

Written for  [secondverse](#)

Original Prompt

Tabi, your assignment is to basically hit all of my fic-kinks out of the park. I want Spike/Xander, post-apocalyptic hurt/comfort. You choose who's hurt and who's comforting, but I'd like for it to focus on the boys in a "last man on Earth" sort of scenario. The rest is up to you – I know you'll do great.

Summary: The world has ended. Xander is sure there is a portal into a better reality and Spike tries to keep him alive long enough to find it.

Babylon

by
Tabaqui

Part One

How many miles to Babylon?

Three score and ten.

Can I get there by candlelight?

Aye, and back again.

If your feet are nimble and light,

You'll get there by candlelight.

Sometimes the sky rained blood, and sometimes it rained ash. On the days it rained ash, Spike shut himself up inside his tent - zipped it all down tight and wasted precious **batteries** reading, reading, reading; hoping to keep his mind off the sooty fall of dusty, gritty feathers that covered everything like the blackrain at Nagasaki. No matter what he did, though, he always found himself sitting and staring - listening to the slither-tick of ash on the rip-stop nylon. Clenching his fist around the black slashes on his right bicep until his nails cut his skin because he could still *taste* it, the ash - could still feel it grit between his fingers and in his *teeth*, and he knew he'd have nightmares until the fucking ash *stopped*. He didn't want to sleep but the ash-rain could fall for days and he had to, eventually. Slumping down over his book and dimming torch, knot of hunger in his belly like a dull-burning coal.

The alley after so much rain has a rill of trash-speckled

water running through it, and the light, quick sound of it bubbling over a buckled section of concrete is bizarrely out of place. There's a thread of scarlet skeining down the middle - Spike can smell it, and he tries to ignore it. Tries not to think of Gunn as quick fuel to heal his own wounds and give him another half-hour on his feet - another half-hour of fight when he's so tired he can barely lift his head. Gunn's hand spasms in his - curls tight - and he says something in a blood-strangled voice. Coughs, and Spike closes his eyes against the warm spatter across his face.

"Not goin' anywhere, Charlie-boy," Spike says, and Gunn writhes on the cold ground - opens his mouth to speak and blood wells and runs out, black and thick. Spike leans forward and puts his hand over Gunn's eyes. So he won't see - so he won't know. Puts his mouth to the tattered flesh of Gunn's throat and drinks, drinks deep...

Spike jerked upright, blinking rapidly - hissing as cramped muscles screamed in protest. *Didn't do that. Didn't drink his blood.* He rubbed his hand over his bicep, gaze turning inward. *Wouldn't do that to you, Charlie-boy.* He

sat for a long moment, just - settling himself. Listening. Silence, outside his tent - the ash-rain must have stopped. Cautiously - you never know what you could be facing - he unzipped the tent flap a mere half-inch, ready to draw back if need be. But there was nothing deadly there, only cooler, desert-dry air and the night. The ash, for now, had stopped. Spike tucked the books and dead torch into his pack, folded the silvery 'all weather' blanket in on top and rolled the sleeping bag up and secured it to the side, then shuffled on his knees to the front of the tent. He unzipped the flap the rest of the way and stepped out into a cool wash of moonlight and a landscape of silver-nitrate and soot, charcoal and bone-chip white. Skeletons of winter-bare trees, utterly empty. And ash over everything, inches thick; the moon riding full and far in a cloudless sky, the stars like sugar on black velvet. The ash-clouds were far to the east, moving rapidly, and the rare, clear night seemed to glow all around him. Spike simply stood, breathing - looking. Taking in the stillness and the air that smelled of burning and of salt. All his senses amped because for the last five or six months he hadn't once dropped back to his human face. There was no need to - he didn't have to 'pass', anymore and the demon was more and more the default.

It's like the fuckin' moon. Nothing alive here. His stomach

complained, but he ignored it. Food soon enough. Methodically, he zipped the tent back up - knocked it free of ash and folded it away into its built-in bag. Secured it to the bottom of his pack, meticulous with the cords. Then he shouldered the pack and locked the clip across his chest. Taking care, because everything in there came with a price, and he wouldn't risk any of it. He'd almost lost it once - *just* the once. He learns quick, these days. He turned slowly for a last observation and when he was facing the east he began to walk. The ash kicked up light as flour and after a bare ten minutes he was coated in it. It irritated his throat even though he wasn't breathing and made his eyes burn. He hated the touch of it; gritted his teeth and endured. The coast was five days away - the city was - and he *would* wade through this shite to get there. Even though there was no real *reason* to get there. But you had to have a goal - had to have *something* - and the city was his current one. Later, it would be something else. Find a first-edition Trollope - an unbroken, *un-opened* bottle of Laphroaig. Anything, really. Anything but *think* - anything but remember. He did that in his dreams, and that was more than enough.

~*~*~*~*~

Two days out from the city, following a faint, rutted track he came up over a rise and stopped dead. Fire illuminated the scene before him and he instinctively hunched down, not letting himself be silhouetted against the palely glowing sky. Dry lightning tonight - silent and sickly yellow - flaring at rapid intervals behind heavy clouds. Down the slope before him was a wide, ashy plain dotted with barren trees. Figures - vehicles - were scattered among them.

A large, wheeled cart sat askew the rudimentary track, shrouded in fire-licked velvet drapes that looked like they had been salvaged from some old theatre. The cart was barred - tall - and a dim memory flitted across Spike's mind, of a childhood trip to Berlin and a traveling circus - a wheat-gold lion pacing behind the bars of just such a cart.

Bodies were scattered across the plain; five, nine - twelve. From the gaudy debris tossed around it looked to be the remains of a traveling show - jugglers and fire-eaters and some attraction, locked in the cart. Four figures - human-demon hybrids, from the look of them - were crouched around a fire, bickering over a roasting haunch of meat. The draft-animals - they looked like

heavy horses - lay dead in the broken shafts of the cart, clumsily hacked to bits for the meal. Spike leaned there, watching the hybrids and wondering if he should plot a course that would avoid the scene or go straight through. The cramp of hunger in his belly argued for straight through. He squinted as a sudden breeze coasted up the rise, raising ash. It also stirred a piece of paler cloth that was draped over the cart, unfurling it - smoothing it. There were words painted on it - poorly lettered in drippy, blood-red paint. '*COME and SEE the LAST REEMANING PUR-BLOODED HUMAN on EARTH!!!*' He snorted softly - reached up absently and stroked his right bicep and the three parallel lines that ran down it.

*Stupid fucks - there **are** no humans - Illyria saw to that...*

The rain has slacked to almost nothing and Spike can sense the sun somewhere left and behind him, getting close to the horizon. Not that it matters; the sky is like a cracked egg - sulphur-yellow and black, sparkling with energies and magic, roiling with thick, low clouds. Starless. A void. Spike crouches in a doorway, his body tattered - bloodied. Gunn lays beside him, an awkward tangle of already-stiffening limbs and congealing

blood, the faint stench of corruption wisping up to Spike's nose no matter how he tries to avoid it. His smokes are gone - too sodden and squashed to be saved - and he craves a cigarette more at that moment than he has in a hundred years. Ten minutes ago there had been a god's awful explosion and Spike supposes he should go check it out, but...he is so fucking **tired**. From out of nowhere Illyria drops to the pavement, crouching for a moment and then standing smoothly.

"The portal which brought the demon horde has twisted. It is no longer stable. A moment ago it expanded by five times and destroyed the lair of the Wolf, Ram and Hart." She stares down at him with that peculiar, intense gaze that by turns reminds him of a snake and Dru's dolls. Neither is a happy image, and when Illyria speaks again she turns to look at the sky, something - new - in her expression. "They have been consumed by their own hubris - shown their place in the universe."

"Hoisted by their own petard," Spike mutters and Illyria once again fixes her unblinking cobalt eyes on him, rain like mercury beading on her blue-dusted face and running over her armor.

"Yes." Illyria lifts her arms, studying herself. "Wesley pushed my power - my **self** - into a pocket. Into a dead end. What the Wolf, Ram and Hart have done have...fractured it." Spike hears her, but his brain simply won't process what she's saying until blue-white light begins to glow around her - until her face and body begin to fracture and split, and suddenly the body - **Fred** - is cracking and splitting away like the carapace of a beetle; like a cocoon - and **Illyria** is emerging. Imago, ready for the world. She is **growing** - she is becoming - and she is pulling matter from everything around her. She is surrounded by a swirling storm of dissolving concrete; steel, glass and the carcasses of demons, mutating and growing and Illyria - God-King - is standing astride the street, fifteen feet taller or more, surrounded by a nimbus of blue-black light. Sparks and flares of electricity crackle around her - a corona of light and energy - and she turns wide, search-light eyes down and down onto Spike, who can only huddle there, gaping at her. Invisible winds lift her hair and stir the sodden trash of the gutter and when she speaks her voice is the screaming of a hundred-thousand lost souls - the breaking of every binding that was ever laid on her. For whatever reason - a reason Spike will never know - she has retained the shape and features of a Texas girl named Winifred.

"Humans have corrupted this place for too long. They have become a parasite - an infection." She crouches, so that she is only a few feet above Spike, and the hand that reaches for him is as cold as space and as caustic as Holy water and Spike cries out, flinching back. His shirt is smoldering where she laid her palm and the skin underneath is cracked and bubbled - marred for eternity, although he doesn't know that yet. "I will cure this place. I will build my kingdom anew - wake my brothers and sisters and we will scour the universe clean! A plague to kill a plague..." **Something** spirals out of her mouth then - some sickly blue-white glitter that expands through the air like dust - that thins and fades and leaves a sheen on every surface. Spike will see it for months, no matter how far he goes. Illyria's virus, made to kill humans. And it works, because there are no humans left. There is no immunity. Spike sees his first changed human a week later: a woman writhing in the grip of the plague, her body metamorphosing before his eyes. He can smell her humanity and then he **can't**, and something like a bundle of bleached bone and ragged skin gets up and walks away a moment later. It's two more weeks and poor meals of half-rotten blood before he discovers that he can eat - and survive nicely - on hybrid blood.

And he takes a lock of hair from Fred's discarded shell, and he takes the shattered fragment of a stake that is still clutched in Gunn's hand and he goes back into the maelstrom of the portal - back to the Alpha and Omega of the destruction of the world. Searching for Angel.

Spike shook his head, snarling softly. Banishing the past. He shrugged his pack off and laid it below the crest of the rise - shuffled ash over it, just in case. Then he rose and staggered pell-mell down the slope, letting his legs tangle and trip him up, letting himself fall into a heap at the bottom, one leg bent beneath him. The hybrids had seen him - had risen up and darted forward and were now circling at a minimum distance, watching. They were humans that had been stretched tall and thin by the plague - spurs of bone had grown out through ash-grey skin, curving up from wrists and ankles, elbows and knees, shoulders and skulls. Their teeth had grown out - grown through their cheeks. They were blood-stained - filthy - dressed in rags, and sickly green-yellow eyes winked and glared from behind strings of matted, colorless hair.

"*Amm-iiiiirrr*," one lisped, hissing, and Spike looked up at them, panting.

"Starvin', mates. Spare me one of those dead, yeah? Just wanna - get to the city."

"*lii-sing eeet*," another said, '*Living meat*', and Spike snarled at that, glaring up at them, his body tense. Waiting. They attacked. At the same moment he pushed *up*, hands coming up from his boots, knife in each fist. His left hand flashed across a belly, opening it and the hooked tip of the knife dragging out the viscera in a glittering skein. His right-hand knife scored across a chest and bit deep into a bicep, jarring off the bone. He jerked both hands in close and spun, kicking. The steel toe of his left boot slammed into a temple and the bone made a popping, cracking sound as it collapsed. A spur raked across his back, and he snarled - spun.

One down for sure, Spike thought, as another spur hooked his thigh and sliced him open. Even though the long bone shards were sharp as razors the hybrids were still just altered humans; they didn't have the experience Spike did, or the will. The hunger had driven him hard for the last three days, and his demon was howling for

blood.

The eviscerated hybrid was down, clutching its belly, shrieking. Another was wailing, its arm hanging useless. But it still dove in over the body of the hybrid Spike had kicked, and Spike slammed both knives into its chest - ripped them across and out and the thing went down, mewling, its lungs whistling as they emptied and collapsed. The fourth, still untouched, shuffled sideways - broke and ran and Spike leapt after it - brought it down in a puff of ash. He drove both knives into its back on either side of its spine and as it arched and screamed he bit. The blood was peppery - hot - full of vitality and magic and the burnt-bone rasp of Illyria's plague. He drained every drop - turned to survey the others. The one lay dead, chest oddly flattened from the broken bones and ruined lungs. Near it, the eviscerated hybrid was twisting slowly in the ash, trying with feebly plucking fingers to pull its intestines back inside. Spike yanked his knives free - pushed himself upright and staggered, his wounded leg buckling. He stood still for a moment, regaining his balance and then moved to the gutted hybrid and drank it down. His leg throbbed - his back did - but he could feel the tingling blood moving through his body and saturating his cells, revitalizing him. He knew he would be healed in an hour or so. He wiped his knives

carefully on the rag slung around the waist of the hybrid whose skull he had crushed - sheathed them and then cocked his head, listening. The hybrid's heart was still beating; staccato flutter, like a sparrow's wings. Fresh food for the next day, if it lasted that long. He carefully lifted the unconscious hybrid and carried it back to the fire. And discovered how these four relatively inexperienced beings had taken out so many others. Two semi-automatic rifles were propped up against the cart, loaded and gleaming.

Those will fetch a pretty penny, Spike gloated. He went back for the other corpses and dragged them in close to the butchered carcasses of the horses - drained the last dead one.

Sated - in need of sleep - he eyed the cart. If he could get into it - if he sun-proofed it - it would be the ideal place to sleep and heal. He limped slowly back up the hill and gathered his pack - went slowly back down, pausing to turn over a corpse of one of the troupe. It was still fairly pliant and Spike figured they'd only been dead a couple of hours - not enough time for the hybrids to take stock. All the better for him, he thought as he looted through the three hand-carts that troupe members had been dragging. Clothing and costumes, make-up and trinkets,

show props and a rusted axe - a dilapidated cross-bow. And a bottle of good whiskey, a pill-bottle of what looked like Demerol and another of something like Valium, and a large clear-glass vial that he sniffed carefully. *Aqua Somnium* - Dream Water. The demon equivalent of heroin. A hypodermic was taped to the side of it, short needle capped; the whole works clean but obviously used.

Oh lovely, lovely, lovely, Spike thought, dumping smeary makeup from a small zippered case and tucking the drugs carefully away - patting the whiskey bottle with a gleeful smile. His luck was turning. There was no indication that the sky was clearing - no break to show the sun was rising or setting - and Spike stood for a moment, groping for the sun-sense that had served him for so long. It was weak - a bit fuzzy - but he was sure sunrise was two or three hours away. Plenty of time to fix up the cart on the slim chance that actual sunlight would shine down anytime soon.

He snatched the '*Last Reemaning Pur-Blooded Human*' banner up and crumpled it, irritated beyond sense by the thing. For a moment he contemplated burning it, but the stiff canvas and thick paint would send up a column of black smoke and he didn't want to draw that much

attention to himself. Instead, he shoved it under the cart and then checked both ends of the cart for a door of some sort. The far end - opposite the dead horses - had a small door and he tried it carefully. Unlocked. He pulled a knife free from his boot and held it at the ready - yanked the door open and sprang back a step. Nothing stirred. He could smell - something. A dry, sickly smell, as if whatever had been housed in the cart was still there, and failing. Firelight coming in under the half-charred drapes made deep shadow and stark bars of light over the interior of the cart and he scanned it carefully, looking for whatever had been caged there. None of the dead scattered around him had been human enough to be the 'last pure human'. He'd seen such a claim a handful of times in the nearly seventeen months since Illyria had let loose her plague. Always they were vampires tortured into never changing or hybrids with the 'wrong' bits removed with clumsy surgery. Never real - never *human*.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Spike sing-songed, stepping carefully up into musty straw; seeing rags and empty, crushed water bottles and what looked like a length of chain, snaking away to the far front corner. "C'mon, little beastie, where are you?" he asked under his breath, and crept closer. The chain twitched and Spike froze - *listened* - and over the popping of the

bone-dry wood in the fire he could hear it. A heartbeat going too fast and lungs working in a jerky, wheezing way. Wet-sounding and unhealthy.

Spike shifted the knife in his hand - crouched a little and walked slowly forward. Finally saw something. A lump wrapped in ratty quilts that moved with the slow breathing. Spike reached out, and with the tip of the knife he carefully dragged the quilts down, exposing a naked, vampire-pale back and the sharp knobs of a curled spine; ribs and shoulder-blades pushing up against dirty, bruise-mottled skin. Thin arms around bony knees and ragged, filthy nails digging into muscle wasted but not all gone. Shivers wracked the thin frame, over and over.

Spike leaned back, listening again. "I know you're awake. Sit up and let me see you. Need to know you don't have any weapons." Nothing; just that heartbeat that skipped and pounded and was making Spike want to *pounce*. "Listen, mate - you show me you're not armed and you behave and I'll let you loose before I leave here, yeah?" Still nothing, and Spike wondered if the other - man, if the glimpse of flesh between clamped thighs was anything to go by - was too sick to move.

"Gonna turn you over now. Don't try anything 'cause I *am* armed and I'll take your bloody throat out, got me?" Nothing, nothing, *nothing* and Spike finally reached out, at the limit of his reach, and took the trembling shoulder in his hand - pulled gently. The man resisted for a moment and then moved - rolled - legs and arms staying curled and tucked, and now Spike could see his head. Chin down to heaving chest, several days' worth of stubble and a skull covered in an inch of cropped hair. Dark hair, dark, thick eyebrows - sunken hollow where the left eye should be and the right eye staring at him, fixed and wild. Dark, dark brown.

"Fuck. Me. Harris?"

Part Two

Spike cursed softly under his breath - looked around at the huddled form by the fire and cursed again. *Xander fucking Harris! Here, now... Fuck, fuck, fuck!* The shivering, blanket-swaddled figure dredged up memories

- too damn *many* memories - and Spike was having trouble pushing them back down. Sunnydale, Dru, Buffy - the Niblet. Demon-girl and the witches and even old Rupert. All of whom were dead now, or altered beyond recognition. Except for Xander, who seemed...

