

After an agonizingly long departure from the cyber world, I'm back, bearing S/X. :). I like my livejournal. Nobody ever reads it but me, so it's almost liberating. Like being able to talk to myself without the threat of being shoved into a mental institution.

Dead Sunflowers

by

Nasty Shrew

Part One

Xander liked the chair by the window. The brown one with the grey pillow. He used to have to fight the other patients for it but he'd been here long enough, caused enough split lips to finally gain rights to it. He would sit for hours sometimes, letting the yellow sunlight illuminate his sketchpad. The florescent lights gave him headaches sometimes and the buzzing was enough to make anyone crazy - if they weren't crazy already. And hey, sane people in the psych ward of St. Peters? Few and far between.

Xander sometimes wondered if anyone would come and save him; if anyone would fly him away from This Place. He hated it here, the doctors talked to him like he was a child with shiny smiles and crystal laughter – pretty laughter that would shatter if he said the wrong thing or put down the wrong answer on their little question sheets. *'There are no wrong answers Alexander, this isn't a test, we just want to see how you're doing,'* they'd tell him. He knew they were lying. He knew because he could read them by now, could see them narrow they're eyes at the paper and shake their heads as they made professionally disdainful noises.

They made those same noises when they looked at his drawings. They told him to stop indulging his fantasies, that the figures were all in his head – the 'characters' he drew were not real. Willow, Buffy, Giles and Anya were ordinary people who had died in an earthquake, they were not killed by Glory, the monster who had eaten up his life and spat it back out. He tried to explain to them about the hellmouth, about the vampires and trolls ... that the

things weren't monsters - they were *Demons*. They only sighed and made him take more pills *whitepinkred* ... Xander hated those pills almost as much as he hated the people who forced them down his throat.

He'd wanted to go to the funerals but they wouldn't let him. Letting crazy people who believed in demons walk around cemeteries wasn't right. Wasn't proper and everyone knows how much stock authorities put into making sure everything is nice and proper. The papers were all properly sent to his parents, who properly signed them to confirm he could rot properly in here for as long as they wanted to keep him.

He'd stopped talking about two weeks ago thinking that maybe if he stopped talking altogether, if he stopped warning them about vampires and ghosts and about the ever present *danger*, maybe they'd let him go. Maybe they'd leave him to set flowers on the gravestones of the only people who had ever cared about him and probably the only people who ever would.

The drawings were mostly of the last thing he saw before the black haze settled in front of his eyes and he woke up here in the ward. Of seeing Buffy lying in the sunlight, perfectly framed as she lay still and Not breathing. A death unmarred by blood, perfection as though she were a figure in a painting. Willow and Giles lay at her right, thrown to the floor and killed by falling rubble, both of them drowning in crimson. Anya's manicured hand stuck out from underneath more rubble and Xander had screamed and screamed, hands torn to shreds as he tried to pull the rocks off of them. Spike was on the ground, his face in his hands as he sobbed ... Tara was with Dawn a little way apart, hugging her close, the two of them crying in silence.

After he drew the pictures he'd stare and scrutinise them, trying desperately to figure out what he had done that was so wrong that he was thrown in here. The doctors told him he was a danger to himself and others, but they wouldn't tell him more than that. It didn't matter how much he screamed and begged, they wouldn't give. So.

Xander sat silently in the brown armchair in the corner by the window and drew and drew until they took his pencils away. He had stopped eating three days ago and Mike said they'd put him on a drip if he wouldn't eat something soon. Xander didn't care. He was working on his newest drawing, one of Spike holding Dawn while she cried, protecting her. The problem was he kept messing up Spike's eyes. The sun had set now, but he couldn't stop drawing. He wanted the eyes to look just right, just perfect so he would be able to remember everything that had happened and he wouldn't be crazy anymore.

"Alexander? We have a visitor here to see you," someone said. He ignored it. "Come on Alexander. Your friend came all this way to see you, at least sit with him a little bit?" the voice continued, coaxing. A sigh. "I'm sorry. He hasn't been communicating for two weeks now – it seems as though he has retreated fully into his fantasies and has become more aggressive – stopped eating a few days ago. We can't get Alexander to respond to anything that isn't in that sketchbook," the voice continued

quietly, though it wasn't directed at him anymore.

"Maybe that's because it's not his name. Friends called 'im Xander," the other voice said, sharp and familiar.

Xander looked up into blue eyes. Dropped his sketchpad. Wondered if he had finally crossed the line, if he'd finally fallen into complete insanity.

"You have until four thirty before visiting hours end," the nurse said, pulling a plastic grey chair out and walking away. Xander stared at Spike, noting how much he clashed here in a world of muted colours. Startling red shirt under familiar black coat - proper solid black - something that was absent in the ward. Xander's trousers were grey and his shirt was sludge green. Spike was so colourful, so crisp and real he just wanted to touch the colour so the colour would seep back into Xander and make him feel like himself. It had been so long since he had felt like that.

Spike had sat in the chair, running a hand through

his hair – hair that wasn't slicked back but was now bleached curls. So he was a little different but then, so was Xander – he'd scrutinised his reflection last week and drawn a self portrait. He was much thinner, so much thinner that his face looked sharp and weary all the time - he had dark circles under his eyes too, darker shadows across his cheeks because he hardly shaved anymore. Allie, the girl who slashed her wrists and was here for another week before she was let out, said that he was an amazing artist because it looked almost like a photograph. Xander tore it up after.

"Came to see you a few times, but they said you were in too much of a state to see anyone," Spike said, rolling his shoulders, looking everywhere except directly at Xander. "Tara and Dawn were worried 'bout you. Dawn wanted to come herself but I thought I should come first, make sure you're ..." he paused but Xander heard the word anyway. Safe. Spike thought he was dangerous. Xander thought that was funny, so he laughed. He thought he saw Spike flinch, which made him laugh more. The laughter was edged with hysteria and it

sounded sharp and unnatural, even to his own ears. He stopped very suddenly and shifted his position on the chair, biting his nails as he watched Spike reach into a pocket and pull out a pack of cigarettes, look around, then put them back. He did this a few times, hypnotic pattern and Xander was crazy now, he was supposed to like pattern. He realised what Spike was doing, nearly started to laugh again.

"Go ahead," he croaked, "Staff are always smoking even though they're not supposed to. We're too crazy and wacked out on happy pills to notice. Didn't you get the memo?" he said, sounding more bitter and old than he ever wanted to. Spike looked at him strangely, tilted his head to the side as he lit up a cigarette. Some things never changed.

"They say when they're going to let you out?" Spike asked, taking another deep drag. Xander shifted again.

"No. At a minimum, I'll be here another three months before I get re-evaluated. I was sentenced to spend as long as I needed to 'recover'," Xander

muttered, spat out the words as they were heavy and sickly on his tongue.

"Recover, then," Spike said, frowning. Xander glared at him, his mind twisting and whirling, he wanted to grab the red shirt and shake Spike until his head snapped back and forth.

"Trying too. Problem is, I don't what I'm supposed to be recovering from. I stopped talking about demons, stopped trying to escape, stopped trying to get a phone, stopped hoping ..." he trailed off and rubbed his eyes with his palms, feeling his fingers twitch a little. Medication caused that. Was a bitch when he was in the middle of drawing something.

When he looked again, Spike was observing him with a cold, calculating stare that felt as though it was piercing into him. Through him. "You don't know what you did?" he asked, the cigarette smoke curling above his head like a twisted halo.

"No, I can't remember. The doctors aren't allowing me to be told – I have to 'recall my actions' myself,"

Xander spat, a malice he'd never had before lacing his words.

"You nearly killed one of the paramedics. Threw him to the ground and pummelled him when he tried to make you leave Willow," Spike said, tone flat, practiced calm. The words were so sudden and unexpected it was like having a bucket of ice dumped over Xander's head. He felt the shock roll over him as he strained to process this new information, but it wouldn't compute. He'd nearly *killed* someone?

There was a long silence and Spike lit a new cigarette with the last. Xander scratched the back of his neck and wished the world would stop spinning and let him off for a few minutes to get his breath back.

"Why didn't you come and bust me out?" Xander asked eventually. Spike shrugged his shoulders, unapologetic,

"Was busy. Needed to look after Dawn. She's been

through too much, too soon. I'm moving her to LA with me – the witch, too. Going to live near my grandsire. She needs a ... a family." Spike said, looking as though the thought of living anywhere near Angel was enough to make him sick. It probably was. "M'not busy now. Do you wanna come with us?" Spike asked casually, as though he weren't asking anything important, blue eyes flashing as he glanced at Bill who was milling around a little apart from them. Bill thought he was a superhero. Tried to fly off a building once or twice. Bill told Xander that after he'd been here for a few years, he'd get used to it. Like it, even. *'In the end'*, he'd said as he grabbed an extra muffin in the cafeteria, *'You'll never want to leave – we're dangerous, people like us. It's better to be here. Trust me, you'll forget all your worries'*.

"I want to leave," Xander said, his voice the steadiest it had been since he'd arrived here.

Dawn had cried when she first saw him and Xander

had held her like a china doll. He was afraid he might snap her if he wasn't careful so he just let her cry and stroked her hair. Didn't speak. Didn't need to. Tara had hugged him too. She looked better than the last time he'd seen her, three months ago.

Spike went out and bought him clothes, proper clothes with buttons and real tangible colours. Dark blue jeans, deep green shirt. His parents had sold or given away all of his things, only speaking to him to shove some dollar bills into his hand - nice to know they cut him in on the deal.

Coming off the meds had been hell. Spike took him to his crypt for the duration so Dawn wouldn't be exposed to his screams. He'd spent three days in agony, going through fevers, shakes, puking and hallucinations he wish he could forget. Tara had brewed some stuff to make him feel marginally better and Spike was the one who fed it to him, the one who took care of him in the darkest moments. He'd said thanks after. Spike had nodded, walked away.

The ride to LA was uneventful, and Xander drove for most of the trip anyway. Dawn sat beside him, providing an almost non-stop buzz of chatter until she fell asleep on Xander's shoulder. They had left at night so Spike drove and they all had to settle for listening to the classic punk station on the car radio. Xander hadn't wanted to drive, his arm still twitched sometimes and he was afraid of crashing and blood and screams. Tara sat beside Spike in the front reading books, unperturbed by the thrashing guitars blaring through the stereo.

Xander felt the beginnings of fear flit about the edges of his mind when he thought about seeing Cordelia again. Fear because the Cordelia he remembered called things as she saw them and if she saw Xander now, she would undoubtedly confirm his worst fear – that he was as insane as the doctors had told him he was. He knew he was different since she'd last see him in more ways than one, a blind man could see that, but he didn't want her to think he was ... dangerous.

