing in his voice as he stared her down.

“No,” Buffy admitted, after a long tense silence. “Ok, let’s try and scare up some soldiers.”

She turned and headed out in the ground-covering stride she only used when out on patrol. Xander took a moment, breathing deeply and getting himself under control before he moved to follow her.

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Dragging himself up the stairs to the apartment, disappointment and fatigue dogged his steps until the climb felt like an impossible obstacle. He was almost unbearably tempted to just sit down half way and give in to it and was grateful for the knowledge that Angel was in the apartment. He’d done a lot of things in his life that he was embarrassed about but he was damned if he was going to break down in front of Angel. And yeah, he was an ungrateful asshole because Angel was trying to help and it was probably way past time that Xander got over his Angel issues but he didn’t like the guy and never had and he was way too tired to deal with it now.
Rubbing a hand over his face, Xander thought wearily that he would have to call in sick to work tomorrow. He could hardly believe it was only Sunday - Monday morning now. It felt like weeks since he’d woken to find Spike gone but that had only been Friday morning. He hadn’t slept well since then and his brain felt like it was functioning at half speed just when he needed to be able to think clearly.

Buffy and he had swept the usual hot spots and come up empty. Buffy had staked a couple of fledges more or less in passing but there had been no sign of the soldiers they were looking for. He needed to figure out a way to flush them out so he could follow them.

Angel left almost as soon as Xander arrived, saying he would do a sweep of the town, looking for both Spike and the soldiers. Xander just thanked him, heading for the bathroom and a hot shower. Something was nagging at him. He couldn’t put his finger on it but it felt like he was missing something. He let his mind drift under the warm spray as he soaped himself up, hoping whatever it was would make itself known.

The water felt good and Xander found himself almost nodding off in the shower. He shook himself awake and finished shampooing his long hair, scrubbing vigorously at his scalp to keep himself alert. Stepping out of the shower, he toweled himself off and suddenly froze, hair dripping around his shoulders, staring at the mist-covered mirror.

“Oz.”

He swore sharply and automatically wrapped the towel around his waist, leaning against the counter as he thought furiously. The only night the soldiers had been out in force had been the night after the attack on one of Buffy’s professors, the attack that Buffy thought had been a werewolf. Not Oz, of course, but another werewolf, the one they hadn’t found even though werewolves weren’t exactly inconspicuous. Buffy had seen soldiers on campus Halloween night - or thought she had, although she admitted it could have just been costumes, and maybe one other time.

If the soldiers were protecting the campus… No, that didn’t seem right. Spike had been patrolling the campus regularly this year and said there wasn’t much demon activity in the area. But if the soldiers responded in force to an attack on one of the professors, maybe he could stage a show that would draw them out.

Turning the idea over in his mind, he stepped out of the bathroom and padded towards the bedroom. He didn’t want to put any of his demon friends in danger but maybe someone could do a “wild dog” type attack with a running, screaming victim and see if soldiers responded. It was something at least and a better shot than just waiting to get lucky and stumble over them, especially if the soldiers weren’t patrolling or whatever it was they were doing every night.

There was a knock at the back door, the one no one but Spike ever used, and Xander swung around, heart pounding as he stood frozen, not sure what to do. The door had been bolted as a precaution ever since Spike disappeared and it was the wild hope that it might be Spike that finally got him moving.

“Who is it?” he asked cautiously through the door.

“It’s Jose, Xander. I apologize for disturbing you. May I speak with you?”
Xander hesitated for a long moment but, bottom line, he trusted Jose.

“Yeah, give me a second.”

He ran into the bedroom and yanked a pair of pants on. He hesitated, then shrugged into a shirt and tucked a stake into his pocket. Spike would kill him if he didn’t take at least minimal precautions. Returning to the back door, he struggled with the bolt until it slid back, opening the door to see the familiar figure of Spike’s senior lieutenant waiting on the other side.

“Come in.”

Jose dipped his head in the half bow with which he always greeted Xander, no matter how many times Xander had told him it wasn’t necessary, and stepped into the apartment. As always, he was in human guise and, despite his surface calm, Xander could see the tension in his frame. Jose came directly to the point, seeming a bit uneasy about being in the apartment, even though he’d never seemed nervous before on the rare occasions when Spike had permitted him to come inside. Jose was the only one of Spike’s Lieutenants who had ever been allowed inside the apartment.

“Xander, allow me to be blunt. I’m aware that Master Spike is missing and that you are covering his absence.” He smiled reassuringly as Xander went still and pale, continuing on with his usual calm deliberateness. “I can’t be positive but I don’t believe any of the other vampires in the Court are sure that Master Spike is not, as Master Angelus says, temporarily absent for his own reasons. However, they are suspicious and the deception cannot last for long.”

“Do you know what’s happened to Spike?” Xander asked, his voice hard.

Jose shook his head with genuine regret. “I’m sorry. I know only what I have just told you. I have been aware that you are searching for him, although you have done well in concealing your efforts.”

“What do you want?”

“You misunderstand. I have given my allegiance to Master Spike. That duty includes protecting his Claimed. I am concerned for your safety if the Court decides that Master Spike is no longer around to protect you.”

The tension fled at the genuine concern in Jose’s eyes and Xander mustered a bleak smile. “I figure I have at least two more days. Angel will keep them busy until then.”

Jose nodded. “I concur. However, it would be wise to be gone from here before suspicion becomes certainty. I will protect you to the best of my abilities, but I am far from being the most able fighter in the Court.”

“I hope Spike will be back before it comes to that.”

“You and me both, Xander. Can I help in any way, other than assisting Master Angelus to keep the Court under control?”

Xander hesitated but only briefly. “Did you know that Spike was investigating reports that demons were disappearing in town?” Jose nodded. “I’m working on a theory that the soldiers that have been seen around town are responsible. I’ve been trying to track them but so far haven’t had any luck. Have you heard anything?”

“Nothing of any use, I’m afraid. Master Spike was tracking down the rumors himself. To my knowledge, he hadn’t learned anything useful.”
Which fit with what Xander knew but wasn’t exactly helpful. “Thanks, Jose. If you could keep an eye out for any soldiers, I’d appreciate it. Let me or Angel know if you find anything.”

“There is one more thing,” Jose said slowly, almost as if he weren’t sure whether he should be saying anything. “Are you aware of what Master Angelus is doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Forgive me, but it is apparent to me that Master Angelus is attempting to determine who would be the best vampire to inherit the Court.”

“What?!” Xander felt a wave of anger. How dare he? Spike was his Childe. Angel could give him the benefit of the doubt for more than a few hours.

“It is the logical step if Master Angelus doesn’t wish to take over the Court himself,” Jose pointed out reluctantly.

“Only if Spike’s dead and he’s not,” Xander said stubbornly.

“Master Angelus is asking many questions of the minions and the Lieutenants. He is watching sparring sessions closely, all under the guise of evaluating the Court he is temporarily in charge of. The presence of Master Angelus is unusual enough that the Court is uncertain of his motives. Keeping them off balance and seeking to impress him is helping to prevent them from speculating too much about Master Spike’s absence.” Jose shrugged apologetically. “Again, the situation will come to a head sooner rather than later.”

There wasn’t anything he could do about it and, if Spike didn’t return, Angel was doing the best he could to prevent a war over the territory. Xander looked away from Jose’s sympathetic eyes. “Thanks for telling me,” he said quietly. “Angel’s right. We have to keep things under control at the Court. If…” he faltered, his throat closing on the words. He couldn’t say it, couldn’t give his fears substance by putting them into words. He cleared his throat and continued: “If Spike’s gone too long, we’ll figure out what to do about the Court then.”

Jose left as quietly as he had come and Xander leaned against the again bolted door leading to the factory. The longer Spike was gone, the more things were spiraling out of control.

“Damn you, Spike. Where the hell are you?”

This was getting old. Coming to once on the cold tiles of the white prison cell had been more than enough. He really didn’t need to experience it again. He’d told Xander once that vampire bodies weren’t very conductive but apparently if you shot them with enough electricity, it worked just fine. The guns the soldiers were using were going to be a problem. Regular guns he could deal with. It was a myth that guns were useless against vampires, bullets did damage same as a knife - tearing into undead flesh and leaving wounds, but with bullet wounds, he could ignore the pain and keep going. The taser guns left him with no muscle control in the few moments before consciousness fled, taking him down as easily as if he was human.

He rolled over, more slowly than he’d intended and only just managed to suppress a groan as he became aware of aches that shouldn’t be there. Vampires didn’t get the aches and pains that humans got from sleeping on hard surfaces or working too hard. Strained muscles and joints healed instantly, if vampires got them at all - Spike wasn’t sure which and didn’t much care. But now, his muscles were trembling and spasming in a way he hadn’t experienced since he was human and he
ached all over like Xander had complained about when he’d gotten the flue that one time.

Staggering clumsily to his feet, Spike leaned against the wall and waited for the tremors to die down, not trusting his legs to hold him up without the wall’s help. He didn’t remember anything since the soldiers had taken him out of his cell. He was still wearing his clothes, which were undamaged and he could find no sign of injury on himself that could cause this weakness. He moved his arms and legs cautiously, testing them for injuries but there was just an over-all weakness and twinges of pain from over-stressed muscles.

His strength gradually returned and the slight tremors that shook his limbs faded, much to his relief. Spike found himself fishing around in his pockets, looking for his smokes. He could really use a steadying drag of warm, nicotine-laden smoke in his body right now. He cursed when he realized the pack had been in his coat and his coat was gone, tossed out into the hall in his useless escape attempt.

Fucking hell. They’d stolen his duster. Bastards were going to pay for that.
There was a pattern to the movements in this high tech prison. The lab coats and soldiers seemed to work different shifts, presumably night versus day. The lab coats sometimes moved up and down the aisle of cells observing and taking notes on clipboards. Once, Spike watched as two of the lab coats took an unconscious demon out of its cell on a gurney. The demon was the Drak’taash cub he’d heard whimpering down the hall ever since he’d first woken up in this hellhole. Spike felt a flash of sympathy for the kid as it was wheeled past his cell but mostly relief that the near-constant crying would stop grating on his nerves for a little while at least.

They didn’t bring the cub back to its cell, which made Spike wonder what exactly they did to the demons they took, and whether they were doing different things to different demons.

He had no memories of the time he’d been gone from his cell. The vampire in the next cell said Spike had been gone for “awhile” - helpful that - which didn’t tell him anything. The only clue he’d been able to find about his absence had been a small shaved spot on the back of his head. If he hadn’t been specifically checking himself for injury, he never would have noticed it. He’d searched carefully all around the spot but found nothing else in the way of an injury, healed or otherwise, in the area. Which made absolutely no sense. If they’d done something to him, why make sure he healed up afterwards? Unless they’d inflicted only a very minor injury, they must have given him enough blood to remove all trace of it. It made him uneasy when he realized that he’d no longer felt hungry when he’d woken up again in the cell, indicating they must have given him blood during the time he was out.

Unlike the lab coats, who handled only unconscious demons, the soldiers entered the cell block armed with the taser rifles that had twice defeated him. Since he’d been here, he’d seen the soldiers bring in only one new prisoner, a Reet’thahk demon, dragging it unceremoniously down the tiled floor past his cell and dumping the unconscious body into a cell a few doors down from his own.

He couldn’t figure out what they were up to. There seemed to be no common thread behind their selection of prisoners. Reet’thahks were reptilian, capable of short bursts of astonishing speed and had poison claws that made them dangerous in a fight, but they had no stamina in a long fight and were easy enough to defeat if you avoided the lethal claws and kept them moving long enough to wear them down. But they weren’t exactly a threat to humans except those with the bad luck to trip over them. There were animals that were more intelligent - as far as Spike knew, they weren’t even capable of speech. He couldn’t see any point in holding one prisoner.

Not that the people here seemed intent on interrogations - not a lot of conversation was happening when everyone who was taken out of their cells was unconscious. Spike had tried to get information from his fellow prisoners, yelling down the hallway, asking who was in here and what they knew. He’d only gotten a couple of answers before the area was flooded with soldiers. He’d timed his questions to the movement of the cameras in the hall, yelling his questions when the cameras swung away from his cell but apparently the two demons who’d answered hadn’t had that much sense. Watching from his cell, he’d seen the soldiers enter two cells down the hallway. There were bursts of light from the taser rifles and the soldiers stepped back into the hall, looking satisfied.

All that had gotten him was the information that there was a werewolf and a Laorg in here. Anyone else was either too cowed to answer or hadn’t understood him. Either way, it got him no further towards understanding the reasoning behind the selection of prisoners. Was it just random, picking up anything they stumbled across? Laorgs were known only for their stupidity and werewolves
were more human than demon.

Spike wasn’t sure how long he’d been prisoner but he was close to losing it entirely and attacking the walls of his cell in mindless frustration and he couldn’t afford that. The first pangs of renewed hunger were beginning to make themselves known, which meant it had been the better part of a day since he’d woken up in the cell for the second time. Having come up with nothing better in the way of a plan, he’d have to use the drugged blood and see what happened. Anything was better than just waiting for them to come for him again. He had a growing certainty that this place meant final death unless he could find a way out of here.

He was worried about Xander, so much so that he could hardly stop thinking about him. He worried about Xander living in the apartment without Spike there to protect him from the Court. Worried about what Xander would do with Spike missing. Pacing the small cell, unable to rest, Spike was driven by the certainty that Xander was in almost as much danger as Spike. Xander’s reckless bravery got him into all sorts of trouble even when Spike was there to rein him in; no telling what Xander was getting up to without Spike around to keep an eye on him. Xander would be looking for him. Spike knew that as sure as he knew his own name. Xander wouldn’t give up and that really worried him. This bunch didn’t seem too fussy about who they kept in here - werewolves were barely demons, could hardly tell them from humans except at a full moon. It would be just like Xander, if he found this place, to simply bang on the front door and demand to see Spike. A human bearing a Claim mark and searching for a vampire might be enough for this lot, enough to get Xander locked up in here as well. He had to find a way out before Xander got himself killed trying to rescue him.

He didn’t have anything like a solid plan, just a few ideas based on all too limited information. He’d just have to seize whatever chance came his way. The best shot at escape was during what he thought of as the day shift, past the unarmed lab coats instead of the soldiers. He’d just have to deal with the sun when he got outside.

Impatient now to put his sketchy plan into action, Spike forced himself to stop pacing and sat down against the wall, waiting for the people in charge to drop blood to him.

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He couldn’t do it. He’d turned it over in his mind, worked out a plan, had his hand on the phone to dial, then found himself hanging up before pressing the numbers.

Xander let the phone drop on to the mattress and bowed his head, burying his fingers in his hair and gripping hard enough to hurt to stop his hands from shaking. He couldn’t do it. Not even for Spike.

He’d even thought of who he could ask to help him. A couple of the demons he’d met at the Z’bat’ryth birthday party he’d been invited to back in January had been part Brachen. Allen had gotten really, really drunk and at one point started laughing so hard that, if he were human, he probably would have had pee in his pants. Instead, spikes had suddenly popped out all over his face. He’d been really embarrassed but his brother had just howled with laughter and let his own spikes come out. They were good guys and Xander had talked to them a few times since then. He thought he could persuade them to do the spikey-thing and scare a professor or two at the campus.

Unfortunately, he’d come to his senses in time. In their demon-guise, the brothers didn’t look like anything that could be passed off as something normal. Allen and Doug had been among the demons who’d spent all night searching for Spike. He couldn’t ask them to put their lives at risk, and expose themselves to a hostile world on the off-chance that it might flush out the soldiers he was hunting for.
The problem was, it was the only plan he had. Giving it up put him back at square one with nothing. Would Spike understand why Xander couldn’t do it, or would he think that Xander was wimping out on him? He’d always wondered about those movies where 20 people die trying to rescue one person. For the first time, he understood the impulse behind the rescue missions when logic and numbers said it was a stupid thing to do. A wry smile twisted his lips as he remembered discussing the issue with Spike while watching ‘Saving Private Ryan’ one night. Spike had taken the position that you should only get involved in that kind of rescue mission if you liked a good fight and were doing it for the fun of it. The rescue mission was just an excuse, to his way of thinking. Maybe Spike would understand after all.

Sighing, Xander stood up and headed for the bathroom. Maybe a shower and some desperately needed sleep would get his brain working again.

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After what seemed like days, the small hatch in the ceiling finally opened, dropping a bag of blood to the floor. Spike stared at it for a long moment before reaching down to pick it up. Aware of the security cameras in the hall, he bit into the bag and pretended to drain it. Keeping his back to the cameras, he squeezed the blood out onto the red silk shirt he’d taken off hours earlier and tossed onto the floor, then kicked the fabric into a ball to conceal the dark stain. His neighbor had been right: the blood smelled off, more than just the reek of preservatives and chemicals that all bagged blood carried. He tossed the now-empty packet away from him and leaned against the wall, before letting himself gradually slump to the floor as if unconscious.

He was just beginning to think that they drugged the food on general principles when at long last he heard footsteps approaching down the hallway. Remaining still and limp, Spike waited, hoping they were indeed coming to his cell. The footsteps were quieter than the boots the military wore, two sets. The lab coats always seemed to travel in pairs.

Thankfully, they stopped outside his cell and he heard the beep of the lock opening and the sound of the door sliding open. He stayed down, letting the two men pick him up and heave his limp body onto a padded surface. One of the men leaned over him and he felt a strap pulled into place across his chest. Time to move.

Spike erupted into motion the instant he felt the lab coat’s hands fumbling to fasten the strap down across his chest. He tore the strap away with contemptuous ease, ripping it free from the gurney and reaching up in the same instant with his other hand, grabbing the man by the throat, shutting off his air with an iron grip, preventing him from shouting for help, buying himself an extra second before the second lab coat could react.

Pain tore through his body and he screamed involuntarily, unable to stop himself. The pain was everywhere, battering at him, and his body arched in agony as he struggled to keep moving. His muscles seized up and that meant his grip on the man’s throat tightened rather than released. Gritting his teeth, Spike concentrated on the victim in his grasp. Whatever the other lab coat had done to him, he still had this one under control. The man’s face was turning a lovely shade of puce and his hands scrabbled frantically at Spike’s hand, trying to get air.

The pain kept surging through him, waves of agony that threatened to drown him and Spike snarled his defiance, grabbing the man with both hands and throwing him away as hard as he could. The man slammed against the wall with satisfying force, sliding limply down and leaving a red stain on the wall. Spike rolled the rest of the way off the gurney and collapsed on the floor, shaking from the aftereffects as the pain ebbed with surprising suddenness.

He used the gurney to haul himself to his feet, facing the other lab coat, who had backed up until
he hit the far wall, and was now standing frozen in place, staring with wide terror-filled eyes at Spike. Not giving himself time to think, Spike leapt for the man. He couldn’t see the weapon the man had to be carrying but he had no other choice. The hallway was monitored, the alarm would sound any second now and this might be his only shot at escape.

He crashed into the man, tackling him to the floor as pain flooded his system again. He roared in agony and rolled free of the scientist, clutching his head. He’d never experienced anything like this level of pain and it was everywhere, enveloping him until he couldn’t think, couldn’t move, could only pray for it to end.

The pain stopped and Spike nerved himself, furious that he was flinching at the thought of facing the agony again, cursing at himself as well as the lab coat who was doing this to him. Spike lurched to his feet and kicked the man in the head as hard as he could.

The pain battered him again but his foot met the mark, snapping the man’s head back and dropping him limp and unconscious to the floor. Spike grabbed his own head in both hands, trying desperately to contain the agony as he dropped to his knees, unable to stand under the waves of pain. It stopped again as suddenly as if switched off and Spike let go of his head gingerly. Avoiding touching the body at his feet - he still had no idea what the man had used on him - Spike ignored his still-trembling muscles and sprinted for the other body.

All up and down the hall, he could hear the other demons: shouting, cheering, begging for release. Fuck ‘em, he thought viciously. Let ‘em find their own way out. Even as he thought it, he was yanking the security card off the lab coat’s body. He needed a diversion.

Belatedly, an alarm sounded and a red light began pulsing in the hallway. He could hear booted feet at a distance running towards the area and, closer, the vampire in the cell next to him demanding to be released, claiming to know a way out of the building. Spike doubted it, unobservant git hadn’t known anything when Spike questioned him.

He took a handful of precious seconds to open the five nearest cells. Four of the demons ran for it, scattering both ways down the hallway. The fifth stayed huddled on the floor and didn’t move even when Spike snarled at it. He didn’t waste time trying to force the useless thing to move, just turned and sprinted down the hall in the opposite direction from the way the lab coats took their victims. His best guess was that that direction went deeper inside the facility.

Whatever the bastard had used on him hadn’t injured him and he ran flat out, hearing shouts and the sound of guns firing behind him. Ahead, he saw that metal doors were dropping down from the ceiling, blocking the hallway, and somewhere he found an extra burst of speed, launching himself into a dive and sliding under the door, making it with no time to spare, barely yanking his feet clear before the metal slammed down behind him.

He rolled to his feet, and swore viciously. The corridor ahead of them was blocked by a heavy metal security door, trapping him and two others: his neighbor and the Bratosh demon from the next cell down. They were both hammering uselessly at the metal door, the Bratosh using its considerable strength to dent the metal but the door was holding firm.

It was a wonder he heard the ping of the elevator over the racket they were making. Spike grabbed the vampire unceremoniously by the back of his coat and flung him at the elevator doors just as they opened. The soldiers inside were braced and ready but obviously not expecting a vampire-shaped projectile. All three went tumbling to the floor and Spike and the Bratosh followed them inside. His neighbor was actually making himself useful for once, burying his fangs in the neck of one screaming victim and keeping him occupied as he fed with the hunger of incipient starvation. The Bratosh handled the other soldier, kicking him in the head and taking him out of the picture as
Spike stooped and snatched up both guns.

He tossed one of them to the Bratosh and grinned. “Let’s get the hell out of here, shall we?”

The Bratosh hooted its agreement.

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Xander was beginning to wish he hadn’t called in sick for work again. He wasn’t accomplishing anything, pacing around the apartment and thinking up increasingly wild schemes about what to do next. He hadn’t been able to sleep and, after an hour or so, he gave up trying and sat staring out the window at the sunlight that had begun to seem like an enemy, keeping him trapped in the apartment and impatiently waiting for night when he could be out searching for Spike.

He couldn’t even watch tv to help pass the time. Not with Angel sleeping on the couch in the living room. Which thought made Xander scowl.

Angel wasn’t helping. Ok, actually he was doing his best but that didn’t mean that Xander didn’t resent him being here. Which was completely unfair and he knew it. He was maintaining just enough control to not snap at Angel every time he did something differently than Spike - which was pretty much everything. It was like the time his aunt and uncle had come for a visit that had lasted for almost a month and his parents had made him move to the sleeper couch in the basement and given them Xander’s room. Only he wasn’t ten now and he’d invited Angel into the apartment for a reason and he really needed to get over it. In his more mature moments, he recognized that Angel was just as uncomfortable about being here as Xander was with having him here.

It was just that Angel was making it clear, without saying a word, that he thought Spike was dead. Xander hated the sadness in his eyes, and the pitying looks he couldn’t quite conceal, and his really lame efforts at encouragement. Most of all, he hated Angel’s really unsubtle attempts to discuss Xander’s future plans “just in case”.

He didn’t want to think of a future without Spike. He wanted Spike to come back. He wasn’t ready to deal with anything else. It was just that ‘missing, not dead’ was beginning to sound thin, even to his own ears.

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As tempting as it was, Spike didn’t dare take the elevator. A secure facility like this, no telling what kind of fail-safes they had on the elevators and he didn’t fancy being trapped inside the thing. Instead, he’d taken off down the one remaining hallway before the last of the security doors came down, the Bratosh demon on his heels as he ran. Security doors were still sliding closed and Spike sprinted down the hall, not interested or caring if the Bratosh was keeping up. He was a diversion and would be more use falling behind or, better yet, going his own way.

He held on to the gun as he ran. Ordinarily, he had very little use for the things. They took all the fun out of killing - made death distant and impersonal and boring. But he was willing to make an exception under the circumstances. He’d learned the hard way that the soldiers’ taser rifles were effective from a good distance and he’d just as soon keep the soldiers as far away as possible until he had them on his own turf.

Diving under one more closing security door, Spike rolled clear and back to his feet in one fluid motion. The place was a labyrinth of twisting hallways and he was choosing his turns mostly at random, although he was trying to keep heading further away from the direction he thought of as the center of the complex. Behind him, he heard the Bratosh howling in frustration as it slammed
into the metal door. Furious pounding noises and the clanging of metal under assault echoed loudly as he raced down yet another hallway, this one fortunately deserted. Turning a corner, the sounds faded behind him and he prayed he was getting to the outer edge of the building.

If only he could find a bloody exit sign, he thought desperately. He could feel the hunters after him, even if it was more imagination than reality at the moment.

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“We need to talk, Xander.”

“No, Angel, we’re good.” Xander so did not want to talk. Angel had gotten up not long after noon, early enough to catch Xander still in the apartment. He’d been leaving in the early afternoon each day, trying to minimize the number of hours he spent with his reluctant house guest.

In the few days he’d been here, Angel had already established a pattern: spending the early evenings at the Court and, true to his word, doing a sweep of the town looking for Spike before returning to the apartment shortly before dawn. Xander and he would meet back at the apartment just before dawn and report their mutual failures.

Despite Angel’s disapproval, Xander continued to stay awake all night, searching the town, returning to the most likely spots over and over, hoping desperately that Spike would be there this time. He was aware that Buffy and Angel and even Jose were shadowing him - Buffy openly, Angel and Jose more surreptitiously and he was grateful for their concern, even if he knew they weren’t looking for Spike so much as safeguarding Spike’s boyfriend who was clearly losing it and refusing to accept reality.

Spike had been missing for five days now and it was becoming harder and harder to cling to the hope that he was just missing.

“You can’t keep avoiding the subject.”

“Trust me, Angel. When it’s something I don’t want to talk about, I can give whole new depths of meaning to the word.”

He could tell that Angel wasn’t going to let him get away with it this time. The vampire was standing with his arms crossed, planted immovably in front of the door and Xander suspected he wasn’t going to move until he’d had his say. He’d probably learned that trick from Cordelia.

“You can’t stay here any longer,” Angel told him flatly. “It’s not safe.”

“You said that three days ago and it’s been fine.”

“That was three days ago. The Court isn’t buying Spike’s absence anymore. Like it or not, Xander, a new Master has to take over.”

Xander shook his head stubbornly. “Just because you’re giving up, doesn’t mean I’m ready to. It’s only been five days, you can keep a lid on things a little longer.”

“Nearly six,” Angel corrected. “You have no evidence that these mysterious soldiers have anything to do with his disappearance. You have nothing but blind optimism telling you that Spike is still alive.”

“And you think your example of abandoning him when he needs you is something I’m gonna follow? Go to hell!!”
Xander threw a punch with all the pent-up frustration of the past days behind it. Angel blocked it effortlessly, knocking Xander’s fist aside. As Spike had taught him, Xander moved with the blow, spinning around and bringing his elbow up to slam into Angel’s ribs. He smirked in satisfaction as Angel grunted at the force of the blow. He kept turning, moving around Angel, trying to get beyond his reach, knowing the vampire was far stronger than him.

Angel’s long arms swept out, ignoring the punch Xander aimed at him, and wrapped him in a bear hug. “Xander! Knock it off, I’m on your side,” he roared in Xander’s ear.

For one second, Xander struggled furiously in the inhumanly strong grip, then something seemed to snap inside him and his anger fled. For a long moment, they both stood where they were, Xander’s harsh breathing the only sound. Then Angel released him and stepped back.

“Are you done?” he asked冷ly.

Xander nodded, feeling stupid. This wasn’t Angel’s fault and taking his anger out on Angel wasn’t helping anything. He closed his eyes and let out a long, shaky breath. “Two more days,” he said quietly. “You can cover a week’s absence.”

Angel frowned but reluctantly nodded. “If we don’t find him by tomorrow night, you pack your stuff and get out the next morning. Agreed?”

“Yes.” His heart ached as he gave his word, feeling like one more person who’d let Spike down. Moving out of their home felt like giving up, like he was accepting that Spike was dead. He turned and walked slowly towards the door, relieved when Angel just let him go.

“He’s my Childe.”

Halfway out the door, indifferent to the danger to Angel as he opened the door and the sunlight streamed in, Xander paused as he heard the low, painful words. He didn’t know if Angel was looking for forgiveness, understanding, or compassion. Whatever he was hoping for, Xander didn’t have it to give. He closed the door behind him without looking back.

Finding the exit had almost been anti-climactic. As he followed the twisting pathways inside the building, Spike had found a ladder of metal rungs bolted to the wall. It had the look of an emergency exit and he had no choice. His luck had held in finding this deserted section of the complex - Spike had wondered fleetingly if the empty cells and the empty offices he was sprinting past meant the facility was only about half-operational - but he couldn’t expect it to last much longer.

Slinging the gun over his shoulder, he jumped up and began climbing rapidly. The ladder ran two stories up and ended in a metal hatch, not much bigger than a manhole cover. With no choice, Spike released the latch and opened it cautiously a bare inch.

As he’d feared, it was daytime. The deadly sun shone down brightly with not so much as a wisp of a vampire-friendly cloud in the sky. Mid-afternoon, he judged, and he didn’t have several hours to sit and wait for sunset. He probably didn’t have minutes before the pursuit caught up to him. The hatch was set in the grass in a middle of a large open area and there were a lot of people around. Surveying the scene for another second, Spike realized he was in the middle of the Sunnydale U campus. Students were strolling past, carrying backpacks and books, and he recognized the field as one of the green spaces between the main buildings. Fortunately, the campus was generous with trees because staying put was not an option.
Nerving himself, and cursing the loss of his duster, Spike threw back the lid and swarmed up the last three steps of the ladder, feeling the deadly heat of the sun as he flung himself across the grass towards the safety of the grove of trees thirty feet away. He could feel his skin blistering and flames ignited on the unprotected flesh of his head and hands in the few seconds it took to cross the open ground. Plunging into the shadows of the enormous old trees, Spike was already tearing his dress shirt off and using it to smother the flames.

The immediate danger over, he leaned against a tree trunk and panted for unneeded air. Shock and pain were catching up with him now. He had burns on his hands, face and neck and he needed blood to speed the healing. He desperately wanted to head straight for the factory but he didn’t dare. The hounds would be after him and he wasn’t fool enough to lead them to his lair. He had to keep moving, lay some false trails in case they had any good trackers among them, throw them thoroughly off the scent before he could risk going home.

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Leaving the sewer tunnels behind had been a relief, despite their dark sanctuary from the waning afternoon sun. Knowing that the soldiers had built their little prison directly under the college campus made Spike twitchy about using the tunnels. The possibility that the soldiers used the tunnels to move around the campus had him on edge, straining to hear any hint of pursuit and anxious to be out in the open where his movements wouldn’t be so restricted if they found him.

The dash from the cover of the trees to the nearest building had left him with more burns and his need for blood almost had him attacking the first student he happened across. He’d forced himself to wait, he was too near the facility, too sure he was hunted to leave such an obvious sign of his whereabouts. As it was, too many of the students stared in shock and horror at the livid burns on his face as he passed. If anyone asked questions in the area, he’d be remembered.

The scent of prey was all around him and his hunger almost overwhelmed him as he made his way down through the building to the basement and the tunnel access he knew was there from his previous explorations of the campus.

He’d headed for the docks, wanting the anonymous prey of transients and hookers. They weren’t his victims of choice - no sport in them, but he wasn’t after sport tonight. He needed enough blood that it would take several humans to give him sufficient blood to heal his burns and bring him back to full strength. It would be easier if he could simply drain them and dump their bodies, but he’d promised Xander. He’d just have to make do.

The sun was below the horizon when he emerged from the tunnels. The wharfs were busy and it was easy to find a business woman trolling for customers. Spike kept to the shadows to hide his burns and offered her $50. She countered with $75 and a hotel room instead of the alley. Perfect.

She’d sleep off the blood loss and no one would be the wiser until morning. Not that she seemed the type to call the authorities.

The deal made, Spike followed her up the dingy steps of the by-the-hour motel where she had “an arrangement” with the manager. He waited, tapping one foot impatiently as she fumbled with the key. He let her step inside and snap on the light before he pushed inside behind her, slamming the door closed and pushing her onto the bed.

“Hey!” she complained. “Money first.”

“Bugger that,” Spike told her, and pounced, pinning her to the mattress and yanking her head back to expose her throat. He rolled off her instantly, screaming as the pain returned again, even worse than before. He couldn’t think, couldn’t move, couldn’t do anything but curl up and scream until it
stopped.

“What the hell is your problem, psycho?”

Spike stared at her dazedly as she climbed to her feet and jerked her clothes straight angrily. “I told you: money first. I’m not a charity, you know. No freebies.” She glared down at him as he remained frozen on the bed, unable to fathom what had just happened.

What the fuck was going on? What had those bastards done to him?

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He tried to feed twice more and only blind unreasoning terror at what was happening made him try the third time. Each time he tried to bite her, the pain shattered him, leaving him screaming in agony, unable to do anything but ride it out. The hooker punched him in the face for his second attempt and, when his third attempt left him crumpled, shaking on the floor, she kicked him twice, breaking one of his ribs with an audible crack.

Swearing at him, she rifled his pockets, then kicked him again when she found nothing worth stealing. The pain of the broken rib wasn’t a fraction of the earlier pain and Spike didn’t move, even when she spat on him and cursed him for having no money. He didn’t even try to stop her when she stalked out of the room.

He couldn’t stay here. The manager, or her pimp, would be here soon but it was hard to care. He’d been beaten up by a cheap tart, a human, and he’d been unable even to defend himself.

They’d done something to him. The soldiers, the lab coats, they’d done something to him. The pain wasn’t a weapon they had used on him, they’d done something to him to stop him from hurting things. In one fell swoop they’d taken everything: his pride, his territory, his birthright. And Xander.

Bastards had taken Xander from him. How could he go back now? Go back and see pity instead of love in his Claimed’s dark eyes? Go back and live off Xander’s charity until his boy resented him for the useless cripple they’d made him. He couldn’t protect Xander now, couldn’t even renew his Claim mark. Bastards might as well have castrated him and pulled his fangs out with pliers. He wasn’t a vampire anymore. He wasn’t anything. Just a helpless cripple who couldn’t even feed himself.

He wouldn’t let Xander see him like this, he’d greet the sun with open arms first.
Chapter 11

He just couldn’t face Angel again right now. Angel was pushing him to move on, to accept that Spike was gone, to deal, and that simply wasn’t an option. Spike was everything to him. Spike was love and home and safety and passion. Their lives were intertwined to an extent that he couldn’t even begin to think about taking up a life separate from Spike.

Xander wasn’t really surprised when he found that his aimless wandering had brought him to the mansion. He’d been checking it every day in case Spike had gone there for shelter, only to find the training mats and equipment undisturbed and the sparsely furnished rooms depressingly empty. Today was no different. The mansion was deserted as it had been since Spike went missing.

Walking numbly through the empty rooms, Xander was forced to confront the possibility that he might never see Spike again. There was no one here to keep a brave face for, no one he needed to convince by a show of confidence he no longer felt to keep the status quo for just one more day.

Standing in the living room, Xander wondered if he should move here when Angel’s deadline was up. The mansion had power and water, thanks to Spike’s maneuverings. None of the minions at Court knew about it, so he would be safe from anyone who wanted to use him in a power play. The mansion wasn’t someplace he’d choose to go under normal circumstances but it would do as a temporary shelter. He sure as hell wasn’t going back to his parents’ house and, although he knew Joyce would welcome him with open arms, he didn’t think he was up to the effort it would take to live with anyone else, especially someone as warm and sympathetic as Joyce. The mansion was cold and barren and lonely. It fit his mood perfectly.

The afternoon sun was streaming in through the French doors that opened onto the back patio, making a rectangle of bright yellow light on the stone floor, and a small smile twisted at Xander’s lips as he recalled Spike’s numerous complaints about the mansion and how it wasn’t a fit place for a vampire to live. Which of course is why they’d used it as both a place to train and an emergency bolt hole - no vampire knew of the place or would covet it as a lair.

Sighing, Xander walked downstairs to the master bedroom he had once shared with Spike.

The bare mattress had long been stripped of Angel’s tacky red satin sheets. Xander stared at the bed where he’d first made love to Spike and wondered if he’d ever feel that cool, strong body against his again. If he’d ever again know the delicious pain of being stretched and filled, the shattering pleasure of his prostate being stimulated. If he’d ever be able to experience the exquisite pleasure of Spike’s fangs piercing his flesh as he renewed his Claim mark. Worse, what if he never again woke up, wrapped securely in Spike’s arms and love, never laughed and fought with Spike over the blankets, never again heard that soft rumbling purr that Spike made when he was particularly happy.

Xander set his jaw and swallowed hard against the lump that threatened to choke off his breath. He felt like an old man as he slowly crossed the room and sank down on the mattress. Picking up one of the pillows, he held it to his chest with both arms and dropped his head, pressing his face against the pillow and inhaling deeply, hoping for a trace of Spike’s familiar scent. Like the room, there was only the faint odor of dust on the pillow. Spike’s scent had long since vanished from the fabric. He sighed and lay down, curling himself around the pillow, closing his eyes against the dim light of the basement room and letting his mind call picture after picture of Spike against the back of his eyelids: Spike laughing, smirking triumphantly as he won at pool, his head cocked to one side as something peaked his curiosity. The quiet moments when Spike sprawled comfortably in a chair, reading books he didn’t let anyone else know he enjoyed. Spike’s intense blue eyes soft with
love as he looked at Xander like he was something precious.

Clinging to his memories, Xander slipped into a light restless sleep, waiting for sunset so he could search for Spike again.

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Spike pushed himself to his feet, using the cheap metal frame of the bed to haul himself upright, ignoring the pain from the burns on his face and hands and his broken rib. He had no intention of hanging about in this fleabag motel any longer, waiting for the manager or the girl’s pimp to arrive and start another round of kick the Spike.

He needed somewhere to hole up for awhile. He couldn’t risk going anywhere near the factory, not in his current helpless state and with obvious injuries. Even without knowing what the soldiers had done to him, the burns and other signs of unhealed violence made him a target for anyone who thought he was too weak to defend himself. A Master Vampire who looked vulnerable generally ceased to be a Master in quick order, usually by meeting final death at the hands of a formerly loyal minion. He needed somewhere quiet, where he wouldn’t be found, somewhere he could lie low until his obvious injuries healed - which could take days without blood to speed the healing.

The answer came to him almost immediately: the mansion. The lack of tunnel access that he’d always derided would be a godsend now, even as it had been when he’d stayed there with Xander after he’d been injured in the fight with Angelus, back when his Sire had been trying to raise Acatlah. There should even be some blood there. Xander had put a number of bags in the freezer at the mansion as an emergency supply in case Spike ever needed it.

Blessing his boy’s foresight, Spike left the hotel room, wishing he could leave his shame and humiliation behind as easily. He set out across town in something approximating his usual arrogant stride - the last thing he could afford to do was let anyone see him limping painfully through the streets.

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Xander hadn’t returned to the apartment, despite knowing he was being an idiot and that he was going to catch hell from Buffy tomorrow. Actually, Buffy, Giles, and Mrs. Summers were all going to take turns chewing him out. But he was tired of being babysat, tired of the assessing looks everyone kept giving him - the looks that measured whether he was ready to stop deluding himself and start listening to reason. Even Mrs. Summers had given up and she’d been the one person solidly in his corner about Spike being alive. But that had been three days ago, and she was beginning to slip sensible little comments into their daily phone calls. Comments about how he should come and stay with her at her house and how he needed to remember to take care of himself and get some sleep. Maybe he was reading too much into it but it felt like she was trying to gently ease him into accepting that Spike wasn’t coming back.

So, instead of going back to the apartment at sunset, even though he knew that Buffy would be waiting for him, he set out to search for Spike on his own. Despite the fact that she thought it was a waste of time - an opinion she tried tactfully to hide - Buffy had gone out with him every night as he searched the town over and over again, looking for any trace of Spike or the elusive soldiers - although even he was starting to wonder whether the soldiers really existed or if he had just succumbed to the desperate hope of a government conspiracy. Going out alone was undoubtedly childish and stupid, but he honestly wasn’t sure he could deal with one more failure and, if he broke down, he wasn’t going to do it in front of anyone, no matter how good a friend.

It wasn’t like he was suicidal or anything. Spike’s Claim Mark gave him a certain amount of
protection and he had weapons and a cross with him, plus he wasn’t exactly helpless. Spike had seen to it that he could take care of himself.

To his surprise, he hit pay dirt after only a little more than an hour. He was checking crypts in the Peaceful Haven Cemetery, looking for any sign that they’d been recently opened, when he heard stealthy movement nearby.

He’d instantly crouched down behind the hedge that had been planted around the crypt he’d been checking, listening intently. There were several sets of footsteps approaching, three or four was his guess, and he wished he dared stick his head up above the brush to see who it was.

They moved past without speaking and he was cautiously lifting his head to get a glimpse of them when he heard a crackling sound, familiar from a hundred war movies. One of them had a radio, which almost certainly meant they were human.

Xander shifted position cautiously, easing further out of his hiding place until he could see who was there. Three dark figures were standing in a group a short distance away. All three were carrying rifles and their faces were dark - masks or camouflage paint probably. One of them spoke: “B-team, checking in. Nothing to report.” There was a brief pause but, despite straining to hear, Xander couldn’t make out the response, then the man spoke again: “Roger that. B-team out.”

“We keep looking,” the man said, this time to his two companions, signaling them to move out.

Feeling the first glimmer of hope in several days, Xander waited until the soldiers had moved almost out of sight, then rose silently to follow them.

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Keeping to the human areas of town nearly doubled the time it took Spike to reach the mansion. Walking openly down the sidewalks of residential neighborhoods was unnatural: he was a predator, not a sodding human out for an evening stroll. Or he had been a predator. Now he was just a wounded animal looking for a place to hide. He’d even nicked a baseball cap from someone’s front porch, yanking it on over his conspicuous white hair and despising himself and the soldiers equally for reducing him to this.

The part of his brain that wasn’t keeping track of his surroundings was puzzling over what exactly they’d done to him and how and, most importantly, how he could fix it. He shoved aside the worry that it wasn’t fixable - it had to be fixable, there was no way he was going to go on like this: unable to feed, unable to fight, unable to protect his Claimed. Rage burned inside him every time he thought about what had been done to him. He wanted to wreak bloody vengeance on the soldiers and the lab coats and everyone associated with the facility. He wanted to burn the place down and piss on the ashes.

He gave himself an impatient shake. Pleasant as it was to think about, revenge would have to wait. He had to concentrate on the immediate problem. The soldiers had taken him out of the cell for “awhile” - he cursed his former neighbor again for his inexact description. He’d fought them when they came for him the first time without experiencing the crippling pain, so he’d been fine until then. When he woke up in the cell again, he’d noticed he was no longer hungry. Which meant they must have done something physical to him, then given him blood to heal all traces of their work. He could pretty much rule out mojo or some kind of post-hypnotic command, because neither explained the small bald spot on the back of his skull. Blood wouldn’t grow his hair back any faster, so the bald spot was the only remaining clue to their handiwork.

What the bloody hell could they have done to him physically to cause blinding pain when he tried
to hit or bite someone? Some new form of electroshock? Dru had gone through a brief phase in the 30’s, when she’d been fascinated by the idea of getting electroshock therapy. She had seized on the idea one day when her visions overwhelmed her and she was tearing her hair out and desperate for relief. She’d thought it might burn the visions out of her. Spike had easily talked her out of it and he hadn’t thought about it again, until now. Could the government have found a way to use electroshock to rewire his brain so that certain actions automatically caused pain? If so, was it something that could be reversed?

Such fruitless speculations kept him occupied until he arrived at the mansion. The house was quiet and undisturbed and Spike headed directly for the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, he almost sagged in relief at seeing nearly a dozen bags of human blood in the freezer compartment. He had no real hope that blood would do anything to fix what the soldiers had done but it would heal the burns and his broken rib.

The three soldiers were hunting something, not just randomly patrolling.

Peaceful Haven Cemetery was mostly open fields with only a scattering of trees and Xander had quickly abandoned any notion of following the soldiers. Instead of trying to follow them, he had climbed to the top of one of the taller crypts and kept an eye on them from there. There was an enormous stone angel on the crypt and the soldiers were unlikely to see him as he stood motionless, pressed up against the statue, even if they looked up.

The soldiers were quartering the cemetery in a search pattern, consulting some kind of device as they went. Xander couldn’t help being reminded of landing parties on Star Trek using tricorders to scan alien planets but, even though he knew it was silly, he couldn’t dismiss the image. Whatever it was they were carrying, it allowed the soldiers to cover ground quickly - they weren’t inspecting individual crypts, just checking an area from a central point with their equipment, then moving on to another section.

It only took them about 20 minutes for them to cover the entire cemetery. Xander watched as they talked briefly, wishing he could hear what they were saying, then the small patrol headed out of the cemetery with purposeful strides. Xander waited until they were at the gate before dropping down from the roof to follow. From the direction they were headed, it looked like they were going to the next closest cemetery, Shady Hill.

He stayed well back, walking openly on the sidewalk like a regular pedestrian - ok, an insane pedestrian out for a midnight stroll on the Hellmouth, but just a regular guy not interested in soldiers - maybe he should whistle, he couldn’t help thinking with an inward grin.

He was two blocks behind them, when he saw them turn in his direction. He tensed, ready to duck up a front walk as if going home if they approached, but they just stared in his direction for a moment, then turned and started walking again. One of them settled something over his shoulder as they moved off and he suspected they had just checked him with their equipment and was grateful that it apparently indicated he was harmless.

A dozen empty bags of blood littered the counter as the microwave dinged one more time. Spike opened the door and pulled out the last mug, finishing it quickly. He could feel the warm human blood spreading through his body and the pain of the burns had already eased substantially as the blood boosted his healing ability. Fortunately, ribs were nothing and burns, no matter how painful, were surface wounds, both should heal fully by tomorrow.
Blood was the stuff of unlife itself for a vampire, the hot fluid was so much more than a necessity. Drinking it, hot and fresh from the veins of an unwilling victim, carried subtleties of taste and emotion that humans couldn’t understand. The taste of living blood was indescribable. It was food after famine, water in the desert, replenishing life and energy by stealing it from the still-living flesh of prey. Vampires had been known to keep killing beyond reason and caution, draining victim after victim in an uncontrollable orgy of bloodlust because of the ecstatic high that came with feeding. Spike himself had gotten lost in the rush of killing and feeding, draining dozens of victims until he was beyond sated.

Now the taste of human blood was sour in his mouth in a way that had nothing to do with the fact that it was bagged and not directly from the vein. Every swallow, no matter how needed and how necessary for healing, had choked him with bitter acknowledgement that this was all that was left to him now - artificial food, frozen and packaged, sterile and empty, something to keep his unlife going, not something to be savored.

As the last drops slid down his throat, Spike flung the empty mug against the wall, unable to even take satisfaction in the destruction as the mug shattered into a million tiny pieces. The destruction just emphasized that this was all that was left to him: bagged blood and property damage. Fucking bastards had no right to do this to him.

He slid down the counter to collapse on the floor, wondering why he’d even bothered to drink. He should have let his burns fester and remain unhealed - outward signs of the inward damage, the pain a reminder of that other, far worse pain.

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Xander groaned silently to himself as the soldiers entered yet another cemetery, their third since he’d begun following them. Restfield was one of the older cemeteries, with uneven ground and a lot of big trees. He wouldn’t be able to keep track of the soldiers from a central vantage point this time, he’d have to risk following them. Hopefully he’d be able to keep far enough back not to alert them to his presence while still being able to guess their movements. He couldn’t just wait for them at the entrance either, since there were several exits they could use.

He waited until they were out of sight before cautiously following them in through the gates. He kept close to the larger crypts, trying to move silently and invisibly from one to the next, tracking the soldiers more by guesswork than by following their actual movements.

The night was quiet enough that their infrequent comments and the occasional radio message carried a long way and helped him to keep track of their movements. He was concentrating exclusively on the soldiers and, as a result, he nearly jumped out of his skin when a hand closed firmly around his arm and yanked him around the side of the crypt he was standing next to. He yelled in shock and was almost grateful for the hand that clamped over his mouth smothering the sound before it could fully escape.

“It’s me,” Angel said in his ear and Xander let out a long breath, sagging with relief. Angel released him and Xander turned to face him, scowling at him in the dim light.

“Jeez, give me a heart attack already,” he whispered. “What the hell are you doing?”

“What am I doing?” Angel hissed back angrily, obviously keeping his voice low only with an effort. “I’m not the one wandering around a cemetery looking for trouble.”

Xander refrained from pointing out that it looked like that was exactly what Angel was doing. “I found the soldiers,” he explained instead, glad he finally had proof of their existence.
“I saw. I suppose it didn’t occur to you that getting some help before going off on your own might be a good idea? Buffy was worried sick when you didn’t meet up with her. We’ve been looking for you.”

The worst part about Angel’s lecturing tone was that he was right. Xander should have called Buffy but that would have lead to Buffy-lectures and she didn’t mean to, but when she was doing her “I’m the Slayer” routine, she came across as pretty condescending. Not as bad as Angel but hard to take for someone who had managed to stay alive on the Hellmouth past high school mostly on his own.

Even he knew that was just an excuse. He’d deliberately not met up with Buffy and worse, not called her, because she was humoring him about searching for Spike, no matter how much she tried to hide it. After Angel’s deadline, he hadn’t been ready for Buffy to take Angel’s side, even implicitly.

“Look, we don’t have time for this. We’re going to lose them.”

Angel’s face got that impatient look he’d had so often sophomore year when he was trying to convince Xander that Spike was bad for him. “Go home, Xander. I’ll take care of this.”

“So not happening. You don’t even think there’s anything going on. I want to know where they go when they aren’t canvassing cemeteries.”

“How is tipping them off by getting caught following them going to help Spike?” Angel asked sarcastically.

Xander glared at him. “How is you disappearing going to help anyone?” he snapped back. “These guys are scanning the cemeteries with some kind of equipment. Whatever they’ve got, I bet they can tell vampires from humans.”

Angel frowned. Xander knew the older vampire didn’t keep up with the modern world the way Spike did and he suspected that went double for new technology - ‘new’ as in post-dating the invention of the radio, he suspected.

“I think they’re using something that senses body heat,” he said, “or maybe something that checks for the sound of a heartbeat.” Ok, so he was a little vague on the line between reality and science-fiction, but he knew for sure that those two things existed. “Whatever they’ve got, if the military is hunting demons, you can bet it’s the most up-to-date stuff there is.”

They stared at each other stubbornly, neither giving ground and Xander knew they were risking either being seen or losing the soldiers if they kept this up. “How about we follow them together?” he suggested.

“That’ll just double the chances of being caught,” Angel pointed out impatiently.

“Not if we tag team them.”

They settled on Xander staying back with Angel and Angel tracking them by sound. Vampire hearing should be able to follow their progress from outside visual range and, hopefully, beyond the range of their equipment.

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As the last of the pain from his burns faded to a dull, itchy sensation as the raw patches began to heal, Spike stirred and reluctantly considered his options. The night was half gone and he had to
decide what to do. He wanted to see Xander, to find out if he was all right - wanted it so badly it was an ache far more painful than even the sun burning his flesh. But he needed to think it through first, make sure he wouldn’t be putting Xander in danger by returning to the apartment in his current state.

He stared at the empty bags on the counter before sweeping them angrily to the floor. He was reduced to being Angelus now, worse, because Angelus bagged it by choice not because he couldn’t bite. Spike had been drinking bagged blood recently more than he would have ever dreamed barely a year ago. He did it to please Xander and, he admitted with a tiny self-mocking smile, because Xander went to so much trouble to make sure that there was always a ready supply of blood in the refrigerator, making it convenient. Spike didn’t need to ever feed off another human to survive but that wasn’t really the point. He didn’t want to be like Angelus had been for so long - just surviving, not living. Violence was who he was: he was the Big Bad, Master of the Hellmouth, and Xander was his Claimed human. He couldn’t have any of that if he couldn’t fight and again he wondered if there was any point in going on like this.

Whatever his decision, he needed to see if Xander was alright. The fate of a fallen Master’s Claimed human was generally not pretty. The new Master often took them as playthings, symbols of their triumph over the human’s former Master. Their lives tended to be short and brutally violent and that was not happening to Xander. No matter what he had to do, whatever it cost him in pain and humiliation, he would protect Xander from that fate.

The soldiers hit three more cemeteries over the course of the next two hours, sweeping through them quickly but thoroughly and Angel had reluctantly been convinced that the men knew what they were doing. They weren’t on some random hunt for an AWOL colleague - it was obvious they were searching for a demon, and probably a vampire. Xander hated the fact that he felt like a tag-along, totally dependent on Angel’s reports because, once the vampire stretched out his hearing, he was able to track them from well beyond the range where Xander could see or hear them. Angel had overheard two additional radio reports and Xander estimated they were checking in every half hour. Both times, the soldiers had reported they hadn’t found anything, once referring to their target as “Hostile 17”.

The fact that they were looking for a specific demon - Xander had to assume it was a demon - gave Xander a surge of hope he didn’t even try to suppress. If anyone was capable of escaping from the military, it was Spike. Regardless, whoever, or whatever it was the soldiers were hunting, Xander was ready to help. Mostly it was the hope that anyone the soldiers were looking for might be able to tell them about the soldiers, their base, and whether they were holding any prisoners, but it was also the fact that all the equipment the soldiers were toting made it seem a bit unfair: Buffy and Spike’s contempt for guns as weapons had apparently rubbed off on him.

“They’ve been recalled.”

Angel reported the news quietly. Xander had developed a healthy new respect for vampiric hearing in the last two hours. He’d known it was substantially better than human hearing but he’d never hunted with Spike this way and it was weird but useful to be able to follow someone he could neither see nor hear, trusting only that Angel actually could.

“Like back to base?” Xander asked.

“Yes.”

“Good, we’ll finally see where they’ve been hiding.”
Angel’s silent warning had them fading back into the shadows on the far side of a crypt as the three soldiers walked past. Although obviously still alert, they were more relaxed now. The stocky guy in the middle who’d been operating the thing that looked so much like a tricorder every time Xander had gotten a glimpse of it, had put it away, and they strode openly through the cemetery on a direct line to the gate, no longer moving surreptitiously and keeping to the shadows.

He waited for Angel’s signal before following the vampire out of the cemetery, well after the soldiers had moved out of sight.

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Xander had been here recently.

Once he’d left the kitchen, Spike had caught faint traces of Xander’s scent in the living room. It was stronger downstairs and Spike followed his Claimed’s beloved scent to the master bedroom.

Xander had been here within the last day. The scent was strongest on the bed, clearly Xander had slept here within the last day and Spike couldn’t help picking up the pillow and inhaling the familiar spicy scent of his Claimed. For a long moment, he just stood there, inhaling deeply, drinking in the familiar smell, before he sat down on the bed, his fingers tightening convulsively in the fabric of the pillow.

Xander’s scent was off. His natural scent was nearly overwhelmed by the bitter tang of grief and loneliness and the salt of unshed tears. His boy hadn’t smelled that way since shortly after Spike met him, when Xander had been so lost in grief for his friend that he’d been taking crazy risks, almost as if he was deliberately trying to get himself killed.

Xander thought he was dead, that much was obvious. And maybe it would be better to let him think that, let him grieve and move on, but Spike knew that Xander didn’t let go of things, didn’t give up on the people he loved.

Question was, where was Xander now and why had he been sleeping on the bare mattress at the mansion instead of back at the apartment? Did that mean that the someone had taken over the Court, that Xander had had to leave the apartment for safety?

Spike felt a wave of fury wash over him at the thought of another vampire trying to take his place. Sunnydale was his town, he was Master here, not some jumped up pretender taking over the moment Spike’s back was turned. And if that pretender had threatened Xander, well maybe Spike just needed to figure out how to ignore the pain, just long enough to kill the vampire that was trying to take his place.

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Xander felt a rush of both triumph and anger as he approached the metal doors set in the concrete bunker. The soldiers had disappeared inside and Angel had heard the sound of what had to be some sort of electronic lock. Angel hadn’t been able to see any cameras so Xander felt safe examining the entrance.

The whole structure was obviously new. Set deep in the woods, the concrete building was less than ten feet square. Except for the fact that it was made of concrete and sitting in the middle of nowhere, it could have been a garden shed. There was nothing about it that spoke of the military or high tech or security. There had been some attempt to hide it by piling brush up around it, but the people who had put it here were obviously hoping that anyone who stumbled across it wouldn’t think anything of it. Just an old concrete structure left over from who knows what. High tech
surveillance cameras guarding the entrance would have called attention to it, doing more harm than good.

If the soldiers hadn’t gone inside, Xander himself wouldn’t have thought this was something worth bothering with. Undoubtedly, it was bristling with security on the inside but right now, all Xander was worried about was what it meant: that the army had some kind of secret base here. Secret base plus demon-hunting equaled the explanation for Spike’s disappearance, nothing else made sense. Even Angel had been sounding less skeptical as the night wore on. Xander didn’t give a damn about vindication, he was just relieved to finally have something to corroborate his gut instinct.

As tempting as it was, Xander didn’t make any effort to open the doors, he knew it wouldn’t do any good. Walking away now was one of the hardest things he’d ever done but he had to do this right, had to plan his next move. If he was going to storm an army base, he needed a lot more backup than Angel.

Reluctantly stepping away from the door he was convinced was separating him from Spike, Xander rubbed his hands over his face tiredly. He’d call Sergeant Morgan in the morning. It was probably time for a summit meeting with Giles, Buffy, Sergeant Morgan and Mr. Olsen. If the military had a secret base in town and were capturing demons, that was Mayor-level bad.

Sitting on the bed, Spike found himself fingering the small bald spot on the back of his head. It was the key to what had been done to him. He had no proof but he knew. It was the only thing that made sense. They’d done something to his head to cause him excruciating pain whenever he hurt something.

There was something…

There was something about this whole set up that was ringing the faintest of bells. Something that seemed vaguely familiar. He’d heard something once, if he could just remember what.

Closing his eyes, Spike lay back down on the bed, struggling to find the elusive memory. Soldiers, government, experiments… why did it all sound so familiar?

And just like that, he had it. He sat up, bitter curses filling the empty room as the memory suddenly sprang into place.

That Nazi on the fucking submarine in the 40’s. That blighter Lawson struggling to read the German document they’d found, saying: “It's technical. Something about stimulation and… control. They've been experimenting on them... and cutting into their brains.” There’d been talk about how Hitler wanted to create an army of vampire slaves and Angelus admitting the U.S. government was interested in the Nazi research. Spike had burned the report on the Nazi experiments but obviously the Americans hadn’t given up the idea.

“Bastards,” he snarled to the empty room. “Took you 50 years but you finally figured it out, didn’t you? Well, I’m not going to be your guinea pig.” A grim smile crossed his face as he remembered the shattered mug in the kitchen. “Can still damage property, can’t I? We’ll just see if your little experiment in behavior modification still lets me burn your fucking building to the ground.”
Chapter 12

Xander spent the walk back to the factory thinking furiously. He was aware that Angel kept sliding sideways looks at him but he didn’t have the time or energy right now to worry about what Angel thought of him.

The soldiers were real. That was what he needed to deal with. After days of searching, he and Angel had proof that there was a group of soldiers operating out of a hidden base here in town. The local army unit didn’t know anything about them or Sergeant Morgan would have heard something. Whoever they were, they were sufficiently classified that the ranking officers at the local base didn’t know they existed. Which had to mean a seriously high level of secrecy.

He needed more information to know how to handle this. If Sergeant Morgan stood outside the entrance they’d found and ordered a soldier to talk to him, would that do any good? Xander suspected it wouldn’t. Undoubtedly they would say something like “need to know only” and walk off laughing. Well, maybe not laughing but certainly not giving up any information about what the hell they were doing and why they were capturing demons and holding them prisoner.

‘Hostile 17’. That’s what Angel had overheard them saying. What the fuck did that mean?

Xander found he was practically vibrating with tension. He kept nervously tapping one hand against his leg and it was beginning to drive himself crazy, never mind how Angel was reacting. He took a deep, steadying breath and shoved both hands in his pockets to still them. He had to stay calm and figure out what the next move was.

Break it down, Xander, he ordered himself. Think it through.

‘17’ had to mean there was Hostiles 1 through 16, didn’t it? Did that mean that the soldiers had at least 17 prisoners? Spike had heard about five or six disappearances for sure and there were undoubtedly others. And that wasn’t even counting any vampires - besides Spike. No one thought anything about vampires who disappeared because everyone assumed they were dead.

What the hell did the military want with a bunch of demons?

“What the hell does the military want with a bunch of demons?”

“What?” Xander realized he’d stopped abruptly and Angel was now walking the few steps back towards him.

“Why would the military want to keep demons prisoner?” he repeated.

“We don’t know that they are.”

“Then what do you think is going on?” Xander asked reasonably. If reasonably meant keeping his voice low while gritting the words out between his teeth.

“I just don’t want you to get your hopes up,” Angel said.

“Angel, we’ve got soldiers hunting for a particular demon, a secret base that no one knows about, and information that they have almost 20 prisoners.”

Angel shot him a dark look. “What we have is soldiers looking for someone or something they call ‘Hostile 17’, and a concealed entrance to something. That’s all we have.”
Xander glared at him. Angel was right, Xander was reading too much into the situation but that didn’t mean he wasn’t on the right track. Angel was being too cautious and cautious wasn’t going to get Spike back. “Fine, but you don’t call something ‘number 17’ unless you went through numbers 1 through 16 first, and those guys weren’t playing games. Plus,” he remembered suddenly, “they weren’t using that equipment to scan for humans. Whatever it is, they pointed it right at me and then walked away. They could tell I wasn’t what they were looking for from a couple of blocks away. There’s no way they’re looking for a human.”

Angel nodded. “Good point.” His brows drew together and he frowned. “The strangest thing about this is them hunting for a particular demon,” he glanced at Xander, obviously conceding the demon part of the equation. “If the military has learned about demons…” he broke off, looking thoughtful, then continued slowly. “I would expect them just to kill them. The secrecy doesn’t seem unusual, they wouldn’t want anyone else to know what they were doing. The military is always worried about civilians panicking. The disappearances could simply mean that they’ve been burying the bodies.”

“You don’t name things you’re just going to kill on sight,” Xander said confidently. “With kill on sight you just call them ‘the big, ugly thing over there’.”

That actually got a small smile out of Angel and Xander was surprised to find himself grinning at the vampire. Hope, so long absent, had been rising steadily in him ever since they found the bunker. Spike was alive, he was a prisoner, and they were going to rescue him. And no one was going to convince him otherwise.

“That actually makes sense in a peculiar way,” Angel said, after a moment. “But, Xander, the disappearances have occurred over several weeks. If they’re taking prisoners for some reason, they could be holding them…” Angel hesitated: “sequentially.”

Sequentially. Xander took a moment to digest that and felt sick. “You mean that prisoners 1 through 16 may be dead.”

Angel nodded grimly. “Plus, I don’t like the idea of the military holding demons prisoner because I can only think of one reason why they would do that - if they were experimenting on them.”

Xander fought back a wave of nausea. He’d been so focused on finding Spike that he hadn’t really had time to think about what might have been happening to him. He’d seen too many X-Files and Alien Autopsy shows not to have thought about the fact that there were a lot of people who would think nothing of cutting into something non-human to see what made them tick. Hell, there were a lot of people who’d done it to other people just because they could. The thought of someone experimenting of Spike made him sick to his stomach and he looked at Angel with stricken eyes.

Angel looked like he was having similar thoughts and he laid a sympathetic hand on Xander’s shoulder. “We’ll find out what’s going on, Xander. I promise.”

Xander just nodded and looked away for a long moment, struggling for control. Angel waited silently while Xander pushed his fears aside and deliberately let his anger take over. When his eyes met Angel’s again, they were full of the stubborn determination that had gotten him through Graduation. “Let’s get back to the factory and figure out our next move,” he said. Without waiting for an answer, he strode off.

If the soldiers had hurt Spike, they were going to seriously regret it.
He needed information. He needed to know what had been happening in his Territory since he’d been gone. He needed to know the status of the Court and, above all, he needed to know if Xander was ok.

The problem was, he didn’t know how to get information when he couldn’t back up his demands with threats.

Pacing the mansion, Spike considered the problem. He hated the fact that he was having to figure out ways to hide the fact that he was as helpless as a day-old fledge. Even if he could hide his reaction to the crippling pain, he couldn’t count on being able to deliver more than one blow in a fight. The pain had literally driven him to his knees, blinding him to everything around him during the fight with the scientists outside his cell. The only reason he’d been able to escape was because they were humans and could be taken out with one blow.

Fine. He’d just bluff his way through. He’d told Xander once that if you walked into a room as if you owned it, you were halfway to owning it. He needed to pull himself together. Very few demons challenged him because he had a well-deserved reputation for having a short fuse and extremely violent ways of dealing with people who didn’t do exactly as he said.

Spike went to the weapons chest Xander had made for him. If he had only one shot at it in a fight, he was going to make sure it was a good one. At the sight of the deceptively simple chest with its inlaid design of dark and light strips, he smiled involuntarily. Running his hands lovingly over the polished wood, he could almost feel Xander’s presence in the painstaking workmanship. He needed to do this right, for Xander’s sake.

Opening the lid, he selected several stakes and a small battle-axe, once more cursing the theft of his duster. In addition to everything else, it had been great for stashing weapons. Sighing, he reluctantly went to the closet to grab an old coat that Angel had left there and shrugged into it to hide the weapons he was carrying.

Leaving the sanctuary of the mansion, which had begun to feel like almost as much of a prison as the white celled one he’d just escaped from, Spike headed for the factory.

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They were nearly home when Xander put a hand on Angel’s arm, stopping him. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a jerk about all this. I really appreciate everything you’re doing to help.”

Angel just looked steadily back at him. “I meant it when I said that I hope Spike’s alive. We’ve had our problems but he’s my Childe.”

“Am I making it harder for you by staying in the apartment?” Much as he hated the idea of moving out, making Angel’s job harder wouldn’t help Spike. “I can go to the mansion if that would make things easier.” His lips twitched slightly in amusement. “If that’s ok with you,” he added somewhat belatedly, the smile escaping as he remembered that technically the mansion was Angel’s despite Spike having pretty much taken it over.

“It’s dangerous,” Angel answered flatly. “The Court’s a powder keg and you’re sitting on top of it. It’s always been dangerous and I’m surprised Spike ever thought it was a good place for a human to live, much less his Claimed. But now…,” he shook his head pessimistically. “There’s a reason I told you to get out.”

Xander’s reply was drowned out by an inarticulate roar of fury. He jerked around, hand going automatically to the stake in his back pocket, and saw Spike running towards them with a look of
uncontrolled rage on his face and his hand dropped nervelessly to his side again in shock.

Spike!

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Bastard! Goddamn interfering know-it-all prick was at it again - criticizing him, belittling him, ordering Xander out of his own home and telling his Claimed that Spike had been putting him in danger all along.

No more. He was not putting up with it ever again.

He’d stopped short at his first sight of his Claimed, walking beside Angelus, clearly headed for the factory. His eyes drank in the sight of his boy for a moment. Xander was alive and well, and the crushing worry lifted a bit at the sight before his brows drew together in a frown as Xander put a hand on his Sire’s arm and stopped him.

What the hell was his Sire doing here? Spike shifted to his demon face, anger growing in him as Angelus stepped close to his Claimed and they talked quietly and earnestly. Bloody, fucking hell, he’d kill Angelus for poaching on his territory. Not to mention for being so human-blind and deaf as to not notice another vampire within hearing distance. Angelus still hadn’t regained his predatory edge and that was dangerous for Xander. Bloody idiot couldn’t protect Xander if he didn’t hear danger when it was standing beside him.

His eyes narrowed and he glared balefully. His Sire had no right to be standing so close to his Claimed and he stretched out his senses to hear what they were saying.

Fury tore through him and he was closing the distance between them in a sprint before he’d even realized he was moving. Xander and Angelus both turned to face him, their expressions equally stunned but, caught up in a wave of out of control rage, Spike couldn’t think beyond tearing his Sire limb from limb.

Angelus really had lost his touch, he thought in triumphant satisfaction as Angelus made no move to defend himself in the critical second before Spike was on him, his fist connecting solidly with his Sire’s smug face and sending Angelus reeling backwards from the force of the blow. Blood spattered and Spike followed up instantly, raining blow after blow down on Angelus who was off-balance and on the defensive when he belatedly moved to defend himself.


“Spike!”

Xander’s voice finally penetrated the rage that filled his entire being, his repeated calls cutting through the pent up fury and frustration that had suddenly found an outlet, reaching him when nothing else could.

“Spike! Stop!”

His Claimed’s voice called to him and he let the longed for sound of his boy’s voice override the nearly overwhelming need to destroy his opponent. He finally registered the urgent hands pulling him away from his victim and he stepped back from his prostrate Sire and looked around.

Xander’s face was stunned and disbelieving as Spike turned to face him, the disbelief transforming slowly to relief and pure joy. “Spike!” he said again, his voice barely a whisper now as he reached
for Spike with shaking hands.

Taking a step forward, Spike flung his arms around his Claimed and hugged him close, dropping his head to bury his face in the crook of Xander’s neck, inhaling deeply and filling his senses with the sounds and scents and tastes of his Claimed.

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Xander clung to Spike, hiding his face against Spike’s shoulder as he slowly absorbed the reality of feeling the lean, wiry body against his own. This was real, he gradually realized. It wasn’t a dream. Spike was here and whole and everything was going to be all right. There was nothing they couldn’t deal with now that Spike was back.

He was vaguely aware of Angel lurching to his feet beside them, but Angel could have been singing and dancing and he wouldn’t have moved or so much as batted an eye. Spike was all that mattered.

Eventually, spurred on by Angel’s increasingly impatient noises, Xander lifted his head. “We should go inside,” he said, not moving to separate himself from Spike. “Sun’s almost up.”

“What the hell was that about?” Angel asked crankily, not without cause, Xander admitted to himself, biting back a near-hysterical giggle. Spike was back! Was all he could think. Why Spike had decided to beat Angel up was way too complicated an idea for a brain that was totally occupied with repeating giddily: “Spike’s here!” over and over.

Spike turned just enough to look at Angel, not letting Xander go for an instant. Not that he had a chance. Xander’s arms were wound so tightly around the familiar slim, muscular body that he was pretty sure they were fused together. “Teach you…” Spike began, then broke off sharply with what sounded like a shocked gasp. Except Spike never gasped like that.

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“Spike? Are you ok?” he asked worriedly, leaning back an inch or two to see his face.

Spike looked like he’d been struck dumb, like he’d just been given his own personal guarantee of life-long bliss and he was suddenly laughing out loud: a triumphant, joyful sound such as Xander had never heard from him before and Xander’s own more than a little giddy laugh joined Spike’s. He had no idea what was so funny but the happiness and relief at Spike’s sudden, miraculous return made him want to dance and sing. Laughter was probably safe compared to the reaction if he suddenly started turning cartwheels and handsprings in the street like he felt like doing.

“What the hell was that about?”

Typical. His Sire was putting on the innocent act, like he had no idea what he could possibly have
done to piss Spike off. Used to pull that same shite with Dru: be standing there, trousers around his ankles, his seed dripping off her flesh and asking what Spike’s problem was.

“Teach you…” Spike began furiously and then reality hit and the world screeched to a halt.

Angel was climbing to his feet, blood dripping from a split lip, one eye already going puffy and swollen from damage that Spike had inflicted and there had been no pain.

No pain.

Elation filled him. The bastards had failed. Whatever they’d done to him had worn off, or broken down, or just plain stopped working. Hell, maybe it had been the blood. Whether chemical, electrical, or psychological, whatever they’d done wasn’t working any more and he was whole again.

He was dimly aware of Xander asking him anxiously if he was ok and Spike laughed out loud at his sudden, unexpected victory. His boy never needed to know about his humiliation. Xander would never find out about how they’d crippled him. How he’d been reduced him to a pathetic, sniveling wreck. It was over. He was better now and could take back his life, his Claimed, his Territory…, and his revenge.

He was laughing like a maniac as he swept Xander into a hug, holding his boy in his arms as he’d feared he might never have the chance to again. He felt like partying, like going to a bar and thrashing every demon in the place, just because he could, like shagging his boy ’til Xander couldn’t stand up. But that would all happen soon enough. For now, he settled for lifting Xander off his feet and spinning him around in sheer exuberance, loving the sound of his Claimed’s laughter and the feel of Xander’s warm body in his arms again where he belonged.

It was over. He was back and the soldiers were going to pay in ways they couldn’t even begin to imagine for what they’d done. They were going to learn the hard way just how badly they’d screwed up by fucking with William the Bloody, Master of the Hellmouth.
Chapter 13

Reluctantly unpeeling himself from Spike just enough to let them walk, Xander kept one arm wrapped firmly around his lover’s waist, half afraid that if he let go for even a second, Spike would disappear again.

“So,” he said as they moved slowly in the direction of the factory, trying for normal despite the sappy grin he knew was plastered all over his face. “Angel and I are working on a rescue plan, want to help?”

Spike lifted an eyebrow, obviously struggling a bit to regain his own cool demeanor. Probably chanting to himself ‘vampires don’t giggle’ or some such mantra, Xander thought fondly.

“How’s that going for you?” Spike asked.

“Pretty good,” he said judiciously. “Although we’ve run into a little snag - it seems our rescue-ee has already saved himself.”

“Ah. Pity,” Spike agreed, wicked amusement dancing in his eyes.

“Well, it means I’ve got some free time now. Any suggestions?” Xander knew he was deliberately ignoring everything they should be talking about. But Spike was clearly healthy and as giddily happy as Xander was, despite his efforts to hide it, and he just couldn’t bear to break the euphoric mood by questioning Spike about where he’d been and what had happened. Now that Spike was back, they had plenty of time and Spike seemed to be totally on board the denial train with him.

“Have a couple of ideas,” Spike purred in his smoky, bedroom voice, sending an anticipatory shiver up Xander’s spine. “What say we kick my Sire out and shag like bunnies.” It was clearly not a question.

“Oh, yeah,” Xander agreed wholeheartedly.

Spike pulled him in for a kiss which he enthusiastically returned, letting himself get lost in the taste and feel of his vampire, so miraculously restored to him. Spike’s strong hands slid into his hair, holding him as their tongues dueled and their bodies pressed against each other and it was like Spike had never been gone. Like the lonely days of worry and aching loss were some horrible nightmare that he’d just woken from. It was only after long moments that Xander’s brain reluctantly kicked into gear again and he remembered that making out with a vampire outside when dawn was rapidly approaching was a bad idea.

He ignored Spike’s protest and pushed himself back just enough to speak, remembering as he did that they had another problem. “We can’t kick Angel out. It’s almost dawn.”

“He can sleep downstairs,” Spike muttered unsympathetically, still kissing his way along Xander’s neck, his tongue tracing along the veins in a way that made Xander’s toes curl.

“Oh, if you keep doing that, we’re never going to make it inside.”

Spike laughed and lifted his had and Xander immediately regretted putting a halt, even temporarily, to Spike’s assault on his senses. “C’mon, luv.”

They walked up the outside stairs, arms still wrapped around each other and Spike grinned as Angel’s voice greeted them at the door. “Are you two finished behaving like children?”
“Nope,” Spike said cheerfully, smirking at his Sire as he blatantly slid a hand down to grab Xander’s ass. Mindful of the fact that they were on the verge of doing it in front of Spike’s dad, Xander seized Spike’s hand to stop it from wandering further, reluctantly moving it to a less compromising area.

“We’ll be good,” he told Angel, trying to sound like he meant it.

“Speak for yourself.” Ok, so Spike wasn’t on board with the don’t have sex in front of Angel plan.

“Spike, what happened? Where have you been?” Angel scowled, “And why the hell did you attack me?”

“Were interfering with my Claimed, weren’t you?” Spike answered unrepentantly. “Don’t be a baby, I hardly touched you.” His pleased grin gave the lie to his words.

Xander sobered somewhat, realizing that Spike didn’t know what had been going on while he was gone and curious himself about why Spike had attacked Angel. “Spike, Angel’s been great. He’s been out looking for you every night and keeping a lid on the Court.”

To his surprise, Spike greeted his explanation with a growl, his features shifting as he glared in yellow-eyed outrage at Angel. “He’s been doing what?” he demanded.

Angel held up a calming hand. “Xander asked me to cover your absence with the Court.” Spike shot a disbelieving look at Xander but Angel continued before Spike could say anything. “I thought it was a crazy idea, but it worked. I told the Court you were looking for the Gem of Amara and…”

“You told them what?” Spike roared. “That child’s fairy-tale? Why didn’t you tell them I was looking for the lost continent of Atlantis while you were at it? Or the fucking tooth fairy? Bloody hell! Were you trying to make me a laughing stock? How am I supposed to take control again without dusting half the Court?”

“Spike, it’s my fault, I made him,” Xander said anxiously, inserting himself between the two vampires. Angel really didn’t deserve getting beat up again for something he’d wanted no part of. Plus, this time he could see that Angel was ready: if Spike attacked him again, it was going to be a real fight and he really couldn’t deal with that now.

“Besides,” he put both hands on Spike’s shoulders and looked him straight in the eye, “we both know that you’re gonna go downstairs, tell them it’s none of their fucking business what you were doing this past week and if they’re thick enough to believe what Angel told them, then that’s their problem; and that’s going to be the end of it.” Angel let out an amused snort at his imitation of Spike’s accent and, to his relief, Spike started laughing.

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Maybe it was just reaction, maybe he was still high from the rush of elation he’d felt at realizing that whatever the soldiers had done to him no longer worked, or maybe it was the sheer absurdity of the situation, but he couldn’t help laughing at his boy’s reasoning. Trust Xander to come up with a plan as crazy as having one Master vampire stand in for another and to actually pull it off. He felt a surge of pride in his Claimed as he pulled Xander into a hug. “Only you, luv. You’re as crazy as I am.”

“Hey!” Xander protested although his eyes were dancing with mischief and his full-wattage grin was back. “I’ll have you know it was a brilliant plan. Worked too,” he pointed out smugly.

“Probably because the minions were too bloody confused to know what the hell was happening.”
Spike shook his head in disbelief. “Vampires don’t babysit other vampires’ Courts, luv.”

“That’s what I said,” Angelus muttered.

Spike was surprised to find his initial fury at the revelation that Angelus had been interfering with the Court had vanished in the rush of amusement at Xander’s hasty explanation. Xander came up with the weirdest ideas sometimes because he didn’t think about things in the same way demons did but a lot of his plans actually worked despite how crazy they seemed.

The Court could very well have erupted in his absence - in fact, he’d expected to find that there had been trouble and someone else had taken over. Less than two hours ago, he’d been arming himself in the hope that he could bluff his way through long enough to learn what had happened to Xander. Now, thankfully, none of that was an issue. He didn’t even have to fight to regain control of his Court - Xander’s summary of how he was going to handle his return had been very nearly spot on. Which didn’t mean he wasn’t still annoyed at being made to look like a complete idiot. The Gem of Amara indeed. Where the hell had Angelus come up with that old chestnut?

Despite the fact that only Xander could have come up with such a bizarre plan and somehow managed to convince his Sire to go along with it, Angelus babysitting his Court in his absence had been a good thought. A show of authority, a couple of dustings, and he would be back in control without even breaking a sweat - and he was looking forward to kicking some ass after the humiliations of the past week. Just let any of those wankers question him and they’d see who they were dealing with. He was still Master here.

No, he’d give this one to his Sire. It seemed that Angelus really had been trying to do right by him, no matter how it looked on the surface. Angelus had protected Xander by his actions and by his mere presence in the apartment and Spike owed him for that. It really had been good of his Sire to step in to protect Spike’s Claimed.

More importantly, the idea had kept Xander out of danger although he was sure that hadn’t been his Claimed first priority. Or even his fifth, Spike thought in fond exasperation, smiling at Xander and pulling him in for another hug. It felt like far longer than it could possibly have actually been since he’d been able to touch and smell his Claimed. After the worry and frustration and agony of the last few days, he just wanted to take his boy to bed and feel Xander’s warm body next to him as he buried himself in the taste and smell and feel of his Claimed.

Xander watched Spike’s face anxiously, relieved when he slid back into human face, obviously getting over his sudden flare of anger. He’d known that Spike would freak over having Angel at the apartment but hadn’t anticipated that he’d be so upset over Angel babysitting the Court. Which was probably really dumb on his part - of course Spike would resent his Sire covering for him. Not only were vampires territorial by nature but Spike had Angel issues that went way back, most of which had to do with the power dynamics between the two of them.

Well, he’d created the situation, so it was up to him to smooth it over. “How about we sit down and talk about what’s been happening without destroying the furniture,” he suggested brightly. “Deal?”

Ignoring the way both vampires rolled their eyes at him, he tugged Spike over to the couch and pulled him down to sit beside him, wrapping his arms around the slim, strong body - partly because he wasn’t ready to give up physical contact with his miraculously returned lover and partly because entangling Spike in his arms made it harder for him to attack Angel. Angel prudently sat down in a chair halfway across the room as Xander began his explanation.
“Spike, when you went missing, I asked Angel to help find you. He’s been staying here on the couch. I was worried about what would happen with the Court without some sort of cover story for your absence so I asked him to cover for you.”

“What did happen?” Angel asked. “Where have you been?”

Xander’s lips tightened at Angel’s blunt questions but he knew they’d have to deal with this sooner or later. He’d just been in the later camp himself.

“Bunch of soldiers and lab coat types got an enormous base set up underneath the college campus,” Spike said flatly. “They’re holding prisoners, mostly demons, and they’re experimenting on them.” He shrugged, “Didn’t like the accommodations, so I left.”

“What do you mean ‘experimenting’?”

“Are you alright?”

Angel’s and Xander’s questions overlapped and Spike smiled reassuringly at Xander. “I’m fine, luv.” He turned to face Angel. “Don’t know exactly what they’re doing but it looks like they’re trying to find a way to control demons.” He looked back at Xander. “It’s alright, luv. I’m fine.” Xander realized that his arms had tightened convulsively around Spike and forced himself to relax his anxious grip.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Nothing to worry about, pet.” Spike said reassuringly, rubbing his thigh comfortingly.

“What do you mean, ‘mostly demons’,” Angel asked.

Xander’s head snapped around at that and he stared at Spike. Not that holding demons and experimenting on them was a good thing since he doubted the government was making any distinctions between good and bad demons, not to mention that kidnapping the Master Vampire of a Territory was absolutely guaranteed to start a vampire war - something they’d avoided only by the skin of their teeth and the fact that Angel and Spike were distinctly not your average vampires - but he could see the government justifying it to themselves since demons weren’t human. But they were holding humans as well? That went way beyond anything he thought the government would let itself get involved in.

Spike shrugged. “Don’t have a list but they had a werewolf locked up and they’re barely demons.” Seeing Xander’s sudden flash of worry, he added: “Not your wolf, pet. Was a female.”

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He ended up giving Angelus and Xander a rundown on everything he’d seen while he was held prisoner, although he didn’t tell them what they’d done to him. It hadn’t taken very long to summarize what he knew and guessed about the place. He’d been unconscious during his time out of the cell when they’d messed with him and his escape had been largely through deserted hallways. Despite itching to pull Xander into the bedroom, or to go knock heads together downstairs, he stifled his impatience and answered their questions, knowing it was important. Above and beyond what they’d done to him, this was an organized, government-backed action against demons, not something they could ignore or take lightly.

Once or twice while he was talking, Xander had given him a sharp look but hadn’t questioned his edited account. Spike simply told them that he’d escaped in the daytime, gotten burned and had to feed before going to the mansion to find Xander gone, then heading here.
He hadn’t even lied to his Claimed, he thought virtuously. He’d just left out a few details like the
fact that the blood he’d drank was bagged not fresh and exactly who had had something done to
them that left them unable to fight. Nothing they needed to know now that it had worn off. He’d
even told them that he didn’t know if what they’d done to the demon had been permanent or
temporary, just that the poor bugger had seemed to be in a lot of pain whenever he tried to fight.

Both Xander and Angelus grasped the larger implications at once and all of them sat silently for a
moment after Spike had finished, thinking about what he’d said. Xander’s arms tightened around
him again, and Spike pulled him closer, resting his head on top of Xander’s dark hair as his boy
thought about what he’d learned.

Xander was the first to speak, and he filled Spike in on what he and Angelus had learned that night
while following the soldiers who must have been hunting for Spike. While it was possible that
some of the others he’d set free had gotten away, Spike doubted it. The two demons with him had
been recaptured for sure and the other two had run in the direction of the center of the base and
Spike assumed they hadn’t gotten far.

It was good to learn there was more than one entrance to the base. If it came down to an assault on
the place, multiple entrances would make things easier.

“We need to talk to Giles and Buffy and Mr. Olsen and Sgt. Morgan about this,” Xander finished.
“They need to know what’s going on.”

“Agreed.” Angel looked troubled, staring down at his clasped hands as if they held the secrets of
the universe. “Spike, would you mind if I stay here until the meeting? I don’t like the sound of
this.”

Spike was pleased to be asked. “Good idea. You can have the mansion back while you’re here,” he
offered graciously and Xander fought back a laugh.

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Spike strode down the long hallway past the rooms set aside for his Lieutenants. He’d taken time
for a shower and change of clothes before heading downstairs to the main Court. The clothing he’d
been wearing for far too many days had reeked of sewers and chemicals and the humans who had
handled him. If he’d been thinking clearly, he would have washed up at the mansion before
returning home and it rattled him a little to remember just how low he’d sunk - he hadn’t even
noticed his appearance until he was getting ready to go downstairs.

For Xander’s sake, he needed to deal with the Court before anything else. Angelus had admitted
frankly that the Court was restless and that, if Spike hadn’t returned so fortuitously, he couldn’t
have kept things under control for much longer without actually taking over as Master. Spike had
surprised them all by simply nodding in agreement - although a good idea, Angelus covering for
him had never been anything more than a stopgap measure. No Court would put up with a
temporary Master for long. He suspected that the situation was so unusual that the Court had been
slow to react and, he thought smugly, too wary of Spike’s return to act precipitously, especially
against Spike’s much older Sire. Spike grinned as he opened the door at the top of the stairs
leading down to the factory floor, the Court vampires must have been desperately trying to figure
out what was really going on the entire time Angelus had been there. Masters were either in control
or they were dust. Vampires didn’t share power.

He’d hated leaving Xander so soon, without even time for a proper greeting but Xander had
understood and he blessed the fact that his Claimed had such a firm grasp of strategy. Xander
himself had pointed out that, if Spike delayed going downstairs, it would be mid-day and the
vampires would all be sleeping. Appearing at dawn, before any hint of his return could filter through the Court, would catch them off guard and unprepared, giving Spike a distinct advantage. Not that he really needed one but a dramatic return when no one was expecting him would be much more effective than letting rumor precede him and steal his thunder. In addition, returning at sunset from the apartment would tell the Court that he had lingered with his Claimed before returning to deal with the Court. It would send the wrong message - that he was weak and sentimental, and vulnerable through his Claimed. It was true, but he couldn’t let the Court know that.

Xander had also pointed out, with a throaty chuckle that nearly sent Spike’s resolve out the window, that Spike would be better off coming back home to an impatient and horny lover instead of returning from the Court full of adrenaline when Xander was already thoroughly sated and sound asleep.

Couldn’t fault Xander’s logic on that one.

He descended the stairs quietly, not stealthily just not calling attention to himself, wanting to make as dramatic an entrance as possible. He was almost to the factory floor when a minion, obviously headed up to the third floor rooms to sleep, caught sight of him and froze, staring in shock. Spike ignored him, although he was gratified to see the minion jump hastily out of his path, pressing himself against the wall as Spike swept past. Michael met him at the foot of the stairs and Jose moving with calm deliberateness as suited his senior Lieutenant, the others with a bit of nervous scurry to their approach. He stopped on the last step, leaving himself clearly visible to the minions who were rapidly becoming aware of his presence as silence fell over the Court and the minions all turned to watch him greet his Lieutenants.

