

Pairing: Spike/Xander

Rating: *Adult*

Warnings: *A human will die in this fic, but it won't be Xander.*

Notes: *Started for the Music of Pain ficathon but never finished.*

Title and story idea come from Johnny Cash's The Beast in Me.

Warnings: Angst, kidnappers, UST, too many italics.

Summary: Xander comes back from Africa a changed man.

Spike comes to Cleveland to fight evil on yet another hellmouth.

Can they help each other accept the men they have become?

The Beast in Me

by

Pirate Purple

The Beast in Me - Johnny Cash

The beast in me

Is caged by frail and fragile bars

Restless by day

And by night rants and rages at the stars

God help the beast in me

*The beast in me
Has had to learn to live with pain
And how to shelter from the rain
And in the twinkling of an eye
Might have to be restrained
God help the beast in me*

*Sometimes it tries to kid me
That it's just a teddy bear
And even somehow manage to vanish in the air
And that is when I must beware
Of the beast in me that everybody knows
They've seen him out dressed in my clothes
Patently unclear It it's New York or New Year
God help the beast in me*

The beast in me

Part One

Xander hated Cleveland. After three years of African heat, Ohio winters held a chill that made his bones ache. But Faith understood that three years could seriously change a person. A fact that had yet to make an appearance in the minds of Willow and Buffy. Some of

the changes were purposeful, and most of them Xander hadn't discussed with anyone yet. Not for the first time, he missed Spike. There were some things you just didn't discuss with girls. Or with slayers. Not that Wood was a girl, or a slayer. But he had been a principal at Sunnydale High, which made him also off limits in Xander's strange little book of propriety. And he needed to stop talking to Giles before words like propriety took up permanent residence in his head. Anyhow, six months back in the good old U.S. of A., and he still couldn't shake the feeling that things here were not quite as real as they had been in Africa. Cleveland made him restless, whether it was just the city, or whether after everything that had happened, he could actually *feel* the Hellmouth. He wasn't sure, and he certainly wasn't going to ask. He'd have to explain about Africa and the things that had happened there, and he couldn't even do that for himself, much less his friends.

But here he was, wandering the streets of Brooklyn Heights. It was the outskirts of the city, and there had been some missing children from the trailer park beyond the golf course. Three in the past six months, all between the ages of nine and twelve. So Xander loped through the golf course, looking for places a child-eating demon might hide. Cleveland had the same problem as

Sunnydale, in that no one particularly wanted to admit that there was a problem. The police had done a cursory investigation, and there had been a short article in the paper about the possibility of a kidnapper, and then everyone except for the poor children's parents had forgotten about it. Well, and the Hellmouth Crew. Xander, who Faith pronounced, "had an honest face" was the one sent to talk to the parents. In all three cases, the children had gone to bed, and had simply not been there in the morning when the parents had awoken. No signs of a forced entry, but the doors had been unlocked from inside the house. Xander frowned, stopped and sniffed the air, and frowned again. It sounded like the children had left the house voluntarily. But why? He finished his circuit of the golf course, and turned towards home. At least the six or so miles he was jogging every night was keeping him in good shape. Xander seemed not to notice the shadow behind him as he crossed the street to Slayer Headquarters, or the pile of cigarette butts by the tree in their neighbor's yard.

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Spike had watched Xander's running form for about an hour. There was something different about the boy,

something more confident in the way he ran. He had seen the boy sniff the air several times, like his human senses could pick up something like the scent of whatever prey he had been hunting that night. Harris had also been alone. Scoobies almost never hunted alone. Something was going on and Spike was going to find out what it was.

Spike found himself a crypt in St. Theodosius' Cemetery, It was a good spot for watching Harris, It bordered the golf course, and the boy cut through it on most nights. Whatever the boy was hunting, he obviously thought it would be found in the golf course, or near it, because he went there every night. And Spike followed, cataloging changes in the boy who was now a man. The most important change seemed to be that Harris no longer thought of himself as prey. He went looking for fledges in the cemetery when his hunt through the golf course was unsuccessful. Spike found himself watching the play of muscles under Harris' clothes, and admiring. The boy had a lot more stamina than he used to.

Spike had been watching for about two weeks when something happened that made him decide to show himself. There was a nest of fledges roaming the cemetery, looking for a new bolthole. Spike was thinking

about going to scare them off, when Xander made his nightly pass through. It was twelve vampires against one Scooby, and Spike wasn't about to watch the boy be torn apart. But by the time he had made his way from the cemetery gate, coat flying behind him, leaping over headstones, Harris had already dusted four of them, and was ripping the head off a fifth. Spike stood stock still in amazement for a full minute, before leaping into the fray. In the end, Spike was only able to dust three, while Xander staked the rest. Xander stood there looking nonplussed.

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“You're awfully active for someone who's supposed to be dust at the bottom of the Sunnydale crater,” Xander remarked dryly, pulling a bandana out of his coat pocket and wiping the dust from his face.

Spike leaned against a headstone. “That's a long story, mate. I think I'd rather hear yours,” Spike nodded to the dust at Xander's feet. “You seem to be the same person you were on the outside, but you've changed, yeah?”

“I'd rather know why you've been following me,” Xander

countered, annoyed by the vampire's aggressive tone.
"I've been smelling you for weeks. I thought I was going crazy at first."

"Smelling me? Human senses don't pick up vampire odor, donut boy. Stop arsing around and tell me what's going on!"

"I've known you long enough that I know the smell of your brand of cigarettes, Spike. If you don't want to stand out, don't smoke those imported things."

"France is only good for two things, and that's cigarettes and snobbery. I'll smoke what I want to." Spike realized he was being successfully diverted. "And that doesn't answer my question."

"Which was?" Xander raised his eyebrow in what he hoped was a passable imitation of Spike's own facial expression.

"Are you human or what, you bleeding idiot?!"

"Well I still give blood at the Red Cross. So I'm still more human than you, Blondie Bear."

Spike snorted his disbelief, but did not argue further. “Not debating that, whelp. Didn’t come here to argue with you anyway. I’ll just be off then.”

Did Spike look *hurt*? Xander remembered how he had been missing Spike just a few days ago, and placed his hand flat on the vampire’s chest. “Wait, Spike. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. We haven’t seen each other in years, the least I can do is offer to buy you a beer so we can catch up.”

Xander did not miss the almost grateful look that Spike swiftly covered with a mask of indifference. “If you say so, mate. Not in my nature to turn down a free drink.”

In spite of Xander’s offer to catch up, they walked in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Xander stopped at his car, and they agreed that driving was probably not a good idea that night, so they kept walking. Xander pointed out a bar with pool tables, and they went inside.

Xander paid for the table, and made Spike buy the first round of beers on the principle that he’d probably be paying for the rounds they’d be playing for, as was their custom. Xander mused to himself over the fact that he and Spike had customary behavior on the way to the

table.

“Harris, you’ve certainly changed. Usually, you’d have talked my ear off before we got to racking.” Spike said with an unreadable look.

“I would’ve thought you’d be grateful for the quiet, Spike.” Xander sighed, feeling suddenly like he had lost something. “It’s been three years and then some. I’ve changed. I guess you could say I had a lesson in growing up, the hard way.”

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours...” Spike leered at him.

In spite of himself, Xander grinned, briefly. Oh, well. The easiest way to avoid the subject was to tell part of the truth. “I spent three years in Africa, hunting slayers. There’s a lot of death there, and most of it’s not supernatural. I watched a mother with AIDS suffocate her starving, dying child while it was sleeping, so that it wouldn’t have to suffer anymore. I’ve watched rescue workers be shot for bringing food to starving people because their governments are starving them to death on purpose. I’ve seen people shot for a number of reasons, actually, and none of them made any sense to

me. I've seen all sorts of death, and seen people hang on to life when they should be dead. And I guess that just sucked the babble right out of me."

Spike merely nodded to this, leaning on his pool cue with a thousand mile stare at the green felt of the pool table. He cleared his throat after a minute, a small sound lost in the ambient noise of the bar. "I'm really sorry you had to go through that, mate," he leaned his hip against the table, still leaning on the cue, "but what happened to *you*?"

It took an effort of will for Xander to look away from the crystal blue gaze fixed on him. He was a lousy liar, so again he resorted to the truth. "I don't exactly know. And I'm really not ready to talk about it."

Spike nodded again. "Then let's play some pool."

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Xander was a little tipsy, and he called Faith to let her know not to expect him. "Yeah, an old friend came by to visit, and we're getting plastered, so I'm gonna crash with him tonight."

“Five by five, Xan. We’ll see you tomorrow, then? And remember, use protection, we don’t want you coming home preg-“ Xander hung up. Spike was sniggering at him. Christ, was he always going to be the butt-monkey?

The bar closed, and they were still talking. Spike told the story of the amulet, Wolfram and Hart, the final battle that had destroyed what was left of Angel Investigations, and looking for a place to be. Xander talked mostly about Africa, a carefully circumscribed account of the things he had seen and done there. They wandered back to the cemetery. Xander was tipsy, Spike less than, but not letting on.

“Spike, why don’t you ever, I dunno, rent an apartment?” Xander asked as he surveyed the dusty crypt. Sitting gingerly on the broken couch, he sipped the beer Spike had tossed him.

“Well back in Sunnydale, I couldn’t. No green card, no dosh. When I came here, I wasn’t sure if I was staying, so I just grabbed the first space available. Besides, I’m kinda used to it, yeah?” Spike sat next to Xander with another beer, flipping open the zippo and lighting his cigarette one-handed.

When am I going to stop being impressed by that?

Xander slouched down and stretched out his legs. “So, Blondie the Bloody, what’re we watching?”

“Whatever’s on the three channels I get, burger boy. Haven’t had time to steal cable yet. Besides, got some money now, put some aside. I might just get a flat.” Spike drew deeply on his cigarette, and blew smoke at the ceiling thoughtfully.

“Gonna make Cleveland your home base then? Another Hellmouth?” Xander tried the eyebrow again, as it had been getting him good results so far.

“Well, gotta fight the good fight somewhere. Couldn’t stay in L.A. Not after –“ Spike made an expressive hand gesture that Xander interpreted as ‘all the events surrounding and including the last apocalypse I was involved in,’ and shrugged. “I was thinking, we could be mates, like, if you didn’t have to live with me, and deal with my towels on the floor, or blood rings in your coffee mug.” Spike looked at Xander hopefully.

Xander was completely floored. He stared, mouth open, for several seconds, as Spike looked increasingly irritable.

“Um yeah... Yeah, we could do that.” Had Spike really just apologized to him? He’d have to ask Faith when the next apocalypse was due. “I was just thinking the other day, actually, that I missed talking to you. Except for Jesse, you’re really the closest thing to a male friend I’ve had, like ever. I used to think, you know, that it would make me happy to see you dead. It didn’t. Knowing you’ve been an ass to a guy who died to save the world is not a good feeling. I never told you how sorry I was, that I never really got my head out of my ass in time to really be your friend. But I am. Sorry that is. Or was, because it looks like you’re giving me a second chance. Right?”

