

Rating: Hard R

Disclaimer: Thank you, Joss. We love you.

Concrit/Feedback: The voices in my head continually tell me I'm perfect, but that doesn't mean I don't like hearing it from you guys, as well.

Notes/Spoilers/Warnings: Set post-NFA but within the bounds of canon. Spoilers for the final seasons of BtVS and Ats.



Awakenings

by
Beetle

Part One

Xander sighs ruefully and shakes his head at the awful display before him.

There's nothing for it but to bite the bullet. As Uncle Rory--God rest his blotto soul--had been fond of saying: *kid, if ya gotta to eat a turd, don't nibble.*

"Whaddaya think?" Xander turns to the second page of movie listings. He's immediately sorry he did. "*Jay and Silent Bob's Most Odious Escapade* or *Batman VIII: Clayface's Revenge?*"

Will's dismayed gasp is a sufficient response and Xander doesn't even look up. "Yeah . . . I'm not too crazy about the choices, either, but what can we do? And we're *not* sitting through *Miss Congeniality 5: Dressed To Kill*. I learned my lesson with *Coiffured and Lethal*, thank you very much--"

Will makes a garbled groan--which still doesn't accurately convey the horror that was *Coiffured and Lethal*--and Xander at last puts down the paper, only to see Will looking at him as if he'd sprouted a third eye.

Xander frowns and touches his face. Nope, still just the one. But this being Hellmouth: the sequel, one can't be

too careful.

“What?” Will continues to gawp at him. “Jesus, babe, you look like you just swallowed a bug, or something! Look, if you really wanna see *The Importance of Being Earnest* that badly, we’ll see that. But I’m tellin’ you: with Sean William Scott as the director *and* star, we’d be payin’ our money and takin’ our chances.”

But Will is still doing a very entertaining impersonation of a deer caught in headlights. He jumps up, knocking his chair, and nearly goes ass-over-tea-kettle trying to back away from the kitchen table and Xander.

Okay . . . this is in no way a normal reaction to Sean William Scott movies--well, maybe it is for most people, but for whatever reason, Will actually likes the guy, so. . .

.

Watching Will turn around in an unsteady circle, his eyes wide and horrified as he takes in their apartment, Xander thinks he knows what’s going on.

Spurred by memories of the complete pandemonium Will’s *last* redecoration spree had caused, he’s up and across the room, pulling Will back against him for a bit of

timely distraction.

“Hey,” he murmurs, oblivious to the tensing of the body in his arms. “Why don’t we skip movie night and stay home? I promise I won’t let you get bored.”

Xander slides one hand down to the fly of Will’s jeans and Will *meeps*, bolting out of Xander’s arms and stumbling into their livingroom.

There’s a crash that probably used to be one of their table-lamps, a thud and a startled yelp.

Okie-dokie, something may be wrong, here. Xander shuffles hesitantly into the livingroom. In his haste, Will’s done in the lamp, knocked over the coffee table and upset a planter.

The man in question is crouched between the mantle and the bookcase. *Wary, confused* eyes track Xander’s progress.

“Sweetie, what--”

“Where the *bloody* hell am I?” Will demands in an angry mockney accent Xander hasn’t heard in nearly seven

years.

“Will--” Xander moves closer; his first instinct is to comfort. But Will tries to scoot backwards and bangs his head against the wall. A few photos topple off the mantle and bookshelves, unnoticed by either man.

“You just stay over there, Harris!” Will--no, *Spike* growls, his eyes as cold as chips of ice. “Stay over there!”

He’s back. Xander’s suddenly numb all over. They said it might happen, but--it’s been so long, I didn’t think it would.

Oh, God, why now? After all this time, why?

“Will--I mean Spike . . . you *are* Spike, right?”

A flat, contemptuous gaze Xander remembers as if he’d last seen it yesterday. After having those eyes look at him like he’d hung the moon, this new/old gaze cuts through Xander’s protective wall of numb like a knife.

“Of course I’m Spike, you moron. Who the hell else *would* I be?” Spike takes another quick glance around, then glares at Xander again. “What is this place--Martha

Stewart's tomb? What the fuck is going on?"

"You--you don't know?"

Another look. "If I knew, would I be jammed into this corner listening to you stammer your way through a complete sentence?"

Taking a deep, not-so-calming breath, Xander bites back the instinct to snipe--and the overwhelming desire to go to his knees and beg the guy who used to be his boyfriend to hold him--and does the thing that's kept him from making too many awful mistakes in the past few years.

Okay, what would Giles do now? Oh, yeah. . . .

"Can you tell me the last thing you *do* remember . . . Spike?" That kind of steady, self-assured tone? Doesn't come easy; every syllable is a fight, but a fight Xander wins.

Spike's mouth opens, as if to let fly with another insult . . . but the only thing that comes out is a shaky sigh. His eyes flutter shut and he frowns. It's Will's *doing-the-New-York-Times-crossword-puzzle-in-ink-so-don't-*

distract-me frown, but that is definitely not something Giles would notice or even *know* about.

“I remember . . . demons,” Spike whispers. “More demons than I’d ever seen in my life. I remember Charlie-boy fightin’ till he fell and *things* swarmin’ over him like lice . . . horrible things with too many teeth in too many mouths. Couldn’t get to him, couldn’t save him. Blue fought her way through . . . had to’ve been about thirty of ‘em to get to him, but by then. . . .”

“I remember Peaches slayin’ his bloody dragon, against all fucking odds. And I knew that if we got out of it in one piece, he’d be an insufferable prick about it, too.” He leans his head back against the wall and laughs a little; but when his eyes open, they’re wet and bright with pain.

“I remember me and Angel and Illyria fighting and fighting and fighting until ichor and blood covered us like a second skin. And as quick as the rain could wash it away, we were covered again. . . .”

“Musta been nearly dawn when Angel took a spear to the chest. Couldn’t tell if it was a heart-shot, but he fell and--he was just gone. Didn’t even see dust. By the time

Blue and I killed everything near where he'd fallen, there was nothing but mud and corpses. None of them were Angel.

"After that, I started to get tired--bleedin' from a dozen different wounds and I know I'm done for. Blue's doin' her best to watch my back *and* her own, but it's a lost cause. Suddenly, there's an explosion near the front of the alley . . . lights above us and around us and--" Spike laughs again, tears finally running down his freckled face. "Sounded like helicopters. Gunfire. Grenades. *Sounded* like the bloody marines had landed, and I was grateful enough to kiss Riley Finn's corn-fed arse if they had."

Without either of them realizing it, Xander'd crept closer to Spike, and now, he kneels, barely in touching distance--not that Spike would ever want him to--and holds out his hand.

Spike doesn't reach for it, but he doesn't slap it away, either.

"And then?"

"Then," Spike smiles, a wry, bitter twist of pale-pink lips. "I caught a Regnarath tail spike right in the gut. Went

down like a ten dollar whore at a Shriners's convention. Woulda got trampled, but for Blue tacklin' that thing like Refrigerator Perry on speed."

Spike closes his eyes again and the hand that Xander's been holding out is grabbed painfully tight.

"Spike--" Xander begins as soothingly as possible, only to have his hand pulled to Spike's stomach.

"Blood runnin' outta me like water--my intestines slippin' between my fingers *here*; screams and roars and snarls . . . like they're comin' from the other end of a long tunnel. I couldn't even see Blue, anymore, just light and dark flashing around me . . . rain hittin' my face and pain. *Too much* pain and I knew I was dust, I just knew, but then--"

If this were Will--the fact that it's not does nothing to stop the wrenching of Xander's heart--recounting one of his nightmares, Xander would know exactly how to comfort him, how to make everything better.

But this is *Spike*.

Spike, who doesn't push Xander away when he pulls him into his arms, but tucks his face into the crook of

Xander's neck.

Spike, who lets himself be held and stroked.

Spike, whose body apparently still knows Xander's well enough to take comfort in it.

The silence stretches, changes. Xander closes his own eyes and tries to think Watcherly thoughts as Spike's hands slide under his sweat shirt.

It's the tail end of movie night and they're standing outside of William's apartment building.

Xander's never this antsy with Andrew there to round out their weekly bonding ritual.

But Andrew's got the flu and William's looking at him expectantly, his pale face flushed from the cold air.

"So . . . guess this is where we part ways." Xander's doing the Nervous Guy Shuffle, and knows he's doing the Nervous Guy Shuffle, but he can't help it. Even aside from Andrew's absence, this particular movie night feels strange and different.

Different how, Xander can't put his finger on how until William's arms slide around him; into his coat and up under his sweater, to sweep up and down his back. So warm and so gentle and so--

Oh.

"It--it doesn't have to be, Xander," William murmurs, his gaze midnight dark in the cloudy moonlight.

In a flash of understanding, Xander's nerves vanish and he leans in, because he knows William, and knows that this is the difference that's been between them since the beginning of the night. Hell, since the hospital room. . . .

Xander shakes his head and quashes the memory before the back of his eye starts to tingle and sting. Smothers that first kiss under worry that Spike's unforeseen return could mean that pesky word that starts with 'A' and ends with 'Pocalypse'.

Eventually, Spike's shaking lessens and his breathing evens out. The sweep of his hands up and down Xander's back grows longer and slower. If this were Will, Xander would swear he was falling asleep.

What else would the G-man do? Xander asks himself again. He already knows what *Xander* would do. Xander would carry Will to their bedroom, lay him down, and rock him till they both fall asleep.

Obviously that's no longer an option. May never again *be* an option.

"What happened then, Spike?"

"Hmm? Whazzat. . . ?"

"Do you remember what happened next?"

A warm sigh ghosts past Xander's throat. Spike's hands have slowed to twitches and flutters.

"Oh . . . passed out, didn' I? But not before m' heart started to beat. . . ."



Part Two

After carrying an unconscious--and lightly snoring--Spike to bed, Xander sits quietly on the edge of the bed and watches him sleep till well after midnight.

Xander's always found Will to be beautiful. From that first moment in the hospital, when Will had opened his curious, dark blue eyes--the soul behind them shining out like a beacon--he'd owned Xander's heart.

It strikes him as odd that he'd never thought of *Spike* as beautiful, soul or no soul; hot, yeah--and that *only* in the dimmest, least-visited recesses of his mind. But now. . . .

Things have certainly changed. So many times and in so many ways, Xander wonders if the vertigo will ever fade. And yet. . . .

There's no tangible difference between them right now; Spike-asleep looks no different than Will-asleep. They're two people--okay, one person, if Xander forces himself to be brutally honest, but there'll be none of that just now--

sharing the same body:

the same too-long, sandy-colored hair tousled over the same clear, smooth brow,

the same strong, elegant hand curled under the same freckled cheek,

the same compact body tucked into fetal position, because Xander isn't under it to be sprawled on like a human mattress,

the same pure, quiet beauty that still keeps Xander awake nights, mesmerized . . . that still takes his breath away.

He wonders if Will is in there, dreaming, lost, frightened.

Alone.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here," Xander whispers, stroking Will's--Spike's soft, warm cheek. "Come back to me, if you can. Please . . . I love you."

Spike snorts and rolls onto his other side, muttering.

Even in his sleep, Will would have smiled, or leaned into Xander's touch; this, more than anything, should drive home just how gone Will is.

Should, but doesn't.

When it really hits me--when it sinks in that there's no do-overs, no going back, it'll break me into a million pieces, Xander thinks, still dry-eyed and numb--and thankful for it.

He knows he should leave Spike in peace, go camp out in the guestroom and make some phone calls. Giles first, so he can sic his rabid research teams on Spike's return, and what it might mean.

Call Andrew immediately after, since he and Will *were* pretty close.

Call Buffy, though she and William *weren't* pretty close--or exactly friends. She and *Spike* have a history that Xander couldn't even begin to ignore, much as he might like to.

More importantly, Buffy's the only person Spike trusts.

After that, he should call Deb, in HR, and let her know that Will would be taking a sabbatical.

Then, finally, call Willow, so she can feel the grief he can't seem to allow himself; cry the tears that'd unmake him completely.

That'd be the smart thing to do; the *Giles*-thing to do.

But Xander is too tired to do anything but the *Xander*-thing.

He lays down next to . . . Spike. When he falls asleep, he doesn't dream.

He remembers.

~*~*~*~*~

"Please, do be careful with that, it's a family heirloom!"
Will tells the movers, as they grunt and strain under the weight of the armoire.

When they finally set it carefully down--directly across from where the bed would go, as Will had instructed--the

movers groan and swear their way out of the apartment door for the credenza.

Xander, ever the opportunist, takes a break from installing the last of the livingroom fixtures to pull his stressed-out boyfriend into his arms. The pouty glower disappears and his eyes light up when they meet Xander's.

"Hullo, love." Will laughs a little when Xander steals a kiss. Then another. Then another. Before either of them know it, Xander's backed up against the armoire, sliding his hands down the back of Will's still-pristine sweatpants.

"Family heirloom?" He asks wryly, just to see Will's face color, ever so prettily. He's not disappointed.

"I thought perhaps the prospect of a lawsuit might persuade them to be a bit more careful with our things. And yes, this armoire is an heirloom of our family. You made it for me and it's very--" Will leans in to kiss the tip of Xander's nose "--very precious to me."

Xander grabs onto where the grabbin' is good. "Cater to my ego, why don'tcha?"

“There are other parts of you I’d much rather cater to.”

And though they’re both hot and sweaty and in the middle of a stressful move . . . or perhaps because of that, they’re making with the necking and moaning and naughty hands when the sound of cursing, complaining-- and what sounds like hours worth of re-sanding, yay-- reaches their ears, growing louder.

“Bugger,” Will murmurs, nipping at Xander’s jugular.

“Double bugger,” Xander agrees with a shiver and one last squeeze; they separate with smiles and a brief, frustrated kiss, and go back to their respective tasks of installing fixtures and haranguing the moving men.

By the time the sun sets, the last of the furniture has been brought in and the movers paid, tipped and shown the door. Xander is only too happy to flop down onto their air-mattress--their new bed’s on order--in a boneless heap.

“At least the worst of it is done.” Will says, squatting next to the mattress; he untangles Xander’s hair from the eyepatch and removes it, tsking when Xander lets out a

sigh of pure relief. "My poor Xan . . . you look all in."

"I am all in." Xander closes his eye and sighs again. "I just wanna lay here and never, ever move again."

"Not even to use the bathroom?"

"Um, hmm . . . nope."

"That's disgusting."

"Yet so small a price to pay for never having to move again."

"Haven't you heard? There's no rest for the wicked, sir. Tomorrow we have to rearrange the furniture and unpack."

Xander opens his eye just enough to see Will's smiling at him. "You are so bad at motivating me. I remain unmotivated."

"That's not what you were saying this morning."

"Touche. C'mere."

Xander pulls Will down to the air-mattress. They cuddle up together in their usual fashion: Xander sprawled all over the mattress, Will sprawled all over Xander, his face tucked into the crook of Xander's neck.

"We don't smell very good," Will notes after a few minutes of contented sprawling.

"We smell damn manly."

"If by damn manly you mean stinky--"

"I do."

"--then we are a damn manly scent to behold."

"Quite."

More contented sprawling--they really don't smell that bad . . . or maybe Xander's just gotten used to it--interspersed with Will wriggling around; making himself comfortable and making Xander hard.

"Okay, you're so doing that on purpose, aren't you?" He groans, Will's response is a laugh, more wriggling and slow, dirty grinding.

“Cocktease.”

“We really should go shower. . . .”

“Together?”

“Of course.”

“Hmm . . . doesn’t showering require standing up?”

“Oh, for upwards of ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, yes.”

“You know, we really aren’t that stench-y. . . .”

“Alexander.”

“Jeez, don’t do that. . . .”

“Do what?”

“Say my name all--British-y, like that.”

Will nips the skin just under Xander’s ear gently. He’s always had a neck fetish. That should wig Xander out, turn him off, seeing who it puts him in mind of, but if

anything . . . it's a guaranteed turn-on. Always has been.

"Mm, my darling, dearest, damn manly Alexander. . . ."

Just like the breathy, British-y sound of his name on Will's lips.

"Fuck," Xander exhales, holding Will tighter, closer.

"Fuck, fuck fuck."

"Can do that in the shower, you know?"

"You have a one-track mind."

Says the man who already has his boyfriend's sweats pushed down to mid-thigh.

"You love my one-track mind."

"This is true."

And the rewards of honesty? Cool hands up under his shirt and a tongue in his ear. Xander decides then and there that honesty is always the best policy, resolves to never lie again.

“Part of me can’t even believe this is all happening. We’re moving into our first place together.” Will catches Xander’s earlobe between his teeth and tugs on it just this side of ow! before letting go. Then he sits up, looking vaguely troubled. “It seems too good to last, like Whoever or Whatever gave us this life could just--take it away, at any moment.”

“No! Nobody gave us a goddamned thing, babe! We worked for everything we have, we earned it.” Xander ignores the shiver that races down his spine. Daffy Duck must’ve walked over his grave. “We deserve it.”

Will looks into Xander’s eyes for a long time, obviously still troubled. Xander doesn’t know what to do to take that look away, so he does the only thing he can think of; pulls Will back into his arms and tell some more truth.

“I love you, William. I’ll hold on to you for as long as you’ll let me.”

“Oh. . . .” Will takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I know this doesn’t mean anything, coming from an amnesiac librarian, but--I love you, Xander Harris. More than anyone one I’ve ever known. I always will. And I won’t ever let you go--not without a fight.”

“God, Will! That means everything--you mean everything--”

Then Will is kissing him slow, hard and aggressive, kicking off the sweatpants and allowing Xander to get his own fly open before pinning his wrists and settling between his legs.

“Wait--what about the shower?” Xander asks between kisses and grinding because he’s just that stupid. “I thought you wanted--”

“Later, love. Now hush. . . .”

The shower doesn’t get taken till before dawn. The furniture doesn’t get rearranged till late Friday night.

Their new bed arrives early Saturday afternoon--

--and they don’t finish unpacking till Tuesday night.

~~*~*~*~*

Saturday morning.

There's nowhere to go and nothing to do . . . two of the things that make Saturday the greatest day ever. And the third thing is currently sprawled on top of Xander and humping his leg.

Ah . . . Saturday morning. . . .

Xander rolls them onto their sides and unzips their pants--pants? in *bed?*--with a relieved sigh. He rubs the point of Will's hip before grabbing himself a double-handful of morning wood. He gets a sleepy, rumbly murmur of encouragement:

"Yeah . . . *just* like that, pet--"

And like a dash of cold disappointment, Xander's fully awake and opening his eyes.

"*Spike?*"

Hazy, happy blue eyes fly open, smiling into Xander's for a moment before widening in fear and dismay.

Just as quickly, *that* look is replaced by the shuttered, mocking gaze he remembers so well.

“Harris.”

Said without inflection. Xander still lets go of both their cocks like they’re on fire, his heart racing with embarrassment and lingering confusion.

Spike looks down between them, then up at Xander again, all a-smirk.

Those’re *Will’s* eyes, but the *gaze itself* is leering and impersonal in a way that Will’s had never been.

“Xander-bloody-Harris strokin’ me off. . . .” Spike rolls onto his back, taking his cock in hand and picking up where Xander’d left off. “Now what sort of cruel and extra-crispy hell have the PTB landed me in?”

And that *shouldn’t* hurt. Considering where Spike’s memories stop, waking up in bed, mid-hump with Xander Harris would be . . . startling, to say the least.

Spike isn’t Will, so those words shouldn’t hurt. It’s Vulcan-logic.

Unfortunately, Xander’s not Vulcan, so they *do* hurt.

They *really* hurt.

Because this is the point where the Protective Wall of Numb crumbles, and realization crashes in like a panzer on a kamikaze mission:

Spike is back and Will is gone.

Meanwhile, the aforementioned, ex-menace is looking around the bedroom with evident disdain and still lazily stroking himself.

Yep, he's back; and Will is . . . *gone*.



Part Three

“You’re not dead, Spike.”

“Oh, really?”

But Will is, Xander thinks, stifling an unreasoning wave of hatred; without the hate, all that's left is a creeping sort of despair. Welcome to Painfest: 2010. "Really. And this isn't a hell dimension."

There goes the eyebrow quirk. Xander longs for the days when Will unintentionally reminded him of Spike. The reverse is getting old in a hurry.

“Prove it. Oh, but first--” Spike lifts his hips, shoves Will’s Dockers and boxers down to his knees and resumes stroking himself unselfconsciously. “Be a mate and give a bloke a hand, yeah? Or a mouth--”

“*No! And--stop doing that!*” Xander scrambles off the bed like a frightened virgin and Spike rolls his eyes.

“Not like I’m askin’ you to go beyond the pale ale, here, Harris. You started this, so get back over here and bloody well finish it . . . you know you want to.”

And Xander’s not wanting, not looking below Spike’s

waist, not at all. This is *Spike*, not Will. “No. Way. There will be no finishing of anything that may have . . . accidentally been started. So put it away, zip up and for Chrissakes *try* not to be a **raving asshole** for five minutes!”

“Five *whole* minutes?” Spike pouts (if he was Will, Xander would’ve melted like a cup of soft-serve over an open flame) but does as Xander asks with an exaggerated sigh. “Dunno if I can. But if I have to be on my P’s and Q’s--I’d appreciate it if *you* weren’t wavin’ in the breeze like a bleedin’ flag. Bit distractin’, that.”

“Oh, God--” Xander turns away from Spike’s mocking leer and quickly does his own tuck-and-zip, talking to cover his confusing mix of embarrassment, grief, desire and regret. “Look, you’re not dead, Spike. In fact--you’re the exact opposite. And though I’m beginning to have serious doubts about it, this isn’t a hell dimension.”

“Says you.”

When Xander turns around, Spike is over at the big picture-window, peering around the drawn drapes timidly, as if he half-expects to burst into flame.

This'll be the first time Spike's been in direct sunlight since the Ring of Amarra, and before that, over a century, Xander realizes. And that hurts, because Will had loved the sunshine so much. Loved it though brief exposure turned him beet-red, and slightly-less-brief exposure made him burn spectacularly, even when wearing sunblock with an SPF higher than Willow's i.q.

"I saved the world--*again*, I might add--but the possibility that my reward might be a stint in a hell dimension isn't exactly inconceivable. In fact, that sounds like the PTB, all over," he murmurs, turning away from the window with a sigh. He looks around the bedroom once again, less critically. Xander looks, too, trying to see the room through a century-plus ex-vampire's eyes.

Okay, yeah, Will's taste is--was kinda eclectic . . . Victorian-era meets thrift-store chic meets Crate & Barrel, Xander thinks. But our place is warm and welcoming. Just like Will.

And fast on the heels of that:

God, I miss him so much. He's been gone less than a day, and it feels like it's been a year. How'm I gonna get through today, and tomorrow, and all the tomorrow's

after that? How--?

“Oi, Harris--*not* a hell dimension?” Spike drifts towards Will’s night table and picks up the framed photograph on it, frowning. He holds it up for Xander to see. “You sure about that, mate?”

And Xander doesn’t have to look to see, to remember--

--Dawn and Connor dancing their first dance as husband and wife, revolving slowly, lovingly around the dance floor and kissing, as if unaware of every envious eye on them.

Xander is amazed that a wedding dress that’d looked frothy and silly on the hanger, somehow looks beautiful and elegant on Dawn--especially while waltzing. Like that last scene in Beauty And The Beast, the one that still makes Willow tear up.

Dawnie looks like the princess she is.

Xander turns to Will to say just that. But the wistful look he catches on Will’s face derails that train of thought easily.

Or uneasily, as it turns out, because that look reminds him of Anya. Of that half-yearning, half-hopeful, half-predatory look she used to get--and Buffy still gets--at weddings.

Like the way Neil Armstrong must've looked up at the moon as a kid.

"Will?"

"Yes, love?"

"Would you maybe wanna do that . . . someday?"

Will smiles distractedly. "What? Dance a waltz? Make-out with Connor? Wear a wedding dress?" That distracted smile turns mischievous. "Cause . . . I've done one of those things already, and more than once."

"Wiseass. You know what I mean and--God, do I even wanna know which one?" Xander asks, dismayed. Will's smile gets Cheshire Cat-y, then turns into a smirk.

"I dunno . . . do you?"

"No . . . leave me under the delusion that my boyfriend

can waltz, for just a little while longer?” Will chuckles and Xander nods at the happy couple. “Do you wanna . . . you know, do the whole wedding-thing?”

Will quirks the scarred eyebrow. “You mean get married.”

“That would be the wedding-thing, yes.”

“Xander--are you--are you proposing to me?” Will’s eyes widen, just like Sailor Moon’s. “Yes! The answer is yes, darling! Oh, we must start planning, right away!”

Xander’s jaw drops so fast, it gets whiplash. There is no amount of back-pedaling that could undo this, but he has to try. “Uh--I--guh--wait!--I meant--”

Will holds that anime-face for all of three seconds before laughing and leaning in to steal a kiss. “Don’t be so skittish, darling, I’m just teasing. I love you, and I love our life the way it is. I don’t need to wear a gold band--or thirty yards of white silk and crinoline to feel secure.”

Still drowning in eight different flavors of relief, Xander nonetheless feels the need to clarify. “Will, I want to spend the rest of my life with you; I’m more sure of that than I am of anything else. But if you wanna have a

formal ceremony. . . ?”

Will glances around the reception hall and snorts, making a Spike-ish face of oh, please. “Since when have we stood on formality or ceremony? Besides, wouldn’t I first have to convert to . . . what are you, again?”

“Um . . . Episcopalian--I think. Or maybe Methodist.”

“Either sounds dreadful. You see, Alexander? I simply cannot marry you.”

“Well . . . I could become--I wanna say Anglican--?”

“Anglican, you Godless heathen,” Will says, all fake, British asperity. Then he smiles all pretty, his eyes lit up with laughter. “Not that I remember anything about it.”

“Hypocrite.”

“I represent that remark!”

It’s banter, nothing special, or even particularly witty about it, but in that moment, something wells up within Xander; something so big and so burning, it has to come out. To be said and heard and answered. He’s only ever

felt this way once before--not nearly this intensely--and it hadn't ended well, despite all his good intentions.

But it has to be said. The way a four-year old on a long car-trip has to goooooo, reeeeeeeal baaaaaad, this has to be said.

Will you marry me, William Kent? trembles on the tip of his tongue, too insistent to be denied. He's about to get down on bended knee--if a thing's worth doing, kid, it's worth doin' right; the only smart thing Tony Harris ever said--when there's a snick and a flash.

"Ah, young love," Andrew says sagely, from the other side of their table. Then he bounces like a toddler on Pixie-Stix. "Sorry. You guys looked so moony and cute, I just hadda take a picture!"