*What if he **is** the last human? God - not possible... But he's the **same** - just the same.* Spike struggled with the ratty quilts that had made a sleeping nest in the cart, doing his best to sun-proof the unwieldy vehicle. It was a hassle, but he took no chances, now - he'd lost his duster to this new and unpredictable sky. The cloud-cover had broken for the first time in weeks and he'd been caught out - huddling in a little trader-tent, too far from his bolt-hole to run and the trader wanting to dismantle and move on. He'd traded his duster for the thin, silver camping blanket, letting the length of leather and memory go with a sick feeling in his gut and his jaw clamped so hard he thought his teeth might crack. He'd never let himself get into that sort of position again, but the damage was already done. The sting of that...still hurt.

Just a sodding coat. Let it go. Things to do, here. Xander hadn't tried to run - had barely moved, his single eye rolling in panic as Spike had gathered him up and half-

carried him out of the cart - gotten him settled in scavenged blankets that the hybrids hadn't yet ruined. His skin had been hot and tight to Spike's touch and he couldn't be *sure* but Xander seemed fevered. *Not sweating, though, and that's not good. Damn it, Harris - fuckin' pain in my ass...*

There was a fairly large cache of bottled water in a cupboard under the driver's seat of the cart and Spike had checked it carefully, finding bottles and bottles of sealed Evian and Dasani. Stuff like that - was easy to come by. Demons didn't much care for 'human' things when it came to food or drink - well, unless it was alcohol. And since Illyria, there had been plenty of some things. A lot of humans, it seemed, hadn't survived the changes. Spike had walked around what was left of Denver rather than go in - from two miles out the stench of death had been overwhelming. It was easy to scavenge, in the mostly-empty cities - there was no competition.

Spike put two water bottles next to Xander - watched a thin and shaking hand fumble one up and then struggle with the cap. With a small snarl of annoyance he snatched it away and cracked the seal himself. "Bloody hell, Harris - you really are a mess."

Xander took the bottle - took a long drink and then looked up at Spike, his gaze going over and over Spike's face. "Sss...pike," he said - whispered, really. Raw, ruined voice coming out of cracked lips and Spike winced. "That...you?" Xander looked - uncertain. Made a gesture with his fingers towards Spike's face.

"Course it's me, Harris - who else?"

"N-not...shh-ure," Harris whispered, and Spike had to think about it for a minute, just staring at the man. Then it hit him. His *face*... He did that little, internal shift - the minute tightening of - *something*. Wearing the human face again after so long felt...odd. But as the demon sank away Xander's own expression relaxed - a bit of the wildness went out of his gaze and Spike realized Xander hadn't been sure - *really* sure - that the vampire who'd hauled him out of the cage had been the one he *knew*. The one who'd...

Died. I died and that's all they ever knew... "Yeah, s'me, mate - in the flesh." Spike touched the water bottle - urged it upward and Xander took another drink. "Died, came back, almost died again. And now here I am with the last bloody Scooby on the planet." The mostly-blank

expression on Xander's face curdled at that and he turned his head away, staring at the fire. Spike wanted to shake him. *Would* have, if Xander hadn't been shaking so hard already.

"I've got to finish this," he said, gesturing to the cart. "Drink that." He stood up abruptly and stalked off and it wasn't until he had been rigging the sun-proofing for ten minutes that he realized Xander had been crying. *Bloody...hell. No point in that. Not anymore.* It made him angry for some reason, to see the man grieving for something he should have put away months and months ago and when he heard the first noises - a sort of mewling cry - he ignored it, not in the mood to comfort anyone. But the sound went on - gained a note of desperation and Spike finally swung down off the roof of the cart and stalked over to the man.

"What the fuck, Harris?" he snapped, but Xander was oblivious to him - was straining in some sort of fit, back arching impossibly hard, his teeth locked shut and his lip bleeding. The water bottle was crushed in his hand and the blankets had been flung away,

"Bloody *fucking* hell..." Spike pulled the straining body to him, not sure *what* to do but not wanting the man to roll

into the fire. *Now* Xander was sweating - a rank, heavy sweat that had a sickly-sweet undertone. An elbow thumped into the gash on Spike's thigh and he hissed and shifted, flashing back to the demon's face and wrapping his arms tightly around Xander's thrashing body. He tilted his head a little and touched the tip of his tongue to Xander's forehead. The taste of the man's sweat - salt, sickness, licorice - exploded across his tongue and he grimaced and spat. *Gave him the fucking Water, god damnit - Aqua Somnium* might be a pleasant little trip into a surreal dream-land for most demons and vampires, but for humans it had side-effects. Sometimes deadly ones. *But he didn't change, so maybe he was part demon to begin with or...no, **couldn't** be, but...fuck! What to do...*

"Harris - hey - you in there? Harris? Wake up, now, mate - c'mon, Harris - *Harris* -" The convulsions were easing off slowly; reducing themselves in intensity until Xander suddenly went limp in Spike's arms, gasping. A thin line of blood trailed down from his nose and after a moment he wiped shakily at it - made a strange sort of grimace that Spike realized was an attempt at a smile. His left front tooth had got chipped, somehow.

"Rusty pipes," he croaked, and Spike picked up the other

water bottle - wrestled Harris into a more upright position, propping him between his knees and pulling the sweat-slick, overheated body back against his chest. He opened the bottle and held it up to Xander's mouth.

"C'mon and drink, damnit. Why're you takin' that shite, Harris?" Xander drank clumsily, water spilling out of his mouth and washing blood down over his chin - his throat. It stank of rotting tin and licorice and the demon in Spike recoiled, *unhealthy unhealthy unhealthy*. "Turnin' your blood to sludge - no vamp in his right mind'd drink from you now."

"Gu-guess I'm sssafe from you then," Xander mumbled - took another drink and leaned his head back onto Spike's shoulder. "Not - taking it. They -" He stopped - coughed - and his fingers twitched, out and around, indicating the bodies and the scattered debris. "Gave it - t-to me. Sso..." His voice trailed off and Spike shook him slightly.

"Harris. Wake up. Finish what you were sayin', yeah? *Harris*." Xander jerked - lifted his head fractionally and then let it fall back again, *thump*, onto Spike's shoulder.

"So I'd be - g-good. Be good...b-boy, hu-human..." The talk seemed to have exhausted him and he fell silent

again - went limp, his too-wet breathing lengthening to a sleeping rhythm in a few minutes.

Bloody...buggering...fucking...hell. Used it to keep him from causing them any trouble. Fuck. How long? "Harris - how long you been on this junk? Harris?" He shook the man gently but Xander was well and truly out. Spike stretched over for the blankets, getting one laid out on the ashy ground and easing Harris over on to it - tucking the other up around him. He paused for a moment, gaze tracing over the network of scars that seamed Xander's body. The firelight picked them out, silver against his pallor. Looked like he'd been lashed - looked like he'd broken a bone or two - been stabbed or cut, somehow. Scar on his jaw, too, and a small hump to the bone there that Spike had to touch to be sure of.

*Broke his jaw - broke his collarbone - what else? Boy - **man** - has been through some rough times. Can't have **all** been from these tossers...* Spike finished tucking the blanket up - hesitated for a long moment and then ran his fingers through Xander's cropped hair. It was thick with sweat and dirt and he felt a lump there, too, over Xander's right ear. But it felt nice, to trace the shape of Xander's skull. To feel the heat of him, even if it was just fever-heat. Spike hadn't been with anyone for so long.

Had only touched in violence for...months. Nearly a year.
The last time...

"Just shut up," Spike grits, eyes shut and hips moving; filling his nose and mouth with the thick, briny air and fug of tallow candles. Trying not to smell the sex-smell of the body beneath him - the stink of too many others. He just wants the release - the loosening of unbearable tensions. Nothing to do with warmth, or softness...nothing to do with memory so degraded that it's like a bad Kinescope - all warped out of true and fuzzy; stop-motion jerky and starting to burn out. The whore obligingly stops its low crooning and shifts on the bed, ass a little higher in the air and Spike's fingers sink into the tumble of rough blankets and wash-worn sheets, shredding them as he comes. "Just shut up," he whispers, and pulls away.

Two CD's - Cher and Cypress Hill, both relatively scratch-free - got him a half-hour with the whore. Human enough to be appealing, demon enough to bear up under his strength.

Spike gets up and washes in the bowl of lukewarm

seawater that stands on a hard little chair near the door. The whore rolls onto its back and chirrup something at him, dolphin-squeak made low and slow. It sounds vaguely like words but not really and Spike doesn't bother to interpret. Its skin is silvery blue-grey and its legs join at the knees, flattening and fanning out into something very like an oversized seal-flipper. Ariels, they're called. Webbed hands, gill-slits in the neck and filmy clouds of white-silver hair. Pretty, if you care. Spike doesn't.

He shoulders his pack and leaves without a word, walking carefully on the bobbing deck of the whorehouse. His traded Cher CD is playing on some sort of rigged system, tinny and unpleasant. What he really **wants**, more than anything, is a bottle or two of good whiskey and a quiet space to sit and drink - to get **drunk** and just forget, for awhile. But whiskey from the Before is scarce and he doesn't have enough trade to get any, at least not here. He walks up and away from the docks - walks through the streets of Seattle, contemplating his next move. He's heard rumors that the east coast wasn't hit as hard - heard rumors that there are ships plying the depths, making the crossing. He thinks he might go back to England for a while. The faint pull that whispers 'Dru' has faded in the last six

months and he thinks she might be there. Finding her is as good a goal as any other. By sunset he's on his way, striding east, leaving the west and its failures behind him.

Spike blinked, coming back to himself slowly, his hand still moving stiltedly through Xander's hair. He didn't...want to move, the heat of the fire felt so good on his skin. It was always cold, now; the sun behind the clouds so often that there didn't seem to be any warmth left in the world. After a moment he shook himself - made himself get up and finish with the quilts and move the rest of the water-cache into the cart. Just in case. The hybrid with the cracked skull was still breathing and Spike pulled the chain and manacles that had been fastened around Xander's ankles through the bars and locked it up. *Wouldn't do, to have my breakfast stumbling off into the wild. Or gutting us in our sleep.*

Done and satisfied that the cart was ready, Spike got out his sleeping bag and set a knife ready under the attached pillow - went back to the fire and carefully gathered up the human's sleeping form. Xander was light - too light - and his head lolled in something closer to

unconsciousness as Spike maneuvered him through the door and into place. Then he wedged a hunk of wood into the door frame, pressing hard with all his strength. It would take something damn strong - or a battering ram - to get that door open in a hurry. He looked around, running a mental checklist. Making sure of things before he gave in and *slept*, and let his body heal. The cut across his back felt shallow but it had bled freely and now his shirt was stuck to him, pulling uncomfortably on the edges of the wound. With a grimace he pulled it off and balled it up - lobbed it through the bars and into the fire. Then he lay down facing Xander - watching Xander's chest rise - hitch - fall. Listening to the heart-beat that was a little too fast - a little uneven.

Got to get him somewhere... Get him to the city. Rumor says there's a sizeable community there...might be a magic-user or two. Might be a healer... He mentally catalogued the trade-goods he had and the ones he'd acquired. Rich, but maybe not rich enough. *Fucking white-hats, always making things difficult. Always trippin' me up.* He glared for a moment at Xander's slack, thin face - reached out and used his thumb to wipe away a smear of dirt. *Can't seem to get away from them. Can't seem to...resist them. Bastards.* Then he curled up and drifted to sleep, lulled by the almost-familiar heartbeat

of someone he'd thought dead and gone. *Makes two of us, Harris, who've survived this mess. Don't give up now.*

Part Three

The city was like most cities these days; an expanse of blasted concrete and twisted metal - shattered glass. The dragon that Angel had wanted to kill hadn't been the only one, and they had laid Biblical waste for months until they had all died. Seems 'Earth' germs were fairly fatal. Spike studied the remains of a dragon that had died just outside the city - long bones scavenged for building materials, the skull mounted high on a fire-warped pylon. Its empty sockets seemed to watch him, and Spike sneered up at it, his hand touching his chest once - reflex. Then it dropped back down to the shaft of the hand-cart he was pulling. Cart with trade-goods hidden in the bottom, underneath Xander's shivering, quilt-wrapped form. A Xander who hadn't spoken again in two days - was barely conscious - and was making Spike by turns pissed off and anxious. He didn't *want* a patient - didn't

want to have some half-dead junkie *not his fault - he didn't ask for that shite* - on his hands. In his life. *What the fuck else are you gonna do? Better than looking for a book or a sodding bottle of whiskey - better than... Stupid fucking white-hats. How'd he manage to get in with a group like that? If he had half a brain he'd have...have...*

But what Xander should have done - *could* have done - was pushed aside as the city loomed closer and make-shift gates came into view. Some idling demons - streams of more going in and out. Nothing as formal as guards and watches and check-lists, Spike was sure, but there would be some small hassle. There always was. He stopped in a small hollow in the road, mostly concealed by a stand of scrubby cedar. Rearranged some things and shoved his pack down under Harris - pocketed a few small things. Bribes, if he needed. He slid an extra knife into his waist - made sure of the ones in his boots and then tugged the quilt back from Harris' face a little. His gaunt, ashen features and empty socket - filthy skin - made him seem a worthless prospect, and hopefully Spike could ditch any trouble-makers by playing the desperate lover. Look like you have nothing, and mostly they'd leave you be. His own ash and blood-spattered self was certain to look less than promising.

The empty cities provided more than enough loot for most. And he couldn't fight with Harris there - helpless and worthless to protect Spike's things. He sighed and pushed his hand back through his hair - grimaced at the ash-clogged tangle. First thing when they found a room would be a bath. He gripped the rag-wrapped shafts of poorly turned wood and tugged the hand-cart into motion, approaching the 'gates' slowly.

"Hey, hey, whatcha got? Whatcha got got got got?" Kee'l demons - thin and birdlike in a creepily reptilian way, with spiny proto-feathers and three-fingered feet and hands that ended in hooked claws. Bright, black eyes and lipless mouths and rows of needle-sharp teeth. They were like a flock of starlings - flock of fucking gulls - ready to descend and pick you to bits if they thought you had anything they wanted.

"Got sickness, here - can't you smell it?" Spike snapped, pushing through them and they circled and darted and backed away - came close again, chittering to each other.

"Got food got food got f-f-f-food," one said, and it came in too close, reaching for the cart - for Xander - for *something*. Spike stopped dead - snatched the creature back by the scruff of its neck, snapping a feather-spine

and growling. The Kee'l writhed, hissing - scrabbling at Spike's hand with its claws.

"*He's* not food, you tosser. Fuck off." Spike shoved it away hard - glared around at the rest who hopped from foot to foot - snaked their heads forward and back, forward and back. Bird-like - snake-like - land-bound piranha if they wanted to be.

"*Mine*," one said - the one with the broken feather and the others looked around wildly - took up the chant; hopping higher and starting to close in and Spike was uncomfortably reminded of that dinosaur movie with the little brats and the pretty, tough blonde.

"*Mine!*" "*Mine!*" "*Mine!*"

"*Shit*," Spike muttered. He looked around at the several hybrids and demons who were lounging against the remains of a building, watching with amusement or speculation. At others who seemed to be going into the city on business - pulling carts like his or driving bigger vehicles, trade-goods or food piled in the back. Nobody who seemed official, or who looked liked they'd care, one way or the other. *Right, then. See if this works.*

"Back the fuck *off!* I got food. Back off - I just wanna go in, you can have it." He took two steps back and put his hand down on the bundle of rags he'd deliberately placed at the top of the cart. Picked it up, cradling the contents carefully. Then with one powerful sweep of his arm, he hurled bundle and food high and *away*. The Kee'l froze, following with jerky motions of their heads as the rags went up and up. At the apex of the arch the flimsy thread holding it all together parted and the rags fluttered apart and jelly beans rained down on the unsuspecting lurkers below. The Kee'l shrieked - chorus of '*mine mine mine!*' - and pounced. Spike jerked the hand-cart into motion, grinning through his fangs as the lurkers bolted in all directions and the Kee'l leaped and grabbed, indiscriminate. The jelly beans had been stale, anyway, and Spike had already picked out all the red and purple - his favorite.

He all but trotted past the 'gates' - really just the torn-up railings from what looked like a private house, set aslant two lanes of pocked asphalt. Got past and *in* and into the crowds and slowed, breathing out a sigh of relief. No one had followed and soon he could park Xander in a room - find something that could *fix* the bastard and... *And then...the next thing. Whatever it is. He'll probably be making a bee-line for...something. Someplace else, once*

he's on his feet. Although what or where Xander Harris might have left to go to, Spike couldn't fathom. Spike glanced back at the man - idly noted respiration and heartbeat, and shrugged to himself. *If he ever gets back on 'em.* The thought that Xander might not recover was...troubling and Spike shook his head and trudged on.

One long, cleared street - like an arroyo between the gutted superstructures of the skyscrapers - led straight into the heart of the city; straight to the markets. Uncleared streets to Spike's left and right were two feet deep in razoring greenish shards of glass and here and there were bodies that had obviously been tossed into it as a sort of punishment - or torture. Most were dead. One whimpered, dark eyes pleading, but it wasn't anything Spike could eat and it was too far into the glass for him to make an effort. And he had things to do - medicine to find, and a place to sleep - a place with running water and privacy. Spike walked on, jumpy in the crush of demons around him. It had been a while since he'd been anyplace this big - this crowded. He couldn't keep track of everyone and for a moment he wanted to turn and leave. But Xander made some small noise and he shook his head and took in a hard breath. Dredged up the *'fuck you'* attitude that had gotten him across continents and through wars and lifted his head - strode

into the thick of it.

The city was roaring - wide open and thick with demons of every stripe. What had once been a park *Boston Common, that's what this is...* was where the main market had been set up. Some of the stalls were more or less permanent, having been constructed inside the surrounding buildings. Others were structures of hide and wood, or thatch and bamboo - rope and rags - whatever was to hand. In the odd, greyish twilight that could have been noon or midnight, oil-lamps and torches and cold-chemical lamps - even some antique carbide lamps - burned on poles and hung from hooks, casting wild tiger-stripping of light and dark over every surface. Spike made his way around the periphery of it all, looking for a place to stop. There were food stalls and stalls hawking weapons - cloth and beads and bones and herbs, books and CD players that might or might not work. Everything anybody might need, but no damn *bars* and no damn rooms. Frustrated, Spike stopped finally and leaned against a wall, resting - thinking. Checked absently on Xander who was fevered again and moving restlessly. Withdrawal, and some sort of sickness - 'flu or something.

