Learning to Live Again

by

Darkling Dawns

Part One

Everything changed on the 73rd day. At least, he thought it was the 73rd day. It had been hard to tell, especially in the first week, but he'd gotten better at it. After all, that was what he did, right? Adjust, learn new ways to handle life, and move on. Except that this time, he didn't feel like moving on.
And after eight years of adjustment after adjustment, Xander couldn't help but think that he'd earned a little downtime.

The girls didn't agree. They were constantly talking to him about coping and new life skills, like the three therapists he already had to see weren't bad enough. They try to convince him to go places with them besides just shuttling back and forth from doctor's appointment to his rooms in the Council, like he can still go for a walk as easily as he always did. They chatter at him, as though he's actually interested in their gossip about boys and clothes and celebrity scandals, and generally try to pretend that life will still go on, with maybe a few minor adjustments.

He thinks they're all idiots. But then, he thinks most people are idiots, including Giles and the goddamned doctors. After all, they say, with a little training and occasional help, he'll be fine. They have no clue. He'll never be fine again. He'll never get to see Buffy smile, or argue with Willow's resolve face, or watch Dawn dance at her wedding. He can't
watch the horror movies he used to laugh at or play a game of pool or check out a hot blond. The few photographs he has of the people he's loved are no good to him now, but he can't force himself to get rid of them just yet.

People stare when they see him on his way to the doctor's. He knows that, can feel the weight of their eyes as they crawl over him, and sometimes he's actually glad he can't see their faces. But mostly, he just turns away and wishes he couldn't feel them either. Hands come out of nowhere to touch him, always soft and caring but still startling, and voices are almost always too close when they speak. He doesn't say anything, though—just goes where they tell him to and prays every night to not wake up the next morning.

But every night he has the same dream, and every morning he wakes up with his cheeks wet. It's a cruel joke, how he can still cry after all that's happened. Almost as cruel as the colors that he dreams in—red, green, yellow... and blue and black. Always blue and black, although there's white in his
dream that there never was in real life. In real life there was just blue and black.

Blue eyes and black leather... that was what had gotten him into trouble. He should've known better than to follow that kid out of the club, but he'd been too eager to get his hands on what was in the too-tight jeans to think about it. They'd been flirting for several hours, first over the pool table and later on the dance floor, and even if there was more coyness and less snarking than Xander really wanted, it was good. It eased some of the everpresent and hidden ache, anyway. So when he'd been pulled down for a kiss that left them both hard, it was only natural to accept the breathless invitation to go outside.

He wasn't looking for a relationship, and he'd doubted the kid was either. He was probably a hustler and he'd seen something in the young American that made him an easy mark, but Xander hadn't minded. It wasn't like it would be the first time he'd done this, and he'd been pretty sure it wouldn't be the last. Besides, there was nothing
wrong with it if they both knew what they were getting into, or so he'd told himself. Ever since Sunnydale, he'd learned to tell himself whatever would get him through the night.

So when the kid pulled out a knife and demanded his wallet, he wasn't that surprised. Except that there was no way he was giving him the whole thing. Not when it contained the only picture he had. He'd pulled the wallet out and started to empty it, intending to give him everything except his identification and the picture, but the kid had gotten impatient. Probably nervous, afraid someone might see him. So when he'd lunged forward at the same time that Xander had moved towards him-

A horrible accident, the police had said. One in a million injury, the doctors muttered to each other where they thought he couldn't hear. The girls hadn't said anything, just cried, while Giles fumbled and stammered, assuring him over and over that he would always have a home at the Council. He'd stayed quiet and gone with them when they came
to take him with them because he knew it wouldn't make a difference. They still saw him as that high school loser who couldn't keep a job. He tried not to think of himself the same way, tried to remember that he'd spent most of the past year roaming over Africa and Asia finding Slayers and coming to terms with himself.

Xander was beginning to think he really was cursed to never get anywhere with his life. It seemed that the moment he started to really understand, the second he began to feel secure in who he was and what he did, the universe smacked him back into place. He'd gone from delivery boy to carpenter, and lost his livelihood along with his eye. There was no getting ahead for him, and the living situation was the worst of it. Instead of being stuck forever in his parents' basement, he was stuck at the Council. But what really irritated him was how everyone seemed to believe that this was better. Like it really mattered where he was, as though he preferred being caged in comfortable privacy to the mildewed hole of his childhood home.
So he let them take him with them, settled into the rooms they'd set aside for him and tried not to think about the man he used to be. That got easier somewhere in the second week. He'd head the girls crying out in the hallway and knew it wasn't about him, for once. They'd been sobbing outright, great wracking bursts of grief that had less to do with an injury and more to do with a death. It was Dawn who brought the news, probably because everyone else was nowhere near coherency. A fight, she said, an apocalyptic battle in LA that had left no survivors that they knew of, claiming the lives of Angel and his crew... and Spike.

