

Deceptions

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Author's Note: This is set at the end of Season 2 on Buffy

Dedication and Deception

Xander made his way into the darkness of his grubby basement. He closed the door quietly, not that slamming the thing would rouse his drunken parents from their stupors.

As he had done nightly for nearly two years, Xander pulled the box from the hidey hole behind the water heater. He sat up his own personal altar with an efficiency borne of nightly practice.

When everything was in it's place, he went to his backpack and pulled out the spiral bound notebook that he had been writing in just an hour earlier. No one ever guessed that while he was researching for the demon of the week, that Xander had his own agenda.

Two years ago, he didn't know exactly what he was looking for, but the more research he did, the more accounts he found of it being done successfully. The problems with most of those stories is that they were vague about the spells used, if they mentioned them at all. But two years of work was about to pay off.

Tonight he had found a passage in one of the Watchers Journals that Giles kept locked away, presumably to prevent someone from doing this very thing. Buffy was facing a specially tough demon and Giles himself had asked Xander to look through this particular journal for any references. The journal entry referred to an ancient book of demonic rituals which Giles happened to have in the stacks of the library.

This was the reason that he never told any of them about his own motivation for joining the 'Scoobies'. Where else could he have access to a library of the occult, and the Watcher's Journals? And after two years of dedication, it finally paid off.

Xander looked carefully at the handwritten pages of the ritual that he would enact tonight. It had taken him hours to write down every detail of the ritual without Giles, Buffy, or especially Willow discovering what he was doing. He was too near to his goal to allow a screw up to ruin it all in literally the last hour.

As he finished reading through his own writing, he gathered the spell ingredients from his box. He had tried some thirty spells in the past two years, and had an impressive collection of spell-casting ingredients. Not that he had the same collection as Willow. Her spells were sparkly, fluffy bunny, white magic.

The demons of the underworld did not respect sparkly, fluffy magic. No, the demons of the underworld understood power and pain and grief and

blood. These were the things that were parts of Xander's spell-castings, not that Xander himself had a taste for such things. He just understood enough to know that these things were necessary to achieve his objective.

As he automatically ground foul smelling herbs and minced the organs and appendages of various beings necessary for the ritual, he let his mind drift back into the past. He sometimes thought that he was one of the few children of alcoholic parents who could look back on his childhood fondly. There was no doubt that they neglected him, and sometimes they were sober enough to be abusive, but at least in those days, all he had to do was leave the house to escape the horrors of his life. He was happily ignorant to the demons of the night.

He stopped his motion as he realized that all the preparation was done. It was finally time. He lit the candles, started the fire in the brazier, and as everything was set, he cast the circle, then began to chant.

The chant was in an ancient tongue that Xander didn't have any business being able to read, much less pronounce. But once again, years of research had paid off. Xander Harris, the screw up of the Scoobies, the Zeppo, had taught himself to read, write and speak the three demon languages he was most likely to need, and nobody knew.

At certain points during the ceremony he would add the different elements to the brazier. He had so much experience with this type of spell that he could read it like an equation. He had easily seen the trap written into the spell. A person reading the spell without understanding the language would have been liquified as a result. Xander could easily circumvent the trap and use the remaining spell to obtain his objective. He could see the balance of forces within the spell and the vacuum that was being created when the ritual was near completion. The forces of the underworld would have to fill the void that he had created. Now, in the final moments of the spell, it would be determined, with what.

He took the most precious item in his life into his hands; a small carved wooden box. He opened the lid carefully and put his hand inside. As his chanting was reaching it's crescendo, he sprinkled the precious dust into his cast circle.

The candles went out and the rumbling of an earthquake could be heard. Then again it could be thunder, because flashes of lightning were showing through the drawn shades of his basement windows.

Dark. Silence.

Then the sound of breathing in the darkness. Xander held his breath to be sure that it wasn't his breathing. It wasn't. With trembling hands, Xander felt through his pockets to find the lighter that he had used to light the candles.

