

*Feedback: Do you really want to see me beg?*

*Archive: Hey, just ask first <g>*

*Series: Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

*Pairing: Spike/Xander*

*Rating: PG (so far)*

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*This story is written for enjoyment, not for profit. Again, I'm not that lucky. Litigation would be a waste of time, people. I'm a member of the Starving Student Sect.*

*Summary: Xander and Spike make some discoveries about each other, that bring them closer. A lot closer <g>.*

*Warnings: Um, spoilers for the current season, and the characters' situations in it. But it tends to veer off in AU directions...*

*Hi. This is my first shot at writing S/X, so please let me know what you think. I will really appreciated it.*

*I finally started watching the show regularly part way through this season, so please forgive me for any mistakes I make.*

## **Discoveries**

**by**

**Kay**

Spike was looking for trouble. He was bored, bored out of his mind, and that boredom had sent him out wandering the streets of Sunnydale. Thanks to whatever those military bastards had done to him, he still couldn't attack any humans, not if he didn't want to experience shooting, agonizing pain.

If he wanted that, he'd stay home and watch Must See TV.

So here he was, skulking through the streets, hoping to find some demons engaged in some sort of nefarious activity, so he'd have an excuse to step in and wreak some havoc, break some bones, end some lives.

Unfortunately, the demons weren't cooperating. He hadn't found any committing atrocities. Hell, he hadn't found any at all, so he couldn't even try to convince himself that they were possibly considering committing atrocities and justify his attacking them.

He was about to give up, and just go back to the crypt he had appropriated, when he heard a familiar voice. It sounded like one of the Slayer's groupies: Xander. He hadn't seen the young man since moving out of his dank little basement almost a week ago.

Screw it. He didn't have anything else to do. Besides, from the stories he'd heard, Xander was a magnet for trouble. With any luck, the kid would get attacked by a ravening hoard of demons. The blond man followed the voice at a distance.

He remembered something else he'd heard. He stopped by Giles's house a few days ago, looking to find out if there were any non-humans about that needed to be persuaded to move on, out of town.

The little red headed witch had made some comment about Xander being out of reach for the next week or two. She'd looked a little worried when she said that he'd told her not to try to get any messages to him through his parents, no matter how important it was.

Spike hadn't thought much of the announcement. He wasn't living with the kid any more; it hardly concerned him. Although...he did find himself almost missing Xander. He supposed he'd gotten used to living with someone, was all. A few more days of living on his own, and he'd stop wondering what the dark-haired young man was up to, if he was remembering to eat, who might be in the basement with him.

It wasn't as though he cared, after all.

He got a little closer to Xander. He was walking with a man, someone Spike had never seen before. They were talking, and laughing. The vampire could see that Xander was still watching out for trouble, even as he chatted; life in Sunnydale had drummed that lesson into him. Spike took a little more care to stay out of sight, but within hearing range. It was good practice, if nothing else.

Who was Xander with? The vampire couldn't remember ever having seen him out of the company of the Slayer and her little band of followers before. As he listened to the young man laugh, Spike decided that he certainly sounded happier with this stranger than he did with his friends.

He frowned. Xander was laughing an awful lot. Too much for him to just be walking along, talking to a friend. If he didn't know better, he'd have sworn that the kid was flirting with his companion. But that was impossible, wasn't it?

After following a bit longer, Spike was forced to admit that Xander was definitely flirting with the other man, who was showing no hesitation in flirting back. What the hell was going on?

Xander walked the stranger to an apartment complex, where they paused outside of a door. As the man

fumbled with a key, Spike drifted closer, wanting to be sure that he could eavesdrop.

After the door was open, the stranger turned and smiled at Xander. "Hey, Xan," he said, a wide grin crossing his face. "Would you like to come in? Night's not over yet."

With a grin of his own, Xander shook his head. "Can't, sorry. I've still got to finish cleaning up." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. "Maybe some other time?"

The other man laughed, calling out a good night as he shut the door. Xander waited, and once the lock could be heard slamming home, he turned and walked back the way he had come.

Spike trailed after him. How very interesting. The last he'd known, Xander was involved with that used-to-be-demon Anya, yet here he was, asking for a rain check after being propositioned by a man. The vampire couldn't leave now, not until he found out what was going on.

He followed Xander to an out of the way club that he had passed by many times without ever noticing it. The young man opened the front door with a key and slipped inside. Spike spent several minutes swearing softly to himself until he was able to find a third story window

with a broken lock. He'd had to dangle from the roof to do it, but he was finally inside.

The club was set up simply. A bar at one end, a dance floor in the middle, and a stage at the other end. Behind the bar, there were a series of offices and storage rooms. The entire building had extraordinarily high ceilings, so the club was more one big room, with several smaller partitioned sections, than anything else. Different lights were suspended from a cat walk near the ceiling, which Spike used to move around on, and watch the man below him.

Xander was working behind the bar, putting bottles away, wiping up spills, and in general cleaning up. He hummed tunelessly to himself as he did so. Spike noticed that he was moving rather stiffly, but because it was going on four in the morning, he figured the man was just worn out.

Once the bar was put to rights, Xander moved on to the rest of the club, wiping down tables that lined the walls, and sweeping the floor. Once the place was in order, the dark-haired man grabbed a bundle of clothes and walked into one of the two areas that was actually ceilinged and walled off properly: a private bathroom in the

office. The other area was the public restroom for the club. Spike heard a shower turn on.

A few minutes later, the young man emerged with wet hair, dressed in an oversized t-shirt and flannel pants. He walked to one of the storage rooms, where a cot had been set up. He tossed his old clothes to one side, then collapsed back on to the cot, wrapping himself up in blankets. He shifted for quite some time, taking longer to get comfortable than Spike could ever remember.

When it became clear that Xander was asleep, and was going to stay that way, Spike took the opportunity to do some snooping around. Yes, the club was Jeffrey's, a small gay club that featured dancing, and dancers. The vampire had heard of it, but hadn't ever been inside.

Apparently, this was where Xander now worked, and lived. An evil grin played at the corners of Spikes' mouth. What a lovely bit of blackmail. Perhaps he wouldn't have to worry about money quite yet, after all. After all, he reflected as he left, Xander wasn't going to want this to get out. Things were looking up.

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Spike shrugged into his leather jacket, mildly disgusted with himself. He had spent most of the day trying to decide which would be most upsetting, what would cause the most trouble: telling Xander that he knew what the boy was up to and demanding money to stay quiet, or tell the Scooby Gang that their little friend was living in the back room of a gay bar, and let them confront him. Somehow, the vampire just couldn't bring himself to go to the Scooby Gang. He wanted to see Xander again, and not even the pleasure of destroying the Slayer's happy little world was worth waiting to get back over to Jeffrey's.

He drank some of the blood he had managed to buy, grimacing with distaste. To have to drink it from a glass, instead of sucking it from living flesh, hot and sweet, pulsing with life and energy...

As soon as he figured out how to go about it, he was going to tear those Initiative bastards apart.

As soon the sun went down, Spike was out, heading straight for the club. It was still early on a Thursday



night, so the crowd in the club wasn't all that large. There were still a good amount of people there, however, more than the vampire had expected. A single dancer was on the stage, moving frenetically to the driving beat of the music. He paused after entering, sliding sideways into the shadows with the ease of long practice.

Locating Xander was easy; the dark-haired young man was behind the bar, pouring drinks. He was talking with the various men who lined the bar. More than talking - he was laughing, joking...flirting. He apparently was taking this whole gay thing seriously.

Spike made his way to a table off to the side, so that he could still see Xander, but remain out of sight until he decided what move to make. His gaze remained locked on the bartender, never wavering.

Xander actually looked happy. Spike was surprised that he noticed, but it was so obvious, he supposed anyone would have. Instead of his usually pensive, eager smile, filled with tension, the young man was grinning with pure enjoyment, obviously relaxed. He talked freely with the people he served, teasing them as he mixed drinks and pulled beers with confidence.

The vampire realized that the member of the Scooby Gang was repeating the same gesture over and over. Every time a man leaned over the bar toward him, trying to engage him in more intimate conversation, Xander would grin, shake his head amusedly, and point one finger upwards.

The next time he did it, Spike followed the line of his finger, and finally saw the sign hanging over the bar.

### **Please Don't Cruise The Bartender**

All the rejected men took it well, laughing at the sign and accepting the unspoken decline of their offers.

The dancer on stage finished his shift, apparently; he jumped off the stage and made his way over to the bar. Spike recognized him as the man whom Xander walked home last night. He walked behind the bar, grabbing a bottled water from under the bar. He and the dark-haired bartender exchanged laughing comments. As the music picked up in tempo, the two of them began to dance behind the bar, grinding suggestively against each other.

Spike clenched his teeth, fighting the urge to vamp out. The appreciative laughs and wolf whistles of the club's patrons shrilled in his ears, grating against his

nerves. How dare they? How dare that dancer approach Xander?

Realizing the path his thoughts were taking, the vampire brought himself under control. What was wrong with him? What did it matter to him what Xander did? This was great. It provided more blackmail material for him to use against the boy. He forced himself to calm down, not caring to think about why he had gotten upset in the first place.

A third man walked behind the bar, and separated the dancer and Xander, pointing up to the sign over the bar. The patrons laughed and applauded. Judging from the way everyone was acting, the third man, older than Xander and the dancer both, was the manager of the club. He handed a loose over-shirt to the dancer, who pulled it on. The dancer blew a kiss to Xander as he walked out from behind the bar. Xander went back to mixing drinks.

Spike lost track of time as he watched Xander work. Different dancers took their turns on stage, men laughed and talked and danced all around him, but none of it caught his attention. All his focus was on the bartender, a trait that he shared with the other people in the building, apparently. Everyone in the club returned

again and again to the bar, including the dancers and manager. Xander's quirky sense of humor seemed to go over far better here than it did with his friends.

A body moved into his field of vision, blocking his view of the bar. Spike had somehow avoided being approached all night, but his luck had just run out.

With a blatantly bored stare, he looked up at whoever it was. "Go away."

The man ignored him. "Why would I want to do that?" He pulled back the other chair at the table and sat down.

Spike really resented the implant. He was about to try a more obvious threat when he realized that this man was the dancer Xander had walked home the night before. Perhaps he could get some useful information out of him. He did his best to lead the conversation around to Xander, but it wasn't working. The dancer was more interested in flirting than talking about another person.

The vampire kept trying though. His frustration prevented him from noticing that the bar had cleared out substantially, and the music levels were turned way down. Very few people, mostly employees of the club, remained..

A voice cut across the dancer's flirtations. "You don't want to pick this guy up, Dave. Trust me." Xander stood near the table, staring directly at Spike.

"I don't know, Xan, he's awfully cute."

"Yeah, he is, and just as cuddly as a rabid pit bull. Just let him go."

"I'm getting the feeling that you know him."

"You could say that." Xander's eyes never left Spikes. "This is the guy that outed me."

Spike didn't notice the way the dancer drew away from him with an expression of distaste, or the hostile glares sent his way by the other people who had overheard. He was too shocked to spare any attention for them. What the hell was Xander talking about? He hadn't known the boy was gay, hadn't suspected until he followed him to this club.

"What the hell are you talking about, \*Xan\*?" he asked, leaning back in his chair.

"You want a drink?" The bartender walked back to his station, leaving Spike with no choice but to follow if he wanted to get the rest of the story. The others in the

club moved to the other side of the room, giving them some privacy.

"I don't like repeating myself. Exactly what the hell are you talking about?" Spike took the shot that Xander poured him, downing it in a single swallow.

The dark-haired man had poured himself a drink as well, but he didn't lift the shot glass to his lips. Instead, he played with it idly, staring at it instead of looking at Spike. "Remember when I laid down some ground rules when Giles said it was my turn to vampire-sit? Do you remember what the number one rule was?"

The vampire frowned. "Something about never going anywhere your parents, not even letting them see me. So what?"

"So what?" Flickers of anger colored Xander's tone. "So you apparently broke that rule the night you moved out. No, that's not right. You didn't break it. You shattered it, blasted it to atoms." He looked at Spike, and saw his blank stare. "You don't even remember it, do you?" He laughed a little, a bitter, resigned sound.

The blond man frowned in thought. What had happened when he moved out? Not sure why he was going along with this instead of making blackmail demands, he

searched his memory. "Do you mean when I ran into that older fellow?"

"Give the vampire a bag of A-positive. That older fellow was my father. Can you also remember telling him to thank me for you for my hospitality? Can you?"

"I might have said something like that."

"Great. Well, as it turns out, my dad doesn't read sarcasm real well. Probably one of the reasons why it feels like we speak different languages. He took snotty-English-vampireness for satisfied-gay-loverness."

"Bloody hell!"

"Yeah, that pretty much describes what I went through when I got home after that. My dad confronted me, and accused me of being gay. Mostly with his fists, although some other household objects were involved." Xander picked up his glass and threw back the amber liquid inside. "So I got mad, and told him that yeah, I was gay."

Spike stared at him. He hadn't expected this. "Then what happened?"

"Then he finished beating the shit out of me, and kicked me out of the house. Fortunately, a friend from high school told me about this place, and I took a

chance. Jeffery needed a bartender, and I needed a place to stay. Everybody wins." There was no humor left in his voice, just a sort of wistful sadness.

The other people had drifted out of the club as the two men spoke. Xander shook himself, and looked at those who were left. "Anyone need an escort home?" he called, voice cheerful once more. "Buddy system rules are still in effect."

"Are you offering an escort home, or an *escort* home?" responded one of the dancers, grinning.

Spike had to fight down another surge of irritation. Of course they were flirting with Xander. The young man had just announced he was gay; they had every reason to do so. He just wished they would stop. It wasn't right, somehow, for them to express interest in the Slayerette.

"My escort services end at the front door," Xander replied primly, even as he grinned back.

The manager walked over. "You going to be all right?" he asked, eyeing Spike distrustfully.

The bartender waved off his concern. "I'll be fine. Nobody will be dying here tonight." Jeffery nodded, and left with the last group of people. Xander watched them go, then poured another shot for both Spike and



himself. Staring once more at the glass as he turned it again and again in his fingers, the dark-haired man said, "So I'm gay. And you found out. I suppose you'll be running along to tell everyone now. I mean, you can't kill me, so why not try to ruin my life, right? It's probably some sort of vampiric imperative."

Spike wasn't sure who was more shocked, Xander or himself, when he heard himself say, "No, I'm not going to do that."

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Xander was sure that he hadn't heard the vampire correctly. He couldn't have. "What did you say?"

"I said I wasn't going to tell anyone." Even Spike looked surprised by his own words.

This had to be some sort of trick, a part of a larger evil plan. The blond man had always been fairly good at

coming up with evil plans. Still, he had to ask. "Why not?"

Spike looked confused for a moment, then his usual sneering expression dropped into place. "Don't stand there and ask stupid questions, Harris. Just be glad that I'm not going to." He tossed back the last of his drink, then stood and stalked out of the club. Xander watched him go, too startled to make any move to stop him.

As soon as the vampire was gone, reaction set in for the young man. He moved out from behind the bar and sat down abruptly in one of the chairs as he began to shake. He wanted to make believe that he was fine, but he couldn't. He wasn't fine, and everything wasn't going to be all right. He was shaken, and frightened, and worried about the future.

Not to mention more than a little turned on.

Xander was gay. He had finally accepted that about himself. He had tried to deny it, all through high school and beyond, and now he could see the disaster that it had made of his life. He couldn't believe his foolishness when he looked back at his past relationships.

He cringed when he remembered how much time and effort he had put into chasing Buffy. The Slayer was

unattainable, at least for him, but did he let that stop him? Of course not. He had acted like an idiot over her for years, and it was all for nothing. He had pursued her because he'd known he could never have her. She was perfect: a woman he would never have to touch, a lover that would never be his. Focusing on her had just allowed him to ignore his true feelings.