At the sound of his name, everything came rushing back. That first night, struggling in Angel's grasp while a demon that seemed to be made of leather and sex slunk towards him, and the dreams that he'd had for a week afterwards that sent him running headfirst for the closet and Cordelia Chase. The hatred he'd poured out on a mostly undeserving vampire, using him as the scapegoat for everything from the mess of his life to the appearance of Angelus. The slow change, so slow
that he couldn't even say where it began, until they'd been something close to friends. Or more accurately, guys who hung out together, but it had been a huge step for them. The nights spent playing pool and snarking at each other in that long grief-filled summer and the way the betrayal in a pair of blue eyes had made him feel so incredibly ashamed after it was brought to such a cataclysmic end. The horrible year that followed as things spiraled downwards and they heaped their own private pain on each other until it ended with an axe in the door and murder in his heart. He tried not to think about what had happened after that, didn't like to remember Buffy's eyes when he'd come upstairs to talk to her because then he'd have to recall the angry words that had burst out and ruined a young girl's innocence.

They'd never been friends again, and it had been his fault. Not that either ever said anything, but he knew both had felt it. It was one of his greatest regrets, that his thoughtless outburst had cut them apart, especially since he knew how close they'd grown over that summer. He'd thought the worst
part had been after- but he couldn't think about that now, couldn't bear the memory of Dawn sobbing in his arms, her regrets tumbling out in tearful words that had made his throat close up. But want never mattered to memory and he was forced to go over it all again, from the madness in a newly souled vampire's eyes to the surprisingly small man that had crept around his apartment in a way that Xander remembered from his own upbringing to finally the elegant hands that had framed his face and the lips that had descended onto his for a kiss that was a lot softer and sweeter than he'd expected. Then they'd faced the First and Spike had burned in a flash of light to save the world, leaving behind a small group of friends who mourned his loss in a way that the vampire probably would've been amazed to see.

And then he was dead-again. Xander had held Dawn while she cried, tried to soothe away the inevitable blame that she heaped on herself for Spike not telling them that he was back, knowing all the while whose fault it really was. His own tears had come late at night, when the house was asleep, grief
pouring out into his pillow until a hand lightly touched his shoulder and she slid into bed with him. He'd never been able to keep a secret from her, not when she wrapped her arms around him like this, and it all poured out—the years of confusion, of angry longing, the handful of kisses that had given him hope and the bitterness of the past year when he'd believed it all lost forever. He told her everything, and she hugged him close until they drifted off to sleep together. There had been no empty words, no platitudes about time and grief, because if anyone knew what it was to lose promises of tomorrow, Willow did.

It was only later that he'd found out what they hadn't told him: they'd all gone down the night he lost his sight. The universe had gotten a good laugh out of that, he was sure. The irony wasn't missed on anyone, on him least of all. There was no memorial service, no grave or monument put up, just the weight of lost friends that pressed down on all of their hearts. They'd had a ceremony after they beat the First where they honored Anya and Spike, along with all the fallen potentials, and Buffy refused to
go through another one for Angel. Xander wondered if she was hoping that somehow he'd turn up, sometimes wondered if he wouldn't have been thinking the same thing if he hadn't lost hope along with his remaining eye.

The days moved by, long hour after long hour trudging onward with heavy footsteps that echoed in the depths of his soul. He wallowed in regret and sorrow for a while, but it was impossible to do so for as long as he might have wanted, because if the girls weren't dropping by to watch movies that he didn't pay attention to or talk about people he didn't know, he was being shuttled off to the stupid doctors. And the worst was Lisa, his 'life adjustment coach', or teacher of Blindness for Dummies, as he liked to think of their sessions. She was tiny, for her voice came from somewhere below his shoulder, and far too cheerful for her own good. There were days that Xander thought that if she chirped at him about counting steps or folding money one more time, he was going to brain her with his regulation white cane. As it was, he settled for 'accidentally' thwacking her on the shins a few times every
Suicide had occurred to him more than once, and he might've made the attempt if he hadn't been pretty sure he'd manage to screw that up too. Besides, if he wasn't around, the universe would have to start laughing at and shitting on some other guy, and that just wouldn't be fair to make some other idiot suffer because he'd taken the easy way out. So he moved through his routine and waited for the next apocalypse, wondering if maybe he could manage to blunder into the line of fire before Buffy saved the world again. And that was his life—until the 73rd day, anyway.