“Anything to report?” Spike asked, with as little concern as if he’d seen them all the night before, and had to fight back a smirk as his Lieutenants exchanged nervous glances, obviously unsure if Angelus was something to report or not. Not surprisingly, Jose took the lead.

“Nothing of note, Master Spike,” he said calmly, his voice carrying just a bit farther than usual in the pool of silence surrounding them. “Master Angelus put the minions through their paces to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. We can give you a report on the results for those minions new to the Court, if you are interested.”

Spike waved a dismissive hand. “I assume my Sire dusted anyone not up to my standards. Let me know if anyone showed any useful talent.” He gave Jose an approving nod. Xander had told him about Jose’s actions during his absence. He’d chosen well when he’d made Jose his senior Lieutenant and his unswerving loyalty to Xander was gratifying.

“Master Spike, were you successful?” Michael asked eagerly.

“Successful?” he asked blandly.

“Yes, Master Angelus said that you were looking for the Gem of Amara.” Michael’s voice trailed off as he met Spike’s raised eyebrow and amused look.

“And you believed him?” Spike shook his head disapprovingly. “Gonna have to do better than that, Michael if you want to keep your position. Had some business to take care of but it most certainly was not hunting for magical objects that don’t exist.”

He let his gaze sweep the other Lieutenants, amused by how quickly their expressions changed from interest to disapproval, trying to show that they had never been taken in by that ridiculous
story and couldn’t believe Michael had been. Arkady actually edged away from Michael a step or two as if afraid of being contaminated with his disgrace.

“Anything else?” He was met with head shakes all around. “Good. Full Court session the day after tomorrow to take care of any business. Jose, who’s the best we’ve got with a quarterstaff?”

Jose considered for a moment. “I would suggest Guillermo.” He glanced at Anthony who gave a confirming nod.

“Right.” Spike smiled ferally. “Let’s see what he’s got.”

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Taking the steps back to the apartment two at a time, Spike couldn’t help grinning. The minion had been good and had given him an honest fight - minions had long since learned that “letting” Spike win was bad for their health. Anyone he sparred with fought to win or they didn’t survive the match.

He’d always liked the quarterstaff for practice bouts - only partly because he was better than most with the weapon. The rapid-fire blows and parries the weapon called for suited his fighting style, and quarterstafifs were a flashy, stylish weapon when used properly. A good opponent could do serious damage with one and Guillermo had been one of the better fighters Spike had faced with the weapon. Thrashing him soundly had been extraordinarily satisfying, like every blow struck was a blow against one of the soldiers or lab coats, every crack of wood meeting wood as they had parried and blocked a reminder that he had beaten them and was himself again.

He’d sent the minion crashing to the floor with a series of rapid moves that had first knocked him off balance and then swept him off his feet, his weapon sent flying as he lost his grip. Spike had laughed and spun his own staff in a flashy move before reaching down to help the minion up, much to the younger vampire’s astonishment. “Good job,” he told the surprised minion. “Gave me a workout.” The minion had been smugly pleased with the rare compliment, despite the broken arm the last flurry of blows had given him. Spike was not generous with his praise and the broken arm and the compliment would make him the envy of the Court for a few days.

Having made his presence indelibly felt again, Spike was able to relax, knowing his absence wouldn’t be questioned and he was still firmly in control. The Court might wonder, but they wouldn’t do it out loud. He paused for a few private words with Jose, quietly letting him know how much he appreciated Jose’s loyalty to his Claimed before bounding up the stairs to return to Xander and reap the rewards of homecoming.

Angelus met him at the apartment door, having heard him approaching. “Everything go alright?” he asked.

“’Course,” Spike assured him breezily. “You expect anything else?”

Angelus shook his head and Spike was secretly pleased at his Sire’s confidence in his ability to handle things. “You off somewhere?” he asked.

Angelus shrugged, looking a little sheepish. “Thought I’d head out through the tunnels, let you have your apartment back.”

Spike couldn’t help smirking. “That for your own comfort or Xander’s?”

“Both,” his Sire answered and started to walk past. He hesitated and then said quietly: “Spike, I’m
He almost said something flippant but found he was genuinely touched by the sincerity in Angelus’ voice. “Thanks. For everything,” he said. Feeling unaccustomedly awkward, he added: “Don’t be a stranger.”

Equally awkward, Angelus nodded and strode off without another word. Spike watched him go, until he turned the corner at the end of the hall. It felt surprisingly good to have Angelus’ approval, unspoken though it was.

Xander looked exhausted. He was stretched out on the couch and had fallen asleep while watching television. Spike took a moment to study him, seeing the fatigue in the lines of his face that the earlier glowing happiness had concealed. He looked drawn and pale underneath his tan and his eyes, even closed, had the pinched, sunken look that came from not eating or sleeping properly. He’d been eagerly anticipating taking his boy to bed and renewing his Claim, but now he hesitated. Xander obviously needed sleep more than he needed shagging.

Spike couldn’t help but think of the human fragility - they just didn’t bounce back the way vampires did - Spike gently lifted Xander’s head off the arm of the couch and sat down beside him, settling Xander down again with his head resting on Spike’s thigh.

“Spike?”

“Hush, luv. Go back to sleep.”

Typically, Xander didn’t do as he was told. Instead, he shifted until he was looking up at Spike, giving him a drowsy welcoming smile. “How’d it go?” he asked, stretching in a way that made him look unbelievably hot - like a dark-eyed harem boy, all sleepy sensuality and beckoning promise. Spike’s resolution to not ravage his boy immediately was seriously put to the test.

“Nothin’ to it,” Spike told him smugly, shifting so they were both lying a bit more vertically. Xander made a contented sound and snuggled closer.

“Told you,” he mumbled and Spike chuckled as he realized Xander was waking up a bit, turning his head and beginning to nuzzle into Spike’s stomach, muttering about inconsiderate vampires who wore shirts to bed.

“Not in bed, luv,” he pointed out, running his own hand down the length of Xander’s back loving the feel of warm skin and solid muscle beneath the fabric of his shirt.

“Why not?”

“’Cause someone fell asleep on the couch.”

Xander smiled up at him again. “Did not,” he lied shamelessly. “I was just resting my eyes.”

“’Course you were,” Spike mocked gently. “The snoring and the drooling were just a coincidence.”

“I don’t snore,” Xander countered. “You just think I do because you don’t breathe.”

Spike chuckled, stroking his hand through Xander’s wavy hair. “Missed you, luv. More than I can say.”
Xander hitched himself upright and looked searchingly at him. “Are you really ok? You look like it was a rough week.”


“Everything’s good, now that you’re back.”

He pulled Spike to him, kissing him gently on the lips. Not the wild, desperate kisses from earlier, this was a quiet coming home. Lips and tongues tasting and exploring, learning each other all over again, reassuring each other that they were back together, that all was right in their world again.

Gradually, the kisses grew deeper and hungrier and Xander twisted around until he was straddling Spike’s lap, his hands fumbling to pull up Spike’s t-shirt, searching for the smooth, cool flesh underneath. Spike leaned back into the couch, letting Xander take control of the kiss, his own hands cupping his boy’s ass as he pulled him closer, grinding their rapidly hardening erections together.

Xander suddenly reared back and glanced wildly around the room. “Oh god, are we doing it in front of Angel?”

“No. Had a sudden attack of consideration and left us alone.”

“Oh.” Relieved, Xander settled back down. “That was nice of him.”

“Gone a bit prudish, Angelus has,” Spike said judiciously. “Guess voyeurism doesn’t go with his shiny new soul. Certainly used to get off on it.” And who would have thought that he’d ever be making casual jokes about Angelus’ soul? When had it ceased to be a mark of shame and a point of permanent division between them and become just another fact: his Sire had brown eyes, used too many hair products, and had a soul.

Xander made a face, collapsing limply against Spike and dropping his head against Spike’s shoulder. “Great. Way to kill the mood, Spike. That’s something I did not need to know.”

Spike laughed and flipped them both in one swift move so that they were lying full length on the couch, himself on top, staring down into Xander’s face, drinking in the sight of his Claimed, still flushed and aroused and staring back up at him with loving eyes, like Spike was the most important thing in his life.

More than anything, he needed to renew his Claim. Beyond the intense pleasures of sex, the joy of feeding from living flesh, the heady rush of power that came from dominating his Court, or the exhilaration of defeating an opponent, renewing his Claim would banish the humiliation and shame of the past week. The worst moments, the lowest ebb had been the realization that he couldn’t protect or hold Xander in his crippled, helpless state. Against all odds, he had beaten them, escaping when no one else had and winning free of whatever they had done. He proved to himself and the rest of the world that he was whole and strong and capable of defending his Territory and, most importantly, his Claimed. He was still William the Bloody, Slayer of Slayers and Master of the Hellmouth, still worthy of his Claimed.

Settling himself comfortably between Xander’s legs, Spike began rocking their hips together in a maddening rhythm, a pleased smirk growing on his face as he watched Xander’s eyes dilate and felt him pushing up with his own hips as he sought more contact. Spike drove his hips down harder, pressing Xander into the cushions as their arousal grew and their movements came faster and more frantically.
Xander arced his head back against the cushions, exposing the long line of his neck with the visibly throbbing pulse and Spike couldn’t wait any longer. Sliding into his true face, he lowered his head, letting his needle-sharp fangs penetrate the freely offered flesh, anticipating the heady taste of his Claimed’s blood filling his mouth after the long absence.

His fangs had barely pierced the skin when lightning tore through him and he screamed uncontrollably in pain, his muscles convulsing, arcing his body backwards as the horribly familiar pain burned like holy water in his veins, until he couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t feel anything except pain. He wasn’t even aware when he rolled off the couch in an ungainly sprawl, his hands clutching his head as he rode out the pain.

“Spike! Spike! What’s happening?”

Xander’s panicked voice was the first thing he was aware of as the pain ebbed abruptly, leaving him shattered and broken on the floor, unable to even try to cover or pass this off as something trivial. Xander rolled off the couch, landing with a thud beside him then his arms were around Spike, holding him and he leaned into the warm embrace, his body shaking with reaction, his mind unwillingly adding up the evidence.

He hadn’t beaten them at all, he realized dully. And now Xander knew. There would be no hiding his humiliation. Humans had leashed him, domesticated him like a dog brought to heel on a choke chain. He should have known. Why would they care if he could hurt, even kill demons? That might even be their goal - creating tame demons who would hunt other demons on command.

He could still be Master, still control his Territory, still tackle demons three times his size for the sheer fun of it, but they’d taken Xander from him as effectively as if they’d killed him. He couldn’t renew his Claim, couldn’t protect him from human threats, couldn’t sink himself deep inside his warm body and take him. A Claiming bite was much like sex: an exquisitely erotic journey along the knife-edge of pain. Whatever they’d done to him clearly didn’t stop him from fighting or biting, it stopped him from hurting humans. Stopped him regardless of whether that pain was desired or not. The pain had been the same, neither more nor less intense, when he’d tried to bite Xander with Xander’s full and joyful cooperation as when he’d tried to feed from an unwilling victim.

Could he bear to be with Xander knowing he couldn’t mark him, couldn’t take him sexually? Was it fair to Xander to make him live such a colorless, joyless existence?

Grateful for Xander’s silent support, Spike buried himself in the strong arms holding him and mourned the loss of everything in his life that had meaning.
Spike bent his head and Xander felt the familiar exquisite pain of needle sharp fangs piercing his skin, marking him, showing the world that he belonged to Spike. As always, the mingled pain and pleasure of the moment brought him to the brink of orgasm and his grip tightened on Spike’s back, clinging to his lover’s whipcord body as he arced upwards, pressing closer to Spike’s cool strength, his hips bucking up against Spike’s body, desperate for that little extra something to send him over the edge.

He yelped in astonishment as Spike suddenly jerked away from him with an agonized scream, his movement tearing his fangs out of Xander’s neck with a careless roughness that was completely unlike him. He pushed himself up on his elbows, and froze in disbelief, his surprised complaint dying on his lips.

Spike looked like he was having a seizure of some kind: his body had snapped upright, arching backwards, every muscle clenched in pain, his expression one of pure agony. For one second, a flash of time that seemed to last for an eternity as Xander stared in shock, unable to move, as Spike collapsed to the floor, landing in a heap with none of his usual cat-like grace.

Xander frantically rolled off the couch after him, all thoughts of carnality gone in his sudden terror.

“Spike! Spike! What’s happening?”

Spike curled into a ball, hands clutching his temples, his whole body shuddering with pain. Xander hovered over him, scared to touch him, afraid of somehow making things worse. Then it just… stopped. The corded tension in Spike’s body released and he slumped against the couch and Xander didn’t hesitate any longer. He pulled Spike into his arms, holding him as Spike curled up in his embrace like a wounded child, his body still shaking from whatever had just happened.

For a long moment, Xander just held him, crooning wordless comfort, waiting for Spike to recover. He didn’t ask any questions, too shaken himself by the sudden shock, the abrupt shift from arousal to fear, to do anything but hold Spike protectively in his arms and thank god whatever it was had just happened.

As he waited for Spike to talk to him, Xander’s brain started adding up random bits and pieces and he couldn’t help putting two and two together. Spike had told him and Angel that the soldiers had done something to one of the demons in the cells, making it so the demon couldn’t fight, couldn’t hit anything or defend itself. Spike had been vague on the details and Xander had suspected that Spike was holding something back. Now he knew what Spike had been hiding.

When Spike’s tremors had faded to nothing, Xander said quietly: “The demon you told us about, that was you.”

It wasn’t really a question but Spike sighed, the nearly inaudible sound telling Xander everything he needed to know.

Spike shifted in his arms and Xander loosened his hold, letting Spike push free without trying to stop him. Spike wasn’t good about accepting comfort - he saw it as being weak, and it was pretty much hardwired into vampires to never admit to any kind of vulnerability. Now, he rose off the floor and moved away from Xander, moving restlessly around the room, not pacing so much as avoiding Xander’s eyes.
“Bastards did something to me. When I hit Angel and nothing happened, I thought it had worn off or something. Turns out they were a bit cleverer than I’d guessed. I can fight demons, just can’t hurt humans.”

Xander frowned, getting slowly to his feet as his mind raced. Something about Spike’s explanation was off, or else he was missing something. Spike still wasn’t looking at him and his voice was flat without any of the anger Xander would expect from anyone, much less Spike who wasn’t exactly famous for his even disposition. Spike sounded almost… defeated. Which was crazy, Spike never admitted defeat. Situations that made others lie down and quit just made Spike fight twice as hard. Spike not only laughed in the face of danger, he kicked its ass and insulted its mother. He never gave up and the fact that he sounded like that was what he was doing now shocked Xander and he had no idea what to say or do to help.

Spike never reacted to pain the way he just had either. He fought his way through it, ignored it, coped with it, did whatever it took. He never let pain incapacitate him like that. Xander had seen Spike continue fighting after Angel had stuck two feet of sword in his gut, and despite gaping wounds that would have killed a human, Spike had beaten the older, larger vampire and still had enough fight left in him afterwards to shred Buffy verbally. But tonight, Spike had been brought to his knees by something that hadn’t left a mark on him.

The implications shook him. The pain Spike had been in had to have been worse than that of multiple near-fatal wounds. Xander couldn’t even imagine the level of pain Spike must have felt to cause the reaction he’d seen.

After way too long dithering, he closed the distance between himself and Spike, pulling him around until Spike was facing him and somehow found his voice. “Spike, whatever it is, whatever they’ve done, we’ll find a way to fix it,” he said quietly but with utter conviction.

Spike just looked at him with despairing eyes. “Can’t protect you, luv.” He ran his thumb over the still slightly bleeding bite mark on Xander’s neck, the older bite mark sloppily overlaid by the new one, the mark only partially renewed before the pain had forced Spike to stop. “Can’t mark you, can’t make love to you, can’t do anything.” He looked away, unable to meet Xander’s eyes. “I’m beyond pathetic,” he said harshly. “You’re better off without me.”

He started to pull away again and Xander tightened his grip, holding him in place. “Don’t you think that’s for me to say?” he asked sharply.

“’m not human, Xander. I’m not going to do the noble martyr thing and neither are you. Not going to be the cripple you chain yourself to for life.”

“Fuck you, Spike!” Xander almost yelled, his cold fear that Spike was planning on leaving him morphing into furious anger at Spike for giving up. “You try and quit on me now and I will chain you to the wall until you get your head out of your ass. We haven’t even had five minutes to figure out what’s happened, much less what we can do to fix it, and you’re already saying it’s hopeless. I’ve just spent the worst week of my life thinking you were dead and I am not going through that again because you want to give up.”

Spike’s own gaze sharpened until he was glaring back at Xander. “You don’t understand, Xander. The minute word gets out, every demon in town will know exactly how to take me out. Fifty quid on the docks will be enough to hire humans I can’t fight. I’m not going to be the laughingstock of the demon world - the pathetic has-been who let humans leach him,” he snarled, shifting to demon features but not before Xander saw the humiliation and the flicker of fear in his blue eyes.

Xander met him glare for glare, his hands tightening unconsciously around Spike’s arms as if he
could hold Spike there by brute force. The sound of his breath was harsh and unnaturally loud in the room as he shook Spike to emphasize what he was saying: “Nobody knows about this and nobody is going to find out until we fix it. Do you hear me? You are not leaving me.”

His voice broke on the last word and he took one step forward, his grip on Spike’s arms shifting, his arms sliding around to hold Spike, clinging desperately, his face buried in Spike’s neck as he continued brokenly: “You’re the one who told me a Claim was permanent, remember? You’re renewing your Claim mark even if I have to take valium or a local anesthetic when you do it. I can’t lose you, Spike.”

After what seemed an eternity, Spike sighed and his own arms lifted to wrap around Xander, holding him. “Love you, Xander,” he said quietly. “Never leavin’ you. We’ll figure it out.”

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Still shaken by Xander’s outburst, Spike gently steered his boy to the couch and settled the two of them down in the cushions, holding Xander close to his side, wondering if this would be enough if they couldn’t fix what was wrong. His fingers traced his Claim scar on Xander’s neck, running over and over it, lips quirking slightly in reluctant humor as he thought about Xander’s suggestion to use drugs to make him able to bite Xander. It only lasted a moment before all trace of amusement vanished before the reality of the situation.

Numbing the inevitable pain through drugs wasn’t the answer. It would probably work both for biting and for sex but it would make the experience meaningless for both of them. Anything strong enough for Xander to feel no pain would be in his blood, ruining the experience for Spike too and Spike didn’t want even a willingly drugged partner. Not when that partner was Xander.

But that was the long term. For now, Xander wasn’t wrong, they needed time to figure out what to do. Spike was a demon. He was used to solving his problems violently. A human who crossed him was a dead human and that pretty much took care of it. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option right now. He would have to find another way of dealing with things.

Well, he wasn’t a minion and he’d been bending the rules since the day he was turned, even more so since he’d met Xander. For Xander’s sake, he was already only rarely hurting and never killing humans. He could handle Xander knowing what had happened to him. If no one else found out, there wouldn’t be any reason for them to guess that anything was wrong. Certainly there was no reason anyone at Court would suspect anything. He’d never hunted with anyone from the Court, no one would notice if he shifted fully to bagged blood for a short time, just long enough to find out what had been done and how they could fix it.

That realization helped. If no one knew, he wouldn’t lose his status. He could still kick the ass of any demon in town and that was more than a little sop to his badly shredded pride.

Resting his head on top of Xander’s, feeling his boy’s warm weight leaning against him, Spike felt the despair that had been knotting his gut ease slightly. Xander didn’t see him as crippled, that was obvious. He saw Spike as wounded, a temporary condition, not something to be pitied. Viewed in that light, it was something he could live with for awhile. Just long enough to fix it and take bloody revenge on the people who had done this to him. It was the thought that this was permanent that had really been defeating him. The idea of a life half lived; the thought of never being able to feed off living prey and, more importantly, never being able to truly Claim Xander again, in any way, that had sent him spiraling into suicidal depression.

Holding Xander, feeling the warm breath, the steady heart beat, smelling his familiar rich spicy scent, Spike found something close to contentment again.
Xander stirred, feeling the softness of worn denim under his cheek. He’d fallen asleep on the couch, his head pillowed in Spike’s lap. He turned his head, wincing a little at the stiff muscles in his neck, and Spike’s strong fingers were there, sliding through his hair to knead the tight muscles and easing the crick from the awkward position he’d been in.

Looking up at his lover, Xander frowned at the harsh lines of the face looking back at him. Spike’s face was naturally thin and angular, the sharp cheekbones and strong jaw defining his face under the intense blue eyes, but now, the hollows under Spike’s cheekbones were deeper, his eyes slightly dull and cloudy instead of their usual bright blue. Spike had lost weight and his face showed the unmistakable signs of having recently healed burns. Xander sat up abruptly, his sleepiness vanishing in a tidal wave of worry.

“When did you eat last?” he asked.

Spike raised his brows at him, lips quirking up into a puckish smile that made him seem almost normal for a moment, but Xander’s questing hand could feel every rib far too easily. Spike hadn’t been feeding properly and Xander cursed himself for not noticing it earlier.

“Don’t fret, luv. Drank the emergency supply at the mansion last night.”

Xander swung his legs off the couch and headed for the kitchen. “Well, I’m guessing they weren’t feeding you at the military hotel, right?” He didn’t wait for an answer, pulling several bags of blood out of the freezer and putting the first one in the microwave. Unable to fight, the odds were good that Spike had been injured escaping from the prison and he had obviously gotten burned by sunlight. An injured vampire needed a lot more blood than a healthy one and there had only been a dozen or so bags in the freezer at the mansion. He wasn’t going to press for details, Spike’s pride had taken enough hits and admitting that a human had been able to injure him wasn’t something he was going to force Spike to do. “You’re obviously a few pints low,” he said, carefully keeping his eyes on the microwave as the bag slowly rotated inside. Let Spike think he was just being his usual overprotective self on the subject of Spike’s eating habits.

Spike drank the blood without protest, and Xander made him drink eight bags before he judged it was enough, watching Spike carefully and seeing the burns fade to nothing, the faint flush of borrowed color in his cheeks and the grey that had shadowed his eyes clearing. The gauntness disappeared from his face and Xander blessed the rapid healing of vampires. A half-starved human could never be brought back to health with a single meal in the way a vampire could.

Xander turned toward the sink to rinse out the mug he’d been filling and re-filling for Spike and Spike watched him as he washed it and set it in the drain board, taking far too long to complete the mundane task.

Even before they’d become lovers, Xander had always fussed over him, worrying about Spike’s wellbeing in a way no-one had since - well, since his human mother. It was annoying and endearing and such an ingrained part of Xander’s caring nature that Spike felt nothing but gratitude and a trace of wonder that he had someone in his unlife who loved him the way Xander did. From anyone else, he would have viewed the solicitude lavished on him with suspicion, sure the giver wanted something from him. But that simply wasn’t an issue with Xander. Xander quietly took care of the people he loved, not expecting anything in return and the person he loved most was Spike. Granted, sometimes Xander’s ideas of how to take care of him meant that he would
adamantly oppose Spike: arguing with him, even going behind his back to do something he thought was in Spike’s best interest, but mostly it showed itself in the way Xander saw below the surface: seeing when Spike was hungry, tired, or hurt, despite his best attempts at hiding it and, like now, quietly insisting on dealing with the problem.

Which, of course, was what made it so mystifying that Xander could also be so oblivious to some things and so pig-headed stubborn that at times it made Spike want to scream with frustration, he thought with a grin.

This time, though, Xander was worried about him with good reason. Spike hadn’t been feeding properly, the bloody soldiers had nearly starved him in that prison cell and he hadn’t fed enough since then to make up for it. The supply of blood at the mansion had been enough to heal him, but not enough to bring him back to full strength.

He was jolted out of his thoughts when Xander turned back to face him, bracing his hands behind him against the countertop, his face set in grim, determined lines.

“Do you know what they did to you?”

The abrupt question took him by surprise and despite his reluctance to describe the details of his humiliating captivity, Spike was relieved that Xander was dealing with the issue with his usual straight-forward, get-to-the-bottom-of-it, attitude. Not like someone coddling a cripple, just looking for answers to a fixable problem.

Spike shook his head. “I was unconscious. Didn’t know anything had happened ‘til I hit one of them when I got out of my cell. Thought the top of my head had blown off. Same thing happens any time I try and hurt a human.” His jaw tightened, remembering his inability to even bite the woman in the cheap hotel room and the searing agony that had accompanied his attempts. “Like you saw, don’t have to intend to kill, or even to hurt, just causing a human pain triggers it.”

Xander’s brow furrowed at that information and he looked like he was unsuccessfully trying to put things together into a cohesive whole. “Haven’t found anything, ‘cept a bald spot on the back of my head,” Spike finished.

Xander reached up and explored, finding the small spot easily. It was the size of a 50-cent piece and just beginning to grow stubble. “I don’t feel a scar or anything, but if they shaved your skull…” he broke off, not liking the implications.

“Wasn’t there before. They fed me while I was out,” Spike told him, remembering how he’d no longer felt on the edge of starving when he’d woken up in his cell afterwards. “Enough blood would heal a lot of damage.”

“You think they put something in your head? Something physical?”

“Yeah. Government doesn’t usually mess with magic, and it doesn’t generally work on vampires reliably anyway. Hypnosis and the like doesn’t call for shaving people, so, yeah, I think they did something physical. Just don’t know what.”

He moved away from Xander restlessly, needing to pace, the anger at what they’d done rising uncontrollably. Bloody cowards, all of them. Not willing to face demons unless the demon was caged and helpless.

He glanced in the direction of the windows, tightly closed and curtained against the deadly sunlight of the late morning. “Why aren’t you at work?” he asked, deliberately changing the subject.
“It’s Sunday,” Xander answered briefly, still thinking hard, clearly not ready to switch topics yet.

Spike made a noncommittal noise. Days of the week meant very little to him, except that they controlled so much of Xander’s life. Human things, first school and now work, happened to a calendar rhythm that hadn’t been part of Spike’s life since Queen Victoria was on the throne. Silence fell as he paced and Xander stood immobile, arms folded, leaning against the counter, lost in thought.

“If it’s something physical, it’s got to be small,” Xander said slowly, obviously thinking out loud. “Small and able to tell the difference between hurting a human and hurting a demon.” He looked at Spike, eyes dark with worry. “That says computer technology to me.”

“Yeah.” Spike didn’t have much use for computers but he knew enough about them to know that Xander was right. Nothing else would be small enough and smart enough to fit the bill. “You think they stuck some kind of computer control in me?”

“If they did, it’s way ahead of any technology I’ve ever heard of. That’s really sophisticated programming to make those kind of distinctions.”

“Governments usually give their best toys to the military first,” Spike noted grimly and they both fell silent for a minute.

“Why would someone want a vampire that can’t hurt people?” Xander asked eventually, sounding baffled. “What possible use can that be to the military?”

“Can think of several things offhand, luv,” Spike answered. “Pure sadism, science for its own sake, a better form of animal experimentation - using intelligent subjects instead of animals. Most likely, they’re trying to control demons, classic carrot and stick, this is just the stick part of the equation.”

“Oh,” Xander blinked at Spike’s matter-of-fact list. “Ok,” he said slowly, “So what do I do with my controlled demon now that I’ve got one?”

“Anything you want, isn’t that the point of control?” Spike answered flippantly. “For starters, you’ve got yourself a better-than-human killer, always useful to have around. Most demons are stronger, faster and have better senses than humans. That’s a solid stealth advantage. Lots of security devices are based on body heat: vampires, repplandi, and kobarien demons all have lower body temperature than humans and both vampires and kobarien can pass for human, just to name a couple.” He shrugged. “Won’t know until we find someone to tell us what’s going on,” he finished.

Xander looked at him worriedly. “Have you felt anything except pain?” He made an apologetic gesture at Spike’s dark look. “I mean, any sense that… you aren’t behaving like yourself?” he explained.

Spike shook his head. “Seems just to respond to my actions. Thinking about hurting humans doesn’t do anything. Don’t seem like a finished product yet.”

Xander gave him a half-smile. “Seems just to respond to my actions. Thinking about hurting humans doesn’t do anything. Don’t seem like a finished product yet.”

Spike folded his arms and gave him a sideways look. “Not talking about anything that happened to me, am I?” he reminded Xander. “Don’t mind giving everyone the skinny about something that happened to some other poor idjit.”
Xander decided to accept that. When Spike had his defenses up, his surface armor was impenetrable. He was just grateful that Spike was usually so willing to drop his guard around Xander. There were still times, like now, when Spike retreated behind his walls even from Xander, but it happened increasingly rarely these days. He couldn’t blame Spike for pulling back now - whatever they’d done to him had shattered Spike’s confidence and torn his self-image to shreds. It was going to be a long time before Spike recovered even if they were able to fix what they’d done to him. Right now, figuring out what was going on and how to stop it was important enough to put Spike through a re-hashing of what had happened. He just hoped Spike was a good enough liar to fool Angel. More than anyone else, Spike wouldn’t want his Sire to know what had happened to him.

Realizing a change of subject and a distraction was badly needed, Xander moved so he was standing face to face with Spike. More than anything else, Spike needed to get back on the horse again - figuratively speaking anyway. Settling his hands on Spike’s hips, Xander leaned in to his lover, bending his head and drawing in Spike’s scent as Spike slid his arms around Xander’s waist, holding him lightly.

For a long moment, he just stood there, letting his warm breath feather out over Spike’s skin, tasting the familiar scent, letting the rest of the world fall away. After a long moment, he stirred, his hands trailing along the supple leather of Spike’s belt, finding the buckle and beginning to undo it.

Spike’s hands caught his and he looked into the blue eyes, seeing the hint of wariness in them for a fleeting moment. He just grinned lasciviously at Spike, fingers nimbly drawing the belt through the loops and off and unbuttoning and unzipping Spike’s jeans before reaching inside and drawing Spike’s penis out through the opening.

“You goin’ somewhere with this?” Spike asked, giving Xander one of his almost unbearably sexy looks, his brow lifting in amused inquiry, as Xander’s warm palms closed around his cock.

“Thinking about it,” Xander answered cheerfully, glad that the flash of nervousness had vanished from Spike’s eyes. Given what had happened just a few hours earlier, it wasn’t surprising that Spike had been momentarily hesitant to let him start anything. Fortunately, Spike had obviously remembered that there were lots of things they could do that wouldn’t trigger the pain and Xander intended to remind him, as graphically as possible, that their sex life was alive and well and only slightly altered.

He shifted his hold, one hand beginning to stroke up and down the length of the shaft, the other hand concentrating on the head, his thumb rubbing around and over the end in teasing circles. He grinned when Spike inhaled sharply, his cock hardening rapidly in Xander’s grip. He loved it when his actions made Spike forget he didn’t have to breathe.

Moving slowly, deliberately drawing it out, he sank down onto his knees, nuzzling into Spike’s groin as he tugged Spike’s pants further down, giving himself room to work. Rocking back on his heels, he took a moment to admire the picture in front of him: Spike’s strong, slender thighs trapped in the worn denim that still covered him from just above the knees, his cock jutting proudly from its nest of light brown curls, drops of pre-cum already forming at the tip.

“Oi, you planning on doing anything down there?” Spike complained and Xander laughed.

“Patience is a virtue,” he reminded his lover teasingly.
“Never been big on virtue,” Spike grumbled, threading his hands through Xander’s hair and giving him urging little tugs.

He didn’t give in immediately, running his hands caressingly up Spike’s thighs. Spike’s pale skin was always a revelation: an astonishingly smooth, soft covering for the corded muscle lying underneath and Xander could lie for hours tracing his hands over the flawless white skin. He didn’t linger this time, his hands continuing towards their goal, bypassing Spike’s eager cock and beginning to rub lightly at Spike’s perineum and playfully fondling his balls, lifting them as if judging their worth and rolling them within the sac. Spike made a half-pleased, half-frustrated sound, spreading his legs wider and pushing his hips forward, his fingers tightening in Xander’s hair. Xander chuckled and leaned forward, beginning to lave his tongue along the length of Spike’s erection, slow, teasing swipes that promised more to come.

Spike’s hips were moving restlessly as he tried to push closer and Xander put both hands on Spike’s hips to hold him back, concentrating on what he was doing: teasingly licking all around Spike’s cock, swiping over the head and mouthing along the throbbing length, dropping down to lap at his balls.

“Bloody hell! Get on with it,” Spike demanded and Xander laughed and relented, taking Spike’s straining cock into his mouth and sliding down along the length as far as he could manage comfortably. For a long moment, he didn’t move, staring up into Spike’s eyes, feeling the heavy weight of his erection resting on his tongue, loving that he was able to do this for his partner. Spike’s cock was twitching eagerly and he laved his tongue around as much of it as he could reach, opening his mouth and exhaling hot breath down along the length in his mouth, watching as Spike threw his head back, hips bucking up into Xander’s restraining hold.

He tightened his hands on Spike’s hips and began to suck hard, closing his mouth around Spike’s cock, intent of pushing him over the edge. It didn’t take long before Spike exploded into orgasm, his seed pulsing out and filling Xander’s mouth, spilling over his lips as he continued to suck, trying to drain him completely.

He pulled back finally, feeling Spike softening within his mouth, coughing just a little, and smiling up at Spike. Spike dropped to his knees beside Xander, gathering him into his arms and Xander leaned into his body, feeling the dampness at his own crotch that signaled he’d found his own release in helping Spike reach his.

They stayed there without moving for a long moment, then Spike turned his head, burying his nose in the crook of Xander’s neck, his tongue darting out to rasp over his Claim mark.

“Love you, Xander.”
Chapter 15

Xander hung up the phone with a sigh and stood leaning against the kitchen cabinets for a minute, wondering if he should take a shower or just go back to bed. His boss was not a happy camper. He hadn’t taken the news well that Xander wouldn’t be in to the job site this week either. Apparently, the company was starting a new job at the college campus tomorrow, finally breaking ground for the long talked about new community center and splitting the crew between two major job sites was leaving them seriously shorthanded. His boss had been upfront about the situation, telling Xander that he might not be able to hold Xander’s job any longer if Xander didn’t come back to work immediately.

It wasn’t a surprise. He’d known the company wouldn’t wait for him indefinitely but Spike was the important thing here and Spike needed him right now. If his job couldn’t wait a little longer, he’d just have to find another job.

One more problem to deal with later, he decided and found himself wondering idly if the excavation work at the college campus would dig up the underground military base. Probably not, he decided. It would be a pretty stupid covert government operation that couldn’t manage to delay or halt planning permission for a job that was going to dig up their secret base.

Glancing at the clock, he reluctantly decided on a shower over returning to bed. His first call of the afternoon had established that Angel had been busy. They were expected at Giles’ shortly after sunset for a planning meeting and that was only a couple hours from now. He wanted to get something to eat and he needed to get more blood for Spike. Now that Spike was completely dependent on bagged blood, Xander wanted to make doubly sure they always had a good supply on hand. And how wrong was it that he hated that Spike couldn’t feed normally and despised the people who’d done this to him, even though what they’d done was ensure that Spike had lost all capability to hurt humans and only humans. He’d long ago accepted the guilt of loving someone who frequently harmed other people, living with the unspoken compromise that Spike fed from humans but didn’t kill them for Xander’s sake.

What kind of person did it make him that he wasn’t happy that Spike could no longer hurt people? And how much of his anger at what they had done to Spike was because he resented being reminded of ethical issues he’d allowed himself to put behind him?

Xander gave himself a mental shake. Spike was a vampire, he’d accepted that a long time ago, accepted that he lived in a world inhabited by demons and humans and each had a right to exist. Every time Spike voluntarily drank bagged blood instead of hunting was a gift and a silent declaration of his love for Xander. It was meaningless now because it had been forced on Spike and they’d taken away his ability to choose what he did and why. They hadn’t even left Spike the ability to defend himself when attacked, leaving him completely defenseless against humans. When it came down to it, he didn’t trust that the military was doing this for the benefit of humanity and he was going to do everything he could to make sure that Spike was restored to his old self.

Feeling somehow lighter for having admitted his doubts and having settled the issue once and for all, Xander straightened up and headed for the bathroom only to stop short at the sight of Spike, arms folded across his chest, leaning naked against the door jamb. He wasn’t surprised by the nudity - Spike never wore clothes to bed - but because the vampire was out of bed and had obviously been eavesdropping on Xander’s call.

“Not goin’ to work tomorrow?” Spike asked, far too casually.
“Nope. I'm spending the day with my vampire,” Xander answered cheerfully.

Spike's eyes narrowed. “Thinkin' I need a babysitter?”

“Of course not. Where did that come from?” How had the conversation gotten off track so quickly? Spike hated Xander being gone during the days and now he wanted Xander to go to work?

“Xander, your job is important to you. Don’t want you losing it because of me.”

“You’re more important than my job,” he answered simply.

Spike just gazed at him levelly, still planted immovably in the doorway, clearly not intending to budge until he’d made his point. “Gonna call your boss right back and tell them you’ll be there in the morning,” he ordered flatly.

“Why would I do that?” Xander could do stubborn too.

“Because you’ll regret it if you don’t. You’ll wish you hadn’t lost the job for no reason.” Spike cocked his head, seeing Xander wasn’t making a move to pick up the phone. “Best way to keep a secret, luv, is if no one knows you have one. You start hovering over me like I can’t take care of myself anymore, everyone’s going to wonder why.”

Xander sighed, conceding the point. Plus, staying at home obviously wasn’t the right move to convince Spike that he didn’t see Spike as any different now, which wouldn’t help either of them. “Ok,” he said, picking up the phone again and hitting re-dial. Listening to it ring, he looked back at Spike, smiling in relief. “Thanks, Spike.”

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“I thought she was going out of town for Thanksgiving?” Xander asked in surprise as Spike hung up the phone. He was sure he remembered Mrs. Summers saying something about that but he had forgotten that Thanksgiving was this week. At least it would be a short week at work.

Despite knowing that Angel had begun to spread the word already, Xander had spent a chunk of time after his shower making calls to let people know Spike was back, stressing that Spike was fine and thanking them for their help in searching for him. He’d deliberately waited until last to call Mrs. Summers, knowing she would already have heard the news from either Giles or Buffy, and had happily passed the phone over to Spike after a short conversation. Spike had actually settled down to talk, something he didn’t do with anyone but Xander and Mrs. Summers. Spike had little use for telephones, grudgingly using them when necessary and generally limiting his conversations to bare essentials. When asked, Spike just said that phones were human things but Xander suspected it was because he liked to see the person he was talking to, watching their eyes and body language and testing their scent. Without the input of his other senses, Spike didn’t feel he could read the person on the other end of the line. With Xander and Mrs. Summers, that wasn’t an issue. Spike trusted both of them and could rely on what their voices were telling him.

“Said she changed her mind.” Spike seemed inordinately pleased by that fact and Xander hid a smile, realizing that Mrs. Summers had undoubtedly changed her plans because of Spike and Spike knew it. Now that he thought about it, of course Mrs. Summers wouldn’t have left town without knowing if Spike was alright.

“So, Thanksgiving at the Summers’ house,” he said, pleased that Mrs. Summers had invited them. “Buffy will be thrilled.”

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Xander’s steps slowed unconsciously the closer they got to Giles’ house. He hated the fact that they were going in planning to lie to everyone, especially considering how angry he’d been with Buffy and Willow when they’d lied about the re-souling spell and had almost gotten Spike killed. This wasn’t the same thing, he told himself uneasily. They were going to tell everyone everything they knew about the soldiers and the secret base and the experiments on demons, they just weren’t going to mention that Spike had been a victim.

Yeah, right. He couldn’t even convince himself that it wasn’t the same thing. Knowing Spike couldn’t hurt humans right now was significant information that they were going to conceal from their allies. Which was exactly what he’d been so angry with Buffy and Willow for doing.

“You ok, luv?” Spike looked over at him and Xander realized his arm had tightened around Spike as his steps lagged.

“I’m good,” he said. “Just thinking about the meeting.”

Bottom line, Spike’s welfare was the most important thing. If he thought they were putting the group in danger by not telling them about Spike’s vulnerability, he and Spike would find a way to stay out of the fight but he wasn’t going to humiliate and endanger Spike by letting people know what had happened to him. Besides, he reminded himself, Spike was incredibly valuable to the group as unquestioned Master of the Hellmouth. If they were going up against the government, they really didn’t need a demon war on top of everything else and, if word got out that Spike couldn’t hurt humans, Spike would be vulnerable; too busy fending off threats to be of any use to anyone.

It didn’t help. Giles and Buffy and Sgt. Morgan needed to know the truth, needed to know the capabilities of the people they would be relying on and, right now, Xander wasn’t willing to tell them the truth. He’d just have to keep track of the situation and somehow get himself and Spike out of things if they were putting the others at risk. It wasn’t perfect but it was the best he could do for now.

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Giles’ warm greeting to Spike earned a grateful smile from Xander as the Watcher stepped back from the door, letting Xander and Spike in to his apartment. Xander stopped short in surprise as he entered the room, seeing who all was inside.

“Wesley? Cordy? What are you guys doing here?”

Cordelia gave him a quick, hard hug then abandoned him immediately to hug Spike. Wesley met him halfway across the room, hand outstretched. “Xander, it’s good to see you again.”

They shook hands in the slightly awkward way of guys who weren’t quite good enough friends to hug. “It’s good to see you too, Wesley. Are you back to stay?” Behind him, he could hear Cordelia’s scathing comeback to Spike’s insinuating question about whether she liked working under Angel. He grinned. Nothing had changed between those two.

Wesley looked different. More confident, not nearly so prim and buttoned down and, best of all, like he finally was becoming comfortable with himself. He was dressed almost casually in jeans and a dress shirt, not wearing one of the three piece suits that had seemed to make up his entire wardrobe last year. His trip must have been good for him.

“No, no. I’m working with Angel now. He didn’t mention it?” Some of the old uncertainty was in Wesley’s voice as he glanced at Angel.
“Angel and I haven’t really had the chance to talk about anything other than Spike,” Xander told him diplomatically, although he wondered why Angel hadn’t said anything, he’d certainly found the time to mention that Cordelia was working for him. He hoped that didn’t mean that Angel wasn’t giving Wesley the credit he deserved.

“Well, I’m a rather new addition to his team,” Wesley said philosophically. “I stumbled across Angel in Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago and have been helping him out doing research. Oh, I’m sorry. Xander, you haven’t met the last member of Angel Investigations. Xander, this is Doyle.”

Behind Wesley’s taller form, a small man with curly hair and bright, curious eyes stepped forward. He shook Xander’s hand, studying him with interest. “So, you’re the Xander that can order Angel around. You’ll have to tell me your secret.”

The Irish accent was familiar. “You’re the one I talked to on the phone when I called Angel, right?”

“One and the same.”

“You all work for Angel?”Angel had said something about people who needed him when Xander had forced him to return to Sunnydale but Xander hadn’t realized he’d meant employees. “Sorry about hijacking your boss.”

“Not at all, Xander. I’m just glad he was able to help.”

“Gave me a chance to show Wes here around the bars,” Doyle said cheerfully. “He needed to loosen up and learn how to have fun.”

“Yes, well…” Wesley looked embarrassed and Xander helped him out by changing the subject.

“How come you guys are all here?”

“Ah, that’s a story for the entire meeting, if you don’t mind, Xander,” Wesley interjected. “It will save us from having to repeat ourselves.”

Giles cleared his throat, attracting everyone’s attention. “Now that we’re all here, why don’t we get started.” Giles remained standing while everyone else obediently found seats. Spike flung himself down in a vacant armchair, his eyes watchful as he studied the others in the room but otherwise the picture of idle unconcern. Xander perched casually on the arm of the chair Spike had chosen, wanting to be near him and hoping he didn’t look like he was hovering. To his surprise, Giles nodded to Doyle. “Mr. Doyle, perhaps you should begin?”

Looking around, Xander saw that only he and Spike were clueless about what Angel’s group from L.A. had to say and he wondered what could be more important than Spike’s information.

Angel’s little Brachen hybrid was prattling on about visions and Buffy being in danger. The whole thing seemed unbelievably vague to Spike and he wondered why they’d felt it necessary to make the drive to Sunnydale to deliver the message in person and why the Watcher was taking it so seriously. Not like the Slayer wasn’t involved in fights most nights of the week.

“I know it sounds pretty vague, but the visions don’t come to order. More like come, deposit general information, then leave me with a killer headache,” Doyle explained, seeing the skeptical expressions on the faces of the Sunnydalers.
“Actually, if Mr. I-Don’t-Understand-Technology over there was willing to join the modern world, we would have just called him with the information on the cell phone he refuses to buy,” Cordelia said, ostentatiously examining a perfect nail for flaws. Spike smirked, noticing she hadn’t explained why she had felt it necessary to make the drive with the others.

Wesley put in hastily: “Actually, Angel hadn’t had a chance to let us know if Spike had been found, so we wanted to come in person to offer assistance.” He smiled at Spike and Xander. “We’re all very pleased to find that Spike has returned and is obviously in good health.”

“Worried about me, were you?” Spike purred, lifting a mocking eyebrow at Cordelia.

“You wish,” she shot back. “I just tagged along because my parents wanted to see me.”

Angel cleared his throat, looking like he’d already had a lot of practice at cutting Cordelia off. “The visions Doyle gets are accurate, even if they aren’t very specific. He only gets them about situations that are serious enough that the Powers want me to intervene. Don’t dismiss this as just another Tuesday night in Sunnydale. Buffy, you need to be careful.”

“Got it. I’m careful girl, although it would be nice if I knew what I was being careful of.” Buffy answered, obviously torn between frowning at Cordelia and smiling at Angel’s concern. She looked at Doyle. “Danger? Fighting? Nothing else?”

Doyle shrugged. “Sorry, believe me, I’d rather the Powers just faxed me the information.”

“Since the Powers obviously want me to be involved,” Angel declared. “I’ll stay in town until whatever it is has happened. Doyle’s visions tend to be in fairly close proximity to the event, so we’ll know soon.”

“We’ll stay as well,” Wesley said, getting a nod from Doyle. “In case there’s anything we can do to help.”

Cordelia gave a put-upon sigh but didn’t contradict them, which was Cordy-speak for agreement.

Sgt. Morgan spoke for the first time. “If the danger is specifically directed at Buffy, as your vision suggests, perhaps we should take over patrolling entirely this week.”

Buffy sat up straight, shaking her head. “I’m not going to hide from this,” she began when Xander interrupted.

“Why do I get the feeling that whatever we do will just make the vision come true?” he said gloomily.

“Because it’s the Hellmouth, pet,” Spike answered, “Murphy’s bloody Law was written on a Hellmouth.”

“Xander and Master Spike have a point,” Mr. Olsen interjected. The cheerleader gave a little snort of derision at Mr. Olsen’s use of Spike’s title and Spike glared at her. “Instead of trying to avoid the situation, I would suggest someone patrol with Buffy this week, doubling our forces and giving fate less chance to play games.”

Giles looked relieved at the suggestion and Buffy nodded her agreement.

“I suspect that all we can do is stay alert until we know what exactly the danger from Mr. Doyle’s vision is,” Giles said. “Thank you, all of you,” he added, looking around the circle. “Your help is greatly appreciated.”
Spike shared the Watcher’s obvious dubiousness about the usefulness of Angel’s team. The replacement Watcher had been fairly useless last year and the Brachen-hybrid was an unknown quantity. Advance warning of danger was only helpful if there was enough information to act on. The cheerleader had hidden depths but Spike still thought it would take turning her to bring the strength he could sense in her to the surface.

Giles had remained standing during the discussion and now he addressed the three from Los Angeles. “As you three know, Spike went missing last week. He’s returned with some disturbing information.” He turned to face Spike: “Spike, what can you tell us about what happened to you?”

Not surprisingly, all eyes shifted to Spike as Giles sat down, yielding the floor, the LA people curious and the Sunnydalers, who had some idea of the size of the problem, worried, especially Sgt. Morgan and Mr. Olsen, the representatives of the demon community.

“Bunch of soldiers in town are hunting demons and have some idea of how to go about it. They have tasers that can drop a vampire in his tracks and they can tell the difference between humans and vampires from a good distance off.”

“Angel and I saw them scanning the cemeteries with some kind of equipment,” Xander filled in. “My guess is they’re checking for body temperature or heart beats or something. It was obvious they were hunting vampires and they could tell I wasn’t one from over a block away.”

“Got a big facility under the college campus,” Spike continued. “Holding cells and laboratories. They’re doing experiments on demons.”

“What kind of experiments?” Sgt. Morgan asked, frowning at the mention of a military base in town. A soldier himself, he’d take it personally that there was a hidden base he didn’t know anything about.

“Not sure.” Spike was aware of Xander listening tensely beside him but he kept his own voice casual, as if this had nothing to do with him personally. “There was a demon that made a run for it and was screamin’ in pain when he tried to fight the soldiers.”

“What kind of demon?”

“Vampire,” Spike answered truthfully, having expected the question.

“Spike said they had a bunch of different kinds of demons in the cells, including a werewolf and a baby Drak’taash demon,” Xander added, getting the pronunciation almost right.

Mr. Olsen, Giles, and Wesley all looked deeply troubled by that piece of information, trading worried glances.

“Why would anyone imprison a Drak’taash cub?” Wesley asked the room at large. “They aren’t capable of hurting anyone and the parents only cause trouble if their cubs are in danger. And last week wasn’t a full moon - why imprison a werewolf during the human part of their cycle?”

“Didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to the prisoners,” Spike answered. “There were twenty or so that I saw and half of ‘em weren’t particularly dangerous. Yeah, they had four or five vampires in the cells, but they also had a couple demons known only for their stupidity: a Reet’tahk and a Laorg. Not worth fighting, either one of them.”

“Why would anyone want to keep demons prisoner?” Buffy asked, not surprisingly. Her world was as black and white as Spike’s - you kill your enemies, you don’t keep them prisoner. That didn’t stop Spike from giving her a withering look.
“Seems pretty simple to me, Slayer. Someone’s got themselves funding for a private little lab, wantin’ to know what makes demons tick. Slice and dice has always been the government’s style.”

There was a brief silence as everyone worked through the implications of that. Spike glanced around the room: they were evenly split, five humans and five demons. The demons looked downright alarmed. The humans were more uneasy than frightened - they weren’t going to end up prisoners in that little hell-hole.

Xander was the first to break the silence. “If the government’s behind this, they’re either finding ways to kill demons or trying to figure out how to make use of them, probably both, and they obviously aren’t distinguishing between peaceful demons and dangerous ones.” He looked grimly around the circle of faces. “We have to find a way to stop them.”

“Xander, that’s a little over the top, don’t you think?” Buffy said hesitantly. “I mean you’re talking about fighting the U.S. army. That’s a bit out of our league.”

Spike couldn’t help wondering if the Slayer had gone soft, turning over half her job to the other demons the way she had. “Getting’ soft, Slayer?” he challenged.

“No, it’s a fair question,” Mr. Olsen said. “This sounds both bigger and more organized than the Mayor who, no matter how dangerous, was only one demon. He never used the power of his office against us.”

“Sheesh, let a guy blow up one high school and next thing you know he wants to take on the entire government,” Cordelia mocked almost absently, her brows drawn together in thought.

“Not the government, just one covert base. If we succeed, they’re never going to admit it existed in the first place,” Xander countered.

Sgt. Morgan shook his head. “That’s a bit simplistic, Xander, although not entirely inaccurate.”

“At the very least, we need a great deal more information before we decide what to do,” Giles put in. “Spike, you said they were experimenting on demons? What, exactly, did you see?”

Xander shifted unhappily on the arm of his chair and Spike casually laid on hand on his leg, stilling him. He knew Xander didn’t like lying to his friends but he knew Xander wouldn’t betray him deliberately. “Demons were taken out of the cells unconscious by humans wearing lab coats. Most of ‘em were brought back a few hours later smellin’ of blood and chemicals. The lab coats would walk the aisle takin’ notes. The one vampire who got out of his cell was fighting two of the lab coats. The vampire would scream in pain and grab his head every time he hit one of them. The lab coats I saw didn’t carry weapons at all, and those two were caught by surprise when the vamp got out. They didn’t have anything I could see that could have caused that reaction in a vampire.” He shrugged. “Looked to me like they’d done something to the vampire so he couldn’t hit people anymore.”

Xander was looking down, studying his toes. Angelus was watching the two of them, frowning, and Spike gave him a bland look. Everyone else was silent, considering the new information and Spike added one more detail. “The place was big. I only saw one section of it but everything was brand new, like it had only just opened for business. Across from the cell I was in was a row of empty ones. The cell block I was in was less than half full. Whatever they’re up to, they’re plannin’ on expanding.”

Xander looked up, scanning the circle of faces. “When Angel and I were following the soldiers, we heard them talking about hunting something they called “Hostile 17”. That says to me that they
think they’re at war. At war with demons.”

Giles raised a cautioning hand. “You may be reading too much into that, Xander; but I agree that it’s a very disturbing term.” He sighed, pulling his glasses off and rubbing at the bridge of his nose, looking very tired all of a sudden.

“See, in general, I don’t give a piss if a bunch of tossers want to declare war on demons,” Spike said into the silence. “Demons and humans have been killing each other for thousands of years. It’s the way it is. Killing your enemies is natural and let the best demon win and all that rot.” Cordelia scowled at him and Wesley’s eyebrows had long since hit his hairline during the short speech. Spike just grinned ferally and continued. “Difference here is that they’re playing at science, cuttin’ demons open to learn what’s inside. Now, I’ve never been one to turn my nose up at a spot of torture now and then,” he ignored Angel’s ostentatious sigh, “but torture should be a free-lance thing, not organized and sterile and in the name of science.”

Angel was the first to break the appalled silence and Spike thought with an inward grin that he was certainly going to hear about this from Xander tonight.

“I think what Spike is trying to say is that the military getting involved in demon hunting is a threat to every demon in town, not just the dangerous ones.”

“Especially when they aren’t distinguishing between good and bad demons,” Xander said grimly. “From what Spike saw, nearly half the demons they’re keeping prisoner aren’t a danger to anyone. And I can’t think of anything good coming from the government experimenting on demons.”

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“That went well,” Spike said cheerfully, hoping to provoke a reaction from Xander who had been silent for far too long.

The meeting had broken up not long after Spike’s little summation. Not much had been accomplished except that everyone had agreed they needed more information about what was going on. Sgt. Morgan promised to see if he could learn anything about the base, find any official record of its existence. Spike had very little hope that would turn up anything. Xander was going to ask around at his job to see if he could find anyone who’d been involved in the massive construction work needed to build a base that size. Everyone else was going to “keep their eyes open” which meant that they would probably have squat to show for it when they met as agreed in one week.

“After your little Ode to Torture, I’m surprised we were invited back.”

Spike looked over at his boy. Xander had a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth and Spike could tell he wasn’t really upset.

“Slayer was halfway to thinking that the government fighting demons was a good thing,” he pointed out.

“So - what? You wanted to push her from halfway to all the way?”

“Needed to remind some of ‘em that if demons torturing humans for fun is a bad thing, then humans doing it for science isn’t any better.” He stopped and pulled Xander around to face him.

“Xander,” he said seriously. “There’s a lot of humans who won’t see anything wrong with the government trying to solve the ‘demon problem’. There’s going to be even more who don’t like what’s happening but aren’t willing to kill humans to save demons. This could come down to...
demon against human and I don’t know which side the Slayer and her Watcher are going to end up on. If this comes down to a war between demons and humans, a lot of people will side with their own species. I’d rather know right now who’s going to take which side. Don’t want to count on someone who won’t be there at the final showdown.”

Xander searched his eyes for a long moment. “So, you were trying to provoke a negative reaction?”

“I’m a demon, Xander. Humans have crossed a line that shouldn’t have been crossed. If we don’t find a way to shut that place down, I’ll take care of the problem myself by declaring war.”

Spike was deadly serious. This wasn’t even about revenge - not entirely. He’d meant it earlier when he’d said that humans had just as much right to kill demons as demons had to kill humans. But humans didn’t have the right to use demons as lab rats, altering them chemically or electronically until they weren’t demons any more.

Xander closed his eyes, taking a deep, steadying breath and Spike watched him worriedly, wondering if he’d gone too far. But Xander’s eyes were filled with determination and anger when they finally looked at him again.

“I’m with you, Spike.” There wasn’t the slightest hesitation or doubt in his voice or eyes. “They aren’t making any distinctions between demons. They can’t justify keeping fifty demons prisoner because twenty of them are dangerous and they’re too lazy or stupid to know the difference. Next week, it could be Mr. Olsen, or Sgt Morgan, or Oz being held prisoner and experimented on. We have to shut them down.”
Chapter 16

Xander neatly stowed his tools in the on-site storage building for the night. The familiar sounds of the job site shutting down for the day surrounded him as he worked: car doors slamming, joking banter as people headed for the parking lot, one-sided conversations as others called home on their cell phones.

Being back at work had helped everything settle down, as if he unconsciously felt that nothing could be too crazy if he was still getting up and going to work, and he was so glad that Spike had insisted. The concentration needed for the detailed finishing work he was doing kept him from constantly worrying over what to do about the multitude of problems facing them and the on-going danger to Spike from the military goons.

He’d called Buffy on his morning break both yesterday and today, catching her between classes and getting reports on the previous night’s patrol. Nothing that seemed to fit Doyle’s warning had been spotted but they had caught glimpses of soldiers around town several times and Xander could only assume they were still looking for Spike. Both nights, Buffy and her patrol partner had steered clear of the soldiers, shifting immediately to a different part of town as soon as they saw them, not wanting to risk the soldiers finding out that the person accompanying the attractive blonde was a little less than fully human. Xander was just glad they were being so cautious. The last thing they needed were more of their friends disappearing.

Snapping the storage shed’s lock closed and double-checking it, he waved at Jim and Rick and turned down their invitation to join them for a beer. Spike had been patrolling the territory every night and the early evening was the only time they had together.

It was driving him quietly insane, letting Spike leave every night without protest, knowing that his lover wasn’t just risking danger, he was actively seeking it out. Oh, Spike wasn’t taking on the soldiers - Spike knew all too well that was a lost cause right now. But Spike seemed driven by a need to prove himself, to show everyone that he was still the same bad-ass he’d always been. The problem was, Spike was mostly proving it to himself. Spike hadn’t known what fear was for over a century and he was not dealing well with having been reintroduced to it now. Both his pride and self-confidence had been shaken to their foundations and, no matter how much he hated it, Xander knew he had to let Spike find them again in his own way. Even if that meant Spike risking his life every night, looking for trouble.

His cell phone rang and he checked the display, frowning when he saw it was Buffy. He’d talked to her only a few hours ago and that made him wonder if something had happened.

“Hey, Buffy,” he greeted, “What’s up?”

“You up for some detective work?”

Ok, that wasn’t what he’d expected. “What kind?”

“The kind where we break the law by crossing police lines trying to find out if we should let the police do their job or if it’s my job.”

“Huh?”

“Professor Gerhardt from the anthropology department was murdered last night.”

“Not wanting to sound callous, because murder is bad, but why is that your problem?”
“Among other things, her ear was cut off,” she reported and Xander winced. Yeah, that image wasn’t going away soon.

“Ok, gross, but it still sounds like a police thing to me.”

“I think so, too but Giles wants me to check it out and find out if it’s a normal sicko or something a little more demonic.”

“Why does a missing ear make it demonic?” Offhand, Xander couldn’t think of any demons that had a thing for ears. “I’m still kind of stuck on gross.”

“Professor Gerhardt was the one responsible for the new Cultural Center, you know, the one you weaseled your way out of working on so I couldn’t make fun of you when I walked by the site on my way to class.” Xander could hear her grin.

“My boss needed me here.” Xander felt a surge of pride even as he said it. His boss had really been pleased when Xander had called him and told him he was coming back to work. The guys on the crew had also been glad to have him back and it was great to be appreciated. Getting back to the subject, he asked: “You said ‘other things’?”

“Yeah. Her body was found in the old mission you guys dug up.”

“Hmm. A little weirder but that’s what anthropology people do, right? Poke around in ruined buildings someone dug up by accident?” And boy he’d been disappointed to learn that it was just an old church not a military base they’d stumbled over. For one moment, hearing the news anchor talk about the ‘surprising discovery’ under the UC Sunnydale campus, he’d thought the construction crew really had dug up the military base and their troubles were over. Covert ops types tended to relocate when accidentally exposed in front of television cameras. Pity that all John had fallen into was the crumbling remains of an old mission.

“They don’t usually get murdered and have parts of their bodies hacked off after they’re dead.” Buffy sounded like she was trying to convince herself that this wasn’t just a waste of her time. “So anyway, I’m going to poke around tonight and see if I can find anything.”

“Sounds like lots of fun. And I would go along because…?”

“Because you’re bored?” Buffy suggested hopefully.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever been that bored. What exactly will you be looking for?”

“Clues, I guess.” Buffy sounded vague. “I think Giles is mostly just still wigging about Doyle’s warning and jumping at shadows. I mean, didn’t Jack the Ripper cut off someone’s ear? Like you said, it’s disgusting but unfortunately human.”

“Wasn’t it Van Gogh who did the ear job?”

“Van Gogh did that to himself. I’m pretty sure Professor Gerhardt’s in the clear on this one.” Buffy was silent for a second and Xander could almost see her little grimace. “Sorry, that came out a bit more insensitive than I intended. It’s been a hard week.”

“I can imagine.” Between Angel being in town and personalized warnings from beyond, Buffy had to be stressing. “I don’t know what I can do, but if you need a second pair of eyes, I’m happy to tag along.” He was lying through his teeth about the happy part because if he went, Spike would insist on going with them, and he really didn’t want Spike getting on anyone else’s radar and violating crime scenes was probably a good way to do that. Spike and the Sunnydale police were just not a
good combination.

“No, it’s ok. Like I said, it’s been a bad week. I just needed to bitch to someone. Much as I appreciate a warning, this one is so vague it’s not helping at all.” That was sure true. Xander liked Doyle, he seemed like a good guy, but frankly the Lost in Space robot’s “Danger, Will Robinson” had been a more useful warning than Doyle’s vision. At least the robot only said it when the danger was two seconds from attacking.

“You sure? Seriously, if you need me, I’ll be there.”

“One person is probably better than a crowd,” Buffy said judiciously. “But I’m counting on you for bail money if I need it.”

“You got it. Be careful. Call me when you get back, would you?” He was spending enough time worrying about Spike, he didn’t need to worry about Buffy too. Although, he was pretty sure she was mostly at risk of being busted by the police. Dead Anthropology professors seemed pretty mundane, not the kind of thing that lead to mystic warnings from beyond.

“Will do,” Buffy promised cheerfully and hung up.

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Xander looked around the dining room, at the white tablecloth and the candles and the little pilgrim dolls that Buffy had set on the table with such loving hands. The rich aromas of roasted turkey and homemade gravy filled the air and Giles and Mrs. Summers were presiding over their motley collection of charges like proud parents. He’d never seen a Thanksgiving like this outside of tv shows. For as long as he could remember, Thanksgivings at his house had consisted of his mother plunking a frozen turkey dinner down in front of each person at the table. On the rare occasion when someone like his Uncle Rory joined them, the alcohol flowed freely during the inevitable football games on tv and, more often than not, the evening ended in a loud argument.

Angel’s people had stayed in town at Mrs. Summers’ insistence, and they were all seated around the table now, laughter and the tangled snippets of multiple conversations filling the room. Xander smiled as he watched Doyle shamelessly flirting with Cordy, who had chosen to have dinner with them rather than endure the dismal atmosphere at her parents’ house. Earlier tonight, she’d told Xander that her father had lost all his money and her parents’ marriage was disintegrating as a result. She’d put a brave face on the situation, as if it really had nothing to do with her, but she hadn’t quite been able to hide the fear and uncertainty in her eyes. Xander had to give her credit; she’d had more money than she could possibly spend - and that was saying a lot for Queen C - all her life and now she was starting over in Los Angeles, without the comfortable safety net her father’s money had always provided. Although she insisted she was just temping with Angel until the right acting job came along, Xander could see the bonds of friendship that were already knitting the unlikely group together. Xander grinned, listening as Doyle called Cordelia “Princess”. Doyle had his work cut out for him if he hoped to date Cordelia but he was making her laugh and it looked like there wasn’t enough of that in her life these days.

Wesley had been amazing this past week. He’d spent days wading through volumes of California history, reading about the Chumash Indians and had done more than anyone else to figure out what was happening: that the accidental discovery of the old Sunnydale mission had released a vengeful Chumash spirit trapped inside.

He looked down the table at Spike, glad to see that he was talking with Mrs. Summers and finally seemed to be enjoying this patched together dinner/welcome home/survival celebration. Mrs. Summers had diplomatically seated Spike and Angel as far apart as possible but that hadn’t stopped
Spike from glaring at his Sire, although it had cut down on the number of cutting remarks Spike could make. Spike was furious with Angel for “forgetting” to call him to let him know that the big fight was happening. Personally, Xander didn’t mind having missed the ridiculous showdown. Ok, potentially lethal, but any fight involving a dozen spirit warriors, a bear, and a lot of crawling around on the floor to avoid arrows had a certain ludicrousness to it that Xander was just as happy to have not had to participate in. Cordelia was still complaining about the damage to her sweater from a close miss with a knife and Doyle had kept them all laughing as he described his attempts to take out an unkillable spirit with a shovel. Xander found himself grinning again as he pictured it: Doyle flailing away, repeatedly knocking down a guy who just kept getting up again. He’d have to remind Spike that it wasn’t exactly a fight that would go down in the record books for style.

Cordelia was still complaining about the damage to her sweater from a close miss with a knife and Doyle had kept them all laughing as he described his attempts to take out an unkillable spirit with a shovel. Xander found himself grinning again as he pictured it: Doyle flailing away, repeatedly knocking down a guy who just kept getting up again. He’d have to remind Spike that it wasn’t exactly a fight that would go down in the record books for style.

Xander’s gaze lingered on Angel, who was regarding the plate of food in front of him dubiously, gingerly poking at it with his fork like he had no idea what to do with mashed potatoes and string beans. Why had Angel “forgotten” to call them? Xander didn’t buy Angel’s explanation that he’d gotten distracted trying to get to Buffy in time and simply forgotten to make the call. He couldn’t help wondering if Angel suspected that something had happened to Spike. It seemed unlikely - Spike had pounced on Angel without any difficulty the first night he was back. Spike himself hadn’t realized that what they’d done to him only applied to humans until later on, so how could Angel have figured it out?

No one else seemed to have any suspicion that anything was wrong. For which Xander was both grateful and guilty. Buffy certainly didn’t. She was treating them both normally: snarking at Spike and talking casually with Xander about her classes and the guy she’d just begun dating. When Spike had been missing, Buffy had known Xander wasn’t interested in trivial stuff and she’d stuck to the issues at hand. Giles, too, had reverted to his normal self, no longer giving Xander sympathetic looks and awkward reassurance. No, as far as he could tell, everyone was treating them normally.

Still… If anyone was going to figure it out, it was Angel. Angel had known Spike longer and better than anyone and had those damn vampire senses. Spike was trying to behave normally but he was seething with suppressed rage and had no outlet for it. He was still going out every night, finding some comfort in killing the largest, most dangerous demons he could find. If Angel had deliberately kept them out of the fight this week because he was protecting Spike, Xander was grateful. But he was also glad that Angel and company were going home tomorrow. He really appreciated that Angel had come when he’d asked, and he’d enjoyed seeing Wesley and Cordelia again but he selfishly admitted he was glad they were leaving. Spike was having enough problems dealing right now, the last thing they needed was for Angel to figure out what had happened.

Spike already wasn’t being careful, he was deliberately seeking out the largest, most dangerous demons he could find and challenging them to fights. Worse, the soldiers were out in force, apparently still hunting for Spike. They’d been spotted several times by the doubled patrols that had gone out every night until they’d discovered that the murder of the professor was the danger Doyle’s vision had predicted. Xander was just grateful that so far he’d woken each morning to find that Spike had come home and was in their bed, relatively unscathed. He would wrap his arms around Spike, holding him and thanking whoever was listening for bringing Spike home safely.

Spike gave up on the factory district and headed for the nearest cemetery. He hadn’t been to Shady Hill in a couple days, maybe something would turn up there.

He’d gone out hunting most nights since his escape from the soldiers, driven by the need to vent his frustrations and to remind himself that he wasn’t completely crippled. The Slayer had
complained half-heartedly that he was doing her job for her and the demons who were backing her up had done the same, but he didn’t care.

Xander had been telling his demon friends to lie low until they knew more about what the soldiers were up to, and pushing the ones who patrolled for the Slayer to stop for awhile, especially now that they’d figured out the half-breed’s warning and the number of people patrolling had dropped back down to their normal level. His boy was worrying himself sick about anyone who went out hunting demons and put themselves at risk. Xander had even had a talk with the Slayer about how exactly she was going to prove she was human if someone saw her using her Slayer skills to fight demons. As concerned as he was about the Slayer and his demons friends, it wasn’t a 10th part of how much Xander worried whenever Spike left the safety of their apartment. It showed in his eyes, in the casual “be careful” that was the last thing Spike heard every time he left the apartment. Xander’s knuckles might show white from his convulsive grip on whatever he was holding and his whole body be rigid with carefully-hidden tension whenever Spike left, but he never asked Spike not to go, knowing, without Spike ever having to tell him, how much Spike needed to be out patrolling his territory.

After the first few nights, Spike had taken to going out well after midnight, after the Slayer and her sidekicks had gone home. He was out later even than the soldiers who, like the Slayer, seemed to do most of their work in the early part of the evening judging from the fact that Spike hadn’t had so much of a glimpse of them even though Xander reported that the Slayer had spotted them several times while on patrol. Leaving Xander asleep in their bed, and avoiding awkward leave-takings, Spike would leave the apartment in the wee hours, restlessly patrolling his territory and seeking out fights until dawn threatened.

Even in that, the soldiers were interfering. The territory was abnormally quiet: the demon bars mostly empty, all but the stupidest demons keeping a very low profile. The rumors Spike had been tracking before he’d learned first hand the reason for the disappearances in town had only grown in the intervening time. The peaceful demons were keeping their heads down, much more so than usual. Granted, Spike didn’t usually hunt every night, but the aggressive demons he sought were either making themselves scarce or had decided to visit the hellmouth some other time. All of which was bloody inconvenient for a Master Vampire actively looking for trouble.

Shady Hill wasn’t quiet and Spike felt a feral grin quirk his lips. There was an Entakkin demon gleefully tearing apart a crypt, tossing the stones around like they weighed nothing, and that was enough of an excuse for Spike.

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Provoking a fight was as simple as a few pointed insults. The Entakkin were known for their hot tempers and within moments of first encountering it, Spike was concentrating on not getting his own ass kicked. Losing himself in the joy of battle, Spike spun and dodged and kicked, battering away at his opponent, rejoicing in the strength and speed of combat and the sharp-edged awareness that comes from the effort to survive and triumph over a stronger opponent.

The Entakkin was good. Larger and stronger than Spike, with tough scaled skin and a love of fighting that almost equaled Spike’s. Ducking under the blows the Entakkin was throwing, bouncing back to his feet when one of the blows connected, Spike taunted the creature, insulting its looks, its fighting prowess and its personal hygiene, relishing the anger he was provoking and letting his own bottled up rage and frustration come out with every blow he landed on the lizard-like skin.

The Entakkin swiped at him with a roundhouse swing, its claws glinting in the moonlight and
Spike jumped back just in time. The blow missed him by a hair’s breadth and he laughed recklessly, launching a two-footed blow at the demon’s side as it opened itself up to him. His booted feet slammed into the thing’s side, the impact jarring his legs all the way up and knocking him off his feet, even as the Entakkin stumbled back several feet, only barely managing to remain upright. Spike bounced back upright, grinning like a madman as he spun around, aiming another kick at the creature.

This was more like it. This was strength pitted against greater strength, speed and skill against something with greater mass and a longer reach and the outcome in serious doubt. This was what he’d been seeking: a truly epic fight. One that would quell his own doubts and remind him of who he was. Let him know those bastards hadn’t taken anything from him he couldn’t take back.

Spike was panting like a human and both fighters were riding the edge of exhaustion, their blows coming more and more slowly as they both tired. The Entakkin was staggering, still on its feet and fighting but growing less and less coordinated as it tired. Its blows were increasingly going wild even though Spike’s own ability to dodge had slowed to little more than human levels. No longer bouncing back to his feet when the Entakkin connected with one of its massive paws, by now Spike was scrambling slowly and painfully upright, his ribs bright slashes of pain from a lucky blow that had slammed him back into a tree a few minutes earlier. Blood dripped from his arm where the claws had connected and his shirt hung in tatters, shredded by the razor-sharp tips of those same claws.

A wisp of… something shivered through him for a moment, and he shook his head sharply to clear it, forcing himself to focus. The Entakkin lumbered forward clumsily, clearly intent on overwhelming Spike by sheer mass and Spike stumbled backwards away from it, struggling to stay on his feet. The Entakkin snarled silently and mouthed what looked like curses.

Spike laughed. “Cat got your tongue?” he asked tauntingly, and almost got killed for his pains, completely distracted for an instant when no sound emerged from his throat as he spoke. Swearing silently, he threw himself down, under the reach of the massive arms, and rolled away ungracefully, tumbling over the uneven ground until he was clear, then pulling himself upright by means of a handy tree branch and cursing himself for an amateur for letting himself get distracted during a fight.

The Entakkin was looking surprised, still opening and closing its mouth uselessly, obviously trying to form words. It had backed away after its last failed attack and was watching Spike warily while it tried to force volume back into its voice. Spike growled silently and swung his full weight against the branch, breaking it off with a loud crack that was doubly loud in the artificial quiet. Roaring with silent fury, putting every ounce of his flagging energy into it, Spike charged the demon, bringing the branch down in a series of punishing blows, battering at the Entakkin until it dropped to its knees, shielding its head with its arms.

Spike heard the massive bones cracking under the force of his blows and snarled triumphantly, shifting the angle of his attack so that the punishing blows fell on the demon’s back and sides. A minute later, he stood panting over the limp body, only keeping himself from collapsing to the ground by leaning against the blood-soaked branch.

For a long moment, he did nothing but stand there, waiting for his strength to return and listening to the harsh rasp of air as his body reverted to old instincts for how to handle exhaustion. He straightened up at last, muscles trembling with fatigue and prodded the unmoving body at his feet. He tried to speak, to sneer his defiance at his defeated enemy one more time, but no sound
emerged.

“Bloody hell,” he mouthed silently. “What the fuck is going on?”
Spike moved as quickly as his injuries allowed through the waning night, cursing himself for what now seemed like an incredible fit of self-indulgence. Oh, in general, he was all for self-indulgence but the fight with the Entakkin had left him battered and injured and not at his peak for dealing with an emergency.

‘Course, it wasn’t necessarily much of an emergency. Not like there was a rain of toads going on or a plague of prraata demons. Granted, he’d been deprived of a well-deserved roar of triumph as the Entakken had crumpled to the ground, bloody and beaten. And he had wanted to scream his victory to the skies. The Entakken had been just what he’d needed, despite the battering he’d taken in the fight and, in hindsight, the inconvenient timing. Every blow he’d landed had bled a little more of the frustration and humiliation out of him, every kick and punch had assuaged the pent up need for revenge that had been building inside him until he’d felt like he was going to explode if he didn’t take action immediately.

It went against his grain to have to be patient, to wait for the retribution that was rightly his, to bide his time until he could eviscerate the enemy who had defeated him, however temporarily. Every instinct he possessed had been yammering at him, demanding that he seek revenge NOW, leaving his gut and his brain in a constant state of war ever since he had escaped. With tonight’s battle, that internal conflict had finally eased to tolerable levels. The blood on his hands, the bones that had cracked under his fists may not have belonged to the soldiers who had crippled him but it would do until he could take his revenge against the ones who were responsible. And he would have his vengeance, he vowed, no matter how long it took or what it cost him to get it, he would have it.

But first, he had to deal with what the Hellmouth was currently throwing at them. He needed to find out if the loss of his voice was something that had just affected himself and the Entakkin or if it was happening to everyone. How far did the pool of silence extend? Did it cover the whole town or only an isolated section? Had it silenced humans or only demons? It was unlikely in the extreme that whatever it was extended beyond the town - this was the Hellmouth after all and town-wide hi-jinks did happen here but he had yet to see them go past the city limits. He was just glad that he’d seen the Entakkin lose its voice as well. If he’d been alone, he probably would have assumed it was some kind of side effect of whatever the lab coats had done to him.

Spike slowed his pace as he neared the factory, slipping into the shadows and easing his way closer, concealing his movements. He needed information more than anything else right now. Most of the Court would be up and about still and Spike did not want to appear in front of them without having a chance to clean up. Not unless he had to.

Stopping across the street from the factory, he kept close to the side of the building, hidden from casual sight and stretched out his senses. In the hour before dawn, the Court should be nearly full, the minions back from their night’s activities but still up and about, not yet ready for sleep. He should be able to hear them from where he stood: gossiping, boasting, gambling.

The pre-dawn air was quiet. Not a single voice carried to his ears, no sound of weapons impacting against each other as minions sparred to the accompaniment of the jeers or encouragement of onlookers. There was the faintest noise of bodies moving restlessly inside the building and nothing else. The Court had been silenced as well.

Spike weighed his options for less than a second, then strolled across the street and mounted the
stairs to the apartment as if he hadn’t a care in the world, careful to conceal any hint of a limp in his
confident stride.

Once inside, he blessed Xander for the over-stuffed refrigerator as he hurriedly heated and drained
bag after bag of blood, feeling the hot blood warming him from the inside, his torn flesh beginning
to heal and his ribs to knit back together. Xander had always made sure there was fresh blood on
hand and an emergency supply in the freezer but since Spike’s return, he had been going
overboard, keeping enough blood in the apartment to satisfy three vampires.

Drinking with his right hand and writing quickly with his left, Spike scribbled a rapid series of
short notes before pushing back his chair. He drained the last mug of blood and stood for a
moment, his senses turned inward, taking stock.

He’d drunk far more than he usually would have for such minor injuries and his system was
responding rapidly. The surface injuries had already healed enough not to cause comment. The ribs
were still sore and would need more time but they would do - he wasn’t really expecting trouble.
Slipping quietly into the bedroom, he pulled a fresh t-shirt and over-shirt out of the bureau and
closet and slid into them, tossing the shredded, bloody ones into the trash.

He hesitated for a moment at the door, looking back at his Claimed. Xander was on his back, one
arm flung out across the space Spike usually inhabited, and his not-quite-a-snore breathing
sounded loudly in the otherwise silent room. Spike was tempted to take the time to wake Xander
and find out if he had been affected but knew that his boy could wait for a little while. The Court
needed to be dealt with immediately.

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Barely five minutes later, flanked by his Lieutenants, Spike descended the stairs to the main floor.
Outwardly ignoring the confused minions milling around, he crossed to the front of the room and
jumped up onto the small platform that had been set there as the Court’s numbers grew and it
became harder to see Spike over the crowd. Frowning, Spike glanced around the room. Less than
half of the minions were present, the more sensible ones having obviously headed for bed to see if
they would wake at sunset, the problem with their voices already fixed as mysteriously as it had
begun. The minions in the main room had all seen Spike enter and were already clustered around
him, some mouthing urgent silent messages at him, others just waiting for him to speak.

Idiots. ‘Course, maybe it was a compliment, figuring the Master of the Territory wouldn’t be
affected along with everyone else. This whole situation just screamed of magic, which was odd
since magic didn’t usually work on vampires.

He needed to get the attention of every vampire in the Court and that was going to be a problem, at
least for the ones who’d already left the main floor. He looked around, spotting a couple of lengths
of one inch metal pipe that the minions sometimes sparred with lying over by the wall. Hopping
down from the platform, Spike strode over and picked one up, hefting it as he looked up at the
metal ducts that snaked overhead, leftovers from the building’s days as a manufacturing company.
He smirked and stepped back up onto the platform, swinging the six foot length in an arc over his
head, metal clanging loudly against metal as the two connected, the sound echoing through the
large space, carrying easily to every corner of the building. Xander was the only one in the building
who would be able to sleep through the racket, Spike thought with a fond smile.

He kept swinging in a steady rhythm, like a clock striking the hour, the noise drawing the
remaining minions down from the third floor.

When the Court had gathered, Spike lowered the length of pipe and used it as a pointer, gesturing
towards the words Jose had just written on the wall, following Spike’s orders.

COURT’S LOCKED DOWN.

He spun the pipe and used it to point to each of the exits where his lieutenants waited. As instructed, for the benefit of the minions who couldn’t read, as he pointed to each exit in turn, the Lieutenant at the exit made a show of slamming the doors shut and bolting them. The seldom-used bolts and barricades dropped heavily into place, the echo of wood and metal sliding home the only sound in the cavernous space.

Spike spun the pole again and pointed back to Jose, who was writing a second message on the wall:

DON’T KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENING
INVESTIGATING

He looked deliberately over the members of the assembled Court, one eyebrow raised inquiringly, twirling the length of pipe idly in a way that made it clear without words that it was a lethal weapon in his hands. He scanned the crowd, seeking anyone who looked like they might disobey or even question his order, then nodded sharply in approval when he saw no sign of rebellion or disagreement. He’d never needed words to convey naked menace, he thought in satisfaction.

A sudden attack of speechlessness wouldn’t drive vampires to panic and despair. Most of them would simply go to sleep and wait to see if their voices had returned when they woke at sunset. Tonight would be the bigger test. If the unnatural silence hadn’t ended, humans would be panicking in droves and their fear and misery would be perfuming the air for miles - a vampire’s perfect feeding ground. Spike had tasted it before, lost himself in the frenzy of human misery and fear, feeding mindlessly, gorging himself on blood and emotions as human society broke down and chaos reigned openly in the streets. There was nothing quite like it. He doubted many of the court minions were old enough to have tasted that kind of ecstatic madness, although the 60’s had come close at times. Problem was, feeding openly on the streets during riots and revolutions in the last century had been one thing. Doing the same thing in 21st Century America, with its wall-to-wall live television coverage, was strictly for fools and his Court was not going to bring that kind of attention down on itself especially when there was a fucking demon research facility run by the military under their feet.

If they didn’t fix this before dark tonight, the government would most likely be declaring martial law and sending in troops to keep order. Spike spared a reminiscent thought for the old days, when there weren’t enough local troops to keep things from spiraling out of control, when the troops were undisciplined rabble more likely to join in the riots than stop them. Today, martial law usually came with curfews and shooting violators on sight so that tended to keep the fun and games off the street, which would help keep the Court calm.

Satisfied the Court would sit tight for now, he dropped the pipe, creating a ripple of noise in the silent building and crossed the room to the bolt hole leading to the sewers. Michael was already opening the trap door and Spike dropped down into the sewers. He needed to check his contacts to see if any of them had any idea what was happening. He looked up at Michael as the Lieutenant looked back down at him, the trap ready to slam shut and the Lieutenant nodded reassuringly. Michael would stand by the exit until he heard the signal knock that Spike had arranged during the hurried meeting upstairs with the lieutenants. Michael would remain at his post for as long as it took but Spike had no intention of being gone for long. Xander would be getting up in a little over an hour and Spike planned to return before then.
He was back well under the time he’d allotted. Nobody knew anything and all the silent mouthing and flailing gestures were already getting to be bloody annoying. He shook his head at Michael’s silent question and waited pointedly while the trap door was slammed closed and bolted shut before taking the stairs up to the apartment, glad that the blood he’d drunk earlier had had another hour to work its healing magic on his wounds. Xander didn’t need to know how close a thing the fight had been.

Once back upstairs, he glanced at the clock on the microwave. Xander’s alarm would be going off in just under half an hour. Taking the time to write a note, Spike carried the pad of paper and a pen into the bedroom and sat down on the bed. He shook Xander gently but Xander just rolled over, his lips moving silently in what was undoubtedly a sleepy protest against getting up. Spike shook him again, a bit more firmly and kept it up until Xander rolled back towards him, a silent grumble of complaint on his lips.

That clearly got through to Xander’s sleepy brain and he sat up abruptly, one hand going to his throat as he tried to say something. He looked up at Spike in alarm, lips moving silently, heartbeat accelerating, and Spike shook him gently and thrust the note in front of him. He’d written it on the assumption that the unnatural silence wasn’t limited to demons but he couldn’t help feeling a flicker of relief that this wasn’t something happening courtesy of the military base, something aimed specifically at demons. If humans were affected too, it was unlikely the lab coats had cooked this up and more likely that it was some kind of mojo. He firmly quashed the little voice inside that said the military goons were amateurs and could have muffed up something intended for demons.

As Xander read the note, Spike sat down next to his boy and put a reassuring arm around him, his thumb stroking absently over the point of his shoulder. His gaze went to the far wall as he waited for Xander to finish the summary he’d jotted down of everything he knew about what was happening - which wasn’t much. He was still turning ideas over in his head when Xander tweaked the pen out of his fingers.

He glanced down as Xander turned the page and wrote his own note: We need to talk to Giles.

Spike nodded and took the pad of paper back. Sun’s nearly up. Soon as it is, go to his place and tell him what’s happening.

Xander looked at him, eyebrows raised, lifting his hands in a helpless gesture. Spike glared at him briefly then wrote rapidly. I know we don’t know what’s happening but the sooner he starts researching the better.

Xander drummed his fingers against his leg for a moment, then made a beckoning motion. He stood up and went to the living room, switching on the tv and channel surfing rapidly till he found a morning news show. He looked at Spike and tapped the back of his wrist.

Spike shook his head, not understanding and Xander reached for the pad of paper and wrote quickly.

Let’s see if there’s anything on the news. Giles has Olivia staying with him, he’s not going to be up yet. If this is all over town, there may be something on the news that will give us a starting point.

Spike nodded. There were enough official types who worked in the hours before dawn: hospital, police, and the like, that it was likely there was some official version being put out already. Most humans were starting their day about now and all over town, if his suspicions were correct, alarm clocks were going off and humans were getting a nasty shock as they tried to talk to the person in bed with them. It wouldn’t hurt to take a few minutes to find out what story the humans came up
with, no matter how useless or off base it was likely to be. Giles and his bird could sleep in a little longer before Xander roused them out of bed.

He sat down on the couch, tugging Xander down to sit in front of him, enfolding his boy in his arms as he tuned out the television, knowing Xander would alert him if anything useful came on. His thoughts turned inward, puzzling over the problem from every angle. Being unable to speak was annoying, but what harm did it do? What was the point in inflicting this on a large population? Of course, it was possible the only point was to cause panic. The demon that Xander referred to as the “Hansel-and-Gretel demon” wasn’t the only demon that fed off strong human emotions. A number of others did as well, to a greater or lesser extent, vampires among them. Vampires didn’t sustain nourishment from negative human emotions but they drank them in greedily anyway. Pain, terror, hysteria, panic all enhanced the normal taste of blood. Which was why someone like Dracula was such a prat for entrancing his victims before he fed. Like living on vanilla pudding and white bread - no taste at all.

They’d never learned whether the Hansel-and-Gretel demon - Spike really wished they’d been able to identify the species, referring to it that way was embarrassing - had been able to directly manipulate minds and emotions or if it had simply stirred the pot using ingredients already present. It had certainly been able to use illusion to change its own appearance. Joyce had told him afterwards that she’d thought she was seeing ghosts, spirits that were calling to her for help. Illusion was mind manipulation, getting a victim to see what you wanted them to see but Spike suspected that the demon had been able to plant ideas and emotions. Certainly Joyce wouldn’t have gone so far off the deep end as to try and burn two of her daughter’s friends without a lot of outside influence. It was possible they were dealing with a similar species here. In which case, there wasn’t much of a problem. The demon had been big but not a particularly good fighter. Too many centuries relying on illusion to hide it, Spike thought with a disapproving snort, albeit a silent one.

He shook off his thoughts, knowing they needed more information before they could figure out who was doing this and why. He tightened his arms around Xander, ignoring the lingering pain in his ribs, and pulled his boy in closer, listening to the steady beat of his heart and, unable to resist, he lowered his head and tasted the skin on Xander’s neck. His tongue trailed up the line of his Claimed’s throat and he could feel the pleased hum rumbling in Xander’s chest even if no sound emerged.

Maybe they should let the Watcher sleep for a bit longer after all.

