



Seeing Beyond Imperfections

by

[Melissa](#)

Part One

In which Xander dies - but not permanently

Xander sat alone in his office-cum-apartment on the top floor of the Slayers Council headquarters building. It was a big old manor house on the outskirts of Marion, Ohio, with extensive grounds,

perfect for housing and training the dozen or so slayers that were called each year.

They had originally set up the Council on the hellmouth in Cleveland. Eventually, however, they had decided they needed a slightly less demon-infested town in which to train the new slayers. So, Faith had stayed with Kennedy and some of the others who had been there for the final battle, while Buffy, Dawn and Giles had moved the headquarters here to Marion, still close enough in an emergency, but safer nonetheless. He, Buffy and Dawn all lived in the house on a permanent basis, each occupying a suite on the top floor. The rooms were old fashioned, with high ceilings and cold floors, but when he got a fire started in the grate it warmed up quickly enough. And it was quiet, far away from anything that might distract him from the pounding in his head.

Xander sighed slightly. His job meant he spent a great deal of his time alone. Sure, he got visitors every hour or so; employees come to pick up the reports of his latest visions. And although he knew

all of them by name they weren't really friends, or even colleagues. Most of them were either too afraid to disturb him, or too freaked out by the way his eyes would film over white every so often to make the effort to get to know him. Not that he made much of an effort, either. He was always pleasant but most of them just didn't understand what he and his friends had been through - what it had been like when there was only one slayer, the constant fear that had stolen away their childhood. He smirked slightly at himself. *Melodramatic, much?* he thought. Besides, he didn't really mind being alone.

Every day, he remembered the people he had lost along the way. But if it hadn't been for their sacrifice, he never would have made it to where he was today. And nothing could make him regret his decision to become a seer to the slayers - not his lost childhood, his dead friends, or the pain he endured as a result of the visions. If it ever seemed like the blinding headaches or the violence he witnessed almost every hour was becoming too much, all he had to do was remember all the lives

that were saved everyday because of his efforts.

Still, when he glanced at the clock and noticed that it was nearly eight a.m., he couldn't help the small sigh of relief that escaped. That meant that his visions would stop for the next ten hours or so, allowing him to get some rest. He would go have breakfast (dinner for him) with Buffy and Dawn, then take a couple of aspirin and hit the sack.

Finishing up his report, he tucked his pad and pen into a pocket and made his way down three flights of stairs to the dining room on the ground floor. On the second floor, he stopped in at Marissa's office. She and James were the ones who e-mailed his reports all over the country, and occasionally the world, although most other countries had their own resident seers.

He greeted her with a smile and handed over the sheaf of paper. 'Hey, Marissa, last one for today, I think.'

'Hello, Alexander, how was your day?' Marissa

insisted on calling him by his full name. She was originally from England, and had received a classical education. She maintained that Alexander was a truly auspicious name, and that he should be proud of it. He suspected that his attempts to convince her otherwise were the main reason she continued to use it. For the first couple of months it had truly wiggled him out each time he heard it. It made him feel like his mother was standing over his shoulder. But eventually he had gotten used to it, and now couldn't imagine her calling him anything else.

'Not too bad. The pain has been getting worse the past couple of days. I think I might have to call Willow, have her jack up the power on the spell.' When he had received his powers, Willow had found a spell that was supposed to stop his brain from degenerating the way Cordy's had done before she became part demon. Recently, however, it had been harder and harder to ignore the pounding in his skull that came with each vision. He hadn't spoken to Willow in months, partly because he didn't want to worry her, and partly because he was just too busy to spare the time. 'Still,' he said

with a smile, 'can't complain, can I? Not like I didn't ask for it.' She frowned, and he forestalled any argument by saying he needed to get to dinner. 'I'll see you tomorrow, Marissa.'

Walking into the dining room, Xander smiled at the two sisters. Physically, Buffy had changed hardly at all over the last fifteen years. In her mid-thirties, she still didn't look a day over twenty-five. Slayer physique and all that, Xander supposed. Still, she had... softened, he supposed. Not that she had gone soft, but without the constant stress of trying to save the world, she had allowed The Slayer to fade into the background more. She had been able to become the, if not entirely normal, then happy young woman that she had always wanted to be. Dawn had matured in her own way. She had grown into her tall figure to become a truly beautiful woman. There were still hints of the teenager they had grown up with, but she had become a force to be reckoned with professionally. It had been touch and go there for a while after Sunnydale had been destroyed, but eventually the two had rediscovered what it meant to be sisters, and were now closer

than ever.

Buffy had cooked dinner for them, a light chicken and veggie soup by the looks of it. Over the past fifteen years, Buffy had gotten to do many of the simple things she never thought that she would live to experience. Training potential slayers was a gruelling job, to be certain, but it had left her time to do things like learn to cook. She and Dawn used to alternate, but Dawn had even less time on her hands than her sister these days. She had taken over the Slayers Council in America last year. When Dawn had turned thirty, Giles had decided that it was time for him to retire once and for all. She worked exceptionally hard, but always found time for these early morning dinners, and Xander knew that it was because she often felt just as alone as he did. Even Buffy, who was around people all day, cherished these times when it was just them. It reminded them all of Sunnydale, growing up there, the good times, before everything went bad. The times when Willow and Giles were there were the best. It was almost as if their family was whole again.

They stopped chatting as he walked over and eyed him critically. After he had kissed them both on the cheek, Dawn demanded, without preliminary, 'Xander, did you eat today? You look terrible. How is your head? Is the pain still getting worse?' She was on edge today.

Xander chuckled and shared an amused glance with Buffy. AGM, she mouthed at him. Of course, the Annual General Meeting of the Slayers Council was tomorrow. Each year, the heads of the council in every country would meet to discuss demons, prophecies, the slayers, plans for the future, that sort of thing. Xander had attended a few years ago, but with his visions had decided it was just too much trouble. This would be Dawn's first meeting as head of the council in America, and she had to host the thing. They would be meeting at a hotel in the city, so as not to disturb the slayers, but Dawn had been making preparations for weeks. He grinned a bit. It also meant that Willow would be coming back for a couple of days.

He picked up his spoon and started to eat. 'Yes, mom. You'll be happy to know I had breakfast and lunch.' He didn't mention that both meals had consisted only of toast and water. Even that, he had been hard pressed to keep down. 'My head does hurt, but it's nothing I can't handle. Willow's spell still seems to be holding up fairly well, although when she gets here I'll get her to have a look at it, make sure everything is still in order.' Dawn seemed satisfied, but Buffy gave him a speculative look.

He knew he was playing down his symptoms, but every time he thought about telling them just exactly how much pain he was in, he couldn't help but worry that if they knew, they might try to take the visions away from him. He could endure the pain with equanimity for as long as he could still hold a pen, even if it did end up killing him. But he would not give them up. He knew, with the sort of certainty that only someone with a link to the Powers That Be could understand, that this was what he was meant to do. They all had their place. Willow travelled the world, searching out the slayers as she felt them wake. Buffy trained them,

and helped them to protect the world from the demons. Dawn protected the slayers themselves, gave them their watchers, whom she personally helped train. And he gave them direction, showed them the innocents they had been taught to protect. He would never give that up. He continued quickly.

'I actually had a fairly slow day, today. Only twelve visions all up. Ten knowns and two unknowns.' This was for Buffy's benefit; Dawn received his visions only shortly after he did. 'I didn't hear back from anyone, so I take it things went well?' he asked Dawn.

'Yeah, we're cool,' she replied. 'We figured out your unknown demons fairly easily. They aren't native to this dimension, which is probably why you couldn't find them in your library. But your descriptions were flawless, as usual. Beats the hell out of those pictures Cordy still tries to draw for us. Thank god we broke you of that habit.' She shuddered comically.

'Hey!' he said indignantly.

Buffy grinned at Dawn. 'Remember the last time we tried to play Pictionary? I swear, the only way he and Willow managed to score any points is because she read his mind.'

Well, that was true. But it was only because his clues were so hard. Had nothing to do with his drawing. He cleared his throat, interrupting the continuing disparaging comments about his artistic ability. 'And today's innocents are...?'

They turned back to him, knowing looks on their faces, but obviously prepared to humor him.

'Innocent still. I've got back nine reports of success. The other three are still on the table. I'll let you know if anything happens.'

They talked for about an hour. Buffy filled him in on the progress of the ten slayers they currently had in residence. They were expecting a new one to arrive with Willow today or tomorrow. She filled him in on how Angel and the L.A. gang were doing. He often

spoke to Cordy himself, but he hated to deprive Buffy of a chance to talk about Angel. As much as he had always disliked the ensouled vampire, he did love the way Buffy's eyes lit up at the thought of him. It had taken her nearly two years, but she had finally gotten over Spike's death and decided that she was ready to try a real relationship with Angel. He was still cursed, but Buffy had never been happier.

Dawn groused about the AGM for nearly fifteen minutes before declaring she didn't want to talk about it. She told him a bit about the two unknown demons he had seen earlier that day, so he would be able to identify them if he ever saw them again. They talked for a while about Willow. They were all looking forward to seeing her. Buffy announced that Giles had promised to come up for a couple of days, so they could all be together again.

Eventually, Xander had to admit that he was practically falling asleep in his chair, and he gave his girls a hug before leaving them to their days.

His head was pounding as he made his way into his bedroom. It felt like someone was poking hot knives into his brain. He stumbled a bit as he exited the bathroom, but he had spent the last ten years ignoring headaches, and managed to pull himself upright. The aspirin wouldn't kick in for a couple of minutes, but he lay down on his bed and closed his eyes. He frowned a bit as he tried to relax. The pain had never been this bad before. Had something happened to Willow's shields? Was the spell failing? Even as he thought it, he reached one hand out weakly for the phone on his side table.

There was something seriously wrong. Perhaps he should have said something to Buffy after all. He remembered what Cordelia used to say about her visions. Was this what she had felt? He was suddenly immensely grateful that the Powers had given her demon DNA, if she had gone through this on a regular basis. What the hell was wrong with him?

His suddenly nerveless fingers dropped the phone as a scream ripped through him. His shields came

crashing down as the spell failed and ten years worth of suppressed pain tore through his brain, leaving neurons overloaded, nerves fried, and severe hemorrhaging. He barely noticed the blood dripping down his face as the pain dragged him down, until he could no longer feel anything at all.

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Buffy was watching the girls spar when she heard the scream. It took her a moment to realize that no one else was reacting; the scream had come from inside her head. 'Xander,' she gasped. She took off over the lawn, using every one of her slayer muscles. Seconds later she was racing up the stairs to his room, screaming to anyone listening to get Dawn. She burst into the room, ready to fight whatever was threatening her friend.

She was brought up short as Willow and another girl materialized in front of her.

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Willow looked around the room wildly. She had been waiting with Marina at the airport for a cab when she had felt her spell fail, and heard Xander's scream lash through her brain. She had known she had to get to him. He didn't have much time. With barely a thought, she had dragged the confused girl into the bathroom, where hopefully no one would notice them, wrapped her power around them, and stepped into Xander's room at the council headquarters. She spotted Buffy, who looked stunned for only a fraction of a second, then The Slayer took over and she nodded her head once, before racing over to Xander's bedroom. Willow was right behind her.

'The spell failed,' Willow called as she ran directly to Xander's side. His heart had stopped. She sent a bolt of energy into his chest, and was relieved to feel it start beating again. But it wasn't enough. She couldn't sense any brain activity. 'The one keeping

the visions from damaging his brain.'

Buffy halted her search of the room and turned to Willow. 'What? How?' She took in Willow's unsurprised state. 'You knew this would happen?' she asked incredulously.

Willow sighed and turned to her. She had enough time to explain. 'No, I didn't know. I was afraid it might. Cordy said her visions got stronger over time. I wondered if it wasn't just her brain dying that made the pain worse, if the visions were becoming more powerful, less easy to contain. But Xander was fine for such a long time. Eventually I thought I must have been wrong, and the spell was sufficient to keep him alive. Buffy, I'm so sorry,' she whispered.

Buffy's face softened and she walked over to Willow. 'Is it too late to save him?' she asked quietly.

Willow's back stiffened, and Buffy watched as she brought out The Witch. Willow was quite possibly

one of the most powerful people on the planet. It amazed her sometimes that this being could hide inside her quiet, funny friend. Then again, she supposed they all had their alternate personalities. Willow shook her head, and Buffy felt the power start to fill the room. 'No, it isn't. I can revive him, and repair the damage to his brain. But the old spell won't work any more. There is another spell I thought about performing ten years ago, but...' she hesitated, looking suddenly unsure. 'I'm not sure how it will change him.'

Buffy stared at her for a moment. 'What does it do?'

'It... how do I explain it... loosens his consciousness.' She waved her hands around for a moment, as though it would make it clearer. Buffy waited. 'I guess you could say... His mind would occupy a higher plane than his body, although they would still be connected. His visions are received by his mind, his soul, if you will, but as he is at the moment, the enormous amounts of energy that are pumped through the link are too much for his brain to handle. My spell siphoned off some of that

energy, which was why his brain wasn't permanently damaged. I didn't realize that energy was being stored behind his shields. The pressure must have become too much and they crumbled. This phase spell shouldn't change him physically, but in a way, when he has a vision, his mind will occupy another level of reality, one that isn't completely connected to his physical body. Most likely, there would still be pain. But it's a big risk, and I don't know what else might happen to him.'

Buffy gazed down at the still form of her friend. He had died. If Willow hadn't been so close, he would be dead. 'No,' she murmured. Then more strongly, 'No. Willow, enough is enough. Why do you have to do the spell at all? Just heal him. Bring him back, let him pass the damn visions on to someone else. I can't lose him. I'm not gonna lose him.'

'Buffy...' She hesitated for a moment. She wanted to. Goddess knew, she hated to see him like this. But... 'Buffy, I can't-'

'Why not?' she interrupted desperately. 'I know you

can heal him.' Her voice hardened. 'It's been so long, Wills. I hate what those visions have done to him.'

Willow didn't move from the bed, but she reached out to grasp Buffy's hand. 'I know. Goddess, I know. But you know how much the visions mean to him, to all of us. He's worked so hard to remember every demon, every city, every town, and every slayer. I know he's afraid that we would try take them away if it ever got too much for him, and Goddess knows I'm tempted. But we can't, Buffy. He would never forgive us.' She looked into Buffy's eyes, and they shared a moment of pained understanding.

Buffy started a bit as a voice spoke up beside her. 'Willow's right, Buffy,' Dawn said softly. 'This isn't about you. I know you don't want to lose him. Neither do I. But you know as well as I do what Xander would want. If there are consequences, we'll figure them out. But if he can be healthy, and keep the visions, then you have to do it.'

Buffy wavered for a moment. 'With the spell, will he

still be Xander?' Willow nodded. 'And he'll keep the visions?' She nodded again. 'And can you promise me this will never happen again?'

Willow looked at her steadily. 'I can't promise he's never going to die. I can't even say exactly what this spell is going to do to him. But this will never happen again. The visions aren't going to be a danger any longer.'

She waited a moment longer before Buffy closed her eyes in defeat and nodded. 'You're right. You have to do it, Wills.' Willow squeezed the hand she was still holding gently, watching as Buffy shrugged away her pain, squared her shoulders and brought her mind back to the task at hand. The decision had been made. 'What do you need?'

Willow smiled sadly and turned away. 'Just give me a bit of space.'

Once upon a time she would have needed all sorts of things to focus her mind. Candles, incense, crystals. For some spells, she still needed those

things. But she knew Xander better than anyone else, inside and out, and she had thought about this spell so many times in the first few years it was almost second nature. There was laughingly little to it. Just a supplication chant and an enormous amount of very carefully directed energy. Although that was probably a good thing considering the state Xander was in. He didn't have time for anything more complicated.

Buffy and Dawn backed up to the doorway as Willow stood, her eyes filming over a pure white. They listened as she began to chant. They couldn't see anything, but both could feel the power building in the room and knew that Willow was channeling it into Xander. Willow's voice rose demandingly and she held one hand out over Xander, the other held up just to the left of his body. With one final shout, they felt her push the energy into the man on the bed.

Buffy leapt forward to catch Willow as her knees buckled and she fell to the floor. She nodded her head, exhausted. 'It's done,' she confirmed. They all

looked at Xander, who seemed to flicker for a moment, as he opened his eyes and looked up at them blankly.

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Xander felt like he'd been floating forever. It was nice, really. He had some vague memory of pain, but it didn't bother him here, so he didn't worry about it. Here everything was light, and peace.

Suddenly he felt a phantom pain in his chest. He frowned. There was no pain here, there never had been. But the sensation came again, and again, beating in his chest, pulling him forward. He started following, and suddenly the beating no longer hurt.

A thought came to him; He was still alive. He needed to go back, back to the pain. *You can stay* The voice came from inside his head. He wavered for a moment. He could? It was nice here... so calm, so peaceful... No! He needed to go back. He needed to keep helping people, his friends, the slayers, the

innocents. It was his purpose. Yes The voice came again - this time it sounded satisfied.

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Then he was back. He experienced an instant of blinding pain before it all just seemed to... stop. He felt different, like he was somewhere else, but the feeling started to fade and he opened his eyes. Willow and Buffy were on the floor. When did Willow get here?, he wondered momentarily. Dawn was in the doorway, Spike standing just behind her, in the other room. No, Spike was dead. He had been for over fifteen years. Xander frowned and blinked. When he opened his eyes again, the blond man had gone, and the room was starting to look solid again.

By that time, the girls were all crowded around his bed, looking worried and hopeful. He realized he felt fine. In fact he felt better than fine, he felt better than he had in years. He'd gotten so used to the pain he barely even noticed it anymore. It was like he was floating. That gave him pause, and he

pushed his arms down into the mattress. Nope, not floating. But still...he could get used to this.

He stretched and leered playfully up at them. 'Three beautiful women in my bed... I oughta die and come back more often.'

He was touched by the relief on their faces, right before they all slapped whatever part of him was closest. He grinned as he sat up. 'Definitely more often.' He gathered them into his arms and held them for a moment. 'What happened?' he asked quietly.

Dawn started angrily. 'They killed you Xander, the visions killed you. Why didn't you tell us they were getting so much worse? Why didn't you trust us? Did you really think we wouldn't have helped? That we would have taken them away from you?' She stopped and sighed as she caught the guilty expression on his face.

Willow lent over and kissed him on the forehead. 'You should have trusted us Xander,' she said

quietly. 'I know you think we don't understand, but we do. All of us.' Dawn nodded, and Buffy just looked at him, her eyes full of sadness, and understanding.

He felt like an idiot. How could he have underestimated his girls? He'd known, of course he'd known. But he'd just been so afraid... Some all-powerful seer he'd turned out to be. 'I'm so sorry.' He looked up into their stern faces and gave them the eyes. 'I promise it won't happen again?'

He felt it the moment they began to crack. He knew they were still angry with him, but hey, he'd just died, surely he deserved a bit of a break.

'Yeah, well, you better damn well see that it doesn't,' Dawn groused.

He smiled cheerfully. 'So, what'd you do to me? I feel better than I have in almost ten years.'

He listened carefully as Willow explained about the phase spell. It wasn't like the other one, which had

been an ongoing thing, kept in place by Willow's power. This was permanent. She had irrevocably changed his basic make-up. It wasn't a big change, but he wasn't about to snap back to the way he was before.

'In a way, you can now occupy two different planes of reality. The other one, you know, not this one, is the next highest plane. It's also metaphysical. To us, anyway. I guess it would be solid to the things that belong there. I don't know if there will be any side effects. There are lots of things out there that we don't usually see, because we aren't tuned into them properly. You might start picking some of them up. Energy waves, that sort of thing. But if it does happen, it should only be while you're phased, which should only happen while you're having a vision, so you probably won't see anything anyway. Except for the visions, of course. I don't know about the visions. They might be clearer. Seeing as you'll be receiving them on a higher plane, you'll be just that much closer to the Powers who are sending them. You'll still be able to remember them the same way. I think.'

He waited for her to trail off. Willow only talked like this when she was nervous. 'Willow, whatever happens, I know you tried your best. And considering you're like the most powerful witch in the country, that's saying something. It'll be fine. Thank you for bringing me back.'

Willow smiled and buried her head in his chest. 'I almost lost you, Xander,' she whispered brokenly.

He held her tightly and stroked her hair. 'Take more than that to get rid of the Xand-man. Nearly thirty-five years and all the nasties out there still haven't managed to get rid of us. I've decided we must all be destined to live to a ripe old age and die in our sleep. And we all know I'm never wrong.'

He sat there for a moment longer, feeling his eyes start to droop, before nudging Willow out of his arms. 'Now, if you don't mind, I really need to get some rest. Something tells me the Powers That Be won't care that I had a rough night. And I'm sure you all have work to do.' He yawned hugely and lay

back down. He stayed that way for a moment before noticing that they weren't leaving. He sighed and turned to face them. 'Guy's Guys, I'm fine, I feel fine. When I was... dead... I heard something, or someone, I don't know. But... this is where I'm supposed to be. Now, like this. They aren't going to take me away again. I think they just needed to be sure that I was sure. And I am. So, either get in this bed with me for some hot Xander lovin', or go away and let me get some sleep.'

He didn't see the glances they exchanged, but he did feel it as they each got up and kissed him on the forehead. 'My head doesn't hurt,' they heard him murmur delightedly as he drifted off into sleep.

One B

In which Xander gets used to life after death and discovers that Spike might not be as dead as they all assumed

He was alone when his inner clock woke him about six hours later. He still felt amazing. Rested, and ready for a busy night, full of visions. He winced slightly when he remembered that he would still get headaches, but for the moment he felt wonderful, and decided not to let it depress him. He glanced over at the clock. Five forty-five. The girls wouldn't be coming in for dinner for another half an hour. Just enough time for him to have a quick shower and head down into the kitchen to get things started.

So he was surprised to see Buffy was at the table with four other slayers, when he sauntered into the dining room fifteen minutes later.

'Xander! What are you doing up. We thought you'd sleep late, what with... you know.' She jumped up to give him a hug, before holding him at arms length to examine him. 'You look... great.' She

sounded slightly confused. 'I thought you'd look, you know, different. I always feel different when you bring me back from the dead. Certainly not like I've just had the best night's sleep in a long time.'

He grinned at her. 'I feel great. Must be because Willow fixed my brain. The headaches'll probably come back when the visions start, but 'till then, I really don't want to think about it.'

He looked around at the slayers, who had been watching Buffy and himself. 'How are you lovely young things this afternoon? You're finished kind of early haven't you?'

Jessica smirked. 'Buffy hasn't been able to concentrate all day. We gave up about an hour ago. Some of the girls have gone into town. They said to say hi, if we saw you, and hope you're feeling better.'

Xander did make an effort to get to know all the slayers. If he was going to be sending them into danger, he felt he owed them at least that much.

And besides, they were a nice bunch of girls. He was happy to count them as friends. He grinned slightly to himself. He doubted there was another man on the planet with as many female friends as him. Not to mention young, beautiful, fit female friends. Even so, he had never pursued any of them romantically. He had gone out on a few dates after Anya had died, only two of whom had turned out to be demons, and had one serious relationship. But then he had received the visions and discovered that there was nothing that killed the mood more thoroughly than having his eyes film over, followed by several minutes of frantic writing as he tried to get every detail down. Not to mention the very manly squeals that occasionally accompanied the stabbing headaches. Sure, he sometimes felt the loss, but he had his family, not to mention all the people in his head. He was content.

Cameron spoke up shyly. 'Yeah, we heard about what happened. I'm glad you're still with us, Xander.' The others nodded their agreement.

He grinned at them. 'Got to say, not hating the not

being dead thing, either.'

Jesse added, 'Besides, if you hadn't come back, who would we have to send us out on dangerous, hair-raising missions. No fun being a slayer if there ain't no demons to kick the crap out of.' She grinned wickedly at him.

'Aw, I knew it! You only love me for my mind. You guy's sticking around for breakfast?'

Phillipa shook her head as she and the other girls got up. 'We have already eaten, but thank you all the same, Xander. We must be going. The four of us have organized to drive into town this afternoon. We are going to see a film before it is time to patrol. Shall we see you tomorrow?'

'Sure, I'll come down and say hi. You girls have a good time.' They all pecked him on the cheek as they made their way outside. He glanced down as he heard Buffy's snort of amusement. 'What?' he grinned.

'You have no idea, do you?' she asked, a grin playing around the corners of her mouth. 'You have got to be one of the most protected people in the world. There are what, like two hundred slayers in the world at the moment?'

'Two hundred and twelve, I think,' he answered. 'Why?'

She rolled her eyes at him. For someone who was meant to be a seer, he sure as hell didn't see a lot when it came to how people felt about him. 'At least half of them were probably in love with you at some stage. By the end of their stay here, most of them have adopted you as some sort of a brother/father figure, and would happily battle the very army of hell itself if it meant keeping you safe. If someone sent out a general e-mail that said 'Xander is in danger' we would have every slayer here within a matter of days. You have to know that.'

Xander closed his mouth, and then opened it again. 'Um, yeah, well now I do. They do know that...'

Buffy interrupted, 'Yeah, they know you're not looking for anyone. Like I said, most of them get over it fairly quickly. But you've got a bigger family than you think,' she finished quietly.

Xander mulled over this for a moment. He decided it felt good to have so many people actually care about him. He sure as hell hadn't had much of the unconditional love thing growing up with his 'real' family. He smiled as they started walking into the kitchen. 'So, tell me about the countless numbers of beautiful girls who've been in love with me over the past ten years.'

'Oh, no. I've said all I'm going to say. That was a big enough ego-boost for one afternoon.'

They bantered lightly while they prepared pancakes and coffee. Dawn joined them at half past six, and they all sat down to wait for Willow. She stumbled in at a quarter to seven, still yawning. Buffy had told him she had preceded the phase spell with a translocation spell, performed on not one, but two

people and quite a bit of luggage. He'd been ready to have breakfast without her, but Buffy said that Willow had insisted on being there. She dropped into a chair and treated him to an intense stare, followed by a satisfied smile, and breakfast got underway.

Just before seven thirty, Xander got out the pad and pencil he carried with him at all times, and placed them on the dining table. He looked at the three women, seeing his own nervousness reflected in their eyes.

Willow tried to smile reassuringly. 'Everything should be fine, Xander. There's nothing to worry about. You should feel a bit of a tug just before the vision starts. Follow it with your mind until the room starts to go out of focus just a little bit. You probably felt it this morning, after the spell. When the vision finishes, you should just slip into this plane again naturally. Remember, don't panic.'

'Right. Got it. Simple.' They waited for a moment, but nothing happened. Xander started to panic.

Maybe he'd lost them, maybe he really was meant to be dead and the Powers had taken the visions away. Maybe...

He felt it. The tug. It was like the vision was being directed somewhere just outside his head, and he had to let go his mind in order to get to it. Mindful of what Willow had said, he allowed his mind to follow, and gasped a bit as he saw the room start to go out of focus. For a fraction of a second he thought he saw Spike again, leaning up against the far wall and watching him curiously. He would have sworn he saw blue eyes widen as he met them with his own. Then all thought of Spike faded as his eyes filmed over, and all he saw were the pictures in his head.

It started as it always did, above, looking down. Then he was moving toward the earth. America... California... San Francisco... the Bay... the moon, setting... a street sign, Parson Road... an old toy factory, abandoned, Jacob and Sons Toys... inside... six demons, Abigor, major players from the hell dimensions... a magic symbol on the floor...

zooming in on it, memorizing it; triangle, inverted, six skulls around the outside... the sacrifice in the center, two innocents, children, the demons cutting their hearts out... an obsidian knife, the blood dripping... a portal opening, more of their kind emerging... killing, bloodshed...

And then it was over.

Xander felt his eyes clear, and for a moment the room was fuzzy, before it slid into focus as he remembered it doing this morning. He immediately picked up pen and paper and started writing. There was no chance he would forget any of it, but it was best to give the California slayers as much time as possible.

He started talking as he was writing. If there was one thing ten years of visions had taught him, it was how to disconnect his hand from his mouth. He could write down everything he had seen, while carrying on a conversation with no trouble at all.

He smiled briefly at the women, who were all

looking at him anxiously. 'Well, first and foremost, I think the fact that I'm still alive deserves a 'yay'. All things considered, I feel pretty good. My head hurts, but nowhere near as bad as it did last night, 'bout the same as it always used to be, actually. Nothing I can't handle. Honestly and I mean it.' He looked up at them for a moment, before they all said they believed him. 'It was just like you said, Wills. I felt the tug, and the room went a little translucent, just before the vision started. There was something weird though. I thought I saw Spike for a moment. And not as a part of the vision.'

Buffy frowned. 'Spike? As in our Spike? Are you sure he wasn't part of the vision? Maybe he fought the beasts at some point... Or maybe you're just thinking about him. It is coming up to the anniversary of his death, and you did die last night. It's probably only natural...' She trailed off.

Xander shrugged. 'I guess so. Like I said, he didn't feel like part of the vision, but maybe you should check it out anyway, Dawnie. I'll make a note at the bottom.'

'But other than that, everything went fine?' Willow cut in, still sounding concerned. 'You didn't flicker the way you did last night. You were still solid in this plane, but you did go a little insubstantial around the edges. I couldn't see into the other plane, but your mind seemed to move fairly easily between them.'

Xander nodded. 'Yeah, there were no problems that way. When the vision finished, I just kind of let myself slide back, although I probably could have held on, if I'd wanted to.'

'Really?' Willow sounded surprised. 'It hadn't occurred to me that you might be able to control the phase, but I suppose there's no reason why you shouldn't. You probably shouldn't try it until you've gotten used to the visions though. Speaking of. Were the visions all right? You seemed to be under for a little longer than usual.'

'Actually, the vision itself was fine. You were right again. It was easier to concentrate, especially

without the pain. Oh, yeah, the pain only started when the vision finished. So, I reckon I probably got more details. The smells and sounds were sharper, too, although they were always pretty good before, so I don't know how much practical difference it's going to make.'

Willow asked a few more questions, and examined his head with her magic, before she finally announced that she was satisfied. She grinned, relaxing back in her chair. 'I really think this is going to work,' she said happily.

Xander finished writing and looked up at Willow. 'Thank you for this Wills, all of you.' He looked around at them. 'I think you know how much it means to me.'

Willow smiled at him. 'Hey, you're happy, we're happy. You are happy?'

'Absolutely.' He waved around the piece of paper in his hand. 'Every time I hear that something like this has been prevented... Well, let's just say very little

compares. Speaking of which, I should probably get back to my office. I know these demons, got a good chapter on them in one of my books.' It still amused him sometimes to think that he, the illiterate one, had a library in his office...and that he actually used it. 'And I want to get a good look at the map. Find out just where it is we're supposed to be going.' He also had what had to be the world's largest collection of street directories. 'We've got 'till the moon sets, but I'd like to get the report out as soon as possible.'

Dawn rose from her seat. 'Yeah, I should probably get back to work as well. Oh! I almost forgot. I called Giles. He should be here for breakfast tomorrow. He's really worried about you, Xander. I'll give him another call to let him know everything seems to be fine, but be prepared.' She grinned at him.

He grimaced and grumbled, 'Great. May 14th, breakfast, get the third degree from Giles. And I suppose I'm gonna have to tidy my room.' Then he brightened. 'Oh, hey! What if you don't tell him I'm

all better? 'Cause, you know, I did just die. That's got to be worth a few laundry-free days, don't you think? If I lie in bed looking really pathetic, I bet he'd get all mother-y and do it for me. I mean, sure, it's a little dishonest, and he'd probably complain, but... no laundry.' He grinned hopefully at them.

'Xander, you can't do that to Giles.' Buffy chided him. Then she grinned 'Besides, the last time I died there was a distinct lack of sympathy cleaning.'

'Well, yeah, but that was the third time. You're old hat. Me, I'm new to the ranks of the resurrected. Scared and need to be looked after. Maybe you should get me a maid, just to be on the safe side.'

Dawn rolled her eyes at them, smirking. 'Xander, you're not getting a maid. I'm going to tell Giles you're fine. And could you two please stop talking about being dead. It's creeping me out.'

Buffy and Xander exchanged an amused glance, but dutifully apologised.

'You coming down soon? Or do you want to forgo training for today?' Buffy asked as she, too, got up.

'No, I'll be there.' It was kind of hard to find the time to train when he didn't know exactly when a vision would hit him, but for a couple of hours at sunset he would go down to the gym and work out in between the occasional vision. He supposed that he could have used the exercise machine for his room and made it easier for himself, but he appreciated Buffy's company, and enjoyed seeing the girls, if any of them weren't out patrolling.

He looked over at Willow, only to see her head cushioned on her arms, resting on the table. He laughed. 'Come on, Wills. I'll walk you to your room. You look like you could do with another few hours sleep.'

They all left the room with a light step. Xander was really ok for the first time in a long time, Willow was back, and by tomorrow morning Giles would be there, and they would all be together again.

~*~*~*~*~

Everything progressed smoothly for the next couple of weeks. Both Giles and Willow stayed for nearly a week, and Xander spent every spare second with them. Giles would sit with him for hours at a time, and they would spend the time researching his visions, or just talking about the past and the future. They talked about Dawn, and Giles confessed he thought she was one of the best watchers he had ever known, and that he was so proud of her for the way she had handled the Council at the Annual General Meeting. Naturally Giles swore him to secrecy, and naturally Xander told Dawn exactly what he had said the very next day. She had cried, and gone straight to Giles, but neither of them had said anything. It was their way.

Occasionally, Buffy and Willow would join them as well, the original Scooby Gang, and Xander would close his eyes and pretend for a moment that they were back in the library. He had a feeling the others

did the same thing. They weren't trying to bring back the past. They had lost so much, but from that they had built something truly worthy. If it wasn't for the past, they wouldn't have the present, and it did them good to remember that.

The visions also seemed to be going well. Xander was becoming more adept at phasing in and out of the two planes he could exist in. He could hold onto the shift indefinitely after a vision, and was fairly sure that with a little practice would be able to phase even without the stimulus of a vision. He was in less pain than he had been for months. The headaches continued to plague him, but they disappeared far more quickly than they used to, and he often found that he could wake up after a good day's sleep in no pain at all.

The only thing that continued to bother him was his visions of Spike. He received glimpses of the man before or after a vision, when he was still phased. For the first week, he had only had them maybe once a day, not enough for him to really worry about. Willow had told him they were most

probably just memories, which, if they were strong enough, could become a kind of independent energy. He had accepted this theory. After all, he usually only saw them when he was around Buffy or Dawn, whose memories of the vampire would certainly be the strongest.

Since Willow and Giles had left the previous Sunday, however, he had started to pay more attention when he saw the man. He just didn't seem to act like a memory. The way he watched them, relaxed but alert. And he was almost certain Spike was avoiding him. The way he would be there before a vision, but gone afterwards. It was... weird. Xander couldn't put his finger on it exactly, but by the end of the second week he knew he had to find out what was going on. He didn't have time to observe Spike more closely before a vision, and afterwards he had to phase back in so he could write up his reports. He was convinced if he wanted to see what was going on, he would have to phase without the aid of a vision.

He figured he should make his attempts when Spike

wasn't likely to be around, if he really was trying to avoid him. So he decided he'd give it a go in the middle of one of his days, the middle of the night for Buffy and Dawn. He'd never seen Spike at that time of the day.

He sat a little nervously in the big chair in front of the fireplace in his office on Monday night. The last vision had been an easy one, and he figured he had a little while before the next one. He was pretty sure he could do this. He knew the theory, and had felt the phase often enough in the past couple of weeks to be completely familiar with it. But still, he was a little worried that if he did it deliberately, it would be different. Maybe he wouldn't be able to come back.

He shook his head, focusing. The tug felt like it came from above him, generally, which he supposed made sense, if he was moving into a higher plane. He closed his eyes and tried to picture the sensation. He could feel where he wanted to go, hovering just beyond his consciousness, but he wasn't sure how to get there. He shook his head

again and tried to reason through it. Usually, he had the visions to pull him into the other plane. He needed to somehow get there himself... Maybe if he pictured himself stepping across...

He felt it the second it happened, like tiny streams of electricity running over his skin. He opened his eyes slowly. The room looked the same, maybe a little out of focus, although the fire in the grate was a bright, pulsing light. Everything seemed sort of... insubstantial, as though he should be able to pass his hand through it. He reached out to the glass of water on the coffee table and was mildly surprised when his fingers connected with the smooth surface. He put the glass back down and looked around the rest of the room. There were faint waves of light running through the room - energy, he supposed - but otherwise everything seemed entirely normal. He got up and wandered over to the doorway. He wasn't sure how long he would be able to stay like this. He'd never stayed phased for more than ten minutes before. He shrugged. It was about time for lunch, anyway. He would see if he could hold it all the way down to the kitchen.

He made his way slowly along the corridors, having to concentrate on not bumping into things. He passed a full-length mirror on the second floor, and was interested to note that his reflection was almost totally obscured by the bands of light running around him. Obviously, he wouldn't be able to live this way. He had just reached the main entrance hall when a group of the girls bounded in from a night of patrolling. They didn't see him standing in the doorway and headed straight for the kitchen. They were all faintly glowing, making it hard for him to recognize them. It was actually kind of disconcerting. He figured he must have been phased for about fifteen minutes now, and although it didn't seem to be making him tired, he was about to drop it and join the girls in the kitchen, when he saw him.

Spike. He followed the girls through the door. Actually through the door, as the last girl shut it behind herself. Xander could hear him laughing softly at something one of the girls had said. He was the only one in the room that wasn't glowing. In

fact, he was the most substantial looking thing Xander had seen yet. None of the girls noticed as he followed them over to the dining room doorway. There, however, Xander was surprised to see him stop, looking slightly sad.

Without really giving himself time to think about it, Xander paced quietly over to the other side of the hallway, reached out, and placed his hand on Spike's shoulder - only to find himself flat on his back a moment later with one extremely pissed looking blond glaring at him.

Seconds later, Spike was on his feet again, staring down at Xander with an equal mix of horror and astonishment.

Okay, definitely not a memory, he thought to himself. He levered himself up so that he was leaning on his elbows and smiled up into that shocked face. 'Spike, good to see you again,' he said nonchalantly. He reached out a hand for Spike to help him up. Spike just stared at it for so long that Xander rolled his eyes and pulled himself to his feet.

The expression on the blond man's face would have been funny, if he hadn't looked so honestly panicked. Xander sighed and took pity on him. He supposed Spike, whatever he was now, wasn't used to people being able to see him. 'Spike,' he said softly, ducking his head down to make eye contact. 'Spike, I think we need to talk. Can we take this to my office?' Finally, a reaction. His face hardened and he nodded once, motioning for Xander to lead the way.

A little concerned at the silence from the other man, Xander held his tongue as they made their way up the stairs to his office. He glanced around frequently to make sure Spike was still there, but he was always following a couple of steps behind. In fact, by the time he finally made it to the door of his office, Xander had stumbled into three tables, two walls, and tripped up at least half a dozen stairs. He was sure Spike was trying not to smirk. He opened the door and motioned for Spike to come in.

