**Child of the Hellmouth**

**Summary**

Sequel to Prophecy Breaker. School is back in session, and it's just another year on the Hellmouth, with demons, hyenas and all sorts of surprises.
Special Author's Note thingy!!!!!

My beta, who is the most awesome person ever nominated the 'Our Roots Run Deep' series over at the White Knight awards. o^^o And now I have fics nominated from this series in several categories. Weee!

http://wka.moments-lost.org/nominees.php

2013

calikocat
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Yuyu Hakusho, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Inuyasha do not belong to me.

XXX

Walking toward the park he looked around him at familiar houses and businesses, it all looked so small town and quaint, and not at all evil. It was really ironic now that he thought about it. A nice little town called Sunny Dale was home to this big vicious evil thing called a Hellmouth. He
snickered to himself, whoever named the town was either an idiot or had a twisted sense of humor...probably the latter.

He paused at the sign to Red Fern Park and gazed at the tree just past the playground. That playground was loaded with memories. For a moment he could see his friends again, small figures, visions of the past swinging on the swings, climbing the jungle gym, jumping off the monkey bars. Well he and Jessie had done that, Willow had lectured them and warned them that they'd break something. Which they did. Jessie had broken his right arm and Xander had broken his left, they got matching casts that time, right down to the smiley faces Willow had drawn on them.

Taking a breath he entered the park and headed toward the tree. It was a maple, and bigger than he remembered. He gazed down at Jessie's impromptu grave. The grass was growing back nicely, and there was a clump of daisies in the center. He sat in front of the grave and reached to stroke the flowers. The ground around them was damp, Willow had been by within the last day to water them. Willow was the only person this side of the Pacific that knew what this place was. The final resting place of a treasured friend. They'd never told Buffy, because...well Buffy really didn't know Jessie and it made grieving for him easier without her there.

He smiled, though it was slight and not his usual bold grin. “Hey Jessie. I brought you somethin’.” Xander reached into his pocket and brought out a small wooden charm, similar to the key-chain he'd given to Keiko. He retrieved a pocket knife from his other pocket and opened it before cutting into his finger just enough to draw a drop of blood which he then rubbed into the back of the charm.

“This is all I can do for you now.” He placed the charm in among the daisies. “Can't have a bunch of kids messing with your bachelor pad can we?” His smile was somber and didn't reach his eyes as he put the knife away and took off his necklace. “Man I wish you were here.” He ran his thumb over the slightly faded emblem on the pendant, the etching of the tiger was a little worn. It had been a gift from Jessie for his thirteenth birthday. “You know I almost always wear this. It helps sometimes, helps me keep you close.”

“My life has gotten pretty crazy lately. I have a brother, can you believe it? And get this, he's a Demon King of one-third of an entire world. How wild is that? I guess that kind of makes me a Prince.” He snickered. “Hey, do you remember Botan? She said she was working the Dale that night...the night you were turned.” His smiled faded. “You know, blue hair, insanely perky, prettiest Grim Reaper around. She's one of his friends.”

“I spent my summer hanging out with demons, demi-gods, psychics and a reaper. It doesn't get any crazier than that. Oh, and there's this Priestess named Kagome, she is hot!”

“It's weird over there man. Almost everyone I met knows about monsters, is crazy strong, or isn't entirely human. Makes me really glad the demons that hang with Yusuke's crowd are all good guys, or at least they don't wanna destroy the world. If someone that powerful opened the hellmouth...well we'd never be able to stop them.”

“I wish I knew what you thought about all this. All Botan would tell me is that you're okay where you are.” He lapsed into silence, he'd said everything he wanted to...well almost. “I miss you man. Always will.” Xander smiled again and slipped his necklace back on, tucking it into his shirt.

“Xander?”

He looked over his shoulder, he'd heard her approach so he wasn't surprised to see Willow standing behind him. “Hey Wills.”

She smiled until she noticed a vast difference in his appearance. “Xander! Your hair!”
He grinned at her. “I thought it was time for a change.” He stood and hugged her. “How was New York?”

She beamed at him and he could sense a babble coming on. “I got to see all the museums and science exhibits! All the mainstream ones anyway. Oh! And there was this really neat...stuff that would have really bored you to tears...”

He laughed. “But you loved it.”

She nodded. “So how was Japan? ’Cause you only sent the one post card.”

“It was interesting. One of Yusuke's friends has a crush on me.”

Her eyes narrowed a bit, growing wary. “Is she pretty?”

He grinned at her, his own eyes mischievous. “I'll tell you about it over a yoohoo.”

Their eyes were drawn to Jessie's grave.

“The flowers look good Wills.”

She nodded. “Jessie's mom always liked Daisies.”

“Yeah.”

She cleared her throat. “So, yoohoo. You don't even like yoohoos.”

“No, but Jessie did. Come on. I'll tell you about Kurama.”

She pouted this time. “She must be really pretty.”

Xander snickered. “Believe me, he is.”

She sighed. “I knew it...wait...what?”

XXX
They walked in silence, having already covered any and everything they'd seen or done during the summer since he'd come home a week ago. Well...Xander didn't tell her absolutely everything because he didn't want to give her a heart attack over the unbelievable stuff. Like the kind of power his brother and friends had...that would be a big fat hell no. Besides, they were across the ocean, and had no interest in their little slice of hell.

He had told her how pretty Kurama was and that they'd danced together at the wedding. He even told her about the walks and the going for ice cream. To which she had asked; “So does that mean you're gay now?” Xander had smiled and shook his head and replied that no he wasn't, but it was nice to have “options”. She nodded and grinned back because he'd showed her pictures of Kurama, and Xander was right...he was really pretty. Not even Angel was that gorgeous.

After a week they had exhausted all topics that came to mind and as they walked they felt Jessie's absence more acutely than they ever had when it was just the two of them. When Jessie was alive they never ran out of things to talk about, for both of them it was like a limb was missing. The loss was that severe. Xander had hoped that they would at least run into a vampire by now.

Finally he could take the quiet no more. “I'm just so bored!”

Willow smiled patiently at him. “You've only been back a week.”

“And we've already exhausted both movie theaters and all of our old board games. If I never play Candy Land again I will die a happy Xander.”

“We could play I Spy.”

Xander shuddered. “Booring.”

“Well if you would spy something besides a tree or a tombstone it might be more fun.”

Xander let his head hang. “I've gotten so bored that I almost can't wait for school to start.”

“You just miss Buffy.”

“Some. You hear from her lately? Not that I care in the romantic sense.”

“Of course not, you have Kurama now.” He mock-glared at her and she rolled her eyes and tried to hide her smile. “Just the one post card. You both have a bad habit of not keeping in touch when you leave town.”

“Come on, I apologized for that...like twenty times already.”

Willow gave him a grin. “Doesn't mean your out of the dog house mister.”

He gave a heavy sigh. “I'm doomed.”
“Darn tootin’.” She hopped up on the low wall that bordered the cemetery they’d been walking by, her face growing thoughtful, her eyes distant.

“And suddenly you're thinking too hard.”

“I just...”

“Come on spill.”

“I can't wait for school to start either.”

“Well yeah, but you're Willow and you love school. While I'm Xander who flails in terror at the educational system.”

That earned him a Willow glare, but she plowed on. “And I can't wait to see Buffy but...”

“But?”

“It's just been so peaceful.” She hung her head in shame. “I'm a horrible person.”

He tapped her forehead. “You're not bad, just thrilled with the change of peace and good will toward men.” He leaned against the wall beside her. “And you're totally right about it being peaceful. Patrol has been a bust all week.” He wasn't expecting the sudden blow to his arm. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Since when do you patrol, alone, and when were you going to tell me?”

Xander shrugged. “For a while now. I'm careful. I always...” He paused, he could feel a cold tingle on the back of his neck, something was wrong. He glanced over his shoulder. Oh look, a vampire. What he said was; “Ahhh!” As he grabbed Willow and drug her off the stone wall.

The vampire followed them, drool trailing down it's chin, and Xander backhanded it while simultaneously pushing Willow behind him. Then he dropped to the ground and kicked the vampire's feet out from under him before rolling on top of the evil undead and thrusting a stake in and out of it's heart. Thank god he had the stake in his pocket to begin with.

“You okay Wills?”

“Yeah I'm-- Xander look out!”

Something tackled him, grinding his face into the dust below him, but he rolled trying to get the upper hand. This one was bigger, bulkier and no matter how Xander twisted, he couldn't get his stake within slaying distance of the asshole's heart.

Suddenly the vampire was gone, flying across the street and into a tree before bursting into dust. Xander looked back to see what had attacked the vampire and saved him.

“Hey guys. Miss me?”

“Buffy!” Willow got there before him, lucky her, not being on the ground and covered in vampire dust. By the time he managed to roll to his feet to hug her Willow was already making small talk. “How have you been?”

“Yeah Buff. Long time no see.”

“I've been okay. What about you guys? What have you losers been up to, besides walking around
like happy meals? And since when are you Slay Boy?"

He stared at her for a moment. Was this really Buffy? 'Cause Buffy didn't talk to them like that. Buffy didn't call them losers. “I was doing okay.” He waved his stake in the air. “I dusted the first one.”

Willow nodded. “Besides those were the first vampires I've seen since I've been back. Not that I went out at night by myself, 'cause that would be dumb.”

Xander slid his stake back in his pocket. “According to the paper there have only been a handful of people go missing.”

Buffy frowned at Willow in confusion. “Paper?”

“I've been keeping an eye on it, and there were only a few of accidental deaths by barbeque forks since you killed the Master.”

She looked back and forth at them. “You guys weren't here?”

“I was in New York with my parents for a couple of weeks. They dropped me off in D.C. to stay with my Uncle for about a week while they went to another conference. Then we came back to Sunny Dale. And Xander spent the whole Summer in Tokyo.”

Buffy looked at him. “Oh really?”

Xander blinked at her, wondering where this new Buffy had come from. “Yeah. I went to Yusuke's wedding and just kinda stayed. I hung out with him, his friends, and helped out in his in-laws restaurant. I just got back a week ago.”

“Huh.”

He tilted his head to the side as if to get a better look at her. “You okay Buff? Oh hey, nice hair.” She smiled at him but it didn't seem to reach her eyes.

“So what did you do this summer? Did you slay anything in L.A.?” Willow asked.

“Nah. It was pretty quiet. I just shopped, and partied some.” Her eyes were drawn away. “What's that?”

Xander and Willow glanced at the cemetery. “Ah.” Xander murmured.

Willow looked excited. “That's the Master's grave. It's the last thing we did before leaving.”

Xander nodded in agreement. “There was chanting and holy water, you missed the fun.”

Willow bounced a little. “We got to wear robes and everything!”

Buffy didn't look enthused, or sorry that she missed it. “Too bad.”

The smiled faded from Willow's face some, it looked like she'd caught on that something was different. “...So have you seen Giles?”

“I just got here Willow, besides I'll see him at school.”

Xander glanced at Willow and their eyes met, she nodded at him and they moved closer to Buffy. Maybe the Buffster felt left out, or hurt that they hadn't sat around moping without her around. He
nudged her with his shoulder as they fell in step with her and started walking.

“I'm glad you're back.”

“Me too.” Willow grinned as she looped her arm with Buffy's.

Buffy smiled, but it still didn't look real. “Me three.”

xxx

The first day of school was not what Xander had expected. Sure his classes were just as yawn-worthy as he knew they’d be. Willow, his bestest bud, was already ahead in all the reading by like a hundred years and encouraged him to do the same, or at least pick a book up. Giles was already hitting his own books, not that he ever stopped.

Buffy was...At first he thought he'd imagined it in the excitement of her return and the reappearance of vampires. But she was definitely different. It was like she was only half there. His worries only doubled when he stopped by the library after school to talk to Giles.

As he watched her knock Giles around with her quarter staff and destroy some of his training equipment he wondered what the hell was going on with her.

He waited for her to leave the library before coming out of the stacks. “Kinda intense today isn’t she?”

Giles looked up, surprise clear on his face. “Been there long Xander?”

He shrugged. “Long enough. So uh...did she beat you up too badly for a...well...”

His pseudo-father looked at him closely. “Xander?”

Xander took a deep breath. “Do you think you could train me too? It's just that Kuwabara, a friend of Yusuke's, was teaching me how to fight and I want to keep it up.”

Giles looked surprised, as if something of that sort had never occurred to him, but his eyes changed to a more thoughtful expression. “That's not a bad idea. Why don't you change into your gym clothes and show me what you've learned so far? Then I can draw up a plan to continue what he started.”

Xander grinned, it was more than he'd been hoping for. While it had been made clear that he wasn't the Slayer, he had stayed in the thick of things proving that he was useful and deserved a chance. “Oh, I've been running every morning...is that okay?”

Giles nodded. “It is, now hurry, off you go.” He smiled fondly at the retreating boy. “He's just full of surprises.”

xxx

Xander moved carefully through Sunny Dale, keeping an eye on his surroundings, and trying to keep his mind off his tired body. He'd keep patrol light tonight, he'd be of no use to anyone if he got snacked on. Giles' was a force to be reckoned with and he now had a much higher appreciation of the training the guy put Buffy through. He should have expected it really, because on a normal day the watcher could put Buffy through her paces, and he'd seen Giles best her during sword play before.

A sound caught his attention, a rustling beneath the ground of a new grave. He moved closer and got
there just a dirty hand clawed it's way through the sod. Patiently he waited for the baby vamp to climb from its grave, and once he had a clear shot at the chest he struck, plunging his stake in and out of the heart.

As the dust whirled about him he swung around, stake ready once again. And he stopped.

“You've gotten better at that.”

“Brood Meister!” Xander's smile and voice were mocking as he looked at the vampire, his hair gelled to perfection.

“Don't call me that.”

Xander rolled his eyes. “So what's up your Cursedness? You usually stalk Buffy, not me.”

“I don't stalk. I lurk.”

“Riiight.”

Angel glared at him, which would have been scary before summer vacation, but the vamp had nothing on Hiei. That guy could glare...and that third eye of his...creepy much. Angel continued to glare. “Have you noticed anything different about Buffy?”

Xander nodded and started to walk away, Angel fell in step and walked beside him. See they could be civil. Wouldn't Willow be proud? “She seems off, twitchy even. She killed some of Giles' training equipment.”

Angel made a sound of agreement. “She's colder than I've ever seen her.”

At that he smirked and did his best not to laugh, out loud anyway. “Gave you the brush off did she? What? You've never been rejected before? Welcome to the real world.”

“Brat.”

“I try.”

Angel snarled something unkind before stomping away and then disappearing into the shadows.

Xander snorted and shook his head. “Drama Queen.” He frowned though, now even more worried. If Buffy was being cold to Captain brood...well whatever it was it wasn't good.

xxx

“It wasn't about groping was it?” The words left his mouth before he could stop them. Of course it wasn't about groping, otherwise Angel wouldn't have been in such a mood last night. “Never mind, stupid question, I know it wasn't.”

Both girls stared at him, Willow gave him a stern poke to the ribs. “How do you know?”

He shrugged. “I ran into Angel while on patrol, he didn't seem like he'd been kissing or groping a pretty girl.”

Buffy continued to look at him strangely. “I thought we went over this, I'm the Slayer, I'm the one who stakes the vampires.” Her look changed from strange to disapproving. “You're gonna get hurt Xander.” She turned back to Willow, almost as she were dismissing him. “It wasn't about kissing. It was just shop talk, all business, nothing more. Vampires, anointed one, evil plots abound. Sound
familiar?”

Xander stared at her. Was this really Buffy? The Buffy he loved and respected? The one he put himself on the line for? Not that he knew breaking a prophecy was a major deal at the time...but still.

Willow glanced from Buffy to Xander, a little worried frown marring her face. “So what's up? And will there be research?”

“Vampires are getting antsy, nothing new. I can handle it.” She closed her locker with more force than necessary.

Xander nodded, even if he didn't completely agree. He moved to make sure Willow was between him and Buffy. He wasn't sure he wanted to be so close to her at the moment, and for Willow's sake he put on a smile. “So we going to the Bronze tonight? Cibo Motto is playing.”

Willow's eyes brightened and her bounce was back in full swing. “Cibo Motto! Really? They're playing?”

He rolled his eyes. “Nope, they're tap dancing.”

Her eyes got round in excitement. “They can...wait, that's sarcasm.” Xander grinned as she elbowed him.

“Well if it isn't the Three Amigos.”

The three of them exchanged a look. Buffy and Willow looked as confused as he felt. He rubbed his chin in thought. “Wasn't that a Disney film with Donald Duck, a cigar smoking parrot and a pistol packing rooster?”

Willow shook her head. “That was the Three Caballeros.”

He blinked. “Huh.”

Buffy looked at them strangely. “Stooges fits better.”

Cordelia frowned at them. “Whatever. So did you guys fight any evil fiends this summer?”

“Nah, not so much.” Xander said then blinked. “And we're really not supposed to talk about all that...like in public. As in out among the gen-pop where everyone can hear us.”

Willow shot the cheerleader a worried and slightly panicky look. “You haven't been talking about the world almost ending all summer have you?”

“As if. It's bad enough I have to go to the same school as you social rejects. Like I would admit to hanging out with you guys for an entire evening.” She turned slightly to focus on Buffy. “I just wanted you to know that I'll keep your secret.”

Buffy shrugged. “Then it's a mutual kind of thing.” At Cordelia's raised brow she elaborated. “You keep my secret and I won't tell anyone you spent an entire evening with us.” She walked away without looking back.

A confused frown appeared on Cordelia's face. “What's with her?”

“I think dieing damaged her circuits.” Xander muttered.

“Xander, she doesn't have circuits, it's not like she's not a demon robot...at least I hope she's not. I
don't want to go through that again.”

Cordelia whirled to face them. “Demon Robot? When did that happen?”

xxx

The band was good, but then Cibo Motto usually was. Their music had a way of wrapping around you like a playful lover...not that he knew anything about that. An image of Kurama and his smile flashed in his mind but he shook it way...now was not the time to think of pretty former thieves. He glanced at Willow who was practically scowling at her ice cream, she sighed and met his eyes.

“Something is up with Buffy.”

“Not disagreeing with you. It's like she's someone else. You think maybe pod people are real? This is the Hellmouth, it could totally happen.”

She gave him a look that bordered on her resolve face and he just smiled at her. “Xander be serious. Maybe she's upset because of what Angel said. I mean that Anointed One is still around.”

He nodded absently, it was possible, but not likely...but then again. “Maybe. He did kinda lead her to her death and all.”

He felt that little cold chill again, something was behind him, and how creepy was it that he could kinda sense vampires now...except when he turned to look, it was Buffy, and not a vampire. She was dressed to kill, figuratively, in a sexy little black dress. He stood and pushed a chair toward her.

“Nice of you to join us.”

“Yeah.” She bobbed her head a bit to the music, the movement drew Willow's eyes to something behind them.

“What's wrong with Angel? He looks upset.”

Buffy shrugged, not even glancing back. “All those decades of being sunlight challenged must be getting to him.” Willow's eyes widened in shock, and Xander couldn't blame her. He could practically feel his subconscious waving a red flag in warning. Then Buffy glanced at him, her eyes glittered, and not in a nice way. She moved closer to him, very very close. “Let's dance.”

Xander blinked. “Okay.” He was too stunned to do anything but let her lead him to the dance floor as a new song started up. It was like everything was suddenly moving much slower, everything got louder, and Buffy pulled him closer. Her body was warm, at odd with her shadowed and cold eyes. She brushed against him, curves swaying as only curves could and a part of him was singing Hallelujah it's about time.

He swayed with her, it was hard not to when she was practically plastered to his front. It was sexy, sexier than anything he'd ever seen or felt. But it was all wrong, he had alarm bells going off constantly in his head.

When someone who like-liked you asked you to dance their smile was warm, real. He'd danced with someone like that. Buffy's eyes were empty, and a cold chill ran over his skin that had nothing to do with vampires, and the room spun for a moment. He could see Angel glaring at him, Willow looked ready to cry, and Buffy moved closer, like a lioness going in for the kill, a cold little smile on her painted lips.

“Xander. Did I ever thank you, for saving my life?”
He swallowed. This was wrong. Buffy never looked at him like that, like something that could be used and discarded. “No.”

She slithered around him to whisper in his ear. “Don't you wish I would?”

He jerked away from her, his heart pounding, aching. And he almost hoped his eyes were glowing, just to scare some sense into her. “Don't flatter yourself Slayer. I've had better offers all summer.” He tried not to snarl at her startled face as he left the dance floor. On his way passed Willow he barely managed to give her a smile. The attempt was feeble, pathetic, and he knew it, but he had to get out of there. He needed to run...

And he did. He ran as if he could escape the memory of the most recent blow to his ego. A series of snarls startled him as he ran, the shadow within him was out in force tonight. It's displeasure rivaled his own. Neither of them liked being prey.

He hurt more than when she rejected him before Spring Fling. He'd had so many offers in Japan, god he was pathetic. After all those pretty girls and one fox, he'd gotten used to being wanted...god...what was wrong with her?

Xander practically flew by the park entrance and didn't stop until he reached Jessie's grave where he immediately collapsed, shaking. He pounded the ground, snarling again, until his hands ached. When he felt like he could speak without screaming, or snarling he rolled over onto his back and looked up at the leaves of the maple.

“I really don't get girls, especially when they're pms-ing. All those offers stroked my ego...but one little demeaning dance with Buffy and I'm back where I started. God, you have no idea how much I miss you right now Jess. I'm drowning in Slayer grade estrogen.”

He lay there for a few moments until a flash of pink and blue caught his eye.

“Ossu!”

“Hey Botan. What are you doing here?” He asked in Japanese.

“Oh, you know. Making my rounds.” She gazed at him curiously. “Are you wearing the translator?”

“Wait a second.” He pulled the ear bud out of his pocket and stuck it in his ear. “Now I am.”

“Wow, your Japanese has improved. I told you that it would start to stick.” He rolled his eyes and she grinned at him. “So I just happened to see you running through town like a crazy person and decided to check on you.”

He snorted and sat up. “I'm not the only crazy person around here.”

“Oh?” She hopped off her oar, willing it to disappear as she sat beside him. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” He sighed. “Just tell me one thing.”

“Sure.”

“When someone dies...can they go crazy?”

“Crazy?”

“Buffy isn't acting like Buffy.”
“Hmm. Well I can't speak from personal experience because I've never died. However in all my years as a guide I can truthfully say that people react in all sorts of ways. Some are accepting, others go into a rage, some try to plead with me or bargain. But it's their time to go and once they calm down I take them to Koenma.”

“What about Yusuke?”

She smiled at him. “I think that's something you should ask your brother.”

He smiled back at her before sighing. “Even if Buffy's gone loony-toons, someone needs to patrol.”

“I'll keep you company.”

“Thanks Botan.”

xxx

“No, you're not.”

“Even if she was attracted to me...she wouldn't have been that cold about it. She's got to be possessed. Or it's that time of the month.” Xander concluded, taking note of the odd looks Giles and Willow were giving him. “So we're agreeing with the possessed theory then?”

Willow nodded. “Otherwise she wouldn't be acting like such a b-i-t-c-h.”

“I can spell Willow.” He muttered as she blushed.

Giles looked heavenward for a moment, his hand twitched and Xander wondered if he was going to polish his glasses. “Yes well. She may simply be dealing with issues we cannot comprehend. Her death at the Master's hands must have been very traumatic. She may not have dealt with it fully.

Xander noticed Buffy coming up to their table, and he sent a warning gaze to Giles before greeting her. “Buffy.”

Giles turned. “Oh. Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

“No really, on account of the Master's gone.”

Silence reigned over their little corner of the cafeteria as that tidbit of information sunk in.

“What?”

xxx

Xander swung the sword in an arc above his head. When he had asked Giles to train him he'd been thinking of Kuwabara's hand to hand combat. He hadn't given much thought to weapons, mostly because he had nothing to combat Kuwabara's Spirit Sword. But Giles was nothing if not practical.

“Keep your wrists fluid.” Giles reminded him, Xander rolled his eyes and Willow kept up her pacing.

“I don't like this, we should have gone with her.”

“Personally, when she blows, I want to be far, far away from ground zero.”

“Xander!”

He shrugged. “Just sayin'.” They were all hurt by Buffy's actions. She'd claimed she couldn't slay
and keep an eye on them at the same time. Hello, he'd been patrolling since they'd found out about
vampires. Giles was a watcher, and had been for longer than Buffy had been a Slayer. And Willow
never went anywhere without a little perfume bottle that was half holy water. A little ingenious piece
of work, mixing holy water with perfume not only hurt vamps, but it screwed their noses up enough
that they couldn't track you as well while you ran away. But did Buffy care that they knew the
score? No, she was off in her own little twisted world that suddenly made no sense to the rest of
them.

“Ah! Ahh! The translation was wrong.” Giles exclaimed. Xander froze. There was that feeling
again, that little chill that spoke of predators getting too close. Giles didn't seem to notice and kept on.
“It actually says the person, or persons nearest to the Master when he died, as in physically...Good
god. It is a trap.” He lifted his head and his eyes widened. “For us.”

Xander whirled with his sword and decapitated the vamp that was behind him. Another screamed,
and he could only assume one vamp had gotten a face full of perfumed holy water. But there were
too many and they rushed him and grabbed the sword before he could swing it again. But he still had
his fists and his stake, and he dusted another before they could completely immobilize him. One
leaned down toward his throat, fangs ready as Xander continued to struggle.

“Don't.” Another warned and the vampire holding him blinked.

“Why the hell not?” Xander wrenched his arm away to elbow the vamp holding him. It snarled and
made for his throat again.

“The Mazoku.” The other vamp whispered. “The Anointed needs the girl for the Master's
resurrection. We don't need the boy, and unless you want us all to die you'll leave him alive.” The
next thing Xander knew was blackness.

When the blackness went a way the ceiling was spinning, and his nose hurt, or maybe it was his
whole head, it was hard to tell. Why am I looking at the ceiling? The last thing he remembered
was...Vampires! He struggled to stand up, gripping the table that was now on it's side. Stupid
undead, disrespecting Giles' handy dandy research table...hmm. Maybe he had a concussion. He
shook his head as he finally managed to get back on his feet.

“Xander!”

Oh joy, Buffy was back. She reached for him and he stumbled back. He snarled, using sheer will to
keep his eyes normal, but it was hard. Half his pack was gone...possibly dead...stupid hyena shadow.
He glared at Buffy, and she took a step back. Right then he hated her. All the little betrayals piled up
in his heart and he wanted to hurt her.

“What happened?”

“You need me to draw you a picture? Vampires happened, the ones you could handle.”

Her eyes were wide now, he could see a little bit of the real Buffy in there now. Huh...maybe it
wasn't too late. He could also see a little bit of panic in those green eyes. “I don't know, I was kinda
unconscious. And I don't know what your problem is, and I don't care. If you weren't so busy
running for bitch of the year you could have stopped this. I don't care what your issues are, but you
need to work them out now. Because if they hurt Willow or Giles we're through and I'll kill you.”

She was staring at him now, as if she'd never seen him, and it gave him a little thrill, and he knew his
eyes had flashed that creepy glowy green.

xxx

Giles looked at Xander, his eyes were still dazed and Ms. Calendar was keeping him steady. “Where?”

Xander stared at the scene below. “She's working out her issues.” His voice was cold, and he didn't care that Giles was looking at him warily, or that Buffy was totally wailing on the Anointed One’s followers. Willow was alive and in his arms, but he couldn't stop shaking. She was safe, but he had come too close to losing her. That's not something he could handle, not after losing Jessie. He hardly noticed the big vampire go up in flames.

Willow moved in his arms and he held her tighter. “Is it over?” Her whisper was strong, she was going to be okay.

He shook his head. “Not yet, she's got one more issue.”

They all watched as Buffy smashed the Master's bones, her fear shining through on her tear-streaked face. Once the bones were dust she fell apart and Angel went to her to help her pick up the pieces.

xxx

Today school went the way it was supposed to. Buffy was really back this time, and he'd forgiven her. Dieing had messed with her more than they'd all thought. Mortality had come knockin' and reminded her that it was her destiny to die young. Just not this time, he'd seen to that.

He realized he'd been staring in the weapons cabinet for nearly five minutes...just how hard had those vamps hit him?

“Thank you.”

Xander jumped and turned startled eyes to look at Giles. “For what? And don't sneak up on me like that!”

“For forgiving her.”

Xander let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and shrugged. “I get it. I don't like what she did, but I get it. Having her mortality shoved down her throat scared the bejezus outta her. But still, I'm glad it's over. I'm not sure I could have handled Bitch Slayer much longer.”

“Xander.”

“If she'd kept it up I'd have gone back to Japan.”

“Xander!”

“What?”

“You wanted to train?”

“Oh...right. So?”

“Quarter Staffs please.”

“Yay.” He reached for the staffs and tossed one to Giles who caught it easily. “Nice.”
“Thank you. Now, shall we?” They moved away from the book cage to a more open spot.

“Let's shall.”

Giles gave him a look before attacking. Xander blocked, but barely. Giles was faster than he'd been expecting. Giles swung again and Xander took a step back, shifting his body weight to take the blow with his staff.

“Not bad.” Giles nodded in approval before attacking again, this time faster and with more force behind the blows. However Xander was a fast learner...well he was now anyway. Training with Kuwabara could be painful so paying attention was vital.

Xander spent most of his time on the defensive, blocking the majority of Giles' attacks. He'd managed to dodge a few, and only a couple met their targets.

They were both breathing hard when Giles took a step back. “You did well, considering this was your first time using the quarter staff.”

“Thanks.”

“I thought you were my Watcher.”

They both looked towards the counter. “Oh.” Giles looked surprised. “Been there long?”

“She's been here for at least ten minutes G-man.”

“Really?” He still looked surprised, however he managed a stern look at Xander. “I thought you weren't going to call me that anymore.”

Xander shrugged. “I never agreed to that.” He held his hand out for the staff and Giles tossed it too him. “So...tea?”

“Oh...of course. Just a moment...since when do you drink tea?”

“I spent the summer in Japan Giles, everyone drinks tea there.”

“I don't have green tea.”

“That's fine. As long as you have sugar.”

Giles nodded and headed for his office and his kettle and Xander headed toward the weapons cabinet with the quarter staffs. He could hear Buffy follow him.

“So...you're really serious about this Slay Boy thing.”

He snorted as he put the quarter staffs away. “I'm not trying to take away your spotlight. You're the Slayer, and I get that, but you can't be everywhere at once.”

She nodded. “How long have you been patrolling?”

“Since the Harvest.”

“Why didn't you tell me? You could have gotten killed...and then Willow would have cried. Me too by the way.”

Xander sighed and turned to face her. “Look. I've forgiven you cause you were really messed up
with the whole dieing thing. And Willow's forgiven you cause she's Willow, but you and I are not okay.” He glared at her and she looked at her feet. “You really hurt us Buff, not the almost getting Willow and Giles killed part, hello site of mystical convergence, almost dieing is the norm around here.”

She looked back up at him. “About the Bronze...”

“I'm not a toy that you can play with in front of your brood boy just to make him jealous. You ever treat me like that again and I will pack my bags and move to Japan. I don't have to stay in Sunny Hell if I don't want to. Yusuke and Keiko would be glad to have me, heck Keiko's parents practically adopted me over the summer. I have other options open to me now.”

She was crying now, quiet tears that streaked down her face. “I—I'm so sorry Xander. I don't...did I make too much of a...mess to fix us?”

He sighed. What was it he had told Koenma? Oh yeah, he'd die before giving up on either of his girls. “No, but you gotta realize Buffy, we're here to stay. We won't run away, ever. You're our friend and we won't give you up without a fight.” He gave her a soft smile. “We will be okay, I just need a few days to process. I know I'm not your match, it just hurt to be reminded of it like that.”

A broken sob escaped her and she covered her mouth, as if to take it back. “Xander.”

“Come here.” His smile and open arms were all she needed before she flung herself at him and broke down again. “It'll be okay.” He met Giles' eyes as he held one of his best friends in the whole world close. “I promise it'll be okay.”

XXX
Botan smiled before taking a sip of her tea, Rupert always kept the best blends. She waited patiently as he said goodbye to the pretty woman who had driven him home. He hadn't seen her yet and she didn't want to interrupt his stuttering. He was so cute when he was nervous. When he closed the door he paused, almost as if he could sense her. Who knows maybe he could, he had always been rather perceptive. Her Ripper was one of a kind.

“Konban wa.”

When he finally turned to face her, he gave a raised brow at how she was curled up in the armchair enjoying his tea. “Do make yourself at home.”

She gave him a cheeky grin. “I already have and we both know you don't mind. Tea?”

The corners of his mouth twitched in the beginning of an amused smile. “Please.”

As she set about fixing him a cup he put away his scarf and coat. By the time he made his way to her, she had his tea ready and handed it to him. He accepted it with a sigh and sat down on the sofa.

“No need to sound so depressed.”

“That depends, is this a social call?” Giles asked before blowing on the steaming liquid. “Or are you going to give me some sort of warning?”

Botan pouted at him. “It's a social call...mostly.”

“Mostly?”

She shrugged. “I'm on break and decided to visit you for a bit. Of course I didn't expect you to be out on a date. Congratulations by the way, she's very pretty.”

He snorted and choked on his tea a bit before answering her. “Nosy bugger.” He took another sip to ease his throat. “So, you're working Sunny Dale tonight then?”

“Yes. I actually requested that Sunny Dale be my responsibility, spirit wise anyway.”

He blinked at her curiously. “Why on earth would you request such an assignment? You'll be working every night in a town like this.”

She shrugged. “It's just simpler that way. Yusuke asked me to keep an eye on Xander, he wasn't exactly happy when he found out the world almost ended and his little brother was in the middle of it all.”

“None of us were exactly happy to be here at the time.” He smirked. “So in order to keep him informed you'll be stopping by often?”

“I may drop by once a week to catch up with you, and of course I'll keep a closer eye on Xander.
But keeping watch over a hellmouth is a lot of work so I'm actually thinking of getting an apartment...or maybe a small house.”

“Really? What about Mukuro?”

Botan waved a hand as if to push the question away. “We weren't in it for the long haul.”

Giles chuckled at her. “You were, as the children say, dumped?”

“It's not funny.”

He cleared his throat, trying to keep his laughter at bay. “My apologies, you're right, it's not funny. Would you like something stronger than tea? To ease your broken heart of course.”

She glared at him. “It's tempting, but I really do need to make my rounds, and I need to swing by the high school.”

“But no one died, well tonight at least.” He looked thoughtful. “Of course our forces were all on campus.”

“Which is why I need to make my regular rounds, and someone did die tonight at the school. Well technically anyway, Daryl Epps died...again.”

“You're going to escort him then? How exactly was his brother able to capture his soul in the first place?”

Botan grimaced. “It's embarrassing really, but my girls have trouble with hellmouths. The energy makes them nervous and clouds their senses.” At his frown she continued. “Almost all of them were human before they died Rupert. Humans who had a little spiritual energy, but never enough to attract anything violent.”

“And you are the exception?”

She grinned. “I never died, and I've never been human.”

His eyes widened. “Really?” It wasn't an answer he had been expecting. “So you do have some secrets left.”

“Yep.” She winked at him. “I've been top guide for more than a thousand years and my heritage...well that's a story for another time.” She finished her tea. “I'll fetch Daryl after I make my rounds.”

“Will you be back tonight? After escorting him?”

She shook her head. “Probably not tonight, after all I still have my quarters in Reikai.”

“If you decide to come back I have a spare room, well it's more of a study but the couch in there is a foldout.”

She looked at him closely, meeting his eyes, and for a moment they gazed at one another. The years seemed to slip away and they were twenty years younger, her eyes twinkled and he gulped. Twenty years ago had been a torrential time for him and she had been an anchor and a safe haven from everything wrong in his world. A lifetime ago he would have done anything for her, and she for him. The moment ended and they smiled fondly at memories they would always share.

“If you're serious I would appreciate it, that way I can get a head start on my search for a new
home."

“I'll leave the light on for you then. Have you eaten? I could whip something up?”

She smiled at him. “Only if you let me help.”

xxx

Xander peered around the corner of the main school building at what was left of the old science building. It was blackened and hollowed from the fire. He studied the empty building and the expansion of pavement in front of it. There was no one in sight, and no movement except the steam that still rose from the building’s shell. He shuddered, Buffy was in so much trouble. The troll had been livid when he heard Buffy had been involved, that was two burned buildings on her record now.

A sudden movement in the parking lot caught his eye and he started to shrink back, thinking maybe Snyder was still around, pacing and plotting against Buffy. After a second glance he was relieved to see that the figure was taller than Snyder and he steeled his resolve for the reason he was here. Taking a breath, he cautiously moved from his hiding place and slowly approached the confused teen.

He hadn't been sure when he'd first seen the guy earlier, but there he was in all his glory. No scars in sight, Daryl Epps looked just like he had before his accident. Xander had first seen him as he and Willow were leaving the scene. One glance and he'd been shocked to see the former football star gazing around him, standing in the middle of the parking lot. He'd almost called out to the guy when a fireman had walked through him. His mouth had snapped shut and he had decided then and there to come back later.

So here he was, hoping to god and whoever was listening that Snyder was no longer on school grounds. With one more look around he walked till he was just a few feet from what was left of Daryl.

“Hey Daryl.” He kept his voice soft, just in case the guy was still a little loony.

Daryl's clouded gaze landed on him and cleared as their eyes locked.

“Do I know you?”

“Not personally. I'm in the same class as Cordelia though if that helps.”

Recognition flared in his eyes and Daryl nodded. “You're that goofball Harris. Right?”

“I tend to go by Xander, but yeah, that's me.”

“You can see me, well duh, you're talkin' to me...why?”

“Why am I talkin' to ya? Or why can I see you?”

“Both.”

Xander shrugged. “I have no idea why I can see you. You're the first ghost I've ever met/talked to/seen, whatever.”

“So I'm really dead then? For good this time?”

“I think so. I mean no one's gonna be able to reconstruct you this time...there wasn't much left.”
Daryl looked relieved to hear that. “And my brother?”

“Chris is gonna be in counseling for a long time...and Eric is going straight to Juvie.”

“He shouldn't have brought me back, but I get why he did. I just...I wish I could tell Cordelia that I'm sorry. I wasn't acting...like me.”

“Yeah well, it's to be expected. You died and were brought back, you wigged, it's totally understandable.”

Daryl gave him an odd look. “You never answered me Harris, why are you here?”

“Me? I'm just here to keep you company for a while until someone comes to pick you up.”

“Pick me up? You smokin' somethin' Harris? 'Cause I don't think people go around picking up ghosts...but hey you're here talking to me aren't ya.”

“Not that kind of pick up ya jerk.” Xander rolled his eyes. “This is what I get when I try to do the right thing. Look Daryl, I'm just hanging out with you for a while until one of the guides gets here.”

“Guides?”

“Spirit Guides, Ferry Girls, ya know...Grim Reapers?” Xander grinned as Daryl gulped. “Don't worry man, they're all cool, nothing scary about them...well Yusuke said Botan can be scary but she's been nothin' but nice to me. Anyway, one of her girls should be here soon, see when someone dies it's the guide that shows them the way to Reikai, which would be the Spirit Realm. And you can stop lookin' at me like I'm crazy any time now.”

“Sorry...but what makes you think any of that is real...not that I think you're psycho or anything...”

Xander shrugged. “I'm on a first name basis with one of the guides.”

Daryl snorted. “Right and I'm Pat Sajack.”

“Does that mean I'm Vanna White?”

Xander smirked at Daryl and pointed up, Daryl glanced up and stumbled back in shock. “She's flying!”

“Technically she's floating. Hey Botan.”

“Hello Xander.” She floated lower glancing at Daryl as she gently landed on her feet. “I'm Botan. Reikai's top guide and I'll be escorting you to your judgment.”

“Judgment?” Daryl's eyes were huge and he looked paler than before...which was weird because of the whole no blood thing. He glanced at Xander. “You were serious?”

“Uh, yeah.”

The former jock looked at Botan again, still pale, and shaking a little. “So...judgment huh.” He frowned. “I...I...”

Botan leaned towards him and gave his shoulder a comforting pat. “Don't worry, what you did after you were brought back is strictly off the record.”

A look of pure relief washed over his face. “Thanks...uh...Harris.” He winced as he addressed
Xander. “About that lunch money a few years ago...”

“Forget about it. Just take some advice.”

“Sure, okay.”

“Don't let Koenma bully you.”

“Koenma?”

“The guy judging your soul.”

“You know him?”

“Eh, he and my brother are friends. Koenma went to his wedding and everything.”

“Holy shit!”

“Yeah, pretty much. Oh hey Botan, question for ya.”

“What is it?”

“Any idea why I can see ghosts now?”

She blinked at him. “ Couldn't you see them before?”

“Uh, that would be a big fat no.”

“Huh.” She shrugged. “Not a clue, maybe because you broke a prophecy? Koenma did warn you the Powers That Be get rather pissy when someone breaks their rules.”

Xander sighed and hung his head. “Great, my very own super power and it's something lame like seeing ghosts.”

“Hey!”

“No offense Daryl.”

xxx

Xander unlocked the front door and let himself in, careful to keep his entry as quiet as possible. Just because Tony wasn't around anymore didn't mean he wanted to disturb his mom. Not that he saw her much, between her job, her new love life and his nightlife, however she did manage to have dinner with him at least twice a week. He closed the door and locked it up tight behind him before wandering into the kitchen, she'd left the light above the stove on along with a note.

Xander,

I'm on call all night, but there's pizza in the fridge.

--Mom

“Cool.” He hauled the leftover pizza out of the fridge and tossed three slices on a plate before nuking them in the microwave.

He sat down to happily eat his dinner, cause yay pizza, when he noticed some kind of brochure on the table. It was glossy and there was a picture of a woman in a kimono serving tea. Picking it up he
started to flip through it as he ate, it was about some sort of exchange program the school would be doing soon. Schools from other countries were sending their students to Sunny Dale for two weeks. Crazy adults. As he flipped through the brochure a loose piece of paper slipped out. He caught it before it hit the floor, it was a letter of some sort.

To the Harris Family,

We'd like to thank you for your participation in our new Cultural Exchange program. The brochure that you have received gives an overview of many aspects of Japanese culture which we hope you will read thoroughly and enjoy. The other document is the information about the student you have volunteered to host. We hope this will be an enlightening experience for everyone. Please be sure to pick up your guest when their plane arrives at the Sunny Dale airport.

Xander stared at the letter...how the heck had his mom forgotten to mention this? This was big! He couldn't have some cram school tourist tagging along and getting himself killed! He made a grab for the other pamphlet and froze when he saw the picture of the student Japan was sending him for two weeks.

“Holy crap.” He smiled and inhaled the rest of his pizza before going upstairs to grab his communicator and going back to the kitchen. Sitting back down at the table he put in a code and waited for the other end to connect. He had just put his translator in when a familiar girl appeared on the screen. She looked surprised to see him. “How's my favorite miko?”

“Xander? You better have a good reason for calling me during school.”

He blinked at her. “Sorry, I forgot about the time difference.”

She sighed. “No, it's okay, we have self study anyway. So what's going on?”

“When were you gonna tell me about this whole foreign exchange thing?”

“Eh?”

“You, coming to America, for two weeks.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Your picture is on my kitchen table.”

“Hmm. Mom didn't tell me the name of my host family, or where in America I was going.”

“That would be Harris. Which would be us. Which will actually just be me 'cause Mom's not home much.”

She grinned. “Well at least we already met over the summer. So, should I expect anything unique about your town?”

He gaped at her. “Uh...Kagome. You know how I told you that my hometown has a portal to a hell dimension?”

She blinked a few times before gasping. “I didn't think you were serious!”

“Well yeah. I wouldn't joke about the mouth of hell actually being under the high school library...okay maybe I would if there were no such things as hellmouths...and if I did joke about it I would say it would be under the principal's office, maybe the cafeteria, but not the library. But I
totally wasn't joking. It kinda opened up a little during our little apocalypse at the end of last term.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. So you wanna help patrol while you're here?”

She looked thoughtful. “I can't just pack my bow and arrows and hop on the plane. Customs looks down on that kind of thing.”

“But you have that spirit bow that's kind of like Kuwabara's sword.”

“It also uses up a lot more energy. Charging arrows is easier and is just as effective.”

“Hmm. We could by-pass the whole plane thing and have Botan bring you over.”

“Not a good idea. My Mom is going to see me off at the airport.”

“But she already knows about your miko gig.”

“Well yeah, but she doesn't know that I keep tabs on the demon population around here...or that I know a Grim Reaper.”

He shrugged. “You could just tell her you found some sort of mystical way of transportation. Say it's like that old well you told me about, but it just leads to Sunny Dale instead of the past.”

“I guess...and it would be cheaper.”

Xander grinned at her. “And then you could totally bring your weapons. Giles might have some spare arrows.”

“You think I'll need them?”

“Don't know. We're getting more vamps now that school is back in session.”

“Really?” She glanced away for a second. “Oh, hey I gotta go. Self study ends soon.”

“Later Kagome. Tell Shippo I said hi.”

She waved and the screen went blank.

Xander snorted. “Ghosts and Mikos...what next?”

XXX
Complete darkness. That's all there was. The complete absence of light. It was the kind of darkness that could only be found deep inside the earth, where sunlight never strayed. Which was freaky-weird because he was still in his room...on his bed, and he'd know his bed anywhere. However that's all he could see. Actually, he wasn't entirely sure his eyes were even open. He tried to moved his hands, he only wanted to feel his face and determine whether or not his eyes were open or closed...or there at all. His arms wouldn't move.

“Well crap.” At least he could still talk.

A scuffling caught his attention and he strained to listen. It was a soft sound, little footsteps in the darkness, growing closer. The sounds of the footfalls were muted, as if padded. Sudden pressure on the bed by his feet made his heart race and he wondered if it would leave him behind trapped in whatever this was...and he hoped to god or Koenma or whoever that this was a dream. ’Cause if it wasn't...”Crap.”

It...whatever it was, moved, walking beside him, casually strolling towards his head. The thing climbed up on his chest and he felt little pinpricks there as its weight settled on him. It wasn't heavy which was a relief, except for the little shots of pain, but they weren't even that bad. It moved again and Xander felt something soft bump against his chin.

And suddenly his eyes were open, the morning sun filled the room and he blinked. “Weird dream.” His eyes landed on the Spirit Egg Koenma had given him, and it all clicked. “Couldn't you have found a less creepy way to communicate?” He reached for it and tapped it, it was warm to the touch. The egg had changed over the summer, it was still green, though a lighter shade, and it had gotten bigger. Which was weird because Yusuke said his egg never changed. He sighed. “If you're pissed about not getting carried around anymore it's your own fault. You shouldn't have gotten bigger.” He tapped it again, gently and it shifted. “Gonna hatch soon then? I'll try to be here when you do...but cut it out with the freaky dreams.” He rolled his eyes. “We will never tell Yusuke about this conversation...ever.”

With a grunt, he rolled out of bed and began the search for his clothes. He'd have to do laundry soon; his Mom never got to such things anymore what with her sudden freedom and social life taking up a lot of her time. At least she still ate dinner with him a couple of nights a week. Hmm...maybe if he cooked she'd eat at home more...then again an absent parent meant it was easier to sneak in late after patrolling.

Soon enough he'd located clean clothes and was out the door and coasting to school on his skate board. It was faster than walking, and slightly more stylish...not to mention his balance was way better after all the working out. Hmm...I'd better run tomorrow morning. Lost in his thoughts and not looking forward to another day in Snyder's domain, he almost missed the guy trying to get his attention as he passed the Expresso Pump. He stopped and looked at the guy...well, make that demon.
“Morning Clem.”

Clem was an acquaintance Yusuke had made when he’d visited and ever since then Clem would stop him and asked about his brother whenever he saw Xander.

“Morning Xander. You got time to sit and have a latte with me?”

Clem was dressed in his usual going out in daylight gear, his wide brimmed hat sort of hid his ears and the trench coat looked way too warm.

“Nah, gotta get to Hell High...don't you get hot in that coat?”

Clem shrugged. “A little, but it's not too bad. How's your brother?”

“Last time I talked to him he was fine, happily married and workin' in his in-laws' shop while she takes college classes.”

“She's a smart girl, huh.”

“Yup.”

“You really don't have time to hang out?”

Xander grinned. “Not today man, but we're still on for this weekend, right? Saturday, Star Trek marathon and Cheesy Puffs?”

“Definitely!”

“Cool.”

“Good Morning Xander!”

Xander and Clem both jumped as Botan seemingly popped into existence beside him.

“Jesus Botan! Don't do that!” He glanced at the very large frothy caffeinated beverage she held in her hands. “Just how many of those had you had?”

She smiled at him. “This is my first of the day.”

“Dear god.” He shook his head at her and caught Clem watching Botan curiously. “Oh, right. Botan, this is Clem, a local neutral. Clem this is Botan, Reikai's top Guide.”

Clem's eyes grew impossibly wide. “Really?”

Botan waved. “Nice to meet you Clem.” He nodded a her.

Xander snickered. “So find a place yet?”

She produced a copy of the local paper from places unknown and waved it around. “Not yet. Care to give me a hand?”

He shook his head. “I've really gotta get going, Snyder's probably still on the war path and I don't want to be an easy target. But Clem's lived in Sunnydale his whole life so he could probably tell ya all about where not to buy a house.”

Botan smiled at Clem. “Would you mind?”
Clem grinned at her. “Never could refuse a pretty lady.”

Xander nodded. “Cool, I'll see you guys later.” He waved as he pushed off and skated down the street.

Botan watched him go for a bit before sitting beside Clem at his table. “Thank you for this. I've been staying with a friend and though we're good company, he's seeing someone and doesn't want to explain my staying at his home.”

Clem shook his head. “It's fine. You really from Reikai?”

She nodded. “Yep, Koenma's special assistant and now solely assigned to the hellmouth.”

“Really? Heck of job.”

She shrugged and took a sip of her drink. “I requested it as a favor to Yusuke. Someone's got to keep an eye on Xander.” She looked at him thoughtfully. “He's not telling his brother everything so I'm here to watch his back.”

Clem snorted. “Kids today. They try to do more than they should. Xander is a decent sort of guy though. And no demon here will kill him. Gotta say the Anointed One cut it close when his minions grabbed the others.”

“Idiot vampire child.” She shook her head. “So, about this list of mine.”

Xander sighed and watched his best friend as she nervously bounced in place while students strolled past them sedately in comparison. A person would think she was the one in trouble instead of Buffy.

Snyder, being the evil little man that he was, had waited until the end of the day to call Buffy, and Sheila, into his office for a little chat. Poor Buffy had been anxious all day, stressing out and as a side effect, making Willow jittery. The Bastard really knew how to prolong misery. So he had led Willow outside, hoping the fresh air would calm her down. He should have known better.

“What do you think he'll do to her?” Willow asked, glancing at him.

“No idea, I'm not an evil little troll-person.”

Willow went on as if she hadn't heard him. “What if he expels her? What if he tells Mrs. Summers! She'll have to move again! I don't wanna lose Buffy! He's probably making her clean out her locker right now! You think if we give him a concussion he'd forget about expelling her? I could distract him and you could hit him with one of Giles' books and then we could--”

Xander put his hand over her mouth. “Relax. Now I'm going to let go and you're gonna remember how to breathe. Right?” She nodded, and he let her go.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Thanks.”

“Welcome.”

“But do you think he'll expel her?”

“Don't know, let's find out.” He smiled and pulled her towards the doors where Buffy and Sheila had just come out.
“Why is she with Sheila?” Willow muttered as they got closer.

“We can work on the banners tomorrow and then figure out the menu.” Buffy said, hands shoved in her pockets dejectedly.

“Yeah, sure whatever. Meat Pie!” Sheila strolled away from them, toward an older guy with long hair.

“Snyder making you guys his own personal slaves?” Xander asked.

Buffy nodded at him. “Snyder’s got his two worst students hosting Parent Teacher night.” She sighed. “You think any other Slayers had to Slay and survive high school? I mean I should get at least a few get outta jail free cards...although I think Sheila might need them more than me. Did you know she stabbed a teacher with pruning sheers? What's her deal anyway?”

“She's scary, not even the football team bothers her.” Willow grinned and bounced in place.

“She won't do her homework, and they can't make her for fear of her skill with sharp objects.” Xander smirked. “You should probably keep her away from scissors or any other potentially dangerous things.”

“Great. I have to slay, do Parent Teacher night, keep Snyder away from my Mom and keep Sheila from maiming anyone.”

Xander rolled his eyes. “Stop worrying, you'll do fine. It'll be a nice get-together for parents to learn and Snyder to plot. As longs as nothing bad happens—Ow!” He glared at both girls. “What was that for?”

Buffy glared back. “You just jinxed us in a majorly bad way!”

Willow nodded and gave him her best disappointed face. “What were you thinking! Bad Xander!”

With one last glare both girls stomped off leaving him blinking in confusion.

“I did not just jinx us!” He yelled after them. “...Well I hope not anyway.” He shook his head and turned around to go back inside the school. He had training with Giles first today.

xxx

Xander kicked a pebble off the sidewalk and sighed. He'd been distracted during the session with Giles and the Watcher just didn't understand what was bothering him, and he'd even tried to explain it. However it seemed there were some things that just couldn't bridge the generation gap. The unwritten law of the jinx was apparently one such thing. Giles had done the eye roll thing, and followed it up with a put-upon sigh when Xander had explained why he was distracted. Adults just didn't get it, a jinx was a big deal. He just hoped the girls would forget about it by tomorrow...well he figured Buffy would. Snyder was on her case so often now that she barely had time to breathe much less be mad at him.

He wondered if there was something he could do about Snyder. Maybe if he revealed that his brother was the guy who scared the pants off the troll he could get some leeway. However he hated to use that particular trump-card this early in the year. It could come in handy during an emergency.

“Stupid Snyder.” He grumbled and glanced at his watch. If he hurried he could make it home in time to possibly see his mom before she went out and he had to patrol. Maybe he could even convince her to stick around for a little stir-fry before she left. With a small and hopeful smile he had just started to cross the street when he heard an engine roar. The car came up on him so fast he barely dove out of
the way in time. He rolled in the grass and rose in a crouch taking a moment to flip off the driver before checking himself for injuries.

“Crazy asshole.” He patted himself down and discovered no new aches or pains and nodded in satisfaction. “Better get home before something else happens.” He shivered in the balmy night air as he gazed at the fading tail lights. “I really hope I didn't jinx us.”

Inside the car, behind blacked out windows a weak giggle drifted out and caressed the driver's ears. “We nearly ran down the prince.”

Blue eyes met brown. “Should I try better next time love?”

“No no. Should the prince die the King will be ever so cross and raze the town before we can paint it pretty and red.”

“Raze the town eh? Sounds like my kind of bloke.”

xxx

The Anointed resisted the urge to smack down his cocky minion. Maybe he'd only been dead for a year but he wasn't an idiot, there was no way this fool could take down the Slayer. She'd proved herself to be a formidable opponent even before she'd killed the Master. He almost sighed in relief when the stranger appeared and distracted the minion from his crowing.

The newcomer had walked in with a swagger, like he was entitled to everything in his path. This was no Fledge, this was a master vampire, and not just any master. The Anointed could feel the familiar thrum of power. Power he could only associate with the line of Aurelius, the stranger was of the Master's blood. He didn't feel old but he was strong, with the potential to be much stronger. A single blow was all it took and his minion was out cold on the floor. Pathetic, and the idiot on the floor thought he could take out the Slayer.

“So, what do you lot do for fun around here? Besides knocking Nancy Boy here on his back?”

The Anointed tilted his head to better observe the newcomer. The Master had never mentioned this vampire. Darla had been his favorite, and her Childe Angelous a vicious prodigy. But this one...he was odd, he'd never seen a vampire who dyed their hair. “Who are you?”

“Spike.” The blond stepped forward, gracefully avoiding the unconscious vampire on the floor. “You're that Anointed bloke.” He grinned. “I've read about you.” That statement said a lot, most vampires didn't pay attention to legends or prophecies. But the Master had taught him many things. One was, clever vampires are rare. Another was that such creatures don't follow orders well. Spike stepped a little closer. “Heard there was a Slayer problem here, normally you kill them and the problem goes away.”

Interesting. “Could you do it?”

“Could I?” For some reason Spike seemed amused. “Killed my first Slayer before I was a hundred, did my second in the late seventies--” He paused and turned to face another vampire who seemed to have wandered in. His minions were very bad at keeping his lair secure. He started to glare at the minion beside him when she caught his eyes.

The newest arrival would have made his blood freeze had he still been human. He could tell she was different, a seer probably. Damaged but powerful. The Master had spoken of vampires with
additional powers, powers over the mind, the ability to see what was hidden. He watched her warily as she seemed to float towards him in her simple white gown as she rambled about daisies. Definitely damaged. But what was most intriguing was that same thrum of power. This Drusilla was Aurelius blood.

She met his eyes again as Spike wrapped his coat around her. “Have you met the Prince yet? Sweet little Prince with the pouting eyes.” She giggled and Spike smiled adoringly at her. Only a Childe would worship their Sire with such a look, he wondered who the heck had turned the loony seer.

“Me and Dru we're movin' in. You keep your boys in line and I'll clean up this Slayer problem you've got.”

The Anointed nodded at him. “You have a deal.” He had nothing but respect for the late Master and the line of Aurelius, but he really hoped these two newcomers would get themselves killed, maybe even take out the Slayer or her people in the process. He just hoped to get the heck out of town before the Mazoku showed up.

xxx

“I can't believe she didn't show.” Buffy grumbled as she touched up one of the letters on the banner she was working on. “What do you think? Think it's welcoming enough?”

Xander glanced over at her banner. “It looks fine Buff.” Xander grinned as he dabbled more paint on his own banner. “I can't believe you actually expected Shelia to show. She's almost as well known for her skipping habits as she is for her skill with sharp and pointy things.”

Willow nodded as she stirred up some more paint. “She goes to this bar called the Fish Tank. Sometimes the police have raids, I think they have a cell set up just for her to sober up in.”

“I heard they gave her own cell because the last time they had someone else in a cell with her she cut off part of their ear. Of course that's only a rumor.” He glanced up as Giles and Ms. Calendar approached them, arguing with one another. “What's the up guys? Trouble in paradise already?”

The girls did their best not to giggle and Giles gave them all a mild glare. “Ms. Calendar has informed me that this Saturday is the night of Saint Vigeous.”

Xander glanced at Willow and Buffy. “Does that name mean anything to either of you?” they shook their heads. “Thought so...can ya give us a hint Giles? Who was this Saint guy?”

Giles looked heavenward for a moment and Ms. Calendar gave his arm a sympathetic pat. “Saint Vigeous was venerated by vampires and is considered to be their patron saint, he was a rather bloodthirsty fellow who led a crusade of vampires that left destruction in their wake.”

Xander blinked. “Huh...knowledge.”

Buffy glared at Xander and pointed accusingly at him with her paint brush. “See, you did jinx us.”

“Bad Xander!”

“Hey! He said Saturday! Parent Teacher night is Thursday thank you very much.” He pouted at them. “Therefore there was no jinx.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Look Giles, if I survive the wrath of Snyder, then I'll worry about the vampire crusader guy.”
Xander felt that little chill go through him, a feeling he was fast coming to associate with any kind of predator. He glanced behind them and saw Snyder turning away from the water fountain. “Troll Alert.” He kept his voice soft, confident that the others would still hear him.

Giles and Ms. Calendar looked up and he nearly snickered at their faces. Giles made a fast recovery though. “Ah well...Young people today...Shall we?” The two of them walked away in a swift retreat. Xander envied them. He and the girls shared a look and turned to face the Troll.

“She ditched didn't she?”

xxx

Xander watched the Billy Idol look-a-like curiously from his place on the dance floor. Either the poor guy was completely taken with the picture his girls presented, their heads bent over Buffy's homework, strands of blond and red hair blending together in the shadows of the bronze; or he was looking for easy prey. And he didn't entrust his girls to just anyone.

He bounced over to their table, sliding in between them and the stranger. “I'm all alone out there.” He flashed puppy eyes at them, Buffy immediately covered her own and kept them hidden. Willow blinked. “We're kinda studying.” Her resolve face wavered.

He pouted at them. “Come on, you two have been studying since we got here. One dance. Please?” Buffy peeked at Willow. “Is he still making the eyes?”

Yep.”

“Guess we have no choice. My brain is fried anyway.” She uncovered her eyes and smiled at Xander. “Lead the way.” He grinned and took her hand and together they dragged a protesting Willow along to the dance floor.

Buffy flowed with him to the music and he flowed right back, their moves were graceful and he didn't flail once. Thank the gods for Kurama's dance lessons over the summer. He twirled her and she frowned. He tilted his head. “What's wrong?”

Her eyes darted behind him. “Willow.”

Xander looked over his shoulder at Willow who was sort of stepping from side to side, barely moving much less dancing. He looked back at Buffy. “Move with me.” Her frown grew deeper until he started to pull her towards Willow. “Put Willow in the middle.” Buffy smirked and they moved together until they had their friend between them.

“Guys?”

They just smiled at her and each other. Buffy put her hands on Willow's hips and Xander ran his hands down her arms. Willow's eyes grew wide.

“Guys?” It came out as a squeak that time.

Buffy grinned at her. “Relax Wills.”

“We're supposed to be having fun Wills. Just Dance with us. Move with us. Listen to the music Wills.” Xander whispered to her ear.

Between the two of them they found a rhythm and had Willow moving and flowing with them.
Xander noticed several guys and girls watching them and he grinned at his friends.

Buffy grinned back and they twirled Willow between them until she faced Buffy again. “You've gotten way better at this.”

“Lots of practice at the wedding.”

Willow giggled, finally relaxed, and grasped Buffy's hands in hers. “Japanese girls think Xander is exotic.”

Buffy made wide eyes at Willow even as they swayed together. “Really?”

Xander snorted. “I was so exhausted it was like every available woman wanted to swing me around the room. But I did learn a few things.”

“You should show her the pictures.”

Xander nodded as a chill went through him. Oops, almost forgot about Billy Idol. He maneuvered them so that Buffy was in the middle, mostly so he could look around without the girls getting suspicious.

~

There she was, Regina of her pride, three teens on the cusp of adulthood. The golden girl, the timid redhead, and a brown-eyed boy. They danced and moved together, the Slayer and the boy pulling the other girl out of her shell. Their movements drew the eyes of both genders, and he could smell the lust in the air. This could be fun, baiting the Slayer would be easy. He'd already sent Nancy-boy to get a bite. He moved closer, trying to get right behind the Slayer, but the boy moved and put himself between him and the girls. Interesting. It was the second time he'd done it, didn't matter though, she'd still hear him.

“I need to call the police, there's some freak outside trying to bite a girl.” He smirked as the Slayer ran toward the entrance, the redhead on her heels, it was too easy. However the boy paused and looked at him, a frown marring his face as he studied him. Spike watched as realization hit the youth as he figured out Spike wasn't just another bloke. He expected the kid to back away in horror, instead he just blinked.

“Huh...figures.” And that was it, nothing more before he made his way toward the doors the girls had gone through.

Intrigued, Spike motioned one of the other flunkies to follow and he watched the proceedings. He got outside just in time to see the boy stake the minion, guy never had a chance as the boy moved with the grace of someone who knew how to fight. And as interesting at he was, the kid was not his prey...not yet.

He kept to the shadows and watched the Slayer. She was a thing of beauty as she fought, but then they all were. Natural predators every one of them. She pummeled Nancy-boy till he staggered, barely able to stand on his own.

“Stake!” She cried, holding out her hand as the boy threw the weapon to her and she caught it easily.

“Spike, help me!” Like he would, Nancy-boy was done for. The stake entered his heart and turned to dust with him. He smirked and approached them, clapping.

“Nice work, girlie.”
She frowned and studied him warily. The boy approached her right and poked her side.

“Keep it up and you're whittling your own stakes, you keep forgetting to pull them back out.”

She snorted and glared at him. “You're critiquing me now?”

The whelp shrugged. “If Billy Idol was gonna attack he'd have done it by now. Besides, he was watching us dance.”

Spike blinked. So he knew I was there the whole time. Very interesting.

The Slayer rolled her eyes and then glared at him. “So Stalker-Guy. Who are you?”

He smirked. “You'll find out on Saturday when I kill you.” With a wink at the boy he slunk back into the shadows, but he was still within range when he heard the kid snort.

“What is it with vamps and dramatic exits?”

xxx

“Spike? That's a bit unusual.” Giles muttered.

Willow nodded. “Yeah, it makes me think of the bull dog from Tom and Jerry...only not as funny.”

Giles looked at her before shaking his head. “He may have gone by something else at one time.”

Xander nodded, it made sense that 'Spike' wouldn't have been the vamp's real name. He looked up from the dagger he was polishing to see Angel lurking by the doors. “How bad can one vamp be? What do you think Angel?”

Angel frowned as all eyes focused on him. “He's very bad. Once he starts something he doesn't stop until everything in his path is destroyed.

Xander rolled his eyes and re-sheathed the dagger before placing it on the table. “So the guy is thorough, a one man crusade, well one demon crusade anyway. I still think the Master and the hellmouth demon were way scarier.”

Willow nodded before looking at him, her face thoughtful. “You never saw the hellmouth demon.”

“Nope, but I heard its screams.” He shuddered. “Talk about nightmare inducing.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Definitely.”

Buffy pouted at Angel and Xander shared a look with Willow and she nodded. Just because he'd accepted Buffy was way out of reach didn't mean he had to watch her make googly eyes at Angel. Willow totally got that and she held her hand to her face mimicking a telephone. He nodded and stood up.

“See you guys later.”

xxx

It didn’t take long for Xander to get to the bar Yusuke had told him about. Willy's was everything that he had expected a bar to be. If it weren't for the demons it would have been the kind of place Tony would have hung out at.
The inside didn't look as rundown as the outside had. The lights almost looked cheery in the light haze of what he only hoped was cigarette smoke. He'd barely stepped inside when a vampire started his way, only to be stopped by a female demon with gray skin. The vamp glared at her and she gripped his arm tighter, shaking her green and purple hair. “Don't touch the boy.”

Xander smirked and nodded at her before stepping further inside. He had the bar's full attention now and not a demon moved as he made his way to the bar and took a seat on an empty stool.

“What's the word Willy?”

The bartender ignored him and kept polishing the clean glass in his hands.

“Come on. A flashy guy like Spike comes to town and you've got nothin' to say?”

Willy snorted. “Don't know what your talkin' about kid. And you shouldn't be here, you're underage.”

Xander grinned. “Liar, and I'm not here for a drink, just information.” He batted his lashes at the mousy guy. “Please.”

There was a shifting to his right and he glanced at the female demon, her grip on the vamp still strong. “Why don't you ask Angelus? He knows.”

Xander tilted his head as if to get a better look at her. “The Broodmeister is hard to pin down, always disappears the moment we're not looking.” He looked thoughtful. “So he and Spike used to hang?”

She nodded at him and he smiled at her. Several jaws dropped, one actually hit the floor and the owner scrambled to reattach it. “Thanks.” He pulled a ten dollar bill out of his pocket and put it on the bar. “Willy, a drink for the lady.” He smiled at her again and headed toward the exit.

Once he was gone she released the vampire. He sneered at them. “Why do you all fear him? He is only a human!”

Willy rolled his eyes. “You're either new in town or stupid. That kid is royalty, a prince even.”

The female demon sneered. “If you had harmed the boy we all would have died when his brother came to avenge him.”

The vampire frowned. “What's so scary about some human?”

Willy nearly dropped the glass he'd been polishing. “You really haven't heard?”

Another demon spoke up from the back. “The Anointed One is getting sloppy and not telling his lackeys the rule the Mazoku set down.”

Willy nodded. “Ya lose more minions that way.” Several demons nodded in agreement.

“Mazoku? The hell is that? Some kind of sushi? You guys are full of crap. I'm gonna make a meal of that kid, he's probably still close by.” He started towards the door but the female grabbed him again, this time simply pulling his head off rather than detaining him.

“Come on Natasha, you know how hard it is to get all the vamp dust up? Next time drag them outside.” Willy whined at her.

“My apologies. Next time I will.” She smirked as she wiped her hands off on a rag Willy handed her. “I'll have that drink now.”
Xander smirked from his hiding place just outside the door before moving further away. Good to know most of them are still following the rules. He flipped open the compact and punched in the code for Giles.

The Watcher's face appeared on the screen. “Really Xander, you're cutting it close. The others just left, and where did you run off to?”

Xander smiled. “Just went out gathering some information.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, look into Angel's past. He and Spike used to hang.”

“How sound is this tip?”

“Pretty sound. I got it from Willy's.”

“The Demon bar? Xander--”

“Relax Giles. Yusuke gave everyone there a warning. I'm off limits, just...just trust me on this. Please?”

Giles smiled. “Alright, I'll look into it. Be careful going home.”

“Sure thing, goodnight G-man.”

He sighed. “Goodnight Xander.”

xxx

It was Thursday evening and according to Cordelia the last time she'd checked on the happenings of Parent Teacher night, Willow was doing her best to keep Buffy's mom far away from any teachers and Snyder. And of course the library where they had been for the past few hours readying weapons and whittling stakes. It was good to have extras but Buffy seriously needed to stop letting her stakes get dusted. He glanced over at Giles who looked way too captivated by whatever dusty book he was reading.

“So what have you found out about this Spike guy?”

Giles look up from his book with a somewhat vacant stare at first. “Hmm? Oh, right. Well you were correct. He and Angel were part of uh...the same social circle. Darla turned Angel as we all know. Angel drove a young lady known as Drusilla mad before turning her and she turned our new friend Spike.”

Xander gave Giles a thoughtful look. “So Angel is like his what? Grandpa?”

Giles coughed into his hand to hide his amusement. “You could say that.”

He grinned. “So how did he end up with a name like Spike?”

“Err...he was originally known as William the Bloody. He earned his current name by torturing his victims with railroad spikes.”

There was a moment of silence as Xander blinked dumbfounded at the Watcher, eventually he found
his tongue. “Really? That's...actually I have no words for that.”

“Honestly Xander you've seen him once and he's already left you speechless.”

Xander mock-glared at him. “You shouldn't make fun of people who're holding sharp objects.”

Giles ignored him. “Luckily as he is Angel's grand-childe he's much younger, not even two-
hundred.” He looked back at his book and stilled as his eyes roamed over the pages. “Oh dear.”

Ms. Calendar chose that moment to enter the library. “Things are winding down, most of the parents
have already left. There's only a handful of people left in the building...” She noticed Xander's
pensive expression and Giles' pale face. “What did I miss?”

Xander glanced at her and frowned. “Giles said 'oh dear'; never a good thing.”

She looked at Giles. “Rupert?”

Giles cleared his throat. “Spike has fought two Slayers in the last century and has killed them both.”

“Well crap.” Xander muttered. There was a crash and screams in the distance. “Double crap.” The
three of them ran through the doors and into the hallway in time to see Buffy lead a group of people
around the corner.

“Spike is here with an army!” She yelled just as vamps appeared at either end of the hall. “Run!”
Xander, Giles and Ms. Calendar dove back into the library while Buffy's group scrambled for the
science lab across the hall.

Xander felt a little cold ball of dread start to form in his stomach. Willow hadn't been with them. He
stamped it down as he helped Giles and Ms. Calendar barricade the door. “Giles, what are we doing?
We're supposed to fight the vamps not hide like mice!”

There was a flicker before the lights went out and the emergency ones kicked on. Ms. Calendar
checked the phone. “They cut the lines.”

“Giles?”

Giles shook his head. “Buffy said Spike brought an army we don't know how badly outnumbered
we are. The only ones with true battle experience are Buffy, you and myself...and Angel. That's it!
Xander, there's a way out through the stacks, an old boarded up cellar. Get Angel and bring him
here.”

“But the girls! Willow!”

“There is no time to argue Xander, we must even the odds!”

Xander nodded, he didn't like it, but back up was essential to limiting the number of casualties. He
couldn't lose his girls. “I'll get him.” He took off through the stacks, finding the door easily and
opening it. It took a moment to pull off the old half rotted boards from the exit but he managed and
escaped into the balmy California night. Quickly, he pushed the vines back into place over the cellar
doors, no need to advertise to the vamps that there was another way in.

In another moment he was running toward Angel's, but not before pulling his communicator out and
punching in Botan's code. He held it up to his face as he ran.

“Xander? What's going on?” Her face appeared on the screen.
“That knew vamp in town? He brought vampires in force to crash Parent Teacher night.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you alright?”

“For now. Look, I know you're here for the souls...but I also know you helped Yusuke and kept Keiko safe when all those people got bitten by the freaky Makai bugs. I need your help now!”

A look of determination settled onto her normally gentle face and she nodded. “Strictly unofficial of course.”

“Thanks Botan. The others are at the school, I'm getting Angel.”

“I'll see you there.” The screen went blank and Xander really hoped that they all survived the night.

xxx

Botan flew low, glad she’d shifted into more casual wear, jeans were just more effective for kicking butt. She got to the high school in time to see a man getting pulled through a window by a vampire. In record speed she landed beside the vampire and knocked him away from the man with her oar. While he lay on the grass in shock, she staked him with the handle. A quick look around brought no other vampires to her attention, so she knelt by the man to check his pulse. It was strong, if a little erratic and the poor guy was out cold.

She smiled and picked him up, whisked him up on her oar and took off for the hospital. There was no way she was leaving an unconscious man laying out in the open with a horde of demons so close. In what felt like moments she had left him with a shocked ER nurse and hurried back to the school grounds.

Screams filled the night and urged her to fly even faster. The source of the screams was a group of adults fleeing the school and a group of vampires only steps behind them.

Wasting no time Botan landed between the escaping humans and the vampires. The vampires skidded to a halt and took in her appearance, visibly sneering at her, discounting her from her red jacket down to her sneakers. She grinned at them and shoved her oar away and replaced it with a baseball bat. The vampires gaped at her, confusion evident even with the wrinkles.

The first vampire lunged at her and she shoved him in a subspace pocket, making him disappear the same way she had her oar. Her grin turned to a smirk as she clobbered the next vampire, knocking him on his butt. “I think a different weapon is in order.” In a heartbeat she made the bat disappear and suddenly a curved blade was in her hand and the vamp on the ground dusted as she beheaded him.

The remaining vampires fled. And Botan gave chase on her oar once more flying low and decapitating them as she caught up.

xxx

Xander had finally made it back to the school with Angel in tow. He panted at the effort running had taken. Slacking was bad, very bad. He was soo running in the morning. God he hoped Willow and Buffy were okay. He turned to Angel.

“Look, I know you and this Spike guy used to hang. Any ideas? How should we handle this?” Angel smirked at him and Xander knew something bad was coming. He tried to dodge but Angel was faster and grabbed him by the back of his neck. “Bad plan!” Xander started to struggle but stopped when Angel used his other hand to cut off his air.
“Be still.”

He glowered at Angel, but kept still. Being unconscious would be bad; he might not wake up. Angel continued to smirk as he dragged Xander inside and down the hallway till they came across a group of vampires poking at the ceiling with sharp poles.

Xander stared at the bizarre scene till he realized someone must crawling around up there. Well...at least I know where Buffy is.

Spike turned to face them, all game face and toothy smile. “Angelus!”

“Spike!” They walked toward one-another and hugged, Angel kept Xander under his arm and between them.

He rolled his eyes, though no one could see it. “Great, I'm part of an undead sandwich.” They parted and Spike glanced at him as Angel cuffed him. Xander glared at Angel who ignored him once more and addressed Spike.

“What were you thinking boy? I thought I taught you to always guard your back. You should have some minions guarding the exits.”

Spike grinned. “What can I say they're barely ten years dead and idiots every one of them. You know how hard it is to find good minions, not that I care. They're not even mine. So what's new with you?”

“A few things.”

“Fought this Slayer yet? Heard she's a tough little thing.”

“Nah, I gave her the I'm a lost and tortured soul routine. That Ann Rice drivel works every time.”

Spike nodded. “Bloody woman nearly ruined our reps. All that crap about not being able to shag. Utter rubbish.” His grin faded. “It is just an act right? Your not...” He trailed off.

Xander snickered. “Angel-cakes? He is totally and completely neutered, he's practically her lap dog. Always begging for treats and belly-rubs.”

Angel shook him and cuffed him again. “What do you say we snack on her friend before we kill her. Make her suffer a bit when she sees his corpse.” Xander stilled and glanced at Spike.

“Why not, it'll be like old times.” Spike's eyes met Xander's and held them as the two of them leaned over his neck.

Xander broke the contact and snarled, bucking for all he was worth. He bit Angel's arm, stomped on the jerk's foot and flipped the vampire onto his back. Spike stepped back and grinned as Angel hit the tiled floor with a thud.

Xander knew his eyes were glowing and he didn't care. Angel was supposed to be their ally and he'd practically served Xander up as an appetizer. He snarled again this time leaning over Angel just before he kicked his side. Repeatedly. ‘I’ kick “am not’ kick “bait!”’ kick. “You ever do that again and I'll kill you. You forget Broodmeister, I know where you sleep and you are very flammable.”

Xander kicked him one last time.

Spike smirked and watched in appreciation. “Feel better, Pet?”
Xander grinned at his enemy, who was at least being civil, and he knew it was feral. “Hell yes!” He took a few steps back and waved at the blond. “I'll be leaving now. You're on your own Angel-cakes, ya jerk.” He stuck his tongue out at the still dazed Angel before turning tail and running.

Spike was still grinning and looking amused. “Get the boy, he's a feisty one.” He glanced at Angel. “Dru will like that one, might even turn him.”

Angel grunted and rolled to his feet before taking off in another direction. The minions divided up and chased them both.

Xander thought he was home free when one of his pursuers tackled him. He pulled out a stake and dusted it. However the second vamp knocked the stake out of his grasp just as he got to his feet. A flash of blue and Botan was there, tossing him a sword, using her scythe to decapitate the vampire in front of him.

“Thanks.” He nodded at her and headed for the cellar entrance just as group of people came rushing out of it. “Botan keep an eye on them!”

“Got it!” She saluted him before following the panicked group.

Xander was barely inside the cellar when he nearly collided with Sheila and gave her a sad look when he saw her game face. “Sorry Shelia.” Then her head was flying and her body disintegrating as he beheaded her. He ran back into the library, passing the stacks and reentering the hallway. He had to find Willow. Taking a breath, he concentrated on her scent, hoping he had enough of the hyena left to track his best friend. He found the faintest hint of rain and sugar cookies and grinned as he followed his nose.

He ended up at a trophy case...where a bust had been knocked off it's pedestal. The bust stared emptily at him from the floor and he glared at it. “Where the hell...” He blinked at the janitor's closet. “I wonder...” He reached for the knob and opened the door, and barely managed to dodge the broom and mop aimed at his head.

“Ahh!”

“Die!”

He blinked at the girls. “Nice to see you too.”

Willow and Cordelia stared at him, their weapons still raised until it registered just who was in front of him. Willow dropped her broom and tackled him in a hug.

“Is it over?”

“Not yet.”

“I thought we'd be stuck in there all night.” Willow shuddered in his arms. “Can you imagine, being stuck in a closet with Cordelia for that long.”

“Hey!”

Xander snickered. “Heh. So what's it like coming out of the closet with Queen C?” Willow smacked his chest and Cordelia whacked him with her mop. “Ow! Oh come on, that was funny!”
Xander sighed wearily as he leaned against a wall. “How many did we lose?”

Botan motioned to the ghost a few feet from them. “Just this gentleman. Spike grabbed him right after he got inside. I need to escort him to Reikai...will you be okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Just gotta make sure Cordelia and Willow get home safe.”

“I'll see you later then.”

“Night Botan.” He smiled at her as she whisked the ghost away and toward the stars. He sighed again and rubbed his face tiredly before heading back inside.

He found them in the Library. They looked determined, each of them holding a stake and cross. Willow nodded at him. “We're ready.”

“Let's get you home then.”

Cordelia gave them a glare. “What I want to know is why every time I'm with you losers I almost get killed.”

Willow and Xander shared a look and grinned. “Karma.”

Spike, did she hurt you?”

“It was a close call.”

“Oh my sweet, come here.” She enveloped him in her arms. “But the Prince is alright.”

Spike merely quirked a brow at her. “A Slayer with family and friends. It's unnatural, Pet.”

Drusilla smiled. “Did you like him?”

“Who?”

“The Prince.”

Spike shook his head. “Didn't see any Prince tonight, love.” He glanced at the Anointed. “Be right back.”

The Anointed glared at the unrepentant vampire. Spike had been so sure of himself, but that was before he'd come against the Summers girl and her people. The blond could have at least had the decency to get himself dusted. He frowned at Spike, who was laughing and stepping toward him. It dawned on him that he had no control over Spike and he was about to die, permanently. He struggled and screamed and fought, but it was in vain and he knew it. Vampires of the Aurelius line were stronger than most and some like the Master could capture the gaze of their prey. It seemed Spike, as a Master of the line was immune to such tactics and couldn't be thrall'd. Otherwise he'd have put the blond under his power. The Anointed continued to struggle, what else could he do, he didn't want to die, especially not by sunlight.

Drusilla smiled and clapped her hands as the child vampire's screams filled the night air. She giggled and held her arms out to Spike as he came back to her. “My sweet Spike.”
The sun was shining with a nice breeze, it was a perfect day, even with Buffy's ranting; however it would have been better if they weren't stuck in a musty museum. But Xander decided he couldn't complain, at least the field trip got them out of class...”Huh...de ja vu.”

The girls gave him a look. “What's giving you de ja vu?”

“I was just thinking how awesome field trips are, ya know? The whole not being in class thing...then I thought about the zoo trip and suddenly I'm on edge.”

Buffy nudged him. “I don't think they have a hyena pen here.”

“No, but they might have an exhibit for them, or they could have any number of mystical/religious objects that could prove dangerous to keep on a hellmouth.”

Buffy paused long enough to elbow him. “Thanks for that, it's not like I didn't have enough to worry about.” She sighed. “Maybe we should start keeping an eye on the museum, patrolling it or something.”

“Oh, I can do that. I'm here a lot anyway.”

Xander and Buffy blinked at their friend. “Sometimes your lust for knowledge scares me.” Xander teased and Buffy nodded in agreement. “But seriously Buff, what are you worried about?”

“Oh come on, a complete stranger in my house for two weeks? It's hard enough keeping my Mom out of the loop, think how much harder it will be keeping my nightlife from someone I'm supposed to be showing around town.”

“Okay, you have a point, but me and Willow will totally help you keep your secret, you know that. Right Wills?”

“Darn tootin’.”

“Thanks guys. It's just, I wish Mom could have given me some warning you know?”

“I get that, but a lot of parents are doing it this year. And aside from the craziness of people from other countries sending their kids to the hellmouth to be happy-meals, the whole cultural exchange thing is kinda cool.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Have you ever done a foreign exchange program?”

“My Dad tried to sell me to some Armanians when I was eight. And I spent the whole summer in Japan. I think I qualify for having been foreigly exchanged.”

Willow giggled. “You're making up words again.”

Xander tilted his head in a small bow. “Thank you, thank you. I do my best.”
“So you're Word King now?” Buffy snickered as they rounded a corner and the group nearly ran into Cordelia.

She gave them a brief withering look for nearly running her down but shrugged it off quickly. “So what's your's look like?”

Buffy frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Your foreign exchange student.” She held up a pamphlet. “Mine is Sven. Isn't he gorgeous? So who did you get?”

“His name is Ampata, and I haven't seen his picture.”

“Are you crazy? He could be dogly, or troll-like.”

“Huh, you both got guys and I got a girl. It's almost like the school is trying to pair us off, boy girl, girl boy.” All three girls gave him confused looks, he sighed. “Mom signed me up too. I'm just glad my she left the pamphlet on the kitchen table or I never would have known about it and Kagome wouldn't have anyone to pick her up.”

“Wait, you're mom signed up for it too?” Willow asked as her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “And how come you're just now mentioning it?”

He shrugged. “I didn't think it was a big deal until Buffy started freaking.”

Cordelia frowned. “Kagome? What kind of name is that?”

He pulled out his wallet and produced a small snapshot of himself and the girl in question. “It's Japanese. This is her.”

“At least she has taste.” Cordelia nodded in appreciation at the clothes Kagome was wearing in the photo before wandering off.

“You've already met her?” Buffy asked.

“Yeah, her family runs a shrine a few districts away from my brother's place. She's pretty cool, I was kinda freaked when I saw her picture in the pamphlet and called her to double check. But she's my guest for the next two weeks.”

“Great, one more person to keep in the dark.” Buffy handed the photo back and he put it away.

“Not really, she's in the know.”

Willow poked him. “Bad Xander.”

“I am not. Well not usually.” He blinked in confusion. “How am I bad?”

“You told a stranger about the night bumps!” Willow scolded him, poking him again.

“Hey, enough poking.” He pouted and took on an offended air. “Kagome was in the know long before I met her.”

“How is she in the know?” Buffy asked. “Are you really sure she's in the know?”

“Uh yeah, on account of I saw her dust a vampire that was three blocks away.”
“Neat, wish I could do that...wait, how did she do that?”

“She’s a miko.” Blank stares met his announcement. “Sorry, forgot you guys don't know Japanese. A miko is a priestess.”

“Okay...”

Xander grinned. “She's got bu-cu white magick. She uses a bow and arrow, charges the arrow with white magick and when the arrow hits the vamps, they dust. You could think of Kagome like a walkin' talkin' holy object.”

“So how many vamps are in her town?” Willow asked.

“Not many.”

Buffy looked wistful. “Must be nice.”

Willow chewed on her lip in thought for a moment. “So just how close are you and Kagome? And does Kurama know about her?”

“Whoa Wills, it's not like that I swear! Kagome is just a friend, and I intend for it to stay that way. We will not be progressing into romanticism...ever.”

“That's good. Kurama would be heart broken.” Willow grinned at Xander's snort.

“Ya know, I still haven't seen a picture of this Kurama. What's she like?”

Xander glanced at Willow. “And you called me bad. All that girl talk and you never told her?”

Willow did her best to look innocent and confused. “I don't know what you're talking about. Besides, it's more fun this way, and I just contradicted myself and gave myself away.”

Buffy stopped and glared at them, her arms folded across her chest in impatience. “Secrets are bad and lead to even more badness. Spill.”

Xander snorted. “Kurama isn't a girl.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “Woman then, she's your brother's age right?” She frowned at Xander's grin and Willow's giggles. “What am I missing?”

“Kurama isn't a girl. He's not a woman either.” Xander's grin widened as he waited for the light bulb to go off above Buffy's head.

The moment it clicked her eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped, she made no sound and could only stare at Xander in shock. Willow started to fidget and look worried as Buffy remained silent.

“Xander...I think we broke her.”

He nodded. “Yeah but...where do we take her for a tune up?”

“Hey!”

“Oh look, she still works. We didn't break her.”

“I am not a car and I do not need a tune up.”
“I could have said ‘get her fixed’ but that just brings to mind icky thoughts of Buffy spa--” Willow clamped her hands over Xander's mouth before he could finish his sentence.

“Moving on.” She squeaked. “So yes, one of Yusuke friends, a guy friend has a crush on Xander. They've even gone out for ice cream.”

Buffy turned her glare away from Xander to focus on Willow. “Ice cream?” Her glare faded and was replaced with confusion. “So you're gay now?”

Xander rolled his eyes. “Why is that always the first question? No, not gay, but hey look, options.”

Both girls nodded. “So what's he look like? Major hunkage?”

Willow sighed and smiled. “He's even prettier than Angel.”

“Is that even possible? Oh my god! Kurama is the better offer you got this summer!”

Xander blushed as both girls started to laugh. “It wasn't just him. I got swamped by female customers every day at the shop.” Their giggles progressed and he rolled his eyes as he walked on. “Girls are weird.”

xxx

The museum guide was going on and on about the Inca exhibit, rambling about human sacrifices and mummification and pleasing old gods. The trio did their best not to roll their eyes as they reached the steps that led up to the sarcophagus of the ancient Inca Princess. However as they got closer Xander and Buffy shivered and came to a stop.

“Did it just get cold in here or what?”

“No it's something else. Kinda like the energy a ward gives off.” Xander frowned and looked toward the sarcophagus. “I think it's coming from the mummy.” He blinked. “Why are you guys looking at me weird?”

The look Buffy gave him was incredulous. “You can feel that?”

“Um...yes.”

“You're noticing lots of strange things lately. Like when the vampires attacked, you reacted faster than you should have. Like you knew they were there.” Willow's voice was somewhat accusing.

“Xander, what's going on with you?”

“Well...it's like I still have some of the hyena left in me.” He stepped back from the girls as they both tried to slap his arms. “Easy, the hyena itself is gone, it's just...like a shadow.”

“I thought you couldn't remember anything about being a hyena?” Buffy had her eyebrow raised. “Lying is bad Xander.”

Xander sighed. “Maybe I didn't want to remember. I didn't want it to come between us and ruin our friendship. You two mean too much to me to lose you because of some spirit demon thing.”

Both girls looked like they were about to cry, their eyes watered and Willow sniffed a bit.

“Oh Xander.” Willow hugged him first and Buffy followed suit.

“It's okay Wills. We all know it wasn't me, and Buffy was there to stop me.”
They hugged for a little longer before the girls pulled back and Buffy wiped at her eyes. “So what does this Hyena shadow mean for you?”

Xander cleared his throat. “My senses are better than a normal person, I'm a little stronger, faster, I can sense...different kinds of energy. And I can sense predators. It's weird, but very useful.”

“So that's why your eyes got all glowy when Willow and Giles were taken.”

“Well yeah. Half my pack was kidnapped and I was uber pissed.”

Willow tilted her head. “Pack?”

“Yeah Will. You guys are my best friends, practically sisters, ergo, pack. It's another hyena leftover. And no matter what you protect pack.”

Buffy looked thoughtful for a moment before smiling widely at him. “I can live with that. I always wanted siblings.” They grinned at one another and mounted the steps to the sarcophagus. “So tell me about these wards.”

“Well, you know how vamps need an invite to come inside your home, but other nasties can just waltz right in?” They nodded at him. “Wards can keep all the nasties out of a place. The more adept at magick a person is, the stronger the ward. I can make simple ones, but they're not very good because I don't have a lot in the way of magickal powers. And I need way more practice. But Kagome, that girl knows how to ward, she's a pro.”

“Think she can put a few of those wards on our houses?” Buffy asked.

“Oh, and the library! That way vampires can't sneak up on us while we're plotting against them.”

“I second that.”

Xander nodded. “I'll ask her.” They had reached the mummy just as the guide mentioned the seal the Incas had placed on their princess to ensure her rest not be disturbed.

“So is a seal like a ward?” Buffy asked.

“Kind of. A ward keeps things out, a seal keeps things in. Like our lady legend here.”

“And I was hoping for a happy ending.” Willow pouted.

Buffy seemed entranced by the seal for the moment. “So this seal. It's the real deal then? Since we can feel it.”

“I still can't feel anything.”

Xander took Willow's hand and held it above the sarcophagus. “Feel that cold static-like tingle?” She nodded. “That's the seal.”

“Oh...kinda tickles.”

“A little. But yeah Buff. Since we can feel it that means the Priest or whoever put the seal in place had power.”

“Creepy.”

xxx
Buffy slumped into her seat once they returned to the bus. “I don't know if I can take anymore cultural mixing. I'm exhausted.”

Xander yawned and nodded. “You'd think it'd be hard for the adults to bore us to sleep while we're standing up.”

Willow looked around them, a small frown on her face. “Rodney's not here.”

Buffy blinked. “Who?”

“Rodney Munson.”

Xander smirked. “God's gift to the bell curve.”

“I hope he's not in trouble.” Willow murmured.

“Relax Wills, he's probably still defacing that Tribal Mask. Or ya know, waking mummy dearest.” He chuckled for a moment till horrified eyes met his own. “Crap...if the seal is real...”

Buffy gulped. “Then so is the curse.”

Willow took a shuddering breath, her skin paler than normal. “We need to find him.”

They made it off the bus in record time and back into the museum, racing past teachers and staff as they went. Buffy was in front with Xander on her heels, glad that he had gotten back into the habit of running in the morning. Willow trailed behind them, barely able to keep up, but when they heard a garbled scream come from the mummy's chamber she caught her second wind and managed to catch up with Xander.

Buffy got there first, jumping up on the pedestal and pulling Rodney away from the mummy's grasp. The Mummy came with them, moaning and snarling and they toppled over the edge and landed on Xander and Willow. The Mummy wasted no time and stumbled down the steps at an amazing speed for any age and disappeared.

Xander groaned. “Buff, I'm all about togetherness but I didn't ever plan on being a landing pad.”

“Hang on.” She climbed to her feet, pulling Rodney with her. “Are you okay?”

Rodney turned a frightened pale face to her, his body was shaking and his hands were cold. “I...I guess. What w-was that?”

Xander and Willow stood and stared at him. Willow reached towards him. “Rodney...your hair.”

Buffy frowned and looked closer at him. Rodney looked a few years older than he had that morning. And there were streaks of white at each temple.

“Holy crap.”

xxx

The minions watched in awe of Drusilla as she twirled and danced in the candlelight. Her white dress was splattered in blood as her supper had put up quite a fight and she twirled and giggled, Miss Edith her ever present companion.

He always loved watching her like this, watching her play in her own little world, where no outside matter could ever bother her. Spike held his hand out to her and she drifted to him. “You're doing
well tonight love.”

“The forgotten Princess of Dust and Bones walks again. She awoke all cranky in her bed, she slept too long and starved. Poor wretched thing. She walks tonight Spike, dust and bones, and cracked leather skin. Poor cousin, little cursed one. So many lives she needs, needs to drink them down. Drink them down and down and down again, she'll never have enough.” She put her hand to her head. “Don't you feel sorry for her Spike? She'll be dust for good soon, never walk again. Dust, just dust, her bones will be all gone.”

Spike kissed the back of her hand. “It happens love, we'll all be dust one day. Forever is a long time.”

Drusilla giggled and leaned closer to him. “Don't worry my dearest Spike. You'll have your forever.”

“I know pet.”

xxx

“Mom! You home?” He waited for an answer and when there was none he sighed. He still had mixed feelings about her being gone so much.

Xander tossed his bag on the kitchen table before making his way to the fridge. He looked inside and grimaced, it was past time to go shopping. Hopefully his mom had left some grocery money so that he could. With a sigh he grabbed an apple and some left over pasta before going back to the table.

Before he could sit down however, the phone rang. “Figures.” He made his way to the phone on the wall and picked it up. “Harris residence.”

“Xander, hello, how are you.”

“Hey G-man. What's the what? Did you find what you were looking for at the museum.”

“Oh, yes. I found the seal...well a large piece of it. And some mental chap with a sword.”

Xander dropped the apple he'd just picked up. “Wait, what? You okay?”

“I'm fine. The lunatic with the sword seemed rather perturbed that the mummy was gone though.”

“Huh. Weird. But you are okay then?”

“No gaping wounds and all my extremities are in place.”

“Good. So you found part of the seal?”

“Yes, but it's not exactly my area of expertise. Buffy suggested that her foreign exchange guest may be able to translate it.”

“Uh Giles...you realize this Ampata guy is still in school.”

“True, but the Southern continent is very rich in history and he may be familiar with legends we do not have access to.

“Speaking of Legends...my foreign guest should be here soon.”

“What does a foreign exchange student from...where was your guest from?”
Xander grinned even though Giles couldn't see it. “Japan.”

“Good lord. You've already met her haven't you?”

“Yes, and she's in the know. She and Botan will be here any minute.

“Is she a friend of your brother?”

“Nah, but I'd like to bring her by your place to meet you. You get those arrows I asked for?”

“I did. Are you going to tell me why you need them?”

“As long as it's okay with Kagome.”

“Of course. I'll be sure to put the kettle on.”

“See you later Giles.” Xander grinned again as he hung up the phone. He took a moment to scarf down his impromptu supper before heading upstairs to check the guest room one more time. He had just finished his inspection and reentered the kitchen when he felt Botan approach.

xxx

Shippo shivered even though he was seated between Botan and Kagome, but it wasn't the cool air that was affecting him. Kagome ruffled his hair a bit. “You okay?”

He nodded and tried not to shiver again. “What is that?”

Botan looked over her shoulder at them from the front of her oar. “That's the hellmouth.”

Shippo gulped. “It's almost like a miasma.”

Kagome nodded. “Naraku's was more toxic than this...and had more of a physical presence, it could be seen for miles.”

“It is more subtle than what that bastard had, but it still messed with my girls. Not to mention that it just gave them the creeps. It's why I'm working solo here, I have a stronger constitution.”

Shippo nodded. “I know how the guides feel. I don't like it either.”

Botan chuckled. “It's not so bad after you've been here a while, you just get used to it. Oh look, there's Xander's house.”

Before they could even glance down Botan had pointed the oar towards a rooftop far below them. And they dropped, she didn't even give them a chance to shout as they zoomed toward the roof that was suddenly under them, nor did she stop as they flew on through it. Kagome and Shippo got a brief glance of an attic, an upstairs and then a surprised Xander as they practically teleported into his kitchen.

Xander blinked at their surprised faces. “Hey there.”

Kagome and Shippo made vague waving motions as they slid of Botan's oar and landed in a boneless heap on the tile floor.

Shippo glared at Botan. “I thought was gonna die!”

Botan grinned while trying to look apologetic. “Sorry.”
Xander rolled his eyes. “So this you're first time traveling via Botan Express?”

Kagome nodded. “Yeah. Is it always like that?”

“Yep. Good thing you have two weeks to prepare yourself for the next trip...not so good for you little guy.”

Shippo groaned and Kagome looked a little green at the thought of the trip home. “It's just been a while since we've flown anywhere.”

Botan's grin faded and she looked truly sorry. “Oh, I hadn't thought of that. It has been more than a year since the well closed hasn't it. I'm so sorry. Don't worry Shippo, I won't fly so fast when I take you home later.”

“Thank you.”

“You guys got your land legs back yet?”

“I think so.”

“Cool. I'll show you to your room then. Need a hand?”

Kagome nodded and he helped her up from her current seat on the floor. “Thanks.”

“No problem, come on, it's upstairs.” Kagome, Shippo and Botan followed him upstairs to the guestroom and simply stared when he flipped the light on. The twin bed had a pink coverlet and the walls were a light rose color with white rabbits all along the borders. The girls gave him a strange look and he shrugged. “My mom wanted a girl.” They nodded in understanding as Botan produced Kagome's bags from a subspace pocket.

Shippo had just started bouncing on the bed when Xander gave Kagome a sheepish smile. “So how tired are you?”

She looked pointedly at him. “Not very. We were napping when Botan showed up...why?”

“Giles got the arrows and I wanted to introduce you..without Buffy and Willow around, so we can really talk...if you want to that is. If you don't we can just tell Giles we'll see him tomorrow.”

Kagome gave him a mild glare. “You could have asked me first.”

Xander nodded. “I could have but I think Giles deserves some sort of explanation after getting the extra arrows.”

“It's okay Kagome, Giles is a close friend of mine. I've known him for more than twenty years.

“Sorry, I'm just not used to so many people who aren't family knowing about me or what I can do.”

“So we're going?”

She nodded. “Sure.”

“Cool, cause he already put the kettle on to heat.”

Kagome grabbed a cushion from the bed and whacked him with it.

xxx
Giles hummed to himself as he puttered around his small kitchen, putting the finishing touches on the tea tray. The pot of tea was steeping and the milk and sugar were on hand. He had just reached for the cups when Botan flew through his kitchen, passed through the wall and came to a halt in the living room.

“How do you like your tea Xander? You have a choice of sugar and honey for sweetening.”

He could hear Botan sigh dramatically from the living room as her passengers disembarked. “He didn't jump.”

Giles rolled his eyes heavenward. “I've grown quite used to you flying about the flat, I'm not going to startle that easily.”

Botan continued to pout as she put her oar away and headed for the kitchen. “Spoil my fun.”

He smirked before turning to his guests. “Do make yourself at home, would you like some tea?”

Giles paused at the sight of the raven haired beauty and the fox kit holding her hand. “I believe I might have some biscuits in the cupboard as well.”

“Giles, this is Kagome Higurashi, and this is her adopted son Shippo. Guys, this is Giles.”

Kagome gave him a bow which he returned before offering his hand. “A pleasure, Ms Higurashi.”

“Kagome is fine.”

“Kagome, then. And it's good to meet you as well Shippo. Welcome to Sunnydale, and please make yourselves at home.”

Kagome smiled and nodded. “Thank you Giles-san.”

They settled around his living room and he went to fetch the refreshments. He noticed that Xander watched him with an open curiosity as he set the cups in front of them and poured the tea. “Yes Xander?”

“Sorry Giles, just never seen you in proper British host mode before. It's different, very cool.”

“Thank you...I think. Now, Ms...Kagome. Xander said that you are in the know. And it is rather obvious due to your son's nature. And it really is a pleasure to meet you Shippo, I've never met a kitsune before.” Shippo grinned at him over his tea cup. Giles smiled back before looking pointedly at Xander. “Does anyone feel like telling me what's going on?”

Kagome and Xander shared a look and he watched them closely as he sipped at his tea. Kagome spoke first. “Have you ever heard of the Jewel of Four Souls? And the Priestess who guards it?”

He nearly choked on his tea. “The Shikon no tama?” She nodded. “I am familiar with that legend.”

Kagome took a breath. “I am the reincarnation of the first priestess who watched over the jewel, and the current guardian of it.”

Giles blinked and then looked at Xander. “Why is it you always meet the most interesting and unusual people?”

Xander grimaced. “This is nothin' you should have seen Prince Koenma's reaction to that prophecy I broke. Man was he pissed. Evidently when a mere mortal kills a prophecy it's major bad news.”

Giles frowned. “And when were you going to tell me that?”
“Um...just now?”

“Lovely. You and I will talk about that later. Now, what exactly was your plan?”

Xander gave him a puzzled look. “Plan for what?”

“For the next two weeks.”

“Oh...ya know, go to school, patrol, and party at the Bronze. Oh, and save the world if some demon tries to rain Hellfire on our heads. Same old, same old. Only I might have told the girls about making wards and they want Kagome to make some for their homes and the library.”

Kagome glared at him. “What else have you told them?”

“Nothing about you adventures, I swear. Actually they were kinda pissed about me not telling them about the hyena shadow. Didn't want to push my luck.”

Botan giggled from the kitchen. “Did you get scolded Xander?”

“Yep.”

Shippo yawned then and Kagome smiled. “Botan do you mind taking Shippo back a little early? I want a tour of the town before we turn in.”

“Sure.”

Kagome nodded in thanks and hugged Shippo to her before kissing his forehead. “I'll see you in two weeks Shippo. Behave for grandma and keep up your studies.”

“I will.”

Botan got them settled on the oar and took off much slower than she normally did. Shippo waved until they disappeared through the ceiling.

“Will you be wanting the arrows now? I took the liberty of procuring a bow as well, that way you won't be unarmed on your way back to Xander's.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded and retrieved the bow, a full quiver of arrows and a short sword from a trunk in the corner. “This is for you Xander.”

“Thanks Giles. See you tomorrow. And uh...when we have that talk about the prophecy thing, we need to talk about something else, something important.”

“Of course. Be careful, will you?”

“Always.”

xxx

They'd been walking for a while when Kagome shuddered.

“You okay?”

She nodded. “Doesn't it bother you?”
Xander tilted his head. “Does what bother me?”

“The aura of the hellmouth. Can't you feel it?”

“Oh, that. Not really, but I've lived here all my life. I mean when I came back everything felt a little off, but it feels normal now.”

Kagome shook her head. “Botan was right.”

“Um...okay...”

“She said I'd get used to it, and I can already tell a difference. It's not as bad as when we first got here.”

“What does it feel like to you?” His question was asked in genuine curiosity.

“It feels...like a presence, or a beast that's asleep, but it could wake up at any time. Something powerful and just...evil.”


“Willy's?”

“It's a demon bar...though the guy who runs it is human.”

She smiled at him. “Not tonight. Let's hit a few cemeteries, and maybe the park where Jessie-san is?”

Xander gave her an odd look. “I thought I'd offer my prayers.”


“Yeah. They've been following us for a while now.”

“Ready then?” He asked her, but Kagome already had an arrow notched. She smirked at him as she released it. Her arrow shined with holy light, flaring up as it pierced the vampire and then both exploded into dust.

The remaining vampires gaped in a combination of surprise and rising terror. Kagome shot another arrow and one of the three dusted. The remaining two tried to run but Xander was already on them, staking one and decapitating the other.

“I'm starting to think that someone is just making baby vamps because they're bored.” Kagome gave him a confused look and he clarified. “They were still in their funeral wear.”

“How many vampires do you usually see in a night?”

“At least one a night, most of the time I find two or more. I think some are just drawn to the hellmouth. Some are newly risen...and a lot have been roaming the streets around here for a decade.”

“How can you tell?”

“Outdated clothes.”

“So do you always patrol by yourself?”
“Mostly. Actually I don't think I've ever patrolled with Buffy. Huh. I'll have to suggest it to her, then maybe we can make a night of it, the two of us can patrol and then meet at Willow's for snacks.”

“There is something seriously wrong with you when you plan your evening around patrolling the town for demons.”

“Gotta get my kicks somewhere.”

Kagome snorted. “Weirdo.”

xxx

Drusilla gently set Miss Edith with her companions before picking up an oriental fan and waving it at them. “Is it too warm for you my darlings? It's even hotter outside. Bright white, burning lights that shoot ever so quickly. Should the priestess prick us we shall fade away, dust in the wind. And the prince watches her in awe of her magic as he hunts at her side.” She giggled. “She's not his forever you know. Poor lonely child. Poor lonely little kitten.”

Spike gazed at her and smiled fondly, if somewhat worried about her ever worsening health.

“Spike.”

“Yes love.”

“The Prince is lonely. Will you go to him?”

He approached her and picked up her thin form and carried her to the large bed. “Why would I go to the Prince when I have my dark goddess right here?”

Drusilla looked at him, all teasing was gone from her dark eyes. “You must you know. Not now, but someday.”

“What do you see love?”

“The stars, they rejoice and sing sweetly of forever. Beautiful, eternal, his soul shines so bright and it burns me. Even when it is tarnished it glows and sparkles. You'll have that someday.”

Not wanting to upset her since she was in one of her better moods, he smiled softly at her. “That may be love, but for now all I want and need is you.”

She pouted prettily at him. “You'll see. Someday.”

“But not today Dru.”

XXX
“And I totally need to introduce you to Clem, he's a local neutral.”

“Neutral what?”

“Demon.”

“What kind?”