A little kiosk opposite was selling *blini*, and tea from an

ancient and lovingly-tended samovar. Spike felt in his pockets - found the little pastilles tin that he'd put five of his Valium in and crossed to the kiosk, keeping a wary eye on Xander and the cart. The demon tending the samovar - it looked rather like a large rat in a turban and long overcoat - looked up at him as he approached, thin, clawed fingers clasped together over its breastbone.

"*Da?*" it said, and Spike gestured to the samovar - held up the cracked-open tin, showing the pills. The demon leaned in close, its elongated snout twitching toward the pills. Spike held up two fingers - gestured to the tea and *blini*. The demon tipped its head to one side, considering.

"*Chetirye,*" it said, holding up four fingers and Spike let his tongue travel contemplatively down one fang.

"*Tri*" he replied, three fingers up and the demon made a clicking sort of noise - finally nodded its head.

"*Sdelano. Done.*"

"*Sdelano.*" Spike carefully picked three pills out of the tin and held them while the demon siphoned tea - piled *blini* into a cone of old newspaper. Six in all, buckwheat pancakes rolled around a strip of what might be salmon

and what was most certainly *not* sour cream. But they smelled savory and good, and the steaming tea - in pottery cups that had the stamp of some hotel on them - got generous dollops each of dark-amber honey. Spike handed over the pills - juggled food and drinks for a moment and then went back to the hand-cart. He put the tea between his feet and ate three of the *blini*, savoring what turned out to be some sort of creamy, demonic roe and possibly tuna. Odd and good and he looked at the last three and sighed - tucked the newspaper around them and put them into the cart for later. For Xander. Picked up his tea and drank it slowly, relishing the thick, sweet heat. Then he traded empty cup for full and went around to where Xander's head lay cushioned on a bundle of rags.

"Harris - you in there? Wake up, Harris, and have some of this." Spike shook him - worked his hand under Xander's back and got him up a bit, Xander's head resting on his shoulder, skin hot and slick with sweat. Xander's eye fluttered open - tracked blearily around, then settled on Spike - widened slightly, and Spike cursed. He shook the demon away - lifted Xander a little higher.

"C'mon and drink this - s'good for you - got honey in it. C'mon, Harris." Xander licked cracked, peeling lips and

Spike put the cup to his mouth - tipped it carefully, carefully; feeding Xander the tea in tiny, separate mouthfuls until the cup was empty. Xander was panting by then - exhausted - and Spike put the empty cup down and used his thumb to gently wipe a trickle of tea off of Xander's lower lip.

"That was good, yeah? Good stuff, Harris."

"Go-oo..." Xander muttered, and then his eye closed, his breathing becoming longer and longer sighs and he was out again. Spike just crouched there for a moment, thumb brushing over Xander's lip and stubbled chin and then he gently lay Xander back down - pulled his arm free of Xander's body and tucked the quilts back up around his neck. The bubbling, hitching breaths continued and Spike picked up both cups and carried them back to the kiosk - handed them to the rat-demon who took them with a small bow.

"Sick?" it asked, looking across at Xander and Spike shook his head.

"Nothing catching. Dope," he added, and the demon nodded.

"Need a room - bath. You know anyplace?" The demon looked Spike up and down - reached out and touched the collar of the shirt Spike had shrugged on before the day's walk had begun. Something from the troupe - moiré-patterned silk in deep blue. Ashy and wrinkled, but still soft. The demon rubbed the fabric between his clawed finger-tips and Spike nodded shortly - stripped the shirt off and held it up, standing in a black t-shirt that was fading to washed-out grey.

"*Da. U prichala.* Rooms there."

"*Prichala?*" Spike asked, his sketchy Russian failing him.

"*Da, da* - docks - the Dens. *Na vostok.*" The demon gestured east, nodding, and Spike handed the shirt over with a tiny bow - walked back over to the cart and touched his fingertips to Xander's forehead.

"Got us a place, Harris. Be there soon. Bath an' all, yeah? It'll be nice. Here we go." Spike gripped the shafts again and pulled, glad to have a place to go - glad to get out of the crowds for a while. *Getting to be as much of a hermit as the old man - be lurkin' in the shadows and brooding, next. Fuckin' bastard. Fucking...Angel...*

The Wolfram and Hart building is flattened - is a ruin the likes of which Spike's only seen once before; when London was bombed and demon and human alike cowered in the tunnels, waiting for the all-clear to sound. A dragon perches atop a tangled heap of steel girders and slagged concrete. It lifts its head and peers left and right - oddly birdlike for all its size. The rain steams off of it, as if the fire it breathes heats its whole body to unnatural temperatures. Something - is in its claws. Spike stares and then he starts to climb, because the tiny figure is **Angel**, and he's moving. Spike doesn't know what he's going to do when he reaches the dragon - if he's seen, he'll be plucked up and rent limb from limb, or worse. But he can't **not** - can't wait to see if it will let Angel go or if Angel will get free, somehow. The dragon tilts its head back and roars and there is an answering roar from somewhere above it. Spike cringes on the slope of smoking wreckage, looking up. A second dragon, circling far overhead and the near one suddenly crouches - leaps into the air with a snap of its wings like a whip. Downdraft hard enough to knock Spike off his feet and Angel goes tumbling - falling - sliding into a rent in the shattered building and disappearing. With a cry of

frustration and rage Spike staggers to his feet, slipping in the streams of dirty water that sheet over concrete and steel.

Clawing and climbing and sliding - leaping finally into the gap in the rubble and falling far - landing next to Angel with a grunt, limbs shaking from exhaustion and pain. His chest is on fire from Illyria's burning touch and his shirt sticks and pulls and **hurts**. He shreds it - rips it open and then crouches next to Angel, squinting in the uncertain light. Angel is... More than broken. Half of him is simply not **there**... Spine and shattered pelvis gleaming sickly white in the gloom - truncated body at an odd angle across a beam and Spike knows that even if he could survive his legs being torn away, Angel's spine is smashed. Perhaps beyond repair. Spike feels a wave of sick, helpless fury wash over him and then he is pulling Angel closer - cradling him tight to his own wounded chest - ignoring the pain of Angel's scarred coat scraping the burn open - making it bleed.

"Wanted to - k-kill the dragon," Angel gasps out, and Spike wraps his arms around the mangled, shaking figure and croons some nonsense at him - some ignorant, useless shite and Angel laughs - chokes - gasps in agony. A sluggish trickle of blood soaks the

legs of Spike's jeans and Spike knows Angel is bleeding out - is **done**, fucking done, oh god **help me**... And then Angel lifts his arm and his hand is slipping into Spike's hair - tugging him weakly, insistently down. His mouth is on Spike's mouth, colder than ice and slick with blood. Kissing him, breathing in jerky gasps between kisses.

"Always - I-loved -" Angel murmurs, and then he's sinking - falling - coming to pieces in Spike's hands - under his lips - and Spike can **taste** the salt-iron ash in his mouth. Can feel it in his eyes and nose and all over his skin and he can't drink it away or cry it away or **scrub** it away, though he tries. It's not until much later that he notices that Angel's dust has got into the wound on his chest - has left something like a tiger's paw-print there, iron-grey-black. The same day he finally notices is the day he takes Gunn's stake and the lock of Fred's hair and the piece of screwed-up notebook paper that he found - paper covered in Wesley's scratchy penmanship - and burns them. Burns them to ash in the hub-cap of a wrecked car and slashes his right bicep - three long slashes, one for each of the friends that he lost. Rubs the ash in, deep as he can. The only memorial he knows to make for

the last heroes of the world.

Part Four

Spike suddenly realized that he'd *stopped*. Stopped dead in the street and was standing there, head bowed. Taking in hard, shaking breaths as that memory washed through him - taste in his mouth like vinegar and wormwood. The crowd streamed around him and he blinked and got moving again with a jerk, the cart wobbling behind him and pulling at strained, tired muscles and he very nearly let it go. Very nearly abandoned Xander in the middle of this nightmare version of Boston Common and walked on.

Very nearly, but not quite. He gripped the wood so hard that it hurt, and he *walked*, the demon's face snarling in rigid ferocity while behind it he tried to get a grip on himself.

Past is gone. What's done is done. No sense in dwelling on it...no sense in letting it...hurt. But it *did* hurt. It always surprised him, that hurt, and he cursed himself silently. Near the edge of the market he stopped again when a certain stall beckoned. A rusted Altoids tin full of old

carbon-film resistors got him half a carton of Lucky Strikes and a re-fill on his Zippo and he resumed his journey feeling slightly better, the prospect of a smoke when he'd got them a room lifting his mood. He hadn't had a smoke in...nearly a month. The Rust Belt had been picked clean.

Boston Bay rose up on the horizon - steel-blue and rolling with waves under the lowering sky and Spike stood at the top of a small hill, looking down at the bobbing patchwork of the Dens. Everything from one-person house-boats to three huge cruise liners bobbed on the trash-speckled surface. Existing docks had been extended - roofed and added to until they were two and three stories above the water. The cruise liners were connected with an intricate webbing of rope and wood; trestles and platforms and swinging bridges. And everywhere - like a huge, weird Christmas tree - were lights. *Electric* lights and music and Spike could see - far out on the Bay - some sort of structure. Tidal generators, maybe. Someone was using the ocean's waves to make electricity and the prospect of a hot bath made Spike shiver in sensual anticipation.

"We got lucky, Harris. Now you just stay quiet and don't muck this up," he added, glancing back at the cart with a

fangy grin. Xander's eyes were closed - he was mostly unconscious again - and Spike just shook his head, his momentary good mood lost. "Bloody thorn in my side, you are," he muttered, and went down the hill to the water, doing his best to judge which boat he should pick.

In the end it was one of the cruise ships, which appeared to be a combination casino and hotel. A Pollch demon was manning the gang-way taking payment of one kind or another and Spike had something he knew the magically inclined demon couldn't resist. Two large vamps, male and female, stood stiffly behind the squatty Pollch, going for silent but deadly and Spike nearly laughed in their faces. Instead he reached carefully into the cart, removing a suede-wrapped bundle and unwrapping it slowly.

He had a rod of watermelon tourmaline that he'd unearthed in an abandoned rock shop; the length of his hand, as thick around as his two thumbs and so purely pink and green that it looked like hard-sugar candy. The Pollch gulped air and swelled and made little, twitchy grabs with its webbed hands as the crystal sparked in the halogen spot mounted over the gangway, and Spike knew he could ask for almost anything.

He got a suite high above the waterline with a balcony and its own bath. Got it for a fortnight with unlimited water. The Pollch fairly shook as it handed over the key and Spike finally let the tourmaline over into its hands. Spike took the shafts of the cart up again and pulled it slowly up the gangway - followed scuffed signs down halls whose carpet had been shredded to his room. ***Our room. Hope he doesn't die. Hell of a way to show his gratitude...***

The lock was stiff and he had to fight it but once inside there was a deadbolt and a chain and for the first time since he'd found Harris Spike felt like he could relax. He left the cart by the door and looked around. The carpet here was in marginally better shape - the linens on the bed musty but clean. The balcony looked out over the boat-clogged Bay but it was at least two hundred feet from the surface and near the bow, so that the curve of the ship's prow would make climbing fairly difficult.

Spike shut the doors and drew the curtains - flicked on the single lamp that stood in the corner and blinked in the glow of incandescent light. ***Fuck. Been so long...been too long when a fuckin' lightbulb seems like... Seems like a miracle.*** It *did* seem like a miracle, and Spike stood for a moment just staring, remembering the first time he'd

ever seen electric lights - a shop somewhere in London. '*Just a gimmick,*' Angelus had said, disliking the harsh, unnatural glare. *Not the first time the old sod was wrong,* Spike thought. He shook himself, deliberately throwing off the mood - chasing the demon away so Harris would know it was *him*. If he ever woke up.

Bath'll wake him, Spike thought, and pulled his backpack out of the cart - dug through it until he found the packet of herbs he'd idly collected at a nursery some six weeks earlier. Pennyroyal and peppermint. Harris, he'd noticed, had some bugs. The bedding he was wrapped in would be tossed out the balcony when all was said and done, and Harris wasn't getting anywhere *near* the bed *or* Spike until he was clean. Spike dug out a bar of Ivory soap, too - his own personal soap and he huffed in annoyance at the thought of Harris' skin cells and hair getting on it. But then, soap was easy to find - most demons had no use for it.

Spike got water running in the bath and he could smell the salt in it, but it was faint. Probably even drinkable, although they wouldn't be doing that. Crushed the wizened sprigs of herbs between his palms and dropped them in the water, swishing his hand around to mix them - breathing deeply of the sharp, sweet mint odor. The oils

stung his sore palms and he reckoned there was enough of it in the water to kill the bugs Xander was inflicted with. He stripped off boots and worn jeans and the faded t-shirt, shivering a little in the steam. Then he stalked over to the cart and Harris and contemplated the limp form for a moment. He stripped away the ratty quilts and hauled Xander up and over his shoulder - carried him to the bath and stepped carefully in. He let Harris down onto his feet and turned him, holding the rag-doll body close. Harris was whimpering softly, his eyes half-open and glazed, his body shuddering. Fevered again, and Spike cursed under his breath and carefully lowered them both into the steaming water.

It was heaven - it was utter *bliss*. It was *heat*, surrounding every inch of him and penetrating his skin to soak into muscle and bone and Spike made a pleased sound - adjusted Xander's body so that the man lay between Spike's legs, his back to Spike's chest and his arms draped over his belly. Spike slid them down in the water until Xander's chin was just touching the surface and then he closed his eyes and just....drifted.

"So...Buffy gave you the amulet." Xander sits down on

the porch step next to Spike - holds out a beer. He has a soda in his other hand. Still taking pain-meds for his eye, and so isn't doing alcohol. Spike takes the beer and twists off the cap - takes a long drink.

"Yeah. She did." Spike holds it up, the chain tangled in his fingers. The gem glints in the orange-white light of the street-light. Dull yellow-gold. Ugly - heavy.

"When she told us about it, I was all 'yay!'... I figured Deadboy'd be doing the mystical mojo amulet thing."

"Nope, just me." Spike takes another drink of his beer and Xander sips his soda. "So you can still be all 'yay'," Spike adds, when Xander doesn't say anything.

"Yeah, well..." Xander drinks again - looks over at Spike, and there's something in his gaze. Some emotion - some darkness. "I'm not feelin' so yay about it, anymore," Xander says. "Aren't you...scared?"

Spike hides his surprise behind the distraction of lighting a cigarette - puffs for a moment, looking up at the stars that wheel and glimmer beyond the roof's edge. "I...dunno. Yeah. A little. But this is...the only way. I'm...the champion, now. Nobody else can do this.

It's....my destiny, I guess."

"Destiny-guy. That's...kinda cool, I guess." Xander says. Spike nods silently and they sit for a while longer, quiet. When Xander gets up to go back inside, his hand falls, warm and heavy, on Spike's shoulder. Squeezes gently. "Thanks, Spike," Xander murmurs, and then he's gone - back inside with his friends. With his family. Spike sits until nearly dawn, his shoulder warm under his t-shirt.

Spike twitched when Xander sat straight up, gasping. Jolted out his daydream and the water wasn't so hot, anymore. He pushed the memories away and grabbed Harris around the ribs, pulling him back as he flailed wildly, splashing.

"Harris - calm down! It's me - it's Spike! *Harris!*" The man kicked - twisted like an otter and got his face under the water and choked. Spike hauled him up and whacked him between the shoulder-blades and Xander coughed. His lungs rattled and wheezed and his ribs creaked and Spike hoped to god Xander wouldn't throw up - or stop breathing. After a bit the strangled coughing eased off

and Xander slumped against Spike, gasping for air.

"There now - you all right? Gonna live?" Spike asked. His hand had stopped trying to drive water out of Xander's lungs and instead was slowly stroking the water-warmed, fever-warmed skin - sliding over the prominent bumps of Xander's spine.

"Live," Xander echoed, rasping growl, and closed his eye; let his head hang down, nearly touching Spike's shoulder. Knees to his bony chest, one arm braced on the side of the tub, the other around bruised shins.

"That's good, then. C'mon and sit up. Gonna get the wildlife outta your hair and then get you to bed, yeah?" Xander looked up at him, eye bloodshot and gaze puzzled, and Spike just sighed and reached for the soap.

~*~*~*~*~

When they were both clean - it had taken two tub-fuls of water to get there - Spike got Xander up and out - got him bundled into a couple of towels from the little cabinet over the toilet and out into the bed. Talking to him the whole time because, after months of no

company, he found he had a need to talk. And it felt good not to be talking to *himself*. *That* tendency - had become a bit worrying.

Whatever moments of clarity had come in the tub - Xander had managed to wash his own face - were gone now as the fever returned full bore. Xander was shivering so hard he could barely walk and Spike tucked him under the covers and then sat for a minute, watching him. Xander's whole body convulsed with the spasms, and his teeth chattered, porcelain clatter that made Spike flinch. He sat naked on the edge of the bed, working a comb through hair he'd let grow long.

"Damnit, Harris. Why can't you just be kicking the fucking drug? You're gonna need aspirin and - something for those lungs." Spike stared at the shivering man and reached out to lay his hand flat to Xander's forehead. Xander whined and flinched away from the touch, so hot that Spike didn't even need actual contact to feel it. Spike tried to *think* - tried to remember when Dawn had been sick, or Joyce.

"Penicillin what you need, Harris? Or you one of those that gets sick from it? What else is there? Bloody fragile humans..." The thought that Xander might *not* be all

human anymore pricked at him, but he ignored it. Sighing, he got up and bundled the quilts together - took them to the balcony and stood for a moment at the rail. The sun was down it seemed, or getting there; the sky was darkening to a bruised, slatey green and the water was the deep, murky blue of clouded ink. The noises from the Dens - music and laughter, shrieks and yells - had doubled in volume and Spike could see demons and hybrids thronging over the docks and the ships. Gambling, drinking, whoring and fighting. Paradise, except that Spike was...fucking tired. He stepped back and hurled the infested, filthy bundle far out over the Bay - went back inside to wash his hands and get clean clothes. Jeans and boots and a long-sleeved tee with a chambray work shirt open over it. Dark, dull colors that attracted no attention, because he just wasn't in the mood for a fight. He tucked knives into various sheathes - lighter and cigarettes into a pocket. Cursing once again the loss of his duster.

Just find a fucking new one, you git, he told himself. But he'd been telling himself that for months, and he still didn't have one. Xander twisted uneasily under the blankets and Spike got two bottles of water and put them open on the night-table. He stood for another moment, looking down at Xander - tucked the blankets

more snugly around the sweating body.

