

Learning How To Fall

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"And you know what I don't understand?" Anya asks as she continues her annoyed rant. "If he really thinks demons are disgusting, why did he go out with me? Was he just using me, so he wouldn't look like a loser who couldn't get a girlfriend?"

"I don't know Anyanka, and I'm not sure it matters all that much. See no matter which way you look at it he's still an asshole! He's either a hypocritical bastard who hates demons but changes his mind as soon as it benefits HIM, or he was using you."

Seeing the devastated look on her friend's face when she agreed that the second part was a possibility, Halfrek realizes that Anya had been looking for reassurances and not a real answer. Trying to reduce the damage, she hastens to continue.

"But from what I've seen of him, it probably was the first. And I don't think he ever thought about your past; I mean, it's not like he tried helping you through the transition. God, I wish that guy would realize how hard it must have been for you to essentially be a neutered demon!"

The second the words 'I wish' leave the other vengeance-demon's mouth, Anya's bowed head snaps up and she stiffens as she feels her power course through her. Gasping, she stares at her friend as possible scenarios for vengeance run through her head. It only takes a few seconds before a malicious smile graces her lips. Concentrating on the image in her head, she speaks.

"Wish granted!"

Confused, Halfrek stares at her, wondering how it was possible for Anyanka to grant the wish of another vengeance demon; usually only D'Hoffryn could do that. As if in answer to her question, the two demons suddenly find themselves in Arashmahar, face to face with their boss.

"Anyanka, Halfrek, I am aware that you are wondering what just happened. Please allow me to explain. I have been watching you, Anyanka, since you returned to the fold, and I have to say that I am deeply angered at how those lowly humans refused to aid you in your quest for vengeance. Thus I decided to bend the rules in this instance and granted you the power to fulfil Halfrek's wish."

His sombre attitude changes as soon as his explanation is finished, and he winks at Anya.

"And let me tell you, Anyanka darling, that was one wickedly evil scenario you created there. I am proud to have you back."

A nod and a short wave of his hand, and soon the two girls find themselves back at Anya's apartment.

Not wasting any time, Halfrek jumps right to questioning the blonde as to how she decided to realize the wish. She can't hold back her glee when she hears that the boy will wake up from his alcohol-induced sleep in the morning, only to find out he is no different then the creature he despises most: Spike.

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Ok, he was used to waking up in pain ever since he had abandoned Anya and started drinking himself unconscious every night. It had never felt like this, though. As the pain increases, Xander's eyes snap open, only to discover that he's on fire. Panicked, he rolls across the floor, trying to smother the flames; when that doesn't help, he races into the bathroom, jumping into the shower and hoping the water will save him.

Luckily for him, he is right and the fire stops. Confused and in pain, he steps out of the shower slowly, trying to listen for any sound indicating whether his attacker is still there. All thoughts of being attacked leave his mind when he turns and stares in shock at the empty mirror in front of him.

Oh god. He hadn't been on fire because someone had attacked him, but because that's what happens to vampires in the sun, he realizes in shock when no amount of twisting and turning changes the vast emptiness in front of him. The emptiness that could only mean one thing - somehow, sometime during the night, he'd been turned.

Xander begins to panic again when he becomes aware of just what that means, and when he panics there is only one thing he knows to do. Cautiously avoiding the sunny spots in the living room he makes his way to the phone, pressing the one button on the speed dial with shaking hands.

Hearing Willow's voice instantly calms him, until she starts talking excitedly about her date with Tara, never letting him get a word in edgewise. Listening to her happy rambling, the calm feeling disappears, leaving him with jealousy and anger at his friend's happiness coursing through his newly dead veins. How can she dare be happy when his own relationship is in shambles? Furious, he remembers what he has become and that his reaction is perfectly natural because he's evil now.

Completely ignoring the fact that he had felt the same jealousy and anger about her fresh start with Tara since the wedding-that-wasn't, he grabs the excuse of being evil with both hands. Growling down the line that he has to leave for work soon, he smashes the receiver down violently.

Glaring disgustedly at the now-shattered phone, he realizes he is getting hungry. As always, the prospect of food makes him forget everything, including his newly undead state. It doesn't take him long to remember though, as the food tastes stale and doesn't seem to do anything to satisfy his hunger.

Realizing he'll need to drink blood now, Xander briefly shudders in disgust at the thought but the ever-growing hunger doesn't leave him any options.

Never giving a thought to how he is going to get blood, he moves to the door, preparing to leave. It's not that the answer is clear to him; he's just not thinking any further than getting some 'food'.

Opening the door, he stares at the sun-flooded hallway in annoyance, finally accepting that he won't be able to leave until sunset.

After carefully closing all the curtains in the living room he starts pacing, trying to figure out what happened to him.

He had been drinking at his apartment, just like every night since Anya left. About halfway through the night, his memories end and Xander realizes disgustedly that finding out what happened will be even more difficult than he had thought due to the fact that he was pissed drunk. No vampire had an invitation into his apartment, and he seriously doubted he had invited one in last night either. He had learned long ago to never voice invitations out loud, and being drunk doesn't usually change your habits that drastically.

There was the possibility that he'd gone out to get more booze, but if some vamp got hold of him outside, how did he get back in? As long as he wasn't dead, he couldn't get turned, and after waking up he wouldn't have been able to enter the apartment anymore, would he?

Same problem if the vamp who turned him wanted to return him here. He too couldn't have entered. And some human that found him and brought him inside? Nah, why would anybody carry a corpse inside and leave?

Wracking his brain, Xander searches for a possible solution, but all too soon the steadily-growing hunger makes concentration impossible. Glancing at his watch, he realizes that barely an hour has passed since he woke up.

It's going to be a long day.

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While Xander is pacing his apartment, growing more and more desperate as the day continues, Willow and Buffy are sharing breakfast after Dawn has left for school.

Buffy's fear of having to explain the happenings of the night before wears off as the witch continues to recount every detail of her date with Tara.

Willow had been dying to tell someone about it all night, and had gotten even more frustrated when Xander hung up on her this morning. She just has to share her excitement with someone before she explodes, so asking Buffy about her reaction to the Spike and Anya scene would have to wait.

Finishing her story and relieved that Buffy at least seems to be happy for her, she remembers Xander's call from earlier and decides to share with her blonde friend.

The girls agree that he is probably still reeling from what Anya and Spike had done, while Buffy silently wonders just how much of his bad mood is in reaction to what Spike had revealed about he and Buffy last night.

Finishing their breakfast, they clean up the kitchen before Buffy has to get ready for work. Putting on her uniform, the Slayer decides to pay her friend a visit after she finishes work; she has to try and save their friendship.

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When Buffy knocks on Xander's door at sunset and tries the doorknob when she doesn't get an answer, she nearly has it ripped out of her hand.

Xander, by now all but insane due to the horrible hunger, loses all control of his urges upon sensing her presence. He doesn't even recognize her as Buffy, and being unused to his new vampire senses he doesn't understand the warning resonating through his body either. Were he older, he'd be able to identify his blood screaming 'Slayer' at him; in his condition, though, the only thing he sees is something that will satisfy the gnawing hunger.

Buffy never has the chance to comprehend that her friend is in game-face before he lunges at her. Luckily for the Slayer, her instincts work faster than her brain and she manages to throw him off before he can get anywhere near her neck.

Stepping into the room, she tries to concentrate on what to do besides breaking down over what has happened to her friend.

Seeing him jump back to his feet, she takes a defensive stance, preparing herself to subdue him until they can find a way to help him. Maybe Willow and Tara can figure out how to bind his soul to him – permanently if possible. Although Willow has to stay away from magic, maybe she could help with the research; she'd want to anyway—Xander was her best friend, after all.

Distracted by her mental rambling, the Slayer realizes too late that instead of attacking her again Xander is merely circling her, trying to get closer to the door. She lunges at him, but she is too late.

Moving much faster than the Xander she knew ever could, he's out of the door and halfway down the street in a flash. Buffy makes an effort to chase him but stops soon when she realizes she's lost him. Her shock at the situation slowed her down enough for the vampire to make his escape.

Xander turns another corner after running for what seems like a lifetime. Chancing a look over his shoulder and finding his pursuer gone, he finally begins to slow down.

He still can't think far behind finding something to eat, but the realization that his intended meal was more than capable of defending itself had forced him to leave her and search for an easier victim.

Looking around at the posh houses he's walking between, he notices something moving in one of the yards. Creeping closer as he sniffs the air, he is relieved to find that the thing smells like food.

Had he been in his right mind, Xander would have thought twice about approaching the clearly agitated Doberman chained to the tree; in his current state, he doesn't even notice the potential danger.

What he does notice, though, is the horrible noise his intended victim is making, as well as the possibility that said noise could end up making him lose his meal. He doesn't process the how and why, but the fear of remaining hungry is there. Driven by that fear, Xander hurls himself at the dog.

While he doesn't manage to get a real hold of the quick animal on the first try, he at least manages to reduce the noise level. The painful fact is that this is due to the dog having much better aim than him, and having succeeded where Xander had failed: namely, in sinking its teeth deeply into Xander's thigh. A fact that Xander, lost to his bloodlust, doesn't register yet.

Desperate with hunger, the new vampire once again moves to sink his fangs into the animal. This time he succeeds, although not hitting the neck as he had intended but still striking a vein.

Had someone happened to walk by at that moment, the curious sight of a vampire and a Doberman biting each other's hind legs would have greeted them. Luckily for Xander, the street is silent, and nobody witnesses his less than graceful performance.

In the end, the vampire's feeding is too much for the dog. The animal slowly dies, its grip on its murderer's leg never wavering.

Standing panting over the corpse, Xander finally comes back to his senses. The sight that greets him is horrifying enough, but when the pain in his leg brings back the memories of what he has just done he is disgusted beyond measure.

Prying the dead animal's jaw apart, it never occurs to him that there shouldn't be any reason for him to feel this way, not if vampires are the unfeeling, vile creatures he always believed them to be. He should relish what he did, not be disgusted by it.

The fact that his hatred and contempt for vampires has not lessened due to his becoming one, and the fact that he doesn't embrace the nature of something he still hates does not yet register; nor does the lack of desire to kill his friends. Sure, when he thinks about it, it would be nice to keep Willow with him forever; if he turned her, though, she would hate him, and what good is an immortal Willow if she isn't his best friend anymore?

While Xander is still wondering what he should do next, he hears a door slamming shut, followed quickly by the sound of a gun being fired. Before he has time to react, there is a horrible pain in his shoulder where the bullet tore through him.

"You sick fuck! What the hell did you do to Demon?!"

He hears the man, apparently the owner of the dog he just ate, yelling as he runs across the yard.

Despite the seriousness of his situation, he can't hold back a laugh at hearing the Doberman's name. He regrets it instantly when the man fires a second shot at him, again hitting his mark without fail.

Realizing a fast retreat might be called for if he doesn't want to end up looking like Swiss cheese, Xander turns and hurries off as fast as his wounded leg allows him. Hoping that being a vampire, although a weakened one, will give him an advantage over the human, he stays on the streets where his injuries slow him down less than if he tried moving through the backyards.

He realizes his error as soon as he ventures a look back and sees the headlights of a Hummer heading towards him. Just his freaking luck, he naturally had to choose the pet-monster of some crazy military freak for his first meal. Probably ex-Initiative too, as the Xander-curse seemed to be in full force tonight.

Scampering off to the side, he tries to seek shelter in a doorway, as he has left the area with the posh houses behind and entered a street lined with apartment-buildings. Running straight into the vamp-barrier, he is painfully reminded that he now needs an invitation to enter someone's home, whether it's an apartment or not. Unable to do anything else, he changes directions again, trying desperately to outrun the giant car.

Just as the car is closing in, a single headlight appears from the opposite direction. Waving his arms frantically, Xander heads straight for the light, hoping against hope that the driver will take pity on him and save him from certain death under the wheels of a crazy dog owner and his big-ass car.

Seeing the panicked man being chased by a car, Spike snickers at the comical situation before deciding that just because Buffy ripped out his heart again, he doesn't have to stop helping her. Besides, it would make his Nibblet proud to know he was doing the hero bit for the poor wanker. Slowing the bike, he draws closer to the frantic man.

Finally getting a good look at him, he nearly reconsiders when he realizes it's none other than Harris. Great, just bleedin' great! Will probably stake him as a thanks for the rescue; oh bloody hell, he'd just have to take his chances on that one. Getting dusted would hurt less than having to watch the Slayer hurt over losing one of her precious friends anyway.

Recognizing Spike the second the vampire draws closer and holds out his hand, Xander is baffled. Not only does it have to be Spike, of all people, who sees him like this, but he wouldn't for one second have believed that the peroxide pest would actually voluntarily help him.

The roar of the Hummer's engine at his back jolts him into action and he grabs the offered hand, allowing Spike to pull him onto the bike. Throwing his arms around the blonde's waist he holds on tightly and the vampire brakes hard, turning the bike on its front wheel and speeding off, quickly leaving the Hummer behind.

