



Pairing: Spike/Xander

Rating: NC-17

Disclaimer: I'm not Joss

Summary: Post series. Xander and Spike are in London, each struggling with his own (mental) demons. Can they help each other?

A/N: This fic is complete and is my first entry for 🍂[fall_for_sx](#). I will post all 5 chapters on Oct.1, spread out across the day. This fic incorporates the 🍂[hc_bingo](#) prompt "depression." Immense thanks to the rest of my team: 👤 [silk_labyrinth](#) for the beta-ing and 👤 [sentine](#) for the art!

Anchors

by
[Whichclothes](#)

Part One

Spike was gone for almost a year and nobody much noticed. He came and went pretty erratically anyway, arriving when he was short on money and prospects, leaving when the presence of a hundred Slayers and Buffy's platonic indifference became too much for him. So when Giles and Willow mentioned some nasty magical

activity going on in Copenhagen and Spike mumbled something about taking care of it, that was perfectly normal. And when he didn't return after a while, nobody at HQ was surprised. Everyone figured he'd reappear sooner or later. He always did. Hell, there had been over a year when everyone had thought he was dust in the crater formerly known as Sunnydale, and then he'd showed up again, fresh from some kind of apocalypse-lite in LA.

And sure enough, one evening there he was, stomping through the foyer in shiny new combat boots, making a mess of the walk-in freezer in his search for bags of blood. It was expected. Marta complained when he stayed in the third floor bathroom for hours, seemingly going through London's entire supply of hot water. Razi threw a fit when she discovered he'd used up her bar of Dead Sea exfoliating soap, which her mother had sent her from Israel for her birthday. Just more of the usual, and nobody commented on the wayward vampire at all, nobody asked him where he'd been. It was as if he'd never been gone at all.

But Xander...Xander noticed. Only one eye, and he was still the one who saw. Maybe it was because, as usual, nobody was paying much attention to him either. Oh,

they'd give him friendly nods or pats on the back, or they'd come running when things needed repair. But he had the feeling nobody was really *seeing* him. Not that there was much worth looking at.

Or maybe Xander noticed Spike because Xander was having trouble sleeping. He'd toss and turn for hours in bed or, worse, wake up at some inhuman hour and be completely unable to fall back asleep, no matter how exhausted he felt. So he was keeping vampire time, prowling the hallways restlessly, sitting in the lounge and staring blankly at the absolute shit that was on TV in the wee hours, fixing himself sandwiches and snacks that he had no appetite to eat.

As Xander haunted the lonely nighttime, he'd encounter Spike now and then, doing his own haunting. And Xander noticed the way that Spike sort of clung to the walls as he walked the corridors, keeping his gaze trained carefully on the threadbare carpets. There was no evidence of his cocky, hip-rolling prowl. Xander noticed, too, that on the occasions when everyone at HQ gathered for briefings or planning sessions, Spike wouldn't show up at all; or if he did, he stayed at the back of the room, silent. He never joined the crowd in the game room for [poker](#) or billiards. Neither did Xander, actually, but sometimes he'd pass

through, and Spike wasn't there. Xander was also fairly certain that Spike wasn't joining any of the demon-hunting sessions. In fact, Xander pretty much got the impression that Spike was hiding, although from what, Xander had no idea. That was okay; Xander was kind of hiding, too. And he wasn't sure what he was hiding from either.

The strange thing, though, the *really* strange thing in a lifetime of strange things, was the way Spike reacted when someone—anyone—spoke to him. Giles might ask him if he knew something about Ysengle demons, or Paola might tell him to get out of her way when she was—for the umpteenth time—moving in or out of Sabine's room, and Spike would flinch as if he expected to be hit and he'd whisper an answer, all without looking anyone in the eye.

It was all kind of disturbing, upsetting enough to make ripples in the thick, invisible bubble that seemed to surround Xander wherever he went. He tried to talk to some of the others about it, but Giles and Buffy were occupied with this month's end of the world; and Willow was madly in love with a woman from Beijing who'd recently joined her coven; and Dawn was in St. Louis, busily writing her thesis to get a master's degree in

something he'd never heard of before and didn't understand. He thought it might have something to do with molecules.

And really, Xander had nobody else to talk to.

In February, the Slayers decided to have a party. They came from so many places and cultures and religions that they'd long since given up on celebrating all the holidays, because there were too many; and they also didn't celebrate anyone's major holidays, because that resulted in too many people feeling left out. Instead, they seized on obscure celebrations, the kind Hallmark didn't make cards for. People in Turkmenistan celebrated something on February 19—Xander didn't catch what—and February was such a dreary month anyway, so that was the day chosen for the shindig.

There was cooking and there were decorations and costumes. There was music. Outsiders were invited—boyfriends and girlfriends, a few friends and family members. People who were accustomed to a little weirdness.

It was a big deal, a major event among young people whose lives were more often filled with fighting and pain

and the ever-present threat of death.

Xander used to enjoy helping out with the planning of these things, but this time he just couldn't get into it. Sometimes someone would come to him needing a hand: one of the big commercial stoves was malfunctioning; the lights in the training room, which was being transformed into party central, were flickering; a temporary stage needed building; someone forgot her Slayer strength when she was tossing some broken chairs out of the room and managed to shatter a window. And he'd do the tasks, albeit not up to his usual high standards, and then wander back to his room.

The night before the party he actually locked himself in his room and sobbed. He cried harder than he had when he'd learned that Anya had died, harder than when Buffy had died that time in Sunnydale, or Joyce. Harder than when Willow nearly ended the world. And he didn't have a frigging clue why.

The evening of the nineteenth, he heard the music even four stories away. It pounded through the floorboards of his room. He tried to sleep through it—laying down in his narrow bed and wrapping the pillow around his head—but that didn't begin to work. He tried to read, but all he

had was a three-month-old issue of *Uncanny X-Men* and his eye refused to focus on a single word. And that pretty much exhausted the possibilities of things to do in his room except jacking off, and he hadn't been in the mood to do that for months.

Nobody knocked on his door to see why he wasn't at the party.

Finally, he slipped on his shoes and his coat, and he made sure he was wearing his eyepatch—don't leave home without it! Out of habit, he almost tucked his trusty Emergency Stake in his back pocket, but then he decided not to bother. If something felt like taking a bite out of him that night, Xander didn't have the energy to fight it.

Maybe he even kind of hoped something did.

He crept down the back stairs, automatically noting the loose banister on the second floor as he went, and out the little door that was hidden in the alcove near the kitchen.

It was raining out, of course. It was always raining. But this was sort of a mist that didn't quite deserve an umbrella, but still made his skin wet and caused him to

shiver. It was the kind of weather that made Buffy complain about frizzy hair.

There were a few pubs not too far away, but he didn't go there. They'd be full of people and, while none of them would be likely to strike up a conversation with a brooding one-eyed American, he'd still have to see them and hear them, and he really didn't want to. So he just walked aimlessly, head down, staring at dirty, damp pavement. He didn't pay any attention to where he was going, and after a while he found himself in a sad little park, with leafless trees and scrubby shrubs and a worn statue of some guy with a sword. But there were benches, and one of them was under a decorative stone arch and was mostly protected from moisture, so he sat down on it, groaning heavily like an old man.

He leaned back against the wooden slats and closed his eye. Maybe he should move, go somewhere warmer and sunnier. *Not* California. But there were other sunny places, right? Arizona. Florida—the Sunshine State! Or...Africa maybe. No, no more Africa. The Middle East?

No. It didn't matter. His Aunt Steffy always used to say, "Wherever you go, there you'll be." She was right. It wasn't a comforting thought. He needed to find

someplace where he *wasn't*.

“You’re even more stupid than I thought.”

Normally Xander would have jumped, maybe even screamed. But lately his reflexes were dulled too, and he only pried open his eye and blinked at the apparition in front of him. “Spike,” he said, his voice flat.

Spike sat down on the other bench, the one that faced Xander and was almost close enough for their feet to touch. “’T’s the middle of the bloody night,” Spike said.

“Yep.”

“There are loads of young girls writhing in the training room, likely rat-arsed enough by now to not mind a missing body part or so.”

“Probably.”

Spike cocked his head. “You’re sitting by yourself in a park in the rain.”

“Not so much with the by myself anymore, am I?” He didn’t say it angrily, because he didn’t even have the

strength to dislike Spike.

But Spike winced and hunched his shoulders, then stood. “Right,” he said and turned to walk away.

“Hey, you don’t have to go,” Xander said.

Spike paused and looked back over his shoulder at him.

“We can be alone in the park in the rain together, I guess,” Xander said. The smile that accompanied the words felt alien to him.

Spike snorted softly. But he also came back and sat down again. He didn’t do it gracefully, and he didn’t sprawl all over the thing as if it were made specifically for him. He sat stiffly, like a man dreading something awful, like a dentist’s appointment.

After several minutes of silence, Xander said, “How come you aren’t there with the drunk girls and the booze?”

Spike shrugged. “Slayers. Make my skin itch.”

“But you live with a whole gaggle of them.”

Spike didn't answer, didn't even roll his eyes or lift an eyebrow. He just looked at Xander, his eyes oddly lifeless, his cheeks especially shadowed and hollow, like a corpse. For a moment, Xander wondered whether Spike was sick, and then he remembered and silently chastised himself for his own stupidity.

"Spike?" Xander began. "Where did you— Where did you live? When you lived, I mean." That wasn't the question he was originally going to ask.

Spike blinked at him a moment and then waved vaguely. "That way. About a half mile from here."

"Do you...have you gone back and visited your old house?"

"Did you ever go back to Sunnydale? Fancy taking a peek at the old place?"

"It's gone, Spike. It's a crater, remember?"

"T's gone," Spike said, then looked away.

The rain started coming harder then, splat splat splat on the sidewalk, on the stone arch, on the guy with the

sword. *Suss-swish* of a car going slowly up the street. Far away, a tinny siren howling.

Xander grew stiff and cold, and he thought that maybe he saw a slight lightening of the gray clouds. “Gonna be sunrise soon,” he said, standing creakily.

Spike just looked down at his boots, which were still unscuffed. Xander only then noticed that the vampire wasn’t wearing his duster; instead he had a denim jacket with a fleecy collar. “What happened to your coat?” Xander asked.