“Uh...never asked him.” He winced as Kagome gave him a look. “Well ya know it's kinda rude to just suddenly ask a guy what kind of demon he is. He's a demon, he's neutral, and he likes to binge on Star Trek with me. We're cool.”

Kagome looked heavenward. “No matter what country or time I'm in, boys never change.”

“Well duh. Oh hey, we should totally freak out the clientele at Willy's.”

“We're underage.”

“I didn't say we had to get drinks. Just walk in and watch'em squirm.”

“I'm starting to understand how much you miss Jesse. Did the two of you always do stupid things together?”

He grinned at her and it was free of atonement. “Pretty much.”

“You're a...what's the word...oh yes. You're a dork.”

“It's not exactly news Kagome.” He watched her in interest as she stopped to look at the school. “The hellmouth still givin' you wiggins?”

“Not as bad as it was last night. Even being this close to it. You said it's under the library?”

He motioned her to keep going. “Yeah, it's this way. Oh, we probably shouldn't talk about the hellmouth, vampires, or mummies around Ampata.”

“Yes, yes. I've kept people in the dark before. Wait...Mummies?”

“Yeah, there's an Incan Mummy staggering around Sunnydale. Some kid broke the seal that kept it all cursed and restful.”

“You're kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Your life is...interesting. Anyway, as I was saying, I've done that dance, so keeping Ampata out of the loop will be easy enough.”
“Speaking of dances, what are you going as? To tonight's dance I mean.”

She grinned. “I thought I'd go traditional tonight.”

They were still discussing their costumes when they entered the library to see Giles hand what looked like a broken plate to a girl Xander had never seen before.

“That was a little fast Giles. You've only just met her.” Buffy rolled her eyes and caught sight of Xander.

“Xander! And guest! Kagome right?” She made her way over to them and Kagome bowed. Buffy looked flustered for a second but returned with a bow of her own. “Nice to meet you. I'm Buffy.”

“And it is nice to meet you as well Buffy-san.”

Xander's eyes were still locked on the strange girl. “Buffy...who's the new girl?”

“There was a mix up. Come on I'll introduce you to Ampata.”

“Ampata the girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

“Ampata, this is Xander Harris, and Kagome...”

Kagome smiled. “Higurashi.”

“That's a mouthful.”

“Hello.” Ampata gave a small smile before turning back to Giles.

“Does anything on that seal look familiar to you?”

Ampata frowned. “Not really...but it is hard to know without all of the pieces.” As she shifted the broken seal in her hands a thin tremor of power rolled through the room. Buffy, Xander and Kagome all shuddered.

“That's...that's all we found though.” Buffy said, watching Ampata closely.

Ampata handed the seal back to Giles and pointed to a pictogram. “This could mean one who watches over the princess. You would call him a—bodyguard. I think.”

Giles hmm'd and latched on to the clue she'd given him and wandered off toward his books with the seal. “I'll just take another look at this and compare my texts for our...club. Willow, why don't you show Ampata around.”

“Sure. We can go to the computer lab first, you'll like Ms. Calendar. We'll see you guys later.”

“Later Wills. Nice to meet you Ampata.”

“It was nice to meet you too.”

After they left Xander and Kagome shared a look and Buffy wrinkled her nose. “You guys felt that too?”
Giles nearly dropped the seal. “Beg your pardon? Felt what?”

Kagome nodded at Buffy. “The seal is still trying to do what it was meant to do. It still has some power.”

“Oh?” Giles adjusted his glasses and peered closer at the seal in his hands. “Well that's quite interesting, do the three of you feel anything now?” They shook their heads and he hmm'd again.

“I guess I'm research girl today while Willow shows Ampata around and you give Kagome the grand tour of Hellmouth High.”

“Want some help? The school's not going anywhere.” Xander asked her.

“Nah. I can handle the books. Go ahead and show Kagome around.”

Kagome looked concerned. “I'm no slacker Buffy-san, I wouldn't mind helping.”

Buffy smiled. “Enjoy the tour first. You guys can spell me after that.”

They nodded and Xander lead Kagome out of the library. “We'll keep an eye out for anything out of the norm...for this place anyway.”

“Thanks Xan.”

They exited the library and nearly ran into Cordelia, who was glowering and snarking at a tall blond boy of European descent. “Easy Cordy, it's not like the guy is used to being a slave.” She rounded on him and stopped her verbal tirade when she saw Kagome.

“And this would be?”

Kagome gave a small bow, never breaking eye contact. “Kagome Higurashi. Nice to meet you Cordy-san.”

“At least your's speaks American.” She huffed before stomping off.

Xander turned a sympathetic gaze to the other boy. “Dude, I am so sorry you got stuck with Queen C. I'm Xander by the way.” He held out his hand and the taller boy accepted.

“I'm Sven, and thank you. When I signed up for this program I did not think it would be so bad. Is she always like this?”

“Afraid so.”

“At least not all Americans are like her.”

“Sven! Come!”

Sven rolled his eyes. “It was nice to meet you Xander, and you Kagome.” He gave them a small smile before trudging after Cordelia.

“Poor guy.”

“Definitely.”

“And would you believe that Cordelia was the girl of Jessie's dreams?”
Kagome looked at him. “Wow.”

“Yeah, I never got it either.”

xxx

“I can't believe you call that food.” Kagome shuddered as the walked down the hall from the lunch room. “That was disgusting.”

“I told you we should have brought something from home. Hot dog surprise is not for the weak.”

“But...how do they get away with serving that...poison?”

Xander snorted. “At first I always thought it was just an untold mystery of the power of the Lunch Lady. But with the hellmouth...” He shrugged.

They entered the library and stopped dead in their tracks as Willow bounced about in a nervous fashion.

“Big guy! Bigger knife! Tried to kill us, yelled something about the seal and he had a big, big knife! It was so scary Buffy! We screamed and he came after us and we screamed again and tripped him and Ampata pushed him down the bleachers. And then we ran here.”

Xander was across the room and putting his hands on Willow’s shoulders by the time she ran out of steam. “Breathe Willow.”

“Breathing now.” She gulped at the air and shuddered again. “I thought I was gonna die.”

Ampata stood near the table, her arms wrapped protectively around her middle. “He was very angry. I think your investigation is dangerous. We were nearly killed. Please do not continue this.” She blinked away tears and ran out of the library.

Willow made sad eyes at the retreating girl. “I...I should go after her.”

Xander gave her a curious look. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I'm okay now. I think. I'll let you know after I come out of shock.” She gave him a shaky smile and went after Ampata.

Xander frowned as she left. “Something isn't right.”

Buffy gave him a look. “Well yeah, we've got a mummy and a crazy person with a big knife running around the dale.”

Kagome sat at the table and looked at the seal. “It is almost as if Ampata is hiding something.”

Xander nodded. “I think so too. Let's get to the books. Take a brake Buff...also it's hotdog surprise day.”

“Yuck. Thanks for the heads up.”

xxx

Xander, Kagome, and Willow stood on Buffy's front porch, while they waited for someone to answer the door.
“So I heard that you and Ampata were holding hands over a plate of hotdog surprise.”

Kagome elbowed him. “It's sweet, don't ruin it.”

Willow smiled at Kagome in thanks. “Yep.”

“No harm meant Wills.”

Willow giggled. “I'm just following your example Xander. It’s nice to have options.”

Xander groaned and was about to retort when Buffy opened the door. He stared at her overalls. “So what country are you supposed to be from? The land of no tradition? Where's your nifty cultural get up?”

Buffy eyed him. “And what are you supposed to be? A burglar?”

“Ha ha, I'm a ninja. See the sword, the dagger, and look, throwing stars.”

“Right. So super-stealth burglar?”

He rolled his eyes. “Seriously Buffy, where's your costume?”

“Well...with overalls she could go as a farmer.” Willow grinned.

Kagome looked confused. “I don't know that word. What is a farmer?”

“Hyakushou.” Xander said over his shoulder at her. “Or nouka.”

“Oh.” She peered closer at Buffy. “Do American farmers dress like that?”

Willow nodded. “Some do.”

“Standing right here people.” She sighed. “There's been a change of plans. You guys are going to the dance with Ampata. Giles and I are going on a mummy hunt.”

“Oh, Buffy...but--”

“It's okay Willow, I didn't have a costume anyway, and you guys totally have me beat. You all look like the real thing. You must have worked really hard on them.”

Willow grinned. “I did, and it's as authentic as I could make it without using real fur. Cause that would be yuck.”

Buffy smiled. “And I love your robes Kagome.”

“Thank you, but this is traditional wear for a priestess. I wear it often when I'm helping my grandpa care for our family shrine.”

“That just makes it cooler.”

Ampata appeared at the top of the stairs. And they all gaped.

“Migoto.” Xander muttered.

Kagome smiled. “He said you're beautiful.”

Willow glanced at Xander. “Wow, you're really getting into the foreign language thing.”
Xander danced with Willow first, which was an interesting experience what with the fake fur coat. It made twirling her very slow and awkward. She had to take a break before the song was even over because she got too hot. However, he noticed that the lead guitar for the Dingos was watching his bestest bud with open curiosity. It was about time someone noticed how amazing she was.

He danced with Kagome next, which was easier because she was less hampered by her clothing. She could run and kick demon butt in her miko gear so dancing wasn’t a problem. They moved together easily and she grinned at him. It was all so amazingly...platonic. It was nice.

Ampata looked like an ancient goddess with her face made up and her clingy gold dress. Her steps were unsure but he lead her and she laughed when he stumbled on purpose. However he was starting to feel uneasy and was glad when the band started up a faster song.

Eagerly, he dragged all three girls - Willow had ditched her coat - to the dance floor and they cut a mean rug until they had to collapse at their table, still laughing at Xander's antics.

Ampata smiled at them all. “I have not had this much fun in a long time. I will remember this night always.”

Willow grinned. “That's sweet.”

“Glad to hear it Ampata. Now, who wants a drink ladies? I'm buying.”

“Coke.”

“Tea.”

“Water.”

“One coke, one tea, and one water. Okie dokie, I'll be right back.”

Xander returned to find Kagome alone. “Where'd they go?”

Kagome looked worried. “They were dancing a moment ago, but then Ampata practically ran off the dance floor. Willow went after her. I think they went out back to get some fresh air.” She blinked just as he turned to face Buffy as their friend came up to the table.

“Hey Buff, thought you were hunting.”

“Where's Ampata?”

“Why? What's up?”

“Ampata's the mummy.”

Xander's eyes widened. “Oh no.”

They ran toward the back entrance and burst into the ally behind the Bronze. Ampata was kneeling on the pavement, Willow in her arms. The Inca Princess was crying.

“Willow!” He moved fast and Ampata scrambled back, surprised at his speed, and his glowing eyes.
“I didn't...I couldn't. She has been so kind. But I don't want to die. I want to be free. And I...I hurt.” She sobbed. “I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to die!”

Kagome approached her as she rocked back and forth on the ally floor. “Then let go.” She took Ampata's hands and helped her to her feet. Ampata started to glow, and a peaceful look appeared on her face, as if the pain she'd been feeling only seconds before had vanished. White light surrounded them.

“Tell Willow I am sorry. She has been so very kind to me.” Xander nodded.

Kagome gave her a small smile. “I release you revered princess, you have fulfilled your duty to your people. You are free.” Ampata smiled back as she dissolved into the light and faded away.

Willow blinked in Xander's arms on the ground. “What happened?”

Xander grinned. “I think Ampata was in love with you.”

Willow gave him a dreamy smile. “That's nice.” And then she was unconscious.

Xander snickered. “Well, it could be worse. She could have had a melt down about a mummy stealing her first kiss.” Kagome and Buffy just stared at him. “What?”

xxx

Buffy frowned as she turned the slip of paper over and over in her hands. “So these strips of paper full of squiggles will really protect us, and keep the nasties out of the library?”

Kagome rolled her eyes. “They're not squiggles Buffy, they're kanji, and yes they will keep minor demons out.”

“Well why not major demons?”

Kagome arched a brow at her. “Because the library is above a nexus of evil, one that has been here for several hundred years. It is impossible, even for me, to completely ban evil from this spot.”

Buffy thought that over for a moment before nodding. “You have a point, but you can keep the big bad nasties from getting in and munching on our parents.”

Kagome looked thoughtful as she gave her answer. “It would depend on the demon. The demons I'm familiar with could probably wear down these wards, eventually. The ones that you see on a daily basis may not be able to break them at all.”

“Cool.”

Willow seemed much more intrigued by the symbols Kagome was painting on the strips of paper. “Who taught you how to make these? They're really neat. And they're also not something my parents will freak about, cause they kinda look like art.”

“Being able to make kanji correctly is actually a thing to be proud of. As for the wards themselves, my Grandfather, and an old priestess named Kaede. They are the ones who guided me through my training. Although I learned some things from a monk too.”

“Training? So this priestess thing is a big deal?” Buffy asked.

“It's a huge deal. Perhaps not as much as it used to be. Most girls who train to be Miko these days don't have any real power. It's just tradition. But my family has been in the same place for a little over
four hundred years. There's power there, it's a naturally sacred place.”

“It sounds nice, I'd like to see it sometime.” Willow sighed wistfully.

Kagome gave her a smile. “Let's put the wards up.” Buffy and Willow helped her place the wards around the library until Kagome had the last one in her hands. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” Buffy asked.

“This.” Kagome laughed as both girls jumped when she put the final ward in place. “Did you feel that?”

“Yeah, kinda shocked me. Not enough to really hurt though, which I'm grateful for.” Willow rubbed her arms. “Still...freaky.”

Another jolt went through the room and a cry of pain sounded from the hallway outside the main entrance to the library.

Buffy shot a look to Kagome. “What was that?”

“The wards at work. There is a demon in the hallway.”

Willow snickered. “Wonder if it's Snyder.”

Buffy shook her head. “I wouldn't be that lucky.” She cautiously opened the doors, the other girls behind her. “Angel?”

Angel was on the hall floor, his clothes were smoking a bit and his hair looked a little singed. “Buffy?”

Kagome had conjured up her spirit bow and had an arrow made of light notched and ready to shoot. “Wait!” Buffy stepped between them. “Angel's okay. He's on our side.”

Willow nodded. “Buffy's right, he's a good vampire, he's got a shiny human soul and everything!”

Kagome looked at them like they'd lost their minds. However she looked closer at the vampire who returned her gaze warily. She could see the essence of a human soul present. “This is the strangest town.” She relaxed and the conjured bow and arrow dissipated. “I'll need to readjust the wards in the library.” She walked over to Angel and plucked a hair from his head before going back inside the library.

Angel looked from Willow to Buffy. “What was that about?”

xxx

Kagome's first experience in an American Mall had been a success, all three girls had shopped to their hearts' content. And since Xander's house was closest, they stopped there first to drop off Kagome's things. However when the girls entered the house laden down with shopping bags they froze.

Buffy sniffed the air. “Something smells really good.”

Willow nodded and her stomach growled. “Xander must have ordered in.”

Kagome shook her head and put her bags on the couch. “No, it smells like bukkake udon, he's
cooked for us.”

Buffy glanced at her as she put her own bags on a chair. “Xander can cook?”

Willow looked thoughtful. “Well it makes sense, he did spend the summer working in a Japanese restaurant.”

Kagome nodded and smiled at them. “He is a very good cook.”

A feminine laughed tinkled from the kitchen and stopped their conversation.

“That didn't sound like Xander's mom.” Willow murmured as they entered the kitchen.

Again Buffy and Willow froze. There was young woman with blue hair standing next to Xander. She looked to be a few years older than them. They were talking in low voices in a language neither understood, more than likely Japanese. He handed her the table ware and she started to set the table. Xander caught sight of them and grinned.

“Hey girls. This is Botan, she's a friend of Yusuke's. Botan, that's Buffy, Willow, and you know Kagome. Botan came over with Kagome and she's been hanging out with a guy she met.” He looked back at Botan. “You sure you can't stay for dinner? I made enough.”

Botan smiled and her oddly colored eyes twinkled. “Thank you for the offer Xander, but I already have plans with Clem tonight. We're going to the movies.”

“Oh, hey. What are you gonna see?” He asked, stirring something on the stove top.

“'Attack of the Pet Rocks III.”

“You're kidding.”

“Nope.”

He shook his head. “You're a very strange woman Botan. So how was the mall?”

Buffy shrugged. “Mall-like. We went, we saw, we bought.”

Willow stepped closer to Botan. “So how did you and Xander meet? Well since your Yusuke's friend I'm sure he introduced you.”

Botan nodded. “I've been a friend of Yusuke and Keiko since junior high. I met Xander over the summer.” She smiled. “I don't cook much so I spend a lot of time at the Yukimura's shop.” She glanced at the clock. “I've got to run an errand before the movie. I'll see you later Xander. It was nice meeting you Buffy, Willow.” She waved at Xander and slipped out of the room, they heard the front door open and close behind her.

Buffy look at Xander. “Are all the people in Japan as pretty as Botan and Kagome?”

He laughed. “You have no idea.

They had set up a range at the edge of town, the library just wasn't big enough to practice properly. Kagome kept a watchful eye on Buffy and Xander as they practiced their archery, and she helped Willow with wards and seals. Being with them was...different and somewhat familiar. They reminded her a little of the friends she'd left behind in the warring states era.
Buffy reminded her of Sango, but Xander was nothing like Miroku or Inuyasha. And Willow was a refreshing presence and so eager to learn, and Kagome had to admit that the red head had a natural talent for magic. She just needed the proper training.

It amazed her how well she fit in with them. Xander had told her they'd made her an honorary Scooby. Of course then he had to explain what Scooby Doo was, she still hadn't quite made the connection to the old cartoon. None of them had a dog.

“How's this?” Willow asked, holding out her most recent ward to Kagome.

“Very good, you've caught on quickly.”

Xander nodded from the range. “Will's is a genius at everything she does.”

“We should all go out.” Buffy announced.

“Bronze?” Xander asked.

“We go to the Bronze all the time.” Willow countered.

“We should take Kagome out to eat, to a real restaurant.” Buffy said, putting the bow she'd been using down. “Nothing too fancy. Just a goodbye dinner.”

“Oh, that's a good idea.” Willow bounced. “We can wear party hats.” At the look Xander and Buffy gave her she stuck her tongue out. “Or not.”

“We don't have to go out.” Kagome offered.

“Don't worry about it Kagome. We'll make Giles pay.” Buffy waved her off. “Watcher pockets run deep.”

xxx

“I've had fun.”

They were sitting on the back porch waiting for Botan to show up. Kagome had her bags packed and sitting on the steps. The two of them sat on a bench by the back door, enjoying the warm night air.

“Even with all the craziness and demons.”

“Even with all of that.”

Xander chuckled. “Good. I'm gonna miss you Kags.”

“You come up with the weirdest nicknames.”

Before he could respond Botan poked her head around the corner of the house. “Found them!”

“Hello to you too, Botan.”

Botan waved and she came to stand at the bottom of the steps. Yusuke came around the corner as well. “Hey kids.”

“Yusuke!” Xander bounded off the porch and tackled his brother in a hug. “Long time no see.”
“Missed you too kid.”

“You ready to go Kagome?” Botan asked.

Kagome nodded and Botan put her things in a subspace pocket. Kagome came down the steps and hugged Xander. “Keep in touch.”

“Will do Kags.” He grinned as Botan whisked her away on her oar. “So, what's the what?”

“Can't I just come see my little brother?”

“Sure. So what's going on?”

Yusuke rolled his eyes and pulled something out of his pocket. “Got something from Raizen's vaults for you.”

“The old man?”

“Yeah.” Yusuke held out a silver ring. “It's his crest, his seal or whatever.”

“Royal logo?”

“Something like that. According to what my subordinates told me, only one of Raizen's blood, or someone connected to his line can wear them.” He held up his right hand. “I've got one too.” It was the same silver, the crest was a red stone, similar to a ruby.

Xander accepted the ring Yusuke held out and slipped it on his ring finger on his right hand, the same finger Yusuke wore his. The red stone turned green.

“Cool.”

Yusuke stared. “Huh...mine didn't do that.”

XXX
Party till You're Eaten

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Very brief non-graphic slash.
Extra: Willow says something in this chapter that's a reference to another show that I threw in there for the hell of it. See if you can catch it. XD

Child of the Hellmouth
calikocat
word count: 4597

XXX

Xander, Buffy and Willow stared at the tv. Willow, sitting on the floor in front of them, was contently sipping from her juice box, oblivious to the mess her friends were making of her hair. Behind her to the left Xander was undoing a braid, and possibly tying knots, he was paying more attention to the tv after all. Buffy on the other side, lay on her stomach making a new braid of the red silk their friend called hair.

Xander blinked at the screen in confusion. “Why is she singing?”

Willow popped the straw out of her mouth to answer. “She's sad because her lover gave her twelve gold coins and then the wizard cut open the bag of salt and now the dancing minions have nowhere to put their big maypole fish...thing.”

He blinked again and shared a look with Buffy who shrugged. “It scares me when you do that. But why is she singing?”

Buffy nodded though only Xander could see the movement. “Her lover? I thought that was her chiropractor.”

Xander held back a snicker and smiled instead. This was why he fought, this was why he trained and helped Buffy. These peaceful boring moments where they could just be a bunch of kids, bored out of their minds watching strange foreign musical soap operas. He continued to grin as Willow continued her explanation.

When she was done there was a moment of silence.

“So how does the Water Buffalo fit in again?”

xxx

He was late, way later than he'd meant to be. Which meant his mom was actually home and thought he was already in bed asleep. Which also meant he had to sneak in. Luckily that turned out to be easier than he thought it would be. Jessica Harris was dead to the world in front of the tv, a late night rerun of Wheel of Fortune droning on into the dark night. He briefly wondered if Pat Sajack was a demon.

He tiptoed to his room, finding nothing out of the ordinary until he flipped the light switch on the
wall. Xander froze. The egg was broken into two large pieces on the night stand. Somehow his dagger ended up in his hand and he moved cautiously into the room.

He had barely taken a step when a cat jumped onto his bed.

“Holy crap!” He gasped and the cat rolled its eyes. Eyes that almost glowed an eerie familiar green. He knew that color. “So...you evil?” The cat snorted and gave him a look.

Do I look evil? The voice in his head was definitely masculine, but young...kinda like a ten year old would sound.

“Wellll...you could be. No one ever said evil couldn't be pretty...or fluffy.”

The cat glared at him. I am not fluffy!

Xander tilted his head at the cat and really looked at it. The base color of its fur was such a light grey it was almost white, making the black stripes a striking contrast. Its fur was short and shined and its eyes glowed for a moment. “You're right, Fluffy doesn't suit you.”

Not Fluffy glared at him, before yawning and pointedly ignoring him by curling up in the center of his bed.

Xander rolled his eyes and moved about the room, changing into his night clothes and eventually making his way to the bed. “Move over Marshal.”

Marshal?

Xander shrugged. “Just popped into my head. It's not Fluffy...and it's better than Pu.”

The cat looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding. Marshal it is. He moved over and let Xander have the majority of the bed and he curled into Xander's side.

Xander hesitated for only a moment before reaching out to stroke the soft fur of his Spirit Beast. A deep purr filled the room. He couldn't wait to tell Yusuke. A cat was so much cooler than a blue chicken.

xxx

Sometimes he felt like an outsider looking in...or like one of those narrators on the nature channel. Observe the SoCal Valley girl in her natural habitat. See how she wears clingy, bright clothes in attempt to attract a mate. Notice her bright smile to those she blesses with her time...but one must be careful around these exotic creatures. Their tongues are sharp and unforgiving. Xander shook his head in amusement, he had an inner Giles...who knew?

He rolled his eyes as he finally caught up with the girls and caught the tail end of their conversation. “What's like a relationship?”

Willow gave him an innocent face. “Nothing.”

Buffy grimaced but waved the question away. “Nothing I have. Coffee?”

Xander nodded. “I can see that, hot equals passion, maybe even obsession, and bitter equals bad breakup. That's why I take cream and sugar, no more bitter.” When both his girls smiled and laughed he decided that maybe he was more in sync with the girl psyche than he originally thought. And he wasn't sure that was entirely a good thing.
“There's really no comparison between college men and high school boys. I mean, look at that.” Cordelia's voice cut through his thoughts and he stopped in front of her, Buffy and Willow kept walking.

“You're snarking at me already?” He glanced at the magazine in her hands, snatching it up for a closer look. “Dr Debbie? How to laugh?” He met her eyes and for the first time noticed they were a really pretty hazel. “I thought the mighty Queen C was above seeking advice from peasants. And really Cordy? College guys? They'll throw you way faster than you do us high school boys.” He really had to wonder what was going on with him today, first he channeled some weird nature version of Giles, and now he was feeling protective of Cordelia. Maybe the hellmouth was finally getting to him?

“Feeling a little jealous Xander? Don't worry, some day you'll go to college. I'm sure your pizza delivery job will really broaden your horizons. Now, give me back my magazine.”

Xander shook his head and handed the glossy paged rag to her. “Here ya go.” As he placed the magazine in her grasp she grabbed his wrist. He raised an eyebrow at her.

“What's that?” She asked, her eyes were glued to his hand.

Xander looked at the ring. “Oh. Family crest, my brother gave it to me.” He pulled his hand back from her and started to walk away.

“Seriously? The Harris Family crest? That's the best you could come up with?”

Xander smirked at her over his shoulder. “Got nothing to do with the Harris Family. This symbol goes back more than a thousand years.” He gave her a little wave. “Later Queen C.”

Cordelia turned to look at her shadow who looked as puzzled as she did. “What was that about?”

The girl just blinked at her and Cordelia rolled her eyes. She needed better shadows.

xxx

Xander had a free period that morning so he'd decided to go to the Library, hoping to maybe get a round of sparring in with Giles. He went in through the back way and was glad he did when he caught the tail end of Giles' lecturing his friend.

“Well here's a hard fact of life. We all have to do things we don't like. You have hand to hand this afternoon and patrol tonight. So you need to be here at the end of period six to get your homework done. And don't dawdle with your friends.” Giles demanded, finishing his lecture. Which of course led to a Buffy pout.

Xander smirked as the infamous Buffy pout failed. Buffy really needed to work on that, she wasn't sticking her lip out enough, and her eyes weren't watery. Xander shook his head and made a mental note to help her brush up on her technique as she skulked out of the library.

He stepped out of the stacks. “What's that about Giles?”

Giles whirled, his hand over his heart. “Don't do that! And don't you start either.”

“Start what?”

“She has responsibilities, she can't remain a child forever.”

Xander rolled his eyes. “And if you try to keep pushing her like that she's going to break.” He fixed
his gaze on Giles. “Tell me something Giles, how many Slayers last more than a year?”

Giles frowned. “Not many.”

Xander nodded. “So she's lived longer than the average Slayer?”

“Well...yes.” Giles looked puzzled. “Where are you going with this?”

“Give me a minute. Since she's lasted more than a year, that proves she's got something all those mediocre Slayers didn't.” When Giles still looked lost, he glared at the man he thought of as a father. “She has us Giles, and you need to lighten up. She's not alone. We'll watch her back, but you need to join the team and stop treating her like a tool. That's what got all those other girls killed. Their watchers saw the Slayer in them, never the girl. I thought you got that.” He shook his head. “I'll come back later when you're not being a boob.”

Giles squawked as he turned on his heel and left the way he'd come.

xxx

Xander continued to glare at the Frat guy who was laying on the good guy charm, practically slathering it all over one of his girls with an aw shucks smile. There was something wrong with the scene. He felt that same chill he got whenever a vampire approached. This guy with the big doe eyes was a predator, and Buffy was the prize in his sights.

“Xander? You're growling.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Just a bad feeling.”

“Rich Frat guy?”

“Predator. Wolf in sheep's clothing. Looks harmless...he's hiding his killer side.”

Willow's eyes grew wide. “Demon?”

Xander shook his head. “Human monster.”

She gulped and shuddered and leaned into him, almost like she needed the safety he provided as her packmate. “Like the Kiddie League Coach?” He nodded and she tugged on his sleeve. “What do we do?”

He opened his eyes and they flickered for a second. “We protect the pack.”

Willow nodded and smiled. “Good.”

xxx

“You're still being a boob.”


“You're done being a boob?”

“I suppose.”

“You realize you're like our dad right?”
Giles froze and looked at Xander. “What?”

“That. Summers is our Mom and you're our Dad. Willow’s parents are never home, they travel all over the country giving lectures. My mom works and goes out, I never see her anymore, and my Dad disappeared. Buffy's Dad isn't really in the picture either. So we've got Mrs. Summers...and you.”

Xander wondered if maybe he'd said too much as Giles looked as shocked as he'd ever seen him. The man's eyes were a little watery and he pulled off his glasses to polish them.

“I...thank you, Xander. I hadn't realized that I filled such a role.”

Xander nodded. “You're welcome. I just figured you should know. It seems like we're really lacking in the father figure department. But that's okay as long as you don't mind the job.”

“I don't mind at all lad.”

“Cool.”

“Right. Now shall we proceed with your training? Or perhaps your homework?”

Xander gave him a slow blink. “What homework?”

Giles sighed.

xxx

“I can't believe he made me do my homework!” Xander groaned as they walked; Buffy was patrolling near the college campus tonight so he was on the other side of town. Marshal had decided to tag along.

You wanted a real Dad.

“Didn't think I'd have to do my homework though.” He stopped and motioned for Marshal to be quiet. “We've got vamps.”

Marshal, as it turned out, was good at distracting vampires. He'd dash out at them, run circles around them, just generally distract them, and Xander would go in for the kill. They worked well together and Xander decided he liked having a hunting partner.

After a particularly good kill Xander straightened and glanced over his shoulder. “How long have you been there?”

“Not long, just happened to be out for a walk. Care to join me?” Blue eyes danced in the dim light of the cemetery. They were pretty eyes, in a pretty face, set above killer cheekbones that could cut glass.

“I'm thinking no, cause of you being the evil undead and all.”

“Prejudiced against us non-breathing types are you? Not nice pet.” A flash of light lit up his face as he lit a cigarette.

“Not needing air has nothing to do with it. It's more about you guys wanting to drink us down the way a little kid attacks Kool Aid. Vicious and painful and all kinds of messy.”

“Doesn't have to be painful. If it's done right I can make you beg for it.” Spike smirked and took a step closer. Marshal growled, it was deep, more like what a mountain lion would sound like, or a tiger. “The bloody hell was that?”
Xander gave him a grin. “See, this is why it would never work out between us. Well one of the reasons. I figure your girl Drusilla is the jealous type, and besides, my cat doesn't like you.”

Spike snorted and stepped closer again until he was inches from Xander, he looked down and met his eyes. “Who knew I'd find something so shiny on the hellmouth.”

Xander quirked a brow. “I'm not a nickel, and you're not a magpie.”

The hand not holding the cancer stick reached out to grasp his chin, and Xander had to wonder why the heck he was letting the vampire touch him. And suddenly his brain froze when Spike leaned down and pressed soft cool lips to his. It was...different. Not bad, just different, not that he had anything to compare it to.

And then Spike pulled away, a satisfied smirk on his lips, lips that had touched his. There hadn't been any action, not really, but considering it was his first kiss and it still shorted his brain...wow. What would a kiss with tongue be like.

“What was that about?”

“Just wanted to test something.”

Xander frowned. “What? I've been upgraded from a happy meal to a guinea pig? Tease.” That last word left his mouth before he could stop it, before he could think about what it would mean.

“Oh pet, I haven't begun to tease.” Spike flicked away his cigarette and disappeared into the darkness.

I can't believe you let a vampire kiss you.

“Shut up Marshal.”

xxx

“I can't believe she lied to Giles! My world is all askew!”

Xander nodded. “It's Giles' fault really, although he did give her time off, which I guess is good...if she hadn't lied about it.” Willow gave him a funny look and he shrugged. “I told him yesterday that he didn't need to push her so hard, that we'd always back her up.” They both sighed as she handed him her coke and he gave her his m&ms.

“At least we can be the dutiful children and help Daddy.”

Xander choked on the coke. “That sounded so wrong, how the heck did you make that sound wrong! That was wrong like maybe you have something you wanna tell me Wills? Like maybe you have an unhealthy fixation on one of our parental units? Daddy issues much?”

Willow grinned. “I made you spew coke. And besides, Giles sings pretty.”

Xander raised an eyebrow. “He sings pretty.”

She nodded. “You should come with me to the Expresso Pump some time.”

“Willow, we talked about that, you're not allowed to have coffee...ever.”

She pouted. “Spoil my fun.”
“Yep. Wills, you're like a squirrel on crack when you have coffee.”

“We were twelve and that was only one time! I can handle it now.”

“You blew up Jessie's tree-house with your science kit thingy.”

Willow grumbled. “You blow up one tree-house and you pay and pay and pay.” They traded coke and candy again.

“I'm going to the party.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“I'm that transparent huh?”

“No...but after the whole 'protect pack' speech I figured you weren't gonna just do nothing...you hoping to catch an orgy while you're there?”

He grinned. “You know me so well.”

“Yep.”

xxx

Xander waved at Botan as she flew off. He really needed a car, depending on a Grim Reaper to give him a ride was so not cool. Well it would be cool if said Grim Reaper wasn't also one of his brother's friends. Speaking of his brother...he glanced down at the black dress slacks and light blue polo shirt he was wearing. He was sooo glad Yusuke had decided to give him an allowance. After combining what Yusuke had given him and what Jessica left on the fridge for him he'd had enough buy the pants and shirt. He'd gotten lucky and found both on sale at the mall. The shoes hadn't cost him a thing, they were an old pair of Tony's that fit him okay, and they hardly had a scuff on them.

He took a breath and walked up to the house, nodding at the other guests as he passed them. When he got to the front door he plastered a smile on his face and shook hands with the big guy who he assumed was playing bouncer. “Tom and Richard said there was a big bash tonight. I barely managed to clear my schedule in time.” He kept the grin up and made sure to flash his ring. Raizen's ring really came in handy; it looked expensive, and expensive meant money and power.

The muscle guy nodded. “Glad you could make it. Richard is escorting a leggy brunette around here somewhere. Tom's probably bored in a corner by himself.”

“At least until a pretty blonde catches his eye.” They grinned at one another and Xander slapped his back and moved away. Once the door man was out of sight he took a deep breath. That was almost too easy. He took another calming breath and snagged a drink off a tray as a pledge dressed in drag passed him.

He gazed around the room and toasted to the first pretty girl who met his eyes. She smiled at him appreciatively and he grinned back. College girls rocked! Xander made his way over to her and started a conversation. Her name was Rochelle, she was a Junior, and majoring in botany. He kept his eyes open, feeling himself relax when he caught sight of Buffy safe and sound, though dancing with Tom.

“I didn't catch your name.”

Xander sipped at his drink, trying not to grimace at the alcohol, it was better than sake, but still... “It's
Alex. Alex LaVelle."

“You look a little young, are you a Freshman?”

He chuckled. “Nah, I'm just cursed with this baby face. I'm a Sophomore, currently undeclared, but I'll probably major in foreign languages. I think I might like working as a translator.” Rochelle smirked at him and rattled something off in Spanish, he blinked. “Sorry, I should have specified. My Spanish is zilch, my Japanese however is brilliant. Japan is where the money is after all.” She grinned at him.

He did his best to keep an eye on Buffy, he was here to watch her back, not scold her. Giles did enough of that already. However he saw her less and less, and suddenly she was gone...and come to think of it he hadn't seen Cordelia at all. Somehow he had to ditch his audience and look for them. Which was going to be a neat trick, Rochelle wasn't alone now. One girl had become two, then four. Apparently college girls, like Japanese girls, thought he was a hottie. Rochelle and her posse seemed to think his time spent in Japan was interesting, and fabulous.

Unfortunately he'd drawn too much attention to himself and he found himself with a Frat guy on either side of him. They grinned at him and at each other maniacally. “New Pledge.” They tried to drag him off and his training kicked in.

One guy went flying into a wall and the other was on his knees grunting in pain as Xander kept his arm twisted behind his back. He shook his head and pushed the jerk away. When another Fraternity member approached him he leveled him with a glare. The man paused, clearly leery of ending up injured.

Xander gave a small bow to Rochelle and apologized in Japanese, and again in English. “It seems dear lady that I'm no longer welcome. It was nice meeting you.”

“Do you really have to go Alex?”

He shrugged. “A man shouldn't stay where he's not wanted.” He smiled and headed towards the door. When he got there the doorman reached for him. “Touch me and I'll break your hand.” He smirked and let his eyes flash green and the muscle man stumbled back in fear.

Xander made his way down the drive a bit and spotted Cordelia's car. Damn, that meant the girls were still inside. He needed a new plan.

xxx

He got lucky, finding the creepy brown cloak in the trash was like a sign from above. Xander smirked as he put on the cloak and waited for the party to wind down before sneaking back in. Sneaking into this place was easy, it was the staying that gave him trouble. However as he filed in with the other cloaked figures no one noticed him, no one raised the alarm. He was in.

And he nearly gave himself away when he saw the three girls chained up in the cavern. Cordelia, Buffy and another girl were glaring...well Buffy was glaring at Tom. Cordelia and the other girl just looked scared. In fact Cordelia was being very vocal with her fears.

He met Buffy's eyes, and winked. She blinked and gave a small nod. Safety in numbers, she wasn't alone. Xander smiled and moved with the others, repeating their mantra, and kneeling on the cold hard floor.

And then Makita appeared and he gulped. No one had said anything about a giant snake.
The crazy cult of Frat guys had unchained Cordelia first and were bringing her to Makita. Buffy was struggling with the chains, yelling at the snake, Cordelia was screaming and Tom hit Buffy. It was just the diversion he needed, and Xander acted, stripping off the cloak he tossed it randomly at some of the guys and got between the girls and the snake. Somehow he'd gotten his dagger out in the mad scramble and he glared at Makita.

“Hello Ugly. Hate to interrupt, but these ladies aren't on the menu anymore.” He brought his dagger up, and his ring flashed in the torchlight. Makita's eyes widened and he hissed...and then tried to swerve around Xander, almost as if he didn't want to touch him. “Don't think so buddy.” He jumped onto Makita's back as he tried to slither passed, and held on. As Reptile guy tried to throw him off he managed to catch glimpses of Buffy kicking Frat guy butt, including Tom's.

“Xander!”

“Get the sword!” He yelled at her. She scrambled for it and she sliced Makita in half just as he slit the demon's throat. It was good to be thorough. He fell and rolled away from the strangling demon.

“What a ride.” He saw Giles, Willow and Angel on the stairs. “What kept you?”

“We came to save Buffy.” Willow looked sheepish. “And back you up.”

“Well you missed all the fun, evidently Buffy and Cordy really know how to party, right up until they're eaten.”

Buffy groaned and poked him. “How long have you been here?”

He shrugged. “I got here early.”

“Was there an orgy?” Willow stage whispered. Giles sputtered and Angel looked paler than usual. Buffy however just rolled her eyes.

“Nah, I missed it.”

Buffy nudged him. “Thanks. I'm glad you followed me.”

“Well I wasn't gonna leave one of my pseudo sisters in the clutches of a bunch of Frat guys...and that was before I knew they were an evil snake worshiping cult.” He motioned at the Fraternity members. “We should probably tie them up, call the cops and get the heck outta here.”

xxx

Xander held the library door open long enough for Marshal to slip inside as he entered. “Hey Giles!”

Giles stuck his head out of his office. “It's rather late Xander, shouldn't you be at home? Or on patrol?”

“We just made a sweep, and we'll check the places we skipped on the way back home.”

“We?”

Xander motioned at Marshal who hopped up onto the counter. “This is Marshal.”

“When did you get a cat and why is it going on patrol with you?”

“He's no ordinary cat G-man. He's a spirit beast. Koenma gave me this egg back in the summer...and Marshal just hatched out of it the other day.” Xander shrugged. “Buffy and I haven't patrolled together yet, so Marshal is my partner.”
Nice to meet you G-man.

Giles blinked and stared. “Your cat just spoke...telepathically.”

“I always knew you were the brightest crayon in the box.”

Giles let out a put upon sigh before nodding to Marshal. “Nice to meet you as well Marshal. Please don't call me that horrid nick name.”

Marshal made a sound that was almost a chirp.

Xander grinned. “So I'm thinking we need to talk.”

“You've mentioned that before.”

Xander nodded and took a breath. “We need to get Buffy more exposure to what's out there.”

“I thought you wanted me to back off a bit, let her be a teenager.”

“I do, but that's not what I meant. When she sees a demon, she slays it...or tries to. Not all demons are evil. She needs to know that.”

Giles looked thoughtful. “You're worried about her finding out.”

He shrugged and wouldn't meet his mentor's eyes. “I can't keep it a secret forever. Someday I'll have to come clean. I mean...Yusuke stared out human. And now he's not. I could be the same way.”

Giles smiled and put his hand on Xander's shoulder. “We'll see what we can do.” He waited until Xander met his eyes. “One step at a time. Now, wait here a moment, I have something for you.” He backed away and disappeared into his office. Xander glanced and Marshal and shrugged. Giles reappeared with a thick tome. “This is a book on the Makai. It has several chapters on the three kings, including Raizen.”

Xander smiled. “Thanks Giles.”

XXX
Conversations with Kings

Child of the Hellmouth

calikocat

word count: 4645

xxx

Xander kicked at one of the four vampires that had picked the festive pumpkin stand as a nice place to hang out and compare their unlives over a quick bite. Their meal had run away screaming the moment the undead fiends were distracted. As luck would have it Xander wasn't alone, Buffy had appeared from the shadows and was knocking another vamp around. Quickly they each staked a vampire and moved closer to one another in an almost instinctual move as the remaining two circled around them. Somehow they ended up back to back. It was an action he decided to ponder later, when they weren't kicking vampire butt.

“Fancy meeting you here.” Xander quipped, keeping his eyes on the circling predators.

She nodded, or he assumed she nodded from the way her hair bobbed at the corner of his vision. “Didn't realize our patrol zones overlapped. Duck and roll!”

He heeded her warning and they both ducked and rolled away from the vampires...who ran into each other before going after them again.

“Are they serious?” He asked her as he dodged a failed flying kick. “And what's with the lame kung fu?”

“Newbies are usually like this. You got an extra stake?”

He tried not to sigh. “You've got to learn to pull them back out before they dust Buff!” He scolded her as he blocked and countered the vampire that lunged at him again. Buffy did the same with her opponent.

“Fight now, lecture later!” She knocked her vamp flat on his back and grabbed a picketed sign and proceeded to stake him with it. “You okay?”

“Fine!” Xander knocked the last vampire back and reached for the nearest pumpkin and threw it at him. The vampire staggered as the pumpkin exploded in his face. Xander proceeded to brain the undead with pumpkins when suddenly one hit the vamp in the chest and he exploded into a cloud of dust.

Xander blinked, and looked at Buffy who gaped at him. They looked back at the settling dust and looked at each other again.

Buffy’s voice seemed loud in the suddenly calm night air. “You just dusted a vamp with a pumpkin.”

He nodded dumbfounded. “Yes. Yes I did. Go me?” At her snicker he shrugged. “The stem must have hit it just right.”

Buffy nodded in agreement and glanced at her watch. “Oh! I'm late!”

He grinned. “Date with Angel?”
“Yeah.” She looked sheepish. “I can...I mean I'm already late.”

He gave her a one armed hug. “Don't stand the demon up Buff. I'm okay. Go on your date. Take some down time.”

She nodded. “You sure you're okay for the rest of your patrol?”

“I'm good. Watch your back.”

She smiled at him and started to walk away. “We should patrol together more often.”

He grinned back her. “And then go to Willow’s for snacks.”

“Read my mind Xan.”

xxx

Buffy stared at the sign up table and Snyder randomly dragging students over to it. “What's the deal?”

Xander wrinkled his nose and leaned against the lockers next to Willow who was currently arm deep rummaging in her own. “A bunch of kids need older sibling types to take them trick-or-treating. Of course the trick is to keep them from eating too much candy before they get home. The less candy they eat the less hyper they'll be.”

Willow closed her locker and smiled softly. “Remember last year when Jesse volunteered?”

Xander smiled back. “He had fun.”

Buffy gave them a sad smile in return. “Was he a huge Halloween fan?”

He grinned and shook his head. “Not just that, Jesse always wanted to be a big brother, so he volunteered as soon as we were old enough. Last year he went as a tube of toothpaste.”

Buffy blinked. “Toothpaste?”

Willow giggled. “His Dad was a dentist.”

Xander grinned. “He threw water balloons full of mouth wash at all the jocks.” The sudden disappearance of his grin was the only warning they had.

Buffy was jerked back as Snyder grabbed hold of her. The little troll could be damn sneaky when he wanted to be.

“Just the menace to society I was looking for. Instead of egging houses this Halloween, you're going to do something worthwhile. You're volunteering, all of you.” Snyder smirked and handed pens to Xander and Willow. “Costumes are mandatory.” He walked away leaving three upset teens behind him.

Buffy pouted. “This sucks.”

Xander nodded. “I vote we dress up as Troll hunters and paint a target on his ass.”

xxx

They entered the cafeteria a short time later, the forced volunteering still the topic of conversation.
Xander sighed. “There goes my allowance. Can't believe we have to dress up too.”

Willow raised a brow at him. “You like dressing up for Halloween.”

“Not when fun sucking leeches make me.”

Buffy nodded. “And I was gonna stay in and enjoy my night off.”

They stopped and gave the Slayer odd looks. Willow frowned. “Night off?”

Xander nodded. “Halloween? The night that is holy to all that is spooky?”

Buffy nodded, her lip still in a pout. “Giles said Halloween is when the paranormal goes on vacation.”

“Huh. Crazy vamps, they're always skewering my world view.” Xander grumbled as he moved toward the coke machine and the girls sat at a table. He put in his change and pushed the button for root beer. Nothing happened. “Come on you piece of crap.” He shifted in awareness just before a heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder.

“Harris.”

He turned to face the quarter back. “Hey Larry, shouldn't you be with your jock buddies playing with finger paints somewhere?”

Larry smirked at him. “Funny man aren't you Harris.”

Xander tried not to roll his eyes. “I do my best. What do you want Larry?”

The jock moved his hand away from Xander's shoulder. “You and Summers, you're just friends right?”

Xander shook his head. “Nah, she's more like a sister.”

“So she's not your girl friend?”

Xander frowned at the taller boy. “What part of 'she's like a sister' did ya not get?”

Larry ignored him. “Do you think she'd go out with me?”

He shook his head. “Not a chance. You're not her type.”

Larry stepped closer into his personal space. “Oh yeah? I heard she was fast.”

“We're going in circles here Larry.” He narrowed his eyes in warning. “I know I just told you she's my sister in all but blood. Which means I'm very protective of her.”

Larry sneered at him, discounting him because he was shorter than the quarter back. “Really? Doesn't change what the guys say in the locker room.”

Xander glared at him. “You're going to shut up and never talk about her like that again.”

Larry grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer. “And who's gonna make me Harris?”

Xander moved faster than Larry could follow, he grabbed the jock's thumb, yanked it back, releasing his hold on Xander. He then twisted Larry's arm behind his back and slammed him face first into the
A wave of lust and pheromones rolled off of Larry. Xander blinked in realization but kept Larry's arm twisted behind his back as he leaned forward, crowding against his back to whisper in the taller boy's ear. “Are you sure it's Buffy you're after?” Larry gasped and squirmed a bit, more pheromones filled the air. “I'm gonna let you go and you're gonna walk away.” He stepped back and released him.

Larry moved away and turned to look at him, almost as if he were really seeing Xander for the first time. It was a kind of hungry look. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Ask me again when you're not being a jerk.” He reached for the coke. “Yuck, diet.”

“Hey Harris?”

Xander ignored him. “You're not walkin’.”

Larry shuffled his feet. “Maybe we can talk some time.”

The scent of Larry's lust tickled his nose again. He met Larry's eyes and smiled, doing his best to make it coy. He slowly raked his gaze over Larry, the older boy shivered. Nifty, he could do sexy eyes. “Bye Larry.”

xxx

Buffy poked at the various props on the shelves while Willow compared wigs. “So what are you going as?”

Willow looked up from the oriental wig in her hands. “Well, I was going to go with a classic.”

“Which was?”

“A ghost. But Kagome sent me a miko outfit, so I'm gonna be a miko. I even saw some toy bows in here.”

Buffy nodded in approval. “Cool. How is she anyway?”

“She's good, keeping busy with school and work at the shrine. Hey Xander, what did you get?”

He pulled a toy machine gun out of his bag.

Buffy looked at the gun and then tried to look behind him. “Where's the rest of it?”

He grinned. “I've got some face paint in here too, and I've got some old army fatigues at home that came from a surplus store.”

She nodded. “Man with a plan.”

“Yep, that's me.” Xander frowned as Buffy's eyes got a glazed look and she wandered over to a pink ball gown. He gave Willow a confused look. “Girl thing?”

“Yep.”

“Just checking.”
“Fancy meeting you here.”

Spike watched the screens closely as the boy and Slayer took on the simpletons posing as vampires. They had taken out two of the newly dead with ease. He shook his head. “What's this then?” He walked around the suspended screens and sneered. “Every bloody fledge thinks he's Jackie Chan.” He frowned as he watched them fight side by side. Both were good, fast, neither wasted much on movement. “You see that? How she staked him with that post.” He gestured to the screens for the minion behind him. “This Slayer is bloody resourceful.” He laughed, it was always nice to have a challenging opponent, and here in this town he had two. “And the boy.” He grinned as the whelp dusted his last fledge with a pumpkin. “Crazy kind of luck he has.”

Drusilla drifted into the room from the darker shadows, Miss Edith clutched in her hands. “The world is spinning in all directions. It made Miss Edith spill her tea.”

“Play it again.” Without taking his eyes from the screens he held out his hand to her. “Come here poodle.”

She grasped his hand, a serene look on her face. “Do you like watching them? Him? Did you like his taste?”

Spike nodded absently, his own eyes glazing at his memory of the not quite kiss he'd stolen from the boy two weeks before. “Boy called me a tease.” He grinned.

“Do you love me?”

“You know I do Dru.” His eyes never left the images on the screens above them.

She frowned a little. It was already starting. Her Prince watched the Kitten, he was already intrigued. “Chaos is coming, the stars giggle, poor tipsy little bursts of light. The Slayer shall trip on her pretty gown and cry at her weakness.”

Spike's eyes broke away from the image of Xander throwing pumpkins to rest on his dark goddess. “Go on pet. What makes her weak?”

Drusilla smiled.

xxx

Xander grinned at his reflection. The face paint he'd gotten at Ethan's was good stuff, almost professional quality. He glanced back at the picture of Raizen in the book that Giles had given him. He already had the fatigues on, and the gun lay on his dresser in front of him. Just a few more lines left.

He had decided to a little something in honor of his ancestor. If it weren't for Raizen, he'd never have met Yusuke, heck neither of them would have been born. And the old guy seemed to be someone that Yusuke respected. Carefully he applied more of the black paint on his face to mimic the tribal markings on Raizen's picture.

“This is gonna be great.”

xxx

Xander gazed around him at the sudden chaos, there was no other way to describe it. Just moments
ago the night had been filled with laughter and children scurrying from house to house. Now all he could hear was screaming.

He saw Willow fall to the ground in her miko robes.

“Willow!”

It was the last thing he saw before everything went dark.

xxx

Raizen blinked. One moment he was in Reikai, the next he was...in a strange sort of building. A library by the looks of it. There were shelves upon shelves filled with books. He was sitting at a table, a book was spread open in front of him. He glanced at the open pages and stared at the illustration of himself. “What in the three realms is this?”

A noise caught his attention and he looked up to see a young human male come in through a set of double doors that hadn't been there a moment ago. As the boy drew closer he noticed that the brown eyes set in his young face seemed familiar. His dark hair was cut short and he walked with some confidence in his step.

What really caught his eyes though, were the markings on the boy's face. Markings that were identical to his own.

The youth stopped in front of the table. “Sorry for barging in. Didn't know anybody else was here. You wouldn't happen to know where here is would you? I mean it looks like the high school but it just stops at the doors to the cafeteria. Which sucks cause that means no food and—Oh my GOD! You're Raizen! This is so cool!”

Raizen regarded the boy silently for a moment. “Have a seat child.”

xxx

Xander gulped as he sat down. He felt mortified, he couldn't believe he'd just babbled in front of his ancestor. Yusuke would never let him live this down...if he ever found out about it at all. “So...why are you here?”

“I know not, I did not appear in this place under my own power. Perhaps it has something to do with those marks on your skin.”

“Marks?” Xander blinked at him confusedly. Raizen tapped his own marks and Xander lifted a hand to his face. The marks weren't oily paint anymore. “Oh crap.”

“Care to share?”

“Uh...it's um...Halloween, and I dressed as a soldier. Except instead of traditional soldier camo face paint I might have copied the tattoos from a picture of you--” He trailed off and his eyes glazed over for a moment. Raizen waited until he shook his head and his eyes cleared. “I think maybe everyone turned into what they were dressed as. My body is going around shooting a gun. It figures something weird would happen.” He sighed. “The one night a year the vamps stay in, something crazy happens.”

“Vamps?”

Xander nodded dejectedly. “Vampires. The hellmouth is almost overrun with them...well it would be
a lot worse without our group, but still.” He blinked. “Sorry about the babble fest. Um...I guess you want to know who I am—and how I know who you are.”

Raizen nodded and pointed at Xander's right hand. “I suppose it has something to do with that ring on your finger. Tell me boy, why do you wear a trinket that bears my crest.”

“Yeah. My brother gave it to me, he found a whole bunch of them in some vault of yours. He wears one too, so does his wife.”

“And just who is your brother?”

Xander grinned, as cheeky an expression as he could manage. “Yusuke.”

Raizen leaned back in his chair and gaped at him. “You are my descendant?”

“Um...surprise?”

“Yusuke didn't tell me he had a brother.”

He rushed to defend his older brother, in case Raizen was starting to get pissed. “That's not his fault, he didn't know. We haven't known each other very long, less than a year really.” At Raizen's puzzled look he continued. “We have different moms...and I'm younger. Tony, our sperm donor, got Atsuko pregnant then left Japan. He married my mom and I was born three years later. Anyway, Yusuke had only been back from the Makai for about a month when he heard me calling out.”

“Calling out?”

“Yeah. See I got possessed by this Primal Hyena demon spirit thing, a whole bunch of stuff happened, but in the end I got un-possessed. Except...I wasn't the only kid that had a hyena in their head for a while and we were a pack, a family. And then the connection was suddenly gone...and I guess it woke something up in me. That's what we came up with anyway. I didn't know I was calling for pack or anything, but Yusuke heard the call and went to see Koenma, cause he was freaking out about the voice in his head. And that's how he found out about me.”

Raizen stared at him for a moment before smiling cautiously, as if Xander might suddenly attack him. “Do you not need to breath as most humans do?”

Xander blushed. “It's a rare talent. Only my best friend Willow can out babble me.”

He nodded in acceptance. “What is your name?”

He could feel his blush deepening. “Alexander, but please, call me Xander.

“Urameshi?”

He shook his head. “Harris.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Why do you live on a hellmouth?”

Xander gave him a curious look. “I've always lived here...there. Its not like I knew there was a hellmouth growing up. Not until earlier this year.”
“Would it not be safer to live somewhere else?”

Xander nodded. “Probably, but it's home. Besides I'd never leave my pack behind.”

“The other possessed children?”

“Ah, no, we don't hang. No more hyena's to bind us. But the hyena I had left a few things behind...I've got sort of this pack mentality now. Willow, Buffy, and Giles are my pack. And really we've gotten pretty used to the weird that the hellmouth throws at us. When you hang out with a Vampire Slayer you can't avoid the weird stuff.”

Raizen gave him a pained look. “You associate with a Slayer?”

xxx

“Ladies, what exactly is going on here?” He was beyond confused. The last thing he remembered was walking into the armory. He had no idea how he'd ended up in this suburb version of hell. And the whimpering brunette in the party dress that was clinging to him was really annoying.

“Quit joking Xander, your taking this Soldier Boy thing too far.” The brunette glared at him, though the effect was lost due to her skimpy catsuit. “And you Willow, what's with the Chinese get up.”

“I don't think she understands you kitten.” He peered at the robed girl, her skin was pale and her hair was fixed in an oriental style...but he'd never seen an Asian with green eyes before. More importantly the girl seemed to be very calm, as if she dealt with this sort of chaos every day.

An inhuman scream caught their attention and they turned to see a small demon charging at them. The Asian girl notched an arrow and almost fired.

“Wait! That's a little kid! You can't shoot a kid!”

He fired into the air, the monster shrieked and ran away. “Didn't look like a kid.”

“That's because there's some weird and freaky hellmouth mojo flying around. But there's a little kid in there. I think...” The cat lady bit her lip in thought. “I think a bunch of people turned into their costumes...not me obviously because I have better taste. I only buy my costumes at Party Town.”

He met the Asian girl's eyes and they both shrugged. “Whatever Cat Woman. Any ideas? We don't need to be out in the open.”

“There you are! I've been looking for you!” Before he could turn and aim at the intruder the robed girl was glaring at the newcomer and had her arrow ready to fly again.

“Youkai!” She snarled.

The man in black stopped and held his hands up. “What's going on? Willow? Xander? Why don't you put the weapons down?”

Cat Woman shoved past them. “Angel! You have no idea how happy I am to see you. Well I'm always happy to see you, but right now it's nice to talk to someone who's not completely loony.”

“Cordelia? What's--”

“None of them know who they are and a bunch of people turned into their costumes.”

“I see...we need to get to a phone, see what Giles thinks about this. Come on, Buffy's house isn't far
from here.”

“Thank god, a voice of reason. Come on you amnesia freaks, you heard the man.” Cat Woman ushered the bow-happy and party girls after Angel. “Coming Xander?”

“If it gets us any closer to what's going on...sure.”

xxx

Raizen kept staring at him like he was crazy. “You fight alongside a Slayer?”

He glared at his ancestor, he could feel his eyes flicker that creepy hyena green. “Her name is Buffy and she is a member of my pack.”

They stared at each other for a few moments before Raizen smirked at him. “Interesting. Is she your mate?”

Xander snorted. “Nope. Never gonna happen. She's too busy making googoo eyes at Angel.” At the confused look he got he shrugged. “Vampire that got himself cursed with a human soul. Besides, she's the sister of my heart, Willow too. I don't see them that way.”

Raizen shook his head. “You aide a Slayer and demons do not hunt you?”

“Nope. Yusuke put the word out that I'm off limits. Of course new vamps are always climbing out their graves, and sometimes I think a lot of the world's vamps just come here for kicks. There's a lot of them.”

Raizen nodded in approval. “Tell me about yourself.”

He tilted his head. “Why?”

The ancient demon smiled. “I claim Yusuke as my son. I now claim you as my son as well. Not my heir...” He almost looked apologetic.

Xander nodded. “I don't want to rule anything. I have enough to deal with between the hellmouth and school.”

Raizen grinned at him. “Still, you are my son and I wish to know you.”

Xander considered the offer for a moment before returning the grin. “Sure thing Pops.”

xxx

Botan looked up from the book she was reading as she sipped her tea. There was something in the air tonight that set her on edge. The tea wasn't helping. Neither was the screaming coming from outside.

“I thought Halloween was supposed to be quiet.”

Giles hmm'd from the card catalog where he was working. “It is.” He looked up and met her gaze. “Usually. What is it?”

Botan tilted her head. “Someone is doing some casting tonight.”

“Really? What sort?”
“It’s not dark...not really. It feels familiar. Almost like--” the phone rang and she blinked.

“Drat.” Giles walked toward the counter and picked up the receiver. “Hello? What? Cordelia slow down...WHAT!? Good Lord. Yes, yes I’ll get right on it. Try to keep them inside until I figure out what's going on. Stay safe.” He slammed the phone. “Damn.”

“Rupert?”

“Children all over town have turned into their costumes. Cordelia remains unaffected, however the others...were not so lucky. They have no memory of themselves before tonight. Willow cannot even understand English.”

Botan frowned as a thought took hold. “Where did they get their costumes?”

“Cordelia got hers from Party Town. She doesn't know where Xander and the girls got theirs.”

Botan shook her head. “Xander used some fatigues he already had...but he needed a toy gun.” She paled. “That magick. Rupert it's Chaos magick! The store they went to is new, I remember Xander talking about it.”

Giles’ eyes grew hard. “What's the shop called?”

“Ethan's.”

They got across town in record time on her oar, no way was she riding in Giles' sad excuse for a car.

The shop was dark and eerie, especially with the flickering candle light coming from the back room.

“Definitely chaos magick.” Botan muttered as they came upon the circle of candles with a two faced statue in the middle. “Janus, God of Chaos.”

“Correct, but then you always were a bright girl Botan.”

They looked up to see Ethan smiling at them. Botan frowned, and if looks could kill, Giles would've needed a shovel by now.

“End the spell Ethan.”

“Now why would I do that? I've had such fun tonight, Halloween is always too quiet.” He grinned at Botan. “How are you my dear? You look lovely as ever. You know, I'm rather curious about that. You haven't aged at all have you? What's your secret?”

She grimaced. “You should do as he says Ethan.”

“Really? And why is that?”

The grimace faded and she perked up as Ripper made an appearance and clocked him. Ethan hit the floor with a thud. “That would be why.” She watched with growing interest as Giles proceeded to beat the crap out of his former friend. It was a shame really, Ethan had had such potential before he'd become so immersed in the dark.

A kick to the kidney's had Ethan gasping. “Tell me how to end the spell.”

Ethan coughed. “The statue, break it.”

Giles wasted no time, grabbing up the statue before hurling it at the floor. Ethan tried to sneak away
but Botan opened a portal and gave him a push into it before closing it again. “Well, that was fun. You're still in good form my dear Ripper.”

Giles stood and polished his glasses. “Where did you send him?”

She blinked at him. “I have no idea.”

He sighed. “Really Botan.”

xxx

Yusuke stalked down the corridor leading to Koenma's office. Stupid toddler, calling him for an important meeting. He wasn't even working for Reikai anymore. He threw the ornate doors open. “Koenma!” He entered the room expecting to find the immortal hiding behind a mountain of paperwork. The Prince of Reikai was suspiciously absent.

“Yusuke.”

He froze in mid-step. He'd never thought to hear that voice again. With a gulp he straightened his stance and looked to his right. “Raizen.”

“You look well.”

“Thanks.” Death suited the old guy, he looked healthier, of course when your dead you can't starve, no need for food. “Why are you here?”

Raizen stared at him for a long moment. “When were you going to tell me about Xander?”

Yusuke slumped a bit, was that all? It could have been so much worse. He shrugged and grinned at the former king. “...oops?”

Raizen threw back his head and laughed, long and hard.

XXX
As Giles' eyes ran over the articles in front of him, a frown quickly took over his features. “Well, that's odd, and certainly not good.”

Willow looked up from the computer behind the counter. “What's not good?”

“The articles in this mornings paper.” He moved to the counter and laid it down so she could see it. “Outside of town, two farms are experiencing a loss of livestock. One has lost three sheep, and another two ostriches. It says all the animals were ripped apart.”

Willow's eyes widened. “Oh boy.”

“What?“

She gulped. “Jonathan's dog was attacked recently. It's at the vet's recovering, but he said it was critical for a while.’’

“Good lord.”

“What kind of demon eats animals?”

Giles peered at his paper again. “Oh dear.”

“I hate it when you do that.”

Giles grimaced. “Sorry, it's just that according to this, the attacks, the scenes are very similar in nature to Principle Flutey's attack.”

“You mean, the 'wild dogs.'” If possible Willow's complexion grew even paler.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

The library doors opened and Xander came striding in, Marshal trailing along behind him before hopping up on the counter. He made his chirping noise at them.

Giles and Willow backed away from Xander.

Xander froze. “What?”
Giles removed his glasses and cleaned them. “Are you quite yourself Xander?”

“Huh?”

“Read the paper please.” Giles backed away further and Willow snatched up a mace from underneath the counter.

Cautiously Xander moved to look at the paper. “O-kay...You two are acting like I've got some weird disease or some...thing...” His eyes trailed over the article. “Holy crap! No wonder you guys are wiggin.” He looked at them, a hurt expression on his face. “I haven't been chomping on any sheep or giant birds. I like my meat cooked.”

Willow and Giles visibly relaxed, the tension flowing out of them. Giles cleared his throat. “What about the other students who were possessed?”

Xander blinked. “I don't know. We don't hang. Although...I don't remember them being around the past few days.”

“Hang on a sec, I'll check the attendance records.” They waited for Willow to put away her weapon before she proceeded to hack the school system, her face was a picture of concentration. “Uh oh.”

“How bad is uh oh?” Xander asked, his hand absently reaching out to run over Marshal's fur.

“Kyle and the others have missed four days in a row.” Willow bit her lip in worry.

Giles nodded. “That is consistent with the attacks.” He glanced at Xander. “And you haven't relapsed?”

“Uh, no. I've got control of myself. The nightly patrolling helps with the urge to hunt and protect the pack...crap.”

Willow blinked. “What?”

“If I retained stuff, maybe they have too...and they don't know how to control it.”

“I don't follow.”

Xander frowned in thought. “I already have such good control because when I was possessed I was the Alpha. I was their leader. Since then I've had some training, thanks to Kuwabara and you. And I patrol every night, which is kind of like hunting. I use my senses all the time, I'm not repressing anything.”

Willow hmm'd. “So if they've been repressing all this time...what's left of their hyena's might have overwhelmed them? What do we do? We can't just kill them...they're not demons.”

“They have retained enough control to not prey on humans...this time.”

Xander nodded. “But we don't know how long that control will last. Wills, give me their addresses. I'm gonna track them down.”

“Shouldn't you wait for Buffy?”

“Wills, they're my pack too. Or they were. If anyone can get through to them it'll be me. Trust me on this, please?”

“If you're sure.”
“As much as I can be.”

As soon as she had the information printed out for him, he was out the door, Marshal on his heels.

Willow frowned and faced their mentor. “Giles.”

“What?”

“When did Xander get a cat?”

xxx

He started with Kyle's house. When they had been possessed he'd been Xander's second. The one in charge when Xander wasn't available. The moderate two story home had a well kept yard, but the house was empty. Their scents were there, mostly Kyle's but the trail was old by a couple of days at least.

Xander went to Heidi's next, their scent was stronger here, but not by much.

What are we going to do when we find them?

“No clue.”

What if they're too far gone?

They were fast approaching Rhonda's home. And he could smell blood, animal thankfully. “That shouldn't be a problem.”

You don't know that.

“Yeah I do. If it was too late to help them we'd know. We'd already be hunting them for killing humans.”

Marshal was silent after that.

It didn't take long to follow the scent to the Sunnydale Motor Lodge. “Really guys, this is the best you could do?” He nose wrinkled at all the stale and unappetizing smells that perforated the parking lot.

This is really gross.

“No kidding.”

He focused on the smell of his once pack, and the smell of animal blood, rabbit if he wasn't mistaken. His nose led him to room number thirty-eight. It was locked. Which wasn't really a problem, Kurama had tutored him in more than just dancing.

Do I want to know how you knew how to do that?

“Kitsune.”

Marshal snorted.

Slowly Xander opened the door, and froze as the smell of sex and pheromones assaulted his nose. The four naked forms on the bed only added to his overwhelmed senses.
I think I'm too young to see this. Marshal's voice was a whisper in his head, but it helped to anchor him.

“You and me both.” He muttered.

Brown eyes opened and Kyle snarled at them. The others twitched and opened their eyes as well. All four pairs flickered back and forth between human and hyena green.

“Marshal, back away slow. Whatever you do, don't run.”

But...

“If you're too young to see them naked you're definitely too young to see what's coming. Go get Botan.”

Marshal nodded and slipped away. Xander squared his shoulders and stepped into the room, softly pushing the door closed behind him.

The pack continued to eye him like he was a steak. Kyle was the first to move. He sneered at Xander. “What do you want Harris?”

“Easy Kyle. I'm only here to help.”

“Help?” He laughed, it was that eerie high pitched trill. “You want to help us. You, the king of losers. You're not tough enough Harris. I'm the Alpha here.” His eyes flashed, but Xander caught a glimpse of uncertainty in that gaze. Kyle was scared.

Xander did his best to keep his voice steady. If he showed how freaked out he was they'd eat him alive, literally. “You've done good so far Kyle. But you can feel your hold on it slipping can't you? You could sense it in the others. You've kept it together this long, only killing animals. I'm proud of you.”

The last sentence made all of them perk up suddenly, the complement seemed to be more important than it should be. But Kyle fought it.

“We don't need you.” The 'I don't need you' was left unsaid.

“How much longer can you last Kyle? How long will you be able to keep them in line? Let me help. Please.”

“You're too weak.” There was no anger in the accusation, only grim acceptance. However Kyle still lunged at him.

Xander dodged and managed to trip him, all the while keeping the others in front of him, luckily they hadn't moved from the bed. He grabbed Kyle by the throat, his eyes changed to green and stayed that way.

“How?” Kyle gasped and struggled against him.

“I use my senses every day. I hunt, patrol. I protect my pack. I am Alpha.”

“You didn't protect us.” Kyle's voice was a whine.

Xander sighed. “My pack is more than just you. I didn't realize you guys retained anything. I'm sorry.”
“Sorry doesn't--”

Xander growled, his eyes glowing brighter, and Kyle tilted his head back in submission, his body completely relaxed in Xander's grip. Xander let go of his throat and leaned forward to lick it. Kyle shivered.

The scent of fresh arousal assaulted him and his eyes changed back to brown. Kyle leaned forward and licked at his mouth. It was a submissive gesture, one that acknowledged Xander as his Alpha.

“Help me, us. We can't control it. Them...not on our own.” Kyle's voice was breathy and he trembled from the strain of keeping the pack in line.

Xander nodded and nipped at Kyle's throat, hard enough to lead a mark. Kyle thrust against him, his erection jutting against his hip and Xander was bombarded with pheromones. Holy crap! He really hoped he was ready for this because Kyle wasn't stopping and was practically writhing against Xander while standing up. He was already so close to the edge that it was no surprise when the other boy came with a growl.

Oh boy.

He moved to the bed, dragging Kyle with him and allowed the other three to pull him onto the mattress, pulling his clothes off as they rubbed against him. Willow would be sad she'd missed the orgy. That was the last thought that went through his head for a while.

Here was a part of his pack that he'd neglected, it didn't matter that he hadn't known. He should have realized that they might have kept something from the possession. They'd been struggling with no Alpha to help them, protect them. If this was what they needed, then he needed to step up.

Heidi giggled and the sound made something hum low in his body. “We'll make it good Alpha.”

Tor was the first to make a play for dominance. He had to remember that this was what they needed. Tor tried to scrape his teeth on Xander's throat, but he wasn't fast enough, Xander had him pinned to the bed and squirming against him before the blond could blink. He offered his own throat with a whine.

Xander smirked and set his teeth into the tan skin and bit down, sucking and marking what was his. Tor shuddered as one of the girls gripped his erection and came, bucking up into her hand and the grip Xander still held on his throat.

Heidi tried to take him then, and they nearly rolled off the bed before he had her throat in his mouth. She struggled, and laughed, brat had never intended a real fight, she just wanted to play. He hoped he didn't embarrass himself as he reached down for the core of her, finding that magic button he'd read about but never really encountered before. Her gasp was all the encouragement he needed as he stroked her already wet folds and tweaked and increased the pressure on her throat. Her whole body tensed and she bucked into his hand as she rode her orgasm out.

Rhonda was calmer and let his hands roam more, moving them toward her more erogenous zones when she got impatient. Who knew the backs of her knees would make her twitch like that. After he'd made her thrash like he had Heidi, she smirked at him and just lounged beside her pack-mates, throat already showing, readily offered to her Alpha.

After marking Rhonda he'd thought his duty was over...but their eyes glowed again. And Kyle was ready for round two. They wrestled, testing their strength against one another, biting one another, but Xander never bared his throat. Kyle nipped at other places, scratched at Xander's back as he was
finally pinned and their erections slid alongside one another already slick with sweat. Kyle thrust up into him as Xander ground down and when they were close Kyle finally offered his throat again in submission and Xander bit down just hard enough to draw blood as they came.

“Damn. That was better than porn.” The voice sounded like Heidi.

Kyle chuckled and Xander released his throat, licking away the few drops of blood that welled to the surface. “Damn Harris. If we'd known...”

Xander gently kissed the bite. “If I’d realized you needed help I'd have come sooner.”

Tor yawned and snuggled into Kyle's side, it started a trend and the next thing Xander knew he was at the bottom of a pile of nakedness. He rolled his eyes but barely managed to fight his own yawn before falling into a light doze.

xxx

Botan flew though the wall of room thirty-eight and nearly toppled off her oar at the sight. “Your first time is an orgy!” She hissed.

Xander cracked an eye open. “They needed control. I helped.”

“By sexing them all up?”

He shrugged, or tried too. All four of them were somehow wrapped around him. “They started the sexing without me...besides, it worked.”

She frowned. “Why aren't you freaking?”

“I'm sixteen. And there was sex. Nuff said. You might want to leave soon. They'll be waking up.”

“Believe me, I'm gone. The last thing I need is Yusuke finding out I saw you naked.” She grumbled before flying back through the wall.

He started to move, trying to extricate himself from them, only to pout at his failed attempt at freedom.

“Quit moving.” Tor grumbled.

“We can't sleep here all day. If I skip the whole day Willow will scold me. Also, we need to talk.”

“So talk, we're listening.”

He glanced at Kyle. “Alright. This was fun, and I know you needed it, but this is not gonna be an everyday thing.”

“What do we do then?” Rhonda asked.

“I can take you out to hunt, to patrol. Maybe even train with Buffy and Giles. My pack is larger and more complicated than just you four. Buffy is sort of like...a co-alpha, she and Willow are my sisters. Giles is our mentor, kind of like our Dad really. I also have a brother in Japan who's married. I don't know why I have so much more control than you guys. It might be because I'm Alpha, or maybe because I channel what's left into protecting my pack. So maybe the more you use what you have the better chance you have at keeping in under control.”

“You want us to hang out with Summers and Rosenberg?” Heidi sneered.
The deep growl that came from Xander made them all freeze. “No. You four can go on like you always have. But making your pack bigger could help to integrate what's left of the hyena's. Make it less concentrated or something. And with a second Alpha...” He shrugged. “Just give it some thought. I will be taking you guys out for a vampire staking field trip though. That's non-negotiable.”

They nodded and began to untangle themselves and find their clothes. One by one they licked at his lips and chin before slinking out of the room. Kyle was the last.

It was strange to see someone usually so confident look so lost.

“What is it Kyle?”

Their eyes met. “Am I still your second?”

“As far as this part of the pack is concerned? Yeah, you're my second.”

Kyle nodded and looked thoughtful. “Not mate?”

He smiled and shook his head. “Not mate.”

Kyle nodded once more and offered his throat again. Xander leaned forward and licked at the mother of all hickeys that he'd left behind earlier. Kyle smirked and rubbed against him one more time before striding out the door.

He sighed and straightened his clothes. He'd have to stop at home and change before going back to school.

Marshal peeked into the room from the still open doorway.

“Wow. Deflowered in an orgy

“Shut up. It wasn't complete sex...just lots of writhing...and skin.”

Keep telling yourself that.

Xander rolled his eyes.

xxx

After a quick stop at home to shower and change, Xander headed back to school. It was relatively easy to slip back in unnoticed. Of course half the time the teachers didn't take attendance. Why call roll in a place where people disappear everyday? He waved off Willow's curious looks with a promise of telling them all at once after school. Which meant a Scooby meeting. He figured today was the day. He and Giles would have to make Buffy understand a new side of that which goes bump in the night.

When classes were finally over he found himself feeling extremely nervous...and a little baffled at Marshal's presence. His spirit beast had rolled his eyes and mewed at him. He'd play the cute cat for now.

Willow and Buffy entered the library together and took their usual seats at the main table after they had each hugged him. Once they were settled Willow completely surprised him.

“Giles said the cat was a gift from Yusuke.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Guys, this is Marshal.” He smiled as Marshal looked at them inquisitively before
hopping in Buffy's lap, and started purring when she scratched his chin.

“He's beautiful.”

“Yeah...”

Willow reached over to pet him as well, briefly meeting Xander's gaze. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah...but we need to talk.”

Buffy put Marshal down on the floor and gave Xander her full attention. “About?”

“Neutrals...and the hyena kids.”

Giles appeared from his office, tea service held in his hands as he deftly avoided stepping on Marshal. He set the tray down and handed each of them a cup of hot chocolate before sitting down with his tea.

Buffy thanked him before jumping in. “Okay, I'll bite. What's a neutral?”

Giles sipped at his tea before answering. “A neutral is a demon, one that doesn't attack humans.” Both girls gaped, but Giles held up a hand to stem their inquiries. “Not all demons are evil, just most. Neutrals only want to live their lives, go to their jobs, and raise their families. Brakken demons for example, are rather humanoid. The only thing that sets them apart from humans is their green skin, facial spikes, and red eyes. They often intermarry with local human populations and enjoy human cuisine, prefer it actually. And they are essentially harmless.”

Buffy frowned. “And when they're attacked?”

Xander snorted. “What do we do when we're jumped?”

She blinked at him and made a 'duh' face. “We fight—oh.” He nodded at her and she wrinkled her nose. “That's going to take some getting used to.”

Willow nodded, but there was a relieved smile on her face. “But its good to know that not all demons want to eat us.”

He grinned at his girls. “Yep, some even prefer cheesy puffs.” Willow giggled.

Buffy however was back to business. “What about the hyena kids?”

A sigh left his lips before he could quell it. “I think they might have had some sort of relapse. The actual spirits are gone...I just don't know if the echoes that they have are getting stronger...I have no clue. But they're better right now. They're in control. Kyle was trying to keep them together to help them. He started rounding them up when they started hunting. But he's a beta, not an Alpha.” At their confused looks he continued. “Hyenas are matriarchal. Females are dominant. Even the lowest female is higher in the pack than the highest male. Only a female can be an Alpha. However a strong male will challenge the strongest female to prove his worth as a mate.”

Willow blinked rapidly and he could almost feel a babble coming on. “But you were...when you were all possessed you were large and in charge and all leader of the pack hear me roar. I am a mighty crazy demon hyena Xander! Are you saying you were such a bitch because you a had a bitch inside you?”

“Language please.” Giles admonished.
Willow looked sheepish. “Sorry. But...your hyena spirit was a girl?”

He felt a light blush color his cheeks. “Yup.”

“Then why did she want to mate with me?” Buffy asked.

He shrugged. “I'm male, you're a strong female, an Alpha. She thought we'd make strong pups...err...babies. I still don't know why she discounted Willow though. I mean yeah, you're strong, but Wills is one of the smartest people we know. Sometimes smarts wins over muscle ya know?”

Both girls blushed, for different reasons, but Willow brought another point up. “Giles is smart too.”

He waved her off. “Giles and I can't make babies...of course that doesn't make sense either cause...” He felt the mother of all blushes hit him.

Giles looked a little alarmed. “Xander?”

“I had to help them get control. I'm still their Alpha. When I got to the hotel where Kyle had them holed up...I guess he didn't know how else to help them. I...I had to dominate them. Prove I was still worthy of being their leader.”

Willow gasped. “Was there an orgy?”

He knew his face was still red but he couldn't help but smirk. “Pretty much.”

Willow looked all too eager then. “How was it?”

“Willow!” Buffy was looking at the red-head as if she'd grown an extra body part or two.

Willow shrugged. “What? You get smoochies from a hot vampire and Xander has an orgy.” She pouted. “All I got was mummy kisses.”

Giles carefully put his teacup down before removing his glasses to polish them. Xander suspected that their resident adult couldn't meet any of their eyes at the moment. “Will you have to...repeat the-”

“Orgy?” Buffy said helpfully.

Giles huffed. “Yes, quite. Will you have to do it again?”

“I don't know. I hope not. For now I'm going to take them patrolling, let them hunt fledges.”

“You said I was an Alpha too?” Buffy asked him and he nodded. “If you're not around will they recognize me as Alpha? I won't have to play orgy with them will I?”

He snickered. “No, no orgies for you Buff. And they should recognize you as Alpha, just remember that Kyle is my beta. He'll recognize me as his leader before you.”

She nodded. “We should all hunt together some time.”

Willow grinned. “The more the merrier. I can bring cookies. Or ya know, sandwiches.”

“A joint patrol sounds fine.” Giles said, slipping his glasses back on. Buffy shook her head. “I was thinking more like a pack outing.”
Xander blinked. “Huh?”

She locked her dark green eyes with his. “They're your pack. And so are we.”

“Thanks Buffy."

“Welcome.”

“Yes, while that's all well and good, we'll work out the details later. Right now you two have hand to hand and Willow has studying to do.”

Willow looked at him. “Huh? What?”

He clarified. “Basic magic and its history. The better prepared you are the better off we'll all be. Kagome did say you have a natural talent, and you proved that during Halloween. Now, hop to it. Lots to do.”

Xander and Buffy groaned.

XXX
“Watch it Marshal!” Xander yelped as he nearly tripped over his spirit beast. Marshal ignored him and continued to bat the toy mouse out the bedroom door. Belatedly, he remembered how slick the hall floor could be. “Marshal!” A cry of shock and some thumping down the stairs was his answer. “You okay?”

Who the heck puts a rug on a floor that slippery?

Xander rolled his eyes before slipping a clean t-shirt on, if Marshal could complain about a rug he'd be fine. “Did you break anything?”

No. The voice in his head held a definite pout. I'm going to go bury my pride in the yard now.

Xander snorted and continued to get ready for bed. However, as he turned back the covers a beeping sound came from his top dresser drawer. He stared at the drawer for a moment before he remembered his communicator was stashed inside. Hurriedly, he retrieved it and flipped the compact open. Yusuke's face appeared on the screen.

“Hey Bro. What's up?” The small image of Yusuke looked odd and he realized that his normally unflappable brother looked pale and...nervous? “Yusuke?”

Yusuke's smile was less than stellar and he gave a shaky laugh. “Keiko's pregnant.”

Xander felt his jaw drop before a grin spread across his face. “Congratulations. That's awesome!” Yusuke's expression wavered between a smile and a less than stellar expression and Xander felt his own smile slip away. “It's not awesome?”

Yusuke blinked, sighed and tried to smile again, it worked, barely. “We just didn't plan on a kid this soon. Keiko's still in college and...I don't know if I'm ready to be a dad. I mean, ours was a complete asshole and--”

Xander cut him off. “You aren't Tony. Tony was a drunken waste of space. You'll be a great dad.”

Yusuke shook his head. “You don't know that.”

“Yeah I do, you're the best big brother a guy could ask for and...and you do a good job at keeping nightmares away.”

“Xander--”

“You'll be fine.” He grinned again. “You're a demon king, there's no way dadhood can be any harder.”

Yusuke stared at him for a moment. “You know you just jinxed me right?”

Xander blinked. “Heh...oops? So how's Keiko?”
Yusuke snickered. “She's...I've never seen her so...” He gave Xander a sappy grin. “She's excited, and a little scared I think.”

Xander nodded. “I think you'll both be fine. Just try not to freak out on her.”

A blank stare met his gaze before Yusuke raised a brow in question. “Where is this coming from? I thought I was the big brother.”

“Ah, but I have more experience with distraught females.”

“Brat.”

“Always.”

“So, when were you gonna tell me that you met Raizen?”

“Uh...I know not of what you speak?”

“Wrong answer kiddo. I don't like it when you keep secrets.”

“How'd you know? And also, why didn't you tell him about me?”

“Uh...”

“Exactly.”

Yusuke glared at him. “Telling dead people that they have an extra descendant walking around isn't something ya think about. Completely different from letting your brother know about your monster of the week.”

“For the most part we can handle what happens over here. Giles and Willow are both wicked smart. Buffy has the super girl thing, I've got some skills, and Botan backs me up sometimes.”

“I know.”

“She's telling you everything that goes on, isn't she?”

“Part of her job kid.”

Xander gulped. “So...anymore questions?”

“Did you really have an orgy in a seedy motel?”

Xander cringed as his face turned red. “God! She told you about that too?”

“Well...no. She was reporting to Koenma...and Hiei might have overhead. And Hiei, being the little shit he is, mentioned it when the gang was all in the shop a few nights ago. I think he just wanted to see Kurama's reaction.”


“Yeah...poor guy choked on his tea. He looked pretty glassy eyed for a while.”

“The hellmouth never opens up and devours a guy when it would be a welcome thing.”

“So...an orgy huh?”
“It was a hyena thing.”

“Right.”

“Seriously!”

“I believe you.” Though Yusuke's smirk said otherwise.

“The other kids that were possessed had a kind of relapse. They'd already had one round of orgy fun before I got there. Dominating them the way I did helped to push back the echoes left behind so they could be in control of themselves again. They've got control now and they're going to be patrolling with me or Buffy. I'll take them hunting to keep them in check. That way we won't have to repeat the orgy thing.”

“You're serious.”

“Uh, yeah. What, you think I'd just go have an orgy in the middle of a school day?”

Yusuke looked thoughtful for a moment. “Was it fun?”

Xander held his head in his free hand. “That's what Willow asked me too.”

“Sorry.”

“Liar.” He risked a glance at the screen. “You done embarrassing me?”

“Maybe.”

“Good. I have school tomorrow, so I'm going to pretend half of this conversation never happened and I'm going to bed. Good night Yusuke.” He grinned. “And also. Telepathic cats rule, blue chickens drool.” Yusuke let out an outraged squawk and Xander closed his communicator. It was good to be a brat.

XXX

Xander stared at Cordelia, he could almost feel his brain turning to mush trying to figure out her strange logic. “I think you mean oppressed.”

She glanced at him and dismissed him in a second. “Whatever.” She went back to ignoring him as she ratted on and he wondered how anyone could be so dense.

He glanced at his girls. Willow passed a note to a very glum Buffy. She'd been off kilter all day, though he wasn't sure why. Though he'd be willing to take a guess or three.

The bell rang and he gladly gathered up his things and stuffed them in his bag before he followed the girls out and wandered down the hall with them.

Buffy sighed. “They seemed pretty friendly.”

He blinked, somehow he always ended up at the tail end of a conversation. “Who's friendly?”

The slayer clammed up. “No one.”

Willow was much more helpful, her tone almost scolding. “Angel and a girl. Probably a vamp girl.”

Buffy sent her a mild glare. “Willow!”
“Hey!” He exclaimed. “It's me ya know. If your boyfriend is being a bastard we have a right to know.”

“Why? So it can give you a happy?” Buffy accused.

He gave her a quirky grin. “Well on some shallow and petty level...maybe. But mostly you and Giles are the only ones with romantic interests. Wills and I have to live vicariously through you. Cause we're not gonna ask G-man about his snuggle bunny.”

“Orgy.” Willow grinned at him.

She said the word a little loud and he noticed a few heads turned their way. “That was a one time thing. Fun though it was.” Interestingly enough his words caused Larry to walk into a pole as they passed him.

Buffy smiled. “Vicariously huh? And eww to the Giles thing.”

Willow nodded. “Yep. Orgies aside, we want to hear the good, the bad, the dramatic. We don't get smoochies so you're it.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “I'm not a soap opera Willow.” They smiled at each other.

He herded them toward the lounge. “Then maybe a wild night at the Bronze is in order. Willow can pick up girls, I can pick up guys, and you can help us tag team them.” Buffy gave him a look. “Or we can just all dance together and make some heads turn, some jaws wag.” She continued the almost pouty expression. He rolled his eyes and he and Willow sat down on one of the couches. “Fine, subdued moping at the Bronze. But that's my final offer.” He frowned as an unpleasant smell tickled his nose.

“I'd suggest a box of Oreos dunked in apple juice but maybe she's over that phase.”

Buffy whirled to face the new guy. “Ford?” She smiled blindingly at the stranger and hugged him fiercely. He was attractive, tall, dark hair neatly shaggy, not bad. Even if he was a little pale and his scent was kinda icky.

“Hey Summers, it's been a while.”

She pulled away from him. “Oh my god, what are you doing here?” The grin hadn't left her face.

His smile was soft. “Matriculating.”

“Huh?”

Xander glanced at Willow. “Huh?” He whispered, parroting Buffy.

Willow just barely kept from giggling at him as she whispered back. “He's transferring in.”

He nodded. “That's what I thought it meant.”

Buffy and Ford were still in their own little world as he answered her 'huh'. “I'm finishing up my high school career at Sunnydale High. Dad got transferred.” If possible Buffy's smile grew brighter.

Xander rolled his eyes at the scene and Willow elbowed him. He grunted and gave her a mild glare. “Ow.”

Buffy blinked and tore her eyes away from Ford and led him to sit on the couch across from them.
“Oh, Ford these are my friends. Xander and Willow. Guys, this is Ford, Billy Fordom, we went to school together in L.A.”

Willow smiled and gave Ford a warm greeting.

Xander wrinkled his nose. “Never would have guessed Buff.” Willow elbowed him again. “Nice to meet you.”

Ford smiled at them. “You too.”

He frowned a little as Buffy prattled on about their child hood, amusing as her crush story was, he mostly ignored it. Eventually they wandered off so that Buffy could show Ford where the office was.

“She bounces back fast. It's like 'poof', Mopey Buffy is no more.”

Willow gave him a disapproving look. “Be nice.”

He ignored her. “And to top it off he smells bad.”

“Huh?”

Xander shrugged. “I don't know. It's something familiar, I can't place it but I've smelled it before, whatever it is, it's not a pleasant smell.”

xxx

After an uncomfortably tense episode of the Buffy and Angel show at the Bronze he'd walked Willow home. Now he and Marshal were patrolling. They’d ended up at the warehouse district not far from the Bronze. Buffy's scent tickled his nose, accompanied by Ford's strange smell.

What is that?

“Old friend of Buffy's from L.A. He just moved to the dale.”

Yuck.

“Yeah. Speaking of Ford, he's about to become Vamp munchies.”

Marshal looked disgusted. Why do humans wander around the hellmouth at night by themselves?

“Some of them have no survival instincts. Some are just stupid. Come on.”

They moved silently, both glad that there wasn't a breeze to carry their scents to the vampire sneaking up on Ford. Swiftly, Marshal dashed ahead and wove around the vampire's feet, tripping her. As she flailed and fell backwards Xander swooped in and staked her. She exploded into dust and Xander slipped his stake away.

“Wow.”

He glance up at Ford's surprised face. “Uh...”

Ford smirked at him. “I thought only Summers took out vampires.”

Xander panicked. “Vampire? What vampire? I didn't see--”

Ford's smirk only intensified. “Kind of hard to ignore vamps when they crash a school dance.
Especially when a tiny blond cheerleader burns down the gym to kill them.”

Xander thought about that for a second before nodding. The guy did have a point. “If you know about vampires what were you doing walking around like a happy meal minus the action figure?”

Ford's eyes became a little guarded. Huh. “Couldn't sleep.”

Idiot. “Right. Look, let me walk you home. I'm patrolling anyway.”

“No, it's cool.”

“You're Buffy's friend and I know the town better than you.” There was definitely something strange about Ford.

Ford pulled a cross on a chain out from under his shirt. “I've got it covered.”

Xander sighed. “Fine. But take this.” He reached into his own pocket and retrieved a charm he'd made. “It's a talisman. It's charmed so the vamps won't notice you as much. Take this too.” He handed him a stake.

“What about you?”

Xander grinned and let his eyes flash just for kicks. “I have more weapons.” He turned and walked away, Marshal at his side. He was glad to get away from the smell.

xxx

The next morning he was at his locker, attempting to keep books and all matter of geek paraphernalia from spilling out into the hall. He really needed to take some of his comics home. Several familiar smells assaulted his nose and he smiled as part of his pack surrounded him. He shut his locker, turned to face them and opened his arms. Rhonda and Heidi slid easily into his embrace. They cuddled against him for a moment and he kissed each of them at the temple. “Morning.” He tightened the dual hug for a moment before letting them go. They grinned and stepped back letting Tor and Kyle take their place.

Once he had an arm around each boy he wondered at the tension coiled in Tor's body. He nuzzled at the spot behind Tor's ear and the other boy finally relaxed. “You okay?”

“Better.”

He nodded and gave them each a pat on the shoulder before releasing them.

Kyle nodded at him. “We'll need more soon.”

“Not a problem. When are you four free?”

Rhonda tilted her head curiously. “Why?”

“There should be a fledge or two rising in Safe Haven cemetery tonight.”

“Fledge?” Tor frowned, his confusion was kind of cute.

“Newbie vampire. Thought you guys might want to go hunting. Fledges are usually easy prey. I want to start you out on something small, get you used to it.”

Heidi grinned and it was a little feral. “Sounds fun.”
He nodded. “Depending on how well you do, we might have you sit in on training with Giles.”

Kyle gave him a look of disbelief and snorted. “The Librarian?”

He raised a brow at his beta. “The Bookman can swing a mean sword and can put both me and Buffy through our paces. Speaking of Buffy, if you guys need someone to help you get control and I'm not available...she is probably Alpha enough to help.”

Rhonda pouted at him. “She's not pack.”

Xander focused his gaze on her. “She's part of my pack. She's my sister, Willow too.”

Rhonda nodded and Heidi looked at him curiously. “Protect pack?”

He nodded at her and grinned. “Always.”

Kyle shifted and cleared his throat. “Tell us when and where. We'll see you later Harris.” The girls and Tor ran their hands over his stomach and back before walking away. Kyle met his eyes.

“You okay?” Kyle nodded but Xander reached up to gently pat his cheek, oddly pleased when the other boy leaned into the touch. “Would you mind doing me a favor?” The smile he got in return was eager and bright. “There's this guy, an old friend of Buffy's from LA. His name is Ford. I want you to get close enough to catch his scent.”

Kyle continued to lean into the hand on his cheek. “Why?”

“Something is strange about it. I need a second opinion.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“Thanks Kyle.” He slipped his hand from Kyle's face and the other boy gave him a smirk before rubbing up against him. “Alright, I get it. We're perpetually horny teens. Go on you tease.” Kyle laughed and licked his chin before walking away. Xander snorted and started to go in the other direction.

“What was that about?”

He turned to see Cordelia, her cheeks looked a little pink and her eyes were just a little glazed. Interesting. “It's a hyena thing Cor.”

“Huh?”

He grinned at her, she was actually kind of cute when she was quiet. “Nothing. Later Cordy!”

Xander whistled as he walked away.

xxx

They were waiting for him at the gates of Safe Haven cemetery. It was still a little early, just after sunset, but some vamps liked to rise at this time. They were all dressed in black to easier blend with the darkening shadows. The four of them let their eyes glow as they swarmed around him. His own eyes flashed and he growled a little. He let them settle for a minute.

“Welcome to Vamp Hunting 101.” He reached into the duffle he'd brought and handed them each a stake. “When you stake a vamp, go for the heart.”

Tor snorted. “We've seen the movies Harris.”
“Good, then you know the basics, except for garlic. It doesn't really keep them away, just annoys them. Mostly cause it's a blood thinner and makes their meals less filling.”

Heidi blinked. “Fountain of knowledge tonight.”

He shrugged. “When your best friends with Willow you retain odd information. Now, when you stake a vamp be fast and hard and make sure you pull your stake back out.”

Rhonda looked at her stake for a moment. “And if we don't?”

“Your stake will dust with the vamp and then you won't have a weapon.”

Kyle grimaced. “I see how that would be bad.”

Xander led them to a new grave. Heidi peered at the name on the headstone. “Harold Combs? Didn't he graduate last year?”

“Yep. He was found dead in his driveway.”

Kyle looked at him. “Barbeque fork death?”

“Yep, you'd think the coroner would be more creative than that.” Xander tilted his head. “He's waking up.” The five of them circled the grave, eyes flashing as Combs dug his way out. “He'll probably pull some lame kung fu moves. They always do.”

Combs pulled free of the earth and made a grab for Heidi. There was a brief tussle but the vampire never had a chance. Tor and the girls had him restrained and Kyle staked him. All four gaped at the resulting pile of dust.

Rhonda coughed a little. “Are all monsters this easy to clean up after?”

He pouted. “Unfortunately no. Come on. We'll sweep the cemetery. Then I've got to meet Willow and Buffy's beau.

xxx

“Why are we here again?” Really, he could be patrolling, or eating, or any number of things. Instead he was in the warehouse district, again. Snooping around with Willow, which was fine, and Angel, which wasn't so fine.

“Cause Angel is suspicious of Ford.”

Xander looked at Angel. “Well I know why I have Kyle checking him out, why are you suspicious?”

Angel glanced at him. “Just a feeling. Who's Kyle?”

Willow snickered. “Part of Xander's harem.”

Evidently that wasn't the explanation the vampire was expecting because he stumbled for a second before turning surprised eyes on Xander. “What?”

Xander rolled his eyes and tapped Willow's nose who was giggling. “He's a member of my pack, he and the other hyena kids still have enhanced senses, including smell. I wanted Kyle's opinion of Ford's scent.” Angel continued to look at Xander with surprise. In Xander's opinion, Deadboy really needed to get his head out of his ass. He and Buffy weren't the only ones with nifty abilities.
“He smells sick.”

Xander blinked at that tidbit of information. “Huh. Curiouser and curiouser. But still...the Sunset Club?”

Willow shrugged. “It's all I could find. Nothing really incriminating though.”

Angel shook his head. “No records, no paper trail, lying to Buffy. That's incriminating enough for me.”

“Deadboy's got a point.”

“Don't call me that.” It came out as a growl.

Xander curled his lip. “I'll call you what I want.”

Willow smacked both of them on the shoulder. “Behave, both of you.”

Angel pouted at Willow for a second before glaring at Xander. “And what hyena kids?”

Xander sneered at him. “Last spring. You were too busy brooding to be much help. Me and some other kids got possessed by Primal hyena things.”

“What?”

Xander glared at him. How could Angel not know? “Well if you were more direct with the helping you'd know this stuff Brood-dork.” Angel growled and took a step forward.

Willow got between them, a fierce glare on her face. “That's enough! We're here already. Go knock on the door Angel.” Amazingly the vampire followed her order. “Xander. Keep it together. I know where this is going.”

“Really.” He snorted.

“Resolve face buster!” She pointed at her face. “I know.”

He looked into her eyes. She really got it. Of course she did. She was Willow. “Sorry.” He whispered.

“It's okay. Now, let's go see what Ford is hiding.”

xxx

The Sunset Club was way too creepy. Stupid vampire wannabees. It was hard to believe that there were people who were actually happy to be happy meals. Bleh. He'd been more than glad to get out of there.

He'd just turned onto his street when two familiar scents caught his attention. He wondered why Kyle and Tor were in his neighborhood. They were waiting for him on his front porch, huddled together on the steps. Tor's left eye was black. He made it too them in record time.

When he reached them they stood and he tilted Tor's face to better assess the damage in the light from the bare bulb above them. Other than the black eye Tor's face was a little bruised, and he'd moved slowly when he had stood.

Kyle's voice was low when he spoke. “We need to talk.”
Xander nodded, he felt a slow burn starting inside of him. Someone had hurt Tor, and Tor was his responsibility. It wouldn't end well for whoever had hit him. He moved passed them and unlocked the door, holding it open for them after he stepped inside. He never issued a verbal invitation. Too dangerous. They followed him and he closed the door behind them, locking it and checked the wards. They were still in place.

He turned to look at them. “You guy's hungry?” They shared a look and Tor nodded.

“Follow me.” He lead them to the kitchen and made a beeline for the fridge. “Have a seat, I'll cook. We'll talk after you've eaten.”

It was interesting how they watched him. Was it really so surprising that he could cook? Well maybe it was, he didn't know any other boys his age who knew how to do much besides use a microwave. His thoughts drifted to Jesse for a moment and his habit of blowing food up when he nuked it. Marshmallows especially. Good times. With a smile he fixed them a each a plate of his impromptu meal and let them eat.

When they were finished he sat at the table with them. “So, what happened?”

Kyle pushed his plate away. “The four of us have always been close, but with...everything that's happened its easier to stay in control if we're together, even if it's just two of us.”

Xander nodded, it made sense. “Sleepovers then?”

Kyle nodded. “The girls don't stay over, parents get weird about that. So I was at Tor's tonight.”

Tor kept his gaze on his empty plate. “My old man thinks I'm gay, or close enough.”

Xander glanced back at Kyle who's eyes had gotten hard, and flickered for just a second. “He stormed in when we were sleeping. We weren't wearing much.” Both boys were silent.

Xander wanted to clobber Tor's dad with his best skillet. “Where's your dad now?”

A little smile tilted the corner of the blond's mouth. “Unconscious on my bedroom floor.”

Kyle outright beamed. “I hit him with a lamp.”

Xander grinned back and nodded with approval. “You two stay here tonight, I've got space. Just expect Marshal to hog the bed.”

Tor smirked at him. “Boyfriend?”

“My cat.”

Kyle shifted in his chair. “What's with Larry making doe eyes at you lately?”

Xander waved off the question as unimportant. “He's having trouble dealing with his sexuality, I told him we'd talk when he stopped being a jerk.”

Tor shrunk in his chair a bit. “I'm not gay...I just--”

“Don't put a label on yourself, just focus on what you want, on what you like. The rest of the world can go fuck themselves.” He grinned at them as he stood to put the dishes in the sink to let them soak. “If you're up to it we'll go to your house in the morning, pack a few things.”
“My dad’s a pretty big guy.”

“Safety in numbers then, I’ll call for backup before we leave.”

“Summers?” Kyle asked as they stood.

“Nah, she’s busy.”

“With that guy you wanted to know about?”

Xander nodded. “Yeah, I’m thinking he’s not a good guy. What did you think?”

Kyle made a face. “He smells bad. Tor got a whiff too.”

Tor nodded. “My grandma has cancer, she smells like that.”

Xander blinked and it all clicked into place. “Huh, thought it was familiar, Morgan smelled like that.”

Tor gave him a questioning look. “Smart kid with a ventriloquist dummy. He had brain cancer.”

Kyle looked thoughtful. “Wasn’t he murdered?”

Xander nodded. “Demon cut out his brain. Didn’t keep it though, diseased brain wasn’t any good.”

Both boys blinked at him and Tor gulped. “Demon?”

“What are you into Harris?”

“Long story and it can wait till tomorrow. Giles can give all four of you the 411 on Demons during study-hall. Now I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to crash.

xxx

Heidi and Rhonda had followed Ford to an old factory, one that had been abandoned for over a decade. They kept their distance though, the area was saturated with the smell of vampires, old blood, and fear. They shared a look as Ford was escorted in the front door.

“Is he retarded or something?” Heidi muttered.

Rhonda frowned. “Not like they'd want to eat him, he smells too bad. We should tell Harris about this in the morning.”

Heidi nodded in agreement and they slunk away.

xxx

Spike hated it when he snapped at her, he just hated to see her so listless and not herself. And it terrified him when she went out in her weakened state. He smiled at her. “Would you like another bird? One that's not dead.” Drusilla continued to pout at him as he nibbled at her fingertips.

Unwelcome footsteps sounded across the darkened room, but he ignored them, thinking it was just the minions...but there was a smell...and a heart beat.

“This is beyond cool! I would totally live here.”

Spike frowned and looked towards the sound of the voice with a pulse. “What's wrong with you lot? Were you this stupid as humans? We don't let the sheep in...unless of course we've found a restaurant
that delivers.” He moved to get a better look at the boy. He was pretty enough, but the smell of sickness wasn't very appetizing. The foolish brat eagerly met his eyes.

“I know who you are Spike.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I came looking for you.”

Spike smirked. “Got a death wish then? Want to offer yourself now before you waste away?” The boy faltered like he hadn't been expecting that.

Drusilla giggled. “It's hungry. Crunching his tender insides, it won't stop. Turning his mind to gruel it is.” He smiled at his princess.

One of the minions handed him a tome.

He took it and looked through it. “This will be very useful. Well I supposed it wouldn't hurt to listen for a moment.”

The boy shifted nervously. “I want to be a vampire.”

“Moment's over.” He handed the tome back to the minion and reached for the boy.

“Wait! I can give you something in trade.”


The boy continued. “You make me a vampire, and I'll give you the Slayer. And her friends. I don't like the way Harris looks at me.”

Drusilla took a step forward and growled a little. “The Prince is not for you.” She nuzzled into Spike's side. “The Prince and his laughing dogs are too clever for this one. They can smell him. They don't like him.”

“No doubt.” He smirked as he kissed her. “Slayer then. Why not. Could be a real party.”

xxx

They had gotten up early so they could go to Tor's house before school started. Hopefully Tor's dad would be asleep.

He was puttering about the kitchen fixing breakfast when he decided to warn them about a few things. “Any strangeness you see this morning you need to keep it to yourselves.”

Tor looked at him oddly. “Why?”

“Because I have secrets.”

Kyle snorted. “You have secrets. Xander Harris has secrets. One of the biggest dorks in school has secrets.”

Tor snickered. “Call the press.”

Marshal, who was sitting by his bowl, waiting patiently for his helping of sausage glared at them.
Can I bite them now?

Xander did his best not to laugh at Kyle and Tor's faces. “No you can't bite them.”

Tor blinked. “Your cat--”

He grinned. “He's actually an infant spirit beast and a reflection of my soul. He looks harmless now, but my brother's spirit beast started out as a blue penguin thing.”

Kyle kept his eyes on Marshal. “And now?”

“Huge ass phoenix.”

Tor however clung to another bit of information. “Brother?”

He smirked. “Yep. He's a demon king. Which is one of my secrets.” Xander tilted his head as if in thought. “Now, our back up should be here in three, two...one.”

Botan floated through the ceiling. “Oh good, you're still cooking, I haven't eaten yet.”

“Guys, this is Botan. Spirit Realm's number one Grim Reaper. And a good friend of my brother.”

Their faces were priceless, so was Kyle's question. “A Grim Reaper is our back up?”

“Surprised?”

xxx

Xander lounged back on the steps, the other four around him. The day had gone by pretty quickly and Buffy had avoided both him and Willow. Evidently she didn't like it when they went behind her back and plotted with Angel. Which actually freed up Giles' time so he could give his spiel about demons and vamps to the feral four. They were still in the shocked/absorbing stage.

Willow approached them cautiously, but Tor shifted from his side slightly to make room. Xander smiled in approval. “Have a seat Wills.”

“I don't want to interrupt.”

Rhonda waved her over. “It's fine.”

Heidi nodded. “We're all pack.”

The comment made her smile and she sat between Xander and Tor. She looked at Tor's face, her own full of concern. “Are you okay?” She lightly traced the bruised eye.

Tor gave her a small smile. “Better than I was.”

“Put some ice on it later.” She leaned against Tor and looked at Xander. “Did you find anything else out--” She stopped as Buffy came into view.

Xander looked at her, her eyes were dull, her face closed. “Buffy?”