For once, Andrew's obnoxious interruption is more than providential--it's a literal lifesaver. What had he been thinking? Had he really been about to ruin his second--and almost certainly his last shot at true love? Had he learned nothing from the Wedding-That-Never-Was, and from Anya's tear-ravaged face?

Had he really been about to risk doing that to Will?

Xander mentally shakes some sense into himself--forces away the twinge of Anya-guilt he'll always feel--and gives Andrew a toothy, Cordelia-Chase-special grin.

"Just make sure you email us a copy, Andy." Xander's voice sounds weirdly relieved to his own ears; neither man seems to notice.

"But of course." Andrew aims his fancy-schmancy digital camera at the bride and groom for the nine billionth time. "Betcha it comes out really great."

"I'll bet it does." Will glances at Xander and the wry amused look on his face changes to one of concern. He puts his hand on Xander's, squeezing gently.

"Love? What is it?"

"Nothing," Xander says, smiling. "Nothing that can't wait."

Wait, it had; for two years, and now. . . .

Now, Spike is here . . . waiting for answers. Xander sighs, running a hand through his hair.

“Do you have specific questions, or do you want me to start from the beginning?”

“I--” Spike frowns at the picture again. “How long have I been outta commission?”

“About six years.”

“Damn. Right, then. The beginning, it is.”

~*~*~*~*~

It's the unloveliest dawn the city of angels has ever seen, and Los Angeles has seen its fair share of unlovely dawns.

Slate-grey, with the promise of even more rain, morning gets under way; rush hour fumes into full swing.

This is a city unaware of the impending apocalypse in its midst.

Likewise, it is unaware of a large alley, packed to bursting with corpses. Most of these corpses are so unbelievable, Ripley would've creamed his pants with glee, just before

shitting them in abject terror.

Since the rising of the sun, an immensely powerful witch has been standing in the mouth of the alley chanting, drawing on her own power and the power of the world's most powerful covens. She holds a glamour and wards over herself, the alley and the Hyperion, as well as the thirty Watchers, one hundred thirty-seven Slayers and pissed-off former GodKing standing between the world and its certain annihilation.

Certain annihilation has come in the form of a ginormous, frighteningly stable inter-dimensional Gate, which is still sporadically spilling out hordes of . . . things.

According to the uber-witch--and to two old mystics--if this kind of Gate can be de-stabilized, it will collapse in on itself and the energy/matter that has passed through it will change direction--be pulled back into it's own universe; all of its denizens, living and dead, will be pulled back through the Gate.

*("Like what the happened at the end of *Ghostbusters*," the Witch will explain to one puzzled Watcher about a week later, only to see the lightbulb go on above his head. "We crossed the streams, reversed the flow of*

energy through the Gate until *blooey!* Bye-bye Goser! Except instead of tons of melted marshmallow--um, I mean demon corpses laying around after the end credits roll, they were all sucked back into their own world!"

"Or into the nearest parallel dimension," the Watcher will add, because he knows it'll put a smile on her pale, weary face. And it does.)

Both mystics and witch also agree that the longer such Gates remain open, the more they want to stay open, and the harder they are to close.

The more dangerous it is for the witch(es) making the attempt.

Not that there's any choice in the matter. The Gate would keep spewing out demons until the world it opened on was utterly emptied. But long before that happened, the Earth would be a dead and burnt-out cinder.

So they fight, each in their own way: the Slayers with their fists, the Watchers with their knowledge and stratagems, the witches, sorcerers, mystics and conjurers with their magicks, and US Special Forces--who will immediately disavow knowledge of, or involvement with

any and all allegedly supernatural matters, including the "closing" of a "Gate"--with their not inconsiderable firepower.

It takes the covens--working through the uber-witch, and at the dubiously safe distance of a mere continent and ocean away--until late morning to de-stabilize the Gate. The collapse is immediate and anti-climactic; several breathless, infinite moments when each being in the alley stops . . . then the Gate and every fiend that came through it winks out of existence, leaving ninety-one Slayers and twenty Watchers to tend the wounded and mourn the fallen. . . .

~*~*~*~*~

“Okay, I get it--epic battle, bunch of dead little girls and Watchers . . . been there, done that.” Spike shivers. “Not interested in the nostalgia, mate, so skip ahead. How long have we--have you and *he* been shaggin’?”

“Will and I have been together for about five years.”

“*Five years?*” Spike’s eyes widen--he’s anime-boy now, throwing shades of Will out like there’s no tomorrow.

“Buggering hell . . . why?”

Ouch. “Why what?”

“Why me--*him*?”

The *couldn't you find some other bloke who wasn't amnesia!*me is unspoken, but heavily implied.

“Because . . . I don't know. *Just* because. I love him. That's all.”

Xander's shrug is as helpless and hopeless as he feels. But he tries to pull a few tattered shreds of Giles-ness to himself. It's better than bleeding heart-break all over the place. “And if you wanna know why me . . . sorry, can't help ya, there, either. I've been asking myself that same question for five years, and waiting for the other shoe to drop--” a bitter laugh. “Guess it finally has.”

Spike places the picture back on the night-table more carefully than Xander would've expected, and wraps his arms around himself. He looks so lost, so confused, so much like Will had those first weeks after waking up, that Xander has to restrain himself from doing so, as well.

“Why can’t I remember?”

“I don’t know that, either.”

“Is there anything you *do* know?”

“Not much,” Xander admits with a tiny, self-mocking smile; he digs in his pocket for his eyepatch. It’d been amazingly easy to not wear it around Will--make himself vulnerable. With Spike, it was near impossible, not to mention spectacularly stupid. “And what little I do know just doesn’t apply.”

The *because you’re back* that colors that sentence is also heavily implied, also unspoken. Spike looks at him sharply, and opens his mouth to say something Xander has no doubt is snarky and cutting.

But at the last second, he looks at the picture again, like he can’t help himself; stares for a long time before saying anything.

“Are you in love with him?”

“Yes.” No point in lying. Not like Spike hasn’t seen the proof of it.

“He looks happy in that picture. You both do.”

This is not a question, so Xander doesn't answer it.

“Well, looks like the PTB've royally fucked us both over-- in one fell blow, the bastards. My sympathies, mate.”

Spike's tone is subdued, and almost kind. Which begs the question: since when is Spike a) kind to Xander Harris and b) dabbling in discretion?

That's Will, Xander thinks the back of his eye stinging. Maybe . . . some part of his brain is still Will, still remembers kindness and . . . how to not hate me--

It's hope, like a knife in the gut. Worse, because it causes pain and means nothing.

Will come to nothing.

“Xander?”

When he opens his eye, Spike is sitting on Will's side of the bed with his feet up, staring off into the distance and hugging his knees.

“What happened after the alley?” He asks. “I know I shanshued . . . but why wasn’t I *me*? Where did I disappear to? What was I--was *William* like when he woke up? Did he remember anything about being a vampire--or being human?”

“He remembered how to walk and talk, how to drive--everyday stuff, but no, he didn’t remember being human or being a vampire. No one knew why, and the PTB weren’t telling, no matter how many times we petitioned them.” Xander sits on his own side of the bed. “When we found your, um--body, you were unconscious. Holes in your clothes, I guess from all the wounds you got, but no holes in *you*. And you were breathing. Warm and dry despite the rain. Untrampled, even with all the demons and Slayers and Watchers that’d been running around.

“Some fairly new Slayers found you, Patti and Entae. They thought you were someone’s Watcher, and tried to wake you up. When they couldn’t, Patti came and got me--”

“You were there? Why?”

Nothing but curiosity in that question. Xander hesitates

before answering, but since an econo-sized can o' worms has already been opened, reopening his own tiny, little, single serving-sized can o' worms is no big, or shouldn't be.

"Wasn't about to let my Slayers go into that alley without me."

Spike looks up at Xander. There's no snark and disdain in his eyes, now. Just sudden comprehension and that same curiosity . . . more shades of Will. "You're a Watcher."

"*Was,*" Xander says shortly, determinedly not seeing flashes of Naiobe's face, maimed almost beyond recognition, or Fabiola's poor, broken body and her lifeless, rain-filled eyes. "Not anymore."

Spike says nothing, once again making with the discretion. It's starting to get eery.

"Were you surprised I was there at all, shanshu aside?"

Xander smiles a little. "Andrew couldn't keep a secret that big to save his life. At least not from me. . . ."

~*~*~*~*~

It wasn't that he cared whether Spike lived or died, Xander rationalized to himself, three days after the Alley Incursion.

Three days during which--despite Willow and Buffy's silly old logic--he'd only left Spike's bedside to relieve himself, get more coffee and scavenge whatever junk he could from the vending machines, and harass Spike's doctor.

No . . . it wasn't that he cared, so much as he couldn't believe the evil undead was still around.

Not just around--alive.

Cordelia and Wesley?

Dead.

But Spike is alive.

Naiobe and Fabiola. . .?

Dead. Both dead.

But Spike?

Spike's alive. As in pulse-having and chock-full of metabolic processes.

Anya's a year in the blighted earth that used to be Sunnyhell, but Spike . . . fucking Spike is still around and alive, sleeping like a baby in his private hospital room.

How's that for a slice of un-fucking-believable?

Some days, the universe just keeps on making with the funny. Xander, however, has had about all the humor he can stomach. Sitting vigil for someone he'd barely liked at the best of times is as good a distraction as any from . . . things.

So he sips his watery coffee, eats his stale nachos and warms the hospital room's single uncomfortable chair, reading the Los Angeles Times or whatever ancient magazines the candy-stripers bother to leave. Sometimes he reads out loud to Spike, but more often than not, he doesn't. If unconscious people really can hear what's said to them, and what's said is all the awful shit they're gonna wake up to--why would they wake up at all?

Time in Africa has made Xander silent enough for the lack

of babble to be noticeable to the friends he hasn't seen in person for nearly a year. He's lost the knack of non-stop yakking. But the silence he's grown used to has nothing to do with recycled hospital-air and sickness, and everything to do with wide, open places and balmy nights featuring starry, Van Gogh galaxies.

So he resorts to telling Spike about his own travels, about the things he's seen, the things he's done (some of these things he will never tell another living soul, as long as he lives), the people he's met.

He speaks of every noteworthy thing that has happened since Sunnydale turned into the world's largest sinkhole. Everything except his Slayers.

His poor dead girls.

"You know what a mbuna fish is, Spike?"

Xander asks the unconscious man questions like that when his mind strays back to the alley, to Naiobe's bright, predatory smile while she fought, or Fabiola's Xena-esque war whoops.

When his mouth gets too dry for pseudo-babble, Xander

studies Spike's pale, serene face till the memories leave him alone. It's a pursuit that surprisingly never gets dull.

You see, he's always been puzzled by how innocent Spike looks while he's sleeping.

Xander remembers that from both wonderful stints as roomie of the undead. Spike-awake had indeed been wickedness personified. Not so much evil--thought Xander never doubted for a moment that Spike was evil by human standards, but in comparison with Angelus, William the Bloody was downright puckish--as wicked.

Spike-asleep looked and looks like the innocent he'd been up until the moment he died.

Another cosmic joke.

By the third day, Xander has memorized every line, every freckle, every minute detail he'd never bothered to notice before, and he's about to go chase down Spike's doctor again, when suddenly, Spike's dark blue eyes flutter open, locking instantly on him.

He yawns. Stretches. Smiles.

“Oh,” he says. The smile is radiant and unexpectedly sweet. “Hello.”

“Uh . . . hi?” Confused much? You betcha! Not only because the loveliness of the smile makes Xander subconsciously doubt his heterosexuality, but because the smile is directed at him.

Spike seems . . . glad to see him.

Somewhere in the world, there’s a rain of toads.

Somewhere else, dogs are reciting the alphabet backwards.

Spike looks around his room, wide-eyed and curious, then back at Xander. “I beg your pardon, but where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital--you’ve been unconscious for three days. Since you shanshued.”

Spike blinks. “Since I what, now?”

“You know . . . since your little heart-problem cleared up.” Xander rolls his eyes, unsure as to why Spike’s pretending to be someone with a little civility and manners, but

willing to play along for the moment.

“Ah . . . I see,” Spike murmurs, as if he doesn’t really see, but also doesn’t wish to seem intractable. Then, he smiles again, apologetically this time. “Well, I suppose that’s good news for me, but--are you quite well? You look to be more in need of this bed than I, if you’ll forgive me saying so.”

For a moment, Xander is perplexed--Spike? Concerned about him?--then he’s shaking his head. “It’s good to see that the whole shanshu-thing isn’t keeping you from being an asswipe, ‘cause I was worried, for a minute, there.”

Instead of snarking back, Spike blinks again, his smile wavering. There’s something different about him--about his eyes. They’re the same color, but there’s something missing from their depths, or something extra or--something wiggly like that.

Pod!Spike? Xander wonders, only half-jokingly.

Pod!Spike fidgets nervously, plucking at his blanket. “I--have I offended you?”

“Not recently,” Xander says, shrugging. The radiant smile is starting to look rather desperate and Xander sighs.

“No, you haven’t offended me--why are you acting so weird, Bleachy?”

Xander gets another puzzled look for his trouble--wary now, as well, as if Xander’s the one who’s acting like a space-case. “Am I behaving strangely?”

“A little, yeah. You’re all--polite and nice and non-insulting. For you, that’s pretty strange behavior. Not that I’m complaining.”

“Ah . . . may I ask you a favor, then?”

“How much?” Xander pulls out his wallet with a fake grimace. This time, Pod!Spike gets the joke and laughs looking down at his pale hands. He turns them this way and that, as if he’s never seen them before, wiggling his fingers. When he looks up at Xander again, the smile is completely gone and his eyes are worried.

“Could you please tell me--who you are, sir, and . . . who I am?”



Part Four

Xander's the one to blink, now. His mind has completely blanked.

"Sir?" Spike asks, when Xander shows no signs of doing anything but gaping. "I realize my words may come as something of a shock, but--I have no memory of who I am, who you are, what we are to each other--or anything about my life, whatsoever. I . . . believe I'm suffering from amnesia."

And Xander's brain? Is still making with the blankness, 'cause--amnesia! Spike? No way, right?

Spike's face is still composed--pleasant, even--but it's so obviously a front. Those eyes are confused and scared; they tick back and forth from his nervous fingers, which

are twisting the edges of the blanket ceaselessly, and Xander's face.

"I understand that this is a fantastic claim to make--and indeed, I, myself, can hardly countenance it. Yet--" Spike laughs a little, but he doesn't sound amused. He sounds scared, possibly near tears. "Yet I find myself in the unenviable and unassailable position of living it."

He keeps sneaking timid peeks at Xander's face, and Xander finally places what's different about them:

Kindness and innocence. That's it. Part of it, anyway. They're Spike's eyes, but there's no demon in them, no contempt . . . no recognition.

No Spike.

Oh, crap . . . I think Spike has amnesia!

"You're sure you don't know who you are, or who I am?"

A look of exasperation passes over Spike's face. "Forgive me in advance for being somewhat abrupt, sir, but--if I knew who either of us are, I wouldn't be asking you, would I?"

And that sounds more like the Spike Xander knows, fancy language aside. "Sorry--I, uh, guess not."

Spike blushes and looks back down at his hands again. "My memory is compromised, and so, apparently, are my manners. No affliction is an excuse for treating you ill, sir. I apologize."

Xander blushes. "No, I'm the one who was being thick. There's no need to--" he stammers, oddly uncomfortable.

"I'm afraid there is." Spike says stiffly, then sighs. "I'm quite sure that my mother, whoever she was, raised me with better manners than I've heretofore displayed."

Heretofore? Xander thinks, bemused. Then shakes his head. "You've been very, um, mannerful, heretofore, Spike. Considering."

"Spike?" Displeasure wrinkles Spike's nose. "Good Lord! Is that my name?"

"Yeah. Well, it's what you started calling yourself about a cent--um, awhile ago." And Xander wonders if he should be telling amnesia-boy anything that hasn't been Giles-

approved. But Giles is already back in London, and with the whole time difference-thing, probably asleep. Besides, what could it hurt to tell the guy his name? "Your real name is William."

"William," Spike says, as if tasting the word. Then that radiant smile is back. "I--feel like I'm a William . . . I think. Actually, I feel more like a Will. Or maybe a Billy. . . ."

"Definitely a Will," Xander says. Spike--Will laughs again. It's a nice laugh, nothing but uncomplicated pleasure in it.

"Will, it is, then . . . do I have a last name?"

"You betcha, you do! And I'll tell it to you, as soon as I remember!" Definitely gotta call Giles ASAP. . . .

"You don't know it offhand?" Will frowns in thought. "I take it we're not related?"

"Oh, God, no!"

"Nor are we friends, I would to deduce from that reaction."

Xander blushes again, and back-pedals, hating the whipped-puppy look on Will's face. "We were roommates on two separate occasions. . . ."

"I see. Roommates, but not . . . friends." It's not a question and Will still looks unhappy.

Xander takes his hand and squeezes it till Will looks up at him.

"Honestly? We didn't get along too well a lot of the time . . . or any of the time. We were both stubborn and mouthy and--it was testosterone-city, most days. Sometimes we were kinda jerks to each other." Xander remembers going after Spike with an ax--as well as the reason why he went after Spike with an ax--and sighs. "Other times, we were absolute bastards to each other. But I respected you, toward the end. Even started to trust you. You saved my life, Sp--Will. Kept me from losing the other one." Xander gestures at his patch.

Will reaches out to brush Xander's forehead and temple near the patch. His fingers are so warm and tender, Xander leans into his touch.

"I never did thank you for that." He can't remember if he

has or hasn't, but it couldn't hurt to do so twice. "Thanks for--for saving my life, Spike."

"I'm sure that it was my honor to be of aid to you," Will murmurs, cupping Xander's cheek. They stare into each others' eyes, only looking away when some kind of muscle car--nice driving in a hospital zone, dickhead--revs its way down the street, startling them both.

Will smiles and hesitantly removes his hand, placing it back in Xander's. Xander clears his throat and turns bright red, but he doesn't refuse Will's hand. The silence between them is comfortable, but--charged.

"Towards the end of what?" Will asks suddenly.

"I beg your pard--I mean, what?"

That scarred left eyebrow goes up. "You said that towards the end you started to respect and t-trust me, and I was curious . . . towards the end of what?"

"Of our, um, time in Sunnydale. My hometown--but not yours. You're not from Southern California, originally."

"Well, I know that," Will snorts, turning their hands so he

can hold Xander's in both of his own. His hands look even paler and more fragile holding Xander's larger, darker one. "I'm just sorry that I can't remember you, er--?"

"Xander--Xander Harris." He laughs, feeling foolish all of a sudden.

"Xander . . . Alexander--" Xander shivers. "I just wish I could remember you, Alexander," Will says regretfully.

Now, they're both blushing. Xander, because he's not used to a Spike-shaped person being this nice to him, and Will because--

--he's obviously embarrassed that he can't remember me, or much of anything else.

"Do you have any idea why I've lost my memories, Xander?" Will's looking at him in a way that Spike never would've: like he's someone to be taken seriously. "You said I've recently recovered from a heart condition--could that have something to do with my amnesia?"

"Uh--I think it's important not to discount any possibilities . . . but we'd have to ask someone who actually knows about this kinda thing."

“You mean a neurologist?”

“Whuh? Oh, yeah--I guess one of them, too. I was thinking more along the lines of my ex-librarian, but it couldn't hurt to have a second opinion.” Xander shrugs.

~*~*~*~*~

“Shit, speaking of--”

Xander stands up, running a hand over his face and through his hair. Spike jumps up, his eyes wide and alarmed.

“Hey! Where're you goin'? Story-time's not over, yet!”

“It is, for now. I've gotta make some calls, Spike. Shoulda made 'em last night.”

“Call who? Why?”

And Spike still looks like he's about to freak out. Xander goes around to Will's side of the bed, but once he's there, has no idea what to do? Take Spike's hands? Hold

him? Kiss him till he forgets to be so wound up?

Yeah, right.

Finally, Xander sits down on the bed, pulling Spike down with him, and places a tentative hand on Spike's back. The tense muscles under his hand immediately begin to relax.

Huh.

Spike takes a deep breath and lets it out, staring down at his socks. "Who're you gonna call?"

"Giles, Willow --Buffy. I'm just gonna let 'em know you're back, in case it means something--Hellmouth-y."

"*Buffy?*" Spike asks, like he's never heard that name before. Then he looks up at Xander shyly; like damn near everything else he does, it's so reminiscent of Will. "She's . . . alright, then? And the 'bit?'"

"They're both fine. Buffy lives in London and Dawn's in Berkeley. She's married."

"Married?!"

“To Angel’s son, Connor.”

“Wait--to Angel’s *what--?*”

Xander starts to launch into *that* whole drama, then shakes his head. “Nuh-uh. It’s a long, *long* story, one that Connor, himself, can tell you.”

Spike is still gaping. Not the most intelligent look, but Xander’s in no position for the casting of stones. “So you’re telling me that the Slayer’s sister is married to a vampire’s son--*Buffy’s sister* is married to *Angel’s biological son--*” Xander nods, repressing a smile. “Some weird vampire-child is shaggin’ *my* Niblet?!”

And this next part? *Still* makes Xander’s brain grin and dance around in his skull like a drunken capuchin. “Yep. They’re expecting their first child, Tara-Joyce, in October.”

Spike’s jaw drops. This expression, at least, is *pure* Spike. “Angel's son knocked Dawn up?”

Had he thought that some remnant of Will might be making Spike a bit more discrete?

“Yes, oh, Arbiter of all that is tactful and mannerly.” It’s amazing how quickly the snark-reflex reasserts itself, and keeps the pain hovering around the edges of Xander’s consciousness. It makes him feel almost friendly toward Spike.

“Look, I’ll admit--at first, it was disturbing on a *bunch* of levels, the whole pregnancy-thing. Till you see the goofy way they moon over each other *and* the baby . . . I’m tellin’ you, that little girl’s gonna have the best, most devoted parents in the world.”

“Not to mention an uncle that’ll take apart any riff-raff that comes near her,” Spike growls. For a nano-second, Xander could swear he sees a flash of gold in Spike’s eyes. . . but that would be impossible.

Much like a vampire becoming human is impossible? Yuh-huh. . . .

It’s probably nothing but his own over-taxed mind playing tricks on him. But it might be worth a mention to Giles--and Xander could do a little research on his own--

“You ponce. They really *did* make a Watcher of you,”

Spike says, smiling a little.

“What?”

“That thoughtful look--and Xander Harris, havin’ *thoughts* completely boggles the mind--was pure Watcher. Put some tweed on you, get you some specs and you’re Rupert Giles. Or maybe Percy.” Spike's smile falters for just a moment. “Hey, you said Blue’s still knockin’ around--is she here? Where *is* here?”

“Los Angeles. And last I heard, Illyria’s in Texas, living with Fred’s folks and trying to hear the song of the green or something. Like everyone in the Alley, I think she’d just had enough of L.A.” Xander’s surprised he can say that without too much bitterness.

“Then why’d you and Billy stay here?”

“We didn’t; Will and I moved back to California last year. After the Alley Incursion--Andrew’s name for it, and it stuck, unfortunately--I had to get the hell outta California for awhile. So when Faith and Robin went back to Cleveland, I went with them . . . and Will decided to, uh, go with me.”

There goes the scarred eyebrow; wonder of wonders, it's playful, not sarcastic. "I'll bet."

"It wasn't like that. Not then . . . Will just wanted to be around people he knew and trusted," Xander huffs.

"Really? And who did he know and trust besides you?"

"Well--Willow, and Illyria. And Andrew--"

Spike rolls his eyes. "I meant who else that was goin' to bloody *Cleveland*, you prat."

"Oh--um . . . Andrew transferred in about six months later--"

"Got news for ya, mate," Spike interrupts, with a speculative leer. "Billy-boy was gunning for you from the moment he first opened those baby-blues. We've always been a sucker for dark hair and dark eyes. Well, eye, in your case."

"Thanks for the insight, Captain Sensitivity." *That look means nothing--I've seen Spike leer at mannequins. If he didn't leer, I'd be worried. Anyway, he's not Will, so it doesn't matter. Nope. Doesn't matter at all.*

“... all of it?”

Xander reigns in his wandering attention. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I said, I think I’d like to get it back. All of it.” Spike glances at the photo on the night-table again, then back at Xander. “Seems like it’s been a good life, full of people and things it’d be a shame to lose.”

Xander’s heart doesn’t beat faster. He most certainly doesn’t forget to breathe. And he’s not thinking hope is getting less knife-in-the-gut-y and more water-in-the-desert-y.

Spike’s smiling at him wonderingly, as if seeing him for the first time. When Xander returns the smile, Spike reaches up and runs a finger along the eyepatch-strap, across Xander’s forehead before pulling it off.

He resists the urge to snatch the patch up and pull it back on and lets Spike look his fill.

“Look better without it,” he declares, dropping the patch on the bed and leaning closer to Xander, whose heart is

now *definitely* beating faster.

“Spike, I don’t think--”

“And now’s not the time to start.” Spike kisses him lightly, a quick pressing of their lips that turns into a deeper kiss, which Xander breaks guiltily.

“I’ve never cheated on Will.” He edges toward the front of the bed; Spike follows. “I *won’t*.”

“Wasn’t tryin’ to--” frustration passes across Spike’s face, then that smile is back, wry, but still genuine. “Just wanted to know what it was like . . . kissin’ you.”

Not gonna ask him if he liked it ‘cause I didn’t like it at all no way no how!

And Spike’s kissing him again, long and slow and possessive. When Xander tries to demure or pull away, Spike follows, barely allowing either of them a breath.

It’s when one of Spike’s hands settles on his thigh-- something his groinal area is very enthusiastic about-- that Xander finally pushes Spike away firmly. The grin he receives in return is smug, self-satisfied--and somehow

endearing.

“Once I get my memories back, won’t be cheatin’, will it, pet?”

And Xander’s afraid to answer, afraid to jinx the little bit of hope he’s been granted. Because what if Spike can get back his memories of being Will? Even without them, he’s not grossed out by the idea of being with Xander--at least not anymore. Maybe . . . once the memories are back, things can go back to the way they were.

Because essentially, Will and Spike are the same person, right? Down to their mannerisms and speech patterns? Will, with Spike’s bad habits, or Spike with Will’s good habits--

Six of one and a half dozen of the other.

Better than nothing.

A lot better, in fact.

Maybe Spike’s return doesn’t have to be a bad thing. Maybe he and Will were wrong to think it would be.

Faint, anemic hope momentarily dares to grow until--

“So. . . .” Spike’s not even trying to cover up how proud of himself he is. “Did I--did William ever try to get his memories back?”

--until reality crashes in yet again.

“There--” Xander laughs ruefully. “There was a spell Willow wanted to try, about four years back, but Will decided not to go through with it.”