Spike looked up at him and worked his jaw but didn’t answer.

“Sunrise. Soon. Vamp flambé, remember? Been there, done that. Let’s go.”

Spike nodded, just once, and then stood and followed him back to HQ.

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“Is it a weight-loss regime?”

Xander looked up from the TV screen. "Huh?"

"Few years back and you were nearly as big as Peaches. Now your trousers are falling off."

Spike was noticing his pants? Weird. Xander shrugged. "Have you tasted the cooking around here? Slayer powers do not extend to the kitchen. And my skills pretty much end with dialing for pizza."

Spike sort of squinted at him and sat on the other end of the couch. "And watching telly at three in the morning?"

"I don't have to arm wrestle anyone for the remote. Which is good, because everyone in this place can kick my ass at arm wrestling, and I'm pretty sure that even includes Giles."

"Can I watch as well? I'll let you drive."

Spike asking for permission? Even weirder. "Sure. Nobody should have to watch *Under Siege 2* by himself."

They didn't speak to each other as the movie dragged on, but neither of them got up and walked away either. Not

even when the show ended and another came on, this one some sort of documentary about a battle in Scotland. Somehow, Spike's silent presence was soothing, and Xander was fully aware of how crazy *that* was, but nonetheless he felt more relaxed than he had in a long time, relaxed enough that eventually he fell asleep.

He woke up hours later. It was the longest stretch of uninterrupted sleep he'd had in months. Spike was sort of balled up on the other end of the couch, his head pillowed on one arm. Xander couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something unsettling about Spike's position. The vampire looked vulnerable. He looked as if he were curled up to protect himself from something.

Maybe vampires had some kind of special sense about being stared at in their sleep, because he jerked awake really suddenly and looked up at Xander, wide-eyed.

"Wha—?"

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you up."

Spike blinked a few times and stood. "'S all right. I reckon...reckon I ought to clear out, before the estrogen brigade descends."

Xander nodded. Together, they walked towards the stairway and they trudged slowly up. Spike turned off when they got to the third floor, but before he went he paused and frowned at Xander. Xander couldn't read him at all.

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Xander was leaning against his windowsill, staring down at umbrellas, when someone knocked on his door. With a heavy sigh—and a momentary impulse to just throw himself headfirst through the glass—he walked over and opened up. And then he groaned, because Willow and Buffy were standing there, and Willow was wearing her Resolve Face while Buffy had that little crease going between her eyebrows.

“To what do I owe the honor?” he asked.

They exchanged a look. “We need to talk,” Buffy said.

He groaned again. Never in the entire history of humankind had good news followed that particular sentence. Nobody ever said, “We need to talk. You won

the lottery!” or “We need to talk. I’ve discovered the cure for cancer!”

He moved aside and they entered.

They stepped over his piles of discarded clothes and dirty towels and fast food wrappers. They scowled in unison at his unmade bed and then Buffy walked over and opened the window, letting in fresh, cold air. They didn’t sit but he did, plopping down on his somewhat ripe bedding. “Yes?”

“The beard is a new look for you,” Willow said after a long minute.

He reached up and rubbed at his chin, and was surprised to find whiskers there. Huh. He guessed it had been a while since he shaved. Or showered. Or brushed his hair. Those things just...they took so much energy. “Do I look dashing? Maybe George Clooneyesque?” he asked.

Buffy shook her head. “More like Grizzly Adams. After a run-in with a bear. Xander, what’s wrong?”

“Whatta you mean? You’re the ones who came here. Second floor toilet clogged again?”

“We’re not here about a toilet, or about anything needing fixing. We’re here about you, Xan.”

“Me?”

Willow walked over and sat next to him. She put one hand on his shoulder. “Come on, sweetie. What’s wrong? We hardly see you anymore and you’re not our good old happy Xander. What’s up?”

He crossed his arms defensively. “You guys have been busy, and I’ve.... I don’t know. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” said Buffy.

“I am. Look, you guys should really be worrying about Spike. He’s—”

“Spike’s fine,” Buffy interrupted. “He always is. He’s the Energizer Vampire.”

“No, he’s—”

“Xander,” Willow interrupted. “Buff and I and, and Giles, we were kind of talking, and we thought maybe....”

“Maybe you’d be happier at North American HQ,” Buffy finished for her.

Xander tried to ignore the stab of pain in his heart. “You want me to go?” he asked.

“No! No, honey!” Willow flung an arm around him. “We just thought maybe you were homesick or something and—”

“And I’d be happier in fucking *Tulsa*? With Faith and Andrew?” He yanked himself out of her embrace and lurched to his feet, stomped to his window and looked out. If he squinted his eye the whole world went blurry and far away.

There was a very long silence behind him and he could almost hope that they’d crept away. But then Willow approached, and again with the hand on his shoulder. “We’re worried about you, Xan.”

Buffy came up on his other side and leaned against him, so he was sandwiched between them. “What can we do? How can we help?” she asked. And he wished he could tell her, but this was nothing she could slay, nothing

Willow could magic away with some Latin and incense and crystals. This was...just him, he guessed. His old useless self, and now he was distracting them from their real problems.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I guess.... It’s the weather, maybe. Gray and depressing all the time. I’ll try harder, okay? I’ll...I’ll be more involved.”

They both sort of squeezed him, and Willow kissed his bewhiskered cheek. “We love you, you know.”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks, guys. Hey, how about if I shower and shave, and maybe we can go out for dinner?”

That suggestion cheered them up, and as they left they were good-naturedly arguing about the relative merits of curry versus Portuguese chicken. He shut the door when they were gone and leaned back against it. “You can get through this,” he said to himself. “It’s just dinner.” Then he pasted on a fake smile and went to clean up.

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He did make an effort, he really did. He went to

meetings. He showed up in the game room every few days and stayed for an hour or two, playing cards or Wii and making stupid jokes. He kept himself showered and shaved and brushed. He even did a couple loads of laundry and took a stab at dusting his room.

He told himself that maybe if he pretended really hard, it would become real.

It didn't.

But at least his pretending got the girls off his back and Giles stopped shooting him Worried Looks, and they all were able to concentrate on the important things like the band of demons that had showed up outside Paris, spitting poison into people's eyes, like cobras.

Xander still had no appetite though, and he still felt like he had a huge weight on his shoulders, and everything—every fucking little thing—just took so much effort. Sometimes he thought about not trying anymore. About how much easier it would be on everyone if he was...gone. *That* wouldn't require much effort at all. He knew a million ways to die. God knew, Xander had seen enough other people die.

Dying was easy.

But there was the one place he could let go of all this, the one place where he felt...well, not happy, but at least not completely miserable or, even worse, totally numb. That one place was in the middle of the night when almost everyone was asleep and he came down to the lounge and turned on the TV, and then—like magic—Spike appeared and sat quietly beside him. And they watched crap together and didn't talk and didn't touch, but they'd both eventually fall asleep on their respective ends of the couch.

And wasn't that fucked up?

Part Two

It wasn't even demons this time. Or hellgods. Or any other kind of inhuman monster. Nope, these were monsters of the strictly human variety, and they were killing people.

Normally, that sort of thing wasn't within the Slayers' bailiwick. Normally, cops took care of human murderers. But of course this wasn't a normal situation. These particular people had got their greedy little hands on a mystical something or other that gave them special powers (everybody had special powers nowadays—everybody but Xander) and they were enslaving innocent bystanders and forcing them to commit robberies.

Or something like that. Xander was having trouble concentrating on details.

In any case, a contingent was being sent to stop these bad guys and because of the sensitive nature of the situation—sensitive in that the gang couldn't just go in and do their usual stake and slash job—Buffy herself was going to go. And Willow, because of the magic stuff. And a couple of the steadier Slayers. Xander went too, because he hadn't gone on a mission in a really long time and because his friends were looking worried again, like they might be planning another intervention. And much to Xander's surprise, when everyone squashed into a pair of Ford Mondeos, Spike was there too, sitting in the back seat beside Xander, saying nothing.

Neither Xander nor Spike said a single word as they drove to Hounslow. That was okay; Buffy and Willow and a tall Czech Slayer named Anastazie did enough talking to make up for it.

They pulled up in front of a nondescript two-story brick house with pots of geraniums out front, and they piled out of the cars. Buffy had that grim look she always got before kicking someone's ass. Xander and Spike hung at the back of their little group.

Buffy didn't bother ringing the bell—she just kicked down the door and they all rushed inside. All except Spike of course, who wasn't invited, and who ran around the house towards the back door, presumably to stop escapees. After a moment's hesitation, Xander did the same.

The back yard had a big vegetable garden with rows of frost-killed squash and tomatoes and decrepit sunflowers still nodding on brown stalks. There was also a strange circle of stones—something that looked more like a miniature Stonehenge than something that belonged in a suburban garden—and in the middle were bits of charred stuff that Xander preferred not to identify.

Just as he and Spike neared the door, it burst open and several people came running out. Xander tried to catch one of them—a portly man in a jogging suit—but as soon as he touched the guy, Xander was thrown several feet backwards with a blast of power, landing so hard on his back that the wind was knocked right out of him. He scrambled to his feet just in time to hear Spike howl in pain as another of the people—this one a middle-aged matron in a tweed blazer—zapped him with something or other. Spike collapsed to his knees.

Xander rushed the woman, and she didn't see him coming so he managed to knock her over, landing on top of her with a solid *oomph*. Then she zapped him too, a jolt of pure agony that threaded through every nerve in his body, and he screamed and pretty much lost track of what was going on.

When Xander was fully aware and capable of movement again, he opened his eye to find Buffy kneeling over him, looking worried. “Sorry,” she said. “They had more mojo than we thought.”

She gave him a hand and he hauled himself upright. Four corpses lay scattered across the ground, while Willow and the other Slayers surrounded three living but

battered and crying villains. Everything seemed to be under control.

Spike was huddled up against the side of the house, his arms crossed protectively over his head. Nobody was paying him any attention, so when Buffy let go of Xander to call Giles and get the mess cleaned up, Xander wandered over to the vampire. At first he assumed Spike had got hit harder than him with that nasty magic buzz, or maybe that the zap had a bigger impact on the living-challenged. But when Xander knelt beside him, he realized Spike was *cowering*, cowering and crying in terror.