Willow gulped. “We're sorry.” And her mouth left the rest of her in the dust. “It's just that Angel was worried and he didn't want you to worry until he was sure of anything so he had me investigate and we ended up at this creepy club that was really tacky and Ford thinks vampires are yay.”
“It’s okay. Angel told me. I still don’t know what he’s planning.”

Xander stood and went to her side. “He’s sick, like Morgan was. Probably dying.”

Buffy sighed. “Great. How’d you know?”

“His scent. It’s wrong, bad.” He wrapped her in his arms. “I’m sorry.”

Willow was there in a second, wrapping her arms around their girl. Buffy sniffed and the rest of the pack surrounded them. Arms were everywhere, embracing her and the others. She hadn’t felt this safe in a long time. No one said anything as she cried.

xxx

When they got there Buffy was kneeling on the grave, scooping up the dust and putting it into a small jar. With careful movements she silently dug a hole big enough and put it in the ground, burying Ford’s remains. She finally looked up to see Xander and Willow watching her a few feet away.

“Is this what it felt like? When you dusted Jesse?”

Xander remained quiet as he and Willow held out their hands, Buffy took them and let them pull her to her feet. They tugged at her. “Walk with us.” Xander whispered.

The three of them walked for a while, Buffy was silent as they led her to a park, and finally to a large tree near the back fence. There was a clump of daisies growing in the shelter the tree provided.

They sat down in a row and Willow leaned against Buffy, her eyes on the flowers. “We used to come here when we were kids. Xander and Jesse thought they could fly if they jumped off the monkey bars.”

Xander chuckled. “We had a lot of good times.”

Willow smiled. “I miss the study picnics.”

Buffy looked at the flowers. “What is this place?”

Willow closed her eyes with a sad sigh. “Jesse's grave.”

Buffy started. “What?”

Xander gripped her hand. “That night, after the Harvest, we went back to the Bronze and swept up his ashes. We brought them here.”

Buffy’s eyes watered, her heart aching for Ford, for her friends. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save him.” She was quiet for a moment. “What was Jesse like?”

Xander smiled, it was soft, not like his usual grin. “He told the best jokes. He was always there for us. He was the Master at keeping a conversation going. Life was never boring with him around. He pulled some good pranks, but his survival instinct was a big fat zilch. And he was Cordy’s number one fan...he was my best friend, my first friend.” He could feel the tears on his face, but didn’t bother wiping them away. Buffy leaned into him, her head on his shoulder.

Willow’s voice was stuffy but she carried on. “He always stood up for me. He was terrible in school, I had to tutor him in everything. When I had the flu he’d come over in a homemade hazmat suit and bring me soup. The suit always made me smile, it had polka dots.”
Xander snickered. “I'd forgotten about that.”

They sat for a while, enjoying the quiet.

Buffy cleared her throat. “Would you guys mind if I brought something to leave here?”

Xander smiled at her and Willow nodded. “Offerings to lost friends are on the approved list.”

Buffy gripped their hands. “Good to know.”

XXX
Enter the Beast

Child of the Hellmouth
Enter the Beast
word count: 6444

XXX

Botan stared dejectedly at the blackened lump in the skillet before her. Cautiously she poked at it with the spatula she held in her hand. Thankfully it didn't move. She heard Tor enter the kitchen and he came up behind her, peeking over her shoulder.

“What's that?”

She sighed and poked at the lump again. “It was breakfast.”

He moved to her side and looked closely at the remains before eying her skeptically. “What did you do to it?”

“I think I killed it.”

He blinked at her. “Ya think? They both stared at the lump again.

She put down the spatula and switched the burner off. “How's cereal sound?”

“Good idea.” He moved away and retrieved a box of cereal from the cabinet while she dumped the failed attempt at food into the trash. By the time she'd put the skillet in the sink to soak he had two bowls filled with cereal and milk waiting for them on the table. They sat and dug into their food.

In between bites she grimaced at the cold breakfast. “I really need to buy a cookbook.”

“I can cook some.”

She blinked at him. “You couldn't have mentioned that before I tried to cook?”

He smirked at her. “You didn't ask.”

“Brat.” She muttered at him, he simply grinned at her.

They ate in silence for a while before Tor spoke up again, though this time he kept his eyes on his spoon. “Do you mind if Kyle and the girls come over tonight?”

She smiled at him. “Not at all...just warn me if you're going to have an orgy. I don't want to walk in on it.”

He blushed, but he couldn't help smiling back. “Xander has been hunting with us. Vamps in town, and some small game out in the desert. We've got things under control.”

She nodded. “You're integrating the shadows then?”

“Yeah. We shouldn't lose control again.”

“Good. I'm proud of all of you. You've handled yourselves remarkably well.”
They finished eating and rinsed their dishes before placing them in the dishwasher.

“You really don't mind me being here?”

Botan grinned at him and reached up to ruffle his hair. “Not at all. I always wanted a little brother.”

He returned her grin. “And it's all legal?”

She nodded at him. “Your Dad won't hurt you any more. If he comes anywhere near you, let me know and I'll drop him in the ocean. Now, run along or you'll be late.”

He gave her a warm smile and grabbed his bag from the doorway. “Later Sis.”

She waved at him as he left and continued to grin. Having a little brother was interesting, if worrisome and it gave her some insight on Xander and Yusuke's relationship. She hummed to herself as she tidied the kitchen up, she was still getting used to sharing her small house with another person, which meant more work. But she found she didn't mind sharing her space, she was after all a very social creature.

She was just putting detergent in the dishwasher when one of her subordinates flew through the ceiling. Botan blinked in confusion for a minute before capping the detergent and setting it on the counter. “Diana? What are you doing here?”

Diana gulped and bowed her head to her superior. “Sorry to bother you Botan-sama, but I thought you might want to see this.” She pulled a sheet of paper out of her sleeve and handed it to Botan.

Botan accepted the paper and looked it over, her curious gaze hardened and her eyes narrowed. “Who's working London? You?”

Diana gave her a wide eyed look and shook her head. “I was in the office when the paper work came through. You had them flagged...why?”

Botan waved her off. “I knew them. Listen, I need you to watch the hellmouth for a few hours, can you do that?”

Diana gulped, her eyes wide with fear. “Sure.”

“Thanks.” Without ever glancing up to see Diana's terrified face she opened up a portal and stepped through, straight into Koenma's office.

Koenma blinked at her in surprise. “Botan?”

“Oi! What the hell is going on? What's happening to Rupert's old gang?”

“Ah, that. Diana gave you the report?” She nodded at him. “Eyeghon is tracking them down one by one for revenge. You know how testy demons are about being used.”

“What's he done with their souls. According to the report from the girl working London they're missing.”

Koenma grimaced, missing souls were never a good thing. “No idea, there's been no sign of them.”

Botan's eyes were as hard as he'd ever seen them. She took her job seriously, as top guide she always had, but now there were souls missing, souls that had been her friends when they were alive. “Permission to investigate sir?”
“It's not your fault Botan. There's no way you could have known that Eyeghon was capable of finding a way to come back.”

She shook her head. “That doesn’t matter, please--”

“Yes, go ahead. You know you don't have to ask. Just remember the girl you left in your place won't be able to stay on the hellmouth for long.”

She nodded at him and disappeared through another portal. He sighed. “This won't end well.

xxx

Never before had Xander ever wanted to willingly abandon anyone. But when it came to Buffy's exercise tape...it was every man for himself. He didn't know how she could actually listen to that—music. And really, 'arobasizing' didn't seem like much of a work out to him. He leaned over and tapped Giles on the shoulder before waving and making his retreat. He could barely hear Giles call him a coward as he slipped out of the library.

Xander sighed as Buffy's music faded away the further he got from the library. It was a nice night out, and he didn't feel like going straight home, so he wandered a bit. Campus was quiet, peaceful, and no Snyder in sight.

He caught a scent on the night air, one that made him gag, there was a rotting corpse nearby. Taking a moment to get past the disgust he felt, Xander took another sniff, he was downwind so it would be easy to track. He only hoped that no one was trying to play Frankenstein again.

Quietly he stalked through the campus grounds, hiding in the shadows, slinking from one pool of blackness to another. The scent trail led him to two figures, one the corpse, moving of its own volition, and the other was the man she was trying to kill. Xander growled and made his move, dashing out from his hiding place and knocking the dead lady away from her intended victim. She managed to stay on her feet and started toward them again. Xander made sure to stay between them. He let the glow of the hyena fill his eyes and he growled again, he saw his ring flash in the darkness. Her eyes were drawn to the ring, and they widened in surprise before she staggered away. When he could no longer hear her he turned to the man, noticing his nice suit, though it was a little rumpled.

“You okay?” The man look to be in his late thirties, and other than a lack of hair on his head he looked to be in good shape. He was out of breath from his struggle, which meant the corpse lady had been overpowering him. She was strong, he'd have to be careful when he ran into her again.

“I think so.” He spoke with a British accent, which made Xander look at him closer. The man blinked at Xander and his eyes held a hint of fear. He wanted to smack himself, he'd been growling like a wild animal in front of the guy.

“I won't hurt you, promise. The growly thing, it's kinda left over from when I was possessed last spring. Helps keeps the vampires in check.”

“Vampires?”

Xander gaped at him. “You come to the hellmouth and waltz around in the dark without knowing about the vamps? Not to mention the creepy zombie chick that just tried to kill you.”

The man still looked flabbergasted. “I...sorry, I wasn't expecting there to be anything other than that...thing. Thank you by the way, if not for you I'd surely be dead.”

“You're welcome. Why are you here anyway?”
“I...I need to find Rupert Giles. I was told he worked at this school.”

Xander nodded. “He'll be glad of the interruption. Buffy is making his ears bleed with her music. Follow me.” He led the man back to the library, this time keeping to the light, just because he could see in the shadows didn't mean his company could.

They entered the library though the back entrance and Xander made a beeline for the stereo and switched it off. Giles looked up with relief on his face.

“Thank god.”

Buffy pouted with her hands on her hips. “What's that about?”

His guest chose that moment to step from behind Xander. “Rupert?”

“Phillip?”

Phillip nodded. “We need to talk.”

Giles looked at him curiously. “Oh? Oh! Of course. Um...I think that's enough for tonight. I'll see the both of you in the morning.”

Xander and Buffy shared a look and he shrugged at her before helping her pack her stuff up. “Later G-man!”

“Night Giles!”

They left through the main doors and headed towards her locker where she stashed her stereo. He wondered for a moment how she managed to make it fit.

“Should we spy?” She asked quietly as she forced her locker shut, the stereo didn't fit as well as she thought it would.

“Nah, let's patrol. That Phillip guy was attacked by some zombie lady. We should see if we can find her, possibly torch her.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “Torch her?”

“You have any other ideas for how to deal with zombies?”

“Not really. And if we don't find her?”

“Then we raid the discount baked goodies at Walmart.”

She grinned at him. “I like the way you think.”

xxx

When Buffy and Xander arrived at his house, each laden with a bag of baked treats, they were more than surprised to see Kyle and Tor on his front porch.

Buffy waved at them. “Hey guys.”

“What's up?” Xander looked at them closely, Tor looked nervous. “Tor?”

Tor cleared his throat. “My sister hasn't come home yet.”
Buffy blinked and looked at Xander. “Sister?”

Xander nodded. “Tor's dad freaked and smacked Tor around cause he and Kyle slept in the same bed. His sister got custody.”

Buffy winced and turned sympathetic eyes on Tor. “Always bad when a parent freaks.”

Kyle gave a bit of a sneer. “What do you know.”

“Kyle!” Xander let just a hint of a growl lace his voice. It was good that Kyle was protective, but Buffy was pack, and an alpha.

“It's okay Xander.” She faced the other boys. “Giles gave you the speech, 'The world is older than you know'.” They nodded at her. “Then you know how strong I am, and what I am. I tried to tell my parents about it, to explain why I burned down the gym at my old school. It was full of vampires. They had me committed. I spent two weeks so pumped full of drugs I could barely function. I had to recount fast or stay in a straight jacket. My folks divorced not long after.” She took a breath to steady herself. “So I know something about parents freaking out.” Kyle couldn't meet her eyes.

Xander wrapped an arm around her. “Jesus Buff.”

She shrugged. “It's in the past. So...we gonna look for Tor's sister or what?”

“We can keep an eye out and make another sweep.” He glanced at Tor. “Did you call her boss? Sometimes her hours can be wonky.” Tor shook his head and Xander managed a reassuring smile. “She can take care of herself pretty well, she knows it's dangerous at night.”

Buffy smiled at him too. “You guys want to patrol with us?”

They looked at Xander who shrugged. “Couldn't hurt, just let me put our goods inside.” He took both his and Buffy's bag of treats and headed inside, but he stayed by the door for a moment to listen.

“Buffy...sorry about before.” He heard Kyle murmur.

“It's okay. Just remember that we're on the same side.” Her voiced held authority and Xander nodded from his hiding place in approval.

xxx

Later that night, after they'd patrolled and parted ways with Buffy they'd ended up at Botan and Tor's home. Botan was still absent. Once they were inside and settled in the living room Xander took out the compact and flipped it open before punching in Koenma's code. In no time the teenage form of the Prince appeared on the screen.”

“Xander?”

“Hey Koenma. Any idea where Botan is?”

Koenma looked surprised. “She's not back yet?”

“Nope.”

“I see...I'll look into it then.” Koenma's eyes shifted to the side, he was hiding something.

“What's going on Koenma? She's been gone since this morning and we're worried, well Tor is kinda freaking.”
Koenma gave him a confused look. “Tor?”

“The kid she took in.”

“Oh...Do you need someone there for him?”

Xander looked at Tor. “Botan's boss wants to know if you want someone here?”

Tor blinked. “Someone like?

“A friend of Botan's.”

He shook his head. “Can we just crash at your place again?”

Kyle reached over and put a hand on Tor's arm. “It's late, it might be better if we all stay here.”

Xander nodded. “I agree.” He looked back at the communicator. “I've got it covered.”

“Alright. I'll see if we can track her down.” The screen flickered and Koenma's image disappeared, Xander closed the compact.

Kyle shifted in the chair he was sitting in. “So...what's with the spy gear?”

Xander sighed. “Botan, we've been over the whole Grim Reaper thing right?” They nodded. “Well the Spirit Realm, or Reikai, has nifty technology. And the guy I was speaking too was Koenma, well Prince Koenma, he's Botan's boss. He seemed surprised that she wasn't back yet, but he wouldn't tell me what's going on.”

Tor moved from his own chair and sat beside Xander on the couch, Kyle followed and sat on Xander's other side. Xander opened his arms and let them get comfortable. Tor was the first to speak.

“How did you meet Botan?”

Xander smirked. “It all goes back to the hyena possession.”

Kyle groaned. “Figures.”

xxx

The next morning Xander found Botan, Giles and Phillip cracking the books in the library. He strode up to her and closed the book she was reading, nearly smashing her fingers.

“So the reason you had your little brother worried sick was?”

Giles cleared his throat. “Nothing of great importance.”

“Giles, last time I checked you didn't legally adopt a teenage boy.” He glared at Botan. “Tor doesn't know you as well as I do, he doesn't know how well you can take care of yourself. So he was kind of freaking last night. Me and Kyle crashed at your place to keep him company by the way.”

Botan sighed, he'd never seen her look so weary. Her hair was in disarray, her eyes were bloodshot and her face was pale. “I'm sorry Xander. Something came up and I requested a special assignment from Koenma.”

“What kind of assignment?”
“Some souls had gone missing. They were mutual friends of ours.” She motioned to Giles and Phillip as she talked. “They died and the souls were no where to be found.”

Xander glanced at the men. “Does this have anything to do with the zombie chick that tried to kill Phillip?”

“Really Xander--” Giles' voice held a scolding tone.

“Hush Rupert.” Botan grimaced. “It does. Giles and his old gang had a bit of a run in with a demon in their youth. And now their past has come back to bite them in the butt. That demon is after them now. He's killing them one by one and then possessing their bodies to go after his next target. However you may have broken the chain by saving Phillip.”

Xander gulped. “May have? I don't like may have. How about some conformation...is this demon still around?”

Giles removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “It's possible. Now will you please run along?” He yelped when Botan slapped the back of his head. “Really Botan, that was uncalled for.”

“So was dismissing Xander.” She turned to look at him. “The demon is called Eyeghon and he can only move about our reality by possessing a corpse or an unconscious person. When he possesses a corpse the body's decomposition is sped up until it disintegrates leaving a puddle of ooze behind.”

Something clicked in Xander's mind. “Oh boy.”

Giles sat up straighter. “Xander?”

“Buffy and I passed a blue puddle in the hall last night. We figured the janitor just hadn't gotten to it, except we didn't see him, just his cart thing.”

Phillip cleared his throat. “I saw him last night, before Eyeghon tried to kill me.”

“So if the janitor shows up and starts killing people can we assume that he's been possessed by the demon?” Xander asked.

Giles blinked. “I suppose.”

“Wonderful.” He glared at Giles. “Don't keep us out of the loop next time, you set a bad example. We're supposed to be able to come to you with stuff, and that's a two way street.” He glanced at Botan. “Go home, get some sleep. I'll let Tor know you're back in town.” Xander started to leave when he paused. “Tonight's the monthly blood delivery to the hospital isn't?”

“Oh...yes it is. Will you need me there?”

“Nah, you guys keep trying to help your friend's souls. Buffy and I can handle the carryout packets of blood.” He then turned around and left the library.

Botan yawned and stood up. “He gives very good advice. I'm going home to get some rest. You two stay on the alert.” She whipped out her oar and hopped on. “And Rupert?”

“What?”

“You'll need to tell them about this soon, especially if you want them to keep trusting you.” She smiled at him tiredly and flew through the ceiling.

xxx
Who the heck had school on Saturday, that's what Xander wanted to know. He didn't care that he'd
gotten to bed somewhat early last night, even though they'd had to stake out the hospital. Saturdays
were for sleeping in, not sitting in computer labs beside Cordelia Chase.

“Hey, did Tor's sister ever make it home?” Willow asked as she settled at her computer.

He nodded as he pushed the power button on his monitor. “Yeah. When he got home from school
yesterday she was home, exhausted from overtime, but home and in one piece.”

“Sister?” Cordelia looked at them carefully. “I thought Tonya Hauer disappeared when we were in
junior high.”

“I remember that.” Willow gave him a skeptic look.

He nodded. “She's one of the few Sunnydale kids that actually ran away. You saw what Tor's dad
did to him. Their old man smacked Tonya around too. She got out before their parents divorced and
their mom ran off with her hair dresser.”

Cordelia gave a heart broken sigh. “Stylez for You just hasn't been the same since Jean Luc left
town.” They gave her odd looks. “He was the hair dresser she ran off with.”

“Right, anyway, Tor got in touch with Tonya, who was in LA and she came home and got custody
of him and now they've got a restraining order against their dad.” He really hoped the lie didn't show
on his face. Tonya really had disappeared when they were in junior high, Botan had just taken her
identity for the sake of helping Tor.

Willow smiled. “That's good.”

He smiled back. “Yeah, Tor got lucky.”

“If you three are done gossiping we have a tutorial to go through.” Ms Calendar looked at them
pointedly, but her stern face broke into a smile. “I'm all for happy endings, so lets go through this and
we might just get out early.”

Xander grinned. “I'm all for that!”

Cordelia nodded and pointed at Xander. “What he said. Let's get this over with.”

Ms Calendar started toward the black board. “The first thing we're going to do is—Buffy?”

Buffy looked a little ruffled and she had a strange man, well not strange, he was the guy who sold
them their Halloween get ups, but she had him by the arm in what looked like a painful grip. Good,
he'd nearly gotten Buffy killed with that stupid frilly dress.

Willow glanced at Xander. “Did you fall asleep and start projecting weird desires?”

He frowned at her. “No, I wouldn't dream about that anyway.”

She nodded. “Right, you've got a harem, what do you need Buffy for.”

“Wills, you seriously need a boyfriend, or a girlfriend.”

“Can I borrow one of yours?”

He wadded up a piece of paper and threw it at her. “They're not a harem Wills, and I'm not dating
any of them.” The paper wad hit her nose and she just grinned at him.
“Harem? Is that why Kyle and his posse are hanging out with you?” Cordelia raked her eyes over him. “Rhonda usually has good taste.”

Xander rolled his eyes. “Evil judgmental person.”


Hazel eyes widened. “Really?”

Ethan clapped his hands. “Children are really quite impressive these days. How many took part lad?”

Buffy shook him a bit before glaring at them. “Take a minute to focus please? I found this guy snooping in the library.”

Willow looked at her curiously. “Why are you here anyway Buffy?”

“I was snooping in the library.” She shrugged. “Giles and his friend have been really quiet about what they’ve been looking for, and we’ve still got some sort of zombie running around that tried to kill Phillip. And then I found Ethan snooping, I’m thinking it all ties together.”

Xander nodded. “So we should tie him up.”

“And call Giles.”

“Good thinking Willow, you call Giles and tell him Ethan Rayne is here, Xander, find some rope.”

“Will do.” They watched Buffy drag Ethan out of the classroom.

Ms Calendar looked at Xander. “Zombie?”

“Yeah...you’re gonna have to ask Giles about that.”

“Xander.” Willow’s voice was one of resolve.

“Seriously. All I know is some zombie lady attacked an old friend of Giles’ who was on campus looking for him. I knocked zombie lady away from Phillip and she staggered away. Phillip and Giles have been all hush hush since then.”

xxx

By the time they got to the library, Xander had located some rope and Willow had called Giles. In no time they had Ethan secured to a chair, he wasn’t going anywhere.

“So what do you think is going on?” Willow asked no one in particular.

“No idea, and Ethan won’t talk without Giles here.”

“Things are always more fun when Rupert is around.” Ethan smiled at them, and Buffy smacked the back of his head.

“Shut--”

One of the full size windows shattered inward and they turned to see a demon leering at them all. “Ethan.”

Willow gulped. “It’s Mr. Eckers, the janitor.”
Buffy grimaced. “It was the janitor.”

Ethan twitched in his chair. “Oh it still is. Poor bloke is still alive, Eyeghon has possessed him.”

Eyeghon laughed and tried to step through the window. There was a crackle of electricity and he became suspended in the open space for a moment. There was a bright flash, and he split in two, a demonic shadow seemed to lift and evaporate from the body and Mr. Eckers fell forward onto the library floor.

Xander looked at the fallen man for a moment. “Well...the wards work.”

Ethan looked on in surprise. “Very well. Tell me, which one of you put those up?”

Willow looked smug. “We know a miko.”

He glanced at the redhead. “In this day and age?”

Xander smirked and leaned down to whisper in his ear. “She who guards the Shikon no tama doesn't like it when her friends are in danger.” His smirk turned to a grin as Ethan gaped at him.

Ms Calendar cleared her throat. “Maybe we should check on Mr Eckers?”

Mr. Eckers was fine, unconscious and likely to have the mother of all headaches, but alive. They settled him on the cot in Giles' office just as the Watcher and Phillip burst into the library.

“Hello Ripper.” Ethan gave him cheeky grin. “Quite the group of kiddies you have here.”

Cordelia glanced at Xander. “Why did he call him that?” Giles strode forward and grabbed Ethan by his hair and wrenched his head painfully to one side. Xander caught Cordelia's eye, she nodded. “Makes sense now.”

Phillip and the others looked on as Giles kept a tight grip on Ethan. “You come here and bring this evil to the people I care about.”

“Don't play coy old man. Your hands are as bloody as mine. Eyeghon would have come after you eventually.”

Buffy folded her arms over her chest and tapped her foot. “Make with the splainy Giles. What is going on?”

Giles released Ethan and turned to look at Phillip who shrugged. “They're your lot Rupes. And just in case those wards didn't kill him they'll need to know about Eyeghon.”

“Right.” He looked at the children who all had their eyes on him. “Where do I start?”

xxx

They all stared at him.

Xander snorted. “And you all thought the orgy was a wild time. Seriously Giles, you summoned a demon for fun? You rebel you.”

Giles glared at him. “Please Xander, this is serious.”

“I think he was being serious, I mean, none of us would even think of summoning a demon. Especially after what happened with Moloch.” Willow shuddered.
“And the Primals.” Xander added, flashing his eyes for Ethan's benefit and letting out a high pitched chuckle. Ethan gulped and Buffy ruffled Xander's hair.

“Good boy.”

“Hyena Buffy, not dog.” But he grinned at her anyway.

“Yes well...”

“So how do we stop Eyeghon?” Buffy asked.

Ethan laughed. “You don't. Nothing will stop him from killing the three of us. The tattoos are like homing beacons.”

Xander looked at each man for a moment, their sleeves rolled up, exposing Eyeghon's mark. “Can't you just remove the tattoos?”

Phillip blinked and Giles met Ethan's eyes. Ethan smirked. “Acid would do the trick. No more homing beacon then.”

Willow stood up from her chair. “I'll get the lab ready.”

xxx

Willow had prepared three vials of acid, one for each man. She carefully applied one to Phillip who held his arm over a sink, with the tap running to dilute the runoff as it went down the drain. Ms Calendar did the same for Giles, she'd been quiet since Giles had told them about his youth, it made Xander worry. However he kept his mind on his task of removing Ethan's tattoo while Buffy stood watch to make sure he didn't try anything.

When they were done they went back to the library and locked Ethan in the rare book cage.

Willow looked carefully at the broken window. “So is Eyeghon really gone?”

Giles sighed. “I don't know.”

Xander stood and stretched. “I'll call Kagome, tell her what happened. The wards may have fried him.”

Ethan looked thoughtful as he leaned against the door of the cage. “It's possible. Eyeghon doesn't do well without a host in our realm.”

“This has been a blast and everything, and way better than a computer tutorial, but can we go now? I have a hair appointment.” Cordelia looked at them all pointedly.

Giles rolled his eyes. “I suppose.”

Ms Calendar nodded. “We'll try again next week.”

“Joy.” Cordelia turned on her heel and left, Ms Calendar was right behind her.

“I'm gonna leave too. Later guys.” Willow waved and left.

Buffy glared at Ethan. “Can I slay him? He nearly got us killed and everything at Halloween.”

Giles sighed. “No, unfortunately the worst we can get on him is trespassing and destruction of school
She made a face. “Yuck, cops. I'm gonna bail then.”

Xander nodded. “Yeah, last thing we need is Snyder seeing her here, he'd blame her no matter what. Later Buff.” She smiled and left. “Come on in Botan.”

Botan stepped out of Giles' office. “The janitor will be okay, he should wake in a few hours.” She joined Phillip, Giles and Xander in front of Ethan's cage. “Dierdra and Thomas' souls are in Reikai where they're supposed to be.”

Giles and Phillip looked relieved. Phillip met her eyes. “And Eyeeghon?”

She smiled. “Kagome does good work. Near as I can tell he's dead, curtey of the wards.” She grinned evilly at Ethan. “Want me to throw him through a portal again? I'm thinking Antarctica.”

Xander grinned. “Again? I like your version of fun. But I'd like to thank him first.”

Phillip gaped at him. “Are you mad?”

“Well...the face paint I bought from his shop...see I still turned into a soldier because of the toy gun. So the soldier was the one in control running around the dale in my body. But I used the face paint to copy my ancestor’s tribal markings. And I ended up in some sort of limbo place that looked like the library. I met my Ancestor there and we had a nice talk.”

Giles sat down heavily in a chair. “Good lord. You mean--”

Xander grinned at him. “That book you gave me with the illustrations? Raizen is a pretty cool guy, for a demon king.”

Ethan blinked. “What?”

“So thanks for giving me a chance to talk to the old man. Later Giles.” He waved and left the library.

Ethan looked at Giles. “Who is that boy Ripper?”

Botan giggled. “Xander Harris. Descendant of King Raizen.”

Rupert smiled at Ethan, and it wasn't a nice smile. “Yusuke Urameshi's younger brother.”

Ethan paled and backed away.

Botan grinned at Giles. “Portal?”

Giles chuckled.

XXX

A/N: So I have a bit of a treat for you now. I wanted to do a Thanksgiving piece, but I didn't want it to be a full chapter. So here we have a small pointless piece. ^^ Enjoy everyone! And happy New Year! :throws confetti:

XXX

Thanksgiving Interlude
They were all lounging under a tree in the quad waiting for classes to start. Xander lay on his back, Kyle and Willow were using him for a pillow, and Tor was playing with Willow's hair. Buffy sat near them, Rhonda and Heidi leaned up against her back so the three of them were supporting one another. It was early, it was peaceful, and they had twenty minutes before classes started. Life was good.

Buffy looked at Xander but spoke to all of them. “What are you guys doing for Thanksgiving?”

Willow lifted her head. “My parents are going to a conference, then to my Aunt's in Denver.”

Buffy looked confused. “Not you?”

“Oh, I'll probably stay home. I don't like my Aunt.”

Buffy's eyes traveled over the rest of them. “And the rest of you?”

Heidi shifted behind her. “Going to LA to my grandparents' place.”

Kyle lifted his head for moment. “My family is scattering. Parents are partying, brothers will all be with their girlfriends.”

Rhonda snorted. “I'm free.”

Tor shrugged. “It's just me and Tonya now. I don't know what we're doing. But it's not safe to eat her cooking.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “Xander?”

He turned his head to look at her. “I have nothing planned for Turkey Day.”

She beamed at him. “Cool. Mom said to invite my friends. So you're all invited. Tor, bring your sister.”

Tor glanced at Xander who smiled. “Relax Tor, we're all family, it's cool.”

Buffy nudged Heidi behind her. “And if you get back early or change your plans you have a plate at our table.”

“Thanks.”

“So dinner is at two. Come hungry.”

Xander arrived at Buffy's with Marshal in tow. When Buffy opened the door she looked at the cat in his arms with an odd expression.

“You brought your cat?”

He stepped inside. “My mom decided to invite some friends over. They came drunk and tried to play pin the tie on the cat. Marshal and I took offense so I brought him with. Is that okay?”

Buffy winced at the mental image. “Yeah it's fine. But Mom has wine for her and the adults.”

Xander smiled. “But our adults won't get violent with their alcohol.”
She nodded. “True. Mom! Xander's here and he brought his cat 'cause drunk party people were trying to hurt it!”

Joyce popped her head out of the dining room. “Poor thing. Hello Xander.”

“Hey Mrs. Summers.”

“Make yourself at home. Buffy come give me a hand.”

She nodded. “Coming. Can you man the door Xander?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.” She left him alone in the living room. A minute later there was a knock at the door.

Xander opened it. “Hey Tor, Ronnie, Kyle...Botan?” He stared at Reikai's top guide. Her hair was braided...and brown. And her eyes were green like Tor's.

She shrugged. “Officially I'm Tonya Hauer. This is sort of what she looked like.”

“So how?”

She smiled. “Glamour.”

“Hmm, nifty.” He stood aside and they came in.

“Who's here?” Buffy called out from the kitchen.

“Tor and his sister brought Rhonda and Kyle with them.”

She made a brief appearance. “Cool. Willow should be here soon, she's catching a ride with Giles and Ms Calendar. You must be Tonya?”

Botan smiled and shook Buffy's hand. “Yes, I'm Tor's sister. It's lovely to meet you. Does your mother need any help in the kitchen?”

Tor cleared his throat. “Don't actually let her cook anything.” He dodged Botan's elbow. “It's safer that way.”

Buffy led 'Tonya' into the kitchen and just as quickly came back alone. “They want to have non-creepy adult bonding time.” They all laughed and settled down to watch the Macy Parade.

A little while later Willow and her escorts let themselves in and she made a beeline for the overstuffed chair and piled into Tor's lap. Giles and Ms Calendar headed toward the kitchen.

A moment later there was a shout from the kitchen. Buffy leaped from the couch where she'd been between Kyle and Xander and ran from the room. There was a few banging noises and then Giles ran through the room and headed for the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Buffy came back into the living room. “Don't eat the cranberry sauce.”

They all looked at one another, but Kyle was the one to ask. “Why?”

“I might have messed it up.”

Xander blinked at her. “How do you mess up cranberry sauce? It comes in a can.”
She shifted from foot to foot. “I made it.”

Rhonda looked up at her warily from the floor. “Did you make anything else?”

Buffy shook her head. “No.”

Willow glanced toward the closed bathroom door. “Maybe someone should check on Giles?”

Buffy nodded. “Yeah...I nominate Xander, all in favor raise your hands.”

Xander watched as they raised their hands. “Yay me.”

xxx

Xander sat at the table and tried not to drool. “It looks great Mrs. Summers.”

Kyle pointed at the main plate that held the turkey. “Why is the turkey missing a leg?”

There was a thump before Marshal shot out from under the table, the turkey leg in his mouth, he sped out of the room and out of sight.

Xander blushed. “My cat has no manners.”

Joyce snickered. “It's okay Xander. There's plenty of turkey left.”

Giles sighed, he'd finally gotten his color back in time for dinner. “As long as there's no cranberry sauce.”

Buffy pouted at him. “I said I was sorry.”

xxx

The adults abandoned the clean up attempt and bonded with the wine in the living room. Joyce and Tonya were getting giggly and were to be considered dangerous around the breakables. So the six teens were left with the chore. However with so many of them to wash, rinse and dry, the dishes were done in record time and none were broken. When the last dish was put away Buffy led them down to the basement where an old tv and vcr were set up.

Buffy started dragging out old sleeping bags, blankets and pillows and with their help they had a huge nest thrown together on the floor. She popped in a tape and they piled up in the nest and settled in to watch the movie. Xander and Buffy were in the center, Kyle was curled up on Xander's left, Tor and Willow were curled up on Buffy's right and Rhonda was snuggled against Kyle. They were full, they were safe, they were together, they were asleep within an hour.

They never saw the end of the movie

XXX

End Thanksgiving Interlude
The three of them sat together at a table in the cafeteria filling out the required paperwork for Snyder's newest circus attraction. Career week.

“Do I like shrubs?”

Xander glanced at Buffy after her odd question. He raised a brow at her. “That's between you and your god. Whoever he may be.”

Willow bounced across the table from Buffy. “They're pretty, especially when they're animal shaped.”

Buffy nodded in agreement. “Okay then, yay shrubs.”

Xander peered over at her sheet. “You didn't check yay cooking did you?”

She looked up at him. “Yeah...why?”

He looked away quickly. “No reason.”

She huffed. “Just because you learned to cook over the summer doesn't mean I'm not allowed to touch a stove.” Willow giggled.

He sighed. “Buff...you nearly put Giles in the hospital.”

She stuck out her lip in a pout. “Everyone's a critic. Fine I'll change it.”

Willow tapped her pencil against the table in thought as she watched them. “What's bothering you?”

Buffy kept her eyes on her paper as she changed her answer. “Nothing.”

He looked at her skeptically. “Right. So you're gloomy Buffy why?”

“It's just...there's no point in me doing this. My destiny takes away my choice of possible future careers.”

He frowned in thought at her words. “Not really, if you can slay when you're in school you can slay when you have a job.”

She shook her head. “It's not that simple.”

He smiled. “Buff, I patrol every night, and I don't plan on stopping after high school. I mean, we even have more people patrolling now. When we all get jobs we can take shifts that fit our schedules.”
Willow nodded. “And we've got UC Sunnydale, so we can go to college and still take back the night.”

“I just...don't want to be trapped on the hellmouth.”

“I get it Buff, but there's always a lull in the summer. And if you need a vacation before then...” He shrugged. “We can handle things for a while.”

A glimmer of hope finally entered her face. “I'll think about it.”

“I aspire to help my fellow man,” Cordelia's voice reached their ears and they turned to watch her walk by with her shadows. “As long as he doesn't drool or think grease is a fashion statement.”

Buffy looked at Xander. “Do you think she checked the shrub box?”

“Yeah...no.”

Willow giggled.

xxx

Discontentedly he paced the room, his stride was quick, agitated. However he kept an eye on Drusilla as he stalked about. She was at the opposite end of the table from Dalton, her attention on the cards she was reading. He took in her abnormally pale skin, the bruises on her arms that should have healed months ago stood out, marring her perfection. She just kept getting weaker. He strode up to Dalton and smacked the back of his head.

He spoke with a snarl. “What's taking so long? Even I can read Latin.”

Dalton gulped. “Well...it's not Latin. At least not any version I've studied.”

Spike sneered. “What good are you to me then?” He grabbed Dalton by his throat and lifted him from his chair.

“Wait love. He needs a key.”

Spike glanced at his lady love. “Key? You mean the bloody book is in some kind of code?” She nodded and he smirked. “In du Lac's tomb then. I'll send brainiac and another to retrieve it.” He shoved Dalton away from him. “Go on then, take some muscle with you.” Dalton nodded and stumbled away.

Drusilla cooed at him. “Will you dance?”

“With you love? Always.”

xxx

After dancing about the factory with Dru he'd been restless, so as soon as the sun was down he went out. It was his lucky night. The boy and his cat were out and about. It was an odd, if interesting sight. The cat was no ordinary creature, not the way it growled at him the first time he'd seen it. But to watch the two of them hunt...it was like they were really communicating. The cat would trip up the vampires and the boy would take them down. It was quite a show.

He watched as the boy paused and looked to his left, Spike followed with his own eyes and watched a blue haired woman and another teenaged boy, blond, approach Xander. They talked for a bit, but he was too far away to hear what they said, and when they left the cat went with them. Once they
were out of sight Xander's eyes met his. The boy's eyes were a luscious brown, like melted chocolate. They held fire and intelligence, no trace of the insanity that plagued his dark princess. Spike flicked away the cigarette he'd been smoking and made his way to the boy.

“Why are you here?”

Spike smiled. “I like the scenery.”

Xander rolled his eyes. “I meant in Sunnyhell.”

He shrugged. “For Dru's sake.”

“We don't have the only hellmouth. According to Giles there's another one in Cleveland.”

“This one is stronger, the one in Cleveland is an infant.” Xander seemed to shiver at his words. “Cold? I could warm you up.” He stepped closer to Xander, who growled at him. Spike grinned and leaned down to place his mouth on Xander's. Xander growled again, low in his throat and Spike growled back, nipping at Xander's bottom lip, and finally sucking on it.

Xander opened his mouth and nipped back, Spike slipped his tongue inside and became lost in the sweet warmth as their tongues caressed and wrestled against each other. The boy was the first to pull back, but he leaned his forehead against Spike's to catch his breath. After a moment he stepped back and Spike pouted at him, which made Xander groan.

“Sorry. One member of my pack angisting over a vampire is enough.”

“Oy! Don't compare me to that Irish bastard!”

Xander chuckled. “I'm not. You'd be an improvement. Seriously. He broods and is all around snotty and depressing. Trust me, Deadboy is not my fave vamp.”

Spike grinned at him and it was coy. “And me?”

“If I had a fave vamp you'd be it.” Xander turned to leave.

“Not going to fight me?”

Xander rose a brow at the question. “You're a Master Vampire that's killed two slayers. I'm not as fast or as strong as a slayer, close but no cigar, and I've only been seriously training for about six months. I'm not stupid. I'm not ready to fight you.” Xander blew him a kiss. “Good night Spike.” He walked away then and Spike tilted his head to watch his ass until the boy disappeared into the shadows. Something clicked in his mind then and he blinked in confusion. “Pack?”

xxx

The next morning Xander found the Fearsome Four at the bulletin board in the quad waiting on Cordelia to finish looking up her career week assignments. He joined them as she read them aloud.

“Personal Shopper or Motivational Speaker.” Cordelia look pleased even as the four cackled.

Xander blinked. “Motivational Speaker? You? With your diamond tipped tongue?” He shook his head as she moved back and Heidi slipped up to the board. “What'd you get?”

“Huh. I got Law Enforcement or Interior Decorator.”

Xander nodded. “Go for Interior Decorator.” Heidi gave him a puzzled look and he shrugged. “You
have a few authority issues.” She pouted and went to him, slipping her arms around his waist.

“I listen to you Alpha.”

He snorted back laughter and pet her hair fondly. “Most of the time.”

Tor was at the board when he positioned Heidi at his side, she still had an arm around his waist. Cordelia watched them with an odd look.

“What's with all the group groping?”

Xander looked at her. “We all got possessed last spring during the Zoo trip by hyena spirits. There's a few leftover quirks.”

“Like what?” They all looked at her and their eyes flashed green, she raised an eyebrow. “Is that it?”

Rhonda blinked and stared at Cordelia. “Huh.”

Heidi peered at her in much the same way and sniffed the air. “She doesn't smell like prey.”

Kyle nodded approvingly. “She's strong.”

Xander glanced at Kyle. “Well duh. She's Queen C. Queen C is no ones prey.”

Heidi was still staring at the other girl. “Pack?”

“Yeah.”

Tor's voice was dejected as he announced his career options. “I got Dog Walker or Landscaper.”

Xander kept his own voice upbeat to hopefully cheer the other boy up. “Landscaping's not so bad.” At Tor's disbelieving look he elaborated. “You'd make a fortune in Japan. I know a guy in Tokyo who makes his living designing rich people's personal gardens. It's kind of a big artsy thing over there.”

Cordelia sneered at him. “Like you would really know.”

“I spent my summer in Tokyo Cor. Shuichi Minamino, the gardener, is a friend of my brother's. What did I get Tor?”

“Prison Guard...and Translator.”


Xander grinned at her and started speaking in rapid Japanese, her mouth opened in surprise before she stomped off. He finished with a simple 'ja ne' before turning back to Tor. “Prison Guard? Really? Yuck.”

Tor nodded. “Kyle got Politics and Education and Rhonda got Personal Trainer and Fashion Design.”

Kyle grimaced. “Joy.”

Xander nudged him. “It's not set in stone, and even if it was, stones can be broken. Check Buffy's and Willow's for me would you Tor?”
Xander wandered into the library in the middle of a heated conversation between Buffy and Giles. He watched them for a moment in confusion.

Giles was in full scolding mode. “You made no effort to find out what they took?”

“Have a cow Giles, I didn't think it was important. Vamps are always stealing stuff.”

“What if it was important? You should have been more thorough--”

“If you don't like how I'm doing my job why don't you find somebody else? Wait that's right, there can only be one. I don't have to be the Slayer, I could be six feet under instead.”

He looked from one to the other. “Are we playing Highlander now?”

Buffy continued to glare at Giles. “No. Just another episode of Buffy's the Chosen One.”

Giles sighed. “All joking aside you need to take your--”

“Giles, she's not alone. If somethings up we can all look into it.” He stared hard at the Watcher. “So...what now?”

Giles relented and took off his glasses as he thought. “We need to go to the tomb the vampires were breaking into.”

Xander grinned and nearly bounced. “Yay! Fieldtrip!” They looked at him with twin looks of surprise, he shrugged. “Well it's better than going over riot procedure with the Warden. And my second seminar isn't until tomorrow.”

Giles continued to look perplexed. “Warden?”

“Career week remember? I got Prison Guard.”

Buffy smirked. “At least you'd be on the right side of the law.”

He grinned back at her. “Says the girl who got Law Enforcement. Oh, and maintenance.”

“Maintenance?”

“You chose the shrubs.”

xxx

Spike smiled has he held the cross out for Dru. Her eyes were sort of glazed and her head was tilted as if she could hear something he couldn't. “This is it then?

“It sings, like a siren's song. Can you hear it?” She gazed at him and her eyes cleared, though her lids fluttered weakly. “No you only hear his song now. It hums in the back of your head. When it blooms it will be so sweet.

Spike leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “You'll get your strength back soon love. And then we'll paint this town red, innards will hang from every lamp post.”

She smiled. “Pretty garlands for my party.”
Dalton shifted behind them. “What about the Slayer? She almost got me! She'll already be onto our plan by now.”

Spike grinned. “No worries. I've hired out some help. The big guns should already be in town.”

Dalton blinked. “Big guns?”

“The Order of Taraka.”

The bespectacled vampire gasped. “The bounty hunters?”

Dru hummed. “Three of them will come to my party.”

“But isn't that too much? A bit overkill?”

Spike snorted. “No such thing.”

Drusilla looked at him. “The Prince will be cross with us.”

Spike took her hand and kissed it. “He'll get over it.”

“It will take more than kisses.” She pouted at him. “I want his kisses. But he won't share.”

Spike smiled down at her.

xxx

Willow wandered through the halls until she saw Kyle and waved him over.

He walked beside her. “You're not on the lists.”

“I know, but there's nothing else to do. Where's Xander and Buffy?”

“Field trip with Giles.”

She gave him wide eyes. “But...if Buffy's not here Snyder's gonna--”

Kyle put a hand on her shoulder. “Kinda scary that Summers and Heidi both ended up with Law Enforcement.” He flicked his gaze behind her in warning.

She blinked but caught on. “That is weird. What about Xander?”

“Prison Guard.”

“Huh.”

Snyder stepped behind them. “Where is she?”

Willow turned to face him and leaned against Kyle's chest, he wrapped an arm around her protectively. She blinked at Snyder. “Who?”

Snyder sneered at her. “You know who. Summers. Where is she?”

Kyle shrugged. “I saw her with Harris last, they probably met up with Heidi.”

Willow nodded. “They ended up with Law Enforcement and Prison Guard.”
“They're probably comparing retirement plans.”

Snyder blinked at them. “You two are full of it.” Willow pouted and Kyle looked at him blankly. “Well go on, get to your seminars.” He turned and stalked off.

Willow looked up at Kyle. “Could you sense him?”

“No, saw him. Why?”

“Xander can sense him, he said Snyder feels kinda like a predator sometimes and he moves really quiet for a troll.” She smiled at him. “You'd better get to your seminar.”

He nodded. “I'll have the others spread the cover story.”

“Thanks.” She hugged him and they parted. When he was out of sight someone approached her.

“Willow Rosenberg?”

She turned to see two men in suits. “What? I mean yes?”

“Come with us.”

xxx

Xander and Buffy clambered out of Giles' car and nearly tangled themselves in the process. He glared at Giles.

“When are you gonna get a real car? I feel like an accordion every time I climb out of this thing.”

“You didn't have to come Xander.”

“Someones gotta make sure you two play nice.” Buffy smacked his arm. “Ow!” He smacked her back.

“Hey!”

“Children please, try to act your age.”

They looked at one another, then grinned at Giles. “We are.”

Giles sighed and looked up at the sky as if praying. “Wonderful. Now, which way?”

Buffy led them into the cemetery. As they walked along she glanced at Xander. “What was your other career option?”

“Translator.”

“Lucky. I can't believe I got Police and Maintenance.”

He nodded. “Yeah, that second one is weird. Tor got Landscaping.”

She blinked. “How'd he get that and I got stuck with Maintenance?”

“No idea. I didn't go for the shrub or any kind of decorative stuff.”

“Huh.” She stopped a little ways from a tomb. “That's it.”
“Oh good. Shall we?” Giles entered first and Buffy handed him a flash light. As they followed him in Xander spoke.

“Here’s a question. If the council pays you, why can’t they pay Buffy? I mean they’re this uber big organization that’s been around forever so they’ve got to be loaded. And Buffy is the one doing the leg work.”

Buffy shook her head. “You help, Willow and the others too.”

“Yeah. We should all get an allowance, or at least compensation for ripped and bloodied clothing...and weapon maintenance.”

Buffy looked thoughtful. “I’d rather get a pay check.”

“Point.”

Giles hmm’d as he looked through a smashed opening in the wall. “Traditionally a Slayer lives with her Watcher and he provides for her on his council stipend. However Buffy was not identified as a potential until after she was called.”

They blinked, looked at one another, and then Buffy spoke. “Wait...”

Xander cleared his throat. “So girls who could be Slayers are trained before they’re called?”

“Yes. It’s not a practice I approve of but yes, potentials are taken from they’re families and raised by Watchers and prepared, trained for the calling.”

Buffy bit her lip. “How many potentials?”

“Oh, hundreds.”

She continued to worry at her bottom lip and Xander nudged her. “You’re worth more than all of those other girls put together.” She smiled.

“Oh dear.”

Buffy and Xander sighed and she looked at him. “I hate when he does that.”

Xander nodded. “What’s the what Giles?”

“This tomb belonged to du Lac. He was part of a religious sect that was excommunicated by the Vatican at the turn of the century.” They shared a look at Giles' words.

Buffy folded her arms and leaned against a wall. “Excommunicated?”

Xander shuddered. “And sent to the hellmouth? That’s a bit vicious.”

“Do you remember the book stolen from the library a few weeks ago?” Giles asked them.

A sad look entered Buffy's eyes. “The one stolen by that vamp that Ford helped?”

“Yes. It was written by du Lac.”

Xander sidled up to Buffy and linked arms with her. “Which means it wasn't a random thing. Spike is up to something.”
“So it would seem. The book was said to contain rituals and spells that could bring about unspeakable evil.”

“Fun, du Lac was a real party animal.” Xander ignored the glare Giles aimed at him.

“However it was written in archaic Latin so that no one but the sect members could understand it.” Buffy leaned against Xander. “Then why did you go ‘Oh dear’? There's none of them left...right?”

“No...but it's not good that the book written by du Lac and something from his tomb were both stolen by Spike's minions.”

Xander felt a chill go through him, evil vampires with their distracting kisses. “You think they've found a way to translate it?”

Giles look perplexed. “I don't know. I certainly hope not.”

xxx

Willow nervously tapped a pencil against the top of the table the three of them were sitting at, she looked at Giles who stood next to the stairs. “So you guys are sure there's a connection?”

Buffy shrugged. “Giles says yeah.”

Xander locked eyes with Willow. “He did that thing we hate.”

The redhead's face fell. “Oh...bad things are coming again.”

The library doors opened and The Four glided in, and grinned when they saw the rest of their pack at the table. They crossed the room and joined them. Kyle headed straight for Xander and settled in his lap, making himself comfortable, Xander merely rolled his eyes. Tor pulled a chair up alongside Willow, while Heidi sat beside Buffy. Rhonda headed for Giles, touching his shoulder as she moved past him to stand in front of the low shelves.

Xander stroked Kyle's back. “How'd it go?

Kyle leaned into the touch. “We ran interference.”

Rhonda chuckled. “Heidi kind of looks like Buffy from the back.”

Heidi grinned. “All Snyder ever saw of me was blond hair going around a corner, and the Police Lady will be here again tomorrow, you didn't miss much though.”

Buffy made a face. “Yay.”

Tor shifted beside Willow, taking the pencil from her hands where she was still tapping it. “So what did you guys do?”

“Cemetery field trip.” Xander answered. “We went to the tomb of some guy that was kicked out of the church for writing evil books.”

Kyle looked down at him. “They had porn then?”

“Do semi-nude engravings count as porn?” Willow wondered out loud.

Giles slipped his glasses back on. “Are you lot done?” All seven of them looked sheepish for a
moment. “Right. Now, du Lac was both a Theologian and a Mathematician.” He picked up a book and flipped through it. “This article describes an invention of his called the du Lac cross.”

Rhonda frowned. “Kind of a lame name.”

Xander nodded. “I’d have gone with the cross of Maddock.” Giles glared at them.

Rhonda looked down. “Sorry.”

Xander looked less apologetic. “We're done now.”

Giles continued. “It was more than a mere symbol. It was used to understand certain mystical texts, to decipher hidden meanings.”

Buffy held up her hand. “Wait...they stole a decoder ring?”

Willow blinked. “Kind of like the Rosetta Stone?”

Giles nodded. “Yes, exactly.”

Several sets of eyes looked at Willow and she made a face at them. “Ancient Egyptian decoder ring, only it was a stone, not a ring.” They all nodded.

Buffy pointed at the book in Giles' hand. “What's the article say?”

“Hmm? Oh. Just that du Lac destroyed every cross, except the one buried with him.”

The slayer frowned. “Why would he destroy them after making them?”

Giles closed the book. “Perhaps he feared what might happen if his creation fell into the wrong hands.”

Xander wrinkled his nose and frowned. “Then why the heck did he make them in the first place, not to mention the bad magick book?”

Buffy nodded. “I mean, you said he got excommunicated from the church, so obviously he wasn't much with the caring.”

“I don't know. There are no records of his reasons, for creating or destroying his inventions...nor his writings.”

Kyle leaned against Xander’s chest. “He probably didn't want anyone to use his stuff, like if there was going to be unspeakable evil, he wanted in on it.”

They all looked thoughtful and Willow shook her head. “Huh...sharing issues.”

Kyle shrugged. “Not everyone likes to share power.”

Xander poked him gently in the side. “Should I be worried that you can get inside dead du Lac’s head?”

“No, I gave up my control to you, remember?”

Xander smirked. “Yeah.”

Rhonda snickered before settling beside Xander. “So what do we do about this?”
Giles placed the book on the table. “We need to preempt their plans.”

Tor looked up from stroking Willow’s hair. “How?”

Willow nodded. “What he said.”

Giles gave a weary sigh. “By finding out what is in the book before Spike does. Which means we have a long night ahead of us.”

Willow immediately perked up. “Goody! Research party!”

The rest of them looked at her oddly. Heidi shuttered. “That was kind of scary.”

Rhonda nodded. “We need to get her out more.”

“I agree.” Buffy smiled. “First chance we get I'm thinking girls night out.” Heidi and Rhonda grinned.

Willow pouted. “What's wrong with a research party? Xander?”

“We definitely need to get you out more Wills. There's more out there than research.” Giles gave him a mild glare. “But tonight our life revolves around the books.”

Buffy stood up. “Speaking of books, I gotta bail.”

Xander blinked. “But...research!”

She smiled at him. “I promise to be here bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in the morning and ready to kill monsters.”

“This is rather dire Buffy.”

She pouted at her Watcher. “I know, but I'm not really book gal. I'm more Slay Gal. I'd only be in the way.”

Willow nodded. “If somethings gonna happen she should get ready, gather her strength.”

“I suppose.”

Xander narrowed his eyes at her, she was up to something. “You going to patrol tonight?”

She shook her head. “Not till late.”

Kyle looked at Giles. “What about us? What do we do?”

“Oh, well...”

Xander grinned. “We go through the weapons cabinet, you guys need to start learning how to use them. Two of you can practice while the other two help research. Then we'll switch.”

Giles looked more than relieved at the simple solution. “Good idea.”

Buffy nodded. “Good luck then, I'll see you guys tomorrow.” She grabbed her bag and practically skipped out of the library. Xander looked at Willow and raised a brow in question. She gave him an innocent look and he rolled his eyes.

xxx
They left the library in mass to get their things before the 'research party' started. Once they were in the hall Xander confronted Willow. “Where is she going?”

Willow smiled and it was a bit wistful. “Ice skating with Angel.” He snorted. “She picked a heck of a time for a date.”

Heidi leaned against Willow. “Who's Angel?”

He cleared his throat. “Buffy's beau.”

“He's a vampire.” Willow added helpfully.

All four of them blinked. Tor looked at Xander. “Why?”

Kyle folded his arms and glared at their alpha. “I thought we could kill them.”

Willow waved her arms in a slight panic. “We can, it's just there was this whole big thing about a hundred years ago and he got cursed with his soul, so now he's got a conscience and is helping us fight the good fight.” Xander snorted again and Willow pouted at him. “Xander!”

“I don't like him and I never will.”

“I know.” She moved from Heidi and gave him a hug. “And I understand. I'm not always comfortable around him myself.” She let him go. “I'll see you guys later okay?” The others nodded and touched her arms or hair as she walked by them. Heidi and Rhonda flanked her, acting as silent body guards.

Kyle caught Xander's eye. “What was that about?”

Xander shook his head. “I have reasons for not liking Deadboy. But he makes Buffy happy...usually.”

Tor tilted his head. “If he didn't?”

Xander felt his face shut down, and his mind went to a cold and dark place for a moment. His eyes hardened, the sharp gaze made Kyle and Tor shiver and huddle closer to him. He sighed and let go of the dark feeling. “Relax.” He moved to stroke their backs and push the cold feeling away. “I'll see you back here later.” They nodded and he stepped back and walked away.

He barely managed to turn a corner when Larry blocked his path. “Hey Harris.”

Xander blinked and looked up at the other boy. “Larry?”

Larry shifted and wouldn't quite meet his eyes. “What's going on with you and those four? I mean, they bully everyone more than all the football players combined, or they used to.”

Xander shrugged. “It's complicated.”

“Are you...with them?”

“Sort of, but not like you think.” Larry finally met his eyes with a confused look. “They're sort of my responsibility, I can't really explain it.”

“Oh.” A determined look crossed his face and he stepped closer, leaned down and pressed his lips to Xander's.
Xander's eyes widened and he simply stood there, too shocked to do much else. Larry pulled back, his face a bright red and he turned and walked away as fast as he could. Xander frowned.

“What is it with guys spontaneously kissing me?”

xxx

Xander burst into the library, Rhonda at his heels. Tor was already there with Willow, Giles was hovering over something small in his hands and Buffy was sitting on the stairs with an ice bag on her knee. Xander went to her and knelt in front of her.

“You okay?”

“I'll live. Just a little banged up.”

He nodded and gave her cheek a gentle pat before moving to sit beside her. Rhonda followed him and settled on the floor by their legs. Xander looked at Giles. “So what exactly is going on?”

Buffy shrugged. “No clue. But Angel freaked when he saw the ring our attacker was wearing.”

Giles moved towards them and handed the ring to Xander. “He had good reason to...freak. This ring is only worn by members of the Order of Taraka.”

Xander turned the ring over in his hand, noting the gold crest. “Taraka?”

“Yes, it's an order of deadly assassins.”

Tor made an odd face. “Sounds more like some weird latin dance.” He ducked his head when Giles glared at him.

Buffy shifted her ice pack and glanced at the ring Xander still held. “But why are they after me?”

“Cause you're Slay Gal?” Willow asked. “Scourge of the Nasties?”

Buffy shook her head. “I haven't been so much on the Scourge lately.”

Giles cleared his throat. “I think the best thing we can do at this point is to keep you in a secure location.”

Xander handed the ring back to him. “The wards Kagome put on our homes are still up. So she should be okay at home Giles.”

“Not all of the members are demons Xander.”

“Wait, you want me to hide? Giles, I'm the Slayer!”

“And the Order of Taraka is unlike anything you have ever faced before. The only desire they have is to collect their bounty. When one fails another is sent until their target is dead. So please, just go home.”

xxx

Tor handed him the slip of paper and Xander rested his other hand against Tor's cheek. “Thanks Tor. I hate to put you in this position.”

“It's okay. She left the communicator on the kitchen table. It wasn't hard to get the code.”
“Still. Thanks for this.”

Tor smiled and licked Xander's palm before heading back into the Library. Xander smirked and pulled out his own communicator and punched in the new code. He hoped the right person answered.

A moment later he sighed in relief when Hiei appeared on the screen. “Xander? What do you want? And how did you get my code?”

“That's a secret, and I need some information.”

“Why would I give you information for free?”

“Why did you let it slip to everyone over there that I had an orgy?”

Hiei smirked. “Kurama wants you. I was hoping he'd do more than choke on his tea, amusing as it was. Although your brother's reaction was a close second.”

“Huh?”

“He was cooking at the time, his spatula flew across the room, food and all.”

“Right, see, I've already provided you with lots of amusement and fun. So now I need info.”

“Clever. Fine what do you need to know?”

“Anything and everything you can tell me about the Order of Taraka would be great.”

Hiei's red eyes blinked slowly. “Are you their target?”

“No.”

“The Slayer?”

“Yes.”

“They are relentless, the only thing that will stop them, is the death of their mark, or if the contract is called off. Anyone who stands between them and their mark is expendable, no matter who it is. They will have researched the girl, they'll know where she lives, goes to school and will track her movements easily. I would tell you to stay out of their way but I know you won't.”

“No kidding.”

“Then I suggest that you wear the ring your brother gave you at all times. It may save your life.”

“I thought you said anyone in the way would be expendable.”

“Idiot. The ring you wear bears Raizen's crest. Even the assassins will pause if they recognize the mark. No one wants a Mazoku pissed at them.”

“I'd wondered about that.”

“What?”

“Two demons we've come across shied away from me when they saw my ring.”

Hiei peered at him curiously. “What demons?”
“Some snake demon that was worshiped by a bunch of Frat guys, they called him Makita. And the other could only survive in this realm by possessing people or corpses, his name was Eyeghon.”

Hiei snorted. “No wonder, weaklings like that would never instigate a quarrel with any Makai demon.”

“Weaklings?” Xander shuddered. “Wonderful pep-talk Hiei. You're full of the warm fuzzies.” Hiei smirked. “Thanks for the insight, don't tell Yusuke about this conversation. In fact it never happened. Now...can you do me a favor and not spread any more of my private information to the general public, or to Kurama or my brother.”

“I can't guarantee anything.”

“Great.”

“If it makes you feel better Kazuma scolded me afterward.”

“Really?”

“After he was through laughing at Kurama.”

Xander huffed and closed the communicator.

XXX
Xander stared into the too blue eyes above him. They were like ice from deep within a glacier. However they held a fire that was deceptive. He wasn't sure whether he was going to become frozen in their gaze...or get burned.

“There a problem pet?”

“Only that you're on top of me and I'm not sure when that happened.”

Spike shifted above him, and hello, it seemed both of them were very happy to be in this position. The vampire smirked and ground his jean clothed erection into Xander's thigh. “How is this a problem?”

“You're evil. And a vampire...and you're planning something.” Xander pouted up at him. “Those assassins you called out on Buffy. They're a distraction aren't they?”

“Smart boy.” Spike leaned down and nuzzled against his cheek, his tongue just barely caressing the skin.

“What are you planning Spike?”

Spike rose above him and opened his mouth...and an odd ringing sound came from him.

“What the?” Xander opened his eyes and his ceiling came into view. “Stupid dream.” Disappointment filled him...but he wasn't sure what upset him the most. The fact that he had dreamed of Spike, or that he didn't mind dreaming of Spike. At least it hadn't been a nightmare, he shuddered and glared at his phone. It was still ringing. He grabbed the receiver and brought it to his ear.

“Yeah?”

“Xander?”

“Heidi? My alarm hasn't even gone off yet...has something happened?”

“I'm not sure...maybe. Did you meet up with Summers for patrol last night?”

“No...”

“Rhonda, Tor and I went to her house last night. No one was home.”

“Her mom's in LA this week...but Buffy should have been there.” He threw back the covers and started to sit up. “Check in with Tor, Rhonda and Kyle. Kyle should still be at the library, he stayed there with Willow and Giles to research.”

“What about you?”

“I'll check on Cordy and then go to Buffy's to see if she's home yet.”
“Why Cordy?”

“If these assassins are serious, and I’ve been told they are, they’ll have done some major research. They’ll know everyone who associates with Buffy. So watch your backs. I prefer everyone in one piece.”

“Will do...watch your back alpha.” He heard a click and he knew she’d hung up.

“Marshal?” He looked toward the plush pet bed he’d recently bought for his spirit beast.

I'm awake. It's hard not to be when you're this loud in the morning.

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry about the phone.”

I meant your dreams. You dream about that bleach blond vampire way too much.

“Marshal, focus. Mom's off today, would you keep an eye on her?”

Sure.

“Thanks.”

You gonna tell Botan?

“Not yet. If we get in over our heads I'll call her in a heart beat.”

If you still have one.

xxx

Heidi and Rhonda got to the library in record time. They slipped inside the double doors and immediately locked eyes on Kyle. He lifted his face to meet their eyes, they all ran their gazes over one another to check for any obvious injury. Both girls relaxed when they saw he was fine. As was Willow who was sleeping.

They moved closer and Kyle held a finger to his lips, they glanced at the other girl, asleep with her head in Kyle's lap where he sat on the steps. He carefully put down the book he'd been looking through and motioned them closer. When they settled around him he whispered. “You're here early.”

Heidi nodded. “We patrolled last night with Tor after we left here.”

“We never saw Summers. So we checked her house. No one was home.”

“I called Harris this morning, he said to check in with you and Tor. He's gonna check on Queen C and look for Summers.”

Kyle nodded. “And Tor?”

Rhonda smiled. “Is on his way here.” Kyle was about to speak again when Giles entered the main room from his office.

“Oh. Morning Girls.”

They nodded in greeting and moved to sit at the main table. Rhonda reached for a book. “We have a while before classes start.”
Giles smiled and shook his head. “Oh, no. I think I may have found what was in du Lac's book.” He glanced at Kyle and motioned to the sleeping girl in his lap. “Could you?”

He nodded and gently placed a hand on Willow's shoulder and shook her slightly. “Willow...Willow.”

She jerked awake, sitting up fast. “Don't warn the tadpoles!” She blinked. “Kyle? Why are you in my room? Not that I mind you being in my room cause we're friends and pack and...” She blinked again. “This isn't my room is it?”

Kyle smiled and reached up to smooth her hair down. “No. Research and assassins remember? We stayed at the library all night.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry.”

“It's fine.”

Giles nodded. “Indeed, you all have gone beyond the call of duty.”

Willow shook her head. “We've gotta find--”

Kyle took her hand. “Easy, Bookman says he found something.”

“Right. Well. I haven't been able to figure out exactly what all it entails...but the manuscript is a ritual. One that will restore a weakened vampire to full health.”

Heidi frowned. “Who makes a ritual for that?”

Rhonda looked just as perplexed. “And why would this Spike guy want it?”

Willow shifted and leaned against Kyle. “Drusilla. She's sort of his girl. She was nearly killed by a mob in Prague.” She bit her lip in growing worry. “I guess she's still weak from the attack.”

“And I suppose she's been getting steadily weaker. I believe Spike may have initially come here hoping the energy from the hellmouth would restore her. However due to recent events we can deduce that the original plan failed and he needs this ritual to save her.”

Willow shuddered. “Spike has the manuscript.”

Kyle slipped an arm around her. “So he can cure his girl now?”

She nodded. “Which is bad on account of she's crazy.”

Rhonda slumped in her chair. “Fun. We don't just get a new vampire to worry about, we get a loony one.”

Heidi raised her hand, and Giles sighed. “Yes Heidi?”

She glanced at Willow. “Don't warn the tadpoles?”

Willow blushed and looked down. “I have frog fear.”

“Ah.” Heidi nodded, satisfied. “Mystery solved.” They all looked at her oddly. “Don't tell me you didn't want to know. That would have bugged me all day.”

xxx
Angel landed with a splash and Willy hopped down after him, grimacing as the water covered his shoes. Spike watched them both with amusement and smirked down at Angel lying in the filthy water. Willy turned to him.

“Here ya go. He's a little out of it, but a little blood, no sun for a few hours and he'll be as good as new.” Spike motioned the minions to grab him, but Willy held up his hand. “Wait, where’s my money?”

He grinned at the rat-faced barkeep. “Don't you trust me?”

“You really want an answer to that?”

“Smart man. Now you keep your mouth shut and I won't have to kill you.” He handed Willy the money

“My lips are sealed.” The minions dragged Angel to his feet and started down the tunnel. “What are you gonna do with him?”

“Dru gets so bored you know? Thought I'd clean him up a bit and slap a bow on him. She loves presents.”

xxx

Tor was at the table when Buffy walked in the library with a dark skinned girl he'd never seen before. He gazed from one to the other and froze when he realized how similar they moved. Despite the fact that Buffy had a more natural gait, while the new girl moved more stiffly...but both had an air of power around them. He caught the new girl's scent, it had the same sharpness that identified Buffy as a slayer. Tor felt his eyes widen as he locked gazes with the new girl. Her own eyes narrowed and he panicked.

In an instant he was away from the table and up the steps to the upper level, but she was faster and already on him. She grabbed him, spun him around and backhanded him. She was about to hit him again when Buffy grabbed her and threw her away from him. The blond slayer stayed between them, shielding him from dark slayer.

“Tor?”

“I'm okay Summers.”

“Good.” She glared at the new girl. “What the hell was that?”

“He is not human.”

Giles gaped at the scene from his office doorway. “What the devil is going on?”

Buffy continued to glare. “Giles meet Kendra. She says she's a slayer. Kendra, meet Giles, my Watcher. Now let's get something straight. Tor is one of my people, you don't touch him again.”

“He is not--”

“He's as human as you or me. He got possessed last spring so he feels a little different is all.”

“Possessed?”

Giles seemed to find his voice. “Oh, yes. Tor and four other students were possessed by Primal hyena spirits. The situation was rectified, but something of the hyenas remained. However he is still
human.”

Buffy moved closer to Tor and looked at him. Her eyes hardened when she noticed his darkening jaw. She touched it gently. “I think it's going to look worse than it actually is.” She patted his arm.

“I'm okay, really.”

She nodded. “Still, go get some ice for that...on second thought, do you still have that cold pack in your mini fridge Giles?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Last thing we need is Snyder seeing him like this.”

“Heidi and Rhonda can cover it up.” Buffy concentrated her gaze on him and he looked away. “You know my dad used to smack me around. The girls always helped me cover it up.”

She nodded. “Go, you're ice bound.” He gave her a small smile and headed towards Giles' office, going out of his way to avoid passing by Kendra. When he was out of sight Kendra folded her arms and confronted Buffy.

“What was that?”

“I'm their alpha, well, one of their alphas. I help take care of them, they help me patrol the hellmouth.”

“I don't understand.”

Giles stepped further into the room. “One of the boys that was possessed is their main alpha. He is the strongest of them and has the most control. He named Buffy co-alpha.”

“We share responsibility for keeping the pack safe. Giles fills the parental role.”

“Just how many people know your secret?”

Buffy shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“The Slayer should work in secret, as my Watcher has taught me.”

Giles cleared his throat and Kendra stood at attention. “And who is your Watcher?”

“Sam Zabuto, Sir.”

“Oh. Really?”

Buffy glanced at him. “So he exists?”

“Yes, we've never met but he's a well respected member of the council. But...this makes no sense. I don't see how there can be two of you.”

The library doors opened and Willow came bouncing in, looking refreshed and better than she had earlier. Her hair was still damp from her shower in the locker room. Kendra strode toward her.

“Identify yourself!”

Buffy held back the urge to bang her head on a solid object, like a wall. “Down girl, she's my friend,
part of the pack.”

Tor stuck his head out of Giles' office then, holding a cold pack against his jaw. He saw Willow and slipped around Kendra to pull the redhead away from the new slayer. He led her to the upper level and kept her somewhat behind him at all times. She frowned at the ice pack and moved it to look at his jaw. Her frown changed to a deep look of concentration as she touched the bruise gently. His eyes widened in shock and she grinned at him.

“Better?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Giles blinked at her suspiciously. “Willow. What did you just do?”

She looked at their resident adult and looked sheepish. “I...Kagome's been helping me get in touch with my magick. Just the healing aspect cause injuries happen with our crowd. I can only do small stuff though.” She glanced at Tor. “Sorry. Next time I'll ask. And I didn't heal it much. Just a little. It—it looked like it hurt.”

“Willow, magick is--”

She pouted at Giles. “I'm doing all the reading you give me. Kagome is helping me through e-mails and phone calls, and Ms. Calendar is tutoring me as well. I know magick can be dangerous Giles, especially on the hellmouth.”

He smiled softly at her. “Calm down Willow, I approve, and you're doing well.”

“Oh...good.”

Kendra looked to Giles. “She is a witch?”

Willow shook her head. “Not yet...and I'm more of a Miko in training.”

Kendra snorted at her. “Miko? My Watcher says none exist now.”

Giles shook his head. “No, no. We've met one. She lives in Tokyo.”

Willow nodded and then blinked. “Uh...can I ask what's going on now?”

Tor shrugged. “New girl, Kendra, says she's a slayer.”

Buffy flopped into a chair and folded her arms, pout firmly in place. “Biggest mix up ever.”

Willow looked from Buffy to the other girl. “Is that even possible? Two slayers at the same time?”

“I've never heard of such a thing happening. A slayer can only be called when the one before her has died...” Giles and Willow made wide eyes at one another before he looked at Buffy. “Good Lord. You were dead Buffy.”

“But I wasn't dead long! Two minutes tops!”

“Evidently it doesn't matter. You were clinically dead, which activated Kendra.”

Kendra looked at Buffy in horror. “She died?”

“A little.” Buffy muttered. Tor looked at Willow who nodded in conformation.
Giles started to pace. “She drowned, but was revived.”

Tor raised his hand. “Who brought her back?”

Buffy looked over at him, her smile warm and soft as she met his eyes. “Xander.”

He smiled back at her. “Kiss of life.” Willow elbowed him and he pouted.

She ignored his pout for the moment. “So there really are two of them.”

“So it would seem. I must say I'm completely out of my depth.”

“What depth? I'm not dead, so she can go home and I can stop being freaked out.”

Kendra glared at her. “I was sent here for a reason. Mr. Zabuto said that a very dark power is about to rise in Sunnydale.”

Willow shook her head. “Okay, but that happens once a month at least.”

“Or at least it seems like it. Look Kendra, I get that you have a job. It's mine too, but randomly attacking people the way you did me isn't the way to get it done.”

“I do not attack at random.”

“Then why did you attack me?”

“I thought you were a vampire.”

“Unlike me, vampires don't have a pulse.”

“I had good reason to think you were a vampire. I saw you kissing one.”

Tor looked at Willow, interrupting the Slayers. “Deadboy?”

Willow poked him. “Hush.”

Buffy sent him a mild glare. “His name is Angel and he's good.”

“Angelus? He is a monster.”

Giles finally quit pacing and sat in a chair. “No, he's good now.”

Buffy nodded. “He was cursed with his soul.”

“I can not believe that, he looked like any other demon when I--”

Buffy was up and out of her chair in a second. “What did you do to him?”

xxx

“I can't believe you got me up this early to go to Buffy's house.”

Xander sighed as they walked away from Cordelia's car and up to the porch. “You didn't have to come.” He reached into his pocket for his key and let them in.

“You're the one that woke me up.”
“To make sure you were all right.” He closed the door behind them and blinked at the rumpled paper talisman. He put his hand over it and could feel no energy coming from the spell. The wards were down, even if Buffy had been home she wouldn't have been safe. “This is so not good.”

Cordelia peered at the paper. “What's not?”

“The wards aren't working.”

“Wards?”

He nodded. “They're kind of like a magical security system. They keep the oogly booglies out.” He ignored the face she made at his choice of words and moved away from the door and started to make his way through the first floor. Cordelia followed him.

“You are so weird. Why are we here?”

“I'm here to look for Buffy. I still haven't figured out why you're here. You decided to play chauffeur on your own.” They passed through the dining room, the kitchen, all he could smell were faint traces of Mrs. Summers' perfume.

“How else were you going to get here?”

“Walk? Jog? Skateboard? Any and all options are safer than your driving.” He shuddered slightly at the memory.

“Whatever. Then why did you call?”

He sighed as they went through the hall and into the back sitting room. For a moment he gazed at the untouched piano. Why did they even own the thing? “Didn't I say that already? To check on you.”

“Why?”

They made it back to the living room. “No one's here, or has been here.”

“Xander.”

“Look, there's these assassins after Buffy. They're hardcore. Anyone associated with her could end up as cannon fodder if they get in the way.”

She stopped and put a hand on his arm. “So you were really worried?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?”

Her gaze was intense as she looked up at him. “We're not friends.”

“No, but I've known you since kindergarten. I don't want you dead.” He looked towards the stairs. “I'm gonna check the second floor. No one's been down here that shouldn't have been.”

“How do you know?”

“No strange scents. And if Buffy had been downstairs last night or this morning her scent would be fresher.” She looked at him skeptically and he grinned. “Hyena perk.” He went up the stairs, leaving her alone in the entry way. He checked each room, hoping that Buffy had used her window as an entry point out of habit. No luck. She hadn't come home at all last night.

As he was wandering he heard the front door open, and Cordelia and an unfamiliar man talking.
That wasn't a good thing. He headed to the stairs and as he got closer to them he could smell Cordelia's unease. Her fear. He ran down the last few steps.

The man standing there looked like a classic salesman. He didn't even know the door to door guys existed anymore. He wore a long dark coat, was pale, kind of chunky and had thick framed glasses. And he didn't smell human. “Cordy?”

“H-he's a salesman, and he was just leaving.” They watched in horror as a worm crawled across his face and into his ear. Cordelia whimpered, it was almost the type of sound a frighten animal would make. He grabbed her arm and pulled her back, putting himself between her and the Worm Man.

“Cordy, I want you to back slowly towards the door.” She nodded and they began to move away from the salesman. He moved toward them, an odd smile on his face, and Xander decided to try to reason with the guy. “She's not the Slayer, she's a civilian. She's not your mark.” The assassin kept smiling and took another step toward them. Xander growled and made his eyes flash. The Tarakan member paused mid-step and frowned in confusion. “She's under my protection. You can't touch her, and you definitely can't touch me. I've got connections like you wouldn't believe.” Cordelia snorted in disbelief and Worm Man smiled again. Xander smirked and held up his right hand, Raizen's ring was displayed proudly on his ring finger.

Worm Guy stopped, almost like he was frozen in place and blinked in obvious surprise at the ring. “That's--”

He smirked, inwardly jumping and crowing in victory and relief. They might make it out yet. “Yep. You can ask any demon in town. I'm Raizen's descendant and Urameshi's little brother. It wouldn't look too good on your resume if you killed the Mazoku's little bro now would it? So we're gonna walk out of here, and you're gonna let us.”

“He'd never know. It's the hellmouth.”

He tried not to gulp and did his best to keep the smirk on his face. “Wrong, the demons here aren't allowed to go after me, and Hiei knows you guys are in town.”

Worm Guy was starting to look a little unsure, he was certainly getting paler. “The Forbidden One?”

“Yeah, his life-mate and my bro are best friends. So we'll be leaving now.” They got to the door and slipped outside. He slammed the door shut and met frightened hazel eyes. “Run!”

They made it to the car in seconds and Cordelia had them speeding away in record time.

“What was all that?”

He wanted to bang his head on the dashboard. The girls were gonna freak that Cordelia had found out his secrets before they did, but what else could he do. “My brother is a Demon King, the demons in town stay clear of me. Buffy and Willow don't know.”

“You're serious.”

“Yeah.”

She was quiet for a moment, deep in thought as she made a sharp turn and he clung to the door for his life and wondered if Koenma could hear his silent prayer for survival. “So you're a Prince...and no one knows.”

“Way to focus on the important stuff Cor.” He rolled his eyes. “Just get us to school.”
The first shot had them running. It came from the commons where they knew Willow and Buffy were. They were right, Buffy was fighting the middle aged lady cop. Another shot was fired and a short guy pushed Willow out of the way, taking the bullet in the process. Kyle thought fast, his heart pounding in fear. If something happened to Willow...who knew what Xander would do.

“Cover them! Get Willow out!”

Heidi and Rhonda moved low and fast and dragged Willow and the boy to safety. Tor stayed at his side and they kept out of Buffy's way, but he knew their eyes were flickering, and they couldn't help but growl continuously.

Kendra came out of nowhere, saving Buffy and forcing the assassin to take a hostage to make an escape, she tossed the kid away and ran out the door. The dark slayer charged after her.

Heidi and Rhonda were still hovering over Willow and her savior. Heidi smiled at them. “It's just a scratch, bullet grazed him.” He nodded and moved in front of them when Kendra came back breathing hard.

“She got away.”

Kyle looked at his alpha. “Want us to track her?”

Buffy shook her head. “No, she might have another gun, we don't do guns. Just...check the perimeter, see if anyone else is hurt.” Kyle nodded and motioned Tor to follow him.

He heard Kendra as they walked away. “More of your pets?”

“Can I bite her?”

Buffy sighed. “No Heidi.”

“Mean.”

Xander stormed into the library, Cordelia and Kyle on his heels, he knew his eyes were glowing, but he was beyond caring. Buffy was in sight and Willow was bandaging her knee. A dark blur sped at him and a girl he’d never seen before attacked him. He blocked the first punch. She blinked at him, pulled her fist back and attacked again. Again he blocked her fist, then her leg. She kicked at him again and he grabbed her foot, flipping her away from him. She landed on her feet gracefully and came at him again. He kept out of her reach, barely.

He snarled at her and finally concentrated on her scent...in a way it was similar to Buffy's. “Why do you smell like a slayer?” The question made the girl hesitate.

Buffy huffed from her seat on the counter. “She is one.”

“Huh. So she attacked me why?”

“Well your eyes are kind of glowing. But she wigged over Tor too.”

He felt his eyes shift back to their normal brown and glared at the new girl. “Here's a tip for living on the hellmouth. Not all demons are evil, there are neutrals. If you just attack at random you're gonna get in over your head.”
She relaxed her body. “Who are you?”

“Xander Harris.”

“You are the one who revived her.” She pointed at Buffy.

“Yeah.”

“I am Kendra. I was called when she died.”

Xander glanced at Giles. “Raised by a Watcher?”

“Yes.”

Xander eyed her again. “I'm not impressed. Now, what exactly happened with the Career Fair?”

Willow finished wrapping Buffy's knee as she answered. “The Police lady was Order of Taraka.”

Cordelia shuddered and leaned against the counter. “Another one?”

Xander touched her arm and sighed. “That makes three.”

Giles nearly dropped a book. “What?”

“Yeah...” He moved toward the table and glanced at Buffy. “Don't go home tonight Buff, there's a man of bugs at your house.”

Buffy made a face at him. “What is it with you and bug people?”

“Well for one thing he was looking for you. The Xan-Man was not on his menu, any kind of menu, sexual or otherwise. And another, he didn't turn into a big bug, there were little bugs crawling on him. He either controls them, or is made of them.”

Giles frowned at him. “You don't know for sure?”

Xander gave the Watcher a look of disbelief. “Uh, no. We ran.”

“Very fast.” Cordelia shuddered again.

“What she said. Now, are you guys okay?”

Buffy nodded. “A little banged up, but Willow took care of the worst of it so my knee hardly hurts now.”

Xander looked at Willow. “Wills?”

She rolled her eyes. “Kagome knows, and I'm studying.”

“Good, then you need to ask her about wards, the ones at Buffy's house aren't working, and I'm not as good at warding as Kagome is.”

Buffy grimaced. “Uh...that might be my Mom's fault. We need to make them less conspicuous.”

“Okay. We'll see if we can put some in the basement, harder to find them there.” He turned to look at Cordelia. “We'll need to ward your house too, and no more verbal invitations. Anyone can be human one day and a vamp the next.”
Her eyes widened a bit at the implications. “Yeah, okay.”

Giles sighed and sat at the table. “At least everyone is alright.”

Xander looked around at all of them. “Are we?” His eyes fell on Kyle who had remained quiet. “The others?”

Kyle nodded. “Are fine. Tor's jaw is bruised though.”

Xander's eyes narrowed and a small growl slipped from his throat. “Who?”

Buffy sent a mild glare at the younger slayer. “Like I said, Kendra wigged on Tor.”

He let his eyes rest on Kendra, and she met his gaze, just barely. She wasn’t as alpha as she portrayed herself to be. She was used to taking orders, she was more like Kyle, a strong beta. “Don't do it again.”

“Are you done?” Giles asked, his glasses hung limply in his hand.

“Yeah.”

“Good, now I've discovered the key to Drusilla's cure.”

Xander blinked at the change of topic. “Huh?”

Willow tucked the first aid kit under the counter. “That's what was in du Lac's book. A ritual to heal a weak vamp.”

Giles nodded. “The ritual will require the presence of her sire, and that of the new moon.”

Willow looked amused for a moment. “Huh, the end and the beginning of the lunar cycle.” All eyes landed on her and she shrugged. “What? It's interesting.”

Buffy twitched, and it seemed uncomfortable, nervous even. “Her sire?”

Xander looked thoughtful. “Don't we know that already? Back when Spike first came to town, you were reading up on his and Angel's past.”

Giles looked perplexed for a moment. “What? Oh, yes...though I don't remember what the book said...”


Kendra stepped forward. “The new moon is tonight.”

Buffy turned wide eyes to her watcher. “Will the ritual hurt him?”

“Yes...in fact it may kill him.”

Her eyes hardened in an instant. “Where is it going to happen?”

Giles slipped his glasses back on. “A church.”

“Guys, there are a lot of churches in Sunnydale.” Willow headed for her laptop. “I'll start searching.”

Kyle nodded. “Yeah, there's at least forty.”
Giles looked surprised at that. “Forty? Really? Willow narrow your search to closed or abandoned churches.”

“Okay. Don't worry Buffy. We'll save Angel.”

Kendra snorted and folded her arms. “Angel? But our priority is to stop Drusilla.”

Xander glared at her. “Stopping the ritual will save Angel.”

“Xander...” He looked at Buffy, met her worried eyes and sighed.

“I don't like him, but I like the thought of a crazed Master Vamp running loose even less.” Even if she's Spike's girl was a thought he kept to himself.

She nodded. “He's right, we all have priorities and right now they mesh. Now you're either with us, or you step aside.”

Kendra relented. “Fine. I'm with you.”

“Now that that's settled, let's get to work shall we? We have five hours before sundown.”

xxx

He stood at the top of the stairs behind the closed door. He didn't move, he simply listened. Dru was talking to Angel, torturing him...giving him retribution while he had a soul and could feel regret for all that he'd done to her. As silently as he could Spike moved away from the door. He knew she hid herself from him. She wasn't quite as mad as she'd have everyone believe. Even now she was more coherent than she'd seemed in months.

And it hurt him, made his dead heart ache. No matter what he did she always chose her beloved, or rather hated, Daddy over him. No matter how much love he gave her, or how gentle, careful he was with her. It was Angel she wanted. To love. To hate. Her Daddy was her world. And Spike was only a star in her dizzying sky.

An image of Xander flashed across his mind. Deep brown eyes, serious, smirking, gorgeous. The way the boy growled, smiled, laughed. The way he moved on the dance floor, the way his body flowed when he killed. Spike wondered what it would be like to hunt with someone like that. He put his hand to his lips as he recalled the second kiss. A shiver racked his body and longing filled him in a way he had not felt since the first time Dru had drank from him.

Spike shook his head as if to scatter the memories. Drusilla was his sire, his world. Who else deserved his love, his loyalty. She was his Dark Goddess. His world.

But somehow that brown-eyed boy had become his silver lining.

xxx

Xander quietly slipped out of the library. Things were tense in there and he needed some air. He headed for the nearest water fountain, but stopped when he sensed someone behind him. Kendra's scent tickled his nose.

“Who are you?”

He turned to face her. “Didn't we do this already?”

Her eyes drifted to his right hand. “Your ring. I've seen the symbol in my Watcher's books.”
“And?”

“What is your connection to Raizen, King of Makai?”

“You need to update your books. Raizen's dead and he was only one of three kings.”

“How do you know this?”

He tilted his head a bit and regarded her. “Your Watcher reports to the council?”

She stood straighter. “Of course.”

“I'm not sure I want this sort of information in their hands.”

“The Council is trustworthy, if you are in danger--”

He snorted. “I don't see how a group of men that use teenaged girls as weapons can be trusted. Giles is the exception because he fights with us. He cares about us. He knows what it means to fight, to hunt.”

Kendra looked thoughtful for a moment. “I will not be telling my Watcher about Buffy's love for Angelus. I can keep another secret.”

It was Xander's turn to think, and he decided that he was pretty well protected. “I guess. It's not like the Council could do anything to me.” She frowned at his words. “Raizen's successor is my older brother.”

“You are his descendant? And human?”

“Yep. What, you didn't know? Like five hundred years ago...well maybe a little more than that. Anyway, Raizen fell in love with a human woman and they had a kid. He stopped eating humans when he met her.” Her eyes widened and he grinned at her, which made her blush. “This trip has been a real information-fest for you, hasn't it?”

Her lips quirked just a bit. “It has.”

“Come on, lets go back.” He started back toward the library and she fell in step beside him. Her scent surrounded him and it was tinged with lust. He ignored it. She was pretty, but they had a ritual to stop. Though he was beginning to wonder about all the pretty people lusting after him. Kurama, Spike, Larry wasn't pretty but he was built...and now Kendra. And Kyle, mustn’t forget his tease of a beta. There was lots of Xander lust going around, not that he was complaining...ritual Xander, don't forget the ritual.

xxx

Buffy tackled Willy and shook him. “What have you heard about this ritual?”

“Nothing I swear!”

“Just hit him Buffy!”

Willy gulped, his eyes wide in fear as they moved from one girl to the other. “It's all been under wraps. Very hush-hush ya know.”

Xander stepped out of the shadows and into Willy's field of vision, the man's trembling stopped and he grew very still. “Willy?”
“Hey kid.”

“How about a coke?” Xander sat at the bar and slipped a five onto the scarred surface. Buffy frowned at him but he just smiled. She reluctantly let go of Willy who quickly scurried around the bar and got Xander his coke. He poured it into a small glass. “So. How have things been?”

Willy just barely met his eyes as Xander took a sip. “Okay.”

“Make any extra cash lately?”

Willy huffed at him. “You don't even like vampires man!”

Xander took another sip. “Doesn’t matter, Deadboy belongs to Buffy. Where's the ritual going down?”

Willy gulped and sweat trickled down his cheek. “I'll take her there, as a personal favor from me to you.”

“That's not what I asked.”

Willy sighed in defeat, his entire body falling into a slouch. “There's an old church on the east side of town. It closed a few months ago. Not structurally sound or somethin'.”

“Thanks Willy.”

Buffy turned to head towards the door. “Let's go.”

Kendra grabbed her arm. “We should go back to the Watcher, it is procedure.”

Buffy pulled her arm away from Kendra and glared. “Spike has Angel and this ritual could happen at any time.”

Xander swallowed the last of his coke. “Buff, calm down. It's a trap. We don't know how many minions there will be and the Taraka members will probably be there too.”

“I can't wait.” She started to head out again and he shot off the stool and grabbed her arm. She whirled to face him and their eyes locked, her arm still in his grasp.

“You're not going alone.”

“You're not my Watcher.”

“I'm your friend, brother, and co-alpha. We are pack and you will not walk into a trap alone.” He stared into her eyes until she nodded. “Good. Kendra, go back to HQ, get the others and meet us at the church. Willow will know which one.”

Kendra nodded in approval. “At least one of you has some sense.”

He smirked at her, and a light pink dusted her cheeks. “Right. Let's move.” They started to leave and Willy cleared his throat.

“Kid...”

“Clear conscience Willy, you gave us information. And we're acting on our own.” He glanced at Buffy. “Ready?”
She gave him a grateful smile. “Let's go.”

xxx

They had barely set foot on the church grounds when Xander paused. Something familiar tickled at his senses and he tilted his head to one side and listened.

“What is it?” Buffy asked.

He grinned as he felt them approach. “The Feral Four are close. They must have started tracking us before Kendra got back to the library.”

“Are you sure it's them?”

Xander tilted his head back and let out a high pitched yipping noise. A moment later they heard four distinct yips in answer. “That would be a yeah.”

“You've got to teach me that.”

They drifted out of the woods, separating themselves from the shadows as they came closer. Kyle grinned at them. “Kendra and the others should be here soon.”

“Good. Weapons?” They all held up stakes, Xander nodded in approval.

Heidi pulled a dagger from behind her. “We have these too.”

Rhonda shifted her eyes back and forth between Xander and Buffy. “How are we doing this?”

Xander glanced at Buffy as she met his eyes. “I'm the one they want. I should go in first.”

Kyle shook his head. “Bad idea. Harris should go with you.”

“Kyle's right. We both go in, we let the bad guys catch us, take us to where it's going down. Then they'll back us up, give the cavalry a little extra time to join the party.”

“What do you want us to do?” Tor asked, while nervously twisting the stake in his hands.

Buffy gave Xander a curious look. “Xan?”

He smirked at them. “Go a little wild. Let more of the hyena out.”

Kyle grinned, and chuckled. “Like when we hunt?”

“Exactly. Just don't eat anyone, and wait for my signal.”

“We'll be ready.” Kyle touched each of their cheeks briefly with his hands before he and the others faded back into the shadows.

“Let's go Buff.”

“I'm really glad they're on our side.”

“You and me both.”

They entered the church and crept through the dark hall as quietly as the floor would let them.

“You picking up anything?” She asked him as they walked.
“I can smell Angel, Spike, some other vamps...Bug Man...and a human, female.”

She grimaced. “Probably Mrs. Trigger Happy.”

“Probably. Vamps are up ahead. Ready?”

“We're trap bound.”

They rounded the corner, there were several vampires and the remaining Taraka members waiting for them. Xander and Buffy kept themselves relaxed and raised their hands in surrender. It worked like a charm and they were dragged to the main room. Angel and Drusilla were suspended before the altar, a dagger had been driven through their joined hands.

“Angel.” Buffy whispered, her eyes wide in horror.

Spike turned to gape at them, his game face in full form. “Why the hell did you bring them here? The idea was to keep them away, not invite them for tea.” He smirked at Buffy's expression. “Problem Slayer?”

She turned her eyes on Spike and they were bright with unshed tears. Xander shuddered at the hate he saw blazing there. “This isn't over. I'm walking out of here with Angel.”

“In case you hadn't noticed, he's a little preoccupied right now. But don't worry, you'll be together again soon enough.” He gave her a nasty grin before turning his eyes on Xander. “As for you...I don't have a quarrel with you Pet. You hate the bastard as much as I do. The way you nearly took him out at the school, it was brilliant.”

“Xander?”

Xander sighed. “Your Beau used me as bait on Parent Teacher Night. Offered me as a snack to Spike. They were both going to bite me and I took offense...and kicked Angel's ass. And then I ran like hell.”

“I could let you go boy. Walk away, and you'll get to live.”

Xander blinked at Spike, even with his game face on...Xander could see the sincerity in the vampire's eyes. Spike was willing to let him go. He closed his eyes for a second before opening them again, letting the hyena green fill them. He tilted his head back and laughed, it came out as a high pitched barking noise. Spike looked at him with such regret he wanted to cry. Then came four answering cackles.

Spike whirled around. “What the?”

The vampires holding Buffy and Xander were knocked away, and chaos ensued. Things were a blur at first, but then there was a lackey vampire in his face and he concentrated on staying alive. He heard the others come in, and he only caught glimpses of Kendra and Buffy fighting. And at some point Willow and Cordy lured Bug Man out of the room. Giles took out a vamp with a crossbow, while Rhonda watched his back, staking a vampire that tried to jump him.

Other vampires met their unfortunate ends when Kyle, Tor, and Heidi ripped them to pieces, laughing and snarling all the while. He staked his second vamp and he met Spike's eyes, still that eerie demon yellow. Spike winked at him as he carried Drusilla down the aisle through the smoke. Xander wondered when he'd had time to start a fire.

He turned to look for Buffy and saw her at the alter, picking up the sensor Spike had used for the
ritual. She swung it above her head, until it was going at a speed that satisfied her before she launched it at Spike. She hit her mark, the sensor hit the back of Spike's head, causing the vampire to stumble into the organ.

Xander stared in horror as the pipes from the organ fell and crushed their adversary. Spike's name was on the tip of his tongue, he snapped his mouth shut, swallowed hard, and blinked away tears. He was thankful for the smoke.

xxx

Xander was walking home, the night felt peaceful and empty. Everyone was safe for the night...except for the slayer following him. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. “Come on out Kendra.”

She came out of the shadows. “How did you know?”

“Could smell you.”

She nodded in acceptance. “What are you doing?”

“Going home...in a round about way. Figured I'd better patrol tonight.”

She stood in a relaxed position as he regarded him. “Why do you do this?”

“To protect the people I care about.” Spike's face flashed in his mind for a second, but he pushed those thoughts away.

“That the only reason?”

“No.”

“You do not like Angelus, but you helped him for Buffy. You come from demons, but you hunt them.”

“I'm still human, mostly. And I only kill demons that eat people, hurt people...or attack us first.”

She nodded. “May I patrol with you?”

He smiled at her and she blushed. “Sure.”

xxx

Xander watched as Buffy walked Kendra out the doors. They'd already called a cab to take her to the airport. He smiled as he remembered their goodbye, it had been nice. Kendra was a good kisser for someone with no experience. And while neither of them had been willing to...go all the way, they'd made an impression on one another. She was a nice girl...and he'd been hurting. And he was the first boy she'd ever really talked to. It had been a nice night, and the first time he'd ever spent all night with a lover. Waking up with someone in his arms was something he wanted to repeat.

He sighed in regret. Why did Spike have to be evil? Stupid fate.

He felt eyes on him and turned to look at Cordelia. “Hey Queen C.”

“We need to talk.”

Then she proceeded to drag him into the nearest utility closet. She pulled the chain and murky yellow
light filled the small space. Her hazel eyes stared at him seriously. He was still trying to figure out why they were in a closet.

“Cordy?”

Her lips were soft, her tongue strong and wet against his. When she pulled back he blinked in confusion.

“'You're a good kisser. I wasn't expecting that.”

He frowned. “Okay...what was that about? And why does everyone keep kissing me?”

“Shut up and let me talk. You're not who I thought you were. Sometimes you're kind of cool and I want to kiss you.”

“Uh huh.”

“Sometimes you're an idiot and I want to slap you, or pretend you don't exist.”

He snorted and reached for the doorknob. “I wish people would make up their minds already. Kiss me or trample me.”

She pulled him back for another kiss, and when her lips were on his he had a feeling that this was going to end badly. But Cordy was a good kisser. He might learn something new.

She pulled back. “Wait. Who else have you kissed?”


“Larry? Really?”

“It was more of him kissing me, and there was no tongue.”

“And Kendra?”

“She was curious.”

“And your harem?”

He groaned. “For crying out loud. They're not my harem.”

“Not what I heard.”

He glared at her. “I like you better when you're quiet.”

“Then kiss me again.”

XXX
Xander sighed in content as he walked with his girls. Buffy at his left, and Willow next to her. They walked slowly through Buffy's neighborhood, enjoying the quiet. They had already made a sweep of a good portion of Sunnydale. The others were patrolling elsewhere.

They had talked over the course of the evening, their topics ranging from homework, to demons, to the band at the Bronze. However some how their conversation had taken an unexpected turn and now he stared at Buffy, like she was something inhuman. She blinked at him in confusion. “What?”

“How can you not know The Captain and Tennille? They were epic! They remade lots of Neil Sedaka's songs.”

“Who?”

He continued to stare at her. “Was it a real culture shock when you came to planet Earth?”

Willow gave him a giggly version of her resolve face. “Oh hush, I bet planet Buffy is a nice place.”

“You two are a laugh a minute.”

He grinned at them. “We have to keep ourselves entertained, right Will?”

Willow nodded. “Cause it's been so quiet.”

Buffy smiled. “I like it when it's quiet around here.”

He shook his head. “And yet we're still staking vampires every night.”

Willow gave them a slightly worried face. “Why is that?”

Buffy shrugged. “Hellmouth?”

He gave her a thoughtful glance. “Yeah but you'd think someone would get the word out that its not vamp friendly territory any more.”

Willow skipped a bit. “Especially since we stopped Spike and Drusilla.”

He felt his face start to slip, and did his best to smile. Though something inside him hurt every time he thought about Spike...a vampire he didn't even really know. “We won't be seeing anymore assassins will we?”

“Angel said the contract's off.”

He nodded. “Good. How is Deadboy? Still in one piece?”

She elbowed him. “Yes.”
Willow gave him a minor scolding glance before poking at Buffy. “Having fun nursing him back to health?”

“Yep.”

“Getting in a lot of practice on your bedside manner?” He dodged Buffy's hand as she tried to smack him. “Easy Buff, I'm done.”

She glared at him. “I think Kyle's rubbing off on you.”

“No not recently.” He laughed as both girls blushed. “Ah, how I love our conversations.” He stepped aside as they ascended the porch steps. “I believe we have reached your humble abode Madam.”

“No kidding.” Buffy started to put her key into the lock when the door swung inward an inch or so. She looked at Xander, suddenly all business. “Xander. I need your nose and ears.” He nodded.

“Wait here Will, keep your stake ready.”

The two of them entered as one on silent predator feet, he tilted his head back a fraction and sniffed lightly at the air. “Your mom is home.” He tilted his head and listened. “I can just make out her voice, someone else is with her...yuck!” He covered his nose, that was not something he wanted to smell.

“What?”

He shuddered. “Pheromones.”

“She brought home a guy!”

He blinked and sniffed again...and listened. “It's weird, I can hear him...but he's not putting out pheromones. And I can't really catch his scent.”

The sound of glass breaking and Mrs. Summers gasp of 'No!' had them running to the kitchen. They burst through the door, a stake in her hand, a dagger in his. Mrs. Summers and a man jumped apart, Buffy and Xander hid their weapons behind their backs. And both blushed.

He cleared his throat and gave Mrs. Summers an apologetic smile. “Oops.”

Buffy looked kind of like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. “I...I...we--”

He grinned. “Heard glass breaking.”

Mrs. Summers had a light pink tint to her cheeks. “Oh, I knocked over a wine glass...you're home early.”

The man smiled at them. “Hi.”

Buffy blinked at him and gave him a wary look. “Hi?”

Xander looked from face to face to face. “Awkward.”

Mrs. Summers finally seemed to snap out of her surprise. “Oh, um. This is my daughter Buffy and her friend Xander. Kids, this is Ted.”

Willow in her impeccable timing popped into the room behind them. “Is everything okay?”
Buffy shifted nervously. “I'm not sure yet.”

“Huh?”

He nodded. “I second that.”

xxx

Ted slid three mini pizzas onto a plate. “You kids sure you don't want any?”

Buffy attempted a smile. “Not hungry.”

Willow looked longingly at the food for a second before agreeing. “We snacked all night at the Bronze.”

Xander smiled and nudged at his girls. “Sorry Ted.”

“No problem, I'll just put the leftovers in the fridge.” Ted busied himself with cleaning up the kitchen and the three of them slipped away.

Once they were out of earshot Willow poked him. “Why aren't we eating the mini pizzas?”

Xander shook his head. “Upstairs, now.” Both girls gave him puzzled looks but walked up the stairs ahead of him. Once they were in Buffy's room with the door closed they settled. Buffy collapsed on her bed, Willow sat cross-legged on the floor, still pouting, and Xander sat at Buffy's desk. The Slayer eyed him curiously.

“What is it?”

He frowned. “His smell, it's wrong.”

Willow shifted. “Wrong like Ford?”

“No, more like...metal and plastic. When they were necking Mrs. Summers was making with the pheromones.”

Buffy shuddered. “Eww!”

He smiled. “Ditto, but Ted wasn't.”

Both girls blinked and Willow paled a bit. “So that means he's not a human...do demons put out pheromones?”

He nodded. “Not human at all, and we know Mantis Lady used pheromones.”

Buffy started to stand up. “He's feeding her. If you didn't want us to eat the food, she shouldn't either.”

“Hold up Buff. They've been seeing each other for a while right?”

“That's what Mom said.”

“Before you slay do some recon. He hasn't hurt her yet, that we know of. We need to find out what he wants before we do anything.”

Buffy sat back down. “Plan man. What would we do without you?”
Willow folded her arms over her chest. “We'd be eating mini pizzas.”

Buffy tapped her head. “Will.”

“I'm hungry!”

Xander rolled his eyes. “There's some cup noodles under Buffy's bed.”

Buffy stared at him. “Since when?”

He shrugged. “A while ago.”

Willow peeked under the bed and pulled out a shrimp flavored cup of instant noodles. “No way to boil water though.”

He grinned at her. “Electric Kettle.”

Buffy eyed him warily. “Do I want to know why you're stashing stuff in my room?”

Again he shrugged, but this time he felt his cheeks redden. “Habit.”

“Huh?”

“He’s always done that.” Willow placed her hand on Buffy's knee. “Whenever Mr. Harris was between jobs he spent more money on alcohol than food. When Xander had food or money he had to hide it.”

Xander nodded, his cheeks still red. “So I stashed food in my room, and in Willow's and Jesse's rooms.”

Willow blinked. “Hey, are there still hoho's in my sock drawer?”

He shook his head. “No we ate them, remember?”

“Oh yeah.”

Buffy smiled. “So where is this kettle?”

“In your closet behind those really ugly puke green boots I've never seen you wear.”

This time Buffy blushed. “They were a present from my Grandma.”

“Sure they were.”

xxx

Marshal watched Xander worriedly as he tossed and turned. It had been a while since his human's nightmares had been this bad. Xander was muttering, almost whimpering as he tangled himself in the covers. He hopped up on the bed and put a paw on the boy's shoulder, and closed his eyes. In a second he was sucked into the dream.

Xander was at the Bronze, dancing with Spike. His arms were looped around Spike's head, and were loosely clasped at the back of his neck. Spike pulled them closer, his hands pressing their hips together as they swayed to the music. They moved well together, and Xander couldn't think of anywhere else he’d rather be. He smiled up as Spike, who was only couple of inches taller, leaned down to meet his lips. However a cold hand on Xander's shoulder pulled him out of Spike's arms.
and whirled him around. Jesse stared at him with hard yellow eyes, glaring out at him from his still human face.

“Jesse?” He felt tears prick at his eyes as he reached for the other boy.

“Sick bastard.”

“What?”

“You killed me, and now you're dancing with him? Why?”

“What? Jesse I--”

“You kissed him! How is any of this fair? What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you mourning him? What was different about him?”

Xander's hand dropped back to his side. “I...you and I were never like that. We were brothers. I loved you, still do, you were a part of me...but never like that.”

Jesse's demonic face finally came forth. “And now you can't have either of us.” He moved too quickly for Xander to follow, but the gasp of surprise behind him had him turning in horror. Jesse had grabbed Spike tight in his grasp. He smirked and bit down on Spike's exposed throat.

“Jesse no!” He tried to reach for Spike, but he couldn't move.

Spike moaned, but kept his eyes locked on Xander's and he spoke softly, with a slight smile tweaking at his lips. “Sweet, silent love, smile for me one more time.”

“Spike!” Xander struggled, hopelessly tangled in his sheet and tumbled to the floor, Marshal narrowly avoided being squished. The young spirit beast huddled at the far side of the room. This was the first time he'd ever seen Xander's dreams. No wonder he was so upset afterward.

Xander was still struggling in the covers when the overhead light flipped on and Jessica stepped into the room. “Xander?”

Xander froze and turned a tear-streaked face up at her. “Mom?”

Jessica blinked and was by his side in an instant. “Honey? Are you okay?”

“Nightmare.” He whispered. “It was about Jesse.” He shuddered and more tears fell.

“Oh sweetie.” She wrapped her arms around him and let him cry. He hadn't mentioned Jesse in almost a year, she had been afraid that the boy had disappeared, that happened a lot in this town. Looks like she'd been right.

xxx

Willow bounced as the three of them walked down the hallway. Xander watched her warily, her scent was a little different today. “So what exactly am I looking for?” She asked in a very chipper voice.

Buffy frowned and shifted the books in her arms. “Anything and everything. If he has a parking ticket I want to know about it.”

Willow nudged her. “Aren't you going overboard?”
Xander made a detour to the snack machine, they followed him. “Nope.”

Willow pouted as he attempted to wrangle a small pack of cheetos from the machine. “He could be a good not human thing that smells like plastic and metal.”

