Notes: This is Spander for electricalgwen, who very kindly contributed to Jolie's anti-leukemia marathon fundraiser. Which, if you recall, was last October, and hey hey, look at the time, is it July already? HOLY COW I SUCK. I apologize profusely to all those who contributed and have not yet seen the fruits of their generosity. Nobody's been forgotten, I swear. And hey, look, I'm dancing crazy!

Gwen asked for Spander, no particular flavor. And so, because I'm me, she gets epic h/c. Set in a desert, because apparently that's my default landscape for h/c Spander. (Seriously, I have a mental soundtrack and everything.) This one's different from the last h/c desert Spander because, um, it's...got different words in it. I'm pretty sure I didn't use the word "appendix" in the last one. Right? Right!

Ship of the Desert

by
Witling

Trust Harris to come through the portal fucked up somehow. The first time he pitched over it spooked both
of them, as well as the little old man they'd been trying to buy an extra blanket from. Harris hit the ground trailing a little spray of blood, and the bloke took one look and spat, "Ghost! Dirty ghost!" Then lost no time making himself, and his blankets, scarce.

Spike crouched down and turned Harris over, searching frantically for wounds, thinking for a moment that something even weirder than weird had happened, that he'd been shot or something--but he was already coming around, woozy and bruised, dust on his face, his eyes unfocused.

"What the--" He raised a shaking hand and dabbed at the blood coming out of his nose, then stared at it. "What?"

"You pitched a fit." Spike looked around--people were looking. Their expressions were unfriendly. "Come on, get up."

Harris tried to get up but couldn't, and it ended up with Spike hauling him to his feet, jelly-limbed and heavy, and the two of them beating as hasty a retreat as they could, down narrow alleys and back out to the outskirts of town where they'd left their supplies. Harris tried to walk on his own but couldn't keep his balance, and by the time they found their stuff he could hardly catch his breath.
"Something's wrong," he gasped, doubled over with his hands on his knees, while Spike repacked so he could carry everything. "Seriously, Spike--something is fucked up here."

"Talent for the obvious," Spike replied, hauling the heavy pack onto his back. "That's why we keep you around, I guess."

Actually, they kept Harris around because he was good with his hands, could read a map, was human enough to pry the orb from its setting, and didn't catch on fire in direct sunlight. Spike was there to get Harris to the orb and on to the return crosswalk without getting killed along the way. It was all very straightforward, in the way that portals and alternate universes always were, which was to say: not at all. The crosswalks were on opposite sides of the desert; the orb was in the middle. The desert was big and sunny, prime vampire-roasting territory. And now Harris was stuttering and stalling, like a car with air in the fuel lines. For a while he'd be fine, mobile and irritating as always--then for no reason at all, he'd keel over.
The whole trip was supposed to take three days max, alternate-universe time. Sixteen hours in the real world. Very quickly, it became apparent that that was not going to happen.

"I'm okay," Harris said, reeling to his feet with his head locked between his hands, as if he was trying to keep it from falling off his shoulders. "I'm--just give me a second-.."

"You're going to fall over," Spike said, and got there just in time as Harris did exactly that, dropping like a tree for the second time in three minutes. This time he stayed out. Spike stood holding him, limp lax and unresponsive, waiting for him to kick back into gear. He didn't. After a second, Spike realized he wasn't breathing.

"Oh, fuck." He dropped to his knees, dropped Harris on his back, and listened for his heart. It was still there, thudding away. Nothing else, though, and in a split second he thought both I am not going to give Harris mouth-to-mouth and I am not going to sit here while Harris suffocates, and then Harris took a deep, wrenching breath, and his eyelids flew up. His lips had gone faintly blue.

"Hey," Spike said, putting his hands on Harris's shoulders. "Harris. Take it easy, just--breathe, all right?"
Harris gave him a panicked look and took another huge breath, then started to cough. He had to roll onto his side, hacking dryly, while Spike sat waiting for it to stop. It took a while.

"Not," Harris said at last, swallowing dryly. "Good."

"Talent for understatement," Spike said, shaken despite himself. "You stopped breathing that time."

Harris spat into the dust, and rubbed his face. "Great."

It got worse very fast. By the middle of the next day, they were holed up in the tent in the middle of fucking nowhere, days from the return crosswalk, and Harris was badly fucked up. The lulls between fainting spells were less frequent and shorter, and he spent them sitting silently on his side of the tent, his arms locked around his knees, his head low.

"When it gets dark I'll just go," Spike said. "Forget the orb. You stay here, I'll just cross and come back and--" It was stupid, obviously. He needed the tent to get through the desert; it was more than a night's walk. Run, even. And then, after he crossed back over and got someone--
Red and the Slayer were busy holding the line, Rupert was in London, but whatever, someone, anyone--they'd still have to come back through the first crosswalk and find their way through the desert again and...

"I'll be okay," Harris said grimly. "I just need to...take it easy for a bit. I'll be able to move by tonight."

Spike didn't contradict him, not even ten minutes later when he slumped bonelessly to one side, out again. In the dim blue light inside the tent, his face looked white as cheese. He didn't breathe, didn't breathe, didn't breathe, and Spike leaned quickly down and put his lips over Harris's and puffed air into him, waited, did it again, waited, did it again, waited. After a few more seconds, Harris gave a violent start and gasped as if he'd just come up from the bottom of the sea. Spike sat back up and listened to him cough. His mouth tingled from the hard, panicky pressure.

"This," Harris said. "Sucks."

"No argument there." Spike paused to twitch the pack into a slightly more comfortable position on his back. It was getting close to morning, and they'd covered less
than a mile. No way they'd make it at this rate. What that meant, he was trying not to consider too closely. The idea of Harris actually dying here, in a godforsaken desert in the middle of nowhere in an alternate universe, was too heinous to dwell on.

"And the irony," Harris went on, because apparently on death's doorstep he still had to keep up a commentary, "of getting CPR." He paused to breathe. "From a dead guy. Is not lost." He waved a hand for the rest of it.

"Me neither." Spike gave Harris a sideways look. "You want to rest?"

Harris shook his head, wiped his mouth, and started forward again. Then promptly folded to the ground, neat and quiet as a bag of laundry.

Spike swore, shrugged out of the pack, and dropped to his knees. It was automatic by now--Harris wasn't breathing, so Spike breathed for him. He crouched there, waiting and breathing, counting silently, wondering how long a human body would tolerate this kind of treatment. Listening to Harris's heartbeat, willing his lungs to pick up again. Every time, a little longer.

When Harris finally took that swooping breath, hitched, choked, then turned to the side and hacked into the
dust, Spike sat back and closed his eyes. This was not going according to plan. None of it was going according to plan. He was going to have words with Red when he got back.

Early morning, and they were maybe half a mile further along, trapped in the tent with the sun beating down overhead. Supposed to be at the orb, Harris prying it out of the setting with human hands, while Spike kept an eye out for bands of brigands. The idea of brigands seemed very remote, almost dreamlike.

"I have this funny feeling," Harris said, staring at the ceiling of the tent, "that I'm not going to see King of the Hill again."

"Sure you are." That was stupid; reassurance just made things worse. But it was kneejerk. Harris was, for all intents and purposes, dying. Unbelievable, but there it was. Spike itched, in every fiber of his being, to do something. Get up, run for the crosswalk, something, anything. But if he left, Harris would be dead in an hour or half an hour or whatever; the next time he seized he'd just stop breathing and that would be it. Even if he
stayed, how long could he keep Harris alive like this? He was already dopey with exhaustion, his mouth bruised and his body obviously losing steam. He hadn't slept more than a few minutes at a time since they'd crossed.

"I also have this weird craving for a granita." Harris laughed weakly. "I hate those things."

Spike rummaged in the pack and came up with a stray packet of Tang. He shook it into a mostly-empty water skin, and handed it over. "Here."

Harris had been dozing; he looked at the Tang with surprise. "Oh. Hey, thanks."

When he stopped breathing again five minutes later, his mouth tasted like artificial orange. Spike breathed and counted, two fingers on the pulse in Harris's neck. Counting higher and higher and higher. Midday, Harris had two fits back to back, and when he came out of the second one his nose bled so much he choked on it. It was bad. He panicked, spraying blood and cursing, then crying for a minute or two, in short, angry barks with his hands over his face. Spike sat back and tried to be invisible.
"Jesus Christ," Harris said at last, mopping blood off his chin with his soaked sleeve. "This is not the way I said I wanted to go."

"You're not going," Spike said firmly, but a loveless, pragmatic part of his mind said, *Yeah, you kind of are.*

"So I'm thinking," Harris said quietly, in the late afternoon, "that--not to be too dramatic here--but, you know, practical--if I kick it, Willow's going to go mental."

It had already occurred to Spike. Red was the one who'd sent them, who'd researched the orb and the crossing, and told them how it would work. If Harris died here, she'd blame herself. It had also occurred to him that that wouldn't be unjust.

"You're not going to kick it," he said. "I'm not going back there by myself and having my goolies fed to me because she thinks I sold you to the circus."

"You want me to write you a note?" There was a faint smile in Harris's voice, but seriousnessness too. "You've been
keeping me alive for the last day and a half, the least I can do is try to make sure there's no...hard feelings."

"Don't be stupid."

Harris was silent for a while. The wind blew sand against the tent.

"You're going to have to think of something nice to say about me," he said at last, sounding half asleep. "Maybe you can say I had good breath."

"You have crap breath."

"So do you. And it disturbs me deeply that I know that."

"Yeah."

The sun was low in the west. Two, three hours to nightfall. Spike closed his eyes and tried to force himself to relax.

He couldn't sleep, not keeping an ear out for the next time Harris fell dead silent. He lay on his side with his eyes mostly closed, his mind running in pointless circles, while Harris's chest rose and fell, rose and fell, and then
just stopped. He went slack in some fundamental way, something deeper than sleep, and Spike sat up in a hurry, leaned over, and started breathing for him.

Lots of people had died in his arms. Hundreds, maybe thousands. He didn't like to think about it. Especially not now, coaxing air between Harris's dry lips and trying not to imagine that all those deaths were going to count against him now, that someone was going to look down on him from on high and shrug and say, *You killed enough of them, what's one more?*

*Not this one,* he thought, senselessly pleading with no one in particular. *Not this one, please, this one doesn't die, all right? I'll make you a deal, I'll house widows or something, just let this one get back where he belongs, don't let him die on my watch.*

Harris didn't breathe. For the first time, his heart stuttered.

"Oh, Christ." Spike slapped Harris's cheek lightly. There was blood crusted on his upper lip. "Come on, Harris. Wake the fuck up." He breathed, watched Harris's chest lift up with the air he'd just put into it, watched it sink back down. *Come on come on come on.*
It took forever for the breath to come on its own, and when it did it was shallow and tentative. Spike hovered, hand open beside Harris's face, wanting somehow to fan more air into him. His lips were purple. He rolled his head sluggishly to the side, and blood trickled out of his nose.

"Oh--God--"

"It's okay," Spike said, wiping clumsily at Harris's face with his sleeve. "It's okay, you're okay."

Harris closed his eyes and said nothing.

Spike went through the pack and dumped everything they didn't need, which was pretty much everything. He kept the map and a small flask of water, just enough to give Harris a drink when he needed it. They were going to get to the crosswalk before dawn. Ditch the tent, ditch everything, just cut and run.

"That's ridiculous," Harris said, slow and woozy. "I can't run. And you can't carry me."

"Sure I can."
"Spike." Harris paused, and drew in a laborious breath. "I'm bigger than you."

"Not by much. I'm a bloody vampire, Harris. I can carry anything."

"Except a tune." Somehow, Harris spared the energy to crack a smile at that. Spike didn't bother. "What happens when I crap out again?"

"Then I put you down and we do the...thing, and when you're okay I pick you up and on we go."

Harris was silent. Spike occupied himself with getting the compass out of its little case.

"There isn't time," Harris said at last. "It keeps lasting longer. If you have to keep stopping, you're not going to get there. In time."

"Yeah, I will."

"Let me see the map."

"No."

Harris licked his lips, and winced. "It's too far. We're barely three miles in."

"Let me handle this, all right?"
"You're going to go up in flames, and then we're both going to be dead."

"No I'm not. Fuck, are you always this negative?"

"Only when the plan is this stupid."