The manoeuvre – something he has done a hundred times before – takes all of Spike's concentration, as he nearly crashed the bike the second the Whelp grabbed his hand. The stupid boy was a fucking vampire. Un-fucking-believable! God, Buffy was gonna be devastated. Bloody girl will probably blame herself for whatever mess the boy got himself into. And what the fuck was *he* gonna do now? Couldn't dust the git, the girls would never get over it. Besides, with as much as Harris hated vamps, he was not likely to embrace the lifestyle without questions anyway. As long as the boy could learn to control the bloodlust, he'd probably be safe to keep around.

Still, he couldn't just let him go; he'd have to lock him away somewhere and let the Slayer decide what to do with him.

Now where to take him? Not to his crypt, that was bloody sure. First off, not even for Buffy's sake was he willing to share a home with Harris ever again, even if the crypt hadn't been bloody well destroyed by the soldier boy. Secondly, knowing his luck, the Slayer would take one look at her friend vamped and tied up in his crypt and assume that the chip stopped working and he had turned the boy. As if he would want to turn Harris of all people.

Any way he looked at it, this scenario could only end with him being dust before he ever got the chance to open his moth and explain what was really going on.

Had to be somewhere else, somewhere they both could enter. Then he remembers, that demon-girl has moved out, so with Harris being one of the undead he should be able to enter the git's apartment. He could take the Whelp there, tie him up – oh, the demon-girl had lived there. That one had to be into kink; surely they had some chains around somewhere. Yeah, he'd chain the ponce to the bathtub, how was that for irony!

As they come to a stop in front of the apartment, Xander is the first to dismount the bike. Swallowing his pride, he turns to look at the blonde vampire.

"Hey, thanks for the save man. I have no idea what that guy's damage was."

Before he can turn away and leave, Spike's hand closes around his throat.

"For someone how who is so sure he has it all figured out, you sure don't know shit about vampires. Did you really think I wouldn't notice?"

Wheezing for air he doesn't need, Xander tries desperately to free himself from the older vampire's steely grip. He was sure that he was going to die. Spike knew the chip didn't work on him anymore and he was going to take advantage of that. He is so sure of this that Spike's next words completely throw him.

"And if you think I'm gonna let you run around free so you can be a danger to the girls, you're sorely mistaken. We're gonna go in there, I'm gonna make sure you're tied up all nice and safe-like, and you can think of a better story as to why that guy was chasing you while I go and fetch the Slayer."

Remembering that Buffy already knew about his sudden vampyness and had by now probably told the others too, Xander stops his struggling. He is not sure what to do with himself now that he is a vampire anyway, so he might as well face his friends now rather than later.

He tries to argue when Spike chains him in the tub, but the older vampire's sardonically raised brow convinces him that arguing about the unfairness of this with the same guy he loved to torment when the situations reversed was not going to get him anywhere.

Whelp secured, Spike returns to his bike, heading off to search for his Slayer.

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After losing Xander's trail, Buffy had hurried back to Revello Drive, needing desperately to talk to Willow.

Arriving at the house, she is disappointed to find only Dawn, who tells her excitedly that Willow and Tara are out on another date. Further questions reveal that the girl has no idea where the two witches went, and Buffy suddenly regrets never considering getting cell-phones for the gang.

Unwilling to tell the young girl about what has happened to Xander, especially knowing that she has to leave her soon to find and warn Willow and Tara, she tells Dawn to go grab an overnight bag and not ask why. Naturally, this only increases the girl's curiosity, and the constant questioning has Buffy on her knees before they are even halfway to Spike's cemetery. Realizing she has to give her sister something before Dawn drives her insane, she tells the girl a vague story about a new evil being in town and having to go find Willow and Tara. Since she doesn't know much about the newest enemy, Dawn has to stay with someone until they can be sure it's not a threat to her.

Secretly Dawn wonders why, after the previous night, Buffy is taking her to Spike's. From her sister's behaviour she'd have expected her to send her to Xander's instead. But no matter how confused she is, she decides to keep this particular question to herself. Better not to risk reminding her sister of the alternative and lose a chance to spend some time with her vampire friend.

Especially since she's dying to question him about the whole Anya thing. He's supposed to be in love with her sister, dammit, so how could he sleep with Anya? And she's sure there is more to her sister's confession of the night before as well. She might have tried to be supportive, but only until she knows both sides of the story. Then someone was going to be in a world of hurt!

Buffy, on the other hand, is at her wit's end. Seeing Spike is the last thing she wants to do right now, but leaving Dawn alone at the house wasn't an option. The girl wouldn't hesitate to invite Xander in should he show up there. She has no idea where Anya is, and with Willow and Tara out on their date, Spike really is the only option. And with Xander not being human, Spike would even be able to fight to protect her sister if necessary.

Upon arriving at the crypt, Buffy prepares to kick it open like she always does when she is stopped by her decidedly angry-looking sister.

"Gee Buffy, what's your damage? You want to ask the guy to do you a favour, don't you think you could at least try to show some respect for his home? You don't just barge into someone's house like that, even I know that! Mom would be so disappointed in you!"

Shocked Buffy stares at the tall brunette in front of her, a comment about how Spike is just an evil vampire who deserves no better on the tip of her tongue, when the truth of Dawn's last sentence hits her.

Her sister is completely right. Her mother would not only be disappointed with her, she'd probably be disgusted; not because she had slept with Spike, but because she had believed herself to be so far above him that she didn't even need to be civil in dealing with him. The Buffy who had treated him so poorly was not the girl her mother raised.

But it was worse than just that. While Joyce might not have liked the idea of Spike's feelings for her daughter, Joyce had considered him a friend. For a long time, Buffy had believed that her mother's feelings for the vampire had changed with his revelation of his crush on Buffy; that ended the day she cleaned out the cupboards and discovered a brand-new bag of mini-marshmallows, a receipt stating that it had been purchased the day before her mother's death stuck to it.

Joyce had been planning to repair her friendship with the vampire. She would have been horrified to know that her daughter threatened someone she called a friend.

Shuddering, Buffy suppresses the guilt welling up inside her. It will have to wait; Xander and his newly-vamped state have to be her priority right now. She will have enough time later to think about how she was so desperate to be who her friends wanted her to be, that she was willing to sully her mother's memory by becoming someone Joyce would have been ashamed to call her daughter.

Nodding to acknowledge the truth in Dawn's statement, she resolutely knocks on the door. Inside they can hear shuffling, but when the door finally opens it is Clem staring at them, not Spike.

"Uhm, hi Clem, Spike not here?"

"Sorry Buffy, he left to get us some more snacks."

At the two girls' disgusted and horrified looks, he hastens to add, "No, no, not what you're thinking. We were out of wings. But now that you're asking, he's actually been gone for a while. Do you think something happened to him? Or maybe they were out of wings and he had to go get them somewhere else."

"I don't know, but I have to head out anyway, so I'll keep an eye out for him. Listen, Clem—could I leave Dawn here with you? I wanted to ask Spike, but... well, he's not here and there's no one else around. You'll just have to make sure not to let anyone but Spike or me in – got it? No one, not even if you know them or if they say I sent them. Only me or Spike!"

Nodding his agreement, although he looks decidedly uncomfortable at getting such specific orders, Clem turns to Dawn.

"Ok, Dawnie, wanna check out what Spike's got on video?"

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Hoping her sister would be safe with Clem, Buffy begins her search for the witches. Having no idea where they could have gone, she decides to start with the Bronze, but they aren't there. Wracking her brain for another place they could be, she nearly misses her name being called when she exits the club.

Turning, she sees Spike's bike heading in her direction. Feeling relief flooding her, Buffy realizes for the first time just how worried she had been for him. Normally she would deny caring whether he lived or died, but after her earlier revelations she just didn't have the energy anymore.

Waiting until Spike reaches her, she forces the guilt from her treatment of him down again. Her vamped friend has to be her priority right now, and dealing with Spike will have to wait.

The bike comes to a stop in front of her, and Buffy hurriedly interrupts whatever the vampire was about to say, not willing to waste anymore time.

"Spike, I'm glad you're here, you have to help me! I can't find Wills and Tara. Did you see them? Can you help me look for them? It's really important."

"Slow down Slayer, don't know where the birds are either, but there might be a more pressing matter to attend to anyway. You see ... there is ... bloody hell, how am I gonna say this ..."

Spike is looking decidedly uncomfortable. When he had thought about fetching the Slayer earlier, he didn't exactly consider how hard it was going to be to tell Buffy what had happened to her friend.

"Alright, Slayer—your friend... the whelp, he's been turned. He's a vamp. There, I said it."

Staring at him for a moment, Buffy shakes her head in relief. So he knew; that made everything so much easier.

"I already know that Spike. That's the reason I'm looking for Wills and Tara; I have to warn them."

"No you don't."

At her confused look, Spike proceeds to tell her what had happened earlier, and that Xander is secured for the time being.

Relieved, Buffy throws her arms around him in a tight hug.

"Thank you, thank you so much for not dusting him! Can you drive me over there? I want to check on him myself. When I saw him earlier, he didn't even seem to know who I was. He just attacked me like a crazed animal."

"He attacked you? Are you alright? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"Of course I'm alright you big doof. I'm the Slayer, it takes more than some fledgling to take me down. I don't know what was wrong with him, though—he knows as young as he is he wouldn't have a chance against the Slayer. But then, it didn't seem like he was thinking at all."

"And that's different to his normal behavior how?"

At Buffy's glare, Spike gives her an apologetic shrug.

"Sorry. Seriously Slayer, he probably hadn't fed yet and was insane with wantin' blood. He was more or less himself when I met up with him."

Relieved that she wouldn't have to deal with the crazed shell of her friend that she had met earlier, Buffy climbs onto the bike behind Spike. When he restarts the engine and heads off towards Xander's apartment, she silently wonders just how her friend got over his bloodlust. Please don't let him have killed someone.

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While Buffy leaves to look for her friends, Dawn is watching Clem carefully. She soon realizes that the friendly demon knows his way around Spike's crypt perfectly. He must be here a lot, she muses. Deciding to take a chance, the girl plasters her most innocent look on her face and walks up to him.

"Say Clem, you and Spike are really good friends, right?"

At his nod she continues.

"So you probably know all about his relationship with my sister, right? I want you to tell me everything."

Clem looks at the young girl, clearly uncomfortable.

"I don't know, Dawnie. He made me promise not to talk to anyone about this; I think he's afraid of what the Slayer will do to him if anyone finds out. And he wouldn't like me talking to you about stuff like that, even if it wasn't your sister."

"Oh, come on, Clem. So he doesn't want you to tell anyone because Buffy wouldn't want them to know. Well, Buffy herself already told me they were together. See, I know it anyway. It's just that Buffy didn't want to give me any details."

Leaning in, she whispers:

"I think she's just uncomfortable with talking to me about sex. You know, being my sister and all...."

"Well, if you know most of what's going on anyway, I guess there's no harm in telling you the rest of it. But if Spike gets mad, you'll have to promise me not to tell him you heard this from me!"

"I promise, Clem. I'll say Buffy told me."

Smiling reassuringly at the demon, Dawn settles onto the couch, waiting to hear the Buffy-Spike story.

And hear it she does. Clem tells her everything, from Spike's chip not working on her sister and what happened that night in the abandoned house up to what happened when he had tried stopping Buffy from going to the police over Katrina's death, finishing with the accusations over the camera two days before and Buffy's last words to Spike. Clem had been Spike's only confidante during his relationship with the Slayer, so he knew of every last detail.

Appalled, Dawn decides to have a long talk with her sister. If the older Summers refuses to change the way she treats the vampire, Dawn would find a way to make her. The Anya incident from the day before is instantly forgiven.

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Not five minutes after Buffy and Spike left, Anya and Halfrek arrive at the Bronze. While they are having drinks and trying to talk a group of young girls into making wishes, they are suddenly approached by Warren. Not recognizing Anya, who is sporting yet another hair color and who had lowered her head as soon as she saw him approaching, he tries to make a move on Halfrek. Annoyed, the demon tries brushing him off, but he doesn't seem to take the rejection kindly.

Just as he is about to grab her, he gets distracted by a group of guys making fun of his failure to catch Halfrek's attention. Giving the girls an over-confident leer and telling them he'll be back soon, he leaves to deal with the guys.

Obediently Andrew follows him, while Jonathan uses the distraction to slip into a chair next to the two girls. Ashamed of his friend's behavior, he tries to apologize to

them and tells them that it might be in their best interest to leave before Warren comes back.

Having an idea how to get the perfect revenge on the nerds for spying on her shop, Anya signals Halfrek to follow her lead and starts talking to Jonathan. Well-versed in the art of persuasion, the two vengeance demons soon have the boy just where they want him.

"I don't know what happened to them! I tried talking some sense into them, but they simply won't listen. I just wish Warren and Andrew would understand how wrong everything we have been doing is and agree to stop this whole super villains crap."

Before he can think of a way to cover his slip, the brunette's face changes and she rasps in a husky voice:

"Wish granted!"

Shocked, he looks from her to the redhead at her side, only to realize the other girl has lifted her head to look directly into his eyes. Watching her smile proudly, he finally recognizes Anya. He is just about to ask her what is going on when he hears Warren crying behind him.