He stood in the middle of the room, and took his first good look at the man before him. From the

various glimpses he'd had over the past couple of weeks, he would have said that Spike had changed hardly at all. The bleached hair, the unrelieved black of his wardrobe, the sure, almost arrogant way he held himself, all screamed Spike to his experienced eye. Looking closer now, however, he could see that the last fifteen years had not left the man unscathed. In addition to the glaring absence of the leather duster, there was a... softness almost, about him. Or if not that, then at least a lot of the coiled tension and suppressed violence with which he had moved was gone. It made it all the more obvious that Spike was no longer a vampire. Xander had no idea where the blond had been for the past fifteen years, even if he was alive or dead. But it was obvious even to him that the years hadn't been a walk in the park. Spike held himself too carefully, pursed his mouth a little too tightly, as though he was afraid any sudden movements might cause him to break. It reminded Xander a little of how he had acted that last year, after he had gotten his soul, especially when they had been living together, when he hadn't been able to help just waiting for the vampire to shatter.

He cautiously met Spike's eyes, unsure what he would find there. They were one thing that had never changed, through everything the vampire had had to endure. Xander had never quite been able to understand that, but there it was.

They were the same. Those blue eyes reflected the same man who had respectively been a hated enemy, a reluctant ally, an even more reluctant friend, and finally a fellow champion, or victim of fate, depending on how he was feeling on any given day. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, he found himself unsure of what to say. 'Sooo... how've you been?'

Spike laughed. He couldn't help it. He had been expecting all kinds of painful and difficult questions. It was good to know some things never changed. 'Dead, mate.'

Xander smirked. 'You were always dead, Spike. Didn't stop you having a good time.'

'Not quite the same, this time.'

Xander nodded. Obviously not. 'Come on, let's sit down, you've got a lot of talking to do.' Spike hesitated. 'Spike, I know you can sit down, I've seen you do it.' He took a step forward before stopping again. Xander sighed and walked over to him.

'What's wrong? Are you not allowed to talk to me?'

Spike smiled sadly and looked into the worried eyes before him. 'No, no. It's not that.' Spike ran a hand through his hair. Xander smiled a little at the familiar gesture. 'It's just that... Xander, I'm... like a ghost, I guess, although not really. I have been for nearly fifteen years. I haven't been able to speak to anyone, to touch anyone. I'm almost entirely invisible to the world around me. And now all of a sudden you can not only see me and hear me, but I can touch you... I haven't been able to touch anyone for so long. You have to understand that it's a bit overwhelming.'

Xander was stunned. And he'd thought his was a solitary existence.

He didn't know what to say. He had so many questions, but none of them really seemed appropriate at the moment. He found that he wanted to reassure the man in front of him. But how did you tell someone who hadn't been alive for the past fifteen years that it was going to be all right? He wished fleetingly that Dawn were there, she would have known what to say. Finally, he did the only thing he could think of. He stepped forward and placed his solid arms around the solid figure in front of him. He figured that if he had gone fifteen years without feeling the touch of another person, this is what he would want.

Spike stiffened for a moment as he felt the arms snake around him, before relaxing and heaving a great sigh of relief. This was heaven. Well, ok, maybe not heaven. But it was the closest he had come in fifteen years to that feeling of peace and contentment he had been searching for. He couldn't stop his hands, didn't want to, as they ran themselves over Xander's back, his shoulders, through his hair. He could feel Xander's heart

beating where their chests were touching. He closed his eyes, reveling in the sensations.

Xander just stood there, one hand making small circles on Spike's back as he let himself be touched. Eventually Spike came back to himself enough to realize he'd been practically fondling the man in front of him, and pulled away in embarrassment. He half expected Xander to either laugh at him or yell at him, so he was surprised to see the gentle smile gracing the other man's face.

'Better?'

He cleared away the lump in his throat. 'Um, yeah, thanks. Sorry about all that...'

Xander waved it away. 'S'ok.' He grinned. 'The girls only love me for my mind. It's about time I had someone who appreciated me for my body.'

Spike snorted. 'Buffy was right, you are completely clueless.' He winced inwardly as Xander stilled. Great, he sighed to himself. Outwardly he smirked

wryly. 'Let me guess, it's time for that talk, isn't it?'

Xander started to nod, but all of a sudden his expression became blank. Spike had seen this often enough to know what was happening. He thought momentarily about leaving while Xander was effectively blind, but then he felt a hand clamp over his wrist. Or he could stay. Perhaps the kid wasn't so clueless after all. He patiently waited for the vision to finish, not attempting to remove his hand from the vice-like grip holding it. Actually, he quite liked it. At the moment, any touch was a good thing, as far as he was concerned, and it wasn't like he really had any blood to stop circulating. Being a guardian was kind of like being a vampire, except for the whole, existing on a metaphysical plane bit. He watched the hand holding his as he gently flexed all the muscles in his fingers, grinning slightly each time he felt the pressure against his hand change.

As he stood there, he came to realize that he could feel, faintly, the pulse in Xander's wrist, and the warmth of the blood under the skin. He remembered that he'd been able to feel his

heartbeat as he held him earlier. It wasn't just Xander's metaphysical body he was holding. He had felt them a couple of times over the years, as he came into contact with other guardians existing on this plane. Somehow, Xander's ability to exist in both planes simultaneously was allowing him to feel the other man's physical body as well.

Even though it had only inhabited his vampire body for a year, Spike's soul had developed an appreciation for the warmth of the living. After fifteen years without, he had almost forgotten how intoxicating it was. He found he'd inched closer to Xander, although he hadn't taken his eyes off the boy's hand. Their bodies weren't touching, but if he concentrated, he could feel the heat radiating from him.

He started a little as the hand holding his flexed, and he looked up to see Xander grinning at him. 'You look like you've just discovered chocolate. Either that, or you're a vampire ghost and you want to suck my blood.' Mmmm... chocolate and blood. He could remember liking chocolate and blood.

Xander looked suddenly alarmed. 'You're not, are you?'

'Nah, mate, not a vampire anymore. You're just nice'n'warm.'

Xander looked at him as if to say 'you're sure you're not a vampire'. 'Cross my heart, pet.'

He received a speculative look, before Xander shrugged philosophically. 'Well, last chance to experience my toasty goodness, blondie. I've got a report to write up, and this one is going to take some research. It'll be hands off for at least the next half an hour.'

Spike felt a momentary rush of disappointment, but shrugged it off. He dropped the hand he had been holding and stepped away. 'I've been at this for fifteen years, mate, I think I can manage.'

Xander pinned him suddenly with a glare. 'Don't go too far. We still need to have that talk.' Spike gave him his most innocent look. Apparently it wasn't

very good, because Xander laughed once before shaking his head and phasing back into the physical plane.

One C

In which Spike and Xander have that talk

Normally, after the last of the slayers came back from patrol, Spike would walk around the house and the grounds, make sure there was nothing threatening the people who lived there. There almost never was, but it gave him something to do until Buffy, Dawn and the other slayers got up at sunrise. Occasionally he would check in with Angel and his people in L.A. He still couldn't say he particularly liked the man, but the year before he died had given him a good idea of what Angel had

gone through when he received his soul, and the past fifteen years, without the anger of his demon to fuel him, had allowed him to mellow a great deal.

He had even checked in with Xander on occasion, as the young man spent the night in his room, alone, visited by what had to be horrific visions accompanied by terrible headaches. In a way, he knew what it was like to carry around pictures like that in your head. Although his demon was dead, he could remember everything that it had done, and the visions still haunted him, when he allowed himself to think about it. Xander had no choice but to think about the things he saw. He was responsible for the salvation of thousands of innocent lives each year. He had come to admire Xander's stoicism, his constant good cheer in the face of such a burden. He was very like Cordelia in that respect, although she still complained about the visions a whole lot more than Xander did. They really were an unlikely pair, to be chosen by the Powers for such an important purpose. He had been worried when Xander had volunteered to carry the visions ten years ago. At the time he hadn't really

been aware of the strength the youth contained. But Xander had thrown himself into his new role, determined to be the very best seer that he could be. And like Cordelia, he had managed to surprise them all with his dedication.

Spike thought for a moment about leaving, doing a quick sweep of the grounds, but something in him was urging him to stay and so he sat down on the window seat and prepared to wait for Xander to finish up his report.

He smiled a bit as he thought about the way Xander had been treating him. A part of him kept expecting the same sort of contempt the boy had always shown him when he was alive. Looking back, though, he could see in that last year how the young man's attitude towards him had changed. They had never been friends, but Xander had started to accept him as a... colleague, perhaps, or at least as the man who was in love with his best friend. Now, Xander was being positively nice, understanding even. It was... strange, although certainly not unpleasant.

He watched as Xander pulled a couple of books down from his shelves - the man had an impressive library - and dug out a street directory from the bottom of a huge pile. He spent the next half an hour or so filling up a good three pages in one of the legal pads he went through like he'd once gone through chocolate, referring occasionally to the books beside him, but more often just scribbling down the details from memory. Eventually, he signed the bottom and closed the books. Then he moved over to his desk and pushed a button on the phone.

'That's it,' he announced, Spike assumed for his benefit. 'Someone'll be up in a sec. Then we can get talking.' Xander ducked into the bathroom for an aspirin, before heading over to the door, papers in hand. He handed them over to the boy waiting outside. 'Thanks, Dan, see you in a bit.'

The kid nodded his head and gave him a grin. 'No problem, Mr. Harris.'

Xander grimaced. 'Xander, please Dan, I'm begging you.'

Dan grinned again. 'Told you, I'm thinking about it.' He waved and took off down the corridor. Xander just shook his head ruefully and closed the door.

Spike stood up and moved over to the fireplace as Xander shifted into his plane, becoming solid again. Xander joined him on the two-seater couch, propping his feet up on the coffee table.

'Mr. Harris?' he asked as Xander got comfortable, smirking slightly.

Xander rolled his eyes and looked over at Spike. 'Dan's fifteen, came in with his sister Jesse, one of the slayers?' Spike nodded. Jesse was a lot of fun, although she tended to get into more trouble than some of the other slayers. 'Well, he seems to think I'm too old to be called Xander. Said it'd be like calling his teachers at school by their first names. 'Course, he only does it 'cause he knows it annoys the hell out of me.'

Xander fell silent, and they sat for a moment, neither entirely sure where to start. Eventually Xander sighed and moved around so he could look at Spike directly. 'I guess I should start with the most obvious questions.' He hesitated, chuckling nervously. 'This is weird... Well, I guess, what happened? What are you exactly? A ghost? I think I'm convinced at this point you're not just a memory. But... why are you here? For that matter, how long have you been here? Not that I'm complaining, it's good to see you again. But, you're dead, you told me that yourself. Just... well, what happened?'

Yeah, that fell into the category of painful and difficult. He had expected this, had been trying to prepare what he could say in his head. At some point, without even thinking about it, he had decided to tell Xander the truth. No one had ever told him not to. No one had ever mentioned what he should do in this sort of situation. But still, now it came down to it, he didn't know what to say. He was nervous, which was making him irritated. And

what the hell did he have to be nervous about? It's not like he was obligated to explain himself. He'd been perfectly happy before all this started. He glanced over at Xander, who was looking at him expectantly. Which was just making him more nervous. Fine, he wanted an explanation.

'Let's see, shall we,' he said harshly. 'I died, again, went to heaven, decided I didn't like it, so they sent me back. End of story.'

Xander smiled slightly, although his gaze remained steely. 'That's the irritable Spike I remember. And here I thought you were a changed man.'

Seeing how composed Xander was being was pissing him off. 'Yeah, well, maybe I'm not, maybe I'm just as evil as ever. What the hell would you know? I'm sure as hell no more human than I used to be. So why don't you just pretend none of this ever happened and go back to hating me.'

Xander was looking at him seriously, sympathetically. Shit. He didn't need this. He wasn't

looking for pity. 'I haven't hated you in a long time, Spike. We may never have been the best of friends, but I could see that you had the potential to be a good person.'

A good person?! 'Except I was never a 'person', was I, seer? I was an unholy demon with a soul. And now? I'm even more dead than I was before.'

He jumped out of his seat and started pacing around the room. Xander wasn't saying anything. That was fine. Why should he care? Man thought he could just waltz in and screw with his head, pretend like he cared, touch him... make him remember things he would be better off forgetting. And now he thought-

Spike was brought up short when Xander stepped in front of him, a hard look on his face. 'You may be dead, Spike, but it seems to me you're more human than you have been in a long time.' He paused for a moment, stepping back slightly. 'This thing, how I am, it's permanent. So unless you plan to avoid me for the rest of my life, which wouldn't accomplish

anything, I suggest we sit down and discuss this like rational adults.' He took a calming breath and tried again. 'Look, I'm sorry if this is messing with your comfortable routine, Spike, but getting mad isn't going to just make it, or me, go away. If the past ten years have taught me anything, it's that the Powers generally have a good reason - well, a reason anyway - for the things they do. Most of the time we don't get to understand it, we just get to accept it.'

Spike felt some the anger wash out of him. Xander was right. He could hardly avoid the man for the rest of his existence, however long that was going to be. He couldn't guard anyone if he wasn't even around. Besides, nothing Xander did could hurt him now, so what was the harm? He took a fortifying breath, gathered his thoughts and began his story.

'I guess it all started when my soul was returned. I'm the only vampire ever to have died with a soul, you know? I'd been doing all right, but that day, under the hellmouth, I felt it, and I felt everything I had ever done as a demon, and for a moment I just

wanted to die. My soul was screaming and all I wanted was for it to stop. When I saw my chance to save Buffy and all the rest of them, I knew that I had to take it. Didn't matter that it'd kill me, that it'd be agonizing, I just knew... I had to do it.' He stopped, the memories of that day flooding back. For weeks, he had willed his soul into submission, for the sake of the slayer and for the fight against the First. He had tried to accommodate it, justify his actions as a vampire and finally settled on ignoring it. That day, however, facing that horde of vampires, it had all come screaming back. Maybe he would have done it anyway, but it had made the decision, the sacrifice, that much easier. And it had been agonizing, for just a moment, before he felt his body crumble to dust. That had been one of the most disturbing things he had ever experienced. But then the pain hadn't stopped, and he had realized that his soul was still screaming. That was when he had truly understood what he had given up. A chance to find peace, to come to terms with his past and the people he loved.

He shook his head, not looking at Xander, and

resumed his story. 'Yeah. So, the demon was dead, and there was I, too good for hell, not ready for heaven. When Buffy died, after she came back, she told me about heaven, and I think I was there. It was like I could... remember it, somehow. It was...' How could he describe it?

'Peace,' Xander said quietly. Spike looked over at him sharply.

'How...?'

Xander smiled sadly at him. 'I died two weeks ago Spike. Granted it was only for a few minutes. But... it was also forever. I don't know where I was, but it was peace. I could have stayed, I just wasn't ready for it.'

'Got something in common, then, don't we? Unfortunately, unlike you, I didn't have a nice healthy body to come back to. But I couldn't stay there, either. So your bleedin' Powers That Be decided to make me a deal. I got to come back, keep fighting demons, as long as I fought for them

and protected you lot. Sounded like a bloody good deal at the time. Someone neglected to mention the non-corporeal bit. Don't even get to beat anything up, most of the time.' Spike sounded so despondent, Xander couldn't help smiling a bit. It would seem this vampire had, indeed, changed less than he had thought.

'Being a vampire for a hundred years spoiled you for the peaceful life, huh?' Xander smirked at him.

Spike winced a bit at that. 'Death. But yeah, that about sums it up.'

Xander cursed himself for his flippancy. He hadn't meant it like that. Still, these were the answers he had wanted. He decided to plough ahead. Spike didn't have to answer if he didn't want to. 'Why? I thought you'd pretty much come to terms with all that being an evil vampire stuff.'

Spike looked at him darkly. Well, okay, that might have been a little insensitive but it was also the truth. 'Not so much, no.'

In truth, Spike had only been starting to deal with the things that the demon had done with his body before he died. Yes, he had understood that he had acted only according to his nature, but every time he closed his eyes he had seen the faces of the people whose lives he had cut short. Given time, he might have been able to make peace with himself, but he had given up that peace for a greater cause, even if it hadn't felt like it at the time.

Xander just looked at him for a moment with eyes that saw more than they should, then nodded and moved on. 'Okay. So you protect us for the Powers. Makes a guy feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Who us? All the slayers, or just us from Sunnydale?'

'Yeah, any of you - you're all touched by The Powers - Buffy, Dawn, Red, Angel and his lot, any of the slayers...you. Long as no one's on the brink of death it's mostly up to me.'

Which explained why he was around Buffy and Dawn so often. 'And how, exactly, is that supposed

to work. Aren't you supposed to be incorporeal? You said you hadn't touched anyone in fifteen years. So, if you can't touch the monsters, how are you supposed to fight them, let alone kill them?'

'Killing them is easy. Explaining it isn't. You'll just have to trust me that it works. Besides, there are some things that exist only in this reality, or in this one as well as yours, kind of like you do. Them, I can fight. So I guess I have had some contact, 'though it's not quite the same.' Spike smirked a little at that. As much as he enjoyed being able to actually fight the creatures he was killing, as opposed to just making them dead or unconscious, it didn't really feel like contact, and it didn't happen all that often anyway.

'So, what, you protect us 'till we die? What then? How long are you going to have to stay here?'

Spike looked a little uncomfortable at the question. 'How should I know?'

Xander frowned for a moment and his eyes went a

little vacant. For a moment Spike thought he was about to have another vision, but then he pinned Spike with a glare. 'You're not just here to protect us, Spike. Why did they send you back?'

Shit. Spike sighed. He was going to have to explain himself. 'It's like this, see. I was given a second chance to find peace. And happiness. Apparently I had never managed that in the hundred and fifty odd years I'd been around.' He winced. God, this was sappy. The part of him that had been a vampire for over a century cringed at the poncy-ness of it all. 'I was apparently judged 'worthy'. 'Selfless act' and all that rubbish. So, they make me a higher being, give me another chance. Still, fact remains that I hadn't been ready to die, and I sure as hell got a better deal than some. I guess. Least this way I get to make sure nothing happens to any of you. So, yeah, I get to stay here for as long as I want, or at least until I find myself some peace and happiness.'

'And how's that working out for you?' Xander asked with a perfectly straight face. Spike couldn't tell if he was taking the piss or not. The old Xander would

have been, but now...? Still, it was not the sort of thing he particularly wanted to discuss with either of them. Why would the kid care anyway? Xander had barely tolerated him, let alone liked him, before he became a big pile of dust.

'No problem. Ecstatic, I am,' he replied harshly. He was surprised at the sad look that appeared momentarily, before it was replaced by a smirk he remembered on a much younger Xander.

'Well, you've got me now, so things are bound to get better.' Xander joked lightly, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

Spike shot him a glare. 'Oh, ha, bloody, ha, mate.'

Xander wasn't sure why he cared about what Spike was going through. He supposed it had started when Buffy had told him about what had happened down in the hellmouth. He had grieved for Anya, was proud of her for how bravely she had fought, for the sacrifice she had made, but ultimately he had understood why she had made it. Spike, on the

other hand...

He had given Spike a lot of thought in the months after the destruction of Sunnydale, when they had stayed in L.A. with Angel, before moving on to Cleveland. He had assumed at first that Spike's sacrifice had simply been for Buffy. But as he talked to the others, Dawn in particular, he had been forced to rethink some of his memories of the vampire, what they told him about Spike. It was true, what he had told Spike earlier, that even before he died he had begun to see Spike's potential to be a good person. After his death, he had been forced to admit to himself that very little of that had to do with the fact that he had regained his soul. Even before then, the way he had always protected Dawn and Joyce, especially what he had done for them during the whole Glory incident. Then he had been invaluable to them after Buffy's death. And although his affair with Buffy and later with Anya was something he had never been able to understand, he had come to realize that Spike was not the only one at fault. His soul may have tamed his demon somewhat, but by that time Spike

had changed anyway.

So, even though Spike was no longer around to appreciate it, and probably wouldn't have even if he had been, Xander had made what peace he could with the blond vampire and had started to think of him as a friend, even if it was only in his own head. He didn't really think about the fact that this Spike didn't know that, that he would expect the old Xander, the one who had never appreciated him.

So, yeah, he cared. It hurt that Spike would assume he didn't, if he was going to be honest. He didn't know how Spike was supposed to find peace and happiness, but he did plan to help. If nothing else, he could help him make peace with the rest of the Scoobies.

Spike, however, was still looking irritated. 'So, peace and happiness, huh? Well, that's easy. Just find yourself a nice non-corporeal girl and get laid. Works for Deadboy.'

Spike rolled his eyes, although Xander was sure he

was trying to conceal a smirk. 'I don't think that's going to do it, Harris.'

'Riiiiight, you said there weren't any people, didn't you? Well, you could always proposition the next demon that shows up solid. You know, 'Oh, sure, I am going to kill you, but could we just get it on first?' How could they resist?' He grinned when Spike finally gave up on the scowl and snorted.

'You haven't changed a bit, have you, mate?'

'What, except for totally and utterly? Nah, no point. I wouldn't have me any other way. Although, neither will anyone else.' He paused for a moment and smiled. 'Seriously, though, Spike, I'll do whatever I can to help.'

Spike just looked at him for a moment and Xander could see the confusion in his eyes. 'Thanks, mate,' he said finally.

Xander stuck out his hand. He couldn't help a small smile at the momentary contentment on Spike's

face as he took it with his own. It was so different to anything he had ever seen on it when he was a vampire.

He was struck again with how hard the last fifteen years must have been for the man, that a simple handshake could mean so much to him. It was hardly likely to amount to peace and happiness, but his touch obviously meant something to Spike. He couldn't find it in his heart to deny him, no matter how uncomfortable it might make him personally. Besides, he had always been very tactile with his friends and Spike now counted as one of them.

He grimaced a little as he felt the tug once again and automatically tightened his grip when he felt Spike start to draw his hand away. He quickly looked over to the man sitting beside him and smiled. 'Duty calls...' he said as his eyes filmed over.

One D

In which we have angst all round and our boys discover they have a disturbing amount in common

Spike watched curiously as Xander's eyes went blank. It was kind of strange, actually. They weren't just normal one minute and white the next; rather, the white swirled over his irises like a cloud, slowly obscuring them. He hadn't been there when the Powers gave Xander back the eye he had lost, although he had heard Buffy, Dawn and Willow talk about it afterwards. The previous seer, the one who had passed his abilities on to Xander, had been with them for a couple of years before he was seriously injured. Xander had volunteered to take his place, and in return, Yesrah had promised the Powers would replace his eye. Now, his left eye was a brilliant blue. It was a startling contrast to his other deep brown eye and probably partly why, as Buffy had said, half the new slayers fell for him.

Spike gazed out the open window as he waited patiently for Xander's vision to end. It wasn't even starting to get light yet. It had only been two and a half hours since he had knocked Xander down in the front foyer, since his entire existence had been turned on its head. It felt like longer, somehow. Or at least like it should have been longer. Surely these things should happen in slow motion or something, give a person time to take it all in. On the other hand, that was one good thing at least about having a conversation with the seer. He periodically gave you time to gather your thoughts. And Spike hadn't had many conversations recently, so he appreciated the silence.

He was back to looking at Xander when his eyes started to de-cloud. He winced a bit in sympathy when he saw the headache hit, then Xander swung his head around and grinned at him.

'Is this going to become a habit, do you think?' Spike frowned slightly. What was he talking about? The hand still holding his flexed a little and he started.

'Is this some previously undiscovered hand-fetish?' He hadn't even realized he hadn't let go. God, Xander was right, he was starting to act like he had when he was alive. Holding hands and thinking about the man's eyes? How much more of a wanker could he turn into?

Xander smirked a little when his hand was dropped like a particularly hot coal. Not that he had really minded the contact. It was just such an un-Spike-like thing to do. Although after fifteen years and minus one demon he had to wonder just how much of what he remembered could apply to the being in front of him. Spike scowled at him and said, 'Hey, you're the one who didn't let me go, not the other way 'round, Harris.'

Xander just nodded his head agreeably, his eyes laughing. 'Suuure, Casper, whatever gets you through the day.' Spike looked like he wanted to hit something, probably him. Xander laughed again, then sobered up as he remembered he had to get to work. He really wanted to keep talking to Spike, but knew that the man probably had someone he

was supposed to be protecting. And he, personally, was in amazingly little danger just sitting here in his room. He still had questions, but now that Spike wasn't avoiding him, he supposed he could ask them some other time. He ignored the vague niggle of disappointment and stood up.

'It's times like this I wish I could have a normal conversation with someone,' he said wistfully. He smiled over at Spike, feeling a little awkward. 'Got a possession to research, I'm afraid Spike. You don't have to stick around this time. I realize you must have things to do.' Spike, however, interrupted him.

'S'ok, mate. Don't usually have much to do 'round this time anyway, after the patrols come home. I can stick around. I mean, if you don't mind. Something tells me you're not done with me yet, anyway.'

Xander shook his head a little, once again amazed by the change in Spike. He couldn't remember a time when the vampire had actually volunteered to spend time with him. He had come to respect the

Spike he had known, but he was actually starting to like this one. He snorted to himself. He would be asking if they could be friends, next. Spike was probably just starved for company, and god knew he often wished he had someone to talk to during the night. Still, he felt a little bad about making him wait around with nothing to do...

He was struck by a sudden inspiration. This was Spike after all. He probably knew almost as much about demons and the like as Xander did himself. 'Well, if you're going to stick around,' he said, 'maybe you can give me a hand with this demon possession thing. Identifying it anyway.'

Spike rolled his eyes, but Xander didn't miss the surprise and pleasure that flashed through them. 'Three hours, and already I'm being roped into research. Got to be some sort of record,' he grumbled.

Xander took that as a yes and jumped right into the vision. 'Ok, well, like I said, demon possession. I couldn't tell what sort of demon it was.' Xander's

eyes defocused slightly as he concentrated on the picture in his head, letting the outside world fade away. His voice was entirely devoid of emotion as he began to describe the vision. 'The innocent being possessed is a young man, Greg Talbot, late twenty's, white, upper middle class, brown hair, although I suppose that isn't really relevant. I see him at home. His wife and child are being murdered by the demon. Pretty young woman, girl looks to be about five. It uses a kitchen knife to torture them, focuses on causing pain, but not quite enough to kill them, then lets them bleed out as it sets the house on fire, using the gas stove. I can tell you exactly how it tortures the victims, if you think it's relevant.' He looked over towards Spike, who just shook his head and indicated that he should continue. Xander noticed distantly that Spike's face was entirely blank. 'Right, the demon itself has physically altered the host only slightly. He's still recognizable, but there are lesions on his face, deep cuts that aren't bleeding, but are kind of gaping open. There is one on his forehead, over his right eye, one under his left eye, one on the right side of his chin, and another on his neck under his left ear. His brow is

pebbly, in a 'v' shape, coming to a point over his eyes. He has the eyes of the demon. Deep green, with a slit pupil.' Xander cocked his head slightly, as though he were examining something. 'His hands have the same sort of injuries as his face. I can't see the rest. He's very strong... not sure what else.'

He glanced back to Spike, who was looking very grim, and just a little disgusted. 'How was it acting?' he asked. 'I mean, did it seem like random violence, or was it calculated.'

Xander nodded his head thoughtfully and ran the images through his mind again. 'I'd have to say it seems quite calculated, although it obviously takes pleasure in the pain it's causing.'

'What do you get from the man it's possessed? Anything?' Spike knew from previous experience that Xander would occasionally receive the emotions of the innocents in his visions.

'Yeah, actually. The demon is very powerful, and obviously in complete control, but I get a definite

sense of awareness from the host.' Spike watched as Xander allowed his emotions to leak though for a second. The seer's face filled with pain as he stood silently, feeling the emotions of the man trapped inside his own body. 'The poor man,' he whispered. Then, with a silent prayer, he directed his attention back to the facts, his face becoming impassive once again. 'Thoughts?' he demanded.

Spike had to admit he was severely shaken. He had never seen Xander like this before. The man almost never actually spoke of a vision. Even when he was around the girls, he would just get out his paper and pen and write down what he had seen, and Spike had never read one of those reports. If he did say anything, it was just general stuff; where the problem was, what sort of demon was involved, the number or nature of the innocents. It wasn't that he had assumed that was all that he saw, but to hear it described in such clinical detail...

He answered Xander quietly. 'It sounds like an Ethros demon. I've only come across a few in my time. They are very powerful, very large in their

natural form. They thrive on violence, but are also intelligent, and can manipulate the people around them by skimming the surface of their minds. They leave behind a phosphorescent green goo.'

Xander nodded. 'Yeah, actually, I noticed something like that around the outside of the house.'

'That'll be the one then. You'll have to check your books, but I think they can be removed from the host with an exorcism.'

Suddenly, Xander was looking at him directly. 'You ok, Spike? You look a little...' He waved his hands around a bit.

Spike shook himself mentally and gave Xander a forced smile. 'Sure, mate. Try your Havelock's Companion first. Got a good bit on possession demons. You better get going, don't have all night, do you?'

Xander continued to look concerned, but nodded his agreement. 'All right. I'll see you in a bit, then.'

With that he phased back.

The minute he was gone, Spike drew in a shuddering breath and got up out of the chair. Without a backward glance he walked straight through the wall and out into the corridor. There he sat down and leaned against the wall, attempting to gather his thoughts. He didn't know quite what was bothering him so much, but he couldn't get Xander's expression as he'd asked if he wanted him to describe the torture of the woman and child out of his head. Intellectually, he'd known that the visions Xander received had to be horrible. Dawn often commented on the detail and accuracy of his reports, and he'd been there on more than one occasion to see them prevented. And it wasn't so much the description, although that had certainly been bad, it was the way Xander had given it with almost no show of emotion. He had been The Seer, in the same way Buffy, when she had to, could become The Slayer. He was tempted to think that Xander didn't care about the people in his visions, but knew that couldn't be true. The time the man spent making sure the slayers had all the

information they could need, the way he demanded to know over breakfast if the missions had been a success or not. But most of all the flicker of pain he had seen on Xander's face convinced him that the stoic mask was just that.

It was that, more than anything, which brought home to him just how much this man had had to endure over the past ten years. And that was where he ground to a halt. If it was true that Xander felt everything the innocents in his visions did, that he was bombarded hourly by the fear and desperation of these people, how could he face each day so calmly? How had he been able to simply suppress all that emotion and describe that vision to him, like he was commenting on the weather? How did he get past the people in his head? And if he asked, would Xander tell him?

Spike's breath hitched a little and he lowered his head into his hands, as he realized that this was what he really wanted to know. The memories of his own past still tormented him. They were always there, in the back of his mind, waiting for him to let

his guard down so they could all come rushing back. He had never had time to deal with those memories while he was still a vampire. The First had always been looking over their shoulders, and Buffy had needed him strong, not held back by a guilty soul. Back then it had been easier, with the vampire there to balance the soul, to explain the sensations. And when it had all become too much, the demon had been there to take control, to keep fighting, even if it could no longer be the bloodthirsty monster of history. But the vampire had died, and the only way Spike had found to cope was to push the crippling memories to the back of his mind and try to forget they were there. And in a way that had worked, he had been able to complete his work for the powers, to see Buffy every day, knowing what he had done to her, without falling apart. But he had never dealt with them, never managed to make peace with the shades of his past. Unlike Xander, he couldn't get past the pictures in his head.

He wasn't aware of the time passing as he just sat there, gathering his thoughts and pulling himself back together. The sound of voices barely

registered before he felt a warm hand come to rest on his knee.

Xander looked down in shock at the still form on the floor. He quickly sent Dan away with his report and crouched before him. Spike had his head buried in his hands, his elbows rested on bent knees. He couldn't see his face, but everything about the man seemed to scream pain. He looked tired. Exhausted, more like, Xander thought. His back was hunched, his head hanging, as though there was some great weight pressing down on him. Xander frowned. Had he said something to do this to him? Was it the vision? Xander had simply assumed that Spike would be able to handle the violence that he had described. He had seen things just as bad in his own time, been the cause of some of them, and helped prevent no few others.

Xander reached out hesitantly, placing a hand on one cold knee. 'Spike. Hey, what's wrong?' he asked gently. The eyes that looked up at him were calm, composed, but Xander could see the world of pain and guilt they were trying to hide. Hell, he'd seen

the same expression on his own face often enough over the last ten years.

'How do you do it, Xander? How do you make them go away?' Spike spoke quietly, but his eyes were desperate.

Xander closed his eyes at the whispered plea and he felt understanding sweep through him. Everything he remembered about that last year with Spike, what he had said about his last moments, the pain in his soul, his second chance to find peace. All this had started with him describing that vision. He had been too distracted to notice at the time, but he had been peripherally aware of the way Spike had tensed up with his offer to describe the torture, his reaction to Xander's admission that he felt the pain of the innocents as his own. Spike had never dealt with his vampire's actions, memories that were obviously tormenting him still. As he opened his eyes, he let his emotional shields drop away, let everything he felt when he was forced to witness what the world was capable of fill his face.

'They never go away, Spike. You know that,' he murmured eventually. Spike didn't answer, and Xander slid to the floor beside him, leaning up against the wall so their shoulders touched. He latched onto the hand Spike had snatched away from him earlier and squeezed it gently. 'Every vision I've ever had is in here somewhere. I can recall any one of them, given a little time. I dream about them sometimes, and they're worse than nightmares, because I'm there, really there. I can smell, touch, taste and hear everything. The worst ones are when I experience what the demon is feeling, but then I guess you would know all about that.'

Spike squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and winced, but otherwise ignored that opening. 'But you're always so... How does it not tear you apart? Is it because you know you saved them?'

Xander stared fixedly at the hand he held in his own, unconsciously stroking his thumb slightly over the soft skin. 'You obviously weren't around for those first couple of weeks.' He tried to say it lightly,

but he couldn't disguise the pain. 'They were... almost more than I could take. I've never told anyone, although Buffy and Willow probably guessed, but I seriously considered getting rid of them, or myself if that was the only way. I didn't eat, could barely sleep. I told them that it was just the headaches - that they were worse than I expected them to be. I tried to explain how the suffering that I saw made me feel, but they never really got it. I mean, we'd all witnessed suffering, right? But there was just so much, and it wasn't even as though it was happening to strangers. I know them, all of them. I see their lives, feel what they feel, fear what they fear... Every time I had a vision, I saw someone I might have known, might have been friends with, who deserved so much more than death at the hands of some monster... Every night for nearly two years I cried myself to sleep. But I couldn't let it tear me apart. It wasn't so much that I did save them, it was the thought of all the ones that might still be saved that kept me going. If I just gave up, it'd be partly my fault if they died.' He paused for a moment, lost in his recollections, unaware that Spike had turned to

face him. 'Did you know that Dawn sends me all the reports she gets of the successful missions? I read them, try to change the pictures in my head, and yeah, it does help a little, to know that they've been saved. It's the ones that aren't successful that haunt me the most. I used to torture myself over each and every one of them. I knew it had to be my fault, if I'd just included more information, got the report out earlier, done something, anything, different... Those are the ones that I still see when I close my eyes, the ones I dream about, where it's me that's the demon... It took me the longest time to realize that it isn't my fault when a mission fails. But they're part of the reason, why I don't fall apart any more. I owe them more than that.'

Spike finally spoke up. 'I hardly ever hear it anymore, but deep down, my soul is still screaming,' he said quietly. 'You can't blame yourself for what you see, but the things that I've done...' He trailed off.

'We're not so different, Spike. You're responsible for the suffering that you remember as much as I

am for the people in my visions who don't get saved.'

'I try to tell myself that, mate, really. But... I can remember everything the demon felt when I did those things. The joy, the bloodlust...'

Xander looked at him strangely for a moment. 'You can remember it's emotions, but the demon's dead, Spike. What do you feel about what it did?'

Spike didn't answer, but a line of confusion appeared between his eyes. Xander knew Spike would need time to think about that, beyond just the obvious answer, so he got to his feet, pulling Spike up by the hand he was still holding. 'As much as I love sitting on the floor in the corridor, I, well... don't, so let's get back inside. It's nearly dawn, and I like to watch the sunrise from the balcony. You can brood out there for a while.' The reference to brooding seemed to put some life into the dead man, as Xander had assumed it would.

'Hey, I don't brood, mate. And even if I did, I think

I've got every right to,' he said as he followed Xander into the bedroom, and out the sliding doors to the small balcony.

As he got settled, pen and paper at the ready beside him, Xander decided to bring up something that had been bothering him. 'Listen,' he said uncertainly, 'I'm sorry if I freaked you out a bit back there. I didn't mean to sound so uncaring. I don't want you to think that I don't care. I never used to be able to describe the visions at all, let alone like that. I had a secretary for the first couple of days, but most of the time I just couldn't get all the details out. When I started writing down what I saw myself it was easier, not having to hear it out loud. Eventually, I got to the point where I could just disconnect my emotions from what was on the page. After a few years, I could do the same thing with the visions themselves and I could examine them clinically, get the most out of them that I could. It was hard, still is, but it's better this way. I've never actually done it out loud. I didn't realize how it might sound. So... yeah, sorry. I won't ask you to help again, if you don't want.'

Spike seemed to give it some serious thought, but when he answered, Xander thought he sounded sincere. 'I reckon I'm more jealous than anything. The way you spoke about that vision, I just wasn't expecting it. It brought back lots of memories. Made me wish I could deal with my own demons that easily, to be honest. I don't mind lending a hand now and then. Least now I know what to expect, right?' He gave Xander a genuine smile. "Sides, I could get used to having someone to talk to now and then. Don't want to go 'round alienating the only person in the world who can actually see me.'

Xander grinned back at him. 'You're all just using me, aren't you?'

They sat on the balcony, watching the sun rise, chatting aimlessly for the next couple of hours, interrupted periodically by three more visions. Xander asked Spike for help on the third vision, trying to edit out some of the more gruesome details before Spike lost his patience and told him

to stop treating him like a bloody child, he knew what to expect now, and he knew what it meant. And besides, how was he meant to identify anything from 'it's very big and powerful'. Xander had looked at him doubtfully, but had complied, and Spike certainly hadn't seemed to have any problems with it this time around.

In between, Xander discovered that Spike, as a higher being, could go anywhere he wanted with a simple thought, and often spent his time jumping between Marion, Cleveland and L.A.. They spent some time talking about their mutual tolerance of Angel, although neither man could confess to actually liking the ensouled vampire. Xander asked after Cordy, and Theo and Georgia, the other two slayers there at the moment, before realizing that Spike could jump around to check on all the slayers all over the world, which he immediately asked him to do.

Eventually, at around seven-thirty, Xander was forced to bring up the issue of Buffy and Dawn. He had been trying to decide what he should say to

them for the past half-hour. Would it be easier for them if they continued to think that Spike was dead and gone? They still wouldn't be able to see him, so for all intents and purposes he would be. Still, Xander knew that he wouldn't be able to keep this from his girls for long. To be honest he didn't really want to. Spike was a part of their family, and they deserved to know that he was there, that he had always been there, even if he wasn't exactly alive, or visible.

He glanced over at Spike. He seemed so real. It was weird to think that he was the only person who could see the man. He sighed to himself. Maybe he should have given this whole, 'find out if I'm really seeing Spike' thing a little more thought. Really, he hadn't expected to find anything. How could he have seen this coming? He didn't know what he would do if Spike didn't want Buffy and Dawn to know about him. He sighed again and Spike flicked him an amused glance.

'What the bloody hell is with all the heartfelts, Harris? You got something on your mind?'

Xander grimaced an apology. 'It's Buffy and Dawn. I don't know what you want me to do, but I should tell you that if you want me to try and keep you a secret it isn't going to work. I'm crap when it comes to lying to them, and if Buffy thinks something is really wrong, you know she'll get it out of me, and if she can't she'll just call Willow and have her come here and read my mind. I don't want to lie to them Spike. They both loved you so much, Dawn especially; you were a part of our family, and they deserve to know what happened. I won't say anything today if you don't want me too, but I will have to tell them eventually. I know that it's going to be awkward, but still... you should think about it.'

