

Genre: BtVS

Pairing: Spike/Xander

Codes: Slash, humor, violence, graphic sex, bondage, dom/sub, minor knife/blood play, some language

Rating: NC-17

Beta: Many, many thanks to my brand new beta, Beamer

Warnings: Contains explicit slash sex, violence, and sex games.

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Summary: (Goes slightly AU immediately following the last ep. of season 6.) This story takes Xander to a place he never went in the series. Immediately following his discovery of Spike's attack on Buffy, he decides to teach the vampire a lesson he won't soon forget.

*Seeking out Spike, Xander discovers he has to rescue the vampire **before** he can carry out his plans.*

Unfortunately, Xander's luck is running true to form and things don't go quite the way he planned. In an altercation with one of the demons that has Spike, he gets sprayed with the demon's blood. It has some . . .

interesting side affects. Xander's plans begin to shift as his controls and inhibitions fail, and memories and desires he'd far rather have kept buried deep in his subconscious come out to play.

AN: The demonic language spoken in this part is spelled with the closest phonetic approximation. Human tongues and throats can't actually form the words. :)~

Tainted Returns

by

Kiristeen

Part One

Xander had worked up a full head of steam by the time the crypt came into view. As far as he was concerned Spike had crossed the line, and he was just the person to bring that point home. Buffy'd said it didn't matter. She'd told him to let it alone. Well, he just couldn't do that.

Spike had something coming to him, and it sure as hell wasn't a swat across the nose and a gentle

'don't do that again, Spike'.

"Ooof!"

"Tur noc fon, slet hic novalmo?"

Xander froze, frowning. That pained exclamation had sounded like Spike. *But who's with him?*

"Turna nog corle. Veta not."

That's two.

Creeping forward slowly, Xander followed the voices and the sounds of flesh hitting flesh. Sure enough, they led him straight the door of Spike's crypt. Someone had beat him to beating up Spike. *Damn!*

"Bloody hell!"

"Slet hic novalmo?!"

Xander stood indecisively for several long moments.

He wasn't sure whether to leave them to it or actually dive in and rescue Spike. The vampire deserved it after all . . . didn't he? Groaning, when Spike let out a pained howl, Xander threw open the crypt door.

Silence descended instantly.

"Spike?" he shouted into the seemingly empty crypt. "Who the hell *else* did you piss off today?"

"Harris?" Spike asked, his voice sounding the worse for wear to Xander.

"Who else would it be, Fangless?" he shouted back, even as he groaned to himself again. *It would have to be down there!* Finding a length of discarded 2x4 as he worked his way deeper into the crypt, Xander hefted it. He smiled. About three feet in length, it would make an *excellent* impromptu weapon.

It didn't take him long to reach the two demons and Spike. He stopped, crossing his hands over top the 2x4, leaning on it as he would have a cane. In other

circumstances, he might have found the scene in front of him amusing. Spike was being held shackled with his own manacles. His arms stretched above his head and out to the sides, the chains were cinched up tight enough that only his bare toes touched the ground. "So," he asked brightly, "what'd he do to you guys?"

The demons shared a look that Xander could only interpret as puzzled, but before either Xander or the demons could respond, Spike startled them all.

"Don't leave me with him!"

The two demons slowly turned until they were squarely facing Xander. They studied him silently.

Xander damn near gaped at the blond vampire. *What the hell?* he thought incredulously. *Oh. Oh!!* Almost grinning, Xander ducked his head to give himself time to control his expression. He so could not believe Spike was pulling a Brer Rabbit!

"Metso?" asked demon one, turning only his head

to gaze questioningly at the manacled Spike.

"Why?!" Spike exclaimed, his voice fairly ringing with incredulity.

Xander's eyebrows rose. He hadn't realized Spike was that good an actor; though, he supposed he should have. Convincing people of lies was, in a way, acting.

"He's a bloody maniac, *that's* why!"

Oh, what the hell! Xander thought, dropping into the character that Spike was even now trying to paint for him. He allowed a slow grin to form, imbuing it with every ounce of evil intent he'd worked up on the hike over.

He was pleased by the startlement that flickered through the vampire's expression, his blue eyes widening ever-so-slightly.

"What's the matter, Spike?" he asked. "Don't have time for your old pal, Xander?"

The demons -- Xander still didn't know what kind they were; he'd never seen them before -- exchanged bemused glances, their smirks turning to full grins as Spike shook his head vigorously.

"Hell, no, Mate!" the vampire vehemently denied. "The last time around I couldn't walk right for a week."

Don't lay it on too thick, Spike! Xander thought. *They aren't going to buy it, if you do.*

"Sic nuw voltar, Spike?" demon two asked.

Spike's eyes widened in what Xander could only describe as exaggerated horror. *He* almost believed Spike was afraid of him. It was a good feeling . . . a very good feeling . . . a *surprisingly* good feeling. Xander let himself feel it. *To hell with always being 'the good guy',* he thought viciously. *Where has it got me?*

Spike shrank back, and if Xander hadn't been one

hundred percent certain it was all an act, he would have been utterly convinced that the vampire was terrified of whatever the demon had asked him.

"What's he asking?" Xander demanded, trying to sound gruff and threatening, instead of plain old curious.

Spike shook his head, pulling as far back as the manacles allowed.

"Sic nuw *voltar*, Spike?" demon two asked again, this time taking a threatening step forward.

Xander copied the movement, bringing the 2x4 up to rest across his shoulder. " *What* is he asking?"

Demon one grabbed demon two's arm, wrenching it around. "Cor nolvatarma lac xtra *nommee*!"

Demon two chuckled. "Nor poolknor."

"Spike!" Xander shouted, this time managing to add a real growl to his words. It wasn't difficult; he was

getting tired of being ignored.

Spike jerked his head around until his eyes locked with Xander's. "He's asking whether or not you'll leave me alive."

Xander laughed. He couldn't help it. So much for the vague, undefined feeling that maybe the 'demons' might stick together. "They understand English?" he asked.

Spike nodded, suddenly lowering his gaze to the floor, the submissive gesture sending a totally unexpected rush through Xander. Yeah, he'd wanted to teach Spike a lesson, but he hadn't expected to actually *enjoy* it. Well, okay, enjoy it *this* much.

Grinning fully, Xander turned to face demon two. "Oh, yeah, I'll leave him alive. He won't learn much from the experience if he's dust, now will he?"

Demon two laughed -- at least that's what Xander thought that sound was. It was a disturbing sound,

that much was certain.

"Och klart, nova almar crom. Kevleen mora tode comavarn alef. Lvnarta colloor rama noz stranta, co'tld vot."

"MOV!" demon one snapped, striding angrily toward demon two.

"Nava, Lart," demon two replied patiently.

Demon one, obviously unhappy with the way this meeting was turning out, stomped back to his place beside Spike.

"Translation?" Xander asked, turning his gaze back to Spike, surprised to find the vampire staring at him with undisguised amazement.

"What?"

Xander almost laughed as demon two pulled a gesture that was -- apparently -- universal; he rolled his eyes, then repeated his statement.

The fear -- *apparent* fear, Xander had to remind himself -- was back. "They said I'm all yours -- roughly."

Demon two reached out casually, and cuffed Spike across the side of his head. The deceptively gentle blow snapped the vampire's head back, rocking his body back as far as the chains and manacles allowed.

Xander's eyes widened at that display of strength. It *really* didn't bode for him, if this didn't continue on its present path of friendly cooperation.

"*Novar molt!*"

Spike shuddered, closing his eyes briefly before returning his attention to Xander. "He *said*, 'What's ours is now yours. You'll get ownership as soon as you pay his debt to us.' The other bit was just an argument about whether they should allow it."

"They own you?" Xander asked incredulously, trying

in vain to keep his surprise out of his voice. "How much?" he continued, this time not having to pretend to disgust.

"No, you bloody wanker!" Spike objected. "They just *think*--"

Spike's words were cut off abruptly as demon one mirrored demon two's earlier actions, only he put more force behind it.

Xander cringed as the loud *crack* reverberated through the crypt.

Glaring angrily, Spike continued, this time carefully *not* moving his jaw as he spoke. "Within their culture, when someone fails to pay a debt, they become the possession of the person they owe. And it's \$200."

"Fine, I'll do it," Xander said flatly, then paused thoughtfully. "I don't suppose they'd take a check?"

Spike carefully shook his head.

"I'll go get the money," Xander offered, turning toward the exit. Then, stopping suddenly, he turned back to demon two. "But I'm paying for him; from here on out, *I'm* the only one that gets to hurt him. Understood?"

Demon one growled, the sound low and full of menace. Pulling itself up to its full height -- full, rather intimidating height -- it took a single threatening step forward. Demon two, however, merely nodded its agreement, turning an admonishing look on its companion.

Xander turned then and strode out of the room, determined not to look back and spoil the image. *This is SO not going to turn out well*, he thought, worried about the demon that *obviously* didn't agree with the 'sale'; though, he had to admit the idea of being able to hold his 'ownership' of Spike over the vampire's head for the next . . . oh, couple of *decades* was definitely grin worthy.

Half way to the outer door of the crypt, Xander saw

Spike's duster laying half on, half off the stone coffin. He grinned, an idea forming in his mind. He might just make it out of this alive after all.

Grabbing the prized coat on his way past, Xander strode out into the night, feeling better about the ending of this little affair than he had.

~*~*~*~*~

Spike watched Xander leave with mixed feelings. First and foremost was his concern about what would happen while the whelp was gone. Secondly, of course, he was concerned that Xander would 'come to his senses' half-way home and decide *not* to carry through on the agreement. He wasn't altogether certain whether that would be a good thing or not. It was a sure thing that Xander would *never* let him live this down.

A growl from his left had Spike stiffening in preparation for being hit again. *If the whelp CAN actually get me out of this*, Spike thought, suddenly revising his indecision, *I can live with the ribbing. At*

least I'll be alive -- sort of. Frankly, he'd been surprised when the Margaso leader had asked about leaving him alive. Up until that point, he'd been certain he was a dusted vampire.

Of course, Xander himself had *really* surprised him, he'd expected it to be a little more difficult to clue the whelp in on the part he had to play. The boy had taken to it with an ease that was . . . unsettling, and it was only now that Spike was beginning to wonder what it was that had brought Harris to his crypt in the first place.

"I can't believe you're selling the vampire to the human!"

"Oh, quit being a child, Lart. This is the perfect solution to our problem."

"How?" Lart demanded petulantly.

Spike listened, his mind automatically translating the unspeakable demonic language.

"You know as well as I do that a vampire servant would be more trouble than it's worth. This way, we get our money, and *he* still gets what he's due for his contemptible behavior."

"I still don't like it," Lart continued. "The human will be too gentle."

The Margaso leader finally snapped. "Leave it be, Lart! What's done is done. I *will* not back out on an agreement -- even if it *was* made with a lowly human. *I* have honor."

"What about--"

"Lart, what do you think will happen when the demon population, as a whole, finds out this one is owned . . . by a *human*?"

Spike's eyes widened in true horror. *Bloody hell!*

"You *can't* bloody let this get out!" Spike exclaimed.

Lart flung his hand out to the side, his attention never straying from his leader. Spike groaned as

renewed pain exploded across his jaw, the barely knit bone recracking with the blow. *Great!* he thought sourly. *Yet ANOTHER bruise. This one's gonna be a beaut!*

"Lart! Don't damage the human's property further."

Lart frowned, his eyes narrowing dangerously, and Spike suddenly wondered if it was going to come to blows between his two so-called owners.

Unfortunately, Lart backed off almost immediately.

"I ask forgiveness, M'lkaro."

"Granted, Lart. You are young, you need to learn the times it is appropriate to control your impulses."

Lart didn't reply, but it was plainly obvious to Spike that the younger demon still wasn't happy. The glare he sent the vampire's way made it abundantly clear wasn't yet satisfied with the new arrangement.

2 The Purchase

The atmosphere in the crypt kept getting more and more tense until Spike thought he might actually scream -- *just* to see the reaction. Grumpy, as he taken to privately referring to Lart, was still pouting, angry over what he saw as a loss. Unfortunately, even M'lkarro seemed to be getting impatient. Margaso demons were hard to read, but the big demon kept sighing and glancing toward the exit through which Xander had disappeared. It made it pretty obvious what was bothering him.

Spike, himself, had done it a few times, wondering, with growing concern, whether Xander really *had* changed his mind. Of course, it could be the boy couldn't manage to lay his hands on the money. Spike frowned as that new worry inched its way into his thoughts. He groaned mentally. He could *not*

believe he actually *wanted* Harris to 'buy' him. But then, his eyes strayed to the two demons who'd so easily overpowered him. *On second thought*, he mused, *Whelp, hurry the bloody hell up!* His arms and legs were beginning to ache -- not to mention the fact that his jaw still felt like crap.

He tensed as he heard the upper crypt door open, relaxing only when he realized it was Xander. *Thank you!* he thought fervently. *We can finally get this over with!*

Only moments later, Xander came striding through the opening, money in hand. He strode straight up to M'lkaro, only his eyes flickering once toward Spike. He frowned.

"Who hit him?" Xander demanded angrily.

M'lkaro bowed *slightly*. "Verta, pos conna. Lart."

Spike sighed. "This other wank--" Twin glares from M'lkaro and Xander cut off Spike's name calling.

"Lart did. He lost his temper."

"Twenty dollars off the price. He's more damaged than when I agreed to the sale," Xander stated firmly.

Spike's jaw dropped. *Ouch! Note to self, until it heals don't get shocked.*

Lart growled, launching himself forward.

Fuck! Spike groaned. *We're toast!*

The next few seconds passed in a frenzied blur to Spike, Xander surprising him yet again by being well prepared for the angry demon's charge.

The boy whipped a shotgun from beneath his duster -- *Hey! That's my duster!* he thought irrelevantly. -- firing it at point blank range. The demon howled as he fell to the floor, the buckshot destroying his knee.

Jerking his gaze from the wounded Lart, Spike was surprised to see that Xander had worked himself to

the wall, his back pressed up against it. He held the shotgun steadily pointed at M'lkarro, though he hadn't fired it at the Margaso leader. Something *else* caught most of his attention, however; Harris was covered in Lart's blood.

Oh that's just bloody fantastic! Spike thought sourly. *My night just CAN'T get any worse!* He frowned. *And no,* he added quickly, *no one HAS to prove me wrong.*

"Are we going to have a problem now?" Xander asked, his voice steady despite the fear Spike could smell rolling off the boy. "Or can we still do this?"

M'lkarro grinned, and Spike almost fainted from relief.

"Varnassa."

"Deal," Spike translated.

M'lkarro cautiously stepped back, slowly reaching down to grab his bag. He clearly telegraphed each

movement to the wary Xander, waving the boy forward after opening the bag.

Xander moved forward, lowering the business end of the shotgun until it pointed toward the floor. He glanced in the bag, then nodded and took a half-step back.

"What's he going to do, Spike?" Xander asked without taking his eyes off M'lkaro.

"Beats me," Spike responded, though he had a sinking feeling he knew *exactly* what the damned demon had planned. The bloody bastard was going to do the whole blasted ritual.

Spike watched in silence as the other demon removed several sheets of paper, and to all appearances completely ignoring everyone else in the room -- including the still moaning Lart -- began writing.

Xander fidgeted restlessly as the first page was set aside and the writing continued. Half way down

that page M'lkaro looked up.

"Gorona?"

"He wants to know your name."

"Xan-- Alexander LaVelle Harris."

M'lkaro produced another piece of paper and held out the pen.

Spike was about to translate the unspoken request when Xander set the shotgun on the table and took the pen.

After Xander handed it back, having written his name, several minutes passed as M'lkaro kept writing. Spike shifted, trying to ease the strain on his arms and legs. Having been in this position for *far* too long already, he was growing concerned that he wasn't going to be able to move when finally released. He knew damn well that it was going to hurt like the very devil when he was finally let go. This wasn't exactly the first time he'd found himself

in a similar situation.

"Gorona doxz farmala."

"Beneficiary!?" Spike exclaimed.

Xander and M'lkaro both turned icy glares in his direction. *Well, that's just bloody fine, Spike thought. S'not like I matter!*

"Willow--," Xander began, then a truly evil grin spread over his face as he cocked his head, and looked over his shoulder at Spike. "Elizabeth Anne Summers," he said, holding out his hand.

Spike's eyes widened. *Oh you right bloody bastard!* Spike thought venomously

The pen exchanged hands twice more. After that, it was a matter of seconds before M'lkaro gathered the papers into a pile and straightened, a predatory smile on his face.

"Ratta naut korma yut!"

Suddenly, there were two piles of paper instead of merely one. M'lkaro picked up one stack, handing it to Xander.

Spike rolled his eyes. *Right!* he thought. *Like Harris is gonna be able to read Margasan.* He frowned as Xander's eyes flickered back and forth, slowly scanning down the first page, and then the second.

M'lkaro pulled a small knife from his bag and flicked it quickly across one calloused fingertip. Lowering the oozing digit, he pressed it to the bottom of both pages, then offered the knife to Xander.

Xander shook his head, a smile playing across his lips as he pulled out his own knife. He deftly copied the demon's movements, carefully placing his bleeding finger in exactly the same spot on his own set of papers.

Picking up both sets of paper, M'lkaro rounded the table, stalking over to the hanging Spike. He set the papers on the floor at Spike's feet, and then, fishing

a key out of a previously unseen pocket, he released the manacle on the vampire's right arm. Spike let out a moan as pain shot through his abused body, muscles held too long in one painful position protesting the movement vehemently.

Grabbing hold of Spike's newly freed wrist as he sagged, unable to support himself, M'lkaro once again flicked the knife. Spike winced as it slit across a finger. By itself, it would have been an utterly ignorable sensation. Added to everything else, it was just something he could have done without.

He barely noticed as M'lkaro first turned toward Lart, telling the younger demon to leave, then unlocked the manacle still around his left wrist. His body screaming in protest as, no longer held in place, Spike slumped to the ground. His focus briefly changed as Xander once again copied M'lkaro's actions, slicing a finger and pressing his bloody finger to the second set of papers.

M'lkaro rose then, holding out the papers with his and Spike's blood print on the bottom. "Velna rot,

cornu veta new."

Spike wearily raised his head as he automatically translated -- this time loosely. "You keep his, he keeps yours."

Spike largely ignored the rest of what Xander and the demon did, keeping only enough attention focused outward to know when he needed to translate, which he had to once, explaining that another set of papers that M'lkaro was handing the boy was the original agreement between Spike and the Margasos.

Spike perked up as he heard the Margaso give the ritualistic business farewell, and he dutifully translated.

"Farewell, and good journey," Xander responded, surprising Spike for the umpteenth time since this whole thing started by giving the demon a respectable bow. He straightened quickly as M'lkaronee needed to take his leave. "Wait," he asked. "How, um, far reaching *is* this . . . agreement?"

Spike groaned. He'd *really* hoped Xander wouldn't ask that particular question.

M'lkaro faced Xander, a broad grin blooming that bared all of his formidable set of razor sharp -- and *long* -- teeth. "Vera pod relava. Rettew mkiut qot." M'lkaro paused a moment before continuing, his smile, if that was possible, growing larger, as he now returned Xander's bow -- this time showing true respect Spike noticed absently. "Korna vot iotre era huir, eto korova *cur*."

"The entire demon community, with a couple notable exceptions," Spike translated exactly, hating the fact that M'lkaro had slipped back into ritualistic speech, "honor the Margaso agreements." Pausing in the same place M'lkaro had, Spike sighed. "Most demons are of the opinion that those who break with us are *idiots* who deserve their fate."

Xander snorted in laughter.

Spike *wasn't* as amused.

3 Taking Possession

Spike let out an audible sigh of relief when M'lkaro left the range of his senses. It was *over*; it was *finally* over. He snorted -- except for the Xander taunting, of course. He certainly couldn't forget that. He ignored the snide little voice inside him that ever-so-thoughtfully reminded him of M'lkaro's promise to spread the news to the far reaches of the demon community. He ignored it again, when it questioned just how long it would take Xander to discover that little fact.

"So," Xander asked, working loose the chains the Margaso had shortened, "what possessed you to deal with them in the first place?"

Spike shrugged. "Didn't have a lot of choice in the matter," he admitted, figuring it couldn't do any

more damage. "I was desperate." He frowned, watching as Xander moved to the other chain. "You know, you should really wash that blood off you. It does funny things to humans."

Xander spun around, his expression of horror, comical. "What does it do?" he demanded.

Spike smirked. "Nothing too bad," he said. "Just makes all those nasty little inhibitions that humans carry around with them take a vacation." *Unless of course, you've been possessed*, Spike added privately, knowing he was safe in that regard. The closest Xander had been to that was the one halloween that the boy had spent acting like a soldier. Of all the stories the scoobies told; embarrassing ones, like when the fear demon had them running in circles; downright humiliating ones, like when Dracula had enthralled Xander and had him eating bugs; the ones about Xander's predictable love life, -- demon magnet is *right*; no one had ever even remotely *hinted* at any one of the Scoobies ever having been possessed.

"Oh?" Xander asked, and Spike wasn't sure he liked the *interest* he heard in the whelp's voice. "How long does that last?"

Spike's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Xander shrugged. "Curious."

Finally, seeing no harm in satisfying the boy's curiosity, he answered. Hopefully, being 'helpful' would shorten the time the boy would ride him about 'owning' him. "Two to three days, on average. I've seen it last as long as a week -- but the girl had been drenched in the stuff."

Xander nodded then, grinning suddenly.

Not good, Spike thought.

"Hey!" he protested as Xander pulled his arm toward a manacle. "No way are you putting me in that thing, Wanker!" He pulled back abruptly, glaring sharply when his traitorous body didn't respond with the strength it should have. He was

still caught in Harris' grip.

He continued to struggle as he watched his arm inch toward the now *hated* manacle. "This is *NOT* funny, Harris!"

Xander paused then, looking at him strangely. "It isn't meant to be, Spike." Xander cocked his head. "What made you think it was?"

Spike frowned, growing seriously concerned. He wouldn't have expected Xander to be into this sort of thing, not even deeply in his subconscious. Of course, the blood wouldn't be affecting him yet. That took time. It wasn't some instant magical whammy -- though, he wasn't quite sure how, exactly, it did work, just that it did. Consequently, that ruled that out as an explanation for Xander's odd behavior.

When Xander renewed his attempts to restrain him, Spike also renewed his struggle. No way in hell was he letting the boy get him back into those!

"Spike!" Xander hissed, suddenly closing the distance between them to mere inches. "I bruised my shoulder into next week firing that ancient shotgun. If you continue to struggle, you're going to hurt me." He smirked. "And we *both* know what happens then."

"Oh! I can not bloody believe this!" Spike exclaimed angrily. "You *so* did not just tell me not to fight you because it might hurt you!"

"You're right," Xander admitted, "I didn't. I told you that, so you wouldn't hurt *yourself*."

Spike's eyes narrowed, shock flooding him. Xander took advantage of Spike's one second of frozen disbelief and managed to lock the manacle around his wrist.

"Oh, bloody hell!" Spike cursed, feeling like he was repeating himself. He jerked backward, *finally* wrenching himself out of Xander's grip.

Xander's hand shot out, and slapped him, open-

handed across his jaw. Spike let out a pained shout as the blow landed on *exactly* the same spot as Lart's had. "Damn it, Harris!" he retorted. "When the hell, exactly, did *you* come to *my* side of the force?"

Xander's jaw clenched. "Exactly the moment I found out you attacked one of my best friends," he hissed.

Fuck! Spike slumped, Xander's angry taunt like a punch in the gut. His second wrist was in a manacle before he recovered. Closing his eyes, Spike tried to calm himself. He was completely restrained, effectively helpless against an angry, soon to be inhibitionless -- was that a real word? -- human. How bad could it be? It was *Xander*.

Understandably, the boy was angry; Spike had attacked, had almost *raped* one of the whelp's best friends. Obviously, the boy needed to work off some aggression. He could understand that. He wouldn't *enjoy* being the recipient, but he could understand it. But, and he couldn't really move past this, it was *Xander*, how bad could bad get? Xander

was 'the heart' of the scoobies, the ultimate good guy, as Angelus had aptly named him, the 'White Knight'.

It wasn't as though he could. . . . Spike's thoughts trailed to a halt as his mind supplied *exactly* where this could go, what someone like Xander -- his inhibitions and moral training completely stripped from him -- would consider appropriate retribution. He could see two different places it could go, actually -- and he *really* didn't like either one.

"You *really* don't want to do this, H-- Xander," Spike began, his voice placating. "When the blood wears off, you'll hate yourself, and you really don't want that."

"Oh really?" Xander asked. "What makes you think I've changed my plans for the evening?"

Spike frowned, unable to find a quick reply to that. "You came here intending this?" he asked finally, shaking the manacles that held him in place, still angry about them, but grateful that, at least, he

wasn't strung up like he had been before.

"No, I have to admit that the manacles are an adlib, but they'll make my plans so much easier."

"Xander," Spike began again. There *had* to be some way to get through to him.

"Spike," Xander interrupted, striding forward. "Shut up," he finished, abruptly shoving the knife against his most tender -- and treasured -- parts, "unless of course, you'd prefer speaking soprano?"

Spike clamped his mouth shut. He most definitely did *not* want to encourage *that* line of thinking.

"Good boy," Xander smirked.

Spike raged, his eyes flashing gold briefly, but he kept his mouth shut. That blasted knife was still held against his groin. It was a *very* effective gag.

Xander's eyes flickered down. Wincing when the boy grinned, Spike was nevertheless relieved when

the knife moved *away*.

