

Challenge response: [Estepheia](#)'s challenge on nummytreats: Spike and Xander are handcuffed (or chained) together for three days. Set during S7.

Rating: NC-17. Bad language is a definite. Oh yeah, plus the smuttiest smut I've ever written - *shrugs* - it had to happen sometime.

Spoilers: nothing too major, set after Lies My Parents Told Me, mini spoilers for that episode. (" " = quotes used)

Disclaimer: all characters belong to Joss. No money is being made, yadda yadda.

Author's notes: a little humour, a smidge of angst, a little smut. And a whole lot of this fic came from me thinking - "How do I get them naked?" and "I can't possibly cut up the coat." Also - I mention today how much I miss snarky Spike??

Also: BIG, big thanks to Becky, Edibbea, Emmy and Karen. I couldn't have done it without you guys :D

Ooh lookie: this fic won the best slash fic in the 2nd round of the Sugar Awards!

Ooh lookie again: this fic won the library award for recommended fic in the 5th round of the Shadows and Dust Awards.

Ooh lookie yet again: this fic won the Best Slash Drama award in the 7th round of the Shades of Grey awards.

Ooh lookie yet again: This fic won 2nd place in the Spike/Xander category in the 3rd round of the Believe Awards.

And again: this fic came runner up in the Perspective Guy

category in the Spring/Summer 2005 round of the White Knight Awards.

Joined at the Hip

by

Nomelon

Part One

Xander: I mention today how much I don't like you?

Spike: You mighta let it slip in... once or twice.

(Mutual smile)

~ Spiral

Day One.

'You gotta be kidding me. Handcuffs?'

Xander held up his right hand, letting the solid looking silver chain rattle a little, its links glinting ominously under the harsh overhead lighting. 'Is this guy for real?' he asked, in what would appear to any casual, outside observer to be an amused tone.

'Looks like,' replied Spike in much the same tone, staring into the barrel of a choppy, dangerous little handgun at such close range that his eyes crossed. Spike was crouched on the balls of his feet, unresisting, as the handcuffs were passed behind an ancient, rusted pipe set into the bare brick wall beside where they sat, before he, too, was shackled at the wrist into the self-same pair of handcuffs.

'Uh, excuse me?' said the large figure on the other end of the handgun. 'Man with the gun talking here?'

They looked up at him. Rather calmly.

'Thank you for your attention. Now I told you already - if you two fucks know what's good for you, then shut. The hell. Up!'

Xander relaxed back into the corner provided by the brick wall and a softly humming drinks machine, watching calmly as he was handcuffed to the recently re-souled vampire. When the metal bracelet had been snapped into place, he shot Spike a look that read: "So -- I'm thinkin' we count to three, you break us out of these babies and we go kick a little convenience store robbing ass. Whadda ya say?"

Spike nodded once, shifted his weight almost imperceptibly at the prospect of a fight, and shot back a look that read: "'xactly what I was thinkin', mate."

As the aforementioned convenience store robber walked away from them up the short but sweet cereal, cookies and other miscellaneous baked goods aisle, Xander held out his arm to give Spike as much slack as he could, and began to silently count.

One.

From the front of the store loud yelling directed at the cowering cashier could be heard, only slightly muffled through the thick, black ski mask that the robber wore. Apparently he needed the register opened -- 'Like *NOW*, motherfuck!' -- or else there would be trouble. Xander couldn't help but wonder if a simple, polite and to the point "please" wouldn't have gone much further in helping with moving things along.

Two.

The terrified cashier had managed to stop his whimpering long enough to open the register with shaking hands, and was obediently stuffing handfuls of cash into a small, green bag.

Spike wrapped his hand around Xander's wrist and lifted his chin to indicate that he was going to pull. Xander bent his knees, pressing his heels into the cracked linoleum and wrapped his free hand under the raised bottom of the drinks machine to anchor himself.

Three...

'You done? 'bout fuckin' time. Gimme the bag, motherfucker. Give!'

Jerkily, the cashier tossed the bag at the robber, clearly not wanting to come into physical contact with him. The robber deftly caught the bag without taking his eyes from the cashier, but growled audibly when a few loose bills fluttered merrily from the bag to land at his feet.

And Spike pulled.

The ancient pipe on the wall shuddered and complained as the chain was pulled taut behind it, but the cuffs remained stubbornly in one piece. Xander's wince at impending pain and possible flying shards of metal turned into a questioning little frown as nothing happened. Nothing at all. So Spike joined in with the frowning, and pulled a little bit harder. Still, nothing happened. He gritted his teeth and pulled with all of his not inconsiderable might, but still there was nothing. No

bending of metal, no twisting of strained links in the chain that joined them, not even the tiniest bit of give. Nothing. Spike was, in a word, peeved.

'Spike!'

A blond head lifted and looked to where Xander was pointing with his free hand.

The robber was bent over; scrabbling on the floor to pick up the few errant bills that had escaped the bag. Seeing their chance, the handcuffed pair jumped to their feet, yanking the weakened pipe from the wall in the process, dashed up the aisle and, as one, hit the robber on the back with their fists. When he straightened against the pain with a roar, they quickly looped the handcuffs over his head and pulled him backwards by the throat, holding his surprisingly strong, struggling body between them. Through the jagged holes cut in the mask, Xander saw a pair of very furious, very yellow, very non-human eyes glaring out at him.

'Demon!' he gasped to Spike in warning, gritting his teeth against the struggles of the body they held between them.

'Yeah?' Spike asked, almost hopefully, and yanked the ski mask off the robber's head. They were greeted with the

sight of greenish yellow skin, a distinct lack of any nose, and some very sharp teeth. 'Lepgnam demon,' said Spike with disgust, awkwardly manhandling the demon into his grasp nearly breaking Xander's arm off at the elbow in the process, and set about swiftly snapping the creature's neck.

'Those blokes are worse than magpies,' Spike said as the lifeless body slid to their feet. 'Worse than bloody Ferengi. Always on the look-out for new treasures or the next big haul. Using whatever means they have at their disposal to get the job done, too - violence, magic, guns, strong language. Would've thought knocking over a corner shop was a little beneath them, though.'

Xander looked sideways at him. 'Did you just make a Star Trek analogy?'

Spike's left eye twitched. 'Did you just use a word with more than three syllables?'

Xander waited patiently, and was rewarded when Spike caved.

'I worked my way through your box-set collection for nerds, didn't I?' he finally admitted, briefly closing his eyes at the admission. 'Wasn't much else to do around your place while you were at work.'

'I see,' said Xander simply, and turned his attention back to their present demon situation, filing away this new knowledge for future reference. 'Well, I guess at least this makes things a little simpler.'

'How exactly do you figure that one?'

'Well, y'know, no cops, no trial, just an evil demon and hey presto the robbery is foiled.'

'Yeah?' asked Spike, his voice dripping with contempt. 'And what about these?'

Xander felt his arm yanked into the air. 'Oh, yeah, I forgot. We'll just have to go get bolt cutters or a saw or something.'

'Bolt cutters, or a saw or something?' repeated Spike slowly.

'Well... yeah.'

'After I couldn't break them?'

'So maybe it's just really strong metal.'

Spike raised a haughty eyebrow. 'Don't give me that. I've broken out of a set or two of manacles in my time, and these,' he rattled the cuffs, 'are nothing special.'

'You didn't manage to break out of the ones in Buffy's basement,' Xander reminded him. Unspoken things floated in the air between them.

'Well, no,' Spike said, a little uncomfortably. 'I made sure of that. They were picked special, to hold a vampire in place. But like I said, these,' another rattle, 'are nothing special. I should be able to break out of these no problem.'

'When did you break--' Xander raised his free hand as though to halt his errant thoughts. 'Never mind, I don't even want to know. You think that they're demony handcuffs?'

Spike shrugged. 'Dunno, I'm not exactly chief metallurgist to the demon community, but maybe we should get 'em checked out.'

Xander nodded. 'The sooner the better. This isn't exactly how I planned to spend my weekend.'

'No,' Spike countered smugly, glancing in the general direction of Xander's abandoned shopping basket, sitting patiently two aisles away, full to overflowing with beer and other, much more intoxicating types of alcoholic beverages. 'You were just going to hide away in your flat, get good and sozzled, and not surface 'til Monday.'

'So what? Like you've never got drunk when the going gets tough,' Xander snorted.

'Don't look at me, *mate*. I only came in for a pack of smokes.'

Reaching an impasse, they stood, glaring at one another.

'Bolt cutters,' Xander said with a firm nod, 'then if that doesn't work, we pay a visit to Willow.'

'You betcha.'

They stood there, the chain joining them momentarily forgotten, as the cashier appeared, sidling up to stand beside them, looking more than just a little wobbly. His arrival brought them back to the present, and they looked down once again at the dead body at their feet. Noting that their attacker was, in fact, a demon, the cashier swayed alarmingly, grabbing on to Xander's sleeve to keep himself upright. Then, seeing that the demon was also a very, very dead demon, the cashier bravely spat on him in disgust and snatched back the green bag full of money.

'I no motherfucker,' he said bitterly. 'No sir. Not motherfucker, sir.'

Spike and Xander glanced at the cuffs connecting them, then at each other, and decided that they shared his sentiment completely.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Later...

'A hold up? Xander, somebody had a gun pointed at your *head*?' Willow's face was a picture of sympathetic, open-mouthed horror.

'Well, yeah,' Xander said, scratching his head a little uncomfortably, fitting in a little mutual glare and a shoulder jostle with Spike when the vampire got too close to his personal space for his liking.

'Oh my god! You must have been so scared.'

'Not really. It, uh, didn't really occur to me to be scared,' he said, really considering it for the first time. 'It was just a gun, not a huge slavering beast, or someone trying to bleed me to death to open the mouth of hell, or-or someone wanting to split me in two for their amusement. Just a gun. I sorta figured we could take him.' He shrugged, evoking another scowl from Spike

when the movement tugged at the vampire's arm.
'Besides,' Xander said between gritted teeth, glaring at his unwelcome, vampire-sized bracelet attachment, 'bullets don't kill vampires, so I just thought I'd hide behind Fangless here.'

'Not so fangless anymore, *boy*,' Spike said, showing a hint of sharp, white teeth. 'And that's something you'd best keep in mind.'

'Guys?' Willow said, going largely unnoticed.

'I'm shaking in my boots, *Soulboy*,' Xander spat back, giving an impressive snarly display of his own teeth.

'Uh, guys?'

'I could murder someone with a soul,' Spike said defiantly, squaring off. 'Just 'cause I haven't up 'til now doesn't mean I can't try it on for size. All I need is the right victim.'

'GUYS!' They both jumped, and looked to where Willow stood behind the table, her hands slapped out on its surface. 'When you've quite finished.'

Mumbles of 'Sorry, Wills,' and 'Yeah. Sorry, Red,' could be heard as, properly reprimanded, they both stared at the floor. Feet were shuffled.

'That's better,' she said, sitting down again. 'Now, as I was saying, there's a spell on the cuffs all right. Lepgnam demons can sense other demon types, and Spike being a vampire, it fits that he would have used a restraining spell on you.'

'Okay, so that explains using the super-cuffs on Spike. But why me?' asked Xander.

'I don't know,' Willow shrugged. 'You were in the wrong place at the wrong time?'

'Story of my life,' grumbled Xander.

'Yeah, so, magic handcuffs,' Willow continued. 'They were probably used as the catalyst for the demon's magic. It's a little complicated, but basically Lepgnams can use the power inherent in metal and precious stones. They're connected with it. Maybe that's why they're always on the look out for jewels and stuff to steal.'

'That, or they're just greedy bastards,' interjected Spike.

'Could be,' agreed Willow with a peaceable little nod, 'but in the meantime, like I said, I can't do anything about it. You're just going to have to suffer for a few days.'

'Days? How many days?' Xander said with a worried expression. This was starting to get serious. As planned,

they had stopped off at Xander's apartment on the way there to raid his toolbox, and tried both bolt cutters and a saw on the cuffs, but to no avail. The metal remained unmarked, unbent, and in one irritatingly solid piece. Spike had suggested using a sledgehammer, but Xander had swiftly vetoed this, leaving them with no option but to swallow their pride, and go to Willow for help. And now this was the best she could do for them?

'Far as I can tell?' Willow drew her finger down the centre of the page in front of her until she found what she was looking for. 'Three days.' She tapped her finger on the text thoughtfully. 'Give or take. That's usually how long a Lepgnam demon's spell lasts for in the event of their death. If you hadn't killed him, he probably would have released you when he was done with robbing the store.' She looked up and her eyes widened at the sight of two angry faces staring fiercely at her. 'Or not!' she added quickly. 'He could just as easily have killed you. I mean we'll just never know now.' She attempted a cheery smile, but it was precarious at best. 'Don't sweat it, guys. This'll be over before you know it.'

'Like hell it will,' said Spike. 'Can't you just do some counter-mojo? You're back to being the Good Witch of the West Coast these days, right? So just call up a favour or something and get us out of this.'

'I-I can't.'

'Why not?' Spike growled.

'Well, it's-it's not exactly an emergency, and I don't really have any more favours to call in. In fact, I'm owing, not owed. Osiris for one will probably never forgive me.' She shrugged lightly, as though it was no big deal, but her eyes told a different story. 'No more magic for non-essential things, you know that. I really can't fix it, I'm sorry.'

'What the bloody hell do you mean you can't fix it?'

Willow took a calming little breath and tried to explain herself for the third time. 'I told you. I don't know what kind of spell the demon used. I wouldn't even know where to start. On top of that, it's temporary magic, and because it's temporary, it's very powerful. The power behind it doesn't have to last so it kind of burns itself out, but in the meantime is almost impossible to break. If the cuffs were supposed to bind you together, like, *forever*,' Xander and Spike shuddered collectively at the very thought, 'then it would a much simpler deal for me to break the spell, but as it is...'

Xander's shoulders slumped as her words finally sank in. 'We're stuck together.'

'Oh, *bloody hell*,' said Spike, and attempted to run his hand over his face in disgust. Of course, he only managed to almost dislocate Xander's shoulder and hit himself in the face with the human's dangling hand.

'Hey!' cried Xander in pain as he tried to snatch his arm back. 'Hey, vampire with the super-strength! Watch who you're yanking around. I'm delicate goods over here.'

'Delicate, schm delicate,' snapped Spike. 'You're nothing but a thorn in my side.'

'I could be the stake in your chest, if you'd like. I could deal with being handcuffed to a pile of dust for the next three days and not have to look at your face.'

'Feeling's mutual. How about if I just drain you dry? Huh? I could cart a dead body around for three days.' Spike narrowed his eyes menacingly. 'Wouldn't be the first time.'

'I'd like to see you try.'

'It can be arranged,' Spike said, nose to nose with Xander at this point. 'We could always just rip your arm out of the socket. That would solve our little handcuff problem for a start.'

They stood, chests puffed out, fists clenched, glaring at one another, until Willow marched around to the other side of the table, laid a hand on each of their chests and tried to physically push them apart.

They refused to budge.

'Cut it out,' she said, and pushed again. 'Or do I need to use the separate spell on you again?' Hoping that they wouldn't call her on her threat to use a "non-essential" spell on them, she was relieved when they relented and backed up a little. 'I don't want to rain on your pity parade, but we do have much bigger fish to fry. Like The First? You both remember The First? How about the impending doom of this whole "end of the world" deal?'

The two men shifted their gaze, starting to look a little like scolded school children, which Willow thought was pretty marvellous, because that was the exactly the effect she was going for.

'Yeah. That deal. The one that makes you two nothing more than a pair of very little fish. Plus the fact that we have a house full of very scared, very tired potentials who will be exceedingly pissed at you if you wake them up by arguing, not to mention what Buffy would have to say.'

'Whatever it was, it'd probably sound very much like a long, and rather dull speech,' muttered Spike.

Willow chose to ignore this. 'Now Xander,' she said, turning her full attention to her friend, 'you should just be happy that you didn't get chained to Spike while he was still under The First's control, and Spike?'

'Yeah?'

'You should be happy that Xander doesn't still want to stake you on sight.'

They both looked at the ceiling. Then the floor. And shuffled their feet a little more.

'All right. Now are we done here? Because to say that I'm pooped would be a major understatement, and unless there's anything else, I thought I might go to bed now.'

The angle of Willow's chin indicated very clearly to both of them that she didn't expect anything less than an answer in the affirmative. 'Great!' she said cheerily.

'Don't forget to lock the door when you leave.' And with that, she closed the reference book she had been using, tucked it securely under her arm and disappeared out of the room, the fading sound of her footsteps leading up and away from them as she headed towards her

bedroom, the soft sound of Kennedy's welcoming voice audible only to Spike's discerning ear.

'Well, that's that then. We're completely bugged. Again.'

'I guess,' said Xander dejectedly.

'What now?'

'Now?' Xander sighed heavily. 'Come on, Spike, we need to go.'

'I don't need to go anywhere.' Spike dug his heels in, reminding Xander very much of a stubborn, if rather blond, mule.

'Yes, we really do,' Xander said, changing tack and moving around behind the vampire to try pushing him.

'No, we don't.'

'Yes, we *do*.' Xander put his shoulder against Spike's back and pushed, to no avail, his feet skidding uselessly over the linoleum tiles of the kitchen floor.

'No we *don't*.'

He gave up trying to push the immovable vampire statue across the floor. 'Yes we do, because I--' Xander gritted his teeth and scowled.

'Because why?' asked Spike, quirking an eyebrow.

'Just because.'

Spike folded his arms across his chest. 'Why?' he asked, eking the word out so he could inject the maximum dose of condescending smugness into it.

Xander closed his eyes momentarily and took a deep, cleansing breath, then leant in and whispered in the vampire's ear.

Spike's eyes widened in alarm. 'Noyoudon't.'

'Yes I do.'

'No, you bloody well *don't!*'

'Yes, I bloody well do.'

Spike's mouth was an open 'O' of horror. 'But-but-but you can't!'

'I can and I will.'

'But I haven't had to do... to see that in over a century.'
He refolded his arms firmly across his chest. 'You'll just have to hold it.'

'For three *days*?' Xander spluttered. 'I don't think so.'
Xander set off again, letting them out the back door and dutifully locking it behind them, and this time a shell-shocked Spike let himself be led along behind.

