Pairing: Spike/Xander

Rating: NC-17

Disclaimer: I'm not Joss

Warnings: slash, angst, horrible poetry

Summary: Set sometime after the series ended. Spike and Xander had a tenuous relationship that has gone sour. Can Spike find Xander and save them both?

Author's Note: Beautiful banner by the lovely and talented 🎨zosmith 🎨!

This is my December 🎄fall_for_sx entry. I used a random word generator as a prompt for this fic; the first 10 words I got were neurology, steak, poaching, guerilla, reunion, outstation, gymnasium, firmware, expiration, and anthropology. See if you can find them all. ;-)

Finding Xander

by

Whichclothes

Part One

There were signs of him at the outstation. Sugary crumbs scattered here and there, that the mice and insects
hadn’t yet made off with. The boy could find junk food anywhere, it seemed. An empty bottle of Chloroquine with the prescription made out to William Pratt. A small pile of dust near the doorway that smelled more of graveyards than savanna, and meant the boy was using himself as bait again. And, on the thin, filthy mattress that sat on a wooden pallet in one corner, the scent of the boy himself. Sweat and a bit of sour vomit, because the drugs upset his stomach.

He’d been here recently, perhaps only a day or two past, and Spike roared with frustration as the sun rose, pinning him inside the little shack as his prey no doubt moved farther and farther away. When angry pacing didn’t make the sun reverse its course, Spike lay down on the mattress. He drew his duster around him. It was bloody hot and sticky out already, of course, but that didn’t especially matter to the undead, and the soft leather was a comfort to him, a portable home of sorts, like a turtle’s shell. The boy’s smell was even more comforting, although at the same time it made his still heart ache with grief and loss. Eventually he slept and dreamt of fires that never burnt out.

He woke shortly before sunset, but had to wait until the sun slipped completely beneath the horizon before he could venture out. Hardly a bit of shade for miles and
miles. The very moment that it was safe, he crept outside and scented the air. He was hungry. There was plenty of game nearby, but he’d have to be careful. There were also armed men who were vigilant for signs of poaching, and scattered here and there, equally well-armed bands of guerillas who’d strayed over the border. Neither were likely to manage to dust him, but he didn’t much fancy painful gunshot wounds, nor complications from being detained. Wasn’t as if he blended in much with the locals. Even the whites around here looked suspiciously at his distinctly un-African pallor.

He walked toward his jeep, inhaling deeply, and didn’t catch any human scents. Other predators, yes, but they were all of the four-legged variety, and tended to give his kind a very wide berth. He caught a musky odor quite close. All right, then. Duiker it was.

The small antelope was browsing at a patch of scrub. Spike had grown fond of them over the past several months. They were common everywhere, were easier to catch than some of the larger hoofstock, and provided just enough blood to tide him over nicely for three or four days. This one remained unconcerned as he stalked it. He was downwind of it, of course, and, now that he’d allowed his hair to grow out in its natural color, he was nearly invisible under the tiny sliver of moon. Plenty of
light for him to see, though, and when he was very close, and the duiker had raised its head in alarm, he pounced. The animal fled, but Spike was faster, and it took him only a few paces to tackle it to the ground, to pin its writhing body beneath his, to sink his fangs into its neck. It froze immediately, as his prey usually did. Xander claimed it was because the bite felt so fucking good, but Spike doubted his feeding had the same effect on antelopes as it had had on his boy. In any case, the duiker’s heart beat impossibly fast, forcing the hot, coppery sweetness into his mouth, until the muscle stuttered and faltered and was still.

Spike stood and stretched, licked the blood from his lips and wiped it from his chin, and allowed his face to shift back to human planes. His belly was comfortably full now, a tight little drum under his black jeans. His cock was hard, too. His demonic nature was always excited by a hunt, and it did no good for the soul to remind the demon that no hands but Spike’s own had touched him for over a year, that it seemed likely that none would for the foreseeable future. Not unless Spike was unfaithful to his boy, and that was something he’d never be again. Infidelity had put him in this pickle to begin with, really.

*It was only a matter of convenience. That’s what he’d told himself at first, anyhow. There were he and Xander,*
both washed ashore Angel’s little island of weirdness by the storms of circumstance. Spike, of course, was the veteran of at least two apocalypses and a side-trip to hell. When things had settled down in LA, so had he, doggedly fighting demons at his grandsire’s side because he hadn’t a clue what else to do with himself. Xander had lost a girl in Scotland to vampires, then he lost Willow and Buffy and Giles to bickering—and, Spike reckoned, simple growing up and growing apart—and he’d returned to the US with a resume that wasn’t going to do him much good in the daytime world even if there wasn’t a recession. He, too, had taken up residence in Angel’s hotel.

It only took a week or so for Spike and Xander to decide they didn’t really hate one another. After all, Spike had saved Xander’s eye, and Xander allowed that that at least made up for shagging a former demon fiancée. Spike’s refusal to snitch to Glory and then his care for Dawn, that summer when Buffy was dead, balanced out the repeated attempted homicides. And the self-sacrifice under Sunnydale paid for the near-rape. As for Spike, he’d never truly hated the boy to begin with, only found him irritating, really, but now he saw that Xander had grown up quite nicely. He was at least more fun than the pouf.
Spike had been drinking heavily for decades, and he soon realized that, despite the boy’s lack of vampire constitution, Xander was giving him a run for his money. Soon they were drinking together, which at least felt less pathetic. And when a bottle or three of Jack led to a spirited slap-and-tickle session in Xander’s room—only without the slap, actually—the development had seemed almost natural. Privately, Spike had always thought Xander was rather a treat, and the few extra years sat well on him. Xander was surprisingly willing to abandon his heterosexuality because, he said, he was a sucker for sexy demons and could only resist Spike’s pale perfection for so long.

So they’d shag, now and then. Never had a relationship talk, never once mentioned the dreaded l-word. It was comfortable and convenient.

Spike had refused to notice when the shagging began occurring rather more now than then, and when, more often than not, they’d end up sleeping together afterward, snugly entwined in whichever bed they’d collapsed into. He hadn’t noticed that they spent big chunks of their free time cuddled up on the loveseats they’d both bought for their rooms, laughing at the telly and absently stroking one another’s hair and skin. He hadn’t noticed when they’d both reduced their alcohol
consumption to a beer or two a night, because even sober they were happy in each other’s company. He didn’t even notice when he stopped smoking, not wanting to expose a mortal pair of lungs to carcinogens.

So one night when they’d decided to go to a club, they’d danced together for a bit, and then both had other partners, because they weren’t a couple. And when a pretty boy with thick eyeliner and purple streaks in his hair had dragged Spike off to a corner near the loo, Spike hadn’t protested when the boy smiled and dropped to his knees, then unbuttoned Spike’s trousers and took Spike’s cock into his slick mouth. The pleasure of the contact helped him to ignore the guilt that gnawed at his mind—he was very used to ignoring guilt, after all. And then Xander had come around the corner, and the look on his face had hit Spike like a sledgehammer. He’d pushed the boy away and tucked himself back into his jeans as he rushed after Xander. But whatever apologies he might have said withered on his lips when he saw the look of cold anger in that one brown eye.

Xander refused to talk about it. If Spike raised the subject, he’d say “Fuck whoever you want, Spike. Why should I give a shit?” and leave the room.
Sometimes Xander still came to his room, and he’d grab Spike for a quick, hard screw, but there was no affection in it, no real pleasure for either of them, not even when they came. Their contented, easy times together disappeared. They took to drinking again, first Xander and then Spike. And, although Spike didn’t stray anymore, Xander did, fucking girls and boys often and indiscriminately, but never the same one twice. He didn’t deliberately flaunt these brief conquests in front of Spike, but he didn’t hide them either. Even when Xander was deeply inside him, the gulf between them was miles wide.

It tore Spike apart.

The only real solace that remained for him was fighting monsters. But even that lost its luster when he saw Xander fling himself into brawls with suicidal intensity, then sneer or lash out when Spike attempted to protect him.

And then one night, Xander went to High Tide. Spike went there sometimes, too, but not when Xander was there, and only to dance or maybe score some interesting pharmaceuticals. He didn’t know whether Xander partook of some of those pharmaceuticals that night, or whether he was fueled only by booze, but in either case Xander was rat-arsed when he left to find a cab. He
ducked into an alley to take a leak, and, when a demon materialized, he’d acted on instinct. Only when the demon was dead and broken at his feet did Xander realize it had been a harmless Ktolke, and that the bloke had probably only been checking to see whether Xander needed assistance.

Xander sobered up and found his way back to the Hyperion. His face pale as Spike’s and Angel’s, and his eye wide and bruised-looking, he’d told them what had happened. Angel had to talk him out of turning himself into the police. “Xander, that demon’s only a little puddle of green goo right now, and if you take this to the cops, you’re just gonna end up in a mental hospital.”

Spike had led the shell-shocked man up to his room and helped him undress, then tucked him into bed. He brought him a glass of water and held him in his arms as he sobbed himself to sleep. Spike eventually fell asleep as well.

When they woke up the following afternoon, Xander smiled sadly at him. “Thanks,” he mumbled, and went to take a shower. Spike wanted to join him, but couldn’t quite bring himself to. They spent the evening together in front of Xander’s television, but it wasn’t like before. Xander only stared blankly ahead, barely acknowledging
Spike’s presence. They slept in their own rooms that night.

When Spike woke up the day after that, Xander was nowhere to be found. But his chest of drawers hung open and empty, and the duffle bag Spike knew he kept in his cupboard was gone. A brief note had been scribbled on the back of a Chinese take-out receipt and left on the desk:

Spike,

I’m sorry.

X

That was all.

Spike had searched for him, of course. He’d followed his trail from LA to San Francisco, from San Francisco across the country and finally to New York, and then to Africa. But unlike Spike, Xander had proper ID and could travel well by day as well as night, and Spike could never quite catch up. Spike had remained always at least a step or two behind, like a sodding bloodhound, never quite managing to catch more than the lingering scent of his boy. Of the man he loved.
Sometimes Spike suspected Xander was deliberately baiting him. Surely he must realize he was being tracked, and sometimes it seemed as if he purposely lingered someplace just long enough to raise false hope, before moving on.

Spike knew quite a lot about what Xander had been up to all these months. He knew he was drinking, but only sparingly. He was finding odd jobs here and there, sometimes doing some construction, sometimes tending bar or washing dishes or running errands. He’d spent time in Africa before, shortly after Sunnydale imploded, and he’d picked up a passable amount of Swahili, as well as bits and bobs of other languages. With his single eye, he was a memorable figure, but the locals liked him. He was willing to lend a hand and never seemed to expect anything back, he took teasing good-naturedly, and he was willing to pay for his supper or his bed with fantastical tales.

As he passed through cities, towns, and rural areas, Xander sought out stories of local monsters. Sometimes he’d tell people he was a graduate student studying anthropology. Frequently, those monsters were demons of a nasty sort, and Spike would find evidence of their recent, violent demise. Such as the vampire that had
come to a dusty end in an outstation in an animal reserve in Uganda.

He wasn’t, as far as Spike could tell, sleeping with anyone, although Spike met many who’d been willing.

He was using several aliases, including Alex Summers and Riley Giles, but most often went by Will Pratt. For some reason Spike found that comforting.

He’d had dengue in Angola and, more recently, cholera in Zimbabwe. Spike had nearly caught up to him while he lay in hospital this last time, arriving only hours after he’d left. But Xander had stayed just steps ahead, traveling through Zambia and Tanzania, then spending a week in Kampala, tantalizingly just out of sight, before heading farther north.

Spike had long since swallowed his pride and had periodically asked Angel to wire him some money. He didn’t need much, but enough to buy a jeep that he’d rigged to be sun-proof, for occasions when he couldn’t find a better place to spend the day, and petrol to keep it going, and some to bribe the occasional border guard or military police into overlooking his lack of proper papers. He wasn’t above spreading a little dosh among the locals, either, if they could give him good news of his quarry. His mobile phone rarely found coverage, but he checked in
with his grandsire via email now and then when he could find an internet café, and the thought of the big ponce hunting and pecking away at a keyboard amused him immensely.

Now, Spike climbed in the jeep and turned on the engine, which growled and complained at him but ran nonetheless. He bumped and jarred over the lonely road for miles. Eyes glowed at him from the roadside as he went, green and gold, and night-creatures called out to one another. He didn’t like Africa. Oh, he’d had some fine times here with Dru, many decades past, but those memories were overshadowed by more recent ones, when he’d arrived desperate and shocked, and fought for his soul, and then rattled around like a lunatic before finding his way back to Sunnydale. It seemed his lot to travel to the dark continent in search of things that were difficult to obtain and likely to hurt you when you got them.