Turning, he sees his partners in crime begging the boys to forgive them. Warren has tears of regret running down his face, and Andrew doesn't look any better.

Looking back at the girls in awe, Jonathan finally understands what they did. Smiling at them gratefully he leaves, ready to take care of his shaken friends.

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Back at Xander's apartment, Spike is leading Buffy into the bathroom. Seeing her friend chained to the tub, she can't help but smile in amusement. Leave it to Spike to think of something like this.

Carefully approaching the bound vampire, she is relieved to see he almost seems normal to her. Noticing he is bleeding, she turns to Spike.

"You didn't tell me he was injured. What happened?"

"I don't know, Slayer... found him this way. Why don't you tell us what happened, whelp? And maybe you could also explain why some guy was chasing you down the street with a bloody big car while you're at it."

Embarrassed by the story he would have to tell, but at the same time relieved that Buffy seems to have no inclination to dust him, Xander hesitantly tells them what happened with the dog and his owner.

Buffy knows she should be appalled that he killed an animal in cold blood, but the whole thing is simply too hilarious.

Finally both she and Spike manage to stop laughing, and the Slayer realizes that it is time to address more serious matters.

"Alright Xander, tell me how this happened—the vampire thing."

"That's the problem Buff! Well, one of the problems, anyway. I have absolutely no idea!"

Shooting him a confused look, Buffy asks him to explain exactly how it's possible that he can not remember getting turned.

"I ... I was drunk last night, OK! Don't remember anything after the second bottle. I only know I woke up this morning like this."

Annoyed with him, Buffy glares at Xander until Spike addresses her.

"Uhm, Slayer, there is more. He doesn't smell like family, and apart from Drac, I haven't met a vampire here in Sunnydale that wasn't Aurelian since shortly after Angelus showed up at the factory back when. The git was turning people left and right when he wasn't killing off every vamp that wasn't from our line."

Two sets of shocked eyes turn to Spike at this statement.

"Are you saying that those vamps I stake every night all belong to Angelus? I thought the danger he posed was over once he got his soul back! And all this time it has been his descendants that have been killing the people of Sunnydale? Oh my god...."

Seeing the devastated expression on her face, Spike hurries to comfort her, no matter how much he'd like for her to finally understand that the poof wasn't who she thought him to be.

"Nah, pet, there were still some of the Master's and Darla's fledglings left. And Dru did her fair share of turnings too."

"You didn't say anything about yourself, Spike. Wouldn't there be some of yours out there too? Maybe that's why you are saying I smell differently. It's your fault I'm like this and you're just afraid that Buffy will finally stake you if she finds out."

Sneering at the older vampire, Xander knows he should at least try to be nicer to Spike; after all, the guy saved his life – er, unlife – earlier. Still, seeing him all friendly with Buffy and knowing what he knew about the two of them made his blood boil.

"Shut your gob, you ponce! If that was true, why would I bring it up at all? Not like anyone else would notice. Don't know where you got that stupid idea. And here I was thinking you might stop acting all high and mighty; after all, you're no better than me now, are you? And for your information, I didn't put myself on that list

because I don't bloody belong there! I don't do turnings. Never have, never will. 's not my style."

Not knowing how to respond to that, and ashamed to realize Spike was right and he really wasn't any better than him anymore, Xander just lowers his head in shame and stays silent.

Buffy, who is still shaken by the revelations about Angelus and the not-exactly-tiny matter of Angel never telling her about any of this, looks back and forth between her friend and Spike. Xander is silently staring at his bound hands, but Spike is angrily stomping out of the room. In the end, she decides to follow the blonde vampire.

In the living room Spike stops, and the two just look at each other for a while. Finally Spike speaks.

"Listen Slayer, about last night...."

"Don't, Spike!"

"No, please... pet, I'm so sorry, I just...."

"Stop it! There is no reason to apologize. I did break up with you, remember?"

"Still, I know it hurt you, and I shouldn't have hurt you like this."

"Don't you get it Spike? You have every right to hurt me, after what I did...."

"What? Buffy, no!"

"Yes! And now you listen to me. Please. Dawn said something to me today that made me realize a few things; mainly, that there is no possible excuse for how I have treated you the last few months. I had no right. You did nothing to deserve that, and even if you had it wouldn't have given me the right to treat you the way I did."

Taking in Spike's confused expression, Buffy decides to explain what brought on the change in her behavior. Afraid she might have played with his feelings once too often already and he wouldn't believe her anymore, she can only hope for the best.

"Look, Dawn gave me a lecture about kicking in your door earlier. And she said something... She said mom would be disappointed in me if she could see that, and she's right. Mom would never approve of me bursting into your house, especially not if I'm there to ask you a favor."

Taking a deep breath, Buffy continues.

"I realized right then, that while my friends might approve of – or at least not care too much about – how I treated you, mom wouldn't. If she was still here and had seen me the last few months, the disapproval and disgust Xander showed over us

sleeping together would have been nothing compared to her reaction to how I treated you. She'd have hated me."

"Pet, your mother loved you. She could never have hated you."

"It's really sweet that you're still trying to make me feel better after all I did to you, Spike, but I think we both know that even the strongest love can't forgive everything. And mom would never have forgiven me for becoming a monster of my own creation."

Watching the crying girl in front of him uncertainly, Spike wonders if it would be all right to comfort her, or if she would snap at him like she always had since they started their relationship. Swallowing hard, he decides to hope for the best and puts his arms around her. To his surprise, not only doesn't she shove him away, she snuggles closer to him.

Staying like this for a while, Buffy finally calms down a bit.

"Do you think we could try being friends again? Only if you want to... I know I don't deserve it anymore."

Stiffening, Spike steps away from her.

"You know very well that I don't want to be your friend, Slayer."

Seeing her distraught face, he decides to clarify his words. Stupid Slayer probably managed to misunderstand him yet again.

"I don't wanna be your friend, Buffy. I love you. I want to be much more than your friend, and I don't think after what we already had together I can be ok with being nothing more than a friend to you."

"Oh. I'm ... I'm not saying we won't eventually get there again, but I thought we could try doing this the right way. And I need some time to get things straight in my head; otherwise I'd always be afraid of falling back on old patterns. And I don't want to hurt you anymore, Spike—it's wrong. So can you give me some time? Be my friend in the meantime?"

Astonished, Spike stares at the hopeful girl in front of him. Did she really just offer him a real chance? God, he hoped this wasn't just a cruel dream! If this was really happening, he was going to get the Nibklet the biggest present ever. Maybe those driving lessons she was always begging him for.

Shaking his head to clear it, Spike decides not to get his hopes up too much; didn't mean he wasn't going to do his damndest to make this work, though.

"Alright Sl... Buffy, friends it is. For now. Now what are we going to do about Harris?"

Aware of her confusion at his sudden change of topic, Spike tries to play it cool. No need for her to know that he was deliberately trying to distract her before she could think about it too much and change her mind.

After some discussion, the two blondes agree that Spike will go and collect Dawn at his crypt, while Buffy stays with Xander and calls her house to leave a message for Willow and Tara to meet them at the apartment. She is going to call the Magic Box too, as no one knows where Anya is staying. Hopefully, the vengeance demon will check in at the shop soon. Calling Giles would have to wait until they have some more information.

After Spike leaves, Buffy considers briefly going to talk to Xander. Remembering that with his new vampire hearing he would have been able to listen to her conversation with Spike, she decides to let him think about what he heard for a while. Maybe what she had said, in addition to what Spike had told him earlier, would make him rethink his reaction to the idea of her and Spike as a couple.

When Dawn and Spike arrive, the young girl shoots her sister a cold look but decides to wait to confront her until she knows why Buffy and Spike are acting so strangely. And what are they doing at Xander's place anyway? And where exactly is Xander?

To Buffy's surprise, Dawn takes the news better than she had expected. Her announcement that it's not that bad, that he's still basically the same guy and Spike should be able to teach him how to live without being all that evil, shocks the Slayer even more. Seeing Spike agree with her sister doesn't help her with her confusion either – as she tells them.

It's not that easy, is it? Wouldn't he need his soul to be their Xander again?

Baffled at her sister's lack of knowledge about a topic that could save her life, Dawn stares at the older girl in astonishment.

Slowly and deliberately, she explains that if a soul was the same thing as a personality, it would be called personality. Same thing goes if a soul was the same as a conscience. Being turned doesn't make you lose any of those; it only makes you lose your soul.

Seeing the Slayer's lack of understanding clearly written all over her face, Dawn bites back a groan. Didn't anyone think it might be good for the Vampire Slayer to have at least basic knowledge about the things she fought? She was *so* going to have a talk with Giles if he ever showed his face again.

Angrily, the girl tries another approach.

"Ok, let's try this. A fledgling wouldn't hesitate to kill, that's true, but only 'cos it's his nature. He feeds that way. Now if you have your average turned human in your hands, and you want him to be a monster that revels in torture and dreams of destroying the world, you'd have to teach him to be that way. That's the reason most

vamps take care of their fledglings for at least a while. They have to teach them how to be truly evil."

Delighted at the understanding dawning on her sister's face, Dawn continues.

"So if you have to teach a new vamp how to be evil, why shouldn't it be possible to teach one how to be not evil?"

Listening to her younger sister's explanation, Buffy at first starts getting angry at Spike for filling the girl's head with stupid ideas. Remembering her earlier decision to treat him better, she realizes that she might be jumping to the wrong conclusions. Maybe asking them about this before accusing him would be the better reaction.

To her astonishment, she learns that the vampire never even talked to her sister about it. No, the girl developed the habit of secretly reading Giles' books during the summer.

Wondering why her watcher kept this information from her, Buffy realizes that is probably a question best answered another day. She should probably bring the topic up on her next conversation with him and for now concentrate on the current problem.

The three of them agree to spend the night at the apartment, hoping for Willow and Tara's call and unwilling to leave the newly-vamped Xander on his own. It being a weekend, there won't be any problems with Dawn's school either, so it seems like the most sensible course of action.

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The witches do not call until the next morning, having had other things on their mind when they returned to Revello Drive late that night. It's only upon awakening that they realize that no one else returned that night, and listening to Buffy's message they hurriedly make their way to Xander's apartment.

Willow's reaction to hearing what had happened to her best friend is far less laid back than Dawn's. Frightened, she makes her way into the bathroom, needing to see her friend for herself.

Unfortunately, due to all the confusion the previous night, nobody thought of getting Xander some more blood. The young vampire is starving again, a fact of which they are soon reminded by twin cries from the bathroom.

Seconds after hearing the cries, everyone is crowding the doorway, looking in confusion at one frightened witch and a vampire holding his head in pain.

Realizing what is happening, Spike can't help laughing at the irony of the whelp not only being a vampire but a chipped one to boot. Suddenly remembering the impossibility of what he is seeing, he sobers quickly, turning to the Slayer in confusion.

Shaking her head, Buffy indicates that she too has no idea what is going on.

Still trying to comfort her shaken girlfriend, Tara announces that maybe they should postpone all discussion about what is going on until the young vampire is fed. Readily the others agree, realizing that Xander is currently unable to think rationally.

Sensing Buffy's need to stay and ensure her friends' safety, Dawn offers to go out and purchase some blood for the two vampires.

Once the vampires are fed, everyone assembles in the living room, including Xander. Since he is unable to harm anyone, even unintentionally, he has been unchained.

Going over the situation again and again, they always come up with the same answer. Even if they were somehow unaware of the Initiative being back in town, there was no way that the chipping could have occurred after Xander had been turned. There just wasn't enough time.

By now feeling slightly better after her encounter with starved Xander, Willow finally decides to speak up.

"What if it happened before? The Initiative knew about us working with Buffy; they probably thought there was a high risk of one of us ending up turned sometime. Maybe they implanted all of us with some modified chip that became activated once we got vamped."

"Not to dismiss your idea, Wills, but wouldn't we be aware of that?"

"Not necessarily, Xander. They could have had us drugged or something."

"Well, I for one don't like the idea of them messing with our brains without our knowledge one bit. I think we ought to call Riley and see if he can get access to the Initiative files to find out if they did something like that."

Seeing Spike's angry look at her suggestion that they call her ex, Buffy secretly squeezes his knee under the table in reassurance. His mood lightens slightly, but the Slayer is aware that she will need to explain to him later that any contact with Riley will be purely business from now on. At least the blonde vampire seems to see the logic in her plan, as he is not openly objecting.

While waiting for Riley to call them back, the Scoobies discuss housing arrangements; they all agree that Xander shouldn't be staying alone right now. Tara is the one to finally come up with the perfect solution; she and Willow will temporarily move into Xander's apartment, leaving Willow's room at Buffy's free for him. This way Buffy, and Spike who is going to stay on the couch, can take care of the boy.

The gang spends the remainder of the day at the apartment, their mostly friendly conversations interrupted only by Riley's call in the evening. Soon after Buffy finishes

explaining the situation to the commando, he gives his assurances that he will do everything to help them, and the group makes their way back to Revello Drive.