Spike couldn’t help but grin. Africa may have made Harris quieter, but the boy had stood up to bigger things, and kept his babble. “Yeah, Harris, a second chance, for both of us. Mates, right?”

“Can we call it friends? The word mate reminds me of nature shows, and things I hope I don’t have to do to be your friend.” Xander blushed, as he thought about it, and certain parts of his body stirred as if interested. *No! There will be no thinking about interlocking parts and Spike. Bad! No!* “Um...S-s-sooo... What’s on the TV?”

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It took them about two weeks to find Spike an apartment, given that they could only see apartments the owners would show at night, and Xander's insistence that the building be up to code. Spike would have no repeat of the basement of doom, so they went up a lot of stairs. Finally they found the perfect one, a loft in the third floor of a house that had been built at the turn of the previous century. The windows were small, and they had shutters that could be closed.

Xander had not explained to Faith why he spent so much time 'patrolling,' but it was time to tell her about Spike, he surmised, when she was waiting up for him when he came home.

"Where were you? Robin and I drove all over town looking for you, and you weren't anywhere we could find. Do you have a girl on the side or something?" Faith chuckled. "That'd be grand," she drawled sarcastically, "but why didn't you tell us? Something's not on, Xan. What's up?" Faith folded her arms and tilted her head inquiringly.

"It's not a girl. It's Spike. He's back. Scooby curse, it's hard to stay dead. I don't really know why I didn't just tell

you guys. We've been swapping war stories and playing video games, mostly." Xander blushed. Faith was about to assume the worst, and he knew it.

"You're sleeping with Spike? William the Bloody, the chipped wonder?" Faith laughed, falling back into the chair behind her, and holding her sides. "I knew you were gay!"

Xander spluttered as an image of naked Spike wandered through his head, with the same results as the first night he had spent with the vampire in Cleveland. "I am *NOT* gay, Faith. I just like hanging with him is all. We're *not* sleeping together."

Faith stopped laughing suddenly. "Is he trustworthy? I know the chip stops him from killing, but will he try to get to us in other ways?"

"Earth to Faith! He has a soul, now. Burned to death saving the world, remember? Chip's been defunct since before that." Xander was a little pissed.

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry. Slipped into that black and white world there for a minute. You'd figure I'd learn, seeing where that mode has gotten me before." She sighed.

“Sorry,” she said again, “We square, Xan? I can kind of see why you weren’t quick to tell me he’s alive, considering.”

Xander patted Faith’s knees. “Yeah, we’re fine. I used to be all ‘vampire bad!’ too, remember? We just need to keep reminding ourselves that we’re past that for demons that don’t kill humans.”

Faith smiled briefly. “Yeah. What’re we going to do about Robin? He’s got something of a chip on his shoulder where Spike is concerned. I’m not sure we should tell him.”

“Yeah, I remember Robin’s grudge,” Xander frowned. “There’s a high likelihood that he’s going to find out eventually, though.”

“Well, how ‘bout we burn that bridge when we come to it? I’m pretty sure Spike can protect himself, but I think we’d all prefer it if he didn’t have to.”

Xander nodded thoughtfully, and changed the subject. “So – what’s for dinner?”

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Spike went with Xander on his nightly rounds of the trailer park, golf course, and cemetery. It had been two months since the last child disappeared, and they had found nothing.

“I got a police scanner, so we’ll know when he takes the next one,” Spike said thoughtfully around his cigarette as they were walking back towards Xander’s car.

“That’s a really good idea, Spike. I hadn’t thought about that.”

“S why you got me, pet,” Spike grinned, blowing his smoke away from Xander’s face.

Xander grinned back. Spike had lost some of the chip on his shoulder lately. He was really good company. They like the same kinds of video games, and Spike was teaching him to appreciate punk music, and ‘football’. Xander, in turn, taught the vampire about peanut butter and honey sandwiches and the Klingon language. Xander had spent several nights over the course of the passing months as Spike’s guest, as they got roaring drunk playing Halo on Spike’s beat up Xbox. Xander’s grin grew as he thought about the present he was giving Spike for

Imbolc, a holiday he only knew about because of Willow. But it was an excuse to buy Spike something with the Council's credit card. Xander figured Spike was owed a few things on the Council's dime.

"Yeah, you're almost as neat as an Xbox 360," Xander retorted with a sly grin. "We need to stop at my car on the way back to your house."

"Well what're we waiting for then? Let's go!" Spike picked up the pace, Xander matching him, again and again until they were running down the street, both of them laughing like loons for positively no reason.

Xander had the sudden thought that this version of Spike would have liked Jesse. The thought sobered him, as he unlocked the trunk and pulled out the duffel bag he had hidden the game console in. There were a couple of new fighting games too, that he had seen Spike looking at. He slung the bag over his shoulder, his mouth suddenly full of Jesse's dust.

Spike saw Xander go pale under his tan as he pulled a big bag out of the trunk, and ran to take it, thinking the boy had somehow been hurt. "What've you got in here? Bricks?"

Xander gave up the bag without a fight, smiling wanly at Spike's joke. "No, I just thought about someone who hadn't crossed my mind in awhile." He ran a hand through his hair, standing it on end for a moment before it flopped back down in front of his eyes.

"How did they die?"

Xander gave Spike a panicked look.

"People don't generally get that look over someone who's still around, pet. C'mon, you can tell old Spike. You're the only person I talk to besides the butcher, and somehow I don't think he's gonna be interested in your secrets."

Xander started to walk as he told Jesse's story from meeting in kindergarten to the day he got dusted. Spike walked by his side, and when Xander had finished, he slung an arm around the boy's shoulders.

"Darla always was a right cunt," he said.

Xander blinked back tears, feeling better for having

unloaded, and glad to be back on neutral territory.
“Yeah, she was that,” he said, sighing. “Dust now.”

“Twice over,” agreed Spike. “So what’s in the bag, donut boy?”

“It’s for you, actually. But you can’t open it ‘til we get to your place.” Xander grinned as rebellion warred with curiosity on Spike’s face. “Spike, the house is right around the corner. You can totally wait the three minutes it’ll take us to walk up the stairs!”

He chuckled at Spike’s dubious look, and fished the keys out of Spike’s duster so he could open the door.

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Spike practically knocked Xander over in his haste to get up the stairs. Xander jingled the keys as he walked up the stairs. “You can’t get in without me, unless you want to explain to the landlady that the door is broken *again*,” he grinned at the vampire.

Spike hadn’t heard him. He had stopped and unzipped the bag on the landing, and was staring at its contents.

He looked up at Xander with a wary expression on his face.

“This for me?”

“Well, yeah, I said so didn’t I? I put it on my expense account.” Xander grinned at the rapt vampire.

“Well, that’s a bit of all right. I’m rubbing off on you.” Spike grinned back.

Xander had a vision of that in more literal terms, and blushed to the roots of his hair. He bent to pull the games out of the bag to hide his reddened face. “I got these too, just on the off chance we ever get tired of playing Halo.”

The wary look was back. “What’s all this for, mate? ‘S not my bloody birthday.”

“Imbolc,” Xander replied. “I hear it’s traditional now to give the latest in electronics for ancient pagan holidays.”

Spike chuckled at that. “Well open the bloody door, already! Let’s get this thing hooked up!”

Part Two

When Xander got home, Robin was waiting for him this time. He grabbed Xander by the front of his coat, and shoved him back against the door.

“Well, hello to you too, Robin. I see you missed me,” Xander quipped, but Robin didn’t smile.

“How long has he been alive, Xander? How long has he been back and no one’s told me? He killed my mother, and you’ve been palling around with him and smiling in my face like nothing’s wrong – “

Faith came bursting out of the kitchen and pulled Robin off of Xander. “Jesus, Robin! What the fuck is your problem that you attack him when he’s barely in the door?”

“Spike,” Robin spat. “William the goddamn Bloody. We take this – this traitor into our home and he repays us by

making friends with a killer.”

Xander stood to his full height. He had a couple of inches on Robin. “Firstly,” he hissed, counting off on his fingers. “Spike isn’t alive, he’s undead. Secondly, I didn’t tell you because I had a pretty good idea of what your reaction would be, and thirdly, your precious fucking *home* wouldn’t be here if Spike, the killer you’re freaking out about, hadn’t *given his fucking **unlife*** to ensure its safety.” Xander took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “Why were you following me?”

Robin tried to throw Faith off, but she was having none of it. She half dragged, half carried him to the living room and sat him down on a chair. “Xan, take your jacket off, at least. Come and sit and we’ll talk like civilized beings.” She aimed those last two words at Robin with a reproving look.

Xander didn’t take his jacket off. “No offense, Faith, but I think I’d rather go. I’m not feeling very civilized at the moment, and by the looks of it, neither is Robin.”

Xander got back in his car. He needed to go and tell Spike that Robin was angry still.

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Spike answered the door bedheaded and grumpy.

“Weren’t you just here?” Spike yawned, inhaling deeply, and his eyes shot open. “Harris? You okay?” The smell of adrenaline was thick on the air.

“Yeah I'm fine, but I thought it would be best if you had a heads up about this. Can I come in?” Xander so didn’t want to have this conversation on the landing.

“Yeah, yeah. Come on,” Spike turned away, and Xander noticed that Spike was wearing a pair of ratty cut-off sweatpants that were covered in paint. Low-slung over his hips, and full of holes, they revealed more than they hid. Xander blushed to his ears. Those were *his* sweatpants. The paint was from right before Joyce died. Xander and Buffy had painted the kitchen for her, to try and keep her spirits up. What was Spike doing with them? He opened his mouth to ask, and then shut it again. He couldn’t afford to get distracted.

Spike disappeared into the bathroom and came out again a few minutes later in jeans and a t-shirt. Xander locked

the part of him that was disappointed in a small box and buried it. Deep. He was here to warn Spike. Very serious, and not at all about the porcelain fineness of the small of Spike's back. Xander scrubbed his hands through his hair. He was gonna tell his story and get the hell out of here before his libido staged a coup.

Spike lit a cigarette and sat on the couch. "So? What's so important that you come flying back here in the middle of the day?"

Xander swallowed. "I told you Robin Wood was living at the house, right?"

"Yeah," said Spike charily, "What of it?"

"He followed me, and saw me with you. He was waiting for me when I got home." Xander sighed.

Spike was instantly on his feet, cupping Xander's chin to examine his face in the light. "Are you alright, mate? If he hurt you, I'll eat him, soul or no soul!"

Xander put his hand over Spike's wrist, turning his face back towards the vampire. "I'm fine, Spike, really."

Their eyes met for a long moment. Spike's thumb brushed across Xander's chin. Xander forgot to breathe until Spike took a breath. A small gasp escaped both of them, and Xander looked away, embarrassed.