'What are you doing?'

'I thought I might find a nice secluded bush that I could hide behind, unless, of course, you'd like to accompany me into a brightly lit bathroom and watch me relieving myself?'

'Right then,' Spike said purposefully, taking the initiative and striding across the Summers' lawn and around to the side of the house. 'There's a nice bush just around the corner that's good and leafy. Great for hiding beh-- I mean, no one should see you there. Least of all me.'

Just under two minutes later, Spike strode back across the lawn, dragging an irate, dark-haired figure behind him. The figure was obviously preoccupied with hastily trying to refasten his pants.

'Stop pulling, moron!'

Spike came to an exasperated halt, and spun around to face Xander with a growl. 'Sod this. Let's just go home.'

'I couldn't agree more,' Xander snapped, angrily fastening the last button of his fly with a flourish.

They each set off for home, only to find they were headed in different directions, their arms stretched out between them and then being yanked back into each other's personal space.

'Where the hell are you going?' they cried simultaneously.

'Home!' came the indignant answer.

'But home's that--' Xander pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. He trailed off as Spike's expression shifted and he looked away, pretending to squint at something in the distance. Xander realised that the vampire had been heading back towards Buffy's house.

'Yeah,' Spike sniffed nonchalantly. 'Right. 'course. Habit. I'm just everyone's favourite basement mascot.'

'Aw, poor baby,' Xander said sarcastically, but felt his usual honed anger towards the vampire dull just a little. With a reluctant raise of his chin in the general direction of his apartment, they set off towards it, walking side by

side, each step leading them further away from Buffy's basement and closer towards his apartment.

'Listen,' Xander said after a few moments of grudging silence, 'if it makes you feel any better, I can tie you up and you can sleep in the chair again. It'll be like old times.'

'Yeah?' said Spike, his face a harsh, pale glare in the overhead buzz of street lighting. 'And how're you planning on doing that exactly?'

'What do you--?'

A now familiar, dully glinting, solid looking chain rattled slightly between them.

'Oh.'

'Proverbial penny dropped, has it?' Spike smirked, striding more purposefully towards Xander's home. 'I get the right side of the bed, mate, and unless you've got any p.j.s that don't have cartoon characters on 'em, I'm sleeping in the buff.'

Xander was too horrified to speak.

~*~*~*~*~

Night one.

'Here. Black shorts. Black t-shirt. Ooh, look, more black t-shirts. And here's some sweatpants if you want them. Good, big, sturdy sweatpants that'll keep you all nice and covered up. And here--' Xander finally straightened up from the drawer he was going through and held up yet another garment in triumph, '-- here is another t-shirt for you, just in case you feel like wearing more than one. Y'know, just in case.'

The first thing he saw was the huge pile of black clothing that had collided with Spike, bounced off him, and was now sitting in disarray in a heap beside a pair of ancient, battered boots, worn proudly on ancient vampire feet; and the second thing he noticed was that the ancient vampire attached to the feet in question, was chuckling at him.

'What?'

Spike only laughed harder.

'*What?*'

'Think about it, Brainiac. How're you planning to get changed?'

'Well I... same way I always do. I put my pants on one leg at a time, same as the next guy.'

'Trousers, yeah, no problem, but how're you planning to get me to wear a t-shirt?'

'You're not sleeping naked!'

'Okay,' Spike repeated slowly, 'I'm not sleeping naked. But how are we supposed to put on t-shirts? Think about it.'

'Oh.' Xander felt a little deflated. 'Right. Of course. Looks like we're sleeping in our clothes for three days then.'

'And the whelp finally catches on.' Spike rolled his eyes. 'S'alright for you. You don't have a vampire's sense of smell,' he grumbled, then made a show of sniffing the air. 'In fact, you don't exactly smell fresh as a daisy now. I'll be choking for air by day three.'

'I am so fresh as a daisy!' Xander retorted before he could stop himself. Realising what he'd just said, he clenched his teeth and counted to ten before speaking again. 'What I *meant* was: I don't smell, and you don't have to breathe, so I don't foresee a problem.'

Spike rolled his eyes again, making Xander want to poke his fingers in them.

'Now if you're quite finished, I'd like to get some shut-eye.'

'Rightio.' Spike walked to the window, dragging Xander with him, and made sure that the curtains were securely drawn, insuring that no stray ribbons of sunlight would be able to reach him come daybreak. When he was happy with the alignment of the curtains, he toed off his boots and made a beeline for the bed, kicking the pile of black clothes out of his way in the process. 'I get the right side.'

'Sure. Of course. Whatever you say.'

Xander was dragged up onto the bed, and watched with jealous annoyance, as Spike seemed to simply *melt* into the pillows, looking instantly asleep. Actually, he looked instantly dead, but Xander had seen the vampire sleeping before and somehow the effect wasn't as unnerving as it once had been. Now he just looked quite peaceful, in an irritatingly disagreeable, annoyingly blond sort of a way.

'Hit the light, mate,' Spike said without opening his eyes.

'Yes, master,' said Xander, reaching across the vampire's motionless body to turn off the bedside lamp. As the room was suddenly plunged into darkness, Xander flinched away at the sound of Spike inhaling deeply.

'Not bad so far,' a deep voice rumbled through the darkness as Xander lay back on the bed, stretching the chain of the handcuffs as far as it would go. 'Not a daisy by any means, but not too bad at all.'

'Shut up, Spike'

'Haven't we played this record before? Isn't this the part where I ask you if you care about me?'

'Shut up, Spike.'

'Xaaannder.'

'Shut *up*.'

'How about if you just call me "master" again?'

'Shut *up*!'

Unseen in the inky blackness, Spike grinned, and drifted off to sleep.

~*~*~*~*~

How had he ended up here? This place was all the way over on the other side of town, and how had he managed to break out of the handcuffs? Unless it was another

spell. Unless something else had happened that he couldn't remember. What if he had hurt someone else?

Oh god. What if he'd killed someone else?

Xander. What if he had done something to Xander? He couldn't remember hurting him. Couldn't remember getting free, but his memory was a sketchy, unreliable thing at best, full of Swiss cheese holes these days. What if they'd all been fooled? It wouldn't be the first time. What if he wasn't free of The First like they thought? He'd trusted them. Trusted their knowledge. Trusted Buffy's judgement, trusted the Watcher's stupid little stone that had burrowed right into his brain -- he was so tired of things crawling around inside his skull -- and yet now he was here, and he didn't know why.

Oh God. What if he'd killed someone else?

Someone like the man he was holding in his fists right now. The man who's face was puffy and broken and bleeding because Spike had made it so. It had only taken a touch, really, only the lightest of caresses. It was almost certain that the man didn't deserve this treatment. He was just a child. Just a child like they all were - lost in the rain, scared and alone. Spike was the only adult here. The

only one with the experience to know better. The only one who had seen the other side and lived to tell the tale.

Well, perhaps not the only one, but he was one of the few. One of the chosen few.

And he was so sorry. It wasn't his fault, but damn it all, he was sorry anyway.

#Early one morning, just as the sun was rising, I heard a young maid sing in the valley below.

"Oh-- #

"That's a nice little song you got there."

The song stopped as he turned to face the music.

"Thanks, doc. You cured me after all. I got my own free will, now. I'm not under The First's or anyone else's influences now. I just wanted you to know that..."

The vampire. The demon. The monster. It was here. It was him.

"... before I kill you."

'Spike! No, don't do it!'

With the beaten, defeated man hanging from his fists, he paused, looking around at the intruding voice, his eyes watering at the sight of the hundreds of crosses decorating the walls.

'Buffy?'

Strange how her name sounded different through an altered mouth, elongated and warped and slightly gassy as it travelled through his fangs. It had been a while since he had shown his true face. The demon still buzzed and strained inside his head, but it was William who was in control here. It was William who set the rules. William, dear, sweet, pathetic William, who had fallen into the trap of familiarity and complacency, and was it really his fault that he had grown used to this over the years?

'Spike. Let him go. It's over now.'

'It's not over,' he insisted. 'I was only trying to teach him a lesson.'

'It's over,' she repeated, and the finality in her words was like a heartbreak to him.

From nowhere, a stake appeared in her hand, shimmering and golden and just and righteous and -- nothing but a shard of wood -- with tears in her eyes, Buffy walked slowly towards him. 'I knew it. You are nothing. You're disgusting. You're a thing. A monster.' The tears were running freely down her cheeks now as she advanced on him. 'I hate you. I can't believe I ever let you anywhere near me. Can't believe I trusted you.'

'Where's all this coming from, luv? I thought we were long past the "Spike, you're a pig" stage. Besides, it's all just sticks and stones.'

'Let him go, Spike. Just let him go.' Her voice was hard, but full of sorrow. That much was fitting. After all she was the Slayer, and this her lot in life.

'Fine,' he answered churlishly, letting go of Principal Wood, not even bothering to watch as the man crumpled to the floor. Instead he watched Buffy's eyes track her boss' path as he dropped, hit the floor, and then there was a loud silence.

'How could you?' she whispered, her knuckles clenched white on the stake she was holding.

And how long had it been since she held a stake and it had actually frightened him? Since it had been any more than a weapon they shared in battle, fighting side by side, or worse... as foreplay? Now there was nothing. Just a little girl with a pointy stick, crying empty tears for the demon who had dared to love her. Just the same game that they'd been playing for months, years, lifetimes, dancing around each other.

Except it wasn't.

He was different now, couldn't she see that? All the father's sins were forgiven in a microsecond whenever the angel, whenever the soul, came back, but William? Spike? Oh no, not Spike. Different vampire, different hair colour, different set of rules applied. He loved her as a demon, willingly changed his unlife for her in ways she would never be able to comprehend, and yet this was all he got - tears and empty threats, and somehow, somewhere along the line, this had stopped being enough.

Was that such a surprise?

'How could I what?' He took an exasperated step towards

her, pausing when she drew herself up to her full height and glared sharply at him, stake held high, ready to strike. 'Look, Buffy, he brought me here. That little scheme he must have cooked up with Giles to get me out of the picture once and for all? Look at this place - the crosses? He-he even played my song, brought out the demon so he could feel all manly and justified when he beat on me.'

Her gaze darted around the room, taking in the crosses on the walls, the computer set up in the corner and the bruises adorning his face. Then she looked back to the mangled body on the floor and the bloodstains around Spike's mouth.

'Not good enough.'

'Not good enough!' He threw his hands into the air. 'Well what exactly would you have me do? Just let him stake me so that he'd feel better about his mum? Can I just say how much I don't like that plan?'

'You didn't have to kill him.'

It left his body in a cold rush -- the anger, the indignity at how unfair this all was, abandoned him, until all that was

left was an ancient man, standing in a garage in the suburbs, being watched by a sad, young girl with a heavy burden.

And a dead body in the corner.

'Kill...? I didn't kill him. Just taught him a lesson. He's still...'

He spun around to look at Principal Wood -- Wood. The man's name is Robin Wood. You killed his mother. You ruined his life before it had even truly begun, and now you've gone and taken care of the rest of the family line. Well done, mate, you've outdone yourself -- his body lying at an unnatural angle on the floor. Head tilted back. Eyes open and unseeing.

Spike fell to his knees, heedless of the pain that lanced up through his thighs when he hit the naked concrete floor.

'But-but I didn't mean to.'

'But you did,' her voice spoke from behind him.

'No,' he whispered.

'I thought they were wrong, Spike. I thought you were a warrior for good now. A champion. Looks like they were right. I should have killed you myself. A long time ago.'

Behind him, unseen, a stake was raised and he felt it in the air above him. Strong, righteous, deserved, and just full to bursting with untapped potential energy. Claspng his hands together in his lap, he lowered his head in a parody of prayer.

'It's all I deserve,' he agreed with a miserable nod.

'Sorry, William,' her voice whispered.

'S'alright, pet. Just doing your job, I know.'

There was a hand on his shoulder, shaking him.

Spike, you need to wake up.

'Goodbye,' said Buffy.

'Bye,' he said simply, sadly. Squeezing his eyes shut against the tears that threatened to fall. This wasn't how the Big Bad was supposed to go out, there was no honour here, no redemption, no fortune and glory - but it would do.

Spike, you moron! Wake up!

'What?'

Spike! Damn it. Wake UP!

Spike sat bolt upright in bed, dragging a disgruntled Xander with him. 'What? What?'

'Jesus, Spike, do you always make that much noise when you have a nightmare?'

'I was dreaming?'

'Yeah.' Some of the anger seemed to bleed out of Xander's voice. 'Sounded like a doozy.'

'I was dreaming.' Spike rubbed a hand over his face and swallowed a gasp, blinking rapidly as he looked around the room. *Xander's room. I was here the whole time. With Xander. Handcuffed. Safe. Everyone's safe.*

Slowly, he lay back down and forced himself not to shuffle closer to the patch of warmth that he lay just on the edge of. Beside him, Xander tried not to frown, tried not to care, fidgeting slightly as he tried to find the optimum position on the bed - comfortable, but as far from Spike as he could possibly get without either falling off the bed, or cutting off circulation to his hand.

'What does a bloodsucker dream about, anyway? Electric vampire sheep?'

'Lots of things,' Spike said cryptically, closing his eyes and turning his face toward the wall.

Part Two

Day Two.

Spike was grumpy. Spike was more than grumpy. In fact, Spike was halfway to brooding and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. The morning had been spent in stony silence, broken only by occasional grunts and muttered insults. There was nothing good on the telly - not that Xander would let him watch what he wanted in any case. The fridge was empty, there was no blood to be had, and he was out of smokes. Add to that the additional embarrassment factor of having had a nightmare while sleeping in the same bed as the Slayer's lowly sidekick and Spike's anguish was complete.

Oh yeah, and there was that other little detail. He was still joined at the hip to one Xander Harris.

One and the same Xander Harris who had woken up at some ungodly hour before noon, claimed human necessity and made Spike stand in the bathroom, arms stretched as far as humanly, and inhumanly, possible, while he relieved himself -- yet *again* -- and then didn't even have the common decency to open a vein when Spike pleaded vampire necessity. Or even, at the very least, let him have the remote control for a while. So here they sat, as far apart as the chain connecting them would allow, on opposite ends of the couch in Xander's tiny living room. Pretending to watch television, and sulking.

Silence, broken only by the sound of the television, had reigned supreme for over an hour when it finally became too much for Spike.

'What a bloody awful way to spend a perfectly good Saturday.'

'It could be worse,' Xander muttered darkly.

Spike looked up in disbelief. 'How? How could it possibly be worse?'

'No!'

Xander lunged towards him, and slapped his hand over the vampire's mouth, but it was too late - in the corner of

the room, the phone started to ring, its bleating tone a shade more shrill and ominous than usual. Xander only just managed to remove his hand before Spike bit him, fangs snapping uselessly in mid air. Xander then hid his face in his free hand and slowly shook his head. Biting back the urge to yell at Xander for having the [audacity](#) to touch him, smearing his blatant human scent all over his sensitive vampire mouth, right under his discerning vampire nose, instead a game-faced Spike only glared at the mortal, then glanced at the still ringing phone.

'What in the hell is wrong with you now?'

'You do remember that we live on the hellmouth, right?' Xander asked, without lifting his head.

'Do you always answer a question with a question?'

Xander growled. 'What I *mean* is that you can't say things like that in Sunnydale.'

Spike answered this with an eloquent 'Huh?'

'If someone tells you "things could be worse" you can pretty much take it as scripture that they mean it [hypothetically](#). You never, ever, actually *ask* someone how it can get any worse, because you can bet your bottom dollar that in this town, that's all it'll take.'

'All it'll take to what?' asked Spike.

'That's the fun part. We find that out when I answer the phone.'

'Oh,' Spike said, wearing a slightly worried frown. 'You just made that up, right?'

'Does the pope shit in the woods?'

'You could always just not answer it,' suggested Spike.

Xander gave him a look. Getting to his feet he tugged on the handcuffs to make Spike give him the slack he needed to reach for the phone.

'Hello? Buffy, hey.' Xander covered the receiver and mouthed, 'It's Buffy.' Spike rolled his eyes and yanked his hand back. Xander glared, hopping a few paces to keep his balance, but managed to keep his tone light. 'What's new with--? ... Demons, you say.' He glared daggers at Spike. 'You need us to help, you say. ... Uh huh. Do you really think that we'll be able to help? ... Willow told you about the cuffs, huh? ... Yeah, yeah, it's not really that funny. ... No, still not seeing the funny side. ... No, really still not. ... Oh, we're just sitting around chewing the fat, trying not to kill one another; you know how it goes. ... Yeah, yeah, sure thing, we'll be there as soon as we can.'

Spike elbowed him sharply in the ribs and gestured at the window.

'Sunset,' Xander nodded glumly, fighting the urge to rub at his bruised ribcage. 'We'll be there after sunset.'

~*~*~*~*~

The walk to Buffy's house (they walked because Xander refused to drive with Spike chained to his wrist, no matter how much the vampire said he would behave in the car) was spent in congested silence, with much stone kicking and "accidental" sharp tugs on the handcuffs every time a corner needed to be turned. They arrived at the Summers' residence shortly after nine, and stood in obdurate silence on the porch, waiting impatiently, until the door swung open, bathing them in a warm, welcoming light. An amused Dawn held the door for them, and they entered just in time to hear Buffy barking out the latest set of instructions to the gathered troops.

The potentials were assembled in the living room, along with the remainder of the Scooby gang. Several faces in the room looked up at their arrival, followed by a rousing chorus of girlish giggles that broke out at the sight of the handcuffs. Xander shrugged sheepishly, while Spike

shifted his weight restlessly, arching cheekbones clenched in silent, irked annoyance.

'Hey, Spike. Xander.' In the corner of the room sat Clem, the skin folds of his arm flopping back and forth merrily as he waved at them.

'Hey.' Xander raised a hand in greeting, unintentionally making Spike mimic the gesture.

'Handcuffs?' asked Clem.

'Handcuffs,' confirmed Xander.

'Magic?' asked Clem.

'Magic,' confirmed Spike.

'Bummer,' said Clem.

'You have no idea,' sighed Spike and Xander in unison.

'You're late,' admonished Buffy in lieu of welcome, stepping around them to retrieve her favourite axe from where it was propped against the wall.