Spike grimaced a little. He had in fact been thinking about the very same thing himself, although he'd been kind of hoping the other man would overlook this particular problem. A part of him was overjoyed at the thought that he could speak to Buffy and Dawn again after all these years, even if it was indirectly. A bigger part of him was so panicked at the thought of actually interacting with the world

again that it could barely think. Harris was one thing, but his history with the boy was a bloody turn among the tulips compared to the slayer and her sister. And he'd changed since his death. He could no longer say that he was in love with Buffy. In all truth, it was his vampire that had loved her with such passion. The return of his soul had not changed the feelings of the vampire, but neither had it entirely shared them. When the demon died he had been left with the memories of its obsession, and in a way did still love Buffy, but more than that he wanted to protect her, wanted her to be happy. He didn't really even resent her relationship with Angel. Like Xander, he could see the look in her eyes when she talked about him, and it didn't make him jealous. The sappy romance of it all made him want to stick his finger down his throat sometimes, but he was happy for them.

And Dawn. She'd fallen apart after the destruction of Sunnydale. He knew that a lot of that was because of him. That had been right after he'd been sent back by the Powers That Be, and he had spent hours just trying to make Dawn understand that he

was there with her, cursing fate, the Powers and anything else he could think of when he couldn't find a way to let her know, to comfort her. That was when he'd truly started wondering what he had agreed to. It had taken her a long time to accept what had happened, and Spike knew that he had Xander to thank for finally bringing her out of it, in large part. Buffy had tried to help her, but she had had so much of her own pain to deal with. Even though he had obviously been cut up over Anya's death, Xander had managed to be there for Dawn, to let her cry on his shoulder, talk to him and even let her lash out when she needed to.

They had moved on with their lives, and so had he, in a manner of speaking. Still, Xander was right, he was going to have to deal with it sooner or later. He certainly wasn't going to hide away in a corner and hope it all went away. He might have when he was human, but being a vampire had given him some balls, if nothing else. Probably best to get all these conversations over at once, anyway.

He looked over at Xander, who was managing to

look determined and hesitant at the same time. He snorted a little. 'Tell them whatever you want, Harris. S'all gonna come out in the end anyway. I s'pose I can handle one more heartfelt conversation today. You're just lucky I'm not a vampire anymore - wouldn't have had the patience.' He tried to sound put-upon, but he suspected Xander could hear the nervousness in his voice.

Still, he didn't say anything, and the look of relief on his face almost entirely obscured the hint of amusement in his eyes. 'Good, I really am so bad at lying to them.'

Xander glanced at his watch. It was about time to be heading downstairs anyway, so he got up and stretched, smiling at the sun on his face. That was one thing he hated about having to work at night. He usually slept half the day away. He used to love sitting outside in the sun, probably a reaction to living on a hellmouth with vampires, but these days he only got to see sunrise and sunset. He glanced over at Spike, who was looking at him strangely and

jerked his head towards the door. 'Come on, like you said, no point delaying the inevitable.'

Part Two

In which Xander convinces Buffy and Dawn that he really isn't mad and Spike really isn't gone

The second Xander walked into the kitchen, the girls were all over him. He was planning on going for cool, calm and collected, but apparently you just couldn't fool the slayer. Or he couldn't, in any case. Or perhaps he just couldn't fool two of the three people who knew him better than anyone in the whole damn world, his parents most definitely included.

They took one look at what he had thought was a pretty convincing smile and immediately ushered him over to a chair at the dining room table, taking seats beside him, to demand what was wrong. So

much for the suave approach. He had the distinct feeling that if he could see him right now, Spike would be smirking at him. He tried to quash the urge to check, but quickly gave in, and let himself go fuzzy for a moment. Sure enough, Spike was shaking his head and chuckling. The blond man looked at him, and he stuck his tongue out briefly before phasing back.

All of which had done nothing for the ladies' peace of mind. They were starting to look truly alarmed. Feeling slightly guilty, Xander rushed to reassure them.

'Buffy, Dawn, don't worry, nothing's wrong. I'm fine, everything is fine.'

They were still frowning. 'What was that, Xander? You went all visionary for a second, but that wasn't long enough for a vision. Is something wrong with the spell? Should we call Willow?' Dawn managed a semblance of calm, but he saw the panicked glance that she and Buffy exchanged.

'No! No, it's nothing like that. Do you remember when Willow said that she thought I might be able to control the shift? Well, I figured out how. It's nothing to worry about. I've been like that most of the night, and there don't seem to be any side effects.'

They looked slightly mollified, so to prevent further discussion, and because he really couldn't wait to tell them, Xander jumped right into the topic of the hour. 'But speaking of last night, something happened that I have to tell you about.' He was grinning, he couldn't help it. He felt like a kid with a really big secret he was just bursting to tell everyone.

Buffy and Dawn were smiling despite themselves. 'Well, I think we can safely assume it's not the end of the world again,' Buffy said wryly to her sister.

Dawn nodded sagely. 'Yeah, that's just not as fun as it used to be, is it? Well, what happened then?' she asked Xander impatiently.

'It's about Spike.'

They looked surprised. 'Spike? Did you see him again?' Buffy asked. 'This is just getting too weird. I know Willow says it's just a memory, but still...'

'Yeah, I saw him again, but he's not just a memory, he's Spike. I talked to him all night. He's here now, too.' The smile faded when he saw how they were looking at him. Concerned, worried. Ok, he guessed it was a little hard to believe.

'Xander,' Dawn said nervously, 'what are you talking about? There's no one here but us. And Spike, Spike's dead, how could he be here?'

Xander looked at her sternly. 'Dawnie, you know better than that. Just because you can't see it, doesn't mean it's not there.'

Buffy wasn't in the least bit convinced. 'That may be true, Xander, and I'm even willing to believe that you can see things that we can't, but how do you know what this thing really is? It could be anything.'

Just because it looks like someone you know doesn't mean it isn't out to kill you. Have you forgotten the First?' she said a little harshly.

He blanched a little at that. He hadn't even considered the possibility that this could be the re-emergence of the First. But he shook his head. He just didn't get any evil vibes from Spike, and since he'd been connected to the Powers, he'd gotten pretty good at that sort of thing. But more than that, it was pure gut instinct that told him that Spike was for real. 'No, Buffy, this isn't like that. I've been seeing glimpses of Spike for the past two weeks, and he's never doing anything to hurt anyone. From what I've gathered, he can't. Besides, the only reason I can see him now is because Willow did that spell. If it hadn't been for that we would never have even known that he was here. I know you're going to say that it's just some demon taking advantage of the situation, but it's not. He's not evil, I'd be able to feel it. And you haven't seen him. It's Spike. Yeah, he's not exactly the same, but I just know... it's Spike.' He trailed off, realizing just how lame his reasoning sounded.

Buffy sighed and looked down for a moment.

'Xander, you know I trust your judgment, but you have to understand our concerns...'

Dawn nodded, but her eyes were sparkling when she spoke up a moment later. 'Obviously, you just need to prove that it's really Spike that you're seeing. We'll have to do a whole 'Ghost' scene. You know, tell me something that only Spike and I would know.'

Buffy seemed to take this suggestion seriously, although when Xander looked closely he could see that the humor of the situation was not lost on her. 'Yeah, I guess that might work,' she admitted grudgingly. 'Are you sure this thing can't hurt us?'

'Yeah, I'm pretty sure. He can't even touch me when I'm not phased, like this.'

She took a deep breath and nodded. 'Ok, but we're calling Willow. Either way, we need to be sure. So, how is this going to work?'

'Well, assuming he's still here, I have to phase out in order to see him and talk to him. It'll be just like when I'm having a vision. Other than that, I dunno. I guess we'll just play it by ear. Spike hasn't changed all that much, so he's probably going to be difficult.' He had added that last mainly for said blonde's benefit, certain it would irritate him. Sure enough, when he phased a moment later, Spike was glaring at him from the other side of the table.

'Difficult, am I?' he muttered. 'Show you difficult, I will.'

Xander grinned at him. 'Come on, Spike, play nice. We'll get to the heartfelt conversations soon enough, I promise. Now, make like Patrick Swayze and tell me something I don't know.'

Oh, dear, was Xander's only thought as he watched the positively evil smile creep over Spike's face. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe he should disappear now while he still had the chance. He glanced desperately over to Buffy. 'Buff, I don't

know that this was such a good idea,' he whispered urgently.

'What? Why?' she asked, startled.

'Because this is Spike! You've just given Spike permission to tell me all your deepest darkest secrets.'

Her eyes grew suddenly wide, but he had to admit he was impressed that she didn't back down. 'Well,' she cleared her throat, 'we don't know that it's Spike, and even if it is, he wouldn't say anything too embarrassing... would he?' She groaned as she realized what she had just said. Xander glanced over at Spike, who was looking like the cat that had swallowed the proverbial canary.

'Well, if he does, I promise I won't repeat it.' He sent him a glare that tried to convey the fact that if he were forced to listen to anything too disgusting, he would have no compunction about phasing out and not talking to him for a week. Spike seemed to get the message, as he just folded his hands and

tried to look innocent. Xander didn't believe it for a moment, but it was obviously the best he was going to get. Sending him another glare for good measure, he got down to business. 'All right then, Spike, let's have it. Something that only you and Buffy know.'

Spike didn't actually plan on telling the man any of the things that had happened between himself and Buffy. It was too intimate, and still far too painful for him to remember, let alone talk about. There had been very little in their affair that had been about anything other than pain and abuse. It wouldn't do him any good to bring it up now. He knew that they would have to talk about it in the end, but that was for another time, when he'd had time to think up what he was going to say, and Buffy actually believed that he was who Xander said he was. Still, the look on their faces had been too much to resist. He wasn't evil any more, but he could still be a bastard when he felt like it.

He tried to think of something innocuous to tell them, that Xander wouldn't already know. 'All right,

I got one. One night we were out patrolling, woulda been sometime after the hell bitch showed up, just the two of us, going after a gang of vampires with, like, mystical tattoos on the backs of their necks, or something. Think they called themselves the Sect of Galvis.'

'I don't remember that,' Xander interrupted with a frown.

'That's the point, innit?' Spike responded irritably.

'Remember what?' Buffy asked at the same time.

Xander shook his head. 'Sorry, something about a Sect of Galvis, tattoos on the back of their necks, he hasn't finished. Go on.'

'Wait,' Buffy interrupted, 'Sect of Galvis? I remember that, we went after them...' A look of understanding came over her face and Spike grinned. 'Oh, no, he's not telling you that story. Tell him he's not telling you that story.'

'Why,' Dawn asked, 'what happened?'

Buffy just looked from her sister to Xander for a moment, then her shoulders slumped in defeat. 'Fine,' she sighed, 'we have to know. I guess it could have been worse. Lets get it over with. But Spike,' she glared at the invisible air, 'just so you know, if you are in any way alive, I will kill you for this.' Spike just snickered, turning back to Xander, who was looking extremely confused.

'Didn't know it was a sect at the time, just a bunch of vampires we came across in an abandoned building. Turned out they'd been there for years, but they weren't just any sect, they were a sect with a very specific purpose.' He glanced over at Buffy, who was looking fearfully at Xander, who was still just looking puzzled.

'Well,' he asked impatiently when Spike didn't go on immediately, 'who were they then?'

'They were a Buffy appreciation society,' he chuckled at the memory.

Xander's eyes widened comically, and Spike could see that he was trying to contain a laugh. 'What? Seriously?' He just nodded, grinning. Buffy groaned, but he could see the reluctant smirk on her face as she lowered her head into her hands.

'Had a whole little shrine and everything, framed portraits, photographs, really, really bad poetry. Even had a larger than life sculpture, done in a... classical style.'

Xander's grin slipped a little as he tried to figure this out. 'Classical? What, you mean, like...oh!' Spike chuckled as Xander's head whipped around to look at Buffy, who seemed to be trying to disappear under the table without leaving her seat. 'Now, that would have been something to see.'

'Oh, yeah. All that draping gauze... Left nothing to the imagination. And I, personally, never got to see that look on the girl's face.' He sighed happily at the picture in his head. 'Pure sex, that thing was.'

'Please tell me you went back with a camera,' Xander asked fervently, chuckling at the still cowering Buffy.

'Nah, bloody bint took a sledgehammer to it. By the time she was done all that was left was a big pile of white marble dust. Bleedin' tragedy, that. Told me that if I ever told anyone about it she would, and I quote 'chain me to a wall and spend weeks cutting off all my body parts, starting with the most important ones, one at a time, with a very blunt knife, until they stopped growing back and I became lots of very small piles of dust. With, I might add, a cd of the Backstreet Boys on continuous replay while she wasn't there.'

'Oh, Buffy,' Xander gasped, 'the Backstreet Boys? Cutting off unmentionables with a blunt knife I guess I could understand - although, can I just wince for the entire male population of the world? - but that takes torment to entirely new levels.'

Buffy perked up a little at this. 'Yeah, that was a good one, wasn't it?' she said wistfully. 'I suppose it

won't work now, will it?'

Dawn was looking highly amused at Buffy's behavior. 'All right, I want to know what you're all talking about. What can have been so bad that you had to threaten to cut off Spike's balls and make him listen to boy bands?' she said sternly.

'No, no! That's fine!' Buffy was quick to interject. 'I think I've, er, heard enough to convince me the person you're talking to was there for that particular... encounter.'

Dawn looked like she really wanted to object, but Spike knew she would probably corner her sister in private and get the story out of her, now that she knew about it. 'Are you and Spike the only two who know about it? Did you ever tell Giles or Willow, or was there anyone else there?' she asked sensibly.

'I sure as hell know I never told anyone about that. I think we can be fairly sure Spike didn't either, seeing as the entire world doesn't know. What does your ghost say about the other people who were

there?' she asked Xander.

Spike chuckled, amused that she still felt the need to test him, but answered obligingly. 'There were about a dozen vampires all up. They didn't put up much of a fight, stars in their eyes and all that, but she dusted every damn one of them, then set fire to their little shrine.'

'He says that you killed them all, about a dozen, even though they were overwhelmed by your presence, and put their shrine to the torch.'

'Damn right I did. Uppity little vampires,' she muttered. She shrugged after a moment, still looking a little uncertain, but said, 'Well, it certainly could be Spike. If it isn't, they've sure as hell done their homework. Unless it was digging through my mind?' she looked over at Dawn.

Dawn, however, shook her head resolutely. 'There are only one or two demons that can do that, but none of the ones I know of can become invisible or exist only on a higher plane. There are more

demons that can read the surface of your mind. Were you thinking about this story of yours before Xander said anything about the sect?' Buffy shook her head. 'Then chances are, either the story came from Spike, or this is Spike.' Her eyes fairly sparkled at this prospect, and Spike felt something tighten in his chest. Dawn was the only one who had ever looked that excited just at the thought of seeing him. He had forgotten how much he had missed it.

As their breakfast slowly congealed in the kitchen, Xander explained what he knew of Spike's situation.

'That's... incredible,' Buffy said softly as he finished.

Dawn nodded her head slowly. 'That he was here the whole time... watching over us.'

Buffy frowned, looking a little disturbed. 'It's weird. I kinda think I should be more squicked out by that. But...'

'Who was he going to tell?' Dawn finished quietly.

'Yeah,' Buffy said shaking her head in confusion.

Dawn was looking around the room, but brought her eyes deliberately back to Xander. 'It must have been so lonely for him. Where is he now?' she asked him quietly.

Xander looked at her for a moment, before taking her hand and leading her over to the seat on the opposite side of the table, where Spike had been sitting the whole time they had been talking. He had half expected Spike to end up leaving, or at least start pacing around the room, but he had remained oddly still the whole time, watching Buffy and Dawn as he spoke to them. Spike turned to look at him a little strangely as he stood behind him, and Xander sent him a reassuring smile, turning back to look at Dawn.

He had known that this would hit Dawn the hardest. 'He's sitting right here, he's looking at you.' He reached out and placed his hand on Spike's shoulder. He stiffened, but didn't move away, relaxing into the touch after a moment. 'I've got my

hand on his shoulder.' Dawn reached out a hand tentatively, passing it through Spike's chest.

'I can't feel anything,' she whispered brokenly. 'He's not there.' Faster than Xander could follow, Buffy was around the table and holding her sister in her arms.

Xander was astonished to notice that there were tears in the ex-vampire's eyes as he pulled him out of the chair and stood him beside the table.

'Dawnie, give me your hand,' he said gently. She looked a little confused, but disentangled herself from Buffy and complied. Xander carefully placed her right hand over his right hand, both their palms facing downward. He wasn't sure this would work, but he knew that Dawn needed something more to prove to her that Spike was really here. He knew how often she had wished for him those first couple of years, and she still spoke more about him more than any of the rest of them. He had never really understood their relationship, but he knew that Spike would do anything to protect her, and she in turn had made him part of her family. 'He's standing

right in front of us, now. If I reached out I would be able to touch him,' he said, waiting for her to get the picture. Her eyes widened slightly, as did Spike's, he was amused to notice, and she glanced over at him. He smiled slightly and nodded, raising his right hand, Dawn's still balanced on top, so that his palm was inches away from Spike's chest. There, however, he stopped, relaxing his arm completely. Dawn had to do the rest. 'Go on,' he encouraged her.

She took a deep breath and pushed Xander's hand forward, gasping when it's progress was abruptly halted by seemingly empty air. Xander had his hand directly over Spike's heart, and although the body felt warm through the soft layer of his shirt, he couldn't feel a heartbeat. Dawn pushed a little harder, and Spike rocked slightly. 'Careful, Dawnie, you'll push him over,' he chuckled.

Dawn started moving his hand over Spike's chest, keeping up a steady pressure. She was starting to grin. 'He's really there, isn't he?' she asked excitedly. She glanced over at Buffy, who was

looking wary, but curious. 'Buffy, this is amazing.'

'You'll have to let me try it,' she agreed.

Xander, however, suddenly had his mind on other things. Spike was starting to squirm. 'Uh, Dawnie, let's try to keep it above the waist, shall we. It is my hand you're using, let's not forget,' he said as he quickly moved his hand away from where Dawn had been taking it. He shrugged an apology at Spike, who just grinned at him. It looked like the blond was actually quite enjoying himself.

Dawn grinned unrepentantly at Xander. 'Sorry.' She let her hand trail over the body in front of her for a while longer, mapping out where it started and finished, before stepping away and pushing Buffy over to Xander. 'Your turn.'

Buffy looked at the air in front of her for a long moment before turning to look at Xander. He could see the old pain reflected in her eyes, the memory of the all the times she had touched the vampire in anger, in need, so very rarely in love. She didn't

need to run her hands over him now, but he knew she needed proof. Xander nodded silently and she stepped into the circle of his arms, placing her hands on each of his. He looked at Spike, but he was staring at Buffy, so he raised his hands to hover them on either side of Spike's face. When he stopped, Buffy pushed his hands forward, closing her eyes as they met resistance. A tiny smile twisted her lips as she raised her eyes to about where Spike's were. 'We missed you, Spike,' was all she said. Then she carefully placed a kiss on Xander's fingertips, before guiding them back to Spike's cheek. Dawn stepped over and did the same with Xander's other hand, her eyes brimming with emotion.

Spike, himself, looked like he was trying desperately to remember how to be the Big Bad and failing miserably. Xander could tell that he was floored by what had happened. He let his fingers move gently over Spike's cheek for just a moment before turning to grin at the girls. 'All right, you've successfully reduced the Big Bad to a little puddle of emotional goo. I think it's time we move on. Besides, it may

look to you like I'm running my hands over thin air, but to me it looks like I've been fondling Spike, and that's just too weird for me to dwell on for very much longer.'

Dawn grinned back, but they both removed their hands. Buffy smiled mischievously at him. 'I don't know Xander. If Spike looks the same as I remember, running your hands all over him shouldn't be any great hardship.'

Dawn nodded sagely, her eyes dancing. 'She's right, Xander, when was the last time you got to fondle a chest that good looking? Or has our favorite ex-vampire been letting himself go?'

Xander let his eye's rake over Spike's body, starting at the bottom, lingering around the middle and ending at a pair of outraged eyes that were fighting a losing battle with shock. 'Got yourselves a point guys. It may be Spike, but that's certainly a chest to write home about. Did it always look that good?' he asked curiously, inwardly grinning at the expression on the other man's face.

'Oh, yeah,' they both said fervently. 'Course,' Buffy continued, 'it's got nothing on Angel's.'

'Oi!' This broke into Spike's stupor.

Xander finally grinned. 'That's got him. What more proof do you need?' Xander laughed at him. 'It's ok, Spike, Buffy's just biased. Dawn and I both think your chest is much nicer than Angel's. Isn't that right Dawn?'

'Absolutely,' Dawn laughed.

Finally catching on, Spike allowed a reluctant smirk to escape. 'Soddin' wankers,' he grumbled.

'Spike thanks us for the compliment, Dawn,' he grinned.

'I'll just bet he does.' She grinned happily. 'This is so unbelievable, you know. I mean, Spike's back, or here, or whatever. I can't wait to call Willow and Giles. I just know I'm never going to get any work

done today.' She stopped abruptly, looking down at her watch. 'Oh my god. It's nearly nine thirty. I've got a conference call starting in a matter of minutes and we haven't even eaten yet,' she groaned. Then she perked up a bit. 'On the other hand, I am the boss. I could just blow off all today's meetings...'

She trailed off at the stern look on Buffy's face. 'Yeah, yeah, I know. It was just a thought,' she grumbled. Looking in Spike's general direction, she said, 'I wish I could see you, Spike. Still, don't disappear on Xander. I'm not going to lose you again,' she stated firmly.

'M'not going anywhere, little bit,' Spike said fondly, his fingers reaching out to hover near her face.

'He says he's not going anywhere, little bit,' Xander repeated. Dawn's breath hitched a little at the moniker, and she flashed him a dazzling, if slightly watery smile.

Buffy smiled gently at her. 'We'll continue this over dinner. Now, go, run. We'll heat up your breakfast and bring it up in a little while.'

Dawn sighed but nodded. 'Dinner, I'll hold you to that. You make sure you keep your eye on him, Xander.' She gave them both a hug and another giddy smile before visibly collecting herself and leaving them alone.

As Xander and Buffy wandered over to the kitchen to reheat their food, Jesse, Marina and Nicola walked into the dining room, followed a few minutes later by the rest of the resident slayers. Their day didn't officially start until ten thirty, given the late hours they were forced to keep. After their family breakfast, Dawn would get to work, Buffy would head down to the gym or the oval to set up for the morning's training, and Xander would stumble upstairs to bed. Usually, they were gone before any of the girls came in to breakfast. Since the spell, however, Xander had found he had a lot more energy, and this morning he was positively wired.

They swung around at the surprised, 'Xander, Buffy,' from the doorway and Xander frowned when

he discovered that he still couldn't quite distinguish the girls through the light surrounding them. He had found with Buffy and Dawn that after a little while he had been able to see through the glow a little, enough to make eye contact at least, although it helped that Dawn, unlike anyone else he had seen so far, glowed a faint green. 'Xan, you're lookin' all visiony 'n see through, but your eyes're normal,' Jesse, he knew from the voice, frowned. 'What gives? Is something wrong?'

'No, I'm good, just a second.' He turned towards Spike, who was lounging against the wall, a question in his eyes.

'Yeah, off you go. Should really get going anyways. Got people to protect and all that. I'll be around.' He forestalled Xander before he could even open his mouth. 'And, yes, I'll be back for your dinner, although I don't mind saying I reckon it's bloody unfair of you to make me watch you all eat.' He paused, the irritation fading from his face to be replaced with a tiny, slightly dazed smile. He reached out a hand to touch Xander's shoulder.

'Fucking unbelievable,' he said softly, wondrously. Looking up into Xander's knowing face the smile turned self-deprecating, and he poked a sharp fingernail into the shoulder, making Xander rock back slightly. 'Shut the hell up, you.' The words were said without menace.

Xander just chuckled quietly. 'Good to have you back, blondie.' Then he phased out and the man disappeared.

Two B

In which Spike contemplates Xander and is forced to confront some of the memories that have been tormenting him

Spike, however, didn't leave immediately. He watched absently as they sat around the table chatting for a little while, Xander assuring the girls that the side effects of the spell were nothing for them to worry about. He had to smile at the way Xander treated the slayers, the way he just automatically made them a part of his family. Marina, the newest slayer, had arrived from Japan with Willow the night Xander had died. Spike had arrived to see her standing in the middle of the room, confused and obviously frightened. Like him, she had watched from the other room, seen the blood all over Xander's face, although she had turned away when Willow started the spell. She may have been new to the slaying business, but even she must have been able to feel the power building in the room. She had still been there afterwards, trying not to listen to the conversation between the four of them. Spike knew it could have been awkward between Xander and the girl, but the man had made a concerted effort to draw her out of her shell, even putting to use the smattering of Japanese that Willow's language spell made mostly unnecessary. She, like almost every slayer before

her, had been unable to resist the devastating smile that Xander reserved just for his girls. Spike had seen many a confused, scared or belligerent girl cave before that huge, happy and just slightly self-effacing grin that went all the way to his bi-colored eyes. It didn't help them a whit that Xander found out all about them from Willow before they arrived, was actually interested in getting to know them, and didn't treat them like slayers, just like girls who were a long way from home and needed, more than anything, to see a friendly face.

Spike smirked a little. Of course, the fact that he was really in very good shape had nothing to do with it. He had felt the muscles in the man's body as he had held him briefly the night before. He had always been fit, what with the demands that slaying and construction had placed on him, but he was slimmer now than he used to be. Spike had a feeling that was because the pain from the visions had kept him from eating the way he used to, but in a way they had done him a favor. And Spike had seen him training with Buffy. He was no slayer, but he could hold his own against the newer recruits, his lean,

wiry build and innate confidence giving him an edge and appeal that he had conspicuously lacked as a youth.

All of which brought back the memory of Xander running his hands over Spike's body. He wasn't entirely sure how to feel about that. Extenuating circumstances there may have been, but it was still Xander Harris, who had feared him, hated him, treated him like dirt, and who may have come to tolerate him, but had never gone so far as to like him.

On the other hand, it wasn't, not really, not anymore. Xander hadn't been one of his charges after the destruction of Sunnydale, not until the Powers gave him the visions, and although he had protected the boy on occasion, he had never really spent much time around him when he wasn't with Buffy or Dawn. After he had received the visions, he had started paying more attention, but by then Xander hadn't really needed protecting, at least not from anything physical.

So although he had been peripherally aware of the boy growing up, the changes in the man's attitude towards him were taking him by surprise. Most especially, how comfortable he was being physically. The old Xander had almost never touched him, unless it was in anger. This one was treating him like a friend, hugging him, touching his face. Although, Spike smirked, he suspected he had never run his hands over any of his friends' chests in quite that manner. Not that he hadn't liked it. It probably should have made him uncomfortable, but every time the man touched him it made him a little giddy, the thought that he was actually able to touch someone again after so long. He knew he shouldn't get used to it. No matter what Xander said, magic was uncertain at the best of times, and even if it turned out that the spell really couldn't be reversed, Xander still had the power to cut him off from the world again, if he decided to. He honestly didn't think the man would do that, but the lack of control was frustrating to say the least.

He was suddenly distracted by Buffy's laughter and his eyes were drawn inexorably to her face, his

hand going unconsciously to where her kiss had touched his cheek. That was perhaps the best gift he had been given today, or possibly ever. He had long ago resigned himself to the fact that he would never be able to feel Buffy or Dawn again, and Xander's actions had been entirely unexpected. It hadn't even occurred to him to try something like that. Closing his eyes, it had almost felt like being alive again. He knew that his soul had never really loved her, but the only time the demon had ever really been at peace was when it held her in its arms, and for a moment the screams had been drowned out by the love and acceptance he saw in the three pairs of eyes before him.

He had never really understood before how the Powers expected him to find happiness in the cold, inhuman world in which they had placed him, but for the first time in years, he allowed himself to hope that he might. He closed his eyes and curled his fingers over his cheek again, relishing the memory of a smooth palm with rough calluses flitting over his skin. Even though, on some level, he was slightly disturbed by how safe, cared for, that

memory made him feel, he didn't stop the smile that ghosted over his lips.

Buffy and Xander leaving jolted him from his thoughts. He really did have work to do. He'd already blown off half the night and a good part of the morning. He hadn't felt the tug that told him one of his charges was facing imminent death, but that didn't mean he shouldn't check on them anyway. With a shake of his head, he threw off his musings and disappeared.

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Two days later, Xander received a worried phone call from Willow. Knowing that any phone call from Dawn was sure to be more than just a little confusing, he had sent her an e-mail detailing everything that had happened to him over the past week or so, and everything he knew about what had happened to Spike. She was in Australia at the moment, where the latest slayer had been called. Willow was in charge of finding and bringing all the

new slayers to America for their year of training. Generally, she spent about a month with each of the girls and their families, gently introducing them to the idea that their little girl was essentially a superhero. Some took it better than others, but all of them had come in the end. But then, they did offer as many incentives as possible. The council was actually officially a private, very selective school, and they did their best to teach each of the girls whatever they were missing out on, so they could easily slip back into the curriculum when they went home. Willow would occasionally accompany the slayers back to Ohio, but more often than not she would just go straight to the next destination, keeping in touch by phone and e-mail.

For the second time in a row, however, Willow promised to come home when her latest charge was ready. Xander was fairly sure there was nothing to worry about, but he couldn't bring himself to protest all that much. He was always happy to see Willow, whatever the reason.

Xander was surprised to find that, once they got all

the really deep and meaningful stuff out of the way, Spike was actually a lot of fun to have around. He was getting used to having to mediate between him and the girls, and increasingly looked forward to one or two am, when Spike would appear to keep him company after coming in from patrolling. It was getting harder and harder for him to remember that the man wasn't real, although every time he walked through the coffee table, or just appeared out of nowhere, it was brought back to him. He couldn't really explain to himself the deep disappointment he felt every time that happened. Why it felt like more than just regret for the fact that Spike had had to die.

They spent a lot of their time discussing demons and visions, but in between, Spike would fill him in on how he had spent the last fifteen years, and Xander discovered that Spike actually knew very little about him, since he hadn't needed much protection after the visions and hadn't been touched by the Powers before. He also found that just sitting, watching TV, listening to the radio, whatever, and not talking was just as enjoyable, but

more than that it was comfortable, like the past and the pain were forgotten and they could just be.

Spike, too, was getting used to the new arrangement. In a practical sense, very little had actually changed for him. Xander was the only one who could see him, and the man didn't spend a lot of his time around Buffy or Dawn anyway. Still, it felt like a lot more than that. For a couple of hours each day he could pretend that he wasn't invisible to the people he cared about the most. Buffy and Dawn both made a concerted effort to include him in their conversations, and he was becoming more comfortable relying on Xander to relay his replies, although there were a lot of things the man simply refused to repeat. Which, he had to admit, was half the reason he said them. Watching Xander try to contain his laughter at Spike's snide comments, while the girls demanded to know exactly what was so funny was more entertaining than it should have been for a one hundred and fifty year old ex-vampire higher being. Actually, just watching Xander was more enjoyable than it should have been, but he'd gotten good at ignoring emotions

like that, and this was no exception.

They were sitting together nearly three weeks later, some time after two in the morning, talking about the vision Spike had just helped out with, when Xander brought up something they hadn't discussed since that first night. Spike was sitting close beside Xander, leaning slightly to the side so that their shoulders were touching. He'd started doing that weeks ago, without even realizing it. When Xander had shifted beside him, he had jerked away, but the man hadn't called him on it, just given him that gentle smile and taken his hand before going back to work. So he had allowed himself to settle back in and by now the position was almost second nature. Xander still took his hand occasionally, although he knew it was just because the man knew how much he craved the contact.

Just as he was doing now, flexing his hand so Spike could feel the changes in pressure. By now, the movement was involuntary, and Spike looked over with a smile to see Xander relaxed back into the couch, his eyes closed.

'What do you remember about being a demon, Spike?' The words were said calmly, quietly, with just a hint of curiosity. Spike felt like he'd been punched in the gut. When he tried to jerk away, however, his hand was suddenly held in a vice-like grip and two deep eyes opened to stare at him, holding him even more firmly than the hand on his wrist. 'Why do its memories bother you so much that you aren't able to forgive yourself for someone else's actions?'

He didn't want to talk about this. Talking about it would mean having to think about it, and ignoring it had been getting so much easier over the past couple of weeks. His eyes skittered around the room, searching for something, anything, that would mean he didn't have to have this conversation. Xander wasn't moving, wasn't speaking, but his hand started tracing soft patterns on Spike's skin, drawing his gaze.

Then he was looking into eyes that showed nothing, no judgment, no pity and no fear, just calm

acceptance. Even as his mind shouted, screamed, tried desperately to stop this, looking into those eyes, Spike found himself replying.

'They weren't.'

Xander cocked his head slightly, but his expression didn't change. 'They weren't someone else's actions?'

Spike was lost in those eyes. Looking into the blue eye he felt like he was spiraling upwards, into light, into peace. At the same time, the deep brown eye was like a window to the man's soul, pulling him down into a lifetime's worth of pain and compassion. Focused on those eyes, he felt distant, separate from himself. He felt like he should be falling apart, or coming together. And maybe he was, because again, he replied.

'I was there.'

'You remember being there, but your soul wasn't. You aren't responsible for the actions of the

demon.' It felt like Xander was speaking straight into his mind, his voice deep, soft, calming. In some distant corner, he was wondering what the hell was going on, but he couldn't look away. All he could see were those eyes, like two pools of color, light and dark, black and white, looking at him, through him, into him.

Spike shook his head slowly, the answer drawn from his lips. 'You don't understand. It wasn't just the demon. I lost my soul when I died, but I didn't lose my mind. That's why I remember. How could I remember if I hadn't been there at all, if it was just the demon?'

The voice became deeper, more distant. 'The heart controls the mind, Spike, not the other way around. When you gained a demon, you lost your heart, the part of you that chose to be a good person. The demon controlled your mind in the same way that it controlled your body. You wonder how, if you were there, you could have allowed the demon to do those things, but that isn't how it works. Without a soul, a conscience, your mind is just a tool, able to

be used, just like anything else.' A part of him wondered; how would the man know that? How could he know anything about this? But a bigger part of him recognized the certainty in the voice, the power in the eyes.

'Pr'haps, but does that really change anything?'

Something changed, then he was falling, or flying, and the world was coming together again, the power fading. 'I don't know. Maybe not. But it's something to think about. You'll have to deal with it eventually.'

He knew that this was true. 'I killed more people in my day... How can I just forget that?'

'You probably shouldn't. But that's not really the point, is it?' The voice reached his ears from the man in front of him.

Spike blinked, and all of a sudden, he was just looking at Xander, his eyes colored, looking slightly amused, but otherwise completely normal. They

were still holding hands, hadn't moved at all as far as Spike could tell. He glanced around the room quickly. The clock on the TV said only a few minutes had passed. He could remember the conversation vividly, like it was etched into his brain. 'Ahh... what the bloody hell just happened here?'

Xander sighed, his eyes becoming serious. 'I know you don't want to talk about your past, Spike. But you have to at least start thinking about it. Obviously, the Powers agree. That wouldn't have worked, otherwise.'

Spike was having a hard time pulling his thoughts together. What had Xander done to him? And what did the bloody Powers That Be have to do with it? He hadn't meant to say any of that. It was hard enough repressing all that crap without having to talk about it. He calmed down considerably, however, when he discovered that he wasn't being overwhelmed by memories. Usually, talk of his relationship with his demon did that, had him huddled in a corner, screaming or crying. Now, however, he still felt... separate. Not objective,

exactly, just... distant. He frowned. As nice as it was, he didn't appreciate having things done to him, especially when he didn't understand them.

'What did you do to me, Harris? I feel different.'

He was irritated to note that Xander was back to being amused. 'Cool, huh? It's the eye, the new, well new-er, one. Don't really know how it works, but I don't think it was always mine. They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. This eye?

Window to something else entirely. I've never looked into my own eye, naturally, but I've been told it's a seriously wiggy experience when it goes all higher being-y.'

Spike had to laugh a little at that. 'Yeah. Wiggy. One way to describe it, I guess. But I've looked you in the eye before, mate, and I can say with certainty that that has never happened.'

Xander shrugged. 'Yeah, well, I can't really control it. I mean I can, to an extent, but it doesn't always co-operate. I have to specifically want someone to

tell me the truth. Wasn't sure it'd work on you, to tell the truth. I dunno how it happens, really. It's kind of like I'm... channeling someone, or something. Possibly the thing that last had the eye, but I try not to think about that too much, 'cause there is a seriously creepy thought.' He paused and looked over at Spike. 'Are you ok? I mean, you said you feel different. Anything I should worry about?'

Spike gave this some serious thought. He tentatively brought forward a random memory, waiting for the screaming to start, and it did, but it was further away, easier to manage. In fact, as he studied the man he had killed, took note of his appearance, his face, remembered his name, his family, the pain seemed to lessen. Disturbed and not a little confused, he dragged his mind back to the present. 'No, nothing to worry about,' he replied distantly.

Xander frowned. 'You sure? You want to talk about it?'

Spike shook his head and determined to contemplate what had happened later, in private.

'No,' he said firmly. 'Not yet.' He smiled reassuringly when Xander continued to look concerned. 'Really. Although, you wanna warn me the next time you try something like that?'

Xander grinned. 'No. So, you looking forward to seeing Willow?'

Spike grimaced, but let the other man change the subject. Not much he could do about it anyway, was there? 'Saw her this afternoon. She was getting on a plane in Sydney. New slayer's quite a looker. A natural fighter, too, from what I've seen.'

'Yeah, Willow says she's got a lot of potential.' Spike rolled his eyes at the exceptionally bad pun. Xander grinned. 'She's bringing her older sister as well, apparently, to train as a watcher or a witch, or both I guess.'

Spike started to relax again, although the memory of what had happened was never far from his mind, as their conversation played out along less traumatic lines. He supposed that was one thing

about Xander, the man never pushed him too far, always seemed to know when to back off. Yet another bonus to go along with the visions, he supposed. The man certainly hadn't ever known when to shut his mouth when he was younger. Neither of them brought it up again, and the night disappeared with visions and comfortable conversation.

Two C

In which Xander thinks about Spike, Dawn thinks about Xander, Willow gets magical and Spike does something we've all been waiting for...

Xander yawned as he plopped down into one of the padded benches decorating the wide front porch of their house. It was nearly eleven thirty, but as tired

as he was, he was waiting for Buffy to get back from picking Willow and Rachel up from the airport. He'd had breakfast with the slayers after Dawn had left for a meeting, but Buffy was expecting to find them hard at work on the oval, working on their archery skills, and she was due back any minute. Jesse had challenged him to a match, so he'd joined them for a little while, astonishing them all by winning two out of three matches. He hadn't used a bow and arrow in some time, and although he was no lightweight, he didn't have the upper body strength of a slayer, but stake vampires for long enough, and you learned how to aim.

He leaned his head back onto the cool brick wall, stretching his legs out and folding his hands over his stomach. With the sun warming his face, he let his eyes drift slowly shut, a smile spreading over his face. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt this peaceful. Sitting here like this, he could almost forget about the monsters and the danger, and pretend that the world was a good place to be. He could hear the girls faintly, laughing and shouting at each other. Inside, he could hear the

murmur of voices from the classroom, as the watchers-in-training laughingly worked their way through this week's tutorial in Fyarl.