Spike cleared his throat, pulling his hand away both too slowly and too quickly for Xander's liking. They looked everywhere but at each other. "Where you gonna stay, now?" Spike wanted to know.

"I hadn't thought about that. All my stuff is at Faith and Robin's..." Xander had a sudden longing for Africa, where it was at least warm when you had to sleep outside.

"I'll make up the couch. You'll stay here." Spike's tone brooked no argument.

Xander waffled for a minute, and then decided not to argue, on the grounds that, his sudden attraction for Spike aside, it was less likely that he'd die from insanity than from freezing.

It was less than a week later when the police scanner screeched out an amber alert. Another child missing. Spike had been patrolling with Xander every night, hoping against hope that luck would be on their side. A

day and a night passed, they talked to the child's parents. It seemed like there were no clues.

They got lucky. That night on the golf course, Xander saw a flash of color off in the distance. They sprinted towards it, Xander pulling out ahead. When Spike got there, Xander was holding a small blanket. It was a patchwork thing, soft and brightly colored. A large, overgrown, thorny bush had captured it. Xander was pushing it aside, scratching his hands up in the process. Together, they pushed aside the tangled branches to reveal a sewer entrance.

"Score," said Xander flatly as Spike pried off the manhole cover.

"Demon four, us one," Spike replied, as he climbed down into the darkness. Xander followed.

The spot they had come down in was a four-way junction. It was completely black, except for the dim light coming from the open manhole. There was nothing to tell them which way he had gone. They went a little way down one pipe, killed some sort of giant lizard that had been living there, and decided to give up for the night.

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They got home and took turns showering. Spike insisted that Xander go first, which Xander only halfheartedly resisted. When Spike came out of the shower, Xander had pulled all the thorns from his hands and forearms, and was daubing them with antibiotic ointment he had gotten from the first aid kit in his car. Spike took the ointment away from him, gently took his arm and slathered it liberally, wrapping it in gauze. Xander was struck speechless for several minutes. This was not a side of Spike he'd expected to see focused on himself. He had seen Spike be gentle with Buffy, and the girls, but he was a guy. He protested weakly, feeling overcome with some nameless emotion, but Spike would have none of it.

“Sodding humans are always dying of some small thing or the other. Besides, what if they get infected and your arms fall off?” Spike picked at a thorn stuck in the base of his thumb, refusing to look at Xander.

Xander smiled at that, and took Spike's hand. As carefully as he could, he took the tweezers and pulled the thorn from Spike's hand. His skin was cool, but Xander's hand burned where it had touched him. Xander bit back a gasp. Spike was a guy. A straight guy. Buffy, Harmony, Drusilla, they were all girls. He had no reason to believe

that Spike would be interested, especially in Xander, king of the Zeppos. And *Xander* was straight. Why was that almost an afterthought? He tried to cover his confusion.

“So I guess that makes me the mouse,” he babbled, flushing at Spike’s raised eyebrow. “You know, the lion and the mouse? The thorn in the lion’s paw? Or was that not a story yet when you were a kid?”

Spike chuckled. “You think I’m older than Aesop? You Americans have no sense of history.” Spike could smell the blood rushing to Xander’s face. “Hungry. Want something while I’m in the kitchen?”

Xander got up and followed Spike into the kitchen, where they argued on the relative merits of certain sandwich fixings, as Xander made a sandwich, and Spike nuked his blood.

“I don’t care what you say, mate, putting crisps inside your sodding sandwich is disgusting.” Spike argued.

“So’s dipping them in blood, but you don’t hear me complaining... much,” Xander retorted, following Spike into the living room.

Spike snorted and snatched the remote.

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Xander struggled over the next few days. Being in close contact with Spike made his secret harder to keep, and his attraction for Spike didn't wane. The moon rose night after night, and Xander wanted to howl at it, make his frustration known to whatever gods watched over young men who were mostly human, but not quite 100% pure any more.

Spike wasn't helping, either. They were slowly clearing the sewers under the trailer park of demons, scaring off the harmless ones, and killing those that attacked them. Sometimes he would get a little *too* into it, and he'd catch Spike watching him with an indefinable look afterwards. The close scrutiny made Xander's stomach flip. Partially with fear of outing his secret, and partially with the knowledge that Spike was interested enough to watch him.

They killed a Par'keckt demon one night, Spike twisting off its head as Xander drove a sharp piece of pipe into its

heart. Xander staggered back when the pipe spewed a brown, foul-smelling ichor all over him. Spike took a bandanna out of his pocket, and carefully wiped Xander's face with it, before any could get in his eye. Spike's hands were chilly against his overheated face, but again, he felt a burning sensation when Spike touched him. His whole body flushed. Spike's hand brushed his cheek, and down along his jaw line to his neck. Xander shivered, in spite of the heat suffusing his entire body. Spike, misunderstanding, moved to support Xander around his waist. Now the vampire was pressed against him from shoulder to hip. Xander bit back a groan.

"Gotta get you home. That ichor isn't doing you any good," Spike looked at Xander, a concerned expression on his face that caused Xander's chest to tighten.

"I'm okay Spike, just taken by surprise a little." Looking away, Xander pulled himself away from the vampire, but Spike was having none of it, pulling the young man snug against his side.

"Right. Well, better safe than sorry, in your case, yeah? Who would make me grilled cheese and then be grossed out when I dipped it in my blood if you weren't around? Not to mention the Xbox is better when I can kick yer

arse at it.”

Surprised into looking Spike in the face, Xander saw only gentle humor and continuing concern there. An ache settled permanently into his chest, but he smiled anyway. “Yeah, Xbox is better when you kick my ass at it.”

~*~*~*~*~

The next night, they noticed a gathering of demons in one of the larger drainage pipes. There were several species together, and they were milling about aimlessly. Spike pulled Xander back into the shadows to watch and see what they were doing.

“Sginvia, Ithnak, H’kartian. All carrion eaters. They seem to be waiting for something, yeah? They’re watching that small pipe there. There must be something about the water...” Spike’s whisper trailed off as they watched a small body fall from the pipe.

Before Spike could take a step, Xander was swinging his axe, cutting a squat Ithnak demon nearly in half and howling with rage. Spike bolted in after him, but not before noticing the eldritch green glow to Xander’s eye.

That boy had some explaining to do.

They left the demon bodies lying in the filthy water, but Spike watched Xander tenderly pick up the mutilated body of a little girl. She was covered in cuts and burns in designs that looked like they could be mystical.

“Let’s get her somewhere there’s better light. I’d like to copy some of those marks down. Spike pulled a notepad and pencil out of his duster pocket, but Xander didn’t move. “Harris?” Spike waved a hand in front of the stony countenance of the boy next to him. Then he noticed that Xander was shaking. Spike put an arm around his shoulders, and gently guided him to where a grating was letting in some moonlight.

After unsuccessfully trying to get Xander to lay the body down, Spike had him sit so he could draw the symbols. He checked for vampire bites or other teeth marks. There were none. The child had been kidnapped as a sacrifice, not as food. Four children, so far the sacrifices had not worked. No bodies, because the carrion eaters got to them while they were still fresh. Whoever was doing this had planned well.

“Xander, we have to leave her body where it will be

found, do you understand?”

Xander looked up and nodded, dully. The green glow was gone, replaced by unshed tears.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike wanted to try and see where the pipe she had come out of went, but Xander was in no shape for that. They walked through the tunnels until they found a piece of the sewer that was under construction, and left her to be found. It was close to dawn, and not even the carrion eaters would come here this close to when the workers would be coming down. Spike had to pull Xander away from the body, supporting him when his knees gave, and half-carrying him until he could walk.

Xander didn't cry, in the throes of a grief too deep for the solace of tears. Just plodded along bleakly, not acknowledging Spike's presence, except to wait for him to unlock the door to his apartment. Once inside, he went into the bathroom, and Spike could hear the sounds of retching. Spike didn't know what to do, so he made up the couch. Xander brushed his teeth, came out of the bathroom, and lay on the couch, eyes open and

listlessly staring at the wall.

Spike scrubbed his hands through his hair, making the gelled strands stick out at odd angles. He'd never seen Harris take a death this hard. Even when Buffy died, Xander had kind of been the rock they all leaned on. He looked down at Xander, and wondered what he should do. He opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again, thinking better of it.

Finally, he simply said, "It's okay to wake me, you know, if you need to talk..."

Xander nodded without looking at him, so Spike went to bed, leaving his door open.

Part Three

Spike woke a few hours later to find Xander sleeping on the floor next to his bed. Still half-asleep Spike lifted Xander and put him under the blankets, curling around his tightly coiled form and immediately going back to sleep.

Spike woke an hour before sunset to Xander watching him sleep. Blinking owlshly, he sat up.

“You okay now? You had me bloody terrified last night.” Xander nodded, still staring at him. “What?!” The scrutiny was making him testy.

“Why am I in your bed?” Xander asked quietly.

“Well, erm... you were sleeping on the floor, and it looked like you were cold.”

“Oh,” was the only response to that.

“So you gonna tell me what happened to you last night?” Spike crossed his arms over his chest.

“We didn’t save her.” Xander’s eyes dimmed.

“No, but at least we got her a decent burial. They’ll have found her this morning.”

“They found her, I heard it on the scanner. But we were supposed to save her. We always save them, that’s what *we do*.”

“We’ll find him before he gets the next one, pet. I promise, okay? We’ve got clues now, a trail we can follow, soon as the sun goes down.” Spike put his hand

over Xander's, on Xander's knee.

"You shouldn't make promises you can't keep, Spike."
Xander sighed deeply.

"I intend to keep this one, Xander. We'll find him tonight." Spike looked calculatingly at Xander. "So what's with the green glowy eye thing? Sodding hell, I'm starting to sound like you!"

Xander looked like a deer caught in the headlights. He had obviously not expected the question. *Good, maybe I can startle the truth out of him.* He watched Xander's panicked thought processes ripple across his face. The boy was going to try to lie.

"Um, I don't know?" Xander winced at his own lameness.

Spike didn't even dignify that with a response, merely raising his eyebrow and crossing his arms over his chest again. He waited.

Xander swallowed a few times before beginning. He opened his mouth and snapped it shut three or four times, before finally settling on, "It's part of the Africa stuff that I'm not ready to talk about."

Not best pleased with this answer, Spike took a deep, if unnecessary, breath. Yelling at the boy would accomplish nothing. Spike sighed. "I'm not a patient vampire, Xander. Something bloody serious is going on with you, and I sodding well want to know what it is. I'll try and wait until you're ready to talk about it, but be ready soon, yeah?"

Xander nodded, staring intently at the thread he was picking off the comforter. Spike swung his legs over the side of the bed. "C'mon, we'll get some pizza before we head back into the sewer."

~*~*~*~*~

It was full dark by the time they got to their entrance. "Need a torch, pet?" Spike pulled a flashlight out of his pocket.