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Xander knocked a second time, a bit louder this time but trying to avoid sounding like he was pounding on the door. Waking Giles when he had a sleep-over friend was bad enough without beating his door down. Besides, that just might bring Giles to the door with a weapon and he really didn’t need a crossbow in his face first thing in the morning, he thought with a slight grin, especially when he couldn’t make jokes about it.

Spike had gone back to bed when Xander left the apartment. Xander hadn’t said anything, not wanting to get into a written argument with his lover, but he could tell that Spike was hurt. Ordinarily, Spike was fluid, unthinking grace personified but this morning there had been a touch of stiffness in his movements, the slightest of hesitations before standing up or sitting down; things that spoke volumes about his health. It had obviously not been a serious injury and Spike had fed well, given the hint of color in his pale skin and the slightly warmer than usual temperature of his body as he’d held Xander. A few hours of sleep would undoubtedly finish healing whatever wounds he’d sustained last night.
The main reason he’d let it slide was that Spike seemed less on edge this morning. Despite the current problem, Spike had seemed more relaxed than he’d been since he’d returned from being held prisoner. Like he’d finally found a way to deal with the doubts and fears that had been haunting him. He hoped so. Spike’s way of dealing so far had meant putting himself in danger night after night, risking his life and the possibility he could be recaptured.

Realizing he’d been standing there waiting for an answer for awhile now, Xander knocked again. It was past time for Giles to be up and researching. Sunnydale had made the morning news: the outside world was still trying to decide if it was a hoax or not, and the streets were filled with closed businesses and freaked out people. Xander was a bit on the freaked side himself because he had that gnawing, we-live-on-the-mouth-of-hell, sensation in the pit of his stomach that this wasn’t just someone’s idea of fun and games. This had bad written all over it and he had a feeling they needed to figure out what was going on and fast. Giles was just going to have to get his butt out of bed and start with the research. He knocked a fourth time and finally heard movement behind the door.

Giles opened the door cautiously, most of his body concealed behind the swing of the door, his right hand conspicuously out of view though sadly his bathrobe was not. Xander liked Olivia and all but he really didn’t need to think about Giles doing it with someone. He gave Giles a little wave and mouthed hello, just so Giles knew they were both in the same boat - the silent one.

Giles gave him the ghost of a smile back and Xander fished out the note that Spike had woken him up with and handed it to Giles. He stepped inside and smiled at Olivia, who was peeking around the corner of the stairs, hands clutching an obviously-borrowed robe closed at her throat, her eyes huge and worried. The door shut behind him and Giles brushed past him absently, reading Spike’s summary of what had happened. Giles laid his crossbow down on the kitchen counter and hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and passed the note to Olivia. Obviously, it was way too late in the game to be pretending in front of the out-of-town guest that all was completely normal in Sunnydale.

Giles headed to the kitchen and Xander heard the familiar sounds of him filling the tea kettle and setting it on the stove. He smiled. Tea was Giles’ drug of choice and clearly Giles was needing a hit right now. He moved to the living room and switched on the small television that Giles liked to pretend he didn’t own. Olivia jumped at the sudden sound of voices and Xander turned the sound down a bit. He found a morning news program and left it on, hoping for updates, then turned to the bookshelves.

He’d helped Giles shelve the books, so he knew where most of the familiar volumes were but he scanned them helplessly now, not sure what to look for. Demons? Spells? Hell, maybe the news anchor was right and this was just an outbreak of laryngitis. Except vampires didn’t catch human diseases.

Not that he intended explaining that to the CDC people when they got here.

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Can't even shout; Can't even cry;  
The gentlemen are coming by;  
looking in windows, knocking on doors;  
They need to take seven and they might take yours;  
Can't call to mom; can't say a word;  
You're gonna die screaming but you won't be heard.

Charming. Xander read it again and was happy to pass the paper on to Olivia. Buffy and Giles
already knew what it said. Buffy had explained, via the white message board she’d shown up
wearing on a string around her neck, that she’d heard the words in a dream. She’d called Giles,
yesterday when phone calls were still possible, and he’d been looking into it, in case it was one of
the prophetic dreams she got sometimes. Yesterday, neither she nor Giles had been sure if it meant
anything or not. Of course, they were pretty sure this morning that it hadn’t just been a weird
dream.

Unfortunately, like Doyle’s vision, it didn’t really tell them anything about what was happening.
Xander couldn’t help thinking that whoever was responsible for sending these messages should get
their heads out of their asses and send something useful. If they could send visions to Doyle and
dreams of little girls chanting gross poems to Buffy, they could surely send a plain message in
English: Monsters coming. Kill them by stabbing through the heart with a blade made of gold. But
no, they got messages that were full of more blanks than useful information. You’d think whoever
was trying to hinder them rather than help for all the good their cryptic messages did.

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Two hours later, they hadn’t found anything even remotely useful.

They had all, including Olivia, been looking through Giles’ books ever since Buffy arrived,
searching for anything that could be causing this enforced silence or any mention of “the
Gentlemen”. Except for the small sounds of pages being turned and the occasional creak and rustle
as someone shifted in their chair, the room remained eerily silent. Only the quiet murmur of the tv
in the background providing relief from the oppressive silence, a lack of noise that pressed almost
tangibly against the room. Xander had never realized how many idle comments a group of people
made, even when they were all reading. A dozen times already, he’d opened his mouth to say
something, only to subside with a frustrated sigh as he remembered.

Mr. Olsen had stopped by about an hour after Buffy arrived, giving them a short break from
reading. He’d come with a note, letting them know that the entire demon community was similarly
affected and that they were also looking for answers. It was clear he’d been hoping that Giles had
something useful to go on but he’d hidden his disappointment well and in turn had shaken his head
in response to their written questions about the Gentlemen.

They’d shown him the poem from Buffy’s dream and he’d copied it down and left shortly
afterwards, indicating he was going to take it back to his group of researchers to see if it meant
anything to them.

It was good to know they had so many people looking for answers but Xander was uncomfortably
reminded of the weeks of futile research into the Mayor’s ascension and could only hope they
wouldn’t be that long solving this problem this time.

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Spike left the Court, satisfied that everything was under control. The Lieutenants would guard the
exits all night, senior minions having taken over the watch during the day per Spike’s orders.
Keeping vampires at home during daylight hours wasn’t really a problem and the guards had been
for show more than anything but he didn’t want some wanker with more bravado than sense
defying him and using the silence as an excuse for claiming they hadn’t understood his orders.

Xander had come home in the late afternoon and let Spike know that they were no closer to solving
the problem than they had been when he’d left this morning. He’d shown Spike the Slayer’s poem
but, other than appreciating the imagery, it had meant nothing to Spike. Communicating in writing
had long since become unbearably frustrating and Xander’s solution had been a long, slow make-
out session on the couch.

Spike had always known his boy was brilliant.

Spike had reluctantly torn himself away and headed down to the Court an hour before sunset, promising to return shortly but needing to make his presence felt downstairs. He had initiated several sparring matches with different minions as a way to pass the time and to remind them how much better a fighter he was. As he had known they would, others had followed his example, using the enforced lock down as an opportunity to train. Minions were so predictable: the ones who weren’t looking for any opportunity to cause trouble spent all their time fawning over and imitating the more powerful.

With everything secure and under control, Spike had signaled his lieutenants to keep an eye on things and left not long after sunset. He’d made enough of a show of his presence by then, given that he wasn’t really expecting trouble from the Court tonight. The vampires had simply slept through the day as usual, not particularly worried by the unnatural silence or the lock down. One night locked down in the Court wouldn’t bother them. When the minions got bored with sparring with each other, they would play cards or dice or read, depending on their inclination. Tomorrow night would be harder if the lock down continued. Some of the Court would be hungry and wanting to feed but hopefully the Watcher would find answers soon or Spike would find them himself when he patrolled later tonight.

According to Xander, the Slayer was mostly going to spend the early part of the night in town, keeping order among the humans. Spike had snorted silently at that plan. Given the time his own voice had stopped working, whatever was responsible wouldn’t move until well after midnight. The Slayer would be all tucked up in bed by that time, having settled a few fist fights between humans and miss the real party entirely.

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There was movement in the clock tower of the old courthouse.

The old building had been abandoned and boarded up for years while the town squabbled over whether to tear it down or repair it. Sentiment had kept the city maintaining the clock itself and its soft white glow was a beacon in the night, the hands currently pointing to 3:12 a.m.. The town was under quarantine and had had a curfew imposed but there wasn’t much of an official presence to be seen in the deserted streets. A cautious check at the edge of town had shown the town was encircled by military vehicles, the soldiers wearing haz-mat suits and looking like complete gits.

According to the news, there was a team from the Center for Disease Control working at the local hospital, trying to find a medical solution and the official explanation was that recent flu vaccinations had caused an outbreak of laryngitis. Spike had just shaken his head over that one. Humans could find a rational explanation for anything. Including, he remembered with a smirk, a 60-foot snake munching on people during a high school graduation.

The movement in the tower wasn’t shadows. It wasn’t human either, not guards stretching themselves for some relief after long hours watching from the high windows. This was jerky and spastic and bore investigation.

Spike crossed the green and circled the building once. Seeing no sign of an opening in the boarded up windows and doors, he simply made one of his own, tearing the boards off of a window that had long ago lost its glass and making an opening large enough to enter quickly. The screech of the nails pulling free was almost unbearably loud in the unnatural silence of the night and he worked quickly, hearing stumbling movement descending from the clock tower.
Leaping in through the opening, Spike saw nothing but a nearly gutted building, dim light filtering in through the gaps between the boards that covered the large windows on all sides of the open space. A scattering of old barrels, lumber and wire littered the floor but there was nothing to show that anything was living here.

Upstairs then.

He gauged the movement and decided to wait, not wanting to meet an unknown enemy in the tight confines of a potentially unstable staircase. He moved back, giving himself room and a moment to see what was approaching, just as two bodies lumbered clumsily down the last turn of the stairs.

They looked mostly human: two stocky figures wearing… straightjackets? Spike let out a silent bark of laughter at the unexpected sight as the two reached the main floor and stopped, looking around, their arms continuing to move, flailing through the air as if they were unable to stand still. Their bandaged faces were close enough to pass for human in dim light - to human eyes anyway - but the slightly ridged, hairless eyebrows and the pointed teeth in their lipless mouths gave them away. Whatever they were, they weren’t human and that meant they were fair game.

Spike charged them, smashing solidly into the one that had taken a few steps to the left, slamming it backwards and off its feet until they both crashed to the floor. With one quick move, Spike twisted its head, hearing the sharp crack of a neck breaking. Dropping the smelly thing contemptuously, he bounced to his feet and whirled, just in time to meet the other one’s rush.

They were stronger than human. The impact of the second creature sent Spike stumbling backwards until his back hit the wall, dried boards and ancient plaster crumbling under the impact of two bodies. He snarled silently and wrestled with the thing, bringing his legs up and heaving it back and off of him. He levered himself out of the wall and kicked it again, crunching its kneecap and dropping it to the floor.

He kicked it viciously in the head and suddenly found himself facing a third. Swearing, even if it was only in his head, Spike spun and brought his leg around, sweeping the thing off its feet. He pounced and broke this one’s neck too.

Stepping back, he glanced around quickly. No others were lurking in the corners and the one he’d first killed… was no longer lying near the foot of the stairs.

What the hell?

A movement near his feet made him jump back cautiously and, to his disbelief, he saw the two creatures getting to their feet, seemingly unfazed by a fractured skull or a twice broken neck.

Ok, maybe they were going to be a bit more trouble than he’d figured.

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Bloody hell!

He was no nearer to killing these things than he’d been 20 minutes ago and they were still fresh as the proverbial daisies while he was seriously regretting not bringing something sharp with him. Of course, like the Mayor, maybe they were immune from being cut to pieces but he’d be more than willing to give it a try. For now, breaking their necks, stoving their skulls in, strangling them - none of it worked.

Fortunately, they weren’t particularly good fighters, relying on strength and overwhelming their opponents instead of any finesse. Still, it was unbelievably frustrating to defeat the same opponent
over and over again without actually stopping them. He needed to come up with another plan, one that probably involved sharp cutting weapons, and start over.

The fight had ranged all over the building, from the ground floor to the top of the clock tower and he’d seen unmistakable signs on the top floor that there were more of these things and that did give him pause. He could fight these two all night, and it felt like he already had, but seven or eight of them might be a problem. Plus, these two had obviously been left to guard home base. Spike had a feeling these things weren’t the cause of the silence in the town but they were clearly connected to it. Hopefully the Watcher had some information on how to kill these annoying things.

Right. Time for a tactical retreat. No sense in fighting these things until the sun came up or until their friends came home.

Spike landed a spin kick on the closer of the two, driving it back momentarily and followed up by slamming his fist into the other one’s face.

It took them a moment or two to recover from having their necks snapped and he used the time to leap down to the main floor and sprint out of the building through the opening he’d made earlier. He ran for another block, then skidded to a halt in the shadow of an enormous shade tree, peering around the trunk at the abandoned building. Nothing moved in the again-quiet night and after a moment, Spike melted back into the shadows and moved on.

Dawn wasn’t far off. He toyed with the idea of rousting the Court and having the vampires deal with these things but abandoned the thought almost immediately. Too many in the Court wouldn’t understand why he wanted them to kill the things and he couldn’t explain without his voice. All too soon, it was going to occur to some of the vampires in the Court that a quarantined town was a perfect feeding ground. They could kill every human in town and there wouldn’t be enough noise to alert the soldiers, waiting safely outside the town limits, there solely to keep people from spreading an unknown disease, not to protect them from monsters who might take advantage of the humans’ inability to scream.

He stopped abruptly, struck by a sudden thought. The soldiers and lab coats under the campus should have been rendered mute as well. For a moment, he let himself bask in the vision of leading the Court against the underground base, tearing their throats out and blowing up the facility. God, it would be sweet.

He sighed, a silent puff of air past frozen vocal chords. The military would be doubly on alert right now, undoubtedly viewing the loss of their voices as an attack. Every entrance would be guarded and those tasers would drop too many of the vampires before they got close enough to do anything. He wouldn’t care if the entire Court got slaughtered if he could be sure they would take the soldiers out first but this wasn’t the time. It would need a solid plan, not a half-baked, all out assault born of impulse, to take that facility down.

He started walking again, putting his revenge back on the back burner. He’d round up the Slayer and a few others and come back at sunset. Once they’d killed those creatures and lifted this annoying silence, he might just go somewhere and scream for awhile.
Spike cursed silently as he stared down at the note Xander had just handed him and braced himself for an argument. A really frustrating argument in pantomime. He was going to tear those things limb from limb tonight for making him go through this. A written argument had to be the most ridiculous thing he’d ever gotten himself involved in. Maybe sign language would work on his stubborn Claimed.

Standing up abruptly, he tore the note in half and let the two halves drift to the floor of the apartment, folding his arms over his chest and shaking his head emphatically. No way in hell was Xander coming along when they were fighting something that, from Spike’s experience last night, wasn’t able to be killed or even damaged permanently. No, Spike was recruiting the Slayer and a couple of the better fighters among the demons into this fight and that was it. Xander was bloody well going to stay put at the Watcher’s place and continue doing research into how to get their voices back so Spike could yell at him for wanting to put himself in danger.

Xander didn’t have the decency to look even slightly impressed. He glanced down at the torn up note for a second, then looked back up at Spike. Little bastard looked like he was suppressing an indulgent smile - like he was thinking that Spike was doing that cute overprotective thing again. “I’m going,” he mouthed silently, repeating his now torn up written declaration and to Spike’s annoyance, Xander simply got up, stepped around Spike and headed for the living room, acting as if the discussion was over. Which it bloody well wasn’t.

He never should have told Xander what he was planning for tonight. But he’d hoped a description of the things hanging out in the clock tower at the old courthouse would give the Watcher some guidance in his research. Spike intended to take along a couple good fighters for backup and put to rest his curiosity about whether the things would stay down after they’d been hacked to pieces. At the very least, it ought to make them a bit slower to get back up.

Xander had read Spike’s description of the creatures and the difficulty in killing them, his speculation that they were not the actual cause of the silence that enveloped the town but that they were related to it in some way, and the request to pass the information on to Giles so he could focus his research while Spike took some fighters with him to take on the things. Instead of following the plan, Xander had taken a long minute to digest the information, then, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, had picked up a piece of paper and written matter-of-factly that he would go to the clock tower with Spike.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Xander to watch his back - his boy could hold his own in any fight and had proven it more times than Spike liked to think about. It was just that he didn’t want Xander risking his neck in a fight with something they had no idea how to kill. It drove him nuts that Xander insisted on putting himself on the front lines of every major battle. Sure, he was content to stay home and miss out on all the little stuff, Xander had no interest in the day-to-day patrolling, but let some unstoppable, unkillable demon show its ugly face in town and suddenly Xander was demanding to be in the thick of things with no concern for the risk to himself.

One of these days, Spike was going to remember to chain him to the bed before he let Xander know about the latest pack of invulnerable demons.

He followed Xander into the living room, determined for once to talk some sense into his Claimed and found him kneeling beside the weapons chest, pulling out a selection of axes and swords and placing them carefully in the duffle bag they used to carry weapons across town inconspicuously. He completely ignored Spike’s agitated presence, examining the weapons and making selections...
that Spike couldn’t help approving. Give Xander the smallest amount of information about a situation and he seemed to have an instinct for how to approach it. Tell him there were demons in town who couldn’t be killed by normal means and Xander calmly pulled out the heavy axes and the weighted broadswords, clearly channeling Spike’s ideas about simply hacking the things to pieces and seeing if they could reassemble themselves.

Watching his boy, Spike lost track of his original plan to shake some sense into him and was caught off guard when Xander turned to look up at him. He mouthed a question that Spike didn’t catch and Xander looked as frustrated by the on-going silence as Spike felt. Xander pulled out the pad of paper he had taken to carrying in his back pocket and scribbled a quick note.

Do you have any chains downstairs?

Caught completely off guard by the non-sequitor, Spike gave him a raised eyebrow smirk and Xander snatched the pad back with mock huffiness. Later, maybe, he wrote with his own salacious look, then added: If we can’t cut them to pieces, maybe we can chain them to a wall or something.

Spike gave him a feral grin and a quick hard kiss. He pulled back just enough to see his boy’s face, close enough to still feel Xander’s warm breath, and he stared into his Claimed’s brown eyes, his hands buried in the thick waves of his hair, holding him steady. “Be careful,” he mouthed, shaking him just a little for emphasis, and Xander nodded.

“Chains?” he reminded Spike silently and Spike nodded, swooping in for another kiss, this one as slow and tender as the first had been quick and hard.

Oh, hell, he couldn’t talk sense into Xander when he had his voice. Not like he was going to be able to do it now.

Mrs. Olsen greeted him at the door with a warm smile but the strain that was beginning to tell on all of them as the town-wide silence stretched on had left its mark in the shadows under her eyes. Unable to say anything to reassure her, Xander impulsively gave her a hug.

Mrs. Olsen gave him a surprisingly strong hug in return before stepping back so he could enter the house.

Xander quickly wrote a note. How are you holding up?

Mrs. Olsen shrugged, making a waggling motion with her hand.

Well, so-so was about the best any of them could claim today. It was surprising how quickly the silence had become oppressive, weighing on everyone’s nerves. It seemed like everyone in town was either so depressed they’d retreated to their beds or else their nerves were jangling until they just wanted to fight someone, anyone. Of course, from the line outside the liquor store before the police had forced the store to close, some were choosing a third option for dealing.

Fortunately, Xander was at the Olsens’ house as the bearer of good news. Sort of.

We think we know what’s causing this, he wrote. Where’s Mr. Olsen? We’re gonna need help.

Giles had found the answer this morning. When Xander had arrived at his apartment with Spike’s information, he learned that Giles had found the answer in, of all the crazy places, a book of fairy tales. Granted, the fairy tales in Giles’ book weren’t the modern, Disney-ized stories. The book he had shown Xander had been seriously old and conspicuously lacking in cute, talking animals. The stories were heavy on blood and guts and people getting their just deserts in really gruesome ways. The Gentlemen were an old story about monsters who come to a town and steal everyone’s voices,
then collect the living hearts from seven people. In the fairy tale, a young princess - Xander had wondered idly as he read why it was always a princess and never the princess’ scullery maid who saved the day - screams and kills the monsters.

Given the headlines in the newspaper this morning and what Olivia had seen outside the window last night, the story fit all too well. According to the paper, there had been two murders in town last night and both victims had had their hearts removed. If the fairy tale was right and The Gentlemen needed to collect seven hearts, they would most likely be out again tonight looking for more victims. Unfortunately, the book was seriously lacking in details like how The Gentlemen managed to steal the voices and why the princess had apparently conveniently not lost hers. Not to mention what they wanted with seven hearts.

Giles hadn’t been sure where Spike’s “half-mummy, half-lunatic” creatures fit in to the picture but had agreed that it was unlikely that two unconnected groups of monsters were in town at the same time, both unable to be hurt by any conventional means. Which was why Xander was currently in charge of rounding up a posse to deal with the things.

With Giles’ warning that the stories said that The Gentlemen couldn’t be killed except by a human scream, Xander had a feeling the bag of axes and swords he’d carried over to Giles’ this morning was going to prove useless. They would have to rely on the ropes and chains he’d brought in the second bag, using them to restrain the things until they could find a way to get their voices back. Actually, he was hoping that with the new information, either Giles or Mr. Olsen’s researchers would be able to come up with some way to get their voices back. Killing someone by screaming at the top of his lungs sounded like a really satisfying plan right now.

The humans and able-to-pass for humans met up at Giles’ apartment an hour before sunset. Spike and the more obvious demons were traveling through the tunnels and would meet them at sunset in the park two blocks from the old Courthouse. Mr. Olsen had arranged for a couple of people to keep an eye on the building during the day but based on the last two nights, The Gentlemen didn’t move until well after midnight and they were hoping to be able to contain them inside the old Courthouse until they could figure out how to kill them. So far, it seemed they’d been right. The people watching had been instructed to call to alert them with a pre-arranged number of rings and their phones had remained silent throughout the day.

Despite knowing who was responsible, they were no closer to finding a solution to getting their voices back than they had ever been. Still, they had almost 20 fighters and Xander was fairly confident that they would outnumber The Gentlemen and their lunatic sidekicks.

Looking around the group in Giles’ living room, Xander couldn’t help being reminded of graduation. Most of the people there had been at graduation, which was both reassuring and worrisome. Not everyone had survived graduation and he prayed that they wouldn’t lose anyone tonight. He really missed Sgt. Morgan’s calm presence but the military base was under strict quarantine and Sgt. Morgan hadn’t been able to leave.

Giles’ had been keeping watch out the window and now signaled that it was time. The sun was almost down and they needed to leave now to rendezvous with Spike and the others. Taking a deep, steadying breath, Xander picked up his bag and headed out behind Giles, hearing the whisper of cloth and the muffled clank of weapons behind him as the others followed suit.

Spike swung his axe, using the back side of the weapon, slamming it sideways against the
creature’s side. Experience had quickly proved that blunt instruments were more effective than blades against the things and Spike had reluctantly given up his plan to hack the things to bits. Their flesh was resistant to blades but they could be knocked off their feet and temporarily put out of the fight with blunt instruments. All of the fighters with them had quickly grasped that fact and an all-out battle was currently raging inside the old building, as bodies were slammed into walls and thrown across rooms. Despite the racket of splintering wood and of blows connecting with flesh, the fight was eerily silent, completely devoid of the typical yells and grunts that normally accompanied battle.

They outnumbered the things and Xander’s plan to neutralize them was slowly working. Three or four fighters would gang up on a single creature until they were able to pin it down through sheer numbers and wrap sufficient lengths of rope and chain around it to restrain it. Even then, the damn things proved remarkably resilient, flopping about and getting into everyone’s way as they struggled to get free. The first one had gotten free but they had learned from their mistake, and now they were wrapping them in a ludicrous number of restraints and taking the time to drag the tied up creature to the wall where they wound the excess lengths of chains through sufficient nails and boards to hold the thing in place.

The Gentlemen themselves had hovered - literally - on the edges of the fight. The damn things were a menace, gliding up behind fighters occupied by their minions and stabbing them with the razor sharp scalpels they had produced from old fashioned doctor’s bags. The perpetually grinning skeletons would then drift back, leaving their minions to follow up with the wounded fighter. Fortunately, the scalpels were too small to kill with a single blow and for the most part, the fighters were ignoring The Gentlemen. They’d learned the hard way that the well-dressed skeletons were too quick, gliding away from attacks and making their attackers chase them around the room in a futile dance as their minions redoubled their efforts to keep the fighters away from their masters. Despite the way they seemed to drift, their feet hovering a few inches above the floor, they could move remarkably quickly out of danger. Having learned the uselessness of trying to attack the Gentlemen while the minions were active, the fighters were now concentrating their efforts on the remaining minions and doing their best to avoid the skeletal figures.

It was hard to adjust strategy in the middle of battle when you couldn’t yell orders and suggestions to your allies. Bad enough he couldn’t taunt his opponents in his usual fashion but they were taking too many casualties, too many of the fighters were going down, at least temporarily, as the Gentlemen moved up unseen behind them. They couldn’t keep on ignoring them like this, they needed to do something about the drifting figures with their little scalpels that slid so easily into flesh.

Spike nearly lost it when he realized that Xander had seen the problem and apparently decided to appoint himself the defender of the other fighters, stationing himself between the Gentlemen and the groups of fighters and doing his level best to ward them off. Xander had long since abandoned his axe in favor of a length of pipe he’d picked up inside the building. He was swiping at the Gentlemen with it now, concentrating more on keeping them back than on actually connecting with them, the metal splitting the air as, over and over again, Xander flung himself between one of the shining scalpels and the unprotected back of a fighter, leaving himself open as he defended everyone else.

When this was over, Spike was going to kill him.

As more and more of the minions were successfully restrained, the fight began turning in their favor and other fighters joined Xander, forming a line of defense between the knots of struggling fighters and the Gentlemen, using baseball bats, axes, and lengths of pipe and wood to fend off the grinning skeletons.
Spike finished wrapping a length of chain around a wildly struggling minion, restraining the flopping arms with the thick links while another fighter used the rags of a dustsheet to gag the thing. They’d learned the hard way that the damn things bit. He turned the thing over to the rest of the group and looked around. The line of defenders was thick enough by now that they’d been able to herd the Gentlemen away from the action. Only one minion was still in the process of being restrained and Spike was moving towards Xander, wondering where they were going to get enough chain to restrain the floating skeletons, when a sudden scream split the air.

It shredded the unnatural silence, slicing through it like a knife, and Spike whirled instinctively, seeing the Slayer standing by the window, screaming herself hoarse.

Something brushed past him and he spun back to face the Gentlemen, cursing himself for the lapse, and was surprised to realize he could hear the words coming out of his mouth. The Gentlemen were no threat to anyone right now. They were rigid in pain, hands raised to cover their ears, as their bodies stiffened and jerked. A quick glance at the minions showed them similarly affected, their bodies convulsing as the piercing scream went on and on. Suddenly, unbelievably, the Gentlemen’s heads began literally exploding. Everyone ducked instinctively as the heads splattered a stinking yellow pus around the room, coating the nearest fighters with gobs of the disgusting stuff. The Gentlemen’s bodies toppled like nine-pins, their minions simply collapsing like broken dolls as the Slayer let her scream die away.

There was a stunned silence. Even the splattered fighters seemed too shocked to move. Spike shook himself, glad he had been out of the range of the yellow goo, and said calmly: “Well, that was interesting.”
Chapter 19

“Not complaining or anything because talking is a good thing but why am I talking?”

Great, his first words in two days and he sounded like a gibbering idiot. Maybe he was better off without his voice.

“Nice lungs, Slayer.” Spike raised a sardonic eyebrow in Buffy’s direction. “Thought my head was going to explode if you kept it up any longer.”

“Hey, so not my fault that those things can only be killed by screaming. I don’t make the rules,” Buffy defended herself.

Taleea, the half-Ferschiff demon, laughed. “Whatever works,” she said philosophically, her claws retracting as she relaxed from battle readiness. “I for one am grateful they are dead.”

There was a general murmur of agreement and, now that the tension had relaxed, those who had been splattered with the smelly yellow remains of The Gentlemen were making complaining noises and peeling off outer layers of clothes.

Spike drifted over to Xander. “Smell worse than a Groymin, pet. Gonna have to burn those.”

“I agree.” Xander gave a disgusted shiver as he looked down at himself. He tugged off his jacket and tossed it into an empty corner. “Buffy? How did you get your voice back?”

Buffy gestured towards the small table with the jars of hearts sitting on it. Xander fought back the nausea that rose at the sight of the bloody organs filling the jars and looked away hurriedly.

“Our voices were apparently stored in that box.”

Curious, Xander couldn’t resist taking a second look, letting his eyes flit quickly past the gory sample jars to a small, carved wooden box with the lid open. He boggled. “You just opened the lid…?”

“Yep, and hey presto, instant voice refund.” Buffy grinned, obviously pleased with herself.

“How did you know?” As far as Xander could tell, there was nothing about the box to suggest it was anything special.

Buffy gave him a wry look. “Remember the little girl in my dream? She was holding the box.”

Ok, maybe he was going to have to dial back on his complaints about the uselessness of visions and mystic dreams. “Not bad.” He looked around the group, relieved that there weren’t any obvious injuries. “Is everyone ok?”

All of them were going to be stiff and sore and limping tomorrow but, thankfully, no one was seriously hurt. Xander himself was thinking longingly of a long hot shower to get the smell off, followed by a long hot tub to soak his muscles in and he could tell the others were having similar thoughts.

He didn’t know what to say. Thanking them felt almost like an insult - like he was implying that the others were only there as a favor to them, the real fighters against evil. Like saying that their group were the real players and the others were just hobbyists and that hadn’t been true in a long
time. The demon community had become an indispensable part of their group, filling a crucial role in the ongoing struggle to keep things under control in the town.

Unable to think of the right words, Xander mustered a weary grin and settled on: “Drinks on me at Tashi’s on Saturday,” he promised and got a laugh and a couple of mock cheers as the group began descending the staircase, all of them intent on going home, getting cleaned up and going to bed.

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“Bloody hell, now what?”

Spike pulled a pillow over his head, annoyed at having been woken up and did his best to ignore the earthquake that was shaking the apartment. It wasn’t a serious quake, just a trembler that rattled the dishes and rocked the chairs for a minute. Still, he kept a wary ear out for structural damage - he wasn’t looking to spend the day hiding under the covers if the shutters broke loose.

Nothing so dramatic happened. The earth stopped shaking and Spike shut his eyes against the ungodly mid-morning hour, determined to go back to sleep again, out of sorts because he was alone in the bed.

Despite how tired he’d been last night, Xander had set the alarm and gone to work this morning. He’d given Spike an apologetic kiss, explaining that, after losing two days of work due to the enforced quarantine, his boss wouldn’t accept anything less than a notarized death certificate as an excuse for not being at the job site. He’d given Spike’s staying hands a playful smack and slipped out of bed, showering quickly before heading out the door with the sun still barely over the horizon.

He really hated Xander’s job. It took him away from Spike for too many hours every day. ‘Course, he had to admit that Xander never complained about Spike’s responsibilities at the Court. That was different though. He was Master of the Hellmouth. Xander was his Claimed and not a bleedin’ day laborer.

Spike pitched the pillow across the room and scowled at the world in general. How the hell had they’d gotten here anyway? When he and Xander were together, everything was right with his world. It was these separations that were the problem and he needed to put a stop to it.

A reluctant grin creased his face as he thought of Xander’s reaction to Spike laying down the law and insisting Xander behave like a normal Claimed human.

Right. That’s how they’d gotten here. He wasn’t willing to force Xander to do things that would make him miserable. Stalemate.

He put the issue aside, shoving it to the back of his mind. He’d be bored silly in a week by a typical Claimed human anyway. Xander’s stubbornness and loyalty and misplaced bravery kept Spike on his toes. Arguing with Xander, training with him, laughing with him, watching him mature and develop had brought more joy to Spike’s unlife than he would have ever believed possible a few short years ago and that far outweighed the desire to keep Xander with him every minute like he was a typical Claimed human. Xander was as unique a Claimed as Spike was among Master Vampires. They suited each other.

The Court was quiet, the vampires long since asleep. Spike had gone downstairs and lifted the lock down last night, shortly after he and Xander had gotten home, warning the minions sternly to keep a low profile for the next couple of nights.
The town was still crawling with police and soldiers, both the ones from the town and outsiders sent in to enforce the quarantine, bad enough that the more obvious demons among the fighters had ended up taking the tunnels back to their homes. There had been a few sightings of the soldiers in the tunnel systems in the past weeks but they were relatively rare. Like most humans, the soldiers apparently disliked the tunnel systems with their perpetual dampness and the myriad foul odors. Spike wasn’t fond of them himself but he wasn’t human squeamish, having the advantage of not having to breathe and therefore being able to avoid the worst of the smells that permeated the tunnels.

After two nights of idleness, the Court minions had poured out of the doors of the factory like school kids at recess. Spike had met briefly with his Lieutenants, pleased to learn that there had been no problems in his absence. He’d told them little more than that he’d dealt with the problem, which they’d assumed anyway since their voices had returned. He hadn’t felt it necessary to mention that he’d had help in killing The Gentlemen. None of the others who’d helped him cared what the Court thought and it was better for his image as Master not to share the credit.

Returning to the apartment after dismissing his Lieutenants, letting them know they’d done well, he’d found Xander, clean and still damp, sound asleep in their bed. Spike hadn’t been tired and had considered waking Xander up, preferably in a way that would leave his boy aroused and eager for more, but, on second thought, had let Xander sleep, knowing he was exhausted and sore from the fight. Wrapping himself around the warm body, Spike drank in the smell of his boy, grateful that the yellow pus had washed out without leaving its stink behind. Head pressed against Xander’s back, he’d let the steady rhythm of his Claimed’s heartbeat lull him into sleep.

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“Come on, it’ll be fun,” Buffy coaxed. “Porter Dorm is THE party dorm on campus. Besides, I want you to meet Riley.”

“Who?” Xander asked absently, most of his attention on his lunch. Buffy had called during his lunch break and he was trying to both eat and talk without being incredibly rude about it. He suspected he wasn’t pulling it off but he didn’t want to hang up, he was enjoying talking with Buffy instead of exchanging notes like they had for the last couple of days.

“Riley. I told you about him at Thanksgiving,” she reminded him.

“Oh, right.” Xander didn’t want to admit he’d just labeled the man Buffy had talked about as ‘New Guy’ in his head, waiting to see evidence that the relationship would last longer than a week before bothering to learn his name. Buffy’s track record with men sucked.

“No, Ramon’s got it. I checked with Giles and he’s sure it was just an earthquake, nothing portent-y, so I’m free to party. You’ll come, right?”

“Not tonight. We’re working late cleaning up, the quake did some damage at the site.” Nothing major but it was a handy, and mostly true, excuse.

He could see Buffy’s mock scowl over the phone. “One of these days, you’re going to have to stop making excuses, Xander. Dorm parties are fun.”

Xander couldn’t resist. “Tell you what, bring Riley to Tashi’s bar on Saturday. You can introduce him to the whole gang at once.”

“Yeah, that’s going to happen. It took a ‘laryngitis outbreak’ to get him to kiss me, he’s so not
“Finally got some action out of him, did you?” He vaguely remembered Buffy complaining that she and the new guy hadn’t seemed to be able to get past the talking stage. Although, he couldn’t help thinking that if the new guy had bought the authorities’ laryngitis explanation, he wasn’t very bright.

“And how,” Buffy answered. Xander could almost hear her licking the cream off her whiskers. Fortunately, she remembered that she was talking to a guy and left it at that. She’d learned the hard way that too many girly details about her love life just caused Xander to retaliate by describing his and Spike’s activities. Buffy claimed she wasn’t old enough to hear about their ‘escapades’ as she put it.

He must have lost track of the conversation for a minute because Buffy sighed. “I should let you go, I can tell you’re busy.”

“Sorry, you caught me at lunch. But have I thanked you for the fact that I’m talking today?”

She laughed. “My pleasure. Tell you what, I’ll let you off the hook about the party this time, mister, but you are going to come to the next party I invite you to.”

“I will,” Xander promised, although he didn’t really want to go to the campus parties Buffy had been inviting him to. He suspected he wouldn’t fit in and, while he didn’t really care what a bunch of college students he didn’t know thought of him, he didn’t particularly want to spend an evening getting drunk and defending himself for not going to college.

Hanging up, he stared into space, chewing thoughtfully on his sandwich. He’d met several of Buffy’s friends and they were ok, but they all seemed to start out talking down to him unconsciously, as if he had to be stupid because he was a townie and not a student. Most of them got over it when they learned he could string a coherent sentence together but mostly they talked about classes and assignments and dorm life, topics he couldn’t really contribute to. Probably he should just be grateful that he and Buffy had remained friends but then there were a lot of things she could talk to Xander about that she couldn’t discuss with any of the other students.

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“Thanks, Mr. Olsen, I’ll head over there and see what’s up. Keep looking.”

Xander hung up the phone and looked at Spike. “Turns out the Word of Valios isn’t a book after all. Mr. Okolo had heard of it. He says it’s a talisman. Last he knew, it was owned by a sorcerer in England.” Once again, Mr. Okolo had come through for them. It was great having a nearly immortal demon on their side.

Giles had called this morning to fill them in. At the Porter dorm party Xander hadn’t gone to, a student had been killed. His blood had been drained and mystical symbol carved into his chest. Giles had found a reference to the symbol and the ritual, which required a sacrifice and three ingredients: the blood of a man, the bones of a child, and something called the Word of Valios. Giles had been seriously freaked, saying that the ritual was intended to open the Hellmouth. Xander was completely on board with stopping that from happening - he still had nightmares from the last time he’d seen it open.

“Well, that puts it nicely out of reach. Sounds like we can knock off and stop worrying about this ritual.”
“Unless it was the first thing they picked up before coming to town,” Xander pointed out gloomily. “Mr. Olsen said he couldn’t reach Giles or Buffy.”

“And you want to head over and see if he’s alright,” Spike guessed.

“Want to come?” The sun had set not long ago.

“Sure. Need to give the Watcher a piece of my mind for sending you on a wild goose chase looking for a book that isn’t a book.”

“It’s possible I might mention it myself.” Giles had asked Xander to check out the museum book archives on the off chance the Word of Valios was there. Granted, it wasn’t an unreasonable assumption that something with that name was a book but it had apparently been a complete waste of four hours in a room filled with musty, really dull books.

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“Wait up, luv.”

Spike put a staying hand on Xander’s arm and Xander obediently halted, knowing Spike had sensed something. Spike was listening intently, his whole body tense as he tried to pin down what had alerted him.

“Watcher’s hurt,” he reported. “Something’s been and gone. Can’t quite place the smell but it’s familiar.”

Xander tried to hurry forward and Spike tightened his grip, keeping Xander at his side as they cautiously approached the sunken courtyard to the Watcher’s ground floor flat. As they got closer, Spike was positive the attackers were gone and let Xander run ahead of him.

Typically, Xander sprinted ahead anxiously, barely remembering to check that the flat was clear before entering through the kicked open door. Spike shook his head. He would never be able to convince Xander to be cautious when someone he cared about was hurt.

The Watcher was lying on the floor of the living room, books and knick-knacks scattered around him, the furniture tossed about, a few of the chairs broken. It looked like the Watcher had put up a good fight and Xander was already kneeling by his side, checking him carefully for injuries.

“Spike, call 911. He’s hurt.”

“It’s my fault.” The Watcher stirred and tried to sit up, blood covering the side of his face and dripping steadily onto the ground from the claw marks that had sunk deeply into his cheek and shoulder.

“Don’t move, Giles. An ambulance is on the way.” Xander looked around at Spike impatiently and saw that the phone had been torn out of the wall. He yanked his cell phone out and tossed it to Spike who fielded it neatly, using it to call 911 as instructed, feeling vaguely embarrassed as he did so. Calling 911 was something that vampires simply didn’t do.

“The Word of Valios is the name of a talisman, not a book,” Giles told them, fighting back the pain. “I had it here.”

“We know….” Xander began then stopped short as the Watcher’s words sank in. “You had it here?” Despite his surprise, his hands remained steady, supporting the Watcher as he struggled to sit up,
“I bought it at a sorcerer's estate sale. I really only glanced at it once. I thought it was a knock off.”
Giles’ faltering voice was full of self-recrimination.

Spike had been looking around as he listened and now he bent down to scoop up a book off the floor, looking at the marked page. There was a drawing of the demon the Slayer had seen on patrol last night. The one collecting the bones of a child from a crypt, sending the Watcher into a tizzy, saying the end of the world was near and the demon was planning on opening the Hellmouth.

“Vahrall demon, eh?” he commented. “Nasty buggers. Big on religious mumbo-jumbo. Always chanting rituals and sacrificing things, trying to bring back the good old days. Dead boring really.”

“The good old days?” Xander asked, leaving Giles propped up against the couch and heading for the kitchen.

“When demons outnumbered humans 10 billion to, well, none really.” Spike grinned cheerfully at Xander’s appalled expression.

“Spike’s right,” Giles said faintly. “They're on their way to perform the sacrifice now.”

“With all the ingredients to open the Hellmouth,” Xander finished for him, returning to his side with a couple of dishtowels and an ice tray.

“Yes.”

“Then we stop them.”

Buffy’s voice came from the open doorway. She had obviously overheard enough to know what had happened and was looking grimly determined. “We should be able to get there before they finish the ritual. Are you guys in?” Her harsh look softened as her worried glance went to Giles. “Will you be ok?”

“Yes. Go, stop them.” Giles reached up and took the makeshift icepack from Xander’s hand. “Go,” he insisted. “The ambulance will be here in a minute.”

Spike strode over to Giles’ weapons chest and selected an axe which he tossed to Xander, who caught it easily. “We’re in.” Ordinarily, he loved a good apocalypse but they were hard on humans. Plus, he hadn’t forgotten what had tried to come out of the Hellmouth when the Sisterhood of Jhe had opened it. He had a score to settle with that little beastie. He smirked in satisfaction, remembering the bomb that had torn the thing to bits. He’d just have to be satisfied with taking it out on the thing’s relatives.

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“That’s it, we’re out of here.”

Spike grabbed Xander’s arm and began pulling him bodily from the shaking ruins of the old high school. The second demon had just fought clear and made a run for it, dropping into the Hellmouth with the talisman clutched firmly in one clawed hand. The earthquake was exponentially stronger this time than when the first one had dived into the hole. Beams were crashing down and the building didn’t look like it was going to remain standing much longer.

“Spike! What about Buffy?”

“She’ll be fine,” Spike answered brusquely. “But the sooner we get their little toys away from the great bloody hole in the ground, the less chance there is of something going wrong.” He hefted the
little sack containing the child’s bones that they’d taken from the third demon, the one Buffy was now fighting. The first demon had had a little jar of blood and his self-sacrifice had clued them in to what the “Sacrifice of the Three” really meant. Not three others but the demons themselves.

“Right.” Reluctantly, Xander realized there was nothing they could do. Buffy’s boyfriend had better be up to the task of getting her out of here. He stopped resisting the pull of Spike’s grip on his arm and started running, jumping over fallen beams and ducking as plaster and wood broke free from the collapsing ceiling, raining down around them.

The town really needed to condemn this place, he thought. The whole building is going to come down sooner rather than later. Besides, covering the Hellmouth with a nice thick layer of concrete seemed like a good plan to him, especially after this week’s shenanigans.

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They waited anxiously near the front entrance. At least Xander did. Spike wasn’t particularly worried. The Slayer was a survivor, she’d be fine.

It wasn’t long before he heard the sound of two sets of footsteps approaching. “Told you, luv,” he said comfortably to Xander. “Here she comes.” He cocked his head, listening. “Someone’s with her.”

“Her new boyfriend,” Xander filled in and Spike made a noncommittal noise. He’d been peripherally aware that someone else had entered the ruined library and joined in the fight, but it had obviously not been an ally of the demons they were fighting and Spike’s attention had remained on demons. The man hadn’t really registered.

As the Slayer approached, Spike stood up from where he had been idly leaning against the wall. Xander had point-blank refused to leave the building once the shaking had stopped until he learned if Buffy was ok. Spike had refused to let him return to the unstable library so they had compromised by waiting in a more stable area not far from the front doors. “Something’s up,” he told Xander. “Slayer’s got her knickers in a knot over something.”

Xander had dropped the axe back in the library when they’d figured out the Vahrall demons weren’t interested in fighting and their goal had changed from killing the demons to taking their trophies away and preventing them from jumping into the open crack in the floor that was the Hellmouth. Now he straightened up and readied himself in case there was a problem. The Slayer wasn’t running or fighting, but Spike could smell her nervousness and her voice sounded tense as she talked to the man with her.

The Slayer appeared around the corner, a large sandy-haired man at her side, and Spike found himself growling almost before he registered that he recognized the uniform the man was wearing.

“Riley, this is Xander and Spike,” the Slayer began nervously but Spike was beyond listening.

“YOU BASTARD!”

Spike was on the man before any of them saw him move and the force of the impact sent them both crashing to the ground. Pain seared across his consciousness as they tumbled over in a tangle of limbs and he screamed involuntarily, rolling away from the soldier as the familiar pain tore through him, leaving him helpless on the ground, unable to see, unable to fight, unable to do anything but suffer the punishing agony.

When the pain retreated enough to allow him awareness of his surroundings again, the first thing
he heard was Xander’s anxious voice.

“Spike! Are you ok? Talk to me.”

He sat up with Xander’s assistance, then climbed slowly to his feet. Despite the trembling in his muscles from the debilitating pain he was not going to stay down like a dog in front of the enemy.

“What’s going on?” Buffy was helping the soldier to his feet and he was staring wide-eyed at Spike.

“Hostile 17.”

Soldier-boy sounded stunned. Xander’s head snapped around and he stared in shock at the Slayer’s boy toy. “You’re one of them,” he whispered, barely audibly.

Xander moved so quickly he left Spike staggering at the sudden loss of support. His fist connected with the man’s face and the soldier stumbled backwards, caught completely off guard, knocked off his feet for a second time by the force of the blow. Xander pounced on top of him, holding him with one hand fisted in the front of his vest and punching the man over and over again until the Slayer finally broke out of her frozen shock and grabbed his arm as he lifted it to strike yet another blow.

“Xander, stop!”

Xander snarled at her and jerked free but the distraction had already done its damage. As he turned back the soldier blocked his next blow, then threw himself forward, grappling with Xander. The two wrestled, muscles straining as each tried to gain advantage over the other, then the soldier succeeded in shoving Xander back and off him. Xander rolled with the force of the shove as Spike had taught him, using the momentum to disengage and regain his feet.

“Knock it off, both of you!” the Slayer yelled, just as the soldier aimed a solid punch at Xander’s head, which Xander barely avoided by dodging backwards.

Spike roared in fury and charged the soldier, beyond caring about the consequences as the man attacked his Claimed. The crunch of their bodies slamming into the wall was completely overwritten by the agony that flared instantly, sending him crumpling helplessly to the ground, unaware that he was screaming and mindlessly clutching his head in a desperate attempt to contain the pain.

The pain faded and Spike found himself held in Xander’s arms. The Slayer’s angry voice sounded in the background, arguing with her soldier boy. He could smell Xander’s anger and fear and feel the tenseness in his muscles, even as he cradled Spike protectively.

“They’re nothing but dangerous animals,” the soldier was saying in clipped, angry tones. “Hostile 17 is an escaped government prisoner and I am taking him back into custody.”

Before Spike could find his voice to tell him exactly how unlikely that was, Xander’s furious voice sounded over his head: “You’ll take him over my dead body.” His arms tightened around Spike and, obviously sensing that Spike had recovered, Xander pulled them both to their feet, using the wall for support as they rose. “We’re leaving and if you make one move to follow us, I swear to God I will kill you.”

“Xander, go. I’ll handle this,” the Slayer said, blocking the move the soldier made towards some kind of weapon. “Riley, we need to talk. Now.”
It went against every instinct he had but Spike let Xander pull him away, backing them slowly down the corridor towards the doors, keeping a wary eye on soldier-boy the entire time. The Slayer moved to stand between them and the frustrated soldier, blocking him from pursuing and Xander picked up the pace of their retreat.

What Spike wouldn’t give for the chance to tie soldier-boy up and torture him until he told Spike exactly what had been done to him and how to fix it. For now, no matter how much he hated it, he was going to have to wait and see how the Slayer handled things.
Chapter 20

As they stepped out of the crumbling high school and into the night air, Spike shrugged off Xander’s supporting arm, not wanting to appear injured or in need of help in case anyone was watching. He scanned the area for threats and relaxed slightly when he sensed no trace of anyone else in the immediate vicinity. Breaking his own rule about smoking around Xander, he reached into his pocket for his cigarettes and lighter and lit up, taking a deep steadying drag, letting the warm, nicotine flavored smoke fill his empty lungs and calm him.

The Slayer knew. Or if she didn’t, she would soon. If she hadn’t figured it out for herself from what had just happened, her boy toy would be happy to fill her in on the details. Let her know that, in a fight with humans, ‘Hostile 17’ was weaker than the most pathetic day-old minion. Spike felt the impotent fury that he had struggled to control since his escape from the underground cell boiling up inside him again.

He took another deep drag, yellow eyes glaring into the night as his thoughts raced. He and the Slayer had a working relationship and he wasn’t worried about her attacking him but it stung that she knew about his weakness. She was close to being his equal, a fellow warrior, and it was humiliating that she knew that he had been taken out of the game so far as the soldiers went. She would regard him with contempt, with ridicule, or worse, with pity. Warriors judged each other based on strength and the Slayer would see him as weak now, an unreliable ally, unable to carry his fair share in a fight.

Scowling, Spike thought about what to do now, grateful for Xander’s continued silence as he walked beside him, giving Spike the time he needed to think. His options were non-existent. He couldn’t leave town - his only chance in finding out what had been done to him was with the people who had done it. He knew the face of one of his enemies now, a name, a lead to pursue, but what good did it do him when he couldn’t force them to tell him what they knew?

Should he even return to the factory? The Slayer knew where they lived. If she had let it slip to her boy toy, they could have soldiers at their apartment by dawn. That would put Xander in danger and expose Spike’s vulnerability to the Court, which would be fatal one way or another. He didn’t think the Slayer would deliberately put Xander in danger, but she didn’t always think things through and certainly not when she was in love. Angelus was unliving proof of that.

“Spike.”

Xander broke his long silence and Spike was glad for the chance to focus on something other than his own uselessly circling thoughts. “Yeah, luv?”

Xander’s brows were knit together and he looked beyond worried, almost frantic. Only the fact that Spike had been lost in his own thoughts had kept him from sensing how nervous Xander was becoming.

“We shouldn’t go back to the apartment.” Spike smiled involuntarily, Xander’s thoughts had paralleled his own exactly. “Angel’s mansion is out since Buffy knows about it and the same goes for any of my friends, plus we can’t lead the soldiers to anyone not fully human. We should hole up tonight in a crypt and figure out what we’re going to do.”

“Bit over the top, don’t you think, luv?” It surprised him that Xander was that worried about the Slayer telling her soldier everything. Personally, he didn’t think she would have, not deliberately. Spike was more worried about what she might have let slip accidentally than that she would
deliberately sell them out.

“No, I don’t.” Xander answered flatly. He pulled out his cell phone and held it up in demonstration. “We’re dealing with the government, Spike. If Buffy’s boyfriend tells his superiors about you, it won’t take long for them to figure out that pulling Buffy’s phone records will lead them to me. What if they can trace the phone itself?”

Spike plucked the cell phone out of Xander’s hand and crushed it effortlessly, dropping the splintered pieces on the ground. “Problem solved.” He did the same with his own phone, the one Xander had bullied him into carrying everywhere after the week Spike had been held prisoner.

Xander gave him an exasperated look. “I wish it was that easy. You don’t exist officially in this town, Spike, but I do. My work; I’ve used both Giles’ apartment and my office as a mailing address, if they want to, they can find me. I don’t want to put you at risk, Spike. All it would take is one person following me back to the factory…”

“Xander, stop.” Spike needed to put an end to this because Xander’s next move was going to be saying he needed to leave to keep Spike safe. He flicked away his cigarette and put both hands on Xander’s shoulders, shaking him slightly until Xander looked at him, the first traces of panic lurking in the back of his brown eyes. “Only two humans in town know where our apartment is and they won’t betray you. Think about it, luv. The soldiers have been working this town for at least a couple of months, that base of theirs has been under construction for a lot longer, maybe years. You don’t build something like that overnight, especially in such complete secrecy that no word gets out. They’ve been planning this for a long time. If they had any idea what they’re doing, they’d have twigged the location of the Court a long time ago.”

The incipient panic in Xander’s eyes retreated under the weight of Spike’s logic and Spike moved his thumbs soothingly, the right one stroking over his Claim scar. Even through the material of Xander’s shirt, he could sense how faded the mark had become since he’d been unable to renew it and that thought added fuel to the anger still burning barely checked inside him. It felt like things were slipping away from him: Xander, his status as Master, his control over his Territory, and it was all he could do not to scream his fury into the night skies.

With an effort, he kept his voice reassuring and his touch gentle. “The soldiers aren’t trying to get information out of the demons they’re taking prisoner, Xander. Bloody idiots don’t give us credit for having enough intelligence even to be worth interrogating. We’re fine where we’re at. If they knew where the Court was, they would have tried to take it out already. Too many vampires living there for them to resist.”

Xander closed his eyes, his hands moving up to grip Spike’s arms as he leaned his forehead against Spike’s and stayed that way for a long moment. Spike waited, his own hands steady and comforting on Xander’s shoulders, until Xander’s heartbeat steadied and he lifted his head, his brown eyes calm and resolved. “What do we do now?”

“We go home.” He overrode Xander’s protest firmly. “Not running from those gits, luv. Not tuckin’ my tail between my legs and giving them the victory. If they want me, they’re going to have to come for me.” Still in his true face, his lips quirked up in a smile that held nothing of humor in it. “We’ll see what those blighters can do against nearly a hundred vampires.”

Xander’s jaw tightened and he nodded slowly, accepting Spike’s decision. Spike flung an arm around his boy’s shoulders and started walking home. Whatever was coming, they’d meet it side by side. This time, he wasn’t going to even try talking Xander into staying out of it.
“Xander, I’m so sorry. I swear, I only found out that Riley was one of the soldiers the night before last. We ran into each other on patrol when I was fighting the Volvo demon.” He shot her an exasperated look. Buffy’s habit of renaming demons to something easier to say didn’t exactly clarify her references, and she explained quickly: “the one stealing the bones of the child from the crypt.”

He suspected he wasn’t looking either amused or patient and she hurried on. “Anyway, Riley was out on patrol for the Initiative and saw me. He could tell I wasn’t just your average co-ed being attacked and he was wearing his soldier suit so everything kind of came out.”

“You should have told us,” he said accusingly. That was the thing he’d kept coming back to all night. Why hadn’t Buffy told them she knew one of the mysterious soldiers?

“I was going to,” she insisted. “But - Giles hurt, world ending - there wasn’t time. I never expected Riley to show up at the school and see you and Spike.”

Fair enough, there really hadn’t been much time and they had been in the middle of at least a minor apocalypse, but still… “So, what? Were you hoping we could all just be friends?” That came out more sarcastically than she probably deserved.

She gave him a tired look. “Xander, when we first met, I thought you were a complete loser.”

“Gee, thanks. And this is relevant, how?”

“Shut up and listen. You were running around, getting in everyone’s way, insisting on learning about demons and making friends with the scariest vampire in town. But, if you hadn’t gotten to know Spike and Mr. Olsen, I don’t know if we would have survived Angel losing his soul or Graduation.” Her eyes met his earnestly. “It taught me something. I’m not naïve enough to think that Spike and Riley could ever be friends but maybe we can be allies.” She gave him a lopsided smile. “After all, you made it work for me and Spike when we hated each other.”

It wasn’t the same and it worried him that she didn’t see that. He didn’t doubt Buffy’s sincerity. She was practically wringing her hands she was so upset, but he had less confidence in where she stood in this war. He didn’t think that she would deliberately hurt Spike but she had been too much on the fence about the soldiers’ activities to make him sure about which way she would jump if it came to a choice between Spike and her boyfriend and his group.

Biting back the words he wanted to say, he settled for information. “The Initiative?” he asked pointedly, wanting to learn as much as possible about what she knew.

He’d rolled out of bed first thing this morning and left the apartment, calling Buffy from the phone booth at the donut shop halfway across town. He knew he was probably being paranoid, but he wasn’t taking any chances on her phone being tapped. He didn’t care how rude it was to call someone at 6:30 in the morning on a Saturday: he wanted an explanation of just what the hell Buffy thought she was doing and he wasn’t about to wait for a civilized hour. It was obvious that Buffy had been expecting the call, she’d agreed to meet him without a word of protest about the early hour. Twenty minutes later, they’d met on the lawn in front of the library, the area deserted at this time of the morning, giving them privacy and open space around them to be sure they wouldn’t be overheard.

Now Buffy just shrugged in answer to his question. “That’s what they call themselves but that’s about all I got out of him. He wouldn’t tell me anything else, he just kept saying it was classified. I think the only reason he told me that was because he thought it would be less conspicuous than having me keep calling them ‘the Monster Squad’.”
“How hard did you try?”

“I didn’t beat him up, if that’s what you’re asking,” she said flatly. “Xander, he’s a good guy and the Initiative are demon hunters, just like me. I really thought if we could all sit down and talk, we could work something out. I still think that. If Riley has a chance to get to know you and Spike, he’ll understand that the Initiative needs to be more careful, that all demons aren’t the same, that they don’t all deserve to be killed on sight.”

Xander scowled, not liking the emphasis she put on the word “all”. “He’s a Nazi, Buffy. You don’t talk to Nazis, you fight them or you might as well join them.”

“He’s not a Nazi,” she flared.

“His group wants to exterminate demons, Buffy. They’re experimenting on them in that underground base of theirs without the slightest interest in sorting out who’s guilty and who’s not. They’re doing it because they’re not human and not for any other reason.”

“Riley’s a soldier, not a scientist. There’s no way he’s part of any experiments. He’s fighting demons just like I do,” she repeated. “They’re amateurs and they’re screwing up but that doesn’t make them Nazis. If you give them a chance, I think we could be allies,” she said persuasively. “We have a lot of the same goals. The Initiative is just trying to control the threat demons pose. I know they’ve made mistakes but we can teach them, show them that there are a lot of demons they don’t have to worry about. And frankly, we could use the help. You know how close it’s been sometimes - the Master, the Mayor, the Sisterhood of Jhe - We could have lost any of those battles and been responsible for the world ending. We could have used a bunch of trained, heavily armed soldiers as back up.”

The anxiety that she hid so well most of the time, the fear that she wouldn’t be good enough, strong enough, fast enough to stop the latest threat was showing openly for once. Buffy had had the weight of the world on her shoulders since she was 15 and sometimes that burden came close to crushing her. How tempting it must be for her to see a chance to share the burden with an official group assigned to help her. Volunteers could disappear as fast as they had signed up, friends could die or move away, but the government would be there.

Which just went to show that Buffy was a little too enamored with the idea of having professional backup to have taken ten minutes to think this through. Xander rubbed his eyes tiredly, he hadn’t had enough sleep to cope with this conversation. He’d spent most of the night staring at the ceiling, aware of Spike lying equally awake beside him, unable to sleep because of the gnawing anxiety that Spike wouldn’t survive the looming confrontation with the soldiers.

“How do you really think the military is ever going to see this as anything other than a war? Us against them?”

“When Riley has time to think it over for awhile…” she began, then hesitated. “I admit, he’s pretty upset right now but I know him. He’ll think things through and see how this will benefit all of us.” Buffy chewed her lip, her gaze falling from Xander’s for the first time as she looked away uncomfortably. “I… I know what they did to Spike, Xander. That he can’t hurt humans now.” He took a half step forward and she held up a hand to stop him. “I don’t know what they did exactly or how to reverse it, Riley went all classified on me when I asked. I didn’t know. Honestly, I didn’t take that part of Spike’s story very seriously.” Her gaze swung back to him suddenly, her eyes intent. “It would have helped if I’d known what really happened,” she said, her voice just short of accusing.

“Spike didn’t want anyone to know,” Xander said unapologetically.
“So, that’s it? If Spike doesn’t want us to know something, you don’t tell us? It could have made a
difference. Xander.”

“We made the decision not to tell anyone together. I wouldn’t have allowed it to endanger anyone,”
Xander said flatly, refusing to feel any guilt. He’d already considered this from every angle and he
wasn’t going to second guess their decision now.

“Xander, if I had known, it would have changed things.”

“How?” he challenged. “You knew the Initiative was experimenting on demons, we even told you
they’d made a vampire unable to hurt humans.”

“You didn’t tell me it was Spike.”

And that was the answer. Buffy made exceptions for the people in her circle but not for anyone
outside it. An anonymous vampire wasn’t going to arouse any sympathy but Spike would have.
Buffy hadn’t cared about the imprisonment and experimentation in anything more than an abstract
way because she didn’t know anyone who’d been affected. Or thought she hadn’t. If she’d known
it was Spike they’d experimented on, she would have been more concerned.

“Well, now you know. Do you think Riley is going to tell us how to fix it?” he demanded, already
knowing the answer. He read the answer in her eyes before she looked away again.

“I don’t know,” she said after a long moment and Xander’s jaw tightened, looking down at her
bent head and averted gaze. Spike hadn’t said anything but Xander knew he’d hated the fact that
Buffy now knew what had been done to him. As the Slayer, Buffy tended to see things in coldly
practical terms: could it help her do her job? If the answer was yes, the person or thing got a lot of
attention and respect. When the answer was no, she tended to be dismissive. She’d lost a lot of that
attitude with the start of college. She had a lot of friends now that didn’t know she was the Slayer
and a lot more freedom from the nightly routine of patrolling. With Willow in England and Xander
a townie, she’d had to reach beyond her small circle of insiders for friends. As just Buffy, she was
a lot less judgmental and accepting than she was as the Slayer.

He shook his head, this wasn’t getting him anywhere. And right now, he needed the Slayer’s cold
calculation of risks, not Buffy’s longing for a normal life complete with Teutonic boyfriend.

“Why do you think they’re doing it?”

“What?” Buffy looked up at him, confused by the non-sequitor.

“Why do you think the Initiative is trying to control demons?” he spelled out.

“To stop them from hurting people, of course.” Buffy said as if it was the most obvious thing in the
world.

“Really? You think the government is going to spends thousands, maybe tens of thousands of
dollars on every two-bit vamp when it takes a twenty cent piece of wood to solve the problem
permanently?” Xander shook his head in disbelief. “Why would they bother? What are they going
to do with the vampires when they’re through with them - get them jobs as night watchmen? Use
your head, Buffy. The government isn’t doing these experiments because they’re trying to reform
demons and turn them into upstanding, tax paying citizens. They’re testing hardware on live
subjects that no one cares about, that’s the only explanation that makes sense. So the real question
is, who or what are they really trying to control and what exactly are they trying to get those people
to do for them?”
Buffy stared at him, disbelief slowly turning to doubt in her eyes. “You think they’re planning on using what they learn on people?”

“Maybe. Or maybe they’re trying to learn how to control demons so they can turn them into assassins or something.”

Buffy shook her head, like she was trying to reject what he was saying. “Come on, Xander. You’re sounding like you’ve watched too many episodes of the X-Files.”

“Then explain it to me. What did your boyfriend tell you about what he was doing that could explain what they’ve done to Spike? Why they would even want to do that to him?”

“He didn’t tell me anything really,” she admitted. “He can’t, it’s classified. But, Xander, you’re wrong. I know Riley. He wouldn’t be part of something like you’re talking about. He wouldn’t hurt peaceful demons, not if he knew they were harmless, much less humans.”

“How well can you possibly know him, Buffy? He’s been lying to you the entire time you’ve known him.”

“And I’ve been lying to him. It’s not like I told him I was the Slayer. Riley is a TA in my Psych class and I’ve known him since the first day of classes. I know him, Xander.”

“Buffy, it’s not the same thing. You’re a person who happens to be the Slayer. You don’t talk about what you do because you can’t. He’s a soldier, not a civilian. You know his cover, not him.”

“You’re wrong, Xander. It is the same. I’m the Slayer. That’s who I am all the time. I lie to everyone because I have to, but that doesn’t mean people who don’t know I’m the Slayer don’t know what kind of person I am.”

“Maybe,” he said grudgingly, not really convinced. “But you don’t imprison demons and experiment on them. He may not be doing it himself but he knows it’s happening.”

Buffy looked uncomfortable and Xander could tell that that had hit home. There was a long silence and Xander became aware that the area was no longer as deserted. Early morning joggers, no one jogged after sunset or before the sun was fully up in Sunnydale, were passing by on the sidewalks and customers were coming and going from the bakery across the street.

“What do we do now?” she asked finally.

“You tell me. What’s Riley’s position on you knowing ‘Hostile 17’?” He used the soldiers’ term bitterly.

“I’m not sure. He said he needed time to think. I told him that Spike has been helping me and that he doesn’t kill humans, and hasn’t for a long time, because of you.” She hesitated. “I don’t think they knew that Spike could still hurt demons,” she said, making an apologetic gesture. “Sorry. He asked how Spike could possibly still help me and I told him about the Gentlemen. Apparently, whatever they did to Spike was supposed to make him unable to hurt ‘any living thing’ as he put it.”

Xander clenched his fists, fighting against the rage that flooded him at Buffy’s words. What they’d done to Spike was bad enough but it was understandable if the plan was to make a vampire harmless to humans. The idea that their actual goal had been to make Spike completely helpless against everything filled him with an inchoate fury that left him shaking with the need to strike out. It was clear the soldiers didn’t view Spike or any of their other captives as anything other than vicious animals that they had carte blanche to treat however they pleased.
Whether through malfunction or oversight, Spike had escaped that fate by the skin of his teeth. Without that bit of luck, Spike would have been left helpless, prey to every demon in town that wanted to take down the Master of the Hellmouth. That thought hardened the resolve in Xander’s heart. The Initiative had to be stopped. Spike was right, they couldn’t leave town. They were going to find out what had been done to Spike and fix it, then they were going to bring their underground base down around their ears.

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Nothing had really been resolved. Buffy promised to keep them posted on anything she learned and Xander hoped she hadn’t just dismissed his concerns. With luck, Buffy would think about what he’d said and not hurry to jump on the Initiative bandwagon.

They’d parted on good terms and Xander just hoped it would stay that way. He really didn’t want to have to fight Buffy for all sorts of practical, as well as personal, reasons. He supposed it was possible that she could bring her boyfriend around but he was skeptical. Riley had seemed awfully by-the-book even in the two minutes of acquaintance they’d had. He might be a good guy but Xander wasn’t willing to bet he didn’t accept the government’s position that all demons were to be killed. He’d sure sounded like a true believer with his ‘dangerous animal’ remark.

It was almost 8 now and Giles tended to be an early riser. Xander turned his steps in the direction of the familiar apartment. He wanted to check that Giles was ok. The Watcher was tough but the Vahrall demon had left him fairly battered and between the surprise of finding out Buffy was dating one of the soldiers and Spike’s destruction of their cell phones, there hadn’t been a chance to check on him. Plus, the walk across town would give him a chance to cool the anger that still raged inside him. He didn’t want to lose the anger but he needed to control it until he could turn it loose on the Initiative.

Arriving at the apartment, he knocked quietly, belatedly realizing that Giles might be sleeping in given that he’d been injured yesterday. After a short pause, he heard movement inside and the door swung open.

“Hi…,” he broke off in surprise. “You’re not Giles.”

“No, I’m not.” The man was short and slender, with curly dark hair, an English accent and the wickedly sparkling eyes of an imp. “Ripper is a bit under the weather this morning, maybe you’d do better to come back later. Tomorrow, perhaps.”

“How is he?” Xander tried peering around the man to see into the apartment but the door wasn’t open far enough.

“He’ll survive. Ripper always does.”

Ripper. The name struck an uneasy chord in Xander. He’d heard someone calling Giles that before. The memory was hazy, accompanied by feelings of mild revulsion and strong embarrassment. Oh. Mrs. Summers had called Giles that while under the influence of the Band Candy. That was not a good association and it worried him that this guy was using the name. He’d never asked Giles, and certainly not Mrs. Summers, about the nickname. As far as he’d been concerned, the quicker they all forgot that night the better.

“How do you know Giles?” he asked suspiciously, casually wedging his foot in the door so it couldn’t be closed unexpectedly. The man blocking the door was making him decidedly uneasy and he wasn’t leaving until he was sure Giles was ok. The man saw the gesture and smirked knowingly.
“Oh, Ripper and I go way back,” he said, his voice filled with suggestive overtones.

“Ethan?” Giles’ voice sounded from inside the apartment. “Who is it?”

“He hasn’t introduced himself,” the man answered provocingly, not taking his eyes off Xander.

“It’s me, Giles,” Xander called inside. “Is everything ok?”

“Yes, Xander. Come in.”

Xander narrowed his eyes challengingly at the man, who hesitated, then shrugged, opening the door wider and stepping back.

Giles was on the couch, looking pale and tired, bandages covering the side of his face and disappearing beneath his shirt collar. “Hello, Xander.”

He perched on the chair across from Giles, acutely aware of the stranger’s presence, hovering nearby as if he didn’t want to leave the two of them alone. Xander suspected he was doing it on purpose. There was an air about the stranger as if he enjoyed causing trouble. “How are you feeling?”

“A bit like I was surprised by a Vahrall demon,” Giles said with a slight smile. “I daresay I’ll survive.”

Xander shot a startled look at the stranger and Giles lifted an unconcerned hand. “Don’t worry about Ethan. He is quite aware of the world of demons. One might almost call him an expert.”

There was more than a hint of censure in his voice and Xander looked between the two men, wondering what was going on.

“Careful, Ripper, that was almost a compliment.” The man settled down on the other end of the couch from Giles, cocking his head at Xander. “And who is this young man who you talk so casually about demons to?”

“Sorry. Xander, this is Ethan Rayne, and old…acquaintance. Ethan, this is Xander Harris, a young student of mine.”

Ethan Rayne lifted a suggestive eyebrow. “As you were once a pupil of mine, Ripper? How…intriguing.”

A wave of color flooded Giles’ face and Xander’s eyebrows shot up. “Nothing like that, Ethan,” Giles said sharply. “I’ll thank you to keep such insinuations to yourself.”

“My, my, Ripper. How stuffy and proper you’ve become. Pity.”

“Do I want to know what’s going on?” Xander asked. “Because if you’re all right, Giles, I can go. Really.” He could tell Giles about Buffy’s new boyfriend another time. Easily.

“Actually, Xander, what Ethan has to say concerns you as well. If you don’t mind, why don’t you stay and listen.” He sent a sharp look in Ethan’s direction. “Ethan will behave.” Somehow, despite the bandages and the pallor, Xander had no doubt about Giles’ ability to enforce that.

He turned his attention to the stranger, studying him. The man had assumed a more serious demeanor at Giles’ warning but he still looked put out, as if explaining something to a teenager was beneath him. Seeing Xander’s scrutiny, the man gave Xander an assessing look of his own. “So, you’re a student of the dark arts?”
“No. I study demons with Giles, not magic,” Xander returned flatly. The man couldn’t seem to help the insinuations wrapped around every word he uttered. Giles rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything.

“Tell me you’re not recruiting this boy into the Watchers, Ripper. Look what that bloody group has done to you.”

“Just get on with it, Ethan.” Giles closed his eyes wearily and leaned his head back. Ethan shot him a worried look before he saw Xander watching and the mocking amusement returned to his gaze.

“Something’s happening in the dark worlds, young man. Something’s harming demons and it’s not the Slayer. Know anything about it?”

Xander didn’t know what he’d been expecting but it wasn’t that. “I’ve heard rumors,” he said cautiously.

“Oh yes, there’s plenty of those around,” Ethan confirmed, looking interested that Xander had heard anything at all. “Demons are scared. The kind of scared that turns to angry. This new outfit, it’s blundering into places it doesn’t belong. It’s throwing the worlds out of balance and that’s way beyond chaos, mate. We’re headed quite literally for one hell of a fight.”

The man’s words paralleled Spike’s so closely that Xander could only stare at him dumbly, unable to utter a word. The fact that a human - he assumed Giles would have told him if the man wasn’t human - thought a race war was coming was a confirmation of his worst fears.
Chapter 21

“Do you have anything specific, Ethan, or are you just peddling vague rumors?” Giles prodded impatiently.

Ethan shrugged. “You know demons, it’s all exaggeration and blank verse. ‘Pain as bright as steel,’ things like that. As I said, they’re scared. There’s something called ‘3-14’ that’s got them scared most of all.”

He paused a moment, watching them, the cynical laughter gone from his eyes. “I know we’re not particularly fond of each other, Rupert, but we are a couple of old mystics. You should be able to read the signs as well as I can.” He shifted position, leaning carelessly back against the arm of the couch, and said with deliberate offensiveness: “Or have you lost your touch entirely, old man?”

Giles didn’t answer, frowning and looking off into the distance. Ethan seemed content just to sit there, watching Giles, a small, mocking smile on his lips. It was Xander who finally broke the long silence.

“That’s pretty much how Spike has it figured,” he said to Giles. “That it may come down to a war.”

Ethan lost his air of casual insolence, jerking upright in sudden alarm. “Bloody hell, Ripper! Are you trying to get me killed?”

Giles glanced at him. “Not at the moment.”

“Then this isn’t Master Spike’s Claimed human?”

“Oh, yes. Spike Claimed Xander some time ago.”

“You know Spike?” Xander asked in surprise.

Ethan was looking very nervous all of a sudden. “We met briefly,” he said. “I’m afraid your vampire was a tad miffed at me.”

Giles just looked amused. “A tad miffed?” he repeated. “As I recall, Spike mentioned something about evisceration if he ever saw you again.”

“You’re not helping,” Ethan told him.

“Well, for Spike, that does actually qualify as just being a little miffed,” Xander pointed out which earned him a glare from Ethan. “His threats tend to be a bit more serious when he’s really ticked off. What did you do?”

“You don’t know?” Giles looked surprised. “Ethan is the one responsible for tampering with the Band Candy last year. Not to mention the Halloween costume stunt the year before.” Giles’ eyes darkened. “As well as a number of other things.”

“I feel obliged to point out that I was a mere subcontractor in the candy business…” Ethan began when Xander interrupted.

“That was you?” He looked at Giles. “So, how come you’re sitting here talking to him like he’s an old friend? Shouldn’t you be… I don’t know, slamming the door in his face or calling the police or something?”
“Oh, Ripper’s not going to call the coppers on me, are you, old mate?”

“Haven’t ruled it out,” Giles told him, then looked at Xander and sighed. “I don’t trust Ethan but he does have connections in places I don’t, sources of information that differ from mine.”

“Careful, you’ll hurt my feelings, Ripper,” Ethan drawled sarcastically, then rose to his feet. “Well, given that I value my body parts exactly where they are, this is probably a good time for me to leave town. Wouldn’t want Master Spike to get cranky over a little misunderstanding.” He looked down at Giles who had remained seated on the couch. “Do take care of yourself, Rupert. You’re getting a bit old for this.”

Giles scowled at him. “Stay where you are, Ethan. We’re not done talking.”

“I think not. Not without Master Spike’s permission. That was a fairly serious mention of evisceration and I really don’t want to experience it first hand.” He headed for the door, then stopped with his hand on the knob. The notepads they had all been using when the Gentlemen stole their voices were still stacked neatly on the table just inside the door and Ethan picked one up and wrote something on it. “If you get lonely, you may be able to reach me at this number,” he said, tossing the pad back on the table. “No promises, of course.”

Giles rolled his eyes but made no further attempt to stop him and Ethan opened the door, glancing back at Giles with one more mocking comment: “By the by, Ripper. Do keep an eye out for the demon Prince Barvain. He is scheduled to rise soon.”

Ethan closed the door behind him and Xander gave Giles a raised eyebrow look. “Interesting guy,” he said finally.

“Yes. He always was.” There was a world of mixed emotion in the brief statement which Xander decided he was a lot better off not asking about.

“Giles, are you up for talking or do you need to rest? I can come back.”

Giles straightened up from where he’d begun to list a little sideways on the couch. “Despite Ethan’s cracks, I’m not that old, Xander.”

“Of course not, but you only just got out of the hospital, Giles. You’re entitled to a little down time.”

“I suspect from your expression that we don’t have time for that right now,” Giles said, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

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Despite Giles’ obvious fatigue, he listened carefully as Xander outlined what little he’d learned from Buffy about Riley Finn and the Initiative. Knowing Buffy would tell Giles soon anyway, Xander told him what had happened to Spike, admitting frankly that it had been a joint decision not to tell anyone that Spike was temporarily helpless against humans. He was grateful that, other than a frown and a sharp look, Giles didn’t comment on the fact that Xander and Spike had concealed the information until now.

“So, Buffy is dating one of our mysterious soldiers and thinks she can convince him of the error of his ways and, from Spike’s condition, we know for certain they are experimenting on demons with some degree of success,” Giles summed up thoughtfully when Xander finished, flicking him an apologetic look at referring to Spike’s helplessness as being a successful experiment. “I take it you don’t agree with Buffy.”
“No. I mean, even if Riley suddenly becomes best friends with Spike, what good is it? He’s not going to convince his superiors to stop what they’re doing.”

“I agree. Bureaucracies are notoriously inflexible. They’ve obviously been planning this for some time, I don’t see them changing their position because one soldier has allowed his girlfriend to persuade him that their mission is flawed. On the other hand, if Buffy is able to convince this boyfriend of hers, he could prove extremely useful.”

“You mean as a spy?” Xander asked, frowning.

“I was thinking more along the lines of telling us what they are up to. What troubles me the most about these people, Xander is the idea that they are trying to control demons. What has been done to Spike is… unprecedented. Killing demons, even indiscriminately, is one thing and understandable.” At Xander’s protest, he raised a staying hand. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t approve. I merely said it was understandable. Governments do tend toward overkill especially when they are frightened. But for an organized group to be experimenting on demons, trying to control them…” Giles paused, looking very disturbed. “The implications are frightening.”

“Like they’re planning on using what they learn on people?” Xander said grimly, voicing the fear that had haunted him ever since he’d learned what they’d done to Spike.

“Possibly,” Giles said slowly, “but I’m rather more concerned with the idea that the military is seeking a means of controlling demons. There are far too many demons capable of wreaking carnage on a scale humans can barely comprehend for me to be comfortable with the idea of the military trying to harness that power.” Giles made a frustrated gesture. “We need to find out what they are planning and Buffy’s new boyfriend may be our best chance at finding that out.”

Xander drummed his fingers nervously against his leg as he thought that over. He had a hard time picturing the straight-laced soldier he’d met briefly, the man who’d wanted nothing more than to take ‘Hostile 17’ back into custody, acting as a willing spy for them. From what Buffy had said, he’d been pulling the confidentiality card about anything useful. Still, he’d told her the name of his outfit, something he probably hadn’t been supposed to. Covert military operations tended to deny they even existed. Which meant that maybe Riley would slip up again. “I wouldn’t put a lot of money on him agreeing to help us,” he said finally, “but I guess we’ll have to see what Buffy can talk him in to.”

“Like they’re planning on using what they learn on people?” Giles said grimly, voicing the fear that had haunted him ever since he’d learned what they’d done to Spike.

“Not military ones.” Giles looked amused at the very idea.

“Do you think he’ll help us?” Xander asked dubiously. Giles was giving off so many mixed signals about this Ethan Rayne guy it was hard to keep up and the man had obviously not left his phone number thinking Giles would call him for sex, as he’d implied. It was obvious there was a lot of history between the two Englishmen but the slender man with the mocking eyes didn’t impress Xander as someone they could rely on.

Giles had let his head drop back against the couch, closing his eyes, and now he smiled slightly. “I don’t know.” He lifted a staying hand and Xander waited, his eyes on Giles, worried about how tired and drawn he looked. After a long moment, Giles sat up and faced Xander, his tired eyes meeting Xander’s steadily.

“Ethan’s a chaos mage, Xander. Probably the thing he would hate most in the world is the government interfering in the
‘dark worlds’ as he calls them.”

“What do you think 3-14 means?” Xander asked, wondering if the numbers had any meaning for Giles that he wasn’t aware of.

“I have no idea. However, the demon Prince Barvain is something I’ve heard of. Would you be so kind as to fetch me Van Wyck’s Compendium Demonicae? I believe it’s on the shelves under the window.”

Xander got up obediently. “He was serious about that?” he asked over his shoulder. “I thought that was a joke.”

“Unfortunately, Ethan’s jokes run more along the lines of waking up and discovering he’s turned you into a demon while you were asleep,” Giles said darkly.

Giles had to be exaggerating about that, Xander thought, returning to the couch with the requested volume and preparing for research.

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Twenty minutes and three books later, Giles put down the last of the volumes he’d had Xander get for him and took his glasses off again, rubbing tiredly at his eyes.

“Honestly, the thing that really alarms me is the fact that Ethan has given us a timely warning of the demon’s rising.”

Xander looked up from the notes he’d been jotting down for Giles. “You mean he’s making it up about this demon?”

“No. No, it’s clear his information about the demon prince is accurate and, believe me, I am kicking myself for not remembering the significance of the date. What I meant was that it’s much more like Ethan to tell you about something like this five minutes after it’s happened, not more than a week in advance. As Ethan would say: where’s the fun in that?”

Xander raised his eyebrows at the dead-on mimicry of the other man’s voice and the softly reminiscent smile curving Giles’ lips but stuck to his earlier decision not to ask. So not going there.

Giles continued after a moment.

“Ethan’s visits usually involve finding out he’s in town because all hell is breaking loose. For him to arrive in town openly and warn me of a real danger - even if it’s a fairly minor one - well, frankly, I’d say Ethan is very worried about the rumors he’s hearing and wanted me to know he was serious. And something bad enough to worry Ethan, terrifies me.”

Xander didn’t know how to answer that. Giles afraid meant the danger was apocalypse-level bad. A five-hundred year old demon capable of destroying half the town rising soon, that was a minor inconvenience in Giles’ view.

Giles’ point of view was a scary place sometimes.

For now, Xander settled on dealing with the immediate problem. “So, the third new moon after the…” he checked his notes “nine-hundredth feast of Delthrox or, in new world talk, Tuesday of next week at sunset.”

“Which gives us plenty of time to prepare and won’t interfere with Buffy’s birthday,” Giles said in weary satisfaction.
Xander headed home shortly after that, having reminded Giles that Buffy hated birthday parties and putting in his vote for not organizing one. He left, fairly sure he’d convinced Giles to just buy her a CD or something. Buffy had mentioned more than once how horrible her birthday parties tended to be. Between Angelus and run of the mill family issues, her last several birthdays had apparently sucked big time, featuring everything from death and mayhem to an absent, indifferent father. Xander could relate and was completely on board with her wanting to break the pattern of her birthday being associated with destruction and disappointment.

He also hoped he’d convinced Giles to take it easy for the next couple of days, pointing out that they had well over a week before they had to worry about the demon prince guy. Giles had acquiesced a little too easily, which spoke volumes about how he was really feeling despite his efforts to appear fine. Xander promised that he and Spike would keep an eye on the crypt the demon was going to rise in - for a wonder there was an actual, specific reference in the texts and they wouldn’t have to hunt all over town for the right spot. He didn’t think Spike would mind doing a sweep during the night and Xander could stop by during the day to make sure nothing was happening on the demon-rising front. The ritual Giles wanted to perform to bind the demon and prevent its rising could wait a few days until Giles was feeling better.

Xander glanced at his watch. It was barely noon and Spike would be sound asleep. He’d make a swing through the cemetery on his way home, find the right crypt, and see how easy it was to get inside.

Spike was sprawled out on Xander’s side of their bed as usual. He wasn’t a covers stealer or a bed hog when they were sleeping together but he automatically moved over to Xander’s side the minute Xander got up in the morning, stealing Xander’s pillow and burying his face in it. He claimed it was to shut out the cracks of light that slipped in around the edges of the window no matter how many times they adjusted the shutters and blackout curtains.

Watching him from the doorway, Xander smiled. Spike hated to admit that he gravitated to Xander’s side of the bed to hold on to the warmth and smell of Xander that lingered on the sheets and pillowcase. He knew Spike wished Xander would adopt a completely nocturnal lifestyle, sleeping during the days and staying up all night, but he wasn’t ready to make that change and didn’t know if he ever would be.

He could be happy forever with this, Xander thought. If there was some way to hang on to what they had now - living together as human and vampire - he would take it. An eternity of Spike, rumpled and crabby in the mornings when he got up, fighting against every normal vampire instinct so he could keep Xander company while he ate breakfast. Of Spike’s rapid mood swings and flaring temper and possessiveness. Of his biting wit and the quieter moments when he would unexpectedly quote snatches of poetry. Of training in the early evenings and lying together on the couch, mocking the television and squabbling over the remote. An eternity of passionate sex and just sleeping together, Spike’s strong arms around him, his head resting against Xander’s back, listening to Xander’s heartbeat as he slept.

“Thinking awfully hard, luv.” Spike’s muffled voice sounded from the pillow. “Everything ok?”

“Everything’s fine. Go back to sleep.”

He crossed to the bed and sat down on the empty side. Spike’s side was closest to the door. Xander smiled involuntarily, one hand reaching out to slide over the smooth pale skin of Spike’s naked
back. Spike’s instinctive need to protect his Claimed meant that he automatically slept between Xander and any possible danger that might come charging through the door.

The sheets were twisted around Spike’s hips, the blanket had long since been kicked to the floor. Since they weren’t paying for the heat - Spike having had a former electrician who was a member of the Court hook up the entire building untraceably to the electric grid - they never bothered to turn the heat down in the winter. Which meant that Xander had an enjoyable view right now of Spike’s lean muscular backside with its narrow waist and prominent shoulder blades.

He trailed his fingers down the line of Spike’s backbone, tracing each vertebrae, then bent over and reversed direction, kissing his way back from waist to neck. He took his time, bracing himself on his hands and paying attention to each individual vertebrae, his tongue darting out to taste the cool skin as he kissed and nibbled his way up.

Spike made a low, almost purring sound, arching his back a little. “Thought you wanted me to go back to sleep,” he said, his voice sounding a lot more awake.

Xander lifted his head. “I’m not stopping you,” he pointed out innocently. “Don’t mind me, I’m just amusing myself while you sleep.”

“Wouldn’t want you to be bored, luv.”

“So considerate,” he mocked lightly, then dipped his head again, exploring Spike’s shoulder blades this time, nibbling and licking his way from one side to the other, leisurely tracing the path of the bones lying so close beneath the skin. Spike murmured in appreciation of his efforts.

By mutual unspoken agreement, they had kept their lovemaking slow and gentle ever since the night Spike had returned. It was so easy for Spike to accidentally hurt Xander and neither one wanted to risk Spike being hit with the punishing pain for accidentally gripping hard enough to leave a bruise. And it was fine, but Xander missed the wild passion of the nights when they would tear each other’s clothes off and go at it like crazed weasels, heedless of the bruises and aches that would follow in the morning. Worst of all, they hadn’t dared risked fucking. Worst of all, they hadn’t dared risked fucking. They’d learned that first night that Spike didn’t have to mean to hurt him. If Spike caused Xander pain, even inadvertently, he paid for it in agony and Xander refused to risk that. He missed it though - the almost unbearable pleasure of Spike pushing inside him, stretching him to the limit, and the shattering pleasure of hard thrusts against his prostate.

But really, it wasn’t anything that Spike hadn’t been putting up with from Xander all this time. As a vampire, Spike had stamina that made a mockery of Xander’s. From things Spike had let slip, Xander knew that Spike had been used to having sex sometimes a dozen times a night. Two vampires could go at it for hours without stopping and be ready for round two five minutes later. Xander couldn’t keep up that pace and Spike had never once reproached him for it. Waiting until Spike was cured wasn’t a hardship, well, not one he couldn’t put up with anyway. Unfortunately, they couldn’t just switch to Xander being on top as a solution.