"I didn't hear you argue with Red about coming here."

"I've been framing a strongly-worded reprimand in my head."

"Me too."

"This is a terrible idea."

"You got a better one?" He paused, looking up from the pile of stuff, letting fatigue and anxiety sharpen his tone. Harris looked like hammered shit. Unshaven, hollow-cheeked, caked with blood. Worst of all, his eyes had the sunken, distant look that tuberculotics got before they snuffed it. He smiled slightly, his teeth white against the blood and stubble.

"Not really."

"Okay." Spike went back to sorting his pile. "Get some rest. It'll be dark soon."
Harris fell asleep, and Spike felt bad waking him up but he did it anyway, the minute it got dark enough to step outside. Harris woke with a jolt and a grunt, his hands coming up to clutch at Spike's sleeves.

"Harris. Wake up. Time to go."

"Are we--"

"We're leaving. Come on, get up."

Harris sat up obediently but slowly, so slowly, and Spike balled his hands into fists so he wouldn't jerk at him. "Bit of a rush, Harris."

"Yeah, I know--"

Together, they got him mostly upright and out of the tent, and Spike patted himself down for the water flask, the map, the compass, the few other little things he'd shoved into his pockets, then turned to Harris. Who was holding himself carefully, like an old and aching man, staring with great concentration at the ground in front of his feet.

"I'm going to stay here," he said. "I'll slow you down too much, you have to be able to run--"
"Shut up," Spike said. "We're going together. What do you think, over the shoulder?"

Harris shook his head. "This is insane."

"Fireman carry, that'll work."

"For forty miles?"

"Come here." He got Harris's arm, got under him, and levered him up. The weight wasn't bad, it was just awkward. Probably worse for Harris, trying to breathe with a shoulder in his gut. "How's that?"

"Humiliating." Harris's heart rate was up, his breath sounded tight. "Awkward. Not the last experience I want from this mortal coil."

"Relax. Just...breathe."

"Yeah."

Spike started walking fast toward the east, toward the crosswalk and the sunrise and home.

Harris passed out for the first time about half an hour in, going suddenly slack on Spike's shoulder, as if someone
had shot him with a tranq gun. Spike was ready for it. He stopped right away, put Harris down, and started breathing for him. He kept count, both so he'd know how long Harris was out, and so he'd know how much time they were losing. It was all about time, now. Time and air, the two most basic things.

Harris swam back up, loopy and exhausted, and Spike gave him a minute to gather steam, then picked him back up and carried on.

The second time happened an hour after that.

The third time, half an hour later.

The fourth time, he put Harris down and knelt beside his head, breathed into his mouth, counted, waited, breathed, counted, waited, breathed, counted, waited...and nothing happened. Harris's heart skipped a beat, then another. Then another. His chest stayed down. Spike pinched his earlobe, hard. Nothing.

"Fucking wanker," Spike muttered, starting to panic. "Wake up, will you?" The seconds kept slipping past. He breathed into Harris's mouth again, watched Harris's chest rise and fall and stay down. "What the fuck do you want from me? Wake up."
Harris didn't wake up. The night breeze picked up sand and scattered it over them. Spike smacked him across the face.

He breathed seven more times, listening to Harris's heart falter and slow, seeing it all play out: the heartbeat fading to silence, the futile efforts to kickstart, the ghastly process of hauling Harris's body across the desert to the crosswalk, of crossing back with it, of Red and Buffy, their faces when they saw. He saw it all with complete clarity: it was what was going to happen next. He just hadn't been able to admit it until now.

Then Harris took a shallow breath, and then another, and Spike leaned down and kissed him spontaneously on the forehead, patted his hair, and said, "Holy shit, that was close, don't fucking do that to me, mate."

Harris hardly seemed to notice any of it; he just gasped for breath with his eyes on the stars.

Half an hour later they came up over the top of a rise, and Spike saw something completely bizarre: a tent. It was about a hundred yards away, bigger than theirs, a square four-poster like the old canvas tents of the Raj,
and outside it was a camel folded up on its knees like a huge hairy handbag. The camel was looking at him, its ears raised.

"Um," he said, remembering the whole thing about brigands. He had a knife in his back pocket, but he also had Harris slung over his shoulder. "Was there anything on the map about...tents?"

Harris raised his head weakly. "I don't--what is that?"

"We're going around." Spike struck out purposefully to the right, cutting across the downward slope of the rise. "We don't have time for this."

"But it could be--"

"Fairies and unicorns, yeah. We're going around."

"Willow said there might be witches."

"I've about had it with witches, thanks, so if you don't mind--"

And Harris chose that moment to go slack and slide half off his shoulder into the dust. Spike swore, knelt down, and turned him over. Not breathing. Fuck, fuck, fuck. With one eye on the tent, he leaned over and put his mouth on Harris's. One two three four five...
The camel levered itself to its feet, put its ears back, nosed the air, and let out a creaking bray. Spike bared his teeth at it.

"Shut the fuck up. Wake up, Harris." He leaned over and breathed, and when he looked up again, the tent flap was opening and someone was stepping out. Oh, fucking fuck. Harris was still, his chest flat, his heart thudding away. Spike put one hand behind his back and fingered the knife up his sleeve. The figure was on the small side, wrapped in some kind of shroud. For the moment it just stood outside the tent door, staring at him. He bent his head and breathed into Harris's mouth again.

When he looked up the figure was walking fast up the rise toward him. No weapons as far as he could see. It was dark, he might have the advantage. Harris still wasn't breathing.

"This is really fucking bad timing," he whispered, digging his fingers into Harris's neck, feeling the pulse throb beneath them. "Come on."

Harris didn't breathe, didn't wake up, and Spike made a quick evaluation of the situation and maneuvered himself around so he was between Harris's body and the approaching figure. He puffed a last breath between Harris' lips, then went to game face and turned for
confrontation. Fangs bared, eyes gleaming, an open invitation to fuck off.

Instead of fucking off, the little figure strode straight up to them without a pause. It was a woman, he realized. About five feet tall and maybe a hundred years old. All he could see of her outside of the shroud was her hands, small and sun-blackened, and her face. She was brown and wrinkled as an apple, her eyes unnaturally dark. She stood staring down at Harris, ignoring Spike completely.

Then, abruptly, she turned and slapped Spike across the face. It didn't hurt, but it startled him badly, and he almost hit her back in automatic response.

"Breathe him," she said, pointing adamantly at Harris. "Breathe him, bring him, breathe him."

He stared at her.

"Breathe him," she snapped, backing away, gesturing for him to follow. "Hurry, breathe him now."

He found his wits, dropped game face, leaned down, and breathed into Harris's mouth again. It felt bizarre to do it with a witness. Harris's chest rose, fell, and stayed down.

"Breathe him," she said, backing slowly away toward the tent. "Bring him."
"Who are you?" Spike asked, pausing long enough to give her a glare. "Bring him where?"


"I have no idea who you are," Spike said, then dropped his head to puff air into Harris's mouth. "But if you can fix this, I swear to God I'll buy you a new camel."

"Bring him," she said, still backing away. He picked Harris up, breathed into him again, and started toward the tent. When she saw him catching on, she turned and ran on ahead, disappearing through the tent flap without another word. The camel watched closely.

"And if you fuck this up any further, I'll rip your throat out," he said, pressing another breath into Harris, hard as a kiss. She was alone inside the tent, he was relieved to find. It was roomy in there, with a thin carpet over the ground, a few pillows, an oil lamp in one corner, and a pallet made up of sheets. She was fussing with some bottles and jars, but she raised one hand long enough to point at the pallet.

"Breathe him."

He carted Harris to the sheets, laid him down, and kept breathing for him. Still nothing. Him die. But not yet,
Spike fervently hoped. Not yet, not for another few hours or days, not until they got to the crosswalk and back to the real world and then he could do whatever he fucking wanted, play in traffic or jump off a bridge, it didn't matter, as long as he didn't punch out while Spike was supposed to be keeping him alive.

Harris's heart gave a weary surge, and he gasped, coughed, and started to choke. When he turned his head, he spattered dark drops across the sheet.

Spike sank back onto his heels, the knife still in his sleeve, looking around. The woman was heading toward them now, holding a little glass pipe. She knelt in the sheets beside Spike and held up the pipe. It was packed with something that looked a lot like pot.

"You breathe," she said to Harris, smiling and displaying a startling lack of incisors. Harris stared at her, then at Spike.

"What--"

"Don't ask," Spike said. "And don't smoke that stuff."

She put the pipe to her lips and lit it with, as far as Spike could tell, her forefinger. He swallowed and leaned away. The smoke smelled very much like pot smoke.
"You breathe." She held the pipe toward Harris's lips, and Spike out a hand to intercept.

"Hang on a minute--"

"You breathe." She batted Spike's hand away and offered the pipe to Harris again. He smiled weakly and turned his head away.

"Who the hell is that?"

She shrugged, took the pipe back, dragged deeply, then leaned forward and blew the smoke into Harris's face. He recoiled, startled. "What--?"

"Breathe," she said.

"Hey," Spike said. "He doesn't need to get bloody stoned, all right? He needs to get fixed."

She turned and pinned him with a dark, glassy look. Her eyes were like the black beads they used to use in taxidermy, not like real eyes at all. He was struck with the bizarre certainty that it wasn't even her real face he was seeing--she was some kind of a puppet, an animated toy. The hairs on the back of his neck rose up, and he felt his fangs itch under the gums.
"I fix him," she said, in a low voice. "Why you let him get so sick? Him your ghost. Why you so mean to your ghost?"

"He's not a ghost," he said faintly. "He's Harris."

"Him your ghost." She turned back to Harris, and offered the pipe again. "Breathe, ghost."

"I don't--"

She pushed the pipe against his lips and he inhaled convulsively, the leading edge of a coughing fit. Spike leaned forward to knock the thing away, but Harris gave a funny little hiccup and then just...relaxed. No coughing, no choking. His eyelids lowered and he took a deep, shaky breath.

The little woman gave a satisfied grunt and took the pipe back for an absent-minded hit of her own. Then she turned to Spike, her blank black eyes staring straight through him.

"You hate him?"

"What?" He didn't like looking at her eyes, so he looked at Harris instead. Who was subsiding into sleep, it looked like. Whatever was in that pipe, it was potent. "No, I don't hate him."
"You kill him." She blew a column of smoke out the gap in her front teeth, and gave Harris a ruminative look. "Almost."

"No, I've been saving him. Look, we need to get to...wait-" He dug the map out of his pocket and squinted at it in the gloom. Maps had never been his strong point.

She didn't seem interested anyway; she grunted again, tapped the bowl of the pipe in her palm, then got up and walked away. "You keep him?"

"What? Look, we need to get to this thing, it's a portal. You know where it is?"

"Him die," she said frankly, emptying the pipe ash into a little bag. "You keep him, or him die."

"Keep him?" Spike glanced at Harris again. Asleep, breathing fine. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"Stupid."

"Thanks, that's very helpful. What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You." She raised her head and looked directly at him, pointing with one thin brown forefinger, and again he thought, That's not a real person in there. That's just a
shell. Again, his neck crept. "You kill him or keep him."
She shrugged. "Which?"

"Well, I'm not killing him, that's for sure. The Slayer'd gut me."

"You keep him."

"Right, fine, I keep him. He's a ghost and I keep him and whatfuckingever, would you take a look at this, please?"
He held the map out at arm's length. "We're kind of in a rush."

She picked up something in a small glass jar, held it up, and studied the contents. Spike gave it a minute, then stuffed the map back into his pocket. "Well, thanks for smoking Harris up, but I've got a train to catch."
He leaned over and shook Harris's shoulder. "Come on, time to go."

Harris didn't move. His head was turned to the side, his face slack and lost-looking, his breathing regular. Spike shook him again. "Wake up, Harris."

The woman made a ch-ch-ch sound behind him, and he turned to give her his thoughts on interfering women, but somehow she'd snuck up close without him hearing, and was waiting with a palmful of something that she blew into his face. He jerked back, going automatically to
game face. Fucking hell, he'd inhaled. She'd drugged him, and now she was going to rob them, maybe kill Harris, maybe kill them both, what a fucking disaster, he should never have agreed to the crosswalk thing. Portals were always like this.