Once there, Willow and Tara instantly start packing Willow's things, as they still need to walk past Tara's apartment to get some stuff for her. They haven't been at the house for more than a few minutes when the doorbell rings.

Opening the door, Buffy is greeted by the sight of her arch-nemesis-s-s, looking very much like someone had killed their puppy. Before the Slayer can lay into them, Jonathan speaks up.

"Please, give us a second. We're here to apologize for what we did. We realize that what we were doing was wrong, and we're going to turn ourselves in to the police, too. There's just some stuff you need to know first. So can we please come in? It won't take long."

Surprised and a bit wary, Buffy agrees. After all, should they be lying she could *so* take them.

She calls the others, and the gang once more assembles around another living room table and prepares to listen to their three ex-enemies.

The boys explain all about the cameras, unaware that the Scoobies already know about them. Unfortunately, there is more. While spying on them, Warren, Andrew and Jonathan had seen something confusing; the camera at Willy's showed Riley giving money to a demon a few days before his official arrival in Sunnydale.

Unsure what to make of what they had seen, the nerds decided to investigate further. The demon Buffy had fought with Riley was not a Suvolte, like he had said, but a relatively harmless species that sometimes works as muscle for pay. Apparently, he had been hired by Riley himself to act as the aggressor. The forgetting to tell Buffy not to kill him had either been a true error on the commando's part or, more likely, a plot to avoid having to pay the mercenary.

The other demon, the one they saw Riley hand money to at Willy's, was one of the group Spike used to play poker with. For a fair amount of money, he was willing to tell them that Riley had paid him to convince Spike to hold the eggs.

The demon was actually very proud to have figured out the blonde vampire's weakness, and gloatingly told them how he convinced Spike that the eggs were designed to be part of a meal he wanted to surprise his mate with on their one-hundredth mating anniversary. Being a sucker for romance, the vampire had agreed easily to help his supposed friend.

The Trio admitted the whole mess had in some ways been their fault too, since it had been their surveillance system that had brought Buffy's relationship with Spike to the commando's attention. Unbeknownst to them, a new Initiative-style group had taken up residence near the Hellmouth, also keeping an eye on the Slayer and her friends. They had recently discovered that somehow, this group had found out

about their surveillance and gained access. It must have been when Riley, as a part of this new organization, saw Buffy and Spike's relationship play out on the video feed that he developed his plan to get revenge on Spike.

Glancing at the shocked and furious faces around her, Buffy suddenly can't take it anymore.

She jumps up and runs out of the room, leaving the three nerds cringing in their seats, afraid she is on her way to get a weapon to kill them as revenge for their intrusion into her life.

Instead, the sound of someone retching can be heard from the upstairs bathroom moments later.

Glaring at the others and hoping they will do as he suggests for once, Spike jumps up to follow his Slayer. Fortunately, the Scoobies actually take the hint and remain seated.

Gently stroking the distraught girl's back, Spike tries to comfort her but only succeeds in making her cry and triggering another bout of her earlier sickness.

When the heaving had finally stopped, she looked up at him, sniffing. "I don't get how you can even stand the sight of me, never mind love me. I am a horrible person, Spike. I believed Riley without any questions, even with all those hints that something had to be wrong, or at least very weird. God, how could I be that stupid?"

Unsure how to make her feel better about that particular occasion – especially given that, if he was going to be completely honest, he really had to agree with the stupid part – Spike decides that maybe distracting her from what she can't change anyway might be the best course of action.

"Come on luv, don't dwell on the past. It's all forgiven now. We have bigger problems right now anyway; we all just agreed to tell Whitebread all about Harris' little situation. If Captain Cardboard is really back with the Initiative, we have to plan our defense. Chances are, they're going to come after the boy."

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While Spike tries to calm Buffy down, the nerds decide to finish their tale; after all, they still have a date with the police.

Upon returning downstairs, the Slayer and Spike find the Troika gone, and the Scoobies crowded around the table. Squeezing in between Dawn and Tara, they stare in confusion at the two orbs on the table.

Noticing their return, Willow hurries to explain their supposed purpose.

"They said they stole them from some demon clan. Worn in close proximity to each other, they're supposed to make the wearer invulnerable and freakishly strong. The three of them want us to have them; you know, use them for good as a first step

towards making up for all the bad things they did. Jonathan also gave me the key to their lair; we're free to take anything we think we could use."

"Cool. But just to stay on this side of careful, could you check the orbs out before we put them to use? You know, research whether they're dangerous for the wearer, and what exactly invulnerable entails—things we need to know before somebody puts these things on."

Looking at the others seriously, Buffy continues.

"That's not all. Spike just pointed out that we might have put all of us – especially Xander – in danger by calling Riley earlier. We don't know how this new Initiative group is operating, but from what we know we can assume they are not much with the cooperation. They might think it would be a good idea to do some tests on Xander to research the chip, see if it behaved like they expected it would. We need to be really careful from now on."

Since Willow and Tara still need to settle into their temporary home, the Scoobies agree to meet again the next day. They all need a night's sleep to help clear their heads, and some time to themselves might be helpful in helping them digest the numerous shocks they had received today. Clearer heads would go far in helping them to think up a good defense.

Unwilling to leave Dawn alone with Xander, Buffy and Spike agree that the blonde vampire will take care of patrolling that night while the Slayer stays with her sister and the younger vamp.

To Buffy's surprise, when Spike returns he is carrying the mini-fridge from his crypt. At her confused question as to why he has it and what he plans to do with it, he explains the plan he thought up while on patrol.

Seeing the logic in his idea, the Slayer agrees without hesitation.

Her agreement shocks Spike greatly. Up until yesterday, she'd have insisted black was white just to avoid agreeing with him; maybe what she said really was true, and she really was changing her behavior towards him. It certainly seemed that way right now. God, how he hoped she kept it up.

Smiling at the blonde vampire, Buffy lifts one end of the fridge and nods at him to take the other one, not caring that either of them could carry it on their own without difficulties.

Once upstairs, they move the fridge into Xander's temporary room. As they enter, the young vampire looks up in surprise and asks confusedly what they're doing.

Trying to find a way to explain their plan to him without hurting his feelings, the Slayer falters and turns her pleading eyes on Spike.

Sighing heavily, the blonde vampire takes over.

"We're going to put some blood for you in there in case you get hungry during the night. Doesn't taste very good if it's not warmed, but it'll keep you from losing control again."

"Why would I need my own fridge for that? I could just get some from the kitchen if I get hungry."

"No, you couldn't. The Slayer and I agreed it might be best if we lock you in during the night. Chip will protect the Nibblet, but as you found out last night it doesn't work on Buffy."

"How dare you! I'd never harm Buffy...."

Clearing her throat loudly, Buffy interrupts Xander's angry exclamation.

"Uhm, Xander... you tried to do exactly that only last night. And you would have taken a bite out of Willow today if not for the chip. If the bloodlust gets too strong, you are simply not experienced or strong enough to control it yet."

"Sorry Buffy, you're right. Hey, how come the chip doesn't work on the Buffster anyway?"

"Oh, that. Tara researched it for me when we found out Spike's chip wasn't working on me anymore. It...."

Buffy never gets to finish her explanation, as she is immediately occupied with dragging an enraged Xander off of Spike. Keeping a tight grip on the younger vampire, she angrily demands to know just what the hell his problem is.

"But Buffy, you just said his chip isn't working on you anymore. We have to stake him! He'll kill you in your sleep."

"Wha...? God, Xander! If he wanted to kill me, he would have done it already. The chip hasn't been working on me ever since I came back, and believe me: he has had every opportunity to take advantage of that fact. He could've drained me dry a hundred times over by now, Xander, but he's never done it once—not so much as a fang out of place."

"He's just trying to make you think he won't hurt you, and then he'll kill you or turn you—either way you'll be dead, Buff! You can't trust him! He's a vampire!"

"Oh, like you?"

Spike decides to enter the fight between the two friends. For one thing, it's pissing him off, and for another, it's bloody embarrassing for the whelp; Harris' accusations are getting ridiculous in light of the latest developments.

"No. Yes... But ... but he's a killer! I'm a vampire, but I haven't killed anybody! He's killed thousands of people—that's different."

"Oh, like Anya?"

At the Slayer's words, all fight leaves Xander and he goes slack in her grip.

"I ... I... sorry, I have to think. Just put the fridge over there. I need to be alone for a minute."

Hearing his half-apology, Buffy releases the boy, and he instantly slumps onto the bed, burying his head in his hands.

Buffy and Spike finish setting up the fridge and are about to leave the room when the Slayer turns back to face her friend once more.

"It was the resurrection, by the way. Tara called it a 'molecular sunburn'; nothing bad, but enough to confuse the chip apparently. Just in case you still want to know."

Xander is just confused—very confused.

Sitting back on the bed, he tries to think through everything he's discovered in the last 24 hours. He himself is a vampire and, contrary to what he'd expected, he still felt pretty much like himself. Well, as long as he didn't get too hungry. If that happened, he killed animals, and tried to chew on both Buffy and Willow.

Spike has been able to hurt Buffy ever since she returned, but he didn't take advantage of it. Buffy had somehow hurt Spike during their relationship, trying to be what her friends wanted her to be; now she was convinced that the way she had treated the vampire would have sorely disappointed her dead mother.

And Riley, his hero Riley, had cooked up an elaborate scheme to get Buffy to dust Spike. While he might have agreed with the soldier about the need to get rid of the blonde vampire at the time, even he could see that it was unnecessarily cruel to try to get Buffy to stake Spike while she was having an affair with him.

To make everything just that much worse, Riley was back in town with a new Initiative-style group, who had known about the Scoobies being spied on all along and who never thought it necessary to warn them.

Shouldn't the commando have known better than to join an organization who played around with demons after what had happened the last time? Where was his common sense? Where was his loyalty? Xander had been sure they were friends, or had the other man just played them all to be able to keep Buffy?

And here they had been accusing Spike of the same thing for months when, to tell the truth, no one could seriously say the vampire had gone out of his way to get into their good graces.

Looking back, Xander has to accept that Spike had really just been himself, no attempts to be artificially nice or friendly, and his attempts to help them had truly seemed to be genuine. He supposed now that he really should have caught up on that when the blonde vampire continued helping them after Buffy had died.

His ponderings keep Xander up for most of the night, and when he feels the hunger rising again, he is grateful for the fridge in his room after all.

Carefully extracting one of the blood bags and eyeing it carefully, he realizes that he has never fed with a clear mind before; he was always lost in a haze of rabid hunger. No matter how satisfying he remembers his earlier feedings to have been, looking at the thick red liquid now he can't see it as anything but simply disgusting.

Shaking his head at himself – after all, he preferred his steak bloody too, so where was the big deal in this? – he resolutely rips open the bag and pours the blood into the mug Buffy and Spike left for just this purpose.

Hmm, the smell is absolutely delicious; it must be just the visual and the awareness of what he was preparing to drink that made him queasy. Inhaling deeply and closing his eyes, he resolutely brings the mug to his lips and takes a deep swallow.

Not bad, not bad at all. Opening his eyes and staring into the mug curiously, he realizes his error when his stomach turns again. Swallowing hard, he manages to compose himself. All right, eyes closed it is.

But the stuff tastes really amazing, and Spike had said it was even better warm? God, he so needed to try that tomorrow. Wonder if you can gain weight from too much blood? If not, this vampire business might just work out perfectly for him.

Xander realizes he is going to get his chance at tasting warmed blood earlier than he expected when his door opens early the next morning to reveal Spike carrying a heavenly-smelling mug.

Taking it gratefully, he watches warily when the older vampire makes himself comfortable in the chair. So he's not just here to make sure he's fed before coming downstairs, Xander thinks; judging by the expression on his face, Spike wants to talk.

Xander doesn't have to wonder what's on Spike's mind for long; as soon as Xander finishes his blood, Spike starts his speech.

"Listen, Harris. I know you bloody well hate me, and believe me, the feeling is more than mutual. Slayer cares 'bout you though, as does Dawn. And for their sake I'm going to do my damnedest to make sure you manage to get through this without making Buffy regret not staking you. All of them want to help you, but they have sod all of an idea what is going on in your head. I do, so you're going to get over yourself and deal with me, vamp to vamp. We clear?"

Xander just nods, unfortunately having come to the same conclusion during the night; he is going to need the older vampire's help.

"Alright. Look, I'll try to make this easy on you, so I'm gonna ask you some questions and you *are* going to answer truthfully, got it? No trying to lie to me cause you're ashamed or some such rot. I've been a vampire for over one hundred and twenty years. ou're not gonna shock me."

When Xander once again signals his agreement, a bit less hesitantly than before, Spike continues.

"Do you have any desire to kill your friends? Not cause of the bloodlust—that's not something you have any control about yet. Do you have any desire to just see them dead for dead's sake? "

Seeing the emphatic shaking of his head that shows Xander's answer, Spike is relieved. At least the boy didn't harbor any serious, previously unrecognized hard feelings against the others.