He still wanted to kick his own ass every time he thought of Willow. His best friend. Of course he had known she had thought she was in love with him: he might not be the epitome of smart guyness, but he cared about her, and that made her feelings obvious. So what did he do? Start pursuing her the moment she became definitely off-limits. Once again, he had chased her because he didn't believe she could be caught.

Cordelia was an obvious choice for him to chase: with her Prom Queen attitude and snob ways, he wasn't sure who was more surprised that she'd actually dated him, her or him. In the end, it didn't matter. It had been just one more mistake.

He wasn't even going to get into Faith. He'd had his Recommended Daily Allowance of self-loathing for the night, thank you very much.

And now Anya. He had broken up with her right after he had gotten kicked out of his parents' house. He just couldn't stand to live the lie any more, and she was a major part of it. Xander wasn't sure what had driven him to pursue her, except for a latent death wish that he didn't seem able to kick.

The dark-haired man stood, and walked back over to the bar. He began to clean up, but his attention was fixed firmly inwards. He found it extremely ironic, and a little frightening, that the men he was attracted to were almost as bad as the women he had tried to convince himself he wanted. In trying to force himself into a heterosexual role, he had gone after the Slayer, a witch, a Prom Queen, various supernaturally-influenced girls, and a former vengeance demon.

The men? There really weren't that many. He'd done a good job of denial. Cleopatra had nothing on him.

Angel. Xander was impressed by how well he'd managed to fool himself, and everyone else, into believing that he hated the souled vampire with a passion that verged on religious fervor.

More like he had wanted the taller man so bad he could barely stand to be in the same room and not jump him.

That relationship had been as screwed-up as any he'd ever had with a woman. More, actually. It couldn't even really be called a relationship, except maybe in a Jerry Springer sort of way, and Xander refused to believe that his life was so messed up that it had to be classified in Springer terminology.

And now Spike. Spike, with his delicious accent, his cutting humor, his lovely pale skin. Spike, exuding menace and vampiric sexiness all over the place, everywhere he went. Sometimes Xander was surprised not to find physical traces of the other man's appeal on everything he touched, as if his attractiveness were a substance he actually oozed.

He'd always been attracted to the vampire. He knew that now that he was finally admitting the truth to himself. The fact that he didn't have to fear for his life every time he saw him now only added to his interest. Oh, the adrenaline-producing edge of menace was still there, thankfully, only now the unpleasant incapacitating terror aspect of it had vanished.

Xander found himself liking Spike. The blond man's nasty comments never really bothered him; growing up in his house had rendered him immune to verbal abuse. Hell, hanging out with the rest of the Scooby Gang had made

sure he was invulnerable. He wasn't sure if any words would ever be able to faze him.

So, to sum up, he had pretty much added a non-souled vampire to his list of romantic/lustful disasters.

Jerry Springer class was too good for him.

Xander finished restoring the bar to order and cleaning the club. He locked all the doors, and officially took himself off duty. He got ready to sleep. The first part of that was taking a long shower in Jeffrey's office. His bruises from his final encounter with his father were fading, and the hot water helped to soothe a lot of the pain away. He was just glad that no damage had been done to his face; that way, if he didn't want someone to know what happened, they didn't have to.

Wet hair tousled and sticking up all over, he pulled on soft pyjamas and made his way to his cot, shutting off lights behind him as he went. He still hurt, so finding a comfortable position to sleep in presented a bit of a challenge. Still, Xander managed. It wasn't as though it had been the worst beating he'd ever experienced.

Xander wasn't looking forward to tomorrow. He was going to go and talk to Buffy, Giles, and Willow. He still didn't know what to tell them. He wasn't ready to come

out to them yet, but he was worried that Spike was going to tell them what had happened, so he thought that he might just have to.

He did need to tell them that he was only really free to help patrol or hunt down the demon-of-the-week in the early evenings; late at night, he was needed at the club. He liked working at Jeffrey's, more than he thought he would. He didn't want to lose his place here, or make Jeffrey regret giving him a chance. For about the hundredth time, he realized how grateful he was that Larry had told him about this place.

He also had to give the Scooby Gang his new phone number. Jeffrey had given him a cell phone, so he would always be able to reach his boss, and vice versa. He needed to let them know that this would be the way to contact him, since they weren't going to know where he was living.

As soon as Xander thought that, he realized what was going through his mind. He wasn't going to tell his friends the whole story of the past couple of weeks. He was just going to tell them that he'd moved out of his parents, that he had a new job and a new place to stay, and leave it at that. It wasn't as though they would ask him a whole lot of questions about the changes: at best, they

only showed minimal interest in his non-college-going, non-graced-with-supernatural-gifts life.

He also realized that this meant he was going to trust Spike not to tell them anything, either. He called himself every name for fool he could come up with, but his decision stayed the same. For some reason, he was trusting the vampire, believing that he would keep his unexpected promise not to tell.

As he drifted off to sleep, Xander wondered what was going on with Spike. And, just for a fraction of a second, he allowed himself to wonder if there might be the chance for something more between them, something other than the usual sarcastic-barb-trading impasse they'd been at for so long.

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Xander shifted nervously, gaze flicking quickly from Willow's face, to Buffy's, to Giles's. He avoided looking at



Anya. "So, uh, that's about it, I guess. You've got my new number, and my work schedule."

Blank stares met his announcement. Well, good, then. That meant nothing had changed. Xander had been agonizing over how to make the announcement to the Scooby Gang about his move. After his run-in with Spike two nights ago, he knew he couldn't put it off any longer.

Fortunately, the news that he was living somewhere else was met with the same enthusiasm every announcement he had ever met was: with all the interest that was usually given to an old man in a nursing home when he started rambling on about the olden days. He didn't have to give any reason for the move, and no one asked where he was working, or even where he would be living.

Xander backed up, moving until he was sitting on the arm of Giles's chair. As soon as he was no longer in the center of the room, conversation resumed. The dark-haired young man sat quietly, trying to dredge up interest as Willow and Buffy discussed college with Giles. So long as he was paying attention to them, he wouldn't have to look over at Anya. At this point, he figured the former vengeance demon would have had

time to get over her surprise over their break-up, and would be well on her way to feeling pissed.

Xander had had enough trouble dealing with angry, fully mortal women; he really didn't want to find out how Anya would decide to make his life miserable.

After the meeting, Xander trailed along behind Buffy on patrol. He'd seen the concerned look Willow had sent his way, after she'd managed to spare some attention for him. He really didn't want to answer any of her questions, so he'd volunteered to go with Buffy. As he had suspected, the Slayer only wanted to talk about the new guy in her life.

What kind of name was Riley, anyway?

After listening to Buffy prattle on for a couple of hours, he excused himself, saying that he had to get to work. She had barely noticed he was going. Xander did wonder if she was just going to talk to herself. At least that way her audience would be interested.

He walked back to Jeffrey's slowly. There was still almost an hour before his shift behind the bar started, so there was no need to hurry. He did something he rarely did anymore: just walked through Sunnydale. No demons chasing him, no apocalypse to be averted, no answer to a

prophecy-riddle to be found. Just him, walking the streets. It was almost nice, in a way. It was a tiny bit of normality in his life.

"Just out for a stroll, then?"

Xander managed to restrain the shriek that welled up in his chest, but barely. He had lived his entire life in Sunnydale, survived his high school years as a Slayerette, and somehow Spike *still* managed to appear out of nowhere. The blond vampire was walking beside him, but refusing to look at him.

The dark-haired young man took a deep breath to steady himself. Spike might not be able to attack him, but that didn't mean he shouldn't be wary. After all, the vampire still had the power to destroy what was left of his life.

"I'm on my way to work, actually. Just taking the scenic route, I guess." He glanced at the other man out of the corner of his eye. "And you? You can't kill anyone, so what are you doing? Window shopping?"

Spike didn't react at all to his jibe. Still not looking at Xander, the blond man asked abruptly, "Is it true?" His voice was low, intense, without its usual mocking edge.

"Is what true?"

"Did you really get kicked out of your house because of me?"

Xander wasn't sure how to answer. He wanted to blame Spike for it, it would be easier to just pass the blame along and lay it on the vampire, but that wouldn't be the whole truth. Forcing a grin, he shook his head. "Don't give yourself too much credit. You started the whole thing, but if I had kept my mouth shut, I could have gotten off with a beating. Instead, I ran my mouth, told the truth. That's what got me kicked out." He took a quick look back over his shoulder, just in case. They were in one of the more deserted areas of Sunnydale now.

Spike glanced at him quickly, and looked as though he wanted to say more. Before he could, the trouble that Xander had been anticipating materialized, in the form of a gang of purple, horned demons.

Xander took one out immediate, more as a result of luck than anything else. How was he supposed to know that whacking one in the nose would knock him out of commission? The second one took a little more effort, but still went down.

The third? The third was a bitch. Apparently he was upset about Xander taking out his friends, so he

protected his nose and did what he could to take the young man down.

As Xander was slammed into a brick wall by repeated blows, he reflected that being "the normal one" sucked. Why couldn't he have super strength or magic powers? He was the person that read comic books, damn it; he'd appreciate the powers, savor them and use them as they deserved.

Realizing the path his thoughts were taking, Xander decided he must have taken a couple of blows to the head.

Suddenly, the demon was pulled backwards and thrown to the ground with devastating force. Spike was on top of the purple hulk in a matter of moments, raining down blows and curses with equal fury. After he began to repeat himself, the vampire drew himself up and landed a single, decisive blow on the demon's nose.

Xander glanced around dazedly. The gang was incapacitated; Spike had taken care of his share of the demons before coming to help Xander.

Strong hands closed on his upper arms. "Are you all right?" The dark-haired man tried to remember the

correct response. The hands shook him gently. "Damn it, Xander, answer me!"

Shaking his head, he managed to clear his mind up enough to answer. "Yeah, yeah I'm fine." Which was almost true. He was going to have a few beautiful bruises, especially where his back had slammed into the wall, but he'd live. He'd had worse. Compared to some of his encounters in the past, he'd been lucky. After all, Spike had gotten to him before any real damage had been done. Give him a few days, and he'd be almost good as new.

Spike held onto him, until he finally had his feet firmly beneath himself. He licked his lips, and met the vampire's gaze. "Thank you." He didn't want it to sound too serious, though, so he quickly added, "I know you were just enjoying the whole causing bodily harm to others thing, but it saved my ass, so I appreciated." He backed away, heading toward the club.

The vampire once more fell in step beside him. They walked in silence for a few minutes, then Spike said firmly, "You can't do this anymore."

"What? Get my ass kicked? I've been doing it for years. I think I'm almost ready to turn pro, move on to the major leagues."

"Not that. Well, yes, that too, idiot. But I mean you can't keep walking around alone. And you definitely can't be walking people home from the club. I mean, look at what just happened, and I was there with you. Imagine what would have happened if you'd had one of those nancy-boy dancers with you. You could be dead!"

"Hey, I'm a nancy-boy bartender, remember? We poufs need to stick together." Xander frowned. Spike sounded genuinely upset. It was almost like he cared. But that couldn't be right, could it? There was no reason for the vampire to be so concerned, unless he cared. The dark-haired man decided to push the issue. "You're right. Sunnydale is dangerous. But if I don't make sure they get home safe, who's going to?" By now, they had reached the entrance to Jeffrey's.

Spike stared at him, eyes searching his face for something. What, Xander had no clue. The vampire opened his mouth to speak, then abruptly turned and walked off, disappearing into the shadow.

Xander stared after him. What was that about? He shook off his confusion, at least for the moment. He had a shift to work; he could brood about all this later, in his bed after the club shut down.

He made his way back to the store room, threading through the dancing crowd. Once there, he pulled on a fresh shirt for work, brushed his hair, and was ready to go. On his way to the bar, he greeted the patrons that he knew, laughing at their jokes and telling his own. Xander was mildly surprised to realize that he enjoyed working, something he had thought impossible. But this, pouring drinks and talking to people, this he could handle.

Throwing himself into the rhythm of the job, Xander soon managed to push the events from earlier that evening out of his mind. By the time the club was closing down, he was tired, but he was also in a far better mood than he had been.

Dave walked over to him as he was wiping down the bar, and slung a friendly arm around his neck. "Xan, buddy, pal, compadre, I need a favor." He smiled winningly at the bartender.

Well-aquainted with the dancer's tactics by now, Xander shook his head and put away the rag he had been using. "Let me grab a coat, and I'll walk you home."

"Xan, are you psychic?" Dave asked with exaggerated amazement.



Remembering his wishes for a super-power, Xander snorted and shook his head. "Nope. You, my friend, are predictable." He walked to the back and caught up his jacket, shrugging it on as they left the club.

Already feeling the bruises from his last encounter with the evil that infested Sunnydale, Xander kept a hyper-vigilant watch around them, not wanting to repeat the experience. The hairs on the back of his neck were raised, and he couldn't shake the feeling they were being followed. He rushed Dave as they walked, not wanting to be outside and in danger any longer than absolutely necessary.

It was only because of his extra care in watching that he saw it. A flash of blond hair, lit briefly by a flickering street lamp as the vampire crossed the street a few blocks behind them. Spike was following them, but didn't want to be seen.

Correction: Spike was following Xander.

Xander didn't allow himself to hope. Spike could be doing this for his own obscure reasons. Just because Xander had said he was going to continue walking people home, and Spike had protested that it was too dangerous, didn't mean that the vampire was following

him to try to protect him. In secret, without Xander finding out. It could be something else entirely.

A grin played around the corners of Xander's mouth. It didn't mean anything at all.

But it could mean everything.

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For the next couple of weeks, Xander didn't see Spike at all. The vampire didn't come back to Jeffrey's. Xander would have noticed; he looked for the other man almost constantly, scanning all the back tables in the shadows for him every night. No slender frame in a dark coat hunched over a beer met his gaze. No darkly sardonic eyes, no little cloud of gloom concentrated over a single figure.

The vampire hadn't shown up at any of the Scooby Gang meetings, either. Xander had to sit through the little gatherings on his own, avoiding Anya's angry gaze and listening to Buffy and Willow prattle on about their new college lives. There was nothing to distract him. No cynical little declarations of hatred. No scathing sarcastic comments.

No hard muscled body in a tight black T-shirt.

Xander realized he hadn't been quite accurate. He hadn't actually seen Spike, but he'd known the other man was around. He'd felt his presence, a shadow that never left him, a ghost always trailing along behind him. He hadn't seen the blond again, though, not since that first night he'd seen Spike following him.

The dark-haired man tried to keep himself occupied, so he wouldn't brood about Spike, or why the vampire was following him. He'd been kicked in the teeth often enough that he didn't want to leave himself open for another blow by hoping, but he couldn't really help it. There had to be a reason Spike kept following him. The whole situation was insane; was it really so crazy to think the vampire was doing it because he cared? Because he felt something like what Xander did?

So Xander spent a lot of time patrolling, and ducking Willow's occasional flares of interest in his life. Fortunately, they were experiencing a freakishly quiet period in Sunnydale, so the fact that he was distracted by his hidden shadow really didn't matter all that much.

Although a nice little demon attack might have managed to flush Spike out of the darkness, if nothing else.

Xander was getting more and more comfortable working at Jeffrey's. Jeffrey was more a father to him than his own had ever been, and the dancers and other bartenders teased him as much as he imagined siblings would. And he had finally gotten the hang of the whole bartending thing. He wasn't Tom Cruise in "Cocktail", not by a long shot, but he had a few moves of his own that seemed to be quite the crowd pleasers.

He still made it a rule to walk home anyone who asked him. Like Dave was about to do, he could tell.