He’d long since accepted the fact that Spike fucked him, never the other way around. For demons, relationships were all about power and, even though Spike was about as atypical a vampire as you could imagine, Xander had figured out pretty early on that Spike had issues - giant, unresolved issues - with being in any way what he perceived as the weaker partner. As the youngest member of a seriously dysfunctional vampire family, it was hardly surprising. Once Spike had struck out on his own with Drusilla, he had made sure he was never again in a position where he wasn’t top dog. Although Drusilla was technically Spike’s Sire and Spike had loved her to the point there was nothing he wouldn’t have done for her, he had still been the dominant one in the relationship. Drusilla had been too damaged - too freaking insane - to dominate anyone.
And it was fine. Xander didn’t have any issues about being the “bottom” in their relationship. Spike had been the experienced one in the relationship when they had started and it had not only been normal but useful to have Spike take the lead. Xander hadn’t had the first clue about gay sex, any sex actually, when they’d begun dating. It had been awhile before he’d even realized that he always bottomed in their sex life.

Although he would love to fuck Spike, and had all sorts of plans for talking Spike into it one day, now was not the time to broach the subject. There was no way he was going to suggest that Spike start bottoming for him, not when Spike already felt out of control and barely able to deal with the fact that humans had effectively crippled him. Someday though, his lips curved in a smirk worthy of Spike himself, someday when Spike was better, he was going to convince Spike to let Xander fuck him and learn for himself what it felt like from the other end.

“If you’re goin’ to fall asleep back there, take your clothes off and do it proper.” Spike’s voice interrupted his woolgathering and Xander realized that he was staring into space, his thoughts having distracted him from what he had started.

“Well, since you put it so nicely,” he answered, sitting up and peeling his shirt off.

“Oi!” Spike rolled over with the fluid grace that was so much a part of him and pounced, pushing Xander down against the sheets underneath him and glaring down at him. “Not nice to start somethin’ you don’t plan to finish.”

Xander laughed, reaching up to pull Spike’s head down. They kissed slowly, deeply and Xander felt Spike’s hands at his waist, unfastening his jeans. He dropped his hands to help, shimmying the pants off his hips as Spike growled against his lips, kicking at the sheet which had gotten tangled up between them.

Xander rolled them onto their sides, laughing as Spike struggled to get free to the sheet, which had wrapped itself around him as if possessed, finally losing patience entirely and tearing it off him with the sound of ripping cloth.

“Laughin’ at me, luv?” he accused, his voice a silken purr of menace.

“Absolutely not,” Xander denied. “I was laughing at the sheet.”

Spike swooped down and stopped his laughter by the simple expedient of covering Xander’s mouth with his own. Their tongues dueled as Spike shifted so he was on top again, this time with no annoying fabric between them. They were both fully erect and Spike began a maddening rhythm, rocking their bodies together slowly so their cocks slid against each other. Xander gasped into Spike’s mouth and pushed up, wanting more and Spike obliged by pressing down harder, trapping their erections between their bodies as they moved. Pleasure built rapidly as their hips thrust and parried, faster and harder, the pressure and motion driving Xander wild and he came with a yell, his semen spurting out between their bodies as Spike continued to thrust against him until he too came hard.

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Looking down at Xander lying beneath him, flushed and panting and beautiful, Spike’s own afterglow faded rapidly. Xander deserved more than this. He deserved a lover who wasn’t such a sniveling coward he was afraid to have sex with his Claimed. If they were careful, if they went slowly…

Even as he thought it, Spike felt his still erect penis soften. He was so afraid of the pain, he
couldn’t even maintain an erection and he despised himself for letting humans do this to him. Xander hadn’t complained and Spike knew he never would. Xander would take what he could get and be happy but it wasn’t fair to him.

Worst of all, Spike knew he was endangering Xander because of his fear. His Claim mark hadn’t been renewed in nearly two months and it was faded to the point where it wasn’t protecting Xander any more. Demons wouldn’t know Xander was Spike’s, if anything, they would assume Spike had discarded him since he wasn’t renewing his Claim.

He felt a wave of possessiveness sweep over him. Xander was his and he wasn’t going to let fear stop him any longer.

Spike dipped his head and began laving his tongue over the faded Claim scar. Xander made a pleased sound and pushed his head back into the pillow, exposing more of his neck to Spike’s attentions.

He had to do this. Once again, Spike had the helpless feeling of things inexorably slipping away from him. There was a battle coming and Xander would be at his side. Spike knew that, knew it beyond the slightest doubt but he needed the world to know that Xander was his, Claimed and marked by a Master Vampire. While the Mark made no difference to most humans, it was both warning and proclamation of ownership to demons.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

Xander gave him an unreadable look. “Of course I do,” he said. “But, Spike, most people only ask that when they’re about to do something they know the other person won’t like. What’s up?”

“Need you to hold still, Xander, no matter what happens. Just for a minute,” he added reassuringly as Xander’s brows drew together and he looked uneasy. “Promise me?”

“Why?”

Spike lifted his scarred eyebrow and Xander sighed. “That’s what the ‘trust me’ was about, right? All right, Spike, I won’t move.”

This was going to hurt and Spike braced himself as well as he could. The pain he could, and had, survived. What worried him was hurting Xander. A Claim mark was supposed to be clean, not the sloppy scar left by feeding. If Spike couldn’t hold himself steady while he did this, his fangs would tear Xander’s flesh.

Spike took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the warmth and scent of his Claimed. Xander’s scent was tainted with nervousness but he lay motionless, his head tilted back, his eyes on Spike, nothing but trust filling the brown depths. Xander knew what Spike intended and Spike felt a rush of love that Xander wasn’t arguing, wasn’t going to try and talk him out of this. His boy knew how much Spike needed to renew the mark that proclaimed to all the world that Xander was his.

Shifting to his true face, Spike took hold of Xander’s shoulders, pinning them down, then hesitated for one more second. Fast or slow? Both held risks and Spike decided that, no matter how much he longed for the taste of Xander’s blood, drawn hot and willing from the source, he needed to do this quickly to minimize the risk to Xander.

Lowering his head, he drove his fangs into the faded scar in the spot between neck and shoulder where the blood vessels ran so thick and close to the surface. Pain tore through him, blinding him and he felt the almost uncontrollable urge to fling himself away, tearing his fangs free in an effort
to stop the agonizing pain that filled him, seemingly coming from everywhere at once. Shaking with the effort to stay put, Spike concentrated on not moving, his hands clenched convulsively tight on Xander’s shoulders as he drove his fangs home. The pain built unbearably inside him as he continued sinking his teeth inside the warm human flesh until he was blind, deaf and barely able to cling to the awareness of what he was doing. A scream filling his lungs, his muscles twitching and spasming even as he fought to hold himself steady and disregard the searing agony.

Almost sobbing in relief at accomplishing his goal, Spike carefully began withdrawing his fangs. He felt it the moment they cleared the precious flesh they were buried in and flung himself away from Xander, the withheld scream bursting free as he curled up in agony and let the pain consume him. It was an eternity before the pain ebbed and his nerve endings stopped feeling as if they’d been dipped in acid.

Shaking with the aftermath, Spike felt Xander’s arms gathering him up, holding him against his warm body. Drops of blood slid along the tanned skin and Spike licked them up carefully, cherishing each drop for the gift it was. He licked soothingly at the fresh bite mark, his tongue lingering as it lovingly traced every inch of the mark. His mark.

He’d done it. Spike felt a flush of victory. Despite what they’d done to him, he’d succeeded in renewing his Claim mark on his boy. They’d taken almost everything else from him, but hadn’t been able to take Xander.

The muscles in his arms stopped trembling and he slid them around Xander to hold him close.

“I love you, Spike.” Xander whispered fiercely in his ear, his arms tightening around Spike. “They won’t beat us.”
There were soldiers and technicians crawling all over the crypt. Watching from his vantage point a hundred yards away, Spike had at first wondered if the Watcher had gotten his dates wrong, but the soldiers were standing guard, most of their attention focused outward on the cemetery and not toward the crew working inside the crypt. They were there to prevent interruptions, not defending against a newly risen demon.

Lying motionless, full-length on the marble roof of a crypt, Spike had been watching for over an hour as the technicians went in and out, hauling equipment and lights. Bright light streamed from the interior of the crypt and the whole operation was surprisingly noisy as they broke through the stone floor and began digging underneath. Spike had been straining to hear what was being said over the noise the workers were making unearthing the demon before he was ready to rise. It was the middle of the night and the crypt they were interested in was deep inside Fairhaven Cemetery. Under cover of the hour and the remote location, the crew wasn’t making any effort at being discrete. They weren’t even being professional. He’d already overheard far more than he was interested in about one of the lab coats’ girlfriend’s excess spending habits and one of the laborer’s futile efforts to quit smoking.

It was with relief that he heard the excited exclamations of having reached their goal. The soldiers rearranged themselves, the majority moving inside the crypt and only a few remaining on guard outside. Spike considered moving closer but discarded the idea. He had a fairly good view from where he was and none of the closer crypts offered the cover and vantage of this one, especially with the bloody soldiers lighting up the joint like it was a disco.

Finally, the Initiative people stopped talking about their personal lives and started saying things worth hearing.

“Careful! Professor Walsh wants it undamaged.”

“No one said anything about moving a two-ton sarcophagus. We don’t have the equipment to move something that heavy. We’ll just have to open it and see what happens. B-Team, stand ready.”

“Everyone not involved in lifting - get back.”

The sound of stone grating on stone followed and Spike wondered idly whether the demon prince was going to sleep through his early wake up call. Demons that had a particular, mystically significant date for rising tended to be unwakeable before that date.

Pity. Here he was with a front row seat and the chances of mayhem were slim to none.

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The whole operation was a huge anti-climax. The technicians succeeded in placing the slumbering demon into a large steel box without so much as a fluttering eyelid to alarm them. The humans chatted happily about how well the new sensors had performed in finding this spot and how pleased Professor Walsh was going to be with the night’s work. A crew remained behind to erase all traces of their work and Spike slipped away into the dark.

Once well clear of the area, Spike lit a cigarette and considered what he’d overheard. This Professor Walsh seemed to be in charge of the lab coats, which made sense. Civilians on the
science side of things, Spike figured, and a military unit to back them up and do all the collecting/protecting. Probably a military commander at least nominally in charge of the base and the soldiers, but the mission directed by the civilian side. Given the base’s location on top of the college campus and the Slayer’s boy toy being a Teacher’s Assistant, it was likely a lot of the soldiers and lab coats had cover jobs on the campus. Shouldn’t be too difficult to find out if there was a Professor Walsh on campus.

The lab coats had been speculating about the demon’s physical makeup in a way that reminded Spike of the mad scientist movies from the 50’s that Xander sometimes watched. Like they couldn’t wait to get the demon back to their lab to dissect it. Too bloody scientific about their torture plans for Spike’s taste. You didn’t cut things to pieces to find out what made them tick, you did it because it was fun. There was just something unnatural about the whole business.

Probably the mysterious ‘314’ the Watcher’s friend had mentioned. He grinned, remembering Xander’s description of his encounter with Ethan Rayne. It was gratifying to learn that the man had nearly wet himself at finding out he was talking to Spike’s Claimed and how hastily he had left town again, not having had Spike’s permission to return. He might give that permission, he thought now, wondering what kind of havoc a chaos mage could wreak on the Initiative. He’d have to think about that.

Didn’t take a chaos mage’s warning to know that the Initiative had a hidden agenda. No one captured demons, held them prisoner and experimented on them without some kind of plan, no matter how harebrained and crackpot it might be. He and Xander had talked about it a lot, picking away at the scanty evidence, searching for the real purpose behind the seemingly meaningless activity. Xander was sure they were using demons as test subjects, intending to use what they learned on humans. Spike disagreed. For one thing, demons and humans had very different physiologies for the most part. Even ones that looked human didn’t work the same way as humans.

Vampires might look human but they weren’t just animated corpses - that was a zombie, and they were a whole different thing. Vampires were demons that inhabited once-living human bodies. Once the demon took over, the entire physiology changed. The demon made the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and what not obsolete. Vampires didn’t age, didn’t need any food but blood, didn’t sweat, didn’t shit. How could anything learned about their physiology apply to humans?

It was clear that the lab coats were studying demons. Know your enemy was one thing and Spike approved of someone who studied their opponents. But these gits didn’t seem interested in learning anything about demons other than how their bodies worked. That wasn’t studying your opponent. Yeah, sure, learning what an enemy could do physically was important but it was even more useful to figure out how they thought, how they reacted. Knowing if an enemy was going to attack in groups or alone, whether they were cautious by nature or reckless, if they were someone that defended territory or a nest, was all significant in knowing an opponent. These humans were so oblivious to anything except the physical, they didn’t even distinguish between harmless and dangerous demons.

The Initiative did have gadgets they were relying on and that might be something that could be used against them. They’d obviously known about the demon’s scheduled rising in a few days. Given what he’d overheard tonight - and the fact that so far these idiots didn’t seem to have any real idea of how the demon world worked - somehow they’d been able to scan for… something. Something that told them Barvain was due to rise. No way these wankers had figured it out the way the Watchers did: with research and laboriously compiled volumes of information and prophecy. And that was something they could use. Get the soldiers where and when they wanted them.
Dropping his cigarette butt, Spike strode out of the cemetery intending to finish patrolling his territory. Tomorrow, he’d follow up on Professor Walsh and sound out the Watcher about that friend of his. A tame chaos mage might come in handy in the days ahead.

He might even tell the Watcher the soldiers had taken care of Barvain for him, he thought with a grin.

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It felt almost like he was arranging to meet Buffy on neutral territory, like they had in the days before they were friends, when they had only a fragile truce keeping them civil to one another.

This time, his concern wasn’t so much meeting on neutral ground so much as it was meeting somewhere where they wouldn’t be overheard. Living without a phone again sucked but having a potentially traceable phone was a risk he wasn’t willing to take right now. It had never been a good idea to have Buffy come to the apartment, even Spike could only ad lib his way around his relationship with the Slayer to the Court for so long. Now, worried that the Initiative might follow Buffy to Spike, Xander had arranged to meet her at the Bronze, probably the last place in town anyone would expect to see him.

Sitting inconspicuously at a small table on the far side of the dance floor, Xander kept a wary eye on the customers but, to his relief, no one seemed to be paying attention to him. Buffy was late, which was no surprise. Give her an apocalypse and she was Miss Punctuality, otherwise she was a bit less reliable. Which was fine, he was still working out what he was going to say to her.

“Xander, there you are.”

“Hey, Buffy.” He gestured with his own glass. “Can I get you something?”

“I’m good.” She slid onto the stool across from him, wearing jeans and an orange halter top, her hair carelessly pinned up. Xander wondered vaguely how Buffy managed to always look good even when it looked like she’d just gotten out of bed and had dressed in the dark.

“How’s it going?” he asked, settling for the small talk approach.

“I’ve had better weeks,” Buffy admitted.

“Me too.” They both fell silent, watching the couples dancing, Buffy wistfully, Xander searching for something to say that wouldn’t sound incredibly awkward. So much for small talk. “How’s it going with Riley?” he asked finally, proud that he’d managed to sound casually interested and not paranoid on the subject of her Initiative boyfriend.

“It’s not.” Buffy shrugged her bare shoulders, trying to appear indifferent and failing miserably. “He won’t even talk to me.” She leaned her elbows on the table, looking tired and defeated. “It didn’t faze him at all finding out I was the Slayer, I don’t understand why he’s having such a problem with my defending Spike.”

“Because he doesn’t believe that there’s any such thing as a good demon,” Xander said flatly, hoping Spike never found out he’d called him a ‘good demon’. “Buffy, that’s what’s wrong with the whole program, that they don’t see that there’s different kinds of demons. They’d kill Mr. Olsen, or Oz, without any more concern than if they were the Mayor in full snake mode.”

“Don’t start with the Nazi comparison again, Xander. You don’t know Riley. I’ve met some of his friends that I’ll bet anything are Initiative soldiers and they’re just normal guys as well.”
Xander stiffened and sat back, shocked that she hadn’t told any of them about knowing other Initiative soldiers. Before he could gather his wits to say anything, Buffy continued: “They’re just a little too…you know?” A vague gesture finished her sentence.

“Too what?”

“Clean cut, buff, old.” Buffy enumerated. “I thought they were just, you know, TA’s, grad students. That Riley just happened to have some really hot friends, but now that I know that Riley’s in the Initiative…” her expressive face finished the sentence for her.

Might as well get all the bad news out at once, Xander thought. “Yeah. I meant to tell you. Um, looks like Professor Walsh may be the person in charge.”

“Professor Walsh? My Psych teacher?” Buffy groaned. “This is not happening.”

“Spike overheard them talking,” Xander explained. “She’s the only Professor Walsh on campus and, what with Riley being her TA…”

“Great, the evil bitch-monster from hell is in charge of the secret military operation.”

“The what?” Xander couldn’t believe she’d just called Professor Walsh that. Buffy had been raving about how great her professor was all semester.

“She called herself that on the first day of classes,” Buffy said carelessly. She frowned at his shocked look. “It was a joke, Xander. All the profs try and scare their students during the first class.”

“Nice. This happen everywhere or just on the Hellmouth?” he asked.

“Just on the Hellmouth,” Buffy assured him.

They both relaxed at that, grinning at each other, the unspoken tension from their last meeting dissipating, the initial awkwardness between them fading.

“So, you think you know some of the other Initiative soldiers?” Xander asked, getting back to her surprising announcement.


“And if you’re right, they spend their nights hunting demons indiscriminately.”

“I didn’t say they weren’t idiots,” she pointed out. “Well, not dumb so much as ignorant. If they knew how many demons there are and how many are harmless…”

“You think they’d come around?” he asked skeptically. Her own boyfriend didn’t seem to be able to deal with her being friends with Spike. Granted, there was the whole helping an escaped prisoner issue there as well, something that never went over well with law enforcement types.

“It’s worth a try.” She sighed. “I’ll try and talk to Riley again. See if I can make him listen.”

She looked so unhappy at the idea that Xander felt a pang of guilt and abruptly changed the subject. “Hey, this is supposed to be a birthday celebration. Late, true, but still a birthday thing. Want to dance?”

Buffy perked up at his suggestion, probably because she’d never seen Xander dance, and he
gamely led her out onto the floor despite knowing he was about to make a fool out of himself. She was soon laughing at his ungainly moves, shouting over the music that she was avoiding injury only because her Slayer reflexes let her duck his flailing limbs. He was glad to see her lightening up, not wanting her to suffer through yet another boyfriend fiasco, and wondering how she could have such awful taste in men.

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“What do you think?” Xander looked at Mr. Olsen. “Am I crazy?”

His talk with Buffy had started him thinking and he’d spent all day at work turning the germ of an idea over in his mind, wondering if there was any point and struggling with his own admitted prejudices against the tentative plan.

He’d needed a sounding board, someone he could bounce the idea off of and Spike was out. It wouldn’t be fair to even ask him about it since the whole concept went against Spike’s nature. Instead, he’d gone to see Mr. Olsen after work. The elderly man was unflappable by nature and would tell him what he thought without a lot of dramatics. If Mr. Olsen turned thumbs down on his vague plan, then Xander would drop it. He’d been meaning to visit Mr. Olsen anyway - Giles had taken responsibility for keeping the demon community apprised of anything they learned about the soldiers and Xander hadn’t seen Mr. Olsen since their last summit meeting.

“Crazy is a bit strong,” Mr. Olsen said with a smile. “Overly optimistic perhaps.” He looked curiously at Xander. “Why are you asking me?”

“Because you have to have dealt with this before. I mean, you were nervous when you told me you were part demon, right? You were worried I’d freak out.”

“Which you didn’t.”

“Actually, I did, it just didn’t last very long,” Xander admitted. “Something Buffy said the other night got me thinking. She made me wonder if we could make the soldiers listen. I’d known you for…. what? about a year when you told me and my first reaction was still to be kind of scared of you. Just for a second,” he added hastily, relieved when Mr. Olsen just twinkled at him, showing the little gold sparks in his eyes for a moment.

“Maybe these guys aren’t as hopeless as I’ve been thinking,” he continued. “If Buffy’s right and the soldiers are just ignorant, or brainwashed into just seeing one side of things… What if we showed them some of the most harmless demons around and tried to explain that not all demons are something to be afraid of?”

“How are you planning on doing that?” Mr. Olsen asked, looking at him over his glasses, his bushy eyebrows raised.

“I haven’t really worked that part out yet. No point if this is a really stupid idea. What I was thinking was doing a show and tell with some of the soldiers. Show them a Bryjuul demon, or a k’thysnn or a Mimtoi, or something similar.”

Mr. Olsen began to look slightly less skeptical. “A show and tell of clearly harmless demons?”

“Exactly, the fluffy bunnies of the demon world. The kind of demons you can tell immediately couldn’t hurt a fly. I mean, no one could be afraid of a k’thysnn and Bryjuuls look like little girls.” He looked at Mr. Olsen hopefully. “It might at least get them to think about what they’re doing and that’s half the battle.”
It was working with Greg hauling supplies together this afternoon that had finally convinced him that his idea might be worth a shot. It had gradually become known on the construction site that Xander was gay. He didn’t flaunt it, Spike had never visited the site, and he certainly didn’t talk about his male lover, but he talked about his roommate and his co-workers had figured it out eventually. Most of them had accepted it without much of a problem, a few, Greg in particular, had given him a hard time until the foreman and some of the others had forced them to back off. Greg had been the worst: belittling Xander whenever they were working in the same part of the job site, calling him names and making veiled threats when no one else was around. Xander had avoided him as much as possible and been relieved when Greg gradually seemed to lose interest in harassing him. They’d worked together silently and efficiently today and Xander had realized how long it had been since Greg had insulted him and felt a reluctant stab of shame. If Greg could get over his prejudices about fags, at least to the point where he could be civil, maybe Xander should get over his prejudice towards the soldiers. Wasn’t he lumping them all together in just the way he despised them for treating demons?

Mr. Olsen had been silent for awhile, sipping his coffee and turning the idea over in his head. Xander shook off his own thoughts and waited patiently for Mr. Olsen to be ready to talk.

“What does Spike think about this idea of yours?”

“He doesn’t know yet.” Xander admitted sheepishly. “I didn’t want him to get upset for nothing if you think it’s a stupid idea.”

“Translation: he’s going to hate it.” Mr. Olsen filled in.

“Well, he’s not real big on the diplomacy side of things.”

“I can imagine,” Mr. Olsen said with a short laugh. “Tentatively, I think that it’s an idea worth pursuing. Cautiously, however. I haven’t told all that many people over the years about my heritage and the reactions have been mixed. Somewhat similar to a person coming out as gay, I imagine.” He gave Xander a pointed look, reminding him that he’d never really come out to Mr. Olsen, it had just gradually become obvious that he and Spike were a couple. “Even long term friends can react in ways that surprise you. However, in general, people have been very understanding.” He set his coffee cup down, sitting back in his chair. “You know who you really need to talk to? Sergeant Morgan. He’s military, he knows how soldiers think. He could give you a better idea than I can about whether this is a good idea or not.”

That made sense. “Thanks, Mr. Olsen. I’ll do that.”

As he got up to leave, Mr. Olsen added one note of caution. “Xander, I would strongly recommend telling Spike what you are considering before you talk to anyone else about it. You really wouldn’t want him to find out about this from anyone but you.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Xander answered, having intended to talk to Spike anyway and knowing that Mr. Olsen would never mention he’d been consulted first.

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“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Spike couldn’t believe what Xander was suggesting.

“Probably.”

Spike glared, not mollified in the least by Xander’s agreement. “You want to have a friendly little sit-down with the enemy and explain the error of their ways?” He had to have heard that wrong.
Not even Xander would suggest something that insane.

“Well, I was more thinking of luring them somewhere and forcing them to listen, but yeah, pretty much.”

“And just who are you planning to endanger with this little stunt? Yourself?” Spike seethed.

“Hey, no danger……” Xander began when Spike cut him off.

“You’re talking about capturing soldiers and holding them prisoner while you parade demons in front of them. That’s going to endanger everyone involved.” Not that Spike cared about the danger to anyone but Xander but he knew Xander would insist on being in the thick of things.

“Spike, we need information. We need to know what these people are up to. The only way we’re going to get it is to get at least one of these guys on our side. I know it’s a long shot but, if it works, maybe we can find out what they’re up to.” Xander argued, keeping his voice calm. Spike just needed some time to think this through. “I really think we can do this safely.” Actually, he hadn’t really worked out the mechanics yet, but he was sure they could come up with something.

Spike scowled. “I’m not against taking the soldiers prisoner. I like that part. But if we’re going to capture them, should just torture them and get the information the old fashioned way.”

Xander grinned at him. “We’re trying to convince them demons are harmless, Spike,” he pointed out.

Spike’s sniff said what he thought of that idea. “Why don’t you invite Buffy’s professor for tea while you’re at it?” he asked sarcastically.

“I think we’re better off starting from the bottom,” Xander answered seriously. “I was thinking more along the lines of inciting a mutiny, not converting the command structure.”

Spike made a scoffing noise but didn’t object immediately, which was a good sign.

“Come with me to talk to Sgt. Morgan,” Xander said. “If he vetoes the idea, that’s fine, we’ll think of something else. I know this goes against the grain, Spike,” he added more softly. “And I know you deserve the right to take revenge on them for what they did to you. But, if it comes down to it, I would trade your revenge in a heartbeat for the chance to find a way to undo what they’ve done.”

He knew Spike would make that trade as well, even if he didn’t want to admit it. Xander hurried on, not giving Spike the chance to say anything. “I really think this is our best shot at getting some answers, getting someone on our side. Even one could make a difference. Let’s at least see what Sgt. Morgan thinks, ok?”

“Only you, Xander,” Spike said, shaking his head. “Fine, we’ll talk to the Sergeant. If he thinks it’s worth trying, we come up with a safe way to do this, or it doesn’t happen. Got it?” Spike gave him a steady, warning look. “We’re talking about trained soldiers with lots of fancy weapons, not your average prat off the streets. Lot easier to kill them than to capture them safely.”

Xander nodded. “Got it.” He blew out a silent sigh of relief hoping that, at worst, this would be a waste of time, not an unmitigated disaster. The fact that Spike hadn’t pointed out any flaws except the soldiers’ not listening made a curl of optimism go through him. There had to be some among the soldiers who would be appalled at murdering something like, say a hr’ashlek demon, with their soft, silvery-grey fur and enormous black eyes. Of course, given their tusks and claws, maybe they weren’t the best demon for show and tell.
They’d have to plan this carefully, like an advertising firm pitching to a client, nothing half-assed and slapped together at the last minute but a fully choreographed presentation. Giles and Mr. Olsen would be good at picking the best demons to be show and tell material. He thought Buffy would get on board with the plan if Sgt. Morgan gave his approval. She was the one who’d kept saying that the soldiers would listen to reason.

They’d have to figure out a way to do this safely for everyone, soldiers and demons alike, or it wasn’t worth the risk. Injuring the soldiers while trying to get them to listen to reason wouldn’t help their case and he didn’t want anyone on their side to get hurt either.

Still, if he could convince Spike, Xander thought with unwarranted cockiness, conveniently ignoring Spike’s obvious opinion that this was going to be a complete waste of time, the soldiers ought to be a snap.
Sergeant Morgan shook his head slowly. “It’s a good idea, Xander, but I don’t think it would work.”

Spike leaned against the wall, carefully out of Xander’s line of sight. He’d been ready to take a shot at intimidating the big half-Kobarien demon if necessary but it had been obvious from the start that the drill sergeant wasn’t enthusiastic about Xander’s plan and Spike relaxed, knowing Xander wouldn’t be taking his crazy notion any further. Xander had promised that if Sgt. Morgan didn’t think it was a good idea, then he’d drop it.

Sergeant Morgan had shown no surprise at their unexpected arrival on his doorstep, welcoming them into his small house and listening without comment as Xander explained his plan to convert the heathen. He had listened calmly until Xander finished, not showing any overt signs of rejecting Xander’s idea but Spike had seen the way he hadn’t reacted - not leaning forward in his chair, no gleam of interest or excitement in his eyes, his heart rate not altering even slightly - and knew that the experienced mentor was simply letting a promising recruit have his full say before shooting him down gently.

“To begin with, I did a records check on Riley Finn when Rupert called us with his name. He had an exemplary record, was picked for Special Ops training, and then…nothing. There is no record of any current assignment, posting, rank, not even pay records. He simply vanishes from any records I can track.”

“Does that mean something?” Xander asked. “Isn’t that standard for someone assigned to a covert mission?”

“This is beyond the normal. There should be some records showing he’s still in active duty status,” Sgt. Morgan waved a hand. “What’s important about the records is that I think we can assume that he is typical for the Initiative, that they hand-picked men out of Covert Ops for this assignment.”

He gave Xander a long, measuring look. “What your idea doesn’t take into consideration is the nature of the soldiers chosen for this kind of operation, Xander. These are men who have been trained to not ask questions, to follow orders without hesitation. They have been told that anything else will lead to deaths in the unit and the failure of their mission. Don’t doubt that they believe it, Xander. If they were the type of people who questioned authority, who wouldn’t blindly obey orders, they wouldn’t have been chosen for this assignment.”

From his position flanking Xander, Spike carefully suppressed a grin. As he’d hoped, Sgt. Morgan had been able to logically explain the flaw in Xander’s plan. Spike knew he wasn’t able to respond rationally to discussions about the Initiative. He was just glad that Sgt. Morgan was able to do it for him.

“But if we got them somewhere and forced them to listen…” Xander began, obviously not ready to give up at the first sign of discouragement.

“You would have an unreceptive, hostile audience who will assume they are being tricked by the enemy.” Sgt. Morgan finished for him. “Xander, you don’t get into covert ops without at least some training in resisting captivity, including torture and brainwashing.” He smiled at Xander’s appalled look. “That’s how they are going to view any new information given to them while being held prisoner: as an attempt to brainwash them or as a prelude to extracting information.”

Xander’s shoulders slumped and Sgt. Morgan patted his knee kindly. “It’s a good idea,” he
repeated, “and I wish I thought it would work. But it’s not worth the risk. There’s too much chance of someone getting hurt or killed and too little possibility that any of them would listen.”

Spike put his hands on Xander’s shoulders, rubbing them reassuringly and Xander sighed, leaning back into his touch. “I guess I knew I was grasping at straws but we know who two of them are now, I thought that would help.” Which reminded him, he needed to get the names from Buffy of Riley’s friends, the one’s she suspected were in the Initiative as well.

“I’m not saying the soldiers aren’t good men,” Sgt. Morgan was saying. “If you could have a few drinks with them, one on one, and just talk to them about your experiences, you might be able to get through their conditioning and get them to thinking. The problem is, you can’t do that. Even in Sunnydale, you can’t bring up the subject of demons in casual conversation.” He smiled crookedly. “Not to mention that they would instantly be suspicious and on guard if you did bring up a subject that’s the core of their mission.”

That had pretty much ended the discussion about Xander’s plan to make the soldiers see reason. They’d stayed for awhile, comparing notes and coming to the depressing conclusion that they still had way too little information about the Initiative. Sgt. Morgan had confessed that he had exhausted his resources without much success.

“I’ve been unable to find anyone who knows anything, or that will admit to knowing anything. Whoever is behind this group, they have done an excellent job covering their tracks,” he told them. “I’ve traced every recent transfer from our base and confirmed the soldiers are where they are supposed to be. They’ve shut the local base out of this completely.”

“The construction companies too,” Xander told him. “No one I’ve talked to has heard of any job on the college campus, except for the new community center and that’s definitely unrelated.”

“Learned anything about this Professor Walsh?” Spike asked. He’d given the name to the Watcher but he wasn’t good with contemporary information retrieval. The Watcher had passed the name on to the demon community to research.

“Enough to fit the pattern. Maggie Walsh has a reputation as a brilliant scientist and Sunnydale U considers themselves unbelievably lucky she agreed to come here. She made her reputation with her studies on Operant Conditioning,” Sgt. Morgan finished grimly.

“What’s that?” Xander asked for both of them, knowing Spike wouldn’t.

“Behavior modification through the use of positive and negative reinforcement,” Sgt. Morgan summarized crisply. “It fits with the information you gave us about what you saw in their facility,” he added, looking at Spike. “The question is: are they experimenting on demons as a side project, or is it the main focus of their operation?”

Seeing the shuttered look on Spike’s face at the blunt description, Xander hurriedly shifted the subject. “So, what do we do about these guys?” he asked.

“We sit tight and continue to gather information. We’ve done everything we can to warn the peaceful demons in town to be cautious, to stay off the streets, to not rely on the usual Sunnydale blindness to cover slips. That’s all we can do for now.”

“Sit on our arses and wait for Armageddon to come knocking?” Spike asked him in disbelief. “That’s your plan? Sure you don’t want us to drop our trousers and bend over while we’re at it?”
“Spike!”

“It’s ok.” Sergeant Morgan told Xander. He looked at Spike and spoke strongly: “No, I’m not suggesting we wait for an attack before defending ourselves. I’m saying we’re not ready yet. In my experience, waiting is always preferable to going off half-cocked. Something is bound to break loose: another demon will escape like you did and be able to tell us what happened to them, or someone will get drunk and talk out of turn. Who knows? Right now, the situation is relatively contained. Their need for secrecy hampers them, they have to be cautious or they risk exposing their operation. We don’t want to provoke a situation where they feel justified in declaring martial law and simply taking over the town.”

Xander’s heart sank as he thought about that possibility. A group able to hide themselves for as long and as well as the Initiative had - especially considering that they had built an enormous base in town without anyone knowing about it - had to have enough power to control the media. Sunnydale had been quarantined and surrounded by federal troops during the “laryngitis epidemic”. All the Initiative had to do was say something like that had broken out again. Then no one would get in or out while they cleaned up. He didn’t like to think of what an Initiative ‘clean up’ would encompass.

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“Satisfied, pet?” Spike asked as they left.

Xander flashed him a quick look. “We’ll think of something, Spike. This can’t just keep going on the way it is. Sgt. Morgan is right, something’s bound to give.”

Spike nodded sharply. He’d seen the wisdom behind Sgt. Morgan’s advice, it was just that it was hard to wait instead of taking the war to the enemy. It went against the grain, this sitting around waiting. Still, he wasn’t an inexperienced fledgling anymore. He’d long since learned to wait for the timing to be right. He could do it now.

Not like he had a choice.

“So, disappointed you didn’t get to intimidate Sgt. Morgan?” Xander asked, dark eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I never…” he began indignantly and Xander just laughed at him.

“Please, like I don’t know the way you think?”

“Not fair,” he grumbled, pulling Xander in for a kiss. “Shouldn’t be able to read me that way.”

Xander kissed him again, pressing his body full length against Spike’s so he could feel his boy’s burgeoning erection. “Your deviousness is one of your most attractive qualities,” he breathed huskily.

“Yeah? What are the others?” Spike’s arms held the strong body to his own.

“Let’s go home and I’ll make you a list,” Xander offered, rubbing against him.

Oh yeah, patrol could definitely wait, Spike thought as he slid his arms down to cup Xander’s ass and grind his boy against him.

Fuck patrol. He had some other territory to claim.
Waiting for Buffy in the ground floor lobby of her dorm, Xander wondered if there was some magical difference between college and high school or if there was just something about the fact that the dorm was the students’ home that made it so different. He could, and had, sat for hours in empty classrooms and in the courtyard at the high school without anyone noticing him. Not so here. In the hour he’d been waiting for Buffy, no less than five women had stopped to talk to him.

In his opinion, he stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb, with his long hair, work clothes and lack of books but the women in Buffy’s dorm didn’t seem to mind his obvious “townie” status. Maybe it was the mysterious lure of being ‘taken’ that had suddenly and unexpectedly turned him into a chick magnet. How else to explain the fact that these women seemed to find him interesting and attractive when he was doing nothing but sitting in a battered but comfortable armchair waiting for someone? Probably it was because he was feeling pretty damn good, all things considered. Work was going well, it was a beautiful sunny day, and, oh yeah, he and Spike had spent all night last night trying to prove who had more stamina between the sheets.

He hadn’t minded at all that Spike had won, he thought with a reminiscent smile that made Sue? Susie? blush and smile back at him.

“Xander?”

“Hey, Buffy. Got a minute?”

Buffy had agreed to call Riley with surprisingly little resistance. As he’d suspected, she was tired of waiting for Riley to either shit or get off the pot and ready to confront him. She hadn’t really planned on Xander being there but she’d been willing to be flexible on that point. Well, willing once Xander pointed out that, as a neutral third party, he could keep the conversation on track. Ok, she’d looked a little skeptical but she hadn’t called him on his self-proclaimed status of being Switzerland. Or maybe Sweden. One of the S countries.

At Xander’s suggestion, Buffy had asked Riley to meet her at the little diner where Xander had had his first real conversation with Spike and where Spike and Joyce had made up after the Hansel-and-Gretel demon had almost destroyed their friendship. It was ridiculously superstitious of him, but he thought of the place as lucky. Still, it was a good place for a wary meeting: quiet, frequently empty - he sometimes wondered how they managed to stay in business - neutral territory, and with a lazy staff that had no interest in eavesdropping on conversations.

They hadn’t told Riley that Xander was going to be joining them. Buffy had just insisted that she and Riley needed to talk and, as Xander hoped, Riley had reluctantly agreed to meet her.

One casual conversation over beer, or in this case, hot chocolate, coming up.

It wasn’t cheating. As promised, he’d completely given up on his idea of capturing the soldiers and forcing them to listen. This was a totally new plan, one suggested by Sgt. Morgan, Xander told himself virtuously. A friendly sit down, one on one, to point out the facts of life to Riley Finn. Buffy was there to back him up on the off chance her boyfriend got any ideas about dragging him off anywhere for questioning. Not that he was really expecting anything like that to happen but, if Spike ever found out about this, he wanted to be able to assure his overprotective lover that he had been perfectly safe the entire time.
He waited down the street as Buffy entered the diner. They’d set the meeting time for early afternoon, knowing that meeting after dark would make Riley suspicious and Xander and Buffy arrived a good ten minutes early, giving Xander time to check the area while Buffy went in first.

Riley arrived exactly on time and alone. Circling the block casually, Xander found no sign of any watchers. He entered the diner ten minutes after Riley got there, wanting to give them some time for personal issues, and saw that Buffy and Riley were sitting stiffly across from each other in a booth. They didn’t seem to be talking at all. Buffy was staring out the window and Riley’s face was a frozen mask. Obviously, the personal stuff hadn’t gone well.

Sighing, Xander ordered three hot chocolates at the counter and carried them over to the booth.

“Hi, guys,” he greeted them casually, ignoring the brittle atmosphere. “Hope you like hot chocolate, Riley.” He set the three mugs down on the table and snagged a nearby chair, spinning it around and sitting down so he straddled the seat, his arms crossed over the back of the chair, joining them but not sliding into the booth with them. “We didn’t really get much of a chance to meet the other day,” he said as affably as he could manage. “I’m Xander Harris.”

Riley stared at him with unfriendly eyes, then looked at Buffy. “What’s going on here, Buffy? I thought you said you wanted to talk to me.”

“I did. I do. I…”

“We thought it might clear the air if we all talked,” Xander filled in when Buffy stumbled to a halt.

“You mean you’re going to explain why you’re helping a demon?” Riley looked poised to leave at any second. “Or are you going to claim that wasn’t Hostile 17?”

“It’s complicated, Riley. Things aren’t as black and white as you think.” Buffy began.

Riley began sliding out of the booth. “It’s not complicated, Buffy. You told me you were the Slayer. You’re supposed to kill demons, not cover for them.”

Xander shifted his chair to block Riley and leaned forward, one arm on the table one on the back of Riley’s seat, staring eye to eye with the soldier. “She does kill demons. She’s probably killed way more than you ever will. But she knows the difference between harmless demons and dangerous ones. Something you seem to have a problem with.”

“Are you claiming Hostile 17 isn’t dangerous?” Riley gave a short bark of disbelieving laughter but thankfully didn’t try and push past Xander to get out. “He put two men in the hospital during his escape - and that was with the chip. He shouldn’t have been able to hurt anyone at all.”

With an effort, Xander kept his face expressionless. Riley had just confirmed what they had suspected, that something physical had been done to Spike. A “chip”. It had to mean some sort of computer hardware, he couldn’t think of any other use for the term.

“Actually, I meant the werewolf and the baby Drak’taash you’re holding prisoner, among others. You have to know that werewolves are normal humans 27 days out of 30 and you must be aware that a Drak’taash cub isn’t capable of hurting anyone.”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss…”

“Riley,” Buffy interrupted, her voice quiet but intense. “I know you guys have done a lot of good but there’s a lot of things you don’t understand about the demon world. They’re not all dangerous. Some of them are completely harmless.”
“And your proof of that is something that kills and infects humans, a baby whose parents took two teams to subdue, and Hostile 17?” Riley shot back at her.

“Yes,” Buffy answered strongly. “God, don’t be such a bigot, Riley. No one asks to become a werewolf but getting bit shouldn’t be a death sentence either. Werewolves just have to be contained for three nights a month, the rest of the time they’re completely human. The only thing that makes a Drak’taash hostile towards anyone is if someone threatens their babies. You created the problem by taking their child. And by taking their baby, you made sure they were dangerous to anyone and anything they ran into while they were searching for their kid.” Buffy had regained her normal confidence and she wasn’t cutting Riley any slack as she pointed out the facts to him.

“I’m the Slayer. This is my turf you’re playing on, Riley. You people are in way over your heads. You’re messing with things you don’t understand and causing problems you won’t even see coming.”

“Among other things,” Xander added, so proud of Buffy he could hardly keep track of the conversation. He should never have doubted which side she’d come down on. “Among other things, you’re risking an all out war. Demons who would never hurt anyone, who wouldn’t even show themselves in public under ordinary circumstances, are going to band together to stop you if you keep this up.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a warning, you idiot,” Xander said flatly. “You push this town too far and, sooner or later, the town is going to push back.”

“Both of you, back off.” Buffy ordered as Xander and Riley glared heatedly at each other. “I’m choking on the testosterone here.”

Xander sat back and was surprised when, after a moment, Riley did too. Ok, so they had been just one second shy of pawing dirt at each other but the other man just got his back up. And, hey, it wasn’t like Buffy wasn’t sweating some testosterone too with her “I’m the Slayer” speech, he thought with a carefully suppressed grin.

Buffy took a deep breath. “Riley, I don’t expect you to just take my word about this but I’m hoping you’ll at least think about what I’m saying. You guys have no idea of what you are stirring up in this town.”

“How is what we’re doing different from what you do?” Riley asked resentfully.

“The Slayer helps keep the balance, Riley. If demons aren’t causing problems, I don’t hunt them. The harmless demons know that. Your group has every demon in town scared.”

“The kind of scared that turns to angry,” Xander added, remembering Ethan Rayne’s words. “Even harmless demons will fight back eventually.”

Xander couldn’t tell if they were getting through at all. There was no expression on Riley’s face or in his eyes but he hadn’t left and he was listening. Maybe that counted for something.

“When we ran into each other on patrol that night,” Buffy said quietly. “I hoped we could work together. Things had been going so well up ‘til then. Finding out that we were in the same line of work - it just seemed to give us more in common. I was glad I didn’t have to lie to you anymore about what I am - what I do.”

She shot a quick glance at Xander who tried to look like he wasn’t listening as she continued.
“I don’t think you’re the kind of person who would deliberately hurt something that wasn’t dangerous, Riley. I hope I’m right because, if I’m wrong, you’re not the man I thought you were.”

Riley was silenced by that. Buffy waited for him to say something, then slid out of the booth with a nearly inaudible sigh. “Thanks for agreeing to meet with me,” she said. “Let’s go Xander.”

Riley didn’t make a move to stop her and Xander’s jaw tightened.

“Give us a minute, Buffy. I’ll be right behind you.”

Buffy hesitated, looking suspiciously between Riley’s puzzled face and Xander’s noncommittal one, and Xander gave her a reassuring smile. “I promise, we’ll be cool. Just need a few minutes of guy time,” he said lightly.

“Ok,” she said slowly, “I’ll be right outside.”

It wasn’t clear which one of them her words were aimed at but Xander suspected it was him. He watched as she walked to the door, glancing back over her shoulders, not saying anything until the door closed behind her. Then he turned to Riley.

“You’re an idiot,” he said pleasantly, enjoying the other man’s surprise at his bluntness. “Buffy’s an amazing person. She’s strong, she’s got more courage than anyone you will ever know, she’s funny, not to mention beautiful. Most guys would kill to have someone like that in love with them and all you’re interested in doing is breaking her heart. I don’t give a damn what you’re involved in or how important you think it is, get your head on straight or get the hell out of her life. She’s in love with you but she’s not going to wait forever for you to get your head out of your ass.”

He shoved back his chair, standing and staring down at the other man, who just gaped at him.

“And by the way, you should ask yourself what your little group would do to the Slayer if they ran across her in a cemetery doing her job. I’m guessing that if anyone but you had seen her fighting, she’d be in one of your little cells right now, waiting to be experimented on to find out what makes her different from other girls.” He waited for that to sink in and added: “Are you really sure you’re on the right side when your people would do that to your girlfriend?”

Leaving Riley at the table, Xander strode out of the room without looking back.
The polgara launched another roundhouse swing and Spike ducked under it, the massive arm brushing the top of his head before he bounced back up and swung his doubled fists into the thing’s back, careful to avoid the sharp growths that jutted from the bones of its shoulder blades, spine and hips. Fighting a polgara required more stamina than finesse, their scaly hides and solid bones made it hard to land a blow the damn things even felt, much less something that would actually hurt them. If the ridiculous looking things had possessed even half a brain, Spike thought, dancing backwards out of its reach as it swung at him again, they’d be unstoppable. Fortunately, they were dumber than shit, barely sentient, and relied completely on their strength and mass to overpower their opponents.

And speed, he reminded himself, forced to drop and roll away as it moved with the startling quickness of its species, nearly catching him with one of the two-foot skewers it was waving about like a human flagging down a taxi. Too bloody stupid to even use a stake properly, he thought, reaching up and grabbing the skewer, using it to pull himself back to his feet and then forcing the skewer down toward the ground, stomping on it with his boot and breaking off the lethally sharp point.

He let go immediately and leapt clear - the polgara was too strong for close quarters fighting, if he got caught where it could grab him, it could tear his head off as easily as Spike could a human’s. Not to mention, it could still power the jagged end of that broken skewer straight through his body, Spike reminded himself as the demon sought to do just that.

He circled it warily, shifting sideways to keep it moving, needing a breather before he attacked again. They’d been fighting for a while now and the broken arm skewer was the first significant damage he’d done to the massive demon. Knocked it sprawling once or twice, he thought in satisfaction, but it had done the same to him more than once and it still looked fresh as a daisy - well, a 7-foot tall, grayish-green, smelly daisy anyway.

Polgara reminded him of nothing so much as the Creature from the Black Lagoon, the monster in a science fiction movie that he and Dru had watched back in the fifties. He grinned, remembering that night, even as he continued to circle the demon cautiously. He and Dru had slipped into the theater and drained several teenagers, their actions completely ignored by the rest of the audience sitting mesmerized by the movie, wearing those ridiculous 3-D glasses. Drusilla had put on a pair of the cheap cardboard glasses and clapped her hands in childish glee, exclaiming rapturously along with the rest of the audience over the 3-D effects, finally standing on the chair, as she tried to touch the fish that seemed to be swimming off the screen above the audience’s heads. Watching her standing tiptoe on the armrests, balancing with effortless grace, her long black dress drifting around her slender form as she reached above her head, her lips red with the blood of her victims, not even the ridiculous glasses able to disguise the wonder on her face, Spike had loved her so much he’d thought his non-beating heart would burst.

Almost made him want to let the polgara go, for reminding him of that night.

Still, he needed to take the thing down. Polgara fed too often and too conspicuously to have one wandering his territory and he’d tracked this one from the messy remains of its last kill, something he suspected had been a large dog before the polgara ate all the meaty bits. If too many German Shepherds and what not went missing in town, that would draw the attention of the authorities. More so than if the thing stuck to eating demons. Polgara weren’t fussy, animal, demon, or human: if it moved, they’d eat it.
Right, back to business.

He kept moving, staying out of the thing’s reach, and made a note to do some research on how to kill polgara demons when he had the chance. Because as far as he could tell, the damn thing had very few vulnerable spots. Trying to knee-cap it had almost crippled Spike: the polgara’s joints were protected by solid bone spurs. Ditto the groin. Its bony chin shielded his neck and hitting its chest with both feet in a kick that had the entire weight of his body behind it had been like crashing into a solid concrete wall. Spike had felt the shock of impact all the way from his heels to the top of his head and the thing had staggered back two steps as a reward for his efforts. Yeah, it had gone down but only because there was a fallen tree behind it when it staggered backwards.

He smirked to himself. When he was describing how he’d kicked this demon’s ass, he probably wouldn’t mention that the damn thing had just tripped, not actually knocked off its feet.

And that’s what he got for letting his own thoughts distract him. Spike spun away as the polgara lunged for him, slamming the remaining length of the broken skewer into his side. Swept off his feet by the force of the blow, Spike was hurled backwards across the clearing, crashing into the thick bushes and thankfully missing the tree trunks as he landed.

He rolled instinctively, struggling to get clear of the bushes and back on his feet, knowing that to stay down was to die. The ground dropped out from under him unexpectedly and he cursed as he found himself tumbling down a hill, unable to stop, completely out of control as he crashed through bushes and bounced painfully off a tree.

There were shouts from above and a sharp buzzing sound and the smell of ozone in the air as he came to rest at the bottom of the small ravine. Ignoring the pain in his side, he scrambled to his feet and moved for deeper cover. Looking back up the slope, the darkness was split by a flash of blue lightening and that crackle of electricity sounded again. There was a moment’s silence, then voices called to each other, clearly audible in the otherwise quiet woods.

“It’s out.”

“Good work. Bag and tag it.”

Spike melted back into the black shadows under the trees, sliding down along a trunk until his white hair was under the cover of the waist high undergrowth.

Figures appeared at the top of the slope and powerful flashlights shone down in his direction, playing along the walls and floor of the ravine.

“Did you see what it was fighting with?”

“Negative. Shall we pursue?”

There was a pause as the flashlight continued to search the bushes. Spike held his position with the unblinking, unbreathing stillness of vampires until the flashlight finally snapped off.

“Too risky,” the second voice declared. “Let’s get this thing back to base.”

The figures at the top of the ravine disappeared and Spike listened as the soldiers readied the polgara to be carried back to the command center. He smiled mirthlessly as he heard them talking. Apparently “mother” wasn’t going to be happy that one of the arm skewers was damaged. When it was clear that the soldiers were occupied and truly not interested in the second fighter, Spike slipped away moving silently along the bottom of the ravine until he was well clear of the area.
The polgara was taken care of and that was one demon he didn’t give a rat’s arse if the soldiers played with. With luck, the damn thing would wake up on the way to the base and take a few of them out.

Sitting at the kitchen table late Sunday morning, Xander frowned over his notes for the upcoming week. Which was more important: Mrs. Walter’s paint job or the Johnsons’ yard work? The Griffins’ fence was the top priority for the week, but which job should come next?

He still had the same three high school kids working for him and he was seriously considering upping it to four. All of his demon customers were nervous, wanting everything about their houses and businesses to be “normal” looking, afraid to let things go even a little in case it called attention to them. As a result, Xander’s business had nearly doubled in the last couple months and he hated the fact that the demons in town were so frightened of being conspicuous that they were having work done that ordinarily they wouldn’t have bothered with.

He hated that he was profiting from their very justifiable fear and tried to compensate by factoring it into his bidding process. If he was sure the job would have been done regardless of the Initiative, he bid it as a normal job. If he thought that the customer was having work done because they were afraid that it was something that might call attention to them, he bid those jobs at cost, like he had when he was learning. The customer paid for the materials and the exact amount it cost Xander to pay his employee to have the work done. His workers were good kids. This was their family and friends they were working for and they knew the score. All three of them were consistently turning in fewer hours than they could possibly have actually worked on jobs where the customers were having work done because they were afraid and not because they could afford it or it really needed to be done.

Just one more reason to hate the Initiative, he thought grimly, deciding the Johnsons’ yard work should be the second job his crew tackled. People got weird about their neighbors’ yards. Plus, they should be able to at least start painting Mrs. Walter’s house this week and getting the front painted would ease Mrs. Walter’s mind. She’d been almost shaking with fear when he’d gone to her house to bid the job, ashamed because she couldn’t control the bristling spikes that flared on her arms as she served him tea. The spikes were a defense mechanism, a way to make the small Q’oniik demon look bigger and scarier than they were, like a cat arching its back and puffing up its fur when faced with a dog. He’d been glad to see she was finally able to control the reaction by the time he’d left, promising to do the job as soon as possible.

It really made him wish he could introduce her to the Initiative soldiers and see if they still felt good about themselves knowing that they’d terrified the tiny widow to the point where she was afraid to leave her house. Mrs. Walter had lived in Sunnydale her entire life and she was just a nice lady who made killer brownies and grew weird vegetables in her backyard garden behind the privacy of the tall fences.

Almost growling to himself, Xander finished filling out the schedule - which of the guys to which jobs according to their skills and their availability for the week. He used to like this part of his business, it was like fitting a jigsaw puzzle together but now, having to balance the clients’ fear level against how much the job actually needed to be done, the fun had gone out of the weekly chore. With a relieved sigh, he set the papers aside. He’d take them to the office later this afternoon and call his workers and give them their assignments. The phone in his office was now the only one anyone could reach him on, thanks to the Initiative, and it was annoying that he had to stop by the tiny converted storage shed that served as his office several times a week to pick up messages now that he no longer had a cell phone.
Stuffing everything into an envelope, Xander headed for the fridge. He’d have lunch, then go to the office. As he contemplated the interior of the refrigerator, someone knocked on the outside door.

It was so rare for anyone to come to the apartment that he almost didn’t recognize the sound at first. For one second, his heart raced and panic flooded him. Then he forced himself to calm down. If it was the Initiative, he doubted they would have the courtesy to knock. Moving slowly to the door, he checked through the peephole.

There was a single figure on the other side, someone wearing a heavy buckskin coat lined in wool, the kind of thing designed for much colder climates than southern California. He was partially turned away, apparently looking out toward the street and the abandoned buildings surrounding the factory. As he turned back toward the door, raising his hand to knock again, Xander gasped in shock and flung the door open.

“Oz!”

Oz looked the same. Standing there on the landing, hands thrust deep in his pockets, a smile lurking in his eyes, he was still the same quiet, self-contained individual Xander had known. Recovering from his surprise, he stepped forward and hugged the smaller man. Oz gave him a brief, tight hug in return and they stepped back again, studying each other.

“When did you get back in town?”

“Pretty much now,” Oz answered with a slight smile. “I was worried about you.” His eyes still watched Xander intently as he continued: “I haven’t heard from you in nearly two months.”

“Oh god, Oz, I’m sorry. Things got kind of crazy in a Hellmouthy way and I stopped checking my email.” He made a face, realizing how lame it sounded. “I guess I never got back into the habit of checking it - email’s kind of a new thing for me. I’m really sorry. I mean it’s great that you’re here but I’m sorry I worried you.”

Oz shrugged. “Not the issue. Just wanted to be sure you were ok.”

“There’s a lot going on, but mostly I’m ok.” Remembering himself, he stepped back. “Come in. Spike’s…”

“Awake.” Spike’s voice finished for him from the bedroom door as Oz stepped inside the apartment. Xander spared a quick glance behind him and was relieved to see that Spike had pulled on a pair of jeans. The vampire was leaning one shoulder against the wall, arms folded across his bare chest, his head tilted to one side as he studied Oz curiously. “Wolf,” was all he said in greeting.

Oz dipped his head slightly in response. “Master Spike.”

Xander’s eyebrows rose. No one except members of the demon community used Spike’s title. Oz certainly never had. He looked curiously between the two, wondering what he was missing.

Oz gave him a slight, reassuring smile. “I’ve learned a lot while I’ve been away,” he said.

Xander was reeling. Oz was the same and yet, completely different.

Spike had sat with them for about twenty minutes, spending the entire time silently listening to their conversation and studying Oz intently. Finally, having obviously decided that Oz didn’t pose
a threat, he’d simply gone back to bed, leaving them alone to catch up. As he’d left, he’d given Oz a long, warning look and Oz had dipped his head again, deliberately. Xander made a note to ask about it later, because it was obvious there was a great deal of unspoken communication going on between his friend and his lover.

Oz had gotten control of his wolf. The woman in Colorado recommended by Mr. Okolo had turned out to be, not a werewolf herself but mated to one. Xander cocked a curious eyebrow at Oz for that term, wondering why he didn’t just say they were married or living together. Oz just did that mysterious thing where he smiled without moving a single muscle in his face and continued his story. Her mate - Oz repeated the term deliberately - was the leader of the local werewolf pack and Oz had spent the last few months learning how to be a werewolf.

“Ok, seriously confused. How do you learn to be a werewolf? You kinda just change at the full moon, right? I thought you didn’t remember anything about what happened when you changed so, what’s to learn?”

Oz smiled at him, showing teeth this time, his eyes going black as he held out one hand. Xander watched in fascinated horror as the fingers lengthened and claws grew and the shape of the fingers changed, the bones longer and more slender and the knuckles more prominent before coarse brown hair covered them.

Heart pounding, he scrambled to his feet. “Oz?” he yelped.

The hand shifted back to human and Oz’s hazel eyes looked back at him, a hint of a smile in them. “As I said, I learned how to be a wolf.”

“And that means scaring the crap out of me?” Xander asked, only half jokingly.

“No. Sorry.” And Oz did look apologetic.

“You’ve been around a lot of people where changing is normal, haven’t you?” Xander guessed, sitting back down.

“Yeah. Turns out, werewolves live a long time, if they make it through the first couple years, and the pack I’ve been staying with is an old one. I’ve learned a lot from them, but mostly, I’ve learned to accept the wolf.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” Xander asked curiously.

“It means I don’t lock myself in a cage anymore.” Xander frowned, wondering if Oz resented them for keeping him locked up every month. Oz shook his head fractionally. “My choice. It was the right thing to do - then.”

“What about now?”

“If I’m somewhere safe, I change. If I’m not, I control the change until it’s safe to let the wolf out.” Oz looked at Xander and a hint of a smile appeared in his eyes at Xander’s calm acceptance of that statement. “When I left, I thought the answer was learning how to suppress the wolf. Turns out suppression and control are two different things.”

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They talked for a long time, and Xander learned more about werewolves than he had in all their research sessions back when Oz had first become the wolf. Like vampires, Giles’ books didn’t know the half of it when it came to werewolves and he was fascinated by the glimpses he got into
Oz’s new world.

Oz was no longer afraid of his wolf, that was the biggest change. He’d left Sunnydale looking for answers because he was afraid he was going to hurt someone and he’d found those answers in Colorado. The pack he’d joined let their wolves run free in the mountains, far from any humans. In freeing the wolf, Oz had learned control even when changed.

“I’m still learning,” he admitted. “My control isn’t perfect and full moons will be difficult for a long time but getting to know the wolf has been… amazing.”

“How so?” Xander asked. Oz’s tone had been almost wondering.

Oz smiled. “I can… ‘borrow’” he sounded hesitant, like that wasn’t the right word but as close as he could get to the concept, “the wolf’s attributes in human form.”

“You mean like strength, speed, that kind of thing?”

“Some. That will mostly come later as I mature as a wolf. For now, I can tap into the wolf’s hearing, scent, eyesight, even taste, as a human.” He looked amused. “Taste can backfire, I don’t use that one very much.”

In turn, Xander filled Oz in on the Initiative and everything that had been happening since he’d left town, ending with the warning that Sunnydale wasn’t safe for anyone with any demon in them.

“It’s great to see you, Oz but I gotta warn you. These guys aren’t fussy about what makes a demon. There was a werewolf in their cells when Spike was there and it wasn’t a full moon.”

Oz’s eyes darkened, literally, his eyes going solid black and the bones around them seeming to shift a little until his face was almost alien looking. “They’re holding a wolf prisoner?” he growled.

“You don’t blame him,” Xander offered. “We’re not ready but we do plan on doing something -as soon as we can figure out what,” he finished candidly.

“You need help?”

Xander hesitated. “Are you sure, Oz? Sunnydale’s dangerous right now and, like I said, we’re still at the trying to find a way to fight back stage.”

“I’m sure,” Oz answered grimly. “And I can bring nearly 30 wolves to the fight, if it comes to that.”

He wasn’t surprised when Oz stood to leave shortly afterwards. It had been a draining conversation for both of them.
“Do you need a place to stay?”

Oz gave him a raised eyebrow look of surprise and Xander finished with a slight grin: “because I’m sure Giles wouldn’t mind letting you stay in his spare bedroom.”

Oz shook his head. “I’m good. I’ll crash at Devon’s place.”

“How is he?” Wow, he hadn’t even known Devon was still in town. Not that he’d ever really hung out with Devon, but still.

“He’s Devon,” Oz said, which pretty much seemed to cover it.

Xander hugged him at the door. “God, it’s good to see you again, Oz.”

“You too, Xander.”

“Be careful. Seriously, Oz. Don’t let anyone know you’re a wolf while you’re here in town.”

Oz just nodded, pulling on his coat and giving him an unreadable glance. Xander watched him go, torn between gladness and worry at his return.

Spike’s voice sounded from behind him. “Thirty wolves. That will come in handy.”
The small hill overlooking the UC Sunnydale campus had a good view of the quadrangle where Spike had escaped from the Initiative. The area was well-lit and clearly visible from where he stood, although the metal hatch he’d climbed out of no longer existed. No trace of it remained; the grass that had been planted over the inconspicuous metal trapdoor looked as if it had been there as long as all the other grass in the courtyard. He suspected that, if he went down there and dug up the turf that now covered the spot, he would find that the access shaft had been filled in as well.

The bunker in the woods that Xander and Angel had discovered was the only entrance into the Initiative that they knew of now and that was sure to be heavily guarded. Spike narrowed his eyes as he stared down at Lowell House, wishing his gaze could penetrate brick and mortar and see what lay hidden inside. The fraternity was one of the buildings that bordered the open courtyard and its proximity to the access shaft was just one more reason to suspect that Lowell House wasn’t quite what it seemed.

Pulling the pack of smokes out of his shirt pocket, Spike felt a stab of renewed irritation at the loss of his duster. Above and beyond the trophy value, the coat had a multitude of pockets and was an excellent place to stash things. Lighting up, he tucked the cigarettes back into his pocket and considered what they knew about Lowell House.

According to Xander, the Slayer suspected that several of Maggie Walsh’s Teaching Assistant’s were soldiers in the Initiative and that they all lived in Lowell House. It made sense that the military would keep all their eggs in one basket. If Lowell House was the Initiative’s on-campus cover, then there should be a way into the base inside the fraternity. There had to be a damn big entrance somewhere for them to move their equipment in and out of and it wasn’t the bunker in the woods. That entrance was too inaccessible for anything but foot traffic. The fraternity would be perfect cover: trucks could go in and out all day and nobody would bat an eye. Slap a caterer’s label on the side of a van and no one would suspect it actually carried military equipment and supplies.

Xander had checked into the fraternity’s history but hadn’t found anything useful. Lowell House had been in the same spot long before the rest of the campus buildings. It had started out life as the Lowell Home for Children and been turned into a fraternity when the state built UC Sunnydale on the grounds of the former group home. From his position on top of the small hill, Spike could see the front of the building, the warm yellow light shining from the windows belying the secrets hidden inside. If Lowell House was the lid covering the underground base, the soldiers must have taken over the existing fraternity, chasing out the real students and filling it with their own people.

Once again, Spike found himself wondering how the base could have been built in such secrecy that no whisper of its existence had reached anyone in town - demon or human. They hadn’t carved the facility out of solid rock, Sunnydale was riddled with natural caves and sewer tunnels and underground passages and many of them were occupied. How could all those underground lairs and pathways have been taken over without the entire demon community being aware that something was going on?

It argued for magic and magic on an epic scale, not some two-bit practitioner who shopped for love-spell supplies at the magic store in town. Yet everything they had learned about the Initiative said they were completely oblivious to the mystic side of the demon world. The underground
facility was white and sterile and filled with science, not an environment conducive to working mojo.

Frowning down at the fraternity, Spike took a deep drag of his cigarette, letting the warm smoke fill his lungs as he turned the problem over in his mind again, wondering if, in solving it, it would put him any closer to destroying the Initiative. If nothing else, it would be nice to know if the soldiers had some powerful witches on their side who could fry the bollocks off him before he got close enough to do any damage.

The only answer that made any sense was that the Mayor - ex-Mayor, he reminded himself with a smirk - was behind it. The timing was right, the Mayor had had enough power to work the necessary mojo to cover something this big, and the Mayor would undoubtedly have found the idea of helping set up a base for demon hunters in the very town he was about to destroy amusing. Hell, Spike appreciated the irony of the idea. Problem was, if the Mayor was the answer, then it was a useless one. The Mayor was dead and no longer a player on anyone’s side.

Still, if the Mayor was the reason the Initiative had been able to build their base in such complete secrecy, it was doubtful the government knew he’d used mojo to achieve his ends: clearing out the demons from the area and making sure no one involved remembered anything. The Mayor had been a talkative git but not about anything useful and the military was arrogant enough to figure they’d kept the lid on their project themselves. Which meant that the Initiative was exactly what it appeared to be: a bunch of cocky amateurs who didn’t believe in magic and thought they knew what they were doing and the “chip” soldier-boy had referred to - Spike had been pleased to learn that he’d put two men in the hospital despite the “chip” - had to be technological, not magical. A computer chip undoubtedly. And the one thing Spike knew about computers was that they always seemed to be breaking down. He just needed to find a way to bollocks up the one in his head and he was back in business. And, bonus, it was unlikely they were going to have to deal with any mojo when they attacked the Initiative.

Flicking the butt of his cigarette away, Spike spun on his heels and left the area. It was past time he started readying the Court for war.

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Meeting Oz and Buffy for lunch, Xander was surprised to see that Oz had a folder of information on UC Sunnydale with him. Oz hadn’t said anything about staying in town for long, certainly not long enough to enroll in classes. After they had ordered, he tapped the folder which Oz had set on the table.

“What’s going on?”

“Getting into the part,” Oz answered cryptically, which just left him even more puzzled.

Buffy filled him in: “Oz is going to check out Lowell House for us. He’s been talking to the registrar about signing up for classes and poking around the campus as a cover story.” She mock glared at Oz. “It’s a cover story because I haven’t been able to talk him into moving back for real.”

Oz gave her a slight shrug. “Got commitments.”

“Whoa!” Xander held up both hands. Oz and Buffy had gotten together yesterday but he’d assumed they were just catching up with each other, not making plans for taking on the Initiative. When Oz had offered to help, he’d sort of figured Oz was volunteering to help them in an attack on the Initiative, if it came down to that, not for recon into enemy territory. Sending someone not fully human into Lowell House to ask questions about where they were keeping the demons struck him
as both unnecessarily reckless and dangerous. “Doesn’t anyone but me think that is a seriously bad idea? As far as we know, Lowell House is filled with people who don’t like demons - and let’s not forget, they don’t see a difference between werewolves and demons.”

Oz gave him an unreadable look. “Xander, we need information. I’m the best person for the job.”

“Hello? These people will lock you up and torture you. You need to stay away from them.”

“As long as I don’t change, they won’t know I’m a werewolf,” Oz said calmly.

Buffy put up a hand to stop him as he drew breath to argue the point. “Xander, he’s just going to wander into Lowell House and the other buildings in the area, just like any other prospective student.” She gave Oz a sideways, half skeptical look. “He says he can just smell things to check for anything unusual.”

“You’re going to walk around sniffing things?” Xander asked in disbelief.

“Werewolves have a really powerful sense of smell,” Oz told him.

“What exactly do you think you’re going to be able to smell? We’re talking underground base here. Asking for a tour of the cellars is going to raise eyebrows.”

“We’re looking for people who are in regular contact with demons and who frequently use weapons,” Oz pointed out. “I’ll be able to tell if Riley’s friends are soldiers too. And I’ll know if there’s a way into the Initiative without leaving the main floor.” Xander was surprised by his certainty and Oz shrugged. “Air circulates. If one of the buildings has access to the underground base, I should be able to smell the demons in the cells anywhere in the building.”

“It’ll be ok, Xander,” Buffy said reassuringly. “Oz and I talked about it. He won’t do anything to call attention to himself, he won’t even have to ask a single suspicious question.”

“I’ll just be another new student wandering around, checking out the campus,” Oz said with a hint of a smile.

Xander bit back his objections. He didn’t have the right to tell Oz what he could and couldn’t do and the two of them did sound convincing. “Ok,” he said reluctantly, “but either Buffy or I should be there as backup.”

It didn’t surprise him that Oz was insisting on being in the thick of things, despite the risk. Xander had spent well over an hour in the library yesterday, reading the accumulated emails Oz had sent over the last two months and it had shown just how much Oz had changed, even if he seemed the same calm, self-contained person on the surface. Oz had found a home and acceptance with the werewolf pack - people who’d been through the same struggles he had and who were teaching him how to not only live with being a werewolf but to embrace it as a gift. It was clear that Oz had begun to think of himself as a werewolf and as a member of the pack. Before he left town, Oz had always thought of himself as human, infected by a disease, but still human. Back then, Oz had been searching for a way to control or exorcise the wolf. Instead, he’d found something he hadn’t even known he was looking for.

Oz’s emails hadn’t been the only surprise waiting for him in cyberspace. Willow had continued to email him regularly despite not having gotten any response from him in weeks. His inbox had held a dozen or so messages from Oz and nearly twice as many from Willow, the most recent having been sent yesterday. Scrolling through the messages, Xander had been ashamed that he’d let himself get so overwhelmed that he’d completely stopped checking in with both of them. Some
friend he was.

After reading Oz’s emails, he’d tackled the ones from Willow and, skimming through them, Xander had felt his stomach tying itself in knots. Buffy had kept Willow abreast of what was happening in Sunnydale, including what the Initiative had done to Spike and Xander had been furious that Buffy had shared that with someone Spike despised.

Reading through Willow’s emails, he’d felt most of the anger drain out of him. Willow’s messages ran the gamut from worry over Spike’s disappearance to relief at his return and what seemed like genuine sympathy for his suffering. Reading them, Xander could tell that Willow had chosen her words carefully, trying to convey her feelings.

She’d done a better job than she probably intended. It was clear she was hurting for Xander’s pain, not for Spike. She may have brought herself to accept his and Spike’s relationship, especially from 5,000 miles away, but reading between the lines, he could tell she was no more fond of Spike now than when she’d left. Not surprising, given that she thought Spike was going to hurt Xander, even turn him one day, and Spike had made no secret of his hatred and contempt for Willow. He supposed it was too much to ask that they would ever get along.

Of course, Buffy and Spike had started out with a negotiated, mutual no-kill pact as their only point of agreement and they were almost friends now. Certainly they had long since arrived at mutual respect and were able to work together even if they only ever hung out together for Xander’s sake.

Willow’s last email, sent yesterday, was a summary of her research into Professor Walsh. He’d skimmed over that part as Willow was talking about Maggie Walsh’s brilliant reputation and her expertise in operant conditioning - which they already knew. Willow speculated that her involvement with the Initiative meant that they were trying to control demons psychologically. She reminded Xander how difficult it was to work magic on vampires and emphasized strongly that Maggie Walsh would be seeking a scientific control system - one that could be implemented on a broad scale. In addition to what was in the public record, Willow had somehow gotten her hands on some classified articles written by Professor Walsh that talked about the benefits of using operant conditioning on military personnel.

I’ve sent this all to Buffy as well, Willow had written.

Based on what we know about Maggie Walsh and how Buffy described Spike’s reaction to hitting someone, my guess would be that Prof. Walsh has found a way to put her theories into practice. The problem with behavior modification is that it wears off and it can be overcome, especially if the person knows what’s been done to them. It sounds like she’s found a way to make the negative stimulus that punishes the undesirable behavior permanent. Sorry - I know that sounds clinical.

The theory behind behavior modification is that you are punished or rewarded for good and bad behavior. You spank a child for stealing cookies so they won’t steal them again. But the child knows if you aren’t home, or if they can blame the dog or their sister, then they won’t get spanked. If the child knows they would be spanked EVERY TIME, without exception, they probably wouldn’t dare risk stealing the cookies ever again.

There are only two ways I can think of that would make that work: either magic or computers. Magic isn’t likely because scientists mostly don’t even believe in it. That leaves computers. It would take a really sophisticated program but a computer has the automatic response that seems to be happening to Spike. I can’t figure out how they could program a computer chip so it would recognize actions and respond properly but, if they’ve figured out that problem, they could wire it directly into the pain centers of the brain so that the chip causes pain without physical damage to the body.
If that’s what they’ve done, Xander, I don’t know how it can be fixed other than by the surgeon who implanted the chip to begin with. I’ll check with the coven but magic and vampires generally don’t mix well. They’re hard to affect magically, either to help or hurt them, and generally you can only use magic against them indirectly. For example: you can use magic to create sunlight and the sunlight will kill them but you can’t just use magic to make a vampire turn to dust.

Xander, I won’t lie and tell you that my first reaction wasn’t: good, he can’t hurt Xander now, but I want you to know I’m not thinking that anymore. I’ve thought a lot about Oz and Sgt. Morgan and Mr. Olsen and where you draw the line between human and demon. And I’ve been thinking about all those demons who came to help us against the Mayor. Some of them died trying to help us. They didn’t care that we were humans. Maybe most demons in Sunnydale are the kind that Buffy needs to kill, but they aren’t all that way and it sounds like these Initiative people don’t understand that. I might feel different about the chip they put in Spike if I could make myself believe that he was the only one it was going to happen to, but that just isn’t possible. Whatever their intentions, I don’t see their long term goals as being anything good.

It’s not a secret that I have a hard time accepting you and Spike, and I worry that things will end badly for you, but I haven’t forgotten that Spike was one of the demons who fought with us at Graduation. Even if he was just doing it for you, he risked his life to help keep a bunch of high school kids alive. For that reason alone, he deserves our help now.

I’ll keep looking and see if there’s anything else I can find that might help. If the coven has any ideas, I’ll let you and Buffy know right away. I hope to hear from you soon,
- Willow

Staring at the computer screen, the letters blurring in front of his unseeing eyes, Xander had turned her words over and over in his head, examining them from every angle. He and Willow had been trying to reconnect and Spike had remained the stumbling block they couldn’t seem to get past. Their electronic exchanges had grown more and more comfortable as they cautiously got to know each other again. Willow had trusted him with some big stuff: her relationship with Amy, sharing her exchanges with Buffy when she thought Buffy was losing it over her roommate, but they had both tiptoed around the existence of Spike, which meant they weren’t really communicating at all. Willow just couldn’t let go of her concern that Spike was going to turn Xander one day, even if she seemed to grudgingly accept that Spike wouldn’t hurt him for now. This was the first time that Willow had really been honest about her feelings about Spike and Xander couldn’t help but believe in her sincerity. It sounded like Willow had been thinking about the Initiative for a long time, cycling through a lot of the same worries that Xander had about what their ultimate purpose was.

Finally, he’d shut down the computer without answering, needing time to think about what to say, wanting to be as honest with Willow as she had been with him. It had given him a lot of hope for their future.

In the meantime, Willow might not be able to do much from England, but it was nice to know she was on their side.

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“How many members of the Court have gone missing in the last couple months?” Spike asked.

His Lieutenants looked at each other and, not surprisingly, deferred to Jose, who took a moment to think.

Spike gave him the time he needed. He hadn’t given his Lieutenants any warning about this meeting, or Jose would have the information ready.
“Nearly a dozen,” Jose said finally. “The Slayer and her helpers probably accounted for at least half of them, but that’s more than they would usually kill in that time. The members of the Court generally know where she hunts and only cross her path when they are hunting her.” He frowned, looking at Spike thoughtfully. “Most of the vampires killed by the Slayer are not members of the Court.” He dipped his head respectfully. “More and more, the Court is following your lead, Master Spike, and hunting humans for sustenance and demons for sport.”

Spike nodded curtly. “There’s more demons than vampires in town, ever since we took out the ones working for the Mayor.” He let a smug grin cross his face, remembering how smoothly that fight had gone, but didn’t mention that the fact that he’d forbidden the members of the Court to create fledges was the primary reason for the decrease in the number of vampires. “Got some quality in the Court now and that’s too many gone missing to be the work of the Slayer.”

“The soldiers?” Anthony suggested. His Lieutenants all knew there was a group of soldiers in town hunting demons. They’d passed the word on to the Court, along with instructions to bring any sightings to their attention. Spike had put Michael in charge of tracking the information, looking for patterns, but the soldiers didn’t seem to patrol to any regular pattern. Instead, they acted with frustrating randomness. There would be no sightings for four or five days, then they’d be spotted three nights in a row. Sometimes they seemed to be following a specific target, other times they appeared to be just roaming around town hoping to stumble across demons.

“Most likely.” With an effort, Spike kept his fingers from tapping restlessly against his leg, showing nothing but outward calm to his Lieutenants despite the frustration roiling inside. “Right. ‘bout time we did somethin’ about these wankers. Been lettin’ ‘em have free run in our town for too long.”

He smirked as his Lieutenants exchanged shocked looks. “Master Spike,” Marc said hesitantly, “we will, of course, follow your orders but are you suggesting we take on the army?” His tone strove for neutral but the suggestion that Spike had lost his mind was clear and Spike let his displeasure show.

“Not talkin’ about the army, now are we? Just a small, self-contained base that the rest of the army doesn’t even know exists.” Marc sat straight in his seat, accepting the blistering reprimand in Spike’s tone without flinching. “Not talkin’ about a suicide mission, so you can stop pissin’ yourself.” He let his gaze scan the faces of his five Lieutenants. “Not goin’ into this half-cocked. I want you to start preparing the Court. From now on, every member of the Court trains every day. Pick the best with every type of weapon and have them work with anyone who’s not an expert with that weapon. Have them trade off: teaching one day and learning the next. I don’t care if they’re the best knife fighter in the world,” his glance lingered on Arkady, who relied exclusively on her expertise with knives, “have them learn the crossbow and using an ax as well. I want every member of this Court up to speed on every weapon we have.”

He stood, signaling the end of the meeting. “Don’t care how many questions they ask, no one but us knows what they’re training for.” He stared at Marc for emphasis, “don’t want the Court scarin’ themselves, thinking they’re in over their heads. We’ll lose half the Court to desertion. I’ll tell them what I’m planning just before we attack. They don’t need to know until then.”

“Master Spike? How long to prepare?”

Trust Jose to ask the sensible question. “Not sure,” he admitted. “Depends on when the Court is ready.” And when he had a workable plan, but they didn’t need to know that.
“Lowell House is Initiative Central,” Oz reported when they all met up at Devon’s apartment.

Oz was the last to arrive, he and Buffy having taken different routes from the campus to Devon’s place. Buffy had hung out in the quadrangle while Oz was checking out the buildings, making sure that Oz actually came out of every building he entered, while ostensibly having an outdoor study date with her friend Eddie as her own reason for hanging out in the area. Xander was just grateful that his paranoia was catching as the other two hadn’t balked at taking what felt a little like spy movie precautions but they had all agreed that it was better if Oz wasn’t associated with either Xander or Buffy. Xander was worried about the Initiative taking an interest in Oz, afraid that Oz might show some sign that he wasn’t quite human at the wrong moment.

Staying with Devon was the next best option to Oz leaving town - which Oz had already refused to do. Devon didn’t know that Oz was a werewolf and was one of the few people in their graduating class who had missed graduation. Not because he’d been scared, but because he’d been stoned and had slept through the ceremony. He’d also managed to miss the planning meeting where Buffy, Giles and Sgt Morgan had explained the facts of Hellmouth life to the senior class and, as a result, was one of the few people in their graduating class who was still mostly ignorant about what went on in Sunnydale after dark. Devon was as safe as it got from the soldiers. He wasn’t interested in anything but music and getting stoned and any one who tried to question him would figure out immediately that he wasn’t smart enough to be hiding anything.

“I checked every building around the area where Spike escaped,” Oz told them. “Lowell House is the only one that smells of demons. The smell is faint but it’s pretty much everywhere in the building. Either the underground base is ventilated through the House or there’s regular traffic in and out. I didn’t see any signs of an entrance but I was limited to the public areas on the ground floor.”

“Ok,” Xander said, feeling like they were finally making some progress. “So, is everyone in the House part of the Initiative, or just some of them?” He looked at both of them questioningly: “Can we get a list of everyone in the House? Sgt. Morgan found Riley’s army records, maybe he can check out the rest of them for us.”

“There ought to be some kind of a list somewhere,” Buffy agreed, chewing on her lip thoughtfully. “Sure would help if…” she stopped abruptly and glanced apologetically at both Oz and Xander. It was obvious she’d been wishing that Willow and her computer skills were here and had only remembered at the last second that it was less than tactful to say so in front of Willow’s ex-boyfriend and Xander with his uneasy, semi-relationship with Willow. “It would help to know how many of them are just college students, if we have to storm the place,” Buffy finished, trying to cover her slip. Xander gave her a reassuring smile.

“There’s another problem,” Oz said grimly.

“Great, because the ones we’ve already got are such piddling little things I was getting bored,” Xander said sarcastically.

“There’s something… off about Lowell House.”

“You mean besides being filled with soldiers instead of students?” Xander asked.

“There’s a chemical smell in the house. It’s not coming from the labs downstairs. It’s in the food, on their breath, in their sweat. It’s everywhere.” Oz’s voice had grown a little more sure as he spoke, like things were falling into place in his own mind while he was explaining it to them and he finished with quiet certainty: “Best guess: they’re taking some kind of drugs.”
Buffy reacted first. “No way. Riley’s like Mr. Corn-Fed Iowa Boy, no way is he taking drugs.”

Oz lifted an eyebrow. “Not that kind of drugs,” he said flatly and Buffy looked a little less positive.

“You mean like steroids or something?” Xander asked, remembering how Buffy had described Riley’s friends as all being big and buff.

Oz hesitated. “Maybe, but I doubt it’s that simple. The smell was strongest in the kitchen. I think the drugs are in their food.”

They were silent for a moment, thinking that over. After a moment, Xander said quietly: “That doesn’t sound like something people do to themselves. Not unless you also smelled brownies.”

“No on the brownies,” Oz confirmed.

“Okay,” Buffy asked slowly. “What does that mean?”

“You’re asking us?” Xander shook his head. “Try asking the mad scientists with the hidden agenda instead.”

“It says everyone in the House is in on it, for one, including the kitchen staff,” Oz pointed out, staying on track, which was more than Xander was managing to do.

It felt like there were a thousand questions swirling around in his head and they didn’t have answers to any of them. “When you have eliminated all other possibilities, the remaining answer, no matter how illogical, is the right one,” he muttered to himself.

Oz gave him a fleeting grin. “Mr. Spock,” he identified, “but I think he said: ‘if you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’”

Xander couldn’t resist: “That was from one of the movies. I was thinking the shuttle episode where Spock logically decides it’s time for desperate measures.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Guys? This isn’t Star Trek. Captain Kirk isn’t just going to beam the Initiative out of our lives.”

“That would violate the prime directive,” Oz pointed out and Xander laughed at Buffy’s disgusted look.

“Is there a point to any of this or is this your way of saying we should take a break?” she asked impatiently.

“Sorry, Buffy.” Xander’s grinned faded as he continued. “What I was thinking was kind of a ‘what do we know’ thing, trying to figure out if any of this adds up.” He started ticking points off on his fingers, more thinking out loud than anything.

“One - the Initiative is experimenting on demons. Two - the scientist in charge is an expert on behavior modification. Three -” he faltered, then cleared his throat and continued: “Three - their experiments seem aimed at controlling demons, making them unable to hurt humans. Four - it looks like they may be drugging their own people.”

He looked at the other two. “And that’s it, right?” Which was unbelievably depressing. That that was all they knew after weeks of trying.
Buffy frowned, obviously trying to think of whether they knew anything else significant. “Five, the soldiers at least, don’t seem to know the ultimate purpose behind the Initiative.” She scrunched up her face, looking doubtful, “which may be something called 314.” Buffy had been highly skeptical of Ethan Rayne’s information, pointing out sarcastically to Giles that a man who poisoned candy and magicked Halloween costumes was obviously a man you could trust.

They mulled that over for a minute. Xander spoke first. “I come up with two theories about the drugging. Either it’s a steroid-type thing, and the soldiers are doing it voluntarily to help them go up against things that are stronger than humans, or it’s involuntary, in which case there’s something else going on.” He shrugged helplessly. “And that’s all I’ve got. How about you two?”

“None of this makes any sense. Riley and the others seem totally on board with what the Initiative is doing, drugging them makes no sense at all.” Buffy looked angry and frustrated and completely thrown by this new piece of information.

Oz said thoughtfully: “I think the fact that Professor Walsh’s specialty is behavior modification is key. The question is: what are they doing with what they’re learning from these experiments?”

“And who are they intending to use it on,” Xander added darkly. “Can we get a sample of their food and get it tested?” he asked. Seeing their blank looks, he added defensively: “They do it all the time on tv, how hard can it be to find a lab? If we know what’s in the food, maybe that’ll tell us what they’re doing.”

“And whether the soldiers’ know about it,” Buffy added, perking up a bit. “If they don’t, that may give us a way to get through to them.”

“Yeah, because drugged-up, brainwashed soldiers are likely to be so reasonable,” Xander muttered.

Buffy’s lips tightened. “I’d be pissed as hell if I found out someone was drugging me…” her voice trailed off and she looked away and Xander winced, remembering that last year she had been drugged without knowing about it.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

Buffy shook her head. “Old news.” She got to her feet, putting an abrupt end to the meeting. “I’ll call Giles about getting a lab test done. Oz, can you get yourself invited to lunch at Lowell House?”

Oz nodded. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Can’t you just make friends with a cute cook or something?” Xander suggested. “Invitations to lunch usually involve eating.”

“Have you seen the cafeteria cooks on campus?” Buffy shuddered. “They make the high school lunch lady look good.”

“I’ll think of something,” Oz promised.

“Be careful.”

Oz’s smile had a hint of the wolf in it. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes
*A/N - slightly mangled quotes borrowed from the Star Trek episode: The Galileo Seven and STAR TREK VI: The Undiscovered Country
Chapter 26

The television was on when Xander opened the apartment door cautiously, checking as he always did to make sure Spike wasn’t standing anywhere the rays of the sun would reach when the door swung open. Spike was on the couch, watching a soap opera - something that always amazed Xander, no matter how many times he saw it. There was just something weird about a vampire being hooked on a cheesy soap opera that featured a witch and a talking doll. Even worse, Xander had been there the day Spike and Joyce Summers discovered they both watched the show. He’d listened with open mouthed incredulity as the two them had discussed plot twists and character relationships with the same serious interest with which they debated trends in art and theater.

And they had the nerve to make fun of his liking for Patsy Cline and classic science fiction.

He vaulted over the back of the couch, reaching casually for the remote as he landed on the cushions. Spike’s hand flashed down with that unfair vampire speed, snatching it away before he could get a grip on it and he grinned as Spike stuffed it underneath his far leg without ever taking his eyes off the screen.

“Not nice, luv.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” Oh well, the show would be over soon anyway. Xander leaned against Spike’s shoulder staring in the direction of the TV without actually watching it, his brain still puzzling over the meaning of what Oz had discovered about the soldiers being drugged. Spike put an arm around him, pulling him in closer as he watched his show.

When the end credits rolled, Spike switched of the TV and shifted slightly so he could look at Xander. “What’s got you all worked up, luv?”

It was almost scary sometimes, how well Spike could read him. Of course, he had all those vampire senses going for him, which meant he could listen to Xander’s pulse and breathing and even smell some of his stronger emotions. Spike could always tell when Xander needed some time to collect his thoughts, as opposed to something he needed to talk about right away.

“Did you know that werewolves have an even better sense of smell than vampires?” he asked. Not really the point but, given how good Spike’s sense of smell was, it had blown him away when Oz told him that werewolves had an even better one.

“Everyone knows that,” Spike told him, cocking his head and studying Xander. “That really what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No, I was just surprised.” And he had been. Although the research they’d done on werewolves back when Oz had first been bitten had mentioned that werewolves had a good sense of smell, they hadn’t said that their olfactory abilities put a vampire’s to shame - and vampires could smell a lot of things that humans couldn’t. Just one of those things that was common knowledge in the demon world that humans had no clue about, he thought.