Once he found it, he didn't seem to be able to make his fingers operate the thing properly. After a few seconds that seemed to be hours, he was able to light the lighter.

He slowly moved the lighter around until he was able to barely make out the body laying in the circle.

"Xander." a whisper of a voice came from the barely visible form.

With a trembling tear-filled voice of relief, Xander answered, "Jesse."

Duty and Deception

Xander looked at the sleeping form of his best friend and thought back on the night before. Jesse had appeared out of nothingness into the circle he had cast. As soon as he had realized that his spell had worked, he fumbled his way across the dark room and found the light switch. He had turned on the light to find Jesse's naked body laying on his basement floor.

Xander had run to him and dragged him onto the bed. He had intended to pick him up, but Jesse was heavier than he looked.

Once they were on the bed, Jesse had begun to shake and sweat. Xander had been worried for a moment until he had realized that Jesse was suffering from shock.

Xander had washed Jesse's face with a damp cloth and uttered soothing words to try and make his friend comfortable. Eventually, Jesse had quieted and fallen into a peaceful sleep.

Xander had carefully gotten out of the bed and put away his magic supplies hoping to never have to use them again. Then Xander had returned to the bed to protect his sleeping friend from whatever nightmares might decide to attack him in his sleep.

Xander had laid for hours beside his best friend with happiness and disbelief vying for control of his emotions. In the fullness of time, however; Xander also slept.

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Jesse awoke and looked wonderingly at Xander who was staring into space. His memories were vague. The last thing he could clearly remember was

being taken by vampires and bitten... and dying. After that was a foggy memory of pain, torture, and an agony of hopelessness because he had known that the torture would never stop. He had known that he would never get used to it, every cut, every burn, every bit of torn flesh had hurt like the first time...

Jesse snapped out of his remembrance and looked around. From his vantage point on Xander's bed, he could see Xander's basement. It wasn't exactly how he remembered it, but there was no denying that that's where he was.

When he shifted his weight to get into a more comfortable position, Xander focused on him. Jesse looked into his eyes and he could see something that hadn't been there before. A hardness that Jesse couldn't account for.

"Mornin." Xander said with a smile, and the hardness in his eyes became hidden behind joy.

"Mornin" Jesse responded, not knowing which of his thousands of questions to ask first.

"I guess we have some things to talk about? What do you say we have breakfast first, then we'll sit down and talk." Xander suggested.

Jesse just nodded his head, food sounded like a wonderful idea. Xander got out of the bed and grabbed a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt and dropped them on the bed at Jesse's feet. Then he started working in the kitchenette-like area of the basement, preparing scrambled eggs on the hot plate.

Jesse absently got dressed and stared at Xander preparing the meal in a daze. Then something caught his attention and he thought to himself, [Xander looks like he's older. How long have I been... gone? Dead?]

Xander placed the completed meal on the card/dining table and pulled out a folding chair in invitation to Jesse. "Breakfast is served Monsieur." Xander said with a horrible fake French accent.

Jesse smiled at the familiar antics of his friend, and was happy to know that at least some things hadn't changed.

They ate as men often do, with grunts, scrapes of silverware against the plates and the occasional slurp of something or another. Finally the meal was finished and it was time to talk.

"Was I dead?" Was Jesse's choice of first question.

"Yeah. Tell me what you remember. I can fill in the rest." Xander replied sadly, reliving the pain of staking VampJesse for the millionth time.

Jesse thought for a second then said, "I remember being captured, and being bitten by a vampire, was that for real?"

"Yeah, as real as it gets. They killed you. They turned your body into a vampire like them. I killed it." Xander said, trying not to break out into tears, that being SO not a man thing to do.

"How long?" Jesse asked distractedly.

"About two years." Xander answered, getting himself back under control.

"I've been dead for two years? How am I back?" Jesse asked, beginning to panic.