That was the most common reason that many fledglings went after their friends and families when they were turned. All the anger and resentment suppressed while human could be given free reign after their turning, with no sense of guilt or social conditions to hold them back.

"Ok. What about turning them?"

At this Xander hesitates before dropping his head to stare intently at his feet.

"I might have thought about turning Willow—but I decided not to!!! I was afraid she'd resent me for it. It's just a nice thought to be able to have her stay with me forever."

"Guessed as much. You're right, you know. She'd probably hate you for doing that to her. Instead of keeping her with you, you'd lose her as soon as she woke up. If you ever catch yourself entertaining thought of turning her or any of the girls again, just think of it like this: how would you feel about her if she had been the one to vamp you?"

The horrified look on Xander's face at the mere thought of Willow being responsible for his current undead state is enough to reassure Spike that none of the other Scoobies will ever be in danger of getting turned by Harris.

Despite his holier-than-thou attitude, the boy really cared for his friends; he would never risk losing them by turning them into vampires.

Deciding that the young vampire has had enough interrogation for one day, Spike forces himself to save his other questions – like how he feels about killing or turning strangers – for another day.

Trying to lighten the mood slightly, he instead asks if the whelp has any questions of his own; he nearly ends up on the floor, shaking with laughter when the boy actually wants to know whether he can get fat from blood.

In the hallway, Buffy smiles when she hears Spike's laughter at Xander's question, and joins his with her own when she hears Spike answer by reminding Xander of the paunch Angel had been sporting on his last visit. Hearing Xander laugh in reply puts her mind a bit more at ease; she quickly decides that seeing one of her best friends and her potential boyfriend getting along for the first time is worth her forgiving them the putdown of Angel. Besides, if she was being really honest, he had gotten a bit fat since he had last been in Sunnydale, and he didn't even eat human food like Spike did.

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Later that day, the witches arrive, and all of the Scoobies sit down together again, trying to come up with a way to prepare for the Initiative's potential attack.

Having stopped by the nerds' former lair on their way over, Willow suggests putting part of their surveillance system to good use. She is sure she should be able to adapt the system so that the commandos won't be able to gain access again. This way they could monitor all the cameras that were not placed in their respective homes, such as Willy's, the DMP, and even some of the graveyards; they could also monitor any Initiative-type activity in all of those locations without tipping their hand to Riley.

Excited by Willow's suggestion, the others quickly agree to her plan and Tara offers to take over the research on the orbs until Willow has finished securing the surveillance system. Unfortunately, she has to confine her research to what she can find in the books, although Willow had managed to hack into the Watcher's Council database after all of the events with Glory. Although the Council may have helpful information, the blonde witch is simply not well-versed enough in dealing with computers to risk their access being spotted, and research in the Council system will have to wait until Willow is available.

To everyone's surprise, Dawn offers to help with that part of the research. Buffy hesitates at first to let her sister become a full, participating member of the group; however, she quickly remembers that the girl had confessed to reading Giles' books all through the summer, and she realizes her concern might be a bit late. In the end, she agrees to let the young brunette do her part to help.

Sadly, research seems to be all they can do to prepare; now they just have to remember to be careful and make sure that no one is out alone at any time.

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Standing in the shower, Anya watches the heavily pink-tinted water rushing down the drain. It had been five days since she had granted the wish to turn Xander into a chipped vampire; while the thought of his suffering makes her own pain a little easier to bear, she is beginning to realize that her talent for inflicting pain on unsuspecting strangers seems to have lost its appeal for her.

She had been hanging around with Hallie nearly constantly those last few days, always making sure to be just a little slower in responding to wishes than the other demon; her own pain seemed to be making her unresponsive to that of others.

Sure, it was nice to have her powers back—she wouldn't want to give those up again for anything in the world, but somehow she felt herself more inclined to use teleportation to make business affairs that much easier. Her strength was nice to have back too; she felt much less meek and unsure, more self-confident. Being vulnerable had been the worst thing about being human; after over a millennium as a vengeance demon, the possibility of being injured and even killed so easily had been the most terrifying thing she had ever experienced.

Realizing that the red tint in the water wasn't going away anytime soon, she sighed, reaching for the shampoo bottle again. She'd just have to wash her hair again if she didn't want to mess up her towels like the last time. The red haircolor was a bitch to get out of cotton.

Just as she is about to lather up her hair again she freezes, sure to have heard something. Just as she is wondering whether it would be better to flee than to investigate, she feels a draft from the bathroom door. Instinctively, Anya turns around, trying to get a look at the invader; however, she is hit by a blast of electricity and the world goes dark before she can see her attacker.

Rancorous laughter can be heard as her attacker's companions enter the room and see the naked woman lying in the shower. Some make lewd comments about what they ought to do with the unexpectedly-presented treat, but an authoritative voice cuts them off.

"Stop it, boys. We're not here to have our fun with the demon scum. Go put some clothes on her; we can't leave here with her looking like that. Someone is going to notice us carrying a naked woman down the stairs. But hurry up—we have to be prepared when the other one arrives."

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Life at Revello Drive had been quiet during the week since Xander's turning. The surveillance system was back up and running, but so far there had been no signs of the Initiative being back in town. The Scoobies would have been relieved, except they hadn't heard back from Riley either; the silence from the commando had them worried that bad things were about to happen.

Even so, right now life was good—great even.

Apart from a brief breakdown on Xander's part when the reality of his situation had finally sunk in, the boy had been coping well. He realized that while he might be undead, he at the same time got his greatest wish—he finally wasn't the only normal

one in their group of freaks—and that realization had helped him to pull himself back together.

His tentative truce with Spike was well on its way to developing into a full-blown friendship, and the blonde vampire had readily agreed to teach Xander how to effectively use his new strength in a fight. Buffy had offered to join them, but the three soon realized that the smell of her blood in such close proximity was still too much for the young vampire.

After training for only four days, Xander was itching to try out his new powers in a real fight; unfortunately, thanks to the threat still hanging over their heads, he was barely allowed to leave the house—much to his growing frustration.

Tara and Dawn had found quite a bit of information on the orbs, confirming everything that they had been told by the Trio. Secure in the knowledge that the orbs presented no danger, they started testing them and found some interesting side effects of their use.

For one thing, they seemed to completely scramble the human signals sent to the chip. A human wearing them didn't register on the chips anymore, probably due to the fact that he or she couldn't be harmed; if the vampires wore them, the chips didn't fire—or if they did, the electronic signals no longer hurt them.

To everyone's surprise, Xander didn't have any objections when Buffy suggested that Spike carry them with him on patrol, just in case they should have a run-in with any Initiative soldiers. It seemed like the boy had finally come to terms with the fact that the blonde vampire was one of them and really wasn't going to harm them in any way.

The only down side was that no one had heard from Anya.

Still harboring some hopes of at least getting a chance to explain his abandonment of her, Xander was devastated by her disappearance. Once he had summoned the courage to ask Spike about their display at the Magic Box, the vampire reassured him that the sex had been the result of heartbreak and too much alcohol; Xander made his peace with what had happened and hoped desperately for the opportunity to tell Anya everything and beg for her forgiveness.

He thought he managed to cover up his pain pretty well, but everyone was aware of it; as a result, no one dared bring Anya up, all of them afraid to voice what each of them secretly thought: that she had completely embraced her return to the vengeance business and might never return.

Giles had been informed of the abandoned state of his shop, but he was unable to leave England due to Council business and requested that they take care of the Magic Box as much as possible until he could return.

With the help of the others, Spike managed to convince Buffy to give working in retail another chance, reminding her that it couldn't be worse than the Double Meat

Palace and that this time she'd even be her own boss. To everyone's great relief, she had agreed; after only two days she had decided that while it wasn't her dream job, it beat working in fast-food hell hands down.

So yes, all things considered, life was good. And it was going to get even better—before it all came crashing down on their heads.

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In what's become an every night after patrol habit, Buffy and Spike take some time relaxing in front of the TV before heading off to bed. When Buffy once again falls asleep halfway through the movie, Spike loses his continuous battle with himself and draws her pliant body closer, cuddling her against his chest and lightly kissing her forehead. Afraid to wake her and destroy the quiet moment, he draws back after treasuring the few seconds of closeness.

Gazing longingly at her relaxed face, he is shocked to see a pair of green eyes staring back at him.

Before he can release his hold on her or stammer out the apology already on the tip of his tongue, Buffy closes the gap between them, covering his lips with hers. The kiss is slow and sensual, unlike the frenzied ones they've shared in the past. Buffy's remaining sleepiness makes her movements languid, and Spike couldn't be happier to respond in kind.

Continuing their slow dance, they break apart only when Buffy's need for oxygen becomes overwhelming. Both of them taking great gulps of air one of them shouldn't even need, they stare at each other until their erratic breathing slows.

Making a decision, Buffy stands, holding her hand out to the vampire in offering. Looking up at her, insecurity written all over his beautiful face, Spike is about to ask whether she is really sure when the small blonde girl anticipates his question and smiles at him reassuringly.

Gathering his courage, Spike finally takes the offered hand and, still hesitating slightly, follows her up the stairs and into her room.

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Standing awkwardly in the middle of the Slayer's sanctuary, Spike tries once more to voice his uncertainty of the rightness of her decision. He is silence when a small finger is pressed to his lips.

"I'm sure." Buffy's voice is strong but still barely more than a whisper, as she is unwilling to break the mood.

Realizing that he can't resist her, that he might as well follow her lead and hope this doesn't blow up in his face in the morning, Spike gives in and envelops her in his arms. Wrapping her own arms around his neck, Buffy lightly runs her fingers through his soft curls, releasing them from the remaining gel that held them in place.

Satisfied with his rumpled look, she slides her hands across his shoulders and down to his chest, where she slowly begins unbuttoning his shirt.

Delighted to feel her soft touches and understanding that for once she isn't going to make him go hard and fast – not that there would be anything wrong with that, except for the fact that to Buffy it seemed to equal the absence of genuine feelings – Spike strokes her back lazily, finally sliding his hands under her top, touching the soft skin underneath.

When Buffy finishes unbuttoning his shirt and slips the garment off his shoulders, she decides it might be better to reassure him a bit more; she lifts her arms on her own, silently asking him to pull off her top.

Clad only in her bra from the waist up, the Slayer takes a few measured steps forward, maneuvering her vampire toward the bed.

Feeling the soft mattress against the back of his legs, Spike uses the opportunity to sink down onto it, aware his legs are shaking too badly to hold him upright much longer. Still in a dreamlike state, he realizes that being seated has brought him into the perfect position to undo her jeans. Giving up on holding back – at least for now – he reaches out for Buffy, sliding his fingers over her hips until he reaches the snap of her trousers.

Running her hands delicately over his chest and shoulders, Buffy lets the ecstatic feelings caused by his response wash over her. Sure, she had been able to feel his arousal earlier when she had kissed him on the couch; while it was obvious that he wanted her, though, his refusal to act without getting her permission first had begun to worry her.

What if she had been wrong in her assumption that they had managed to rebuild a certain amount of trust and friendship between them? What if she had irrevocably destroyed any possible future for them?

Right now, Buffy is not sure if she could have lived with herself had that been the case. She is only now beginning to see that the vampire might have been right all along. She does feel something for him, quite a lot actually; she just isn't completely sure whether it is love or something else. Oh, she has her suspicions, all right, but no way would she tell him before she was absolutely certain. After hurting him so badly already, Buffy knows that telling Spike she loves him only to take it back later would destroy him.

Feeling a tugging sensation on her calf, the blonde girl is suddenly brought back to the here and now. Looking down, she realizes that her vampire is trying to get her to step out of her jeans, and thankfully he seems not to have noticed her spacing.

Smiling softly, Buffy complies, pushing Spike onto his back while doing so. Straddling his still jean-clad thighs, she leans over him to initiate another of those bone-melting kisses. Finally, her annoying need for air forces her to detach her

mouth from his, but she makes up for the unwanted pause by trailing tender kisses over his neck and chest until she is stopped by the waistband of his trousers.

Cupping him lightly through the black denim, she continues stroking him while toying with the buttons of his fly. Reveling in his throaty moans and the knowledge that she still has this power over him, Buffy slowly pops the buttons one after another, slipping her other hand inside at the same time.

Hearing his moans turn into whimpers of need, she finally relents and helps him remove the jeans.

Climbing up his body again, she leans in for another kiss only to be stopped by his hands on her shoulders. Confused by his stalling, she looks at him curiously, only to relax when his hands trail down to remove the bra she forgot she is still wearing.

And then they are kissing again at last. Feeling like she will never be able to get enough of this, Buffy remembers guiltily how she used to punish him by refusing to kiss him during sex. Had it felt like this for him even back then? If it had, refusing him this bliss might just have been one of the cruelest things she had ever done.

Completely lost in their kiss, the Slayer barely notices when Spike rolls them over, tenderly covering her heated body with his cooler one. Suddenly his mouth is gone from hers, and she wants to weep from the loss. Feeling him descending her body slowly, leaving a trail of wet kisses in his wake, she realizes what he is planning to do; the anticipation forces her protest at the loss of his kiss die on her lips.