The morning and afternoon went like they always did, the minutes crawling by at an agonizingly slow pace until his solitary supper alone in his room. Not that he had to eat there, but he wasn't about to subject himself to the scrutiny or the others to the spectacle that dining with them would entail. So he ate before they did, from a special compartmented plate that always managed to make him feel about five or six years old that Willow or Dawn brought up
just before they all sat down to dinner. Afterwards, the nightly 'cheer up Xander' project would get underway until Buffy left for patrol and he booted them all out so he could go to bed.

It wasn't the knock at the door downstairs that alerted him to anything different, or even the first happy squeal. There were almost thirty girls in the Council building, after all, most of them teenagers, and if he'd learned anything about teenage girls in the past eight years, it was that squealing was a major form of communication. No, it was when the first squeal was joined by another and another, wordless screams of shock and delight that he got a crawling feeling over his skin. He got to his feet, and began to make his way to the door, but barked his shin on a footstool and nearly fell before he made it back to his chair. The brief flash of curiosity had begun to abate by then, and he figured that if it was important, one of the girls would tell him eventually.

An hour later, there was the click of his doorknob and the draft of air as it swung open. Footsteps
walked over to him and a hand touched his arm. "Xander, it's Willow." All of them did that, identified themselves whenever they spoke to him as though he didn't know the voices of his closest friends. But it was a small thing, so he never mentioned it. And her voice was shaking, full of some unnamed emotion that she was obviously trying to keep from him. For the ten-thousandth time, he realized how hard it was to tell these things without being able to see if her eyes were shining through tears or if she had that little chin wobble she always got when she was sad.

He opened his mouth to ask about it, but another voice rang out from the doorway, and there was absolutely no mistaking this voice. He'd heard its whiskey tones murmur comfort to Dawn, heard it bark orders in a fight and once listened to it whisper his name before they shared those few earthshattering kisses that had left him hollow and aching afterwards. "Hello, Harris."
Part Two

"No Seein' Eye Nazi today?" The low voice from the doorway made him smile. Spike always announced his presence, as if he was afraid he wouldn't be welcomed, or thought he might get attacked if he got too close.

"No. I think she realizes that I'm getting good enough with the cane to be a real threat, now." The day off was actually a reward for getting through the increasingly difficult obstacle course, but he wasn't about to say that.

Spike chuckled. "So what's the plan, then?"

"I dunno. Probably just watch TV or something." There was a snort that made Spike's opinion of that plan clear. "You know, you don't have to be here. It's not like you're being held prisoner or something, and I'm sure Dawn would love to show you all the
sights, so don't feel like you have to stay."

"Know the sights, you berk. Grew up with 'em all around, didn't I?" The voice drew closer and then moved past him, into the kitchen, where the opening fridge door and gentle clink of glass made it clear that the blond was making himself at home. "Sides, it's daylight out."

A hand pressed a bottle into his palm, and Xander reached out to snag Spike's wrist. "That's not a problem anymore, is it?" The pulse under his fingertips fluttered for just a second before his hand was carefully detached, but not released.

Instead, Spike turned his hand up and began to trace a line lightly from heel to fingertip and back. "I ever tell you 'bout the time I had my palm read?"

"Spike-"

"Back before everythin', was at Cambridge an' got invited to this party. Didn't wanna go, didn't like parties, but it was Halloween, so I figured what the
hell. Might make for an interesting letter to Mother that week, right? An' the bloke that was throwin' it, he hired a gypsy to come in an' read fortunes. Pretty common practice in those days, way to give the guests a thrill. So I sat down at the table an' she took my hand, looked down at it an' said-

Xander frowned. Where the hell was he going with this story? He opened his mouth to ask when Spike muttered, "Dunno why I was thinkin' about that, really." It was uncanny how he seemed to read minds sometimes. Xander didn't doubt that there was a point to the story-there almost always was when Spike started talking like that, but it usually made him take a look at things he wasn't ready to see. And there was a lot he wasn't ready for as far as Spike was concerned.