Xander noticed and spoke calmly, hoping that it would calm his friend, "I brought you back."

"But I'm supposed to be dead. Right? What are you doing raising the dead?" Jesse asked, his panic escalating.

"Jess, you died an unnatural death at the hands of a vampire. That's why I was able to bring you back. If you'd been shot in a convenience store robbery or hit by an ice-cream truck, I would have been sad, but I would have accepted it. But you weren't. You were killed by an unnatural being, drained of your blood and your body was filled with a demon... "

Xander looked at Jesse to see that he was getting through, then continued, "I killed the demon. And as soon as I could figure out how to do it, I brought you back because you're my best friend and you didn't deserve to die."

Jesse could see that Xander meant it and sat dumbfounded for a few minutes, trying to make sense of it all.

Xander watched as Jesse tried to process the information. He figured that he would wait for Jesse to ask about the things that he needed to know, so as not to overwhelm him.

"What about my parents?" Jesse finally asked.

"They moved away from Sunnydale about a year and a half ago. I don't know where. After you... died. The police assumed that you ran away from home. Your parents thought that I had something to do with it and wouldn't talk to me." Xander said with pain in his voice.

"I guess they donated your clothes to charity before they left because I found some of your things at a used clothing store." Xander said as he got

up from the card table. He went to the far end of the basement and came back with a large cardboard box and set it beside Jesse. "I bought back all the things that I could find."

Jesse bent down and opened the box. He looked through the entire box, item by item without saying a word.

Xander just sat back on his chair and watched, waiting for the next volley of questions that he knew were on the way.

"What am I going to do now? I mean, everything... everyone... it's all gone." Jesse said with a lost tone to his voice.

"I've had two years to think about that, and I have some options for you. If you want to stay here in Sunnydale, then you'll have to use your real name and we'll come up with a cover story for where you've been. If you want to start a new life, I know some people... sort of... who can make that happen. We can get you all the identification that you need to cover any story you want to make up." Xander said, as if reciting a speech.

"How do you know about stuff like that, what have you been doing the past two years?" Jesse asked, surprised by the look of determination that fell over Xander's face.

Xander said with hardness in his voice. "I know about that stuff because I've been working with a group of people who fight supernatural creatures, like the ones who killed you. I've been keeping my mouth shut and learning everything that I would need to know for when you came back. Buffy and Willow..."

"Willow? How is she?" Jesse interrupted.

"Willow's fine. She's become involved in magic, Wicca, she uses it to fight the bad guys. And she's met someone, this really cool guy named Oz who's in a band... and he's a werewolf." Xander ended quietly.

"Werewolf." Jesse parroted in shock.

"Yeah, things aren't like they were before you died. There are a lot of things out there that want us dead. Demons and stuff. Maybe it's because I've been hanging around with Buffy but..."

"Buffy... Uh... Summers? The new girl from LA?" Jesse interrupted again.

"Yeah, her. She's the slayer. Let's see if I remember this... 'The one girl in all the world with the strength and skill to fight the forces of darkness...' or something like that, I can't believe I don't remember it. I've heard it enough times." Xander said distractedly.

"So you and Willow and Buffy fight the demons?" Jesse asked disbelievingly.

"Well, there's also Giles, Buffy's watcher... " Xander noticed the confused look on Jesse's face and clarified. "This British guy who trains Buffy to fight and tells her how to kill different demons and stop apocalypses and stuff. And Oz helps us sometimes... Oh, and Cordelia shows up now and then."

"Cordelia Chase? The beauty queen fights demons?" Jesse asked, not buying that one for a minute.

"Well, she doesn't actually fight the demons, she helps with the research sometimes. Oh yeah, and there's dead-boy... "

"Dead-boy?" Jesse asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, Angel, he's like this 250 year old vampire who's cursed with a soul. So he helps us sometimes to make up for the crap he did as a demon." Xander said nonchalantly.