His smile widened as he thought of seeing Willow again, and they would have to get Giles up for another visit; all the Scoobies together, including one they had never thought to see again.

His mind drifted towards thoughts of Spike, as he found them doing with disconcerting frequency these days. He knew that the ex-vampire was a good part of his current contented mood. Having him back was like being able to reclaim a part of his childhood. But more than that, he was the first real friend Xander had made in a long time. He was becoming addicted to being able to have some one to talk to, to joke with, to help him with research or just to sit and be with. Someone who shared his need to protect the innocent, and who understood some of the pain in his heart. Even the knowledge that Spike wasn't really real was ceasing to bother him. He'd known a lot of different creatures over the years, and the fact the Spike was a ghost, or a

guardian, or whatever he wanted to call himself just wasn't as important as it once might have been.

He was constantly surprising himself with just how relaxed he found himself around Spike. When he'd resolved to physically touch the other man as much as he was comfortable with, he'd thought it was going to be difficult for him, embarrassing even. But, whether it was the fact that it was just between friends, or it was the grateful and surprised look that Spike still got every time he did so, Xander had found himself becoming addicted to that as well. And although there was a great deal of the vampire he remembered in Spike, there was also a whole new level to the man that made it that much easier.

He didn't react as he heard someone open the front door and walked over to where he was sitting. He did smile when, a moment later, he felt a warm body curl up beside him, and he moved a hand to run his fingers through a head of soft, shoulder-length hair. He cracked open one eye at the contented sigh that this produced, one corner of his

mouth twitching up at the sight of Dawn curled up like a cat beside him. 'Gonna get your suit all rumped,' he said lazily.

She smiled a little. 'Yeah, probably. Buff just called, they'll be here in a couple of minutes.' She giggled softly as Xander yawned again, stretching before pushing himself up to sit straight. He just nodded, smiling, and put his arm around her shoulder.

Dawn looked at her friend as he continued to sit, smiling peacefully out at nothing in particular. He looked so young at the moment - almost the teenager she had first met as Buffy's new best friend. She knew how hard the past ten years had been on him. As the rest of them had slowly learned to relax, to just live again, he had taken on the responsibility of the visions, cutting himself off from any chance of a normal life. She understood his reasons, god knew she'd wished often enough when she was younger that she could do more to help in the fight against evil, that she could have a purpose.

So she had argued less than all the others against his decision. She had managed to find her place in the world, as a watcher, and she understood that Xander had wanted that same sort of security. She had also had some idea of just how good he would be at the job, although he had managed to exceed even her expectations. Like her, he had never been as directly involved in the action as the rest of them, and she knew he already saw so much more than they tended to give him credit for. He would never have made a really good watcher, but this had almost seemed like a natural progression.

But she also saw how hard it was for him, that they couldn't really understand the pain the visions caused him, physically certainly, but more mentally and emotionally. They had known how close he had come to the edge those first few weeks, but had been at a loss as to how to help him. It had come as a great relief when he started eating again, but he had been all but silent for months, just handing over his reports, speaking only when spoken to. They had eventually managed to draw him out of his shell, and in time he had started laughing and joking

with them again, but he had never been quite the same.

These last few weeks, though, she had seen him more contented than he had been in a long time. She knew that it was because of Spike. Even though she and Buffy couldn't see him, it was like this was a reward, like they were getting something back after all they had sacrificed. It was all kind of weird, actually. Xander had told them that Spike looked almost exactly the same as the last time that had seen him, minus the leather duster and the ability to go into game face, and she could imagine just how he would look, but sometimes it was so hard to believe that he was actually there. Spike had been part of her family, and losing him had almost been too much for her. All the loss and the pain of the last seven years had come crashing down, symbolized in that one final straw. She knew that it had to be Spike, the things he knew, the way he spoke, but she wished desperately that she could see him. Grateful as she was, she had to admit she had been jealous of Xander, that he, who had never loved the vampire as she, or even Buffy had, should

be the only one able to see him. But now, seeing what the last couple of weeks had done for him, she couldn't find it in her heart to begrudge her friend the first thing that had managed to put that look on his face in more than ten years.

'What? Have I got something on my face?' Dawn started a little at the amused voice beside her.

'Yep.' She leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. He looked surprised, but pleased.

'What was that for?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing. It's just... I'm happy, that you're happy. It's been too long, and I've missed seeing that look on your face. I know it won't last forever, but... I don't know. It feels like the old days. I just missed him so much and... you brought him back, and now it feels like when I got Buffy back, but even better, 'cause everything's better... you know?'

'Yeah, I do,' he said, smiling softly, gazing out at the

sunlit countryside.

She didn't really want to break the peaceful silence, but there was something she had wanted to know for a while now. 'Xander, is Spike ok, really?'

His face became pensive as he turned to look at her. 'I don't know Dawnie. I did the eye thing on him last night. He's still in a lot of pain and he's got loads of issues to deal with. He doesn't like to talk about it, but I am worried about him. I just wish there was more I could do to help.'

Dawn covered her surprise. She had suspected that Spike would still be tormented by memories of his past. Hell, Angel had had a soul for decades and still hadn't managed to deal. What she hadn't expected was the depth of emotion in Xander's voice. She knew that the two were becoming friends, or at least Xander was, but hearing his concern for the other man, she wondered if that was all there was to it. Xander had never had much luck with relationships, but at least in the past his partners had all been visible. And Spike was dead. Granted,

he'd been dead when he and Buffy had been together, but surely this was different. Mentally shaking her head, Dawn decided she would have to talk about this with Willow, they just didn't know enough about what Spike was, and so far it seemed innocent enough. Besides, she could be wrong.

Setting aside her concerns for the moment, she said, 'Buffy and I both want to help, Xander. If there's ever anything we can do...'

'I think just being able to talk to you two again helps him, Dawnie,' he said with a smile.

They were interrupted by the sound of a car coming down the gravel driveway, and they both stood up and made their way to the small set of steps leading down to the yard. The car pulled up, and Xander leapt down the steps to open the passenger side door, a massive grin on his face. The second that Willow stepped out, he swept her up into a huge hug, planting a sweet kiss on her forehead before setting her down. Her protesting 'Xander's' would have been a whole lot more convincing were it not

for the grin that was plastered all over her own face.

'Hey, Wills, long time no see.'

She tried to frown through her grin. 'Alexander Harris, what have you got yourself into this time?'

He held up his hands defensively, laughing. 'Hey, don't blame me, it was your spell.'

She lowered her voice, mindful of the new slayer and her sister. 'Buffy and Dawn both tell me they're convinced it is actually him, not that I don't plan to run a few tests myself, mind, so where is the bleached menace? Is he here?'

'He left after breakfast, but he promised to be back for when you got here. I haven't looked for him yet, thought it could wait 'till we got inside.' When Willow nodded, he grinned at her again, turning towards the two newest members of their household.

The girls had moved away from the car, and were gazing up at the mansion in awe. They were obviously sisters, with the same dark brown hair, green eyes and full, smiling mouths. Even after nearly twenty hours travel, the younger of the two was bouncing on the balls of her feet, looking around excitedly at her new home. The enviable product of slayer physiology and being fifteen, Xander supposed wryly. The elder sister looked much more subdued, although no less curious. He strode over and tapped them on the shoulder, giving them his most welcoming smile.

'Hi there, you must be Rachel and Fiona. It's great to finally meet you. Willow's told me so much about you.' He held out a hand to each of them. 'I'm Xander.'

'Oh, hey, Willow told us about you! You're like vision-boy or something, right?' the younger, Rachel, exclaimed.

'That's me.'

'The seer,' Fiona said curiously, looking into his eyes, blushing when she caught him smiling at her.

'Hey, I love your eyes!' Rachel said, leaning in to get a better look. 'Are they real? Were you born like that?'

He chuckled a little, looking over their heads to where Willow was smirking at him. He flicked a sympathetic look towards Buffy, who was shaking her head, her eyes sparkling; this one would be a handful. 'They are indeed real, but alas I wasn't born like this. Fifteen years ago I lost my eye in a fight against evil, but the Powers That Be decided to reward me by giving me a new one.' He tapped his cheek under his left eye, grinning a little. He knew he was hamming it up, although it was essentially the truth. 'We think that this eye once belonged to a higher being, an angel, if you will. That's why it's a different color. The brown one is the eye that I was born with.'

Fiona seemed a little dubious, but looked at her sister in amusement as Rachel continued to stare

into his face. 'Cool, an angel-eye. It's very pretty. Although I gotta say, I think I like the other one better, wouldn't you say, Fi? All deep and soulful.' She turned around to look demandingly at her sister. The eyes in question widened slightly and Fiona dutifully looked back into his face again. She flicked him an apologetic but resigned glance. Obviously she'd done this before. Xander grinned at her and shrugged.

'Absolutely, Rache.'

Rachel nodded thoughtfully and Xander couldn't help laughing. 'Oh, I like you two. Come on, you've got things to do and people to meet.' He led them over to Dawn and Buffy. 'Buffy you've met. This is her sister Dawn, she's the head of the Slayers Council and she takes care of all the watchers.' They shook her hand politely. He grinned and gestured up at the house. 'And this is the headquarters for the Council in America. What do you think?'

'It's incredible,' Rachel enthused. 'Is this really where we're going to be living?'

'Yup, home, sweet, home.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike watched as Xander and Willow sat down on the floor of the man's office. The two hadn't said much after taking their leave of Buffy and Dawn, but Spike got the distinct impression they were communicating nonetheless. Willow reached into the small bag she had brought with her after dropping off the rest of her luggage and brought out a large white candle and a stick of incense.

The silence from the two figures was starting to get to him. Spike wished he could ask just what the hell they were planning on doing, since no one seemed inclined to say anything out loud. As if on cue, Xander finally smiled and said, 'Ok, Wills, you know I trust you, but what is this going to involve, exactly.'

She took a deep breath. 'Well, essentially, I'll put my mind in your body for a little while. You remember

after Glory took Dawn and I had to go into Buffy's mind to get her out? It'll be kind of like that.'

Xander frowned. 'And what happens to my mind? I'm not comatose.'

'No, I know, your mind will still be there, too. It'll even be in control most of the time. What I'm hoping will happen is that when you phase, I'll be able to follow you. I'll be able to see and hear everything that you can. I should still be able to work most magics in the higher plane, but only if you let me. That's where the trust comes in.' She looked a little worried. 'If I want to cast any spells, you'll have to lend me your mouth and your body. I wouldn't be able to do anything you don't want me to, Xander. Not that I would, of course, and I know it's a lot to ask, but I can't think of any other way for this to work, other than casting the phase spell on myself, which I don't really want to do, seeing as I don't get visions, or anything, and I would never do anything to hurt you, but I'll try to find something else if you don't want me inside your head-'

Spike shook his head a little in amazement. The witch was worse than the seer. 'Willow,' Xander was saying, his own mouth curving just a bit, 'I told you, I trust you. What do you want me to do?'

'Oh, right. Sorry. Well, find out if Spike is here first.' Xander nodded and became solid. He looked around to where Spike was sitting in the window seat. Xander gave him a warm smile that he found himself responding to almost in spite of himself. Xander winked at him before turning back to Willow.

'He's here.'

She looked around curiously, but took him at his word. 'Ok, Spike, I need you to come and sit over here with us.' She patted the floor to the left of them, in between where she and Xander were sitting. With a glance at Xander, who just shrugged, he got up and took himself over to where she indicated, folding himself gracefully down onto the floor. He shivered a little when Xander's hand came to rest on his knee, quickly looking up into

reassuring eyes. He didn't miss the speculative look that Willow flashed Xander, and for just a moment, it occurred to him what they must look like, casually touching all the time. In an instant, his world twisted, his eyes looked on Xander in a completely different light. Could this have been more than just compassion and friendship? Then it twisted back. No, that couldn't be right. He was dead, practically a ghost, and Xander had never said anything to make him think the man saw him as anything other than a friend. Still...

Xander brought him back to himself. 'He's there. What do you want him to do?'

'Nothing for the moment.' She placed the candle in the middle of the circle they made, lighting it and the incense with a thought. She took one of Xander's hands in her own. 'Xander, you'll have to phase back for a moment.' The man complied, and suddenly his hand passed straight through Spike's body. He knew the startled look on Xander's face mirrored his own. But Willow was pushing on. 'I just need you to look into the candle and clear your

mind. Let me do everything else.'

A few minutes later, Xander phased back and took his hand. He didn't seem to be any different, and so he was surprised when the man opened his mouth and began chanting. He felt the energy growing in the room, pressing in around him. He tried to wrench his hand away when he felt some of that energy directed towards him, but found that he couldn't move. His eyes flicked desperately up to Xander's, and they caught him. Willow may have been using his mouth, but Spike knew those eyes, and the reassurance in them was all Xander. He stilled, letting them focus him. Xander would never let Willow do anything to harm him; she just needed to find out for herself that he was real. To be honest, he knew Willow wouldn't do anything to hurt him either. She would test him, but as long as she believed there was a chance he was who he said he was, she would be careful.

For nearly half an hour she poked and prodded him with her magic, asking technical questions about his plane, his essence and his body that he'd never

really considered in the past. Eventually, however, he demanded to know if she was satisfied for the moment, and if so, then Xander really needed to get some rest. This immediately put a stop to the inquisition, and a second later Willow opened her own eyes. 'Xander, I'm so sorry. I lost track of the time,' she said worriedly, looking not a little guilty.

Xander, naturally, waved it off. 'Don't stress, Wills. You find out what you needed?'

A hint of excitement crept into her voice. 'It was amazing, Xander. I might have to run a few more tests, and there are some things I'll have to look up, oh! and I should give Cordy a ring, but I think I know what's going on. It's definitely Spike, or at least a part of him, and I'm fairly sure he's not out to hurt you, or any of us for that matter.'

Xander nodded, smiling, but his eyes were starting to look a little glazed and Spike could see that even sitting on the floor, he was swaying slightly. Willow apparently noticed this too, because she suddenly got to her feet, tugging on Xander's arm in an

attempt to get him to his feet. 'Come on, mister, you have to get up. I can't carry you to bed.'

Xander groaned. 'I could just sleep on the floor. You could bring me a pillow,' he said hopefully. Spike rolled his eyes and wrapped his arm around Xander's torso, hauling him to his feet. He laughed a little at the startled expression on Willow's face.

'C'mon, mate. Little effort on your part.' Xander dutifully snaked an arm around his waist, his fingers tickling a little as they ghosted over his back. Hoping that Xander wouldn't decide to phase out between here and the bedroom, he walked Xander into the other room, laying him down on the bed. Xander immediately closed his eyes.

Willow poked him in the ribs from the other side of the bed. 'Xander! Don't you want to get changed?' He squirmed a little, but didn't open his eyes.

'I do 't later,' he mumbled. Willow looked at him with a kind of fond exasperation.

She chewed her lip for a moment, glancing around furtively, before sighing and looking back to Xander. 'I really shouldn't do this,' she muttered. 'Spike, don't look.' Knowing Willow would never do anything to hurt Xander, Spike watched this display curiously, and was still watching a moment later when all of the man's clothes disappeared, only to be replaced just as suddenly by a pair of sweats and a loose t-shirt. He blinked once as his brain tried to process what it had just seen. "Night, Xander. I'll see you in the evening," Willow said quietly, kissing him on the forehead. Xander opened his eyes a slit.

'G'night, Wills, love you.' She smiled at him affectionately, before carefully drawing the blackout curtains and leaving the room.

Spike was about to do the same when he heard a mumbled, 'Spike.' He turned around to see Xander propped up on one elbow, looking bleary, but serious. "I'm glad that you're you, Spike. Always knew you were, o'course, but I'm glad." He reached out a hand, and Spike took it, allowing himself to be tugged down to sit on the side of the bed. Xander

was looking at him so openly, weariness having lowered all his emotional shields. And still, all Spike could see was affection, friendship, understanding, trust. When was the last time someone had looked at him like that? Dawn, his mother, they had loved him, but they had been a part of his family. Buffy had never quite been able to let go of herself enough to put that much faith in him. He felt the world twist again, leaving him breathlessly aware of the man in front of him. He knew that Xander didn't love him, hell, he barely knew him. But he didn't need or want flowery declarations or lifetime commitments. Even forgetting for the moment that he was dead, he didn't know if Xander would even consider feeling that way about another man.

Still, looking down into those trusting eyes, he knew that he did want... something. To express his gratitude, his friendship, perhaps even hope. And for the first time in a long time, he was free to act on what he was feeling. So, ignoring for the moment inconvenient thoughts of consequences and complications, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to Xander's. He let them linger for only a

split second, before pulling away. It was nothing really, a kiss between friends, but the sensation was incredible. Xander's lips were smooth and hard, and he closed his eyes as he felt little tingles of electricity shiver through his body. God, he knew that had been a bad idea. How was he supposed to stop himself from doing it again? It had made him feel almost... happy.

He shied away from that thought, and opened his eyes when he heard Xander chuckle lightly. 'I take it back. Who are you?' He shook his head once, smiling fondly at Xander.

'Go to sleep, mate, I'll see you later.'

Xander had already flopped back down, his eyes drifting shut, although the smile didn't leave his face. 'Night, Spike.'

'Night, luv.'

Part Two D

In which Willow explains exactly what Spike is all about.

Willow had the dining room table covered in books, papers, her laptop, the phone and various spell-type accoutrements when Xander came downstairs that evening. He only had time to grin a little at the way she was bouncing around the room before all three women zoomed in on him. He knew he was really late. The first vision for the evening had actually pulled him from sleep, making him wonder for a moment if he was still dreaming. But it was a simple vampires-on-the-hellmouth type vision, so instead of making them wait any longer, he had thrown on some clothes, and brought his notebook downstairs with him.

'Xander, there you are! We were starting to get

worried!'

'Sorry, Wills,' he grinned at her, 'but that's what happens when you have a beautiful young thing keep you up most of the night. Or day in my case.'

She looked immediately contrite, but smiled beatifically when she took in the compliment. Just as quickly, the smile turned into an excited grin. He chuckled inwardly. And people thought he was one with the mood-swings. 'Morning, guys.' He wandered over to the table, giving Buffy and Dawn an absent kiss on the cheek while searching fruitlessly for a clear corner of workspace.

'Hey, Xan,' Dawn said with a smile.

'You're up late,' Buffy commented, snaking an arm around his waist. 'You sleep through your first vision again?' she grinned.

'Nearly,' he grinned back at her. 'So...?' He waved his hand at the table, looking over at Willow.

Dawn rolled her eyes, smiling ruefully at Buffy. 'Willow wanted to look a few things up.' The three of them shared a smirk, while said witch put her hands on her hips and tried not to look amused.

'So I see. I don't s'pose you could clear me a corner, could you Wills?' He glanced down at the book open in front of him, skimming a few lines. 'Although I'll understand if you feel the mating habits of dryads are relevant in this case. Not a subject I'm well versed in, but I guess it could have something to do with vampires becoming higher beings and me being able to see them.' He grinned at her, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

She glared at him, but moved the book obligingly. Sitting down, he started writing - waiting while the three of them did the same. 'So, what's the verdict? Oh, wait!' he said suddenly. He hadn't noticed Spike before his vision started, or when he had glanced around for him afterwards. He had figured this was where the man was most likely to be. Phasing out, then, he was unsurprised to see Spike leaning up against the wall behind Willow and Dawn, exactly

where he had glimpsed him for only the second time, all those weeks ago. 'Evening, Casper.' Willow and Dawn looked around, and Buffy smiled in the direction Xander was looking.

'So he is here. I never know if I should say anything just in case. And I'm not going to start talking to myself on the off chance you're around to hear, either, Spike.' She softened the words with a grin.

'The way you talk to yourself when you're in the shower, luv?' Spike said with a lascivious grin. Xander's eyes widened. He wouldn't. Would he? No, this was Spike with a soul. On the other hand, he was in love with Buffy, or at least he had been. Xander frowned a little. Spike must have noticed, because he rolled his eyes and said, 'Relax, mate, I wouldn't do that. Not any more anyway.' He smiled disarmingly, and Xander found himself responding in spite of himself. Still, he couldn't help but worry about the state of affairs between the ex-vampire and the slayer.

He had simply assumed that Spike was still in love

with Buffy. No matter how much he had tried to deny it in that last year, Xander had been able to see the way the vampire had looked at her, much the same way the way he had gazed at her just a few weeks ago, when she had stood in the circle of Xander's arms and used his hands to touch Spike's face. He had seen the longing, the affection in the other man's eyes. Still, they had never talked about it. In fact, Spike seemed to speak about Buffy in exactly the same he spoke about Dawn or Willow. Like she was family. Someone he loved, but someone he wanted to protect, to see happy, not to make happy.

The same way he himself thought about Spike. Although... his mind flashed back to the kiss last night. He had been close enough to sleep at the time to dismiss the brief fluttering he had felt in his gut. He wanted to lie to himself, pretend he didn't know what that feeling meant, to deny any attraction to the other man. Because he knew that nothing would, could, ever come of it. Even if Spike wasn't in love with his best friend, the man wasn't even real. And he wasn't fool enough to ruin the

best friendship he'd had in years, not counting his girls, to indulge in a purely physical, unrequited attraction.

Subdued, now, he offered Spike a small smile. 'I just wanted to make sure that you were here. I'm afraid you'll just have to listen for a while. I'll write up my report and phase back in a few minutes. That ok?'

Spike was looking at him oddly, but replied, 'Sure, mate. Take your time.'

Xander just nodded, phasing back and picking up his pen again. 'Sorry, Wills, go on.'

'Ok, well, like I said last night, it definitely is Spike. Not exactly the same Spike, without the vampire and with a new body, but I'd know that soul anywhere. What you said about the Powers offering him a reward for his sacrifice is believable. There have been cases of similar things happening throughout history. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the reward. Like your eye, Xander. You sacrificed a normal future to be a messenger for

them, so they gave you back your eye, and a nifty truth-detecting power to go along with it. Spike sacrificed not only his life, but also, from what he's said, any chance he might have had to find peace. And he did it out of love, to save the world from hell. That's a big sacrifice. Now, I don't know why they didn't make him human again, or whatever is supposed to happen to Angel. Maybe it's because he didn't have an actual physical body for them to work with. From everything I've read, the Powers can change a body from one thing to something else, but they very rarely make a new one, fully formed, from scratch. If you know what I mean?'

She waited for them to nod. Xander noticed there were tears in Dawn's eyes, although she looked proud. Willow took a deep breath and started again. 'Right, so they made him a higher being. Not a higher being like Cordelia was for a little while, lesser than that, but higher than us. Cordy told me that when they made her part demon, she had a guide, Skip, that only she could see. I think that's kind of what Spike is, although he calls himself a guardian, not a guide.'

Dawn interrupted. 'So how come only Xander can see him?'

Willow nodded. 'That's got to do with the nature of the plane. Obviously, to us, it's a metaphysical plane. Things exist there in essence. Which means that everything that exists here also exists there, but not physically.' She grimaced, frustrated. 'I'm not explaining this right... Ok, take this table.' She knocked once on the wooden surface. 'Perfectly solid. Now, to Spike, it would be intangible. He'd be able to walk straight through it. That's right, isn't it Xander?' She looked at him expectantly. He nodded, glancing up from his page.

'Yeah, he can walk through just about anything. Although, he can also sit down, lean against the wall, that sort of thing. How is that supposed to work?'

Willow frowned, sighing. 'I don't really know. The table doesn't have a soul or anything like that, but like everything it has an essence, an energy. That's

what exists in the other plane. I guess, being a part of that plane, Spike might be able to manipulate that energy. I'd have to run some more tests. Anyway, it doesn't really matter. Ok, then. Now, people are a little different. Generally speaking, we have souls, which are made up of a very special type of energy. That energy is intangible on this plane, but it can exist physically on higher planes.'

Xander looked up again. 'So, Spike is just a soul?'

Willow seemed startled at this. 'Oh, no, Spike's body is perfectly real. Like I said before, the Powers didn't create him a new physical body on this plane, but they did give him a body. It's just made up of more energy than matter.' Xander frowned again. For all that he was able to touch him, he'd unconsciously been thinking of Spike as a kind of ghost, not really real. The fact that he existed in a more tangible sense seemed to make things different somehow.

'I don't get it Wills, how can he have a physical body, when we clearly can't see it?'

'The entire plane is out of phase with ours, Xander. Do you remember when we created that demon by bringing Buffy back? It was only slightly out of phase with this reality. That's why we could kind of see it. When Tara and I gave it form, all we did was pull it's physical body from Spike's plane into our plane. We didn't create life, or anything like that. If it hadn't already existed physically in some sense, that spell wouldn't have worked.'

Xander pondered this for a while, his report momentarily forgotten. 'Alright, then. So, why do I exist there physically when I shift?'

Willow grinned, once again back on solid ground. 'Now this, I know. Remember I said souls could exist physically there? Well, for most people, their soul is locked tightly inside their body. That body prevents the soul from existing fully in the other plane. When we die, our soul is released. Spike told me that he's been able to touch people right after they've died, when their soul passes through his plane on to wherever it goes next. Most of the time, a soul can't

remain on that plane without a body, I guess they have more important things they have to be doing, which is why the Powers had to create one for Spike. But, to answer your question, Xander, you can exist physically there because your soul can move outside your body. Instead of being trapped inside, when you phase it sort of leaks out, becomes like a second skin. But it's still firmly connected to you. That's probably why Spike can feel your physical body as well. Does that make any sense?'

Xander couldn't help smirking a little at that. Glancing over he saw Buffy quickly wipe a similar amused look from her face. He caught her eye and they both suppressed another grin. Willow looked so earnest, however, that they both nodded encouragingly. Dawn actually seemed to know exactly what Willow was talking about. And Xander had gotten the gist of it. Besides, as long as someone understood it, and Willow assured him there weren't going to be any unpleasant side effects, he was more than prepared to live with ignorance.

Dawn started asking intelligent questions. 'His soul is on the outside of his body? Will that leave it susceptible to attack? You know Xander hasn't had the best record with that sort of thing to begin with.' She grimaced an apology at him. He shrugged. Couldn't argue with the facts.

As Willow explained that she could put warding spells around him, but that it shouldn't be too much of a problem anyway, considering he would now be able to actually see a great many of the things that tried to attack him psychically, he signed off on his report, and phased back to look for Spike. He was slightly startled to find him sitting right beside him. He punched him lightly in the arm, provoking an innocent grin. 'So, turns out you're a real boy after all, huh, Blondie?' he whispered, not wanting to interrupt Willow and Dawn, who had moved on from stuff that he could mostly understand to the properties of matter and energy and other such gibberish.

'Imagine that. You know,' he said, sounding slightly aggrieved, 'most people, they live, they die, and

that's it. Me, I've been more bloody things in my time... Getting right confusing it is.'

Buffy leaned over at his grin, resting her chin on his shoulder. 'What's up?' she murmured.

'Spike's complaining about how unfair his life is,' he told her with a twinkle.

She raised an eyebrow, smiling slightly. 'Oh, I don't know. There aren't all that many people who get the chance to be a human, a vampire, a vampire with a soul and a higher being all in the space of one existence. Could be considered a good thing. Although, there is Cordy. And she's only thirty-five, who knows what else could happen. And I've still got him beat on the number of times I've died. Besides,' her face fell a bit, her voice becoming wistful, 'at least he's still here. That's got to be worth something.'

Xander put an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. 'He is here. And,' he paused for dramatic effect, continuing in a whisper, 'he's even managed

to learn to be slightly less irritating than he used to be.' He paused, giving Spike the eye. 'Well, 'slightly' might be a little strong. And 'less', come to think of it.'

Spike was looking amused. 'You better watch yourself, Harris. I might just have to dig deep and find that part of me again.'

Xander grinned, turning back to Buffy. 'Now he's threatening me. You've got no idea what I have to put up with.'

'Oh, gee, let me think. Spike being irritating, threatening and complaining. No, no, I've got no idea what that might be like.'

'You know, you were all much nicer to me when you thought I was dead.' He was obviously going for put upon. Xander just grinned at him, reaching over to put a hand on his shoulder.

'What can I say, Spike? You just bring it out in people.' Not giving Spike a chance to respond, he

pushed back his chair and turned to Willow and Dawn. 'Guys? I'm just gonna run this upstairs.' He waved around the piece of paper. He turned to Buffy. 'You wanna order pizza or something? Wills hasn't been here for one of our infamous Friday movie-interrupted-by-visions nights for ages. Spike can come, too.' Willow lit up and Dawn grinned, nodding enthusiastically, their conversation forgotten for the moment.

Buffy responded, 'Sure thing, Xander. Say half an hour? We'll meet you upstairs.'

Part Three

In which Spike comes to terms with his past

The next few months were more pleasant than the last fifteen years put together for Spike. He felt welcome, forgiven, accepted, in a way he hadn't since the day he'd been turned. So many people

had used him as a vampire. Power had been a heady thing, and once he would have accepted that it was really all he needed, but he was discovering that this was better, this sense of family. His mother had meant the world to him, and even as a vampire he had unconsciously latched onto anyone or anything that could provide that illusion, that sense of belonging. It was exhilarating to find it again after so long.

Not that it was a perfect situation. He was still invisible to everyone except Xander. But they acted like he was there, included him in every way that they could. He wanted to say that he was happy, and there were times when he almost believed it. But every time he felt himself getting close, his past would rear its ugly head and the screaming would start. He was beginning to truly want to find some way to come to terms with it; to really make the guilt and the recriminations stop, instead of just suppressing them. He wanted to find peace.

He figured he should talk to Xander about it, but was never quite sure where to start. He knew that

the man understood some of the pain he was going through, and it wasn't even as if he would feel uncomfortable discussing it with him. Xander was giving him space, careful not to bring up subjects that might be too upsetting, which he did appreciate. He hadn't forgotten Xander's trick with his eye, how it had quieted the screams for a while, and he wanted that again. He just couldn't get himself to make the first move. So, he fell back on old habits, ignoring what he couldn't deal with, and focusing on the myriad distractions that his existence offered.

He surprised even himself then, when, sometime at the end of November, out of the blue, his mouth took over and started the conversation he had been so diligently avoiding. It had been an unremarkable day, all things considered. There had been a bit of a scare in Japan with a gang of Pavoran demons, and they'd come away with a couple of innocent fatalities, but nothing worse than any other day of the year. He had followed the slayers-in-training in from their nightly patrols, making his way up to Xander's room, as he did nearly every night these

days. He was a bit restless, but he hadn't really been thinking of anything other than sitting and relaxing for a few hours. When he didn't find Xander in his room, there was an inexplicable surge of panic, quickly dampened. Xander often wandered around the house these days in between visions, doing odd jobs, working out in the training hall, reading in the library, chatting with any of the slayers who weren't out patrolling that night. Xander hadn't said anything, but Spike knew that in the past, before the spell, he had spent that time trying to get over the pain in his head enough for it to start all over again. Besides, he knew for a fact that nothing had happened. His connection to the Powers would have let him know if something was wrong. So he had simply focused his senses on the man, appearing beside him a moment later.

He looked around for a second, blinking. This was new. 'Xander, why are we on the roof?' The man had placed a thick folded blanket down on the flat concrete roof, and was currently laying back, his hands folded behind his head, ankles crossed, gazing at the stars. His laptop was open beside him,

casting an eerie white glow over his features. He looked beautiful, peaceful, and Spike felt his heart flutter a little.

Xander's eyes flicked over to him when he spoke, his whole body tensing, one hand going to a dagger placed strategically by his head, before he recognized who it was. Spike watched as the tension disappeared as quickly as it had come, and Xander gave him a happy smile. 'Spike, hey,' he blinked up at him. Apparently disinclined to get up, Xander reached over and rested a hand on his calf, where it was standing near the man's waist. He tugged on his jeans a little 'till Spike got the hint and folded himself down to sit cross-legged beside him, close enough so that Xander could still rest his hand on Spike's knee. The man smiled warmly at him again, before turning his attention back to the sky.

Spike allowed himself to just sit there for a little while. He glanced up once to see what Xander was gazing at, but he had spent one hundred and twenty years looking at the night sky; it held little interest for him any longer. He gazed, instead, at

the man in front of him, illuminated by starlight, moonlight and laptop-light. It might have been quite romantic, in another lifetime. He ignored the part of him that wanted to protest that it could still be romantic, here and now. The thought, however, jolted him out of his absent musings, and he shifted the knee covered by the other man's hand a little.

'Xander, what are you doing out here? It's nearly winter, for Chris's sake. You'll freeze your nuts off.'

Xander grinned at him, this time obviously focusing his attention on Spike. 'Nah, it's a thermal blanket. Could take it to Antarctica and it'd still work. As for what I'm doing out here, I should have thought that'd be fairly obvious, even for you, Blondie. I'm stargazing.' Which was typically unhelpful.

'Ok, mate, little more information. Why are we stargazing?'

Xander shrugged, the grin fading, to be replaced by a slightly melancholy look. 'I used to come out here all the time, back before the headaches got too bad.'

The visions were so hard to control. There were all these people screaming in my head for me to save them. Up here, at night, it was... I dunno, quiet, I guess. Looking up at the stars made me feel so insignificant. Which, given my previous role in the gang, shouldn't really have been very comforting. But it made me realize that I didn't carry the weight of the world on my shoulders. Don't know why I felt like coming up here tonight. Just seemed like the right thing to do.' He frowned slightly. 'It's been a bit of a weird day all 'round, actually.'

Spike narrowed his eyes and cocked his head sideways. 'Weird how? Did something happen?'

'Well, no, not really. You saw at breakfast that the first vision was early, which was nothing to really worry about. But I've had twelve visions so far tonight. That's like one every half an hour. I barely had time to finish one report before it was time to start another one. I gotta say, I was getting just a little worried, seriously not looking forward to having to do that all the time. But... the last vision I had was at one o'clock,' he glanced at his watch,

'about an hour ago. That was when I suddenly got the urge to come up here. I don't know what's going on,' he shrugged again, 'but it doesn't feel wrong, so I'm just going with it.'

Spike frowned, casting out his senses. Xander was right. It didn't feel wrong. It was odd, certainly, but not wrong. He could usually tell if something was threatening one of the Power's chosen, but there was nothing like that here. Maybe they were just trying to give him an evening off, unlikely though that sounded. Xander had said it himself, once. The Powers always had a reason for the things they did, whether you ever got to understand it or not. With that thought, he felt an inexplicable calm creep over him, his concerns evaporating.

'Fair enough.' Without really thinking about it, he twisted around and stretched his body out beside Xander's, crossing his ankles, but resting his hands on his stomach. He could feel the heat radiating off the man beside him. When Xander shifted slightly so their shoulders touched, then the line of their upper arms, he felt his soul sigh contentedly,

soaking up the warmth.

Lying there, looking up at the stars, he thought he could begin to understand what Xander meant. He really was an insignificant part of the grand scheme, whatever that might be. Sure, he'd saved the world, but so had a lot of people, including the man beside him. There would always be champions. And it felt good, really, to know that he was only a part of something. That's why Buffy had survived so long, and been so successful as a slayer. Even before the spell to share the power of the slayer, she had never really been alone in her fight.

It was hard to remember these days that he was still a part of something bigger.

His mind was silent for once. He could feel himself drifting, with an oddly quiescent feeling that went all the way to his soul. When he spoke, it was like an axe falling, irrevocable, terrifying, but strangely freeing at the same time. 'I've been thinking about what you said, about having to deal.' It was said quietly, but Xander shifted beside him, pressing

their arms together in silent encouragement. 'I want to. I just don't know how.'

Xander closed his eyes and sucked in a silent breath of relief. He'd been waiting for this. Watching Spike the past months, knowing the pain he was in, had been incredibly hard for Xander. He wanted more than anything to help, had seen the positive effect his gaze had had the first time, but knew that if it was ever going to really mean anything, Spike had to get to this point himself. He knew first hand how distracting it was to have memories screaming inside your head. He had never been able to repress them like Spike seemed to be able to, but they had occupied his every waking thought, and then returned in full color to haunt his dreams. Those had been some of the most miserable times of his life, desperately wanting to turn to his family, unable to reach out to them, to take the help they kept trying to offer. It was only when he had started trying to deal with the images, to face up to the memory of all the innocents he failed to save, that he had come to understand that it wasn't his fault. And it was only when he had found some peace

within himself that he had truly found his way back to his family.

He gazed up at the stars for a moment longer, but he needed to see Spike's face for this. He sat up slowly, turning around to sit cross-legged by the other man's waist, pulling his blanket more securely around himself. He waited for Spike to meet his eyes before nodding, a small smile quirking his lips.

Spike closed his eyes against the panic that suddenly coursed through him. How could he have thought he was ready for this? Xander would want him to remember, to talk about all the horror that he had participated in, had exalted in. He would have to feel the blood on his hands, in his throat, hear the screams of their souls, his soul, he didn't even know anymore, see their faces as he cut them down with no more regret than any animal has for it's food, drown in the loathing, the guilt...

He wasn't even aware of the tear that had escaped when Xander leaned over and brushed a finger down his cheek, but the touch was enough to

startle his eyes open. He was immediately caught, his body unresisting as the other man drew him up to a sitting position, his mind unexpectedly still as his soul continued to scream around it. He took a single shuddering breath, but didn't let his eyes waver from the two before him. Xander just looked at him, a question in his eyes, and Spike took a moment before nodding. He was ready.

Immediately, the icy blue eye before him seemed to flare, glowing softly with the promise of peace, and he felt his soul calm a little, experienced that same feeling of distance he had the first time. However, it was the other eye that he felt calling to him, breaking him, even as it promised to put him back together, showing him years of pain and loss, guilt and self-loathing, but also strength, compassion, purpose, love and forgiveness. He wanted that. God, how he wanted that. He didn't want to be alone anymore. He just couldn't do alone. He'd only managed to survive the last fifteen years because his soul cried out for punishment. Even then, if he hadn't been able to at least be with Buffy and Dawn, he knew he would have succumbed to the

insanity as he had after first receiving his soul. He fucking hated that now, when he had a chance to be with his family again, some part of him refused to believe he deserved that happiness. And he didn't. He knew that he didn't. But he wanted it. And if he had to live through it all again, all the things he had done... If that was what it was going to take, then that's what he'd do. He'd been given a second chance to find happiness by the soddin' Powers That Be. Surely, that had to count for something.

Whatever he had been expecting, the reality was worse. He looked into Xander's eyes and felt the world fall away, until all that was left was the pictures in his head. And then they weren't pictures any longer, they were real, or close enough that he couldn't tell the difference, and he was once again the monster he had tried so hard to forget, to deny. Except this time he was also William, the innocent soul who had foolishly given his life to a beautiful woman in an alley, a woman he had loved even before knowing, and that his mind, his demon, had continued to love in his place. This time, that soul

got to witness first-hand the atrocities that had been committed with it's body, in the name of hate and power and worst of all in the name of love, love that had survived the loss of a soul, but not without price, without perversion.

It started with impressions, flashes of memory, meaningless acts of violence to a vampire that translated into unforgivable sins to the soul. The first person he had killed, the first person he had tortured, the unbelievable rush of power that came from the screams of the dying, drinking the blood of the slayer, fear, despair, pain, and joy, abandon, the knowledge of the demon, that life was death, and death was life, and whether they were innocent and undeserving or criminal and condemned to the same hell he came from, it didn't matter, because he was power, and they were his to do with as he pleased.

And he could only watch in horror, impotent, crying for the lives that he cut short, unable to do anything, change anything, because this was only a memory, and he hadn't been there the first time

around.