It had been almost three months since Spike showed up on the Council's doorstep, three months since that quiet 'Hello, Harris' had turned him inside out. He'd never forget the sense of stunned amazement that had all but turned him into stone. Before he could stammer out a greeting or
invitation, there were footsteps approaching his chair and a hand taking his in a gentle grip. It had taken him a few minutes to realize what was so different, why his touch felt wrong, and when he had, he'd been caught between laughter and tears, able only to ask, "How?"

The question was one that was still being asked, and the single word answer, "Shanshu," was as mystifying now as it was then. But it was all Spike would say, and pressing for more always led to angry words in a hard voice making it clear that he wasn't about to talk about it. So everyone had eventually stopped asking, and if every so often Xander resented blue eyes that could still see or Buffy cried for the vampire that didn't get the prophecy or Giles and Willow locked themselves in the library while they argued over books and scrolls that kept their secrets hidden, nobody said anything.

Things eventually settled into what resembled a routine: Dawn went back to studying for her A-levels (something Xander would never understand,
no matter how many times Giles and Spike tried to explain it), Buffy went back to training the slayers when she wasn't shopping or out on the party circuit, Willow and Giles went back to the business of cataloguing mystical texts and running the Council. In fact, the only ones who didn't have anything to go back to were Xander... and Spike. But as the days passed, even they eased into a pattern, filled with appointments and lessons, but now there was beer, TV and comfortable banter to make it a little more tolerable.

He never knew exactly when Spike began to supplant Willow as his aide and primary contact with the outside world, but somehow he found himself turning to the blond for descriptions and layouts, and they were always provided in a brusque but detailed manner. When he tripped over clutter on the floor, there was a rough hand to catch him before he went sprawling and a rougher voice yelling at whoever had "left their shit scattered all over the soddin' place!" But for all his protectiveness and help, Spike was a harsher taskmaster than Lisa could ever have thought of
being. There was no quarter asked and none given from him-once layouts were described, he sat back and expected Xander to navigate the space, or dumped objects in Xander's hands and left it to him to figure out whether he'd been presented with something neat, like Dawn's new kitten or sunglasses that didn't scream 'blind dork', or something not so pleasant, like the axe that Buffy had just killed a Gorsham demon with or a piece of raw liver that supposedly was for the kitten's dinner. Xander still wasn't sure about that one.

Spike had even convinced him to go out a few times, although Xander still preferred the comfort and relative quiet of the Council. Everything outside seemed loud and chaotic, and he was left with only Spike to stand between him and the strangers, had to depend on him to read the menu or buy the movie tickets or guide him along the sidewalk so he didn't step out into traffic. Spike had tried to take him into a club when they'd gone out the other night-he'd said something about seeing if the blooming onion had crossed the Atlantic yet and it wasn't until they were inside that Xander realized
where they were. The music, the scent of cologne and leather, the brush of a passing male body... it had been too much. He'd torn his arm out of Spike's grip and shoved his way outside to what he hoped was the alley before he'd gotten sick. Spike hadn't said anything, just waited until he was through, helped him up and guided him back home without a word.

He'd had the first nightmare that night. It had all happened again—the kid, the dancing, the kissing and groping and then the knife. But this time it was different. It was Spike's eyes he saw before his world went black, Spike's smirk that followed him into darkness. The worried voice that called his name was swallowed up in taunting laughter and his own screams until he was shaken awake and hauled up against a slender body. With the dream lover still fresh in his memory, he began to struggle until he drew in a breath. Irish Spring and Right Guard and clove gum—Spike. A hand stroked the back of his neck, where cold sweat soaked his skin, the touch light and calming, and Xander let the touch and low voice that whispered to him take the
fear away, let them ease him back down onto the bed where another body stretched out and held him close, promising to keep him safe.

That was five days ago, and he hadn't slept the whole night through since. At least once a night he woke screaming, only to find Spike's hands and voice there to lull him out of the terror and back to sleep. Except for last night, that was. Buffy had been in one of her party moods, and Xander had helped her convince Spike to go clubbing. He'd thought he'd be okay, figured that even if he wasn't, they'd be back in time, and been proven wrong. Instead of a soft T-shirt or warm arm, he'd found only a cool sheet, and the laughter from his dream rang in his ears for long minutes after he woke.

Spike's absence had proven more unsettling than he liked to think about, making him wonder if maybe he wasn't relying too much on the blond. What would happen when Spike decided to go live that regular life with the regular girl that Buffy said Angel had always wanted and pushed her towards?

