

Maps: Sappho's Mix (v 2.0)

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Summary: Lint's "Maps", remixed. Faith and Xander meet, in a slightly different fashion. Post-"Dirty Girls". Assume some changes in "The Killer In Me" and "Get It Done".

Dedicated to the beauty that is Lint, for "Maps" and "Static"; and
to Unconventional Shippers, for thinking outside the box.

Most nights the hole in his head doesn't matter. This is one it does, when the empty space feels bigger than it has any right to and his sinuses start to back up with spring pollen; he changed the filter on the furnace just last week and it still seems to coat the inside of the entire house, Dawn's speculations on demon mold notwithstanding. The pills are contributing to the groggy as well, in a way that would be enjoyable without the words of the discharging doctor echoing in his head: sympathetic, headshrinking nonsense about 'violation of bodily integrity', delivered with professional concern and certainty. That kind of caring he can live without, would rather forget. He's in enough shock already.

Also, witnessing unexpected whammies of this proportion will do that. He's not sure if it qualifies as worse than lips of Spike, but there is most definitely a moratorium on blind jokes for the foreseeable future.

His hand trails the wall as he moves down the hallway, hoping not to stub his toe again, or the Slayers-in-training haven't left edged weapons lying about. Trying to walk softly is a lost cause when roughly ten percent of the house's inhabitants can hear a mouse fart during a thunderstorm, but years of unwelcome practice have made him sneakier than the average bear. Anya keeps dropping little hints about her door being unlocked and her roommates having sleep disorders that prevent them from hearing adults having sex, no matter how loud or passionate. He's grateful for the gesture; he's just not sure if it's more than that, or even which way he'd prefer it.

He makes his way to the bathroom without incident, finds the switch and shuts the door, doing a very good job at not thinking about what lies ahead. He even manages to remove the bandage without making a sound, but when it's time to look in the mirror all he can do is stand there with his head bowed, clutching the sink until his knuckles are as white as its porcelain surface.

His forearms tremble as a single crimson tear hits the curved basin in a starburst. He watches the stain spread, a tiny stream of his life trickling down the drain. Two pills before dinner, more food than he'd wanted all while he wished in silence for a beer, hearing Jiminy Cricket shake her finger inside his head. Pills and beer, bad combo. Roger that, Buffy-boss. Only some lessons you don't get to learn twice.

The slightest sound makes him start, and he almost catches his reflection before he registers Faith standing in the doorway. Her face and forearms are still bruised from whatever went down in LA, hair wild and tousled; she looks almost small and delicate, and so out of place in an oversized white nightshirt instead of denim and dead cow.

She meets his ruined gaze without flinching. "You'll put your eye out."

He can't believe she said it, but part of him is still fighting a smile. "At least you

didn't call me kid."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

So, no witty banter. But nothing says you can't be witty in a serious way. "Never would have pegged you for a Christmas Story gal."

"Major Ralphie fan." She doesn't even look embarrassed, at least not about her taste in movies. "You know me. Always wantin' what I can't have."

If he lets go he'll fall, but he just wants to sit down. He wishes his legs were as steady as he sounds. "I had this whole speech prepared, for if you ever came back."

"And?"

He finally trusts himself to relinquish his grasp on the sink. "After the latest Buffy peptalk and the resulting carnage?" His fingers curl around a beer bottle, or making a fist. "Let's just say this little carpenter is all speeched out."

Her eyes flash, but her voice remains calm and reasonable. Just like his.

"This ain't no tea party, Xan. You put your ass on the line for her for what, eight years now? And you just now figured out job safety ain't in the fine print?"

He turns a little in the light and she does flinch, whether at the mess of what was his left eye or the look in the one that remains. Something absolutely does need to be said, if only he could think of it, but the insistent throb of his socket mocks the far-off promise of Percocet. Then another red splash hits the tub and her hands are on him; as strong as Buffy's, just a little bigger and rougher, holding him upright in one arm while she opens the medicine chest.

He doesn't want to cling to her, but it feels so good in so many ways, and he supposes if you can't trust yourself to speak you may as well concentrate on breathing. Always start with the basics.

She lowers him to the tub again, making sure he's steady before letting go and looking through the cabinet. Carefully picking and choosing a kit, assembling it on the sink and toilet. Plenty to choose from. Never let it be said they don't keep a well-stocked larder of disaster.