That dancer walked toward him, grinning widely. "Xan, my man," he called cheerily.

"I'm not your man," Xander shot back, with a grin of his own.

"That could change, Xan. Just say the word." Dave moved in close to him, running a teasing hand up Xander's arm.

The dark-haired man shook his head. "I don't think so, Dave. You're not the one."

The dancer nodded. "I know," he said seriously. "But he's out there, Xan. You'll find him soon, I'm sure."

Not if he kept lurking around in the shadows, Xander thought, but he grinned. "You bet. Ready to go?" He led the way out of the club, locking the door behind them. He didn't mind walking Dave home, which was a good thing, because the dancer often needed him to. It was nice to talk to someone who genuinely liked him for himself.

As they walked they spoke idly, laughing over things that had happened that night in the club. Xander was distracted, though. Something wasn't quite right. He began to keep a stricter watch on their surroundings. That was the only thing that gave him any warning as the group of men charged into the alley.

"Dave, get out of here!" Xander shouted, beginning to run himself. Mighty member of the Scooby Gang he might be, but taking on five guys was definitely out of his

league. Dave made it, getting away clean down a side path. Xander wasn't so lucky.

Rough hands grabbed him in punishing grips, and he was thrown back against a brick wall. Harsh words in low voices came to his ears.

"Got him..."

"...damned faggot..."

"...show him what he deserves!"

Ah, not demons then. Just ordinary, run-of-the-mill gay bashers, then. Gay bashers who were apparently set on bashing him.

Xander struck back viciously, doing his best to fight his way free. To his way of thinking, these guys were worse than demons. They were human beings; why couldn't they act like it? There was only so much he could do against five other guys, however, and he knew he was going to get hurt.

"Get your bloody hands off him!"

Spike? No! Throwing a punch that left one of the men down on the ground, hands clutching his stomach, the bartender shouted, "Damnit, Spike, these guys are

human. Stay out of it!" The vampire could only get hurt; he wouldn't be able to defend himself.

Two of Xander's attackers were gone; presumably to take care of Spike. Working as a Slayerette all through high school had taught him quite a bit. So had his short experience in being a soldier. Both these things added up to help him do enough damage to the two men still standing in front of them to drive them off. They picked up the man on the ground, and staggered away, back down the alley.

He turned his attention to the remaining two men. He watched in amazement as Spike, obviously in agony, managed to smash one of them across the face with a length of pipe. Xander didn't wait to see what happened next. He picked up a discarded piece of wood and began to do his best to do as much damage as possible. Soon, those two were retreating as well, without even any threats or slurs to throw over their shoulders.

It was just as well; Xander didn't have any attention to spare for them. He was too focused on the man before him, who was groaning and clutching his head. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," the vampire ground out. He allowed Xander to haul him to his feet. "It's just this damned chip."

The dark-haired man pulled out his cell-phone. He punched in a number. "Hey, Dave? Good, you made it home, man. No, I'm fine. I'm fine! Don't worry. I've got someone here with me, and I'm going back to the club. I'm fine! Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow." He put the phone away. One of Spike's arms thrown over his shoulder, he made his way back to Jeffrey's.

He was surprised as the vampire allowed him to manhandle him into a chair. Hell, he was surprised Spike was allowing himself to be manhandled at all. "Are you all right?" he asked again, hovering worriedly.

"I told you I'm fine." The vampire looked up at him, gaze suddenly intent, piercing. "Are you hurt?"

"Me? Not really. They didn't have much of a chance to do anything before you showed up. Speaking of, what the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that it looked like you were going to get your ass kicked!"

"Those guys were human, Spike. You can't fight against humans, not without that implant going wiggy inside



your skull." Xander heard his voice rising, but couldn't stop it. "You should have stayed out of it. You could've been hurt! I don't want that to happen." He managed to shut himself up. He'd almost gone too far. He didn't want to reveal too much of his feelings, not without knowing more about how Spike felt.

He looked away, not wanting to give anything away with his expression. Sighing heavily, he sat down in a chair beside Spike. He heard the vampire mutter something, but couldn't make out the words. "What?"

"I said, I couldn't stay out of it." Spike stared down at his hands, then raised his head and met Xander's gaze. "I couldn't just stand there and watch you get hurt. Damn it, I had to try to do something, anything." He shook his head, and stared off into space. "I can't let you get hurt." His voice was low, tight with tension.

Xander stared at him. Couldn't let him get hurt? Hope lit a flame inside him, kindling warmth and pleasant surprise. That didn't sound like a merciless killer. It sounded like someone who felt the same way he did.

He studied Spike's profile carefully. The vampire looked a little confused, a little nervous. It was an honest expression. Xander decided to take a chance. He stood up slowly, and approached the other man. Spike looked

up at the dark-haired man as he moved to stand close to him, between the seated man's knees.

Xander leaned forward slowly, telegraphing his intentions as clearly as he could. He raised a hand, and placed it on Spike's shoulder, rubbing his thumb against the pale sweep of the blond man's neck. He locked his gaze with Spike's, trying to read the dark eyes and the thoughts behind them. He saw questions there, and the first licking flames of heat. That heat added to the warmth inside him, reinforcing the hope he felt. He inclined his head slightly, and closed his eyes as he pressed his lips to the other man's.

He savored the soft contact, but kept it brief. He straightened slowly, his legs shaky, his breathing unsteady. Despite his hope, he was worried about what expression he would see on Spike's face.

Steeling himself, Xander opened his eyes.

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Spike held himself completely motionless, still able to feel the warmth of Xander's lips on his own. He wasn't sure how this had happened. He had never thought he would feel like this for one of the Slayer's friends. Hell, he never thought he'd feel like this for anyone.

He'd known intense attraction, combined with love and hatred both. Angel.

He'd known obsessive, destructive love. Drusilla.

He'd known lust intermixed with contempt. Harmony.

But he'd never know this emotion before. It was protective, and concerned. There was lust there, of course, but it was tempered with a need to see the other man happy. He wasn't sure if this was love, real pure love, but he couldn't imagine anything else feeling any better.

It was strange. He couldn't hurt Xander, but not because of the implant in his head. That had been the beginning of it, but not anymore. At first he had tried telling himself that the reason he was following the dark-haired man was that he wanted to make sure the bartender stayed healthy long enough to be blackmailed. Eventually, he couldn't convince himself of that any longer.

He tried to tell himself that he was protecting Xander because he couldn't hurt the Slayerette, so no one else could either. Obviously, he was making sure the other man stayed alive until he could have the pleasure of killing him himself.

Soon, he couldn't believe that lie either. He was protecting Xander, spending his nights outside Jeffrey's, or following the bartender while on patrol with the Scooby Gang or acting as an escort for one of his co-workers, simply because he wanted to make sure Xander was safe. He wanted to watch him. He wanted to protect him. He wanted \*him\*.

All this passed through his mind in the matter of seconds; he had been brooding over these thoughts for most of the week. Now the time for thought was over. It was time to act.

Smiling, he looked up and met Xander's eyes. Licking his lips, he reached out and placed his hands on the standing man's hips. With a gentle tug, Spike pulled him closer. Not knowing what to say, he chose to say nothing. Instead, he stood slowly, invading Xander's space, hands still on his hips.

He kept his gaze locked with the mortal's. He saw no fear in them, a fact he found strangely pleasing. Dark

brown eyes grew darker as arousal caused the pupils to dilate. Xander's breath was quickening; Spike was so close he could feel the rapid pants of air against his skin.

He leaned forward, covering the other man's mouth with his own. Hot. Wet. Sweet. The vampire soon lost himself in the sensation, in the smooth glide of tongue against tongue. He pulled Xander's hips against his, grinding their groins together. He was vaguely aware of fingers clenched in his hair, a hand wandering over his back. He let his own hands roam, mapping the lines of the other man's body, learning by touch what he had been studying with his eyes for so long.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when Xander wrenched his head back and to the side, breaking contact. He was breathless, lips wet and swollen.

"Is something wrong?" Spike asked, not relinquishing his hold on the mortal. He wasn't going to let him go, not now. Not when they were so close to what they both wanted.

"I haven't finished shutting this place down," Xander said.

Spike stared at him in disbelief. "You're thinking about work?" His voice was incredulous. The most stunning

kiss he'd ever experienced, a heady rush of so many emotions he couldn't even track them all, and the whole time the dark-haired man had been thinking of *work*?

Xander shook his head, and grabbed Spike's head. He kissed the vampire, fiercely, but briefly. He rested his forehead against the blond man's. "I'm thinking that I want to spend the rest of the night figuring out a thousand different ways to make you scream and beg for more, and I don't want to have the fact that I've still got so much to do hanging over my head, distracting me." His voice was serious, and hoarse with desire.

Hardly able to believe it, Spike heard himself say, "I'll help." Well, why not? It would be over sooner. The two of them made short work of the few remaining parts of the club that needed to be put to rights. Spike used the opportunity to bring himself back under control. He was fairly certain that this was the first time Xander had done anything, with a man, anyway. He didn't want to rush this. Besides, he told himself, reasserting some of his evil vampire spirit, just for his self-image, if he hurt the mortal, his implant would go off.

And that Spike wouldn't be able to.

As soon as they were done, Xander was back at his side, gaze nervous and hungry, locked on Spike's face. The

vampire reached out and traced a finger down his cheek. A thought occurred to him. "You've only got a cot here, don't you?"

Xander groaned. "Damn it. I forgot." He chewed at his lower lip. "But closer quarters are good, right?"

"Definitely right," Spike whispered, lowering his head to nuzzle at Xander's ear, feeling the warmth of his skin, and the brush of soft hair against his skin. "But if we're going to be looking for ways to make each other scream, a little breathing room will be good."

The dark-haired man laughed breathlessly. "But I'll be the only one breathing."

Spike growled at him, and grabbed his arm. "Do you have your keys?"

"Yeah..."

"Good." The vampire began to drag Xander out of the club.

"We are *not* going back to your crypt," the bartender stated firmly as he locked the door to Jeffrey's.

Spike repressed a grin. "Right. We're not going there." The last demon he'd come across had quite the

hidden packet of money in a back pocket. The blond man had helped himself to it after breaking its owner's neck. He was having trouble coming up with a better way to spend it then on Xander. A satisfied smile played around the corners of his mouth as he felt the weight in one of his coat pockets of the thing he'd spent some of the money on earlier. At the time, he had thought it was just wishful thinking that he'd get to use it, but now he was glad he'd followed through on the impulse.

He led his soon-to-be-lover through Sunnydale, barely able to spare any attention for potential danger, so distracted was he by the feel of warm skin under his hand as he kept a hold of Xander's arm as they walked through the streets.

When Xander realized where they were going, he stopped. "Spike," he protested, a blush mounting in his cheeks, "this is a hotel. An expensive hotel."

Spike watched his color deepen with appreciation. Standing close to the other man, he smiled. "It is where one usually finds beds, isn't it? Of course, we could always drop by Giles's place, ask if we can use his extra bed-"



Xander shook his head furiously. "Nope. That's not necessary. Hotels are good. Sometimes they even give you free mints, and I'm sure Giles wouldn't do that."

The vampire led the way into the hotel, aware that Xander was still embarrassed. He surprised himself yet again by not making a big deal about getting a room, just for the pleasure of seeing the man behind the desk's face prune up. Instead, he got the room quickly and quietly, and brought Xander there without drawing anymore attention to them than he had to.

Once inside the room, Spike turned to Xander. Before he could say anything, his mouth was taken in a hard kiss. The vampire responded hungrily, walking backwards and pulling his lover along with him. The back of his knees hit the bed, and then he was sprawled on his back, with the warm weight of the dark-haired man sprawled across him.

Spike busied his fingers, tugging at Xander's shirt, pulling it up and over his head. He grinned at the unhappy noises the other man made when their mouths were forced to separate. The bartender was quick to reciprocate, tearing at Spike's clothing until he was bare-chested as well.

Warm hands skimmed over the vampire's chest, and were followed by a hot, wet mouth. Spike groaned appreciatively, anchoring his fingers in thick dark hair. When Xander's tongue dragged slowly across one nipple, then the next, Spike couldn't remain passive any longer. He flipped them over, moving so that he was straddling the mortal's hips.

He leaned down and claimed another kiss, refusing to break contact until he worried about lack of oxygen for his lover. He leaned back, admiring the flushed, dazed face below him, before reaching over and grabbing his jacket, which was laying on the bed beside them.

"Going somewhere?" asked a rich, amused voice.

"No, love just fetching something for later," he replied, reaching into one deep pocket and pulling out what lay inside. He tossed the clothing onto the floor and placed the articles on the bed. The body beneath him grew still as Xander stared at the tube of lubricant.

Shit, had he ruined everything? Was he pushing things too fast? Spike began to regret his actions, then Xander moaned and thrust upwards with his hips. Relief flowing through him, the vampire ground his own pelvis against the one below him, gasping at the feel of a hard length against his own.

The dark-haired man reached up and grabbed his neck, forcibly hauling Spike's face down until it was inches from his own. "I hope you didn't bring that just for show," he breathed, eyes nearly black.

"If you're sure," Spike whispered back, not wanting to risk a misunderstanding, not when they were so close.

Xander grinned up at him, arching his hips to press himself against the vampire. "What do you think?"

"I think it's time those pants came off," Spike said, reaching down to worry the buttons. With Xander's enthusiastic help, they were soon naked, wrapped around each other, reveling in the feel of bare skin against skin.

The blond man nipped and kissed and sucked at every inch of Xander's skin he could reach, until his lover was moaning continuously, hips thrusting upwards mindlessly in search of release. Placing his lips beside an ear, the vampire whispered, "Are you ready?", then licked at the delicate skin.

The body beneath his shuddered, but Xander's voice was firm. "If you don't hurry up-

"You'll stake me?" Spike asked, lavishing wet attention on the other ear.

Laughing, Xander replied, "I was hoping you'd 'stake' me, but if you insist..."

Spike silenced him with a kiss. "I'll be doing the staking tonight," he said, kissing his way down the body beneath him. When he reached Xander's erection, he gently sucked the hard flesh into his mouth, laving it with his tongue as held the other man's hips still.

When Xander was once more incoherent with need and want, the vampire reached out and grabbed the lube, using it to carefully and generously prepare his lover. He wanted to tell himself that he was doing so to avoid giving the implant any chance to act up, but the truth was he wanted this to be good for Xander, so good that the other man would want it again and again. So good that he would never want another.

He hooked Xander's knees over his shoulders, and slowly pressed inside the other man. Once fully inside, he leaned down and sealed his mouth over his lover's, nearly gasping from the feeling of the tight heat, the wonderful closeness. He thrust slowly, deeply, quickening the pace as Xander's moans and pleading increased.

"So good...so right...oh, god, Spike, please..." His voice was hoarse, almost desperate.

He mercilessly drove both of them toward completion, lunging forward to kiss his lover, swallowing Xander's final cry, and giving him his own triumphant shout.

Spike slumped, collapsing down on top of Xander, exhausted and spent. He wrapped his arms around his lover, rolling over and pulling the dark-haired man to lie across him, needing the contact.

Xander's eyes were heavy-lidded, his face still flushed. "Wow," he said softly, staring into Spike's eyes.

"Wow, indeed, love," the vampire agreed, running his fingers through the dark, sweaty hair. He saw that Xander was still staring at him. "What?" he asked, smiling.

In answer, the other man reached out and traced a finger across Spike's brow. It was then that the vampire realized he was wearing his game face. "Shit, I'm sorry, Xander," he said quickly, forcing himself back into human guise, "it happens sometimes."

The dark-haired man cut him off, not letting him continue. "It's all right. I understand. You are a vampire," here his voice faltered a little, but he pressed on, "and it's bound to happen, right?" He swallowed hard, but refused to look away. "It's part of you."