Sitting up straight, he quickly filled Spike in on what Oz had learned at Lowell House. Spike’s eyebrows rose in disbelief when he heard that there were drugs in the soldiers’ food supply.

“Well, in’t that interesting,” Spike said after Xander finished, his eyes narrowing as he considered what the information meant.

“Oz is going to try and get a sample so we can test it.”
“Good thinking,” Spike said absently, his thoughts obviously still elsewhere. “Be nice to know what they’re taking, ‘specially if the wolf doesn’t think it’s steroids.”

“Buffy thinks they don’t know they’re being drugged.” Xander wasn’t as sure about that as Buffy, but she’d made a pretty strong case.

Spike made a scoffing sound. “Slayer would think that. Still wantin’ her toy soldier to be a good guy, isn’t she?”

“That’s part of it,” Xander agreed slowly, “because she doesn’t think he would take drugs voluntarily.”

“Surprising what people are willing to do if they’ve convinced themselves it’s for the greater good,” Spike said before he could finish. “If his bosses told him it was for truth, justice and the American way, soldier boy would probably open wide and swallow anything they gave him. Git.”

“Yeah, but they could just be telling them it’s vitamins and stuff,” Xander argued, not really sure why he was taking on the devil’s advocate role. Maybe Buffy wasn’t the only one who wanted the soldiers to be the good guys at heart. It would sure make things easier if it was true, no question. “If we can find out what they’re taking, we’ll have a better idea.”

“Don’t really care if it’s voluntary,” Spike said. “But what they’re takin’, that’s important. Need to know if it’s going to make them better fighters.” He looked at Xander’s steadily. “Lots of stuff out there to make you stronger, faster, tougher, even it most of it doesn’t last long. An army of drugged up soldiers feelin’ no pain is a whole different thing than fighting regular humans.”

Xander met his gaze, not flinching from the summation. He still clung to the hope that they could avoid an all-out war but Spike was right - they needed to know what they were facing, either way.

“Oz is pretty sure he can get a sample,” was all he said. “But, Spike, if they’re being drugged without knowing about it, and we can prove it, maybe we can get through to them.”

Spike didn’t even try and rein in his skepticism. “Xander, whatever they’re taking, it’s not the reason they’re doing what they’re doing. Telling them about the drugs isn’t going to make them feel bad about what they’ve done and release all the demons they’re holding.” He held up a staying hand and Xander bit back his response and let him finish.

“The drugs aren’t stopping them from living their lives, teaching classes, handling weapons, obeying orders. We’re not talkin’ about dribbling idiots in padded cells. Their brains are clear enough that you and the Slayer didn’t suspect anything and the Slayer’s known soldier boy for months.”

Spike waited, his scarred eyebrow raised in silent question and Xander nodded reluctantly, Spike’s logic having silenced his arguments.

“Not saying that some of them aren’t going to be pissed as hell, luv. But don’t count on it making a difference. If they’re drugging soldiers without them knowin’ about it, their superiors would be dumb as posts if they didn’t have a plausible explanation all ready to trot out in case they need to bring their boys back in line.”

“I suppose. Still, maybe enough of them will be pissed off to at least start to ask question.”

“Long as you’re careful, feel free to start any insurrections you can, luv.” Spike smirked at him and Xander had the depressing feeling that Spike was humoring him. He sighed, feeling like they had stepped one step closer to war, not one step further away, like he’d hoped since Oz told him about
the drugs.

“Something I need to tell you, luv.” Spike’s voice interrupted his gloomy thoughts. He ran his hand down Xander’s thigh, caressing him absently as Xander looked at him inquiringly. “Gonna have to spend more time downstairs for at least the next few nights, probably longer.”

“Is everything ok?”

For a minute, he thought Spike was going to duck the question, then Spike pulled him in for a one armed hug. “Getting the Court ready, luv. I’ve given orders that everyone is to train every night.” He shrugged. “Don’t need to be there, the boys will see my orders are carried out, but things will go better if I’m around to supervise.”

Xander felt new fear curling inside him and he licked suddenly dry lips. “You’re getting them ready to attack the Initiative, aren’t you?”

“Not going to let things go on like this indefinitely, Xander. This is my Territory and I’m going to take back control, one way or another.”

He’d known it was coming a long time, Xander thought. It wasn’t a surprise even if he’d been trying to avoid thinking about it. Vampires were about power and status and Spike liked being top dog. The Initiative weren’t just a threat, they were a challenge to his status and that was the reason that Spike wouldn’t agree to just leave town. Spike had accepted the chip as a temporary setback only because he viewed it as temporary. He wasn’t willing to ride out the Initiative’s presence in his territory because they were a rival claimant to his control and it wasn’t likely they were going to just fold their tents and leave.

Bottom line, even if it came to a war, he knew which side he was on. Spike had kept the number of vampires down lower than they had been at any time since the Master had artificially built up their numbers. Fewer humans were being turned and more were surviving vampire attacks due to Spike’s subtle encouragement for the vampires of his Court to go after more difficult prey. Sunnydale was safer under Spike’s control and the Initiative was the one endangering harmless beings. The Initiative was the one stirring things up to the point where war was beginning to seem inevitable. Even without Spike, the demons in town would eventually turn on their attackers.

None of which made it anymore likely that Spike would survive the attack. Unable to fight humans, the chances that Spike would both make it through the attack unscathed and survive the aftermath were slim to non-existent. It was all too likely that some of the vampires would figure out that Spike was crippled and try to take over the Court. As Spike had pointed out once, not all vampires were above hiring a human to take Spike out.

Without a word, Xander practically threw himself at Spike, pushing him back down into the cushions and kissing him hungrily. His mouth devoured Spike’s, desperate to hold onto him for as long as possible.

Spike returned the kiss with enthusiasm, opening his mouth under Xander’s, as Xander’s tongue darted in aggressively, tasting, exploring. Spike’s fingers curled in his hair, holding him firmly as they kissed until Xander pulled back a little, eyes almost black with arousal, breath coming in short pants as he stared down into Spike’s eyes.

“I love you, Spike.”

He didn’t give Spike time to answer, his mouth closing the narrow gap as he kissed Spike again, softly, nibbling and licking and memorizing the tastes and textures of his lover. Spike’s hands slid
from his hair down to his back, stroking, tracing the outlines of his shoulder blades and dropping to his waist, holding him firmly and tenderly as they kissed, tongues dueling lazily, advancing and retreating, lips sliding against each other, both lost in sensation.

Only gradually did Xander become aware of a competing sensation and he shifted slightly to better align their erections, never breaking the contact of mouth on mouth as he began rocking their hips together in a slow maddening rhythm that was guaranteed to drive them both out of their minds before long.

Spike’s hands slid to his ass, cupping him and encouraging the rocking motion, even as he sucked on Xander’s tongue and groaned into his mouth. Xander felt himself speeding up, hips jerking against Spike’s narrow hips, even as he tried to stop their accelerating rush towards orgasm, wanting this to last as long as possible as if he could stave off the outside world as long as they remained in the magic circle of their love and desire for each other.

With a harsh cry that was as much defeat as relief, he lost the battle and came, his cock jerking against Spike’s narrow hips, even as he tried to stop their accelerating rush towards orgasm, wanting this to last as long as possible as if he could stave off the outside world as long as they remained in the magic circle of their love and desire for each other.

Oz answered Xander’s knock in worn sweat pants that hung low on his hips and a faded t-shirt, which had surprised Xander. They weren’t clothes Oz would have worn to the fraternity, not in his role of a prospective student wanting to make a good impression, which implied that Oz had been back for awhile. Which didn’t bode well for the success of their plans.

Oz led the way to the messy living room, taking the one open spot on the couch and picking up the guitar he’d obviously just put down to answer the door.

“Clear off a chair and have a seat,” he said, his fingers already fitting themselves to the strings.

It was like revisiting their senior year, when he would sit in the studio behind Oz’s house and listen to Oz practice and for a short space, outside time and their looming problems, Xander relaxed and just watched Oz’s fingers shaping chords and let the music wash over him. Buffy would be there in a little while and that was soon enough to find out what had happened at Lowell House.

He sighed when he heard the knock on the door, and reluctantly went to answer it. Buffy came in with a smile and the smell of cookies and coffee and they moved to the folding table that served as Devon’s kitchen table and settled down for caffeine and chocolate chips and news.

“Something big is going down at the frat,” Oz told them. “The place is deserted, just a couple of guys keeping an eye on things and they aren’t really hiding the fact that they’re guarding the place.” He gave them a moment to let that sink in before going on. “Something’s made them take the gloves off. I was stopped at the door by two guys who were so obvious they might as well have been wearing uniforms, demanding to know what I was doing there.”

“Did they suspect anything?” Buffy asked worriedly, frowning at that news, setting her third cookie down untasted.

Oz shook his head. “I just told them I’d been invited to lunch by Graham and they said to come back another day. Made up some excuse about the kitchen being closed because of a problem.” He shrugged. “They weren’t the best ad-libbers, couldn’t come up with what the problem was on short notice.”
“Graham?” Xander asked.

“One of the guys at the fraternity,” Oz explained. “He’s the one who invited me to eat with them.”

“He’s a friend of Riley’s,” Buffy added. Her lips quirked up in an impish smile as she glanced at him. “He’s really cute, Xander. You might like him.”

“Oh, yeah. ‘Cause the military is definitely a safe place to troll for dates,” Xander answered flippantly.

“The guys at the door weren’t big with the welcome mat.” Oz looked at them soberly. “They were upset and worried, but mostly, they were angry. Fists-clenched, teeth-gritted, barely-holding-it-together angry. And not at me. So, no luck on the food samples. I bailed.”

“Good,” Xander told him.

“What could make them so angry?” Buffy asked. “And where do you think everyone was.”

“Down in the basement?” Xander suggested, only somewhat facetiously.

“I’d guess that one of the demons killed someone,” Oz said, “except, I didn’t get a grief smell, just anger.”

Xander considered that, tapping a finger nervously against the table. Out of control anger and lots of weapons were a really bad mix. “The brotherhood in blue?” he suggested.

“Could be,” Oz answered, looking thoughtful.

“I hate it when you guys do the cryptic thing,” Buffy complained.

“When a cop gets shot, every cop in the area reacts, even if they never met the guy who was killed,” Xander explained.

“You think the Initiative is reacting to someone being killed, because it’s a member of their group.” Buffy’s lips tightened and she looked stricken.

“Someone like one of the scientists,” Xander hastened to reassure her. “All the soldiers probably know each other, so Oz would have sensed grief too. But if one of their captives killed someone in the labs, that would be enough to set them all off.”

“In which case, we better lay low for awhile,” Buffy said after a moment. “You, especially, should stay clear of them, Oz.”

Xander was relieved to see Oz nod. If the Initiative had lost one of their own, they were likely looking for revenge. He looked grimly at the other two. “I’m going to call Mr. Olsen and tell him to warn everyone to stay off the streets tonight.”

“Good idea. I’ll take patrol, I think Pyotr’s scheduled.” Pyotr was half E’tofskoni. He could pass for human from a distance but the shape of his ears and the color of his eyes gave him away up close.

“Let it go for tonight,” Oz suggested and, after a moment, Buffy nodded.

“I can use the study time. I’ll call Giles and Pyotr.”

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Lounging in the high backed seat that he so rarely used because it was so bloody pretentious, Spike watched the minions sparring with critical eyes. He’d spent at least half the night in the Court over each of the last few nights, watching, sparring, and receiving reports from his Lieutenants on the Court’s state of readiness.

With Spike’s frowning regard on them, grumbling about the training he was insisting on had been almost non-existent. Most vampires didn’t see any need to improve their skills, minions were reborn arrogant and sure of themselves. It generally took a few decades of unlife before they realized that there were things in the world that could kick their ass without breaking a sweat. Not humans, of course, but Slayers and older vampires, and some demons. One good scare and, if they survived, the smarter ones re-thought their assumption of invincibility and started training. Spike had “demonstrated” moves to some of the less enthusiastic minions over the last few nights that had given them that scare - a stake in their chest, stopping barely an inch from their heart, an ax buried two inches deep in the side of their neck before it was jerked back, and suddenly the minions were putting some effort into it and actually listening to the vampires assigned to train them.

He estimated the Court would be ready in another two or three weeks. Target practice just couldn’t be hurried - aim improved with practice and repetition. It was easy enough to be good when you were standing in a well-lit area with a stationary target, but he needed his troops to be good against moving targets who were shooting back at them and that took a bit more work

Which reminded him of another problem he needed to deal with.

He stood up abruptly and paced to the edge of the small platform that allowed him to be seen by the entire Court, his eyes seeking out Anthony and Arkady among the shifting bodies on the factory floor. He’d prefer to use Jose, but Jose’s strengths were his loyalty and his intelligence, not his fighting ability. Arkady’s nearly unmatched skill with knives and Anthony’s steadiness and experience were the best combination for this assignment. He signaled them to follow him and jumped down from the platform, stalking out of the factory into the quiet street outside.

They followed him silently, although he could feel their curious looks behind him as he strode through the poorly lit area until they were well clear of the factory and not at risk of being overheard. He stopped and, under cover of lighting a cigarette, made a quick scan of the area, listening for any sound that didn’t belong in the deserted business district.

“Got a job for you two.” He kept his voice casual, like he was asking for nothing more than a beer run, studying them through the smoke of his cigarette as they stood before him.

“The soldiers have been out in force the last few nights. Looks like they’re hunting something in particular and they’re angry. Angry enough that they don’t seem to care too much what they’re hunting. Angry enough to be making mistakes.” He grinned at them, his fangs gleaming in the light of the crescent moon, eyes glowing yellow in a way that even humans could have seen. “I want one of their weapons - a tazer rifle. You two are going to get it.”

He gave them a moment, taking another drag then flicking the cigarette away in a glowing arc before looking back at them. “Don’t want it to be obvious that a vampire took the weapon. If you can make it look like an accident, even better. They’ve searched the town from one end to the other in the last two nights and yesterday they moved further out into the woods. Push one of them down a hill, if that’s what it takes. Arkady, if you have to use your knives, try and make the wounds look like they were caused by somethin’ else. Don’t want ‘em knowing we’ve got one of their weapons, or they may start using something’ else.”

Anthony and Arkady exchanged looks then Anthony said: “We’ll take care of it, Master Spike.”
Arkady nodded in agreement and Spike was pleased that both of them looked grimly serious about the assignment. There was no glory and nothing to boast about with this job, just a necessary task and he emphasized that now.

“Careful is better than fast, but we can’t count on them being out in force forever. Even that bunch of wankers is bound to stumble across whatever it is they’re looking for sooner or later.”

The Slayer’s reports coincided with his own observations. Something had the soldiers spitting mad and it was making them careless about being seen. At least a dozen of them had been out prowling the cemeteries for the last two nights and early this morning, he’d seen unmistakable signs that they had shifted their search to the woods. He was the only one patrolling the territory right now, the Slayer wasn’t patrolling so much as venturing out for a short while to keep an eye on the soldiers. The volunteers who’d been helping the Slayer were staying home - with the soldiers on a rampage, it wasn’t safe for them.

Wasn’t particularly safe for him either, Spike admitted to himself, but he wasn’t willing to surrender his town to the bastards, even for however long it took for them to find whatever it was that had them so riled up these past couple days.

He needed to know the range of the tazer rifles if they were to have any chance in an attack. His vampires had to be accurate with a crossbow and throwing weapons from outside the range of those damn tazers or the soldiers could take them down before they ever got close enough to do anything. He’d been desperate enough to even consider guns, but the theft of enough guns to make a difference would likely tip their hand. Plus, guns were best for the center of a target - shooting a person in the head was Hollywood bollocks. You aimed for the center of the body and the soldiers wore vests. Which was going to be a problem for crossbows as well, but he was willing to bet that a hand axe thrown with vampire speed and power would do a lot of damage, vest or no vest.

“You two are relieved of any other responsibilities until this is done. There’s a lot of them out now, which gives you a choice of targets. If the soldiers go back to their regular numbers, stick with them until you can get one of those weapons. If you can’t make it look like an accident, break their necks or stab them, or fucking beat them to death. No feeding. Don’t leave any clear sign that a vampire is responsible. If others see you, stay in human guise. Clear?”

“Yes, Master Spike,” they said in unison.

“Good.” He started to walk off, then turned back. “And do keep in mind I need the weapon undamaged. I won’t be happy if you bring me one that’s broken.”

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He could sense’s Xander’s agitation from the second the apartment door opened. Spike was off the couch and halfway to the door by the time Xander had crossed the threshold.

“What’s wrong?”

Xander thrust a newspaper at him in answer and Spike hastily scanned the headline as Xander went to the sink and splashed some water on his face. ‘Local Boy Brutally Murdered’ and Spike frowned, skimming the article quickly, wondering why Xander was so upset by something so mundane.

After a moment, he looked up. Xander was watching him, drying his face on a towel, droplets of water clinging to his hair and dripping onto his shirt.
“Says the boy was skewered,” he commented. “You thinkin’ there’s another polgara around?”

“Or the Initiative let the one they caught escape,” Xander answered. He balled up the dishtowel and threw it onto the counter with unnecessary force. “Fucking idiots. They can’t even manage to hang on to the one dangerous demon they did manage to catch.”

Spike looked down at the newspaper again. “Dunno, luv. Paper says the boy was mutilated. Doesn’t sound like a polgara.” He shrugged, “less by ‘mutilated’ they mean half-eaten. Polgara’s don’t generally play with their food, but if it was interrupted while eating, it could have left a fairly messy body behind.”

Xander looked sick and Spike could have kicked himself. Humans were so bloody squeamish about other humans being eaten and Xander had been vibrating with tension for days now. “Want me to check it out tonight?” he offered, not really interested but wanting to make it up to Xander.

Xander shook his head. “Oz called me before I left the job site. I’m going to meet him at the crime scene in an hour to see what we can find out.”

“Why isn’t the Slayer doing this?” Spike demanded. “It’s her job, not yours.”

“She’s got two mid-terms,” Xander explained and Spike grumbled under his breath. Bloody Slayer needed to be a whole lot less part-time about doing her job. “Oz is doing all the work, I’m just going to watch his back.”

“Wolf can take care of himself.”

It didn’t help that Xander just smiled at him indulgently and ignored that. “She’s meeting us at Giles’ afterwards. Meet me there?”

Spike hesitated, his first reaction was to forbid Xander to go. But it was daylight and the killing had been hours ago and there was no reason to think whatever had killed the boy would return. The soldiers had not been making a nuisance of themselves during the day, and weren’t likely to be at the crime scene. A meeting at the Watcher’s was bound to be a waste of time, rehashing stuff he already knew, and he needed to be at the Court. Anthony and Arkady hadn’t had any luck last night and would be going out through the sewer entrance just before sunset, hoping to get a jump on any patrols by going out early in the evening instead of later. Still, Xander sounded like he wanted Spike’s company and Spike could tell Jose and the others that he was patrolling during the early part of the night and would be in the Court afterwards.

“Want you away from the area well before dark, luv,” he said, the brief hesitation going almost unnoticed. “I’ll meet you at the Watcher’s right after sunset.” By taking to the sewers, he could get within a block of the Watcher’s apartment and be there within minutes after the sun was done. He was glad for the decision as Xander’s face lightened at bit.

“I’ll be there by sunset,” Xander promised.

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“It wasn’t a demon attack,” Oz said quietly as soon as he and Xander were out of earshot of the police, reporters, and onlookers still milling around the crime scene.

Xander stopped short. “What?! He twisted around to look over his shoulder back at the hillside closed off with yellow tape, incongruously cheerful given what it marked. “A human did this?” It almost made him physically ill to think of a person could have done something so sick to a little kid. Oz tugged him back around and Xander remembered belatedly that they were trying to be
inconspicuous. There weren’t any soldiers obviously at the scene, but they still didn’t want to draw attention to themselves.

Oz was shaking his head. “I don’t know what it was, the smell was… wrong.”

“What do you mean?” On the way here, Xander had relayed Spike’s opinion that the killing was not typical for a polgara, but Spike had also pointed out that there wasn’t a lot of information on how polgara would behave after being held prisoner and probably starved. Polgara had to eat every two hours and it was highly unlikely the Initiative would have fed it that frequently.

Oz was silent for a moment, his brows furrowed and his eyes a little darker than usual. Xander blinked, wondering if he was imagining that Oz’s sideburns were longer and bushier than they had been a minute ago.

“Oz?” he prompted after a minute.

“Either someone’s laying a false trail, or… Or, I don’t know what.” Oz looked puzzled and a little uneasy. “I smelled faint traces of a couple different types of demons, a human, and something metallic, almost like a computer.”

“Computers have a smell?” Xander couldn’t help asking.

“Everything has a smell,” Oz said flatly.

“Could it have been a bunch of things working together?” And wasn’t that a fun thought.

Oz looked unsure, glancing back at the taped-off crime scene. “Maybe, but I didn’t get a sense of different trails, just the same mixed scents all over the area. Even walking close together, a group that big will leave different scent trails.”

“Oz, don’t take this the wrong way, but can you track the scents well enough to follow them?” Xander really didn’t want to make Oz sound like a bloodhound.

This time, Oz’s eyes were definitely black and a feral grin curled his lips, showing teeth that were a bit longer and pointier than human. “Why do you think we’re circling around? The crowd has tracked over any scent near the scene but I’m hoping I can pick something up further out.”

Xander nodded and let Oz do his thing without any further comments. If they could find where this thing was holed up, they’d have something useful for Buffy and Spike when they met up at Giles’. Hell, to stop something that would do that to a little kid, he’d go to the damn soldiers themselves and tell them to clean up their mess or he’d blow their cover to the entire world.
Chapter 27

It took circling the crime scene twice, each time further out, before Oz found the smell he was looking for. Following his lead, Xander couldn’t help feeling like the dumb tenderfoot in all those old westerns, the one who couldn’t see the trail the tracker was following even when it was pointed out to him. It was weird because Oz wasn’t doing anything obvious. As far as Xander could tell, Oz wasn’t even breathing in harder than usual, much less bending over and sniffing the ground. At one point, he just stopped and said “got it” quietly, then began walking diagonally away from the taped off crime scene as if he was simply going for a stroll. The boy had been killed on the edge of town and now Oz led the way uphill and into the woods, following the trails that wound through the sparse underbrush.

After nearly 20 minutes steady walking, they were well into the range of hills that ran almost north-south, between Sunnydale and the coast. Growing up, Xander had hiked these woods almost every weekend with Jesse, and now he wondered when they had stopped doing that. Somewhere around 8th grade, he figured, his thoughts in the past as his feet automatically followed the once-familiar trails, when Jesse had developed his crush on Cordelia and had wanted to spend the weekends going to movies and playing basketball and swimming: activities he might run into Cordy doing.

Following silently in Oz’s footsteps, lost in his memories, Xander almost ran into the other man’s back when Oz came to a sudden stop outside a cave entrance. From what he remembered of the caves in the area, it was one of the larger openings, easily tall enough for a person to walk inside without having to duck and Xander squinted at it suspiciously as Oz spoke for the first time since he’d found the scent trail:

“I can tell it went in here but the scent isn’t particularly strong. Whatever it is, it’s not real close.”

Xander chewed his lip, looking around the area and struggling to remember old landmarks. “I think this is one of the entrances to the old World War II bunkers.” Oz looked blank and Xander explained: “They built them all along the west coast in case the Japanese invaded. There are tunnels and caves all through these hills, and the army fortified a bunch of them.” He moved closer and began pushing aside the vines that grew in tangled profusion, flowing down the sides of the low cliff and softening the ominous look of the dark opening. “There used to be metal doors closing off the entrances but they got worried about people being trapped inside, so they took them down years ago.”

“I’ve read about that but I didn’t know Sunnydale had any.” Oz said absently, his eyes studying the opening. “You up for going on?”

“A lot of these caves and tunnels connect together and they’re pretty extensive. If this thing’s got a nest or something in here, pinning down the location would help a lot, or we could be searching these caves for days,” Xander said thoughtfully. He didn’t see any trace of the rusty metal hinges the army had left in place, the hinges that invariably signaled the cave was one of the old bunkers “You think you’ll be able to tell when we’re getting close?”

“I think so.” Oz gave him an apologetic look. “This is still a bit new to me.”

“You’re not the only one,” Xander muttered, then added more loudly. “Let’s try it. But - ready to run at the first sign of trouble?” he questioned.

“Maybe the second sign,” Oz said, once again looking a little wolffish around the edges.
Following Oz’s nose, they moved from chamber to chamber cautiously, alert for any sign of the
whatever-it-was that they were tracking. Some of the rooms were simply caves, others had
concrete and steel reinforcing the stone walls. The army corp of engineers had done a fairly slap-
dash job setting up these bunkers, working in the panicked months following the attack on Pearl
Harbor. In a lot of cases, they had simply enlarged existing caves, shoring up the ceilings with
concrete walls and blasting connecting tunnels through what had once been solid stone.

Xander had a sinking feeling that all these chambers hadn’t connected this neatly when he and
Jesse had been exploring these caves ten years ago. Maybe as kids, they had deliberately made the
caves seem more labyrinthine and complicated than they really were, but he distinctly remembered
circling and backtracking and encountering dead-ends and blocked passages with Jesse that he and
Oz simply weren’t running into now.

The caves were cool and damp. Enough light filtered through from the entrances and air shafts the
army had installed so they could see where they were going. Roots had forced their way through
the dirt ceiling in places and moss and lichen grew everywhere. The quiet was oppressive, broken
only by their muffled footsteps and his own thundering heart. Oz was seeming less and less sure of
himself, saying the enclosing stone walls were concentrating the smell, making it seem to come
from all directions. Whatever they were following had either been using these caves for awhile,
long enough for the scent to permeate the walls, or something about being indoors was interfering
with his sense of smell.

There was no sign that anything had been using these caves, so they pressed on. Xander was
beginning to wonder if the thing they were following had simply taken shelter in the caves and it
was just passing through, when Oz came to an abrupt halt.

Looking over his shoulder, Xander blinked in surprise. In one corner of a concrete reinforced room,
someone had set up what looked like nothing so much as a home office. Granted, the desk was an
old door resting on sections of metal pipe, but there were two computers on it and a couple of
metal storage cabinets had been set up against the walls. There were small lights mounted on the
wall and the computers were on, the monitors powered down but the hard drives had red power
lights glowing on their faces.

“Well, this is unexpected.”

His voice sounded unnaturally loud after the long silence and he winced.

“I agree.” Oz crossed over to the computers and switched on the monitors, while Xander checked
the other two entrances to the room, relieved to find no signs of life in the connecting chambers.
Finding none, he returned to the makeshift desk and watched over Oz’s shoulder as Oz settled into
the chair and typed a command into the computer.

Eyes narrowed intently, Oz flicked rapidly through several screens and Xander began trying to
figure out where the power was coming from, following the tangle of cords to a single extension
cord that snaked along the floor, leading to a small generator in the next chamber. Xander was
liking this less and less and he hastily returned to the first room, thinking it was high time he and
Oz got the hell out of there. Before he could suggest doing just that, Oz sat back in the chair he’d
appropriated.

“Whoa.” Oz sounded shocked and Xander looked at the gibberish on the monitor screen.

“What?”
“Someone’s hooked into a lot of places.” Oz rolled the chair across to the second computer and began typing and clicking on the second keyboard while Xander puzzled over what Oz had found on the first computer, wondering what Oz had seen in the lines of code. Oz’s low whistle brought his attention to the second computer and Xander saw he’d opened a picture file.

“Are those…?”

“Security feeds,” Oz told him. He frowned. “That looks like City Hall.” They watched for a minute more. “I don’t think these are live, just stored backups,” Oz flicked a glance in Xander’s direction. “These computers have firewalls and encryptions like I’ve never seen before. It would take someone a lot better than me to crack the system. This is one of the few files that doesn’t require passwords to access.”

“I’ll have to fix that.”

Xander’s head snapped around at the sound of the intruding voice, and he stared appalled at the thing standing at the entrance to one of the tunnels. Peripherally, he was aware of Oz coming to his feet, but time seemed to freeze as his mind tried to come to grips with what he was seeing.

A combination of demon, human and metallic, was how Oz had described the scent at the crime scene. There was no question in Xander’s mind that they were looking at the source of those smells. He just had no idea of what it was. Tall, well over six foot, and built like a linebacker, was his first thought. That is, if linebackers came in shades of green and grotesque. Seven of Nine looked hot with her metal implants, he thought dazedly, this thing had chunks of metal grafted onto its head, its shoulder, its arm and metal staples holding together things that were never meant to be joined. It was wearing boots and army fatigue pants and nothing else unfortunately. One side of its face was human, a good looking man with short cropped dark hair, the other side was green with a red eye that almost seemed to glow in the dimly lit room.

Xander realized he was clinging white-knuckled to the back of Oz’s chair at about the same time he heard Oz growling. Dragging his eyes away from the monster, he saw that Oz was changing, the growl becoming a full-out snarl as Oz shifted fully to wolf form before Xander could blink.

“Oz, NO!”

He was a lifetime too late, his reaching arms closing on empty air as Oz sprang at the monster, his wild snarl echoing loudly in the room, matched by the laughter of the monster as it casually batted Oz away, with no more effort than a child swatting an annoying mosquito.

Oz yelped as the thing’s arm connected, flinging him away with unbelievable speed and power. He crashed into one of the storage units, the metal giving way under the force of the impact and Oz crumpled to the floor, lying unmoving as his body morphed back into human form, his bare flesh pale against the dirt floor.

“Interesting.”

Xander tore his gaze away from Oz’s body, and swallowed hard as he saw the thing was looking at him curiously.

“A werewolf, I believe,” it said. “Are you one also? It will be interesting to learn if there are internal differences between the wolf form and the human.” The thing looked back at Oz’s unmoving body. “Its form reverts to human when dead or unconscious. That will be an interesting challenge.”
Xander was not liking the sound of this. His mouth was too dry to form words and all he could think was to run. With luck, the thing wasn’t as fast as it was strong.

With adrenaline-fueled desperation, Xander picked up the chair and flung it at the thing, turning to run even as he threw it with every ounce of strength in him. He heard the thing laugh again and the clatter of the chair hitting the far wall but he didn’t look back. Racing to Oz, he scooped the other man up and shoved him through the opening into the next chamber. Heart pounding, he whirled around and saw the thing striding towards him. Praying it wasn’t fastened to the wall, Xander overturned the dented metal cabinet, pulling it over so it blocked the opening, falling to the floor with a deafening crash.

Already hearing the thing shoving the cabinet out of its way, Xander yanked Oz up by one arm and hoisted him over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry, thanking every god he could think of that Oz was fairly small and Xander had nearly a year’s practice carrying heavy loads at the construction sites.

He took off down the tunnel in a lumbering run. It wasn’t the way they’d come in but that was less important than getting the hell away from that thing as fast as possible. He didn’t know if Oz was alive or dead, didn’t know how badly he might be exacerbating Oz’s injuries, but all of that was unimportant in the face of a Frankenstein monster that talked so casually about studying “internal differences”.

His breath was rasping in his lungs and sweat was pouring down his face when he slowed his steps, knowing he wouldn’t be able to go on if he kept up this pace. He was three chambers away from the thing’s lair when he slowed by necessity to a walk. He looked behind for the first time and was relieved to see nothing following him. Shifting his grip, he was able to circle Oz’s wrist with one hand and the wave of relief almost sent him to his knees as he felt a pulse thumping against the pale skin.

He didn’t dare set Oz down to examine him, he couldn’t risk being caught by that thing. He’d just have to hope that Oz wouldn’t be harmed by being carried over his shoulder, that Oz could hang on until he could get him to a doctor.

For now, Xander put his head down and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, on putting distance between them and the nightmare behind them, hoping to find an exit before he collapsed under Oz’s weight.

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“Giles! Give me a hand here,” Xander called as he pushed open the door of the apartment. He helped Oz inside, the other man leaning heavily against him now.

Oz had come to not long after Xander had found an exit to the caves and Xander had lowered him to the ground, his back to a tree as Oz looked around with bleary, confused eyes. They hadn’t dared rest for long, and, when they moved on, Oz had insisted on walking. Xander’s trembling muscles had forced him to agree, even as he hastily tore his shirt into a makeshift sling for Oz’s badly swollen arm.

They’d stopped again at the edge of the woods, and Xander had left Oz long enough to steal a pair of pants for him, kicking open the door of an empty house without shame and rifling rapidly through drawers, finding a pair of sweat pants and a couple of tee-shirts for both of them. Oz’s clothing had not survived the transition from human to wolf and half-carrying a battered, bleeding, naked man through the streets of Sunnydale was just asking for trouble they hadn’t been prepared to deal with.
“What happened?” Giles asked, moving to Oz’s other side and helping him into a chair.

“I think we found out what 3-14 is,” Xander said grimly.

Giles reached for the phone. “We should call an ambulance.”

“No.” Oz’s voice was faint but adamant.

“My dear chap, you’re badly injured.”

“I don’t want to be on that thing’s radar.”

“What thing?” Giles turned to look at them, the phone receiver forgotten in his hand.

“It’s half human, half demon, half machine,” Xander said. “Some kind of science fiction cyborg. It threw Oz 30 feet like he was made of paper. It’s the scariest thing I’ve seen in my life and that includes the Mayor post-transformation.”

“I couldn’t even touch it,” Oz said, still sounding dazed. “Not even in wolf-form. Attacking it was like crashing into a brick wall.”

“Are you sure you don’t need to see a doctor?” Giles asked again, gesturing with the phone.

“No.” Oz was adamant and Giles reluctantly put the phone down. “Got any aspirin?” Oz asked and Xander was relieved to see a hint of his usual dead-pan humor return.

“Yes, I should have that at least. Why are you so concerned about going to hospital?” Giles pressed.

“Giles, this thing has set up shop in a cave. He had a couple of computers going and it looked like he was tapped into just about every system in town. Oz’s right, he can’t risk there being records of Daniel Osborn checking into the hospital with exactly the injuries you’d get from being slammed into a wall by a monster. If that thing goes looking for him…” Xander looked bleakly at Giles and let the silence speak for itself.

“Well, then. Tea and aspirin it is,” Giles said, moving briskly to the kitchen.

Xander followed him and opened the freezer. “How are you fixed for ice packs?” They’d have to figure out something to do about Oz’s arm, which he suspected was broken. Maybe drive to Los Angeles and go to a hospital there?

The kettle was whistling and Oz was settled on the couch with an ice pack to the enormous bruise on his face, having swallowed several aspirin. He’d moved stiffly the few steps to the couch, obviously in a lot of pain, although he hadn’t said anything, and was lying with his eyes closed, lines of pain darkening his face. He needed to see a doctor, Xander thought worriedly, just the door swung open.

“What the hell is he doing here?” he demanded.

“Buffy?” Giles said, sounding surprised.

Xander looked up from fixing a second ice pack and saw Buffy at the door, one arm around Riley as she steered him inside. He swore sharply and dropped the ice on the counter, practically running out of the tiny kitchen to block them before they got more than three steps inside.

“What the hell is he doing here?” he demanded.

“Xander, get out of the way. I’ll explain.”
“This isn’t a good time,” he hissed, hoping she would get the message. Damn Buffy anyway, she knew Oz was supposed to be here and still, she’d brought the one guy they had all agreed shouldn’t associate the three of them together.

“Sorry, Oz,” Buffy said, looking over Xander’s shoulder at Oz, who’d sat up enough to see over the edge of the couch. And be seen. “I didn’t have a choice. Riley’s sick.”

“And you bring him here?” Xander asked harshly. This was not the time to be mother-henning the enemy.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“Of course you did.”

“Xander, it’s ok,” Oz said. “Calm down.”

Realizing he was making things worse by being so obvious about not wanting Riley here, Xander backed down and tried to cover. “Fine. But Oz got hurt playing basketball and we’ve got enough problems without giving him Riley’s flu or whatever.”

As uncharitable as he was feeling towards all of the soldiers right now, Xander had to admit that Riley looked really ill. He was flushed and sweating, his hands shaking uncontrollably and he looked unsteady on his feet. He was resisting Buffy’s efforts to get him to sit down though, looking suspiciously from one to another of them with blood shot, red-rimmed eyes.

“I don’t know why she brought me here,” he complained, trying to pull out of Buffy’s grip and ending up having to cling to her to keep from stumbling when she refused to release her grip on his arm. “I should be with my friends.”

“Riley, I told you, you can’t trust them. They’ve been drugging you.”

“They wouldn’t do that,” Riley said stubbornly. It sounded like they had been arguing about this for awhile.

“It’s true.” Oz sat a little straighter, wincing as he did and Riley stared at him suspiciously.

“How would you know?” he began, then said: “Wait - I know you. You’re the guy that was hanging around our House the other day.” He looked accusingly at Buffy. “You’re sending people to spy on us now?”

“No, Riley…”

Riley cut her off. “Who’s side are you on? You said you kill demons but every time I see you you’re with them. First the vampire, then that bar, and now - what? Who are these guys.”

And suddenly Xander was staring down the barrel of a gun. Riley had pulled his weapon with surprising speed and was pointing it in Xander’s face with one shaking hand. “Are you people even human?”

“Riley, don’t.” Buffy’s voice was somehow both soothing and commanding. “Xander’s human, I promise. Put the gun down.”

With slow, easy movements, Xander put both hands up in a surrender gesture. “Riley, we’re not a threat. Everyone’s human here.”
For a long, tense moment no one moved, no one even seemed to breathe. Xander sure wasn’t. He’d never had a gun pulled on him before and it was scaring the crap out of him, especially a gun in the shaking hands of someone who looked like they were on the verge of losing it entirely. He could see Buffy’s muscles tense, judging her moment and was worried that if she knocked the gun away, Riley would end up shooting Giles instead. Or all of them. Buffy was fast but not bullet fast.

Riley spun away suddenly and slammed his hands down on the dining room table and Xander breathed again for the first time in what felt like hours. He leaned against the back of the couch, his legs trembling and unable to hold him up. Buffy had her arm around Riley and was speaking softly, reassuringly in his ear. Screw comforting him, Xander thought. Get the damn gun away from him.

“Riley, you’re sick. You’re not thinking straight.”

Giles cleared his throat. “Buffy’s quite right,” he said in his most reassuring British tones, “I’m afraid you do look rather ill.” Moving slowly and calmly, keeping within Riley’s line of sight at all times, he approached the two of them, his eyes mild behind his glasses, librarian personality front and center. “I have a spare room upstairs, if you would like to lie down for a few minutes.”

“Come on, Riley. Let’s get you to bed.”

His body racked with tremors, Riley straightened slowly, moving like an old man. Xander’s lips tightened as Riley automatically re-holstered his weapon but he didn’t say anything to break the fragile spell that Buffy and Giles had created between them. With Buffy gently urging, they mounted the steps to the second floor together, Buffy’s arm around Riley’s waist as she supported his shaky steps.

Just before they were lost to sight around the corner, she looked back and mouthed: “Wait for me” at them.

Xander wasn’t the only one who breathed out a silent sigh of relief as the two of them disappeared into the guest bedroom.
The tension in the room faded at the sound of the bedroom door closing behind Buffy and Riley Finn. Oz slowly lowered himself back down on the couch with a stifled groan and Xander went into the kitchen to pick up the ice tray he had dropped on the counter when Buffy had walked in. He finished dumping the ice cubes into a plastic bag and carried the bag and a dishtowel back into the living room.

Oz’s arm was swollen and hot to the touch. Bruises were rapidly darkening along his jaw and forehead, spreading beyond the coverage of the icepack Oz had been holding pressed against his cheek with his good arm. As gently as he could, Xander spread the dishtowel over Oz’s arm and did his best to distribute the ice cubes along the length of the swelling. Oz breathed in sharply, his face going white, but made no sound.

“Hang on, Oz. I’ve got an idea,” Xander told him.

He picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number, waiting impatiently as the phone rang on the other end.

“Mrs. Olsen? It’s Xander. We’ve got a problem. Do you guys know a doctor who can handle Hellmouthy things unofficially?”

He breathed a sigh of relief as Mrs. Olsen assured him that there was a doctor the demon community had relied on for years.

“Umm, is it someone who can pass?” he asked. “We have kind of a situation here.”

He gave her a quick, bullet-point summary: an injured werewolf who needed medical attention and an Initiative soldier on the premises, one probably going through drug withdrawals. As always, he was amazed by her calmness as she listened to his explanation without interruptions or comments. Mrs. Olsen was just as unflappable and practical as her husband and Xander was grateful to have both of them on their side.

“Thanks, Mrs. Olsen. I owe you one.”

He hung up the phone and met Giles’ inquiring look. “She’s sending someone over. She says there’s a doctor in town they’ve been using for years to treat demons who can’t go to the hospital. The good news is, he’s human.” He gestured toward the stairs in silent reminder of their in-house problem in olive drab.

“Well done, Xander,” Giles said quietly. “Frankly, I really don’t feel capable of setting a broken arm.”

“You and me both,” Xander agreed wholeheartedly.

“While we’re waiting, why don’t you fill me in on what happened?”

Xander went back into the living room and sat down on the coffee table next to Oz. Oz’s eyes were closed but from the pinched look to his face, he was still conscious and hurting. Keeping his voice low, Xander described the setup in the caves and the Frankenstein monster they’d found. He found he was clenching his fists to keep them from shaking as he did his best to describe the monster seemingly pieced together from bits and pieces of demon, man and machine.
Giles looked deeply troubled as he finished. “I suspect you are correct in saying that the creature is the ‘3-14’ that Ethan warned us about. Most likely, it is also what the soldiers have been searching for so actively these last few days.”

“Which means the soldiers have probably known about that thing this whole time,” Xander said bitterly, remembering Riley’s vehement protests that the Initiative was just trying to do good. Funny, how he hadn’t mentioned they were playing Dr. Frankenstein in their spare time.

“It’s strong, Giles. It tossed Oz thirty feet without breaking a sweat.” He looked down at Oz, lying so still and battered on the worn couch. “It’s my fault he’s hurt. I talked him into following that thing into the caves.”

“My fault.” For a moment, Xander thought he’d imagined the soft disagreement, then Oz turned his head just enough to meet Xander’s eyes. “I lost control. Shouldn’t have attacked it.”

“Might I suggest that we place the blame where it belongs - on the creature that attacked you?” Giles suggested tartly.

“Works for me.” Oz closed his eyes again and Xander looked at the clock, willing the hands to move faster.

“The doctor should be here soon, Oz.”

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Dr. Bradley was tall and heavy-set, with graying hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He introduced himself and shook hands with Giles and Xander. Maybe it was just relief that help had arrived, but Xander couldn’t help thinking he projected an air of competence that boded well. Not that he’d thought that Mrs. Olsen would send an incompetent idiot or anything but still, it was nice to know the guy didn’t come across as a quack.

Xander was vaguely disappointed that Dr. Bradley wasn’t carrying one of those little doctor bags that doctors who show up at the door on tv always seemed to have. Instead, he had an ordinary suitcase that he pulled into the apartment behind him, the wheels sounding loudly on the tile floor.

“This way, Doctor,” Giles said, leading him toward the couch. “We suspect a broken arm, but hopefully that is the worst of the damage.”

“How old is he?” Dr. Bradley asked, setting the suitcase flat on the floor and unzipping it to reveal a wide variety of medical equipment.

“Twenty-one,” Xander answered, exchanging a puzzled look with Giles, wondering why that had been the doctor’s first question.

“Sorry, I should have been clearer. How long has he been a werewolf?”

“Oh. Uh, a little over two years.”

Dr. Bradley looked up sharply. “Then why didn’t you take him to a hospital? Even a two-year old wolf shouldn’t have problems with shifting during medical treatment.”

“He’s afraid of being found by the thing that hurt him,” Xander explained briefly.

Dr. Bradley accepted that without comment, continuing to examine Oz as Xander and Giles hovered somewhat uselessly in the background, Xander answering the doctor’s questions about
how Oz was hurt. After a few minutes, the doctor looked up from his patient.

“The arm is broken but it’s just a simple fracture and I can set it here. Three of his ribs are cracked but there isn’t any displacement and, so long as he is careful, they should heal without any difficulty. It’s likely he has a concussion and someone will need to monitor him for the next twenty-four hours. The rest is essentially just extensive bruising. It’s painful but not life-threatening. I’d be happier with x-rays and a CAT scan but I’ve gotten used to doing without.” He smiled reassuringly at Oz, who’d opened his eyes to hear the verdict. “You are by far not my first patient with concerns about going to the hospital. I’m afraid you are going to be quite stiff and sore for the next few days, but as you know, you will heal far more quickly than a human.”

With unhurried competence, he set Oz’s broken arm and put a light-weight removable cast over the bandages, telling Oz it would have to be adjusted as the swelling went down. He advised ice, rest, and for Oz to stay off his feet, and handed Oz a bottle of pain pills.

“Now,” he said, standing up and stretching to ease the crick in his back. “I believe there is a second patient?”

“That’s… tricky,” Xander said.

Dr. Bradley simply waited, his eyebrows raised interrogatively.

“Doctor, the young man in question is a soldier in the Initiative - are you familiar with them?”

The doctor nodded, his expression unreadable. “Yes.”

“While it is possible he is simply ill, we believe the soldiers have been drugged and we are concerned that Riley is going through some sort of withdrawal. He was acting quite paranoid and hostile when he arrived.”

“It might not be safe,” Xander said bluntly. “He was accusing us all of being demons and waving a gun around.”

Dr. Bradley just nodded again. “I will keep that in mind. Where is he?”

Xander stayed downstairs with Oz while Giles took the doctor up to see Riley. Helping Oz swallow two of the pills, Xander wondered if it would be better to move Oz. If Riley flipped out again or called his buddies to come get him, Oz needed to be elsewhere. On the other hand, Oz looked like he was already three-quarters asleep and the doctor had said not to move him. Given the lack of shouting and furniture breaking upstairs, he decided to wait and see for now.

Not long after, Giles and Dr. Bradley came back down the stairs, talking quietly.

“Until I get a blood test done, I can’t say for sure, but he does appear to be suffering from classic withdrawal symptoms. Until we know what drugs are in his system, I’m afraid the safest thing is to continue giving him nothing but water or juice in hopes of flushing his system. Once I’m sure it won’t do any harm, I may be able to give him a sedative, if he still needs one.”

Dr. Bradley headed for the door and Giles hastily wrote his number down. “Please call if you learn anything from the blood tests.”

Dr. Bradley took the number and handed Giles a business card. “I will. And call me anytime if either of them takes a turn for the worse.”

He collected his suitcase, shook hands, reminded them to wake Oz every 4 hours to check that he
wasn’t experiencing any increased symptoms, and left before Xander could find words to thank him.

“How did it go with Riley?”

“Surprisingly well. The blood sample was the only tricky part and Dr. Bradley managed to convince Riley it was necessary with a minimum of fuss. I expect it helped that Riley is feeling sick enough that seeing a doctor made sense to him.” Giles rubbed at his eyes tiredly. “We should perhaps move Oz to my bedroom,” he suggested. “I can tell you from personal experience that the couch is not the most comfortable place to spend the night.”

“What about Riley?”

“He’s sleeping.” Buffy came down the stairs, looking as tired as they all felt.

“What exactly are we supposed to do with him now?” Xander asked, his anger rising again at Buffy’s idiocy in bringing him here. “Spike’s going to be here shortly and do you remember the plan to keep Oz off his radar?”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“Of course you did.”

“You don’t understand…” Buffy began heatedly, then looked in Oz’s direction, somewhat guiltily.

Xander reined in his own anger, realizing a loud argument wouldn’t help Oz. “Sorry,” he muttered. “Let’s get Oz into the bedroom first.”

Buffy and Xander were able to move Oz without waking him, Giles hurrying into his bedroom ahead of them to hastily clear off the bed and yank the covers on straight. Between them, they got Oz settled on the bed and they returned to the living room, collapsing into chairs and onto the couch.

“I went to Willy’s bar to see if he’d heard anything about the thing that killed that boy,” Buffy told them. “Riley came in while I was there. He was acting half-crazy: accusing me of socializing with demons and Willy of harboring them, threatening to take Willy back to the lab to find out what kind of demon he was.”

“And that made you think it was a good idea to bring him here?” Xander asked in disbelief.

“What was I supposed to do?” Buffy flared back at him. “Call his friends and let them pump more drugs in him? You saw how sick he is, Xander. It’s the drugs making him act this way.”

“It doesn’t make him any less dangerous,” Xander pointed out, but with a little less heat. He really didn’t like the thought of the Initiative hauling off demon-sympathizers just because they could. He thought Buffy was giving Riley too much credit, but he had to admit it probably wasn’t fair to hold things said under the influence against someone. He just wished he was a bit more convinced that Riley wouldn’t say the same thing sober.

“He’s better now,” she offered quietly. “He was rambling on upstairs about not knowing who the good guys were anymore, saying maybe he was a bad guy.” She looked at both of them and Xander saw the shock and mixed emotions in her eyes. “Maggie Walsh is dead.”

“What? When did that happen?”
“Three days ago,” Buffy said. She looked away for a moment and Xander was reminded that Professor Walsh was - had been - Buffy’s Psych professor and Buffy had practically had a crush on her she admired her so much. Despite what they suspected about Walsh’s activities, learning that she was dead had obviously been a blow. Buffy shook her head impatiently and continued: “That’s why the Initiative has been out in force these last few days. Apparently something got loose and killed her - probably the polgara demon that killed the little kid yesterday. The soldiers have been hunting for it since they found her body in the labs.”

“It’s not the polgara,” Xander said slowly, wondering what it meant that the lead scientist in the Initiative had been killed. “It’s something else entirely.”

“If Maggie Walsh is dead, and Riley, at least, is clearly not receiving the drugs anymore, then it would seem likely the soldiers do not know they are being drugged.” Giles was frowning at the ceiling, thinking out loud. “If they are hunting for an unknown demon, then perhaps they don’t know about the creature you found.” Giles slipped his glasses back on, his eyes becoming sharp and focused once more. “It would appear there are secrets within secrets inside the Initiative.” A slight, self-mocking smile crossed his lips as he looked at Xander. “Spike once pointed out to me that people belonging to a secret society always believe they are privy to all the secrets of the group. I believe the soldiers may in fact be ignorant of what Maggie Walsh was doing.”

“No.” Xander’s head snapped around at the sound of Riley’s hoarse voice at the top of the stairs and they all shot to their feet, Xander desperately hoping Buffy had remembered to throw Riley’s gun out the window. He really wasn’t up for another round of stare down the barrel. “You’re making her sound like some kind of psychopath. She wasn’t like that! She was a brilliant woman, a scientist.”

“From everything I’ve heard, she was an extremely intelligent woman,” Giles said soothingly. “Unfortunately, it’s not uncommon for scientists to get caught up in their work….”

“All she was doing was trying to help people . . . You admired her! This is the way you want them to remember her?!” he said accusingly to Buffy.

“Riley…”

Gun or no gun, it was time for Riley to have a reality check. Overriding Buffy’s attempts to calm Riley down, Xander said harshly: “Stand down, soldier.” He bit back a grin, silently blessing the drill sergeants of afternoon television as Riley snapped his mouth shut, unconsciously straightening to attention before he shot Xander a glare as he became aware of his automatic response.

“Riley. I’m sorry, I know Professor Walsh was important to you. But we can prove she was drugging you and your friends,” Xander told him flatly, hoping it was true and the drug test would come up positive. “I don’t know if she was under orders or what, but if you will listen to us for just one minute, we can prove what we’re saying.”

The silence stretched out for a long, tense minute before Riley nodded curtly. “Fine. I’ll hear you out.”

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To give Riley credit, he did listen. Not with a particularly open mind, but he heard them out without interrupting as they told him what they knew, guessed, and had pieced together about the Initiative, Maggie Walsh, and the Frankenstein monster in the caves. Buffy was as shocked as Riley to learn about the thing in the caves and Xander realized belatedly that he hadn’t actually told her about it yet. Under other circumstances, he might have pointed out
that that’s what happened when you dragged the enemy into a status conference but it turned out that her obvious surprise at hearing about the monster helped convince Riley that they weren’t all conspiring against him. Buffy just wasn’t that good an actress and Riley obviously knew her well enough to know that. The suspicion and hostility he’d been radiating cranked down a few notches and Riley actually uncrossed his arms and looked like he was finally really listening to what they were saying.

“The thing in the caves isn’t natural,” Xander summed up. “Something - someone - created it.”

“And you just assume Professor Walsh was playing Dr. Frankenstein, creating monsters in her secret laboratory?”

Ok, maybe he’d overestimated the lowering of the hostility levels.

“How do you know it isn’t just some demon you’ve never seen before?” Riley challenged. “Demons aren’t natural. Some of the things I’ve seen…”

“Don’t flatter yourself, mate. Demons are more natural than humans - we’ve sure been here for a hell of a lot longer than you lot.”

Xander cursed himself silently for losing track of the time. He turned with the others, seeing Spike leaning casually against the doorjamb, arms folded, wearing his usual tight black t-shirt and black jeans, looking predatory and dangerous and unbelievably sexy. Although outwardly he seemed completely at ease, Xander could tell Spike was tense and wary and practically vibrating with suppressed anger.

Great.

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“Well, well, the gang’s all here.” Spike smirked, sauntering inside, pleased at having caught both the Slayer and her toy soldier off guard.

He’d been standing at the door long enough to overhear Xander’s description of what he and the wolf had found in the caves in the hills. The only thing that had kept him from exploding was the fact that Xander was obviously unhurt, but they were going to talk about this as soon as they were alone. From what he’d overheard, Xander hadn’t been satisfied with staying at the nice, safe crime scene. Instead, he’d followed the bloody werewolf into the woods without bothering to tell anyone what they were up to or even taking the time to pick up a weapon.

Eavesdropping in the open doorway, Spike had barely been able to control his anger at both the wolf and himself - he hadn’t thought about the fact that the wolf’s sense of smell would let him track what they found at the murder scene. Of course, Spike had assumed it was a human that had done the killing. Most demons didn’t artistically mutilate corpses unless it was part of some ritual and this clearly hadn’t been - demons doing a ritual sacrifice generally didn’t dump the body by the side of the road for humans to stumble over once they were done. No, he’d assumed it was a human doing the killing and, as a result, he’d let Xander walk unprotected into a situation in which he could have been killed.

They were definitely going to have a talk about that.

“So, you think something put together out of bits and pieces is just a new type of demon, eh?” he asked. “Just how thick are you? Demons got better things to do than play in laboratories. Your Professor Walsh, on the other hand, that sounds right up her alley.”
“She wasn’t like that,” the soldier insisted, jaw set stubbornly.

Spike watched how slowly he moved as he rose to his feet, gripping the back of his chair to keep from swaying, his face going pasty white under the flush of fever and knew the soldier wasn’t a threat. His holster was empty and right now, soldier boy wasn’t fit to go two rounds with a kitten. Spike could take him out with one punch, assuming the Slayer didn’t stop him. Which was good, he thought bitterly, since that was all he would get before the chip incapacitated him.

“You really going to try and tell me that your little group doesn’t do the mad scientist bit?” he asked incredulously.

“That’s different.”

“How?” Xander demanded. “How is what you people did to Spike different from creating that thing in the caves?”

“He’s a vampire,” Riley answered, as if that answered everything. For him, it probably did.

“Yeah, I’m a vampire. It’s you bloody lot that tried to turn me into something else.”

“They made you incapable of hurting humans,” Riley shot back. “I don’t see you convincing me that’s a bad thing.”

“Stop it, all of you,” the Slayer snapped loudly. “We’ve been over this before.” More quietly, she said: “Riley, sit down before you fall down. Spike, you’re not helping.”

“Wasn’t trying to,” he pointed out. But he reluctantly gave in to Xander’s silent plea and crossed to join Xander, as far from the soldier as he could get and still be in the same room. He threw himself with seeming casualness into the chair Xander had been sitting in, not surprised when Xander immediately perched next to him on the arm. With an effort, Spike stopped himself from touching Xander, not wanting to display where his weakness lay more than he had to. If they were going to learn anything from the soldier, it would be now while Finn was weak and sick and off balance. He reeked of chemicals and grief, and a blind Fhiovar demon could see the man’s confusion and uncertainty.

“Riley,” the Watcher had waited until the soldier sat down, now he stepped into the center of the group and everyone’s eyes turned to him. “You must admit that all the evidence points to the Initiative not being quite what it seems. I’ve heard rumors that secretly they’re working towards some darker purpose. Something that might harm us all.”

“No, that’s not what we’re about.” Spike smirked at the automatic denial, thinking the soldier sounded like he was fighting a rear guard action and one he was losing.

“Then what is 3-14?” Xander asked.

“I don’t know.” More’s the pity, that one sounded like the truth.

“Riley, think about it for a minute. They told you some unknown demon had escaped and killed Professor Walsh.” Oh, bloody hell, the Slayer was holding her soldier boy’s hand, giving him wide-eyed concerned looks as she tried to reason with him. She really had gone soft over the git. “They couldn’t describe what killed her, or give you any idea how it got out of the lab. Does that sound right to you? Don’t they have security cameras? Doesn’t she have lab assistants? How could something have killed her without anyone seeing it, or having it on film?”

Good point, Spike thought grudgingly. “Certainly had cameras everywhere I turned when you had
me down in your little shop of horrors.”

Finn looked slightly rattled by that argument and didn’t answer.

“Riley, most demons have a fairly medieval level of technology. They aren’t interested in computers or sophisticated machines. Xander said he found the creature in a makeshift office, with a sophisticated computer system set up,” Giles shook his head. “I can’t even begin to tell you how unusual that is for a demon.”

Spike rolled his eyes. Lots of demons used computers and kept up with modern technology. They were just the boring ones who didn’t cross the Watchers’ radar. They were going to be here all night at this rate. He was beginning to think this overgrown farm boy was too bloody stupid to be of any use to them. “Look, you unbelievable twit, Xander said the thing was grafted together from bits of human, demon and machine,” he glanced up at Xander. “Right?”

“Right.”

Shifting his gaze back to Finn, Spike continued: “Demons don’t want human parts. We don’t need ‘em. We’re stronger, faster, and frequently smarter than humans. Why would we want to muck about adding human qualities? Not like you lot got much to offer.”

“Gee, thanks,” Xander muttered and Spike grinned up at him unrepentantly.

“Despite Spike’s lack of tact,” the Watcher said with a sigh. “He is essentially correct - although not about demon superiority, of course. You must know that something with machine parts grafted onto its body can’t possibly be born that way. Someone must have manufactured it. Do you honestly believe that, in a town the size of Sunnydale, there is another sophisticated laboratory capable of creating something like that? Or anywhere else for that matter? You must recognize that the only possible place that creature could have come from is the Initiative.”

“Which means the Initiative created it.” Xander said when Finn’s shoulders slumped and he looked unwillingly convinced. “In that case, don’t you think you owe it to the people of this town to help stop it?”
Chapter 29

Riley had appeared reluctantly convinced by their arguments and had agreed to ask questions inside the Initiative, both about Maggie Walsh’s death and about 314. With one of the Initiative’s own asking, Xander was hopeful they might actually learn something useful about what really going on. It had been a struggle, but he hadn’t demanded that Riley produce the Initiative files on Spike and the chip. He didn’t think Riley was ready for that step yet but Xander thought Riley might get there, once he’d proven to his own satisfaction that the people he worked with had been concealing information from the soldiers on the team.

Buffy put a stop to the conversation at that point, insisting that Riley go back to bed before he passed out. By then, Xander felt a lot better about Riley and Oz remaining under the same roof even if only because Giles promised quietly, as soon as Buffy had helped Riley back up the stairs and out of earshot, to make sure to keep an eye on both of them.

Buffy asked them to wait for her and Xander used the time to fill Spike in on what he’d missed: Riley’s breakdown at Willy’s bar and the details of what he and Oz had found in the caves. Hoping Giles and Buffy would have enough sense not to mention it themselves, he left out the part where Riley had pointed a gun at him, knowing Spike would tear Riley apart for that, chip or no chip, at destructive cost to both himself and their tentative alliance with Riley.

“Spike, you up for a monster hunt?” Buffy asked, reappearing at the top of the stairs.

“Thought you’d never ask,” Spike drawled, getting to his feet.

“What?” Xander demanded in disbelief.

“No.”

“Xander, it’ll be fine.”

The amused condescension in her voice infuriated him.

“Like hell it will. Weren’t you listening when I described that thing?”

“Not to worry, pet. Just because it tossed your mate around like a nine pin doesn’t mean it can do the same with me, or even the Slayer,” Spike said complacently. “Both of us are a bit stronger than a werewolf.”

Xander was going to kill them both.

“I’m inclined to agree with Xander,” Giles interjected. “We’re dealing with a complete unknown.”

“Dealing with somethin’ half human and half demon,” Spike pointed out, cutting Giles off. “Neither one is really a problem.”

“Giles, we know where it is. We could lose it if we don’t go after it now.” Buffy was already rummaging around in Giles’ weapons chest and now she straightened, tossing an ax to Spike, who fielded it easily, and taking a second one for herself. “I am not letting that thing kill another little kid.”

There was nothing but grim determination and bitter regret in her eyes. She was taking the boy’s death personally, blaming herself because a demon had killed him. As a result, she wasn’t thinking clearly, acting on emotion and her thirst for revenge.

“Buffy, will you excuse me and Spike for a couple of minutes?” Xander asked tightly. Not giving
anyone time to object, he snatched the ax out of Spike’s hand and set it down on the table, hauling Spike out the door after him, hoping Giles would take the opportunity to talk some sense into Buffy while he tried to do the same with Spike.

He didn’t stop in the little sunken courtyard outside Giles’ door. He had a feeling this conversation was going to involve some yelling, so he kept walking, marching up the stairs and across the street, where he turned and confronted Spike, folding his arms over his chest and glaring at his lover.

“You can’t go after that thing without more than just the two of you,” he said flatly. “And don’t give me that crap about being able to take it because it’s half human. That thing isn’t more than about 20% human. The rest is demon and machine parts. No way are the human bits in control of that thing. It’s some kind of reanimated corpse and I for one would like to know what the hell is keeping it alive before we try and fight it.”

“Reanimated corpses aren’t exactly something new, luv. I’m one. So are zombies, and they’re barely worth fighting.”

“Yeah, but your demon is providing the power that has you up and walking around. There’s no way that bits and pieces of demons sewn onto a human corpse are keeping that thing going. Maybe it’s magic, like zombies, but what if it isn’t? I seriously doubt that thing is running on two AA batteries. We have no idea what’s powering it or why it’s even alive. Don’t you think we need some answers before you guys go off and try and kick its ass?”

Spike glared right back at him, his voice a low, dangerous purr. “Seems to me someone isn’t following his own advice.”

“What?” Spike’s accusation threw Xander off track. “What are you talking about?”

“Talking about you following that thing into the middle of nowhere without weapons or backup,” Spike growled angrily.

“Don’t you dare start with me over that, Spike. I am not listening to a lecture from you when you are on your way out the door to do the exact same thing you’re mad at me about.” Spike began to say something and Xander practically snarled as he cut Spike off. “You even think about saying it’s different for you, and I swear to god I am walking away and not coming back.”

Spike snapped his mouth shut so quickly it was obvious that that had been exactly what he’d been about to say, even as he closed the distance between them and grabbed Xander by the shoulders, gripping so tightly he was just shy of hurting Xander. “You’re not going anywhere,” he snarled.

Even in game face, his eyes were stricken and Xander felt a wave of shame that almost drowned out his anger. Spike would rather be dunked in holy water than have Xander leave him and Xander knew it. He’d been lashing out, angry that Spike wasn’t listening to him, pushing Spike’s buttons, and now Spike was on the verge of losing control because of words spoken in haste and anger. He wouldn’t leave Spike, never - not for longer than it took to calm down. Spike had to know it was an empty threat but the words had hurt him more than Xander had ever intended and he regretted saying them.

He forced himself to relax, unclenching his fists and taking a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

Spike wasn’t even slightly mollified, his grip didn’t slacken in the least. “You’re mine, Xander. My Claimed. It’s my responsibility to protect you.”
“I understand that, Spike. I know you want to protect me, I know how important it is to you but you can’t wrap me in cotton wool and keep me safe from everything. We live on the Hellmouth, things are going to happen. Sometimes you just have to trust me to do what I think is necessary.”

“I trust you, Xander.”

“Then stop treating me like I’m helpless! You have to let me protect you, let me watch your back, as much as I trust you to watch mine. If you’re going after this thing, then I’m going with you.”

“No!”

“Why not? If you and Buffy can take it down with no problem, then there’s no reason for me to stay behind.”

Spike glared in yellow-eyed outrage at having his own words thrown back at him. Xander stared adamantly at his lover, not willing to back down. They either did this together or neither one of them went.

After a long moment, Spike relaxed his grip on Xander’s shoulders and pulled him in for a hug, clinging to him fiercely. “Couldn’t bear to lose you, Xander,” he said, his voice muffled in Xander’s hair as he buried his face in the crook of Xander’s neck.

“You can’t have it both ways, Spike,” he said softly into Spike’s ear, his own arms coming up to hold Spike close. “Either this thing is too dangerous for any of us, or I’m going with you.”

He counted it a victory when Spike didn’t immediately refuse, although he could feel Spike’s body tense and knew Spike was struggling against his own instincts. Xander pulled back just enough that he could see Spike’s eyes, seeing the conflict in them. He put his hands on Spike’s face and met the yellow eyes squarely.

“I love you, Spike. You make me happier than I have ever been in my entire life but you can’t always protect me, no matter how much you want to.”

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As the trail got steeper and they got close to their destination, Xander finally figured out who was to blame for this situation.

Hollywood.

If Hollywood had, even once in its entire history, been able to make a scary Frankenstein, they wouldn’t be in this fix now.

It was a lot more comforting than the thought he’d started out with, which was that this was his fault. Somehow, he’d been unable to convey the overwhelming sense of menace he’d gotten from the Initiative’s version of Frankenstein’s monster. The thing should have been a joke - a side-show monster as bad as any every dreamed up by Hollywood. Between the randomly grafted bits of shiny metal, the mismatched arms - one green and one almost flesh-colored, just enough off to be clear that it wasn’t human flesh even if the bulky but slightly odd distribution of the muscles hadn’t already given it away, but instead it had been terrifying. Xander couldn’t remember ever seeing a demon that had frightened him more and it was seriously ticking him off that Buffy and Spike weren’t taking him at his word about the threat level.

Of course, Giles hadn’t done any better than Xander at convincing Buffy to wait for more information about the thing’s capabilities. Buffy was on a mission: she wanted to kill the creature
responsible for the little boy’s death. Between Slayer arrogance and her burning need to avenge the mutilated child, Buffy wasn’t listening to reason. He wasn’t much affected by the child’s death - Xander knew that the death of most humans didn’t mean much to Spike, Spike hated to see Xander upset but it was strictly for Xander’s sake. He suspected that Spike just needed to kill something. The vampire was still upset and angry after their confrontation and the thing that had endangered Xander was the closest target. He wouldn’t take his anger out on Xander and he couldn’t take it out on Oz - not with Oz unconscious and injured and being Xander’s friend. Which pretty much left the monster in the caves for working off his unresolved issues with a spot of heavy duty violence. Which officially made this a sucky time for them to have gotten into an argument.

Admittedly, Buffy and Spike hadn’t completely disregarded his warnings, it was just that they were overly confident the thing wasn’t a match for them. Xander was clinging to the hope that he was being over-cautious and this wasn’t going to end in disaster. Giles had been overruled when he planned to accompany them, and had reluctantly agreed to remain behind to keep an eye on Oz and Riley. Xander had simply picked an ax out of the weapons chest and, ignoring Buffy’s arguments and Spike’s disapproval, had led the way out of the apartment.

Reaching the entrance to the caves, Spike pushed in front of him, giving him a look that brooked no argument as he and Buffy entered the cave first, moving quietly and cautiously into the dimly lit interior, Xander treading close on their heels.

“How far in?” Buffy asked quietly.

“Maybe a dozen rooms,” Xander answered, equally quietly, gesturing in the direction he and Oz had gone.

Maybe the thing had privacy issues, disliking having people enter his lair without knocking, maybe it was just out for a stroll, but they had barely left the connecting tunnel into the fourth cave when Buffy came to an abrupt halt.

Buffy and Spike hadn’t exactly been talkative as they were journeying through the caves but the dead silence now as they both, more or less obviously, gaped at the Initiative’s monster made Xander think he was so going to say ‘I told you so’ - if they survived this. Because now, seeing the thing again, Xander was as struck dumb as both of the other two. You’d think he’d have an advantage, him being on his second viewing and all.

The thing faced them calmly from across the cave and Xander got the impression it was cataloging them in some way. Filing them away for future reference. And wasn’t that a lovely thought.

“You returned. Interesting.”

That same eerily calm voice, simply noting the fact that it recognized Xander.

“He brought friends,” Buffy said, hefting her ax with hands that gripped a little too hard.

“Human. And vampire.” The mis-matched eyes returned to Xander for a moment. “You are human as well.” The eyes swung back to Spike, who was studying the creature intently and without the horrified disgust that neither Buffy nor Xander could hide. “Hostile 17, I believe.”

Oh, that couldn’t be good. How much did this thing know about them?

“I’ll show you hostile,” Spike snarled and launched himself in a blur of motion, Buffy a split second behind him.
He despised being called that. ‘Hostile 17’ was the Initiative’s prisoner, the helpless, chipped vampire. He was Spike, William the Bloody, Master of the Hellmouth, and he was going to take this thing’s measure.

He leapt forward, peripherally aware of the Slayer a half step behind him and they moved in a coordinated attack, spreading apart slightly to take the thing from both sides. Xander was right, this thing was an abomination against demon and human and needed to be killed.

He swung his ax in a low deadly arc, perfectly timed to strike the thing’s side just before Spike was on it. The Slayer had her own ax swinging, cutting through the air in a shining blur on the edge of his vision and Spike was already tasting victory when his ax was blocked, a thick forearm lashing out and meeting the wooden handle, stopping the ax seemingly effortlessly, as Spike was sent stumbling to the side, struggling to stay on his feet as his momentum was so abruptly knocked off kilter. He heard the clash of metal on metal and saw the Slayer’s ax blade had been blocked by the metal plate on the thing’s right forearm.

In the half-second that followed, the creature snatched the ax from the Slayer’s grip and back-handed her with it, flinging her across the cave with one sweep of its arm. Using its momentary distraction, Spike swung his weapon again, aiming for the thing’s unprotected back. The blow landed, hard enough to briefly stagger the creature, but Spike cursed as he saw the blade had been stopped by the ragged line of metal staples marching up the thing’s back like an enormous centipede. The two-inch, heavy metal staples connected two different types of flesh, neither human, and the blade barely penetrated the tough scaly hide of either.

In his surprise at the failure of his attack, Spike made the amateur mistake of stopping to assess the damage for a fraction of a second too long. The thing twisted sharply and Spike clung to the ax handle, his feet leaving the floor as the blade pulled free of flesh and he was flung to one side with contemptuous ease. He landed on his side and was back on his feet in a blink, the demon turning to look at him curiously.

“It seems the files were wrong. You are able to hurt other living things. The chip would appear to not be functioning properly.”

“Bugger the chip. No one controls me!”

The Slayer was back on her feet, a thin trickle of blood running down from a cut above her eye attesting to just how hard she’d hit the wall. Slayers were almost as hard to mark as vampires. This thing was bloody strong and Spike had the uneasy feeling that Xander had been right and they should have waited before attacking it. The Slayer was disarmed, the creature now examining her ax with curious interest, and Spike saw that Xander had taken advantage of the thing’s back being turned and was charging across the cave, his own ax raised.

“Xander, no!”

He was fucking killing the Slayer for that, Spike thought viciously. Her yell did nothing but warn the thing that it was about to be attacked. He sprang toward the creature, determined not to let it hurt Xander, and saw with disbelief that Xander wasn’t attacking the monster. His boy was attacking the computers.

What the hell?

The thing met Spike’s blow with the Slayer’s ax, the two blades meeting and Spike’s blade
shattered at the impact, splinters of metal spraying outward as the blade snapped in half, almost drowning out the sounds of smashing glass and plastic as Xander used his ax to destroy the computers, smashing the heavy weapon down on the putty colored boxes over and over again.

As a distraction, it worked beautifully. Too well. Hearing the noisy destruction going on behind it, the thing swung away from Spike and the Slayer, and made an annoyed sound, dropping the Slayer’s ax and striding across the room, even as Xander’s ax reduced the second computer to useless scraps.

“Xander!”

Xander spun around at Spike’s yell and threw himself to the side just as the creature swung its arm up, a familiar skewer appearing suddenly from its wrist. Running flat out, Spike was too late to stop what happened next and Xander screamed as the skewer caught him in the side, slicing along his flesh, missing the center of his body only because of his sideways momentum. The skewer was sliding back into the thing’s forearm as Spike slammed full tilt into the creature’s back.

The creature lurched forward a single step and Spike was almost stunned by the impact. It had been like crashing at full speed into a solid wall. Spike snarled and grabbed one of the thick metal staples protruding from the thing’s mismatched flesh, yanking on it, trying to tear it free, willing to tear this thing apart, metal stitch by metal stitch if necessary.

The u-shaped piece of metal was solidly lodged and didn’t come free.

What the fuck was this thing made of?

Riding the thing’s back, it was having trouble reaching him, but Spike couldn’t find a vulnerable spot and wasn’t doing any damage. The Slayer was there, kicking the thing, landing a solid punch in its mid-section, just where the jagged seams of flesh met together and the creature didn’t even flinch at the blow. It smacked her away like a human slapping at an annoying insect and Spike gave in to desperation, burying his fangs in the thing’s neck, nearly gagging on the chemical taste and stench as his fangs penetrated, even as the Slayer was sent flying across the cave to smash into the wall for the second time.

The thing growled and reached up, grabbing at Spike’s head and shoulders and tearing him free, tossing him across the cave with effortless strength. Spike tucked his head in and tried to judge his landing but there wasn’t time. He slammed into the wall and slid down to the floor. Only his fear for Xander, lying motionless and unprotected on the floor, the smell of his blood strong in the room, got Spike up and moving, swaying drunkenly as he lurched back to his feet.

The thing had turned to its computers, crossing to the makeshift table and surveying the damage as Spike limped quickly across the floor towards Xander. He bent down and pulled Xander up over his shoulder, something that should have been easy but wasn’t as Xander’s limp body rested heavily on Spike’s battered torso.

The Slayer was stirring but Spike had no time for her. He needed to get Xander out of here while the creature was ignoring them. He pushed his aching body, moving as fast as he could out the door of the cave, ignoring the pain, ignoring the screaming of torn muscles, not stopping or looking back until he was clear of the caves entirely.

At some point, the Slayer caught up with him, moving almost as stiffly as he was. Limping heavily, blood still dripping down her face and onto her shirt, she was as grimly silent as he was. Spike felt a surprising kinship with her in this moment - neither of them were used to fleeing the scene of battle, neither used to being beaten, much less defeated so easily it had made them appear
weak as normal humans.

Xander had done better in the encounter than either of them, Spike thought. For whatever reason, Xander’s destruction of the computers was the only thing that had seemed to faze the creature, even for a moment. The Slayer and he had been nothing to it and Spike burned with humiliation at the thing’s obvious contempt for their fighting abilities.

He could still smell a worrying amount of blood and there was no sign of pursuit. Spike gently lowered Xander to the ground, ignoring the pain in his own body as he concentrated on not hurting Xander any further. He leaned Xander up against a tree and checked him over quickly. The skewer had grazed Xander, carving a deep trench in his side but not actually penetrating his flesh, Spike saw with relief. The wound was bleeding messily but wasn’t life-threatening. Spike tore his own shirt off, and quickly ripped it into strips, wrapping the longest piece around Xander’s lean waist in a makeshift bandage. Xander had blood in his hair and the beginnings of a lump, Spike found, running gentle fingers over his scalp. Like both Spike and the Slayer, he’d hit the cave wall but, unlike them, he’d been knocked unconscious and Spike was once again reminded how fragile humans were.

This was what Xander never understood. That it tore Spike apart to see his love injured and bleeding and so frighteningly still and pale. Xander was so easily hurt compared to a vampire, and he didn’t heal as quickly or completely. Xander could have easily been crippled in the fight, something he never seemed able to make Xander understand, no matter how hard he tried. He should never have permitted Xander to come along and he cursed himself for his own over-confidence that had caused Xander to be hurt.

“How is he?”

“Don’t know,” he said worriedly. “He needs a doctor.”

To his overwhelming relief, Xander stirred, his eyes opening slowly and gazing blearily around the dark woods.

“Xander? You ok, luv?” Spike put a shaking hand against Xander’s face, watching the confused gaze turn in his direction.

After an endless moment, Xander’s eyes cleared slowly and he focused on Spike. “Did we win?” he asked dazedly after a minute.

“We got our asses kicked,” the Slayer reported truthfully, bitter self-recommendation in her voice. “Sorry, Xander, we should have listened to you.”

“Bit tougher than I thought it would be,” Spike admitted, his finger caressing Xander’s cheek with gentle fingers. “Nice work on the computers,” he complimented, although still puzzled by why Xander had chosen that target.

“Guess, I’m the only one here not stupid enough to attack that thing,” Xander said with the ghost of a smile.

Spike could tell he’d meant it as a joke, but he couldn’t help feeling the sting of the unspoken accusation. Xander had warned them, told them he had a bad feeling about the Frankenstein monster in the caves, and they had ignored him. Xander shouldn’t have had to pay for their arrogance and overconfidence.

Xander tried to move and winced, looking down in puzzlement at the bandage around his
midsection. Spike shook off his bitter thoughts, as he steadied Xander.

“Easy, luv. Got a bit skewered.”

“Oh. Yeah. Think we found the polgara,” Xander said.

“Bits of it anyway,” the Slayer put in, wrinkling her nose in disgust. Spike shook his head at her squeamishness.

It was just one more humiliation that he didn’t dare carry Xander. No matter how gentle he was, movement would hurt Xander now that he was conscious. He would have to recruit the Slayer’s help getting his boy safely back home.

“Can you walk, luv?” he asked quietly. “Need to get you to a doctor.”

“And getting further away from that thing seems like a good plan,” the Slayer put in. “You up for it, Xander?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Surprisingly, the Slayer took the lead, helping Xander to his feet. Watching helplessly as his boy winced and bit his lip to keep from crying out, Spike wondered how much she knew about the limitations imposed on him by the chip. With relief, he found he could sling Xander’s arm over his shoulder and, careful to keep his hand away from the wound on his side, take most of Xander’s weight as they made their slow retreat out of the woods and away from the abomination in the caves.
“Twice in one night is a record for me,” Dr. Bradley told him sternly. “Let’s try not to do this again.”

“Sorry.”

He wasn’t apologizing for the inconvenience of having called Dr. Bradley out to Giles’ apartment twice in the same night, Xander thought, so much as for the doctor having to treat a patient with a psychotically over-protective boyfriend hovering nearby, growling every time Xander flinched or even looked like he was in pain. For the doctor’s sake, Xander had tried really hard to act like the wound in his side wasn’t hurting him, and that having the torn strips of shirt that Spike had first bandaged him with removed didn’t hurt like hell. He was pretty sure, given the increasing loudness of Spike’s growls, that he hadn’t been able to hide the fact that it hurt like hell when the doctor had cleaned the matted blood out of his hair so he could examine the fast growing lump on his scalp.

Fortunately, it was obvious that Dr. Bradley was used to dealing with possessive demons, furious at the necessity of letting someone else touch their Claimed. He hadn’t batted an eye at Spike’s vampire features, serenely ignoring Spike as he went about his work, although Xander suspected that the reassuring running commentary he kept up the entire time was as much for Spike as it was for Xander.

“I can give you something for the pain,” Dr. Bradley said now, “but I’m afraid I can’t risk a sedative, not with the head injury.” He’d already told them that it didn’t appear to be anything more serious than a mild concussion.

They hadn’t dared risk going to their own apartment. With both Spike and Xander injured, it was just asking for trouble from the Court. So, once again, they had imposed on Giles, who was bandaging the cut on Buffy’s forehead with some of Dr. Bradley’s supplies.

Xander was lying on the couch in the living room, much to Spike’s dissatisfaction but Xander had refused to oust either Oz or Riley from their beds and Giles’ apartment just didn’t have any more rooms for stashing wounded bodies in. Giles really needed a bigger place at the rate this year was going. Spike had given in ungraciously rather than fight with Xander while he was injured but it was clear his lover resented that Xander wasn’t getting the best available accommodations and “that fucking soldier” was.

Getting to his feet, the doctor said: “As long as I’m here, I’ll check on my other patients.” He handed Spike a bottle of pills. “Give him two of these every 6 hours until they’re gone.”

Spike brought him a glass of water and Xander swallowed the pills gratefully. His head was throbbing and his side ached, but he ignored that as he peered up at Spike. “Are you ok?”

“Fine, luv. Nothing that won’t heal in a day or two.” Spike caressed his cheek gently, perching cautiously on the edge of the couch next to him. “Go to sleep, Xander. I’ll be right here.”

Either it was the medicine or exhaustion from the long hike back from the caves - he’d lost enough blood that he had been dizzy and weak, his muscles trembling with fatigue, Spike’s support the only thing keeping him upright during what should have been an easy 20-minute stroll, but Xander felt his eyelids drooping, even as he fought to stay awake for a little longer. “Giles?”

“Yes, Xander?”
“You remember Angel’s mansion?”

“The one on Crawford street?” he could hear Giles’ surprise, feel it in the way Spike’s fingers stilled on his face.

“There’s blood in the freezer there. Would you get a dozen bags for Spike?”

“Of course, Xander.”

Satisfied, Xander let himself slump back down on the couch. Spike would ignore his own needs in favor of fretting over Xander’s injuries and Giles didn’t have any blood in the apartment. Spike needed blood, he thought, surrendering to the nearly overwhelming tiredness. His vampire shouldn’t look so bruised and battered.

“Don’t worry about me, luv. Just rest and get better.”

Xander fell asleep, Spike’s cool fingers entangled with his own.

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The Slayer was giving her Watcher a report, and Spike spared just enough attention to listen in. He scowled as she bluntly described their complete failure, hating to hear the detail of their embarrassing defeat repeated. Looking down at Xander, his scowl faded at the sight of his Claimed’s bandages and felt the minute tremors that shook his muscles, even in sleep. He deserved to be humiliated for letting Xander come to harm.

“You mustn’t blame yourself, Buffy. You had no way of knowing…”

“Don’t make excuses, Watcher,” Spike growled softly, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb Xander. “We fucked up. Went in like a pair of bleedin’ amateurs, so sure of ourselves we didn’t do our homework. Deserved what we got.”

“That’s a little harsh…”

“He’s right. You and Xander both tried to warn us.” The Slayer looked at her Watcher helplessly, “I could barely fight him, Giles. It’s like the Initiative designed that thing to be the ultimate warrior. It’s unbelievably strong. It’s fast and smart. I don’t know how we’re going to take it down.”

“It’s just that you were unprepared,” the Watcher said reassuringly, though Spike could tell from the way his eyes shifted away that he didn’t believe his own comforting words. “We just need to find out more about this thing. I’m sure there must be some vulnerability we can exploit, some flaw in the design.”

“I think the part where it’s pure evil and kills randomly may have been an oversight,” the Slayer said wryly.

“We need the design schematics,” Spike interjected harshly. “Need to know what makes that thing tick. And your boy better be prepared to get them for us,” he glared at the Slayer. The time for pussyfooting around was over. It was past time the soldier either proved he was useful or stopped being a distraction.

Looking down at Xander’s battered features, Spike made a silent promise, to himself and to Xander.
The taser rifle was surprisingly small, an ugly, graceless weapon, completely lacking the elegant beauty of a good sword or ax. Which was beside the point because Spike’s sole interest in it was learning its limitations.

“Good work,” he told Anthony and Arkady, not looking up from the weapon they’d delivered proudly the moment he’d descended the stairs into the Court. Much as he’d hated leaving Xander alone, he’d known he couldn’t be absent from the Court for two nights in a row without causing problems he wasn’t in a mood to deal with. Xander was still tucked away safely at the Watcher’s, after spending all day yesterday drowsing on the couch, watching tv, and trying to hide from Spike the fact that he was hurting.

With the blood the Watcher had fetched from the mansion for him, Spike was almost fully healed. The Slayer healed almost as quickly as a vampire and she had taken her soldier back to the campus, so at least they hadn’t had to put up with him all day. Extracting a promise from Xander that he wouldn’t set foot outside the Watcher’s until Spike returned, Spike had left shortly after sunset, heading for the Court.

The mechanism on the weapon was easy enough to figure out, safety here, trigger there, no sign of anything to regulate the intensity of the electricity. Either one jolt fits all or tied to the trigger mechanism. “Were you able to get it without raising an alarm.” He looked up for the first time since Anthony had approached him, with the weapon in his hands, fixing his Lieutenants with a piercing look.

“Yes, Master Spike,” Anthony answered proudly. “The soldier carrying this lost his footing and ‘accidentally’ fell into the ravine, dropping his weapon somewhere on the slope,” Anthony reported. “He may suspect he was pushed, but I am positive he didn’t see us.”

“Good.” Spike rose, the gun in his hands, tempted to try it out on the minions but, although amusing, it would serve no purpose. “Gonna take this thing out and see what it can do. You two can come along, if you like,” he added generously. The two had done good work and had earned a reward. He suppressed a grin. Of course, they might not like what he had in mind as a reward.

He signaled to Jose and Mark that he was leaving and that they should keep the minions training in his absence, then jerked his head at Anthony and Arkady to follow him, leading them out into the night, heading for the DeSoto.

Giles slammed down the phone in irritation and stood with his back to the living room for a moment, obviously struggling to get his anger under control before he turned to face them.

“No help?” Xander took a wild stab at the problem.

“Bloody, useless idiots,” Giles snarled. “Can’t see danger when it’s standing in front of their faces.”

“Who’re we talking about?” Oz asked from the hallway.

“The Council,” Giles answered bitterly. “They aren’t willing to help because ‘the creature you describe isn’t a natural demon’” he quoted sarcastically. “Berks!”

“How’re you feeling?” Xander asked him, changing the subject quickly as he saw the question on Oz’s lips and realized that Oz had already left town and wasn’t aware of the huge problem between
Giles and the Council.

Giles had never been officially reinstated as Buffy’s Watcher by the Watcher’s Council and he understandably resented it. They used him as Buffy’s Watcher, giving information when he called, but refused to pay him or give him the respect he deserved, treating him like a petitioner every time he contacted them. Privately, Xander suspected they knew Giles would never abandon Buffy and were getting a little petty payback for Giles’ part in Buffy’s increasing independence and Wesley’s defection. They really were a heartless bunch of unbelievably cold fish.

He’d fill Oz in later, when Giles was out of the room. Giles didn’t need to hear it being talked about, no matter how much he dismissed it as politics, it had been a severe blow to his pride that the Council refused to reinstate him.

Oz took the cue from him. “I’m good.” He graciously refrained from mentioning his faster-than-human healing abilities to the one fully-human, injured party.

Having already spent most of the day, lying on the couch, not trying very hard to suppress his resentment of the fact that Oz, Buffy and Spike all had an unfair advantage in the healing department, Xander wished he hadn’t promised Spike he wouldn’t go home. He wasn’t up for much, it still hurt to change position and Xander had been wistfully thinking of the big tv and unlimited channels at their apartment. You could only sleep so long and Giles’ tv just wasn’t worth watching - small and hidden away in a cabinet like a shameful secret, it was too much trouble to pull it out, not to mention the man didn’t have cable, which limited the choices. Without Spike to provide commentary and play with his toes as they watched, it just wasn’t worth turning on and, now that Spike had left for the night, Xander was bored.

Oz, on the other hand, was in heaven ever since he’d discovered Giles’ record collection late in the afternoon, and promptly began putting one album after another on Giles’ surprisingly good stereo. Xander didn’t know enough about any of the bands to participate in Oz and Giles’ discussion about the glory days of rock and roll, and Giles’ enthusiastic - almost rapturous - descriptions of concerts he’d attended 20-some years ago was reminding Xander of Band Candy Giles - a night which Xander worked hard at repressing because of his own embarrassing conduct.