“ . . . it’s up to you, love.”

Spike does *not* look pleased? “Why the hell not?!”

The absolute trust in Will’s eyes is addictive. Xander’s hooked through the bag--can’t imagine that look winking out, being gone forever. . . .

“Hello? Earth to Harris?”

“I don’t wanna lose you, Will. It’s not worth it. No spell.”

“You in there, mate?” Spike’s waving a hand in front of Xander’s face, impatiently.

“Are you sure?” The relief in Will’s eyes isn’t obvious, unless you happen to know him very well. And Xander knows him very well, indeed.

“Damn sure,” he murmurs, touching their foreheads, so Will’s eyes are his whole universe. “One hundred ten percent sure. No spell.”

“Harris!” Will’s face becomes Spike’s face, mere inches away and getting pissed off. “Snap out of it and answer the bloody question!”

“I asked him not to.”

Spike makes Will-esque anime-eyes and sits back.

“What?”

“No spell,” Will agrees. Xander pulls him close and holds him so tight, it must hurt. But Will doesn’t complain. The tears wetting Xander’s shirt are as warm as blood “I love you, Xander.”

“I love you, too.”

“I asked him not to and--he didn’t go through with it.”

Xander shivers, remembering the way Will had shivered in his arms, as if he was afraid to believe Xander could love him.

Something flickers in Spike's eyes--anger, sorrow, *something*--and is gone before Xander can name it or puzzle it out. Then Spike's standing up, walking over to the window once again. "Didn't wanna lose your little boyfriend, eh, Harris?"

"Do you? Love me, I mean?"

"I do. Always."

"No, I didn't." But I lost him, anyway. It just took a little longer.

Spike opens the drapes wider, unable to suppress a slight wince when it streams over him. "You should call Rupert and whoever . . . already lost six years, and I'm not gettin' any younger, you know."

Is it just Xander, or is Spike starting to sound less like Will and more like--himself? Cold, indifferent, imperious. . . .

Amnesiac mood-swings?

Will hadn't had mood-swings.

But Spike isn't Will.

"I'll make some breakfast, then I'll call Giles." Xander temporizes--almost goes over to Spike, but fear stops him. Fear that Spike will kiss him again, and fear that Spike won't. "I'd, uh, eat, if I were you . . . he's gonna have lots of questions--you know the G-man."

Spike grunts, but doesn't turn away from the sunlight; leans into it even more, as if daring it to do something. Xander gets up and goes to the kitchen, leaving Spike to his sun-taunting.

Although still in the grip of his own grief and dashed hopes, Xander still can't help but wonder what'd happened to the Spike of a few minutes before.

~*~*~*~*~

He makes breakfast in a daze: eggs, runny-side up, bacon and toast with strawberry preserves and coffee.

Normally, Sunday morning's the one day Will lets him near the stove. Today's Saturday, of course and Will won't be here to enjoy his favorite breakfast. But keeping to this tradition provides comfort, even a little peace of mind.

Or it would, if Xander could stop replaying that second kiss over and over in his mind. He's already burned the bacon and eggs, scorched the toast and somehow singed the preserves. And the coffee--

Well, the less said about the coffee, the better.

Xander scrapes most of breakfast in the garbage, washes the dishes then contemplates the take-out menus laying haphazardly on the counter. Indian, Thai, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Lebanese, Greek, Cajun--and the *Moonstruck Diner*, which not only makes the best triple-decker Reuben ever, but also *delivers*.

Folks . . . we have a winner. . . .

Suddenly hands slide around Xander's waist and a warm body presses into his back, pushing him against the counter. Surprised, he drops the menu.

“Spike? What’re you--?”

“Hush, love,” Spike--*Will?* No, Spike--murmurs, nuzzling Xander’s nape. He unzips Xander’s jeans and lets them drop, running hot, slow, sure hands under t-shirt and into boxer shorts to grip and tease. “Feels so nice . . . so *familiar. . . .*”

Yeah, it does. And Xander's gonna put a stop to it any second, now.

“--guh . . . agh. . . ?”

Xander-speak for *prithae, my dear man, will you kindly discontinue caressing my nether regions, heretofore?*

The reply? Is more caressing, the pushing down of Xander’s boxers, and biting kisses down the back of Xander’s neck. He braces himself on the counter-top and spreads his legs before his brain can do more than scratch it’s head in confusion.

“Interestin’ how well his body knows yours, isn’t it?” Spike’s low, dirty chuckle is accompanied by low, dirty grinding against Xander’s ass and yup. Spike's hard. “Knows you better than you know yourself, isn’t that

right?"

Once again, all Xander can do is moan. His brain is still three steps behind, still wondering if it's Spike or Will back there. His body, meanwhile, doesn't care--is so with the program, thrusting into Spike's fist with none of that pesky *rhythm* or *control*.

"So eager . . . is Billy-boy not puttin' it to you regular, then? That's a shame." Spike kisses his way down to Xander's shoulder and bites down hard enough to make Xander yelp. "That's a *cryin'* shame. . . ."

At the mention of Will, Xander's brain finally catches up with the proceedings. "Spike, we can't--" he starts to push away from the counter, but Spike thrusts against him hard enough to slam him right back, knocking the wind--and likely breakfast, had he eaten any--out of him.

As Xander gasps and tries to catch his breath, Spike resumes the aggressive, controlled stroking/grinding of a few seconds earlier.

"You know this body." His calm, reasonable voice cuts through Xander's pain easily. "You've known it--*had* it for five years. Had William, the simpering poof, on his knees,

on his stomach, on his back--and up your arse, I'll wager . . . bet you had a good laugh, too."

"Laugh? Why would I *laugh*--" Spike's hands is suddenly squeezing him too-tight, crossing the thin line between pleasant-pain and *ohdeargoddon't*-pain. It's enough to wipe the rest of Xander's question out of existence.

After a few seconds, Spike relaxes his grip, turns it back into stroking and leans closer whisper in Xander's ear.

"Laughed and touched this body in ways I'd never have consented to in a million years. . . ." he sweeps his thumb back and forth over the tip of Xander's cock slowly, once again on the pleasure side of painful; like the nails that drag across Xander's chest hard enough to leave welts. "If I was in my right mind, that is. Which brings us to the crux of the matter, doesn't it? I'd *have* to've slipped a few cogs to ever take up with *you*."

Between the hurt-y words and hurt-y *hurts*, Xander should not only not be hard, his testicles should be staging a strategic retreat back into his body. He should be shoving Spike off of, and away from him. Should be on the phone to Giles, and to Willow to see if she still has that spell.

He should be broken in pieces on the floor because Will is *gone*, and even if the memories of those five years could be restored to Spike . . . Spike wouldn't be Will.

Couldn't be.

But Xander's not broken--not broken enough. He's ashamed and guilt-ridden and still hard. Getting harder and about to come.

What kind of man *is* he?

"You sheltered, fed, held, fucked, *kept* an imposter--a hitchhiker in *my* bloody shanshu for *five years*," Spike is still whispering. His breath is warm and moist, his hands still turning pain into pleasure and vice versa. "I didn't lose those years--misplace them, like a set of house keys. You *stole* them from me. Both of you."

Didn't wanna lose your little boyfriend, eh, Harris?

And now Xander understands the look Spike gave him back in the bedroom; anger and sorrow, yes, but most of all--betrayal.

It's so clear, he wonders how he missed it when it was staring him *right* in the face, waiting for a reason, or even an excuse.

Too late for either, Xander knows, but he has to try.
“God, Spike, it's not what you think--”

There's a rush of cool air as Spike steps away just far enough for the hand on Xander's cock to drag and furrow its way over Xander's hip and around to his ass.

Xander's sex-stupid, slut of a body knows what it wants, but his mind has some serious reservations. Reservations that admittedly aren't borne out by his reaction to the wet, careful, impersonal fingers wiggling and scissoring into him, opening him up.

It burns. It stings. It hurts.

It's *amazing*.

It's *Spike*.

And Spike hates him.

Against all logic, that hatred . . . *hurts*.

Xander opens his eye to scattered take-out menus.

“Even with a body temperature of my very own, you feel so damn *hot*. Like a furnace.” Spike adds a third finger.

“Tight, too. I’ll bet Billy-boy loved bein’ in you . . . when he could summon up the nerve to take you, that is. Always was a gutless little squeaker.”

Spike’s searching and probing with his fingers. It’s so intimate, so embarrassing, so *wrong* . . . so good. “Don’t . . . don’t talk about Will like th-tha--”

When Xander’s brain comes back from where Spike’s fingers--and his own body--have sent it, Spike’s chuckling again. It’s not-nice chuckling . . . *William-the-Bloody* chuckling.

“I can say and do whatever I fucking like . . . you owe me for all you’ve taken, don’t you?”

Xander nods, the menus blurring in his vision. He's in the hazy mental outlands that only exist just before orgasm. He'd say yes to puppy-souffle for dinner and a Sean William Scott movie-marathon for desert, in this state, just so long as it brings release.

“Want me to take care of you, love?” Spike asks, aka Will: sweet and solicitous, but for the words that came before them. “For--old times' sake?”

Yes--no--please--Will--

That oh-so-manly whimper could mean anything at all. Not even *Xander's* sure what.

So he nods, and the warm, wet hand on his cock picks up speed. Each time Spike's fingers brush his prostate Xander gets a little bit harder, breaks a little bit more.

Because he wants this; it's Spike Xander wants in him, Spike he wants holding him, Spike he wants murmuring in his ear--even though the things Spike murmurs are cutting him into bite-size pieces.

"Please--" It's the closest he come to voicing what he wants so desperately.

There goes that seething, William-the-Bloody chuckle. “I'd have to be a few inpatients shy of a bloody asylum to want you, Harris. But I'll give you what you need one last time.”

And just when the hurt and humiliation couldn't get any worse, Spike stabs into his prostate *hard* and Xander comes violently--silently, with his eye squinched shut against tears.

Everything whites out for a minute, an hour, a year. One of those.

By the time Xander's *compos* enough to remember his own name, he realizes he's shaking and crying and starting to slide off the kitchen counter. Spike's chest is warm and solid against his back; Spike's arms are around his waist, partially holding him up.

"And what galls me." His tone is light and conversational as he backs away and lets Xander go to stand or fall, as he wills. Xander pushes himself upright, relying on the counter to steady him. "What galls me is that you have the bloody *nerve* to act like *you've* lost something."

Xander shudders, hunching his shoulders up against the accusation in those words, in that *voice*--shrinks from Spike's proximity when he leans in to say:

"I am not your lover, your partner, or your friend. I never

will be. So you go call Red up and get her over here. Tell her to bring whatever she needs for that spell, and to be ready to cast it.”

“Spike, you don’t understand--”

“Oh, I understand perfectly, Harris.” Spike says, still in that reasonable tone. He wipes his hand off on the back of Xander’s shirt. “I’m gonna get *all* my memories back, you hear? I’m gonna get back the time you and that selfish ponce stole from me and then I’m *gone*.”

Spike slams out of the kitchen.

A minute later, the shower starts to run.

Xander just stands there, head hanging down, tears leaking out of his closed eye to drip on the menus.

Long after the shower cuts off, long after the front door’s slammed open, then shut--

Long after Xander’s run out of tears--

He’s still standing. Broken in pieces on the floor, but still standing.

He wishes he wasn't.



Part Five

Spike lays his head against the shower door.

Despite the hot, punishing spray of water, he can still smell Harris all over him, still feel the warm, solid body in his arms, shaking and pushing back on his hand.

He'd been so bloody close to just *taking* the git, hang all his own blather about not wanting.

Another one of William-the-Bloody-Thief's sense-memories grips him like a fever and Spike *knows* how

Harris feels underneath him, the sounds he makes when he's being fucked *just right*, the way his body arches up *just so* when he's about to come--

He also knows whose name is on Harris's lips when he does.

Spike nearly puts his fist through the door--stops his hand a millimeter away from the glass and unclenches his fist slowly. "M not jealous. Not of *him* and not over *Harris*," he tells his ghostly reflection, and turns into the spray, reaching for the shower rack. It's jam-packed with shampoos and conditioners, a bar of *Ivory* soap and--

Body-wash. At least three different kinds. And one of those foofy, ridiculous thingamajigs bints sometimes use instead of washcloths.

"Bloody poof," he mutters, grabbing the thingamajig and a peachy-colored bottle of body-wash, then--God, even Harris wouldn't use something this poncy-smelling; it *has* to be William's--puts it back, choosing a greyish-green bottle, this time.

This one's not nearly as girly: herbal, soothing . . . puts him in mind of poor Glinda, which makes it a bit of not

bad.

Like everything else in William's stolen life seems to be.

"No. *Not everything*. Playing house with Harris is an abomination. It's *his* fault I took a six year siesta instead of a two year nap," Spike reminds himself, lathering up efficiently, angrily. "Harris and his bloody *Will!*"

They stole *years* from him--would've stolen his entire life, all to keep their comfortable little romance and their comfortable little world.

Not wanted, a poofy, prissy, Victorian voice whispers in his head. *They preferred me so much more that they kept me. And why wouldn't they? You may have been an impressive demon, but as a man, Spike . . . can you blame them--him for wanting me more? Can you?*

"I bloody well can and *do* blame them--Harris especially! They stole my shanshu! My *reward!*"

Oh, really? A wry, condescending laugh echoes so loudly throughout his being, he looks around, half expecting to find his double standing behind him. Nothing there but sea-green tile.

And what would you have done with a human life, Spike? Drink and smoke your way through to an early death? Fuck around until you caught something incurable and/or terminal? Waste your life pining away for women who don't love you--will never love you way they love your Sire?

“Shut. Up,” Spike warns The Voice. The Voice seems very unimpressed.

You've been human for less than a day and you've practically raped the one person you know loves you--

“Wasn't rape . . . and he loves you, Billy-boy, not me.”

Yes . . . because we're two completely different people who just happen to share a body? Bullshit.

“He loves you, not me.”

And he certainly won't love you now, will he? It took you six minutes to destroy what it took me six years to build. Good show . . . William.

“Fuck you, you don't know *anything!*” Spike rinses away

the damn body-wash, debates using some shampoo and decides against it. He already smells poofy enough. “You never did.”

I know everything about you, Spike . . . I am you. A better you than you ever were. You should've stayed gone--

“Shut up!”

--and left your humanity to an actual human being.

“Bastard! Thieving, hateful bastard!” Spike rips the shower rack off the wall. Shampoo, conditioner, body-wash and a bar of soap all land on his feet--

“Bloody *hell!*”

--just as the water turns ice cold.

Spike's screech is blood-curdling, but manly.

Once he's safely out of the shower, he grabs a towel and quickly dries off. He's about to drop the towel on the floor and hunt up some less poncy clothes than the ones he'd woken up wearing, when he notices the fogged up mirror.

Following an impulse he doesn't quite understand, he wipes down the mirror and confronts his reflection.

A pale face, slightly too thin, under curling, impeccably cut sandy hair. At some point, probably within the past year, Will had freckled spectacularly across his nose and cheeks. That coupled with the smiles lines bracketing his mouth and fanning gently outward from his eyes make him look too damn . . . happy. Soft.

But the eyes--they're the same. The only thing that is, really. The rest of him is a total stranger. Despite not seeing his own reflection in over one hundred years, he instinctively knows that this face is not his own.

Spike shudders and closes his eyes, wondering if he *is* the imposter in this life, after all.

Do the right thing . . . petition the PTB and ask them to put you back to sleep. Then I can get on with the business of living this life. . . .

"I don't think so, William."

Spike sneers, opens his eyes, and sees . . . himself.

Peering from behind the smile-lines and from underneath the freckles, he catches a glimpse of a face he's *never* seen, but that he recognizes instantly.

He sees *Spike*.

Tossing the towel in the general direction of the hamper, Spike marches into Harris and William's bedroom. He avoids looking at pictures on the walls, dresser and night-tables. The last thing he wants reminders of is how bloody happy he was, once upon a fever-dream.

He goes straight to the closet and opens the sliding doors.

On Harris's side of the closet is the expected mix of jeans, plaids, sweats and t-shirts--not to mention some *unexpected* Armani-wear Spike is sure William picked out.

But William's side looks like *Barney's* and *Brooks Bros* chucked up in it. The man obviously doesn't know what casual wear is. The closest to it that Himself seems to own are a couple pairs of khakis and more Dockers like the ones Spike'd woken up in.

Almost all of his variation-on-tan-or-grey shirts are button down.

“Suffering Christ,” Spike mutters, eyeing this travesty with something approaching real horror. “It’s worse than I thought. I’m gonna have to walk out of here naked, ‘cause I wouldn’t be caught undead *or* alive in this horrible stuff!”

On the closet floor, there’s a pair of new-ish sneakers that are so huge they have to be Harris’, the same for a pair of shiny dress shoes. There are several other pairs of shoes in descending levels of fancy that are obviously William’s.

Behind the shoes and next to a pair of new workboots, is a medium-sized brown box. Looking at it makes Spike’s mouth go dry, and before he can rationalize the impulse away, he’s given in to it.

This box *is* his, he knows that. Not *William’s*, but *his*.

Knocking aside the shoes, Spike tugs the box out into the bedroom. It’s not heavy and not sealed. One of the flaps is open enough for him to see in, but even before he does, a sorely-missed scent hits him: leather, cigarettes

and old blood.

Then he's laughing and hugging his duster to himself like the old friend it is.

He stares down at Nikki's pretty, dead face almost regretfully. She's been the best he's ever fought--could probably take on Angelus and walk away, if not win. He pulls on her nice leather duster reverently; it smells of sweat and perfume and child . . . but he reckons it won't once he's had it for awhile, and he plans on keeping this trophy, no mistake. . . .

Spike sighs, stroking one sleeve--immersed in a memory that doesn't come weighted with any guilt or baggage.

Nakedness totally forgotten, he pulls it on a few minutes later, shivering at the cool, sensual slither of leather across his still-damp skin.

Bloody lovely.

"Let's see what else's hidin' in William's closet." Spike pushes the flaps open again and sees clean, neatly-mended black jeans, a black t-shirt and under them . . . battered Doc Martens that he'd know anywhere.

And it must be his mortality making him so damn womanish, but there are tears running down his face. The happy kind, not the just-got-tortured-by-a-HellGod kind. Opening this box is the first real sense of self and *home* he's had since waking up.

*--tight around his fingers like a glove, so warm, so right--
the only thing righter would be to replace his fingers with
his cock and let Xander's orgasm force his own from him,
erase the awful things he's said and done . . . things that
are wringing tears from Xander, not pleasure--*

Spike forces the memory away. "No . . . that's William's home, not mine. Never mine; I've made sure of that."

He means for it to come out defiant and angry. It just sounds petulant and regretful.

Scowling, Spike reluctantly sheds the duster, stands up and pulls on the jeans; they're noticeably looser than when he'd first stolen them. He's not skin and bones, but he's not nearly as muscular as he used to be. The shirt is also disappointingly loose.

The Docs, however, fit the same, though he supposes if it

was possible for feet to get feeble and small, William would've found a way just to spite him.

At last, he holds up the duster--". . . *it's like a second skin!*" he remembers yelling at Angel that time they went haring off to Rome--and puts it on again, trying to remember what it was to be a Master.

Instead Spike remembers a broad back, bent over a counter, muscular arms straining as his fingers twist and thrust and--

"Easy, there, William," Spike says; patting himself down for lighter and cigarettes is still as instinctive as breathing now is. "You've no longer got a lovin' carpenter to shag. Saw to that, didn't I? Give it a rest, already."

No luck on the lighter, or the cigarettes, though he hadn't really expected to find either.

But he does find something in one of the inner pockets: a folded sheet of ponce-quality paper with his name written on it in a sprawling, carelessly elegant hand he recognizes all too well.

I don't have to open this, Spike thinks as he does just

that. *I could tear it into little pieces and throw it away. There's nothing William has to say to me that I need to hear.*

And then the paper is unfolded, filled from top to bottom with narrow, neat, Copperplate hand.

"Very good, my darling," she says, a smile in her voice. She leans over him, her hand warm and reassuring on his shoulder as he painstakingly makes the twenty-sixth letter of the alphabet.

He's four; far too young for a tutor, and he's never had a nurse. It's always just been him and her, and the gentle scent of violets. . . .

"Now, take some more ink--very good--and let us begin your numbers. Remember, slow and steady wins the race. You must always take care to be precise. . . ."

"Stop it." Spike refolds the note and lifts a shaking hand to his temple as memories cascade behind his eyes like a movie-of-the-week. "Please, stop?"

His brain cycles through one more memory from his life--his mother's pale eyes opening and flashing gold . . . the

scent of faded flowers, silk and blood--the scent of the death. This memory drives him to his knees, forces more tears out of his eyes. The note flutters to the floor as Spike cover his ears then his eyes.

But she's in his head and can't be stopped--*won't* be stopped. . . .

"If I were a carpenter/And you were a lady/Would you marry me anyway?"

Startled, Spike looks around for the source of one of Country's goldenest oldies and finds it almost immediately: Harris's clock-radio--which is apparently set for noon--is spewing Cash and Carter like there's no tomorrow.

Another William-ish impulse stands Spike up and walks him over to Harris's night-table. As he pushes the snooze button, a fond smile tries to curve his lips.

Back off, Billy.

When the fuzzy feelings pass, Spike smirks and turns his back on radio and bed.

If this is how it is before six years of extra memories, who knows how it'll be after? To be constantly swamped with memories of a life with Xander-bloody-Harris would be--

Bloody terrible . . . of course.

Spike goes back to the box and picks up the note again, shaking his head at that familiar scrawl. He steels himself and opens it:

Dear Spike--

Welcome back, old man! Welcome to our life!

"Right, then. That was unexpected," Spike says, then goes back to the letter.

If you're reading this, that means you've woken up, so to speak, and I have gone to sleep.

I do hope this finds you--us, rather--in good health, and dearest Xander in better spirits than I would dare to hope. I only wish I was there to comfort him.

Though I don't expect you to laud my choice of mate, I do expect you to act as my proxy in this trying time: comfort

him, be kind to him. Be patient with him, for he loves us.

Now, before you sneer or smirk or make any of those charming facial expressions I'm told you're famous for, please understand that Alexander Harris is the center of our Universe. Without him, we would have been adrift in world we were ill-equipped to handle. He is our saviour and our Love, and I cannot stress to you enough that above all else he must not be hurt. . . at least no more than this situation has already hurt him--

Spike balls the letter up, more shocked than angry at the man's cheek; but not before one phrase near the bottom of the page catches his eye:

--that you haven't, in the time between your awakening and the finding of this letter, managed to do some irremissible hurt to Xander--

"Already done it, Billy-boy."

He drops the crumpled letter in the box and goes over to the dresser. Next to a copy of *The Stranger*, is a wallet. The driver's license says it belongs to *William Kent*.

Spike wonders who gave William the spiffy, new last

name . . . if it was Harris, or one of the other Scoobies, or if William chose it, himself. Wonders why he even cares.

Then he decides he doesn't, and stashes the wallet in an inner pocket.

He stalks out of the over-done bedroom and clomps down the hallway as noisily as possible.

Probably nothing in that letter but guilt trips and mind-games and more waxings poetical about dearest Xander.

And talk of the Devil, or perhaps one of the Devil's least effectual imps--

He pauses as he passes the kitchen. . . .

No sounds, but Harris is still in there, Spike knows it. Still in there, hunched over the counter, folded in on himself and shaking with--grief? Shame? Anger? All of the above?

Spike reaches out and rests his hand on the cool wood of the door. A little effort and it'll swing right open. A little more effort and Harris'll be in his arms, still crying, probably calling him every name in the book and a few

that aren't . . . but maybe not-letting-go as hard as Spike'd be not-letting-go.

Only it wouldn't be *Spike* Harris was not-letting-go of.

Serves you right, doesn't it, tosser? Lucky I didn't put one of those Ginsus in your heart after what all you've taken from me, Spike thinks, though he's not even convincing himself. Has to in fact restrain himself from going in there and--well, how can he make right what he did to Harris? Wasn't rape, but it wasn't a romantic romp in a field of daisies, either.

That bridge is well and truly burned. There's no choice but to move forward and get his life back.

His *real* life, one that doesn't include monocular ex-Watchers.

Reluctantly removing his hand, Spike slinks out of the apartment, slamming the door on the way out.

As acts of rejection go, it's pretty pathetic.

Except for the bit where he's pretty sure it breaks what's left of Harris's heart.

Nothing's changed about Los Angeles, which should be comforting, but is just disappointing.

Not that he expected everyone to be riding around in flying cars and all the buildings to be on mile-high stilts, but he'd thought the future, even the near future, would be more--*future-y*

Instead, it feels as if no time has passed. The only thing that's different is . . . walking around on an aggressively sunny afternoon and *not* bursting into flames.

Oh, Spike'd done it once back in Sunnyhole, with the Ring of Amarra, but that'd been different. There'd been magic involved, and as little as Spike cared for magic, it'd been an easier thing to put his faith in an ensorcelled item then, than it is to place it in the hands of the PTB, now.

He doesn't have much of a choice, though, unless he wants to go back to the apartment and wait there for Red to show up.

With Harris.

Spike's stomach growls, reminding him that he needs to eat. Yes, breakfast is the first order of business . . . well, lunch, considering the time.

He stops at a likely-looking greasy spoon--the *Moonstruck Diner*--about eight blocks from the apartment.

As he's about to cross the threshold, into the welcoming smells of grilled meat and over-cooked fries, he gets one of those weird pangs of familiarity that he's felt since he woke up this morning.

Down at the other end of the diner, a pretty, redheaded waitress has noticed him and waves, calling: "Hey, Will!"

Spike turns and walks away. He's not quite as hungry as he thought.

All afternoon, Spike walks.

Till his feet get tired, the duster gets unbearable and his McBreakfast is but a McMemory. He stops at a *Dunkin' Donuts* and fuels up on krullers and iced coffee beverages, chatting with a homeless bloke about aliens, till he's itching to hit the streets again.

It's the sky that draws him out. It's turned a soft, faded overcast blue, the clouds a pearl-grey. Probably going to rain around midnight, but for now, it's perfect. Glorious.

He spends more time gazing at the heavens above than all the useless sturm und drang below.

By early evening, Spike's standing on the corner of Third and Louisiana, finishing up a chili dog with everything on it and zoning out. Occasionally, passersby jostle him and glare. Some even call him names that would've gotten them a railroad spike in the shin for their troubles . . .

once upon a century.

Spike, however, doesn't even notice.

He's watching clouds.

He has yet to spot one that actually looks like an animal, but it's only a matter of time. And he's surely got a good day or two to kill before Red flies into town on her broomstick, or jet, or whatever.

Plenty of time until he has to begin the considerable task of facing William's memories . . . before repressing them altogether--

“Scuse me?”