He came to a small town. An overgrown village, really, with a few shops and a garage and two bars. One of them looked dark and empty, but the other was lit with strings of colored lights, and four or five people were clustered out front, chatting and drinking from brown bottles, while music pounded inside. Spike pulled the jeep over and quickly looked down at himself to make
sure he was marginally presentable. He was a bit dusty, but that could be explained away easily enough, as long as he wasn’t spattered in antelope blood.

Even this late, the air was soupy and so thick with insects that Spike was sure he must be breathing some of them in. They hummed and buzzed around his head, most likely frustrated at his lack of potable blood. He wondered how people managed to live at all in places like this. Then he remembered the choking soot that was everywhere in the London of his youth and the stinking sewer that was the Thames, the cholera and influenza and tuberculosis—gods, his mother discretely coughing blood into embroidered linen—and the butchery that passed for medical care. And he thought of his home today, Los Angeles, where the sky was tinged a sickly yellow and the air always smelled of exhaust, as the locals ate their Big Macs and drank their venti frappucinos and texted each other while piloting their SUVs on the 10. Every place had its hazards, he reckoned.

The people outside the door stared at him as he walked by, and he nodded his head. “Hullo,” he said. He could manage Swahili and Luganda and Arabic as well, but sometimes folks became prickly if you chose the wrong one, and besides, almost everybody in Uganda spoke at least some English. The people nodded back cautiously.
Everyone inside turned to look at him. He nodded again at the room in general before making his way to a table near the back. After a moment a stout middle-aged woman came over. She wore a blue patterned skirt and matching head cloth, and a cream-colored blouse. She had a clear glass bottle in one hand and an empty can of vegetables in the other. “Waragi?” she asked.

“Yeah, please.”

“Two thousand shillings.”

“Erm, fresh out. Will you take US dollars instead?”

She shrugged. “Two dollars.”

That was several times the going rate, but he only smiled and dug into his pocket. He placed a ten on the table. “Leave the bottle, love.” Her eyes grew big and she quickly pocketed the bill.

“You want food?” she asked with an avaricious gleam.

“What do you have?” He knew better than to hope for a big, bloody steak. He and Xander used to go to steakhouses, now and then when they were...dating...and they’d both order the biggest on the menu. Xander liked his medium-well, but Spike, of course, always asked for his so rare it was barely warm.
“Ugali and vegetable stew. Roasted groundnuts.”

“Nsenene?”

She looked at him in surprise. Likely not too many Europeans fancied fried grasshoppers. But they crunched pleasantly in his mouth, and it always seemed to endear him to the locals when he munched on them. She nodded. “Just a moment.”

He sipped at his liquor, which went down like fire, and looked around the place as he waited. There were perhaps two dozen people in the small, hot space, some dancing to the radio, some sitting or leaning against the walls and drinking. They stared back at him, curious but not hostile, until the woman returned with a cone of folded paper. He paid for the snack and she watched with slightly morbid fascination as he happily popped some of the hot, salty insects into his mouth. “Lovely,” he said with honest appreciation. They were almost as nice as those onion things they’d had at the Bronze.

The woman smiled warmly at him. “You’re American?” she asked.

He pretended to be offended. “Nah. English, love. Though I’ve been living in California of late.”

“And what brings you such a long way?”
“’M a writer,” he said. It was a lie that always worked out well for him. People seemed almost to expect writers to bear a certain amount of eccentricity. “Doing some research for a novel. But I misplaced my mate a few weeks back, and now I’m looking for him. Has he been by? White bloke, American, one eye?”

She nodded eagerly. “Yes, yes! He was here just yesterday afternoon.” Spike choked back a curse. Still not quite close enough! “He stopped to fill his car with petrol, and he ate here. I fed him some stew, and he paid me ten thousand shillings!”

Good, Spike thought. At least the boy had dosh, and he was eating. “Did he look ill?” he asked.

She shook her head. “A bit pale, perhaps, but not so white as you. The drugs do not agree with you?”

“No, it’s not that. I come from a very pale family.” Which was true enough, in its own way. “Did he say where he was going?”

“Yes. He said he was going to Nairobi. I asked him why he would want to do that when we have such beautiful country here, and he said he had an airplane to catch.” She smiled. “He was a very charming man.”

Spike sighed. “Yeah, he is that.”
“And generous,” she hinted.

Spike pulled out another ten and handed it to her. She tucked it away even more quickly than the last. Didn’t matter to him—it was the pouf’s money anyhow.

Spike shoveled the last of the nsenene into his mouth, grabbed the bottle by the neck, and stood. “It’s been lovely, and I do appreciate the nosh and the info, but I need to run. I’ll take my waragi with, yeah?”

She smiled again. “Perhaps if you hurry you can catch your friend.”

“Perhaps.”

**Part Two**

Across Uganda and over the Kenyan border, he only caught tantalizing hints of Xander. At Jomo Kenyatta he nearly despaired, but a bit of flirting with a tall, busty blonde from KLM and a few drinks at an airport lounge earned him the information that a bloke named William Pratt had been on the 19:15 Virgin flight to Heathrow that evening.

Spike went into the loo and had a tantrum. He’d missed his boy by less than two hours.
When he calmed, he came out again and tried to sort out how he could follow. Traveling by air was problematic. His false papers were probably too dubious to pass inspection by security, and, although he could find a night flight, a slight delay might mean vampire flambé. He paced around the terminal, angrily considering and rejecting schemes, until he accepted that he had no other choice. With a heavy sigh, he fished his mobile phone from his pocket.

“What!” Pouf sounded crabby. Spike had no idea what time it was in LA, but likely not proper demon hours.

“Nice to hear your dulcet voice, Peaches.”

He could picture the big hand reaching up to the prominent forehead and rubbing, as if vampires could get headaches. “You’re out of cash already?” Angel asked.

“Nah. Got another problem. Boy’s just left for London, and I’m stuck in Kenya. I’ll lose him completely if I have to follow by land.” He was aware that a note of pleading had filtered into his voice, and he wasn’t proud of it, but he couldn’t help it, either.

There was a very long pause in LA. Finally, Angel said, “Fine. I’ll make some calls. Stay put.”
Spike waited until they’d rung off before he let out an audible sigh of relief. None of them would ever admit it out loud, but, grudgingly or not, Angel had come to care for Xander. And even for Spike, perhaps.

Spike spent three hours restlessly exploring. He didn’t like airports. Always too bright and too many people, none of whom he could even eat anymore. Overpriced drinks, screaming babies, fat ladies with too much luggage, blokes in suits and ties not watching where they were walking. For a time he occupied himself with a newspaper someone had abandoned on an uncomfortable plastic seat, then he pretended to stalk small children, flashing a bit of fang at them when their parents weren’t looking. The screams were very satisfying.

He sat at a bar for a time, nursing a millet beer. His thoughts were drawn to Africa, and souls, and love, and the intersections of those three things. If it wasn’t for his last visit to Africa he wouldn’t be here now. He couldn’t really regret winning his soul, however. If he hadn’t, he’d likely be dust, either from the Slayer’s stake or by his own hand, because he couldn’t have stayed away from the girl, and he couldn’t have stopped himself from trying to hurt her, even if he hadn’t meant to. And even if he had managed to keep his distance, there would have
been the chip, and that would certainly have been the final death of him long ago. The fire that consumed him under Sunnydale had destroyed his flesh, had burnt away the urgency of his love for Buffy, but it hadn’t taken his soul, and he was, despite everything, glad of it. Even this helpless, endless chase across the globe meant he still had hope, and that was a precious thing to possess.

When the phone finally rang, he was simply standing by a window, watching jets come and go in the dark.

“You’re still at the airport?” Angel asked.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Wait by the British Airways ticket counter. A guy named Arthur’s gonna meet you there in a few minutes. I’ve found you a spot on a charter to Gatwick, but it leaves right away. If you have anything you need to take with, now’s the time to grab it.”

Spike had nothing but the jeep and a change of clothing, both of which he was willing to abandon. “Cheers, Liam. I’ll give you a kiss when I get back.” When we get back, he wanted to say and didn’t.

“Yeah, well, I’ll pass, thanks. Just, um, call me from London. Let me know how.... You’ll let me know when you need a top-up on your MasterCard, I guess.”
He waited obediently, watching the crowds surge here and there, reflecting that the fame that had fallen upon them after their interlude in hell had its advantages. He wasn’t much fond of people recognizing him, asking him for his sodding autograph, which was one of the reasons he’d stopped bleaching his hair. But it was handy now and then to be able to find people who could get things done, like finding space on a last minute flight from Nairobi.

A young bloke in a smart suit walked up to him. “Mr. Spike?” he asked with a wide smile.

“Yeah.”

“I’m Arthur, sir. Please follow me. We’re in quite a hurry, you see.”

For a short man he had a quick stride, and Spike had to nearly jog to keep up. Arthur flashed a badge at a security guard, who let them through a plain, gray door. Then they rushed down a long, empty corridor. It had scuffed beige paint and a greenish tile floor, and fluorescent lights overhead that flickered in a way that hurt Spike’s eyes. Their echoing footsteps were the only sound as they turned several corners, went through a
pair of brown doors and up a set of stairs, and then turned again before descending another stairway. Finally they emerged from another gray door, and Spike found himself outside, where the air was pleasantly cool and the sound of jet engines roared nearby.

They ran across the tarmac to a red and white Learjet. Arthur ushered Spike to the stairway. “Have a pleasant journey, sir.”

“Cheers.” Spike hesitated a moment, trying to decide whether he was meant to tip this bloke, but by the time he made up his mind Arthur was already rushing away.

A pretty girl in a uniform met him at the top of the stairs and showed him to his seat. He had a row to himself—there were only three other passengers, all of whom were busily talking on mobile phones while poking away at laptops.

The girl—her name was Gemma, she said, and she had lovely, long legs and an Australian accent—brought him a Scotch right away. Good stuff, too. Moments later the pilot made some announcements and then they were taxiing away.

The pilot had said it would be about eight hours until they landed, and Spike tried to get some sleep. He hadn’t
yet worked out how he was going to manage to avoid incineration when they arrived, though, and the bloke behind him was nattering loudly to the one across the aisle about firmware and sales projections and beating the competitors to market. Finally Spike shut the window shade and stuck the headphones over his ears, then dozed in front of series of films so boring he couldn’t have named a single one after.

The bump of the landing tires on the runway roused him. It was early morning and he looked warily out of the window across the way, some part of him yearning for his first glimpse in years of his hometown. It took some time for the plane to taxi to a halt, and Spike was just considering whether the blanket Gemma had draped over his lap was thick enough when she bent down to him.

“Mr. Spike? We’ve been notified of your, erm, sensitivity, but it’s rather an overcast morning. Do you suppose you could manage with this?” She held up a long, black umbrella, still furled. “It’s only a short way.”

“That should work a treat, love. Ta.” It should, and although the bloody things made him feel like a ponce, you got far fewer strange looks with an umbrella than with a blanket over your head. He wondered what Angel
had told them about his problem with sunlight. Porphyria, perhaps. They’d used that one before. Most folks in LA had got used to the idea of vampires, and non-lethal ones at that, but the rest of the world hadn’t yet caught on.

Spike was the first one off the plane, and a man in a uniform pointed him toward the door to the terminal. He had a moment to worry about passports, but then another bloke walked up to him, this one a balding round man with a blob of a nose. He took the umbrella from Spike’s hand. “Mr. Spike? Welcome to London. Right this way, please.”

The path here was even more convoluted than back in Nairobi, but eventually he found himself blinking in the overhead lights of the check-in zone of the South terminal and bidding his anonymous guide goodbye. He had many more hours before he’d be able to venture outside, but at least it was cloudy enough for him to be safe in front of the huge walls of glass.

He knew from the KLM bird at Jomo Kenyatta that Xander hadn’t booked a connecting flight from Heathrow, and Spike hoped that meant he planned to remain in town for a while at least. In fact, he had a fairly
good idea where his boy might be heading, but it wasn’t a place that Spike fancied visiting at all.

He found a cash machine and withdrew a pocketful of money. It felt odd to be using pounds again after several decades. He browsed the shops and was pleased to find a nice, black silk tee in one of them. A few more minutes of prowling and he discovered that the terminal contained a hotel with small, podlike rooms. He didn’t especially need to sleep, but a hot shower would be lovely, and some quiet, and perhaps even a decent bed, so he hired a room.