"Okay, this is getting to be a little too much for me. You're friends with a slayer, a werewolf, and a vampire?" Jesse asked, with his voice raising into the hysterical range.

"I didn't say I was friends with Angel, I've been treating him like crap since I met him. I couldn't be friends with any vampire after what they did to you. But I couldn't bring you back without the watcher's journals and magic books, so I had to put up with him since the others wanted him around."

Jesse nodded in acceptance. Then he asked, "So what are you going to do now? I mean, if you've been hanging around with them so you could bring me back... well, I'm back... so what now?"

"I don't know. I haven't made any definite plans because I need to know what you want to do. If you're going to stay in Sunnydale, then we'll have to decide how we want to deal with the Scoobies. If you don't, then it isn't an issue." Xander said matter-of-factly.

"Since I haven't really met any of the... Scoobies?... except for Willow, I guess I should meet them before I make any decision about that. I mean, we can always leave anyway, right?" Jesse asked with hope.

"Right." Xander said emphatically.

"But they know I died, don't they? I mean Willow knows." Jesse asked with his spirits falling.

Xander noticed his friends darkening mood and said, "Yes, they know, and the only way I can explain your being here is to tell them the truth." [As little of it as I can get away with.] He thought to himself.

"And what is the truth?" Jesse asked, not sure he wanted to know.

"That I found a spell in one of Giles' books that could bring you back." Xander said simply.

"That's it? You resurrected a guy who's been dead for two years, and that's all you're going to tell them?" Jesse asked suspiciously.

"Yep. That's all I'm telling them. I've had to put up with their crap for two years, so this once, they can just deal." Xander said with finality.

Then, Xander was struck with inspiration. "Let's get out of this basement. We need to get our minds off this serious stuff for a while. You haven't seen the town for two years. And it's Saturday so we HAVE to go to the mall. We can get all serious and stuff when we get back."

Jesse saw Xander's enthusiasm and couldn't help but join in. "Okay, I guess I've got my clothes right here. So I'll be ready in a minute."

Xander walked over to his dresser and opened the top drawer. He pulled out a pouch on a necklace and handed it to Jesse. "Put this on."

Jesse took the necklace and smelled the pouch, "It smells like my grandmother, I'm not wearing this." He said emphatically.

"Then your grandmother wasn't bothered by werewolves, thoth demons or Z'nor because this is a ward to keep them away." Xander said snippily.

Jesse looked into Xander's eyes and said, "I'm guessing that there is like zero chance of me getting out of this basement without this. Right?"

"Right!" Xander said with steel in his voice.

Jesse put the grandma smelling pouch necklace on and tucked it inside his shirt. Within moments he was ready to leave.

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Jesse couldn't believe how many things had changed in the past two years. Most of the stores that he remembered in the mall were gone, and there were so many new ones that he couldn't keep track.

As they walked away from the food court, Xander heard a familiar voice say, "What is that smell?"

He turned just in time to see Oz running for the public restroom. And in front of him was a pale, shaking Willow.

She finally gasped out, "Jesse?"

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A huge smile broke across Jesse's face and he ran to Willow and pulled her into a big hug. Willow stood stiffly with wide eyes and a terrified look on her face. Xander noticed the look and fished in his shirt for his cross and took it from around his neck.

"Don't worry Wil, he's not fangy." Xander said as he pressed the cross to Jesse's neck, right in front of Willows shocked gaze.

As Jesse released Willow, she started sputtering, "How? How? I mean, you said... two years... oh God... How?"

"Does it matter? He's back, can't you just be happy for him?" Xander asked seriously.

"Yes it matters! Absolutely it matters! To do this takes magic. I mean the so not happy kind of magic. So yes it matters very much!" Willow said with increasing volume.

Xander quickly said, "You might want to tone it down, Wil. Public place, non-Scoobs. We can tell you all about it later if you want. I was thinking of taking Jesse to the Scooby meeting tonight before we go Bronzing. I mean, we ARE meeting at the library in about an hour, aren't we?"