Xander just looked up at him with a glowing green eye and climbed down without taking it. Spike took a deep breath, did a short quadratic equation in Fyarl, and followed. *Patience is bloody overrated.*

They went back to where they had found the body and explored the area. They tried to climb the pipe the little girl had come out of, but it was too small for a grown man, even with Spike on short rations ever since the chip. The carrion demons seemed to have vacated the area. There were no nests. Whatever was here was too dangerous to be near, even with the fresh food. Spike said as much to Xander, quietly. They knew it was near, and didn't want to tip it off. Xander nodded and restlessly paced up and down the small section of sewer they were exploring.

After a couple of hours of fruitless search, Xander suddenly stopped pacing. He walked close to Spike and hissed against his ear, "Willow. Willow will be able to get the plans for the sewers!" They picked up the pace, and left at the nearest ladder up.

"I guess it was your turn to have the bloody bright idea!" Spike practically crowed, as they piled into Xander's car. Xander grinned and floored the gas.

~*~*~*~*~

Willow was, it turned out, more than capable of

'acquiring' Cleveland's sewer schematics, but was adamant about explanations.

"Faith told me Spike was alive – err... undead, and that you ran away from Watcher House to go live with him."

Xander took a deep breath. He was never going to be able to keep his attraction for Spike from Willow if he didn't distract her. "Actually the bleached wonder took me in after Robin tried to strangle me for hanging out with him. I didn't exactly feel welcome there after that."

Willow sounded teary. "Why didn't you tell us he was back?"

That was not the reaction he had been expecting. "Well, after Robin's reaction - and Faith kinda assumed he was still evil, too – I guess I was trying to protect him." Crap, he hadn't really said that out loud, had he? He peeked at Spike from under his hair. The vampire was looking right at him, with an expression that was both surprised and pleased. Crap. Willow was gonna guess, Spike was gonna *know*, and Xander was going to die of embarrassment. Crapity crap crap.

"... know that Buffy's married?"

Xander mentally flailed as he tried to pick up the thread of the conversation. “Ummm... I dunno?” He looked at Spike again. The vampire look wistful, but smiled gently at him, looking like his smile might break of and shatter to pieces on the floor. “I guess he does now, what with vampire hearing and all.”

“He’s there?!? Xander! I wanna talk to him! You are so rude, mister!” Willow’s voice went up an octave.

Xander winced, holding the phone away from his ear, and turned to Spike with a questioning look. Spike looked terrified, but held out his hand for the phone anyway.

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“Hello?” Spike stifled the urge to take a huge, panicked breath. He had no idea what to expect from Red.

“You are in so much trouble, mister! Dawn is going to beat you to life, and I may just join her with my favorite shovel! How could you not tell us?”

Xander saw the stricken look on Spike’s face, and made

an 'I'll go now' gesture. Spike nodded, and Xander wandered into the kitchen.

"Spike, are you there?"

"Yeah, Red. Right here. M'sorry. I figured Andrew would tell all of you."

"Andrew knows? He needs a shovel-talk, too. Spike, I know the Scoobies haven't always treated you the way you probably deserved while you were fighting for us. But we would have wanted to know you were... not gone. Buffy would have wanted to know you were back. Wants to know." Willow sounded tearful again.

"Well, it would have been hard to follow the act that was the last time she saw me. And she's better off without me. She always was." Spike's voice was tight, each sound clipped as he tried to control the emotions coming through in his voice.

"There was a time when you were what she needed. But Xander will be glad to hear that you've let that go." Willow's voice was gentle.

Spike could hear Willow's tearful smile in her voice, but

he still didn't understand. "What's that, Red?"

Willow chuckled. "I guess you haven't figured it out yet. Well, it's not my place to tell you. You'll just have to figure it out on your own, mister." Spike could hear movement on the other end of the phone and an electronic hum as Willow booted up her computer.

"Now, do you have Dawn's number, or should I give it to you? And you better call her soon, if she finds out I know and didn't tell her right away, she'll come after me too."

Spike dutifully took down several numbers for Dawn, Giles, and Buffy. Willow bemoaned the fact that they didn't have a computer, so she couldn't just email them the sewer schematics. She would have them overnighted to Xander's P.O. Box. Xander came out with a mug of tea just as he was hanging up the phone.

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Xander handed Spike the tea. He had very carefully made a pot the way Spike liked, and then liberally 'spiked' it with the brandy that had been sitting on top of the cabinets. Spike took a huge gulp, looked surprised, coughed several times, and drained the rest of the cup.

“S’good tea,” Spike sighed, leaning back into the couch.

“Want more?” Xander picked up the mug.

“Maybe I should call Dawn while I'm still sober...” Spike waffled.

“Two cups won’t make you drunk, and you might need the muscle relaxant when she comes flying through the phone to hit you.” Xander considered. “It might help with the shrieking, too. In fact, I’ll join you.” Xander went back into the kitchen and came out with two mugs.

They sipped, and stared at the phone.

“Bit’s gonna stake me.”

“I don’t think so, but she might make you wish she had.” Xander made a wry face. “You want me to call? I don’t think you can get away with not talking to her, but I can take the initial screaming.”

“Could put her on speakerphone. Tell her together, like.”

Xander smiled at Spike’s worried look. “Yeah, that’s a

good idea.”

“You talk first,” Spike said, as he dialed the phone.

The ringing sounded loud in the small living room. Spike pushed back a cuticle with his thumbnail while they waited for Dawn to pick up.

“Hello?” Dawn’s voice was accompanied by the crackle of static.

“Hey, Dawnie! How’s Paris treating you?” Xander said cheerily. It was good to hear Dawn’s voice, even if she was going to lay into him in a minute.

Spike put the end of his thumb in his mouth and bit it, worrying the nail. He touched the speaker on the phone tenderly, as if Dawn were actually inside.

“Your voice sounds funny, is the connection weird?”

“No, honey, I have you on speakerphone.” Xander tried to give Spike a reassuring look, but the vampire was too focused on the phone to see.

“Speakerphone? Why? Is someone else there?” Dawn

sounded worried.

“Yes, Dawnie, someone’s here, and he’d like to speak to you.” Xander reached across the couch and put his hand on Spike’s, wanting to comfort him in some way.

“Hey Bit.” Spike’s voice husked out, choked thick with emotion.

“Xander? That’s really not fucking funny. You don’t even sound like Spike. Who is dust. Buffy saw him burn up in Sunnydale, remember?”

“No, Bit, it’s really me. I’ve been back awhile, just kinda laying low, yeah?”

“Spike? Oh my gods, Spike?” Dawn burst into tears.
“Xander, tell me this isn’t a trick!”

“It’s not a trick, Dawnie. I ran into him in a cemetery here in Cleveland a few months ago.”

“*MONTHS?!?!?* He’s been back *months* and nobody told me? You fucking prick!”

“Language, Bit!” Spike looked chagrined, but didn’t

correct her on the amount of time he'd been back.

“Please, you taught me most of what you're chiding me for, don't you remember?” Dawn took a shuddering breath. “When can I see you? I need to see you.”

Dawn wanted to skip school and fly down that day, but they managed to talk her into waiting until school had a break, as it was only two weeks away. She agreed on the condition that Spike call her at least four times in those two weeks. Then it was time for her to leave for her 10 AM class. Xander looked at the clock; it was 2:30. He yawned. Then they said their goodbyes and hung up.

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Spike hadn't stopped staring at the phone since the moment Dawn's voice had come through it. Xander gently pressed another cup of tea into his hands. “We don't have to make any more phone calls tonight, Spike.”

“Think if we called the watcher, we could get him to tell Buffy?” Spike was sitting on the couch, but his body was tight. Xander's heart was breaking a little at the evidence that Buffy could still create such a stir of emotion in the

vampire. Xander locked it in the 'no' box, with all the other feelings he wasn't supposed to be having about Spike.

"You don't want to talk to Buffy?" Xander was confused.

"Some things are best left dust." Spike sounded devastated, and Xander moved the phone to sit near him on the couch.

"Is there anything I can do to make this easier?" Xander kicked himself even as he said it. Firstly, could he be any more of a girl? Secondly, wasn't he supposed to be keeping his feelings for Spike a secret? Not so much of a secret if he was laying his heart out for Spike to step on.

Spike leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes. He looked as pale as Xander had ever seen him. "Don't think there's an easy way to do this, pet."

Xander dialed the phone, his eyes still on Spike. "Yeah Giles, it's Xander. Spike's undusty and living in Cleveland. You should find a way to break the news to Buffy that won't have her coming over here to stake him. Don't have time to discuss that now, Giles. Just tell her. Yeah, Dawn and Willow already know. Yeah, he's helping me

with that. Yeah, I'll call you if anything happens." He hung up.

Spike just stared at him. "Wow, Harris, that was... good of you."

Xander just grinned. "Wanna kick my ass at Xbox before we crash?"

Part Four

Spike woke with a start. Blinking at the clock, he saw that it was 6:45 am. He had only been asleep about an hour. He heard a choked sob coming from the other room. That must have been what woke him up. He silently padded into the dark room, letting the demon out so he could see better. Xander was stirring restlessly. Spike stood over him, uncertain whether to wake him or not. He bent to shake the boy's shoulder, just as Xander shot straight up, yelling, "No, Betine! No!" There was a crack as their heads smacked together.

"Ouch!" They both said, rubbing their heads.

"What the hell, Spike?" Xander grouched. "Trying to sleep over here."

"Doing a bang up job of it, too!" Spike snarked in return. "Who's Betine?" He asked more gently, returning to his human face.

Xander went very pale. "Oh."

Spike sat next to Xander's knees on the couch. "Xan?"

Xander looked up. Spike had turned his name into an endearment. The tears spilled over. "Betine was a slayer I knew in Africa. Her name -" a sob interrupted him, and Xander visibly struggled to continue. "Her name means 'no more deaths'. She was a beautiful girl, full of promise. The Urhobo, her people, put a great stock in names. They changed her name when she was orphaned, to protect her. She supported herself, and her little brother being a midwife to nearby tribes. She was seventeen, and had brought at least fifty babies into the world. She believed it was bad luck to count them. When I came for her, she said she would go, but only if she

could bring her brother." He took a deep, shuddering breath. Tears flowed freely down his face.

Spike took one of Xander's hands in his, and stroked the back of it. "What did she do that you tried to stop?"

Xander continued, almost as if he hadn't heard the question. "Ofuako, her brother, had the biggest smile in all of Africa, I swear. He was seven. He taught me jokes in his language, and would climb trees like a monkey and come back down with honeycomb for me. Somehow he never got stung. I called Giles and told him that Ofuako was coming back with us to England, and that it was non-negotiable. He could take it out of my paycheck, if need be." Xander combed the fingers of both hands back through his hair. "Did you know I was possessed by a hyena, back in high school?"