The demon didn't care about its victims, would not have thought to recall their faces, but nothing is ever really lost, and he knew suddenly that they shouldn't be forgotten. However painful and humiliating their deaths had been, he owed it to them to keep their memory at least alive for as long as he was able. Xander was right, you never forgot, but maybe you weren't supposed to.

Spike was too lost within his own head to notice, but something changed with that realization, as Xander's eyes started suddenly to swirl over white. And for the first time, Spike heard the other man's voice inside his head. It was calm, deep, but unobtrusive, like the pull of the tide. 'Start at the beginning, Spike. Tell me what you remember.'

So he did. He lost himself in the memory of that first night. Every detail became suddenly clear, sounds were sharp, colors were vivid, the scent of blood thick in his nose, the urge to feed, the desire to kill heavy in his mind. The words tumbled out, as he

described looking up into the face of his dark princess, how she had led him to the young woman walking home alone from a party much like the one he had so hastily left himself. And even as it watched the life drain from her to feed the demon that possessed his body, the soul shuddered, and Spike studied her face, the anguish in her brown eyes, the tear that streaked down a pale cheek towards a thin mouth. Memorized the soft fall of her dark hair, the shape of her face, her body, despaired that this was all he had of this girl, this innocent, all he could preserve of her. He didn't even know her name.

'Her name was Sarah. Sarah Forsythe.' He closed his eyes as Xander started to speak. And this time it really was Xander, not some higher power working through him. The pictures swam before him, but he couldn't open his eyes, couldn't risk losing them. 'She was seventeen. She dreamed of traveling to Italy, meeting a Roman prince, being swept off her feet. She wanted to see the Vatican, take mass within the halls of the chapel. She loved her family, her mother and father, her baby brother, wanted to

see the man he would become. She was never meant to live, though. Everything happens for a reason.' It felt like his heart should break, but his soul was quiet. As much as it was tearing him apart to know this, at the same time it was a gift. She had given him a part of herself, given him life, willingly or not, and although he might never worship at a shrine to her memory, neither would he ever forget her, ever cease to be grateful or mourn for her loss. And with this silent promise, her felt one tiny pair of the claws ripping through his soul loosen and disappear, one of the hundreds of screaming voices fall silent, and he was amazed, hoping for the first time that maybe the promise in Xander's eyes had been true, that after all this he really would be put back together.

It didn't stop. For every memory that he recounted, Xander would give him back a small piece of the person's soul, and every time his own would feel a little more whole. After that first one, his soul skipped through visions, finding those most painful and reliving them with a kind of savage joy, knowing that he was finally finding a way to lay some of his

ghosts to rest. It wasn't an end. Hell, it was barely a beginning. But it was hope, and a promise of peace, which was more than Spike had ever thought he would deserve, let alone find.

Eventually the sun came up over horizon, and the white cloud lifted from Xander's eyes. Spike opened his own only when he felt Xander's fingers trace a line from his forehead down to his chin, before tapping him lightly on the shoulder. He felt tired, mentally exhausted, as he never had before. But he also felt better, quieter than he had in a long time.

He raised his eyes to meet Xander's again, and saw that the power was still thrumming there. Shaking his head slightly, he said, 'That was...' God, he didn't even know. Wonderful, painful. He didn't know whether to say thank you or fuck you. He would never be able to forget now, to repress it, but maybe he wouldn't have to anyway, anymore. '...different,' he settled on.

Xander gave a short bark of what sounded like slightly hysterical laughter. 'Yeah, different.'

Spike focused on him for the first time. God, he thought, the man looked even worse than he felt. 'You saw all that,' he said slowly. 'Your eyes were white. Was it just like having a vision? Did you experience all that like I did?'

Xander took a deep breath, closing his eyes for just a moment. When he opened them Spike could see that the shields were back up. 'Yeah, like a vision.'

Xander hated him. He had to. His past wasn't just a nebulous concept any more, he had actually seen every detail, knew just exactly how much he had reveled in the death and destruction he had caused. He despaired to think that he had gained a measure of peace at the cost of the only friend he had. He drew away from Xander, his face shutting down. 'I'm sorry.' It wasn't enough, but it was far too late for anything else.

Xander's blue eye flared for a moment, then faster than he could follow, Xander reached out to take both his hands in a crushing grip. 'No. No, Spike, I

don't hate you. I told you that before. This doesn't change that. Yes, it's a little overwhelming, but that wasn't you. I felt each and every one of them die, but I also felt everything that the demon did.'

Spike was angry all of a sudden. He looked up, his eyes flashing. He could remember everything it felt, everything it did. 'I am the fucking demon, mate. Soul or not, I was there, which means some part of me must have wanted all that.'

Xander narrowed his eyes and stared at him for a long moment. His voice was harsh when he finally spoke. 'Yeah? All right then, Spike, let's pick a day, any day.' Then he quite deliberately allowed his eyes to defocus, and Spike knew he was reliving a vision. He ignored the heat that suddenly rushed over the back of his neck, focusing instead on his anger. Mere seconds later Xander was back, his eyes hard. 'There we go. March 10, 1886. You and Drusilla find a family living in a cottage outside of a small English town and decide to work on earning you a name for yourself. So tell me, look back and tell me what you felt when you pinned that little girl

to the floor with a railroad spike. Well?'

What the hell was this? 'You want to know how it felt?' He narrowed his eyes dangerously, glaring at the man sitting across from him.

'No, I wanna know how you felt.'

His eyes flashed, and he wanted nothing more than to leave, forget this conversation had ever happened, but Xander wasn't letting him go, with his hands or with his eyes, and after a moment he gave up, the truth sounding like a curse as he spat it out. 'Fine. I loved it. The demon fucking gloried in the pain, the fear and the blood. Is that what you wanted to hear, you bastard?'

'You're missing the point, Spike.' His voice was softer, but Spike could still hear the sharp edge of anger. 'That's not what you felt; it's what the demon felt. I know, 'cause I felt that too. But that's not what I felt. Those emotions weren't mine. What did you feel?' He paused for a moment, continuing ruthlessly. 'Think about this then... what did you

feel reliving it just now? Did you enjoy it? Did it make you want to go out and brush up on your skills?'

'How can even fucking suggest that, you fucking wanker,' he hissed.

'Answer the question, Spike.'

'No, I didn't enjoy it. Of course I didn't fucking enjoy it. It rips me up on the inside to know I've done those things. I feel horrified, guilty, I wish I could go back and change everything, but I can't. That's how I goddamned feel.'

'And the first time? What did you feel then? What would you have done differently? You, William, not the demon.'

'What the bloody hell are you talking about? I wasn't fucking there, was I?' There was nothing he could have done differently.

And that was it, wasn't it? The point Xander had

been trying to shove down his throat for months. It didn't change the fact that terrible things had been done with his body, and a part of him had been there to witness all of it. But it wasn't him. They might have been his thoughts, but they weren't his feelings. He hadn't been there to stop it, and he knew, because he had lived with a soul for over a year as a vampire, that he if he could have, he would have. He let the realization wash over him for a moment, but it wasn't enough.

'The worst thing?' he said bleakly. 'It wasn't even all bad. I loved Dru, and there were times when we were just happy, just to be together. Even when there were people dying all around us, I didn't care. No, worse than that, it made me feel good, because it made her happy. It wasn't even about them. It feels so wrong to have to regret loving someone. There was so much of me in what I felt for her. I wanted to give her everything she'd ever desired, and the demon knew exactly how to do that.' He let the images run through his mind, astonished at how painless it suddenly was to relive this, now that he had something else to focus on. But he still didn't

know how he was supposed to just dismiss the actions of the demon. He looked up to find Xander watching him grimly. 'And what about after the chip, huh? Did all that mean nothing? I helped you,' he said fiercely. 'God, I even liked you. I would have died to protect Dawn and Buffy. Was all that just the demon? If it was, what excuse is there for all the things I did before that?'

Xander just looked at him for a moment, the anger falling away. 'You think that you should have been able to control the demon even without the chip. That if there was enough of you in the demon to love Drusilla and Buffy and Dawn, even Angelus, to want to help us, protect us, then you must have also wanted everything else it did.' Spike flinched at the cold assessment, unable to deny it, and Xander sighed, looking down. After a moment, Xander looked up again, catching his eyes, his own still glowing with power, although he when he spoke the voice was entirely his own. 'I don't have all the answers, Spike. It's true that even before the soul I thought, or can see in hindsight at least, that you had the potential to be a good person. But you

went through some pretty goddamned remarkable crap those couple'a years. I don't know, maybe losing Dru, falling in love with Buffy, being a part of something again, you just changed. You and the demon. I do know that if we liked you, it was because you were forced for the first time in one hundred and twenty years to suppress the demon. You said it yourself, Spike, you lost your soul, not your mind. With your demon caged, it seems to me we got to know the real you. Before that, yes, your mind was there for all those deaths, but you weren't in control then. You probably wouldn't have been able to control the demon without the chip anyway, and why would you have even tried? There was nothing you could have done differently.'

'But all those people... If only I'd... God, how can they ever forgive me,' he murmured.

Xander's eyes were sympathetic, but his voice was hard. 'You've been redeemed, Spike. That didn't happen just 'cause the Powers felt like it. You were broken and tortured. You lost all the people you loved, but you still fought and suffered. You loved

and despaired. You helped us, and all we did was hate you. You gave up everything you were, everything you knew, for love. All this while you were still a demon, before the soul. If they wanted vengeance, they found it. If they wanted you to change, you did. If that wasn't enough, you were driven insane by your soul, used by the first evil. You suffered for what you did, Spike, and then you gave up life and peace to save the world. You have been forgiven, or you wouldn't have been given this second chance. More importantly, you deserved to be forgiven, and I think you know that.'

The anger drained out of him, and he lowered his head, not sure if he wanted to laugh or cry. The sound that escaped was a desperate mix of the two, and it was only when he got the urge to bury his face in his hands that he realized they were still being tightly held. He gazed at the large, sun-darkened fingers for a moment, before gently extricating one hand, running it through his hair as he lifted his head.

Xander's eyes were normal now, the power

dissipated. He looked tired, worn, but a small, wry smirk had settled around his mouth, and his eyes were open, smoldering with friendship and hope. When Spike offered a tentative smile of his own, Xander's whole body seemed to relax slightly.

'Okay?'

And that was it. End of painful conversation and generally soul-destroying experience. Letting out a tired puff of laughter, he allowed his smile to reach his eyes. 'Yeah, actually. Thank you.' And there was more in those two words than Spike could ever hope to express, but he had a feeling that Xander got that.

Xander lifted his free hand, resting the tips of his fingers on Spike's cheek and gazed at him for a long moment. There was so much intensity there, and even through his exhaustion, Spike thought he saw something that drew his mind back to the kiss all those months ago, and caused a faint fluttering in the pit of his stomach. But before he could react, it was gone, and Xander was grinning, his hand dropping away. 'No problem. Let's hope we don't

have to do that again anytime too soon, whaddaya say?'

'Shit, yeah. Gonna need some serious recovery time.'

'Do you even sleep?' Xander asked curiously as he levered himself up off the ground and started to collect his things.

'Not usually, but I might be prepared to make an exception.' He groaned as he stumbled to his feet. His head was pounding, and he doubted he could raise a hand to protect anyone at the moment. He supposed it was only to be expected. His soul had taken a beating tonight, and given his nature, it was only natural his psychological pain would manifest physically. Which was all very well, but wasn't stopping him from quietly toppling over as his legs refused to admit they had to support him any longer.

Xander's eyes widened in amusement as he turned around to see Spike sitting on the ground again.

'Would you like me to get you a pillow?'

Spike just shook his head in confusion. 'What?'

Xander chuckled. 'Oh, yeah, seriously knowing how that feels. Well, I guess I should return the favor. Up we get, Casper.' He grunted slightly as he snaked an arm around Spike's waist and hauled him to his feet. 'I am not carrying you,' he warned. 'Don't fall asleep just yet.'

Spike leaned further into the solid wall of heat that Xander presented, one arm reaching around his waist, his head resting on the other man's shoulder. It felt like his body was just shutting down, taking his brain along for the ride. He smiled languidly, finding it very difficult to work up enough energy to care. Xander was just exactly the right height to act as a pillow. At the moment, that seemed like the single most important fact of his existence. 'But you're all warm and toasty like a pillow,' he protested, distantly aware that they had been moving for the past couple of minutes.

He came back to himself a little when he felt himself lowered onto a bed. Xander had taken off his boots for him and was unbuttoning his shirt. 'Xander?' he asked in confusion.

'Hey, there you are,' he said softly, smiling. 'Any other time, I might be offended. You falling asleep in my arms and all.'

'What...?'

'Relax, Spike. Like I said, just returning the favor.'

Xander had, by this time, managed to remove his shirt, and was pushing him back onto the bed. The moment his head hit the pillow his eyes closed and he started to drift off. But there was something bugging him. Something about a favor...

His eyes opened suddenly, his hand reaching out to grab Xander just as he was getting up to move away. 'I'm me,' he stated fairly incoherently.

Xander regarded him curiously for a moment,

before a smirk appeared and he nodded. 'Can't argue with that. All right, Spike. It's only fair, I guess.' Then he leaned over and placed a soft kiss on his mouth. Spike sighed and smiled, his eyes drifting shut once again.

'Mmm, s'right,' he murmured.

He drifted off to the sound of a warm chuckle and the feel of strong, gentle fingers tracing through his hair. It made him feel happy. And his last thought as sleep claimed him was that for the first time, that didn't sound like a lie, and it didn't make him afraid, it just felt undeniably, wonderfully right.

Part Three B

In which Buffy and Dawn give Xander a nudge in the right direction.

Xander exhaled heavily as he closed the bedroom door behind him. On top of everything else that had happened tonight, it was just too much. His head was pounding, and more than anything else, he just wanted to fall into bed, but he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep, not like this.

Detouring via the bathroom for aspirin, he made his way down the hall to Buffy's room. He knocked once and was slightly surprised to hear someone call 'come in'. He hadn't really expected her to be up yet, although he hadn't quite decided if he wanted to wake her up or just sit on her couch and wait. Shrugging, he opened the door and stepped into the small sitting room. He was even more surprised to see Buffy and Dawn sitting together on the couch drinking coffee and chatting quietly. They looked up as he came in, getting to their feet immediately as they took in his worn expression.

He glanced down and attempted a smile. 'Hey, guys,

what's up?'

'Xander! We've been worried sick about you!' Dawn exclaimed. 'Marissa called us a couple of hours ago, frantic that she hadn't heard from you since one o'clock.'

Xander groaned. 'Oh guys, I'm so sorry. I was up on the roof. There's nothing wrong. I guess I just got a little... caught up. Marissa is never going to forgive me.'

Buffy moved over quietly and placed a hand on his arm. 'Hey, don't worry about it,' she said soothingly, 'we found you up there. It looked like you were having some sort of a vision. Your eyes were white, and we couldn't get you to respond to us, but I couldn't feel that anything was threatening, and neither could Dawn. We've been checking up on you every half-hour or so, although we were going to call Willow if it went on for too much longer. We let Marissa know what was going on.' She paused for a moment, glancing over to her sister. 'We wondered, what with how you were sitting, if Spike

was there with you.'

It was just way too much. Visions were bad enough on a normal day, but having to see Spike's past had been worse than anything he had ever had to do before. Not because it was particularly gruesome, and not because he'd had to feel everything that the victims had. But he'd had to watch this thing that looked so much like his friend, and yet felt nothing like the man he knew, do all these terrible things, and know that this was the past Spike had to live with. Even though he wasn't responsible for the actions of the demon, a part of him was there, the same part that had been able to surface when a tiny metal implant effectively caged his demon, that had shared hot chocolate with Joyce, that had endured torture at the hands of a God to save Dawn. As much blood as Xander himself had on his hands, he couldn't even begin to comprehend the pain the other man had to be feeling, had felt for the past sixteen years, the strength it must have taken to finally decide to face up to it. Honestly, Xander didn't know if he could have done the same, were their positions reversed. He felt tears pricking the

back of his eyes and looked down at the floor. He had no idea if anything he had done tonight had helped, but honestly believed what he'd said, that Spike had been redeemed.

He gave a hollow kind of laugh, running one hand through his hair. 'Yeah, Spike. Buffy...' He looked up finally, and whatever she saw in his eyes, he suddenly found himself whisked over to the couch and wrapped in strong, tiny arms. 'No, no,' he protested half-heartedly, 'I'm cool, really. Just doing what needed to be done.'

'Xander, what happened?' she asked quietly.

And so he told them. Not the details. They were not his secrets to reveal, but the gist of the thing, and how much it had hurt him to know that Spike was in so much pain.

Dawn sat down on the end on the couch and started rubbing gentle circles over his back. 'That must have been awful. Are you alright?'

He glanced over, surprised at the question. He'd been so wrapped up in everything that had happened, he'd hardly given a thought to himself. 'Sure. I'm a bit tired, I guess. It was... hard.' Which was possibly the understatement of the decade. 'To see what the demon did with his body, from his point and from the people who were killed, but I'll be alright. I kind of think I was almost beside the point. This was about Spike. Me... I'm just the messenger.'

'And what about Spike?' Dawn continued seriously. 'Is he ok?'

Xander sighed, shaking his head. 'I just don't know Dawn. I think so. I want to believe that it helped. I guess we'll have to wait and see. He's actually sleeping now, or whatever the equivalent is. He's never done that before. He told me he doesn't usually sleep, so whatever he went through must have been really draining. He's been keeping this inside for so long... And I know he deserves to find some peace. I wish there was more I could do.'

Buffy smiled at him fondly. 'Hey, I know you, Xan. You'll do everything in your power and then some. He couldn't ask for a better person, a better friend, to help him.'

He leant into her a little and gave her a tired smile. 'Thanks, Buff.'

She smiled at him, before asking hesitantly, 'Xander, don't take this the wrong way, but... what's going on between the two of you?'

'What do you mean?'

She glanced nervously at her sister, before turning back resolutely. 'Well, you're friends, right?'

'Well, yeah, sure. I mean, he's not nearly as irritating as he used to be, and we seem to have a few things in common. I like having him around.'

She looked at him searchingly, and he knew trying to keep anything from her was an exercise in futility. 'Is that all it is?'

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. 'Ok, I can admit I seem to like him a little more than I should.'

'Should?' Buffy narrowed her eyes and shook her head, not understanding.

He glanced at her in confusion. 'Well, yeah. Buffy, this is Spike. You know, Spike who hated me for a good six years before getting dead. I mean, I know things are different now, but I haven't changed that much, and it's not like he could just forget all of that.'

She was looking at him incredulously, and he squirmed a little in his seat. He was sure it all made perfect sense. She shook her head once, glancing over at Dawn, who was looking amused. 'Xander... I can't believe you just said that,' she said, half to herself. Before he could start to get really annoyed, she pinned him with a glare. 'Ok, I guess you can be forgiven for thinking that Spike hated you.' Her pursed lips told another story, but she continued.

'So I'm telling you that he didn't. It might have started out that way, but it seems to me, once he understood you were both fighting for the same thing, he pretty much gave up on that. Besides, knowing Spike, putting all that effort into hating you probably just seemed like too much work. You also might remember, he not only agreed to live with you after we got him out of the school basement, but he didn't kill you on one of his evil sprees. Not to mention the fact he helped to save you from demon-date lady and stopped Caleb from poking out your other eye. You don't do that for people that you hate.' She continued to glare at him while he digested this.

Dawn laughed and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'You know she's right, Xander. Think about it. When did you stop hating Spike? And no, you haven't changed much, personality-wise, but I think we've just established that that's probably part of the appeal. I always thought you two could be friends, given a little peace and quiet. And let's face it, oh 'normal one', the visions have given you a whole new perspective on the demon-world. Is it so hard

to believe that Spike might have learned to like a thing or two about you in the last fifteen years of watching all of us?'

Fair enough, he could... accept that. It was true enough that he hadn't hated Spike for a long time. Sure, he hadn't exactly liked him, but he had accepted him, respected him even. He couldn't quite wrap his head around why Spike might have done the same for him, but if Buffy and Dawn agreed it was true, then he would take them at their word. 'What about you, then, Buffy? Spike was in love with you. I do know that. I could see it.'

He saw the pain wash over her face and cursed himself. 'Buff, I'm sorry...'

She gave him a wry smile, shaking her head. 'No, it's ok. I wish... I wish I could talk to him about this myself,' she said quietly. 'But the fact is, I'm not in love with him. I never really was. I could have loved him... I did, in the end, like I do you and Willow. I wish... I wish that had been enough. You said was. Is he... does he still...?' She trailed off, unwilling to end

that sentence.

Xander picked up both her hands, stroking them gently as he tried to figure out how to answer this. In all honesty, he'd been expecting the question for months, had been trying to figure out the answer for almost as long. 'Buffy, he does love you. You should have seen the way he looked at you that first morning, when you told him you'd missed him. But I don't know... I don't think...' He didn't think Spike was still in love with her, but he really wasn't sure enough to say it, to make it real, because what if he was wrong?

She squeezed his hands. 'Sorry, I shouldn't have asked. Not an easy conversation to have with a third party translating, I guess.'

She looked so discouraged that before he knew it he was speaking. 'Do you want me to ask him?'

She didn't even hesitate as she shook her head, giving him a smile. 'No, it's ok. What would it change, anyway?' She shook her head resolutely,

then, her smile becoming mischievous. 'Ok, I grant you that Spike being in love with me still might just make it a little harder for you two to get together, but that's a big if at the moment. I can't see that anything else is standing in your way. I know I wouldn't mind. Spike deserves a little happiness, and God knows so do you. And we've both seen how much more relaxed you've been recently. Right, Dawnie?'

Dawn nodded decisively. 'Absolutely. He's been good for you, and from what you've told us, you've been good for him, too.'

Xander looked between the two enthusiastic faces dazedly. He couldn't believe they'd gone from Spike being in love with Buffy to both of them trying to set him up with said ex-vampire in such a short space of time. He hadn't really even thought that far ahead. Sure he had felt something when he kissed him, both times, and he was a good companion, fun to have around, but a relationship? 'Guys, he's not even real,' he tried to protest.

Buffy frowned, while Dawn waved her hand dismissively, answering, 'Of course he is. Weren't you paying any attention when Willow explained all that?'

'But he hasn't said anything, or done anything...' He bit down on the urge to tell them about the kiss, tonight and the one a couple of months ago. It would only encourage them, and he was certain he didn't want that. Fairly certain anyway. He sighed to himself, admitting that he wasn't actually certain at all any more. 'I just... I don't know. I wouldn't want to risk it. I'm good with what we've got now, and until he says otherwise I reckon Spike is too. I've only been able to see him for the last few months, and he's only just tonight started talking about his past. It's too much right now. I don't think it'd be all that good for him, for either of us, to try to start anything yet.'

Buffy sighed in disappointment, but seemed to give in with good grace. 'Fair enough, I get where you're coming from. Just... don't rule it out completely, and don't wait too long just 'cause you're afraid you

might get hurt, like I almost did with Angel. Spike's a good person, and if he makes you happy, nothing else matters.' She grinned suddenly, 'You of all people should know that.'

'Hey! No fair bringing up my sordid past.' She was right, though. He did have a way of forgetting about the problems if a person made him happy. He and Cordelia had been snubbed by most of their friends, hell he'd been snubbed by Cordelia even while they were dating. The love of his life had been a former vengeance demon, with a track record that not even Spike could hope to compete with. But he'd loved them, so it didn't matter what the rest of the world thought. He didn't love Spike, not like that at least, but he was no longer sure that he couldn't, and if that was the case, then Buffy was right, nothing else did matter. He grimaced, dropping the hand he was holding to run his hands over his face. 'You are right, though, I guess. I'll think about it.'

~*~*~*~*~

He didn't see as much of Spike over the next couple of weeks, understanding that the man would need some time to come to grips with everything that had happened that night. He was slightly disturbed to notice just how much he missed his company.

Even when he was around, Xander couldn't bring himself to raise the issue of their 'relationship', whatever that meant at the moment. Still, he had promised, so he watched, and he thought about it. And now that he was actively paying attention, he couldn't help but feel that Dawn was right. They could have been friends, if circumstances had thrown them together a little differently twenty years ago. Maybe not immediately, he had, after all, been very young, but they had more in common than he would ever have wanted to admit.

Fifteen years was a long time, by his standards at least, but he hadn't spent all this time as a seer without learning a thing or two about memory. He found himself sinking into the meditation he usually only used to recall past visions, and instead pulling

up memories of his own past, of Spike. He needed to know that this wasn't just a knee-jerk reaction to suddenly having the man back, being the only one able to see him, and, of course, his own much discussed inclination towards those of the demon or ex-demon variety.

He couldn't deny that Spike had been an asshole, but he could also see now what being chipped must have done to the vampire. If he himself had been a little less indignant about the whole kidnapping/trying to kill them thing, a little less wrapped up in Anya, if Spike had been slightly less angry, resentful and abrasive, perhaps he could have been more sympathetic, less ready to hurt the vampire in any way he could. On the other hand, back then he had no idea how it felt to lose someone you'd dedicated your life to, to lose everything you thought made you who you were, trapped inside a body you could no longer even control. His problems paled in comparison to Spike's, he could admit that now, though it hadn't felt like it at the time. Even if he had wanted to offer his sympathy to the vampire, it would have

been hollow, and Spike would have been more than justified in dismissing it and him.

Even if his break-up with Anya had given them something in common, it was too late. Spike had hurt Buffy so much, and if he felt a twinge of sympathy for the way she had treated him back, it had been easy enough to dismiss, and go back to the dislike that had been almost second nature before Glory.

When Spike had slept with Anya, he had raged at him, instead of looking towards himself, once again finding it easier to blame the evil vampire than the people he knew he loved. It appalled him now to realize just how often he had refused to see the guilt within himself or his family, how quick he was to make excuses for them, and how adamant he was about never forgiving Spike, whether he was guilty or not.

The whole soul bit had seriously screwed with his world, melting the last vestiges of Black and White that he had been clinging on to, and forcing him to

see all the shades of gray. Not that he'd ever been naïve enough to believe that there was only good and bad in the world, with nothing in between, but he had clung to the idea that there were truly good people like Buffy who destroyed all the things that were evil in the world. Sure, there were things out there that were only slightly evil, or a little less than good, but they were beside the point.

Of course, it had been more than just the soul. It might have started with Anya, maybe even with Oz, and with Willow trying to destroy the world, but when the one man he knew, knew, was evil, was still a demon, despite everything he had done, could feel enough remorse, enough love, to sacrifice everything he was, any peace he could ever have, righteousness had just kind of faded away. He had finally admitted to himself that there was no black and white, no perfect hero and no ultimate evil to vanquish. Which had, of course, been the final irony. Because he finally understood that it wasn't about killing the bad guy, it was about protecting the people you loved and the people who couldn't protect themselves. He couldn't hate Spike, any

more than he could hate Willow or Anya or Buffy. He didn't have the right, and Spike didn't deserve it.

If they hadn't become friends then, it was only because once again circumstances intervened. For some reason it made him feel better about what they had now to know that it wasn't just the new and improved Spike he liked, it was all of him.

~*~*~*~*~

Christmas eve, the gang were sprawled in the library, drinking hot chocolate and passing the occasional comment, but mostly just relaxing, being together. The few slayers and watchers in training who hadn't gone home for the holidays had gone to their rooms, probably not to get any sleep, but that was something none of them were really worried about. Buffy was curled up on one of the couches with Angel, lazy smiles playing over both their faces as they occasionally gazed into each others eyes. Wesley and Dawn were sitting over at the table, arguing good-naturedly about the origins of the

Santa Clause myth, while Gunn and Cordelia sprawled on the rug in front of the fireplace, making occasional loud pointed comments about working on Christmas eve. Willow and Fred were also sitting at the table, hunched over a laptop and various other technological-type implements whose function generally had Xander completely mystified, and giggling in a way that he was sure could have nothing to do with science. Although maybe with biology, given the lingering looks they periodically exchanged. Giles was simply sitting by himself in the large armchair beside the couch where he and Spike were lounging, watching the people in the room, a content smile on his face. Xander understood the look, had a feeling his own mirrored it. The peace in the room was almost palpable, and he felt a great surge of affection for these people, his family.

He glanced over and caught the older man's eye, his smile widening into a grin. He leaned over the armrest to whisper theatrically, 'Spike says he senses sparks between those two,' he glanced over to where Wesley and Dawn were ignoring them at the table. His eyes twinkled. 'What do you think?'

Wesley could be a tough bastard these days, but whenever he was around Dawn Xander could almost see the geeky Watcher he had first known rising to the surface.

Giles regarded him for a moment too long, and Xander was just about to say something else, when he winked suddenly, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. 'I should certainly hope so,' he said, sounding slightly aggrieved, 'I spent long enough planting the suggestion.'

Xander's eyes widened, and he had to force himself not to laugh out loud. 'You go, G-man. Didn't know you had it in you.' Xander grinned, and Giles continued to look pleased with himself.

He turned back to Spike, who was propped up against the other end of the couch, his unshod feet in Xander's lap. The blond was looking at him knowingly, a smile playing around the edges of his mouth. He could see that the peace in the room was wrapping itself around the man just as effectively as the rest of them. He had never seen

Spike so honestly relaxed, happy. It was beautiful. He felt an affectionate smile inching up the corners of his own mouth.

Spike found himself caught once again. He couldn't help the wry thought that those eyes would be the death of him. He didn't think he'd ever been looked at like that; like falling into pure, untainted warmth. He knew he should be moving, tensing, saying something, anything, but the atmosphere and that smile were combining to make movement impossible, but unnecessary, so it didn't really matter. When Xander's hand came up to take his own where it was resting on the back of the couch, he felt the little sparks of electricity, and tightened his fingers automatically, never once taking his eyes off Xander's face. It was nothing new, they touched all the time, but this time it felt different, more... significant. Xander blinked and Spike knew he felt it too.

With a burst of clarity, he realized he wanted more than just affection. He wanted all of it, the mind, the heart, the body and the soul. He would never

have imagined himself looking twice at Xander Harris, but it would seem forced intimacy had its advantages, because it had required him to keep looking, finding new layers, until he now couldn't imagine wanting to look at anything, or anyone, else.

And then he wanted to move, needed to move, needed to kiss that smile, touch it, claim it, take it into himself, because what did he ever do to deserve it, and who was to say it would still be there tomorrow? Xander hadn't moved, but neither had the smile, and his thumb was making small circles against Spike's skin, and Spike was leaning forward, through the impossibly thick air, slowly, too slowly...

Because Xander was tensing, the smile falling from his face, his eyes becoming distant, then a brief, wry twitch of his lips as they filmed over white.

Part Three C

In which Willow has a surprise for Christmas and the gang gets to see Spike

Spike knew a brief moment of panic as he relaxed back into the chair. What the hell did he think he was doing? Not only had they never talked about this, which Spike took to be an exceptionally bad sign, given they had actually kissed twice already, but they were also in a room full of people, most of whom couldn't even see him.

It wasn't like they could have any sort of relationship anyway. No matter how happy Xander made him feel, how much he was prepared to help, the peace that he had already brought, he deserved more than a man he could never even introduce to his friends. He had no idea how long he would even be around. Moving on, finding peace and happiness had never really seemed like an option, he had

always kind of assumed he would be around forever.

It was the only thing that scared him about this whole situation. Would he have to leave? Would finding peace come at the cost of losing his family, the people he had only just found again? This was supposed to be his reward. Surely they wouldn't do that to him. But that was the rub, wasn't it? From what he knew, that was exactly the sort of thing the Powers would do. They had never cared about him before, had never done anything, as far as he knew, that didn't end up causing someone pain, somewhere down the line. Why should he think this time would be any different? The problem was, he didn't know that it really made any difference. The promise of peace, of happiness, no matter how little of it he might end up having, was just not something he had the strength to refuse. He was so tired, of the pain, the screaming, the hate, tired of being used.

While he would love to stay here for as long as possible, he wouldn't make himself miserable on

the off-chance that finding some happiness with Xander would send him away. If he were only going to get a moment of perfect happiness, then he would take it. And if, as he hoped, he did get to stay for as long as he wished, no matter when he found his peace, he would thank the Powers then.

The problem, of course, was finding out how Xander felt about him. Preferably without having to ask, he thought with a mental grimace. He thought he could probably be happy to merely be the man's friend but he couldn't deny that he did want more than that. If the Powers had redeemed him, Xander had certainly saved him and he could have loved him for that alone. But he had also proved himself a true friend, and that was a relationship that Spike had never before experienced. It saddened him slightly to think that his pride, Xander's anger, and too many uncontrollable circumstances had robbed him of this those last few years of his life. He had seen it, of course; Xander was self-sacrificing, loyal to a fault and totally committed to his friends, but he had never been one of them.

Now, they had more in common than Spike would ever have believed possible. The darkness in Xander called to him, the pain in his eyes a mirror to his own. The man had seen more suffering than any of them, knew the evil as well as he did, who had lived it, saw the world in as many shades of gray and still fought to save as much of the good as he was able. The fact that he was still able to contain so much light, so much hope and joy, took his breath away. Xander's humor might be self-deprecating, even a little black, but it was real. The world had beaten him down but it had never defeated him and he had never given up on it. It was partly why he had fallen in love with Buffy. She had embodied the same duality of light and dark, and it grieved him to think that she had almost lost herself to that darkness because of him. It was an indication just how strong Xander was that he had not done the same.

He didn't know exactly what it would take to make him happy but he knew in his soul that it would involve Xander. He did know that he wanted to be loved. He wanted to experience love that wasn't tarnished by pain, or hate or disinterest. And he

wanted passion, but without the violence that had characterized every one of his past relationships. For him, love had always meant pain and he had accepted that, craved it even, unable to stop himself no matter how many times his heart was ripped apart. And in a way that was okay. He had been a vampire, thrived on the suffering of others, as well as his own.

But he wasn't anymore. He wasn't human again, but in a very real way, he was closer to the man he had once been than the vampire he had become. God knew, even human relationships weren't always happy but he knew that they could be and he knew that, like himself, Xander had witnessed too much pain, known too much suffering to want that in a relationship. If there was anyone on earth who wouldn't lie to him, or deliberately hurt him, but throw his heart into making him happy, it was Xander. He had proven that already.

Every day he could feel himself falling a little more for this man. And for the first time it was easy, purely uncomplicated. He was content to just feel.

There was no one to answer to, nothing to fear. He didn't even feel a burning desire to make Xander love him back. Xander was the only person in his world, literally, but even if that changed tomorrow, it was too late. Xander had opened himself up and Spike had seen into him; seen a soul almost as beaten and broken as his own, yet still standing, still willing to befriend a once-hated enemy, to heal him, to give him hope.

Which was why he was prepared to wait for as long as he had to. Xander had already shown him love as he had never known it, the same unswerving devotion and concern he showed his friends, his family. So as much as he wanted passion, wanted to lose himself in the other man, his eyes, his lips, his body, what he had now was enough. Even if Xander never came to think of him that way, it would be enough.

None of which meant he would give up. He would give him space, but he knew he hadn't imagined the look in Xander's eyes tonight, or up on the roof all those weeks ago. Not passion, but maybe just not

yet. There was no hurry. He would do this right. This was his second chance, his last chance, and he would not bollix it up. Not this time.

Everyone was looking their way curiously as Xander came out his vision, his free hand going to his forehead to massage his temples for a moment.

"You ok, Xander?" Cordelia asked with an understanding smile.

'Yeah, sure, the throbbing pain just keeps you on your toes, right?' he shrugged philosophically. They shared a meaningful glance, before he turned to Willow and Fred at the laptop. 'You wanna send that thing over here, Wills? This shouldn't take long.' Willow positively bounced out of her chair, sending him a blindingly cheerful grin. He chuckled at her as she bounded across the room. 'You're such a kid,' he said affectionately as he started typing.

She batted him on the back of the head, but didn't stop smiling. 'Well, it's Christmas! A time for family and giving, and coming together, and peace and

happiness and... twinkly lights and decorations and... and eggnog and presents!' she enthused.

'And Christmas carols,' Wesley added seriously, his eyes sparkling.

'Yes!' she exclaimed. 'Oh!' Spike wondered that she wasn't jumping up and down clapping her hands. 'We can get Giles and Spike to sing for us!'

Buffy eyed her best friend with amusement. 'Well, we could if Spike wasn't invisible. But I'm sure Xander would appreciate it.'

Oddly enough, this didn't seem to faze the witch. 'Oh, right, well, sure,' she grinned.

Spike regarded her warily. What was she up to? And more importantly, what did it have to do with him? Apparently he wasn't the only one wondering. 'What are you up to, Willow?' Dawn asked sternly, her eyes laughing.

'Me?' Her eyes went wide. 'Nothing. Nothing at all. I

mean, it's a surprise. Oooh, it's so exciting!' Spike rolled his eyes fondly. She really was jumping up and down now.

'A surprise, huh? Who's it for?' They were all paying attention now, Willow's enthusiasm becoming infectious.

'Well, it's for everyone, kind of. Except maybe Gunn and Fred.' She frowned a little. 'And Wes.' Her face cleared. 'But they can enjoy it too. Mostly it's for Spike. And that's as much as I'm saying 'till Christmas.' Her eyes twinkled at the chorus of groans. Spike was starting to get worried. She wasn't going to put a spell on him, was she? He didn't care how powerful she'd become; this was still Willow they were talking about.

'Spike, huh?' Buffy commented. 'Well, I wouldn't worry too much, Spike. Willow's gotten much better at spells, haven't you Wills? So, is it a new one? Something experimental, maybe?' Buffy was grinning wickedly.

'Oh, thanks heaps, Slayer. I'll just stand behind you, shall I? See what it does to you first,' he muttered mutinously, still glancing suspiciously at the witch. He jumped a little when Xander snorted under his breath, glancing up to give him a sympathetic grin.

The man quickly scanned the page, nodded to himself, punched a few more keys, and placed the laptop on the floor. Shoving Spike's feet off his lap, he stood, stretching for a moment before walking around the couch to stand in front of Willow, a serious expression on his face. The bouncing stilled almost at once. 'Xander, what's wrong? Was it the vision? Oh, god, is everything all right?'

Xander placed his arms around her waist and pulled her close, leaning back so he could look her in the eye. 'Relax, Wills, everything is fine,' he said calmly. 'But, I have something to tell you.' He sounded serious. What then, was prompting the renewed bouncing and the return of the shit-eating grin? Everyone else was looking concerned as well. He glanced around again. No, they weren't. Buffy and Giles were both completely relaxed, Buffy obviously

trying to suppress a smile. After a moment of confusion he realized what must be going on. Their connection, the one that let them speak mind-to-mind, to know if the other was in danger. Willow had to be broadcasting excitement like a kid at Disneyland, and Xander was obviously not panicking, either. Xander swept the little witch into a hug, leaning down to whisper in her ear, 'Merry Christmas.' He pulled back and tapped his watch, a huge grin spreading over his face. 'It has now officially been Christmas for three and a half minutes. You've got no excuses for keeping us in suspense. Spill,' he told her sternly.

She rolled her eyes, but wasn't doing a very good impression of reluctance. 'Fine, if you insist. Gather 'round, I'll be back in a sec.'

She sped from the room as everyone moved to sit around the fireplace, debating exactly what she had in store for them. Moments later, Willow was back, carrying a small box that, to Spike's eyes, was pulsing with a bright, white light.

Xander apparently noticed as well. 'Uh, Wills, your box is glowing.'