"Uh... Yeah. Meeting tonight." Willow said, refusing to take her amazed eyes off Jesse.

"We're going to go now, tell Oz that I'm sorry about making him sick. I didn't expect to see you today, so I made a ward to protect Jesse from werewolves. I mean, it IS Oz's time of the month tonight, isn't it?" Xander said matter-of-factly.

"Uh... Yeah. How'd you learn to make a ward powerful enough to effect him so strongly?" Willow asked with professional curiosity.

"Martha Stewart, I saw her making this thing she called a sachet, and I just substituted wolfsbane for lavender. It seems to work." Xander said as he looked to the far end of the food court where Oz was standing with a paper towel pressed firmly over his nose and mouth.

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Xander and Jesse made their way into the school. Xander had made a point of putting Jesse's ward in the car so Oz wouldn't be affected.

As they walked into the library, silence fell over the room. [Here it comes.] Xander thought as he led Jesse over to the table for a seat.

"Hey G-man, I don't think you ever met my best friend, Jesse. Jess, this is the G-man." Xander said with goofy smile #3 firmly in place.

"Rupert Giles, a... pleasure to meet you." Giles said stiffly to Jesse sparing an irritated glance at Xander.

"I hope no one minds that I brought Jesse along, I mean, he already knows about the whole vampire thingie so I thought he would fit in." Xander switched smoothly to goofy smile #4.

"He's dead." Buffy said shortly.

Xander turned and took Jesse's wrist and looked up as if he were honestly taking Jesse's pulse. "Nope, alive and kicking." Xander said with a smile.

"Kicking your ass if you don't let go of my hand." Jesse said seriously to Xander. The hand was immediately released and Xander affected a wounded look.

Willow let out a chuckle despite herself. Buffy shot her a venomous quelling glance then spoke again. "How is he alive? He was killed two years ago." She said with attitude.

Xander got a conspiratorial look on his face and leaned across the table to her. He mock whispered, "I think he can hear you. He's sitting right here." Then he sat back into his chair and spoke normally, "It's not polite to speak about him as if he's not."

"Just answer the damned question." She snapped, unaccustomed to having Xander stand up for himself.

"Fine, I found a book in the stacks that had a resurrection spell, so I used it to get Jesse back." Xander said simply, then sat back with his arms crossed across his chest.

"Which book did you use?" Asked Giles with curiosity.

"I dunno, I think the title was about twenty-two letters long and didn't have any vowels. What does it matter? It worked. Jesse's back." Xander concluded.

"It matters because you were doing magic. You could've raised a zombie or a demon or hurt someone." Buffy said in a near scream.

"Could'a would'a should'a. What's the diff? Jess has been alive since last night, he hasn't tried to suck my blood or eat my brain all day so I figure it worked. Why don't you stop trying to force me into saying I was wrong for bringing him back? I wasn't. Jesse's alive and it was the right thing to do. And you, Buffy, are cordially invited to get off my ass about it."

Buffy sat in shocked silence for a minute, giving Willow a chance to ask her own question. "What was the spell that you used?"

"I already told Giles, it was in one of those books over there." And he pointed in the general direction of the stacks. "I can't really tell you much more, you know I don't retain the things I read." And a quick transition into goofy smile #2.

Seeing that this was going as he expected, Xander stood and addressed the group as a whole. "The only people who know that Jesse died are in this room. In the name of whatever friendship we ever had I'm asking that you never mention it again. We're going to say that Jesse ran away from home two years ago and now he's back. If you ever met his family, you'd have no problem believing that."