He'd observed Dawn quietly as she slept, his hand

flying across the page almost of it's own accord. He found it comforting to draw something that didn't involve mayhem or grief for once - just the peaceful sleep of the innocence. Sometimes he could feel Spike's measured gaze on him, though he pretended he didn't notice.

When they finally arrived at the Hyperion Hotel Xander debated carrying Dawn inside but the decision was made for him when she woke up, scrunching her nose as she yawned and stretched. They were to stay at the hotel for a few weeks until Spike sorted out their living arrangements – it was decided the four of them were to live together for Dawn's sake, but finding a place to live in LA – one that was big enough to accommodate them all without being frighteningly expensive – was no mean feat.

Tara and Dawn had went ahead as he and Spike dragged the trunks from the boot of the car. Spike was irritable and only growled when Xander asked how many bags there were so Xander decided it would be better to stay quiet for a bit. When they

dragged the necessary suitcases inside the girls were already sitting on a circular chair in the wide hallway, smiling and talking to some people he didn't know and some people he did. He recognised Angel, Cordelia and Wesley but there was a bald black man, a thin white girl and a green demon with red horns. The realisation that there was a demon with red horns near Dawn hit him like a ton of bricks and suddenly he was on top of the demon and screaming as he smashed his fists into it's face. He felt himself being hauled to his feet and looked in confusion to Angel's drawn face. They still fought demons, right?

The demon was climbing to it's feet, rubbing it's chin and smoothing out it's yellow suit, it's red eyes narrowed at him as he complained about 'demon rights violations' in a nasal American accent. Xander blinked and stared. He realised someone was talking to him and switched himself back on.

"... Lorne. He's not evil. He reads people when the sing and helps us," Angel was saying, looking more than a little disturbed at Xander's little display.

Xander nodded mutely and wrenched his arm from Angel's grip, turning away from the demon and walking straight to Dawn's side. Asked her if she was alright, apologised for scaring her and pointedly ignored Lorne's muttered demand for an apology. He wasn't going to apologise to a demon. Never had before and didn't intend on changing. He nodded hello to Cordelia who was staring at him with wide mascara eyes, shook Wesley's hand. Tried to smile when he was being introduced to the other two - Gunn and Fred - but he suspected he looked more frightening than friendly judging by the wary looks he got from Gunn and the pure terror etched on Fred's face.

Three hours later, he was once again asleep in a bed that wasn't his.

Xander dreamt of dead sunflowers and drowning. When he woke up he was gasping and writhing – and not in a pleasant way, either. The sun was shining outside so he pulled himself out of bed and

showered, brushed his teeth and changed into a loose shirt and jeans. He walked out of his room with his sketch book, into the darkened hallway. It was slightly disconcerting - to walk through the silence. Nothing ever seemed to be silent in St. Peter's. There was always the quiet moans of some of the patients, the murmurs of the staff, the clicking of the ceiling fans. But here the quiet was only interrupted by his own breathing and the sounds of his bare feet on the carpet. It was only when he neared the stairs that he realised he wasn't the only one up.

"... scary. Cordelia said the Xander she knew was funny and goofy ... this Xander is quiet and intense ..."

"And sends out a 'Hello, I'm the local psycho axe murderer' vibe?"

"Charles!"

"Come on Fred, you've got to admit, the guy is weird. Did you hear him screaming when he was

hitting Lorne? If Angel hadn't stopped him he would have killed him for sure. I've seen that once or twice in my crew – guys like that are bad news. And after his psycho-attack? He didn't say a word. Just sat next to the blonde guy and stared into space,"

"He's been through a lot. After losing all those people close to him and being sent to that place for three months ..."

"Yeah, and what does that tell you? He was sent to a wacko ward for three months until he was *busted out*, not released."

Xander walked down the stairs. Fred looked up and her eyes widened as she said good morning and started to sort out a stack of papers that she had alphabetized several times already. Gunn nodded hello and he was ignored, so he started to sharpen the axe in his hands with exaggerated concentration – pretending not to notice the track marks up Xander's arms. Whether they were evidence of an addiction or left over from his stay in hospital, Gunn didn't know and didn't care to. Either way, he didn't

trust Xander, that much was obvious.

Xander didn't speak, only looked at them for a moment with his dark, sunken eyes before he turned away and walked out the front door – with no shoes on. They both watched him as he looked up at the sun like he'd never seen it before, shielding his face with his hand before he settled for sitting on the front steps. In the shade of a withering tree outside, he drew dead sunflowers and tried to pretend the world didn't exist.

Hours later, Dawn and Tara came outside with water and a sandwich, both asking him to come inside because it was hot out and he would get sick. He sighed and tried to smile like he used to, really tried. He came inside with them, into the dark and the cool, wondering if he'd ever feel warm again. Tara looked at him strangely and he didn't know if he'd said that aloud.

"You alright?" Spike had asked gruffly, later when he was climbing into car to go with Spike to look for apartments.

"No," Xander said simply, staring straight ahead. Spike scratched his head and shrugged.

"Okay. Just don't go 'Jack the Ripper' on me, yeah?" he said, starting up the car. Xander just looked at him, eyebrows raised.

"Wouldn't that be more your thing?" he asked and somehow, it didn't sound as accusing as he'd meant it to be. Spike snorted as he screeched around a corner, cigarette dangling precariously from his lips.

"Nah. I knew Jack – was a bit of a poof and over-compensated a tad too much. Personally, I never had a hankering for slicing up women's bits. Made me feel more queasy than anything. Still, whatever floats your boat," Spike said, over-taking two cars on a whim and flicking the birdie to the unfortunate drivers.

"You knew Jack the Ripper?" Xander asked doubtfully.

"Oh yeah," Spike drawled, "But like I said, fella was a bit of a wet blanket. Whiny as hell. Dru liked 'im but he always got on my nerves more than anything," he said, shouting an obscenity or two at a pedestrian daring enough to try and cross the road.

"You are so full of it," Xander muttered, shaking his head. For a moment, Xander felt like it was old times. For a moment, he was just Xander and Spike was just Spike and the biggest problem he had to face was a few vamps and the occasional nasty demon. The silence that followed was heavy, like Spike could feel it too. It was almost as though they felt guilty for forgetting for a moment, for not feeling the grief. It was almost like a sin to forget the other for a single instant, to forget the pain.

They didn't really speak after that, not until Spike finally screeched to a halt and they were met by a woman called Judy, who was to show them around the apartments. Judy was sweet, carried a clipboard and wore her curly hair in an untidy bun held in place with pencils. She showed them around the

spacious apartment and didn't explain why the price was so reasonable - never a good indication. She asked if they had lived together before and Spike and Xander said 'yes' at the same time, though in entirely different tones, and Judy thought that was cute, she laughed. Xander only realised what she had been implying when Spike had pointed it out to him when they were driving back to the Hyperion.

"I'm not surprised they thought you were gay – you're British, you wear eyeliner and your hair is bleached," Xander had reasoned, a teasing edge to his voice that had been gone for far too long. Spike glared.

"She thought you were a fairy-boy too," he'd reasoned, a slight flash of glee in his eyes when Xander realised this and inspected his clothes as the car slowed to a stop in front of the hotel.

"Well if I look gay it's your fault – you bought the clothes. If I'd been wearing my old stuff, I'd look like a regular disaster. Willow used to say ..." and then it

hit him like a ton of bricks. Willow used to. *Used* to. Willow was dead and ...

"Oh God. She's not coming back," *Not ever*. Xander felt a hand on his shoulder and that was when he realised he was shaking and Spike was still there. He looked up into Spike's eyes. "She's dead. I ... I laid flowers on her grave and I didn't cry, and I thought that there was something wrong with me because I could cry for Giles and Anya and Buffy ... *og God*, Spike. My Willow is never coming back," Xander whispered, horror filling the hole in his chest as his head spun and he felt like he was going to be sick. But Spike's eyes, his razor blue eyes, they were still fixed on his, tying him to the ground and making him feel sane for the first time in so long it hurt to think about.

"No. She's not," he said stiffly. Xander knew Spike wasn't talking about Willow. He decided he didn't much care because Spike knew - he knew what Xander meant and that was enough for now. Maybe that was enough forever.

Part Two

After

Xander was lost. Faces *black, white, grotesquely wide smiles, shops doors gaping like hungry mouths, greedy fingers and dirty hands*; and oh God Xander was crazy and so very lost.

“Hey, are you okay?” someone asked, no English accent, not Spike. A guy, puffing on a cigarette, flat green eyes that swept over him, lingering on his thighs. Xander wanted to scream.

“I ... I’m lost,” he said and his voice was so small, too fucking small. Like he was a child - he hates that because Xander may be crazy but he wasn’t

innocent. Hadn't been for some time.

“Where do you need to be?” *In Spike's arms.*

Xander was embarrassed he even thought that, because now he felt like a girl and a child. Girl child, and if he were a girl child he shouldn't be talking to leering men with flat eyes, but hey, back to reality now. He was getting better at it. Reality. Most days he felt almost like himself. Days when Tara would recruit him to help her in the kitchen with a quiet word and gentle smile, days when Dawn would pretend she was annoyed Xander sketched her but was secretly delighted, days when Spike would kiss him and love him almost as much as he had loved Her.

But some days? Some days were dark days.

“Green street? I'm new here, not sure which way is which,” Xander explained, his voice clear and steady because he knew this, Spike had made him practice the address until he was sure. It had made Xander furious at the time, humiliated that Spike was treating him like he was backward and he had

snapped out that maybe Spike should make him an 'if found please return to ...' dog collar, just in case. That had made Spike laugh and then they'd been kissing but that really wasn't the point - he was supposed to be concentrating now.

"That's cool. Where did you use to live?" the man asks, not sounding particularly interested in the answer. He wanted more than an answer, he wanted a fuck – Xander could practically smell it on him. He wanted Xander. Xander wanted home.

"Sunnydale. Look, I'm sort of in a hurry, do you know where Green street is?" Xander was aware his voice was brittle, that he was quickly losing any semblance of dignity or calm.

"You're not far off," the man said, not seeming to notice the slightly desperate look in Xander's eyes, "just walk in the same direction you're headed now, then take a right at the music store at the end. Take another right at the first corner you come to, walk about two blocks due east and voila, Green street,"

“Thanks,” Xander muttered, turning on his heel.