The cheetos finally fell down, but Xander was too busy staring at Willow to notice. He flicked his eyes to Buffy in question, she looked just as bewildered.

Buffy cleared her throat. “Willow...” She looked at Xander helplessly.

He nodded. “Did you sneak a mini pizza?”

“No...” She looked at Buffy, beyond puzzled. “But your mom gave me some cookies before I left.”

Buffy’s eyes widened. “Ted made those.”

Xander ran a hand through his hair. “Will, test the cookies. I was wondering why your scent was different today.”

She paled and gulped. “Okay.”

He nodded, and felt his own eyes widen as Ted came into view as he walked down the steps across from them. “Ted!”

Buffy frowned. “What about him?”

“Hi Ted!”

Buffy and Willow turned and tried not to look too surprised. Ted approached them, a smile on his face. “Hi kids.”

Buffy blinked. “What are you doing here?”

Willow bounced and waved, though her movements were jerky, nervous. “Hi Ted.”

Ted waved back. “I’m upgrading the software in the guidance office, and this, Willow, is for you.”

He handed a set of disks. “The upgrades I promised.”

Willow grinned. “Thank you!” Buffy sent her a disapproving look.

Ted stuck his hands in his pockets, completely at ease in the tense atmosphere. “Listen Buffy, your mother and I were thinking we could take you three out for some mini golf this weekend. You know, bridge the gap and have some fun with the old people.”

Xander shifted and glanced in Buffy’s direction when he detected a familiar presence and smiled when he saw Rhonda lean against her and put her chin on the other girl’s shoulder. Buffy relaxed against her. “Hey Rhonda.”

Rhonda smiled. “What’s up?”

Willow laughed nervously. “We’re just talking to Ted. Ted who gave me nifty upgrades for my computer.”

Rhonda blinked at Willow, then focused on Xander. “Huh?”

Xander motioned to Ted. “He’s Mrs. Summers beau.”
Ted grinned. “Hello young lady. Rhonda was it? That's a pretty name. So Buffy, what do you say? You three up for mini golf this Saturday, or should I say four, you're invited too Rhonda.”

Buffy grimaced. “Saturday?”

Rhonda raised her head and looked thoughtful. “Study group.”

Xander nodded, thankful for an out. “Yeah...we meet in the library for tutoring.”

Buffy managed to smile apologetically at Ted. “Willow keeps us afloat, she's our favorite super genius.”

Ted smiled back. “Well that's good, I guess that means your grades will be going up soon.” He glanced at his watch. “Oh, gotta go. I'm meeting your mother for lunch. See you later kids.” He walked away, leaving a fuming Buffy behind with them.

“How does he know about my grades!”

Rhonda settled her hands on Buffy's shoulders in a soothing gesture. “What is he?”

He met her eyes and shrugged. “We're thinkin' robot. Just not the demon kind.”

She blinked at them in disbelief. “Demon robots?”

Willow blushed. “My internet boyfriend turned out to be a demon robot.”

“Not to worry though.” Xander grinned. “He's fried now.”

“Yeah, that slayage was mostly luck.” Buffy sighed. “You guys realize that now we actually have to come to school on Saturday right? Nice save by the way.”

Rhonda smiled. “You're welcome.”

He snickered. “School on Saturday isn't that bad, not counting the whole Eyeghon incident. Now, Willow needs to test those cookies and find out where Ted works and lives.”

Buffy nodded. “And when we know that I'll check out his office. Will you check out his home Xander?”

“Sure.”

Rhonda let go of Buffy. “I'll tell the others about Saturday. If we don't actually study we can train or something.”

Buffy pouted. “There goes my Saturday.”

xxx

Xander looked closely at the faded pendant he always wore. He'd taken it off for a moment to look at it, besides Raizen's ring it was the only jewelry he ever wore. His eyes drifted from the animal etched onto the metal surface to the patch of daisies that grew under the maple tree. It was strange, but they always seemed to be in bloom.

Kyle settled beside him. “Hey.”

Xander acknowledged him with a nod. “I wondered who was following me. You could have walked
“You looked like you wanted to be alone.”

“I did.” Kyle started to get up but Xander grasped his hand. “Now I don't. Stay for a while.”

“Sure.” He smiled and tried to pull his hand away but Xander held on tight. “Harris?”

Xander closed his eyes and bowed his head. “I need... just stay like this for a while.”

Kyle squeezed his hand. “Okay.”

They sat in silence for a while, in one hand Xander held the necklace from Jesse. In the other he held Kyle's hand. He slipped his hand away from Kyle's to put the necklace back on. Once it was in place he reached for Kyle's hand again. “Thanks.”

Kyle nodded. “What is this place?”

“You remember Jesse?”

“That McNally dweeb that hung out with you and Willow?”

Xander smiled. “Yeah. This is his grave.”

Kyle was quiet for a moment. “What happened?”

He sighed as Jesse's second death flashed through his mind. The surprise on his friend's face as he turned to dust. Xander shuddered and turned a heartbroken gaze on Kyle. “He was the first vamp I ever dusted.”

Kyle's eyes widened, and he cupped Xander's cheek with his free hand. “I'm sorry.” He wiped away a tear Xander hadn't been aware of. Xander leaned into the touch until Kyle pulled his hand away.

He sighed and continued to hold Kyle's other hand in his. “I've been having nightmares since the church. Even before then really.”

Kyle nodded. “It was intense.”

“In the nightmare... well it starts out okay. I'm dancing with Spike at the Bronze, not that we ever did that—”

Kyle shifted to face him, but kept their hands clasped. “Wait, you and Spike?”

Xander shook his head. “Not really. Well... he was my first kiss, and I wasn't expecting it. We crossed paths in a cemetery, he watched me take out some fledges, said something about me being shiny and put his lips against mine.”

Kyle smirked. “First kiss huh.”

Xander felt his cheeks warm a bit. “And the second one. There was tongue that time.”

“Was he a good kisser?” Xander's blush deepened and Kyle snickered.

He cleared his throat and continued, ignoring Kyle's amusement. “The dream always changes then, Jesse is there, mad because I'm mourning Spike, that I killed him and kissed Spike. But Jesse and I were brothers, never lovers. In the dream he always kills Spike in front of me, drains him and Spike
“Turns to dust. Except last night something changed.” Kyle looked at him curiously. “Last night as Jesse killed him he quoted a Captain and Tennille song.”

“Okay...”

“Sweet, silent love, smile for me one more time.”

“ Weird.”

“Not really. Willow and I were talking about them last night before we walked in on Ted and Mrs. Summers.”

There was silence between them for a moment, then Kyle glanced at him. “Is he really a robot?”

“Think so.”

“Creepy.”

“Just another week on the hellmouth.”

Kyle nodded. “So...Spike...really?”

Xander huffed. “Everyone seems to want in on spontaneous Xander kissage.”

Kyle's eyes narrowed. “Who else have you been kissing?”

Xander gently flicked the other boy's nose. “I have been the kissee, never the kisser. Larry planted one on me...Kendra and I had a long goodbye...and Cordy keeps dragging me into closets.” He watched as Kyle's eyes got a far away look. “Kyle?”

“We need to expand the harem.”

Xander tackled Kyle and began to tickle him. They wrestled and laughed as they play fought for dominance. Finally Xander had Kyle pinned beneath him and Kyle growled a little, even as he offered his throat. He grinned down at the other boy and latched onto his throat, biting hard enough to leave a mark, but not break the skin. Xander hmm'd and licked the bite when he felt Kyle's hands on his hips.

A twig snapped behind them in the darkness. Kyle sighed and pouted up at him. “We have company.”

“Yep. Feel like sharing a hunt? That's all I can offer you.”

Kyle's eyes were very serious as they looked at one another. “Still not mate material?”

“Sorry.”

“Just keep me in mind?”

He grinned at him. “Who would forget a tease like you?”

Kyle laughed and nipped at Xander's jaw and Xander gave him a light kiss, the barest brushing of lips against lips. “Lead the way Xander. I'll follow.”

“I know.”
Jessica paced the kitchen nervously as she waited for someone to pick up on the other end of the line. She had no idea why she hadn't thought of doing this sooner. Scratch that, she knew why, she'd been so focused on herself that she'd been neglecting her son. But...he didn't even seem to need her anymore, except for last night. She sighed. It would be good for Xander to see Yusuke again. She heard a click and a man on the other end answered.

“Moshi moshi?”

“Um...hello. My name is Jessica Harris. I'm Xander's Mom...is Yusuke there?”

There was a pause as the man took a moment to decipher her words. “Xander okasan?”

“Um...yes?” There was some rustling noises and then another voice answered.

“Hello?” This time the voice sounded familiar.

“Yusuke?”

“Jessica?”

She smiled. “Yes.”

“How are you?”

“I'm doing pretty well, but I'm not sure about Xander. We don't...connect the way we used to. And he's...having nightmares. I've heard him toss and turn in his sleep before, but last night was pretty bad. He yelled and actually fell out of bed. All he would tell me is it was about Jesse.”

“Poor kid.”

“Yeah...I was wondering if he could go visit you during his Christmas break...it will be starting soon.”

She could practically hear Yusuke's smile. “I'd like that.”

“Good, I think it'll be good for him. Now, how are you and Keiko doing? Xander told me he's going to be an Uncle.”

xxx

Willow looked like she was ready to throw her laptop across the room. “No warrants, no parking tickets, he's like Mr. Clean! There's nothing on him.”

Buffy leaned over her shoulder and peered at the screen. “What about where we works?”

“I got the address. “But you might want to wait on account of I saw him talking to Principal Snyder on my way in.”

Buffy blinked at her. “Say what?”

Xander put down the sword he was polishing and frowned. “He's checking up on you. Will, bring out the white board and start jotting down history notes. Everybody get your books out, put the weapons away and look busy.” Buffy and Heidi got the weapons squared away while Xander and Kyle arranged everyone's notes and books on the table. They had just gotten settled with Willow at
the board when Rhonda and Tor came in laden with drinks and snacks.

Rhonda passed out the drinks before sitting down at the table. “Roboman is headed this way.”

Xander nodded and thanked Tor for the chips before looking at Giles. “G-man! Get your paperwork out and get ready to act all adult-like and like you're keeping an eye on us or whatever.”

Giles sighed and gave him a put upon look but slapped some paperwork on the counter and sat on his stool. “Does this meet your approval.”

“The sarcasm doesn't.”

Giles looked heavenward for a moment before actually concentrating on his paperwork. Willow started lecturing and held her miniature, impromptu class like an expert.

Ted came in the doors and paused at the scene, like he hadn't really expected to find them studying. Giles looked up from his papers. “May I help you?”

Ted smiled. “Oh, no. I'm just here to see if Buffy and her friends wanted to break for lunch.”

Giles smiled as he glanced at the group of teens. “I do believe they've already procured refreshments for themselves, and I hate to bother them when they're working.”

Ted watched the teens with an odd look on his face, like there was a puzzle he couldn't figure out. “They come here often?”

“Oh, all the time. They spend quite a bit of their free time here.”

“Is that so? You wouldn't know it by their grades, except for Willow's of course.”

Giles blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Oh nothing. Have a good day.” Ted smiled at him again and left.

Giles mildly glared at the exit. “I don't think I like him.”

Buffy nodded. “Join the club.”

Xander grinned as he closed the book in front of him. “We're thinking about making a t-shirt.”

“Guys!” Willow tapped her marker on the table. “Pay attention, we do have a test over this next week.”

They groaned and several heads slumped against the table top.

xxx

The rest of the weekend had been uneventful and Monday morning found Xander in front of an old store with Heidi and Cordelia.

“You didn't have to come Cordy.”

“Who else was going to give you two a ride?”

He let his head droop and sighed. “I so need a car.” He knelt in front of the door and pulled out a small set of unusual looking tools.
“What's that?” Cordelia asked, looking at the tools curiously.

Heidi however looked on in envy. “Is that what I think it is?”

The lock clicked and Xander grinned at them. “Go me.”

Cordelia blinked. “You just picked the lock.”

“Yes.”

Heidi grinned back at him as he put the tools away. “You have got to teach me that.”

He stood and held the door open for them. “Only if you promise to use your powers for good...or to protect the pack.”

Heidi licked at his jaw as she pulled Cordelia inside. “Promise.” Cordelia eyed the blond and Xander didn't want to know what she was thinking.

They prowled around the dusty store and came up empty.

Cordelia waved some dust motes away from her. “God, it's filthy in here!”

Heidi patted her arm in sympathy. “He needs to fire his maid.”

Xander nodded. “Or at least update his address. It looks like he just uses this place for storage.”

Cordelia nodded and turned her nose up at the ratty decor. “Yeah, the only classy thing here is the rug.”

He looked at the rug, and Cordy was right, it looked very out of place. He rose his eyes to Heidi’s. Then he flipped the rug up, there was a trap door underneath. He looked a Heidi again.

She blinked. “Door number one had an abandoned store.”

He nodded. “Let's see what door number two is hiding.” He lifted the door. “Huh, stairs, go figure.” He went down first, carefully making his way till he reached the bottom. “Wait till I find a light.” He called up. Luckily he found the switch on the wall not far from the stairs and flipped it on. Music started up and the lamps came on, he could see an old fashioned turntable on the other side of the very fifties style room.

Heidi stepped off the stairs and wandered about the room, making her way to the turntable.

“Homey.”

Cordelia grimaced and wrinkled her nose. “If you're Tabitha on the Hellmouth.”

They looked around, but other than being creepy there was nothing that stood out. Until Xander got to the closet, and he caught a strange smell, it reminded him of some of the crypts that vampires liked to crash in.

“Heidi, you smell that?”

She moved closer to him. “What is it?”

“I'll check it out, stay with Cordy.” He reached for the knob. “And door number three it is.” He opened the door. At first he wasn't sure what he was seeing, it was all a blury mottled mess. But then his mind started to make sense of it. The old clothes, the stringy blond hair barely hanging on to
white skulls by patches of mummified skin. He slammed the door shut and leaned against it, he closed his eyes and attempted to block the scene from his memory.

Cordelia's voice seemed to come from far away. “Xander?”

He gulped and he knew he was shaking. “How many wives did Willow say he had?”

Cordelia blinked at him confused. “Four.”

“Well we found them.”

Both girls paled and huddled together. He managed to steady himself enough to walk over to them and wrap his arms around both of them. Cordelia put a hand on his chest.

“Mrs. Summers...”

He nodded. “He wants her to be number five.”

xxx

The plan was simple and very effective. Giles and Ms. Calendar went to the gallery and kept Mrs. Summers busy while Buffy confronted Ted at her home. And Willow anonymously sent a tip to the police.

It was already dark when Ted parked his car, Buffy was waiting for him. “Hello Ted.”

He looked at her oddly. “Buffy. Where's your mother?”

“Safe from you.”

He smiled at her, and it wasn't friendly. “Buffy, I care about your mother a great deal.”

“I bet you cared about those other women too, you remember them? Those four skeletons in your closet?”

“You've been snooping through my things. I knew you would, so I took the liberty of reading your diary. What is a Vampire Slayer?”

“That would be me. And I have everything I need to keep you away from my Mom. The police would love to meet your wives.”

“Like anyone would believe a delinquent like you.”

“Just try and stop me.” Buffy took off across the yard and down the street, Ted took off after her. He was fast for a man made of metal. Buffy barely kept ahead of him, he almost grabbed her a time or two but she finally managed to lead him to the nearest park. She stopped and turned to face him.

“Are you ready for your punishment young lady?”

Buffy smiled at him. “I don't like you, and neither does my pack.”

Xander and the others came out of the shadows then, their eyes flashing green as they laughed and gripped their weapons.

Heidi's grin was feral and she handled her mace eagerly. “Can we play now?”
“Have a ball Heidi.” Buffy reached for the crow bar Tor handed her. “I plan to.”

xxx

Later that night, after they'd disposed of Ted's parts at the dump, and after Willow made sure he was completely deactivated. Xander was about to collapse into bed when his communicator started beeping.

“Geeze Yusuke.” He grumbled and got it out of the drawer. “Yeah?”

“Hey kid.”

“What's up?”

“I hear you're going to be on break soon. Want to visit?”

Xander grinned. “Hell yeah!”

“Cool. So what's new on the hellmouth?”

“Not much, we just dismembered a robot tonight.”

“You did what?”

“Yeah, this robot was dating Buffy's mother and wanted to add her to his collection of dead wives.”

“Everyone okay?”

“Yep, we took him apart and Willow deactivated him, so that should be the last of it.”

“Should be?”

“Willow was drooling a bit over the parts, I think she was a bit too fascinated over the robotics. She said they were very advanced.”

“That's really creepy.”

“Yep. So what's Christmas like in Japan?”

XXX
A/N: I have no idea if the businesses that I've mentioned were actually in Sunnydale. I was using the Sunnydale High Yearbook as a reference. ^^ Which I own. XD

Xander took his time walking to class. He'd gotten to school early and had already completed a morning work out with Giles, and followed it up with a shower in the locker room. Now he was pleasantly loose feeling and headed toward his first class.

The only warning he had was the creak of a door opening just behind him. The next thing he knew a slender hand was dragging him into a closet...again. He sighed when Cordelia started to kiss him. He didn't mind kissing Cordy, really he didn't. Even with the dreams he'd been having, kissing her didn't feel wrong. Spike was dead...shouldn't he move on from the relationship that never was?

What he didn't like was being in the damn closet. He pulled away from her and frowned down at her in the pale light from the bulb above them. “Class Cordy.”

“In a minute.” She started to press her lips to his again, he put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back a bit.

“Why are we in a closet? Why are we always in a closet?”

“Because you're Xander Harris, geek extraordinaire. The only thing not geeky about you is your clothes, whoever picked them out definitely has taste. But you're still you, at least the you that everyone in this school knows.” She got a far off look on her face.

“Okay...”

“It would be different if you could come out.”

“My point exactly, I don't like these closets you keep dragging me into.”

“No you dork. Think of it, a real Prince! If everyone knew you'd--”

He pushed her further away. “That's why you drag me into closets? You want to add a bit of royalty to your discard pile?” He sighed and shook his head. “No thanks Cor.” He opened the door and stepped out of the small enclosure without looking back.

He made it as far as the entrance to the boys bathroom when a hand reached out and grabbed him, dragging him inside. Xander prepared himself for a fight, fists clenched, there were very few reasons to drag someone into a bathroom. It had been a long time since he'd been the victim of swirly, it was never gonna happen again.
“Easy Harris.”

“Larry?”

“Yeah.”

Xander resisted the urge to stomp his feet, just barely. “What is with you people?”

“What?”

Xander ignored Larry's confused expression and went into a full rant. “Did it ever occur to anyone that I might not want to be dragged into closets or bathrooms for necking? That it might piss me off to be someone's guilty pleasure? I'm not some mindless lust object!” Larry blushed. “Either you ask me out on a proper date or don't even bother!” Xander folded his arms and glared at the taller boy. “I'm no one's dirty secret.”

Larry stared at him uneasily for a moment. “Is that happening to you a lot?”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “More than I'd like. Sorry for snapping.”

“It's okay. And about that date thing...I've never...asked a guy out before. Can I get back to you on it?”

Xander looked at him closely. “Why exactly did you grab me then?”

“I uh, hadn't really thought it through. You were actually alone, none of your harem was with you...but I had no idea what I was gonna say. I just...wanted to see you for a minute.”

Xander stepped closer to Larry who held his ground and stared down at him. “Think on it for a bit and get back to me when you've decided.”

“You don't seem nervous about a guy asking you out?”

Xander smiled at him. “I've already been on several dates with a guy.”

“Kyle?”

He rolled his eyes. “Everyone thinks Kyle and I have a thing. No, over the summer a friend of my brother's took me out a few times.”

“Oh...what did you guys do?”

“Went for walks, got ice cream, played tourist to a few historic sites outside Tokyo.”

“Tokyo?”

“My brother lives there.”

“Wow. I don't think I can compare to Tokyo.”

Xander placed a hand on Larry's shoulder. “You don't have to. I like hanging at the Bronze, going to movies, and going for ice cream is a classic. So think about it and get back to me.” He slipped passed Larry and exited the bathroom. Kyle was waiting in the hall for him, a smirk on his face.

“You really are popular. Walk you to class?”
Xander looked upward and prayed for guidance.

xxx

The sound of Mr. Whitmore's chalk scratching on the board echoed dully through the room. “SEX. Sex. As humans, our sex drives are intense, we've all lost numerous hours plagued by unwanted sexual thoughts.” Xander felt eyes on him on his left, and knew that Kyle was watching him. He glanced away from the board and met his beta's gaze. Kyle gestured toward the board and snorted, shaking his head in disagreement with their teacher. Xander tried not to laugh. Evidently Kyle treasured his sexual thoughts and wanted them very much.

After that he spaced for a while, not really concentrating on Mr. Whitmore's lecture, Willow could give him an overview later. And he ignored Cordelia's attempts to bait him and lure him into the lecture. No thank you. He finally tuned back in when Willow brought up pregnancy.

Mr. Whitmore smiled at Willow. “That's what I was looking for. Now your assignment is to give parenting a test drive. Each of you will have a partner and an egg.” Kyle raised his hand, Xander wondered if he should be worried. “Yes Kyle?”

“Do we have to be traditional, or can we have unconventional couples?”

“Could you elaborate please?”

Kyle smirked, which caused a lot of their classmates to look nervous. “Wouldn't it be more realistic to have a few same gender couples?”

Mr. Whitmore gaped at him, before smiling like a proud parent himself. “That is a wonderful idea! Volunteer's only of course.” He looked around the room, ever hopeful. No one raised their hands.

Kyle however grinned at Xander and held out his hand. “Partner?”

Xander snickered. “So are you saying you want to have my baby?” He could practically feel everyone's eyes drilling into him.

“I wouldn't mind playing house with you.” He winked at Xander.

Xander laughed and accepted Kyle's hand for a brief squeeze before letting go. “We volunteer. Kyle wants to be a Mommy.”

Kyle huffed and scolded him. “If you're bad you'll be sleeping on the couch.”

He shook his head and looked back to their teacher who seemed to be shocked speechless. “Can we get our kid now?”

“Uh...sure.”

“Cool. Come on honey, let's go meet our eggling.”


“That's me.”

xxx

“Buffy!”
Buffy was in the library messing with the card catalog when he walked in with Kyle and Willow. She looked up as they approached her and smiled. “Hey guys.”

Kyle nodded at her absently as he cradled the egg carefully in his hands. “Summers.”

Willow smiled and set her egg and basket on the counter, a second egg still in her grasp. “Buffy how come you weren’t in class?”

“Vamp stuff. Did Mr. Whitmore notice I was absent?”

A helpful “Yep” came from Kyle.

She sighed dejectedly. “Great.”

“Well, he wasn't mad, and he wanted me to give you this.” Willow handed the second egg to her.

Buffy accepted it and turned it over in her hands. “I know I missed breakfast but since when do teachers hand out food?”

Kyle smirked at her. “Cannibal.”

Xander shuddered and frowned at him. “That was so wrong.”

“Sorry.”

“Liar.”

Willow held up a hand to halt their banter. “Okay, eww. And it's not food...it's your baby.”

Buffy looked up from the egg. “But I'm not a chicken.”

Xander looked at her and wanted to flick her nose, gently of course. “He talked about it last week Buff.”

“Refresh me? I've slept since then.”

Kyle leaned against the counter and gestured at her egg. “Sex leads to kids and responsibility.”

Xander held his hand out and Kyle handed him their egg. “The eggs are our kids. We take care of them, keep them safe and teach them how to hunt vamps.”

Buffy gave them wide eyes, gulped and put the egg down before stepping back from it. “I'm not good at taking care of things. I shorted out my gigapet! And my Dad stepped on my Nanopuppy...oh god...who's my partner?”

Willow cleared her throat. “Well...you weren't in class.”

Xander grinned. “And everyone else got a partner.”

“You're a single parent.” Kyle reached over and gave their egg a gentle tap.

“Oh god. This is what my life will be like. Just like my mom.”

Xander came around the counter as he handed the egg back to Kyle. “Buff, it's an egg. And besides, I think ours may have already gone bad.”

“Huh?”
He shrugged. “It smells weird.”

Willow looked at their egg. “I can't smell anything.”

“No he's right.” Kyle wrinkled his nose.

“It's not really a rotten smell.” Xander glanced at the egg. “But we should ask about it tomorrow.”

“Finally! I've located your new friend Lyle Gorch. He and his brother Tector made their reputation by massacring a Mexican village in 1886.” Giles said as he came out of the book cage, and nearly crushed Buffy's egg with his book. She managed to snatch it out of the way in time.

She glared at him. “Two vamps took out a whole village?”

“Oh, no. They were still human then...” The watcher stopped and looked at them curiously. “Why do you all have eggs?”

Xander grinned and couldn't resist. “Congratulations Giles. You're a Grandpa!”

“What?”

xxx

“We really shouldn't have had junior out so late. It's not good for him.”

They were walking up Xander's drive way and he quirked a grin at Kyle. “Really, the funny just never stops.”

Kyle ignored him. “You think Summers and her Beau are actually patrolling for those Gorch vamps?”

“Nope, which is why were were out so late, though in hindsight we probably shouldn't have had the egg with us. That was a close call at the Espresso Pump.”

“Is Queen C mad you're not her partner?”

“Who knows.” They reached the door and Xander unlocked it and let them in. When Kyle passed the threshold he jumped and nearly dropped their offspring. “Whoa, easy with Junior there.”

Kyle rubbed one hand against his leg. “Sorry, it felt like I got shocked.”

“That's weird.” Cautiously he touched Kyle's arm. “No static charge now. Come on, let's eat.” He led his guest to the kitchen and busied himself with preparing dinner. He had some chicken breasts that had been marinating since the night before.

As he worked on the food Kyle busied himself with making a nest for the egg with a kitchen towel. Once it was nestled he headed upstairs for a shower.

Dinner was a very domestic scene. The two of them dug into their baked chicken with relish and talked about their usual topics, demons, vampires, the probability that Snyder wasn't really human.

Marshal hopped up on the table and Xander ruffled his fur. “I hope you don't do that when Mom is home.”
Duh, I'm not stupid. Did you leave me any chicken?

"Yeah, I'll pull some off the bone for you in a bit."

Cool. He peered at the nestled egg and cautiously poked at it. Were you gonna eat this?

Kyle watched the spirit beast with apprehension as he continued to poke at the egg. "Could you not do that?"

"We weren't going to eat it. It's part of a school project."

Marshal nodded. "Good, it smells."

"All the more reason you shouldn't poke it."

Marshal stuck his tongue out at Kyle and Xander sighed. "I'm surrounded by children."

Kyle threw a carrot at him.

After his shower he entered his room feeling refreshed and wearing a clean t-shirt and Scooby Doo boxers. Kyle was sitting on his bed petting Marshal. "Can I?"

Xander nodded, he wouldn't want to sleep in the guest room either. Too much pink. "Sure. I'm not seeing anyone, so I don't mind sleeping with you. Only sleeping though."

"Cordy?"

"She's disappointed that she can't brag she was making it with a Prince."

"Larry?"

"Told him I wouldn't be anyone's dirty secret. So he's thinking about asking me out." Kyle nodded and Xander smiled. "Let's turn in. Is Junior secure?"

"Yeah, it's strapped into it's basket on the dresser."

"Cool, we're sleep bound then."

xxx

As the four of them wandered away from Teen Health, the class that wasn't, Kyle glared at their egg. "We can't ask about the eggs now."

Willow gave him a puzzled look. "Huh?"

Buffy looked at her own egg. "About the smell right?"

Xander nodded. "Not just ours though. All the eggs we've gotten close to smell weird. The others picked up on it too."

"But not rotten?"

"No...just different. Of course now ours smells kind of cooked, but we had it in the kitchen last night while I was cooking. So it may be a lingering thing."
Willow held up her egg. “So do all the eggs smell funny?” She handed him her egg and he sniffed it...and stopped.

“It smells cooked.”

“But I didn't cook my young! I never even took it in the kitchen!”

“Buffy?” The Slayer handed him her egg and he repeated the sniff test. “The same.” He handed both girls their eggs back. “Did anything unusual happen with the eggs last night?”

Willow glared at her egg, pout out in full force. “No.”

Buffy however looked thoughtful, as if she were remembering something. “I got shocked a little when I walked inside the house. It startled me and I almost dropped Eggbert.”

Kyle met his eyes. “Sounds familiar...Eggbert?”

“Focus Kyle.”

“Wait a minute...I remember getting shocked too. I didn't think any of it though.” Willow stared at her egg. “What's going on?”

He took their egg from Kyle. “The wards.”

Kyle looked around at all the eggs. “Demon eggs?”

“Probably.”

Buffy snapped her fingers. “Wait, why didn't you guys get shocked in the library? We've got wards in there. Did they get fried when Eyeghon tried to come in?”

Willow shook her head. “Xander and I both talked to Kagome, the wards should still be sound.”

He sighed. “We may have to start checking them every day to be sure.”

“Good idea.” Buffy's eyes were worried. “Now lets go see why they didn't work.”

“And possibly crack an egg open, just to see what we're dealing with.” Willow suggested, the rest of them shuddered at the idea.

xxx

When they got inside the library Xander put his hand over the paper talisman on the library side of the door. It looked intact, but it wasn't working, he couldn't feel the thrum of power. Willow put her hand next to his and her eyes widened.

“Xander...it doesn't feel fried...just like someone took it down.”

Kyle peered at the paper over their shoulders. “How do these things work anyway?”

Xander looked towards the windows. “When you ward a place you put a paper talisman, or spell at each entrance. Which means doors and windows. When they're all working it's like a circuit.”

Willow nodded. “When one is taken out the connection is gone and the wards don't work.”

Buffy followed Xander's gaze. “We should check the windows then. And the back way through the
“And the hidden entrance to that old cellar that I used to get out during Parent Teacher night.”

“Why does the library have a cellar?”

“Who knows Kyle. Spread out, check the windows and doors.” They moved away to check the exits, finding the break in the wards their top priority. “Hey G-man!”

Giles popped his head out of his office. “What?”

Xander headed over to him, if anyone had seen anything or anyone messing with the wards it would have been Giles. However as he got closer he noticed that Gile’s scent seemed off. It had that same weirdness that the eggs had had before they’d been cooked by the working wards at their homes. “Just wanted to make sure you're alright, the library's wards are down.”

Giles looked at him curiously. “Really? I hadn't noticed.” He stepped out of his office and started around the counter. “We really must get that fixed.”

The moment he was at the corner of Giles' vision he grabbed the older man, keeping his hands behind his back. Xander nearly jumped when something moved underneath Giles' shirt on his back. “Guys! A little help! There's something on Giles!” They came running. “Kyle give me a hand, I want to see what's on his back.”

Kyle untucked Giles' shirt while Xander kept him immobile. “Holy shit. What is that Harris?”

“My guess, that's what's in the eggs. Any idea Willow?”

Willow got closer, and leaned down to get a better look. “It looks like it's attached to his spine.”

Buffy shuddered and pulled Willow further back from the thing. “Can we take it off?”

She shook her head. “I'd be afraid to try it. We don't want his spinal fluid leaking out everywhere.”

“Eww. Then what do we do?”

Giles started to struggle and it was all Xander could do to keep him restrained. “We need to either lock him up, or make him unconscious. Give me a hand would ya Buff?”

“Right. Willow, get the tranq gun.” She moved to grab Giles other arm and together they kept him in place.

“Right.” Willow disappeared into Giles' office.

Kyle looked at them warily. “Tranq gun?”

Xander gave him a crooked smile. “Yeah.”

Willow came back with the tranq gun. “Giles got one after the hyena thing in case other people got possessed by stuff.”

“Huh.”

“Yep.” She aimed at Giles. “Keep him steady.” And fired.

It took a few seconds but Giles gradually sagged in their grip. However in case he was faking
Willow kept him in her sights while Xander and Buffy tied him up and stashed him in his office.

Buffy looked down at her trussed up Watcher, unconscious and tied up on the cot. “Guess we're hitting the books.”

xxx

They’d been hitting the books for an hour. Xander was sitting on the steps with Kyle’s head in his lap, each absorbed in the books they were skimming through. Willow was scribbling notes of what they’d found on the white board, and Buffy was at the table looking at a book on parasite type demons.

The library doors opened and they all looked up to see Larry looking around the library as if he'd never seen it before...which was entirely possible. His eyes finally landed on Xander and Kyle as he walked further into the room. “Xander?”

“What?”

“I thought...” He looked uneasily at Kyle.

Kyle grinned. “Easy big guy. Harris and I aren't dating.” He directed a pout up at Xander. “Unfortunately.”

Xander flicked his nose. “Kyle likes to cuddle. And more. I'm only okay with the cuddling.”

Larry's eyes glazed for a second. “Was there really an orgy?”

Kyle smirked. “Yep. Fun was had by all.”

Willow pouted as she capped her marker. “And I missed it.” Buffy tossed a paper wad at her while trying not to blush.

Larry's eyes cleared and he looked closely at Xander, then Kyle, almost as if he couldn't make up his mind. “So are you two free Friday night?”

Kyle blinked and sat up. “You're asking us both out?”

“Think so.”

Kyle let his eyes rove over Larry's tall form and broad shoulders. He glanced back at Xander and grinned. “What do you think?”

Xander's mind had stalled. A date with Larry and Kyle. That might just be asking for trouble. He looked at Larry who seemed hopeful, then at Kyle who was pouting, and groaned. “I'm doomed.”

Kyle laughed and winked at Larry. “That would be a yes. We're free.”

Larry's smile couldn't have been brighter. “Pick you two up at Xander's at seven-thirty?”

Xander smiled back at him, it was hard not too. “Sure Larry.”

“Cool...I'll just let myself out then.”

When he walked out the doors Buffy and Willow gazed at them in shock. Buffy cleared her throat. “Larry just asked you two out...on a date.”
Xander gave her a wry smile. “So it would seem.”

Willow was still staring at the doors. “Wow. Sunnydale’s star Quarterback is gay...when did that happen?”

“Focus Willow. Demon bug things remember.”

She shook her head. “Right. Evil stuff.”

The doors opened again and Cordelia strode into the room like she owned it. “Figures you’d all be slaving away in here when there’s a crisis.” They looked at her with confusion, they hadn’t told her about the demon on Giles’ back.

Buffy looked at her carefully. “Who told you about the demon eggs?”

Cordy blinked and folded her arms. “What are you talking about? I meant that Mr. Whitmore is missing, presumed dead.”

Willow looked at the white board. “I don’t think he’s dead. According to what we’ve found he’s probably still alive.”

Xander stood up and approached her board. “What have we got Wills?”

She picked up a book and showed him the demon on the pages. “The baby bezoars attach themselves to hosts and they take their orders from their mother telepathically.”

Buffy leaned forward to look and made a face at the picture. “But what are they?”

Willow put the book down. “Pre-prehistoric demons.”

“And Mommy-Bozo just decided to raise her kids on the hellmouth.”

“Bezoar Summers.”

“Eh, Bozo, Bezoro, same difference.”

Kyle tugged her hair gently. “How do we stop the kiddies?”

“I think if we cut the connection between her and her young the uh...babies will die. They need their mother to survive.” Willow closed her book.

Kyle leaned against Buffy’s seat, still playing with her hair. “How do we find her?”

Xander grinned at him. “That’s the easy part. We pick up Mr. Whitmore’s scent. Wills you said he’d still be alive?”

“Probably.”

“Then if we find him we’ll find her.”

“Would they be in a closet?” Cordelia looked at him pointedly.

Willow shook her head. “She’s too big.”

He shrugged. “Sorry Cor, no closets.”

Kyle got a mischievous smile on his face and headed towards the door. “Well lets go. The sooner we
get this done, the sooner we can let the girls coordinate our clothes for Friday night.”

He blinked. “Huh?”

Cordelia put her hands on her hips and glared at Kyle. “Ditto.”

Buffy grinned at her. “Larry asked them out on a date. Very surprising.”

Cordelia's glare gradually changed to a more calculating look. “Since when are you two a package deal?”

He rolled his eyes. “We're not. Kyle just puts on a mean pout.”

“True. But no one beats your puppy eyes Xan.”

Kyle looked back at him. “What?”

Buffy and Willow shared a smile and Cordelia frowned. “What puppy eyes?”

Xander smirked before carefully changing his expression and hitting them with it. He widened his eyes, and could feel them water a bit. His lower lip stuck out just so and he let it tremble. Kyle and Cordy seemed mesmerized.

Buffy laughed. “And that's why Xander is King of the Puppy Face.”

xxx

They met up with the others and began tracking Mr. Whitmore's scent, no one was surprised when they ended up in the basement. However the huge hole in the basement wall was another story. As was the cavern with the busted up floor which the Mama Bezoar had made her home sweet home.

Fortunately only a handful of possessed people were there, gathering eggs and carting them off.

“Everyone have a weapon?” Buffy looked at them all, noting the pick ax's, shovels, and swords.

“Kyle where did you find a spear?”

“Giles' office.”

She shook her head. “We go in quick, and be careful when you start hacking. The picture showed tentacle things that looked like they'd be good at grabbing.”

Willow manned the tranq gun and knocked out the drones while Rhonda and Cordelia pulled them to safety afterward. Everyone else picked a crack in the floor and started hacking at Mommy-dearest. She let out ear piercing shrieks and roars and her tentacles did indeed try to grab them. Xander wished he'd had a chain saw. One of the tentacles managed to grab Buffy and pulled her down and he rushed after her, cutting at the tentacle but she'd already disappeared down the crevice.

“Buffy!” He jumped down without thinking and landed beside her. “You okay?”

“Yeah, but my shoes are ruined. Lets send her back to the stone age.” She struck at the flesh of the Bezoar under their feet with her pick ax.

“Will do.” He slashed as the tentacle tried to grab at them, cutting it cleanly in two while Buffy hacked away. Eventually she hit something vital because the whole demon suddenly shuttered and gave one last cry before falling silent.
Slaying Bezoars was nasty business, there wasn't an inch of them that wasn't covered in purple blood. Xander poked at the flesh one more time.

“I think it's dead Xander.”

“Just checking.”

xxx

Kyle and Xander were on their way back to the library, having just showered and changed in the locker room. He stopped as a door opened on their right and Cordelia dragged them both inside the janitor's closet.

“Really Cordy, this is getting old.”

She looked them both carefully. “Larry? Really?”

“Yeah. He asked us both out.”

Kyle grinned. “Maybe he just likes brunettes.”

Xander elbowed him. “I think Kyle just wants to expand the Harem.”

“You know me so well.”

Cordelia continued to look at them. “So if Larry comes out...and he's dating you. That should raise your status. He is our football star after all. And I'm the best member on the Cheer-leading Squad. So if you date both of us that will make you cooler. And Kyle has a reputation for being picky.” She nodded as if satisfied. “I'll talk to Larry.” And with that she left them alone...in the closet.

Kyle looked at him. “What just happened?”

“Queen C logic.”

xxx

Can I go?

He looked up from the duffel he was stuffing clothes into. “Sure Marshal. I wasn't gonna leave you here.”

Oh, good. Should I pack?

“You don't have thumbs.”

I can still pack.

“Right. Don't worry about it Marshal. I'll get a bag for your bed and a couple of your toys.”

And my bowls.

“Sure.”

Thanks. Marshal hopped off the bed and wandered off. Xander watched him go in amusement. He sighed and looked at his half packed bags, he needed to hurry, Botan and Tor would show up soon.

“Right, bag for Marshal's bed.” He headed toward his closet and grabbed a suitcase and proceeded to
put Marshal's bed in it before going back to his own bags. As he worked his mind wandered to the
date with Kyle and Larry. They'd gone to see a new action flick at Sun Cinema, there was nothing
like male bonding over explosions. They'd shared a mega bucket of butter popcorn as an appetizer
before heading over to Yano's Pizza and splitting the cost of a pie between the three of them. The
atmosphere had been...comfortable, hardly even date-like. The flirting had been muted, barely there,
which was fine as it was a first date and they were taking baby steps.

They'd finished up at the Bronze for a game or two of pool. Kyle won of course, and that was where
the strangest part of the date had happened. Evidently Cordelia had gone through with her talk with
Larry because she 'd been at the Bronze. And Larry had waved at her, she'd smiled back at him in
acknowledgment but stayed with her clique.

He shook thoughts of the Bronze away. The sudden Xander lust still confused him and he wondered
about the guilt he felt. He enjoyed spending time with Larry, Kyle...and even Cordy on occasion.
But Spike was never far from his thoughts. Xander sighed and sank to the floor and wondered if he'd
ever get over the vampire.

xxx

This weakness was for the birds. He couldn't walk, bloody hell he could barely move, and all Dru
would bring him was scraps. What he needed was a few decent meals and some Sire's blood.
Unfortunately his Dark Goddess was as flighty as ever and was definitely not cut out for playing
nurse for anyone.

He let his mind wander, to try to escape if only for a moment his pathetic state. Beautiful and warm
brown eyes danced in his thoughts, what was the boy up to? Had he made it out of the church all
right? Foolish child, he'd given him a chance to run and he'd stayed to rescue a vampire he hated.
But the boy was loyal to the Slayer, and he and his pack of cackling children were magnificent when
they fought...and strong. He'd never seen humans tear apart vampires before. Bloody brilliant is what
it was.

He let out a sigh as he laid on the bed he was sequestered too as he watched Dru dance for her dolls.
She'd promised him a Christmas Feast. He'd be lucky if she remembered at all, and with his luck of
late it would be something with mange...or a dead squirrel.

His unlife really sucked sometimes.

XXX
Pretty Boys

Chapter Notes

A/N: ...sadly there isn't much brotherly interaction between Xander and Yusuke. Stupid boys were being difficult. *grumbles* So from here on you'll need to start checking out the story 'Our Pack' which is a series of side chapters to this fic that I couldn't make fit. In other words scenes that happen...I just couldn't really figure out where the heck to stick them. LOL

Child of the Hellmouth
calikocat
Pretty Boys
word count: 6364

XXX

Steps are evil. Marshal's comment was very matter of fact and Xander barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“We know Marshal, which is why Botan is carrying you.” He sent his Spirit Beast a mild glare where he was curled in Botan's arms ahead of them on the steps to Genkai's place.

Kyle and Tor who were lagging behind him huffed and grumbled in agreement about the evil of steps. Tor's voice grew louder and had just a bit of a whine to it, not that Xander could blame him. “Why couldn't we have just flown?”

Xander smiled though Tor and Kyle couldn't see it. “Because Botan is evil.”

Botan stopped and turned to look down at them. “Actually I'm just giving you a prelude.”

Kyle and Tor both stopped and looked at her then at Xander, confusion on both their faces. Xander clarified. “Her way of helping us train.”

Tor frowned. “We'll be training here?”

“Yep.”

Kyle looked thoughtful. “Maybe it's not too late to enjoy that nice quiet Christmas by myself. Ow!” He glared at Tor who didn't look a bit sorry for elbowing him.

Xander sighed. “Relax, we'll have fun too.” He ignored Kyle's eye roll and started up the steps again, they were almost to the top.

Originally only Tor and Botan were going to Japan, but Kyle had called at the last minute asking to come along. His parents were going on a cruise and his brothers were partying. So here they were, walking to Genkai's home at 3:30 in the afternoon, when half an hour ago in Sunnydale it had been midnight.
They finally crested the top of the steps and happily followed Botan towards the main building. She stopped only to put Marshal down before opening the door and slipping inside.

They slipped in behind her, copying her movements and taking off their shoes as she called out a greeting. He smiled to himself with pride, he didn't need a translator anymore, Tor and Kyle however, each wore one. Hopefully in time they would be able to retain enough Japanese that they wouldn't need them either.

They heard several voices respond from the living area and they entered on sock feet. Marshal followed them quietly, playing the part of the docile pet. He tried not to snicker. His amusement vanished when he felt Kyle and Tor grow tense behind him. He looked at his pack members curiously, both boys were eying the occupants of the room warily. Their eyes darting from face to face. Their hands twitched and Xander wondered if they had daggers hidden on them. When their eyes flashed green and growls slipped from their throats Xander growled back.

Kyle cast him an unsure look. “Alpha?” He and Tor moved closer so that they could touch him.

“Easy, they won't hurt you.”

Tor looked down. “Sorry.”

Kyle looked less apologetic, his eyes were still wary, and flickered green a couple of times. Xander nudged him and let out a yipping noise. Finally Kyle nodded. “I'm okay now.”

The silence in the room was deafening and Xander looked to meet the curious gazes. Kurama met his eyes almost immediately, and he was struck again by how beautiful the fox was. It was Hiei's voice however that broke the silence.

The shorter demon sat next to Kuwabara, smirking. “This would be part of your harem?”

Tor blushed, Kyle however met Hiei's gaze and smirked back. “I'm trying to get him to expand it. He's being difficult though.” Xander could feel a slight warmth to his cheeks as he gently cuffed Kyle. “Very difficult.”

He snorted. “Ignore Kyle, he talks too much.” Kurama was still looking at him, looking at him in a way that worried him just a bit. However Yusuke distracted him with a surprise headlock and ruffled his hair. “Oi! Yusuke! Quit it!” By the time he managed to squirm out of his brother's grasp everyone was relaxed and grinning. Marshal chose that moment to jump onto his shoulder.

Kuwabara blinked at the feline. “When did you get a...” He paused and concentrated on Marshal. “Your spirit beast is a cat?”

Is that a problem? All eyes focused on him. What?

Yusuke blinked at the cat in slight surprise. “Huh, he really talks.”

“I told you he did. Everyone, this is Marshal. And these two are Kyle and Tor.”

Hellos were exchanged and the three boys settled in for their visit. At least until Kyle and Tor fell asleep curled up together on the sofa.

Kuwabara gestured to the sleeping teens. “What's their story?”

Botan smiled proudly. “Tor is my brother, adopted of course.”
Xander's smile slipped a bit. “His dad was beating the crap out of him, we got him out.”

Kuwabara's eyes hardened a bit. “And Kyle?”

Xander shrugged. “His parents are on a cruise, Christmas alone sucks, so he came with...He's my beta.”

Yusuke nudged him. “The hyena thing runs deep doesn't it.”

“You have no idea.” He did his best to fight a yawn.

“Geeze kid, what time was it when you guys left?”

“Midnight.” Botan practically chirped, no hint of fatigue in her voice.

Genkai put her tea down and motioned toward all three boys. “Leave them here for the night. They'll be fine.”

Xander nodded. “Thanks Genkai.”

Yusuke stood and helped Xander to his feet, giving him a hug. “I'll pick you up tomorrow then, I doubt you'd stay awake on the trip back. See you tomorrow brat.”

“Night Yusuke.”

“Come on love birds, let's catch that last bus back to the city.”

“Speak for yourself Urameshi, we're catching a ride with Botan. Hiei tends to scare passengers.”

“If they wouldn't stare I wouldn't be forced to scare them.”

Botan sighed. “I guess that's my cue, I'll be back in the morning Xander, tell Tor for me.”

“Will do.”

She smiled and headed after the retreating men, already whipping out her oar for transport.

Xander felt a gentle hand take his and he looked up to see Kurama smiling at him. “Hey Kurama.”

“Walk with me for a moment.”

“Uh...okay.” He allowed himself to be lead outside to the wrap around porch, Marshal followed them outside before wandering off and leaving them alone. “What's up?”

Kurama smiled. “I've missed you.”

Xander smiled back, but he knew his heart wasn't in it. “What exactly do you want from me?”

Kurama blinked, as if he hadn't been expecting the question. “You've changed.”

“Yep. And I'm...sort of dating...I think. It's complicated.”

“Oh?”

Xander sighed. “It's like all my life no one wanted me, and then Boom! Everyone has Xander-lust.”

Kurama gave him an amused look. “There's a girl back home, the most popular girl in school and she likes to drag me into closets and make out, but I'm her dirty little secret. Or at least I was.”
“What changed?” There was no anger or betrayal in the green eyes that met his.

“Larry, one of our school’s star athletes asked me out, well me and Kyle.”

At that Kurama’s eyes widened a bit. “Separately?”

“Nope, same time, same date.”

“Well...”

“Yeah. So this girl, Cordelia, is hoping my coolness factor will increase if I’m dating someone else cool besides her.”

“Is it what you want?”

Xander shrugged. “I like spending time with Cordy and Larry. Kyle too. Kyle wants more and has since we became pack again. I don’t, not really...I don’t think so anyway. I’m not sure about Cordy and Larry. I’m still feeling my way.” Spike’s image flashed across his mind, and something on his face must have shown the pain that came with it.

“Is there someone else?”

“Not anymore.” His voice came out quieter, almost a whisper. “He’s dead.”

“A friend?”

“An enemy.” He looked away, but felt Kurama’s hand gently take hold of his chin and turn his face to meet his.

“A demon?”

“A vampire. His name was Spike.”

Kurama’s eyes softened at the pain in Xander’s voice. “Did you love him?”

“I don’t know.”

Kurama released his chin and smiled down at him. “Thank you for being honest.”

“Yeah. So...now what?”

“Do you have plans Christmas Eve?”

“No, I mean Yusuke mentioned dinner and chicken.”

“I have tickets to a concert. Would you like to go?”

Xander thought for a moment. He was trying to move on after all, and he hadn’t really committed himself to anyone. He’d only had the one date with Kyle and Larry, and nothing official had gone down with Cordelia... “Sure. I’d like that.”

There was a wooshing sound above them and suddenly Puu swept by with Marshal on his back. Marshal’s yell of Faster echoed after they left.

“My Spirit Beast is a dork.” Kurama’s chuckles were the only reply.

xxx
At the end of the day Kyle practically collapsed on a stool at the counter. He gave an exaggerated sigh and laid his head down on the counter. “Is it always this busy?”

Yukimura Kirai smiled at him as he dried a plate. “Only when Xander is here.”

His wife, Yukimura Zuka, smiled at Kyle and added, “But it’s gotten even busier with you and Tor here as well.”

Xander laughed from where he was cooking their food. “I’m just glad I’m not the only one getting swamped with fangirls.

Kirai smiled. “It’s good to share your good fortune. We’ll have you three married off before New Years at this rate.”

Kyle lifted his head enough to send a smirk towards Xander. “That’s possible. Xander already has a date Christmas Eve.”

Yusuke nearly dropped the plate he’d been washing. “When the heck did you have time to...” Realization spread over his face, overcoming his surprise. “It was Kurama wasn’t it?”

Xander merely nodded. “Yep.”

Kirai looked confused for a moment. “Kurama? Oh, that Minamino fellow?” Xander nodded again, this time a faint blush tinted his cheeks. Kirai paused to ruffled Xander’s hair. “Thought so. I was expecting him to pick up where he left off.”

Brown eyes widened in surprise at the statement and Xander gaped at the man. “Tousan!”

“Easy kid, I’m teasing...mostly.” Xander rolled his eyes at the response, then snickered as Zuka lead her husband from the restaurant and into the portion of the building where they lived, lightly scolding him the entire trip.

She called out to Tor before they left, “Lock up please Tor.”

Tor acknowledged the request with a wave and flipped the lock and turned over the sign proclaiming them closed for the day. Kyle sighed again and started helping his friend and pack member clean the tables.

While the other boys worked Yusuke turned to Xander who was adding seasoning to the skillet of food that was going to be their supper. “Christmas is a big time for couples.”

“Huh?” Xander looked up from his cooking with a frown.

“It’s when guys get their girlfriends chocolate, take them out to fancy restaurants and rent rooms in expensive hotels.”

Brown eyes blinked at Yusuke in confusion. “Huh...wish I’d known that before.”

Yusuke snorted. “Would it have changed anything?”

“Probably not.”

Yusuke smacked the back of his little brother’s head lightly. “If I find out I have to defend your honor on Christmas day I am not going to be happy.”

“Orgy!” Kyle and Tor called out in unison.
Xander shot them a dirty look. “You weren't complaining at the time.”

“Wouldn't complain now.” Kyle leered at him and winked.

“See what I have to put up with?” He glared at Yusuke who was snickering.

xxx

That night Kyle and Tor were restless. So the three of them did what they usually did when they couldn't be still. They patrolled. However they had been at it for nearly an hour and had not found a single vamp.

Tor was pouting, disappointment clear on his face. He'd been hoping for a good hunt. “It's weird here. Why are there no vamps?”

Xander glanced at the blond. “If you were a vamp would you wanna hang out in this town?”

Kyle grimaced and shook his head. “Not with all the super powers here.”

Tor nodded thoughtfully. “Point.” His step faltered. “Wait a second...you smell that?”

Xander and Kyle both stopped, sniffed the air, and tried to contain their glee. Well, Kyle didn't try too hard, and Xander worried for a moment. “Then again.”

Tor nodded, catching on to the worried tone in his Alpha's voice. “Either he's really stupid...”

Xander grimaced. “Or he's a bad ass.”

Kyle gripped his machete eagerly, though he tilted his head and waited for Xander's call. “Leave, or track?”

Knowing both boys needed to hunt Xander made his decision. “Proceed with extreme caution.”

Kyle and Tor's eyes flickered green in response.

They tracked the vampire slowly, moving through streets and alleys until they found him at a ramen stand of all places. He was tall, broad shouldered and was feeding on the owner of the stand. They moved as one, snarling, eyes glowing. Tor dashed in closer, throwing a water balloon filled with holy water at the vamp's face.

The vamp let go of the victim and screamed, clawing at his face as the water burned him like acid. Tor took his chance to drag the stand owner out of the line of fire while Kyle and Xander attacked. Kyle swung his machete low and took out one knee, making the undead fiend stagger, while Xander went for the neck with his battle axe. The ax only went about halfway through the neck, making the vampire's screams garbled as his throat took damage. Xander swung again just after Kyle sliced an arm off at the vampire's elbow, the appendage dusted slowly as it lay on the ground. This time when Xander made contact the vampire's head detached and hit the ground with a thud. They watched in amazement as the body slowly disintegrated.

“Tor?” Xander called out, moving his gaze away from the dust.

“I've got the bleeding stopped. He'll need a doctor though.”

Xander nodded and tossed his communicator to Kyle. “Call Botan, ask for directions to a hospital.”

He went to help Tor get the man to his feet, the poor guy was out of it, moaning something about losing his best customer.
Xander had made Kyle and Tor wait outside while he dragged the man inside to get medical attention. Luckily the nurse on duty recognized him from the wedding and asked no questions about how he'd become involved with the injured man. It was good to be the brother of a former delinquent.

Except when said former delinquent was waiting for him outside with Tor, Kyle and Botan. For a second he considered ducking into an alley and hiding, however Yusuke knew the area better than he did, so hiding would be futile. “Uh...Hi?”

Yusuke leaned against a support column and raised a brow. “Hi? That's all you have to say for yourself?”

Botan rolled her eyes. “We'll see you later. Go easy on him Yusuke. Come on Tor.” Botan practically dragged her little brother away, muttering all the while. Xander noticed that their weapons were missing...they were probably hidden away in one of Botan's subspace pockets.

“Let's go.” Yusuke motioned them to follow him, his steps were jerky and tense.

Xander and Kyle did their best impression of chastised youths, not something they were good at, and followed. “Can I say something?” Xander asked.

“You just did.”

“Oh come on Yusuke. We patrol all the time. This wasn't any different.”

“Yes it was. This isn't the hellmouth. Things work differently here.”

Xander pouted and shot Kyle a curious look when the other boy nudged him. “What?”

“Why did it take you two swings to decapitate that vamp?”

Yusuke paused and looked back at them, Kyle's question taking him by surprise. “Decapitate?”

Xander nodded. “Yeah. Newbie vamps only take one swing. He must have been older. Probably why he dusted so much slower too.”

Kyle looked thoughtful. “Age matters huh?”

“Yep. When Buffy killed the Master his whole skeleton was left behind.”

“Wow.”

Yusuke shook his head, his brother and his friends had the weirdest conversations. “Just let me know next time you decide to patrol.”

Xander and Kyle shared a glance and then looked at Yusuke like he was an idiot. Xander shook his head. “Yusuke, what did you think we were gonna do when we left with an ax and a machete?”

xxx

Tor went flying, and landed in a heap nearly six feet away from them. Kyle stared dumbfounded at his friend before looking at Xander. “What the hell?”

Xander shrugged. “Kuwabara can kick demon butt with the best of them.”
“The best being?”

“Yusuke, Kurama and Hiei.”

“Great.”

Tor managed to get up and made his way back over to them. “Why does he hit harder than Kendra?”

Xander eyed the smirking man who had sent Tor on his brief flight. “Probably conditioning.”

“Repeat that.” Kyle demanded.

“Lots of fighting. He's probably been in more fights than Buffy. And a lot of those fights were against demons that would tear us to pieces.” Tor and Kyle looked a little green at that comment.

Kuwabara moved into position and stood ready for them. “He's right. I started getting into fights when I was still in elementary school. Usually with Urameshi. No one I know hits harder than him. Now come on.”

The boys shared a look and converged on the taller male. Tor and Kyle were knocked away almost instantly. Xander took a hit and managed to stay standing, he blocked the next hit, landed one of his own and managed to evade two more attacks when Hiei came out of nowhere and slashed at him with the dull side of his katana.

Xander took the blow to his abdomen, but managed to jump back enough to minimize the damage. When he could breath again he managed a few pained chuckles as Kuwabara scolded his lover for interrupting.

“Geeze...You'd think they were married.” Tor muttered as he crawled to Xander's side, who was kneeling on the ground still breathing hard.

“Technically, they are.”

Kyle blinked from where he'd landed a few feet away, having decided to not move. “Really?”

“Yes.”

They watched in interest until Kuwabara finally ran out of steam and looked at them. “Hey Xander, Hiei wants to try something.”

“You mean he wants to bruise the rest of my ribs?”

Hiei smirked and sheathed his sword. “Not at the moment.” He reached for the ward that covered his third eye and unwrapped it. The purple eye focused on the three boys and glowed with power. They stared back at the eye and blinked, before sharing glances. Tor was the first to speak.

“Is something supposed to be happening?”

Xander shrugged. “No clue.”

Kyle sat up and leaned towards his Alpha. “What would happen if I poked that eye with a stick?”

“Instant death.”

Kyle nodded. “Just checking.”
Hiei ignored their conversation, hmm'd, and wrapped the ward over his Jagan once more. Kuwabara gave his mate an impatient tap on the shoulder. “Well?”

Hiei caught the hand and held it in his. “It seems Xander is not the only one immune to the Jagan’s gaze. Though whether it is because of their beasts or the residual energy of the hellmouth I can’t tell.” That caught Xander's attention. “Cool. Does that mean we'd be immune to mind control?”

Hiei nodded. “It would.”

Xander began to look hopeful. “Possession?”

“Probably not.”

“Damn.”

Kuwabara gave him a look. “You were wanting a different answer?”

“Yeah, I don't want to get possessed again. First the hyena, then the soldier. It's not a fun ride.”

Kyle and Tor nodded before giving him odd looks. Tor poked him. “What soldier?”

“Back at Halloween.”

Kyle shuddered. “I was hoping I just dreamed that. It was real?”

“Yup.” Xander grinned at him. “What did you go as?” When Kyle blushed the need to know grew stronger. “Well?”

“Lets just say...I had a proton pack.

xxx

Kurama was about to enter the Yukimura shop when he sensed someone behind him. Kyle's voice met his ears. “We need to talk.”

He glanced at the boy behind him. “Do we?”

Serious brown eyes met his and Kyle nodded. “For a bit.” He entered the narrow alley beside the building and Kurama humored him by following.

When they stopped Kurama tilted his head a bit and watched Kyle curiously. “Are you going to warn me away from Xander?”

Kyle twitched a bit before meeting his eyes bravely. “Don't hurt him.”

That was not what Kurama had expected him to say, and for the first time he realized that the boys were truly pack members. They would protect one another, even against a strong fox like himself.

Kyle took his silence to continue talking. “Xander knows what I want from him. He doesn't quite feel the same, but I hope that over time, that will change. Xander can do what he wants, and be with who he wants...but don't hurt him. Don't use him.”

“I had no such plans. But if I did?” He watched in fascination as the boy's eyes bore into him. The look he received was cold. It was then he remembered that Kyle had eaten human flesh, according to Xander's story of the possessed students.
“The Pack would devour you.” The words were stated plainly, their point clear.

Kurama nodded. “I understand.”

“Good.”

“Shall we go inside now?”

Kyle shook his head. “I'll hang back a minute.”

“He is very important to you isn't he.”

Kyle met his eyes again, this time the look was more like that of a child. “He's my Alpha. He saved us...if he hadn't shown up when he did...” He blinked away a horror that only he could see. “We might have lost control.”

Kurama nodded. “I will be as careful with his heart as I am able to be.”

When he started to exit the alley Kyle's words gave him pause. “He told you...about Spike.”

“Yes.”

“Then you need to know...he's not over him yet. Spike was his first and second kiss.”

Again Kurama nodded. “Thank you.”

“Don't mention it...seriously.”

xxx

It was Christmas Eve, and he wasn't nervous about the upcoming date. Not really. He'd always felt comfortable with Kurama, there was no pressure. Maybe Kurama was just patient, a side effect of his age. Still, he ate lightly at dinner, even though Keiko and Yusuke outdid themselves with the roasted Terriyaki chicken and the veggies.

He was worried that Kyle was going to pass out from food pleasure. Especially after the piece or three of Christmas cake he had. You'd think the guy had never had Christmas dinner before. Then again...Kyle's parents were like Cordelia's, rich socialites with a big house and hired help. They were even part of the same social circle as the Chase family.

Shaking off his musings he showered and dressed for his date. He chose simple black dress slacks, black shoes, a light blue sweater and a suit jacket that Yusuke donated. Once he was Keiko approved he waited for Kurama to show.

Kurama was mouthwatering as always, dressed for their date in black paints, a white button up shirt and a long black coat. He stood gaping for a moment and struggled to close his mouth...and did his best to not smack Kyle who was snickering behind him. The smell of Kyle's lust didn't help things either, though it made him wonder exactly who the lust was for. Him, or his date. Or both of them. That sounded like Kyle.

“Ready? The cab is waiting in front of the building.”

“Sure.” He accepted the arm Kurama held out to him, always the gentleman, and they left.
The cab ride started out quiet and he opted to sit on the opposite side of the back seat so that he could better converse with Kurama. “What kind of music are we going to hear?”

“Gackt plays a variety, mostly rock with some ballads, and the occasional pop music.”

“Well rounded kind of guy?”

The amused smile Kurama gave him set off a small fluttering in his stomach reminiscent of butterflies. “I wouldn't say that exactly, his style is unique though.” He reached across the seat and gently grasped Xander's hand. “The number of fangirls he has is staggering.”

“You're kidding? More than what we see at the shop?”

“Many more.”

“Oh boy.”

Xander gazed at the stage, his jaw had yet to snap back into place and he knew he was blushing. He knew, in his head, that what Gackt did on stage was mild compared to what he'd done with his pack...but it was still provocative.

“Is that even legal?” He yelled above the fanatic screams of the surrounding women.

“One can only assume so. He hasn't bee arrested for it yet.” Kurama's eyes were bright with pleasure and amusement. “Are you enjoying the show?”

He smirked at the older teen and grasped his hand. “Yeah, I'm glad I came.”

Kurama in turn brought Xander's hand to his lips and pressed them to his knuckles in a barely there kiss. “I'm glad.”

Xander moaned in absolute, exquisite, pleasure. “Oh god.”

“Good?”

“I want this recipe.”

Kurama laughed and fed him another bite of cake. “It's their specialty this time of year, I don't think they’ll hand it over lightly.”

Xander savored the chocolate for a moment before swallowing. “We can steal it. I even brought the lock pick set you gave me.” At Kurama's surprised face he backtracked. “I didn't bring it with me on the date, it's back in my room at Yusuke and Keiko's. But we could come back when they're closed, find the recipe, copy it, and get out. No one would ever know.”

“Perhaps I'm not the best influence for you to be around.” His smile though spoke otherwise. “Have you had to use the set?”

“A couple of times. The most recent was when we were investigating the guy Buffy's mom was dating.”
“Yusuke mentioned him. He was some sort of machine?”

Xander shuddered. “Yeah. The real Ted was sick, dying, and his wife left him. So he built a better Ted, and robot Ted brought her back. And killed her. And he kept bringing women who matched her looks back to his bunker ‘o love.”

“You're joking.”

“Afraid not...the worst part...”

“Worst part?”

“We found his wives, all four of them. What was left of them anyway.”

Kurama's hand gripped his, his thumb moving soothingly over the knuckles. “You saw the remains.”

He nodded and gulped. “It wasn't pretty. I'm just glad the girls didn't see them. I felt no guilt about dismantling Ted.” He shuddered again.

“Do you want to go home?”

“You kidding? I still have cake.”

“You're still able to eat? After remembering and discussing that?” Kurama looked more than a little surprised.

He smiled. “Kurama, it's chocolate cake. Very good chocolate cake. The building would be on fire and I'd finish my cake before I even thought about leaving. Or ya know I'd just take the cake with me. Actually a fire would be a good distraction.”

“Xander.”

“Just a small one, keep everyone busy so we can find the recipe.”

“Xander.”

“What?” He gave Kurama wide innocent eyes, it wasn't his puppy look, more like a distant cousin of the puppy look. Still the fox groaned waved a hand in dismissal.

“Eat your cake.”

“Have you ever had a pack?”

They were walking back to the apartment building, enjoying the clear night, not that he could see the stars. Too many lights in the city. He looked at his date and wondered at the thoughtful look on Kurama's face.

“I don't suppose I have. I barely remember my mother, and I lost track of my litter mates long ago.”

“Litter mates?”

“Foxes have litters.”

“I knew that.”
Kurama continued to look thoughtful as they walked side by side, their hands clasped together. “I had a partner once, many years ago, his name was Korunue.”

“Were you lovers?”

“No. Partners in crime. We were both thieves. He died during a heist.”

“Sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.” Were the words that left his mouth, but Xander could sense the old pain that was underneath and he squeezed his hand. Kurama sent him a smile. “I suppose I have one now though. Yusuke, Hiei, Kuwabara, and Botan...and I suppose the others as well. Would they qualify as a pack?”

“Yeah, they would.”

“Then I have a pack.”

By the time they reached the building they had gotten to know one another a little better. They had talked about Xander's pack, Kurama's University courses, his landscaping job, and about Xander meeting Raizen. It had been a successful talk, and even better he'd enjoyed the company.

“Xander, I have something for you.” Kurama's voice brought him out of his thoughts.

“What? After everything else you really didn't have to--”

Kurama pulled a box out of his coat pocket and presented it to Xander. “Merry Christmas Xander.”

Xander carefully accepted the box and opened it. Inside the somewhat thin package were to ornate silver daggers with hand carved wooden handles. “Oh, weapons.” He grinned. “You know me so well.”

“I'd like to, but somehow I think I have barely tapped the surface.”

Xander closed the box and stuck it under his arm. “You realize I'm a fairly simple creature right? I'd have been happy with going to the movies, or dancing at a club. Err, not that I didn't have a good time. But...”

Kurama put a finger across his lips to stall the flow of words. “I know, but I wanted to take you out. Next time we'll do something a little more normal.” He removed his finger and smiled. “This is where I say goodnight.”

“Or you could come up and watch a movie with me and Kyle.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Early the next morning Keiko woke to find Xander, Kyle and Kurama asleep in her living room floor in front of the television. Kurama and Kyle were curled protectively around her brother in law. She managed to take a few pictures without them waking up.
“I'm bored.” Kyle announced for the third time in as many minutes.

“And restless.” Tor muttered as he wadded up the last of the candy wrappers.

All three of them were practically jittery with excessive energy, which was their own fault. They'd found a stash of candy hidden under Genkai's porch and had consumed it. Which Xander was now regretting, a hyper Kyle might just equal a dead Kyle if Genkai kept giving them evil looks.

Tor jumped up and practically bounced into the kitchen to throw away the candy wrappers, and then bounced back only to flop back on the couch between them. “We've already exhausted the video games.”

“Why don't you three go play in the forest.”

Xander gave her a look. “It's infested with demons.”

“Nothing you three can't handle, at least not if you've really been patrolling the hellmouth everyday.”

For arguments sake Kyle pouted at her. “What if we don't want to play in the forest?”

“It wasn't a suggestion.”

“Way to go Kyle.” Tor elbowed him, and Xander proceeded to drag them both out of Genkai's home.

“We'll go play.”

“Good, maybe I can get some peace and quiet for a half hour at least.”

xxx

Several hours later Yusuke, Kurama and Botan showed up just in time to find Yukina clearing away three cups of tea from where Genkai and Rinku were sitting and playing cards.

“Hey Rinku, been a while.” Yusuke greeted him, while Kurama nodded and Botan gave him one of her patented cheery waves.

“Hey Urameshi, Kurama, Botan. Chu says hi and he wants a rematch soon, he's been training.”

“Cool, I'll keep that in mind when I go back to Makai next month.” He turned to Genkai who showed her hand to Rinku, by the look on the teen's face he'd just lost. “Where are the kids?”

Rinku looked up. “What kids?”

Genkai didn't bother looking up as she shuffled the cards. “They're playing in the forest.”

“What?”

Kurama only smiled and gave Yusuke's shoulder a comforting pat.

Botan giggled. “Relax Yusuke. I'm sure they're fine.”

He glared at her. “Our brothers are in a forest full of demons, how am I supposed to relax?”

Rinku looked from Botan to Yusuke. “Brothers? I heard you had a little brother Urameshi, but not
Botan.

She shrugged. “I adopted him recently.”

Yusuke turned his glare back on Genkai. “Why are they in the forest?”

“They sniffed out a stash of candy Hiei left here, ate all of it and were bouncing off the walls. I told them to go play with the demons.”

“Someone will have to reimburse Hiei for his candy.” Kurama murmured absently.

“Was that really a good idea Genkai? I mean they're just kids, and human kids are more fragile than demon kids.” Rinku asked, imagining how two little human boys might be terrified out of their minds in Genkai’s forest.

Genkai snorted. “Those brats will be fine.”

Yusuke rolled his eyes and went back outside, Kurama and Botan on his heels a smile on each of their faces. Rinku followed them in curiosity. The curiosity only deepened when he saw an unusual cat sleeping on top of Yusuke's spirit beast Puu. “Where'd the cat come from?”

Botan glanced at the scene. “Oh, that's just Marshal. He's Xander's spirit beast.”

“Xander?”

“Yusuke's brother.”

They proceeded to the back of the house and stopped just behind Yusuke. Rinku looked around him and shrugged to himself. “What's your brother like?”

“At first I thought he was just some goofy kid...but he's changing. He's getting stronger, more dangerous. He's still a dork though.”

Botan grinned. “You sound proud.”

He nodded. “I am.”

“It doesn't sound like your talking about a little kid.”

Kurama smiled softly. “Wait and see for yourself.”

Screams erupted from the forest and made them all tense, but eventually Yusuke smirked. “He's not a kid.” He sniffed the air. “I smell blood. Demon blood.” More screaming accompanied his statement.

A minor demon appeared at the edge of the forest, running for it's life, it was scratched and bleeding slightly. It was not wounded badly, the scratches were most likely from underbrush.

It made it halfway across the yard before three forms came running out of the forest and surrounded the demon. The laughter was eerie and made the hair on Rinku's neck stand up on end. He saw glowing green eyes, three sets of them gleefully going in for the kill, the demon didn't stand a chance. They surrounded the demon...and the leader tapped it on the head.

“Next time, you're it.”

The demon gaped at it's attackers in shock. “What?” Rinku wanted to know what the heck had just happened. “You aren't going to kill me?” The creature asked.
“Nah.” The leader grinned and it was warm. “We were just playing. Playing with you guys was safer than pissing Genkai off. Later.” With that all three boys bounded over to them. Their clothes were torn, there was dirt all over them...and they were grinning widely at Botan, Yusuke and Kurama. All three looked to be about Rinku's age.

Yusuke smirked. “Have fun?”

The leader's eyes flickered an eerie green that gave Rinku chills, despite the happy smile on the guy's face. “The demons in Genkai's forest are more fun to hunt than the ones on the hellmouth.” Rinku could almost feel his knees' urge to buckle. Hellmouths were dangerous places. Then he could only look on in wonder as Kurama held his hand out to the leader, who could only be Xander, and the boy accepted the hand and let the fox lead him away. He continued to stare.

He never saw the hand that smacked the back of his head. “Ow!”

“That better not be my brother you're drooling after.”

“Sorry, just shocked is all. Kurama is courting your brother?”

Yusuke frowned after the pair. “Maybe. A lot of people seem to be courting him.”

Rinku watched them walk off. “Wow.”

The other two boys cackled and the brunette slung an arm over Rinku's shoulders. “You have no idea.”

XXX
Xander watched in amusement as Kyle took orders. The guy was completely in his element, natural flirt that he was. When the fangirls came to coo and flirt with them, he was the one who always flirted back. It had gained him even more fans, and even a few of his and Tor's fans had converted to Kyle fan-girls. Which was fine with them, the girls were sort of overwhelming. Still, Kyle was his responsibility so he kept an eye out for trouble, but so far Kyle was fine.

Tor was at the stove, gladly watching and assisting Yusuke with their lunch. Xander couldn't really blame him. He'd eaten Botan's cooking once, and if he were honest...eating Buffy's cooking was safer.

He sipped at his coke and stretched a bit and continued to enjoy his break. The lunch rush had ended a while ago and only Kyle's audience was left to serve. A meager five girls, who drooled and batted their lashes at the other boy. Kyle winked at him and Xander raised his glass in acknowledgment before turning to looked towards the door. A familiar presence had pinged on his awareness.

Kagome slid the door aside and entered the mostly empty shop. “Xander!”

“Kagome!” He rose to greet her, aware that Kyle was watching him closely as he hugged the new arrival. “What brings you here?”

She returned the hug and stepped back. “You haven't come by the shrine and I wanted to see you.”

He grinned at her. “Come on in and have a seat. I'm on break but I can get you something. Are you thirsty? Hungry?”

“Some oolong tea would be fine.”

“Sure, I'll--”

“I can get it.” Kyle moved fast...and quiet when he wanted too. Kagome jumped a bit.

“Oh...thank you.”

“Kyle. Be nice. This is Higurashi Kagome. She was the foreign exchange student that stayed with me last October.” When Kyle continued to give her a narrow look Xander stroked his arm in a calming gesture. “She's just a friend Kyle. She's one of my girls, like Willow and Buffy are my girls.”
The tension immediately left Kyle's body and he gave Kagome a smile. “Oolong tea right?”

“Yes.”

“Be right back.” He practically skipped behind he counter.

Kagome turned a wide-eyed gaze to him. “What was that about?”

Xander rolled his eyes. “Has Willow been keeping you up to date on the comings and goings of the hellmouth?”

She nodded, her surprised expression changing to one of amusement. “So, he's part of your harem?”

He smirked. “Something like that. He's getting protective though. I think he's mostly worried that I'm getting stretched in too many directions by too many people.”

“Ah, that would be the Xander-lust Willow mentioned that everyone in Sunnydale seems to be experiencing.”

“Yeah, come on and sit with me. And then you can tell me why you're really here.”

“Ah, that would be the Xander-lust Willow mentioned that everyone in Sunnydale seems to be experiencing.”

“Yeah, come on and sit with me. And then you can tell me why you're really here.”

She gave him wide innocent eyes. “You mean you don't believe that I just wanted to stop by and see a friend?”

“You live too far a way for a short social visit Kags. You are so busted.”

She gave a small sigh and a soft smile. “You're right. This isn't entirely a social visit.”

“Here's your tea.” Kyle set the mug in front of her and sat beside Xander. “So, what'd I miss?”

Kagome accepted the tea with a smile. “Thank you.”

Xander rested his chin in one hand as he leaned on the table. “Kagome was just going to tell me why she's really here.”

She nodded. “Right. So here's a question before I get to the point. Can you still see spirits?”

Xander blinked. He hadn't been sure what he expected Kagome to say, but that question came way out of left field. “Uh...maybe? I don't know for sure, I mean I haven't in a while. Mostly because Botan's working the dale so there's fewer ghosts around. And even if I do see one I don't know they're a ghost until someone walks through them, or I'm close enough to pick up on the lack of scent.”

“Whoa, wait....you see dead people?” The smirk on Kyle's face was nearly blinding in it's amusement. “Seriously?”

He lightly smacked Kyle on the arm. “Focus man. Why did you ask Kags?”

She smiled lightly at their antics and sipped at her tea before answering. “There's an old farm outside the city, the current owner is the son of one of grandpa's friends. His family goes there for weekends sometimes to get away from the bustle of Tokyo. Anyway, neighbors have seen strange things at night and they went to check it out. And they got scared, ended up staying with the neighbors because they were so jumpy. So they asked grandpa to banish the spirit or whatever is there. And grandpa volunteered me, and I'm volunteering you.”

“Gee, thanks.”
“What are friends for?” She hid her smile behind her tea cup.

“So, does that mean we're going ghost busting?” Kyle's question was beyond hopeful.

Xander sighed and nodded. “I guess so.” He gave Kagome a mock glare. “I bet you just wanted one last adventure before going to college.”

“Of course. And it wouldn't be an adventure if I was by myself.”

xxx

Xander quirked a smile at Kurama. “We'll be fine.”

“You're sure? I could stay.”

“Kurama, you told me yourself that you have a client in the morning. An important client. It's one haunted house, I think we can handle it.”

“It's not that I don't think you can handle yourself...but this is not the hellmouth.”

He shrugged and kissed the older boy's cheek, surprising the fox. “I'll be fine.”

With a sigh and lingering touch to his cheek Kurama nodded. “I'll be back to pick all of you up tomorrow afternoon.”

“Cool.” He smiled as Kurama sent him another worried glance before getting into his car and driving away.

“I thought he'd never leave.”

“Kyle.”

“What?”

He rolled his eyes. “Nothing. Let's go find Kagome and Tor.”

They found their friends already inside the old farm house in the main room. Tor looked up and smirked. “Did you get a goodbye kiss?”

Kyle pouted. “No.” Xander smacked him lightly. “Ow!”

“Behave.” Xander flopped down on the floor beside Kagome. “So, what did the owner tell you? What do we know about the history of this place?”

“It's a small farm with only a couple of fields and a small river along one side. Its been in his family for generations, and he inherited it from his mother. I asked him if there were any family legends about spirits haunting the farm and he said no, but that if something strange should happen his mother left behind strict instructions that my grandpa be contacted.”

Kyle sprawled out on the floor. “So why isn't he here instead of us?”

Kagome snorted. “Because grandpa's spells aren't worth the paper he inks them on. He doesn't have the power to back them up.”

Tor looked at her curiously. “And you do?”
“Guys, Kagome’s the one who originally warded the library, and our homes.”

“Huh. So she’s qualified for this ghost thing?” Kyle still looked doubtful. “And you Harris?”

Kagome tossed an apple at him that she’d pulled out of her yellow backpack. “I'm a fully trained Miko and Xander helped a ghost find peace.” When both boys looked at Xander expectantly he shrugged.

“Remember Daryl Epps?” They nodded, eyes wide. “I nearly freaked when I saw someone walk through him. We talked, and he moved on. I'm just glad the guy was feeling sane.”

“Is he the one that his brother brought back...kind of like Frankenstein's monster?”

“Yep.”

“Whoa whoa whoa!” Kyle held up a hand. “Chris brought his brother back from the dead? He really pulled a Frankenstein?”

“Yeah, he burned up with the old science building though.”

Tor blinked. “The one Snyder said Summers burned down?”

Xander frowned. “Snyder is full of crap, the fire just happened. A Bunsen burner got knocked over, though why Chris and Eric had gasoline in there to begin with I have no idea.”

“Wow.” Tor murmured and Kyle nodded.

“So where is the owner now Kags?”

“Oh, he's at the neighbors' for the night.”

“Cool. So, cards anyone?”

xxx

Kagome had just won another round and if they had been using money instead of pistachios he’d have been so very much in debt. A diversion was in order, a tactful retreat was needed.

“I'm going to walk the perimeter before it gets any darker.”

“I'll go with you. Not like I have anymore pistachios.” Kyle grumbled as he tossed his cards in Kagome's lap before grabbing his water bottle and following Xander. Kagome simply smiled and waved at them.

Kyle caught up with Xander outside. “This whole taking your shoes off when you go inside is really annoying. Wastes time too.”

“Yusuke tried to explain it to me...well not really. He just said it's the way things are and to deal with it.” They walked in silence after that, around the property, Kyle following wherever Xander lead.

However they came to a tree, a very old and large tree, that made Xander stop and stare. He closed his eyes and tried to get a grip on the presence he felt. It was unlike anything he'd ever sensed before. Ignoring Kyle's questioning look he made his way around the tree, once, twice, three times. Yep, it was definitely coming from the tree. He put his hand on the bark, it practically pulsed.

“Harris?”
He didn't bother looking at his companion. “It's alive.”

“Most trees are.”

Xander spared a smile at Kyle who was looking more than a little impatient at this point. “Not what I meant.” He stepped back from the tree and returned to Kyle’s side. “Hello?” The tree remained silent. Hmm... “Kyle, hand me your water.” Kyle continued to give him ‘your crazy’ glances but handed him the water bottle. “Thanks.” He stepped back toward the tree and began to pour the water out, walking all the way around so that water was around the entire base of the trunk. When he came full circle he capped the bottle and handed it back to Kyle. He faced the tree again.

“I'm not sure how this works, I've never met a tree demon before, but I'd like to speak with you.”

“Xander?” Kyle whispered.

“Just wait.” He grasped Kyle’s hand and the other grew quiet.

In a moment a face seemed to grow out of the bark at eye level. Kyle jumped back and if Xander had not released his hand he would have tumbled from the other boy's momentum. “Hi.”

The tree smiled at him, it's face was old and cracked with age, like's its voice. It was hard to discern a gender...but he looked male. “It has been a long time since anyone has addressed me in such a way.” His eyes squinted in the fading daylight. “Your aura is strange.” His gaze widened as he took in Xander's full appearance and the ring on his finger. “That symbol!”

Xander smiled and held up his hand. “Yeah, demons are always shocked when they see it.”

“That I do not doubt. Are you of the line young one, or married in?”

“Born to it.”

“And human, very unusual...but your aura. Both of you have unusual auras.”

Xander tilted his head in mild amusement, Kyle still hadn't come any closer. “Ever heard of a hellmouth?”

The face before them bobbed in a semblance of a nod. “Rumors from long ago.”

He shrugged. “I was born on one. So was Kyle.” He pointed at the other boy who shifted, but remained somewhat behind him.

“Amazing. And you are?”

“Xander.”

“What would you have of me Young Lord?”

“Is there a spirit on this property that can't move on?”

“There is, there are two actually.”

“Huh. Do you know why they can't leave?”

“I do. They can not find one another.”

Kyle moved forward a little. “ Were they lovers?”
“Hardly.”

Xander smiled. “Siblings?”

“No. A young boy died here many years ago from health complications. You see that river over there?” Both boys looked over their shoulders at the river on the far side of the property.

Xander nodded. “Yeah.”

“The child nearly drowned in it, were it not for his dog he would have, but the dog pulled him to safety, only to get caught in a mess of debris and drown himself. The boy was pulled from the banks and a sickness set in. The poor child died within days.”

Kyle sidled up to him and leaned against him. “So the kid is looking for his dog?”

Again the face bobbed. “He is.”

Xander felt his gears start to turn. They might be able to actually fix things here. “Where is the dog buried? Did they recover the body?”

“He is here, at my base. It is the boy who searches, calling for his pet. Up and down the banks of the river.”

“What are their names?”

“The boy was called Akira, his dog was Shiro-chan.”

Xander smiled and gave the tree a small bow. “Thank you for your help.”

“May I ask what you plan to do?”

“Make plans with a Miko.”

“A real one? Young Lord you are truly blessed to keep such company.”

“Nah. She’s like family. Thanks again, Kodama-san.” The spirit of the tree smiled and face sunk back into the bark. Xander turned and motioned for Kyle to follow him. As they walked back toward the house Kyle finally spoke.

“That was creepy...even for us.”

“Yep.”

xxx

As they sat in a circle finishing up their instant noodles Kagome looked thoughtful. “I thought I sensed something. Its just so unusual to find beings like that in this time.”

Tor shifted and started putting their trash in a bag. “What do we do now?”

Kyle yawned. “Sleep?”

Xander shook his head. “I want to check out the river bank.”

Kagome nodded and handed her trash to Tor. “That's a good idea.”

“Thanks. So, do you have any idea how to release a Jibakure?”
Tor and Kyle blinked and Tor frowned. “That didn’t translate.”

Xander shrugged. “There’s no word for it in English.”

The Miko smiled. “A Jibakure is a ghost that is bound to a certain place.”

Kyle nodded almost absently, his own face thoughtful. “Here’s a question, if the kid is at the river and the dog’s at the tree...what’s been spooking here at the house?”

They all looked at one another...and the lights flickered. Xander sighed. “Guess we’re gonna find out.

Tor smacked Kyle’s arm. “You jinxed us.”

The other boy rolled his eyes. “It would have shown up anyway.”

“Boys, do I have to separate you?” Both glared at him and Xander grinned.

“I’m surrounded by children.” Kagome shook her head. “Let’s split up.” They looked at her questioningly. “I’ll stay here and see if I can get the spirit in the house to talk to me. Xander I want you to go back to the tree, see if Kodama-san will talk to you again.”

“I don’t want to bother him. Shouldn’t I just try to talk to the dog?”

“Whichever works.” She looked at Kyle and Tor. “You two should go down to the river and see if you can make contact with Akira-chan.”

Tor shifted and tilted his head. “We can’t see ghosts.”

Kyle nodded and pointed at Xander. “That’s your department Harris.” His gaze met Xander's. Xander raised a brow at the boldness. Kyle sighed. “Fine we’ll go look for the kid.”

All three boys went outside, leaving Kagome to meditate in the living room. Xander could hear Kyle grumbling as they headed toward the river, Tor was silently pouting. He shook his head in amusement and headed back to the tree.

Once he was settled on the ground by the tree he opened his senses up. He hadn't bothered to bring a flashlight, the moon was bright enough to see by. Pulling his collar up to block some of the cold he closed his eyes. “Shiro-chan. Here Shiro-chan.”

He could feel the pulse of the Kodama...and an echo in the ground in front of him. Xander put his hand above the echo. “Shiro?” There was a cold tingly sensation, accompanied by a whimper. Xander opened his eyes in surprise to find a medium size dog in front of him. It was white, and vaguely see-through. “Um...hi?” It looked at him. “Can you uh...leave this spot?” Shiro barked. “Okay...I’m gonna go look for Akira. He misses you.” Shiro whined and wagged his tail a bit. Tentatively Xander reached out to pet the ghost dog. Shiro didn't really have any substance, but his fur felt...like an echo of softness, like a dream slipping from his grip. It was very cool. “Let's go.”

He rose and started toward the river, Shiro was able to follow him until they got about ten feet from the tree. When he could go no further he whined pitifully at Xander, who pet his head again. “You can do it.”

At the encouragement Shiro’s tail wagged again and he pushed at the barrier, moving inch by inch. Suddenly there was an audible snap and Shiro tumbled forward...and started to fade away. Xander grabbed him and felt a rush of energy move through him and into the ghost. He wasn't sure if it was
spirit energy or something else, but whatever it was allowed the dog to stabilize, he was still transparent, but he was no longer on the verge of disappearing. “You okay?” Shiro panted at him, as if exhausted, he probably was. “Let's go.”

They made it to the river without anymore problems to find Kyle and Tor on the bank, soaked and shivering. Tor stood hunched over a kneeling Kyle who had a transparent child in his arms. Kyle looked up at Xander. “Took you long enough.”

Xander shrugged. “It's not an exact science.”

Shiro barked and ran toward Kyle and the little boy. The boy looked up and ran toward the dog and they rolled and he laughed and hugged his dog, reunited for the first time in decades.

Tor wrinkled his nose. “Ugh, kodak moment.” He glanced at Xander. “I already called Botan. She should be here soon.”

“Cool. So why are you two all wet?”

Kyle stood and huddled closer to Tor. “Kid slipped into the river, shook him up some. We had to drag him out.”

Tor nodded. “Still not sure how a ghost can trip and fall into a river.”

Xander felt Botan land behind them. “Considering what happened the last time he fell in it's no wonder he got scared.”

Tor and Kyle jumped apart and whirled to face her, Xander tried not to laugh. “Hey Botan.”

She pouted at him. “You didn't jump.”

“Nope.”

Kyle however glared at her. “Jesus woman! A little warning next time!” The grim reaper merely grinned at them.

“I'll take care of these two now...but you might want to check on Kagome. I heard a crash as I flew by the house.”

Xander nodded. “Come on guys.” He took off at a run.

“Later Sis. Wait up Harris! It's too cold for this! And we're still soaked!”

By the time they got to the house Tor and Kyle were shivering and there was an unholy wailing coming from the farm house. Suddenly they saw a dark misshapen thing flee through the open front door. Only to get struck with an energy arrow a second later. It practically poofed out of existence.

“Kags? You okay?”

Kagome stepped outside, her hair was in disarray, but she seemed unharmed. “Yeah.”

Kyle was still staring at the tendrils of dark matter as they disappeared. “What was it?”

“Poltergeist.”

Tor blinked. “You're kidding.”
Xander barely resisted the urge to poke at the last wisp of darkness. “Don't they need kids to feed...it was using Akira.”

She nodded. “Yeah. It's gone now. What about Akira-chan?”

Tor pointed back towards the river. “Botan is taking him and the dog to Reikai.”

“Good. Now, lets get you two into something dry and warm.”

XXX

Xander felt her approach before she entered the shop, Kagome's aura was unmistakable. He looked up from the table he was wiping down and smiled at her. “Hey Kags, got another ghost busting job for us?”

She smiled and shook her head. “Nope, just wanted to tell you how thankful Grandpa is.”

“Huh?”

“It turns out that Akira-chan was the younger brother of Nakao Hideaki-san's mother.”

He blinked. “Wow. That almost sounds like the plot of a soap opera.” His eyes were drawn back to the door, a second later it opened and Kurama stepped through. “Kurama.”

“Xander. Hello Higurashi-san.”

Kagome nodded at him before turning and winking at Xander. “I'll just go over here, maybe order some food.”

“Very subtle Kags.”

She laughed as she walked away, flagging Tor down to give him her order in the process.

Kurama moved closer, allowing his hand to ghost up to Xander's wrist where he touched him gently. “Would you like to go for a walk? After your shift of course.”

Xander sighed in minor annoyance when Kyle brushed passed him, the other boy managed a good wiggle into his side. “Kyle.”

Kyle merely smiled and batted his lashes. “Yes Alpha?”

“Quit it. We can't always be a package deal.”

Kyle pouted, but his eyes glittered in victory at Kurama's chuckle and suddenly heated gaze.

Xander briefly wondered if maybe introducing Kyle and Kurama might not have been in his best interest.

XXX

This was nice. Of course it would have been a lot nicer if it hadn't been so cold. He didn't understand how anyone could stand to be outside in this temperature. The hellmouth sounded like paradise right now. At least it was warm there.

However he couldn't complain about the company. He and Kurama were walking through a park, hands grasped lightly. It was nice, and slightly romantic. But still cold.
“Would you like to see a movie?”

“Sure, when?”

“Tonight?”

Xander smiled. “That'd be cool.” As they walked he shivered.

“How are you cold?” Kurama's question sent his mind back to the night Spike had kissed him a second time. He'd shivered then too, right before he'd experienced lips and tongue of Spike.

He mentally pushed the memory away, it wasn't fair to Kurama to think about Spike right now. “A little. I'm still not used to the cold. California boy remember?”

Kurama's smile was kind and he released Xander's hand, only to wrap his around around his shoulders, and pull him closer. Much closer. He tilted his head up to ask a question, but promptly forgot what that question was when Kurama pressed his lips to Xander's. A warm tongue not his own ghosted against his lips. When Kurama pulled back he wasn't sure the kiss had actually happened. But the smile on Kurama's face was the only proof he needed. “Better?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Kurama chuckled and kept him close as they started to walk again. The cold seemed to have retreated from their little bubble.

“Can I ask a favor?”

“Of course you can.”

“It might involve you coming to Sunnydale.”

The smile that appeared on his companion's face was nearly blinding. “I don't have a problem with that.” He leaned down to kiss Xander again. Xander however leaned back a bit.

“The others...”

“I don't mind the competition. And Kyle's pout is something to behold.” He smiled and kissed Xander again. This time Xander kissed him back.

xxx

Tor gazed around the castle courtyard in awe. He'd only ever seen the stone structures in movies. The films didn't do this one justice. It was tall, not overly so, no more than three stories, but it was large enough. The stones to make it were pretty big, nearly up to his knee. But, what really stuck out about them, was their smoothness. They were geometrically perfect, and had no rough edges. There was no way they were man made.

A shadow passed over the courtyard and he glanced up, he could see a cloud above him, passing over. It wavered and rippled in his vision as he looked up through the layer of water. Botan had told him they were under a lake. The castle was most definitely not man made.

“Why are we here Botan?”

“We're here to meet someone important.”

“Who?”
“Well...since I adopted you...its only right that I brought you to meet my parents.”

“Aren’t you...well...really old?”

She frowned and flicked his ear. “Behave.” However she perked up and waved in the direction of the main entrance. He looked and saw two figures exit the castle. “Mother! Father!” A beautiful woman just a little taller than Botan approached them and hugged Botan. Her hair was long and in a single braid, it was white with strands of aqua blue scattered throughout. Her dress was silky and moved like water. And of course, her eyes were pink.

The man was the same height as his wife, though he was more...human looking. He had no hair, but wore a metal plate on his head. However he did have a mustache and a short trimmed beard. He wore a cloak, dark leather pants and carried a staff.

“Mother, Father, this is Tor. My little brother. Tor, these are my parents, Nimue and Merlin.”

XXX
“Cool, I'll see you later then Wills.”

“Okay, goodnight Xan.”

“Night.” He set the phone in its cradle, a fond smile on his face.

Good news? Marshal asked him from the bed.

“Yeah. Everyone's good. Everyone had a good break. Willow celebrated Hanukkah with her folks. Rhonda is at Heidi's tonight so both of them had a good Christmas.”

And we know Kyle and Tor are safe at home.

Xander nodded absently as he gazed around his room in thought. His mind wondered at the change in Tor. The other boy's energy...aura...there was something different about him. It was a quiet and subtle power that hadn't been there before. But Tor's personality seemed unchanged, and he still felt and smelled like pack so it wasn't high on Xander's list of things to figure out. He had, however, questioned Botan briefly. She'd simply smiled and for a moment he felt that same thrum of subtle power pulse from her. It didn't really explain anything, but he could take a hint. It wasn't necessarily his business...at the moment. If whatever she'd done started to hurt Tor in any way he'd be having words with a certain blue haired Grim Reaper.

Xander?

“Sorry, just thinking. So you ready?”

Marshal blinked at him. Ready for what?

“I'm restless.”

So? What's that got to do with me?

“Patrol.”

Marshal glared at him. Do we have too?

“Yes.”

I miss Japan.

Xander snorted. “You mean you miss playing with Puu.”

That too.

“Seriously, who yells 'Weee!' when they're flying around?”
Shut up!

xxx

It had taken a little more prodding but he'd finally gotten Marshal to go on patrol. His spirit beast could be a real brat when he wanted to be. Sometimes he was envious of Yusuke. After all Puu didn't talk back, he just cooed and twittered.

Why do we always end up in the warehouse district?

“We don't always end up here; this is just where we end up when we don't have a plan.”

When do we ever have a plan?

“When Willow plans out our route of course. On those nights someone else gets this area.”

Marshal was silent a moment but then he looked up at Xander. It's pretty dead tonight.

“You noticed the lack of walking dead too huh? It's probably because people are still on vacation.”

The cat nodded. Less food to snack on.

“Exactly.” As soon as the word left his mouth a scent tickled his nose and he paused. Tilting his head he sniffed the air to get a better hit of the smell.

Marshal had noticed his change in behavior and looked back. What is it?

“Vampire...but this scent...I know it.”

There's not many vamps in town that you know personally.

Marshal's words hit him like a sledgehammer. Was it possible? His heart raced with the possibility.

“Just a few. Let's go.” Making their way on near silent feet Xander led Marshal after the scent that teased him on the soft breeze until they reached a familiar factory.

What is this place?

“This is where the Anointed One tried to sacrifice Willow and the others.”

Vamp Central?

“Pretty much, Spike and Dru--” He froze, even forgot to breathe for a few seconds, because speak of the devil and there he was. Near a closed doorway, out in the moonlight, was Spike .... sitting in a wheelchair.

Spike and Dru what? Xander? Xander ignored him and moved closer. What are you-- He saw Spike for the first time and his eyes widened. Wow, he looks like crap.

Xander continued forward, getting closer and closer, as he watched Spike try to light up a cigarette. His face flashed in the flame of the lighter and the light reflected off the ghastly scars on the right side of his face. His hands shook as the lighter tumbled from his fingers with the flame going out on the way down. The swear words that flew from Spike's mouth sent pin pricks of pain through his heart.

His eyes watered and Xander could feel a couple of tears slip down his face as he continued forward. Finally Spike heard his approach and looked up; shock coloring his sickly features. A few more yards and Xander was crying freely as he collapsed to his knees in front of the vampire. Xander
reached up and cradled Spike's face in his hands.

The shocked looked had yet to leave the vampire's face as if he couldn't believe the tears on Xander's face were for him. And why should he? They had only shared two kisses. Just two...

He finally found his voice as his hands, who had a mind of their own, stroked the scarred flesh with a barely there touch. “Thought you were dust.” His voice cracked just a bit and he didn't care how young it made him sound.

Spike's cool hands grasped his wrists in a firm but not so punishing grip. “Might as well be.” Xander glared at him through the tears that still fell from his eyes. Spike gave him a small smirk. “Miss me then?”

Xander choked on a laugh and pressed their foreheads together. “I angsted and everything.” Gently he brushed his lips against Spike's. It was the first time he'd ever initiated a kiss with the vampire. “I'm glad you're not dust.”

Spike pulled back just enough to focus on him. “Still evil.”

“I know.” This time when Xander kissed him he kept his mouth open and nearly devoured Spike's mouth, his teeth, his tongue. He barely managed to keep himself from crawling into the vampire's lap. But he had to breathe and so he pulled away, with more than a touch of reluctance.

“Bloody hell.”

He smirked and nearly dove in for another kiss...

Are you done smooching the enemy?

Spike blinked at Marshal. “Your cat...”

“Yes, he can be an opinionated little shit.”

“Right though. Minions catch ya and they'll suck you dry. Go home boy. Xander.”

Xander smiled. It was touching that Spike didn't want him dead. Well at least by another's hand. He stood and leaned down to kiss the vampire's cheek. “Goodnight Spike.”

xxx

Xander tilted his head a bit and watched the exchange between his pack-mates. There was a mystery there. Cordelia and Rhonda had never been close; well that he knew of. Cordy was Queen C, their resident Teen Queen, after all. Rhonda, on the other hand, had always been on the outer edges of the popular crowd. They knew her name, she had a rep, and her tongue was nearly as sharp as Cordy's. Plus no one messed with her crowd.

He couldn't hear what they were saying, as he couldn't read lips, but he could read body language. Both girls were familiar with one another and they were relaxed in each other’s company. Really they did have a lot in common, not to mention Rhonda was a strong enough personality to avoid being one of Cordy's mindless shadows.

He breathed in and caught their scents...something niggled in the back of his head. Something he should be able to figure out. He pushed the annoyance away and turned to head toward the library.

xxx
Rhonda watched as Xander walked away and wondered what his confused look was for. She looked back to Cordelia. “We should tell him at least.”

Cordelia frowned. “Why does he need to know?”

Rhonda smirked and shrugged. “Just in case there was another orgy...I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable.”

A light blush colored Cordy's cheeks. “Eww.”

Rhonda snickered. “Just think about it.”

xxx

It had only taken Rhonda a few minutes to catch up with him. Neither of them mentioned her talk with Cordelia. If it was something he needed to know she'd tell him. If it wasn't...well he was her alpha, not her keeper.

“Where are we going?”

He grinned and pointed towards the double doors where Kyle, Heidi and Tor were peering through the windows. “Library, where else?”

When they reached the boys Rhonda poked Tor. “What's going on?”

Heidi grinned. “We're placing bets.”

Xander blinked and tilted his head. “Is Buffy trying to get out of training again?”

Kyle shook his head. “No. We're betting on how long before Giles kicks Snyder's ass.”

Xander and Rhonda shared a perplexed look and Tor snickered at them. “Snyder is raising hell, no idea why though.”

He frowned, none of them liked Snyder, but Giles actually going Ripper on someone could be of the bad. “Then maybe we should find out. He doesn't usually bother Giles for any reason.” He moved passed them to open the doors while the pack turned to follow him.

Snyder was in a full out snit. “This is my school and you cannot just decide to redecorate. Those stickers you've got all over this place have got to—go--What are you five doing here?”

Xander ignored the question and looked at the Watcher. “Giles?”

“Oh, Xander, good morning.”

Rhonda moved closer to him, putting herself between the fuming troll and their resident father figure. “What's going on?”

Snyder sneered at her. “Nothing that concerns you young lady and that goes for the rest of you too.”

Kyle took a step closer. “Really?”

Xander held up a hand to still his movement. “G-man?”

“Principal Snyder is the one who keeps messing with the wards.” The words were laced with anger and Xander really couldn't blame him. Because of Snyder's actions Giles had been possessed by a
baby Bezork thingy.

It seemed that Tor was in agreement with this popular opinion as he snorted. “Are you stupid?”

“Watch it.” It seemed that Snyder was in full troll mode today.

Xander took a step forward and shook his head. “Sorry Snyder, the wards stay.”

The short man looked up at him with contempt. “You're only a student, you have no say.”

He tilted his head a bit and glared at the toad. “It's our Library, the protective wards stay.”

“Listen Harris--”

“Unless you want just anything waltzing in here to open the Hellmouth you'll leave the wards alone.”

Snyder's sneer had faded, his eyes had widened just a bit and he looked a little shocked. “I don't know what you're--”

Kyle snickered and started to walk around the tiny man. “Being brave isn't he.”

Xander looked at Kyle in confusion for a moment before he smirked. “Oh, you're definitely evil.”

Snyder glanced from boy to boy. “What?”

Heidi followed Kyle's lead and started to walk around him as well. Her voice was a happy chirp that didn't match the predatory look in her eyes. “This place is ours.”

Rhonda followed them, a sinister smile twisting her lips. “Get out.”

Tor joined the hunting circle and laughed. “Or we'll help ourselves.” The others laughed with him as they circled Snyder.

The scent of Snyder's fear was satisfying. “What are you doing?”

Xander smirked, though he felt a deep regret for a man that didn't deserve to get eaten. He sent a silent apology to Bob Flutie’s spirit, wherever it resided. “Principal Flutie wasn't eaten by wild dogs.”

“What?” There was a sheen of nervous sweat on Snyder's forehead now. He shook like cornered prey.

Xander continued. “He was eaten by Laughing Dogs.” All five of them laughed then, their eyes glowing as they cackled, and the stench of urine filled the air. “Get out of our Library.”

Snyder had never run so fast as he dashed out of their circle. Heidi was still cackling, though it was more human now.

“That was fun.”

Giles was smirking and Xander saw a bit of Ripper peeking out from behind those glasses. “I found it amusing. Now, weapons training.”

“Damn.”
Xander took a bite out of his sandwich while he made the correction to his homework. Giles peered at the worksheet. “Do you see what you did wrong?”

“Err, sort of?”

“Xander, if I just give you the answers it doesn't really help you.”

He rolled his eyes. “I know, but I sort of get it.”

“Try the next one.”

“Sure Dad.”

“Cheeky brat.”

Yep.” Xander looked back to his homework, while he nibbled on his food, glad he'd decided to pack a lunch instead of braving the cafeteria. The sudden slamming open of the library doors nearly made him drop his food. He looked over his shoulder with a glare in place...and could only gape.

Buffy strode into the room, covered in pink goo with a much cleaner Willow trailing along behind. Giles was the first to regain speech.

“What on earth happened to you?”

Buffy stood in place and glared down at her ruined clothes before turning a pout on her Watcher. “Billy Shurner turned into a giant pink slug with lots of teeth at lunch. Heidi and I dumped a bunch of salt on him...and he exploded.”

Willow dazedly sat at the table beside Giles while studiously keeping her gaze away from their food. “I may never eat again.”

Buffy followed her to the table and placed a large blue stone on its surface. Giles looked at it then at her. “And that is?”

“All that's left of Billy ... besides the goo. I'm going to shower now.” She turned on her heel and strode back out of the library. Willow continued to stare blankly at the stone.

Xander looked at her. “What set him off? He always seemed pretty normal to me...I mean occasionally he smelt funny, but he ran track so he sweat a lot.”

Willow gulped. “Amber Benson turned him down...so he tried to eat her.”

“Wow...some guys just can't handle rejection—Ow! Willow!”

Xander made a detour by Larry's locker on his way out of the building. The Quarterback was shoving books into his bag and hadn't noticed him.

He tapped the taller boy on the arm and smiled when Larry grinned at him. “You okay? Buffy said there was weirdness at lunch.”
“Yeah, I'm cool.” Larry blinked. “It's strange though, I don't remember much. I mean it’s all a blur. Something about Shurner freaking out?”

He tried to keep the unease off his face; he wasn't quite ready to drag Larry into the world of the Hellmouth. “Glad you're okay.”

Larry nodded. “Thanks. Hey listen, are you and Kyle going to the Bronze tonight?”

“Uh, don't know...I'm not Kyle's official keeper.”

Larry blushed a bit and shuffled another book into his bag. “Sorry.”

Xander sighed. “No it’s...I'm being pulled in like four or five directions. There's you, Cordy, Kyle and Kurama and sometimes Kyle wants us to be a package deal and--”

“Who's Kurama?”

“Oh.” He blinked for a moment; he'd forgotten that Larry didn't know who Kurama was. “My brother's friend. The one I told you about before break.”

“Right...how did that go anyway?”

Xander shrugged. “We went to a concert on Christmas Eve, and then got desert at a fancy restaurant. That restaurant had possibly the best chocolate cake in Japan, maybe the world.”

“Are you two serious?” Larry asked, trying his best to keep his voice even.

“Er...when I told him about you and Cordy and Kyle...he said he was up to the competition.”

Larry's smile was blinding. “So, Bronze?”

“Maybe, I gotta few things to do...Hey Larry, do me a favor.”

“What?”

“Never invite anyone into your home.”

Larry gave him a look that said he thought he was crazy. “Okay...”

“I mean verbally, when you have company just open the door and stand aside. Don't invite them in.”