And then his head is between her legs, his tongue lapping tenderly at her folds, and she knows she is not going to last. It had been too long, and she had missed him too much during her self-imposed distance from him for this to not be over far too soon. Her suspicions are proven true when she explodes as soon as Spike begins to focus his attention on her clit.

Not waiting to find out what his next move would be, Buffy grabs him and pulls him back up to face her as soon as she can think clearly again. Rolling them onto their sides, wanting to show him that she sees him as an equal for once, she scoots even closer to him, not able to bear any distance between their bodies.

Pulling the leg she had draped over his higher so it can rest comfortably on his hip, at the same time opening her up to him, Spike moves slightly to position himself between her legs, the smooth head of his cock only just touching her damp folds. Looking up into her eyes once more to make sure this is really what she wants; he is met with the same soft smile as before.

Hoping with everything that he is worth that Buffy knows what she is doing and won't regret what is looking to be the best experience of his life in the morning, he slowly pushes in.

At the glorious feeling of him stretching her once more, Buffy throws her head back, letting out a low moan. Instantly Spike stops moving inside her and softly touches her face.

"Buffy, luv.... Please, look at me."

Realizing that she had unintentionally looked away from him and he was probably terrified that she was going to shut him out again, Buffy snaps her eyes back to his, holding his gaze as he starts moving once more.

Their emotions, for the first time fully experienced and acknowledged by both of them, only heighten the sensations their bodies are creating and soon both realize that they are not going to last. Only breaking their eye contact to bring their lips back together, they give in to the feelings building inside them and go over the edge nearly simultaneously, swallowing each other's cries of release.

Lying still, basking in the afterglow of what they have just experienced, neither of them is able to give voice to their thoughts—Spike for fear of scaring her off again with a declaration of his feelings, as had happened so often in the past, and Buffy because she doesn't want him to believe she is lying to him.

Once their breathing returns to normal, Spike prepares himself to be told to go back to his lonely bed on the couch, sure Buffy won't want the others to know what has happened between them. He is stunned when, instead of telling him to get lost, she signs contently and snuggles closer to him, pulling the covers over both of them.

It doesn't take the Slayer long to fall asleep; the vampire lying next to her, however, fights to stay awake. He is terrified that if he falls asleep he will wake up downstairs alone, only to find out that this night had been nothing more than a dream.

Despite his intentions, he has to succumb to sleep in the early hours of the morning. He is so sure that he will wake up in the living room that he nearly jumps out of his skin when he feels someone softly stroking his face. Warily opening his eyes, he is delighted to see his Slayer looking down at him, a tentative smile gracing her features.

Seeing him awaken, Buffy leans down to steal another kiss, nearly making him weep in relief. She doesn't regret it. It is morning and she's still here with him, about to face her friends' reaction when they see him coming out of her room. This has to be the best bloody day of his existence.

The surprises just keep coming for the blonde vampire on this day. When Dawn sees them leaving Buffy's bedroom hand in hand, the younger Summers squeals happily before grabbing both of them into a tight hug. The noise calls Xander out of his room, but instead of screaming or attacking him, as Spike had expected, the boy just smiles at Buffy and jokingly reminds her to call Willow as soon as possible so the redhead can't get mad at her for being the last one to hear the news.

So much has changed in such a short time. Only last week, Buffy had been ashamed to be seen in his company and yet here she was, openly holding his hand. The Scoobies, whom Spike had expected would try and talk her out of a relationship with him, if not outright kill him, are making jokes and congratulating them. The blonde vampire decides that he must definitely be dreaming and desperately hopes that he will never wake up.

Over the course of the next few days, Buffy realizes something disconcerting; while things with Spike seem to be going great, he whimpers and cries every night in his sleep. He absolutely refuses to tell her what's going on, blaming nightmares he supposedly can't remember in the morning. Buffy knows better, though; the look in his eyes after he wakes tells her everything she needs to know. He is scared, absolutely terrified that she will be gone when he wakes up; no matter how hard he tries, he's still unable to believe that *they* are real.

She had been thinking about telling him of her feelings for him ever since they woke up in her bed that first morning, but she feared he wouldn't believe her. Neither of them has voiced their feelings since they had reconciled. Oh, she can see his love for her in his eyes every time he looks at her; he hasn't said "I love you" aloud again, though, and it scares her to think that she has hurt him so badly that he doesn't dare tell her anymore.

Desperate, Buffy finally decides to talk to the person who knows the vampire best – Dawn. Talking to her little sister about her relationship with Spike makes the Slayer decidedly uncomfortable, but ever since the younger girl had taken her aside and revealed that she knew everything that had happened between them (giving her a stern warning that very unpleasant things might happen if Buffy ever dared treat him like he doesn't matter again), she had gained a new respect for her younger sister's maturity.

Despite lengthy discussions on what to do to make the vampire trust in how their relationship was now, it's not Dawn who offers the final solution, but – to their astonishment – Xander. Having overheard their conversation, he enters Dawn's room, walking right up to Buffy and asking her if she really loves the blonde vampire. Having already decided to never lie about her relationship ever again, her answer is a simple but sincere "Yes."

"In that case, you might want to check out Giles' books on information about mating rituals. I don't know much about it; Spike only told me the basics when we talked about vampiric customs, but from what I understand it's a really big deal. Much more binding than human weddings, and it gives you an awareness of where the other is and what they're feeling. It's impossible to break, too—so if you did that with him, he couldn't doubt your sincerity anymore."

Seeing the delighted smile on his friend's face, Xander is certain that he had done the right thing in supporting her relationship with the other vampire. It's nice to see her happy, and if he were to be completely honest, he is glad to be able to do Spike a favor, too. The guy had been nothing but helpful since Xander had become a vampire himself; that kindness, combined with the fact that Xander had had to

readjust his view of vamps greatly upon experiencing it first hand, made Xander feel as though he owed Spike a great deal.

Soon the sisters are discussing excitedly which books are most likely to contain the information Buffy will need.

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Two days have gone by since Buffy and Dawn started burying themselves in books, and Spike is still unaware of his girlfriend's newest obsession. Willow and Tara, on the other hand, have been informed of the Slayer's plans and had readily agreed to manage the Magic Box for a few days so Buffy could continue her research uninterrupted.

Finally, the two Summers girls have all the needed information together; while the Scoobies are a bit apprehensive over the biting involved in the ritual, Buffy's mind is made up. She is more than willing to endure a bit of pain if it means that her man will stop living in fear of her.

Spike notices her giddiness during patrol that night, but still being terrified of saying the wrong thing and losing her again, he refrains from asking her about it.

Arriving back at the house, an anxious Buffy nearly drags Spike up the front steps, only to stop short when the door swings open on its own as soon as she touches it. Exchanging worried glances, the two blondes silently enter the house, weapons at the ready.

Everything is deadly silent, and they are beginning to wonder if the others had simply gone out and forgot to close the door properly when they hear a groan from the living room.

Hurrying over, they discover a groggy Willow and Tara, who seem to be just waking up. It seems harmless enough, until another groan from the top of the stairs catches their attention.

Racing upstairs in near-panic, Buffy and Spike soon find the source of the groan to be Dawn, who is lying in the hallway and just coming to. Having a pretty good idea of what might have happened, Spike leaves Buffy to tend to her sister while he goes to check Harris' room. Like he had feared, it's empty.

While the witches have no idea what had happened, Dawn remembers everything.

She had been watching TV with Willow and Tara when the two girls had fallen asleep and she couldn't wake them up. Worried, she had gone upstairs to ask Xander for help when she heard the door opening. Turning around, she had screamed upon seeing a group of soldiers enter the house. Warned by her scream, Xander had left his room and come up behind her; before she could say anything to warn him, she saw one of the soldiers draw a gun and aim it at her. After that, everything had gone black.

With Dawn's information, the others manage to piece together what must have happened. Knowing Buffy and Spike would be out on patrol that night, the new, improved Initiative had somehow managed to drug Willow and Tara, thus disabling the only people who would have had a chance to defend the house against an intruder with firearms.

They either didn't care about shooting Dawn with a tranquilizer gun or believed that the girl would be asleep during their attack. After rendering both Dawn and Xander unconscious too, they took the vampire with them, leaving the others behind.

Worried for their friend, Buffy and Spike head out again in hopes to be able to track Xander, leaving Dawn with the witches. Unfortunately, their search is unsuccessful.

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Buffy and Spike return to Revello Drive only seconds before dawn, only to find the others still awake, the lack of sleep making their worried faces look even more drained.

Upon seeing the two blondes return subdued and alone, the girls look at each other and nod before turning back to their friends.

"I guess you didn't find him, then?"

"Not a trace Wills. I'm so sorry."

"Damn! All right—see, while you were out we thought of what to do in case you couldn't find him. And we have a plan, we just need you to listen to everything before deciding what you think, deal?"

When Buffy and Spike agree readily, a trace of hope returning to their faces, the redhead continues.

"Ok, we discussed using magic to find Xander. There's a problem, though—a locator spell for a vampire needs power. Lots of power. In fact, more than Tara has. So she suggested supervising me while I ease back into doing magic myself. We'll have to go slow, though, so I won't lose control again. A few days, maybe a week at most. Tara...."

"It's ok, really. The magic itself was never the problem, more that Willow was using it so much that she forgot how to get by without it. That and then she began to get a buzz out of being able to control others. She knows she was wrong now, and I have been thinking about slowly getting her back into it for some time. The power is always going to be part of her anyway; as long as we are needed to help defend the Hellmouth, it's too important of a resource for us to ignore its existence."

Surprised, Buffy stares at the blonde witch. She had believed that Willow's problem with magic was similar to an addiction. Those didn't simply go away. Why had no one told her the problem was something else entirely?

While Buffy is still wondering why she seems to be the only one not aware of this, Spike just nods in agreement to the witches' words.

"You sure she's ready, Glinda?"

Tara's positive reply seems to satisfy the vampire, and he shoos the three girls upstairs, reminding them that they won't be of much use to Xander if they collapse in exhaustion.

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Just outside of Sunnydale, Xander awakens to find he is not lying in his bed as he had expected, but on a cold floor instead. Opening his eyes in confusion, he takes in the empty, white cell he's in and slowly the memory of what happened in Revello Drive comes back to him. He growls in anger.

They had been right; the Initiative did come for him. But none of them could have had expected the soldiers would walk straight into their house. Oh god, they shot Dawnie! Had it been the same gun? Did they drug her too, or had it been real and the girl was dying right now? And what had happened to Willow and Tara? Please, please, let them be all right.

Terrified for his friends, an unknown future in front of him, Xander gives in to the panic inside of him and curls himself into a small ball, whimpering in fear.

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"And you're telling me it was living with those people? Friends of its human shell? Funny, it doesn't seem to have any human instincts, cowering in the corner like the animal it is. I wonder how it managed to fool those people? Are you absolutely certain that this is the right vampire?"

Major Ellis, commander of the new Initiative, is questioning his troops while watching the brown-haired vampire on the monitor.

"Sir, yes sir. I knew the human before he was turned, sir, and I'm positive it's the same body."

"Ah, Agent Finn. Right, you had relations with this so called Vampire Slayer, what was she called? Buffy Summers? Ridiculous name. Anyway, I want your team to supervise the tests on the subject. Your common memories might come in handy. Remember, our priority is to find out how he got chipped. Those microchips are supposed to be top-secret. The Department of Defense spent a huge amount of their biological weapons budget to have them developed. We have to know if we have a traitor among us."

Saluting their commander, Riley leads his team out of the debriefing room.

"All right. Agent Miller, how are the tests on the two new ones coming along? Any success at extracting their teleportation powers yet?"

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Hearing voices, Xander slowly raises his head, hurt but not really surprised to see Riley leading a group of soldiers toward his cell. What does surprise him, though, is that Riley starts his interrogation by asking him how he had gotten chipped. What the hell? They didn't know? That would mean the Initiative wasn't responsible for it.

So far, that was great news; it meant that the Initiative hadn't been messing around with his brain. Unfortunately, it also brought up the question: if not the Initiative, then who the hell had chipped him?

Unsure what to do, but not willing to help an organization that shot innocent fifteen-year-olds in cold blood, Xander decides to stay silent.

The longer the vampire refuses to answer, the angrier Riley is becoming. He doesn't need this shit! His career was on shaky enough legs as it was; they still hadn't forgiven him for using Initiative funds to pull his little stunt with Spike. If Subject 22 – formerly Alexander LeVelle Harris – didn't give him the information he needed, he might just as well pack his bags.

To Xander's disgust, he soon notices that his former 'friend' is dangling promises of freedom and humans to feed on in front of him as if he would actually be stupid enough to trust the soldiers who had captured him; apparently, Riley was under the impression that he was an animal without any common sense. Wow, he had always had a low enough opinion about vampires, had hated them above all others for reasons he had believed to be true without bothering to confirm them. But never had he dismissed them as creatures without a brain.

And the Subject 22 thing? God, Spike would never let him live that one down if he ever saw the older vampire again.

Realizing that his interrogations are not getting him anywhere, Riley sends his men away, hoping he might get the vampire to talk more easily if they're alone.