But he wasn't thinking about that today. He had the
day off, and he intended to rot his brain the old-fashioned way, never mind that he couldn't really follow a lot of what was on TV without Spike's narration. Xander fumbled with the caddy next to his chair and came up with the remote, aimed it in the direction of the TV, and hit the button to turn it on. The babble of voices and sudden explosion seemed louder than usual, but he just set the remote down and listened to see if he could identify the program. A growl from the couch was followed by a sigh and muttered, "Right, then."

"What the hell does that mean, huh?" His tone was sharper than usual, but he couldn't hold back the swell of irritation that the obviously frustrated words had brought on.

"Doesn't mean anythin', Harris. Just drop it, yeah?"

"Maybe I don't want to 'drop it', Spike! Maybe I'm sick of you always being here, of everybody thinking they have to sit with me so I don't get any privacy, you ever think about that?"
"Don't hear you complainin' when you need someone to tell you what's on the telly, or keep you from trippin' all over your own feet." A harsh note had entered the ex-vampire's voice, but Xander didn't bother to listen to it.

"Yeah, well, it's all you're good for anymore, isn't it? Can't fight with Buffy or be the Big Bad, so you might as well play seeing-eye dog for the freak."

"Shut the hell up! Was tryin' to help you out cause I thought maybe you could use a mate, but then I thought you'd changed from the git you were in Sunnydale."

"Oh yeah, I know all about changing. Kinda have to when you have your EYES GOUGED OUT! But you wouldn't know anything about that, cause you're-

"Cause I'm not blind. That's what you were gonna say, right?" Spike's voice rose sharply. "Believe me, boy, after what I've seen, I might rather be!"

Xander's control snapped, the long sleepless night
and his own uncertain feelings making him lash out with a harsh laugh. "Well, we only have your word on what you've seen, don't we, Spike? Oh no, wait... we don't even have that because you can't be bothered to tell anybody what happened!"

Glass shattered across the room, and Xander flinched, the sound reminding him too much of the arguments that used to drift down from his parents' room. "Shut up, you fucking git! You wanna know what happened, Harris? Really wanna know?" Something in Spike's tone told him that he didn't want to, but before he could say anything, hard hands had hauled him out of his chair and jerked him over to the wall, where he was pressed up against its unforgiving surface. Hot breath scalded his face as Spike leaned forward and spoke. "Last of Angel's crew dropped ten minutes into the fight an' it was a miracle he lasted that long. Left Angel an' me, along with a god who'd hollowed out our friend, to take on Hell itself. Fight went on for hours, mate-demon after demon, an' the rain kept comin' down til I couldn't see anythin', just hacked at whatever came up to me."
His grip tightened and Xander reached up, hands closing over Spike's, although he wasn't sure if he was trying to get away or offer some kind of support. "Somethin' touched me, touched my back an' I didn't look, just swung out-" There was an odd sound, like a strangled sob, and then the bark of bitter laughter. "Didn't hear him scream, but I saw him fall. He'd come to watch my back an' I- his arm-" Spike shuddered, hard enough to knock Xander's head lightly against the wall.

He was silent for a few minutes, gasped sobs the only noise in the room until he spoke again, quieter this time. "Fight ended right there, with Blue chasin' the demons down the alley. Got Angel-got him inside an' settled an' then there was this pain... felt like I was gonna burn up all over again, but when it was over I was... alive. He didn't wake up for three days, but when he did, he knew right away. Looked over at me an' his eyes- Christ, never seen 'em that cold, not even when Angelus was ready to stake me. Told me to get the hell out of his sight an' never come back. So I left, wandered around for a bit an'
ended up here."

He released Xander with a slight shove, his voice fading as he turned away. "Reckon you'll wanna tell the others. Just gimme til night, yeah? I'll pack up an' get outta your- get out. Shoulda known better than to think it'd be any different."

Xander's hand shot out in the direction of Spike's voice. "Wait." He couldn't say more just then, was too busy trying to not think about the events that had just been described for him. Jesus, how had Spike not gone crazy long before this? He'd lost friends and what passed for family, if you could consider Deadboy as anything but a selfish prick, that was, and then been kicked out and come... here. Where he spent his time helping Xander, seeing for Xander, hanging out in Xander's room and trying to get Xander to go outside with him. In fact, if you didn't count last night, Spike hadn't spent more than two hours at a time with Buffy, and usually then only because everybody was having dinner or watching a movie together.
There was no response for a few minutes, and just as he was about to try feeling his way back to his chair, there was a soft, "What?"