'Sorry,' said Xander automatically.

'Aren't those the clothes you were wearing yesterday?' she asked, stepping back around them on her way across the crowded room.

Spike's gaze flitted around the room, his mouth set in a grim, white line. He decided to sidestep the chit-chat and get right to the heart of the matter. 'Yeah, so what's the big emergency? Donut boy here wasn't too forthcoming with the info. The First put in an appearance, has it?'

'Nope,' said Willow, her arms full of magical supplies as she passed them on the way to the couch, where Kennedy took the supplies from her one at a time to load them into a battered leather satchel that Xander recognised as Willow's from their early high school years. 'Just a regular old demon that needs to be taken care of. Clem told us about it.'

'You grassing up the other demons now?' asked Spike. 'You do know they don't take too kindly to that, right?'

Clem shrugged. 'It's a Malodordom demon. Didn't think anyone would have an issue with bringing in the Slayer with one of those guys in town.'

'Oh great. Just what we need,' muttered Spike.

'A Melododowhat demon?' Xander asked, feeling out of the loop as usual, watching as Buffy slid into a light jacket and Kennedy stood, looping her arms through the straps on the fully loaded satchel.

'Malodordom demon, Xander,' said Anya helpfully, as she too stood, and readied herself for their patrol.

Behind them, Buffy was giving Clem strict instructions to watch over Dawn and the potentials, and not to let anyone stay up past midnight. And to lock all the doors and windows. And to make sure Dawn did her homework instead of watching TV. And not to invite anyone they didn't know into the house. And not to speak to anyone that they knew should be dead. And to keep an axe handy, just in case. And to help himself to anything in the fridge if he got hungry.

Xander, having been the only one close enough to hear what Spike had said, raised his eyebrows in question.

'Malodordom?' Spike repeated, as though the word should mean something to Xander. 'It means "stink demon".'

'We have to fight a stink demon?' Xander asked in disgust. 'You do know this is all your fault, right?'

'My fault? Just how in the hell is it my fault?'

'I told you. Didn't I tell you? You asked how things could get worse, and this is the result.'

'You asked how things could get worse?' asked Anya with obvious displeasure. 'Spike! Don't you know any better than that?'

'Yeah,' nodded Xander, glad to have someone agree with him. 'I told you. You jinxed us.'

'Yeah, yeah,' sneered Spike sarcastically. 'It's all my fault that a walking pile of rancid shite, stacked seven foot high, chose tonight of all nights to spread its reeking foulness over Sunnydale.'

Buffy smacked Spike's shoulder on her way past and hissed, 'Language!' jerking her thumb in the general direction of Dawn and the younger potentials.

Meanwhile, Xander gulped. 'Seven feet tall?'

Glancing at the brightly smiling Dawn, Spike sighed heavily and followed the short procession of Buffy, Willow, Anya and Kennedy out the front door, dragging Xander along in his wake.

'Seven foot, give or take,' he said in an irritated tone. 'The little ones are, anyway.'

Xander gulped again. 'Shouldn't we take a couple of the potentials with us? Y'know, safety in numbers? Give them a little hands-on experience in the field?'

Buffy shook her head firmly. 'Nope. This is a magic deal. Kennedy and I are there strictly as back up. At least, I think that's the plan.'

'Oh,' Xander said in relief. 'There's a plan? I guess that's okay then.' He looked at Spike hopefully. 'So long as there's a plan.'

Spike only gritted his teeth a little harder and picked up the pace, making Xander scurry to keep up with him.

~*~*~*~*~

Pure, unadulterated terror.

Xander was no stranger to this extreme emotion. He had experienced it in many shapes and forms during his years spent living on the hellmouth. So much so that he had developed his own particular system of dealing with it. This system mostly involved making jokes, running away or hiding under tables or behind the various super-people -- interspersed with occasional acts of manly bravery on a grand (and largely unrecognised) scale. This was simply the way things worked. It was a good system and he was sticking to it. After all, he did have a Buffy to protect him when things got too scary. Of course, having

a Buffy was the main reason his life was so fraught with danger in the first place. It was a vicious, not to mention cruel and illogical circle, but it was one that Xander knew well.

He also knew the terror. He respected it, even relied upon it.

And above all, he expected it.

So it was with a supreme sense of relief that, when he finally laid eyes on the Malodordom demon, he found it to be a dusky brown, garden variety demon, with gentle doe eyes, two long slits on its muzzle, and long, flowing red hair hanging almost to its waist. There were no horns, talons or dagger-like incisors that he could see. From their vantage point, they could see the demon busily preoccupied with snuffling its way through a patch of jasmine, which seemed to flourish all over Sunnydale, and occasionally pausing to snake out a long and delicate tongue to ensnare a mouthful of petals.

'This is the guy that had us at DEFCON 3?' he asked in a confused, not so hushed whisper. 'Why couldn't Buffy take this guy out herself?'

'Shut up, Xander, would you?' said Spike sharply. Xander opened his mouth to reply, but Spike silenced him with a

not often seen serious look. 'I mean it,' the vampire reinforced. 'You don't *ever* want to see one of these guys with their backs up against the wall. They make skunks look like... like...' Spike struggled with his comparison, 'like... um, something decidedly less pongy.'

Xander remained unconvinced, eyeing the demon warily over the top of Spike's head, but stayed quiet out of grudging deference to what he hoped was Spike's greater knowledge in the area.

The six-strong group were lying side by side on their bellies in the grass, on a raised patch of ground behind some leafy shrubbery. The patch of ground in question was in a secluded area in the woods on the east side of Sunnydale, not so far from the caves where Adam and, over the years, other various assorted demonic flotsam and jetsam had made their home. Behind them lay Sunnydale Lake, which was really little more than an overgrown pond, the cool night air breezing merrily over its surface to ruffle through their hair as it reached them. On Xander's left hand side lay Buffy, who was peering through the bushes at their intended target.

'He doesn't look all that scary,' she said, agreeing with Xander. 'And he's nowhere near seven feet tall.'

'Six four, six five, if he's an inch,' said Anya, nodding.

'Will you all shut up!' hissed Spike. 'Who cares how tall he is? It's not his height we have to worry about. Now why don't you ladies get with the mojo, and we can all get the hell out of here.'

'Right,' said Willow decisively, laying her hand on Kennedy's shoulder, signalling for her to relinquish the bag full of magic supplies. Kennedy shrugged out of the satchel, and Willow began pulling items out of it, laying some on the ground in front of her, and passing others along the line to Anya, who lay at the far end, beside Spike.

In between passing handfuls of bramblewort, lavender and pickled frog-spawn to Anya, Spike felt rather left out of the proceedings, and so he rose up and asked, very quietly, 'So, what exactly is the plan here?'

Unfortunately, for all of Spike's earlier warnings, this simple question turned out to be the point at which the evening's outing took a decided turn for the worse. Seeing the flash of white blond hair through the foliage, the Malodordom demon froze, and opened the two long slits on its muzzle, which became cavernous nostrils, flared and quivering as it scented the air.

Vampire. Humans. SLAYER.

The demon let out a bellow as it realised it was being spied upon, the gentle doe eyes becoming hard and beady, and full of evil, malodorous intentions. Deep in the centre of the woods where the hapless Malodordom had made its temporary home, the row of six interlopers stiffened as the eerie wail reached them. As one, they looked up, in time to see the Malodordom toss back its mane of fiery red hair and paw at the ground like an angry bull as the demon readied itself for attack. Massive arms were raised into the air, making visible dozens of little flaps of tissue-like skin along the demon's sides that fluttered back and forth in the gentle night breeze. The sight was an imposing one and, for a dragging moment, the little group was frozen in indecisive shock. It was Spike who recovered first, too late realising the abject stupidity in lying upwind from a demon whose greatest weapon was smell.

'So, yeah, like I was saying, what exactly is your grand plan?' he asked sharply as he scrambled to his feet, dragging Xander up with him. Suddenly spurred into action, it was barely a second later when the others had clambered to their feet.

'The plan.' Buffy swallowed nervously. 'Right. The plan. Willow, what was the plan again?'

'The plan? Who? Me? I-I thought you had the plan.'
Willow visibly began to panic. 'You're the commander in chief, remember? Queen Buffy of the inspirational, if rather longwinded, speeches, right? I'm just the unreliable witchy girl with magic issues. Nobody told me I had to have the plan, too!'

Kennedy laid a soothing hand on Willow's shoulder, and the redhead managed to pull off looking both relaxed and wildly uncomfortable at the same time, while smiling gratefully at her girlfriend.

Tiring of all the procrastinating, Anya rolled her eyes heavenward, and sighed heavily, with a perfected skill and ease born of millennia of practising the joint manoeuvre. She then stepped into the centre of their informal little circle, and immediately took charge. 'Spike and Xander - you two are going to run across there,' she said perfunctorily, pointing in the general direction of the howling Malodordom, 'yelling at the demon and generally grabbing its attention. Then, when it's distracted, Willow and I are going to cast a spell to vanquish it.'

'That's your plan? I hate that plan!' yelled Xander.

'What about me?' asked Buffy.

'And me?' added Kennedy.

Anya didn't skip a beat. 'Buffy - you are going to circle around behind it, in that direction.' Anya pointed to the left. 'And Kennedy - you go in that direction.' She pointed to the right. 'You two are there strictly for backup, just in case things don't work out on this end.'

'Hold on just a mo'. We're the bait? I don't like this plan much, either,' said Spike, mostly to Xander who was the only other one not hanging on Anya's every word.

'Bait?' Xander shrieked, firmly in the clutches of indignant panic at this stage. 'We're the *bait*?!'

Ignoring them completely, Anya finished debriefing the Slayer and the Potential Slayer. '... in which case, you are to attack and chop it into little pieces and we'll just have to hope the resulting stench doesn't kill us all.' They all stood in silence, staring at one another, flinching slightly when the Malodordom let out another bellowing scream from behind them. Anya placed a hand on her hip. 'Okay, um, when I explained the plan to you all... did I *stutter*?'

Sense of urgency effectively instilled, the group broke up, scattering in their designated directions.

'Tag. You're it,' Anya said as she tapped Xander lightly on the shoulder.

'Just for the record, everybody does know that I hate this plan, right?' asked Xander despairingly, even as he started to run.

'Sorry, guys,' called Buffy over her shoulder, already streaking away from them at inhuman speed, circling around behind the demon, twirling her axe like a pro as she ran, 'but we needed an easy target, and you two more than fit the bill.' She flashed them what she hoped was a heartening smile. 'That's the plan!'

'I am *not* an easy target!' insisted Spike, as he ran alongside Xander. 'I'm just chained to one!'

'I *hate* this plan!' Xander yelled once more for good measure.

Whooping and yelling, the handcuffed pair quickly gained the full attention of the enraged demon, running as close to it as they dared, effectively playing chicken as it barrelled towards them. At the last minute, Spike dodged to the right, tugging on the cuffs to give Xander just enough warning to prevent him being decapitated by a meaty forearm. They ran on, dodging around trees, shrubs and the occasional rock, Spike's enhanced night vision leading them unerringly through the undergrowth.

Xander's erratic heartbeat and harsh breathing were loud in both their ears as they ran, trying to lead the demon around in large circles while at the same time not get tangled in each other when Spike decided that a sharp turn was necessary, or trip over anything in the dark. Spike could sense Buffy and Kennedy circling somewhere nearby, but for the time being they weren't close enough to be seen. Meanwhile, it was becoming apparent to the vampire that this truly was a terrible plan, as it seemed that the Malodordom was unnervingly surefooted, and covered the ground at a rapid pace as it chased along behind them, growling and screeching all the while.

'Come on, come on,' he hissed at a panting Xander. 'He's gaining.'

Xander could only shake his head helplessly as he tried to keep up. It simply wasn't enough. He just didn't have the strength.

Letting out a growl of his own, Spike realised two things.

One: Willow and Anya obviously couldn't be trusted to magic their way out of a wet paper bag.

And two: Xander simply wasn't moving fast enough, and the pained whimpers every time Spike tugged on the cuffs were getting worse.

Praying that this day would be over soon, Spike bit back his irritation and took hold of Xander's hand, lacing their fingers together so that he had a secure hold on the human. Before Xander could even begin to attempt a complaint at this forced intimacy, they were running again, Spike willing some of his unnatural strength through their joined hands to Xander.

Crazy thing was, it seemed to be working.

They flew over the ground, dodging obstacles and putting some distance between them and their furious pursuer. Swinging around a large oak tree, Spike brought them to an abrupt stop, and pushed Xander against the trunk of the tree, standing protectively over him.

'Where in the hell are they?' he said, glaring out into the darkness, watchful for the inevitable sudden appearance of an angry demon charging right at them. 'Suppose they think this is funny, having us run around like headless chickens while they hold back and play with their spells.'

'I can't see anything,' said Xander, when he had got some of his breath back, peeking out from under Spike's chin and peering through the trees.

'Course you can't, you're only human.'

Xander looked up, just as Spike looked down, and their eyes met. 'You say that like it's a bad thing.'

It was only then that they realised they hadn't yet dropped their joined hands, and instantly let go.

Spike declined to answer, not missing the extra edge to Xander's words. 'We can't stay here. Who knows when in the hell the bints' spell will kick in, and I don't fancy testing my fighting skills with you dragging me down. Come on.'

Spike pushed his body away from the tree, ready to put some more distance between them and the demon he could even now hear charging through the undergrowth, but found that his arm disobediently stayed behind.

'Spike!' Xander pleaded. 'Really. Spike, I can't run anymore!'

'Yeah?' Spike gave a sharp tug on the cuffs, taking more than just a modicum of pleasure at the grimace of pain on Xander's face. 'I couldn't give a monkey's. We run.'

Xander nodded wearily, then caught himself and frowned. 'Wait. You couldn't give a monkey's what?'

'Bloody obvious, innit?' Spike glared at the question, irritated to the extreme. 'I... I... I don't bloody well know,

I just couldn't give one, all right?' he snapped, taking Xander's hand again.

And then there was more running.

They hit a clearing, one that Xander vaguely recognised as being the one where they had started this mad dash through the night, and zoomed across it, where they paused. Xander was gasping for breath, his chest burning, as they turned to face their pursuer. On the far side of the clearing, framed by the moonlight and swirling ground mist, was the Malodordom. It pawed the ground with gusto as it stared at them, its snorting breath sending great hot clouds into the air to mingle with the mist. Xander swallowed, glancing at Spike just in time to see the vampire do the same.

They stood side by side, ready to meet its attack, but when Xander cast his gaze back to the Malodordom, it was obvious that something had changed. It seemed that, unfortunately, the demon had grown bored with their mad chase, and had set its beady little eyes on a much more attractive target. No amount of yelling, jeering or hand waving would sway its attention from its newest prey -- sitting cross-legged less than twenty feet away, chanting rhythmically, their hands connected, and glancing fearfully up at the demon every few seconds,

but not moving from where they sat, were Anya and Willow.

Spike and Xander shared a look, and a slow nod of unspoken agreement. With a roar, they took off at a run, their cuffed hands stretched out between them, heading straight towards the demon. The Malodordom saw their charge, and decided to rise to the occasion, meeting their challenge head on. They collided in the centre of the clearing, Xander helplessly closing his eyes at the last minute, trusting Spike's vampiric speed and accuracy to see them through. He felt his arm connect with something very large, and very solid, and then it felt like his shoulder was being ripped out of the socket, but miraculously he stayed upright. He tentatively opened his eyes, and realised with amazement that they had knocked the large demon off its feet, taking it down in a rough approximation of one of his favourite double-teaming wrestling moves. His grin at the thought of clotheslining a demon was short lived, however, when the demon in question opened its eyes and growled at him.

Then a few things happened in quick succession. He was peripherally aware of Buffy and Kennedy running towards them, weapons held high, but it was too late. He saw Spike fall to his knees, and was pulled down with

him by his now battered and bruised wrist, to watch as Spike desperately tried to beat the demon unconscious with his free hand, but it was too late. He contemplated dragging Spike off the demon and making a run for it, even though his legs felt like they had the consistency of raspberry jelly, and letting the Slayers try and take the demon out, but it was definitely too late.

The Malodordom bellowed again in rage and raised its arms above its head, seemingly oblivious to the blows that Spike was raining down on its face and head. At this, Spike suddenly seemed to panic, grabbing at the demon's arms and trying to drag them back down to its sides, but to no avail. A solid green puss was oozing from the demon's skin, Spike's grip slipping and sliding as he tried to keep hold. The little fissures all along the demon's sides once again fluttered in the breeze, opening and closing in tremulous abandon all along the gills under its arms. A swampy green gas slowly leaked from the fissures, sending puffy little clouds up to envelope the demon.

That was the last thing they had time to note before the smell hit them.

Only this wasn't a mere smell. Nothing so paltry. This was a ferocious emanation of cruel and epic proportions.

An emanation that hit them in a solid wave of stench, sucker punching them, instantly making Spike and Xander crumple in pain. They tried desperately to cover their eyes, noses and mouths as they scrambled away from the demon, tripping over it and managing to get more of the sticky green ooze on themselves in the process. In anguish, they managed to move only a few feet away before they collapsed to the ground on top of one another, tears streaming from their eyes.

Behind them, Anya and Willow's rhythmic chanting finally built to a crescendo and ended. Their spell finished, the girls immediately dropped their joined hands and rooted through the leather satchel, producing two clothes pegs and two pairs of swimming goggles, which they scrambled over for a second, before putting on the goggles and jamming the pegs securely over their noses. Meanwhile, their spellcasting was doing its job, resulting in the demon letting out a last indignant howl, before erupting in a white hot ball of flame, flaring brightly for barely a second, branding its image in negative onto their eyelids through the meagre protection of the goggles. The approaching Buffy and Kennedy flung their arms over their eyes, and were knocked off their feet by the resulting shock wave

travelling out from the magically engineered demise of the stink demon.

Xander and Spike, however, missed the brief light show. They lay on the ground choking and complaining, eyes watering, hands slapping at one another as they tried, uselessly, to waft the stench away, to hit one another, *anything* just so long as they didn't have to deal with their overloaded olfactory senses. Everything else was forgotten - the handcuffs, the demon, their friends, everything. There was only the foulest, most pungent, odoriferous reek that it had ever been their misfortune to experience.