"Stupid." She patted him gently on his forehead ridges, then turned to Harris and started taking off his shirt. Her hands were quick and careful, and when she had it off she smoothed his hair down like a mother. She folded it and put it aside, then made a shooing gesture at Spike so she could get at Harris's shoes. Spike got up, moved up to Harris's head, and watched while she got the rest of his clothes off. He was sunburnt and dusty, and there was a red mark on his belly where he'd lain over Spike's shoulder. He was still breathing all right. Better, actually, than he'd been doing for the last couple of days. He looked like he was sleeping properly, his eyelids were twitching and there was a faint upward curve at the edge of his lips.

It occurred to Spike that he was just sitting there, watching, while some weird little biddy stole Harris's clothes. It was a remote, academic sort of realization. He thought, *Huh.*
"Poor ghost," she said. She had something in her hand, something with a silvery gleam, and that was enough to spark him to reach out and touch her wrist with his fingertips in silent warning. She turned her hand and showed him the little cross inside it. No sharp edges, not a weapon. She smiled and pressed it to his forearm, and he jumped. It didn't burn. "Stupid, you." He examined his skin, then looked back to see her put the thing in the center of Harris's chest. He twitched as if she'd pinched him.

"You," she said, pointing at Spike, the smile gone now. "You tie him. Him a ghost, ghost need ties."

"I don't understand." He looked down at Harris, at the silver cross gleaming on his chest. "You want me to tie him up?"

She bared her lack of teeth at him. "No, no. Tie him. Him a ghost. Ghost not real, not solid." She reached out, gestured for Spike's hand, and when he put it out, smacked it. "You real. Him not real."

"He's real."

"Him not real here. Him ghost." She lifted Harris's hand, which looked just as real to Spike as it ever had, and let it fall. "Him die."
"No, that's not--" Spike frowned, trying to think. His head felt vague and blurry. "He can't die. I have to keep him alive."

"Yes, you keep him." She smiled and leaned forward, excited that they'd made some breakthrough Spike couldn't see. "You tie him. Look." She grabbed Spike's hand and put it over the silver cross, palm down. "Like that, yes."

"What, just--push on him?" Hesitantly, he pressed down. There was a moment of nothing unusual, just the cool metal against his skin, the warmth of Harris beneath that. Then something shifted, a jolt went up his arm, and at the same time he realized he was pressing just his palm to Harris's chest. No more cross in between, no metal on his hand at all. Harris opened his eyes and looked straight up into Spike's face, his mouth open in a perfect O of surprise.

"What the--" He jerked his hand away. "Where's the thing?" Not in the sheets, not anywhere he could see. Just gone. Oh fuck, was it in Harris?

The woman laughed, high and trickling, like a hinge.

"What--" Harris touched his fingers cautiously to his chest. "What did you do?"
"I don't know." He put his own hands behind his back, as if that could make it all okay. "I don't know, I just did what she told me. I didn't know it was going to go in you-..."

"It's...it hurts," Harris said dazedly, still fingerling his chest. "What is it, a knife?"

"What? God, no, what the fuck do you think I am?"

"You sleep," the woman said, gathering herself up behind them, brushing dust off her shroud. "Sleep now."

"No, we have to go," Spike said. "Harris, come on. We have to get going."

"Where are my clothes?" Harris sounded blearily pissed, like a man too exhausted to really care. "Am I naked?"

"You sleep," she said again, and this time it was punctuated by a brassy yawn from the front of the tent. Spike turned and saw the camel's head poking in through the flaps. Its eyes were black and liquid, with long female lashes. It looked at him with recognition.

"Is that a camel?" Harris asked, astonishment in his voice, and Spike looked back just in time to see his head fall to the side, his eyelids flutter closed.
There was no shifting him, so after a while Spike just gave up and went to sleep too.

He woke up in warm orange light, pressed full length to a warm body, his lips against warm skin. Harris, he realized. He was lying behind Harris, belly to back, one arm draped over Harris's bare side and stomach. They'd fallen asleep. They were--in the desert. In the tent. It was--

He jerked fully awake, realizing suddenly that he'd been asleep, he'd fallen asleep, Harris might be dead because he'd fallen asleep when he should have been awake and listening--

Harris twitched and blinked, opened his eyes, and lifted his head an inch off the sheets. There was dust in his hair.

"Where--?" he started to say, then cleared his throat and coughed.
"You okay?" Spike leaned up on one elbow, listening despite himself for the reassuring pull and chug of Harris's lungs. All there, all working.

"Yeah." Harris turned his head enough to see Spike lying behind him, and grimaced. "Just thirsty." There was dried blood on his face, and his eyes were exhausted, but he looked better.

Spike nodded, got up, and found the water flask near the head of the pallet. He unscrewed the lid and sniffed the contents critically, looking around. The tent looked deserted, except for a few jars and bottles in a little wooden box, the gas lamp, the pillows. That and a lump of black fabric in the far corner.

"Hey," Harris said softly, and Spike passed him the flask without looking, got up, and went over to toe the pile. It was the shroud she'd been wearing. Along with her skin. The pile was dry and smelled of nothing at all, but it still bothered him. He put a pillow on top of it, and went back to Harris.

"I had this weird...thing," Harris said, gulping from the flask. "There was this little apple-head granny, and a...camel."
"I think the camel was the granny," Spike said. Harris gave him a blank look. "Never mind. Don't drink too much of that."

"No, okay." Harris lowered the flask and sat up, wincing. "God, I'm sore."

"Me too." The last two days of tension had knitted hard knots along his neck and shoulders, and he rolled his head in irritation, trying to loosen them up. Harris reached out and thumbed a line from Spike's collarbone up to his ear. The pressure was warm and firm. It felt good.

"Is there any more water?" Harris was looking around as if he'd just noticed they were in a tent. "What's that big drum thing?"

Spike glanced and saw the outline of a barrel cask on the far side of the tent, through the canvas. It took some doing to get it inside without burning his hands, but he could smell the water through the wood. Must have been part of the camel's load, though why she'd left it he couldn't imagine.

"That's good news," Harris said, looking it over with a pleased, weary expression. "I wasn't looking forward to
shriveling up into beef jerky while we wait for the sun to
go down."

"Enough there for a couple of days at least." Spike went
back over to the little box of jars and bottles, and found
an empty glass and a little silver hammer. A minute or
two later he had a hole pegged through one of the
staves, and was tipping clear water into the glass. "Here."

Harris took it and downed it in one. "Oh my God, that's
good."

"Yeah?" Spike took the glass back and had one, himself.
It was good. He hadn't drunk water in a couple of days,
hadn't drunk blood since leaving their tent behind. He
realized, in a remote and unimportant way, that he was
very, very hungry.

"So what's the plan?" Harris asked, settling back into the
sheets, one hand going absently to the center of his
chest. "We wait until the sun goes down, then make a
run for it?"

"Depends." Spike tapped a spare cork into the cask, and
came back over to the pallet. "How you feeling?"

"Fine. Just...tired." As if in evidence, he yawned widely,
cracking his jaw. "I could sleep some more."
"Yeah." For a moment Spike stayed where he was, kneeling at the edge of the pallet, feeling a vague sense of disquietude. Something, it seemed to him, was off. Just slightly off, but it was important, and he was missing it.

"You want to...?" Harris asked, gesturing vaguely behind himself with one hand while he pillowed his head on the other arm. Spike nodded and crawled over him, lay down, wrapped an arm around Harris's bare midriff, and kissed him on the shoulder.

That must have been it, the off thing, because as soon as he lay down everything else fell away and he felt perfectly right and at peace. When he woke up again he was already hard, rocking forward with his dick pressed to the seam of Harris's ass, his palm flat in the middle of Harris's chest, holding and steadying him. Harris was awake too, or drifting at least, grinding back into Spike's crotch. Spike had a moment of concern for his breathing-it was coming hard and fast but it was okay, he could hear it was okay. When he moved his hand lower, he brushed Harris's hard-on, silky smooth hot and damp, and Harris groaned and thrust forward.
"Baby," Spike murmured, kissing the spot between Harris's shoulder blades. "That's right, yeah, just like that-"

"Oh God, Spike, that's good--"

Spike ran his hand up the insides of Harris's thighs, stroked his dick, his belly, his ass. Smooth hot skin, wiry hair on his thighs, below his navel, sweet lust smell rolling off him. There was sweat at the back of his neck, and as Spike stared at it he tipped his head back, rolled, and offered his mouth. Awkward and backward and perfect, like a fish on a hook, twisting his dick into Spike's hand while his lips fell apart for Spike's mouth, while Spike's free hand traveled down the one-way street of his spine and around and under and gently, shallowly, in. The noise Harris made was drunken and wonderful.

For some reason they'd never done this before, so it was a bit of a surprise when, after hardly more than a minute, Harris stiffened and spasmed and came all over Spike's fingers. Spike blinked, startled, and for just a second he felt uneasy. Something seemed...off, somehow. But then Harris closed his eyes and thumped the back of his head against the sheets.

"Fuck, sorry, I didn't mean to do that."
Spike closed his hand gently around Harris's warm, wet dick. "Right, that's a terrible idea."

"Yet. I didn't mean to do that yet."

"Because you can't ever do it again."

"Blow me." Harris was already moving again, thrusting slowly into the slippery loophole of Spike's fist. "Or..." He opened his eyes--bloodshot, Spike noticed, making a mental note about sleep and water--and smiled. It was a particular kind of smile, a revelation that Spike recognized. He smiled back. "Or, yeah."

"Yeah," Spike agreed, thinking, Why the fuck didn't we ever do this before? as Harris turned and bent his head and kissed Spike's belly, his hip, his inner thigh, and then from there the only surprise was how incredibly good it felt, and how it tore his chest wide open when he came.

Later, just before dusk, they lay entangled with the breeze pushing the canvas in and out.
"We should go," Harris murmured. His leg was heavy and across Spike's hips. "They'll be worried about us."

Spike said nothing. He let his fingers run through Harris's hair, which was dry and dusty. The desert wasn't somewhere to stay. His own belly was hollow, the hunger a constant irritation. They should go. But for some reason he didn't want to. Not yet.

"We can wait a day," he said at last. "Give you a chance to get your strength back."

Harris said nothing, but his shoulders relaxed a little further. He didn't want to go either, Spike realized.

They spent the second day in sleep and sex, getting up periodically to drink from the keg and cast a weather eye out through the tent flap. The world outside was serene and blue, hot as a frying pan, barren as Mars.

"It's the Sahara out there," Harris said, coming back and dropping wearily into the sheets. "I keep expecting to see Bedouins."
Spike hooked an arm around Harris's chest, pulled him close, and kissed his chest. There was a spot right in the middle that was unbelievably, inexplicably enticing. He gnawed gently at it, and Harris groaned and thrust upward, barely hard but apparently still willing. Spike had fewer limitations in that regard. He licked a trail down Harris's belly to his dick, and after a while he was only dimly aware of the sounds Harris was making--pained, pleading sounds--because Spike's own dick was leaden and hot, grinding a wet groove into the sheets, and the only thing he could think of was frankly, crudely, Harris's ass. There was nothing--no lube. They hadn't been planning on this. He came for the sixth time, into the sheets, Harris still panting and struggling under his mouth.

"Jesus Christ, I'm going to--" Harris's legs were twitching, his hands grabbing the sheets.

"Come?"

"Die." Harris fisted himself hard and fast, and came again, negligibly, his whole body struck rigid. Then he dropped his forearm over his eyes and lay panting.

Spike smiled, wiped his mouth, and pushed himself upright. He was sore, throbbing and strained. It felt great. Except his belly was empty, beyond empty,
dangerously in the red, and his body was starting to mutiny. His fangs kept threatening to drop.

The sun was almost down. He sat stroking his fingers down Harris's leg, staring at the low orange light outside the canvas. Harris twitched a few times, then sank into sleep.

They had to go back, Spike reminded himself. Had to.

They had to, so they did. When it got dark enough, Spike staggered to his feet and found his clothes, then shook Harris awake. Harris's breathing was fine now, perfectly normal. It was hard to believe he'd spent the last few days half-dying in Spike's arms. The blood was off his face; Spike had licked it all away. Tiny morsels, just enough to make him half-crazy with want, his hips jerking and his jaws aching to bite.