"I'm going to go out, Harris. Find you some meds. And some better clothes and maybe some...soup or something." Spike turned to the cart, emptying the last of its contents onto the far side of the double bed - the guns, his pack, and a bundle of scavenged clothes and gee-gaws from the troupe. "No way to heat it, though... Maybe I can find one of those - camping stores. Get a little stove or something." He opened his pack and dug out a small chamois pouch. Inside were three dull-red crystals, strung on copper chains. Wards, that he'd spelled himself from a book he'd found in the ruins of an occult shop in Oklahoma City. They'd keep things out - keep his pack and Xander safe while he was gone. And as importantly, they'd keep Xander *in*. He pulled an old canvas book-bag from his pack, so he'd have something to haul his finds in.

Spike made sure of the locks on the balcony doors and wound the chain of one ward around the knobs, whispering the trigger that turned them 'on'. The crystal glowed for a moment and then faded from view. He repeated the simple spell at the door, putting the ward around the inner doorknob.

"Just a little warding spell, Harris - won't hurt you. Just won't let you open the door." He cast a last look at Xander and shook his head. "You don't look like you're going anywhere, anyway. I'll be back soon." He stepped out of the room - dragged the empty cart out with him and closed the door. The last ward went around the outside knob and then Spike grabbed the cart and went away down the corridors - down the gangway and back into the city, abandoning the cart on the docks. He needed to eat, and he needed a chemist's that wasn't too smashed or looted. *Need my head examined. Fucking Xander fucking Harris and here it is, same old same old. The Amazing Wind-Up Vampire! Give him a helpless loser and away he goes!* Spike snorted softly in self-disgust and slipped away into the city.

Part Five

"You lucked out, Harris!" Spike called, pushing open the door, the ward swinging from his fingers. But the bed

was empty - the blankets pulled half onto the floor - and there was the smell of blood in the air. *Christ!* "Harris?" Spike piled food and finds by the door - slammed it and locked it and dove for the bed. One water-bottle, empty and crushed on the floor, the other one on its side, mostly empty. The trailing edge of the sheet was soaked and Spike yanked the blankets back before they got wet, too. *Bathroom, then. What the fuck?*

Xander was huddled in the corner between tub and wall, arms tight around his shins and his head on his knees. There was blood all down the side of his face and trailing onto his neck - smeared on his hands and ribs and arms. He was still fevered and his whole body juddered and trembled with hard, cramping shivers. A low, breathy *sound* was coming out of him - words, but Spike couldn't understand them. After two days of silence Xander's voice was cracked and broken.

"Harris, you *git*, why didn't you stay in bed?" Spike crouched down in front of Xander and reached hesitantly for his arm - touched the sweat-slick, too-hot flesh and jerked away as Xander flinched and banged his opposite shoulder and arm into the tub.

"*Harris* -" Xander lifted his head - looked at Spike with a

dazed, too-wide eye - looked *through* him. His gasping, breathless voice was finally clear and Spike listened with growing dismay.

"Wo-won't do it a-g-g-gain, won't - won't - d-d-d - *P-Promise!* I prom-mmise I w-wo-won't...do it ag-again just l-l-let me have my sh-shhhhot, let me have my *shhot*, fuckers, give it to me -" Raw-voiced whisper that was so full of desperate *need* that Spike very nearly got up and *got* the stuff. Instead he reached out again and carefully touched Xander's face, steeling himself against the involuntary, terrified twitch *away*.

"Harris - stop that, now. You're sick. Can't give you a shot - that shite'll kill you. You hear me?" Xander kept mumbling - kept *pleading* - and Spike growled softly in frustration. "Wake. *Up! Xander!*"

Xander checked - blinked - and drew in a hard, wheezing breath, his lungs creaking and whistling. "Spike. S-spike?"

"Yes. Yeah. Spike. Got you free, Harris - got you some medicine. You'll be fine in a - a few days." Xander raised one thin and shaking hand - looked at the blood on it and blanched even whiter. He looked up at Spike with a strange sort of lost expression on his face.

"I d-dreamed you died," he whispered.

"Yeah, well. I got better." Xander only looked confused and Spike shook his head - stood up and grabbed a towel and turned on the water in the sink. "Let me get the blood off you and then back to beddy-bye. Got you some medicine -"

"My sh-shot -"

"No." Spike glared at Xander in the mirror and Xander curled down on himself tighter. "No, Harris, no more shots. Dream Water's for *demons*, not for the likes of you. Kill you, that will."

"I'm dying *n-now*, Spike! Just give m-me the fuckin' - sh-shot!"

"Shut *up*, Harris," Spike growled, getting - he had to admit - a certain satisfaction from saying that. He turned away from the sink, the towel dripping in his hand and crouched down again - reached and lifted Xander's head, fingers under the stubble-rough jaw. He started to wipe the blood away, dabbing carefully around the empty socket. "You're not dying. Just the withdrawal, is all. Pass

in a few days." Xander's eye was closed, his lip caught between his teeth and Spike rubbed his thumb along the hollow cheek. "Harris...how long were you -?"

"The I-last pure-blood hu-human?" Xander whispered, and Spike nodded - realized Xander wasn't looking and spoke instead.

"Yeah. How long'd those bastards have you?"

Xander didn't say anything for a long moment and then he opened his eye, the lost look back in his gaze. The confusion. "Wh-when is it? Is it - Ss-summer?"

"No, it's - it's nearly October, Harris." The weather had gotten - strange, after Illyria. It should have been a lot colder than it was, especially this far north. Spike couldn't remember seeing snow, since...Before.

"Oc-oct-t.... No, it c-can't be, it was *J-july* when they f-f-found me... *Spike* -" Xander's hand shot out and gripped Spike's forearm, ragged nails digging painfully in and Spike hissed. "Doesn't mm-ake sense -"

"It's almost October of naught-five, Harris. The Before, that was - year and a half ago. They had you - three

months?"

"*No!* No, no - nonono -" Xander's nails cut into Spike's arm and Spike tried to jerk away but Xander came with him, falling forward onto Spike - clutching at his shirt, all salt and iron-earth and the bitter licorice stink of the drug - fever heat like a smoldering, smothering fire. *Panic* suddenly adding itself to the mix as Xander flailed - fought - seemed to be wanting to get away and shred Spike's skin from his bones at the same time.

"Harris - stop it!" Spike hissed again as Xander's nails raked his neck - his face - as the scrabbling legs drove boney knees into his gut and thigh and groin and Xander's teeth suddenly found his *jaw* and bit, drawing blood. "*Bloody hell!*" Spike howled - gave an almighty heave and flung Xander backwards *hard*, into the tub. Xander crumpled to the floor, thin shriek of pain whistling out through his teeth and Spike just lay there for a long moment, panting. Watching as Xander gathered himself jerkily up into a knot of bloody skin and bones and started rocking - muttering. Shivering on the cold tile floor.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! God damnit. Spike heaved himself wearily upright - thought for just a moment and then

leaned around Xander and turned the shower on, dialing it up hot. Stripping his clothes off and tossing them out the door - pulling a reluctant and dazed Xander to his feet.

"C'mon, Harris. Fucking hell. Let's get in the shower - get warmed up again, yeah? I got you some soup - good stuff, smells like. Some kind of fish chowder and - and some sweet and sour soup. You used to like that."

Xander let himself be maneuvered into the stall but flinched from the pound of the spray and the hollow click of the glass door shutting. Spike bit his lip, listening to Xander's heart speed up and his wheezing breathing grow labored. He grimly forced Harris under the water - held him there when he writhed and coughed and tried to get away.

"Stand *still*, damnit! You're gonna fall, Harris! Break your sodding skull!" Xander opened his mouth and *screamed* - hoarse and hysterical and Spike just hugged his arms around Xander - held him tight and sank down to sit on the floor. Closed his eyes against the spray and wrapped arms and legs around Xander's shivering body and just held on. Crooning nonsense into Xander's ear - telling him it would be all right, all right '*all right, Harris, all right...promise...*' Gradually warming under the spray and

finally Xander went limp; little hitching breath and his hand curling around Spike's wrist, holding tight.

Spike - just sat. He was so damn *tired*. Just so tired. Still just wanted...a drink. Wanted some fucking *peace*. But he hadn't had that in years. Hadn't had that since Dru - since they'd danced together to her own private music. Music of the stones and the stars and the bones of their latest kill. Danced with eyes closed, forehead to forehead and body to body, the Hellmouth nothing but a place to leave behind. All of eternity at their feet. But...

*Always keep my promises, don't I? Promise I'll do my best to fix this... Won't let you hurt like this. Don't **deserve** this, Harris. **Xander**. Don't deserve this.*

~*~*~*~*~

By the time Spike felt like they'd both calmed down Xander's shakes had come back with a vengeance, so Spike got them up and out. Got them both mostly dry and Xander back into the bed, tucked up with extra blankets and wearing the sweats and t-shirt Spike had dug out of an abandoned sporting-goods store. Spike got Xander to swallow three aspirin and a dose of penicillin

and Xander simply lay there, propped on pillows and watching Spike's every move with a bleary, half-aware gaze. The hurt place on his head - where he'd fallen, Spike assumed - was bruised but the cut was nothing and Spike didn't bother with a bandage.

"For a city this size the place isn't half-bad," Spike said, laying out his finds on the bed and sorting through them, watching Xander watch him. "Half the shops still have gear in 'em - guess by the time the wave got here, they -" and he gestured out toward the city and the demons and hybrids who owned it now, "- had everything they needed. Could have got enough clothes for a year." As it was he'd gotten several changes of jeans and t-shirts for both of them plus the sweats and some warmer clothes - a couple of thermal shirts and sweaters. Light but bulky things and he was figuring in his head how it was all going to pack - if Harris would be able to carry his own gear or if Spike would be stuck burdened with another pack.

Fuck. I guess 'wither thou goest', Harris... Already making plans for us... But it was better, a very quiet voice in his head said, than being alone. *So much better.*

"Look here," Spike said, and displayed the camping stove.

He'd traded the bulk of the clothes and trinkets scavenged from the traveling show for the stove, and the last of the Valium - nearly twenty pills - for two bottles of fuel. "We can make tea over this, coffee - heat this soup up. You want some soup, Harris? Got -"

"S-sweet and sow...er," Xander whispered, and Spike felt the grin stretch his mouth wide before he schooled it to something less - obvious. Grinning because Xander remembered - grinning because Xander was *talking*, and Spike just *needed* that right now. Needed to hear someone else's voice. Convince himself he wasn't off the deep end.

"Yeah. You up for some?" Xander considered that while Spike set up the stove. Thick wire tripod that held a heating element at the center. He fiddled with the fuel-bottle and the valve - finally got it lit and adjusted the hissing blue flame down low. Found the small pot whose handle detached and opened the waxed carton the soup was in. Barely warm, it still smelled sharp and savory and *good* and he held it out toward Xander, eyebrow going up.

"Yes or no, then?"

"Yess. Just - a l-little," Xander said, measuring with his fingers and Spike snorted softly, pouring soup into the pot.

"Take more than that to get some flesh back on your bones," he muttered, but Xander just looked away, scrunching down a little lower under the blankets. As the soup heated Spike sorted the rest of his haul. *Three* kinds of antibiotics, just in case Xander was allergic to the penicillin. He'd found them in the private pharmacy of a little clinic near Beacon Hill. The lobby had been littered with sun-faded brochures for Botox and silicone injections and the pharmacy shelves had been looted for painkillers but for nothing else.

In a desk drawer in one of the doctor's offices he'd found a pretty little cloisonné box with a pretty little chunk of hash inside, the color of Turkish Delight. The hand-blown glass pipe and three marijuana buds nestled beside it - as sticky as candy floss - had made him grin.

"Look - got you some jeans and stuff," Spike said, holding up the clothes but Xander didn't seem overly interested - seemed to be half asleep, actually. Lying against the headboard, his eye shutting in long, slow blinks - his face relaxed and expressionless. With his chopped-off hair

sticking up every which way and his unshaven face all hollows and bones, he looked -

Looks younger even then that time Angel tried to feed him to me. Looks like a little boy. Spike wondered what *he* looked like, with his hair grown long enough to braid back in a short queue or get in his eyes. Vampire bodies *did* change, and the mutated blood of the hybrids had made him...different. Had made *all* the vamps different. Closer to the demon, he supposed. No spare flesh on him anymore but his muscles singing with strength and speed. *Didn't recognize me, did he? Wasn't sure. Just the drugs...* Spike didn't like to think that he didn't look like *himself*. "Soup's hot, Harris. You ready for some?" Xander blinked and licked his lips - struggled into a slightly more upright position and Spike poured three fingers-worth of soup into a tin mug - brought it over to Xander and offered it.

Xander's hands shook as he took the mug and he sipped slowly, slowly. Spike rooted out the left-over *blini* and ate them, reckoning that day-old fish might not be good for...whatever Xander was. *Not human, that's for sure. Can't be. But not demon, either. Something...else.* He licked his fingers and wished for a shot of whiskey - had a smoke instead, standing over by the balcony doors and

watching the lights of the Dens roll and bob on the surf - watching pinkish-blue lightning flicker through the dull pall of the clouds. It felt late - past midnight, probably. He finished his cigarette and sent the butt arching out over the rail - turned back inside, shutting the doors.

Xander was tipping sideways in the bed, cup tilting in his hand and his gaze glazed and distant. The shivers had stopped, finally and Spike stepped quickly across the room, plucking the cup from lax fingers.

"You're gonna make a mess, Harris," he said and Xander jerked - looked up at him - and recoiled.

"What the fuck do *you* want?" Xander rasped, his look one of intense anger - *hatred*. A look Spike hadn't gotten from him since -

Since the beginning. Since the fucking Initiative. Just bloody great. "I'm just makin' sure you don't spill your soup, Harris," he said, and Xander made a sort of confused sneer, his gaze flickering here and there.

"Get out of m-my house, Ss-spike, you're not w-welcome," he said - then he flinched again, curling down around himself as some pain shot through him.

"Not your house, mate -" Spike muttered, catching Xander's shoulder and pushing him away from the edge of the bed - tugging the covers up only to have Xander claw wildly at them.

"Tryin' to - s-strangle me! No, get off me!" He bucked - arched hard and then curled up again, arms around his belly, a sudden sweat breaking out on him. "God, g-god..." He hugged himself, shivering again but this time in reaction instead of fever and Spike crouched down next to the bed, wiping Xander's face off with the damp corner of the sheet.

"It's the drug, Harris - *Xander*? It's the drug, is all. You'll be okay in a couple of days -" Xander's hand shot out and locked around Spike's wrist, ragged nails digging in.

"Ss-pike, just gimme the sh-shot, it w-won't hurt mme -"

"It'll *kill* you, you stupid wanker. *No*. Look, I got - got something else -" Spike wrenched away from Xander's grip and snatched up the little cloisonné box - hastily assembled a pipe-full of the blonde hash and found his lighter. "Just - take a couple hits of this, okay? Make you relax. Take your mind off it." Xander turned his face

away, mouth drawn down in anger or distaste. "Damnit, Harris," Spike yelled, his temper flaring. "You're *not* getting a shot! For fuck's sake just *smoke* this!"

Xander twitched away from Spike's raised voice - gasped in a wheezing breath. "Gonna - kill me with th-that, can't - b-breathe -"

"You'll be fine, for fuck's sake!" Spike held up pipe and lighter and waited. Xander pulled his knees up higher, cradling his belly and then finally he looked back at Spike again. Nodded slightly. Spike sighed in relief and held the pipe to his lips - let him take one and then two and finally three deep hits, waiting through the coughing fits that came after each one. "There now, that's enough. Condition you're in, wouldn't be surprised if you passed out on me."

Xander glared at him, wiping at his eye which was tearing all down his cheek. He plucked at the damp sheet and sketchily wiped his face - collapsed back onto the pillows with a groan, his arms going around his ribs. "Fuckin' hurts."

"Yeah. It'll get better. You... How long you been on that shite, Harris? You remember?" Xander seemed to be

thinking, his lips moving soundlessly, and Spike sat down by the bed, leaning against the side - closing his eyes. *Almost twenty-four hours with no sleep...pullin' him all over the city and... Need to sleep...* His meal - two too-fat-to-run hybrids that had been nesting in the doctor's office - was urging him toward rest, and he wanted to crawl into the bed and *forget* for a while.

"I d-don't know," Xander whispered, and Spike jerked, half-asleep, his head drooping down toward the mattress.

"What?"

"I don't - know how l-long they... They got me in J-july -"

"So only a few months - only three months, Harris." Spike said softly. "You'll be back to your old self in no time."

"*No. No.*" Xander scrubbed one hand wearily across his eye - looked at Spike with a desperate sort of fear. "I - I was t-trying to get to - L.A. When they f-found me. It was j-just after... It was l-last *year*, Spike, it was - wa-was - I've...been..." Xander stopped, panting, and Spike reached hesitantly and touched his shoulder - stroked his fingers down muscles hard as steel with tension. "It can't

be a year, Ss-spike, it c-can't be - *more* than - it can't, it can't, it can't..." Xander's voice trailed off into soft, hoarse sobs and Spike watched helplessly for a moment.

His hand crept up from Xander's bicep to his neck and he curled his fingers around the back - rubbed gently with his thumb just behind Xander's ear. "Hey now, Ha-Xander. It's.... It's all over now, right? Got you out - gonna get you off this shite... All good, yeah?"

"No. N-n-never g-good again. Never g-good..."

"Shh - hush now. That's no way to talk." Spike stood up - pushed at Xander until he scooted over, dragging his pillow with him. Spike stripped off boots and jeans and shirt and slid into the bed, curling into the fever-warmth of Xander's body - pulling him close. Half expecting the man to lash out, or pull away. To reject him. But after a moment's silence Xander settled on his side, back to Spike's chest and his hands clutching Spike's wrist - pulling Spike's hand close to his bony chest.

"Don't know wh-what to do, Spike. I'm...lost."

"We'll figure it out tomorrow, Xander. Promise," Spike whispered. He rubbed his chin across the crown of

Xander's skull - through the silky prickle of his butchered hair. *We've got all of time and the wide world to roam, Xander. We'll find...something.*

Part Six

The hardest part, Spike discovered, was getting the antibiotics into Xander at appropriate intervals. He slept a *lot*, and raved in between, and the fever wracked him daily - hourly. Never quite going away, always lurking there on the fringes, ready to rush in. Xander fought the medication - fought the baths Spike insisted upon and the teeth-brushing and the food until Spike was exhausted and angry and ready to leave him there - or give him his fucking shot.