He must have used gallons and gallons of water, with the tap turned as hot as it would go. It had been months since he’d been able to shower properly and this felt brilliant. In the past he’d gone many decades living places without proper plumbing—crypts and old factories and the like—but his recent years in LA had softened him, he reckoned, and made him crave the sweet bliss of near-scalding water cascading over his body, warming him up, and nice-smelling soap and shampoo, and fluffy towels after. He and Xander used to shag in the shower sometimes, and that had been extremely pleasant as well.
When he felt that all the dust of Africa was gone from his body, Spike lay down naked on clean, crisp sheets and turned the telly on to something innocuous. Soon his eyes slid closed and his left hand crept down his belly to his cock, which was flaccid and still tepid from the shower. As soon as he touched it, though, it responded like a neglected puppy, filling and hardening in his grip. “Down, boy,” he thought, but of course it did no such thing, and it twitched eagerly as he began to leisurely stroke it. His right hand wandered onto his chest, where his fingers toyed and teased at his nipples, first his left and then his right, until the hard little nubs ached with pleasure almost as much as his cock.

Lately, he always tried to picture someone else when he wanked, Drusilla or Buffy, even Harmony or, gods help him, Angel. Fantasizing wasn’t infidelity, he reasoned, and these other familiar faces and bodies didn’t fill him with a sense of despair. But it was Xander whom he ended up seeing in his mind’s eye, Xander with his crooked grin and his one eye and his messy hair, Xander with strong callused hands and arms roped with muscle, Xander with a dark line of soft hair over his very slightly squishy stomach and his pretty cock jutting proudly between heavy thighs. Xander with his goofy laugh and appalling taste in music and clothes, with his pizza boxes
and hamburger wrappers and Twinkie crumbs, with his kind caresses and always-busy mouth, with his lack of self-confidence and his stupid bloody courage.

His Xander.

Nearly.

Spike’s cock was slick now with pre-come, and he pressed his thumb into the slit, enjoying the stab of almost-pain, before switching to long, fast strokes down the length of his shaft. He was rocking his hips upward into his fist, twisting and pinching his nipples. He tasted copper and knew he’d bit his lip, but the taste of his own blood was so unsatisfying, nothing at all like the ambrosial little drops he’d lick from Xander’s neck or thigh or chest, just tiny little pinpoints of scarlet that made them both writhe and moan, that filled his mouth and throat and entire being with zinging ecstasy, like an x-rated vampire version of the Pop-Rocks his boy once persuaded him to try.

His pace now was furious, almost savage. His dick and his balls throbbed almost like the heartbeat he barely remembered having, like the powerful one he’d felt in Xander’s chest when they’d shagged, or even when they’d only lain in each other’s arms, relaxed and satisfied.
Three more strokes, then three more. As he came he called out Xander’s name with a sound halfway between a sob and an animal’s howl.

~*~*~*~*~

It wasn’t a bad little room, and it was cheap. It was in a Georgian townhouse situated in a crescent of nearly identical buildings, all long-since converted to hotels. A small park was directly across the street and it was quiet. He had to climb four flights of stairs to get to his room and the loo was down the hall, but of course that didn’t matter to him. At least he had a tiny private shower, and the single small window faced north, providing protection in the unlikely event of a sunny day. The bed was narrow but comfortable, there was a telly and a small desk and a wardrobe, and the staff was cordial but not particularly inclined to inquire into his business.

The only disadvantage was the lack of a fridge, so he had no place to store blood and had to drink it as he got it. The butcher at a supermarket nearby was willing to sell cow and pig blood, though, and another call to Angel produced the name of a couple of demon pubs in which
Spike could purchase packaged human blood of only slightly dubious origin.

He liked the neighborhood. The British Museum was close by and the British Library, but, more important, so was Watchers’ Council headquarters. The only downside, really, was that two other sites were also only blocks away: the house in which he’d lived his entire human life, and the alley in which he’d died.

As soon as dusk fell his first night there, he walked over to Watchers’ HQ and hung about for a time. He couldn’t very well just knock on the door and announce himself. Soul or not, he reckoned he wouldn’t be too welcome there. So instead he skulked, hoping to catch a glimpse of his boy. He spent the whole night huddled against the building across the way, shivering uselessly, and saw nobody enter or leave at all. He crept back to his room shortly before dawn and turned up the heat as high as it would go. Then he crawled into bed, curled into a ball, and fell fast asleep.

The next evening, he vowed not to be such a sniveling coward. Again he waited, tucked so deeply in the shadows he could almost believe he didn’t exist.

Almost two hours later, he heard a familiar voice proceeding up the pavement in his direction. He pressed
himself still more tightly against cold, unforgiving stone. Two men walked by. The taller one had graying, sandy hair and wore a brown leather jacket and tan trousers. He had a gray scarf knotted about his neck. The other man had dark brown hair, curling long and unruly around his shoulders. He wore a thick coat but his arms were wrapped around himself as if he were used to a warmer climate. He had an American accent and he was talking about a Jiutrimo demon he’d killed in South Africa.

Spike could actually smell his boy as he passed, could very nearly have reached out and touched him, but he found himself paralyzed, unable even to breathe. After two continents, after not seeing Xander for a year, all he could do was watch as Xander and Giles crossed the street and Giles unlocked the heavy door on the building opposite, and they walked inside. The door shut behind them with a sound of finality.

Spike cursed himself then found the nearest pub and got completely rat-arsed. The following day he slept like the dead.

He haunted the Watchers’ HQ for nearly two weeks. Several times he caught brief glimpses of Xander, each one of which tore his heart in two. He couldn’t bring
himself to approach, to face that final rejection. He couldn’t stay away.

One night, after once again seeing Xander enter the building with Giles and a woman he didn’t recognize, Spike found himself wandering the streets aimlessly. He’d done a bit of roaming already, and it was strange how some bits of the city were exactly as they were when he was alive—or long before, really, such as the Tower or the bit of Roman wall that still stood near it, or gaudy old St. Paul’s, which had recently been spruced up and brightened. At the same time, though, so much was unrecognizable. London wasn’t the same city he’d left over a hundred years ago. Even the accents seemed strange to his ears now. Foreign.

This night he didn’t walk far, and he wasn’t especially surprised to look up and find himself standing in front of a familiar building just off Tavistock Square. For just a moment, the urge to simply walk up the steps and open the door was nearly overwhelming. But of course even if the door was unlocked, he wouldn’t be able to enter, would he? A small sound of sorrow slipped from his throat and he staggered. As he collapsed onto the steps of the house next door, a thousand memories popped into his head all at once, like fireworks, and he squeezed
his eyes shut and rocked and shook like a drunk with DTs. He didn’t cry, though.

After a long time, he stood. He felt drained and empty. Which naturally led him slowly down Woburn Place and over to Guilford Street and then to a tiny alley that was now tucked behind a natural foods shop and a curry house. It was paved, now, of course, and empty save for a couple of dustbins and a few stray pieces of rubbish. A security light glowed weakly from the side of the building.

Spike leaned against the bricks and contemplated this empty space and the way a chance encounter here had changed his existence in ways he could never have imagined. Despite everything, he couldn’t possibly regret it. It was not as if he’d rather be crumbled bones, long forgotten beneath the earth. And although, with the perspective of over a century and the addition of a soul, there were a great many things he wished he had done differently, thousands of lives he wished he hadn’t filled with pain and death, there were also memories that brought him happiness. And, he discovered, he was proud of some of what he’d done. He’d been told more than once that he was beneath others, and perhaps that had been true. But now, he thought perhaps he really
was worthy, truly deserved the love of a decent human being.

He lifted himself off the wall and straightened his shoulders. Tomorrow, he vowed, he’d talk to Xander.

~*~*~*~*~

It was drizzling out, little needles of icy coldness that stung his face and soaked through his hair and trouser cuffs. He pulled his collar up and shoved his hands deeply in his pockets, and pressed close to the building for the small protection of a slightly protuberant window above. Xander might not be about at all, this night. A true native Californian, he’d always acted as if a bit of rain might melt him. Spike promised himself that if Xander didn’t appear within the hour, Spike would finally march up to the Watchers’ front door and ring the bell.

Although it was not very late, the street was utterly deserted. A few of the windows in the Watchers’ building were lit, but they were heavily draped, and he could see nothing within. He wondered if one of them was Xander’s.
Fifty-nine minutes later, according to the cheap watch Spike wore, and still no sign of his boy. Spike took a deep breath, then another, and walked across the street, splashing through small puddles in his way. Five whitewashed steps led up to the double door and he stomped up them as confidently as he could. He raised his hand to push the bell, and then, with no warning at all, one side of the door swung open. He jumped back, automatically crouching defensively.

“Finally. Come in, Spike.”

He wasn’t surprised to see Giles, of course, but he was shocked at the man’s nonchalant invitation to him. The last time he’d seen him—six, no, seven years ago—the bloke had only a few weeks earlier conspired to permit Spike to be dusted. They’d had sort of an uneasy truce afterward, mostly because there were more immediate concerns at hand. And then Spike had burned. Not much closure there, really.


Cautiously, with his duster drawn closely about him, Spike stepped inside. He was in a perfectly ordinary little foyer, with a black and white tiled floor and an ornate umbrella stand full of umbrellas and a few tatty-looking
chairs. A tiny table was stacked with magazines and newspapers that wore a patina of dust. There was a fireplace, but it was empty and cold.

“This way, please.” Giles led him past a wide carpeted stairway and down a corridor. Faded floral wallpaper was interrupted by several unmarked doors.

“In here,” Giles said, and held a door open for him.

Spike briefly wondered if it was a trap—perhaps he’d find another room lined with crosses, like that Slayer’s son’s garage—but he stepped through anyway. Giles followed, shutting the door behind them and flipping a light switch. “We’re unlikely to be disturbed in here,” he mumbled.

They were in a very large space that seemed to have been set up as some sort of gymnasium. Punching bags and climbing ropes hung from the high ceiling, and the scuffed floor was scattered with thick blue mats. It smelled of stale sweat and old canvas.

For several minutes they stood, examining one another. Rupert’s hair was a bit thinner and there were more wrinkles around his eyes, but he was trim and fit-looking. He wore a slightly baggy greenish jumper and a pair of worn blue jeans and short black boots. He broke the silence first. “Visiting the old homestead, are we?”
Spike leaned against the wall and crossed his arms and wished he had a cigarette. “Got to missing the lovely weather.”

“I understand you’ve lately been someplace much warmer.”

“Yeah. My tan didn’t quite take.”

Giles tilted his head a bit. “Why are you here, Spike? What is it you want?”

“Not here to natter with you. I want to see my b—Harris. Lead me to him.”

“When you tell me what you want.”

“What are you, the boy’s bloody guard dog? If he doesn’t want to talk to me, fine. He can tell me so himself.”

Giles shook his head. “Xander is in rather a fragile emotional state right now. I don’t want him needlessly...disturbed.”

Spike tried very hard to keep his temper in check. “I know he’s a bit off. Been chasing him for a year, haven’t I? Don’t want to sodding disturb him.”

“So you say. But you’re hardly the most calming influence. I don’t know what’s happened with you two,
but it seems to me that if Xander wanted to speak with you, he wouldn’t have been running from you all this time.”

“Wasn’t me he was running from, Watcher. I was only along for the ride.”

Giles just looked at him stubbornly. Spike could easily overpower him, of course, or could just dash out through the door and look for Xander himself. But the building might be crawling with people who were accustomed to dealing with vampires in unpleasant ways, and creating a ruckus here wasn’t likely to endear him to Xander anyhow.

“I only want to talk to him, Rupert. Please.”

Giles squinted his eyes at the note of pleading that crept into Spike’s voice unbidden. “Why?”

The last thing Spike wanted was to divulge the whole mess to Giles, of all people. Not only did he object on principle, but Xander had clearly not told the Watcher many details, and Spike didn’t want to be responsible for spoiling his boy’s privacy this way. “I want to apologize,” he finally said. It was an honest answer. “I only want to tell him I’m sorry. If he tells me to bugger off then, I will. You’ll neither of you see me again.”
Giles peered at him a while more, as if he could peel back Spike’s skin and read his soul. Then he sighed. “All right. But keep your voice down. I’d rather not advertise your presence here.”