Annoyed, Spike looks down from the sky, ready to growl at whoever interrupted him. He's faced with a pale, dark-haired man, about his own height. His clothing is drab, synthetic and threadbare, but he's holding a sleek, fancy-looking black cellphone in one pale palm.

Well, one of those things just doesn't belong there, Spike thinks wryly, sizing the man up. His face is square, his smile friendly--not at all a bad looking bloke, if you like

'em small and scrappy.

“Hate to interrupt ya,” the man says, in a faint Irish lilt.
“But I think you dropped this.”

“Sorry, mate--that ain't mine.” Spike's already looking back at the sky again--hey! that one's a turtle . . . or maybe a rhinoceros--by the time he finishes speaking. So he's surprised when a hand touches his shoulder.

“Oi! Look, don't touch, Paddy!” He shrugs the hand off. The Irishman grins, shrugs and holds out the damn phone again.

“I'm pretty sure this doohickey's yours, pal, just--give it a look-see. If it's not yours, just drop it in the garbage, okay? That's not too much to ask, is it?”

Yeah, it is, so fuck off, Spike's about to snarl, but he finds himself reaching out to take the phone, a polite smile on his face. “Not at all. Thank you,” he says. As he takes the phone, his fingers brush the stranger's palm briefly and he gets a static shock.

He looks up into the stranger's clear, green eyes and sees--

--kindness. Nothing more, nothing less.

Spike shakes his head like someone just waking up from a half-remembered dream and the stranger turns away.

“Hey--do I know you, mate?”

“Nope!” The man calls without looking back. In seconds, he’s disappeared into the madding crowd. Spike bobs up on his toes a couple times, but can’t spot a single milk-pale complexion in a sea of California tans.

“Bog-troddin’ weirdo,” he mutters, turning the schnazzy phone this way and that before flipping it open. Worse comes to worse, he can maybe pawn it, or trade it for something semi-useful, like a gun--or some stakes.

The display lights up and Spike gasps.

“Bloody hell . . . this really *is* my phone. . . .”

There, in living color, is a screensaver of *Harris*, laying sprawled in bed, shirtless and smiling at the picture-taker. The smile--which promises dirty, dirty things--coupled with the eyepatch makes Harris look dangerous and sexy in ways even a blind man could appreciate. And

that's the only reason Spike's starting to get hard.

The *only* reason.

Spike scans the small crowd waiting to cross the street, certain he'll see the Irishman--or even Harris watching him, laughing--but there're no familiar faces in the crowds. No way the stranger could've gotten hold of William's phone, no way this could *be* William's phone--
--except for the bit where it is.

The phone suddenly starts to vibrate in Spike's hand, playing ABBA. *Take A Chance On Me*, if he hasn't missed his guess. The screensaver fades out to be replaced with Red's smiling face, frozen in a nervous, but friendly smile.

Gee, I wonder who's calling, he thinks, glancing around again before answering and putting the phone to his ear.

"Hullo?"

"Will? Thank the Goddess!"

Spike smirks and joins the crowd waiting to cross the street.

“Well . . . hello, love.”

“--got this really strange message from Xander, and he asked about the memory spell--”

“Is that so?” The light changes and Spike lets himself be carried across the street by the crowd. Winks at a leggy blonde giving him the old hairy eyeball and nearly trips over the curb.

“--sounded strange and hoarse, like he was losing his voice. I tried to call both you guys back a bunch of times, but no one answered till you picked up just now and I’m *really, really* worried! What’s going on?”

Spike glances up at the at up at the sky, wondering if Harris is still at the apartment, staring out the window, waiting for him to come back.

“Will?”

Probably not. Not even Harris is that puppy-loyal. Certainly not after the way Spike had said good-bye.

“Hello? Will, are you still there?”

“M still here, Red . . . but I’m not William.”

Her indrawn breath is loud and almost whistling.

“Spike? But *how*-- oh, boy!”

“Just--woke up last night, no memories of the past six years,” Spike cuts to the chase with no preamble. “I shanshued in that alley, and then I was sitting at a kitchen table with Harris yammerin’ away at me about Oscar Wilde and that kid from *American Pie*.”

If he’d thought Red thinking was loud when she was younger, now, it’s silent. And heavy.

“Hmm,” she says finally. Then: “That’s really weird.”

Spike’s reached another corner. He ducks into a *Payless* and finds an uncomfortable chair to sit in. Glares at the helpful salesponce who offers to assist him.

“Right. Not exactly the kind of brilliant explanation I’ve come to expect from you, but. . . .”

“Did Xander tell you about the spell we found, one that

can make what was forgotten remembered?”

“Yep.” Spike closes his eyes and sees Harris’s weary, too-calm face as he admits to being in love with William.

“Told me he and Billy-boy decided not to do it.”

Red snorts. “Yeah, well, with the lethal side-effects, you can hardly blame them for being a little avoid-y.”

“Lethal. . . ? Side-effects. . . ?”

“And even if there was a way around the whole *exploding head-factor*, there was still no guarantee the spell would actually work. On a human, anyway. But Will *really* wanted your memories back, and he begged me to help him get them, so--”

“Tell me you didn’t, Red.”

A long, *long* silence. Spike opens his eyes again. Now two salesponces and a salesponcette are hovering at a not-so-discrete distance, ready to see him shod. He amuses himself by leering at them, then realizes the silence is drawing out for far too long.

“Red . . . what did you do?”

“See, that’s the thing, Spike. *I* didn’t . . . *you* did.”



Part Six

The first order of the worst day of Xander’s life is to call Willow.

Wonder of wonders, he actually knows where the cordless is. Normally, it’s MIA, but today, it’s sitting on the kitchen table, where he’d left it the night before (God, had Spike only been back for less than a *day*?) The little recharge light is beeping fitfully, but it should still have enough juice to make one measly call.

One measly call that’s at best, gonna result in Spike hating him even more, and at worst gonna result in Spike

and Will dying.

Why didn't I say something when I had the chance?

Xander asks himself. But he already knows why. Better to be damned by silence than by his own, awful words . . . his own awful truth.

Short of outright murder, Xander would've done anything--including actively cheat Spike out of his shanshu, had that been necessary--to ensure that Will was always with him

Always loved him. . . .

"Casting the spell would be really simple," Willow says when they've finished brunch, but she's not wearing her smiley-face. That can't be good. "A ten year old with an eye for details and fluency in Middle K'strrl could cast it."

"So--bring on the ten year old and let's get this show on the road!" Xander's enthusiasm is fake, and probably fooling no one.

Now Willow smiles, but it's pained, like she's on the verge of tears. Xander hasn't seen her smile like that since--since before the First was defeated. "Guys, there are . . .

complications.”

“Complications?” Will’s voice quavers slightly. “But you just said this was a simple spell.”

“I-it is. Easy-peasy! But the side-effects aren’t so simple.”

Xander’s stomach is churning, as it always does, when Spike’s possible return is brought up. But this time, there’s a cold dread that creeping through him, as well. “How not-simple are we talking? Laymen terms, Wills.”

Willow looks down at the remains of brunch and gathers her thoughts. The translation from Wicca to American takes a few minutes.

“Well,” she says finally. “The spell would make every memory stored in your brain--from birth, to death, to unlife, to shanshu to now--come rushing back at all once, wh-which would kinda make your head sorta explode a little.”

“Just a little?” Will murmurs, poking at his last few bites of fruit salad. All the color’s drained out of his face. Xander takes his other hand and squeezes it.

“I mean, I might be able bring to the probability of . . . head explosion down to a--well, not to a minimum, but to somewhat less of a maximum--”

“I can’t tell you how comforting that is, Wills. Mostly ‘cause it’s not.”

“Xander.” There’s a rare flash of Spike-ish warning in Will’s voice and eyes that makes Xander subside. Will clears his throat and returns his attention to a very uncomfortable-looking Willow. “How much of a maximum?”

“Um . . . eighty-seven point nine nine three percent--but I think that with some tinkering and tweaking, I can bring it down to seventy-five percent.”

Everyone’s silent for a few minutes, mulling that over. Then Xander plasters a big, fake grin on his face. “Wow! I, for one, can’t wait to climb on board the crazy memory-train, how ‘bout you, babe?”

“Dearest, you’re not helping. . . .” Will quietly sing-songs. For a moment, Xander’s reminded of the fights his parents used to have. His father would say something boorish and horrible in front of company, and his mother

would use the same tone Will just used to try and keep him civil.

It didn't work, then and it's not working, now.

Xander scrapes his chair back and jumps up, pacing around Willow's earth-tones kitchen angrily, before leaning on the sink. "I mean--what's a little ol' exploding head factor when there's some really great memories of being a psychotic, murdering asshole just waitin' to be had, huh?"

He can feel Willow's discomfort and uncertainty, feel Will watching him, willing him to sit back down and at least pretend to be a mature adult . . . put on his company-manners. But where Will's safety, or reversion to Spike is concerned, Xander turns into cave!carpenter.

"Supposing I survive this spell, will I finally have all my memories back?" Will asks when no more outbursts are forthcoming. "Will I be . . . whole?"

"The spell was created for certain kinds of demons and higher beings, Will. Not humans." Willow sighs miserably. "I'm not sure even a vamp'd have the psychic and physiological strength to withstand the spell. My research

indicates that if you were to come through the spell alive, you'd probably be in a persistent vegetative state for the rest of your life."

Xander turns to face them again. He hopes he looks more in control than he feels. "Are those Vegas-odds?"

"These odds make Vegas-odds look like a back-alley crapshoot." Willow shakes her head, smiling that pain-y smile. "The other spells and potions we tried didn't work and by all means they should have. There's no explanation for the memory loss. None--not physiological, mental, psychic, emotional--no clear cause for this effect. So that says to me . . . that Someone doesn't want you to remember."

Will's eyes narrow in understanding. "Someone like the PTB?"

"That'd be my guess." Willow shrugs apologetically. "The amnesia may be some weird mystical proviso of the shanshu. In any case, I strongly recommend we not mess with your memory anymore."

"Do you really think they'd intervene if it looked like I would survive this spell with body and mind intact?"

“They don’t strike me as the kind of folks who like interference with their plans,” Willow says, thankfully leaving it at that.

“I see.” Will runs a hand through his hair--a nervous habit picked up from Xander--and tries to smile. Not only does he fail, but Xander doesn’t like the the defeated slump of his shoulders at all.

“Willow, could you give us a few minutes?”

“No problem--I’ll just be in the livingroom!” Her fork clatters into her plate and Willow makes tracks, obviously glad to get out of her kitchen and away from their drama. Xander watches until the door swings shut behind her, then goes to Will.

“Baby, please, tell me you’re not gonna do this?” He kneels next to Will’s chair and turns it to face him . . . brushes away the tears rolling down Will’s cheeks. “I know how badly you wanna remember--and I agree that Spike doesn’t deserve to miss out on his shanshu, but the risk. . . .”

“You deserve a whole man, Xander.”

“Damn it, we’ve talked about this--you are a whole man. You’re the wholest man I know.” Will laughs a little, and Xander smiles. “I mean it, Will. You’re perfect to me.”

“Not to me.” Will hangs his head. “And I’m glad I can’t remember killing people, and fighting and--all the horrible things I’ve done. Yet I can’t help but think that I’m--diminished. Less than what you want, or need, or deserve.”

“How can I convince you that’s the farthest thing from the truth?” Xander stands, pulling Will up with him. Tears still run down his pale face, too fast for Xander’s words or fingers. “What can I say, or do to prove that to you?”

The look in Will’s wet, miserable eyes clearly says: nothing. But Xander says the words, anyway. Will keeps saying them till he’s believed.

“You are everything I want, and need, and much, much more than I deserve. And as awful as it sounds--if not doing the spell means I get to spend the rest of my life telling you that--”

Will gasps, his eyes widening in pleasure and surprise like

some cartoon character. It's the kind of look a man could get used to. "Xan, love--"

"If," Xander goes on, for the moment ignoring Will's shock and his own. "Not doing the spell means I get to spend the rest of my life telling you that, retrieving Spike's memories is just aren't my number one priority."

Something flickers behind Will's eyes. Xander doesn't dare to hope it might be the beginnings of belief. At least until a small, shy smile curves Will's lips just a little. "Choose for me, Alexander."

"What?"

Will leans into the gentle touch still catching his tears. "Whatever you decide, I'll abide by. It's up to you, love."

The absolute trust in Will's eyes is addictive--has been since the moment he woke up in the hospital, polite and frightened and frighteningly lovely. Xander's hooked through the bag--can't imagine that look, that trust winking out . . . gone forever. Can't imagine a memorial service, a funeral, a life without Will.

Definitely can't imagine Spike smirking at him, and the

love in Will's eyes turning to disgust.

"I don't wanna lose you, Will," he says, ignoring a twinge of guilt. Were the risk to Will negligible, would he choose differently? Does it even matter? "It's not worth it. No spell."

"Are you sure?" The relief in Will's eyes isn't obvious, unless you happen to know him very well. And Xander knows him very well, indeed.

"Damn sure," he murmurs, touching their foreheads, so Will's eyes are his whole universe. "One hundred ten percent sure. No spell."

"No spell," Will agrees.

Xander pulls him close and holds him so tight, it must hurt. But Will doesn't complain. He's shaking, and his tears are as warm as blood on Xander's shoulder.

"I love you, Xander."

"I love you, too, William."

The first time either of them have said it out loud.

Xander's heart is immeasurably lightened, and pleasantly weighted down. Even though the timing isn't so great, he laughs. He's been in love with Will for a lot longer than the year they've been together.

For his whole life, it feels like.

He's sure down to the bottom of his soul that it's the forever kind of love, too. Instead of freaking him out, it makes everything amazingly clear.

"Do you?" Will whispers shakily, his hands sweeping tentatively up Xander's back. The timid hope in his voice is instantly sobering. "Love me, I mean?"

"I do. Always," Xander promises. In a moment, he'll call Wills in to tell her the spell is a no-go. In a moment. . . .

Xander smiles, tears in his own eyes, now, as he takes the phone into the bedroom and flops on the bed. A *forever-love*, is how he's always thought of his and Will's relationship. As if forever would've been long enough.

He holds the phone close to his face and tries to remember Willow's phone number. He can't, but he does remember the next best thing: she's one on their speed

dial.

In seconds, he's listening to her voice-mail schpiel:

"Hey! This is Willow's voice-mail! Please leave a message and I'll call you back when I can!"

beep

He starts talking automatically. "Wills, hey, it's . . . it's me. How's it goin'? How's Oz? Hey, tell him Will said thanks for the mix cds, they were really awesome. He just--he loved 'em.

"So, um, yeah. I wanted to know--I'm calling about that memory spell . . . um, you know the one. Please call me as soon as possible, Wills, it's really important. Thanks. Love ya. Bye."

Xander puts the phone on his night-table. He did what Spike wanted--which in no way makes up for what he took, but maybe. . . .

"Maybe nothing. Will's gone. Even if Spike gets all Will's memories--he'll just be Spike with Will's memories. He won't be *Will*. The man I love is gone," Xander tells

himself, laying down and curling up into a ball. "Gone."

It's a tiring thought, and Xander's already tired . . . so tired. The only thing he wants is to sleep until the world makes sense again. Or till Willow calls, whichever happens first. . . .

~*~*~*~*~

"A perfect falcon, for no reason, has landed on your shoulder, and become yours."

Xander looks up--from the mess of spreadsheets, scrap paper and two calculators spread all over the diningroom table--and into the livingroom. Will's sprawled on the couch on his stomach, bare feet in the air and grinning like a kid.

"That's pretty. Did you write it?"

"Goodness, no! I haven't a poetic bone in my body, you know that!" Will blushes, and Xander fights a smile. "That was Rumi, a 13th century Sufi poet and mystic."

“Huh.” That warm glow Xander’s currently feeling? Pride, of course. His boyfriend is smart and cultured. Not to mention hot. “Is there anything you haven’t read?”

“Hmm . . . haven’t gotten ‘round to those Star Trek novels you fancy so much. Probably never will,” Will admits with a chuckle.

“It’s Star Wars, my stubborn padawan, and you’re missin’ out.”

“I shall somehow resign myself to an unenlightened, Force-less life.”

Xander laughs and goes back to his quarterly budget report. It’s not that he doesn’t trust Marisa to be accurate down to the half-cent, it’s just that Harris Handcraft is his baby, and no matter who looks after her from time to time, he’s her primary care-giver. He’s the one who’s ultimately responsible for her well-being.

But the slow-build tension headache waiting behind his eyes says that math? Is so not his strong-suit. Either that, or maybe he needs glasses.

You know . . . the kind that give people the ability to see

through lead and budget reports.

Why didn't I pay more attention in algebra? Oh, yeah, 'cause it was really boring and made my head ache. . . .

*Xander sighs, taps both **clear** buttons with his pencil and watches the evil numbers go bye-bye. He's fully prepared to keep feeding figures them to the damn calculators till they spit out some less evil numbers; but warm, distracting arms slide around his neck.*

"It's almost midnight. Come to bed, love."

"I will, I just gotta finish this up."

"They make software that can struggle with that for you, you know?" Will murmurs, kissing Xander's hair. "In fact, I seem to remember buying said software for our PC not three months ago, when you insisted on going over the budget after Marisa."

"The buck's gotta stop somewhere. And since I'm the owner. . . ."

"Darling, Marisa is a CPA. She makes an excellent living planning budgets so civilians don't have to."

Xander tilts his head back till he's looking into Will's eyes. "Is my numbers-crunching disturbing your gold-bricking, light of my life?"

"Hmm, not so much the numbers-crunching, as the teeth-grinding, pencil-chewing and muttered imprecations against math in general . . . you're stressing, love."

"I'm not stressing," Xander lies. Will gives him a dubious look, then brushes his finger down Xander's right temple.

"This throbbing vein indicates otherwise."

"I've got Clint Eastwood-vein already?" Will nods with false gravity and Xander groans. "It'd go a lot faster if you pitched in, Brainiac."

"You must think I'm mad!"

"Mad? Nope. Pretty? Yep!"

"Oh, no, love. I fell for that last quarter--checked and double-checked the figures for you, and what did you do afterwards?"

Xander blushes and looks back down at his calculators. Yet again, they provide him with no useful answers.

“Well--”

“What did you do, Xander?”

“I--did the budget.”

“You stayed up all night making yourself crazy, doing the budget, when you could’ve stayed up all night doing me. It was nearly dawn when you finally got to bed, and in the morning, you were monosyllabic and snappish.” Will pouts, then puts on his resolve-face, which is almost as resolve-y as Willow’s. “Now, I accept your obsessive compulsive need to micro-manage every aspect of the business, but not when that micro-management keeps you away from me needlessly.”

Xander puts down his Ticonderoga, a weary gunslinger laying down the tool of his trade. “Will, you know I’d much rather be doing you than doing math, but--”

“Then do me, love.” Will says in that husky, Spike-voice that does it for Xander every time. “I’m ever so much more fun than the budget. . . .”

Of course . . . the hand snaking into his sweatpants does it for him every time, as well.

“Baby, I can’t--”

“This does not feel like can’t to me, Xander.”

“Sweetie. . . .”

Will tilts Xander’s face back up and kisses him, one of those upside-down kisses, like in Spiderman 2, one of Xander’s all-time favorite movies.

It’s dirty pool, and Will’s a shark.

“Come to bed, Alexander.”

In that voice Xander will never tell Will he didn’t invent. He’s on his feet and pulling Will into his arms before he realizes he’s lost this particular battle.

Or won, he thinks, brushing Will’s hair back off his forehead, looking into his super-blue eyes. “You need a haircut.”

“I need something else a lot more.” Will unerringly backs

toward the bedroom, tugging Xander along.

(Xander thinks that if he'd been doing the backing, he'd have already sustained a concussion and possibly a broken ankle.)

The bedroom is dimly-lit, the floor lamp on the lowest setting. Will's eyes are dark and glowing . . . beautiful. He takes off his t-shirt--Xander's t-shirt; Will often wears Xander's cast-offs around the house--and it flutters to the floor. The skin revealed is creamy-pale and touchable.

Xander's stupid brain tries to rally, make one last stand--if the business fails, we'll be homeless! Homeless! it shrieks, despite the very generous pension he receives from the New Council--at industriousness and the pursuit of not getting laid.

"What about the budget?"

Will pushes down his sweatpants--yet another cast-off of Xander's, that he has to wear with the drawstring hanging practically to his knees--and sits on their bed expectantly, letting Xander look his fill before saying:

"Fuck me, Xander."

“Kay.”

Will kicks off the sweats and scoots back towards the headboard, crooking his finger and grinning wickedly. “This way, Mr. Harris.”

Mr. Harris makes a new land-speed record getting naked and into bed. He kisses and licks his way up Will’s body, till they’re looking into each others’ eyes.

“Hi,” Xander says. What he means is: You are far too sweet and lovely--far too wonderful to be mine. But you are mine, and I love you more than I have the words to say.

Or something like that.

“My darling.” Will brushes his thumb against Xander’s lower lip, sighing happily when Xander opens his mouth and bites down gently. “My love.”

“How is it you can talk me out of, and into--anything?”

Will smiles; the big, pretty smile that always floors Xander. “You are in love with me,” he says, wrapping his

legs around Xander's waist and kissing him tenderly. "I shall make you perplexed."

~*~*~*~*~

Xander stretches and rolls over, reaching for Will.

Nowhere to go and someone to do, he thinks. Saturday rocks.

But Will's spot is empty. Not so unusual that Will's up and about--his idea of sleeping in is waking up at 8:00 a.m on a Saturday (8:30 on a Sunday)--but because he's almost always back in bed when Xander wakes up.

"Will. . . ? Good-morning sex waits for no man," Xander calls out sleepily, which is a lie. At least this morning, because he's not feeling especially horny.

"--stole from me, Harris--"

Xander sits up so fast, the room spins.

He's alone and the drapes are closed. The bedroom is hot and dim and stuffy--he's covered in sweat and his clothes

cling disgustingly to his skin.

“The hell?” He groans, covering his face with his hands.

“Will?”

“Didn’t wanna lose your little boyfriend, eh, Harris?”

“No, it had to be some kinda nightmare.” Xander talks to cover the stuttering, rabbit-fast beating of his heart and the thudding in his head. “Spike didn’t just come back and--and--”

“I am not your lover, your partner, or your friend.”

“Oh, God.” Xander closes his eyes against sudden nausea, and lays back down, curling back into a fetal ball.

“I never will be.”

It was real. All of it. Will’s gone and Spike . . . Spike really, *really* hates him. With good reason, it can and has been argued. Now, Spike’s dead-set on going through with a memory spell that has a higher kill-ratio than tobacco. Even if he could be convinced that the spell was really dangerous, Spike’s just stubborn enough to risk it, anyway.

And if Spike comes through the memory spell with flying colors, what are the odds that Will's love would win out over Spike's hatred?

Xander's no math whiz, but he's guessing it ain't even OTB good.

He rolls over, meaning to go back to sleep--back to happier times--when the box catches his eye.

Spike's box.

About six months ago, Will had called Giles and asked him to mail Spike's old clothes to them. The clothes had arrived one day later, wrapped in vacuum-sealed plastic--the same plastic it'd been in for over five years.

Xander had come home that evening to Will sitting tailor-style on their bed and patiently sewing up holes like somebody's mother--

Like he *expected* Spike to just--come back, and wanna wear his fucking clothes.

"He'll--we'll need the comfort of something from our old--"

er, unlife.” Will’s voice is distracted, matter-of-fact.

“Yeah, well, Spike’s clothes were always raggedy and sometimes hole-y--I should know, I used to do his laundry,” Xander grouses, watching Will patiently tackle a large rip in the thigh of Spike’s jeans. “Maybe you should leave them the way they are.”

Will glances up at Xander; he’s squinting because he doesn’t have his contacts in.

Xander loves him desperately.

“Xan . . . we may not have been a fashion-plate, but I’m certain we appreciated nicely-mended clothing as much as the next person--er, thing.”

“We? What’s this we, Kemosabe?” Yes, Xander knows he’s being a jerk, knows it’s childish and unattractive, but can’t seem to stop it. Spike comes up more now, than he had when getting those memories back had actually been an option. “Will, where’s this coming from and why now? It’s been five years--why now?”

Will smiles, putting the jeans aside and patting the bed next to him. Xander sits sulkily, feeling like the worlds

biggest five year old.

“He was a champion, and--the world tends to have need of those, more often than it doesn’t.” He takes Xander’s hand, holds it in both his own. “Spike will come back, someday. And when he does, maybe--maybe I won’t be here to smooth the transition from his old life to this new one--”

“Don’t say that.” Xander pulls his hand out of Will’s. “Just don’t.”

“Love, you must accept the possibility that--”

“Look, can we not do this tonight?” Xander stands up, digging in his pockets for his eyepatch. “I need to get some new blades for my jigsaw--I’m gonna hit Home Depot before it closes.”

“Don’t run out, please, Xander--” Will’s soft, reasonable words follow Xander into the hall and to the front door. He’s never once walked out on Will angry, or while they still disagreed about something that mattered; but walking out is better than staying in. Better, by far, than listening to Will plan his own funeral in that calm, fearless voice. And since Home Depot is open till 1:30

a.m., Xander plans on hanging out there till close.

Which is long after Will's usually asleep.

But instead of lingering at the handyman's Shangri-La, Xander gets the blades, as well as some other things--he resists Home Depot sales the way Cordelia resisted Neiman Marcus sales, which is to say not at all--then spends hours parked in the Hollywood Hills, gazing down at Los Angeles and not thinking.

When he gets back, their apartment is dark, but for soft, yellow light coming from under their bedroom door.

Of course Will is waiting up.

He's a good boyfriend. A much better boyfriend than the boyfriend he's got.

Xander drops his bags near the door and hangs his jacket on the coat-rack. The walk to the bedroom is the longest walk ever. The door is slightly ajar, but he hesitates before pushing it open.

I love you so much, I can't even consider the possibility that you won't always be here, Xander thinks, blinking

back tears. Talking about Spike is talking up trouble--why can't you see that?

Will's sitting up in bed, not even pretending to read the novel open on his lap. The relief and welcome evident in his face and body makes Xander feel like a creep.

He shrugs off his flannel shirt and hangs it in the closet. "Heyya, sweetie."

"Hello, love. Did you find what you needed?"

Xander winces and unbuckles his belt. "And then some. Won't need to get new blades for any of my saws for the next year. Or drill bits. Or washers. Or 3/4 inch bolts--"

"Xan. . . ."

"Please." Xander toes off his sneakers and kicks off his jeans; it's tough to keep his voice so even, but not looking at Will helps. "Let's not talk about it now, 'kay?"