But in all the mess and screaming and near-unconscious stretches of sleep, Xander *talked*, and Spike was secretly, pathetically glad for it.

"I was down in Africa, you know? F-finding Slayers and

getting them to the Council b-branch they opened in Dakar. The c-council paid their families most of the time..." Xander stopped and rubbed tiredly at his eye - took a small bite of the apple Spike had cut up for him. Spike had already eaten his, the crisp flesh and sweet-sour juice reminding him of days long past. Of a trip to an Uncle's house in Devon and an apple orchard at dawn; the dew chill against his legs and the apples sugar-mouse pink and blush and frail green, tart on his tongue. The familiar ache of memory dulled by Xander's rough, soft voice.

"When - when it all went down in L.A., the Council knew about it. They were t-tracking it. It all h-happened sooner than they th-thought it would." Xander took another bite and Spike stopped his desultory straightening of the room and lay stomach-down on the bed, propping his chin on his fists and watching Xander nibble, nibble, nibble.

Eats like a fucking mouse. How can he live off so little? Xander's skin was translucently pale, threaded with blue-violet veins and the lingering shadows of old bruises. Clean now, nails clipped and hair shining-soft he still looked like a scarecrow and his eye was huge and deeply socketed - darker than a dry well. *Not right - he's just*

not...right. What'd the plague do to him?

"They were keeping track of us, huh? Even after Giles -"

"Yeah. W-willow filled me in on all of - th-that when..."
Xander stopped and shut his eye - pushed the plate and apple away, turning his face into the pillow.

"Hey, you need to finish that, Harris, you're -"

"Fuck off, Ss-spike," Xander muttered and Spike huffed out an irritated breath - reached over and yanked at Xander's sweater-clad shoulder.

"Hey - none of that. You don't get to tell me to fuck off."

"Can if I want." Xander scrunched down further in the covers, shutting his eye and pushing weakly at Spike's hand.

"No, you *can't*. Tell me about what you did. How'd you get from Africa to here? What happened? What did -?"

"You w-wanna know?" Xander sat up, glaring at Spike. Breathing hard, looking furious and near tears. "The Council *knew*, and they called us all h-home. And they

tried to s-stop it and everybody *died*, Spike!" Spike flinched a little from Xander's rasping shout but not much.

C'mon, Harris - yell at me! Wake yourself up, for fuck's sake! You're still in there -

"They all died and I d-don't want to talk about it." Xander slumped back, panting, and Spike scooted closer - reached to the bedside table for the flannel that was in a bowl of cool water and wrung it out - wiped Xander's face with it.

"Sometimes it's good to get these things out, though. Talk it out and you feel better, right?" Xander twitched away from him - reached out and yanked down the shoulder of the flannel shirt Spike was wearing, exposing his right bicep. His fingers - hot and damp - grabbed the muscle - dug into the tattoo.

"Charlie-boy, Blue, Percy," Xander said - eerie sing-song to his voice and his eye gone glassy and dazed - gaze vacant. "Dead in the rain and the filth, dead and gone, *oh* -" Spike tried to jerk away and Xander's hands scrabbled at his chest - at the wife-beater Spike was wearing, tearing the worn neck. Pressing his hand to the marks on

Spike's chest. "*Angelus*. Stupid bastard thought he was St. George -"

"Shut *up!*"

"Don't you wu-wanna *talk* about it, Spike?" Xander hissed, and Spike shoved him away, *hard*. Didn't care that Xander's head cracked into the wall. He shot to his feet and stalked over to the pile of stuff in the corner - jerked up one of the rifles and the kit he'd scrounged a couple of days before and sat on the floor, pulling the rifle apart to clean it. It still had ashes in it from when he'd - found Xander. What Xander had just done - was too much like Drusilla's trances. Too much like some kind of *seeing* and Spike wanted no part of that. He threw the wet flannel away from himself, fuming.

*Fucking bastard. Fucking **bullshit**. Not the same. He was - off in Africa, he was... They were barely friends anymore, not the bloody same -*

"It *was* the same," Xander said tiredly and Spike jerked around to glare at him, snarling. "Don't flash your fucking fangs at m-me, Spike." Spike scrambled up, the rifle parts dropping to the floor. He strode over to the bed, yanking Xander up with a fist twisted in the front of his sweater.

"Why did you say that? What - what do you know about - them - about *this*?" he snarled, covering the marks on his chest with his hand. Xander had flinched back, face averted - one hand coming up to claw at Spike, the other raised as if to ward off a blow.

"L-lemme alone, just - lemme alone! Need my sh-shot, need - need the fuckin' - *shh-shot* -" He stiffened - gagged - and Spike pulled him *up* - sent him staggering into the bathroom on legs that barely held him.

Spike slouched in the doorway watching Xander heave and gag over the toilet for long, long minutes until finally Xander slumped down onto the floor, panting, sweat matting his hair down and his mouth wet with saliva and bile.

"Fuckin' hell, Xander - shouldn't get all -"

"F-fuck *off*," Xander groaned, curling around himself and Spike snorted and walked out - got a cigarette and lit it and then angrily stubbed it out and stalked back into the bathroom. Xander was crying silently and Spike sighed.

"C'mon, Xander, c'mon now - hot shower'll see you

right," Spike said, hauling Xander gently up - peeling off the damp sweater and sweat-pants - holding him close while he got the shower on and the water heating. Holding Xander *tight*, listening to his sandpaper voice whispering into Spike's shoulder.

"I t-ried to k-keep them, I t-ried but they f-forgot, they all *forgot*. G-giles stayed the long-longest but he l-left too, he l-left too, Spike...*Sspike*... They all died, they ah-all *left* -"

"Shh, shhh...I know. I know, Xander. It's all right. I won't leave. Promise. I promise you," Spike whispered back, lips brushing Xander's temple and his hands slowly, slowly rubbing up and down the thin, heaving back. "*Promise.*"

~*~*~*~*~

"We tried to s-stop them," Xander said, days later. Nearly three days, and Spike jerked around from where he was sitting, having finally got down to cleaning the rifles. Staring at Xander who was sitting cross-legged on the bed, slowly turning a slice of bread-and-not-really-butter into crumbs. He'd sat on the balcony for hours earlier

that day, turning his face to the hidden sun and dozing.

"Who - Wolfram and Hart?" Spike said, and Xander nodded hesitantly.

"I - guess. I think I heard Giles talking about - them. Just - big evil, you know? He started k-keeping track of them after that - crazy Slayer and he found out they were up to something really b-big. Willow told me," he added, at Spike's skeptical look. Spike looked down at the gleaming metal in his fingers and slowly wiped a last piece down - started to re-assemble the rifle with soft clicks.

"That's right, something big. Did they - *you* - ever think to call Angel - tell him what you were doing? Could have used some fucking help, you know." Spike glanced up at Xander and frowned at the puzzled look on his face.

"I thought Giles *had*... I d-don't know. I thought - th-thought he - the *Council*... Willow made it s-sound -"

"Forget it," Spike muttered, slamming the empty magazine into the rifle and putting the assembled weapon aside - wiping his fingers on a smudged, oily rag. "The *Council* decided we were on the side of the devils. They weren't helping us."

"Oh." Xander crumbled the bread some more - twitched a little when Spike growled.

"Would you just *eat* the bloody stuff? You're fucking skin and bones."

"It tastes funny," Xander said but he put a bit in his mouth, chewing slowly and then taking a sip of the tea Spike had made him. Tea with honey and something like cream, Spike trying to get as many calories as possible into the one thing Xander would take in - and keep *down* - with any regularity.

"So you were watchin' the big evil..." Spike prompted, moving up to the foot of the bed and mirroring Xander's pose, his own tea gone luke-warm. But he drank it anyway.

"Yeah, *they* were. I just knew what W-wills told me. When it all started to - to go down, we got called back. We all went to C-cleveland."

"Why...Cleveland?" Spike asked slowly. He'd *been* to Cleveland - walked right up on it on his way east. "What's special about that dump?"

"There was - there was another H-hellmouth there. Faith and R-robin Wood - you remember? They were assigned there after - Sunnydale."

"Huh." Spike got up - turned on the camp stove and opened a bottle of water. He wanted *hot* tea - wanted... Wanted not to hear what Xander was saying. *Too bad, though. Not going to tell him to shut up. Not...now.*

"Yeah, I remember them," he said finally, adjusting the flame and putting the tin coffee pot on the stove. "Got all googly-eyed, didn't they." He leaned on the dresser, staring at Xander who ducked his head away.

"Yeah. Well, we - went there. Me, Willow, Giles...B-buffy and about fifteen new S-slayers. And that c-coven that helped Willow? All of us."

"Why did...what -"

"You know - *why*," Xander said softly, looking up finally from his hands - from the crumbled bread. "The energy. They were going to use the - Hellmouth energy to take out - everything. Giles said the building in L.A. was a p-portal. Things coming and g-going all the time and when it - when they opened it to send all those d-demons out it

was v-vulnerable and the c-coven and him and Willow could make it..." Xander waved his hand uncertainly, slopping a little tea onto his knee.

"Wills said it was like a - Mobius?"

"Mobius Strip. Never-ending loop," Spike said softly. He could see that. Turn the portal at the Wolfram and Hart building into something that - ate itself. No way in - and no way out. *Imagine **that** hangin' over the Hollywood sign. Fuck. Might have worked. Didn't, though...* Spike checked the water which steamed but wasn't boiling, not yet.

"Yeah, that. She said - they could trap them. But the H-hellmouth..." Xander's voice trailed off into silence and Spike snarled to himself - made his tea and settled on the edge of the bed.

"Didn't work, did it? Fuckin' Council and their grand schemes...Hellmouth bit 'em on the ass. I was *there*, Xander. I saw the fucking...Hellmouth."

"I was there, too Spike. When it happened..." Xander shivered - rubbed his hand over his jaw, slowly. "It...they knew it was going wrong. They were going to sh-shut it

down and then t-teleport the Slayers and Buffy to L.A. to - to take care of anything that got th-through. Buffy thought maybe some of the S-slayers would stay in L.A. and h-help you guys."

"But not *her*," Spike said, a sudden and un-looked for pang in his chest. *That's deader than the world, that is. Stop it, now.*

"No, not her. Giles knew it was - fucked. He b-broke out of the circle, he t-told us to r-run and...we d-did. And it..."

"Went to hell, didn't it," Spike growled and Xander nodded miserably - put his cup on the night-table and hugged his arms around his ribs, layers of t-shirt and thermal and sweater hanging off his too-thin frame - bunching under his fingers.

"Yeah -"

"I *saw* what the bloody Council did there. Fucking hole in the ground worse then Sunnydale and it's still *open*, for fuck's sake -" Spike stopped himself - snatched his flask off the night-table and poured a measure into his tea - took a long drink and tried to let the heat of it sink in -

relax him. *Not gonna happen. Fucking bastards. They should have asked, they should have done...something. They let Fred die...*

Cleveland had been a blight - an ugly sink of fire-twisted rubble that had *seethed* - that had boiled with a never-dying fire. Smut of poisoned smokes and the glassine creak of cinders underfoot as he'd gained the rim. Spike had stared down into that pit - watched something crawl and flounder to the edge and killed it before it had gone two feet. But other things had writhed in that interface of *here* and *there* and he'd left soon after, putting Cleveland and any hope of the world ever shifting toward normal behind him.

"How'd you make it out of that mess alive, then?" Spike asked, long minutes later in which Xander had simply huddled into himself, eye closed, and Spike had abandoned his tea completely in favor of his flask. Newly re-filled from a jar of still-made moonshine, the raw spirits reeking of copper and corn.

"Willow. She - tried to get us out. Send us back to - to London. But she only - threw us. A couple of miles... Broke my arm, broke a couple ribs and my j-jaw."
Another rub at the place on his jaw where the bone still

humped up a little, not quite back to normal. Must have hurt like a bitch.

"Giles was there and Buffy - most of the S-slayers. Some of the c-coven. Willow...was in there when it opened. The c-coven was still linked and they... They t-told us what was h-happening. They -" Xander stopped and reached out - lifted the flask from Spike's hand and took a drink and then choked, coughing. "That's not whiskey," he croaked.

"Nope. Somebody's got a still going. Well, several somebody's. This is the best of the lot."

"*Christ.*" Xander wiped the back of his hand across his mouth - took another big drink and sighed. "The plague came about - two days later but things were - already weird. I was in a hospital - just got my cast and m-my jaw all wired shut... I wasn't the only one hurt - one of the S-slayers had died; she had a b-brain injury. Then everybody starting getting - s-sick. Started *changing*..." Xander curled slowly over, tucking himself up small and tight like he had been in the cart out in the plain. Closing his eye - tucking down and going silent and Spike wanted to shake him.

"Why didn't *you* change? Xander - why didn't you change?"

"Course I ch-changed," Xander whispered, and his eye slitted open, glaring at Spike. "*Look* at me, Spike! I won't ever be b-better than this. They gave me d-drugs so I wouldn't *see* but mostly 'cause I was s-sick all the t-time. All the fucking...time. My arm and my j-jaw - my *bones* healed up f-fast but I'm not...better." Xander reached out slowly - touched Spike's knee where it was pressed to the worn blanket. Traced the smudges of gun oil and ash on the jeans with a shaking fingertip.

"I'm not *well*. Won't ever be. Something...wrong with me. Just - wanna get *out* of here." Spike watched Xander's hand move and then fall still - watched Xander drift toward sleep, the alcohol drugging his thin body as fast as any opiate.

"Get out to *where*?" Spike whispered, and was surprised when Xander moved - looked up at him again, his gaze flat and distant. *Seeing* again like before, and Spike's hand twitched protectively to cover the tattoo on his arm.

"North and west," Xander whispered, his voice gone as

strange as his sight. "Mountains...water...there's a place. *Locus Obiti...*" Xander's words trailed to silence and then he took a hard, deep breath. "Spike?" Small voice - *lost* voice, and Spike reached out and smoothed Xander's rumpled hair.

"What, pet?"

"Lay down with me?" Shimmer in that single eye, but Spike chose not to decipher what it might mean. If it truly meant anything at all.

"Course I will. You cold? Let's get the blanket..." Spike got the duvet and blankets that had been pushed down to the bottom of the bed and spread them out - tucked them around Xander and then slipped under himself, curling close and wrapping his arms around Xander's shivering body. Xander's hand - cold as ice, all bird-bones and silken skin - covered his, fingers lacing with Spike's. Shift and sigh and Xander's mouth on his knuckles, whisper of warm breath. Spike gritted his teeth tight and pushed the surge of nameless emotion that welled up in him back down. Pushed it *away*, as hard as he could. It lodged somewhere just above his heart and stayed there, ember-hot. Burning him, but not like the soul had. Not at all.

Part Seven

On day twelve of their crystal-bought fortnight Spike came back from scavenging with a gash across his back, a full belly and a map. Ready to move *on* - get out of Boston and find some other place to be. Maybe go to New York and see if there was passage east - see if those junk-rigged ships he'd seen passing along the horizon went out to sea or only hugged the coast.

Xander, despite his claims, was *better* - better enough to be chafing at the confinement of the room. Spike had put the wards up anyway, because even this many years later he didn't exactly trust Harris not to do something...impulsive. Xander was reading, though, when Spike came in - wrapped up in blankets with the last of the nonpareils smudged on his chin and cheek.

Leave it to Harris to be able to keep down chocolate, Spike thought, but he had more - a dented steel thermos of hand-made hot chocolate, thick with nearly-cream. He'd traded a match-box with ten working watch-batteries inside for it. Xander looked up as he shut the door, lips curling in a sleepy smile, *The Moonstone* slipping out of his hand and sliding down the slope of his knees.

"Hey, Spike." Low and rough, whiskey-voice that, it seemed, would never recover. It stroked over Spike's senses like a warm and callused hand and Spike coaxed and teased for more, always.

"Like the book, then?" Spike asked, slipping his pack off and dropping it on the bed - going around to the side and sitting down. His hand went out to Xander's forehead - palm to warm skin, checking for fever. Automatic motion, one Xander didn't flinch from anymore. Xander's temperature seemed normal and Spike let his hand comb back through the silky hair, pausing for a moment to rub the fine strands at the nape of Xander's neck, his thumb stroking behind Xander's right ear. Routine now, these touches. Xander's eye blinked and then closed and Spike worked his fingers into the muscle at the top of Xander's spine, gently prodding. Xander sighed and let his knees fall, settling cross-legged, blanket edge unwrapping a bit from his shoulder.

"S'a good book," Xander mumbled, and Spike touched the leather-bound volume with his other hand, stroking its worn cover. Willkie Collins' epic tale of a stolen Indian diamond, and William had adored it. A [rare books](#) shop in Philadelphia had yielded several such volumes and Spike

kept them in his pack despite the weight and bulk. Ties to a past long-gone that he...needed, somehow.

"Yeah, it is," Spike said - got up and got the thermos and poured out a cupful and brought it over - handed it to Xander with a small smile and Xander took it and sniffed and then grinned up at Spike, his whole face lightening - his eye sparkling. Flash of that boy that had shared his home - his *friends* - with Spike so many years before.

"Can't believe you found any," Xander said, taking a tentative sip.

"Any good?"

"Mmm...yeah. You have some too, Spike," Xander said and Spike lifted the cup from thin fingers and took a sip.

"Yeah, that's all right, then. Look here, Xander..." Spike handed the cup back - pulled his pack closer by one strap and fished the map out - spread it over the worn duvet between them. "Look - we're gonna leave in a day or so - go to New York and -"

"*Locus Obiti*," Xander said softly - sing-song voice that made the hairs stand up on Spike's neck. He looked up

and Xander was gazing at the map, a dreamy expression on his face. Dreamy and *gone*, his hand lax on his thigh, the cup tipping in the other, chocolate slopping over the edge.

"*Harris* - Christ -!" Spike snatched the cup - recoiled when Xander leaned forward and reached out, tracing a damp finger over the map.

"*Ha-de-ron-dah*...there... there in mountains, there behind the veil, west, north, up, down...
Passing...through."

"Passing through *what*?" Spike asked, staring at the map - at Xander's trembling finger that traced a path from the coast to the interior to - "Adirondacks, pet? What's there?"

"*Ha-de-ron-dah...Locus Obiti*...passing through..." Xander whispered. He sat utterly still for a moment and then he looked up at Spike, grey and shivering and with a sheen of sweat across his face. "What's that mean, Spike? What's - *locus* -?"

"Means...means place - destination. *Obiti*..." Spike shook his head. "I can't - remember. What - did you *see*

something?" Spike asked - held out the still-steaming cup of chocolate and Xander took it in weak-fingered hands - carried it carefully to his mouth to sip slowly.