Spike was nonplussed by the seeming non sequitur. His hands itched to smooth the hair from Xander's forehead. Not a Big Bad thing to do, but his mother had done it for him, when he was alive. "No, pet, I hadn't heard that story." He stroked Xander's hair away from his face.

Xander nodded. "Yeah. So when I felt it happen the second time, I knew what it was, and could control it.

Betine, on the other hand, went nuts. I had to stand over Ofuako with a knife to keep her from killing him. We were two days from civilization. Seems some of the magically-inclined women of the area had taken it badly when Betine decided to leave. I think they meant for her to kill both of us. I tried to keep moving, get Ofuako back to civilization, and get help. I was falling asleep at the wheel after 30 hours of driving, though, and we had to pull over. Betine got Ofuako while I was sleeping. I really tried not to sleep. But I did, and I failed him. I woke up to Betine standing over me, covered in her brother's blood. I only had a knife, but I slashed her across the arm, and she ran. I couldn't let her go around savaging people, so I chased her. She fought me, nearly killed me. In the end, though, I killed her." Xander looked at Spike with pleading eyes. "I had to. I didn't know what else to do." Spike merely nodded. "The hyena roared for me to keep killing, but I controlled it for long enough to find a shaman. He tried to remove the hyena, but said he couldn't do it without removing my humanity as well. He said it would leave me a shell. He sent me to another, more powerful shaman. I think I saw six or seven shamans in all, and they all told me it couldn't be done." Xander shuddered. "I'm a demon, now, on the inside."

"You're still a good man," Spike said simply.

Xander shook his head. "I'm not. Not on the inside."

Spike pulled Xander into his arms. "Not taking any arguments from you. Been a demon for longer, and certainly know goodness when I see it."

Xander sobbed again. "I can't ever go back to being who I was. I can't tell the girls, they wouldn't understand. I'm afraid Willow will try to take the hyena out, even if it's not safe. I love her, but I'm not sure what her idea of an acceptable loss is anymore."

"What matters is who you are today, Xan. Take it from someone who has some experience being a demon with a soul." Spike patted Xander's back awkwardly. "And if Red wants to get to you, she'll have to come through me."

Xander hiccupped and pressed his hot forehead to Spike's neck. "You can go back to bed now, if you want. I'm sorry to keep you up."

Spike snorted. "Yeah, I'm gonna leave you alone after all that. You can either bunk out with me on the bed, or I'm going to try to kip in that chair." Spike inclined his head

to a chair near the couch.

Xander blushed from his toes to the roots of his hair. Spike had - however innocently - invited him to bed. "Uh-uh-um..."

"Right then, I'll just take the chair." Spike reluctantly began to disentangle himself from Xander.

Xander stopped him with a hand on his arm. "We can share the bed, Spike." Xander looked Spike in the eye.

Spike cradled Xander's face in his hand, and wiped away the remnants of tears with his thumb. Xander leaned into the touch, his eyelashes brushing his cheek when the intensity of Spike's gaze became too much for him. Spike tilted Xander's face up, and kissed him gently on the lips.

"Been wanting to do that for awhile." Spike pulled back. "Now is probably not the time, yeah?"

Xander bit his lip, trying to capture the taste of Spike on his lips. "Could we..." Xander looked at his hands. "Could we sleep on it?"

"Still want the bed?" was all Spike said.

Xander just nodded.

When Xander woke in the afternoon, he and Spike were back to back. Spike's cool skin lay along his spine like a damp cloth on a fevered head. Xander pressed back slightly, enjoying the coolness. He smiled when Spike rolled over, remembering the flavor of Spike on his lips.

"If I'd known you were better than a sodding electric blanket, I'd have tried getting into bed with you a lot sooner." Spike complained mildly, wrapping himself around Xander.

"You'd have gotten staked for trying. I wasn't so... accepting, before Africa." Xander rubbed the vampire's arms, where they had snaked around his stomach.

"Is it terrible if I'm happy about you being more accepting?" Spike buried his nose in the hair at the nape of Xander's neck, breathing in.

"No. No it's not." Xander hummed as Spike held him a little tighter. "Spike? If I tell you something, will you promise not to laugh?"

He wondered if he should turn around to face Spike while he was talking, but rationalized that he was more likely to actually say it, if he didn't have to contend with blue eyes. "Spike, I'm not... I've never done... I've never been attracted to a guy before." He inwardly cringed, waiting for the vampire's snort of derision.

It never came. Spike pulled Xander around to face him. "Truly, pet?" Xander's face flamed as he nodded, trying not to meet his gaze. Spike rested his chin on the boy's bent head. "I've never been anyone's first, myself." Spike smiled sadly as Xander's head pulled up, he looked into disbelieving brown eyes. "S'true." He stroked the hair back from Xander's forehead. "Was a virgin when I was turned, and at first there was Dru and Angelus, then just Dru, for over a hundred years. Dru would have staked me had I come home smelling of sex, for all that she had her paramours. Then there was Harm - bloody huge mistake that was, but she'd had half the Sunnydale High football team before I showed up. Then there was Buffy. Mostly since then it's been just me. Angel and I, a few times, towards the end. I think we were both disappointed, though." He sighed, and closed his eyes, remembering.

Xander laid the lightest of possible kisses on Spike's forehead, then his closed eyelids, and finally his lips. He

pulled back. "I need to go slowly, but I'd like to kiss you. Really kiss you, and have you kiss me back. Is that okay?"

Spike chuckled. "I honestly can't think of anything that would be more `okay.'"

Xander kissed him again, tentatively, at first. Nearly chaste, closed mouth kisses, that nevertheless made them both have to pull back after a few seconds to breathe. Their lips met again, Xander's hand moving up to Spike's arm to clutch at his shoulder, as Spike's hands stayed at Xander's waist, fisted in his shirt. He was desperately afraid to break whatever spell they had woven between the two of them, by doing something to startle the boy. When Xander's tongue finally came out to lick at his bottom lip, he moaned.

The sound went right through Xander. His hand moved to fist in Spike's hair, and he took advantage of the vampire's open mouth, plundering it with his tongue. His free hand moved to the small of the vampire's back, exerting pressure until they were pressed together from lips to toes. They were both hard and aching. Xander's hips began to thrust, rubbing his erection alongside Spike's.

Spike pulled back, his eyes golden in the half-dark of the bedroom. He was panting. "Slow, slow. Remember?"

Xander moaned. "I remember saying it, but not why I thought it was a good idea." He kissed his way down Spike's neck. "Want you."

Spike exerted all of his limited self-control to pull away again. "Gods know, Xander I want you, too. But I want you to be sure. Want you to want me, not just someone."

Xander rolled onto his back, but kept his hand in Spike's hair. "I get that. Not going to be easy, though." He laughed.

Spike gave him the eyebrow. "What's funny?"

Xander giggled, "Me. I am so gay." Spike shot him another look. "Well, I ran away from home to live with my vampire boyfriend, came close to getting groiny, and am about to go jerk off in the shower thinking about kissing him." Xander got up and kissed Spike on the head. "I'll be back."

Spike groaned, thought about wet, soapy Xander, and wished for a second bathroom.

Xander went to the post office alone, since it was still light outside. Spike took the opportunity to spend some private time in the bathroom.

When Xander came back he had just stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. "Uh, hi Spike." Xander stepped into his personal space and sniffed, nostrils flaring. "Thinking of me, I hope," he said, laying a hand on the vampire's chest, and kissing some water droplets from the corner of his eyes.

"You're pretty much the sum total of my thoughts, these days, luv. Not that I'm complaining." Spike was not going to make it if Xander's presence was going to make him hard every time. "Now go out to the counter, turn on some lights, and spread those out on the counter, while I get dressed, so we can look at them."

"Don't wanna," Xander pouted, tracing a droplet of water with his pinky.

"Yes, you do. And if you don't go now, I'll lay you over my knee, and make it so you can't sit for a week!" Spike prayed to whatever gods gave vampires gorgeous virgin boys as housemates that he would listen, because Spike's

ability to say no was not getting any better.

He was totally unprepared for the wave of lust that hit him at that statement. Xander's eyes had gone dark, and a tiny, needy sound escaped him. Xander made several attempts to speak, but ended up turning and fleeing back to the kitchen area without saying anything intelligible.

Spike shut the door and leaned his forehead against it, before turning to get dressed. That man was going to be the final death of him.

~*~*~*~*~

They looked over the blueprints, Xander pointing out to Spike places in the sewers where they'd killed things. They figured that the body they had found had come from a drainage pipe for the golf course. They just had to find the right one. It was Spike that pointed out a pipe that seemed to come from nowhere, and end right where they had found the little girl.

"That means it's coming from somewhere above ground." Xander noted. "Maybe one of the sprinkler sheds on the golf course? There's one right near where

we found the blanket."

"You haven't checked those already?"

"Well I did, externally, but they were all locked. I figured that meant no-one had broken in."

"Just means that our killer has a key. Let's go get him."

They left, grabbing coats and keys on the way out. Xander did double the speed limit the whole way there. They stood outside the shed while Spike picked the lock. "You ready?" he asked, waiting for Xander's nod before throwing open the doors. There was a blinding flash of light, and when Xander recovered his eyesight, Spike was on the ground, bleeding from a gash on the side of his head.

Xander felt the hyena rising up in him. He threw himself at the man who was standing over Spike, knocking him on the ground. Growling, he twisted the man's head with a sharp jerk, breaking his neck. Standing up, and dropping the body, he turned and fell to his knees beside Spike.

"Spike, I need you to wake up now. You need to come

back to me. I just killed someone. Oh, gods, I just killed someone, Spike." Xander put his head on Spike's chest and sobbed with relief when the vampire stirred.

"Can't be dead unless I'm dust, git. Where is he?" Xander pointed with a shaking hand. "C'mon. If we put him through the chute the carrion eaters will take care of him."

Xander helped get him into the chute. He smelled like he had been living in the shed, grease and mold and unwashed male. There were drawings of mystical symbols on the wall and Spike took them all down.

"We'll send these to the Watcher, see what he was trying to do." Spike turned to look at Xander, but he was outside of the shed. He finished retching, took one look at Spike, and ran off across the golf course. Half an hour later, Spike was still searching. He had thought the boy just needed a minute, but was increasingly more worried as the minutes ticked by. He crossed the golf course, and scaled the cemetery fence. Xander would be looking for somewhere to be alone, and the old crypt was a likely place.

Spike opened the door without stopping, and was

instantly rocked back by the fist in his face. He laughed, "Gonna deal with your problems the Scooby way, then? Beating me is a tried and true cure for what ails ya." He wiped the blood from his lips and licked it off his fingers. He took two more punches to the face before he reached out and caught Xander's hand. "Stop, pet. You'll regret this in the morning."

"You wanted the fucking monster, you got him." Xander growled, kicking out at Spike's feet. Spike went down, Xander on top of him. Spike flipped them, holding Xander's hands above his head.