'The... the pond,' Xander choked out, blinded through a haze of tears.

Spike could only nod, and stagger in the direction he thought Xander was pointing.

They reached the pond, and without further ado, leapt straight into it, fully clothed. The murky waters closed over their heads like the sweetest, purest ambrosia, wiping the worst of the sticky ooze away, bringing blessed relief to their stinging eyes and noses. For as long as he could, Xander stayed beneath the waters, surfacing only when the urge to breathe became too strong to ignore. Spike stayed under for a lot longer, generally

thrashing about, scrubbing the goo from his hair and hands as best he could, before stilling. Looking up through the cloudy water at Xander, he wondered if he could get away with holding the human under the water until he choked, because somehow, *somehow*, it was all his fault. It was the only rational explanation. In the end, however, he didn't, thinking that it was highly probable that Buffy might just frown on that sort of thing.

A pang of regret that he was even entertaining such a notion shook Spike from his musing, and he scowled beneath the water. Scowled at himself, scowled at the soul, and scowled at the laughable disaster area that was his unlife. It was several more minutes, and several well-placed kicks from Xander before Spike resurfaced. Sharing one last disenchanted look, they shook the water from their hair and trudged back out of the pond. Xander stumbled on an invisible rock on the pond's bottom, his foot sliding off it to get stuck in some sludgy mud. A pale hand shot out and grabbed the lapel of his sodden jacket, righting him before he could fall. Shaking his head, Spike took Xander's hand again to lead him out of the pond. Their hair was filthy and dripping, their faces smeared with demon goo and pond slime. Their clothes were heavy, their boots squelchy. They were two drowned rats; miserable, cold and tired. To top it all off the

unmistakable stench of Malodordom still hung in the air around them as they made their way back to the other Scoobies... only to realise that they were being laughed at.

Soaking wet, holding onto their noses with their free hands as though their lives depended on it, and draped in slimy greenery from the pond, they glared at the giggling trio of Anya, Kennedy and Willow. Buffy had yet to put in an appearance.

'And what, pray tell, is so funny?' Spike asked, his voice like thunder.

'What? Apart from the obvious?' asked Anya, biting on her lips in a rather unsuccessful effort to hold back her giggles. She pointed at their joined hands, fingers still entwined together.

Immediately they let go with mutual exclamations of disgust.

'What?' demanded Xander, industriously ignoring the water running down his face and the way his wet jeans were already beginning to chafe the inside of his thighs. '*What?* It was so we could run. My wrist was hurting and we--'

He stopped when Spike kicked him smartly in the shin.

'OW! What was that for?'

'Just... just shut up, Xander, would you?'

Furious, but completely lacking in any immediate snappy comebacks, Xander shut up.

It was at this particular moment that Willow chose to let out a loud, horrified squeal and practically jumped into Kennedy's arms. Kennedy, not seeming to mind in the slightest, followed Willow's pointing finger, her gaze landing on Spike.

'What is it, Willow?' she asked. 'What's wrong?'

'Pocket!' Willow squeaked.

They all looked at the pocket of Spike's duster that Willow was pointing at, and saw the source of her distress. Peeping out at them was a large, dark green frog, which, seeming to notice all the sudden attention, let out a loud, baleful "ribbit". Surprising them all, Spike let out a snort of laughter, which he quickly squelched, and went back to scowling mutinously, but not before carefully extracting the frog from his pocket, lowering it to the ground, of course with the assistance of Xander, and giving it a swift pat on the bottom to make it hop away. They all heard Willow breath a sigh of relief when

it disappeared into the night in the general direction of the pond.

'Are you guys...!' Buffy came to an abrupt halt as she ran towards them, as though she had run into an invisible brick wall. 'Are you guys... *phew* You guys *stink!*' Xander and Spike shared a weary look as Buffy held her nose and mimed waving away a bad smell. 'Wow. I mean, I'm sorry,' she continued. 'Great job at being bait and all, but I mean, really. You smell worse than the dumpsters out the back at the Double Meat. *Really*. Peee-yeeuuu.'

'Yeah, Buff. Thanks,' Xander said, feeling the beginnings of one hell of a headache forming at his temples.

'You've probably just killed off the entire ecosystem of that pond,' commented Anya, readjusting her clothes peg, which seemed determined to slip off her nose. 'And I'd have to agree with Buffy on this one. Peee-yeeuuu.'

'You guys have spare pegs?' asked Kennedy hopefully.

Anya nodded, producing two more pegs, which Kennedy and Buffy accepted gratefully, laughing softly at each other as they pegged their noses.

'Yeah, this is great, very helpful, thanks, thanks a lot,' said Xander, sounding as completely insincere as was humanly possible. He took a hobbling step forwards,

tugging ineffectively on the cuffs, and turned his head to glare at Spike. That was when he saw it. Spike was watching Buffy. The familiar scowl was still worn proudly on the vampire's face, but there was a softness to his eyes, not obvious, but there nonetheless. Xander wondered if it had anything to do with seeing Buffy laughing again, even if it was at their expense.

'You should go and shower,' said Anya in a telephone operator voice. 'A lot.'

Spike and Xander stared at her. Then at each other.

'Not in this lifetime!'

'No bloody way!'

They spoke simultaneously, letting go of their noses in horror, only to convulse at the smell and grab blindly at their faces, choking as the smell reinvaded their already overwrought nasal passages. The girls watched with interest as Spike turned a peculiar shade of green. It looked very much as though those heightened vampire senses could be a real kick in the pants at times.

'I feel like I've just eaten a skunk,' said Xander miserably, once he had his finger and thumb clamped firmly back over his nose.

'We might... we might actually have to shower,' Spike admitted reluctantly.

'Couldn't we just burn our clothes and scour our skin off with wire wool?' asked Xander hopefully.

Spike didn't reply, preoccupied with thinking over the logistics of getting clean. 'We could cut off our shirts, and safety pin on new ones after.'

'Another swim in the pond?' Xander said desperately, clutching at straws.

'Burn the rest of our clothes, 'cept my coat, of course. It'll take more than a stink demon to make me get rid of it.'

'Bleach? Sulphuric acid?' said Xander, his voice raising higher and higher with every word.

'I'll just have to wash round it. There's no way in hell I'm cutting this coat off.'

'Good grief,' said Anya, as the two men carried on seemingly separate conversations, blinking owlishly behind her swimming goggles. 'Do they ever stop?'

Willow, Buffy and Kennedy all shook their heads fondly, stepping back a little when Xander, who was doing his

best to pace up and down while still attached to an unmoving Spike, got a little too close for nasal comfort.

Anya walked around Kennedy to fish a small book out of the front pocket of the satchel that the potential slayer was once again carrying. Abandoning the loose fitting clothes peg for the more reliable, if slightly more awkward method of pinching her nose, Anya held the book with her one free hand, balancing it precariously on her knee. She hopped slightly to keep her balance, until she found the passage she was looking for. Silently, she read for a moment, and replaced the book in the satchel. Walking up to Spike, she murmured a few words in a language that only Willow understood. Then, a look of supreme disgust on her face, she patted Spike on the arm, and his coat slithered from his body to pool on the ground at his feet.

Speechless with a sudden fury, Spike's head snapped around to glare at her. 'What did you just do to my coat?' he asked, his voice flinging sharp little metaphorical ice chips at her.

Anya only gave him a bored little one-shouldered shrug.

Lifting his foot, Spike brought the duster up until he could grab it, without having to go through the process of making Xander kneel with him. Examining the coat

carefully, he discovered that it was still in one piece, and even better than that, it was clean. Dry. Stink free. In fact, it was good as new.

He looked at the ex-vengeance demon in silent question.

'Leather,' she said simply, while thoroughly wiping her contaminated hand on the grass at her feet. At their blank stares, Anya shrugged again, and rose to her feet. 'Easy stuff to work with. Once alive, can be joined again.'

'Please tell me you didn't just bring my coat to life,' Spike said, eyeing the leather suspiciously.

'Oh please, as if I'd be foolish enough to do something like that,' Anya retorted. 'I'm not Willow, for heaven's sake.'

'Hey!' came the indignant cry from their resident witch, who was busy gathering up the remainder of her magic supplies.

'Oh, you know what I mean,' said Anya, waving her hand in a dismissive gesture. 'I meant that I don't botch the simple spells the way you used to do all the time.'

'Oh, right, if *that's* all,' said Willow.

'You couldn't do that with the cuffs?' asked Spike caustically, feeling tired, sticky, very, very stinky and wanting nothing more than to be able to walk away from the night's activities in a swirl of freshly laundered coattails, without having to drag Xander along for the ride. 'Metal has to have been made up of something living, once upon a time.'

'Yeah,' snorted Anya - at least she tried to snort, but as she was still holding her nose, it came out more like a hacking, phlegmy cough. With a swift glare around the group, she silently *dared* anyone to call her on it, then continued as though nothing had happened. 'Perhaps a *billion* years ago. Anything that much older than me, and I just don't trust it.'

'Wait, he has a point!' Xander said hopefully. 'Doesn't he have a point?'

Anya sighed, wishing that she hadn't bothered. 'Sure. Metal was once alive. And we're all made of stars. Big whoop. I still can't help you.'

'Try harder!' snapped Spike.

'No,' Anya replied succinctly. Xander gave her his best puppy dog eyes. Spike just glared. 'There's nothing I can do,' she said. 'Can't you feel the protective magic

practically flowing off them? Honestly,' she tisked, 'I'm only a human now and not very good at magic anymore, and I can still feel it. Some vampire you are.'

'Hey! I knew they were magicked!' said Spike, his ire growing in leaps and bounds.

'Only because you couldn't break them,' interjected Xander.

Spike turned, very slowly, and glared at him, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides. Xander, who could feel the sharp pull of the metal at his tender wrist just from the muscles used by the vampire to open and close his fists, swallowed, wishing suddenly that he was able to walk away from all this and hide behind Buffy, but he didn't back down.

'What about it, Ahn?' he asked instead of getting drawn into further confrontation with Spike. 'Think you can get us out of them?'

'Those things?' She shook her head. 'Sorry, boys. You're stuck together.'

'I told you so,' said Willow in a singsong voice as she walked past, her head held high, clothes peg still in place, on her way over to where Buffy had retreated to a safe distance, several feet away.

Xander and Spike chose to ignore her.

'Now,' said Anya, 'if you'd like to say thank you properly, please go away. Somewhere far, far away. And consider washing. Soon. You really do stink.'

~*~*~*~*~

Very carefully, Xander leaned over the bath, twisting the taps until a cloud of steam rose into the air and pulled a nozzle so that the shower sprang into life. He stood, muscles clenched, his body turned sideways to Spike, trying, largely unsuccessfully, to keep his most naked manly parts out of view.

I can do this. I can do this. It's just like taking a shower after gym class, and that was a room with thirty other naked guys. This is just one naked guy. One naked Spike. That I just so happen to be handcuffed to.

And why am I not surprised that doesn't make it sound any better?

Crap.

I can do this. I can do this.

Spike, on the other hand, Xander couldn't help but notice, looked completely relaxed with his nudity. That bastard. In fact, Spike was exuding bored disinterest as Xander adjusted the flow of water and stepped into the bath, standing under the spray from the showerhead, his hair immediately darkening to jet-black and moulding itself to his head.

Can't believe the situations I get myself into in this poxy little town. Naked Xander. Hmmm. Wonder if he's got any tattoos in interesting places?

They'd abandoned their clothes at the rear entrance to the building, and immediately thrown them into the trash. Spike had obligingly torn through the sleeve of Xander's jacket when the wet material proved too strong for Xander's tired muscles to cope with.

Xander had expressed deep-seated concern about being seen stripping outdoors at three a.m. while handcuffed to a man who could so easily be mistaken for... for so many different shades of kinky that it made Xander's head hurt just to think about it. However, the thought of bringing any more of the rancid stink into his home was incentive enough, and so Xander didn't overly complain about having to strip off his clothes with Spike as his witness. They had made the mad dash of shame up the

three flights of stairs to Xander's apartment with Xander clad only in a pair of damp boxer shorts, and Spike (who, Xander had discovered to his alarm, didn't believe in wearing underwear) draping his duster around his shoulders and sticking his feet back into his ancient boots. The ancient boots which were apparently just as precious to the vampire as his coat.

Besides, Xander figured, he'd lost track of the number of times he'd been ego-crushingly embarrassed in the name of demon slaying in this town, so if anyone saw him... well, he could just chalk it up to another wonderful monkey boy experience and leave it at that. A tug on the cuffs brought him back to the present, reminding him of just how much of a battering his wrist had taken that evening as he let out a cry of pain, clutching the injured limb to his chest. Spike let out a huff of annoyance as the back of his hand smacked wetly against the human's chest.

'Gimme that.' Spike took his hand, as Xander watched him warily, and examined it brusquely, noting the dark circles of bruising under the cuffs. 'You'll be fine,' he announced, letting go of Xander's hand. 'Nothing's broken. Don't be such a negative nancy.'

'Great bedside manner you've got there, Spike.'

'Yeah, yeah, take two aspirin and call me in the morning.'

Not deigning to answer, Xander only narrowed his eyes, blinking against the stray droplets that were hitting his face, and glaring at the naked vampire who stood patiently waiting on his bathroom floor.

'Will you hurry the hell up so we can get out of here? I haven't got all night, y'know.'

Well, perhaps not so patiently.

Xander snorted at the bizarre situation he found himself in. Good ol' reliable Spike, guaranteed to bitch, moan and snark his way through any eventuality. Same Spike, different day. Except now he just so happened to be naked, wet and handcuffed to good ol' reliable Spike... and was it Xander, or did good ol' reliable Spike look thinner, a little leaner than he once had? Not that he made a habit of noticing these things, but Spike had always been slender, with a sort of coiled, ethereal grace, but Xander had always assumed that came with the vampire package. Compact and well muscled, wasn't that what he had once said?

Spike noted the sweeping pass of Xander's gaze as it flitted down his body with well-hidden surprise. He

hadn't taken the boy to be the sort for surreptitious glances.

Xander Harris, Spike considered silently -- with a sort of head-shaking fondness that could only come with years of rose-tinted hindsight and mutual, bull-headed dislike firmly behind you. He was handcuffed and naked with Xander Harris. Spike did a little surreptitious glancing of his own. The boy had filled out some since high school, the years of junk food and devouring Twinkies whole finally catching up with him, but there was muscle, too. Good, solid, living, breathing muscle, that flexed and bulged in his legs as Xander shifted his weight, and in his arms as he reached for the soap. Faint tan lines on those arms from the T-shirts he wore to work.

Free hand hovering in mid-air, Xander paused. And was it Spike, or did the right side of Xander's body -- the part closest to Spike, within touching distance in fact -- look much more tense than the left?

'Hey! Quit ogling the goods!'

'Goods! Ha! I've seen better "goods" on a week old corpse.'

Xander eyed him acidly. 'Oh, I have the goods, buddy. Don't you doubt that I have the goods.'

Spike glanced at Xander's stomach, and was rewarded when he saw a breath being hurriedly sucked in. Placing a hand on his own chiselled stomach, Spike made a show of patting away some imaginary droplets of water. Letting a sly smile creep up one side of his face, he looked back up to meet Xander's eye. 'Just checking out the tan lines, mate. 'Snot so often I meet someone with a tan who's willing to share. Know what I mean?'

'I don't *ever* want to know what you mean,' Xander said firmly. 'Now can we please get washed so I can get out of here and dressed and begin the long, drawn out process of trying to forget that this ever happened?'

'Repressing?'

'Oh yeah. Whole big bunches of repressing.'

'Sure thing, mate.'

'Good,' Xander said with a final glare for good measure, as he again reached for the bar of soap, sitting innocently in the tray at the base of the shower cable.

No sooner had he picked it up, than it shot out of his hand into the air. A brief, but expertly choreographed, mid-air battle between Xander and the soap played out, before it thwarted one of his better attempts at grabbing

for it, and fell to his feet, landing with a mocking splash in the swirling eddies of water just above the plug hole.

They both stared down at the soap.

'Don't say a word. Just don't say a single, solitary word,' pleaded Xander.

'Not even one?'

'Not even one.'

'Just one?'

'Spike.' Xander growled the word, mildly impressing Spike with both its menacing depth of tone and resonance.

'You might like it.'

Xander shook his head slowly. 'All right. I just know I'm going to regret this, but... what?'

'Shampoo.'

'Shampoo?' The unmistakable sound of hope permeated the word.

'Shampoo,' Spike repeated firmly.

Xander reached for the large bottle of manly man shampoo, opened it and poured some into his hand, then, without another word, passed it to Spike.

'Shampoo.'

'Cheers.'

Xander then raised his arms to begin shampooing his hair, and immediately hit himself in the face with Spike's hand. Rethinking his earlier offer of tearing Xander's arm out of the socket, Spike shook his head disparagingly, and without another word, stepped into the bath behind Xander, who recoiled in alarm.

'What are you doing?!'

'Look. You don't want to be here, I certainly don't want to be here, so I say we just stop all this faffing about and get it over with, because the sooner we do, the sooner we can get dry and dressed. Deal?'

Xander stared thoughtfully at him, then nodded. 'Deal.'

'Good. Now hold still and I'll do your hair.'

As Spike reached out, Xander immediately tried to jump away, only to collide with the wall. He then managed to stand on the soap -- the soap that was obviously out to

ruin what was left of the tattered shreds of his dignity -- and it skidded out from under his foot. He then only managed not to fall on his ass by grabbing on to a rather chilly, rather muscular upper arm, belonging to a vampire who didn't seem hampered in the slightest by the slippery surface that they were standing on.

'You're... you're going to wash my hair?' The horrified disbelief in Xander's voice stood between them like a third person in the room.

'Well, yeah. You need to get the slime out of the back of it, or we'll never get rid of the stink. It'll be all over the bed and everything. You can do mine in a minute. We have to be squeaky clean, or it'll smell like this forever.'

A myriad of insults, objections, arguments and complaints danced their way through Xander's mind, but in the end he only closed his eyes and hung his head.

'Fine. Wash my hair. See if I care. But if you tell anyone about this...' He let the sentence trail off menacingly, and was rewarded when Spike smacked him on the back of the head.