Seeing that they were all paying attention, he dropped the goofy persona completely and continued. "If you force me to choose between the Scoobies and Jesse, I'll tell you now, I'll pick Jesse. If for no other reason than the fact that he would never ask me to choose. Now as to HOW I brought Jesse back, let me put it to you this way. I'm will never willingly tell you how I did it. And if you attempt to bully me or magic me into telling you, you'll regret that you ever screwed with me. Willow and Giles have some idea of the dark forces involved in necromancy. I don't like to use them, but I can."

Then he put the goofy smile back onto his face, making it evident that the goofy persona was an act. "I'm going to go to the Bronze. They have a live band tonight. Jess, Wil, wanna come with?"

Jesse nodded in stunned silence as Willow said in a trance-like voice, "I'm going to stay with Oz."

Acting as if it were any other day, Xander said, "See you guys later."

After the exit from the school was complete Xander broke out into a fit of laughter. In about half a minute, Jesse was laughing to as he remembered the looks on their faces.

Finally Xander was able to speak again, "Oh God Jess, you don't know how long I've wanted to do that."

"You did it very well." Jesse said with a smirk.

"C'mon, I was serious about the live band." Xander said as he opened the trunk of his car.

He handed two stakes to Jesse and took two for himself. Then they drove off to enjoy the nightlife of Sunnydale.

Desire and Deception

Jesse and Xander arrived at the Bronze just after sundown, just as the party atmosphere started to get into full swing.

They ran into a few people who Jesse remembered. Xander just told them that Jesse ran away from home and finally decided to come back. No one had any problem with that explanation and went on as if he was never gone... dead.

They drank sodas, played pool and just generally hung out. After they had been there for about four hours, a dark man walked into the club with Buffy.

Xander pulled Jesse to his side and said, "That's Angel, the vampire I told you about."

Jesse watched as the dark man walked around the room with Buffy, looking completely out of place. A beacon of depression in a room full of joy.

"Why does she hang around with him. It's like he sucks the fun right out of the room." Jesse asked Xander with curiosity.

"You noticed that too? I don't know, all I can figure is that there is some kind of forbidden thrill for them. What with him robbing the cradle and her robbing the coffin... Personally, I think she could do better... actually, so could he." Xander said with a smirk.

Buffy noticed Xander and Jesse at a table and dragged Angel over to talk to them.

"Are you guys having a good time?" Buffy asked politely, the question being rhetorical, though she didn't consciously realize it.

She was surprised to have the question answered with something other than the obligatory 'fine'.

"We are having a GREAT time. This band is totally ON tonight and Jess has been kicking ass at pool!" Xander said with a look of complete joy on his face.

Buffy and Angel were both taken aback by Xander's happiness. In the past two years, they had only ever seen him under a blanket of gloom, making the occasional nervous bad joke to break the constant tension.

"Angel, would you mind if I asked Buffy to dance?" Jesse asked politely, barely containing his own joyous attitude.

"Um, no, that would be fine." Angel said, as surprised that he had been asked politely as he was by the question itself.

"Buffy, would you allow me the honor of this dance?" Jesse asked Buffy with a gentlemanly bow.

Buffy giggled despite herself and accepted Jesse's offered arm as he led her to the dance floor.

Xander noticed a slight look of concern fall over Angel's face. Reflexively he said, "Don't worry Angel, Jesse has just been wanting to dance for the past few hours and hasn't had the balls to ask any of the girls who were here. He won't make a move on her."

"What did you call me?" Angel asked carefully.

"Angel? Oh, yeah, sorry about that whole 'Dead-boy' thing. While Jesse was dead, I hated all vampires for taking my best friend away from me..." Xander trailed off and ended in a shrug.

"And now you don't?" Angel asked, not believing that Xander could turn off his hatred like a switch.

"Jesse's back. It doesn't seem important anymore. I just realized that I don't have any reason to hold on to all that hate and junk. So I hope that you won't miss the cuts and digs that I usually do around you... I just don't feel like it anymore." Xander said simply with a serene honest smile.

Angel was surprised by the open honesty and responded without thinking, "I think I'll be just fine without them... but some of them were pretty funny." Angel said with his own smile.