"What, exactly, does punching me in the face solve, monkeyboy?" Spike asked calmly, moving to absorb Xander's struggles. Damned if the boy wasn't nearly demon-strong. Spike straddled Xander's hips. "Does it make you less of a demon to pummel me? Does it somehow prove your humanity if you make me bleed?" Spike spat blood at the wall. "That enough blood for you? You're almost as strong as the slayer was when she used to beat me then fuck me, is that what you're looking for?"

Xander went limp. "Gods, no, Spike - oh fuck." He sobbed. "I'm so fucked up. I'm sorry. So sorry. I never

wanted to make you feel like that."

Spike let go of Xander's hands, and carded them through his hair. "I know, pet. I know. You're a little out of your head at the mo', but I'm not going anywhere. We're gonna get through this. You Scoobies are pretty much indestructible."

"I deserve to go to jail, Spike. I killed two people. I'm more of a killer than some of the fledges I've staked." Xander's breath was coming quick and hard between sobs.

Spike kissed his forehead. "Both times you killed someone who was about to kill you, or someone close to you. No fault in fighting to survive, pet."

"It hurts so much, Spike. Can you make it stop hurting?" Xander's hands were fisted in the front of Spike's shirt.

"Don't know about making it stop, but I can do my best to make you forget for a little while." Spike smoothed his hands down Xander's chest.

"Please," Xander whispered, pulling Spike towards him. They kissed cautiously at first, slowly. Xander licked the

blood from Spike's split lip, and peppered it with tiny kisses. The taste of his blood in Xander's mouth made Spike painfully hard in just seconds, and the kiss became progressively more hungry and desperate.

Spike rucked Xander's shirt up under his arms, and began kissing his chest. Coming to a nipple, Spike teased it to a peak with his lips and tongue before biting it hard enough to make Xander hiss and arch his back. Spike slid a hand under Xander's hips and held him up. He licked, kissed and nibbled his way down Xander's twitching midriff, following the sparse trail of hair. Pulling open the buttons of Xander's jeans, Spike traced the length of his erection with the tip of an index finger. Xander groaned, and arched up into the touch, trying to increase the contact. Spike pulled his finger away, and drew Xander's pants and boxers down to his knees. Xander kicked his sneakers off and his pants soon followed.

Spike dragged his nails up the inside of Xander's thighs, causing his legs to part. Spike moved to kneel between Xander's legs, his cool breath on Xander's cock making him whimper and tilt his hips up towards Spike. The vampire kissed the sensitive spot on Xander's inner thigh, and bit down again, making Xander cry out, but not breaking the skin. Kissing the mark he had left, Spike

slowly worked his way all the way around Xander's shaft without ever touching it, only to bite the other thigh.

"Please!" Xander begged, as Spike pressed the bite with his tongue, making it burn. Spike licked a drop of precum gently from the tip, and then slowly sucked the broad head into his mouth.

The salty taste was all Xander, and Spike pressed his thumbs into the marks on Xander's thighs, sucking hard, so that he came with a shout.

Spike sat back on his heels, as Xander melted bonelessly to the dirt floor. Xander reached for Spike, but the vampire pulled back, standing and picking up Xander's pants. "C'mon Xander. Let's go home."

When they got home, Spike led Xander to the couch. Once Xander was seated, Spike went to the bathroom and shut the door. After a few minutes, Xander heard the water running in the shower.

Not really knowing what to do, Xander made up the couch. He really hoped Spike would tell him that he didn't have to sleep out here alone, but was wary of encroaching on the vampire's space. He was ashamed of

hitting Spike, taking all his anger and fear out on the smaller man. He tried to find the words to apologize, but none would come.

In the shower, Spike wavered between brushing his teeth and keeping the taste of Xander. There was a cold, heavy feeling in his gut, as he brushed his teeth, deciding to try and wash away the memory. He didn't want to remember his first taste of Xander mixed with the scent of death that he imagined hung all over him just now.

He didn't want to feel his affection for Xander tainted with the pain of being used, yet again, but it seemed he didn't have a choice about that. Soon Xander would toss him aside for someone more human, someone who brought out Xander's humanity instead of teasing out the demon. The cold, heavy feeling roiled up, and Spike had to lean against the wall until the wave of nausea passed.

He should leave Xander be. Pack up his stuff and leave, go to ground somewhere. Somewhere where he wouldn't taint people. Spike turned the water to cold and stood under the punishing spray as a single silent sob wracked his body.

He left the shower, shivering. Leaving the bathroom, he

saw Xander sleeping on the couch. Yes. He was good enough for fighting and fucking, pleasing the demon inside, but when it came to something cleaner, more innocent, he was cast aside. Touching the rapidly fading bruise under his eye, he went to the bedroom and shut the door.

Xander awoke at noon to find an empty house and an envelope taped to the TV.

Xander.

The apartment is paid up through June. I left enough cash in the safe in the closet for you to be comfortable until then. The key is in the bowl by the bed.

I'm so, so sorry.

~S

Xander's mouth worked, but no sound came out. The paper fluttered to the floor.

Part Five

Dawn arrived in Cleveland and was a little surprised when no one met her at the airport. Whatever, she was a resourceful girl, and she had the address. Slinging her small bag over her shoulder and hailing a taxi, she set off to see her boys. Xander and Spike. Spike. It still seemed like a dream that he was alive.

She knocked on the wooden door, her bag dangling from her arm to sit squat by her feet. There was no sign of life. She knocked again, trying the handle and finding it open. Maybe they had been late going to pick her up, and left the door open in case they missed her. She shut the door behind her and tossed her bag on the couch, which had rumpled blankets on it. They must have overslept.

She used the bathroom, noticing a few cigarettes that looked as if they had been left to burn down to the filter in an ashtray on the back of the toilet. Unlike Spike to let that much precious tobacco go to waste. She grinned at the thought.

Leaving the bathroom, she wandered into the kitchen, and pattered around there for awhile, cleaning. It looked like the boys needed a maid service. Finally, unable to contain her curiosity, she peeked in the bedroom. There was a cigarette burning in the ashtray by the bed. She

stubbed it out, confused, nearly screaming when what she had assumed to be a pile of laundry reached out toward her with a weak, "No, please."

"Fuck! Xander!" Dawn jumped. "Is this your twisted idea of a surprise party? Where's Spike?"

"Gone." Xander's eyes were bloodshot and swollen.

"What do you mean, gone?" Dawn asked, a tinge of hysteria coloring her voice. She took a deep breath. Spike wasn't dead again. She would know. Xander would have called her.

Xander merely held out a slip of paper in response. It had been folded and refolded, and she sat next to Xander on the bed and smoothed it over her knee to read it. There were a number of places where the pen ran, and she realized that Xander had cried over this paper many times. But the note held no clue as to why the vampire had left.

"Xander, why did Spike leave?" Dawn held up a finger as she ran to the living room to get her bag, and came back. "Tell me what happened?" She started laying out ingredients for a spell.

Xander closed his eyes and sobbed, but no tears came out. He hadn't left the bed, except for short trips to the bathroom, in five days. He had eaten nothing and drunk nothing, determined to drive the demon out with hunger. The demon would leave, and then he would be human enough for Spike. Spike would know and come back to him.

Spike would know.

Dawn's face creased with worry when she heard the dry, rasping sobs that degenerated into a hacking cough. She pulled a bottle of water from her bag and held it to Xander's lips, surprised when he wrenched his head away with a desperate cry of, "No!"

"It's just water Xander. You look like you need some fluids. And some food. And definitely a bath," she said, wrinkling her nose.

Xander just curled into a ball, facing away from her on the bed. He murmured something, and Dawn had to hold her breath to hear him chant, "Nonononononono..." breathlessly.

What the hell had happened? Summoning a resolve face she had learned from Willow, and the voice-of-steel that was a combination of Buffy and her mother, she took Xander's face in her hands and forced him to look at her. "Xander Harris! Sit up now!" A shocked look crossed Xander's face, and he sat up, looking at her like this was the first time he had seen her. Satisfied that she had his attention, Dawn continued. "I don't know what the hell happened, but I intend to find out, if I have to get a shovel and beat it out of both of you. Drink this water, and I'm going to go get you some more, and something to eat, and you will eat it. Are we clear?"

Eyes wide, Xander dutifully took the water and nodded.

When he was ensconced against the headboard with a bowl of canned ravioli on a tray in front of him, and a gallon of water on the nightstand beside him. Dawn sat cross-legged on the floor, spreading a map out in front of her and arranging some crystals around the edge. She put a cigarette on the other side of the map, concentrating on it a moment, inhaling the smell of smoke, leather, whiskey, and dark spice that was Spike's scent. Then she closed her eyes and blew some powder over the map. One spot glowed green on the map when she opened her eyes. "Got him," Dawn said with

satisfaction. He hadn't even left the city.

"You eat all of that, and drink all of the water you can hold. And because I know you'll think of something, I forbid you to do anything stupid and noble. Stay right there. I'm bringing Spike back."

~*~*~*~*~

Dawn followed her map to an extremely shady side of town. The place she wanted had stairs going down to a black metal door with no knob. No light above the door, which was shadowed and dark. Dawn took a deep breath and willed herself not to be nervous.

When she knocked a small sliding door opened and a pair of red eyes looked out. "I'm the vampire slayer named Buffy's sister. I'm sure you've heard of her." She hefted the small axe in her hand, leaning it casually back on one shoulder. "I'm here for one vamp. Let me have him, and you'll be left alone. If I don't return with the vamp in an hour, there'll be an army of slayers here to kill every one of you and burn this place to the ground."

The little door closed, and Dawn held her breath and

waited. There was a commotion behind the door and Dawn backed up two stairs, axe ready in her grip. The door opened just wide enough to eject one skinny, swearing vampire, and then it slammed shut, and Dawn heard the sounds of several locks clicking.

"Bloody hell! There is no way I drank a whole grand worth of whiskey!" He pounded on the door. "I'm not even properly pissed! This is no way to conduct a business!" was Spike's parting shout to the door. Kicking it hard enough to make a dent in the metal, Spike spun drunkenly away from the door. "Sodding wankers can't let a vampire drink his whiskey in peace," he mumbled.

Dawn cleared her throat. "I think that might be my fault. I threatened them with Buffy." She had to hide a grin at the look on Spike's face.

"Bit? What the bloody fucking hell are you doing here?! You could have been killed, or worse!" Spike was suddenly much more sober.

"Yes, but I wasn't, and now I have what I need." Dawn fixed Spike with her resolve face.

"Dawn you don't -"

"I do. I need your help to save Xander."

"Save Xander from what? Where is he? Is he hurt?" Spike felt a cold burst of fear. He had left Xander unprotected.