As he doesn't change his attitude once they are alone, Xander has finally had enough. Jumping up, he moves to stand directly across from the soldier, separated only by the Plexiglas wall, and lets loose a stream of insults. He feels a little better every time the bulky man flinches at his words. Especially satisfying is telling Riley that Spike is a better man than the soldier could ever be, and he hopes that the other vampire will be very happy with Buffy.

Unfortunately, Riley's surprise at the suddenly talkative vampire doesn't last long, and soon Xander hears the other man giving orders to starve him until he's willing to talk. Remembering what happens if he doesn't feed regularly, Xander tries to warn the men, but they just laugh at his attempts. Some of them even eye him curiously, as if they are surprised he's able to speak their language. Honestly, who trained these gits?, he wondered to himself, unconsciously channeling Spike.

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Two days had gone by since Xander had been kidnapped, and while Buffy and Spike went out every night, they hadn't found a trace of him so far. It was beginning to look like the locator spell was their only hope.

Fear for the life of their friend has the remaining Scoobies relying on each other even more than before, and they spent all their time together. They are only separated during the night, when Willow and Tara return to Xander's apartment to sleep. All of them had agreed that it would feel wrong for them to move back into their old room while Xander was gone; it would have felt too much like they didn't expect him to come back.

When, on the third day, Buffy's constant worry leads to her snapping at Spike for no reason and she sees her boyfriend flinch back like he is expecting a punch and waiting for her to throw him out, the Slayer has finally had enough. Telling the vampire to stay put, she leaves in search of her sister.

Finding the girl downstairs, she grabs her arm and unceremoniously drags the surprised brunette outside.

"Dawnie, I need you to do me a favor. Get Willow and Tara and leave the house. Stay with them tonight. This thing with Spike is getting ridiculous. He flinches every time I scowl or raise my voice, and it's tearing me apart to see him live in constant fear of me deciding that I've had enough of him. Now he's insisting that when we go to rescue Xander, I should wear the orbs."

Buffy just shakes her head when her sister tries to interrupt.

"He's saying that he'll be able to work through the pain from the chip if it's for something really important. According to him, I need them more because the soldiers might carry guns. Should I decide to go along with him on this, I want at least this awareness thingy the mating will bring. I'd go crazy in there, not knowing if they took him down or not. So the three of you need to leave. I'm going to ask him to do the ritual once you are gone. Wish me luck."

Nodding in understanding, Dawn goes to collect the witches. Not five minutes later, the Slayer and vampire are alone.

Taking a deep breath, Buffy checks her appearance in the hallway mirror before returning to her room and the vampire waiting for her. Sitting down next to him on the bed, the blonde girl turns toward Spike and takes his hands in hers.

"Spike, we need to talk. You have always been there for me, ever since I came back—ok, actually you were there for me before that too—but still. I want you to know how grateful I am for that. I know I treated you horribly these last few months, and the fact that you can even look at me without disgust is a miracle on its own. But I want...."

Concentrating so hard on the speech she had prepared days earlier, Buffy completely misses Spike's expression darkening. As a result, his sudden withdrawal from her grip, followed by his jumping up from the bed takes her completely by surprise.

"That's all very touching, Slayer, but you don't have to feed me some stupid lines to soften the blow. Always knew this was too good to last. I'm well aware just what you think of me"

Frustrated, Buffy jumps up too.

"You stupid, stubborn, irritating vampire! You think I'm breaking up with you? God, how screwed up can this be? I'm trying to tell you I love you. I want to ask you if you want to become my mate, and you, you...."

The completely blank look on her vampire's face stops Buffy mid-rant. Sheepishly, she realizes that this had not been the way she had envisioned telling him.

"Spike? Spike, are you all right? Come on, don't go all catatonic on me baby, say something!"

Pulling himself out of his shocked state, he finally manages to form a coherent thought again. But it's not a pleasant one.

"Don't bloody mess with me, Slayer. Is this your idea of a joke? Well, lemme tell you, it's not soddin funny!"

"God, Spike, no! I'm completely serious."

"No, you're not! You have no idea what you are talking about, little girl."

Buffy's confession is simply too much for Spike. He had been so sure she was just playing with him again; he had needed to believe it because if he had allowed himself to hope and she had kicked him out again he knew he wouldn't survive the loss. And now—if what she said was true, it would be like all his dreams coming true at once. This couldn't be happening, not to him. He didn't get to be happy, didn't get the girl. He had learned that the hard way long ago—no way would Buffy of all people change that truth.

"Yes, I do. I read all about the ritual and what it would mean to us. It's what I want."

"Your friends...."

"Are fine with this. Dawn helped me with the research, and Willow and Tara managed the shop so we'd have the time for it. Xander—hell, Xander was the one to suggest it. So you see, no problem there. Don't... don't you want this? If not, just tell me... I'll understand... I'll just, I...."

Hearing the insecurity in her voice finally slices through the fear clouding Spike's mind. He realizes that this is real, that his Slayer is really standing in front of him, asking if he wanted to be mated to her. And there he was, acting like a complete wanker instead of being on his knees thanking her for this gift. Shaking off his thoughts, he crosses the space between them with two quick steps, pulling the shaking girl into his arms.

God, what a pair they were, making each other miserable when they should be overjoyed. The sudden happiness flooding Spike is finally too much for him and he buries his face in her soft hair, sobbing helplessly.

Clinging to each other, the two blondes stay like this, wrapped securely in each other's arms, for what seems like an eternity. Finally they pull away; not letting go, just making enough space that they can look in the other's eyes.

"You really sure about this, luv? You know it's forever?"

"More sure than anything. I love you, you silly vampire."

"Love you too, pet. So sorry I didn't believe you before... was jus' too scared to hope."

"It's ok, Spike. It's my fault you even had a reason to doubt me anyway. So we gonna do this? You still want me?"

"More than ever, luv, more than ever. Don't think I've ever been happier than right now."

Smiling at each other, the two start disrobing quickly, not even taking the time to undress each other. The sort-of-fight they just had, along with their confessions, have left them in a frenzied mood. Adding to it is the slight worry neither can suppress completely. What if the other refused the bond at the last moment? No answers are to be found in lonely wonderings, so instead they hasten to get to the point of no return.

The sooner they have to make the final decision, the sooner they will know for certain; either they will be bound together for the rest of their existences, or this is the end for them. Both know that, should one of them reject the other now, they can never make it right again. It's either everything or nothing; it is far too late for half-measures.

Spike had been down that road before. Drusilla had refused to be bonded to him, and he stayed with her despite her rejection of him. Of course, she had never pretended to want to be his mate; that mistake had been caused by him and his foolish romantic notions.

Buffy, though—Buffy had asked him to be her mate, had looked up the ritual and brought it up without him ever doing so much as hint at it. Should she decide she wanted to stop now, he couldn't handle it. He'd help her get the whelp out, as the

boy had actually been pretty nice to him since he had become a vampire, and that would be the last time he set foot in Sunnydale.

Finishing their frenzied undressing nearly at the same time, they tumble on the bed in a tangle of limbs. Mouths fused together before they even manage to regain their balance, tongues dueling while hands skate frantically over exposed flesh, determined to touch as much as possible.

Soon nails and teeth come into play, nipping, scratching over hardened nipples, leaving red welts on pale skin, trying to mark the flesh before the ritual even begins. Desperate to create something lasting on the other's skin, something to be remembered by if the other should reject promises eternity, preparing to leave behind the memory of a broken dream.

Then the vampire is on his back, the Slayer astride his slim hips. As if there had ever been a question as to who exactly was the master in this relationship. She couldn't stand the weak, couldn't let herself be controlled, either; this... this is what she needs, what she wants. Someone to match her, blow for blow, kiss for kiss, and not give up even if they lost every time.

Because if you love, really love, you couldn't lose if the other won. Both winning and losing were shared; there was no shame in either.

Scooting back a little, she slides down onto his length, meeting no resistance because she is ready—god, how she is ready for this; she's been waiting for so long... too long. Like him—he's there, too, knows that there is no way that this is going to last. And it doesn't matter, not this time. The journey doesn't matter now, when only arriving is what counts.

Their pace is frenzied, his hands on her hips, bruising; more marks on her—good, that's good. Slamming herself down on him harder, again and again, squeezing him, willing him to surrender first. But he's not relenting, instead pushing up, meeting her halfway. And suddenly it doesn't matter anymore.

Their eyes lock and they know. Neither is going to back down, neither will be left in the dust. The time is here, and so are they—still together.

Then there are teeth, tearing into flesh... his smoothly, hers ripping. She has to smother a laugh... not the time. But there will be, later—they will have time later. Together.

Maybe she will tell him one day, and he will apprentice the irony of the Slayer's bite being more damaging than a vampire's. But she will tell him later.

Pulling hard on his blood, she moans happily; who would have thought—no pain at all. Then he is drinking and god, why didn't the book mention this? Does it feel like this for him too? Just in case it does, she takes another deep swallow. He does it again, and she knows she wants this to last. This feeling—it's unlike anything she has ever experienced.

But he's stopping... why is he stopping? He's pulling away... no, don't stop! He's talking now, what's going on? Oh, the ritual, she's supposed to be speaking too. What were the words? She can't remember the words. Maybe if she just repeats his... they sound familiar. Good, good... he is smiling... she did it right.

Thank god he is better with words and remembering details than she is. Otherwise they would surely have botched this up but good. What would have happened if they had? They would have just had to do it again—no way was she ever going to let him go. And hey, doing the biting thing again? So of the good. Would have to ask him about that—maybe they could; without the words, though, because concentrating was definitely not her strong suit right now.

And then she's at the precipice—she jumps and he's right there with her, and they fall and the world goes black.

Exhausted and slightly disoriented, the two blondes come around moments later. And there it is, just on the edge of their minds. A new presence, a new consciousness. Contently, they snuggle back under the covers, falling asleep with no problems. Just sleep for both of them: no nightmares for the vampire, no watching him worriedly while he cries in his sleep for the Slayer—not anymore.

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It had been six days since they stopped feeding him, four since Xander was last in control of his actions. Now the hunger was in control, and it wasn't happy.

Riley is standing outside the chipped vampire's cell, watching the creature intently. There is nothing human left in its behavior—the vampire is pacing its cell, hurling its weakened body against the Plexiglas wall, not heeding the electrical shocks he receives in return.

Switching his radio back on, Riley listens to the frenzied voices on the other end. This is bad news... very bad news. They are under attack. The Scoobies have found them, and not only was Willow back on the magic train, but Buffy had somehow found a way to make her body bulletproof and Spike was fighting humans. Either the chip was gone or the witches had temporarily disabled it. Probably the last—they'd all be dead already, and not here fighting the new Initiative's soldiers, if Spike's chip was gone.

They didn't know what he had done with the eggs, didn't know it had all been a game to see if she would stake the vampire, didn't know about his true part in the new Initiative either. He shouldn't have any problems convincing them that he was here to prevent another disaster like Adam from happening. They trusted him—he was one of the good guys.

There was only one problem—the brown-haired vampire pacing in the containment cell in front of him. He had been under his supervision, and the creature had seen and recognized him. Right now, he was no threat—but the witches were powerful, and they might be able to restore him. He had to get rid of this thing.

Slipping his identification card through the slot, Riley punches in the security code to open the cell and grips his stake tighter... no plastic wood-grain this time.

The second the door opens, the starving vampire hurls himself at the soldier. Riley doesn't even flinch; it is chipped, and they have run tests to confirm this fact. Besides, he kind of liked watching the vampires' reaction to the firing of the chip, had liked it back when it had been Spike's even more.

Watching gleefully, Riley's trust in the chip doesn't waver until he feels Xander's fangs sink into his jugular. Then he screams. But they are under attack, and there are screams everywhere; no one hears him.

Xander is starved; he drains the large man in seconds. Letting his dead meal glide to the floor, he slowly begins to come back to his senses. The pain in his head is nearly overwhelming. The chip had been firing the whole time he drained Riley, but like earlier when he had thrown himself against the force field, the hunger had drowned every other pain out.

When Xander regains full control of his senses, he is horrified. He killed Riley. Sure, the guy had been an asshole—and a traitor to boot—and he was pretty sure the soldier had been here to kill him. Still, he had killed a human, and he had been so sure that he was better than that. That he could live in the body of a monster without becoming one.

The moment of his devastating epiphany is the moment he notices the radio on the floor is still switched on. Listening curiously, he wonders briefly if the other commandos will be coming for him soon. Suddenly he hears Willow's voice, shrill with shock; but it's not her being there that sends his head spinning. He had known they would come for him, and at least that explained Riley's sudden decision to stake him. No, it's Willow's words that have him breaking into a run in the direction of the faint battle noises.

"Anya! Oh my god, Tara, come here! You have to help me! That's Anya in this cell!"

All remorse over his unintentional kill forgotten, Xander races down another corridor. The noises are getting louder. There... there, only one more corner... and then he can see them. Buffy and Spike are fighting the soldiers, keeping them away from the others—no, not just keeping them away, they're driving them back. And there are Willow and Tara, helping Anya and a woman who looks like her friend from the wedding out of one of these horrible cells.