It hadn’t gotten any better when Spike woke up not long before sunset and added his opinions to the ones already being bandied about the room. Xander had ended up simply lying on the couch, his head in Spike’s lap, feigning sleep, letting the voices wash over him and feeling Spike’s fingers running through his hair. Thanks to the blood packets that Giles had brought over from the mansion, Spike was almost completely healed and, at sunset, he’d extracted the promise from Xander not to leave Giles’ apartment until Spike returned, and had left to check on the Court.

Oz had also decided to spend one more night, saying something about how Devon had a party going more nights than not. Oz’s ribs were already giving him a lot less trouble and his bruises looked like they’d been healing for a week, not just over a day.

Buffy had called and let them know she would be spending the night in her dorm room, so it was a surprise when the door pushed open and she walked in just as Giles was serving dinner, with Riley Finn trailing behind her.

Riley looked better - physically anyway - than when he’d left this morning. Buffy had walked with him back to the campus and Xander had taken it as a good sign that Riley hadn’t said anything about Spike, who’d finally let himself fall asleep after the sun was up and he resigned himself to being imprisoned at the Watcher’s all day. He’d given Spike, who was sprawled on one end of the couch, Xander’s feet on his lap, his arms resting on Xander’s legs, one sharp glance on his way out the door but, other than his jaw tightening a bit with disapproval, he hadn’t said anything. Xander
had decided to take it as homophobia rather than demonphobia and had ignored him. He was in full uniform and clearly still on an emotional roller-coaster, but his face no longer had the flushed, feverish look and he looked steady on his feet and grimly determined.

Standing immediately inside the door, Riley looked distinctly uncomfortable about being there and Xander didn’t miss his quick glance around the room, obviously checking for Spike. He reminded himself firmly that they were trying to get Riley on their side and bit back the rude comment that rose to his lips at the soldier’s obvious relief that Spike wasn’t there.

“You guys were right, the Initiative created that thing.”

Riley’s opening remark surprised Xander and he exchanged a hopeful look with Giles and Oz. “Does that mean you found the Initiative’s files on it?”

Riley shook his head, looking grim. “No. It means it came ‘home’,” Xander could hear the distasteful quote marks. “To the Initiative.”

Xander’s lips formed a silent ‘oh’ and Giles set the pot he was serving out of back down on the stove. Absently wiping his hands on a dishtowel, he moved into the dining room to join them. “What happened?”

“It overrode our security and got into the facility somehow.” Riley looked angry and helpless and grief-stricken. “It killed two of my men and wounded another.”

Buffy put a sympathetic hand on his arm and Giles said quietly: “I’m very sorry to hear that.”

Riley nodded and continued. “It calls itself ‘Adam’.”

“It has a name?” Xander interrupted. Ok, that wasn’t really the issue but, for some reason, that surprised him.

“Apparently Maggie Walsh named him.” Riley’s jaw tightened as he said the name, though his voice remained emotionless, a soldier giving a report.

“Adam - as in Adam and Eve?” Oz suggested quietly.

“Maybe,” Riley’s formal tone relaxed slightly. “It was apparently intended to be a prototype. Except no one figured it would go rogue.”

Buffy gave him a quick glance and stepped in, summarizing crisply: “It killed Dr. Engleman, the scientist who was second in seniority behind Professor Walsh. And Riley says it had some computer disks from the Initiative. It was plugging the disks directly into its body.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Oz said.

“If he can do that, why does he need computers in his home cave?” Xander asked. Granted, computers weren’t his strong suit, but if ’Adam’ was a walking laptop, why did it need other computers?

“It’s one thing to read a disc,” Oz told him. “He was downloading an awful lot of information on those computers. He’s probably using the computers to store the data until he can process it. There’s a lot of useless information on security feeds, the excess can really clutter up a database.”

“I took an ax to the computers in the caves,” Xander told him, having forgotten to mention it earlier.
Oz lifted an eyebrow and Xander gave him a small grin. “Seemed like a good idea at the time. I didn’t like what you’d said about how those computers were hooked into so many places,” he explained. Sunnydale had far too many secrets for him to be comfortable with the idea of big brother watching. Especially when big brother was a six-foot-four Frankenstein monster with psychotic tendencies.

“Good thinking.”

“Oz, from what you saw, could those computers have been hooked into the Initiative?” Xander asked, as a thought suddenly struck him. “Enough to open doors?”

Oz thought back. “Maybe. It was all encrypted, so I don’t know exactly what he was getting into, but it’s possible.”

“The Initiative isn’t accessible from outside,” Riley told them.

“Except Adam was built inside the Initiative and given computer bits,” Buffy reminded him. “That might have given him a way around your security.”

“I thought you destroyed the computers,” Riley asked Xander. It didn’t sound hostile, and Riley was frowning thoughtfully.

“Trust me, those computers aren’t doing anything for anyone,” Xander answered confidently. “Problem is, he’s had almost 24 hours to set up new ones.” Although where Adam would shop for computers even in Sunnydale was an interesting question. The guy wasn’t exactly inconspicuous.

“If this Adam has access to the Initiative’s computers, it is even more vital that we get any information on him immediately,” Giles said. “Otherwise we run the risk of the data being erased.”

Xander smiled fondly at him, remembering a time not so long ago when Giles regarded computers with fear and willful ignorance. Now he was even familiar with the terminology.

“I agree.” Xander’s gaze swung back to Riley in surprise.

“Washington is sending in a team to do an internal investigation of the Initiative, but I’m still in charge until they get here. I’ve got people going through every file in the place, computer or paper, and compiling every scrap of information they can find about Adam and Project 314.” He glanced briefly at Buffy. “We have men with taser rifles guarding the caves’ entrance but their orders are not to engage unless Adam tries to leave the caves. Given Buffy’s lack of success against Adam, we’re going to try and find out what its vulnerabilities are before we take it on.”

“You may need help,” Giles said and Riley shook his head firmly.

“As Xander pointed out, we created this problem, it’s up to us to deal with it.”

Ok, that hadn’t been what he’d meant, Xander thought with a sigh but let it alone for now. Maybe the Initiative had weapons that would work against that thing, he thought optimistically.

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The taser rifle was effective at close range only, Spike discovered immediately. He driven 10 miles outside town, into the coastal hills and pulled over in a day-use picnic area. The level clearing was perfect for his purposes and Spike let loose a few experimental shots, finding that the weapon was limited to one intensity. All or nothing, no way to ramp up the voltage on the electricity.
The discharge lit the clearing like tamed lightning, lashing out and fizzling into nothing when it didn’t find a target. It wasn’t very accurate either, Spike learned, aiming at a clump of decorative boulders and finding he had to be within 10 feet before he could reliably hit a specific spot. Accuracy didn’t really matter that much, he supposed. If the electricity hit any part of the target, the lightening spread out instantly, enveloping the entire body. Twenty feet was the furthest he could stretch the range, beyond that, the blue lightning just fizzled out uselessly, leaving nothing but a lingering smell of ozone.

“Right,” he said after a few minutes, turning to his Lieutenants with a feral grin. “Let’s have some fun with this.” His grin widened at their uneasy looks. “The enemy is armed with these things. Let’s have a bit of target practice, shall we? Don’t worry,” he threw them a disgusted glance, “it won’t kill. Just hurts like hell, which gives you a bit of incentive not to let me hit you,” he informed them cheerfully.

“Need to know how fast this thing is and how well we can dodge it.” He let the grin slip, wanting them to know this was serious business. “If you two can’t avoid it, then for damn sure minions won’t be able to, and we’ll have to plan accordingly. Ready?”

Give them credit, they didn’t look happy, but they nodded willingly enough. “Remember, you’re attacking, not running away. Start about 50 yards out and see if you can take me.” He didn’t need to warn them to give it their best effort. Every vampire in the Court knew that holding back was a sure way to get themselves dusted.

He hefted the gun as Anthony and Arkady moved out, curious as to how they would handle this.

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Driving back to the factory an hour later, his Lieutenants’ unconscious bodies dumped carelessly in the back seat, Spike frowned to himself.

Anthony in particular had acquitted himself well: ducking, weaving, dropping to a sudden roll before springing upright again, he had avoided three shots from the weapon, the electrical discharge burning scorch marks into the grass where he’d been half a second earlier, but when he’d gotten within ten feet of Spike, he was simply too close to miss. Arkady hadn’t done nearly as well and Spike had dropped her five times before she got within 15 feet of him.

It would have been different if they’d been armed. Arkady could stand 30 feet away and take out a half-dozen soldiers with her knives while staying out of range of the tasers. And it was good to know that vampires could withstand multiple hits from the tasers - something he hadn’t been entirely sure of before tonight. The recovery time was too slow though. It took five to ten minutes for a vampire to shake off the effects - longer after repeated hits - and that meant they were effectively out of the battle at the first shot.

He’d need to work out covering fire, concentrate on crossbow training with the minions, he thought. Get at least 30, preferably 50 or so, up to acceptable accuracy levels and use them to cover for a wave of shock troops. Right now, he had probably ten minions who were any use with a crossbow. Most minions trained with axes and knives and other hand weapons - it was a lot more satisfying to do your killing within arm’s reach of your victim. Crossbows put you too far away, so most minions didn’t like them. Plus, they took more skill and inexperience showed in a way that was difficult to hide.

Fucking hell, he thought, furious with himself. He’d forgotten the damn vests the soldiers wore. Crossbow bolts wouldn’t penetrate vests designed to repel bullets. Could he get enough minions good at throwing a hand-ax from a distance with sufficient force and accuracy to keep the soldiers
busy? Throwing an ax accurately was more difficult than throwing a knife. Axes made a better distraction than knives though. An airborne ax, spinning as it flew, made a visible threat, the blade catching any light and shining in a deadly arc, cutting the air with an audible sound, as it flew towards the target. Knives were much less conspicuous in the air, which meant they had a better chance of actually hitting the target, but a soldier ducking an ax was just as unable to fire a weapon accurately as one actually taken out by a knife.

A combination attack? Knives and crossbows aimed at the vulnerable head and neck by a handful of actual marksmen, paired with a group of minions throwing axes as fast as they could?

Drumming his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, lips mouthing the lyrics of the music pounding from the speakers, Spike considered the options as he drove back to Sunnydale with his usual reckless disregard for the niceties of human speed limits.
“Well, that’s something you don’t see every day.”

The Lhrrasyn demon was suspended in mid air, tied spread-eagle between two trees and rather thoroughly dead. Spike had found the body while on patrol - the smell of meat and fresh blood alerting him to something recently and messily dead. The body was so mutilated, it had taken a moment to recognize the species but only Lhrrasyn had that dark red skin and the prehensile toes at eye level had clued him in to what he was seeing.

Lighting a cigarette, Spike looked up at the remains of the Lhrrasyn, studying it with curious eyes. Lhrrasyn kept to themselves for the most part. Boringly pretentious, they had an arrogant belief that they were better than other demons - some twaddle about being descended from the last of the pure demons to walk this dimensional plane - as if vampires couldn’t make that same claim. They were good fighters when provoked, but this one didn’t look like it had had much of a chance to defend itself.

This was a dissection not something ritual, Spike decided. He couldn’t see anything missing as if removed for sacrifice to some demon or other. Heart, lungs, sex organs, all there. Not exactly intact, but there. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to dissect this thing.

He could almost admire the exquisite delicacy of the display: the way the dark-red skin had been kept whole even as it was peeled back from the chest cavity displaying the bony skeletal structure underneath. The surgical neatness with which the internal organs had been removed. The mathematical precision with which the body was suspended exactly halfway between the trees. Almost.

If he hadn’t been so sure who was responsible, Spike would have taken a moment to admire a fellow artist’s work, but he couldn’t give credit to something that he suspected went about this sort of thing with nothing but scientific curiosity driving him and that was too reminiscent of the Initiative scientists for Spike’s comfort. This Adam was more machine and human than demon: cold and calculating, taking no pleasure in the kill, just mechanically butchering things with robotic precision.

Which was why he found it so bizarre to find the demon strung up this way. The body was displayed with the intent to frighten, to warn others away from something bigger and badder then themselves. Maybe Adam did take pleasure in his work after all, Spike conceded, and had hung the bloody thing up so others could admire his efforts. Adam didn’t think like a demon, or a human, and Spike was finding him frustratingly difficult to figure out.

The Slayer’s toy soldier had gotten word to them that the soldiers had located Maggie Walsh’s files on her pet project. Adam had been created from a single human, half a dozen demon species, plus machine and computer parts. From the notes they’d found, the goal of Project 314 was to create an unstoppable fighter, a ruthlessly efficient killer, one that was obedient to the will of its controller - in this case, Maggie Walsh.

Two out of three wasn’t bad for a first try, Spike thought with a flash of malicious amusement.

He’d taken morbid pleasure in the fact that the prototype had apparently killed its maker within minutes of being activated. Served the bitch right for creating that thing in the first place. Problem was, he was the one who now had to deal with the unstoppable monster she’d created and he didn’t
know how to kill the thing - yet.

Adam was stronger than both Spike and the Slayer. It had kicked both their asses and made it look easy and Spike didn’t let anything get away with that. He needed to find a way to take Adam down and that meant figuring out what Adam was up to. He obviously had some kind of agenda, even if Spike had no clue what it was yet. When Adam broke into the Initiative, he’d reportedly said something about wanting to learn about itself. Somehow, Spike doubted the creature was merely seeking enlightenment.

Spike flicked another glance up at the flayed demon over his head, wondering what Adam was trying to accomplish with these kills. First, he’d killed and mutilated a human child. Now a demon. What was the point? Adam was only days old, two weeks at the outside, activated full grown, programmed with basic information and apparently with the desire to learn more - about demons, humans, and itself. Was this just some bizarre quest for knowledge about different species? A hands-on practicum instead of book learning?

Something about the situation made Spike think back to his own awakening after human death in that alley in London. Power such as he’d never known surging through his body, his senses overwhelmed, bombarded by input he had no words to describe, a thirst for blood and an insatiable craving to know and explore the limits of his new existence. If he could have found a way, he would have taken over the world in that first week of unlife, so cocky and arrogant in his newfound strength. Instead, he’d settled for taking bloody revenge on every person who had insulted or belittled him during his human existence. If he had possessed Adam’s power in that first week of unlife, Spike wouldn’t have settled for goals that petty. He would have wreaked havoc on a scale that would still be being talked of in hushed voices now, a century later.

Spike dropped his cigarette butt and strode away from the display, leaving the carcass to the waiting scavengers. Adam was a bigger threat than the Initiative and Spike was not willing to let a demon stronger than himself move in on his Territory. The Initiative had first created Adam, then been careless enough to let him escape. Scowling, Spike realized he might just have to delay his plan to attack the Initiative until they had a go at taking out Adam. While he doubted they would be successful, they had weapons and expendable fighters in droves. He had no doubt that the soldiers would make an attempt and it seemed only fair to let them have a chance to find out for themselves just how unstoppable the thing they’d created was.

If a bunch of soldiers got killed trying - well, bonus.

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“So, this is it?” Xnader shoved the papers aside in irritation.

“What do you mean?” Buffy was hiding her worry well. She and Oz had met Xander at the job site at the end of his shift and dragged him off to the Espresso Pump, ostensibly for coffee but really to share the latest information on Adam.

“I mean what good is it to have the list of parts that Adam is made out of? Didn’t they have a plan for shutting him down if things went wrong? Some kind of off switch?” What kind of idiots didn’t put in a fail safe, he thought, once again furious at the Initiative’s short-sighted arrogance.

“I guess not.”

“Of course, because that would make sense,” Xander said bitterly.

Oz leaned forward and tapped the drawing Buffy had brought with her.
Riley either couldn’t, or wouldn’t - Xander had his suspicions about which word was more accurate - supply them with copies of the actual blueprints they’d found, but he’d given Buffy a rough sketch of the crucial information. Part of Xander couldn’t believe they were losing sleep over an amateur-looking anatomical sketch of body parts, even if the parts were labeled: “left arm - polgara - skewer” and “legs - shinzik” and so on. And how tired was he that he found himself wondering if the reason there was no neat little circle and label for the groin area of the sketch was because Riley was embarrassed or because Adam wasn’t an “anatomically correct” Frankenstein monster.

He really needed to stop trying to save the world at the end of his work shift.

“What worries me most,” Oz said in that calm way of his, “is Riley’s information about Adam’s power source.”

Riley had told Buffy that Adam’s power source was a uranium core embedded inside his chest. The diagram showed a neat little circle near the spine, labeled ‘uranium core’. Riley was irritatingly anal about his diagram labels, Xander decided, knowing he was being petty and unreasonable and not caring.

“Why?” Buffy asked, looking down at where Oz’s finger was pointing on the diagram.

“Because it implies almost infinite power,” Oz told her.

Buffy frowned, digesting that. “So, Adam was designed to be both really hard to kill and he’s also the Energizer bunny of demons?”

“Yeah, I’m guessing wearing him down enough to hurt him isn’t really going to be an option.” Xander couldn’t help remembering the desperate hours of research into how to kill the Mayor, when they had poured over every scrap of material they could find, looking for an answer about how to kill something impervious to harm. There really ought to be a limit to how many impossible to kill things you were required to tackle in one lifetime, he thought grumpily.

“Which leaves…what? Beheading? Removing his power core?”

“Somehow I suspect he’s not going to agree to just lie down quietly while we do some exploratory surgery,” Xander pointed out. “Who votes for total annihilation?”

Oz raised his hand and Xander grinned at him, feeling a bit more cheerful for some reason.

“How do you totally annihilate something you can’t even dent?” Buffy asked grimly.

No one had an answer.

Spike woke instantly, rolling to his feet as his eyes shot open at the sound of his Claimed’s distress. Xander’s muffled exclamation and accelerating heartbeat were clearly audible over the sound of the television, volume turned low as it always was when Spike was sleeping. Xander wasn’t giving off signals of imminent danger but it was more than just a normal reaction to an upsetting news item.

Spike crossed the room in three rapid strides, jerking open the door to the living room and saw Xander, on his feet, a bowl of cereal forgotten in his hands as he stared wide-eyed at the television. Spike moved to stand beside him, wondering what was on that had provoked this reaction. He
frowned, seeing the Breaking News logo on the screen, as the announcer, standing in front of what looked like half the Sunnydale police force milling around in front of a church, finished her description:

“There is no report on the condition of the parishioners still trapped inside, but their assailants have vowed to kill all of them if police attempt to storm the church.”

Xander gave him a look in which worry and puzzlement were mixed. “Three or four vampires have barricaded themselves in a church and are holding a bunch of people hostage,” he explained, shaking his head in disbelief. “It’s broad daylight. That’s just not normal behavior for vampires.”

“Got that right.” Spike didn’t wait for more details, spinning around and heading back into the bedroom. He needed to deal with this right away. And those bloody idiots in the church were going to pay for the fact that they were rousting the Master of the Territory in the middle of the day to deal with their foolishness.

“Spike?” Xander had followed him into the bedroom where Spike was already yanking on last night’s jeans.

“Toss me a shirt, luv.”

Obviously still bewildered by Spike’s reaction to the news, Xander did as asked and Spike caught the black t-shirt that Xander tossed to him, pulling it on over his head. He grumbled under his breath as he pulled it on, promising himself exactly what he was going to do to those idiots the moment he got his hands on them.

“Spike?” Xander’s voice was a little more insistent this time and he was standing planted in the doorway, making it clear he wasn’t moving until Spike explained himself.

“Got to deal with this personally, luv. Only two explanations for what they’re doing: either they’re challenging my control or they’re too stupid and out of control to follow the rules. Either way, if I don’t deal with it immediately, it’s as good as admitting I can’t control what goes on in my Territory.”

He snagged the leather coat he’d nicked from a store a week ago out of the closet and pulled it on. It wasn’t the same as the beautiful coat he’d worn for nearly three decades as a souvenir of his second Slayer but it was serviceable: pockets to hold weapons and made of finely worked leather that could serve as shelter against the sun in a pinch. The pockets already held an assortment of items: stakes, knives, a pack of smokes, and Spike took a second to check they were all in place.

Xander was no longer blocking the door and Spike knew that his boy understood the necessity of Spike leaving. Xander hated Spike having to move around during the day, always worried that something would go wrong and Spike would be burned by the unforgiving light of the sun but Xander had a clear understanding of how fast things could spiral out of control if the vampires of the Court thought Spike was losing his edge.

He paused long enough to give Xander a quick, hard kiss, then Xander pulled back.

“The police are in a holding pattern for now, according to the news. I’ll take the car and pick up Giles. He and I will work on damage control from the outside, try to keep anyone from getting ideas about storming the place until you get a chance to take care of the vamps.”

Spike considered that for a quick second. “Doubt it’ll be necessary, luv. The police aren’t going to be in a hurry to get inside, not with that many nice church-going voters at stake. Everyone’s going
to be wanting someone else to give the order, just in case things go wrong.” Xander’s jaw set stubbornly and Spike could tell that Xander just wanted to be there, in case Spike needed help.

He wasn’t worried about it himself. Granted, the training he’d been putting the Court through had kept the vampires off the streets more than usual lately, but he would have heard about it if anyone strong enough to seriously challenge him had arrived in town.

Any vampire who thought this stunt was a good way to challenge the Master of a Territory wasn’t working with a full deck, or else they were worse than Angelus at the peak of his religious phase. Spike shook his head at the thought. At least Angelus hadn’t been getting his rocks off in churches during a century in which television cameras had been invented. Unlike these wankers.

“Still, can’t hurt,” he conceded and was rewarded by Xander’s smile. “Know where this place is at?” Spike wasn’t familiar with the church but it was obvious it had a sewer entrance. Vampires stupid enough to pull this shite weren’t going to have the patience for an ambush job.

“It’s the Sunnydale Presbyterian, corner of Third and Myrtle, two blocks down from the elementary school.” Xander told him, grabbing a pair of his own pants and pulling them on as Spike headed for the back stairs and the entrance to the tunnels.

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Spike hoisted himself up through the trap door and took a quick look around. He was in the dust shrouded crypt of the church and it was deserted. Only the need for stealth kept him from snorting out loud. What kind of idiots set up a public hostage situation and then didn’t bother putting a guard on the entrance they’d used themselves?

Climbing the flight of wooden stairs leading up to the ground floor, Spike stretched out his senses. A lot of humans, all of them stinking of fear, at least a couple of whom had soiled themselves in their terror, and one voice, raised to address them all.

“…been avoiding this place for so many years, and it’s nothing. It’s nice! It’s got the pretty windows, the pillars .. lots of folks to eat. Where’s the thing I was so afraid of? You know, the Lord? He was supposed to be here. He gave us this address.”

The speaker paused long enough to heave a dramatic sigh. “Well, we’ll just have to start killing off His people. See if He shows up.”

The noise the humans were making in response to the threat completely covered the sound of Spike entering the main part of the church. He took in the situation with one sweeping look: three vampires, young ones from the feel of them, were grouped near the alter, backs to him as they focused on their prey. Nearly 30 humans, at least half of them too old or too young to be any kind of threat, all of whom were staring with wide, terror-filled eyes at the three vampires. None of them, vampires or prey, noticed Spike’s arrival.

The third vampire’s dust was turning colors in the light from the stained glass windows before the other two vampires realized anyone was there. The leader spun around to face Spike and blinked momentarily in shock at the dusting of one of his companions before he recovered his arrogant assurance.

“I told the cops: they send anyone in, I start the whole massacre thing,” he said.

“Like I’m the bleeding cavalry,” Spike snorted, offended by the suggestion that he was an errand boy for the police. “Don’t give a damn about these people, I’m here to kill you.”
He could see it the moment it sank in and the other vampire realized Spike wasn’t human.

“T’m not afraid of you,” he blustered. “T’m not afraid of anything anymore!”

“Good for you, mate. Can’t stand gits who whine when faced with final death.”

The second vampire took that moment to attack, obviously assuming that Spike couldn’t keep track of both of them at the same time. He’d been perched on the wooden railing that ran the length of the alter and now he launched himself in a flying tackle aimed at Spike’s back. Spike could have given him some pointers about telegraphing his moves if he’d been in a better mood. As it was, he spun away from the attack, bringing his leg around in a spin-kick that landed squarely in the vampire’s back, adding considerable momentum to his original leap.

Spike was already turning to face the leader when he heard the sound of wood splintering as the second vampire crashed into the carved wooden railing in front of the first set of pews. He grinned and ducked the furious blow launched at him by the leader, springing back up and hammering the vampire backwards with a series of lightning fast punches. The vampire was a bit taller than Spike which gave him the reach and a better fighter than Spike had been expecting, given the idiocy of the vampire’s actions in taking over this church. After his initial surprise, he gave as good as he was getting, throwing a series of rapid blows of his own.

They lunged and parried, trading blows and shifting quickly up and down the length of the aisle as they struggled to gain the advantage, humans scrambling out of the way in a panicked rush for the exit. Spike was peripherally aware that the second vampire had grabbed somebody’s coat and was making for the exit, obviously hoping to escape in the crowd. If he hadn’t been fully engaged in a fight, Spike would have rolled his eyes. The idiot had obviously forgotten all about the tunnel entrance in his panicked flight from Spike. Hopefully, Xander was outside by now. His boy wouldn’t miss a supposed hostage running out of the church and covering himself from the sun’s ray.

The momentary distraction let the other vampire get in a lucky blow and Spike staggered back, tripping over a fleeing human, sending them both sprawling to the floor, tangled in a mass of flailing limbs. Spike snarled furiously as he rolled clear, pushing the heavy-set man away from him and scrambled ungracefully back to his feet. The other vampire had used the time to good purpose, breaking off the corner of a pew, and now he hefted the makeshift stake threateningly.

“I have strength you can’t dream of,” he gloated. “Adam has shown me the way, and there is nothing that can stop us.”

He flung himself at Spike, the stake stabbing downwards, aimed at Spike’s heart. Spike leapt backwards, his foot flashing out and catching the vampire squarely between the legs and Spike grinned at the pain-filled sound that escaped the vampire. He snapped off another kick, this one landing in the vampire’s stomach, then whirled around, bringing his foot up and around in a devastating blow at the vampire’s head.

The vampire crumpled to the ground, the stake flying free to land, clattering on the stone floor, well out of reach and Spike glared down at the vampire.

“We’re vampires, you pathetic twit. We don’t work for other demons. And we sure as hell don’t work for a pasted-together collection of spare parts like Adam.”

If he hadn’t already intended to kill this idiot, he would now. The knowledge that Adam was recruiting vampires infuriated him. It was the Mayor all over again and Spike had had it with vampires who would whore themselves out to other demons. Vampires hired other demons, not the
other way around. Vampires like this gave other vampires a bad name.

The vampire was struggling to rise and Spike kicked him again, his booted foot catching the vampire in the side and flipping him over. Spike kicked him once more in the head for the satisfaction of hearing bones crack then pulled out a stake and stabbed downwards, jerking the stake back before it dusted along with the vampire.

As the dust settled to the stone floor of the now-empty church, Spike swore softly and vehemently to himself.

Adam was recruiting vampires.

An unstoppable, essentially immortal demon was setting up shop in Spike’s Territory.

Just great.
Chapter 32

“You should have called me,” Buffy repeated.

“Like I need your help to take care of a couple of fledges, especially ones so young they can’t tell a vampire from a human at twenty feet,” Spike scoffed.

“That’s not the point,” Buffy leaned back in her chair and gave Spike an exasperated glare. “There were witnesses. The last thing we need is a bunch of people telling the world that vampires are real.”

“Not like I’m the one sent those vampires into the church now, is it?” Spike pointed out.

Spike had been more than a little worried about the fact that Adam had apparently sent the vampires into the church. It infuriated him that Adam was recruiting vampires, even if his recruits were idiots and too young to be a threat to anyone other than humans, and Spike had been frustrated that he couldn’t find any reason for Adam wanting a church full of ordinary people killed by vampires in a public spectacle. If Spike had been able to convince himself that Adam had done it for kicks, that he would have understood but, as he’d pointed out to Xander, killing for the thrill of it was a hands-on business. Adam had had some other reason for setting up that little scenario and Spike had spent too much time already trying to puzzle out what Adam had been trying to prove.

However, that didn’t mean that Spike was going to share his uncertainty with the Slayer or let a little thing like that get in the way of a Buffy-Spike snark fest, Xander thought with a grin.

He pushed his chair back quietly and began to stack plates before carrying them out to the kitchen, biting his lip to stop himself from smirking - something neither Buffy nor Spike would appreciate.

Buffy and Spike had been sniping at each other all through dinner. The real problem, the one they weren’t actually talking about, was that they both thought of themselves as the town sheriff. Both of them had a more than healthy ego - which, to be fair, they had a right to, neither one of them was exactly your average, run of the mill person - and they both had a tendency to believe that they were solely responsible for keeping a lid on the town. Buffy had been more than a little annoyed that Spike hadn’t even bothered to let her know he was going to the church this morning. Spike telling her cheerfully that people who shagged their boyfriends into the wee hours tended to miss the early morning fights hadn’t helped.

Buffy had blushed crimson at Spike’s comment and hotly protested that she hadn’t even seen Riley last night. Joyce Summers had simply raised one eyebrow and told Spike firmly that there were some things a mother just didn’t want to know about her college-age daughter’s activities.

Anyone but Joyce would have gotten a snering comeback but Spike had actually looked abashed and, to Xander’s relief, immediately dropped the subject of Buffy finally getting physical with Riley. Xander himself was still boggling over the fact that Spike had known instantly, as soon as Buffy opened the door to her mother’s house, that Buffy and Riley were sleeping together. Being Spike, he’d felt compelled to share his knowledge with Buffy, who had not taken it well. Fortunately, Joyce had been in the kitchen at the time and hadn’t heard the comment, as Buffy’s panicked look over her shoulder had confirmed, and Spike hadn’t mentioned it again.

Until now.
The swinging door between the kitchen and dining room opened again and Joyce Summers came in with her own small stack of dishes. She met his eyes just as Buffy’s voice floated in from the dining room:

“You being all rescue-vamp didn’t exactly help with the low profile.”

Xander clapped a hand over his mouth to stifle his laugh as Joyce mouthed “rescue vamp?”, her own eyes sparkling with laughter.

“Please, like I needed to suit up to handle those wankers. All the humans know is that they were saved by a devilishly handsome mystery man.”

Xander’s shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter as Buffy made a clearly audible gagging noise in the next room. An indelicate snort escaped Joyce as she struggled to control her own amusement.

“I can hear you two,” Spike said loudly.

“We both can,” Buffy added her own complaint.

Mrs. Summers just laughed and pitched her voice so it would be clearly audible in the dining room. “Xander, what do you think? Should we leave those two alone to continue their bickering or offer them pie if they will stop?”

“I vote we split the pie between us and leave them to it,” Xander answered immediately. Mrs. Summers made great pies.

“Oi!

“Hey!”

Xander and Joyce exchanged grins as Buffy and Spike forgot their argument and joined forces in the face of imminent pie theft.

Sunday dinner at Joyce’s house happened at least once a month. Joyce always served what Xander thought of from television as a traditional holiday meal: a roast of some kind, potatoes, vegetables, desert; the whole sitcom family dinner scenario. From comments Buffy had made, Xander knew this wasn’t something Joyce had done when it was just her and Buffy eating and by now, he’d figured out that Joyce was doing it for Spike.

Spike didn’t like talking about his human family and, from the little he’d let slip in unguarded moments, there was something huge that had happened with his mother. It was clear that he’d loved his mother but Xander had enough family issues of his own to respect Spike not wanting to talk about his own. Still, something in the way Spike had gotten quiet the first time Joyce served them roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for Sunday dinner made Xander think that Joyce knew something he didn’t.

It might be nothing more than the feeling of family that Joyce created through the magic of food and warmth and laughter. Xander just hoped that she got as much out of the dinners as the rest of them did. Both Spike and Buffy seemed to let down their guards more at Joyce’s house than anywhere else and Xander no longer envied people who had parents who loved them and gave a damn about them.

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“So, you and Riley are back together?” Xander asked casually.

He and Buffy had settled on the living room couch, leaving the dishes to Joyce at her insistence. Xander could hear the low murmur of voices in the kitchen as she and Spike talked quietly over the sound of water running and china rattling. Oz had been invited to join them but he had taken Devon up on his offer to play with the band in Los Angeles this weekend and Xander suspected Oz had just needed some time away and the familiar solace of his music. The encounters with Adam had shaken all of them so it hadn’t been surprising that Oz needed some time to deal. Sometimes Xander thought that he was the only one of them who could handle being pummeled by something stronger than himself. It was an all too frequent occurrence in his life but it was always a shock for the stronger than human members of the group when something bigger and badder kicked their asses. He wasn’t worried. Oz’s way of dealing with things had always been to take off for awhile and Oz would be back tonight, or whenever he was ready.

Buffy shot him a measuring, sideways glance as she continued leafing through the magazine she’d picked up from the coffee table.

“Well, ok is probably a stretch but he has agreed not to tell his friends about you two unless Spike becomes a threat to them,” Buffy hedged.

Xander wondered if Spike training a hundred vampires to attack the Initiative would be considered a threat. Probably.

“Yeah. Riley’s had some time to think and he’s not as freaked out by my crazy life any more. He told me he trusted me and that was the bottom line for him.” Buffy sounded shyly pleased and like she was braced for disapproval.

Riley was still trying to find a middle ground between the Initiative and Buffy and Xander had to give the guy credit for keeping his word and sharing information about Adam. Riley seemed to be trying to walk a line between his duty to the military and helping them: like the way he’d given them the information from, but not actual copies of Adam’s schematics. Still, it was an improvement over how he’d first reacted to Buffy’s non-human and human-adjacent friends, but Xander would be happier if he was able to convince himself that Riley wasn’t just covering his bases. From what Xander could tell, Riley was boy scout enough to want to have a fallback plan for saving the world, just in case his team wasn’t successful in handling it themselves.

“So, he’s ok with you hanging out with me and Spike?” was all he said.

“Well, ok is probably a stretch but he has agreed not to tell his friends about you two unless Spike becomes a threat to them,” Buffy hedged.

Xander wondered if Spike training a hundred vampires to attack the Initiative would be considered a threat. Probably.

“What changed his mind?”

Buffy smiled ruefully. “It didn’t hurt that the blood sample Dr. Bradley took proved that there was a scary mix of drugs in his system. And Adam acknowledging Maggie as his ‘mother’ made denial pretty hard to hang on to.”

“Convinced him his superiors hadn’t exactly been upfront about what they were doing?”

“Something like that.” She hesitated, then said: “Riley hasn’t been talking much since the new commander arrived. Just said the guy was taking a look at the whole operation and would be making a report to his superiors.”

Xander sat up straight. “You mean they might be shutting the Initiative down?” he asked hopefully.

Buffy shook her head. “I didn’t get that feeling. More like cleaning house, getting rid of Maggie
Walsh’s mad scientist bits or something. The government may be in the demon fighting business to stay.”

She didn’t sound any happier about that than Xander felt.

“Any chance cleaning house will mean they’re willing to listen to outside advice?” Xander wondered if there was any possibility that Sergeant Morgan could talk to the new commander. He was pretty low rank in the military but he was one of their own and well-respected, unlike Buffy, the outsider freak girlfriend of one of their own.

The phone rang before Buffy could answer and she got to her feet, heading for the hall phone, calling to her mother: “I got it.”

Xander’s understanding of politics was pretty much non-existent and he had no idea who the new commander of a covert army base would report to. Someone high up, probably back in Washington D.C., he supposed, wondering if there was any way they could send their own report to the same source. Riley wasn’t an ally that Xander put a lot of faith in but he was better than an unknown military type, especially one with delusions of making the Initiative a permanent fixture in Sunnydale. If the new guy shut down the science side of thing, that meant they’d be killing demons instead of imprisoning and experimenting on them and given the Initiative’s track record of not caring whether the demon was dangerous or not, that wasn’t really an improvement.

He thought about the harmless demons trapped in the cells and his demon friends in town and knew that Spike was right. Unless the Initiative shut down completely or left town, they would have to attack the base. Even a reformed Initiative was a danger to every non-violent demon in town.

In the hall, Buffy’s voice was rising as she became more and more upset and Xander got to his feet, eavesdropping shamelessly. Something had gone seriously wrong. The water shut off in the kitchen and Joyce and Spike came into the hall, listening as well.

Buffy hung up the phone and stayed facing the wall for a long moment, shoulders tense, hands curled into fists on the telephone table as if she was forcibly restraining herself from punching through the wall.

“Buffy?” Joyce moved forward, putting her hand on Buffy’s shoulder. “What is it? What’s happened?”

Buffy turned to face them, moving slowly with a tight control in which Xander read both anger and misery. “That was Riley. The Initiative attacked Adam in the caves.”

“Idiots!” Spike exclaimed contemptuously. Xander’s only slightly more diplomatic: “Are they crazy?” came at the same time.

“They had a theory that Adam wasn’t fully powered up yet, that that’s why he hasn’t really done much of anything up ‘til now. They went in with tasers and hit him with multiple blasts at the same time.” A muscle jerked in Buffy’s jaw and she closed her eyes for a second, folding her arms around herself tightly as she continued. “Riley said Adam seemed to feed off the taser energy, absorbing it and growing even stronger. He killed almost half the soldiers before the rest could retreat.”

“Serves them right. Bloody amateurs,” Spike said. Joyce laid a staying hand on his arm and he continued, less abrasively: “Walsh was building a perfect soldier, stands to reason she’d make it invulnerable to weapons her own side is using.”
“Why didn’t Riley talk to us first?” Xander couldn’t help asking, even though he knew the answer.

“He’s a soldier, Xander. He’s been trained not to question orders. The only reason he called is because he’s worried about what his superiors will do now.” Buffy fixed Xander with a challenging stare. “He risked a lot to call me and give us a heads up. If anyone finds out, his career is over and he’d probably be court martialed.”

“He won’t find out from any of us,” Joyce reassured her and Xander smiled inwardly at her inclusion of Spike in that, knowing Spike would have thoroughly enjoyed the idea of Riley in a prison cell. Joyce had effectively stopped Spike from even joking about it by her serene confidence that he wouldn’t do something like that.

“What does Riley think his superior are going to do?” Xander asked, not liking the idea of something that worried Mr. By-the-Book so much he was willing to break orders to contact them.

“Gonna want to save face now they’ve botched the mission so badly, yeah?” Spike answered for Buffy. “Soldier boy’s worried about escalation, isn’t he?”

“Something like a rocket launcher, maybe?” Xander wondered if that would be enough to stop Adam and if so, where they could get their hands on one.

“Think bigger, luv. Adam’s got that nuclear power core, remember? I’m guessing Finn is worried about them fighting fire with fire.” Despite his outward calm, Xander could see sparks of demonic gold flickering in Spike’s blue eyes and knew that Spike was a lot more edgy about the possibility than he was letting on.

“Hitting Adam with a nuke? No way. Sure, it might kill Adam but it’s going to leave a big smoking crater where Sunnydale is.” Xander was appalled.

Buffy looked at them with worried eyes. “It all depends on how dangerous they think Adam is. If they think he’s going to destroy the town anyway, they might think it’s worth the risk.”

“Plus, getting rid of all us demons in one fell swoop might seem worth a little radioactive fallout.”

“But people would know,” Joyce protested. “They couldn’t hide something like that.”

Spike shrugged. “Accidents happen. Oops, an explosion caused by an unknown gas pocket set off a nuke in an underground silo. Lot of fingers pointed, a few million paid in damages, and the government moves on.”

The three humans stared at Spike, appalled, all the more so because he’d made the unthinkable sound so plausible. Given some of the things the government was known to have covered up, Xander could easily see things playing out exactly as Spike had described. After all, who would ever believe the government had authorized extreme measures against an out of control demon? Especially a demon the government had created themselves.

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Walking Xander home a short time later, Spike considered the latest stupidity on the part of the soldiers and what it would mean for him. He wasn’t about to let the soldiers destroy his Territory, if that’s what they were planning. Despite what he’d said back at Joyce’s, the possibility of the soldiers using nuclear weapons was fairly unlikely. The government might get that desperate eventually, but not until they’d exhausted all other possibilities and had had time to cover their arses in twelve different layers of paperwork. Still, there were a lot of conventional weapons that could do enough damage that there wouldn’t be a whole lot left of the town afterwards.
Sunnydale was on the map now in a way it hadn’t been before. The fucking Gentlemen and their ‘laryngitis epidemic’ had made Sunnydale headline news across the nation. The government, or at least the portion of it behind the Initiative, had to be worried about something like that getting out again. And Adam had their serial numbers on him. Now that they’d realized that Adam wasn’t going to be an easy target, they might get to the point where taking out the entire town and all its problems in one strike had a certain appeal. One big disaster instead of a series of small ones.

Spike shook his head impatiently, letting that worry go for now. The army wasn’t going to nuke the town tonight or tomorrow. Which brought him back to his own problems. Tempting as it was, Spike couldn’t hit the Initiative now while so many of their people were in hospital. He wasn’t ready. He needed a workable plan for getting in, his minions needed more training, and he needed a way to get the fucking chip out.

Which brought him back to Adam and what he was planning.

The vampires in the church had said they were working for Adam. None of them had been members of the Court, but the fact that Adam was recruiting vampires was worrisome. Adam knew Spike had been chipped and he had access to the Initiative’s files. Even if Adam hadn’t figured out by now that the chip only prevented Spike from hurting humans, he could do a lot of damage by spreading the word that Spike had been imprisoned for nearly a week and experimented on. Having that spread around would lead to stupidity on the part of vampires in the Court, thinking Spike was vulnerable to challenge. He needed to find out as soon as possible if Adam had just recruited a couple of vampires he’d stumbled across or if he was deliberately undermining Spike’s status as Master.

“Everything ok?” Xander asked and Spike realized he’d been growling quietly to himself.

“Yeah, just a bit tired of dealing with morons.”

“What do you think about having Sergeant Morgan meet with the Initiative’s new commander?”

“Thought you gave up that idea?” Spike countered, surprised by the non-sequitor.

Xander waved a dismissive hand. “This is something entirely different. I’m not talking about kidnapping soldiers, I’m thinking about a one-on-one with an army Sergeant.” He grinned at Spike. “You know, with an appointment and everything.”

“Have Morgan tell him he knows all about demons and has never reported it to his superiors?” Spike raised an eyebrow, amused by Xander’s persistent optimism that somehow the Initiative could be made to see reason. “Can’t think of a quicker way to make them suspicious, luv. The Sergeant probably doesn’t deserve to be dissected,” he said judiciously.

Xander’s shoulders slumped and Spike laughed, putting his arm around his boy and pulling him close. “We’ll figure it out, luv. We always do,” he told Xander with more confidence than he was really feeling at the moment.

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The evening practice session was wrapping up as Spike went downstairs to the Court to have a talk with his Lieutenants. Xander was already headed for bed as Spike left and, knowing his boy would be leaving for work at dawn, Spike couldn’t help feeling frustrated and annoyed that their schedules were so out of kilter again. It was as good a reason as any for killing Adam, he thought as he descended the steps to the factory floor.
He stopped a moment on the balcony overlooking the factory floor, watching the sparring matches going on below. He could tell instantly which minions were aware of his presence and which weren’t and made note of the ones so caught up in their individual fights that they were oblivious to their surroundings. He signaled Michael to approach and pointed out the minions in question, telling Michael to arrange to have another minion attack the careless ones from the side during their next sparring session.

“Toss a knife at them,” he ordered. “If they get hit by it three times, make the fourth one a stake. Can’t afford to put all your focus on the person in front of you.”

That taken care of, he left Michael fixing faces and names in his memory and strolled over to join Jose who was circling the edges of the factory floor, occasionally making comments to the minions.

“How’s it going?”

“Well enough. I estimate another week before they are ready.”

“I make it two, at least,” Spike said disparagingly, although progress had definitely been made and the minions were improving rapidly. That wasn’t what he wanted to talk about right now though and he told Jose to follow him upstairs to the deserted third floor, where he led the way into one of the empty rooms and closed the door.

“ Heard anything about a new player in town?” he asked. Jose generally had a good feel for what was happening in the Court and was by far the most reliable of his Lieutenants and the safest to bring a tricky problem to.

Jose shook his head. “No, Master Spike. The training has kept the minions in the Court more than usual so there is less gossip about the town.”

That made sense. Spike’s thoughts raced, considering the implications of several courses of action, then made a quick decision. “Want you, Anthony and Marc to head out. Spend the rest of the night checking out the bars and other hangouts. Let me know if you hear anything about a demon recruiting other demons - especially vampires.”

Jose dipped his head, acknowledging the order. “Is there any information in particular you seek about this demon?”

“Anything and everything. Goes by the name of Adam. Doubt you’ll see him in person but I want to know if he’s recruiting and, if so, who he’s after and what his pitch is.”

“Understood. The three of us should be able to check every gathering place in town before sunrise.”

“See that you do,” Spike told him.

Jose bowed in acknowledgement of Spike’s orders and left to collect the other two lieutenants. Spike was confident that he would know soon whether or not Adam was actively recruiting vampires.

He just wished he knew what the hell Adam was up to and whether it was a threat to Spike or his Territory.
Spike listened closely to Jose’s report, weighing the information carefully, even as he pretended indifference, toying idly with the taser rifle lying on the table in front of him. For the past two nights, his senior Lieutenants had visited the town’s gathering spots, watching, listening and asking discrete questions. What they’d learned was disturbing.

Adam was up to something, that much was obvious. He was recruiting heavily among the aggressive demons: Crynt’ks, Klantosh, Nyntakkii, even vampires. From what his Lieutenants had learned, Adam had half the demons in town thinking he was some sort of fucking messiah and the idiots were apparently lining up to throw themselves on the pyre for him. Adam was somehow convincing demons who normally wouldn’t give a member of another species the time of day to work together. Spike wasn’t particularly interested in controlling those kinds of demons himself - it was a lot more fun to kill them - but he couldn’t help wondering how Adam was doing it.

Putting the snippets of information together, Spike suspected Adam was working on his own plan for attacking the Initiative. If that was really what Adam was planning, and if Spike hadn’t been dead set against Adam poaching in his Territory on general principles, he’d be half tempted to sign up with Adam himself - second in command of course, not the cannon fodder Adam was recruiting. The species being most heavily recruited all tended to be vicious and dumber than dog shit. Which explained how Adam was convincing them to be sacrificial lambs for him. From a conversation Anthony had overheard, Adam may have actually talked some of the demons he was recruiting into allowing themselves to be captured by the Initiative.

Which begged the question - why did Adam want all those demons filling the cells of the Initiative? Attacking from within? Which meant that Adam was confident he could open the cell doors when the time came. Either that, or he didn’t care if his recruits died in the cells.

Something wasn’t adding up and it bothered Spike more than he was willing to let on. From what he’d seen of Adam, he should be capable of taking down the Initiative himself, without needing a bunch of trench fighters to back him up. Was there something in the Initiative they didn’t know about? Or was Adam up to something else entirely?

He realized that Jose had finished his report and his Lieutenants were looking at him for a response.

“Right,” he said, getting to his feet. “Good work, all of you. Check around the Court, make sure anyone gullible enough to fall for that tripe doesn’t survive the experience. Stake anyone who even sounds like they admire Adam. We can’t afford that kind of stupidity in the Court.” He tossed the taser rifle to Anthony, who caught it smoothly. “Take the minions out in groups of 10 or so, give ’em a taste of what that can do. Might as well give ’em some practice in ducking taser fire. Soldiers seem to have a bit of a one track mind when it comes to weapons,” he ordered, thinking about the stupidity of attacking something like Adam with a taser and conveniently ignoring the fact that he’d attacked Adam with his bare hands. “Questions?”

Not surprisingly, there weren’t any and Spike strode out of the room heading for the apartment. The Court would be ready soon. The question was, could he use what Adam was doing to help him take down the Initiative? As tempting as it was to make a temporary truce, he was not giving Adam the chance to establish a powerbase in his Territory. Especially if there was something inside the Initiative that Adam wanted.
Xander was sprawled across most of the bed, face half buried between two pillows, leaving only his shock of dark hair visible, the tangled waves curling down to brush against his shoulders leaving Spike, as always, with the nearly irresistible urge tobury his fingers in the thick, dark mass, stroking and playing with the brown waves.

One arm was flung out across Spike’s side of the bed, the other curled underneath the pillows and Spike sat down on the mattress, unable to resist running his hand up the toned muscles of his boy’s back, feeling the warmth of the suntanned skin under his palm and the steady beat of his Claimed’s heart.

Not for the first time, Spike marveled in the changes that construction had wrought in his once gangly, awkward boy. Xander had filled out in the past year, especially through the shoulders and arms, having gained considerable muscle mass from hours of heavy lifting on construction sites. His torso tapered down to a narrow waist and flat abdomen, and his long, muscular legs were beautiful. His boy had become a confident man, not only physically but emotionally as well. Xander was everything Spike had wanted when he’d first set out to make the lonely, uncertain boy his own: loyal, generous and loving, with sunlit laughter and dark undercurrents that drew Spike like a magnet. Of course, he hadn’t forseen that Xander would also be as stubborn as the proverbial mule and would drive Spike nearly mad by his insistence on putting his own life in danger to protect others - usually others who were stronger and faster and better able to survive danger than Xander. Xander made Spike laugh, made him so frustrated he wanted to scream but, above all, he made Spike feel loved and wanted as no one else ever had, either as a human or a vampire. For the first time in his restless existence, Spike had learned what contentment was. Having Xander by his side made everything else bearable. Without Xander, Spike wouldn’t be alive now. He would have staked himself in frustration and despair over the chip a long time ago but Xander’s refusal to accept the chip as anything more than a temporary problem had given Spike hope and the will to carry on until he could find a way to get the damn thing out.

His hand traced idly over Xander’s back as his thoughts wandered. Even without being able to see it, Spike knew his Claim Mark was fading and overdue for renewal. He needed to renew it soon before the building tension in town exploded into violence. A Claim scar wasn’t of much use in a pitched battle but even the slightest hesitation as an opponent realized the human they were facing had been Claimed by the Master of the Territory could make the difference between a blow that landed and one that was successfully blocked.

“You know, you could use the other hand and make it a real massage,” Xander mumbled sounding still half-asleep and Spike realized his hand had continued running over Xander’s skin on its own, the slow, soothing motions more for his own peace of mind than anything else. Coming back to himself, Spike glanced towards the darkened windows. The sun hadn’t risen yet, but dawn wasn’t far off and Xander would be leaving for work not long after.

Plenty of time, Spike thought with a smirk.

“And what possible reason could I have for doing that?” he purred, his voice dark and sensual. As he spoke, he lifted his free hand off the mattress, beginning to run both hands over Xander’s tanned skin on its own, the slow, soothing motions more for his own peace of mind than anything else. Coming back to himself, Spike glanced towards the darkened windows. The sun hadn’t risen yet, but dawn wasn’t far off and Xander would be leaving for work not long after.

“I’m willing to offer cash incentives,” Xander suggested, sounding more awake now, awake and shifting under Spike’s hands in a way that told Spike he was not adverse to a little pre-dawn dalliance before work.


He let his hands slide away from the warm skin beneath him, bracing himself against the mattress
as he bent down and began kissing his way across Xander’s back from one shoulder blade to the other. His tongue darted out, tasting that sun-touched flesh and he inhaled deeply, drinking in the rich scents of his Claimed. Xander tasted like the almost-forgotten sunshine of his human years, he thought, not for the first time. Xander’s natural scent began to take on the musky smell of arousal as his kisses moved further south.

He took his time, laving his tongue over every inch of his boy’s skin, swirling the tip over and around the bumps and hollows of Xander’s spine, giving each vertebra individual attention before moving on to the next, loving the way Xander arched his back into his touch, wordlessly asking for more, his breath coming more rapidly as his arousal deepened.

Spike sat up abruptly as he reached Xander’s waist, ignoring Xander’s protesting “hey!” as he straddled Xander, resting his weight on Xander’s thighs and turning his attention to his boy’s firm, strong buttocks.

“Said you wanted a massage, luv,” he reminded Xander innocently, deliberately kneading and working the muscles in a way guaranteed to not be relaxing, bending down to kiss and nip playfully at both cheeks as Xander squirmed under his attentions, beginning to rock his hips down into the mattress, seeking friction. Spike could tell from the heady scent that Xander was fully aroused and he breathed in sharply, inhaling Xander’s spicy scent made deeper and richer with his arousal. His own cock was reacting to his efforts, but he ignored his need to plunge deeply inside his boy, knowing the chip prevented that for now.

The flash of furious resentment, the helpless rage that simmered constantly beneath the surface of his mind helped keep his arousal in check even as he worked to insure that Xander lost control.

Spreading Xander’s cheeks with his thumbs, disguising the movement in his massage, Spike dragged his tongue up the exposed crack, swirling it teasingly around the entrance and chuckled as Xander yelped and squirmed beneath him at the sudden shift. Spike laved his tongue back and forth over the tight entrance, loving the way it twitched and fluttered under his attentions.

Xander was gasping now, his hips riding up off the mattress as he thrust back against Spike, wanting more, moaning as Spike obliged him working the tip of his tongue inside the opening, losing himself in the taste and scent and sound of his Claimed’s arousal. His own erection was screaming for attention and he pulled back with a sudden movement that had Xander practically keening a protest, folding himself over his boy’s back and pulling their bodies tightly together. He slammed his hips forward, fitting his erection into the crack of Xander’s ass, feeling the heat and moisture surrounding him as he rutted furiously against his boy, reaching one hand around and encasing Xander’s weeping erection in his strong palm. He thrust hard, his hand pumping Xander’s pulsing cock in rhythm with his own movements as they both approached the precipice together.

The sudden shrill of the alarm and Xander’s bark of surprised laughter sent them over the edge together, Spike’s seed erupting over Xander’s ass and Xander coating Spike’s hand as he exploded into his own orgasm and they collapsed on the bed together, Xander’s sweat-soaked limbs tangling with Spike’s cool flesh, the alarm blaring obnoxiously on the bedside table as Xander panted heavily and Spike inhaled their mingled scents rapturously.

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Sitting in his usual spot, perched on the arm of Spike’s chair, Xander watched curiously as Giles went to answer the knock on the door. Everyone had already arrived for the meeting, as far as he knew. Oz was there, his usual quiet composed self, back from a long weekend with Devon and the band, having dealt with the issues that had made him seek space and music and time away. Buffy had obviously been at Giles’ for awhile, munching on a cookie, a discarded text book on the table
at her elbow.

As usual, he and Spike had been the last to arrive. Spike hated being summoned to appear anywhere and scored some kind of point by making his entrance last. It had something to do with sweeping in and starting the meeting as if he’d been the one to call it, but Xander had decided a long time ago that he wasn’t going to get involved in Slayer-Master Vampire one-upmanship, except to prevent it from turning violent.

He was surprised to see Mr. Olsen and Sgt. Morgan follow Giles into the living room and he straightened up alertly, wondering what was up. Mr. Olsen and Sgt. Morgan didn’t usually come to their periodic gatherings at Giles’ apartment, attending only the big meetings and he hadn’t had the impression that this was anything more than their usual state-of-the-Hellmouth update.

Mr. Olsen smiled at him and Sgt. Morgan gave the room a half-wave, half-salute greeting and Xander relaxed back against the wing of the chair. Neither of them seemed worried, so they probably just had some news. They were all being paranoid about talking on their phones these days, so it made sense they would have come in person to deliver any news.

As Giles courteously found them chairs, Xander thought idly that, if the meetings got any bigger they were going to have to find another place to meet. Just their usual four - now five with Oz back, pretty much filled Giles’ small living room. Which was always Xander’s excuse for sitting on the arm of Spike’s chair rather than claiming one of his own.

Of course, if Spike had his way, Xander would be sitting in his lap but that was so not happening. Lap sitting was a naked activity, thank you very much. He was bigger than Spike and, unless nakedness was involved, he felt ridiculous perched on top of Spike’s smaller body, no matter how much Spike loved it. He leaned over and dropped a kiss on top of Spike’s platinum hair, grateful as always that Spike understood which points were non-negotiable.

Spike had the strength and the instincts to enforce a lot of things that Xander wouldn’t like and it always amazed and humbled him that Spike fought his own instincts for Xander’s sake.

Spike glanced up at him, eyes smiling although his face was impassive and slid his arm around Xander’s waist. Xander put his right arm across Spike’s shoulders, one finger slipping beneath the neck of Spike’s black t-shirt to trace patterns on the cool skin underneath. Despite his casual sprawl in the chair, Spike was watching the others take their seats with a wary intensity unusual for one of their periodic meetings and, as Buffy started to speak, Xander wondered what Spike was sensing that made the meeting unusual.

Certainly, her report didn’t seem that serious on the face of it. Twice in the past week, different species of demons had been seen traveling in pairs. A vampire and “something with horns and a bad case of the hairy backs”, and two similar looking demons with “weird tattoos on their faces”. Fortunately, Giles was able to clarify Buffy’s typically less than helpful descriptions with the information that the mixed pairs had consisted of a vampire and a Klantosh demon, and two Dakram sub-species that were usually mortal enemies. Xander looked at Spike for confirmation of that assessment as Buffy summed up - Spike was a much more reliable source than even the best of Giles’ books. Spike didn’t say anything and didn’t seem surprised, which made Xander narrow his eyes, staring down at Spike and wondering what he knew about this.

“Extraordinarily odd,” Giles commented when Buffy finished. “As a rule, demons have no empathy for any species other than their own.” He gave Sgt. Morgan and Mr. Olsen an apologetic look which Sgt. Morgan waved off, looking amused. “Particularly the vampire-Klantosh pairing. Most demons think of vampires as abominations. Mixing with human blood and all.” His gaze went briefly to Spike and Xander frowned when Spike didn’t take the opportunity to make a snarky
“What do you think brought them together?” Xander asked.


Giles’ eyes widened behind his glasses. “Adam,” he said grimly.

There was a moment’s silence as they all digested that, then Buffy said flippantly, but with an underlying seriousness: “Well, who better to bring together a bunch of different demon types than someone who’s made out of a bunch of demon types?” Buffy looked around at them all. “But why? What’s Adam up to?”

“That’s the question we all have been trying to answer,” Mr. Olsen pointed out. “Uniting different species would seem to indicate that he’s building a power base.”

“How much good is it going to do if his foot soldiers are all in a cell?” Buffy asked. “These guys were being way obvious and they have to know…”

Her voice trailed off and Sgt. Morgan finished for her tactfully: “That since their losses against Adam, the Initiative soldiers have been out in force and not in a friendly mood.”

Which was an understatement. The surviving members of the Initiative were grieving their losses in the only way they knew how: by seeking revenge. Since Adam wasn’t available, they were taking out their frustration and anger on any demon they could get their hands on. They had all seen Initiative patrols around town and it worried Xander - worried all of them - that they were becoming so obvious, like they had decided the time for hiding was over. Mr. Olsen had reported that half the demons in town were scared to leave their houses and Xander had gotten a list from him and his three employees had spent the last two days running groceries to the frightened demons.

Buffy was freaked because Riley wasn’t returning her calls and she hadn’t heard from him since he’d called after the disastrous raid on Adam’s cave. Only the remnants of common sense had kept her from accosting the soldiers on patrol when all attempts to talk to people at Lowell House had failed and Xander was worried that her patience was going to end and she was going to do something stupid and reveal her Slayer strength to people less understanding than Riley. Even Buffy couldn’t handle taser blasts and Xander was afraid that, in their current mood, the soldiers might just decide to find out why Buffy was so strong.

“We’re in the difficult position of having two opponents: the Initiative and Adam,” Giles said crisply, drawing Xander’s attention away from his depressing thoughts. “Among other things, we need to decide which is the greater threat, and therefore the one we must move against first.”

“Adam,” Buffy answered decisively. Spike’s watchful expression didn’t change in the slightest but Xander could sense his disagreement.

“No question,” she continued, looking around at them all. “We need to deal with Adam first. The Initiative may even help us take Adam down but Adam’s sure not going to be helping us stop the Initiative.”

“Don’t be too sure, Slayer,” Spike spoke for the first time since they’d arrived. “Wouldn’t be surprised if Adam didn’t want the people who created him out of the picture.” He gave her a deliberately offensive smirk. “Most vampires make their first kills in the family. Don’t like the reminder of where they came from. Adam’s bound to have some vampire bits in him. Could be
he’ll help us take down the Initiative.”

Xander gave him a sharp look. Spike was the one who’d told Xander that vampires often killed their families because they were the easiest prey for confused fledglings just risen and not sure what to do with their new existence. He let it go without comment for now because Spike had a good point. The Initiative had Maggie Walsh’s files and Adam certainly knew it. It was a logical assumption that the ones with the most information on what made him tick had the best chance of defeating him, which meant they probably were first on Adam’s to-do list.

“We don’t need that kind of help,” Buffy told Spike sharply who just gave her a mocking smile.

“I’m inclined to agree with Buffy,” Giles said. “Adam is an unknown and that makes him terribly dangerous, simply because we cannot predict where or when he will strike.”

“Isn’t that kind of a reason to tackle the Initiative first?” Xander asked. “We know what they’re doing and we need to stop it.”

“And what if Adam attacks while we’re in the middle of a fight with the Initiative?” Buffy asked. “Besides, if we can work with the Initiative to take down Adam, maybe we won’t have to fight them at all.”

“Still hoping boy toy is going to come through for you?” Spike sneered and Xander put a warning hand on his thigh. Buffy was more than a little volatile on the subject of Riley, especially now.

Sgt. Morgan spoke up before Buffy could draw breath to answer - just as well, Xander thought, given the anger on her face. The last thing they needed was for Buffy and Spike to seriously get into it. While frequently entertaining, it wasn’t always productive.

“We know where they are, Xander but we don’t have a plan for getting inside,” Sgt. Morgan reminded him. “They appear to be well fortified and we don’t have a way in that they wouldn’t see coming and be ready for us. An all-out assault would be extremely costly on both sides.”

“Adam has a way in,” Giles reminded them all. “According to Riley, he’s already gotten inside their base once, without them seeing him coming.” He shifted his gaze to Buffy. “Did they ever find out how he did it?”

She shook her head. “No. He overrode their security somehow but they’ve never figured out how.”

“Sounds like someone should ask him,” Spike said and it worried Xander that he didn’t sound like he was being sarcastic.

Buffy said up abruptly, looking way more interested than Xander thought the remark deserved. She stared at Spike thoughtfully. “Spike, do you think you could pretend to team up with Adam? If he’s recruiting demons, wouldn’t he want you more than anyone?”

“What?!” Xander began, outraged, but Spike was way ahead of him, shooting Buffy a withering look.

“What?!” Buffy argued, obviously annoyed at having her idea so summarily shot down and Xander shook his head, surprised as always by how little Buffy understood about demons. Anything except how to kill them simply didn’t interest her.
“Course he does,” Spike shot back. “Got his nose from the demon side of the spare parts bin, didn’t he? That’s the whole point of a Claim mark - so other demons are warned off. Enough bits of him are demon to know that.”

Spike didn’t mention the Claim scar was fading again but Xander knew Spike was aware of it. Spike spent an inordinate amount of time recently licking at the Claim scar, as if willing it to stay fresh. It wouldn’t be long before Spike felt compelled to renew it and Xander hated how much it cost Spike to do it. It didn’t matter for now, even if the mark had faded to the point where other demons couldn’t sense it anymore, Spike’s scent was all over Xander, as Xander’s was all over him - among other things they slept together every night. If Adam had any sense of smell at all, he knew that Xander and Spike were lovers.

“So, how do you stop an unstoppable demon?” Xander asked, wanting to break the tension between them.

“If both guns and our weapons are useless, I’m beginning to wonder if the military isn’t right. Maybe a nuke is the only way to stop Adam,” Buffy said, slumping down a bit.

Xander’s eyebrow shot up, although he knew Buffy couldn’t be serious. He hoped. “Well, since that pretty much leaves Sunnydale as just a big smoking hole in the ground, I vote we think of something else.”

“In addition to everything else, a blast that size would create seismic activity which could open the Hellmouth,” Mr. Olsen told them. Which was a new, and charming thought.

“So, nuclear radiation and demons overrunning the earth? Suddenly, Adam isn’t sounding so bad anymore.” Xander was beginning to sympathize with Buffy’s gloomy attitude. Spike trailed his fingers over Xander’s hip and Xander straightened his shoulders, taking comfort from the small touch. “Ok, if we can’t attack Adam physically, that pretty much leaves us with magic, right? Is there some kind of spell for killing an unkillable demon?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Giles said patiently. “However, I am not much more than a dabbler when it comes to magic.”

“How about your friend Ethan?” He seemed like the kind of guy who knew about the down and dirty side of magic.


“Desperate actually. If we don’t come up with a viable alternative and fast, the military is going to be explaining the general public how a nuke ‘accidentally’ detonated in the hills just outside of town and we’ll all have to choose between glowing in the dark or demons overrunning the town.” Xander rubbed his hands over his face and tried to think outside the box. Trouble was, in Sunnydale everything was outside the box. The box was outside the box. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

“Basically, we need to do what we did to the Mayor,” he said slowly, thinking out loud. “Get him somewhere by himself and destroy him, right?” He looked around the circle of faces, seeing both amusement and exasperation at his simplification of the issue. “So, how do we do that?”

“The problem with that is we knew where and when the Mayor was going to be at the school and we knew how to kill him,” Buffy pointed out. “We don’t have any of that here.”

“Ok, right, but we didn’t have any of that when we started. We pooled our resources and came up
with a plan. So what do we have now?"

“We have a psychotic, unkillable demon and no way to kill him,” Buffy said. Xander shot her an exasperated look and she held up an apologetic hand. “Sorry. Ok. We have a lot of fighters and we know where Adam is.”

“Was.”

Everyone looked around at Oz, who had been listening quietly to the debate.

“Oz?”

“Adam’s not in the caves anymore. Given enough time, I can probably track him but there’s a lot of traffic in and through those caves. It’s not going to be easy.”

“And we’re back to square one,” Giles murmured, looking discouraged.

“From my perspective,” Sgt. Morgan volunteered, his deep rumbling voice making them all sit up just a bit straighter, like recruits who had disappointed him. Xander still didn’t know how he managed to do that when, as far as he could tell, the man’s expression hadn’t changed in the slightest. “The problem is relatively straightforward. The intelligence we have says that Adam has an atomic power source. Remove the power source and it seems likely that Adam will cease to function. Something artificially created like that is going to be dependent on their power source to keep running.” He looked around at the others. “My suggestion would be for us to focus our attention on how to do that, rather than how to defeat him.”

Xander considered that. The shift in perspective was small but somehow it made the job seem more doable. “Ok, so how do we take out his power source? Can we shut him down or black him out somehow? Or are we back to exploratory surgery?” He saw Sgt. Morgan’s amused look at the last suggestion and just shook his head. “Don’t ask,” he advised.

“I wasn’t going to,” Sgt. Morgan assured him, lips quirking a little. “As for your first two suggestions, my understanding is the Initiative didn’t put in any kind of emergency override that would allow us to shut him down. Once activated, he was apparently intended to remain that way. And, although we don’t know for sure, I believe it would be safe to assume that they shielded his power source. The Initiative apparently intended him to be the ultimate weapon and he would be useless if an enemy could short him out.”

“Which leaves us with removing his power core?” Buffy sighed. “Xander’s exploratory surgery is beginning to sound like our only option.”

“Got about 75 vampires we could pile on top of him. That might hold him down long enough for me to rip his heart out.”

“Power core,” Xander reminded him and Spike just shrugged.

“Same difference.”

“Can we trust the vamps not to side with him?” Buffy asked, lifting a challenging eyebrow.

“They’ll do what they’re told,” Spike shot back immediately, a flicker of gold showing in his eyes at the suggestion that he couldn’t control his Court.

“I would rather have one or two fighters who can physically overpower him,” Giles said practically. “If it takes 100 to hold him down, we won’t be able to get near him to remove the
“So how do we get a couple of fighters that are stronger than Buffy and Spike?” Xander asked, then looked at Giles. “Can we use magic to enhance their strength?”

Giles leaned back in his chair and slowly removed his glasses letting them dangle by one earpiece as he considered. “It is possible to magically enhance a person’s strength for a short period,” he said slowly. “But such spells are inherently dangerous. They are not something I would wish to perform on another without a competent magic user to back me up.”

“How about contacting the Devonshire coven?” Mr. Olsen suggested and Giles looked at him, eyebrows raised. Mr. Olsen smiled. “I can’t imagine they wouldn’t be willing to help. Even if the Initiative didn’t use magic in constructing him, Adam is a fundamentally unnatural being. I think the coven would be willing to make an exception and intervene, don’t you?”

Giles’ expression cleared and he looked interested. “Put that way, you may very well be right. They might see this as a matter they are willing to intervene in.” He checked the time and frowned, obviously calculating time differences. “I’ll contact them later tonight and see if they are willing to help. At the very least, they might have some useful suggestions.”

He got to his feet, signaling the end of the meeting and Xander frowned, wondering whether they had actually decided anything. Mr. Olsen, Sgt. Morgan and Giles moved toward the door, talking together quietly and Xander wondered if he should say something before they all went their separate ways. Oz beat him to it.

“Stopping Adam isn’t enough.”

The quiet voice sounded unusually loud in the room and Xander felt Spike’s tension in his sudden motionlessness.

“We have to stop the Initiative as well.”

“Oz, we can tackle the Initiative, if necessary, after we take out Adam,” Buffy said, having obviously decided that her ‘Adam first’ argument had won the day.

“Strategically, taking the Initiative down while Adam is around to distract them is our best chance to succeed.” Oz met her eyes steadily. “There’s a werewolf down in those cells, if she’s still alive. I’m not leaving her down there indefinitely to be experimented on.” He glanced around the group. “And neither will the pack.”

“The pack?” Buffy repeated blankly.

“I contacted them while I was out of town last weekend,” Oz told her calmly. “They’re on their way.”

“What?! No. Call them off. I’m sorry, Oz, but the last thing we need right now is a bunch of angry werewolves in town.”

“Not your call,” Oz told her flatly. His eyes had turned black as she spoke and Xander watched the confrontation uneasily, knowing that Oz sometimes lost control in the heat of intense emotion.

He got to his feet, holding both arms out in a placating gesture. “Guys? I’m calling a truce. Buffy….” Xander hesitated trying to come up with the right words, which was a mistake as that allowed Mr. Tactful to get there first.
“Wolf’s got a right to look after his own. Not your business, Slayer.”

“Of course it’s my business,” Buffy flared, jumping to her feet. “I’m the Slayer.”

Oz cocked his head slightly, slowly standing and staring at her with those black, impenetrable eyes. “Are you slaying werewolves now?” he asked quietly and Buffy looked at him, shocked.

“Of course not! But, Oz…”

“Slayer’s always been an us against them kind of gal,” Spike began provocingly and Xander glared at him, cutting him off with a sharp gesture.

“This stops - Right Now. This is not about demons versus humans - that’s what Adam’s trying to do. He’s trying to pit humans against demons. If we act like that, we’re playing into his hands.” He glared at all three of them impartially and saw that he had their attention. More calmly, he continued: “This is about defending ourselves. It’s really that simple. The Initiative is threatening everyone in this town, human and demon alike. They started this. And yes, humans are probably going to die in this fight. But so are demons. And I am not going to say that Mr. Olsen’s or Pyotr’s lives are worth less than my own just because some of their ancestors weren’t human. That’s the Initiative’s line. We’ve tried to talk to them, to get them to see what they’re doing, and it hasn’t worked.”

“Bravo, Xander,” Giles said. He and Sgt. Morgan and Mr. Olsen had stopped at the open door, listening to the argument with concerned faces. “You’re absolutely right. We can’t afford to be divided amongst ourselves. If we can’t work together, we won’t succeed.”

Buffy and Oz nodded and Xander was relieved to see they had both taken a metaphorical step back and weren’t bristling at each other any more. Spike’s eyes were shuttered and Xander could tell he was thinking rapidly, weighing and discarding options. Well, that was the best they could expect. Getting this group to work together had always been an exercise in herding cats. They all had their own agendas, the trick had always been to convince them that their agendas overlapped.

“Might not need to choose who to attack,” Spike said abruptly. “Adam’s recruiting demons to attack the Initiative.”

“What?!” “Perfect.” “What are you talking about?”

Spike shrugged, indifferent to the hostile attention he was now receiving from nearly everyone, though his eyes flickered briefly, apologetically, in Xander’s direction. Much as he would have liked to have known that little tidbit of information before the meeting, Xander had to admit that they’d gotten a bit distracted this morning and hadn’t had a chance to talk.

“Been having some of the boys check around town,” Spike explained. “Mr. Bits is playing messiah and a lot of demons are lining up to do his bidding.”

“What exactly is he asking them to do?” Giles asked.

“Work together. May even be deliberately planning to let themselves be captured. Far as I can tell, he wants the demons showing themselves around town.” Spike’s smile had nothing to do with amusement. “Got them hanging ‘easy prey’ signs around their necks, just waiting for the soldiers to scoop them up.”

“Why didn’t you say something before?” Buffy demanded.

“Not sure I disapproved. Having a lot of demons on hand to kill those buggers sounds like my kind
of party.”

“Damnit, Spike!”

“Let it go, Buffy,” Xander told her sharply. “Spike has a responsibility to his Court, same as Oz does to another werewolf, and you do to humans.”

Giles had moved back to the living room, flanked by Mr. Olsen and Sgt. Morgan. “If Adam is planning on attacking the Initiative, having demons he can count on inside would be extremely useful - assuming he can get them out of their cells.”

Sgt. Morgan nodded thoughtfully, crossing his arms over his massive chest, his eyes calculating. “A Trojan horse scenario,” he said. “Fill up the enemy camp with your soldiers, then strike from within.” He looked around the circle, meeting each of their eyes in turn. “From what I understand, Adam is too intelligent to try this unless he is confident he can release his demons at the proper time. I think we must assume he believes he can override the Initiative’s security.” He frowned. “I dislike the idea for many reasons, but our best bet may be to use Adam’s attack as a cover for our own. Attack both Adam and the Initiative simultaneously.”
Pacing furiously back and forth in front of the couch, Spike couldn’t help repeating his objections as if he thought it would actually make an impression this time. “Don’t trust the Witch. And I’m not letting her anywhere near you.”

Xander just gave him that infuriating tolerant look. The one that said he thought Spike was being paranoid and overprotective and he thought it was cute. Spike bit back a snarl, knowing Xander would just find that cute too. He was a Master Vampire. He wasn’t cute.

“You really think she’s going to be able to fool Maggie? It didn’t take Maggie 30 seconds to make you back down and you’re a lot tougher than Willow.”

“Oi! She’s the one backed down,” Spike retorted indignantly.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Xander smirked and Spike did growl at him this time.

Despite his denial, he knew Xander was right. Maggie Apsford-Burns was a formidable woman and Spike had been unwillingly impressed by her at their first meeting. Despite her physical frailty, she hadn’t been even slightly intimidated by Spike’s threats and she’d done alright by Xander in removing the memory spell. Grudgingly, he admitted that, if anyone could control the redhead, it was probably Maggie.

“Shouldn’t be bringing her,” was all he said, flinging himself down on the couch next to Xander.

“We need all the help we can get,” Xander reminded him.

Which didn’t help his mood. He hated that he had a problem in his Territory that he didn’t know how to deal with, much less one he needed outside help with. Especially outside magical help.

“Don’t trust the kind of help where people hold secret meetings behind our backs,” he complained.

“Please, like you really want to go to something like that anyway. They’re just going to sit around, talking about all the ideas they have that won’t work. I don’t know about you, but I’m sick of talking about how we can’t defeat Adam - let someone else do it for a change.” Xander shifted sideways on the couch, grinning at him cheerfully. “All we need to know about is the plan they decide is going to work.”

Xander had a point, not that Spike was going to admit it out loud. The whole bleeding lot of them did way too much talking and not enough doing. But that wasn’t his only concern. Something about the planning meeting made him suspicious. It might be nothing more than the fact that a number of very powerful people, at least one of which he despised, were setting up shop in his Territory and holding meetings he was excluded from but it felt like something more. Like the magic workers were deliberately hiding things from them.

He’d been surprised and suspicious when the coven had consulted and then, a couple days later, announced that they were going to fly out to America. From what Spike understood about the coven’s history and the Watcher’s own deep surprise at the announcement, it was a very unusual move for the group. Hell, the Watcher hadn’t even thought to call them for help until someone else talked him into it, he’d been that sure they didn’t muck about in problems that weren’t strictly magical. The fact that they were coming in person meant they thought Adam was a big enough threat they were willing to help deal with it and in person no less.
Then he’d learned that the Witch was returning with them and only the spectacular set-to with three Minbarii demons he’d sought out and killed in a protracted, exhausting and satisfyingly bloody fight had allowed him to discuss the Witch’s imminent arrival calmly with his Claimed.

To top it all off, learning that the people from the coven were meeting with Giles upon their arrival, and that none of the rest of them were invited to the meeting had turned suspicion into certainty that they were up to something. Only the news that the Witch wasn’t invited to the meeting either stopped his plans for meeting the plane at the airport and killing them all on the tarmac. Ok, he’d have had to use members of the Court to do it, but it would have been worth it, he thought sulkily, except Xander had obviously recognized he was thinking along those lines and called him on it. It was fucking annoying that Xander could read him so well, Spike thought, even as he pulled Xander against him, needed to feel the living warmth of his Claimed beside him.

Bloody witches. Can’t trust any of them.

Given the lack of loud music coming from the apartment, Xander guessed that Devon was either sleeping or not there. He knocked, wondering if it was wrong to want the Initiative gone just so he could get another cell phone without worrying that the government was monitoring his calls. Having a phone sure made it easier to find out if people were home before you dropped in on them. He didn’t regret his somewhat paranoid decision to go without a phone for now, but it really made life more complicated.

He assumed that Oz had heard that Willow was returning and he wanted to find out if the other man was ok with that. Willow and Oz’s breakup had been full of almost as many emotional landmines as Xander’s and Willow’s parting of ways. Xander himself was mostly fine with the idea of seeing Willow again. He and Willow had done a lot of emailing last fall and he thought they’d do ok face to face. He wasn’t sure how they felt about each other any more but he found he was almost eager to find out. He’d been right last year when he’d thought that having Willow gone would make it easier for them to find their way back to being friends. Having an ocean between them had made it easier for both of them to communicate again, something they had lost the ability to do after Jesse’s death.

Sometimes he couldn’t help wondering: if Jesse had lived, would he and Willow have remained close? Would Xander and Jesse have jumped on the Slayer bandwagon and become loyal Slayerettes, or hopefully something slightly more manly sounding, he thought with an inward smile. Would they have simply transitioned from the Three Musketeers into the Four Musketeers, integrating Buffy seamlessly into their inseparable trio?

It saddened him how scary he found the idea. He couldn’t imagine that alternate version of himself becoming Spike’s Claimed and the person he was today. It really sucked that losing his best friend was the necessary first step in the chain of events that had led to him losing Willow almost as thoroughly as he’d lost Jesse and yet, at the same time, giving him more happiness and satisfaction with his life than he’d ever known before.

The door swung open, interrupting his thoughts, and Oz nodded at him from the doorway.

“Hey, Xander.”

“Hi, Oz. You busy?”

Oz hesitated for just a second, then swung the door all the way open in invitation. “Not really. Got some friends here.”
Xander stepped inside the small apartment, seeing two people sprawled on the couch and a third in the kitchen, pulling things out of the refrigerator.

“Everyone, this is Xander,” Oz said generally. “Xander, this is Terry,” he gestured to the tall, lean blonde woman who waved a beer can at him from the couch, “Matt” the solidly built black man in the kitchen who had the most amazing dreds Xander had ever seen, cascading down nearly to his waist, “and Dean,” Oz finished, gesturing to the third person who had risen from the couch and was approaching them. “Dean’s my pack leader.”

Xander could see that Oz was watching him closely from the corner of his eye, waiting for his reaction, and he gave Oz a quick reassuring smile before meeting Dean halfway, hand extended.

“Xander Harris,” he introduced himself formally, suspecting that pack leaders had some of the same status issues that Master Vampires did. Small signs of respect for their position generally went a long way.

“Dean McNair,” the other man responded. They shook hands, each sizing the other up openly. Dean was shorter than Xander by a couple of inches, probably at least ten years older, with weather-beaten features that made Xander think of tv cowboys. He had sandy hair and brown eyes with deep-set lines around them and there was a just a hint of the wolf in the length of his sideburns and the rough texture of his hair.

Which might be just his imagination, of course.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. “We really appreciate the help.” He meant it sincerely, even though Spike was going to be furious that there was only three of them. Spike had been anticipating having thirty werewolves in town helping to attack the Initiative with a kind of murderous glee.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Oz relax his tense stance and knew he’d said the right thing.

“You owe us nothing,” Dean said. “We’re grateful you steered Oz in our direction.” He straightened to his full height and Xander could almost see the power radiating from him. “As Daniel Osborn’s pack-leader, I offer you formal apology for your life being placed in danger by a member of my pack.”

“Excuse me?” Xander asked blankly. He had no idea what the man was talking about. Peripherally, he was aware the other two newcomers had moved to stand behind their leader, off to one side but clearly backing him up. Xander shot a puzzled glance at Oz who stood beside his pack leader, one pace to the rear, eyes fastened unwaveringly on Xander.

“I lost control of my wolf in Adam’s cave,” Oz reminded him.

Grateful for some of Spike and Jose’s explanations of Court protocol, Xander kept his eyes on the pack-leader as he answered. “There’s no need for apology. The circumstances were unique and Oz didn’t hurt me.”

“Nevertheless, I misunderstood the situation in this town. I permitted Oz to return without truly understanding the challenges he would face here. He was not yet ready to return. The error was mine.”

“Sunnydale is different from other towns.” That seemed a fairly safe thing to say.

“I give you my word this will not happen again. When Oz explained what you were facing and what had happened, I brought only my most senior pack members.” Dean glanced at Oz. “Oz is not yet mature enough to take part in this fight. He will be allowed to remain in town but not to join in
the battle.” Dean relaxed his formal stance slightly as he continued. “We three are not the only members of the pack who have come. There are four more out exploring the town.”

Xander nodded, his eyes straying to Oz, wondering how he felt about this but not daring to ask. Oz met his eyes steadily.

“Dean is my pack-leader,” he said calmly. “It’s his call.”

Xander nodded. He couldn’t help thinking that Dean was probably right, although he intended to ask about it in more detail as soon as he could get Oz alone. He’d been wondering how werewolves could help without risking attacking the wrong people, and now he suspected that Dean and the others had complete control over their wolves during the change, something that Oz hadn’t yet mastered.

He ended up having lunch with the four werewolves. Matt made up an extra sandwich and they all sat comfortably in the living room munching on sandwiches and chips, drinking beer and talking. It was clear the three newcomers liked each other and liked Oz and Oz was as relaxed and open as Xander had ever seen him.

He tried to not ask them about what it was like being a mature werewolf and about pack dynamics, worried that they might think it was rude, and for the most part, thought he had been successful in hiding his curiosity. That notion was blown when Matt laughed at him and told him to just ask his questions before he died of curiosity.

Embarrassed, Xander looked around at the others. Dean nodded permission, Terry gave him a friendly grin, and even Oz smiled.

“Just ask, Xander. I doubt you’ll be able to come up with a question I didn’t ask when I first met these guys.”

Dean leaned back against the cushions behind him and grinned at Xander. “Just keep in mind, we have a few questions of our own about the Master of the Territory and the politics in town. Oz isn’t as up to date as you are.”

Xander grinned back at him. “That seems fair.”

Trading information about their groups not only seemed fair, it was a good idea. Yeah, he was curious to learn more about werewolves and Oz’s new pack but he wanted to know what kind of backup these guys could give Spike since it might very well come down to the wolves and the Court attacking the Initiative, depending on what the coven was planning.

Xander couldn’t help drumming his fingers quietly on the table as he waited nervously for Willow to arrive. He’d thought he was going to be fine with seeing her again but, as the time approached, he found he was getting more and more nervous. Unlike Oz, he hadn’t been able to put Willow behind him and move on.

Spike had gone ballistic when he found out that Xander intended to meet Willow alone and it had taken some fast talking to convince Spike not to accompany him to their meeting. In her emails, Willow had been upfront about the fact that she still couldn’t bring herself to really trust Spike and Spike was equally sure that Willow remained dangerous, especially to Xander. After a lot of arguing, Spike had grudgingly agreed that Xander would be safe meeting Willow in a public spot
during daylight. Xander had carefully chosen a restaurant that he knew had sewer access in its basement so a certain overprotective vampire could be there just in case.

Xander smiled to himself, looking down at the tiled floor of the sandwich shop and the vampire he just knew was down in the basement below him pacing and smoking and muttering threats about what he would do if the witch put one toe over the line.

“Hello, Xander.”

Willow’s voice sounded shaky with emotion and looking up, Xander saw she was as nervous as he was. He slid out of the booth, and stepped towards her hesitantly. Then he was hugging her and her arms went around him, hugging him back hard and he felt his nervousness disappear.

Willow gave a funny little laugh and stepped back. “I’ve missed you,” she said fiercely, stepping back. “You look great.”

“You, too.”

It wasn’t just empty words. Outwardly, Willow looked a little different - her hair shorter and a lighter red than he remembered, wearing a long skirt that looked vaguely like something from the 60’s. But the real change showed on her face. Underneath the nervousness of seeing him again, she looked happy and - lighter somehow, like she’d found a way clear of all the burdens and temptations that magic had put on her and in doing so had found herself again. She looked like someone who’d learned to like themself, like she’d grown out of the arrogance and selfishness that had begun to taint so many of her actions.

“England’s been good to you,” he said without thinking and was glad when Willow just gave him a beaming smile.

“It has. The coven’s been great and I’ve learned so much, and I love Oxford and I’ve even gotten used to the rain, but it’s good to be home.”

And just that easily, they were sitting and talking in a way they hadn’t done since freshman year, and something inside Xander, an emptiness he’d almost convinced himself didn’t really exist, ached with bittersweet longing for what once had been. Willow seemed to feel it too and at times her eyes shone with what he suspected were blinked back tears as they caught each other up on their lives, staying by mutual unspoken consent to the safe areas for now, but still, communicating more in this one conversation than they had in the last three years.

There was one subject he was surprised that Willow didn’t cover and Xander couldn’t help asking curiously: “How’s Amy?” No one had even mentioned Amy in talking about the coven and Willow’s arrival.

Willow just shook her head. “She’s struggling,” she said. “She’s had some relapses. The coven’s still working with her.” She sighed, looking away for a minute. “I hope she makes it,” she said quietly.

“Are you two still…” Xander made a vague back and forth gesture, not really sure how far their relationship had gone.

“Dating?” Willow supplied, obviously amused at his circumspection. “No. Turns out we were a textbook lesson in why two people in the early stages of recovery shouldn’t get together.” She looked down again, gripping her hands together under the table and Xander regretted asking. “When she relapsed…” Willow faltered for a moment, then just said: “It was bad. I almost
followed her lead.”

“I’m sorry,” Xander said, not sure what else to say to fill the awkward silence that followed Willow’s words.

Willow sighed. “We stopped seeing each other after that. It was the right thing for me but Amy took it badly and let’s just say things got pretty crazy for awhile.” Willow met Xander’s sympathetic gaze. “She’s doing better now, not great, but better. Maggie is optimistic that she’ll make it one day.”

“Sounds like it was tough.”

“It was.” She hesitated, then added quietly. “It was like looking into a mirror and seeing what you could have become. Like the Soul Mirror spell Maggie did on me, only showing the future not the present. Seeing a friend change into something I barely recognized,” her eyes were steady on his, “gave me a new perspective on what I put you through. I don’t think I’ll ever get over being ashamed for what I did.”

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Below them, Spike made a scoffing sound. Leaning against the wall at the foot of the stairs to the basement, he dropped his latest cigarette and crushed it out beneath his heel. He’d been able to hear them clearly, it was late afternoon and they were almost the only customers, listening in over the clatter of dishes and running water in the kitchen, he’d shaken his head in disbelief more than once. Witch had gotten better with words, that was for sure. And there was Xander, right on cue, patting her hand and telling her that all was forgiven. Couldn’t hold a grudge worth a damn, that boy of his.