"He's been lying in a pile of your dirty laundry and burning those horrible cigarettes you smoke. And tried to refuse food and water. And cried over this -" she held up the folded note, "about a gazillion times. You are going to walk back to the apartment with me, and on the way you're going to tell me what happened."

"I can't go back there, Bit. It's - it's complicated. Anyway, I'm the last thing he needs."

"I wasn't asking, Spike. You're coming and you're going to tell me. Willow can be here in a few hours, and I'm sure she'll bring an extra shovel for me. And if I could find you, do you really think you can hide from her?"

Spike had the grace to look ashamed. "It's an adult matter, Dawn. Not for your ears. `M just trying to do what's best for the boy."

"Don't think using my actual name is gonna get anything

past me, William." Spike flinched. Dawn went on, more gently, "Xander and I are both adults now. You need to let him decide what's best for him. And I'm trying to help, but I can't do that if you don't tell me what's going on."

"Fine. I'll tell you, but then you have to leave me be. It's hard enough without the rest of the gang trooping in to make it worse." Spike lit a cigarette, blowing smoke at the sky.

"I won't repeat what you tell me, but I don't promise not to harass you about it myself." Dawn crossed her arms and leaned against the side of the stairwell.

"Something happened to Xander in Africa. S'why he had to leave. Then something happened here, reminded him of that. Made him feel guilty. Then we, ah, fought. I left."

"Could you vague that up a little for me? That doesn't tell me anything, Spike."

"Kinda caught between a rock and a hard place here, Bit. The first part isn't my story to tell, and Xander might stake me. The second part you might stake me for." He sighed. "Bloody hell."

"I'm not going to stake you, Spike. Even if you went back to the wholesale slaughter of humans I'd be more likely to try and find a non-lethal way of stopping you. You're practically my brother." Dawn looked away, unable to meet Spike's eyes.

"Bit -" Spike's voice had tears in it he wouldn't shed.
"Okay. Xander's possessed by a hyena spirit. He had to kill a slayer in Africa, also possessed, in self-defense. Then he comes here, and we're hunting what we think is a demon that's been kidnapping kids. We, ah... got kind of involved. Then we find the guy, not a demon, a human. He knocks me down and Xander panics and kills him too. Then we, uh fought, and I kinda did something I shouldn't've, let him do things. I - It was really not good, for either of us. So I left before I could make it any worse."

Dawn took this in silently. Spike was a bit worried about the lack of interruptions, and the continued silence. He lifted the cigarette to his mouth with a shaking hand. He was so dust.

Dawn didn't look up. "Do you love him?" She asked quietly.

Spike looked up sharply at the question, and then away again. "I don't know, Bit. It's complicated."

She looked up at that, taking his chin in her hand and turning his face back towards her. "No, Spike, it isn't. I have a pretty clear idea of how Xander feels about you. I need you to stop bullshitting me so I can come up with a way to help both of you."

"I'm no good for him, Bit. I -"

"That's not what I asked."

Spike looked away again. "Yeah. I do."

Dawn smiled at him. "Let's go, then." She grabbed his hand and started to walk.

Spike let himself be pulled.

Part Six

Xander ate three ravioli before he felt sick. He put the tray on the floor, then lit a cigarette and left it burning in the ashtray, before lying back down. He wondered if Dawn was actually going to bring Spike back. Probably not. Spike would tell her what he had done, and she wouldn't come back.

He would be alone. He had lost Betine and Ofuako, he had driven Spike away, and now he would lose Dawn. Probably Faith too. Wait.

Faith. Faith might understand. She would turn him in to the police, but that was exactly what he deserved. Xander reached for the phone.

"Faith?" Xander croaked.

"Xander? What's wrong? Where are you?" Faith was really worried.

"I need to talk to you. Can you come? Alone. I need to talk to you p-privately." Xander shuddered. He felt so cold.

"I'm on my way. It's the apartment on the third floor of that old Victorian, right?" She didn't wait for an answer. "You hang in there until I get there, you understand?"

Xander hung up. He shivered and pulled a few of Spike's shirts up over his shoulder, breathing in the scent that was Spike, trying to memorize it.

~*~*~*~*~

Faith just barely remembered to try the door before she kicked it in. It was open. The house reeked of cigarette smoke. She opened a window. "Xander? Where are you?"

"Here." Xander stood in the doorway of the bedroom.

"You look like shit. What happened? Is it Spike? Where is he?" Faith growled the last question, feeling for the stake in her back pocket.

"Put that away, Faith. Spike's not here, and he has nothing to do with this." Xander shuffled to the couch and sat down heavily. "I need you to take me to the police. I've killed someone." He put his head in his hands,

not daring to look at her.

Faith squatted, putting her hands on Xander's knees.

"Xander, we kill demons all the time -"

"Not a demon, Faith. A human. The kidnapper wasn't a demon, he was a human trying to perform some sort of spell, and I killed him."

"Oh. Xander, I'm so sorry -"

"Don't be. I deserve this."

"No, Xander. You don't." Dawn's voice from the doorway caused them both to look up.

"Dawnie, you don't understand. I've done things. More than just that -"

Faith's "What?" was overridden by Dawn's "I know."

"You don't know, Dawn. In Africa I -"

"Killed a slayer who tore apart a seven year old boy and tried to kill you. I know."

"I never told anyone. How did you find out?" Xander paled.

Spike stepped into the room. "You told me, Xander. I'm sorry, but I had to tell her."

"Spike," Xander breathed, afraid to say it out loud. Faith squeezed Xander's knees and stood, walking to the other side of the room, as Spike walked forward and stood in front of him.

"Bit says you need me. I'm here."

Tears pricked Xander's eyes. "I have to go. The police have to know about me. I have to be locked up."

Faith came back and sat on the couch. "Xander, I don't think you have to go to jail. I had to go because I would have done it again, on purpose. When Willow killed Warren, you didn't send her to jail, did you?" She put her hand on Xander's arm.

"No..." Xander said uncertainly. He was different.

"Willow didn't have a demon inside of her."

Faith's eyebrow went up, but she said nothing, looking

instead to Spike.

Dawn was looking at him, too. Bloody hell.

"Xan..." Spike trailed off as those bottomless brown eyes focused on him. Bloodshot, red rimmed, and swollen, but still the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen. "Maybe, like Willow, you just need help to handle the power you have now." Spike swallowed, hoping he hadn't said the wrong thing. He looked at Dawn. She was smiling encouragingly. He relaxed an inch or so.

"There's no coven of hyena-possessed people for me to go to and be trained." Spike wanted to send him away. He looked down as tears filled his eyes again. "I'll go though. Somewhere. Back to Giles." His voice broke on that last word, and several tears rolled down his cheeks and over his nose.

"Oh." Xander wanted to leave. Of course. He wanted to be with humans again. "I'll, uh, go get the phone, and call him, then." Spike was about to turn away when Dawn thwacked him on the head.

She looked at Faith. "Are all boys this stupid? Maybe I should date girls." Faith snorted. Dawn pulled Xander up

so he and Spike were standing face to face. Their eyes locked, but they said nothing. Dawn sighed. "Spike, don't you have something you want to tell Xander? Maybe the two of you should go into the bedroom and talk." When they didn't move, she shoved them towards the door.

When they finally closed the door, Dawn went to the kitchen and got the whiskey and two glasses. She sat next to Faith. "This might take awhile."

Faith looked at the clock. 11:41. "It's early yet." She sipped the whiskey Dawn poured her.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike was shocked by the state of the bedroom. Xander had dredged up every piece of clothing he hadn't taken with him and made a nest on the bed. Spike could see the indentation where his body had been. Idly, he wondered if it was still warm. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Xander shift his weight from foot to foot. He had no idea what Dawn expected him to do. Xander was a mess and he had obviously caused it. They should be taking Xander far away from him. The thought caused his chest to tighten. He had to say something.

"Xan... I'm sorry." It was all he could think of.

There was an awkward silence as Xander just stared at him. "You're sorry?" Xander was incredulous. "What on Earth do you have to be sorry about?"

"Took you out hunting. Treated you like a demon. Shouldn't've. Should've taken him down m'self." Spike looked up at Xander, silently pleading with him to understand. "It'd been so long since I'd had a hunting partner. I was lonely, and there you were."

"I thought you'd left because you couldn't stand what I had done." Xander's voice broke on the last word, and he swallowed back tears for several moments. "I thought I wasn't human enough for you. That you hated what I'd become."

Their gaze broke, the moment too intense. Spike looked at Xander's bare feet, repressing an urge to kneel and cradle them in his hands. To touch any part of Xander, really. "Thought you hated that I brought out the demon in you. Figured you'd blame me for what had happened."

"No. Nearly killed me that you left." Xander stared out

the window, watching a car drive slowly down the street.

"Should I leave, now?" Spike was still uncertain of what Xander wanted.

"If you want." Xander managed to choke out, steeling himself for the sound of the door.

Spike's hand twitched as he stilled the urge to reach out to Xander. If he left now, he'd lose Xander. "Bit says I'm supposed to let you decide what's good for you. I don't want to hurt you. I..." love you. Spike let the sentence trail off.

"What if I do it again? Kill another human being. What if I'm totally out of control now?" Xander looked at his hands.

"You don't look out of control to me, pet. The slayer and I will help you. We'll call Red. Giles won't let her do anything stupid." Spike stepped a little closer to Xander, wanting to comfort, but not knowing how.

"Does that mean you're staying?" Xander asked quietly.

"Not if you want me to leave." Spike's stomach clenched.

"I know you wanted to go slow, and I know what I did was wrong. I'll understand if you don't want me around anymore." He wouldn't like it, but he'd do what was right for Xander.

Xander was staring again. "Did you miss the part where I begged you to do it? I didn't really give you a choice." Xander took Spike's hands in his, rubbing his thumbs over the backs.

"I'm a demon, pet. Comfort comes in limited forms for us. But I should've done something else."

"Did you miss the part where I'm part demon, too, now? You gave me what I needed. Going slow was the worst idea I ever had, anyway." Xander shot him a self-deprecating smile.

"You need time to be certain of your feelings for me. I understand that, Xander." Bloody hell, he was turning into sodding William. Spike's chest felt hollow. He shouldn't hope that Xander would love him someday.

"No, actually I don't." Xander wouldn't meet Spike's eye.

"How's that, again?" This was where Xander would tell

him he could never be more than friends. Maybe not even that.

"It took me awhile to figure it out. I would have interlocking parts thoughts, about you, and I tried to tell myself it's just because I've only had a few one-night stands since Sunnydale. And then every time you would smile, my heart would skip six or seven beats. I tried to tell myself it was because I hadn't really had a close guy friend since Jesse." Xander turned away from Spike and went to stand by the window.

"It wasn't until he knocked you on the ground, and I saw you there, unconscious, that I knew." Xander's hands were shaking. "I was in love with you. I was terrified that you'd been hurt. I killed him because he hurt you, Spike. Not because I thought he was a demon. Not because of what he did to those kids. You."