'Get over it, Harris. You think I want *this* to get out?' He gestured to the two of them, standing side by side in the bath. 'Besides, the girls already know that we had to get clean. That means more jokes at our expense, probably

including some reference to your quaint little "Gay Me Up" speech. It also means that by tomorrow, all the little potentials will probably know about it, too. And Dawn.'

Xander hung his head a little lower as Spike's fingertips started rubbing shampoo into his hair, wishing suddenly that he could just wash himself away, down the plug hole, and not have to deal with any of this.

'Lift your head,' Spike said a moment later, unceremoniously grabbing him by the ears and yanking his head up. Xander yelped at the sudden pain, and opened his eyes to glare at Spike.

Spike, of course, was grinning at him.

'Wouldn't want you to get soap in your eyes.'

'Piss off, Spike.'

'Ooh, such language. Now, hold still 'til I wash this gunk off. We'll have you back to daisy status in no time.'

'Joy.'

'Yep,' grinned Spike, a wicked gleam in his eye. 'Then you can do me.'

Xander closed his eyes, and shuddered, his body pulled in different directions as he tried to move as far away from

Spike as was possible in the small tub, while leaning his head into the surprisingly wonderful feeling of strong fingers massaging his scalp, washing away the last traces of Malodordom goo.

A cold hand suddenly slithered its way down his spine, causing him to leap away again, this time banging his shins off the taps and yanking Spike after him until they nearly collided. The thought of this -- full body contact with the wetness and the nakedness and the Spikeness and the male parts touching other male parts where male parts should never, ever touch -- made Xander immediately freeze in place. His shoulders hunched and his back still to Spike, he stared at the wall, eyes wide with apprehension.

'Hold still, wanker. You have gunge on your back.'

Xander's shoulders sagged with relief before he could stop himself, then immediately he drew himself back up, ramrod straight, as though he hadn't just been thinking the things he had just been thinking.

'Go fuck yourself with a stake, bleach boy.'

'Nice. You kiss your mother with that mouth?'

'You can kiss my ass with yours,' Xander snapped, slapping Spike's hands out of the way just as a trickle of

soap ran into his eye. Then, realising what he had just said, Xander blushed furiously and stuck his head under the stream of water to rinse the soap away. 'Just not at this precise moment in time.'

As he stood under the showerhead, lathering, rinsing and repeating and trying his damndest not to brush his fingers against Spike's any more than he absolutely had to, he didn't notice as Spike drew back a little to check out the aforementioned ass, clenching and unclenching slightly as Xander moved back and forth under the spray of water.

Spike raised an appraising eyebrow, his expression one of deep consideration. *Not bad. Not bad at all. I give it a seven. Maybe an eight. Not as good as mine, though, but definitely not bad.*

'Hey, Spike?'

Spike jumped, immediately looking anywhere but at Xander's ass, his face a picture of cool indifference.

'Yeah?'

Xander looked back at him, blinking water droplets out of his eyes, his dark, squeaky clean hair slicked back against his head. 'Pass me a towel, would you?'

Wordlessly, Spike snagged a towel from the rail behind them and passed it to Xander, who stepped out of the spray and wrapped it around his waist, moving awkwardly in the bath so that they could swap places.

'Ta muchly,' said Spike, stepping under the water with relief, letting it soak through his hair and warm his body.

'You... you want me to do yours?'

'Sure,' Spike said. 'I scratched your back...'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Xander, and took the proffered bottle of shampoo from Spike.

As hesitant fingers began to rub shampoo into his hair, Spike smiled into the falling water. It would be such a relief to get rid of this smell, although he was sure he'd be catching whiffs of it for weeks to come, such was the burden of heightened vampire senses. Still, right at this moment, it was almost worth it. The last time someone had washed his hair for him, Callaghan was still PM and the Pistols were debuting in the charts. So this -- the warmth of the water sluicing over his body and the feel of hands, however reluctant, washing him -- this was... nice.

Nevertheless, if he never had to set eyes, or nostrils, on a Malodordom again, it would be too soon.

'Spike?'

'Mmm.'

'After this, I, ah...'

'What?'

'I need to pee again.'

'Again?!'

'Fraid so.'

'Bloody. Shagging. Buggery. Hell.'

'I'm sorry. I can't help it. I'm only human.'

'Yeah. So you keep reminding me. That's it. You don't get to drink anything else until these cuffs come off.'

'I need to drink.'

'Yeah. So do I. Doesn't mean I have to keep running to the pisser every five minutes. Honestly, pregnant women pee less than you.'

'No they don't! And-and this is only the second time today. I thought I was doing pretty well.'

Leaning forward, Spike slowly banged his head on the cool tiles. 'Fine,' he said through gritted teeth. 'Fine. Pee

away. See if I care. But,' he held up a forceful finger, 'I get to decide what we watch on telly after.'

'Deal,' said Xander, and silently handed him a towel.

~*~*~*~*~

Night two.

Xander shifted slightly against his pillow.

I had a shower with Spike.

Spike gritted his teeth and willed himself not to snap at Xander for not lying still and going to sleep. For breathing and sighing and fidgeting and for having such a bloody loud heartbeat, not to mention the waves of distracting heat he was spitefully sending over to Spike's side of the bed.

I had a shower with Xander.

Xander wondered what Spike was thinking about, then wondered why the hell he cared. He wondered if Spike was asleep, then wondered why the hell he cared about that either. Then, verbosely, and in great detail, he cursed Lepgnam demons, Malodordom demons, their

extended families, and all their descendants for generations to come. Then, for good measure, he also cursed the person who had seen fit to invent such teeny tiny bathtubs in the first place, and whoever it was who had decided that shirts shouldn't have button up sleeves.

I had a shower with Spike.

Clenching his right hand into a fist until his knuckles cracked, Spike prayed for sleep. Then he realised that praying probably wouldn't do him any good, what with him being a demon an' all, and he wished for sleep instead. Then he remembered the dreams that he'd been having and wondered if sleep was such a good idea after all. Xander shifted again, interrupting his thoughts, and this time Spike completely forgot to be annoyed about it.

I had a shower with Xander.

They lay there. Stiffly, not touching.

'Xander?'

'Yeah?'

'Can't sleep. You?'

'Not a wink.'

They continued to lay there. Stiffly, and most definitely not touching.

'Fancy getting stuck into that booze?'

Xander considered this for a moment, and sat up.

'Sounds like a plan.'

They wandered silently through the apartment like ghosts, pausing on the way to grab two glasses and the bag of booze that Xander had originally gone into the convenience store the previous day to purchase. The bag of booze that the shopkeeper had noticeably *not* given to them free of charge as thanks for saving his life. Xander had just accepted this as the way of the world, and paid without argument, silencing Spike with a look when the complaints about ungrateful sods who had better be on the lookout for visits from both the health inspectors and immigration services had got a little loud.

Each of them wore a pair of Xander's good, big, sturdy sweatpants to keep them nice and covered up, but they had forgone the task of pinning on shirts to sleep in, leaving that for the following day. So, for the time being, they were both barefoot, and naked from the waist up. Xander's hair was loose and felt wonderfully clean, curling over his forehead and trailing down to the nape of his neck. Spike, however, had roughly towel dried his

own hair, then raided Xander's ancient supply of hair gel, expertly slicking his own hair back within seconds, and all without the aid of a reflection. Xander had been curiously fascinated at this display of vampiric bathroom ritual, and had literally bitten his tongue to refrain from making a comment containing thinly veiled references to hair gel, Angel, and "like father, like son".

They settled on the couch, again sitting as far apart as the cuffs would comfortably allow, each taking a bottle of lukewarm beer. Xander looked around for the bottle opener, sighing as he realised that it was still hanging on its designated hook in the kitchen, just like always. He was about to tell Spike that they would have to go and get it, but was interrupted by the hiss-pop sound of a bottle being opened. He glanced up from the beer cradled almost respectfully in his hand, just in time to see Spike morph back into his human face and spit out a mangled bottle cap. Spike passed him the bottle with a silent, lopsided smirk, exchanging it for the unopened one that Xander held. Another shimmer passed over Spike's face and there was a demon blinking at him, eyes glowing softly in the half dark, flickering in tandem with whatever infomercial was showing on television. Another hiss-pop, another spat out bottle cap, and the demon was gone again, replaced by Spike. The bottle cap

skipped away across the floor, ignored by both of them. A hint of a smile graced Xander's lips as they clinked, and drank.

'Always knew vamps were good for something besides murder and mayhem.'

'Sure,' nodded Spike. 'You got any tough jam jars you want opened -- I'm your man.'

They sat in the half-light, neither of them having hit the light, so Xander grabbed the remote from the coffee table, found a station playing music videos and turned the sound down low. The light from the television illuminated the far corner of the room, and a soft light from a distant streetlight bathed the rest of the room in a not unpleasant pale amber glow.

'So.'

'So.'

'So here we are.'

'Here we are all right.'

Spike took another slug from his beer, and eyed the bottle of whiskey sitting on the coffee table. 'Think I'm going to hit the hard stuff. Care to join me?'

Xander took in the expression on Spike's face, and wondered in passing if he would still be able to walk or talk at the end of this evening's drinking. Talking he could do without, he supposed, just so long as the Gentlemen weren't back in town. If he had trouble with the walking part, Spike was strong enough to carry both of them. And, if he passed out, he could always sleep on the couch.

'Sure,' he said, sitting forward a little. 'Hit me.'

'Don't give me any ideas,' said Spike, uncapping the bottle and pouring out two healthy shots. 'Here.'

He held out a glass to Xander, who accepted it, and brought it straight to his lips. Wincing at how his still tender nose burned at the fumes from the glass, he drank it down quick, before his common sense had time to kick in and tell him that "hitting the hard stuff" with someone who had the constitution of a vampire just *had* to be a bad idea. With a gasp, he brought the glass back down, his eyes shining with that light that only the first stiff drink of the night can bring to you.

'Another?' asked Spike, who had yet to taste his drink.

Xander rolled the glass in his fingertips. 'Sure. Set 'em up. Let's do this right.'

Spike's eyebrow twitched, and he tipped back his head, polishing off his whiskey in one long swallow. 'You're the boss.'

'And don't you forget it,' said Xander, holding out his glass for a refill.

~*~*~*~*~

It was an hour or two, and several drinks later, that they sat in the centre of the couch, the coffee table pulled closer, so it was within easier reaching distance. They were leaning back bonelessly against the cushions with a few empty beer bottles scattered around their feet and a three-quarters empty whiskey bottle in front of them.

'Bit squiffy, are we?'

'The squiffiest,' said Xander, putting two or three extra 'f's into the word for good measure. 'So tell me again why we're doing this.'

Spike held up the cuffs, only to have them yanked back down again by Xander.

'No, not that. Why're we drinking?'

'Oh. That.' Spike shrugged, his shoulders brushing up against the cushions. 'Dunno. Seemed like a good idea at the time. The booze was in the kitchen, callin' to me. I had to answer its siren song.'

'You could hear that, too?' asked Xander, a hint of drunken wonder clouding his voice.

Spike nodded.

'So what do we do now?' asked Xander.

'Keep going 'til it's all gone?'

'I guess so.'

Xander watched as Spike took a long swallow of his beer, tipping his head back, exposing the long, pale column of his throat as he drank, his Adam's apple bobbing sluggishly. It really wasn't fair, all those muscles, frozen forever in perfection, never going to atrophy, never going to become hidden under a layer of fat or old, wrinkled skin. Every movement of Spike's body, however small, seemed to set off a chain reaction of muscles moving and flexing just beneath the surface, showing off their perfection without him even having to try.

He wondered how strong Spike really was. How much his diet, his moods, his age, the time of day and a million and

one other little demonic nuance would affect the vampire's strength. Xander had seen him fight on more occasions than he could even try and remember. He'd seen Spike take down demons more than twice his size with ease, laughing and whooping all the while, dancing around them, generally showing off and enjoying himself. He'd seen Spike beaten down by humans, who were, yes, generally *special* humans like Buffy or Riley, but Spike had also recently fought Principle Wood, and from what Buffy said, they'd given each other a run for their money.

An odd little flare of pride heralded the memory that he and Spike had traded blows before. Generally they had ended up with Spike cradling his head in agony and Xander unconscious, but he was still here, intact and mostly unmangled, ready, willing and able to tell the tale.

Everybody had good days and bad days, he supposed, even vampires. But still, it was interesting to think about it. Vampires. What really made them tick. Why they never changed, never scarred -- so, yeah, what exactly was the deal with Spike's eyebrow? -- never got sick, never grew old. Frozen in time, like Spike, who looked so very, very human right at that moment, sprawled out over Xander's couch, his body, strong and vital, relaxed now, but with so much potential. Capable of doing so much damage.

And very pale. Why didn't their skin keep the colour it had when they died? Was it rough or soft? It certainly looked soft, like silk over steel maybe. Did it change when they were in game face or not? Would it feel like a shark?

He wondered if--

Spike was staring at him, eternally scarr'd eyebrow raised in question.

Xander cleared his throat. 'Um, yeah, just thinking, you know that I will have to go bathroom at some point, right?'

Spike's familiar scowl appeared right on cue. 'And what? You need me to come hold your hand and wipe your arse for you again?'

'Fuck off, Spike.'

'You brought it up, mate.'

'I'm not your mate, and it's not like I can help it. Copious drinking involves many bathroom breaks and pissing like a racehorse,' Xander said solemnly, sounding like he was reciting one of the Ten Commandments. 'It's not something I can help.'

Spike grunted. 'Huh. Should've made Anya put the whammy on you when she was being all free and easy with the mojo.'

'What whammy?' asked Xander in alarm.

'Should've got her to tie a knot in it for three days, so I'd be spared the repugnant sight of you having a tinkle.'

'Hey! I am not repugnant, and in case you hadn't noticed, I've been on a starvation diet for the past day and a half. Can't really find it in my heart to feel bad about not giving up liquids for you, too. Just think about that next time you feel liking complaining about being chained to a human.'

Spike opened his mouth to reply, then paused, the deeper meaning of Xander's words sinking in. 'Oh,' he said, a frown of understanding appearing. 'Ohh. I get your point.' He shifted his shoulders uncomfortably, and drained his glass. 'Uh, thanks for that,' he said, his frown deepening, shoulders hunching up as he spoke.

'Trust me, it's more for me than for you, but you're welcome,' said Xander, his frown mirroring Spike's. 'Now can we please change the subject, and never, *ever* speak of this again.'

'You got it,' Spike nodded. 'So, uh, what *do* you want to talk about?'

Xander pulled a face. 'I don't know. You're bored, I'm bored. I want to smash your face in, that's pretty much a given, but these days I'm kind of at a disadvantage, what with you being all chipless and fancy free.' He smirked, knowing that it would annoy Spike. 'Deadboy Junior in so many, many more ways than you used to be. So come on. Talk.'

Spike sighed and leaned back, wishing that he could put both hands behind his head instead of just one, but that would mean having to move Xander, which just meant more arguing than it was worth. And right now, he really didn't feel like arguing.

'All right, you wanna talk. Let's talk. What do you want to talk about?'

Xander frowned, off guard. That wasn't the reaction he was expecting. No fire in the eyes, no empty threats, just sad, grim acceptance. Almost like Spike was humouring him. 'Well, ordinarily I'd say, "how about them Broncos", but I haven't exactly been keeping up with the sports recently. And I really, really don't want to talk about the end of the world, The First, the potentials, or anything to

do with the impending sense of doom that's fallen like a big, cosy, blanket over this dear little town of ours.'

Spike clearly didn't want to talk about these things, either. He noticed, however, that Xander was watching him closely, with that intense, unguarded scrutiny that only those who had sunk half a bottle of whiskey can truly achieve. He was on edge, that much was obvious, and something was bothering him. Or maybe it was just the whiskey bringing out a good, drunk bitterness in the boy. It didn't really matter. He wanted to talk, so they should talk.

'All right. Seeing as you brought up Angel--'

'I didn't.'

'You just did.'

'I did not.'

'You just called me... Angel Junior,' Spike said, spitting out the words as though they were made up of Malodordom excretions.

'No, I didn't.'

'Yes.' Spike gritted his teeth in irritation. 'You did.'

'No, I didn't. I called you Deadboy Junior.'

Spike rolled his eyes. 'Jesus H. Christ,' he said under his breath, then pinned Xander with a look. 'I think the word you're looking for is "whatever".'

Xander looked completely unrepentant, choosing to ignore Spike's vexation, and absently let the flickering television draw his attention away to watch some anonymous boy band or another strut their stuff.

Spike noted this, and his rising ire faded away, only to be replaced by something else. Something old and tired, that ached in his chest and behind his eyes. A sudden, nostalgic pang for years long passed swept through him. He remembered the demon Angelus, remembered their family, remembered lessons that were hard to learn, ingrained with fists and fangs, and he remembered days of blood and laughter. Fighting, dancing, loving, hating, feeding - all gone, all over, all as dead as he was. Now all summed up in one flippant remark by some child who thought he knew something of the world because he palled around with the Slayer and happened to live on the hellmouth.

Spike shifted again, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. The boy wanted to talk, so they would talk.

'Angel had it good.'

Xander didn't look away from the television. 'Yeah? And how do you figure that one?'

'A hundred years of poncing around the world getting used to this... this *hell*. And when he's ready to face up to life again, he has a pretty little Slayer to forgive him and stand at his side and tell him everything's going to be okay. Me? I just get thrown in at the deep end. And there's nobody here with me.'

'Jealous much?'

'Maybe I am. It's not easy, y'know. This existence. Made me go insane.'

'Yeah. That insanity thing.' Xander finally tore his gaze away from the television to look at Spike. 'It's been a while. How's that working out for you?'

'I dunno. What do you think?' Spike shot him a look that was designed to unnerve him.

Xander felt a little unnerved.

'I think you've always been touched.' Xander tapped his temple. 'What with the electroshock therapy and now your new weighty morality... who knows.'

To his surprise, Spike chuckled coldly. 'Maybe you're right. Maybe it was because Dru made me. She's quite the puzzle, that one. Didn't make many vampires. Minions, yeah, but not ones that were important to her. The ones she did make didn't survive long. I was the only one who made it past a decade with her. Maybe she's the reason I turned out different.'