Xander looked up quickly, but the girls were all occupied.

“Spike?” he said quietly, not daring to actually touch him.

Spike didn't respond.

So Xander took a deep breath, reached out, and put his hand on Spike's shoulder. “Spike?” he repeated. He was very much hoping he'd actually get to keep that particular hand. He was pretty attached to it. “You okay?”

Very slowly, Spike lowered his arms, and he raised his head to blink up at Xander with red-rimmed eyes. He looked confused, Xander thought. Lost.

Xander glanced over his shoulder again. Maybe it would be good if Buffy and Willow saw Spike like this. Maybe then they'd finally understand that something was wrong with him. Xander considered calling them over. But there was something in the way Spike was looking at him, something...pleading. And Xander couldn't do it. Couldn't sacrifice Spike's dignity that way.

"Hey," Xander said quietly. "I took a pretty big hit from one of those guys. Think you could walk me back to the car? I don't want to be by myself if there's more of them lurking out front."

He and Spike both knew he was lying. But still, for just a moment, an expression of naked gratitude flashed across Spike's face. Then Spike unfolded himself with the ghost of his usual grace and looked down at Xander, still on his knees. Spike sucked on his front teeth and rubbed a pair of quick hands across his eyes. "C'mon, then," he said gruffly.

Xander stood, too. "Buff, we're—Spike's walking me to

the car,” he called out. Buffy looked at them for a moment, nodded absently, and turned back to her phone and their captives.

Xander and Spike sat in the back of the car again. Xander picked pieces of dead grass out of his hair, while Spike stared resolutely out his window. After a very long ten minutes or so, Xander said, “Spike? What hap—”

“Don’t.” Maybe Spike meant it as a warning or command, but it came out more like a plea. So Xander shut his mouth and looked at the blackness outside his window too.

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Within a couple days, it was as if their little outing to Hounslow never happened. Buffy and Willow and Giles and the rest got caught up in some sort of demon trouble in Bratislava, and Spike again joined Xander on the couch in the middle of the night.

Xander tried to say something to Buffy and Willow and even Giles, tried to get them to see that Spike was like some delicate sea creature, a thin brittle shell just barely

covering his vulnerable insides. But they all pretty much blew Xander off. They were definitely preoccupied: they had some good connections pretty high up in the government, thanks to Giles's old Watcher contacts, but dead humans were still considerably more problematic than dead demons. Besides, every time Xander brought up Spike's issues, the conversation seemed to turn inevitably to his own mental state and he just didn't want to go there.

So most nights Xander ended up on the couch, and most nights Spike was there with him.

It was equilibrium, Xander decided. It wasn't great. He wasn't happy. But he was...hanging in there. Keeping his head above the surface.

And then one night, Xander was yanked out of sleep by a sharp kick in his side and a choked cry. His legs took a little longer to wake up than the rest of him and he slid off the couch. As he knelt on the carpet, his heart beating a frantic rhythm, he saw that his assailant was Spike. Spike had curled into an impossibly tight ball atop the couch cushions and he was whimpering and murmuring something that Xander understood after a moment to be "No, no, please, no, stop...."

With only a fleeting thought for his own safety, Xander gripped Spike's shoulder and shook him gently. "Spike! Spike! Hey, wake up!"

It took a few moments to get any response, but then Spike twisted his head and looked up at him, wide-eyed.

"Spike? You okay?" Xander said lamely.

Spike made a truly awful keening sound and threw himself at Xander, and for a split second Xander was certain he was about to become vamp chow; he wasn't afraid. But Spike only flung his arms around Xander and squeezed so tightly that death by suffocation seemed more likely than exsanguination, and he sobbed into the crook of Xander's neck. Xander didn't know what to do. Comforting had never been his strongpoint. He wasn't even sure he *had* a strongpoint, actually. But he wrapped his arms around Spike anyway, because that seemed to be his only choice at the moment, and Spike cried against his skin, soaking Xander's collar, and Xander's knees started to hurt from his awkward kneeling position; but he was crying too, he realized, and Spike's sleep-ruffled hair was surprisingly soft, and Spike smelled good, like oranges and cinnamon.

Predictably, things were kind of uncomfortable between them when they finally stopped bawling and drew apart. “Sorry,” Spike sniffled, not meeting Xander’s eye.

“S okay. Nightmares—I get ‘em all the time.”

“They were only humans, you see,” said Spike, his voice raw and hoarse.

Xander had no idea what he was talking about, but he nodded anyway.

“Only human,” Spike repeated. “I’m a demon. I’m not meant....” He buried his face in his hands and took a few deep breaths before rubbing his eyes and looking at Xander again. The expression on his face reminded Xander uncomfortably of those weeks in Sunnydale when Spike was living in his closet and talking to ghosts. Spike shook his head slowly. “I couldn’t stop it. Couldn’t stop it and I *broke*. Fell apart.”

“Can...can I help? I’m pretty good at fixing things.”

Spike smiled at him, a sad, sweet smile that looked way too fucking human. “Mend yourself, Xander.”

He stood and patted Xander's shoulder and walked away.

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Xander didn't see Spike after that. Several nights in a row, he waited on the couch, but nobody joined him. So one afternoon he knocked on the door to Spike's room. Nobody answered. He knocked again, and when there was still no response, he turned the knob.

Spike's room was a lot like his: same size, same general layout, same furniture that Giles had bought in bulk from Ikea, using some of the Council's funds. Spike's room was neater than Xander's, though, with the bed made up carefully and the wood floor free of debris. The window had a set of thick wooden shutters that Xander himself had installed, shortly after Spike first materialized at their door several years earlier. Like Xander's room, Spike's had a small bookcase, but whereas Xander's was empty except for the complete series of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on DVD, Spike's was stuffed with actual books. Well-worn paperbacks, mostly. Some were novels and quite a few looked like poetry.

Spike's closet was empty, though, and so were his dresser drawers, apart from a few porn magazines that Xander eyed with passing interest. *Aktuell Rapport*, which had a bunch of big-boobed blondes; *Knave*, which was at least in English; and *Männer*, which surprised Xander so much he actually dropped the magazine on the floor. Huh, he thought, carefully replacing the magazines in the drawer. Anya had told him that demons tended to be sexually...flexible...and God knows *she* had been, but he hadn't really thought about Spike in that way.

That particularly strange and diverting train of thought was quickly derailed by more immediate concerns: it was pretty obvious that Spike was gone.

Xander found Willow and Giles and Buffy in the library. Willow and Giles were bent over a book together, laboriously translating something while Buffy paced back and forth. They all looked at him as he entered the room and Willow gave him a small smile. "Hey, Xan. Wanna help?"

"Help with what?"

"We found this scroll that we think has some pretty

gloomy prophecies, but we're having trouble making out some of the passages."

"Will, how am I gonna help with that? I have trouble with English sometimes."

She looked slightly chagrined. "You could...be our cheerleader? Sharpen pencils, maybe?"

"I could use some fresh tea," Giles mumbled.

"That's just great. I'm invaluable as always. But actually, I came to tell you Spike's left."

Everybody stared blankly at him.

He sighed. "You know. Vampire? British? Nuclear hair? Helped save the world a couple times?"

"We are well aware of who Spike is, Xander," Giles said. "But what is the problem?"

"I told you! He's gone. Like...vamoose. I think he left about a week ago and—"

"Did he steal something of yours?" Buffy interrupted.

“No! What the hell do I own worth stealing anyway?”

“Then why do you care?”

“Because.... I’ve been trying to tell you. There’s something wrong with him.”

Now Buffy did look concerned. “Has he lost his soul?”

“No! He’s not Angel, for Christ’s sake.” She winced a little but he was angry enough not to care. He bit at his lip, wondering whether he should betray Spike’s confidence. Yeah, he decided. He had to. He grabbed Buffy’s shoulders. “Buff, he was *crying* the other day. I mean, really bawling his eyes out, like...like he did when you died. And he said he was broken.”

“Why?”

He shook his head. “He didn’t say. At least, not in a way I could understand. You know how he gets sometimes...kinda cryptic.”

He could feel the tension in her body relax. “Xan, you know what a drama queen he is. He gets all...all PMS-y

now and then. They probably canceled another of his soap operas or something.”

“No, damn it!” God, he was really tired of nobody listening to him. “This was something serious. Something happened to him and he’s really hurting and now he’s gone.”

Willow got up from her chair and put a hand on Xander’s arm, and she made the same face she used to make when his parents had had a particularly rough night and Xander was showing the effects of it in school the next day. “Sweetie, sometimes when somebody’s feeling...kinda down...and they maybe don’t want to admit it, they think that *other* people are feeling down instead. It’s called projection, and it’s—”

With an inarticulate growl, he broke his contact with her and with Buffy. “That’s great, guys. Thanks for making me feel like a nutjob *and* an annoying six-year-old who’s bugging the grownups. Well done. But I didn’t project Spike fucking crying in my arms, all right?”

They all gaped at him, slightly aghast at his outburst. After a long minute, Giles stood too, and took off his glasses. “I apologize for not taking your concerns more

seriously, Xander. It's only...well, these prophecies are quite grim and.... We'll see if we can track Spike down, all right?"

Xander knew he was being mollified. But he nodded anyway, because prolonging his tantrum wasn't going to help.

Giles nodded back. "For the time being, perhaps you'd care to assist Buffy in collecting all the library's volumes on medieval Spain? Or if you'd prefer, it would be lovely if someone would run to the bookstore and fetch us an Urdu-English dictionary."

Xander rubbed over his missing eye. "I'll go to the bookstore," he said.

~*~*~*~*~

They couldn't find Spike.

Xander asked them about it. Not every day, because that got him more of their worried frowns. But every other day, or every third. And they assured him that they were trying. He believed them. It appeared the missing

vampire had vanished like a puff of smoke. None of their demon sources had seen him, none of Spike's known blood suppliers had filled a recent order. Spike hadn't been showing up at bars or poker games anywhere in Europe, as far as they could tell. Willow tried to do a tracking spell, but apparently it didn't work well with the undead, and all she could conclude was that he was probably still out there, somewhere. Which was only marginally comforting.