"You won't mind if I borrow this, I trust?" Xander asked, not waiting for Spike's reply before releasing the buckle on Spike's belt, quickly working it loose from his jeans.

"Hey!" Spike exclaimed in outraged protest. "Hands off!"

Xander ignored him. Crossing the room, he took the belt to the table and bent low over it.

The boy's back to him, Spike twisted, trying to see what the whelp was doing to his belt. "That's my only belt, you wanker! Don't mess it up."

Xander just chuckled.

Son of a bitch! Spike thought, now seriously wondering if the blood really was affecting the whelp this quickly. And, *Damn it all to hell!*, he *really* wanted to know what was being done to his belt! His eyes narrowed as a new thought occurred

to him. Harris was bloody using the blood dousing as an excuse to do whatever he wanted! *That sneaky son of a bitch!* he thought, actually impressed.

Xander finally straightened, holding the belt triumphantly up. Spike didn't like the truly evil cast to Xander's growing smile.

"Now the fun can start," Xander practically purred as he crossed back to the bound Spike.

Spike shied backward. "And just what 'fun' would *that* be?" he asked. "Cuz, you know, I *really* don't think our ideas of fun are gonna match."

"You'd consider it fun if you were in my position," Xander countered, circling behind Spike.

"Not really reassuring me there, Xander," Spike replied, trying to twist around so he could continue to watch Xander.

"Wasn't meant to," Xander retorted with a soft

chuckle.

Spike flinched as a loop of the belt came over his head. "No bloody way, Harris!" Spike snapped as Xander began tightening the belt around his neck.

Spike twisted and ducked, but held in place as he was, it ultimately did him no good.

"There," Xander said, once the belt was secured, "your new collar -- complete with leash."

Spike growled. "Just remember this, *Harris*. When everything is said and done, eventually I'll be free, that's when you'll need to watch your back. Remember *that* as you're having your . . . *fun*."

"Oh, I will," Xander replied, and Spike could hear the grin. "You want to know what your leash says?" he asked.

"No!"

"Well, I'm going to tell you anyway."

Spike blinked as the tail of the improvised collar and leash was suddenly thrust before his eyes. It took a moment to focus on the words scratched into the leather.

~ ~ ~Property of Alexander LaVelle Harris~ ~ ~

Eyes blazing, Spike jerked his head to the side. "You're letting the Margaso paperwork go to your head, Whelp!" Spike snapped, his gut clenching as he realized that instead of teasing him as he'd expected, Xander was apparently planning on taking his claim as 'owner' quite seriously. "My, my," he continued snidely, "what would your friends think -- 'owning' a vampire."

"Who's going to tell them?" Xander asked sweetly. "You? I can see it now."

"Buffy . . . Yeah, I know I did, but you've got to listen. Xander 'owns' me, and he's . . . *gasp* . . . taking *advantage* of me."

Spike growled again. "Not even remotely funny, Harris."

"Really? I thought it was."

When Spike didn't retort, Xander sighed. "Nothing left to say?"

Spike remained silent. He was determined, now, to ride this out without saying another word. He seemed to only dig himself deeper every time he opened his gob.

"Ah, well," Xander said finally. "I discovered something a long time ago, but I've never had the opportunity to test it. I don't really understand how it works, considering you guys don't actually *have* circulation -- no working heart to pump it round."

Spike frowned again -- it was getting to be a habit. *What the bloody hell is he going on about?*

"Damn, Spike, if I'd known it was *this* easy to get you to shut up, I'd have done this a *long* time ago."

Spike glared, but stubbornly kept his mouth shut. He knew damn well that the boy was trying to get a rise out of him, and he sure as hell wasn't going to let the wanker win that easily. He was, however; beginning to wonder if he might not have been better off staying with the Margaso.

"Not even curious?" Xander asked with another laugh. Shrugging, he reached up.

Spike reared forward as Xander's thumbs pressed into the veins on either side of his neck, coming to an abrupt halt when he reached the end of the chains holding him. He brought his chin down savagely, trying to block, or alternately, to break, Xander's fingers. The chip twinged at that thought, and Spike groaned mentally. *NOT fair!*

Spike didn't have a clue how it worked either, but he'd used the maneuver on Dru, so he knew it did. If he didn't dislodge Xander's thumbs he had about twenty seconds of consciousness left. Spike's vision started darkening. *Okay, he admitted, I MIGHT have*

overestimated a tad. It was his last thought before the darkness reached up and grabbed hold of him.

4 Truth and Consequences

Spike came to suddenly with a gasp of unneeded breath. The crypt dark and silent, he was immediately aware of several things. His jaw no longer hurt, but it was replaced by a new stinging low across his belly. Secondly, an experimental tug of his hands revealed that he was still manacled, but this time to his bed. Thirdly, as he turned his attention away from himself, a heartbeat.

He inhaled deeply, scenting the air. He'd known before he'd tested that it was Xander. Who else would it be. But the scent was off; it was tainted with the sweet smell of the Margaso. Xander was now fully under its influence.

"So," Spike ventured, searching the darkness for the human, "you got your wish. You're free of all those nasty little inconveniences called human morals. What are you going to do with your freedom?"

Spike frowned. He could see the boy, but the heat of his body was off. It was high, like he had a fever.

"I want to thank you," Xander replied softly, his voice lower than Spike expected, kind of gravelly.

Say what? "What for?"

"For freeing me. I've hidden so much of myself over the years. It's . . . nice."

Spike stayed silent, not sure, exactly, how to respond to that.

"So many things have happened to me, good things, bad things." He paused. "Though I suppose that whether you would think they were good or bad depends a *whole* lot on your perspective."

"Good point," Spike commented, not entirely certain where this was headed, but figured, the longer he kept Xander talking, the less time there would be for other, less pleasant, activities. "I take it that your current 'perspective' changes your

viewpoint on some of those things?"

Xander chuckled, the sound sending shivers skittering down Spike's spine. "You could say that."

"I did, already," Spike replied, smirking.

"There was an . . . incident, back in high school -- a lot of them, actually -- but one in particular that changed my life beyond return."

"Oh? What was that, pet?" Spike asked, curious despite his current circumstances.

"Did you know we have something in common?" Xander asked instead of answering Spike's question. "Something I wouldn't admit any time but right now?"

Okay, that's unexpected! "Yeah?" he encouraged.

"What's that?"

"We *both* tried to rape Buffy."

"What?!"

"Yeppers. Of course, I was possessed by the spirit of a hyena at the time."

Spike whimpered. *I TOLD you, no one had to prove me wrong!* Unfortunately, it was far too late to undue the damage his earlier silence had caused.

"How'd that happen?" he asked, wishing he could be *any* place but where he was. This was *so* not the way he wanted to spend the evening.

"Doesn't matter," Xander replied, finally stepping close enough for Spike to get a good look at him.

Spike sucked in a quick breath at the startling differences in the man he thought he knew. He held himself completely differently. Gone was the comic. Gone was the Zeppo. Gone was the gangly young man that tried his best to keep everyone's spirits up no matter the circumstances. In his place was a predator. Xander stood at ease in his own skin, his stance at once relaxed and alert. In short, he looked

like he was ready to take on the world.

"See, the thing is, I learned from my mistake. Did you?"

"You learned from that?" Spike asked flatly. "Just what did you learn? That it's stupid to push a slayer?"

Xander laughed again, moving forward until he stood beside the bed.

It was then Spike noticed the two bowls Xander was holding.

"Well, that too," Xander admitted wryly, his lips twisting upward into a crooked smirk, "but I learned oh so much more than that."

"Really? And just what was that?"

"You'll find out."

Okay, not liking the sound of THAT! "What do you

mean, I'll learn. Wait, never mind. I don't think I want to know."

"Not even remotely curious about what's going to happen to you tonight?"

Spike shook his head. "Not really. Talking is good. It's been . . . informative, so far." He watched warily as Xander set the bowls on the bedside table.

The scratch and immediate flare of a match startled Spike, and he had to blink away the spots caused by the sudden brightness. Xander lit the two candles Spike always kept by his bed.

"Sorry," Xander said, turning to face him as he blew the match out, "you're pretty much out of luck on that. We've got to move ahead, before those cuts heal completely."

Cuts? Oh, my stomach! Spike peered down trying to see what Xander had done.

"You Pillock!" he accused, finally making out the

words Xander had lightly carved into his skin.

"Now, now," Xander replied, amusement clear in his voice. "It's not nice to call the person who holds the keys to your chains names."

"You git!" Spike laughed, despite himself. "That won't stay, you know. It'll be gone in a matter of minutes."

Xander shook his head. "No it won't," he denied, climbing onto the bed. Straddling Spike's thighs he settled himself on the now worried vampire.

"And why's that?"

Xander picked up the nearest bowl, holding it above Spike. "Finally, all that research at Giles' pays off."

Spike's eyes narrowed.

"All sorts of interesting stuff in there," Xander continued, ignoring Spike's unresponsiveness. "I'm sure some of it, the G-man would prefer we didn't

know."

"Oh, I can pretty much guarantee *that*." He eyed the bowl Xander seemed to set such store by.

"What's in it?"

"Nothing overly special really."

"You didn't go messing with that dark mojo stuff did you?" Spike asked worriedly. He *really* never had liked that stuff -- especially when it came to being cast on him. And, despite the fact that Xander seemed much more confident now, he was even more concerned about it being *Xander* that tried to cast something on him.

Xander laughed. "No way! I've seen some of the shit that can go wrong with that. I'll stay as far away from that as I can get."

Spike sighed in relief. That was good at least. "Care to explain what's in the bowl then?"

Xander grinned, up-ending the contents of the bowl

over Spike's stomach.

Spike arched up off the bed, a startled shout yanked out of him at the surprising pain that arced through the cuts on his belly. Xander had to steady himself to keep from being bucked off. "What the fuck's in that?"

"Like I said, nothing overly special."

Spike growled as Xander began dragging his fingers through the fine powdery substance, driving it painfully into the cuts.

"Ingredient one; Cherry wood sawdust. I chose cherry for the color. I like the dark red."

"You're shoving *wood* into me?" Spike demanded in outrage. Immediately beginning to buck, he completely ignored the strain it put on his body. Xander spread his knees, widening his support base, and clenched Spike's hips with both hands.

"You'd prefer I used a bigger *whole* piece, a little

higher up?"

Spike stilled, grinding his teeth together in frustration. That bloody *should* have dislodged the blasted idiot! He wished he knew more about exactly how Margaso blood affected humans who'd been possessed. Xander seemed a hell of a lot stronger than he should be. Unfortunately, before now, he'd never really had the need to know. Rumors were all he had to go on.

"That's better," Xander replied soothingly. "Now, be a good boy and stay still while I finish my artwork."

Wanker! Spike thought viciously, wanting so much to vent his frustration. If not for the bloody chip, he would not be *in* this position -- weakened by the Margaso bastards, or not! Of course, if not for the chip he wouldn't have needed to deal with the Margaso in the first place. He could trace every single one of his present troubles back to the initiative and their poking their noses in places they had no business poking!

At least ground up wood won't make the scarring permanent, no matter what the git thinks, Spike consoled himself. A couple of weeks of the humiliation of knowing it's there, and then POOF it'll fade away. Spike almost smirked. Wait!

"First ingredient?"

"Oh, yeah, there's also pure silver flakes, and the ashes of a flamed vampire. The book was very specific," Xander continued conversationally, never pausing in his work, "it had to be a vampire that had burned. It wouldn't work using the ashes of one that had been staked or beheaded."

Spike shuddered. That was just . . . *gross*. Xander was working pieces of a dead vampire into him!

"Tell me you're kidding!" Spike pleaded.

"Nope, I'm really not kidding. I told you those books had interesting stuff in them."

"Don't do this," Spike asked, for once removing all traces of his condescending attitude, and all the

bluff and bluster he usually kept up. Even still, he had to pause before continuing, "please." He was no longer worried this was going to head in one of the two obvious directions he had earlier. No, it was worse, it was *far* worse.

If Xander had managed to get his hands on the right -- or wrong depending on your point of view -- books, this situation could turn *seriously* permanent, and to his utter disgust, there wouldn't be a damn thing he could do about it.

Xander stopped his tracing, and leaned over Spike, bracing himself on hands planted on either side of the vampire's bare chest. "Did Buffy say please, too?" he asked. "Did you stop when she did? Or did it take her beating the crap out of you to get you to stop?"

"She didn't have to 'beat the crap out of me'. I stopped, damn it! I realized what I was doing and *stopped*. I got carried away, but I *stopped*." Spike was pissed now. He'd done something wrong, something horrendously *stupid*, but he'd stopped

because he'd realized what he was doing, not because of anything anyone else did. "I didn't rape her. I didn't even push all that hard, you bloody wanker!"

"Oh really? I suppose that's why she was sporting a bruise the size of a grapefruit? Buffy isn't exactly easy to bruise."

"Oh, get real. She's come away from our bouts of sex with more bruises than she got in that bathroom!" Spike snapped in exasperation, the words out before he could stop them.

Xander's eyes narrowed dangerously, his lips thinning into a tight, unforgiving line.

Oh, shit! Maybe I shouldn't have brought that up!

"You *really* shouldn't have mentioned that, Spike. If it was meant to reassure me, in anyway, it backfired."

Like DUH!

"I may be overly impulsive, which gets me into all sorts of trouble I'd really rather avoid, brat, but I'm not *stupid*"

"Good, you should be easy to train then," Xander quipped.

"TRAIN!?" Spike sputtered. "Are you out of your bleeding mind?"

"Yep," Xander retorted, "that's the whole point of the Margaso blood, isn't it?"

Spike stared incredulously at Xander. He couldn't *possibly* be serious.

"Anyway, I'm done," Xander said, suddenly sitting up straight, and carefully brushing the excess powder off Spike's abdomen. Leaning forward, Xander blew gently across the scabbing cuts.

Spike's stomach tightened reflexively as the warm moist air slid across his tender skin.

As Xander leaned toward the table beside the bed, Spike seriously considered trying to dislodge him again. Ultimately he gave it up as a lost cause. It might give him momentary satisfaction, but Xander would still be free, and *he* would still be chained to the bloody bed.

Relieved when he saw the bowl contained only a rag and what he sincerely hoped was plain tap water, he continued to watch warily.

Xander carefully squeezed the excess water out of the washcloth, and proceeded to gently clean Spike's stomach, his gaze fixed firmly on his work.

Spike shifted uncomfortably, the warm water feeling better than he would like -- in his current situation.

"Do I get *any* choice in what does and doesn't happen here tonight?" Spike asked, gratified when his voice sounded completely normal.

His hand stilling, Xander's gaze darted up to Spike's for a brief second before returning to the vampire's stomach. "Depends," he answered with a shrug, this time not stopping his efforts.

Spike cleared his throat. "On what?" he asked carefully. He could see the grin his question provoked, and he *really* didn't like it. Gritting his teeth, he waited as patiently as he could for Xander's response.

"On what it is you *don't* want to do," he replied. "I've got the next couple days completely planned, and I doubt I'll change my mind. Unless, of course, there's something you *want* to do that intrigues me," Xander continued, his voice dropping to a velvet purr.

Swallowing, Spike shook his head.

"I didn't think so. So, what is it that you want to avoid enough that you actually risked asking?"

Spike eyes narrowed as he considered his options.

He wasn't sure whether it would be better to keep his mouth shut -- for a change -- or admit what had him . . . concerned.

"Come on, tell me," Xander encouraged, "that way you'll know one way or the other."

With a sigh, Spike, trusting that Xander had probably told the truth about not changing his mind, decided to take the risk. "Well," he began, "considering the setting and all--"

Xander laughed, the sound loud in the previous quiet of their low conversation. "I'm not planning on raping you."

Spike heaved a sigh of relief. That, at least, was one worry out of the way.

"I'm planning on seducing you."

Spike blinked, shock stealing his voice. "You what?" he asked after several moments of trying to speak.

"You what?" Spike repeated when Xander didn't respond, going completely motionless. He couldn't have heard that right!

Xander still didn't respond, just grinned, dipping his head down toward the still healing marks on Spike's stomach.

Spike jumped, startled when Xander's wet, hot tongue flicked out and traced the X in Xander's. The muscles beneath that tongue twitched in response, which got a knowing chuckle from Xander. "Hey, um, not to be obtuse, or anything--"

Xander's tongue darted out again, this time tracing the a. Spike snapped his mouth shut cutting off his own words -- and the moan that threatened to emerge. This was ridiculous. Not five minutes ago he'd been worried that Xander was going to force himself on him, and *now* he was actually reacting to the gentle touches. It didn't make any sense. He didn't want that then, and he didn't want it now. He *wouldn't* want it, either!

He squirmed beneath Xander's tongue, ready to lodge a second protest.

Suddenly, Xander sat straight up, wearing a feral grin. "I'm hungry," he said out of the blue.

Spike swallowed, surprisingly nervous. He didn't understand this Xander. He didn't have a single clue what to expect from him. "Hungry?" he asked warily. "Hungry for what?"

The grin just grew as Xander hopped off the bed and he strode toward the exit. He shrugged half-way there. "At the moment, I'll eat just about anything," he said, then cast a glance over his shoulder before continuing. "Didn't you know, hyenas are carrion eaters." With those parting words, he disappeared through the exit.

Spike shuddered, swallowing convulsively, his eyes drawn of their own accord to the very spots Xander had licked. He *hadn't* known that. Jerking his head up to stare at the now empty room, he wondered if he should be grateful uninhibited Xander hadn't

taken a *real* taste. It was going to be a *very* long night, and an even longer time before the blood effects wore off Xander.

He couldn't believe it, but, he *really* wanted the 'white knight' back. At least with him, Spike knew what to expect. He might have to deal with brassed off best friend, but he sure as hell wouldn't have to deal with all this 'seduction' shit! The Xander he knew didn't *like* guys. The Xander he knew, the slightly goofy Xander, sure as hell wouldn't have put a *collar* and *leash* on him, and carved his name into his belly!

Spike groaned. This was bloody getting him nowhere! Jerking on his restraints, he pulled himself toward the headboard until he could raise himself into a sitting position. It was time to get himself out of this mess. He could disappear for a couple of days until Xander was back to himself. He already had enough blackmail material on the git to keep the boy from taunting him too much about 'owning' him. It might even be enough to keep him in smokes for the next year.

He grinned, realizing that this situation just might turn out to his advantage after all.

5 Becoming

Xander closed his eyes, reveling in the utter freedom of movement. Part of him wanted to head straight to Giles' and look up the effects of this type of demon. Fortunately, it was a very small part of him, because he'd forgotten to ask what kind of demon it was. He could figure it out later. What he knew now was enough for him -- mostly.

He wasn't possessed again. It wasn't the hyena spirit come back. He vividly remembered how that had felt. Like when he'd been the soldier; he'd been along for the ride, but kinda separate, as though he were two different people. This was different. It was *him* doing and feeling this. It was *him*, Xander

Harris, moving like an athlete.

Spike had been right about the blood letting him bypass his inhibitions, his 'morals', but that wasn't *all* it did. Something no one else -- well, possibly Giles -- knew, and that *he* had ignored, was that after each possession he'd changed. The hyena had left behind instincts and desires that he'd never acted upon, that he had, in fact, buried so deeply that he forgot about them most of the time. The soldier left behind the memories of his training, and even some knowledge.

That, he'd let the others see for a while, but when nothing changed, he'd slowly allowed them to forget. He'd acted like it was all fading. He'd gone back to being what they needed him to be -- the joker, the one who kept everyone's spirits up, the one who made sure nothing got too heavy to handle. He did it with a joke, using morbid, gallows humor that everyone rolled their eyes at, chuckled, and tackled the demon of the week that could literally tear them limb from limb -- and *win*.

He was also their precious glimpse into normal. He was the single one of them that actually had a chance at a completely normal life -- if he were to take it. He was their ever present picture of what, exactly, they stayed fighting for. Those were his roles with the Scoobies. They knew it, and he knew it. And as much as it sometimes hurt being that person, it was an important part to play. Eventually, habit became truth, and all his skills and abilities had surrendered to the Zeppo.

For the moment, he was freed from all that, and it was *glorious*. He'd been completely honest when he'd thanked Spike for it. It wasn't something he'd have given -- allowed -- himself. Even in his current state, he knew that. The blood hadn't taken his intelligence. He laughed. No, just his ability to care about right and wrong.

A scent in the light breeze caught his instant attention, and he dropped into a crouch. Nostrils flaring, he inhaled deeply, savoring the fresh mouth watering odor. He'd found what he was hunting for. Grinning, he rose gracefully to his full height,

heading toward the source at a trot.

When he neared, he slowed, moving carefully now. Not a sound was made as he picked his way through the trees, not a leaf rustled, not a stick cracked beneath his feet. The hyena instincts may not have been all that great at stealth, but the soldier's were.

There! Dropping down, he waited, the hyena urging him to charge ahead and *take*, the soldier urging patience, urging him to wait until the time was right. He followed the soldier's advice, waiting, forcing himself not to fidget restlessly.

He watched, eyes avid as the yearling ate, apparently oblivious to its imminent mortal danger. It worked its way ever closer to the waiting man. Xander swallowed as the deer stopped *just* short of the ideal ambush spot to nibble on the leaves of a newly sprouted sapling. His mouth watered.

He remembered well the feeling and taste as he and his pack had slaughtered and ate the school's mascot. He remembered, too, the feelings of

disgust after the hyena spirit had been banished. He was sure he'd have to go through that again, but right now he didn't care. That was tomorrow, or the next day. Tomorrow wasn't important to him.

His heart pounding in his chest as the yearling took that precious extra few steps, Xander leapt. He crowed, howling with glee as he landed squarely on his prey's back. Xander's feral laughter rang out as the animal fought for its life, twisting and bucking wildly. Locking his arms around the animal's neck, and clamping his knees tightly to its heaving sides, he held on for all he was worth.

Finally, his chance came; the yearling, mouth frothing from exertion, stumbled, and Xander's weight drove it to its knees. Never loosening his grip, Xander threw himself to the side, rolling with the animal. Twisting deftly as it hit the ground, Xander clamped his blunt teeth over the deer's throat. He didn't break the skin, merely held on until the animal lost consciousness.

Hyena, soldier, Xander, all crowed as the life

beneath him stilled into blissfully unaware sleep; merging, joining, becoming one cohesive whole.

Now, all he needed was a pack, teammates. Xander grinned. A mate. He was working on that.

Energized with renewed purpose, Xander leapt to his feet, hefting the unconscious animal over his shoulder. With one last triumphant glance at the scene of his victory, Xander headed back to Spike.

The return trip took him longer, weighted down as he was, and what with the necessity to hide from the few souls brave -- or stupid -- enough to be out this late at night, but eventually the crypt came into sight. He grinned again, his mind whirling with ideas, thoughts, and nebulous plans. He had a vampire to seduce, and he now knew he had the way to do it.

Of course, he hadn't forgotten the fact that the vampire in question still needed to be punished, but that could wait. It would wait until that being was *his*, well and truly his. Then, and only then, would

he exact his punishment for Spike's crimes. That he understood completely what had driven the vampire, did not one single thing to change the fact that Spike had overstepped his bounds in attacking someone Xander held dear, someone Xander chose to protect.

The moment he entered the dark crypt, Xander knew something had changed. He paused, scanning the room, scenting the air, trying to figure out what it was. It didn't take him long, and he grinned when he realized what it was. Spike was trying to escape - - and hadn't yet made it. It seemed he'd been close, the air was permeated with the sweet scent of the vampire's fevered anticipation. Clinging to that, was the lingering odor of the flash of panic that Spike *had* to have felt in that instant he'd heard Xander's return.

He'd ignore the transgression for now. It would be added to the ones the vampire would pay for later. He looked forward to it.

Striding in, Xander frowned, wondering how he'd

managed to bury his enhanced senses. Until tonight, he hadn't realized he actually still had them. *Yay for the power of denial*, he thought sarcastically. He hoped that this time around, not all of his potential would get buried. He *liked* feeling this way. He *liked* moving with grace instead of awkwardness. He *really* liked being in control.

When the blood wore off, he hoped with every fiber of his soul that it wouldn't all get hidden under the weight of guilt. With that thought in mind, he told himself not to do *anything* so bad that his 'normal' self would feel obligated to overcompensate. Maybe if he could prove he wouldn't do anything *too* drastic while completely uninhibited, maybe normal Xander would get a clue.

He shook his head, chuckling as he strode into the room that housed Spike, then sighed. It was a nice *thought* anyway. Normal Xander couldn't even loosen up enough to admit that he liked guys the same way he liked girls. He certainly couldn't admit that Spike, in particular, drove him to distraction. What he was doing on that score alone would be

enough to send Normal Xander into a tizzy of denial so strong, Free Xander wouldn't see the light of day -- or the moon -- for *years* to come.

Spike's eyes were locked on him, following his every move as he stalked slowly toward the bed. He could feel the weight of that intense gaze, though he didn't bother looking at the vampire as he closed the distance between them. Dropping the yearling on the floor, Xander turned away, crossing toward the chest at the foot of the bed.

Opening it, he found what he'd hoped would be stored there. Grinning, he popped back up, prize in hand.

"Bloody hell!"

He grinned at Spike's predictable response to the new set of chains he held. "You didn't really think that I wouldn't realize you'd be able to work yourself free did you?"

"I'd sure as hell *hoped!*" Spike muttered, then

snapped his head up, eyes blazing angrily. "If I'd been at full strength, I'd have been out of here *long* before you got back."

Xander nodded knowingly. "The chains are strong enough, but that bed, sturdy bed that it is, isn't exactly made to withstand a vampire's strength."