"Time to go," he said, to Harris's confused, upturned face. Harris blinked, then closed his eyes and ground his sandy fists into them, rolling the back of his head against the sheets in silent, futile protest.
"You could eat brigands," he offered, half-serious, flipping and heaving himself to his elbows and knees. Spike paused in picking up Harris's shirt to contemplate the image of Harris, head down, ass in the air. Brigands. That was a thought.

"Red," he said firmly, shaking himself out of it, shaking sand out of Harris's shirt at the same time. "Is going to go barmy. Or come looking for us. Either way--"

"--bad, bad, bad," Harris said, sinking back onto his heels and reaching for his shirt. "Understood. Jesus, I'm a tool. She's probably got us on a milk carton by now."

"And there's the orb," Spike reminded both of them, although by now the orb, and the minor catastrophe it was supposed to divert, seemed eminently skippable, an unimportant coda, an appendix.

"The orb." Harris yanked his shirt over his head and sat for a moment, staring at the sand between his feet. "Right."

"Time to go," Spike said, dropping Harris's trousers within reach, and going to stand by himself in the door of the tent, where he could feel the cool evening breeze come through the flaps. For some reason it felt important to notice everything just the way it was--the
breeze, the smell of canvas and sand, the fading heat still rising from the ground. He found himself trying to memorize it, hold it in place the way he'd once tried to memorize the cobblestoned streets of London, the neighborhoods where he'd come back to life.

They made good time, now that Harris was back on his pins. Three hours' quick walk to the obelisk, a black rock finger upthrust from the red sand. Nobody in sight, although Spike noticed some big soft mushroom-shaped hoof prints that looked suspiciously cameliad, right around the base of the thing. They didn't seem to have come from anywhere or to lead anywhere, and he didn't mention them. Harris was too busy chivvying the orb out to notice.

"And now," he said, edging away from the empty socket, the orb clutched in one hand, Spike's knife in the other. "We make like a tree and get the hell out of here."

"Give me that before you stab yourself," Spike said, hand upraised for the knife. When Harris jumped down from the little ledge, he gripped the back of Spike's neck and
Spike pushed up against him for a kiss, neither of them caring that there wasn't really time.

They half-walked, half-ran after that, stopping when Harris had to, picking up again as soon as he could. Spike kept a close ear on his breathing, but it never hitched, never caught. He was tired, dehydrated, probably famished, but he wasn't about to fall down and stop breathing. Well, he hadn't seemed about to do that in the first place. Spike kept a close ear on him, but in some deep, unexamined way he knew it was all right. Besides, they were almost to the second crosswalk. Almost home.

He didn't think too closely about the feeling that thought gave him, deep in his belly.

"That's it," Harris panted, pointing at the horizon ahead, on which Spike had long ago noticed a pair of big red rocks and between them, a faint shimmer. "That's the crosswalk."

"Looks like." Dawn was candling the sky over their left shoulders, and Spike was feeling its faint prickle under his skin. They had no tent, no shelter. If he got caught out in the sun here, it'd all be a tragic farce--he'd go up in flames, and Harris would be the one traveling home alone. Still, he felt a strange reluctance to hurry. Harris, too, seemed unhappy, or at least uncertain.
"How far, do you think?" Harris had the orb in his left hand; he transferred it absently to his right, and shook out the left as if it ached. Spike wondered what it felt like to hold that much mojo in the palm of your hand. He'd never know--Red had told him it would blast him to bits like kindling if he touched it. Apparently the orb didn't take kindly to the undead.

"Less than an hour," he said, squinting at the crosswalk. Desert distances were hard to judge. But there was less than an hour to dawn, so one way or another, that was their window.

Harris cast a quick glance back at the dawn behind them. There was worry in his face now. "Let's go," he said.

The rocks were as tall as Harris, roughly rounded as if they'd been molded from damp clay by a gigantic thumb. Between them shone the crosswalk. It was a relief it was there at all, Spike supposed. All told, it could have gone worse.

"So," Harris said, juggling the orb with a slight frown, gazing at the shimmer.
Behind them, the sky was pink, almost orange. It was a matter of minutes now, Spike knew.

"Right," he said, squaring his shoulders. Neither of them was saying it, but they were both thinking it--when they went through, something was going to be left behind. No telling exactly what it was, but that didn't change the fact. There was no telling exactly what happened when you died, but people still avoided doing it. For some things, instinct was enough.

Spike had already died once, and Harris had been close a few times. They should find this kind of thing old hat. And yet.

"I'm thinking," Harris said, and Spike listened with interest to hear what he was going to say, but there was nothing else. He just closed his mouth, swallowed hard, then turned to Spike with a lost, hopeless look on his face.

"C'mere," Spike said, then added quickly, "But keep that thing away from me."

Harris held the orb at arm's length in one upturned palm, while he stepped in and pressed his face to Spike's throat. His face was hot with sunburn, wet with sweat. He smelled of dust and unwashed skin, and of his own
particular smell, the one Spike now knew as exactly as he knew the patterns of light behind his own eyelids. The hunger in Spike's belly rolled over and kicked him with clawed feet.

"Come on," he murmured, taking Harris's hair in his fists, bending his mouth to Harris's ear, nipping his earlobe, then daring briefly to mouth his throat. The blood was too close, too hot and fresh and urgent, for him to stand it more than a few seconds, and he shoved Harris back with a palm at the base of his neck.

"What--?" Harris watched as Spike wrestled game face down, watched him run a tongue over his fangs, over and over, shaking his head like a dog coming out of water, until finally it subsided and he was harmless again. The look on Harris's face was, if Spike was any judge, regret.

"I guess it's time," Harris said.

"Guess so." Spike took a last look at the light behind them, then stepped up to the crosswalk. It raised all the hairs on his arms and neck, like static electricity. It seemed amazing to him that when they'd come through the first time, he hadn't insisted on having Harris in his arms, or at least under his hand. What an idiot he'd been. Portals were daft things, anything could happen.
He held out his hand, and after a moment Harris took it. They looked at each other.

"Here goes," Harris said, with a faint smile. Behind them, light curved up the sky, like water seeping upward into paper.

Together, they stepped through.

"Oh my God," said Red, staring at them over the gigantic book she was holding. "I was just about to send Andrew in after you!"

They were standing in the middle of the shop, on the white X Red had chalked there for their return, a million years ago. Ten feet away, Andrew stood glumly on the white X she'd drawn for departing flights, wearing a Boy Scouts of America backpack and a pair of what looked like aviator goggles. As soon as he saw them, he leapt off his X as if it were hot.

"What happened?" Red asked, marking her place in the book with what looked like a flattened toad, and coming
around the desk at them. "Are you all right? Did you get the orb?"

"Yeah," Spike answered, feeling slow and stupid. He looked around the shop with a kind of dull, distracted interest. The shelves were all still there, undeniably familiar, boring, and at the same time completely fascinating and foreign. All those bloody books, all those joss sticks and mouse skulls and tawdry Druidic figurines manufactured in Taiwan, the whole lot Anyanka'd brought in after Rupert had sold up shop, all of which had occurred in some half-remembered Jurassic period before she ditched Harris and moved to Denmark or wherever. It all seemed unbelievably strange, like a weary, laughably long-running storyline on Passions--all it needed was a dwarf and someone to turn suddenly, shockingly gay.

Harris held up the orb in his free hand, and Red grabbed a small black bag from the desk, frowning. "You're just holding it?" she asked, hurrying forward with the bag held open. "You were supposed to carry it in the bag."

"I know," Harris said, letting the orb go with a sigh of relief. "About that plan."

"Where's all your stuff?" Red asked, staring at them, seeing what she hadn't noticed before. "Oh my God,
Xander, are you okay? You look really..." She glanced at Spike, her face sharpening almost imperceptibly, and he felt the same quick burn of annoyance he always felt when they defaulted to suspecting him. The soul didn't mean much to anyone, it turned out. Except in a general way, a way that allowed them to use him when they needed to.

"It's not Spike's fault," Harris said--he'd seen that look, too. "He saved my life. That place was...not so great, as it turned out. Not super hospitable."

"What do you mean?" She was staring at Harris, clutching the black bag in both hands like the family jewels. Dimly, Spike remembered the catastrophe, and wondered if it had already happened. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"Also," said Andrew, who'd propped his inexplicable goggles up on his forehead, and was surveying them with keen interest, "why are you holding hands?"

Everyone looked at Harris's and Spike's hands, which were still clasped together. A moment passed.

"Why the hell wouldn't we be?" Spike snapped.
"So, let me get this straight." Buffy was back; she'd been out killing a batch of giant cockroaches, which, now that Spike remembered, was part of the catastrophe that had sent them off in the first place. There was green goo in her hair. "You went through the first gate, and Xander couldn't breathe."

"Not right away," Spike repeated. "It took a while to start. We were in that town--"

"Utz," Willow monotoned. She had her head in her hands, and was staring at the table in front of her.

"Right. Getting blankets, stuff for the trip. He dropped like an ox."

"I prefer to think of it as a balletic decline," Harris said. "But yeah. I just remember suddenly with the breathing, not so much."

"So," Buffy said, then stopped, staring at Spike's right hand, which he was using to rub the back of Harris's neck. He took it back, irritated. She looked at Red, who'd caught the whole thing in her peripheral vision, and who was giving Buffy an annoyingly worried look. Andrew sat
on a high stool at the far end of the table, his knees drawn up in front of him so he looked like an owl, still wearing the goggles. He was rapt.

"So," Buffy said again. All too clearly, she was thrown. Spike wondered whether the catastrophe was worse than he'd thought--but if it was, wouldn't they be out fighting bugs, instead of in here, rehashing the trip? "So you started the crossing, and Xander got worse, and then you met this camel..." She trailed off, looking lost.

"Right," Spike said briskly, hoping to move things along. Beneath the table, Harris' hand squeezed his knee gently-- *don't be a jerk.* "Camel, tent, little old lady. Except she wasn't really a little old lady, she was the camel, she left her skin behind when she went. She did something to Harris. Made me do it, actually. Pushed a cross into him." He hesitated, remembering the sensation of the cool metal melting into Harris's warm skin. "Smoke and mirrors, but it seemed real at the time."

"Where did you..." Andrew's face was the picture of horrified fascination. "Where did you, um, push the cross into him?"

Spike turned and stared at the little git. Beside him, he could feel Harris staring too. The silence drew out.
"I don't think," Red said weakly, then stopped. "I mean, that's actually kind of an important question."

"It went into his chest," Spike said, with leaden emphasis. "At least, that was the gimmick. It didn't actually go into him, you can't just shove a cross into someone's chest--"

"I've done it," Buffy muttered, in an undertone. "Lots of times."

"Not without blood," Spike said, rounding on her. "Or...ashes. Or whatever. Look, it was just a trick, she blew something in my face and I wasn't thinking straight--"

"Mugwort and cat's breath," Red muttered morosely, and he looked at her. "Oh, just...it was probably mugwort and cat's breath, at least partly, or at least that's what I'd use if I wanted to dope up a vampire and make him nice and docile while I did weird, inexplicable--" She made a vague, finger-wiggling hand gesture in the air between them. "Things. To his...friend."


"What about the cross?" His hand went to the center of his chest, the fingers brushing lightly. "I don't remember any of this, by the way."
Red was frowning, preoccupied with the problem, which bothered Spike because it implied there was a problem in the first place. As far as he was concerned, the problem was solved--they were back, they had the orb, Harris hadn't kicked it. Time to kill cockroaches.

"Look, it's been nice catching up," he said, pushing his chair back and standing up. "But I've got a blood bag to savage. Been a week since I've had a decent bite, I'm ready to drink skunk blood through a bendy straw."

"And isn't that a lovely image," said Harris, pushing his own chair back. Buffy looked at him, then at Spike, then back at him. Her face was alarmed.

"Where are you going?" she asked, and the sharpness in her voice made Harris pause and look at her. He was exhausted, Spike remembered, and he hadn't eaten in a couple of days, either. His eyelids were heavy, his cheekbones were high with sunburn.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said carefully. "Or do we need to go lay bug traps right this minute?"

"Oh." Buffy leaned back, obviously relieved. "No, no, it's fine, I staked--I mean, whatever it is you do with big cockroach things, which is sort of like staking but with more goo. I got most of them."
"I'll start with the orb," Red said, gathering up the black bag with quick fingers. "See if I can put a plug in whatever cosmic bughole they're coming out of. And I'll see if I can figure out what that thing with the cross was all about."