"Maybe, but now I see that they were meant to hurt you and Buffy. That was wrong of me... What can I say, I was hurt, so I wanted to cause hurt in response. Real mature, huh?" Xander said as he leaned comfortably against the table.

"Don't worry about it. I think at seventeen, you're more mature than I was." Angel said seriously.

"You had a misspent youth? The serious master vampire?" Xander said in real amazement, then cast a conspiratorial glance as he asked, "Tavern wenches and ale, huh?"

Angel was stunned by the question and apparently the truth showed on his face.

"I was right? Oh Angel, I never suspected that you had a childhood, much less that you were ever my age." Xander said and began laughing.

There was no trace of malice or derision in Xander's laugh, only pure unfettered joy. Angel had never heard Xander's true laugh before and was smiling without knowing it.

Jesse and Buffy joined Xander and Angel at the table.

"Are you up for another dance?" Xander asked Buffy before she could be seated.

She cast a questioning glance at Angel who must have signaled his approval because she responded, "Sure, let's go."

Jesse took a drink of his soda and looked at Angel carefully.

"Xander says you're a vampire." Jesse said in an informational tone.

Angel nodded.

"He also said you got cursed with a soul, so you don't bite people anymore." Jesse said after taking another drink.

Angel nodded again.

"That's cool. I mean, not the curse thing... the no biting thing. Anyways, what do you do when you aren't avoiding sunlight?" Jesse asked as he finished his drink.

"What do you mean?" Angel asked, trying to follow the boy's rambling conversation.

"I mean, when you aren't sleeping, what do you do to fill your eternal existence?" Jesse said bluntly.

Angel was shocked by Jesse's blunt question and said, "Nothing really. I help Buffy fight demons sometimes but..."

"That explains your mood then." Jesse said as if he had it all figured out.

"What?" Angel asked in confusion as much as amazement at this boy.

"You don't have anything to fill your days except thinking and rethinking your thoughts and stewing your emotions until every last bit of flavor has been exhausted from them." Jesse said as he made a drink motion to Xander who was coming back from the dance floor.

Xander nodded and went to the bar, taking Buffy with him.

"Why are you telling me this?" Angel asked, truly confused.

"If I'm going to be hanging out with Xander's friends, I need to get to know them. I was just trying to get a handle on where you're coming from." Jesse said simply.

Angel thought about it and the things Jesse said did seem to make sense.

"Just a suggestion. Get some hobbies, write a book, get a job, do something to fill your days... or nights... it gives you something to look forward to, and something to distract you from your own thoughts. If it doesn't work, don't do it anymore, but I bet you'll be feeling a lot happier with your life... err, existence... if you aren't just sitting around brooding while you wait for the sun to burn out." Jesse said and a look of happiness came over his face as Xander and Buffy returned to the table.

"What have you two been talking about?" Xander asked Jesse as he sat drinks before them both.

"Oh, I was just telling Angel how I think he should run his life... existence... can we just call it life? I mean we all know he's dead, but it will just make conversation easier." Jesse asked everyone at the table.

Everyone nodded in acceptance and Jesse took a drink of his soda.

Finally Xander couldn't contain his curiosity anymore and asked, "What do you think Angel should do?"

"I dunno, play the stock market, restore antique cars, woodworking, it doesn't really matter, just something." Jesse said with an honest expression.

Xander thought about it for a minute before saying, "You should think about it Angel. It just might do you some good to do something different. Have you ever thought of being a private detective? They work mostly at night and investigating mysteries can really consume your mind."

Buffy was stunned by the conversation, especially because Angel looked as if he were really considering it.

"We have to be going." Buffy finally said, giving Angel the 'now' look.

"But it's still early." Xander commented.

"A slayer's work is never done. I promised Giles that I'd patrol tonight." She said matter-of-factly.

"Well, thanks for the dance. See you in school on Monday." Xander said as Buffy and Angel left the room.