Spike stared at him. He'd never expected something like this. Not from Xander. It was time he began to look at the other man as something other than one of the Slayer's groupies. He'd begun to do so, but not enough, obviously. Not if Xander's acceptance, or at least will to try to accept, was so strong.

He pulled Xander's head closer to his, sharing a gentle kiss. He felt the mortal grow heavier against him, feeling his breath slow as he drifted toward sleep. Spike held him closer, treasuring the warmth of the sleeping body. He closed his eyes as well, but he had no intention of sleeping. He'd never held a lover as they slept, never felt the pleasure and tenderness of watching over someone he cared for as they lay in his arms. He hoped it was something he'd have the chance to get used to. Pressing a kiss to Xander's brow, he settled himself down for the night, experiencing and wondering and loving the man in his arms.

**The End**

**Discovered**

Spike sat in his usual chair at the far edge of Giles's living room, doing his best to remain silent. It wasn't easy: he wanted nothing more than to get up, walk across the room, and snap the Slayer's neck. Then he could tear off one of her arms and use it to beat the witch to death. He might drain Giles, or not. Either way, the Watcher would die. And Anya...Anya he would linger over for days, drawing her pain out until she begged for death, anything so that it would stop the agony.

Of course, thanks to the chip in his head, he couldn't do any of these things. The next best thing would have been to insert a few scathing comments into the general conversation, playing on the insecurities and weaknesses of the Scooby Gang, and amuse himself with that. It wouldn't be the same as feeling flesh tear beneath his hands, as breathing in the heady scents of terror and death...but it was better than nothing.

So why was he sitting in his chair, keeping his mouth shut like a good little neutered vampire?

The reason was sitting perched on Giles's table, staring down at his hands, clasped together in his lap. The reason had dark hair tumbling into his eyes as he chewed on the inside of his bottom lip, listening to his friends talk

around and at him, but never to him. The reason steadfastly refused to look at Spike, at anyone, during the entire meeting of the Scooby Gang.

The blonde vampire stifled an impatient sigh. He didn't know why Xander insisted on coming to these meetings. He was invariably ignored, his ideas and suggestions brushed over as if he'd never voiced them. It was pointless; his "friends" couldn't really care about him. If they did, they'd have noticed a few things about his life.

Like the small fact that Xander had gotten kicked out of his parents' house.

That he was working at and living in the back of one of Sunnydale's gay clubs.

That for the past week, he had been Spike's lover, sleeping most of the daylight hours away within the blond man's arms. If any of the Scooby Gang gave a damn about Xander, that little fact wouldn't have escaped their notice.

Spike shifted in his chair, and stayed silent. He had promised to keep what lay between him and Xander a secret. Ordinarily, he would have broken that promise in a moment, just for the sheer pleasure of watching the



shock and disillusionment spread through the mortals, seeing their little world crumble around them.

But doing that would upset Xander. Spike was mildly disgusted with himself, but he admitted that he wasn't going to do anything to upset the mortal.

Ever since he'd admitted to himself that he was in love with the dark-haired man, Xander's happiness had become one of his primary foci in life. That, and getting him into bed as often as possible. Or at least horizontal. At least naked.

Spike shook himself out of his thoughts, and paid attention to the conversation once more. Whatever they had been discussing seemed to have been settled, and they were getting ready to go on patrol. The vampire had found out early on that Giles hadn't come any closer to figuring out how to get the damn chip out of his head, but had lingered to wait for Xander. Seeing the Slayer's gaze fall upon him, Spike said, "I'll go with the boy."

"Why?" demanded Willow, a worried frown crossing her face.

The vampire sighed impatiently. "Because he seems to be the most trouble-prone of all of you. He just radiates the idea of victim. It's amazing that he's lasted this

long. If I'm going to have a hope of killing anything tonight, I'm going to have to go with him."

Buffy got ready to object, but Xander raised one of his hands. "'Sall right, Buff. At least this way we'll know where he is, right?" He pulled on his jacket and grabbed a few stakes on the way out. "I'll see you guys later," he called over his shoulder as he left, Spike right behind them.

As soon as they were out the door, Spike was right by his side. "I hate them."

Xander nodded. "I know."

The vampire supposed he did. They'd had this conversation before. He didn't know why Xander was so insistent on keeping them a secret - he was going to be outed sooner or later. He was living and working at Jeffrey's, after all. It was only a matter of time. But if Xander didn't want to tell anyone, then that was fine with Spike. He couldn't care less about what the Scooby Gang thought; he only worried about it for Xander's sake.

Spike said nothing, letting the conversation drop. He wasn't going to push Xander, not when he finally accepted that he'd fallen in love with him. He didn't want to push him too far, and risk losing him.

Following the train of his own thoughts, the blond man shook his head. He really needed to kick his own ass. He was Spike. William the fucking Bloody. And he was living his life according to the whims of one of the Slayer's groupies, when he didn't even know how the other man felt toward him.

It had to be love. That was the only possible explanation.

After a few minutes, Xander shot him an uncomfortable glance. "You don't have to come to the meetings if you don't want to."

"Don't even start. It's either go, or wait around outside for you to come out so I can do this ridiculous patrol thing with you." He knew Xander would have no trouble convincing the others to let him patrol alone, so that Spike could be with him, but he didn't want to lurk around the Watcher's house and wait for him.

"This isn't ridiculous. Somebody has to try to make Sunnydale a little safer."

"Right, but the position of Slayer has been filled, in case you didn't notice."

"I can still help," Xander said stubbornly. He turned to glance down an alley, but before his gaze shifted, Spike caught the glimmer of hurt in the brown eyes.

Shit. "You do help," the vampire said, uncomfortable in the role of reassurer. "I don't want you to get hurt." He muttered the last bit quickly, not wanting to reveal too much and frighten the other man off.

Xander turned to look at him, an odd light that looked almost like hope in his eyes. "What did you say?"

Spike was saved from having to answer by a voice calling to them from an alley up the street. "Well, well. What do we have here?"

Dark blue eyes narrowed, the vampire watched as three men approached them, swaggering arrogantly. The three spread out once they got within a few feet of Spike and Xander, stopping to stare the two men down.

"Kind of a chilly night to be out for a stroll, isn't it?" asked the stranger who had spoken first.

"Yeah, it is," agreed one of his friends. "A guy could catch his death like that."

Spike had heard enough. He could tell they were vampires - the scent of death clung to them as it only did with his kind. And judging by their unimaginative attempts at banter, they were fairly young.

"Bad guys?" Xander breathed under his breath.

Spike caught the muttered words, and nodded. "Of the undead variety."

The dark-haired man dipped his left hand into his jacket pocket, where Spike knew he had a stake. "Thanks for the concern, guys. You know, it's really nice to meet people who care. Usually people don't care if you live or die." Xander stepped forward, extending his right hand toward the leader, grinning like a fool the whole time.

Spike was going to kill him. Just as soon as they took care of these three idiots.

The blond man watched as the leader, confused by Xander's actions, automatically reached out his hand to complete the hand shake. He nodded in approval when the mortal wiggled his eyebrows for a moment, just before plunging his stake into the vampire's chest.

Before the dust that once was the leader had settled, Spike vamped out and attacked one of the followers. There was a brief struggle, then the Englishman gained the upper hand. With a satisfying crack, the younger vampire's neck snapped in his hands. The body went limp, and Spike staked him with a stake he'd stolen from Giles.

He turned to check on Xander, and growled low in his throat at the sight that greeted him. The dark-haired man was just barely holding the other enraged vampire off, working too hard to defend himself to be able to go on the offensive and stake his attacker. Before he had time to think about his actions, Spike was on the other vampire, slamming him up against the wall.

He didn't move in for the kill right away. First, he wanted to be sure that the other had understood his mistake.

Raining blows down upon the now-whimpering vampire, Spike spat out viciously, "Nobody touches him, you get me? Nobody fucking lays a hand on him, nobody fucking looks at him."

"I didn't know he was yours!" the other vampire gasped out.

Spike stopped hitting him, and hauled him up so that he could look the other in the eye. "I know. And you'll never have the chance to make the mistake again." Never shifting his gaze, he staked the vampire.

Brushing the dust off his jacket, he turned to look at Xander. "You all right?"

The dark-haired man nodded. "I think so." He drew in a shaky breath, and put his stake back in his pocket. He

licked his lips, and chewed on his lip as he looked at Spike.

"What?" demanded the blonde man.

"You're still sorta...pointy," Xander said softly.

It was true, Spike realized. He was still wearing his game face. He shifted back to human appearance. "That better?"

The mortal shrugged and smiled a little. "You're a little less obvious now." He rubbed at his left wrist absently.

Spike moved forward and took the wrist in his hand. "Damn it, I thought you said you weren't hurt."

"It's just a bruise," Xander protested, an odd hitch in his breathing.

The vampire looked at him in concern. What was with him? Then he saw the dilated pupils, and heard the rapid heartbeat. The adrenaline from the short scuffle had evidently transmuted into desire. Grinning knowingly, he moved in and kissed Xander. He was surprised by the enthusiasm with which the other responded, but gave into it, until he felt fingers fumbling at his waistline, trying to pull his shirt loose from his jeans.

He broke away from the kiss, and caught Xander's hands with his own. "Whoa, there, love. Later. Not here. Not in an alley in the middle of bleeding Sunnydale."

Licking his lips, the dark-haired man nodded. "But later?"

"Count on it," the vampire promised, hearing his own voice deepen with lust. "Let's get you to work now, eh?"

As the two men walked toward Jeffrey's, Spike called himself a fool, but was unable to help himself. Keeping Xander happy meant keeping him employed and safe. That meant sex in an alley was out.

Damn it.

---

Xander poured drinks automatically, responding absent-mindedly to the men (and the few women) lining the bar. He wasn't up to his usual funny-flirty-sympathetic-bartender best, but he figured he could have an off night. Besides, he couldn't really make himself be too



concerned. He had something more important on his mind.

What the hell had happened in that alley?

At first, Xander had been mildly terrified. Sure, he had Spike with him, and he knew Spike wouldn't willingly let anyone hurt him, but three vampires against the two of them was mildly chancy. Obeying the last vestiges of high-school-boy hormones, he had thrown himself into the fray, taking on the leader.

Then the second vamp had been on him, and he'd been completely terrified. Just when he was about to give in and try screaming for Buffy, Spike had ripped his attacker away. Then the blond man had said it.

"Nobody touches him" - and then Spike had as much as claimed him before killing the other vamp.

Xander had never been so turned on in his entire life.

He and Spike had never really discussed their relationship, or if they even had one. Sure, the vampire had been with him day and night for the past week, and they'd had sex and slept in each other's arms every night, but they had yet to talk at all. The dark-haired man was almost afraid to - what if he freaked Spike out, and he

took off? Xander had been in lust before, but this was something more.

Lust had never made him want to jump someone in the middle of an alley. That Spike - *Spike!* - had been the voice of reason and said no was almost as unbelievable as Xander trying to persuade him to get naked in the first place. Xander was beginning to worry that he just might be falling in love.

With an evil soulless vampire who had tried to kill him in the past.

If working at Jeffrey's didn't work out, then he could always be a full-time guest on Springer.

Looking around the bar, Xander spotted Spike skulking around the corners of the club. He usually hung around outside, coming in after the bar closed to be with the mortal, but tonight he seemed reluctant to let Xander out of his sight. The blond man had come by the bar once or twice, but hadn't lingered to talk. As Xander watched, Spike turned down an invitation to dance, a familiar sneer curling his lip.

He sensed someone coming up behind him, and turned to see Jeffery standing at his back. The owner's gaze was

locked on Spike. "That's the guy who was here last week, isn't it? Do you want me to have him thrown out?"

As he spoke, David came up from his shift on stage to lean against the bar. "I'll help," he offered.

Xander smiled and shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but don't worry about it. I guess you could say that we made up, sorta. No more enemies."

"You sure?" persisted Jeffery.

Meeting Spike's gaze across the room, Xander couldn't help the grin that stretched his lips. "Oh, yeah."

Jeffery nodded and left. David lingered, looking back and forth between Spike and Xander. Finally, Xander couldn't stand the speculative glances any longer. "What?" he demanded.

"I just don't believe it," the dancer commented, a teasing smile on his face.

"Don't believe what?"

"That the peroxide abuser hiding in the corner might just be your one."

Xander could feel the flush rising in his cheeks, but he met Dave's gaze squarely. "Yeah, I think he just might

be. But I'm not sure how I feel, and I have no idea what he's thinking, so just stay out of it, all right?"

"Oh, far be it from me to interfere in the course of true love." The dancer raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "Just be sure to keep me up on the details, all right?"

Xander raised a bottle in mock-threat. "Don't you have a groove thing to be shaking?"

For the rest of the night, Xander tracked Spike as he walked around the club. The vampire never accepted any of the numerous invitations to dance that he received. He never stopped to watch the dancers, or joined in a conversation with anyone. Instead, he just circled the club, eyes always returning to the man behind the bar.

He came to the bar at irregular intervals, looking for something to drink. Xander found himself looking forward to and anticipating the visits. It gave him something to look forward to in between pouring drinks and fending off flirtatious drunks who couldn't take a hint. After firmly turning down one of the most persistent, he looked up and saw Spike walking toward the bar.

He licked his lips as the vampire approached. "What'll you have?"

Dark blue eyes failed to meet his; instead, they were fixed on the persistent drunk, who had wandered over to a table and was trying his luck with the guy seated there. "What did that guy want?"

"Something he can't have," Xander answered with a shrug. He watched in fascination as Spike's brows lowered. Was that actually a growl?

His amusement disappeared when Spike moved to go over to the swaying man.

"Whoa," he called, getting the vampire to focus his attention on him once more. "What's the problem?"

"What's the problem?" Spike leaned across the bar, keeping his voice low and intense. "The problem is that you've been at work for hours now. That means it's been hours since you started something in that alley, and you have yet to finish it."

A rush of heat flooded the dark-haired man, and he was tempted to pour himself a drink. "The crowd's beginning to thin out. We close in another half hour."

"Then you'll insist on cleaning this place up, I suppose?" Spike's voice sounded almost petulant.

"Well, it is a part of the job." Xander wiped at the bar, trying to distract himself from the other man, who was still leaning over the bar. "And after I'm done, I'll be all yours."

All right, that was definitely a growl. The mortal looked up in time to be pulled into a hard kiss. At first he tried to resist, but then gave in, losing himself in the frantic motion of Spike's mouth on his.

Were those happy little noises really coming from him?

A throat cleared behind them returned some modicum of sanity to Xander, and he wrenched his mouth away from Spike's, ignoring the vampire's exclamation of protest. He turned to see Jeffery looking down at him, one eyebrow raised inquiringly.

"I didn't know that you added a floor show to your duties," commented the owner.

Cursing the blush he could feel burning hotly in his cheeks, Xander tried to apologize. "I'm sorry, really, I am. It won't happen again-"

"It damn well better," Spike muttered.

Xander shot an exasperated glare at him, which the vampire shrugged off unrepentantly, and continued. "- I promise. I'm sorry, Jeffery."

The owner stared at him for a moment, then grinned. "Hell, I was young once. I'm not going to fire you over this, but do try to be a little more discrete in the future, all right? Or at least give me some warning, so I can sell tickets before hand."

Wondering why the earth never opened up beneath him when he wanted it to, Xander nodded mutely. As Jeffery walked away to begin work on closing down the club, the dark-haired man turned to face Spike. "You're going to get me fired," he hissed, beginning to get ready for last call.

"Then you'd have more time to spend with me," Spike replied with a grin.

Xander rolled his eyes, but he began to speed up, trying to get as much done as possible, so he'd be able to leave sooner. He ignored the vampire who sat smirking at him the entire time, knowing that Spike knew that he was hurrying, and why.