'You saying you're the black sheep of your close knit vampire family?'

'Maybe,' Spike considered solemnly. 'How many other vampires do you know that fall in love so damn easily? How many others stay around for a nice chit chat once the fighting and biting is over?'

Xander fought the urge to say 'Harmony'.

'Soft as a pansy.' Spike shook his head in vague disgust. 'Making nice with a bunch of humans. Falling in love with one of them. Living in your homes. Letting you feed me. ... Protecting you all.' There was a long moment of silence. Spike slowly turned the glass in his hands, watching the amber liquid swirl endlessly. 'The chip broke me,' he said, his soft voice making Xander start. 'Rebuilt me, I suppose. Made me walk a different line, until it was something that I chose for myself.' He let out a heavy, self-deprecating sigh. 'For better or for worse.'

'Yeah?' asked Xander, sounding more than just a little bored, more from force of habit than an actual lack of interest. 'Are you going to be getting to a point anytime soon? 'Cause I knew all this already.'

'Shut up,' Spike said, without inflection. 'You can compare me to Angel all you want, but I don't recall Angelus helping any of you out when the soul went bye bye. I don't remember him loving Buffy when it was just the demon walking around in that huge, overstuffed body of his. Me... I kept my promises, but him? He would have found a way to hurt you all. He'd have got someone else to do it, he'd have tormented Buffy until she didn't know which way was up anymore, and she wouldn't have been able to hurt him because he would have played the helpless card.'

'You mean if he was the one that got chipped instead of you?'

Spike sighed, wondering if Xander would be so calm about the whole thing if he knew about the sweet spot that Angelus had had for dear little Willow, although these days, his grandsire might just be biting off a little more than he could chew trying to take on the witch. It was funny the way these things worked out. He folded his hands together around his glass, deep in thought,

only to have them tugged them apart again the second that Xander's fingers brushed against his knee.

'Oops. So sorry,' he said in a humourless voice, noting the splash of whiskey against his thigh, and took another swallow of his drink before any more could be spilt.

'Yeah, if Angelus got chipped he'd have found a way out. That's just the way he is. He's cold. Ruthless. Hard as steel. Could bring the world to its knees if he put his mind to it. Almost did.' Spike smirked and drained his glass. 'Now me?' He stared into his empty glass as though it held the answers to his questions. 'I loved as a demon. Right from the day I was turned I loved. I loved Dru from the moment I awoke. Still loved my Mum, can you believe that? A vampire, evil to the core, and I still loved my Mum enough to want her with me.' Blue eyes fluttered closed. 'Fool that I was, I loved Angelus, too.'

His voice had dropped to a hypnotic whisper, lost in the past, and Xander was entranced by it.

'You and Angelus...'

Spike almost smiled at the way the question trailed off. Xander knew exactly what he was asking, but didn't want to say the words. That way, if the answer was 'no', he could deny that he had ever thought it, make up some blustering lie to cover his tracks. Pretend that the idea,

obviously so repellent to him, had never even crossed his mind.

But if the answer was yes...

Spike figured, what the hell.

'Yeah. Me and Angelus.'

'Oh.'

There was a whole world put into that one little word. Spike could almost hear the cogs turning in Xander's head as the boy replayed everything that he knew of Angel, updated it with this latest information, cross referenced everything, and then had a startling moment of clarity when a few important things appeared in a harsh new light. The almost-smile lingered on Spike's face. The whelp really hadn't been expecting that one, but then, idle curiosity could be a dangerous thing.

'Me and Angelus. Me and Dru. Dru and Angelus. Me and Dru and Angelus. You could sometimes add Darla to the mix. Or any other hot young thing that came along and took our fancy. Just sprinkle liberally with some nice wholesome incestuous bloodplay, and serve.'

'Oh.'

The one heartbeat in the room was a little faster now, beating out a staccato rhythm deep inside Xander's chest.

'And Buffy?' Xander asked sharply, wanting to steer the conversation back to things that he knew about, that he had witnessed and felt justified in having an opinion about, not realising that he was whispering too. It didn't seem right to make this conversation any louder. It was too private, telling secrets that Xander was suddenly convinced he had known all along.

'Ahh, Buffy,' Spike said, rolling her name around on his tongue as though he could taste the word. 'She's quite a girl that one. I hurt her, I know it.' He smiled bitterly, mirthlessly. 'I'll never forget it. But I loved her so much...' He shook his head. 'I let her beat me. She let me return the favour. I let her break herself on me. Don't know if it was right, but she needed it, needed something, and I... I needed her.'

'And now?'

'Now?' Spike smirked, but his expression seemed curiously empty. 'Now... I don't know. Same thing as if I met Drusilla tomorrow, or Angel for that matter. It was the demon in me who loved them. I feel it too, but I wasn't there.' He tapped his temple lightly, echoing

Xander's earlier gesture. 'Not really. Now I'm the man who has to live with the memories of the beast.' He rolled his head in a tight, controlled motion, a pained expression on his face. 'Handy, how everyone's forgotten that there's a brand new person in here now. I remember myself, a life so long ago, belonging to someone else, but... there's so much of the beast in me. It's hard to remember.'

'So-so what are you looking for? Forgiveness?' Xander was surprised, and yet not surprised, at the venom he could hear in his own voice, but as sharp shoulder blades rose and fell in answer, he noticed that Spike didn't seem to care. Or he was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice about Xander's anger. Or perhaps he had already accepted it, and there was nothing more for him to do. Nothing more that either of them could do but deal with it.

'Maybe. I don't know. Should I have to ask for forgiveness for things that I didn't do? Such horrible, nasty, bloodthirsty things?'

Spike's voice hitched and Xander wondered if he was crying. Wondered if it was wrong to find it fascinating if he was. Remembered the last time he saw Spike cry. When they'd broken all the laws of God and nature, and

brought Buffy back. When Spike grabbed him by the lapels and slammed him into a tree, heedless of the resulting pain from the chip. Blamed him and cursed him and called him out. Took the things that Xander had done wrong and shoved them back in his face. The tears running down Spike's face wordlessly thanking him for what he had done, even though it was wrong, even though they had created an abomination. Even though they had made a mockery of everything that they had ever stood for when they brought back Buffy. A demon making him feel guilty, and worse still, the demon being right.

'You-you did do them. Don't try and say it wasn't your fault.'

'Oh, I did them. I know I did. But there's more to me than the Spike you knew.'

'Don't try and--'

'Imagine,' Spike cut him off, 'just imagine if you disappear tomorrow. Just poof!' He snapped his fingers, then blew through them as though chasing away some insignificant speck of dust. 'Gone. You're gone for a year, or a lifetime, it doesn't matter. You're gone, but someone else has your body. You come back again, and you remember everything they did while you were gone. They've killed,

they've drank, done things you can't even imagine, and they enjoyed it. Your friends, your family, the ones you loved. Innocents. And they *enjoyed* it. They got off on it. They did it again and again and again and again.'

Red rimmed eyes bored into him.

'And they pretended to be you when you weren't here. You hate it, it disgusts you, but it's like you did those things. It feels like it was you it happened to. You remember it all. Their passion, their hatred, their love of the kill, their love of... their love. Every second of it. It's all you know. You're... you're used to it.' Spike placed his fingertips against his temple and *pushed*. 'Thing is, you see, you've come back, but they're still here. Inside your head. Whispering things to you. Such terrible things.'

Xander opened his mouth to answer, but there were no words, only shock, only bitterness, and why -- *why* -- couldn't Spike have told him this when he was thinking clearly, when he could have said that it didn't matter, Spike already had much more acceptance and forgiveness than he would ever... *could* ever deserve, couldn't he see that?

'Things a demon did with my body and I have to remember as though they were my own deeds?' Spike looked down at his hands, rubbing his thumbs

distractedly over the pads of his fingers. 'I mean everything I ever... God, even my very name.' He closed his hand into a fist, until his knuckles turned white, and set his fist very precisely on his knee. 'Spike,' he said softly, raising and lowering his fist just once. 'And it was a hard earned name. Didn't cut any corners in that department.'

He took a breath, his fingers itching for a cigarette. 'Maybe.' His voice was softer now, lips moving with barely any sound at all, and Xander had to strain to hear his words. 'Maybe I'm just looking for acceptance. Understanding. Belief that I'm not the beast I was. ... That maybe... maybe there was more to me than just the beast in the first place.' He looked up suddenly, and eyes glittering in the darkness caught Xander, held him there like a deer in the headlights.

'Why are you telling me all this?' Xander asked, his words running together in a harsh whisper.

Spike actually grinned then, but it didn't reach his eyes, just a flash of white teeth, and it was gone. 'Because you wanted to talk.'

'Talk?' Xander nearly choked on the word. 'This is pretty hefty talk.'

Spike nodded. 'I'm a pretty hefty kind of guy.'

'What do you want from me?'

'Nothing,' was the immediate reply, and Spike tore his gaze away, bringing his free hand to his face, liking the temporary hiding place it offered him. 'Maybe I'm just a man with sharp teeth and a couple of lifetimes worth of bad memories.'

Xander didn't answer. Spike sounded too cynical, too desperate.

Too hopeful.

'Maybe,' Xander heard his own voice saying after a time, devoid of anger, filled with some other nameless emotion, and wondering if he believed it.

Spike was watching him with dubious surprise.

'Maybe,' Xander said again. 'We'll just have to wait and see.'

Xander's whole body was tense. This was new, this... sharing. Except it wasn't, not really. Spike wore his heart on his sleeve for the whole world to see. They'd lived together, whining and complaining about it the entire time. They'd fought together, bitching and moaning

every step of the way. They'd even saved each other's lives, more than once, objecting to the very idea of it, but that was just the way things were. They'd talked to each other, cried on each other, given each other the truth when they needed it, and sometimes when they didn't. But they'd never been friends. Neither of them had looked for it, wanted it, or expected it.

They'd never been friends.

They weren't friends now.

'At least you're alive,' Xander continued. 'Relatively speaking. You have a chance now, to make things right.' There was a flicker of a headache forming just behind his frown. This wasn't the way things were supposed to go. He wasn't supposed to be offering this olive branch. His was the easy job. He was the one who watched, who sat in judgement, just outside of the firing range, a few thousand feet away from ground zero. Safe, warm, most definitely not getting his hands dirty. Black and white. He rubbed his thumb thoughtfully through the smear of whiskey on the lip of his glass.

'Just don't... just don't fuck it up.'

Spike nodded mindfully. Calmly, Xander lifted the bottle in front of them and poured out two generous shots,

shaking the last drops from the bottle, and passed one to Spike, who accepted it in grateful silence.

'The most precious thing we have is life,' Xander said solemnly, raising his glass.

'Yet it has absolutely no trade-in value,' Spike commented, just as solemnly.

Xander's glass wavered in mid-air. 'Don't say that. We don't know that. You don't know that.'

Spike didn't reply, choosing, for once, not to descend into an argument. Just to listen to what the young man had to say without picking holes in it.

Xander seemed to pick up on this and smiled grimly. 'At least we don't have to worry about what happens if you get too happy one day.'

Spike nodded, and there was a sad smile reflected in his eyes. It didn't last long.

'There is that,' he said, and they clinked glasses, and drank.

Part Three

Day Three.

The next day, as Xander lay in bed like a banana, he awoke to something pulling at his arm. Through the early morning fog of his brain, he could hear quiet muttering.

'Come on. Come on. Come on, you little bugger, give.'

'Still attached?' Xander asked, without opening his eyes.

'Ugh,' Spike grunted, and flopped back onto the bed. 'Still attached.'

Xander's stomach flip-flopped. 'Urk. Could you please not rock the bed?'

'Feeling a little tenderised, are we?'

'More like liquidised.'

'Ah.'

'Uh.'

'You know what you need?'

'What?'

'Another drink.'

Xander groaned, and pulled his pillow over his face. Shortly, the pillow was pulled away, and Xander cracked open one bleary eye to take in a truly awful sight. A bored, perky, wide-awake vampire stared back at him. He groaned again and tried to grab back his pillow. Spike held it just out of his grasp, so Xander flung his free arm over his face and tried to sink back into the blissful darkness.

'So. What do you want to do today, then?'

The perky vampire obviously wasn't going to be fobbed off so easily.

'I have to call in sick to work. Plus, y'know, hangover.'

'You mean you actually still have a job? I would have thought showing up more than a day a week was a prerequisite for employees these days.'

'They don't seem to mind at the minute. Or should I say "care"? There's not much construction work to be done, what with the mass exodus out of town an' all.'

'Ah, that might just put a dampener on end of year bonuses, all right.'

Xander nodded dolefully.

'Still,' said Spike brightly, 'just think. When we save the world, there's just *bound* to be lots of buildings knocked over. Great, gaping holes in the road opening into hell dimensions and the like. When everyone comes home and sees the structural damage that's been done to their homes in the name of the ultimate battle twixt good and evil, the money'll come rolling in.'

'Are you... are you trying to make me feel better?'

'No,' said Spike quickly.

Xander waited in his self-imposed darkness, expecting more, but there was only silence. They lay there for a while, Xander hiding behind his arm, Spike propped up on one elbow, listening to the sounds of silence in Xander's apartment building. It was strange. There were so few people left to make all those everyday sounds that went hand in hand with the living. With the thing they laughingly called "civilisation". No phones ringing, no murmur of voices, no footsteps or babies crying. There was a faint gurgle of running water, and a radio had been left on somewhere in the building. That was all. Nothing else. If things continued on like this, they really would be the only ones left in town.

The only ones left to fight.

An image of a fight to the death with The First and its minions flashed through Spike's mind. A battle played out on Main Street, in an insignificant ghost town in modern day America, situated above the mouth of hell. A town abandoned by its inhabitants when they finally woke up after years of existing in a dream state; blindness and apathy their only weapons against the dark magics that had been dancing around them for generations. He would fight side by side with the Slayer and the group of silly little girls brave enough and stupid enough to stand at her side. He would fight with them and for them, and he wouldn't quit, and he would *earn* something that he didn't yet possess. A faint smile toyed with the curve of his lower lip. It was coming. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but it was coming. Soon. They all knew it. It was in the air they breathed, it was under the ground they walked on. Waiting to devour them whole.

He could almost feel the rush of the fight, the clash of blades, the scent of blood in the air.

It was a good place to be.

But then, so was this.

'You planning on getting up any time soon?' he asked eventually, growing tired of examining the length of

Xander's arm, and trying not to notice the subtle shades of the human's hair peeking out from under it.

Wondering how much was natural, and how much was lightened from walking in the Californian sun.

'I dunno,' came a gravelly voice from underneath the arm. 'What time is it?'

'About three.'

'In the morning!?!'

'Nope, p.m.'

'Crap. Guess it's a little late to be calling in sick.'

'Guess so. So, can we get up now?'

'What for?'

'For nursing your hangover, ordering pizza, watching telly? And don't forget, I get to pick what we watch.'

'I guess,' sighed Xander. 'Oh yeah, and may I request no demons, no leaving the house for any reason, and did I mention, no demons?'

Spike smiled. 'How about a drink?'

Another stomach flip-flop.

'Don't even joke about that. I think my stomach would do the dance of a thousand toilet bowls if I even attempted another drink. May we never, *never* have a repeat performance of last night.'

Spike nodded slowly, suddenly serious, and rolled over onto his back to studiously examine his fingernails.

'Listen, Xander, about last night.'

All at once, behind closed eyes, Xander was wide-awake. He was acutely conscious of the seriousness of Spike's tone, remembering what they had talked about the night before. Remembering how he had accepted what the vampire had told him, but most of all, he was suddenly, startlingly aware of Spike's hand on his chest, resting gently on the side of his ribcage; the hand having drifted while they slept as Xander wrapped his own arm around himself. The cool skin of the back of the vampire's loosely curled fist rested inches below Xander's right nipple. He felt his heart rate pick up and knew that Spike would be aware of it, too.

'You don't have to--'

'Don't worry,' Spike cut him off, 'I'm not going to get all weepy on you or anything, I just wanted to say thanks for listening. I didn't expect to find a shoulder to cry on this weekend, least of all from you, so I appreciate it.' Spike

paused, seemingly fascinated by a loose thread on the corner of his pillow. 'That's all.'

The arm covering Xander's face was removed, and he blinked against the relative brightness of his room. 'Oh,' he said softly. 'Yeah, well, you're welcome. I guess I should say thanks, too.'

'What for?'

'For yesterday. The stinky demon. You pretty much saved me.'

'All I did was yank you around the place and keep you out of harms way.'

'Hence the emphasis on you *pretty much* saving me.'

'Right. So we're all square, then?'

'Yeah. We're practically rectangular. Just don't think this means we're friends or anything.'

'Oh, no, bloody hell, of course not. Couldn't have that.'

'Absolutely.'

'Ridiculous notion.'

They both shook their heads energetically.

'Right then,' said Spike. 'Glad we got that sorted.'

~*~*~*~*~

Peeling himself out of bed, Xander followed Spike to the bathroom with the minimum amount of fuss. He stood, seeing only himself in the mirror, as Spike rooted around in his meagre toiletry supply and extracted a mangled tube of toothpaste from the clutter. Squeezing some paste onto his finger, the vampire set about cleaning his teeth. Shaking his head at the odd domesticity of it all, and trying not to look too closely at the unpleasant sight of his own blurry reflection, Xander reached across, grabbed his toothbrush and diligently brushed his own teeth. Some manner of small woodland mammal had apparently crawled into his mouth while he slept and choked to death on the toxic alcohol fumes, leaving him to try scraping it off his tongue with the bristles.

They had almost fallen into a routine by this stage, wordlessly moving together, the tugs on the cuffs becoming less frequent, used more for mildly irritating one another than an actual need to communicate movement. Spike held his left hand out without having to be asked, giving Xander the slack he needed to clean his

teeth, and when it came time to spit, they took turns, Xander mutely turning on the tap to let the water swirl the frothy toothpaste away. Throwing his toothbrush back into its mug, Xander cupped his hands under the running water, and splashed it over his face and chest, managing to spray Spike in the process. Something juvenile and completely unsquashable inside Xander made him fight back a grin, and do it again, as though he hadn't noticed the first time, only stopping because he just didn't think his brain could process the concept of having a water fight with Spike.