After several weeks of Xander's constant pestering, Buffy even bit the bullet and called LA. Angel hadn't been exactly forthcoming about Spike being resurrected in the first place, and he and Buffy hadn't really been on speaking terms for years. But she called him anyway, and Xander did appreciate it, even though Angel said he didn't have a clue where Spike was and didn't particularly care.

Really, Xander didn't know why *he* cared either. A bunch of nights sharing a couch and one mutual sob fest didn't exactly make for best buds. But maybe there had been something in their shared misery. Or maybe it was just that focusing on Spike gave Xander something to think about besides himself, besides the...the nothingness that was his life. Whatever the reason, he couldn't help but

remember that desolate look in Spike's eyes their last night on the couch, or the way the vampire's voice hitched when he said he was broken. Xander even dreamed about him sometimes, on the occasions when he managed to get some sleep. In his dreams, Spike was always burning, burning.

Then things got busy around HQ—more of that prophecy crap—and for a few weeks even Xander was caught up in it, heading out for nightly demon raids, driving underaged or unlicensed Slayers around so the girls could do a little creative interrogation, helping build some giant wooden magical satellite dish thing (at least that was the best analogy Willow could give him) in the middle of fucking nowhere in Scotland. So for a while he didn't have time to think much about himself or Spike, and Xander was almost as thankful for that as he was that they eventually averted another disaster.

But then things returned to their usual abnormal normalcy—just ordinary run-of-the-mill demon crap to deal with—and Xander again found himself with time on his hands. And that was not a good thing. By then the weather had warmed a little, at least, and he started taking long walks at night when he couldn't sleep. Willow caught him at it one night when he'd rambled so far

away he didn't return home until after dawn; and she began to frown at him again, so he told her he was just patrolling, just like old times. She didn't look especially convinced.

So he continued his nightly walks until he began to feel like he'd stepped on every inch of pavement in London. Once in a while he really did come across something suspicious—his old knack for finding demonic trouble hadn't left him—and he'd report back to HQ. More often, he felt like someone was following him, watching him. He didn't report that—it sounded too much like crazy-time and he figured the others thought he was skirting the edge of sanity as it was.

At first, the walks had been soothing, the steady rhythm of one footfall after another like a drumbeat, like a heartbeat, solid and sure, and he could turn off his mind and just move. But after a while he lost even that solace; his head continued to whirl even as he walked farther and farther, the same pointless thoughts running around as steadily as his footsteps. *Worthless. Stupid. Waste of space.*

He wasn't sure when he noticed that most of his perambulations were taking him near the Thames, but

when he did notice, he wasn't surprised. He'd stop and spend long periods—hours maybe—just staring at the dark water as it flowed by. His favorite vantage point was up high on Tower Bridge, where the river was so far below that it was hard to see in the dark, and the ancient walls of the Tower brooded along the bank to his right while the funky-looking city hall was lit up on his left. Traffic rushed by on the bridge behind him and sometimes there were other pedestrians, but nobody paid any attention to him. Not even when he climbed over the railing and stood precariously at the edge, his hands gripping the metalwork behind him. And when his hands slipped and he fell forward, nobody made a sound.

Part Three

Xander used to be a good swimmer. That was back in high school, back in the days when members of the swim team were turning into fish. He really hadn't spent much time in the water since—no time, no inclination, plus a whole lot of ominous thoughts about what sorts of monsters lurked under the water, where he couldn't see.

Still, swimming was like riding a bicycle—an activity your body didn't forget. He probably would have been just fine doing laps at the Y. But the drop from the bridge deck to the water had been considerable, and hitting the

river felt like hitting a brick wall. And the water was fucking *cold* and it was moving swiftly and he was bogged down with jeans and boots and jacket.

And let's face it—he really wasn't trying all that hard.

Actually, when the water closed over his face, despite his lungs' instinctive panic, the rest of him felt...relieved. Like finally he could stop trying. Like it was time to let go.

And he was doing just that, his consciousness fading fast, when something grabbed him around the middle.

He kicked at it, although he dimly wondered why he should mind getting eaten by whatever lurked in the Thames more than he minded plain old drowning. Anyway, he kicked and struggled but the thing was strong, and it was dragging him up and over, and he couldn't begin to overpower it. Fine, he thought. Bon appetit. And he went limp and waited for the tearing of teeth into his flesh.

The teeth never came. Instead, Xander was dragged out of the water and lifted up onto cement. He lay there on his back, gasping like a landed fish, looking up at a furious, familiar face.

“What the *bloody* hell do you think you’re doing?!”

“I f-f-fell.” His teeth were chattering so hard he could barely speak.

“Bollocks.” Spike shook himself like a dog, sending water droplets everywhere, including over Xander, who was already about as wet as he could get. Then Spike put out a hand and helped haul Xander to his feet.

Xander wanted to ask Spike where the fuck he’d come from, but he was concentrating too hard on not shivering himself to pieces. Spike scowled at him, grabbed his arm, and dragged him away from the riverbank.

Spike found them a cab. The mustached driver frowned at the two of them as they dripped onto the sidewalk, but once they were seated he obligingly turned his heater all the way up. Bone-deep exhaustion crashed over Xander like a wave and he closed his eye and tipped his head back and dozed away the short drive home.

Spike still seemed to have the keys to HQ, which was good because Xander’s were apparently now among the debris at the bottom of the Thames. So Spike let them in

and he half-carried Xander up four flight of stairs, muttering to himself the entire way about why the bloody Slayers couldn't live in a building with a bloody lift. Once inside Xander's room, he wrinkled his nose and stated, "Your housekeeping hasn't improved much, has it." He was right—the place had gotten pretty rank again.

Xander was about to flop down on his bed, sodden clothing and all, but Spike grabbed him and efficiently stripped off Xander's clothing until he was completely bare. Spike gave Xander's body a careful inspection and seemed satisfied when he discovered no major damage. He then pushed Xander down onto the mattress—gently, though—and turned to leave.

"Wait," Xander said.

Spike stopped and turned, his hand on the doorknob.

"What now?"

"Do you have dry clothes?"

"Doesn't matter. Can't get pneumonia, can I?"

"Yeah, but you also don't have any body heat and this old pile of rubble is about as warm as a walk-in cooler. Don't

tell me you're comfortable like that."

"Of course I'm not *comfortable*, pillock. I just had a bloody swim in the Thames in the middle of the bloody night, right before I hauled your fat arse halfway across the city!"

He looked so indignant, standing there with his hair still wet and starting to curl, and his boots planted in little puddles on the floor, and his hands all balled up into fists. And maybe Xander still sort of had a death wish, because he started to laugh. Spike's eyes flashed momentarily amber, but then back to blue, and Spike's frown relaxed, and then his mouth was twitching upward, and soon he was laughing too, so hard he had to lean up against Xander's dresser for support. And yeah, maybe there was a tinge of hysteria in their laughter, but it was still real laughter and it felt good.

Breathless for the second time that night, Xander got out of bed and—heedless of his own nudity because it was kind of late to be worrying about that—he padded over, yanked open a drawer, and pulled out a blue sweatshirt and a pair of plaid flannel sleeping pants. He held them out towards Spike, who cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Hey,” Xander said. “It’s the only clean clothing I’ve got.”

Spike rolled his eyes, shrugged his coat onto the floor, and began to peel off his wet t-shirt. Xander stared. He couldn’t help it—it was as if the gallon or so of river water he’d swallowed was drugged, because he felt light-headed and kind of buzzed. Floating. And anyway he’d already courted death a couple times today—what was once more?

In any case, Spike didn’t seem to mind. He pulled his own clothing off as quickly as he had Xander’s and then reached for the pile of fabric Xander still held in his hands.

But instead, they kissed.

Xander wasn’t sure who started it. It might have been a mutual decision. And he didn’t know why he went along with it, except that over the past few weeks he’d been thinking now and then about that magazine Spike had in his room—the German one. The one with the men. And it had been a really, really long time since Xander was naked with anyone; and Christ, Spike was fucking gorgeous, and he was right *there*, and Xander was still feeling drunk or giddy or whatever.

They kissed and after a while they groped, and Spike pushed against Xander, backing him up until Xander fell backwards onto his mattress. Then Spike was on him, his skin cool and slightly clammy-feeling, but smooth as satin. They kept right on kissing until Xander felt as though Spike was stealing his breath away, like that old wives' tale about cats and babies, except Xander didn't especially mind because Spike was a really good kisser, and Spike was wiggling and rocking his hips just so. The feel of another cock and another set of balls against his was strange to Xander, but not at all unpleasant; so when Spike raised himself up slightly and wrapped his warming fingers around both their lengths, Xander tilted his pelvis up and reached down to stroke at the soft skin between Spike's ass cheeks. As Spike made a desperate little mewling sound, Xander pressed delicately against Spike's tight little pucker and then, almost in unison, they came, spreading sticky come all over their bellies.

It took a few moments before their movements slowed and then stilled. Spike groaned softly and rolled over so that he was sprawled beside Xander, their lower legs hanging off the edge.

"Fuck," Xander finally managed to say.

Spike made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a giggle. "Already did, love."

Xander tried to muster up enough energy to bop him, but failed.

After a few more minutes, Spike sighed. "I expect I ought to get to my room now." He made as if to sit up, but Xander grabbed his arm and pulled him back down.

"Stay," Xander said. "You're still cold. *I'm* still cold. Let's get under the blankets."

There was a sharp, surprised intake of breath from Spike. "But you don't.... What if one of the girls finds me here?"

"Nobody will. Nobody pays any attention to me. And even if they did...I don't care." And he found that he really didn't. But then it occurred to him that maybe Spike did, and he propped himself up on one elbow to look down at the vampire. "Do you care?"

Spike snorted. "Gave off caring what this lot thinks ages ago. Wouldn't mind if the whole herd of them came bursting in right now. Besides, half would be insanely

jealous and the other half would have wet knickers at the sight of us.”

Okay, now Xander was the one giggling, especially when he had a very clear mental image of what Willow’s face would look like if she came in the room just then.

“So get under the covers, then,” Xander said, and Spike did.

It wasn’t a very big bed. In the years since they’d been here, Xander had never needed a mattress wide enough for two. So now they had to huddle against one another, Xander spooning Spike from behind, but Xander didn’t mind because that put all that wonderful smooth skin and all those beautiful tight muscles against him, and judging from the way Spike sighed contentedly and pressed slightly back, he wasn’t exactly feeling tortured either.