Xander moved his hand in the air, a circle that grew bigger in search of Spike. He realized dimly that he probably looked ridiculous, but when Spike's hand closed around his, he didn't care. Feeling his way up Spike's arm, he curved one hand around a shoulder to hold him in place, the other sliding along until shirt became skin as he was following the ex-vampire's neck up to his face, where it settled on his cheek. He swallowed hard and leaned forward, angling his head and hoped he didn't end up kissing an eyeball or ear. But his aim proved good, lips settling on another pair that parted with a soft surprised gasp.

The kiss was short and chaste, mostly because Xander didn't want to risk getting shoved across the room if he'd made a huge mistake. But it was still enough to remind him of why those few kisses they'd shared before the apocalypse had left him so
hurting and hollow afterwards. When it ended, he leaned his forehead against Spike's and whispered, "Don't leave."

"Why not?" The question was so soft that he might not have heard if he hadn't been in the same space. "Is it that you don't wanna lose your favorite seein'-eye do-"

"Shut up." He kissed him again, hard and quick, then muttered, "Shouldn't have said that. I just-"

"Yeah, I know." One of Spike's hands slid into his hair, the other wrapping around his waist to bring them closer. "An' I'm not goin' anywhere." He tugged Xander's head down, muttering, "But you might wanna keep convincin' me to make sure," just before their mouths collided again.

They kissed for a long time, lush and wet, tongues slipping into each other's mouth to explore and stroke, and when they finally broke for air, both were gasping like they'd run a marathon. Xander's head was spinning, his heart pounding, but
when Spike took his hand and drew him away from the wall, leading him down the hall, he went soaring into the stratosphere. It took forever to come back down to earth, a feat accomplished only after he'd tasted heaven. He drifted back to himself to find a warm body in his arms, still slick with sweat, like so many other nights since he'd left Sunnydale. But this was different. This wasn't just a slender body that smelled like leather and cigarettes-this was *Spike*, smelling like beer and sex, so much better than his fantasies that he wondered why the hell he'd thought vampires were sexy when ex-vampires had them beat hands down.

Despite being boneless and pretty sure his brains were floating somewhere past Jupiter, he managed to ask, "So... think that was convincing enough?"

A satisfied groan answered him. "More than, mate. Had to be sure, though, didn't I?"

"Hope you're sure now, cause I don't think I can handle any more of that kind of convincing for a little while, at least."
Spike chuckled and nipped his ear. "Plenty sure, luv."

They lay still for a while longer, drifting in the comfortable silence, both drinking it in. Eventually Xander murmured, "Spike? That gypsy story you started to tell me last week... what did the gypsy say when she looked at your hand?"

"Said I had a long life ahead of me, with lots of fantastical things to come. Didn't think much of it then, cause that's what they told most everybody they saw, but gotta wonder if maybe she saw more'n she said. Course, I was more interested in findin' out about my future love, so I didn't really listen to the rest. Told me to stay away from blondes an' said brunettes would break my heart. Left me wonderin' if I was supposed to find some little redhead to settle down with, or if I was just gonna end up alone an' broken-hearted."

"Spike, you can't-"
"Hush, pet." His grip tightened momentarily before he continued. "Never put much stock in readin' the future from someone's hand, anyway. Not like we get to choose what they look like, right? But that's not to say there's not a story there. Just that it's about where they've been instead of where they're goin'. Like yours." He turned Xander's hand in his, stroking a finger over his palm. "Got callouses from all that buildin', couple of scars where you probably cut yourself when you were learnin' to make stakes, some tougher skin round the edges an' really deep lines. Almost like all that fightin' etched itself here. Tells a helluva story 'bout you, too. Says you're a survivor, a fighter an' a warrior who made it out of the battle. Figure that's worth more'n any gypsy's fortune, yeah?"

Xander's chest tightened and it took a few minutes before his throat opened up enough to let him speak. When it did, he said quietly, "Thank you, Spike."

"Anytime, luv. Now go to sleep. We're goin' out tomorrow, no matter what you say, an' that's that."
There was a whisper of lips over his and then Spike turned in his arms, drawing Xander's hand over his chest as he settled into the curve of his new lover's body. Xander fell asleep with the steady beat of Spike's heart against his palm, and peace in his soul for the first time in what seemed like forever.

The End

"Gunn is dead. Illyria keeps fighting. Angel loses an arm. Spike gets Shanshu. And Xander loses another eye, which is funny, because he isn't even there." - Joss Whedon in SFX Magazine