Spike shrugged, already starting to walk away. "Don't see why, frankly. When you've been around as long as I have, pet, you learn to leave well enough alone."

"Says the man who thinks 'well enough' is a mug of skunk blood and a bendy straw," said Harris.

"Xander," Buffy said, her voice louder, and sharp again. Spike paused and looked back, annoyed beyond measure. Harris was right behind him, looking back too. Buffy, Red, and Andrew sat staring at them, big-eyed as urchins. Buffy said, "I thought you were going to take a shower."

"I am." Harris was irritated too. "Skunk blood, bendy straw, shower. Pizza. Sleep. In that order." He started to turn away, and Buffy leapt up from her chair and started twisting her hands like a maid distraught.

"But you don't drink skunk blood," she said loudly. "You eat pizza, which is a normal food and which we can order for you, and you can eat it right here. With us." Her eyes
slid sideways, to Spike, then off him. "You always eat pizza with us."

"Yes," Harris said, in the tone of a man humoring the harmlessly insane. "And I'm sure I will again. But right now, I'm exhausted and starving and I have sand in places I don't even want to think about. I'm going to shower."

"With Spike?" Andrew put in, narrowing his eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous," Red said, turning on him. "That's not what Xander meant. He just meant--"

"Actually," Harris said, "that is what I meant. And then I'm going to bed, also with Spike. And when I wake up I'm hoping everyone here is going to be a little bit less insane." He walked past Spike to the door, opened it, and checked outside. "It's dark," he reported, to Spike. "Flame off. But I bet I have a parking ticket."

Spike walked out into the familiar warm Sunnydale night, and Harris let the door bang closed behind him. His car was parked up the street where he'd left it.

"Don't get me wrong," Harris said, jimmying the driver's side door handle in that particular way that made it open. "I'm glad to be back and not dead and everything. But does it seem to you that everyone around here
pulled up stakes and moved to Crazyville while we were gone?"

"A bit," Spike allowed, waiting for Harris to get in and open his door for him. For a moment, standing alone on the sidewalk under the yellow light of the street lamp, he had the strangest feeling, sort of like unrequited relief. A feeling of having dodged a bullet of some kind, and at the same time of profound sadness over...what?

Then Harris popped the lock and Spike got into the car, and they hit a blood-thru on the way back to Harris's flat, where Harris fell asleep sitting down in the shower, after giving Spike possibly the best, or at least most urgent and unexamined, blowjob of his life.

"There's something wrong with you," Buffy said, earnest as a choirboy.

"There's a lot wrong with you," Spike replied, "but I don't harp on it, do I?"
"No, seriously." She had him trapped against the shelves; they were supposed to be getting horny toad toes or something, he'd wondered why Red had sent both of them back here, but now he recognized it, belatedly, as an ambush. "You're...just trust me, Spike. Something is very, very wrong."

"Right." He leaned against the shelf, humoring her. "What's the trouble, pet?"

"You're..." She looked momentarily at a loss for words, clutching the jar of fleabane. "You're, I don't even know what, but I think you're sleeping with Xander."

He chewed on that for a minute. "Yeah. I am."

"Spike! That is wrong! That is not you! And it's not him either, and neither of you seems to get that, which is the weirdest part--"

He held up a finger. "If neither of us gets that it's not us, then I guess it's us, isn't it?"

"No, it's something that happened in the portal, in that desert. That camel-woman did something to you."

"Like what?"
"I don't know, she...made you gay. For Xander!" There was a high spot of pink in each of her cheeks, and her knuckles were white around the jar. She was going to break it if she didn't watch out. "You went in barely liking each other, and you came out..." She paused. "Well, you just came out, I guess."

"I'm not a poof," he said mildly. "You want a poof, you go see your ex-boyfriend. Great lunky bloke, spends a lot of time on his hair. Prances."

"You're sleeping with Xander! Who is my best friend!"

"Ooh, don't let the witch hear you say that."

"Who is straight!"

He shrugged. "You're all crazier than a nest of meerkats, but whatever, I don't give a toss. None of your business who he sleeps with, or me either. So you can roll up your bloody Watchtowers and cram them up your--"

"Hey," said Harris, stepping through the doorway. He looked a little flustered, and Spike wondered if he'd just escaped a similar lecture from Red. "How's that fleabane coming along?"

Buffy gave Spike a we'll settle this later look.
"It's here," she said, holding it up over her shoulder. "We're just coming."

"Right," said Spike, giving her a butter-wouldn't-melt smile. "Just got to reach down the fingernail trimmings and the magical dust bunnies. Give me a hand, will you?"

He raised his chin at Harris, who replied with a look that said he knew exactly what Spike was doing, and shook his head. "Oh, come on." He leaned his full weight back against the shelf, stretched one arm up, and let the fingers run along the bottoms of the jars.

"Willow needs that stuff," Harris said. He stayed where he was while Buffy walked out past him, then turned and frowned at Spike. "Don't be a jerk."

"It's not me that's all wound up, love."

"Exactly. I think they're seriously freaked out about something."

"Well, there are giant cockroaches taking over the world."

Harris looked thoughtful. "Yeah, but it's something more than that. Something about us."

"What's wrong with us?"
"Nothing." But Harris's expression turned from thoughtful to troubled, and that took the fun out of teasing him. Spike pushed off the shelf, walked over, and put a hand around the back of Harris's neck.

"It'll be fine," he said, pulling him close, smelling the warm, particular smell of his neck, the hair behind his ear. "It'll all be fine, don't worry so much."

When he pressed a kiss to Harris's jaw, he noticed Buffy standing at the other side of the shop, past the cauldron where Red was hurriedly brewing. Watching them with big dark eyes in a face as white as milk.

"Okay," Buffy said, leaning forward with her hands wrapped around her mug. "Remember that time Spike and I thought we were in love? We were going to get married, remember?"

"Don't remind me," Spike said, and Harris winced. Buffy grimaced too, but persevered.
"Right, but remember how that was all in our heads? I mean, we weren't really in love. We were under a spell."

Harris nodded. Spike stared at Buffy. Vaguely, he remembered the taste of her mouth.

"Well?" she said, prompting with her hands. "Anyone seeing anything the least bit similarish?"

"So you think," Harris said cautiously, "that you're under a spell again?"

"You are acting weird," Spike put in. "The whole lot of you. Maybe it's fumes from the witch's brew." Under the table, he moved his hand to Harris's knee.

Harris's sunburn had faded back to his usual dark summer tan, darker on the neck and hands, paler on the belly and ass, like a tapir and laughable really, unless you happened to be balls-deep inside him, rubbing oh so gently back and forth, heat and friction like the urgent whining rasp of a violin's bow sawing delicately back and
forth across the strings in just the right spot, right there, oh God, just, yes--

They always said the sound of the violin was the most like a human voice, drawn past the point of articulation.

"What's wrong with them?" Harris was awake, tipped on his side, staring into the darkness with Spike's arm draped across his throat, Spike's belly against his back. "It's starting to get weird. Actually, it's past weird. We lapped weird a while back."

"Don't fret," Spike murmured, only half-awake, and zero percent engaged. It was like hushing Dru.

"They're my friends." Harris lay silent for a minute, then scratched his nose. "Seriously, there's something wrong with them, and I'm starting to think it's not going to go away on its own."

Spike tried, and failed, to lever himself out of his stupor. "Hmm," he said.

"I mean, do you remember them being like this before?"
"Nnh."

"I think something happened while we were away. Maybe it's something to do with the bugs."

"Unh."

"Maybe I should call Giles."

Spike let that one go without comment.

They lay in silence, long enough for Spike to slide almost completely off the face of consciousness.

"I miss them," Harris said quietly.

Spike tightened his arm around Harris's chest, a single firm squeeze that was all he had to offer. The orb did what it was supposed to do--stuffed a sock in the unraveling corner of the universe, and stopped the big bugs coming through. There were still a lot of bugs skittering around, though, so they spent several nights chasing them down and skewering them, like olives on toothpicks. Cacodemons, Red called them. Spike preferred, "bloody disgusting."

"I think that's all of them," she volunteered as they trudged, slime-covered and weary, back to Revello Drive. "At least, I'm not getting any more readings from the
amazing magic giant bug-sensor device." She flourished the little tablet map, which still bore a faint glow in a few spots. Harris frowned at it, and she added hastily, "Those are just the regular old cockroaches at the Bronze. One more reason not to order the fries, right?"

"I like the fries," Harris said.

"I'd eat a fry," Spike put in. He'd skipped lunch; there'd been another lecture about hand-holding in public, or something--he hadn't been listening. If Buffy wanted to give herself a coronary about something that wasn't her bloody business in the first place, that was her lookout. He turned his head and spoke over his shoulder. "What do you think, geek boy--fries, maybe one of those onion things?"

Trailing a few steps behind, Andrew said nothing. Spike glanced at Harris, who was glancing back at him, his expression wary. Spike shrugged.

"Alternately," Harris said, "I found a bunch of old Battlestar Galactica episodes on VHS when I was moving stuff around the apartment." Actually, he'd been helping move Spike's things in, but that was neither here nor there. "Want to screen a few?"
"The original series was stupid," Andrew said shortly. "The remake's way better."

"Well, yeah, but the original series has historical value, plus, hey, Lorne Greene."

"Why would I care about Lorne Greene?" There was real acid in Andrew's tone, so much that even Buffy and Red looked around. "Why would I care about some stupid show with lame seventies actors walking around with tinfoil buckets on their heads and Geordie Laforge visors, and a stupid robot dog that doesn't even look real, and they don't even know enough to not have sound effects in space, hello, no air?"

There was a brief silence. They'd all slowed down a bit, and Spike caught the look that passed between Buffy and Red. It was an *I'm too tired to deal with this, are you too tired to deal with this, yes, we are not dealing with this* look.

"Oh-kay," Harris said.

They walked all the way back to the Slayer's house in silence, where Red, Buffy, and Andrew all turned in. Andrew stomped up the stairs, opened the door, and let himself in without looking at any of them.

"Geek boy's on the rag," Spike observed.
"Nice," said Buffy. "Very nice, Spike."

"What? I'm just saying that was a pissy little--"

"I think," Red said, with a quick look at Buffy, "that Andrew's feeling a little...left out."

"We just invited him to come over and watch TV." Harris was clearly as confused as Spike was. "I'm really not getting the left-out-ness of it."

"I think," Red said, and paused again. "I think it's not really the TV thing that's got him down."

"He'll get over it," Buffy said. "I'm going to bed." She started up the steps, then turned back, raised her axe, and leveled it at them, like a pointer. "And now that this whole bug thing is over with, we're starting fresh on whatever's going on with you two."

"There's nothing going on with us," Spike said. "For the millionth bloody time, everything is fine."

"Uh-huh." She turned back and started up the steps. "Just do me a favor, will you? Keep the freakiness down to a dull roar. Believe me, you'll thank me later."

"Hey, we will get as freaky as we want to--" There was no point in any more; she was already inside, and it was just
Red now, staring at them with that worried look on her face. He glowered at her.

"Andrew's jealous," Harris said, in the wondering tone of a newly-sighted man. Red's expression turned into a sort of wince of agreement.

"Really," she said. "You guys aren't usually like this together. I know it sounds weird, or...apparently it sounds weird, because you keep saying it sounds weird, but really, the weird thing, here? Is...you." Her hands twisted apologetically in front of her. "I'm going to start with the heavy-duty research tomorrow AM, I promise."

"Research away," Spike said, turning on his heel. "You're not going to find anything."

"I really hope you're wrong." But she didn't sound mean, just sad, and she kissed Harris's cheek before she went into the house.

Harris fell into step beside Spike.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," he said. "But did you just promise to get bar-raisingly freaky tonight?"

"Bloody Slayer," Spike growled. "None of her business if I strip you naked and do you on the hood of your own crap car."
"I thought so," Harris said, rueful and happy.

"The dimension you were in is called Bezos," Red said, in a tone that suggested there was a long, boring lecture polishing its specs in the wings. "It's sort of like Earth--I mean, the Earth we live in, as opposed to the many other Earths that also exist alongside our own--"

"Sometimes they all go into crisis at once," Harris said quietly. Andrew cracked half a smile, then remembered himself and went back to being silently wounded.