“Where were you?” Xander whispered into the soft hair behind Spike’s ear. “We were looking for you.”

He felt Spike shrug. “Traveling. I’ve been back in London for some time, actually. Watching you.”

“Oh. That was you.” Xander was kind of relieved he hadn’t sunk into paranoid delusions. “Why didn’t you come home?”

“I didn’t.... I’m no good to anyone here. Or anywhere else for that matter. Didn’t want you to...to....” He squirmed around until they were face to face. “You have your own problems. Xander, what were you thinking tonight? If I hadn’t been there....”

“What were you doing there, anyway? Why have you been watching me?”

“Trying to keep you out of trouble, git. You’re off marching about by yourself in the dead of night, hardly paying attention to what’s around you. This might not be Sunnydale but that doesn’t mean it’s safe.” He paused. “But you know that don’t you? You didn’t escape death enough times already? Now you’re actually going out and looking for it?”

“I wasn’t....”

“You took a dive off bloody Tower Bridge!”

Xander didn’t really have an answer for that.

Spike reached up and stroked the cheek under Xander's missing eye. "The Scoobies...they love you, yeah? How could they let you hurt yourself like that?"

"They haven't.... Spike, they have their own issues to deal with. Important stuff."

"You're important, pet."

Oh, that was nice to hear, even if Xander knew it was a lie.

Spike kept right on petting him, more tender than any lover Xander had encountered before. "I'm wondering why you're taking all...all *this* so calmly." Spike sort of undulated against him, which was nice. "You make a habit of shagging male vampires?"

"Um, no. You're my first guy and my first vamp although, I should note, you're hardly my first demon. And maybe I'll have a total wiggins in the morning. I don't know. Right now I'm far too comfy to freak out."

Spike smiled at him and kissed his forehead. Then he twisted back around the other way again, fitting

comfortably in Xander's arms. "Spike?" Xander said when they were both almost asleep.

"Hmm?"

"You're not gonna incinerate in the morning, are you? No shutters here."

"Your window faces north, git. I'll be fine."

"Good. Hard to get ashes out of the sheets."

Spike snorted again, pressed his ass a little more firmly against Xander's groin, and fell asleep. Xander slept too, better than he had in months.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike wasn't there when Xander woke up in the middle of the afternoon, and for a moment he was certain that the vampire was gone for good. But then the door burst open and Spike came in, a towel slung precariously around his hips and his hair sticking up in all directions. "Gave a few Slayers an eyeful," he said with a smirk.

“You probably made their day.”

Spike grinned and let the towel drop. He took a single step towards the bed, a fairly monumental leer on his face, when somebody knocked on the door. Hard. With a philosophical shrug, he bent over and retrieved the jeans he'd been wearing the night before, and he quickly pulled them on. Xander simply made sure the blankets were covering him to the waist. “Come in,” he called.

Buffy and Willow entered, Buffy already talking. “Xander, we heard—”

Then they caught sight of Spike.

“Oh,” Buffy said.

“I found Spike,” Xander said, pretty unnecessarily.

“You mean I found you.”

Xander looked at Spike in alarm. He wasn't going to tell—
But no. Spike gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head and crossed his arms over his bare chest.

“What are you doing here?” Buffy demanded.

“Live here, don’t I?”

“Not *here* here,” said Willow, her voice slightly shrill.
“Not in Xander’s room.”

“Fancy it more than my own. ‘T’s warmer.” He did that thing with his tongue and his teeth, and Buffy made a choking sound.

Willow blushed and turned towards Xander. “Hey, it’s not that I’m not supportive, and yay with the LGBT! But are you, um, sure this is such a great idea? ‘Cause, I mean—”

“I don’t care if it’s a great idea and I’m not in the mood for a lecture. I’m a grown man. Whatever happens, it’s between me and Spike.”

“But...it’s *Spike*,” Buffy said.

“Yeah. Kinda figured that out, Buff.”

Buffy and Willow looked at each other, at Spike and Xander, then back at each other. They did that silent eyebrow thing that meant they were going to have an

intense conversation the minute they were out of Xander's earshot. He couldn't find it in himself to care.

Finally, Buffy took a deep breath. "There are some Blingbling demons—"

"Brleenbrlin," Willow corrected.

"Brr—whatever. They've been chomping on tourists in Vienna. We have a meeting about it in an hour. Can you be there?" She made a small face. "Both of you, I guess."

"Yeah, sure," Xander said.

Willow and Buffy gave them a final shocked look and left, making certain to shut the door firmly.

Spike looked over at Xander. "So much for nobody noticing you."

"Hey, it was *you* that got noticed, Mr. Half-Naked in the Hallway."

"Could be all naked in bed instead."

Xander grinned and pulled back the blankets in

invitation. “We do have an hour to kill.”

Xander felt more clear-headed than he had the night before, but he wasn't at all hesitant about getting groiny with Spike. Spike seemed relieved when he realized that, quickly stripping back out of his jeans and launching himself across the room, landing on top of Xander with enough force to make Xander *oomph*.

“You're heavier than you look,” Xander said, grabbing shamelessly at Spike's ass.

“Hmm,” Spike hummed against Xander's neck before licking a broad stripe under his jawline. “You can get on top if you fancy.”

“No, this is good. Better access.” Xander squeezed Spike's ass to demonstrate.

Spike stopped sucking on Xander's skin—as Xander tried not to wish there was biting instead—and Spike looked down at him.

“You reckon the bints have told the Watcher about us yet?”

“Okay—Giles and sex are *not* two great thoughts that go great together. But yeah, I’m pretty sure they did.”

“Doesn’t bother you? Him knowing, I mean.”

“Do I *look* bothered?”

“Only in a good way. Have you any slick?”

“Huh?”

Spike rolled his eyes. “Lubricant. Could shag me without, but....” There was a slight tightening of his jaw. “But we’ll both enjoy it more with.”

Xander’s brain was still several words behind. “Sh-shag you?” he stammered.

“You’ve lived in Jolly Old long enough, pet. Surely you’ve picked up a bit of the vernacular by now.”

“But...I’m going to shag you?”

“That was the scheme.” Spike ground his groin into Xander’s. “Unless you’d rather—”

“No! It’s...it’s a perfectly good scheme. I was just kinda surprised you wanted me to— Just kinda surprised.”

Spike smiled broadly, like the Cheshire cat. “Now. Slick?”

“Um...I don’t have any.”

“What do you use when you wank?”

“I don’t...I haven’t done that in a while.”

Spike frowned. “I reckon we can do without, but—”

“Would something else slippery work?” Xander thought for a moment. “Shampoo?”

“You want me to go to the shower like this?” Spike wiggled. “It’d likely bring even more Slayers to your door.”

“My shampoo’s in my top dresser drawer. If I leave it in the bathroom people keep using it up.”

Spike bounced off the bed, making Xander feel bereft, and walked to the dresser, where he found the shampoo. He looked skeptically at the label. “‘Nordic wood’, pet?”

“Dawn sent it to me,” Xander said defensively. “And it makes my hair really shiny.”

As it turned out, it made a pretty passable lube, too. Or at least, if it had any shortcomings in that respect, Xander sure didn't notice them—not as Spike sank down on top of him, impaling himself on Xander's amazed cock, not as Spike rode Xander with considerable enthusiasm, and not as Xander came so hard he bonked his head really solidly on the particleboard of his Malm bed. Spike didn't complain, either—he came just a few moments later, his spend spurting all over Xander's chest and chin.

Xander was still inside Spike when Spike stopped moving and looked critically at Xander. “I reckon it's time you took a shower, pet. Unless you want to meet with the Slayers like this.” He swiped a droplet of fluid off Xander's right nipple and then popped his finger in his own mouth and sucked, making Xander moan.

“You're evil,” Xander said.

Spike grinned back at him.

~*~*~*~*~

They were a bit late to the meeting—clean-up took a little longer than anticipated—and when they entered the training room, every head swiveled to stare. Nearly one hundred pairs of eyes. Xander felt very self-conscious because he realized as he was getting dressed that he'd lost his eyepatch during his swim the night before, and he didn't have a spare. But then, as he paused in the doorway of the meeting room, he realized that Spike was hiding behind him. Spike's head was bowed and his shoulders hunched, and Xander was close enough to hear the harshness of his breathing.

Fuck the stupid missing eye.

Xander took a step backward and to the side and put his arm around Spike's waist. Spike looked up at him for a brief moment in surprise, then gave a tiny smile and sort of melted against him.

Giles was standing at the other end of the room, having obviously been caught in mid-lecture. He took off his glasses, stared at them for a moment like he'd never

seen them before, and put them back on. “Yes. Well, welcome back, Spike.”

Spike nodded at him.

“We’ve just begun a briefing on the situation in Vienna. Do you both care to join us?”

“Sure, Giles,” Xander said. He was going to sit down on one of the mats in the middle of the room, but he could feel Spike lightly pulling on him, holding him back; and it occurred to him that the vampire might not be very comfortable right in the middle of all those Slayers. So instead Xander hunkered down against the back wall alongside the door and Spike crouched beside him. They were almost but not quite touching as they listened to Giles speak.

Xander figured he caught about twenty percent of the lecture: the end of the world is nigh blah-blah-blah slay first and ask questions later blah-de-blah-de-blah. After it was over and the Slayers had filed out of the room—each of them staring at Xander and Spike as they went but not saying anything—the remains of the old Scooby gang arrayed themselves nearby.

“Will you be going to Vienna?” Giles asked.

Xander looked at Spike out of the corner of his eye, but Spike was busily staring at the floor as if the people looming over him made him uneasy. “I don’t know,” Xander replied.

“We could use your assistance.”

“No you couldn’t. Spike’s maybe. Me—well, I guess if something breaks.”

“Xan, you’re always helpful,” Willow said. Good old loyal Willow.

“Thanks. And...I dunno. Maybe. You’re not leaving for a week, right? That’ll give me—” he glanced at Spike again, “give us some time to think about it.”

Willow sort of squished her mouth to one side and then nodded. Buffy frowned, said something about needing to go kill something, and dragged Willow out of the room. Which left Giles, looking down at Spike and Xander while they leaned against the wall.