"...in love with me?" Spike parroted, all higher brain function gone. He felt like he was floating.

Xander hung his head, still facing away. "Yeah. You can laugh, it's okay."

Spike did laugh then, taking three broad steps to Xander

and spinning him around. He kissed Xander thoroughly through a grin he wasn't able to fight. "Bloody hell, Xander. I never thought you'd say that to me."

Xander's eyes were wide. He had expected derision. Instead Spike was happy and babbling a mile a minute. "I should have said something before things went bad, I know. But I really didn't know until Dawn made me think about it. And then I knew, and I came back. I only left because I thought I was hurting you. Can I come back? Is that okay?"

"Spike, it's kinda your apartment." Xander's smile was uncertain.

"It can be our apartment if you want. I'll have the landlady come up in the morning. Is that moving too fast?" Spike had to physically bite his tongue to keep from pleading.

Xander pressed his forehead against Spike's chest, afraid to look up. "Tell me?"

Spike tilted his chin up until they were looking each other in the eye. "Love you, Xan."

Xander's arms wound around Spike's waist, and he rested his head on a leather-covered shoulder. " `Kay. We both stay."

Spike pressed a kiss to Xander's temple. "We both stay."

~*~*~*~*~

Faith and Spike spent the next hour or so drawing up a training schedule for Xander. They would be training him in how to restrain and disable, as well as kill. He would have an option the next time he had to fight a human. Dawn and Xander put a word in now and then, but for the most part just watched the other two argue.

The arguing stopped when Xander's stomach made a loud growling sound. Everyone looked at him. "There's a Chinese place that delivers that's open `til two. I'll call." Spike grabbed the phone and wandered off to the kitchen.

Faith excused herself before the food came. "I gotta get back before Robin freaks. Xan, I expect a call this afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am. Soon as I wake up." Xander was lying on the couch.

Food was eaten quickly, as Dawn had begun to nod off in the chair. Spike cleaned up the various leftovers while Xander made up the couch for Dawn. He gave her a kiss on the forehead. "Night, Dawnie. Thank you, for everything."

"Anytime, Xander." Dawn yawned. "You know you've always been my hero."

"Yeah? It was you who rescued me, today." Xander smoothed the hair back from her forehead. Dawn made a pleased humming sound, and closed her eyes, so Xander continued to stroke her hair until Spike came out of the kitchen. Xander held out a hand and let himself be pulled up and guided to the bedroom. While Spike was hanging up his duster in the closet, Xander stripped to his boxers. Spike turned around, and groaned. "Maybe I should sleep on the floor, pet."

"Is it the boxers?" Xander teased, "because I can always take those off." He pushed the waistband down a little.

Spike closed his eyes. If he couldn't see it, he wouldn't

want it. "Slow, remember?" His eyes opened when Xander pressed his body against Spike's and wrapped his arms around the vampire's waist.

"Slow was a bad idea. Want you. Unless," Xander pulled back, "you'd rather not." He pulled away completely, eyes on the ground.

Spike put his hands on Xander's arms, fighting the urge to pull him close again. "Gods, Xander. Want you so much. But I don't want you to do anything you'd regret, and Bit's in the next room."

Xander ran over to the bedside table and rifled through the drawer for a few seconds. He held up a crystal on a chain triumphantly. Rubbing it until it glowed a soft amber color, Xander hung it from the bedpost. "Silencing spell. Willow gave it to me when I went to Africa. Privacy for Council business. Mostly so I could talk demons and slayers without scaring aid workers." Xander raised an eyebrow. "And you're supposed to let me decide what's good for me, remember?" He held out his hands. "Any other objections?"

Spike took his hands. "You sure, pet?" He kissed Xander's shoulder.

Xander shivered at the contact. "More certain every time you touch me."

"I'll just have to keep doing that, then, yeah?" He pulled Xander close, kissing his way up the tanned column of his neck.

"Please, yes!" Xander groaned, leaning his head to one side, and struggling to untuck Spike's shirt.

Spike put his hands over Xander's. "Shh... It's okay, Xander. Gonna take care of you. Calm down, yeah?"

Xander giggled. A manly giggle, really. "I've wanted this for so long, Spike. Calm is not something I think I'm capable of."

"Could tie you to the bed." Spike whispered in his ear. "Tease you until you have a reason to be frantic. Taste you everywhere," Spike ghosted a palm over the tented front of Xander's boxers, "leave this until last. Until your voice is hoarse from begging."

"Oh, god..." Xander's knees buckled, but Spike was there to hold him up. "Spike," he breathed, before the vampire

took his mouth. They kissed until Xander's entire body felt like it was made of Jello.

Spike lifted Xander and laid him down on the bed. Xander whimpered when he withdrew, but watched with hungry eyes as the vampire unbuttoned and removed his overshirt and drew the t-shirt underneath over his head. Xander put a hand inside his boxers and began a slow stroke.

Spike groaned. "Take off the shorts, yeah? Let me see." He undid the first two buttons of his jeans and leaned back against the wall.

Xander planted his feet and lifted his hips, sliding the boxers down and kicking them to the side. Ghosting his palm over his arousal in a mirror of Spike's earlier action, he locked eyes with Spike. Gasping at the heat he saw on the vampire's face, he wrapped his fist around his aching cock, and slowly began to thrust up into it. "Like this, Spike? This what you wanted to see? How much I want you? How hard I am just thinking about you?"

Spike cupped himself through his jeans. "Yes. Love to look at you." He was breathing, heavy, wet breaths that brought the taste of Xander's arousal to him a little

stronger with each one.

"Let me see you? Show me how much you want me."
Xander was mesmerized by the movement of Spike's hands as he unbuttoned the rest of his jeans and peeled them off, kicking them towards the closet.

Spike took himself in hand, using his thumb to gather the fluid at the tip, and bringing it to his mouth to taste, never looking away from Xander. "Bet you'd taste like chocolate and sunshine," he said, starting up a slow stroke. "Bet I could suck on you for hours and never get tired of the taste. Gonna taste you every day. Want you, Xan, so much."

"Have me." Xander's voice was hoarse.

Spike crawled up the bed, skimming his body over Xander's. They both moaned. There were hungry, biting kisses on lips, neck and shoulders, but Xander kind of lost track because Spike had wrapped his cool hand around both of them. Both too far gone for finesse, they both thrust into Spike's fist, the tight channel slowly becoming slick with their mixed juices.

Xander's hands roamed over Spike's body, touching

every dip and bump on Spike's spine, tangling in his hair, and finally grasping his hips desperately, as orgasm washed over both of them. Spike fell to one side, but threw an arm over Xander's chest.

Xander slid a finger through the slick substance on his stomach and tasted it. "Mmmm." He offered some to Spike who fellated his finger obscenely, making his cock twitch. Xander moaned. Spike grabbed a tshirt from the pile that had ended up mostly on the floor and used it to clean them both off.

"Sleep now, pet. We can continue this when you've rested." Spike laid his head on Xander's broad chest.

"Promise?" Xander whispered.

"Promise." Spike twined his legs with Xander's. "Sleep now."

"`Kay." Xander yawned. He rubbed the crystal above his head until it stopped glowing.

When Dawn peeked in on them in the morning, they were still asleep in each other's arms.

Spike put the dishrag down and went to answer the knock on the door. "Xan, I thought you were going out with Faith -" he stopped when he saw who was at the door. "Wood. Did something happen to Xander and Faith?" His face was blank.

"No! No. I wanted... umm... Can I come in?"

Spike snorted. "Umm... No. Last I saw you, you were trying to kill me. Heard you roughed up Xander, too." Spike's fist clenched and released, clenched and released.

Robin sighed. "That's fair." He held up his hands to show he was unarmed. "I just uh, heard what you did for Xander. What you and Faith are doing for him."

"And?" Spike narrowed his eyes.

"I realized something." Robin's gaze fluttered about nervously. "I love Faith, you know? She has some things in her past... Well, maybe they're not on the same scale as your past - She hasn't lived as long. And don't get me wrong... atonement is something that happens for her every day." Wood looked Spike in the eye. "I just wanted to say, I get it now. What you did, in Sunnydale, for all of

us. What you're still doing, now. I get it, and I've been an ass, and thank you." He looked at the ground again. "I can't forget what you did to my mother, and I don't expect you to forget what I tried to do to you." There was an awkward pause, and Robin cleared his throat and continued. "I know we're never going to be friends, but I'd like us to move past all that enough to work together."

Wood shifted as Spike's eyes bored into him. Finally, Spike put out his hand. "Okay," he said gruffly.

They shook, briefly. Wood turned on the landing and began to walk down the stairs. He stopped on the third step. "So... patrol tomorrow night? Theodosius' has a nest of Soonath demons."

"Yeah? They breeding?"

"Six family dogs missing in the neighborhood, so probably."

"Seven thirty, then?"

"Yes. Sounds good. I have a shotgun. Do you have a bag of rock salt?"

"Yeah. Landlady gave us a twenty-pound bag. Used some of it to kill some flesh-eating slugs north of town, and some on the stairs last freeze, but we've still got at least fifteen pounds."

"It's the only thing that'll kill the eggs. Probably won't need more than a pound or two, though."

"See you tomorrow night, then." Wood walked down the stairs and out the door.

Xander came home a few hours later. "Nest of Soonath demons in your old crypt. They're breeding," he called from the living room, shucking his boots next to the door.

"I know," Spike said from the doorway.

Xander pulled off his hoodie and t-shirt, unbuttoning the button on his jeans. "You know? Did you go out?"

"No." Spike looked pensive. "Had a visitor."

"Do we know anyone in town beside Faith and... Robin. He came here?"

"Yeah. Said he wanted to let the past be the past and move on. Patrolling with him tomorrow."

"Wow," was all Xander could say.

"Yeah. Not something I thought I'd see. He said atonement was something that happened for Faith every day." There was a look of pain on Spike's face, and Xander went to him, trying to smooth it away with gentle touches. "Am I atoning? Being here, with you... it doesn't feel like punishment."

"I don't think atonement and punishment are necessarily the same thing." Xander ducked his head so that Spike had to look at his face. "If you weren't you, if we didn't have the history we have, would you have been able to help me? Maybe I would have gone off the deep end like Faith did, if you weren't there." Xander straightened and pressed a kiss to the top of Spike's head. "Yeah, most of the you and me stuff is good. If we didn't have anything good in our lives, we'd be like Angel was, all brooding and boring. Besides, if we're going to save the world, there needs to be something to make it worth saving. Even heroes need incentive."

"Part of my atonement is helping you, that what you're

saying?" Spike looked happier.

"Yup." Xander kissed Spike again. "Wanna help me with something right now?"

"What do you need help with?"

Xander put a cool hand on the heat and hardness under his zipper, and began to pull Spike toward the bedroom. "Think you can help me with this?"

Spike chuckled. "Yeah pet. That I can do."

The End