"Angel isn't such a bad guy." Jesse said, giving an inquiring look at Xander.

"No, I guess not. By the way, good call on the 'too much free time' thing. Anyone would be broody with two hundred fifty years to sit around and think." Xander said as he looked around the room.

"Yeah, I call 'em like I see 'em." Jesse said, following Xander's gaze to the open pool table.

As one, the two friends got up from the table and headed back to the pool tables for yet another game.

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Jesse reflected on his day. His first day of being reborn. Xander had taken him to the mall, to the Scoobie meeting and then to the Bronze.

The entire day had been one long adventure. He had been nervous about meeting Xander's friends, but now he felt pretty good about it. Buffy and Angel weren't so bad and Willow was pretty much her old self, maybe just a little more serious.

He turned his head to look at Xander sleeping beside him in the sofa bed. Xander had always just been there, always supporting him, always encouraging him to follow his dreams. And more importantly Xander had always been honest with him.

Honesty, that was the problem he was having. He felt like he was lying to Xander every time he opened his mouth and said anything except, 'I love you.' But could he honestly tell Xander what he was feeling and not be rejected by him. What if Xander didn't want to be his friend anymore. Then he went from a place of feeling to a place of thinking and realized that Xander would NEVER reject him as a friend. The absolute worst that he would do is say no to his advances, but their friendship would never be in doubt.

"Xan." Jesse whispered as he shook Xander's shoulder gently.

"Jess?" Xander asked sleepily.

"I need to talk to you about something." Jess said with worry showing through his voice.

Xander was immediately awake upon hearing the serious tone of Jesse's voice.

Turning in the bed, to look Jesse in the eyes, Xander quietly asked, "What about?"

Jesse reached deep into himself and dredged up every shred of courage he ever had and said, "Us."

Seeing the concerned look on Jesse's face, Xander's mind raced through a hundred possible meanings for the two letter word.

"I mean... God Xan, I guess I mean I'm gay cause all I want to do is take you into my arms and kiss you right now." Jesse blurted out, looking like he was halfway between preparing to take a punch and bursting out in tears.

Xander could see the confusion and distress in his friend. In a comforting tone he said, "Come here."

A long hug of comfort and support followed. As Jesse made a move to kiss Xander, he was shocked to hear Xander say, "Not yet."

Puzzled, Jesse pulled away to look into Xander's face, waiting for an explanation.

"Jesse, you know that you're my best friend and nothing is ever going to change that, right?" Xander said carefully.

"Yeah." Jesse said, feeling his heart sink in his chest.

"I don't know how I feel about doing something like this. I'm not saying 'no', I'm just saying, 'not yet'. Jess, I need some time to understand how I feel. Can you give me time?" Xander said seriously.

"Yeah, I can do that." Jesse said, happy that at least it wasn't a no.

"By the way, the whole hugging thing... I'm good for that. It's just the rest... kissing and stuff... I need a little time to deal with that part. Okay?" Xander asked, afraid that he might have hurt his friend.

"Hugging is fine. But will you promise me something?" Jesse asked seriously.

"Sure, what do you want." Xander asked with equal seriousness.

"Will you tell me as soon as you've figured it out? I mean, I just need to know if I should have any hope of this going somewhere or not." Jesse said and turned to look away.

"Jess, I won't keep you up in the air any longer than I have to. Just let me be sure before I jump into this. Maybe you should think about it too... I mean, you just came back to life and everything you ever knew is pretty much gone except for me... please be sure that you want me for me and not because there is no one else left." Xander said sadly.

"Yeah, I guess we'll both be doing some thinking... but you said the hugging is okay... right?" Jess asked to be sure.

"Oh yeah, the hugging is very okay." Xander said with a smile and pulled Jesse close to him.

They both laid silently, holding on to each other, thinking their own thoughts until they drifted off to sleep in each others arms.

[The End]