Spike nodded once and followed him back out into the hallway. They went back the way they came, then climbed up the stairs. As they began to ascend the second flight, Spike asked, “How’d you know I was there?”

“Security cameras. I’ve been watching you skulk about for days. You’re fortunate I was able to keep the others from staking you.”

Spike felt phenomenally stupid. Cameras. Of course. He didn’t know why it hadn’t occurred to him that this doddering old lot might have entered the twenty-first century. “Does Xander know?”

“Yes. He refused to discuss it with me, though.”

Spike digested that piece of information as they went up another set of stairs, this one considerably narrower. Had Xander been embarrassed about him? So angry he didn’t want to talk about it? Or did he care so little for Spike now that Spike’s presence just wasn’t important to him?
This hallway was dank and slightly musty-smelling. The Watchers weren’t much as housekeepers, Spike thought. Giles stopped at the third door down and knocked. Spike steeled himself for this meeting.

There was no answer.

Giles rapped on the door again, harder this time. But again no response came.

Frowning, Giles tried the knob, which turned easily in his hand. He opened the door slowly. It was a small bedroom, Spike now saw, with a bed neatly made and a desk and straight-backed chair. The walls were papered in a pale abstract pattern, the floor was bare wood, save for a small throw rug near the bed, and the duvet looked like it came from somebody’s grandmother’s house. There was nobody in the room.

Spike stepped inside, looked around briefly, and then whirled furiously toward Giles. “Where the fuck did he go?”

“I don’t know,” Giles replied, and opened a door, revealing a cupboard completely empty except for four wooden hangers. “He’s taken his things.”

“Was this your scheme or his?” Spike hissed. “Delay me just long enough so he could slip away.”
Giles shook his head. “There was no scheme. I thought he was still up here. We were going to go out for supper soon. He said he wanted pizza.” The man looked bewildered. Either he was a far better actor than Spike gave him credit for, or he truly hadn’t known that Xander was going to leave. “He can’t have gone very far. Can you trace him?”

“Not a bloody tracking dog, Rupert. It’s raining out. Any scent he left would be gone in minutes.” And there were a hundred different directions Xander could have headed in that time. He might even have made his way to a Tube station and be halfway across the city by now.

Spike cast his eyes around, desperate for any remaining sign of his boy, some indication that he’d only stepped out for a bit. That’s when Spike noticed the two papers on the desk. They were lined white sheets that looked as if they’d been hastily torn from a notebook. Each was folded in half. G-Man was scrawled on one of them. The other said Spike.

An odd feeling of unreality crept over Spike as he reached for his, as if this were a dream. But the paper felt real enough against his fingers. With hands that shook slightly, he unfolded it. The handwriting was even
more horrible than usual; clearly, the author had been in a hurry as he wrote it.

Dear Spike,

I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lead you on like this. Literally. Ha ha.
Go home, Spike. Fall in love with someone you deserve and write them love poems.

Goodbye,

X

Spike didn’t realize he was crying until the words blurred before his eyes. He walked slowly to the bed and sat down, still staring blankly at the paper.

“Are you all right?” Giles asked with what sounded like genuine concern.

Spike felt...numb. “I didn’t expect he’d be so cruel,” he whispered.
“Cruel? That doesn’t sound like—May I see?”

Spike held the paper out without looking up. What did it matter now what the Watcher thought?

It took Giles only a few seconds to read the note. Then he cleared his throat a few times and put the paper gently on the bed beside Spike. With his peripheral vision, Spike could see Giles take off his glasses, pull a white cloth from his pocket, and begin to polish the lenses. He cleared his throat once more. “I see,” he said.

Spike said nothing.

“You and he...yes. I see. I understand now.”

Spike wiped his eyes clear with his forearm. “You understand,” he snarled, and stood and walked toward the door.

“Spike!”

He took another step and then stopped. “What? Need your chance to glory in it? Go ahead, then. Can’t hurt me now.” Nobody could, not when his b— when Xander had already torn out his heart.

“That’s not what I want,” Giles said softly. “Tell me—you said he was cruel. What do you mean?”
“You read the bloody note. ‘Go home,’ when he knows I haven’t any, not without him. ‘Love someone you deserve.’ I’ll never be good enough to deserve him, will I?” His eyes flooded again and he clutched at his hair with both hands.

“Spike, I don’t believe that’s how he meant it. I think he means he doesn’t deserve you.”

Spike looked up at him in confusion. “Why?”

Giles sighed. “He’s never thought that much of himself. A situation which I did very little to improve, I’m afraid. But now…. Did he tell you about that demon he killed? The Ktolke?”

“Yeah, but—“

“He took an innocent life, Spike. He’s deeply troubled about it. I expect he feels it makes him unworthy of you.”

“Unworthy of me? How many innocent lives have I taken? And not by accident, either.”

“Yes, of course, but you had no soul then. He does. How many have you taken since you regained your soul?”

Spike paused for a moment. “None.”
“You were right. He’s not running from you. He’s running from himself.”

Despite his grief, Spike saw some logic in what Giles was saying. So he did something unthinkable—he asked the Watcher for advice. “What should I do?”

Rupert sighed again. “I can’t believe I’m saying this to you, of all people.” He closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them. “Go catch him, Spike.”

Part Three

“That is the bloody stupidest castle I’ve ever seen.”

The man grinned. “Not authentic enough for you?”

Spike snorted.

“Sixty years ago an American film star arrived. Wanted his very own castle, he said. He bought that worthless bit of land and drew up the blueprints himself. I’m not sure he’d ever seen a real castle before. And then got himself killed in a car accident less than a year after it was completed. It sat empty for decades, a bit of a tourist attraction.”
“But not now.”

“Now it’s some sort of girls’ school. An odd lot. They keep to themselves, mostly, but some say there’s strange goings on there.” He shrugged. “But they pay taxes and they spend money in the village shops, so who are we to complain?” He tucked the postcard back into his photo album and shut the cover.

Spike nodded at the bartender, who brought over two fresh pints. The man took a long draught from his and smacked his lips with satisfaction. “What makes you want to write about our neck of the woods, Mr. Harris?”

“My protagonist is traveling Great Britain by motorcycle. He’s a bit of a wanderer. Thought he might wander this way.”

“And what will happen to him here?”

Spike swallowed some of his ale. “Don’t quite know yet. I’ll have to let my muse guide me, once I’ve had a chance to look about a bit more. Perhaps he’ll meet a winsome lass.”

“Not too many of those here,” the man scowled, and cut his eyes toward the homely middle-aged woman a few tables over.
Spike smiled at him. “Ah, but that’s the power of artistic license.”

Mr. Gibson chuckled and drained his glass. “Well, you’ll let me know if you need more information, then, won’t you? I know more about this area than anyone.”

Yeah, and happy to tell it for the price of a few pints, Spike thought. But what he said was, “Cheers, mate. Will do. But now I think I’ll take a stroll, get a feel for it.”

The man frowned a little. “It’s quite late, Mr. Harris.”

“’M still on California time,” Spike lied. “It’s only tea time there.”

“Ah, right. California,” said the man, as if that explained all sorts of eccentricities. Which perhaps it did.

Spike drank the last of his ale and stood. He gave the man a final smile and then stopped to pay his tab before stepping out of the pub. It was raining here, too—was raining bloody everywhere on the island, probably—but this was just a soft mist that almost caressed him as it touched his skin.

The castle was a few miles away and he decided to walk. He’d driven far enough already in his hired Ford, and he fancied the chance to stretch his legs a bit. Besides, he
was hungry and the butcher’s was long closed, and he hoped to find a bit of a nosh on the way.

He’d been in Scotland before, but not around here, and this didn’t resemble any other bits of the country he’d seen. The empty road rose quickly over a surprisingly rugged hill and twisted this way and that. He spied a deer in the darkness, a young buck, and ran it down. With his stomach pleasantly full, he continued his walk, finding himself in a contemplative mood. It was odd, he thought, that now not only was he beholden to Angel for aiding his quest, but to Giles as well. But it was Giles who’d suggested that this is where Xander might be headed next, and Giles who’d given him directions to get here. Without Xander he might be all alone in the world, but at least there were a few who were willing to assist him on Xander’s behalf.

He came over the crest of another hill and there, tucked in a little valley, was the ridiculous castle. He couldn’t see it well through the mist, but he could tell that lights shone in a few of the windows. He wondered if Xander still had a room here.

He hesitated, unsure of whether to turn back. But his cowardice in London might have cost him Xander, so now he traipsed down the steep hill, his Docs skidding slightly
on the damp pavement. As he came closer he saw that the building had a faux drawbridge over a faux moat, but a perfectly ordinary-looking front door, like one you might find on any suburban house.

Knocking on the front door of a castle full of Slayers wasn’t any less imprudent than ringing the bell of Watchers’ HQ. He did it anyhow. When nobody answered, he knocked again, more loudly, and this time he could hear footsteps approaching inside.

He didn’t recognize the girl who opened the door. She was of medium height, almost boyishly slim, with tan skin and straight black hair. She wore a pair of green sweats cut off at the knee and a pink sleeveless tee. Her eyes went wide at the sight of him and she immediately crouched into fighting stance. “Bampiro!” she yelled.

Spike scrambled back a step and held his hands up high, as if he were being mugged. “Wait! Wait! Don’t mean any harm here. I only—”

Before he could finish, the girl lunged at him and kicked him hard in the bollocks. When he bent over she grabbed him and, in one fairly smooth move, twisted his arm behind his back and tucked her elbow tightly around his neck. He could feel her wiry strength against him. Still, she was green and he’d fought much more experienced
Slayers than her. He could have got away easily, but not without hurting her. And, although there was a part of him that clamored and howled at the chance to kill his third Slayer—he never would be free of that bit, soul or not—that voice was firmly overruled by the rest of him, which hesitated to harm yet another person, and which realized that causing mayhem here was hardly the wisest course of action.

He tried to talk to her, to explain what he was about, but he hadn’t enough breath. He squirmed a bit but she growled at him and tightened her grip. He considered himself fortunate she hadn’t a stake at hand, but he reckoned it wouldn’t be long before she found some other way to dust him.

If he’d had any oxygen, he would have breathed a sigh of relief when he heard many running footsteps echoing on the stone floors. A moment later, a whole group of girls burst out the door and surrounded him and his captor. There was a nearly deafening babble of polyglot shouting, until one voice, clear and lovely, called out, “Spike!”

He rolled his eyes toward her. She did look familiar, although if he ever knew her name, he couldn’t recall it. She was older now, of course, tougher-looking than the
little girl she’d been back in Buffy Summers’s house. He made a pleading face at her.

“Diwata! Let him go! He’s a friend.”

Diwata didn’t loosen her grip one bit. “Vampire!” she snapped. “Kill it!”

One of the other girls stepped forward with a sharpened bit of wood in her hand, and Spike made a desperate, strangled sound. He was relieved when the one who knew him leaped between the stake and him and held her hands up. “Don’t! He’s a vampire, but he has a soul. He’s Spike!”

Diwata relaxed a bit and that was enough for him to slip free. He stood in the middle of a ring of glaring Slayers, holding his hands high and gasping. He didn’t actually need oxygen but it certainly felt loads better when he had some.

“It is you, isn’t it, Spike?”

He nodded enthusiastically.

“And you’re still a good guy?”

“Yeah,” he rasped. “White hat.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Buffy said you died.”
“Didn’t take.”

She peered at him a moment later and then seemed to reach a decision. “Okay. Come with me. But no funny business, or Diwata’s gonna practice some of her moves on you.”

Spike grimaced and rubbed at his neck. “She could use the practice.” He turned to her. “I could’ve killed you in a mo, love. Don’t think all vamps will be so forgiving.”

Diwata glared at him, but his savior grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the door. “Come on,” she ordered. He bumped against an invisible barrier when they got to the door and she rolled her eyes. “You’re invited, Spike,” she said. Then, with all the other Slayers following behind like some sort of strange parade, they marched down a series of stone-walled corridors, up two flights of stairs, down several more twists and turns, and finally up four more steps, before coming to a halt outside a closed wooden door. The girl rapped loudly on it.

A sleepy, familiar voice answered from inside. “Go away.”

“Buffy, I really think you need to see this.”

Spike took a deep breath and tried to brace himself. He hadn’t any idea what her reaction would be to seeing
him. She knew he was undead—Xander had told that much to her in one of their rare communications while Xander was in LA—but her feelings on the matter were unknown.