He cleared his throat. “Xander...Spike. I understand the

need for companionship, especially amongst trying circumstances.”

“Giles, if this is gonna be a lecture on the evils of same-sex demon shagging, I don’t want to hear it.”

“It’s not. There’s nothing at all wrong with same-sex relationships. A great many people have them instead of or, erm, in addition to relationships with the opposite sex.”

Xander gave Giles a speculative look. Huh. Was *every* guy he knew secretly bi?

“And as for the demon bit, Xander, I’ve long understood the foolishness of persuading you to avoid that. My concern isn’t over the nature of your...affiliation, but rather over the timing.”

“Timing? Giles, I’m pushing thirty and I haven’t had a serious squeeze since Anya. And Spike, his last was—” He glanced over again.

“Buffy,” Spike murmured.

“See? So neither of us is on the rebound or anything. And

if you tell me to wait for a time when things are calm and apocalypse isn't in the air, well, that's *never* gonna happen, is it?"

But Giles was shaking his head. "It's not that. It's only...well, your mental state has been a bit...delicate of late. For both of you, actually."

"Are you saying we're both nuts?"

Giles sighed. "No more than usual. I only meant to suggest that perhaps you might wish to become more stable first, before a new...venture."

Part of Xander was furious, because he hadn't asked for this advice, and it wasn't like he was a kid, or Giles was his fucking father. But a part of him also understood the wisdom in what Giles was saying, and that the man meant well and was genuinely concerned—about Xander, at least; Xander had his doubts about the depth of Giles's concern about Spike.

"Thanks, Giles," he said. "We'll take it under advisement."

Giles looked like he wanted to say something more, but

he just nodded and left.

“He’s right,” Spike said when he was gone.

“Right about what? That I’m wacko? That you should back off?”

Spike peeled himself away from the wall and then knelt in front of Xander instead, grasping his shoulders with both hands. “You were trying to kill yourself last night, love. And I’m...Christ, I’m a mess. You deserve someone better. Someone stronger. Someone *worthy* of you. I’m ruined.”

“I don’t know what I deserve, Spike. It’s not like there have been a whole lot of anybodies anxious to get a piece of the Xan-man. And I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone stronger than you.” Spike laughed harshly, but Xander continued. “Look, it’s not like you and I... I’m not picking out colors for the wedding yet, okay? But for some goddamn reason you’re the only person I’ve felt...felt comfortable with for *years*. Isn’t that good enough for now?”

Spike looked as if he were really considering what Xander had just said, and then he nodded. “All right. But you

have to promise—no more jumping off bloody bridges. Or anything else suicidal.”

“Fine. As long as you promise you won’t up and disappear again.”

“Done.”

And, not caring whether someone might walk in on them, they sealed their bargain with a kiss.

Part Four

“Come on, Xan. How can you resist this?” Spike held his arms up, displaying his nude body.

Things had gone reasonably well, for a while.

Xander had moved into Spike’s room because it had the shutters. They bought a bigger bed.

They went to Vienna and kicked some demon ass. Spike alone took out a half dozen of the little green fuckers. Afterwards, there was Florence and then Rijeka, more

fighting, more dead demons.

Xander still felt really down sometimes, but Spike would pick up on those moods and entice Xander to shag him, which would help. Spike still woke them both up with his nightmares, and Xander would hold him tight until they fell back asleep. Spike was still nervous around...well, around almost everyone except Xander, actually. But that was fine. Xander had no particular desire to spend much time with anyone but Spike.

It was like a honeymoon, really, but like all honeymoons, it had to end eventually. This one ended gradually, as Xander started leaving his repair projects unfinished because he'd run out of steam midway; and he felt the gray clouds seep into his ears and settle in his brain; and he found himself spending long hours lying beside Spike's sleeping form, exhausted but unable to fall asleep himself.

And now Spike was parading in front of him completely naked, and although Xander could appreciate his lover's beauty, he found no desire to do anything about it. Xander ignored Spike's plea and shoved his foot into a shoe. "I'm gonna go for a walk."

Spike let his arms drop down to his sides and he glanced at the shuttered window. "But the sun's risen."

"Yeah. And it looks like the sun may actually even be visible today."

"But I can't...."

"I'm capable of taking a walk by myself, Spike. I promise, no diving. Get some sleep." Xander put the other shoe on.

Spike's shoulders slumped. "Xan, we haven't shagged in days."

Xander stood up and stomped to the closet. "I'm sorry I'm not satisfying you."

Spike came up behind him and grabbed his shoulder to turn him around. "It's not that, pet, and you know it. You're not.... I'm a bit concerned, yeah?"

"Oh, that's just great. Now Willow and the rest have you on my back, too. I'm fine!" He wrenched himself away, flung open the closet door, and grabbed his coat.

“They haven’t,” Spike protested. “T’s just me—I can see it myself. You’re not—”

“Not what, Spike? Not constantly giddy with happiness ‘cause stupid old me managed to land a catch like you?” He didn’t intend to be so angry with Spike, but he couldn’t stop the words from coming out of his goddamned mouth.

“Love, —” Spike began, reaching for him again.

“Leave me alone!” Xander roared. And then felt like shit as Spike actually flinched and fell back a step or two as if he was expecting Xander to hit him. Dandy. Just dandy. Now he was adding to Spike’s trauma. “I gotta go,” Xander mumbled and pushed past Spike and out the door.

~*~*~*~*~

They made up later that day. They even had sex. But Xander couldn’t help but notice Spike’s wary looks, and he couldn’t quite tell whether Spike was afraid for him or afraid of him. Maybe some of each.

The following evening, as they lay in bed, Spike played idly with the hair on Xander's chest. "Pet," he began.

"Hmm?"

"Perhaps...perhaps we should consider going somewhere else."

"Why? You like my old room better? I guess I could put some shutters up there, too."

"No, I mean away."

"You want a vacation?"

Spike sighed. "Perhaps this place isn't good for either of us. We could go back to the States if you fancy it, or...anywhere. Italy. Hong Kong. Argentina. Johannesburg."

"Not Africa."

"Yeah, I've some nasty memories of the Dark Continent myself. But we've the entire world to choose from."

"Do you hate it here, Spike?"

Spike shrugged against him. “I reckon not. But you’re not happy.”

“I don’t think I’d be any happier anywhere else. I never have been. I mean, I’d still be me.”

“Oh, love. I want to make you happy, but I’m just a bloody demon, and I was never much of a man.”

Xander caught Spike’s hand in his and kissed the knuckles. “You’re the best thing that's ever happened to me. It’s not your fault I’m fucked up.”

Spike’s exhalation was cool against Xander’s chest.

~*~*~*~*~

It had been one of their better days. Most of the Slayers were gone on some sort of field trip to learn more about Mesopotamia or something, and why that was relevant to anything, Xander didn’t know and didn’t care. He and Spike had HQ practically to themselves, and Spike seemed to walk taller in the hallways when he wasn’t at risk of bumping into anyone. Xander had rented a couple

of Alfred Hitchcock flicks and they'd cuddled together in the lounge to watch them, and then they'd run up to their room and stripped and made out.

Spike was a good kisser. No surprise there. But he liked to take his time at it, mouthing along Xander's neck and jawline; brushing his lips across Xander's brow and nose, even across that empty, fucking ugly eyelid; then finally pressing against Xander's lips, licking Xander's teeth, twisting their tongues around in ways that defied physics. And while they kissed, Xander could play with Spike to his heart's content. He liked to thread his fingers through Spike's hair, working the gel out until the hair was soft and curled, and he had favorite bits of Spike's body to stroke: the lower back, just barely above the swell of Spike's ass; the little hollows under Spike's hipbones; the incredibly tender skin inside the crook of Spike's elbows and behind his knees.

Xander had not had many lovers in his lifetime, but of the few he did have, none had ever lavished such time and care with him.

After they'd kissed and petted one another for what seemed like hours, Xander reached over to the nightstand and retrieved the bottle of Astroglide. Spike

pushed him flat on his back and straddled him, giving Xander easy access to Spike's body. Xander took a few minutes to smooth his palms over Spike's belly because he liked the way it made Spike shiver, and he gently caressed Spike's balls and ran a single finger up the length of Spike's hard cock.

Spike knee-walked a little closer to Xander's chest. Xander smiled and reached between Spike's legs, gingerly inserting one slick finger into the tight hole. "Christ," Spike moaned, squeezing his eyes closed and slowly moving himself up and down. "More, Xan."

So Xander added a second finger and he used his free hand to play with Spike's peaked pink nipples. He'd been learning where and how Spike liked to be touched. He knew that his lover got off on both tender strokes and sharp little moments of pain, and Xander would alternate them: a teasing light fingertip followed by a quick, sharp twist; a momentary digging in of fingernails and then a careful smoothing of indented skin. He liked to watch as Spike got more excited, as his breathing sped up and his eyelashes fluttered, as his hips gyrated and his cock dripped and he gnawed at his own full lower lip.

"S-Spike," Xander stuttered warningly, because

sometimes he was pretty sure he could come just like that, his cock untouched, just from the sight of Spike above him.

Spike gave an evil little leer and raised himself off Xander's fingers. He repositioned himself farther down, took Xander's shaft in his hand, and lowered himself onto it.

"Oh, gods," Xander moaned. Fucking Spike was nothing like fucking Anya or Faith or any of the women he'd had one-night stands with. Spike was so goddamn tight, and cool inside until friction warmed him, and he wiggled his body and clenched muscles that Xander was fairly sure humans didn't even possess. And while Spike was doing all that, Xander was free to roam his palms over that glorious milky skin or, even better, wrap a hand around Spike's cock and feel the urgent way Spike rutted into his grip.

Tonight, though, Xander wanted to try something different. He wanted to drive for a change. So when Spike rose high up on his knees, so high that he was almost detached from Xander, Xander gave a quick jerk to Spike's hips, toppling him over. Before Spike could recover, Xander rolled him onto his belly and then

Xander climbed on top.

He didn't penetrate Spike again right away. Instead, he humped against Spike's ass, cock sliding smoothly between but not quite into the cleft of those muscular cheeks. At the same time, Xander gnawed lightly on the back of Spike's neck because—big shock—Spike liked teeth there and whatever vestiges of hyena that remained in Xander enjoyed it too.