At least, not this early in the day.

At the sound of a low warning growl, Xander turned off the taps and hid his grin behind the towel he used to mop his face, running it down over his chest and under his arms. Feeling a little more refreshed, he tossed the towel into the bath and they wandered out, heading towards the living room for a hard day of sitting around and doing nothing in particular.

'You want to order food?' asked Spike.

Xander nodded, his mission clear. 'Phone. Pizza. Movie. Couch. In that order. That's the plan, and no deviation from the plan will be tolerated,' he said in no uncertain

terms. 'Except for maybe just a hint of couch in between stages.'

'Phone,' said Spike, grabbing the phone without pausing and handing it to Xander. 'No garlic, extra pineapple.'

'Movie?' Xander asked as they reached the television.

'Don't care. Something good. Nothing with vampires or Klingons.'

'Matrix?'

'That'll do.'

Smoothly inserting the tape, and having to quickly squelch that tiny inner squeal of excitement at the prospect of seeing Jonathan in action that *still* attacked every time he watched this particular movie, Xander hit play and they rounded the coffee table to land on the couch, stage four of their plan complete.

The pizza was ordered (after only having to call five different places before they found one that both answered their phone and agreed to deliver) delivered (sadly within twenty-nine minutes as always, so the pizza boy still required payment), paid for (with Spike hiding ineffectually behind the door, actually earning them a look of less surprise than the time Anya had ordered

pizza and not bothered getting dressed to pay for it) and devoured. Keanu Reeves took the red pill, discovered that he knew kung fu, and ran about looking cool in shades and wearing too much PVC. Several loud belches later and a bottle of beer appeared in front of Xander's face.

'I don't know if I can,' he said, almost regretfully, eyeing the bottle Spike handed him as though it might suddenly bite.

'Well, I figure, after the rousing success of yesterday's little venture into the outside world, that your original plan of "hole up, get good and sozzled and not come out 'til we absolutely have to" was probably for the best.'

'Hmm.' Xander took a slug from his bottle, and the cool beer sliding down his throat at four o'clock in the afternoon wasn't as repellent as he expected. 'Maybe you have a point.'

'Course I do, mate. I'm always right. Even when I'm wrong. Cheers.'

They clinked bottles and drank in silence for a while, watching the movie. Three beers later and Xander missed the edge of the table when he tried to set his bottle down.

'I think I'm a little buzzed again,' he admitted, just as Keanu was realising that there was, in fact, no spoon.

'Bet your hangover's gone, though.'

Xander blinked slowly and rolled his eyes in thought as he checked for his headache, suddenly noticeable in its absence. Dry mouth, nope. Queasiness, nope. All systems go. Normal body functions present and accounted for. A little shaky on the hand-eye co-ordination, but hey, a man can't have everything. He squinted at his bottle, and the seemingly innocent pale liquid it contained, trying to figure out if this was a good thing or not. 'Isn't this like the first step down the slippery slope to Alcoholics-ville?'

'Nah,' Spike dismissed this with an idle wave of his hand, bumping lightly against Xander's hip. 'This is just a little hair of the dog that bit you.'

Xander's gaze flickered to the hand that had just casually touched him. The look took less than a second, but it was enough time for his brain to leap headlong into several well concocted and fleshed out scenarios that he was pretty sure he would have been happier not considering.

'I think I got bit by a pretty big dog. We're talking Cujo. Beethoven. Or at least Lassie.'

'Lassie, huh?' Spike raised an appraising eyebrow.

'Sounds serious. Maybe we can just put it down to Lost Weekend Syndrome, and leave it at that.'

'Works for me,' Xander said, retrieving his bottle, and he sunk another long swallow of his beer.

A slight frown seemed to have attached itself to Xander's face after that. They watched the movie, Spike enjoying the normality of it all, playing pretend at being just another guy for an afternoon, handcuffs notwithstanding. He let everything else just fade away, concentrating on not very much at all, losing himself in the plot of the movie. The knowledge that real life was looming, as always, just around the corner was banished for a few hours to a place where it couldn't bother him.

Xander's frown deepened. The sounds from the television were annoying him. Every time Spike took a drink it jostled him slightly, bringing back the knowledge that he was chained to this vampire, and he had just accepted it. Something was rising up inside of him, fuelled by the beer that was going down far too easily. Something that made the muscles in his shoulders bunch up, and made him bounce his feet restlessly against the floor. This was all too easy, and it shouldn't have been, and it just wasn't in his nature to accept like this. He liked

to bitch and fight and complain and why the hell was he kicking back with *Spike* of all people like it was no big deal?

'What is this?' he asked suddenly.

Spike grimaced when he heard the tone of Xander's voice. 'What is it now?'

'What are we doing?'

'Drinking beer. Watching movies. Thought it was pretty obvious.'

'Yeah, I know that, but why?'

'Cause we're handcuffed together, you stupid berk.'

'So?'

'So?' Spike shifted his weight so he could look Xander in the eye. 'So what else would you have us do? You wanna go back to fighting? Is that it? Because honestly, I've had it up to here with--'

'Stop, stop,' Xander waved his bottle in the air between them. 'I don't want to fight. I just...' he rolled his neck uncomfortably, 'had a moment, y'know? It's weird that we're here. ... Hanging.'

Spike heard the confusion in Xander's voice and backed off a little. 'Like what friends do, you mean.'

'Yeah, except--'

'Except we're not?'

Xander's expression faltered, his gaze flitting down to the bottle in his hands. 'Yeah. We're not.'

Spike leaned back into the couch, took another slug of his beer, and scratched distractedly at his forehead. The scratch turned into a rub as he tried to figure out exactly what Xander expected of him. 'I never asked to be your friend, mate.'

'Isn't that like a double negative?' asked Xander.

Spike stared at him with deepening confusion. 'What?'

'Saying you're not my friend, then calling me "mate"?'

Resisting the urge to thwap Xander over the head, Spike instead drained his beer, unconsciously highlighting the sweeping arcs of his cheeks, while silently counting to ten, and dropped the bottle carelessly over the side of the couch to the floor. 'So. What now? You don't really want to fight with me, but to make yourself feel better

you have to keep ramming it down my throat how much you hate me. Is that it?'

'Don't.'

'Don't what?'

'Don't hate you.'

'Huh.' Spike spread the fingers of his free hand over his flat stomach, suddenly very much interested in what Xander had to say. 'Is that a fact?'

'Don't think so. Not any more. Don't like you, either, but you were right.'

'I was? I mean, yeah, 'course I was. Goes without saying. Uh, what about?'

'Last night. What you said. I've been thinking about it. I think...' He looked up without raising his head and met Spike's eye. 'I think maybe you were right.'

'Yeah? We talkin' about second chances, yeah?'

'Yeah. Souls and new lives and redemption and all that stuff. I guess there's some stuff you really can't help, and some stuff you... learn to overcome.'

'So you sayin' you were wrong?'

'No,' Xander said slowly. 'Maybe. I don't know.'

Spike watched him for a moment, curious about Xander's discomfort, then let out a quiet breath of laughter. 'Kills you to admit this, doesn't it?'

'No.' Xander took another swallow of his beer and shrugged. 'Maybe. I don't know.'

'Listen, I'll make you a deal,' offered Spike.

'I'm listening.'

'Lost Weekend Syndrome. Whatever we had to do to get through it -- potty breaks, showers, drinking sessions, group hugs, the works -- I won't bring it up again if you won't. How's that sound?'

Xander regarded him curiously. 'Sounds okay.'

He smiled, a little hesitantly, and raised his beer in salute. Spike lifted his hand to show that it was empty and nodded towards the floor where his empty bottle lay.

'Dead soldier.'

Toying with the thought of making a very inappropriate joke about a certain Initiative soldier that the old Spike would have thought was hilarious, he instead settled for

a private smile and reached forward to grab another two beers from their rapidly decreasing stockpile.

Quickly finishing off his beer, Xander accepted the fresh one with a faint smile.

'It's been an interesting weekend,' he said.

Spike took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'You can say that again.'

'It's been an interesting weekend.'

'Wanker.'

'Right back at'cha.'

'Bet you don't even know what it means.'

'No,' Xander admitted, 'but I don't think it's a compliment.'

'Whatever gave you that idea?' asked Spike, laying on the sarcasm thickly.

'Asshole.'

'Nonce.'

'Shit-head.'

'Fuckwit.'

'Donkey raping shit eater.'

Spike's eyebrows crawled up his forehead. 'Donkey raping shit eater? That's a first.'

Xander shrugged. 'Terrence and Philip. It's a highly educational experience.'

'Ah.'

They took their first sip of the new beers and Xander tilted his head curiously. 'Spike? Aren't you hungry?'

'Not really.' Spike patted his stomach. 'Half a pizza fills a space, know what I mean?'

'No, no, not pizza. I mean blood. Don't you need to eat?'

Spike toyed with the corner of the label on his bottle.

'Nah. I don't have to drink every day. Helps keep me big and strong, but I'm a big boy now. I'm old.' A faraway smile appeared on his face. 'I'll survive.'

'Oh. Okay. Just... if it gets too much, we can go buy some if you like.'

'Thanks, but like I said, I'll survive.'

Spike shifted again on the couch, letting the television recapture his attention, and so the conversation was drawn to a close.

~*~*~*~*~

The battle for the last beer.

The movie ended, but the closing credits ran until the music ended, both parties agreeing that turning off Rage Against the Machine early was always a bad idea. Goodfellas was the next choice of film, and it was watched mostly in silence. This time when the screen turned to black, Xander flicked the station back to music videos, which they watched passing comments back and forth like Beavis and Butthead, slamming those they didn't like, and defending or cheering those they did.

A stalemate had been reached. Past conflicts set carefully to one side, ready to be reached for in an instant should the situation merit it, but for the time being, forgotten. An unspoken agreement, but a significant one for both of them.

The last beer sat innocuously enough on the coffee table for almost twenty minutes before they both made a grab

for it at exactly the same moment. Spike got there first and sat back with a triumphant smirk on his face. Xander let out a huff of annoyance as the bottle top hit the floor, and he heard rather than saw Spike take his first long drink from the bottle.

With a long, sideways glance he saw the loose grip Spike had on the bottle cradled against his stomach. Xander considered his options. Decision made, a sneaky, underhanded little smile lit his face. Without warning, Xander lunged. The bottle almost left Spike's hand before the vampire realised what was happening, but just in time his grip tightened. Xander knew there was no way he'd be able to take it by brute force, so he opted for a combination of twisting the bottle away and using his feet for leverage against the vampire's thighs. Attempts were made at keeping thumbs over the mouth of the bottle to prevent spillage, but at some point hands were dislodged, causing a stream of foam to surge out of the bottle and splatter over the wooden floor. Then it was Spike's turn to lunge, trying to keep the bottle under the spray of foam, as though to try and stop the precious drops from escaping, even as they both knew it was a wasted effort as the laws of physics simply didn't work that way.

They ended up practically lying together on the couch, each with one damp, handcuffed fist wrapped securely around the bottle held high over their heads.

'Why you little...!'

Then the battle truly began, and Spike had the advantage, lying on top, but Xander knew a thing or two about fighting dirty and playing the underdog, so the struggle went on. Somewhere along the line, the fight morphed from serious to friendly to absurd. One of them laughed, they weren't entirely sure who broke down first, and then the ridiculousness of the situation kicked in and they were giggling -- two grown men, enemies, reluctant allies, housemates -- giggling together in a way that they never had before, as they wrestled over a beer. Every time Spike was convinced that he'd won, Xander twisted and wriggled under his grasp, shaking the beer until they were fighting over a mostly empty bottle filled with an inch of foam, but neither of them seemed to notice.

A sudden realisation of the position that they were in, lying chest to chest, hands grabbing at hands, faces inches apart, and they stilled, a frozen snapshot of time.

~*~*~*~*~

Abruptly, the room swings, and everything changes. Xander's smile hits the brakes and comes to a screeching halt, and he can actually *see* the realisation hit Spike barely a split-second afterwards. Something has changed, something important, perhaps even life altering, and it crackles like electricity in the air around them.

Spike is looking down at him and he's frowning, but not moving. Mouth open, like he was in the middle of taking a breath, but someone hit the pause button because now his body is deathly still. Xander can't help but notice how he isn't pushing the vampire away anymore, and he swallows nervously, watching how Spike's gaze flits to his throat to track the movement and back to his eyes. There's panic there, heavy, dangerous, intoxicating panic, but still neither of them has moved. It can only have been a few seconds, certainly not more than that, and yet the moment has been stretched out into something much longer.

They stare into each other's eyes and see their own thoughts there, reflected back at them.

Bad, bad, bad idea. Too soon, way too soon, and much, much, much too much to even *think* about

contemplating, to even consider, and besides, insanity to think that they could do this and walk away from it without being affected, for better or for worse. It's the booze working its magic, or it's the bizarre circumstances of this weekend, or it's the end-of-the-world vibe in the air making them all crazy again, or it's the cuffs. The damn cuffs, it has to be. The cuffs that are the only reason that they're even still here together.

If it wasn't for the cuffs, they would never--

Over their heads, there is a dull click, and then a snick-snick-snick of metal.

Together they look up in time to see the handcuffs slide from their wrists and fall to the floor. As one, they recoil in shock and release their grip on the beer bottle. It joins the cuffs on the floorboards, landing with a ching-thud and rolls away, forgotten and unimportant, under a vacant chair.

Spike is the first to look back down, his tongue darting out to lick his lips, and just for a second Xander is certain -- he's *certain* -- but Spike is drawing away, taking that coolness away from where their chests were pressed together. Xander feels much more naked than he did even when they were in the shower together, and oh god, this is so not the time to be thinking of a wet, naked

Spike with suds running smoothly over those shoulders and that chest and those long fingers working their way through his hair...

Spike who is now sitting as far away as he can get on the end of the couch, rubbing fingertips over his freed wrist, and conspicuously not looking at Xander. Taking one, two, three little breaths, Xander sits up, reaches out and tentatively touches a cool, bare shoulder. Spike hunches over a little at the touch, but obediently looks up and Xander blinks when he sees fear and regret there.

'Sorry,' Spike says immediately. 'For... and for not... just... sorry.'

He looks away again, about to stand up. Xander can tell by the way the muscles are bunching in his shoulders, by the way he's leaning forward. And he knows that he can let Spike stand up and walk away and he'll be left sitting on the couch. He'll be safe here and they can both pretend that they weren't looking at each other like that -- was it really less than a minute ago? They can both pretend that this weekend never happened and they can go back to hating one another with gusto and no one will ever have to (... *suspect*...) know a thing because that's the way things like this work. That's the way it *has* to work.

All Xander has to do is let him stand up and walk away.

Instead he reaches out a hand, his right hand because he's finally free, *free*, and amazingly the word isn't as glorious as it sounded three short days ago, and he touches the sharp curve of Spike's cheek. It's a soft touch, but it has the desired effect, because Spike isn't leaving anymore. He's looking at Xander. He looks scared, and if that isn't crazy Xander doesn't know what is. Spike doesn't have anything to be scared of here, he's the vampire in the room after all. Xander is just... Xander. Just the human guy. It's been drummed into him his entire life. He's nothing special. Except that's not entirely true anymore, and Xander isn't a big enough fool not to recognise that, no matter what his stunted growth of an ego might tell him, but still -- right here, right now, he's just a guy.

Touching the curve of a vampire's cheek.

And there's a cold tear sloping down to dampen his fingers.

'Xan... I don't... don't deserve...'

'Shhh.'

Have to make him stop talking. Stop him whispering and stumbling over those heartbreaking words. Talking

means that he has to think. Has to think about the future and about consequences and rhyme and reason and can't Spike see that none of that matters when all that matters is *now*?

And Xander is leaning in closer. Close enough to smell him now, and if he can smell Spike, who doesn't, just for the record, smell like a daisy either, then Spike's senses must be swimming with him. He must be able to smell Xander's uncertainty, Xander's fear, Xander's... heat. Yeah, there's more than one type of heat and that's here too; buckets of it, rising in Xander's body and he wonders if Spike can feel it. Decides that Spike, being a vampire, must be able to, but then he sees Spike shiver and it doesn't make any sense to him at all.

Something tickly and a little scared twists in his stomach as he inhales. He can smell his own shampoo on Spike, and there's something so new and *enticing* about the thought of his shampoo being worn by another man, and then there's the beer smell that surrounds both of them like a cloud, and the faintest tang of tobacco from Spike's skin. Spike's skin that he's still touching, only with the tips of his fingers, but the contact hasn't been broken, and is it his imagination or is Spike leaning into the touch now?

No. No, he's not.

He's leaning towards Xander, all the way in, until barely an inch separates them.

'Xander...'

'Shhh.'

Then one of them moves and the distance between them is closed.

Their lips meet softly, chastely at first, and behind closed eyes Xander blinks in shock. Spike watches this with something akin to wonder, and when his eyes drift closed another solitary tear rolls down his cheek.

A cold hand hovers in the air, hesitating, then settles on Xander's shoulder, making them both jump, but giving Xander the encouragement he needs to press his palm to Spike's chest, the heel of his hand making contact with a pebbled nipple. Xander feels goosebumps break out in a rush over his own skin when he hears Spike groan softly at the touch. Encouragement and daring are good, welcoming things because when Spike opens his mouth to groan, Xander slips his tongue in -- an act of daring that makes his body lurch with fear, sure he's misreading this, sure he's going to be roughly shoved away at any minute -- to taste the mouth of the killer that he made

cry this weekend. The vampire who drank with him. The man with sharp teeth and a couple of lifetimes worth of bad memories who is... kissing him back, tongue sliding velvety cool against his own.

Suddenly there is a hand on his other shoulder and Xander is being pushed away. Held at arm's length and regarded curiously, and it's all he can do not to cringe under the intense scrutiny. There is a flash of the madness in Spike's eyes and Xander wonders how healed the vampire could truly be after only a few months of his new life. How he can be walking and talking and acting like a man for them, and how much of it is playacting for their benefit.

'What are you doing?'

There's a lot in that question.

'Um, kissing you?'

And he can feel the burning blush rising to his cheeks because he just put what they were doing into actual *words*. For as long as he lives he'll be able to remember the way those damning words sounded in the air. Uncertain and nervous, and irredeemably, irrefutably, irrevocably true.