"Um," said Red. "Anyway, it's also sort of not like Earth, and I thought I had that part figured out, but apparently not, because I wouldn't have sent you there at all if I'd known there were going to be, uh, air issues--"

Harris waved a hand, dismissing and forgiving.

"Except," Red said, wearing her *you're not going to like this* face, "I've been reading a little more, and I don't think the problem was actually with the air after all."
"Funny," Spike said, concentrating on getting a pencil to stand on its eraser. "Harris had a spot of bother with it. Maybe he didn't read the right books, though." Harris kicked him under the table.

"The problem," Red went on, "actually seems a little more...cosmic than that. I think the air was fine, but Xander wasn't." She caught the look on Spike's face, and added quickly, "I mean, of course he's fine, he's more than fine, we love Xander, it's just that from what I've been reading, Bezos doesn't really accept visitors very well. If you're not from Bezos, Bezos doesn't really like you. And it tends to sort of...kick you out."

"Bezos didn't like me?" Harris sounded wounded. "What did I ever do to Bezos?"

"Apart from steal its orb?" Spike asked.

"I didn't--I mean, that was later! Bezos started strangling me the minute I got there! I could have been working for Mary Kay for all Bezos knew! You don't just take an immediate, homicidal dislike to everyone who walks into your...Bezos, and automatically strangle them!" Harris paused. "Besides, you're not from Bezos, and Bezos didn't try to assassinate you. What's up with that?"
"It was bloody sunny in that desert," Spike reminded him.

"It's sunny in California! Sunshine is the norm. Killer air is just...cold." Harris crossed his arms and sank lower in his chair. "The hell with Bezos. Bezos can kiss my sunburnt Earth-born a--"

"Spike's already dead," Red interjected. "Um, sorry, Spike. But from what I can tell, undead people are immune to a lot of things that alternate universes would do to...non-undead people."

"Fine," said Harris. "Whatever. And how did we not know about this before we left?"

"It's confusing," Red said, sinking down and riffling through the big red book she'd been carrying for the last two days. "I'm still sort of figuring it out--I think instead of calling people visitors or travelers or non-Bezos people, they call them 'ghosts' or 'phantoms,' which is, yeah, weird, but from the context--"

"That bloke in the village," Spike interrupted. "Putz. He called Harris a ghost."

"Utz," Red said. "He did?"
"And the camel biddy, too. Called him a ghost a few times. I thought they were just..." He circled a finger around his ear. "Didn't pay any attention."

"Ah-ha!" Red smiled, lighting up like a menorah. "See? I thought so!"

"You thought so what?" They all turned to look at Buffy, who was sitting on a stool at the counter, toying with a sprig of something dried and crispy. "What did we just figure out, exactly?"

"Well, we know that Xander stopped breathing because he was--"

"Not from Bezos," Buffy finished. "We knew that. He's not going back there, so how does this help us with the--" She inclined her head in the general direction of Spike and Harris, and Spike felt his hackles rise.

"If you've got something to say," he said quietly, "you should bloody well say it, Slayer."

"Okay." She put the sprig down and slid off the stool. "You and Xander are under some sort of spell. You did a ritual in Bezos to keep Xander alive, and while I'm very glad it worked, I'm less happy to see the two of you playing the newlywed game, and I'm a lot less happy when I think about how you're both going to feel when
we get this thing lifted and you wake up to reality with your tongues halfway down each other's throats. I'm extremely unhappy when I think about the potential for one or both of you getting pummeled into stadium cheese, or renewing your membership to the Drink-of-the-Morning club." She directed that last part at Harris, who flushed and scowled.

"Buffy," said Red.

"We need real answers," Buffy said. "We need to know what that ritual was all about, and how we reverse it. I'm sick of this, Willow. I want Xander back."

"I'm right here," Harris muttered, but Buffy turned and walked out. They watched her go through the door into the training room, and close it behind her.

"She's right," Andrew said, his mouth twisting unhappily, the way it did when he talked about his mother donating his original, complete Aquaman series to the Goodwill. "But she doesn't have to be so mean about it."

Behind the closed door, Buffy started beating the hell out of the heavy bag.
"Okay," said Red, squaring the red book and the smaller black book on top of it. She was wearing the same shirt she'd worn the day before, and there were circles under her eyes. At some point, she and the Slayer had cried and made up--Buffy was keeping very quiet, laying low, studiously drinking an iced coffee through a straw. Andrew was over on the stairs, only half-listening, most of his concentration on the new Authority, which he'd liberated from Harris the minute Harris had walked in. Apparently hurt feelings only extended so far, and not far enough to keep a geek from his comic fix.

"Okay," Red said again, and Spike settled himself a millimeter lower in his chair. He was getting extremely fucking tired of these kinds of meetings. And it was the middle of the day, so he'd had to come through the sewers to get there. Which was never a treat.

"Willow," said Harris. "You are the wind beneath my wings, you know that. But I'm on lunch break, here. I'm due to move a very big pile of rubble ten feet to the left in..." He checked his watch. "Thirty-two minutes. Let's get this party started."

"Okay," said Red, for the third time. She was nervous, anybody could see that. It was getting under Spike's skin.
What the hell was she going to tell them--they were going to explode into flames next time they shagged? Tough, but not a deal-breaker. Harris was about the best lay Spike had ever had, not that he'd worked his way around to actually telling Harris that.

"I've been researching," Red said, wetting her lips with the tip of her tongue. "I think I know what the ritual was. I told you last time, Spike was immune to the air in Bezos, because he's not, technically speaking, alive." She gave Spike a quick, apologetic glance. "And the ritual, as far as I can tell, basically extended Spike's immunity to Xander. Without making him undead," she added quickly. "Xander's still Xander, he's just...under Spike's protection. And Spike's still Spike, he's just agreed to protect Xander from harm."

"Yeah," Spike said, in the most duh tone he could summon. "Listen, are you people all completely mental? Of course I protect him, that's not--I don't need three days of research and a bloody spellbook to tell me that. This is fucking ridiculous."

"It's not," Buffy said quietly. "It's completely non-ridiculous." She sipped her coffee. "What else, Willow?"

"Well..." Red flipped open the black book and studied a page. "Obviously, there's a lot more than just protecty-
ness going on. Whatever she did to them, the spell she cast, it's like, protection raised to the power of...a lot. The cross, it's a symbol for the intersection of life and death. The horizontal line meeting the vertical one. Very old, full of power-y goodness. I'd say it was the, uh, the engine of the spell. And it happens to be a very big, turbo-charged engine."

"And now it's in Xander," Buffy said, leveling a gaze at Harris's chest. "Do we have to get it out? And if so, how do we do that?" She looked momentarily blank. "I'm not trained in removing things from chests. I mostly put them in."

"You're not cutting on him," Spike snapped, even as Harris sat up a little straighter in alarm. "Don't even think about--"

"No, no, no!" Red put out a hand and touched Spike's fingers. "Spike, listen, we're not going to do that, Xander, no cutting, I promise!"

"Okay," he said. "Okay, good. Great. So, I set off airport metal detectors until I die, or what?"

"I don't think so," Red said, giving Spike's hand a last pat, and going back to her book. "I think, because it's matter from Bezos, it's probably going to break down on its own."
Our universe doesn't host visitors from Bezos much better than Bezos hosted you, Xander. I think it's going to just..." She looked up and shrugged. "Dissipate. On its own."

"How long?" Buffy was staring into her coffee, not meeting anyone's eyes.

Red shrugged. "A few weeks, maybe?"

"And you think it's going to just..." Buffy squared her shoulders, and looked up at Spike and Xander. "Fade?"

"I think they're going to start feeling normal again, yeah." Red closed the little black book, and squared it again with the tips of her fingers. "I think it's just a matter of time."

Spike sat fuming in silence. On the staircase, Andrew licked his finger and turned a page.

"Okay," Harris said, at last. His voice was flat, a little hollow. "Can I go back to work now?"
They lay side by side, staring up into darkness. Harris was still breathing hard, and the arm he had trapped beneath Spike's back was hot and damp. They'd kicked the covers to the floor. The clock read 3:12 in glowing red digits.

"It's all bollocks anyway," Spike said abruptly, as if they'd been having the conversation all along, instead of just thinking it separately and privately, and channeling the frustration and fear into hard kisses and neck-bites and desperate fucking. "It doesn't add up, does it?"

Harris said nothing. He was toying with Spike's fingers, absently pressing the nail beds in order, one after the other and then over again.

"The camel-biddy saved your life," Spike went on. "Got you breathing, and got us out of a tight situation, and all right, thanks for that, I'll stand her a pint if I ever see her again. But all this crap about it wearing off--" He turned his head and gnawed briefly, ferociously, on his thumbnail. "They don't even know what it was, do they? They weren't there. It was all just smoke and mirrors, I feel a right idiot for ever buying any of it, honestly--"

"Willow's usually right," Harris said, to the ceiling. Spike faltered and fell silent. Harris's fingers pressed his: pointer, middle, ring, pinky. Then again.
"Well, she's not this time," he said firmly. "I'm not going to... to stop wanting you."

He lay waiting for Harris to repeat the assurance back to him. The silence drew out. After a long while, Harris pressed Spike's palm to his face, kissed it, and rolled away to sleep. *Keep him*, the camel-witch had said. *Kill him or keep him*. And Spike, forever unthinking, forever caught without a plan, had barked back *Fine, fine*, as if it were no big deal to sign away his heart, his life, whatever he had, fine, take it, whatever. He didn't have much--maybe that was the problem. What he never seemed to learn, or never remembered going in, was that it didn't matter how much he had, relatively speaking. What mattered was whether he'd have anything left, after he'd come out the other side.

"Want to go see a movie?" Spike was at the counter, eating a bowl of Kix and blood in a desultory way. He was branching out into American cereals, but so far the
experience had been less than revelatory. Grape Nuts, in particular, had been a misstep.

Harris, en route from the bathroom to the bedroom, toweling his head dry, muttered something. Spike gave it a minute; when Harris didn't repeat himself, he picked up his bowl and went to stand in the bedroom doorway. Harris was at the dresser, searching for a shirt.

"Movie?" Spike prompted, chasing a Kix with his spoon. "There's giants sharks on at the mall."

Harris pulled a shirt from the drawer, smelled it, and tossed it into the closet. The laundry pile was getting big again, Spike noticed. Harris shrugged, grabbed another shirt, and pulled it on. His hair dripped water down the side of his throat, and Spike had a spontaneous and brilliant idea involving the bed. He put the bowl down on the bookshelf, stepped into the room, and reached for Harris's towel. "C'mere."

Harris stepped away, rooting through the boxer drawer now. Spike tugged at the towel, and it came away in his hands, warm and damp. Beneath, Harris was three shades of olive, darkest at his feet, palest on his ass, delicious all the way up. Spike let the towel fall, and put his hand on Harris's hip, raising the other to Harris's shoulder, turning him and grinning, going in for the kiss.
Harris let him do it. No more.

After a minute, Spike pulled back. There was a strange, unpleasant feeling in his stomach.

"I'm kind of tired," Harris said. "I think I'm gonna stay in, maybe watch the game. You go."

Giant sharks, Spike thought. He was being sent off to watch giant sharks. Alone.

"All right," he said, stepping back, taking his hands back. "I'll...do that."

He reached for the bowl, because Harris hated finding bowls of old blood around the place, but before he could pick it up, Harris said, "Spike." Spike turned, and suddenly Harris was in his space, kissing him hard, hot-mouthed and urgent. It only took Spike a second to start kissing back, to get Harris's wet hair in his fingers and to let himself be pushed back until he hit the bed, Harris climbing him and humping him, biting his throat, tugging at his fly.

"You can't resist me, can you?" Spike said, trying for triumphant and almost making it. It was sex, it was something, it was better than being alone in the dark with giant sharks and his own thoughts, even if afterward he lay awake while Harris got out of bed and took
another shower, then went into the other room and turned on the telly and fell asleep on the couch by himself.