Xander had been doing this for several minutes when he realized that Spike wasn't moving at all underneath him; he had, in fact, gone stiff as a corpse and was quietly chanting something into the pillow. Xander went still and listened.

“No, no, no, please, no, no, please...”

Xander immediately clambered off and tried to roll Spike back over. But Xander got just a glimpse of Spike's terrified face and flaccid cock before the vampire curled into a tight, protective ball and began to rock himself, back and forth, back and forth, still chanting brokenly.

“Spike?” Xander said softly, not sure whether touching him would help or make things worse. “Did I hurt you?”

God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

But Spike didn't respond. He just kept rocking, only now his words devolved into a soft, heartbreaking keen, something more like an injured child or a hurt animal than a demon or a man. Xander watched helplessly for a time and then, because he felt awful sitting there with his cock still slick from Spike, he pulled on a pair of gray sweatpants and a plain white tee.

After a long time, Spike stopped moving and grew silent. Xander thought he might have fallen asleep. Xander propped himself next to him on the bed, head and shoulders up on the headboard, and he waited. He felt even more useless than usual.

A long time later, Spike slowly uncurled. He reminded Xander of a startled hedgehog checking to see whether the coast was clear. Eventually, he blinked blearily at Xander.

"You okay?" Xander asked, knowing it was a stupid question.

Spike shivered and gave a little nod. He was still naked, so Xander lifted up his own backside so he could fold the

blankets on top of Spike. But Spike slipped out of bed anyway and walked on slightly wobbly legs to the window. He opened the shutters and looked out into the night.

“They were only humans,” he said, his back still towards Xander. “Wizards, I expect. Shouldn’t have been much trouble for me. But I reckon I was a bit careless, and....” His voice broke and he stopped.

Xander wanted to tell him that he didn’t need to go on, that he didn’t have to tell this story. Except Xander kind of got the idea that Spike *did* need to tell it. So Xander remained silent.

After a minute or two, Spike took a few hitching breaths. “They kept me as their slave. As their bloody fuck toy and whipping boy. I can...I can manage pain. Had plenty of it, haven’t I? Beginning with Dru’s bite and Angelus’s games; and then there was that bitch Glory and the First and some of the fun I had with the Slayer, and.... I thought I was *above* pain, that it meant nothing to me.

“But it wasn’t just the blades and the whips and the.... It wasn’t that. I could have borne that. But they ordered me about like a dog, had me crawl about on my hands

and knees, they fucked me, they.... I'd begun to think of myself as a man again, or nearly so. Saved the world once or twice, you know. But they stripped that from me, stole every bit of my humanity."

Spike turned and walked from the window so he was looking instead at a book he'd left open on top of their shared dresser. He picked the book up, shut it, smoothed at the spine, and set it back down again. He still didn't look at Xander. "You know the worst of it? They left me alone now and then, all bound in chains, and I knew, I *knew* there'd be no bloody rescue party for me, no cavalry riding up in white hats, no fair knight to take me away."

"God, I'm sorry, Spike. I'm so fucking sorry. We should have—I should have gone after you, found out why you never came back."

Spike shook his head savagely. "Wasn't your responsibility, was I?"

"How'd you get free?"

"Bided my time. Nearly gave up. But they were still human, mojo or not, and humans always make a

mistake, sooner or later. When they did, I killed them.”

He looked defiantly over at Xander then, as if he expected some sort of chastisement for murder. But Xander nodded. “Good,” he said.

“I came back here because I’d nowhere else to go. And there you were, Xander bloody Harris, and you didn’t.... You were kind to me. To me! Not condescending; you treated me like a person, and I could tell you *saw* me, yeah? Hiding there in the shadows with your own problems and you saw me.”

“Spike, I don’t—”

“Came to realize you were broken too, in your own way. Nobody valuing you as they should. And I thought...I can make you see yourself as well. Make you see how bloody *good* you are.” Again, he shook his head. “But I couldn’t even do that. Only thing I’m bloody good at is being fucked, but that wasn’t enough to—”

“Is *that* why?” Xander shot up off the bed and marched across the small room to Spike. “That’s why, with the sex, and.... You were trying to heal me, huh? Trying to shag me back to mental health?”

“No! That’s not what I meant!”

But suddenly Xander was furious—at Spike, but even more at himself. “Did you really think we’d screw a few times and that would fix everything; everything’s hunky-dory, rainbows and sprinkles and fucking happily ever after?”

“No.”

“Because it’s not, okay?” Xander shouted. And even as he did, he realized that a part of him *had* thought exactly that: he could fall in love and all his problems would be solved. But he didn’t say that to Spike. Instead, he got up very close in Spike’s face and when Spike flinched back again, Xander almost lost it completely. “A couple pity fucks aren’t gonna make me a nice guy, or a successful one, or one who’s worth the space he takes up. I’m still the same old screw-up, only now I’m taking advantage of a guy with fucking PTSD because he’s good in bed and I can’t. Fucking. Do this anymore!” With that final roar he stomped out of the room and down the hall. He flung himself down the stairs and, still barefoot, out the front door and into the night.

Part Five

Good job, Harris, he thought. As always, the disparaging voice in his head was his father's. Spike—the man he was falling in love with—opens up and displays his heart, and Xander just rips it right out of him. Spike survived a year of hell on earth, an existence horrible enough to damage a demon who had been hurt so many times before. And he didn't talk about it, didn't tell a soul, not until now. And when he finally did, Xander yelled at him.

Jesus.

This would be a stellar addition to Xander's Fuck-Up Hall of Fame. As if the place wasn't crowded enough already.

Xander stomped around during the predawn hours, his bare feet getting filthy, and shaking like he had the DTs the whole time. Not from the chill, but from that fucking evil voice echoing in his head. Tony Harris's voice which, no grand surprise, actually sounded a hell of a lot like

Xander's own.

Twice he ducked into alleys to vomit sour bile onto crumpled newspapers and candy wrappers.

HQ felt very empty when he returned, and so he wasn't at all surprised to discover that Spike was not in his room, nor was he anywhere else in the building. Xander climbed the fourth flight of stairs slowly, like an old man. His feet were all torn up and every step hurt, but that pain didn't matter.

His old room was dusty. It had only been a couple months since he'd moved in with Spike, but the room smelled musty and unused. The bed was still unmade, still unwashed after the last time he and Spike had had sex there. Xander sat down in his Poäng armchair and stared at the empty wall.

~*~*~*~*~

"Xan, sweetie, you can't go on like this."

"Leave me the hell alone!"

He wasn't so far gone that he missed the exchange of looks between Buffy and Willow. Willow got up off her knees and brushed her skirt, as if his floor had contaminated her. Buffy stepped in closer, her hands on her hips. "You're either gonna get up and eat something and go see the doctor on your own, or I'm gonna pick you up and carry you myself." She looked like she meant it.

A moment ago he had yelled, but now he barely whispered. "What's the point?"

"The point is the doctor can help you, Xander. She can help you feel better."

"Just a magic pill and everything goes away, huh?" He was playing with the hem of his filthy t-shirt, rolling it back and forth in his fingers, back and forth.

"Hey, I know how it feels, okay? I was in heaven and I came back and it was like I was in this huge black pit, and—"

"Yeah. Another of my better decisions, huh?"

"That's not what I meant! I'm not blaming you for

anything.”

Beside her, Willow nodded earnestly. “Nobody’s blaming you, Xan. It’s just bad brain chemistry and it’s not your fault any more than it’s Paola’s fault she’s diabetic. But it’s treatable! There are lots of different things that help—therapy and meds and, and even lights!”

“Spare me the Psych 101, please,” he said, staring at his shirt and his busy fingers.

“Look, how about if we make a trade? You do us a favor and see the doc, and we’ll do something you want. That’s fair, right?” Willow said.

“There’s nothing I want.”

Buffy grabbed his hand and firmly pulled it away from his hem. “What about if we find Spike?”

He shut his eye. “Find him, please. Just to make sure he’s okay, ‘cause.... Just make sure. You tell me he’s all right and I’ll go to your doctor.” He was lying—he had no intention of going anywhere. But hey, just a lie, just another of his sins.

And it was a lie that worked, because Buffy and Willow said all right and then, reluctantly, they left him alone again.

Time passed, he supposed. Buffy or Willow or Giles came to his room now and then—he suspected they had some kind of schedule—and told him if he didn't eat something they would force-feed him. So he'd have a few bites of whatever was in front of him, just enough to make them go away. It all tasted like sawdust and ashes anyway.

Then one day all three of them showed up at once. “We found him,” Willow blurted out almost immediately.

He'd been numb to emotions for so long he couldn't even identify the one that washed through him. “Is he okay?”

“He's in LA. With Angel.”

Xander nodded once. “Then he's safe.”

“Um....”

He looked up sharply. “What?” he demanded.

It was Buffy who answered. “Angel said Spike showed up and tried to fight him. So Angel’s got him sort of locked up in a cell in his basement.”

Xander lurched to his feet. “Locked up? No, no! That’s—”

Buffy grabbed his arm. “It’s for Spike’s own safety, Xan. Angel says Spike’s really wiggling out, like crazy-in-the-basement time, and Angel didn’t know what was going on. Xan, what happened to Spike?”

“It was when he was in Copenhagen, wasn’t it?” Giles asked.

“Yeah. It was...it was really fucking bad, okay? And he was here, trying...trying to feel safe, I guess, and instead of helping I made it worse.”

Giles sighed. “Xander, how can you possibly help someone else when you won’t even help yourself?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know, okay? I thought.... I thought I could love him and that would make everything better. It was fucking stupid of me.”

Giles didn’t look angry over being yelled at. “It was

human of you, Xander. You're human. It's one of the things we...we love about you." And, predictably, he pulled off his glasses and began to clean them with a handkerchief.

Xander didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so he did a little of both. When he had himself slightly under control again, he asked them, "Are there therapists for demons?"

"Well, not precisely," Giles answered. "But I've a colleague here, a psychiatrist. He's quite human, but he has a strong knowledge of matters that are somewhat...unusual."

"Would he help Spike?"

"I expect so."

Buffy shook her head. "Xander, you need to worry about you now. You can't—"

"Don't tell me what I can't. I'm going to go talk to Spike—if he'll talk to me, that is, which I kinda doubt—and try to persuade him to see this shrink."