Will sighs, but nods when Xander finally looks at him, and pushes back the coverlet. Xander climbs into bed, laying on his side and Will puts an arm around his waist, spooning up behind him. His breath and lips are warm on

Xander's neck.

"We will talk about this, Xander"

"Yeah, we will, just--not now."

"Soon."

"Soon," Xander lies, closing his eyes.

The next morning they don't talk about it, but there's a box at the back of the closet. When Xander asks what's in it, Will only looks at him.

Xander drops it--never brings it up again. Whenever Will broaches the subject of Spike's possible return, Xander remembers pressing matters at Home Depot, or Lowe's.

Eventually Will gives up, and Xander can relax again. Though he has a sneaking suspicion Will is terribly disappointed in him.

The box itself stays out of the way; a small white elephant at the back of their closet.

Spike's fucking box.

“You suck,” he tells it, tells Spike. He sits up and tries to stand. The room’s still kind of unsteady and he crashes to his knees.

“Ow,” he moans belatedly. Perhaps because of his previous comment, the box is totally unsympathetic.

When pulling it to him with the power of his mind doesn’t seem to be working, Xander crawls to the offending box, meaning to tear it into pieces. The balled-up piece of paper rolling around inside stops him.

He reaches for it. It’s a good quality--the kind Will uses for correspondence, or for his very recent hobby of writing Xander poetry.

I’ll never find another poem waiting on my pillow when I get home, or in my pocket when I’m waiting on line at Costco . . . never again, Xander realizes. Hurt eats away at his heart like acid.

He smooths the paper out it carefully, tenderly, wondering if Spike had crumpled and left Will’s poetry like a piece of garbage out of spite. Despair and pain swim around in his head like poisonous fish, but he

pushes them aside, as well as any thoughts of Spike. If he's going to read Will's last poem, he doesn't want that reading . . . tainted.

But the page is filled, margin to margin, top to bottom, in Will's super-neat handwriting.

This isn't a poem, it's a letter. A letter to Spike . . . why would Will write a letter to Spike?

There's only one way to find out, and by the time Xander has--three times over--the despair and pain have been eclipsed by rage.



Part Seven

“I’m sorry, say again?” Spike says through numb lips and a sudden painful throb behind his eyes.

“I said *you* were the one who did the doing,” Red says, slowly and loudly. “Not me. You’re back because you *got* yourself back.”

“Think you have your wires crossed, Red,” Spike scoffs, ignoring the feeling in his head and the pit of his stomach. It’s just the chili-dog and all the lattes. “I haven’t been in a position to do sod-all for six years. Amnesia, remember?”

And the strange looks he gets from *Paylessemployees* and customers alike serve to remind him: this is not the kind of conversation one has in a discount shoe store.

Right.

Throwing a last few a glares back at the salesponces, Spike stalks out into the balmy evening again. Not exactly *fresh* air, but it’s the best he’s gonna get in L.A.

He can already see the difference sunset has brought. Now that the worst heat of the day has passed, the crowds have gotten thicker. For a moment, he’s totally

disoriented, wondering who he is and what he's doing in this place. . . .

"--have no memory of who I am . . . I believe I'm suffering from--"

Then Red's voice brings him back.

". . . Will-you, not you-you. And nothing you--he hasn't been doing on and off for the past five years."

"And that would be--?"

"Trying to get an audience with the PTB."

Spike stops spang in the middle of a crowded cross-walk. It earns him a few love-shoves and two one-fingered salutes.

Huh. The ponce didn't lack for brass knackers, I'll give him that. But he'd have been better off taking our chances with the exploding-head spell, than with that lot.

"Not that he hadn't already tried to get an audience with them, but you can petition them for an audience, like, a million times, and that doesn't mean you're ever gonna

get one.”

A shove from behind gets Spike’s legs walking on automatic, carrying him to the other side of the street, just as traffic starts moving. “So you’re saying the same bastards who put me to sleep are the ones who woke me back up? At William’s request?”

“Yes. *Finally*. Only a bit differently than any of us expected. They took away your memories of being Will.”

“. . . *beg your pardon--?*”

Spike shakes the William-voice--*none of your tricks, Billy-boy, I said give it a rest--* out of his head. He wishes he could shake loose the migraine building behind his eyes and threatening to break across his consciousness. “No Billy? Fringe benefit, if you ask me.”

“Spike!”

“He’s not a real person, Red, he’s nothing, he’s--Harris’s imaginary boy-toy.”

“We both know you can be, and have been worse.”

Ouch. Not because Red scored a point, but because of the impending migraine.

Obviously.

“Yeah? Well, if Billy’s so bloody real, and I’m so bloody awful”--*all the horrible things I’ve done*--“why was he tryin’ so hard to get me back?”

“Uh, hello? Because he’s a good person who wanted to give the man he loves all of himself. Even the parts that’re *you*.” Double-ouch, damn that migraine.

“Anyway, the PTB are the only ones who could’ve brought you back. They made sure of that.”

--tired, gaunt, covered in stubble and yes, somewhat piratical--smiles and is suddenly familiar. The only familiar thing, it would seem. Especially his warm, good-natured smile; like sunrise on the best day any man could ever hope to wake up to.

Spike massages his left temple with one shaking hand. “I see . . . and from whom did William learn how to petition the PTB?”

“I showed him.”

Spike's gobstruck non-reply is reply enough to make Red start babbling.

"Look--there are ways and there are *ways* to get an audience with the Powers--some more dangerous and costly than others. I thought it'd be better to teach him the safer ones, than to leave him to try any old spell he finds--and believe me, Will was *really* good at mystical research. He'd have found a way."

Mini-lectures and huffy justifications. Same old Red. Spike doesn't know if he's angry, amused or incredulous. The flare of red-tinged pain behind his eyeballs decides him.

"Can't imagine Harris took too well to the idea of his boyfriend playin' Harry Potter, or to you playin' Professor McGonagall."

Red's silence is hesitant . . . guilt-ridden.

"Right, so you two kept Harris in the dark about the whole mess--what? So he wouldn't worry?" More guilty silence and Spike snorts. "You white hats are so bloody predictable. So bloody *stupid*. What if the PTB changed

him, took something from him in exchange for gettin' me back? Sodding *hell*--you know more than anyone that just because you're callin' on the PTB doesn't mean any old demon, god, higher being or *lower* being can't pick up and then piggyback its way to this plane of existence!"

"Hey, don't *you* lecture *me* on the mystical side of magic, bub!" Spike can imagine the hectic, indignant roses blooming in Red's pale cheeks. It almost makes him smile. "You think I didn't take all of that into consideration? I *redesigned* those spells specifically *for* Will's use--"

"Did you, now?" Spike sneers at--well, not so much *at* that little old lady, but in her general direction. Not his fault the old bird gets in sneer's way, is it? "And your magic is so bloody reliable, is that it?"

"Yes. It is," Red says in a voice that's as cold as it is soft and low. Spike shudders, 'cause is it just him, or did the air around him get--*charged*. Must be just him, since no one else's hair seems to be standing on end, nor does anyone else seem to have broken out in gooseflesh.

However far away the pissed off uber-witch is, she's still six galazies too close for Spike's comfort. Time for serious

back-pedaling.

“Take it easy, Red, didn’t mean--”

“Do you think I’d risk Will’s life and soul--or yours--by letting him cast a spell that wasn’t completely safe? My best friend’s boyfriend and one of *my* closest friends, and you think I *wouldn't* put every protection ward invented on it--then invent a few more just to be safe?!”

Spike grits his teeth and wishes for patience. For a head that isn't increasingly feeling like it's about to split open and spill his brains on the sidewalk. “That’s just it, Red, magic is *never* safe, you know that. If it’s dangerous and addictive for someone with your power and experience, think of how much trouble William could've--”

“Spike.” She takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out. “You’ve been gone a long time. You don’t know anything about me or my magic.”

“. . . mystical proviso of your shanshu. In any case, I strongly recommend we not--”

“Not my fault I was gone, is it? I didn’t ask for any of this!”

“No, you didn’t, but--sheesh, quit whining and get over it! Is that all you’ve done since you got back? Whine and recriminate? You must be driving Xander nuts!”

And doesn't Spike's migraine just love *that* name?

“We will talk about this, Xander.”

“Oh, yes, poor *Harris*--lost his love and has to put up with second-rate Spike, who just so happens to have lover-boy’s face--poor Xander, boo-bloody-hoo!” Spike is aware that he’s practically shouting; aware that he’s clutching the phone nearly hard enough to break it. Aware that his wild gesturing is making pedestrians steer cautiously around him. He just can't stop himself. “What about what / lost?!”

“What about what you’ve gained?”

That quietly reasonable tone--eerily like the William-voice in his head--is the last thing Spike expects, the last thing he has a defense for. It makes him remember Harris’s lips parting tentatively against his own, soft and warm and so damn familiar. So *right*.

But that's no longer an option, is it?

"Oh, yes," Spike says as nastily as he can. Nothing puts Red on the defensive like insulting her nearest and dearest; if she's on the defensive, maybe she'll stop making sense. "I've gained a donut-boy's undying devotion. Good thing I didn't sleep through that! But in case you weren't paying attention--it's William that Harris loves, not me."

"Spike, Will, whatever you call yourself, Xander loves *you*. Not the superficial things, like the way you dress, the color of your hair or the way you talk. He loves *you*. And you love him, whether you remember it, or not!"

"Don't be too sure about that, pet. If I don't know you anymore, you damn sure don't know me, either."

The ensuing silence, punctuated by the pounding in his head, says Spike struck a nerve. It occurs to him that Red and Billy probably got on like a house on fire. How must she feel about his absence? Not as broken up as Harris, surely, but probably not happy with William's substitute.

What a perfect punishment this is, Spike thinks. Spent my whole unlife playing second fiddle to Angelus, now I'll

spend the rest of my life playing second fiddle to myself . . . bloody priceless.

“You don’t know me,” he says again, not at all regretfully.
“Neither does Harris.”

“We know Will. You and Will are just different facets of the same person--you two are more alike than you are different!”

“Oi! No need to be insultin’!”

“It’s those similarities that Xander fell in love with,” Red finishes doggedly, as if Spike hadn’t spoken. “I’m not saying he won’t have to get used to the differences, but you’re still the man that he fell in love with!”

Spike laughs long and loud and jaggedly, yet again alarming the pedestrians nearest him. “Is that so?”
What’s a little ol’ explodin’ head-factor when there’s some really great memories of being a psychotic, murdering asshole just waitin’ to be had? Those were his exact words, weren’t they? Maybe he wasn’t trying to keep me gone, but don’t lie and say he wasn’t happy to write me off as a loss.”

“So you think he just threw up his hands and said ‘oh, well, screw Spike, I’ve got Will and I’m keepin’ him’?”

Boom-boom-boom, goes the all-drum marching band behind Spike’s eyes; it keeps perfect time with each stalking step he takes . . . with each labored beat of his heart. “You tellin’ me he didn’t?”

“Do you know how afraid Xander was-- how afraid they *both* were that once they brought you back, you wouldn’t want to be with him? And how hard they tried, anyway?”

“A man’ll do a lot of things he doesn’t necessarily want to. Harris tried to bring me back because he’s a white hat and that’s what you people *do*; it’s his *nature* to do the right thing. Doesn’t mean he *wanted me* back.”

And when did I start sounding this pathetic and needy? Starting to sound like you-know-who. . . . must be this bloody migraine. I forgot how awful these things were-- feels like my brain’s bein’ split in two! I hate bein’ human!

“Have you even given him a *chance* to want you? I mean--you haven’t even been back a whole day, right? That’s not long enough for him to decide *how* he feels about

you!”

“Xander-bloody-Harris strokin’ me off . . . now what sort of cruel and extra-crispy hell have the PTB landed me in?”

Spike rolls onto his back, but not before he sees the flash of hurt and disappointment in Harris’s eye. That look is wrong for two reasons. One, Harris never had any expectations of him, so it’s sill for him to equate Spike with disappointment. It’s not like Harris is Drusilla, or . . . Buffy.

Two--Harris’s hurt? Hurts Spike. And aside from a bit of preacher-induced eye-loss, Spike's never felt much empathy for Xander Harris. Never expected to.

But then, he never expected to wake up to a heartbeat and a Harris-handjob, either. . . .

“I think it’s plenty long enough, Red,” Spike mutters over a rousing rendition of every drum-solo ever made. “He hates me, and he's got good reason. I saw to that.”

“Not even *you* could totally alienate someone who's hopelessly in love with you, in less than a--okay, what did you say, Spike?”

"I'd have to be a few patients shy of a bloody asylum to want you, Harris."

"Nothing. . . ." Spike lies, and badly. His vision throbs in time to the migraine. The orange light of sunset, which is almost completely gone, makes his eyes ache and tear. Or maybe that's the migraine, too.

Maybe he came back just in time for brain cancer. Wouldn't that be ironic?

"What did you *do*, Spike?" When *Spike's* reply is a guilty silence, she goes on, only barely hiding her concern and anger. "Look, I don't know what you did, or said when you found out about you and--*Will* and Xander, but--they never forgot about you. And if Xander wasn't exactly jumping for joy to see you back, it's not because he hates you and wants to cheat you out of your life--"

"Stop." He's not sure if he means Red or his damned head; either or both would be bloody lovely.

"Xander wasn't afraid that if you came back that he wouldn't be able to love and accept Spike-you. He was afraid that Spike-you wouldn't be able to love and accept

him. At all. He never hated you, or wished you ill, he just--wanted to hold on to the part of you that loves him."

"Don't--

"But if he thought that you--whole-you, with *all* of your memories--could love him back, even just a little, do you know how happy that'd make him? How happy he could and has made *you*? Has anyone else in any of your lives loved you even half as much?"

Spike finally shoulders his way out of foot-traffic, and under the awning of a closed motorcycle repair shop. He desperately needs a breather. Too much caffeine and too much junk-food do not a happy body make. "No. No one. And no one ever will. Not now--" the pain in his head suddenly cranks up to nigh unbearable. To shut out the last of the orangey-red glare, he--

--opens his eyes to blurry surroundings and closes them again, yawning and stretching. He feels as if he's been asleep for ages.

What a strange and horrible dream, *he thinks, meaning to examine it before it slips away, but when opens his eyes again, he sees a pirate. That drives the dream*

straight from his head.

He smiles, and squints this rather interesting character into better focus. Not a pirate, it seems, just a weather-beaten young man with an eyepatch and, apparently, no parrot. "Oh . . . hello."

"Uh . . . hi?"

No . . . definitely not a pirate.

The young man--tired, gaunt, covered in stubble and yes, somewhat piratical--smiles and is suddenly familiar. The only familiar thing, it would seem. Especially his warm, good-natured smile; like sunrise on the best day any man could ever hope to wake up to.

He glances around the (his?) bedroom. Takes in drab-green everything, the elevated television and complete lack of personal affects. Unless this is an exceedingly strange sort of bedroom--and he is an exceedingly strange sort of man--this must be a hospital room.

And why would I be in a hospital room? I don't feel ill--don't remember falling ill--or--or anything else, for that matter. Well, I remember my name, of course, it's--it's . .

. oh, dear. . . .

He looks at--Mr. Pirate, for lack of a proper name, and can't help smiling again, in spite of the panic nibbling away at the edges of his mind. "I beg your pardon, but where am I?"

"You're in the hospital. You've been unconscious for three days," Mr. Pirate says in a rasping whisper, as if he's either been speaking too much, or not speaking at all for far too long. "Since you shanshued."

Perhaps the meaning of shanshu is one of those things he cannot yet recall, like his own name, or Mr. Pirate's name. And he can't extrapolate what it might mean from the little information he's gotten since awakening.

There's to be no brazening his way through social interactions until memory returns, it would appear.

"Since I what, now?"

"You know." Mr. Pirate rolls his eyes in annoyance. "Since your little heart-problem cleared up."

"Ah . . . I see," he says. It's a lie, but a discrete one. Either way, this shanshu heart-worry has obviously already

passed, is no longer a threat. In the mean-time, his--the pirate looks ready for a nice long collapse. "Well, I suppose that's good news for me, but--are you quite well? You look to be more in need of this bed than I, if you'll forgive me saying so."

You look as if you've been through the wars, sir, *he thinks, noting the dark circles under the other man's eyes, the pallor underneath darkly tanned skin, the wan, starry look in his eye.* Your broken heart weighs upon you heavily, and your grief hangs from your shoulders like a shroud.

As if seeing these thoughts in his eyes, Mr. Pirate shakes his head, his smile turning colder, and bitter. "It's good to see that the whole shanshu-thing isn't keeping you from being an asswipe, 'cause I was worried, for a minute, there."

Despite the spreading feelings of familiarity and safety he feels in this man's presence, he wonders if he should keep his disorientation to himself. Every word he utters seems to annoy or push away, and he finds that--rather upsetting.

Well, of course. This man is the first person I've ever met,

so to speak. For all I know, my life may rest in his hands. I may be alienating my brother, or--no, he's not old enough to be my father. I'm a man, a grown man. And he's not my brother. I don't *want* him to be my brother. . .

"I--have I offended you?" He doesn't mean to ask, but it slips out, almost taking tears with it. Why he should shed tears over the distaste of a man he does not remember is puzzling.

"Not recently," Mr. Pirate says tersely, shrugging. Then he sighs, his face relaxing a bit. "No, you haven't offended me--why are you acting so weird, Bleachy?"

Bleachy? Could that be my name? No, of course not. What sort of name is that? A nick-name, perhaps, but not a given name. *"Am I behaving strangely?"*

Mr. Pirate smiles again. It's small, but genuine and lifts more of the bitter grief from his face. "A little, yeah. You're all--polite and nice and non-insulting. For you, that's pretty strange behavior. Not that I'm complaining."

"Ah." He realizes he has no choice but to lay the truth out plainly. If he can't trust the pirate sitting vigil by his sick-

bed, whom can he trust? "May I ask you a favor, then?"

"How much?" Mr. Pirate makes a face and pulls out his wallet, but there's a flicker of humor in his eyes and his mouth is twitching at the corners.

He laughs, even though this may be a disturbing bit of insight into his forgotten character. He looks at the Pirate's large, rough hands, then down at his own. They're pale, soft--not the hands of one used to manual labor. He is, perhaps a rich man, or maybe a bureaucrat. But he doesn't know--will never know unless he admits that he doesn't know.

So he takes a deep breath and looks up again, catching a look of relaxed amusement that transforms the grief-ravaged pirate into a boyishly handsome man.

I certainly hope we are not, in fact, brothers, he thinks, immediately recognizing his attraction to this man. But even stronger than that is the total trust he feels.

He knows that this is a man who will never hurt him.

Before he can third-guess his feeling, he's placing his life in the hands of a familiar, but total stranger.

“Could you please tell me--who you are, sir, and . . . who I am?”

“. . . okay? Spike? Spike?”

Red sounds so worried, it's hard to stay angry at her. And anyway, anger doesn't seem to be helping him catch his breath or get his shit together. “I’m here, I was just--woolgatherin’.” *Remembering? No--Harris told me this bit earlier. Just my mind playing tricks, trying to make me want things I really don’t.* “Got a lot goin’ on in my head, today, and I--”

“--guess this is where we part ways,” Xander says, covering his uncertainty with a laugh.

It's movie night, and they're, at last, all alone on the porch of Will and Andrew'd apartment building.

The night is crisp and clear--a night perfect for walking with the man one loves and talking about nothing in particular. A night for holding and being held under lamp-posts. For stolen kisses that sizzle in the cold January air. .

. .

Xander's shifting around nervously, not meeting Will's eyes. He looks half-ready to bolt off the porch and run screaming into the night. If Will has any doubts as to whether his feelings are returned, this shuffling discomfort allays them.

But the intensity with which he wants this man startles and scares him--cannot possibly be returned in kind. For Will is a man obsessed; has been since the moment he recognized his attraction for what it is.

Love. The strongest, purest largest emotion he's ever felt; even pre-amnesia, he's certain. It lifts him up and wraps him 'round in golden chains. It burns him and exalts him and makes him feel as if he can do anything.

It is unmistakable and undeniable, not that he ever could or would.

I want you, Alexander . . . I think it would frighten you, if you knew just how much. . . .

It frightens Will. . . and makes him incredibly bold.

He steps closer and slips shaking hands under Xander's coat and sweater, untucking his t-shirt to caress the

warm, firm flesh underneath. Then he slides his hands around to sweep up and down Xander's back gently, restraining himself from doing more till he receives some small sign. . . .

"Oh," Xander exhales and shivers, his breath pluming white in the winter air. He smiles wonderingly, blinking as if he's seeing Will for the first time.

"It--it doesn't have to be, Xander," Will tells him. His voice is unsteady, but his smile feels as if it stretches from ear to ear.

Xander's reply is to pull Will against him, and--when Will turns his face upward expectantly--lean down to bring their lips together softly, feather-light. . . .

"--you get it?" Red asks again. She sounds weary and desperate. Spike knows the feeling. "I understand that it's hard, and weird and scary for you, Spike. That maybe you didn't get back here as quick as you would've liked, but you *are* back. There's a life waiting for you--a *good* one. So instead of being a poop-head, why don't you go put your arms around your boyfriend, apologize for whatever mean things you said, and stop playing the blame-game?"

Still shaking with the force of that--memory?--Spike watches the passersby and sees only blobs of color. Hears only William's plaintive, insistent din as it drowns out rational thought. He's still breathless--and faintly nauseas, but the migraine has receded, ever-so-slightly.

"Xander loves you."

So much for receding.

"Don't tell me that, Red, please. It's too late."

"What do you mean, it's too late?" There goes that hair-on-end, gooseflesh prickle, again. When she speaks, her voice is too calm, too even, too non-threatening. "Spike, did you hurt Xander?"

"I didn't know, I thought--" I thought he just wanted to keep me gone . . . God, could I even blame him? Would Billy have hate-fucked someone, then left them to drown in grief and shame?

Probably not.

Apparently Billy's a swell guy.

“Spike? What have you done?”

“I’ll give you what you need one last time.”

“Somethin’ stupid, of course . . . but non-lethal.” Spike laughs, hanging his head heavily. The headache cranks up again . . . just that one notch that takes it back into the land of unbearable. “Somethin’ I probably can’t take back. I thought he and William were trying to steal my shanshu and I . . . may have mentioned that to Harris at a . . . delicate moment--”

“Delicate moment--? What--*Oh, my God!* You haven’t changed at all! I mean, you may not be all psychotic and murder-y, but you’re still a raging assho--wait a minute. How did you know?”

Such an abrupt change in mood and tone is dizzying and unexpected. It does nothing for Spike's head or the growing sense of guilt nagging the bloody soul. “Know *what?*”

“How did you know what Xander said about you?” Red’s voice is soft and low again, but excited, rather than cold. “The day I told them about that last memory spell,

Xander called you a psychotic, murdering asshole--”

“Yes, such lovely endearments--made m' heart go pitty-pat--”

“--more than four years ago! The only reason *I* remember that's what he said, is because you just quoted him *word-for-word*.”

“I'm assuming there's a point at the end of all this. . . ?”

“Spike--four years ago, you were *Will-you*.”

Oh.

"Oh."

And *oh*, and this isn't good. Red's voice seems to be coming from far away, fading in and out. Odd, because up till this point, it's been crystal clear, and as close as his conscience. Spike leans against the still-warm brick facade of the shop, and closes his eyes against pain and a moment of mental and physical vertigo.

“Yeah, *oh*.. Unless Xander repeated that conversation to you verbatim--and I doubt he did--there's no way you

could know what you know. Which means you're getting your memories back!" Red whoops happily. "Do you remember anything else, yet? God, I think I know why Will--"

"--iam Aurelius Kent?"

Xander winces and looks from the Ohio driver's license--that'd arrived in the mail, along with a passport, birth certificate and green card, all with that same name--to Will. "William. Aurelius. Kent?"

"Mmhmm. I love it when you say my name, baby." Will grins and winks.

"Wiseass." Xander blushes and glances at the license again, shaking his head. He looks bemused and dismayed and bloody irresistible. "The Aurelius I get--at least in the sense that I know where you picked the name from, you weirdo. But Kent? Why Kent?"

Will reaches over and takes his brand new license from Xander. Aside from his pallor and wide, startled eyes, the picture came out much better than he'd expected. Thank goodness he'd had the sense to dye his hair back to what he's been told is its original color.

“Well . . . I was--sort of, if one ignores the blood-drinking and murder--like Superman. Faster than whatever and taller than whatever-else. Powerful and bullet-proof.” Will turns to his livingroom window, which looks out on a trashy, undeveloped lot. “Now, all that lovely super has been stripped away, and there’s just the pathetic, one-dimensional alter-ego left: the Clark Kent, if you will.”

He shrugs and turns away from the question in Xander’s eye. It’d seemed a rather witty joke several weeks ago, when choosing the name to go on his fake ids and documents. Now, it just feels. . . .

Like he’s the empty shell that’s left behind, now that the special is gone.

“Hey . . . I think it’s a cool name. Okay, not the Aurelius part, but the rest of it is cool.” Xander’s arms slip around his shoulders in a loose hug, his breath stirring Will’s hair. “William A. Kent . . . a great name for a great guy.”

“Xander, you’re” beautiful, wonderful, amazing “too kind for saying that.”

“I’m not being kind, I’m being honest.” Xander’s arms

tighten around Will. "You're not pathetic, or one-dimensional. You're not Spike's alter-ego. You're your own man. A good man, who I not only like and respect, but also--"

"Also--?" Will asks breathlessly, when Xander falls silent.

"Also care a great deal for." Xander clears his throat and loosens his embrace. "Clark Kent was an ordinary guy, but--I happen to think ordinary guys are the best guys there are."

"Oh." Will shivers and leans back against Xander, wanting more than anything for those strong arms to hold him just a little tighter again, to never let him go. . . .

"--had to be gone to get all his memories back! I know what the PTB did!" Red's practically squealing, now, so of course her voice is loud and clear, once more.

*Penetrating and unrelenting, like a power-drill right into his temple. Add to that the sun's last rays, itching and tingling and--*burning*, scorching his face and straining lungs like fire.*

And the memories are pounding down the doors of his conscious mind, battering and breaking to make

themselves known. To save his sanity, Spike closes his eyes, throws open the doors and sees--

--that his bedroom has been replaced by a small atrium, which looks onto . . . a misty sort of nothingness.

The grey Nothing between and behind All Things, Will thinks, shuddering. Willow had told him to expect this, should he ever make it this far. But in all the years he's been trying, he's never gotten further than the protective pentagram drawn on his bedroom floor . . . and never really expected to.

Will is quickly discovering that expecting and experiencing are two different beasts.