"You knew!" Spike accused petulantly.

Again Xander nodded, stepping forward.

Spike shifted instantly, his hidden hands coming back into view as he renewed his frantic efforts to free at least one hand before Xander reached him.

Xander stopped, cocked his head, and waited.

It didn't take long to get a response. Spike stilled when he realized Xander was just standing there staring at him.

"What are you looking at?"

"You."

Spike's eyebrow cocked upward in surprise, obviously unsure what to say in response.

"Do you really think you're going to get free before I can get these on you?"

"Got to try, don't I?" Spike retorted, resuming his efforts.

"Why?"

"Huh?" Spike responded, once more stopping to stare at him. "What do you mean 'why'?"

"Why waste the energy doing something you know won't change anything?" he asked, honestly curious.

6 The Chase

That question stalled Spike's thoughts for a moment, but only for a moment. "Yeah, right, Harris, like you wouldn't be trying to escape every second, too," he sneered, leaning back against the half-destroyed headboard.

"Actually," Xander replied, "if I was in your position, I would have slept while my jailor was gone. I would have conserved my energy for when I needed it to fight him."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Sure you would have; Mr. Attention Deficit himself, would have slept while he was scared out his mind."

"Nice to know you can admit to being afraid," Xander replied.

"I did no such thing!" Spike exclaimed in outrage. *How dare the whelp!*

"Right," Xander said drily, suddenly darting forward and clamping one manacle around Spike's ankle before the vampire realized he was even moving.

He groaned. This was just *not* his night. He'd let the *whelp* get the jump on him.

Spike sighed, giving up escape as a lost cause -- for the moment -- and merely watched as Xander hooked the other end to the proper ring -- the one attached to the steel post that was imbedded three feet down into concrete of the crypt floor. He knew there would be an opportunity to escape at *some* point.

Xander then moved silently toward the deer he'd left on the floor beside the bed. It was only then that he noticed the thing was still *alive*. He'd been so focused on thoughts of escape, and of what Xander was doing, he hadn't heard the heartbeat until now. His eyes widened; he was impressed, despite his best intentions. He didn't *want* to be impressed by Xander, and that was happening far

too often for comfort lately.

"You know," Xander began conversationally as he crouched next to the animal, "why Normal Xander was always so hyper don't you?"

Not really," Spike admitted, "just always figured it was all the sugar you ate."

Xander shook his head. "Nope. Normal Xander kept so much buried, hidden away, it had to come out somehow."

Normal Xander?

"When I was younger, it was anger, anger and hurt. You may -- or you may not -- have noticed that my family life sucks. When I met Buffy, and Willow and I joined in her fight against evil, I replaced my old family with a new one, and the hurt and anger went away -- most of it, anyway. For a while after that, it was fear.

"After the hyena possession, it was all the hyena

instincts that got left behind when the spirit was banished, those and the memories of what I'd done. It was the longings to be that free again that, no matter how much I wanted to deny them, that always rose at the most inconvenient times.

"Then came the soldier; that halloween night I spent as a green beret was exhilarating. Of course, afterward, I was expected to be the same old Xander."

Spike swallowed, trying to wet his suddenly dry mouth. If his heart beat, he knew damn well it would be pounding about now. Throughout Xander's quiet, unemotional explanation, he'd been drawn closer and closer to understanding the man. So much of what Xander had just said applied to *him* as well. He'd never realized just how much there was that Xander kept hidden behind his goofy, sarcastic exterior. It was startling to know just how much they really had in common -- more than the boy knew about even, and Spike wondered if he'd ever reveal just how *he'd* started out life.

The slow smile that spread across Xander's face caught Spike's immediate -- and wary -- attention, jerking him out of his thoughts, and had him berating his inattention. The smile was wild, holding very little of Xander's remaining humanity, and Spike unconsciously licked his lips. Eyes locked with his, Xander bent down, bringing his head near the just stirring deer. Nostrils flaring wide, he inhaled the scent of the awakening animal. His eyelids dropped to half-mast as he savored the smell.

Spike quivered, sharing the sentiment, remembered excitement racing through him, his tastebuds coming alive as he re-lived doing the exact same thing with kills of his own. It was intoxicating, that moment before the kill, savoring everything about the life you held in your hands.

Just as the animal jerked, instantly struggling, Xander's head darted down, and he clamped his blunt, human teeth on the thing's throat.

Spike jumped at the sudden movement, his body responding intensely to the incredible scene

unfolding in front of him. Rock hard, he watched, anticipation watering his mouth, every single fiber of his being tensing, wanting to join the boy, *aching* to sink his fangs into hot *living* flesh.

He whimpered as the heavenly scent of fresh blood hit the air. It didn't matter at this point that it wasn't human. It was hot, fresh, and pumping itself uselessly onto the ground as Xander ripped the deer's throat out.

Spike panted as Xander silently rose, heedless of the blood dripping from the sides of his mouth, over his chin and disappearing from sight below his collar. Frozen, mouth half-open, he watched in helpless need as Xander crawled onto the bed, straddling his legs.

The scent of arousal rolled off Xander, teasing his senses with yet another, tempting, odor. He swallowed, shuddering against the need that raced through him, the fresh blood -- and the man -- so close, yet so far. He held himself absolutely still as Xander leaned forward, stopping when his face was

less than an inch from his own. There Xander stayed as Spike fought with himself, the blood staining Xander's mouth taunting him, calling to him. All he had to do was lean forward the *tiniest* little distance and *take* it.

Xander was so obviously offering to let him do *just* that. Spike's lips parted further, his tongue darting out once again to lick his upper lip. There were strings to that offer. He knew that. He could see it in the dancing light of Xander's eyes, in the knowing smirk that just touched the edges of the youth's mouth, in the aroused anticipation that fairly made him tremble.

"Oh, bloody hell!" he growled, darting forward, at last giving in to the incredible desires racing through him. Sucking lightly, he licked the deer blood from Xander's chin, moaning softly as the taste of the blood, laced with the living warmth of Xander, danced across his tastebuds.

Xander remained motionless, inhaling sharply through his nose.

Spike hesitated only the briefest of moments longer, and closed his mouth over Xander's, his tongue carefully lapping up every trace of blood to be found.

Xander's mouth opened the slightest bit, and Spike suddenly found himself the recipient of a mouthful of hot, Xander tasting, deer blood. He swallowed automatically, accepting the erotic offering without thought. Plying his lips across the human's, he teased his tongue inside Xander's mouth, seeking and finding every last trace of blood, learning and reveling in the moist contours of Xander's hot, human mouth.

Xander pulled back suddenly, panting for breath, his eyes dilated with unrestrained lust, and dancing with victory. With eyes now only half open, Xander's tongue slid slowly out from between his parted lips, the pink tip slowly, enticingly, tracing a trail over his upper lip.

A jolt of electric arousal shot straight to Spike's

groin at the display, and he leaned forward intent on reclaiming that mouth.

The moment Xander chuckled, Spike realized he'd made *every* single move. Xander hadn't once made a single attempt to touch him, or to initiate a kiss, yet he'd so very *thoroughly* succeeded in seducing him completely.

Spike sighed, leaning back against the headboard again.

"Apparently," Xander said quietly, reaching up to trace Spike's mouth with a single, gentle finger, "having girls as my only friends is finally coming in very handy."

Blinking at the odd statement coming out of the blue like that, Spike just *had* to ask. "What?"

"Listening to all the 'girl talk'," Xander explained, grinning crookedly, "I learned early on that the way to a man's heart was supposedly through his stomach."

Spike chuckled. "It wasn't the blood, Pet." Spike paused, frowned, then began again. "Well, okay, yeah, it *was* the blood, but not *just* the blood, ya know? It was the way you went about it." Spike's breath hitched as the picture of Xander bent over the deer flashed through his mind once more. "You'd have turned on a *dusted* vamp with *that* routine!"

Xander grinned, and for a moment, Spike saw 'Normal Xander' shine through. "That good, huh?" he asked, his hand coming up to cup the side of Spike's face.

"Oh, yeah," Spike breathed, unconsciously leaning into the touch, "that good."

"Good," Xander said firmly. Eyes never straying from Spike's, Xander slipped his hand behind the vampire's neck. As he gently pulled, he inched forward.

/ Spike went willingly, his mouth automatically

opening under Xander's as it was claimed with a passion-filled kiss. This time, Xander's tongue invaded his mouth, dueling slowly with his own. He moaned low in his throat as Xander's free hand ghosted down his chest to trail lightly over his abdomen. It stopped, resting teasingly above the waistband of his jeans. He bucked without taking his mouth from Xander's, silently demanding the hand continue its path.

Xander pulled back the merest touch, their lips now only barely touching. "More?" he asked, his voice a low, husky whisper.

Spike moaned. He was expected to make decisions *now*? Instead of replying, he leaned forward, trying to restart the kiss. He growled when Xander matched him inch for inch, maintaining their distance.

"Spike."

"What, now?" Spike demanded. Hadn't he made it bloody obvious he wanted to continue?

"You say no, or don't answer me, and it stops here and now. No reprieve."

"Bloody, Wanker! I'm in *chains*, tied to the bloody bed, and you're *asking*?!" Spike's eyes narrowed. That *wasn't* how the game was played!

Xander rolled off the bed, landing gracefully on his feet. "I said, I wasn't going to force you, Spike. And this *first* time," Xander leered, "I won't even *play* at it. You want me, you gotta say it -- loud and clear."

Spike's growl was now virtually continuous, his frustration growing by leaps and bounds. The boy wanted him, it should have been obvious to a blind *IDIOT* that he wanted the boy in return. Why the *hell* did words have to come into it at all?

"Tell me, Spike," Xander purred, running his splayed hands down his own chest, slowing long enough to circle each covered nipple before continuing downward.

Spike gasped, the smallest of whimpers escaping as he watched the wanton display.

"Tell me you want me. Tell me you want me to *take* you."

His traitorous body twitched as pure, unadulterated lust shot through him, his jeans suddenly becoming tighter, even as a small fissure of uncertainty clouded his thoughts. Not since he'd been newly turned, and Angelus had been his *god*, had he bottomed voluntarily. Until Xander's taunting words, he hadn't thought that far ahead, hadn't really thought through, where this would go.

He swallowed convulsively. Did he want this? *Hell, yes, I do!* Did he want it badly to enough to accept Xander's terms.

"Tick, tock, Spike," Xander said, a single finger clicking back and forth like a taunting metronome.

Fuck! He did! "Fine!" he snapped, all his lust, anger, and yes, fear, poured into that single word. "I want

you! Happy?"

"All of it, Spike," Xander demanded, one knee now on the bed. "Say it *all*"

Spike groaned as, unbelievably, his lust shot up another notch, the fire racing through his body enough to make his eyes drift shut in response. He couldn't believe he was getting *this* turned on by the mere *thought* of Xander dominating him. He hadn't--

All thought stopped as Xander lay a hand firmly on his thigh, the warmth of the fingertips, that *just* missed being where he wanted them to be, seeping through the jeans he no longer wanted to wear as they slowly, teasingly, moved back and forth.

"God, yes!" Spike finally exclaimed, not opening his eyes. He couldn't look at Xander and say what he wanted to hear. "I want you to take me. Do it, Xander! Do . It . Now!"

7 The Joining

Xander's moan in response to Spike's demands was more than half growl. Spike's eyes remained glued to Xander as he strolled to the end of the bed, slowly peeling his shirt over his head as he went. He turned, eyes bright, running his hands down the planes of his chest.

Spike rattled the chains in frustration as he watched Xander perform a slow strip, teasing as he took the time to touch each portion of flesh as it was revealed. Spike moaned low in his throat. He couldn't touch himself; he couldn't touch Xander. He couldn't even help remove clothes. The waiting - the chance to 'cool down' -- should have given him time to think, but damned if all this didn't turn the heat just that much higher.

His anticipation growing, Spike watched Xander methodically strip away each piece of clothing. A moan caught low in his throat as Xander, finally divested of his garments, crawled onto the bed, and

slowly inched his way up Spike's body. Xander took his time, exploring every part of Spike, his large, hot hands searching, finding, touching everywhere but where Spike most wanted them to be -- hands that while strong enough to do damage, were surprisingly gentle and tender.

Spike couldn't take it. He'd expected -- wanted -- rough, raw, wild shagging. What he was getting was so much more.

"Xaannder!"

Xander chuckled, the sound throaty and strained. "Yes, Spike?" he breathed, panting lightly as he stopped completely, waiting.

"Don't stop!" Spike exclaimed, his own voice a little breathy. "Just fuck me already!" Spike froze, his breath caught in his throat. Had he actually *said* that?

Xander gasped above him, the grip on his hips tightening. "Pushy, pushy," Xander whispered

teasingly, completely ignoring Spike's demands as he resumed his slow torturous climb. But *now* he bent low, his mouth touching -- caressing, sucking; his tongue darting out to taste. He hummed as he sucked one erect nipple into his mouth, rolling the tiny nub gently between his teeth. A moment later, his tongue darted out, soothing it.

Spike's eyes rolled back, his lids half-closed as Xander sucked and nipped his way to the other side, giving equal time to his other nipple. He fairly snarled when Xander's mouth *finally* reached his, and their lips met with bruising force, tongues dueling for control of the kiss.

Suddenly Xander pulled back, slipping his hands beneath Spike and yanking him down until he was laying flat on his back.

Spike gasped, but before he could say anything, Xander had reclaimed his mouth, Xander's tongue demanding immediate entry. Spike granted it, his lips parting almost automatically. He was floating in a sea of sensation, Xander's hands working his

entire body into one giant erogenous zone, their constant motion seemingly hotwiring every single one of his nerves directly to his groin and his weeping cock.

Xander broke from the kiss, panting, trailing moist breathy kisses across Spike's jaw and down his throat.

Spike threw his head back, giving complete access to that most vulnerable part of himself. "Yesss!" he hissed as Xander deftly unbuttoned his jeans finally freeing him from the confining material. Events blurred a bit for Spike after that, Xander managing to free him of his remaining clothing, all the while never completely losing skin to skin contact.

Spike's skin felt alive, every touch, every sensation heightened. He could feel the slight breeze through the room rustle the sprinkling of hair across his body, the incredible heat radiating from Xander's body, the coarse material of his jeans crumpled around his bound ankle, Xander's hands, Xander's mouth, Xander's tongue -- Xander's incredible

tongue doing incredible things to his inner thigh.

Spike's legs parted without thought from him. He wasn't capable of rational thought. He both prayed for and feared the moment Xander actually touched his cock, believing he might actually cum from just that additional stimulation. He felt out of control.

Suddenly everything stopped, and he whimpered, his body crying out for more. He snapped his eyes open, only to find Xander staring at him. He arched off the bed as Xander bent down, the very tip of his tongue darting out to lick across the slit of his cock. "God, YES!" he shouted, electric shots of pure lust radiating out from his groin to his toes, his body now shaking with raw need.

Two hands grabbed firm hold of his hips, pinning him in place. Xander then leaned forward again, sucking the crown of Spike's cock into his mouth.

Spike let out a groan, struggling against the hands that prevented him from moving, wanting nothing more than to thrust into that hot, moist haven.

Ever-so-slowly, centimeter by torturous centimeter, he was drawn in, Xander's tongue curling around his cock. Then, abruptly, it too was gone.

"Arrrrrrr," he bellowed in frustration, eyes locking angrily onto Xander's.

Xander simply lifted his hand and sucked a single finger into his mouth, lathing it with his tongue.

Spike's eyes widened. *Oh!* He panted, his hands clamping around the chains as he watched that finger descend. He tensed the instant it touched him, sliding down behind his balls to the puckered opening.

"Shhhh," Xander soothed, not practicing, just firmly caressing the ring of muscle. "Let go," he encouraged in a hoarse whisper, "Let someone else be in control."

Spike swallowed, forcible relaxing back onto the bed.

"Nothing dangerous here," Xander continued soothingly as he slipped the tip of his finger just inside that first ring.

Nothing dangerous!? Spike thought wildly, moaning as Xander's finger slipped the rest of the way in, now moving slowly inside him.

No, just everything I am! Staring into those lust-dazed, caring eyes, he could so easily lose himself to--

He stiffened, raising his head slightly. "Release one manacle," he said quickly, "let me roll over."

The finger stilled, even as Xander brought his other hand to Spike's cock and began slowly working it from base to tip and back again. "Why?" he asked.

Too much, Spike thought frantically. *This was just supposed to be a good shag! Xander will go back to normal and I'll be alone again. I can't do it like this.*

"Spike?" Xander asked, and Spike was startled to

discover that they were now face-to-face, Xander's body covering his, Xander's hands working soothingly through his hair. The warm weight of the body pressing against his was at once both comforting and, truth be told, a little scary. *This* Xander had the strength to be an equal. This Xander could actually be strong enough to-- No. *This* Xander wasn't going to stick around. Spike had been down this road once already -- was *still* down it in fact. He was *not* going down it again.

He simply shook his head. He couldn't explain without sounding like a ponce, without humiliating himself further. Xander couldn't possibly understand what it was like to *feel* loved only be rejected immediately afterward. Spike did. He'd felt that aching void time and time again. He'd felt it until he'd finally lashed out, wanting to hurt the person who'd hurt him more deeply than should have been possible.

"I want to see you, Spike. I want to watch your eyes as you cum with me buried to the hilt inside you."

Spike's eyes widened, and he wanted to deny the request. He wanted to ignore utterly what the words implied. He wanted to demand this change back to the fun shag it really should have stayed. But one look into those soulful eyes and he was lost.

"Let me watch you."

Resisting the urge to close his eyes, Spike nodded, the movement barely perceptible. He felt like he was giving up all control, and he couldn't believe how terrifying that was. It felt like he was offering himself up on a pedestal, knowing full well that sooner or later that pedestal would come crashing down, leaving him broken once again. How many times could he survive that and remain fixable?

Spike was left feeling vulnerable, and oh so very exposed as Xander's weight disappeared, taking all warmth as he went.

"X-Xander?"

Xander was back in an instant. Positioning himself between Spike's ankles, he held up the object of his search.

Spike took a shaky breath, unneeded though the air itself was, and bent his knees, spreading his legs wide as Xander coated his fingers with the slick he'd retrieved. He moaned again as one finger returned, pumping slowly in and out, the tip finally hooking just right.

Stars exploded behind his eyes. *Hell's bells!!* he thought. He'd forgotten what that felt like. Almost no time later, a second finger joined the first in easing its way inside, the two scissoring as he relaxed into the intrusion. Soon, he was rising up to meet Xander's thrusting fingers. He faltered briefly, whimpering as Xander's fingers withdrew until only the very tips remained.

"Yessss," Spike groaned as Xander eased a third finger inside him. His eyes drifted shut as he ground his hips upward. "More!"

Xander growled, the sound mutating to a moan as he moved forward instantly.

Despite knowing what came next, Spike whimpered as the fingers withdrew, leaving him feeling empty.

The blunt head of Xander's cock brushed his entrance. Hands braced his hips.

"Open your eyes, Spike," Xander whispered faintly, his voice trembling.

Spike hesitated, then, forcing his heavy eyelids up, he locked gazes with Xander.

Holding himself still for only a moment longer, Xander slipped only the head of this cock in. "God, Spike! *So tight, so cool,*" he moaned, easing the rest of the way in a single smooth thrust.

Spike tried to move.

"GAhhh!" Xander exclaimed, clamping his hands tightly around Spike's hips. "Don't move," he

demanded. Several slow, deep breaths later, Xander continued. "You move now, and it's going to be over before it starts."

Bowing forward, Xander rested his forehead against Spike's chest. "Didn't realize--" Xander mumbled incoherently. "Never thought-- So . . . different."

Spike's chest tightened, and his eyes stung, his grip on the chains becoming painfully tight. "Different good?" he asked. "Or different bad?"

"Good," Xander replied immediately and the bands constricting Spike's chest released. "So good," he continued, raising up, and pulling back until he barely remained inside Spike. On that threshold, he paused for a split second before plunging himself back in to the hilt, trying to angle just right.

Slowly, steadily, he withdrew and entered, each time carefully keeping his gaze locked on Spike's, each entry made at a slightly different angle.

Spike gasped as the head of Xander's cock slid

across his prostate, once again sending electric shocks through his body. The fiery tension curling deep in his gut, built and built, until he thought it couldn't build anymore as Xander managed to hit his prostate with almost every thrust -- and then it built some more.

Moaning almost continuously now, Spike clenched the chains spasmodically. "God, Pet, gotta cum, gotta cum," he muttered feverishly, riding out the crest he'd risen to but couldn't seem to top.

"Pleeease," he begged, the words coming without his volition.

With a startled shout, Xander's movements quickened, his thrusts becoming harder, deeper.

Beneath him, Spike met him thrust for thrust, driving himself up onto the hot cock buried inside him.

"Spi-ike!" Xander groaned, shaking as his hot seed flooded the vampire.

That was just enough to send Spike over the edge, and he screamed out Xander's name as pulse after pulse of his orgasm spread through his body. He jerked as each spurt of the pearly white fluid shot out over his chest, leaving him drained, and utterly sated. As he lay there limp, Xander panting above him, supported on trembling arms, even Spike's *toes* tingled.

Dropping his head, finally breaking eye contact, Xander sighed a shaky sigh. "I knew it."

"Knew what?" Spike asked, instantly wary.

"That you'd look incredible as you came," Xander replied wickedly, raising his head just high enough to leer at Spike through his eyelashes.

Spike gaped at the man barely supporting himself above him. A shocking shyness snuck up on him, stealing its way through him, and he averted his gaze away from that knowing stare. He almost jerked his head back a moment later as it hit him just how *submissive* that gesture had been, but

realized instantly it was too late. The impression had already been made.

Xander shifted, carefully not disconnecting them, and his hand reached up gently turning Spike back to face him.

Spike inhaled deeply at the tender, caring smile that met his sight. His eyes flickered upward to see the same emotions lighting the brown eyes boring into his, those and something more. It took him a moment to identify what it was. Shock coursed through him as he did. He swallowed convulsively at the possessiveness he saw there. 'Mine,' that look said clearly.

Part of him reveled in it, ignoring the voice of reason that said it would end all too soon. That part of him longed simply to *belong* once more. He moaned at the first gentle brush of Xander's mouth across his.

"It'll be okay," Xander whispered against his lips, "I promise."

Spike shook his head in denial. He knew it wouldn't. It never was.

"Sleep," Xander whispered as he eased back, gasping as he did so. Reaching over to the table, he grabbed the cuff key and swiftly unlocked the two wrist manacles, freeing Spike's arms.

A moment later found the two of them curled together, Xander spooned behind Spike, one arm under the vampire, one arm thrown protectively over. The two were fast asleep.

8 Plots in Plots

Spike woke swiftly, jumping directly to full awareness with no stop for the gentle hazy rise through the layers of sleep. The first thought that

popped into his mind was, *I had sex with Xander Harris!* In the cold, hard reality of the next day, it was difficult to believe.

Not bothering to open his eyes, Spike took stock of his situation. He was hungry; there was nothing unusual in that. The room itself was permeated with the overpowering scent of sex -- and he was alone.

Well, that's familiar, too, innit! he thought sourly, slowly opening his eyes and raising himself up on his elbows. That was one thing that Harmony got points for. In those precious few waking moments -- before she woke too -- he had enjoyed lying still, quietly cuddling against her. Of course, at the time, he hadn't properly appreciated it. He hadn't known just how sorely lacking it would be in the future.

A lesson in that, somewhere, Spike thought, then shook his head. Right now, he had plans to foil. If Xander thought that Spike was an easy mark, well, he just had another think coming. Restrained or not, Spike had a trick or two up his sleeve. The boy

wouldn't be taking him by surprise this time.

Frowning, Spike threw his covers off, glaring at the ankle restraint hidden beneath his jeans. Not having much choice in the matter, he quickly redressed and hopped out of the bed -- firmly repressing the events that had led to his jeans being wound around his bound ankle in the first place.

He wasn't in the mood to examine what had happened. It was sex, so what.

I had sex with Xander Harris! He groaned. *Give me a break, and shut the hell up!* he told himself, but couldn't quite shake the shock of the last night's events. It wasn't that he was all that concerned about what had happened; sex was sex -- but it had been with *Xander*! He shivered briefly as he unwillingly remembered being the focus of Xander's undivided exploration attentions, his thoughts immediately shying away from how it had made him feel.

In objective retrospect, Spike could see where

Xander's touches had gone from tentative and a little clumsy, to confident and deft as the boy became more and more sure of himself -- and Spike admitted ruefully, his reactions. And did Harris catch on fast, learning quickly what he liked and what he didn't! A shiver of arousal slithered across the base of his spine, stiffening him.

"Okay! We're *not* going there again, so you can just forget it!" Xander already had enough reason to stake him after this was over; he *didn't* need to give him more. "Not even supposed to be *thinking* about it," he berated himself, swiftly crouching down to inspect the manacle around his ankle.

If nothing else, it gave something *else* to concentrate on. Thing was, he'd had them specially made, and he seriously doubted even *he* could get out of them. Of course, when he'd got them, he hadn't exactly planned on being the one *in* them.

He sighed. *Hindsight 20/20, and all that.*

Several moments later, he jumped up in

exasperation. It was useless tugging at the damn thing. It was solid, demon construction, and wasn't coming loose for nothing. For the moment, he was forced to admit that he was well and truly caught. Absently worrying his thumbnail as he thought; Spike paced back and forth restlessly, the length of the chain dictating his path. His attention, however; kept straying back to the bed.