'Really?' She peered at it curiously. 'Well, I guess that makes sense. It's got a spirit guarding it and, more importantly, the contents.' She grinned, obviously bursting with anticipation. She glanced over at Xander, and he directed his gaze to where Spike was sitting on the couch. Following suit, Willow looked at him almost directly. 'Now, Spike, when I open this, I want you to pick up what's inside.'

Spike narrowed his eyes, confused. 'I thought Spike couldn't touch anything,' Angel said with a frown.

'He should be able to, in this case. I guess we'll see in a moment. Ready?' Not waiting for an answer, she opened the box to reveal a ring, made of what looked like sliver, with a large black stone in the center. The surprising thing, however, was that it looked completely solid. Most of the time objects were transparent, emanating a kind of muted glow that he could manipulate, treat as solid. This thing

looked as real as Xander when he was phased. Wonderingly, he reached out and picked up the ring, cradling it in the palm of his hand. He looked up at several startled gasps.

'What?' He looked over at Xander, who shrugged.

'Yeah, what?' He looked around at the others.

Willow chuckled, back to grinning and bouncing. 'It worked! Oh, this is so cool! Don't worry, Spike, it looks like the ring is floating, to the rest of us. Now!' she exclaimed, 'I need you to hold it in the palm of your hand while I bind it to you.'

'Bind it to him?' Xander said anxiously. 'Willow, what exactly is this thing for? It's not dangerous is it?'

'Oh, no,' she answered quickly. 'It's not even permanent. I promise there's nothing to worry about. I know what I'm doing. I've been working on this for months, and there is nothing I'm about to do that can't be undone, if that's what Spike wants.'

Now, when I said I want to bind it to him, I just mean I want to make it so no one else can use it. That's all. Is that ok, Spike? We don't have to do this if you don't want to.' She sounded so earnest, but there was a hint of real disappointment under there, such that Spike didn't have the heart to refuse her. Besides, he had to admit that he was intrigued, and if Willow gave her word that nothing was going to be permanent anyway, he figured he could take the chance.

Curling his fingers around the ring resting on his palm, he nodded to Xander, who flashed him a smile. 'He's good to go, Wills,' he reported.

'Great!' She clapped her hands, grinning again. 'Everyone should probably stand back. Spike, you wanna come stand over here?' She gestured to the clear space behind the couches, beside the table. Grasping the ring more tightly, he did as instructed, facing Willow warily. She smiled at him, in his general direction, anyway, as she stood facing him. 'Ok, for the first part of the spell, I need you to hold the ring in the palm of your hand. Don't clench your

fingers over it or anything. When I tell you, I want you to put it on. You can test it out now to see where it fits. Give me a sec, and then we'll start. I've already done most of the hard work, so the whole thing shouldn't take long.' He quickly tried the ring on, finding it fit best on the middle finger of his left hand. As he did so, he watched Willow center and ground herself, all the nervous energy of a couple of minutes ago visibly leaking away. He could feel the air start to thrum around her as she stood up straighter, lifted her head, shedding the excited little girl she usually wore like a skin. This was the Witch, confident, and powerful as hell.

A non-existent breeze ruffled Willow's hair slightly as she stood there, but Spike relaxed slightly as she opened her eyes. They were hers. Green; not white, which meant this wasn't an exceptionally powerful spell, and not black, which meant she was in complete control.

'Ready?' she asked distantly. Taking a deep breath, he placed the ring on his open palm and, never taking his eyes off her, nodded.

Xander had been watching the same transformation over by the fireplace, although most of his thoughts were with Spike. The man looked nervous as hell, which Xander supposed he could understand. But he could also feel that Willow was completely sure of herself. And if she was that confident, he knew everything would be all right. Still, he wished he could reassure Spike of that.

When Spike nodded in answer to Willow's question, he used their bond to send his response to her, not wanting to chance interrupting the ritual.

She lifted one hand to hover over the ring, and started muttering to herself quietly. He couldn't understand exactly what she was saying, although he could feel the power swelling in the room, could see Willow become brighter as she drew that power into herself. The ring started to pulse with a corresponding radiance that, as he watched, resolved itself into strangely chaotic lines and whorls. The silver of the ring moved like quicksilver, the golden lines forming and reforming as the black

stone lightened through gray until it, too, pulsed with a brilliant white light.

It was only then that Willow issued the terse command for Spike to place the ring on his finger. With the barest hesitation, he complied.

Xander was halfway across the room when Spike suddenly cried out in pain. There was blood dripping from the finger Spike had placed the ring on. But with the power eddying around the two of them, he couldn't get close. He would have stopped Willow, gone into her mind if he'd had to if, at that moment, Spike hadn't whipped his head around and warned him away with a fierce look. He stopped in confusion, knowing he had to trust them, aching to run in there and stop whatever was hurting his friend. But Spike was looking at Willow, his clenched fist held out in front of him like an offering, and in the back of his mind, Xander noticed that she was looking at Spike. Directly.

Willow's hair was flying now in a breeze that he still couldn't feel, her skirt snapping around her ankles,

Spike's black shirt billowing a little around his chest. She spoke in a quiet voice that echoed around the room, 'It is bound. Shall I activate it?'

Spike's eyes never left Willow's. 'Yes.' Before Xander could even think about relaying this, Willow smiled briefly, distantly and began the next part of her spell. She spoke in ancient Greek, which Xander knew passably well, calling on the primordial goddess Gaea, mediator between the higher and lower worlds, between light and darkness, life and death, source of the physical universe, present in all reality. Barely pausing for breath, she switched to Latin, her voice demanding now, rather than supplicating as she appealed to Janus, god of doorways, thresholds.

All the while the ring was becoming brighter and brighter, the patterns swirling frantically around the metal of the ring then, with the call to Gaea, bleeding over onto Spike's skin, tracing lines over his arms, his chest, until his entire body was covered. He was breathing heavily, his mouth open, his eyes wide, but his body rock steady as he gazed

at the witch. Then, as Willow shouted for Janus to open the doorway, the lines of light disappeared inside Spike, before both he and the ring pulsed with a radiance so bright that Xander had to slam his eyes shut.

He immediately opened them to slits but the light was already fading and both Spike and Willow were slumped to their knees, Spike looking at his still-glowing form curiously, Willow back to grinning like a maniac.

A faint whimper from behind him caused him to turn. Everyone looked stunned. Buffy was clutching at Angel, her eyes wide and shining. Angel, while looking equally astonished, was actually starting to smile. Giles had taken off his glasses and was furiously polishing them. Wes and Gunn had their mouths hanging open, while Cordelia had clamped a hand over her own. Fred was grinning, her eyes dancing, looking more excited than amazed. However, it was Dawn he had heard. She had fallen to her knees on the carpet, her hands clenched to her mouth, her eyes filling with tears.

What had provoked this reaction, he thought? As far as he could tell, the only thing that Willow had managed to do was make Spike glow a little. It was very pretty, but it was hardly earth shattering.

Then his head snapped around as it finally occurred to him what they were all looking at. They were looking at Spike. Invisible Spike. Every one of them had their eyes directly trained on him.

Half afraid to test his theory, he focused his eyes on the other man, the man only he could see, and phased out.

Spike looked up from where he was kneeling on the floor, his blue eyes vibrant, his pale skin luminescent. He stood gracefully and smiled, a warm, delighted smile. 'Hello, all,' he said cheerfully. 'Good to see me again, is it?'

His words broke the spell that had everyone dumbfounded, and Dawn flung herself to her feet and across the room, followed closely by Buffy,

Angel and Giles. She stopped only long enough to glance at Willow, who nodded once and grinned, before throwing herself at Spike. When she didn't fall through him, and he didn't disappear, she buried her head in his chest, her arms going around his waist, her body wracked with sobs.

Spike seemed slightly taken aback, but his arms wound themselves around her, one hand rubbing circles on her back while the other gently stroked her hair. 'S'okay, Dawn, it's okay. Come on, it's only me, Little Bit,' he murmured.

She pulled back with a strangled laugh. 'Spike, oh my god, Spike.' Tears continued to stream forgotten down her face but now she was smiling, grinning, and she ran a wondering hand over his face before pulling him back into a powerful hug.

This time he just laughed. 'Take that as a yes, shall I?' Still, Xander noticed with a smile of his own that Spike wasn't rushing to push Dawn away. His hands kept moving over her back, and he would swear that his eyes seemed brighter than usual.

He smirked a little as Spike raised his head, his gaze going unerringly to where Xander was standing by the table. Spike ducked his head, giving a wry smile of his own. But Xander's expression gentled as he took in the wonder on Spike's face. Then his heart sped up as those beautiful blue eyes seemed to focus, holding him motionless as they filled with not just warmth, but heat. He thought he might have shivered, as that contemplative, expectant gaze lingered on him. Mentally berating himself that this was neither the time nor the place, Xander deliberately forced his expression back to a grin and gestured with his eyes towards Buffy, who was practically vibrating where she was standing next to Angel. With one last glance that seemed to promise more than Xander was really comfortable thinking about, Spike turned back to Dawn. He dropped a kiss on her head before gently easing her out of his arms and turning to Buffy.

Not even glancing at Angel, she stepped forward, smiling softly. 'Buffy...' Spike uttered her name softly, her eyes tearing up again as for the first time

in fifteen years she heard it, and smiled. He tentatively reached out his free hand to her face. Xander could see the uncertainty on his face, and smiled as Spike glanced his way briefly. Taking a deep breath, the other man reached out and gently traced his fingers over the soft line of her jaw. She closed her eyes, as one tear sloped over her cheek, and turned her head into the caress, her whole body relaxing and a smile breaking out on her face. Spike was staring at his hand as he whispered again, 'Buffy.' He barely had time to blink before she had him in an embrace that would have crushed the air out of a lesser man. Xander snorted as she picked Spike up and whirled him around, laughing delightedly, as he smiled and protested. 'Careful Slayer, don't know how fragile this new body of mine is, do we?'

'Sorry,' she grinned. 'Although I still owe you for that story; don't think I haven't remembered.'

He smirked back. 'All for a good cause, though, wasn't it? I wouldn't be here today otherwise.'

Angel grinned and placed a large hand on Buffy's shoulder. 'Is this all your fault then, love?' he asked sternly. His smile faded as he ran a measuring gaze over the recently reappeared man before him. Spike stilled immediately under the scrutiny, then started to fidget, and finally Xander could see the defensive shields going up, just as Angel stepped around Buffy and drew Spike into a strong hug of his own. Spike struggled for a moment but, when it became clear that Angel wasn't letting him go, he rolled his eyes and patted the other man on the back. Xander could barely hear the muttered 'Poofter' that belied the pleasure in the man's eyes.

Angel stepped away after a moment. 'You not going to pick me up too, then, mate?' Spike asked innocently.

'Not even if you'd have me,' Angel snarked back, looking at Spike knowingly. Xander was confused at the look Spike sent his way but didn't dwell on it. 'You look good, Spike,' he said softly. Then he cocked his head to one side thoughtfully, gazing at Spike steadily. 'William.'

Spike smiled sadly and shook his head. 'More than you can imagine,' he murmured. 'But stick with Spike.' He smirked wryly, the sorrow obvious in his eyes. 'Think of it as a testament.' They shared a look of pained understanding. Angel placed a hand on Spike's shoulder.

'You were always William to me.' Spike hesitated a moment before smiling and nodding.

He shook off the serious mood with a little effort and turned to Giles, who had been waiting patiently with Willow. 'Allo, Rupert. Bet you didn't think you'd be seeing me again,' he smirked, holding out a hand. Giles took it without hesitation, smirking back.

'Nothing surprises me anymore, Spike. Besides,' he said with a grin, 'you always were notoriously difficult to get rid of. By the way, I do apologize for trying to kill you. Upon reflection, I'm rather glad I failed, even if it did seem like a good idea at the time.'

'You're just saying that 'cause I saved the world.'
Spike softened his words with a grin.

Giles was completely unconcerned. 'Well, yes.
Seems like a fairly good reason if you ask me.'

Spike shook his head and chuckled, turning to
glance at Xander. 'You were right mate, they are all
just using us, aren't they?'

Xander grinned. 'They'll tell you it's 'cause they love
you, but don't you believe it. It gets so much more
fun when they then try to prove it's 'cause they love
you.'

'Xander!' Dawn exclaimed, slapping him on the arm
and grinning. 'Spike knows we love him, don't you
Spike?'

Spike put on a worried expression. 'I don't know,
Bit. Haven't even got a kiss yet. What's a man
supposed to think?'

Xander saw the glance that Buffy exchanged with Giles, feeling her amusement thrum through their bond as she sent him a mental picture. He barely managed to contain a snort before she spoke up, 'Well, that's easy enough to fix,' she said blithely. Giles rarely went along with these things, but in an atypical moment of humor and compliance he stepped forward and kissed Spike soundly on the lips. Xander was amused to notice that, although Spike was clearing his throat and turning a shade of red that he would have thought impossible for someone without real blood, Giles was completely composed. He really was unflusterable these days. Like one of those Zen masters.

Before Spike could gather his thoughts to protest, Willow stepped up and poked him in the ribs, grinning madly. 'That was from all of us,' she said. Then she, too, pulled him into a hug. 'I'm really glad the spell worked,' she whispered.

'Me too, Red,' he smiled into her white hair. He looked up and held out one hand to Buffy, another to Dawn, keeping Willow at his side. Xander thought

the tears that had been threatening might actually fall when they took his hands but Spike's mouth just twisted into the most bittersweet smile Xander had ever seen. 'I never thought I'd get to hold you again,' he whispered to the two of them.

Part Three D

In which we have the aftermath of the spell and Spike has a conversation with Buffy

Xander kept to the background as the reunion moved over to the couches by the fireplace. He had had months with Spike all to himself, and couldn't begrudge any of them this time together. He firmly ignored the little twinge of jealousy that tried to twist in his gut, disgusted with himself for the mere thought. He didn't own Spike, had never sought to

monopolize him. Things might have turned out that way, he might even have been glad that it gave him the excuse to befriend the man, to entertain the notion that there might be more between them.

Now that Spike could exist in the real world again, however, he would not have to rely solely on Xander for companionship. He felt like something was slipping away from him, something he desperately wanted to grasp hold and never let go of. But Spike could have a life now, and Xander refused to be anything but happy for him. He would continue to help the man, wouldn't give up on their friendship, taking whatever he had to offer, but he also wouldn't press him for anything more. Spike could have anyone he wanted now. Buffy, Dawn, Willow even. It was obvious he loved them all, and as much as Xander himself cared for them, he knew he could never compare with them, would always lose in a competition for someone's affections. History had proved that. They were three of the most remarkable women he had ever met and he loved them more than anything. No one had a chance against any of them, no one deserved one,

himself included.

Still, he couldn't help but be saddened by the thought. He had begun to believe that he might be happy with Spike.

He shook his head at his foolishness and smirked wryly. As long as Spike was happy, that was all that mattered. The man deserved his reward and now he wouldn't have to settle for second best. He had promised to help Spike find peace and happiness. That had not, and never would, change.

With a determined nod, Xander moved over to the couch where Spike was holding court, standing behind him, one hand resting on the back of the couch. He smiled down at the beautiful blond head, resisting the impulse to card his fingers through the hair. He wasn't even sure that he should place his hand on the man's shoulder anymore. He always touched Spike, whether they were alone or not, but he wondered if Spike would still want that, need that connection, now that he was solid. It had started out as a way to reassure both of them that

this was real, that they had really found each other, Spike after so many years of being alone, Xander after just as many believing his friend was dead and gone. Somewhere along the way, Xander could acknowledge that it had become more than that for him, and something seemed to break inside his chest at the thought that he could lose it.

But then, as though he had read his mind, Spike suddenly looked up to find Xander standing over him. He smiled, a heart-wrenchingly beautiful smile, that contained almost nothing but joy, and Xander couldn't stop a corresponding smile stretching over his own face. Spike casually claimed the hand by his shoulder, leading Xander around to sit on the armrest beside him.

Xander had to admit he was confused when Spike didn't release his hand but the blond had turned away, falling easily back into his conversation with the others. Xander sighed to himself. Why did this have to get so complicated? It was all Buffy's and Dawn's fault. As much as he may have enjoyed kissing Spike, he would never even have thought

about it's meaning anything more if they hadn't brought it up. He would not have thought about it even then were it not for the fact that Spike had no one else to turn to for companionship. Whatever they said, he knew that the man had never looked twice at him when he was a vampire and he couldn't really see why that would change now that he was a higher being. He had nothing Spike could want; for all that he got visions, he still thought of himself as a fairly unexceptional middle-aged man.

But... earlier, before the spell, Spike had held his hand and he had felt... something, something more, and even as the vision had pulled him away, he'd thought Spike was going to kiss him. Apart from that dazed kiss after their revelatory night on the roof, which he wasn't sure that Spike even remembered, it was the first time he had given any sort of indication he wanted something more. And, for a brief moment, Xander had been sure that he wanted that, too.

But now everything was different. Spike didn't need him anymore. He hoped he would still want to be

his friend but he couldn't expect anything other than that. He'd gotten his hopes up, believed he was helping, and maybe he was, but he had never seen Spike as happy with him as he had been tonight with Buffy and Dawn.

And that wasn't jealousy. He had nothing to be jealous of. Of course they would make him happy. He loved them.

He just didn't know what their contact meant anymore. Spike could touch anyone or anything he wanted. If it was just friendship, that was fine, but some part of his brain kept trying to insist that it was more than that. Every time Spike's fingers moved over his own, he was thrown back to the way Spike had looked at him not half an hour ago, on this very couch, with warmth and maybe even a little heat but, most of all, with promise.

Suddenly uncomfortable, he gently disengaged their hands, smiling reassuringly when Spike absently glanced his way. Turning to Willow, he leaned in close and put on his best smile. 'One hell of a

Christmas surprise, Wills,' he teased quietly.

She grinned back at him, but looked searchingly into his eyes. 'Do you think I did the right thing?' she questioned, biting her lip. 'I mean, is this what Spike would have wanted? It's just, we all wanted to see him again. It was so wonderful to find out he'd been watching over us but... Xan, it's good, isn't it?'

Xander quickly shifted to the arm of the other lounge so he could pull her into a hug. 'It's good, Wills, it's very good,' he whispered to her. 'Truth? I've never seen Spike this happy. That could never be wrong. This is how we should be. Together.'

She gave him a watery smile, tightening her arm about him. 'Thank you, Xan.'

'Love you, Willow.' He smiled gently at her, running one hand over hair that had long since turned permanently white.

They sat together for a while, watching the conversation flow around them. Gunn and Fred had

heard more than a few stories about Spike over the years but had met him for only the first time tonight. Seeing him probably didn't seem quite so strange to them, and they appeared to have taken an instant liking to the man. Wesley had never met Spike in person either, and seemed to want to take this opportunity to study one of the most notorious vampires to have ever existed. Xander watched in amusement as Spike expertly played to this rapt audience, somehow managing to make his past seem dark and violent without ever actually giving the man any details. The first thing Cordelia mentioned, of course, was his clothes, which had apparently only become more dark and depressing than during his evil phase, as she called it, when she had known him. But, being the good person she was, Cordy snarked at him for his evil deeds for only a short while before tossing him a smile that effectively closed the topic for discussion and laid aside the past. Dawn was curled up beside Spike, seemingly content for the moment to just hold him again. She kept looking up at him wonderingly, and never let go his hand. Spike, for his part, squeezed her hand rhythmically, as Xander knew he did when

he was reassuring himself that what he was touching was real. Buffy was curled up with Angel on the far end of the couch, but she didn't take her eyes off Spike, and he often looked around to meet her gaze, smiling every time she met his eyes directly.

'They didn't really believe he was real, did they,' he murmured, half to himself.

He was surprised to hear Willow answer in his head. 'They knew, and they did want to believe. I saw him as well, the last time I was here. It's not that they didn't believe you, Xander. But I think they needed to see him, or there would always have been this faint doubt in their minds that he hadn't really come back to them. Spike won't be like this all the time, but now they know that he really is always there, whether they can see him or not.'

Xander just smiled a little sadly and nodded.

Once again shaking himself out of the serious mood that kept pulling him under, he said, into a lull, 'So,

Wills, tell us about the spell. Whatcha do to him? I heard something about Gaea and Janus, so I'm thinking doorways between planes?'

'Wait a minute,' Spike interrupted, looking a little annoyed, 'you speak Greek and Latin?'

'Yeah, of course. I'll have you know I'm very well read.'

'Well then why the bleedin' hell have I been translating all those passages for you?'

Xander grinned bravely. 'Um, 'cause you're such a good friend?'

At which Spike paused, looking by turns pissed, exasperated and finally shaking his head affectionately. 'Twat,' he muttered.

Willow was looking between them, smiling oddly. 'If you two are finished, I'll explain about the spell.' Not waiting for an answer, she continued. 'Like I said, it's nothing permanent, and I haven't really

done anything to Spike. The spell's in the ring. It acts as a doorway into the physical plane. But it needs to be touching Spike to work, seeing as I've bound it to him. When Spike takes the ring off, the doorway will collapse, and he'll be drawn back into his own plane. How he looks now is how he is in the other plane. I've just drawn his physical body into this plane. He's all light and glowy 'cause of the nature of matter and energy on the higher plane and how they've been combined to form his body. Essentially, he's more soul than we are. None of which you really care about anyway, so moving right along.' She looked a little embarrassed, but grinned and turned to Spike. 'You won't be able to do your teleporting thing while you're like this, Spike, just in case you need to go protect someone. But you can put the ring back on any time and the doorway will open automatically. It needs your blood to activate. There's a little needle under the stone, which you already know. Sorry for not warning you about that, by the way. Um... you should keep it in the box I brought it in.' Which was now a thoroughly innocuous small wooden thing. 'The ring is bound to the box, and you're bound to

the ring, so it should open automatically when you put your hand on it. That's about it, really. No time limit on wearing it, or anything like that.' She shrugged. 'If anything happens, take it off and let me know. But I don't think it will.'

They stayed for a couple of hours, but eventually even Dawn had to admit she was practically dead on her feet. With promises to see each other for breakfast tomorrow, the party broke up, people drifting away to their separate rooms. Eventually only Xander, Spike, Buffy and Angel remained in the library. With a consideration and perceptiveness Xander would not have thought to credit him with, Angel simply kissed Buffy on the forehead, whispering something in her ear before smiling tenderly at her and leaving for their room. His thoughts were in turmoil, but he could feel what Buffy wanted, as surely as he knew what Spike needed, so with a grin and a 'Merry Christmas', Xander left them alone and retreated to the solitude of his room.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike looked after Xander as he left the library, then turned to gaze down at the beautiful blond slayer in his arms. He had barely left her side for so many years, had dreamed about moments like this, when he would look into her eyes, and she would look back. Some part of him had feared it. Not knowing what he would see in them. Anger, hate, love, forgiveness, dismissal, pain, or would they be blank, did she even care to remember him at all? Not knowing what he wanted to see in them.

Except now he did, because she was looking up at him, smiling slightly, and the reality was better than he could have come up with in any case. Because he did see forgiveness and joy - and even love. And if it was obvious that she wasn't in love with him - that was okay, too. He understood now that he didn't need her to love him. He didn't need her at all. He loved her. She was still strong, solitary, darkness and light and in some far corner of his soul he

couldn't deny that he did want her. But she wasn't the tortured soul that she had been. She had been like a beacon to his demon, everything it should never want, could never have. The beast within him, still tainted with humanity, had made him unique. He was probably a little insane by vampire standards, but all of him, human and demon alike, had been drawn to her suffering, wanting by turns to feed it and extinguish it.

She had needed him for a while. But he had needed her to want him. She had abused him, used him to feel alive or maybe needed him to feel dead, but she had never truly wanted him. It was only after the soul that he had understood that that just wasn't enough.

That last year, if she had given any sign that she did want him, just him... maybe everything would have been different. But now he was holding her in his arms, and all he could think was that there was something he wanted more. It was too late for them, maybe it always had been. Buffy had found her peace, with the one man she had always

wanted more than anything else, and Spike was starting to believe that he could never have found peace and happiness with anyone but Xander, any time but now. Everything was finally falling into place. He couldn't help but smirk at the thought that it gave a whole new meaning to Xander's favorite adage; that everything happened for a reason.

Realizing he'd been drifting, he brought his eyes back to Buffy's face. From the look in her eyes, she had been doing the same, and Spike discovered there were things he definitely didn't want to see in them. They were filled with remorse, guilt and pain, and when she spoke her voice cracked a little. 'Spike, I'm so sorry. I-' Already that was more than he could take, and he had to place a finger over her lips.

He shook his head frantically, his heart breaking at the tear falling down her cheek, unaware of the liquid spilling from his own eyes. 'Buffy, no, you've got nothing to be sorry for.'

She smiled tightly, moving back a fraction so his hand fell away. 'Yes, I do, Spike. The way I treated you... I used you. No matter how much I was hurting, I had no right to do that. I am sorry that I never apologized, never said thank you. For two years, you did nothing but help us, and I'm so sorry I couldn't see far enough around my job to really see you. I'm sorry I could never be what you wanted me to be, Spike. But you did help me, and I'm not sorry for that.' She smiled sadly, and he ran a finger along her jaw gently.

'I'm not sorry about that either, love.' She sent him a cynical smirk and he grinned in response, but she sobered quickly.

'I wish...!' She paused and smiled a little. 'Well I don't wish obviously, but... you deserved better, Spike, more than I could give you.'

Spike cursed himself again, looking down at this beautiful, fragile woman. More than anything he had ever done, he regretted hurting her. It was worse because he knew that he couldn't blame the

demon for the way he had treated her. Xander was right. The chip had allowed his mind, what was left of his humanity, to come to the fore. There was no excuse. He had done those things knowingly, had used her, taken everything she had to give and come back screaming for more. It didn't help, now, to know that he had acted out of love. The person he was now, the gentle soul he had been almost a century and a half ago, could recognize what the demon had felt, how it had tried to do what it thought was right, but he could not countenance the methods. For all that he had the memories of one hundred years obsessive, destructive passion, he could not help but think that if he had truly loved her, he would have been able to let her go, to give her what she needed, rather than to keep pushing for what he so desperately wanted. 'You know what the worst thing is, luv? I think you did love me, just a little. Or you wanted to.'

She bit her lip, looking down, but wouldn't allow herself the luxury of not meeting his eyes. 'You're right. I did. For what you did for Dawn, with Glory. And when I came back, before... And then... I

couldn't. Not because of you, but because I couldn't believe I could do that to someone I loved, so it was easier not to.'

'Dug my own grave, didn't I pet?' He smiled wryly. 'I don't think it ever even occurred to me that there could be anything other than absolute love or hate. I tried to make you love me the only way I knew how. And all I ever did was drive you farther away. I kept trying to drag you down into the darkness with me so I wouldn't have to be alone. I can never tell you how sorry I am for that.'

'Oh, Spike, you never had to be alone.'

'What would a demon know of friendship, luv?' He said it gently. 'I didn't understand what you were offering.'

'And now?'

'Now, I do. Buffy, who I was before, with the demon. I wanted to own you. You were my everything. But... I'm different now. I do still love

you. How could I not? But not the way I did before. It's been fifteen years, luv. I watched you grow up, lose the weight of the world, find Angel again. I don't need you now, and even if I did, there's too much pain, and guilt, and I... I don't want that anymore.' He tried on a grin. 'Besides, I don't think Peaches would give you up without a fight. Which, granted, I'd win, but it's the principle of the thing, right?'

She smiled distractedly. 'So, you're okay with the whole Angel thing?'

'Yeah, well, don't let on, but you're good for him.'

She grinned, but her eyes were troubled. 'If you hadn't died...'

Spike interrupted gently. 'You'd still have chosen him.' She opened her mouth to argue, but the guilty look in her eyes belied anything she might have said. It didn't even hurt. He'd had a long time to come to terms with the relationship, and it meant something that she would worry about him, that

she might have had to think about the choice. But Spike knew he was right. Buffy had never been able to forget her first love. This was what she had always dreamed of. Not a normal life, perhaps, but obviously the next best thing. And she was happy, which was why he could say he didn't mind and mean it.

'I... thank you.' She stepped forward suddenly and put her arms around him. 'Thank you for wanting me to be happy,' she whispered. She leaned back, her arms clasped loosely around his waist.

'Whatever happened between us before... It's in the past, Spike. I don't know if it matters, but I forgave you a long time ago, and I wouldn't have what I do today if it hadn't happened. Xander's always saying that everything happens for a reason. And I think... I think a lot of it was worth it.'

Spike closed his eyes to stem the tears he could feel gathering. It was one thing to believe that he had been forgiven, it was quite another to hear her say it. He hadn't realized just how heavily she had been weighing on his soul until then. He didn't know if he

would be able to forgive himself as easily, but the relief he felt at knowing she didn't hate him, that she was still prepared to offer him the friendship he should have accepted years ago... He felt lighter, freer. He grinned suddenly. 'I think maybe you're right, pet. And it does matter. It makes all the difference in the world. So, whadda'ya say, clean slate? Friends?'

She grinned back, and he could see the relief in her eyes. 'Absolutely.' Her smile gentled as she looked into his eyes. 'I'm glad we could do this face-to-face. Did you know Xander offered to mediate? He didn't really want to. I think he thought it was between us. He was right, too. I needed to see your face. I needed this. It's so good to see you again.' She said this last a bit wistfully.

He shook his head fondly. 'I was always there, luv.'

'Yeah, I know. But it makes a difference, you know?' He just nodded, and they shared a moment of perfect understanding.

With unspoken agreement, they moved over to the couch, settling beside one another before the fire. 'You know, I have the coolest set of friends,' she commented absently. 'I can't believe I ever wanted a normal life. This really is so much better.'

She turned to him with suddenly determined eyes, her face set. This, then, was why Xander maintained he was so bad at lying to her. He could already feel himself wanting to squirm, and she hadn't even said anything yet. 'How're you doing, then? Xander tells us you seem better, but it's obvious he's still worried about you.'

He'd opened his mouth to tell her he was fine, when he actually heard what she'd said. Xander was worried about him? 'Really?' He felt absurdly pleased with himself.

He didn't really notice Buffy glaring at him for a moment, before she chuckled, shaking her head ruefully. 'Yes, really. And don't think we're not talking about that, too, mister. But first; Answer the question.' He opened his mouth, but she

interrupted, saying gently, but forcefully, 'Honestly, Spike.'

He narrowed his eyes at her, fighting the urge to say that it was really none of her business. But she just kept gazing at him steadily, waiting, and he felt himself cave. 'I'm okay,' he sighed. 'Not fantastic but not fighting off insanity any longer. Don't know how much Xander told you about the other week, up on the roof, but since then, it's been better. Quieter. I feel like some of the people living in my head have taken a permanent hiatus. He said... he told me they'd forgiven me.'

She smiled warmly. 'Well, if anyone would know, it'd be Xander. We have it on good authority he's never wrong.'

Spike smirked. 'His authority?'

She giggled. 'Well, yeah. But hey, voice of experience, too. He's saved a lot of lives with those visions.'

'Well, he always was a lousy fighter.' It was supposed to come out snarky, but Spike suspected there was more than an appropriate amount of fondness there as well. It was also a lie. Xander had trained just as hard as any of the potentials that year, and had been better than most of them.

Buffy was looking at him intently, knowingly, again. It was getting damn aggravating. 'What?' he finally snapped defensively.

The corner of her mouth quirked up, but she answered readily enough. 'You obviously haven't sparred with him recently. He's gotten quite good. Put a lot of effort into toning all those muscles of his. He can pick most of the girls up one handed. They seem to like trying to goad him into doing that. Even when he's all sweaty from working out. Flexible, too, you know. Gotta keep limber if you wanna be able to go at it with all those vamps. Broadsword's still his favorite. He always gets an audience for those sessions. Although that might have less to do with his technique and more to do with the fact that he practices half naked, if you can

imagine. He's even getting better at hand-to-hand. S'pose it's cause he's got such strong fingers, from all that carpentry he did. You should come down sometime,' she added casually.

He knew what she was doing, and he refused to give her the satisfaction. He would not think about it. His eyes were not glazing over. As of right now he was not imagining Xander half-naked and sweaty. With his eyes closed, mouth opening with his even breaths, swaying with the weight of the sword, muscles bunching and releasing with coiled energy as he moved from one position to the next, long, strong, calloused fingers stroking the hilt... Shit. Shitshitshit. He was not turning into some nancy-boy and drooling over the pictures in his head. Especially in front of the Slayer! If he wanted to drool, he could do it when he was alone with Xander. No! Not alone, not drooling. He was taking it slow. Besides, as attractive as the man was, he wanted him for more than his body.

That thought calmed him down and he opened his eyes, which, to be honest, he hadn't even noticed

closing, to glare at the innocent face before him. 'I'll think about it,' he responded calmly, refusing to acknowledge that his voice might have sounded even a little rough.

She smiled brightly. 'I'm glad to hear it. I think you'd... ahh, enjoy yourself.'

Part Four

In which the hellmouth opens and things get bad

Spike didn't see a great deal of Xander that week. He spent most of his free time wearing the ring, with Dawn or Buffy and Angel, who was staying for a couple of weeks, over the holidays.

At first, he didn't even really notice. It wasn't that Xander was avoiding him; on the contrary, he was almost always there with a grin and a sarcastic comment when Spike went looking for him. But

after a few days, he was forced to admit that something about the man was different. And when he actually put his mind to it, it wasn't hard to figure out what had been bothering him. Xander had been supportive, obviously thrilled for him, and whether they were alone or in company, treated him like a friend. But never anything more than that. Really, his behavior hadn't changed at all, and there was only one difference Spike could actually point to. Xander had stopped touching him; stopped reaching out to take his hand when they spoke; stopped leaning in when they sat together so Spike could feel him breathe. He never pushed him away if Spike initiated it but he also never made the first move.

Spike couldn't understand what it meant, if it even meant anything, other than Xander's wanting to give him some space to become reacquainted with his family.

So it hadn't really made an impression to start with. Someone was always by his side these days anyway. But he missed his friend, the man who had brought

him back from the brink of insanity, changed what had promised to be a lonely, loveless eternity, made him remember what it was like to feel, to be human. It felt like something was slipping away from him and Spike didn't understand why, or how to stop it.

He knew that once upon a time, he would have simply gotten in the man's face and demanded to know what was going on. But then, once upon a time, he would have made his interest known a long time ago, fuck consideration and consequences. He just didn't have that possessive, violent instinct any longer. Alive, he had always been the archetypal gentle soul, selfless, uncertain and, while one hundred-and-fifty years as a demon had changed him almost beyond recognition, that much of his nature had survived to reassert itself.

Still, after a few days, he was seriously considering bringing the subject up, no matter how stupid it might make him look.

But that never happened because, on December

thirtieth, Xander had a vision. And on the last day of the year the hellmouth under Cleveland opened.

Xander had wanted to go, but Buffy had vetoed that, and secretly Spike had been immensely relieved. She and Angel had taken Willow, Wesley, Gunn and the three slayers still living in the house over the holidays and raced to Cleveland to meet with Faith, Robin Wood, and the other two slayers stationed over the hellmouth. Xander had insisted that the other nearby slayers be called, but Spike knew they would never be able to make it in time to help.

Spike had not left the Slayer Headquarters immediately, partly because he knew he could simply appear in Cleveland when he was needed, but mostly because of Xander. He had rarely seen the other man like this, and never in the few months since he had learned to phase. There was a weight of guilt and despair in the seer's eyes that spoke volumes about what he had seen. He didn't say anything, but Spike could tell he didn't expect everyone to survive. Occasionally, his eyes would

defocus, his face would go blank, and Spike knew he was reliving the images. And every time he did so, the pain was shoved ruthlessly aside, the fear and the anger channeled into research, meetings, phone calls, anything to help, to keep his mind occupied.

Spike had read the report, knew what to expect and, as daunting as it sounded, he would have said they had done everything they could to prepare for what was coming, that they had a good chance of winning, were it not for that look in Xander's eyes. If he hadn't known the man so well, he might not have even noticed that there was anything wrong. He put on a good show, somber, concerned, but always encouraging optimism in the people around him. Spike supposed he'd had a lot of practice. Which wasn't so much encouraging as it was indicative of just how much he had had to endure over the last ten years.

Dawn saw it was well, and when Spike finally decided it was time for him to get going, she pulled him into a tight embrace, demanding that he take care of them, and pleading with her eyes that he

look after her sister. He looked her in the eye and swore it. About to remove his ring, he paused and turned back to her. 'Look after him, Dawn. For me.' He didn't elaborate, but her blue eyes widened and she nodded once.

It was nothing like the last time. The portal was still in the very center of town, but this one was out in the open, part of a system of caves that opened into a popular picnic spot. Xander had seen it happening at sunset. They would have cleared out the park, formed a defensive circle around the hellmouth, but the enemy was already there.

As they made their way through the snow, shivering in the cold, Spike counted twelve bodies, slashed open to lie spread-eagled, like an offering, blood painting the pristine snow perversely beautiful colors. Marina gasped as they passed this, and Rachel breathed one shocked and angry, 'Shit,' but no one else said anything.

The atmosphere, though, changed. Spike could see the change in Buffy and Willow particularly. Now

they were angry. Now, it was personal.

Spike thought of Xander. Had he seen these deaths? Were these more people he would never get to know but never be able to let go of?

There was a roar, and the group fanned out. Spike wasn't really part of the plan. They couldn't see him to direct him and, besides, he had his own purpose. He was the tool of the Powers, there to protect them. The roar was followed by another, then another, and suddenly, they burst into a clearing to discover the hellmouth, surrounded by at least one hundred demons, all carrying weapons and arrayed in battle formation.

They had seven slayers, five civilians, one witch and himself, with Angel standing in reserve. He began to understand the look in Xander's eyes.

They had known what to expect, and had armed themselves accordingly, but there was no way they would be able to get through all those demons in time to prevent the sorceress at their center from

opening the hellmouth. The sun was setting even as the first rank charged.

Then his mind shut down, and instinct took over. His senses were screaming at him, tugging him in different directions as slayer after slayer found herself in mortal danger. Again and again, he plunged his hand into demon's chests, squeezing his fist around the bright light that signified the center of their life force, allowing his own soul, his own light, to burn brighter until it consumed the other completely. The process was tiring, but he couldn't rest.

He had his fist in his tenth demon when he lost his first chosen. He felt the sharp tug, but the demon was bearing down on Rachel, and she was moments from decorating the end of a sword herself. So he didn't move, and a moment later he felt the tug dissipate, become something else, even as the demon before him dropped dead with Rachel's axe perforating its chest.

Sparing her barely a glance, he appeared beside

Marianne, one of the resident Cleveland slayers. She was looking around in confusion, and Spike reached out to place a hand on her arm. Her eyes widened as one of the demons passed harmlessly through them, but he ignored it. This was the other part of his job, and at the moment, it was more important than the fighting going on around him. She looked up and met his eyes, one corner of her mouth lifting in a wry, sad smile. 'You must be Spike.'

He couldn't help a slightly surprised smile at that. They never used to know who he was. It was... maybe not nice, but gratifying perhaps. 'That's me, luv. I'm here to say thank you.'

She crinkled her forehead for a moment, then smirked. 'I bet you say that to all the girls.' He laughed softly, ducking his head.

'Well, yeah, but I mean it every time,' he replied gently.

The smile faded as her face became sad. 'Tell my

husband and my daughter that I love them. And that this is the way it should be.'

'Will do, luv.' He squeezed her arm and let go.