He turns his back on Nothing--which used to be the armoire and the bedroom's south-facing wall--and that leaves him facing a small marble temple. Its denuded walls are crawling with some vaguely unpleasant weed, and supported by crumbling columns. At the entrance to this fabulous structure, are two Beings of mutable form and crushing presence.

The urge to kneel is literally crushing Will.

He fights it for as long as he can; William Aurelius Kent kneels for no one . . . save one divine carpenter, who is currently visiting his Uncle Rory in Reseda.

Their forms continue to flicker and shift--sometimes human, sometimes not; sometimes flesh, sometimes not--colors and light flash so intensely from them, that Will bows his head and closes his eyes.

In seconds, sweat is running down his face and soaking his shirt; his legs are starting to wobble.

In less than a minute, he crashes to his knees with a pained and startled cry.

But it's when he's on his stomach--hugging the chill stone floor and cooling the wet, angry heat of his face--that they speak at last. Their voices are the loudest of whispers, a muffled maelstrom audible only within the fragile, imperfect walls of his skull:

vampire

vampire

why

do you continue to bother us?



Part Eight

Will tries to sit up, to look them in whatever insane kaliedescope passes for their eyes, but the weight on his body and soul makes him groan, and kiss the eroded stone of the courtyard.

**Bother you?* His incredulous snort sends dust straight into his wind pipe, causing him to choke and sputter.*

This is the first time I've ever made it this far!

vampire

you

have squandered

our gift

our benediction

your reward

yet you continue

to bother us with foolish questions

No! When I shanshued--

as promised

as prophesied

the champion

the vampire

with a soul

was made human

you were given reward

yet seek reversion

Because you took my memories away!* Will tries to lift his head, look upon his so-called benefactors, but Their presence is unrelentingly heavy. Even breathing is a strain in an atmosphere so tainted by magic, and mysteries beyond time and mortal comprehension. *You didn't reward me, you erased me!

we

gave you life

vampire

And you took away my memories, my identity! Is that the price of my humanity? Complete loss of self?

amusing

truly

it thinks that a beating heart

and mortality

erase what it is

what it truly is

vampire

you are

amusing

ignorant

yes

yes

too ignorant to comprehend

the magnitude

of the gift that has been granted

the boon

amusing

Will blinks away tears and glares at slate-gray stone; the very faint breeze in this place stirs stone-dust, carrying it toward his face and once more down his throat.

Ignorance, yes, I'll admit to that freely. Whatever your game, it has rules I cannot comprehend, let alone follow. But the shanshu did erase who I really am--it took away my memories and without his recollection of past experiences . . . a man is not whole. Is nothing.

you

speak of your demon

and its exploits

as if that is the core

of who

what

you are

william

the bloody

is in your nature

but does not comprise it

this audience--

I was a demon for over a century! Those experiences are such a large part of who I was that without it--I'm a shadow! A pale remnant of what I was--* Sensing that appealing to their softer sides is getting him nowhere, thus far, Will changes tack. *It was prophesied that the vampire with a soul was to play a pivotal part in the apocalypse.

yes

yes

**Yes, and Spike played his role. He was your champion, he fought for you, sacrificed for you. By erasing his*

*memories, you erased him, stole his reward from him.
Stole his life--**

vampire

you

are alive

mortal

only

because we will it so

we

submerged your demon

we

made it sleep

we

made you mortal

we

made you human

and we

made you happy

though happiness was neither prophesied

nor promised

nor appreciated

we

healed your wounds

before the life we gave

bled away into the mud

we

gave you the life

you would so quickly cast aside

we also

gave you a champion

whom you would cast aside

you

take these gifts

give nothing in return

and demand more of us

vampire

vampire

an apt description

after all

this audience

**Wait!* The force of Will's desire jerks his head up off the stones, high enough for him to see two pairs of sandals;*

which become two pairs of taloned feet;

which become two pairs of barnacle-green pincers;

which become innumerable clusters of tentacles;

*and then one sterile ray of intense white light before he is again weighed down by his own awe of these Beings. This time, he must close his eyes to collect his thoughts. *I need to remember! I need to be whole**

the vampire

makes demands of us

still

amusing

but becoming less so

as the audience progresses

**Please--I have nothing that is of value to you but my life!
I offer it in your service--gladly! Please--**

your life

is no longer of value

to us

is not yours to give

by your own words

but is your demon's

you cannot pledge

what is not yours

you have nothing of value

**Then I throw myself on your mercy!* Melodramatic, yes,
but his last, desperate hope. *Spike and I throw ourselves
on your mercy! He was your champion--this life that I
have lived was his reward. He's already missed six years*

*of it, don't take away any more!**

The terrible weight of their presence, their attention is momentarily lessened; enough so that Will can open his eyes. The breeze has picked up and the dust is stirring in irritating eddies.

shall we

return what was taken

renew

what was lost

and send it hence

reforged?

Please, Will thinks, but knows enough not to say. Having earned their consideration, he is wise enough to accept the it graciously, and silently.

shall we

give it this last gift

this curse

that it may

at last

trouble us

no more?

At some point Will had stopped breathing, but that doesn't matter anymore. Life and death don't matter in this place, neither does time. He is no more or less ephemeral than the dust coating his throat, and the wind that eternally drives it across the stones he lays upon.

Time does not pass here, but it most certainly is passing everywhere else, *Will thinks with something too slow to be panic and too fast to be objectivity.* I shall be like Rip Van Winkle, waking up long after all that I know and love has died . . . oh, Xander. . . .

Slow tears run down his cheeks and weighs down the flying courtyard dust, turns it into grey mud. And Their terrible attention returns, heavier than ever, pressing Will

against the stone and into it.

the champion

must be reforged

a life

for a life

vampire

the sleeper

must awaken

*Visions of David Lynch films dancing in his head, Will manages another brief glimpse of furry, prehensile, eight-toed feet before he's once more kissing the courtyard. *I don't underst--**

this is the covenant:

what was taken

will be returned

the sleeper

will awaken

life

must be sacrificed

for life

that is given

that is the covenant

live

live

or die

by your choice

by your will

abide

or

revert

I don't understand! Will means to say, once again, but that would be a lie. In the depths of him, where his instinct is, he understands and chooses before his conscious mind can confuse matters.

accepted

done

this audience

is over

vampire

trouble us no more.

Their attention shifts, is gone in less than an instant. Weightless, now, Will is flung, flailing and screaming into the void.

~*~*~*~*~

Someone's smacking him in the face.

"Yo? Hey, dude--wake up!"

Hard.

"I think he hit his head!" An elderly woman with a thick New Yawk accent squawks loud enough to make his headache think of returning. A nasally, male version of her voice doesn't help matters when it calls:

"Hey, you--kid with the two-tone hair and piercings? Call 9-1-1--"

And *still* the hand is smacking.

"Oi, quit it! I'm awake!" Spike grumbles, trying to open his eyes and sit up, ignoring the gentle hands trying to keep him still. But vertigo makes him groan and flop right backdown to the (courtyard?) ground. "What's goin' on?"

“You maybe wanna lie still for a bit, *boychick*,” the elderly male voice says. “You hit the cee-ment like a *Hefty*-bag fulla doorknobs! I nevah seen anything like that before!”

“You fainted dead away!” The female voice exclaims.

“Been out for nearly a minute,” the first voice, young and male adds.

“You maybe hit your head a little.”

For a moment the vertigo increases past the point of nausea and disorientation, to outright pain . . . then it’s gone before Spike can scream, gone like it’d never been. In its wake, he’s left gazing up at three blurry people. He doesn’t recognize any of them, nor can he recall his name, where he is or why he hit the cee-ment like a *Hefty*-bag fulla doorknobs.

Then it’s all rushing back, with the force, mass and velocity of an asteroid.

Oh. God.

He blinks up into the concerned and avid faces of his small crowd of gawkers--a little old man and a littler old

lady in loud, tourist-y colors, and a gangly, pizza-faced skater--and gets his legs under him.

“Dude, I think that guy called an ambulance. You should chill out till it gets here,” the skater says, rubbing at his scabby left elbow.

“I said I’m fine.” *Bloody stupid, but fine.*

“You don’t looks fine, sonny.”

The world only heaves a little as Spike stands up. And once he’s been up for a few seconds, it stops heaving altogether. He towers over the old people and the kid, six-foot-one if he’s an inch, towers over him.

A quick look around tells him the sun’s set completely. Thank goodness. All that bloody orange light had done nothing to help that screaming bitch of a headache.

“You’re very pale and clammy,” the little old lady notes. “Like ya got the food-poisonin’. D’ya think ya got the food-poisonin’?”

“No.” Though he has been eating suspect fast-food all afternoon . . . Spike shakes his head. “No, I don’t have

the food-poisonin'. I feel better than I have in ages.”

“This is how kids today look when they feel better? *Oy vey,*” the old lady says. Her husband nods sadly.

“Whatever.” The kid shrugs and walks off, slouches off. The old couple, however, seem content to stand there and stare at him.

Fighting the urge to scream *piss off!*, Spike smiles politely--second time today, too--and turns away, adjusting his duster. The pat down reveals no lighter, no cigs and one wallet. As for the phone--

Lo, and behold, there it is; laying on the ground at his feet, miraculously unbroken--miraculously *unstolen*.

Spike picks it up, dusts it off and starts walking.

The display lights up and the world's most gorgeous screensaver appears, promising lovely, dirty things with nothing more than a look and a smile.

My darling Xander, he thinks, smiling. The smile doesn't last long.

“Not darling and not mine at all, are you?” Spike asks
screensaver!Harris. Damned if the little bastard isn’t
leering at him . . . damned if he isn’t bloody irresistible.

Stop that, he thinks automatically, but there’s something
off. The feeling of *William*--the feeling of a school-
teacher looking over one’s shoulder disapprovingly, as if
despairing of their charge--is strangely absent. It’s been
with him since he woke up this morning and now. . . .

Now it’s gone.

“This is the covenant,” Spike murmurs, understanding
coming swiftly on the heels of memory. “A life sacrificed
for a life given . . . the sleeper will awaken.”

Life or death.

Abide or revert.

“Jesus, Billy . . . no one likes a bloody martyr.” Spike
wipes his eyes--they’re still irritated from that
technicolor dream-coat of a sunset, that’s all--and closes
the phone. He’s about to shove it into one of the inner
pockets of the duster when it jumps in his hands,
startling him so that he very nearly drops it again.

*If you're all alone/ When the pretty birds have flown/
Honey, I'm still free/ Take a chance on--*

Spike rolls his eyes and flips the phone back open; the ABBA stops and the screensaver disappears to be replaced with the picture ID of his caller.

“Lo, Red.”

“What happened?!” Willow screeches into his ear. “You gasped and then there was a loud *thunk* and then the line went dead! What happened?”

“Had a bit of a lie-down.”

“What?”

“I passed out.”

“*Passed out*?! Did you hit your head? Are you okay?”

abide

or revert

“I’m fine, Red. More importantly, I remember.”

“That’s great! How much do you remember?”

Gone seven hours--seven hours, supposedly, since he assumed a full-lotus and started chanting. Seven hours since he scattered dried and consecrated herbs over a flame that burned greener than a demons eyes.

He should be stiff and achey, but he’s not. He should be tired, tight and lethargic, but he’s not. He’s energized, loose, jittery--scrambling to hide the magical paraphanelia, clean up the pentagram and air out the smell of incense before Xander gets home.

When he finally hurries into the bathroom to shower, a glance in the mirror shows a grey and dusty, tear-streaked face, dominated by wide, starry eyes. There’s gritty mud all down his drying shirt and dust all over his pants.

The clothes go into the hamper, and under some of Xander’s work-clothes.

When the spray is as hot as he can stand it, he steps into the shower, letting it rinse the dust and age of that place

off of him. He gargles it out of his mouth.

It's only then that he allows himself to remember, to realize what he's done.

What he's given up.

He sags against the wall and slides to the floor dry-heaving and weeping. He stays that way until Xander--darling, wonderful, Xander--finds him there, huddled under the ice cold spray. . . .

Spike sighs and starts walking toward Xander. Toward home.

"I remember everything," he says, and hangs up.

~*~*~*~*~

"What was that?"

Will's sprawled on his back in a limp, post-coital heap, staring up at the ceiling.

"What was what, love?" He drawls, thinking, for the first

time ever, that he could really use a cigarette.

“That. . . .” Xander snuggles against Will’s side, running his hand up and down Will’s chest. “I mean, jeez, I’m gonna be walkin’ funny for the next two days! Not that I’m in any way complaining. . . .”

“Better not be,” Will murmurs, rolling on top of Xander and kissing him, touching every bit of lover that he can get his hands on. “I love you.”

“Not as much as I love you.”

“Ten times as much as you love me.”

The kissing and fondling turns into heavy petting and groping and soon, Will's hard again. For the fourth time that night.

“What are you, a machine?” Xander asks between kisses, wrapping his legs around Will's waist. Will's immediate reply is an affirmative that leaves Xander gasping, and reaching backwards to grip the headboard.

As always, that first thrust into Xander’s body is a sweet, unbearable shock, even after five years. The way his body

yearns prettily so and yields so completely is a constant revelation. A treasure that he knows he could never give up.

How will I ever let you go? Will thinks, trying to accept with his conscious mind what his heart has known since the day his long-sought audience was finally granted. I know that I must, but how? I cannot break the covenant, and yet I doubt I'll be able to hold up my end of it. . . .

But this isn't the time for such thoughts. Xander feels like heaven under him and around him; best to savor this while he can, and leave philosophy for later.

"Oh, Jesus, Spike. . . ." Xander moans, biting his lip. Not the first time that's slipped out mid-coitus. Once upon a time it'd bothered Will, made him not only doubt that he'd ever be enough for Xander, but doubt Xander's love entirely.

But at some point, within the past few years, he'd learned to take this rare Freudian slip as a positive. Will's seen photos of his former self. It's a given that Xander's fantasized. And no doubt fantasy! Spike had amazing skill and stamina.

Ergo, if Xander's calling out Spike's name . . . Will must be doing something right.

Very right from the way the headboard is starting to creak and the thin trickle of blood running from Xander's bitten lip down to his chin. Some perverse impulse makes Will lean down and lick the trickle away, then kiss Xander hard, chasing down every last trace of salt and copper with his teeth and tongue. It's the first time he's tasted blood that isn't his own.

The intimacy that goes with tasting--finally--Xander's blood, and Xander's needy, breathy moans only makes Will harder, more desperate to be in so deep, he can never be got free. To love and fuck a permanent imprint of himself in Xander's heart and body, a reminder that will be there long after Will himself is gone. . . .

Xander whimpers--whether from pain or pleasure, Will can't tell--and the spell is broken; will comes back to himself--back to the present. Xander seems to be unable to catch his breath, and his eye is squinched shut so tight, tears are leaking out.

"Love, I'm--I'm sorry! Dunno what's gotten into me." Will stammers, reaching for some kind of control and, for his

customary tenderness. He brushes away tears with gentle, shaking fingers. "Was I--did I hurt you?"

Xander blinks up at him, as if trying to place his face, or puzzle out his words. Then he grins, brightly, beautifully. "Yeah, baby . . . hurt me harder," he orders, drumming his left heel on Will's back impatiently.

Will rolls his eyes and fake-sighs. "As master commands."

I love you . . . I will *always* love you. Please don't hate me for what I've done. . . .

~*~*~*~*~

"Harr--er, Xander? I'm back!"

Spike closes the front door behind him and locks it. He knows Xander's here. He can feel it.

He walks quietly down the hall, glancing into the empty livingroom and diningroom as he passes them. He's tempted to go check the master and guest bedrooms, but he know that isn't where Xander is.

In the kitchen . . . waiting.

Guilt that's got nothing to do with William spreads through Spike, like a fever.

He puts his hand on the cool wood of the kitchen door and remembers doing the same thing hours earlier, and thinking how easily it would open, and how Xander might curse him but might hold him, too.

The door still swings open easily enough, he discovers.

Xander's sitting at the kitchen table, his head bowed slightly and his hands clasped around a folded piece of paper that Spike instantly places. William's guilt joins his own in a poncy, pathetic chorus and he briefly considers just walking away. Anything'd be less painful than this is shaping up to be.

"Hello, Spike," Xander says softly, neutrally. He looks as if he's been sitting, gazing at his hands for hours, but his clothes are different and his hair is damp. Spike steps into the kitchen proper and approaches the table slowly.

"Hello, Xander."

“Willow called. She said you remember.”

Bloody interfering witch. Spike takes another few steps closer. He suddenly wants to feel Xander’s arms around him. When Xander’s arms are around him, everything is right, nothing is hopeless and everything is fixable. At least according to William. “That’s right. I remember everything.”

“I see.” Xander nods and still doesn’t look up.

“Do you really?” Spike ventures, and Xander’s head whips up. Then his face and eye turn bland and apathetic. A Xander-mask hiding the turmoil and rage underneath.

“Why are you here, then? You got your revenge, and you got back what was stolen from you.” Xander smiles absently and stands up. Forgotten, the folded letter drops to the table. “There’s nothing left for you, here.”

Spike flinches and looks away. The hurt is distant, almost ghostly, but there. Deep in the core of him.

“Xander--”

“That’s what you said you were gonna do. Get your memories back and make tracks, but--” Xander shakes his head and that awful cold smile gets a bit wider. “You’re still here.”

"Yes, I am." *Ask me why. . . .*

"Guess that makes you a liar."

"Xander--"

"Or maybe just too stupid and half-assed to make a decent exit."

Snark, with edges that cut and jab. “It doesn’t have to be like this, love.”

“Don’t call me that.” Anger passes over the Xander-mask like a cloud across the face of the moon. “In fact, don’t call me anything at all. Just get out.”

No, a faint voice whispers in Spike's head, too soft and small for him to tell if it’s his own or William’s.

“No, Xander, I’m not leaving.” Spike closes the last few feet between them, till bare inches separate them.

Xander backs away, and Spike matches him step for step until Xander hits the counter.

“What happened this morning is never gonna happen again, Spike.” His voice is cold and eerily calm. “Back off.”

The resentment in Xander’s voice and his own guilt backs Spike up a few steps.

“I’m sorry. I was angry, and--and stupid.” Spike sighs, letting his guilt carry him back a few steps. “I probably don’t deserve forgiveness, but I’m askin’ you for it. For a chance to make things right between us.”

Genuine surprise makes Xander laugh. It’s alarming, and a pale shadow of the laughter Will remembers.

“There’s nothing between us, Spike . . . wrong, right or otherwise.”

“There’s *everything* between us, pet. William--”

“Is dead.” Forbidding tone and cracks in the mask that let white-hot anger peer out.

“Not dead.” Spike taps his own temple. “He’s in here.

And here.” Spike puts his hand over his heart and steps closer again. “So are you. Couldn’t shake you loose if I wanted to.”

Xander looks down at the diminishing space between them. “And this is my problem--how?”

“Damn it, he’s *in here*, Harris!” Spike grabs Xander’s hand, pulls it to his chest and holds it there. “Everything he felt for you, every memory, everything he was is *still* in here and it still *loves* you! *I love you!* *I love you*, you stupid sod, and it’s not stopping just because the memories aren’t mine.”

A flicker of *something* in Xander’s eye, but it’s gone too fast to interpret and Xander’s pulling his hand away. Spike tries to hold on, but all it earns him is an aching wrist and a scornful glare.

“A lot’s changed in six years, big bad. I could’ve broken your wrist before you finished taking your next breath.”

“But you didn’t. And you’re not gonna.” Spike steps closer and puts his hand over Xander’s heart. The beat is strong and slightly too fast. “Not gonna, ‘cause I’m in there. Me and William . . . in so deep that you can’t get

us out.”

There goes that flicker again, and again, it’s quickly iced over. Xander shrugs. “I’ve got another fifty, sixty years left to try.”

“Stubborn whelp.” Spike’s hand drifts down to Xander’s side and around his back, where’s it’s quickly joined by the other hand. Under the t-shirt, a warm, familiar expanse of back waits to be stroked and kneaded. Spike’s more than happy to oblige.

“You’ve got me on the ropes, love. You want me to beg? You got it.” Xander shivers and Spike steps closer, till his boots bump Xander’s sneakers and he can smell that herbal-cinnamon-clean scent of soap, skin and fabric softener. It’s so familiar and intoxicating; Spike is getting hard, even though sex is probably the worst thing that could happen at this point.

Is the only thing that could make matters worse.

“Want me on my knees? You got it.” Spike leans in till he can feel Xander’s breath on his lips; Xander looks startled enough to jerk away. . . but he doesn’t. “Want me on my stomach, as penance? Got that, too. Whatever you need

me to do, or say, or feel--whatever proof or demonstrations you need are yours, pet. . . .”

He brushes Xander's lips with his own, then presses them firmly, convincing them to part with brief flicks of his tongue.

Yes, the small voice whispers happily, and Spike couldn't agree more. The taste of Xander's mouth, the *click* when their teeth occasionally clash, the rasp and tease of tongues . . . all so familiar and new and lovely.

Spike rests his hands on Xander's hips, urging him closer, and Xander finally pushes him away.

“Don’t,” he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “The only thing I need from you is your absence, hint-hint. So, sayonara, have a nice rest of your life, be sure not to write--”

“No!” Spike grabs Xander’s arms and shoves him back against the counter impatiently. “I won’t let you dismiss me, like I’m some--”

Spike only has a moment to register the complete disintegration of the Xander-mask--*bloody hell, he’s*

angry!--before pain of the most agonizingly ironic kind explodes in his groin.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike looks completely stunned for a moment before collapsing to the kitchen floor with a choked-off groan.

He blearily struggles to sit up, before giving up and curling into fetal position, clutching himself and moaning.

Almost as stunned as Spike, at first Xander can do nothing but lean on the counter, horrified. Then a memory--welcome, this time--pushes away the horror, leaving an almost detached sense of satisfaction and poetic justice.

“You are not my lover,” he says, stepping over the moaning, rocking figure on the floor. “You are not my partner and you are not my friend. You never will be. Now get out.”



Part Nine

Since the worst of the pain abated, Spike's just sitting. Has been for fifteen solid minutes.

The letter sits on the kitchen table, unfolded and neatly smoothed. He's lost track of how many times he's read it.

Every few minutes, the cellphone in his pocket vibrates. He'd figured out how to turn off the ringer half an hour ago, on the way back to the apartment. If he never hears ABBA again, it'll be too soon.

And hell, even if the phone'd been playing *Blitzkrieg Bop* or *Rockaway Beach*, it'd only distract him from thinking up a way to get Harris to listen to him. Then maybe give him a chance to . . . set things right? Not gonna happen. Let Spike woo him and win him over?

Yeah. They'll be holding the Winter Olympics in Hell before that happens. I've gotta make up for the wronging him twice--and one of those times technically wasn't even me!

But that kind of self-pitying thought isn't going to get him back in Harris's better graces.

Though why he even cares. . . .

When the door to the room opens, Will doesn't sit up, or even turn his head. He knows who it is.

"Will. . . ."

"Go away, Xander."

But Xander does not go away. Xander shuts the door and comes to the bed. After a moment of hesitation, he sits carefully on edge of Will's bed and puts a hand on his shoulder. It's a comforting touch, a sure touch . . . a brotherly touch, and Will wants so badly for it to be a lovely touch.

But it never will be. Not if the half of what he's just been

told is true. Not if the things he's done to Xander's friends, and Xander are true.

"God, how you must despise me."

"Never."

Said so fervently, and with a tightening of the hand on his shoulder, that Will turns his head so he can see Xander. In the dim lighting of their hotel room--a double, not the single Will had wistfully wished for; even if Xander could, by some miracle, return his attraction, he'd never 'take advantage' of a man with amnesia--he looks very young. Too young to have lost his parents in an earthquake, and his . . . Slayers in an apocalypse.

Not to mention his eye to an evil preacher. And would've lost the other, if not for Spike. But one act of selflessness doesn't mitigate all the terrible things Spike did.

"Why, Alexander?"

"You're not Spike."

"He did awful things--"

“He was a vampire. Comes with the territory.”

“Didn’t you hate him for it?”

“Of course, I did . . . till I realized that’d be like hating a crocodile for being a predator. Spike was being who and what he was. I couldn’t keep hating him for that.”

“What did you keep hating him for, then?”

Xander starts to answer, then sighs . . . thinks long and hard, while absently kneading Will’s shoulder.

“Mostly? Buffy. And Anya. But after he saved my life . . . I couldn’t hate him, period.”

“Because he saved your life.”

“And because he’s repeatedly saved the lives of people I love. Not to mention he helped save the world a few times. It’d be kinda petty to hate someone after all that.”

Even if that is the only reason Xander doesn’t hate Spike, it’s better than nothing. If he doesn’t hate a murderous, undead fiend, then he certainly doesn’t hate me.

“But Spike hated you?” If there truly was such a benighted time in my life, I consider myself lucky to have forgotten it.

“In the end, don’t think he did.”

“The end . . . when the First Evil tried to destroy the world. . . .” Will closes his eyes, trying to picture it. He can’t. *“How can any of this be true? If it is, why can’t I remember?”*

“I don’t know.” Another brotherly squeeze. *“Look, I know this is a lot to take in, all at once--”*

“You’ve a talent for understatement.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Will sits up on his elbows and Xander’s hand slides down his arm. “Vampires do not exist, Xander.”

“I know, Will.”

“But apparently, before I lost my memories, I was one.”

“Yeah, you were.”

"And I killed people."

"Yes."

"And I drank blood."

"That, too."

Will sighs and lays back down, closing his eyes again. Xander's hand immediately returns to his shoulder, comforting and right. "The sight of blood makes me nauseas."

"You don't have to tell me. My shoes know, firsthand."

"I was addicted to cigarettes, blood, sex and alcohol. And bad soap operas."

"Well, since vamps are technically dead, I don't think they can be addicted to anything. Okay, yeah, the blood, for sure--and maybe sex--"

"That is not comforting, Xander."

"Sorry."

Will cracks an eyelid. "But at least I was bloody gorgeous."

Silence. Long silence. Disheartening silence.

"Well . . . if you consider the chiseled, super-confident, bad-boy type, with penetrating blue eyes and a devil-may-care smirk gorgeous, then yeah, you were a knockout. . . ." Xander mutters, with much clearing of the throat.

"Were?"

Xander shrugs, and looks away. His hand is still comforting, still soothing, still brotherly. "Okay, are a knockout, except for the bad-boy part. But . . . your smile's way nicer than Spike's," he admits.

Hmm . . . not so disheartening, after all. Perhaps not so brotherly, either, Will thinks, looking back up at the ceiling. "That's better . . . and you've a way nice smile, yourself, Xander. . . ."

Spike sighs, rubbing his temples. His head aches a bit, but nothing like the migraine trying to repress the memories

brings. “Okay, Mates, these flashbacks are gonna be stopping sometime soon, right?”