"I saw...a veil, a...a *portal*? A - hole, Spike. There's a hole, there. And something - on the other s-side."

"What, then?"

Xander shrugged - drank another and another tiny sips and sighed. "I don't know. Couldn't see that. We should g-go there," he said finally, and Spike lifted an eyebrow - *looked* at him. Xander shrugged again and drank his chocolate and Spike sat there, studying the map - looking out the balcony doors at the clouded, curdling sea.

"Reckon?" he asked finally, and Xander reached out and touched his cheek - cupped it, his fingers hot from the cup, smelling of chocolate and salt and Ivory soap.

"Yeah. Reckon. It's *out*. We should go s-soon." Spike closed his eyes and leaned into the touch and when Xander's arm started to tremble from the strain of being held up, Spike reached up and folded Xander's hand into his - rubbed his thumb over the too-prominent, scarred knuckles.

"You can't walk that far," he said, and Xander nodded.

"Doubt it."

"All right, then," Spike said, and got up - started laying out every item he had in his pack - from the cart. They'd need transportation - another sleeping bag - warmer clothes. He had work to do.

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Later, when the sooty-grey sky had turned an ominous greenish-black and rain was slashing like buckshot against the hull of the ship they sat rib-deep in the tub, the small bathroom lit by a Coleman lantern that Spike had brought back the week before. The generators had been turned off, apparently, in the face of the storm. But not before Spike had drawn a bath.

Spike slowly ran soapy hands up and down Xander's back, tracing the lash-marks there. Silvery tracks like a pulled seam, skin slightly wrinkled, the scars themselves a little sunken, stark over sharp bones. "Those bastards beat you," Spike said, and Xander curled down into

himself a little bit. Spike snarled silently. "Don't curl up like a damn snail in salt. Isn't *your* fault, what they did."

"Sure it is," Xander said, and Spike *shook* him - took one bowed shoulder in his hand and tugged Xander half around in the steaming water.

"How do you figure, then?"

"I fought 'em. All the time," Xander said - looked up at Spike for a moment and then dropped his gaze again, fingers twisting in his lap - water-drops and soap foam slipping down his chest. "Don't know why, r-really. Couldn't - get away from them and they were stronger than me... Should have just -"

"Just *what*? Gave up? You don't ever give up, Xander. S'why you'd make such a good vamp - tenacious, just like me."

"You mean obsessive-compulsive with a side of ADD," Xander mocked, but he smiled a little, and his shoulders came back up and Spike grinned.

"Turn 'round now, let me wash your hair. Growin' out nice, it is."

"Yeah. Haven't had it this long since... Well, they kept it buzzed to keep the - the wildlife to a minimum."

"Huh. Didn't work though, did it." Spike kneaded shampoo into Xander's hair, careful to keep it away from both eye and socket. Then Xander tipped his head back and Spike picked up his smallest cooking pot and poured water over Xander's head, sluicing the soap away until the dark strands lay sleek and clean, close to the skull. Xander sighed - eased back slowly until he was lying along Spike's chest. Buttocks to groin and his hands loosely on Spike's thighs - his head on Spike's shoulder. Spike just wrapped his arms around Xander's chest and rested there, cheek to the wet hair, listening to the strange, stumbling tattoo of Xander's heartbeat.

Not right, that. Seems to trip - almost stop. And it's too...liquid. To rushy Spike thought maybe a faulty valve - blood leaking back into the chamber it was supposed to be pumped out of. It would explain a lot - Xander's tiredness, his dizzy spells - the sometime pain he had in his chest. The wheeze and gurgle of lungs that never quite emptied of fluid, despite the pills Spike had given him. Xander *was* better, but he was right, too - he wasn't ever going to be *well*.

"Why is this so nice?" Xander asked softly, his thumbs stroking gently on the insides of Spike's knees, and Spike shrugged - pulled Xander a fraction closer.

"Oh...suppose it's just...us knowing each other all these years. You can...trust me. You know?" Xander was silent for a moment and then he turned his head - twisted a bit to look up at Spike. Spike looked back, not daring to blink for fear he'd miss...something. Miss *that* - that light in Xander's eye - that crinkling of the skin as Xander smiled.

"Yeah, you're right. I guess - I can. I...do." Long silence, and Xander's breath warm against Spike's jaw - breath tea-sweet and chocolate rich. Spike tipped his head a little, half an inch closer and just *wanting* the warmth - wanting...

And then Xander's lips, light and soft on his and the weightless kiss seemed to last forever.

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It took every bit of trade Spike had - and could scrounge - to get what he wanted. But it was worth it and he said

goodbye to the bits and bobs of gold and semi-precious stones - and one diamond - without a quiver. A handful of still-viable electronics and the rifles and he was mobile again. He patted his sleek new acquisition and climbed aboard - drove with a sense of nostalgia through the streets and back to the Dens. He parked - gave the demon on duty a glare and a flask of moonshine to keep watch and bounded up the gangway to the room. Gather up the wards, gather up their gear - gather up Xander and get on the road.

Xander was waiting on the bed, leg bouncing in anticipation and nerves, pale face looking a little pinched under the dark knit cap he had on. He'd woken up fevered and the weather wasn't co-operating; it had turned chilly in the last twenty-four hours and Xander was moving stiffly. *Sore* he said. Aching in his joints. Spike had found him a fleece-lined coat and wool gloves - a scarf against the wind and Xander sat with his hand on the pile of things, shivering.

"You up for this, then?" Spike asked, tucking the wards away into their pouch - secreting *that* in his pack and making sure the pocket was closed tightly.

"Yeah, I - want to g-go. How are we gonna get there?"

"Oh, just you wait," Spike said, grinning - picking up his pack and Xander's - gathering up the bundles of the stove and the extra blankets. He hadn't *wanted* two packs, but in the end he just wasn't able to jettison his things - his books and a few keepsakes. Xander hadn't said anything but he'd nodded, smiling a little, when Spike had packed them back away. *And* he'd assured Spike he could carry a pack that consisted of little but sweaters, jeans and an all-weather sleeping-bag.

Xander tucked his scarf into the front of the sweater he was wearing - sweater, flannel, thermal undershirt and he was *still* cold, Spike could tell. Then he dragged the coat on - pulled on the gloves and Spike stretched the cuffs over the coat sleeves, to keep the wind from blowing right up. Spike did a last check of the room and then they walked out. Slow, for Xander's sake, but it still felt...special. Felt *good*.

Good to have some fuckin' purpose in my life. Even if it's a goose-chase. Spike wasn't sure they'd find anything in the hundreds of thousands of acres of wilderness where Xander had seen a 'veil' - but it beat dying of boredom. It beat...remembering.

The sky was low and dark that day - dry and silent lightning the color of snow flaring and snapping overhead and they stood at the head of the gangway for a moment, Xander taking in a few deep, slightly bubbly breaths - squinting at the lighting. He looked down and stomped his feet inside the hiking boots Spike had found - looked up again.

"Haven't walked around in...shoes in a long time. Probably get a blister."

"That's why we're gonna ride in style, Xander. Come and see." They walked slowly down - crossed the dock and Spike was grinning - anticipating. Xander didn't disappoint.

"Oh! Oh - wow. That's so cool! Th-that's really - Indiana Jones style, man! What kind is it?"

"Harley-Davidson WLA. Used 'em in the war. Scouts and couriers and such. Good overland, tough as nails. Had one in '44."

"Yeah? Where? What happened?" Xander was grinning back and Spike flipped open the panniers on either side of the rack and stowed their gear, being fussy and

making sure it was all seated just so.

"In Belgium. Me an' Dru - we were havin' a Christmas in Antwerp and the bleedin' Krauts thought they'd do some fighting. Stole one of these and chased the moon, getting the fuck out of there before they burned us out. Went right through a line of Panzers..." Spike had to grin at the memory - at the wild night of cross-country travel on a stolen motorcycle, Dru perched behind him with a 9mm Luger, shooting at shadows as they'd jounced and slithered over the slush-covered ground. "Never let a crazy vamp have a pistol, Xander - always leads to tragedy. For somebody," Spike added - patted the cushion that was rigged on the old ammo box. "Climb on, then."

"I'll keep that in mind," Xander said, still grinning. He swung his leg over the bike carefully, unsteady, and Spike held his arm while he settled. Then he held the pack while Xander threaded his arms through and buckled it in front, struggling a little with gloves and the bulky coat. Then Spike got on himself, pack already in place - patted the gas tank in appreciation. Xander touched his arm.

"Where's *your* coat? Why don't you have your coat, Spike?" Xander said, his hand lightly on Spike's sweated

forearm.

"Lost it," he said shortly, putting his foot on the kick-start - half standing. "We should -"

"*Spike*. You need a coat," Xander said and Spike sagged - looked around at Xander and saw the *serious* look on his face - the determined frown. "You can't ride like this - you'll freeze."

"Don't really feel the cold -" Spike started, and Xander poked him.

"Yes you *do*. I know you d-do. Let's go get a coat. Can't have William the Bloody on a motorcycle in a *sweater*. That's lame." Spike opened his mouth to argue and just - stopped. If Xander wanted him to have a coat, then... He'd have a bloody coat.

"Whatever you say, pet," he grumbled, and Xander poked him again, grinning.

"*That's* what I like to hear. Let's get ramblin'."

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I-90 wasn't very clear and they had to test the WLA's off-road ability often. It got colder as they headed inland and after about four hours it was obvious Xander couldn't go much longer. He was clinging to Spike's ribs, face pushed into the pack somewhere. Between bouts of coughing a steady whimpering sound creaked out of his throat. Spike was pretty sure he wasn't even aware of it.

They only made it as far as the exit to Springfield - not even a hundred miles. Too much back-tracking and long detours around dragon-blasted areas and cities that looked - or *smelled* - wrong. Demons not friendly to much of anything had moved in in force in several places and for once Spike wasn't looking for a fight.

Springfield was lit up with magic and bonfires and they found an abandoned house easily enough, Spike choosing one with three chimneys and solid brick walls that showed no signs of damage. Xander coughed, bent double and stumbling as they made their way up a cracked walk, hanging on to Spike's arm. The fireplace in the downstairs sitting room was choked with rubble and Spike hauled Xander upstairs, pushing him down onto a rumpled bed while he broke up furniture to start a fire. Xander's lips were blue - his face ashen and streaked

with tear-tracks. And the choking cough seemed to go on and on, and Spike was getting worried.

"Gonna live, mate?" he asked, setting up the stove and getting water heating for tea - finding his 'wildlife' herbs and crushing them into a pot on the hearth in the hope that the astringent steam would help.

Xander dragged in a hard, ragged breath, eye wide and still spilling moisture. "Just - n-need to - catch my -- b-breath, I'll b-be - fine."

"Yeah. Sound it, you do." Spike went into the bathroom that was attached to the room and found mostly clean, slightly mildewy towels under the sink. He brought one back and wet it with some of the warming water - carefully wiped Xander's face. "Get you warm, get you some tea - rest a bit, you'll be all right." Xander nodded - doubled over, holding his ribs and all but strangling on the cough and Spike helplessly rubbed his back - slipped the cap off and rubbed his hand through Xander's hair.

"Maybe one of those - inhaler things, yeah?" he said, and Xander blinked up at him, shrugging a little - catching Spike's hand and squeezing it in his.

"Don't - know. Never tried. M-maybe. But - I-later? Don't - I-leave," Xander said, his hand curling tighter into Spike's and Spike squeezed back - rubbed his thumb over the bones and tendons standing out on the back of Xander's hand.

"No, okay. Later. I'm gonna - make a pallet up, yeah? Right down by the fire. Bake that cough out of you."

"Yeah, okay," Xander rasped, and Spike rubbed his back one more time and then got up - went down the hall, searching. In a third bedroom there was a kid's bed - a narrow mattress that wouldn't take up every bit of floor space and he hauled it into the master bedroom - heaped duvet and blankets on it and then their sleeping bags - knelt down and helped Xander unlace his boots and get them off.

"Undo your coat, now - you're holding all the cold in." Xander's fingers struggled clumsily, even after he'd stripped the gloves off and Spike ended up doing it for him - got him settled on the pallet, the steaming pot of herbs near his head and the rest of their blankets draped over him. The fire was burning hot and fast and Spike went downstairs and gathered up what cut wood there was in the house - birch and pine, it seemed - and took it

up. After Xander fell asleep, he'd get more - probably a whole stack in the back yard or something.

Xander was breathing in the steam and coughing a little less by the time the tea was ready and they both had a cup. But Xander wouldn't eat and he set his cup down and curled into an exhausted heap, fever-warm and shivering. Three aspirins in his belly and not much else and Spike didn't like it. But he didn't know what to do about it, either. He shed his own too-new leather coat and scooted in close - hugged Xander to him - stroked sweat-damp hair off Xander's forehead and, after a moment's hesitation, lightly kissed his temple.

"S'okay, you know," Xander murmured.

"What is?"

"That. You... I don't mind if you...kiss me. S'nice."

"Yeah?" Spike asked, but he was grinning and Xander twisted his head a little on the pillow, looking up at him.

"Yeah. Been - a long time and... And I -" He stopped abruptly, chewing his lip. Twining his fingers with Spike's and closing his eye briefly, as if sorting his thoughts. "I -

never would have minded. Not after that...summer."

'*Yeah?*' seemed like a stupid thing to say again and Spike just lay there, silent. Remembering the long summer of Buffy's second death and how he and Xander had...called truce. Let go the old hates so they could concentrate on keeping what was left of their family...alive.

"You were supposed to kiss me again," Xander said, teasing edge to his voice but his grip tight and *needing* and Spike smiled - bent his head and kissed him again, mouth on mouth and just - lightly. Letting Xander breathe - letting him pull back when he wanted. Which he didn't seem to do, and they kissed slowly until Xander was half-asleep, his breathing slowing and his body going lax beside Spike's - shivers easing as the fever broke.

"You rest now," Spike whispered into his cheek - brushed his lips through Xander's hair and snuggled down behind him, pulling him close. Xander sighed and wormed backwards and was out not two minutes later and Spike lay blinking in the heat and dance of the fire, waiting. Letting Xander slip far, far under, stroking his hand up and down his arm - over his fingers. He'd do his hunting and foraging...later. There was no hurry.

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They ended up staying four days in Springfield - the fever lingered and the cough worsened until Spike started seriously thinking about finding a healer of some kind. And Xander had a sort of...relapse. Asked brokenly for the shot, over and over, until Spike yelled at him - told him the bloody shite was down the drain and *gone*, no chance. It wasn't - not really. It was riding in cotton-wrapped splendor in a side-pocket of Spike's pack, just in case. But they weren't anywhere near 'just in case'. Not by a long shot.

Not unless you really are dying, Xander, and you're not - nowhere near dying. Just sick, is all - just got too cold. I'll get you better clothes - figure a way to keep you warm on the bike. You'll be fine. He found camping gear in a high-end shop - silk long-johns and space-age fiber sweaters - wool shirts. And the real prize, a box-full of some hunting gadget; little chemical packets that heated up after you flexed them - started some kind of reaction. Small enough to tuck into boots and gloves and pockets - radiate warmth for hours. Xander looked them over and nodded, wan smile on his stubbled face. Spike thought a

beard would help keep him warm but Xander wanted it *off* - it itched, he complained. So Spike found a nice straight-razor in a pawn shop and carefully removed every bit of stubble - suffered with a smile Xander rubbing his cool, smooth cheek over Spike's.

"Isn't that - b-better?" he said, and Spike just kissed him, silent approval.

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Their next stop was some little town near the border of New York and Massachusetts - the signs were all gone. But there was a clutch of Hnuk demons there and on the second day of raging fever and bloody phlegm Spike tracked them down and got one to come back to the community center he and Xander were squatting in. It had a fireplace as wide and tall as a truck and a generator in the basement and Spike had got the boiler working - got hot water, finally, and was giving Xander baths in between roastings.

The Hnuk took one look at Xander and went off on an herb-hunt, coming back an hour later with a bushel-basket of stuff. It diced and boiled and stewed in the

kitchen and smeared a stinging, eye-watering poultice over Xander's chest and throat. The sludge-brown stuff was foul, but within ten minutes Xander's agonized, liquid breathing had eased and he fell asleep, sweating face bathed in fire-light, his clothing all stuck to him with sweat.

"Every day - three times a day. Heat, hot in the belly - no more of *this*." The Hnuk eyed the inhalers Spike had found with distaste and shoved them away - gave Spike a packet of dark-red leaves. "Make tea - as much as he'll take. Honey fine, sugar fine, no al-co-hol. His heart -" The hirsute, heavy-lidded Hnuk shook its head, clicking its tongue behind its teeth. "Heart not good."

"I know. Nothing to be done about that, then?"

"Tea will help - hawthorn, thistle, rosehip, *tchka*. You find me trade - find me good plant things - I give you enough for...six months." Spike couldn't go foraging for three more days but he ended up raiding a police warehouse two towns over for gro-lights, drip-irrigation supplies - somebody's marijuana-growing set up, it seemed. Plus a biscuit-tin full of seeds from a nursery that specialized in 'antique' plants. He was gone for almost twenty hours but it was worth it - the Hnuk were pleased and Xander...

Xander just pulled him down onto the pallet and hugged him, sighing softly into Spike's neck and not letting go.

"Missed you too," Spike said.

They were there ten days all told, and then they were in New York and turning north - coasting along increasingly better roads toward the Adirondack Park and Xander's *Locus Obiti*. Spike had no idea what they would find - if they would find *anything*. But hope was a little coal in his chest, as warm and welcome as Xander's lips on the back of his neck - Xander's hand on his chest while they slept. Hope, anticipation....excitement. Things he hadn't felt in a long time, and Spike held Xander close in the rustling darkness of the tent, listening to an ash-fall slither over and down, over and down - rasping susurrus that went on and on. He slept deeply, his only dreams that of primal forest and clear, cold water - long march of dark evergreens upright and prickly against a snowy frieze of stone. Nothing of Gunn, or Illyria, or Angel. Nothing at all.

Part Eight

It took them almost two weeks to reach Saranac Lake. The tea the Hnuk had made seemed to be working - seemed to be doing *something*, but Spike wasn't taking chances and anyway - there was no hurry. It was amazingly pleasant to ride along at slow speeds, watching the mountains unfold and rise up all around them. The woods were mix of dense evergreens and sugar maples, the still-vivid crowns winding through the dull, dark green of the pines like threads of ruby and antique gold. The towns got further between - the demons and hybrids thinned out and it was...quiet. Normally that would have put Spike right over the edge but somehow, it didn't. The demon who'd traded the bike had done something to the motor and Spike didn't have to forage for gas too often. He'd traded his bottle of whiskey for that little bit of magic but so far all the stations they'd come across had still had petrol in the big underground tanks. He didn't begrudge the whiskey, though - he just didn't *take* some risks, anymore.