"One track mind, ya git!" he muttered angrily. "Get your mind where it needs to be!"

And where's that? On how wonderful last night felt?

Spike ruthlessly ignored that thought, frowning. What he needed to do, he corrected, was just make sure he didn't give in again. After this was over, Harris would give him credit for that . . . wouldn't he? Spike sighed again. *Who cares?* If the whelp reacted badly--

IF?!

If the whelp reacted *really* badly, Spike could always

make himself scarce until he calmed down. Yeah, that was the ticket. Spike nodded firmly, the decision made, and since he was pretty sure Xander had thrown all the surprises he was going to, it would be easy to resist further temptations.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander licked his lips, his anticipation building as he once again tested the weight of the dart gun in his hands. He'd snatched it from the Magic Box, making sure to get there well before Anya usually arrived. He really hadn't wanted to run into her right now. He suspected she -- out of all of them -- would know instantly something was different about him. Not wanting to dwell on what would have happened if she *had* been there, Xander returned his attention to his surroundings and the gun. They hadn't needed it for Oz in ages, but no one had bothered to get rid of it -- for which he was now very grateful.

Xander sighed as he scented the wind again. He could smell his prey, but he couldn't seem to get

any closer. He'd been at this for three hours already, and he hadn't made *any* headway. It was beginning to get irritating!

He wanted to surprise Spike -- though he was pretty sure he'd done *that* already. He chuckled. He would *never* forget the look on Spike's face when he'd straddled the vampire, blood dripping down his chin. He'd never before seen such raw, aching need in his entire life. And while he knew damn well most of the attraction had been the blood, it had *felt* like he'd been the center of Spike's world, the most coveted, precious thing in existence.

It had felt *good*, and he wanted to feel it again.

He *was going* to feel it again, he vowed. First, however, Spike deserved a treat, and stale pig's blood just wouldn't cut it. Xander grinned widely. He knew Spike had to be virtually starving. The vampire hadn't had anything to eat last night beyond the mouthful Xander had give him, and there hadn't been anything there at the crypt to give him this evening.

Xander winced. The waste of most of the deer bothered Xander on several levels, but he pushed it aside. It had been done for a greater cause.

Yeah, he thought, his grin growing, getting into Spike's -- as he would say -- knickers.

Moving deeper into the woods, Xander frowned, not really sure why he'd chosen Spike -- though he *did* know why he had bypassed Buffy this time. Normal Xander saw her through rose tinted glasses. It wasn't that he didn't see her shortcomings; he just overlooked them. He was her friend; that's what friends did. And while Buffy was strong, an equal, Free Xander wanted someone more giving, someone not afraid to let themselves go, someone who'd give everything for someone they cared about -- like he did.

He snorted, even as he kept his senses trained. Normal Xander wouldn't have looked twice at Spike given that definition -- even if he *had* managed to look past his gender, and of course, the whole

vampire thing -- but Free Xander knew better. He'd figured several things out during this early evening hunt.

Unlike Normal Xander, he saw the blond vampire without the haze of hate and bigotry. He could look back on this past year and see what Normal Xander had missed in his misplaced outrage. He could see how Spike had given of himself over and over again -- only to be rejected almost each and every time.

It hadn't all been selfless, Xander knew that too. Spike was Spike, after all. What Xander hadn't been able to figure out at first, was why Spike had helped them so much *before* he'd fallen for Buffy. Sure, he couldn't function as he had before the chip. His world had been turned upside down, and as would *anyone* who suddenly found themselves in Spike's position, he'd been lost and afraid.

Xander began moving more quickly, the scent of his prey getting stronger and stronger now, the chase not interrupting his musings -- or vice versa.

Turning to the good guys had been an act of desperation for Spike, Xander knew, one that had most likely been a last resort. He had immediately understood that. It was the coming back later, before the Buffy lovin started, that he'd had trouble with. He'd figured Angel had survived just fine without biting anyone, why couldn't -- or more to the point, hadn't -- Spike?

It was the answer to that nagging question that had been the final piece to the puzzle, and was why -- even without previous understanding -- he'd chosen Spike. The vampire had kept coming back to them, because they were familiar and he knew what to expect from them. He had an innate need to belong, to not be alone that was easy to see for any idiot who chose to actually look, and *that* Xander could understand all too well.

A low growl to his left jerked Xander out of his thoughts and fully back onto the hunt. His prey was near, and trying to turn the tables. He turned slowly, waiting. Instincts urged him to throw aside the *man-made* gun and take his prey with his hands

and teeth.

Common sense told him it wasn't a good idea. He was strong, he was quick, but experienced he wasn't. For now, he'd keep every advantage he could get his hands on. Besides, if it came down to a one on one, animal-to-animal fight, he'd fight to kill, and he wanted the wolf alive.

Xander set himself, gun at the ready, waiting for the animal's charge. He didn't have to wait long, and as the grey streak burst from the trees Xander pulled the trigger. The gun bucked lightly in his hands, and the nearly simultaneous, startled yelp from the magnificent animal told him he'd hit true.

Wary, but grinning, he kept the gun raised as he inched forward. According to Willow, it had worked almost instantly on Oz, but he wasn't taking any chances. When he reached the wolf, and a nudge with his booted foot gained no response, Xander slung the gun over his shoulder and bent to pick up the sleeping animal.

Moments later he was on his way back to the crypt.

9 Challenges Issued

Spike automatically tensed the moment he heard Xander return. A bored expression carefully fixed in place, Spike leaned casually against the bedpost, waiting. He may not have been able to find his shoes or his shirt, but he could still make an impression. He couldn't control the low tingle that spread through his gut as he listened to Xander's footsteps echo above his head, however; and he groaned inwardly at his body's betrayal. Refusing to let his unwanted arousal change his expression, Spike waited, the picture of bored patience.

Spike *wasn't* bored -- far from it. He *had* been, though; right up until the moment Xander had returned. He frowned as Xander's progress halted at the trapdoor.

"Hey, Spike!"

"What?" he asked irritably, wondering why the hell the bloody git hadn't just waited the twenty seconds it would have taken to get down. It was inconsiderate of him to waste the whole scene Spike had spent so much time working on. It was . . . irritating.

"Does different blood taste differently?"

Spike rolled his eyes. *Stupid question! Haven't I spent enough time bitching about pig's blood?* "Of course it does, ya pillock. Pig's blood is bloody disgusting." Spike paused, rerunning his last sentence through his mind. "No pun intended."

From the floor above him, Xander chuckled. "Well, yeah, *that* I know. What I meant was, does different animal blood taste differently?"

Spike blinked. He'd never thought about it before. ". . . suppose it might," he admitted tentatively.

"Haven't exactly tried a wide variety."

"Well, I was thinking--"

"Why don't you come down here, before you continue that. You can bore me with your theories just as well that way."

Xander laughed, the sound full and echoing.

"Naughty, naughty, Spike. Keep that up, and I'll take away your treat."

Even as he frowned, outraged at Xander's effrontery, a small frisson of pleasure bloomed inside Spike. *A prezzie?* He briefly debated with himself over whether he'd get more satisfaction out of the, 'sod off,' that was hovering on his lips, or finding out what Xander had brought him. It *could* be interesting, after all.

The decision was taken out of his hands, however; he took just a little too long and Xander took his silence as compliance.

"That's better," he said into the silence. "Now, as I started to say; I was thinking; human blood seems to taste a *lot* better to you than pig, and humans -- even if they do eat veggies -- are basically predators."

After a fashion, Spike thought, snorting.

"I wondered if *that's* what makes the big difference."

"What makes the *difference* is humans are what were *supposed* to eat!" Spike snapped, irritated now. "It's like comparing Prime Rib to gruel!"

"Hmmm, okay," Xander replied with yet another chuckle. "I guess that means you don't want anything to do with what I brought, then."

"I didn't say that," Spike denied, before he could remember he was supposed to be bored. He mentally whacked himself, rolling his eyes.

"Thought you might say that."

Spike growled quietly. *Wanker!* "So, what is it?" he asked, glad when his tone came out as bored as he wanted it to.

"Dinner!" Xander replied, dropping through the trap door, landing easily on his feet despite his burden.

He shouldn't be able to do that, Spike thought absently, surprised by the boy's apparent prowess. It was like last night with the unexpected strength, he thought; though, most of his attention was centered on the *live* wolf Xander was busy carrying the short distance across the room.

"Now I know you can't bite humans," Xander said matter-of-factly as he laid the wolf at Spike's feet, "but can you bite animals? Have you tried?"

Spike shook his head numbly, until he realized Xander wouldn't know which question he was answering. "I don't know. I've never tried."

"Why not? I mean, there are animals out there that

would be a hell of a lot more of a challenge to hunt than the average human. Might be fun." He shrugged, stepping back. "I know it was for me."

Spike blinked. He really liked the way this Xander thought. *No, you don't, git! You want normal Xander back, so you can get back to your normal life -- well, unlife.* Spike tried to believe it, but somehow the thought rang hollow. This was a Xander that was fun. This was a Xander that-- *NO! This Xander won't be sticking around, so don't even think it!*

"Could be," he allowed.

"So, are you going to try, or do I kill it before it wakes up? I only gave it a half-dose, so it shouldn't be out long."

Spike weighed the pros and cons in his head as he warily watched the sleeping animal. Even now, it's heart beat was slowly speeding up. If he *could* bite it, it would open a whole new vista for him.

Thoughts of hunting tigers with just his wits and fangs flitted through his mind. That would be

almost as exciting as fighting demons -- and *way* better tasting. Nothing tasted worse than the average demon -- excepting vampires, of course.

Once again, the conscious decision was taken out of his hands as the wolf stirred, struggling to its feet. Instinct took over. Spike darted forward, wrenching the beast's head to the side, and -- mentally preparing himself for the zap from hell -- shifted, sinking his fangs into the furry throat.

He sighed as the first mouthful of the hot, wild blood poured into his mouth. Swallowing the liquid in hungry gulps, Spike growled against the neck. He felt like a *vampire* again! Jerking his head, widening the wounds as the blood began to slow, Spike forced his fangs further inside. This was heaven. He was sure of it. It may not be human, but he had his *bite* back!

And it was Xander who gave it back, came the unbidden thought.

Tears of joy, mixed equally with a sadness he didn't

fully understand, sprang into his eyes, only to fall unheeded down his cheeks. Long after the blood ceased to flow, and he'd retracted his fangs, Spike left his head buried in the animal's neck. He'd already given the boy enough ammunition for a lifetime of humiliation, he didn't have to give him this, also.

He stiffened as he felt Xander's hands drop gently to his shoulders, kneading slowly. He relaxed into the deft touch, the warm fingers digging into each kink they found in his shoulders. Not moving, Spike ignored the *other* reaction he had to the touch that *seemed* so caring.

Supposed to resist stuff like this, he thought half-heartedly, not really intending on stopping it. It simply felt too good. Muscles that had been knotted for so long that they predated recent memory began to relax, and Spike wilted against the cooling body of the wolf. All his muscles had been wrapped up in knots for so long, he'd forgotten what it felt like to be completely relaxed.

Last night came close.

He ignored the voice again. He was getting good at it -- especially since it kept telling him stuff he didn't want to hear.

"Better?" Xander asked quietly, close enough to Spike's ear that Spike could feel the human's hot breath across his skin.

Spike shivered, then nodded. He didn't trust his voice enough to reply.

"Good," Xander whispered, dropping his mouth to Spike's shoulder.

Spike groaned as Xander began gently sucking.

Time to stop him, Spike thought, gasping and arching into the mouth as Xander grazed his teeth across the temporary mark Spike was sure Xander had left behind. Lightly nipping his way across Spike's shoulder and up the side of his neck, Xander teased with his teeth, and soothed with his tongue -

- all the while breathing hot, moist air across the sensitive flesh.

Xander's mouth continued working its magic as his hands slid down Spike's sides, and Spike shivered under the touch. *Fuck it!* he thought, he was already going to have to disappear after this was over, may as well be condemned for the whole nine yards. *This* time, Xander would learn at the hands of a true master.

Spinning around suddenly, catching Xander by surprise, Spike swooped down and claimed his mouth in a nearly bruising kiss. A surprised, 'oh,' parted the lips beneath his and Spike took full advantage, his tongue diving inside to explore. It was a full three of Xander's heartbeats before he responded. When he did, Spike was shocked at the sheer ferocity of it.

Yes! he crowed. Leaning forward, he pressed Xander backward. Intent on the feelings running through his body, and his ultimate goal, Spike missed the moment that Xander's response

changed. He found himself flat on his back before he realized what was happening.

Not this time! he thought, arching up and flipping Xander back over. He grinned down into Xander's lust-dazed eyes, but jerked back just the tiniest bit when Xander simply grinned impishly back at him. A second later the brat copied to perfection Spike's last maneuver.

"Bloody hell!" This was getting ridiculous. As fun as a pre-shag tussle could be, Spike wanted to get to the main event. He switched tactics, thinking to play on Xander's sense of fair play. "My turn," he whispered. Smirking at the man above him, Spike canted his hips upward, pressing his erect cock against the matching one on Xander.

Eyes bright, tongue darting out to lick his lips, Xander grinned, leaning into Spike. Whispering softly into Spike's ear, he chuckled. "Not gonna happen, Spike."

"Get off me, tosser!" Spike shouted angrily, shoving

upward with all his strength. All the same, he was a touch surprised when Xander went easily, using the momentum of Spike's push to roll easily up onto his feet. Wishing for the time when that shove would have sent Xander flying into a wall, Spike scrambled to his feet, and for the first time since before his turning, felt awkward in comparison to someone else.

Meeting Spike's gaze with an amused one of his own, Xander shrugged. "Okay by me. We can just move on to the next event in tonight's festivities.

Frowning, Spike wasn't sure whether to believe that Xander was going to give up that easily. Spike wouldn't have.

"Told you before, Spike, I won't force you." He grinned then, his eyelids dropping to hide half his eyes, just before he licked his upper lip slowly.

"Until you *want* me to, that is."

"When hell freezes over, wanker!"

Again Xander shrugged, clearly not caring -- either that or not believing him. It was, in a word, *infuriating!*

At a seeming impasse they eyed each other, Spike wary, and Xander -- to Spike's disgust -- amused.

"You ready?" Xander asked.

"I'm ready for whatever *you've* got planned," Spike retorted.

"You're sure?" Xander checked, his grin widening.

Spike rolled his eyes. "Oh, get *over* yourself, and get to it!" he snapped. Patience had *never* been his strong suit, and right now, he was at the end of what little he had -- past it, actually. The curves Xander kept throwing his way had him off balance and unsure of himself. He didn't like it, and he just wanted to get this -- whatever this was -- over with.

"Get on the bed."

"EXCUSE me?!" Spike exclaimed, outrage and amusement equally mixed racing through him.

"I said," Xander repeated slowly, "get . On . The . Bed."

"Fuck no!"

The grin he got in return for his exclamation threw Spike, and before he even thought about it, he stepped back a half step. Xander had *clearly* lost it. He'd finally rounded the bend and entered Dru's territory.

"Are you challenging my authority?"

"Your *authority*?" Spike asked incredulously. "Fuck, yeah, I am!" He couldn't believe it. One time -- one time -- he'd *allowed* Xander to top him, and now the boy had delusions of grandeur.

Allowed? I seem to recall there being something in there, came the ever present voice of that which shouldn't ever be mentioned.

"Good," Xander replied, dropping into a credible fighting stance that once again surprised Spike -- he *really* needed to quit underestimating this Xander. "This is going to be fun."

10 And the Battle is on

Manic glee filled Xander as he and Spike watched each other warily. He was on the cold cement floor, out of breath, and loving every second of it. Neither one of them had managed the upper hand in the first go round, nor any of the succeeding ones -- though Xander was pretty sure he was more worn out by the exchanges than Spike. The simple fact that Spike was obviously considering him a serious threat was beyond incredible, but it was more than that, really. In fact, it was fantastic. It was a rush beyond all other rushes. Now, he just had to find out if he *could* beat Spike. He knew normal humans -- trained of course -- could beat fledges, but even Buffy had trouble with Spike. This was a chance of a lifetime, one that would probably *never* happen

again, and he was going to make the most of it.

Of course, he wasn't going to be 'fair', and release Spike. The advantage of surprise may be what got that manacle on, but by God, he put it there and it was staying. It wasn't really hampering the vampire much, anyway. Spike seemed fully able to work around the limitations it placed on him. Xander had noticed something during their bouts, however; and he was pretty sure he could take advantage of it. Spike had been good, very good, at keeping the chain out of the way -- of both of them. Sometimes it almost seemed as if it were an extension of the vampire's body.

Occasionally, though; just twice in fact, that chain had come within reach of Xander. Both times, if he'd realized it soon enough, he could have used it to his advantage. The trick was going to be getting Spike in the same position a third time -- without seeming to be trying -- *and* be ready.

Xander rose slowly, keeping an eye on Spike the whole time. He grinned when Spike stood also, the

vampire on his feet and ready before Xander was even halfway up. It made Xander feel . . . dangerous. Trying *not* to telegraph his moves, Xander faked a lunge left, charging right. He wasn't surprised when -- again -- Spike seemed to anticipate his moves, and the two of them tumbled to the floor, both strong-arming to retain -- or regain -- the top position. He didn't like it, but it was something that had happened time and time again already.

Of course, *this* round he hadn't really expected to surprise Spike, he'd made the exact same move he had the last two times. He'd already discovered that he *couldn't* fake the vampire out, so he was going to try something different. Fortunately, it seemed Spike was having the same difficulty, and therein lay the difference from encounters they'd had before the last two days. They were on a level playing field -- well, more level.

Spike's elbow rammed into his gut, and gasping for blocked breath, Xander rolled away. He grinned, though; his parting shot -- a knee ground into

Spike's thigh -- hadn't left the vampire feeling much more chipper than he was. Of course, the shot from the chip couldn't have helped the vampire's condition either.

"Bloody hell, Harris, what's this going to prove? You're not going to get the better of me. I've got a century of fighting experience. You *don't*."

Xander chuckled through the easing pain in his gut. "I don't exactly see you 'getting the better of me' with all that *experience*," he retorted. *And does that feel good? Can we say yes!*

Spike frowned, glaring at him.

Xander almost giggled at the indignation clear in the vampire's expression. The blond obviously wanted to retort, but couldn't find a comeback good enough. Ah, well. Time to end this. He'd had his fun, and found he *still* couldn't take Spike in a strength for strength match -- of course, Spike's experience *was* a huge factor there, so he wasn't exactly mortified by the discovery. As he rolled to his feet

once again, Xander wondered, just how badly he'd be getting trounced if Spike was actually up to *full* strength -- which he was fairly certain the vampire wasn't.

Xander started this round with the exact same move he had the last three. He almost grinned at Spike's disgusted expression. This time, though; he planned a twist. He faked left and dodged right, only to spin back left again -- risking his back to Spike as he circled behind the vampire -- Xander was euphoric when it actually worked. For once, the underestimating of the Xandman was coming in handy. He was sure, though, that the only reason it had worked was because Spike thought he was 'predictable', wouldn't try something different.

He backed up rapidly as Spike almost immediately reversed himself, and was once again facing Xander. *Come on, Xander thought. Just a little closer. NO! Don't look at the chain!* Gaze firmly locked on the now enraged vampire in front of him, Xander prayed no telltale flicker of his eyes or body gave away his true objective. Spike just had to step close

enough. Xander needed a little more slack in the chain to carry this off.

He laughed at himself -- assuming Spike didn't catch on too quickly. That was really the key. If he didn't do it quickly enough, he was toast, and would be trapped by his own trap.

"Give it up, Harris," Spike said as he stalked forward. "You'll only exhaust yourself . . . and leave me laughing."

Gritting his teeth, Xander dove; not for Spike, but for the length of chain curled on the floor. Mentally crowing as he actually came back up to his feet after the dive-roll -- chain both in hand and wrapped around one ankle -- Xander didn't give himself -- and hopefully Spike -- any time to think. He leapt forward, using the chain much as he would a lasso. Flipping the upper length around one of Spike's wrists, he yanked, and at the same moment, kicked back with his trapped foot.

He almost giggled as Spike went down -- hard -- his

head hitting the cement floor. He winced at that, though; that *had* to hurt, but didn't let his sympathy slow him down. He did hope that Spike would be slowed for bit from the blow. It would certainly help. Freeing his foot, Xander quickly strode forward, but only managed one additional wind of the chain around Spike's wrist before the vampire was actively fighting him off.

Damn! Just a second longer!

"I don't *think* so, Wanker!" Spike exclaimed.

The blow from Spike's free hand caught Xander completely by surprise, and sent him flying off the semi-prone blond. He didn't know how, because he was *literally* seeing stars, but he'd managed to retain his hold on the portion of chain caught around Spike's wrist. Of course, if Spike's yelp was any indicator, the blow had hurt the vampire far more than it had Xander, and right now, Xander was so not above taking advantage of that.

Ignoring the pain pulsing on top of his cheekbone --

he'd have a bruise come morning for sure -- Xander scrambled toward Spike, finally -- *YES!* -- managing to get the chain around both of the vampire's wrists. Now he just had to keep his position. Easier said than done, he knew. Spike wasn't going to just lay still simply because of this.

"Think you've got the better of me, do you?" Spike asked, his expression an odd mixture between smirking superiority and confusion. It was almost as if the vampire couldn't figure out how he'd managed to get in the fix he was in.

Of course, Xander thought, almost laughing, that's probably pretty close to the truth.

"Nope," Xander replied honestly, shaking his head. "If getting you tied up was enough to best you, you wouldn't be as dangerous as you are."

Spike reared back in outright surprise.

Now, how'd he do THAT laying on the floor?

"Well, yeah, of course. Glad you realize that."

Xander waited. He may have surprised Spike with his admission, but he wasn't deluded into thinking Spike was done yet -- and he was right.

Spike bucked violently just as Xander made his muscles relax. Having expected it, Xander was ready for him. He immediately clutched the chain tighter, and spread his legs to lower his center of balance. He was *determined* to make this the final showdown. If he didn't manage it this time, he would have to find another way. Spike had been half-right early. This was *exhausting*, and he didn't have the energy to keep it up much longer. Spike, weakened and chained, was *still* a formidable opponent.

Xander winced as his knee impacted with the *hard* cement. He now had an acute sympathy with Spike's head. Simply holding on, and twisting to make sure *he* didn't end up with his back to the floor -- again -- Xander wondered if telling Spike he was a better ride than the deer would help, or just

be suicidal. In the end he decided silence, in this case, was the better part of valor.

"Bloody hell, Harris! You're bloody hard to get off!"

Spike frowned and Xander smirked, chuckling as the vampire's expression turned sour, and he rolled his eyes.

"Perhaps that wasn't the *best* phrasing I could have chosen," Spike admitted.

"You do that a lot, don't you?" Xander asked, still smiling. *I'm still on top! Yay me!*

"So," Spike said, lifting his bound hands, ignoring Xander's comment completely, "what are you going to do now? I'm here, you're there. The minute you get up, I'm free."

"You ready to do as you're told?" *As if!* Xander thought to himself.

"Have you gone daft?" Spike asked incredulously,

looking as if he thought Xander had done just that.

"Thought you might say something like that."

Xander's eyes narrowed as he considered his options -- limited though they were. Spike was right. If he didn't handle this carefully, Spike was free as soon as Xander stood up. Maybe even if he *did* handle it carefully. Spike was Spike, after all.

"Find yourself at something of an impasse, hey, Harris?" Spike asked, his smirk firmly twisting the corners of his mouth upward, and tilting his words.

"Yes, actually," Xander admitted. *What the hell, it couldn't hurt.* "Got any ideas on getting out of it, since you don't seem inclined to be an obedient vampire?"

"Harris, getting me . . . 'obedient' as you so quaintly put it, is a lost cause. I've *never* been obedient. Even back when there was someone with the *right* to try and tell me what to do." Spike's smirk turned to a glare as he continued, his tone darkening. "Which *you* don't."

"Really?"

Spike shook his head, rolling his eyes. "You don't have the knackers to even *begin*, Harris, just let me go, and we'll call it even. You *did* help me out of a fix after all."

"Don't have the 'knackers'?" Xander questioned evenly, the tone difficult to maintain with his jaw clenched so tightly his teeth hurt.

"Oh, don't go getting your knickers in a twist," Spike answered, placating. "Even Angelus couldn't do it."

Narrowing his eyes, Xander cocked his head, staring at the vampire temporarily trapped beneath him.

"You know something I learned from both you *and* Buffy?"

"No," Spike replied warily, his entire body stiffening.

"What's that?"

Xander grinned, leaning forward slightly. "To use

any, and every, weapon at my disposal."

Spike blinked. "Well, like you all say, 'Duh'."

"Glad you agree," Xander said, grabbing the extra dart tube he'd stuffed into his back pocket.

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing much," Xander replied, unpeeling the tube and letting the dart fall out. He just hoped it really would work without the gun. Giles had said they would, he'd made sure of that when they'd first had to keep Oz under control during the full moon.

Spike's eyes widened as the dart was revealed. "You bloody wanker!" he shouted, renewing his struggle for freedom. "You are *not* using that . . . on . . . me."

Xander grinned. "I'm not, huh?" he asked the comatose vampire, pulling the dart out of Spike's neck. "Sure looks like I already did." He snickered,

standing and carefully untangling the chains as he scanned the underground room. It didn't take him long to realize the best place was still the bed -- despite the fact that Spike had half-destroyed the headboard in his escape attempt.

He frowned, swiftly crossing the room and closely inspecting the damage.