No answer. Not that he’d expected one.

The PTB’ve had their say, kept their end of the covenant . . . now, it’s up to you to fix what we’ve broken, William says softly.

Despite Spike’s overall anxiety, muscles that he hadn’t even known were tense relax. Annoying though a conscience is, it’s better than being empty and alone in one’s own head.

“Well, well, Billy . . . and what the bloody hell do you think I can do to fix this?” He picks up the letter and shakes it, as if there’s someone else in the room to see. “After what we’ve done to him, he’d be an imbecile to forgive us, and not even Harris is that stupid!”

With sweet-talk like that, we’ll get him back, for certain.

Spike snorts derisively. “And who says I want him back?”

Tell me he repulses you? Tell me that if he was here, all open arms and silly, lovely grin, you’d run screaming in

the other direction?

“For my bloody life, if I was even remotely sane,” Spike sighs. William laughs, long and loud, and Spike realizes something that Dru’s probably known for nearly two centuries: the voices in one’s head are impossible to lie to, impossible to ignore.

“But I’m *not* bloody sane. I’m love’s bitch.” Spike reads the letter once more. Every word in it fills him with such a tumultuous mixture of anger, remorse, fear, guilt, shame, desire, yearning, sadness, loneliness and--love. “Harris’s bitch. You’ve seen to that . . . but even if he was crazy enough to give me a chance, he’d always be wishing I was you.”

You are me! William insists.

“No, I’m not.” Spike refolds the letter. Wonders how differently this day might have gone had he read it when he found it. “I could pretend to be, but it wouldn’t be enough for him. I’m *never* enough, and this time won’t be any different.”

That’s only true if you give up without a fight. Please, Spike . . . please. Fight for him!

Spike stands up gingerly, leaving the letter on the table. “Between the two of us, we’ve done more than our fair share of damage to the man . . . it’d be better to just--go.”

William is silent again. Not the silence of absence, but a waiting, weighing silence. It lasts all the way to the front door. Just as Spike’s turning the knob, that silence is filed with white light and noise that resolves itself into another memory:

Long after Xander’s fallen asleep, Will lays there watching him, occasionally touching him, and reassuring himself that they’re both still there.

He’d be content to do that for the rest of the night--the rest of his borrowed life--but there are plans that need to be made, now that things have finally been set in motion. He stretches and rolls out of bed.

Rifling through Xander’s half of the closet--Xander-clothes are always more comfortable than his own--he selects a pair of grey sweats and a Rocket T. Squirrel t-shirt.

Then it's back to Xander-contemplation. Just watching him sleep makes Will's heart feel like it's too big for his chest, and like his lungs just can't get enough oxygen. If anything, the passage of time has increased the frequency and intensity of the feeling.

"I love you very much," he whispers, kissing Xander's shoulder. Xander mumbles something in sleep-talk and rolls toward him, smiling.

Smiles that sweet have to be kissed.

And kissed again.

And again.

And again, until Xander takes the hint, and wakes up enough to wrap strong, warm arms around his neck and kiss him back.

"Hey, baby."

"Hello, love." Will kneels on the bed, straddling Xander for better kiss-leverage. "Was afraid I'd put you in a coma."

“Damn near. How come you’re still awake?” He pulls Will down on top of him and into another sleepy kiss. “Not to mention way over dressed?”

“Got me all wound up, didn’t you?” Will says in the voice, which never fails to result in an alert, aroused Xander. “Need a hot cuppa to settle me down. Unless you don’t want me settled. . . .”

Xander groans and shoves Will off of him, onto his own side of the bed. “Nuh-uh, sex-machine. Four times is my physical limit. At least on a week-night. So go, be British . . . have fun.”

“Alright . . . but it won’t be as much fun as bein’ here.” Will pulls Xander’s hand to his lap and yes, Xander’s patented, official, Will-tested/Will-approved cocktease still works when the teasee is in sweats and the teaser is half-asleep.

But then, they both already know that from experience.

Xander stops teasing and yawns, smacking Will’s thigh. “Get--there’s a cup of Earl Grey with your name on it just waiting to be poured.”

“Come on, love, one more, for the road. . . .” Will murmurs, more than half-serious, more than half-hard.

“You are a bad, bad, bad, bad, bad man!” Xander rolls away, pulling the sheets up over himself like an aegis. “Go! Make some tea and lemme recover!”

Sighing, Will steals one last kiss--the back of Xander’s head, since that’s all that isn’t covered by sheet--and sits up. “I love you, Xander.”

No response for a couple of seconds, then:

“Stop pressuring me. No means no.”

Thwarted, Will gets out of bed. Again.

Plans to make and things to do.

~~*~*~*~*

Five minutes later, steaming, overs-sized mug in hand, he pads into the den and turns on a lamp, making himself comfortable in front of the computer.

He settles in the huge new leather chair--the command chair, Xander calls it, and has called it since one interesting night three weeks ago--turns on their G7 and opens a blank Word document.

Dear Spike. . . .

What does he say next? 'Welcome back, old man! Welcome back to our life!'

Will snorts. Not bloody likely.

But he types it out, anyway, since it's better than nothing, and he can always delete it later.

The next words that come to him should be the hardest, but they aren't. Maybe because they're inevitable, now. He types them with a sense of relief and calm despair.

If you're reading this, that means you've woken up, so to speak, and I have gone to sleep--or disappeared completely.

The words flow more easily, after that. Of course. They're about Xander.

. . . he is our saviour and our Love and I cannot stress to you that above all else he must not be hurt. . . at least no more than this situation has already hurt him.

After brooding over that last paragraph for a few minutes, he adds: Than I have already hurt him.

Now. How to talk about the deal he made with the Powers? How to inform his other self about a pact he doesn't rightly understand, except so deep down that to call it instinctual would be to understate?

I've always known that time would bring you back, *Will temporizes, fingers flying over they keys*. Even though Willow, Rupert and Ethan could not. Even though the Powers, for over five years, would not.

Which, I suppose, brings us neatly 'round to the reason you're back.

For years, now, I've been petitioning those authors of my existence, the Powers That Be. For years, they've turned a deaf ear to my pleas, until today. I was granted an audience and I made my petition for my memories. For you.

I was successful.

The sacrifice required to secure you is my own; do not be concerned that your return has occasioned a debt that you did not incur and cannot pay. I will pay, in full, what is owed.

This one is on me, as the saying goes. I'm certain you can figure out how I expect you to repay my sacrifice.

Sacrifice.

Will stops and sips his chai, scrolling up to read what he's written so far. Not exactly Kerouac, but it should hold Spike's attention for the two minutes it would take to read it.

Despite that infamous temper--which is even more infamous than the facial expressions--Will suspects that, underneath the admittedly thick facade of rage and bloodlust, Spike, the original William, has a solid core of kindness and reason.

But just in case. . . .

I can only hope that you haven't, in the time between

your awakening and the finding of this letter, managed to do some irremissible harm to Xander. Not to put too fine a point on it, old man, but I've given up my existence. Not just for you, but because it's the right thing for Xander . . . for everyone.

I've had six years of near-perfect happiness, but I cannot, in good conscience, let you remain absent. Though I doubt that had you not gone to sleep, you would have seen Xander for the Powers-send he is, this life is yours, to do with what you will.

Whether you give our current situation a chance, go haring off after your Sire and wind up re-turned, or resume your hopeless, and rather embarrassing pursuit of Buffy Summers . . . this life is yours. I only ask that you make a calm and informed choice. A life of safety, security and love with Xander, or . . . the alternatives.

Will sighs. The horse isn't dead yet, but it soon will be if he beats it anymore. Time to move on.

I do not labor under the delusion that my ineloquent desperation has moved the Powers to change their plans on our behalf.

Instead my reason, as steadfast a friend as I've ever had, has taken me by the hand and led me to one inescapable conclusion: you are a champion. The world has need of you, and so you're back, by the grace of . . . Whomever They Truly Are. You're back, reading this letter--likely frothing with rage at my presumption--and the world has need of you.

The debt will be paid; you are under no obligations. But that does not mean you won't be called, won't be given a choice. . . .

Do what you must, Spike. Be who and what you are. But don't forget me, and don't forget Xander. Don't let him walk away from us, or we may never get him back. If we don't--

Will writes several heartfelt paragraphs about Spike's likelihood of finding someone who'll make him half as happy as Xander could, if given a chance. Then he deletes every one of them, settling on:

If we don't, then I most certainly do not envy you the rest of your lonely life.

Eternally yours, and Xander's,

William Aurelius Kent

*He hits **save** and leans back in the chair, staring at his own words. All he has to do is print it out and rewrite it in on good paper, in his own hand (digital Copperplate isn't nearly as nice as his own).*

Write it, and leave it . . . where? With whom?

He must talk with Xander about what happened, yes, but the idea of leaving this letter with Xander, or anyone else doesn't feel quite right. But there's nowhere he could leave it that Spike would be sure to find it before he does something unforgivable. No place he would go, no former haunts--

Then it hits him like a Godsmack.

He knows the perfect place to put it; the one and only place Spike would be sure to find it, in fact. It'll take some doing, and Rupert will be curious as to why, after all this time, he wants Spike clothes. More than curious, Will knows. The man's mind never stops working, and if he doesn't quite put two and two together . . . Ethan might very well put it together for him.

But it can't be helped. Or stopped. What does it matter if they figure it out? What does anything that isn't this last bit of time with Xander matter?

*Will logs into his private email account and clicks **compose**. In minutes, he's dashed off a sedate, if brief missive to rupert.giles@thenewcouncil.co.uk.*

All that remains, is to tell Xander what happened.

Yes, Xander, darling, not only will Spike be restored, but the price of that restoration was my own existence. I've chosen suicide over a long and happy life with you, in effect, leaving you to face a life alone, or with a man who'll probably do his best to hate you. Well . . . now that that's done with, pass the peas?

Will can only imagine how well that'll go over.

"Hmm . . . I don't think that cuppa's working, 'cause you don't look anything like settled."

Will looks up, startled and feeling more than a little guilty. Xander's leaning against the doorway, wearing the plush green robe Will had gotten him five Christmases

ago. "Er--say again?"

"I said I don't think the cuppa's doing much to settle you." Xander strolls over to the desk and Will clicks on **inbox**. He opens a random email, just as Xander sits on the edge of the desk and takes a peek at the screen.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Just a little inbox cleaning. Apparently a great many spam-bots wish to sell me discount Vicodan and Oxycontin."

"Sweet. If spam-bots sell it, it must be good." Xander picks up the mug and takes a sip, then makes a face. "Ew! It's cold and--you forgot the sugar."

"Well, dear, if I'd known you were going to be co-opting my chai, I'd have been sure to put in your customary eight teaspoonsful of sugar."

"It's ten teaspoonsful, and no, you wouldn't have." Xander places the mug out of Will's reach. "Hmm . . . you know--I'm pretty happy with the size of your penis, so . . . you can just delete this one."

"What?"

Smiling Xander nods at the monitor, where, in huge, multi-colored letters, someone named Dr. Love-muscle is offering to enlarge his penis by fifty percent, for only \$49.99, after shipping and handling fees.

“Oh, and please tell me this not you shopping for my birthday present, 'cause if so? You're sleeping on the couch, Mister.”

“Bloody spam.” Will deletes the email. The next one is from Andrew and has nothing to do with enlarging one's penis. Will hopes. “Why are you up? Weren't you going back to sleep?”

Xander pouts a little. Dawn's been a horrible influence on him. “I missed you . . . been waiting up for you. In more ways than one.”

“Is that so?” Will puts his hand on Xander's thigh, then slips under the plush robe. Xander's indeed hard and, after some patented, official Xander-tested/Xander-approved stroking, he's even harder. “My . . . is all this for me?”

“Mm-hm.”

Will's eyebrow quirks of its own accord, as it so often does. "Thought you needed some recovery time, love?"

"So . . . I'm recovered." Xander shrugs, then stands up, careful not to dislodge Will's hand or look away. He smiles imperiously. "Shall we continue this conversation in the bedroom, mon Capitaine, or would you rather we have it in the command chair?"

Xander's Q impersonation is disturbingly good-- disturbingly enticing, as is the memory of Christening the command chair, but . . . Will reluctantly stops stroking. "Want you, and in our bed."

"Oh, where's your sense of adventure, Picard?" Xander sighs expressively, flamily, but he's already grinning. "So ix-nay on the am-spay, and come back to bed."

"Be along in a minute, love."

"Hurry."

*Waiting till Xander's out the door and around the corner, Will logs out and restores the letter. After one reread, he selects all and lets his finger hover over the **delete***

button.

*A minute later, he presses **command-q**. A minute after that, he's in Xander's arms, trying to forget Spike, the letter, and his own guilt till morning. . . .*

“Bugger!” Spike snarls, letting go of the doorknob; his body's valiant effort at an erection makes the fading pain in his groin flare white hot for a few moments. He leans weakly against the wall, doing his best to stay upright. If he doesn't make it out the door now, he knows he'll never make it out.

The hell of it is, he's not at all sure he *wants* to make it out.

Let him go, and this is the rest of your life, Spike, William presses his advantage and Spike's uncertainty. Beautiful, happy memories, followed by intense agony. Time will only make it worse . . . for you and for Xander.

And somehow, the thought of Xander spending the rest of his life feeling like someone kneed him in the goolies--figuratively speaking--is unbearable. It makes Spike's chest hurt like--

Like he just had another chili-dog.

He reaches for the doorknob, but his hand stops far short. He can feel William, hovering over his shoulder like a better angel, waiting breathlessly.

“It could take *years* for him to forgive us, you know? Maybe even decades. We may very well *die* unforgiven.” The realization hurts, makes Spike feel futile and alone.

Got something better planned for the next rest-of-your-life, have you?

Spike opens his mouth to say “yes”, but nothing comes out. It really *is* impossible to lie to the voices in your head.

Go to him, William whispers, begs, offers Spike any of a thousand wonderful memories as impetus to stay. *He’s in there, hurting, hating us and hating himself--we have to make this right--*

“Give over, Billy,” Spike grumbles, making his way back down the hall slowly--ignoring some of the *really* wonderful memories, so as not to cause himself anymore pain. “You had me at intense agony.”

William whoops--does bloody cartwheels in Spike's mind. Between the happy in his head and the throbbing in his groin, Spike doesn't know if he's coming or going. Then one clear thought--whether it's his or William's is anyone's guess--cuts through the chaos like a high-C:

Time to get our boy back.



Part Ten

Xander's satisfaction lasts only as far as the bedroom.

Once there, it turns back into despairing rage . . . or maybe raging despair.

Will left him. Their big, fairy-tale, light-at-the-end-of-the-

tunnel, *forever-love* was just one big lie.

This is the rest of my life, he thinks, flopping in the center of the bed. *He left me, and it'll just hurt and hurt and hurt, till I die.*

Right now it sucks to be the Xan-man. In fact, being the Xan-man is much like being a suppurating wound. Add to that, his head is really starting to pound--not that it hadn't before, but it's getting noticeably worse, now--and you have one not-fun Xan-man.

The not-fun-iest.

"I'm gonna get back the time you and that selfish ponce stole from me, and then I'm gone."

So, Spike's gotten Will's memories back and . . . he's not gone yet. At least, Xander doesn't *think* he's gone--but he can't imagine why Spike would stay.

He's trying not to care and failing miserably.

"I probably don't deserve forgiveness, but I'm askin' you for it. For a chance to make things right between us."

Those words coming from The Menace Formerly Known As Undead? Funny. Hilarious, even. But the idea itself, that what Will did could be made right, or at least better--made to hurt less--was powerfully seductive. For a moment, Xander had wanted so badly to believe.

But only for a moment. Or so he's been telling himself.

Because so what if he wants to believe, or maybe already believes a little? He'd also believed Will would've died before doing something like this without telling him. What does *that* say about the nature of belief, or basic trust?

And, as if bringing Spike back without so much as a heads-up wasn't bad enough, Will'd done it at the cost of his own life.

"Damnit, he's in here, Harris!"

Right. Sure.

And even if the only difference between Will and Spike is a barrier of amnesia that'd been knocked down . . . so what?

. . . shaking and crying and starting to slide off the kitchen counter. Spike's chest is warm and solid against Xander's back and his arms are around Xander waist, partially holding him up.

"And what galls me." His tone is light and conversational as he backs away and lets Xander go to stand or fall, as he wills. Xander pushes himself upright, relying on the counter to steady him. "What galls me is that you have the bloody nerve to act like you've lost something."

Xander shudders, hunching his shoulders up against the accusation in those words, in that voice--shrinks from Spike's proximity when he leans in to say:

"I am not your lover, your partner, or your friend. I never will be. . . ."

Spike and Will are two halves of the same man?

So. Fucking. What. That just means Xander's been burned twice by the same person. And this same person had the nerve to try for chance number three.

How's the saying go? Oh, yeah: fool me once, shame on Will, fool me twice, shame on Spike. Fool me three times,

and I'll get the duller butter knife I can find and cut your fucking heart out. . . .

And when the voice in Xander's head starts sounding like pre-rehabilitation! Faith, it's time to take a step back. But back to what? Will had left him without so much as a good-bye--chosen to limit his existence to one small corner of Spike's diseased memory banks, over their life together. Nothing to step back to there.

And Spike--

"Want me to take care of you, love. . . .?"

Yeah, Spike'd taken care of him, alright, in ways that gave new meaning to the term 'bad-touch'. Just remembering makes Xander angry and hard, sad and embarrassed. At no point in his life had he ever felt more used, dirty and worthless than he did this morning, And it's as much his fault as it was Spike's . . . more maybe.

If he'd just spoken up as soon as he realized what conclusions Spike was jumping to--

"If, if, if . . . if 'If's and 'Buts' were candy and nuts, then every day'd be Christmas," Xander says out loud, in a

more than fair imitation of his late mother.

It's more than enough to make him shudder--possibly even enough to drive him to drink--but hell, he has to give credit where credit's due. Jessica'd had the right of it; life's 'ifs mean doodley and squat. Spike had been determined to blame someone for those lost years--and Xander was the zeppo who'd gotten drafted.

Then, Spike had read the letter--admittedly, *after* the bad!wrong!hot!counter-sex--and he'd *known* the amnesia was no one's fault but the PTB. He'd still left.

Knew.

And then left, anyway.

That says it all, doesn't it?

Xander curls up on his side; fetal position seems to be the theme of this day--of the rest of his life. 'Cause it's always gonna feel like this. Time won't make it better, won't make it fade. There is no such thing as emotional distance when it comes to losing the love of your life.

He reaches out to Will's night-table and picks up the

picture of the two of them at Dawn and Connor's wedding. They're smiling at each other in a way that'd be sappy, if it wasn't so damn sincere.

Why hadn't he proposed when he'd had the chance? Maybe Will would've been happier, would've felt more whole if Xander'd given him a big fancy to-do of a wedding, cemented their love and vows in front of all their family and friends . . . and the PTB.

Maybes and ifs. The absolute worst things hindsight has to offer.

"He looks happy in that picture . . . you both do."

His eye starts to sting and burn--the picture starts to blur. Xander puts it back on the night table and closes his eye. Even the best memories are tainted by Spike.

And speaking of hard-headed, should-be-long-gone assholes. . . .

"You're still here," he says, surprised and obscurely pleased at the cold steadiness of his voice.

Spike shuts the bedroom door. Unfortunately, he's still

on the bedroom-side of it, from the sound.

“Like a bad case of herpes, me.” His voice is cocky, easy, unperturbed. “Always show up when I’m least wanted.”

More like a wind-up toy. . . . “So, now that you’ve been caught, you’re giving up on being sneaky and switching to bravado? So predictable, Spike.”

“Not so predictable, it’s just that you know me . . . know m’ ways.”

Spike crosses the room in a familiar creak-swish of duster; in seconds, the mattress is dipping under his weight. Xander can smell leather and--very faintly--cigarette smoke and blood. Also . . . chilidogs. Then a tentative hand lights on his shoulder. He doesn’t care enough to shrug it away. At least according to the official propaganda going around his brain.

The unofficial rumors going around his heart, however, aren’t exactly towing the party line.

“Did a real number on my wedding tackle, pet.”

“Yet you followed me into my lair. How . . . stupid of

you.”

“Still angry, I take it?”

Xander’s a big believer in conservation of energy, so he doesn’t waste any on a “duh”, or a dirty look.

“Not that you don’t have every right to be.”

“Was kneeling you in the balls not enough of a hint? Am I gonna have to break out the flashcards and sing a little jingle? Just to make sure you retain the salient points of *fuck off?*”

“Look, bein’ human sucks, pet, and I suck at it.” Spike’s bold enough to knead and squeeze Xander’s arm, once he realizes he won’t be actively discouraged. His touch is slow and sure. “I don’t know how to fix what I did to you-how to atone for it, but I’m gonna try.”

“You know, I hear if you ignore your conscience long enough, it starts to atrophy and eventually, leaves you alone entirely. It’s old hat among lawyers, politicians and other professional slime-bags.” Xander’s grimace feels more like something found on the face of a man who’d died unhappy, than a smile. “Should be no problem, for

you.”

“Ouch.” Spike doesn’t sound particularly upset and the hand on Xander’s arm doesn’t so much as lose a beat. “I deserve that and a lot more. And I’ll take it all without complaint, ‘cause I know if you’re still mad at me, you still care. You haven’t given up on us.”

“There *is* no *us*, Spike!” He opens his eye and the damn picture is directly in his line of sight. Why hadn’t he turned it face down, or away, or just dropped it into the waste basket? “There’s just a bunch of worthless memories that don’t mean shit to anyone anymore.”

“They mean everything to *me*.” The kneading turns into absent-minded petting. “*You* mean everything to me.”

“Which’d make you a few inpatients shy of a bloody asylum, wouldn’t it?”

“No . . . me thinkin’ I have a shot at being forgiven makes me a few inpatients shy of a bloody asylum.”

“At last, something we both agree on. I feel much better, now. Good-bye.”

“There’s no excuse for what I did, pet--I was cruel.”

“No, there isn’t, and yes, you were. Now go away.”
Xander yanks his arm away, cradles it to his chest as if Spike’d tried to break it. Unfazed, Spike kneads his shoulder and upper back, now. Xander’s tense, tired muscles are relaxing without his say-so.

“I thought you and Billy had decided to play Keep-Away with my shanshu.”

“Already figured that out.” A few tears run down Xander’s face; he silently curses his traitorous tear-ducts, and his traitorous body for not differentiating between Spike’s touch and Will’s. “Of course, by the time I *did* figure it out, you had me bent over the kitchen counter and three fingers up my ass.”

The petting slows out of rhythm, but only for a moment.

“I’m scum for the way I treated you--for a bunch of other reasons, besides, but especially for that. I’m sorry I hurt you. Gimme a chance to prove it, to prove how much I lo-
-”

“What’s to be sorry for?” Xander cuts Spike off before he

can say the I-word. It's a word he's never had much of a defense against. "Giles used to tell Buffy: *Spike will only get away with what you let him get away with.* He was right. It's in your nature to take advantage of people and hurt them. I was the stupid one for expecting better of you."

"You're not stupid, you're--too trusting and too bloody good for me, but you're not stupid. And I know you hate me right now, but--"

"You don't matter enough for me to hate you, Spike."

It's a direct hit; Spike finally stops petting, and removes his hand entirely.

Now, he'll leave, Xander thinks, equally torn between bitter satisfaction and the forerunner of worse pain to come. It's the death-throes of some brighter sensibility that Xander can afford to hold on to about as much as he can afford to let it go. He'll go, and it'll hurt even more, but at least I'll be able to respect myself.

According to Aretha, respect is of the good, but it's only making Xander feel hollow.

“Darling Xander. . . .” such a soft, concerned, deeply missed voice. The voice of a liar. “I made a mistake, not confiding in you, not *trusting* you.”

“Stop it. You’re not--you’re not him.” Xander’s voice cracks and more traitor-tears escape, like death-row inmates going over the Wall. “Get out.”

“Look at me, love.”

“I told you not to call me that, and I already know what you look like. Fuck off.”

“I said *look at me*, Alexander.”

“Will that get you outta here? Me looking at you? Fine.” Xander wipes his eye and rolls onto his back, turning his head just enough to see Spike. Maybe it’s his own yearning, or the damn tears, but those are *Will’s* deep blue eyes shining down at him. Will, wearing Spike’s clothes--a bad-ass bookworm in leather and denim.

Will, who looks as brittle and uncertain as Xander feels.

No, it’s Spike. And even if Will’s in there, it doesn’t make any difference. It’s over. There’s no going back.

“Okay, I’m looking. You happy, now?”

That’s definitely Will’s gentlest, fondest smile. “In raptures of ecstasy, beloved. You?”

Which startles another brief laugh out of Xander.

“You’re always beautiful, Xander, but never more than when you’re laughing,” Spike says, reaching out to caress Xander’s face. Trained to lean into that touch, Xander does, hating himself and Spike for every shiver that touch still causes. “So very beautiful.”

“And you’re *so very* full of shit. Everything you say is a lie.” Xander looks up at the ceiling. It’s better than looking at Spike and feeling the last struggles of hope or whatever it is that’s making his heart skip beats and his stomach churn.

“I should’ve told you about the audience--should’ve told you that I’d started petitioning Them again,” Spike says, running the tip of his index finger down Xander’s temple and cheek, to his jaw. “By the time I had the courage to tell you what I’d done, I didn’t want my last words to be something that would hurt you--”

“Why are you doing this, Spike? Is this payback for me stealing four years of your life? ‘Cause, newsflash, asshole: *I didn’t!*”

“I know. Didn’t before I walked out, though--got mad and crumpled the letter up before I got to that bit.”

“Now *there’s* a revelation that doesn’t change a goddamned thing.” The ceiling definitely needs to be repainted. Hey, now that Will’s not here to talk him out of it, he can finally stencil in some glow-in-the-dark *Star Wars* art on the ceiling.

Really, if there’s a lesson to be taken away from all this, it’s that *every* cloud has a silver lining.

“I remember the moment Andrew took this . . . how handsome you looked and how happy I was.”

When Xander glances back at Spike, he’s holding the picture--really close to his face; obviously he’s not wearing Will’s contacts--and smiling wistfully. “I remember wishing that you’d ask me to marry you right then and there, and knowing that you wouldn’t. Hoping that we’d always be as happy as we were at that

moment . . . and knowing that we wouldn't. That I'd eventually get an audience, get the memories back, and--everything would change."

"*Two fucking years ago*, and you were trying even then?!" Xander asks, batting Spike's hand away from his face and sitting up on his elbows. His own shock, and the look of guilty misery on Will's--*Spike's* face is chipping away at the tenuous control Xander has on his body. Crying, screaming and homicide are imminent, and not even in that order. "God! How could I have been so fucking blind?"