'Why?'

A very good question. Why is he doing this? This is Spike. It's *Spike*. Spike who he has hated for years. Spike, who slept with Buffy and tried to rape her because she could never love him the way that he loved her. Spike, who slept with Anya and ruined Xander's life just a little bit more than he'd already ruined it for himself. Spike, who stood by and cheered as Drusilla killed Kendra. Spike, who kidnapped him and Willow, and has hurt him and knocked him out and threatened to kill him and everyone else he knows more times than he can count.

Spike, who tried to kill them all.

Except it isn't.

This is a new Spike, who is so very, very like the old Spike that it makes Xander's stomach flutter just a little bit more to think about it, but with one glaring difference.

(... man with sharp teeth and a couple of lifetime's worth of bad memories...)

A clean slate. A new life to lead. Mistakes to be made up for.

Xander wishes suddenly that Spike were wearing a shirt so that he could grab fistfuls of it and drag him closer. Instead he settles for sinking his fingers into soft, blond

waves that caress his fingers like cool silk, and he gently tugs the vampire towards him.

'Because I want you.'

'You do?' Spike voice sounds breathless to him, but genuinely confused.

'Oh yeah,' is Xander's reply, and then there is no more talking.

This time their kiss isn't chaste. It's wet and hot and deep. All those good things that kisses should always be. Moans and grunted encouragements and half-finished sentences and then suddenly, wordlessly, Xander stands, breaking their kiss. Spike looks up at him, lips swollen, blue eyes glazed.

Xander holds out his hand. Spike takes it and is pulled to his feet. Then there are new sensations to discover and new places for hands to wander and explore as they stand in the centre of Xander's apartment, bare-chested and alone/together and oblivious to the rest of the world.

Xander smiles into the kiss. This is good. This is better than good. This is... more than he had ever expected. He has wondered before, not often, but on occasion he will admit to himself that he has at least wondered, and now

he knows. He knows what it's like to kiss a man, and he knows what it's like to be kissed back. What it's like to be touched.

By Spike.

Spike who is placing an open mouthed kiss to his jaw, his throat, his shoulder and is running his fingertips down the length of Xander's arms, slowly, maddeningly, until Xander's toes curl into the floor.

As their hands meet, Spike raises his head to look Xander in the eye. He lifts their joined hands, and without breaking eye contact, brings Xander's bruised wrist to his lips. He runs his tongue gently over the inside of the wrist in wordless apology for all the times he tugged the metal against fragile human skin, over the little patch of flesh where the blood runs the fastest, pumps the hardest. The cool, wet touch is like a balm to him, yet Xander wants more pressure, wants more friction, wants *more*. With his free hand -- except now they're both free -- he pushes against Spike's chest, and this time Spike doesn't complain, letting himself be moved, so that they're stumbling backwards, kissing, out of the living room.

A succession of shuffling footsteps, with many pauses along the way, and they find themselves back in Xander's bedroom, where they have spent the last two nights

together. Xander is practically *thrown* onto the mattress and lands with a whoof of air. He looks up to see Spike leaning over the edge of the bed, reaching for him with a terrified lust burning brightly in his eyes. Cold hands are curling into fists around the waistband of Xander's sweat pants and inching them down over his hips, silently asking permission with every inch.

A bright stab of fear when Xander realises that this is actually happening, he's actually going to do this with Spike, and the pale hands still, halfway down his hips.

'Xander?'

The reply is a smile and Xander lifts his hips. Spike returns the smile and quickly divests first Xander and then himself of the remains of their clothing. Then he pauses and they stare at one another, each silently comparing differences, taking deep breaths at the sight of the other laid bare before them, so, so different to the awkward time spent in the shower. The strangeness of being separated. The inexplicable choice they have made, and the understanding that they, in return, were chosen. The knowledge that either one of them could walk away from this, that they could be alone for the first time in a very long weekend, but all they want is to be closer, chained together again inside this moment and

never let go. Then Spike is crawling up the bed, dropping wet, lingering, bold kisses along Xander's thighs and belly, making him squirm and raise his hips, looking for attention in the areas that Spike is studiously ignoring.

Then they are together, clinging together on the bed, bodies rubbing together, hands gripping shoulders, hips, thighs. Greedy kisses and shared breaths. Xander twists handfuls of the sheets when Spike finally rises above him, determined and beautiful, and Xander's body, pulled taut like a bowstring, leans into the caress. Spike is touching him everywhere, and it's heaven and his heart is going to explode out of his chest and it's too much and it's not enough and he's never been touched like this before, with such certainty, such reverence, and it can't go on like this forever, he can't possibly last... and then Spike isn't touching him anymore, only hovering above him, looking down at him with impossibly blue eyes.

'Spike.' The word comes out like a whisper, and he knows he's whining, begging, imploring.

'Yeah?'

He can't be teasing him now. Not now. It's just not fair to do that to people.

'Are you trying to kill me?'

That actually makes Spike smile. 'Not today, no.'

Xander lets go of his death grip on the sheets and gives up trying to press his body up into Spike's. Instead he grabs at narrow hips and flips them on the bed, insinuating himself between Spike's thighs and sliding their bodies together, pressing his erection, hard, into the curve of Spike's hip.

'Then stop teasing me.'

'M'not teasing you. Want this to last, that's all.'

'Oh.'

Unable to stop the soft smile lifting the corners of his mouth, Xander leans down for a kiss, squirming against the hands cupping his shoulders, mapping the bumps of his spine, tracing random circles lower and lower over the small of his back, scratching lightly over his buttocks. Then there are fingers ghosting lightly down the crease where no one has ever touched before, teasing, exploring, separating, until cold fingers are pressed intimately against the opening of his body and he is torn between the urge to simply knock Spike's hands away because he can't do this -- he just *can't* -- and the urge to press back into the touch, because he *wants* this. He settles for biting down on Spike's tongue, releasing him

only when the vampire gasps in pleasure. Xander hides his face in the crook of Spike's neck, licking the indiscriminate patch of skin where shoulder becomes throat.

Uncertainty suffused with warmth.

'Spike, I've never... I mean, I don't think I'm ready for...'

'Oh.' Spike runs his free hand almost absently over Xander's back as he thinks this over. Xander glances up and there's a look in Spike's eyes that he can't quite read. A look, perhaps, of things yet to come. 'Oh, okay then. You do me.'

'Me...?' Spike's fingers slip-slide, and Xander finds it necessary to clear his throat, as squeaking his words at this point seems somehow inappropriate. 'I-I've also never...'

Spike's answer is a wicked grin, unseen as Xander tries to burrow back into his throat. 'It's like falling off a log, nothing to it.'

'Falling off a log, huh?' Xander relaxes into the words. The smile he can hear takes the edge off the seriousness of what is happening, so it can be packaged up and examined at a later date. For now there is only the lift of

his head and an easy smile in return. 'Okay, then. I suppose I could give it a whirl.'

All the while Spike's fingers are circling, teasing, and Xander isn't sure that he can get his lower body to work at all just at the moment. Then the fingers are withdrawn and Xander almost whimpers at the loss of touch, but there are new places to go and new things to try, and Spike is a malleable tapestry, woven in steel, laid out for his lips and hands to explore.

Pale, smooth skin tastes like smoke in the rain, and Xander knows that he will never forget his flavour.

Spike is pulling him closer, and Xander is vaguely aware of the shaking strength in those slender, fragile looking fingers as muscles that could break him in half bunch and flex under white skin.

'Xander. Please.'

'Don't want to hurt you. Shouldn't I--'

'You don't need to.'

Words reach his ears like they have to swim through jelly to reach him.

'What?'

'Vampire, remember?' A lazy, predatory smile and gold rimmed eyes remind Xander of that fact better than any words could.

'How could I forget?'

'You shouldn't.'

The smile is gone as easily as it appeared.

Xander reaches up and takes hold of a handful of blond hair, taking time to wonder at the unruly curls adorning Spike's head and how the hell Spike manages to beat them into submission every day.

'I won't.'

And he kisses the place where the smile briefly touched, and the mouth under his responds, wet and open and Xander wants more.

'What was the question again?'

Spike is arching up underneath him, wrapping one leg around to rest behind Xander's bent knees and pull him closer, pull him off balance, frustrated that Xander has stopped moving, stopped kissing him to talk.

'Fucked if I know,' he complains, trying to drag Xander back down for another kiss, but Xander has never been one for simple, unquestioning compliance.

Warm hands spread over pale, sculpted abdominal muscles. One hand drifting to read the braille of Spike's ribs, the other moving south, tracing circles and nonsense words over Spike's sensitive skin until it finds what it is looking for. He closes his hand around the hard column of flesh, slick with precum, and slides it up and down, real slow, relishing the way Spike's hips jerk up against the touch.

'I think I remember the question,' Xander murmurs against parted, panting lips, and the knowledge that he has made Spike breathe is a thing to be savoured.

'Yeah?' Spike's answer sounds almost bitter, like a challenge, but when the vampire blinks hard and looks up at him, Xander knows the real answer.

'Yeah,' said Xander, wondering if he can judge from Spike's reaction if he is doing this right.

When the body straining under his howls and bites down on his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood, Xander gets his answer in a gush of fluid over his hand. Smiling against the pain of his lip, Xander just has time to draw in

a gasp of air before he finds himself flat on his back with icy blue eyes, flecked with amber, staring down at him.

His hands have been knocked away, but they're tingling, wet and sticky, and he glances at his hand. His free hand. And it suddenly occurs to him what that pale liquid is, and without even thinking about it, he brings his fingers to his mouth and sucks on them, foreign/familiar taste exploding across his tongue, even as he stares coquettishly up at Spike from under his lashes.

He hears his own name rumble up through Spike's chest in a low growl.

Blue eyes are so close to him now, staring down intently as a tongue darts out to lick away the tiniest smear of red from Xander's lower lip. He just has time to see Spike's pupils flare and then they are kissing again.

For just a second the insanity of what is happening crashes down around him again. The gay thing. The vampire thing. The Spike thing. And the soul, never forget the heavy burden on the soul. He's flirting and fucking, when there should only be fighting. There is a sudden flood of panic and Spike must be able to read it in his body, must be able to see it in his eyes, because the smile is back again, subdued and cautious, but it's there, and it's all for Xander.

Spike's hand is back on his cock, and all rational thought flies out of the window.

'The things you do...'

Xander's eyes flutter closed as he lets Spike touch him, lets Spike devour him, lets Spike's voice seduce him, even though he knows at this point he doesn't need to be seduced. He's in this for the duration, insanity or not. This is good, and it's here, and it's right, and it's--

Another strangled moan as he discovers exactly what it feels like to be deep-throated by a vampire.

Wonders, when he can snatch a fragment of coherent thought, how he's managed to last this long. Finds it within himself to be able to be glad for the recent, unfulfilling "goodbye sex" and realises that another circle has been closed.

Is there anyone here that hasn't slept together?

Suddenly not liking this ill-timed stroll down recent memory lane and needs to see the person he's currently fucking. Needs to look him in the eye.

'Spike?'

Inside a heartbeat, Spike is lying beside him again.

'Yeah, love?'

Spike just called him "love" and that is so Buffy's territory and that can't be right, but it is, and it happened, and Xander files it away in the ever-expanding box of things to be examined at a later date.

'I want...'

'What do you want?'

'I want...'

It's actually difficult to force the words out against the way his stomach is clenching and his thighs ache and his muscles are all mixed up with his nerves, and nothing can figure out where it's supposed to be or what it's supposed to be doing.

'I mean... can I fuck you now?'

A beautiful, honest smile that Xander has never seen before. Surprised to think that it's directed at him now. It's all for him.

'Thought you'd never ask.'

They move on the bed so they're kneeling together, Spike's back pressed up against the warm chest behind him, and Xander takes the time to trace the length of

Spike's body, stretched out for him, supple and willing. The muscles he grazes are corded steel, yet they move under Xander's hands, bending for him. He reaches one hand around and takes hold of Spike's cock, heavy and hard and ready -- gotta love that vampire turnaround time -- squeezing too gently for the vampire's liking, but Xander knows what he's doing. He rests the palm of his other hand flat against Spike's shoulder blade and pushes, so that Spike bends over in front of him. Xander is stroking him like a cat, noting how Spike presses into the touch, silently begging for more, so he squeezes the cock harder, drags his blunt nails along the pale length of back and is rewarded with a drawn out hiss of pleasure.

He presses his body into Spike's, enjoying the sweet sensation of pressure, knowing that more is to come, and that this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Spike's whole body is panting beneath him when Xander realises something.

'Damn.'

'Xander? What...?'

Frozen in his isolation, Spike is sure, so sure, that Xander has realised what they're doing, realised it's wrong, improper, and has left him there, open and exposed and

alone. It's only right, it's only fitting, it was only a matter of time. Spike should just accept it, gather the tattered shreds of his pride and slink away into a dark corner to lick his wounds. But it's not right, it's not fair, because he wanted this, and thought that he had found understanding, a connection, a want that equalled his own. Should have learnt his lesson by now because no one ever wants him, not really. Should get up now, run away, hide, but he doesn't think he could control his shaking, needy body enough to get off the bed if he tried.

Xander has leapt off the bed and is rooting through his bedside drawer. Finding what he is looking for, he returns to the bed, triumphant. He runs a hand along the alabaster spine laid out before him, and with the other, flips the lid of the tube he retrieved from his drawer.

Spike's head is hung low, so Xander misses the haunted expression that melts away seconds after he starts touching the vampire again.

'Xander...'

'Shhh,' Xander tells him, and bends forward to kiss the spine that he has warmed with his touch.

'You didn't leave.'

'Of course not. Not going anywhere.'

An elastic moment later and he is prepared, holding his breath, pushing forward at the entrance into Spike's body. They both hiss in pain? pleasure? longing? when he slides out of place and underneath Spike's body. Xander rocks back and forth once, twice, three times, until he feels another tremor run through the cool body beneath him, then he takes hold of his cock and positions himself again.

This time when he pushes forward, the tip of his cock breaches the tight ring of muscle and he realises with a start that he's inside Spike. He's really *inside* him, and he's going to fuck him. This is happening. This is really happening. He clenches the muscles in his thighs and buttocks, trying to keep his control, but it's not easy when sweat is running into his eyes, and Spike has started making desperate, keening sounds and is trying to push back against him. Tossing his hair back out of his eyes, Xander takes hold of the narrow hips in front of him, and with no further warning, pushes all the way in, until his body is flush against the back of Spike's thighs.

As their bodies touch in this most intimate of ways, Spike rises up onto his knees with a shout, twisting around to grab a handful of Xander's hair and smash their mouths together in a searing kiss. Xander wraps his arms around Spike's torso, smoothing his palms over the soft skin of

Spike's chest. Their kiss can't last long, because Xander's legs are shaking from the effort of staying upright and both of them are panting for breath.

'God,' Spike looks into his eyes, so close now, emotions laid bare for Xander to see. 'It's been so long.'

'I know,' says Xander, and thinks that for once, perhaps he really does.

Spike lets go of him then, and drops back down onto all fours, leaving Xander to feel strangely tall and very in charge behind him. He runs his hands over Spike's back, kneading muscles and dragging blunt nails over ribs and shoulders and hips until Spike hisses and growls in frustration. This is when Xander begins to move. He draws back as far as he can, until he's certain that he will slip out altogether, and plunges back in. Spike's body reacts, gripping him tightly as they both hiss in pleasure.

Pain.

Pleasure.

It's a fine line that they are walking and Xander is losing himself in what they are doing, half-listening to the nonsensical words streaming from Spike's lips, holding tighter as his hips pump back and forth, watching as he buries himself deep in Spike's body. Wonders what this

means, wonders how this happened, wonders how he's managed to live this long without experiencing this, wishes that he could see Spike's face, that he could kiss him, wonders if insanity is catching because it feels like he's losing his mind.

'Xander... no...' Spike *whimpers* when he pulls all the way out.

But it's better this way, it has to be. Fumbling fingers grab at the vampire lying prone beneath him until the body turns and Xander looks into blue eyes, filled with... something Xander doesn't think there's a word for, but it makes his breath catch in his throat to look at it.

'I had to kiss you.'

There's no need for further explanation, because Spike smiles, that beautiful smile, and they're kissing again, and Xander knows that he's gasping, moaning, demanding, but he can't seem to care because Spike is *kissing* him, wrapping his legs around Xander's waist, drawing him closer until they're pressed together again. Spike lifts his hips, nudging gently, until Xander's addled mind finally catches up, and he rises up, taking his weight on his hands so that Spike can shift, tucking a pillow under his hips, draping one leg over Xander's shoulder with effortless grace, and hooking the other more securely

around his waist. They both groan when Xander pushes forward, sheathing himself once more in the willing body wrapped around him.

And it *is* better this way, because there's kissing, and more touching, but best of all he can see the look on Spike's face and it tells him more than words from the vampire ever could. Xander rolls his hips and the wholly sexual sound that Spike utters makes his body erupt in flames. Thrusting faster now, he hooks his hands around Spike's shoulders, dropping his head forward to rest there, even as Spike's head lolls back onto the pillow.

'Spike. So good... never thought...'

Spike only smiles.

'Spike.'

'Xander.'

And then Spike is coming, spurting onto both their chests, and it's enough to send Xander over the edge, emptying himself into Spike with a gasp of completion. He collapses bonelessly onto the vampire and they still. Lifting his head slowly, Xander blinks, feeling like he has just woken up, but it was no dream, because Spike is still there, smiling tentatively at him, reaching out to brush a sweaty lock of hair out of Xander's eyes. His body shaking

only a little, Xander disentangles himself from his vampire lover. With a final, lingering kiss, and a mutual groan of loss as he pulls out of Spike's body, he slumps to the side and they lie, side by side. Grins when he realises that he now actually *has* a vampire lover.

A vampire lover who is lying beside him, inexplicably breathing just as heavily as he is.

~*~*~*~*~

Night three.

They lie there. Stiffly, not touching.

Spike reaches out his left hand, just as Xander is extending his right, and without looking, without knowing that the other had moved at all, their hands meet between them, and their fingers lace together. They lie there, staring at the ceiling, silently holding hands.

The stiffness between them melts away.

And it's good.

The End