"Well, that's just not good enough," Xander said softly. He supposed they'd just have to go somewhere else; the problem was, where? He frowned, the idea growing on him. Taking Spike out of his 'territory' would work to Xander's advantage quite nicely.

He *very* briefly considered his apartment, wondering whether Spike's pride would keep the vampire quiet enough not to alert Xander's nosy neighbors. They were used to him and his friends coming and going at odd hours, looking and smelling like they'd decided to swim in the sewers -- and, of course, Anya had never exactly been a church mouse when it came to sex. They were used

to sudden screaming too. He shook his head. No, it was too risky. If even one neighbor decided to check 'things' out, it would be all over. They might be *used* to it, but that didn't mean they wouldn't investigate.

Damn! There had to be some place, maybe a place he hadn't been to in years. He grinned. *That* would do just nicely.

11 The Claiming

Spike groaned as the blackness that had claimed him slowly slipped away, the outside world filtering into his awareness one tiny bit at a time. His first, nearly immediate, realization was that he wasn't in his crypt any longer; the smells and sounds were all wrong.

That wanker drugged me! was Spike's first rational thought, which was swiftly followed by a reluctant acknowledgment that it had been a smart backup for Harris to have. He felt weak and tired, his muscles not wanting to move. The heavy manacles around his wrists and ankles felt like lead weights pinning him down, wearing him out. It was . . . upsetting being repeatedly bested by *Harris* -- additional strength or not. And yes, he fully realized that errors in judgement on his part had played a huge factor, but somehow that didn't really help.

Despite his best intentions, Spike trembled as full awareness descended and he realized *exactly* where he was. He was restrained and naked at the mansion -- Angelus' mansion. Memories of the place rolled over him, memories he never wanted to relive, and he briefly contemplated simply going back to sleep and closing out the world. Surely the blood wouldn't affect Xander much longer, and it might be possible to feign drugged unconsciousness long enough to out wait the human.

Surely, if the blood wore off and he was still 'out',

Xander would release him and leave, not wanting to face what had happened. He sighed. No way would he be that lucky. Xander would probably--

The sound of slow clapping brought his thoughts to an abrupt and startled halt. He growled at allowing himself to become so preoccupied that he forgot to listen for Xander. That was a trap fledges fell into -- *not* master vampire's who'd survived for over a hundred years.

"You know," Xander began conversationally, "I could really get to like the enhanced senses. I could tell the instant you woke up."

Not fair! Spike thought petulantly, realizing even as he did so that he was being a touch ridiculous. *I'm supposed to be the one with enhanced senses, not the whelp!*

"So, what now, Harris?" Spike asked, hating the fact that, face down as he was, he couldn't see what the whelp was doing behind him. It was driving him crazy.

"We move on to the reason I came to your crypt in the first place."

A shiver of uncertainty traveled down the length of Spike's spine at the . . . satisfaction in Xander's voice. That couldn't be a good thing, could it? Spike knew damn well what had brought Harris, the white knight, to his crypt. The boy had already made that quite clear. What Spike didn't know was what the boy was planning on actually *doing* about it -- especially now, what with the demon blood and all.

"What *did* you come for, Harris?" he asked, putting every ounce of bravado he could lay claim to into the words. "Came to beat the shit out of the vampire?"

"Something like that," Xander answered.

Stiffening, Spike refused to think about just how badly this was going to hurt. He held no doubts that Xander, even in his right mind, could inflict enough pain to make even a vampire feel it. But now?

"Well, get on with it, then," Spike muttered.

"What?" Xander asked with a chuckle. "Not even going to try and talk me out of it?"

Spike laughed back, wishing it didn't sound slightly hysterical. "No," was all he said. *Like it would do me any good*, he thought sourly.

"Good," Xander replied.

Spike tensed again as he felt more than heard Xander step closer.

"I found some rather . . . interesting toys here while I was waiting for you to come to."

Bloody hell! Spike thought, memories of what the boy *could* have laid his hands on here rushing through his mind with a frightening clarity. He jumped at the sudden touch of-- He frowned, trying to figure out what the whelp was lightly brushing against his back.

Soft, and unexpectedly gentle, strips of -- he sniffed -- leather. Spike squeezed his eyes shut. Xander had found the cat o' nine. That was *very* not good. Unfortunately, Spike's body had other ideas; it reacted to the sensual caresses in ways Spike *really* didn't want. In that instant self-awareness flared, and he suddenly hated Angelus, Dru, and Buffy with an intensity he hadn't been able to summon in a very long time.

All three had the same kink, and all three had trained him well. *He* may not be obedient -- about as far from it as a vampire could get, actually -- but his body was.

The whisk of air, the whistle of the cat as it was whipped through the air, the slap of flesh on flesh as Xander's *hand* came down on his arse, tore a startled shout out of Spike. He'd prepared for the cat, that searing pain the lashes would release as each leather strip cut into his skin. That, he could have stayed silent against.

The sharp contrast of the flat of Xander's warm palm as it was brought down, with what Spike suspected was only about half of the human's new-found strength, confused his senses, twisting his reactions into both recognizable and unrecognizable patterns.

He steeled himself for the next blow, determined that this time, his mouth would stay *shut* -- but the blow never came. Instead, he heard a whispered question.

"You know why I'm doing this, right?"

Spike blinked. "Rather obvious, that," he replied sullenly. *Just get it over with!* he thought angrily; though, he wasn't sure who he was more angry with -- Xander, or himself and his body's betrayal. If Xander had just started waling on him from the beginning, this wouldn't be happening. But no, the boy had to go and 'seduce' him first, had to engage every sense Spike had. Spike's mind still reeled from all of it, disbelieving that he'd got himself into this situation.

"Not really," Xander replied, moving until he stood above Spike's head.

Spike tried to glare up at his captor, but the height difference made it both difficult and awkward. After a moment, Spike gave up trying and sighed as he allowed his head to drop back down to the floor.

"Getting even," he muttered softly, not wanting to answer, but knowing damn well the whelp expected a reply, "getting vengeance in Buffy's stead."

"*Wrong, Fangless,*" Xander retorted, and Spike jerked his head up just as Xander squatted in front of him.

"How's that?" Spike asked. "What would *you* call this then?"

"Oh yeah, when I first came, I was gonna beat you black and blue, get even, teach you a lesson."

Spike snorted. *Just as I thought.*

"But, see, things changed. That's not what it's about anymore."

"No?" Spike asked. *Sure seems like it to me.*

"Nope."

Spike waited impatiently, certain there was more Harris wanted to say. When the boy said nothing, just stayed there, squatted above his head, Spike sighed. He wondered how long Harris would wait for some kind of reply, some sign that Spike was curious. He wondered if he could just stay silent and ward off the seemingly inevitable.

"So what is it, then?" he asked, cursing himself six kinds of idiot for opening his bloody gob -- especially when Xander chuckled and rose.

"Let me ask you something first," Xander replied, moving out of his line of sight.

Spike almost growled, lifting his arm to peer behind him. He *really* didn't like not being able to see

Xander. Unfortunately, Xander continued to his other side, and Spike refused to look like a scared ponce by twisting around to look from under his other arm. But his skin crawled as he forced himself not to try and follow the boy's movements. Something had changed between the fight and now. He'd been having fun earlier. Okay, it had been worried fun, but fun just the same. He wasn't now.

"Did you know this would happen to me?"

What? "How could I know you'd get covered in Margaso blood, and then refuse to wash it off?" he exclaimed indignantly.

"Not that!" Xander replied drily. "I mean, when you told Normal Xander about the effects of the blood, why didn't you tell him about *all* of it?"

"Didn't know he'd -- you'd -- been possessed. Thought I was safe on that score."

"Right! Try again. You knew about the soldier on

Halloween."

"That wasn't a possession." Spike frowned. "Was it?"

"None of us thought so, but the soldier memories were pulled out the same as the hyena instincts."

"They were?" *Well that explains the whelp's sudden moves.*

"Yep. Then when I caught that deer, all three kind of, I don't know, merged, I guess you could say."

Spike didn't even *try* to stop the whimper.

"Merged?" he asked.

"Yeah. You know, I don't think Normal Xander is gonna come back."

Swallowing convulsively around the sudden constriction in his throat, Spike shook his head violently. "I've *never* heard of permanent effects from Margaso blood." Spike's thoughts flew in

useless circles, trying to dredge up every last rumor and myth he'd heard about it all, the very thought that this Xander might be around for good sending shivers of both excitement and fear skittering up and down his spine. On the heels of that, however; was the fear that if 'Normal' Xander *didn't* make a reappearance, he was staked once and for all. Buffy would *never* forgive him for this, for not spilling everything he knew when Xander had first been tainted with it. She would *never* believe he hadn't planned it -- somehow.

"You figured it out yet?" Xander asked, suddenly breaking into Spike's thoughts.

"I've figured out that I'm done for, either way," Spike admitted mournfully. It seemed he couldn't get a break no matter *how* things went. "Buff--"

The overly familiar whistle came out of nowhere and Spike had no time to prepare himself for the blow. He tried to arch away from the pain blooming across the back of his legs as he grit his teeth.

"Not about that, Spike. Have you figured out why I'm doing this?"

Spike briefly considered toughing it out. Xander, even this Xander, couldn't inflict any more damage than he'd suffered in the past -- and survived. Unfortunately, his own curiosity was getting in the way of his stubbornness. "No," he freely admitted. "I can't say that I have -- not if it's not about getting even."

"You poached, Spike."

Shock shot through him even as his mouth opened before he could stop it. "I did *not!*" He tensed, rapidly preparing himself as the whistle once again warned him.

"Fuck!" he shouted, as the cat slapped the floor beside him, and it was once again Xander's hand that struck him. *Bastard!* he thought viciously. *How the hell am I supposed to get through this, if I can't bloody figure out what he's going to do next?!* He let out a humorless chuckle as the huge *Duh!*

reverberated through his mind. That was the bloody point, now wasn't it? He was forced to admit, Xander was better at the psychological shit than Spike would have ever given him credit for.

"You attacked, you *hurt*, what belongs to me."

Spike froze. *What?* "Xander," he began tentatively, certain he *really* didn't know why he was saying this, since it was sure to get him hurt, "Buffy doesn't belong to you. She never has, and she never will."

Xander chuckled, and this time Spike was absolutely sure he was beginning to hate that sound.

"She's not my mate, Spike, she's *pack*." Xander's hand touched him, and Spike flinched away, but nothing else happened. Xander simply let his hand sit at the swell between Spike's leg and arse. "I protect pack. Nothing hurts my pack and gets away with it."

Spike shuddered at the gravel in Xander's voice, but a new idea was beginning to form inside Spike, and

it was playing merry havoc with his world view.

"You've always done that," Spike said tentatively.

"Yeah, it just got more . . . intense after the possessions."

His thoughts whirled. Xander had admitted he attacked Buffy while possessed the first time, cuz he wanted her as his mate. Xander had admitted he had learned a lesson in that somewhere. He'd said Spike would figure it out. And then he-- Spike gulped, and asked. He couldn't *not* ask.

"Am I . . . 'pack'?"

"Do you want to be?" Xander shot back, his voice almost a silken purr.

Spike groaned. He *hated* the answering a question with a question shit!

The hand moved, caressing up over his arse, smoothing out the lingering sting, and that was

almost worse than the blows. Against his will he pushed into the touch.

"Guess that answers *that* question," Xander said smugly, bringing his hand up swiftly then back down, the sound of his hand hitting Spike's backside echoing through the room.

Spike gasped. That one had been full strength. Spike was sure of it!

"Now, tell me."

He *hated* this. He hated the fact that he wanted to belong. At this point in his unlife, he almost didn't care *where*, as long as he belonged. He'd spent almost four years caught between worlds, not fully belonging to either one. But *someone* help him, he still wanted it. The "Yes, damn it!" was dragged out of him, and he felt more naked after the words fell into the room than merely being without clothes had ever made him feel.

He waited for the taunting laughter to follow his

admission. He waited for the cruel words of 'tough shit' to come spewing out of Harris' mouth. He knew they were coming and he steeled himself for the put down. Therefore, the sudden weight of Xander's body covering his came as a complete surprise, the roughness of the boy's clothes brushing against his skin.

"Good," Xander hissed into his ear, his warm hands ghosting down Spike's sides. "Because you're mine."

Heat flashed through Spike's entire body as a number of emotions whirled through him. The automatic denial and the ecstatic sense of belonging were just as vehement as the lust they rode through him on. He could not *ever* remember being this torn. He wanted to throw Xander off his back and just lash out until either Harris was dead for daring to make such a claim -- or until the chip rendered him unconscious. He wanted to reverse their positions and slam into Xander, reasserting his own control and claiming the boy in return. And just as overwhelmingly, he wanted to surrender.

For long moments confusion reigned inside him, seemingly tearing him apart bit by bit.

"You're mine, Spike. Mine to protect. Mine to . . . punish."

Spike shook his head no, shuddering as Xander's clothed erection slid along the crease in his backside. The word 'yours' hovering on his lips, Spike was rapidly tipping toward surrender even as the feeling of utter vulnerability swamped him and he desperately wanted to clench his legs together. He was so . . . open the way he was.

Suddenly, all of Xander's weight was gone, and the cool air left in his place raised goosebumps along Spike's exposed skin. A growl rent the air, and it was only after the fact that Spike realized it was him. He couldn't take much more of this on again off again. He was achingly hard, and more scared than he could *ever* remember feeling since his turning. Oh, it wasn't of Harris, or what Harris could do. He was afraid of himself. He felt so bloody out of control, but that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was,

part of him didn't bloody care.

Lost in his own world of hurt and confusion, Spike didn't register the fact that Xander had released one side of the manacles until he found himself flipped over. He didn't bother trying to get free as Xander pinned him down, using the entire length of his body to do so. It just seemed a waste of energy to try. Even as Xander stared down at him, a small part of Spike was screaming at him that he'd missed his chance to get free. He ignored it, locking gazes with the human above him. He couldn't have got very far anyway, he reasoned, the restraints would have prevented success.

Xander leaned forward, sniffing him, nuzzling into his neck, his armpits, down his chest.

Spike shivered as he realized this was the hyena. This was the beast part of Xander.

In a sudden move that Spike wasn't exactly sure how Xander accomplished, Spike found his legs bent slightly with Xander's knees wedged beneath his

thighs.

Shit! Shit! Shit! He was not ready for this. Spike's thoughts flew into panic mode. He should have realized that this was where this was headed, but he hadn't thought that far ahead. He still thought of Xander as Xander, the guy who would give and give, never take. He'd just managed to open his mouth to protest, to remind Xander of what he'd promised, when Xander lunged forward, and even as their cocks brushed together, sending unwanted lust spiraling through Spike, Xander's teeth clamped around his Adam's apple.

Spike froze, a tremor racing through him. A dominance display! It was all a dominance display. Giddy relief flooded him even as he refused to submit. *This* he could deal with. Xander was in control, but that didn't mean--

Xander's teeth tightened fractionally.

Oh, God! He fought his instinctive reaction, not wanting to arch his head back in pleasure. That was

exactly what Xander was waiting for. Xander -- no, the hyena -- wanted him to bare his throat in submission.

No one but Angelus had *ever* gotten him to do that. He'd been beaten, abused, tossed around, and generally gotten his ass kicked -- sometimes rather spectacularly. He'd made a fool of himself. He'd degraded himself, but he had *never* bared his throat.

Xander's teeth tightened again, and this time Spike could feel them sink into his skin -- even before the smell of his own blood hit his nostrils. He whimpered, beginning to struggle, ignoring the voice that told him he had waited too long, and that it was *far* too late. Somehow, somewhere, he hadn't quite believed Xander would take things this far. Beyond that, he couldn't believe the kid knew what he was getting himself into.

Even as he struggled he thought furiously. If getting out of it was as simple as pretending to go along, Spike would have done it in a heartbeat -- a human

heartbeat. The chip had ruthlessly taught him the value of compromise. Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. Demons, even vampiric ones, were ruled by instinct. Intelligence notwithstanding, instincts were powerful motivators in a species that generally acted on every impulse they had.

Spike bucked -- carefully -- forcing his chin downward into Xander's head.

Xander stiffened and held on, pressing himself firmly to Spike, curled around him like a bloody vice.

Spike winced as he felt his throat tear, blood dripping down the sides of his neck. It didn't take him long to come to the only conclusion he could; struggling was useless. Xander wasn't letting go, and to struggle harder would only get his throat ripped out -- if not set his chip off as well. Closing his eyes, not truly believing it was happening, Spike went absolutely still. Allowing his body to go limp, he lifted his head just a fraction. It was enough, he knew.

Xander growled around the hold on his throat, sinking teeth in just the slightest bit more before easing back.

Spike shivered, unaccustomed feelings running through him as Xander licked his neck clean. It was the most erotic thing he'd had done to him in decades, and considering what Xander had accomplished so far. . . . Spike's thoughts trailed off as Xander leaned back, shifting enough to allow Spike's legs to fall back to the floor and pushing their cocks that much more firmly together.

Xander's eyes met his, and Spike fought to maintain the contact. He couldn't -- even after having spent years fighting to get out from under Angelus' domination. He lowered his eyes, unable to meet Xander's stare. Groaning internally, he realized he had forgotten how powerful a feeling this was. Until that moment, he'd maintained hope he could fight his instincts. He'd done it before, but it was beginning to dawn on him that the ease with which he'd done it had probably been due, largely, to Angelus' absence. He'd just made a mistake, a very

big mistake, and he was certain it was one he would come to regret.

12 Returning

Gazing down at the still form below him, Xander licked his upper lip. His anticipation growing, he froze as a sudden thought occurred to him.

What am I doing?

He grinned then. He *knew* what he was doing. Spike was his; he just had to show Spike that. The very thought sent tendrils of lust, and something he didn't want to define, something pleasant, creeping through him.

"Spike?" he asked, dipping his head and tracing his lips along the vampire's jaw line. The body beneath

him stiffened, and Xander grinned, waiting as Spike fought through several responses.

"What?"

Xander leaned back to meet Spike's flashing blue eyes, and he wondered how much control the semi-civil response had taken. He had no doubt that Spike was going to fight him every step of the way -- and he would have it no other way. He just wouldn't let Spike know that quite yet.

"Mine!" Xander hissed, reaching up to card his fingers through Spike's hair. Xander grinned again as Spike shivered beneath him, the vampire tensing further, his eyes flashing with flecks of gold.

Lips narrowing to a thin line, Spike clenched his jaw tightly, not responding to Xander's possessive declaration.

"Come on, Spike, I *know* you have something to say," Xander teased. "You always do."

That time, Xander couldn't mistake the flash in Spike's *very* angry eyes. "Sod off, Harris! You got what you wanted!"

"Not by a long shot," Xander denied calmly, even as his hand tightened in the short strands of Spike's hair. "Say it."

Spike shook his head.

Xander's grip tightened again, and Spike winced. "Say it."

"You won't be like this forever, Xander," Spike replied through clenched teeth. "What then?"

Xander just grinned down at him.

"Damn it, Harris! Think! Would 'Normal Xander' want this?"

"He's *not* coming back," Xander denied vehemently. He *had* to believe that. He couldn't go back to that other existence. He *couldn't*. He didn't want to be

like that anymore. Everyone walked all over *that* him, even his friends.

"Yes, he *is*!"

Trembling, rage and fear making him alternately hot and cold, Xander wrenched Spike's head back painfully. "Don't *say* that!"

"You wanted me to talk, Harris, so, I'm talking! When the blood wears off, you're going to hate yourself -- and you're going to hate *me*. Don't--"

Spike's words choked off, and something inside Xander wilted at the deep pain he could see cut into the lines of Spike's face.

"Shhh," he replied, easing his grip. "You don't understand."

"Damn right, I don't!" Spike spat back, fury displacing the pain instantly and radiating off him in palpable waves.

"Say it, Spike," Xander said again. He could feel the fine tremors shake Spike's body, and Xander inhaled deeply, tasting the scents that assailed him. Rage, fear, lust, all poured off the vampire. It was a heady mix, and he was beginning to understand some of the things that drove vampires to do what they did. That was a scary thought, and it *almost* made Xander pull back.

Scary? He blinked, wondering why it would be scary. A moment later he realized it didn't matter, he simply *had* to taste the beautiful creature trapped below him. Without another thought, he did so, dipping down to lick at the wonderfully exposed throat. The muscles beneath his tongue clenched and relaxed as Spike swallowed.

"Say it," Xander murmured, never removing his mouth. He shifted down, grazing his teeth lightly across Spike's prominent collarbone, relishing the shiver it provoked. "Say it," he repeated softly.

"You don't know what--" Spike began, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"Shh, I *do* know," Xander replied, releasing Spike's free hand as he moved further down to tease a taut nipple. "You're mine, Spike," he said again, never raising his voice, being quietly encouraging. "Say it."

Silence greeted him, and he frowned. Shifting sideways, he lathed Spike's other nipple gently, pinching the first one hard between two fingers.

Spike arched up off the floor, his resultant moan wrenched from his throat.

With great satisfaction, Xander felt the hard cock beneath him twitch; though he hadn't needed that verification to know Spike was aroused. Along with everything else, the scent of the vampire's lust filled the air. Xander just needed to work past the vampire's anger at being bested -- and his fear, which Xander couldn't understand.

For about half a second, Xander wondered if he should really be pushing this hard. With a frown, he immediately shook off the uncomfortable,

unwanted thought. He froze; pulling back, panic trilling through him. It was in that awful moment he knew what was happening.

No! he screamed silently. *I won't go back to being caged!*

Lurching backward, Xander stumbled across the room, desperate to outrace the waning effects of the blood. He'd been so *sure* the merging had been permanent. Panting, fighting to hold on to what he now had, Xander fled the room, wincing as he heard Spike's outraged shout.

"Oi! Let me loose first!"

He had to fight to hold on; he'd promised Spike. He had no illusion as to what would happen if Normal Xander resumed control. Slamming the mansion door behind him, Xander rushed across the courtyard and collapsed against the fountain. Inside, Spike was shouting at him to 'bloody well let him go already!'.

He winced again, focusing inward; the returning rush of consequences, the future, and *guilt*, forcefully telling him his time as he was now was coming to an end.

"No!" he hollered, refusing to surrender. He could find the Margaso, surely he could make some kind of deal.

His returning conscience sat like a tiny angel, laughing at the idea.

Right, and I'm sure Buffy would just love that. She'll go along with it. She'll say, 'Sure, Xander, whatever you want'. Besides, you don't have the time.

Free Xander glared, though there was nothing to glare at. He was alone. And he was talking to himself. At this point he didn't care, though. He wasn't going to surrender to the Zeppo in himself without a fight. He wasn't really split. There weren't two of him -- even inside one body. But that didn't change the fact that he didn't want to go back to the way things had been.

Laughing as he remembered the one time he really *had* been split into two beings, he pictured Zeppo and Suave Xander having this argument, only he -- Free Xander -- stood in place of Suave Xander. It was marginally more sane than arguing with himself, and he went with it.

He was grasping at straws, and he well knew it, but there had to be *something* that would prevent Normal Xander from burying all this freedom beneath the jokes and the clumsiness again. He just had to figure out what it was.

He sighed, slumping. His imaginary argument not going well. He hadn't realized, not really, just how *stubborn* he could be. He frowned. He'd have to work on that. At least he *hoped* he'd have the chance. If not him, then maybe Normal Xander would take it to heart and do it.

He growled low in his chest. He'd been careful. He'd made *sure* he hadn't done anything *really* bad. At least nothing that Buffy would slip into Slayer mode

over. And still, as the effects of the blood wore off, heavy guilt, horror, and fear descended to tear him apart.

As darkness closed in on him and he gave up the fight, he swore that if he *ever* got completely free again, he'd find a way to *stay* free. He'd even go to the Margaso. If that meant having to flee Sunnydale and his friends, so be it. He just hoped Spike wouldn't get hurt in the process. He'd given his word, and he didn't break his word. His last faint thought was another promise. If Xander didn't bury him, he would . . . control himself if he ever got completely free again.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander leapt off the fountain as he came to. Shivering, his mind reeling with the events of the last two days, he still didn't believe he'd fai-- passed out. His knees gave out almost as soon as he was fully upright, and he sank back down onto the fountain. He tried, but couldn't stop shaking. It was

all so . . . unreal.

All he'd wanted was to teach Spike a lesson.

Oh, yeah, you did that alright, a nasty voice inside him snarked, *in spades*.

His stomach clenched, and he hurriedly bent over, losing the contents of his stomach. "Oh, God!" he breathed. He and Spike. He'd . . . with Spike.

But then he remembered the thrill of hunting the deer, and later the wolf. *That* had been great, he had to admit. His stomach rolled a bit as he recalled what came later. The deer's blood. And, oh my, sharing it with Spike. How he'd-- Xander gulped, shooting a guilty glance toward the mansion. He pushed aside a lot of what that made him feel, *really* not wanting to examine it. It was enough that he'd actually *done* those things -- and *liked* them. He really didn't want to know whether he'd like it now.

Unfortunately, he couldn't run and hide, forgetting

it all. Spike was trapped inside, and unless he wanted to go to Buffy and explain the whole sordid mess -- *NOT!* -- he had to go back inside at least long enough to throw Spike the key to the manacles.

His thoughts buzzing with conflict, feeling torn in two completely opposing directions, Xander slowly made his way back inside. He really didn't want to go in, but he owed the blond vampire. He owed him *big* time. And much as he would have just left the bastard where he was two days ago. He couldn't do that now. He wasn't stupid. He knew something fundamental had changed between them; he just didn't know how it was all going to turn out.