There was that, and there were other things. Little things, things he wouldn't have noticed if Red hadn't planted her evil seed. Or maybe he would have. They built up, over time. Harris went to work early, got home late. Sometimes he didn't get back to the flat before patrol, so they just met up at Revello or the Box or wherever they were starting out from, and then it was a quick hello, a quick kiss, no time for more than that. Harris got moody. He stopped sitting so close. When Spike reached out for him, half the time he wasn't there— he'd walked off to do something else, or he was talking to Red, or he was just standing too far away. They'd come back hand-in-hand, and ever since then they'd shared space easily, automatically, following each other around without needing to talk half the time. Now, Harris wasn't even there to talk to. He was busy doing a
hundred things, stupid things, things that involved not being home and not looking Spike in the eye.

Despite his devastating good looks, despite his killer charm, despite everything he had going for him, from the soles of his battered Docs to the bleached tips of his hair, it wasn't Spike's first time being dumped. Not anything like, in fact. He knew how to read the signs. What he didn't know was what he was supposed to do about them. So he drifted, anxious and frustrated, beneath the axe. He's just not that into you, his brain told him. His stomach, his heart, took a lurch to the left and refused to listen. Cut it off now, while you've still got some dignity. Red was right. He's fading away. Impossible, somehow, to believe it. Harris was a part of him. Keep him, the witch had said, and Spike had said, Yes.

"It's a signed first edition," Andrew said, stepping around a headstone and peering into the bottom of the bag. "It's worth hundreds of dollars. If not more. I'm not going to sit around with my finger on the mouse just hoping nobody else is interested--"
"I'm not saying don't do it," Harris said. "I'm just saying it's kind of...lame."

"Everybody does it. You'll never win an auction if you don't do it."

"Yeah, but it's an arms race, right? One guy snipes, everybody has to snipe. Look where that logic got us with nuclear fission, is all I'm saying. Suitcase bombs." Harris shuddered. "Did you eat all the pistachios?"

Andrew passed the bag over quickly. "I just had a couple, I think you ate most of them. Anyway, it's a moot point because I already signed up, and by tomorrow morning I plan to be the proud owner of an extremely valuable piece of modern sequential artwork--"

"It's a fucking comic book," Spike snapped. He'd been feeling frayed all night; the geek talk was too much. "Shut up about it, would you?"

Andrew's eyes went big, and he got that furtive, authorial look that made Spike suspect that Andrew had a far-too-intricate backstory worked out for Spike and Harris both. Like he was going to go home and write up another chapter of some modern sequential artwork in which Spike and Harris starred as moody Byronic heroes, constantly bickering over non-issues because their capes
were on too tight. He probably drew the sex scenes in full color, the little tosser.

"Indeed it is," Harris said, flicking a pistachio shell onto the grass. "Sorry to be so lame. What do you want to talk about, Spike?" He'd been doing this lately--aligning himself with the geek boy, or maybe just aligning himself with anyone who wasn't Spike. Picking fights. Waiting for Spike to either ante up or back down, and seeming somehow even more frustrated when Spike reliably, predictably, backed down.

"Nothing." He turned and kept walking; they were supposed to cover the whole south section of the graveyard in the next hour, then meet Buffy and Red back at the mausoleum. "I don't want to talk about anything, all right?"

"That's weird," said Harris. "For someone who doesn't care what we talk about, you seem to have some pretty strong opinions about Frank Miller."

"I don't give a toss about any of it, I'm just sick of hearing you two wankers go over every bloody detail like it's the Magna Carta. It's a fucking comic, it's for children, for Christ's sake."
There was a stony silence from behind him. He could feel the waves of geekish antipathy radiating from behind him, scorching the back of his neck, but for once he didn't care enough to turn around and make it better. He kept walking, sped up a bit, let himself pull ahead.

After a minute or two, Andrew said in a careful tone, "So anyway, the reserve is set at two hundred--urk." There was a thump, and Spike turned to see Andrew sprawled in the grass, underneath a big vamp in a dirty red leather jacket. Harris was just starting to react, dropping the pistachios and crouching like a linebacker, ready to plow into the vamp from behind, except that before he could do it, he was tackled by the vamp who'd appeared beside him. They hit the ground together and rolled into a headstone.

Spike let out a yell and charged the vamp on Harris. It was a big wanker, a gym bunny, and hungry as stink. The whole time he was wrestling it off, he could hear Andrew shouting, and part of his mind was thinking *Get the vamp off geek boy, get the vamp off geek boy*--. Meanwhile, he was getting his hands hooked under the gym bunny's chin, bracing his heels in the turf, and yanking just so. There was a snap, a pop, a shower of dust. Harris lay sprawled on the grass, staring up at him.
"Are you--" Spike started to say, and then an outraged bellow cut him off. The vamp on Andrew had stumbled back, hands slapped over its face, yelling. Andrew, Spike noticed, was still on his back. He was brandishing a yellow water pistol, spritzing madly.

There was a stake in Spike's pocket; he braved the squirts of holy water to dash over to the vamp and stake it, neat as you please. All told, it took less than a minute.

"Oh, yeah!" Andrew yelled, spritzing a last few times for good measure. Spike walked over and kicked the pistol out of his hands. "What? Did you see that? I totally maced that guy!"

"Amazing," Spike agreed, and turned to go back to Harris. Who was picking himself up slowly, fingerling his temple. Spike caught a sting of blood in the air, and reached out. "Did you hit that block? Christ, let me see--"

"I'm fine," Harris said, pulling away. "I'm okay."

"That's concrete, pet. Let me take a--"

"I'm fine." Harris sounded vicious this time, yanking his arm out of Spike's grip. There was blood running down the side of his face now. "Jesus, Spike, let it go."

"You're bleeding--"
"Fuck off." For half a second, it actually seemed like Harris was going to come at him. His throat was tight, the tendons raised. His teeth were bared. Spike took a step back. Vaguely, he noticed that Buffy and Red had arrived on the scene, in answer to his yell. Perfect timing.

Harris dropped his gaze, flicked blood to the grass, and pressed his lips together until they went white. "I'm fine," he said again. "Just don't...just leave me alone, will you?"

Spike said nothing. Nobody said anything. They all just stood there, while Harris wiped his bloody hand on the headstone, picked up his dropped stake, and walked off alone in the direction of the cemetery gate.

It was a stupid idea, a rotten cliché, but some things were classics for a reason. Spike got drunk.

He always got drunk when he was dumped--sooner or later, it was a necessary rite of passage. At some later
point, he knew, he'd probably destroy a bunch of his own stuff. That was part of the pattern, too. But first things first--he had a bottle of JD and a pack of fags, and a pool table that had his name on it until he couldn't make the balls sit still on the felt anymore.

"I think maybe you've had enough," said Willy, straightening him on his bar stool. Spike took a swing more or less at random, and knocked Willy's hat to the floor. That meant he got to hold himself upright on his own, and that in turn meant that he took a little nap with his face pressed to the top of the bar, his arms dangling like sausage links.

"Spike."

He woke up with a start, and almost dropped off the stool--only a strong hand around his bicep kept him from falling. He blinked, and felt around in his mouth for his tongue until he realized he was feeling with his tongue. Someone had plucked out his eyeballs, rolled them in cat litter, and put them back in his skull.

The Slayer was sitting very blurrily on the stool beside him, wearing a kicky leather jacket and an expression of concern. He propped his chin on his hand, after a couple of tries.
"Slayer." It came out sounding slurrier than it had in his head.

She looked at the bottle beside him, and the corners of her mouth turned down. "I was actually more worried about Xander and his appreciation for all things malt. I didn't realize you guys had the same coping technique."

"'S not a coping technique, love. 'S a bender." He laughed, and fumbled for a cigarette. "Where the hell--?"

"Come on." She slid off her stool and took hold of his arm. "I'm taking you home."

"I am home." That made no sense, but it felt grand to say it, so he spread his arms to get the full effect of the sentiment, and almost toppled over. Buffy sighed and used his momentum to get him off the stool. "I'm not going back to...Harris's flat, all right? Not welcome there anymore, anyway."

"I'm taking you back to my house." She said it with steely resolve, the way she said We're going to stop this thing or I'm getting it in both colors. "Xander just needs some time to...come to terms."

"Come to terms," he repeated. "Nice expression, that. Means, he needs time to work up the stones to tell me to fuck off."
"I think it's more complicated than that, actually. He's just really confused and upset right now." She had his arm around her neck, hauling on his wrist to keep him walking.

"He's a fucking poofter," Spike muttered, tugging his arm free long enough to turn and announce to the room, "Xander Harris--Alexander Lavelle Harris--is a bloody poofter!" A few people paused and studied him. Spike swayed on his feet, trying to find his center of gravity. "Likes it up the bum," he added confidentially, to the woman in the booth beside him. "Who doesn't, right? But not man enough to say it."

"Okay," Buffy said. "You're sleeping in the basement."

"Save a bloke's life," Spike said, letting her get hold of him again and swing him around toward the door. "Go to hell and back with him, buy his cereal and watch his bloody cartoons and keep all manner of nasty beast--like you--" he said pointedly, to a big vamp standing by the door, "--from eating him, and what do you get?"

"Hammered?" Buffy asked rhetorically, and kicked the door open.

They staggered out into the cool night air, and Spike took a deep, involuntary breath. It was intolerable to be
hauled all the way home, so he wrenched his arm free and stumbled backward, losing his balance and tumbling over the rubbish bin beside the door. He hit the pavement in a clatter of cans and bottles, and just lay there.

"Spike--" Buffy stood over him, looking hopeless and frustrated. "Come on, it's not that bad. I mean, it must be wearing off for you too."

"Wearing off," he said. There was a bottle digging into the base of his spine, and he rolled sideways, pulled it free, examined it, and tossed it aside. "That's right, it's all a spell, isn't it? 'S not real. You were right. Well done, you."

She stood there staring at him for a minute, then let out a long breath and sat down on the curb. He lay staring at the stars until he realized she really wasn't buying the drama, then pulled himself up to sitting beside her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I really am. But it's a spell, and it's going to wear off."

"When?" He scrubbed his face with his hands; he smelled of rubbish and booze. He smelled awful. "When's it going to fucking wear off?"
She covered her knees with her palms, and rested her chin on the back of her hands.

"Why's it worn off on him, but not on me?" he asked, feeling the hot seep under his eyelids, and hating it. "Why do I have to feel like this? Why is it always fucking me?"

"He feels bad too," she said quietly.

"Good." He took a swipe at an empty lager can, and sent it clattering down the sidewalk. "This whole fucking thing is Red's fault. I was trying to save him."

"You did save him." She stood up and held out her hand. "I haven't thanked you enough for that, I know. You saved his life, Spike. We all owe you for that."

He wiped his cheeks and stared at the rubbish between his feet. "Fine," he said at last. "Don't think I won't cash that in, someday."

"You can start tonight," she said. "Hot shower, mug of blood, cozy basement suite. All the Tylenol you can swallow. What more could you ask for?"

He laughed without humor, and let her help him up.
The next few weeks were awkward. Harris was over it. Harris was back in a world where Spike and Xander didn't kiss, didn't hold hands, didn't even think about shagging like minks on a Thursday night, on the couch, with baseball on the telly and pizza on the way. Harris had trouble being in the same room as Spike, now. He was weird with everyone. Moody, withdrawn. Buffy and Red gave each other looks when he turned up late, with shadows under his eyes, for meetings. Andrew, on the other hand, moved in for the kill. He dogged Harris's every step, brought him little gifts of comic books and action figures, tokens of affection that everyone but Harris recognized for what they were--opportunistic, rebound courtship. Finally, Buffy told him to lay off.

"It was getting too pathetic," she said to Spike and Red, in a rare moment of comradery, when they were all at the table in the Box, waiting for Harris to show up late, as usual, with Andrew in tow. "Plus, tacky much?"
Red nodded in agreement, and they both shot looks at Spike, as if he weren't going to notice. He noticed, but ignored them.

He could see now that it had been a spell. With part of his mind, he completely understood it, could see the difference between the world as it really was and the way it had seemed to him for those first couple of weeks after Bezos. Like those insects that had their eyes half above water, half under it. Life in the real world was all sharp edges and harsh realities. Life in the post-Bezos world had been blurrier, less distinct, softer around the edges. Not real. But he missed it.

It had worn off enough that he knew it had been a spell, but not so much that he'd stopped wanting Harris. He'd said that, at some point--I won't stop wanting you. Unfortunately, it was true. For some reason, Harris had gone all the way back to normal, but Spike had only managed half the trip.

Love's bitch, right. It wasn't that surprising, when you took that into account.