“Why?”

“Its just part of the Sunnydale weird factor and it will keep you alive longer. Please?” He flashed his puppy eyes, mostly to distract Larry from the topic. Larry stared down at him for a moment before leaning over to kiss him. Their lips pressed firmly together but their tongues did not come out to play. When he pulled back they noticed the silence around them.

And then Harmony, who was across the hall, pointed and laughed. However she was cut off when Xander and Larry were surrounded by The Four. Kyle glared at Harmony until she gulped and hurried away. Larry turned to face the other onlookers.

“There a problem people?”

Another football player, Xander couldn't remember his name, frowned at Larry. “Larry, man...really? Harris?”
Larry shrugged. “Maybe you haven't heard, he's got a harem going.” He aimed a smirk at Xander. “And I'm looking to join.”

Another jock...a basketball player snorted, though he was now looking at Xander as if seeing him for the first time. “Heard about an orgy, but a harem?”

Xander rolled his eyes. “For crying out loud, the orgy was a onetime deal.” His exclamation was met with several surprised stares.

Kyle, ever so helpful, smiled at the crowd. “I'm making a sign-up sheet.”

He absently smacked Kyle's arm before he turned his own glare at the onlookers and he let just a bit of his inner predator shine through. “I really don't care what you guys think of me, never have. Most of you don't even know who I am and that's fine. I'm dating more than one person, and before any of you even think about signing that sheet that I'm sure Kyle actually has you need to know one thing.” He paused for a second and looked over the crowd of pretty and semi-pretty people. He kept his gaze coy and smirked at them. “You cannot handle me.”

The football player moved forward, fully expecting Xander to flinch or move away. Xander however grabbed his arm as he reached for him and twisted him away before letting go and sending him flying into a locker. Larry looked on in mild surprise. “It's a really good thing the season's over.”

The basketball player could barely contain his laughter, and Xander finally remembered his name, Steve Garreth. “You've finally done something that's made you cool Harris.” He walked away chuckling, and that was enough for the rest as they trickled away.

Tor poked Xander's side. “Have you actually told Summers and Willow about Cordy?”

“Nope.”

Heidi giggled. “We'll make sure your funeral is nice, lots of flowers for our Alpha.”

xxx

Kyle watched Xander walk down the school steps, pausing only to wave to someone walking toward him. A gorgeous redhead, one he'd thought they'd left behind in Japan. What the hell was Kurama doing in Sunnydale? He sensed two others join him at his sides before Larry and Cordy's scents surrounded him.

Cordelia was watching Kurama with a critical eye. “She's gorgeous, practically flawless, not an easy feat.”

Larry nodded. “Who is she?”

Kyle smirked. “He is Kurama...our competition.”

XXX
Charms and Curses

Chapter Notes

A/N: So I did some research...sort of. And Varrine is a Prince of Wrath in hell or whatever. The part about him only being able to be summoned by women is something I made up. So yeah. Next chapter takes us back to the episodes.

Child of the Hellmouth
calikocat
word count: 6306

XXX

Xander successfully closed his locker just as Cordelia appeared at his side, looping her arm with his. It was early and there weren't very many people around, the few that were seemed to be doing pretty good impressions of zombies. At least he hoped they were only impersonating zombies, because eww. He focused his gaze on her and gave her a curious look. It certainly looked like Queen C. "You realize we're in public right? Out in the open?"

"Duh."

He looked down at her arm, still looped with his. "Then why?"

"Well--"

Then again maybe he didn't want to know, so he stepped back and pulled his arm away. "I'm not an accessory Cordy. Just because I suddenly have the cool factor doesn't mean anything. I'm still the same Xander." She glared at him and he wondered if maybe he'd gotten things wrong.

"Would you let me talk already?"

"Shoot. Just, you know, not literally."

She rolled her eyes. "Thank you. Now..." She hesitated and a little bit of her usual confidence slipped away and he got a glimpse of a girl he might really want to know someday. She cleared her throat and met his eyes; they really were a pretty hazel color. "I like spending time with you and your weird friends. You do great things and I like being able to help. I like helping keep the big picture in one piece. I don't know if I really like you or if we just have this weird lust thing. But I don't back down from a challenge."

Xander could feel a smile starting on his face as his lips quirked. "You wouldn't be Queen C if you did."

"Damn straight."

He sighed. "Just...let me tell Buffy and Willow first?"

"When?" Her voice was stern and he stared back at her. She blinked in surprise at his obvious challenge.
Tonight at the Bronze. I'll tell them then. But Cordy, you ever belittle me in front of your posse and I walk away.” He stared at her, and she stared back. Once upon a time gazing at an alpha female of Cordy's stature would have left him quaking in his sneakers. But he was an alpha as well and no one's possession. Meeting her eyes was easy, and she didn't look away. He breathed in and a distant whispered laugh rang in his head as her scent filled his nose. Cordy was potential mate material, they could produce some really kick ass offspring...and he needed to think more human like thoughts now.

“Understood. And once we're in the clear and you've escaped bodily harm from Buffy and Willow you can walk me to class tomorrow.” She gave him a small smirk and waltzed away.

Xander snorted and shook his head. “We'll have to disband the 'I hate Cordelia Club'.”

xxx

The Dingo's were playing well tonight, now if only Devon would stop drooling every time he looked in their direction. Darn Buffy and her skimpy tops that showed way too much skin...and he wondered for a moment when he'd started thinking like an overprotective older brother. Hmm...Devon was still drooling into the microphone. Oz, the guy that had saved Willow during the career week fiasco, had his eyes glued on Willow. Oz was someone he could approve of, he'd already proven he was willing to take on damage to keep her safe. Now if only Willow would come out of her shell a little more and realize someone had noticed her, that someone was interested.

His eyes drifted toward the redhead and he mentally nodded in approval. Good, she'd noticed. However her eyes moved from the boy rocking his guitar on stage to him. He'd been doing well until then too. He could stand up to just one set of concerned eyes but two sets were too much.

He fidgeted under Buffy's gaze. Both girls were starting to get worried but he couldn't help it. This was it, the big tell all...well the tell all concerning the weird mutual lust thing he and Cordelia had going on. He wondered if this might be a huge mistake...but if Cordy was willing to take things public the least he could do was tell his girls before they found out from someone else.

Just as he was about to talk, Buffy beat him in breaking the silence. “Is everything okay Xander?”

Xander looked at her. “Maybe. I think so.” He nodded absentely, mentally gathering his strength for the task at hand.

“Xander?” Willow was giving him big worried eyes and his protective nature kicked in. The last thing he ever wanted was someone wasting time worrying about him. He wasn't some hot house flower that wilted under a little harsh treatment. He sighed and took the plunge. “We have to disband the ‘I Hate Cordelia Club’.”

Buffy did that cute nose wrinkle thing that she always did when she was confused. “Huh?”

Willow's voice was much more in control. “Why?”

He gulped. “Cordy and I...might have a thing.”

Buffy blinked at him, and frowned. “A thing?”

“What thing?”

He flicked his eyes over to Willow. “We're not sure yet. It started out with her dragging me into closets to make out but I think I started to care and then I called it off because I'm no one's dirty secret. But Cordy is willing to go public which means no dirty secrets but I wanted to tell you guys
first to get the screaming and possible bodily harm out of the way.”

The slayer looked at him in awe. “That was Willow-grade babble.”

“Thank you.”

Willow was giving him a face that looked to be a close cousin to her resolve face. “Anything you want to add to that Mister?”

“Uh...I think Cordy might want to watch me make out with Larry...or Kyle...possibly both.”

Buffy scoffed. “Oh is that all? Everyone wants to watch…err…I'm not going to finish that sentence.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “No more secrets?”

“Uh...”

Buffy nailed him with a more serious look. “Xander?”

“Kendra might have spent the night...in my bed. We uh, didn't go all the...way though.”

Willow's gaze had grown a little distant at this newest revelation. “Wow. Kendra plays both teams.”

Xander stared at his bestest Willow-buddy with an open mouth, while Buffy just looked confused again. She blinked and asked; “Huh?”

Xander snickered. “You too Wills? I thought I smelled your shampoo on her that night.”

Buffy shuddered. “You know what...I think I've heard enough. Cordy's already part of the group. So, it's okay if you two have a thing.”

Willow nodded and gave his hand a pat. “You weren't a very good treasurer anyway.”

Buffy's word of the night seemed to be “Huh?” so he answered. “I was treasurer of the ‘I hate Cordy Club’.”

“Oh.”

Willow nodded. “So Cordy is pack?”

He grinned, but then, he felt it slip. “Yeah...actually that's the weird part.”

Buffy smirked. “Really?”

“Funny. No, what I mean is that Cordy has always smelled and felt like pack. And I don't know why.”

Willow blinked. “Huh, that is weird.” She blinked again. “Uh, guys. I think I'm seeing things.”

Buffy perked up a bit. “Things?”

Willow gestured toward the stage where the Dingoes were playing. “There's a cloud above the stage.” They looked toward the stage and Willow was right. There was indeed a cloud, or something very cloud-like, floating above the band.

They all stared for a second before Buffy narrowed her eyes at the thing. “No, I see it too.”
He nodded. “And I make three.” They continued to watch the cloud. It started to move, almost like it was twitching. Within its misty depths it looked like a pair of hands was starting to take shape and reach out. “Damn, I was really hoping the Dingoes had a new special effect going.”

“Not likely.” Willow grimaced. “Oz says they don't have the money for that kind of thing.”

Buffy sighed, “Figures.”

They watched for a second longer before Xander sighed. “We should probably do something.”

Their resident slayer nodded in agreement. “Yeah, but how do you kill a cloud?”

“Guys, it could be a neutral. Right?” Willow asked hopefully.

“Xan?”

He nodded at Buffy and closed his eyes, feeling out with his inner predator. Sometimes he wondered if blending what was left of the hyena with himself was the best thing he could have done. However she'd been helpful so far. But sometimes...sometimes he could feel something else inside of him. It worried him.

He shook off his thoughts and concentrated. When he locked onto the cloud his eyes popped back open. “Whatever it is, it's pissed and hungry.”

Buffy glared at the cloud. “Aren't they always? Let's move.” As one they got up from the table and headed toward the cloud. Luckily it had drifted away from the band and was heading toward the center of the dance floor. It was lucky for Oz and the guys but not so much for the dancers. They started to circle it, all of them arming themselves. Willow had a stake in one hand, and a mini water gun filled with holy water. Buffy was eagerly cracking her knuckles in anticipation, and Xander was wishing the rest of the pack was there.

It was almost like the cloud knew it was being stalked because it suddenly it expanded and let out a blood curdling shrieking noise. The scream drowned out the band but not the sudden panic that erupted from the clubbers. He could literally feel the creature's blood-lust dance across his skin. The cloud pulsed red, shook, spun and made a dive for Willow. And he saw red; no one hurt his Willow-buddy. No one. He tackled the cloud, surprised to find that it was solid, while at the corner of his vision he saw Oz drag Willow away. Willow who was shooting in his direction with the holy water. The cloud sizzled when the water hit it. Interesting.

They tumbled and Xander pushed the cloud in the last direction he'd seen Buffy, and briefly wondered why the air suddenly smelled of blood. He ended up in a crouch and looked up to see Buffy beating the crap out of the cloud with a pool cue. The cloud roared a bit and...dissipated. He blinked. Buffy carefully poked at the air where it had disappeared with her current weapon.

She met his eyes. “I don't think I killed it. Usually when I kill things they dust, or go squelch, or something equally yucky.”

He nodded. “Yeah...Willow!” He turned to see Willow practically hovering over him, with Oz hovering behind her. “You okay?”

“Me? I'm fine! Oz saved me...from the weird swarm of night bees.”

He blinked. “Okay...”

Buffy was beside them instantly. “Yeah, those night bees, vicious little bugs. But we're all fine.”
“Oh...good. Then we should probably go home...hey Oz, maybe you should check on Devon and the guys?”

Oz gave one last look at Willow, but she smiled at him and he smiled back, before walking away. Buffy snorted. “Subtle, thy name is not Xander.”

“Xander.” Willow murmured, kneeling by him.

“What?”

“You're bleeding.”

He rolled his eyes. “Really? I hadn't noticed. I was too distracted by the pain.”

Buffy ignored them both and turned him to get a better look. “Looks like claw marks. Can you walk?”

“It's my arm that's wounded Buff, not my legs.”

She poked his good arm. “We need a first aid kit.”

He nodded. “Giles' place it is. We gotta tell him anyway.”

xxx

Giles opened his door on the fifth knock, and though it was early from their perspective, he was already dressed in sleeping pants...and no shirt. And his hair was tousled. “Good lord. What happened?”

Buffy, like Willow and himself stared, at their chosen parental unit; however, it was the Slayer who answered with confusion in her voice. “There was a cloud monster at the Bronze...why are you buff? You're too old to be buff.”

Xander nudged her. “I'm still bleeding here.”

She blushed in embarrassment. “Sorry Xan.”

Giles cleared his throat and stepped aside. “Right. Let's take care of that.” They entered the apartment and Willow headed straight for the kitchen while he collapsed on the couch. Buffy was still eying Giles suspiciously, her world view still shaken with the idea of Giles being fit.

Willow reappeared with the kit and sat beside him. He shifted to give her better access to his arm as she set about cleaning his wound. However a smell tickled his nose and he wrinkled it in vague childish horror as he realized just why Giles' hair was so tousled. And he simply couldn't help himself. “Sorry for interrupting your night in.”

Willow and Buffy froze and looked at Giles, who blushed, just a bit. “Er...yes...apology accepted.”

Willow gave him big innocent eyes and asked him in a small voice; “Daddy do you have a woman upstairs?” Giles glared at her and Buffy sat down heavily in the armchair.

“Oh god. My mind just went where no daughter should ever go.”

Xander snickered as Willow went back to treating his wound. Giles let out a put upon sigh. “Jenny is still asleep; do try to keep it down.”
Buffy nodded, still a little in shock. “Kay.”

“Good, now what's this about a cloud...monster?”

Willow frowned as she finished cleaning the wound. “It was weird. Xander and Cordelia have been making out in closets.”

Giles looked at him pointedly. “Do we need to have a talk about the facts of life Xander?”

Xander smiled. “I totally deserved that and no we don't.”

Buffy snorted. “Guys, can we not talk about that?”

“Right.” He inspected the bandage Willow had applied, she'd done good work. “Back to the demon...well we think it’s a demon.”

“A cloud demon?”

Willow shrugged. “Well it looked cloud-like, but it clawed Xander up. Which is why we needed a first aid kit.”

Xander nodded. “It went after Willow.”

Buffy shifted in her chair. “Xander said it was pissed and hungry.”

Xander shuddered. “I could feel its blood-lust Giles...and then Buffy beat it up with a pool cue.”

“Really? Fascinating.”

“So what kind of monster looks like a cloud?” Buffy asked him.

“But is solid.” Willow pointed out as she rose to put the first aid kit away.

“And had the munchies.” Xander added.

“You lot do realize that I don't know everything don't you?” At their wide-eyed looks he sighed. “Yes, well. Let's do some research shall we?”

At that Buffy frowned. “How long we talking?”

Her Watcher gave her a confused look. “What? As long as it takes, obviously.”

Xander nodded and stretched, careful of his wound. “We may need cover stories.”

Giles parroted his earlier question. “What?”

For the moment Xander ignored him. “Wills are you parents out of town?”

“Yep.” Her voice answered, coming from the kitchen.

Buffy bounced up and reached for the phone. “Cool. Then I'll tell Mom I'm staying at your house Wills. Xan?”

“I'll tell my mom I'm staying at Tor's. He can probably cover for me.” He looked at Willow as she reentered the room. “Do we have clothes here?”

“Yep.”
Giles made a spluttering noise. “Since when?”

Buffy blinked. “Uh...Xan?”

He tilted his head in thought. “I think we each stashed a bag here back in August.”

“Prepared for anything, are you?” Giles muttered as shook his head in wonder.

Willow grinned as she headed toward the nearest bookcase. “Of course. We’re Scoobies.”

Xander nodded. “Which is like a hundred times more awesome than scouts.”

Giles snorted and headed toward his books. “Let's get to it then.”

xxx

Xander opened his eyes, groaned and rolled off the couch before stumbling to the bathroom. Giles' couch was not a comfy place to sleep, next time he'd unfold the stupid thing. When he was done in the bathroom and a little more conscious he entered the kitchen. Ms. Calendar was already dressed and drinking a cup of something.

“Do I smell coffee?”

She smiled. “Morning. And yes.”

“Thank the gods.”

“Long night?”

“Yes, and I am in great envy of the extra sleep you got.” He reached for a mug and poured himself a cup before he sat across from her. A scoop of creamer and sugar later, he was sighing in bliss at the first sip. When the smell of rain and sugar cookies teased his nose, he stood back up, much to Ms. Calendar’s confusion, and retrieved another cup. By the time Willow shuffled into the room he'd taken the still hot water from the kettle and had the cup ready for her.

As she reached for the mug she gave him a hopeful and sleepy smile. “Coffee?”

“Hot chocolate.”

She sighed but took the cup and headed toward the table. “You blow up one tree house and you're marked for life.” As she sat down beside Ms. Calendar she looked closer at her drink and pouted.

“No marshmallows?”

“Nope.”

“We need to restock his cabinets.”

Ms. Calendar had a thoughtful look on her face. “I had wondered about all that junk food.”

Before either of them could comment Buffy wandered in with a yawn. “Juice?”

He shrugged and settled back at the table with his coffee. “No idea.”

Ms Calendar nodded. “There's apple and orange in the fridge.”

“Yay juice!” She set about getting a glass and pouring herself some apple juice before sitting beside
Xander. They sat in silence for a moment, each enjoying their drinks.

Then Giles breezed in, a flurry of angry motion. “Some idiot female is summoning Varrine, the Prince of Wrath.” The following silence was not a good one.

Xander wondered for a moment if he could slip out of the room without any of the women noticing. “Uh, Giles. Can you not insult the womenfolk when we're currently outnumbered by them?”

“What?” The Englishman looked confused for a moment and then he noticed the three women glaring at him. “Er, right. Sorry. I haven't had my tea yet. I have no idea what came over me.”

Ms. Calendar grinned. “Nice save England.”

Buffy looked as if she didn't agree but didn't mention it. “So who is Varrine and what happened last night?”

Giles used the still hot water from the kettle and started on fixing his tea. “Varrine is the Prince of Wrath. A high ranking demon of Hell. Only women can summon him and there are only two reasons why he would be summoned.”

Xander set his coffee down. “I'm guessing one involves wrath.”

Giles nodded. “It does, or you could split hairs and say revenge.”

Willow looked a little confused. “It went after me first...and I don't think I've made anyone really mad. What's the other reason?”

It was Ms. C who answered. “Procreation.”

Buffy gagged a bit. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

Unfortunately Giles nodded. “The woman who summoned him either wants revenge on someone or wants to have his child.”

Xander raised his hand a bit. “Or they're a crazy person.”

“We have way too many of those.” Buffy sighed. “Is there a way to track him?”

“Not really.” Giles stayed at the counter, there were no seats left at the table. “What you saw last night was a poor manifestation. That feeble attempt at a summoning wouldn't have left any remarkable energy signals for that. In fact that's probably why he went after Willow. He wasn't strong enough to go after anyone else.”

“Thanks Giles.”

“Sorry.”

Xander sipped at his coffee, a thoughtful look on his face. “So we're talking about a woman with power...just not much power.”

Ms. C drummed her fingers lightly on the table. “Yes, but I don't know of any local practitioners that would be so reckless.”

He sighed and laid his head down on the table. “Great.”

Buffy glared at her empty glass. “I hate the waiting game.”
Willow nodded and looked longingly at Xander's half finished coffee. “Amen Sister.”

xxx

Xander slammed his locker shut, score one for him. Nothing had fallen out this time. The smell of Cordelia's expensive perfume surrounded him and he knew she was behind him. He turned to face her just as she sidled up to him. “Morning Cordy.”

“Did you forget something?”

“Uh...don't think so.” He glanced at the book in his hand. “Nope.”

She raised an eyebrow at him and poked his chest with her index finger. “I meant walking me to class. It's third period already.”

Damn. “Right, sorry. We got distracted by the demon of the week and spent a lot of last night researching.”

She stepped back a bit. “So you didn't tell them?”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her back into his personal space. “I told them. But then there was a demon attack and we were otherwise occupied. They seemed okay with it though.”

“Good, not that I care about Buffy's opinion but you can't walk me to class without all your limbs. Now, let's make with the walking.” She wrapped her arm around his and he winced and let out a pained hiss. “What?”

“Easy on the arm Cor.”

She frowned and lifted the sleeve of his t-shirt, her eyes widened at the size of the bandage. “What happened?”

“Last night's attack.”

“You're okay though...just a scratch?” Her hand trailed over the bandage in a barely there touch.

“Yeah, just a scratch. A really deep scratch.” He smiled at her. “I'll heal though. Now, let's get to the walking thing.”

xxx

Larry settled beside him at the table, and Xander shifted his lunch to make room for Larry's tray. Larry looked at the food with a grimace. “How do they expect us to get anything done when they try to feed us this crap?”

Xander shook his head. “No clue. I'm just glad it hasn't killed me.”

Larry continued to glare at the food. “It would be hard to die from.”

“True. We've had it every day since kindergarten, we've had too much exposure to die from it now...hey blue jello.” He ogled the blue jello having just noticed it on Larry's tray.

“What'll you give me for it?”

Xander gave him a hopeful look. “My green jello?”
“Not a fair trade.”

Xander stuck his lip out in a pout, it wasn’t his usual full puppy face, but it was enough to distract Larry while he leaned in for a quick kiss on the cheek. He batted his lashes. “Please?”

Larry blushed and handed over the jello. “Evil.”

“Yay! Thank you!”

“Definitely evil.” Xander just grinned at the grumbling jock as he set the jello aside to save it for last.

They talked for a while, ate the questionable lunch, because really, none of the vending machines had anything especially filling. However, just as Xander was reaching for his jello he sensed the blood-lust from the night before prickle over his skin. He sat straighter and looked around, but saw nothing.

“Xander?”

Xander held up a hand for silence...and he looked up. Above them was a cloud of mist, and from the center two bright red eyes glared down at him. As he stared it appeared to gain more substance and hands started to reach out at them. “Move! Now!” He pushed back from the table, managing to drag Larry with him; which was a good move because the table was reduced to scrap wood a moment later.

In retaliation Xander grabbed the nearest weapon, a cafeteria chair, and stated to hit the demon. And like the night before it dissipated with a wailing screech.

Larry shivered behind him. “What was that?”

“Tell you when we don't have an audience.” He whispered back before looking around at said audience. “Uh...the meatloaf...tasted kind of off...” Gee, that was believable. Sort of. He ignored their continued stares and dragged Larry out of the room. Once they were in the hall Xander relaxed, but kept his hand on Larry's arm.

“What happened in there?”

Xander blinked at him. “Did you see the misty cloud thing?”

“Yeah.”

“It was a demon.”

“...seriously?”

“Yeah. Come on, Giles can give you the 411.”

Larry snorted. “The librarian is going to tell me about demons.”

Xander nodded and tugged on his hand. “And why Buffy can break you in half.”

“I didn't want to know that.”

Xander just grinned at him and continued to pull him towards the library...but stopped when he realized something very important. “Crap. My jello.”

xxx
There had been no sign of the demon since lunch, which they were all somewhat thankful for. And now, unfortunately, Larry had been given the introductory course on the Hellmouth and its nasties. He'd really been hoping to avoid that...but forewarned was forearmed or something like that. However Larry still looked a little shaky after watching him spar with Buffy. And that didn't sit well with Xander, the way the older boy now looked at him with caution. Nice move Xander, why don't you just chase all potential partners away with your scary not quite humanness.

Speaking of...er, thinking of not quite humanness. He held his hand up to signal Rhonda to stop. She lowered her sword and tilted her head. “What is it?”

“Willow's here...brought someone with her.” And right on cue the library doors opened and in walked two gorgeous redheads. One walked with caution, the other had a dreamy look on her face. “Willow?”

She beamed. “I like Oz. Also, you have company.” This was all she said as she wandered to their table.

The other redhead smiled in amusement at her before focusing on Xander. “Hello.”

Xander smiled. “Hey Kurama.”

“May I speak to you for a moment?”

“Sure.”

Kurama held out his hand and Xander took it lightly and let himself be lead out of the room.

Larry, who had been sitting at the table with Kyle while Xander and Buffy had been training with Rhonda and Heidi, looked very confused. “What just happened?”

Kyle gave his arm a sympathetic squeeze. “That was Harris trailing after a pretty face.”

Buffy frowned. “That was Kurama right? The pretty guy that's friends with Yusuke?”

Willow nodded. “Yep, he's nice.”

Larry turned a nearly pouting face to Kyle. “Does he do this often?”

Kyle shrugged. “I've never seen him trail after either of us or Queen C. We usually just drag him along.”

Larry looked thoughtful though he kept an eye on the hand that Kyle left on his arm. “Maybe that's where we're screwing up. We're going to him instead of letting him come to us.”

Kyle snorted. “Please, if we waited on him, we'd never get anywhere.”

Heidi folded her arms. “Alpha is stingy with his kisses.”

Kyle growled at her, she growled back, eyes flashing. Buffy made sure to stay between them, a scowl on her face, just a hint of a growl escaped the slayer and they stared at her. “That's enough. Xander is pack, not an object. Act like it.”

Heidi still looked surprised. “You growled. You've never growled before.” The smile on her face was just a little creepy. “I like it.”

Buffy snorted. “Put the weapons away, we'll do some stretches to loosen up, and then we'll patrol.”
Kyle tilted his head. “Rain check? I want to walk Larry home.”

“You'll be okay alone?”

Kyle smiled at her; it always felt good when his alphas were concerned for him. “I'll be fine.”

“Good. Willow?”

“I'm staying to help Giles for a while. Tor's on his way, he can walk me home.”

Buffy nodded and looked at Rhonda and Heidi. “So, patrol?”

Both girls nodded and Rhonda grinned. “We'll follow.”

xxx

Xander let Kurama loosely hold his hand as they walked down the school steps. “So?”

Kurama smiled that soft smile at him. “I'm nearly finished.” His face held some mild amusement. “I was surprised by the variety of ingredients your local magic shops supply.”

“Cool, thanks for this. It means a lot to me and will be all kinds of helpful.”

Kurama squeezed his hand just bit before tracing his fingertips over the palm. “Are you free tonight?”

“Yep, well I have to patrol later.”

“Join me for dinner then, afterward I can patrol with you.”

“It's a date...err that's what you were after wasn't it.”

Kurama chuckled and leaned down to place a kiss on his forehead. “I'll pick you up at 6:30.” And then he released Xander's hand and walked away.

“How the heck does he know where I live?” Xander asked no one in particular. However he knew Cordelia was behind him.

“Kyle said that was our competition.” She'd moved beside him and watched Kurama walk away. “I knew you had good taste...but wow.”

“Yeah, he has that affect on most people.”

“So...you're going out with him tonight?”

“Yeah...why? Did you want to--?”

She smirked at him. “You should introduce us later.”

He rolled his eyes.

xxx

The next morning found Xander spacing out during the substitute's lecture. History was normally pretty sleep inducing, but this lady was just bad. The way she talked it sounded like she approved of the Holocaust. Which was evil and bad and he still had the occasional nightmare from the stories Willow's great grandpa had told him years ago. Crazy schizo teacher. Willow looked like she wanted
to throw something sharp and pointy at her.

Deciding he didn't want to listen anymore he tuned her out and thought about the date with Kurama. It had been nice. Not sure what to expect he'd dressed in a nicer pair of jeans and the blue polo shirt he'd worn to the frat party. Evidently it was a good choice; Kurama seemed to like it given the way he'd stared.

They'd gone to a restaurant, nothing especially fancy, it had a friendly atmosphere and good food, and the company was nice. They'd talked about the work Kurama was doing for him, their friends in Tokyo, and the current boogly of the week. The concern Kurama showed for him was touching...but he wasn't helpless. Sometimes he thought the fox forgot that.

Which became the case during patrol. Xander hadn't gotten to dust a single vamp, or kill a single demon, of course that was partly because the only demon they'd seen was Clem. And Clem was only out buying more cheesy puffs. But still, he hadn't gotten to show off any of his moves, or his ability to hunt. That seemed important for some reason. He needed a hunting partner...not a keeper, not a protector.

Sure it was cool watching Kurama decapitate vamp after vamp with just a twitch of his rose whip...but really. However he'd kept his displeasure to himself and let Kurama walk him home, then let himself get lost in the good night kiss on his front porch. As soon as Kurama was out of sight he'd gone inside, said goodnight to his Mom and went to his room.

The date clothes had come off, and the black patrol clothes had gone on. Jessica had still been awake, so out the window he'd gone. He'd wandered the dale for nearly an hour, staked two vamps, and somehow ended up at the factory.

Spike was outside again. Almost as if he was waiting for him. The vampire's face was still scarred. His hands still shook. He wasn't eating properly...and Xander wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Spike lifted his head, sniffed, and his blue eyes found him in the darkness. “Going to get bitten yet pet. Skulking about in the shadows like that. Not sure if I should be worried. Or flattered.”

Xander smirked and stepped closer until he was in front of the chair. The smell of depression and sickness surrounded Spike. He'd nearly gagged. “You aren't eating.”

“And how am I supposed to hunt?”

“Isn't Drusilla taking care of you? You took care of her right?”

Spike gave him an annoyed look. “Princess isn't quite all there, in case you didn't know.”

Oh yeah. He'd never actually met the vampiress, but he should have remembered the part about her being crazy. Silly him. “What would you like?”

“Wot?”

“To eat.”

“That's a stupid question pet.”

Xander frowned. “I won't bring you a human. I might not be quite human myself but I won't do that.” An image of Tony flashed in his mind. “Well...not when I don't have easy access to someone I hate.”
“There someone out there you'd feed to a vamp?”

Xander shrugged. “Vamps may have already got him. I don't know but he disappeared.”

Spike tilted his head in curiosity. “Just who are we talking about luv?”

A scowl crossed his face before he could stop it. “My Dad.”

The flash of yellow eyes and the accompanying growl sent a little thrill through him. “Wanker is dead then?”

“Don't know. He and my big brother had words; actually bro had a good right hook for him and left him unconscious in the front yard. Next morning he was gone. No blood on the ground though. He could be dead or he could have walked away on his own. Don't care. He's gone.”

“Good on your brother.” Spike smirked and Xander worried, he could still see the tremors going through the vampire's body.

“Do you eat demons?”

“Occasionally.”

Xander nodded. “I'll be back.” He'd still had an itch to scratch anyway; he needed to hunt after the frustrating patrol with Kurama.

The look on Spike's face when he'd come back with live food had been priceless. The tussle and minor wounds his prey had given him during the scuffle were worth the expression on the vampire's face. So was the utter bliss Spike expressed when his fangs sank into the neck. Xander had only been able to watch in fascination.

When the life was gone from the demon and the last of its blood swallowed Spike had looked up at him curiously. “There's a strange scent on you tonight.”

He nodded, not sure what he should say. “Date.”

Spike's eyes had narrowed and flickered gold. “With a demon.”

“Kitsune.”

Spike's eyes had widened. “Get around don't you.”

He'd shrugged. “He's the one courting.”

The smirk aimed at him was glorious. “You don't sound happy about that. From what I've heard they're very good at seducing virgins.”

Xander raised a brow. “Unless there's something you want to tell me there’s no virgin here tonight.” He hoped Spike wouldn't call his bluff; he'd done enough to not be considered a virgin...hadn't he?

“Then what's the problem pet?”

Another shrug, there wasn't really an answer to that. “Don't know.” He knew he needed to leave, though he didn't want to. “You done?”

Spike released the corpse. “Not as filling, but it’s better than the puppies and dead things Dru brings.”
Xander growled a bit. “She's bringing you dead things? How are you supposed to get better?”

Spike gave him a curious look. “You're forgetting something important pet. We're vampires, evil. Could eat you.” His eyes smoldered. “Want to anyway.”

Xander picked up the body of the small demon he'd caught; he felt no remorse for its death. It had been hunting Amy Madison. “Eating me for food wouldn't be fun.”

“Oh?”

Xander gave him an innocent look. “You'd only be able to enjoy me once.” Then he'd walked away, corpse over his shoulder, and Spike chuckling in the background.

He blinked as his mind returned to the present. The cloud demon was back...Varin or whatever Giles had called it. And it was hovering over the substitute...whose name he didn't even know.

She'd seen the cloud and screamed. “No! I would have given you many strong offspring!” Then the cloud descended on her and she disintegrated.

Xander blinked then looked up and met Willow's equally surprised face. “Whoa.” She nodded in agreement.

Cordelia tapped his shoulder. “Does this mean class is canceled?”

“Good enough reason for me, how about you Wills?”

“Yep.”

“Cool. Let's go raid Giles' office for snacks. Coming Cordy?”

“Sure.”

The three of them left their classmates sitting in stunned silence.

XXX
So Many Presents

Child of the Hellmouth
calikocat
So Many Presents
word count: 10,208

XXX

It was a slow night, and a slow patrol, but not a boring one. Mostly because Xander kept excellent company in the form of Buffy, Willow and Kyle. The company however, didn't stop the guilt that had been eating at him. He honestly didn't know how long he could keep Spike and Drusilla's survival a secret, and really, he probably shouldn't. Spike wasn't a threat at the moment...Drusilla on the other hand was active. The whole thing made him feel off-balance. Not to mention he could feel something off about the entire town. It was like something was coming...or waiting...holding its breath for a big event.

The clicking in his head was almost audible and he decided to bring the thought to light. “Has anyone else noticed the lack of vamps tonight? And last night, and the night before that?”

Kyle nodded. “I haven't seen a dead guy all week.”

Buffy sighed and her shoulders slumped. “I was hoping it was just me.”

Willow tilted her head in confusion. “Er, isn't a lack of dead people, not just the bitey kind, but any kind a good thing?”

Kyle snickered. “What she said.”

Xander gave them a brief smile and shook his head, dashing the hopeful look from Willow’s face. “Not really. If they're not out and about eating, then they've gotta be somewhere else.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose before glancing at him. “Think they might have a new leader?”

“Possibly.” He did his best to hide his wince.

Kyle however had sharp eyes. “Spike and Drusilla?” His gaze was thoughtful as he gave Xander a look. The girls didn't notice the byplay.

Willow bounced a little, in a worried way. “But they're dust.” Guilt shot through Xander and Kyle brushed against him. Willow's worried bounce was followed by a frown. “Aren't they dust?”

Xander didn't meet Kyle's eyes as he answered her. “That ritual that Spike was doing might have made Drusilla better. They've been around for a while. We shouldn't write them off just yet.”

Buffy nodded, but there was no smile on her face. “Xan's right. Something's happening, or going to happen. I can feel it.”

The tiniest bit of relief made itself known in his heart. “Oh...good.” Three sets of questioning eyes fastened on him. “I thought I was going crazy. Been feeling on edge lately.”

Buffy smiled a bit and shook her head. “No...not just you.”

Kyle looked from one Alpha to the next. “So what do we do?”
Buffy shrugged. “We wait.”

Xander nodded. “We train.”

Willow’s bounce had a happier step to it. “We eat mini pizzas.”

Buffy and Xander stopped...and stared at Willow. Buffy folded her arms. “Willow you didn't.”

Willow stopped and stared back, nervously meeting their eyes. “I only accessed his memory for the recipes...minus the drugs.”

Xander shook his head. “Sometimes I worry about you.”

Kyle blinked. “Did she do what I think she did?”

Willow gave him a sheepish smile. “Maybe?”

“Crazy Tree-girl.”

Willow pouted.

xxx

Kyle walked beside him silently, and had been since they'd walked Willow home. Buffy had wandered off to meet Tor and the girls for a brief sweep of a newer cemetery.

As they got to Xander's front yard Kyle stopped, as if he had something important to say. Xander stopped as well and turned to face his beta. “Kyle?”

Kyle looked at him closely. “What was all that about?”

“Be specific.”

“You know what I'm talking about. You smell like guilt Harris.”

He sighed, it was time to face the music. “Spike...isn't dust.” He kept his eyes steady, watching Kyle's posture change and become more cautious...even angry.

Kyle's eyes flashed green, like a warning. “Secrets from the pack are bad Harris.”

“I know.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since we got back from Tokyo. I went on patrol. Caught his scent. He and Dru are holed up in an old factory..”

Kyle's voice came out as a snarl of accusation. “Were you just gonna wait for them to come after us? To kill us?”

“Kyle, I have no idea what Drusilla is up to. But right now Spike isn't doing anything.”

“Two kisses Xander. That's all you've had from him.”

“Four kisses now.”

Kyle snorted and shook his head. “I can't deal with this. He's a demon.”
“So am I...partly.”

“The Hyenas...”

“There's demon blood in me Kyle. You know that.” He held back the sadness that enveloped him as Kyle shook his head again turned away from him and left. The regret deepened when Kyle never looked back.

There was no way he'd be able to sleep now, not for a while at least. So Xander straightened his shoulders and headed back into the night.

Kyle trailed behind Xander from a safe distance, staying downwind so his Alpha wouldn't catch his scent. He acknowledged Marshal with a nod as the small Spirit Beast joined him.

You know about Spike then?

“Yeah. What is he thinking?”

You seemed okay with it before.

“When I thought Spike was dust...What is he doing now?”

What's it look like? He's hunting.

Watching Xander hunt always sent a thrill through him. One minute he was the goofy Harris kid he'd always known, the next he was...grace...a primal beast moving with intent to kill. The demon never knew what hit it as Xander threw a dagger to take out one of it's legs and trip it before tackling it and breaking the bones necessary to disable it...but not kill it. For good measure they watched Xander hit it hard enough to render it unconscious.

“I thought we were being civil to peaceful demons.” Kyle muttered.

Look up ahead genius. That demon was hunting.”

Kyle looked further down the street...and saw Jonathan walking his dog. “Oh...why didn't he just kill it then?”

You'll see.

Kyle gave Marshal a confused look but followed the cat as he trailed along, keeping Xander in sight at all times.

When they got to the old factory Kyle tensed when he saw Spike sitting outside...in a wheelchair. He froze. “He looks like crap.”

Well, an organ sort of fell on him. And then a church burned down around him.

“I think maybe we're a bad influence on you.”

Quiet. This is better than a tv drama.

Kyle rolled his eyes but kept quiet as they watched. Xander approached Spike with the demon over
his shoulder. Carefully he placed the unconscious creature in the vampire's lap, and Spike wasted no
time sinking his fangs into it's neck and drinking it down. What Kyle noticed most however, was the
intensity on Xander's face as he watched Spike.

When Spike finished he licked his lips and spoke to Xander, but they were too far away to hear what
he said. Nor could they hear Xander's reply. Spike reached up, his hand open in invitation as he
touched Xander's cheek. Kyle watched in shock as his Alpha leaned into the touch, the simple
gesture, and turned his face to kiss the vampire's palm. Spike's smile was soft...and mischievous at
the same time. Nothing else was said as Xander took the demon's corpse and walked away from the
injured vampire.

Come on.

Kyle gave him a disbelieving look as Marshal trotted over to Spike. “Stupid cat with a death wish.”
But he followed him anyway, he was too curious not too. As he moved closer he finally caught
Spike's scent. Demon blood, pain, depression...lust. Another step and Spike noticed them. Busted.
However that seemed to be what Marshal had in mind as he kept getting closer. And since Kyle
couldn't leave Marshal alone with a potential threat he had no choice to move closer as well.

Once they were just out of arms reach Kyle stopped. And stared at the scars on Spike's face. He
moved cautiously, circling the vampire and observing him, he stopped when he was facing him
again. And squatted down so that he was more at eye level with him.

“You're one of his.”

Kyle tilted his head. “One of whose?”

“Xander's cackling children.”

He felt a growl slip from his throat, a surge of protectiveness filling him. “If you're playing with
him...”

“I'm not. But I have to be careful. Dru...she sees things. You might call her a psychic of sorts.”

“You hurt my Alpha, and the pack will suck the marrow from your bones.”

Spike merely blinked at him. “Well, that's vivid.” Kyle snarled as he stood and ran off into the night.
Spike looked down at Marshal. “And you kitten?”

Marshal stood on his hind legs, put his front paws on Spike's knee and looked him in the eye.
*Xander had some bad nightmares when he thought you were dust. Kyle witnessed one. It scared
him.* The look of wonder on Spike's face was a comfort, as was the hand that reached to scratch
behind his ear.

“Go home kitten.”

Marshal nodded and left.

xxx

Buffy gazed up at Angel, putting as much emotion in her eyes as humanely possible. She had to
make him understand how important this was. How much it scared her. “Angel she killed you right
in front of me.”

“She's dust Buffy. We don't have to worry about her.”
“No...its...Xander and I both feel something coming. The vamps are being scarce, they aren't just wandering around all random like...which means there might be a Vamp in charge...and you used to run with them. They're pretty tough right? Spike and Drusilla?”

Angel frowned down at her, disbelief clear on his handsome face. “Xander thinks that?” His expression was beyond skeptical.

“I trust his judgment. He is one of my best friends.”

“Oh.”

She shrugged. “Just not when it comes to you...but you know he has gotten better. He doesn't rag on me about you anymore. So anyway...we're both worried...” Angel leaned down and kissed her, his tongue slipped into her mouth and stole the words right off it. When he leaned away again she stared at him blankly. “What were we talking about?”

“Your dreams, and you really shouldn't worry so much. What else did you dream last night?”

“Er...I dreamed that Xander had a bunch of tattoos and ran the Hellmouth. And I was traveling around the world taking care of supernatural problems.”

“Is that all?”

She gave him a sheepish grin. Busted. “I was also an immortal with an unlimited credit card...I had a lot of shoes.”

“See.”

“Yeah...but the shoe thing...that was nice.”

“So I should get you shoes for your birthday.”

“Nah, surprise me instead.”

He leaned forward, and pressed his lips to hers again. “I can do that.”

The three of them sat on a bench in the morning sun. Buffy shifted nervously and tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. She glanced up at him and Willow and licked her lips. “I mean, once you reach a certain point seizing the moment is kind of inevitable. And...and I think we're going to...seize it.”

Willow gaped. “Wow.”

He on the other hand cleared his throat. “You know I love you.” He held up a hand to stall any protest Buffy could utter. “Like a sister.” She nodded. “So...just be careful.”

The smile she gave him was bright...and relieved. “Thanks...so I was wondering...what was it like when you guys and Kendra...seized the moment.” The blush that accompanied her words was endearing and served to remind Xander how young they all were. It scared him a little. Being so young and not knowing what the hell he was doing.

Willow, ignorant of his inner panic, looked thoughtful. “It was nice, mostly it was about curiosity. An exploration of what our bodies liked...And I think I was her trial run before she worked up to going after Xander.” She smirked at him a little. “But we definitely had mutual lust-age and fun.”
He smiled fondly at his own memories of Kendra. “There was a nervousness about her. She wasn't expecting me to take care of her...or to stop.” Both girls looked at him in confusion, he ducked his head. “When she goes all the way it should be with someone she knows and cares about.” His best friends gave him matching smiles of pride and quick one-armed hugs.

Buffy pulled back first. “Next question. Did all of that make her pack?”

He shook his head. “I already have a beta...we already have a beta. But still, the experience was wow-worthy.”

Buffy's eyes wandered from him to something else in the distance. “So speaking of wow-age and romance, there's a handsome Dingo who looks like he could use some Willow time.”

Willow blinked as Buffy and Xander pulled her to her feet and pushed her toward Oz who was across the quad. “But what do I say I mean...”

“Go on Wills, live a little.” He grinned as she grumbled about heart attacks and blaming her death on him. But the shy smile she gave Oz was worth it. He gave a mock sniff and looked at Buffy. “Our little girl's growing up.”

She smiled and patted his arm. “If we start experiencing empty nest syndrome we are not getting a puppy.”

“Agreed. So, see you later?”

Her smile changed to a knowing look. “Gonna track down Cordy?”

“No. Later.” They split up, Xander tracking Cordy's scent, and Buffy simply wandering.

He found Cordelia at her locker.

“So Buffy's party is tomorrow night.”

Cordelia looked at him over her shoulder. “Yes. I know this.”

“Well since we're both going...I thought maybe we'd make it our first date.”

She pulled a book out of her locker and turned to face him. “It's not a date unless you spend.”

He stuck out his lower lip in a pout. “Well we can go to the party tomorrow night and this weekend I'll cook dinner for you.”

Hazel eyes widened in surprise. “You cook?”

“Authentic Japanese cuisine.”

Her smile was soft and bright and took his breath away. “Okay.” He smiled back and kissed her cheek.

“Cool. I'll see you later then. Quick meeting with Giles.”

“Go.”

As he walked away he never noticed Kyle watching. He was too busy tracking down Giles who was
discussing Buffy's dream when he found him. Ms. Calendar was with them and her body language was nervous, at the mention of Drusilla killing Angel in the dream. That was kinda wig worthy, Slayer dreams had a lot of clout. Especially after what Spike had told him....

"Be careful pet; Dru has plans."

“What plans?”

“Bad ones.”

“Apocalypse bad?”

“Maybe.”

He blinked the memory away and frowned. He needed to see what else he could get out of Spike. Guilt stabbed through him at the thought...he didn't like using Spike...but he had to protect his pack.

xxx

Larry was in the locker room when Kyle found him. He noticed for the first time that Larry's eyes were a dull green, a green that lightened just a bit when Larry smiled at him. His heart fluttered and he smiled back.

“Hey Kyle.”

“Larry...so...Summers' birthday party is tomorrow.”

“The surprise one?”

“Yeah. Do you want to...go...with me? Just me?”

Larry's smile was gentle. “Xander is taking Cordy isn't he.”

“Yeah. But you're not my second choice.”

“I know. And yeah. I'll go with you.” Larry's smile turned to one of amusement as he watched Kyle's jaw lower in surprise.

“You don't mind?”

“I like Xander...but he...he scares me sometimes. And he's kind of...”

Kyle nodded, he understood what Larry was trying to say. “Out of reach?”

“Yeah.”

“So you and me?”

Larry gave him a relaxed grin. “Yeah. And if you want to go out again, just us. I'd be okay with that.”

Kyle felt his lip lift up in a smirk and he leaned toward Larry, brushing his cheek against the taller boy's. “I'll remember that.”

xxx

“I have your package.”
Spike looked up at Dalton who stood on the landing. “And?”

“Err, I'll just put it on the table with the others?”

“Smart boy.” He glanced over his shoulder at Dru as she giggled and pushed him around in his chair. She'd been going on and on, making plans for her party...and he'd had no luck whatsoever in changing her mind about it. She wouldn't even change the bloody location, kept insisting it had to be in Sunnydale. The only thing that had gone his way, was that she didn't seem to have any idea what going on in his head. Which confused him as he had always been an open book to her in the past. But apparently not now.

“Are you sure? Vienna is more fitting than this hellhole.”

“But the invitations are sent. We mustn’t disappoint.”

What he wouldn't give to walk again! Even with the demon blood he was healing slower than he should. What he needed was sire's blood. But Dru wasn't sharing, and he wasn't in a position to force her. If he could he'd hit his Dark Goddess over the head, toss her in the trunk of the desotto and get her far away from the boy. His boy.

Drusilla moved away from his chair, a twirling movement, like a leaf caught in the breeze. “Remember Spain? The balls we had.” Her dark eyes glistened at him in the candle light. Her voice was seductive as she licked her lips. “And New York? Suck pretty lights, like stars brought to earth.”

He couldn't help but smile at her. “I remember love. But this Slayer...”

“Shh. I'll be a proper hostess, there will be a little something for everyone.” She leaned towards him and licked the scars on his cheek. He shivered as she slunk away from him again...only to start screaming and ripping up the flower arrangement.

“A change in décor seems to be in order then.”

She smiled at him over her shoulder, the insanity clear on her face for just a moment. “Can I open a pressie?” Her faced shifted, like the surface of a puddle, the insanity replaced with childish glee. “Can I?”

He hid his worry behind a smile. What she wanted to do scared the hell out of him. But what could he do? “Go ahead, but only one.”

She moved to the nearest box and opened it. “Its lovely, blue and dismal. I love it.” She closed the lid again and moved toward him, only to settle in his lap. “This will be the best party ever. We should have sent an invitation to the Prince and the King.”

“Why is that?”

She smiled. “Because, it will be the last.”

xxx

A scent drifted past Xander's nose as he walked past Ms. Calender's classroom, his eyes swept inside automatically. A man in a worn suit in a dark hat stood in front of her, they were talking, animatedly, his voice was somewhat deep and accented. It was weird...but nothing wig worthy.

Willow grabbed onto him and he forgot about the stranger in the computer lab.
“Come on! We have to wish Buffy a happy birthday!”

“We have all day Wills.”

“Nope, we gotta do this now!” She grinned at him and dragged him all the way to the library, where she proceeded to bounce through the doors and all the way to their favorite slayer. “Happy Birthday Buffy!”

He almost grinned at his girls...but Buffy looked especially grim and the smile never made it to his face. “Did we miss the memo about the birthday blues?”

Giles cleared his throat after downing a sip of tea. “A small part of Buffy's dream has transpired.”

Willow straightened and bit her lip in worry. “Which part?”

“The part where my mom broke a plate. It was creepy.”

Giles gave a small sigh. “Yes I imagine it was unnerving.”

Willow started fidgeting at the evident tension. “So that means...”

Buffy nodded. “That Drusilla may not be dust. I can't lose him Giles. In the dream she dusted him so fast it felt like I was frozen.”

“You mustn't lose your cool Buffy, we can still protect Angel. Dreams aren't set in stone, nor are prophecies. And as we all know prophecies are no match for Xander.”

He grinned. “Yep, that's me. The Prophecy Breaker. Got a prophecy you don't like? I'll hack it to bits.” Giles and the girls stared at him. “Or not.”

Giles shook his head. “Let me read up on Drusilla, see if I can gain any insight. Why don't you come back here at seven and we'll talk about strategies.”

Buffy sighed. “Right. So now what?”

“What you normally do. Go to classes, go home.”

She nodded without much enthusiasm. “Same old same old. I'll see you later guys.” She gave them a weak smile and grabbed her bag before leaving the library.

Willow huffed and pouted. “Darn it. There goes our surprise party. I even got little hats and noisemakers...and sparklers!”

Giles made a noise that was almost a snort. “Don't be ridiculous. A minor crisis that isn't even an apocalyptic event is no reason to cancel.”

“But danger!” Willow protested.

“Yeah Mr. Caution Man, what she said!”

“There is always danger on the hellmouth. However we must take advantage of the good moments and celebrate when we can.”

Willow nodded and smiled at him. “Thanks Giles. Buffy deserves a party.” She headed towards the exit, a happy bounce in her step once more.
Xander waited until she'd cleared the room before looking at Giles again. Giles in return looked back in curiosity. “Was there something else?”

He nodded, and took a breath to steady himself, he needed to come clean with someone. Watching Kyle walk away last night hurt, so this was something that needed to be done. No matter the results. “We need to talk.”

“Oh? What about?”

It was now or never. “Spike and Drusilla are alive...well as alive as vampires can be.”

The silence that followed his statement almost became a physical presence in the room. Giles' eyes narrowed at him and he very carefully put his tea mug on the counter before giving Xander his full attention. “How do you know this?”

“I saw Spike my first night back.”

“And you're only telling me now? Xander what were you thinking? Just how many people have lost their lives to that monster?”

He swallowed, somehow this felt worse than every time Tony had ever yelled at him put together. “Since the ritual? None. Because Spike is injured and he can't walk Giles.”

“I don't bloody care. You've put us all in danger, you foolish child. You will explain yourself this instant!”

“He kissed me. Months ago, just before the frat party. It was my first kiss Giles. He put his lips to mine, smirked and walked away.”

“That's no--”

“The second kiss was during career week. There was tongue that time. He approached me on patrol. I broke the kiss though, told him one member of my pack angsting over a vamp was enough.” A broken chuckle slipped out. “He felt insulted that I compared him to Angel. Then disappointed when I walked away without a fight.”

“And why didn't you fight?”

“Uh because he's killed two slayers and I'm not as good as Buffy.”

Giles' voice was tight with some restrained emotion. “Is there anything else you want to share with me?”

“Two more kisses, when I first saw him again.” He closed his eyes for a moment before meeting the Watcher's gaze, that's who Giles was right now. Gone was the kind father figure, he was all business. “I'm glad he's not dust Giles.”

“Get out.”

The first stirrings of anger shifted deep inside of him. “You told me that when I looked at Jesse that it wouldn't be him. When I staked him, Jesse was still in there. A small part. We'd been best friends since we were in diapers Giles. And when he turned to dust it was him. When I choked on his ashes...it was him.” He swallowed again, shoving down all the emotions he could. “And the way Spike kisses me...he's evil. But I know what its like to have a demon in your head. He's evil, but not crazy enough to end the world evil. Drusilla is.”
“You don't know--”

“His scent is wrong. He's wounded, barely eating. Drusilla isn't--”

“That's enough. Get out now!” Giles eyes were practically on fire...in fact there was nothing but Ripper in his gaze. But Xander had faced things much scarier than an inflamed Ripper as a child. He remembered every scream, every punch, every kick...he remembered every time Tony pushed him down the stairs. Ripper wasn't enough to scare him...not at the moment. The absence of the father he found in Giles, that was horrifying.

“Fine. Just keep two things in mind. One: My brother used to be human. Now's he's a demon. I can feel something else inside me besides the hyena and the soldier. Some day I may not be human either. Then what will you do?”

Ripper's gaze had gotten softer, losing its intensity. “And the second?”

“Whatever it is Drusilla is planning, scares the unholy fuck out of Spike.” There was nothing more to say...so he left.

Giles waited until Xander had slammed his way through the doors before he sighed and took off his glasses, and then nearly dropped them when someone cleared their throat from the direction of the stacks. “Good Lord! What now?”

Kyle made his way down the steps and stopped in front of the counter. “Before you pass your judgment, let me tell you about Xander's nightmares. The ones that make him cry...and scream. And about the guilt he feels.”

Giles slipped his glasses back on, fervently wishing he had a bottle of bourbon to calm his nerves. “I'm listening.”

xxx

He'd been sitting here in the dim light of his office since Kyle had left. He'd been too shocked and weary to do anything else. So he sat there in his desk chair, staring at his tea, still wanting that bit of bourbon. However school was still in session, not that he would bring alcohol on the grounds but...it was a nice thought.

Sometimes, like now he wondered how he ended up being responsible for so many children, as he obviously wasn't taking very good care of them. He grimaced at the tea as he sipped it. Definitely too cold.

A sigh escaped him. What he wouldn't give for normal teenage drama. Instead of make-up, shoes, and getting dumped before a dance his kids were falling in love with bloody vampires. However he knew from experience that you couldn't always help who you fell in love with, or in lust with.

Still, in light of everything the children had been through, he owed Xander an apology. He'd had no idea the boy had been suffering so, as he had been hiding it well. But considering what Tony Harris had been like he could understand Xander's need to hide weakness. Even so, he'd forgotten what it was like to be a teenager. Everything had been bad enough without the destiny to be a Watcher bit. But what Kyle had told him...it had been a year since Jesse's death and some nights Xander still woke screaming. Or worse, he kept on dreaming. Giles had trouble equating the lad he saw everyday with the emotional mess Kyle had described.

A sound at the door caught his attention and he looked up to see Xander, and for the first time he could see the truth in the words Kyle had told him. The boy's eyes were red from crying, his face
was a dull red, and his cheeks were tear streaked. Without any hesitation he put his tea down and opened his arms. “Come here son.” Xander's eyes widened in surprise and he took a step forward. When he hesitated it broke Giles' heart to see the flash of fear in those brown eyes. “I'm sorry Xander.” Fresh tears fell from Xander's eyes as he took another step before collapsing into Giles' lap and arms. The sob that broke the silence echoed in his heart and perhaps for the first time he realized that he truly was a father. And he would damn well do a better job than his own.

However he'd never had a distraught teenager in his lap before. Not even when Buffy had left Ford to die or when she'd had to stake him afterward did she come to him for this sort of comfort. It was uncharted waters for him, but he recalled a distant childhood memory, from when he was very small. His mother had held him like this once or twice. He did his best to emulate it as his arms came around the boy to hug him closer. Without realizing it a shushing noise escaped his lips and he stroked a hand down Xander's back and murmured soft words to the lad that had his head tucked under his chin. “I'm not mad at you.” And really he wasn't. He was upset, but not furious. Not now that he'd had time to think.

It felt like hours before Xander's cries had subsided, and his shaking had stopped completely. His voice croaked. “Thanks. Only Mom, Yusuke...and Kyle have done this.”

“You're welcome.” There wasn't much else he could say.

“Something big is gonna happen. Drusilla's got something really bad in the factory.”

He frowned at Xander's quiet words. “How do you know?”

“I could feel it.”

He sighed and gave Xander a pat on the back. “We'll figure it out. Now, dry your tears. We have a party tonight.”

Xander nodded and sat up, wiping at his eyes. “Thanks Dad...are we...” He lowered his eyes. “Are we telling everyone?”

“No. Buffy already suspects Drusilla might be alive. We'll leave it at that. But any information you can get...”

Xander sighed and closed his eyes, probably to keep the guilt at bay. He hated to do this to him, but they needed to keep ahead of their enemies. “Right...use him.”

“Do you love him Xander?”

Xander met his eyes and gave him a scared and almost helpless look. “I don't know.”

xxx

In the dim lights of the Bronze they all crouched down, trying to stay out of sight. Xander however nudged Kyle and whispered. “Thanks.”

Kyle blinked at him. “For what?”

“For talking to Giles.”

Kyle nodded, smirked...even leered. “Gotta take care of my Alphas.”

He snorted, already feeling relieved, but just to be sure. “Right. So are we okay?”
Again Kyle nodded, but this time the look was more serious. “You hunted for him. That means something.”

“Guys be quiet!”

“Sorry Wills.”

Angel stood from his hiding place. “Shouldn't they be here by now?”

Xander wrinkled his nose, Deadboy had a point, however before he could verbally agree there was a noise outside. Giles stood as well. “That's probably them now.”

There was another noise...and then a feeling that made Xander stiffen. “Vamps.”

Giles whipped to look at him. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Heidi, with me. Kyle, you're in charge.” He didn't even look to see if they'd follow his orders, he knew they would.

He and Heidi were already out the door when Angel spoke up. “What is she going to do?”

Kyle raised a brow at him. “Run interference. The bad guys get confused when a second perky blond joins the fray.”

Angel frowned. “You're just kids.”

Kyle, Tor and Rhonda all growled at him, their eyes flashing. Angel took a step back.

Willow giggled. “They would be the hyena kids Xander mentioned.”

Heidi dove right in and drew one of the vamps away from Buffy. It was funny because the vampires really did get confused when a second blond came flying at them. Heidi and Buffy fell in sync with one another, keeping their backs together as the vamps surrounded them.

Buffy kicked one back and as it stumbled Xander tripped it, and staked it. Heidi copied her actions and Xander repeated his own. He saw another try to sneak up on the girls and he tackled it, rolled it and dusted it. By the time he stood up Buffy and Heidi had staked the rest...except one late comer that tried to jump at him. He kicked it back, right into Angel who had joined them. Angel's eyes widened as he stumbled back, became tangled with the other vampire and the two of them crashed through the Bronze window.

Xander stared at the destruction for a moment before glancing at the girls. Buffy glared at him. “Oops?”

“Oops? You just sent my boyfriend through a window.”

He shrugged. “I thought he was here to help.” She smacked his arm and he stuck out his tongue. Heidi rolled her eyes and proceeded to drag them through the broken window and into the Bronze.

Angel stood up, brushing vampire dust off his clothes. “Thanks Harris.”

Again he shrugged. “Not my fault you have crappy reflexes.” He dodged Buffy before she could smack his arm again.
Oz looked at them for a second before raising his hand. “Did everybody just see that guy turn to dust?”

Larry nodded. “Yep.”

“Not just me.”

“Nope.”

Kyle sighed as he leaned into Larry's side. “Vampires are real.”

Tor nodded and sat at the table. “Sunnyhell is their favorite party town.”

Willow bit her lip and put her hand on Oz's arm in a nervous gesture. “I know it's weird to think that they're real and all...”

Oz put his hand on hers and smiled. “So what were those vicious night bees?”

Giles looked confused. “Night bees?”

Xander nodded. “Cover story.”

The Watcher looked satisfied. “Oh, well. Which incident?”

Buffy folded her arms and looked around the Bronze at the party décor. “The cloud guy.”

Larry snapped his fingers. “Oh yeah.” He looked at Oz. “It was a demon.”

“Well.”

Done looking at the decorations Buffy was tapping her foot expectantly. “Why are you guys all here and what's all of this anyway.”

Cordelia sniffed at the mess. “It was your surprise party.”

Rhonda grinned as she leaned against Cordelia. “Happy Birthday. Not everyone crashes their own party.”

Buffy smiled. “Yeah, I'm good at that. Thanks guys.” She reached for Angel's hand. “This was really sweet.”

A sound at the door pulled their attention to Ms. Calendar who was struggling with a large wooden box. “Little help please.”

Xander stared at the box, frozen where he stood as Giles and Angel helped her get it to a table. There...was something strange about it. Giles looked it over, running his hands on the wood. “What is it?”

Ms. Calendar shook her head. “No idea.”

Buffy moved closer to it. “The vamps were loading it up.”

Giles continued to examine it. “Does it open?”

Angel ran his hand over a hinge. “Look at this, it should.”

Buffy reached for the box. “Yeah, here's some latches right here.” She undid the latches and opened
Xander shivered, the strange feeling from the box intensified and his inner alarm for all things demony was going full blast. When Buffy leaned over the open box he felt a pulse of evil wash over him. “No!” He dashed forward just as something grabbed Buffy by the throat. Angel was at his side and they grabbed the thing, whatever it was and tried to pull it off of her. It took all of his strength and by the time its grip loosened he was snarling, growling and he knew his eyes were glowing. Once it let go of Buffy he shoved it back in the box and shut it. Angel latched it.

He turned back to Buffy to make sure she was okay. He lifted her chin to look at her throat. “Looks like some bruising, but it should fade quickly.” She nodded and coughed as Angel slipped his arms around her.

Angel glanced at him. “How’d you know?”

He blinked. “You mean you can't feel it?”

“No.”

Buffy coughed again, rubbing at her throat. “What is it?”

Oz held up his hand. “It looked like an arm.”

She frowned. “Yeah, but from who? Hercules?”

Angel shook his head. “No...a demon.”

Kyle snorted before popping a chip into his mouth. “Really? Who'd of guessed. A demon arm on the hellmouth.”

Angel’s glare did little to quell Kyle’s smirk. “Its a legend from before my time.”

Xander pushed the box a little further away from Buffy who was giving it wary glances. “What kind of demon?”

“One brought forth to rid the Earth of human pestilence.”

Kyle ate another chip. “Great. A people exterminator.” Tor and Rhonda smacked him. “Ow!”

Angel ignored them and kept talking. “He was to separate the righteous from the wicked and to burn the righteous down.” Giles looked up, seemingly stunned by his words...that wasn't a good sign. “They called him the Judge.”

Xander shivered and felt for his communicator, wondering if he'd need to make an emergency call. He might actually need back up.

Giles however was thinking of a different tactic as he absorbed Angel's information. “This is him?”

“No all of him.”

Buffy waved to regain their attention. “Why is he just an arm?”

Giles cleared his throat. “He couldn't be killed. An army was sent to stop him. He killed most of them. They were only able to dismember him. Not kill him. No weapon forged could end his life.”

Angel looked from Xander to Buffy. “You two were right. Something is coming. And Drusilla is the
only one crazy enough for this.”

Willow gulped. “For what?”

“Armageddon.”

Xander sagged and collapsed into a chair. “Oh how I wish we'd been wrong.”

“We'll have to get this out of town. Now.” Giles muttered. “We have to keep Drusilla from putting him back together.”

Ms. Calendar looked at Deadboy. “Angel, it should be you.”

Buffy stared at her. “What?”

Angel nodded even as he held her hand. “She's right. It will take some time. But I have the connections. I can call in a few favors.”

Buffy's voice was on the verge of panic. “Time? How much time?”

“Weeks...months.”

“Months!”

Xander ignored the rest of Buffy's panic driven drama attack and caught Tor's gaze. They shared a nod. Botan would be able to get the arm out of town much faster.

xxx

Ms. Calendar had ended up driving Angel and Buffy to the docks. Xander and the four were still in a darkened corner of the school away from Willow and Giles. He did his best to ignore his own panic, but they'd been unable to raise anyone via communicator.

“Where is your sister?”

Tor shrugged. “Working...or she could be visiting our parents.” They looked at him and Tor winced. “Coms don't work where they live.”

Xander raised an eyebrow at that. “And that would be where?”

“In a castle...under a giant lake. Her...our parents aren't human.”

Xander stopped glaring and touched Tor's arm. “Its okay Tor. But that doesn't explain everything.” He dropped his hand away from Tor and Heidi tilted her head.

“What?”

He sighed. “The compact won't reach anyone. I get nothing but static no matter who I try to call.”

Kyle kicked at the closest locker. “Shit. The one time we need help.”

Tor shifted a bit and caught his eyes. “Is Kurama sill in town?”

“No. And we always used the coms. I don't have his phone number, not that that would help.”

Rhonda looked a little more alarmed at that admission. “Why? What about Yusuke?”
He knew the smile he gave her was bitter but he couldn't help it. “Something is conspiring against us. Every phone I try, a long distance call won't go through.”

Heidi shuddered and huddled closer to Kyle. “This is bad.”

Rhonda hunched even further into herself. “We're really in trouble aren't we?”

He slipped his arm around her shoulders. “Looks that way.”

xxx

They were all scattered among the books trying to find every detail ever written about The Judge when Buffy breezed into the room.

“What do we know?”

Willow looked up from her book and blinked. “You're back...and you changed.”

Buffy waved off the comment as she paced. “Got wet when Dru's guys ambushed us. They have the box Giles.”

Xander put down the book he'd been looking through as he felt a chill fill him at her words. He sought out Giles with his eyes and they locked gazes as the Watcher rattled off what they already knew, which was all old news. The demon's touch could burn the humanity out of a person, a true creature of evil would survive...but a human would be reduced to ashes.

When he finished Tor sighed and looked from Giles to Xander to Buffy. “All nighter?”

Buffy nodded. “Round Robin time.”

Giles paused. “What?”

Willow patted his shoulder. “That thing we did when we crashed at your house for research.”

“Oh yes...good idea.”

xxx

Spike watched as a sense of detachment filled him along with a dash of unease as Dru handed the last box to the minions. They moved with nervous tremors and Spike really couldn't blame them. Drusilla had really outdone herself, who'd have ever thought the Judge would ever be reassembled. The box was put into place and as the lackey's stepped back there was a flash of light and all the boxes fused together and became one large open box.

The Judge stumbled out in all his blue and ugly glory. No wonder the guy wanted to burn all of humanity...he couldn't stand how much prettier the blood bags were compared to him. Looks of course didn't matter to Dru.

She simpered and ran a hand over his shoulder. “He's perfect. Just what I wanted.” He controlled the urge to shiver in fear, it had been so long since he'd actually felt that particular emotion that he almost didn't recognize it.

The Judge stumbled some more and pointed at them. “You both reek with the stench of humanity. You share affection. Jealousy.” He glared at Spike specifically. “Love.”

He hid his unease behind a lifted brow and a cocky smirk. “Yeah? Knew that already. You just
remember who brought you here to the Merry Old Hellmouth. Alright?” Big Blue sneered and staggered away from him, right to Dalton and burned the fool up. “Prat. You could have at least killed on of the stupid ones.”

This was not good. And there was nothing he could do. Even if he wasn’t stuck in this stupid chair...there was only one thing he could hope for at this point. That the boy stayed away. For his own safety.

xxx

Xander hadn't been sure before that following Buffy and Angel on their recon mission would be the best course of action. But he'd had a bad feeling since this whole thing started. Not being able to get in touch with anyone outside of the dale had put him on edge and he wanted to keep his pack close. So he, and the others followed them, leaving Willow with Giles at the library.

They had entered the factory after Buffy and Angel, doing their best to stay hidden, which had panned out because so far The Judge hadn't noticed them. He was too focused on his new captives as the minions dragged Buffy and Angel down to the lower level.

Kyle, at his right gulped. “Is that?”

He nodded. “I think so.”

Heidi who was behind them shivered. “What do we do?”

That was a damn good question. “We...we wait until we get an opening.”

Tor's whisper was almost too quiet to hear. “What if there isn't one?”

He looked over and met Tor's eyes, doing his best to look confident. “We get them out anyway.”

Rhonda bit her lip, nerves evident on her face. “Good way to die.”

“Probably.”

Kyle nudged him. “Don't let the guilt control you.”

“Too late. I could have stopped this.” He felt four hands touch him in support.

Kyle gripped his arm tighter than the others. “Like you said, something has it out for us. We can't get in touch with anyone outside. You can't control everything.”

“Yeah.”

Heidi shifted, her wide eyes glued to the crowd below. “We need to move.”

He nodded and they started to move downward, keeping to the shadows and keeping quiet. When the Judge reached for Buffy they were nearly to them. When Buffy kicked him and sent him flying it was the distraction they needed.

They dove in as one driving back the minions who were still in shock before grabbing Buffy and Angel and dragging them away as fast as they could move. Their only thoughts to keep the pack safe. Xander more than the others. He was responsible, so he lagged behind, bringing up the rear. Someone had to watch their backs. The last he saw of his people, Kyle was leading them away. The last the he heard was Kyle’s voice yelling at them to scatter. And then he was surrounded by the undead and grabbed by several sets of hands.
He didn't remember yelling, or making any noise as he struggled, but he must have because suddenly Kyle was back and ripping into the vamps, but it was no use. They were outnumbered and disarmed. There was nothing they could do as they were dragged back into the factory. And to the Judge.

“Alpha.”

“I'm sorry Kyle.” He met Kyle's eyes and shared a look, one of understanding. They'd go down together. Alpha and Beta and they'd go out fighting.

The Judge smiled as he approached Xander, who still struggled, despite the overwhelming odds. As he reached for him Spike rolled forward his gaze hard. “Not that one.”

The Judge sneered at the incapacitated vampire. “They are all the same.”

Drusilla actually bit her lip, almost as if she was nervous. “The King will be cross with us should the Prince burn.”

“Understatement much.” Kyle muttered.

Her words made the Judge pause. “Prince?” He looked at Xander, as if he were nothing more than a bug. “He is just another human. Another bit of vermin with which to regain my strength.” And he touched Xander's face, as the minions backed away, not wanting to end up like Dalton.

And Xander screamed.

He couldn't think or speak, there was nothing but the fire burning him from the inside. And then, something inside him shifted, his screams stopped and he started struggling again, harder than before. His hands came up to claw and tear at the Judge's arm and his snarls and growls were more primal than ever before, there was a flash of green as he howled. It might have been from him. At that point Spike tried to get to him but only manged to topple his chair and had to pull himself closer with his arms.

Kyle's howl of rage and despair echoed through the building nearly as loud as his own snarls. And for a second he was transported to his house and he could see Marshal standing up from the bed in alarm, before his spirit beast's eyes flashed green and he passed out.

Then the Judge let him go, and Spike caught him him as he fell, keeping him from hitting the floor. Spike pulled him closer, as close as he possibly could, his hands ran over Xander's face, his shoulders, chest and back, almost as if he were checking to see if he was all there.

The only thing Xander was aware of though, was Spike's arms around him...and that the pain was gone.

xxx

Xander's eyes were vacant as he trembled in Spike's arms, but even then his hands were clenched, hanging on to Spike's duster as if everything depended on that connection. His brown eyes seemed empty, though they flickered back and forth between brown and green. Spike really did not understand how the boy could be alive, he should have burned up completely. But it wouldn't do to look a gift horse in the mouth. He placed a kiss on Xander's forehead and turned a furious glare on the Judge, baring his fangs at the blue monster.

“I told you. Not this one.”

However the Judge didn't seem to hear him, he was too busy staring at Xander in apparent
wonder...and a satisfied smile. Actually he looked a little high. “Such power.” He licked his lips, an action that made him drag Xander a little farther away. Then, the Judge's eyes widened and he leaned down to look at Xander's hands, which were still holding onto the duster. “You should have said something sooner.”

“Git.” Spike glanced down at the boy's hands, wondering just what had caught the demon's eye. There was nothing telling about his hands, they were nicely shaped but...there was a silver ring on the ring finger of Xander's right hand. He couldn't see what made it special, there was some sort of crest but it was twisted away from him.

Xander's trembling was getting worse, his skin was cold, then hot and he was starting to sweat. Spike looked up at Kyle. “Let him go.” The minions still in shock that the human had survived let Kyle go and he wasted no time in getting to Xander's side.

“Alpha?” The whisper was broken with a whimper.

“Get him out of here.” Kyle's eyes met his, they were lost and filled with fear. He gentled his voice and pushed Xander into Kyle's arms. “Now.”

Kyle nodded and started to drag Xander to his feet, and for a second Xander's eyes became focused and his gaze locked onto Spike. Spike shook his head as he removed Xander's hands from his coat. “Now is not the time love. Go.”

Kyle dragged Xander away and presumably out of the factory, when they were out of sight he glared at he Judge. The Judge staggered a bit...whatever it was about the boy the Judge was still flying high.

“Bloody Wanker.”

xxx

Kyle was about four blocks away from the factory when the others surrounded him. All of them were drenched in the downpour that had started while they were in the factory. He was thankful when they all reached for Xander and started to carry him. Xander was out cold, and as acting Alpha he had priorities. “Summers?”

Tor nodded. “Got away safe with Angel.”

Heidi gripped at Xander, worry on her face. “Alpha?”

Kyle growled. “Judge touched him. He almost...there was a flash of light. Hyena green, he glowed with it. We need shelter.”

Rhonda bit her lip. “Cordy's house is closest. Follow me.” She took point and led them toward the richer part of town. It wasn't all that surprising that Rhonda knew where she was going.

When she rang the door bell an accented voice told them to go away. However Rhonda stood her ground and her voice came out like a scared child's. “Gwenny its me. Please let us in. Our friend is hurt!”

The door opened and a matronly woman with graying red hair peeked out into the night. When she saw Rhonda on the doorstep, soaked in the rain she flung the door open wide. “Child what are you doing out in this weather and this time of night?” She stepped aside, not giving a verbal invitation, and let them carry Xander inside. Once they were in she locked the door and looked at their
bedraggled state. “Take him to the guest room on this floor Miss Rhonnie.”

Rhonda nodded and leaded them to a large room with a king-size bed. None of them questioned why she knew her way around the house. Gwen followed them, towels already in hand. They laid Xander on the bed and she started to reach for him, intending to get his wet clothes off. However she jumped back when Kyle growled at her.

Rhonda smiled gently at the older woman. “Its okay Gwenny. We just had a close call tonight. We'll take care of him.”

Gwen nodded and gave Rhonda's cheek a fond pat. “I'll be in the kitchen, you need something warm to eat. Get his clothes off and dry him thoroughly. Don't forget to take care of yourselves.”

“Thank you Gwenny.”

Gwen smiled and left the towels on the bed.

They moved hurriedly to get Xander stripped and dried, the sooner he was dry and under the covers the better. It scared them all that he was still shaking. Cordelia came into the room just as they got him under the covers. Her hair was tousled from sleep and her short silk night gown did wonders for her long tan legs...and the boys barely noticed.

“What happened?”

Rhonda approached her and took her hand, pulling her closer to the bed. “We followed Buffy and Angel on their recon mission. The Judge is whole Corrie.”

Cordelia blinked and gripped Rhonda's hand tight as she looked at Xander in shock. “Rhonnie?”

“We got them away after Buffy kicked the Judge. We thought we made it out.” She looked at Xander's pale form, the sweat glistened on his skin, the tremors still wracked his body...and there was a hand print that covered half his face.

Kyle looked up and caught Cordelia's gaze. “Xander was the last out, he was right behind us...then he wasn't. I went back...and they caught us both. The Judge touched him Cordy. We almost lost him tonight. The only reason the Judge stopped was because he got high off of him or something. He...there was a flash of hyena green. Spike tried to stop him...he's not as crazy as Drusilla. I don't think he wants to end te world.”

Cordelia frowned at Kyle's almost random words. “Why would Spike...” Her eyes narrowed as realization dawned on her. “Xander gets around doesn't he.”

Rhonda nudged her. “Easy. Giles has already yelled at him.”

Cordelia gave an almost defeated sigh, but when she looked at Kyle...his eyes were scared, haunted. It was a look that didn't belong on him. “Kyle?”

“We almost lost him tonight Queen C.” His eyes watered and he shuddered.

She nodded. “Rhonda, go get some dry clothes for everyone. Tor call Giles and tell him what's happened. Heidi, go help Gwen in the kitchen.” They nodded and scattered, glad to let her take charge. Kyle stayed where he was, like he didn't know what else to do. “Dry off Kyle.” He nodded and stripped to his boxers before grabbing a towel.

She sat beside Xander, and seeing his necklace started to remove it. Kyle grabbed her wrist. “Don't.
He hardly ever takes it off.”

“Okay...”

“It was a gift from Jesse McNally.”

She frowned. Jesse had disappeared a year ago, but she remembered him. Tall, gangly, a geeky clown kind of guy. One who had had a huge crush on her. “What happened to him?”

Kyle's eyes were solemn. “Dust in the wind...Xander's first kill.”

She felt her eyes widen and she covered her mouth to stop the gasp. “Jesus.” She took a second to regain control. “You can all stay here tonight.”

Tor came in as she spoke. “Appreciate the offer, but I'm headed to the library. I'll get dry clothes there.”

Kyle nodded at him. “Be careful.”

Tor smiled and approached the bed, leaned over it and licked the hand print on Xander's cheek. It was an action the others would expect and thought nothing of, neither Kyle nor Cordelia would notice the bit of healing magic he'd used. Tor was glad he'd accepted the gift from Merlin and Nimue. Xander would need all the help he could get tonight. He stood back up. “I'll see you guys in the morning.” He headed out with a nod to them both.

Cordelia watched as Kyle sat down on Xander's other side. His question surprised her. “When are you going to tell him about you and Rhonda?”

She blinked. “How did you know?” He tapped the side of his nose. “Right. Hyena perk.”

“He's been wondering why you've always smelled like pack.”

“I'll tell him soon.”

They made room for Heidi and Rhonda when they joined them bearing soup and fresh rolls from the kitchen. They ate per Gwen's orders and settled in for the night in dry clothes. Kyle and Cordelia stayed where they were on either side of Xander. Rhonda lay down behind Cordelia and Heidi mirrored her actions as she lay down behind Kyle. All of them made sure to keep a hand on Xander's shivering form.

It felt like hours before they managed to fall asleep.

xxx

When Cordelia opened her eyes the gray light of early dawn was creeping into the room, sneaking past the heavy drapes. She looked at Xander and was relieved to see that his color was better. He was still pale, but not as bad as he had been the night before. Even the hand print left behind by the Judge had faded some...actually it was the most significant change to his face.

The other change was the green crescent tattoo on his right shoulder, the mark looked like an upside down smile. She looked up to see Kyle watching her. “When did he get this?”

“He didn't. It wasn't there last night.”

“Should we call Giles?”
“For what?” They both jerked in surprise at Xander's voice, it was rough, husky, his throat probably sore from last night.

“Xander!”

“Harris!” They embraced him together until he started to squirm.

“Air! Issue! Breathe now!” He gasped. The commotion woke Rhonda and Heidi. They peered over Kyle and Cordelia to look at him. Who finally leaned back to let him breathe. He looked at them and frowned. “What hit me?”

Kyle snorted. “Judge.”

“Feels like a bus.”

Kyle thumped him on the forehead. “We almost lost you Alpha.”

Xander weakly smacked at his hand and managed a smile. “Never happen.”

Kyle however frowned as he leaned over and tapped the tattoo on Xander's shoulder. “It was close.”

Xander followed Kyle's hand with his eyes which widened almost comically when he saw the new mark. “Well...that can't be good. Yusuke didn't get his tribal marks until after he died a second time.” The silence was deafening, but not nearly as bad as Cordelia's shriek.

“What! Start talking. Now.”

He gave them a weary sigh. “My brother, he's a demon remember? Sort of a King. But he was born human and stayed human until he died a second time. That's when his demon genes got jump started.” He yawned widely blinked a couple of times and said. “Wake me when its time for school.” And he was asleep.

Heidi's whisper was timid in the sudden quiet. “Does that mean he died a little?”

The all shuddered and Kyle said something they all agreed with. “I hope not.”

XXX
He blinked at the landscape that surrounded him; or rather he stared at the lack of a landscape. In fact all he could see was a weird gray fog that lazily clung to his ankles and beyond that… nothing but blackness. But there was something...something waiting for him just beyond the darkness. He shivered and wished he still had a shirt, but he'd lost it somehow, though that was the least of his problems. Whatever it was it was strong and evil in a way he'd never seen before. It wasn't a thing he wanted to see, or face, ever. He started to back away from it as he could feel it coming closer. There was a flash, an image of a golden gaze sneering at him, the sheer madness in those golden eyes made him back away. He stumbled, fell over backwards, and landed on soft grass that hadn't been there a moment before.

“What the…?” The face...the Judge? Whatever it was had vanished...and there were trees and a...pink sky? He didn't remember taking any drugs.

“My thoughts exactly Xander.”

He looked up at the voice that he hadn't heard since Halloween. “Raizen?”

“Hello son. Care to tell me why we're here?”

He blinked. “Uh...”

Raizen sighed and rested his chin on a fist. “I'm supposed to be enjoying the afterlife with my human lover at my side. We've been reunited you know.”
“Huh?”

“The human female that I fell in love with so long ago? I found her again, and we were making our journey to the next phase. Now, your turn. Why am I here with you instead of back there with her?”

Xander sat up and shrugged. “No idea. Last thing I remember is getting touched by the Judge. After that, nothing...except something bad is coming. Could be the Judge...but it didn't feel the same as him.”

Raizen blinked at him in disbelief and then sighed. “Nothing is ever simple.”

“No kidding.”

“The Judge touched you.”

“Yep.”

“That would explain the mark on your arm.” Raizen commented, making an idle gesture toward Xander's shoulder.

“But he touched my face.” Xander glanced at his right shoulder. “Oh yeah. Okay, I remember that too...damn.” He looked back at Raizen. “How much of me died?”

Raizen stared at him for a moment, as if examining his soul, for all Xander knew that could be exactly what he was doing. “I don't think any of you died...or at least not enough to make a difference.”

“Says the guy who's completely dead.”

“You're fine Xander. The Hyena spirit left you quite a few gifts didn't it.”

“Lucky me,” Xander responded sardonically though curious over exactly what other gifts might have been left that he knew nothing about. He'd already gained so much from the possession, his senses of hearing and smell made patrolling way easier, and that little quirk of actually sensing vamps and predators was way cool...what else might he develop? Raizen spoke again, dragging him away from his chain of thought.

“Indeed, you are very lucky. It looks like what's left of the hyena merged with the part of you that is Mazoku. They are tied, one and the same even. Did you feel something when he touched you?”

“Like a shift? I felt something that was sort of like a pulled muscle.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah... so what was it?”

“Your demon blood was compensating, basically your body and soul worked in unison and...shielded you.”

“Huh. I have an inner panic button. That’s rather nifty.”

Raizen snorted and stared at him some more. “Something else is different.” He tilted his head and squinted. “Have you mated?”

“Err...in what sense?”
“Child, have you chosen a mate?”

“Um... that would be a no.”

“Hmm. The very beginnings of a bond then,” Raizen mused to himself before giving a nod, “or perhaps it is a possible bond.”

“Okay...”

“Male or female?”

“Uh...what if there was more than one...let’s say like two...and one of each.” Xander blinked. “Actually I may have a whole lot of bonds going on, cause of the whole hyena thing. I reconnected with the other kids that got possessed and we're a pack again. Only this time Buffy, Willow and Cordy are pack and so is Giles, who is Buffy's Watcher man. So... yeah lots of bonds going on.”

It took Raizen a moment to understand the Xander-speak, but when he did he snickered. “Been busy haven't you. But what I see are two bonds that are stronger than the other bonds you've formed. And one is going to be stronger than the other. The stronger one, tell me about them.”

“Err...I'm not sure which one is the stronger bond. But the girl, her name is Cordelia. And she's...fierce with her words.” He smiled. “She has beautiful hazel eyes and she doesn't let anyone boss her around. And even though she doesn't show it much she's very protective of the people close to her.”

Raizen nodded. “That seems to be the case with the females our line likes. What of the male?”

“His name is Spike.”

“And...?”

“Um...he's a vampire.”

Raizen frowned. “A vampire? Really boy you can do better.”

“Hey, there's nothing wrong with Spike, I happen to be very attracted to him thank you very much. He's got amazing blue eyes, cheek bones that put diamonds to shame, and he...hey! Stop laughing at me.”

Raizen could barely stop his chuckling. “What line is he from?”

“Uh... Aurelius.”

Raizen stopped laughing and almost looked impressed...almost. “Ah, one of the oldest vampire houses, and certainly the most respected. Tell me his lineage.”

“Like who turned him and stuff?”

“Yes.”

“Okay...” He shrugged. “Spike was turned by Drusilla, who was turned by Angel, who was turned by this bitch named Darla. Not sure who turned her. But the four of them were called the Scourge of Europe.”

Raizen gave him a small smile and a nod of approval. “I know the line, Darla was turned by the Master, and he was pretentious and short sighted, but strong for a vampire of this time. There was a
time when vampires were something to be feared. They've let themselves grow weak. But the Aurelius line has always had the most potential. I approve.”

“Dude...did you just give me and Spike your blessing.”

“Whichever it is you choose, Spike or Cordelia, you have it.”

“I really need to wake up soon.”

Raizen gently cuffed him. “Show some respect.”

Xander sighed. “This sucks.”

xxx

Tor hurried through the darkened halls of the school, ignoring how desolate and empty the building felt. He just wanted to get to the library where Willow and Giles were working. He'd spoken to Giles on the phone, but he wanted to see them with his own eyes. With the threat of the Judge looming he wanted to keep an eye on them while the others kept watch over Xander.

When he burst into the library Willow jumped out of her seat, startled, as were Giles and Ms. Calendar.

“Good Lord Tor!”

“Sorry, you guys okay?”

Ms. Calendar nodded. “We're fine.”

Willow shook her head as she approached him; her whole body trembled as she spoke. “Is everyone okay? Giles said the judge is whole and he touched Xander! Is Xander okay? He's not dead is he? Please Tor you've got to tell me he's okay! I don't know what I'd do without my Xander-shaped friend and--”

Tor placed his hand over her mouth to stop the river of words. “Alpha is alive. Now, please breathe.” She nodded and he let go as she took several calming breaths.

“Thank you.”

He nodded at her. “Welcome.”

Giles shifted his glasses but didn't take them off. “What is Xander's current condition?”

Tor met his eyes even as he slipped an arm around Willow offering her comfort he knew she needed. “Alive, unconscious, a fever, and the shakes...there is also a hand print on his face.”

“My god,” the response came out as a horrified whisper.

Ms. Calendar bit her lower lip, a worried gesture that made him tilt his head in curiosity. “How did they get away?”

He shook his head. “Kyle didn't say. I'm just glad they did.”

Willow raised her head from his shoulder. “Should we—Should I go to him? Do the pack thing?”

Tor squeezed her again, tightening the hug just a bit. “He's in good hands. They're all indoors now,
and Cordelia's house has wards.”

She nodded. “Good. That's good.” She gave him a brave smile but her trembling hadn't stopped; only lessened.

“Hey, it’s okay. Xander's alive and safe with the pack.”

“Kyle's taking care of him?”

“And Queen C.”

“Cordy?”

He shrugged. “Her house and she's got an Alpha personality, just not the power to back it up. She was pretty shaken up when we brought him in. They really do care about each other Willow.”

“I know. Xander wouldn't waste his time on someone if they weren't worth it.” Her smile was a small one, but it was real. He flicked his gaze to Giles who met his eyes for a moment, Willow didn't notice, lost in her thoughts. “So he doesn't need me.”

“What, never think that. You know he will, but right now we need to help Giles, and I need to keep an eye on you guys. Xander would never forgive me if I let something happen to you.”

“Okay.”

Tor smiled at her and led her back to the books she'd been going through, he kissed the top of her head. “Be right back.” He looked at Giles. “Give me a book and I'll start with the research.”

“Oh...yes. There's a volume in my office, this way please. Er, Jenny, perhaps you could get something for Willow, juice perhaps?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you.” They shared a small smile before she left the library and Giles lead him into the office, gently pushing the door closed. “Any word from Botan?”

Tor shook his head. “None. Xander tried earlier, too. I tried to reach her again on the way here. I even tried contacting Yusuke, Hiei and Kurama. The coms aren't working. All I get is static. Xander thought that they were being jammmed on purpose, especially since he can't make any long distance calls on a landline.”

“Damn.”

Tor let a little of the fear he felt show on his face. “Giles, what do we do now?”

The older man sighed heavily. “Grab a book, start reading...and pray.”

xxx

Spike stared at the Judge, who was currently facing away from him, kneeling of all things, on the dirty floor of the factory. He'd been facing the wall for a while now, probably still coming down from whatever high feeding off of the boy had put him on… which had been bloody weird. Still, things could be worse. Xander could have been burnt to nothing like Dalton had been. Yes things could have been much worse.

The world still turned and hadn't erupted into chaos yet. That wasn't to say he didn't like chaos, he
appreciated it very much, but like everything chaos had its place. But in his opinion chaos shouldn't include burning their entire food supply to ashes. Frankly, demons didn't taste as good as humans, well a few did, but those were demons that were way out of their league. His and Dru's. They were only vampires, bloody good ones, but the tastiest demons didn't even live in this realm.

Maybe he'd get her to see reason...worth a try anyway. “I'm not happy with this pet.”

She laid a hand on his cheek and made a shushing noise. “Your prince will be fine love. Be stronger than before. He'll not die. Not this night.”

He nodded, that was good news, and he was glad to hear it, but there was still the matter of big blue. How exactly would he get shed of an indestructible demon? “Still, we should be moving. The Slayer and her posse know where we are.”

Drusilla tittered at him, making soothing sounds. “Nonsense. The laughing Dogs guard the Prince with a Queen. They will not bother us again tonight. And dear Angel is too smart to face my Present again.” Her gaze drifted to the Judge. “He really is lovely.”

“Right, but what exactly is he doing? Besides imitating a ruddy gargoyle.”

The Judge spoke, but did not move from his kneeling position. “I am readying myself.”

“Really? Looks more like you're sitting on your ass giving the Slayer time to retaliate. So far I'm not impressed.”

The Judge didn't move, only spoke. “My strength will return. Be sure of that. Sooner than I had dared even hope.”

Before Spike could question him further, Dru cried out in pain and he swung his chair around in time to see her collapse. He wheeled himself to her side and watched, helpless as she stared at things he couldn't see. She was having a vision. Something was happening. Something big.

Her cries and moans were dismal. “Angel! Oh my Angel.” She lay, unresponsive to any outside stimuli. No matter how loudly he called to her she didn't hear him. She was too caught up in what she saw for anything else to matter.

Spike hung his head and wondered when things had started slipping from his control. “Bloody hell.”

xxx

Cordelia was roused from sleep by a whimper, and a trembling body beside her. Xander. Her eyes opened and she stared in surprise, he seemed to have shrunk in on himself. It didn't make sense, he always seemed so full of life, and half the time he seemed to run things on the Hellmouth. Seeing him shake, almost in terror, in his sleep was unnerving.

She felt eyes on her and looked into Kyle's gaze. “What's happening?”

“It's a nightmare. He has them sometimes.”

She raised a brow. “You know this how?”

Kyle rolled his own eyes, but somehow still managed to leer at her, just a little. “He told me. And I witnessed one in Tokyo. He was thrashing, crying, and I couldn't wake him up. I had to get Yusuke. Yusuke...he just held Xander...and the nightmare stopped.”
She bit her lip slightly. “Can we...will it work for us?”

“We can try.”

Rhonda shifted and met their gazes. “Let’s do this.” Heidi nodded in agreement, though her sleepy expression could have meant that she wasn't sure what she was agreeing too.

The four of them huddled closer to Xander, Cordelia and Kyle, being on either side of him, wrapped their arms around him. Then gentle rumbling filled the room, soft growls that were almost like a cat's purr, accompanied by soft yipping sounds. Cordelia, not to be left out or outdone hummed a little as she snuggled closer still to Xander. Eventually Xander stopped trembling.

Cordelia smiled at them and whispered. “Go us.”

Kyle nodded, “Definitely a success.”

A loud growl interrupted the moment, and Heidi ducked her head and mumbled an apology. “Sorry. Hungry.”

xxx

He couldn't ever remember feeling this weak. It was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. This was completely unfair. Both times Yusuke died he'd been on his feet and causing mayhem right away. Okay, not right away. The first time Yusuke had died Koenma had brought his body back into a sort of coma state while Yusuke's soul was on probation and doing good deeds. Then the second time he'd been out of commission for maybe an hour before coming back to life as a demon. Still this sucked. He died just a little, if any at all and he was weak as a kitten. Stupid Judge.

“This might go faster if you focused on getting there.” Cordelia muttered as she squeezed his hand. She and Kyle were on either side of him, supporting him as they trudged toward the library.

“Sorry, was thinking.” He ignored the snickering coming from Rhonda and Heidi somewhere behind them. Evil girls making fun of his thoughts.

When they entered the library Willow was the first to get to them. Her hair was tangled every which way and she absolutely vibrated as she approached them. “Tor said the Judge touched you. That's...Xander I don't know...” Her shaking didn't stop and tears trickled down her cheeks. “I can't lose you too.”

He stepped forward on his own, gently shaking away Cordelia and Kyle's hands. “Come here Willow.”

She took a hesitant step and slowly hugged him. “You have to be more careful. I know the pack is important, but don't forget that you're part of it. That makes you important too.”

He kissed the top of her head and pulled back so he could wipe her tears away. “Thanks. And I'm sorry I worried you.” He swayed a bit.

“Xander?” The fear on her face was obvious.

“It’s okay; I just need to sit down.” He sagged a bit and Willow nearly stumbled under his weight, and to everyone's surprise Cordelia was the first to his side, and together she and Willow got him to the table. Kyle pulled a chair out for him and Xander all but collapsed onto it.

“You are so not allowed to scare us like this anymore.” Cordelia frowned as she made sure he was
situated comfortably.

“I second that.” Willow muttered. The others didn't bother to nod, the agreement was understood.

Xander rolled his eyes. “So you guys get any sleep last night?”

Giles was watching him closely, worriedly. “We did manage, a bit. Jenny eventually went home.”

Ms. Calendar snorted. “Not that I got much sleep.”

Giles gave her a rueful smile. “Willow, Tor and I stayed here.”

Willow nodded. “Giles had the cot and I used the sleeping bag. Tor kept watch all night.” She sent a mild glare to Tor who waved her off.

“Someone had to keep a look out.” His words didn't make the glare lessen.

Giles however kept looking at Xander. “How are you really Xander? Did you get any rest?”

He shrugged. “I passed out. If you can call that rest. And I'm slightly traumatized with the almost dying thing. I think I woke up once and then actually fell asleep.” He glanced at the others who nodded. “I still feel really tired though. Some coffee would be of the good.”

Ms. Calendar smiled. “There's a fresh pot in Giles' office. I'll get you a cup.” She stepped into the office and Xander looked at Giles.

“Where's Buffy?”

“We're not sure.”

Willow put a hand on his shoulder. “She never checked in.”

“Damn.”

“Easy.” Kyle said as soothingly as he could. “We know she got away.”

“Yeah. No one called her house right? The last thing we need is Mrs. Summers asking questions.”

“No, we know better. It was tempting though.” Giles muttered, fiddling with his glasses, as if he were just itching to polish them.

Cordelia gripped his hand. “She could still be with Angel. Safety in numbers or whatever.”

Tor caught Xander’s eyes. “Should we look for her?”

Rhonda shifted a bit. “Heidi and I got plenty of sleep, we can search.”

Xander shook his head. “No, I want everyone to stick close for now. The vamps may not be able to come out during the day but the Judge won't have that problem. And I'm not recharged enough to be of much use. Buffy's missing, Tor is exhausted, speaking of which, Tor you look like I feel. Go rest on the cot for an hour or two.” Tor nodded and disappeared into the office, passing Ms. Calendar who came bearing a steaming cup of coffee.

She handed him the warm mug and he sniffed in appreciation before taking a careful sip. “Ah, nectar of the gods.”
Ms Calendar smiled even as she stepped away and Giles shook his head. “No, that would be ambrosia.”

“Eh, close enough.” He sipped again before carefully handing the mug to Kyle, who took a sip himself. “Okay, calling her house is out, but have you tried Angel's apartment?”

Giles faltered. “Oh... well no. That hadn't occurred to me, not after everything that happened. Damn.” He moved to pick up the phone, just as Buffy entered the library.

“Buffy!” Willow nearly ran to her, but pulled short when she saw the slightly lost look on Buffy's face.

Giles stepped away from the counter. “Oh thank god.”

Xander studied the careful way Buffy held herself, as if she was unsure of something. Then the lingering smell of Angel drifted past his nose. He ignored it. “Buff? You okay?”

She looked at him, really looked, and her eyes widened. “Xander? What happened?”

“Papa Smurf packs a mean punch. Without, you know the actual punching.”

She walked to him on shaky legs and reached out with her hand. Gently putting it over the faint, almost gone mark the Judge had left behind. Their eyes met. “He touched you.”

“Yeah.”

“Because you got us out. You almost died.”

“Kyle doubled back, we got out. Kyle's very good at distracting the bad guys...but it was close. So, you okay?” He gave her a grin and she gave him a weak smile.

She moved back, her hand slipped from his face. “Yeah. We made it out. Split up and hid most of the night. Sewers aren't fun...has Angel checked in?”

Ms. Calendar shook her head. “No.”

Willow grasped her hand lightly. “But I'm sure he will.”

Buffy tried to smile. “Yeah,” Her eyes drifted back to Xander. “We got lucky, both of us.”

“You kicked him.” Heidi stated, as if only remembering, her eyes rushing over Buffy's body, checking for injuries.

“Yeah, it was like a sudden fever...if...” She shuddered, her gaze focusing on Xander again.

He nodded and gave her another small smile. “Yeah, glad he didn't get his hands on you Buff. Being touched by the Judge was not fun.”

“Luck won't hold us up forever.” Giles sighed. “We need to find a weakness. I'll continue to look through the books; the rest of you should get to class.”

Xander reached for Cordelia and she helped him to his feet. Kyle was at his other side in an instant. “We'll be back later to help out Giles.”

“I'll look on the net; see if I can find anything there.” Ms. Calendar said as she held the door open for the others.
Giles gave them a tired smile. “Thank you. All of you.”

XXX

Xander paused, holding Cordelia and Kyle in place for a moment as they watched Ms. Calendar watch Willow and Buffy on the stairs. The girls spoke for only a moment, but Buffy's unease was obvious, as was the speculative look on Ms. Calendar's face as she observed the Slayer. Even as Buffy and Willow trudged up the stairs Ms. Calendar stared after them before slowly going on down the hallway.

Kyle glanced at him. “What was that about?”

“Yeah, that was only slightly creepier than what I'm used to.” Cordelia muttered.

“I'm not sure...but Ms. Calendar has been acting a little off. And there was this weird guy in her classroom yesterday.”

Kyle nudged him a bit. “Sometimes she smells like guilt.”

“Emotions have a smell?” Cordelia asked in clear disbelief.

He nodded at her. “Yeah...it’s kind of weird but we've gotten used to it.”

“Alpha...Summers smells like Angel...and sex. Think she showered though.”

“Yeah... I noticed. Which means she lied about hiding in the sewers.”

Kyle grimaced. “Bad morning after?”

“Don't know.”

“Okay eww on the talk about Angel and Buffy's sex life...but speaking of sex.” She tugged on his arm, making him face her. “You and Spike. You want to explain that?” Her eyes were sharp with anger, and she had a right to feel that way.

He met those beautiful hazel eyes. “Have not had sex. We've kissed four times.”

“So this cheating thing, how do you define it?”

He could feel Kyle step back a bit, not wanting to get caught up in the drama of two alphas. “I started getting his kisses before us Cordy.”

“Still,” Her eyes softened a bit, the beginnings of pain showing.

He squeezed her hand gently. “If we survive the Judge I'll still cook for you this weekend.”

“But you-”

He kissed her, gently manipulating the words from her tongue and swallowing them down as if they'd never been. When he pulled back she blinked at him, just a little dazed, and surprised that he'd used her own technique against her. “I'm not sure what I have with you, but it’s more than lust. And I want to find out what that something is.”

Before she could respond a grating voice intruded on them. “Well if it isn't Cordelia and her geek.” The three of them idly glanced at Harmony and her gaggle of pretty girls. Cordelia straightened her neck, held her head high, and readied herself for a cat-fight. Xander saw this, squeezed her hand
again, and casually glanced at Kyle.

“Kyle.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you hear something?”

Kyle smirked. “Nope. Why?”

“Thought I heard something. Sounded kind of annoying… And squeaky,” He added as an afterthought. He glanced at Cordelia, whose smile looked positively evil, and kind of hot. “What do you think Queen C?”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Probably just a bug buzzing.” She narrowed her eyes and Harmony took a step back. “They really should do something about that infestation.” Then she tugged on his arm and they walked away.

Then Xander realized they weren't going the direction he wanted to go. “Hey, what about breakfast?”

“You already ate everything Gweny put in front of you.”

“But I'm still hungry.” He whined just a bit, and ignored Kyle's snickering. “Mean.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

xxx

Spike gazed at the demon that was once his everything. Dru lay listless on a low table, her eyes glazed as she stared up at the ceiling. He wheeled over to her. “Dru? How are you love? Better?”

She didn't acknowledge him at first, but after a moment she sighed, and it was wistful. “Did you see anything pet?”

“I've been naming all the stars. It gives them comfort, knowing they belong.”

That was his Dru, batty as ever. “That's the ceiling Dru, and the only star about is the bloody sun.”

“Doesn't matter.” She giggled. “I can see them. They cannot hide from me.” Finally she turned her head to look at him, a look of dismay on her face. “But I've named all of them the same name.” Then she smiled again. “Except for one, but there is still such confusion. Only Jesse knows who he is.”

That was as random as she'd ever been. “Never mind this Jesse bloke. Did you see what happens to Angel?” There was a shuffling noise behind him and a chill went down his back. A footstep and then a voice. Angel.

“Well. He does a stint on Broadway, working his way up, if you get my drift.” He winked and stalked further into the room. “And in no time he's nearly at the top.” He smirked at them as if sharing a joke. “Then the big star has an unfortunate accident, the fatal kind.”

Spike glared at him for a moment. This rambling creature reminded him of Dru, just a bit. “I think the Hellmouth has made you stupid. What kind of idiot waltzes into enemy territory like this?”

Angel stepped a little closer. “Haven't you learned boy? I go where I want. And as long as there are horrific crimes against humanity, as long as trash like you is rattling around I'll be there.”
Spike continued to stare at him. Something was wrong, and it wasn't just the almost random flow of words spewing from Angel's mouth. There was a strange look in Angel's eyes. Not even when they cut a bloody path through Europe did Angelus look like that. But it didn't matter, because the Judge was behind the prat and would burn him to ash in a moment. The day was looking up after all. "This has been a confusing little chat, but it's time for you to go now." He smirked and looked at the Judge. Angel looked over his shoulder just as the Judge grabbed him, placing a hand firmly on Angel's chest. He heard Dru shift behind him to get a better look. She giggled as Angel stiffened a bit...then nothing. "Why isn't he burning?"

The Judge looked pleased. "This one has already been cleansed." And he let go of Angel, who looked positively giddy. Bastard.

"What?" Spike couldn't believe it; it wasn't possible...was it?

Big Blue shrugged. "There's no humanity in him." And he walked away. What the bloody hell?

Angel just grinned, "Lucky me."

Dru of course cooed and tittered over the return of her daddy, taking his hands and nuzzling at his neck. It set his teeth on edge, but he had to play along didn't he. He was in no shape to take on Angelus. Fuck! "Really? No more being the Slayer's lapdog then?"

Angelus growled at him, but Dru giggled and smoothed a hand along his cheek. "Your bright light has flown away." She grinned at him. "And you've come home to play."

He grinned back at her and nipped at her fingertips. "And play we will."

Spike simply smirked as Angelus leaned toward him to lick and nibble at the scars on his cheek. He could play along for now, soon Daddy dearest would have dear Dru between the sheets and would leave him on his own. He never could compete for their affections, not when they had each other. What worried him though...was what would happen later. When Xander and the Judge faced one another for round two. And with Angelus back in the saddle, so to speak...things just got very, very bad.

Fuck.

xxx

It was quiet where he was, the football field and bleachers were deserted this time of year. The quiet wasn't exactly what he needed, but it was away from the pack, away from what he'd almost lost. It wasn't easy facing facts, but he needed to sort things out, otherwise he'd be useless to his Alphas. He was so absorbed in his thoughts he almost missed the sound of footsteps coming closer, it was a sound that was fast becoming familiar to him. Larry.

"Kyle?"

He looked up, and up at Larry's taller form, he seemed even bigger from Kyle's viewpoint on the ground. "Hey."

"Heidi said I'd find you here. You're missing lunch. It's pizza day." Larry smiled and held up a tray. "I brought you some."

"Thanks."

Larry frowned and sat down beside him, careful not to spill their food. "Milk or coke?"
“Milk.”

Larry opened the small carton and handed it to him. “You wanna tell me about it?”

“No.” He sipped at the milk. “Yeah,” Kyle sighed and set the milk down. “I screwed up.”

“You mean last night? Heidi told me what happened to Xander.”

“No, before that.” He took a breath and let it out slowly. “Larry...what I tell you here, you can't repeat to anyone.”

“Okay.” Larry put down the tray and slipped an arm around him. “What happened?”

“Xander. He's been keeping secrets.”

“From you?”

“From all of us.” Kyle leaned into him, putting his head on Larry's shoulder. “From the pack.”

“And that's bad.”

“It’s dangerous. The pack is everything, it’s our family.”

“What was he hiding?”

Kyle sighed. “You know those vampires that gave us so much trouble earlier in the year, Spike and Drusilla? We thought they were destroyed back during career week. But when we came back from Christmas break Xander ran into Spike on patrol.”

“And?”

“He didn't tell anyone.”