“Could I buy you a coffee?” the guy asked, but Xander pretended he didn’t hear and continued walking, sunlight bouncing off the pavement, hurting his eyes – there was a hand on his arm, hot, smooth and *not Spike’s*. The man’s bones crunched in Xander’s fist, like autumn leaves. It was good, so good to feel that decisive crunch, but then the screaming started and Xander felt hollow.

Remembered the man’s instructions ... the man who’s hand he’d just broken - *Oh sweet Jesus I’m fucking insane* – had told him to take a right at the music store, so he complied, running running running.

He didn’t stop until he was curled up on the cold bathroom floor, hands shaking, blood sketches on the tiles because he couldn’t find his sketchpad and he’d needed to do something. Dimly, he was aware that the bathroom door was splintering, that there were voices screaming his name, mixed in with obscenities and fury. Then he was in Spike’s iron grip, being shaken, his head snapping back and

forth, back and forth.

“... the *fuck* are you doing!? Trying to top yourself, were you? Nice Xan, where’s the goodbye note for Dawn? Did you even fucking consider her you selfish bastard?”

Xander doesn’t like this, so he doesn’t listen. He concentrates on the steady buzz of florescent lights overhead, reminding him of St. Peters.

Reminding him that maybe it would have been better if he’d stayed there.

Part Three

Xander knew that listening to David Bowie records and drawing new album covers in oil pastel was not the best way to cope with mental instability. He also

knew that Spike was going to be extremely pissed when he got back – pissed angry, not pissed drunk because hello, not British – because Xander was supposed to be shopping with Tara for new sheets today. Not sitting alone in the apartment, eating cold pizza and attempting to listen to as many of Spike's hidden stash of records as he could before he was discovered.

Two weeks after the incident in the bathroom and he was still being treated like spun sugar. Spike and Tara had organized their time so that Xander wouldn't be left alone for more than a few minutes at a time and it was driving Xander cra ... crazier. So. He'd pulled a Dawn – not *pulled* a Dawn in the British way because ew, and again, not British - and told Spike he was with Tara, and Tara that he was with Spike. Dirty trick though it was, there was something to be said for good ole fashioned manipulation. Dirty trick – there were so many levels to that phrase and Xander had a mind corrupt enough to think of them all and giggle. Giggle. Which was a funny word in itself. He considered that maybe that he'd had one too many swigs of

whatever Spike kept in the flask in the bottom drawer.

So, British-Spike would be pissed in American and American-Xander would be pissed in British.

Xander glanced at the pile of about 30 records that he had found under his bed, or rather, *their* bed. The pile had intrigued him and so he had dragged the dusty albums out, reading through the titles reverently. The only thing he'd heard Spike listening to was the Sex Pistols, the Ramones and the Clash. He hadn't considered that Spike liked any music beyond the hoarse screams and metallic cacophony that made Xander's ears feel like they were being assaulted. Turned out he was wrong.

Most titles he didn't recognise but there was Spike's scrawl across the thin cardboard covers with lewd doodles or dates and places of where he saw the band perform. The few Xander did recognise made him realise how *old* Spike was. He found David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Alice Cooper, Deep Purple ... *snerk*, Billy Idol.

“Hot tramp, I love you so,” he sang under his breath, selecting crimson to give his Diamond Dog glowing eyes. It occurred to him that according to the movies he’d watched about loonies, he should be upset by the colour. Should have a dramatic flashback to his own crimson, spilling onto the white tiles of the bathroom, gathering in little pools on the floor as he used his fingers to push it into pictures ... but he didn’t.

The oil pastel was just red, just a colour. He didn’t know whether that meant he was getting better, or whether that meant he was soon going to find a kitten to maul and call himself Wendy. Either way, he knew a doctor would blame it on his parents. It was always the parents. Like Robin Williams in *One Hour Photo* – his dad took pervy photos of him and sent him off his trolley years later. Maybe one of those hurled beer bottles of Xander’s dad would metaphysically fly through the air and lodge itself into Xander’s brain, pushing him over the edge into total oblivion. Maybe, but probably not.

Probably not because Xander didn't believe that everything in life could be blamed on one particular person. Except maybe Glory. He could blame a fuck of a lot on her. Now there was happy pile of issues that would be any psychologist's wet dream ... but still, it wasn't as though he crawled into the fetal position every time he met a woman with a perm and red lipstick. It was never anything that obvious. Half the time Xander wasn't sure what prompted that sudden all consuming fear that attacked him as it had two weeks back. It could have been that he felt vulnerable because he had been out in the open or it could have been that he saw someone wearing an aquamarine Hawaiian shirt that triggered a repressed childhood memory. Who knew? He didn't, therefore it was illogical that some quack with a degree could know by giving him a sheet of questions like 'Do you think that the phrase 'cunning as a fox' is fair to the species of fox? Why?'. .

Xander took another swig from Spike's flask and drowned the thoughts. Drowning, a popular theme of his nightmares, though they had lessened since

they had moved into their new home. His eyes flicked to the fridge, an anchor for when he was feeling a little lost between reality and dead sunflowers. It never failed to make him smile, to see the drawing he'd done of the four of them sitting around the television, pinned up with a pink fridge magnet. Beside it was a yellow notepad, also attached by multiple magnets, with notes scribbled to one another. Some pages were shopping lists, others were running conversations via fridge. Dawn and Spike had been sending each other scathing messages about their tastes in movies for the past three weeks. He and Tara sometimes added their own contributions to the debate Cult Classis vs. Teen Classics, but mostly they just smiled together when they heard the latest angry squawk of the insulted party.

They were a family. Albeit a strange one, but a family nonetheless.

The door clicked. Xander looked up, grinning, oil pastel on his fingers and hair in his eyes. A bat swung downwards.

He fell to the floor.

Part Four

This chapter is dedicated to amejisuto, who suggested my posting on bloodclaim.

Before – The Hyperion Hotel

“Too many rooms in this place. ‘S a bloody nuisance,” Spike muttered, moving down the hall. Xander nodded, like he knew what Spike meant even though he didn’t, wondered if that counted as lying. Because he didn’t want to lie – not to Spike.

He looked up as they walked past door after door with dulled metal numbers hammered onto the

wood. There had been numbers on the doors at St. Peters, but they were blue on plastic, slid into little plastic windows. Blue on plastic, grey on mind and Xander *knew* that made no sense but had long since resigned himself to his fate. He never made any sense these days, so it was okay when people didn't understand him because neither did he.

"Room 345," he said.

"What?"

"Room 345," Xander repeated, and he didn't know why. Spike cocked his head to one side and looked at him for a moment, assessing, weighing.

"Room 345, what?" he asked, moving towards Xander, fast and smooth like a fish only not, because fish were gross and not dangerous at all. Spike was, he knew that - dangerous. Beautiful, too. Xander paused mid-step and hoped that was just his brain throwing out words again because he knew Spike would be disgusted if he knew Xander was in ... he stopped the thought, filled the void

with words.

“I’m in room 345. I sleep there, at night. Not much though, I wake up because of the dreams and sometimes because it’s too quiet without the buzzing,” Xander explained, though it was a ridiculous explanation that he didn’t really understand himself.

“Right. Room 345. Any particular reason you’re telling me that, then?” Spike asked, and he was close now, close enough to taste leather in the air and feel the crisp clarity that Spike seemed to maintain, even when he was confused. Only he didn’t look confused. He looked intent, searching.

“You said there are too many rooms. You can have mine, if you want,” Xander said, cast his eyes to the floor, hands in his pockets. He shouldn’t have said that, shouldn’t have implied what he was implying. But now it was done, so he stood and waited for Spike to walk away, to hit him, to laugh like a hyena because Xander had been a hyena, known the revulsion for weakness, the loathing for the

vulnerable and hey, maybe that's all he was – a crazy idiot that Dawn cared about and if it weren't for her he'd be dead dead dead in the moonlight, or alone locked up in ...

“Hey, stay with me, yeah?” Spike said gruffly, and it was more of a command than a question. Steady strength hauled him back and his fingers were on Xander's chin, lifting his head up so he was looking into Spike's eyes.

“Stay with me?” Xander whispered, instantly wincing because *when* had his brain been taken over by a simpering teenage girl, and why hadn't he got the memo? But Spike didn't seem to notice and if he did, he didn't care.

“If you need me to,” he said, cool mouth pressing gently on Xander's chapped, picked lips. Xander's forehead ended up pressed against Spike's and they were kissing, standing in the middle of the hall of the first floor of the Hyperion hotel, with dull metal numbers surrounding them.

No more blue on plastic. No more grey on his mind.

Now

“What the *fuck*, Tara? Is the insanity catching?!” Xander yelled, rubbing the quickly forming bruise on his shoulder. He wanted to laugh and scream all at once as he watched Tara’s horrified face crumple and the wooden baseball bat hit the carpet with a dull thud, like a the hollow clunk a corpse makes when they fall out of bed, and wasn’t it strange that Xander actually knew what that sounded?

“I .. I I I th .. thought you w ..w .. were a b .. burglar!” she stuttered, a slow stream of tears dripping onto her light green blouse. “Y .. you .. w .. were supposed to be with Sp .. Spike!”

“Christ,” Xander muttered, and he was laughing as he stepped forwards and took Tara into his arms, reassuring her as wetsalt tears seeped into his shirt as she shook and apologized. “Hey, calm down, it’s okay, I’m fine. It’s okay,” he said, because if anyone knew what needed to be said in a panic, it would be him. “Just, remind me not to piss you off, okay?” he

added, hearing a weak laugh and marveling at how surreal it all felt because it had been a long time since he'd used humor to help someone.

“You scared me,” she said finally, and Xander only realised then that they were sitting down, hugging on the Persian rug that wasn't really Persian but was from Minnesota but Spike had got a great deal on it – Xander focused.

“You're okay, though, and I'm okay too,” he assured her, moving back and planting a kiss on her forehead, helping her stand as she wiped her tears away with a light pink tissue that clashed unforgivably with her pale lime shirt, and oh my, Xander was *really* gay these days. Tara called Spike, told him Xander was fine and with her at the apartment so he could go and pick up Dawn and they could start making dinner. She said the part about dinner whilst staring pointedly at the empty pizza box by the records and the colour pastels. A Diamond Dog glinted in the dim light, and Xander considered winking back – reasoned that he was both drunk off his ass and unstable, so he had as

much of a right to wink at a drawing as any other self-respecting lunatic. Having decided this, he exercised his right, and also winked at Ziggy Stardust and a picture of Spike on the mantel. Tara helped him tidy up and then directed him to chop some carrots as she looked over the recipe and answered the phone. Women were truly the overlords of Multitasking Kingdom, and damn would Multitasking Kingdom be a confusing place to live, or what?