"So when did you get your degree in candy striping?"

He's sort of sorry even before he sees her shoulders momentarily freeze, and he can't help the twist of fear in his gut. Call it primal instinct, but some part of him will probably always respond to her, and not Buffy, as Cave Slayer.

"Logged a few hours in the infirmary." Her tone is deceptively calm, but when she turns round, those dark shadows under her eyes are screaming more than lack of sleep. Maybe just yelling, but definitely not happy shadows. "They don't let you in there 'til you earn it. Screw up once, you're out. Unless you come back the hard way."

All those boxes and bottles and instruments laid out between them, and even if he did trust her it looks just as much torture display as surgical theater. He's having trouble keeping his balance and the edge of the tub feels awfully thin and slippery, much like the conversational razor he finds himself straddling. His immediate response would just normally be *So, you ever screw up?*, or something equally charming and – he will *not* think 'Anya-like'.

"Give it to me straight, Doc. Will I ever –"

"Xander, let me." Her voice is soft, but it's no less a command. "You shouldn't have to. Not yet."

She's trying to make it easy, and it shouldn't be this hard. But she shouldn't be killing his patented flippant remarks, his only by-God genuine and unique superpower; shouldn't be kneeling before him like some naughty nun fantasy but almost innocent in that damn nightshirt, giving him that look he'd searched for in vain just before she threw him out like a used rubber, the one he'd dreamed of seeing even after she tried to choke it out of him.

"I saw you."

He somehow sounds calm, not accusing in the least; her expression doesn't change though she obviously gets it. For protocol's sake, he adds the unnecessary. "With her."

She doesn't flinch, or pull away, or darken her brow, or any of the thousand things he was expecting. Just watches him, until he actually has to look away. Note to self – never play poker with this woman. Maybe a glass eye would help, give him the edge of misdirection.

"That what this is about?" The aint-got-time-for-shit vibe comes through loud and clear, too worn out to care about whatever he's throwing her way. He bites back an immediate, resounding confirmation.

"I don't know." *Oh no, no mixed signals here.* He clears his throat to say something, always mindful of a house full of people and thin walls, but she interrupts.

"You figure it out, let me know. 'Til then –" She holds up the disinfectant. "Unless you got a problem with it. But don't go mixin' your problems up."

He sags, limp as a dishrag. "It's not that I don't trust you –"

"With you, or her?"

He truly can't think of any response to that. She just watches him, and he wonders what she sees.

She picks up a gauze pad, holds his gaze while she upends the bottle on it.

"You don't want to leave it exposed for too long." Her tone is soft, conversational. Finally, he nods.

She straddles the tub beside him, and any fleeting sexual thoughts are dispatched at the touch of the wet gauze. He stiffens and his fingers grip the tub in a futile gesture; his breath catches once and then his good eye squanches shut and he has to try with all his might to not scream until his throat bleeds too. Liquid seeps into his brain, illuminating with unholy fire, her other hand cradling the back of his head and holding him steady as she dabs gently but firmly at the wound. He has no idea how many minutes or years pass before he notices she's finally stopped.

Through the haze of pain he hears the rustle of packaging, paper tearing, then the feel of her hands on his face, applying a fresh pad. He opens his eye, one tear running down his cheek as he draws a shaky breath.

"Just keep tellin' yourself how wicked dangerous you'll look with an eyepatch."

Her smirk is right up there with the ghost of Faith's past, and he shivers even while cracking a smile of his own. She halts in taping up the fresh gauze, looking positive she's said something wrong, her hand hovering over his cheek.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

He reaches up and takes her hand, offers his best manly grip of reassurance.

"I'm contemplating whether my Valentine's Day massacre would have been better or worse with you there. At this point, I'm thinking even odds."

She returns the squeeze and there's not a hint of pain, though he knows those fingers can bend steel.

"Actually, I *was* this close to givin' you another ride." She flashes a saucy, lopsided smile and for an instant he's back in that cheap, smelly motel room, feeling the miracle of connecting flesh. He can't help but stare even as he wonders if he might actually have taken her up on it.

"But, demon girl's still got a hefty jones for ya. Plus..." The smile fades as quickly as it arrived. "Just never seemed like the right time."