After the club had closed, Xander flew through his closing routine, ignoring the dancers who were sitting near the

bar, talking and unwinding after a long but fun night. A voice calling his name repeatedly finally broke through his concentration on the final details of shutting down the bar. He looked up to find David laughing at him. "What?"

"You still game for walking me home?" the dancer asked.

"You're a big boy. I'm sure you'll be fine on your own," Spike said dismissively.

Xander glared at him. "Of course, Dave. Why don't you sweep off the stage, and I'll finish tables, and we'll go."

"I liked it better when you did this for free," the other man grouched, but he grabbed a broom and walked over to the stage.

Xander watched him go, then turned to Spike. "Get moving."

"What?" asked the vampire, raising one eyebrow.

"Go stack chairs."

"Now why would I want to do that?"

"Because," answered Xander, walking around the bar to stand close to the blond man, "if you do, we'll be able to get Dave home sooner. Then I'll be done here



sooner." He leaned in closer to the vampire, speaking directly into his ear. "The sooner I'll be able to finish what we started."

Spike grabbed at him, but the dark-haired man danced out of reach too quickly. "Chairs, Spike." The vampire growled at him, but got up and moved to start stacking the chairs. Xander wiped off the tables, and soon the three men were ready to go.

Xander and Dave talked all the way to Dave's place, with Spike stalking along behind them, hands thrust deep in his pockets. The dancer disappeared into his apartment with a wave and wishes that the two men outside had a "*good night*".

As soon as the door was closed, Xander found himself backed up against the wall, faced with a very intense looking vampire. "So, Spike," he said, licking his lips. "How has your night been?"

"Bloody frustrating," the blond man said firmly.

"Well, we can't have that, now, can we?"

"No, we can't." Spike leaned in and kissed Xander hard, thrusting the other man even harder up against the wall.

Not that Xander was going to complain. He moaned happily into the kiss, and pulled the vampire even closer to him.

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Spike pulled back for a moment, leaving the warm haven of Xander's mouth reluctantly. He still pressed the other man up against the wall, holding him there with his own weight. He stared into the dark eyes so close to his, brown eyes now hazy with desire and want. As he leaned in for another kiss, the vampire remembered the words he had exchanged with Dave earlier on in the evening at Jeffrey's.

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The blond man had been sitting in a booth in a corner, watching Xander pour drinks and talk to patrons, resenting every moment that passed where the mortal was working, instead of being with him. At least he got to watch him, keep an eye on him and make sure that no one else was making a play for the dark-haired man. He'd meant what he said; Xander was *his*, and no one was going to interfere with that. Even if he hadn't explained that to his lover yet.

A shadow fell across his table, and he looked up. That dancer he'd first seen with Xander stood there, looking down at him. "What?" he asked irritably, not wanting to be distracted from his Xander-watching.

"I just wanted to give you some advice," Dave replied, sliding into the seat across the table.

"Not interested."

"Get interested. I don't know you, but if you're going to be with Xan, then you had better know me."

Was that a challenge? Feeling a sneer twist his lip, Spike leaned forward. "Where are you going with this?"

"Not far. Just don't hurt him." Dave's gaze wandered over to Xander and then back to Spike's eyes. "He's special, and he's got a lot of friends. You do anything stupid, like tear his heart out, and you'll regret it."

Leaning back, the vampire raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like a threat."

"Call it a warning." The dancer stood and turned to leave, but was arrested by Spike's voice.

"I've got a bit of warning of my own," the blond man said languidly, stretching his arms out across the back of his booth. "If anyone messes with *Xan*, if anyone does anything to upset him, they'll have to answer to me. You got that, pet?"

Dave stared down at him. "Got it." A sudden smile crossed his face. "With that attitude, you might just be all right." Then he was gone, lost in the crowd of dancers.

Spike returned to his new favorite hobby, a small smile on his face as he watched Xander sing along with the music as he mixed a couple of drinks.

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The memory fresh, Spike again pulled away from the kiss. This time, Xander followed his motion, refusing to give up contact. Finally, the vampire managed to get his mouth away from the demanding lips that had captured them. Chuckling softly, he traced the other man's features with a finger. "I don't know where this obsession with sex in alleys has come from, love, but I think I like it."

The dark-haired man flushed, but didn't look away. "I think it's more an obsession with you," he admitted. "Do you want to come back to-"

He never got the chance to finish the sentence; Spike's mouth was back on his, and the vampire's hands roamed over the mortal's body. It wasn't a declaration of love, but it was the closest thing the blond man had yet to hear, and he intended to fully reward Xander for it. Finally remembering what his intentions had been, Spike licked his way up to the other man's ear.

"I've...come across, let's say...another hotel key. Care to join me?"

Voice none too steady, the younger man asked, "'Came across'? Don't you mean 'stole'?"

Spike left off chewing gently at Xander's earlobe to whisper, "King-sized bed...hot tub *in* the room..."

"Sounds high-class," the other man murmured, between nips placed down

Spike's jawline. "Does it have Magic Fingers? I like Magic Fingers."

Laughing, the vampire pulled himself away, maintaining a tight hold on Xander's hand. "If it doesn't, we'll make our own, I promise." He pulled his lover toward the hotel, a trip that took forever because said lover kept ducking into alleys to steal a few more heated kisses.

Not that Spike was complaining.

Once they were finally inside the hotel room, Spike never had the chance to suggest checking out the hot tub. That would have required using his mouth, and since Xander was apparently trying to suck his tongue out of his head, it would have been a problem.

The vampire allowed himself to be backed up across the room. The dark-haired man didn't even give him the chance to speak when they reached the bed; the other man continued to kiss Spike even as they tumbled down

onto the mattress. He kept it up even as he began to tug at the vampire's clothing, trying to strip him without losing contact.

Finally, Xander sat up and looked down at Spike, who was sprawled beneath him as the mortal straddled his hips. "Lose the clothes," he panted.

The blond man raised his eyebrows. "How very romantic."

"Fuck romantic," Xander said, grinning as he pulled Spike's jacket away and tossed it to the floor. He leaned down to speak directly against the vampire's lips. "Better yet, fuck *you*."

Spike stared at him for a moment, then pulled off his own shirt, and ripped Xander's off the other man. Laughing, the brown-haired man began to help, and soon skin was sliding across skin with no impediments.

Xander's hands were everywhere; the vampire arched his back up into the sensation of teeth scraping delicately over one of his nipples even as hands wandered possessively over his body. The dark-haired man seemed to have lost his sense of urgency. Now, he moved slowly

over and around Spike's body, taking his time to lavish attention everywhere.

Shivering, and unable to believe that he was affected by the gentle gnawing on the inside of his elbow - his *elbow* - Spike lifted his hips, thrusting himself against Xander suggestively. "I thought you said we couldn't have me frustrated, love," he growled.

With a final scrape against the soft skin, Xander grinned up at him. "Maybe I changed my mind."

"Maybe you should change it back," Spike retorted, dragging Xander up to lay sprawled across him. Undulating his hips slowly, he let his hands roam over the body on top of his own. "Change it back fast."

Sealing his mouth over Spike's, Xander began to plunge his tongue in and out of the vampire's mouth in a suggestive rhythm. His free hand fumbled for the supplies that Spike had placed on the bed when he had scouted the room out earlier. He began to carefully prepare the vampire, taking as much time as he had in everything else that night.

The blond man groaned, thrusting in time with the fingers inside of him. "Just get on with it."



Dark hair brushed his cheek as the other man shook his head. "Nope. 'm still a nominal good guy, remember? Not into causing pain."

Spike growled, but the other just laughed. Finally, Xander seemed satisfied with his preparations. With a single slow thrust, he sheathed himself inside the vampire, his moaning merging with the man below him's.

Both men were too worked up to last long. The combination of the sensations of Xander's hard length pistoning in and out of him, Xander's hand on his erection, pumping in time with the dark-haired man's thrusts, and the sight of Xander himself, eyes glazed as he drove them both toward completion, proved to be too much for Spike. With a strangled howl, he came hard, losing himself completely in the feeling.

As he came back to himself, the vampire became aware of the weight of Xander, who had collapsed down upon him. Spike lifted a hand to run his fingers through the sweaty dark hair slowly, waiting for his lover to recover.

The mortal roused slowly, lifting his head to look down at Spike. He grinned softly. "I didn't even miss the Magic Fingers," he mumbled, in between the kisses he scattered across the vampire's chest. The blond man

moved to take Xander's mouth, but the other man pulled his head back.

"What's wrong, love?"

"Nothing's *wrong*," Xander replied, placing soft kisses across Spike's brow and down his cheek. "You've just gone pointy again, and I'm a bit leery of those teeth."

The blond man realized that he had vamped out again during sex. He had been trying to control it, but it apparently didn't bother Xander. He pulled himself back into human guise, even so; he wanted that mouth.

After exchanging countless long, lazy kisses, Xander's head came to rest on Spike's chest. The vampire enfolded him in his arms, holding the mortal tightly as he listened to him fall asleep.

Oh yeah, he had it bad.

Regardless of what the Slayer and her Watcher might think, vampires could love, at least the older ones could. The newer ones tended to be too wrapped up in themselves, in their need for blood and power, to realize it, but the capability was still there. Spike had loved Drusilla, and while what he felt for Xander wasn't the same, it was still love. It was just cleaner, somehow, more real, definitely more powerful.

After all, he had left the Slayer and her groupies alone, hadn't he, instead of trying to arrange their deaths? He might long to feel their torn flesh slowly cool under his hands, but that would never happen.

Why? Because Xander didn't want it to. That was enough for Spike. He might still want to kill them, but he couldn't, because that would hurt Xander, and he only wanted to see his lover happy.

Xander snuggled closer in his sleep, and Spike smiled. He wasn't going to lose this man. No matter what he had to do, he wasn't going to lose him. He loved him.

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Xander sang quietly to himself as he mixed a drink, then presented it to the woman who had ordered it with a wink and a flourish. She grinned and shook her head at him, and returned her attention to her girlfriend.

The dark-haired man shared her grin, and continued to sing along with the music as he worked. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so damn good. His life just kept getting better and better, and most of the happiness he felt stemmed from his relationship with a certain blond vampire. Spike was around all the time - Xander spent every day in the other man's arms, whether they were sleeping or otherwise engaged. Spike went out on patrol with him, and then came with him back to Jeffrey's. Sometimes he could even get the vampire to help him with his work.

Not tonight, though. He could see Spike lounging in what was rapidly becoming his booth. In a back corner, it was away from most of the dancing crowd. Xander knew it was no coincidence that the booth also gave the blond man a clear view of the bar. That thought in mind, he waved at the vampire, waiting for the other man to nod in acknowledgment before getting back to work.

Xander smirked a little at the long-suffering expression he had seen on Spike's face. He had laughed more in the past month than he had in a long time. Spike's nasty sense of humor never failed to lift his spirits. The bartender knew that some part of him had to be sick to enjoy being insulted, but really, words couldn't hurt him, not anymore. Not after growing up in his house. Hell,

after hanging around with his friends all through high school, he was immune to insults. Besides, Spike's voice seemed oddly lacking in heat anytime he tried to say anything cruel to Xander. It was as though he was just going through the motions.

Well, his voice did heat up when they were in bed, but Xander wasn't going to think about that. Not at work. He and Spike had behaved themselves...*mostly*...since Jeffery had asked them to try to keep it down while he was at work, although there had been a few slips.

The best way to avoid making them was to avoid thinking about sex. Which wasn't going to happen if he didn't keep sneaking glances over at Spike. Yeah, right. Like he was ever going to be able to stop himself. He shot a quick look over at the booth, and saw the vampire looking up at a standing man and talking idly with him. Xander began to get a little irritated, then saw it was Jeffery, and relaxed.

He and Spike's impromptu kiss a few weeks ago had nicely announced their relationship to all of the dark-haired man's co-workers. At first they had seemed leery of Spike, and Xander understood that; he would have been worried if they hadn't. But after having the

vampire skulking around the club for weeks, they seemed to have gotten used to him, and Dave and Jeffery seemed to like him.

Realizing that he was spending all his time thinking about Spike, Xander shook his head. He had it bad, even if he wasn't quite certain of what *it* was yet. He was halfway convinced that it was love. Nothing else would explain this need to be with the other man all the time, to always know what he was doing. It would also explain the jealousy he felt whenever he saw someone else get too close to the vampire.

It also was a convenient excuse for the few little slips that they did make at the bar. Spike had never been big in the area of impulse control, as long as Xander had known him, and it seemed that it was wearing off onto him as well. That was the other reason Spike sat at the booth - with that much distance between them, they were less likely to get themselves into trouble. For example, it was unlikely that Xander would brush too close to the vampire when reaching for an abandoned glass, prompting the blond man to try to drag him over the bar while claiming his mouth in an almost-desperate kiss. Not that Xander, or any of the witnesses, had complained when it happened the other day, but still, there were some proprieties to be maintained.

On the upside, most of the patrons of Jeffrey's were regulars, and those slips let them know that Xander was not available, and neither was Spike. It had cut down on the number of propositions he received, to the point where he hardly had to use his **Please Don't Cruise the Bartender** sign anymore. Which was a good thing, because his lover dealt with jealousy so well.

The dark-haired man took a few drink orders, and managed to drag his thoughts away from Spike long enough to flirt mildly and laugh with the people at the bar. There was no harm in playing, was there?

He heard his own thought, and sighed. Playing...he was a little worried that was all their relationship was to Spike, some sort of game. It might be more, he wanted it to be more, but what could he do? Sit the other man down and ask him? If it was just playing for the vampire, then he would be opening himself up for merciless teasing, as well as ruining whatever chance he might have with Spike.

Xander shook himself out of his thoughts. No brooding, not for him. Brooding was for Deadboy, not him. Besides, if Spike was just playing a game, he would have lost interest and moved on long before

now. Whatever they had, it meant something to the vampire. It was up to him to find out just what, though.

A new song cycled through on the sound system of the club, one with an irresistible beat and rhythm. Xander began to move almost despite himself, not able to stand still with the sound of it moving through him. As he danced behind the bar, he watched as Dave walked over to him, a wide smile on his face.

The dancer looked at him, and laughed in delight. "Mind if I join you?"

Xander wiggled his eyebrows and pulled him in behind the bar. They soon found a mutual rhythm, and began to move together, much to the delight of the men and women by the bar. They had done this before, but not recently. Just as Xander was beginning to get into it, an accented voice reached his ear.

"I do believe you're in my place," Spike said, staring at Dave, his tone filled with amusement and possessiveness mixed.

The dancer stepped back, gesturing for Spike to take his place. "By all means."

"Too bloody right," the vampire muttered, moving to stand with less than an inch separating him and Xander.



The dark-haired man slowed his dancing; what was Spike up to? The blond man had never done anything like this, preferring to avoid drawing any attention to himself when at Jeffrey's.

The vampire moved even closer, placing his hands on Xander's hips. "You've lost the rhythm, love," he scolded gently. "It's like this." He began to guide the bartender into the moves of the dance, grinning at him even as he himself began to move.

Xander began to warm to the idea of dancing with Spike. It was new, but he liked it. He slowly lost himself in the beat of the music, in the feel of his lover's body brushing against him in tantalizing little teases, the way that dark-blue eyes were darkening even more, fairly burning with heat - all for him. He was vaguely aware that a crowd was gathering at the bar, and that Dave had taken up service as bartender. Not that anyone was ordering; all attention was fixed on him and Spike.

He gave himself over to the rhythm, dancing with greater abandon. Spike responded in a like manner, swaying even closer, so there was no distance between them at all. Xander could feel the heat building within himself, a slow burn that he knew was going to torture him for the rest of the night, but it was completely worth it. He

laughed out loud, and could feel Spike's answering chuckle reverberate through him.