Xander set about thinking of what an ordinary citizen in Multitasking Kingdom would be paid per week when he realised Tara was stuttering again, and stopped chopping carrots. It was then that he could hear Spike's voice, small and not quite right, emitting from the receiver.

"I .. I'll call Angel. I'm sure she'll just be at a friend's house and forgot to tell us! Spike .. calm down. Dawn's probably fine, she just forgot to call or something,"

Xander turned away and began chopping carrots

again. He didn't want to listen, didn't want to hear. Things were finally good, he just prayed they'd stay that way.

Part Five

Dawn hadn't called. Three hours since school finished and Dawn hadn't called. Two hours since the panic had begun and one hour since Tara had begun searching for a locator spell.

Spike was tapping the demon world for info, Angel's team were calling all of Dawn's friends and possible places she could be. Xander was watching the OC with the sound switched off.

Dawn liked the OC, so he would watch the repeats on Monday afternoons with her. He liked brushing her hair and hearing her laugh. Dawn liked Anna and Seth best, but thought Ryan was hot. Xander couldn't name a character if his life depended on it because he never actually paid attention to the show – preferred to watch Dawn's smile and hand her tissues when she was stubbornly insisting she

never cried at 'stupid teen shows'. Spike would sometimes sit with them, delivering a scathing commentary until Dawn would throw magazines at him.

Xander turned over the magazine covers so that the unnaturally wide smiles and the perfect skin of the people on the covers were face down on the coffee table. He was almost paranoid that those glossy eyes could see, were watching, waiting for his misfortune so they could talk to each other in scary Perfect People parties. *Almost* paranoid, or so he claimed. Almost paranoid. Almost sane. Almost completely round the fucking bend, tralala there fly the faeries and oh this train of thought was nice and distracting. But then the Giles factor kicked in: Faeries, mythical small winged humanoid creatures that were said to steal children away into their kingdom.

Faeries stole children and why hadn't Dawn called?

He shut his eyes, tried to block the niggling fear in the back of his mind – what if Dawn *never* called?

What if she never ever called and Spike would leave. Xander would be alone and numb, with Tara's forced smiles, forced because *really*, nobody wanted to be stuck with some psycho who beat up paramedics, now did they? Xander would be gone if Dawn never came back, toner low like a poor photocopy until he drifted away completely – and did he just compare his emotions with photocopy toner? What the *fuck* was wrong with him?

He jerked when a crack sounded through the apartment, heralding Spike's arrival. Sans Dawn. "Did you find anything?"

"No. You been helping Tara?" the words are clipped and expression in Spike's eyes unflinchingly clear – Xander was stupid, useless and very much alone.

"No." Xander replied.

"Why don't you do something with yourself?" Spike growled, throwing his coat onto the floor. The coat thumped to the floor like rotting velvet and no, he didn't understand what he meant by rotting velvet

but that's what it sounded like. Rotting velvet and the dull thud of Spike's boots as he kicked the wall.

"Not useful. M'crazy, I'll just get in the way," Xander said, and he could pretend he sounded reasonable because it was easier that way. The room was silent and so thick he couldn't quite breathe – Spike staring at him with unforgiving eyes as he ran his fingers through his own brittle bleach hair.

"Fuckin' useless you are, Xan," he snapped, words slicing into Xander's skin, ripping shredding, "She could be hurt and screaming somewhere but no! Almighty Xander doesn't care! He's far too busy dribbling and rocking himself in a corner to care about anyone else!" slicing, ripping and why was Spike *doing* this?

"Stop it," Xander murmured, but Spike was too far gone to hear.

"... pissing himself and mumbling 'bout the sunflowers,"

“STOP IT!” Xander was standing, throwing punches and screaming but Spike was dodging every one,

“... then he asks me if I found anything about where she is with this stupid fucking look on his face, like I’m incompetent or something ...”

“Stop it, please Spike, stop it,” he was begging now, begging but he didn’t care, anything to stop it anything to stop the agony of Spike’s words, tearing into him.

“Why? Because you asked me to? Because I love you? Bullshit. I fucking hate you, you’re just a good shag, a tight hole for when I need one,”

Disgusting foul words and Xander had to stop them. He grabbed the stake that was kept underneath the couch cushions (just in case, Sunnydale bred remember?), and swung it wildly at Spike’s chest. Now, now he was inches away, he would do it, he would plunge the cool wood into Spike’s chest and they’d be done ...

Spike looked up at him with green eyes. Green. Tara's warm dove eyes were looking up at him, filled with tears as she was trapped in his iron grip, a knife above her breast – the knife with shreds of carrot still attached to the blade.

Xander dropped the knife.

Part Six

Before

“She's worried about you,” Spike said from somewhere behind his left shoulder.

“I know,” Xander replied, and he did know, for once, what Spike was talking about. He also knew that the long pause that followed was his cue to

‘fess up, but that was far to Dawson’s Creek for his liking and he wasn’t going to spill his guts like a baby to anyone. Not even Spike.

“You stopped eating, then?” the question is simple, asked with a certain indifference that only Spike is capable of. Xander always knew something was wrong when Spike spoke like that, no emotion, no teasing edge or smouldering glare to speak of. He didn’t answer, just kept his back turned and continued drawing with charcoals.

He was currently smudging the edges of an Roy’s jaw, making him look a little more grimy. Roy was homeless and 62 years old, he talked to garbage cans and sometimes would show Xander his medal from ‘Nam, muttering about how it was back then, how he was a hero and nobody remembered.

Nobody remembered, like how Xander had forgotten, he’d had the *nerve* to forget It Happened, had actually stopped thinking about It for a second, had spent an hour or so without It rolling through his head, chipping away at his mind.

“I forgot, Spike,” he said finally, the words like rocks

lodged in his throat.

“You forgot? Xan, that has to be *the* most piss poor excuse I’ve ever heard in my entire unli...”

“I forgot they were gone. No pills to numb me, no booze or spells, I just ... I don’t think it hurts so much now, because the hole in my head isn’t so empty any more, you know? When you kiss me, I feel like ... I feel more like I did Before it happened. And that’s wrong. We should never forget, so I ... we should stop,” Xander interrupted, feeling wretched. They had to stop. They had to stop because Xander was *dying*, dying everyday because of the painful knowledge that Spike would never forget what had happened, would never manage to love Xander like he had loved Her because he would *always* hurt. Forever. They had to stop. They had to just, stop.

White hot tears were crawling down Xander’s face and the rocks in his throat scratched and bit, taunting him, knowing Spike would leave him now - and what was worse that it was Xander who had

asked him to leave. There was silence in the room, no sound other than the scratch scratch of the charcoal on paper and Xander's own uneven breathing. No sound. Back to the dull grey darkness and drowning in his bed with no one to cling onto. He was dying.

"I don't want to stop," Spike's voice was sure, strong, cool body wrapping around Xander's back, with arms holding tight around his waist.

"Okay," Xander said. Spike's head rested on his left shoulder, sharp chin digging into him and no breath tickling his neck because Spike had no breath to offer. Xander didn't have a full mind to give Spike, and Spike had no breath to give Xander. It was better that way.

Now

Dawn was safe and sound. She hadn't been missing at all, just a few minutes late. They hadn't sent search parties and Spike hadn't come home with a coat that sounded like rotting velvet. It was all in his

head. All in his mind.

Xander had sat heavily on the couch after it had happened, ordered Tara to tie him up and screamed until she did so. She called Spike after that, told him through shivers and tears what had happened, that Xander was on the couch in ropes Not Speaking.

Dawn was scared, worried about him, stashed away at a friend's house for the evening because it wasn't right for her to see him that way. Spike came home, untied him and sat in front of him, his face drawn and his lips thin. Spike loved him, he knew this like he knew grass was green and Willow was dead. But he'd made a promise to protect Dawn, a promise that Xander knew he'd keep.

"Let me go to the roof," Xander said.

"What?" Spike genuinely looked confused, and Xander nearly laughed before he caught himself.

"Let me go to the roof. I won't go back to St. Peter's, Spike. I'll crumble away, there. Let me go to

the roof and I won't be a danger to Dawn anymore," he explained, surprising himself with his own calm. Stark realisation hit Spike.

"It won't come to that. We'll ... you and I, we can go away for a while. Heard about a shaman," if Spike said San Fransico, Xander *would* laugh because that sounded remarkably like a song title, "... in London who might help us," he said, shifting and pulling a two cigarettes from his pocket, handing one to Xander and lighting one for himself. His hands were shaking.

"You think he could," Xander pointed at his head, wiggled his fingers a bit, the international symbol for loopy. Spike gave a sharp hacking cough of a laugh.

"If he doesn't, I'll rip his lungs out," he said, deadly serious.

Xander wondered if it was a bad thing that he felt so comforted by the fact Spike was willing to commit homicide for him.

Came to the conclusion that he was crazy anyway, so it didn't really matter.

Part Seven

Dawn had cried when they told her they were going away for a few weeks. Whilst Tara and Spike were busy reassuring her, Xander was silently wondering why it was that so many people commented on the beauty of crying. Crying was never beautiful, on anyone. Faces scrunch up and noses run, making the unfortunate victim of the onslaught of tears closely resemble a pug.

Dawn perked up when she was told they would return safe and sound and Xander promised to bring her back photos and to get Jude Law's autograph if he saw him. Autograph, but "no Dawn,

for the millionth time, I would *not* make out with him, even if he was unconscious and I was drunk!”.

Two days later he was sitting next to Spike in the airport smoking room, too many thoughts and too many people and the ever present danger thrumming about him. Smoke, smoke everywhere in the room but not fire, calm down Xander, it's a fucking *smoking room* that was what it was for. He told himself to concentrate on something other than the thick scent of cigars and bleach because it would be a Very Bad Thing if he went spazzy and had another mini-panic like he had when he nearly ... when Tara ... stop thinking about it, Harris.

A room of glass with buzzing lights and the occupants talking quietly with one another, camaraderie found between strangers because everyone here was a smoker – a condemned pastime in anti-fag California at least. Fag being Spike's word for cigarette and Xander had been horrified when he first heard Spike use it, because that was an ugly ugly word that should never be taken lightly. Spike had laughed at him, laughed but

not with bitter keen edge that made Xander nervous; laughed because Xander wasn't British and didn't get words like bint or bollocks and probably never would. But they were going to England now, off to the jolly homeland, so Xander wondered if he could speak English and if he couldn't then would they stop him getting into England because that would just *suck* and ...