“Why?”

Kyle snorted. “He's in love with Spike...or at least crushing on him like crazy.”

Larry shifted and glanced down at him. “What about Cordelia?”

Kyle shrugged. “Harris is an emotional and complicated mess. I think he's in love with both of them.”

“Huh. Now, what's really bothering you.”

Kyle moved away and met his gaze. “You're reading me too well.” Larry only smiled. “Fine.” He sighed and hung his head. “I practically turned on him when he told me.”

“When was this?”

“Night before last. We'd been walking with Willow and Summers, and he smelled like guilt, so after we walked Willow home and Buffy went off to do her own thing I confronted him.”

“And he told you about Spike.”

“Yeah. And I verbally tore him a new one.”

“Why?”
“I thought I'd already worked through this.”

Larry reached out to him, his hand cupping Kyle's cheek. “Worked through what Kyle?”

“That I'm not enough for him. I can't be what he needs. I thought I'd gotten over that. And then I followed him.”

“To Spike?”

“Yeah. I've never seen him like that. I've seen him with Kurama in Tokyo, but this was different. It's like something inside him comes alive when he's with Spike,” Kyle blinked in realization. “You've seen how he reacts to Cordy.”

“Yeah.”

“It's like that, only more.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

Larry shifted. “So...this pining thing you're doing. How long is it going to last?”

Kyle tilted his head in confusion. “Why--” Larry's lips on his interrupted his question, and Larry's tongue in his mouth chased all the thoughts right out of his head. Strong, thick arms surrounded him as he was lifted from the ground and deposited on Larry's lap. His legs wrapped around the older boy's waist and for the first time he realized how much bigger Larry was. It was funny he'd almost forgotten, but oh how he remembered now with Larry's arms around him. He broke the kiss and gasped for air. “Damn.”

“Well?”

He blinked at Larry, completely lost. “Well what?”

“What about Xander?”

Kyle grinned and wiggled a bit. “Xander who?” And he moved toward Larry's mouth again.

xxx

Xander glanced over at Cordelia nervously as they waited for the classroom to fill up. Her staring was starting to get to him.

“So...Spike.”

He sighed, glad that they didn't have this class with Buffy and Willow. “What about him?”

“What's so special about him? I mean...the Billy Idol scene is so totally over...though he does wear it well. That coat is real leather right?” He could almost feel his eyes glaze over as he pictured Spike in that coat, and only the coat. She poked his arm.

“Hey!”

“Well?”

“Cordy, think about it. He's a vampire.”
“And?”

“He's over a hundred years old.”

She rolled her eyes. “Get to the point.”

He smirked. “He has a lot of experience. Think of the time he's had to perfect his technique...and we've only kissed and those kisses pretty much fry my brain.” He watched in amazement as her eyes started to glaze, lost in her thoughts. “Cor?”

Her eyes cleared. “I want to watch.”

“Say what now?”

“If you're going to be smooching someone else I want a front row seat.”

He rolled his eyes but smiled at the determined glare she gave him. “You're one of a kind Cordy.

xxx

Willow flagged Oz down in the hallway; she'd been working up the courage to talk to him all day. He smiled at her. “Hey.”

She gave him her best nervous, quivery smile. “Hey. Hey I...I just wanted to...to let you know that I had fun...while there was fun to be had. You know before the vampires crashed the party.”

He nodded. “Me too. It was kind of like an instant roller coaster.”

“Yeah. So...um I just wanted to tell you that...in case bad things start happening.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, you know. Unkillable demons wandering around and burning people up.”

His smile finally faded. “I saw Xander today.”

Willow swallowed her fear, Xander had actually looked better at lunch than he had that morning, the hand print was practically gone...but still...she hung her head and whispered. “It was close.”

“But he's okay.”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good. So...”

She looked up at him. “So...”

“Walk you to class?”

She smiled. “That'd be nice.”

xxx

Xander's strength returned to him slowly...oddly enough lunch almost seemed to energize him. By the time school was over he simply felt tired, no more aches, just tired. Which was a vast improvement from that morning. However his return to normal seemed to be the only break they'd had.
Angel was still unaccounted for, no one had heard from him, and Buffy was on the verge of a breakdown. Botan was still missing and the coms were still down. It was beyond ridiculous.

He looked up as Willow hung up the phone. “Any news?”

She shook her head and leaned on the counter. “Nothing. Buffy said she looked everywhere, and she even beat up Willy some. Angel's vanished.”

“Well, he isn't prone to telling us his every move.” Giles reasoned.

“Nope, he'd rather keep a bunch of silly kids in the dark for their own protection.” Xander sighed and slammed the book he'd been reading shut. It wasn't telling him anything new.

“Please do not abuse my books Xander.”

“Sorry. Its...This doesn't feel right. He should have checked in by now. Things are too dangerous to go Lone Ranger.” He stood and stretched. “Who wants snacks?”

Cordelia looked up from her book. “Are you going to battle the machines?”

He snorted. “Those stingy quarter stealing thugs? Nah, I planned on picking the lock on the kitchen door.”

She nodded in approval. “Good. Bring me back a salad, and some low fat Italian dressing.”

“Anything for milady.” He sketched a small bow towards her. Cordelia gave him a haughty look, but it was ruined by a smile.

Willow giggled and came around the counter. “I'll go with you; I need a pick me up.”

Xander gave her a look. “Coke only.”

She pouted. “Mean.”

They left the library together and walked in comfortable silence for a while. Then Willow sighed.

“What's up Wills?”

“Even if we armed every person in town it wouldn't be enough. We’d just end up with a bunch of dead citizens.”

“How?” He paused and looked at her.

“You know, what the books said, about before. They all say it took an army. We don't have enough people for an army...and they all got killed. And it's not like we can call the President and say 'Hey can we borrow the guys for a bit?’”

He froze as memories flooded his mind in broken flashes. Gunfire like thunder. Smoke filled forests as they burned. Bodies everywhere, piled waist high. Explosions...wait a minute...Explosions!

Willow shook him as hard as she could. “Xander!”

He blinked as the visions faded. “Sorry, flashback.”

“What?”
“Err...the soldier I turned into on Halloween...”

“What about him?”

“He was Specials Ops...Army Ranger. I get flashbacks from his battles sometimes...mostly as dreams though.” As if he hadn't had enough nightmare material before Halloween. Since the soldier possession he'd simply gained a little more variety in that part of his dream-scape. At least his new tie to Raizen had been beneficial from the beginning. Now though, something good might actually come from the soldier.

“What triggered it?”

“What you were saying. About an army and us not having one.” He grinned at her. “We may not need one.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I might have a plan.” He grinned at her, already feeling triumphant. Then the lights went out. “And now I have a wiggins...how 'bout you Wills?”

Her eyes were wide in the shadows, a touch of fear shining through. “Yep. Wiggins in residence.”

“Let’s get back.”

“Good idea.”

They turned to go back toward the library when Xander felt a chill go through him. He looked over his shoulder...and saw Angel come through the door at the end of the hall.

Angel took a few steps forward. “Willow. Xander. What happened to the lights?”

Willow smiled at the vampire, though Xander could tell she was nervous. “Hey Angel. We're not sure, as it kinda just happened.”

Xander peered at the vampire through the shadows. “Where have you been?”

“Oh, ya know, just around. Listen, I found something amazing that I want everyone to see.”

He blinked...what the hell? “Dude, you've been AWOL for almost twenty-four hours, and Buffy's on the verge of a meltdown. The Judge is complete, everyone's freaking, and you didn't check in!”

He glared at Angel furious, but gradually his anger slowed down to make way for caution. Something was wrong...it looked like Angel was smiling...

“Sorry. I had to keep them off my trail. Why don't you go get the others? I've got something to share.”

Xander shook his head; it was almost like Angel was a different person. “How about you come with us?”

“Sure Xander.” Angel smiled at him...Angel never smiled at him.

Xander motioned for him to follow them, even as he grabbed Willow's hand and whispered to her. “Run.”

She jerked in surprise and stared at him. “What?”
“Just run Wills, please.” He pushed her ahead of him and she took off. Angel moved closer, like he was considering chasing after her, then he changed his mind and walked towards Xander. Xander growled in warning, it was enough to make Angel pause. Good, now for some answers. “How?”

Angel gave him an amused smile. “How what?”

“How did you lose your soul?” It was a guess...but Angel really wasn't acting like his normal self, and it was as if there was something missing whenever Xander looked at him.

The vampire's eyes widened slightly. “You're just full of surprises aren't you little prince.” He laughed and gave Xander a little smirk that seemed to say ‘it's only us guys here’. “There was this little slice of heaven I came across last night. Between Buffy's thighs--”

Xander saw red and before he could even think about what he was doing he'd tackled Angel, and thrust his ever present stake into the vampire's thigh as they rolled on the floor. Angel screamed and kicked him away with his uninjured leg right into a wall; luckily the wall didn't crack at impact, though it still hurt. Xander hit the wall head first, dazed. He shook his head to try to shake off the ringing noise which was most definitely not the school bell.

Angel limped over to him, even as he pulled the stake out of his leg and took aim over Xander's chest. “Give this message to Buffy.”

There was a blur of blond hair that looked like Buffy coming to his rescue, and he thought she might have said something to Angel, but all he could make out was a garbled mess that reminded him of the adults of Charlie Brown's world. The rest was a blur that he couldn't keep up with, a struggle that danced before his vision, and then Buffy was slammed into the wall beside him. Angel laughed and limped his way out of the hall. And Buffy cried brokenly into his shoulder as he tried to figure out what had happened. Though one thing was very clear to him.

Concussions sucked.

xxx

Her eyes opened and she sat up rapidly, instantly regretting the action as her head was torn apart from the inside by some monster pretending to be a headache. It was almost like a hangover after bad Makai home brew, but she knew she hadn't been drinking. She hadn't had a drink since her break up with Mukuro.

Botan groaned and rubbed at her head, desperately trying to will the pain away even as she took in her surroundings. At first her vision was blurred and she couldn't tell where she was, but it gradually returned with a sluggishness that suggested she'd been drugged. When she found out who had drugged her she was going to knock them silly with her oar...possibly her baseball bat and then toss them through a portal and straight into a pool of lava.

She sighed and tried to stand, and barely made it to her feet. This place, where ever it was...wasn't Earth...or Makai, or even Reikai. Somehow, her attacker had dragged her to another dimension. Actually it looked sort of like...

“You're awake.”

She spun around to face the voice...and gaped. “What...but...how? You're supposed to be dead!”

Eyghon stood before her in his true form, and smirked at her. “Welcome…To my home.”

XXX
Chapter Notes

A/N: And here we get to see Botan spaz a bit the way she did in the anime. LOL

Eyghon rushed at her again, even as she jumped clear of his attack and left him glaring after her. He clearly had not expected her to be a challenge. Such things happened when you hid your true power. Botan let the cheeky grin on her face fade to a small smirk.

She waved at him as she sank into the ground, disappearing from view and becoming one with the soil. From beneath the surface she could monitor his every move. He took a step forward, and then moved from foot to foot, probably looking around for her, wondering what the heck was going on. Botan stifled a giggle and slid through the dirt, as if it wasn't there at all and moved behind him before raising herself above.

She never expected the clawed fist that crashed into her face. Botan cried out in surprise as the blow caught her off guard and she fell back and rolled over the terrain. When she regained her footing she glared at Eyghon, all the while plotting her revenge.

“You surprise me girl.”

Her glare faltered. Oh gods and goddesses...it was coming...the part of the fight where Eyghon was going to explain everything to her. Then again...answers would be good... With that decision made she tilted her head a bit and put on her best puzzled face. “I did?”

“I did not think you possessed such magic. But whatever magic you possess it will not be enough. You are mine.” And then he rushed at her, feinting from one side to the other before finally taking a swing at her. She dodged the blow, and grabbed his arm and wrestled him to the ground. She put her free hand to the top of the soil and called upon the life of the dimension they were in and a creature made of stone emerged to hold her prisoner for her. Eyghon struggled against his new prison, made of living rock. “What is this?”

Botan stepped back and summoned her oar, then hit him with it; the resounding smack was very satisfying. “Answers. Now.”

“You think you can make me speak girl?”

Botan sighed; she so did not have time for this. She had no idea how long she'd been gone or if the kids and Tor needed her. She looked at the rock creature she had summoned, “Premo.” The golem-like being began to squeeze Eyghon. Said demon looked stunned, then slightly panicked as his air supply was lessened.
“What,” he wheezed a bit, “are you?”

She ignored him. “Magis.”

Eyghon winced as his bones and cartilage started to grind under the pressure. “Is this,” he gasped, “all you have?”

“I’ve already called upon the earth of this realm; do you want me to call a being of each element? A being of wind could tear you apart with the force of a hurricane. A water creature could drown you or freeze you. And a fire child...well all that would be left is ash.” She gave him a steady gaze. “What will it be Eyghon? Your death here? Or answers and your life spared?”

He’d turned an interesting shade of gray...possibly blue...oops, he couldn't breathe, “Subsisto.” The creature stopped squeezing, “Solvo.” It loosened its grip on Eyghon enough that the demon could breathe again. “Well?”

“You don't have the power to--”

Botan struck the ground with the end of her oar, there was a flash of light and it transformed into a staff. And for the first time Eyghon looked at her with fear. “That...You...”

“You may be older than me, but even scum like you should recognize my father's work.”

“Your father? That weak wizard? He--”

Botan struck him with her staff, making sure to zap him with a little lightning before giving him her sunniest smile. “You were saying?”

“They owed me!” Eyghon roared at her in anger. “They called upon me, called upon my power for their games, and did not expect a price! Their souls were mine. And you took them from me!”

She blinked at him. “That's what this is about? The souls of Ripper and the others? That was months ago, what took you so long?”

He sneered at her. “That ward, those children should not have that kind of power.”

She sighed and flicked her staff back into a subspace pocket and retrieved her oar. “Idiot, a demon as old as you sold have recognized a Miko's craft before trying to walk through a barrier.” She smacked him with the oar. “Any thing else you want to tell me?” A growl was her only answer. “That's fine, now if you'll excuse me I need to make a call.”

Botan turned her back to him as she fished out her communicator, confident that the rock creature would keep Eyghon in its grasp. She flipped open the com and punched in the code for Koenma, and blinked in confusion when all she got was white fuzz and static. “What in the name of Yama? The coms always work.” She put in Yusuke's code and got the same result, a bad feeling started to fill her. After putting in Xander's code it worsened. When she got no response from Giles the bad feeling had shifted to mild panic. Every code she put in ended with the same result...nothing. Even her last ditch effort of contacting Mukuro gave her nothing. She glared at the apparently broken communicator and grumbled. “I'm actually a little glad the last code didn't work, but this is ridiculous.” She sighed and slumped against the golem creature. “I shouldn't be getting this snowy screen.” Eyghon growled at her and she absently hit him with her oar. “Quiet, I'm thinking.”

She leaned her head back and looked at the odd light green sky. There really was no reason for the communicator to be on the fritz like this...unless...but he wouldn't do that...would he? Not without telling her. But what if he had...if he had she was going to kill the godling. Prince or no prince.
“What in the name of the creator was he thinking?” She grumbled, “Of all the times to do this.” Botan sighed and moved away from the creature she summoned. “You can go now. Thank you for your help.”

The golem nodded and spoke for the first time. “You are welcome daughter of Nimue.” It released Eyghon and sunk back into the soil it had originated from. Eyghon eyed her cautiously.

“What now?”

She shrugged. “I can't let you run loose. You'd cause too many headaches. Sorry.” She made a sweeping motion with her hand and four walls of stone rose around a very surprised Eyghon.

Following the stone, ancient and gnarled vines rose from the earth to wrap and coil around the walls and to form a grid over the top of his new prison.

“What are you doing? You think this will hold me Fae Child?”

She snorted and pulled a paper talisman from her sleeve. “Not alone it won't but that's why I have this.” She approached the stone and vine box and placed the spell on the wall in front of her.

“Eternus obfirmo.” A flash of light and the vines began to glow and then held fast. “I'll check on you in a few centuries.” She smirked at his muffled cursing. “Now, to find out what the heck is going on.”

Botan waved her hand and tried to summon a portal...nothing happened. “You've got to be kidding me.” She tried again, and stared at the empty air. “There is supposed to be a portal there. Damn.” Closing her eyes in concentration she let her senses extend, hoping to find a weakness between dimensions. If she could find such a point she'd be able to squeeze through and get back to Reikai without a portal.

It took a moment before she found such a point, about a mile ahead of her. She released her oar to see if it would hover, to her relief it did. At least one of her Spirit Guide powers was working.

xxx

The weakened area was a nondescript little patch of grass with a bit of shimmering air that seemed to hover three feet from the ground. Beside it sat a little being that looked like it might have been related to a goblin. She wasn't surprised to see it there; a place like this one usually had a keeper, a guardian of sorts.

“Good day to you, sir.” She greeted as she slid from her oar, putting it away as her feet touched the ground. “Might I have passage?”

“Do you know where you want to go?”

“I do.”

The being nodded, “Your kind usually use mirrors Milady.”

She smiled at him. “Unfortunately I don't carry a mirror big enough for such purposes. May I inquire about the fee?”

He looked at her closely. “A strand of your hair dear lady.”

Botan kept the surprise off her face. “My hair?” She took a closer look at him and his features shifted ever so slightly, he was wearing a glamour. “May I ask why?”
“A strand of your hair Milady would be a fine core for a wand.”

She blinked, and smiled. “You're wand maker then?”

“No Milady. My cousin however is the best Wand Maker in Britain, Ollivander.”

She nodded in acknowledgment, she recognized the name. “And you are here as a gate keeper?”

He nodded. “Collecting fees such as your hair miss. My cousin pays me well for the more unique cores.”

“Very well, one hair for passage to Reikai.” She plucked a hair from her head and handed it to him. “My fee sir.”

He accepted the hair and waved her on. “May your path be clear Daughter of Merlin.”

She smiled at him again and touched the weakened area, her hand slipped through and she slid between the worlds.

xxx

Yusuke tried again to reach Xander on the communicator. All he got was static.

For hours now he'd been feeling uneasy and then he'd felt a distant ache accompanied by a scream of pain in his head. It wasn't the first time he'd heard Xander's cries in his mind, but it was the first time he'd ever felt his little brother in pain. Something was happening in Sunnydale, something bad, and he couldn't get in touch with Xander. Or Botan as it turned out. When he tried he got the same static. Which led him to trying Kuwabara on the communicator, thinking that a local call would work, again no such luck. Good thing they had phones.

Kuwabara answered on the fourth ring. “Hello?”

“Is your communicator working?”

“...That's why you're calling me? Come on Urameshi, you know I've got a class tonight.”

“Screw your class my stupid communicator isn't working and something is happening to Xander.”

“Hang on a second.” There was a rustling sound as Kuwabara shifted the phone. “Found it. Just wait while I... huh... static.”

“Damn.”

“You get the same thing?”

“Yeah. I was hoping it was just mine that was fucked up.”

“Have you tried calling him on the phone?”

Yusuke resisted the urge to smack himself, just barely. “Later Kuwabara.” He hung up and dialed Xander's home number and waited for it to go through...and waited...and then an automated voice informed him that his call could not be completed at that time. Yusuke gently placed the phone down, if he broke it Keiko would probably hurt him but now he was sure that he'd have to smack someone around. Either it would be Botan for not being there when he needed her to open a portal or Koenma for the situation with the communicators.
She fell through the air, pulling out her oar in time to keep from going splat on the rocky terrain. Botan glared at the ground as she flew; of all the places to end up she'd not expected it to be this far from the Palace. However her oar was fast and her skills as a flyer were well known and it did not take long to get there. She by-passed the main gate and flew through an open window in the main reception area.

“Botan-san!”

She glared at the red Ogre that approached her. “Not now, I need to see Koenma.”

The ogre gULped. “He's been looking for you.”

She nodded and put her oar away before striding toward Koenma's office. She had a bone or ten to pick with her boss...and possibly stab him with a few.

As she approached the golden ornate door to Koenma's office ogres of every color dashed out of her way. She couldn't blame them really, for the first time in ages her magic was leaking out due to her emotions, she was afraid for her little brother and needed to vent her anger. Koenma's door never had a chance. Nor did Koenma.

She kicked it open, possibly breaking it, she didn't stop to inspect the damage. “Koenma!”

The prince looked up from his paperwork; he looked regal in his adult form now that he no longer wore the pacifier. “Botan?”

She was across the room in a second her hands clenched in his shirt collar as she started to shake him. “What the hell were you thinking? You didn't tell me you were going to do this!”

Koenma flailed a bit as she shook him and he yelled back. “I did tell you about it!”

“No you didn't! If I had known I would have told the kids what was going to happen! That we wouldn't be able to use the compacts!”

“Botan let me go! I sent you a memo; it’s on your desk!”

She stopped shaking him but didn't let go. “You idiot! I spend most of my time on the Hellmouth; I'm never at my desk!”

“Then you should have had the ogres forward your messages to your location! It’s not that hard Botan, any of the guides can open a portal and deliver your messages to your home in Sunnydale.” Botan bowed her head with a groan and reluctantly released her boss with a sigh. Koenma took the moment to scoot his chair back, just out of her reach in case she decided to grab him again. “What happened to you anyway?”

She raised her head to glare at him and he flinched. “I got abducted by Eyghon, who evidently has more lives than a cat and Yusuke put together. We fought, I won, and he’s locked away now. And then I tried to open a portal to come here only to discover that I couldn't open a portal.” She moved a little closer to him; his desk was supporting all of her weight now. “Why is that Koenma-sama?” She stressed the honorific with a deceptively sweet tone.

He gulped. “We're...we're on lock-down.”

Her eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped, she seemed frozen for a second. Then she was kneeling
on his desk and had him in her clutches once again shaking him. “We don't go on lock-down when the Communications system is being updated! It’s in the rule book!”

He put his hands on hers in an attempt to stop her from shaking him apart. “We do when the fates intervene and tell us too!”

She stopped suddenly, nearly giving him whiplash. “What? The Fates? What in the three realms does any of this have to do with the Fates?”

Koenma sighed and rubbed at his forehead. “Xander is facing the first of many tasks that are being put to him and the others.”

“What tasks? Why does he have tasks to complete?”

“Botan...you know as well as I do that there is a price to pay when a prophecy is broken.”

She glared at him. “That's what this about? The prophecy he broke?” She slid off his desk, scattering paperwork as she went, and started toward the door. “When I get my hands on those Fates they're gonna be--”

“Botan! You can't take on the Fates! You know you can't. They hold all our lives in their hands.”

“I wasn't going to kill them...just toss them into a hell dimension for a century or two. Or beat them bloody with my oar. That would be satisfying.”

“Botan!”

She stopped...and sighed. “Can I at least go to my parents’ home?”

Koenma was silent for a moment. “You can't use a portal to get there, but yes you have permission to go.”

“Thank you.” She did not look back as she left his office.

xxx

 Luckily the ogres stayed out of her way as she headed toward the more residential area of the castle that housed a great many of their staff. Her apartment door looked rather forlorn as she approached it; however there was not a speck of dust on the handle...which was odd. She shrugged off the oddity and opened the door...and was promptly engulfed in an avalanche of paper.

She gave a shout of surprise as the stacks fell on and all around her. She managed to get her head above the mess and grabbed one to see what it was...paperwork...of all the things to do. She’d only been living full time in Sunnydale for a few months and the ogres had turned her quarters into a store room. With a sigh she waded through the paper and into her old rooms and resisted the temptation to set the paperwork on fire, especially while she was still in the middle of it. However, there was another element that would cause less damage to her person, so with a little grin she spun her hands just so and created a small tornado that whisked most of the papers right out the door and into the hall. Let someone else deal with them, she had a mirror to find.

And she did, the full size mirror leaned against the wall by her bed, just where she'd left it...only the glass was cracked. This was not at all how she’d left it. Gently Botan thumped her head against the ornate frame her father had crafted for the mirror. How the heck the ogres had managed to crack it she had no idea.
“I'll have to fix it.” She muttered to herself. “Stupid Fates.” Botan sighed again and brought her oar out. Since her mirror was crafted by her parents it was magical, alive and sentient. The only way to repair the glass was to use a type of nectar that had healing properties and pour it on the cracks. Luckily such plants existed in Reikai; still, she had some flying ahead of her.

xxx

Yusuke had called Kurama next, on the phone since the communicators were seemingly broken. Kurama tested his own compact, and just like the others it failed to make a connection. The lack of communication between Tokyo and Sunnydale and Reikai was really starting to piss him off.

Next was Shizuru, she didn't have a communicator but he was hoping that she could tell him what was going on. Amazingly when she picked up the phone what she said was; “No Yusuke I don't know what's happening on the Hellmouth, but if you're patient for a little while longer Botan is going to show up and you will get a few answers then. She's just stranded right now, and that's all I can see.” And then she hung up on him.

Yusuke wondered if one of those Apocalypses that Xander had mentioned was happening in California.

xxx

Kurama looked at the communicator in his hand. It was odd really, this feeling of helplessness. It wasn't that he hadn't felt helpless before, he had, several times, and usually when someone he cared for was in danger. But...those times he always knew exactly what the threat was and could find a way to counteract it. This time he had absolutely no information, except that Yusuke had been able to sense that Xander was in trouble, and in pain.

Xander...the boy...young man really, was like a complex puzzle that he had yet to figure out. He knew he had messed up their last date when he'd been in Sunnydale, sometimes he couldn't help himself. He'd been too focused on trying to impress Xander with his skills that he hadn't really paid attention to the signals Xander was sending him.

And now that he thought back on the date, he realized that Xander had simply humored him, allowed him to take charge and kill all the vampires they came across during the patrol. The goodnight kiss that had followed was a good one, one of the best they'd shared even, but even then he could tell that Xander held himself back.

He smiled to himself and knew it was not one of joy, Xander kept holding himself back, and perhaps with Kurama he always would. Still...it was nice to dream.

Kurama put the communicator away and said a silent prayer for Xander and his pack.

xxx

Carefully Botan applied the special nectar to the mirror her parents had made. Drop by drop the liquid settled into the cracks in the glass, repairing it as it settled. She'd been lucky to find the large blooms so close to the castle, even luckier that King Yama hadn't been about as they'd been in his personal garden. She tried not to shudder at the thought of what would have happened if he'd caught her stealing the nectar.

When the last crack was healed the mirror shimmered a bit and a vague face appeared in the depths of the glass. “Botan-sama?”

“Yes, I'm back, how are you feeling?”
“Better, thank you for repairing me.”

She nodded and set down the bottle of nectar. “Do you know what happened?”

“Not really...I was sleeping...and I began to awaken when I heard a voice. And then boom! I was out cold.”

Botan sighed; she hadn't really expected the mirror to remember anything. “I’d like to speak to my parents please.”

“Of course.” The face faded way with a chiming sound, similar to a chorus of small bells. The main sitting room of her parents’ castle appeared before her and a moment later her mother Nimue shuffled into view, looking barely awake with tousled hair.

“Botan?”

“Sorry to wake you Oka-san, but it’s really important.”

Nimue blinked a couple of times and nodded, her sleepy appearance fading quickly. “What is it?”

“Something is happening on the Hellmouth and I can't get in touch with Tor or Xander, because Koenma is having the com system updated. And due to the Fates interference Reikai is on lockdown and I can no longer open portals.”

Nimue looked thoughtful. “Why haven't you simply used your mirror to get there?”

Botan blushed with embarrassment, something she had not done in a long time. “Er...because I don’t have a mirror at the house?”

Nimue sighed. “Those Reikai powers of yours have spoiled you.”

“At least I remembered how to repair this mirror.” Botan grumbled.

At that Nimue's eyes grew sharper. “The mirror you are using now was broken?”

“Yes...”

“Botan dear, it takes a lot of power to break one of the mirrors I've made...was it the glass that was cracked, or the frame?”

“The glass.”

Nimue nodded. “The frame was forged by your father in his work shop, and should withstand just about anything. The glass however is more fragile, but still, no ordinary being could break it...was the glass shattered?”

“Only cracked.”

Nimue was glaring now. “You said the Fates were involved.”

“Unfortunately. Koenma wouldn't let me go after them.”

“And you shouldn't. Even I tread with caution when those three are involved.”

“But...Koenma said there was a trial...or a task.” She sighed. “Xander broke a Prophecy and this is his first hurdle of many.”
Nimue's eyes widened. “He broke a Prophecy?”

Botan nodded. “Koenma was fairly upset when he found out.”

Her mother smiled. “A Prophecy Breaker. There hasn't been one of those for many years now. Things are changing.”

“Mother?”

“Dearest I know you're worried, and I can't stop you from worrying. But if what you've told me is true, and young Alexander is a Prophecy Breaker then everything will work out in the end. His path is a hard one, but he will survive.”

Botan shook her head. “But at what price?”

xxx

Giles fiddled with his glasses as he paced. “Are we absolutely certain that Angel has reverted to his former self? If you have any doubts I'd like to know now.”

Xander shook his head, gently though as he was pretty sure he had a concussion. “No doubts here, Giles. He was going to kill us, make us his special little crazy message for Buffy.”

Willow shuddered where she was huddled in her chair by Cordelia. “It was...he was so different Giles. The way he looked at us. The way he smiled...if Xander hadn't...wait...Xander how did you know?”

He blinked at her and wished his headache would go away. “He felt different.”

“Care to elaborate Xander?” Giles asked.

“Sure. You guys know I can sense vamps, and most other predators.” The others nodded with the exception of Buffy who sat on the other side of the table, lost in her own little world. “Angel has always felt different from other vamps, I guess because of the soul. Tonight...tonight he felt like just another vamp. Except we know his history.”

Giles nodded. “And Angelus was...is anything but an ordinary vampire.”

Tor shifted in his seat. “What do we do?”

Giles gave him a humorless smile. “Aside from panic?”

“Rupert.” Jenny touched his arm. “Not around the kids.”

“That's okay.” Cordelia said. “I'm all for panicking.”

Kyle shook his head and moved closer to the table, his hand in his pockets. “That's not very productive.”

Giles nodded as he stopped pacing. “You're right of course. It’s just...things were bad enough with the threat of the Judge. Now that Angel has switched to the other side...I wasn't prepared for that. I wasn't prepared for the Judge to be honest, and now.”

Jenny pulled him closer to her in an attempt to comfort him. “None of us could have been prepared for that.”
Willow caught Kyle's eyes and she motioned him to follow her lead as she stood and approached Buffy. Xander looked on in curiosity.

“Buffy. Are you okay?” Willow asked as Kyle slipped behind the Slayer and put a hand on her shoulder.

Buffy continued to look at her hand, possibly at a ring he didn't remember seeing her wear before, but then he never paid much attention to her jewelry. She shook her head, never bothering to look up at any of them. Not a good sign.

“I...I should have known something was wrong. He was different. The things he said...it wasn't like him at all.”

Giles moved away from Jenny, interest in his gaze. “What things?”

Xander closed his eyes, he couldn't imagine what Buffy was going through, and Giles picked the worst time to be curious. He didn't blame her for her next words. “It’s private.”

“But you didn’t know he'd turned bad?” Jenny asked. Buffy shook her head.

Giles relented for a moment and spoke more to himself than any of the others. “I wish I knew what had happened. What has changed.”

Buffy looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“Something like that doesn't just happen, Buffy, something must have triggered it, some event, perhaps a ritual or a spell. You spend the most time with him Buffy, surely you know.”

Her eyes were wide, scared and she shook her head. “No, I don't.”

“Did anything happen last night--” He asked, but Jenny put her hand on his shoulder, distracting him and giving Buffy time to shake her head, mumble an apology and run from the room.

“Heidi.” She perked up when she heard Xander speak her name. “Go with her, keep your distance if she needs her space, but look after her.” Heidi nodded and left.

Giles sat in a chair, tiredly running his hand over his face. “I hate to ask this of her, I know how she must feel but--”

“No.” Willow shook her head. “You don't.”

“We should leave her alone for now; let Heidi take care of her.” Jenny murmured.

“So, now what do we do?” Cordelia asked.

“I haven't the foggiest,” was the watcher's answer.

“Xander might have a plan...at least he did before Angel showed up.” Willow gave him a slightly hopeful gaze. “Maybe?”

He nodded and stood. “Yeah. Cordy I'll need your help on this...and we'll need a getaway vehicle.” He held up his hand when she started to respond. “Your car's not big enough.”

Kyle leaned against the table. “How big we talking Harris?”

Willow in turn leaned against Kyle in thought. “Oz has a van, will that work?”
Xander thought for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, it should. Tor I want you to stay here with Giles and Ms Calendar. Cordy, you and Rhonda meet the rest of us at Willow's in half an hour. Wear something...er...” He could feel his face heating up. “Attractive. Not that what you have on now isn't attractive Cordy, it is just...”

Cordelia gave him a little smirk. “We'll see you there. Come on Rhonnie.” They rose and left together, Rhonda snickering the whole way.

He pouted at the grins on Willow, Tor and Kyle's faces. “Why doesn't the earth do that whole swallowing thing when I want it to?”

xxx

Spike watched Angelus limp about the room; however despite the pain in his thigh he could not contain his glee. The bloody wanker was so full and sure of himself. Proud with whatever it was he'd done. Though Spike wondered how he came to have a hole in his thigh.

“Well?”

“It was exquisite. You should have been there; the look on her face was perfection, such anguish and pain.” He gave a happy sigh, even as he grimaced in pain as he sat down.

“Looks like you're the one in pain mate, Slayer has a bit of temper.”

Angelus sneered. “This?” He asked, gesturing to his injury. “This wasn't her.”

“Oh?” He asked, somewhat surprised by the answer. Drusilla giggled and cooed at the doll she was holding.

“Daddy was bad, so the Prince hurt him.”

A chill went through him at her words. The only one Drusilla ever referred to as a Prince was Xander. He did his best not to smile; it wouldn't do to give Angelus something to hold over his head.

Angelus chuckled. “You were right Spike, when you first came here. The boy does have fire.” He smirked. “I'd like to blow that little flame out.”

_Not if I have anything to say about that._ Spike kept his thoughts to himself; there was no need to put Xander in any more danger.

xxx

“Are you sure you're up to this? After last night with the Judge, and the concussion tonight...maybe we should do this.” Kyle gestured to himself, Rhonda and Cordelia, “and you can stay here with Willow and Oz. I'm already wearing your camo.”

Xander gave him a look. “Do you have any idea what you're looking for?”

“...nope.”

“Then I have to go in. Besides, I need you to shadow us, and possibly make some soldiers all unconscious-like if we get caught.”

Kyle nodded, reluctantly. “Okay.”

“Good. Now Wills, when you and Oz see that window open, get out the ladder and we'll pass you
the goods.”

Oz nodded. “Okay.”

“Goods? As in more than one package?” Willow asked him with wide eyes.

He grinned at her. “Thought I'd shop around a little.” He looked at Cordy and Rhonda. “Ladies, let’s move. Lovely outfits by the way.”

Cordelia gave him another little smirk and Rhonda wiggled a little excessively as they climbed out of the van. He rolled his eyes and went ahead of them to begin ‘Operation Rob the Army Blind’.

Getting inside was easy, a joke even. They got all the way to the fence around the armory without being seen. Not easy considering Cordelia's bright blue dress or Rhonda's silver sequined top. But they got in; squeezed through a hole in the chain-link which he made a bit bigger with the wire cutters he brought and were almost to the door when footsteps sounded, not Kyle's, and a voice.

“Halt! Identify yourself right the hell now!” The words were accompanied with the sound of a gun being readied.

He spun around and saluted. “Private Harris with the 33rd.”

“Try again nimrod. The 33rd is on maneuvers.”

“I'm on leave.” He relaxed and motioned to the girls. “Obviously, otherwise I wouldn't be in such lovely company.”

“You always spend your leave sneaking into the Armory?”

“Not always.” He grinned as Kyle slipped up behind the guard and hit him, the guard crumpled. “Nice. You'll need to hide him till we're done.” He bent down and picked up the rifle. “When you're playing guard, don't hold your gun the way he was... hold it like this.” He put the gun in Kyle's hands and positioned it just so.” Kyle gave him an odd look and he shrugged. “Don't ask. We'll be as fast as we can. Come on girls.”

They followed him into the armory, and watched as he looked over the crates of weapons.

Rhonda wondered around, careful not to bump anything and Cordelia settled herself on top of a large crate. “Do you even know what you're looking for?”

“Yep.”

“Which is?”

“Something big.”

Rhonda snorted. Cordelia tried again. “How do you know what you're looking for?”

“Back during Halloween, I was dressed as a soldier.”

“Yeah, I remember you being amnesia boy.”

Rhonda stopped and stared. “Wait, that happened to you guys too?”

Cordelia rolled her eyes. “Not to me, I told you to get your costume at Party Town.”
Rhonda shrugged. “The other place was cheaper.”

“Rhonnie money isn’t a problem. Daddy gives you the same allowance as me...er...” She blinked at her slip. “I mean...”

Xander looked at her, then at Rhonda, and back at her again. “Huh...that's why you've always smelled like pack...so...sisters.”

Rhonda grinned at him. “Half sisters. My mom is Dillon Chase's other woman, always has been.”

“This doesn't change anything...does it?” Cordelia asked him.

He shook his head. “Why would it? Oh hey, here we go our main attraction. Go open the window Rhonda, and get ready to pass this to them.”

Rhonda made her way to the window. “What are you gonna do?”

“Find more toys.”

xxx

When Botan stepped out of the full length mirror in the hall Shizuru merely smirked at her. “Didn't I tell you it would be a good idea to leave one of one of those mirrors here?”

Botan sighed wearily and nodded. “Yes, you were right, I shouldn't have doubted you. I was foolish.”

Shizuru put a cigarette to her lips and lit it, breathing in deeply. “Now what are you going to do?”

“Find Yusuke, tell him what I know. And pray for our brothers' safety.”

“Better go then.”

Botan nodded and summoned her oar. “I may be back to use the mirror.” She didn't wait for Shizuru response; she simply flew through the ceiling and out of the building.

xxx

When a very tired and subdued Botan slipped into a booth and let her head gently thump on the table in resignation, Yusuke barely managed to not throttle her. The only thing that kept him from acting was Keiko's hand on his arm. His eyes met hers and he took a calming breath before heading toward the booth and sitting across the table from Botan.

“Do you have anything to say?”

Botan raised her head. Her eyes were worried, and there was a frown on her face. “If you yell at me I will throw you through the window.”

Yusuke blinked. Normally Botan was cheerful, practically ditzy, however now that he thought about it, the ditzy part seemed to mostly be an act as time had gone by. Perhaps there was more to Botan than he realized. “I won't yell.”

“Good.”

“So...?”
She straightened in her seat and looked him in the eye. “I have absolutely no idea what's going on in Sunnydale. I woke up a few hours ago in a dimension I'd never been in before. There I had to fight and contain a demon named Eyghon. I subdued him temporarily at first and tried to get in touch with Koenma to give him an update and check in. That is when I discovered my com wasn't working. So I locked the demon away and tried to open a portal to Reikai, only to discover that I could not open a portal. So I had to fly to the nearest weak spot and slip through it into Reikai that way. I confronted Koenma. The communications system is being updated...and Reikai is on lock-down, no one is coming or going.”

“How did you get here then?”

She sighed. “I wasn't always a Spirit Guide, I have another way of travel, but its limited and I can't get to Sunnydale.”

“Why not?”

“My kind use mirrors to travel Yusuke and I've gotten so used to portals that I never set up a mirror at my home in Sunnydale.”

“Mirrors? What are...?”

“Fairies, Yusuke. Fairies use mirrors for travel and communication. The only reason I made it here is because Shizuru told me to set up a mirror in her apartment.” She shrugged. “Now I don't know any details, but Koenma said that whatever is happening on the Hellmouth is the first of many tasks that Xander and the others will have to go through.”

“Tasks? Why does my little brother have to go through some stupid task?”

“Because he broke a Prophecy and the Fates are testy about that sort of thing. If it’s any consolation my mother thinks everything will work out.”

“...Your mother?”

“She's...very old...and very wise. She called Xander a Prophecy Breaker...almost with reverence. It was odd.”

Yusuke was silent for a moment, letting everything sink in. “Okay...so here's what I know. I felt Xander again, like I did before. I felt and heard him scream...it was some of the worst pain I've ever felt. But it stopped. The pain and the screams changed to growls. Then I felt nothing.”

“I don't know what to say Yusuke. I'm just as worried about Tor. I have no way to get in touch with him.”

Yusuke took pity on her and smiled. “Have you eaten?”

“Not since before I was drugged and dragged to another dimension.”

“Wait here, I'll fix us something.”

xxx

Heidi ran her fingers through Buffy's hair, keeping her touch gentle, and her humming low. Her alpha had finally fallen asleep a short while ago, and her heart was breaking.

Heidi had followed her home and had gone so far as to go inside the house with her and wait for
some sign that she was needed. That sign came when Buffy had broken down in tears on her bed.

So Heidi did what Xander had told her to do, something she would have done anyway. She took care of her alpha.

Now she sat with her back against the headboard of the bed, with Buffy's head in her lap. The Slayer's tears had left a wet spot on her jeans but she didn't mind. For now Buffy was at peace, at least until morning came.

xxx

The next morning Xander, Oz and Willow watched as a very furious looking Buffy stormed through campus. Following closely behind was a very confused looking Heidi who only shrugged as she passed them. Clearly she had no idea what was going on.

Willow took a step forward, as if to follow them but Xander held her back. “Heidi's got it covered.”

“What do you think has happened now?”

“No idea. You guys will be ready tonight right? We figure that whatever is going down will be soon.”

Oz nodded. “Full tank of gas man.”

Xander nodded. “Good.”

xxx

The day went by quickly and none of them could decide if that was good or bad. Especially after word had spread, courtesy of Heidi, through the rest of the pack that Ms Calendar was in fact a member of the gypsy tribe that had cursed Angel.

And to make matters worse, her uncle, perhaps the only one who could have helped them get Angel's soul back, was dead. Found by Ms Calendar, Giles and Buffy in his hotel room, slaughtered.

Xander really didn't think the day could get much worse, unless of course his big idea failed. Which he really hoped wasn't the case.

He nudged Buffy. “I'm sorry it only came in green.”

She nodded. “That's okay...sort of matches my mood.” She gazed down at the weapon. “We need to go by the factory first.”

“Okay.” Xander pulled her close for a moment, and kissed the top of her head. “I'm sorry.” She nodded again, words escaping her for the moment. “Do you want me to show you how to use it?”

“Yes.”

xxx

Spike looked on, keeping his worry hidden. “Have fun.”

Drusilla cooed at him, as she kissed his forehead, then his lips. “Sweet Spike.”

Angelus clamped a hand on his shoulder. “Too bad you can't join the party Spike. We'll be thinking of you while we're ending the world.”
“I won't be in this chair forever Angel.”

“I know, but until that day comes...” He trailed off and smirked at Spike as he took Drusilla's hand and led her away. “We'll be thinking of you.”

“What are you going to do if the Slayer and her posse show up?”

“What else? We'll have fun.”

Spike sneered at them as they left with the Judge, and wished with all his unbeating heart that he had a way to warn his boy.

xxx

They spread out when they got to the factory. Tor and the girls went up the stairs, Buffy and Giles stayed in the center area next to the long table the vamps had set up. Oz, Willow and Cordelia were near them, peering into the shadows, armed with crossbows. Xander however, followed his nose straight to Spike who was hiding in the back behind some old machinery. Kyle followed him close enough to act as a lookout.

They stared at one another for a moment, neither knowing what to say. Then Spike broke the silence. “I'm glad you're not dead luv.”

Xander gave him a little smirk and leaned down to kiss him, just a press of lips. “You okay?”

“Shouldn't I be asking you that?”

Xander pulled back enough to lean his forehead against Spike's. “Probably, but we don't have time for a big ol' conversation.”

“Right. I'm fine, been better, but I'll survive. Look, the Judge is ready to do his worst. They're going to the mall.”

Xander blinked at him. “What is it with you guys and the teenage hangouts?” When Spike gave him a look he snorted. “Dumb question, ignore it please.”

“Do me a favor?”

Xander nodded. “If I can.”

“Don't kill her.”

Xander sighed and placed a kiss on Spike's cheek. “I'll do my best. Don't let Buffy see you.” He motioned for Kyle to follow him back. “Let's go.”

When they rejoined the group they were trying to figure out where Angel and Drusilla would go. They had already vetoed the Bronze because it was closed, and there hadn't really been many other places the vamps hit as often as the local club.

“They'll be going somewhere crowded, that way the Judge can achieve maximum damage.” Buffy said aloud. “You guys find anything?”

Xander shook his head. “Just a whole lot of nothing.”

Oz raised his hand. “Where do we go when the Bronze is closed?”
They all looked at one another in confusion for a moment and several places were mentioned; Yano's Pizza, Sun Cinema, the Museum, the Zoo...The last two were quickly discarded, because only Willow would go to the Museum for fun and only Kyle thought adding the Zoo to the list was funny.

Oz shook his head. “If I was gonna line up, I know where I'd go.”


xxx

There was already a touch of dread in the air when they got to the mall. And Xander could sense the Judge; evidently nearly getting killed by the guy put him permanently on his demon radar. He was able to lead them right to the bastard.

They got there in time to witness the beginnings of a freaky light show, the Judge's power connecting all the humans before them as he started to burn the humanity out of them. Buffy however already had the crossbow in her hand and shot a bolt to distract him. Her aim was true and he stopped, releasing the crowd from his power. Angel and Drusilla looked on in confusion. The Judge yanked the crossbow bolt from his chest.

“Who dares?”

Buffy looked on, her gaze cold. “I dare.”

He opened the crate and got ready to hand his gift to Buffy while the Judge smiled at them all. “Foolish children. No weapon you could forge would ever stop me.”

Buffy held her hand out and he placed the rocket launcher in her grasp. “That was then.” She lifted it to her shoulder and took aim. “This is now.”

“Everyone down!” Xander yelled before hurrying to make sure his pack was safe while his co-alpha took down the Judge.

“What does that do?” Where the last words the Judge ever said. Then...there was chaos, people began screaming and running in every direction to get away from whatever it was they thought they’d witnessed.

“Best present ever.” She handed it back to him and he put it in the box. “We can't be sure the Judge is dead. Pick up the pieces.”

He nodded. “And keep them separate. Let's go.”


Buffy ran after Angel and when the pack looked to him he shook his head. “Let her work out her issues. We've got plenty to keep us busy.”

“Uh, arm!” Oz called from farther away.

“And a foot!” Willow added.

Xander gave a tired sigh and joined the search.

xxx
The moment her communicator beeped Botan and Yusuke practically threw themselves into seclusion, which just happened to be inside the pantry just off the kitchen. Keiko shook her head and continued going over her class work, hoping that the news they received was good.

Botan flipped her com open and glared at Koenma. “Well?”

“Come back to my office Botan. Lock-down is over.”

“Right,” She closed the compact again and put it way before she took hold of Yusuke's arm. “Ready?”

“Let's go.”

She waved her free hand and a portal opened in front of them, they stepped through it and directly into Koenma's office. The Prince of Reikai blinked at them in surprise. “Er...you brought Yusuke with you?”

“Yes, because we were sharing our misery, the kind where we were afraid for the lives of our younger brothers'.

“You feel like giving us an explanation Koenma? I kinda want to know why my little brother was in pain.”

Koenma sighed. “I only just got the report myself.”

“How many died?” Botan asked her voice barely more than a whisper as she waved the portal away.

“Only three. Your brothers are fine; all of their people came out okay.”

“Oh yeah? Then why was Xander hurting?”

“He was touched by a demon called the Judge. A demon that was brought forth...I don't even remember now who summoned him originally in the twelfth century...anyway he was able to burn the humanity from a person. Even most demons would be reduced to ashes by his power, only a creature of pure evil could survive his touch.”

Yusuke closed his eyes, almost as if he was searching for something deep inside of himself. And he found it, his link to Xander. He opened his eyes again in relief. “Don't scare me like that, I know he's alive.”

“Yes...but it was a close call. I don't have all the details yet, but he survived, relatively unscathed.”

“And the others?” Botan asked.

Koenma sighed. “Perhaps you should both sit down, this may take a while.”

Botan and Yusuke shared a look before nodding in agreement. Whatever it was, they definitely needed to hear it.

XXX
Moon-bound

Child of the Hellmouth
Moon-bound
calikocat
word count: 8504

XXX

She watched him as he slept, peaceful in the darkness of the night. He'd gotten back from patrol an hour ago, only making a quick sweep of the surrounding area, before collapsing into bed. Her precious little brother.

She could have lost him.

Botan shuddered a bit and pushed that horrible thought aside and locked it away. It wouldn't do to think about that. Still...the fear Tor must have felt when the coms were down, not being able to contact her, or Yusuke, or anyone. Especially with a demon like the Judge active and on the Hellmouth, oh the guys back in Japan could have taken care of him easily, but these kids...they weren't that strong yet. And Xander...could have easily died. That alone would have put Tor and the other kids at their wits end.

A small smile appeared on her face. Xander. He really was something else. If it weren't for him, things could have been so much worse. She was thankful he'd survived the Judge's touch, and that he was able to find a way to defeat the Judge. Still, it was worrisome. She had no idea how many tasks he'd have to complete before the Fates would be satisfied.

With a small sigh she stood from the chair she'd been sitting in and pulled the blankets up to Tor's chin before leaving his room. It was late and she too needed her rest.

As she entered her bedroom her eyes were drawn to the full length mirror against the far wall. The next time the coms were down she'd be ready; she wouldn't be caught without a way home again. Not when her little brother's life was at stake.

xxx

Xander sat under a tree, staring at the worksheet in front of him, the morning sun filtering through the leaves and warming him. As he waited for the first bell his mind wandered over recent events. Mostly Yusuke showing up after the whole Judge incident had been resolved.

Yusuke evidently had felt it when the Judge had touched him, and had gone into a panic when the communicators weren't working. Or the phones. Xander had agreed with him that the entire situation was crappy. When Yusuke told him the reason the coms were down he had a distinct urge to throttle Koenma. Some warning would have been nice. Stupid Spirit Prince.

But worst of all...the whole thing...the panic, the fear, the almost dying. It was all a test, a task to see if they would survive. And it was his fault, because he broke something he wasn't supposed to.

He didn't regret breaking the Prophecy. Nothing could make him regret that. He'd do it again if he had too. After all, he had people to protect.

“Morning.”
Kyle's appearance drew him out of his thoughts. “Hey Kyle.”

“How did patrol go with Tor?”

“Not bad, he turned in early though. Then I killed a demon. Actually that part was odd. It was hunting Amy.”

“Amy Madison? Why is that odd?”

“It was identical to one I caught hunting her last week. Killed it too.”

“Huh. Hey Harris...the demons we kill...are they from that Makai place?”

“Nah. Makai’s current ruler has forbidden anyone from interfering in the human world. That includes eating people.”

“So the demons here are?”

“From different dimensions or according to Botan a lot are native to this realm.”

There was silence for a moment before Kyle sat beside him, motioning to the homework in Xander's hands. “So… Spanish, huh?”

“Yeah, I'm pretty much stumped.” Xander smiled at him.

“Need help?”

“You good with it?”

Kyle nodded. “Yeah, I'm in the Spanish Club.”

Xander gave him wide eyes. “There's a club for Spanish? Whoa.” Kyle rolled his eyes and snatched the homework away from him to look it over. Xander was quiet for a bit, however curiosity got the better of him. “So how did the double date with Willow and Oz go?”

Kyle smiled, his eyes never leaving the Spanish worksheet. “It was nice.”

“What was the movie about?”

“No idea.”

“Too busy making out with Larry?” Xander's question made the smile turn to a smirk. “Willow had fun though right?”

Kyle looked up, his expression thoughtful now. “She did. She really likes him.”

Xander smiled. “Good. So, help me?”

Kyle gave him an odd look. “Why don't you just use the translator?”

The wide-eyed panicky look his alpha suddenly gave him was priceless. “Are you kidding? If Botan found out I used Reikai tech to cheat in school I'd be a dead Xander!”

Kyle snorted. “You are such a dork Harris.”

“That's Alpha Dork to you...wait. Quit laughing at me!”
Larry approached Oz as Willow walked away from the senior and towards Buffy. “Hey, you two okay?”

“I think so, but I think she's disappointed.”

Larry managed to look sheepish. “I guess we didn't help much.”

“It’s a free country. If you guys want to make out I'm not gonna stop you.”

Larry smiled a bit. “Yeah but we could have made things easier. Maybe you two should double date with Cordy and Xan next time. I hear he cooks.”

“I'll think about it...are you okay?”

Larry blinked. “Yeah. Why?”

“Your arm.”

Larry looked at his sleeve and lifted it to show a bandage with a couple of small blood spots. “Huh, must have pulled the stitches a bit...doesn't look bad though.”

“What happened?”

Larry shrugged. “Got attacked by a stray dog. I ended up with thirty-nine stitches and a round of antibiotics in case the thing had rabies.”

Oz gave him a meaningful look. “You sure it was a dog?”

“Yeah. Animal control caught it and I identified it. Guess who the owner was.”

“Who?”

“Jack O'Toole.”

Oz made a face. “Harsh.”

“No kidding.”

Rhonda leaned against the lockers while Cordelia exchanged her books for a different set for her next class. She glanced at her younger sister, who met her eyes curiously. “So how goes the night watch?” Cordelia asked. “You're being careful right?”

Rhonda rolled her eyes and gave her a small smile. “Yes big sister.”

“Hey, I'm allowed to worry.” She grinned and her eyes were soft. “You're not patrolling alone right?”

“No. I'm usually with Heidi or Buffy. Last night though I stayed in. I had a short story to finish for The Razor's Edge.”

“When does the next edition come out? You know Daddy likes to frame all your work.”

Rhonda smirked. “And put it right beside your cheer-leading trophies.”
Cordelia shrugged and closed her locker. “Parents are weird like that.”

They moved as one down the hall for a moment before Rhonda glanced at her. “You should probably train with us in the library some time.”

“Well did that come from?”

“You aren't the only one who worries. The pack is pretty large, but you aren't always with one of us.”

Cordelia nodded. “I'll think about it. What are you doing tonight?”

Rhonda grinned and it was mischievous. “Bronze.”

“With?”

“Owen.”

Cordelia blinked in surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah. What about you?”

This time Cordelia grinned. “Dinner at Xander's.”

“Wow...since when do you do domestic?”

“Since I found a guy that can cook.”

xxx

Buffy and Heidi lounged on a bench while Willow stood behind the bench with her eyes closed in concentration.

“Anything?” Heidi asked as she watched a couple enter the ice cream parlor across the street from them.

“I think so.” Willow opened her eyes and stared at the shop across from them. “There's a demon.”

Buffy sat up straight. “Where?”

“...Getting ice cream...” Willow frowned as the door opened and a figure with a wide hat and a trench coat exited the ice cream parlor. It paused when it saw them before waving and going on, a tub of ice cream tucked under one arm.

Buffy stared after the figure. “What was that?”

Willow giggled. “I think it was Clem, a local neutral.”

Heidi glanced at her. “And you know Clem how?”

“He and Xander watch Star Trek reruns together and eat Cheesy Puffs.”

Buffy made a 'huh' noise and Heidi gave her a grin. “Good call by the way.”

“Thanks. Kagome has been emailing me all kinds of lesson plans and articles. I mean it would be
better if she could actually train me in person and I talked to my parents about going to Tokyo this summer and they gave me a maybe!” She was grinning and bouncing as both blonds looked at her.

Buffy grinned as she stood. “That's exciting.”

“I know!”

Heidi stood as well, absently brushing her pants off. “Hey, everyone's homes have wards now right?”

Willow nodded. “Yep. Xander and I have put up some pretty good ones. He says he's not that good at it but truthfully his wards are better than mine...oh...oh...”

Buffy blinked at the sudden alarm on Willow’s face. “What is it?”

Heidi eyed their surroundings warily. “Is there another demon?”

She shook her head. “I was wrong, not everyone has wards. Larry and Oz's homes don't have them yet.”

Heidi breathed a sigh of relief, glad that there was no immediate threat. “Mention it to Xander tomorrow.”

“Right, good idea.”

Buffy smiled and tugged on Willow’s sleeve. “Come on. There are some new graves over at Pine Grove Cemetery.”

Willow bounced a bit more. “Yay! More practice!”

Heidi and Buffy smiled and shook their heads as they led the red head away from the street.

xxx

Dinner had gone smoothly. He'd opted for a more American tradition tonight, namely salad, pot-roast, potatoes, and carrots. And could he just say ‘yay for slow-cookers!’ By the time he'd gotten home from school the roast was so tender it fell apart, not to mention it had absorbed all the flavors from the seasonings he'd added. The best part though, was that Cordelia had liked it.

With the dishwasher loaded and the innards of the slow-cooker soaking in the sink he joined Cordelia in the living room. When he entered the living room Cordelia was on the couch, Marshal purring away in her lap as she pet him. He settled beside her and she smiled. Xander loved the quiet moments they shared. It proved that they had more than just hormones going for them.

“What?” She asked him, her expression one of curiosity.

“Nothing, just being.”

“Weirdo. So, are we going to patrol tonight?”

“You're really getting into this patrol thing.”

“Well, I'm pack right. I should do my part or whatever. And I think I might be an adrenaline junkie.” She frowned at that thought. “Except for the part where all the stuff out there still scares me silly.”

“That's not a bad thing. Fear is healthy. Keeps you alive longer.”
“Like paranoia.”

“Pretty much.”

She nodded and settled against him, her head on his shoulder, his arm around hers. She spoke softer this time. “When did Marshal get so big?”

“When the Judge touched me.”

She shuddered a bit at the memory. “I always thought Marshal wasn't an ordinary cat. What's the deal?”

Marshal lifted his head up and met their eyes. *I'm Xander's Spirit Beast.*

“You two are just full of secrets.” She muttered.

“Yep. Basically he's a reflection of my soul. Yusuke's got one too; it's a kind of bird...sort of like a giant blue phoenix. Only Puu started out as this little blue penguin thing with floppy ears.”

She shifted a bit to look at him. “Puu?” He shrugged and she snorted before giving him a serious look. “So Yusuke's Spirit Beast changed too.” Her eyes widened. “What happened to Yusuke?”

“He died. A second time.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Actually that's how Yusuke and Botan met.”

“And Botan would be?”

“Tor's sister.”

“Okay buddy, back up. Are you trying to come clean about a whole bunch of stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

He took a calming breath and tightened his hold on her just a bit. “I don't want to keep secrets from you.”

She stared at him for little longer. “So...Yusuke met Botan.”

“Right. She's a Spirit Guide. A Grim Reaper. She works for Reikai, the Spirit Realm, there's even more to her though, but it's not relevant. Originally she stayed on the Hellmouth to keep an eye on me for Yusuke. Then she adopted Tor when his dad beat the crap out of him. She took Tonya's identity so she could keep him, however according to Tor; Botan's parents adopted him too.”

“And her parents are?”

“Well...Tor and Botan don't know that I know who their folks are and it might be a secret...and it's not really important cause it doesn't have anything to do with Sunnydale.”

“Okay...so...what's Kurama?”

He smiled. “Kurama is a kitsune, which by the way actually just means fox. I think the way he
described himself as a Spirit Fox that over time gained the powers of a demon. He's more than a thousand years old Cordy.”

“Wow...wait...you chose me and Spike over someone with that much experience?”

“Yep.”

“But Spike's kisses make your brain melt. Didn't Kurama's kisses do that?”

He paused, mostly because he was surprised. It wasn't something he'd actually thought about.

“Well...not really. He was good, don't get me wrong...but there was something missing.”

“And Spike and I have whatever it is you're looking for?”

“I think so.”

She smirked and settled back on his shoulder. “You realize all the secrets you're keeping from Willow and Buffy are gonna blow up in your face.”

He sighed, she was right, there was no doubt he was playing with a time bomb. “Yeah, it’s only a matter of time.”

“Well. I've decided something.”

“What's that Cor?”

“When it blows up...I'll be here.”

He grinned though she couldn't see it. “Really?” He asked as he kissed the top of her head.

“Duh! Do you know how hard it is to find a man who can cook...and do laundry?”

He snorted before letting out a mock growl and began tickling her for all he was worth. She jerked and shrieked, making Marshal jump from her lap as they rolled off the couch in a laughing heap. Xander continued to tickle her till she shouted Uncle in a breathless voice and they collapsed and lay beside one another catching their breath. Brown eyes met hazel and then their lips met and all he could do was kiss her.

xxx

The moon was large and bright overhead; it lit the night so that the only true darkness was within the trees that surrounded the clearing they were parked in. In all, it was a beautiful night, romantic even, not that the two hormone charged boys in the back of Larry's truck noticed. Larry was sitting in the bed of the small truck with his back to the cab; Kyle was happily straddled on his lap facing him as they kissed. However Kyle was careful where he put his hands, mindful of the stitches on Larry's arm. So instead of clutching his boyfriend's biceps his hands traveled lower, over Larry's broad chest and lower still, to slip underneath the quarterback's shirt. They sighed together once his hands reached skin and started to slither around to the larger boy's sides. Larry's sudden gasp of pain when Kyle pressed just so on his ribs put everything to a halt and Kyle pulled away. He glanced at Larry's pained expression and lifted up his boyfriend's shirt, seeing clearly in the moonlight the beginning of what looked to be a colorful bruise.

He frowned as he smoothed the shirt back down. “What happened?”
Larry rolled his eyes. “O’Toole jumped me after school.”

“Why? Because of the fine he had to pay? He should have kept his dog at home.”

“Hey, I held my own...until he pulled out a knife.”

Kyle’s eyes flashed green and he snarled. “What?” Larry gulped and a wave of pheromones surrounded them and Kyle was hard pressed not to purr.

“Nothing happened. Mr. Giles showed up, and can I say that man can be really scary? He took the switch blade from Jack like it was nothing. The look on O’Toole’s face was priceless when Mr. Giles snapped it closed like he knew how to use it.”

Kyle smirked. “Yeah. Back in the seventies his friends used to call him Ripper.”

“Whoa.”

“Yeah. So, you’re okay.”

“Just a bruise Kyle, I get worse from football practice. He didn’t even crack my ribs.” Larry grinned and leaned forward to kiss him again. Their lips melded and clung together with their tongues coming into play easily, as if they’d always been doing this. It was like every move wasn’t new and experimental, like they’d been together forever. And Kyle wanted to keep this, this moment, this kiss, he wanted it to last. But it wasn’t to be. He pulled away from the kiss and looked out into the shadows of the trees, concentrating on his senses, which was hard with Larry now latched onto his neck.

“Larry. Larry, wait. Something’s here.”

“Something? Like what?”

“I don’t know. We’re upwind so I can’t get a lock on its scent...Get Down!” Kyle pushed himself up and moved in front of Larry just as a large hairy figure came flying out of the shadows. It lunged at them and Kyle kicked it back. It lunged again and Kyle hit it, this time growling and snarling, his eyes glowing as he kept himself between it and Larry. And Larry, being resourceful, put something cold and metal in his hands. One more lunge and Kyle hit the creature with the tire iron he now held. It yelped and scrambled out of the truck bed, growling at Kyle. Kyle let out the deepest growl he could muster, baring his teeth in warning, it worked, and the creature gave one last snarl before loping off into the night.

“What was it?” Larry’s question was loud in the sudden quiet. Not even the crickets were chirping now.

“It wasn’t a demon. Demon’s have a feel to them...and you can tell by the smell.”

“Then what?”

“Er...Werewolf?” He tossed the tire iron down and helped Larry to his feet.

Larry looked thoughtful. “It did sort of look like a wolf.”

Kyle smiled and moved in for a quick kiss. “Let’s get you home.”

Larry frowned but nodded. “Yeah, it did kind of ruin the mood.” He returned the kiss before they started to climb out of the truck bed. “Thanks for not letting it eat me.”
Kyle smirked as he reached for Larry's butt and gave it a quick grope. “That's my job anyway.”

Larry smirked. “Feeling's mutual Kyle.”

xxx

Buffy stared at them, a little worried frown on her face. “Are you guys sure it was a werewolf?”

They were gathered in the parking lot, going over the details of the night before when the creature had crashed Larry and Kyle's make out session. Also in the light of day they could see the scratched paint in the bed of Larry's truck and a few tufts of hair. Xander picked up one of those tufts and gave it sniff. Cordelia made a face and gave his arm a gentle smack.

“Ew. Could you be any grosser?” She asked him.

He gave her a pout. “I'm helping. Helping is crucial.” He ignored the snickers and giggles of the others. “Moving on, back to you guys.”

Larry hid his smile and shrugged a bit, his arm around Kyle's waist. “I guess. Kyle got a better look at it.”

Kyle nodded. “Trust me Summers, it was wolf-like. Fangs, snout, dog breath.”

“You sure? Any number of jocks fit that description...present company excluded.” Tor gave Larry an apologetic smile.

Larry made a waving motion to show he wasn't offended. “Yeah but none of the guys on the team are quite that hairy.”

Willow gave them a confused look. “What were you guys doing out there anyway?”

Larry blushed and cleared his throat suddenly not making eye contact with any of them. Kyle simply gave her a raised brow and a pointed look before saying: “Breaking in the bed of Larry's truck.”

She continued to look confused until Oz patted her shoulder gently and shared a smile with her. Then realization dawned and she blushed. “Oh...Oh! Gotcha.”

Giles meanwhile was not looking at any of them as he'd suddenly found his glasses and the apparent dirt on them very fascinating. “There was a report of some animal mutilations last night.”

Willow gave the Watcher wide eyes as he slipped his glasses back on. “Like Bunnies?” Her voice came out as a squeak.

Oz moved to comfort her. “Bunnies are tougher than everyone thinks.”

Kyle snorted. “No kidding. Heidi has one; crazy thing attacks everyone except Heidi. I nearly lost a finger to it a couple of years ago.”

Heidi flipped him off. “I told you not to stick your hand in Lucy's cage. And she doesn't attack everyone. She likes Rhonda.”

“Don't drag me into this. Lucy only likes me because I bring her treats.” Rhonda muttered holding up her hands in a gesture of surrender.

Kyle glared at Heidi. “I didn't think she'd try to rip my hand off, I had to have stitches after that.”
Xander rolled his eyes, “Enough guys.” They quieted down and he turned to Willow. “Feel better? The vicious bunnies are tough cookies.”

The red head gave a sigh of relief. “Oh good...well er...you know what I mean.”

Kyle gave her a grin before focusing on Giles. “So...what do we do about the Wolf?”

Giles gave a sigh. “I suppose we'll have to wait until the next full moon to try and catch it.”

Xander blinked. “Uh Giles...last night wasn't the full moon.” He blinked again. “It wasn't, was it Wills?”

“Nope. Tonight is the full moon...how did you know Xander?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes the demons get a little frisky on the full moons, not always though. Also my calendar doesn't usually lie to me.”

Giles looked surprised. “Really...this could mean that the legends are wrong. This is rather exciting.”
He smiled. “This calls for some research. I'll see you lot later, don't be late to class.” He walked away, a bounce in his step that had been missing since the fall out with Ms Calendar.

Xander watched with a mild shudder. “I never thought I'd see a grown man so giddy.”

Tor nodded as they watched Giles walk away. “Is he skipping? Tell me he's not skipping.”

Cordelia frowned at the sight. “Can we forget we ever saw that?”

Buffy nodded. “Believe me it’s already forgotten...maybe this Father's day we can get him a pet... or a book on hobbies or something.”

Kyle smirked. “As long as we don't get him a killer rabbit.” He barely dodged the book Heidi threw at him.

xxx

Coach Foster walked back and forth in front of the class where they were grouped on the bleachers. Xander only half listened to what she was saying. He was too busy watching Oz tuck the tag into Willow's shirt. He smirked and pointed it out to Cordelia who rolled her eyes, but smiled anyway.

Suddenly the class started to climb down from the bleachers and he blinked in confusion. “What are we doing?”

Cordelia snorted. “If you had listened you would know.”

He gave her a pout, one that was two seconds away from his puppy eyes. “But Cordy.”

Her lips twitched in a not quite smile. “Alright. We're getting into groups for self defense training.”

“Oh. Okay. So you're gonna throw me around huh?”

“Yes.”

He gave her a little smirk. “This could be our most fun gym class yet.”

“Dork.” She said, but there was the faintest tinge of pink to her cheeks.
Larry moved toward Theresa. “Hey Theresa.” Theresa looked up at him, her eyes wide, and her body tense.

“Larry.”

He frowned. “You okay?”

His question seemed to surprise her; she gave him a slightly puzzled look and responded with: “Um...maybe?”

“So you're not sure?”

“No...Because usually you'd be harassing me by now, and you're not, and so it's suspicious.”

“Oh.” He had the grace to look away and felt his face heat up. “All that...the aggression...and stuff. Sorry. I'm sorry about all of that.”

She blinked at him. “Who are you and what have you done with the real Larry?”

Luckily Buffy chose that moment to bounce into being beside them. “Hey Larry, Teresa.”

If Larry was straight he would have kissed her for the welcome distraction. “Summers.” He gave her a crooked smile. “Try not to break me?”

Buffy grinned. “Don't worry, I'll return you to Kyle in one piece.”

“Thanks, but I was talking about the stitches on my arm.”

Theresa looked from one to the other. “Kyle?”

Buffy looked at her and smiled. “Oh...you didn't know?”

“Know what?”

“Larry and Kyle DuFour are dating.”

Theresa's jaw dropped as she stared at Larry...then it was as if she was putting all the pieces together and she saw the light all at once. “Wow.”

Larry gave her a sheepish smile and hoped he wasn't blushing too much. Buffy giggled and tapped his good arm to get his attention. “How is your arm by the way?”

“Better. It'll be a while before the stitches come out. So take it easy.”

“Will do.”

xxx

Giles adjusted the globe and moon during his explanation. “While scientifically unexplainable the phases of the moon do seem to influence the human psyche, and the full moon seems to have the greatest influence of all the phases. It brings out our darkest and wildest sides.”

Rhonda frowned as she looked at the model to him. “I haven't really felt a difference on those nights.”
“Really? How odd, I thought that you five would be especially influenced by the moon, not to the extent of actually changing form of course.”

Xander shuddered. “Which we are more than grateful for.”

Willow shook her head. “But Giles, whenever they tap into their hyenas aren’t they already entering their more wild side.”

“Good point. Anyway, the werewolf may be completely unaware that they aren’t human any more. The changing back and forth probably leaves them disoriented, confused, along with blank spots in their memory.”

Buffy glanced at Xander and Rhonda. “Can’t you guys just sniff it out?”

“The hair in the back of Larry’s truck wasn’t fresh enough, not to mention it got blown around a bit back there. If there had been blood or skin attached I might be able too. But I don’t know if I could find them when they’re in human form.”

“Why not?”

“Well. If they change their form, their scent might change too. So their human smell might be completely different from their wolf smell.”

“Darn. There goes that plan.”

Rhonda threw a pencil at her, which the slayer caught. “Besides Summers, we’re not your own personal bloodhounds.”

“Yeah, but it would have been so much simpler if you could just track it down.”

Xander nodded. “True.”

Willow shifted and rested her chin on her fist. “So, how do we catch? We are catching right?”

“Yes, catching the wolf would be our best option. I only wish we had more than one tranquilizer gun.”

“That would be something to look into for future use.” Xander sighed. “So tonight some of us go wolf hunting.”

Buffy gave him a look. “And what are you going to do?”

“Start Cordy and Larry’s training with the weapons.”

“Ah, good idea.”

xxx

Buffy and Heidi giggled as they trekked among the parked cars towards Giles, who was shining his flashlight into the vehicles. Buffy frowned a bit, that didn’t make much sense, the werewolf would be coming from the woods...not a back seat. “Think Giles likes to watch?”

Heidi shuddered. “Eww. I did not need that image in my head.”

“Sorry.”
“Liar.”

Giles made his way over too them. “Have either of you seen anything?”

Heidi grinned. “Just enough gossip material to make Cordy very happy for like the next six months.” The look Giles gave them was not overly amused.

Buffy shrugged. “No werewolves. There would have been a lot of yelling if we had spotted one.”

“Good point. I thought we might start knocking on a few windows; see if anyone has seen anything.”

Heidi snorted. “Like a backseat?”

Buffy shook her head. “And again, there would have been screaming.”

Heidi nodded. “Good screams from a backseat, bad screams if the wolf showed up.” She grinned. “There hasn't been any screaming at all.”

“Right. No wolf then...we should...just stay vigilant then.” He wandered away again, avoiding any possible embarrassment.

“You are so very bad.” Buffy elbowed her gently.

“I have my moments.”

They moved away from the more populated area in favor of a spot where the trees were thicker and made for better cover. Like say for a werewolf that was skulking about. They moved quietly now, with a hunting intent, Buffy kept her eyes open and Heidi scented the air.

“Anything?” Buffy asked.

“Nothing like a dog, but someone's--” Her eyes widened as Buffy was snatched up into the trees by a net, “Been here recently. Hey Summers.”

“Yeah?”

“I don't think we're the only ones hunting tonight.”

“Really? What was your first guess?”

Before Heidi could make a sarcastic reply a man came bursting out of the bushes, gun raised and pointed at her. “Got'cha!” He called out as Heidi raised her hands in surrender, not wanting to chance getting shot. Buffy however yelled for help.

“Giles!” Her call was all it took to bring her ever faithful Watcher running to them...only to end up with the gun pointed at him.

“What the bloody hell? Who are you?”

“Name's Kane, and since I'm the man with the gun I'll be the one hosting this interview--” Heidi promptly grabbed his rifle, pointed it in the air and proceeded to kick him to the ground. The gun stayed in her hands when he hit the dirt.

She smirked down at him, keeping out of reach. “You were saying?” He glared at her. “Cut my friend down please. Gently.”
He sneered at her but did as she told him. Once the slayer was once again safe on the ground the man called Kane whistled and tipped an imaginary hat at Giles. “Have to say I'm impressed.”

Giles voice was tight and controlled, not liking Kane’s implication. “Excuse me?”

“Have a thing for young blonds? Can't say I blame you. These two are ripe for the picking.”

Giles removed his glasses, almost like he was getting ready to beat the stranger to a bloody pulp. “I suggest you take that back.”

“Hey, easy. It’s a compliment, though how you keep up with these two bombshells is beyond me.”

Giles made a move toward him, but Buffy managed to grab him before he actually laid a hand on him. “Okay, easy now Giles. And you Filth for Brains, no more icky comments.”

“If he makes another one can I shoot him?”

“No Heidi.”

“No one ever lets me have any fun.” Heidi pouted and Buffy ignored her.

“Hey what a group of people do at Make Out Point is their own business.”

“Can I hit him instead?”

“No Heidi.”

“Mean.”

“Enough Heidi,” Buffy scolded her before turning to look at Kane. “We're not here for pleasure, we're hunting...werewolves.” Kane snorted before doubling over in laughter. “Maybe I should let Heidi hit you. I mean its not your normal explanation, but it’s not that funny.”

“Sorry. It’s just the thought of you three hunting a werewolf. A bunch of amateurs like you are just gonna get yourselves killed. You're not even armed.”

“I can assure you these young ladies are quite capable.”

“Sure they are. How many of these animals have you taken out?”

“Ever?” Buffy asked.

Kane gestured to the necklace of teeth around his neck. “I tore a tooth from every one I killed.” Heidi growled at him and he looked at her, his eyes widened a bit. “So what are you?”

“Easy Heidi. She's human...you're just gonna kill it? The Werewolf?” Buffy asked, hoping to distract him from Heidi’s otherness.

“They're a little hard to skin when they're alive, and their pelts bring in some decent pocket change on the black market.”

Giles swallowed. “Good god man. You hunt them for sport? They're human beings. Most of the time anyway.”

“Sport nothin’. I'm in it for the cash. Now, if you'll excuse me I've got a wolf to track. If it’s not here it'll be where ever else the kids like to party. The beasts love that whole hormones on parade thing...”
you teenagers do. Can I have my gun back sweetheart?"

Heidi grinned at him...and tossed it into the woods. “Fetch.”

Kane glared at her and disappeared into the night.

“Nice.” Buffy smirked before dragging them in the opposite direction. “We gotta go. I might know where the wolf is gonna show up.”

“And where would that be?” Giles asked as he stumbled along.

Heidi snorted. “Where else?”


xxx

Tor was really starting to appreciate how useful Marshal was, and he understood why Xander on occasion liked to patrol with only his spirit beat for company. Marshal was excellent bait; the demons thought he was just an ordinary cat, though a large one, right up until he bit a chunk out of a leg.

*Its pretty dead tonight.* Marshal stretched before moving a bit ahead of him.

“Yeah, I thought we might have at least seen the werewolf by now.”

*I'm gonna circle around the back street, see if anything is skulking behind the houses.*

“Be careful.”

Marshal didn’t reply as he disappeared over a fence, leaving Tor alone with his thoughts. He walked along a bit longer, catching sight of a couple talking on the sidewalk. The girl looked back toward him, almost nervously, and he recognized her. Theresa Klusmeyer. And the man with her...was Angel. Shit.

Tor moved swiftly, and as quietly as he could he crept through the yards, coming to a stop beside them, behind some shrubs. He could hear Angel comforting Theresa.

“It gets sort of scary at night when you're all by yourself. Hey...don't I know you?”

Tor jumped over the shrub and tackled Angel, knocking the vampire to the ground. However Angel seemed to be ready for him as he managed to get Tor into a choke-hold. Briefly he managed to scream “Run!” at Theresa before air became an issue.

He struggled as Angelus laughed. “You will make such better present for dear Buffy than the girl would have.” His game face flash forward and Theresa's scream sounded loudly throughout the night. Tor wondered briefly if something else had grabbed her while he'd been busy...at least until a heavy canvas backpack hit Angelus square in the face, knocking him away from Tor. Tor gasped for air, and in shock as Theresa hit the vampire again.

If he'd had the breath to spare he would have laughed, but time was of the essence, whatever that meant and they needed to get indoors. “Come on.” He grabbed her and dragged her away. “We need to get to your house. Vampires can't come in without an invitation.”

Theresa nodded as she kept hold of him, switching their roles as she dragged him toward her home. Tor looked over his shoulder as they ran and wished he hadn't. Angel was chasing them...and he was catching up fast.
Fortunately Marshal hopped a fence and managed to trip the vampire, sending Angelus sprawling all over the pavement. The next thing Tor knew Theresa had dragged him down another street, into a yard and through a side door. Marshal barely made it inside before she slammed the door shut and locked it. She was breathing heavily as she let the door support her weight and she looked at Tor. “Vampires?”

“Are real. I need to...put up some wards.” She gave him a blank look. “He can't get in without an invitation...but I'd feel better if you had some extra security.”

“Go ahead. Then maybe you can tell me what’s going on.”

Tor gave her a calm smile. “As much as I can. I'm also going to need your phone, see if my sister can come pick me up, because I'm not walking home if he's still out there.”

“Good plan.”

xxx

Willow looked over at Rhonda, who was sitting beside her, watching the other patrons at the Bronze dance and mill about with a frown marring her face and Willow sighed. “Sorry about your date with Owen.”

Rhonda met her gaze, her gray eyes were sad though she gave Willow a small smile. “It’s okay.”

“Ya know he's been all Danger Man since he nearly got killed on a date with Buffy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Rhonda snorted. “Huh. I just wanted to dance. Get a burger...maybe some ice cream.”

“What did he want to do?”

“Go down to the docks and spy on all the 'gangs'. ” Rhonda rolled her eyes as she made air quotes at the word gangs.

“Sorry. But, you know we could go get ice cream, do the moping thing with cold ice creamy goodness. It’s not like I have any plans, what with Oz not being here, or anywhere.”

“Dating is not all the sunshine and rainbows you thought it was, is it?”

“I don't know. I've never dated anyone before. I can't figure him out.”

“Welcome to the mystery that is men.”

Willow sighed, and before she could form a response the werewolf crashed through the skylight and landed on the coffee table in front of them. Luckily Rhonda's reflexes were fast and she kicked the wolf backwards and away from them before practically picking Willow up and running with her toward the exit.

When they got outside Giles, Buffy and Heidi were just clambering out of Giles' car. Willow grasped Buffy's hands. “The werewolf is inside!”

“Right, Wills, stay with Giles. Rhonda, you're with me and Heidi.”
Rhonda nodded as she and Heidi fell in step behind Buffy and they entered the Bronze.

“How did it get in?” Heidi whispered as they walked around various pieces of toppled furniture.


“Tie it down, lock it up.” Buffy held up a hand for silence, then pointed at a shadow behind a beaded curtain. “Get ready.” She whispered as she slid her backpack from her shoulders and retrieved a large chain from its depths.

They flanked her and followed her into the next room. Nothing. Heidi and Rhonda shared a look and spread out further, each listening for the sound of claws scraping the floor. The scent of the wolf was strong and they couldn't tell where exactly it was coming from as it seemed to be everywhere and was mixed with all the other smells that filled the club.

The stairs to the stage were empty as well; however the wolf appeared on the other side and made a grab for Rhonda. She dodged, just barely and Buffy managed to throw and loop the chain around its neck. Rhonda and Heidi tackled it, bringing it to its knees; however it was stronger than they were expecting it to be. The wolf reared up, bringing its teeth close to Heidi's face and she moved away to avoid them. Rhonda was tossed aside as Buffy and the chain were dragged into the drum set and the wolf crashed through a window and escaped into the back alley.

Kane frowned at the three of them. “You chickadees are a real piece of work. It’s bad enough a bunch of girls try to do a man’s work, but it’s worse when you screw things up and let a monster get away.”

“Are you sure I can't bite him?” Heidi asked as Kane walked away from them.

“It’s tempting…but we still have a wolf out there on the prowl. Rhonda, take Willow home please.”

“You got it.”

xxx

Xander watched Buffy pace back and forth across the library, like an angry lioness on the prowl. Her movements were controlled and tense. “Buffy, relax. The wolf hasn't hurt anyone yet; we still have one more night to catch it.”

Willow nodded and blinked. “Also, you're kind of making us dizzy.”

Buffy paused and gave them an apologetic look. “Sorry…but we have to catch this thing before Kane kills it.”

Xander turned to the sound of footsteps, a very pale and tense Oz walked in. “Kills what?”

Giles straightened from his position of leaning over the table. “There is a hunter in town. He plans on killing the wolf for its pelt, there is evidently money to be made off such a thing.”

Buffy shuddered. “So we have to catch it first, before he kills them.” Her eyes landed on Xander. “Rhonda and Heidi said there was something familiar about the werewolf.”

Xander looked at her in thought, but it was Willow who spoke. “Could it be a student?”

Giles sighed and took off his glasses, wearily rubbing at his eyes. “Possibly. I just wish we could
Buffy had caught it last night.”

“Yeah, but it came close to munching on Heidi, if she hadn't let go of it...”

Oz gulped. “Is she okay?”

Buffy nodded, “Yeah.”

Xander leaned towards Oz as he continued to think. “No one’s been acting any more aggressive than usual. No new attacks have made it into the paper. So that doesn't help.” Without realizing it he'd leaned even closer to Oz... and sniffed.

Oz twitched. “What are you doing?”

“Your cologne...is different.”

“I'm not wearing any.”

“Huh.” He sniffed again.

Willow was giving him wide eyes, while Giles was trying not to find the scene humorous. Buffy however didn't hide her amusement. “Xander, what have I told you about sniffing at the guests.” She grinned.

He blinked again. “Sorry. I'm gonna...go away now.” He circled around Oz, still thoughtful and exited the library.

Oz blinked. “Okay...”

Willow giggled. “Don't worry about it. Xander still channels his inner hyena.”

“Right...I heard about that.”

xxx

Xander nearly plowed into Tor and Theresa as he walked away from the library, so lost in his thoughts he didn't notice them until the last second. “Hey Tor...what's wrong?”

Tor motioned to the pale girl beside him, who seemed jumpier than he remembered her being in gym class the day before. “Angel almost got Theresa last night. Marshal helped us out. I had to give her the rundown.”

“Huh. You're both okay?” He scented the air, happy when he didn't pick up any blood from either of them.

“Yeah...why weren't you patrolling last night?”

“Kyle and I were familiarizing Cordy and Larry with the weapons.”

Tor nodded. “Good idea.”

Xander glanced at Theresa again. “Theresa, you need to get a cross, preferably a wooden one and keep it with you or maybe some jewelry with a cross on it and a stake.” She nodded. “We patrol every night and there are a lot of us, but we can't be everywhere.”

“Okay. Thank you.”
Tor smiled. “Come on, I'll walk you to class.”

xxx

Giles was loading the tranquilizer gun when Willow burst into the library, her clothes were dirty, torn, and Tor was across the room and at her side in an instant. Drawn to her in an effort to chase away her fear. “Willow?”

Buffy joined him, putting her hands on the other girls' arms. “Breathe Wills, come on, deep breaths.”

“It’s Oz!” She all but gasped.

Tor tilted his head and brushed some debris out of her hair. “What's Oz?”

“The werewolf.”

“Good lord, are you sure?”

“I'm way sure Giles. I went to his house because of all the wonky mixed signals he's been giving me. And he told me to leave, he was going through some changes and I didn't leave and then he went through those changes and I ran.” She took a breath. “That is the tranq gun right?”

“Oh, yes. No worries. Just going to knock him out for the night.”

“Focus Willow, where is he?” Buffy asked her.

“Still in the woods. I'm not sure what happened. One second I'm on the ground and I thought my almost boyfriend was gonna eat me...and then he wandered off. Like something else got his attention.”

Buffy frowned. “Something like our not so friendly werewolf hunter.”

“Buffy...we have to save him.” She shuddered and Tor pulled her into a hug.

“Come on. We have a friend to save.”

xxx

They got to Oz first, just barely. The wolf had been hovering over a large piece of raw meat while Kane was taking aim with his rifle. Buffy rushed at the wolf to distract him while Giles took aim with his own gun and Tor blindsided Kane, knocking him out.

Then there was a bit of chaos. Giles couldn't make the shot because the wolf and Buffy were moving too much and too fast. And then when the wolf couldn't sink its teeth into her it threw her and sent her crashing into them, the tranquilizer gun went flying into the underbrush. Buffy and Tor struggled to untangle themselves and stand as the wolf approached them. Luckily Xander came out of nowhere with a snarl on his lips and his teeth bared in challenge.

He tackled the large creature and they rolled, struggling for dominance. For a moment it looked like the wolf was going to win, its teeth bared in some sort of sick victory grin. But Xander punched it square in the face, it howled in pain as he tackled it again, this time holding it down with all his strength. The wolf growled in defiance, drool escaping its mouth, and Xander let out the deepest growl they'd ever heard from him, his eyes turning solid green, and for a moment it looked like his teeth were sharper.

The wolf paused in surprise, then shuddered and offered its throat. Xander dove down and grabbed
the offering with his teeth and bit hard, somehow avoiding drawing any blood. The wolf became limp and Xander pulled back, their eyes met and though it looked like the wolf was glaring at him its gaze slid away from him.

Slowly Xander rose from the wolf and kept his eyes on it. “Willow. Do you have the tranq gun?”

“Yeah...I found it. Do I need?”

He nodded. “Just in case. He's stronger than I thought he'd be.”

“Okay. I'm sorry about this Oz.” She took aim and squeezed the trigger. The dart hit and a few moments later Oz was out cold.

“It’s no wonder this town is full of monsters with freaks like you brats running around.” Kane quipped as he rubbed at his head. “What the hell are you?”

Buffy picked up his gun and bent it nearly in half. “We're the Sunnydale Pack.” She tossed his gun to him. “I ever see you in our town again you won't be leaving it.”

“With a bunch of monsters like you here there's no reason to come back.”

Xander snorted. “You know...sometimes the worst monsters around, aren't monsters at all. They're called humans.” His eyes flickered. “Now get out.”

Kane held up his hands and fled into the night.

xxx

They watched in amusement as Willow trekked back to Oz to plant a kiss firmly on his mouth before she headed to class. Kyle tilted his head. “Harris?”

“Let's go.” Xander moved across the quad, the Feral Four at his back as they made their way to Oz. They stopped and surrounded him, Xander stayed in front of the older boy.

Oz met his eyes for a moment, and then looked away, “Alpha.”

“You okay?”

Oz seemed surprised by the question and the concern in Xander's eyes. “I think so.”

He nodded and placed his hands on Oz's shoulders. “You're not alone. You need us we're here. You're pack now.”

A look of relief crossed Oz's features. “Thanks.”

Each of them put a comforting hand on Oz's shoulder's or back before the four walked away, leaving him alone with Xander. Tor crossed the quad to Theresa while Kyle dragged Larry away, probably to find a roomy closet and the girls left together.

Xander met his eyes again. “If the wolf gets out of hand let me know. We'll help you blend and stay in control.” Oz gave him a confused expression. “The wolf won't stay separate. Eventually you and the beast will be one and the same.”

“Is that what happened to you guys?”

“Sort of.”
“Thanks.”

Xander nodded and then drew the shorter boy into his arms. “Welcome to the Pack.”

XXX
Valentine’s Day. The holiday that so many loved...and so many hated. Fortunately this year Xander, Kyle, Oz, and Tor had people to share it with. Which was why they were currently at the mall, shopping for their significant others to avoid being in the dog house.

Xander looked to Oz. “So, you and Willow?”

Oz nodded. “Dingoes will be playing at the Bronze; we'll dance during the breaks.”

Kyle nudged Tor. “How goes things with Theresa?”

“No bad. She said she'd be my date for the dance. Do you think it’s too soon for jewelry?”

They all nodded and Oz held up a finger. “One white rose.”

“Good idea.”

Xander grinned, enjoying his time with the guys, and away from the girls. “What about you and Larry?”

Kyle smirked. “He's picking me up, taking me to the dance. There may be a possible ravishing afterward. Should I get him something or would that be too girly?”

Tor snickered as he said: “Girly.” Kyle elbowed him for the comment.

Xander ignored their antics for the moment. “Simple gold cross on a chain...make it a thick chain.”

Kyle nodded. “Functional.”

Oz gave a little half smile. “What about you?” Xander pulled a box out of his pocket and opened it. Inside was a silver chain with a heart charm, and inside the heart, hung a cross. Oz nodded. “Nice...what about Willow?”

Xander gave him a thoughtful look. “Hmm. Something simple, she doesn't wear much jewelry, and if you put some thought into it it'll mean even more than the gift itself. Flowers are a must though. She's never gotten flowers on Valentine’s Day.”

“Got it.” The older boys smiled. “Thanks.”

Xander nodded and Tor let out a bit of a whine. “Can we get some food now? I'm starving.”

“Sure Tor, lets...wait...did you guys just see that?”

“What? A sale on Star Trek merchandise?”

Xander sent a glare at Kyle. “No, that girl.”
The other boys all looked toward the girl he was pointing at. She was a petite, brunette, with just a bit of wave to her long hair, and she was leading a boy their age, no one they recognized, away from the mall crowd.

Oz looked back at Xander. “Definitely a girl.”

“Come on.”

“Please don’t tell me we’re going to spy on random strangers getting lucky.” Kyle grumbled, but nevertheless he followed Xander, the others grinned and kept quiet.

They tracked the couple silently through the mall which was easy, the boy only saw the pretty girl in front of him, and the girl was intent on finding a secluded spot. Which she found in the form of a shoe store that was closed for renovations, and in true Sunnydale fashion it wasn't locked against intruders.

It was odd, to see a girl get right to business, something he thought only happened in porn, but she wasted no time going to her knees and reaching for the boy's erection. Xander didn't have much experience, if one overlooked the orgy, but Cordy and he had only just got to the heavy petting part of their relationship. And this girl...was...whoa...

“Whoa.” Oz whispered.

“Maybe she's a hooker?” Tor suggested as he tilted his head, almost like he was trying to get a better view.

Kyle stared, his nostrils flaring. “She's not human is she?”

Xander nodded. “Caught her scent a while ago, I think she's at least part human. I'm not sure what the other part is.”

“Should we help?” Oz asked.

Tor snorted. “I think he can handle this on his own. I know how pissed I'd be if a bunch of guys pulled a pretty girl off of me like that.”

Xander shot him a look. “If all your bits and pieces were still intact you'd be pissed at the interruption.” They all winced.

They turned their gazes back to the couple as the girl brought the boy to his climax. He shuddered, grasping at her hair as she swallowed. When the girl pulled back, she licked her lips and smiled up at him. There was a soft glow of blue light emanating from her eyes for a few seconds...and then he collapsed.

“Let's move.”

They came out from their hiding place from behind the shelves of shoes and surrounded the girl who was still on her knees. Her eyes were wide in surprise as Tor and Oz grabbed her arms and held her back. Kyle stood between her and her victim, dagger already in hand. “Alpha?”

Xander knelt to check for a pulse. “He's alive.” He looked at the girl. “What are you?”

She gulped. “I'm not sure I should answer that question.”

He raised a brow at her. “Well since you didn't kill him we're not gonna kill you. Would he have
been willing before you worked whatever mojo you did?”

She gave him a look. “What do you think?”

“I think you're some kind of succubus...one that doesn't kill.”

She sagged a bit against her captors. “So what now?”

“Let her go.”

Tor looked at him. “Harris?” Interestingly enough the girl's back snapped ramrod straight and she looked at him in sudden fear.

He frowned at her reaction and asked in what he hoped was a soft and calming voice. “Will there be any nasty side effects from his experience?”

She shook her head. “No. I...my kind...we intermarry with humans...but until we find a mate that completes us we need to feed.”

“Will he be able to get home?”

“He...he might be a little out of it for a while. My car is in the lot, I can get him home.”

Xander looked at her closely, and could smell her fear. “Hey, it’s okay. You're one of the neutrals just trying to live your life. We just had to be sure, ya know? We'll help you get him outside.”

She relaxed just bit and gave him an unsure smile. “Okay.”

“And then we can eat, right?”

Xander rolled his eyes. “Yes Tor.”

xxx

Buffy smiled as Willow bounced from grave to grave in the cemetery. There were quite a few with fresh sod over them and the young miko in training was giddily checking each spot for vampire activity. Most of the dead tonight weren't vampire victims, but Willow wanted to be sure that what she was sensing wasn't just her own excitement.

“Hey Rhonda, check this one in the obits.” Willow called from the grave of Walter Yeager.

Rhonda dutifully checked the clipping from that day's paper. “It says he had a neck injury, possibly by a fork-like implement, with cause of death being exsanguination.” She looked up from the paper. “I bet we're the only girls in town that carry around clippings from the obits.”

Willow grinned. “Yeah, but think how creepy it would be if other girls did that. We have a reason.”

Buffy and Rhonda both looked thoughtful for a moment before making faces and shuddering. “Okay Wills, you have a point. So, is he gonna wake up?” She asked her friend, letting her own Slayer sense feel out the area. Walter was definitely about to rise.

Willow scrunched up her nose in concentration. “I think so. There's...it's like a heartbeat, but not, cause ya know vamps don't have heartbeats. But...I guess I'm feeling the demon about to rise.”

“You might want to get off the grave then. I think he's starting to move.” Rhonda suggested, just as the sound of scratching reached their ears.
Willow made an eep-like sound and hopped off the sod. Walter broke through it a couple of seconds later and crawled about halfway out of his grave before Rhonda staked him. She struck, and pulled back with the efficiency of much practice. He gasped as he turned to dust.

“Very good, you guys have come really far with the slay-age.”

Rhonda grinned and pocketed her stake. “This was the last new grave here. Were we making anymore stops?”

“We're done? But I'm not tired at all, and evil doesn't sleep or wait or anything,” Willow pouted at them.

Buffy grinned. “You've been acting like you're high on coffee all night. You can't wait until the dance can you?”

Willow grinned and bounced as she spoke. “I can't help it. I'm excited. It’s my first dance with a date and a boyfriend. Yeah he's in the band but there will be breaks and we can dance then and I can't wait and I have all this excess energy and can we please hit just one more cemetery before we walk me home?”

“Sometimes I wonder about that babble, it's not a normal human talent.” Rhonda grinned to erase any hurt her comment might cause.

“You haven't heard her and Xand babble back and forth at each other. It’s like they speak their own language sometimes.” She glanced at Willow who was still pouting. “Okay, one more cemetery.”

“Yay!”

xxx

Cordelia held her head high as she walked past her former sheep, ignoring the giggles and snide looks Harmony and the others aimed at her.

“Hey Cordelia.”

She kept walking.

“Are you and your loser going to wear matching outfits to the dance? Let me know so I can have my stomach pumped. I don't want to vomit in public.” Harmony's voice grated at her nerves as she stopped, and for a moment contemplated murder. Xander wouldn't mind too much if she had blood on her hands. Harmony hardly qualified as human anyway.

Luckily, before she could come up with any sort of solid plan for Harmony's demise she was surrounded by Rhonda, Heidi and Theresa. Rhonda looked down her nose at Harmony, letting her eyes flicker. “Problems?” She asked casually, smirking as Harmony and her group took a step back.

Cordelia gave her sister a grateful smile. “Not at all. In fact I'm glad you guys showed up. We need to coordinate for the dance. Walk with me.” She led them away leaving a stunned Harmony and a flock of sheep behind.

Rhonda smirked. “Owen asked me to the dance.”

Cordelia frowned. “I thought it wasn't going to work out?”

She shrugged. “I think he got a clue after two girls dumped him for wanting to live dangerously.”
Theresa gave them a confused look. “What?”

Heidi grinned. “He nearly got killed on a date with Buffy and kind of got addicted to the adrenaline rush.”

Rhonda nodded. “He's getting over it though. I hope.”

Cordelia nodded as she eyed Theresa critically. Theresa fidgeted a bit, not used to having Queen C focused on her. “You should wear white. It will look great with your hair.”

Theresa let out a sigh of relief. “I already have a white dress hanging in my closet.”

Cordelia smiled and looped her arm through the other girl's. “What can I say? Great minds think alike.”

xxx

Xander ignored Buffy and Willow's conversation with Amy, too focused on his last minute check on his paper. He felt fairly confident about it; it should get at least a C+ if not a B-. Also he really didn't want to intrude on the girly talk...just...no. However as he found himself behind Amy and one the last students to leave the room he felt a tingle...and looked up to see Amy working the mojo on Ms. Beakman. Ms. Beakman's dull gaze turned to a smile as she accepted an imaginary paper from Amy who smiled and walked away.

He blinked and handed his very real paper to the teacher and looked into her eyes. “Are you okay?”

Ms. Beakman gave him a confused look. “I'm fine Xander. Why?”

“Just...you look a little tired. Don't work too hard okay.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you for your concern but I'm fine. Don't be late to your next class.”

“Yes Ma'am.” He returned her smile and hurried to catch up with Buffy and Willow.

He caught up to them just as they caught sight of Giles talking with Ms. Calendar further down the hall. Buffy had frozen her body almost unnaturally stiff at the scene ahead of them. Xander shared a glance with Willow who nodded and they each took hold of an arm and pulled her back a bit into a sort of cocoon between them.

She glanced at them both before focusing on him, a mild glare firmly in place. “Xander.”

“I know you're hurting, and she kept secrets...but she was taking orders from her own pack. And you know pack is everything.”

Buffy's eyes moved back to the older couple for a moment before settling on the floor, a pout on her lips and her expression thoughtful. “It doesn't make it right.”

Willow hugged her tighter. “Maybe not, but I don't think she planned on falling in love with him.”

Buffy blinked, sighed, and nodded. “Guess I should talk to them about it some time, take the first step.”

Xander kissed the top of her head. “Proud of you.”
She nodded and stepped out of their embrace before walking away.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a sophomore getting shoved into his locker by a member of the football team. Xander tapped Willow's shoulder and directed her attention to the scene.

“Oh...that’s...I know his name...Um...Andy or something. He's Tucker Wells younger brother.”

“Let’s go help.” He suggested as they moved as one to aide the younger student. When they got there he casually tapped the jock on the shoulder, much as he had Willow a moment before. “Hey there. Is there a reason you're abusing school property and a fellow student?” He asked in a cheery voice.

“This is none of your business Harris. Just because Larry is fucking you doesn't mean the rest of us are gonna bend over.”

Xander held up a hand. “Whoa there...I think you've been misinformed. Larry is dating Kyle DuFour, you don't want to be spouting off bigoted slurs against DuFour's boyfriend now do you? Think about it.” He said the last with a smirk.

The jock, whose name he couldn't remember, paused...and shuddered at the thought of a vengeful Kyle. Thank the gods for Kyle's rep, being a mean kid meant certain lines were not crossed, not ever. “Got a point.”

“Now, let the kid go.”

“You gonna make me Harris?”

Xander grinned, and it wasn't a nice expression, “If I have to.” He took a step closer, put a hand on the guy's bicep and pulled on it, just enough to unbalance him.

The jock's eyes widened in shock, clearly not expecting Xander to be that strong. Willow giggled, but managed to give Xander a minor scolding. “Xander, it wouldn't actually be a good thing if you broke every bully in the school.” The jock's eyes bugged a bit and he started to sweat.

“Why is that Wills?”

“Because then you'd be the biggest bully of all.”

“I guess Mr. Macho better let go of the kid then and walk away. What do you think?”

The jock nodded and let go of the sophomore and gulped. “Now what?”

“Start walking.”

He couldn't get away fast enough.

“Thanks.”

Willow and Xander glanced at the kid as he pulled himself out of his locker. “No problem. You okay?”

“Yeah, he didn't hit me or anything. I just got a little scraped up when he was shoving me inside.”

Willow took out a handkerchief and moved to place it on the boy's cheek, it was indeed a little scraped up and had even bled a little. It had to sting like hell. “You might want the nurse to clean that a little.” She said as she blotted at the blood. “Here keep it pressed to your cheek till you see her.”
“Er, thanks.” He looked at the both of them and blushed like crazy before dashing away.

Xander looked after him for a moment before turning to Willow. “Were we ever that jumpy?”

“First day of high school remember? Jack O'Toole had a whole bunch of older friends that chased us all over the place during lunch.”

He nodded. “Right...Jesse pulled that stupid prank and we nearly got tossed in the freezer.”

“Yep.”

“I'd forgotten about that.”

xxx

Just before lunch Cordy accosted him at his locker with a hello kiss that left him smiling. “And hello to you to.”

She smirked. “So, what are we doing after the dance?”

“Oh...we go home?”

She gave him a look that plainly said 'that's what you think'. “You didn't get anything for Spike?”

“Er...what?”

She continued as if he hadn't spoken. “If you're going to date both of us you should at least get him a present.”

“I wouldn't call what we're doing dating...no one has spent any money.”

She put a hand over his mouth. “We'll go shopping after school today.” With that decided she released his mouth, grabbed his arm and proceeded to walk him down the hall. Xander was staring at her still wondering what had just happened. Cordelia took his silence for agreement and continued talking. “Does he wear jewelry?”

“I think I've seen him wear a ring.”

“Necklace?”

“Nope.”

“Hmm...blood? Human blood would be tastier, for him I mean. Right?”

He paused and pulled her closer to him, his free hand reaching up to cup her jaw. “You're serious about this?”

“Of course I am. I'm always serious about dating. What about Kurama?”

Xander smiled. “He's backed off, things sort of cooled down. We're just friends.”

“Okay then. So back to Spike--”

Xander cut her off with a kiss, a gentle one, and pulled back to look adoringly at her. “You are amazing.”

“Duh.” She smiled at him, eyes sparkling.
He laughed. “We'll talk about Spike later; right now I need to see Giles about a witch.”

“Xander watch out!” Cordelia warned him just in time and he managed to avoid colliding with the boy he'd rescued earlier that day.

“Sorry about that.”

The boy...Andy?...blushed and looked at his shoes. “It’s okay.” His cheek looked better than it had before and he could smell the faint scent of some kind of antibiotic salve. “Oh um...tell your friend that I'll give her hankie back to her...as soon as I wash it.”

“Sure.”

He blushed. “So um...bye.” And he was running off again.

“Who was that?”

Xander shrugged. “Not sure, but he might be Tucker Wells younger brother.”

“And he's star-struck over you why?”

“I might have saved him when a jock was shoving him into his locker. And Willow did this little nurse routine with a hankie.”

Cordelia smirked and started pulling him along toward the library once more. “Always the White Knight aren't you?”

xxx

When they got to the library Giles was puttering about the card catalog. “Yo G-man!”

The Watcher looked up from his work with a sigh. “Must you call me that?”

“Yes I must.” Xander replied with a smile as he led Cordelia to the table and pulled a chair out for her.

“Bloody cheeky brat.”

“Yep, so I've got a question for ya.”

“About what?”

“Are there demons that hunt witches?”

Giles paused, surprised by the question. “That does happen on occasion. Especially if the witch is practicing the darker arts. Why?”

Xander frowned. “Amy Madison. I saw her work some mojo on Ms. Beakman.”

“Really?”

Cordelia blinked at him in surprise. “Amy's a witch? A real live witch?”

“Remember the craziness with the cheer-leading tryouts last year?”

“Yes Xander, I do remember being blind.”
He grinned, completely unrepentant. “Sorry. Amy's mom had used witchcraft to switch their bodies and used Amy's body to get on the team. She wanted to relive her glory days as Catherine the Great.”

“Her mom was Catherine the Great? Seriously? And to think I respected the legend. Lame much?”

“Yeah. So that kind of means that Amy might be predisposed to magic because of her Mom.”

Giles moved closer. “What does this have to do with demons that hunt witches?”

“Twice now I've killed demons that were hunting her. Same kind of demon each time.”

Xander could have sworn Giles' hands twitched toward his books in eagerness. “Can you describe them?”

“They looked kind of like an ant eater, but a lot bigger, and purple...with scales.”

Cordelia made a face. “Eww.”

Giles however nodded. “That does sound familiar. I'll look into it.”

“Cool, thanks Giles. Come on Cordy, we have class.”

“Lunch isn't a class Xander.”

“Says you.”

xxx

Spike slid the box across the table to Drusilla and waited patiently as she carefully opened her gift. “Do you like it?”

She let her hands trace over the diamonds set into the silver chain. “It's beautiful my Spike.”

“Nothing but the best for my--” The scent of blood hit his nose as Angel placed a human heart on the table beside the necklace.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Dru.”

“Oh Angel, its lovely,” Her hands grazed over the still muscle, “And it’s still warm.”

“I found it in this quaint little shop girl. Her hair was red, her eyes were blue. I thought you'd like her heart.” Angel looked puzzled at the necklace for a moment before picking it up. “Cute, from you I presume?” He gave Spike a little sneer, even as he put it on Drusilla.

“Will you dance my Angel?”

He gave a gallant bow and swept her off her feet as she giggled all the way to the bedroom. Leaving Spike alone with the rapidly cooling heart and his thoughts.