The door was yanked open, and there she was, wearing only a ratty old bathrobe. Her hair was a mess and she had dark circles under her eyes, but she still looked lovely. Her brows flew up when she saw him, but she didn’t look completely shocked. “Spike,” she said evenly.

“Buffy.”

Another woman appeared in the room behind her, a dark-haired girl about Buffy’s age. She put her arm possessively around Buffy’s waist, and now it was Spike’s turn to be surprised. He wondered how Angel would react, and really, really hoped he had the opportunity to tell the pouf in person.

For a moment, nobody said anything. Then Spike swallowed and said, “Look, I’m here because—“

“I know why you’re here.” She looked around at their eager audience. “Let’s, um, go someplace a little more private, okay?”

He nodded. He didn’t much fancy pouring his heart out in front of this lot anyhow.
“Just a sec,” she said, and shut the door in his face. He was left in the hall, with two dozen pairs of eyes focused curiously on him.

“Are you really the Spike?” one of them finally asked.

“You’ve heard of me, then?”

She nodded. She had frizzy ginger hair and freckles and bright blue eyes. “Buffy said you chose to fight for your soul and you helped save the world.”

He puffed his chest out a bit. It was gratifying to know that Buffy had discussed him at all, let alone in such a positive light.

The ginger girl leaned forward a bit. “Is it true you and Buffy were, uh, close?”

A wave of giggles followed the question, and most of the crowd looked him up and down so appraisingly he felt rather like a pair of shoes on sale. He was wracking his brain, unsure how to answer, when the door flew open again. Now Buffy wore jeans and a bright green jumper, and, over that, a heavy gray coat. She’d stuffed a navy woolen cap on her head and her feet were encased in fleecy boots. “Come on,” she ordered, and rolled her eyes at the fresh round of laughter that followed.
Spike trailed her through the castle until they came to another door which led to a set of steep stairs. Nobody followed them, and when they got to the top, Buffy unbolted another door and Spike went with her out onto the roof. It was still raining softly, but she led him to a bit where there was an overhang.

They leaned against the cold stone wall, looking out at the mist that swirled around the little valley.

“You look good,” Spike said.

She smiled slightly. “You, too.”

“So, that bird....”

“Her name is Maria, and yes, we kind of have a thing.” She said it more than a bit defensively.

“Never knew you fancied the fairer sex,” he replied mildly.

“Yeah, well, neither did I.” Her voice softened. “I’m still not...I don’t know. I’m almost thirty, Spike. Don’t people usually know what they want by then?”

He chuckled. “Takes some a mite longer, love. A hundred years and more, perhaps. Besides, I expect a heart goes
where it will. Least, mine always has, long after it stopped beating, even.”

She turned and looked at him. “And it’s gone with Xander.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. “Yeah.”

“Have you really been following him for fourteen months?”

He nodded. “Wow. You really take stalking to new heights.”

“Would have done the same for you, once.”

She smiled, then reached up to stroke his cheek before letting her hand drop. “I know. Even when you were...more with the big bad, I knew. You really loved me. More than anybody ever will, probably, ‘cause you accepted me as I am. And...you did the best you could, without a soul and all. I mean, you cared, even if you were kinda clueless sometimes about what to do about it. You...you never meant to hurt me, which is hard enough for guys without demons in them.”
It wasn’t quite forgiveness, but her words fell on him like a benediction. She understood. “Ta, love,” he said, and his voice was thick and rough. He had to look away for a moment. Funny how even if she never loved him back, the Slayer could always make him feel like a real man.

When he felt like he could speak steadily again, he turned back to her. “I don’t know what Xander said to you—“

“He said a lot. We talked for, like, hours. It was good. We hadn’t—We needed to work some stuff out.”

“So you’ve got it all sorted between you?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Good. It was grieving him, being…apart from you.”

She nodded and looked out at the fog.

“Buffy, I don’t know what he told you about me....”

“He said you’d show up in a couple days. And here you are, right on schedule.”

“I need to talk to him.”

She crossed her arms over herself. “He doesn’t want to talk to you, Spike.”
Her words scoured him, flayed him wide open. He swallowed and said, “I know...I’m only a demon, yeah? I might never be good enough for him. But if he’ll only let me try....” Helplessly, he listened to his voice break.

Buffy put a hand on his shoulder, and he hated that she could feel him shake. “Spike, that’s not it,” she said softly. “He thinks he’s not good enough for you.”

He blinked tears away. This was similar to his discussion with the Watcher, but he still couldn’t credit it. “Why? Why would he think that?”

“Because you’re a hero, a Champion. And you’re sexy as hell, which you know perfectly well. He’s only boring old Xander Harris, the guy who lived in the basement and did crappy in school and couldn’t keep even bad jobs.”

She said these words matter-of-factly, and Spike saw the truth in them. Not that Xander really was that way, but that was how he saw himself. Spike’s real crime hadn’t been letting some boy in a club blow him, but rather never letting Xander know how valuable he was. How valued.

He sniffled. “You’ve become wise in your old age,” he said. She swatted him playfully. “What should I do?” First
asking the Watcher for advice, and now the Slayer. Surely an apocalypse was near.

“Give him a little more time. If you try to see him now, I don’t think he’s gonna really listen, really believe.”

“I can’t just let him go. I might lose him then.”

“Keep following him. Stay close. Just not, you know, too close.”

He rubbed wearily at his face. “If I weren’t already dead, the boy would be the death of me.”

“You’re not enjoying your travels?”

“No,” he snorted. “I’ve seen much more than I wanted already of Africa. I’d rather be with the ponce in LA, even.”

Her eyes grew distant for a moment. “How is he? Angel?”

“He’s...herself. You know, struttings around with his cape all a-flutter, marathon brooding, ordering people about. The usual.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. When did she learn to do that?
“He’s all right,” he admitted. “Been financing my end of the holiday, actually. Helping now and then, even. I expect he wants Xander to be happy.”

“And you,” she added quietly. “He wants you to be happy, too, doesn’t he?”

He shrugged.

“Look, Xander needs more time to learn that he’s worthy. So do you, I think.” She marched to the edge of the roof and looked down before turning back to him. “I’m really frigging cold, Spike. Let’s go inside.”

~*~*~*~*~

The castle had a dungeon. Spike wondered whether the film star had had some interesting kinks, or if he’d simply felt that a castle wasn’t complete without one. In any case, this one had thick walls inset with heavy chains, and a half dozen individual cells with thick bars.

Spike hadn’t wanted to spend the night in the castle because he wasn’t certain he’d have the willpower to keep from wandering the rambling place in search of his boy. But there was little time left until sunrise, and no real shelter between here and the village. So he and
Buffy had dragged a mattress and a pile of bedding into the center of the dungeon and she’d given him a chaste little kiss on the cheek before leaving and locking the door behind her.

It was odd that he felt so comfortable confined beneath a whole household of Slayers, but it made him happy to know he was under the same roof as Xander. And it was surprisingly cozy down there, with a half dozen pillows and an enormous stack of quilts, and no windows to worry about in the morning. Surprisingly, it was dry, too. The daft film star had at least known something about waterproofing. There were some very undungeon-like overhead lights, and Spike turned them all off so the only remaining light was a faint glow that slipped under the door at the top of the stairs.

Spike stripped and snuggled under the blankets, which smelled pleasantly of soap and fresh air. He wondered idly whether the Slayers did their own laundry.

He closed his eyes and took himself in hand and remembered the first time he and Xander had made love. Not the first time they’d shagged. They’d both been rat-arsed that night, worked up after a fortnight or so of drunken groping, and their coupling had been fast and messy and unpolished. Oh, it had been lovely in its own
way, with both of them patient enough—and sober enough—for only the most cursory application of slick, and Xander pistoning and grunting into Spike, while Spike writhed and howled underneath him. The next several times had also been under the influence of a shot or five of Jack, and, although even then Xander had exhibited creativity and enthusiasm, it had mostly been just two blokes getting their ends away.

And then one night they sat together in Xander’s room at the Hyperion, on Xander’s black leather loveseat that was identical to the one in Spike’s room, and they were watching Psycho on the telly, and neither had had a drop of alcohol. Spike threw his arm around Xander’s shoulder and Xander leaned into him, resting his shaggy head against Spike’s cheek.

Honestly, Spike would have been content to spend the whole night like that. But then Xander put a hand on Spike’s thigh and the heat of it had soaked through the denim and up to his crotch, slowly hardening his cock. When good old Norman was stabbing the bint in the shower, Xander squirmed happily against him and allowed his hand to creep farther north, until he was outright massaging Spike’s erection through Spike’s jeans. Spike groaned and let his head fall back against the cushions.
Xander rubbed Spike for a long time, and it felt too bloody brilliant for Spike to move. Not just the friction against his hard-on, although that was certainly nice, but also the warmth and weight of the man nestled in the crook of his arm, and the soft tickle of Xander’s hair on his neck, and the steady heartbeat that thumped against him. It felt so good, in fact, that he was taken by surprise when his balls drew up and tightened and he came in his trousers like a randy teenager.

When Spike was able to speak again, Xander had twisted his body around so that he was facing Spike. A small grin played at the corners of his lips. “Sorry,” Spike mumbled, relieved that at least he couldn’t flush with shame.

But Xander only widened his smile. “Don’t be. Me being able to do that to you—that really kinda does it for me.” And to emphasize his point he grasped Spike’s hand and set it against his own crotch, where his cock was tenting out his sweatpants nicely.

Spike’s embarrassment fled. “Yeah?” He squeezed gently and saw Xander’s eyelids flutter in response.

“Yes. I want to make you lose control.”

At Xander’s words, Spike’s softening cock regained interest in the proceedings. Hooray for vampire
constitutions. Spike summoned his best leer. “Sounds like a challenge, whelp.”

When Xander laughed, there was a surprising flash of something predatory in his brown eye. Spike hardened as if he hadn’t had his end away in weeks. “If you’re up for it,” Xander teased. “Cause me, I am definitely up for it.” He thrust lightly into Spike’s palm.

Spike released his grip and spread his arms wide. “’M all yours, pet.”

Xander stood and grabbed Spike’s arm, and used it to haul him to his feet. He dragged Spike to his bed and then pushed him firmly down until Spike was sitting on the rumpled duvet. Spike allowed himself to be tugged slightly this way and that as Xander peeled his black tee slowly off of him. When he reached up to return the favor, Xander batted his hands away. “Nuh-uh. I’m driving you crazy. Next time it can be your turn.” Spike liked the sound of that—the implied promise of a next time—and he collapsed obediently back onto to mattress when Xander pushed on his chest.

Staring up at the ceiling, he felt his boots being unfastened and pulled off, and he heard the thunk-thunk as they were tossed aside. But he nearly shrieked in
surprise as the great toe on his right foot was encircled by damp, hot suction. “Bloody hell!” he groaned.

Xander stopped suckling long enough to chuckle. “Only one toe so far and already I’ve got you cursing in British. I’m so gonna win.”

Spike reckoned the boy was right, and he didn’t bloody care, because now Xander was carefully nursing each digit in turn, taking special care with the smallest. Spike didn’t dare look anywhere but the ceiling, because if he caught a glimpse of that dark head bowed over his feet, he was likely to come in his trousers for the second time tonight.

When Xander had lavished attention on all ten toes, he stood and bent over the bed. His lips were damp and slightly swollen, and Spike longed to taste them, but he stayed still like a good little vampire while Xander unbuttoned and unzipped Spike’s damp flies and then drew his jeans slowly over his hips and down his legs. Xander was still fully dressed, and he looked down at Spike’s nude body and licked his lips, which made Spike’s cock twitch.

Spike expected Xander to strip next, but he didn’t. Instead, he climbed onto the bed and draped himself over Spike, so that they were nestled together from chest to
feet. The soft cotton of Xander’s clothing felt good against Spike’s bare skin. Xander spread out his arms and pinned Spike’s wrists in place at their sides. They both knew Spike could easily get away if he wanted, but he really, really didn’t want. He felt almost helpless like this, with Xander’s greater weight atop him and the man’s strong muscles bunched against his. As if he were at Xander’s mercy. He liked the feeling.

Xander dipped his head and now, finally, Spike felt those soft lips against his. When Xander’s tongue demanded entry into Spike’s mouth, Spike meekly let it in, and then his palate was filled with the taste of Xander, salty and good. He groaned when Xander suddenly pulled his head up again. Xander looked down at him speculatively for a moment before gnawing hard enough on his own bottom lip to produce a single, scarlet drop of blood. A brief second later they were kissing again, but now Xander’s blood was sparking and fizzing inside Spike’s mouth, and Spike groaned again and thrust up with his hips.