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” Spike asked, nudging his shoulder, inhale smoke exhale smoke, pretty white wisp patterns in the air. Xander didn't answer, just kept his eyes trained on a spot of blue on the tile floor and set about wondering what it was.

Blue spot. Could be gum, blue-tac, cleaning agent, plastic pin, button, Raglah demon blood, bits of his brain dripping out his ears and woah, there was really no escaping a Sunnydale education and a healthy dose of wacky.

“Come on Harris, penny for your thoughts,” Spike’s voice was closer to his ear now, smooth and low

pitched, words rolling over his tongue like thick summer honey. Xander said nothing, deciding not to answer Spike until he managed to follow a legitimate, non-psycho line of thought. So he concentrated on the low hum music in the background over the buzz of the lights, the voices and the crisp hiss of the cigarettes burning with every breath each smoker took. He shut his eyes and tried to concentrate, to listen to the rasping lyrics.

“Brains are frying while the kings and queens are dying

Satan won the race and the miracle mile

Somebody raped my tapeworm abortion

Come on motherfuckers and deliver the cow.”

Xander blinked and supposed he should take comfort in the fact even he couldn't fathom what that meant. Or maybe he should know what it meant, after all, what kind of self respecting crazy person could he be if he didn't understand some rock lyrics?

“Johnny sat down beside the old oak tree

Cut off his hand what did he see,” ... or maybe it was better they were left an enigma because cutting off hands was a truly gross pastime, and didn't Angel mention cutting some lawyer's hand off at some point? Big, massive “**ow**” for the lawyer. Spike would probably have something witty and facetious to say about the hand chopping incident. Something like: “I hope you didn't lopp off his right one, because as annoying as I'm sure he was, no man should be reduced to wanking with his left hand”. Wanking, which brought him back to his original worry: what if Xander couldn't speak English?

“Xander? Xan, please, come on love,” Spike said, cutting through the muddle like a cool clean blade.

“Is he okay?” a woman asked, cigarette dangling from plum coloured lips and dark brown eyes framed with black spectacles that reflect Xander, but not Spike.

“Xan? Love, come on, leave that place, tell me what it is,” Spike was holding his face, people were looking and it occurred to Xander that Spike was

ignoring the plum-lipped woman which was rude because she looked concerned.

Xander blinked and was pulled back by white-blue magnesium eyes, forever burning.

“I can’t speak English,” Xander muttered, only just realizing that they were standing outside the smoking room now. Spike didn’t miss a beat.

“Yes you can, pet. You’re speaking it right now,” he said calmly, reasonably. Xander realised Spike was the reasonable one in their relationship and dimly noted that they were Doomed.

“No, I’m speaking American. Not English. I’ll get to England and nobody will know what I’m saying,” Xander explained. Spike grinned,

“I’ll translate. You Yanks never have much to say anyway,” he slipped into a horrendous American drawl, “Ew, I hate tea, I’ll have a soy mocha latte that tastes like demon goop. Dude, this place is wiggy. Oh my God, is that, like, the Queen? Duuude,

she's old,"

Xander stared.

"Don't. Ever. Do. That. Again," he said, furthering his point with a shudder. A nasal voice rang through the airport, announcing flight J307 was boarding – their flight that would conveniently be through night so there wouldn't be a Spike-shaped pile of ash on the airplane seat.

"Ready to get going, babe?" ... and the pseudo American drawl was getting old *really* fast. Xander frowned and punched Spike's arm. Hard. Of course, Spike responded with a smirk and lewd remarks whispered in his 'Elvis meets NYPD Blue' accent. Xander was calmer now, happier and there was less of the terrified churning he had encountered earlier. Glory was still there, like she always was, sitting in the back of his mind ready to rip and shred at his guilt and his sanity whenever she felt like it, ready to remind him of his failure if he forgot about *them* for a moment.

But right then, with Spike's arm slung haphazardly around his waist and the stewardess giving them a genuine smile and a look that screamed "aw, look! Cute!", he was okay. He was okay, then this shaman would fix some mojo on his head and he would be more than okay. That was the plan, and for once, it sounded like a good one.

The lyrics are from **Velvet Revolver's** *Sucker Train Blues*. *huggles Velvet Revolver, who shoved through her writer's block*.

Part Eight

London was crushing, crashing, yellow light pooling from streetlamps bright as the sun, scarred buildings all around and beauty in the strangest of

places. A solemn white church sat next to a painted Indian restaurant, wooden beams visible, like a Tudor house dipped in scarlet. An old lady with a grimy face and a stunningly grand coat sat singing on the sidewalk (pavement, pavement in London, learn the language Xander).

“You’ll fit it here. Everybody’s barking,” Spike had said, toothy grin, pride as he pointed out buildings and waved to people he didn’t know because they were *English*, his home, his people.

“Barking like crazy, not like dogs,” Xander said, clarifying, because they were in London now and he was the foreigner so maybe people *did* bark in England.

“Like crazy, pet. Not dogs,” Spike replied easily, lighting a cigarette and taking a deep drag as though he’d never smoked before. “Always tastes better when there’s rain in the sky,” he explained, noticing Xander’s raised eyebrow (because he did that more now, the raised eyebrow thing – facial ticks were worth a thousand words, or maybe two

thousand, because the ‘one thousand words’ thing was patented by pictures and hello, really not the issue).

“Won’t it be light soon?” Xander asked, wanting to go back to their *warm* hotel, pulling his coat closer to him and biting his lips because he was walking in bone-deep cold that no human should have to live in. Spike laughed, a sound from deep in his gut that made Xander feel a tiny bit warmer. Which meant he was still freezing.

“Not for ages yet. Its only six in the morning! Sun doesn’t rise ‘till about ten in the winter, if memory serves correct,” he said, throwing his head back and taking a deep breath of biting, crisp air he didn’t need. For a moment, hair sticking up every which way, pale lips soft as they day he died, he looked like Xander would have imagined William to be. William, the human who Xander knew nothing about and didn’t care to. William was the past, whispers in the London wind to be forgotten. He was Spike – not Xander’s, never would truly be Xander’s. But he was Spike and Xander loved him

anyway.

“I’m cold.” Xander forced out between chattering teeth. Spike blinked, snapped out of his reverie and was himself again. Dead and vicious, with elegant fingers giving the two fingered salute for all to see. Xander wondered if it was a façade, decided that maybe it was, once, a very long time ago.

“Right. Forgot ‘bout that. Bloody humans, fragile as spun sugar and all that. We’ll go to a pub or something, warm you up,” he muttered, sounding annoyed as he grabbed Xander’s right hand with his left. He turned on his heel and started to tug Xander with him.

“Spike ...” Xander murmured, because they were moving fast, too fast, the world was blurry and the wind was slapping his face, unrelenting. Car horns blared all at once, in his head? On the street? Either way he wanted to stop because he was dizzy and something was Off.

But Spike was not looking back, not seeing Xander’s

face. Staring straight ahead, bringing the cigarette to his lips occasionally and sucking in the black tar and smoke like it was oxygen ... okay, vampire, so not the best metaphor (simile? He could never tell the two apart because he'd been asleep in English that day – admittedly, he'd been asleep in English that *year*).

Xander observed the cigarette with mild disgust, which quickly morphed into virulent loathing when Spike lifted it to his lips for what, the *ninth* time that minute? The cigarette, the fucking cigarette, got to sit in Spike's right hand. His right hand, and we all know what *right hand man* means, it means Spike was far more concerned with his cigarette than with the fact that Xander was attached to his left hand like a limpet (a *cold* limpet who felt alien and unsure in this vast metropolis – metropolis, a three dollar word he'd learnt from Superman and my, that was sad). But back to Spike's right hand cigarette. Was he trying to tell Xander something? Was he trying to communicate that he loved smoking more than he loved Xander? It was fairly logical, Spike had probably been smoking since long

before Xander was even *born* so he probably was in a far more intimate relationship with the happy-white-cancer-stick than with Xander.

He heard someone saying his name, realised it was Spike. Realised that his palm *hurt*. Realised that Spike was standing very still, saying his name in that quiet voice again. He stepped forwards and took Xander's hand carefully, pulled his fingers open and tipped his opened palm to the ground. A crushed cigarette fell to the icy sidewalk and Xander's hand was burnt.

"I'm sorry," Xander said suddenly, didn't know why because it was *his* palm with a little circle of exposed flesh.

"Don't do that anymore," Spike asked, his voice shaking a little.

"I'm sorry," Xander repeated.

"Don't be sorry ... just ... don't do that anymore. When you go there, when you feel yourself moving

towards wherever you disappear to ... tell me. And if I don't listen, fucking punch me. I deserve a good thumping occasionally, yeah?" Spike said, his voice ragged, dragging across Xander's soul, cutting it wide open, pulling at parts of him he hadn't known existed.

"Yeah. Okay." He replied, and it was that easy. Spike looked intensely for another moment before inspecting Xander's hand. The conversation was over.

"This isn't bad. Nothing a good few pints and some ice won't fix. Up for it, yank?" he asked, a hint of a dare in his voice. They both pretended not to notice his hands were shaking.

"You betcha. I'll order me some fish and chips, guv'ner," Xander said in his worst English accent. Spike winced, glared at him. Xander stared back innocently. "And then I'll 'ave a cuppa and wotch the footie," he added, just because it was funny watching Spike wince some more – he even growled this time.

“Do that again, and I’ll permanently adopt my yankee drawl,” he threatened. Xander smiled and realised he was still really, really cold.

“M cold, Spike,” he said knowing Spike had no warmth to offer him. No breath, no warmth, that was the deal.

“I know,” eyes like blue ice met his and Xander saw then that Spike was a part of here. Part of London, with her buildings proudly thrusting into the sky, daring God to object to their existence. When Spike pulled Xander to his chest, holding on to him as though he might fall, Xander came to a conclusion that more than made up for Spike’s lack of warm blood. Spike was part of London ... and Xander was part of Spike.

Part Nine

“Manchester united suck,” Xander said. Sipped his beer, grimaced at the foul taste of the lukewarm pint of bitter. Spike called American beer weak, watery bull’s pizzle and preferred the black goop

that Xander was being forced to consume. Obviously, British people were sadists. And judging by the way the other men in the pub were chugging theirs down, they were masochists too. Britain, home of tea and kinky sex. But, maybe not so much with the kinky sex – maybe they confined their sadism and masochism (and sadomasochism?) to their food choices. Like Marmite – the brown, salty goo of evil. Possible the most disgusting thing Xander had ever tried and Spike liked it with cheese in a sandwich – a desecration of bread, in Xander’s mind. Desecration, defilement, violation, rape. Marmite was bread rape. Nasty, gooey, bread rape. Xander picked at the bandage on his hand and followed Spike’s trained stare on the television screen.