They would ride for three or four hours and then stop. Find a house or a hotel and camp for the night. They even slept in the tent a couple of nights but it was cold and damp and Spike didn't like how it made Xander's

chest sound. So it was beds and fireplaces and sometimes, if there were demons, hot water and hot food that Spike would sniff and taste and dither over until Xander would remind him he *wasn't* actually all human anymore, so hand over the damn *stew*, Spike. Xander never got sick but Spike couldn't keep himself from checking, every time.

Here where the land was mostly untouched and the towns simply deserted rather than destroyed the pickings were easy. In the back of a pawn shop Spike found a rifle that slotted nicely into the scabbard on the WLA, with a box of hollow-point ammo besides. Most of the hybrids could be killed by a well-placed round, and he wanted something Xander could use, if he had to. Spike also got them all new clothes at least twice - nobody had working washing machines and he'd be bugged if he'd try and wash jeans by hand. Xander just dressed his freshly-bathed self in layers and layers, snuggling down in a cocoon of blankets by the fire Spike had made, reading '*The Scarlet Pimpernel*' now - reading aloud to Spike who fed the fire and lay with his hand on Xander's thigh, letting the rough, low voice lull him into a half-doze; scent of woodsmoke and chocolate and salt, honey-sweet tea on his lips from Xander's mouth.

'Chauvelin, who, as he told Marguerite once, had seen a trick or two in his day, had never dreamed of this one. With one ear fixed on those fast-approaching footsteps, one eye turned to that door where Desgas and his men would presently appear, lulled into false security by the impudent Englishman's airy manner, he never even remotely guessed the trick which was being played upon him.

He took a pinch of snuff.

Only he, who has ever by accident sniffed vigorously a dose of pepper, can have the faintest conception of the hopeless condition in which such a sniff would reduce any human being.'

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Xander stopped reading, his voice choking off and Spike twisted around to look up at him, wondering what, exactly, the odd snuffling noises were. Xander was *giggling*.

"He g-gave him *snuff*?" Xander wheezed. "That's the b-big plan? Chauvelin's gonna *sneeze* himself to d-death?"

"You ever done snuff, then? It's wicked if you get a nose-

full of what he did."

"But - b-but -" Xander let the book droop down out of his hands. He was laughing out loud now, his eye leaking tears and his breath getting wheezy - his whole body shaking and Spike couldn't help grinning at him - squeezing his thigh and poking him in the belly when he started to double over.

"Not *that* funny -"

"It is! It is, i-it - Oh god." Xander squirmed lower in the bundle of blankets, pulling Spike up closer, his breath hitching in little snorts and huffs as he tried to control himself. "Okay, maybe it *isn't* but...it just ss-struck me... *Snuff.*" Spike propped himself on his elbow over Xander and Xander grinned happily up at him, his chipped tooth and thin face making him so damn boyish - so *innocent* in the soft, amber light of the fire. Even the empty socket seemed nothing more than shadow - a trick of the light - and Spike had to lean down and kiss him.

Xander tasted of honey and salt and the complicated *green* flavors of the heart-tea - underlying tang of *not-human* that was like tin and licorice. But all of it warm - all of it opening eagerly to him as Xander kissed back, his

hand curling loosely into Spike's hair and his leg shifting over, thigh to thigh under the blankets. Long, slow kissing that made Spike feel - breathless. Made him inch his hand up under Xander's layers and stroke the finely-textured skin of his back. Scars over muscle felt like coarse silk under his fingers and Xander sighed into his mouth - pulled Spike over a little closer and did his own slow exploration of backbone and ribcage and sternum, making Spike laugh.

"You think there's gonna be a test later, pet?" he asked, and Xander pulled his hair a little, laughing back.

"No, you jerk. I just want to...know you. Want to know everything. All the stuff I didn't b-bother with, before."

"Yeah?" Spike asked, and Xander's smile faded, then - went to something solemn and intense and *young*, again. So very, very vulnerable and open and Spike felt that look like a fist to his gut.

"Yeah," Xander said finally, fingertip skipping up and down Spike's ribs, his eyebrows drawn down and his eye veiled behind lashes and lid. Looking like he wanted to say more but just not quite able. Spike tipped Xander's chin up and studied the dark, defiant eye that gazed back

at him and then he just leaned in and went back to kissing. But they both knew something was different, after that.

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They sheltered from an ash-fall about ten miles from Saranac Lake - the town there the closest they could get on the bike to where Xander said they had to go. Spike was fretting about that - fretting about Xander having to hike miles and miles through forest, on trails meant for experienced hikers or at least people with properly working *hearts*. Xander ignored him - took out the book and started looking for their page, nibbling a piece of dried meat that was possibly demon, possibly dog. The demon selling it had been suspiciously unclear and Spike wondered if it was *family*, which would account for the absurdly low trade-price. But it tasted salty and savory and good, and Xander seemed to like it so Spike wasn't going to quibble. The ash made him restless, though - that and the hike ahead and he couldn't settle enough to listen. After a while Xander shut the book and reached out - touched his arm.

"Tell me what happened? With Angel and - the others? It

felt sad and...angry. You were angry."

"I was out of my mind, pet," Spike said softly - carried Xander's hand to his lips and then folded it into his own. He lay on his back and told the story, his voice trembling and breaking from time to time, but steady enough. When he was done Xander tugged until he turned over - let himself be pulled and pushed until he was lying with his head on Xander's chest, the rushy start-stop of Xander's heart right under his ear. He lay there for a long time, thinking he might cry but in the end Xander's hand, sweeping over and over his hair lulled him to sleep and when he woke up, the ache had passed.

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Breaking down the tent, Spike's anxiety returned but it wasn't about Xander, this time. It was about where they were and he moved fast, rolling and packing and getting things settled - not liking the feeling of the place. The air was damp and the ash clung to everything and made Xander cough. The clouds were high and moving fast - deep, pearly grey lit with intermittent, silent lighting. A strange day - the sun was up there somewhere - and the skin on the back of Spike's neck prickled. Crows were

circling and cawing away to the east and then a covey of morning doves started up out of the tall birch opposite, whirring away with small peeps of alarm. There was a deep, breathy, *growling* sort of noise from - somewhere. A guttural *huuh huuh* that reminded Spike uneasily of a lion, beating the bush for prey.

"Xander - get on the bike," Spike said. Deliberately kept his voice low. Jerked the buckle down tight on the off-side pannier and put his hand out, steadying Xander as he straddled the bike. "Keep hold of my pack for now, all right? I just want to -"

Something *moved* - something struck, fast as a snake but infinitely larger and Spike felt himself hit tarmac and then ground, rolling hard, cloud of ash kicking up and covering them. Something all angles and bone and coarse fur - all snarling, fang-filled mouth tearing at him and he jammed his leather-clad arm into its jaws and *pushed* - heard something *crack*, loud as fucking canon and Xander yelled and then Spike was free, crashing hard into a tree-trunk and scrambling to his feet, ash gritty between his teeth.

About twenty feet away was a hybrid, snarling as it clawed at the leaf-mold; struggling to right itself as well,

blood pouring down its arm. Spike, ears ringing, threw a wild glance at Xander who was lying on his back beside the motorcycle, the rifle clutched across his chest and a stunned look on his face - one foot hooked on a pannier.

*Oh, fuck, did it hit Xander too? Fuck, fuck, got to get the fucking **gun*** - Xander wasn't making any move to get up and Spike dove across the space between them, snatching the rifle and chambering another round - taking aim before the hybrid was able to do more than howl. He pulled the trigger - cocked - pulled again and the hybrid went down, gurgling. The 45-70 round left an exit wound the size of a dinner plate and Spike had hit it mid-trunk with both shots. Half its spine was gone - lungs and heart pulverized - and it crumpled into a heap of bony limbs and brindled fur, fanged snout gaping open as the wide, black eyes slowly glazed and went dead. Blood pooled beneath it, black and silvery-grey as the ash mingled with it.

"Xander? You all right?" Spike dropped to his knees beside Xander, hardly daring to touch him until the man moved on his own. Xander lay there blinking up at the sky, his mouth twisted into a grimace of pain.

"Ff-fuck, that's got a wu-wicked fucking - kick," Xander

muttered. He made an abortive attempt to get up and Spike leaned the rifle against the bike - carefully hauled Xander upright. Xander yelped and put his hand gingerly to his right shoulder. "That's gonna leave a m-mark," he said, and Spike snorted softly.

"Scared me, pet. Didn't know if it got you or not. Just the shoulder, then?"

"Yeah, just the shoulder, turned into mincemeat. No worries."

Spike couldn't resist a quick kiss to Xander's forehead and then he was standing up - lifting Xander with him and picking up the rifle again. Just in case. Brushing at Xander's coat and hair, cursing at the mess.

"Is that - it?" Xander asked, and his voice sounded - odd. Sounded *off* and Spike looked at him sharply.

"Yeah, that's it. What's wrong?"

"N-nothing. I mean... That's -" Xander's voice trailed off into a ragged intake of breath, his eye fixed on the hybrid. Spike laid his palm against Xander's cheek and stroked the jut of bone there lightly with his thumb.

"What is it, Xander? Have you seen that kind before? Do they hunt in pairs or - packs?"

Xander blinked - started to lift his hand and then winced. He held his right arm close to his body with his left and stared for another moment at the hybrid lying crumpled on the tarmac. It had been tall and lanky, darkly pelted and maned. Long, clawed hands, clawed feet and a blunt snout that was reminiscent of a hyena. Human enough that it was obviously female but the legs bent backwards at the knee, like a dog's.

"N-no, they don't - hunt in pairs or packs. Th-they - hunt alone. Always - alone..." Xander's voice trailed off to silence and Spike felt a twist of unease in his belly and let his hand drop away from Xander's cheek. Something - familiar about that.

"Listen, pet, you need to tell me what's going on, you hear? Makin' me nervous, now."

"Oh." Xander sniffed - looked away from Spike, rubbing his hurt arm slowly. "When it happened - when the change happened... That's what - the Slayers turned into, Spike. That was - that was a Slayer."

"*Slayer?* Christ." Spike tugged Xander gently closer - hugged him - and Xander hugged back, pushing his face into the collar of Spike's coat and just breathing, for a long moment. Then he stepped back - wiped at his eye.

"Spike? Can I - borrow your knife?" Spike nodded silently, slipping the short-bladed one from the sheath at his waist and handing it over. Xander took it - took a deep breath. Walked stiffly over to the - body - and knelt down. A moment later he was coming back, and Spike watched him tuck the long lock of dark, brindled hair into his pocket without comment.

They rode in silence, Xander's hand on Spike's hip, and settled into a resort cabin for the next three days while Xander's badly bruised and strained shoulder healed. Then they shouldered their packs and a cache of tinned food - said a fond farewell to the motorcycle - and walked into the forest.

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Walking was easy - worrying about Xander was exhausting and they made the journey in fits and starts,

resting often despite Xander's protests. Spike kept alert, the rifle in his hands just in case. The woods were quiet, though. The dim light filtered down all dapple and shadow, dimmer yet under the close-knit pines and the air was thick with the astringent smell of them - with the thick scents of leaf-mould and mushrooms, rotting wood and water. Rills and creeks, ponds and springs at every turn and Xander scooped up a handful from a tiny waterfall, drinking and then *smiling* - amazed that it tasted so good and was so cold. Spike had some himself and it was sharp and clean on his tongue. Xander said it made the tea taste better and drank an extra cup.

But halfway through stirring in the honey - while he was re-winding his scarf - adjusting his gloves... He'd get that *look* in his eyes. Dazed and strange. Turning a little, this way and that way, whispering.

"North, up, sideways...through the looking glass...broken glass...broken record, there's a skip..." Rasping whisper and a little shudder and Spike touched his cheek - made sure he was awake - was *there*, before they went on.

Picking their way around the skeleton of a huge, fallen maple Xander slipped and scuffed his hand - stood sucking the red, scraped skin of the heel for a moment

while Spike dug around for a length of clean gauze and some A&D that he'd picked up in the Lake town.

"I was born with a caul, you know?"

"You were?" Spike looked at Xander for a moment - held out his hand and Xander put his hand in Spike's, fingers open, palm up. Tiny beads of blood welled along the scuff. "Had a cousin that was," Spike said. Cousin Jules, who had died at the age of eight. He remembered the caul - a thin membrane stretched over the face of some newborns, reckoned to be - good luck. The midwife had taken it - sold it, or so William's mother had said, with a sniff and a moue of disgust.

"Yeah?" Xander flinched a little from the cold ointment - smiled at Spike's *cluck* of amusement. "My granny - my mom's grandma - she saved it. Buried it. Said it meant I was special - meant I would do...great things." Spike wound the gauze around and around - tied it neatly and tucked the ointment away - ran his fingers over Xander's palm and wrist, just - touching.

"Guess she was right," Spike said finally, and Xander shook his head - laughed softly.

"I don't think being the 'last pure-blooded human' is special, Spike."

"They used a caul to tell the future, pet. For divination. Guess *that's* special. *I* think - it's special."

Xander's fingers curled into his - held fast - and Xander hitched his pack up a little higher. "I think... I think I was already part demon before the changes happened. I think - that was my...m-mark -"

"Of what - Cain? What are you hinting at, pet? Not gonna tell me you're *evil* or some such, are you?"

"*No*, no... I meant... What I was, in Sunnydale... I think the caul meant I'd be that. *Different*. Not - right."

"Bollocks, Xander," Spike growled, squeezing his hand - *glaring* at him. "*Nothing* wrong with you that isn't wrong with the whole bloody *planet*. We're all changed."

Xander sighed, his shoulders sagging. "I know. It's not... It's just, I'm...afraid," he whispered. "What if where I'm taking us is - I-like Cleveland? Or - what if it kills us?"

"What if it takes us to the Land of Milk and Honey? It

doesn't make any sense to fret about it, Xander. We'll know when we get there. For the record -" Spike tugged Xander closer - leaned his forehead into Xander's and trailed his fingers gently over Xander's cheek. "For the record, I trust you. I think it's going to be grand."

"Liar," Xander said softly, but he tipped his head a little and got a kiss - started back up the slope they were trying to climb, a small smile lingering on his mouth. Spike took a deep breath - lit a horded cigarette, the familiar action and taste calming him a little. He'd found a Latin dictionary in the last town and looked up Xander's 'veil'. '*Locus*' he already knew - a place, a designation. '*Obiti*', though, had two meanings. *Going*, which would make this portal simply a place to step from *here* to *there*. But also...destruction - death.

Spike didn't trust to luck - didn't trust to fate or destiny, only to his instincts and his desires. But here - at what seemed the heart of an untouched, primal world... He had no compass - nothing telling him yes or no. And his only desire was Xander. Was that connection of history and blood and pain - love and happiness that they shared. He hoped - for something 'grand'. For his sake, and for Xander's as well.

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They came to the portal on their fifth day in the forest. Xander was looking pale, that day - feeling the cold. The temperature seemed to have dropped several more degrees and he was shivering in his layers. Breathing too hard and not catching his breath, his heart laboring. Spike was ready to call a halt - set up camp and rest for a day or so but Xander just shook his head, standing with his hand on the peeling parchment bark of a birch-tree, his teeth chattering together while he tried to talk.

"It's close. Spike, it's r-really close. Feels like - feels like ants on me or - s-sstatic electri-city. Just - want to *get* there, Spike. Just - get there." Edge to his voice, something close to panic and Spike couldn't tell if it was because they were so close to the portal or because Spike wanted to stop.

"Just sit for a minute or two, Xander, you're all in..."

"*Please?* Spike? Please just - help me -" Stopping, then, was the panic and Spike cursed as Xander swayed a step and then another away from the tree, clutching

reflexively at Spike's arm as his legs wobbled.

"*Fuck*. Xander -" Wide, wide eye - sheen of moisture and Xander's hand trembling, clutching tight enough to make the leather of Spike's coat creak. "God *damnit*. Fine. We'll go. But if you fall down you're *staying* down and I bloody well won't be talked around. Got it?"

"Yu - yu -" Labored breath in - out - and Xander clenched his teeth and nodded, abandoning his attempt at speech. Gestured with his head upslope, where Spike could see glimpses of dark rock between the tree-limbs.

"Right. Hold on, now." Arm around Xander's waist and they walked, boots slipping on the dead leaves and old pine-needles, the sound of running water getting louder. A sort of roaring, and Spike saw white water foaming and falling and realized they were coming up on a waterfall. His skin felt - itchy. His ears buzzed and he imagined this was what Xander had been talking about. Shivery pulse of *wrongness* that was the magic that made the portal or that held it open - who knew? The blood in his belly - deer that he'd hunted and drained a few hours before - seemed to curdle and for a moment he just wanted to turn *back*. Find what was left of civilization and just...live. With Xander.

*He doesn't want that, though. He wants **this**. Whatever this is. God...*

Xander's breathing was harsher now - a tearing gasp that hurt to hear and he sagged in Spike's arms - shook his head when Spike stopped. "No, no, no - no ss-stopping, we go, Spike!"

"*Xander* -" Frustration and anger and *panic* - visions of Xander's heart just *stopping* - pushed past all limits and failing at the critical moment. But Xander gulped and breathed and coughed. Breathed deeper, eye closed and sweat standing out on his lip - on his forehead.

"It's closing. T-tomorrow, today - ss-oon. Has to be *now* Spike. *Come across, come across, come across...*" Shake of his head and a dazed look up and around and Spike snarled, flashing into the demon-face. Xander laughed - coughed hard. "You ss-scared?"

"*Fuck* you! Scared your fucking *heart's* gonna stop, you git." Xander's mouth was still curled in amusement and he leaned in close to Spike and kissed him, hard. Not minding the fangs and he drew back with a bead of dark blood on his lip and a look that was full of affection and -

happiness.

"Git, yourself. N-not gonna stop. Just get me th-there!"

"Fine. *Bastard*. I'll get you there." They staggered onward, upward - came out of the trees to a sandy margin and a small pool that churned and foamed under the hammer of falling water. Forty or more feet high, a waterfall as wide as two men fell in a champagne-torrent down black, slick rock. And at the base - behind the boiling cloud of mist and spume was - *light*. Shiver-flicker-flash, coldly white, bright enough to make rainbows dance in the humid air.