"You were happy and in love," Spike says softly, reaching out to touch Xander's arm. He sighs when Xander bats his hand away again. "I was careful, and you saw what you wanted to see. What you *needed* to see."

"Oh, so it's *my* fault that my boyfriend was a lying, secretive bastard?"

"That's not what I mean, love, and you know it."

Xander ignores another sad, Will-ish sigh--"*We are going to talk about this, Xander . . . soon*"--and his own regrets. "I don't have to listen to this--and certainly not from you-

_"

“That’s your whole bloody problem, right there!” Spike explodes, drawing back like he’s going to hurl the picture at the wall. But at the last second growls and slaps the picture down on Xander’s chest, hard enough to sting. “You *won’t listen*--especially when you’re happy! You’re so bloody afraid you’ll hear something that’ll take you out of your nice little comfort-zone and strip away your precious illusions!”

Spike gets up and paces to the armoire, the closet, the bathroom and then comes over to the bed glare down at Xander. When the response to his words and glaring is nothing more than a stunned, stubborn silence, Spike sits on the edge of the bed again. He picks up the picture, lays it face down on the night-table and visibly tries to calm himself before speaking.

“I admit I was wrong to let you walk away, time and again, because it was easier than telling you what I had done. But what was I *supposed* to do? Tie you to the bed and *make* you listen to me?”

“What you were supposed to do was leave well-enough alone,” Xander tells him. Blinking away the ever-present

tears makes Spike's face sharper, harder, definitely not Will's. "And you were supposed to stay gone."

Xander's only seen Spike look like this once, seen his face quiver like a crystal that's about to shatter. It's a face that tugs painfully on Xander's heart and memory-- makes him remember a girl he'd still been half in love with, dead at the foot of a tower. Makes him remember a girl he'd been all-the-way in love with, dusty and bruised, but still alive, with a heart still unbroken.

It makes him remember Will's face after Giles and Buffy had told him who he'd been before the shanshu and amnesia.

And *that* also makes him wonder how *he*, Xander Harris, had gotten the power to make *Spike* look like that--how he'd gotten the power to *hurt* Spike this much. It's not a power he wants. He doesn't want the guilt and pain that come with it.

He shakes his head. He doesn't want the *man* that comes with it. "It's over, Not-so-dead-boy. Get that through your head."

"You don't mean that, love--"

“Now who’s hearing what they wanna hear?” Xander lays back down. He figures there’s plenty room for Luke, Leia, Han, Chewwy, Sir Alec Guinness!Obi-Wan . . . Yoda, of course, and Vader. Maybe even R2 and C3PO; but no Jawas, Ewoks, storm-troopers or Imperials, though. There’s a thin, shifty line between War-head geek and Troika-hopeful. “You say you wanna make up for what you did? Prove it. Stop hurting us both and just go.”

“No.” Spike’s face appears over Xander’s own; it’s tired, unhappy . . . and effectively blocks out all efforts at visualizing a swanky new Jedi-ceiling. “We still love each other--”

“There’s no *we*! There *was* me and Will, and then Will fucked it up. He didn’t believe me when I said he was enough.”

Spike’s eyes are shining, and wet with--unshed tears?
“Maybe Will was enough for you, love, but--he wasn’t enough for *himself*. He wanted--”

“What about what *I* wanted?” Slips out, before Xander’s brain can rein his heart and his mouth in.

“You wanted him to feel whole, and be happy.” Spike smiles and there *are* tears in his eyes. That’s just wrong . . . Spike, and tears. Two unmix-y things, or so Xander’s always thought. “Well, we’re whole. We have all the pieces; but the happy bit’s up to you.”

Xander blinks back his own tears, forces away the yearning with resentment. “Don’t you dare . . . don’t you make me feel like the bad-guy in this. *I* never thought Will was missing pieces or less than whole--that was always *his* fucking trauma. *He* was the one who walked away from *me!*”

“But I came back!” Spike swipes frustratedly at his eyes. “Because I love you!”

“*You* came back, because *you* love me?” Xander laughs. “The PTB didn’t give Will Spike-memories. They brought *you* back, then gave you *Will*-memories--”

“Which do you think woulda been better? Givin’ a man who’s one hundred-plus years old memories of six happy years, or giving a man who’s six years old one hundred-plus years of bloodlust and violence and carnage?”

Touche. But so what?

“Yet another revelation that doesn’t change a goddamned thing.” Xander closes his eye again, before he succumbs to the urge to brush away Will’s--*Spike’s* tears. That’s not his job, and never will be. “My point is that the PTB could cram *Dawn’s* memories into my skull, but that wouldn’t make me her. You’ve got Will’s memories, Spike . . . but you’re not him.”

“I’ll be whoever you need me to be, Xander: friend, lover, sin-eater, punching-bag, good-guy, bad-guy, Will, Spike--hell, Randy-bloody-Giles! Doesn’t matter to me, just--” now *Spike’s* voice is cracking. “Just don’t give up on me.”

“Will gave up on *me*. Lied to me for years--”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t take it at all well, if I told you! I can see now how wrong I was to think *that*.” Spike’s voice sounds strange, muffled. “Never mind that every time I tried to bring it up, you wound up maxing out a credit card at *Home-bloody-Depot*.”

“Fuck my credit cards, and *fuck* fucking *Home Depot!*” Xander snaps, mostly to drown out the voice in his head telling him *shoulda-shoulda-shoulda*. It’s been running its

mouth since morning, but until a few minutes ago, it was easy to ignore. “The bottom line is you--*Will* just did whatever the hell he wanted to do, without coming to me first.”

“Well, *Will* wasn’t aware he needed your permission, pet.” That genteelly despairing voice has turned chilly and flat.

“Not my permission, but he wouldn’t even let me be there for him . . . he didn’t tell me what he was doing, or warn me that one evening I’d look across the kitchen table and see--” but if he looked at Spike now, Xander isn’t sure *who* he would see.

“What? A stranger?” Spike’s tone is more bitter than any Will ever used, but once again soft, cultured . . . pure Will. “A monster? *Something* you can’t love, or trust?”

“Will was the one who looked and saw someone he couldn’t trust. You looked and saw someone you couldn’t love. You both left me.” Xander’s unable to stop the words because this *is* Will . . . even though it’s not. So he does the only thing he can, and turns onto his side, so Spike can’t see the toll this little tete-a-tete is taking. “I’m not the sharpest bulb in the shed, but even I can follow

that logic.”

“*Logic*, huh?” There are two hollow *thunks* as an empty pair of Doc Martens hit the floor. Xander remembers that distinctive sound from their roomie-days, seven years past. “Can’t argue with *logic*, I guess. That’s never been my area of expertise.”

“Really? I think I’m gonna have a heart attack, and die from not-surprise.” Xander knows he’s scraping when he turns to Disney movies for appropriate sarcasm. But snark takes work when his heart’s not in it.

There’s a sibilant whisper of leather and a rasp of denim as Spike makes himself comfortable--makes the same sighs and settling-in noises Will used to make when laying down for the night.

“What in the name of electro-shock therapy do you think you’re doing?” He demands, wanting to glance over his shoulder, but also not wanting to give Spike the satisfaction. His worst suspicions are confirmed when a possessive hand squeezes his arm briefly, links with his own.

“If there’s one thing I know, it’s when to follow my

instincts,” Spike whispers, his breath stirring the hair on Xander’s nape. He spoons up behind Xander--thankfully, it feels like he’s only taken off duster and Docs--body curving and conforming so there’s--

--contact all down the length of their bodies. Slightly sharp teeth nip a tingling trail up his neck, to his ear and whisper:

“Wake up, Alexander.”

And he does. To a neat bedroom that’s not his own, weak, winter sunlight and a slow, but purposeful handjob. He grins and snuggles back into Will’s arms. “Okay, I’ve been awake for, like, three seconds and already this is the best day ever.”

“Good morning to you, too.” Will chuckles, kissing Xander’s neck and pressing his morning-wood against Xander’s ass. Which should be wiggy and strange, but is actually . . . guh! “Did you sleep well?”

Xander shifts onto his stomach little and draws one leg up as close to his chest as he can get it. “Had good--oh, Jesus--good dreams and everything.”

“Hmm.” Stroke, nibble, grind . . . stroke, nibble and hello! Fingers in naughty places! “I’m glad. Glad you slept well, glad you’re here.”

“Me, too.” Xander’s blushing all over, like he hasn’t had more than Will’s fingers in his ass--hadn’t had the biggest orgasms of his life, then fallen asleep being kissed and cuddled and complimented. “So . . . The Big Gay Sex, hunh? I mean, wow! We had it, and it was indeed big and gay--”

Will chuckles again. “Xander, relax . . . last night was amazing.”

“Really?” And that’s not a quaver of relief in Xander’s voice. It’s a quaver of confidence. “Cause I’ve never . . . you know. Been with a guy before. Never wanted to, till you.”

“You’re the first lover I’ve taken since before the shanshu--” Will patiently waits for Xander to return from the happy, magical land that two fingers and an unerring sense of direction have sent him to. Then he goes on almost timidly. “And the only person I want to be with like this.”

And that warms places in Xander that are nowhere near his prostate or his groin. Places that've been cold since he walked out on Anya and the wedding-that-wasn't.

Am I falling in love? Xander asks himself giddily, as Will does a tongue-in-ear thing that's probably illegal in all fifty states, American Samoa and Guam. I can't even remember what that feels like. All I know is that this-- whatever this is, has been happening since the moment he woke up, and smiled at me, like he . . . oh, God, this is the real deal, isn't it?

And on the heels of that: Please don't let me screw this up.

Xander feels empty for a few seconds when the Fingers of Wonderfulness reluctantly disappear, but he knows they're about to be replaced with something a lot larger, which actually does kinda wig him out a little. But the discomfort? So brief, and so worth the pleasure that comes with it.

"Now, I'm not an expert on morning-after etiquette, but. . ." a shallow thrust and Will's inside him one scant, teasing inch. *"Would it be terribly forward of me to say that I want to be inside you again very soon and very,*

very badly.”

“N-not terribly forward. . . .”

“I want to be inside you again, Xander.” More tongue and another inch. “Very soon and very, very badly.”

Xander shivers, closing his eye to shut out everything that doesn't begin and end with Will. “Please--”

He hasn't finished stammering out his assent when the teasing turns into a thrust that fills him in so many ways, all of them scarifyingly good. Being with Will takes his breath away, makes him think words like love and forever before it eradicates his ability to think altogether.

It's not long before Xander's coming, tears running down his face as he shouts Will's name.

Will comes a few seconds later, gasping yess and Gods to the steady beat of angry-neighbor-pounding-on-the-adjoining-wall. . . .

“Stop it.” Xander tries to shrug Spike off him, but Spike just latches on tighter, like the former-leech he is.

“Don’t think you want me to,” he says, all reason-y Will-voice. “What you want has nothing to do with logic, and everything to do with what’ll make you happy.”

“Will made me happy, and you’re not--”

“--not Billy, yes, so you’ve said. You’re right. I’m *not*.” Spike yawns and shifts around, cracking jaw and vertabrae in one fell swoop. “I’m not Billy inasmuch as I don’t actually give a shit if there’s someone better for you, or deserves you more. You’re mine, and that’s the end of it. I’m never lettin’ you go again.”

“You don’t actually have a choice, Spike--”

“No, *you’re* the one who doesn’t have a choice, pet.” Strong hands maneuver Xander onto his other side and he doesn’t fight them. He’s too tired, doesn’t have the energy, doesn’t really want to be let go of.

When Xander’s facing Spike, he gets that same radiant smile that Will always saved for him, and him alone.

“You’ve seen how I love,” Spike says, brushing his thumb across Xander’s lips, then across his cheekbone. That radiant smile doesn’t lose wattage, but it gains an edge

that's . . . predatory. And there it is again!

A fleeting flash of hungry gold in eyes that should be pure, human blue.

What the hell? Xander thinks, searching Spike's eyes for hints of the demon. What he finds are hints of Will, and a sharp watchfulness that's all Spike.

"I can't promise I'll never do something stupid, or thoughtless, or reckless ever again--still me, after all--can't promise I'll never break your heart again. But I will never *lie* to you again, and I will never. Ever. Leave you."

Spike punctuates each sentence with an aggressive, open-mouthed kiss . . . like Xander's token resistance, and half-hearted evasion is futile.

And Xander's futile resistance? Is very token. In fact, when Spike breaks the kiss, Xander follows him, trying to put off the moment he has to feel anything other than *want*. But Spike seems determined to look him in the eye and make promises he probably won't keep.

To try and drag promises out of Xander that he doesn't know how to give, anymore.

“I can make you happy, if you’ll let me,” he says. “The alternative is both of us bein’ miserable for the rest of our lives. Is that what you want, just to spite me?”

“What do *you* want, Spike? Really?” *Because you can’t want me. You left me twice, and I may be dumb, but I’m not stupid.*

“What do I want?” Spike smiles a little. “I want you to give this--*us* a chance. Take a leap of faith. You deserve more than *I’ll* ever amount to . . . but no one’s gonna love you more, or make you as happy as I can.”

“Dig you with the refreshing modesty.” Xander rolls his eye and Spike shakes his head.

“Don’t, love--no more snark. That’s not us, anymore.”

Xander subsides, laying his head on Spike’s chest. It’s a purely for comfort, but what’s *not* comforting? That Xander doesn’t have to pretend it’s Will he’s drawing that comfort from.

“Then what are we, Spike? We’re not friends, we’re not lovers. We don’t even know if we can stand to be around

each other without hurting each other and now you're telling me that we're soulmates--?"

"Never been sure what-all a soulmate is . . . all I know, is I *am* still missin' a piece." He pets and smooths Xander's hair. "I've still got a hole and it's . . . you-shaped."

Xander blinks.

Xander blinks again.

Xander starts laughing.

Long, hard, uncontrollably. Till there are tears running down his face, wetting Spike's shirt, and snot-bubbles threaten to do the same.

And Spike . . . obviously doesn't know how to take this new development.

"Oi, what're you laughin' at?"

"Your *hole* is *me-shaped*?" Xander cracks up again, his face hot and his jaw aching.

"Yeah." That tone? Means Spike is pouting. Xander

remembers it well enough from their halcyon basement days. “‘S how I feel. Like I’ve got a Harris-shaped hole in me--”

The pictures that conjures up are hot, hilarious, and so wrong. “Oh, God, stop, before I have an embolism!”

“I’m pourin’ my bloody heart out, here, and you’re brayin’ like a jackass!”

“Spike . . . your *hole* is *Harris-shaped* . . . yeah, I think I remember a line like that in *Romeo and Juliet*.” Xander snorts and he’s off to the races again, his face pressed against Spike’s chest to muffle the laughter. Spike sighs and relaxes, wrapping his arms around Xander.

“You just have a dirty mind, is all,” he says loftily, tracing small figure-eights on Xander’s back. “Not that I’m complainin’. A dirty mind’s just the thing for a proper Consort--er, boyfriend to have. And I can’t say as I’m averse to having my Harris-shaped hole . . . filled.”

The laughter--which really *was* getting uncontrollable, and possibly about to turn into hysterical sobbing--tapers off. Xander wipes his face and looks up into Spike’s eyes; there’s no gold, just dark, somber, sultry blue.

Holy, crap, he means it.

“Um . . . never imagined the big bad bottoming for anyone.” It’s stalling, until his brain can get over its shock and start telling him exactly how he should be responding to this.

Spike takes Xander’s hand and pulls it to his . . . surprising lack of erection. “You’re not just anyone, love.”

“Uh--” *think, brain! Think!* “Spike, not only aren’t you hard, but I’m guessing that after the kitchen, *getting* hard is kinda gonna hurt.” Another big jolt of dark satisfaction and even darker desire . . . and the tiniest twinge of guilt.

“Kinda.” Spike shrugs dismissively. “Not a vamp anymore, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like a little pain with my pleasure.”

“Is that so?” A firm squeeze makes Spike’s eyes widen, then he nods, holding Xander's gaze.

“Try me.”

Rub, squeezes, stroke . . . it doesn’t take long for Spike to

get hard--then wince and groan. There's a golden flash in his eyes as he bucks up into Xander's hand, but he's even paler than ever.

"I think you're hurting more than kinda." Xander removes his hand, uncertain which disturbs him more; the fact that Spike-in-pain makes his cock ache or that Spike-in-pain makes his heart ache. "After everything that's happened, you're not really gonna let me fuck you?"

The gold doesn't flicker or flash . . . it smolders. "There isn't much I *wouldn't* let you do to me, and not just for atonement's-sake. I mean that," he adds, when Xander's brooding has gone on for long enough to worry him.

Xander reaches up to trace the little frown-line between Spike's eyebrows. It immediately smooths out. "I know. And that's the scariest thing anyone's ever given me."

"Don't mean to be scary . . . I love you," Spike says for what what must be the hundred millionth time. Xander doesn't know whether or not he believes it, but he's pretty sure Spike does. He's just not sure that matters, or if he wants it to. "I'll do anything to prove it, whatever you want."

“Spike . . . I ‘m not--I don’t want to hurt you just to get proof that you love me.” Xander lays his forehead on Spike’s chest for a moment; tries to marshal his thoughts before looking into Spike’s eyes again.

But his thoughts are like wild stallions--or wild mustangs. Wild *some* kinda horse, because they refuse to be marshaled. The few thoughts that are limping by slow enough to understand--*just because this feels right, doesn't mean it is, and he's lying, or he's too confused to know what he wants . . . but it's not this--*don't stand a chance, once Xander actually looks up.

There’s no desire in Spike's eyes, no gold. Just concern, misery and fear.

It’s the fear that decides him.

The same fear he thinks must've been in his eyes whenever Will brought up Spike; the fear of losing, and of being left alone. It's the one emotion from Spike Xander can almost trust.

You really are this stupid, aren't you? His common sense asks, throwing up its hands and stomping off towards the

exit. *I'm through, dumbass. You're on your own!*

Xander sighs.

“I dunno how I’m gonna feel when we wake up tomorrow morning, Spike. I dunno how I’m gonna feel the next day, or the day after that. I can’t promise you *anything*, and I may not be able to for a long time. I’m still fucking pissed at Will--and yeah, at you, too. And there’s a part of me that’s telling me I deserve whatever I get for wanting to believe the things you say. . . .”

Xander falters under Spike’s intense scrutiny and looks down at his t-shirt. The black is still deep, hasn’t faded since the day Spike--Will--*they* were found in the alley. “Jesus, I don’t even know you, or what to call you--”

“You know exactly who I am, love . . . and you can call me whatever you like.” Even avoiding it, Spike’s gaze makes Xander feel naked, makes him wish he was naked, makes him want to put on every article of clothing he owns and hide in the linen closet, makes him--

“This probably won’t work out,” Xander tells the t-shirt. “I don’t see how it *could*. But just in case it does--” Xander takes a deep, shaky breath. His throat is as raw as

the cyclone of emotions whipping through him. It's a leap of faith time, and Xander left his parachute in his other life. Oh, well.

“Just in case it does, if you're gonna get itchy feet or have second thoughts about being a long-haul guy . . . please do it before I can't live without you?”

Right. That was unexpected, Spike thinks, watching Xander stare holes into his t-shirt.

“Love?”

Xander looks at him again, warily, and the part of Spike that's still very much William wants to give yet another heartfelt assurance, and make yet another sincere promise about never leaving.

But in the end he just nods.

Xander smiles, small and timid, then leans in to kiss him on the lips. It's a shy kiss, lacking in tongue, and sweetly awkward . . . a first-kiss sort of kiss. It makes Spike shiver, and ache in many places for many reasons.

"Good night . . . Spike," Xander murmurs, looking Spike in the eye for all of a second, before laying his head on Spike's chest again. His face is warm and dry, sparking a thousand memories of being Will, and laying with Xander exactly like this.

Someday, Spike promises himself and Xander silently. I'll make you happy, and you'll remember how to trust me again. Someday.

They lay there--Xander thinking so loudly, Spike can almost hear his thoughts, and Spike soothing shapes and letters into Xander's back--comfortably for a long time. After awhile, one of Spike's hands drifts up to Xander's too-long, silk-soft hair. There are already a few strands of grey mixed in with the sable-brown, something which quietly terrifies Spike until William's murmur ghosts through his mind like a soft breeze.

I know how silly it would be, asking you not to fret over

his mortality--our mortality. But for the moment, just be with him. He sighs in Spike's mind, and it's the oddest sensation Spike has ever felt. *Right now, he's alive and whole. Don't waste that worrying about the things you can't change.*

When the man's right, he's right.

So Spike runs gentle fingers through Xander's *mostly* dark hair, and across Xander's scalp till neither of their thoughts are as loud . . . till Xander's breathing slows and evens out.

He's fallen asleep in Spike's arms. It's more than a bit of trust, more and sooner than Spike would've expected.

'A perfect falcon, for no reason, has landed on your shoulder, and become yours', William points out, then rolls his mental eyes. *Your hole is Harris-shaped, is it?*

Spike smiles. *What can I say, Billy. Making him laugh is half-way to winning his heart . . . you should know that better than I do. That one laugh did what all the begging and pleading didn't: got us Xander.*

William concedes the point huffily. *Yes, well, don't get*

too cocky. Xander can be forgiving, but he has a long memory, when he sets his mind to it. Even if he forgives us, he may never get past what we've done. What I've done . . . be ever-so-careful with his heart, Spike.

Spike nods again, his vision blurring just a little from tears or tiredness. Nevermind that his heart feels like it's going to grow wings and take flight. He cautions himself about getting his hopes up--it's no surprise to him that Harris could hold a grudge with the best of them. Who knows what emotional storms the morning would bring?

And 'good night, Spike' is, after all, no 'love you, baby'.

No, it's not . . . but it'll do. For now, William tells him, and Spike agrees. For now, 'good night, Spike' will do quite nicely.

"Rest well, love," Spike whispers around his heart, which seems to have relocated to his throat. Xander doesn't stir.

When sleep takes Spike, it moves fast: it's got a schedule to keep, and no time for backtalk, arguments or negotiations. It closes his eyes for him, in the middle of his last conscious thought:

Tomorrow morning had better bring its A-game, and sod off, till then. Better--



Epilogue

It's another Friday night in the Harris-Kent household.

Xander's sitting at the kitchen table, flipping through the *L.A. Times*. Across from him, Will sips his chai and stares serenely into space.

'Space' being whatever direction Xander's in. Will literally can't help himself; it's been this way since as far back as he can remember, pun very much intended.

Six years. Strange years. Wonderful years.

Blessed years, that he wouldn't trade for anything, made more lovely and poignant by the ephemeral nature of . . . everything, most especially himself.

Spike . . . such a life you have to look forward to, such love, *he thinks, without fear or regret*. I give it to you freely, lucky to have tasted even so small a sample of it.

And that's when it starts.

A ringing sensation in the back of his brain--or maybe from the depths of his soul--like church bells on Sunday morning.

Time to keep his end of the covenant. At last.

Watching Xander frown down at some article or other, Will feels the faintest stirrings of panic and opens his mouth to confess everything. At least as much as he can in the few moments he has left.

"Alexander!"

Xander looks up, distractedly. "Yeah, babe?"

"I--"

did something for which you'll probably never forgive me

never meant to hurt you

was only trying to do what's best for us both

only regret not being brave enough to tell you

--love you."

That earns him a bright, easy smile. "I love you, too. But not enough to sit through the Stiffler adaptation of The Importance Of Being Earnest. Even true love has its limits."

I don't know where they'll send me, or if I'll even exist as more than an occasional ripple in Spike's memory banks, but . . . I will always love you, and, if I have any say in the matter, so will Spike.

Will returns the smile, hoping it looks normal enough to pass muster. "Well, if you're going to be adamant about it, read me the other movie listings, won't you, love?"

“No problem-o . . . ‘kay, let’s see. . . .” Xander turns some pages and makes a face. “Ugh, whaddaya think? Jay and Silent Bob’s Most Odious Escapade or Batman VIII: Clayface’s Revenge?”

I think I’m leaving just in time.

Will wipes the tears from his eyes before they can fall. Wouldn’t do for Xander to be any more alarmed than necessary. Or Spike, for that matter. There must be no tears. He has fears, yes, and regrets; but he will not yield his life in a flood of tears.

Though I *would* have liked to see Sean William Scott in a period piece . . . would’ve liked to make love to you one more time, Xander. . . .

He gasps as light, warm and golden eats away at the edges of his consciousness. It sort of tingles, like static electricity in his brain . . . or maybe his soul. . . .

“Yeah, I’m not too crazy about the choices, either.” Xander doesn’t even look up from the paper. “But what can we do? And we’re not sitting through Miss Congeniality 5: Dressed To Kill. I learned my lesson with Coiffured And Lethal, thank you very much.”

*Xander's voice, comforting and beloved--always beloved--
follows Will*

down

into

sodding

buggering

hell.

*His heart racing--racing!--Spike looks around the painfully
tasteful, earth-and-sepia-toned kitchen. He blinks a few
times, but the kitchen remains.*

What happened to the alley? Where's the demons and
Blue and the bloody Marines--? How the hell did I--?

Bugger . . . I'm in Hell, aren't? One of them, anyway.

*Spike knows he was very badly gored--was a few minutes
away from dust when he shanshued. But the bleeding
hadn't stopped just 'cause he shanshued, nosiree! He'd*

bled and bled and hurt, till pain and bloodloss blacked him out, and then--

Here.

I'm dead and in Hell, that's where I am. I saved the world for those bugging Bastards That Be, and got sent to Hell!

This hypothesis is confirmed with another glance around the room and at it's only other occupant, who is none other than--

Oh, yes. That clinches it. This must be a hell-dimension. And so far, the scariest thing about this particular Hell is that there's a demon that looks exactly like Xander-bloody-Harris yapping at him.

And bloody hell, even hell-dimension! Harris can't shut his gob for longer than it takes to suck in a bit of oxygen.

"What is it?" Hell-dimension! Harris asks, seeming as confused and thick with it as human! Harris had been. Only . . . human! Harris had never looked so concerned and solicitous. At least not toward Spike.

Which Hell is this and how many of you blokes do I have to eviscerate before I'm runnin' this place? *Spike means to snarl, but something about the way Harris is looking at him banishes all thoughts of ruling in Hell.*

Makes him start thinking he may be completely wrong about the metaphysical direction in which his soul has travelled--

"If you wanna see The Importance of Being Earnest that badly, we'll see that." The look on Harris's face is one of dread and determination. "But I'm tellin' you: with Sean William Scott as the director and star, we'd be payin' our money and takin' our chances."

--at least until he's really listening to what Harris is yammering.

Huh.

So much for the heaven-dimension theory. . . .

**That line is way too good to be mine. Props to Rumi, for kickass poetry that fits any occasion.*

The End