He froze as he stepped into the open living room, embarrassment flooding him as lust shot through him at the sight of a naked Spike, chained and virtually helpless. He swallowed and tried to breathe normally past the tight band constricting his chest. Spike was curled into a tight ball, the very picture of abject misery.

"Spike," he called out hoarsely, his voice hardly more than a whisper. It was loud enough though; Spike launched himself up off the floor, immediately trying to tear himself loose from the remaining manacles. The stark fear that flashed through the vampire's eyes before he hid it, kept Xander frozen in place.

"Now, now, Harris. Don't do anything rash," Spike urged, his voice urgent yet placating. "We can just forget it all happened. No need for sharp pointy objects at all."

Xander couldn't believe the hurt that stabbed through him at the vampire's plea. "Oh, god! You really believe I'm that much of an asshole, don't you?" he breathed disbelievingly. He'd taunted, tormented -- oh god! -- *marked* Spike, all but raped him, and Spike believed he'd go even further and stake the victim. Shaking as rage, pain, and shame all vied for top position, Xander strode across the room and tossed the key within Spike's reach.

Making the mistake of meeting Spike's gaze, Xander

froze for just a second before turning and fleeing. He wasn't running from Spike, or what he'd done; he was running from what he wanted to do. Though, given the chance, he wasn't entirely certain whether he'd have chosen to beat the crap out of Spike, or fuck him. The shock in those startlingly blue eyes had been the last straw, and he'd simply run. Spike had really believed Xander would stake him for what had happened.

13 Fallout

Spike gaped after the rapidly retreating form of Xander Harris. His mind on complete shutdown, he didn't know how long he simply stood there trying to make sense of what had just happened. Kneeling, he absently picked up the key and undid the locks still holding him captive, never taking his eyes off the door through which the boy had disappeared.

He felt the manacles fall away with a sense of relief that was all twisted up with a sense of loss. He knew what it was; he'd been through it once before. He had to admit that he *really* wasn't looking forward to working through it again; although he

was glad the boy hadn't been of the mind to stake him.

For the first time since Angelus had deserted him, Spike had bowed before someone else. It wasn't a feeling he was used to anymore, nor was it particularly comfortable. His own sense of superiority warred with his instinctive needs. His instincts didn't care that he'd submitted to a different Xander than the one who remained. They only cared that he was being abandoned . . . again.

"You knew it was going to end this way, so why are you so bloody surprised by it?" he muttered to himself, lurching to his feet. "It's not like you *wanted* it. Be bloody grateful the whelp's not in a dusting mood, and just get on with your life." He didn't want to 'belong' to the whelp. He didn't need to belong at all. He was the Big Bad. He might be leashed, but that wouldn't last forever. When, inevitably, the chip no longer held him, he would be free, and that's exactly what he wanted.

When the words of reason he muttered with utter

disgust held no power, no dent in the ache that filled his chest, Spike sighed deeply. Closing his eyes, he dropped his head back and fought the tears he in absolutely *no* way wanted to shed. He was in love with Buffy. He may -- *may?! --* have screwed that up for all time, but that didn't change how he felt.

"Bloody *fucking* hell!" he shouted. Launching himself into action and grabbing up his clothes, he dressed as quickly as he could. Love or no love, he had to find Harris. He had to try to make this right.

Why?

With one shoe on and one shoe in his hand, Spike's movements faltered. "Good bloody question," he replied to the silence around him. *Why did* he care? He should be happy that Harris was probably miserable, hating what he'd done. Spike smirked briefly before the expression faded. The git was probably having a massive wig and questioning his heretofore-unquestioned heterosexuality. Spike should be ecstatic. He'd created havoc without even

trying.

He wasn't, though; he was as bloody miserable as he'd pictured Harris to be. "How do I get myself *into* these situations?" he asked plaintively. He got the answer he expected -- silence.

The debate continued as he finished dressing, his mind whirling in useless circles. *I should just leave town until I get myself through this*, he thought shabbily. It was possible, given enough time. He'd already proved that. So what, if Harris had gotten him to do something not even Buffy had.

Sure, he'd let her beat the piss out of him -- not that he could have done much to stop her, even if he'd wanted to. Sure, he'd let her do whatever she wanted, no matter how humiliating it turned out to be. Sure, he'd pretty much turned himself into a pathetic tosser for her, basically prostrating himself on the alter of his love for her, but he'd never, *never*, gone so far as to submit, saving that last tiny piece of independence, that last little bit of control, for himself.

Why?

"She wouldn't have bloody understood the significance! That's why!" he shouted, angry at the little 'why' voice inside himself. He didn't want to think about it; thinking about it led to *big* thoughts about the fact that he'd actually considered it in the first place.

It had never really been a conscious thought before, and it was with sudden, startling clarity that he realized; if Buffy would have understood what it meant, he *would* have. If Buffy had demanded it of him, he would have readily surrendered that last bit of himself.

He was panting. He couldn't stop. *Love's bitch is right!* he accused himself disdainfully. *But could I at LEAST be a bit less pathetic about it?*

Xander understood.

Half way to the door he stumbled as that thought

flashed through his mind. He couldn't readily move past the thought that the *slayer* -- the woman he loved -- knew and understood less about vampires than her goofy sidekick.

He groaned as he resumed his stride toward the door. He was so confused, his insides twisting in knots, trying to pull him in two diametrically opposed directions. He wanted to hide, to disappear and lick his wounds until they healed -- both the physical and the emotional. But his thoughts wouldn't leave him be. Too many questions, wants, and desires were tearing him up, begging him to find answers -- answers to entirely new questions.

Did Xander *really* understand what had happened, what it meant for Spike, or had he merely been reacting to the instincts left behind by his own . . . demon? Spirit? Whatever it was, Spike suddenly *had* to know. He had to find out what Harris was going to do now. Would he block it all out, act like nothing had happened, nothing had changed? Would he hem and haw, and stutter, trying to work

past red-faced embarrassment?

Of course old ones bubbled right along side the new questions. Why had he fallen so hard for someone who was -- if he was being completely truthful -- utterly wrong for him? Someone who couldn't, wouldn't, understand the least thing about him? Why had Harris picked *him* to pick on? And having done so, why had the git taken it as far as he had?

Flinging the door open, having no clue what he was actually going to do about any of it, Spike yelped and jumped back. The sun hadn't set yet. Trembling, glad the doorway had been shaded at least, he berated himself for having got so caught up in everything that he hadn't even realized it was still day.

Growling lowly, he slammed the door shut, quickly retreating from the deadly rays of the sun. Spinning on one heel, he headed for the basement, and for the sewer entrance he'd be forced to use if he didn't want to wait until sunset.

No, I don't bloody well want to wait! he snapped silently, almost muttering the words aloud. *I . Want . Answers!*

By the time he'd reached the sewer exit nearest the whelp's apartment, he knew the sun had gone down. Glad he didn't have to wait, Spike scrambled quickly out into the new night. He ignored the buzzing questions his thoughts kept throwing at him. Convinced he would leave town as soon as he had the answers he wanted, Spike strode with single-minded determination toward Xander's apartment.

He'd go in. He'd get the whelp's attention. He'd demand to know what the hell Harris wanted now. Did he want absolute silence? Did he want-- Spike growled at himself as he stopped in front of the whelp's door. His brain was getting bloody repetitive now, and he wished it would just shut the hell up!

Spike raised his hand, but froze mid-motion, a voice sounding from inside the apartment. Had one of the

Scoobies come over *that* quickly? Leaning a little closer to the closed door, he frowned slightly. He couldn't hear anyone but the whelp. Who was he talking to?

"Yeah, I know I worried you. I'm sorry."

Must be one of the Scoobies, then. Who else would be worried about him?

"Yeah, well, it was kind of unavoidable."

Oh, hurry up and get off the phone, Git.

"I said I was sorry, and that it couldn't be helped. What more do you want? Blood? Besides, I *did* call you. Yesterday morning."

Spike snorted. Was that *Xander* getting snippy with his friends. It was certainly hard to believe.

"I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap --"

Unable to identify the new emotion in Xander's

voice, Spike inhaled deeply. He sensed impatience, uneasiness, and kind of nervous. . . . *The whelp's lying to one of his friends!* Xander wasn't sorry. He was angry still and . . . something else. Spike's eyes widened as he realized Xander didn't want to be talking to his friend -- whichever one it was. That was a *very* interesting tidbit. Spike had no clue what it could mean, he just knew that it was interesting.

"-- It's . . . been a really long couple of days."

Spike listened as Xander sighed heavily, fighting against the strange urge to comfort the boy.

"I'm fine. Hey, would you do me a favor?" Xander asked with forced brightness.

Spike stiffened, worried about what 'favor' the whelp would ask for at that particular moment, thoughts of help with stakage and other not-so-vampire-friendly favors flitting through his thoughts -- all this despite the fact that Xander hadn't done so earlier, when he'd had the perfect opportunity.

"No, nothing like that," Xander assured quickly the other listener. "I'm fine, really. Just, would you let everyone else know I'm okay? All I want to do is shower and then fall into bed."

Spike breathed a sigh of relief. It almost drowned out the soft footfalls of Xander's increasingly agitated pacing.

"I *know* I should do it myself," Xander snapped, sounding at the end of his control, his frustration and fear coming through loud and clear to the listening Spike. "Yeah," the boy continued sarcastically, "I should call everyone individually and stand here exhausted while they lay into me like you have."

The pause was long enough this time that Spike leaned closer straining to hear any sounds. The boy wasn't moving around anymore -- either that or he was doing it *very* quietly. Had he hung up?

"Damn it, Wills! If you aren't willing to do it," Xander snapped angrily, "just say so, and I'll damn

well call them tomorrow."

Spike reared back in surprise. He couldn't recall a time he'd heard the boy swear at *any* of his friends.

"Thank you," Xander breathed softly. "I appreciate it. And tell them, I'll talk to them all - at the same time - tomorrow."

That's going to be fun, Spike thought dryly.

"Scoobie meeting? Yeah, that's as good a time as. N. Nite, Wills."

Spike almost knocked as soon as he heard Xander hang up, but Xander's tense muttering held him in place, listening.

"Damn!" Xander exclaimed, his angry steps echoing as he moved. "Treating me like I'm a child," he continued, muttering half-under his breath.

As Xander moved farther from the door, his voice became harder to hear, and Spike strained to hear

the mumbled, angry words.

"Acts like I wouldn't call if I could have." Xander snorted, slamming a door.

The fridge?

"Right, I can see that call now. 'Hey, Wills, sorry to bother you, but I thought I'd let you know. I got drenched in demon blood. What? No, it doesn't hurt, just made me not give a damn about right and wrong. What?'" Xander continued, his rant now getting loud.

Spike almost laughed.

"You'll send the slayer right over to 'contain' me. Thanks, Wills, just peachy that idea.' Not!"

Spike snorted at Xander's sarcastic 'Not', then jumped as something hard and *big* crashed against the door. It shook, making Spike take a second to reconsider confronting Xander right then. Maybe it would be better if--

"FUCK!"

Right, Spike thought, later it is.

He'd only made it a couple steps from the door when he spun back around. *Sod that!* he thought angrily. *Don't give sod all if he's angry.* Stomping back, Spike didn't give himself time to think before pounding loudly on the door.

"Who is it?" Xander growled, wrenching the door open without waiting for a response. "Oh," he said flatly, his eyes flashing. "It's you."

Spike almost stepped back at the sudden rage he saw. He steeled himself. He didn't back away from anyone, let alone Xander Harris. "Yeah, it's me, Git."

"What do you want, Spike?" Xander snapped, turning and walking away from the open door. "I'm not in the best of moods right now."

Intent on striding into the room after Xander, Spike

bounced off the invisible barrier. He'd forgotten. He didn't have an invite here. Confusion stole through him at the hurt that welled up at that thought. Why the hell should he care? He knew why, deep down. He just wasn't ready to go there. He wasn't here for that, anyway. It didn't matter in the least. He was out of here as soon as he was sure how Xander wanted to play this. It shouldn't take too long to work past the shit Harris had pulled, but if the git was going to be an idiot and spill all to his friends, Spike was planning a *very* long vacation.

"We need to talk," he said.

"Talk?!" Xander repeated, incredulous, spinning back around to gape at Spike. Then, suddenly he was laughing, gut-wrenching, hysterical laughter. "I'm so mixed up that I don't know whether I'm right side up or upside down. I'm seriously questioning my orientation. I'm angry at *everyone*. I don't know whether to hide in my room until it all goes away, or whether I should just cram it all down and forget it, and *you*, the soulless vampire, want to *talk*."

Spike hid the wince. No one had to know, except himself. "Invite me in."

"No," Xander replied coldly. "Do you have *any* clue how seriously whacked out I feel right now? I'm--"

"Yes," Spike admitted softly, before he could censor his response. *Do I ever!* "I do."

Xander froze, his words coming to an abrupt halt. "Just leave, Spike," he said tiredly. "I can't deal with this right now."

Guess that answers THOSE questions. The git had absolutely no clue what he'd done. "Fine," Spike snapped, "I'll leave after you answer one simple question. Are you telling the others about what happened? *Any* part of it?"

"Are you out of your ever-living mind?!"

"I'll take that as a no," Spike replied, grinning slightly, unable to stop the disappointment from

seeping through him. "See you around, *Harris*." He shouldn't be disappointed. He should be glad. It wasn't supposed to hurt, like it had with Buffy. He was bloody in love with Buffy. It had hurt that she was ashamed of what they'd shared. The git telling his friends, on the other hand, should be the last thing he wanted. It would just lead to all sorts of trouble they could *both* do without. He turned to leave, but a tired sigh stopped him.

"Come in, Spike."

He turned slowly, feeling like the world was suddenly moving in slow motion. He took two steps forward, wondering what had made Xander change his mind. The barrier no longer present, Spike slipped inside the room. It felt like coming home. With a frown, he ruthlessly stomped the feeling down

14 Recovering

They stared at each other for several long moments before they both shifted uncomfortably.

"You realize don't you, that I still really hate you," Xander offered finally, his tone a mixture of exasperation and amusement.

"Ditto," Spike replied immediately striding past Xander further into the room.

Xander sighed heavily. Moving just far enough, he dropped down onto the couch and threw an arm over his eyes. "I really screwed things up this time, Spike. I know that."

"Well, I . . ." Spike's words trailed off as he shifted uncomfortably. He was unsure what to say; he hadn't exactly had much practice at the comforting shit. He'd even botched trying to comfort Buffy the day he'd gone to use the shotgun on her.

Xander went on after a couple moments of silence, as if he hadn't heard Spike's aborted words. "You want to hear something hilarious?"

"Sure," Spike replied uncertainly, stepping closer. "I could do with a spot of funny."

"He thought that if he-- / thought that if I didn't do anything *too* bad, everything would be fine."

"Not really seeing the funny, H-- Xander," Spike frowned, not understanding what the boy was getting at.

Xander lifted his arm slightly, peering out from under it. "Don't you get it? He, /, had no fucking clue about what would happen after. He was completely clueless, utterly without clue."

Spike sighed, dropping into the chair directly across from Xander. This was going to be a long night.

"That's the thing about having no . . . moral compass; things like consequences have no

meaning. Guilt, regret, they have no definition. They simply don't exist."

"So, you're telling me you don't regret what happened?" Xander asked at the same moment Spike continued.

"Until you're hit over the head with 'em."

"Oh."

Spike shrugged, leaning back. "Regret, is a strong word, Xander. I. . . ." Spike hesitated before continuing, suddenly pulling himself back upright. He was afraid this would just reopen another can of worms, ". . . .regret what I did to Buffy."

Xander made a sound, one that Spike couldn't fully identify -- either disgust or sarcastic agreement. Either way, at least the boy wasn't automatically laying into him about it. It helped him control the impulse to make a dash for the door -- and freedom -- getting himself free of this uncomfortable topic.

"But honestly," *Just stake me now before I give Harris the reason he needs on a platter!* "the reason I regret it, is because it didn't work, and I'm left with the *very* unpleasant results."

Xander jolted up, glaring at him. "Continue," he said softly.

Spike sighed. *Yep, should have kept my gob shut.*

"One: I hurt her, which despite what you may believe, was *not* my intent. I was angry and lashing out, feeling like I had to *prove* something to her."

Spike ignored the tense look on Xander's face, not really believing he was saying this, and continued on doggedly. He had a point to make here and it was too late to back out now. "Two: she, of course, hates me now. Understandable though that may be; it wasn't what I wanted. The problem is, it never even occurred to me that I might make the situation worse. I just knew, at the time, that I had to do *something*."

When Spike finished, Xander didn't say anything, just stared at him.

Spike rolled his eyes finally. "Unpleasant as the subject matter was, do you get my point?"

"Yeah," Xander said slowly, drawing the word out, obviously gathering his thoughts. "The hyena part is like that. Tomorrow, or even twenty minutes from now, doesn't exist for that part of me. The hyena lives in the now, and only the now."

"Yes! That's it exactly. Makes it kind of difficult to plan things, when every instinct is screaming at you to just *do* it."

"Yeah, I get that now."

"Do you really?" Spike asked intently, wondering if that were truly possible.

Xander nodded absently, his eyes unfocused and seeing inward. "Only one problem."

"What's that?"

"That doesn't help me figure this out. I can't just bury all this anymore. For one thing," Xander paused, shaking his head in disbelief, "I find I don't really want to."

"You don't?" Spike asked in shock. He *really* hadn't expected that. Hysterical Xander he'd expected -- and gotten -- but he'd also figured on huge amounts of denial, which didn't seem to be happening. It left Spike at something of a loss.

"No. I learned something over the last couple of days." Xander paused. "Well, not while they were speeding by me at light speed, but now, thinking back on them, I learned it. The thing I learned."

"Xander?" Spike interrupted, amused.

"Yes?"

"You're babbling like Red."

"Sorry," Xander replied, grinning ruefully. "The point is, I learned that you can't be happy, living

your life *just* to make others happy -- not really."

"Point. But how can the two . . . sides be reconciled?"

"Three actually, if you want to get technical, but really only one. It's me. It's *all* me."

"What?" Spike asked faintly.

Xander blew out an explosive breath, jumping off the couch and pacing impatiently. "Didn't you listen to anything I said?"

"Yeah, pet, I did. Just that all of it didn't make a lot of sense. Well, it probably did -- make sense I mean," Spike frowned, glaring at Xander. "Now you've got *me* doing it!" He shook his head, staring down at his restless hands. For one of the first times in his life, he had no clue what to do with them. He jumped up, pacing for only a few feet before he stopped, realizing how . . . nervous it made him look. He just wished he could smoke; the problem was he didn't have any. He sighed again, reluctantly

continuing. "But, to be truthful, I was kinda caught up in my own troubles at the time."

Xander stopped *his* pacing long enough to blink at Spike in surprise, then he ducked his head, blushing. "Yeah, I imagine you were. Sorry."

"No worries," Spike replied immediately, brushing aside Xander's apology, wondering where the hell this was going. This was certainly not the conversation he'd imagined on his way over. Part of him didn't really care, however; part of him simply reveled in the confidences being given him by this man. The sane part of him was screaming, asking what the hell he was doing, and telling him that this was going to hurt when all was said and done. When Xander got back with his friends, he would revert to type, Spike was pretty damn sure of that. Then, once again, Spike would be left out in the cold.

Right now, however; he couldn't bring himself to care. He was tired of trying to always be careful today for fear of what tomorrow may bring. Like

he'd told Xander, he simply wasn't put together that way. He'd spent the better part of a year trying to rewire how he thought -- no puns intended, thank you! -- and look where it had got him. Nowhere, that's where. "How about you remind me," Spike said softly.

For several long moments Xander stared quietly and Spike began to think the boy wasn't going to answer. Then Xander began to speak, so softly at first that Spike had to listen carefully, then louder as his confidence grew.

"There was nothing 'left behind'," he said, miming air quotes, "when the hyena was banished -- or whatever word is right for that. The *memories* of how the hyena acted -- and made me feel -- got mixed up with the darker part of myself." Sighing softly, Xander resumed his seat on the couch.

"There was nothing to *be* left behind when the Halloween Spell ended -- just memories. Like I told Cordelia, back when you and Dru were getting all cozy with 'The Judge', I remember it all. Even now, I

could quote you military procedure."

"Please don't," Spike quipped, making himself sit back down when all he wanted to do was, well, anything but sit still.

Xander chuckled, casting a knowing look at Spike. "I know stuff about ordinance and access codes, that boggles my mind really. I never understood bureaucracy until that Halloween. Strike that, I still don't understand bureaucracy, but I *could* use it to my advantage, thanks to the soldier memories."

Spike listened quietly, a lot of what Xander was saying was a repeat of what he remembered from before, but this was more, and it was giving him an incredible insight into the mind of Xander Harris. Of course, before today, he'd have looked on that thought with horror.

"Anyway, the soldier stuff wasn't that bad. I mean it gave me *skills*, skills I'd never had before -- and I have to say they've come in handy more than once. It was the hyena stuff that got me. The *memories* of

how the hyena acted -- and made me feel -- got mixed up with the stuff I already liked, or thought maybe I *might* like. Only in my deepest, darkest, most private thoughts."

Xander stopped and shook his head. "I was a teenager at the time, that kind of stuff was "sick" and "perverted". I buried it all so fast, it was *almost* like it hadn't happened. Everyone else was glad to believe it, and truth is, so was I. I wasn't anywhere *near* ready to deal with that. I was still trying to figure out the . . . normal stuff." Xander paused and cocked his head. "You know what I mean?"

Spike nodded. "I remember. Don't forget, you're looking at a bloke who grew up in good old Victorian England -- the inventors of repression." It may have happened a long time ago, and he may not much like to think about it, but he did remember.

"Yeah, never thought about that," Xander laughed and shook his head.

Spike almost missed the change in expression when Xander leapt up off the couch and headed for the kitchen.

"You want a beer?" he asked.

Not one to pass up free beer, no matter who was offering, Spike grinned. "I could do with one," he replied. Hell, he could do with a good bottle of Jack right about now, but he didn't want to break up the bizarre atmosphere they had going here. This was the first civil conversation he and Xander had ever had, and it felt surprisingly good.

Xander silently came back into the room and handed him an opened beer. Without saying a word, he crossed to the picture window and stared out into the night.

Usually, Spike was comfortable with silence; too much talking made him jumpy, but as the silence wore on, he had the sudden urge to break it. Xander beat him to it by a breath.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Xander asked quietly, not turning around.

Spike eyed the way the boy was standing; tense, one arm hugged across his chest as he nursed the beer he was holding. *Must be a doozy of a question*, he thought warily. "Go for it," he said, wondering whether he was going to want to answer.

"Do you hate what happened?" Xander asked, his voice almost inaudible. He didn't move. He just stood there, staring out the window.

Ok-ay, didn't expect that one this century. Did he hate it? No. Was completely okay with it? Again, no. And what the hell was the boy doing asking him this shit? Why did he need to know? This was just a chit chat to make sure no one was going to stake anyone, and then *he* was taking off for parts unknown.

Right! So why does the thought of answering the question wrong bother you?

Shut up!

He must have been silent just a little too long, because Xander turned, nervously fingering his beer bottle.

Spike sighed. What was it with him and wounded puppies? "No, I didn't."

"No?"

Spike snorted and shook his head. "You repeat any of this, and I deny it," he warned, glaring at Xander for good measure. "But I . . . enjoyed most of it."

"Most of it?"

Spike rolled his eyes. *Hell! This is getting to be home confession week!* "Could have done without the uncertainty factor," he admitted, conveniently taking a swig of his beer to break eye contact, without *looking* like he was breaking eye contact.

"Uncertainty?"

"What are you? A bleedin' Parrot?" Spike asked angrily. He didn't want to answer the questions. Hell, he didn't even want them to have been asked in the first place. All this made him feel too much like when he'd been mortal -- all uncertain and . . . afraid.

Xander shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry. What--"

"How about I ask *you* a few questions?" Spike hurriedly asked, interrupting Xander. It was time he re-took control of this situation, preferably before it spiralled *completely* out of control.

"Oh, um, okay."

"Did *you* hate it?" Spike asked, controlling his smirk by the thinnest of margins. *There! That ought to send the boy running for cover, and pulling the denial blanket in with him!*

Spike's mouth almost fell open at the rush of lust that waved off Xander. *Okay! Didn't expect that.* He

took one step forward, drawn by the tempting scent.

Xander gulped, and Spike could see the boy's trembling. "N-no," he said, and hastily ducked his head.

And I didn't expect that, either. Spike moved back, suddenly feeling very unsure of himself again. Everything he did today seemed to back-fire on him. It was an unsettling feeling and he didn't like it one bit. *What the hell is going on here?* He glared at Xander, wanting to rant and rage, and demand to know exactly what Xander thought he was playing at.

How could the boy *not* hate what happened? He was one of the good guys. He hated demons -- vampires in particular. Spike fully admitted the boy had good reason, but still.

Xander took in a deep breath, letting it out in a huff, and Spike snapped his head back in the boy's direction.

"Okay, Spike. I'm going to go out on a limb here."

What? No, you're not supposed to do that! You're supposed to kick my arse out of here, ranting that you never want to see me again. I disappear, and we all forget it ever happened!

And now who's the one running for cover and grabbing for that nice comfy denial blanket?

Sod off!

"Look, Xander. No need for that. Thanks for the beer. Got things to do, you know. See you 'round," Spike said quickly, setting the empty bottle down and heading for the door.

"Spike! Wait," Xander said. "Please."