"*There*. God, th-there. C'mon, Spike let's - let's *go*." Xander's gaze was riveted on the portal and Spike hesitated, searching. The sides of the pool by the fall were sheer - there was no way Xander could get past them.

"How do we *get* there? You're not climbing *that*. And that pool could be - twenty feet deep. No way you can swim it."

"No, not deep, it's - it's okay"

"Xander, you can't *know* -" Spike growled and Xander swung around to face him, his hand coming up and grabbing the back of Spike's neck, wool glove prickly and damp.

"I *can*. I do. It's shallow. We just - walk. T-t-trust me, Spike. Okay?" Tug at his neck - tip of Xander's chin and they kissed again. Xander tasted like sorrel and honey and saltine crackers and Spike suddenly pulled him into a hard, hard embrace, burying his face in Xander's neck.

"You hold on to me and don't let go, you hear? Don't even *think* about it," Spike said, his voice gone husky and Xander tugged at the messy braid of his hair - hugged him back.

"Promise. I promise."

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The water was *cold* - bone-freezing cold that crept up to mid-thigh and Xander was wheezing - breathing in sharp, tight pants that hurt to hear. Spike grimly held him, arms around his waist; plowing through the water and slipping on the worn rocks underfoot. They paused for a long

moment at the foot of the fall and then plunged ahead, gasping and ducking on reflex when they passed under the sheet of glass-clear water that flowed past the portal. It *pounded* down on them and Xander flailed and lost his footing, kicking out and tangling his feet with Spike's. They *both* went down, the water sluicing in past Spike's coat collar, icy wash of it down his back. Spike struggled upright and found Xander's pack - yanked him up by it and shoved him forward.

Xander was reeling - coughing - and Spike scrambled and slithered and splashed, heading for the lip of stone that rose out of the water - heading for the portal that shimmered at the back of the tiny alcove that the fall had hid. Like a TV turned to static; it buzzed and sizzled and made Spike's head hurt and he stumbled up against Xander who was clutching the stone edge, coughing so hard he was gagging.

"Fuck - *fuck* - grab hold, damnit, *Xander* - pull!" Spike got his shoulder into Xander's flank and heaved and Xander scrabbled at slick, wet rock, half out of the water and his face a ghastly blue-grey. Spike clambered after, hindered by the sodden weight of the pack - the blankets - the awkward bundle of the stove that Xander had talked him into keeping, just in case. His jeans clung, making it hard

to bend his knees and he finally flopped down next to Xander, pulling the shaking body half over onto him. Holding him close. The energy from the portal washed over them, sickly whine in Spike's ears and his skin all but crawling off his bones. It was horrible.

"Bloody *fucking* hell - you all right? Xander - you okay?"

"Ju-ju-jesus *Christ* it's c-c-c-"

"Yeah, I know. I know." No way to light a fire here - no room to change and he doubted the clothes had survived their dunking and they had to get *out* of here - he had to get Xander warm and dry. "Gotta get the fuck out of here."

"Go th-through, Sss-pike, we gotta -" Xander was grimacing; teeth clenched shut and his hands clutching fiercely at Spike's coat, his whole body spasming with chills.

"You're gonna get pneumonia for fuck's sake," Spike snapped - pushed Xander over and levered himself to his feet, hauling Xander with him. The overhang was too low for them to stand straight and they both crouched there for a moment, Xander wiping his gloved hands back over

his head, wiping water off his face, his lips a pale blue.

"N-now or n-n-never," he said, gaze wide and glassy. Staring at the portal and Spike looked out - past the falls - at the wavering scene of furling clouds and upright pines - green and grey and autumn-gold, water like crystal. Then he grabbed Xander and *pushed*, launching them both through the air - into the portal.

The interface was sticky - *hot* - and it pulled them in and then repelled them with a bone-jarring *push* that sent them flying - falling - spinning off into a grey-static nothingness. Spike clamped his hands down hard, holding onto Xander but he couldn't *feel* anything. Everything was numb - everything was *roaring* and he shouted, twisting.

Then there was a thump - a trembling surface that caught and stretched and finally broke, spilling Spike down onto something springy and damp - fragrant. Spike rolled, the pack and bundles banging into his sides and finally catching him on something and he lay there, panting - blinking into a spangled darkness that gradually resolved into... Tree branches. Stars. A warm, steady breeze that smelled of salt and grass and green leaves -

smelled of earth and somewhere, blackberries. Crickets, the rushy hiss of the surf, the low call of a territorial owl.

And a muffled *thud-shush* - faltering heartbeat that he knew so, so well. He grabbed branches and a long vine of creeper - pulled himself upright, the branch that had tangled with his pack parting with a sharp *crack*. Wetness down his face and he smelled blood - shook it off with a snap of his head, impatient.

"Xander? Pet - where are you?" He staggered through brambles that caught at coat and pack and his hands, the sweet, thick fragrance of blackberries rising up heady and warm as he crushed them under foot. Something pale flashed, away to his left and he stumbled faster - barely avoided a tussocky lump of grass and fell to his knees beside... "Xan - hey, Xander - you awake? Xander?" He ran his hands over the crumpled figure, not daring to move him until he moved on his own. Snarling, unconsciously reverting to the demon in his distress.

The heart sound went on, stuttery and wrong but still going - sharp, wheezing breaths that caught and then evened out and Xander stirred - reached out for Spike.

"Spike? Can't - see you -"

"Here, I'm right here, Xander, right here." Spike grabbed the questing hand - held tight, his other hand scrabbling in the unfamiliar coat, searching. Finally he found his Zippo - flicked it open and lit it. Xander's face in the wavering, golden light was pale and scratched - smudged with dirt - tracked with tears. His pack was askew and his coat torn - dirty.

"Oh - god! Spike-" And then he was yanking Spike down, arms going around in an awkward embrace, mouth seeking Spike's and Spike fumbled the Zippo shut and just held on, kissing back, the both of them shaking into half-hysterical laughter.

"That was fucking - awful, *god* - Xander, you okay? Can you stand up? We have to get you warm, pet."

"I th-think - think I can, just -" Momentary confusion in the dark, Xander uncertain where to put his feet and Spike got up and lifted him - held him close. Xander's hands curled tight into his back and they stood there a moment. "You smell like blackberries," Xander said finally, his voice muffled. "And you're bleeding."

"So're you. Can you walk? Let's - let's get out from the

trees, see if there's any - anything."

"Yeah, okay." Xander held on as Spike guided them twenty yards or so through bracken and trees, toward the sound of the sea. They broke free and staggered down a sudden slope onto a rocky beach, the waves crashing and curling over, phosphor glow and white foam. Starshine lending a faint glow to everything.

Far, far down the strand - glimpsed through tree-limbs and tall grass - Spike could see light reflected on the water, blue and red and gold. Jewelry strands of diamond-white and movement - *cars*. Faintly, the sound of traffic came to him, carried on the breeze.

"Look there, Xander. Looks like - something."

"Yeah. Something *good*. Hot b-bath," Xander said, swaying a little, his arm tight around Spike's waist.

"Yeah? You think so?" Spike asked, pushing his hand through Xander's hair - plucking out a leaf and a tattered bit of bark.

"*Know* so, Spike. Special, remember? It's - something. Not home. But - *look*." Xander gazed at him, smiling *that*

smile - innocent and so, so young and Spike had to grin back - had to laugh again, softly.

"Yeah, special. I remember. Let's go, then. Sun'll be up in an hour or so."

"Will it? Wow. It's been...a long time." They started walking, picking their way over rocks, following the gentle curve of the shore. Somewhere far above a plane moved, blinking lights and the distant roar of the engines. Spike tracked its progress for a moment, blinking at what might be tears. They *weren't* home - never would be again. But Xander was there, and that was...enough.

Epilogue

A cool breeze was coming in the window, rain-washed and thick with the scents of wet earth and roses, rusting iron and woodsmoke. The curtains belled and sank, belled and sank and Spike stood in their folds, looking

out. Watching the sky slowly darken. Straight overhead it was navy velvet with a liberal decoration of rhinestone stars. But further down it shaded to raspberry and lemon, watercolor-green and peach. Sherbet colors with lacings of plum-dark clouds. Spike rolled a cigarette and smoked, the damp breeze cool on his naked skin. Lamplight - low and amber and dancing - lit the dim cave of the room behind him.

Somewhere to the west a train whistle sounded, high and lonely as a coyote's howl and there was a small sound behind Spike - a soft, querulous noise. Spike turned, looking. Xander was sprawled over the bed, face half-buried in the pillow, washed-soft sheet of bleached linen tangled around his legs and draped over his back. Spike watched the steady rise and fall of his ribs for a moment and then turned back to the window, satisfied that Xander was still asleep.

They were leaving in a few hours - taking a midnight train down out of the mountains to the coast. This place was...good. But not right - not what they wanted. For one thing, Spike was slowly going crazy without his music and Xander was starting to mourn the loss of junk food. Not that Spike let him *have* much, but still...

Spike smiled to himself, pulling in a lungful of dense, sweet tobacco smoke with satisfaction. *This*, he would miss. He was already stockpiling the stuff - tanned leather pouches stuffed full, stored in biscuit and tea tins against future need. The tins all packed tightly into the bottom of their trunk, which hid backpacks and torches, books never written and the XPods - what Xander called the almost-the-same music players they had acquired. Things that took too much time to explain. They were getting good at camouflage. And they were getting *smarter*. Avoiding some things - ignoring others. *Paying attention*. Paring their mistakes down to a minimum.

They'd made a *big* mistake, the first time around - the first world. A bad one. They'd gone in search of - *themselves*. In search of former lives and former homes and former things. In search of the past. It hadn't been a good idea. They'd found heartbreak; too many dead, the living bitter and closed off - nothing *quite* the same. Everything turned just five degrees *off* and it had been - utterly miserable. Spike had spread out a map of the country on the table at a 24-hour diner and Xander had *looked* and found another portal in down-town Detroit and they'd gone; raided a Food 4 Less and stolen a Mercedes and three nights later in the middle of Greektown they'd stepped through into somewhere *else*.

Now, eleven months and nine portals later they were moving on again.

Spike finished his smoke and pinched it out - tossed the butt out the window. There was still a little packing to do and he moved quietly around the room, laying books and odds and ends into the brass-bound trunk, covering what didn't *fit*, here, and making sure they had enough clothes to last a trip of several days. They were leaving Ni'iihi' - Denver in *their* world - and traveling to Jijiyama - Seattle. Train service was good but there were always delays - weather or animals or a running tribal feud spilling across the neutral lines of the Nippon-Castile Railroad. They bought first-class tickets and looked forward to traveling in style no matter what.

Spike picked up an object from the little dressing table. It was a strange thing - a rough-coated tube that at first glance had seemed to be a branch of dark coral. But the broken end showed smooth, glossy black - like obsidian. Xander had picked it up in the sandy earth near the second world's portal and decided to keep it. It was glass made from a lightning strike, and Xander had decided it meant good luck, so they'd kept it. It was the *only* good thing that had come of that world.

Because *that* world - had been dead. No life, no light, nothing but cold wind and black dirt and they'd hiked for two weeks, Xander living on their rapidly diminishing supplies of tinned food, Spike living on *him*. Stumbling through the third portal half dead, stumbling through grey streets and blasted houses. Fourth World War? Fifth? What was left of the population - grey zombies that matched their grey world - didn't even know. Endless war and draconian rationing made it almost impossible to scrounge what they needed and Xander had left that world as bad as he'd been back on *their* Earth, all his gains lost and the fever back. The fourth and fifth worlds had been - wrong. *Off*. No demons in one and it had made them both feel ill - unreal.

"Feel...thin. Like butter scraped over too much bread." That quote had made Xander shiver - and demand they find a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* before they'd left. Spike said it wasn't quite right and Xander had got more copies in the next worlds to compare - something that looked to becoming a hobby.

Or is that obsession? Spike thought, grinning. *Something* had stopped the sixth world somewhere in the Stone Age; they'd walked vast stretches of glacier-carved plains, dodging tarns and fissures - *Homo erectus* stalking

them through the cold mist. The portal had been a mile off the coast of what had been Florida and Xander had almost drowned, getting to it. The next world had been very home-like - except for the people like little Stepford clones and the churches like grains of sand.

Uncomfortable and increasingly creeped out, they'd been glad to get out of there. Even the demons had been...strange. That world's copy of the book had been found in an 'underground' bookstore - banned for fifty years or more.

World eight had been - nightmare. Soldiers everywhere, half the population in 're-education camps' and Xander had been forced to shoot someone. He still had dreams about it - cold sweat nightmares that left him hollow-eyed and silent all the next day. They'd had to go underground to find that world's portal - down deep under a mountain in Colorado. Buried missile silos or maybe bunkers for a war that had already happened. Skeletons down there, and the trapped and choking stink of long-hidden death.

This world - the ninth - was peaceful. They'd passed themselves off as cousins, the older escorting the younger to the mountains for the 'cure'. TB - or something like - had caused sanatoriums to be built all

over the Shining Mountains and Xander needed rest, good food and peace. Lazy days spent in the library had told them that the Black Death had lingered far into the nineteenth century here, winnowing the European population decade by decade. Columbus had never crossed the sea - there had been no need and no ships. Japan had colonized the west coast - allied themselves with the tribes there and kept the migrating hordes of Central America from taking over. They'd moved slowly east until they'd been stopped at the Great Divide by the impenetrable wall of the Apache, Navajo and Shoshone tribes. Portugal and Spain had eventually found the eastern shore and colonized as well, but they hadn't pushed much past the Allegheny Mountains or the Catskills and the tribes - who'd adopted something of the Samurai tactics as well as gunpowder long before the first ships had anchored - possessed most of the interior and lived side-by-side with the Japanese colonists, moving slowly forward into a much more peaceful Industrial Age.

Steam engine trains and some cars, repeating rifles and the telegraph - they were stuck in the Old West and Spike wanted *out*. Xander had been ecstatic for the first few weeks while they'd rested and learned. But he was tired of it now, too - restless, and ready to move on. There was

something to the cure - something in the thin, clean air. An Arapahoe medicine woman had looked over the heart-tea and made up her own version and it seemed to work as well - maybe even work *better* - and Xander had gained some weight and lost the dreadful grey pallor that had followed them through eight worlds. He'd even sat out in the sun, acquiring a wash of pale gold on his skin and deep claret lights in his earth-brown hair. There were quantities of the new heart-tea in the trunk as well, and a pouch-full of raw gold nuggets that Spike had lifted from a few meals. Ni'iihi' was in gold-rush territory. Spike patted the little pouch full of knobbly insurance and shifted a thick sweater over. Some things were universal.

Spike folded a last shirt and laid it in the trunk - closed the lid and locked it, then padded over to the bed, settling onto the mattress and propping a pillow between his back and the iron bedstead. He reached out and stroked his hand lightly, slowly down Xander's back. Xander shivered - twisted around a little and flung an arm over Spike's thighs - pushed his forehead into Spike's hip.

"Is it time to go?" he mumbled, eye still shut and his hair - grown to his shoulders now - tangled across his face.

"Not quite. Couple more hours, yet. Didn't mean to wake you, pet."

"S okay. I don't mind." Xander sighed and inched closer - let his fingers curl over Spike's hip. Warm brush of lips on skin. "Gonna take me forever to get dressed, anyway," he grumbled, and Spike grinned down at him, stroking Xander's hair out of his face - tracing the dark curve of his eyebrow.

"I'll tie your tie for you, if you like."

"You better." Xander sighed and hitched himself around, pillowing his head on Spike's thigh now and getting his other arm behind, hands clasping together over Spike's hip. Rolling his eye to look up at Spike. "Stupid way to travel."

"Nothing wrong with a little style, Xander," Spike chided, but he was grinning and Xander was. Travel here was an event, and it called for polished boots and waistcoats, silk ties and velvet-collared jackets and hats. Rather like his days as a human, but Spike's jacket was plum brocade and the waistcoat embroidered with silver thread, while Xander had rich browns and golds. Spike's 'new' coat had fit in well enough that it was hanging still on the coat-

rack but Xander had had to buy a greatcoat. Spike knew he secretly loved the great, caped thing. Xander had wanted to get spurs, too, but since neither of them rode Spike had talked him out of spurs and into a lovely pocket-watch. Picking out the watch-chain and decorative seals had taken half the day, and Spike...hadn't laughed so much in ages.

"*Style*," Xander scoffed, but he was smiling now and Spike ran his fingers through Xander's hair, working gently at knots and tangles while Xander stared off into the distance, his own hand stroking along Spike's flank.

"Do you think...we'll want to stay?" he asked finally, and Spike shrugged, working at a particularly stubborn knot. "Ow."

"Sorry, pet. I dunno. Guess we'll just have to wait and see."

"Yeah." Xander sat up suddenly, sitting cross legged with his knees propped on Spike's thigh. "Are you - it's okay that we're traveling, right? I mean...if you want to stay someplace, Spike, you have to say so." Xander reached out and pushed a lock of hair behind Spike's ear - let his thumb rub gently over Spike's cheekbone. "I don't feel

like stopping. Not - yet."

Spike leaned into Xander's warm hand, smiling. "I don't mind. We'll stop when we find a place that's - right. There's no hurry."

"No hurry," Xander repeated, with that so-young smile and Spike leaned forward and kissed him, his hand loosely circling Xander's bicep. Covering the vertical slash of black that ran down the center of it. Ashes, from the lock of Slayer hair that Xander had gathered just before they'd left their world forever. Memorial in skin and he and Xander were all that was left. Forgotten history imprinted on their DNA now - carved into their flesh forever.

When they found a world that was comfortable - that didn't jar them with some small difference or strange scent...that didn't make them wake in a cold sweat, or cry in the bath, they would stop. When they found a place that didn't remind them of home at all. Then they would lie down, one dawn, and Spike would cure Xander's heart for good and all - kill to cure. Spike had offered and Xander had agreed, sideways nod and a lingering kiss - whisper that he never wanted to be alone again. And they didn't know, really, if Xander would be

able to see, once he was turned. So it would be their way of saying - they had come home.

Xander pulled Spike a little closer, a hand dropping down to rest heavy and possessive on Spike's belly. "Guess we've got time then, if you'll do my tie."

"I will, love," Spike said, "Any time."

Ni'iihi' is an Arapaho word meaning 'in a good way'.

Jijiyama is Japanese and means Old Man or Grandfather Mountain.

The book quoted is J.R.R. Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings

The End