The feel of the music pounding through him, the cheers and catcalls of the watching men and women, the heat warming him as it flickered in Spike's eyes; all this combined and went straight to Xander's head, causing to lose himself in the moment, until all that mattered was the rhythm and feel of his lover moving against him.

All this conspired to make the dark-haired man oblivious to the fact that a group of people had just entered the club: two men, three women. The Scooby Gang.

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Buffy peered around the multi-colored interior of the club, scanning the room for any sign of Xander. Nothing. She turned to look at Anya. "He's not here, you see? You must have followed someone else by mistake." No way would Xander be hanging out in a gay club. There wouldn't be enough women for him to

ogle. Anya must have been mistaken when she thought she had seen him come in here.

Anya shook her head emphatically. "I'm not wrong. I know it was Xander, and I know he came here." She walked of into the crowd, jostling roughly through dancers, looking for the man.

Buffy exchanged an exasperated glance with Willow, Riley, and Giles, and moved to follow her. The Slayer noticed that a large group of men was clumped around the bar, laughing and cheering. She caught several shouts of the name Xan.

Xan? Buffy followed Anya's path, elbowing her way through the dancers, breaking a way for her and her friends trailing after her to reach the bar. When they finally managed to reach the bar, she stopped dead, sensing that the shock she was feeling was shared by the others behind her.

There, behind the bar, was Xander. He was dancing. Dancing with *Spike*.

Not just dancing. What the two men were doing went way beyond dancing. They were both moving to the compelling beat of the music that was pumping through the club, bodies twisting and weaving around each other,

entwining as they swayed back and forth, lost in the rhythm and in each other.

Xander's face was set in an expression of pure pleasure, head tipped back and eyes closed as he laughed quietly. Spike - *Spike* was smiling as well, gaze locked on Xander's face, completely concentrating on him.

Buffy watched as they drifted toward each other, lips meeting and clinging in a fierce kiss that went on and on. The on-lookers shouted encouragement, which the two men ignored. Finally, they broke the kiss, going back to dancing, oblivious to everyone and everything around them.

The Slayer shook her head in disbelief. This wasn't real. That wasn't Xander. Xander was goofy and sweet, and clumsily in love with her and in lust with every other woman. He made bad jokes, ate too much junk food, and lived in his parents' basement while he drifted from one ridiculous-uniform-requiring job to the next.

Xander didn't know how to dance like this, how to sway in such a seductive way around his partner. Xander didn't dance with men, or hang out at a gay bar, or kiss vampires.

Finally, she couldn't stand to watch any longer. This was wrong, completely wrong. "What the hell is going on?" she shouted.

Xander's eyes flew open, and as his gaze fell upon her, he lost the rhythm of the dance, stumbling as he did so. Spike caught him, holding him close as the dark-haired man steadied himself. The brown-eyed man stared at Buffy, and the rest of the Scooby Gang standing behind her, eyes wide and shocked as his face drained of color.

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Spike couldn't believe it. This wasn't happening. The Slayer and her little cadre of groupies were *not* standing on the other side of the bar, staring at them. There had to be another explanation for what he was seeing. The chip in his head had probably shorted out, causing him to have hallucinations. That was it.

So why had Xander stopped dancing? Why had he almost fallen? Why were all the patrons of Jeffrey's standing as still as statues, watching and filling the air with anticipatory tension?

Fuck. It was real.

Spike could feel the first flickers of panic lick through him as his thoughts moved lightening fast through the thick silence that surrounded him. He didn't want this. Oh, sure, a month and a half ago, he would have leapt at the chance to wreak havoc in the lives of Sunnydale's plucky little band of do-gooders, to try to tear them apart. Watching one of them squirm in a situation as volatile as this one would've made his afterlife.

Not any more, though. That was before - before the damned chip in his head, before he'd had to go crawling to the Slayer for protection, before he'd gotten to know Xander. Before he'd fallen in love with him.

Now all that mattered was Xander's happiness. Spike couldn't find any pleasure in the situation, in the tight pallor the Scooby Gang's faces and the unnatural stillness of their postures, because it all came at his lover's expense. The price was too high; nothing was worth that.

The vampire's panic grew as a second thought occurred to him. He could lose Xander over this. The mortal had already lost his family. As rotten as his relationship with his parents had been, he knew the loss affected the dark-haired man, hurting and haunting him even though he refused to discuss it. Xander was closer to his friends than he was to his family; he couldn't lose them, too.

Spike knew that it could very well come down to a choice between himself and Xander's friends. He didn't want to force his lover into the position of having to decide.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know what that decision would be.

Steeling himself, Spike gently pushed Xander to stand on his own feet, not wanting to be holding the other man if the choice didn't go his way. Being dumped hurt; he didn't want it to happen while they were in a semi-embrace.

Avid gaze locked on Xander's face, he watched as his lover turned to look at him, a small smile fighting to form on the dark-haired man's lips, and barely making it. Brown eyes shot him a grateful look; there was fear in that gaze, which the vampire recognized easily, as well as something more, that he couldn't quite name and hardly dared to allow himself to hope for.

Xander turned to face his friends, standing directly in front of Spike. To the vampire's surprise, his lover's body suddenly relaxed completely, all tension draining from him. The young man leaned backwards, bringing his back, slightly damp from the exertion of dancing, to rest against Spike's chest. More out of instinct than out of thought, the blond man's arms came up to encircle Xander's waist.

His confusion deepened as Xander raised his hands to gently clasp Spike's, even as he burrowed deeper into the vampire's embrace.

"Hey guys." Xander's voice was steady, but Spike could hear the tension that lay beneath the thin veneer of calm. "Buffy, what are you talking about? What does it look like we're doing?" He swayed his hips from side to side slowly, and Spike followed the motion unthinkingly, still unsure of what was happening. "We're dancing. You do dance at college, don't you? I mean, I know you're full-on students and all, but you don't gather at the frats on the weekends to work on math together, right?"

"Of course we dance," Buffy shot back, leaning forward. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"Oh. I'm working, actually. I'm bartender here. Anybody want a drink?" Xander made no move to break free from



Spike's hold, and the blond man really didn't want to let him go, so the embrace continued. Spike might not know what the hell the mortal was going to do next, but he was willing to play along.

The Slayer shook her head. "I don't know what's going on, Xander. What's wrong with you?" She transferred her gaze to Spike. "Get your claws off him."

"Buff," Xander said. He got no further.

"Shut up," the blond girl said. "I don't know what he's done to you, but it ends now. You're dust, Spike."

Xander shook his head, dark hair brushing softly against the vampire's cheek. "No, Buff. You shouldn't have said that. Nothing's going to happen to him." He turned his head to face Jeffery, who had come to investigate the disturbance at the bar. "Boss, these kids are underage. You might want to clear them out."

Jeffery glanced at Buffy and the others, then at Xander, whose face was still pale, expression still tight. The club owner nodded slowly, and faced Buffy. "You'll have to go," he said firmly. "Not you, sir -" this to Giles "-but the rest of you."

Buffy began to object, but Jeffery held up a hand to silence her. "Go now, or I call the in the muscle."

Giles bent slightly to speak to Buffy, words too soft to carry past her ear. She nodded reluctantly, and turned to go, Riley close at her heels. Anya stared at Xander for a moment longer, and even Spike could read the shock and betrayal in her gaze, then followed the Slayer out of the club.

Willow hesitated for a moment, face and eyes unhappy. "Xander..."

"We'll talk, Will. I promise." Xander's voice cracked a little. "Just not now, not here, K?"

Nodding slowly, the redhead turned to follow the rest of the Scooby Gang to the exit.

Once only Giles remained, the crowd at the bar began to disperse, seeing that the confrontation was over. Soon, only the Watcher remained at the bar.

Xander gently pulled away from Spike, and the vampire let him go. The blond man stayed close, though, refusing to move from his place at his lover's back.

He couldn't believe what was happening. Had Xander really just chosen him over his friends?

Giles shook his head. "I don't understand what is happening here, Xander."

"Oh, I rather think you do," Spike said, smirking a bit. Xander shot him a look, and the blond man subsided reluctantly.

The bartender sighed, and returned his attention to Giles. "What's going on is really none of your, or Buffy's, business. Keep out of my personal life, all right?"

"He's a *vampire*," Giles said.

"I did sorta notice that, G-man."

"He might not be able to kill you, but he's still dangerous. He's going to hurt you, Xander. We're trying to protect you."

Spike wanted to react, to protest, to smash the Watcher's nosy face in. Hurt Xander? He'd bloody well stake himself before he hurt his lover. Who the hell did Giles think he was? He kept silent, though, knowing that the dark-haired man wanted to have control of this situation.

Xander took a deep breath. "Look, I'll come by your house tomorrow night, all right? We can talk then. Not now."

The Watcher stared at him for a moment, then nodded. "Tomorrow night, then. We'll be waiting. I just

hope you will have come to your senses by then." With a final worried glance at the dark-haired man, the Englishman left the club.

Spike stared at Xander, not sure what to do. He'd never expected the events of the past few minutes to take place, and was completely unprepared for them.

The younger man turned his head a little as he watched Giles leave, and the vampire was able to see the sheen of unshed tears in his dark eyes.

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Xander stared after Giles, feeling the trembling he had been repressing begin to move through his frame, the shaking growing worse as each moment passed. He'd played it cool in front of his friends, cooler than he had thought he'd be able to get away with, but he had managed it somehow. Now that they were gone, he let the act slip, not able to sustain it for a moment longer.

The dark-haired man squeezed his eyes shut, willing away the tears that threatened. He wasn't sure if he was strong enough for this. Losing his family had been bad enough; even though they'd never been close, they were still his parents, and it hurt to be rejected by them, cast aside forever. To lose his friends...they'd been his entire world since high school, hanging out with them and helping Buffy as a member of the Scooby Gang. Sure, they'd drifted apart lately, but they were still an important part of his life. He couldn't imagine not having them around, not having them as a part of his life.

Hands fell on his shoulders, turning him around and pulling him into a near-crushing embrace. Cool lips brushed his ear as a low voice promised him he wasn't alone, that he'd never be alone, Spike had him, was there for them. Xander wrapped his arms around the vampire, the tremors slowly lessening as he held the other man in an equally tight grip.

He might not be strong enough for this alone. But he wasn't alone. He had Spike.

After a few more minutes in his lover's arms, Xander had enough control of himself to pull back slightly. Or at least try to. Spike's arms just tightened around him, refusing to let him go. After a second unsuccessful

attempt, the bartender smiled a little and relaxed completely into the embrace. "Spike...Spike, c'mon."

"C'mon what, love?" the vampire asked, raising his head and brushing his lips over Xander's temple.

"I've got work to do. You gotta let me go."

Spike sighed something as he reluctantly let the mortal go. Xander didn't quite catch what it was. His heart told him the whispered word had been 'never', but he told himself not to fool himself. Today had been bad enough, without getting his hopes up over a word he'd barely heard.

Dragging a hand through his dark hair, he turned back to the bar, trying to force his brain back to thinking of work, knowing that he was setting himself an impossible task. Sensing someone besides Spike and himself behind the bar, he turned around. "Jeffery." Shit. His boss had seen the whole thing. "Look, I'm really sorry. I had no idea they'd ever come in here. I can't believe they did that. It will never happen again, I swear."

The older man shook his head. "Xan, calm down, all right? I'm not upset." He raised his hand to place it on Xander's shoulder, but a warning growl from Spike

caused him to abort the move. "Why don't you take the rest of the night off?"

Xander shook his head. "That's not necessary. I'm fine."

"Of course you're not." He didn't give Xander a chance to object again. "Look, Xan, we've all been through this before. Confrontations with friends are always hard. Go on." He glanced at Spike. "Spend the rest of tonight with someone who cares."

"I'm not going to turn you down again," Xander warned, a weary smile on his face.

"Get out of here," Jeffery said, returning the smile. "I'll see you tomorrow." The owner moved to stand behind the bar, taking over Xander's position himself.

Spike grabbed the dark-haired man and began to pull him out from behind the bar. "Let's go, Xander."

The young man allowed himself to be pulled along, out from behind the bar, and then out of the club itself. Once outside, the vampire paused, not letting go of Xander. Worried blue eyes met brown. "You sure you're all right?"

Teeth worrying his bottom lip, the mortal shook his head. "No," he

admitted. "I will be, though. I just can't believe they did that. That they could come in and judge me like that!"

The blond man shifted; Xander noticed that he looked almost uncomfortable. "I hate to tell you this, but I think they were judging *me*, pet."

That made the young man pause. Buffy had seemed most upset about finding him with Spike, rather than in a gay club, although there had been some shock over that as well. Spike was probably right; his friends were probably more worried about him being with a vampire than the fact that he was with a man.

He glanced up, and caught sight of his lover refusing to meet his gaze. Instead, the vampire was paying an inordinate amount of attention to his boots. Xander realized that Spike must be worried that he was having second thoughts, doubt about what he had just done. Summoning up another smile, he moved to stand closer to the other man. "Hey. Have you come across any other hotel keys?"

Spike looked up quickly, a sly grin crossing his face. "As a matter of fact, I have. A very posh place, as it happens. Would you like to take a look at it?"

Xander nodded, shivering a bit in the night air.



The vampire shook his head. "Can't have that, Xander. No shivering - at least, not from being cold." He pulled off his own jacket and slung it around the other man's shoulders.

Xander took it, grateful not only for the warmth it provided, but for the symbol it was that Spike cared. Wrapping the material tightly around himself, he followed Spike through Sunnydale, until they came to an upscale hotel.

Once inside the room, Spike began to pace about, moving from one area to the next, never stopping for long. "So, what now, hmm? Fully stocked wet bar, room service, Jacuzzi bath - it's all here. It's up to you, anything you want, we can do."

Xander watched him pace, suddenly feeling very tired. Hoping he wasn't making a mistake and a huge fool of himself, he mumbled an answer.

Spike stopped his restless movements and walked over closer to him. "I didn't quite catch that."

Forcing himself to speak louder, the young man repeated himself. "I wanted to know if you'd be willing...if you'd just, you know, hold me?" Now he was the one fascinated with the ground.

Gentle fingers caught his chin and forced him to look up. Dark blue eyes stared into his. "I can do that, love."

Xander watched him, knowing his eyes were wide. He had half-thought the vampire would laugh at his request, thinking him sappy or weak. He stood still as the still gentle hands stripped the jacket from him, and led him over to sit on the bed. Spike knelt, and removed the young man's shoes and socks, then paused to take off his own boots. He tugged off his own shirt and jeans as well.

The brown-eyed man licked his lips. "Spike..."

"Don't worry, love. You'll be more comfortable without all these clothes on. That's all." He almost managed to look...tender.

Xander figured he must be more shocky than he had thought. Shaking his head, he pulled off his own shirt, and stood to remove his own slacks. He shivered a bit, feeling unexpectedly vulnerable standing there in just his boxers.

"What did I tell you about that, love?" the vampire chided gently, pulling Xander into his arms, then leading him over the bed. He pulled back the covers on the bed, and pushed the dark-haired man down onto the sheets.

He quickly followed, yanking up the covers before tugging Xander into his arms.

Sighing heavily, the young man settled into the cool embrace, feeling the lingering tension in him finally begin to dissipate. Just being held was so nice - the simple contact was exactly what he needed. With a pleased murmur, he cuddled closer to his lover, even as his eyelids grew heavier.

Xander didn't realize he had fallen asleep until he began to wake up, called away from slumber by soft kisses feathered across his face. Shifting a little, he woke up the rest of the way, smiling as he found Spike lying on top of him. He lifted his lips, silently asking for another kiss.