“Told you once I was a nummy treat,” Xander said a little breathlessly, his mouth now nearly touching Spike’s neck.

“Should’ve listened then,” said Spike.

Xander hummed his agreement and licked the length of Spike’s carotid. Spike shivered and stretched his head to
the side, wondering if the boy would bite, wondering, too, how Xander seemed to know exactly the right buttons to push with him. Had he read some sort of manual on shagging vampires?

Those thoughts disintegrated, though, as Xander did bite, perhaps a bit too gently. “Oh, fuck,” moaned Spike, and again arched his groin up into Xander’s. If Xander had pushed his teeth in just a bit more Spike would have come. But instead Xander released his jaws and set a trail of light kisses down over Spike’s collarbone and onto his chest, before settling in to suck and nibble at one hardened, sensitive nipple. His broad, callused fingertips teased the other.

When Spike tried to move his own hand to play in Xander’s hair, Xander immediately stopped and clucked his tongue, and moved Spike’s hand back to his side. “Don’t make me get the ropes,” he threatened, which, as the cruel bastard had probably predicted, only made Spike squirm beneath him a bit desperately. But squirming meant Xander would stop again, and now he was pressing gentle lips down the center of Spike’s chest, slowly working his way downward until he tongued at Spike’s navel and moved off to one side a little to suck lightly at the hollow under one hipbone.
“Fuck,” Spike hissed again, as he struggled not to move, to find just a bit of friction for his aching cock.

Now Xander was kissing the inside of Spike’s thigh, just inches from where Spike needed him most, and Spike could almost cry from the sweet frustration of it. He sighed instead as Xander’s lips acquainted themselves with his leg, with the tender bit behind Spike’s knee, with the protruding bone of his ankle. Then Xander shifted slightly and started working his way up the other leg.

Spike had lost all track of time and felt almost dazed. He’d had lovers before, of course, Dru and Buffy and Angelus and countless boys and girls whom he sometimes let live after he’d fucked them. But, passionate as some of those couplings had been—he and Buffy had torn down a sodding house, hadn’t they?—they were all fierce and bloody, with pain and pleasure so tightly entwined that he couldn’t tell the difference. There had been nothing like this, tender and slow, such exquisite torture that his body at once thrummed with need and melted with bliss.

When Xander was back between Spike’s thighs, he soothed his palms over the muscles there and then urged Spike’s knees up and apart, exposing Spike completely. His tongue felt almost pointed as it stroked teasingly along Spike’s perineum and then circled Spike’s twitching
little hole. When the tip of that tongue finally penetrated the ring of muscle, Spike had to press his lips together to stifle a howl.

Xander’s tongue was insistent and his breath was scorching against Spike’s sensitive skin. Spike could feel his muscles loosen against the onslaught, but when Xander’s fingertips played over the length of his shaft like it was a sodding flute, Spike’s control really did begin to unravel in earnest. “Fuck, yeah, please, like that, please…,” he heard himself begging. “More!” And he thrashed and tried to fuck himself on Xander.

Xander suddenly stood up. Spike gasped with dismay, afraid he’d somehow managed to break some rule. But Xander was flushed and smiling, and he yanked off his own loose, red t-shirt so quickly Spike heard a seam rip. Then he pushed down his sweats and boxers at once, revealing a cock that looked as hard and hungry as Spike’s felt. Xander kicked his clothes away and strode over to the bedside table. He opened the drawer there and fished out a tube of slick, which he waved around a bit.

“Want some of this?” he asked.

Spike nodded enthusiastically.
Xander pretended to consider it. “I dunno. I’m not sure if I’ve won yet.”

Spike growled a bit and pulled his own knees up against his chest. “You’ve bleeding won, whelp, all right? Now, please! Fuck me, Xander.” His last words may have been coarse, but they held a note of true pleading that kindled that predatory spark in Xander’s eye again.

Spike let out a long sigh of mixed relief and impatience as Xander knelt in front of him, rampant and beautiful, and squirted a healthy dollop of slick onto two fingers. He pressed those fingers against Spike’s sphincter and Spike whined and tried his best to impale himself.

In the past, they’d spared little time for preparation. But now Spike thrashed and whimpered and begged as Xander lubed and stretched him with excruciating care, sometimes allowing his fingertips to brush against Spike’s prostate, sending tingling bolts of pleasure through Spike’s body.

Only when all Spike could do was move his head back and forth on Xander’s pillow, and brokenly cry, “Please, please, Xander, please, Xander!” so loudly he knew the pouf would be shooting him dirty looks for days, only then did Xander withdraw his fingers and, with unbearable slowness, sheathe his cock inside Spike.
There was no pain or discomfort at all, only the heady urgency of the moment. Xander bent Spike nearly double as they engaged their lips in a heated kiss, and Spike’s hands latched onto Xander’s tight, strong arse, urging him to bloody move.

At last, Xander did move, his thrusts slow and deep and long, the blunt head of his cock pressing against Spike’s prostate each time as Xander slid nearly all the way out and then all the way back in. When Xander undulated downwards and Spike arched up, Spike’s cock was trapped between their bellies, rubbing wetly with precome.

There was so much sensation everywhere on his body that Spike could no longer even identify where each feeling was coming from, could barely even discern where his body ended and Xander’s began. He felt like one giant nerve ending, struck and struck again, until it was too much and he nearly feared he was just going to dust from the magnitude of it all, but instead he exploded, flying apart into an infinite number of tiny pieces and then falling slowly back together again.

He was trembling, he realized, and Xander was still inside him, caressing his biceps and murmuring soothing nothings into his ear. It took several minutes for him to
reign enough control of himself to take a deep breath and whisper shakily back, “You win.”

For the first time, they slept together that night, sticky from sweat and semen and with arms and legs all twisted together.

In the dungeon of the Slayers’ stupid castle, Spike’s release spurted tepidly into his own hand, and he smiled and fell asleep.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander left that afternoon, a few hours before Buffy released Spike from captivity. Spike was inclined to rush after him, but Buffy persuaded him to wait a few days. “He’s gonna need some time to get this one straightened out, I think,” she said. “Give him a chance, okay?”

So Spike stayed for four more days in the castle. He spent the daytime in his dungeon, then arose in the late afternoon to join Buffy and her crew. She was worried at first about feeding him, but he found another deer his third evening there, and that was plenty.

He found himself the center of rather more attention than he was used to, and it made him a bit
uncomfortable, seeing as that attention came from several score Slayers. He was even more uncomfortable when the attention took the form of roving eyes and roving hands. Time was, all these hens without a rooster among them would have been his wet dream come true, but now he was just glad that only Buffy had the key to the dungeon.

It wasn’t all torture, though. He and Buffy talked at length about what she’d been doing over the past years, and the same with him. It was pleasant just to sit in front of a roaring fire like old friends. She asked more questions about Angel, entirely too nonchalantly, he thought, and he was surprised to find himself very gently goading her toward a reunion with her old flame. Perhaps they’d only destroy one another, but perhaps they could find some happiness in each other again. Not perfect happiness—he reckoned it was too late for that with either of them—but that was just as well, and sometimes bittersweet was better in its own way.

Spike also spent some time sparring with the Slayers. That was brilliant. He hadn’t had a good fight in ages. Some of these girls were old veterans by now, but some were as untested as Diwata. They listened carefully to his advice and learned quickly, so that by dawn every morning he was pleasantly bruised and battered.
And, speaking of dawn, or, more accurately, not speaking of her, Buffy hadn’t mentioned her sister even once. Finally, as he sat on a thick rug in the parlor, nursing a tumblerful of Glen Garioch, he asked, “So how’s the Niblet, then?”

Buffy’s mouth grew tight at the corners. “Fine.”

He took a sip and raised an eyebrow at her.

“She’s in Rome. I think.”

“You think?”

“We haven’t spoken in...a while.”

“Why not, love?”

“She.... We’ve had to do some stuff to support ourselves. Slayers have to eat, you know. Not everything we’ve done is exactly, uh, legal.” She sighed. “That was part of the thing with Xander, actually, and Dawn’s not happy about it either. So she left.”

Spike’s dead heart ached for Buffy. She never had easy choices to make, and she was so alone. He put his glass down and scooted closer to her, then put one arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him in a way...
she had only a few times before, right before the end of Sunnydale.

“She’s family, love. You should sort this out with her.”

“I know. But I don’t even know where she is.”

He thought for a moment. “I could ask Peaches. Ever since he became famous, he has loads of connections. I expect he could search her down pretty easily.”

She tilted her head up to look at him. “You think he’d do that for me?”

“He might do. Might have some financing ideas that don’t involve a life of crime as well.”

She looked wistful. “That’d be nice. You know, I never pictured my life turning out this way.” She gestured around her at the room.

Spike chuckled. “Nor did I, pet. Nor did I.”

Part Four

Angel found him a plane from Glasgow to JFK. This was another charter flight, this time filled with a goth band, the members of which were absolutely thrilled to be sharing a ride with an actual vampire. They had some good hash, so he was willing to let them admire his
gameface, but he drew the line at actually biting any of them. That would have felt uncomfortably like infidelity to Xander. One of the band members had some Ramones and the Damned on his iPod, so they got pleasantly stoned and listened to good music, and the time went by quickly.

Spike had passed through New York as he followed Xander to Africa, but that had been only a very brief stay, and he’d been more concerned with finding his way to his boy than with sightseeing. He really hadn’t spent any appreciable time here since the 70’s, when he’d killed Nikki Wood. He liked this city. It was fast and dirty, without LA’s pretentions of glamour or London’s patina of age. He liked the gaping tourists and the junkies and the bustling men in suits and ties, even now that he wouldn’t eat any of them. He liked the fact that his pallor and taste in clothing and the hours he kept exacted no notice from anybody.

It was early spring and gray and rainy out, but not especially cold. With more help from his grandsire he found a decent small hotel in the East Village. His room was on the 6th floor and its only window looked onto an airshaft, so keeping out the sun wouldn’t be a problem even if the rain stopped.
He spent his first night simply wandering around, reacquainting himself with the city. It was cleaner than he’d remembered, with far fewer bums in the Bowery and the whores gone from Times Square. The little bodega he remembered on 8th Street was still there, though, with, as far as he could tell, the same wizened little woman behind the counter. She glanced up at him when he entered and, without changing her facial expression, produced three plastic bags of blood from a cooler beside her stool. She plopped the bags down in front of herself. “Twenty bucks,” she rasped.

“Prices have gone up.” Not that he’d actually needed to pay for his supper very often, the last time he was in town.

“Eight each or three for twenty.”

He dug into his wallet and pulled out one of the fresh new greenbacks he’d got at the airport ATM. She took it from him and rang up the sale on her ancient cash register, then stuffed the blood in a thin plastic shopping bag. “Havea nice day,” she intoned as he left.

After he fed, he found a club with palatable music and spent the remainder of the night drinking lightly and watching people dance. Quite a few of them, both boys and girls, invited him to join them, but he politely
declined. He wasn’t much of a dancer, not really, unless the tempo was slow, and then what he and his partner did was more like sex than dancing.

He didn’t mind being cooped up during the day. He had a nice kip and a long, hot shower, then curled up in bed and watched the telly until dark.

He presented himself at Willow’s door fifteen minutes after the sun set. A tall, curvy woman with curly dark hair answered. “Yes?” she said, smiling at him sweetly.

“’M here to see Willow,” he replied. “’M an old friend from Sunnydale.”

Her eyebrows flew up to her hairline. “Another one? She doesn’t—um, I’ll go get her.”

Spike waited in front of the open door. When she realized he wasn’t coming in, she motioned him inside.

“I need something a bit more formal than that, love,” he said patiently.

Now her mouth fell open. “Oh,” she said faintly.

“Not to worry. ‘M not hungry. I just need to talk to Red. Please,” he added, trying for polite, if not charming.
“Um, you’re invited,” she said awkwardly. He came in then, and followed her into a small room filled with crowded bookshelves and comfortable, if slightly worn, furniture. He sat on a scuffed leather armchair and she scurried out of the room and up some stairs.

When she returned, Willow was with her. The witch was wearing a pale, flowing skirt and a nubbly green jumper. Her hair was in a short cut that suited her. She had ink smeared on her right hand and a tiny smudge of it on her chin.

“Hi, Spike,” she said warmly. He’d risen as she entered, and now she moved forward and gave him a small hug, which surprised him.