Groaning, Spike stopped, his hand on the door. He refused to turn around, though. "What?" he asked in a near whisper. He didn't want to hear what Xander wanted from him. He wanted to walk out

the door and never look back. He wanted-- He wanted to *not* feel what he was feeling -- not care about what Xander thought and felt -- not care about whether, or hope that, Xander might care about what *he* thought and felt.

"I want-- I would like it, if we could see where this might head."

Don't do this to me, Harris!

"I-if you would too."

Spike's head dropped back and he closed his eyes, letting his hand fall from the door handle. That was *Harris* saying that! Without turning around he straightened almost immediately. "Do you get some kind of perverse kick out of blasting away every preconceived notion I have about you?"

Xander laughed. It was a delighted, child-like laugh and it had Spike turning around before he realized he was doing it. Mischief danced in Xander's eyes, and curled the corners of his mouth upward. It

made him look years younger, wiping away the worry lines that were almost a constant presence on the boy's face anymore.

Spike couldn't help it; he responded with a slight smile of his own. The boy's sudden good humor was infectious. *Should be quarantined!* Of course, since he was already infected, he'd have to be quarantined as well. Images of what they could do to pass the time during their mutual confinement flashed through his mind, and he shifted, his jeans uncomfortably tight as he rose to the occasion.

Xander's eyes widened, his nostrils flaring, and he stalked forward, all traces of child-like gone, replaced almost instantly with predatory grace.

Okay, Mr. Split Personality, who said you could suddenly alter the script? Spike thought, startled, taking a step back only to find the door right behind him.

"Hey!" he complained. "I don't bloody recall saying yes, Harris."

Xander grinned, his gaze flicking down, then right back up. "Maybe not, but your body did. Smells great!"

Spike glared. That was *not* fair! Harris wasn't supposed to be able to smell him like he could-- *Oh!* He swallowed, now that he was paying attention, the lust rolling off Xander was incredibly inviting. "I'm not a slave to my body's responses," he snapped.

Liar!

"Unlike certain hormonal teenage boys I know," Spike taunted, going on the defensive the only way he still could -- by lashing out.

"Oh, really?" Xander asked, pressing up against Spike, aligning the entire length of their bodies perfectly. "Then why aren't you pushing me away?" he whispered, leaning in and lightly raking his teeth across Spike's earlobe.

Spike shivered, his eyes drifting shut. *Not fair!* Part of him wanted this so badly he couldn't think straight. Of course, an equal part was *still* screaming. "Don't feel like it just yet," he replied, stubbornly refusing to listen to the nay sayer he'd developed over the last year. Smirking, he shifting subtly against Xander. *To hell with tomorrow!*

"So, I can take that as a yes?" Xander whispered, dropping his head and nibbling down the side of Spike's neck.

"Take it any way you bloody well want!" Spike exclaimed. "Just get *on* with it." Arching forward, suddenly tired with waiting for the sodding human to move it along, Spike pushed Xander far enough away to capture the boy's mouth with his.

Xander moaned, parting his lips and meeting Spike's probing tongue with equal enthusiasm. Spike groaned, feeling himself melt against the warmth pressed against him. Xander tasted even better than he remembered.

"Hey, Spike?"

"What?" Spike mumbled irritably, immediately trying to resume their kiss.

"That 'hormonal teenager' crack doesn't hold water."

Spike blinked, pulling back in surprise. "What?!" The sodding git wanted to talk about wise cracks when they had their tongues down each other's throats?

"The crack you made, about me being ruled by my hormones, because of my age."

"What about it?" Spike demanded, finally giving in and leaning back against the door.

"Like I said," Xander continued, grinning widely. "It doesn't hold water."

Spike rolled his eyes. "You already said that. What . About . It?"

"I'm older than you."

"In what sodding universe?" Spike asked incredulously.

"This one."

"Okay," Spike said cautiously, "please tell me how twenty is older than one hundred and twenty? Rounded."

Xander's grin just widened as he spoke. "How old were you when you were turned?"

"Nine--teen." He snorted, then chortled, then broke down and actually laughed. "Only you," he said after a moment.

The laughter died slowly. As it did, Xander was surprised to see the wary expectation return to Spike, his body tensing subtly. He doubted he'd have seen it before, but now it was as obvious to Xander as Willow's blushes. He watched Spike in confusion, wondering what had caused the returning wariness.

"What are we doing here, Spike?" Xander asked, shaking his head.

"Thought that would have been bloody obvious," Spike retorted, tensing further.

Xander rolled his eyes. "Not that! I *know* what that was. I meant-- Damn it! What about Buffy?"

Spike's eyes narrowed. "What about her?" he asked cautiously, his voice taking on a hint of danger.

Xander wasn't sure he wanted to continue, but it was either that, or back off completely. He wasn't ready to do that. He'd already decided what he wanted--

When did you do that?

--he wasn't going to second guess himself -- no matter how much he kept trying to -- and he was just going to go with what felt right. It was confusing. It was scary. But he was doing it anyway.

"I " he said slowly, "I thought you were in love with her."

"I am," Spike replied simply, not elaborating at all.

Xander blew out a frustrated breath, and wondered whether Spike was being purposely obtuse. He rolled his eyes at himself. *Of course he is! He's Spike!* Fine, he knew how to play.

"Doesn't seem like it to me."

"You," Spike replied, his tone low, vibrating menacing, "don't know squat."

"Then why are you here, Spike?" Xander countered.

"You say you love Buffy, but you're here with me . . . letting me kiss you, seduce you." Xander stepped back toward Spike, invading the vampire's personal space. "Why?"

To a casual glance Spike was closed off, unaffected, angry even. To Xander's heightened senses, there was far more than met the eye. Spike's tense body, his narrowed eyes, his tightly controlled tone were more than just arrogant anger.

"You started this, Git!" Spike retorted.

"Oh, that answers a whole lot," Xander snorted.
"Not!"

Spike's eyes closed, frustration rolling off of the vampire. They didn't stay closed long, though, and he pushed himself away from the door with an angry shove, moving them even closer together.

"Sod this, Harris! I don't need this crap from you," he snapped, his eyes flashing with flecks of gold.

"You can just crawl back to your *scoobie* friends and make nice with the kiddies. I'm out of here!"

Spinning away, Spike wrenched open the door.

Raw anger suddenly rolling through him, Xander grabbed Spike's arm, yanking the vampire back from the doorway. Shoving a startled Spike against the door jamb, Xander himself was surprised to feel a quickly suppressed shiver run through the vampire. It was almost enough to make him let go.

"Let go, Harris!" Spike hissed angrily.

It was then that everything fell into place -- though it did absolutely nothing to clear up Xander's confusion. Spike was afraid. He imagined that was so not sitting well with Spike. He relaxed his hold; though he did not release Spike.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked quietly.

Spike shook him off, glaring. "I'm not afraid of sod all!" he denied hotly.

Xander just stood still, silently watching, his gaze calmly locked with Spike's glare. It wasn't often he

could keep his mouth shut, but somehow he knew doing so now would yield more results than spouting off -- or pushing.

Spike looked away, shoving his hands in his jeans pockets. "You have absolutely no clue what you've done, do you?"

"Tell me," Xander replied softly, his mind swiftly reviewing the last few days He couldn't find anything that would make Spike react this way. He almost laughed. He could think of a lot of things that would piss the vampire off. . . . But make him scared? "Explain to me what I've done."

"I'm not explaining *anything*! You want to know so badly, do some more of that *research* you were so proud of the other day and bloody well figure it out yourself!"

Xander started to reply, but found himself at a loss for words, floored by the angry defeat he'd heard in Spike's voice.

What the hell?

Before he could find his voice again, he had no one to answer. Spike was already half way out of the apartment building. Shaking his head, Xander thought about following. He was pretty sure he could trail Spike, whether or not he could actually keep up.

No, he decided. Spike was obviously very . . . upset, or maybe unsettled with whatever it was that was bothering him that it wouldn't do any good. Maybe he should take Spike's advice and do some more digging. The thought of voluntarily opening those books of Giles', though, reminded him all too well of studying. Well, of *trying* to study, back when he was in school.

Besides, he rationalized, would the watcher's books be accurate? Where had they gotten their information? Watching? Xander really didn't see the watchers actually *questioning* vampires to get it. He laughed. Even if they had, he *seriously* doubted their research . . . subject would have told the truth.

That left him back at square one.

His frown deepening, Xander absently shut the door and wandered back to his couch. Maybe he could figure it out himself. Mind racing, Xander worried his lower lip between his teeth as he thought. He tried putting himself in Spike's position, shivering in distaste as he did so. The parts of him made up of the hyena and soldier memories *really* hated the idea. To be so . . . dominated went against the grain.

Was that it?

He shook his head. No, he didn't really think so. Spike *had* said he hadn't 'minded' what had happened.

Could have done without the uncertainty factor.

"What uncertainty?" Xander asked again, this time to the empty apartment, suddenly realizing he'd never managed to ask Spike what he'd meant by that, the vampire having gone on the offensive when he'd tried. A faint glimmer of an idea began to

form, but it was elusive, darting just outside his conscious control, and he couldn't quite pin it down.

He grinned then, a new source of information hitting him like a brick wall. Who better to tell him exactly what Spike's problem was. Laughing, knowing damn well this call was going to be received with shock, Xander leapt to his feet and started punching in numbers. He was going to enjoy this call.

"Angel investigations. We help the helpless."

"Cordelia?" Xander asked, surprised. Though why he should have been, he didn't know. Willow had told them about Cordelia working with Angel, about her getting visions now. He so did not envy her the headaches Willow had told him went hand in hand with them.

"Xander!?"

"Yeah, it's me. Can I talk--"

"Is everyone okay up there?" Cordelia demanded.
"Cuz, if Angel has to go up there, I need to prepare myself. He always gets so broody after."

"Everyone's fine, Cordy," Xander assured with a chuckle. "I just need to--"

"You're sure, Xander? I mean, you didn't just call to chat did you? Because I've got to say this is a--"

"Cordy!" Xander shouted, interrupting his ex-girlfriend's rant. He rolled his eyes, feeling an amused nostalgia. Some things never changed it seemed "I just need to talk to Deadboy. He in?"

Silence reigned from the other end of the line.

"Cordy?" he asked, wondering if they'd somehow been disconnected.

" *You* want to talk to *Angel*," she said flatly.

He laughed. "Yes," he said drily. "I want to talk to

Angel." He paused. "Okay, maybe saying 'want' is a little strong, but I'm gonna enjoy shocking the shit out of him."

Cordelia laughed. "Now *that's* the Xander I remember," she said. "I take it I shouldn't tell him who's calling?"

"Oh, go ahead. It won't hurt the shock value one bit."

"It won't?" Cordelia asked suspiciously. "Just what are you up to, Alexander Harris?"

"Me?" he asked. "Up to something?"

"Yes, you! Now spill."

"Can't rightly say right now, Cordy." He heard the swiftly indrawn breath from Cordelia and hurriedly continued. "I promise, after this is over, I'll come up there and 'dish all the dirt'. You'll feel you've hit gossip central."

Xander didn't know why, but it was easy to talk to Cordelia, where he'd just wanted off the phone with Willow. It didn't make a lot of sense to him.

Shouldn't it have been the other way around? He shrugged it off; he would figure it out sooner or later. He almost laughed again, though. He could almost *hear* Cordelia squirming, trying to decide whether or not she could worm anything out of him now.

"Okay," she said finally, "but if you don't keep your end of the deal, you'll find me *in* Sunnydale and in your face." She paused. "And it *won't* be in a good way."

"Okay," he laughed, smirking as he added fuel to the fire of her curiosity. "Now make sure you can see Angel's face while I talk to him, so you can tell me about it later."

Cordelia growled at him and his eyes widened a fraction. *She's been hanging around Deadboy too long*, he thought as the hollow sound of a hand over the receiver sounded through the line. He wasn't

sure, but he thought he heard her calling out to Angel.

Good, he thought, suddenly anxious to hear what Angel might have to say.

"Xander?" Angel asked tentatively, sounding as though he hadn't believed Cordelia.

"Yeah, listen. I need some information from you."

"Is B--everyone okay?"

Xander sighed, rolling his eyes. "Yes, everyone is just fine. Well, except Spike."

"Spike!?" Angel asked in shock.

Cordelia's gasp in the background was loud enough that Xander heard it.

He grinned, knowing that after hearing just that much, his ex-girlfriend would be dying of curiosity.

"Why would you care about Spike?" Angel continued suspiciously.

Xander frowned, pulling the phone away from his ear to stare disbelievingly at it.

"You *are* his Sire, right?" he asked after he pulled it back.

"Not that I see what difference it makes," Angel replied in irritation, "but yes."

"Then you should understand."

For several long moments, silence once again roared loudly through the phone line. "If Spike's being a pain, why doesn't Buffy just stake him and get it over with?"

Xander felt instant rage fill him to overflowing. "I can *not* believe you said that! Buffy would **never**. Well, she's threatened to a couple times, but I think it's more habit than anything."

"I coming up there."

"What?!" Xander asked, his rage turning immediately to panic. "Why? You obviously don't give a shit about him."

"Him?!" Angel asked incredulously, "I'm more worried about all of you! What's he done to make you all so vulnerable to him?"

Xander's thoughts froze. They'd told him. Sure they had. Angel *had* to know. He frowned. "Oh, my God!" he breathed. "You *don't* know."

"Don't know *what*, Xander??"

Taking a deep breath, Xander rapidly filled Angel in on the initiative and what they'd done to Spike. All the while he wondered how the hell Angel could *not* know about it already. He'd been in Sunnydale since Spike had been chipped. He'd even met Riley. Hadn't the two of them met since then? Wait. Spike had been tied to a chair when Angel had come to help that one Thanksgiving.

Didn't he even ask why?

By the time Xander finished his explanation, held his breath, hearing Angel growling lowly through the phone.

"Is this why you're calling me?" he asked lowly.
"You need help getting rid of them? How is Spike taking it?"

"No. That happened a long time ago, Angel. He was in a bad way to start with, but he's pretty much dealing now. And we *already* took care of the initiative."

Angel blew out a frustrated breath. "Then what *is* the problem?" he asked, confused.

Xander grinned, this was getting fun again. "I needed some information about vampires -- from someone who might actually know, *and* would tell me the truth."

"And you think that someone is me?" Angel asked.
"Obviously I know about vampires, but what makes you think I'll tell you the truth about anything?"

Xander laughed. "Because you don't care what I think about you. You won't worry about sugar-coating the honest truth *just* so I won't think less of you."

"Good point," Angel admitted wryly. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to just open up to you either -- for the same reason."

"True," Xander acknowledged. "Look. You don't like me, and I don't like you. We both know this. But this is important Angel. You can believe I would so not be asking if it wasn't."

Angel sighed deeply, and Xander instantly knew the vampire had given in. "Okay, Xander. What do you need to know?"

"Vampires have a . . . pecking order, don't they?"

"Yes," Angel replied slowly.

"Where would you say Spike rates in that order?"

"Pretty high," Angel replied immediately, then hmmm'd in uncertainty. "Before the chip, anyway. Now, I don't know."

"How do vampires assert their . . . dominance?"

"Why?"

Xander grit his teeth, clenching his jaw tightly. "Just answer the damn question Angel. I need to know. If it'll help, it never gets repeated."

Several moments passed and Xander began to wonder if Angel had completely closed off, or like spaced, or something. To his relief the vampire began speaking, his voice a near whisper. He could just imagine Cordelia leaning closer trying to hear what her boss was saying.

"That depends a great deal, Xander."

"On?"

Angel sighed again, this time his reluctance coming through loud and clear. "On why exactly the dominance is being asserted."

Xander felt like he was trying to pull teeth! He was about to snap when Angel continued.

"If it's a case of two random vampires meeting and a challenge is issued, they fight. Of course, the loser usually ends up dead -- unless the winner has a use for him."

"Go on," Xander urged.

"If it's the case of a master vampire wanting to take over a territory, he goes in, picks the current master and kills him. Usually everyone falls into line after that, but he may have to fight a few others, loyal childer, an especially stupid minion or two."

"Go on," Xander said again, when Angel fell silent.

"Xander, what the hell is going on up there, if that doesn't cover what you need to know?"

Part Sixteen

Xander frowned as he hung up the phone. He'd ended up telling Angel a *whole* lot more than he'd intended to, and he still wasn't quite sure how that had happened. He supposed it had been worth it, though, because it had gotten Angel to quit hinting and start telling him the bald facts. And man! Had some of those facts been bald! Reading the watcher's accounts had been totally different than hearing it from the source.

He closed the door quietly behind him. He had a vampire to find.

Xander had been honest with Angel; he didn't like the dark vampire -- never had and probably never would -- which, surprisingly, had made it easier to spill his guts.

Striding out into the night, Xander paused as he made the street, inhaling deeply. It was faint, very faint, but he could still smell traces of Spike's scent, and after three false starts he managed to begin following it. After about thirty minutes, Xander found himself thoroughly enjoying the chase -- even if the prey didn't realize they were involved . . . yet. The crisp night air and the mingled scents on the breeze kept him vigilant, constantly backtracking with the wind changes and mistakes.

He grinned suddenly. He was catching up -- despite his false starts and errors. Spike's scent had been growing steadily stronger -- thanks largely to the fact that Spike had obviously made several stops along the way -- Xander's unwary prey still unaware of being trailed. Xander's grin widened as the undeniable scent he'd been following suddenly grew stronger still.

And there he was! Shivering, anticipation racing through him, Xander watched. Quietly scenting the air, he was very grateful to discover he'd caught up

to Spike while the vampire was upwind. He was unalterably certain that Spike would be far better at the hunting gig than he was. He needed to be careful if he wanted to maintain the upper hand. If he got too close at this point, Spike was sure to sense his arrival -- regardless of the advantage wind direction now gave him. Vampires weren't animals; they had senses beyond those of the average hunting creature. This was the tricky part of the chase, the part that wound him tight.

He wanted to get close enough to alert the vampire that *something* was there . . . watching, but he didn't want to get close enough for him to figure out exactly who that 'something' was -- at least not yet. He wasn't sure he could do it, but he sure as hell wanted to try. His chances of success depended largely on luck; he knew that. He had to be able to disappear from sight any time Spike's senses told him to double-check his surroundings. Timing also played a large part.

Oh! Xander ducked behind a tree as Spike spun his direction. In his preoccupied excitement he hadn't

seen the vampire resume movement. Of course, it had been just his luck that Spike had decided on a direction that brought him closer.

He heard an irritated growl, and quickly held his breath, then let it out slowly, quietly. If he could hear Spike's reaction, Spike could probably hear him if he wasn't careful. His heart pounded as he listened closely for any sound that might indicate Spike was again on the move. He was dreadfully sure that Spike was sure to hear the overly loud sound as it certainly sounded deafening to *him*.

Xander had to clench his jaw shut to prevent himself from laughing as he heard Spike mutter under his breath something about going crazy as the vampire stalked away. Grateful that despite his near discovery Spike was not yet trying to move stealthily, he followed, and for a few minutes, he carefully stayed far enough away not to alert the vampire.

That didn't last long. As soon as he had a good place to hide, he quickened his stride just enough to

move inside the range of the vampire's senses. He knew it the moment he'd done so. Spike froze. Xander quickly ducked out of sight, hoping he was quick enough.

Several long, tense moments passed while Xander waited, breath held, listening for the slightest sounds from his prey.

"All right, Harris!" Spike shouted angrily. "What the bloody hell are you playing at?"

Xander let out a giggle that had him *instantly* clapping his hand over his mouth. *I did not just GIGGLE!* he thought, his eyes widening. Forcing himself to drop his hand, Xander stepped out into view. The gig was up and now it was time to take this to the next level.

"Playing?" Xander called out. "What makes you think I'm *playing*?" A thrill shot through him as he caught sight of the blond vampire. Standing defensively, the moonlight glinting off the shockingly white hair of his, Xander couldn't recall a

better sight.

Spike strode toward him, stopping several feet away and eyeing him in confusion. " *What* are you doing out here?" he demanded.

"Hunting," Xander replied, debating whether to draw this out or just jump the vampire now. With a purely mental sigh, common sense won out and he decided drawing it out would be better -- at least until he either convinced the blond inside somewhere, or alternately chased him there.

Spike frowned. "Are you daft? Your little stint affected by demon blood gone to your head?" he snapped. "What the bloody hell are you 'hunting'?"

"You," Xander replied honestly, taking a single step forward, allowing the smallest portion of what he was feeling to show.

"Come again?" Spike retorted, looking just a touch gobsmacked.

Xander grinned, taking three more, deliberate, slow steps forward. "I said, I'm hunting you."

"Why!?"

"Because it's fun."

"Fun!?" Spike exclaimed. "You *have* lost it, mate."

"No, actually, I've just found it."

Spike's confused frown returned -- Xander was growing to like the look. He was surprised to admit it, but it was a cute look for the vampire. "What in bloody hell are you talking about?"

"I took you up on your advice."

That got a growl. "What advice?"

Stifling the strange impulse to let out another giggle -- *I do NOT giggle!* -- Xander grinned instead. "You told me, if I wanted to know what I'd done, research it. Well, I did."

"Ri-ight," Spike replied, disbelievingly, but warily taking a step back. "And just *where* did you do your 'research'? I happen to know for a fact that the watcher's books don't have anything good in them."

Xander snorted. "Nah, I bypassed the books. I went straight to the horse's mouth, so to speak," Xander frowned, pretending to ponder the question. "Or maybe that should be the horse's ass."

Spike's eyes narrowed. "What did you *do*, Harris?"

Xander grinned again. "I called Angel."

Spike's jaw dropped. "You what?"

"I know, shocking isn't it? But once we got things explained a bit, he was most helpful, though he did threaten to come up here, until I told him a bit more than I wanted to."

"Bloody hell!" Spike exclaimed angrily. "I *cannot* believe you did that! It's not bad enough that I've

had the crappiest night of my life; you have to go and bring the *poof* into this?" Spike spun around and stalked away.

"Don't you think you've run enough, Spike?" Xander taunted, following.

"No!"

"You may be better at the tracking and the hiding, Spike, but I've got an advantage you don't."

"Oh?" Spike inquired sarcastically, not stopping.
"And what's that?"

"The sun will be up in a few short hours."

Spike growled and spun around to face him. "What the hell do you want from me, Harris!?"

Xander shrugged. He hadn't thought much beyond the need to find Spike, really. "Nothing much," he replied evenly, stepping closer, invading the vampire's personal space. "Just you."

Spike's jaw dropped. "If you think for one sodding minute, that I'm just going to *let you--*"

Xander struck out, punching Spike in the jaw with every ounce of his strength, sending a *very* shocked vampire to the ground.

"How the hell did you do that?" he exclaimed, jumping back to his feet and rubbing his jaw.

"Left over benefit," Xander shrugged. "I'm not letting it all fade away this time around."

Spike's eyes narrowed. "You're being bloody obtuse, Harris," he growled. "Explain what you mean, or leave me the sodding hell alone!"

Xander sighed. "Do you think we could take this somewhere a little more private," he asked. "I really don't feel like letting the whole of Sunnydale's demon population in on my business." He saw a brief flash of temptation in the vampire's eyes before it was quickly squashed.

"I don't think that would be a good idea, Harris. I still need to eat tonight."

Xander frowned. "Didn't you get anything while you were at Willy's?"

"How did you know I'd gone there?"

Rolling his eyes, Xander shrugged yet again. "I've been following you. Took me a while to get the hang of the following of scents gig. Now, why didn't you get something at Willy's?"

Spike let out a long suffering sigh, dropping his head back and grabbing the bridge of his nose in obvious frustration. "You remember what the Margaso said about announcing the trade, right?"

Xander's eyes widened as memory flashed. "Yeah, something about making sure everyone knew. I assumed they meant demons."

Spike nodded. "Well, they followed through with it."

"And?" Xander asked, not understanding what the point was. So the other demons knew what happened, well, what happened between them and the Margaso. What did that have to do with him not eating?

"Apparently," Spike growled, closing his eyes and looking away, "that means my money's not good anymore."

Xander growled right back, spinning away and storming off. He had a bartender to visit.

"Where are you going now, Harris?" Spike demanded from behind him. Xander was pleased that the vampire had decided to follow.

"Willy's," he replied shortly.

"What for?" Spike demanded suspiciously. "Haven't I been humiliated enough for one night?"

Xander stopped dead in his tracks, spinning back

around to face the vampire. "You want to be able to buy blood at Willy's?"

Spike nodded warily.

"Then I'd better straighten out one dodgy bartender, hadn't I?" he asked, the question mostly rhetorical considering he was going to do it whether Spike answered in the affirmative or not. It was either this, or he was buying all Spike's meals in the foreseeable future. Not something he was interested in doing when the vampire was quite capable of doing it on his own.

Surprising him immensely, Spike followed in silence after that, but Xander didn't know what prompted the silence. He didn't dare turn around to check. For the first time since he'd caught up with the vampire, however, he took a moment to scent what he could, the confusing mix of scents radiating off the vampire, the base of which was pure Spike, was a heady combination that had him swallowing heavily and shifting uncomfortably, that ratcheted up his own latent arousal up several notches.

With that as impetus, it didn't take them long to arrive at Willy's Bar. Throwing open the door, Xander stalked straight toward Willy, trusting in Spike -- amazingly enough -- to watch his back. "Willy," he growled. "What's this I hear about you not serving Spike?"

Part Seventeen

Spike followed Xander, not sure when, exactly, hell had frozen over. He was sure it had, however, because Xander was acting most unXanderlike. It was . . . unsettling.

Arousing, don't you mean?