“Fuck off,” Spike said cheerfully, roaring with the rest of the pub when another one of the guys in the red soccer strip (football, say football or Spike will start another lecture on how yanks’ football is like rugby for softies), missed a penalty shot. As far as Xander could make out, the red players were Manchester united and the ones with the black and

white stripes on their shirts were Newcastle united. Otherwise known as “those bloody Geordie bastards”. Xander didn’t know what a Geordie was, but didn’t feel brave enough to ask just yet. Also, judging by the steady stream of curses pouring from Spike’s mouth, Manchester united were losing. Badly. Choruses of: “... REF IS FUCKIN’ BLIND! SHEARER FOULED HIM!” rang through the small pub, similar sentiments yelled back and forth between the patrons.

Xander lifted his pint of bitter to his lips, reconsidered, set it back down on the heavy oak table that looked older than Spike. The match was over and Spike was glaring at the television set as though his simple will could make the little numbers in the left hand corner of the screen dissolve.

“Told you they sucked,” Xander said calmly, serious, deadpan. Spike turned to face him, opened his mouth, looked ready to snap something snarky but pocketed Xander’s packet of crisps (crisps, three points to the idiot American) instead. They left after that, because it would be light out soon and Spike

wasn't keen on the whole 'ash' thing. In more ways than one – Xander hadn't seen him smoke since ...

Spike held onto Xander's arm when they were outside, guiding him to the hotel, not dragging, eyes occasionally flicking to Xander's face as they talked about every inconsequential thing Xander could come up with. Stall, procrastinate, delay, use every tactic you ever learnt to keep that slight smile on Spike's face, that wry twist of his lips that meant things were okay.

"How's your hand?" Spike asked when they were in their hotel room, tone light, eyes dark. He hadn't asked that since it happened yesterday, 24 hours, 1140 minutes and Xander wished for the first time he'd tried harder at maths because this form of distraction would work *way* better if he could work out the number of seconds in a day. He stood at the foot of the bed and counted the knots in the wood instead.

"Fine. Just stings," Xander said, feeling a thud in his stomach, a grinding scritch scratch in his mind.

Spike was going to say something serious now, serious and Xander didn't want to listen because he was having fun and he'd drink ten pints of English beer if it meant no more words.

"Good," Spike said, not looking away, not looking at his own hands as he systematically bent and unbent a metal fork left over from room service – bent, unbent, bent, unbent. Maybe it was Freudian. Flick of Spike's wrist and the tough metal looked like rubber, shifting and molding into whatever he wanted it to. Power harnessed in hands that had been dipped in hot-cherry blood more times than Xander could count, power to manipulate metal and snap bone. "We'll be goin' to see that shaman tomorrow. Managed to get an appointment," Spike said (flick, bend fork, flick, unbend fork).

"Okay," Xander replied, not looking up from the flick, bend fork, pattern Spike's fingers were making.

"The shaman will do poke your head some, ask you some questions and the like. It won't be ... fixed by

tomorrow. He'll analyse you first, work out if it's do-able," and didn't that make Xander's lungs line with lead. If. If. *If* he could fix Xander, which meant there was a good possibility he couldn't. Possibility that he was stuck in his own head, naked, alone, scared of shadows and living on the edge of murder. Happy Xander then a cosmic *blink* later he was stabbing Tara with a carrot knife and blood would gush everywhere, everywhere, like in *Kill Bill* with the arterial spurts and crimson fountains ...

"Work out if I'm do-able? You do me all the time, so it should be okay," he said weakly. It was a tawdry attempt at humor. A crude, lameass joke that he clung to with every inch of his the sanity he wasn't sure he had left.

Spike didn't laugh, didn't even smile. He just sat on the bed (Queen sized bed, queens, were the staff trying to tell them something?) and bent the fork. The silence was palpable, the tick tock of the bedside clock the only indication that the world was moving at all. The stillness was like that of the empty white rooms at St. Peter's, forced, distilled

with chemicals and bleaches that gave Xander headaches.

The fork snapped.

So did the silence.

Spike threw the pieces at the wall and they split open the wallpapered wood.

“I’m bad at this,” Spike said bluntly, leaning so he sat with his back against the headboard.

“Yeah. Me too,” Xander agreed, moving so that his head lay in Spike’s lap. He stared at the black television screen, seeing himself lying alone, head floating a few inches above the mattress, his hair moving of it’s own accord. Spike had no reflection, of course - something that seemed impossible to those who didn’t know about vampires, something that would convince people they were nuts. He smiled, was able to relax a little. His grip on the norms of reality was wavering, yeah. But reality? Not so normal.

“Was easier with Dru ...” Spike said, moving his

finger's through Xander's hair, "With Dru I always could ... I never felt so," obliged? Obligated? Trapped? Xander felt wretched, wanted to shrivel up and disappear, "completely scared shitless. Never loved Drusilla like I love you. Didn't understand what it was like to feel like someone's clawing out my chest whenever you ..." he made an expansive gesture at the ceiling, "melt away. Whenever you get that absent look in your eyes and I wonder if that's it, if I've lost you like I lost ..." he choked on his words and his lips set in a thin line as he stared at the ceiling some more.

Xander didn't have anything to say, so he sat up and pressed his lips against Spike's.

He tried to tell Spike things without words. Tried to free himself, if only for a few hours. In a three star hotel in a seedy part of London, Xander managed something he'd never been able to do before – he loved and didn't care about the consequences. He loved without fear.

Five and a half thousand miles away, Dawn had a gun and Tara was screaming.

Part Ten

Before

The Hyperion Hotel

Spike never kissed Xander's eyelids because he was superstitious. Kissing someone's eyelids meant it would be the last time you saw them - or so he'd been told. He also hated peacock feathers, knives lying across one another and got pissy about putting new shoes on the table. Xander liked that, because it meant he wasn't alone in irrational fears.

Xander never bought white lilies, froze in his tracks when he heard the blare of an ambulance and

never, ever went into pharmacies or hospitals because he was afraid they'd notice ... afraid they'd see the he was missing a few marbles. Figuratively because Xander was never a fan of marbles, not even when he was a kid because Uncle Rory told him marbles rolled into your throat when you were asleep and you'd choke, no air, just you and smooth baubles of glass lodged in neck and no *air* ...

"You think too much," Spike interrupted his thoughts, not looking up from polishing a black boot.

"Never been accused of *that* before," he replied, weak smile but they both know he isn't joking.

"Not healthy to think all the time. Should try and do summat else for a change," Spike continued as though he hadn't heard, rubbing the polish in small circles with a stark orange dust cloth, black spots all over it like a leopard skin loin cloth from Tarzan – only, way more domestic and it smelled like shoe-polish. There was a smudge of the black grease on Spike's cheek, along the bone, making him look like

a moving sketch with bad shading across the face. Xander knew all about the shading, knew how to draw the shadows if you only knew where the light was, angle them so they drop in all the right places.

“Like what?” Xander found himself asking, interested to see what Spike would come up with as mild entertainment. Listening to the mellow screeching of Sid Vicious (who *did too* look like a drowned rat)? Set up a nice 3D game of ‘Operation’, using a real wiggling person as their patient? Burn down a village?

“Could ask one of Angel’s people to take you around, see the city a bit. S’ a nice day outside,” he said. Anti-climax supreme.

“Of course it’s nice. Everyday is a nice day, when you’re in LA,” Xander said, only realizing he had spoken in verse when Spike looked up, snorted.

“Not so dear Xander, some days are grey,” Spike deadpanned, flicker of amusement flashing through his eyes.

“You’re right, you’re a genius *and* a good lay,” Xander shot back, sarcasm ladies and gentlemen, his very best friend. *Very* best friend - all the others were dead.

“Course I’m a good lay, you great hulking ... gay,” Spike shot back, triumphant, shoe polish stripe glistening a little in the dim glow of the lamp. Xander rolled his eyes derisively and thanked Dawn for helping him learn to perfect the art.

“And you used to be a *poet*?” he asked, carefully scornful, calculated disbelieving shake of his head.

“Never said I was a good one, did I?” Spike growled, but he was smiling widely now and Xander could see two indents that his teeth had left when he’d been chewing his lip earlier. Lustful, teenaged Xander popped up to say hello, along with other parts, and the mood shifted slightly. But not by much.

“I bet you’re better at romantic poetry. ‘Oh

Alexander, by the shimmering light bursting forth from the deepest parts of your beautiful eyes ...”

Spike threw his boot at Xander’s chest. It left a black smudge on his white t-shirt and Xander mused that maybe this was someone’s fucked up joke of symbolism – dark smudge on white t shirt, like Spike’s own darkness clinging to Xander in a way that was more comforting than scary because darkness was enveloping, safe and ... Spike’s lips were on his and thinking too much was no longer an issue.

“Effulgence. Never knew the fucking meaning before,” Spike had whispered later, when he was poised above Xander, eyes yellow, heaving unnecessary gasps. Xander didn’t know what he meant or whether it was a good thing, or whether he should be intimidated by the fact Spike knew a lot more words than he did ... but wasn’t thinking about it when he came. Which, generally, was a good thing.

Now

“How did you find us? Why aren’t you dead?” Dawn asked, her voice steady despite the violent tremor that ran through her fingers. The gun jerked and shook, though it didn’t shift from its position - pressed against Tara’s temple in the dim lamplight.

“Dawn, please, what are you doing?” Tara was still, her blood cold as the barrel of the gun pressed harder. “Please, sweetie, it’s me, Tara, put the gun down ...”

She heard the safety catch click with terrifying clarity.

“Stop talking about her,” Dawn said, voice screechy now, panicked, furious, “You took her from me, you stole her life so you could what, run home? You *used my blood* and my sister died for me! She sacrificed everything, all because of you,” Dawn stopped speaking, shutting her eyes for a moment, the image of Buffy’s broken body scorched in her mind. She pushed the gun hard, used her other hand to steady it.

Tara was begging, stock still, eyes tight shut, pleading for Dawn to see *her*, to wake up, wake up from whatever nightmare she was trapped in. Xander's words spun through her mind and she could have laughed, the hysterical edge slicing through her body as she thought of it "*What the fuck Tara, is the insanity catching?*"

She opened her eyes, saw Dawn with the gun clutched in her palms, eyes slightly glazed, spitting out words of hate, of condemnation and wanted to scream, wanted to but it was stuck in her throat. "Dawn, I love you ..." heaving gasps, eyes squeezing tight shut once more when Dawn only shook her head,

"You don't get to say Buffy's name anymore, Glory," she whispered as her finger slowly pulled the trigger.