Ignoring everything that's going on around him, ignoring that Anya isn't his anymore, he runs to her, taking her hospital gown-clad form into his arms. The girls are helping Anya's friend, and he supposes that that's good, but Xander couldn't care less right now. He is holding his Anya, and she is letting him. Not just letting him, but clinging to him and sobbing her heart out.

At this moment, he vows that he will do anything in his power to make things right for her again.



The Initiative – An Interlude

Unsure what to expect, the reunited Scoobies are sitting in the Initiative's conference room. It's not like they felt they could trust the soldiers that remain, but the man that asked them to meet him here had saved Willow's life, and they felt that they owed him enough to at least listen to what he had to say.

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The unexpected help had come shortly after Xander had joined them. Buffy and Spike had been making great progress in forcing the soldiers back, especially since their mating had had an unexpected side-effect. Apparently the orbs of Nezzla Khan didn't need to be physically close to each other in order to protect the wearer as they and the Trio had thought. They hadn't really been wrong, but they hadn't understood the nature of the forces they were dealing with; the orbs just needed to be somehow connected. For normal humans wearing them, this connection could only be achieved by bringing them in close proximity to each other; however, Buffy and Spike weren't normal humans, and the claim had connected them. Much to their delight, they had found out that the orbs worked just as well if the connection was of supernatural nature.

The discovery had been completely accidental; Buffy had dropped one of the orbs while securing them on her person and Spike unintentionally exposed his hand to the sunlight while attempting to pick it up. With the Slayer wearing one and her vampire mate holding the other, the orbs activated, giving them a sudden rush of power and protecting both of them at once.

Thanks to this unexpected help, they had been winning. The battle wouldn't have ended without casualties on their part, though, as Major Ellis had used the distraction of the Scoobies discovering Anya among the captives to sneak up on the witches from behind.

The cold steel pressed against the back of her neck had surprised Willow too much for the redhead to be able to think of a spell that might save her.

"You bitch! Your little friends just destroyed my career. The blonde cunt and her pet vampire might be bullet-proof, but I bet you're not."

All color drained from her face; unable to breathe through her terror, Willow just stood there as if frozen in place, waiting for the bullet that would end her life. But when the shot rang out, there was no pain; instead, there was only the heavenly feeling of the pressure leaving her neck as the gun suddenly wasn't pressed against her anymore.

Hearing some of the soldiers cry out in surprise and disbelief, the Scoobies had stopped their fighting and turned to where the enemy's attention was focused. Even Willow, by then enclosed in her relieved girlfriend's arms, had been able to shake off her terror and turn around.

There he was, the man who had been prepared to end her life about something as relatively unimportant as his career. He was lying on the floor, blood still seeping from the head wound that had killed him.

Given that Willow was still alive, the discovery that Major Ellis wasn't had not been a big surprise for any of the Scoobies. The identity of her savior, on the other hand, had had them gaping in disbelief.

Just as the commandos prepared to launch an attack upon the supposed traitor in retribution, the man spoke. His authoritative voice stopped them in their tracks.

"Stand down, soldiers. This is Captain Graham Miller, Military Police. I am authorized to take over the command of this base until my unit arrives. Major Ellis was preparing to kill a civilian for unauthorized personal reasons, thus violating the terms of his command. I took the necessary steps to stop him. If any of you have a problem with that, you can denounce me to Colonel McClane when he arrives. Until he arrives, you will return to your quarters. Now!"

Relieved to be saved from further battle with the seemingly invulnerable blonde couple, the soldiers retreated, and Graham led the stunned Scoobies into the conference room.

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And so it was that the Scoobies found themselves sitting around the big table, waiting for the uncomfortable-looking soldier to begin his explanation.

Only Xander seems distracted from the drama of the scenario. In fact, he seems to barely notice his surroundings; he is focused instead on keeping a tight hold on Anya, as though he is scared that she might disappear again. To his great delight, the vengeance demon has yet to make a move to leave his embrace; however, she seems to have calmed down, and is now watching Graham with a calculating look in her eyes.

"Alright. Let's begin. First, I want to explain that, while you remember me as one of Riley's friends from the Initiative, that is not what I do anymore. After that organisation was shut down, someone in the upper ranks of the review board noticed that I had sent in several reports that should have lead to a thorough investigation of Professor Walsh's methods. As a result, I was asked to join the Military Police and operate as their man on the inside of Major Ellis' unit. There was still some fear that leaving officers once involved with the Initiative in command positions might end up coming back to haunt us."

At the unbelieving stares he receives, Graham hastens to explain further.

"I know you have difficulties believing me here, especially since it must seem to you that I didn't do anything to stop what was going on here before you intervened. It's not that simple, though. See, this installation started out as an observation base. Our orders were to keep an eye on the activity on the Hellmouth. It was believed that this unit could act as reinforcement for you in case it should open. In fact, part of our

orders required us to get in contact with the Slayer and her group to offer our services if you deemed it necessary."

At this, Buffy can't stay silent any longer.

"If that's true, then why the hell did you decide to spy on us instead of letting us know you guys were here? Fuck, the guys whose cameras you were using had nearly managed to kill some of us on numerous occasions. Their leader murdered his girlfriend, for God's sake. How could you sit there and watch and never even think of contacting us?"

Flinching at the fury in the Slayer's voice, Graham decides it might be best to tell group in front of him the full story, rather than the slightly altered version he had prepared. There really was no reason to try to spare Riley in this. After all, his involvement had been the main reason everything had gone so wrong, and Graham really didn't want to be at the receiving end of the blonde girl's anger should she find out he had lied to her.

"While we were still setting up the base, some of our technicians accidentally discovered the signal from one of the cameras you're talking about. They traced the signal and got a picture, but not knowing any of you by sight, they didn't know what to make of it. They showed it to Major Ellis, and he, of course, consulted Riley; Ri fed him some line about how you, Buffy, had obviously changed sides since you never would have considered a relationship with a vampire otherwise. Major Ellis bought it..."

"That's such crap, Graham! Riley knew about Angel even before we fought Adam. And I should know, since I'm the idiot that told him."

"I know that, Xander—he told me about it back then. The Major didn't know it, though, and he bought what Riley told him without question. Everything Ri said fit in well with his own ideas about demons, and he decided to use the access to the demons here on the Hellmouth to continue some of the research projects Professor Walsh started, I guess."

Shaking her head in confusion, Buffy wonders how a bit of deliberate misinformation could have led to all of this trouble. Voicing her question, she agrees to let the soldier continue his explanation.

"From there, things got only worse. The Major struck a deal with some armament companies. He agreed to complete the Initiative research they had been secretly funding in exchange for the promise of a well-paid position once he had finished his term in the military. At the same time, changes in the security system severed my contact to my unit, and that gave Riley the opportunity to pull his stunt with the eggs. You know what really happened there, right? That Spike didn't have anything to do with it?"

The Scoobies' agreement only furthers Graham's belief that he is doing the right thing in telling them the whole truth. Who knows what else they are already aware of, anyway?

"What you probably don't know, though, is that he claimed that his stunt was the result of an order by Major Ellis; the lie enabled him to enlist his unit help him. He even took one of his soldiers – Samantha Brown – with him on the mission so he could pretend that she was his wife. When the truth about the whole scam came out, he was in danger of losing his rank; to save his career, he offered to figure out a way to bring in a vengeance demon. You see, that had been one of the Major's main goals for a long time. He'd have been a rich man if he could have been the one to figure out how their teleportation abilities work."

Everyone in the room notices that the commando is by now trying to avoid looking in Anya's direction. Still, the man seems desperate to finish his story, so they stop themselves from calling him on it.

Gulping hard, Graham continues, "Vengeance demons are hard to distinguish from humans; they have the same body temperature as humans, and all of the same bodily functions, too."

"That's true. If you don't try to kill us, and we don't go into game face, no one can tell that we're not just another human. It's what makes our disguises so effective," Anya agreed, feeling compelled to agree with him.

"Exactly. When Riley saw the tape of the aborted wedding, he was sure you'd have returned to your former profession. He monitored you for long enough to be certain that you had become a vengeance demon again, and then he convinced Major Ellis to let him assemble a team to bring you and your friend in."

Upon hearing who was responsible for Anya's captivity, Xander finally loses his temper. Jumping up, he exclaims heatedly that he is glad to have been the one to kill his former friend.

Noticing the stunned and curious faces around him, the young vampire realizes that no one yet knew about his loss of control. Still seething, he explains what had happened earlier in his cell and is surprised to see none of the expected disgust on his friends' faces.

Delighted by the news of Captain Cardboard's demise, Spike can't stop himself from congratulating the whelp; his gesture earns him only a half-hearted slap on the chest from his mate. Apparently, even the Slayer couldn't deny that he had more than one reason to rejoice her former boyfriend's death.

Xander, on the other hand, barely notices the blonde couple's exchange, as he is solely focused on Anya. After distancing herself from him at the mention of the wedding earlier, she has now inched closer again and is now beaming at him, a look of pride in her eyes. He knows he should be bothered by her obvious happiness at

hearing he killed a human, but he can't seem to force himself to feel anything but elation that she seems to be softening towards him.

Anya is a demon, after all, and more than that she is a demon that has been held captive by the very human he killed. Why shouldn't she like the idea of her tormentor being gone? And hey, humans were grateful to judges for punishing criminals so they couldn't cause further harm, weren't they? Xander's inner musings are interrupted when Graham speaks up again.

"Alright. I can't say that I didn't hope to get a chance to convince Ri that he was doing the wrong thing here. I've heard his men talk, though; you did warn them over and over that you wouldn't be able to control your actions if they starved you. Professor Walsh did enough experiments that Riley should have known without a doubt that you were speaking the truth. If he chose to ignore that knowledge, I can't exactly blame you for what happened. And if you want to be proud of what you did, I can't really blame you... it's not like I can control your thoughts...."

"Oh, you could...."

Seeing the disapproving glares from her friends and her girlfriend, Willow hastily backpedals.

"Uhm, but... but you shouldn't, cause that'd be wrong...."

"It's ok, sweetie. We know you wouldn't do something like that again—not now. And you are right, it is possible. Now let's let Graham finish, OK?"

Relieved that Tara doesn't seem to be angry with her, Willow relaxes back into her girlfriend's embrace and nods at the commando to continue.

"Anyway, you guys attacking the base finally gave me the opportunity to contact my men—they're on the way as we speak. I'm pretty sure that what happened here will be the end of any government involvement with the demon world. My job right now is to figure out where to go from here, and what you guys are going to do. We need some sort of agreement on your part that you are not going to go public with what happened here."

The silence that follows Graham's announcement doesn't last long, as Anya shakes herself out of her stupor and straightens, looking the soldier square into the eyes.

"I want money—damages for the time you held me captive and did experiments on me. And you'd better make it a lot of money, or I'll arrange a meeting with some nice reporters who'd just love to hear what the army did to a defenceless woman."

No sound is heard in the room after the vengeance demon's exclamation until, slowly, first the vampires, then the Slayer, and finally even the two witches start chuckling. Soon they are all laughing out loud, grateful for the release of tension. What shocks them back into silence, though, is Graham's enthusiastic nodding at Anya's demands.

The soldier explains that it might actually be a good idea for her to go ahead with her plan to threaten to sue the army for damages. This way they would stand a better chance of avoiding a repeat of any Initiative-style operation, as the government and any involved companies would be threatened where it would hurt the most – their budgets.

Amazed that Anya's love of money should be what they need to finally get rid of the Initiative for good, the gang decides to keep their opinions to themselves and let the vengeance demon and the soldier work out how to proceed.

After the two come to an agreement about who Anya should approach with her demands, it doesn't take the group long to wrap up the meeting, all of them glad to finally be able to go home and rest.

Once outside the base, Halfrek, who had been silent throughout the meeting, grabs Anya's arm and suggests they return to the former's apartment.

Panicked that his girl might disappear again, Xander hurries after her.

"Anya, wait! Do... do you think we could maybe... talk some time? I know I hurt you terribly, but I'd like to explain. I'm not saying there's any reason that could possibly be good enough, and I don't expect you to take me back, but maybe you'd feel better once you see that it really wasn't about you...."

Anya's first instinct is to tell him to leave her alone; seeing that he seems to be sincere, however, and remembering that he had admitted to being glad he had killed a human when he found out that human had hurt her, she softens and decides to hear him out.

"Alright Xander, you get one chance. Meet me in front of the Magic Box tomorrow after sunset, and if you really want to make sure I believe you, have Willow or Tara do a truth spell on you beforehand. I'll still talk to you if you don't, but it'll be easier for me to believe you if you do—it's your decision. Oh, and bring money. You can buy me food while you explain."

Not waiting for his response, she turns and follows Halfrek back to her apartment.

Xander, on the other hand, stands frozen to the spot, the sentence "I have a date with Anya tomorrow!" repeating over and over in his head. He barely notices when his bemused friends finally give up on trying to get him to respond to them and simply drag the still-smiling vampire home.