Spike pulled another box out of his coat and opened it. Inside laid a thin leather cuff with crosses burned in the surface all the way around it. It was just big enough to snap onto a man's wrist.

xxx

The dance had been great, mostly because there hadn't been any of the usual Sunnydale craziness
going on. Cordy had spent most of the evening by his side, either at a table or on the dance floor. They had danced passed Harmony and her posse every chance they got. None of the sheep or Harm had dates and kept sending them glares, especially when Xander led Cordy into a very graceful dip during one of the Dingoes slower songs. It had never occurred to Cordelia's old crowd that a geek like Xander had depths.

Kyle and Larry had already left, probably headed toward Lover's Lane; they'd left quite a few people speechless when Kyle had led Larry across the floor with some fancy footwork. Tor was still dancing with Theresa, while Willow and Heidi were rocking to the Dingoes. And Rhonda was dancing with Owen. The only thing that seemed odd at all was the way that Andy kid kept giving him and Willow cow eyes. It was starting to get creepy. But before he could think too deeply about it Cordelia was pulling him out of the Bronze and into the night. He'd barely had time to wave goodbye to Willow before she dragged him outside. Willow had just grinned and waved.

“Cordy?”

“Where would we find Spike?”

“The factory. We'll have to be careful, because of Angel.” She nodded and he smiled at her before pulling out the box. “Hey, Happy Valentine’s Day.” He handed it to her and she opened it, her eyes widening just a bit.

“It’s beautiful. Help me put it on?” He smiled and fastened it around her neck as she moved her hair out of the way. “Thank you. Now, let’s go find Spike.”

He continued to grin and whistled. Marshal came out of the shadows. “Keep an eye out for Angel.”

Marshal nodded. You got it. Not like I have a date or anything.

Xander rolled his eyes and Cordelia smirked as they started toward the factory.

They got there just as Angel and Drusilla were walking away; luckily they found a corner to hide behind till the vampires were gone. Angel was watching the vampiress in amusement as she twirled and danced ahead of him. For a brief moment Drusilla's eyes landed on them and both Xander and Cordelia held their breath, afraid that she'd give them away. Instead Drusilla just smiled and continued to lead Angel further away.

Cordelia nudged him. “Did she just...”

“ Weird huh.”

“Beyond.”

They continued to watch, Marshal making a brief appearance before darting back into the shadows to patrol the area. Eventually Spike wheeled out the front entrance. They stepped out into the open so he could see them. Frowning he made his way over to them.

“What's this then?” His voice held a touch of worry that Xander didn't like.

Xander stepped forward, suddenly nervous, “Spike, this is Cordelia. Cordy, Spike.”

Cordelia stepped forward as well. “This is my idea. Coming to see you.” Spike gave her a bemused look as she continued. “See if you're going to be stealing my boyfriend's kisses I should at least get to
Cordelia smirked at him and pulled out a box. “Happy Valentine’s Day.” She handed him the small box. Spike accepted it with wide eyes, clearly surprised by the gesture. He opened it and his jaw dropped just a bit. Inside was a charm on a chain. On the charm was an etching of the symbol of Saint Vigeous, patron Saint of Vampires.

Xander grinned at Spike’s reaction. “We were a little surprised to find that. Cordy picked it out of course. This is from me. I made it myself.” He handed a wooden charm to Spike.

If possible Spike looked even more surprised by this second gift. “A protection spell?”

Xander shrugged and ducked his head. “I’ve picked up a few tricks from that kitsune...and a Miko.”

At the mention of Kurama a shadow passed across Spike’s face. “Right. How’s that working for you?”

Xander met his eyes. “The fox has moved on to greener pastures.”

The shadow moved on and Spike smirked. “He’s a fool.”

“He wasn’t what I wanted.”

Spike gestured to himself and Cordelia. “And we are?”

“Yeah.”

Cordelia gave them a prim little snort. “Hey, don't knock it. Xander chose us over a guy with more than a thousand years experience in seduction. Oh, I almost forgot.” She released Xander's hand to dig in her purse. “Here it is.” She pulled out a pack of blood and handed it to Spike.

Xander grinned. “Hope O Negative is okay.”

Spike accepted the blood, and looked at them in confusion. “You brought me human blood.”

Xander shrugged. “Not all the blood at the Red Cross gets used.”

Cordelia grinned. “We snuck in and stole a bag they were going to throw away. Xander picked the lock.”

Spike smirked at them. “Sneaky brats aren’t you.” They grinned at him, and Spike handed the cuff to Xander, who accepted the gift with bright eyes. One would think the boy wasn't used to receiving presents. He pulled Cordelia's hand to his lips and kissed the knuckles. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

xxx

Xander kissed Cordy goodbye as he left her at her first class and continued on his way to the library. He had to dodge a sudden mob of people chasing a scrawny blond boy, who at a glance looked like the Wells kid. Xander shook his head, the mob didn't look murderous, and in fact several of them were holding flowers, so he let it go.

Buffy was on edge and twitchy when he entered the library, pacing back and forth, never a good sign. “What happened?”
Giles cleared his throat. “Angel left a box of roses on her doorstep. Along with a note.”

Buffy almost growled. “All it said was 'Soon'. We've been going over some of the stuff Angelus did to whoever he was interested in around Valentine’s Day.”

“And?”

She grimaced. “Let's just say I'm glad I don't have a puppy.”

“Lovely.” Before he could comment further shouts of outrage came from the hallway. “Hold that thought. Not that you want too, cause eww.” He poked his head out the door to see Amy, her eyes black as a swirl of almost amber colored magic circled her. She was facing the jock that had been bullying the Wells boy the day before; interestingly he had a bouquet of roses in his left hand.

“Goddess Hecate work thy will. Before thee let the unclean thing crawl!” Amy hurled the magic at the jock and in a flash all that was left was a pile of clothes and flowers.

“Holy Cheese on Rye!” Xander exclaimed as he stared at the clothes, and then looked at Amy. “Have you gone crazy? You don't just go flinging mojo like that!”

Amy gave him a somewhat crazed look. “He can't have Andrew! Andrew and I are meant to be! We love each other so much, he could never love Andrew the way I do!”

“Definitely crazy.”

“Xander?” Buffy asked as she poked her head out of the library. “What's going...which jock is running around naked?” She asked as she stared at the pile of clothes.

“Don't know his name but he's not...oh my god.” They both stared as a rat crawled out of the sleeve of the Letterman jacket. “She ratted him.” Before the rat could get away he scooped it up. “Grab Amy and the clothes. We gotta fix this.”

“Got it.” She scooped up the clothes, and dragged Amy into the library; he followed her, hoping that they'd be able to undo the spell.

“What happened?” Giles asked as he stared at their new acquirement. “Actually I'm not sure I want to know.”

“Amy just turned a jock into a rat...because they were fighting over some guy named Andrew.”

Buffy gave him a look. “What guy?”

Amy folded her arms and pouted at them. “Where have you guys been? He's only the most adorable guy in school.” When they continued to give her blank looks she rolled her eyes. “Andrew Wells.”

Xander sighed as he felt the beginnings of a headache. “Blond boy, sophomore, shorter than me, gets bullied a lot...Tucker Wells' younger brother?”

“If you mean blond demi-god of cuteness by that description, then yes.”

Xander frowned. “This is weird.”

“Really?” Giles asked. “Which part?”

“All of it obviously, but yesterday this jock,” He held up the rat, which was being oddly docile, “was trying to shove Andrew into his locker. Then today he was holding flowers and he and Amy were
having a standoff competing for the kid's affections. What gives? Not to mention before I came in the library a whole of bunch of people were chasing him down the hallway.”

“Good lord.”

“I hate when you do that.” Buffy grumbled as she tossed the clothes on the counter.

“Sorry, but it sounds as if someone, possibly this Andrew chap preformed a love spell.”

“On everyone in town?” Xander asked.

“Why aren't we trying to pin him down with presents and seduction?” Buffy asked as she forced Amy to sit at a table.

Giles looked perplexed for a moment. “The wards. That is the only explanation.”

Xander nodded. “Not only do they keep out unwanted non-humans, but they block magic. Go us. Shouldn't the magic have undone itself on Amy and Rat Boy once we walked into the library though?”

“No kidding.”

Giles hmm'd a bit. “It would depend on the spells that were used and the amount of magic the caster had. It would seem Amy has inherited her mother's powers, add in the influence of the Hellmouth and there will always be exceptions. It is why we have to keep strengthening the wards on the library.” He let out a sigh and polished his glasses. “I suppose we could try the spell we used last year to reverse the late Catherine Madison's magic. Unless Amy has a better idea.” He gave the young witch a pointed look. “And then you and I are going to have a very long talk about the proper use of magic.”

“What would you know about magic?”

Buffy and Xander shared a smirk and Buffy did her best not to giggle. “Giles was very much a rebel back in the seventies. They called him Ripper and he summoned demons just for kicks.”

Amy's eyes widened as she looked at their high school librarian anew. “Whoa.”

“Yes well...let's restore this young man to his...former self and then we'll track down this Andrew chap and see about undoing his love spell.”

xxx

Luckily de-ratting the jock was easy. The reversal spell that Giles had preformed the year before worked like a charm and Amy was able to restore the guy to his...former glory. Unfortunately he ended up naked and in Xander's arms because he'd been holding the rat to avoid losing the guy.

Xander couldn't help but smirk when the guy clung to him and hid his face in Xander's throat to avoid looking at the other people in the room. “Ah, Giles, think he could get dressed in your office?”

“Of course, Buffy if you would put his clothes in there.”

“Sure.” In a flash of slayer speed she'd deposited the poor guy's clothes and shoes on the cot in Giles' office. “All yours.”

Xander nodded and carried the guy inside, gently kicking the door closed behind him. “You can let go now.”
“What...what are you gonna do?”

“I'm going to leave you here to get dressed and no one will ever speak of this again.”

Slowly he slipped out of Xander's arms and reached for his clothes. “What happened exactly?”

“Someone used a love spell, everyone is acting crazed and Amy turned you into a rat.”

“How...”

“Trust me you don't want to think too much about it.” He started to leave when the guy grabbed his arm. “What?”

“Was there really an orgy?”

Xander snorted, would anyone ever forget about that? “Yeah.”

“And you...”

“Dominated the Feral Four.” He blushed and wouldn't meet Xander's eyes and Xander felt a little light bulb go off above his head. “So why exactly were you shoving Andrew Wells into his locker?”

“He...wrote me a love letter.”

Xander couldn't help himself; he lightly smacked the back of the guy's head. “Stupid, when someone confesses their feelings you could at least give them a chance. God are all you jocks in such denial that you can't even allow yourselves to be happy?” He shook his head in disgust. “Get dressed and get out.” And with that he let himself out of the office.

xxx

About an hour later Giles was in full lecture mode giving Amy the do's and don'ts of magic. Poor girl looked like she couldn't decide to be frightened or bored. Xander and Buffy were tuning out the lecture and looking up love spells for more information. It looked like the same counter spell they'd used earlier would work, but they would need the original caster to take part, which meant finding Andrew.

“How hard could that be?” Buffy asked. “I mean all we have to do is look for the mob of moaning fans.”

Xander rolled his eyes...then let his jaw drop as Larry and Kyle came in, a bedraggled Andrew between them. “Or we could just let Larry and Kyle bring him to us.”

Buffy's eyes bugged a bit at the kid's state of dress...or undress rather. Only about a sleeve of his shirt remained and his jeans looked like someone had tried to rip them off of him. The button and zipper were totally defunct. “What happened to him?”

Larry shuddered. “The football team almost had their way with him.”

Kyle smirked. “They're unconscious now.”

Xander let his head rest on the table for a moment. “I'm guessing Tor and the girls helped?”

“Rosenberg is very handy with a Louisville Slugger.”

Giles looked at the boy, Andrew. “You are going to join Ms. Madison's lecture on proper use of
magic. As soon as we reverse the love spell.”

Andrew nodded. “I...I'm sorry. I was just so tired of being alone. Every Valentine’s Day it’s the same thing. I give someone a love letter, and they try to beat the crap out of me.” He looked at Xander. “Then you and your friend were so nice to me...and I just wanted to find someone nice and I didn't mean to do this.”

“Love spells in general are bad.” Giles sighed and offered the boy his jacket. “Sit. We need to begin the reversal.”

“Thanks...can I ask something?”

Xander nodded. “Sure.”

“Why aren't you guys trying to uh...you know.”

“Our homes are warded against magic and intruders.”

“Wow, you guys can make wards? That is so cool!”

“Focus please. We need to get this done before a mob of crazed hormonal teens come crashing through the doors.” Buffy said.

“Sorry.”

xxx

That evening Xander and Cordy were on patrol, Marshal lurked in the shadows watching their backs, and Cordelia was getting better at staking the vampires. Her reflexes were spot on and Xander knew he had her cheer-leading to thank for that.

“So how did it feel helping to beat up the football team?”

“Refreshing. They've always had wandering hands so I feel no remorse for handing out a few concussions. What's really weird is how Russ Luna is now dating that Andrew kid.”

“Who the heck is Russ Luna?”

“The jock that Amy turned into a rat.”

“Huh. Glad he took my advice.” When she gave him a look he elaborated. “Andrew had a crush on him and wrote him a love letter. He's the jock that tried to shove Andrew in the locker.”

“Huh. Love is pretty crazy.”

“The ultimate chaos.”

She linked her hand with his. “But its not all bad.”

“No, no its not.”

She smiled and squeezed his hand. “Spike...he's different from other vamps.”

“Yeah, we established this already.”

“So we should probably get him some more human blood.”
“Okay...where's this going Cor?”

“Angel...Angelus he's crazy...and Spike is stuck in that chair. Helpless.”

They both shivered. “Let's go do some crime then.” He paused and kissed her softly on the lips. “I think I love you.”

Cordy smirked. “I think I love you too. Crime now?”

“Yes, let the crime begin.”

XXX
For a Moment

Child of the Hellmouth
For a Moment
calikocat
word count: 7189

XXX

It was nice, having a pack that was as large and as strong as theirs, the feral four were dependable and he cared about all of them. But nothing could replace the feeling of just hanging out with his best friends and his girlfriend.

They were at the Bronze, dancing to the DJ of the night; there wasn’t a band so there was no cover, always a cool deal. He took a turn dancing with each girl, if there was one thing he'd learned over the years of being friends with Willow, it was that girls liked to feel pretty and wanted. Willow thought he was clueless about that sort of thing, and sometimes he was. But not when it came to dancing at the Bronze. So he danced with Cordelia, then Willow, then Buffy and then Cordelia again. Of course when the DJ played something fast enough to really party too then all four of them were on the floor flowing and rocking out to the music.

And usually he enjoyed such nights, he liked making heads turn, he liked how when the girls danced freely that eyes followed them. It was fun to rub it in the faces of the 'popular' crowd, their message to the snobs was always the same; 'See how free we are. See how pretty, how we shine. You can't touch us. We're way out of your league.'

But tonight...there was almost a feeling of foreboding in the air. Something sinister was watching them...or someone. But every time he looked around, he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. There were too many people, too many smells, and he couldn't pick out exactly what was making him uneasy. All he could be certain of was that there was a predator lurking among the prey tonight, and it was focusing its attention on them. Especially when he danced with Buffy...

Angel.

Other vamps would occasionally stalk them when they partied, but none had the intensity of the master vampire. Yet Xander still couldn't find him in the crowd, and the girls didn't seem to know they were being watched. Buffy had a high natural Slayer talent for spotting vamps in a crowd; but Angel had always been her blind spot, even now when he was at his most deadly.

The feeling lessened suddenly, and he felt almost at ease. Not necessarily a good thing. Now he needed to get the girls out and start on his patrol. If Angel wasn't at the Bronze anymore then he was out hunting. Damn.

``Where are you tonight?'' Cordelia asked him as they moved back to the table where Buffy and Willow were holding down the fort.

``Just thinking. We should probably call it a night, hit the road. Prowl a few alleys."

``In other words time to walk Willow home and make a sweep before bed.`` Buffy pouted just a bit, even as she grabbed her purse. ``Ready Wills?"

``Yep. Kinda dead tonight anyway, its better when they have a band.``
Cordelia smirked as she grabbed her sparkly clutch purse. “You mean when the Dingos are playing.” Willow grinned. “That too.”

They moved through the crowd easily and said goodnight as they reached the exit. Buffy left, arm in arm with Willow, and Cordy linked her arm with his. “Want to show a girl a good time?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“A little excitement, a couple of slayings and a long kiss goodnight?”

He smiled a little. “Got a weapon?”

She pulled a stake out of her clutch. “Always.”

“That's my girl...how the heck did you fit that in your purse? It’s tiny!”

“A girl's gotta have some secrets...I also have a dagger.”

He stopped and looked her over. “Where?” She smirked and he rolled his eyes. “Right, girls, secrets, got it.”

“Good boy.”

He snorted as they continued to move through the darkened streets, a comfortable silence between them. As they approached the more industrial part of Sunnydale he held up a hand to signal complete silence as he let go of her. He motioned for her to duck behind the corner of a building. She did, just as a vamp jumped at him. He punched the demon's jaw, hard enough to knock it back a couple of feet and leave it stunned. Then there was a splash and the vampire started screaming and clawing at its face. He darted forward, grabbed it, and Cordelia charged forward with her stake, striking it's heart and pulling back like he'd taught her. The vampire poofed into dust and he remembered not to breathe in, choking on vamp dust was never fun.

“Well? How’d I do?”

“Perfect. The holy water was a nice touch.”

She grinned at him as he took her hand and they continued on to their destination. The factory.

Spike was waiting for them.

Cordelia wasted no time letting go of his hand to greet Spike with a kiss to his scarred cheek before promptly seating herself on the vampire's lap and digging a bag of blood out of her seemingly magical purse.

“Geez Cordy, what are you Mary Poppins? How much more stuff do you have in there?”

“The usual: My car keys, compact, lipstick, some cash, and a few unmentionables.”

“Including a stake and pack of blood, what every other girl is carrying I'm sure.”

She made a face at him as she handed Spike the blood, however she frowned as she looked at his nails. “Your polish is gone.” She took the blood back, put it in Spike's other hand and dug into her tiny purse, retrieving a bottle of black nail polish. “Hold still.”
Spike looked at her for a moment in disbelief before turning his gaze to Xander, one brow raised in question. Xander shrugged. “I've learned not to question what Queen C does, there's less bloodshed that way.”

Cordelia gave a very prim snort as she continued to polish Spike's nails. “I'll show you bloodshed Mr. Harris.”

Xander grinned at her as he leaned down to kiss her temple before moving to inspect the scars on Spike's cheek. “They're almost gone.” He let his thumb trail over the remaining blemishes. “Any other progress?”

Spike looked at them both searching for answers. “Some... why do you do this?”

Cordelia finished up his pinky and capped the bottle of polish. “Because Angel is crazy.”

Xander nodded. “And if you don't heal you can't defend yourself.”

Cordelia grabbed the pack of blood and set it on her lap as she reached for Spike's other hand and began painting the nails.

“So...you want me well again.”

“Pretty much.” Xander answered as he settled on the ground.

“You do realize I'm a demon. Prone to attacking humans and eating them.”

“Is that what you do?” Cordelia asked as she glanced at him with a smirk.

He smirked back at her mischievous hazel eyes. “Oh on occasion I catch a football game, real football, not that crap you Americans are so obsessed with. I'll get a pint with Clem, play a round of kitten poker with him and the fellows. But mostly yeah, I eat people.”

Cordelia looked up in surprise. “You know Clem?”

“Focus Cordy.” He looked back at Spike. “But would you eat us?” Xander asked.

Cordelia capped the nail polish again and popped it back in her purse, her own gaze focusing on Spike and his answer.

Spike looked at one brunette, then the other. A matched set. Sharp hazel eyes and soulful puppy brown. Could he eat them? Probably not.

“No.”

Matching happy smiles shown brighter than the sun in the darkness and if he could breathe...well the sight would have taken the air right from his lungs. He quirked his lips in a smirk and brought the girl's hand to his lips, placing a kiss on her knuckles, and on each finger tip. “It's getting late.” He wasn't prepared for the pouts both children gave him. “Now, now. You have school, and I don't want Daddy to catch me consorting with the enemy...for all our sakes.”

Cordelia kissed his lips, firmly, her mouth closed. “Good night.” She smiled and stood and Xander came forward.

The need to warn them was a dull ache in his unbeating heart. “Angel is getting restless, probably going to step up his games with the Slayer. Be careful, she might not be... his only target...” Xander's lips cut him off gradually as the boy leaned down to kiss him, passion igniting almost instantly. Teeth
teased at his lips and he opened his mouth to drink the boy down, making a whimper of need escape the teen...both teens actually. Spike pulled back, only to dive in for a softer kiss to chase away the pout that was already forming. “Go on pet. Get your girl tucked in safe for the night.”

Xander gave him a soft smile before putting the pack of blood back into Spike's hand, as it had slipped from his lap. “See you soon.”

Their walk back to his house was quiet, peaceful, and contemplative. Xander wasn't sure what Cordy was thinking of...but her reaction to him kissing Spike was interesting. It almost gave him hope that this would work...at least until Buffy and Willow found out about the Spike thing. Then he'd be a dead man and wouldn't have to worry about it anymore.

They passed by Cordelia's car, which they'd left in his driveway before going to the Bronze, and headed up the steps. He unlocked the door and paused, listening.

“What is it?”

“Sorry. Habit.”

“Your dad?”

He nodded. “It was always better to know where he was, easier to avoid him that way.” He motioned her inside. “Hungry?”

“A little.”

Xander smiled as he closed the door behind them and led her into the kitchen. “How's a salad sound? Topped with some sweet teriyaki chicken and my homemade low-fat dressing of course.”

“Sounds good.”

He got the bowl of salad out, glad he'd put it together the night before, along with the container of chicken. They ate their late meal in companionable quiet, until it occurred to him how late it was getting. He didn't want to send Cordelia home so late without an escort. “Do you want to stay the night? Er, in the guest room I mean. It being so late and all and us living on the mouth of hell and everything...”

Cordelia smirked a little at his ramble. “Nope. Your room will be fine.”

He nearly choked on his water. “O-okay.”

He was surprised he wasn't blushing, though thankful for it. He handed Cordelia the largest t-shirt he could find. “Here, you can borrow this for tonight.”

“Thanks.” And in a very trusting gesture, she turned her back to him as she started to undress. He gulped and did the same, suddenly glad Marshal was nowhere in sight.

In no time he was in his boxers she was ready for bed as well. He turned down the covers, made room for her and waited for her to join him. Cordelia smiled and slid in beside him, snuggling her way into his arms and relaxing.

Xander smiled, kissed the top of her head and whispered; “Good night Cordy.”
“Night Xan.”

xxx

They woke the next morning to Marshal sprawled over the both of them, purring loudly. Shy smiles were exchanged before Cordy crawled out of bed, grabbed his old tatty robe and dashed out the door. He puzzled the action over in his mind, until she returned with an overnight bad. Sneaky girl, she'd planned to sleep over all along. He shook his head with a grin as he got out of bed to give her a quick kiss. “I'll shower first, and then fix us something to eat.”

“Leave me some hot water?”

“For you Queen C? Anything.”

They moved around one another from room to room, going about morning rituals as if they'd been sharing space for years, like it was completely natural to wake up next to one another. It was like a weight had been lifted, maybe they weren't ready for some things, but he knew now that when they were, they'd be okay.

However they were so relaxed in their new found freedom with one another that they never noticed Jessica peek out of her room, nor did they see her when they left for school. Jessica knew her son was growing up...but she'd never expected him to bring a girl home...this changed a few things.

xxx

Buffy slammed the library door open and strode in with an air of agitation...and borderline panic. “He was in my room last night.”

Giles looked up from the counter where he was doing actual librarian stuff, not watchery stuff. “Who?”

“Angel.” She came to a halt by the table where he and Cordy sat, hands loosely clasped. “When I woke up there was a picture on my pillow. A drawing of me sleeping.”

Cordelia gave him a worried glance. “I thought vampires had to have an invite before they could come inside.”

Giles nodded. “That is true, but once a vampire has an invitation they're always welcome.”

Xander grimaced. “It's never a good idea to invite strange men into your home anyway.”

Cordelia gave him a little smirk. “So you don't want to come over tonight?”

“I'm not strange. Just abnormal.”

Buffy glared at the two of them and he and Cordelia both ducked their heads in temporary shame. “Focus people. Angel can come and go as he pleases and I need a way to take back the invitation.”

“I can redo your wards, but a de-invite spell would definitely be a good idea.”

Giles sighed. “Xander, de-invite is not a word.”

“Not even when you add a hyphen?”
“No.”

“No. Anyway, that'll be something for Giles to look up.” Xander grinned at the watcher who looked to the ceiling, as if he were praying for patience. The library door opened again, making everyone tense just a bit, but when they saw Jonathan and a girl walk in they immediately relaxed.

“Hey guys.” Jonathan looked at the varied group curiously.

Xander stood from his chair, helping Cordelia stand. “Hey Jono. What's up?”

Jonathan made a face. “Research paper, we need some books on Stalin.”

Giles perked up a bit. “Oh, historical biographies are in the third row.”

“Thanks. Later Xander.” Jonathan and his partner headed toward the stacks and their group slipped out the door.

Once they were in the outside corridor Giles spoke. “So he has decided to step up his games then?”

“By watching her sleep? Sure it’s creepy but I thought he wanted to hurt her or kill her.” Cordelia looked puzzled by their looks. “What? It’s a legitimate thought.”

“Yes well...Angelus was known for his...head games. He's a master strategist, and what he's doing is a classic tactic. He's doing this to throw you off, too provoke you, and drive you to make a mistake.”

Xander snorted in disbelief. “Wow...that's more like a classic kindergarten tactic. We did that all the time when we were five, right Cordy?”

“Those were the days.” She smiled. “It always made my day to make the older boys cry.”

“You're all heart Cor.”

“Guys, enough. Giles...Angel told me...months ago that when he was obsessed with Drusilla that the first thing he did to her...was kill her family.”

Suddenly Buffy's panic made sense and he wanted to smack himself for being so flippant before. “Your Mom.”

She gulped. “Yeah. I'm going to have to tell her something. I don't suppose the truth is an option?”

The hope in her eyes was quickly squashed.

“No, you must keep your identity a secret.”

“Why?” Cordelia asked. “We all know.”

“And that is not for lack of effort on my part.” Giles reminded them.

“Giles I've got to tell her something. He's got a skeleton key to my house; no door is going to keep him out.”

“Xander already told you he will rework the wards, this time without making an exception for Angel the way Kagome did. And I will find...a spell. One that will revoke the invitation.”

“But what about until then?”

Xander moved to give her a quick hug. “We can step up patrol around your house and the gallery.
Maybe put some wards up there to specifically keep him out of the building, and we'll redo the wards on your house soon. Willow needs the practice anyway."

"Thanks Xan that will help. I'm going to go find Willow and let her know." She slipped from his arms and walked away.

Giles cleared his throat. "Xander perhaps you would accompany me to um...strategize...err that is..."

"Smooth, Giles, very smooth." Xander smirked. "Before you hurt yourself with that lame line you should know that Cordy knows about Spike...everything about Spike."

"Oh." Giles slipped his glasses off to polish them before looking from Cordelia, who was smiling, back to Xander. He placed the frame back on his face. "And you're still alive?"

"Yep."

Cordelia smirked. "As long as I get to watch, which is very hot by the way, I don't mind sharing my boyfriend. Especially with the potential of having two boyfriends at my fingertips."

"Yes...well..." Giles looked lost for a moment. "Er...does Spike. Good lord I can't believe I'm asking this. Does he have any ideas, perhaps some insight to the situation?"

Xander's smile slipped from his face. "He warned us that Angel is getting restless."

"Playful." Cordelia added helpfully.

"Possibly bored, and that he won't just come after Buffy. We all need to be careful."

"Then Buffy is right, her mother may become a target."

Xander nodded. "Just like any of us."

"Wonderful."

xxx

Giles caught up to her just as she all but dragged Willow out of Jenny's classroom. She gave her watcher a small smile and a nod of approval when he stayed behind to talk to his former lover.

Willow caught the gesture and smiled at her. "I'm with Xander. I'm proud of you, for lots of things of course, but this especially. She really means a lot to him."

Buffy sighed; doing the right thing was hard. "I don't want him to be lonely."

Willow smiled. "Come on. Let's go pile up with Larry and Kyle in the commons."

"Wouldn't it be rude to interrupt their cuddle time?"

The grin her friend gave her was a tad mischievous. "Maybe a little, but Kyle is comfy."

"Does Oz know you feel this way?"

"Yep, he's cool with it. We all fell asleep in a pile in the back of Larry's truck watching a meteor shower the other night. Oz thinks a pack pile is comfy too."

At that image Buffy had to smile. "Maybe piling up with the guys wouldn't be so bad."
Cordelia stared at the foliage by his front door as he locked it behind them. “What's with the flowers? They look different than they did last night.”

“Well, they're not normal flowers.”

“Really.” The look she gave him was not one of amusement.

He grinned and kissed her cheek. “A while back I had Kurama plant a few at everyone's houses. I just recently activated these.”

“And that's why they’re moving a bit...if there was a breeze I wouldn't have noticed them. What are they supposed to do anyway?”

“Take a bite out of anyone who shows up with malicious intent.”

“Neat. Oh hey, is that why he was in Sunnydale?”

“Yep.”

“Huh. So are their some of these at my house?”

“Yeah. Just gotta activate them.”

She nodded and started to drag him to her car. “Let’s go then, you probably need to get them all done huh?”

“Wouldn't hurt.”

The click of Drusilla's heels on the tile floor alerted him to her presence, something he didn't mind once. But now...these days she brought him gifts, gifts no self-respecting vampire would want. The whimper of a puppy made him want to cringe, but he didn't move. At least she was bringing him something that was still alive this time. But her presents always paled compared to what the children brought him.

“I've got something for you. A sweet little orphan, all alone now. She's precious isn't she? Her Mummy died without a fight.” Dru circled around him. “I brought her to cheer you up. You look so lonely without them, your sweet puppies, your doe-eyed pets.” Dru's smile was knowing. “Have a taste love.”

“I'm not hungry, and that little treat is hardly enough to fill my stomach.”

“Just a bite? Until your next meal? Come now, open wide love.”

He snarled and wheeled away from her. “I'm not a child Dru, stop bloody treating me like one.”

“Oh?” Angel said as he entered the room. “Why is that? She does practically everything for you; you should be used to it by now. How else is she supposed to take care of you since you can't do it yourself?” He smirked at Spike, his gaze cruel, taunting. “Speaking of, if there's anything you need me to...do.” His eyes drifted to Drusilla. “Don't hesitate to ask. I'll be happy to help.”

“You would taunt me in my own home.”
Angel leaned down and pressed his lips to Spike's forehead. “If you weren’t stuck in this chair spinning your wheels I’d be more than happy to play with you. But you're no fun like this.”

“Get your hands off me.” Spike snarled as he pushed the other away.

Angel only laughed as he stumbled back. “No need to feel jealous my boy. You'll be on your feet soon enough, then we can have some real fun. Just like we used to. Right Dru?” Angel tilted his head in question. “Dru?”

Spike turned to look at her as well; she was caught in a vision. Her eyes were unfocused, seeing something that only she could see. She cried out as if in pain, and moaned in despair. “Dru what is it? What do you see?” He only hoped it wasn't about Xander or his girl, their girl...whatever she was.

The puppy slipped from her grasp as she leaned heavily against a chair. “Something...something’s going to happen. The air whispers to me, secrets and old magic will come again. An old enemy is going to destroy our happy home.”

Angel actually looked nervous, and considering what happened the last time magic broke them up he had a good reason. Frankly, Spike couldn't wait for whatever was coming.

xxx

Xander caught up to Buffy and Willow on the front steps of the school. “Hey Wills. Where were you last night? We passed by your house on patrol and you weren't home? Were you having late night smoochies with Oz?”

Buffy gave him a look. “Sometimes I think you like gossip more than most girls.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Angel left me a present last night in my room. So I spent the night at Buffy's. We had a girl's night in, with weapons.”

Xander growled a bit. “What did he do?”

“He left me my fish in an envelope.”

He winced. “Sorry. We need to get those wards done as soon as possible.”

“Thanks.” She looked across the front lawn and pouted when she caught sight of Ms Calendar. “Darn. She's here, and I was so looking forward to teaching her class this morning. Hours of lesson plans wasted.” Willow continued to grumble to herself as she wandered off.

Buffy gazed in the same direction. “I...I'm gonna talk to Ms. Calendar.”

“Should I get a paramedic?”

Buffy smacked his arm. “No. There won't be any violence.”

He hugged her briefly before she slipped away and headed toward Jenny. As they talked in the distance Kyle, Heidi, Tor and Rhonda joined him.

Kyle took in the scene and glanced at him. “Things getting a little easier?”

He nodded. “Looks like it.”

Heidi leaned against him. “Is there a reason there are blood thirsty petunias by my front door?”
He gave her a half smile. “Er...maybe?”

She snorted. “Not that I minded. The guy was a jerk anyway.”

“If it helps he was thinking malicious thoughts and that why the flowers bit him...and you all have flowers like that now.”

Rhonda grimaced. “Fun.”

xxx

Willow finished nailing the cross to her bedroom wall and hid it with her bedroom curtain. She looked at Buffy. “Xander said he’d come by tomorrow so we could redo the wards on my house and yours.”

Buffy turned the page of the book Ms Calendar had given Giles, one that had a barrier spell in it. “Why didn't you guys do both tonight?”

“We weren't sure how the different magics would interact; we figured it was safer to lay the anti-vampire spell over the existing wards. And so far there hasn't been any sparks, so it should be safe to do new wards tomorrow.”

Buffy smiled. “You guys are really getting into this magic thing.”

Well you can't really dabble without getting involved, and being a miko is different than being a witch.”

“Are you still going to the range we set up? I know archery is big with Kagome.”

“Yes, I go with Tor a lot. Sometimes with Oz. He seems pretty interested in getting to use the weapons we have...I think that’s a guy thing.”

“I don’t think so. Have you seen the way Heidi can use a sword? I think it’s just a Sunnydale thing.”

They grinned at one another until Willow caught sight of an envelope on her bed, one that was very similar to the one she'd found her fish in. Carefully she opened it and pulled out its contents...”Buffy.”

“What is it?”

Willow handed her the sheet of paper, on it was a drawing of Joyce sleeping.

xxx

When they visited Spike in an alley not too close to the factory they were immediately on edge. There was a nervousness about the vampire that was almost catching, and made them worry, almost jittery.

Xander knelt in front of the vampire and held his hands. “Spike?”

“Dru had a vision. She knows about whatever it is your planning, Angel's already gone out to stop it.”

He and Cordelia looked at one another in confusion, and it was Cordelia that spoke. “We aren't planning anything...are we?”
“Not the last time I checked.” He looked back to Spike. “What was the vision about?”

Spike looked even more worried at their confusion. “An old enemy ending our 'happy' home.”

Xander frowned and lifted a hand to cup Spike's cheek. “I'm sorry you're stuck spending your days with Dead Boy.”

Cordelia put a hand on his shoulder. “Focus. Who could be the old enemy...you've never liked Angel.”

“I'm not that old though.”

She nodded. “So someone who's had an uber grudge against him.”

Xander felt his eyes widen. “...the gypsies...”

Cordy mimicked his expression. “The only gypsy we know is...Ms. Calendar.”

“Call her house.”

Cordelia pulled out her cell phone and dialed the number. He was humbled by her ability to remember so many phone numbers without getting them mixed up. “There's no answer.”

“She may still be at school.”

“That's good right. There are wards there.”

“Wards? Talented little group aren't you.”

She flicked her eyes at Spike. “You have no idea.”

“We haven't redone the wards in the library to keep Angel out...and we never put wards on her class room.”

“Oh no.”

Spike looked at them and nudged Xander away from him. “Better hurry.”

“Thank you.” Xander gave him a quick smile before they both kissed his cheeks and handed him a pack of blood. “Gotta go.”

They were off and running before Spike could even form an answer, and by the time he sank his teeth into the blood pack he could hear a screeching of tires in the night air. He quietly wished them luck.

xxx

Jenny ran for all she was worth, she had no idea what she'd been thinking, trying to hold a conversation with Angel in his current state was pointless. And now she just might die for trying to right her people's wrongs.

Angel lunged at her, almost playfully, she didn't bother wasting time to scream, she just kept running, but he was getting too close. She tripped down the stairs instead of running down them like she meant to do and tried to climb to her feet...but strong hands grabbed her and lifted her up.

“Sorry Jenny. It’s been fun though.” Angel smiled at her as he slipped his hands around her head. He
was going to snap her neck.

In a second of pure panic and rage she lashed out at him, kicking him where it would hurt him the most. His face contorted in pain as he snarled and threw her from him, the last thing she saw was the wall coming toward her.

Xander saw Ms. Calendar crumple after her head struck the wall and without thinking he tackled Angel before the vampire could recover from the injury she'd given him. For a few moments they struggled, both of them snarling, punching one another, and on Xander's part nearly biting Angel's ear off. Then Angel hit his chin just right and Xander saw stars which gave Angel the upper hand...until a red blur, which happened to be a fire extinguisher, smashed into the side of his head, knocking him off of Xander.

Then there were several splashes, followed by screams of pain and sizzling...and burning flesh? Who the heck brought the acid out? Xander shook away the stars and climbed to his feet. Rhonda and Cordelia stood between him and Angel, who was currently writhing in agony on the floor.

“Alpha?” Rhonda whispered, her eyes never leaving the vampire.

“I'm okay.” He hurried over to Jenny and scooped her up. “Let's move.”

Cordelia nodded and led the way to her car, fire extinguisher still in her grasp. He followed her, keeping his eyes and ears open in case Drusilla or some other vamps were laying in wait. Rhonda brought up the rear of their little parade, her super-soaker full of holy water cocked and ready for action. She too kept her eyes open for possible attackers while covering their six.

“Alpha? Where are we going?”

“Hospital, the faster the better.”

Cordy spared a glance back at him. “She’s alive?”

He nodded, even as he flicked his eyes toward the bleeding head wound Jenny now sported. “Barely.”

xxx

Waiting was never easy, but it was especially hard when you were stuck in a hospital waiting room and the doctors wouldn't tell you anything about the person you were worried about. Xander sat on a hard couch, Cordelia huddled in his lap, and Rhonda huddled beside them. They'd been that way for nearly twenty minutes before the others arrived in mass, Giles, Willow and Buffy at the head of the pack with Kyle Heidi and Tor behind them.

Giles spotted them first and strode to them, his face pale, his fists clenched, and anguish in his eyes, and he feared the worst. “Jenny, is she?”

Xander barely kept from flinching under that worried gaze. “Alive, but they won't tell us anything.”

The anguish turned to rage in an instant. “Why the bloody hell not?”

Cordelia lifted her head and spoke in a soft voice, one that had a bit of a soothing effect on everyone. “We're not next of kin Giles, doesn't matter if we feel that way.”
Rhonda unfolded herself from the couch and stood, putting her hand on the Librarian's arm. “Maybe they'll talk to you.”

Giles nodded, and closed his eyes. He took a few breaths to calm down and Tor put a hand on his shoulder adding his support. Tor looked at them obviously wanting answers. “What happened?”

Xander let a small growl escape. “Angelus happened.”

Buffy winced. “How'd you get her away from him?”

Cordelia slid off his lap but kept her hand in his. “Rhonda had some water balloons of holy water.”

Rhonda nodded. “And a super soaker full of the stuff.”

Xander gave them a small satisfied smile. “And Cordy brained him with a fire extinguisher.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well I wasn't going to let him kill you.”

Buffy nodded at them, some relief creeping into her eyes. “I'm glad you're all okay.”

Giles seemed to regain some of his composure. “Yes, we all are.” He sighed. “I'm going to find a doctor.” He slipped from Rhonda and Tor's hands with a small apologetic smile and strode to the nurses’ station.

The others situated themselves around the room and Xander watched them. Something was off. “Is everything okay?”

Kyle gave him a look. “That's a stupid question Harris.”

Xander glared back at him. “I meant besides the reason we're here.”

Willow shifted a bit and wouldn't quite meet his eyes. “Well...”

“Willow?”

Willow blushed. “It's not my place too...um forget I...”

“It's okay Willow.” Buffy took a breath. “Angel was at my house when Mom got home. He was doing this obsessive ex-boyfriend turned stalker routine...which he is, only he was acting like an off balanced college guy...human guy. He...told her that we'd...” She swallowed and looked away. “That we'd had sex.”

“Ouch.” Cordelia murmured.

Heidi shuddered. “You guys had 'The Talk' huh.”

Buffy nodded. “Not something I want to go through ever again.”

“Completely agree. Giles is coming back.” Xander motioned their attention toward the watcher. “Giles?”

Giles sank into an empty chair. “Her brain has swelled a bit, and there was some bleeding. She's...she's in a coma. The doctor is hopeful; he said the swelling should go down.”

Willow looked a little perkier at the news. “So she'll be okay?”
Giles looked a little lost. “There’s no way to know for sure Willow. The longer she stays...like this...the harder it will be for her to wake up.”

Xander felt a chill go through him. “So she'll be here for a while.”

Giles nodded. “Yes...Xander...what is it?”

“She won’t be safe from Angel here if he decides to finish the job.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, eyes wide at that revelation. It was Buffy who spoke. “It’s a public building.”

Willow sat straighter in her seat, purpose burned in her green eyes. “We need to ward her room.”

Xander nodded. “Yeah.”

Kyle stood. “What do you need?”

Xander gave him a nod of approval. “There's a bag in Giles' office under his desk. It has what we'll need for the wards.”

Kyle motioned to Heidi, Tor and himself. “We'll get it.”

Rhonda shifted and pulled her back pack to her, the super soaker was still inside. “I'll keep watch.”

Cordelia shook her head and pulled out a cross. “We'll keep watch.”

Willow smiled. “Good. I need to find a quiet place to meditate so I'll be ready for the warding.”

“Go ahead Wills.”

Giles looked at them all with pride, and a thankful tear in his eyes. “Thank you, all of you. I...I'm going to sit with her for a bit.”

They watched him walk towards the room they'd put Jenny in. Buffy stood as well. “I'm going make a sweep of the grounds.”

“Watch your back Buff.”

She nodded at him and headed out the door.

xxx

He'd been designated the fetch person of the night, so he'd ended up in the hospital cafeteria to pick up eats for Cordelia and Rhonda while they kept watch in the waiting room. No one wanted to actually be in the room with Giles and Jenny; it would have felt like an intrusion of the worst kind.

Willow was somewhere outside, meditating within a protective circle, readying herself for the warding they would have to do. It would take a little more power than they were used to using to protect an area they had no claim too. The library was somewhere they were at everyday, even some weekends, it was theirs and easy to ward. Warding Jenny's room at the hospital would be so much different. It wasn't their territory, and it wasn't a home.

Xander wrinkled his nose at the healthy food available in a cold case, the salads looked wilted, and the sandwiches looked moldy. In short, none of it was up to Queen C’s standards, much less Rhonda's. He looked over at the fry cook who was putting some fresh burgers on the griddle behind
the counter, then took a sniff. The meat smelled real...and fresh. Hmm...That had possibilities.

Familiar footsteps drew his attention away from the cooking food and he turned to face Buffy as she
erented the cafeteria, she looked worried which immediately put him on alert. “Buff?”

“What's Giles?”

“Isn't he with Jenny?”

She shook her head and his heart sank in fear. “No. I've got Rhonda and Cordy in there with her
now though...just in case.”

“Damn.”

Her eyes shown with fear now. “Xander...you don't think...”

He nodded. “If it was Cordy laying in that bed...it's what I would do.”

“He'll die.”

“Not if we stop him.”

xxx

“What were you thinking? Have you lost what little sanity you had left? If you're going to kill the
slayer just kill her, stop mucking about with her friends.”

Angel looked at Spike as if he were the one a few cards short of a full deck. “What are you so
worried about Spikey?”

“I'm worried that you're playing around will get us all killed by a very brassed off slayer. I'd rather
not die in this chair Angelus.”

“Don't worry baby.” Angel smirked. “I'll carry you wherever we need to go.”

“No thanks mate, rather you didn't.”

“Relax Spike, everything's under control.”

“Right, that's why you're covered in holy water burns. What? Did the kiddies have a fire hydrant
blessed by a priest?”

“You're pushing Spike. You need to--”

There was a crash, the smell of accelerant hit their noses...and the table caught fire. “Told you, you
tosser.”

“Shut up Spike.”

xxx

When they got there the factory was already on fire, though neither of them knew how that had
happened. Angel had his hand around Giles' neck and was holding him up high above him.

“You've had your fun Rupert. Now you know what it's time for?”

Buffy lunged at Angel, knocking Giles out of the vampire's grasp, and into Xander's waiting arms.
Xander lifted him up easily and felt torn. Get Giles out? Or help Buffy? Spike caught his eyes then, and motioned with a nod of his head to follow. Xander gave an answering nod and did as Spike wanted. He followed him to safety.

“So who had the holy water?” Spike asked once they were outside.

“Rhonda. Water balloons and a super soaker water gun.”

“Are all of you that resourceful?”

“Cordy hit him with a fire extinguisher.”

“That would be a yes then.”

Giles opened his eyes for a moment. “You... you warned them?” Spike nodded. “Thank you.” His eyes rolled back and he passed back out.

“Get going Spike... it’s gonna get messy.”

“Right. Be careful yeah?”

“Always.” He watched Spike wheel away for a second before putting Giles down on the pavement, far enough from the building that he wouldn't get singed. Then he headed back into the building.

Buffy and Angel were still fighting... but he could tell her heart wasn't in it... and with Angel being her opponent it might never be. “Buffy! Run for it!” He yelled to her, just as he pulled his secret weapon of the night out of his pockets, armed them, and tossed them further into the factory.

Buffy heeded his warning and kicked Angel far away from her before following him back outside. Inside... Angel started screaming.

“Do I even want to know?”

“Canisters of tear gas... blessed by a priest.”

“Creative.”

xxx

Xander sighed as he unlocked the front door. He didn't think it was possible to be this exhausted. But he had a right to be tired, after saving Jenny, saving Giles, and warding Jenny's room at the hospital he was all but tapped out.

All he wanted was to go upstairs to his room, and pass out on his bed, and he had every intention of doing so. He crept quietly inside, locking the door behind... but before he could even set his foot on the bottom stair step his mother's voice reached him from the kitchen.

“Xander. Come here please.”

“Crap.” He hung his head, thinking he was in trouble for being out so late on a school night and shuffled into the kitchen. “Hey Mom.”

“Have a seat Xander.”

He nodded and sat across from her at the kitchen table. “What's up?”
She looked at him, really looked, and he tried not to fidget, then she brought her hand up from under the table and set a box of condoms in front of him. He made a strangled sort of eep-ing sound that made her smile just a bit. “I saw the Chase girl here with you. She spent the night.”

He blushed. “Yeah...but we...nothing happened I swear.”

She held up a hand to stop any further rambling. “You're not little anymore and I don't expect you to share every detail. But I do want you to be careful. So use them. Do you understand?”

He nodded, he'd agree to almost anything to get the moment over with. “Yes Ma'am.”

XXX
Visiting hours would be over soon, and though she could easily sneak back in and stay the night she'd promised her parents she'd be home at some point. For the moment though she was needed here...but if the kid sighed forlornly one more time she was going to shove his crayons down his throat and then leave.

Heidi looked up from her magazine and glared at her little brother. “You've got to sleep sometime.”

Ryan glared back at her. “Don't you have something better to do than read stupid teen magazines?”

She looked at the clock on the wall. “You're right. I do need to run an errand.” She tossed the magazine to the floor and started to stand. The sudden panic on his face at her actions amused her for a good two seconds.

“Where are you going?”

“Well, normally I'd love to stay and bug you, but I promised I'd check on somebody while I was here.”

“That teacher, the one that got attacked at your school?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think she'll ever wake up?”

“Don't know. We're all rooting for her though.” She stretched a bit, letting her muscles relax.

“Didi...”

“What?”

“You'll come back right?”

“Yeah. I'll come say goodnight before I leave.” She tilted her head and took in his suddenly frightened expression, maybe there was more to her brother's fear than just being away from home.

“What's wrong?”

“Can I go home with you?”

She sighed, then again... Sometimes her little brother whined just a little too much. “Ryan you know I can't check you out. I'm underage, and so not your legal guardian.”

His eyes remained scared. “He'll come back.”

“Who?”
“Death.” The surety in his voice sent a chill through her, but he'd always had a wild imagination...and a love of horror movies. Maybe he'd finally seen one too many.

“I'll be back in a little while.” She ruffled his hair. “Try to go to sleep.”

xxx

Xander walked quietly down the sidewalk, Marshal was several feet ahead of him, and Cordelia was a few feet behind him. After three attempts of trying to track Spike down, they'd had no luck. Every time they doubled back to the factory to try and track him, there was nothing. Even when the scent had been fresh the vampire had all but disappeared.

All they'd managed to do so far was clean out a couple of small vamp nests in the surrounding warehouses. A good night’s work, but not the kind of luck he was after. So now they were in a more residential area...on their way to Buffy's house in fact. Just because Buffy had a barrier to keep Angel out didn't mean she and her mother were safe.

For a lack of anything better to do Cordelia had tried to distract his bad mood with conversation...it was working.

“So you think I'm getting better?”

“Yeah. Kind of impressive how fast you pick up the moves.”

He heard her move closer to him. “Why do you think I'm such a good cheerleader?” He looked at her over his shoulder, knowing he looked confused, she rolled her eyes. “I remember the moves once I've seen them and do them a couple of times.”

“Cool. Remind me to take you to the archery range we have set up.”

“Oh, crossbows?”

“And a regular bow.”

“Neat...anything on Spike yet? Not that we'd find any vampires this close to Buffy's place.”

Marshal hung back to walk with them. No.

He sighed. “Marshal's right, the trail was cold, frigid even.”

“Where do you think he'll go?”

“Abandoned house maybe?”

“Great, there's a lot of those around. Only half of them get repossessed and put back on the market. The rest just end up staying empty. At least an old house would be a step up in living quarters, compared to that stupid factory.”

He gave her an exasperated look. “Cordy.”

“What? Some of those houses have really nice carpet.”

Marshal snickered a bit. Moving on people. So Spike could be anywhere?

He nodded. “Yeah.”
Cordelia wrapped around him for a second. “You're worried about him.”

He held onto her as well. “Yeah. Aren't you?”

“Yeah.”

*Ugh, mushy human stuff. We're at the Slayer's now...why are we here anyway?*

Xander held up a finger and shushed them both. “Just checking on something. Follow me, quietly.” He moved into the yard and started to climb the tree.

“I am so not following you up there.”

“Suit yourself.” He continued up until he could safely get onto the roof in front of Buffy's bedroom window.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking to see if Buffy is home...” He looked inside the darkened room, crap. “Which she's not.”

*Why does that matter?*

Cordelia however was more informed. “You don't think...”

He jumped down and landed...almost silently. “Gotta work on my landings...and yeah I do think.”

*Someone wanna let me in on what's going on?*

“But she's sick, and gross looking.” He rolled his eyes at her comment. “Well she is.”

*See, if I knew what was going on that conversation would have actually made sense to me. But no one ever tells the cute little kitty anything.*


*Smart ass.*

“Boys behave.” Cordelia scolded them before looking back to Xander. “What now?”

“We get the pack out and search for her...except for Heidi.”

“Why...oh yeah. Her brother is in the hospital with the same flu.”

“Yeah.”

Cordelia's cell phone rang just then and he quickly looked back at the house, hoping Mrs. Summers didn't hear it. She fished it out of her bag and answered it. “Hello? Whoa, slow down Heidi, take a breath, start over and try not to Willow Babble my ear off.” There was a look of careful concentration on her face as she listened to Heidi for a moment. “She what? We'll be there soon. Yeah, thanks Heidi. I'll call the others; keep an eye out for bad guys.” She hung up and gave him a worried look.

“That didn't sound good. What happened?”

“Tor and Rhonda just brought Buffy to the hospital. They ran into her on patrol...then Angel showed up. They managed to get her away from him, but she passed out. She's in the ER now.”
Whoa.

Xander let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. “Damn. You call Kyle; I'll get Giles on the com. Marshal.”

Yeah?

“Can you finish up patrol before heading home?”

Sure.

“No heroics.”

That's not a problem.

xxx

Heidi, Tor and Rhonda stood beside a baffled Giles as they watched Buffy desperately struggle with the hospital staff, even in her weakened state they could barely keep her contained. Giles felt simply helpless. The others however, faced a struggle of their own. One of their Alpha’s was struggling against captors, against a situation she didn't want to be in, but those same captors were trying to help her. They couldn't decide if they should grab Buffy and run, or help restrain her...Joyce watched with worried eyes a bit farther back. She was the only one who knew why Buffy was so scared.

This was the scene that Xander and Cordy saw as they burst through a set of double doors, Xander having tracked their pack members by scent. He took it all in, and strode toward Buffy, pushing orderlies, and nurses aside to get his hands on Buffy. She continued to struggle.

“Buffy.”

Her eyes opened wider, as if she could see him now, when she couldn't before. “Xander?”

“I'll take care of everything. You need to rest now.”

She shook her head. “Not here.”

“You'll be fine. Let them help you.”

A nurse tried to dart foreword with a needle, Buffy managed to knock it out of the woman's grasp. “No!”

Xander sighed as he leaned closer to her and whispered in her ear. “I'm pulling rank on you Buff. I'm the first Alpha of this pack; you can't help me look out for everyone if you're this weak.”

“Xander.”

“Behave; let them give you something to help you sleep. We'll take care of you.”

“Stupid logic guy.”

“She'll be fine now.”

A second nurse moved forward with another needle, and moved slowly as she medicated Buffy. She eyed Xander and Buffy warily, but did her job silently. Xander moved back to rejoin the others as a now very sleepy slayer was moved to a private room.
Joyce gave him a quick hug when he reached them. “Thank you Xander.”

“No thanks needed Mrs. Summers. Just looking out for my friend.”

“It’s more than that. You all do so much for her. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

They managed rather sheepish smiles, and to break the mushy moment Cordy spoke her mind. “What was all that about anyway?”

Xander nodded. There had been real fear on Buffy's face. “I've never seen her scared like that.”

“She...really hates hospitals. When she was eight, her cousin Celia died in one.... Buffy was alone with her at the time.”

Rhonda and Tor both shuddered, but it was Rhonda who spoke. “Whoa...that's...that would be like losing Cordy.”

Joyce looked from Rhonda to Cordelia, a bit of realization hitting her, but she didn't quite comment on the girls' likeness. “Yes, they were as close as sisters.”

“Harsh.” Cordelia grasped her sister's hand for a moment.

Joyce let out a weary sigh. “I should probably call her father.”

Giles gave her a brief smile. “Oh...I believe there's a phone at the nurses’ station. I'll walk with you.”

“Thank you Mr. Giles.” They headed toward the nurses’ station, leaving the teens alone.

Cordelia leaned towards Xander. “Is she safe here? Can Angel get to her?”

“He can waltz right in, there's no threshold barrier.”

Tor glanced towards the room where Buffy was. “So we need wards for her room, just like Ms. Calendar's?”

“That would be best. I need someone to stay here while I get supplies.”

Heidi shook her head. “I'm going to be here anyway.”

Cordelia looked unsure and shook her head. “That's a bit of a stretch. You can't sit with your brother, check on Jenny, and watch Buffy.”

“I just checked on Jenny a little while ago, I was on my way back to my brother's room when they brought Buffy in.”

Xander nodded. “How are the wards?”

“Still tingly.”

Tor motioned toward Buffy's room. “Since her wards are okay I can stay out here and keep an eye out for Angel.”

Xander thought for a moment, considered his options, and shook his head. “I'll stay here; someone needs to make another quick sweep before turning in. Rhonda?”

She nodded. “Tor and I can make the sweep.”
“Thanks. Cordy?”

She smirked. “Supply run?”

“Yeah, call Kyle again. Have him meet you at my house. Here's the key.” He fished out his house key and handed it to her.

“What about your mom?”

He shrugged. “She's...at a friend’s.”

“Oh...Oh! Okay. So, what am I getting?”

“The warding kit is in my closet, Kyle knows where.”

“Alright, be careful.” She gave him a quick kiss and headed back the way they'd come. Rhonda and Tor touched his arms and left through another set of doors.

Heidi watched them leave for a moment before looking at him again. “I'll get you some coffee before I check on Ryan again.”

“Thanks.”

xxx

Once he had his supplies in his hands the warding went quickly, with a paper talisman on the window and the door he at the very least felt better, and Heidi went home. Kyle and Cordelia were just about to follow her example when Angel all but skipped into view, a small bouquet of flowers in his grasp. There was a bounce in his step, a smile played on his lips and Xander had the distinct urge to turn him inside out. Slowly...maybe with some barbwire that had been blessed by a priest. He could dream.

They were standing in the hall, watching him as he approached Buffy's room, and paused in the open doorway. He felt the barrier then, the nifty ward they'd put up to keep him out. That's what they thought anyway...as it turned out Angel was just savoring the moment of having Buffy helpless and at his mercy because a moment later he tried to step into her room...and got shocked as he rebounded, slightly singed from the barrier.

“Cordy, stay behind us.”

“Not a problem, I'm not feeling brave tonight.” Was what she said, but a glimpse of the wooden cross in her hand was heartening.

The three of them approached Angel with extreme caution and a dash of what was probably insanity. Angel turned to face them, his smile just a little sour, probably because the ward had mussed his perfectly styled hair. “Hey guys, seems someone put up a do not disturb sign. How thoughtful.”

Xander moved a step closer, making sure Cordelia was completely behind him. “You need to leave.”

Angel smiled at him, amused. “You think you can make me boy?”

Xander grinned back; it was a feral grin, an animal grin, a baring of teeth and not much else. He spoke with authority, a haughtiness he didn't feel. “You forget your place vampire.” He added a flash of green eyes for effect.

“Oh?”
“I'm not just Demon Kin, I'm also part Primal, and I've got the first of my Mazoku markings.”

“You're still human Little Prince, and I don't fear you.”

“You should.” Xander felt his grin broaden as he felt a familiar presence behind them. “Botan, how nice of you to join us.”

She walked around their group, glowing faintly, her magic leaking out causing a subtle light show across her body. “There a problem Xander?”

“No yet.” He focused on Angel. “I've got friends in all sorts of places Angel. Don't forget that.”

Angel smirked at him, as if he had a secret and was willing to share. “The White Knight never gets the reward he craves. It must really bug you that I got her and you didn't.”

Xander couldn't help the snort that erupted from him, nor the laugh that followed. “God, childish much? I'm so over her.” Cordelia's hand slipped into his. “But we're pack and we'll do anything for her. And Angelus, just so you know, even with your soul you're not good enough for her.”

Angel had no retort, except to snarl and leave, tossing the flowers at their feet as he stomped away.

Xander tried to slow his heart rate, hoping his fear didn't show as he casually asked Botan. “So. You working?”

She nodded her magic drawing up back into her. “So far just a couple of natural deaths here tonight.”

“Anywhere else?”

“There was a bar fight at the Fish Tank, no demons involved.”

“Huh.”

“Really?” Cordelia murmured as she put her cross away. “How often does that happen in this town?”

xxx

Xander was restless after that, he'd always been uneasy around Angel, but Angelus scared the bejesus out of him. With good reason thank you very much.

He'd volunteered to stay the night at the hospital, and his loyalty and restlessness had him pacing the halls, checking on Jenny and Buffy periodically. He had just decided to check on Ryan as well when he turned down a hall and found Buffy and Ryan both standing in a daze...a worried daze if there was such a state.

It puzzled him that they were just standing there, and then two orderlies wheeled a gurney with a small body covered with a sheet out of the children's ward. He grimaced at the smell of death and hated that he couldn't fight this crappy flu that seemed to have so many at its mercy.

Buffy and Ryan seemed responsive enough and he managed to coax them back to their beds before the nurse on staff made her rounds. Then he patrolled the halls some more, he didn't leave the hospital until the first rays of light peaked over the horizon.

xxx

Angel entered the slightly run down house they'd taken over, just until they found something better
of course, in a state of...anger? Rage? He was certainly ticked; something must have gone wrong with his plans tonight, whatever they had been. Spike didn't really care what those plans had been, but that they'd gone terribly wrong and pissed off Daddy was a plus in his book.

The older vampire slammed the door shut and immediately kicked a hole in the wall of the small foyer, then another, and a third. The mice in the walls barely scurried away in time.

“If you're going to bring the house down I'd like to get outside first if you don't mind. I don't want dry wall in my hair.”

His grandsire stalked toward him, the wall forgotten, and without a word of warning he kicked Spike's wheelchair, sending both chair and vampire across the room, in different directions.

Angel loomed over him and Spike felt just a tiny spark of fear. “The only reason I keep you around boy, is because you amuse Dru on her good days. And myself when I need a laugh.” With a sneer he turned away from Spike. “Dru! We're going out! Now!”

Drusilla appeared, dressed in a ball gown. “Will you take me dancing Daddy?”

“After I kill something.”

“What happened my Angel?”

“What always happens Dru? That boy, that thrice damned little prince. He and his friends had the Slayer's hospital room warded up tight.”

Drusilla let a giggle slip through. “The Prince is smart love. We'll just have to find a way around him.”

“I don't want a way around him, I want him dead. Come on.”

They left and Spike started to move toward his chair several feet away from him. He had healed quite a bit, but he wasn't up to walking yet. He heard the mice scurrying away in the walls again and Marshal came into view beside him.

“How the bloody hell did you get in?”

*Basement window was broken. Angel didn't notice me following him.*

“Best you keep it that way.” He started moving toward the chair again. Marshal didn't bother watching him struggle. Instead he went to the wheelchair, now lying on its side and began to push it toward Spike, putting his now greater mass to good use. Spike really looked at the cat, realizing that he'd gotten much bigger than he'd been the first time he'd seen him. Marshal pushed the chair to him and Spike set it upright, locked the wheels in place and managed to climb back into it. Marshal watched him move his legs.

*It won't be long till you're walking again will it?*

“No, another week, maybe two...Marshal.”

*What?*

*“Why do Dru and Angelus call Xander a Prince?”*

*Marshal's eyes grew wide, almost comical. You don't know?*
“Obviously, otherwise wouldn't be asking.”

That's something you should ask Xander...can I tell him where you are? He and Cordelia are worried. They've been trying to track you down every night since Giles burned the factory up.

“Go ahead; miss seeing the both of them. Best get going.”

Marshal nodded and slipped down to the basement to leave the way he'd come. Spike sat and wondered about the title that his sire and grandsire had used to label the boy. Could Xander actually be royalty? Nah.

xxx

The group stood around Buffy's room en mass as she told them about Ryan, a little girl named Tina who died, and a monster that Ryan had seen. A monster he'd called Death.

Xander nodded. “Well that explains why you guys were out in the hall last night; do you remember me putting you back to bed?”

“No...what about Ryan?”

“Tucked him in too.”

“How long did you stay here last night?”

“I left at dawn, which is why I feel like crap and probably look like it too, if Cordy's reaction this morning was anything to go by.”

“Ah.”

Giles slipped his glasses back on. “Children do have, at times, very vivid imaginations Buffy. Perhaps what this boy saw was not a true monster.”

“Yeah but I think I saw something too, I mean I was loopy from the drugs and fever but I know a monster when I see one.”

“I believe you Buff.” Xander told her, shooting Giles a look that stalled any other comments. “Add in that Ryan is Heidi's little brother and it's enough to make me worry.” Giles and Buffy looked at him and Willow smiled, Xander rolled his eyes. “Come on, we told you that Heidi's little brother was in the hospital with the same flu. Didn't we Will.”

“Yep.”

“Huh, didn't realize that was her Ryan. Anyway...what Ryan saw really scared him and one of the doctors was acting really suspicious last night. There might be a connection. I'll try to keep an eye on him if you guys will start the research on monsters that only kids can see. And guys try to be careful on patrol.”

xxx

The kids eyed him warily as he worked, the only reason they trusted him at this point was because the nurses, the older ones who had known him for years vouched for him. It was odd; he'd never thought all the injuries of his childhood would actually pay off one day.

Heidi waltzed into the ward with a duffel bag, though she peeked over her shoulder, as though checking to make sure she wasn't being watched. Then she shivered and looked around the room.
“Harris?”

“Yeah?” He asked as he put the last paper talisman into place, and the wards came to life, their invisible tingly energy basking the walls and doors.

“Why are you putting wards in the children's ward?”

“Ryan and Buffy saw something last night...and a little girl died.”

Heidi's healthy complexion paled. “He...he wasn't just being a baby. There's something actually here?”

“Good chance of it.”

“Damn.”

Ryan, who'd been sitting on his hospital bed looked from Xander to Heidi. “Is he your boyfriend?”

Heidi rolled her eyes and tried to share a conspiring look with Xander. “Little brothers.”

“You forget, I am a little brother, so I do not share in your plight.”

“Ugh.”

He ignored Heidi's pain and grinned at Ryan. “We're friends, practically family, it's a weird thing, but we look out for one another and I'm looking out for you too.”

“With paper.”

“Weird. They'll keep the monster out.”

“...Really?”

“They've kept out all the other monsters so far.”

“Oh...thanks.”

xxx

Kyle slipped through the halls of the hospital, nodding to the nurses that Xander had talked to earlier. They pretended he wasn't there, though they smiled as he passed them, he wasn't sure why Xander was tight with the matronly nurses, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

He had already checked on Jenny, she remained unchanged...except that there seemed to be a bit more color to her cheeks so he supposed it was an improvement. His next stop was Buffy's room...and of course she was not in her bed. With a sigh he moved on toward the childrens' ward, given the current situation there was no point looking for her anywhere else.

He found her there; or rather he gaped at her in surprise as she went flying across the hall from just outside the door to the ward. He winced as she hit the wall stunned, and slid to the floor in a Buffy shaped puddle. An older man, a doctor, stepped out of the ward and started toward her. She managed to move her arm in warning but was too late and the doctor went flying too, hitting the wall beside her.

Buffy struggled up and caught sight of him. “Kyle!” Her yell seemed to jump start him and he started moving again, toward her and the doctor...and whatever it was that was attacking them.
Heidi got to them first; appearing out of the ward, running not flying, her hair was mussed from sleep. Buffy yelled at her. “Get the doctor behind the wards.” Even when not quite awake, Heidi was good at following orders; because she simply dragged the doctor back into room. Though she staggered a bit when something...sliced into the both of them. Buffy was back on her feet and kicked at whatever it was giving Heidi time to get the doctor to safety. Then the...monster started trashing Buffy.

'Protect the Pack'. Their first rule, the first Xander had laid down for them. It was what drove all thought from Kyle, he simply ran for the space by Buffy, managing to knock away whatever was attacking her, its foul scent attacked his nose when he connected with it and sent it flying. Then he grabbed Buffy and dragged her into the ward and behind the protective barrier that had been set up.

“Thanks.” Buffy gasped as she leaned back against him.

“You okay?”

“Fine...Heidi?”

They looked to Heidi and Kyle whispered her old nickname into the darkness. “Didi?”

A lamp clicked on, and a wide-eyed Ryan gazed at them all from beside his bed. Heidi was at his feet, kneeling by the doctor. “I'm okay. But the doc's bleeding pretty bad.”

Buffy knelt by them. “So are you.”

Heidi looked at her arm. “Oh...yeah...guess so.” A scared, strangled sound escaped Ryan's throat as he gripped at his older sister's shoulder. She gripped his hand in turn. “I'm okay Ryan.”

Buffy gave Ryan a calm smile before checking the doctor's wounds. “Kyle get me something to wrap up their wounds, we need to stop the bleeding.”

“There's some towels in the bathroom.” Ryan's voice was soft, scared.

“Thanks buddy.”

“He couldn't come in.”

Buffy grinned at him from where she was examining the wounded. “Xander does good wards.”

xxx

Xander sat at Buffy's side, ever vigilant; she in turn glared at him as she ate. “You don't have to watch me eat every bite.”

“You're right, but if I don't you won't eat it.”

“Xander, its hospital food. It’s disgusting.”

He gave her a wry smile. “Any food is worth eating Buff. Trust me.”

Her eyes turned thoughtful, almost as if she were remembering something. “Does this have anything to do with your food stashes? And when do you have time to hide all that food. Seriously. I found energy bars in my couch cushions a few days ago. You're worse than a squirrel.”

“Better than one actually, squirrels forget where they hide their food.”
She rolled her eyes, sighed, and ate the last bite of her meal. “You win.”

“I know.”

She gave him a glare, and he just grinned at her. Heidi raised her hand from her seat in the corner of the room. “If you two are going to have a knock down drag out Alpha fight can I leave the room? I don't want to get caught in the crossfire. I like being in one piece.”

Before Buffy could turn her glare on Heidi, Giles knocked lightly on the door before entering the room, Willow bounced in behind him, a stack of papers in her hand. Willow's excited bounce became less bouncy when she felt the tension in the room. “Err...should we come back later?”

“Well, that depends. Is that homework in your hands?” Buffy asked, her glare gone.

“Oh...no. No homework, just all the dirt we could find on Dr. Backer.” Willow smiled and started to hand the papers to Buffy. “This guy is really bad...news...” She looked from Buffy to Xander to Heidi. “Um...guys?”

“Sorry Willow.” Buffy waved the papers away. “The monster isn't Backer.”

“Oh darn, are you sure?” Willow pouted at her. “I mean we did all this research and everything. Giles even touched the computer!”

Xander snorted, and just barely kept a snicker from escaping his lips. Heidi however didn't have as much self control and simply cackled. “Did...did the computer...survive?” Heidi asked between gasps of laughter.

“The infernal machine is unscathed, thank you very much. Are you sure this Backer chap isn't our monster?”

Yeah, sorry Giles.” Buffy grinned at him, though it disappeared quickly enough.

“Enough Heidi.” Xander glanced at her and she managed to stifle her laughter. “Buffy, Kyle and Heidi had a run in with the thing last night.”

Buffy nodded. “The—thing. It attacked Dr. Backer, nearly killed him. If Kyle and Heidi hadn't been there he'd be dead, and I'd probably still be unconscious. As it is he spent the rest of the night in surgery. I called Xan in to put up some wards on his room after his surgery was over.”

“Xander, that's a lot of wards, Buffy's room, the children's ward and now the Doctor's room? How badly are you drained?

“I could use a nap, possibly a burger. Next time someone needs wards I'm volunteering you for the job.”

“I'll keep my supplies ready.”

Buffy nodded and handed a drawing to Giles. “This monster is definitely real Giles, and it's invisible. None of us could see it.”

Giles looked at the drawing, a strange look on his face. “Err...did you draw this?”

Xander and Heidi both snickered while Buffy glared at her watcher. Heidi waved toward the drawing. “My little brother drew it. Seems the kids can see it, whatever it is.”

“Oh. Yes. Um...I wonder what it could be.”
Buffy raised a brow at him. “That's what your job is, to find out. See if you can get the run down on his ugliness.”

Xander snapped his eyes back to her. “You're having a plan?”

“Yeah. I'm gonna go through Dr. Backer's office to see if I can find out why the Monster went after him. Willow, I'll need you with me. I don't speak or read doctor.”

“I can totally help.” Willow grinned and motioned to Xander. “We used to play doctor when we were kids.”

Three pairs of amused eyes focused on Xander. Heidi of course, leered. Xander rolled his eyes. “Stop being evil Wills. You and I both know you always played it wrong.”

Willow gave him a confused look, but her eyes were mischievous. “What do you mean?”

“Wills.”

“Mean.”

Buffy looked at them. “Do I even want to know?”

Willow shrugged. “I used to diagnose Xander and Jesse with my Mom's old medical books.” She turned back to Xander. “Remember when Jesse found that old straight jacket in my attic? And then we put it on him and he chased us through the house?”

He smiled. “Yeah, good times.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “Your childhood memories scare me.”

“Quite.” Giles murmured.

“As fun as this is I need to go check on Ryan.” Heidi grinned as she got up from her chair. “But I want to know why you had a straight jacket in your attic.”

“Later.” Willow promised.

“I'll have Kyle come by later to back you up if you need it Heidi.”

“Thanks.” She slipped from the room.

“And you Xander?” Giles asked.

“If you need help with the research Cordy or Larry are free. But the rest of us need to patrol.”

“Good plan.” Buffy smiled. “Now, let’s get to work.”

xxx

Giles took a sip from his tea, only glancing occasionally at his research assistants. For the most part Larry had remained quiet; Cordelia however was full of questions. Normally he didn't mind a young and inquisitive mind, but they didn't have time to go in depth over every demon in every book.

“What does this one do?” Cordelia asked again.

“It uses minor demons to collect the souls of the dead, which it then uses to sustain itself.”
Larry shuddered. “So this is the not glamorous part of slaying.”

Cordelia gave him a little smile. “It’s also the gross part…unless you get slimed on patrol.”

Larry stared at her. “Xander lets you patrol?”

“Yep.”

Giles sighed and closed his book. “You are going armed.”

She rolled her eyes a bit. “Stake, cross, holy water, dagger, and Xander of course.”

“I don’t think Xander qualifies as a weapon.”

“You haven’t seen him beat up a vampire.”

Giles gave a small snort. “He had mentioned he was training you.”

“Rhonda is helping me too.”

Larry gave her a thoughtful look. “What’s with you and Rhonda? You’ve always kinda hung out, just not at school…until recently anyway.”

“Oh, we’re sisters.”

“Whoah. Really?”

Cordelia shrugged. “Her mom is the ‘other woman’.”

“Wow.”

“Indeed. Suddenly things make much more sense.”

Cordelia grinned at them both, but closed the book she’d been looking through with a sigh…and stared at the cover. Then she looked back up at Giles. “Hey Giles. Where’s that picture Heidi’s brother drew?”

“Hmm? Oh, here…” He handed her the drawing. “Why?”

Cordelia held it next to the cover of the book she’d just closed. Larry peered closer and gaped. “That can’t be a coincidence.”

“What? What is it?” Giles stood to get a better look. “Good lord. I think you may have found our monster. Good work Cordelia.”

“Cool.”

“…”

“I still think this is a stupid idea.” Willow muttered as she continued to support Buffy’s weight, managing to glare at them both.

“Seconded.” Heidi growled. “Tell me again why you both have to be sick.”

“Being sick means being weak.” Buffy groaned. “And if I’m off my game I could get killed.”

“I’m still not sure how you talked me into drinking the flu germs with you.” Xander grumbled…and
stumbled, thankful that Heidi was strong enough to support him. “Especially since I'm still wiped from putting up all those wards.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Definitely not your greatest idea, that goes for both of you by the way. Also, the flu is a virus, not germs.”

“Eh.”

“Oh shit.”

They all looked at Heidi. “What?” Xander asked her, and then he looked in the direction Heidi was staring. At some point they'd ended up at the door to the children's ward, though he didn't remember much of the walk from Dr. Backer's office. He wasn't sure what the problem was, his mind already fuzzy due to the virus he and Buffy had ingested. Then he realized what had Heidi so upset. The children's ward was empty; Ryan and the other kids were gone.

Heidi let out a low, frustrated growl. “I'm gonna kill the brat. I told him to stay here.”

“They probably got scared, look.” Willow pointed at the paper talisman that Xander had placed on the door earlier. “Someone messed up the wards.”

He sighed. “Stupid orderlies, Nurses, whatever.”

“Where would they go?”

Xander nudged at Heidi. “Track it; you know this dirkenfiend's scent.”

“Der Kindestod.” Willow corrected him.

Buffy gripped Willow's hand gently. “Close enough. You're up Heidi.”

They entered the room, careful to stay out of Heidi's way as she circled the area, scenting the air. “It's been here, recently.” She came to a stop at another door. “Here...great.”

“What is it?” Willow asked as they moved toward her.

“There's a back stair well here that leads to the basement.”

“Who the heck puts a basement access door in a children's ward.” Willow muttered.

Xander rolled his eyes and shuffled to the door. “Ponder later, find kids now.”

xxx

Xander grimaced when they reached the lower levels of the hospital, the very bowls of the building...it was a sight he could have lived without. Who knew that there was a place in Sunnydale that was creepier than the boiler room of the high school. Heck who would have thought the basement of the hospital was this icky.

A scream ahead of them brought him out of his thoughts, and Heidi's worried whisper of “Ryan” got his blood moving faster. “Get the kids.” Heidi and Willow moved away from them and circled around the Der Kindestod to get to the kids.

“Do you see it?” Buffy asked him as they approached the Der Kindestod.”

“Old fashioned black suit, scary face, black hat that looks like the illegitimate offspring of a bowler
and a top hat.”

“That’s our boy.” Buffy confirmed.

“You hit him, I’ll tackle him.”

“Why do you get to tackle him?”

“Because I’m bigger and he’ll go down harder.”

“This is not the time for a short joke.”

“Says the short person.” He gave her a grin as she knocked the thing away from Ryan. Then they both tackled it giving Heidi and Willow the chance to gather the children and head back towards the stairs. However the beast knocked them both off and made its way toward the group. “See if you’d stayed on your feet you could have knocked him back down when he did that to me.”

Buffy sent him a glare even as they did a slowed scramble to go after the monster again. They were a step too late and the Der Kindestod made a grab for the kids. Ryan and the others screamed and Willow put herself between them and the threat she couldn’t see and shouted something, though he couldn’t make out what it was. There was a flash of light and a translucent green dome formed over the group. The monster hit it, and rebounded off its surface.

“Guys! Hurry!” Willow yelled at them. It was all the encouragement they needed.

Xander piled on top of the thing again and held it in a full body lock. “Buffy!”

Buffy was there in front of him in an instant and with a quick twist and a sickening snap the Der Kindestod fell limp, its head hanging at an unnatural angle.

“Is it dead?” Heidi called out from behind Willow's shield, her little brother safe in her arms.

Buffy sat back and nodded. “Very dead.”

Willow breathed out a sigh and the shield disappeared. “Good. I don’t think I could have kept that up much longer.”

“What was that Willow? The fancy light show.”

“Looked like a barrier, a quick and dirty ward even.” Xander groaned as he crawled off the dead demon. “Nice move there Wills.”

“Thanks...I wasn’t sure it would work...it’s a pretty advanced move.”

Ryan looked at them all like they were crazy. “Can we get out of here now?”

xxx

Heidi carried the tray carefully as she entered the room, it was laden with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, glasses of juice and bologna sandwiches. Buffy gave her an odd look. “So Mom put you to work?”

“I offered to carry it all up. She’s the one who made the sandwiches.” Heidi set the tray down and handed a plate to Buffy. “Crunchy peanut butter and extra jelly.” The next plate went to Xander who was lying on top the bed covers, but with his own blanket wrapped around him. “Bologna with mustard and cheese.” She then handed the last of the sandwiches to Willow and Oz who were
snuggled in a chair beside the bed. “There’s more downstairs if you’re still hungry afterward.” She then carefully climbed over Buffy, with her own peanut butter sandwich, and snuggled down between Xander and Buffy.

“Thanks Heidi.” He grinned as he moved to make room for her.”

“Welcome, oh, here. She pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket. “Ryan drew a picture for you.” She handed the paper to Buffy. “You didn’t rate a picture Xander. Ryan thinks Buffy is prettier.”

“Gasp, no. My heart, it breaks.”

There were a few snorts and Oz looked up from his sandwich. “Sorry I missed all the excitement.”

Xander shrugged and took a bite of his sandwich. “No big. There’ll be other battles.”

Buffy made a face at that. “We need to step up our training. I’m thinking we all need experience putting up wards. We can’t just rely on you and Willow for that. It’s not smart.”

“Tor’s already been practicing. It looks like he might have some talent with magic anyway.” Xander looked at all of them. “We need to make time for a group trip to the archery range.”

“My van should hold us all.”

“Cool.”

“Let’s all get better first.” Willow grinned at them and raised her glass of juice. “To our health.”

Gales of laughter filled the room.

XXX
Author's Notes: I know that in the episode Xan and Cordy were dancing at the Bronze when Ben approached Buffy about the Sadie Hawkins dance...but I didn't realize they were there until I was eleven pages into the chapter and had the episode playing in the background. Oops.

Koenma stared at the folder. He'd been staring at it for over an hour...or at least it seemed that long. It was tempting to just put the whole thing into an incinerator, not that he would, his father's wrath scared him much more than this manila folder full of a young man's life.

Alexander LaVelle Harris.

The boy the Faerie Queen Nimue had dubbed a Prophecy Breaker. The man-child that the vampire Angelus had named the White Knight. He worried what other titles the kid might have.

He opened the folder.

He'd read through it before, when he first discovered the connection between Xander and Yusuke...before Xander had broken the Prophecy. Some things were familiar...some things not. He continued to flip through the pages, wincing at the updates, the trials the guardians/children of the Hellmouth had already endured.

The side notes jotted in the margins were less than comforting. The Fates considered the kid annoying and were not kind in their descriptions. And then he saw it...the new title, the new name, the new label bestowed on the boy by the Fates themselves.

Wild Card.

Koenma let his head thump loudly on his desk. “Fuck.”

From the doorway King Enma shook his head in amusement at his son's antics, he was tempted to make his son's world tilt even more off scale but decided that Koenma wouldn't be able to handle that at the moment. After all, he would eventually figure the rest out; Xander wasn't going to be the only handful of the bunch.

xxx

Buffy sighed as Ben walked away from her, shot down in record time, but she knew that if she even thought about inviting new romance into her life Angel would only make them his newest target...not that she wanted anyone new.
“You okay?” Heidi asked her, touching her arm briefly.

She gave Heidi the barest of smiles. “Maybe. I guess you saw that huh.”

“Saw what?” Heidi asked her, though her eyes flickered toward Ben.

Buffy’s smile deepened. “Go ahead, my eyes do still work, I’m just not in the mood. And he is a hottie.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” Heidi considered her words a success when the briefest flash of amusement appeared on Buffy’s face.

“Have fun. I’m gonna check in with Giles, see you at school tomorrow?”

“Sure. Be careful.” She watched as Buffy made her way to the lower level of the Bronze, where Willow stopped her for a few moments. Heidi gave the scene a small smile before catching up to Ben. She touched his shoulder and stepped back, giving him room to turn around.

“Yes? Heidi, right?”

“Yeah. Listen, I’m sorry about Buffy shooting you down like that. It’s really not you. She’s still suffering from a really bad break up. The guy ended up being a real psycho.”

“Oh...so she’s gun shy then.”

“Majorly, and it doesn’t help that he still stalks her sometimes.”

“Oh...wow. That’s messed up.”

“Yeah. So I just wanted to let you know that it really wasn’t anything against you personally.”

“Thanks. You’re close, you and Buffy?”

“Pretty close...and she probably wouldn’t mind if I asked you to the dance.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it’s a date.”

xxx

He gave Jenny one last look, taking in the sight she made, and thought she appeared as a peaceful dark-haired angel in slumber...or at least she would have been without all the monitoring equipment such as the IV and breathing tube. At least she was breathing on her own, but it had been two weeks since they’d brought her in and the doctors were less hopeful everyday that she remained in her coma.

“Any change?” Cordelia asked him, her arm linking through his.

“No.” He sighed and pulled her just a bit closer. “Let’s go.” They moved out of the room, he spared the wards a brief check over, they were working perfectly. He and Willow had had to redo them once already because some of the younger hospital staff had taken them down not realizing what they were.
“No problems this time?”

“No, we're good. Just need to check in with the nurse's station before we leave.”

“We've all wondered about that.”

He looked at her curiously. “We who and about what?”

“How tight you seem to be with the older nurses.”

Xander couldn't stop the bitter little smile that graced his face. “You know how I was a clumsy kid. Always coming to school with bruises.”

Cordelia's grip tightened on his arm. “If your dad wasn't missing I'd wait for him outside his favorite bar and run him over with my car when he stumbled out.”

“Have I told you how awesome you are today?”

“Nope.”

“Well you're awesome, and I'm very lucky.”

“Of course you are.” They shared a grin as they stopped by the nurse's station.

“Hey Merry, let me know if there's any change with Jenny Calendar, better or worse, okay?”

A thin gray-haired woman with gentle green eyes smiled at him tiredly. “Don't worry kiddo. We'll take good care of her.”

As they left Cordelia slipped her hand into his. “Do you think Jenny will wake up?”

“Maybe someday.”

“Will she still be...well, Jenny?”

“Her soul is still here, but I don't know how her brain's been affected.”

“Her soul?”

“Yeah.”

“So you can sense souls.”

“And ghosts.”

“And that's how you knew Angel had gone dark side.”

“Yep.”

“Our lives are so very screwed up.”

He grinned at her. “But we're alive.”

xxx

The next morning Tor plopped himself down in a seat beside Xander, the first bell had rung but the stragglers had a few more minutes to get to their classes. There own class room was already half full.
Tor gave him a curious look. “So, what's up?”

Xander blinked. “Up?”

Tor nodded. “Snyder dragged Buffy into his office the second she came through the doors.”

“Huh. Usually she at least has to be on the scene of some catastrophe before the troll nabs her. What's the rumor mill say?”

“No much, just that there was weirdness last night.”

“That's nothing new.”

Tor grimaced. “It is when there's a gun.”

That caused Xander to sit up straight and focus all his attention on Tor. “There were guns?”

He shook his head. “A gun. I haven't heard much else. I'll keep listening though.”

“Alright, you do that. At least until we get a chance to talk to Buffy.”

Rhonda drifted into the room then, walked towards them...and stared at the girl sitting in front of Tor until the poor thing got the hint and gathered up her books and took a different seat...on the other side of the room.

“Wow. You don't even have to talk to be intimidating.” Xander sent an apologetic look towards the girl, though she was refusing to look their way.

“Habit.” She sat down in front of Tor. “So, Billy Crandle has chained himself to a snack machine again.”

Tor rolled his eyes. “Dude is weird.”

Xander snorted. “Aren't we all?”

xxx

“Something weird is going on.”

Xander snorted and gave Buffy a look. “Buff, when is something weird not going on at this school, much less in this town? I mean, look at all the crap we've seen this year, and last year! Face it, we are weird central and it’s probably gonna stay that way.”

She stuck out her lip just a bit. “This is different though. Usually we have a demon to face, slay, whatever. But so far it’s just people acting weird...and not even realizing that they're being weird. The couple last night just up and started fighting, but didn’t’ even remember why, or where the gun came from. And then that thing in class, the teacher didn't even realize what he'd written until after people started laughing. It’s not just weird; it’s weird with all capital letters.”

“We'll just have to keep our eyes open...and our ears. Tor's keeping his trained to the rumor mill, see if any other couples are having any weird fights with guns.” He paused as they reached his locker and he gave it a wary glance. “Uh...Buffy.”

“What?”
“Have I by chance mentioned that I can sorta see and uh...sense ghosts?”

She blinked. “No. When did that happen?”

“Well sure when...it just happened. And I might have helped Kagome put some spirits to rest over break. Although I stayed out of her way and let her work over the Poltergeist.”

“Why are you telling me all this now?”

He gave his locker another glance. “I think there's a ghost in my locker.”

“You're not serious.”

“As a heart-attack.”

She looked at his locker. “So how do you want to do this?”

“I open it and we see what happens?”

“Usually your plans are better than this.”

“Heh.” He could feel his cheeks heat up just a bit. “Let’s just be careful.” Slowly he put in the combination, and opened the door, both of them keeping to the side.

An arm made of rotting flesh, somewhere between the colors gray and green shot out thrashing and reaching for them. Luckily they were out of reach.

“Holy crap!” Xander shared a look with Buffy and they moved as one to get the locker closed again. With the both of them working together they just barely were able to get the arm back in.

Buffy leaned her head against the locker door. “What is it with us and monster arms?”

“I was wondering the same thing...hear anything?”

She shook her head. “You sense anything?”

“Nope.”

They opened the locker again. There was nothing inside, the arm was gone and the contents of his locker were undisturbed.

“Think we better see Giles. What do you think?” Buffy asked him, taking another peek inside.

“Definitely. We are so Giles bound.”

xxx

When they entered the library they found Willow and Tor at a table, surrounded by books, possibly discussing a history report, and Giles behind them shelving books on the lower shelves. Willow’s eyes widened when she saw them, Xander felt a bit insulted at that, they weren't that roughed up from their encounter with the arm monster.

Tor merely blinked and closed the book in front of him. “What happened?”

Xander pulled out a chair across him. “Well, we definitely have a ghost.”

Giles nearly popped up from his shelving like a jack in the box, an eager expression on his face.
“Oh, really?”

Buffy eyed him warily as she too took a seat. “Is it just me or is it creepy to you guys too that he gets perky whenever something new shows up.” All three of them raised their hands. “I don’t feel so alone and judgmental now.”

“You lot just don’t appreciate the classics.” Giles muttered, as he grabbed a book and went back to his shelving. “Well, what makes you think it was a ghost?”

Xander snorted. “Well, Buffy's history teacher did this weird channeling thing in the middle of class, and there was a ghastly, ghoulie arm waiting for me in my locker.”

“Lucky for us Xander sensed it so the thing didn't get a chance to grab either of us.” She gave him a glance. “I’m guessing it’s not like what you and Kagome took care of over break.”

“Nope.”

Willow smiled. “She told me about that in an e-mail, about the little boy and his dog and that mean poltergeist that was feeding off the little boy's ghost.”

Giles sighed. “Really Xander, that would have been a story worth sharing. It is rather fascinating. Do you think the spirit here is a poltergeist?”

Xander shook his head. “Doesn't feel the same. I think it’s an actual ghost.”

Willow blinked and made a note on a piece of paper. “There's a difference?”

“Yeah. A ghost is what's left of a human soul, or I guess more like a human soul that's trapped.”

Buffy frowned. “So what's a poltergeist?”

“It’s a spirit thingy that was never human.”

Tor smirked. “The word would be entity.”

“Eh, thingy, entity, whichever. But they feed on the energy that kids and teens give off, all that chaos energy we stir up? They love it. But they're kinda constant and they usually end up at people’s homes, not at a school.”

Willow made another note. “So we're dealing with a dead kid then.”

Tor shook his head. “Or a dead teacher.”

She nodded at his logic. “True.”

Buffy sighed. “Well we have that much figured out, but how do we find out who it is? Or rather was I guess.”

He shrugged. “Just wait for more clues. Maybe it will try to communicate again...hopefully without maniacal ghoul arms of doom.”

xxx

Yusuke let the cream warm in his hands a bit before soothing it onto Keiko's stomach. She was six months along and the skin was growing taught as the baby grew. Yukina had made a salve to soften the skin and help prevent the stretch marks, and heal the ones she’d already had.
Applying the salve was a soothing ritual for them both, plus it gave Yusuke a chance to escape his worries.

“Yusuke.”

At least until Keiko wanted to talk about them. “Yeah?”

“It’s going to be pretty crowded this summer. Not everyone will fit in the apartment.”

He looked at her, his hands still rubbing the salve into her skin. “Just how many kids are you planning on having?” She punched his shoulder. “Ow!”

“You know what I meant you jerk. Xander will be here and probably Kyle, Tor, and who knows how many others.”

“Genkai can put them up while they’re here.”

“You’d better run that by her first.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“He’ll be okay Yusuke.” Keiko moved her hands on top of his and held them against her stomach.

“We don’t know that, and I'm not allowed to protect him.”

She rolled her eyes. “He's your little brother.”

“And that's what worries me; I've taken some pretty shitty risks.”

“And most of the time they were the right choice.”

“That's not comforting Keiko.”

“You're thinking about it too much. Come here.”

Yusuke complied and let her distract him from his thoughts, if only for a while. Maybe Keiko was right...maybe Xander would be okay.

xxx

Cordelia sighed as the three of them made their way toward the library. Rhonda looked at her oddly. “Problem?”

She let her lip stick out a bit. “I never thought I'd spend my valuable dating time in the school library for medieval weapons training.”

Heidi grinned. “Beats getting eaten.”

Rhonda smirked. “The next time you need some alone time with Xander we'll distract Book Man him so you guys can sneak out.”

“Gee thanks, I really--” There was a shriek, a woman’s voice raised in fear up ahead of them. “Oh come on! We're here for training, not ghost busting.”

Heidi shrugged. “Better go check it out.”

Cordelia sighed. “Let’s go.”
They moved faster now, but cautiously, one never knew what was lurking in the halls of Sunnydale High. For all they knew Snyder was still around and bullying some poor girl. Unfortunately that wasn't the case.

They peaked around a corner, there was a terrified woman...and a hysterical man...and he had a gun pointed at her.

“Oh my god.” Cordelia whispered.

Rhonda nodded. “Isn't that Ms. Frank?”

Heidi was gaping open mouthed. “Why the hell is George the janitor pointing a gun at her?”

Cordelia shook her head. “Don't know...but we need to do something. His hand is really starting to shake...” As she spoke Ms Frank turned to run. “Now!”

They rushed the two adults. Cordelia made a dash for Ms. Frank, managing to knock her to the floor...just as the gun went off, and Ms. Frank let out a cry of pain. Behind her there was the sounds of a scuffle and the clatter of the gun hitting the floor and sliding away. She spared a glance at the other girls and George. Rhonda was using her belt to tie his hands behind his back while Heidi was keeping him still. Satisfied that he was under control she turned back to Ms. Frank.

“Are you okay?”

“My shoulder...it hurts...what happened?”

Cordelia looked at the blood seeping through the torn sleeve of Ms. Frank’s blouse. The bullet had only grazed her. She let out a sigh. “I'm not sure...let's get you patched up.”

The sound of someone running reached her ears just a moment before Giles rounded the corner. “Good lord. What happened?”

All three girls looked up at him, Heidi glared. “Where the heck have you been?”

“I...was in the library when I heard the shot.”

Cordelia sighed. “Whatever it was, it’s over...do you happen to see a gun anywhere?”

They all glanced around...the gun was nowhere in sight. Giles cleared his throat. “I take it the ghost has struck again?”

They continued to glare at him. “Ya think?”

xxx

Xander frowned as he followed Marshal through the darkened streets of Sunnydale. They were in one of the older neighborhoods, one where both sides of the street had small mansions surrounded by high fences. Some fences were stone, some iron, very few were wooden. This was where the old money lived, including Mayor Wilkins, newer money like Cordy's parents lived in a different part of town.

“I can't believe you're just showing me where Spike is now.”

*Well we have been busy. And Angel just moved them here recently, they were in a real dump last week.*
“So which house is it?”

That one, the really old fashioned one.

Xander stopped, and stared. “The old Crawford place?”

Yep.

“That’s actually sort of a relief.”

Marshal looked up at him in surprise. Why?

“Cause it’s been abandoned for years. The Crawford’s moved to LA back when I was in third grade. Their daughter disappeared not long after Crawford Senior was found dead in the back yard from blood loss. So the widow Crawford, and her son and daughter-in-law took the rest of the family to LA. They haven’t been back since.”

Whoa. Come on, I’ll show you the best way to get in.

Xander grabbed his tail and gave it a gentle tug. “Hold up. Let’s not get any closer.”

Ow, and why?

“I don’t want Angel to know we're anywhere near here.”

How would he know?

“He has a nose Marshal. He'd be able to smell us; I'm pretty sure by now he knows my scent.”

Oh...I knew that.

Xander snickered and Marshal ignored him for a bit while they waited in a sort of nook within a particularly tall and bushy overgrown hedge. He was just starting to get fidgety when he saw Spike wheel himself through the open gate of the Crawford place. The vampire paused just outside the gate, as if unsure which direction to go, Xander made the decision for him when he stepped out of his hiding place. The movement caught Spike's eyes and he blinked before wheeling towards Xander. He stepped back into the hedge and Spike wheeled in after him, they were completely hidden from prying eyes there.

Marshal looked from Spike to Xander, rolled his eyes, and slipped away, leaving them alone. Xander could just see the beginnings of tear trails at the corners of Spike's eyes in the dim light from the nearest lamp-post. He frowned as he took a step toward the vampire his hands moving of their own accord to wipe the tears away.

“What happened?”

“Nothing unusual. Just the same bloody story of my entire bloody unlife. After all this time it shouldn't hurt so much...especially since I've betrayed her with you.”

Xander blinked. “Drusilla?”

“Crazy bird all but forgets about me when Angelus is around.”

Xander sighed and settled himself on Spike's lap, his legs hanging over one arm of the wheelchair. “We're a little insane doing this aren't we. You've got guilt because of Drusilla, I've got guilt because I haven't told my best friends about this...but I don't think I can stop.”
“Addicted to me pet?”

Xander felt his own eyes water and leaned his head on Spike's shoulder, all but burying his face in the older male's throat. “I think it’s more than that. I don't know what I'd do without either of you.”

He felt Spike's arm shift and then cool fingers started to run through his hair. “Where is your Princess tonight?”

“Weapons training with Giles.”

“Really?”

Xander shrugged and breathed in Spike's scent. “The more she knows the better prepared she'll be. I can't be with her 24/7 to protect her.”

They sat in silence for a while; Xander all but huddled in Spike's lap and Spike running his hand through Xander's hair. When Xander raised his face, his lips were captured in a very demanding kiss, and he yielded. He let Spike lead, let the vampire manipulate every move of his mouth, lips and tongue as if he were a puppet.

While their mouths were occupied Xander slipped his pocket knife out and sliced into his finger, just a bit. The scent of fresh blood brought Spike to a halt and he tore his mouth from Xander's. “What are you doing?”

“Here.” He gulped and held out the bleeding digit. “Blood given freely.”

Spike stared at him in surprise, even as he gently grasped Xander's wrist and brought the bloodied finger to his lips. When he closed his mouth over the wet tip his eyes widened, and a moan slipped out. Xander smiled and felt his cheeks redden as Spike's tongue worried at the cut, trying to wring every drop free that it could.

When Spike pulled back the cut looked a day old and well on its way to healing. “Huh.”

“Hell pet, you taste divine.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Like sunshine and chocolate.”

His blush deepened and he ducked his head, smiling. Spike took hold of his chin and pressed their lips together again, in a chaster kiss. When he pulled back Xander sighed.

“I guess that was goodnight.”

“It will have to be.” Spike murmured, then he smirked. “Give your girl a kiss for me.”

“With pleasure. Oh, here.” He reached into his jacket and pulled a pack of blood out. “Happy eating.”

“You spoil me.” They shared a smile and Xander slipped away into the night.

Marshal caught up with him a block later. Won't Angel be able to smell you all over him?

“Quit using my logic against me.”
“Then stop thinking with the wrong head.

“I'm seventeen, its gonna happen. Besides, Spike always smokes after he's been around me and Cordy, and he'll wait a while before going back inside.”

Marshal simply snorted.

xxx

The three of them watched as Giles paced back and forth alongside the counter, as he spoke, his glasses moved from hand to hand as he gestured. “I think the incident with Xander's locker was in fact the only time this spirit was able to make direct contact. For the most part I believe it's stuck in a form of purgatory.”

Buffy frowned. “What makes you so sure?”

“I believe that a traumatic experience has trapped it in some sort of loop, doomed it so to speak to repeat the event that led to its demise.”

Willow frowned. “I don't remember any recent shootings at school, and even if it happened when we were in junior high or elementary school we would have heard about it.”

Xander shrugged. “So go back further.”

Willow shot him a look, even as she started typing. “Well it would be nice to have a starting point Mr. Smarty-pants.”

“1955.”

All eyes focused on Buffy, though Willow's fingers really started flying over the keyboard at that point. Giles slipped his glasses back on. “What makes you think that?”

“I...sort of had a vision just before my history teacher did the channeling thing. It was of a teacher and student that were having an affair.” She gave them an almost sheepish look. “And then when I was in Snyder's office an old year book shot off the shelf, one from 1955.”

“I have a copy of it here, just a moment.” Giles retreated into his office, and returned with a copy of the book.

“Oh hey, I found them!” Willow exclaimed. “Here, there's an old article in the paper.”

Xander blinked. “Really? Who the heck takes the time to put old articles from the fifties online?”

“Don't knock it Xander, since it just came in handy and everything.” Willow scolded him. “Hey, Buffy, the couple from 1955, were they Ms. Grace Newman and James Stanly?”

Buffy at that point had already opened the book and located James' picture. “Yeah...he looks just like a regular guy doesn't he. What's the article say?”

“Murder/Suicide. Looks like James went a little crazy when she broke up with him.” Willow winced. “He shot her on the balcony, and then killed himself in the music room.”

Buffy slammed the book closed. “Sicko.”

Giles gave her a look. “Buffy.”
“He deserves to be trapped the way he is. He couldn't make her love him, so he killed her.”

Xander took a breath. “Buffy. He's been suffering for over forty years for his mistake, don't you think four decades trapped in this place is punishment enough.”

Her eyes nearly crackled with sudden hatred. “No.”

“You don't feel sorry for them at all?” Willow asked quietly.

“For her yeah, but not for him. He destroyed the one person he loved most in a blind moment of rage. He should go on paying for it.”

Giles stepped closer to her and placed his hands on her shoulders and forced her too look at him. “Perhaps, perhaps not. But it would be best to resolve this issue regardless, before a woman dies, because if the pattern holds that is what will happen.”

Xander suddenly wanted to smack himself. “What if they're both trapped?”

They all looked at him, and Buffy had a very confused look on her face. “What?”

He continued with his thought. “Someone's possessing the woman right? What if they're both trapped in the loop? And the only one able to lash out is James because he's so torn up about what he did.”

Buffy nodded. “Then we need to find a way to help her.”


Buffy glared at him. “We need to find a way to free her, or something.”

“Oh, Ms. Calendar had a bunch of spell and Wicca sites bookmarked on her computer.”

“Whoa Wills, we don't want to get involved with any unfamiliar magic. Neither of us is familiar with Western spells. E-mail Kagome; see if she has any suggestions, because this is way beyond me.”

Giles looked perplexed. “You did say that you had experience in laying spirits to rest Xander.”

“Yeah...but the kid was in a talking mood and all I had to do was reunite him with his dog. James's isn't very cuddly in case you hadn't noticed.”

Willow shuddered. “Right, I'll e-mail Kagome, and then we can go to lunch.”

He grinned. “Thank god.”

xxx

Buffy picked at her food, even as she stared at Xander as he inhaled his own lunch. Willow was munching on a celery stick, watching them both in amusement, and Kyle was perched on Larry's lap, the two of them sharing a tray.

Buffy pushed her plate aside, an almost disgusted look on her face. “Xander, you do realize that school food is only a step above hospital food.”

He swallowed and grinned at her. “You forget my little friend, I like all food.”

Willow gave him a little smirk. “Except Brussels sprouts.”
He shuddered and nodded in agreement. “Except those.”

Buffy sighed and sat back. “No one eats Brussels sprouts...you think Kagome will be able to help us?”

Willow shrugged. “She’s a fully trained miko odds are she’s faced something like this, she just won’t be able to help us in the physical sense, with her being in Japan and us being here.”

Cordelia placed her tray on the table and sat beside Xander. “I hope you guys aren’t going to the Sadie Hawkins dance tonight.”

They all blinked at the rather sudden change in conversation and Xander gave her a look. “Why?”

“Because I’m organizing a boycott, I mean the girls have to ask the guys, and pay, and everything. It’s crazy!”

“Cor if you didn’t want to go all you had to do was say something. You know I’ll cook for you whenever you want to come over.”

She rolled her eyes at him and Kyle pointed his fork at her. “I will join your boycott.”

Larry nodded and snagged another bite from the fork when Kyle brought it back towards him. “We both will.”

Kyle ate another bite. “It’s discriminatory.”

Xander snorted and started to make a comment when he felt...something...he sat up and looked around. Willow he noticed was shivering.

Buffy caught on to the change in his mood. “Xander? Will?”

He shuddered. “We need to leave. Now.” He stood up and looked at them. “Move people.” He all but hauled Cordelia to her feet by her arm and gave a couple of high pitched warning yips to Rhonda, Tor and Heidi a few tables away. Then the pack was on the move.

They got to the doors of the cafeteria when the screaming started, Xander made sure they were through and to the sides when the mob of students and staff came rushing out. His pack all exchanged looks of confusion with one another, along with looks of wonder at him.

When the last screaming person came through the doors it was Kyle who peeked through the window of the door.

Buffy nudged him. “What happened?”

Kyle made a face. “Let’s just say I'm glad Xander has ghost-dar.”

“How bad is it?” Willow asked.

“Snakes.”

Cordelia huddled closer to him, his grip still on her arm. She grimaced. “Snakes?”

“Everywhere.” Kyle confirmed. “Floor, tables, food trays.”

Heidi made a gagging noise. “Thanks Xander.”
“Everyone is welcome.” He grinned and started tugging Cordelia away from the doors. “Come on. There’s some cup ramen in Giles office...chocolate chip cookies too.”

They all grinned and trailed along behind him.

xxx

“Is your sister going to mind having us over?” Cordelia asked as they followed Tor to the front porch of his home.

“Nah, besides we need to talk to her about this.”

Xander nodded. “Who else would we talk to about ghosts but a Grim Reaper?”

“That part still creeps me out.” She muttered as she followed them inside.

Xander gave her an encouraging smile. “She only guides souls across Cor, she doesn't take lives.”

“Still.”

“Hey Sis!” Tor called out. “Oneechan! Xander and Cordelia are here!”

Botan’s replay was practically instantaneous. “I'm in the kitchen.”

They made their way toward the room her voice came from; Botan was putting a plate of cookies on the table.

“Oh, cookies.” Xander grimaced. “You shouldn't have.”

“I bought them.”

He and Tor both relaxed, Cordelia gave them an odd look. “I'm guessing her cooking is sort of like mine?”

“Worse.” Xander gave her shoulder a pat, his eyes darting towards the Spirit Guide in apology. “No offense Botan.”

Botan shrugged and started pouring coffee into cups. “None taken. Tor get the sugar and cream out please.”

The four of them settled around the kitchen table, and began to tell Botan what was going on at school in length.

Tor picked up a cookie. “What I don’t get is why the ghost didn't do all of this last year, or the year before.”

Xander hmmd. “I've been thinking about that...could be he finally has someone he can identify with and its drudging up all of his emotional baggage.”

Cordelia shuddered. “The great fallout of Buffy and Angel.”

“Exactly, now, Botan.” He eyed the spirit guide. “Can you maybe sorta just scoop James and Ms Newman up and send them on their way?”

She shook her head and sighed. “Not when they're trapped like this. They need to resolve their issues with one another and themselves before they can crossover.”
Tor let his head hit the table gently. “Great. Can we at least keep him from killing anyone else?”

“That won’t be too difficult. A barrier would work.”

“Would Kagome know how to do that? Willow e-mailed her today, asking for suggestions.”

Botan nodded and sipped at her coffee. “It’s a fairly basic, if large scale procedure. She’ll probably send in depth instructions.”