Part Eleven

“Favourite colour?” the wizened little man asked, peering over his glasses like that guy from Harry Potter, the one who squeaked a lot and made Dawn laugh - Xander couldn't quite grasp his name, just out of his reach, on the tip of his tongue and had the shaman actually asked him his *favourite colour*?

“Blue, I guess,” Xander said. He would not make a list of all his favourite blue things because he wasn't some pre-pubescent girl who actually based her favorite colour on her boyfriend's eyes. He wasn't and didn't. Have a boyfriend, that is, because Spike was a lot of things but boyfriend wouldn't be a term he'd use and was the shaman speaking again?

“... vote for?” cue Xander panicking because there were *so many* questions that would end with ‘vote for?’. The shaman could have asked who Xander voted for in last month's Presidential elections and there was no good answer to that. If he said “Bush”,

the shaman would think he was a right wing, yeehaw cowboy American Idiot but if he said Kerry, he'd be thought to be a left-wing, bleeding heart liberal who sat on the fence so long he had splinters in his spinal cord ... that was the definitions according to Spike, anyway. However, the shaman could be asking something else entirely, like who he voted for the last American Idol (Fantasia for him, Tara and Dawn and when they managed to drag Spike to the TV he only cheered when Simon was meant to people) so what should he *say*? Come on Harris, spit it out, man hasn't got all day so just say something, Christ, could you be any more inept?

-

"You could have just asked him to repeat himself," Spike said calmly as they waited in the dingy room outside the office. Xander stared at him incredulously,

"If I asked him to repeat himself he'd think I drifted off into Happy-Crazy-Shiny-Land and wouldn't want to treat me," he said slowly, deliberately. Spike

wasn't the only one who could patronize, no siree.

“That’s bollocks,” Spike said with a roll of his eyes, fishing around in his coat for what Xander assumed was a lighter, “Better to ask if you weren’t listening – better than telling him you’re a communist, opposed to voting altogether,” he said. There was no mistaking the bemused hint to his tone, the slight shake of his head as he brushed his hand through his hair, a gesture he had repeated more in the past two weeks than ever before. His coat (black comfort, older than Xander which was a funny thought because that meant Spike was a dirty old man) rustled and creaked as he tugged and sifted through more and more pockets, pulling out bottlecaps, bits of hay and was that Xander’s *shampoo bottle?*

“Is that my shampoo bottle?” way to verbalize thoughts there Xander, ten points to the soon-to-be-sane guy.

“No,” Spike snapped, shoving the bottle into another pocket, “You’re a nutter, remember? Seein’

things,” and wow, he had to be really embarrassed to pull the ‘you’re seeing things’ card.

“Like you can talk, Mr. ThinksAnneRiceStalkedHim,” he said, derisive snort and he was really getting better at that. He was only half joking with the crazy Spike joke, ‘cause Spike ... was never much with the sane, he was just a better brand of crazy.

“Mr. Harris?” brusque tone, clipped accent looking ridiculous emitting from the purple haired, skinny teenager with a clipboard who stood before him. He remembered why they were there and he felt his heart drop into his stomach. But not literally because he’d be dead if that happened and despite his earlier blood-in-bathroom mishap, he was very happy to be alive, thanks.

“Yes?” it would come now, his answer, the answer to whether he had a shot at a normal life or Not. If he could walk into a room and sit by Dawn without having to worry about stabbing her with one of her own pens with the pretty designs on the plastic, and there was that image of Dawn lying beside him with

flat eyes and pens with daisies on them sticking out of her neck *oh sweet Jesus please please let this guy fix me...*

“Shaman Albert,” Albert? The guy’s name was *Albert*? Not exactly shaman-like, he was supposed to be called something mystical, something Xander couldn’t pronounce and **for fuck’s sake Xander pay attention**. “Shaman Albert has decided that in this instance, rehabilitation in magical form is unnecessary, Mr. Harris is ...” like a medicine ball to the gut, except without the medicine because the shaman wasn’t going to help him and Dawn would end up with daisy pens sticking out of her aorta, dead, ruined, gone all because of him and he’d be alonealonealone.

Spike was on his feet, yelling, back turned, focused on the purple haired boy with a grey folder in his hands, dangerous fury tasted like unripe plums in Xander’s mouth, sharp and bitter. Xander didn’t want to kill Dawn and he didn’t want to go back to St. Peter’s and Spike wouldn’t take him to the roof. Xander was a man, perhaps a strange one, but a

man all the same. So. He stood up and walked straight out the little waiting room, not looking back, then he was running, pounding on the pavement, thudthud with his heartbeat and London rain dripping into his eyes.

There were rooftops in London and he didn't need Spike to hold his hand when he jumped.

*

“W .. we have to call Spike and Xander,” Tara said quietly, legs tucked beneath her as she stroked Dawn's hair, repetitive motion, calming, she hoped.

“I saw ... you were ... I saw Glory, weak, making fun of Buffy and then I was holding the troll's hammer and I just wanted to kill her, make her stop and then ... your eyes, it was you and am I going crazy, Tara?” she whispered, little girl alone in a world of broken dolls. Tara hugged her closer.

“A few weeks ago I came in and I thought I saw ...” Tara stopped, shut her eyes, bowed her head, “I

saw someone in the apartment. He looked like Ben and I just ... there was a baseball bat in my hands and I was terrified and angry so I swung but then he turned around and it was Xa .. Xander. This isn't us, Dawn. Something is happening here, something bad," she said, eyes casting to the silver gun sat glinting in the light like a malevolent spectre, watching, waiting.

"If the gun had been loaded ... if," Dawn started to cry again and Tara rocked with her, her gaze strong and sure when she lifted Dawn's face to look at her.

"We'll stay at the Hyperion until Spike and Xander come back. We'll be alright. We're always alright," she said, warm strength with no need for a raised voice or a harsh word. She would keep Dawn safe.

Part Twelve

London - ten thousand people swarming through thick winter rain, talking into black plastic boxes in their palms, grey coats, burgundy umbrellas, innate knowledge of their city, grand and unforgiving.

And then there was Xander. Xander who was wet, cold, and searching for a place to die. Xander who had just realised his last words to Spike hadn't been "tell Dawn I'm sorry", or "I love you". Not like the movies, not like he had wanted. His last words had been a joke, a meaningless line – one of many that he kept stored in the wreckage of his mind because hey, if nothing else, Xander always had a line. Possibly lame, always facetious. So maybe it was apt that his last words had been so very inconsequential. After all, let's face it Harris, you know you've been inconsequential, expendable right from the get go.

"Watch where your fackin' going!" a woman snapped when Xander bumped into her as he ran down unfamiliar streets, fackin' not fuckin' because the woman's accent was heavy – heavier than Spike's ever was. Was. But Spike wasn't past tense,

Xander was past tense only not yet, hey, still running, still grabbing for sanity that wasn't there, not anymore.

He would be past tense soon, in the past, dead and gone if all went to plan. However, *Xander* was never one to make the plans so no guarantees there. Always someone else who made the plan, who read the books and drew up their sketches because *Xander* was inept and perfectly content to be so.

He slid on the wet stone slabs beneath his feet as he ran around the corner, felt himself losing his balance, felt the harsh sting of cold when he landed in a puddle of water that actually looked far more like tar than water, which was a stupid thing to notice because that didn't change the fact that he was *fucking freezing*, fucking not fackin'. Foreign city or not, there was no way he was going to start speaking like the locals - he was still the obnoxious American, loud and obtrusive in a country that didn't want him, had never wanted him.

"You alright, son?" distinguished man with silver

hair and polished shoes frowned down at him.

“I fell,” Xander said, making no effort to get up. He sat with head resting on his hands, dragging deep breaths in and out, wondering what his death rattle would sound like.

“Yes, evidently,” the man replied, no sarcasm, casual agreement that bordered on a pleasantry which led Xander to wonder - what sort of person went around talking to young American men sitting in puddles? “Would you like some help getting up?” the man continued, same tone as before, completely unfazed when Xander lifted his head, dark circles under his eyes and lips red raw and bleeding.

“No, thanks, I’m good. I’m good,” *I’m good, good, white knight who is broken. Can’t you see the brand on my forehead? The one that tells you I should have died like a proper hero. Died, not lost my mind, not tried to kill my friends, not survived* Xander thought the last part, didn’t dare say it because saying it would make it true.

“It’s really not healthy to be sitting in that cold puddle in this weather – if you don’t catch a disease from the water, you’ll defiantly get hypothermia at least. Trust me, I’m a doctor,” the man said, the doctor, concerned, crouching down and Xander could get a better look at him. Xander was shocked to see the doctor was young, only looked in his thirties, handsome face, pronounced lines around his mouth that either meant he laughed or yelled a lot. Xander’s dad had those lines – attributed to the latter. Tony Harris, the man who took the term ‘repulsive’ and turned it into a way of life, complete with the drunken, bitchy wife and their *useless, idiot, ungrateful shit, wish your mom’d listen to sense and had you ‘taken care of’* son. Ah, family.

“I guess,” Xander replied. He hauled himself up, staggered a couple of steps as his coat, heavy with water, weighed him down.

“I have a mobile here, do you need to call someone? A friend? A taxi?” the doctor asked, moving easily to his feet, brushing off his briefcase,

eyes never leaving Xander's. Mobile? Mobile what? Mobile like a trailer, because that didn't make any sense and was sort of insulting because yeah, Xander wasn't exactly well bred but he grew up in the suburbs, sure suburbs with it's own hellmouth but it still was no trailer park and ... *oh*. Click. Mobile was cell phone, come in number 9, England calling.

"No, I'm good," he replied, making a mental note to get himself a new phrase then remembering that he was going to be dead before long so that was sort of redundant.

"Are you alright?" the man pressed, stepping a little bit closer, smelling like mints, cologne and hospitals. A terrifying combination for an escaped mental patient.

"I'm fine, just fine," Xander rasped, turning on his heel and walking into the traffic, eyes shut because he just wanted to do it *now* or else he never would.

Shouting in the distance, someone shouting his name – odd because he'd never told the doctor his

name. But he didn't have time to think about it because the blare of car horns was deafening and everywhere was pain.

The Hyperion hotel

"So ... Xander isn't crazy?" Dawn asked, confused.