Grinning, Spike complied, leisurely exploring his mouth, stopping only to allow Xander to breathe before resuming the examination.

Beneath him, the mortal murmured in sleepy enjoyment, awake, but still lethargic. He returned the kisses, taking his time to do a thorough job. He felt other parts of him begin to wake up, as his arousal lengthened and hardened from the feeling of his lover moving against him.

The vampire broke off the kiss. "What's this I feel, love?" He began to thrust slowly against Xander, keeping the languid mood that enveloped them.

"You'd think after all your years you'd recognize it," Xander answered, smiling lazily as he returned the thrusts, feeling his arousal grow, but not his excitement. It had never been like this before - sweet and slow without their usual urgency.

The two men writhed slowly against each other, letting their need build slowly, exchanging those lingering kisses continuously. Finally, Xander gasped softly as he came, feeling Spike shudder against him at the same time. They pressed together, and Xander slowly caught his breath.

Opening his eyes once more, the mortal looked up into the smiling face of his lover. "That was..." his voice trailed off as he failed to find the words he wanted.

"It certainly was," Spike agreed, pushing back the blankets. "C'mon, time to get cleaned up."

Xander shook his head. "I don't wanna move."

"You don't want to sleep like that, love. I promise." The blond man pulled the unwilling mortal to his feet, and half-carried him into the bathroom. He settled him down on top of the toilet, then turned on the shower.

The dark-haired man allowed himself to be pulled back to his feet. He didn't help as Spike stripped his boxers away, and the vampire practically carried him into the shower. Leaning against the cool tile wall, Xander watched as Spike's brow creased in concentration as he washed both Xander and himself clean, taking more time than necessary.

Finally, Xander laughed and caught Spike's hands with his own. "I think I'm clean."

"I just want to be sure, love." The vampire grinned. "It's so much more fun to get you dirty when you're nice and clean." He turned off the water and led the mortal out of the shower, and then gently toweled him dry.

The dark-haired man let his lover lead him back to the bedroom, where he was once again gently shoved into the bed. Spike spooned himself around behind Xander, pulling him back until they were fitted as closely against each other as possible, warm skin nearly merging with cool.

Laying there, Xander was still caught in that contented drowsiness. Vaguely, he thought that he had never felt so safe, so cared for. He wanted to hold on to the feeling forever. With a sleepy chuckle, he realized that there was no hope for him. He was definitely in love.

The arms wrapped around him tightened convulsively, nearly cutting off his breath, as Spike asked "What?" in startled amazement.

Xander realized that he must have said that last bit out loud.

Shit.

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Spike was in shock. Xander was in love with him? He hadn't expected to hear that, not knowing the mortal's past history with love and with vampires. He'd hoped, of course, but he hadn't believed his feelings would be returned.

The body in his arms went utterly still, muscles tensing up into hard knots. Spike frowned until he realized how tightly he was holding his lover; it was almost a death grip. He must be scaring the shit out of the other man.

He relaxed his grip immediately, and he pulled Xander, turning him until he was laying half on top of the dark-haired man. "What did you say?" he demanded, not wanting to frighten him further, but needing to be sure.

"Nothing," Xander muttered. "I didn't say anything."

Spike bent his head down and nuzzled at his lover's lips with his own before moving over to lick at his earlobe. "I heard you, love. I know you said something."

Xander pulled his head away. Frightened brown eyes met blue. "It was nothing."

It looked like Spike was going to have to take a few steps of his own. Recapturing his lover's lobe with his teeth, he spoke softly into the ear. "A pity, that. I thought I heard you say you loved me." Xander stopped breathing. "Too bad. It would've been nice to hear, since I'm in love with you."

The brown-eyed man stared at him for a moment, then surged upward to cover the vampire's lips with his own. In between hard kisses, the young man gasped out, "I love you. I love you."

Hearing those words spoken again and again, so fervently while Xander moved underneath him was too much for Spike. Desire rushed through him, amplified and made

stronger by the knowledge that his love was returned. He caught Xander's head in his hands and held him still, exploring his lover's mouth with fierce possessiveness. He could feel his face change as he vamped out and he pulled back, ashamed to have lost control. He attempted to pull his face back into its usual human lines, but it was difficult to find the necessary concentration.

Hesitant fingers ghosting across his face distracted him from his efforts. He looked down at Xander, who was reaching up to touch him. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

The young man shook his head slowly. "Don't be." His fingers trailed up over the new lines and planes that distorted Spike's brow and so changed his appearance. His hand then slipped back to cup the back of the vampire's neck, and he pulled his head down before capturing his lips in a slow, careful kiss.

Spike moaned into his lover's mouth, forgetting about trying to get back to human guise as a warm tongue swept through his mouth. The questing organ stroked over the roof of his mouth, then hesitantly moved over to where his fangs were, low and distended. After a moment, it licked up the length of one of them.



The vampire shuddered hard, hands convulsing into a painfully tight grip on Xander's shoulders. He tried to push himself closer to his lover, trying to crawl into his skin. The tongue returned to the fang, curling around it with more confidence, and Spike groaned once more, thrusting helplessly against his lover.

Xander pulled back, eyebrows quirked questioningly. "You like that?"

"What the hell do you think?" was the growled reply.

"I think those over-sized teeth of yours are pretty sensitive," Xander shot back, an evil little smile playing over his lips. He pulled Spike's head back down with a sharp, demanding tug. As soon as their lips met, the brown-eyed man's tongue was back in the vampire's mouth, testing and teasing the elongated teeth.

Spike gave himself over to the sensations, giving up all pretense of resistance. The dancing tongue slithered wetly over his fangs, and every caress rocked the vampire, sending waves of pleasure crashing through him until he was mindless with it, rocking in desperation against his lover as needy noises sounded from the back of his throat.

Just when he thought he was going to come, Xander pulled away. The mortal stroked his face gently, trying to calm him a little. Spike wasn't having any. He ground down harder against Xander, sneaking a hand down to grasp the other man's erection, pumping it in an attempt to bring his lover to the same level of need he was caught at.

Xander gasped and thrust upwards before he regained control of himself. He dragged Spike's hand back up to his shoulders. "I'm not done yet," he said hoarsely.

"What else do you want?" demanded Spike, licking his way across the other man's chest.

"I want to try something."

Spike looked up, and watched as one of Xander's hands approached his face. He opened his mouth, and two fingers slipped inside. He sucked on them hard, pulling a groan of appreciation from the other man. Before the vampire could try anything else, the fingers moved, gliding through his mouth to brush up against his fangs.

The blond man worried that if his eyes kept rolling back like they were, they'd get stuck like that. He managed to focus long enough to look down at his lover, and saw

Xander chewing on his own lower lip, before swallowing hard and nodding as if in decision.

What was he up to?

Spike's question was answered when Xander pressed his index finger against the tip of one fang. Before the vampire could try to pull away, to warn him to be careful, the finger moved. Spike could feel skin parting, sliced ever so slightly open by the razor edge of his fang.

There was no pain.

He was so shocked that it took him a few moments to recognize the taste in his mouth: the heady, copper-sweet taste of blood. Xander's blood. He sucked ravenously, rolling the thick liquid across his tongue before swallowing. The finger slipped free of his lips, and he opened his eyes, staring down at his panting lover.

"It worked," Xander said, a pleased grin crossing his face.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing?" Spike asked, the words rasping out of his throat. Damn, he could still taste the blood, the warmth of it lingering on his lips, on his tongue.

"No," Xander replied softly. "But I'm not thinking. I'm doing what feels right." He pushed himself up and

caught Spike in a hard kiss, pulling away only to gasp for breath. "I love you."

With a rough growl, the vampire leaned down and plundered his lover's mouth, taking complete possession of it. He then moved down to the long expanse of throat, exposed in a wanton display of trust and desire. "I love you," he replied. "Christ, I love you." He scraped his teeth over the delicate skin, hearing and feeling it as the other man's heart rate increased.

Spike cast out an arm, blindly groping at the nightstand. He knocked over the lamp in his fumbblings, but finally came across the bottle of lotion he had been seeking. He pulled the bottle back onto the bed, and tore the lid off, uncaring of the amount that spilled across the sheets.

Xander's hands were wandering all over his body, trailing fire across the skin they touched. Breathily words urged him on, as did the frantic noises forcing their way out of the boy. "Please, oh please..."

The blond man quickly prepared his lover, unable to wait any longer. Even as he did so, the other man's fingers, now coated in the lotion that had oozed out onto the bed, stroked over his erection, coating him in slickness. Once he was sure he wouldn't hurt Xander, he

pulled his lover's legs up to wrap them around his waist. As he entered Xander in a single thrust, he bent his head to claim his mouth in a kiss once more. The mortal writhed beneath him, pleading wordlessly for Spike to do something, anything to take the passion and heat between them higher.

Spike couldn't refuse him anything. He slid one hand down the sweaty body beneath him, moving to grasp Xander's hardness firmly and pump it in time with his thrusts, which were gaining in force and speed. He bent his head further down, licking at the juncture of throat and shoulder.

Xander threw his head back. "Anything. Everything..." he whispered, eyes screwed shut in ecstasy.

With a frantic cry, Spike dragged his fangs over the sensitive skin, once, twice, three times. Thrusting harder and harder into his lover, he bit down, sliding his teeth into the heated flesh. Blood, warmed and flavored by arousal, flooded his mouth, the taste and feeling driving his need higher, farther.

The blond man pumped his lover harder, and with a wail of absolute pleasure, Xander came, shuddering for long minutes. The convulsions of the other man drove Spike over the edge, and he came as well, pulling his teeth out

of Xander's flesh and shouting out his love and triumph as he collapsed on top of him.

Both men took a long time to recover. Spike was the first able to move. He dragged his tongue over the twin punctures in Xander's skin, lapping away the smears of blood that remained. He hadn't bitten deep, or drawn much blood. He loved the other man; he wouldn't, he couldn't hurt him.

Slowly, Xander's eyelids fluttered open. He blinked lazily at Spike. "Wow." He kissed Spike slowly, still effected by his orgasm. "You're not pointy any more," he noted idly.

"No, I'm not. And wow indeed, love." The vampire returned to licking his throat. He smiled as Xander fairly hummed in contentment beneath him. Satisfied that he'd cleaned his lover, he lifted his head and looked down into brown eyes. "Do you know what you just did?"

"Came harder than I ever have before in my life?"

"Don't play stupid. How did you know I'd be able to bite you?" Buried in that question was a second, unspoken query: why?

Xander apparently heard both. "I didn't *know*. I guessed." His hands moved over Spike, trailing down

from his back to roam over his ass, and then back up again.

"How did you guess, then?"

"You can't hurt anyone. Every time you try, the migraine from hell hits." Xander shrugged. "You don't want to hurt me, so when you bit me, the thingy in your head didn't go off because there wasn't any intent behind it."

Spike stared down at him. He'd never even considered that. But what about his other question?

The younger man seemed to read it in his eyes. "I wanted you to. I know you wanted to do it. You needed to." He shivered a little, eyes hazy in memory. "It was...I've never felt anything like it before."

Spike pulled him closer automatically. "And you won't. Not with anyone else. Not ever." His tone was commanding, possessive.

Xander bared his teeth in a mock-snarl, but his tone was fierce. "Neither will you."

Nodding in agreement, the vampire met Xander's lips in a near-violent kiss of claiming, of declared mutual ownership. When it was over, he stared down at his lover for long minutes.

"What?" asked Xander, blinking sleepily.

"I love you," Spike replied simply, brushing his lips over his lover's eyes, cheeks, nose. He settled down on top of Xander, resting his head on the broad chest beneath him, feeling sleep not that far off.

Warm fingers carded through his hair. A whispered "I love you," drifted down to his ears, even as he drifted off to sleep.

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Xander paused on Giles's front step, taking a moment to try to calm himself down. It was going to be hard enough to convince his friends that he knew what he was doing. Jittering around like he was about to have a panic attack wouldn't help any.

He tugged nervously at the turtleneck he was wearing, unused to the material clinging to his neck. He'd had to



borrow it from Dave, not owning one himself. He needed the shirt, though. After last night...

A rush of heat flooded through him at the thought of the night before. So much had happened. In a way, he was glad that the Scooby Gang had found him. The confrontation had pushed he and Spike into declaring their feeling for each other. It had also led to the most intense sexual experience he'd ever had.

He moved his fingers downward and brushed them lightly over the bite mark, hidden beneath the fabric of the shirt. He shivered a little as he did so; the twin puncture marks didn't hurt, exactly. It was more like a tingle that made its way all through him, making him wish that Spike was near, that they were back in the hotel room. He'd hardly been able to tear himself away from his lover to go get the shirt from Dave. The vampire had been no help; Xander thought Spike would be perfectly happy just to spend the rest of their lives in bed. So would Xander, but still. He could use a little help in the self-control department.

He glanced over his shoulder, but couldn't see anything in the dark. That meant nothing. He knew Spike was out there somewhere, watching him. The blond man had wanted to come with him, but Xander had said

no. Things were going to be tense enough without Spike's rather unique brand of charm added to the mix. Throw in his penchant for sarcasm, and things could get messy. Besides, he wanted to face his friends on his own. He owed them, and himself, that.

Spike being Spike refused to be left behind. They fought about it for a long time, until coming to the compromise that Spike could lurk around outside to his unbeating heart's content, but he couldn't come inside or interfere in anyway. After reaching the compromise, they'd gotten to do the best part of having an argument: make-up sex.

He was going to have to pick more fights with Spike.

Taking a final deep breath, he rang the doorbell. It felt strange not to be able to walk right in, but he didn't want to push things, not when he was so unsure of where he stood.

Giles answered the door. "Xander! What are you doing out here? Come in, please."

The dark-haired man nodded and entered quickly. The gang was all there: Buffy, Willow, Anya, even Riley. He nodded at them. "Hey guys. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing much," Buffy answered. "Just a light night of patrolling. I only dusted a couple of vamps, though. Never found the one I was looking for. English guy, bad dye job. Have you seen him?"

Xander fought down the instinct to lash out back at her. Swallowing his irritation, he shrugged. "Yeah, I've seen him. He's not here, though, so the threats are kinda unnecessary." He shook his head. "I came here to talk. Can we do that?"

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded. "I'm just worried about you."

"We all are," Willow said. "Xander, I don't understand."

He smiled at her. "It's OK, Will. I haven't exactly been telling you everything that's going on." He quickly recounted the story of getting thrown out of his parents' house, his new job, and his relationship with Spike. Minus the gory details, of course.

"So you're gay," Anya said bluntly. "What were you doing with me, then?"

Xander winced. He didn't want to hurt her any more than he already had, but there really wasn't a way around it. "The same thing I was doing with other girls. Lying to myself, to everyone else. I didn't want to

accept it, so I tried to prove that it wasn't true. I do care about you, Anya. As a friend, even if I haven't been a very good one myself."

Buffy leaned forward. "Xander, I know you don't want to hear this, but you have to. Spike is using you. He's an evil vampire, remember? Arch-enemy of the Scooby Gang? Is any of this ringing a bell for you?"

"Are you upset because Spike's a vampire, or because he's a man?"

The Slayer paused. "I'll admit that you being gay is a surprise, but I can deal with it. Living on the Hellmouth tends to make you flexible. I'm upset because Spike is Spike. I don't want to see you hurt."

"The only thing that could hurt me is if something happens to him." He spread his hands. "I don't know what else to tell you. I love him. And I know you and Giles still need him around, so the only reason to kill him would be to hurt me."

"Protect you!"

"Hurt me," he insisted. He raised one hand to his neck, letting his fingers brush over the bite mark for a fleeting instant. That mark, the fact that he had it and was still alive, proved to him that Spike wasn't going to hurt

him. Realizing what a give away the motion could be, he dropped his hand back to his side. No one seemed to notice the movement, except Giles, whose eyes widened for a moment.