"Xander gave me this for you," Red said, trying for cheerful, sliding a thin manila envelope across the table to him. More of his things, trickling back piecemeal so he wouldn't have to go over with a cardboard box and his
tail between his legs. He was living in Buffy's basement, at least for the moment. The whole thing was beyond humiliating. "He's not coming tonight, he's got a cold."

"A cold." Spike took the envelope--it was light, practically empty-feeling, and what did he have left at Harris's flat anyway?--and slipped it into his pocket. "Right, thanks."

"Okay," said Buffy, walking in from the training room with a towel around her neck, Andrew trailing behind looking cowed and carrying a pair of kick shields. "What's the story on these fungus demons? Because I've seen enough This Old House to know that fungus is, generally speaking, the mortgage-payer's bane, and if I go into overdraft one more time I'm doubling everybody's rent."

The fungus demon thing was squishy but uneventful, and they actually finished early for once. Buffy took off for a quick patrol before bed, while Red went back home to catch Charmed in reruns. "It's relaxing," she said, a little defensively. "Anyway, you watch Passions."
"None of my business," Spike said, lighting a cigarette. "I'm going to take a walk, I think. See you later."

"I'll save you some popcorn. It's good in blood, right?"

He walked her to the corner, along with Andrew, who lingered a minute after she left. Spike raised his eyebrows. Andrew looked sheepish.

"I just wanted to say," he said, and cleared his throat. "Sorry. I mean, I'm sorry about you and Xander. What happened."

"You are not," said Spike. "You've been trying to get your hooks into him since day one. Just your bad luck, you're not his type."

"Well, apparently you're not either." Andrew paused, and backtracked. "I mean, yeah, all right, he's hot. But so are you. You were hot together. Not--" he added hastily, when Spike's eyebrows went back up. "Not in a creepy, voyeuristic way, just in a, you know..."

"Creepy, voyeuristic way," Spike finished for him. Andrew had the grace to blush, slightly.

"Well, he's been pretty clear he's not interested in me," he said, staring off up the street. "So at least when you
guys were together, I had a kind of vicarious... I don't mean, not in a creepy--"

"If I ever find any of the little stories you wrote about us," said Spike, "I'll shred them and force-feed them to you, with a nice Chianti."

"Understood."

"Good."

Spike wandered through downtown, past the Bronze and the coffee shop and the grocery store and the banks, then out into the suburb beyond, smoking and thinking. Sunnydale was quiet, vampire-free, a nice little California town without a whole lot going on. Hard to think why he stayed here, sometimes. Oh, right. His things.

He fished in his pocket and drew out the envelope, letting his cigarette smolder in the corner of his mouth. What minute trifle had Harris not been able to stand the sight of this time? He'd already returned all Spike's old photos, his fake IDs, and a Chinese takeout menu on which Spike had made a few notes for, embarrassingly enough, a poem. What the hell else was there to give back?
Inside the envelope was a slip of paper, folded over. Inside the paper, a key. Spike stared at it in the palm of his hand. Then he unfolded the paper.

*Spike--I think we need to talk. Come over--I'm home tonight and tomorrow.*

That was it.

He refolded the paper and slipped it back into his pocket, then stood studying the key. It was for Harris's front door.

He managed to leave it alone for an hour. An hour of walking briskly around the cemetery, like a man with a purpose except he had no purpose and he was hoping something would attack him so he could kill it. Of course, nothing did. It took an hour for him to work himself around from *He wants to see me now? He can bloody well wait to No point drawing it out any longer.* By eleven thirty he was standing outside Harris's flat, fingering the key and staring up at the light in the front room window. The telly was on; he could see the flicker. What did Harris
mean, *We have to talk?* Was that code for, *I have to dump you some more, in person?*

Harris answered the first knock, and Spike's first realization was that Red hadn't been giving a cover story—Harris really was sick. His nose was red, and his eyes were heavy-lidded and bloodshot. He smelled of cough syrup and sour sweat. For just an instant, Spike wanted to step inside, feel his forehead, make him a cup of tea. Then he came to his senses.

"I already know I've been dumped," he said curtly. "So if that's what this is about, we're done. And you can take this back, I don't need it." He held out the key. Harris looked at it, then back at him. He cleared his throat.

"Hi, Spike."

Spike let his hand fall, and tipped his head to the side. He said nothing. Harris pursed his lips, then stepped back from the door, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

"I'm sick, sorry. It's disgusting in here. But...you want to come in?"

"What for?" Spike stared inside with narrowed eyes, looking for the bear trap.
"I was thinking we should talk. About..." Harris sighed. "About us. Whether there's an us."

Spike snapped his gaze to Harris, and blinked theatrically. "An us?" he repeated. "Oh, that's rich. I guess you weren't around for the part where you told me to fuck off. Good thing I was, or we'd still be shagging on your living room carpet, totally unawares."

Harris winced. "Yeah, I--I was there, Spike." He pushed the door open a little wider. "Come in, will you? It's cold out here."

It wasn't cold, but Harris was obviously exhausted, and it was no fun kicking a man when his nose was running. Spike shrugged and stepped inside. The place smelled the same, but staler.

Harris shut the door behind him, stepped around, and went into the living room. He was blowing his nose on a wad of Kleenex when Spike came in. The couch was covered in blankets from the bed, and *Deep Blue Sea* was on the telly, muted. Harris tossed the Kleenex into the overflowing waste paper basket, and waved a hand at the kitchen.

"You want a beer or anything?"
Spike just stared. Harris sighed, sank down into the couch, and pulled the blankets down around him.

"So, okay," he said. "For starters, I'm sorry."

Spike turned and walked over to the bookshelf, where he started flicking through Harris's DVDs.

"I was a total jerk," Harris said. "That whole time it was wearing off, I was a complete prick to you. I picked fights and needled you and was just generally a giant gonad. I'm sorry."

Spike shrugged, fingering *Kill Bill*. "To be expected, really. You woke up and found yourself shagging someone you didn't even like. Can hardly blame you for being put out."

It was true, he knew it was true, he'd known it even when it was happening, it was part of the reason he'd kept placating for so long. Well, that and he'd been too much of a coward to let Harris pull him into a showdown.

"Yeah, well." Harris pulled another tissue out of the box, and massaged his nose with a squeaking sound. "Whatever, I was a dick and you totally didn't deserve that."

Spike studied the back of the *Matrix* case.
"So that's one thing," Harris said. "And then the other thing was..." He trailed off. Spike waited. "The other thing was, and I realize that probably the in-person approach is sort of lame, since it puts you on the spot, and also when I did this in my head I didn't have a motherfucking headcold, so there was more dignity and less mucus, but basically I was wondering whether there's any remaining chance whatsoever that you'd be willing to give me another shot." He fell silent, cleared his throat, then added, "With you, I mean."

Spike put the DVD back on the shelf, and turned around. He let his gaze roam over the room, over the scattered comics, the sections of newspaper, the used Kleenexes, the throat lozenges and the Nyquil, the empty spaces where his few books used to sit, during that brief period when he'd lived here and slept in Harris's bed and woken up every morning with his back pressed to Harris's, Harris's feet tangled up with his. He let his gaze roam over all of it, then come to rest on Harris himself, frowzy-headed and puffy-eyed, stale, snotty, flushed, and shivering. Doped to the gills on cough medicine. Not quite allowing himself to look hopeful.

"Didn't you just kick me out?" Spike asked. Harris took a breath.
"Well, technically. Yeah. But..." He fisted the blankets a little tighter around his chest. "I'm not asking you to move back in, I'm asking whether you'd like to, you know, try the whole thing again. But with eyes open. Because last time, don't get me wrong, it was great while it lasted, but I'd really rather feel like I'm making my own decisions, not just zombie-ing through some crazy protection spell cast by a...camel." One side of his mouth quirked up, self-mocking. "Like I'm choosing to be gay for a dead guy."

Spike let it sit for a minute.

"I'm funny like that," Harris muttered to his lap.

Spike eased back until he was leaning against the shelf, his hands propped beside his hips. "What makes you think," he said, "that I'd have any interest in being gay for you? It was a spell, remember? For both of us."

Harris flushed, if possible, a deeper red. He nodded, his lips pursed judiciously. "I do realize that," he said. "That is something that I realize."

"Even if I did still give a damn," Spike said, "I might have a chip on my shoulder after the way you treated me, don't you think? Might expect something more than just tissues and apologies." He pushed off the shelf, went and
glanced into the kitchen. It was a disaster. "I saved your life, Harris. Least you could do is buy me a box of toffees."

Harris sniffed loudly, and fished for another Kleenex. "You saved my life," he repeated. "You totally did. Also, you saved the world from giant cockroaches. I've got an envelope out, we're all kicking in a few bucks. As soon as it gets back from Malaysia, you're going to have a lifetime supply of toffee."

"What are you thinking, anyway?" Spike turned back. "What, go to the movies? Go dancing at the Bronze? Are we supposed to date?"

Harris looked trapped. "Um, I don't know?"

"Because I don't date, Harris. I fall in love and I stay that way until someone kicks me hard enough in the face to make me let go."

"Oh." Harris wiped his nose on his sleeve. "That sounds...painful."

"The penny drops. I'm not starting things up again with you, not unless you've got some really fucking good reason, and by that I mean you've decided it's your life's work to give me more head than I know what to do with." He bit at his thumbnail, spat the shred onto the
carpet, then pointed at Harris as if his finger were a gun. "I'm not opening this up again so you can faff about playing slightly-queer for three weeks, then go off me again. You want to experiment, go to bloody college. That's not what I'm about."

"So..." Harris swallowed with a wince. "You're not interested in trying anything unless I'm prepared to sign a contract in blood, saying I'm completely sure you're the one, forever and ever, amen."

"Yeah. And get it bloody notarized."

"Huh. This is...not how I was thinking this would go." Harris sat for a minute, then put his hands on his knees, blinked, and stood up. The blankets slipped and he clutched them to his chest. It took him a minute to navigate around the coffee table, and shuffle over to stand in front of Spike. There was heat coming off him, waves of the hot grotty sickbed smell. He looked wiped out. "How about a compromise?"

Spike narrowed his eyes.

"I hereby pledge," Harris said, "not to freak out unduly about being gay for you. Because I am. I admit it, I can't help it, I've tasted heaven and I can't go back. Also, the repression's feeling played. I miss you and I think about
you and I..." He paused, seemed to consider, then said, "I've jerked off thinking about you sixteen times since we broke up. Gisele, five. I think that has to tell you something."

"You're a randy bastard." Spike kept his tone flat, but in fact that admission--Harris, flat-out saying it to his face like that--it was more than he'd expected.

"Yeah, I'm a serious dynamo when I'm not suffocating to death or hosting viruses. So, I pledge to stay gay for you, and probably to increase in gayness. Although I draw the line at getting a pug."

"Who said anything about--"

"Also," Harris broke in, raising a hand. "I just drank about sixteen ounces of cherry Nyquil, so I'm going to make this short. I don't know about the forever and ever amen part, but I...it's not just the sex. It's--I miss you. I miss waking up with you and I miss hanging out with you and I think about not having that anymore and I just feel like crap. I feel like crap without you." He gave Spike a quick, searching look. "You know what I mean?"

Spike stood there a minute longer in silence. Behind him in the kitchen, the refrigerator kicked in. Harris's nose started to run, and he sniffed it back up.
"Yeah," Spike said. "All right, fine, it's worth a shot. Christ, you're disgusting."

"You're dead."

"At least I'm not seeping." Spike pushed past Harris, grabbed the box of tissues, and handed it to him from a distance. "This couldn't wait until you weren't oozing fluids anymore?"

"Oh, I plan to ooze many more fluids before I'm done," Harris said, in a promising tone, then paused, Kleenex halfway to his nose. "That came out...weird."

"Revolting, actually."

"That too." Harris blew loudly and juicily, groaned, and tossed the tissue toward the basket, missing it. "I really am drunk on cough syrup, but just so you know, I'm not going to regret this in the morning."

"You'd better not." Spike clicked the telly off, took the key out of his pocket, and held it up. "Or I'll give this to Andrew and you'll be on your own there, mate."

"Not for all the Frank Miller in the world," Harris said, in a tone so heartfelt that Spike walked across the room and kissed him, hot and salty and sick as a dog, the best taste ever, amen.
The End