“But what about you?” Willow asked.

“Doesn’t matter.”

And he brushed past them and out the door, because he guessed he’d better shower if he was going to travel.

~*~*~*~*~

It wasn’t quite that easy, of course. But he could be stubborn with the best of them—it was one of the few things he did well—and in the end the others grudgingly agreed to pay for his ticket on Virgin Atlantic and to give him Angel’s address. Willow wanted to accompany him, but he refused.

He got into LAX in the middle of the afternoon, thoroughly jetlagged and totally wiped. He hadn’t been in California since he’d left Sunnydale; it didn’t feel like home. He knew if he had any smarts at all, he’d go check into the Radisson and try to get a few hours’ shut-eye. So of course he caught a cab and headed straight for Angel’s instead.

As it turned out, Angel was living in a hotel anyway, some

big old pile of a place that had seen better days. Of course he couldn't live in a second-floor walk-up or suburban ranch house like a normal person. After the cab dropped Xander off, he hovered uncertainly at the door for a few minutes before finally marching inside.

Angel must have heard him enter, because as Xander stepped into the center of the lobby, Angel appeared through a small doorway. He froze and gaped when he saw Xander. Angel, of course, looked the same as always: spiky hair, dark clothes, handsome face. Xander looked like a guy who'd lost an eye, seen a lot of nasty things, aged ten years, spent several months mostly brooding in the corner, and then dragged himself halfway across the world.

"Xander," Angel finally said.

"Where is he?"

"He's...I don't think...."

"Where the fuck *is* he?" Xander hadn't backed down from Angelus that time in the hospital and he wasn't going to do it now.

Angel made a pained face. “Look.... At least sit down and talk to me for a few minutes first, okay?”

Xander wanted to have a chat with Angel about as much as he wanted to swallow hot coals. But he nodded, and Angel motioned him into a room that appeared to be an office. The big desk was littered with various books and papers. Angel sat in the leather chair behind the desk as Xander collapsed into the seat opposite.

Angel rummaged in a desk drawer for a moment before pulling out a bottle of Bushmills and a pair of glass tumblers. He filled each of the glasses about halfway, paused, and then added several more splashes of whiskey. He took one of the glasses into his big hand and, handing the other to Xander, had a nice long sip. “Buffy called last night,” he said.

Xander swallowed some of his own drink and didn’t answer.

“She said something bad happened to Spike a few months back, but she doesn’t know what. And she said you and him have been kind of...involved.”

“Did she tell you I’m about ready for the men in white

coats, too?”

Angel scratched at his chin. “Pretty much. So now you’re here to....”

“To get Spike some help. Get him out of your fucking cage.”

“He was trying to dust himself, Xander. He tried to get me to do it for him actually, but when I figured out he was purposely losing our fight I refused, and then he went stomping out into the sunshine. I had to drag him back. Got kind of singed myself.”

“Gee, that’s too bad.”

Angel didn’t seem to take offense. Maybe he knew Xander was only trying to cover his distress over the idea of Spike trying to kill himself. They both sat silently for a few moments, drinking.

“What is it you plan to do with Spike? Double suicide?”

“No! I’m going to take him to a therapist....”

Angel snorted. “Spike in therapy. That’s...that’s less

surprising than it should be. But he won't go."

"I'll find a way to make him."

"Xander, I've known Spike a really long time. He's...well, he's about the weirdest vampire I've ever met. Maybe that comes from being sired by Dru. He probably could have used a shrink years ago. But when he makes up his mind about something, he's like a pit bull. Never lets go of it. Even worse when he makes up his mind about *someone*."

"What's your point?" Xander asked wearily.

Angel swung his nearly empty glass in Xander's direction. "He's made up his mind about you, Xander."

Xander's laugh held no humor. "Yeah, I bet he has."

Angel tipped his glass to his mouth, emptying it, and then refilled it. He held the bottle out to Xander, who shook his head.

"I talked to Spike last night, after I got off the phone with Buffy. He still won't say what happened to him."

“Yeah, well, he didn’t exactly get a sterling response the last time he told about it.”

“But he did tell me that you’re...well, ‘Buried in a crater deeper than bloody Sunnyhell,’ was how he put it.”

“I guess that’s not too far off.”

“He said he’s broken. That he’s only dragging you deeper down that pit. That you need someone who’s made of light, not another demon. He quoted some poem. Homer, I think: ‘The starry lights that heaven’s high convex crown’d.’ You know he’s really gone when he’s reciting poetry. He said he loves you.”

Xander choked on his whiskey and then blinked his one eye in shock. “He *what* now?”

“Don’t make me repeat it,” Angel said with a sour face. “The moron has made some stupid choices before, but this one....” He shook his head. “Xander, what are you...what are your intentions for Spike?”

“Huh?”

Angel downed his entire glassful at once, then put the

tumbler down on his desk. “You fly all the way here and yell at me and tell me you’re gonna haul Spike to a headshrinker. You really care about the little asshole, don’t you?”

“I... Yeah. I do.”

“Then stop breaking his stupid dead heart. He’s had it broken enough times already.”

Xander wasn’t sure which made him more flabbergasted: that Angel was giving him relationship advice, or that Angel was so obviously concerned about Spike’s welfare. “But...but I’m...I’m just a fucking loser. You know that. *He* knows that. He used to call me these names...lackbrain. Droopy boy.”

“Spike calls everyone names.” He poured himself a third glass and drank it all down. Then he rubbed at his forehead and Xander wondered if vampires got headaches. “Listen up,” Angel said, “because I’m only gonna say this once, and if you repeat it to anyone I swear I’ll drain you dry. You’re not a loser. Neither of you are. You’re both brave and stubborn and heroic and enormous pains in the ass, and you absolutely deserve each other.”

Xander could only gape.

“Go down there and tell him you love him, Xander.”

“But...no. I’m too fucked up. And just loving someone doesn’t solve all your problems. It won’t get rid of his PTSD or whatever and it won’t turn me into a bundle of sunshine.”

“No. No, it won’t. But I think maybe you could both heal if you each had the other as your anchor, your tethering point. Take him to that psychiatrist and while you’re at it, see if you can get a group discount.” He leaned forward over his desk. “I don’t know if you’ll make it together. Hell, what kind of expert am I on...any of this? But I do know neither of you is gonna make it apart.”

After a very long minute or two, during which Xander allowed the words to sink into his thick head, he nodded. “Okay. Where is he?”

~*~*~*~*~

The cell was in the basement. Xander so did not want to

know why Angel had a cell in his basement.

Spike was in the cage, sitting on the floor with his back wedged in the far corner and his arms wrapped around his knees. His head was down and he didn't look up as Xander came down the stairs. "Finally decided to do it, wanker?" he said without inflection.

"Actually, I've been doing no wanking at all," Xander said, and Spike's head snapped up so quickly Xander was afraid he'd get whiplash.

"You!" Spike said.

"Yeah."

"How did you...."

"Little twentieth-century invention called a jet. And Giles's MasterCard."

Spike just looked at him, a dozen different emotions playing across his face, as Xander stepped closer. When he got to the cell itself, Xander clasped the cold iron bars. "You promised me you wouldn't run away."

“And you promised you wouldn’t off yourself.”

“I didn’t. Standing right here, perfectly alive and not rebaptized in the Thames.”

“And you look more like a corpse than I do.”

Xander looked down at himself. His clothing hung loosely and he knew his face was pale and grayish, his hair too long. “Always the romantic, Spike, with the sweet words.”

Spike suddenly stood and marched to the bars, only inches from Xander. “I’m gone. Why haven’t you got some help? Why haven’t those friends of yours made sure you’ve been eating properly and taking care of yourself?” He sounded furious.

“You can’t *make* someone get better, Spike. They have to want to. With you gone, I...I didn’t want to.”

“Why are you here?”

“To take you home with me. So we can *both* get help.”

He heard Spike swallow, and when Spike answered, his

voice was hoarse. “You can’t.... Love, I’ll ruin you. I’ll end you. I’m bad and I’m broken. I’m be—”

“If you say you’re beneath me I’ll...I’ll spank you!”

Spike’s eyes widened.

“Look, Spike, we’ve both been folded, bent, and mutilated. But I’m willing to try, at least. If you’ll try with me. Please?”

Spike stared at him for a few moments and then slowly raised his arms. He wrapped his hands around Xander’s on the bars. “All right, then,” he said softly.

Xander felt an odd little hitch in his chest, and it took him several seconds to recognize it. Hope. That was *hope*. He’d forgotten what it felt like. Oh, it felt fucking *good*!

“Did Peaches give you the key?” Spike asked with a smile.

Xander pulled the key from his pocket and undid the lock. Spike emerged slowly from the cage, a little hesitantly, like an animal held in captivity too long. But then he was out and they were embracing, tight, tight, so tight Xander couldn’t breathe and he didn’t care.

They pulled slightly apart and rested their foreheads together. “Let’s go get something to eat, yeah?” Spike said. “You could use a good bit of bulking up.”

“Sounds like you’re fattening me up for your dinner.”

A leer, definitely the most wonderful leer Xander had ever seen. “I am, pet. I am at that.”

Spike gave him a chaste little kiss on the cheek and they slung their arms around each other and walked up the stairs. Angel was hovering in the lobby, looking simultaneously anxious, annoyed, and—when he saw them together—sort of pleased.

“Have any takeaway menus lying about, pouf?” Spike asked. “I fancy some kung pao.”

Angel shook his head. “But you can use the laptop in my office if you want.”

“Brilliant! Come on, pet. Help me order and then I’ll wash up while we’re waiting for the food. I expect I’m a bit ripe by now.”

Xander nuzzled Spike's neck. "I can handle it. But yeah, I think I'd better call HQ, let them know...let them know everything's gonna be okay."

Spike looked at him, eyes shining with the same hope that was still fluttering comfortably inside Xander's chest. "Will it, pet?"

Xander smiled. "Yeah, I think it will."

Spike grabbed his arm and began to drag him into the office while Angel looked on, bemused. Loudly enough for Spike and Xander to hear, and with an almost-laugh in his voice, Angel said, "I wonder if you can buy Zoloft in bulk?"

A rejoinder drifted from his office: "If anything, pouf, make it Wellbutrin. No sexual side effects."

The End