Shit. He'd just have to deal with that later. "He isn't going to hurt me, Buff. So please, please don't do anything. I've finally found a job I like. I don't want to have to leave it."

"Why would you leave?" asked Willow, her tone alarmed.

"I'd have to, since Spike couldn't stay in Sunnydale with Buffy putting him at the top of her hit list. I'd go with him."

"He means that much to you?"

"And more."

The witch stood up and walked over to stand in front of him. "I'm scared for you, Xander. But I don't want to lose you. If you're sure about this..."

"I am."

"Then I'm here for you."

Xander pulled his friend into a quick hug, blinking rapidly. Gay he might be, but that didn't mean he had to show off his sensitive side. He wasn't going to lose his best friend. The knot formerly known as his stomach began to loosen. He wasn't going to lose Willow.

Standing with his arm around her, he looked over at the Slayer. "Buff?"

She stood and came over to him. "I still don't like it, but Will's right. If he does anything, I mean anything at all..."

"I'll hold his arms while you stake him," Willow finished.

Xander grinned a little. Proof that even though they'd grown apart, his friends still cared: they were threatening to kill his boyfriend. Ignoring Riley, he glanced at Giles and Anya. "G-man? Anya?"

Sitting with her arms crossed, Anya shook her head. "I'm still mad at you. No hug for you. But I suppose I should tell you I hope everything works out for you."

"That would be the socially correct thing to do, yes." He looked over at the Watcher.

"Xander, you've chosen a difficult and dangerous path, being with Spike. If you ever need anything, please let me know."

The dark-haired man smiled at him, a little nervously. Was it his imagination, or was Giles staring at his neck? Deciding to worry about it later, Xander cleared his throat. "I should get going. I've got to work tonight."

Willow nodded and took a step back. "So you're living at the club now?"

"For right now, yeah." He wasn't going to mention the hotel keys Spike kept 'finding'. None of them were ready to have that conversation. He sure as hell wasn't. "If you need me, you know where to find me."

"Since when did they ever need you?" Anya asked, scowling at him from the couch.

Willow began to object, but Xander stopped her. "It's OK, Will. Really. With Cordy gone, things just didn't seem right without my daily ration of belittling comments. Now things will seem a little more normal around here." He could understand Anya's anger. He just hoped she got over it quickly. Her woman scorned routine had the potential to be very messy.

He wished everyone goodnight and left. He figured they all needed some time to think about and get used to things. As for himself, he needed something else. As

soon as he hit the sidewalk, he called very softly,  
"Spike?"

"Right here, love," answered a voice in his ear.

Barely reining in a shriek, Xander turned to face his lover. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to scare me into a heart attack."

"I'd never, pet," the vampire protested, wrapping his arms around the mortal. "No real fun in that, now is there? I'd rather try something a little more enjoyable. Say, fucking you to death, maybe?"

Xander groaned. "I've gotta be a work in a little while. Don't start something we won't be able to finish."

Completely unrepentant, Spike leaned forward and kissed him. All Xander's resolutions and protests disappeared as he responded eagerly, pulling the vampire closer. After kissing him breathless, the blond pulled back. "So I take it everything went all right, then?"

"Basically," Xander replied. "There will be no immediate stakage of you, and they're still talking to me, even though Anya is pissed. I think it's going to be all right."

"Good," Spike said, and the mortal could hear an overwhelming amount of relief hidden in his voice.



"Very good," he agreed, moving in for another kiss. With Spike in his arms, things were good indeed. He just hoped that his friends didn't change their minds, that they managed to accept him with Spike completely.

He also hoped Jeffery would be understanding when he was late for work.

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Spike sipped his drink, savoring the flavor before continuing his argument. "I understand what you're saying. I know the techno-trash brings in the dancers, but it gets old after awhile. Something different could also be a draw."

Jeffery shook his head. "I'll think about it, but this is what's working." He grinned. "I try not to mess with what works."

Spike took another drink, and continued with the good-natured debate. To his surprise, he'd come to like the

people Xander worked with. The fact that they were nearly as fanatical about protecting the mortal as he was probably had a lot to do with it. Dave reiterated his threat every few days, just to be sure Spike didn't forget.

The dancer had plenty of opportunities to do so; for the past couple of weeks, Spike's life had revolved around the club. Watching Xander work, for the most part, although he still kept a careful eye on the patrons who congregated around the bar. There was always a newcomer or some overly arrogant bastard who didn't know about Spike's claim on the bartender, or thought it didn't apply to him. If he wasn't at the club, then he was somewhere else with Xander, usually in one of a long succession of stolen hotel rooms, or even crowded together in the dark-haired man's cot in the back room of the club.

He did leave Xander, occasionally, mostly to work out some aggression, usually taking it out on demons unlucky enough to cross his path. He was also working on procuring an apartment for Xander. He'd be happy enough in a crypt, but his lover had made his feelings clear where that idea was concerned. The vampire thought he was close to finding the perfect apartment; it wasn't easy, finding one that was worthy of Xander, after all.

His gaze, and his attention, wandered away from Jeffery and over to the bar. The owner was used to it, so he made no comment. Spike watched his lover pour drinks and talk to the people lining the bar, moving a little to the music that pulsed through the club. He glanced at the clock over the bar - only an hour left of Xander's shift. Good.

The door to the club opened, and the vampire glanced over to it out of habit. Had to keep an eye on the would-be competition, after all. He sat up straighter as he watched the two women enter the club.

Jeffery noticed his sudden attentiveness, and glanced over at them himself. "Hey, aren't those two of the people Xander had me throw out?"

"Oh, yeah." Buffy and Willow made a bee-line for the bar.

"Should I bounce them again?"

Spike glanced at him, appreciating his desire to protect Xander. "Nah. They're not here to cause trouble." Not if they knew what was good for them. He decided to wander over to the bar, just to be sure the Slayer and her friend were smarter than they looked.

As he reached the bar, he could see Buffy leaning over it to talk to Xander. He caught the end of what she was saying. "You know the high school, Xander. We could really use your help in running these demons down, finding them." Willow nodded.

Xander nodded slowly. "Dave owes me a few favors. He'd finish out my shift for me, since I'm not closing tonight." He glanced over at Spike. "You ready to go?"

"We don't need him," Buffy said, her tone final.

Xander shrugged. "I do."

"I'm part of the package now," Spike added. He walked over to Jeffery, telling him Xander was leaving. When he finished, the three members of the Scooby Gang were waiting at the door.

Xander held the door open for all of them. Buffy and Willow walked out without comment. Spike pulled Xander out after him. "Thanks, love," he murmured, kissing his lover briefly. He didn't relinquish his hold on Xander as they walked. The vampire was aware of the irritation rolling off the Slayer, and the witch's concern. Those were sweet, but not nearly so important as the amusement coming from Xander. The dark-haired

man rolled his eyes, but he also smiled and allowed Spike's show of possession.

The vampire was inwardly relieved. He knew Xander was still trying to make peace with the new strain on his relationship with his friends, and he'd worried that their reappearance might make his lover question *their* relationship. He was reassured by Xander's acquiesce, and was elated when the mortal slipped an arm around his waist in turn.

At the school, they met up with Giles and Riley. As Xander and Buffy walked over to talk to them, Willow hung back. When Spike went to follow his lover, the redhead grabbed his arm. Spike glared at her. "What?"

"I just wanted to make sure that you knew that if you hurt him, you'll answer to me. I don't care what information you can give Buffy. The minute you hurt Xander, I'll be there with a stake, you understand me?"

Spike pulled his arm away carefully. "I understand you. But you understand me, now. If I ever hurt Xander, I'll bloody well stake myself." He grinned viciously. "If anyone else ever hurts him, I'll kill everyone remotely involved. If he's killed, everyone dies, and then I'll stake myself. You get me?"

Looking shaken, Willow nodded. Spike held her gaze for a few moments longer, then walked past her to catch up to Xander. Giles and Riley each drew back a little as the vampire came near. Good. He might not be able to tear their throats out, but that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. He grinned at them. "Rupert. What was it that you need my help with?"

The Watcher bristled. "I don't need *your* help. I-

Xander elbowed Spike lightly in the ribs. "Stop it." He smiled at Giles. "He's with me. What do you need me to do?"

The older man glared at Spike, but answered the mortal. "As I said, it doesn't appear that the demons have any interest in the Hellmouth. They are just using the school as a convenient hiding place. We need to clear them out."

"Letting demons squat on the Hellmouth would be a bad policy," Buffy agreed.

"What type of demons are we talking here?" Xander asked. "Hopefully ones of the non-slime variety?"

Willow nodded. "Non-slime. Rkanshak demons."

Spike kept his face blank. Rkanshak? Nasty buggers that shouldn't be allowed at the school, yes, but hardly something Buffy and her soldier-boy couldn't handle on their own.

Buffy shook herself impatiently. "Enough talk. Let's get this over with. I've got a quiz tomorrow. Willow, you're with Xander. Spike, you go with Giles. Riley-

"No." Spike and Xander spoke in unison, then grinned at each other.

"We're a matched set, Slayer," the blond man said. "Can't be broken up." Xander nodded his agreement, leaning against the vampire.

Buffy's jaw tightened, but she said, "Fine. Have it your way. Let's move."

As they entered the school, Spike stayed close to Xander. He wasn't going to let a Rkanshak get a lucky shot in and hurt the other man. He watched as Buffy and Riley followed them at a distance, not trusting him to protect the dark-haired man. The vampire bared his teeth in a vicious grin. He hoped they'd run into the demons. That way he could give the Slayer a demonstration of what happened to anyone, anything, that dared to

threaten his lover.

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Xander yawned hugely as he crossed the threshold, exiting the old high school for what he hoped would be the last time. "Well, that was fun," he muttered, keeping the sarcasm to himself. What had Buffy been thinking? She didn't need him. What she needed was a couple of Cokes. A good caffeine high, and she would have finished the Rkanshak demons off on her own in a few hours. Add in a few candy bars, and she could've done it in an hour.

The demons took little or no effort to finish off. With Spike beside him, Xander's contribution to the events had been restricted to praise each time the vampire effortlessly destroyed one of the Rkanshak.

He grinned a little to himself. Spike wasn't just content with praise - he usually demanded a reward as well. Xander rather liked rewarding him; the kiss they'd



shared in front of his old locker had been pretty amazing. It had also embarrassed the hell out of Buffy and Riley. The deadly duo had spent most of the night following them and watching Spike kill demons. He was certain that if his lover had made any sort of threatening move toward him, Buffy would've staked him. He was trying to take it as a compliment, but still felt pissed over the whole thing.

The entire evening had been a test and a peace overture rolled into one. The test was to see if Spike was trustworthy, Xander suspected. The vampire had to have passed - he killed the problem, and if they couldn't tell by now that Spike would never hurt him, then they'd never be able to.

He was focusing on the peace overture aspect. His help really hadn't been necessary. By asking him to come along, Buffy and Willow were trying to include him in the Scooby Gang once more, and show that their friendship was still there. He didn't want to lose them, and was glad they'd taken the step.

He glanced over at Spike. "I'm ready for bed."

The vampire leered at him. "You're always ready for bed, love. Or the floor. Or a wall. Or-"

"I think you have me confused with someone else. There's a bleach-blond sex-fiend vampire who fits that description, but not me."

Before Spike could reply, Buffy walked over, Riley hovering protectively behind her. "Xander? Xander, thanks for your help. Really. It was very...helpful."

The dark-haired man smiled at her. "No problem, Buff. Any time you need me, you just let me know, all right? I'll be there."

"We'll be there," Spike corrected, wrapping his arms around Xander from behind.

Xander rolled his eyes, and frowned a little when he saw Willow nodding in approval. "You good, Will?"

The redhead nodded. "I'm fine. I want to get to sleep, though. I'll talk to you later?"

"You bet." The rest of the Scooby Gang made their good-byes, and Xander and Spike were soon on their way back to Jeffrey's.

Xander yawned again. "I think I could sleep for a week."

"What do you have to be tired for? I'm the one that did all the work."

Xander glared at the vampire. "Only because you wouldn't let me help. You were too busy showing off your big-badness to Buffy."

Spike shrugged. "I think it worked." He patted his jacket pocket regretfully. "I haven't come across a hotel key tonight."

"We can stay at the club. Close quarters can be good."

"So they can, love." The husky note in the vampire's voice sent a shiver up Xander's spine. Maybe he wasn't as tired as he had thought. Jeffrey's was closed when they arrived. Xander opened the club, and saw that the place had been cleaned up, so he didn't have any last minute surprise work to do.

Spike grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the back room, and his cot. "Bed."

Xander shook his head. "Shower."

The blond man paused, and an evil grin crossed his face. "Shower," he agreed.

In the small bathroom, Xander stripped quickly, wanting to wash away the dust and dirt of the high school that was coating his skin. He stepped under the spray of warm water and reached for the soap.

"Freeze." Spike stood outside of the shower, glaring in at him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What? Oh, this? Well, in the last hundred years, we humans have found that washing with soap tends to help in the whole getting clean process-"

"I know that," said the vampire, stepping into the shower and taking the soap away. "I've told you I like to get you clean. Why weren't you waiting for me?"

Xander grinned, completely unrepentant. "Sorry. Wash away." He spread his arms wide, laying his body open for Spike's ministrations.

The vampire returned his grin, and gently began to run soap-covered hands over Xander's skin. The mortal's grin soon faded, replaced by an expression of love and want. Cool hand coated in silky lather were all over him, never lingering any one place too long, arousing him but bringing no relief. "Spike..."

Blue eyes met his. "Yes, love?" His tone was teasing, and a trifle smug.

No way. Xander wasn't going to let him win that easily. "Gimme the soap." He snatched the bar away from the vampire, and began his own assault on the pale body before him. He paid loving attention to cool skin,

concentrating on the areas he knew to be most sensitive, but steadfastly ignoring Spike's growing hardness, or his gradually escalating growls.

After he had washed every inch of skin, he took a small step back, standing directly under the spray and letting the water rinse away the lingering traces of soap that still clung to his own skin. Xander then stepped out of the shower. "I feel a lot better," he commented, reaching for a towel. "There's just something about a nice hot shower -"

He never reached the towel. Strong hand closed on his upper arms and jerked him back into the shower stall. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" demanded Spike.

"To bed," Xander replied in a puzzled tone. "Take shower, then go to bed. That was the plan, right?"

The vampire growled at him, then covered his mouth in a demanding kiss. Xander gave himself over to it. He had won. Now it was time to collect his prize. He snaked a hand down in between their bodies, even as he used his other to bring his lover's face closer to his own.

Gathering soap off Spike's skin, he moved to pump their erections together. The vampire groaned into the kiss, and pressed himself closer to Xander. The dark-haired man sped up his motions, even as he became weak in the knees from the feeling of Spike's mouth on his and the blond man's hands roaming over his skin.

Xander came first, with Spike following him quickly over the edge. The mortal's knees did give way, and it was his lover who managed to hold him upright, and pull him out of the shower once the spray had rinsed them clean. Moving lazily, the two men pulled on boxers and made their way to the cot in the back room.

Spike lay down first, and pulled Xander down into his arms. Laughing a little, the brown-eyed man exchanged slow, sleepy kisses with his lover. He shivered a bit when Spike nibbled lightly on his lower lip. The vampire grinned at him, and after a few more kisses, Xander rested his head on the cool body beneath him, ready to sleep.

As he tightened his embrace of his lover, Xander sighed in contentment. He loved, and was loved. His friends were finally coming around to accept the situation. Feeling Spike's arms tighten around him in

return, he smiled, knowing he was finally where he wanted to be. Where he belonged.

**The End**