“Why large scale?” Cordelia asked.

“The barrier will have to go over the entire school.”

“Lovely.”

xxx

“Is this gonna become a habit?” Cordelia asked as they sat, spread out over Giles’ living room.

“Going over to people’s houses and eating cookies?”

Several of them stared at her, but Xander was the one who spoke. “Wasn’t planning on it. Why?”

“Just thinking we might stash a few low-fat snacks here instead of your usual junk food.”

“There are salt free crackers in the cabinet.” Willow grinned.

“I do wish you lot would stop leaving your groceries here.”

Kyle snorted. “Then we should just make a list and you can buy them.”

“Right, never-mind. Moving on.” Giles gave a sigh of defeat. “We are in agreement then. Until we have a permanent solution we’re going to put up a barrier to keep everyone out of the school. That way James won’t be able to lead anyone to their death.”

Willow nodded. “Yep. Kagome said she needed to do some research on her end; she's not sure how one of her exorcism spells will interact with the Hellmouth. But this is our best chance to keep everyone alive.”

“Right. So what do we do?” Buffy asked.

Xander pointed at the map of the school Willow had printed out. “There needs to be one of us on each corner of the property.”

“It’ll have to be the strongest of us.” Willow added. “So Buffy you and Xander each get a corner.”

“You too then Wills.” Xander frowned in thought. “And maybe Giles will get the last.”

Buffy nodded in satisfaction. “We have a plan then.”

Willow passed them each a piece of paper. “This is the English translation of the incantation.”

Giles accepted one of the copies. “Thank you. Good work Willow. Now, let’s finish up and be on our way.”

xxx

Xander settled himself on the ground at the northern most corner of the school grounds, Cordelia
stood just out of bounds so as not to get caught in the magic.

“So how exactly are you gonna know when to start the spell?”

He grinned. “The magic has already started rising; Willow started the spell when she walked around the school chanting a blessing to help clear out any unrelated energy.”

“That's what she was doing?”

He nodded. “I should be able to sense when to start the spell.”

“Tor has magic now right, couldn't he take a corner instead of Giles?”

“Yeah, but Giles has more experience with casting...hang on Cor.” He picked up one of the tools for the spell, a thin wooden rod with a strip of crinkled paper attached to one end. Gently he pushed the other end into the ground, then he placed a flat rock beside it, then he grasped the paper talisman in his hand. “Restless spirits of times past. No more will you harm the innocents of today. With this barrier we seal you in place. No more will you bring harm to others.” With the last words he placed the talisman onto the rock and scooted back. A second later the barrier shimmered into existence, a pretty translucent blue.

“That's it?” Cordelia gave him an incredulous look. “Where's the lighting? Where's the mayhem?”

“That's it.” He confirmed as he got to his feet...and promptly started to fall; luckily Cordelia was there for him to lean on. “That took more out of me than I thought it would.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, nothing a hot shower and a few more cookies won't cure.”

They slowly made their way toward the front of the school where the cars were, Buffy and Kyle joined them in much the same state, Buffy using Kyle as a crutch. She gave him a look with a tired smile. “You feel dizzy too?”

“Just a little.”

Kyle looked back at the school, the barrier still shimmering around it. “So we can go home now?”

Xander nodded. “Yeah. We've bought ourselves a few days to find a more permanent solution.”

Cordelia made a face. “Let me guess, that means hitting the books. Again.”

They all shared a sigh. Research never seemed to end on the Hellmouth.

xxx

They had just pulled into Xander's driveway when Cordelia's cell phone started ringing. She managed to get it out even as she parked the car; the near miss of his mom's sedan almost gave him a heart-attack.

“Hello? Willow? We just saw you at school for the spell, this couldn't have waited...what? You're kidding! Ugh. We'll see you there then.” She hung up and glared at him. “What's wrong with you?”

“Oh nothing...just saw my life flash before my eyes.”

She rolled her eyes and started her car back up and began backing out of the drive. “Willow's in
panic mode. Seems ghost boy possessed Buffy and made her go back to the school, she's inside the barrier. How is that even possible?"

“Kagome has slipped through barriers before; it could be that James was able to manipulate it to let Buffy through.”

“Great.”

As it turned out they missed all the excitement, by the time they got back to the school the barrier was down and Buffy was huddled on the steps with Giles and Willow. Kyle and Tor were asleep in the back seat of Giles' car.

“So, what did we miss?” Xander asked as he knelt beside Buffy.

She raised her head and gazed at him in confusion. “She forgave him.”

“Buff, you got to stop beating yourself up. You didn't know what was gonna happen.” He ruffled her hair and kissed her forehead. “You loved him. Still do, even after everything that's happened, right?”

She nodded. “I never stopped.”

“The soul that made him Angel still loves you too, and he'd forgive you anything. You were the sun in his life, don't ever forget that.”

She nodded and let Giles help her to her feet. “Willow, you wanna stay over tonight?”

“Sure Buffy.”

xxx

Once they'd gotten back to Xander's house they'd headed up to his room, his mom was already asleep, and set about getting ready for bed. It was already late so once again Cordelia opted to stay the night. He showered first, quickly washing away the grime that clung to his skin and emerging in a fresh pair of boxers.

As he stepped into the bedroom she'd moved around him and his room with familiarity, opening the top dresser drawer to retrieve her sleepwear before heading into the bathroom for her own shower.

Marshal was dozing on the open window ledge, enjoying the breeze of fresh air; Xander smiled and let him sleep as he tossed his dirty clothes into the hamper. He took his time turning down the covers, and settling on the bed. Tired as he was it took only a moment for him to start dozing.

He only opened his eyes when he felt Cordelia's familiar weight settle beside him on the bed. “Night Cor.”

“Night.”

She'd already reached for the lamp beside the bed to turn it off when he grasped her wrist lightly. “Wait.” He whispered, looking over his shoulder towards the window.

Marshal had woken, and hopped down from the ledge as the window was opened even wider from the outside. Spike peered in at them from the roof.
“Whoa.” Cordelia whispered. “It worked.”

Xander gave Spike a small smile and sat up on the bed. “All better?”

“Little shaky on my feet, but I'm capable of violence.” Spike's tone was flat...as if he were waiting for something.

Xander knew what it was. Acceptance. “Come in Spike.”

Spike schooled his expression, fighting to keep the surprise off his face, even as he crawled through the window and placed his feet on the floor. “Sometimes I think you forget what I am.”

“Never, but I need to know Spike, where do we stand? How does this change things?”

The vampire was across the room and on top of him in seconds, his cool mouth all but torturing him with kisses and licks. A low growl filled the room and Xander responded with a growl of his own and struggled for control. He didn't get it, what he did get was acknowledgment when he nipped at Spike's lips, Spike yielded to him, even as he plundered Xander's mouth.

When Spike pulled away suddenly Xander growled again and followed up towards the vampire's throat, grazing his teeth against pale flesh. His eyes however focused on Cordelia who had her hand on Spike's cheek.

“Well?” She asked, eying them both, a shadow of insecurity flickering over her face. “What happens now? And not just us, but with Angel and everything.”

Xander knew he was pouting when he pulled away from Spike's throat, their eyes met in a look of understanding. Then Spike reached for Cordelia and pulled her into a very slow, very gentle kiss. And Xander had never seen anything so...yummy. The purr that escaped him was low and surprised all three of them.

Spike's laugh was rich and warm. “Liked that did you?”

Xander pulled him down for a shorter kiss, licking the taste of Cordelia from Spike's mouth. Intoxicating. Even with Cordelia snickering at him.

“Understatement much.”

He harrumphed and tugged Spike down between them so the three of them could snuggle. They lay like that for a few minutes, Xander already starting to doze again.

Spike sighed. “Can't stay long. Don't want to get caught out of my chair.”

“Spike?” Cordelia whispered.

“I reckon I'll be playing spy. Keeping tabs on Daddy Dearest.”

Xander clutched at Spike's coat and buried his face in the vampire's neck. “Okay.”

Cordelia laid her head on Spike's chest and murmured into it. “Be careful.”

Spike lay there, content for the first time in a very long time, a beautiful brunette on either side of him.

xxx
The lunch crowd had come and gone, and Yusuke was enjoying the near emptiness of the shop. He enjoyed the lull between lunch and dinner when he could catch up on the dishes and preparations for the next meal.

Keiko was at class and her parents were doing inventory in the back, which left him alone as the last customer from the lunch crowd paid for his meal and left...then Kagome entered the shop, with Kurama.

It was an odd combination and he wondered if maybe his friend was finally showing an interest in someone besides his little brother. “Hey guys.”

Kurama nodded in greeting. “Hello Yusuke. Kagome was just telling me of Xander's latest adventures in Sunnydale.”

Yusuke felt his left eye twitch. “Oh really?”

Kagome grinned. “Seems they had an unruly ghost that needed to be put to rest...didn't he tell you about it?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off the headache he could already feel developing. “That brat doesn't tell me anything.”

The priestess actually had the nerve to laugh. “I was the same way with my family when I was traveling to the past. I edited the stories of my journey as much as I could so they wouldn't worry.”

Kurama chuckled. “Unfortunately, I don't think Xander even does that.”

Yusuke lightly banged his head on the nearest wall. “That kid is gonna drive me to an early grave with all this worrying.”

XXX
“So how are things with Xander?” Kuwabara asked him before shoving some noodles into his mouth; he chewed and swallowed them with gusto. “Come on Urameshi. You never talk about the kid.”

Yusuke threw a chopstick at his best friend with deadly accuracy; Kuwabara caught it and threw it back. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“What are you two fighting or something?”

“No, he just never tells me what’s going on with him.” He tossed the used chopsticks into the trash. “He calls to ask how Keiko is, Mom, Keiko’s parents and me. When I ask him how he’s doing he talks about classes, and his friends.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“He’s leaving out the important stuff, like how many times he almost got killed that week, or how many vampires he’s taken out. Stuff I need to know!”

“You’re turning into a girl.”

Yusuke threw a salt shaker at him; Kuwabara caught it and salted his ramen, then tossed it back. “You’re an ass, and I’m not turning into a girl.”

“He’s been on his own a lot right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So you didn’t rely on adults or authority figures when bad shit happened.”

“That’s not the point Kuwabara.”

“Actually it is. He’s kind of like you, doing things his own way.”

“It doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Kuwabara snorted. “I really hope you never have any daughters.”
“Why?”
“If you're this worried about your little brother...if you have a daughter you're going to be grey-headed before you're thirty.”
“Go to hell.”

xxx

Xander ignored the party going on around them, content where he was, his head in Cordelia's lap as they cuddled by a bonfire. They were under a blanket to help ward off the chill of the ocean air.

Willow and Oz were beside them, huddled together, each with a drink in their hand, bobbing their heads to the music of someone's boom box. Obviously they were more into the party than him.

“You're dying of boredom aren't you?” Cordelia sighed.
“Pretty much. I'd rather be on patrol with the others. Why are we here anyway? None of us are even into sports, except for Larry and you Cordy.”
“You didn't have to come.”

He shrugged. “This is where you wanted to be. Huh, just answered my own question didn't I?”

Cordelia smirked at him even as she said; “Aw.”

Willow smiled at them. “Well I think it's nice, a party on the beach is festive, and the team did win so it's a good reason to party.”

“And the tunes are good.” Oz waved vaguely toward the direction of the boom box.

Cordelia patted at his head. “Besides, you guys wanted to get Buffy out of Sunnydale for a while, for a change of scenery or whatever.”

“Next time we go camping in the desert, or clubbing in LA, something besides a school or after school function.” He grumbled.

“Maybe not Xander.” Willow pointed toward the shore. “Looks like Buffy's made a friend.”

He rose up enough to see Cameron talking to Buffy. “Oh come on. She can do better.”

“He is the number two swimmer on the team.” Cordelia pointed out. “Even if he is sort of a jerk.”

“Huh. Maybe you gals can get together for a girls night, no guys around to distract you.”

“You just want an excuse to sneak in and steal some of Gwen's homemade brownies.”

“Would I do that?”

“Help!”

They all moved at once towards the yell. Dodd McAlvy was trying to drown Jonathan in a tub of ice water.

“Somebody!”

“Some jocks just never learn.” Xander grumbled as he made his way toward the ruckus, his blanket
falling to the ground.

“Help me!”
He and Oz moved on either side of Dodd and grabbed him. “That's enough.”

“Back off Harris.”
Russ Luna stepped up, his boyfriend Andrew tucked safely behind him. “Easy Dodd, Harris has a habit of breaking bullies. He could probably throw me across a room.”

“Yeah right.” Dodd started to pull away...and couldn't break Xander or Oz's grip. “Uh...”

“Take a walk.” Oz suggested.
Dodd nodded. “Right.”
Xander smirked and they released him. “Bye now.”

“Right.” Dodd started walking away, another team member, Gage, followed after him.

“You okay Jono?”

“Yeah...thanks for...stepping in...instead of Buffy.”

Xander put a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. “Been there, done that. It hurts the man-pride to get saved by a girl. Come on, we've got a fire and a blanket.”

xxx

“He seriously wants you to change Gage's grade?” Xander shook his head. “That's not fair; everyone else works hard for their grade, including those of us with D's.”

“That's the way high school works Xander. The jocks with the best skills get the perks.” Cordelia gave him a little smirk. “If you tried out for a team you'd be getting a few of them.”

He grimaced. “I'd rather be an outcast, besides, I like spending my free time with you, the pack, and keeping everyone alive.”

“And the sentiment is appreciated; especially the part where you said you liked spending time with me.” They shared a grin.

Willow smiled as well. “Also, we all know you're making B's and C's, so the offended act isn't really working.”

“It’s the principle of the thing Wills, and I really don't see what the big deal about the swim team is.”

“Gee Xander; tell us how you really feel.”

He eyed Cordelia when he said very simply. “They stink.”

Willow gave him a disapproving look. “Xander!”

He shook his head. “No, I mean they smell. All of them, and I'm not talkin' about chlorine.”

Both girls looked at him in confusion, and a bit of dawning realization, Willow actually stopped to ponder out loud. “Like Cancer? All of them?”
“I know cancer smell and that's not what they smell like.”

Cordelia made a disgusted face. “Cancer has a smell?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Huh. So that's why you don't like being around the team, because of their smell.” Willow murmured.

“Yep.”

Cordelia elbowed him a bit. “Why didn't you say so in the first place?”

He shrugged and smiled at her. “You wanted to bask in their victory for the school.”

“Oh...thanks.” She smiled back and linked arms with him.

“You think we should tell Buffy? Maybe before she and Cameron get too close?”

He nodded. “Sure. If she can pull herself away from his stinky swimliness.”

xxx

“So I'm thinking we need to teach Cameron a lesson...or at least throw Snyder off the roof.”

Xander blinked at Heidi in surprise, then checked to make sure no one heard that oh so casual comment. “Good morning to you too Heidi. Now you wanna clear up that little speech for me?”

Heidi’s eyes nearly spat fire. “This morning. Cameron drove Buffy to school. Then showed his true colors and tried to accost her.”

“I'm guessing he survived her retaliation since you want to teach him a lesson.”

Her smile was a touch feral and complemented her burning gaze. “Can I play with him a bit?”

“How badly did Buffy hurt him?”

“Hmm, broken nose and a sprained wrist, I think.”

He smirked. “And then Snyder took his side.” She nodded and he gave her knee a pat. “Don't do anything that would get you in trouble...or at least don't get caught doing it.”

“Thanks.” And then she was off again, off to implement whatever torture she had planned for the unsuspecting Cameron.

xxx

He was within sight of Snyder's office when Willow appeared and dragged him into a nook next to some lockers. He was so shocked by her suddenness that he went unresisting. “Hey Wills, what's the what?”

“You're hiding something.” She stated, folding her arms and blasting him with the full force of her resolve face.

He tried for calm, nonchalant and a dash of confused. “Huh?”

“Don't try and pull that 'Huh?' stuff with me mister. Jesse may have been able to read you better than
me, but I can tell when you're keeping a secret.” Her resolve face wavered and her lower lip started to stick out in a pout. “I just thought you'd have told me by now what was going on. You've never kept anything from me this long. It's been months Xander.”

Damn, it was happening...things were going to start falling apart...he was so not ready for this. “Willow...it's complicated...and could change a lot of things...and could hurt some people.”

Her eyes widened. “Does it have to do with Angel?”

He shook his head. “No...well...not directly. Can I...can we talk about it later, just us?”

Her lip was still in a pout, and her look was somewhat sullen. “I guess...why?”

“Our Snyder was giving Buffy a hard time after she busted Cameron's nose...after he tried to make some unwanted moves.”

Her stance changed, and a familiar protective air came over her. “You want some back up?”

He smiled at her, glad to be back in familiar territory with his best friend. “Nah, I can handle Snyder. You can keep the secretary busy while I bully though, if you want.”

“Sure, but we need to talk, soon.”

“Promise.” He held up his pinky, and she linked hers with it and they shook on it. “I won't need long. And this is better than what Heidi wanted to do.”

“Do I even wanna know?”

He grinned. “She wanted to throw him off the roof.”

xxx

Xander gave Willow thumbs up as he moved behind the secretary. She had the woman embroiled deeply in a conversation about class schedules and the substituting gig she was doing for Jenny's classes. She winked at him and he moved to the door of Snyder's office. He slipped inside, and locked the door behind him.

Snyder looked up, and his eyes grew wide. “Harris.”

Xander casually walked to one of the chairs in front of the desk and took a seat. He put his feet up on the corner, leaned back and gave Snyder a smile. “So Cameron is a jerk and you let him get away with it, simply because he's a super swimmer.”

“Ms. Summers--”

“Defended herself. I'll admit it was excessive but you need to stop watching her every move.”

“Now why would I do that?”

“She's a member of my pack.” He bared his teeth. “You remember my pack. Don't you Principal Snyder?” He flashed his eyes.

Snyder gulped. “You think you can get away with threatening me?”

“You think you can get away with pressuring Willow into changing grades for the swim team?”
“I never said--”

Xander laughed, cackled actually. Snyder's fear was...delicious...huh... “Keep in mind that our pack is keeping the vamp population under control. It would be bad if we decided not to patrol your street any more...now wouldn't it?

“What do you want Harris?”

“Leave. My. Pack. Alone.” He sneered. “I really can't say it any plainer than that.” Xander stood and leaned over the desk, looking down at Snyder. “Be careful going home tonight. There's a lot more out there than just vampires.” He stood straight again and left the office.

Snyder took a moment to get his breathing under control, and then he snatched the phone up, and nearly dropped the receiver twice while he dialed a very familiar number. It rang twice. “Sir? It’s Snyder. We may have a problem here at the school...Xander Harris...” His eyes widened. “But...what do you mean Diplomatic Immunity? How is that possible? No, I understand. Good day Mr. Mayor.” He hung up...and for a moment allowed his fear to overcome him.

xxx

“So Snyder and the coach totally take his side, and I'm treated like the bad guy, even though Cameron is a total jerk and Nurse Greenleigh totally didn't even say anything. And the coach even told me to dress more appropriately...Anyway Cameron gets away with it and I'm the one in trouble because he's on the Swim Team...and he's also sort of banged up. But it's so stupid that he's practically royalty just because...” Buffy halted her tirade and cleared her throat. “So...um.”

Xander smirked. “Relax Buff. Don't worry about Snyder; I've already had a talk with him.”

“You what?” Buffy gave him a horrified look.

Giles looked up from his research. “He's still terrified of you then?”

“Yes.”

Willow looked from Giles to him. “Huh?”

“Someone want to fill us in? Wills looks as lost as I feel.”

Giles stood, and smirked a little. “I caught Principle Snyder messing with the wards here in the library. Xander and the others merely assisted me in making it clear that the library was off limits to him.”

Buffy failed at her attempt to hide a smile. “When was this?”

“Right after Christmas break I think. This time I also reminded him that we don't have to patrol his street anymore. We could just let the monsters have him.”

“Neat. So, other than that, what have you guys been up to?”

Willow grinned at her. “You mean now that you've seen the error your ways and are anti-swim team once more?”

Buffy gave her a sheepish smile. “Yeah...sorry about that.”

“Yes well, now that our dose of teenage drama is out of the way. Dodd McCalvy is dead.”
“So that's what Coach Marin meant...he said that Cam was his best swimmer now, but he wouldn't say what had happened to Dodd...what happened to Dodd?”

“It wasn't pretty.” Willow grimaced.

“Quite. He was eviscerated, nothing left but skin and cartilage.”

“...something ate out his insides?”

“We don't know that for sure...I mean what self-respecting predator would want to eat something that smells as bad as a member of the swim team. If I was a demon I'd have better taste.”

That got him three awe-filled stares...and Buffy added a face of revulsion. “Ew, and very creepy.”

Willow looked a little green. “You did mention that this morning, that the whole team smelled bad to you.”

Buffy latched onto that. “What would cause that?”

Xander shrugged. “Dunno, but they're not sick.”

Giles looked thoughtful, even as he continued to peruse the books for demons that like to eviscerate. “Something in their blood perhaps?”

If possible Willow looked greener. “Like drugs?”

“This wouldn’t explain the skin being left behind thing.” Buffy pointed out, and then sighed. “I guess I'm joining the research party.”

“Maybe someone should snoop around in the team's personal belongings?”

Xander didn't even bother to look up from his book. “Not you Will.”

“And why not?”

“You won't know if someone is coming.”

She huffed. “I can kind of sense aura's now...if I concentrate.”

“Which you won't be able to do if you're being snoopy; also Oz might not appreciate you being in a boy’s locker room.”

Willow pouted. You get to have all the fun.”

“No I don’t.” He grinned. “I was gonna make Tor or Kyle go snoop.”

Buffy grinned back. “Isn't that an abuse of Alpha power?”

“I won't tell if you won't.”

xxx

He was using a lot of magic for being so new at it...Tor could see a lot of meditation in his near future...and possibly a scolding from Botan. However he was on a mission, and these two spells were really cool and he really wanted to try them out.

It was his first time using a glamour out in public, and it was a pretty good spell, even for a beginner.
It was very different from the glamour that Botan used when masquerading as his late sister Tonya, that glamour made her appear more human, blond hair, green eyes etc. What he had done was to hide from view, he wasn't necessarily invisible, but it was as close to invisibility as one could get. It made going around the locker room unnoticed a breeze.

The second spell was for the locks on the lockers. Unlike Xander, Tor didn't have a lock pick set, nor knew how to use one. Instead, magic was his key.

And so far he was finding nothing. Every locker he checked came up negative for drugs...well there were a couple of baggies of weed, but no steroids. He had just closed a locker when he heard voices close to the steam room entrance. Cameron and Coach Marin.

Tor smirked and tiptoed closer so that he could hear what was going on.

“My god. What happened to you?” Tor blinked at the coach's question...had something else happened to Cameron? He peeked around the lockers...and had to put his hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh. Cameron was blue, or rather had splotches of blue on him.

“Someone pranked me. It wouldn't come off in the shower.” Cameron grumbled.

“Looks like a hippie tried to tie-dye you. Go get some steam son.”

“Yes sir.” The towel clad swimmer did as told and opened the door to the steam room...and a wave of steam gushed out. As did the sickening smell that always seemed to follow the swim team members wherever they went.

The steroids were in the steam...holy crap. Wait till the others heard about this!

xxx

“Kazuma said you need to speak with me?”

Yusuke jumped a bit, nearly dropping his cigarette, the last thing he needed was Keiko finding out he was smoking. He put it out and tossed it over the balcony before facing Hiei, who was perched on the railing.

The small balcony of his apartment left them enough space without feeling crowded. “Was it hard, just watching over Yukina, never being able to be a part of her life?”

Hiei was silent for a moment, never looking away from the view of the neighborhood. “It was.”

“How come you're still sane?”

“What makes you think I am?”

“Point.” Yusuke sighed. “I just don't get the kid.”


“What do you mean?”

“You fight for the same reason Raizen did. For the thrill, for the fight itself. The need for battle runs in your blood.”

“Yeah? And? How is Xander different?”
“He doesn't. The boy fights to protect, not for the thrill...he feels the thrill, enjoys it even. But he fights to protect what is precious to him. Kazuma is the same way.”

Yusuke leaned against the railing beside Hiei. “They are a little alike aren't they? Too damn honorable for their own good.” He snorted. “Maybe that's why I'm so worried about him.”

Hiei smirked. “And you should be.” He moved to leave. “When Xander comes back I will train him some more.”

“Thanks Hiei.”

xxx

Xander checked Cordy's salad off his list and glanced at the growing pile of ill gotten goods. He still needed Willow's orange juice and Tor's milk, other than that he'd gotten everything. With a grin he made his way to a different refrigerator. Slaying was hard work, it was only right that the school donate snacks and meals to its protectors.

He had just opened the fridge and reached for a carton of milk when the kitchen door opened. There was no time to duck down and hide, so he waited to see who it was. It was Cameron. They stared at one another; Cameron seemed very surprised to see him there.

“Harris.”

Xander smirked. “Cam.”

Cameron sneered. “How'd you get in here? The door should be locked.”

“I don't see how I got in matters. You got in.”

“I have a key.”

Xander sneered back. “Just another swim team perk.”

“Jealous? Loser.”

“Hardly. I'm not the one who got beat up by a girl, or the one sporting the borderline smurf look.” He grinned as Cameron gaped at him, the blue splotches really added to his complexion. “I love it when you dumb jocks piss her off. Which reminds me.” Xander closed the fridge and started walking toward Cameron. “The next time you try to accost a girl, any girl, you and I are gonna have words, and then I'll let Heidi do what she wants with you. Next time Heidi will do a lot more than turn you blue.” By this time he was in Cam's personal space.

Cam gave him a smirky sort of smile, though he twitched a bit when he heard Heidi's name. “What? Is that supposed to scare me?”

Xander growled and let his eyes flash a bit. Cam stopped smiling. “Trust me Cam. If I was trying to scare you, you'd have wet yourself by now.” He bared his teeth and snapped them, making Cameron stumble back in surprise.

“What kind of freak are you Harris?” Was the tough guy's closing shot as he made a quick exit.

“Heh.” Satisfied with a job well done Xander started to turn back to the fridge...and then Cameron screamed. “Damn.” Xander spared a moment to sigh before running into the lunch room...only to stare in helpless shock.
Cameron was still screaming...but he was also shedding his skin. It was splitting and peeling off of him, like he no longer fit inside of it and was bursting out of it. Then the smell hit him, and Xander almost lost everything in his stomach. If he thought Cameron and the other guys stunk before, it was nothing to what was coming from him now.

Then Cameron's screams changed to inhuman howl's...and the last of his human skin fell away. It was then Xander realized that Dodd most likely hadn't been eaten. Instead he'd probably gone through the same change that Cameron had just gone through. Poor guy.

Then all sympathy went out the window when the fish monster, formerly known as Cameron Walker, tried to eat him. The creature dove at him, mouth open, and teeth ready to tear the flesh from him. Xander snarled and kicked it away, baring his own teeth in challenge.

It was enough. The thing shrieked and jumped through a window to escape him.

"Who's the freak loser now Cam?" He yelled after it, gesturing rudely at the departing figure. "Holy crap...I gotta tell Giles."

xxx

Tor, Cordy and Giles were the only ones in the library when he slammed through the doors.

"Good lord Xander, don't do that." Giles scolded him.

"Sorry. I was right. Dodd wasn't eaten."

The Watcher paused. "Oh?"

"Cameron just turned into Super Fish."

Cordelia blinked in confusion. "What are you talking about, and where are our snacks?"

"While I was raiding the kitchen Cameron came in...and we had a little heart to heart about how to treat women. I might have growled some and made glowy eyes at him...and then he stumbled into the lunch room...and started screaming. By the time I got to him he was half out of his skin and not happy about it...and stinkier than ever. So...what about you guys?"

Tor just sort of stared at him. "Whatever it is they're taking its in the steam. And that was a lot of babble; I didn't know you could go that long."

Xander looked over his shoulder, sensing Willow and Buffy come in the library behind him. "Hey Wills. Tor doubted my babble capabilities. Also Cam turned into a Fish Monster."

"Silly Tor...also...what?" Willow blinked at him. "What's going on?"

Buffy raised her hand. "I second that motion."

Giles sighed. "It would seem that, not only are the boys taking steroids, they're also turning into fish creatures." He straightened. "Hold on. If the drugs are in the steam...then Coach Marin and Nurse Greenleigh are responsible."

"That kind of tracks with what we found out." Buffy said.

Willow nodded. "Right, after Dodd, Cameron was the best swimmer, and after him Gage."

Cordelia shuddered. "So Gage is the next in line to join mutants are us club?"
Giles shook his head. “Not if we get a sample of the steam to the hospital's toxicology lab so that they can start working on an antidote.”

Xander grimaced. “Then we have a lot of work ahead of us.”

Tor raised his hand. “So...can we still have the snacks?”

xxx

“Dude, I can't believe this.”

“I know. How can they get away with this crap?”

“Come on Larry, help us out!”

“Sorry guys. I don't run this show. This is Harris' baby, and Red here is really handy with that tranq gun so I think you guys should just go along with this. Because if you get past her you have to deal with Kyle and the others.”

The boys of the swim team looked from Willow, who was standing at the ready with her handy-dandy tranquilizer gun, to Kyle, Rhonda, Tor, and Heidi...all armed with not-so lethal sports equipment. Well okay the baseball bat could be lethal, but not so much as a mace.

Xander smirked. “Believe me guys; you are going to thank us. Coach Marin and Nurse Greenleigh are already in police custody, and hopefully by this afternoon the hospital will be able to reverse the effects of that oh-so lovely monster making steam.”

It was Gage who asked. “What are you talking about Harris?”

“I'm saying that if you don't want to end up turning into creature features from the deep blue sea you need to relax and take your plasma transfusions like good little guppies.”

A few of them turned pale. One asked. “Is that what happened to Dodd and Cameron?”

“Yes.”

After that they were quiet, and very cooperative.

Heidi pouted. “That's it? They're gonna just go quietly? I don't get to break anyone.”

“Heidi.”

“But Alpha! They're jerks.”

He gave her a look. “Behave.”

Her pouting continued, but he got some curious looks from the swim team for the commanding tone he’d used.

xxx

They were sitting at a bench in the quad; various members of the pack were trying not to pout. Xander sighed. “I agree with Heidi. I can't believe how simple that was.”

Buffy smacked his arm. “Please don't jinx us.”
“But...”

Giles grimaced. “Let’s just be glad we found everyone and that the doctors at the hospital feel rather positive about the success of the plasma treatments.”

Cordy leaned into him with a miserable look on her pretty face. “Still, we’re never gonna win any sort of state championship at this rate. It almost makes me want to give up my pom poms, I have nothing left to cheer for.”

He grinned at her. “There’s always the Track team, and hey you can always cheer for us the next time we save the world.”

She poked him. “Not funny.”

Tor lifted his head from Buffy's lap. “So what do we do about Dodd and Cameron?”

Buffy pet his hair. “As much as Cam talked about the ocean I don’t think we have to worry about them hanging around.”

xxx

Xander was sitting on his back porch, in an old rocking chair, plate of food in his lap. Cordelia was sitting across from him on an old porch swing; her own plate of food in her grasp, Spike was sitting beside her, sampling his own meal.

“You made this?” Spike asked, after swallowing a bite.

“Yes. You like?”

“No bad. Dribble a little blood over it, be perfect.”

Xander blinked. “I should have thought about that. There’s some blood in the basement fridge.”

Spike stared at him. “You have some in your fridge.”

“Well I can’t keep it in the kitchen fridge, my mom is a nurse’s aide and would totally know what all the medical jargon on the bags would mean...so you like?”

“Yes Pet, it’s good.”

Xander grinned and Cordelia snickered. “You see now why I’m keeping him. He also does dishes, laundry and all kinds of housework. It’s too much hassle to find another fully domesticated seventeen year old boy.” She smiled at him to take any bite out of her words.

He rolled his eyes. “Thanks Cor. I love you too.” Though he smiled back at her.

Marshal chose that moment to hop into Spike's lap and flop over on his side. Spike barely moved his plate out of the way; he made a face at the cat. “I wouldn't say the boy is fully domesticated, the way he's always growling at every little thing. Want to tell me about that?”

“Hey yeah, I never actually heard the whole story about you and the others getting those Hyena Perks.”

Spike blinked. “Hyena?”

Xander grinned. “It started last year when we had that trip to the zoo.”
Chapter Notes

Ugh. @_@; And with this chapter this account is caught up to ff.net and twisting the hellmouth. ^^

Child of the Hellmouth
calikocat
My Girls
word count: 9514

XXX

“That's supposed to be masculine right?” Cordelia asked him as they went over one of the Spanish worksheets.

He glanced at the sentence. “Yeah...damn.”

“At least we're doing better.”

“Yeah. God I hate Spanish.”

“Xander.”

“What?”

“Your bag is beeping.” He blinked, she was right; there was a beeping coming from it. “Is it a bomb?”

“Nah, it’s my communicator.” He reached inside and pulled the compact out.

“And here I thought you were carrying makeup around.”

He snorted and flipped it open. Kurama appeared on the screen. “Hey Kurama.”

“Xander, is this a bad time?”

Xander gave a sort of apologetic smile. “Er...sort of. We're studying for a final.”

Cordelia blinked and moved so that she could see the screen, her chin resting on Xander's shoulder. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Kurama. “Hello.”

“Oh. Cordelia-san?”

Her voice was almost frosty. “Yes?”

“Forgive my intrusion, are you well?”

“Perfect.”
Xander started to sweat a bit and cleared his throat. “Was there something you needed?”

Kurama smiled sadly. “You might want to call Yusuke soon. He worries.”

“I'll do that. Thanks Kurama.”

“You're welcome. Take care.” The screen went blank.

He closed the compact and glanced at her. “What was that about Cordy?”

“I don't like boyfriend poachers.”

“But you like Spike.”

She smirked at him. “You and Spike and I go well together.”

Xander blinked. “Cor I love you, but sometimes your logic makes less sense than Spanish.”

xxx

“Are you sure Buffy is here?” Larry asked him as they walked through the cemetery hand in hand.

Kyle gave him a little smirk, even as he tilted his head and listened. “Oh yeah, she's here. She's wailing on some vamps up ahead.”

Larry looked ahead of them, listening carefully. “I can't hear anything.”

“You will.”

They walked a bit farther; the sounds of a battle were now within hearing range. Larry blinked at him in surprise. “Those hyena perks you have are pretty damn awesome.”

“They have their moments.” He tugged Larry along. “Come on.”

When they finally saw her, Buffy was indeed wailing on some vampires, in fact it looked like they weren't even trying to fight back. Larry nudged him. “Is that one unconscious? He's not moving.”

“Could be, she's been kind of testy lately.”

Buffy still hadn't acknowledged them, she was too into the fight, one sided as it was. “Tell Angel I'm tired of waiting. I'm taking the fight to him.” She hit him again, and then dusted him.

Kyle rolled his eyes, but kept their distance, it wouldn't do to sneak up on her. “You realize they can't deliver a message if you dust them. Right Larry—Larry!” With only that as a warning Kyle darted around his boyfriend and staked the vampire that had tried to sneak up on them. “You okay?”

Larry blinked, slightly wide-eyed and pale. “Yeah, thanks.”

“Welcome.”

“Hey guys.” Buffy gave them a little wave, then staked the unconscious vampire laying on the ground. “Where's Xander?”

Kyle shrugged. “With Cordy, where else? They're hitting the books; he said they'd do a sweep later tonight.”

She blinked. “Is there a new demon? Oh wait finals.”
“Yeah.”

She sighed and slipped her stake back up her sleeve. “We should probably do that too...hit the books. I have a French final tomorrow.”

“I can help you with that.” Larry offered, she gave him a confused face. “Oh, I'm in the French club.”

“Wow. Neat. Let's go then. We're book bound.”

xxx

His eyes snapped open. The lighting in the room was wrong; sunlight should be pouring in through the eastern window of his room. Xander sat up, blinking, and looked around. The heck?

A door opened and Cordelia came out, her hair damp from the shower, towel wrapped around her. It was a very short towel, a towel he could approve of. “Morning.”

He blinked at her, forcing his eyes away from her legs. “Uh...”

“Don't worry; Gweny is making coffee, and breakfast.”

“Uh...did we...”

She smiled at him, well it was more of a smirk really, and then she leaned down and kissed him. “If we did, you would remember.”

He smiled back at her and kissed her again. “So...oh...damn. Finals start today.” He gave her a hopeful look. “Did we get any studying done?”

“Well, let's hope something stuck.” He looked around her room. “Do I have clothes here?”

“Yes.”

“When did that happen?”

She grinned. “After your mom gave you the box of condoms.”

xxx

Willow nearly ran into Rhonda as she exited the library, text books under her arm. “Oh hey. Did you need something?”

Rhonda steadied them both. “Just looking for Book Man. Everyone else is busy and I needed someone to go over my study sheet with me.”

“Oh, Giles got a call early this morning from the curator of the museum.”

Rhonda shifted, as if going into alert mode. “Another mummy?”

She smiled and gave Rhonda a comforting pat on her arm. “Nope, some sort of relic or something was found by the construction company that's building those new apartments.”

Rhonda relaxed, almost instantly. “Huh.”
“But I have some time before class, so I could help you...if you wanted.”

“Cool. I'm pretty sure I know what I'm doing, just wanted a double check.”

Willow took a step back and backed into the library. “Come on, let’s look over those notes.”

xxx

Kyle took his usual seat beside Xander, who spared him a glance and a nod before trying to become one with his notes once more. However his last moments of study were not meant to be.

Kyle shifted and focused his attention on Xander. “So I called your house last night to see how patrol went...and your mom said you didn't come home.”

Xander shrugged, vainly trying to concentrate on his notes. “Fell asleep at Cordy's.”

“Really.”

Xander lifted his head and let his gaze fall heavy on his beta. “Any more questions Kyle?”

Kyle grinned, uncowed and unrepentant. “Nope.”

Xander snorted. “So how’d patrol go?”

“Couple of vamps in a routine sweep. Larry staked his first one. We met up with Summers. She got two, I got one. Then we went to her house for a couple of hours to hit the books. You?”

Xander shrugged, and closed his notebook; obviously he wasn't going to be looking at it anymore before the final. “One vamp, one demon, the demon was Clem so we hung out for a bit.” He gazed at Kyle for a moment. “I'm glad you're getting Larry some slaying experience, since he's in the know it’s better for him to be prepared. But Heidi and Rhonda aren't taking their boyfriends on patrol are they?”

Kyle smirked. “Nah. Rhonda's got Owen cured of his danger fetish, and Ben has no idea about our night life.” He blinked. “You didn't ask about Tor's girl.”

“Teresa? I don't think she wants to take part in our extracurricular activities. She's just happy knowing enough to stay safe.”

They both shifted, coming to attention when their teacher walked in the classroom, stack of finals in her hand. Kyle put his books away and grabbed a pencil. “Ready?”

“Ugh, no.” He gave a heavy sigh and did the same. “I hate finals week.”

xxx

Five of them were sitting at a table in the cafeteria. Willow was happily perched in Oz's lap, Buffy was sitting in her own chair beside them, and Cordelia was sitting beside him. Xander sat with his head laying heavily on the table's surface.

“I don't know if I'll survive finals week. I mean I only had the one today...but it pretty much fried my brain.”

Cordelia gave his shoulder a comforting pat. “Poor baby, but you know, when we studied last night you knew most of the material.”
He caught her hand with his and pressed a thankful kiss to her knuckles. “Cordy, sweetheart. I don’t even remember what final I just took.”

That got a round of giggles from the girls, and a mild smile from Oz. Kyle sat down on Buffy’s other side. Willow gave him a wave and Kyle waved back. “It was Spanish.” He supplied helpfully, obviously referring to their conversation.

Xander let his head hit the table top again. “Oh god.”

Cordelia rolled her eyes, her hand still in his. “You did fine. Your B-C average will remain intact.”

Willow wrinkled her nose, as if trying to puzzle something out. “How come you picked up Japanese so easily and Spanish gives you so much trouble?”

He shrugged, not bothering to sit up, and ignored Kyle’s smirk. “Kind of hard not to pick it up when everyone around you is speaking the language, and my sister-in-law is brilliant and helped me out.”

“How is she by the way?” Cordelia asked. “Its Keiko right?”

He nodded, finally raising his head again. “I haven’t heard recently. I figure things are stressful enough without me calling and bugging.”

Buffy frowned. “Something wrong?” Kyle used the distraction to steal one of her fish sticks.

“Huh? Oh, no. She's expecting...you know...a baby.” He grinned. “I'm gonna be an uncle.”

Willow perked up. “Really?”

Buffy showed a bit of excitement as well, a spark coming into her eye that he hadn't seen in a while. “Have you gotten her anything?” She smacked Kyle when he tried to steal a second fish stick, Kyle pouted.

He blinked, distracted by Kyle's antics. “Uh...”

Cordelia saved him. “I've already been shopping. I'll send the presents with him when he goes back to Tokyo this summer. Unless of course I go with him.”

“Huh?”

She smiled at him. “Gotta keep Kurama from getting his claws back into you.”

Oz raised a hand. “I think I missed some part of this conversation.”

Willow snuggled into him a bit, while handing Kyle a slice of apple. “Kurama is one of Yusuke's friends, and he and Xander dated some.”

“Yusuke?”

Buffy nodded. “Xander's brother.”

Oz was putting the pieces together. “Who lives in Tokyo.”

“Yep, half brother.” Xander confirmed. “Good old Tony Harris slept around, before and after marriage. He was in the Navy before he married Mom and was stationed in Tokyo.”

“Ah.”
Buffy moved her tray further away from Kyle, but did hand him a roll. “Speaking of Tokyo and trips there, how about you Will? Are you going to go hang with Kagome this summer for some miko training?”

Willow huffed. “My parents are being difficult, but I think I've just about got them talked into it.” She smiled. “In the meantime Kagome has been translating some scrolls to help me with my training. Now, are we on for our study date after school? Chemistry waits for no one.”

Buffy nodded. “We'll rock it.”

Cordelia grinned. “Wow Willow, you're really getting into this teacher gig. First filling in for Jenny and now tutoring.”

Xander snorted. “Willow's been tutoring since elementary school. Otherwise Jesse and I would have flunked out.”

“It's not that they were bad students precisely.” Willow added. “The teachers just had trouble explaining a lot of things to two little boys who were constantly on sugar highs.”

“You were the one always bringing brownies.” They grinned at one another.

“But yeah, I really like teaching. I might even make a career of it.”

Cordy nodded. “It’s good to think ahead. Most of the class doesn't even think about life after high school.”

“Some of us do.” Kyle added.

“Yes.” Xander smirked. “Kyle's thinking about being a Spanish teacher, or a magazine editor.”

Buffy nearly slumped in her seat. “Meanwhile the rest of us are lost.”

He rolled his eyes. “Don't say that Buff, you have plenty of time to decide what you want to do.”

Willow patted her hand. “You just haven't found what you're looking for yet.”

Xander straightened and looked up. Snyder was across the room and coming toward their table. Kyle noticed his change in body-language and became alert, glaring at the troll as he approached.

Snyder sneered at Xander and pointed to his hand that was still clasped with Cordelia's. “What's this? Hand holding? This isn't a picnic people, and you!” He glared at Willow who immediately slipped from Oz's lap to her own chair. “These displays of affection have no place in my school!”

Cordelia tried to slip her hand from his but he squeezed it gently, even as he glared at Snyder. “Principle Snyder. Is there something you wanted? Besides taking your uber repressed teenage angst out on us?” He smiled and bared his teeth, his eyes flickering. Kyle did the same, growling as he bared his own pearly whites. Oz even shifted to look at the little man, his eyes turning solid black.

Snyder gulped at the new development and backed away before turning tail and not quite running away. Kyle snickered. “I love doing that.”

Willow slipped back into Oz's lap. “Oz?”

Xander smiled a reassuring smile at his newest pack member. “Easy Oz, the danger is past. Take a deep breath, let it out slow.”
He did and his eyes cleared. “Thanks.”

Xander nodded. “You should probably have Willow help you meditate.”

“Will do.”

“You know.” Buffy started. “That was the most fun I've had today.”

Cordelia laughed. “Amen sister.”

xxx

Spike watched them in mild amusement. Sometimes Angel was just so damn gullible, it was fun to watch Dru lead him on a bit.

Angel circled around her, all curious eyes and eager steps, like a demonic spaniel. “Did you have a vision?”

“Hmm.” She smiled prettily at him...funny; it no longer even stirred his own demon when his sire acted like this anymore. Not when he had two other brunettes that were very much interested in him.

“Is something coming?” Angel whispered against her ear.

“Yes.” She hissed back. “Something so terrible, it whispers Daddy. My Angel, it whispers so many wonderful and dreadful things.”

“Where is it? This terrible and wonderful thing?”

God it was like a crappy American soap opera, their antics nearly made his stomach roll.

“The museum.” She giggled. “There's a stone, a tomb. With a pressie inside.”

“Really?” Angel asked, a look of wonder on his face. “You can see all that in your pretty head.”

Spike snorted. “No you ninny, she read it in the morning paper.”

Angel gave him a put-upon look, like it was his fault Angel had been led on, and snatched the paper from him. His eyes lit up like a demented two-year old on Christmas Morn when he saw the picture of the tomb. “Oh yeah.”

“That's it. That's what I've been hearing. Isn't it pretty?”

“Oh yeah.”

Spike felt a chill go through him. Angel and Drusilla both had that suicidal-apocalypse gleam in their eyes. He only hoped he'd be of some use to Xander and Cordelia. The last thing he wanted was the world to end or those two beautiful brunettes to end up dead.

xxx

Cordelia's hand tightened on his sleeve as he stared in shock at Buffy and Willow. The others were in much the same state. He swallowed. “You found what now?”

To her credit, Buffy looked a little shell-shocked herself. “The curse, for Angel's soul.”

Willow was almost jittery in excitement. “Jenny was able to translate the curse, the one that her
ancestors used to restore his soul.”

Giles looked like he was having trouble breathing. “She...she said it couldn't be done, that those magics were lost.”

Buffy handed him the translated pages. “She didn't give up.”

Kyle's shock had worn off some, as he growled a bit. “And now she's in a coma.”

Buffy nodded. “I know.”

Cordelia tugged on his sleeve. “This...this is good though, right? We...well not me obviously, I don't have mojo powers, but he can be cursed again, right?”

Giles looked over the spell. “Perhaps, but something like this is very dark...and very much beyond my capabilities. None of us are well versed in the darker magics.”

Xander cleared his throat. “There is someone.” That got several stares. “Amy.”

“That is true...but this is...” Giles seemed to search for an answer. “Very, very dark Xander.”

He shrugged. “Amy is already delving into the dark stuff, and to be honest I don't want Willow to corrupt her miko powers. And Tor is just starting to use magic.”

Giles nodded, though it was a reluctant nod. “I hate to agree, but Ms. Madison does seem to be the most experienced witch we know.”

Xander leveled his gaze on Buffy. “What do you want to do?”

She bit her lip. “I don't know.”

“We're actually considering this?” Kyle asked.

Giles gave a sigh and slipped his glasses off. “It was what Jenny wanted.” He looked thoughtful. “She'd been working on a project, but didn't want to discuss it with me until she had something concrete. This must have been the project.”

There was silence for a moment, and then Buffy seemed to hug herself, as if she were cold. “I need to think.”

Xander nodded, and gave her what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “Okay.”

xxx

He held Cordelia's hand in his as they walked through Sunnydale. Luckily there was little to no activity as his heart just wasn't in it.

“You've been really quiet tonight.” She stated, sidling closer to him.

“Yeah.”

She tried again. “What do you think? About recursing Angel?”

“Truth?”

“Why else would I ask?”
He sighed. “Part of me wants him out of the way so he’ll stop hurting her.”

“And?”

“And part of me is wracked with guilt for keeping so many secrets.”

There was a moment of silence, and then she squeezed his hand, gently. “Kyle seems against it.”

“Kyle doesn’t like it that I let my guilt influence my decisions. Pack safety should come first.”

Cordelia changed their course. “Come on; let’s go see Spike before we meet up with Rhonda for our study date. That will cheer you up.”

He smirked. “You just want to get Spike kisses...and watch me get Spike kisses.”

She flashed a mischievous grin at him. “Duh.”

xxx

They were a few blocks from the mansion when Xander stopped and lifted his head to scent the air. Leather and tobacco, hint of smoke. Spike.

“What is it?”

He gave her hand a squeeze and smiled. “Hey Spike.”

The vampire slipped into view, a smirk on his face. “Your sense of smell is better than a vampire's whelp.”

Cordelia approached Spike, not bothering to release Xander's hand, merely tugging him along with her. When they reached him she pressed her lips to his in greeting. Spike tugged her closer to him and deepened the kiss gaining entry to her mouth and caressing her tongue before pulling away and smirking. “Good evening to you too Miss Chase.”

Xander smirked at them, then eeped a bit as they both pulled him toward Spike and the next thing he knew Spike's tongue was in his mouth. Spike tasted like he always did, which was divine, but there was a hint of Cordy there too, the tastes complimented one another nicely. And just knowing that Cordy would taste like Spike made his head swim.

“Some night we seriously need to lock ourselves in a room with a do not disturb sign on the door because we are hot.”

Cordelia's comment had him breaking the kiss and gazing at her, Spike nibbled at his jaw. “That would be...” Xander swallowed as his imagination dived into the gutter.

Spike chuckled. “A lot of fun.”

Xander nodded in agreement. “So what are your plans for the night?” He batted his lashes playfully.

“Tempting Pet, either of you would be enough to tempt a Saint; together you could bring the world to its knees.”

“Of course.” Cordelia grinned as she snuggled closer to Spike.

Xander pouted. “But?”
“Angel and Dru are out on an errand.” A shadow passed over Spike's face. “They're up to something again, something big.”

Cordelia shifted a bit and looked up as Spike, a worried expression in her hazel eyes. “How big?”

He ran a cool hand through her hair. “Bigger than the Judge.”

Xander let out a sigh and let his head thunk gently onto Spike's shoulder. “Oh for the love of Twinkies. Seriously?”

“Unfortunately.” Spike grimaced. “They're getting the main ingredient for their little apocalypse now. However Angel doesn't know much about magic or rituals, should take him a while to figure out how it works. Bloke's bloody insane and not thinking too clearly.”

“So we've got a little time, small relief I guess.” Cordy shivered. “The Judge was bad enough though. Xander was out of it for a long time; he had a fever, chills, and nightmares. It was horrible.”

Spike gave him a look and he shrugged. “It's of the past. This thing, that's worse. What's it called?”

“Acathla.”

Cordelia didn't bother pulling into the drive; instead she stopped her car on the street in front of his house. “You want to call Giles now? About Acathla?”

“I'll call from inside. Its late and you need to go home.” He smiled. “Sorry we couldn't study.”

“That's okay, we'll manage somehow.” She smiled back and leaned toward him for a kiss; he accepted it and cupped her cheek in a caress. Their lips moved slowly, not having a reason to rush the goodnight kiss, they'd already had their fill of frenzied kisses before, with, and after Spike. When she pulled away there was a pink tinge to her cheeks that he could just see in the dim light.

He smiled at her. “Good night Cordy.” He pressed his lips to hers again, chastely, and pulled back. “See you in the morning.”

“Want a ride to school?”

“Sure. Thanks.” There was another chaste kiss before he got out of her car. He waved as she pulled away and drove off.

About time.

Xander looked toward the front porch and rolled his eyes before walking toward Marshal. “And what were you doing while I was out patrolling? Catching catnip mice?”

Marshall's glare turned into a wide eyed look. Watch out!

The spirit beast needn't have warned him. He'd already sensed the vampires, and the first was dusted the moment it was within reach of his ever present stake. Another tried to grab him from behind but Xander slammed his head into its face, forcing it to let go of him. It scattered to the ground like the first once his stake slammed home. The third was hindered by Marshal, who had launched himself onto its back, carrying enough force to knock it to its knees, and then the vamp grabbed him and flung him away.

“Marshal! Get out of here! Get Botan!” There was a squealing of tires, and someone, most likely a
bad guy hit him on the back of the head. Shit...there was just too many of them. Then the world went black.

Marshal landed on his feet, looking back at the chaos, Xander was already unconscious and the vamps were shoving him into the trunk of an old car. There was no way he could take on the remaining vamps by himself. Marshal snarled and his eyes glowed an eerie green as he began to run. *Botan better be home.* As he ran he let out a series of yips, putting a bit of power into each one, letting that power carry the sound to the ears of those who needed to hear him.

It worked.

By the time he threw himself onto Botan's front porch the Feral Four were already there, all of them breathing heavy, having ditched their patrol routes to answer the call. Botan knelt down and scooped him up. “Marshal?”

*Vampires took Xander, they were Angel's.*

Wicked snarls filled the air around them, accompanied by four sets of glowing green eyes. Botan held up a hand as if to calm them down. “Where would they take him?”

*The Crawford Mansion.*

She nodded. “Let me make a call.”

xxx

Spike and Drusilla were in the main room with the statue of Acathla when Angel came in, two lackeys following behind him carrying a bound and shirtless Xander. An unconscious Xander from the look of it. Spike stared at the scene, waiting for the punchline, hoping that it would start making some sort of sense. Why the hell would Angel bring the boy here as a sacrifice? Bloody hell, had he found out?

Drusilla let out a low, but alarmed moan. “You brought the Prince?” She bit her lip, a hopeful gleam entering her eyes. “Is he to watch the show?”

Angel smiled cruelly as the lackeys dumped the boy to the floor. “Hardly. He's one of the ingredients.”

Dru gasped. “That's...bad. Bad Daddy! Killing the little Prince will anger the King. He will find us, even in hell.” Spike stared at her, nothing was making any sense.

Angel smirked. “Let the King come.”

“Oh Daddy.” She started to sway a bit, and Spike wasn't sure if was due to worry or excitement...it was hard to tell sometimes.

Angel moved toward the boy, pulled a leg back to kick him, and Xander moved, rolled really and managed to get to his feet. Though his wrists were still bound behind him. Angel merely grinned. “I thought you were awake.”

Beautiful brown eyes smoldered in hatred at the older vampire. “So...” The casual tone did nothing to lighten the glare. “What's going on? Usually you bug Buffy not me.”
Angel moved a bit closer in an attempt to cup the boys face, Xander of course stayed out of reach. “I wanted something special for Acathla's coming out party.”

“Acatthla?” Xander's eyes darted toward the statue. “Eww. So what? I'm some sort of gift? I've been reduced to a party favor?”

Angel sneered. “No boy. You're the key to ending this world.”

Drusilla tittered nervously, and Spike had to agree with the sentiment. Angel was bloody off his rocker. Xander just cocked his head to the side and said; “How do you figure that?” Boy had stones, more than he had sense really.

“I thought maybe a virgin would do the trick.”

Xander actually had the nerve snicker. “Then you've got the wrong guy.”

Spike blinked...when had that happened? Angel merely continued in a conversational tone. “Right, you had that orgy.”

Now he had to say something to that, he raised a brow and smirked at Xander. “Really now?”

Xander shrugged as much as his bounds would allow. “Eh, it was a thing. It was better than letting a bunch of hyena kids terrorize the populace.”

Drusilla move forward and leaned on his chair a bit. “You're Laughing Dogs are ferocious.”

“Focus Dru.” Angel snapped his fingers to get their attention. “Back on topic. Since you're not a virgin, you're still the next best thing. I figure Demon Kin like you will be the perfect offering.”

Xander blinked. “Huh?”

Dru's voice was a bit husky now. “We're going to change things.”

Xander shook his head and looked at Spike, as if asking for clarification. Spike snorted. “They're talking about sucking the world into hell.”

Angel practically skipped a step. “Not just any hell. A demon dimension.” He batted his lashes at the boy. “Be just like going home for you.”

Xander had the gall to roll his eyes. “You do realize that Makai isn't a hell dimension...and that the demons who live there are as varied as humans. Also there's no barrier separating that realm from this one anymore. It was taken down a few years ago.”

Angel paused, as if shocked, Spike knew he was. Xander had ties to the Makai? Bloody hell. Angel got over his shock quickly though. “Doesn't matter. I'm still using your blood.”

Spike wheeled forward a bit, he had to do something. “The boy is Demon Kin and you're going to sacrifice him? And not just any bloody demons, but Makai demons! You know what those things are capable of?” Angel just grinned as he picked up a knife, motioning the lackeys to take hold of the boy again.

“Tell me if it hurts White Knight.” Angel chuckled as he approached a now struggling Xander.

Spike rolled his chair forward again, but Drusilla stopped him and held firm. “Dru.” He whispered. “Please.”
She shushed him. “Your boy is strong William. He'll not die from this.” She moved her hands to his shoulders and held him in place. “Watch.”

Xander continued to struggle and growl, right up until Angel drew the knife back and plunged it into his stomach. His growl turned into a scream as the blade was twisted and then pulled back out. The lackeys dropped him and he curled up into a ball, shielding the wound as best he could.

Spike started to move again, this time he tried to stand, Drusilla had already forgotten him, watching Angel walk towards Acathla. Xander met his eyes and shook his head and mouthed two words to him. ’Not safe.’ He glared at the boy; if something wasn't done he'd bloody bleed out.

But Xander's eyes held and they were steady. Finally Spike sighed and nodded before they both turned to watch Angel...to witness the end, both glad that their girl wasn’t here to see it.

Angel approached Acathla, Xander's blood dripping from his hand. “Bear witness as I ascend. As I become everything that I am. Everything that I have done has led me here. I have strayed. I have been lost. But Acathla redeems me. With this act we will be free.” His hand touched the sword and he pulled. The sword did not move, though there was a flash of white light from the blade. Acathla's eyes blinked and their gaze roved around the room, skipping over Angel to land on Xander before glowing green. Another flash from the sword sent Angel flying backwards a good twenty feet.

Spike watched, with a bit of amusement. “Well. That made my night.”

Xander cackled weakly from the floor, it sounded a bit hysterical. Angel scrambled to his feet. “Dammit!” He stomped toward a still snickering Xander, probably to kick the poor boy.

Drusilla cried out. “It’s opening...a portal.” Everyone froze and looked at Acathla, who remained dormant. Dru tsked at them. “Not his, not ours.”

Angel glared at her. “What are you--”

A bloody portal opened right beside the bastard and a chit with blue hair stepped out of it. She held a jeweled staff in her hands and knocked Angel away from her with very little effort. Four other figures slipped from the portal after her, all of them teens, Xander's age. Spike recognized Kyle. It seemed the rescue party had arrived, and none too soon. The children scooped Xander up and dragged him through the portal.

Angel was still lying on the floor, twitching a bit, but otherwise not moving. He put a cigarette to his lips and lit it, somehow keeping his hands steady. “You sure the boy is Demon Kin? Because that didn't look like a demon to me.”

Drusilla sort of hummed and giggled. “What a pretty fairy.”

Angel just growled...and twitched some more. Spike snorted and hoped that Dru was right, that Xander wouldn't die.

xxx

Cordelia paced from room to room of Tor and Botan's home. No one else was there; the house had been empty since she'd gotten there. Granted she hadn't been there long as she'd driven as fast as she could since Rhonda had called her cell phone and told her what had happened.
God! What if Angel had found out about Spike helping them? What would he do to Xander? Or Spike? She paced some more, a flash of light in the kitchen sent her running toward the room, a mace in her hand.

“Easy Cordy.” Rhonda motioned to the weapon. “Just us.”

Cordelia put the mace on the counter as Kyle and Tor placed a bleeding Xander on the kitchen table. “Oh god.” She was across the room before she even realized she was moving, putting her hands on his face. He was unconscious. “What happened?”

Botan placed one of her hands over the wound on Xander's stomach. “Looks like he was stabbed. Tor, take my hand.” She held up her hand Tor gasped it. “Now put your other hand on the wound. We're going to heal him as much as we can.” Tor nodded and began to concentrate; the hands they kept on the wound began to glow in soft white light. Tor's hair changed from blond to light blue, with a few darker blue strands here and there...and his eyes became the same shade of pink as Botan's.

Cordelia however didn't care about any of that. All she wanted was for Xander to open his eyes let her know he was okay, that he was going to make it. She kept her hands on his face, smoothing his hair away from his forehead, noticing for the first time how long it was starting to get. “Xander?”

His lashes fluttered and she pressed a kiss to each eyelid. His lips twitched, either in a grimace or a smile, it was hard to tell. More hands became visible as Kyle, Rhonda and Heidi each touched his arms or chest in a show of support. All of them shivered as Botan pulled a little bit of energy from each of them and gave it to Xander.

Brown eyes opened and Xander blinked rapidly. “Ow.”

Cordelia snorted and slapped his forehead gently. “Quit scaring me like that you jerk.”

“Sorry.” He shuddered. “Wake me when the pain stops.” And he passed out again.

“Botan?”

“It's okay Cordelia. We're almost done. He'll be fine in a few hours...a little tender but he'll be fine.”

They all let out a sigh of relief.

xxx

“This is the second time I've had to help you hobble around school.” Cordelia griped, as she kept an arm around his waist to help him.

He rolled his eyes. “Sorry for getting kidnapped and stuck with a big knife.” Xander didn't really need her support; he was healed enough to walk on his own...though he wouldn't be doing any running for a few days. Botan and Tor had done wonders for his injury, his stomach was still tender, but he was in no danger of dying. Still, Cordelia was being extra touchy feely after the close call...her helping him was more for her own peace of mind and he let her do what she wanted.

The library was all but empty when they finally got there...except for Giles and Kendra. Cordelia tensed just a bit, probably because of his one night with the foreign Slayer. He hugged her closer and pulled her along with him. Giles stared at them in worry, and Kendra gave him a brief nod, her eyes flicking to Cordelia in understanding.

“What happened?”
They made their way to the table and he settled himself in a chair, Cordelia sat in his lap. “Angel's lackeys grabbed me last night.”

“What on earth for?”

“I asked him the same thing. Crazy guy decided my blood was the key to ending the world. He wanted to use my blood to open a portal to a hell dimension by offering it to this big stone demon called Acathla.”

Giles slipped his glasses from his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I suppose this would be why your watcher sent you Kendra.”

“It sounds about right.”

“It’s good to see you Kendra.”

She nodded at him. “You too Xander.” A light blush flushed her cheeks. “I am glad you are happy. You are happy?”

He grinned. “Very.” The tension drained from Cordelia at his words.

Giles slipped his glasses back on, his face filled with concern. “How did you escape?”

“Marshal witnessed the snatching of me and went to Botan.”

“And she saved you? How?”

Xander shrugged. “How else? A portal, probably the most awesome rescue ever.”

“Try scariest moment of my life ever.” Cordelia scowled at him. “You lost a lot of blood.”

“But I can make more...especially if you feed me.”

“Heavens, he bit you?”

“Now that would have been the scariest thing in my life if he had. Yuck, Angel's mouth anywhere near me. Eww.” Xander shuddered. “I'm almost glad that he stabbed me instead...granted I'd have rather not gotten stabbed at all.”

“Should you be here?” Kendra asked. “Since you're injured.”

“Botan and Tor healed me, I'll be okay.” He gave a heartfelt sigh. “I guess we can't put it off any longer.”

Kendra gave him a confused look. “Can't put what off?”

Cordelia leaned against him in shared misery and they moaned together. “Finals.”

xxx

Xander was halfway through the test, and he felt pretty good about it, he knew the material thanks to all the study sessions. He had just turned a page when a woman started speaking. The heck? They were supposed to be quiet during...

“Holy crap!”
The woman...female vampire burst into flames as she spoke and gave Buffy, who just happened to be beside him, Angel's warning. When she poofed, there was an overwhelming silence. Then he turned to Buffy.

“He really knows how to personalize an invitation...which cemetery do you think he meant?” Buffy glared at him, Cordelia just at the corner of his vision didn't look amused either. “What? It’s a legitimate question!”

xxx

They were all gathered in the library, even Amy since she was the only witch they knew. Most of them were sitting, though everyone had been on edge since Angel's flame-o-gram that day, even now Buffy paced along the upper level in front of Giles.

“She said more would die, I have to go.”

Kendra placed a sword on the table; one that her watcher had sent with her...it was their ace in the hole against Acathla. She stared up at Buffy and Xander watched the byplay. “You should not go alone.”

Buffy shook her head. “It would be better if I did. I'll need you here in case...in case I can't stop him.” She took a breath and focused her gaze on Amy. “Amy, do you really think you can do this?”

Amy looked up from the curse, her teeth worried at her bottom lip, but she nodded. “I think so...I'll do my best.”

“Thank you. Now as long as I keep Angel busy he can't suck the world into hell.”

Kyle snorted. “Not for lack of trying.”

Xander glared at his beta. “Kyle.”

Kyle flicked his eyes to Xander's before looking away again. “She should know.”

Buffy leaned on the banister, her hands clenched tightly on the wood. “Know what?”

Xander sighed. “He did the ritual last night.”

Willow blinked. “How do you know that?”

“He used my blood.”

Buffy's eyes widened. “What?”

Xander held up a hand to calm them. “Obviously it didn't work.”

Willow was glaring at him now. “I thought something was wrong. You were moving really slow today.”

Buffy made her way down the steps, her hands fidgeting, as if she wanted to reach out to him, but not sure if she should. “Xander.”

“His guys jumped me before I got in the house. I managed to call the pack to me before they knocked me out.”

Giles looked thoughtful, though he knew the truth. “And they tracked you, like they did before,
when all of you were possessed.”

Breathing a sigh of relief Xander nodded. “Yeah.”

Kyle however was still sitting tense. “We were lucky to get him out.”

Buffy stopped and knelt in front of him. “What did he do to you?”

“Not much-”

“Truth Xan.”

He huffed. “Knife to the stomach. It’s mostly healed.” She reached for his shirt and he lifted it up for her to see. “Gotta love those hyena perks...Tor helped too.”

She touched the new and tender pink scar on his stomach and grimaced. “Kendra should definitely stay here then since you’re hurt.”

He grabbed her hand and held it in his, pulling his shirt back down. “Buff...you know it’s some sort of trap.”

She smiled sadly at him. “Yeah, but our pack is bigger now. We stand a chance.”

He pulled her toward him and kissed her forehead. “Be careful sister-mine.”

She wrapped her arms around him, careful not to crush him. “I will.”

When he released her Kendra stepped forward and helped her up. “Here. In case it is your only option.” She held out a uniquely carved stake and offered it to Buffy. “This is my lucky stake...I call it Mr. Pointy.”

Buffy blinked. “Really?” But she smiled and accepted the offer. “We have got to get you a stuffed animal.”

Kendra smiled. “Watch your back.”

xxx

“We’ll have to take wards down.” Giles murmured as he looked over the notes Jenny had made about the curse.

Xander nearly shot up and out of his chair. “How about no.”

“Do you lot recall the young man who performed the love spell?” Giles asked, as if Xander hadn’t spoken.

Amy wrinkled her nose at the memory. “Andrew Wells.”

Kyle looked up from the knife he was sharpening. “What about him?”

Xander sighed, and it wasn't a happy gesture. “I get it. His spell couldn’t go through our wards, so for Amy’s mojo to work its gotta be able to get past the library.”

“Precisely. We don't want any interference.”

Cordelia seemed to share Xander's opinion. “Do we really?”
“I like the wards.” Willow added.

Amy raised her hand to get their attention. “Uh...guys. This is my first gypsy curse. The last thing I want is it to blow up when it hits your wards. Magical backfire can get messy.”

Xander grimaced and stood. “Right then. Everybody needs to be armed. Kyle, get the weapons passed out. Everyone gets a stake and I mean everyone.”

Kyle stood as well, putting away his tools before heading towards the weapon cabinet in the book cage. “Daggers too?”

“Whatever you're comfortable with. Wills you and Cordy help Amy get set up.” He sighed; he was probably going to regret this. “I'll take the wards down.” No one said anything as he headed toward one of the paper talismans. He reached for it...and removed it. The circuit was broken...and the magic dissipated.

“Did you learn about these from the miko who trains Willow?”

Xander turned to face Kendra. “Yeah, after a kitsune gave me a few pointers.”

“Xander.”

He held up a hand. “I'm dating Cordelia. I'm pretty sure I love her.”

She smiled and nodded. “I understand, but I...what we did...it was nice.”

“It was, and I hope you find someone that completes you.”

Kendra ducked her head in a pleased sort of embarrassment. “I suppose Willow is also dating?”

“Yep. His name is Oz. He's a werewolf.”

“I remember him. He was the one who saved her from the assassin.” Her eyes turned thoughtful. “Your pack is very accepting.” He just smiled at her. Finally she nodded at him, as if coming to a decision. “I'll follow your orders as if they were my Watcher's.”

That...was probably the greatest honor she could have given him. “I want you and Kyle by the main doors.” She nodded and drifted off, collecting Kyle as she headed toward their post.

He took a breath and took his place overlooking the main table. Kyle and Kendra stood guard by the main entry, he with a spear and Kendra with a stake. Rhonda and Heidi moved passed him toward the back door and the hidden entrance. He wasn't sure where Heidi had found a saber, but Rhonda was handling her mace with confidence. Tor positioned himself at a window, to keep watch, a short sword clutched in his hand.

Cordy was beside Amy and Willow at the table, in one hand she held the burning incense, in the other a stake. Willow's stake was stuck in her back pocket, in her arms a book of Latin. Amy sat on the table, Jenny's translation in her grasp.

Giles was standing guard like him, a crossbow armed and ready in his hands. They shared a look and Xander nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Amy nodded back and looked to Willow. Willow gulped and spoke. “Quod perditum est, invenietar.” Cordelia swirled the incense.

He watched the smoke as Amy began. “Not dead nor not of the living. Spirits of the interregnum I
call...” Xander blocked out the rest, and for a moment a feeling of unease settled over him. Something...something was wrong and he really wished he'd called Botan before giving the girls the go-ahead and rushing into this.

He shook off the feeling and focused on Amy again. “Let him know the pain of humanity, gods. Reach your wizened hands to me. Give me the sword...”

He felt it then, several vampires were approaching. Rhonda's voice rang out in a chorus of yips of warning as the vampires burst through the back door and overtook her position. Heidi's howl joined the fray, but it was one of victory, probably meant there was one less vampire to deal with. But they were still under attack and that was not a good thing.

The racket distracted Kendra, who was unused to fighting with a group, especially their pack. In hindsight he really should have taken her hunting with the pack the last time she'd been in town, but it was too late and now vamps were coming in through the main doors. The bloodsuckers got some cheap shots in, Giles shot one before it managed to snap Kyle's neck, it screamed, clutching at the bolt sticking out of his eye socket. Damn G-man had good aim.

“Damn. I was aiming for the heart.” Giles muttered oh so casually as he reloaded, though there was a satisfied smirk on his face.

Kyle let out a whooping battle cry as he threw himself at the vampires that surrounded Kendra. He managed to get to her, placing his back to hers so they couldn't sneak behind her again. Kendra managed to go with the flow, and moved as though having Kyle at her back was an everyday occurrence.

Giles had to dodge suddenly when a vamp tried to make a grab for him, luckily Tor had moved from the window and tackled it to the ground. The distraction allowed Willow and Cordelia to drag Amy away from the table in the hope of finding a safe way out.

Xander moved forward, intent on providing that safety. It was hard, making that choice as he kept the vampires off their backs as they ran for it. Heidi was down, hopefully just unconscious but there was no time to check. He could see Rhonda in the fray, still fighting; Giles went down, the now one-eyed vamp dragging him to the floor.

Tor came out of nowhere, and zapped the vamp...with fire? That was new...and the vampire lit up like a Christmas tree soaked in gasoline and then was gone. The other vamps converged on Tor, now considered the bigger threat. He went down fast, evidently tapped from his use of magic. Shit.

He pushed Cordelia further ahead and yelled at the girls. “Run and don't stop!” And then he went back, throwing himself onto the mob that had downed Tor. He sent them flying, managing to stake one...but another hit him in the stomach...in the very place Angel had stabbed him the night before.

Xander saw stars, but gritted his teeth through the pain and knocked it away from him. Then he grabbed Tor by the arm and tried to drag him away, a scream from the upper level distracted him and he gaped in horror as the stacks fell domino style. He wasn't sure which girl was trapped under the bookcases, but whoever it was Rhonda was crawling towards the pale arm he could see under a pile of books.

He swallowed his fear and grief and looked toward where Kyle and Kendra were still fighting. Kyle could barely keep up with the slayer as she danced around her opponents; his movements were more like a wild animal's more feral than graceful.

“Tor, can you move?”
Tor blinked at him, his eyes not quite focused, but he nodded and used Xander to climb to his feet. “I can make it.”

“Good, Get Rhonda and Heidi out. I'll get Giles.” Tor nodded again and headed toward the upper level, his steps shaky and a bit wobbly. Xander made his way toward Giles, his own breath coming in gasps as pain lanced through his stomach. He’d just made it to the man's side when Drusilla made her entrance. “Oh shit.”

Giles struggled to sit up. “What?”

“We're gonna die.”

“Glad we had this chat Xander.” Then he caught sight of the vampiress. “Blast.”

Drusilla moved towards Kendra, and the other vampires switched their focus to Kyle. That...that was not a good thing. Drusilla was old, a master...and crazy. He made a move towards Kendra and Drusilla, at the corner of his vision he saw Kyle go down with a blow to the head.

He almost made it to Kendra's side just inches away from tackling Drusilla, but the group that had taken out Kyle converged on him. Xander snarled, and struggled at the hands that held him back. He bit and kicked at them, only able to watch helplessly as Drusilla be-spelled the young slayer. The last thing he saw before his world went black was blood dripping down Kendra's throat.

xxx

Footsteps.

His eyes didn’t want to work quite yet...but he could hear just fine...and he couldn't sense the vampires anymore. He breathed in, catching familiar scents...Giles' was faint, Kyle was close...Kendra's blood was the heaviest smell. Oh god Kendra. Xander opened his eyes, everything was blurry, but he could just make out Buffy in her flashy blue coat kneeling beside Kendra's body.

More footsteps...and Xander's blood ran cold when someone appeared behind Buffy in a dark colored uniform...gun cocked and ready. Figures his eyes would start working right when someone decided to aim a gun at his friend...and since when do the cops show up on time?

“Freeze! Put your hands up and back away from the girl...slowly.” The first cop looked like he was about to go into hysterics, his eyes wide and wild from the state of the room. Wonderful.

Another officer entered the room behind the first as Buffy stood up and backed away from Kendra's body...and right past the dead girl's soul as it stood staring down at her corpse. Oh god. Kendra was crying as she stared at herself. He wondered if there were therapists in Reikai, because Kendra was gonna need one. The second cop checked Kendra for a pulse and shook her head.

“This one's dead.”

Buffy gulped. “I didn't do anything. I just got here.”

Both ignored her and the one with the gun pointed at Buffy grimaced but nodded his head in Xander's direction. “That one keeps twitching, better check on him.”

“Xander!” She took a step toward him.

“Don't.” The cop kept his gun on her. “Come with me.”
Xander started to sit up. “Buffy.”

She shook her head as she allowed the first cop to lead her away, her hands behind her back. “I'll be okay Xander.”

“Buffy!”

The woman officer tried to shh him. “You're fine, she can't hurt you now.”

He shrugged her off. “You don't understand. She just got here.”

“Shh, we'll figure this out. I need to check on your friends.” She left him where he was, using her radio to call for paramedics.

Stupid woman. He crawled to the nearest bookcase and used it to pull himself up. By the time he was steady on his feet there was a commotion in the hallway...and then the sound of someone running.

“Stop!” And then a gun went off.

Xander froze for a second; the sound sent an unfamiliar fear through him. When the second shot went off he moved, faster than he thought possible, the edges of his vision tinged with an all too familiar green. He ignored the pain and ran into the hall.

“What are you doing? She didn't do anything!” He skidded to a stop in front of the cop that had shot at Buffy.

Snyder stood to the side, a smirk on his face. “Harris. Another trouble maker.”

Xander whirled on him, eyes glowing and slammed Snyder into the lockers. He moved in close and whispered in the little man's ear. “You remember the guy who scared you last year? The one who made his finger glow with unidentified power? That guy could destroy this school with one attack. And he happens to be my older brother...and a demon king. You keep your mouth shut.”

Snyder paled and swallowed. “You're...”

“Demon Kin and my pack is badly injured. You say one word against Buffy in this and I will eat your heart and use your head for a doorstep. Got it?”

“Got it.”

The first cop had finally holstered his gun. “Is there a problem?”

Xander turned on him. “Yeah. You shoot at another unarmed and terrified teenager again and I will slap you with a law suit so fast your grandkids will be paying for our retirement funds. Buffy just got here, she's innocent you cops don't speak to any of us minors without a parent or lawyer present.”

Leaving the shocked adults behind him he stalked back into the library, glaring and growling at the woman officer, who at least looked ashamed now as she hurried past him.

Kendra was still there. His face softened and he touched her shoulder. “Hey.”

She blinked, surprised at the touch. “Xander...you...how can you...” She swallowed. “I'm dead.”

“Just a little talent of mine.” He blinked away the tears. “I'll keep you company until Botan comes to take you.”
“Botan? The one who saved you last night?”

“She's a spirit guide assigned to the Hellmouth. She’ll take you to be judged. Don't worry. I know the guy doing the judging. I'll make sure she puts in a good word for you.”

She gave him a small smile. “Why would you?”

“Cause you're one of my girls.”

XXX
Well...he'd screwed up royally. How did he know how badly he'd screwed up? Simple. When Botan had showed up to collect Kendra's soul she had practically vibrated with energy and anger. But she never said a word to him, wouldn't even make eye contact. She simply whisked Kendra away to Rekai...he'd barely been able to hug the slayer goodbye.

It figures he would have the Spirit Realm's top Grim Reaper pissed at him, that's just the kind of day it was turning out to be.

Now, though, Xander was standing guard in the hospital hallway. He'd done his duty to Kendra, now he had to concentrate, on the friends that could still be helped. He'd made sure, thanks to his in with the nurses that his people were still together, that way he could guard all the rooms at once. Except for Jenny's but her room was warded up tight.

The one who was in the worst condition, aside from Amy who was in a coma, was Kyle. He'd taken a bad beating. The doctors had spouted a bunch of medical jargon when they thought no one was listening, luckily he had Willow to translate. Kyle had some cracked ribs and internal bleeding, which required emergency surgery. That was two hours ago, now he was in recovery, Larry hadn't left his side. Again he was glad for all his past visits to the hospital, if not for the nurses; there was no way Larry would be able to be with Kyle. They were lucky...Kyle was lucky...the bleeding hadn't been as bad as the doctors feared.

Tor was still unconscious and relatively unhurt, but the doctors couldn't figure out why he wouldn't wake up. He didn't have a bump on his head and only had minor bruising, the medical experts were baffled. Xander figured Tor was just exhausted from using so much magic...heck he didn't even know Tor could do that.

And Amy...he hoped she came out of her coma. The doctors were hopeful, but since Jenny still hadn't woken up from hers...he wasn't sure what to think.

Rhonda and Heidi's injuries were minimal, Willow didn't have a scratch on her...and Cordelia had a slight limp from nearly twisting her ankle during their mad dash of an escape. They were all okay...the only one unaccounted for, other than Buffy...was Giles. He hadn't seen him since he'd regained consciousness; it left him with a bad feeling. So bad that he'd sent Cordelia and Rhonda to the Watcher's apartment to look for him.

Willow stepped into his vision and he blinked...she wasn't alone. Botan was with her, wearing her guise as Tonya, Tor's late sister. Willow eyed Botan, her eyes focused, as if trying to see past Botan's glamour...maybe she could.

Xander cleared his throat and met the Spirit Guide's eyes. “I think Tor is okay, just tired. He used a bunch of magic...magic I'd never seen him use before.” Botan's eyes softened, their current green color, the same as Tor's.
She stepped toward him with a sigh and ruffled his hair. “I'm not mad. Just scared.” She gave him a small smile and headed toward Tor's room, leaving him alone with Willow.

“I think we need to have that talk now.”

He nodded. “Heidi.”

Heidi slipped into view; she'd been just out of sight in Amy's room. “Alpha?”

“Keep watch for a while?”

She nodded and took over his post in the hallway, giving Willow a poke in the stomach as she passed her. “Go easy on him, the guilt's been messing with him bad.” Willow frowned.

xxx

He took a breath, he really wasn't ready for this, but as they walked down the hall he realized he couldn't put it off any more. “I can't tell you everything. The stuff going on with Tor and his sister is something that we'll need permission to talk about.”

Willow gave a prim little snort. “You mean like how Tor seems to have uber magic now and his sister doesn't feel human to me?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, we'll leave that for later. Now. What's going on with you?”

“Love...I think. It makes you do crazy stuff. Like consort with the enemy.”

Her eyes widened a bit at his admission. “Well I know you'd never do love stuff with Angel, you hate him too much. So that leaves Drusilla...or Spike?” She gaped when he blushed and ducked his head a bit. “Oh. Wow...Does Cordelia know? If she does why are you still in one piece?”

“Yeah she knows, and I'm in one piece because she evidently likes to watch...and she likes Spike kisses just as much as I do.”

It was kind of fun watching Willow's mind go to a happy sort of place while she imagined the three of them doing who knows what...the glazed eyes and tint of blush was a nice touch. “Wow.” She shook the dazed thoughts away and tried to glare at him. “How long?”

He did his best not to pout, he really did. “Spike is a sneaky evil vampire...he stole my first kiss just before Buffy and Cordelia nearly got sacrificed by the evil frat boys.”

Willow bit her lip. “Do you love him?”

“I had nightmares Will. The entire time I thought he was dead, after I thought Buffy killed him at the church.” He swallowed. “Jesse was in most of them...in one he drained Spike right in front of me.”

“But do you love him?”

He met her eyes. “I think so...I cooked for him...he's the only reason Kyle and I got away from the Judge. He warned us about Angel going after Jenny.”

Willow gaped at him in surprise. “He's been spying for you.”

“Yeah.”
“Xander. He chose you...you and Cordy over his clan. That's a pretty big deal among the older vamps...according to Giles’ books anyway.” She narrowed her eyes a bit. “But...that doesn't make it okay.”

“I know.”

She took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “But if you love him, then maybe there's something there worth getting to know.”

He pulled her into a hug and clung to his oldest friend, burying his face in her hair as he let a single sob out. “Thank you.” She clutched him back.

“What are friends for? You can tell me the rest later.”

xxx

They were walking back when they saw Buffy sneak in. She was dressed all in black, complete with a hat pulled over her hair. It almost made her more noticeable, but he kept his thoughts to himself. Willow reached her first, and hugged her, Buffy returned the embrace and he simply wrapped his arms around both of them when he joined them. Just in time to keep Buffy shielded from two police officers as they walked by.

After they passed Buffy pulled back a bit. “What's the sitch?”

Willow simply tugged on her hands. “Come with us.”

xxx

Larry was waiting for them with Cordelia, Rhonda and Heidi outside the rooms. Xander looked at Larry first. “Any change?”

“Kyle woke up for a few minutes; the doctors say he'll be fine.”

Buffy nodded at Larry in thanks. “What about Tor and Amy?”

Heidi motioned toward the rooms. “Tor is sleeping. Amy is still in a coma.”

Xander looked to Cordelia and Rhonda. “Any sign of Giles?”

Cordelia shook her head. “We checked all over the school, his apartment, nothing...except...”

“Except what?”

“There was this guy hanging out in his apartment with really bad fashion sense. We knocked him out and brought him here.”

Buffy tried to hide a smile. “Where is he now?”

Rhonda smirked. “We left him in the trunk, but he might not be there now...he didn't smell human.” She looked thoughtful. “Or like any kind of demon we've ever met.”

xxx

Rhonda was right; their mystery guy was in the wind. The trunk was open when they got to the car, but there was always a chance he was still in the area. After all he had head injury, how far could he have gotten? They split up to look for the mystery non-human guy Buffy headed out into the night,
managing to blend rather well with the shadows in hope of catching a break. Willow and Cordelia took over guard duty in the hallway, while Rhonda and Heidi prowled over the hospital grounds.

Xander ended up at a nurses' station instead of joining the search, because evidently he had a phone call...which had never happened before. He accepted the phone from one of the nurses. “Hello?”

“‘Lo pet.” A shiver went through him. He’d never heard Spike over the phone before...it was interesting.

“What's up?”

There was an exhalation and Xander could just picture the smoke that would be coming from Spike's mouth. “Your pack, they okay?

“Little banged up. Kendra is dead.”

“The other slayer.”

“Yeah.”

“She was a friend of yours love?”

“Kendra was good people.”

Another exhalation, this one more of a sigh. “Sorry. If I'd known...”

“Where are you?”

“Payphone.” There was a chuckle. “I'm about to meet up with your slayer and make a deal.”

“What!” Xander felt what was probably panic seize his heart.

“This has gone on long enough Xander. Angelus and Drusilla may really succeed this time. They've got the Watcher.”

Xander closed his eyes, his fear for Giles growing. “I was afraid of that...” He gulped as he put the pieces together. “You're gonna get make the deal to save Giles, and get Dru out of the way while Buffy fights Angel. Aren't you?

“Think she'll go for it?”

“Only one way to find out.”

“...are you...in one piece?”

Xander let out a little laugh, it was better than crying. “Little achy.”

“Cordelia?”

“She's fine.”

“Right. Well then...I guess I better go talk to the slayer.”

“Okay...Spike...can you...keep Angel from killing Giles?” His voice wobbled a bit. “He's...the closest thing most of us have to a Dad.”

“I'll do my best love, that's a promise...I won't be able to save him from the torture though.”
“I'll take what I can get.”

xxx

Cordelia pulled into the Summers' driveway next to Joyce's car. Lights were on the first floor...someone was home. Cordelia peered at the house, reaching for his hand. “Think he's really here?”

“Yeah.”

She closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. “This is about to get really bad. Isn't it?”

“Probably.”

She squeezed his hand, but he wasn't sure either of them were comforted by the gesture. “Let’s go.”

The front door was unlocked, and they could hear voices in the living-room, Buffy, Joyce and Spike.

Joyce was sitting on the couch with a cup of...something and looking sort of shell shocked. That wasn't good. Buffy was standing in front of Spike, arms folded over her chest. “Alright. Talk.”

Before Spike could say anything they entered the room, hand in hand, Spike's eyes widened in surprise. Xander cleared his throat. “Buffy.”

Buffy turned to look at them. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Back up, if you need it. Also Giles is gonna need a hospital and Cordy drives pretty damn fast. What's the plan?”

Buffy snorted. “Spike wants to help. Hard as that is to believe.”

Spike gave a small shake of his head, Xander ignored it. “He's on the level Buff.”

Buffy stared at him. “What?”

“He's been keeping me informed on Angel’s actions. He's the only reason we got to Jenny as fast as we did.”

Buffy's stare had changed a glare, her eyes flicked back and forth from him to Spike. “Why?”

“You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

Buffy stalked toward him...and he shoved Cordy behind him...just in case. Spike twitched in their direction, going so far as to take a worried step toward them. Buffy's glare was almost murderous by now, a rage slowly building in her eyes. “You're still keeping secrets from the pack.”

He closed his eyes and couldn't stop his voice from breaking at his admission. “And hating every second of it.”

She halted her progression toward him, head cocked to one side as she studied him. “We are going to have a long talk after this is all over.”

“I know.”

Cordelia peeked around him at Buffy and spoke with as much authority as she could, which was a lot actually. “Can we do the angst stuff later? We have a Dad to save.” Xander looked over his
shoulder at her, and Buffy blinked, he was sure they both looked rather shocked. Joyce even shifted to stare. Cordelia frowned at their reactions. “What? Giles is like a Dad to me too. Have you met my parents? Half the time they don’t even remember my name.”

Buffy managed the smallest of smiles. “Right. Back to business.” She turned back to Spike. “What’s the deal?”

Spike gave Xander and Cordelia a look before focusing on Buffy. “Simple enough. I get Drusilla out of your way and you let us leave town. Angel faces your wrath.”

“No deal. Drusilla killed Kendra.”

“And I’m sorry for that, but like I told you before I wasn't in on that raiding party. Angel might not care what I do, but Dru keeps me out of the loop more and more.”

“Poor Spike, it’s not my fault your girl can't keep her hands off of Angel.”

Joyce grabbed on to the conversation with shaky words. “So you didn't kill that girl?”

Buffy blinked in disbelief at her mom. “No...I'd never kill a human...or a neutral.”

“Neutral?”

“It’s a long story Mom.”

“Did she explode like that man?”

Xander and Cordelia exchanged a look, and he asked. “Vampire?”

Spike nodded. “One of Angel's boys.”

Cordelia sighed, if a little dramatically. “This just gets better and better.”

Buffy ignored their byplay and tried to explain things to her mom. “Kendra was a slayer.”

“Like you...have you tried not being a slayer?”

Spike rolled his eyes and pulled Buffy to the side, away from a still confused Joyce. Xander whispered to Cordelia. “This is going pear shaped.”

She nodded and whispered back. “Explosion of the mom variety eminent.”

“Yes.”

Spike huffed in impatience. “Me and Dru for your Watcher and Angel. We leave town, and you don't see the pair of us again.”

Buffy finally nodded. “Fine, get back to the mansion and make sure Giles is still alive.” Spike moved away from her and headed toward the door. “Go with him since you're so chummy. Wait for me there.” She glared at Spike. “Giles dies, she dies.”

Spike nodded and stepped out the door. Cordelia and Xander exchanged another look and followed him out. The three of them climbed into Cordelia's car, Spike settled in the back seat.

“I was going to keep the two of you out of it.”
Xander leaned back, a weak smile on his face. “I know, but its better this way.”

The sarcasm came through loud and clear in Cordelia's voice. “Yeah, cause now you have an excuse to stop all the secrets at once.”

He winced and tugged gently at her hair. “Just drive Cor.”

She glared at him. “I told you I'm not going anywhere. I made my choice Xander. Besides, you need me; I'm starting to think you both do.”

Spike muttered a protest and Xander merely laughed. “Thanks.”

xxx

Heidi stepped out into the hall and motioned to Willow. “Amy's awake.”

“Stay here?” Willow asked, glancing at Rhonda beside her.

“Sure.”

“Thanks.” Willow stood and followed Heidi into Amy's room. Amy was sitting up in her bed, a bandage on her head from where the bookshelves had toppled over on her. “Hey Amy.”

“Hey...what hit me?”

“A bookshelf.”

“Oh...that's why it hurts.”

Heidi snorted. “Crazy head injury girl wants to try the curse again.”

“I'm not crazy, and I can do it.”

Willow moved closer and put her hand on Amy's shoulder. “I don't know Amy.”

“Come on Willow, I have to try...for all our sakes.”

Willow bit her lip, not sure what the best course of action would be...she really wished Xander or Buffy were there.

“Willow?” Heidi snapped her fingers to get her attention.

“What?”

“You're in charge.”

“Huh?”

Heidi rolled her eyes. “That's the way the pack works. Harris and Summers are our alphas...well Cordelia is sort of an alpha. You and Kyle are betas. Kyle is out of commission. The alphas aren't here. You're in charge.”

“Oh, thanks. No pressure here.” She took a breath and thought for a few moments. “Okay. Oz is in the cafeteria. Go get him and the two of you go back to the school. Get what Amy needs, and watch out for Snyder, go in the back way.”

Heidi nodded. “On it.” She slipped out; Willow heard her murmur an update to Rhonda before she
Willow sighed and sat heavily in the chair beside Amy's bed. “I hope we're doing the right thing.”

Amy reached for her hand and they clasped one another in comfort and determination. “We can't just sit here and let the world end.”

Willow nodded. “No...you're right about that at.”

Angel paced in front of Giles, who wasn't looking too good at this point, though he was still conscious. “Just tell me what I need to know, and I'll make the pain go away.”

Giles managed to raise his head up and meet Angel's eyes. “If you want to be worthy of Acathla, you must perform the ritual in a pink bunny suit. And don't forget the carrot; you'll need it to gouge out your eyes. Pillock.”

“Someone get me the chainsaw! I think it’s in the tool shed.”

Spike wheeled himself into the room; he gave Giles the barest of nods, before tutting at his grandsire. “Now, now. Let's not lose our tempers, you used to have much more patience than this. What happened to our boy eh? There was a time you could torture a bloke for days. Lost your touch?”

“Keep out of this.”

“Look, you hack him up with the chainsaw you'll never get what you want.”

Angel looked at him curiously, as if trying to see through his words for an ulterior motive. “Since when are you so cool and collected.”

“Since you lost your marbles. Besides, I like the carpet in this room, and the lackeys aren't good at housekeeping, you never did turn the ones with half a thought.”

“Spike.”

“And you're bloody forgetting about the easiest option.”

“Which is?”

Spike smirked...and really hoped this worked. “Dru? Sweetheart?”

Drusilla drifted into the room. “Hmm?”

“Feeling playful?”

Heidi and Oz made it inside the library without running into anyone. The police had been nowhere in sight...no surprise there. However the lack of Snyder made them nervous so they hurried to gather the orb, herbs, and incantations before he decided to pop in.

The approach of footsteps from the hallway outside the main entrance startled them and sent them scurrying for cover in the stacks. The two of them crouched down side by side, taking reassurance in one another. They heard someone enter the library, and dared to peek from their hiding spot. Buffy was at the table. Oz nearly stood to greet her...but Heidi put a hand on his arm, making him hold his
position. Snyder had entered the library and approached Buffy with a smirk on his face.

“They say criminals always return to the scene of their crime.”

Buffy lifted a duffel bag from the floor and peeked inside before she even acknowledged Snyder. “You know I'm innocent, the police will figure that out.”

“Maybe, but our boys and girls in blue on the SDPD aren't the best or brightest. But that's neither here nor there. You, Ms. Summers, are too dangerous to have at this school.” He smiled. “I've been waiting to say this ever since I took this job. Buffy Summers, you're expelled.”

Buffy merely pulled out the sword Kendra had brought with her. The one that had been blessed by the knight who first defeated Acathla. She faced him, and he gulped. “You were the joke of your class in high school weren't you? You were the super loser who never got a date.”

“Your point?”

Buffy didn't say anything else; she simply walked past him and out the library doors. Heidi and Oz exchanged grins...which were dashed when Snyder smirked and dialed a number in the cordless phone he held. They watched in curiosity.

“Its Snyder...would you tell the Mayor that I have good news.”

Heidi and Oz blinked in shock, jaws dropped...well Heidi's dropped, Oz just let out the barest hint of a 'huh'. He then tugged her along with him toward the back exit. When they were safe in the hall Heidi was shaking her head.

Oz nodded in agreement. “That was enlightening.”

She snorted. “In a terrifying way.”

xxx

Giles blinked in disbelief, his arms twitching against his bindings. She was right there, right in front of him. He hadn't held her in so long, and his arms ached to pull her closer to him. Jenny smiled at him, even as she used a handkerchief to sooth away his aches. Her touch was perfect, just as he remembered it. “Jenny. You're awake. Thank god. I was afraid you never would.” He leaned his cheek into her soft hand. “I've missed you.”

She smiled at him beautifully. “I don't remember much about what happened...or what's happening now. Do you know how to stop him?”

“Yes. We, we need to get Angel away from Acathla. We need to get out of here.”

“Shh. It’s okay. Just tell me what to do. Tell me how I can help, then we can be together finally.”

He frowned at that. “We need to get him away from it.”

Her eyes fluttered. “Angel himself...Angel is the key.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. “I've waited so long for this.”

His frown deepened and he pulled back from her. “His blood...but you would know that if you'd put your mind to it.” He closed his eyes in pain. “You're not Jenny are you?”

Her eyes widened and Jenny disappeared, morphed really, back into Drusilla. “How did you know?”
“Jenny and I have been together. Bloody hell.”

Angel snickered. “I didn’t think the two of you got that far. Go Giles.” He sighed in appreciation. “Thanks Dru. I really should have guessed that. You too Spike...Spike?”

Spike was staring at Giles. “Sorry. Just a little shocked. No one's ever seen through Dru's spell before.”

“Huh...oh well. Kill him.”

“Wait, Watcher is a clever one. Like I said no one's ever done that before...and he could always be lying.”

“Right. Good thinking.”

xxx

They waited for Buffy two blocks from the Crawford mansion. When she caught up with them Cordelia asked the question that they had both been wondering about.

“Did anyone ever find the bad fashion sense guy?”

Buffy nodded as they walked beside her. “Yeah. His name is Whistler. He's a balance demon. We had words. I know how to use the sword.”

“Okay. Let’s rescue Giles.”

“We are not okay.” Buffy sent a brief glare at him.

“I got that.”

They snuck into the mansion just as Angel started his incantation.

“Acathla...Mandatussum...pro te necave. Sanguinem meum...prote effundam...quo me digum...esse demonstratem.

xxx

Amy sat up in her hospital bed, her tray table in front of her for an alter. Heidi held the incense, the end lit, smoke trailing up into the air around them. Oz held the book of Latin, an unsure look on his face. Willow stood at the foot of the bed.

“Ready?”

Amy nodded. “It’s now or never.”

xxx

Sneaking up on the vamps was almost too easy. Drusilla handed Angel a knife and he approached the statue. “You will be free, as we all will.”

Buffy chose that moment to decapitate one of the lackeys. Angel gave a sigh as he and Drusilla turned to stare at her, he hadn't seen Xander or Cordelia yet. Buffy held the sword tightly. “Hello lover.”

“I don't have time for this.”
“Make time. This is all you have left.”

He smiled at her. You think you can take us all on? What kind of gamble are you making kiddo?”

Another lackey dusted and Cordelia lowered her crossbow. “I love this thing.”

They stepped out and Xander waved at Angel. “I'd say she's making a pretty good one.” He grinned as Spike rose from the wheelchair and brained Angel with the nearest object at hand...a fire iron. Heh.

They scattered. Buffy taking out lackeys left and right while he and Cordelia made a beeline for the curtained off area where Giles would be. It was good to have inside information. Speaking of which...Xander made a quick detour and tripped Drusilla so she sprawled over Spike instead of landing on him in a tackle. He wasn't sure how much difference it would make, but he was feeling vindictive, not only had she killed Kendra, but she'd hurt Spike. He was petty, so there.

What he didn't see, was Spike and Drusilla rise to face one another.

“You're not my Spike anymore.”

He snarled at her. “Whose fault is that?” She lunged at his throat, nails and teeth bared; he was ready for her and knocked her to the floor. “I'll never be your Spike again.”

xxx

Amy cast the stones, Heidi waved the incense, and Oz read the Latin out loud. “Quad perditum est, invenietur.”

Amy nodded. “Not dead...nor not of the living. Spirits of the interregnum I call.

xxx

Cordelia pulled back the curtain. “Giles!”

Xander kept a look out, even as he helped her untie the ropes that kept Giles bound to his chair. “Time to wake up.”

Giles shook his head in denial. “You're not real. It's a trick. Drusilla got inside my head.”

“Easy G-Man.”

Giles looked up at him, his gaze tired and defeated. “She made me see what I wanted...Jenny.”

He smiled at the older man. “You know she's still in a coma. Come on Giles, focus. We need to get you out of here.”

“Xander?”

“You were expecting someone else?”

They managed to get Giles out; the mayhem going on was the perfect distraction. Giles went into the back seat of Cordelia's car easily.

Cordelia slipped behind the wheel and looked to him for instruction. “Xander?”

He nodded. “Let’s go. I have a feeling.”
Botan could feel all sorts of magic in the air. Just in the next room the witch Amy was trying that godforsaken gypsy curse, and miles away she could feel Acathla humming in anticipation.

But she couldn't do anything about it...all she could do was hold her little brother's hand while he slept off his exhaustion. Even if she was allowed to interfere, she was almost tapped out herself. She'd slipped into Kyle's room earlier to heal him...and she'd healed Xander the night before. Unfortunately healing never was her best subject and it always took a lot out of her, it was far more complex than say, throwing lightning bolts.

The world wasn't scheduled to end that night, and she knew that. However Hellmouths were tricky environments and sometimes the schedule got thrown out the window. All she could do now...was pray.

Amy was starting to weaken, she knew it, and so did Willow, but still she tried her best to cheer the other girl on. “Come on Amy, you can do it.”

Amy gritted her teeth and continued. “Gods, bind him, cast his heart from the...evil...realm.

Angel placed his bloody hand on the hilt of the sword that was set in Acathla...there was a flash of light...and he pulled it from the stone. He looked at Buffy and smirked.

“Hurry Cordy.”

“What's the rush? Not like the world could end or anything.”

She cut off an ambulance and parked her car at the emergency entrance. “Thank god. How do you ride with her every day?” Giles asked.

They bailed out and dragged him from the back seat. “I keep my eyes closed and go to a happy place.”

“Hey!”

“No time Cor.” He picked Giles up and shoved the man at the irate EMTs that came out of the ambulance they'd cut off. “Here. We just rescued our Dad from a gang on PCP. Please help him!”

The EMTs didn't question him and carried Giles inside. Xander grabbed Cordelia's hand and all but dragged her to Amy's room. They burst through the door just as Amy grabbed Willow...both girls began speaking Latin fluently...like something had taken hold of them.

“Oh god.”

“Te implor, Doamne, nu ignora aceasta rugaminte.”

Oz gulped and looked over at them. “Is that supposed to happen?”

Heidi took a step back. “I don't think so.”
Xander didn't dare try to drag Willow away from Amy...there was no telling what would happen if he tried to break the connection. “Shit.”

xxx

Spike stared at them as they fought. It was brutal, beautiful...deadly. Angel was playing for keeps. He knew how important the slayer was to Xander...but if he interfered now...he'd probably end up in pieces...then dusted.

He shuddered and prayed for a good outcome as he carried Drusilla out, he had a deal to keep. The sooner he got Dru away from the Hellmouth the sooner he could come back on his own. After all, he'd only promised the pair of them would stay away.

Angel had knocked her sword away, and now he was stalking toward her, grinning like a loon. “Poor thing.”

xxx

Xander and Cordelia made their way to the roof of the hospital, sides aching and breath coming in gasps. She clung to him in confusion. “Why are we up here?”

“A long shot. Something I want to try.” He took a few breaths...and then threw his head back and howled...long, loud, hard. He called the pack with all that he had.

Xxx

Kyle's eyes snapped open. “Larry.”

“I'm here.”

“The window...open it.”

Larry did as he boyfriend said and caught Kyle as he ripped his IV out and stumbled to the open window...and howled.

xxx

Rhonda and Heidi yanked the nearest window open, and practically climbed out of it to answer the call, howling for all they were worth into the night sky.

xxx

Tor, still unconscious, answered the call anyway. Botan could see his spirit rise, in the smoky from of a hyena as it dashed out the window. Pausing in the air outside, glowing brighter as if collecting energy from the others...he probably was...and then zipping away faster than she could track with her eyes.

xxx

Angel smirked down at her. “No weapons, no friends, no hope. You have nothing left Buff.” He raised his sword.

And Buffy lifted her head up...there were...howls in the distance, familiar howls. Something green slammed into her and made her gasp, and she could see them...Xander on the roof, Kyle clinging to Larry, the girls hanging out the window...and Tor...who was with her even now. She wasn't alone. The pack was with her and she smiled.
She caught the sword between her hands, she felt energized, whole, healed. “I'm all you need.” And she knocked him back, and the fight began anew.

xxx

Heidi and Rhonda slid to the floor, exhausted from whatever the hell had just happened. They had no energy left and could only watch as Amy and Willow were still caught up in the curse. Suddenly the orb of Thesula glowed...and disappeared. Amy's eyes closed and she fell back against the pillows unconscious. Oz just barely kept Willow's head from hitting the tile floor.

xxx

She'd seen it...the light of Angel's soul filling his eyes. But it was too late...and she knew it. “Close your eyes.” He was so trusting as she kissed him and held him. It had been so long...and now. “I love you.”

She shoved her sword through him and stepped back, tears filled her eyes but her vision remained clear as Angel stared at her in confusion...still reaching for her...even as he was sucked into hell.

XXX
Epilogue

Child of the Hellmouth
calikocat
Epilogue
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XXX

Kyle leaned heavily on Larry as they all stood around somewhat awkwardly on the sidewalk in front of the school. “Well, the world didn’t end...and we still have finals.”

Tor snorted and glared at his friend from the bench he was resting on. “Was there a good part in there somewhere?”

Cordelia rolled her eyes. “Wow. Being out of commission makes you guys grumpy.”

“Enough guys.” Willow bit her lip. “Anyone heard anything from her?”

Giles shook his head, though the movements made him wince. “None, there was no sign of her at the mansion either.”

Rhonda shuddered. “What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know...where is Xander?” He asked, looking around.”

Heidi shrugged. “Said he had an errand.”

xxx

Xander slipped into the office...and inhaled. “Huh. You know you reek of magic Mr. Mayer. That’s some funky mojo cologne you have there.”

Mayor Wilkins III blinked in surprise...didn’t he have someone in the outer office to keep children from wandering in? However he put on his best smile. “Mr. Harris.”

“Xander.”

“Of course. What can I do for a fine young man such as yourself?”

Xander stared at him, enough to make the man fidget just the tiniest bit...at least Xander thought the guy was a man. It was hard to actually pinpoint the guys real scent. Too much magic in the air. “When Buffy comes back you need to let her back in school. Tell Snyder to shove it. What happened wasn’t her fault.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it’s kind of non-negotiable.”

Wilkins smiled. “Is that right?”

“Yes.” Xander grinned right back. “I don’t even care if I have to break a few rules to make it so.” He moved closer. “Yusuke doesn’t care much for rules either...I don’t know what your endgame is, and right now I don’t care. I’ll worry about it later. But when she comes back, she has a place here, in
Sunnydale, and at Sunnydale High.”

Wilkins smile stayed in place, even though it looked a bit strained by now. “I suppose Ms. Summers is entitled to her education.” He sighed heavily, letting his smile slip just a touch. “I knew it was too good to be true. I'll call Snyder...and the police.”

Xander nodded and left the office. He hoped Wilkins couldn't smell fear.

xxx

They were gathered in the library, all of them except Buffy...and Amy...but Amy was still in the hospital and not a core member of their little family.

Xander took a breath and focused on Willow. “So I guess it’s time to come clean.”

She nodded. “That would be nice.”

“Right. We do this...and give Buffy time to deal...then I'm going after her.”

Giles gave him a skeptical look. “How do you propose to find her?”

“I've got Marshal keeping tabs on her, and since Marshal is a part of me I can track him down no problem.”

Willow blinked. “Your cat?”

He sighed, and ignored the smirks the feral four gave him. “This is gonna take a while.”

“Start at the beginning.” Willow suggested.

“The beginning...right...so a little over seven-hundred years ago there was a demon king named Raizen. He was pretty much a bad-ass, even ate humans. Then...he met a woman.”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Oh boy.”

XXX

The End

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