She was already fading when her mouth quirked again. 'Xan always says everything happens for a reason.'

Spike didn't know what to say to that, but she was almost gone, so he just smiled and nodded, knowing that in this case, at least, that was true. That the Powers had called her home. He knew that if he couldn't protect them, they weren't meant to be saved. He might not always like it, but that was the way it worked.

As hard as he tried, she wasn't the last one who died. Every one of them threw themselves into the battle but it wasn't enough to stop the hellmouth from opening. Dozens of demons escaped before Buffy finally waded in and furiously hacked at the sorceress, spraying her blood over the portal, closing it. He could not have done it himself. He

killed without blood, and only the living blood of the one who opened it could have closed it. But he was at her side, just as he had always been, and she didn't die.

With the portal closed, the demons scattered, and they came upon more innocent victims as they tracked down each and every thing that had come through the gate.

There had been worse battles, but this was bad enough.

Hours later, the survivors gathered at Faith's house. They would drive back tomorrow but, for now, Spike knew there was nothing he could do there. He needed to go back to Marion. Buffy had called but he would be able to tell them exactly what had happened. Besides, he wanted to get away from the sight of all that carnage. He wanted to see Xander.

With no way to let them know what he was doing, Spike simply disappeared, appearing a moment later beside Xander. He was sitting in the

conference room with Dawn and a young woman he identified as Fiona. They all looked tired, drawn. Dawn looked like she hadn't slept in days, and she had pulled her chair over to the young woman's, whom she held in a gentle embrace. Fiona had dried tear tracks running down her face, and Spike realized that this was Rachel's sister. Rachel had been wounded in the fight but wasn't in any danger at the moment.

Xander was hunched over the table, his pen moving unhesitatingly over a piece of paper. Spike thought for a moment that he was okay but, when Xander turned his head, he could see the vacant look in his eyes, the blank expression on his face. It was obvious Xander's hand was moving independently of his thoughts, and Spike's heart broke a little as he watched this man relive the death and the pain of too many innocent people.

The box containing his ring was sitting on the table. They all looked up when it opened and he picked up the ring. There was a momentary prick as he placed it on his finger, then a flash of light and they were

looking at him directly. He immediately turned to Xander, almost automatically picking up his hand as it lay on the table. He quashed the disappointment he felt when the other man didn't respond.

Xander had turned his gaze on Spike but his face was still blank. Spike glanced at Dawn, sitting opposite, and she gave him a very small, bleak smile, a twitch of lips that was gone almost before it appeared. He turned back to Xander.

'How many?' the man asked quietly.

'Marianne and Jason,' he named one of the Cleveland watchers. 'Marina, Rachel and Robin were the worst injuries, but they'll be alright. Everyone else is just banged up.'

Xander was watching him steadily, giving nothing away. 'How many others?'

Spike hesitated before replying, but he was going to know sooner or later. 'Forty-eight, by my count,' he eventually answered quietly. Xander nodded, and

for a moment, his eyes reflected all the guilt and the grief he was holding inside. Then the shields were back up and he lowered his head, one hand coming up to run over his eyes.

'Not as bad as it might have been,' he murmured distantly.

'Xander, it's not your fault, you know that.' Spike was worried. This was a Xander he saw only rarely, and had little experience with. Most of the time, he could almost forget that this man was fifteen years older than the one he had known. This isolated, wounded individual was the product of those years, and while he had seen him, usually it was only because Xander allowed it. This was different, and Spike began to understand what Xander must have been like when he first received the visions. Although even now, there was still strength. He wasn't letting himself drown, but he was closer than Spike had ever seen him.

But Xander took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them he was at least

present. Spike relaxed a little when Xander smiled sadly at him. 'Sure, I know. It's just... hard, you know.' Spike nodded, looking at him searchingly, but easier at heart. 'We should call Buffy, let her know where you are.' He looked over at Dawn and Fiona, who were wilting in their chairs now the adrenalin was wearing off, and smiled softly. 'Why don't you guys get some sleep? They won't be back 'till tomorrow. There's not much we can do 'till then. I'll call you if anything happens.' Even Spike could hardly see through the reassuring tone. Fiona nodded gratefully, giving Dawn a final hug before heading out. Dawn stood as well, but headed around the table to stand before Xander. She pulled him into her arms and he laid his head on her own where it tucked into his shoulder, threading his arms about her.

'I'm sorry we couldn't save them all, Xander,' she whispered tiredly.

Xander let out a little puff of sad laughter. 'Me too, Dawnie. But it really could have been worse. We saved a lot lives tonight. More than they need to

know about,' he added, almost to himself, and Spike wondered again exactly what he had seen.

Dawn shuddered. 'Yes,' she agreed fervently. Her arms tightened for a moment before she stepped away from him.

Xander smiled down at her, and then turned to Spike. He opened his mouth, but didn't seem to know what to say. For a moment he looked so lost, and all Spike wanted was to hold him in his arms and take all the pain away. But he didn't know how Xander would react to that, and the past week he had been so strange, that all he could do was hold out his hand. It almost brought tears to his eyes when Xander reached out and took it, squeezing gently as they looked into each other's eyes. 'Spike, I...' His voice was full of an emotion Spike couldn't identify, but it caused something to tighten in his gut. He thought maybe it was hope. But Xander was pulling away from him again. 'I'll talk to you later, Spike. Thank you for everything you did tonight. I know it would have been worse without you.'

He smiled one last time, before turning and walking out of the room. Spike was left standing, one arm reaching out to the man who had once again turned away from him. 'Xander... damn it,' he whispered.

He started when Dawn touched his shoulder. He'd forgotten she was even there. 'He'll be alright. Just give him a bit of time. He's always done this, pushes things away until he's ready to feel them. It was actually pretty useful back in Sunnydale.' Spike sighed and nodded.

'I just want to help,' he said.

She smiled. 'You will, you do. He'll need you when this all comes crashing down.'

Spike smiled ruefully. 'He doesn't need me, Bit. I just wish I could say the same about him.'

Her eyes darted over to him. He winced. He hadn't meant to say that out loud. But she didn't look surprised. 'That man has a hard time admitting he needs anything. We don't let it stand in our way.'

She grinned faintly, turning him to face her. She looked into his eyes seriously. 'I'm going to tell you something, Spike, 'cause I'm not sure it'll ever work itself out on his own. Xan may not admit it, but he does need you, just as much as he needs us, to be his friend, to be his family. But he also wants you, more than he thinks he should, in his words. And it's pretty obvious you want him, too. Don't give up on him, Spike,' she said quietly. 'He's been happier the past few months than we've seen him in years. You make him happy. If it's anything like the same for you... That's worth fighting for.'

Spike narrowed his eyes in confusion. Xander wanted him? 'He told you that?'

Dawn smirked. 'That he wanted you? Yeah, we got him to admit it. But it's pretty obvious.'

'Well, then... ' What had this last week been all about? Spike had to admit, he'd been fairly sure of Xander's interest previously. Enough to want to take a chance, anyway. But ever since Willow had given him that ring for Christmas, since he'd been

able to interact with everyone again... Spike rolled his eyes as everything clicked into place. Xander leaving him alone to be with Buffy and Dawn, treating him like a friend, not going out of his way to touch him. 'The bleedin' nitwit,' he muttered. 'He thinks I don't want him now I've got this thing.' He waved his hand around.

Dawn chuckled. 'That sounds about right. He could barely bring himself to believe it when we told him you didn't hate him back when you were a vampire.'

Spike heaved an exasperated sigh, his mouth quirking a little. 'Always puttin' himself down, ain't he? He probably thought I'd want to go back to Buffy.'

She stared at him searchingly for a moment. 'I guess you'll just have to convince him otherwise.'

He glanced at her, reading clearly the question she was asking. He smirked self-deprecatingly, trying to reassure her with his eyes. 'Damn straight.'

Dawn relaxed, nodding firmly. 'Good. Now, back to the battle. First of all, thank you for protecting them, all of them, especially Buffy.'

'Always, Bit.' He smiled. 'You know that.'

'Was it bad?'

He sighed. 'Yeah, pretty bad. Messy.' He shuddered, remembering.

Dawn reached out to run a hand down his arm, rubbing gently. 'You alright?' she asked, peering at him carefully.

'Tired, is all.' Having to kill that many demons with his energy was always a little draining.

She nodded sympathetically. 'Right there with you. Why don't you crash in Buffy's room? We can go over everything tomorrow.' He nodded gratefully, and they made their way upstairs. He paused as they passed Xander's room, but Dawn drew him

past with a quiet, 'Not yet,' so he kept walking. He was about to open the door to Buffy's room when Dawn turned back to him with an exclamation. 'Spike! I completely forgot. It's after midnight.' She grinned.

He frowned at her, confused. 'Yeah, so?'

'So,' she rolled her eyes, 'Happy New Year.'

His eyes widened. 'Huh, well, look at that. So it is. Happy New Year to you, too.' He leaned over and gave her a light kiss on the lips. 'Now, go to bed. 'M tried.'

She chuckled and shook her head. 'No sense of occasion. Night, Spike, sleep well.'

She turned and walked away. He smiled at her back. 'You, too, Dawn.'

Part Four B

In which Xander falls apart and Spike puts him back together

Over the next couple of days, Spike didn't see Xander because this time the man actually was avoiding him. Not that he could really take it personally. He avoided all of them, withdrew into his own little world. The girls would look at him sympathetically, say that he did this occasionally, when a vision had gone badly, just give him a little space, but Spike was starting to get impatient. For someone who professed to understand that what had happened was not his fault, Xander sure seemed to be swimming in guilt. Of course, thinking things like that only served to make him feel bad. If anyone was able to understand what Xander was going through, it should be Spike. But at least he had actually been there for his memories.

He managed to contain himself for four days, vacillating between irritation and understanding, before deciding he had to say something.

Everyone had gone to bed early on Thursday and Spike had used the early evening to check up on all the slayers around the world, answering one call to protect a slayer in India, but mostly just picking up his usual rounds, which had been somewhat disturbed the past couple of weeks. When he reappeared the house was dark, quiet, the only lights in Xander's suite and the one that was always on in the kitchen.

Spike made his way up the stairs to Xander's office automatically, pausing only when he came to the closed door. He stared at it for a long moment. Dawn had told him to wait, but she had also said that he had to fight for what he, and possibly Xander, wanted. And every time Spike went near the other man, he could feel him drawing further away. If it went on for too much longer, Spike was afraid Xander would have talked himself out of any feelings he may have ever had for him. That was

something he just couldn't risk, no matter how much space he was supposed to give him. He would help Xander get past this, just as Xander had helped him, and hope that their relationship wasn't already fucked up beyond repair, that there was still a chance that it could be something more.

With a deep breath, he steeled himself and walked through the door.

It took him a moment to realize that Xander wasn't there, and he felt an unwarranted flicker of irritation. He was getting just a little sick of this.

He narrowed his eyes and appeared a moment later in the gym, out behind the main house.

Xander was alone. There was only one light on, casting most of the place into shadow. Xander was standing in the middle of the open practice area, as far away from the light as he could get without actually losing himself in the shadows. He had out his broadsword and was slashing it through the air, smoothly moving from one position to the next,

never pausing, tension radiating from his shoulders.

It was almost exactly as Spike had imagined it, but he found he wasn't able to appreciate the picture. Xander's movements were violent, focused, and he attacked the empty air in front of him as though his very life depended on it. One look at his face, however, and all Spike's frustration just seemed to bleed away. Xander had his eyes closed and, while his expression was blank, Spike could see the strain around his mouth. And he could see the tears that crept down Xander's face, falling past long, damp lashes to dry unnoticed on pale cheeks, occasionally making it far enough to drip off his chin and become lost in the sweat that soaked his shirt.

He was close enough that the sword passed through his chest, but Spike barely noticed. Xander turned, following the movement of his swing, and Spike reached out a hand to the muscled back, wanting more than anything to touch it, to rest his fingers on the warm flesh, not just have them pass, invisible, through the glowing light that was the human's soul.

But Xander didn't know he was there, and Spike knew he wouldn't until his next vision forced him to phase.

So he was surprised when Xander suddenly swung around, his eyes open and confused, the point of the sword falling to the floor. 'Hello?' he called out, looking around carefully. Not knowing what, exactly, he had done, Spike reached out to pass his hand through Xander again, jerking back in shock when the man frowned. When he still didn't see anything, Spike thought he was going to go back to his exercises, but suddenly Xander was solid, looking at him curiously.

'Spike, hey, I thought I felt something. What are you doing here?' It was said mildly enough, but Spike couldn't help taking exception to the question.

However, he carefully regulated his tone when he answered, 'Haven't seen much of you lately, came to see how you're doing.'

Xander smiled tightly at him. 'I'm fine.'

'S that so? 'Cause, you know, you look like shit. Haven't been eating, doesn't look like you've been getting much sleep either.' He examined the circles under Xander's eyes critically, smirking inwardly at the irritation that flashed over the other man's face.

'I'm fine,' he repeated, finality in his tone.

Spike just raised an eyebrow. 'Uh, huh. So you haven't been hiding yourself away from us, from me, for the past four days. Haven't been blaming yourself for all those people we couldn't save. Aren't, in fact, here, now, taking out your guilt on some invisible enemy. And those aren't tears on your face, you just got something in your eye, right?' He had started out calmly enough, but he was glaring at the man by the end of his tirade.

Xander took one step backwards and narrowed his eyes, his whole body tensing up. 'This is none of your business, Spike,' he bit out angrily. Spike actually felt a little better at this show of emotion. It

didn't stop him pushing though.

'I'm making it my business, Harris. Believe it or not, I actually care about you, and so do all the people up in that house. It's true, they have no concept of what the visions are like, what you feel when you get them. But I get the guilt, Xander. I also know that you know that you aren't responsible for the deaths of those people. You weren't the only one there. Hell, you weren't even there at all. You think we don't all regret that we couldn't do more? But we did everything we could. You did everything you could. It's not your fault.'

Xander regarded him for a moment from beneath lowered lashes. Eventually he heaved a sigh, some of the tension draining from his limbs. He smirked half-heartedly as he looked up. 'Do you know how weird it is to be getting a pep talk from you, Spike?' Before he could respond, Xander sighed again, running a hand through his hair. 'It's not guilt, Spike,' he said softly. Spike couldn't contain a snort of disbelief, and Xander shot him an amused smirk. 'Well, not entirely guilt, then. I know it's not my

fault. It's... grief, I suppose. I told you how my visions work...' He turned around suddenly and strode over to the weapons rack. Spike followed slowly as he just stood there, staring vacantly at the rows of swords. He started when Spike appeared beside him, flashing a small smile as he hung up his broadsword.

Tentatively, Spike wound a hand around his wrist, pleased, and relieved, when for the first time in days Xander didn't draw away. He tugged Xander over to one of the benches lining the walls, and they sat down. Xander leaned back and closed his eyes, his face telegraphing pain and exhaustion. Spike sighed, turning to face him. 'Mate, what's going on?'

Spike was a little disturbed by the bleak smile that this produced. 'You know, Spike, sometimes I really hate this shit.'

'Oh, that's real nice, Harris. I'll have you know I only wanted to help.'

'Not you, Spike,' he sighed. 'This,' he gestured to his head, 'gift' of mine.'

He sat up abruptly. 'All this crap in my head... You wanna know why this time was different? Why it's taking me so long to process it? What you saw, Spike, those people who died? That was only the beginning. You stopped my vision from coming true. That was good. Just think for a moment what bad would have been like. That's what I saw. I felt the death of hundreds of innocents, and I have to go through every one of them, sort out those we did save from those we didn't. I have to. I have to know, have to say goodbye. It's the only way to make the screaming stop...'

Spike just stared at him for a moment, wordless. There were a thousand thoughts running through his head, but he didn't know how to say anything without it sounding like pity.

But there was one thing he had to know. 'Why do you do it? The visions I mean. I realize you've had a lot of practice and all that, but it's been ten years,

mate. Red said you didn't have to keep them. That night you died, she said she could heal you, and pass the visions on. You're nothing special. Good mind, strong body, stubborn to a fault, but so are a lot of other people, or demons if you will. Why do you keep doing this to yourself?'

Xander was smirking at him. 'Geez, Spike, was that supposed to be a compliment, 'cause I think it got lost in all those insults.' Spike just narrowed his eyes and glared. Xander eyed him mutinously, but eventually he sighed and dropped his head. 'I do it because I want to help, want to be more than just the backup. I do it because I swore to the Powers that I would, because there are thousands of innocent people out there who don't deserve to live like we do. And yes, because I'm good at it. But mostly, Spike, I do it because I can.' He paused for a moment, turning to eye him seriously. 'How many seers have you met, Spike?'

'A few,' he answered warily. 'I lived with one going on one hundred years. Granted Dru wasn't quite like you, but she was still a seer. Met one in Poland

once, 'nother in Japan. Both seemed a bit touched in the head, if you ask me. Cordelia, though before she got them. Yesrah. Why?'

Xander shrugged. 'You know how Yesrah died?' Spike did, but Xander didn't wait for an answer. 'He was thirty-one. He'd had the visions for eight years. He was part human, part fucking Schofas demon. And they drove him insane. He couldn't deal with them. Yeah, he was injured in battle, but he didn't even try to step out of the way of that axe... You just admitted the three seers you've known have also been crazy. For whatever reason, I'm not. Maybe I'm just too stubborn to give up. It doesn't matter. The point is, I can deal with them. All opinions to the contrary, I'm not insane. Not likely to go that way either, far as I can tell. Who's to say the next sucker is gonna be so lucky?'

Spike grimaced. He wanted to say he didn't give a flying fuck about the next seer. Problem was, he couldn't even really say it convincingly to himself. It was so much easier when you were a demon and didn't have to care about people. 'Yeah.' They sat

next to each other for a few moments, both staring off into space, lost in their thoughts. Spike laced his hands over his stomach and looked sideways at Xander. 'So, the question is, is it worth it?' he eventually asked blandly.

Xander flicked him a look. 'Maybe, yeah, I think so. You?'

'Yeah. Even after everything. Right now... Yeah.'
Xander looked at him curiously for a moment, before settling back against the wall, stretching his feet out in front of him. After a minute, he lent over so their shoulders were touching, and Spike allowed a tiny smile to appear on his face.

They stayed that way for a while, both soaking up the comfortable silence. Spike spoke without thinking. 'We are two seriously fucked up individuals, mate.'

Thankfully, Xander just chuckled softly, glancing at him out of the corner of one eye. 'Amen to that, Spike.' He looked away and said ruefully, 'You know,

I didn't mean to make you think I was avoiding you.'

'Yeah, well,' Spike cleared his throat. 'Got used to having you around, didn't I?'

'What about the others?' Spike thought he heard a slight tension in Xander's voice, but that could have been wishful thinking.

'What about them? They're not you.'

Spike caught the confusion on Xander's face and mentally rolled his eyes. Subtlety was obviously not going to work in this case.

But apparently now wasn't the time to practice candor either. As he watched, Xander's face clouded, his mouth tensing as weary resignation flashed in his eyes. Eyes that went blank a moment later, as the vision claimed him.

As always, it was over in less than a minute. It was only because they were sitting so close that Spike noticed the faint trembling in the man beside him.

Almost unconsciously, Spike picked up one tightly clenched fist, but Xander didn't seem to notice. When his eyes cleared, Xander lowered his head, but not before Spike saw the tears that gathered in his eyes, the hopelessness that momentarily flashed across his face.

Not looking at him, Xander stood and went over to his bag to collect pen and paper. Spike stayed where he was, still caught by the despair he had seen in the other man's eyes.

However, he jumped up when he heard the pen Xander had been holding clatter to the ground. He rushed over, but was once again brought up short. Xander was looking blankly down at the ground, his hand shaking uncontrollably. His eyes seemed to focus on the pen that had rolled over to rest near Spike's boot.

Slowly, mechanically, he knelt, never taking his eyes off it. Spike was a little disgusted with himself for the thrill he felt at seeing Xander in this position. However, all thought flew from his head a moment

later, when Xander's trembling, outstretched hand stopped halfway to the ground, and a single fat tear rolled down his face to splash on the floor between them.

Spike was appalled. He honestly didn't know what to do. He'd had plenty of experience with distraught females, but this was Xander. Xander never cried. He never had, and Spike had been through enough heart-wrenching disasters with him to know that. He became angry, or withdrawn, but he didn't cry, and certainly not when there was anyone else to witness it.

He hadn't known... All this time, he had thought he was beginning to understand Xander - that he knew the pain the other man endured. That Xander had let him in, lowered his shields, allowed him to see into his heart.

And maybe he had, to a certain extent. But like all the rest of them, Spike had seen the light, the love the other man was prepared to offer, and had assumed that meant the darkness wasn't so bad. He

had known it was there. He even had a feeling he had been allowed to see more of Xander than even Buffy and Dawn.

But he hadn't really understood. He had been too wrapped up in his own affairs, and Xander had kept his problems out of the limelight, partly because he wasn't the type to share but, mostly, because that was the sort of friend he was. Maybe he wasn't going insane, but the visions were sucking the life out of this man. A person couldn't live without hope. He knew that Xander would fight, would pull himself out of this funk, but it was only a matter of time before it happened again, and Spike was suddenly terrified that a day would come when Xander didn't have the strength or the will to bring himself back.

He had thought that he would leave Xander one day, and had been okay with that. But it had never occurred to him that Xander might be the one to go. The very thought made him feel ill. It couldn't happen. He wouldn't let it happen. Xander maintained that Spike deserved to be redeemed, to

be happy. That he had given his life in the service of a higher power, for a greater good and that, because of that, his past sins had been forgiven. Yet Xander had fought for the Powers far longer than he had, had never wavered, had given up his future because of his desire to protect the innocent, to keep them that way.

He had wanted Xander because he had thought the man would make him happy. But all of a sudden, his own happiness seemed irrelevant. He would not let Xander lose himself to the darkness. Xander had saved him, pulled him out of a downward spiral he hadn't even been aware he was on, given him something to hope for, something to come back to. He could do nothing less. Whatever it took, whatever the cost, if had to defy the Powers themselves, he would see this man happy.

Xander refused to allow himself to cry. He knew that if he started, he wouldn't be able to stop. He could picture himself drowning, as wave after wave of his tears washed over him. He could hear them,

rushing in his ears, coming for him. And all the dead people who lived in his mind would wrap their hands around his ankles and hold him under, their blood tingeing his tears red, as he struggled to find the surface.

He didn't want to drown. He knew this, but the image was so real, so captivating... In some lucid part of his brain, he supposed that his tears probably wouldn't kill him, that the people in his head didn't hate him but, with that vision running through his mind, he was paralyzed, too afraid to take the chance.

So he willed them away. He would cry later, he promised himself. They would scream at him, he would cry for them, and maybe, just maybe, they would forgive him. He only wanted them to stop dying. Was that so much to ask? He didn't want to kill them anymore. Every time he went to sleep he killed them again, only to wake up sweating or screaming. Every time he closed his eyes they cried for someone to save them...

But he was stronger than that. It was incredibly difficult to have to grieve for so many at once but he had done it before, and he had no doubt he would have to do it again before the end. But it was true what he had told Spike, he could do it. He would grieve for them, and he would never forget them, but he would not let them drag him down. He had too much still to do. They didn't even really blame him. He knew that, too. They didn't even know he existed, for the most part. He had been given a chance to save them, nothing more than that. And as long as there was still a chance he could save anyone else, he refused to give up.

Which brought his mind back to the vision he had just had. It hadn't been particularly horrific but it had caught him unawares. Spike had taken his mind off things for a moment, turned his attention away from all his carefully erected emotional barriers. So the image of that one young woman being gutted by the Inferni demon had hit him harder than usual, bringing back the memories of the hellmouth opening only a few days before.

He realized dimly that he was kneeling on the floor. His pen was resting next to a large black boot. One look at his hands told him how it must have gotten there. He was holding himself so tightly his whole arm was shaking.

The boots were suddenly replaced by a pair of black-clad knees. He followed with his eyes as the pen rolled across the floor, dislodged by a thoughtless foot, distantly wondering how he would save them now, if he could never tell anyone what was going to happen. When it came to rest against the wall, Xander lifted his head carefully to find Spike watching him warily. His eyes were bright, and Xander cocked his head as he wondered what was wrong. He almost wanted to smile at the thought, except it wasn't funny. It was all wrong, always wrong. Spike had just as many dead people living in his head as Xander did. Of course there was something wrong. He felt a tear run down his face and his heart sped up, the rushing in his ears getting louder.

He heard Spike say something, but he couldn't focus

past the noise, couldn't see past the faces, so many faces.

He felt two hands on his face, pulling his head up, and he latched onto the sensation. All the others, the screams, the pain, they weren't real. He wasn't dying, being carved open, stabbed, broken, beaten and cast aside. It wasn't happening. Not happening. Not this time. Not to him.

He wrenched his eyes open desperately, and then he could see something else. He could see Spike and it was like water to a dying man, or a hand to a drowning one.

'...have to breathe.' The words came from too far away but he understood them. He fixed his eyes on the top button of Spike's shirt. 'Xander, love, come back. Come on, don't do this to yourself. It's not you. Not your fault. They don't blame you.' Spike. He could feel hands running over his face, frantic.

He needed to get away, needed to think of something else, say something, not to worry, he

was fine, not to worry, not to worry. 'Shhh, love. I know.'

'They're dead. I don't want them to be dead,' he whispered wretchedly to Spike's neck.

Hands running through his hair, coming to rest at the back of his neck. And it felt nice, not wrong. 'Oh, love... You can't change what happened, but they're all right. We both know that. I wanted you to know... I was with Marianne after she died. And you know what the very last thing she said was? She said, Xan always says everything happens for a reason. I'm starting to believe that's true, love. It'll be alright.'

He knew that the words were true, and it helped to hear them, a little. But there was something in Spike's voice that cut through all the emotion, all the noise, and lodged painfully in his heart. His eyes found Spike's. They were crying. Crying for all the innocents, for their families, but most of all for him. He reached one shaking hand up, catching a drop on the end of a finger as it hovered on the edge of

his chin. Averting his eyes, he slumped against Spike, leaning into the curve of his neck, winding arms about his waist. Spike felt so alive, so real. So right.

Spike whispered, just loud enough for him to hear, even as close as they were. 'Not gonna let go of you, love. Never let go.' It was a promise, and with it the sound receded. He buried his face as his tears started to fall, silently washing away guilt and grief.

All the while Spike held him, and he didn't drown.

Part Four C

In which Spike makes a declaration of intent and Xander takes it fairly well

The memorial service was, as always, at once immensely painful and blessedly cathartic. Xander had watched in awe as Spike quietly spoke to Marianne's family, the faint golden glow he emitted lending the scene an aura that Steven and his daughter obviously took comfort in. For himself, he sought out the families of each and every person who had died, not to try to explain what their loved ones had been thinking in their last moments - this was hardly the time or the place to be explaining to these people what he was - but to fix them in his own mind, make them real so that he could let them go. It didn't change what he would have to live with but it somehow made it easier to know they would have people to remember them when they faded from his mind.

Still, he kept to himself for a few days. Buffy, Willow, all of them had their own pain to deal with, but he knew that they had each other to lean on, so he felt he could take some time to work through everything on his own. And it wasn't like this had never happened before. They knew the routine as well as he did.

It actually took him a while to realize that Spike wasn't leaving him alone. Whether it was because he had become so used to his presence over the last couple of months, or it was because he was too lost in his head to notice, the fact remained; Spike was spending almost all his free hours hanging around him.

Actually, Xander couldn't quite bring himself to mind. He didn't want to talk and Spike didn't make him; most nights they spent in comfortable silence, Xander ignoring Spike, and Spike surreptitiously watching Xander.

Actually, it was this that first started to draw him out. Spike kept looking at him. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Xander would be writing or brooding -yes, he could admit it - and would suddenly look up to catch Spike watching him with this... soft look in his eyes. Spike, being Spike, refused to look away of course, merely raising an eyebrow if Xander looked at him strangely.

That wasn't even the worst of it. Sometimes, Xander would catch him smiling, a beautiful, gentle curve of his lips. Then, the smile would widen into a grin, but he didn't lose that look in his eyes. If it had been anyone else, Xander might have been tempted to call it loving. But that was ridiculous. Besides, Spike had not looked at Buffy like that, had he?

Eventually, curiosity, verging on irritation, overcame his distraction, and he simply had to say something.

It was the middle of the night, they were sitting in his office, and Xander had just caught him doing the smile thing again. This time, instead of turning away with a slightly confused smile of his own, Xander stopped to glare at Spike. 'Alright, Blondie, just what the hell is going on?' he demanded, exasperated.

Spike actually looked confused. 'What'd I do?'

Xander wagged a finger at his face accusingly. 'You keep smiling at me. All nice and... caring. It's getting creepy,' he complained.

Now Spike looked hurt. Xander reviewed what he'd said and inwardly winced. But he still wanted to know what was going on. 'I, ah... see. So, no more smiling. I'll try to keep that in mind.'

Oh, shit, it looked like he was going to leave. Since when was Spike this sensitive anyway? Xander reached out and snagged an arm, pulling Spike back towards him. 'No, Spike, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. You've just been... different, lately. What's going on?'

Spike regarded him hesitantly for a moment, before nodding his head resolutely and sitting back down. 'Been thinking about things. About you.' He nodded in Xander's direction.

'Me?' Xander was startled, a fairly stupid reaction given the fact that Spike had been staring at him for the last few days. He cleared his throat. 'What about me?'

'You wanna talk about this now, then,' Spike asked,

looking at him closely.

Xander found himself somewhat distracted by the expression in those eyes. 'Ahh... sure?'

He sure as hell didn't sound sure, but it was apparently enough for Spike. 'Right then,' he said decisively. 'So this is what I want to know. Are you happy?'

Xander waited. Spike just looked at him expectantly. Eventually, Xander realized there wasn't going to be anything more and raised an eyebrow. 'That's it? Am I happy? Why do you want to know that?' He almost wanted to laugh, except Spike didn't look like he was joking.

'S important, that's why. Just answer the question.'

Now he was just confused. What was this about? 'Well, what the hell do you mean, am I happy?'

Spike sighed. 'S a fairly straightforward question, mate. Happy. Content. At peace. Wanting for

nothing.'

Xander stared at him for a moment longer. 'Right at the moment? I'd have to go with no. I am confused, just a little irritated, and I want to know what this is all about.'

Spike glared at him. 'Not right now, generally.'

'Generally.' Xander shook his head, looking at Spike curiously. 'Spike-'

'Xander, please. Just... tell me.' Xander took a breath, prepared to evade the question, but that look was back in Spike's eyes again. He really didn't understand this, but he had also never seen Spike look so earnest. Frowning, he made a decision. Maybe it really was important.

'Fine. Ok. Generally speaking. Well, I don't know if I'd call it happiness, but... I've got my family, my friends, a purpose in life. It might not be perfect, but it's mine, and yes, I'm... content, most of the time.' Spike was staring at him again, as if he could

read the truth in his eyes. Xander resisted the urge to squirm. 'What's all this about, Spike?'

'You've got a shitty job with bad hours, painful headaches, no pay, very little gratitude and whole loads of existential angst. I want to know if you're happy anyway, and if you're not, I want to know what's going to make your life easier so I can change it myself, or go bug the Slayer to do something about it. I want to make you happy but if I can't do that, then I want to see you happy. And don't go thinking you can get out of it. I've made up my mind and that's all there is to it.'

'I get paid.' It was the first thing that came out of his mouth, mainly because the rest of his brain was currently booking itself on a plane to Hawaii. Spike stared at him for a moment, then snorted. He opened his mouth to say something, but Xander held up a hand, furiously trying to engage his wits. 'Sorry. Wait. Just... wait a minute. Let me see if I've got this. You don't think my calling, my sacred mission for the Powers That Be, is making me 'happy', so you've decided to what? Make me your

pet project? I thought we were supposed to be making you happy. And what does that even mean, you want to make me happy? Why?'

Xander had a feeling that came out slightly more annoyed than he had intended it to, but a look at Spike told him the man had decided not to take offence. In fact, he was looking at him so intently that Xander was starting to feel like a bug under a microscope. And that smile was back again. The... soft, caring one that belied the exasperated tone of his voice. 'I should have thought that was fairly obvious, pet. I love you.' The smile... loving. Fucking hell. He didn't know what to do.

Spike sat back with a smirk as Xander opened his mouth a good six or seven times before actually managing to articulate a sentence. Almost. 'I... You... What? When? What?'

'I love you,' he repeated calmly.

This was... so totally unexpected he couldn't even begin to process it. How could Spike possibly be in

love with him? He'd never even said anything about his attraction to the man. Maybe it was... a joke. Yeah, that was something the old Spike would have done, and he was smirking. Maybe the soul was taking a break, or reliving the old demon days. It could happen. Except, he knew Spike now, except apparently for the fact that the man was in love with him. But leaving that aside for the moment, he would have said with utter confidence that this Spike wouldn't play with his emotions like that. So... maybe he just meant it in a friend way. He would probably never have said it, but he did love Spike. Could have fallen in love with him if they'd ever gotten that far. Which apparently they had, he thought slightly hysterically. But, yeah, that was probably it. Friends.

Calming down a little, he said, 'How do you mean?' Which wasn't what he had wanted to say at all.

Spike grinned wolfishly. Xander gulped. That was not a friendly smile. 'I want you. I want all of you. I want to give you a reason to live. I want to love you. I want you to want me. I want to make you forget,

and I want to lose myself in you. We're two of a kind, luv.' He smiled and Xander felt a little faint. 'How does it go? You're everything I never knew I always wanted. You make me remember what it's like to be alive. You've already given me back my family, my sanity, my hope. You are my light. You deserve to be happy, Xander. More than I ever did or ever will. I want to see that you are.'

Xander gaped. 'Jesus Christ, Spike,' he whispered roughly. His head was spinning. 'A few more speeches like that and I don't think you'll have any problems at all.'

If possible, the smile became even more suggestive - and maybe just a little smug. 'That so, pet? I'll keep it in mind. Can I take this to mean you won't run screaming from the room then when I tell you what I want most of all?'

The smug was finally infiltrating Xander's brain. It was like a bucket of cold water to his thoughts. Smug Spike was always irritating. It was probably mostly why nothing like this could ever have

happened when Spike was alive. Even if there hadn't been Anya and Buffy, Spike had just been so superior that Xander would have been more inclined to wipe the smirk off his face with his fist than with anything else. As his intellect finally caught up to the conversation, he discovered that the impulse to remove the smirk was just as strong as ever. With a roll of his eyes, he shot Spike a knowing look. 'Go on then. I promise not to run screaming. Try not to surprise me with anything too original.' He relaxed back into his seat, waving a hand for Spike to continue.

Spike narrowed his eyes momentarily, before snorting and apparently giving up. 'You're ruining my dramatic moment, pet. How'm I supposed to swoop in and shock you with a passionate kiss now?' he complained.

'That's what you want most of all, Spike? I find myself strangely disappointed.' He grinned. 'But,' he rubbed his hands together, leaning forward, 'that's no reason not to give it a go. If you're still interested, of course?' He raised an eyebrow.

'It was the gloating that did it, wasn't it? You always hate it when I'm smug. You know, it's all the demon's fault. Never would have happened when I was human. Now I can't get out of the habit-'

'Spike,' Xander interrupted. 'Shut up and kiss me.'

Spike's eyes widened as a grin slowly made its way over his face. 'Well, ok, then.'

Xander rolled his eyes, letting a small smile flicker over his own face as he leant in, one hand coming up to tug Spike's chin towards him. This was apparently all the encouragement Spike required. He knocked Xander's hand away with a quicksilver grin, tilted his head, and swooped in to press their mouths together.

For a moment, it was just like the other two times they had kissed, then Spike moved his lips and it was nothing like anything they'd done before. He felt fingers curling around his upper arm, and watched delightedly as Spike's eyes drifted shut. He

let his eyelids lower and pressed himself into the kiss, taking Spike's lower lip between his own and caressing it with his the tip of his tongue. He let it slide out through his teeth, slitting open his eyes as Spike moaned softly and opened his mouth. He pulled back slightly, grinning faintly when the fingers around his arm tightened in frustration and Spike's head unconsciously followed his movement. He didn't have to wait long for Spike to open his eyes, his grin widening when they glared at him in frustration.

The second Spike took in his expression, his eyes darkened and a wicked grin flashed over his face. Xander couldn't help the shiver that traveled up his spine at that look, or the challenge that darkened his own eyes. Once again, Spike displayed his initiative, and he was being pushed back into the couch as Spike leaned into him. Smiling inside his head, he opened his mouth obligingly to the tongue industriously seeking entrance. He had just enough time to curl one hand into Spike's hair and one tightly around his waist. Then a warm, wet tongue tickled the roof of his mouth and all higher brain

function ceased as he was treated to a kiss with one hundred and fifty years of experience behind it.

It wasn't like him to just sit there and take it, and he did try to reciprocate, really he did. And from the moans he could feel deep in Spike's throat, he wasn't doing too badly. But it was all instinct, and either way he got the feeling he was getting the better end of the deal.

Not that he was complaining. No sirree, no-one complaining here.

Spike explored his mouth enthusiastically, tracing around his teeth, his tongue, and his lips, coming back to the roof of his mouth when it made him shiver. He hummed in approval when Xander stroked his tongue gently, winding his own about it.

When Spike pulled away, he couldn't even work up the mental acuity to be mortified by the whimper that escaped. Not that he could go far, seeing as Xander was still holding him tight against his chest. Still somewhat dazed, it took Xander a moment to

realize this, but he eventually loosened his grasp and allowed Spike to sit back.

Spike was wearing a satisfied smirk as Xander slowly sat up. He licked his lips thoughtfully and the smirk deepened. He didn't know what Spike was looking so smug about. Sure, there'd been some sort of challenge, although for the life of him he couldn't think what at the moment. But whatever it had been, he was pretty sure he must have won. 'Cause if this was losing, he was just gonna have to stop trying.

He was even prepared to forgive the smug look at the moment. Still... He relaxed into the cushions and regarded Spike thoughtfully. After a moment, the smirk slipped a little and Xander grinned inwardly and raised his eyebrows. Then Spike was just smiling at him. 'Well?' he asked impatiently.

'Not bad,' Xander nodded approvingly. Spike raised an eyebrow. It had been a whole lot better than just not bad.

'That so? Well, it has been a while. Just need to find my feet again, I expect. Work on my skills, so to speak.'

Xander shivered a little at the heat in Spike's eyes, the promise. He knew they really had to talk about this, where it was going, what Spike expected of him, but it just felt so right. It was easy, fun even, and when Spike smiled at him like that all he knew was that he wanted him. He raised a hand to touch his thumb gently to that smile, holding Spike's jaw in the palm of his hand. He felt muscles shift under his hand as Spike swallowed and raised his eyes from pink lips that had parted slightly from the pressure of his thumb.

He knew he was supposed to be making some smart-ass comment, but one look at those wide blue eyes and he felt the world spiral away. Pain, longing, need, desire... He wondered distantly if this was what people felt when they looked into his eye, like drowning in someone's soul, as the rest of the world faded away. It occurred to him for the first time that Spike had actually meant it. That, for

whatever reason, he really did love him. He couldn't profess to understand it, but right now, he thought he could see it.

'Sure,' was all he could manage to whisper as he drew Spike's mouth towards him.