“Hello, Red. Been taking good care of yourself, it looks like.”

She dimpled at him. “Thanks. Oh, this is my partner, Rachel,” she gestured at the other woman, who still looked slightly stunned at his presence. “Rachel, this is Spike. I’ve told you about him.”

Spike stuck out a hand and Rachel hesitantly shook it. “Charmed,” he said.

The initial pleasantries complete, they all sat down, Spike on the armchair again, and the women on the loveseat
opposite. Willow offered some herbal tea, which Spike managed to refuse without making a face. Shite always tasted like straw to him, and the non-herbal stuff only reminded him of his mother.

“So, um, Xander’s gone,” Willow said.

Spike sighed. He’d been afraid of that, but he hadn’t wanted to rush him. “When did he leave?”

“Two days ago.”

That meant he’d had five days in New York. “Did you two work things out?”

She smiled. “Yeah. We’re good.”

“Glad to hear that. He’s missed you. He loves you, you know.”

“I do know.” And then, slightly shyly, she added, “He loves you, too, I’m pretty sure.”

All the breath rushed from Spike’s lungs. “He does?” he finally choked.

She nodded.

“But he won’t let me near him.”

“I think he’s afraid if he does, you won’t stay.”
Spike wanted to protest that this was ridiculous, but of course it wasn’t, not from Xander’s point of view. After all, Spike had never let on how much Xander meant to him, and then he’d let that boy…. “I’m sorry,” he said miserably. “Didn’t mean to hurt him. I only...oh, bollocks. I’m not any good at this.” He buried his face in his hands.

“You’re fine, Spike. You’re just....” She laughed. “You’re just men.”

He looked up at her. “’M a one hundred and fifty year old vampire, love.”

“Yeah, well, you’re still a man. And guys...you’re usually not so much with the sharing feelings thing, are you? Most of you would rather die—or, um, die again—than admit you’re feeling kinda insecure but someone else is really important to you.”

Rachel nodded her agreement at this.

“Is that why you’re into birds, then? Because your lot is better at nattering about how you feel?”

Willow and Rachel exchanged amused looks. “Well, that and a few other reasons,” Willow replied, blushing slightly. “But, hey, before Xander I never knew you liked guys.”
He shrugged. “It’s the person that matters, not the equipment, I reckon.”

“And Xander matters?”

“Yeah,” he answered softly. “He does.”

She nodded as if the answer satisfied her. “I reminded him about how persistent you were with Buffy, no matter what, and how you stuck with Drusilla for, what, a hundred years? I told him that if you really love him, I didn’t think he’d ever get rid of you. And you’ve been chasing after him a long time, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I think, deep down he knows, Spike. He’s known how you feel for a while. He just needs to...to realize it, I guess.”

“I could prove it to him somehow, if he’d let me near.”

It was Rachel who spoke next. “Look, I know this isn’t really my business, but can I say something?”

“Rache has a PhD in Psychology,” Willow beamed proudly. “She teaches it at NYU.”

He’d already begged advice from other unlikely sources—why not the witch’s girl? “Go ahead,” he said.
“Before someone can believe that they’re truly loved, they have to believe that they’re loveable. I think Xander’s still working on that. I think he knows now how important he is to Will, and to Buffy and Mr. Giles.”

“How important he’s *always* been,” Willow added.

“What should I do?” he asked again.

Willow said, “Keep after him, sweetie. He needs you. You need him, too.”

“Do you expect—Will he come around finally? Will he see me?”

“I think he will,” Rachel said.

~*~*~*~*~

Back in his cocoon of a hotel room that morning, Spike mulled over his visit here, and the others he’d had. It was good to know that Rachel felt there was still hope for him. Even better, though, was the sudden realization that not one of Xander’s friends had rejected him. Not one had accused him of being incapable of love because he was a vampire, and none had even hinted that he might not be good for, or good enough for, Xander.
Much the contrary, they’d accepted him into their homes and spoken comforting words and actually encouraged him in his pursuit.

Even the great pouf hadn’t complained once about the expense of Spike’s travels, or the inconvenience of making arrangements for him. He only helped, and, lately, even inquired about when Spike might return to LA in a way that made Spike think he might actually want Spike to return.

William Pratt had had very few friends. As a vampire, Spike had had occasional minions, sometimes companions to fight at his side, but never friends. Even Dru, his beloved Dru...she’d needed him to care for her at times, and she’d enjoyed him much as she enjoyed Miss Edith, but she’d been far too barmy to have anything like a normal relationship, even by vampire terms. Until Xander, nobody had ever made him feel...cherished. Wanted. Esteemed.

Now, the knowledge that these others also cared for him—even though nearly all of them had tried to kill him many times—that knowledge was like a warm glow deep inside him.

Part Five
One more charter flight, this time with a group of lawyers who scowled at Spike’s clothing and then ignored him until they landed at LAX. That was fine with him. He stretched out and stuck some headphones over his ears—Willow and Rachel had taken him to the Apple store and bought him his own iPod, then Willow loaded it with all his favorites, from Brahms to the Buzzcocks—and dozed his way across the continent.

As soon as he deplaned, a pair of blondes in tight clothing that showed off their big tits recognized him. He good-naturedly signed autographs and posed for pictures, but he was already missing the anonymity he had in the rest of the world.

He took a cab to the Hyperion. It loomed there, the same as always, perhaps looking a bit more forlorn than when he’d left. Angel was waiting for him in the lobby. “You’re back,” he announced unnecessarily.

“Yeah.” Spike adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder.

“Are you, um, planning to stay?” He tried for nonchalant and failed.

“Yeah,” Spike repeated. “Still have a bit of business to sort, but yeah. I expect this is home now.”
Angel nodded stiffly at him.

They stood there, all alone in that heap of a building, and Spike remembered what Willow had said about men. Even men who happened to be ancient vampires. He cleared his throat and said, “Everything you’ve done for me lately—the dosh, the travel arrangements—well, cheers. You didn’t have to and, erm, I appreciate it.”

Angel looked as flabbergasted as Spike had ever seen him, so the difficult words had been worthwhile if only for that. After a very long pause, Angel said, “Uh, you’re welcome.”

Spike dipped his head once. “Right, then,” he said briskly. “Is my room still available?”

“Yes. There’s, uh, fresh linens on the bed. The others were kind of...dusty.”

Spike pictured Angel, spending most of the past year by himself, and then going so far as to put out clean sheets. He swallowed and looked away. “Ta,” he mumbled.

As he started up the stairs, Angel didn’t say anything more, but Spike saw the hint of a smile playing about the corners of his grandsire’s mouth. It made him pause. “I have to take one more trip tomorrow. Only a short one.
When I get back, remind me to discuss the Slayer with you.”

Angel looked at him in surprise, and Spike smiled and continued toward his room.

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The sheets smelled of laundry soap and fabric softener, but Spike could still sense just the barest ghost of Xander’s scent in his room. He might have expected it to grieve him, but instead he found it comforting, as if his boy had never quite left him.

He’d meant what he said to Angel—this was home, or at least the closest he’d been in a very long time—and it felt good to be in his own bed.

Off to one side was a small shelf full of books he’d picked up over the past few years, and a few DVDs Xander had given as pressies. A drawing was tacked on one wall, a portrait of Drusilla and Spike together, circa 1880. Angel had made it at some point and Spike had found it tucked between some other papers when he was nosing about. He wondered what Angel thought of his having hung it
there.

He owned nothing else but a couple shirts—his few possessions had been destroyed in Sunnydale, and he hadn’t bothered accumulating much since—but that was all right. He had everything he wanted now, except for his boy.

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When Xander had left LA, Spike had been driving a beat-up Firebird with the windows blacked out. He’d followed Xander across the country in that car and then abandoned it in New York without a qualm. But that left him without transportation now, unless he wanted to nick Angel’s precious Viper. Much as it pained him, he found himself needing to beg still more money from Angel.

Shortly before sundown, Angel was in his office, sipping at a glass of cow’s blood and shuffling paperwork. He looked up briefly. “So you’re off on your errand?”

“Erm, yeah.” He scratched at his cheek. “Don’t suppose you’d mind if I used your card to hire a car?”
“You’re actually asking before you spend my money? Wow.”

Spike rolled his eyes.

Angel opened a drawer, reached inside, and took something out. He slapped it down in front of Spike. “Why don’t you take this instead?”

Spike peered at it. It was a Visa, and written across the bottom were the words “William S. Pratt.”

“Sorry about the name,” Angel said. “They wouldn’t let me open an account with just ‘Spike.’ They probably do it for Bono and Madonna and Cher, but you’re not quite in their league.”

“It’s mine?” Spike asked in confusion.

“Yep.” Angel placed a pile of papers next to the bit of plastic. “Three bank accounts, all in your name. So you can pay your own damn bills when they come due.”

Spike picked up the papers and his jaw fell open when he saw the balances. “How.... Why.... Wha—“ he stammered.
“I figured if you’re really gonna stick around, I ought to give you a paycheck. There’s about a decade of back pay there.”

“But…but....”

Angel smiled smugly at him. “Speechless, huh? Look, I have the cash, and this way you can stop mooching off me.”

Spike stared at him for a moment. “Ta,” he finally managed, and Angel smiled back, genuine and warm. Spike was reminded what a beautiful man he was, on those rare occasions when he wasn’t frowning.

Spike sniffed. As Angel bent back over his work, Spike stuffed the credit card in his wallet, then fished out his mobile phone.

“Who you calling?” Angel asked.

“Car hire.”

Without looking up from the form he was filling out, Angel said, “I’d look out front first, if I were you.”

Night had just fallen. Directly in front of the hotel, right where the cab had dropped him off the night before, was an enormous monster of a car. It was black with shiny
chrome and huge tailfins. Spike walked around it. 
*Imperial*, it said on the side. The thing was fifty years old, but someone had lovingly restored it, good as new. The key was in the ignition, and the fob was a red metal letter: S.

Spike stroked the bonnet as if the car were a lover. Hell, he probably would shag the thing if he could suss out how. He looked over his shoulder at the hotel, and thought he caught a glimpse of movement inside, as if someone were skulking just inside the door. He whooped out loud and hopped into the driver’s seat. Time to see what kind of engine this beast had.

~*~*~*~*~

He made the two hour drive in less than an hour and a half. Could have gone faster, but he hadn’t a proper driver’s license and didn’t much fancy trying to talk his way out of jail.

He parked at the edge of the crater. One other car was there, a white Ford Focus. He hadn’t been here since his last death, and it was odd to stand at the edge and know that he’d done that. He didn’t much understand how his resurrection had worked—he’d long since decided not to
risk bollocksing up a good thing by delving too deeply into mysteries—and he wondered if some part of him still remained at the bottom of that great hole.

He remembered, too, all of the things that had happened in Sunnydale, and the way the town had changed his existence in unforeseen ways. He’d only come looking for a cure for Drusilla, and now here he was. It had been a difficult road to say the least, but not one he regretted now.

Spike’s sharp eyes caught a bit of movement at the bottom of the crater, far from the edge where he stood. He slid and skidded down the steep edge. If he was honest, he’d have to admit that a part of him was badly frightened to be here again. What if re-entering the place reversed whatever mojo had brought him back from the finally dead? But he knew with a certainty he couldn’t explain that his boy was here and that Spike needed to join him now.

As soon as the ground was level, he took off running. He shivered when he ran past the blank spot where the school once stood, where the Hellmouth had been nearly opened, where he’d burned and burned. He shivered again as he passed the bit where his cemetery had been.
There’d been his crypt, just over there. Now there was nothing but dirt and scrubby weeds.

He slowed as he approached the still figure, whose back was turned to him. Xander was standing and looking down at a patch of ground that seemed as empty as the rest, and he didn’t react to Spike’s approach at all until Spike stopped only a few feet behind him.

“I think it was right here,” Xander said quietly.

Spike’s breath caught at finally hearing that familiar voice. “What, pet?” he asked.

“Our house. Well, their house. I hadn’t been back since I moved out of that goddamn basement.”

Oh. His parents’ place, of course. Spike didn’t say anything.

“I wonder, sometimes. Were they too stubborn to leave, or just too drunk? Would it have done any good if I’d bothered to warn them? I mean, probably not. Since when did they ever listen to me anyway?” His voice had risen to a near shout, but then he almost whispered, “I should have at least tried. I didn’t even think about them.”
Spike came two steps closer and then, cautiously, lay one hand on a broad shoulder. “Wasn’t your fault they were wankers, pet.”