Witch sounded sincere, he’d give her that. He wouldn’t kill her unless she made a false move but he wasn’t going to trust her just because she did the big eyes and tearful apologies thing. He’d seen that before from her without it changing her behavior. He didn’t trust her now any more than he ever had. Whatever the coven was planning, he just hoped she wasn’t part of it.
Two days after the coven arrived, everyone gathered at the Olsens’ house to learn what the magic workers had come up with. Giles’ apartment was far too small for the size of the full group and Mr. Olsen’s house was as close as it got to neutral territory in Sunnydale. There was a reason Mr. Olsen had been chosen to be the liaison between the demons and Giles, Buffy and the rest of them - because everyone who knew him liked and respected the elderly man and, although he was something of a leader among the friendly demons in town, he didn’t have the touchy sense of pride and territoriality that Buffy, Spike and even the pack leader, Dean, did. Plus, he had a large basement room that could hold all of them without the kind of crowding that could lead to problems.

Glancing around the room, Xander saw they were almost the last to arrive. Mr. Olsen had produced a collection of mismatched chairs and set them in a loose circle around the large, nearly bare room.

Spike was practically vibrating with tension as he stalked across the room, although he hid it so well that Xander was sure hardly anyone in the room would be able to tell. The vampire had been on edge ever since learning that the magic workers had met for a second time and Xander could tell Spike was regretting having let Xander talk him out of renewing his Claim Mark before this meeting.

His arguments had made sense or Spike wouldn’t have agreed - the actual attack might still be days, possibly even weeks off, and Xander hadn’t wanted Spike to have to go through the pain of renewing the mark twice. He’d pointed out that the members of the coven were human and wouldn’t be able to sense the mark, and anyone like the werewolves who could, accepted and honored Spike’s Claim, with or without a mark.

Of course, logic failed in the face of a roomful of allies, many of whom Spike didn’t trust. Xander really wished the coven hadn’t thought it necessary to have their secretive meetings. Either they didn’t know, or maybe they just didn’t care, that it would drive Spike, and to a lesser extent Buffy, crazy, feeding paranoid thoughts that really didn’t need to be fed.

Xander obligingly stayed close, knowing Spike needed his solid backup when he was this twitchy, letting Spike’s possessive hand on his back steer him towards a defensible corner of the room without pausing to greet any of the assembled people.

The corner Spike had chosen was already occupied by Oz and Dean, who were there representing the Pack. Spike’s quiet “shove over, mate” to Dean, allowed them to settle into the chairs the two werewolves had been sitting in without fuss. Xander gave them an apologetic smile but Dean just inclined his head, obviously understanding Spike’s need for a secure location where he could protect his Claimed, if necessary.

Spike had been disgruntled to realize that only seven wolves had arrived in town to help but fortunately, he’d been impressed by Dean when the two of them had met earlier to discuss strategy and how to coordinate their fighters. Unlike Xander, Spike didn’t really get that having younger wolves, who might lose control during a battle, was a liability. Spike thought it would be fun to watch them rampage.

Xander unobtrusively edged his chair closer to Spike’s, so that their legs and shoulders touched, then glanced around the circle.
Maggie Apsford-Burns looked the same: still tiny and frail, her braided white hair wrapped around her head, her bright eyes belonging to a much younger person. Willow and three strangers were sitting next to her, two on each side of Maggie and Xander eyed them curiously, wondering why Elizabeth hadn’t come back with them. Elizabeth, who’d helped them stop the Mayor, had the advantage of being familiar to the core group from Sunnydale and they were dealing with far too many unknowns already. Willow had told Xander the coven members’ names but they’d pretty much gone in one ear and out the other and he couldn’t remember them right now. None of them were nearly as impressive as Maggie, he thought, studying them critically, but then few people were.

To his surprise, Mr. Okolo was there, sitting quietly next to Sgt. Morgan, gazing around the room at the others with mild curiosity. Xander’s brows shot up and he nodded respectfully to the dark-skinned man who could pass for someone in his 60’s, not the 400-some years he actually was. Mr. Okolo, more than most of the demons in town, kept to himself and guarded his privacy carefully and Xander wondered how bad a sign it was that the reclusive Teer’ah demon was here. He reminded himself to tell Oz that Mr. Okolo was the one who’d given Xander the information about the werewolf pack. He suspected Oz would like to thank the man.

Sitting on Mr. Okolo’s other side but half behind him, almost as if she was trying to hide from the rest of the room, was a young woman, probably about his own age, head bent so that her dark blonde hair swung forward over her face, everything about her just screaming that she wished she was invisible. Her bowed head was giving Xander a good look at the odd zig-zag part in her hair and he couldn’t help wondering why someone who seemed so shy would want to do something like that to her hair; something that seemed designed to make people to look at her.

Just then, Mr. Olsen came down the steps, Buffy and Giles following behind. Xander watched as they took the last vacant seats, completing the circle. Giles smiled impartially around the circle, nodding in greeting to everyone while Buffy’s wary eyes and tense posture betrayed her on-going annoyance with Giles and the coven. Buffy had been nearly as paranoid as Spike that the magic workers were so obviously not sharing their thoughts with the rest of them. From the way she shifted her chair a bit further from Giles’ and the fact that she gave Willow only a single, brief glance, Xander assumed she hadn’t been able to wheedle any information out of either of them and was not happy about that fact.

Frankly, he sympathized and thought that the coven had blown it big time with that stunt. He’d reserve judgment for now since it was possible they had a good reason for their actions, but pissing off your allies immediately after arriving in town was just not a good move on their part.

As Buffy, Giles and Mr. Olsen took their seats, Sgt. Morgan glanced at Mr. Olsen, then rose to his feet, commanding silence with one sweeping glance around the circle. “Most of us know each other,” he began, “but I think it would be wise to begin by introducing ourselves so that the newcomers have some understanding of who we all are.” He squared his shoulders, drawing himself to his full, impressive height, and began:

“I’m Sergeant Geoff Morgan, half Kobarien demon. I’m a sergeant in the US Army, stationed here in Sunnydale for the last 12 years. I am not a member of the Initiative, nor are they affiliated with the regular army base here in town.”

He sat down then and nodded to Mr. Olsen and the introductions began to circle around the group, each person rising to introduce themselves in turn. The only interruption in the smooth flow was when Mr. Okolo introduced first himself and then the shy blonde woman beside him. “This is Tara Maclay, she is a student at UC Sunnydale and a powerful witch, although her training is not yet complete.” The woman lifted her head and gave them all a quick look and a nervous smile before
subsiding into near invisibility again. Xander wondered why Mr. Okolo had wanted her here. She didn’t seem like someone who was going to be able to work in a group.

The coven members introduced themselves as Abigail Hartness, Helen Bridge, and Michael Stafford, listing their magical proficiency levels and how long they’d been practicing and that pretty much completed the introductory phase.

Not surprisingly, it was Maggie who began the meeting in earnest. She rose to her feet, one hand gripping her cane tightly, her voice carrying easily to all of them.

“Some of you are familiar with our group and no doubt you were surprised when we agreed to come here. This creature who calls himself Adam is not a magical being and we do not usually become involved in issues that are not strictly magic related. However, only fools bind themselves to inflexible rules that cannot be altered to meet new situations and I do not consider myself a fool. As Mr. Giles pointed out when he first contacted us, Adam is an unnatural being and worse, he is threatening to cause a war between demons and humans. Such a conflict would not remain confined to this small town and the coven has chosen to act because we view this as a serious threat - one that could spread beyond Sunnydale and potentially activate the Hellmouth itself.

“As you are all aware, you are confronted with two issues: the second being the group that calls itself the Initiative.” Maggie paused, and her voice grew even firmer. “The coven will not provide magical assistance against them.” Xander could feel Spike growling almost inaudibly and slid his hand over to rest on Spike’s thigh, hoping to forestall an outburst as Maggie continued.

“The Initiative is a strictly human group, no matter how misguided, and we will not use our power directly against them. However, recent developments indicate that the two problems are becoming one and we are willing to provide assistance against Adam, despite the fact that it may lead to magic power being used against humans.”

“As many of you know,” her gaze swept the room and Xander had no doubt she was aware of the suspicion and resentment their private meetings had caused. “We have held meetings since our arrival in town and, among other things, we have learned that your suspicions are correct: the Initiative’s holding cells are dangerously crowded with demons.”

“How do you know?” Buffy asked sharply.

“There are spells that can track the location of demonic energy, even pinpoint specific life signatures.” For some reason, she shot an impish look at the shy blonde standing by Mr. Okolo, who blushed crimson, ducking her head even lower and hunching in on herself. “From the patterns of demonic energy signatures, it was easy to track the locations of the underground cells and many of them appear to have two and even three demons in them, often of different species.”

That information brought a flurry of low-voiced comments and exclamations, primarily among the demons in the group. Considering that Xander had been worried about overcrowding at this meeting where everyone was at least nominally allies, he could only imagine the kind of fights that were going on inside the Initiative’s cells right now. If Adam wanted to use the demons he’d sent out to be captured, he would have to act quickly or his recruits would end up tearing each other to pieces. They didn’t have weeks, or even days, they had to move now despite the fact that they still had no idea what Adam was up to.

“We also believe we have located Adam,” Maggie said, her voice carrying over the others and commanding their attention again. “There is a single, highly unusual energy signature, very close to the holding cells, but apart. Given that none of us have ever seen this type of signature before, we believe this to be Adam,” she said dryly.
Maggie’s eyes touched briefly on Spike and Buffy. “Adam has strength substantially beyond that of a Slayer and a Master Vampire. Mr. Giles asked if there were spells which could enhance a fighter’s strength so that they could defeat something otherwise too strong and seemingly immune to weapons. There is such a spell. Put simply, the spell gathers power from other sources and temporarily re-directs that power into another. That other serves as a vessel, and for the duration of the spell, has access to that power as if it was truly their own.”

Buffy’s eyes were shining, looking like a kid on Christmas who had just been told that every present under the tree was theirs and Xander smiled, knowing without looking that Spike would be scowling at the idea of the Slayer getting more power. They were more evenly matched now than when Spike had first arrived in town, Buffy had grown stronger as she got older and, although Xander would still bet on Spike if it came down to it, he suspected Buffy would give Spike a serious run for his money these days. With a power boost of the kind Maggie was talking about, Buffy would definitely be able to kick Spike’s ass. Even if it was temporary, Spike clearly hated the idea.

“Mr. Harris, are you willing to be the vessel and fight Adam?”

Spike shot to his feet with an outraged roar before Xander had gotten over his astonished disbelief. “No. Fucking. Way.” His voice was cold and deadly, matching the anger inside him. He pulled Xander behind him, putting himself physically between Xander and the rest of the room. “Get yourself some other sacrificial prat. You’re not using my Claimed as your cannon fodder.”

He was beyond furious. This was what they’d been planning in those secret meeting, to sacrifice Xander for the greater good. No doubt the Slayer was too important to risk. Well, they weren’t getting near Xander with their fucking spells.

Looking infinitely regretful, Maggie met his eyes squarely. “We did not come to this conclusion lightly, William. Nor was it a random decision. And I can assure you, we are not intending to use Xander or anyone else as ‘cannon fodder’.” She gestured around the room at the diverse group gathered there. “Xander is the focus. The heart of the group. He is the one who has consistently drawn you together, and the energy of the group flows toward him. It must be him.”

The Slayer jumped to her feet, shoving her chair back out of her way as if preparing for action. She looked furious and betrayed, like someone had taken her toys away from her. “No! Xander’s good but he’s not our best fighter by far. We can’t put him on the front lines, Adam will kill him. I’m the Slayer, it’s my job. I’ll do it.”

The witches and the Watcher exchanged glances and Maggie silently deferred to Giles. “Buffy,” Giles began, then hesitated. His eyes sought Xander but Spike shifted, preventing him from making eye contact. Rallying, Giles again addressed Buffy. “There is a spell which can draw on the power of the Slayer line,” he admitted.

“Problem solved then.” “We’ll use that one.”

Their voices overlapped but the Watcher just shook his head.

“We can’t. The source of the Slayer’s power is demonic.”

“What?” The Slayer’s shocked question interrupted her Watcher.

“The Slayer line was created by tapping into the power of demons, their energy, and feeding that
power to the original Slayer. Strength, speed, enhanced reflexes, healing powers; those are all demonic traits. The ones who created the Slayers intended to fight fire with fire.” Mr. Okolo explained with the authority of one who’s grandfather had been there to witness it. Unlike the others, he remained seated, a calm, commanding presence in the stormy room.

“Adam has power over demons,” the Watcher reminded them all. “Whether it is a power that was built into him or simply that of a charismatic leader, we don’t know. But there is a risk that, if we use the power of the Slayer line, then Adam may be able to control that power. In addition, the coven has found irrefutable evidence that the Slayer power is in some ways almost a living thing. Invoking the essence of the first Slayer would be taken as an insult to the source of that power and there would be dire consequences.”

“Like what?” Buffy pressed, still not looking happy. “You say that about a lot of things.”

“And I’m generally right,” Giles answered waspishly. “In this case, it appears likely that anyone participating in such a spell would be hit with a magical backlash that may very well kill them all.”

That silenced the Slayer but it wasn’t going to satisfy Spike. “So, you’re settling for just killing Xander, is that it?” he snarled.

“Of course not,” Willow burst out, then lapsed into silence when Maggie put a staying hand on her arm and Spike growled at her. Only the need to stay between Xander and the rest of the room, all watching the confrontation intently, kept him from attacking the red haired Witch. Invited to the secret meetings or not, she’d clearly known about this plan to put Xander on the firing line before now and she hadn’t seen fit to warn him.

“The spell we intend to use calls on the power of the earth. Instead of fighting fire with fire, we intend to fight fire with water,” Maggie explained. “If you will pardon the simplistic metaphor,” she added with a small quirk of her lips. “While invoking the power of the Slayer line might very well work; as Rupert has said, there are unacceptable risks involved. This way is much safer for everyone, including Xander.”

“Guys?” Xander had been gripping Spike’s arms tightly, restraining him and providing a welcome bulwark against the reckless fury that made him want to attack them all, consequences be damned. Now he spoke for the first time since Maggie’s astonishing request. Hearing the determination in his Claimed’s voice, despite the nervousness he could sense in his boy, Spike reluctantly moved so he was beside Xander, no longer blocking everyone’s view of his Claimed, including his own.

Xander had used the confrontation to steady himself but Spike could hear his thundering heartbeat and see the fear in his eyes. It wasn’t physical fear, Spike was certain of that. Xander had never let fear of being injured, or even dying, stop him. But magic had rarely done anything good for him, and his boy associated magic with the Witch’s violation of his mind and memories. Spike slid one arm around Xander’s waist, pulling him close to his side and glared around the circle, making it clear that no one touched his boy except by going through Spike first. He felt and heard Xander take a deep, shaky breath.

“I think you guys got something wrong. I’m pretty much backup guy. Really not point-man material.” He looked around the room. “I mean, this is me we’re talking about. Not a great fighter, not a magic worker, not our best thinker. I guess what I’m saying is: have you all completely lost your minds? Do you really see me as someone who can handle superpowers?”

Spike growled at Xander’s description of himself but didn’t contradict him. Now was not the time to be singing Xander’s praises, given that he wanted this idea squelched as quickly as possible.
“Xander,” Willow said earnestly. “That’s actually one of the main reasons why you’re the best choice.”

“What? Because I’m not good at anything?”

Willow smiled at him fondly. “No. Because you don’t want it. You can be trusted with power, especially the level of power we’re talking about.”

“We’ll all be there backing you up, Xander,” Giles added reassuringly. “Every one of us has a role to play.”

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“Why me?”

Xander knew he was being a wuss about this, knew he should probably be excited about getting a power boost, even a temporary one, but all he felt was dread. The spells Willow had done on him last year had made him extremely leery of magic in general and not big with trusting people who used magic. The idea of having a bunch of foreign stuff dumped into him was too much like having his mind and memories tampered with and he was feeling sick at the mere thought of going through that again.

“Tara,” Mr. Okolo said quietly, glancing down at the shy girl beside him. “Would you be so kind as to explain.”

The new girl shot her head up in alarm, looking wide-eyed around the circle of strangers, her gaze flinching away from Spike’s yellow-eyed glare. Ordinarily, Xander would have elbowed him for intimidating the obviously frightened woman but right now he was too freaked out to care. Willow gave Tara an encouraging smile, and she swallowed nervously and began to speak.

“P-p-power isn’t stationery,” Tara began hesitantly, seeming to draw courage from Willow’s gentle smile. “It’s m-more like a river. It has a, a flow to it, a direction, c-currents and eddies.” She faltered, her eyes flicking in Xander’s direction before dropping to her clasped hands again. “W-w-we charted the f-flow of power within the group.”

Maggie gave her an approving look and took over, to Tara’s obvious relief as she immediately ducked her head and slipped into the background again.

“Xander, I’m afraid we’ve charted the power three times already, both here and while we were still in England. Not,” she said tartly in Buffy’s direction, “because we had doubts but because we wanted to be absolutely sure we hadn’t overlooked anything. The power in this group all flows in your direction.” Buffy opened her mouth and Maggie held up a stern hand. “It has nothing to do with physical strength or fighting abilities, Ms. Summers. It has to do with cohesion. Xander is the one who keeps this group together and functioning.”

“No, I don’t.” He shook his head, remembering all the times when he had created conflicts in the group because of Spike and Willow. Something had to be off with their magic. “Buffy and Giles, they’re the center of this group.” Spike’s outraged growl brought a tiny smile to his lips as he glanced at his lover. “Spike is my center and the focus of his Court. Oz is tied to the pack now, and Mr. Olsen, maybe, for the demon community,” he wasn’t really sure who the demons looked to as a leader, they had different people for different tasks. “And Willow…” he looked at her, still feeling guilty, despite her ready understanding of his long email silence. “She’s connected to Buffy if anyone…”
It really annoyed him that Maggie, Willow and, hell, even the new girl from behind the curtain of her hair, were all smiling at him indulgently.

“Xander,” Maggie said, her eyes conveying both amusement and sympathy, “those are eddies, as Tara put it so aptly. Places where power circles around different, lesser focuses. You are what brings the entire group together - humans, demons, magic users, werewolves,” her eyes went to each one as she named them and Xander was horrified to see them all nodding in agreement. Her smile was mischievous as she looked last at Spike, “even the Master of the Territory is brought into the group because of your influence.”

“But…” he began helplessly.

“Xander, she’s right,” Buffy said reluctantly. “I hate it because, well for both good and bad reasons,” she admitted, “but you are the one who ties us together. You’re the reason Oz is back,” she smiled at the werewolf as she spoke, “without you, none of the rest of us would ever have even met all the demon-hybrids in town, and god knows Spike wouldn’t be part of the group if you hadn’t dragged him with you.”

“Damn right,” Spike agreed, arms tightening possessively around Xander. “I’m not anywhere near convinced this is the way to go, but you are the center of this mismatched bunch, luv,” he admitted quietly with obvious reluctance. Then he lifted his head and glared challengingly around the room. “Gonna have to prove it’s safe before I allow this,” he said flatly.

He needed to stop this, right now, before it went any further.

Damn them for springing this on them. He could tell that Xander was going to agree to this, going to let them mojo him despite his fear, going to volunteer to tackle something they didn’t even know could be killed just because they said he was the only one who could do it. No explanations, no research into other possibilities, just putting this burden on Xander because they knew his boy would shoulder it without complaint.

Didn’t even have the decency to tell them in private. He glared furiously at the Watcher, who was looking everywhere but Spike, then at the Witch, shifting to his true face as her green eyes met his. He didn’t fucking care if she was under the authority of the coven, she claimed to be Xander’s friend and she should have warned him what was coming.

Xander was going to agree any second if Spike didn’t do something and Spike was not willing to talk about this with his Claimed in front of everyone. And they were going to talk about this before Xander did the stupidly heroic thing and agreed to this latest piece of insanity.

He stepped forward abruptly, one hand sliding down Xander’s arm to wrap his fingers around Xander’s wrist in a firm grip that was a long-time signal that Xander was to follow him without question.

“I’m taking my boy home,” he said flatly. “You fucking people had no right to just spring this on us and now you can bloody well wait for my decision.”

Without waiting for an answer, not caring if anyone protested, he strode forward, tugging Xander behind him, not surprised to see that people were moving out of his way. He wasn’t sure how many people in the room were aware of the chip, but at least half of them weren’t human and he almost hoped someone tried to stop them so that he could vent his fury on them.
Xander didn’t say a word until they were outside, following Spike obediently as he walked with long agitated strides away from the house and everyone in it. Grateful for his Claimed’s silent understanding, Spike released his grip on Xander’s wrist and fished around for his cigarettes, desperately needing the calming sensation of the warm narcotic smoke inside him.

He didn’t break stride as he lit up, inhaling deeply as he angled their steps towards the human section of town, the quiet residential streets where the soldiers never hunted.

“Bastards,” he said finally, after they’d walked in silence for nearly a half mile. He stopped and turned so he and Xander were face to face, dropping his cigarette butt. “You ok, luv?”

Xander nodded but Spike saw the fear hidden in his eyes and cursed Maggie and the rest of them as Xander wrapped his arms around himself, looking vulnerable and frightened despite his attempt to look fine.

“Don’t have to do this, Xander. They have no right to ask you to be the subject of a spell, not after what the Witch put you through.”

“I don’t like it. It scares the crap out of me to think about having people do magic on me,” Xander admitted. “And I don’t know if I really am the heart of the group. I mean, sure, I’m the one who met Mr. Olsen, and there’s you and me, but..”

“No, that’s the one thing they got right,” Spike acknowledged reluctantly. Because if they were right about that, Xander probably would end up agreeing to do this. “Remember when me and Joyce had our falling out? Wasn’t the Slayer who tricked the two of us into meeting so we could patch things up.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“It’s what you do, luv. Drives me crazy at times, but you don’t let people fall away from you. You’re the one who kept in touch with the Wolf and Watcher Junior when they left town. Hell, you even managed to drag Angelus’ enormous arse back here when he was needed. No, they got that bit right, like I said. I’m just not convinced that they haven’t picked this particular spell because it’s convenient. And I want to know a lot more about what exactly ‘gathering power from other sources’ means before we agree to anything.”

“Maggie said it was safe.” Xander sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Spike snorted. “Safe means she doesn’t think you’ll die. Doesn’t mean you won’t be changed. Like you the way you are, pet. Got long terms plans for you. Not going to let them muck about with that by using you as a power dump.”

“Long term plans?” Xander smiled at him, a shadow of his sultry, heated smile that said he wanted to go to bed. Now. Spike opened his mouth to answer and was interrupted by a slyly familiar voice.

“Sounds like you two are in need of some expert advice from a neutral party.”

Furious at the interruption and furious with himself for allowing himself to get so distracted he hadn’t noticed there was anyone nearby, Spike whirled around, pulling Xander behind him instinctively.

A slender figure stepped out from behind a tree, moving to the sidewalk where the glow from the streetlight down the block illuminated the dark hair and arrogant smirk of the Chaos Mage Spike had ordered out of town last year.
Chapter 36

Ethan Rayne. That was all they needed, someone who enjoyed causing trouble for no other reason than because it was fun.

Ethan smirked at them, strolling towards them as if the idea that they might not welcome his presence hadn’t even crossed his mind. He was wearing a black and grey silk shirt that shimmered under the glow of the streetlights, tight black jeans and a smug air of knowing more than everyone else - of course, as far as Xander could tell, that was how he always looked.

Spike’s arms dropped from around him and Xander cursed bitterly, recognizing what was happening one second too late. He tried to grab Spike as the vampire launched himself at Ethan with a furious roar, crossing the space between them in two leaps. Ethan’s expression showed only astonished terror as Spike crashed into him, hands closing around Ethan’s throat as they hurtled to the ground, slamming down onto the concrete sidewalk with Ethan underneath.

“Spike, NO!”

Spike screamed as the chip activated, his body convulsing, muscles straining, yellow eyes blazing fire as he fought to keep his grip on Ethan’s throat, trying to snap his neck with hands that wouldn’t obey him. He screamed again and his arms dropped nervelessly to his side just as Xander reached them, pulling Spike clear of Ethan and into his arms, holding him as he spasmed through wave after wave of pain.

He was peripherally aware of Ethan’s shuddering gasp, as the man hitched his body out of reach, then collapsed back down onto the sidewalk, cradling his head in his hands and complaining bitterly about being attacked for no reason. Xander ignored him.

“Spike? Are you ok?”

Shielding Spike in his arms as the pain ebbed, Xander simply waited for Spike to recover, hating how many times he’d had to sit there helplessly while Spike was in agony, unable to do anything to ease Spike’s pain. This time, given the way Spike had fought the pain, still trying to kill Ethan even after the chip fired, he suspected that Spike hadn’t just lost it and forgotten about the chip, . He was worryingl aware that Spike was on edge, facing too many enemies, with too many things he couldn’t control being thrown at him at once. Ethan had been the proverbial last straw and it had obviously infuriated Spike beyond caution that Ethan had defied him by reappearing in town.

Spike stirred, lifting his head and glaring at Ethan. Xander helped him scramble to his feet, being as unobtrusive as possible, knowing Spike wouldn’t want to appear weak in front of an enemy.

Ethan obviously had no such concerns, gingerly checking his head for blood and continuing to mutter about the unfairness of people who shot the messenger. Fortunately, the ludicrous sight amused Spike and he relaxed his wary stance, pulling out a cigarette and sneering down at Ethan over the flame of his lighter.

“Don’t be a baby. I barely touched you,” he said smugly obviously pleased that, even with the chip, he’d been able to take Ethan down.

Granted, from everyone’s descriptions of past encounters, Ethan wasn’t big with physical courage, but it was a testament to Spike’s strength of will that he could deliberately act against the chip when the situation called for it, despite knowing in advance he would pay for it in unbearable
agony.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Xander asked. Ethan had obviously not expected Spike to attack him, which meant he knew about the chip. It wasn’t like Ethan had any illusions about Spike’s peaceful nature.

Ethan climbed to his feet and brushed himself off, fingering a tear in the sleeve of his shirt with irritation. “Believe it or not, I’m here to help you.”

“Try another one,” Spike scoffed. “And I thought we were clear on what would happen if you ever came back to town.”

“Ah, but the situation has changed since then, hasn’t it?” Ethan smirked, recovering some of his normal cockiness. “You’re no longer capable of eviscerating me or we wouldn’t even be talking.”

Spike didn’t react beyond giving Ethan a narrow-eyed glare through the smoke of his cigarette. “Still Master here. Don’t need to kill you personally,” he said flatly.

While it was true that Spike could easily send a member of his Court to kill Ethan, it would lead to awkward questions that Spike really didn’t need right now. Ethan held up placating hands, losing a little of his confident air as he said hurriedly:

“Which is why I thought we might be able to come to an agreement. Especially since I have something you rather desperately want.”

“Yeah? And what would that be?” Spike asked, his tone making it clear he didn’t care what the mage was peddling.

Right on cue, Ethan’s smirk reappeared. “I can take care of your little evisceration problem, mate.”

Without having moved in the slightest, Spike felt like he’d turned to stone beside him and Xander’s hands tightened convulsively around Spike’s arm as he realized that Ethan was talking about the chip. He felt his heart beating faster and fought to keep his expression neutral, even as he wondered if there was any chance that Ethan was telling the truth. For a long frozen moment, the three of them just stared at each other. Xander was the first of the three to break.

“How?” he burst out unable to play it cool even a second longer as hope flooded through him.

“My dear boy, I am a wizard and a very experienced one. Ask Ripper if you don’t believe me.”

“You know a spell that can remove the chip?” Spike sounded no more than mildly curious but Xander could still feel the rigid muscles under his hands.

“You mean none of the coven members offered to help?” Ethan’s attempt at astonishment was patently unreal, his smirk growing as he made a disapproving tsk-ing sound. “Not very friendly of your allies, is that?”

“What are you talking about?” Xander demanded after a moment. Did Ethan know the coven was in town or was he fishing?

Ethan raised a mocking eyebrow. “You don’t think a group as powerful as the Devonshire Coven can arrive in town without every magic worker for a hundred miles being aware of it, do you? We do tend to keep track of each other.”

“Are you saying they could remove the chip if they wanted to?” he asked faintly. Willow had lied
to him, he thought numbly. She’d told him she’d been researching ways to get rid of the chip and hadn’t found any. She’d lied to him. He fought for control, forcibly shoving thoughts of Willow to the back of his mind. That wasn’t the issue right now. He’d deal with it later when he didn’t need to concentrate on what was happening now.

“Powerful group like that one? I’d think it would be child’s play for them, wouldn’t you?”

Xander was getting really tired of Ethan’s smarmy smile.

“You’re offering to take the chip out?” Spike asked, still absolutely calm to all outward appearances. “And why would you be willing to do that?”

“As I said, I think we can come to a mutually beneficial agreement. I remove the chip, and you lift your ban on my visiting Sunnydale.”

“That’s it?” Xander asked suspiciously.

“That’s it.” Wow, even Ethan’s sunny smile was smarmy. “Free and clear access, no killing me yourself, a word in the right places that I’m not to be touched and that I’m under your personal protection,” he shrugged. “The usual.”

“And it’s just coincidence that you happen to show up in town now?” Xander asked.

“Of course it’s not coincidence. You think I’d miss a magical showdown between Adam and the coven? With that much power being tossed about, there’s bound to be plenty of spillover for innocent bystanders to tap into.”

“What do you know about Adam?” Xander asked, relief swamping him as Spike stirred beside him. Spike had been too quiet for too long, which just showed how shaken he’d been by Ethan’s offer.

“Enough to know that you people had better get this right, or we’re all going to be in a world of hurt.”

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“You people may be all noble and self-sacrificing,” Ethan continued when neither of them said anything, “but I do value my skin. If Adam has his way, there won’t be much left of this world. As I said before, that’s way beyond chaos, mate.”

“Got something useful on Adam, or you just pissing in the wind?” Spike challenged.

The offer to remove the chip had made him feel like a human who’d been hit over the head, dazed and barely able to think, and he was grateful that Xander had covered for him. Well, he was over the shock and thinking clearly again, and he wouldn’t trust Ethan Rayne if the Founder of his Line himself returned from dust to vouch for the man.

Ethan smirked. “I’ve heard things around town,” he said. “Demons like to talk. Adam’s convinced them to do a Trojan horse on the Initiative. Trouble is, they don’t know what they’ve really signed up for.”

“And what would that be?” Spike asked, deliberately letting his skepticism show.

“Adam’s going to set them all loose, inside the Initiative. Let the soldiers and the demons tear each other apart.” Rayne didn’t seem very troubled by the idea but then, he was a chaos mage.
Spike shrugged. “Why would I care about that?” he said indifferently, watching the mage intently while seemingly occupied with staring at the glowing end of his cigarette. “Kill all the soldiers myself if I could, and any demon stupid enough to follow Adam deserves what they get.”

“Unfortunately, it’s what comes after the massacre that the real problem.”

Spike just lifted an eyebrow and waited, wondering where the mage was going with this.

“Adam is going to take all those lovely body parts and create more hybrid monsters like himself,” Ethan told them, folding his arms and staring at them challengingly. “Now I don’t know about you, but I really don’t fancy living in a world where there are fifty or a hundred Adams running things. Wouldn’t be my cup of tea at all.”

Obviously sure he had them with that piece of information, Ethan lifted his eyebrows and waited smugly for their verdict.

If that really was Adam’s plan, the mage was right. Even if it meant rescuing every living being from the Initiative base to avoid giving Adam body parts to work with, they would have to do it. Of course, Spike thought more cheerfully, if Adam was dead, a nice pile of mixed bodies was still a highly satisfactory answer to the Initiative problem.

Question was, was the mage telling the truth? Rayne lied so frequently, his scent didn’t change much. And really, what were the chances that Adam could lay his hands on fifty, much less a hundred, nuclear power cores? As far as Spike could tell, without his power core, Adam was just a collection of spare parts, half of them probably rotting by now. The power core was the key, it was what made Adam dangerous, made him even possible, given the lack of mojo in creating him.

Spike flashed a look at Xander, wishing they’d worked out a signal for “hurt this wanker for me” and furious that they even needed that kind of signal. To his complete disbelief, Xander nodded slightly, then, with no warning of any kind, stepped forward and landed a solid punch on the chaos mage’s jaw, dropping him almost as neatly as the Slayer could have done. The effect was only slightly ruined by the way Xander shook his sore hand afterwards, cradling it for a moment in his other hand as Ethan gaped up at him like a fish.

“Care to try that again, mate?” Spike told him, letting a feral smile cross his lips. “Had my Lieutenants covering this town recently. You didn’t get that kind of information from a few drinks in the local bars.”

“Oh my god,” Xander exclaimed in sudden realization. “He’s working with Adam.”

You’d think a chaos mage would be better at keeping a poker face, Spike thought idly.

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Ethan’s sudden appalled silence didn’t last longer than it took to scramble back to his feet.

“‘Working with’ is a bit harsh,” he said, having obviously decided that denying it was a waste of time. “Coerced labor more like. After all, when something that can kill you as easily as swatting a fly asks you to do a job for him, a prudent man does what the monster wants.”

“And what job would that be?”

“He wanted me to nudge you lot in the right direction. Make sure the Slayer was there for his little dust up in the Initiative.”
“And it didn’t occur to you to warn us instead?” Xander asked in disbelief.

Ethan shrugged. “Like I said, long as I’m not caught in the middle, I don’t really care if a bunch of soldiers and demons kill each other.”

“What about Giles?” Xander asked pointedly and something flickered in Ethan’s eyes for just a second.

“Ripper can take care of himself,” was all he said.

“If Buffy’s the one Adam wants inside the Initiative, why come to us? Why not go to her directly, or Giles?”

“Now, don’t feel insulted. Adam wants Master Spike there as well.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Xander told him.

“Believe it or not, I thought you two would be the easier sell.”

“Because of the chip,” Xander finished flatly.

Ethan smiled. “That’s right. Didn’t have anything to offer the Slayer. Or Ripper. And Ripper’s gotten very cynical these days.”

“So, you dangle the chip in front of me and you think I’ll dance to whatever tune you play, is that it?” Spike said in a low, dangerous voice. He shifted slowly to his true face with unmistakable menace. “Counted on me being so desperate I wouldn’t ask questions, were you?”

Ethan looked like he was trying to figure out which answer wouldn’t get him killed and didn’t say anything.

“Well, since that plan’s out, I think it’s about time you picked which side you’re on. And believe me, you don’t want to choose the wrong side.” Spike’s quiet, deadly anger was more terrifying that any screaming, cursing rage could ever hope to be, and Ethan swallowed hard.

“I tend to prefer the winning side, in general,” he admitted frankly. He gave what Xander supposed he thought was a disarming smile. “With the coven here, I’m guessing that will be you lot.”

“Convenient,” Xander muttered snidely. He forced himself to stay away from the subject of the chip for now, despite desperately wanting to know if Ethan had been telling the truth about being able to remove it. There were others questions that had to be answered first. “Why does he want Buffy there? Isn’t he afraid Buffy will kill him instead?”

Ethan looked at him in disbelief. “It’s going to take a lot more than Slayer strength to hurt Adam, much less kill him. He’s not worried about her at all. Adam thinks she’ll even the kill ratio. Make sure as many demons as humans are killed. He wants as wide a choice of body parts as possible.” He shrugged, indifferent to the carnage he was describing so blithely. “If Adam wins this, he’s going to be busy for quite some time stitching bodies together,” he mused with a malicious smile, then looked pointedly at them. “Understand, if it saves my neck, I’ll be first in line to volunteer to help him create his hybrid monsters. However, I’d really prefer to be given another option.”

“Like, you help us and we let you live?”

“Precisely.”
“And what do you think you can do for us?”

“You mean in addition to all this lovely information I’m giving you?” Ethan looked disappointed at their lack of appreciation. “Well, I suppose that just leaves us with the chip.”

“You telling us you weren’t lying about the chip removal spell?” Spike asked scathingly. “Why would I believe you? Not been exactly truthful so far, ‘cept when your life is on the line.”

“Are you saying my life isn’t on the line now?” Ethan asked hopefully.

“Oh, it’s very much on the line,” Spike told him, wondering again if there was any chance this would work.

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According to Ethan, the spell wouldn’t remove the chip, it would just permanently scramble the signal. “The chip itself doesn’t actually hurt you, you know that, right? It just sends a signal directly into the pain receptors in your brain.”

“And how do you know that? Drinking buddies with one of the scientists, I suppose?” Spike scoffed, fighting against the hope that was rising in him.

Ethan gave him an exasperated look. “Adam told me, of course.”

Xander’s jaw dropped and he stared in open outrage at Ethan, who just shrugged. “I had to have something good to offer you if I was going to convince you to listen to me. Adam told me about the chip and I pointed out that I needed to know how it worked before I could sell you on my ability to remove it.” He smirked oblivious to Xander’s growing anger at his cavalier attitude. “Adam’s been watching you, trying to understand why your chip doesn’t work and he figured out that it did work but only on humans.” He lost his smile for a moment, scowling as he rubbed his head again. “He didn’t mention you were stubborn enough to attack humans anyway.” he complained, then continued:

“Seems Adam used to have a chip of his own. When he left the Initiative, he deactivated his control chip, which is how I know it can be done.” He smiled triumphantly at them and Spike and Xander exchanged looks. That actually sounded plausible. If they could trust Ethan.

If.

“You figured out what to do because of the information you got from Adam?” Xander asked. “So the coven doesn’t know how to get rid of the chip?” He wondered if they could ask the coven to do it. They were certainly more trustworthy than Ethan despite their recent actions. On the other hand, he was pretty sure they could be trusted not to do the spell. What had been done to Spike wasn’t magical and it stopped Spike from hurting humans. He had a sinking feeling the coven wouldn’t lift a finger to help.

“It’s possible I may have exaggerated a bit on that point,” Ethan said without the slightest hint of apology. “Even if they were willing, I doubt they could help. Surely Ripper has told you that earth magic doesn’t tend to work on vampires.”

Xander nodded, ashamed that he had so readily believed that Willow was lying. He remembered both Giles and Spike explaining that earth magic worked by drawing on the interconnectedness of living things and how vampires weren’t part of that, so spells reacted unpredictably on them. “So
how come you can do it when they can’t?” he asked suspiciously.

“I’m a chaos mage,” Ethan reminded him. “Scrambling signals is almost a specialty of ours.”

“And we’re supposed to trust you, just because you say so.”

“Well, there is the fact that I’m all you’ve got.”

Spike was going to agree. Xander was sure of it. Despite the fact that Ethan was about as untrustworthy as it got, despite the fact that they wouldn’t know if he was doing this on Adam’s orders until after it was too damn late, Spike was going to agree.

And there was nothing he could do to stop it. It was Spike’s decision. He didn’t even have the right to ask Spike not to go through with it. He’d known for a long time that Spike would rather die than have to bear the chip for the rest of his unlife. The chip was a continuous presence effecting everything he did and a constant reminder of his defeat and humiliation by people he considered unworthy opponents. It was one thing for Spike to voluntarily give up killing humans to please Xander, it was another thing entirely to have that choice taken from him. With the chip, Spike was a leashed predator, a chained prisoner - not because Xander saw him that way but because Spike saw himself that way. Spike had been surviving on hope ever since he’d escaped from the Initiative, the hope that something would turn up and he’d find a way to remove the chip, and Xander had been afraid for a long time, that Spike wouldn’t want to go on if he ever lost that hope. Spike had been counting on the Initiative scientists, hoping that one would be captured in the attack on the Initiative, someone who could be forced to undo what they had done.

If that didn’t work… Xander had been scared for a long time about what would happen then.

He met Spike’s eyes steadily, knowing his own eyes were showing both his fear and his support for whatever Spike chose, and Spike gave him a tiny nod.

Only one thing left to do.

Xander took a long step forward and his hands shot out, grabbing Ethan with both hands, fisting them in the front of Ethan’s shirt and hauling him closer until they were almost touching.

“Let’s get one thing perfectly clear,” he said coldly, staring directly into Ethan’s slightly pop-eyed gaze. “If you are lying, if you mess this up, if you harm Spike in any way, there will be no place in this world you can hide. I will hunt you down if it takes me the rest of my life. And I won’t just kill you, I will obliterate you. And it will be long and excruciatingly painful.” He gave Ethan a shake for added emphasis, then released him, shoving him away contemptuously so hard that Ethan staggered. “Are we clear?”

“Bloody hell! Thought you were supposed to be the good one in this crowd.”

Xander gave him a tight lipped smile. “As long as we’re clear.”

“Oh, we’re clear. Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

“You better.”

Stepping back, Xander slid an arm around Spike, who looking over at him, a hint of a smile showing. “Nicely done, luv.”

Maybe other couples didn’t measure the strength of their love by the seriousness of their death threats, but it worked for them.
Chapter 37

Xander rolled his eyes. “Tell you what, Spike,” he said patiently. “I won’t play the ‘I’m fine’ game if you don’t.”

Spike’s head snapped around, affronted, and he glared at Xander. Xander sighed.

“Spike. The least trustworthy person on the planet has just offered to give you the thing you want most in the world. You can’t tell me you don’t have some mixed feelings about that. I sure as hell do.” He stepped forward, blocking Spike’s pacing and grabbing him by both upper arms when the vampire tried to swerve around him, pulling him around so they were face to face.

They’d arranged to meet Ethan at 9:00 tomorrow night to do the spell. Spike had been silent on the walk home, his face unreadable, his strides long and agitated. Xander hadn’t tried to get him to talk then, too busy with his own racing thoughts to even begin helping Spike with his, but now that they were home, they were going to talk about this.

“Ethan’s magic could kill you and I wouldn’t know the difference until it’s too damn late. Are you sure we shouldn’t try to find a better way? Ethan can’t be the only Chaos Mage out there, maybe they aren’t all as completely unreliable as Ethan.”

That brought a hint of a smile to Spike’s face. “Comes with the territory, pet. Never met a Chaos Mage who wasn’t untrustworthy and out to stir up trouble.” The smile faded almost immediately and Spike met his eyes squarely for the first time. “Gotta try this, luv. Can’t go on forever with this thing inside me.”

Spike pulled him in for a hug, and Xander clung to him desperately, wrapping his arms around his lover as if he could stop the world from hurting him as long as Spike was inside the circle of his arms.

“This is our best shot, Xander,” Spike said quietly. “There’s risks any way we go. We don’t even know if the bloody chip can be removed physically. If the choice is between a human with a scalpel and a Chaos Mage with a spell, I’ll take the mage.”

He pushed back just far enough so he could look at Xander, his hands coming up to bury themselves in Xander’s hair, holding him as blue eyes stared into brown, letting Xander in, letting him see Spike’s hope, his determination, even his fear and desperation.

Xander kissed him. Pulling their mouths together, his lips moved hungrily over Spike’s, his own hands coming up to frame Spike’s face, thumbs stroking tenderly over the sharp planes of his cheeks.

For a long moment, their mouths moved together, letting lips and tongues and teeth express their fear, their worry, and their love.

“Be all right, Xander,” Spike said after they’d pulled apart. “If nothing else, we can trust the mage to act in his own self interest. He may be working with Adam but I don’t think it’s by choice.”

Spike flashed him an amused look. “Doesn’t hurt that he’s got you to deal with if he mucks this up. Nearly pissed himself when you threatened him, luv.”

“Good. Because I meant every word.”

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Giles opened the door at his knock. While his sleep-mussed hair, bathrobe and bare feet looked as if he’d just rolled out of bed, his eyes were clear and he looked as if he’d been up for awhile. Despite the early hour, he didn’t seem surprised to see Xander at his door.

“Hello, Xander.”

Xander stepped inside, just far enough to let the door swing closed behind him, feeling for the first time like Giles’ apartment was hostile territory. He didn’t bother with pleasantries, blurtting out the question that had been nagging at him since the previous night: “Why didn’t you guys talk to me first? Give me some warning, maybe even a little time to deal before having to make that kind of decision? What the hell were you thinking, just dumping that on me in front of everyone?”

“For what it’s worth, I am truly sorry, Xander.” Giles stood facing him awkwardly, looking regretful and very tired all of a sudden. “The coven was worried that Spike would forbid it, would possibly even take you out of town to avoid the situation if you were given any advance warning.” He sighed, removing his glasses and polishing them absently with the belt of his robe. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “Knowing how protective Spike is, I was afraid they might be right. It wasn’t about you, I knew that you would be willing to help.”

Some of his irritation with the coven drained away at the explanation but conversely, his annoyance with Giles grew into full-blown anger. “I thought you knew me well enough by now to know that Spike doesn’t control me,” he said, keeping his tone level with an effort. “I make my own decisions, I don’t have to have Spike’s permission to act. And frankly, I’m insulted that you think that Spike has a snowball’s chance in hell of dragging me out of town when I don’t want to go. Yes, Spike is a demon, and sometimes it’s hard for him, but he has bent over backwards to let me live my own life when his every instinct tells him that isn’t the way his Claimed human is supposed to behave. After everything we’ve done to help this town, how can you have so little faith in both of us?”

There was a long pause, during which his eyes continued to bore into Giles’, before Giles looked away, pulling out a chair and sitting down heavily.

“You’re quite right. If you were the type of person to let Spike drag you out of town, you wouldn’t have risked your life fighting zombies, or the Mayor, or any one of a dozen other threats. I really am sorry, Xander. I allowed my fears to override my common sense.”

His remorse and regret were obviously sincere and Xander let his confrontational stance slide, enough to let him pull out a chair for himself and settle into it stiffly. He supposed even really smart people could be incredibly stupid sometimes.

“So, tell me about this spell,” he asked, trying to pretend like they were starting at the beginning, the way they should have in the first place.

“The coven might be better for that,” Giles began and Xander interrupted.

“I’m asking you. Because until last night, I would have said I could trust you completely. I don’t know them as well as I do you.”

Giles nodded, accepting the rebuke. “What do you want to know?”

“When Willow did the soul-restoring spell, you said the magic would change her. I think we all saw the results of that. Is this going to do the same thing to me?”
That was his biggest fear, the concern Spike had mentioned, that letting them do this spell would change him. Giles was already shaking his head firmly.

“The magic that Willow channeled to do the soul restoring spell was very old, very powerful and very dark. And you are correct, I believe that spell was a significant factor in her behavior last year. The magic we are talking about here is also very old and powerful, but it is profoundly light magic. Unlike the gypsies’ soul-restoring spell, which compelled the return of a soul into an unwilling body, this spell channels freely given power into a willing recipient. That is why your consent is essential and why only volunteers will be invited to participate in the spell.”

Giles gave him a long, steady look. “What you should know is that, while you are by far the best candidate to be the vessel for the reasons explained last night, you are not the only option. If you are not comfortable with this, it will be possible, although considerably more difficult, to do the spell using another person as the vessel.”

Xander took a deep, shaky breath, feeling the weight that had been pressing down on him since Maggie had asked him to agree to the spell ease up a little. “Buffy?”

“As a Slayer, Buffy’s first instinct is to hold on to power. Buffy may be willing to return the borrowed power to its rightful owner, but the Slayer will instinctively try to hold on to that power because it makes the Slayer a stronger warrior. I suspect that is at least part of the reason that tapping into the power of the Slayer line is so dangerous, because the power resents being given to another, even temporarily and in a good cause,” Giles finished, with a quick smile.

“Only as a last resort.” Giles said slowly, looking like he was choosing his words carefully. “As a Slayer, Buffy’s first instinct is to hold on to power. Buffy may be willing to return the borrowed power to its rightful owner, but the Slayer will instinctively try to hold on to that power because it makes the Slayer a stronger warrior. I suspect that is at least part of the reason that tapping into the power of the Slayer line is so dangerous, because the power resents being given to another, even temporarily and in a good cause,” Giles finished, with a quick smile.

“Oh.” That made sense to him in a weird way, especially the part about the soul spell being dark magic. The whole idea of forcing a soul back into a demon-inhabited corpse had always creeped him out. If it wasn’t the magic itself but the fact that it was dark that caused Willow to change so much, then he should be ok. And grimaced inwardly even as he thought it. Despite what he’d said to Spike last night, despite the fact that he’d come here to ask questions and make up his mind, obviously he’d already decided he was going to do the spell.

“Do you think the spell will change me? Or will the spell end, the power go back to where it belongs and I’ll just be the same old me?”

Giles hesitated and Xander’s heart sank. “That’s a more difficult question, Xander. I believe that you will remain unchanged but it is possible that the amount of power we’re talking about could change you in some way. You will be using abilities you don’t naturally possess, it is possible that there could be some residual effects. If there were any changes, I suspect they would be very minor.”

“Like what?”

Giles made a helpless gesture. “As far as the coven’s research shows, the last use of this spell was over a century ago. I’m afraid the records don’t say much about what happened afterwards, just that the vessel returned to his home and lived a long and honored life.”

“Sounds like a fairy tale,” Xander complained.

“Exactly. For all we know, it may be true but it does have a bit of ‘and they all lived happily ever after’ about it.”

Xander pushed himself to his feet, suddenly unwilling to sit here and discuss this any longer. “Fine. You can tell them I’ll do it. Spike and I will meet you all at Mr. Olsen’s tonight at sunset. We’ll
Spike came alert, hearing the sound of feet climbing to outside stairs to the apartment. Given their location above the factory, visitors were almost non-existent and he stretched out his senses, relaxing slightly as he identified the two people ascending the steps.

It was only late afternoon, which made opening the door a bit less than an impressive performance, given that he had to hide behind it to avoid being disintegrated. He nudged Xander, who had fallen asleep during the early scenes that were supposed to make you care about the characters the monsters were about to eat, leaving Spike free to channel surf.

“Wake up, luv. Got company.”

“Hmmm?”

“Get the door, will you? Sun’s still up.”

“Right.”

Amused, Spike watched his half-asleep boy shuffle to the door, only seeming to recall this was an unusual occurrence when his hand actually closed around the knob. He snapped awake then, shooting Spike a questioning look. Spike smirked at him and nodded for him to open it as he took a position well clear of the path the late afternoon sun’s rays would take as the door swung open.

Still puzzled, but trusting him, Xander swung the door open in response to the knock, blinking for a moment in surprise at the sudden brightness and the identity of their visitors.

The wolf stayed behind his pack-leader, giving Xander a nod but remaining silent. The pack-leader’s eyes sought out Spike in the dim interior and for a long moment they stared at each other.

“I think we need to talk,” Dean said.

Spike nodded, “Yeah. Think we do at that.” He kept his face expressionless but felt a surge of reckless glee at what he sensed. The werewolves weren’t happy. The pack-leader smelled of anger and bitter disappointment and Spike guessed the meeting hadn’t gone well after they’d stormed out last night.

Xander invited them in and Spike was pleased to hear the wolf quietly asking his boy if he was all right. Good to know the wolf recognized that the coven had been way off base in how they’d handled things. Xander assured him he was fine and Spike could tell that both the werewolves took that with the skepticism it deserved.

They settled down in the living room, Spike and Xander on the couch, the werewolves across from them in the two armchairs.

“We’ve located Adam, or at least close,” Dean said without preliminaries. “Oz took us to Adam’s old lair and we spent the afternoon tracking him.” He gestured for Oz to take over.

“There’s a tunnel, about half a mile from the campus, that dead ends in a concrete wall with a really sophisticated door in it. It looks new, like something built in that last year or two. It’s got to be the Initiative. And Adam’s smell is all over it. My guess, his new base is behind that door.”

“Remember what the coven said? That there was a single weird demon signature near the Initiative
but off by itself? You said that Adam was built inside the Initiative. I’m betting he knows a back door no one else knows about.”

Xander and Spike exchanged glances.

“Got some new information last night,” Spike told the werewolves casually. “Seems Adam’s got a bit more on his mind than just destroying the place. Turns out, he wants the demons and humans to kill each other and use the bodies to make more things like him.”

Dean whistled. “That’s a scary thought.” He shot Oz a look. “This town is as weird as you said.”

Oz just shrugged. “That’s Sunnydale.”

Xander grinned, thinking that, even for Sunnydale natives, Oz had blasé down to an art form. “You think Adam making more of his kind is the weirdest it gets?” he asked Dean. “Didn’t Oz tell you about our Mayor, Mr. I-Want-to-be-a-Big-Snake Wilkins? Or the swim team?”

“Forgot about the swim team,” Oz said, looking amused.

Dean held up his hands. “Let’s keep focused for now. I have a feeling you three could tell stories about this town all night and barely scratch the surface.”

“Right. Sorry,” Xander said apologetically and immediately got back to business. “Oz, remember how Adam was wired in to everything?” He barely waited for Oz’s confirming nod before continuing. “The good news is, he’s waiting for us to act before he makes his move. He wants Buffy and Spike there when he sets the demons loose, so they’ll make sure as many demons as humans are killed.”

Dean’s brows drew together in a frown. “That’s pretty specific information,” he said slowly. “You got someone in Adam’s camp?”

Spike had made up his mind some time earlier. He trusted the pack-leader, Dean had a good head on his shoulders and had a right to know what he was facing, so he answered frankly. “Got the word from an untrustworthy git that Adam’s trying to use against us. Don’t think the man wanted to be working for Adam but he’ll go with whichever side he thinks is going to win.” He smirked. “Right now, he’s more scared of us than Adam.” He shrugged. “Enough of his information fits with what we already know that I think he’s telling the truth.”

“He’s the one who first warned us about 314,” Xander filled in, then glanced at Oz. “It’s Ethan Rayne.”

The wolf frowned, obviously trying to recall the name.

“Halloween costumes?” Xander prompted. “Band candy?”

“Oh.”

The pack-leader could obviously read his wolf. From the long steady look he sent the younger man, Spike could tell the wolf would be telling at least those stories tonight.

“Like we said, not exactly a reliable source. Man’s a Chaos Mage,” he clarified voluntarily, and saw the frown as the pack-leader assimilated that little tidbit. “But he doesn’t like the government mucking about on his turf, and he doesn’t want Adam takin’ over either.”

There didn’t seem to be much more to say on that topic and for a long minute, they all fell silent.
Spike idly traced the vein on Xander’s neck, feeling the blood pumping so close to the surface, and he fiercely suppressed the hope surging in him that he would soon be able to taste that blood again, be able to Mark his Claimed, be a vampire again.

Xander turned his head to look at him, and Spike could see the desire simmering in the brown depths. Xander wanted him whole as much as he did and he rejoiced that his boy accepted him for who and what he was. Any other human would have been glad for the chip, glad that Spike wasn’t able to hurt humans, wouldn’t have seen the need to remove the chip.

Xander cleared his throat suddenly, dragging his gaze away with an effort as he remembered they weren’t alone, and shifted back to face their guests.

“So, what happened after we left last night?” he asked them. Spike looked at them as well, curious despite himself about how the group had handled their best hope walking out.

“Lot of useless talk, some arguing, a few pointed comments about how unfair they’d been to you,” Dean summarized. “They hadn’t told any of us what they were up to,” he said, shaking his head in disapproval. “Shitty thing to do to you.”

“I wasn’t thrilled to have that just dumped on me, but Spike and I have talked about it.” Spike scowled but let Xander finish, knowing it was inevitable. “I told Giles this morning that I’ll do it.” Xander smiled wryly. “It sounds like our best, maybe our only shot against Adam, so we should probably listen to the experts we called in.”

“I thought that would be your answer,” Dean said and his gaze shifted back to Spike. “Everyone else pretty much thought that too. That you’d be back and would agree to do the spell.”

Spike scowled at that, wishing Xander wasn’t so predictable, especially when it came to putting himself in danger. Would have been nice if the coven had had to sweat for a bit, thinking they’d muffed things up.

“Problem is, they’re still mostly focused on Adam and he’s only half the problem. After you left, they came up with a plan to have everyone sneak into the Initiative, locate Adam, and then find a quiet place nearby to do the spell and take him out. Everyone not actively involved in the spell will be guarding the magic workers.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Spike burst out. He flung himself to his feet and began pacing up and down in front of the couch. “Let me guess who came up with that plan.”

“Buffy, mostly,” Oz confirmed quietly.

Spike swore, wishing they had time for him to fully express his opinion of the Slayer’s ability to plan battles. Show up and hope everything goes your way was about the extent of her strategic thinking. Never mind that that type of planning was what got Angelus sent to hell and Spike left with a sword in his gut, just to name one example. His agitated pacing slowed a bit when he saw the pack-leader grinning at him.

“Glad you agree with me that the plan needs a bit of work,” he said with a lot more restraint than Spike was capable of right now.

“Needs to be thrown out with the trash and burned is what that plan needs,” he snapped. The fact that the wolves recognized how idiotic and incomplete the Slayer’s plan was calmed Spike enough that he resumed his seat beside Xander, letting Xander’s warm hand on his thigh steady him, even as his Claimed’s amused voice said:
“Buffy’s always been a bit seat-of-the-pants with her planning. I think maybe we should tweak that
one a bit.”
The levels of tension in the group had dropped substantially, Xander saw with relief as he and Spike entered Mr. Olsen’s basement. People were standing around, chatting casually, not sitting stiffly silent, watching everyone else with cautious eyes like last time.

Which just went to show how badly the coven had miscalculated by not being more open. Everyone had been on edge at the last meeting, egos bruised, suspicions aroused by the coven’s secrecy. Granted, some of the change was probably due to the fact that they had the beginnings of a tentative plan - even if Buffy didn’t know yet that it had been changed a bit behind her back, Xander thought with an inward smile. Having some sort of a plan was making them all a little less stressed.

Word had obviously spread that Xander was going to do the spell and Xander wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or annoyed at the lack of surprise. Granted, they’d kind of backed him into a corner by telling him he was the best candidate but still - he hadn’t known whether he was going to agree to the spell until after he’d left the meeting yesterday. How could everyone else claim that they’d been sure what his answer would be?

Stopping briefly to talk to Willow and Maggie, Xander was pleased when they echoed Giles’ apologies, admitting candidly that they had misjudged the situation. Even if Spike dismissed the apology with a cutting remark, Xander appreciated the fact that they directed their apologies to Spike as well as him.

For almost ten minutes, it felt more like a party than a war council and Xander moved around the room, touching base with people he hadn’t had a chance to talk with recently. Even Spike was relaxed enough to chat with Dean. Now that the vampire knew what the coven had been up to and they’d made their own plans, Spike’s nervous energy was focused past this gathering, concentrated on their meeting with Ethan Rayne later tonight. Something Xander was absolutely refusing to think about yet.

Sgt. Morgan finally called them to order and everyone found seats around the big room, drifting back to their own groups now that they were getting down to business.

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Spike listened with malicious amusement as the Slayer outlined her plan. It hadn’t improved much in the past twenty-four hours. A picked group to go inside the base, find Adam’s exact location using the Initiative’s own computers, protect the magic workers while they did the spell that would allow Xander to fight Adam. Then rescue the soldiers from the demons and get as many as possible safely out of the underground facility. Good work team and home to shag your loved ones by bedtime.

You’d think with a full day, someone would have pointed out to the Slayer that her plan was a bit optimistic and had serious flaws. Did she actually think she was going to get inside the base without the soldiers noticing? And just how long did she think she was going to have free access to the Initiative’s computers without anyone catching on? No contingency plans in case things didn’t go quite as planned. Not to mention they apparently weren’t going to actually do anything about the Initiative itself - but then, he’d always known the Slayer wasn’t going to be much use there.

He watched Sgt. Morgan as the Slayer talked and was pleased to see the man was merely biding his time. From his expression, the sergeant at least was not on board with this piece of lunacy.
Some of the others were looking dubious as well.

The Slayer finished her spiel and looked around the circle, asking if there were any questions.

Her mistake, Spike thought cheerfully.

“How exactly do you plan on getting inside the Initiative in the first place?” he asked, cocking his head to one side with amused condescension.

“We go in through Lowell House,” the Slayer answered, apparently having at least thought that far ahead. “Riley said there’s an elevator inside the fraternity that goes down to the base. The House has been nearly deserted ever since the soldiers attacked Adam. There haven’t been more than a couple people inside and they’re telling people some story about fumigation or something. We go in, take out the guards, and go down the elevator shaft to avoid the Initiative’s security.”

“Right. And you think they won’t see you comin’?”

“You got a better idea?” she challenged.

“Could plan to walk in dressed as a pizza delivery boy and it would have more chance of success than that plan,” he drawled and smirked at her outraged glare.

He got to his feet, his casual sprawl vanishing as if it had never been, suddenly every inch the Master of the Territory. His voice went from an insolent drawl to commanding as his eyes swept the room.

“First off, we have two new pieces of information that change things a bit. One, the werewolves were able to track Adam this afternoon and they found the entrance to his lair.” He nodded respectfully to the pack-leader and Dean inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Second, Adam is waiting for us to make the first move. He’s planning on using the fight between the demons and the soldiers to give him enough parts to create more creatures like himself and he wants the Slayer there so the fight’s not completely one-sided.” He deliberately left out the fact that Adam wanted him there as well. He would need the Slayer on board and if Adam was waiting for the Slayer before making his move, that boxed her in to Spike’s plan as neatly as they’d pushed Xander where they wanted him.

He silenced the muttering that broke out around the room with one look - time enough for explanations later. Ignoring the Slayer, who looked stunned and furious at being out of the loop, he began outlining the plan they had worked out earlier this afternoon:

“We go in in three groups. First group is demons, werewolves, vampires. We go in through the back door - that bunker in the woods. Our first priority is to take care of the demons in the containment cells.

“Second group is Xander and the magic workers. They go in through the caves and tunnels, set up shop just outside Adam’s lair and do their mojo. Adam should be watching the fun inside the Initiative and hopefully won’t see them coming until too late. They take care of Adam then get the hell out.” He shot Xander a stern look. They’d had a lot of words about that after the werewolves had left. Xander didn’t see why they shouldn’t keep going after tackling Adam, into the Initiative proper to join the main fight sure to be in full swing by then. Only by reminding him that the magic workers refused to be involved in the fight against the Initiative did he convince Xander that his group would have to retreat after they defeated Adam. Xander had muttered something about getting radios so he’d know what was happening but had reluctantly agreed to be responsible for getting the magic workers out safely. Not that Spike cared about them particularly, but giving
Xander responsibility for other lives meant his boy wouldn’t do something foolish.

“Third group, the Slayer and humans. You go in the most obvious way you can.” He glanced at the Slayer briefly, “through the fraternity seems like as good a way to attract attention as anything else. You’re going to keep the soldiers occupied as long as you can, then get them out of there when Adam opens the cell doors.” Again, it wasn’t that he cared about the soldiers but Xander, Dean and Oz had all pointed out that, once the fun began, the soldiers were going to be shooting at anything that wasn’t wearing an army uniform and that would put every one of them in danger. Spike wouldn’t be at risk from random bullets but the demons he was leading inside would be.

“We’re going to need to coordinate our timing on this. The human group is going to have to go in first, draw the soldiers’ and Adam’s attention. Demons move in second, only a couple minutes behind the humans. Magic workers, you’re last. Once the cell doors open, Adam won’t be watching the caves at his back, he’ll be watching the fight. That gives you the chance to do the spell and take him by surprise.”

Behind his librarian glasses, the Watcher’s eyes were narrowed. “How do you know all this?” he asked. “What makes you think Adam is waiting for Buffy before he attacks?”

“Stands to reason, don’t it?” Spike answered impatiently. “We know Adam’s been tapping into the security cameras around town. We know he’s got access to the Initiative’s security systems. He’s going to see us coming. It’s what he’s waiting for. If he just wanted to create merry havoc inside the base, he would have done it before now.” He gestured toward the coven members. “We know the cells are full, what else is he waiting for? We all know if he lets those demons loose now, the soldiers won’t just be killed, they’ll be eaten - and that doesn’t get Adam his pile of useable body parts now does it?”

“About that…”

“Why do you want only humans to go in the front door?” the Slayer asked suspiciously, interrupting her Watcher.

“Because humans aren’t going to be killed out of hand by the soldiers. Demons would be tazered on sight and useless, but a bunch of civilian humans are going to be questioned and imprisoned at worst. If they throw you in a cell, you’ll be released with all the other prisoners when Adam makes his move.” Spike glared at her. “You’re the one wants the bloody soldiers to live. I’d as soon the whole lot of them were killed by their prisoners. Your job’s going to be getting them out before we blow the place up.”

“What?! Who said anything about blowing the place up?” the Slayer exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

“Not leavin’ that place standing,” Spike said flatly. “My team’s gonna bring in enough explosives to level the place. Don’t worry,” he smirked at her. “We’ll leave enough time for everyone to get out. But once Adam’s dead, we’re destroying the entire base.” He matched the Slayer stare for stare, daring her to fight him on this.

“Once we’re inside,” Dean said quietly. “My wolves will be working to evacuate the peaceful demons that have been held prisoner. I suspect there aren’t that many left, given the information about how crowded the cells are,” he finished grimly.

The wolves had been adamant about checking for the imprisoned werewolf. Despite the fact that Spike would have liked to see them on the front lines, they were the best for the job of evacuating victims. Other than Xander’s friend, the wolves the pack-leader had brought to Sunnydale were all
over 50 years old and most of them knew a bit about other demons. The ability to phase back and forth to human form at will would come in handy if any of the harmless demons had actually survived Adam’s recruits being packed in with them.

Spike looked around the room, seeing who was with him and who was looking uncertain. Not surprisingly, it was the full humans who looked like this was a bit more than they’d bargained for. “I heard your plan,” he said, meeting the Watcher’s eyes. “Even if it works and you kill Adam,” his tone made it clear how unlikely he thought that was, “it leaves the Initiative base intact and the soldiers can just move back in and pick up where they left off, imprisoning and torturing demons randomly. Before I let that happen, I’ll take the Court in and wipe them out myself.” He morphed into his true face to emphasize how serious he was. “This way, the soldiers get to live but they won’t have a base in town and all their records and equipment will be destroyed. Your choice.”

His Court was going to be pissed at missing the fun, but the pack-leader had pointed out that a single coordinated attack on both targets was their best chance of destroying the base entirely and Spike had been forced to agree. He couldn’t help smiling at all the training he’d put his minions through for no reason but had just shrugged. It made them more useful, better fighters and that was always good.

The Watcher nodded slowly. “I see your point, Spike.” He glanced around the room, obviously seeing the lay of the land and recognized that the majority was with Spike. “However, I think we all have some questions. Where are you getting your information about Adam?”

“Ethan Rayne.”

Spike shot Xander a disbelieving look before controlling himself. They’d agreed to leave the mage out of this. Xander was looking at the Watcher, avoiding Spike’s eyes.

“After we left yesterday, Ethan Rayne found us. He knew the coven was in town.”

Everyone glanced towards the members of the coven and Maggie nodded ruefully. “He would,” she said quietly.

“Adam told him to push us in the right direction, to make sure Buffy was there when the fight began.”

“Ethan’s working for Adam? Oh, that’s just perfect,” the Watcher exclaimed.

“He’s not happy about it either. He gave us the straight story - hopefully.” Xander said, with a shrug. “He doesn’t want Adam to win, that much we can be sure of. And his information fits with what we know from more reliable sources. Even if Ethan’s lying and Adam isn’t planning on creating more things like himself, he’s obviously waiting for something or he would have acted by now.

“Why did he go to you?” the Slayer demanded.

“He thought we would be the easiest to convince, because Giles, especially, has history with him and you’ve tangled with him a couple of times,” Xander answered smoothly. “It probably helped that we beat him up,” he admitted, “and he thinks that the coven being here means we’re going to be the winning side.”

“Ethan has always had a strong streak of self-interest,” Giles said thoughtfully. “And he did warn us about the Initiative before anyone else.”
“When exactly did you decide to come up with a completely new plan?” the Slayer asked.

“When I heard yours,” Spike told her flatly. “Among other things, your plan leaves Xander and the witches in the middle of a firefight, hoping they can find a place to set up the spell before they are all killed. I’m guessing everyone involved in the spell going to be pretty helpless while they’re working their mojo?” He looked at Maggie, eyebrow raised.

Maggie nodded.

“My way, we keep the most vulnerable of our people out of harm’s way until they can do their part.”

The Slayer’s nodded. “You’re right about that. But nothing’s ever been said about blowing up the Initiative.”

Spike couldn’t resist. “It’s called a contingency plan, Slayer. You’re powering Xander up to fight something we don’t even know can be killed. Spell don’t work, we see if burying Adam under 100 tons of concrete will slow him down. But we are not putting Xander in the middle of a race war and then finding out if you know what you’re doing.”

That was the only reason Spike was willing to be separated from his Claimed. If the spell didn’t work, Xander and the others would be left sitting outside Adam’s lair, unable to do anything but feel foolish. If they tried the spell inside the Initiative and it didn’t work, Xander would be picking up a weapon and getting in the middle of things. This way was safer.

“How are we getting inside the bunker?” Sgt. Morgan asked. “I thought that entrance had pretty solid internal locks?”

Spike relaxed, hearing the acceptance in the Sergeant’s voice. With the big Kobarien demon on his side, everyone else would fall in line. He wasn’t surprised the sergeant had immediately put his finger on one of the stickier bits. Explosives might do the job in getting the door open, but that would alert everyone to their presence.

“Howing one of you witches can help us out with that,” he said, looking at the coven.

“I believe we can find a way to get your group inside,” Maggie said, trading looks with the other members of the coven and receiving confirming nods.

Spike smirked, pleased at how things had gone, as the discussion became a general one, hashing out the remaining details, assigning jobs and setting a time table for the attack. The Slayer could have been a serious problem with her reluctance to actually do anything about the Initiative. As Xander had suggested, phrasing it in terms of saving the majority of the soldiers - including that boyfriend she was so worried about - made it something she was willing to go along with.

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Ethan appeared at the entrance to the alley right on schedule. Which surprised Xander as he’d about half convinced himself that Ethan would simply leave town rather show up tonight. Showing up pretty much put Ethan squarely in the middle of the fight with Adam and was a clear declaration of whose side he was on and Xander had serious doubts about whether Ethan was really prepared to take that step.

He and Spike had arrived at the meeting point well before the set time because Spike didn’t trust Ethan and wanted to be sure they weren’t walking into a trap. Be just like Ethan to lure them here to turn them over to Adam or the soldiers or the Great Pumpkin - Xander had no illusions about
Ethan drawing any moral lines about who he’d work for.

Well, maybe not the Great Pumpkin.

“Gentlemen,” Ethan greeted them, inclining his head with a mocking smile, “right this way.”

He led them halfway down the alley and stopped at one of the doors. The sign read ‘The Magic Shoppe’ in plain, business-like letters unlike the gothic-style ones on the front door.

“Why here?” Xander asked curiously.

“Where else?” Ethan answered. “I’ll need to pick up a few things for the spell and they have a nice combination of a large storage room and extremely poor security.”

Great. Not only was Ethan a chaos mage, he was a chaos mage who stole his ingredients. He wished he could even pretend to be surprised.

Ethan produced a set of keys and began trying them in the door. After the tenth or twelfth try, he gave a small exclamation of satisfaction and pushed the door open. “After you, gentlemen,” he said, waving them inside as grandly as if they were guests and not fellow burglars.

Xander stepped inside, letting Spike’s hand on his back guide him in the darkened interior. To Xander’s eyes, even after the long wait in the dark alley, the room was nearly pitch black, only the faint glow of streetlights through the front windows allowing him to see at all. Spike’s eyes glowed yellow next to him, almost startling bright in contrast to the black interior.

A sudden flare of light blinded him as Ethan produced a flashlight, and began shining the beam around the room, illuminating the shelves of herbs and potions, the bins cluttered with amulets, and row after row of books.

He’d never been in the store before and had no idea what Ethan was looking for, so he told Spike quietly that he would keep a lookout and picked his way carefully across the room, the flashlight providing just enough ambient light to let him avoid the shadowed lumps of display shelves and other hazards that loomed suddenly in his path.

His heart was pounding, both from the unexpected breaking and entering they were doing and in anticipation of the spell. Watching the quiet street outside, searching for any sign they’d been noted, he concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths, shoving his hands in his pockets to conceal their nervous shaking and wishing this were over.

“All set, luv.”

Spike’s voice in his ear made him jump, and he turned to see Spike standing beside him, his golden eyes and white hair shining in the faint light, the rest of him no more than a dark silhouette. He nodded and let Spike steer him across the sales floor towards the storeroom, where Ethan was crouched down, lighting candles.

Closing the door behind them, they waited together, watching Ethan closely, although Xander was depressingly aware that Ethan didn’t even have to be subtle. He could do anything he wanted to muck up the spell and they would have no idea it wasn’t legitimate. Once again, he wished desperately they had had a chance to research the spell on their own and didn’t have to place their trust in Ethan.

Ethan glanced up at them. “Are you two planning on helping, or are you just going to stand there and let me do all the work?” At Spike’s hostile stare and Xander’s blank one, he gave a put-upon
sigh. “I meant with the candles.” He gestured to the small forest of candles around him. “Could use a bit more light in here. We’re not all vampires.”

Xander moved forward to help, picking up the already lit candles and setting them up on boxes. As the room gradually brightened, he couldn’t help wondering whether there really was a problem with magic and electricity or if magic workers just liked the effect of using candles instead of real light.

It certainly made sleight of hand and treachery easier to mask, he thought grimly.

Ethan kept eight dark red candles near him and began drawing on the floor with chalk, sketching out a circle, then adding symbols around the outside at regular intervals. He didn’t use a reference book, his hands sketching the symbols with the ease of long practice. His studies with Giles had given Xander a passing familiarity with some of the more common non-human alphabets and runes and it wasn’t exactly reassuring that nothing the Ethan was drawing was even slightly familiar.

Ethan settled back on his heels and checked his work, then picked up a ceramic bowl and several packets of herbs he’d obviously taken from the shop. Mixing them in the bowl, he looked over at Spike, who’d remained leaning against the wall, motionless as a statue except for his watchful eyes gleaming in the flickering light.

“I’ll need a few drops of your blood.”

Spike pushed off from the wall and stalked forward with his predator’s stride, all power and deadly grace, and Xander was glad to see Ethan swallow hard as he approached. Good, they needed Ethan to remember that he was more afraid of Spike, even chipped, than of Adam.

Spike loomed over Ethan, staring down at the mage for a long moment, then, ignoring the knife Ethan was offering, reached one hand up to his mouth and sliced a finger open against one of his fangs, holding it out for Ethan to catch the drops in the bowl.

“…six…seven…eight,” Ethan counted quietly, then pulled the bowl away. “That’s enough. Don’t get any blood in the circle,” he ordered. Spike ran his tongue over the already almost healed wound and watched with hooded eyes as Ethan stirred the mix in the bowl with two fingers, then set the bowl down in front of him.

“In the middle, please,” he said, gesturing to the circle. “Don’t touch the lines.”

Spike stepped over the chalk lines and into the circle, his eyes lifting to Xander’s in a long intent stare before turning to look down at the mage.

Ethan, still crouched on his heels, lit the herbs in the bowl on fire, then held the bowl up to eye level, beginning to chant in a language Xander didn’t recognize, something guttural and harsh, the words filling the empty room until Xander thought he could almost see them in the air.

The small fire inside the bowl grew brighter, flames beginning to leap over the rim, sparks beginning to dance in the air above the bowl. The sparks leapt higher and higher, swirling together in intricate patterns in mid-air, glowing orange and red and yellow, until their light dwarfed that of the candles, brightening the entire room.

More and more sparks joined them, until they formed a dense mass that moved together, looking almost like a comet’s tail as it began swirling around the boundary of the chalked circle. The sparks rose higher, whirling more and more rapidly, until they were circling around Spike’s head and shoulders in a dizzying blur of motion.
Ethan’s chant was louder now, no longer cajoling but commanding, and suddenly there was a net of energy encompassing Spike as the sparks crackled and spat tiny bursts of lightning at each other, until Spike’s upper body was lost in the storm of power within the circle.

Xander clenched his fists, forcing himself not to move, even though every instinct was telling him to get Spike out of the circle. To his horror, he saw that Spike had been lifted off his feet by the energy around him, his body frozen stiff, every muscle taut as he dangled in mid-air.

Xander tasted blood as Spike screamed in agony, the energy seemed to be passing through him now instead of circling around him. He screamed again and Xander knew he wouldn’t be able to take it if Spike screamed again. This was worse than the chip and he was standing here and letting it happen.

Ethan shouted one last word and the fire in the bowl died instantly, followed a second later by the sparks, which flared together in one last burst and vanished, leaving nothing but dark spots in his vision and Spike’s body crumpling bonelessly to the floor, landing half in and half out of the circle.

“Spike!”

Xander crossed the distance in two steps, sliding to his knees and pulling Spike up into his lap. “Spike?”

Spike stirred slowly, tremors shaking his body, then looked up at Xander with dazed eyes that didn’t recognize him.

“Spike?” Xander asked anxiously, terrified by the blankness in Spike’s eyes.

For a heart-stoppingly long moment, Spike didn’t answer. Xander bit his lip again to stop himself from shaking Spike in an effort to get a response, giving Spike a minute to pull himself together. Please god, that was all this was. He breathed a shaky sigh of relief as Spike sat up, moving with arthritic slowness, shaking his head like he was trying to clear it. He looked at Xander. “I’m fine, luv.”

He helped Spike to his feet. Spike’s muscles were still twitching in sudden spasms but he didn’t seem to be in pain anymore, as he tested his limbs, making sure they were working.

“Well, there you are, back to your old self. Now, remember: no hurting me, no ordering me out of town, and most important, no killing of me,” Ethan said briskly, getting to his feet and dusting his slacks off.

Spike put a gentle, still slightly tremoring hand on Xander’s cheek, and Xander gave him a shaky smile. He was torn between telling Spike to pinch him or something and wanting to wait until Spike was a little steadier before risking the chip firing if the spell hadn’t worked.

Spike obviously had other ideas.

Turning abruptly, Spike’s fist shot out and he decked Ethan with one swift brutal punch.

Everything froze and Xander held his breath, waiting to see what would happen.

“Bloody hell! What was that for?” Ethan complained, scrambling back to his feet and moving a wary distance away.

Spike’s smirk was barely contained and Xander’s own disbeliefing smile just kept growing. It worked! It worked! It worked! He chanted to himself giddily.
“Not going to test your spell on my boy here, now am I?” Spike said. “Didn’t want to be the test subject, should have brought a volunteer. Now I know you’ve kept your side of the bargain, I’ll keep mine.” Spike looked at Xander. Only the fact that his hands lighting the cigarette were shaking just the tiniest bit showed his emotions. “Shall we go, pet?” he asked casually.

Xander nodded, not trusting his own voice, afraid that nothing but insane repetitions of “It worked!” would come out of his mouth.

Pulling himself together, he managed to ask: “Adam?”

Both Spike and Ethan looked at him blankly and he clarified. “Did you tell Adam you convinced us?”

“I will tonight,” Ethan assured him.

“Anything new?” Spike asked sharply.

“He’ll wait another day or so for the Slayer, then figure something else out, is my guess,” Ethan shrugged like it didn’t matter to him. “Better tell Ripper to get a move on if he wants in on this party.”

“Tell Adam we’re moving in 48 hours,” Spike ordered. “If we survive, I’ll spread the word you’re not to be touched by anyone and you have free access to Sunnydale.” He gave Ethan a pointed stare. “Pull any more town-wide stunts and I’ll reconsider our agreement.”

Spike strode out, catching Xander’s wrist as he swept out the door. Xander cast one backward look at Ethan then shrugged, trotting after Spike. Wasn’t their mess. Ethan could clear it up himself.

“We’re attacking tomorrow night,” he said when they were outside the shop and well away from Ethan. It wasn’t quite a question.

Spike grinned at him, an expression Xander had only seen once before on his face - the same giddy, incandescent joy that he’d seen the night Spike had escaped from the Initiative and finally made it home. “Don’t want either of them to have too much information, eh, luv?”

“Right,” Xander agreed, barely able to keep his brain focused on the conversation. “Untrustworthy gits, both of them.” He pulled Spike to a stop, putting his hand on the cool alabaster cheek of his madly grinning vampire. “Want to celebrate?” he suggested huskily.

“’Til the end of time, luv.”
Spike was trying desperately to remember the Xander was human, fragile, and far too easily injured. Because what he really wanted to do was throw his Claimed down on the mattress and shag him silly. Repeatedly.

It had been a long frustrating time since he’d been able to sink deeply inside his Claimed’s hot, tight arse, thrusting hard against his boy’s sweet spot until Xander came screaming, Spike’s own orgasm erupting as his fangs penetrated flesh that tasted of sweat and arousal, the heady taste of blood filling his mouth as he shot his release inside his Claimed.

Slowly, he reminded himself, even as his mouth devoured Xander’s. He couldn’t risk injuring Xander in his eagerness. He forced himself to move cautiously, unbuttoning Xander’s shirt rather than tearing it off like he wanted to, fighting the need to strip his boy and plunge inside NOW.

Xander wrenched his mouth free of the kiss. “Spike, I swear to god, if you don’t fuck me right now, I am going to kill you.” Xander’s hands were busy yanking and tearing at Spike’s clothes with feverish impatience. “Just rip the damn thing off and fuck me already!”

Spike threw his head back and laughed, a full-throated sound of joy and triumph. Xander sounded as needy and desperate as he was and Spike was being paranoid. His boy wasn’t that breakable. He could feel his Claimed’s eager erection straining against his jeans and knew that Xander was more than ready.

Xander succeeded in wrestling the t-shirt off over Spike’s head and Spike swooped back in for another heated kiss, lips and teeth and tongues battling for dominance, as Spike gave in to Xander’s urgings and tore Xander’s shirt from collar to hem, his hands rubbing and stroking the warm skin bared by the gesture. Xander’s hands were running over his back, nails raking lightly, hands diving below the waist of Spike’s jeans to cup his arse cheeks, pulling their bodies closer together.

“Pants off!” Xander gasped and Spike laughed again before Xander pulled a hand free and yanked his head back down.

They thrashed together on top of the bed, limbs tangling, as they rolled and struggled with recalcitrant zippers, frantic hands hampering more than helping the quest for bare skin. Spike growled with impatience and finally just tore their jeans off, vampiric strength allowing him to split the fabric at the seams and shove the tattered scraps away.

Mouths still fused, he rolled the two of them across the bed, stretching one hand out and fumbling blindly in the bedside table for the lube. Vampires didn’t need it but even in this mood, Xander would. He snarled in frustrations as his blind rummaging knocked the table over and he reluctantly pulled out of the kiss and dove for the scattered contents of the small drawer, seizing the small tube and rolling back onto the bed before Xander had time to voice a complaint.

He buried his hands in Xander’s hair, holding him still as he met the brown eyes. “Love you, Xander,” he said intensely.

“Our love, Spike.”

Their lips met, softly at first, then rapidly deepening, mouths opening, teeth nipping, tongues dueling, Xander’s warm breath filling his mouth. Xander’s big, calloused hands stroked and clung, holding him tightly as he rocked their hips together.
Spike flipped the cap off the small tube and squirted the oily stuff over his fingers. He hesitated, then cautiously began teasing at Xander’s opening with two fingers, hoping he wasn’t going too fast. Xander moaned against his lips, trying to kiss him and mutter encouragement at the same time.

He pressed two fingertips against the small, puckered opening, then stopped, ignoring the jerk of Xander’s hips against his hand as his boy sought to hurry him. Spike twisted his fingers carefully, teasing the opening in a circular motion and gradually began pressing inside. Xander’s head arced back and a long, shaky inhalation accompanied the moment Spike’s fingers cleared the outer ring of guardian muscles.

“So good,” Xander breathed. “More.”

Spike gave him more, pressing inside slowly but steadily, moving his fingers in tiny circles as he worked to open his boy. When his fingers were inside as far as they could go, he began to cautiously open and close the two fingers, loving the feel of the incredibly tight heat yielding to him.

Xander’s hips were rocking back against him, trying to force him to move faster and Spike chuckled.

“Patience, luv.”

Xander’s glazed eyes met his. “Can’t. Been so long.”

Spike kissed his again, crooking his fingers as he did, searching for the hidden gland. He grinned against Xander’s lips, knowing he’d found it when Xander gasped and bucked against him.

Spike began fucking him with his fingers, sliding them out almost to the entrance, then pushing back in, rejoicing in the way Xander met each thrust, angling the fingers to brush teasingly against Xander’s prostrate, giving his boy a taste of things to come.

Xander’s breathing grew ragged and his hands closed convulsively around Spike’s shoulder blades as his hips thrust backwards against Spike’s fingers.

“Now, Spike.”

Spike shifted, pushing Xander’s legs up and settling between them. Xander threw his legs over Spike’s shoulders and Spike grabbed a pillow and stuffed it under Xander’s hips. He was hard and aching and seconds away from spilling his seed like an overeager human having their first sexual experience and, for a second, he thought he was going to lose control entirely as he rapidly slicked himself up.

He pushed inside Xander, staring down into his boy’s eyes the whole time, seeing the arousal, the erotic pain, the love in those beautiful dark eyes as he buried himself inside, a fraction of an inch at a time. Xander’s harsh breathing was the only sound as he welcomed Spike inside his body, tight muscles giving way reluctantly to the inexorable pressure until Spike was buried inside to the hilt, bodies fused together in the most intimate way possible.

For a long moment, Spike didn’t move, giving Xander’s body time to adjust, feeling the fluttering muscles gripping him, heat scorching him. He fought for control, wanting this to last, fingers tearing into the mattress, as he struggled not to lose it and come right now, just from the incredible feeling of the hot tightness of his Claimed’s arse surrounding him.

After a long moment, the excruciating need receded slightly and he smirked down at Xander.
“Ready, luv?”

Xander managed a shaky grin. “Only for the past ten minutes,” he snarked back.

Spike laughed. He began rocking their bodies together, slowly at first, giving Xander time to get used to the motion. Gradually, his thrusts became longer, harder, building up speed and force until he was pounding into his Claimed, feeling Xander’s hips rising to meet his own, slamming into that bundle of nerves that caused Xander to buck and cry out as pleasure swamped them both.

He couldn’t hold out any longer and Spike leaned over, hips never losing their frantic rhythm and buried his fangs into his Claim scar, feeling the hot, hormone-spiked blood filling his mouth as her erupted into orgasm, hips jerking against Xander with short, harsh movements as Xander screamed and came, his cock bucking between their bodies, covering them both with his cum as Spike emptied himself inside his lover, drinking his blood at the same moment in a perfect cycle of bliss.

Spike withdrew his fangs before he took too much, licking at the renewed Mark until he had cleaned up every drop of his Claimed’s blood. He shifted them to a more comfortable position, and gently withdrew his temporarily spent penis, knowing if he remained inside, he would be roused and ready long before his boy. He held his Claimed’s strong body in his arms, as Xander’s panting breaths slowly evened out and the sweat cooled on his heated skin.

“You know, we really need to thank Ethan,” Xander mumbled drowsily, fingers tracing idle patterns on Spike’s chest.

“Let him live, didn’t I? That’s thanks enough,” Spike said comfortably, turning his head just far enough to nuzzle into the top of Xander’s head, wishing, not for the first time that humans had even a fraction of the stamina vampires did. Much as he’d love to go another round or twelve, he wouldn’t risk Xander going to battle tomorrow exhausted and sore. They’d have all the time in the world for shagging after the battle.

If Spike had his way, they’d have centuries.

“Why do you think he’s really back in town?” Xander asked, a yawn cutting across his words.

“Hoping to hook up with the Watcher, most like.”

Xander lifted his head just far enough to look at him. “What?”

“Reeks of hormones every time he says the Watcher’s name,” Spike told him.

Xander collapsed back on his chest. “Oh man, I so did not need to know that.”

Spike laughed.

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It wasn’t the ability to hurt humans the chip had taken away, Spike thought, lying in the quiet aftermath of passion, Xander’s warm weight lying half on top of him, his fragrant breath feathering over Spike’s chest with the deep soft inhalations of sleep. He’d always known that. It was the constant humiliating reminder that a pack of humans had held him prisoner and found a way to control him. Never completely - he could do what he had to despite the chip - but he’d hated how much the chip had changed him, had forced him to alter his behavior, his thinking, his life.

Being free of it was - beyond words. Walking back from the magic shop earlier, only the fact that he was Master of the Territory and really couldn’t be seen dancing like a loon in the middle of the
street had kept him clinging to the ragged shreds of his dignity.