Spike held his eyes for as long as he could. Then they were locked together and the kiss was so deep, so desperate that Xander felt like he was crawling inside the other man, owning him, being taken over. Spike seemed to be pouring everything he felt into the kiss, everything Xander had seen in his eyes. And passion. Maybe it was just Spike, but he had never felt such naked desire infused into a single kiss before. It had his heart racing, his blood thundering around his body.

And in his mind something broke, as he accepted everything Spike offered. Maybe he wasn't in love with him yet, but he could be. It would be so easy to fall for this man. Spike. Who had never given him a second glance eighteen years ago, whom he had more recently been content to just be friends with.

A man he now knew almost better than he knew himself, whom he had rescued from the brink of insanity, who had then turned around and returned the favor. They really were two of a kind. Battered, broken, chained to a past they weren't even responsible for, laden with guilt and desperately looking for understanding, for a connection, and for forgiveness. He could love Spike for that. But there was so much more to it. First and foremost, Spike would always be a friend. After all the pain and heartache faded, if that ever happened, he could still see them together. They had more in common than sorrow and death. The past six months had been exhilarating, liberating. If he let him, he knew that Spike could give him something else to live for.

He didn't want to get hurt, knew that chances were good that he would lose Spike sooner rather than later, but he was starting to think that maybe it was worth the risk.

He was breathing heavily when they finally parted and opened his eyes to Spike's fingers running tenderly over his face. When he looked into his

eyes, however, he was greeted with a slightly guarded expression. He couldn't honestly say he was surprised. That had been a kiss to make or break a relationship. It would be almost impossible to go back to what they'd had before, and now Spike was waiting for his reaction. He could only hope he didn't screw it up completely.

He took a deep breath and smiled gently. 'So, you love me.'

It wasn't a question, but Spike answered with a poor imitation of his usual smirk. 'Uh, yeah. 'S that gonna be a problem?'

'No,' he said firmly. 'Not a problem. It's good, wonderful. But,' he felt Spike tense and flinched inwardly, but hurried on, 'where is this going, Spike? I mean, you're meant to be finding happiness and I thought, Buffy...' He trailed off, uncertain.

Spike cocked his head and regarded him for a moment. Xander couldn't read his expression and started to draw away, cursing himself for saying the

wrong thing already. But Spike dropped his fingers away from Xander's face only to pick up his hand, smiling a little.

'I know what you thought and I can never tell you how grateful I am to have found her again. She fascinated my demon, and I feel for her, for everything she had to endure. But she's not mine, love, she never was. I don't love her anymore. Me, the soul, never really did. Whatever the demon made me, it couldn't change what I am. I can't give her what she needs, the violence she gets from Angel, not anymore. I don't want that. I don't want this to be like that.' Spike paused, his eyes darkening. Xander waited, and after a moment, he began again, speaking regretfully. 'You used to remind me of myself, back when I was alive. We could have been friends. I think that's why I treated you like shit most of the time. Especially when my humanity began to reassert itself. You represented everything the demon hated. And now... well, now everything is different. You, me, Buffy, everything. Whatever I had with her, it wasn't happiness, or peace. Six months ago I would have said I was as

content as I was ever likely to get. You changed that, love. Not Buffy, not Dawn or Willow, you. You gave me a way to find peace and you make me happy. I don't know how long it'll last, but I want you for as long as I can have you. I can't give you a normal relationship, if that's what you're looking for. But you do get me, heart and soul.' He smirked a little. 'To do with what you will, for as long as you want me.'

Xander just sat there, and after a moment, Spike put a finger under his chin and pushed his jaw shut with a grin. Xander blinked. 'I'm gonna get a lot of those, aren't I?' he commented eventually. Spike had always had a way with words. Although it was good to see he was putting his super powers to better use these days.

Spike gave him that guarded smile again, hope lurking in the depths of his eyes. 'I don't know. Are you?'

Xander gave him a lopsided smile. 'You know, I almost had a normal life once, after you and Anya

died. I must've drifted off your radar for a while there.' He looked at Spike sideways, raised a curious eyebrow.

Spike frowned. 'Now you mention it, yeah. There were a couple of years you did kinda disappear.'

Xander smiled a little wistfully, remembering. 'Yep, I managed to spend nearly two years without getting myself into mortal danger once. It was unbelievably boring.' He grinned. 'Actually, that's not true. It was good for a while.' His smile slipped. 'I was just so tired after that year. I helped set up the new council, got Buffy and Dawn settled, but then I had to split, to get away from it for a while.'

He'd still been hurting for Anya, although he had moved on. But more than that it was just the whole lifestyle. In a moment of weakness that even then he had despised himself for, he'd said fuck the responsibility, they could do it without him, he didn't care anymore. Even though it was tearing him up inside, he had calmly stated one day that he was leaving, moving away from the hellmouth and

resuming his construction career in Washington. They had cried, but they had let him go, and none of them could say that they didn't understand. 'Found myself a nice guy, not a demon, didn't even believe in magic... just a nice, normal guy. But it didn't last. It couldn't. Eventually, it just wasn't enough.'

He had needed the break, but it had only served to remind him of what he fought for. He had been happy for a while. But one day he had been passing an alley to see a young woman being attacked by a vampire and it had all come rushing back. It had been so easy to fall back onto his training, exhilarating to have saved the woman, and he had suddenly realized how purposeless his life had felt. He had always been able to feel Buffy and Willow and Giles in the back of his mind, ever since the spell they had used to defeat Adam had bound them together forever, but now it was like they were calling to him, calling him home.

'I used to think I wanted a normal life. But I don't. It's part of why I never married Anya. I could live

with the fact that she'd been a demon, had killed more people than I could probably even imagine. And she told me about a lot of them, so that's saying something. But the second things started to seem normal, when she started to be more simply human than ex-demon... I'd seen normal. For sixteen years that was all I knew. And it's not worth it. I hate the thought that I could stop caring about the fight, about the people I love.'

Xander paused and watched Spike for a moment. He couldn't really imagine how this could work. They couldn't live together. Spike wasn't even alive. He didn't eat, wouldn't leave towels lying around, wouldn't forget to do his laundry or wash the blood out of his mugs. He had hated living with Spike the first two times, but now... he wondered how much he would miss all those little things that every normal relationship had. Would it make it easier or harder? Still, he meant it when he said he didn't need a normal life. If he was going to commit himself to this, then whatever they had would be enough. Nothing else mattered.

'I'm not in love with you,' he continued bluntly, trying to ignore the hurt that suddenly appeared in Spike's eyes. 'But I like you, and I want you. I don't want to lose you, and I'm going to, which makes this that much harder. But, right now, none of that seems to matter. Unlike you, apparently, I've been happy before. You make remember what that's like. I reckon that's worth a little risk.'

'Yeah?' If he hadn't been sure before, the light that suddenly appeared in Spike's eyes would have been enough.

He shrugged and nodded. 'Yeah.' He grinned suddenly. 'So, is this the part where you ask if I wanna go out with you?'

Spike snorted. 'Little late for that, don't ya think, love? Personally, I reckon we should just get back to the snogging.'

'And people say romance is dead.'

Spike grinned and pulled him in for a short,

passionate kiss.

'And to them I say, good riddance,' he panted when Spike let him go.

Spike gave him a smile so beautiful it shot straight to his heart. He brought Xander's hand to his lips and kissed his palm, never taking his eyes off the other man's face. Dear god, this was going to be so much easier than he had thought. 'Gonna make you happy, love,' Spike whispered, breath ghosting across his skin and making him shiver. Xander could only nod, stretching his fingers so they touched Spike's cheek. He believed him.

Part Four D

4d - In which Spike finds peace and then finds himself faced with a decision: to die or to forget

It was actually kind of amazing how little seemed to change over the next few weeks. It wasn't that nothing was different; much making out followed by sex was certainly a pleasant addition to Xander's daily schedule. And everything that Spike said or did seemed to take on new layers of meaning. But, for the most part, he didn't actually say anything he'd never said before, and life just went on much as it always had.

Xander wasn't entirely sure what he'd been expecting, when he stopped to think about it. He could only suppose that faced with one of those life-altering types of declarations, it seemed strange that the rest of the world hadn't somehow tilted on its axis and plunged everyone else into the same turmoil he found himself.

In fact, no one really seemed surprised by the newfound status of his relationship. Which, if was

going to be honest, was kind of a disappointment. Although Buffy, Dawn and Willow did manage to come up with a few gratifyingly girly-squeals when he told them, particularly when he recounted a few of Spike's more memorable speeches. He'd noticed Buffy's slightly wistful look at this and had asked her later if she really was okay with him and Spike.

She'd looked at him searchingly. 'Would it make a difference if I wasn't, Xan?' she'd asked seriously.

He hadn't really known what to say. Would it make a difference? Would he give Spike up if Buffy said she wanted him back? More to the point, would Spike want to go? He thought probably not. And if he did, then yes, he would let him go. But if Buffy simply didn't approve? Didn't think Spike would be good for him, was afraid he'd get hurt. Then, yeah, it would make a difference, but would it make him give it all up? 'No,' he'd said thoughtfully. 'I mean, yeah, of course, I never want to hurt you, Buff. But... in the end, and unless you had one hell of a reason... No, no, I don't think it would.' He'd grinned a little as he came to this realization. He

wasn't gonna just give Spike up. That felt... good. Better than good, it felt right.

Buffy had looked at him knowingly. 'And nothing else matters. Right?' She'd smiled as he nodded. 'You know, I appreciate you being all sensitive to my 'history' with Spike, but I am actually in love with Angel. I'm gonna start taking it personally if you don't stop trying to break us up.'

Even Angel hadn't batted an eyelash. Although he had given Xander a thorough and graphic lecture on what would happen to him if he found out he was hurting Spike. Dawn had stood beside him and added the occasional helpful comment. The whole thing had been seriously disturbing, up to and most definitely including the part where Angel had pulled him into a vampire-strength hug. Which had been followed by hurried reassurances on his part as he beat a hasty retreat from this disconcerting new father-in-law-type Angel. He'd really had no idea that Spike was that important to Angel, and had to wonder if Spike himself did either.

Of course, the whole thing had become much more amusing when Spike told him that Willow and Buffy had cornered him and given him an equally terrifying version of the shovel talk. They didn't have to say it, but they both knew how lucky they were.

It was only after this that Xander started to notice that things were different. It had been so subtle at first that he wasn't aware of anything off. Early on he'd discovered that examining all of Spike's actions to try and determine if any of them were making him happy was not conducive to actually just being happy. So after a couple of days of pointless Spike-analysis, he'd decided to just let it go and try to enjoy himself.

But he was sitting alone in his room a couple of days later, at something of a loose end, thinking about getting started on his new book, when he realized that for the past couple of weeks, he'd been almost constantly busy. The time in between his visions, that had become something of a chore over the past few months, as he wasn't incapacitated by the

pain and had very little else to do around the house, had somehow been filled.

He'd started working on carving a new weapons chest for Buffy, had plans for bookshelves for Dawn and a cabinet for Willow. He'd volunteered to organize repairs for the mansion, spent a lot of his time on the phone to craftsmen or jotting off e-mails to various suppliers. He'd also started writing to all the slayers all around the world. Now that Spike could tell him what they were up to, he realized he'd been neglecting these friendships and spent hours each night catching up on their lives, chatting on-line. Especially when everyone came back after the holidays, he found himself spending more and more time down in the gym after dinner, sparring with the girls long after Buffy and Dawn had gone to bed, or staying up and chatting or watching TV with the ones who came home in the middle of the night.

He used his laptop to write up his reports almost exclusively now, carting it around the house. Dawn and the watchers had scanned the entire library

years ago, so although he had always liked to use real books, it wasn't strictly necessary. And in the early hours of the morning, Spike would appear and join him in whatever he was doing, or they would go down to the gym, where Spike would thoroughly trounce him with any weapon he would care to name, before carefully instructing him in how to use it properly.

But looking back on all this, he could suddenly see that most of his newfound activity was due entirely to suggestions that had actually come from Spike. For the first time in years, he was actually living his life. Within the strict confines of his mission for the PTB, sure, but there were moments in between when he felt like his life was his, just his. That he was more than just a tool for a group of seemingly indifferent higher beings.

And that did make him happy.

It also made him look at Spike in a whole new light. Here was purely selfless act. Spike had nothing to gain from any of it, hadn't even drawn attention to

what he was doing. He couldn't deny that he still had reservations, but he also had to admit they were rapidly disappearing.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander was dreaming. He was lying in bed, holding Spike in his arms. He couldn't remember ever feeling so peaceful. He could feel the smooth, cool skin of Spike's chest under his fingers, rising softly with each inhalation. It felt so real. And in his dream he smiled, as a connection was made. This was wonderful, but the real thing was better.

He opened his eyes.

He smiled again as he realized he must have drifted off. Spike did tend to be rather... energetic, and he wasn't as young as he used to be. Usually, he tried not to fall asleep straight away, if only because when he woke up, Spike was almost always already gone. He didn't really mind. Spike didn't need to sleep, after all, and he couldn't realistically expect

him to just while away the day lying in his bed, doing nothing, when he should be out protecting people.

Still... as much as he loved going to sleep with Spike in his arms, waking up to find him still there always made him feel pleasantly mushy inside.

Spike was lying on his back, his eyes closed, his bare chest rising and falling rhythmically with his breaths. One arm hung off the edge of the bed, while the other curled next to Xander's, slung over his stomach. Xander propped himself up on his other elbow, gazing down at this beautiful body.

The room was dark, even though it was midday outside, but Spike was clearly visible. With his ring on, he gave off a faint golden glow that only emphasized the paleness of his skin, made his mussed hair look almost metallic.

Xander had flatly refused to have sex with him without the ring after the first time Spike had lost his concentration and left Xander fucking the

mattress with Spike two stories beneath him. However hilariously funny it may have been in retrospect, it had put a serious crimp in the evening.

Xander shook his head a little, the hand resting on Spike's stomach shifting, drawn inexorably to that perfect face. He soothed his fingertips over sharp cheekbones, soft lips, and a high forehead that lost all its harsh lines when Spike was like this. That had been slowly losing its lines even when Spike was awake. It was beautiful, perfect. He grinned slightly; the face that launched a thousand ships.

He traced around Spike's jaw, barely touching, his eyes following as they made their way back up around his mouth, over his cheek, and finally to eyes that had slit open and were regarding him amusedly. Xander moved his hand back to Spike's chest, where it was immediately captured, and grinned at him.

'What are you grinning at then, love?' Spike asked with a smile, his other hand appearing to touch Xander's jaw.

Xander's grin turned into a smirk. 'Literary analogies,' he said.

Spike raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. 'Yeah? Who're you comparing me to?'

Xander cleared his throat and his eyes darted away, but his smirk deepened. 'I don't think you want to know,' he answered, patting Spike's chest consolingly.

The hand at his jaw moved to poke him in the chest. 'Oh, no. Now you've got to tell me. I've got to know what you think of me, don't I? Come on, how bad can it be? Unless it's someone from your comic book collection, then you're right, I don't want to know.' Spike smirked.

'Hey! I don't have a comic book collection anymore.' He grinned and squeezed the hand he was holding.

'Only because it got destroyed along with the rest of Sunnydale. You'll always be a geek at heart, love.'

'Helen of Troy,' Xander stated with a satisfied smirk. 'I was comparing you to Helen of Troy.'

Spike's eyebrows shot up his forehead and he let out a surprised bark of laughter. 'What?'

'Well, sure,' Xander commented reasonably, his eyes laughing. 'Stolen away by Prince Alexander, favorite of the gods-'

Spike interrupted. 'Who then either dies or ditches her and dies, depending on the story, although not before making her responsible for one of the most infamous wars in mythology, and she still just ends up back with her first husband. You trying to tell me something, love?'

Xander chuckled. 'Ok, so it's not a perfect analogy...'

Spike snorted. 'If we're going to go around comparing people to ancient Greek chits, I woulda thought you and Cassandra'd be more appropriate.' Xander narrowed his eyes as he thought about this.

He couldn't imagine what it would be like if people didn't believe in his visions. That probably would drive him mad.

He felt Spike's fingers on his face. He focused on blue eyes that had filled with sympathy. Spike lent up and dropped a sweet kiss on his lips. 'Maybe not, huh? 'Sides,' Spike leered at him playfully, 'she was s'posed to be chaste.'

Xander smiled back, his eyes clearing, before leaning down to return the kiss. 'Just meant you're beautiful,' he murmured into Spike's mouth. Spike smiled and moved into the kiss, pressing his body along Xander's. Xander moaned when Spike pulled away to press tiny kisses down his chin, laving his neck with his tongue, and relaxed back into the pillows.

Then he managed to entirely ruin the mood by yawning hugely, cracking his jaw. Spike chuckled, sending vibrations through Xander's skin where it was still connected to Spike's mouth. 'You need to get some sleep, love.' Xander sighed petulantly.

Sometimes not being a teenager with boundless energy really sucked. 'Until the Powers decide to give you a day off, sex marathons are just gonna have to wait.'

As if crippling headaches and horrifying visions weren't enough, The Powers That Be were making him go without sex marathons, too? Sex marathons with Spike? He swore that, when he died for real, they were gonna have a hell of a lot to answer for. He grimaced and opened his mouth, but the traitorous thing took that opportunity to yawn again. He shut his jaw with a snap and glared sleepily at Spike as the next best thing to glaring at the Powers themselves, who probably wouldn't even notice, or care if they did.

But Spike just chuckled again and smoothed his fingers through Xander's hair. 'Sleep first.'

Xander sighed and gave up. Spike was right, after all. Although he was definitely going to have to look into getting a day off. 'You staying?' he asked.

Spike nodded. "Course."

So Xander grinned and pulled Spike down to rest against his chest. He felt the other man smile. 'Night Xan. Love you.' Xander tightened his arms in reply and dropped a kiss on the soft curls tickling his chin.

He held Spike like that for a long moment, silently marveling at the creature in his arms. This beautiful, flawed man who loved him. And he believed that. Over the past month Spike hadn't said it much, hadn't pressed him, and certainly hadn't chained him up like he once had Buffy, literally or metaphorically. But he had shown him. In every touch, every gesture, every lingering look, it was obvious. It was also finally becoming obvious to Xander that Spike wasn't toying with him. He still couldn't profess to understand what he'd done to deserve any of this, what Spike could possibly see in him to warrant this much devotion, but the fact was he did, Spike did. He wasn't second best. He was needed and wanted, and even though they didn't know what the Powers had in store for him, Spike didn't want to lose him, wouldn't want to leave him.

There was nothing more he could ask for.

When he realized that, he felt the last of his reservations fall away. He'd been treated almost as badly as Spike by the gods of relationships. For years he'd just given his heart away to anyone who looked like they might want him. But he'd learned his lesson with Anya, had tried to protect his heart before it got broken. Maybe he hadn't needed to in this case, but Sunnydale mentality taught you it was better to be safe than sorry.

'I love you, Spike,' he whispered. He did. Of course he did. How could he not? He had never felt as safe as he did when Spike was holding him in his arms.

It amazed him sometimes that so much should have changed, to make something like that not just possible, but to make it feel like the most natural thing in the world. But then, as often as he and Spike had lashed out at each other all those years ago, they had also always protected each other, frequently to the bemusement of all involved. Their

entire history had taken on a rosy glow that Xander knew intellectually it didn't deserve, but that knowledge wasn't enough to fade it.

Spike shifted so he could look Xander in the eye. 'Yeah?' There was a slow grin spreading over his face.

Xander quirked up the corner of his mouth and nodded. 'Yeah, I do.'

Spike's eyes were suspiciously bright as he opened his mouth a couple of times, seemingly at a loss for words, just staring, grinning, at him. 'What?' Xander said after a moment, starting to get self-conscious.

Spike shook his head. 'Don't think anyone's ever said that to me before. Well, not and meant it. 'Cept maybe Dru, but then it was always hard to tell with her.'

Xander smiled and leaned up for a kiss. 'Well then it's a shame you're so set on me sleeping, or we could celebrate. Love,' he added with a suggestive

leer.

Spike growled, his eyes dilating. Xander barely had time to raise an eyebrow before he was covered in six feet of glowing ex-vampire. 'Fuck that,' Spike muttered, before using his tongue to show him just how much he appreciated the sentiment. His mouth was busy, but Xander's eyes reflected the self-satisfied smile it would have shown.

But Spike was kissing him with very little of his usual finesse, grinding against him desperately. Xander's eyes softened as he realized this. He wrapped both his arms around Spike, forcing him to still and gently pulled away from the kiss. Bright blue eyes fluttered open, filled with desire, confusion, impatience, but Xander just smiled, running the fingers of one hand over Spike's backbone, relishing the little shiver this produced.

When he was certain he had the man's full attention, he stilled his hand and repeated, 'I love you. And I wasn't planning on changing my mind anytime in the near future, so I think we can spare a

few extra minutes to get this right, don't you think?'
Then he smiled.

There was a different sort of desperation in Spike's eyes now. 'Xan... I... please -' His voice broke and at the tears in his eyes Xander's heart followed suit. God, he loved this man. Right at that moment he couldn't remember ever having felt anything else. It was like looking into forever. One hundred and fifty years and no one had ever just loved him, wanted him, for everything he was, everything he wasn't.

He rolled them over so he could look down at Spike. 'I promise,' he whispered. Spike moaned as he leant down and kissed him deeply for a moment. When Xander pulled away, Spike's eyes had dilated and he was breathing heavily, but the need was still evident in his face. So Xander breathed a final, 'Love you,' into his ear and proceeded to prove to him that he wasn't going anywhere, and that when he said he loved him, he meant it.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander had fallen asleep at last. Spike sat up against the headboard, carding his fingers through soft brown hair as he looked down at the other man. His face softened into a smile. Xander looked so young like this, sleeping peacefully. He knew from experience how that peaceful façade would be shattered even in sleep when Xander started dreaming. Then the lines would deepen in his forehead, his teeth would grit, his mouth pursed in a grimace of pain as he twitched anxiously, fighting against unseen enemies.

It was a spectacle Spike was familiar with even from his nights spent in Xander's basement, tied to a chair, when the unconscious fear rolling off the youth had been entertaining more than anything else. And just as back then Xander had always made light of those dreams and his reactions to them, so now he merely brushed them off when he woke. Still, every time, Spike's relief was tempered by a deep and abiding sadness that Xander, Buffy, any of them, should live in a world so full of monsters and darkness that even nightmares that woke them

screaming and sweating should be so easily dismissed.

However, Xander had been dreaming less, recently, which felt to Spike like a greater victory than it probably was. But a victory nonetheless, and it made him hope that he really was helping, that everything he'd done over the past couple of weeks was making Xander's life better, happier.

His eyes drifted shut. He could hear the occasional raised voice, slammed door, rushing footstep from the house below them, but it was distant, unimportant. He relaxed backwards, allowing his thoughts to spiral aimlessly.

It was so quiet inside his head these days. For sixteen years he'd grown so used to the voices, the screaming, they'd become just white noise, except when something brought back a memory.

He still thought about them. Every night he'd confront another ghost, and there'd been one more session on the roof that had left both of them

mentally and physically exhausted. But more importantly had left Spike forgiven, free. He didn't forget them, wasn't sure he would be allowed to, even had he wanted to. Xander had suggested he get one of the watchers to write everything down. He was still one of the most infamous vampires in history. Even the new and improved council had jumped at the opportunity to know more about the life and death of William the Bloody, and once again he had related every gory detail and everything Xander told him about the people he had killed. As his life was put down on paper, it had started to feel like he was fulfilling some responsibility to the people inside his head, and that, more than anything, had reinforced the peace that had become so much easier to hold onto.

With his eyes shut, it took him a moment to realize that the room seemed to be getting brighter. He started to feel like the Powers were pulling him somewhere and quickly slipped the ring off his finger, but when he focused on the feeling it didn't lead him anywhere. He opened his eyes in confusion. The room, and Xander, was gone. The

light was everywhere.

He'd only seen this once before. He felt a momentary rush of panic, but even as he tried to grab hold of it, it drifted away. Glancing down at himself, he was relieved to note he seemed to be solid, unlike the last time, and clothed, which was a little confusing.

Tears formed in his eyes. This was it then. One hundred and fifty years, and still all he could think was that it wasn't enough. Not now. Not when he'd finally found something worth living for.

But he screwed his eyes shut impatiently and willed them away. There had to be a way out of this. There had to be.

Suddenly he was looking at a young blond woman. His eyes widened in surprise and he took a step backwards. She was perfect. And ordinary. His brain couldn't quite reconcile the two impressions. On the one hand, he felt he probably wouldn't look twice at her if he'd passed her on the street. On the

other, he couldn't believe he'd ever seen anything more beautiful. It was like she was a part of the light all around them. Her skin was whiter than her gown, translucent almost. He could see golden trceries over her arms and neck like veins. He looked at her face, but was having trouble focusing on it. Even as he gazed at her, he knew he would forget her the moment he looked away.

Her right eye was a brilliant icy blue, her left a pure flat white. Spike frowned when he noticed this, but didn't immediately understand why he found them disturbing. As he watched, the whiteness started swirling, like clouds over the moon, and an oddly familiar blue eye emerged.

She'd appeared directly in front of him and was smiling. He heard her voice inside his head.

'William,' she said.

'Yeah,' he answered warily. 'Who're you?'

'I am Theirs.' The Powers That Be had appeared as a

little chit in a white dress? He hadn't seen that one coming. Spike shrugged mentally. He didn't really care. They could be whatever they chose, so long as they did what he wanted.

'And what do you want, William?' The voice echoed around his head.

Xander, was his first thought. He wanted Xander.

'Why?' she asked him. There was no inflection to her voice, not even curiosity. He got the feeling she already knew the answer to anything she might ask.

It wasn't the sort of question you could just answer anyway. How did you put longing, desire into words? How did he describe what the very thought of Xander made him feel?

He frowned and attempted to answer. 'Because I love him. Because he makes me happy. When I'm with him I feel whole. Complete. Because I think I make him happy, too. And he deserves that.' He didn't add, 'after everything you've done to him',

but he wanted to.

The young woman smiled at him knowingly. 'Believe it or not, William, I want our seer to be happy. And you are right. You do give him peace. He loves you as much as he loves his family. All of you combined are his sanity, but you, William, are his joy.'

'Then don't make me leave him.'

'We made you a guardian so you could find peace and happiness, William. You not only found it, you went looking for it.'

'And so now I'm just going to be dead? After what you said about Xander, after every goddamned thing I've done for you-' He broke off, glaring desperately at the complacent figure before him.

'You are not dead, William. But this is an end. You have found peace.'

'I have found life. Everything I never had when I was alive, when I was dead, when I was your fucking

guardian. Everything William ever dreamed he'd have. Love, family, a purpose. Not even perfect happiness, 'cause let's admit, that'd be bloody boring in the long term. But yeah, lying in his arms just now, I felt it. For the first time, I felt it. And it was like my heart had started beating.' He stopped, closed his eyes and took a calming breath. Opening his eyes, he found her watching him impassively. 'I've found things worth dying for before,' he continued quietly. 'But what I have now - Xander, Dawn, Buffy. They're worth living for. I can't lose that. You asked me why I wanted him. Well that's it. He makes me feel alive. I'll be your sodding guardian. Whatever you want. For as long as he's alive I'll be anything you want. You gave me this gig 'cause I wasn't ready. Well, I'm still not ready. You can't give me this and then just take it away.'

'Death is not about losing those you love, William. What you feel for the seer does not disappear. You would live forever in your perfect moment. He would never leave you, would always love you, and there would be no room for doubt, for despair.'

'And what about Xander? He needs me.'

'Are you so sure of that, William?'

'Yes, I'm bloody well sure. I'm sure.' This last was added in a desperate whisper. He believed it. He did. It didn't matter that Xander had never said it. He felt it.

She regarded him for a moment, the absent look in her eyes suddenly disturbingly familiar.

'Then we will give you a choice, William,' she said before he could say anything. 'You cannot return as you were.' No! He opened his mouth to protest. This couldn't be it. He was not going to fucking let it end this way. But she raised a hand, her eyes suddenly hard as steel, and he was forcibly reminded that here was a messenger for The Powers That Be, not just a pretty young woman. Her voice in his head was almost enough to drive him to his knees, although it hadn't gotten any louder. 'No, William, your time as a guardian is over. You have come to terms with your death, your demon,

accepted your forgiveness. You have achieved redemption. The scales have been balanced. But, we will give you back your life, if you wish it. You will be giving up your redemption. "Spike" will die. Everything that happened from the night you were rejected by Cecily Underwood, everything that led up to this point has been resolved. Your saving the world will mean as little as your attempts to destroy it. You will remember none of it. However you choose to live your life from now on is all that will determine your fate. Or you may take the peace you have found, the redemption you have earned, and die. You will see your seer again, and until you do you will hold his love in your heart. There will be no pain, no decisions, no doubt, no responsibility, and you have our word that the seer will be happy without you. Our gift will not destroy him. And you will have found the peace you have spent so many years searching for.'

Spike was silent. These were his choices?

She was right. A lot of him did want it to be over. To be able to give up the fight to someone else and

finally get some rest. To forever feel like he had tonight, lying in Xander's arms, knowing that the man he loved would be safe, and happy, and that someday they would meet again. He believed her when she promised Xander would be happy, and not just because she was meant to be one of the good guys.

'It's yours, isn't it? You love him, too.' Her eyes softened and a faint smile appeared at the corners of her mouth.

'I gave him my eye, yes. Not because I loved him. But now, I know his heart because of it. It will hurt him to lose you William. Immeasurably. But he will be happy. I swear it.'

Or he could become human again. Give up the assurance of redemption and peace. Live out the remainder of his life, become anything he wanted to be, make his own choices. But he honestly didn't think he could just walk away from everything he knew. And he knew he wouldn't be able to just walk away from Xander, Buffy and Dawn. Or would he?

Would he remember how much he loved them? He didn't understand how he could lose this feeling, but what if he could? It was unthinkable. But was it better to never hold Xander in his arms again? 'If I go back, will I still love him? All of them? Will I even remember it?'

'We cannot change your soul, William. Other than that, I can't say.'

Spike nodded, supremely unsatisfied, but understanding he wasn't likely to get anything else out of her. He ran a hand over his hair and closed his eyes for a moment. He couldn't do this. He shouldn't have to make this decision; it was just too hard. 'Don't s'pose you could give me some time to decide,' he asked, not really expecting an answer.

She smiled suddenly. 'We can.' Spike glanced up, startled.

'Really? How long?'

'Long enough for you to make a choice.' She looked

at him intently for a moment. 'There is no wrong decision, William. Remember that, too.'

The light flared. As it faded, Spike found himself back in the bedroom, standing by the bed. Xander was sitting up against the headboard, legs crossed, his hands in his lap clenching convulsively. They were the only sign of his distress. His face was clear, controlled, which Spike supposed should have tipped him off straight away. But it was only when he really looked into Xander's eyes that he recognized the deep sadness hiding behind all those carefully constructed walls for what it was.

Then he smiled, and Spike felt his world fall apart.

Xander had smiled like that when he'd said he loved him, had smiled at him like that in a million different ways over the past few months. The mischief in his face, the joy in his eyes that couldn't be contained even by the deepest sorrow. It was love, sincerity; everything that made up Xander was reflected there. And he loved it. For that more than anything else. Couldn't picture his existence without

it. He imagined it was branded upon his soul.

And suddenly the decision was simple. It didn't matter that he'd been redeemed, that he would have some sort of heavenly reward for dying a champion. It didn't matter that his record would be wiped clean, at least as clean as it has been when he was alive. It didn't really even matter that he wouldn't remember the last one hundred and thirty-five years of his life, up to and including the last few months. She'd said they couldn't change his soul. So all it came down to was whether he wanted to spend the next fifty years, or however long it might be, with Xander, before being with him forever. Or if he wanted to spend them happy, at peace, but alone. Holding onto his one perfect moment, but never allowing for the possibility of another one. They'd never end, never have to feel the pain of love faded, broken. But he'd never get the chance to see every variation of that smile, never argue over some pointlessly mundane thing, never find out what sort of an old man Xander would turn into, or finally take him on the vacation of a lifetime when he decided the visions were too

much for him to take any longer.

Dying would be easy, and after so long it was a temptation he couldn't deny the appeal of.

Life, on the other hand, held no guarantees. He had no idea how hard it would be to build their relationship again, although from what he remembered of William, it would take more than a feeling. But it was a feeling he knew would be impossible to ignore. With Xander, he was already alive in every way that counted. Memories or not, he would still be himself, and maybe one day they would find a way to restore them.

Besides, he'd never been all that fussed with making things easy for himself.

He couldn't have said what had changed, but Xander's smile suddenly held an edge of cautious hope. 'Spike, no,' he whispered. 'You don't have to do this. Not for me. Don't give up everything you've suffered for. I'll understand, really. I'm happy as long as you're happy. And you are. We both knew

this wasn't going to last forever.'

Spike smirked and tilted his head to the side. He looked into Xander's eyes for a long moment. 'Tell me you want me to leave, Xan,' he eventually said gently. 'Tell me you'd be happier if I wasn't here. Not because you think I'd be happy, or better off. Just because you never want to hold me in your arms again. Mean it. Tell me you don't want me.'

Xander stared at him, his eyes huge, bright, his hands still now, but clenched so tight his knuckles were white. He opened his mouth. Spike waited, a tiny smile on his face, but nothing came out. He took a step forward, close enough to touch. The smile slipped from his face, and he just stared into the eyes of the man he loved. 'Then tell me what you want. Tell me the truth, Xander,' he whispered.

Spike watched Xander's face crumple and faster than thought was on the bed with his arms around him. Xander pushed weakly at him, but he ignored it. 'Of course I don't want you to leave, you bastard. I love you. I need you. You're everything...' His voice

broke and he pulled back to look Spike in the eye. 'You're my everything,' he repeated fiercely.

Spike wanted to raise a smug eyebrow, or at least voice a small 'I knew it'. Instead he just smiled. 'Same goes, love. Makes it pretty easy, once you think about it.'

Xander let out a slightly despairing laugh. 'Spike, are you sure? Everything will be different. You'll suddenly find yourself in the twenty-first century, for god's sake. I heard what she said. You won't remember any of this. Hell, you'll barely be the same person. Do you have any idea how hard this is going to be?'

They were good points, but Spike hadn't missed the fact that Xander still hadn't said he didn't want to do it. 'They can't change who I am, Xan, who I've always been. If you think you won't love me without my memories then tell me now. But as long as I've got you it's worth the price.'

Xander sighed. 'I will always love you, Spike. It's

just... it feels like an end. Even if you're still here, it feels like you'll have left me. I never understood how you fell in love with me once. What are the chances of it happening again?'

Spike smiled and relaxed. 'It won't have to, love. Although if I start acting like some sort of shy nancy-boy virgin, you have my permission to beat me over the head with my biography.' He grinned, thrilled at the rolled eyes and wry smirk that Xander sent his way. 'Right then?'

'Yeah.' Xander's smile lit up his face. Spike had to kiss it. Xander's lips were sweet and warm, and never quite managed to lose the smile. Even as tongues stroked and twisted, Spike could feel it like joy, bubbling over and lodging somewhere deep in his gut. But the most wonderful thing was, it didn't feel like goodbye. When they broke away they were both grinning. 'So,' Xander laughed, still a little breathless, 'should I start calling you William? Billy the Bloody, maybe?'

'Only if you feel like getting the crap kicked out of

you,' Spike replied pleasantly.

Xander just chuckled. 'Check. No Billy the Bloody.'
He sobered a little and sighed. 'You've decided then?'

Spike nodded. 'Yeah. Yeah, I have.'

Epilogue

William was aware that something was different. He felt strange. Like he'd been... gone. Gone where? For that matter, where was he now? He thought back. What was the last thing he remembered? Leaving for the party at the Hoxtons', where Cecily was going to be. He waited for the expected rush of giddiness that the thought of her always produced, but there was nothing. He frowned mentally and

thought of her again. Lustrous brown curls he would have given his life to touch were... just hair. She felt so far away, and if he hadn't known better, he would have thought he hadn't seen her in years. Suddenly his mind flashed to shorter, darker hair, ruffled, but his hand twitched and he could feel how smooth it was under his fingers. There was a brief flash of sparkling brown and blue eyes, then the impression was gone, leaving him unaccountably light, happy. Who was this person? Had they done something to him? Why couldn't he remember more? He had heard of people losing their memories after an injury or a traumatic event. Perhaps that was what had happened. It struck him, then, that he should be panicking. And while he did feel a little off balance, for some reason he wasn't worried.

He felt himself settle into his body a little more firmly and determined that he should open his eyes if he wished answers to his questions. He could feel that he was lying on a bed, probably, but by flexing his limbs it was obvious that he was clothed.

His eyes flickered open to an unfamiliar ceiling. 'Spum, William?' a strange female voice said hesitantly and he rolled his head to the side, blinking a little at the light. There were two women standing by the side of what was most definitely a bed. They were beautiful, stunning, and he felt his heart start to beat a little faster in his chest. He couldn't even begin to understand why that felt so strange, so he shook his head and pulled himself up a little, not taking his eyes off these two angels. He didn't remember them, but he got the oddest feeling that he did know them. The way he felt, as he looked at them... protected, cared for, like he would do anything to keep them safe. And it was so familiar. He couldn't even bring himself to question the emotion.

'Yes,' he said belatedly, realizing they were waiting for him to answer. The smaller woman sagged in relief and smiled at him, while the other shot him such a warm grin that he felt himself responding automatically.

He was about to ask one of the many questions

whirling around his brain when a deeper voice spoke from the other side of the room. 'How do you feel?'

He froze, his mouth half open as the voice reached him. It felt like a needle straight to his heart and for a split second he forgot how to breathe. Longing, love, desire, protectiveness, peace, joy. They slammed into him and washed over him, leaving him panting as he caught his breath again. And with them came flashes of that brown hair again, dark, light, deep eyes, and how was that even possible? Filled with joy, with tears, a smile... But he couldn't put the images together, couldn't see... He closed his eyes, desperately trying to recapture the impressions even as they fragmented like shattered glass.

'William?' He heard the man say again, concerned now, but once again he couldn't open his eyes. The word echoed around his head, sparking a memory of something that had never happened.

'William.' Said with amusement, maybe a little

uncertainty, testing, tasting the sound of it on his tongue. A smile. Gentle, loving, teasing. One of his favorites. Favorites? A flash of eyes, dark and light again, boring into him. Truth. They were truth. 'I will always love you.' Determination. Certainty. Lips pressing against his own, their heat branding him. A kiss full of passion, love, promise.

His own voice answering. 'I'll remember, love. I promise. I'll always remember.'**

His eyes snapped open even as he pressed his fingers to still tingling lips. Who was this person? What had been done to him? The man was standing in front of him, looking a little worried. If he'd thought the rush of emotion was strong before, it was nothing compared to what he felt as he actually looked at this stranger who was definitely not a stranger. 'Who are you?' he whispered, awed and just a little frightened.

The man cocked his head to the side. 'Xander,' he answered.

Then he smiled, and William felt his world come together.

He didn't understand what was happening, had thousands of questions about where he was, where he'd been, why his surroundings looked so strange, why he felt so calm in the face of all this uncertainty. Somewhere deep down he knew that something had changed; his life was different, would never be the same again.

Intellectually, he certainly didn't understand why he felt so drawn to the people in this room. But at that smile, something clicked. He didn't understand the sensation, so deep it was almost visceral, lodging in his heart. It was at once calming and exhilarating.

And the soul he was no longer aware of thrummed in recognition and even through all the doubt, the confusion, one thought formed clearer than all the others in the back of his mind.

Home. He was home.

The End