Xander spun around and glared at him furiously. “They were my fucking parents!”

Spike grasped both of Xander’s shoulders with his palms. Calmly, he said, “They were a pair of tossers. Every time they ignored you, every harsh word they ever had for you—that was nothing to do with you, love. It was all about them and their mean little minds. They didn’t deserve you and they were too thick to see what a treasure they had.”

Xander’s eye was so tear-filled Spike wondered if he could see at all. “They were my family,” he cried.

“No, pet. They were just the gits that bred you. Accident of fate. Your family—your real family—is still alive. You’ve just been visiting with them, haven’t you?”

Xander blinked at him for a moment and then, with a tearing sob, flung himself into Spike’s arms. They clutched at each other in the darkness and Xander drenched Spike’s neck and chest. Spike’s vision blurred with tears as well, and he blinked and tried to remain strong for his Xander.
At long last, Xander straightened and pulled away a bit. He swiped at his nose with his sleeve and gave a tiny, crooked grin. “That was not in the least bit manly,” he rasped.

“That was quite a holiday we took. Would have enjoyed it more if we could’ve been in the same place at the same time, though.” Again, he remembered Willow’s words. “I missed the feel of you in my arms, pet.”
Xander whirled around so suddenly that Spike backed up a step to avoid colliding with him. “Is that what I am to you, Spike? A good fuck?” His tear-streaked face was red with fury.

Bloody hell. “No! That wasn’t what I meant at all. Look, just stop and listen for a mo, and—”

But Xander didn’t stop. He turned back around and stomped quickly away. Spike just stood there a moment, frozen with frustration and anguish. Xander wouldn’t listen at all, and that didn’t even matter because Spike couldn’t seem to get the right words out. Bloody awful poet that he was, he couldn’t even manage a simple declaration of love.

He was debating with himself whether it was better to chase after Xander or give him a little space when suddenly, without the least warning, his back was raked with pure and intense agony. Spike screamed in pain and shock and nearly fell, but managed to keep his feet underneath him as he turned around.

He’d seen monsters like this before. He didn’t like to remember it, but creatures like this had tormented him in those glimpses of hell that Pavayne had given him. It was very tall, well over seven feet, and rail-thin, and its body glimmered and glowed as if it were made of flames.
Its eyes were green saucers that held no mercy, nothing but a dumb malevolence, and at the end of its long arms were hands tipped with razor claws. It was these claws that had dug into his back, giving him wounds that even now felt like he’d been splashed with holy water.

Deep in his hard-won soul, Spike knew this creature was here for him. He’d cheated death once too often, it seemed, and now death had come to collect. Spike had no weapons but his natural vampiric ones. He allowed his face to morph and his fangs to drop. “Come and get me, then, you bastard,” he hissed. As the creature lunged at him again, Spike was wishing most fervently that it would be satisfied with him, that it would leave Xander alone. He couldn’t even spare a glance to make sure Xander was safely away, because now those talons were digging down his chest, each wound a line of fire.

Spike had no idea how to kill the thing. No idea, in fact, if the thing even could be killed. Perhaps it was some hellbeast, even more undead or immortal than he. He had to try, though, and he launched himself at it. He ducked its swinging claws and wrapped his arms around its skinny body. He was unsurprised to discover that it burned him every place it touched. But still he clutched at it and he sank his fangs into whatever bits of it he
could find, and he scrabbled at it with his own, completely inadequate claws.

It folded its long hands around his neck, and then he couldn’t breathe anymore. No worries, he could still fight. And he did. But now it was twisting at him, a horrible wrenching sensation as the tendons began to pop and snap, and his bones stretched and nearly screamed in dismay. He only had time to think, *Decapitation. Never died that way before*, when the grip around him suddenly released and he felt the monster jerk backwards.

He stood for a second, dizzy and breathless, trying to make sense of this, but what he saw then filled him with greater terror than had his own imminent demise. Xander was there, and he had a sodding sword in his hand, a short blade he must have had hidden inside his jacket. He was shouting and swinging the thing like Errol bloody Flynn. He had, in fact, apparently managed to hack of a good bit of the monster, because a large chunk of its flesh lay nearby in the dirt. The remaining bits didn’t seem to miss it too much, however, because the creature was still moving fast and deadly.

Before Spike himself could do anything, Xander swung again and the sword seemed to stick halfway through the
thing’s midsection. The monster let out an unholy roar and bashed its hand so hard into Xander’s head that Xander went flying a good ten feet. He landed face-down on the ground, slumped and unmoving. Spike could smell his blood.

As the creature was still slightly distracted, Spike darted forward again and grasped the hilt of the sword with both hands. He yanked it free, ignoring the fresh pain that blossomed as he moved. Then he thrust the sword at what passed for a neck on the monster, hoping decapitation was as fatal to it as to him.

It wasn’t. The head went flying but the rest of the body fought on, swiping blindly at him, opening up new injuries on his bicep and torso. Spike thrust again, this time into the center of its body. As he tried to work the blade lengthwise up its body, it clutched at him, and once again squeezed its hands around his neck.

His already-damaged ligaments began to give. But with one final, desperate movement, Spike yanked the sword upward. The beast’s body fell into two pieces and then, as Spike staggered back, disintegrated before his eyes.

Spike collapsed to his knees, gasping and wheezing. He wanted to curl up into his pain and perhaps pass out. But
there might be more of these things, and there was Xander. Hurt. Maybe worse.

Spike staggered to his lover’s prone body. Blood oozed thickly from Xander’s head and ears and Spike howled. His heart was still beating, shallow and weak, but still beating. No longer feeling his own pain at all, Spike scooped Xander into his arms and ran.

Afterward, he could never say quite how he got to hospital. In his weakened state he couldn’t possibly have managed to carry Xander up the steep sides of the crater, and he couldn’t imagine how he managed to steer the Imperial the several miles to the hospital in Goleta, the next town over. He hadn’t even consciously known where the hospital was in Goleta. But somehow he did those things, and a crew rushed out when the big car came to a crooked halt in front of the emergency room entrance.

~*~*~*~*~

What Spike knew next was white. White ceiling, white walls, white sheets. His eyes focused a bit better and saw three humans in blue scrubs, all gaping at him in astonishment. “Wha—“ he tried to say.
A big, beefy hand landed on his bare shoulder. It was cold. “You’re in the hospital. You’ll be okay.”

Spike blinked and rolled his head to the side. An angel, he thought. No, no, Angel, hulking and frowning down at him.

“Wha—“ he tried again, but Angel shook his head.

“Feed first,” Angel said. And Spike watched in mute astonishment as Angel bit into his own wrist and held that wrist to Spike’s mouth.

He hadn’t had sire’s blood in...a very long time. It was rich and wonderful and intoxicating, and he could feel it seeping into his body, mending him as he swallowed. It took some effort for Angel to pull his arm away. “Enough,” he said, but his voice was gentle.

Somebody made the head of the bed lift a bit, and one of the humans handed something to Angel, and then Spike was drinking again. Human blood this time, and from a straw stuck into a plastic bag. He drank a lot.

When his stomach was as full as it could be, he tried again to speak. “Xan—“ was as much as he managed this time. But perhaps the blood had been drugged, because his mouth fell slack and then his body seemed to drop away from him as his world plunged into blackness.
When he awoke again he felt nearly himself. Angel was still there, slumped in an uncomfortable-looking chair, asleep. He looked pretty corpse-like himself. But he woke, too, when Spike stirred, and he stood and stretched and walked over. “How’re you feeling?” he asked.

Spike didn’t bother to answer. “Xander?” he asked pleadingly.

Angel patted him awkwardly. “He’s here. He’s alive.”

“Oh, thank gods,” Spike breathed and fell back against his pillow.

Angel looked worried. “He took a pretty bad hit to the head, Spike. They’re not sure... well, he’s still recovering.”

“I need to see him!” Spike said urgently.

“I don’t think— You were practically dust, Spike. You should wait until—“

“No! I’ve waited long enough!” Spike swung his legs over the side of the bed and only needed one hand to steady
himself as he stood. He might have marched out into the hall just as he was, but Angel cleared his throat and gestured, and Spike realized he wasn’t wearing so much as a hospital johnny.

“We didn’t want fabric sticking to the wounds when they closed,” Angel explained. “They were sort of, um, gaping.”

Spike glanced down at himself. The slash marks looked red and raw, and several places were blistered and charred, but the skin was mostly whole again. Sire’s blood was a wonder. “My kit?” he demanded.

Angel shook his head and pointed at another chair. His Docs were there, and a clean pair of jeans and tee, neatly folded. His duster was draped over the back of the chair.

“They had to cut off what was left of your clothes,” Angel explained. “So I brought new.”

“Ta.” Spike hastily pulled on the trousers and then yanked the shirt over his head. He stuffed his feet into the boots and shrugged on his duster. “Where is he?”

Angel sighed, but strode toward the door. “Follow me.”

As they walked down the corridor, ignoring the stares, Spike asked, “How did you get here?”
“They were kinda freaked out when they realized they had a vampire in the ER. But one of the nurses is a fan, and she got them to call me. It’s a good thing, too. They didn’t have a clue what to do with you.”

“You gave me your blood!”

“Yeah. Don’t expect me to make a habit of it.”

They turned a corner and entered through a set of double doors that read, Neurology. The nurse at the desk just inside startled when she saw them and looked like she might try to stop them, but then she shrank back instead. They walked briskly past an astounded-looking doctor as well, and then Angel opened a door and ushered Spike in. “I’ll, uh, wait out here,” Angel said.

Xander was in bed, his head swathed in white. He looked pale against the sheets but he turned his head to see Spike when he came in. “Spike!” he exclaimed. His voice was weak.

Spike hurried to his side and reached a hand out. But Xander looked so delicate that he was afraid to touch him, and he let his hand fall. “Xander,” he said. “Jesus, Xander, what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking you were gonna end up really dusty if I just stood there.”
“You were nearly killed.”

Xander shrugged, a slightly elaborate and painful-looking process. “It’s not the first time.”

“You shouldn’t have—it was after me, Xander.”

Xander scowled. “So, what? Weak human here, I’m supposed to just stand by and let my…my friend get killed?”

Spike felt a small rush of pleasure when Xander called him his friend. It wasn’t what he’d hoped for, but it was enough. He’d settle for that. What he said was, “You’re not weak, and you saved my worthless hide. I just…I couldn’t go on if you’d died because of me.”

Xander’s glare softened. “Well, I didn’t. Just another concussion. Maybe this one will knock some sense into me.”

Spike smiled. “Would have to be a pretty hard knock for that.”

“Spike, look—”

“No. I’ve been trying to talk to you for so bloody long. Please, Xan, please just listen, before something else nasty happens and it’s too late. Please.”
Xander regarded him for a moment. “Okay.”

Relief washed through Spike like a tidal wave. “You said—When you wrote me that note, back in London, you said I should write love poems for someone I deserve.”

Xander looked uncomfortable. “Yeah, about that note—“

“Wait! You’re listening now, remember? You can talk all you want later.”

Xander shut his mouth and nodded.

“Well, I did. I did what you said. Wrote a bloody poem.” Spike pulled a piece of paper out of the pocket of his duster and, as Xander watched, he sank to his knees beside the bed and began to read.

Your loss was like an amputation
Worse than any conflagration
It might come to you as revelation
But all I’ve had is masturbation
I kneel today in adoration
And pray you’ll grant my restoration
Although I’m prone to transformation
My love for you has no expiration.
Spike looked up at him and scratched his head. “The meter’s off on that last bit,” he said doubtfully.

Xander gaped at him, openmouthed. “That’s...that’s the most awful poem I’ve ever heard,” he finally managed.

Spike wanted to curl up and die. Again. He dropped the paper on the ugly floor, stood, and started to leave. Forever, this time.

“Wait!”

Not daring to hope, and without turning back, he paused by the door.

“That’s the most awful poem I’ve ever heard. And what I want right now more than anything else in the world is to hear it recited every single day for the rest of my life.”

Spike spun around to find a single brown eye sparkling at him, filled with joy and, he was fairly certain, love. He hurried back to the bed and carefully drew Xander into an embrace that had his boy—his man—laughing and puffing breathlessly at the same time.

“Won’t let you go,” Spike declared into warm, sweet-smelling skin. “I’ll write you crap poetry forever and I’ll never let you go again.”
Xander squeezed him back. “Oh, there might still be some going. But I promise, from now on, you’ll be my American Express Card vamp. I won’t ever leave home without you.”

The End