He blinks. There must be a word for something between a wink and a blink, just for the ocularly-challenged like himself. "So there's a right time for this?"

"'This' what?" She's still not angry, but it's definitely a challenge.

"I want to know, Faith. No – I *need* to know." He fixes all the power of his gaze upon her, going for the Eye of Sauron of stares. "You and her. Tell me it's not just skin."

That rocks her, but only for a second. When she looks at him, he sees too many emotions to count.

"What if that's what she wants?"

He's raising his voice, gets it back under control. "It's not what she needs."

"Xander –" She exhales loudly, throws her head back and closing her eyes for a second.

He's not the only one trying to stay calm. When she looks back at him, her voice is velvet steel.

"You're her best friend. I get that, I really do. Known each other since kindergarten, got all this history even B ain't a part of. You guys would do anything for each other, and all I've ever done is try to tear you apart. I tried to kill you - hell, both of you. Not exactly a stellar track record."

"That about sums it up." His hands shake, ever so slightly. "But you're on the atonement thing now. Like Angel."

"Please," she scoffs. "I'm *way* prettier."

He has to laugh – his checkered history with the vampire demands it. "Yeah, I can see you're going with the minimal brooding program."

"Still got a few trust issues." She folds her arms but doesn't look away, holds her head high.

"That's a two way street." He takes a deep breath. "I don't blame anybody but Caleb for what happened at the vineyard. We all had each other's backs going in there, we had no idea what to expect, and we had our asses handed to us. But I went in there trusting you, and Buffy. And the potentials, and – God help me for saying it – Spike."

"Yeah, well..." To him it looks like she wants to shove her hands in her non-existent pockets, make with the tough act. "I'll do better next time."

"That's what I said when I broke up with Cordelia." He has to look away, silently cursing. "Jesus. I should have a gun installed in my jaw so I can shoot my mouth off from the inside. Save other people the pain."

Her low chuckle reaches his ears. "Don't sweat it, wild man." He looks back, and the beauty of her smile is something to behold until she turns serious.

"So, we're cool."

"Yeah." He tests the concept for a moment, poking it like a tongue at a loose tooth and finding it solid. Hesitant at first, then firm. "Yeah. We are."

"But you still don't trust me with Willow."

And there it is in black and white; like the initial idea of Willow 'with' Tara, or any girl, not to mention the heaping helping of Buffy/Spike overtones that he'll never, ever get used to in a million years. "I don't know. It's just –" He exhales loudly, running a hand through his hair. "Would 'weird' be too strong a word? 'Cause I can..."

A fuzzy wave rolls through him, turning his vision grey for a split second.

"You okay?" And with those words he realizes she really does care, if it wasn't obvious before. He manages a nod.

"Pills kicking in. Must have gotten the ones with extra mule."

She extends a hand, which he isn't too macho to accept, watching as he tries to find his balance.

"I wouldn't say weird," she finally replies. "More like...strange. But good."

He regards her carefully, trying for that mystical certainty where you know truth the moment you hear it. But that's coming at it the wrong way.

"What if I ask her?"

She shakes her head, as if in awe. "Then you're a braver man than I am, gunga din. Red's a big girl, and I *really* don't wanna clean up what's left of you if you go givin' her the little lost lamb treatment." A subtle, sly grin. "Assumin' she doesn't slap you upside the head and start checkin' the closet for cameras."

And that's pretty much it, except –

"What about Kennedy?"

She lowers her head; he can see her fighting a guilty smile. "Hey, you snooze you lose." She tosses her head back and squares her shoulders, victorious and unashamed. "Way I heard, Junior Slayer had her chance and freaked when she got tapped for the dark mojo. Decided maybe she'd try for somebody safer. Can't say I blame her."

"And you're –" He balks at the word. Good or bad, *safe* is one thing Faith has never been. "You don't worry she'll do the same to you?"

"Could happen." A world of shrug. "If it does, I'll deal."

"Still living for today, then."

She leans in, brushes her lips against his forehead. "With a little more plannin' for tomorrow."

He watches her walk down the hall and disappear, quietly shutting the door. Lowered voices and happy whispers emanate from the room where Tara died, a light in the darkness.

He wonders how soon he'll go to Anya's room. He hopes it won't seem like saying goodbye.

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