Spike growled under his breath, really beginning to hate that inner voice. And there was Willy's, the

place he'd just spent 45 minutes in, suffering through the third most humiliating experience of his existence. Why the hell was he back here? Oh, right, because the pillock, known as the slayer's White Knight, had insisted.

You didn't have to follow.

"Sod off!" he muttered quietly, speaking to no one but himself. *I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I just don't have the energy to fight against this shit any longer.* The final shock of the night, he received as Xander Harris simply stormed into Willy's, a bar full of vampires and assorted demons without so much as a look left or right, heading straight for the bar itself -- and the bartender. Harris was either completely insane -- Drusilla level insane -- or the idiot trusted him to watch his back.

Spike frowned, equally pleased and pissed off at that thought, not entirely certain which feeling should take precedence. He couldn't deny that it felt good, however, at least to himself.

"Willy!" Xander growled, and to Spike's surprise, it was a rather impressive growl. Almost didn't sound human. "What's this I hear about you not serving Spike?"

Spike bristled at the human's easily carrying words, wincing as several of the bar's patrons noted it as well, smirking in response. *Bloody big mouthed prat!* he thought spitefully.

Willy simply shrugged the boy off. "My customer base is made up of demons. I abide by their rules. They say you own him, which means he can't conduct his own business. Sorry, guy."

Spike growled low in his chest. This was *just* what he'd wanted to avoid, a repeat performance. Surprisingly, the customers present seemed happy enough to just watch the night's 'entertainment'. Spike, on the other hand, wasn't so happy; though, he was revelling in the intense smells the boy was putting off, an incredibly arousing mix of lust, anger, and something indefinable, something that seemed inherently Xander.

He clamped down on that. Spike didn't know what all Xander was planning, but *he* wasn't going to get caught up in it all again. He was already in too deep to get back out easily. The last thing he needed was to get in deeper. He was leaving town. He didn't even know why he'd let Xander talk him into coming here. It wouldn't make any difference in the long run. Jerking his attention back to Willy and Xander as he sensed the sudden, sharp increase in Xander's anger, Spike was surprised to see Xander's hand dart out and grab the bartender's shirt collar and haul him across the bar.

"You say I 'own' Spike, right?"

Willy nodded eyes wide and he darted a quick, wary look Spike's direction. "When did you suddenly get so strong?" he asked Xander, worried, bringing both hands up to the one holding him in place. He couldn't budge Xander's grip.

"About the time he got doused with Margaso blood," Spike offered, smirking. It was fun seeing

the oily bartender get his. Since he couldn't do it himself, this was the next best thing.

"What?!" Willy exclaimed, horror spreading across his face. "Did you tell the slayer?"

Spike snorted. "Of course not! Why would I?"

"Hyena," was all Willy said, his words cutting off as Xander's hand tightened.

Did everyone know about that but him?

"A side affect," Xander said shortly, "the other stuff already wore off." He pulled Willy closer. "You leave the slayer out of this," he ordered. "Understand?"

Willy nodded quickly. "Whatever you say, mate."

"Good," Xander purred. "We've already established that I own his ass. That means I can tell him what to do, right?"

Bloody Prat! Spike thought in growing horror,

diverting more of his attention toward the bar's patrons. They were still getting a good laugh out of the show, but he didn't know how much longer that would last if Xander kept denigrating him. Part of their willingness to sit back *might* actually be fear of him. If that went away, they might *both* be in trouble here. Anger started to overcome everything else he was feeling. *I thought the bloody kid wanted to help, not get us both killed!*

"As long as you've got the strength to back it up, I suppose so," Willy replied.

"Good, so what happens if I tell him to come down here and buy supplies?"

Willy blinked in response, saying nothing.

"You going to deny my right to have him do that? Go above demon law all that shit?"

Willy shook his head vehemently, beginning to turn a bit blue around the gills.

"Hey, Harris," Spike called out, "unless you want the bloody bloke dead, you might want to ease up on your grip. I don't think he's getting enough air."

"Think so?" Xander asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Spike retorted drily.

"Hmmm," Xander replied thoughtfully, looking only at Willy. "You think so too?"

Willy nodded emphatically.

"Really? You going to serve Spike when he comes in here?"

Again Willy nodded.

"Good," Xander replied, immediately releasing the man.

"All you had to do was ask," Willy muttered, scrambling back to his side of the bar and rubbing his throat carefully. "No need to go acting all demony

on me."

Xander just turned, smirking. "Spike?" he inquired politely, indicating with a wave that he should approach the bar.

Spike hesitated, all too aware of every single eye watching the by-play. "I'll do it later," he drawled.

The deep flash in Xander's eyes as they narrowed, surprised Spike, sending a flash of uneasiness through him. He purposely rolled his eyes and *sauntered* forward. "Oh, I *suppose* I could do it now," he replied, as if it were a bother. "The good stuff," he continued, directing that comment toward Willy.

Standing next to him, Xander leaned close and whispered. "Get enough to last a couple days," he said.

Pure, unwanted, visceral lust shot through Spike as the human's hot breath ghosted across his neck and ear, and he shivered in direct response. He clenched

his hands on the bar, but gave no other outward sign he'd heard. "Give me three days worth of bags," he ordered when Willy came back with his steaming mug.

Spike took a long swallow, savoring the taste he got so rarely these days. Human was a special treat when he was flush for a change. When he set the mug down, Willy had yet to move.

"The good stuff for that too?"

Spike wanted to say yes. Unfortunately, he may have more cash than usual, but he didn't have enough for *that*. "Half and half," he replied.

"All good stuff," Xander refuted.

Willy nodded and hurried off.

Spike jerked his head toward the boy, but any response was abruptly halted as he watched Xander pull out several bills and lay them on the bar.

X-X-X

The walk home was disturbingly silent. Disturbing, because, as much as Spike liked silence sometimes, this one was overlaid with the primal lust rolling off the human walking beside him. Spike would have left, told the boy, 'nice knowing you' and all that rot, but he knew the blasted idiot would simply chase him down . . . again. He knew he could get away from Harris. It really wouldn't be all that difficult. The problem would come when he had to go to ground -- so to speak.

When he had to seek refuge from the sun, Xander Harris would then be able to take all the time he needed to catch up to him. So what would be the point? He just didn't see why Xander had come after him in the first place. The boy had made it perfectly clear earlier where Spike stood.

Did he really? Didn't he just question your motives?

Spike shifted uneasily, risking a covert glance at his temporary companion. Xander seemed intent on

staring straight ahead, not paying him a moment's notice. Xander had come after him, though, something the Slayer had never done. Dru hadn't ever, either, come to think of it. It was a new feeling.

"You're thinking awfully hard there, Spike," Xander offered quietly.

Spike started. He hadn't thought Xander was paying attention. Damn, but he was losing his touch. "Why did you come after me? Really," Spike demanded. "You had a cozy little chat with the pouf, big deal. What's that got to do with this?"

Xander just shook his head. "Let's wait for a bit more privacy, before we start that talk, please," he asked.

Spike frowned, but nodded just the same. He supposed it wouldn't hurt him to wait the few minutes until they reached the whelp's apartment. He shook his head, though, how he'd come to be heading back to the place he'd left in such a rush

earlier -- fully intending never to return -- was a mystery he didn't think he'd ever solve.

Oh, quite being so stupid! You know damn well why. It was the very same reason he'd always followed Angelus back to whatever their current lair was . . . no matter how brassed off he was, or how badly they had fought each night.

He ignored the thought, shoving it aside -- hopefully never to be dealt with -- forcing himself to be *patient* until the moment the door closed behind them.

"Explain," he said shortly, whipping around to face his current nemesis, arms folded around the bag he carried, and not coincidentally, across his chest.

"Have a seat, Spike," Xander countered evenly, retrieving the bag of blood from him and heading for the kitchen.

Fighting yet another growl at this additional delay, Spike threw himself down onto the couch,

sprawling along its length. One arm thrown along the back, one leg stretched out and one leg over the edge, his foot braced on the floor, he got as comfortable as was possible in the current situation. Hyperaware of the man in the other room, he could hear every movement, every action, and was surprised to realize that Harris was fixing him blood, the opening and closing of the microwave door a dead giveaway.

He shifted restlessly as the timer dinged, indicating the blood was ready, almost jumping up to retrieve it himself. He forced himself to remain seated, however, acting as if he hadn't a care in the world. In fact, he studiously ignored Xander as he re-entered the room, holding both the steaming cup of blood and two beers.

When Xander chuckled, however, he didn't manage to retain his air of uncaring. He snapped his head around to glare at the offending human, wondering what in buggering hell the bloody boy thought was so funny. It didn't phase the prat, who simply handed him the blood and one of the beers.

"Thanks," he muttered sullenly, angry that Xander seemed to be holding all the cards in this game of theirs. Spike wanted control back, and he wanted it back now.

"I never realized just how much of an advantage vampires have over humans with their increased sense of smell.

"What?" Spike asked, thrown by the seeming tangent.

"It's amazing just what you can learn when you can smell emotions."

Spike frowned, raling against the unfairness of it all . . . despite the fact that he had rarely 'played fair' back when he'd really been the 'big bad'. He suppressed the growl of irritation *and* the demand that Xander get on with it all bloody ready. Instead, he cocked his head and turned to stare at the prat.

"I haven't heard that explanation yet," he said

evenly. Grateful when it came out devoid of all the confusing mix of emotions he was currently fighting.

Xander sighed softly, raising his head to lock gazes with Spike. "I did know exactly what I was doing when I did it," he said softly. "It was . . . instinctive. The problem is, when everything swirled back to normal," and here he chuckled wryly, "well, as back to normal as it's ever going to get, everything that's human about me swamped everything that isn't.

Oh, that's bloody brilliant, innit? Spike thought sourly. He could recite word for word what was going to happen next. Xander was going to give him the brush off. Oh, he would 'soften' it, the bloody white knight would try to 'let him down gently', but it would be a brush off none-the-less. And he didn't need that. He was so out of here.

"I just needed time and a little reminder, that's all."

What? Spike was now confused. That hadn't sounded like a brush off, not even a 'gentle' one. Now competing with the bitterness and the hurt

were tiny seeds of hope, seeds he tried to crush. That way led only to more pain. He knew it well.

"Right," Spike said falsely cheerful, jumping to his feet, "glad we got that cleared up. I'll just be on my way, then."

"What?!"

"I get it, *Harris*, Spike said airily, heading for the door. He didn't bother to look back as he continued. "The Zeppo's back. You don't need to explain any further. I'll just head out. See what the world has to offer. Was planning to anyway, before the Margaso got hold of me."

The wave of white hot anger that rolled off Xander at that point, was almost enough to make him stop . . . almost. He continued on his trek for the door. He made it to his goal, his hand reaching for the knob when a rustle behind him alerted him to Xander's movement. He grabbed for the knob, intent on ignoring everything behind him, but before he could grasp it, he found himself spun around and pressed

up against the still closed door.

He gasped at the feral anger he saw reflected in the normally smiling eyes. "So, is this how you handled things every time *Buffy* said something you didn't like?" Xander snarled, pushing a little harder.

Spike frowned. *What?* "Of course not. I--"

"Oh, so it's just me that gets this special treatment, then?"

What the hell? "What are you on about *now*, Harris?" Spike blustered, thoroughly confused. Here he was, letting the wanker off the hook, and bloody git was yelling at him. It didn't make any sense.

"Is *this* all you understand?" Xander snapped, darting his head forward and claiming Spike's mouth in a bruising kiss.

A lightning bolt of arousal shot through Spike, and for just a second he was tempted to give in to the moment, enjoy whatever it was Xander was offering

and the hell with tomorrow . . . or even 10 minutes from now. Sanity returned quickly, however, and he shoved hard. All the same, he was surprised when Xander was easily shoved away. "Get the sodding hell off me!" he growled, tired of being a yo-yo.

Glaring at Spike, Xander sneered. "Is that why you attacked Buffy? Because force is the only thing you understand?"

Shock flashed through him and his jaw dropped open. He couldn't believe-- "No, you sodding arse!" Spike snapped, rage swamping everything else he was feeling. "You *know* what that was about! I *told* you." He was so angry, he was shaking with the force of it.

"Right," Xander drawled, his face still twisted up into a sneer. "you were . . . *frustrated*."

"Damn right! Out of my head, I was."

"Why?" Xander asked bluntly, flatly.

Spike blinked in surprise at the unexpected question. "Bloody bint blowing hot and cold all the time." What was so hard to understand about that? "Couldn't take it anymore."

"You mean, like you're doing with me?" Xander asked casually.

Spike froze. "Say what?" he asked as soon as he could get his mouth to work. Xander Bloody Harris did not just accused him of being a *tease*!

"Every time I think I've got things figured out, you switch directions on me!"

"I do not!" Spike exclaimed, insulted.

"Oh, really?" Xander asked skeptically. "I take off from the mansion -- and yeah, I admit I was the one that switched paddles midstream there -- leaving you every opportunity to simply take off, if that's what you wanted. But *no*. You come here, demanding answers, and when I don't answer right, you get all hurt and start to storm off. We get all

hot and heavy, then suddenly your pushing me away and screaming that I don't understand you . . . just like a blasted *girl*."

"Hey!" He was not a sodding bint! He didn't have to take that. Before he could protest, or otherwise take action, Xander continued his rant.

"Then, I bloody well take your advice and become research guy. I go to Angel . . . *Angel* for information and advice, just to figure out what the hell I'd done wrong. I take the time to track you down to let you know and we come back here, I assumed to work things out. And just as it looks like we're getting somewhere you fricken jump up and basically say 'well, sod off, have a nice life, I'm outtie'! What the hell am I supposed to think? That you're screwing with me, maybe?"

"No!"

"Prove it!"

"What? How in sodding hell am I supposed to do

that?" Spike asked, beyond exasperated. "If you bloody think I'm putting out just to prove a sodding point, you've lost it completely, Mate!"

Xander snorted. "No, Spike. I don't fucking expect that! If I wanted that, I'd simply take it. I'd push until it was all you could think of."

Eyes glazing for just a moment, Spike shook his head, clearing his thoughts . . . somewhat. Frustration taking over, he had to fight the urge to simply stomp his feet. That would be too imature even for him. "What do you want, then?" he snapped.

"Stick around long enough to *talk* to me. Listen to what I have to say, instead of jumping to conclusions and putting words in my damn mouth!"

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

"So, you *weren't* going to just brush me off, then?"

he asked quietly, hoping he wasn't going to be the butt of the joke yet again, that he wasn't putting himself out on too fragile a tree limb. He wanted off the sodding roller coaster he'd been on for the last three days, and hopefully not on the downside.

"No, Spike, I wasn't," Xander replied softly. "I'll be the first to admit that this experience has sent me for more than one bloody loop, and I don't know where the hell it's going to end up. What I do know, is that I'm tired; tired of fighting what's inside me, tired of playing a part that isn't me anymore, and most of all, I'm tired of fighting you."

More than surprised, Spike swallowed nervously. "You are?"

Xander nodded. "Yeah, I am. What I want, is to move on, to discover if we can actually be."

"Oh," was all Spike could reply to that. He hadn't expected that. For so long, every one of the Scoobies had been so dead set against him, Xander especially, how could he have expected this

alarming turnaround?

"Now, only one question truly remains."

"And what's that?" Spike asked warily, taking a deep breath, and letting it out slowly.

"What do *you* want?"

And that was the big question. What *did* he want? His earlier submission, and the after affects of such, notwithstanding, did he want to give up his hope of Buffy, and give Xander Harris a chance? Part of him, his instincts, screamed, 'hell yes!'. The hopeless romantic in him wanted to continue the tragic romance that was he and the slayer. The majority of him, however, was simply confused. He was a bloody vampire. None of this stuff was supposed to be this complicated! He wanted something, or someone, he took it; simple as that. There wasn't supposed to be this mind numbing confusion.

Buffy was a known quantity. Sure, it hurt like hell, but he knew what to expect. Xander, on the other

hand was a complete unknown. This wasn't even the Xander he'd grown to know over the years. This was a completely new Xander, raw and exciting, but. . . .

Spike swallowed heavily, one more time, daring to meet Xander's steady gaze. Decision made. "I want. . . ." It was official. He'd gone off his nut! He'd be dusted as soon as this got out. If the slayer didn't take care of it, Xander's gal pal, Willow, would -- and that was one witch he *really* didn't want to piss off. Even when she messed up the results were . . . spectacular.

"Yes?" Xander encouraged.

"I want you."

Xander grinned, widely and closed the remaining distance between them. When they were nothing more than a breath apart, Xander stopped. "You're sure? You're not going to cut out on me again?"

"I'm sure."

"Good," Xander said brightly, pulling out of Spike's personal space. "Now that we got that girly stuff out of the way. What say you to a beer?" he asked as he made a beeline for the kitchen.

Spike gaped after the confusing human. Nearly growling, he was now utterly certain he was going to get whiplash trying to follow Xander's bloody moods. He shook his head. "And I thought Dru's moods were hard to follow," he muttered too quietly for the apartment's other occupant to hear, and made his way back to the couch. "Sure," he replied, just as Xander re-entered with two beers in hand

Part Eighteen

Spike had taken no more than two swallows from his beer before Xander swept his foot off the couch and dropped down beside him. He snorted, rolling his eyes, but shifted to a new, comfortable position without protest. Unusual for him, sure, but he was - - quite frankly -- way out of his depth here. Some of -- try most -- of his instincts were telling him that this man was his dominant. He'd submitted to him and that was that.

Of course, it couldn't be that simple, not for him. He had other instincts at work too, instincts that said humans were food, not dominants . . . at least not to vampires. Admittedly, Xander was really completely human anymore, now was he? He almost shook his head, trying to free himself of his confusing thoughts. It didn't work very well, especially since his own experience was adding to the mix and was telling him that this would *not* work. It couldn't work.

Experience had taught him two things all too well over the years. One, humans were nothing but trouble. Two, being under the control of a dominant

was -- as the brats would say -- of the bad. The slayer and her little minions had driven the first point home forcefully. Angelus himself had pounded the second one into him until it was second nature.

What he could not believe was that, despite all that, here he was submitting himself to both. He had to be bloody out of his mind to even consider doing this -- instincts bedamned! He should take off before Harris got used to being the one in control and things escalated, and escalate they would. It was a given, the nature of the beast, so to speak.

"You're thinking too much, Spike," Xander said suddenly, startling him.

He snorted in response. Of all the things he'd been accused of -- repeatedly -- over the years, thinking too much had never been one of his faults. "And you," he retorted automatically, "don't think en--" His words cut off abruptly as Xander's hand shot out and grabbed the back of his neck, pulling him forward.

by the time he'd waded through his surprise enough to even think about protesting, it was already too late; he was already responding to the warm, wet mouth that was firm and demanding on his. For several seconds he actually flirted with continued thoughts of stopping all this, protecting himself, but those nasty evil thoughts slowly derailed as he lost himself in the feeling of Xander's mouth on his, the hot firm hand holding him in place. It was all too easy to slip back into old ways of thinking, of simply feeling. He wanted this. He wanted it with every fiber of his being.

Sod thinking! he told himself firmly and finally surrendered to the feeling of being wanted, of being owned. Even if Xander really didn't, not truly, understand what had happened when he'd demanded Spike's throat baring submission, that knowledge would come with time, or it wouldn't. He was simply not up to fighting these powerful instincts, not in addition to everything he knew about Xander Harris. Xander did *not* abandon his friends -- not even when they deserved it -- and if

nothing else, they were certainly getting . . . *friendly*. That was a very powerful inducement to a vampire whose longest lasting relationship had spanned over a hundred years.

But, he thought suddenly, grinning inwardly, *I wouldn't be me if I just lay back, now would I?* With that mischievous thought, Spike rolled, landing both of them on the floor, him straddling a flat on his back Xander.

Xander blinked up at him in surprise as the fall broke their mouths apart.

"You didn't think it'd be *easy* did you?" Spike taunted happily. "Thought that the Big Bad would just let you take the lead and all, be a good little *pet?*"

Xander grinned back at him, the sheepish, crooked grin that was so typical of the man and shook his head. "Nope," he replied easily, reaching up a hand between them and palming Spike through his jeans. "What would be the fun in that?" he asked

Spike gasped, not having expected Xander to be that bold, not this quickly. Before he recovered from his surprise, he found himself flipped and his jeans undone. The hand that had been busy palming him was now grasping him firmly.

Okay, he thought distractedly, who bloody cares who's on top, as long as he keeps that up! Allowing his eyes too drift closed, he arched into the firm, slow, touch, reveling in the feeling of being cared for. He reached up, intent on returning some measure of touch, kneading Xander's shoulders briefly and trailing his hands down the man's chest.

"No," Xander growled and Spike's eyes popped open in surprise, even as he automatically jerked his hands back. Eyes narrowing, he frowned and reached forward again.

Xander stopped him, shaking his head. "This is about you," he breathed softly, "all about *you*. "Feel," he continued, eyes feral, possessive, gently pushing Spike back onto his back, "accept."

The moment he obeyed the command, and command it was, no matter how seductively given, and relaxed back onto the floor, his eyes drifting shut once again; Xander's fingers caressed down his chest, barely touching, only to sharply pinch one of his nipples through the material of his shirt.

"Enjoy."

The twin sensations of gentle touch and sharp, minute pain, combined with the sensual words spiked his arousal and he moaned deep in his chest. Unbelievable sensations raced through him as he surrendered himself to the thorough assault. I had never been all about him before. Something had always been expected in return. It was an incredible rush being Xander's sole focus. He felt like he was the center of the universe.

He became feeling, barely noticing as clothes came off, more skin bared to alternately gentle and wonderfully rough touches. His nerves, as once before, seemed unerringly attached directly to both

Xander's wandering hand and the firm one moving in a torturously slow rhythm on his aching hard cock.

Xander's murmurs barely registered, but each one added to what he was feeling, leaving him adrift on a chaotic sea of sensation and incredibly intense lust. He felt it. He smelled it. He *lived* it, leaving no room for anything else. He was lust and lust was he.

Hot and wet, Xander's mouth replaced that slow hand, enclosing him and sucking him inside that moist haven.

Spike arched off the floor, growling lowly when Xander suddenly hummed, the sound vibrating around him. It nearly made him come on the spot, but the arse pulled back at the last second and Spike found himself letting out a whimper of protest. Despite that, he willingly raised his hips to assist when Xander began divesting him of his jeans.

Moments later, in a tangle of both helpful and unhelpful limbs, both were completely nude and

Xander was instantly back at his neck, nuzzling softly and inhaling deeply. He hissed when Xander's warm, wet tongue tasted what had once been his pulse point, the sound just covering Xander's quiet whisper. But before Spike could figure out what he'd said -- and whether or not he truly cared -- Xander had already moved on and was inhaling again, nose deep in his arm pit. Again Xander said a single word that he could not quite make out, muffled as it was.

Spike shivered briefly, his mind instantly transported back to the mansion when Xander had done this the first time, reminding Spike, very forcefully, that the man with him was forever changed by what had happened over the last few days.

As if I needed reminding! he gasped silently as the new -- and improved -- Xander literally crawled down his body and continued his nuzzling, this time inhaling the primal scent of Spike, the vampire knew would be intense near his groin, before completely engulfing his cock once again, humming

unintelligible words nearly continuously.

"Yes!" Spike gasped out as feeling rushed up at him, taunting him with his nearing climax.

The scent blast of a sudden rise of intense lust from the man made Spike dizzy in response.

Xander once again pulled back quite suddenly -- this time to Spike's growled his protest -- replacing his mouth with his hand. Leaning forward, he captured Spike's mouth with his own, demanding entry. Pulling back a couple inches, Spike's lower lip caught gently between his teeth, Xander whispered fiercely, his words completely understandable this time. "Mine!"

A flash of shock shot through Spike, not having expected this again.

What? he thought, but couldn't respond as Xander had once again taken possession of his mouth. Tongue tangling with his own, the hand around his cock tightening and picking up speed, Spike

moaned, arching into the hand. He was almost there, and so help him if the whelp-- He hadn't even finished the thought when he was suddenly cumming, shooting onto his own chest.

Xander sat up, then, his right hand milking Spike of every last drop. Forcing his eyes open, he had just enough time to notice that Xander's other hand was busy on himself before the young man was cumming as well, his release landing in white spatters across Spike's torso and abdomen.

"Mine!" Xander growled, darting downward and clamping his blunt teeth on Spike's neck even before the vampire had stopped pulsing from his climax.

Spike arched his neck almost without thought this time, moaning as -- despite his recent spending -- his cock twitched.

Xander bit down harder, growling into his neck and suddenly Spike knew what Xander was demanding this time.

Several seconds ticked by, the only sound in the room, Xander's harsh breathing and the intermittent growls low in the man's throat.

"Yours," he choked out finally, completely unable to believe he'd actually said it.

The growls changed tenor immediately, becoming softer, contented, and the teeth clamped around Spike's throat eased off.

Licking the sure to be reddened skin, Xander trailed his hands down to Spike's chest and began rubbing in their combined fluids.

Incredulity raced through Spike as it suddenly hit him; Xander really did know *exactly* what he was doing, because as sure as his sire was a bloody pouf, Angel had *not* told Xander about *this*!

Contentment stole through Spike's sated body, zapping what little remaining strength he had and he felt himself literally wilt against the floor. He

belonged!

"Mine," Xander whispered again, smiling down at him. "I've marked you now and you are mine."

This time, the word came much easier. "Yours," he agreed, returning the soft smile. There would always be time later to push, to test. And on that thought, Spike let himself fall into the beckoning sleep, simply enjoying Xander's possessive touches.

The End