He’d felt Xander’s own barely contained joy as they’d walked almost silently back to the factory. His boy had known that Spike was barely holding it together and had walked beside him silently, giving Spike time to “deal”, as he liked to say.

Turning his head to look down at the tousled dark hair of his Claimed, Spike was once again stunned and grateful that Xander understood, that his boy had never once thought that the chip was a good thing. How had he ever been so lucky to find Xander - a human with a heart big enough to accept Spike for who and what he was, and who knew Spike was a vampire and loved him anyway.

Pulling Xander closer into his arms, he settled himself for the night, needing these quiet hours with his sleeping Claimed before they went into battle once more.

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Sergeant Morgan stood by the tailgate of the truck, big hands resting casually on his belt buckle as Spike flipped up the tarp to inspect the goods inside.

He snarled, shifting to game face as he saw how few explosives the Sergeant had brought. “What’s going on?” he demanded. “Thought you said you could handle the supplies?”

“I brought what was needed.”

“The hell you did. Where the rest of it? This isn’t near enough.”

“It’s plenty,” Sergeant Morgan told him calmly. “My men will lay the explosives where they’ll do the most good and handle the detonation.” He nodded towards three men in civilian dress but whose bearing and clean cut look just screamed ‘military’. Spike narrowed his eyes at the three, and inhaled deeply, pulling in their scents. He could tell at once that two were not fully human, although physically they looked human. The third smelled human normal but none of them had blinked at the obvious demons in their group so it was clear they knew the score.

“What are you trying to pull, Kobarien?” he snarled. “You think you’re safe from these people because you’re half human and a soldier?”

“Don’t even think about going there, Spike.” The drill sergeant was usually one of the calmest people Spike had ever met, but his anger flared openly at the accusation. “That place is an abomination and an insult to the military. But the amount of explosives it will take to destroy an installation that size would take half the town with it. Fortunately, it isn’t necessary. We don’t need to destroy the entire facility to render it unusable. We’ve brought enough explosives to take out the labs, the offices, and all of their records and computers. We’ll also take down their power grid so that none of the cells doors will work without extensive repairs.”

Staring at Spike, his deep voice calm once more, Sergeant Morgan finished with absolute conviction: “We know this place is here now. We’ll keep an eye on it from now on and make sure no one ever tries to use it again. My guess is they’ll seal it off themselves after tonight. The government has always been quick to shut down and abandon failed projects.”

He didn’t like it. What he really wanted was to see the Initiative go up in an enormous fireball. But they were on a clock and he’d trusted the Sergeant to supply the needed explosives which meant that Morgan had the upper hand for the moment.

“Trusted you,” he glared, unwilling to let it drop completely.
“Your mistake,” the Sergeant said jovially. “My explosives, my plan.”

“We had a plan,” Spike snapped, despite knowing he’d already lost.

Sergeant Morgan just gave him a toothy grin that Spike had to reluctantly admire for its sheer cheek. “I believe the Slayer thought she had a plan too.”

Oz led the way, the mixed group of witches and demons following his lead as they wound their way through the labyrinth of caves and tunnels leading to Adam’s hideout. The pack leader had assigned Oz to be guide and protection for their group and Xander was grateful for Oz’s quiet company as he walked behind the werewolf. If everything went well, they wouldn’t encounter any danger until they opened the doors to Adam’s lair, but this was Sunnydale and anything could happen. Most of them were carrying weapons, just in case but Xander was worringly aware that, other than himself and Oz, their group was seriously short of fighters.

He’d expected it would be just himself and the magic workers in this group, but the coven had apparently done a lot of testing to see who would be the best people to participate in the spell and some of the members of the group surprised him.

All but one of the coven members were there, of course, and Willow but Giles was with Buffy. Xander suspected it was more because Giles’ focus had always been on his Slayer, rather than any lack of magical ability on the Watcher’s part. To his surprise, Mr. Okolo and Mr. Olsen were part of their group, along with the intensely shy newcomer Tara. As far as Xander knew, Mr. Olsen couldn’t do magic and he had concerns about Tara’s ability to work with virtual strangers, although he’d noticed with an inward smile how quickly Willow had been drawn to the other witch. Even now, the two were walking side-by-side, heads tilted towards each other, talking quietly, their soft voices a soothing background noise in the otherwise oppressively silent tunnels.

Two more demons completed their group, although neither were fighters and weren’t among the demons who were helping Buffy patrol. Henry Jamison, his half-Lrtokk customer who’d been so generous about loaning his books was there, and - astonishingly, Tashi, who owned the bar most frequented by the friendly demons in town, brought their numbers to eleven, stumping along on his thick legs, his usually laughing eyes watchful as they walked in near silence through the tunnels. He didn’t know how or why these particular people had been chosen but assumed that Mr. Olsen had suggested names to the coven.

In front of him, Oz slowed, one hand coming up in a signal for the rest of them to stop. The werewolf crept forward silently to the spot where the tunnel opened out into the next cave, stopping just inside the tunnel, his entire body tensing as he listened for signs of danger.

After a long, tense minute, Oz stepped back from the entrance, striding back to where the rest waited. “It’s clear,” he reported, speaking so quietly they had to strain to hear him. “The entrance is on the other side of this cave.”

Xander glanced at the watch that Giles had given him, carefully synchronized with the ones Buffy and Spike were wearing and even under the circumstances couldn’t help smiling again at the look of utter disgust on Spike’s face as he’d reluctantly strapped the watch on, complaining about them not having the decency to nick a nice pocket watch for him. “Buffy should be inside the fraternity now.”

“We’ll set up in that last chamber,” Maggie decided, looking back in the direction they’d just come. “Better to be a bit further away from the hornet’s nest.”
“Probably less chance Adam has cameras back there,” Xander agreed, struggling not to show his nervousness, now that the spell was about to happen.

Mr. Olsen gave him a reassuring smile, as they turned to retrace their steps the short distance back to the last cave.

Twenty-five of them assembled a short distance from the bunker in the woods. Seven werewolves, Sgt. Morgan and his three men, five demons who patrolled with the Slayer, three others Spike recognized from the battle with the Mayor, four more he didn’t know but who’d been vouched for by Mr. Olsen, and one human - the member of the coven who’d come along to open the bunker doors for them. Except for the woman from the coven, everyone in their group was either full or part-demon, most - like Spike and the werewolves - could pass for human, at least until they shifted into their demonic forms but a few couldn’t. The Rhylto’k, who been at the battle against the Mayor had blue skin, and couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than what he was. The half-Ferschiff demon, whom Spike vaguely remembered from the same battle, had yellow slit-pupilled eyes that glowed in the dim light, her retractable claws already spread in anticipation.

Although as far as they’d been able to determine, the concrete structure had no security cameras set up around, Spike didn’t want to take an unnecessary risk and signaled the others to stand back as he and the witch approached the doors. The heavy metal doors looked formidable and Miss Hartness examined them closely for a long silent moment.

“You going to be able to get them open?” he asked.

“I believe so,” she answered, just as quietly, her eyes not leaving the structure.

“How long?”

“On your signal,” she said confidently.

Spike glanced at the watch he’d so reluctantly strapped to his wrist. Only the necessity for coordinating their attacks had convinced him to put the thing on - vampires cared about sunrise and sunset, not the tedious counting of minutes that humans lived their lives by. “Not quite yet. If the Slayer’s on time, she should be in the elevator shaft. They’ll wait till she’s down and on their turf before moving on them.” It’s what he would do. Why take her in the fraternity with its multiple exits and possible witnesses? No, they’d wait until they had her boxed in at the bottom of the elevator shaft with all the advantage on their side.

It was like a spring welling up inside him, cool clear water rushing through him, filling him until he was no more than a container for all that energy.

The magic workers had positioned themselves in a large circle, putting the demons between them so the circle alternated witches and demons. Xander had expected to be told to stand in the middle but instead was instructed firmly that he needed to be outside their circle. Candles were lit and placed carefully at the four compass points. Willow and the two members of the coven, Helen and Michael, set herbs down between the candles in precise patterns, and a faint spicy smell drifted up into the dank, stale air of the cave.

When everything was in position, a wooden bowl with herbs inside it was placed carefully in the exact center of the circle. Maggie glanced around at the others, and received confirmed nods. She
nodded calmly back to the others. “Then let us begin,” she said quietly.

Maggie reached up and cut a lock of her white hair and held it in her hand. Willow, the two coven members and Tara followed suit, passing a small silver knife from hand to hand, each saying in a clear, quiet voice as they cut their hair: “A part of myself, freely given.”

When each of the five had a small lock of hair in their hands, Maggie dropped the piece of her white hair into the small polished wooden bowl in the center of their circle. “Let the vessel accept what is freely offered.”

Again, each of the magic workers followed suit, until Maggie’s white hair had been joined by small pieces of red, blond and brown hair. As the last piece was dropped in, Maggie lifted a small silver pitcher from her side and poured an aromatic oil over the mixture of herbs and hair in the bowl and made a sharp gesture with one hand. A small flame burst into life inside the bowl, burning the ingredients. To Xander’s surprise, it didn’t smell like burning hair. Instead of the acrid, choking smell he expected, the scent of herbs deepened until the cavern was filled with a pungent, spicy scent that made him feel a little lightheaded.

The witches reached across the circle and joined hands. Each of the others sitting around the circle: Oz, Mr. Olsen, Mr. Okolo, Tashi and Henry put their hands on the shoulders of the witches they were sitting between, forming an enclosed circle with their arms.

The magic workers all closed their eyes and began to recite an invocation, their voices blending softly:

“Freely offered, freely accepted. The power we hold within ourselves and that which is offered to us. Let the power flow from us and through us into the vessel. Let the vessel accept what is freely offered and return it when the need is past.”

Xander wasn’t sure if it was the smoke, the eerie flame-lit scene, or his imagination, but he could swear he could see light beginning to glow around the magic workers, faint at first but growing stronger as the witches continued their chant:

“We come before thee with one voice, one purpose. Make what is separate, united. Let the vessel hold all that we give. Let the power flow to where it is needed.”

“Let it begin.”

The last was Maggie alone, her voice rising sharply until it filled the cavern. Hands that had been holding each other with firm, light grasps suddenly tightened around the circle, white knuckles showing. The magic workers threw their heads back, and what had been imagination became tangible as light brightened in the cavern until their bodies were outlined in colors, glowing brightly in the dime light. The light surrounding each person began to flow into the circle, looking like living strands of brightly colored yarn. The strands of light met in the center of the circle in an explosion of color that blinded Xander for a moment.

When he could see again, he blinked the spots from his vision, watching as the energy strands wove together until they were flowing around the circle like a slender braided rope, each person weaving their own contribution into the whole, adding their unique offering to the multi-colored whole. The rope swept around the circle, picking up more colors and Xander realized the demons around the circle were adding their own energy to the rope. Their strands weren’t as thick and solid, but the braided cord brightened and thickened slightly with each new contribution.

Xander could almost hear the energy humming now, filling the cavern with a muted singing, like a
skilled chorus whose voices blended into perfect harmony. The energy continued to build as other energy streams joined those of the beings in the circle, flowing from others not present, but who were joining in tonight’s efforts, sitting at home, alone or in small groups. Volunteers who had agreed to sit quietly, their eyes focused on a candle’s flame, concentrating on being as relaxed and open as possible, willing their help to their joint efforts.

The magic workers sent tendrils of energy outside the circle, seeking those uncertain strands of volunteered energy, gathering them up and weaving them into themselves, returning to the circle stronger and richer than when they’d left, bringing the freely offered contributions of dozens of demons and humans into the whole they were weaving.

When it was complete, the woven power was a dazzling array of colors, dozens and dozens of different colored strands woven into the whole. There was no signal he could see, but the rope suddenly flowed over the edge of the circle and poured into him, striking his chest and freezing him in place.

It was both agonizing pain and pleasure bordering on ecstasy, as the power flowed into him, filling his veins, his flesh, every part of him with electricity. It was like being hit by lightning, as if his whole body had been filled with searing power that somehow didn’t burn him.

The power in the cavern was a whirlwind, an electrical storm circling around him and inside him and he waited until the storm eased. For an eternity, the power flowed around and through him, filling every inch of his being, until he could hold no more. His skin tingled, every sense heightened, knowledge he had never earned was suddenly his for the asking. The person he had been before was there inside him still, but the power sang within and around him, and everything else, including his own identity, seemed remote and far away.

The vessel looked at the circle of beings, demons and humans, seeing the individual strands of energy each had contributed to the power within him, seeing the pattern of energy within each with eyes that could read the meaning of the patterns and see the beings as they truly were.

His purpose was not here, and he turned away from them and began walking slowly out of the cave and towards the concrete wall that was the boundary of what he sought.

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“Now.”

The witch spoke two short, staccato words, and made a spread-fingers gesture towards the door with one hand. There was a metallic clunking sound and it was as simple as that. The two demons stationed on their side of the doors, swung them open, and Spike’s taser rifle spat electrical fire at the two soldiers in the brightly lit hallway.

The soldiers had been turned away from the doors, looking back into the Initiative, listening to their radios, and were taken completely by surprise, crumpling to the floor without having had time to lift their weapons or send a warning.

Sgt. Morgan issued a rapid order and two of his men moved inside, disarming the soldiers and snapping handcuffs on with quick efficiency. The third soldier scanned the area and quickly disabled the security camera covering the entrance and the security desk the soldiers had been Manning.

The crackle of the radio was unnaturally loud, echoing in the white tiled sterility of the hallway:
“Intruders contained. Humans. No weapons found.”

“Good work. Bring them to the control room.”

Having learned what he needed to know, Spike bent down and ripped the radios off the uniforms of the unconscious soldiers. The Slayer had been taken as planned and all eyes in the Initiative and hopefully Adam’s as well should be on her group for a few minutes.

Spike stared at Morgan’s men thoughtfully, then made a quick adjustment to their plans. “Sergeant, have one of your men put on a uniform and move down the hall, disabling the security cameras as he goes.”

Morgan nodded, looking down the long hallway that sloped steadily down from the bunker into the Initiative. “Don’t go further than the first intersecting hall,” he ordered, his eyes singling out one of his men. “Return at the first sign of Adam making his move or when you reach populated areas. If you meet someone, try and pass yourself off as one of them. Taser them if you have to.”

The soldier nodded his understanding, already beginning to strip off his shirt.

“Good man,” Sgt. Morgan said. “Let’s get the explosives inside,” he told the others and everyone moved to obey. Spike stood in the open entrance, worried the doors might close on them and prepared to block them physically if necessary as the others wheeled in handcarts stacked with small boxes.

Just then, the lights went out, plunging them into blackness for a moment until several flashlights snapped on, the circles of light illuminating the grimly determined faces.

“It’s started.”

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There was a spell for opening things, for clearing paths, and he spoke the words in a language the power recognized although the vessel had never studied it. Locks disengaged, metal scraped against concrete, and a large circular door rolled aside, giving him passage.

He stepped through, into an enormous room, its walls made of dead materials, everything sterile and cold inside. There were four bodies in the cavernous room. His unblinking eyes regarded the four. One was human, and the vessel recognized him. The human was seated in a metal chair, motionless, eyes widening with shock at the vessel’s entrance. He saw the slight flare of wrongness in the human’s energy signature, the tendrils of unnatural energy weaving through the human’s own green-blue patterns, controlling and dominating the patterns, which struggled uselessly to break free. He turned away, dismissing the human for now. The human was not what he was seeking.

Two of the beings were animated corpses, their natural energy long fled, their bodies kept functioning by chemical and mechanical means. There was only a fragment of natural energy there, a trapped remnant unable to escape the prison of dead flesh, held captive against its will by the sickly orange and green energies woven around it. The beings moved towards him, their movements jerky and unnatural, the flow of muscle and energy hijacked by an outside agency unable to give them even the semblance of normal movement.

They weren’t his target, but they were as much of an abomination as what he sought. He reached out with his borrowed power and quieted the machines, stilled the chemicals flowing through the tubes, freeing the tiny drop of captive energy, which flickered and died almost instantly as the
animated corpses folded to the ground like puppets with their strings cut.

“Interesting.”

He turned to face the fourth being, the one he sought and the purpose for which the vessel had been created. This was no trapped flicker of natural energy, this was a chaotic swirl of clashing energies, all bound together in a cage of dead flesh, metal, and unnatural energy. Something that should never have been stood facing him and he could feel its curiously abstract evil - a disturbed child who simply doesn’t comprehend that it is wrong to hurt other living things because it feels no connection with, and absolutely no empathy for, anything outside itself.

Alarms blared and emergency lighting came on and Spike led the others down the long, sloping tunnel, moving at a steady, rapid pace that would get them inside quickly but not exhaust them before the battle even began. Running footsteps approaching caused those with weapons to bring them up defensively but it was one of their own, the soldier sent to disable the cameras, returning as ordered. Sergeant Morgan tossed the man his civilian clothes ordering him to change out of the Initiative uniform before following. He signaled one of the demons wheeling a handcart of explosives to leave it for the soldier and they moved out again.

They could hear screams now, and shots being fired and they picked up the pace. Obviously the Slayer’s group had not been able to convince the soldiers to simply evacuate when the cells doors opened.

The sound of the fight swamped them before they actually saw it. Bursting around the last corner, they found themselves in a huge open area and in the middle of a pitched battle. With a roar, the werewolves shifted, leaping forward and attacking while the rest of them were still sorting out the chaos. Spike cursed and ran forward, slamming into a 9-foot tall shinzik demon, sending them both tumbling to the ground. He landed on top, twisting the shinzik’s head viciously, hearing the crack of the neck snapping and dropped his victim, bouncing to his feet and looking for his next prey. The joy of battle filled him, as he darted through the melee, kicking, biting, punching.

For a long moment, they studied each other: the other simply curious, the vessel reading the swirling energy until he found the center, the man-made power core knitting the clashing power streams together.

The creature stepped forward, a long skewer sliding out of its left arm, and he watched the flow of energy down the arm, seeing how the man-made power center flared at the movement, tracing the pulse of energy that activated the stolen arm and its concealed weapon, seeing the way the energy had been re-routed around artificial intrusions in the dead tissue - intrusions that signaled other surprises hidden inside.

His body moved with borrowed reflexes, dodging the sudden thrust with effortless grace, the lethal skewer sliding harmlessly past him. The creature swung at him again and again, and he avoided its clumsy efforts with ease, his body moving with a speed and skill borrowed from others.

The creature looked surprised, and stopped its attempts, head cocked to one side in puzzlement.

“Very interesting. Fortunately, I’ve been upgrading.”

It lifted its right arm, folding its hand closed, and metal grew down over the hand, cylinders
clanking faintly as they slid into position. The vessel raised his own hand, reciting words in a language that had died out when the world was still young and stood patiently, waiting as the thing fired, a rapid cacophony of bullets that stopped short, swallowed whole by the faint, shimmering shield he had raised in front of him.

The thing looked puzzled, shifting its position slightly and firing again. This time the arm fired small missiles and the vessel strengthened the shield, letting the shield absorb the energy into itself as the missiles disintegrated, their energy transformed by his magic, woven into the fabric of the shield, strengthening it as it dissipated the threat.

He pushed some of that energy back towards the creature, reversing what it had done, causing the metal to fold back in upon itself, turning its weapon back into an arm.

“How are you…” it began, but the vessel was ready to make an end to this.

He pushed the energy shield forward into the creature, letting the energy reform, folding it around the creature and pushing it back against the wall, holding it in place. He walked forward, matching its forced retreat step for step. He focused all his borrowed power and aimed for that bright spot of energy at the core of the creature, feeling the metal and glass that encased the power inside the creature. The energy inside the creature was natural but highly dangerous and he dissipated it, scattering it within the creature’s body, where it would do no further harm.

He watched with remote eyes as the clashing energy inside the creature faded and died. The darkness where the unnatural energy was gone spread outward from the place where the man-made core had been, until the creature was nothing more than dead flesh and metal, no longer held together by the implanted energy core.

He released the shield holding the body upright and stepped back, letting the corpse fall unheeded to the ground as his eyes turned back to the human, still sitting motionlessly in the metal chair. He sent a tendril of energy into the human’s body and destroyed the small spot of mechanical energy near the human’s heart, deactivating the device that had been implanted with such ill-will and rendering it inoperable.

Surveying the room with remote eyes, he sent a flare of energy into the machines lined up against the wall, burning them out and destroying the information they contained. When the last of them were burning, the vessel’s reason for existing was gone and he released the energy he was holding, sending it back to its rightful owners.

The sudden rush of emptiness inside him as the power flooded out of him like a river overflowing its banks, made his vision go black and he was unconscious as his limp body hit the floor.

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It was more of a free-for-all than an organized battle, Spike thought, ducking under a vicious swing by a Groymin, before bouncing back to his feet and landing a hard kick on the thing’s side. The demons recruited by Adam weren’t interested in anything but killing, and it didn’t matter who. They were fighting anything that crossed their path, with no sense of caring about who was friend and who was foe. Granted, they were seeking out humans whenever possible, but they were just as happy to fight other demons when no human happened to be handy.

Too many of them weren’t even able to keep their minds on the fight, he noted disapprovingly, seeing a Klantosh demon feeding messily on something that had probably once been human, blood staining its dark fur as it tore bits of meat free from the steaming corpse.
The werewolves had been occupied for several long minutes at the start of the fight, trapping and subduing the werewolf prisoner, who had been rampaging through the battle, attacking everything that moved without discrimination. Once it had been contained by the other wolves, the pack leader had split his wolves, ordering some to take the netted werewolf out of the base, the rest to follow him to the cells.

Spike cursed the necessity for splitting their forces, which was seriously hampering their ability to fight effectively. Between members of his team off on side missions and the necessity of keeping their line of retreat open, they were fighting a defensive battle. Too many of his team were concentrating their efforts on rescuing and evacuating former prisoners. Between that and Sergeant Morgan and his men off setting the explosives, Spike was left with only a handful fighters against nearly a hundred demons.

Not to mention miscellaneous other problems.

The soldiers were a danger to everyone, and he caught glimpses of the Slayer and her small group fighting by their side, trying to prevent the beleaguered soldiers from being overwhelmed. The tasers were having some effect but too many of the soldiers were armed with conventional guns which all too often were nearly useless against the demons they were shooting.

And bloody annoying for the rest of us, Spike thought wrathfully, dropping to avoid a spray of bullets fired wildly as the soldier holding the gun was taken down by a Fyarl demon who had obviously been seriously pissed off by the sting of bullets striking its chest.

The Slayer’s boy toy was suddenly there, appearing out of nowhere and shouting orders at the soldiers. For a wonder, the surviving soldiers actually listened. They began falling back, retreating across the room, the Slayer and her crew moving to provide cover as they retreated.

Spike looked around. Three of the wolves had left the fight permanently, taking their insane captive with them, the werewolf struggling furiously and uselessly inside the net. The other wolves were still in the area with the cells. Three of the demons on his team were escorting former prisoners across the battlefield, sending them up the hallway to the bunker. He’d lost two more of his team to former prisoners too injured to walk, the demons carrying the bodies up the hall and not returned yet.

Sgt. Morgan and his men weren’t back from setting the explosives and they had two dead in their group. The Z’bat’rryth had been disemboweled by a Vulsik demon and the Rhylo’tk had been shot by a panicked soldier who hadn’t realized the slender blue-skinned demon was coming to his assistance. Xander was going to be devastated by their losses, Spike knew, especially the Z’bat’rryth’s death - he’d been a friend of Xander’s.

There had been no sign of Adam, which Spike hoped meant that Xander’s team had been successful.

The wolves returned, shepherding a couple of terrified demons in front of them, two of the wolves in human form coaxing the former prisoners along, two guarding the small group in wolf form. The wolves sent the demons running up the long hallway towards the exit, then turned back to the battle, their wolves leaping and tearing at the enemy demons in a whirlwind of fur and fangs and blood.

Sgt. Morgan was suddenly beside him, yelling in a voice trained to carry over a battlefield: “We’re done. Fall back.”

“Fall back!” Spike repeated the order, and their team began disengaging, backing towards the
hallway they’d come in through, pulling together in a defensive line as, step by step, they left the battlefield. Two of them shouldered the bodies of their dead, carrying them with them as they retreated up the hall. Sgt. Morgan and his soldiers took the rear guard. They were the freshest, having avoided most of the battle in order to set the explosives and they were all armed with taser rifles now. Standing shoulder to shoulder across the entrance to the long hallway, they fired again and again as the others retreated, running up the white tiled hall towards the exit, as the demons learned they couldn’t approach the soldiers without being shot with electricity.

Running with the others, Spike kept an ear out behind him, turning to look back occasionally, until he heard Sgt. Morgan’s sharp command to disengage and the sound of booted feet racing up the tunnel after them.

The sound of the battle faded with distance but the intensity didn’t diminish and Spike suspected that the remaining enemy demons had simply continued to attack each other now that their prey was gone.

The last of them had cleared the entrance and Sergeant Morgan was slamming the door’s shut when the earth shook with the rumble of explosives detonating.

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“Xander?”

“Oh, goddess! Why isn’t he answering?”

The voices were familiar but seemed to be coming from incredibly far away and Xander was too tired, too achingly empty to respond.

“We don’t have much time. Let’s get him out of here.”

Gentle hands lifted him, four strong arms holding him in a chair carry, and Xander kept his eyes closed against the swaying motion.

“Spike?” he mumbled.

Oz’s familiar voice answered instead. “We’ll take you to him, Xander.”
Chapter 40

The distant rumble of sound struck a chord of familiar dread in Xander, cutting through the exhaustion and numbness. He lifted his head, staring around himself dazedly just as someone nearby called out sharply:

“Brace yourselves!”

The ground lurched beneath their feet and a sharp surge of adrenaline shot through Xander, snapping him out of the fog that he’d been trapped in. His arms tightened instinctively around the shoulders supporting him on either side, even as he felt the solidity of rough stone against his back as the two men carrying him pressed back against the wall to steady themselves against the waves of tremors shaking the ground.

“It’s alright. Take it easy, Xander.”

He turned his head toward the reassuring voice and his eyes slowly focused on Tashi’s tree-bark skin, the bartender’s black eyes staring back at him with concern. Looking around, Xander saw that they were still inside the tunnels and Oz and Tashi were carrying him between them.

“We’re almost clear,” Oz said to all of them. “The entrance isn’t more than 50 yards ahead.”

“Let’s get out of here then,” someone else said uneasily, the nervousness of someone just a touch claustrophobic in their voice and there was a general murmur of agreement.

Everything seemed dreamlike, unconnected to himself, and the voices sounded tinny and distant, as if the speakers were far away instead of so close he could have reached out and touched them. Xander shook his head, trying to clear the fog and struggled to stand.

“I can walk,” he said, vaguely surprised at how weak he sounded, even to his own ears.

His statement proved overconfident as Oz and Tashi set him down gently and his legs buckled. They caught him again, steadying him, and Xander found he was able to stand upright with their support, his arms around their shoulders and theirs around his waist. His legs were shakier than he wanted to admit and he gratefully accepted their continued help as the party began moving again.

His steps grew stronger with practice and he was able to lean less of his weight on them as the party made it out of the tunnels into the woody hills on the edge of town. Xander drew in deep lungful of the night air, hoping it would help clear his head as the small group kept walking, putting distance between themselves and the tunnels. It helped a little but lethargy still smothered him, making it hard to think. His feet followed the path automatically, Oz and Tashi unobtrusively steering him around obstacles that his dazed mind didn’t seem able to register in time to avoid them.

He was only distantly aware of the party coming to a halt, of someone handing him a bottle of cold water, the cool liquid helping to bring him back to himself a little.

“Xander.”

The quiet voice held a firm command he was unable to ignore and his eyes lifted to meet Maggie’s. “Xander, what you are feeling is a natural reaction to the spell. Your body was pushed beyond its normal limits and you are exhausted as a result. You will be fine after you get some rest.”
She patted him reassuringly and Xander thought distantly that he should probably be finding that comforting but he was too tired for her words to really sink in. He wondered if it would freak anyone out if he just lay down and went to sleep right here.

Probably.

Sgt. Morgan effortlessly took command of the clean-up: making sure the wounded were tended to, barricading the entrance to the Initiative so nothing could follow them out, and generally handling the minor jobs that Spike usually left to his Lieutenants - well, except for the wounded. Injured vampires either made it back on their own or were left behind for the most part. Few vampires cared enough to bother helping the wounded. They certainly didn’t cart around the gigantic first aid kits like the one that Sergeant Morgan had produced from the supply trucks.

Ignoring the activity around him, Spike studied the metal doors leading down into the Initiative. The witch’s spell had bollixed up the electronic locks permanently and the doors were now closed and barricaded from the outside. He nodded in satisfaction and turned away casually, not wanting his interest to be noted. Sergeant Morgan had used less than half the explosives that Spike would have for this little job but there was nothing here to stop Spike from slipping back inside the base and making sure the job had been done properly.

“Spike.”

He glanced around and saw the pack leader approaching. Despite the bloody bandage wrapped around his arm and the smears of blood darkening his sandy hair, Dean looked as fresh and ready for action as he had before the battle. “We’re heading out. The wolf we rescued is in bad shape and a danger to everyone right now.” He grinned and Spike could see the wolf lurking just below the surface. “Good fight.”


Dean shook his head. “We’ll stay on a day or two, heal up.” He looked back towards the little group of wolves clustered around their netted captives and looked grim. He didn’t have to say anything for Spike to know that the pack leader was hoping they could get through to the rescued wolf before they left. Be a bloody nuisance to have to drag an out-of-control werewolf across several states. And from what little Spike has seen, the rescued wolf had lost all control, phasing back and forth randomly between her human and wolf forms.

“Come see me before you leave.” It was a request, not a command, and the pack leader nodded. The wolves hadn’t been as much help as Spike had hoped, but they’d done good and most of them had some injury to show for the night’s work. That deserved respect and, given the tendency of the Hellmouth to boil over about once a year, reliable allies were not to be dismissed out of hand.

Not that the local talent wasn’t useful in a pinch, but not much about this fight had gone according to plan and every one of them was sporting some injury or other, Spike thought, once again shoving back the pain from his own injury - a gash in his leg from a downed Ranatli who’d had enough fight left in it to close its teeth around Spike’s calf, only letting go after Spike had used his free leg to kick it in the face three times. Even then, he’d had to pry the damn thing’s teeth loose. The wolves had helped tip the balance in their favor, even with their ridiculous insistence on rescuing the captive wolf as first priority.

“I’ll do that.” Dean gave him a long look, then strode back toward his pack, signaling them to move out.
Wolf had the right idea, Spike thought. Enough mucking about. It was past time he turned this lot over to Sgt. Morgan and found his Claimed.

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Xander surfaced slowly, exhaustion still trying to drag him back down to sleep. He was in his own bed but Spike wasn’t there and alarm shot through him at his lover’s absence. He sat up a bit too quickly, judging from the wave of dizziness that resulted, and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Even that small movement tired him, and he sat on the edge of the mattress, feeling ridiculously weak and wanting nothing more than to lie back down again.

“Spike?”

His hoarse call produced no response in the silent apartment and Xander’s alarm shot straight to panic levels. He still hadn’t replaced his cell phone and he braced himself on the bedside table, then forgot about standing as he saw the note propped up on the table where he couldn’t miss it.

Got some business to take care of. Back soon.
Stay in bed.

He was going to kill Spike when he got back.

“Business?” he asked the empty room crankily. “What the hell does that mean?”

Spike’s ‘business’ meant the Court, but somehow the note didn’t sound as if Spike had just gone downstairs for a few minutes. It had to be something important or Spike wouldn’t have left him. Spike tended to hover when Xander was sick or hurt and, since he didn’t remember getting back to the apartment, that meant that Spike should have been a permanent fixture beside the bed until he’d woken up.

Well, the town was a lot safer today than it had been yesterday, he told himself reassuringly. Even if he hadn’t been awake enough to learn the outcome of the battle inside the Initiative, Adam, at least, was history and the explosions going off on schedule boded well for the success of the other teams.

He hoped that Spike had been somewhere with a tub of popcorn and a good view as the Initiative base went up in a fireball. He wished belatedly that they’d thought of telling someone to bring a video recorder so they could play tapes of the explosion for all the demons in town who had been so terrorized by the soldiers for months. He was really glad that so many people had had the chance to participate in this fight, even if it was just by sitting at home and making themselves available to the coven’s efforts. To know that they had had some small part in defeating the Initiative would hopefully go a long way to helping them take back their lives after living in fear for so long.

Spike could handle himself and, right now, Xander was about as much use as a day old puppy. Sighing, he lay back down on the bed. Spike would explain when he got back and maybe by then Xander would be feeling a little less like something that had been run over by a truck.

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Nearly thirty vampires arrived at the meeting place outside the bunker in the woods - not bad for a last minute assembling of the scattered members of the Court. Spike got straight down to business.
“There was an explosion inside the soldiers’ base a few hours ago. Bunch of demons got out of their cells and started a bit of a free-for-all with the soldiers. We’re going in to clean up anything that’s left. Safe to say, once we’re inside, if it moves, kill it. Don’t care if you find your long-lost brother down there, anything that’s been held prisoner by the soldiers this long isn’t something we can trust.” He nodded in the direction of the small hand-picked group selected by the Lieutenants for the skills they’d learned when they were human. “A few of us are going to make sure the explosions put this base out of commission permanently and take care of anything that got missed. The rest of you, mop up any survivors.”

There was a murmur of excitement among the assembled vampires. Anthony and Michael began passing out weapons from a box they’d brought, while Arkady and Jose cleared Sergeant Morgan’s makeshift barricade away from the doors and swung the doors open. Spike was pleased that the doors opened easily, obviously no one had tried to seal them from the inside. With luck, they were the first people who’d tried to get back inside after the battle. Anything salvageable inside was probably still there, and Spike meant to be the first inside to ensure the destruction had been thorough. He didn’t trust the Initiative, or their bosses, not to try and salvage what they could of the base.

As the rest of them prepared to enter, he signaled for Jose to stay back. “Stay here and keep the entrance open. Anything but a member of the Court comes out, kill it,” he ordered.

He doubted that anything would come but he wanted to keep Jose out of harm’s way, if possible. Jose was his most reliable Lieutenant but not a strong fighter. Spike didn’t want to lose him to a simple clean-up job like this. And Xander would be upset if Jose was killed.

Spike hefted the double-bladed ax he’d taken off Lagos last year and strode forward into the base followed closely by the small group of former electricians, computer users and construction workers that were going to join him in making sure that nothing inside was left in salvageable condition. They had all been given heavy iron weapons, things that could be used either as weapons against survivors or as tools to destroy anything the explosives hadn’t taken care of.

The emergency lighting wasn’t working, which was a good sign that the explosives had done a thorough job. The darkness was no hindrance to vampire sight and their footsteps echoed in the tiled hallway as they descended into the base. The smells of battle filled the stale air of the corridor, blood and smoke and death, and Spike inhaled the mingled scents with relish, tasting their victory all over again.

He’d drunk several pints of blood at the apartment and bandaged the wound on his leg before heading down to the Court to gather recruits. The pain had faded to a mere annoyance and the slight stiffness in his gait wouldn’t slow him up, although he needed to avoid relying on the leg too heavily - the other reason he’d brought a weapon. Still, now that Adam was out of the picture, he didn’t expect to run into anything they couldn’t handle. If any of the soldiers had returned, hoping to salvage anything from the base, well, they’d had their warning.

He’d hated leaving Xander but he needed to take care of this now. If the soldiers were going to try and reoccupy the base, it would be sooner rather than later. Tonight, they’d be licking their wounds and contacting higher ups and making plans. Tomorrow, salvage operations would begin and Spike was going to make sure there was nothing left to salvage. Having gotten rid of the Initiative, he was not about to allow them to try and resurrect the base, not in his Territory anyway.

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Spike’s eyes narrowed as he stared down at the two bodies. The corpses stank of chemicals, not surprising given the two lab-coated figures were lying in a pool of chemicals that was still slowly...
leaking from the tubes connected to their torsos. Beneath the chemical smell, the bodies stank of decay. Whatever had kept these two going, it had been a temporary job. From what Spike could smell, the two corpses would have been rotting to pieces in another month despite the chemicals that had pumped through their bodies. These two had been nothing more than zombies, reanimated by science instead of magic, and no more durable than real zombies.

One of the bodies was a middle-aged woman, the other had been a dark-haired male a little younger than the woman. Spike poked at them with his ax, seeing the bits of metal and the plastic tubing through which the chemicals had flowed into the bodies, but seeing no wounds other than old, stitched-up ones where the tubes had been inserted.

He hadn’t gotten the full story of what had happened with Adam, he’d been too worried about Xander to pay attention to more than the wolf’s brief summary that Adam was dead and Xander would be fine once he’d slept off his fatigue. Now he wondered what these two had to do with anything. Why were they here inside Adam’s lair? Had Adam gotten bored with waiting for his pile of body parts and created these two to keep his hand in? The lab coats on the bodies made him wonder if the two had been connected with the Initiative. Viciously, he hoped so. He liked the thought that two of the scientists responsible for the abominations here had had their own creation turn on them.

Adam’s corpse was on the other side of the enormous room. Like the other two, he was lying seemingly untouched and uninjured but obviously very dead. Spike briefly wondered how Xander had killed him. He’d expected to find Adam torn to pieces, or something similar, not this untouched corpse.

He shrugged, not particularly concerned. Dead was dead, whether dusted, ripped to bits, or your life snuffed out magically. Didn’t really matter how Adam had died, so long as nobody tried to create another one of him.

Which meant Spike needed to take care of this area. There had been some attempt to destroy the computers but the magic workers hadn’t really put their heart into the job.

Bloody amateurs, he thought, exasperated at how much had been left behind for anyone who wanted to try and reconstruct Adam. It obviously hadn’t even occurred to them to destroy Adam’s body. No, the creature had been left lying there like a felled tree, big as life and just full of dissectible classified bits. The computers had been burned - from the inside, from the looks of them but were still far too intact for Spike’s liking. Even if the coven had wiped the computer hard drives magically, nothing beat an old-fashioned orgy of destruction for making sure no useable data was left on a computer.

With all the chemicals on the floor surrounding the two bodies, Spike thought he knew how to ensure no one was able to salvage anything from this room. A good chemically-fueled bonfire would take care of the bodies and computers alike.

Spike slipped in between sheets fragrant with the smell of his Claimed and spooned up behind Xander, drawing his boy into his arms. Xander slept on, oblivious, and Spike frowned. His boy was used to Spike returning to their bed at dawn but he usually gave some sign he was aware of Spike’s presence: his body settling in to Spike’s, an arm shifting to cover Spike’s, a few sleepy words. This time, there wasn’t the smallest indication that Xander had sensed his return.

Pulling his boy closer, Spike was reassured by the steady beat of his heart and the even breathing that spoke of natural sleep. He’d let Xander sleep himself out but if his Claimed woke up still
suffering from the aftereffects of the spell they’d been assured was harmless, the coven would have some explaining to do, he thought grimly.

Burying his nose in Xander’s hair, Spike put aside his worry for now and allowed himself to revel in the deep satisfaction of having destroying the Initiative. From beginning to end, it had been a good night’s work. The fight inside the base had finished the Initiative as a power in the territory and the precautions he’d taken afterwards assured that no one would be using the place or anything inside it ever again. The Court minions he’d taken with him had gotten a workout and bragging rights over the ones too scattered to recall quickly.

The handful of demons who’d survived the first battle were dead now and the Initiative and Adam’s lair were burning merrily, destroying the evidence and ensuring that nothing useable remained. Anyone with plans for the bodies, or designs on the information stored in the underground base, was out of luck. What the explosions and his small group of skilled minions hadn’t taken care of, the fire would finish off.

He smirked. After all the training he’d put the Court through, the minions who hadn’t been located in time to join them were going to be more than a little peeved at missing the fight. Served them right, wandering off at the wrong time. Nearly half the Court had been rounded up in time to join the party and those minions had seen enough action to appreciate the training regimen. Not that anyone would dare complain - Spike scoffed silently at the very idea - but he’d have to keep an ear out for grumblings, especially if the real story got out.

Nothing he couldn’t handle, he thought, his arms tightening around his sleeping Claimed. Pity Xander wasn’t in any shape to celebrate properly but there’d be plenty of time for that later. For now, it was enough to wrap himself around the living warmth of his boy.

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Consciousness crept slowly over Xander bringing awareness of the feeling of a strong arm around him and cool, silken flesh pressed against his backside. A slender thigh was pushed between his own and Spike’s fingers were splayed out across his chest. He made a small, appreciative noise and slid one hand along Spike’s arm down to his hand, twining their fingers together.

He opened his eyes just enough to see the clock on the bedside table, and was dimly surprised to find that it was late afternoon. He let his lids fall shut again, too drained to care that he had slept through most of the day. He thought vaguely that he should probably get up and find something to eat but felt too lethargic to actually follow through with the idea.

“You alright, luv?” Spike’s voice sounded quietly in his ear

Speech seemed like too much of an effort so he just made sleepy mumble in response. He thought dimly that he should probably be worried about how tired he was but he couldn’t seem to care about that either. Even finding himself rolled over suddenly and Spike’s blue eyes staring intently down at him didn’t shake him free of the sense of complete detachment from his surroundings.

“Xander?”

The worry in Spike’s voice pierced through the muzzyiness and he made an effort, smiling faintly up at Spike. “I’m fine, just tired.”

“Been sleepin’ all day,” Spike told him. “Should eat something.”

“Later.”
He tried to roll over, intending to go back to sleep but Spike stopped him. “Come on, luv. Up you get.”

Spike tugged him upright, ignoring his muttered protests, and steered him into the kitchen. Xander slumped against the kitchen counter, wishing Spike would just let him rest, wanting nothing more than to put his head down on the countertop and go back to sleep but it was impossible with Spike brandishing a cup of coffee and insisting he drink it.

Three cups of coffee and a plate of freezer waffles later, Xander was feeling a bit more awake but still exhausted and lethargic. His whole body ached but not in any specific muscles. Despite the food Spike had pressed on him, he felt empty, sucked dry, like something was missing except he couldn’t figure out what was gone. Spike sat across from him, drinking blood and watching him intently and Xander shook his head, trying to wake himself up.

“Where did you go last night?” he asked. He had a dim recollection of waking earlier and finding Spike gone. He was pretty sure it had really happened.

“Back to the Initiative.”

“What?!” Ok, apparently adrenaline cut through the fog nicely.

Spike shrugged, looking irritatingly blasé about his little announcement. “Took some of the Court inside to check things out.”

“You took minions on a field trip to the Initiative?”

“Needed to make sure the job had been done right, check if the explosions we set off last were enough to take the place out permanently.” Spike drained his mug and got up to put another bag in the microwave. “Wasn’t going to take the risk that anything significant had been left lying around for anyone to make use of. Bloody good thing I did too,” he added, sitting back down across from Xander. “Had to clean up a few things that might have caused problems.”

In hindsight, it wasn’t really surprising - of course Spike would want to make sure the Initiative was completely destroyed. Xander could have kicked himself for not anticipating that and making sure Spike had more reliable backup than Court minions. “How did it go?” Spike didn’t seem injured, but now that Xander thought about it, that was his third bag of blood Spike was drinking - which was a lot more than he usually had in the morning when keeping Xander company at breakfast.

“ Took care of some odds and ends,” Spike said dismissively, then gave Xander a curious look. “How’d you take out Adam? Body didn’t have a mark on it.”

Xander shivered, remembering the feeling of all that borrowed power inside him. “I could see things, Spike,” he said hesitantly, after a minute. “I could see the energy that held things together and I just…ended it.” He wrapped both hands around his coffee cup, clinging to the warmth in the suddenly chilly room. He remembered the remote, unemotional judging he’d done while under the spell. Remembered looking at Adam and the two others in the lab and just deciding they were unnatural and destroying the energy that kept them alive. Ending their lives with little more than a thought.

“Xander.” The slight sharpness told him Spike had called his name more than once. Spike’s voice softened as soon as he saw he had Xander’s attention. “Don’t fret about it, luv. Did the world and this town a favor. Adam would have killed us all without batting an eye. Nothing to do with somethin’ like that except kill it.”
Xander nodded. It was true and he’d known it when he agreed to be the vessel. He just hadn’t been prepared for the form the spell had taken. He’d assumed the spell would make him sort of a super-Buffy, and he would kick Adam’s ass in a physical fight. Instead, there had been an eerie calmness to the whole thing. The spell had given him the ability to just end lives, the power to see energy flowing and be able to stop it or alter it at whim…

“What happened to Riley?” he asked, remembering suddenly what he’d seen inside the soldier: the tendrils of unnatural energy wrapped around and controlling Riley’s natural energy. He remembered seeing it and just turning away, leaving Riley sitting there helplessly during the fight with Adam. He shivered again, not liking the memory and wondering why the spell had made everything seem so cold and distant. He’d helped Riley only as an afterthought, destroying the mechanical thing inside him that was sending out that unnatural, controlling energy.

“Slayer’s boy?” Spike looked surprised. “He was retreating with the Slayer and her group last I saw. Far as I know, he made it out fine.”

“Did everyone get out ok?” Xander suddenly realized he didn’t have any idea what had happened to the others and felt a wave of shame that it was only occurring to him now.

“Lost a couple,” Spike told him reluctantly. “The Rhylto’k demon who was at graduation and your friend B’rryn. A few others were hurt, but nothing serious.”

Xander clenched his fists, bowing his head and swallowing hard at the lump that rose in his throat, choking him. B’rryn had been one of the first demons he’d met that was around his own age. He’d invited Xander and Spike to the Z’bat’rryth birth celebration again this year. It had been a quieter, more cautious party than the one they’d attended the previous year - the participants had been worried about drawing the Initiative’s attention - but there had been music and dancing and he’d met B’rryn’s fiancée, S’laria.

Spike’s arms slid around him and he leaned into his lover’s body, turning his head into Spike’s chest, grateful for his strength. He hadn’t known the Rhylo’t’k demon very well and now he wondered why he hadn’t taken the time. Kevin had fought with them at graduation and helped Buffy patrol for nearly a year and Xander had only spoken with him a couple of times. He didn’t even know if Kevin had a family or who his friends were.

“Not your fault, luv.”

“I know. It was their fight as much as ours - maybe more so. They were the ones at risk from the Initiative, it was their family and friends in danger just because of what they are. I just…” His voice broke and he let the grief take him, his tears escaping his control and soaking Spike’s shirt as the vampire held him.

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Waking wasn’t any easier the second time around. Xander stirred, feeling Spike’s arms tighten around him, and his mild surprise at finding himself in bed triggered memory of Spike’s news and he drew in a long, ragged breath.

He needed to check with Mr. Olsen, see if he needed any help letting people know what had happened and that the Initiative was no longer a threat. He should talk to B’rryn’s fiancée and Kevin’s people… He sighed, feeling like he’d already attended more funerals than anyone should have to in their entire lives. Just one more perk of living on the Hellmouth, he thought tiredly, wondering if he could put things off until he didn’t feel so exhausted.
“What are you thinking about so hard?” Spike asked.

“I’m wondering if we can just hole up here for a week and pretend the rest of the world doesn’t exist.”

Spike’s chuckle brought a faint answering smile to his own lips. “Might have to do that soon,” he said. “But got some things need takin’ care of first.”

“Maybe in a week or two,” Xander said wistfully.

“Take you to LA for a few days, soon as we get things settled here,” Spike promised.

That sounded good. A few days away from the Hellmouth seemed like heaven about now and Xander shifted so he was facing Spike, still lying in the circle of his arms. “Maybe we can get that hot tub suite again,” he suggested.

Spike smirked at the memory. “Good idea, pet.”

He dipped his head and kissed Xander gently, lips moving softly over Xander’s, making no effort to deepen the kiss. Xander lifted his arm and slid his hand behind Spike’s head, holding him in place, not letting him pull back. His own lips moved hungrily over Spike’s, his tongue darting out to trace along the line of Spike’s lips, which opened under the insistent pressure of Xander’s tongue.

For long moments, they kissed, Spike’s initial caution giving way to slow, deep kisses that left Xander gasping for breath. Spike’s arms closed tighter around him and he rolled them over so that Spike was on top and Xander welcomed the feeling of being surrounded by his vampire, feeling Spike’s lean, muscular body pressing him down into the mattress.

He was suddenly desperate to feel Spike inside him, stretching and filling him until he was drowning in pleasure and everything else fell away. Xander clung to him, hands sliding over smooth skin and prominent shoulder blades, trying to touch and stroke every inch of his body, legs coming up to wrap around Spike’s and pull their bodies closer together, pushing his hips up eagerly to meet Spike’s, until they were rocking together, moving faster and faster, arousal building to an almost unbearable level.

Spike lifted his head, and Xander’s panting sounded loud in the otherwise quiet room as Spike stretched across him, reaching for the bedside table. Then Spike was staring down at him, eyes glowing golden in the dim light, watching Xander intently as a slick finger teased at his entrance, moving in a circular pattern that eased him open as it slid deeper inside him.

Xander hissed, body arcing into the sensation as Spike added a second finger, working his opening.

Xander managed to speak as Spike began to push a third finger. “Don’t. That’s enough. I want to feel you inside me. Please,” he added, when Spike looked hesitant.

How could he explain that he needed to feel the burn and pain of being entered without being fully prepared. That ever since he’d left the caves, he’d felt like something was missing inside him and that he wanted Spike to fill him? Unable to find the words, he simply repeated: “Please, Spike.”

He knew he’d won when Spike turned him over, pulling him to his knees and settling behind him. Xander clutched at the sheets with both hands, pushing his hips back impatiently and almost sobbed when he felt the blunt head of Spike’s cock pushing at his opening.

Spike’s hands held his hips steady as Xander flung his head back with a cry, feeling the blissful
fullness pushing inside him, slowly, oh god, slowly, sphincter muscles opening with reluctance to let him inside, the burning pain of muscles being stretched beyond their capacity giving way with infinite slowness to nearly unendurable pleasure as Spike pressed all the way inside, until he was buried to the root, their bodies fused together.

For a long moment, they remained in that position, locked together, Spike refusing to allow Xander to move, the only sound Xander’s harsh breathing and Spike’s low, crooning reassurances, brought on, Xander knew, by the trembling in his muscles as his body fought to adjust.

Finally, just went Xander thought he was going to scream in frustration if something didn’t happen, Spike began to move, pulling out with infinite slowness then pushing back in again in a rhythm that Xander was sure was going to drive him crazy if Spike didn’t go faster. Spike’s hands on his hips still prevented him from moving, from affecting the pace Spike was setting in any way.

Gradually, Spike’s thrusts picked up speed, moving just a little harder, a little faster, rocking his hips into Xander’s and his grip relaxed, letting Xander move for the first time. Xander pushed back eagerly into Spike’s thrusts, craving the feeling of being filled, of Spike’s hard flesh inside him, sending electric flashes of pleasure through him as his cock hit that small bundle of nerves inside him.

He wasn’t going to last long, he knew, and neither was Spike. He could feel Spike’s rhythm becoming ragged, his movements a little frantic now, short hard thrusts that pounded into Xander, until Xander felt him stiffen, then felt Spike’s hips jerking against his ass as Spike erupted into orgasm inside him.

Feeling Spike’s semen pumping into him sent Xander over the edge, his own release pouring out of him in long pulses. His arms folded under him and he collapsed onto the bed, indifferent to the slick, wet sheets beneath him. Spike followed him down, lying on top of him, arms still holding him, the last of his orgasm still shuddering through his body.

In the haze of sated exhaustion, Xander felt Spike shift, preparing to pull out of him.

“No,” he said, pulling Spike’s arms closer around himself. “Need to feel you inside me.”

“Always here, luv,” Spike murmured in his ear.

Xander fell asleep, feeling his vampire around him and inside him, filling the aching emptiness inside him for the first time since the spell.

Giles opened the door, looking mildly surprised to see him. “Xander, I’m glad you stopped by. How are you feeling?” The Watcher’s eyes examined him closely as Xander stepped over the threshold and into the apartment.

“Tired,” he answered truthfully but it was only part of the truth. He was still dragging around with only half his usual energy but that wasn’t his biggest concern. “Do you know…” he broke off, seeing the object of his quest was already in the apartment.

Maggie was sitting in the living room, a cup of tea in hand. She looked exhausted - white-faced and unbelievably fragile, and Xander was alarmed to see that her hands were trembling faintly.

“Are you alright?” he asked, forgetting his reason for coming over in his concern for her. She looked way worse than he felt.
“I’m not as young as I once was,” Maggie said ruefully. “It takes me a bit longer these days to recover from a spell of that magnitude.” She looked at him keenly and Xander was relieved to see that the fatigue did not reach her eyes which were as clear and sharp as ever. “How are you feeling?”

Xander hesitated, but seeing Giles scrutinizing him as carefully as Maggie was, he decided to just forge ahead. “I feel….different,” he admitted, groping a little for the right words to describe what he’d been feeling. “I was really tired yesterday but I feel like something’s… missing inside, only I don’t know what it is.” He looked worriedly at the two of them. “Is something wrong with me?”

Maggie shook her head immediately but it was Giles who answered. “Xander, your body channeled an enormous amount of power during the spell. What you are feeling now is the absence of that power. The energy paths in your body expanded to accommodate the power flowing through you. I suspect it will take a few days for them to settle back to what they were before the spell.”

He let out of silent breath of relief. “So, I’m still me?”

“You are exactly the same,” Maggie told him firmly. “A person who has a natural aptitude for magic might have been affected by the power we raised but I am afraid you are simply not someone who is particularly magically talented.”

“Like Willow when she did the soul spell,” he said, remembering Giles’ warnings about Willow opening doors she might not be able to close.

“Exactly,” Giles confirmed. “Willow does have a natural gift for magic and was affected, however, unless you were to deliberately choose to try to work with the changes and develop powers you do not naturally possess, that will not happen in your case.”

Xander smiled in relief. “Good, I don’t want to be a magic worker. I’m happy being just plain Xander.”

“You are hardly ‘just plain’ anything, young man,” Maggie said tartly, her words softened by a smile. “And I believe I owe you an apology.” She set her teacup down and regarded him steadily. “We should have talked to you privately before asking you in front of everyone if you would agree to be the vessel.

“I know that Rupert has explained our reasons for acting as we did but those reasons do not justify treating you that way.” She sighed and shook her head slightly. “It is a shortcoming we have fallen into more often in recent years. We have a tendency to rely on ourselves too much, to make decisions that affect others for what we feel are very good reasons. It is rare for us to work with outsiders as we have done here. As a result, we tend to make decisions within our group without necessarily consulting others. As in your case, those decisions have not always proven to be the right ones. I am concerned that, if we do not control this tendency, we may lose the ability to work with others entirely.”

“Speaking as someone who got run over by that particular truck,” Xander told her, “I hope you won’t do it again.” A lot had happened since then but he discovered now that he was still angry and disappointed with the coven for trying to force him into a decision about the spell. Maggie’s explanation and apology helped but they’d almost destroyed the fragile alliance in town before anything had been accomplished. “You should know that you came close to putting Spike in a position where he had to take a stand against you or lose control, and I came very close to having to choose between Spike and you. That isn’t always going to work out the way you want it too.”

Before he could decide if he was ready to forgive them - he sure as hell wasn’t going to forget that
stunt anytime soon - Maggie gave him a stern look, her eyebrows raised in question. “Do you always consider the consequences before you act, Mr. Harris?”

“No,” he acknowledged. “But I try to for the big stuff.” He looked warily back at her, wondering at the switch from apology to interrogation.

Giles had remained silent during Maggie’s apology but now he asked, his voice carefully neutral: “Xander, is there anything you want to tell us about the explosion of chaos magic in town a few nights ago?”

Damn it. He should have brought this up with them first, so he wouldn’t be on the defensive for this conversation. Spike had argued against telling anyone at all, pointing out that it was foolish to just give away an advantage like people believing that he couldn’t hurt humans. Xander had been worried about how Buffy and Giles would take it when they learned about the chip being deactivated and had pushed Spike to let him just tell them what they’d done. After everything that had happened, he thought Buffy and Giles would be ok with the chip being gone, but it was hard to tell, especially given Ethan’s involvement. Explaining to Buffy that the “evil chaos guy” as she tended to refer to Ethan, had been responsible for deactivating the chip was probably not going to go over well and Xander had been hoping they could gloss over that part. He should have realized that, if Ethan knew the coven had arrived in town even before they’d done much of anything magical, the coven would sense a major spell being done by Ethan.

“The control chip in Spike no longer works,” he answered, trying to sound as if it was no big deal. Giles inhaled audibly, as if Xander had just confirmed his worst fear, but his voice remained calm. “Are you sure that was wise?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation. “They had no right to do that to him, Giles. Spike would have preferred being staked to having that chip in his head.”

Giles nodded slowly, apparently accepting that, even if he didn’t look exactly happy about it. “I’m a Watcher, Xander. I will always have concerns about you being involved with a vampire, even though Spike has certainly proved his trustworthiness.” He managed a faint smile. “Please don’t take it personally, I had grave reservations about Buffy’s involvement with Angel as well.”

Xander let out a short bark of relieved laughter. “Well, yeah, but so did everyone else. I mean Angel was a stuck-up jackass. Spike is way more fun.”

“That makes all the difference, of course,” Giles answered, shaking his head, then gave Xander a look he couldn’t quite read. “I suppose there’s no possibility that Ethan wasn’t involved in removing the chip?” he asked. He sighed, obviously reading the answer in Xander’s face. “I do hope that in return you didn’t promise Ethan anything we’ll all come to regret.”

“Possibly. Spike gave him permission to be in Sunnydale without Spike killing him,” Xander told him cheerfully.

“That’s it?” Giles asked skeptically.

“That’s it.” Xander grinned, unable to resist. “Spike has a theory about that. Want to hear it?”

Maggie coughed suddenly, and Xander was sure she was hiding a laugh behind her hand.

“I think I’d rather not,” Giles said firmly, despite the tiniest hint of a smile that deepened the lines around his eyes.
The dance floor was full. Xander didn’t know the band but they were obviously popular and he entertained himself by imagining Spike’s comments about the quality of the music. If it wasn’t “classic” punk or a demon band, Spike had little patience with most popular music, especially bands like tonight that managed to combine a pounding base line with schmaltzy, predictable lyrics.

Which, of course, was one of the reasons Spike despised the Bronze.

Xander was watching three kids, probably high school freshmen, dancing together. A girl and two boys, they were having fun and obviously not caring that none of them were good dancers. A reminiscent smile curved his mouth as he watched. The three gave off a friendship vibe, not a couple and a spare, and Xander was reminded of nights like tonight when he, Jesse and Willow had danced together at the Bronze. Before Jesse’s crush on Cordelia, and Willow’s on Xander, and Xander’s self-consciousness about his crap clothes and complete lack of cool had begun the first cracks in their friendship. Before vampires and magic and Slayers had caused Jesse’s death and shattered Willow and Xander’s friendship.

Would their friendship have survived if Jesse hadn’t died?

Xander thought it would have. He and Willow had come the long way round to the beginnings of a new friendship. They were both so different now that they were just barely getting to know each other again, and that process was both helped and hindered by everything that had happened in the last few years. If the foundations were strong enough for his and Willow’s friendship to survive, then surely Jesse and he would have made it as well.

He raised his glass to the three kids on the dance floor and wished them well, hoping the Hellmouth treated them kindly.

The song ended and Buffy and Riley came back to the table, holding hands like they seemed to have been doing pretty much non-stop since the fight inside the Initiative. Buffy was glowing with happiness and Xander was glad for her sake that Riley had finally gotten his head out of his ass and chosen her over his prejudices.

Discovering that his superiors had imbedded a control chip inside him without his knowledge or permission had done a lot to make Riley reevaluate his loyalties.

Xander himself hadn’t realized that the wrongness he’d seen in Riley’s energy patterns had been a control chip similar to the one they’d planted inside Spike, although he thought that he would have realized what he was seeing if not for the remote distance with which he’d viewed everything while operating under the spell.

Apparently Adam had been able to activate Riley’s chip, giving him completely control over the soldier, and he’d used it to call Riley to his side. Buffy had made a disgusted face when telling him about it.

“Adam kept calling Riley his brother,” she’d said, wrinkling her nose in distaste. “Riley said Adam was going on and on about Riley’s destiny and how Professor Walsh had planned on creating an entire new race of demon-human hybrids.” She shook her head. “For once, it would have been nice to be wrong about what the bad guy of the week was planning.”

Despite her light tone, her eyes had been haunted and she’d stumbled a little over Professor Walsh’s name and Xander remembered how much Buffy had admired and respected Maggie
Walsh at the beginning of the year. Xander himself was deeply grateful that he had only vague memories of the reanimated corpses that had been Adam’s creative solution to his need for workers - turning his first two victims into drones intended to help him create more creatures like himself.

From what Buffy told him, Xander had apparently deactivated Riley’s chip when he’d used his borrowed power to destroy the thing inside Riley that was twining malignant energy of its own around the other man’s natural energy patterns. In doing so, he’d free’d Riley to move and act independently. Riley had immediately joined the battle inside the Initiative, helping Buffy to rally the surviving soldiers, convincing them to fall back and evacuate before the Initiative had exploded. “Good thing, too,” Buffy had said. “Since they weren’t listening to any of us.”

“Riley says the soldiers are all being reassigned,” Buffy had finished cheerfully. “They’re talking about filling the base in with concrete, so the Initiative really is dead.”

Which had somehow led her to inviting Xander to join her and Riley at the Bronze so he and Riley could start fresh. “He really wants to thank you, Xander.” She’d looked so hopeful that Xander knew he was going to agree, even though he wasn’t really interested in being friends with Riley. Even if Riley had seen the light and become a card carrying member of the Demon Pride Brigade, Spike was so not going to just forgive and forget. Spike was more a forgive-your-bloody-corpse-after-evisceration kind of guy.

“Spike invited too?” he’d asked dryly.

“I was thinking we could work our way up to that,” Buffy admitted with a grin. “Riley knows that Spike was fighting on our side in the Initiative, but it’s going to be awhile before he’s comfortable with demons. I was thinking about starting with someone like Sgt. Morgan and working our way up to Spike.”

“Probably a good idea,” Xander conceded. “Just make sure you clear your revelations about demon ancestors with the demon in question first,” he warned.

Buffy gave him an exasperated look. “Of course I will.”

So here he was at the Bronze, supposedly getting to know Riley but really mostly watching him and Buffy being incredibly sappy together.

Which was fine. It would be a long time before Xander trusted the soldier around the friendly demons and especially Spike, and part of him couldn’t help selfishly hoping that Riley would just get himself reassigned out of town, but Buffy was happy and Riley was trying, so it could have been a lot worse.

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“Xander!”

Riley jogged up to him as he turned at the soldier’s call.

“I asked Buffy if she would mind walking home by herself so we could talk,” Riley told him and gave him a quick grin. “One of the perks of dating a Slayer: chivalry can be ignored when necessary.”

“Yeah, Buffy can pretty much get home safely on her own,” Xander agreed.

He started walking again and Riley fell into step beside him. When he didn’t say anything, Xander was the first to break the awkward silence.
“Talking usually involves more words than this.”

“Sorry, just not sure how to begin.” Riley frowned off into the distance for another minute. “I wanted to say thanks for whatever it was you did inside Adam’s bunker.” He met Xander’s eyes squarely and his own were haunted with grim memories. “When Adam was controlling me, I’ve never felt so helpless in my entire life. He gave me orders and my body obeyed. I just sat there, unable to move, while he told me what he was planning and that he was going to kill all my friends,” Riley swallowed hard. “And what he was going to do with their bodies after they were dead.

“Almost worse than anything was the fact that Professor Walsh did that to me. Even after everything else, even after learning she’d drugged us, for her to be so insane, to put a control chip inside me…” His voice trailed off as if he couldn’t find the words to finish.

“Buffy told me about the spell.” Riley made an uncertain gesture. “If I hadn’t seen it for myself, I don’t know if I would really believe it.” He shrugged. “Not a lot of mysticism in the military, even with this assignment. But you were something more than human that night. Your eyes were glowing.” He shook his head, like he was trying to get the picture out of his head. “I don’t know what you did exactly, but you deactivated the chip somehow and I’m really grateful.”

At some point, they’d stopped walking and Xander looked at Riley, studying him for a long moment. “What’s going to happen to the Initiative?”

Riley stiffened, then drew in a long breath and nodded, almost to himself. “It’s being disbanded,” he answered. “Most of the soldiers and all of the scientists are being transferred out of town. I think my superiors intend to keep a few soldiers in town to keep an eye on the situation but they’ll be stationed at the regular army base and have regular duties.” He met Xander’s gaze evenly. “Having seen what’s out there, the government wants a few soldiers who know the drill in town just in case, but no more experiments and no more captures.”

Xander folded his arms over his chest and didn’t try to hide his distrust. “You guys have figured out that a lot of demons aren’t dangerous in any way, right? Are these soldiers going to be patrolling and killing demons randomly?”

“We’ve explained the situation and so far they’ve agreed to let Buffy do her job.” He flushed slightly. “I’ve been assigned as liaison and will be patrolling with her. The other soldiers are emergency backup only, and won’t be patrolling.”

“Good. I hope Buffy’s told you that you soldiers had dozens of people too frightened to even leave their homes, people who wouldn’t hurt a fly, who’ve lived in this town for decades in some cases, but who happen to have blue skin” - he faltered for a second, remembering Kevin - “or scales, or some other outward sign of their ancestry.” He looked stonily at Riley. “I’m glad for her sake that you and Buffy are back together, but if you can’t accept that demons have a right to live in this town, then you and me, we’re going to continue to have a problem.”

“I’m not going to say it will be easy, but I’m willing to learn.”

“Good.” Xander relaxed slightly. Riley sounded sincere and Xander was willing to watch and see how the soldier did. “Just follow Buffy’s lead professionally and you’ll be fine,” he suggested.

“That’s kind of how I had it figured,” Riley told him.

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Sprawled in the chair his Lieutenants had set up on the raised platform at one end of the main floor, Spike felt nothing but smug satisfaction as he gazed out over the clumps of minions spread out across the floor, all intent on their individual practice bouts. As he watched, he saw one of them drop to the floor to avoid a knife that flashed towards her from the onlookers circling her and her sparring partner. The minion kept moving, spinning her legs around in a vicious kick that forced her opponent to jump backwards, giving her precious seconds to regain her feet. She’d kept ahold of her weapon - a small hand axe - during the maneuver and then the two were circling each other warily again.

It was a very impressive performance for a minion. Making a note to compliment her personally later, for now Spike kept his expression neutral and continued watching the Court. His Lieutenants were doing the same, moving around the floor, making suggestions and criticisms, and stepping in to demonstrate on occasion.

He’d been hard put to conceal his surprise when the Court minions had decided to continue training after the Lieutenants had spread the word that it was no longer mandatory. Given the arrogance of the average minion, Spike had expected that they would give up training gladly, sure that they had never needed it to begin with. His hard work with the Court had paid off, it seemed. The foolish and grossly stupid had been weeded out and he couldn’t help smugly comparing his Court now to the complete wankers he’d inherited from the Anointed One, all of whom were long since dust, mostly by Spike’s own hand. Well, Angelus had taken out a few, but he’d unintentionally done Spike a favor. Not one of those gits had been worth keeping.

It hadn’t hurt that the minions who’d participated in cleaning up the Initiative had been bragging about how much fun they’d had, and implying that Spike had only taken the best of the minions down into the base with him. In reality, it had been pure chance - he’d taken everyone that could be rounded up on short notice - but he wasn’t planning on setting the record straight. A bit of competition was good for them.

He was considering picking a sparring partner when a sudden stir swept through the Court. He sat up a bit straighter as the minions began ending their bouts, most of them turning towards the main doors. Spike frowned at the crack of wood on wood as a single pair continued fighting, quarterstaffs blurring with the speed of their blows, utterly oblivious to the spreading silence around them. Marc was already there, snatching hold of their weapons and ending their bout, with a nearly-silent reprimand that raised blisters with its scathing contempt. Spike fought back a smirk, amused by the colorful imagery his Lieutenant employed and met Marc’s eyes with a brief glance before turning his attention back to the doors. The two would be watched. If they were caught being that oblivious to their surroundings again, they’d be dust.

The pack leader swept into the building as if werewolves visited vampire Courts on a daily basis, not something unheard of in Spike’s experience. The pack leader had brought five of the seven pack members with him, along with Xander’s friend. Spike watched as the wolves fell into a precise formation, two staying back by the door and the rest flanking their leader as he approached Spike.

Dean simply walked straight up to Spike, ignoring the vampires on either side, though Spike could see the tense wariness in the wolves’ bodies, showing how acutely aware they were that they were in potentially hostile territory. The delegation came to a stop at the base of the small platform. Spike remained seated. He respected the pack leader but this was his Court.

“Master Spike.” Dean inclined his head in respectful greeting. The wolves with him fanned out slightly but remained a step behind their pack leader, a silent, deadly entourage that even the stupidest vampire would hesitate before challenging. The wolves Dean had brought to town with
him were all impressive; seasoned veterans who had been werewolves for years, some of them for decades. Xander’s friend held up well in such company, his short, compact frame giving off no hint that he was far younger and less in control of his wolf than his pack mates.

“Pack Leader,” Spike acknowledged. “What brings you to Court?” It wasn’t that he didn’t know, he and Dean had talked about this earlier, when he and Xander’s friend Oz had stopped by the apartment for a beer and a casual conversation - this formal approach was a piece of theater for the minions.

There was a low murmur of conversation as the minions took in the fact that Spike was on apparently friendly terms with a werewolf pack leader. Werewolf packs weren’t common and most of them didn’t tend to mingle much with others, preferring living in the wilds, well away from people and towns. Most demons were only familiar with rogue werewolves, either ones who chose to live apart, deliberately hunting in populated areas, or wolves who were too young to know how to control themselves.

“I wish to give formal thanks for your assistance in locating and rescuing the rogue wolf held captive within your Territory. The wolf is under our control and we - and the rest of the pack - will be departing with her tomorrow.” Spike’s impassive mask hid a fleeting grin at the wolf’s implication that multiple other wolves were in town. Obviously Dean agreed with him on the principle that you never let your enemies know your true strength. Not that they were enemies, but a vampire Court was hostile territory by definition and the pack leader was on guard.

“Before we leave, I would request the honor of formal alliance between your Court and my pack,” Dean finished.

Spike cocked his head to one side, regarding the pack leader curiously. He wasn’t sure if werewolves liked formality for its own sake, or if Dean thought this was the best way to make a show. “Live a long way from here,” he observed, not wanting to look eager, even though he and Dean had already worked out the details. “You goin’ to be any use if there’s trouble?”

“Wolves aren’t tied to a Territory the way vampires choose to be.” Dean grinned, showing more teeth than a human would, and subtly shifted form slightly so that his wolf was more obvious. “And we travel faster than vampires.”

“Point taken.” Spike gave a regal nod of acceptance. “You lot are good fighters and you clean up when one of your pups creates a mess. I appreciate that in an ally. You need us, send a message and we’ll answer. We’ll do the same if we need your help.” His tone made it clear that he didn’t think it likely he’d ever need the help.

He didn’t really think much would come of the connection with the pack, but Xander and Oz were planning on staying in touch, so the channel of communication was there if either of them ever needed it. And this was the Hellmouth, sometimes it kicked up things that even he needed a bit of help with. Not often, but it had happened.

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He and Willow had lunch, the day before the coven left town. Xander thought there was even a chance that Spike wasn’t watching them from a distance but had decided not to ask.

It was a pity there were still so many cross-currents in the group. It would be nice if they could all have gotten together to celebrate their victory and to mourn their losses but Oz still went dead quiet around Willow and had been unobtrusively avoiding her since she’d returned to town. Buffy was joined at the hip with Riley, the two of them completely inseparable and everyone else was still
extremely wary of the ex-Initiative soldier suddenly thrust into their midst by the Slayer’s whim - Xander suspected that the Hellmouth would be spouting puppies and kittens before Spike and Riley were able to be in the same room without hostility crackling between them and attempted murder happening on both sides.

Maggie had recovered fully and the coven was ready to head home. Willow had called him and asked if he would have lunch with her, just the two of them. “Buffy and Riley are driving me to the airport,” she’d told him. “And I’d really love to talk to you before I go.”

They’d only had the one private talk since she’d arrived and Xander had agreed, pleased when Spike grumbled but hadn’t tried to prevent him from going.

They’d had a long, leisurely lunch, picking up sandwiches to go and taking them to a park where they could talk without being overheard by civilians. Now, with the remains of their meal scattered on the grass in front of them, Xander sprawled on his side and waited to see how Willow answered his question.

“I worry about it,” she said hesitantly. “Sometimes a lot. That I’ll be tempted again. It can be really easy to slip and find yourself thinking that something would be a lot easier if you just used magic.”

“I can imagine,” Xander said calmly. “Like your exams for instance.”

“Xander!” Willow looked shocked. “I would never cheat like that! Exams tell you how well you’ve learned the material. Whether you deserve the scholarship you’ve been given.”

“Exactly.”

“Huh?” Willow frowned, puzzled.

“Willow, all through grade school, you wouldn’t ever let us copy your answers. You would help us in lots of other ways, but you didn’t believe in cheating - which was annoyingly inconvenient to a less academically gifted friend, by the way.” She returned his grin with a hesitant smile.

“I guess what I’m saying is that you’ve always had ethics. You just need to apply them to your magic.”

“I know. That’s what the coven has been telling me.”

“Smart people.”

“They are. It’s been like having a dozen incredible role-models.”

“See? Easy. Just keep asking yourself: What would the coven do?” More seriously, he added: “Willow, as long as you’re asking yourself questions and worrying about it, you’re on the right track. When you did that stuff last year, you never thought about whether what you were doing was right, you just did what you wanted.”

“No, I thought about it,” Willow said quietly. “I just told myself that it was ok. It’s pretty easy to lie to yourself when that lie gets you what you want.”

“But you knew you were lying, didn’t you?” Xander met her eyes steadily and she nodded. “So, don’t lie to yourself and you’ll be fine.”

“Have I told you lately that I love you, Xander?”
“No. And I haven’t told you. But I can say it now. It’s good to have you back, even if you’re not staying.”

“I think Spike needs a little more time before he’s comfortable with me being around,” Willow said wryly. “I don’t blame him. I hurt the person he loves, that’s not something most people would forgive.”

She was right. Spike wouldn’t trust Willow without a lot more proof she wasn’t going to hurt Xander again. And maybe never, he thought realistically. But then he wasn’t ready to accept Willow completely either. Given how fast he had found himself distrusting Willow over the vessel spell, it was obvious he still had issues about trusting her completely. Rebuilding their friendship long distance would take more time than if she was in town, but it would make for a more solid foundation when she moved back for good.

“I promise I’ll keep in touch this time. Will you be coming back for the summer?”

“Only part of it. I’m going to go on a retreat with the coven. Tara’s going to fly over and join us,” she said, her casual tone belied by the blush heating her cheeks.

Xander successfully fought back both a smile and several suggestive remarks. “She seems really nice,” was all he said.

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Relaxed and sated, Xander leaned bonelessly back against the wooden side of the hot tub. “Oh man, we have got to get one of these in the apartment.”

Spike chuckled, pulling him back against his body. “You going to be the one to clean it?”

“Hmmm. Maybe you could draft a minion to do it,” he suggested and smiled as, even without turning to look, he could practically hear Spike’s eyebrow rise.

“Like I’m letting one of the minions into the apartment,” he scoffed. “One look at your Babylon 5 collection and those crap CD’s you strew around the place and I’ll have to stake every minion in the Court to keep my reputation intact.”

Xander mustered enough energy to poke him. “Someone who’s addicted to a soap opera featuring a talking doll lost any claim to manliness a long time ago.”

“Not addicted, just get bored in the afternoons,” Spike defended. “If you were at home all day like a proper Claimed, we’d be shagging all afternoon and I wouldn’t be forced to watch tv.”

“Nice touch of injured dignity,” Xander commented judiciously. “I almost buy it.”

They’d left Sunnydale Friday night, roaring their way out of town in Spike’s deSoto, detouring just long enough for Spike to drive over the Welcome to Sunnydale sign on the outskirts of town before hitting the freeway. Usually Xander made a token protest about Spike’s habitual destruction of the sign but this time, he’d found himself laughing like a maniac as the splinters of wood exploded past the windows of the car.

He’d always assumed that Spike’s glee at destroying the sign was just the teenage rebel in him finding an outlet, but this time, Xander had suddenly seen it differently. It was Spike’s way of flipping off the Hellmouth, blowing it a raspberry to show their contempt and their fearlessness. The Hellmouth had thrown a lot at them over the last couple of years but they’d survived and were stronger than ever and were on their way to LA to celebrate.
And they had celebrated. For two nights straight, they’d danced, drank, and “shagged like rabid weasels” as Spike had so elegantly put it. Xander was just glad the last two bouts of sex - well, two and a half, if you counted the underwater attempt that had ended with him choking, spluttering and admitting defeat to the non-breathing member of the team - had been in the hot tub where afterwards the hot water could work its miracle on his muscles because otherwise he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to walk in the morning.

Spike shifted slightly on the bench seat so that Xander’s back was settled more firmly against his chest and reached over the side of the tub for the bottle of Jack Daniels. Xander closed his eyes and tipped his head back, luxuriating in pure contentment as Spike took several long swallows of whiskey before setting the bottle back down again.

“Been thinking about making you my Consort, luv. That ok with you?”

Xander went completely still for a long moment, then twisted in Spike’s arms, turning his head so he could see Spike’s face. The elaborate casualness of the question and the way Spike was determinedly looking across the room at the far wall spoke volumes about how important this was to Spike.

He’d read about vampire Consorts but had long since learned that a lot of what was in Giles’ books was worthless. All too frequently, the authors had extrapolated information from third hand hearsay accounts, then filtered what they learned through human sensibilities to arrive at wrong conclusions. So his understanding that taking a Consort was essentially the same as getting married might not be right.

“Spike?”

“Don’t have to, luv. Just a thought.”

Xander ached for the barely-hidden emotion in Spike’s voice. So many of the most important people in Spike’s life had abandoned him, and none of them had loved him the way Spike deserved to be loved. Even Drusilla, despite being with him for nearly a century, had been too damaged - too freaking crazy - to really love him. From things Spike had occasionally let slip, it hadn’t been unusual for Drusilla to simply wander off, for weeks at a time sometimes, forgetting about Spike entirely. It made Xander want to promise Spike anything to take away the pain, but it also made him cautious. He didn’t ever want to make promises to Spike that he couldn’t keep. Spike had had too much of that in his life.

“Spike, I’m sorry, but I’m not sure exactly what you’re asking and I need to know before I agree.” He turned completely in Spike’s arms until he was straddling his lover, their faces only inches apart, and he leaned forward and kissed Spike hard, desperately hoping he would understand and not be hurt by the fact that Xander hadn’t just said yes immediately as Spike had so obviously hoped. “I don’t want to promise something I might not be able to follow through on,” he said. “So, tell me what a Consort is.”

To his relief, Spike relaxed, losing his tense nervousness. His vivid blue eyes met Xander’s and a slight smile curved his lips. “Can’t you ever just say, ‘yes, Master’, like a proper Claimed?”

Xander’s own relief erupted in a laugh. “If I did, you’d be bored in a week and looking for a new Claimed,” he pointed out, then glared fiercely. “And since I’m never going to let that happen, you’ll just have to deal. So, start explaining.”

Spike slid a hand caressingly through Xander’s wet hair, his touch lingering as his eyes held Xander’s. “Consorts are pretty rare, luv. Claimed humans are considered property but a Consort is
close to an equal. There are some physical changes: you live longer, you become a bit stronger and faster, and you heal better than a human.”

“I wouldn’t be human any more? Do you mean, I’d be a vampire?” Xander tried to keep his voice level and suspected he’d failed spectacularly. He’d long since made his peace with the fact that he loved a vampire, but he didn’t want to become a vampire himself. There were too few vampires like Spike and Jose, who were capable of seeing things as being anything more complicated than kill or be killed and he didn’t trust that, as a vampire, he’d be something his human self would like or want to be.

“No, a Consort’s not a vampire,” Spike assured him, obviously sensing Xander’s concern. “They’re… human with something extra. Bit like the Slayer - only much better.” He gave Xander a long searching look. “Woudn’t be immortal, luv, but you’d be the next thing to it. Consorts have been known to live for centuries.”

“Centuries?” Xander was pretty sure that hadn’t come out as a squeak. Pretty sure.

Xander looked stunned, then thoughtful at that piece of information and Spike cursed himself for just plunging in without laying the groundwork first. He knew better. Xander asked questions and liked to know what he was getting in to - except, of course, when there was some demon three times his size and five times his fighting ability that Xander thought was endangering someone else. Then, his boy lost all capacity for rational thought and jumped right in.

Xander hadn’t freaked out though, and hadn’t said no, so Spike patiently answered his questions, feeling hope rising inside him that his boy was going to agree.

He wanted Xander as his Consort. More than he’d ever wanted anything in his unlife. He wanted to know that Xander wouldn’t grow old and die in a few short decades. Wanted to know that Xander wasn’t as fragile and vulnerable as a mere human, wanted that little extra bit of safety for his boy. He’d nearly lost Xander several times, despite the protection of his Claim Mark. Xander was just too fond of throwing himself into the middle of unequal fights. Elevation to Consort status would give his boy strength, speed, and stamina nearly equal to a Slayer. Even better, it would give him some of Spike’s healing ability. Far too many times, Spike had sat by Xander’s side, waiting to know if he would live or die, or just watching helplessly as his boy suffered with the pain of injuries for days while his human body slowly healed.

“I wouldn’t get any older?”

“Be decades, before you notice anything different,” Spike said with satisfaction. “Consorts age much slower than normal humans.”

Xander didn’t look excited at the thought. Bloody hell! Did his boy want to grow old and die? Spike fought back the need to force the issue. Taking a Consort only worked for someone who was willing and Xander was still working his way through the idea.

“What do you have to do to become one?”

“Mostly it’s about sharing blood,” Spike held up a hand before Xander could voice an immediate protest. “An’ there’s a ritual involved, just tasting each other’s blood doesn’t do it,” he explained, guessing that Xander had been about to remind him that they’d both tasted each other’s blood
during some of their wilder bouts of sex - Xander had figured out a long time ago that Spike found it almost unbearably arousing when Xander bit him.

“So, we do a ritual, share blood and that’s it?”

“Pretty much.” Spike reached out a finger and traced his Claim Mark. “Ritual makes the mark permanent, so other demons can tell you’re my Consort and transfers some of my abilities.”

“Transfers?” Xander asked and Spike cursed silently, having hoped Xander wouldn’t pick up on that. “What happens to you?”

He shrugged carelessly. “Takes me awhile to get back to full strength, but nothin’ to worry about, pet.”

“Awhile?” Xander repeated suspiciously.

“Like what? Hours? Days?”

Reluctantly, but compelled by the brown eyes boring into his own, Spike confessed, “more like months, actually.”

“MONTHS! Are you crazy?!” Xander looked furious and pulled back against Spike’s hold, struggling to stand. Spike kept him pinned against him.

“I want this, Xander. More than anything.”

Xander glared at him pointedly and Spike reluctantly let go. Xander found his footing and climbed out of the tub, snatching up a towel and throwing one at Spike. Sighing, Spike fielded it easily and stepped out of the hot tub, water cascading off him to join the puddle Xander had already left on the floor.

Wrapping the towel around his hips, Xander folded his arms over his chest, watching Spike as he toweled himself off. The anger was gone from his eyes, but the determined expression didn’t bode well for Spike’s plans.

“Luv…,” he began.

“No.” Xander’s voice was adamantine and Spike’s heart sank. “You’re not talking me into this. This is the wrong time for you to make yourself vulnerable and you know it.”

“Well, I’m not losing you either,” Xander said flatly. “Spike, too many people know, or guess, about the chip and since we haven’t advertised that it’s gone, some of them are going to want to test whether the rumors are true. We don’t know for sure the Initiative is gone for good. And, by the way, you just spent weeks making sure your minions were ready for a big fight, then left most of them out of it, which I’m sure they are resenting like hell. This is not the time to give anyone ideas that you aren’t on top of your game. All it would take is one person to recognize that there’s a new Consort in town and put two and two together - that taking a Consort means a weakened Master.”

His boy was right, but Spike didn’t want to admit it. “I can handle the Court.” He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut again, pride stopping him from begging. Irritably, he snagged the bottle of Jack from beside the tub and took a drink. “Forget it,” he said harshly.

He stalked across the suite and flung himself down on the couch, switching on the television and staring at it blindly to avoid Xander’s eyes. Should have known his boy didn’t want this. Shouldn’t
have asked. It was Dru all over again. Always the love-sick fool, chasing futilely after the object of his affections.

His view was blocked as Xander sat down on the table in front of him. Ignoring him, Spike lifted the bottle and drank again.

“Spike.” Xander’s calm voice pulled Spike’s gaze to him reluctantly. Xander met his eyes steadily. “In case I haven’t made it clear: I love you. I won’t get tired of being with you, or find someone else, and I won’t ever leave you - not voluntarily.” Spike’s brows dipped into a frown at that qualification but Xander continued before he could interrupt. “This isn’t about not loving you, or not wanting to spend the rest of my life with you. This is about you not putting yourself in danger. And it’s a little bit about timing.”

“Want you as my Consort, luv,” Spike told him. Pride be damned.

Xander smiled and the warmth of the look he gave Spike made him feel like nothing had gone wrong after all. “I want that too. I like the idea of never growing old with you. I just think we should wait a little. For your Territory to settle down enough so you can take a month off and we can go somewhere else, some place where you being weakened by this ‘transfer’” - he gave Spike a pointed look that told him that more questions would need to be answered about that - “won’t put you at risk.”

“You want a honeymoon?” Spike asked, reluctantly amused.

“Hey, I’m worth a month in Hawaii.” Xander looked away for a second, for the first time since he’d sat down. “And there’s something else.”

“What, luv?” Spike asked gently when Xander didn’t look at him. His boy smelled nervous and a little embarrassed.

“It’s just that… If you don’t mind…,”

“Xander, just tell me.”

“Are you ok with waiting a while?” Xander asked hesitantly. “Like a year or two? ‘Cause what I’m thinking is that, if I’m not going to get any older, then I want to be just old enough that people won’t still treat me like a kid.” He grimaced. “I got that a lot at work when I first started - the guys who’d been on the crew for a long time were nice but they pretty much expected me to be too young to know anything. I’m only nineteen, Spike. I don’t want to have to show ID to buy a beer for the next few centuries.”

Despite the attempt at humor, he could tell this was important to Xander. Spike tilted his head, studying Xander curiously. Xander was… Xander. He didn’t think of his boy as being any particular age. He was beautiful: dark wavy hair brushing his shoulders, expressive dark eyes, and the once-coltish body that had broadened and matured this past year. To his eyes, Xander was perfect but that wouldn’t change with the addition of another year or two of maturity.

“How old do you want to be?” Spike found himself asking and was glad when Xander’s whole body relaxed and his boy smiled at him gratefully.

“I don’t know…” Xander looked worried. “I don’t want to make you wait.”

“Fancy immortality as a 21st birthday present?” Spike suggested. It was only a bit over a year away and he could wait that long.
“That sounds about right.”

Xander took a step towards him, and kissed him, pressing his damp, towel-clad form against Spike’s equally damp nakedness. “Love you, Spike.”

Spike dropped the towel he’d been holding and wrapped his arms around his Claimed. “Love you, Xander.”

Still kissing, Spike steered them towards the bed, laying Xander down gently on top of the covers and lying full-length on top of him.

“Hmm, Spike?” Xander pulled free and looked at him apologetically. “I don’t think I have another round in me.”

Spike, having felt Xander’s lack of arousal, was well aware of that. He leered down at his soon-to-be Consort. “Did I mention that stamina increases when you become a Consort?”

Xander’s laughter filled the room.

Later, lying beside his sleeping Claimed, wrapped in the living warmth and intoxicating scents of his boy, Spike listened to the steady beat of Xander’s heart and looked forward to having the joyous sound of Xander’s laugh in his unlife for centuries.

Just as well, his boy was asleep, Spike thought to himself with amusement. At this moment, it would be impossible to deny that the quiet rumbling in his chest was a vampire’s contented purr.

- end -

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