"Sweetie, he's still tall, dark and psychotic," Lorne replied, customary wince when he remembered the sound of a human fist cracking on his jaw. "Thing is, your apartment was infested with Majnoon— nasty specters that create illusions of what you most fear, then gives you the power to kill it. They feed off desires to hurt, desires to kill. That's why you were all seeing things – your friend though? Xander? He has problems of his own. Big, fat, after-school special problems," he explained.

"I know Xander isn't *okay* okay. But he's with Spike, he'll be safe. Nothing will happen to him with Spike," she said, staring earnestly at Lorne, something pleading in the halting smile, hair stuck to strawberry lipgloss.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Lorne replied. He didn’t know if he was lying or not.

Part Thirteen

Before

Hyperion Hotel

Spike kept a small axe in the blue vase by the door, a knife in the bedside table, two stakes under the mattress and a loaded crossbow in the closet.

Xander wondered how much a psychiatrist would pay to write a book about him – because he found the littered weapons comforting. Evidently, Gunn? Didn’t.

“Hey man, chill okay? I’m not going to come at you or anything – just put the knife down, alright?”

Gunn said slowly, carefully. Xander rolled his eyes, wondered when it was that this encounter turned into an episode of *NYPD Blue*.

“I’m cleaning it, no need to freak out,” he said simply, as though it were obvious.

“Xander, you’re cut pretty bad,” the façade of calm on Gunn’s face shimmers for a moment, threatening to shatter. Xander stared, utterly confused. He glanced down and realised he’d nicked his arm, that’s it’s dripping thick red life onto the carpet. Ah. So that was why he was freaking out. It occurred to Xander this might be a good time for him to freak out as well – after all, it was *his* arm leaking everywhere. Strangely though, he was just annoyed at being pegged for a slit-my-wrists type. He looked back up, saw Cordelia standing in the open doorway, Gunn holding her arm.

Xander watched tears dribble down her cheeks, quietly marvelling at the strange sight. The tears were black with mascara *black tears, like a mime, but Cordy was never silent* and they slid down her pale face. Then she walked away and he heard her voice shouting. Which was never a pleasant experience. Except she was shouting for Spike, which wasn’t so unpleasant because Spike would

stop the leak in his arm. A plumber for humans - only when his trousers slid down his ass, Xander was more than happy to look because it was smooth, taught Spike Ass, not hairy flabby Nameless Plumber Who Overcharges And Eats All The Tuna Fish Sandwiches Ass.

He glanced up again from the blood, now pouring more steadily, and watched Spike shove past Gunn with a little more force than necessary. Gunn and Spike – if they stood next to one another long enough, they looked like a Benetton advert (as in United Colours of ... wow Xander, doing better with the fashion references, soon you can get your own lisp and let your wrists flop around some more). Unnaturally pale, pink lips, crisp curled hair and dark, smooth skin with dark eyes that contained a warmth Xander imagined he once had. They were beautiful together. Xander considered that in the event of his death, he'd haunt the two until they got together, if only for some meaningless sex. Xander thought he'd make a great voyeur.

“Hell’s fucking bells,” Spike muttered, nodding to

Gunn and sitting Xander on the edge of the bed, taking the knife and dropping it onto the floor. He then moved Xander's uninjured hand to the cut, pressing it there, to put pressure on the wound. Which, as a Sunnydale boy, he should have already known.

"Sorry," Xander muttered as Spike wrapped the cut with a bandage, eyes slightly narrowed. "But hey, at least you can suck on the carpet," he added, glancing at the small puddle of red on the ugly green carpet, red and green, festive colours heralding holly, mistletoe and screaming, mean drunks – and sometimes even *he* was aware his childhood was pathetic.

"Maybe I should let you bleed in different spots in the room. That way we'll have a 'suspicious brown stain' pattern on this carpet," Spike said finally, flopping down next to Xander, laying his arm across his eyes.

"Spike?" Xander asked, eyes trained on the open door. Cordelia hadn't returned. "You didn't ... you

didn't ask," he said, and he knew it was only half a sentence, that he wasn't making sense again but fuck he was tired and *he* knew what he meant, so Spike would just have to learn.

"It was a bit obvious. You had a bloody knife in your hand," Spike mumbled, not moving his arm, face contorting very slightly in what Xander presumed was a repressed yawn. Spike hadn't slept in three days – Xander kept waking him by mistake with his nightmares.

"No, I mean, you didn't ask if I did it on purpose," he clarified.

"Didn't need to, luv. You would have told me," came the reply; quiet, slurred. Xander smiled.

Now

The funeral is small, though more people come to the memorial than they had expected. The first few rows of the church are filled with people who had taken a liking to the quiet, unassuming man who

had often been there - never saying much, always sketching, listening as people poured out their worries. The front row is reserved for family. Xander's real family. Tara holds Dawn, Dawn with big dark eyes and no smiles left. Angel lets Cordelia nearly crush his hand as she bites her lip and Doesn't Cry.

*Spike stands in the back of the church, hands in his pockets. He refuses to say a eulogy, refuses to change into a black suit like they want him to. He just stands, stares at the coffin and knows that if anyone touches it, touches the polished wood and starts talking about Xander, about how sweet and quiet he was, shed a tear for the boy like they have a right to - he'll rip their throat out. Because his Xan, his Xan couldn't be in that coffin, that fucking **box**, body mangled, eyes unseeing.*

Spike stands in the back of the church, hands in his pockets, smokes a cigarette with his right hand and pretends he isn't crying.

Because Xander can't be dead.

And Xander really *wasn't* dead, so he knew he should stop imagining his funeral. There were limits to how many morbid scenarios could run through your head before you had to snap back to reality. Only, reality wasn't very much better. Orange plastic seats, booming nasal voice through the speakers and he's back in the smoking room, the smothering room, with Spike who's so very angry.

"Mom always said my impatience would be the death of me," Xander said, tone light. Spike didn't laugh. "So. How about them Manchester United's?" another joke falls flat, words like bullets on metal, clanging, making them both edgy. But not like literal bullets because they were in another airport and shooting bullets would make Xander a terrorist – which, he wasn't. No bullets, other than verbal ones. Glad we got that sorted out, Xan, care to pay attention to the furious vampire sitting on your left? The one who has barely said six words to you since he shoved your miserable ass out of the way of a car last night?

“Our flight leaves in an hour but we’ll be stopping off in Amsterdam. Might have to spend the night if the weather’s this bad when we get there,” Spike snapped, eyes on the rain pouring onto the tarmac outside. Xander shifted, tried not to think and started counting the cigarette butts. 12, 16, 18, 23 ... they were in a pile in the ashtray, some tipped with pink or red lipstick. Grey with ash, spark crushed out by some gigantic fucking hand who sucked on it, used all it’s fire, threw it away when it was bleeding tobacco and there was nothing useful left in it and holy crap this line of thought was far much more with the ‘angst’ than he’d intended.

“So,” he said suddenly, needed to speak, need to stop the thoughts leaking into his ears because he was afraid they might seep from his mouth and he’d be one of those muttering crazies, rocking himself in an airport, “... this shaman guy. Said I didn’t need rehabilitation because I wasn’t a danger to anyone,” Xander said, not asked, said, because he’d asked so many times today he already knew the answer. Normally, Spike would snarl or laugh, maybe roll his eyes and say something witty that ended up with

kissing. But today wasn't normal.

"Other than to yourself. The incident in the flat was due to a Majnoon spectre," Spike agreed, flat, neutral tone – familiar territory, "Would have known that if you hadn't gone to top yourself - if you'd stayed and listened for a minute," low voice, flash of fury, then the cool indifference was back in his gaze and Xander wanted to hide from it.

"Well you didn't listen at first, either. You were too busy shouting at the guy to even see me leave," he shot back, and again with the bullet metaphors, accusing, hurt.

"My fault, then?" Spike growled, and wow if Xander had thought him angry *before* ... "My fault that you decided you knew better, that it was better to be dead than sit still for *one fucking second* and listen?" he hissed, gold eyes, then back to cold blue.

Xander turned away, started counting the cigarettes in the ash tray again.

Part Fourteen

He'd called Dawn from the airport and told her they'd arrive tomorrow due to the bad weather. Her voice was sweet, fresh, innocence and cherry lip gloss that unfailingly tore a smile and a laugh from him. Facetious humor, promises of presents and a couple of really bad puns convinced her that he was okay. Tara was next and she took a little more convincing, complete with promises to get something to eat and to stop drinking tiny bottles of booze on planes because 'just because it's free doesn't mean it's compulsory'.

"So. Amsterdam. Heard good things about this place - prostitution and pot is legal ... Uncle Rory paradise," he said to Spike's back, filled the void of quiet because quiet meant thinking and Xander was far too tired to try that.

"Yes, you are," Spike replied. Xander blinked, wondered whether this weird answer was the result of his own brain malfunctioning and pulling a 'confuse Xander' whammy or if Spike was just not listening. So he decided to go for a subtle inquiry,

"Huh?" Subtlety, thy name is Xander Harris, king of fuck-ups.

"You're forgiven. If you started following a rational line of thought I'd probably stake myself in the confusion - I'm sorry for hassling you about it. So stop making inane comments about overweight family members and scaring the locals," roll of his eyes, slight shake of his head and he doesn't even pause to look at Xander, doesn't miss a step.

"That was ... easier than I thought," Xander said, unable to fathom what had prompted his sudden victory. It was an unexpected gain, a good one, and Xander wasn't sure what to do with it. He'd been prepared for days of angst, of screaming through slammed doors, attending regular therapy with

some quack called Dr. Jay who had little to no hair and a red nose all year round ... he'd expected things to be harder.

"Life's too short," Spike shrugged, his hair in tight curls, soft and wet in the pouring rain, catching the moonlight so that it almost looked like he was walking with a halo.

"You're *immortal*," Xander said incredulously, deep drag of his own cigarette (discovery channel said crazy people liked to smoke and who was he to break protocol?), wondering why the ember didn't go out, even when the rain was coming down in sheets.

"You're not," the reply came with a pointed glance at the little happy stick of tobacco sitting between his fingers, yellowing his skin, pale winter sunshine yellow and a death wish all contained in one small package.

"You asking me to quit?" he asked, words wrapped in sarcasm and something else he couldn't put a

name to.

"M not asking," Spike replied easily, snatching the cigarette with unnatural ease, throwing it carelessly into a puddle.

"This is sort of becoming a tradition," Xander said, memories of London and Spike's right hand fag. Which sounded way more lewd than he intended, but hey, Xander liked lewd, could make with the lewd, *had* made with the lewd. And enjoyed it.

"Come on, we'll miss the bus," Spike said suddenly, taking Xander's hand and pulling him forward, up the street and past the blue of lights and movement of people, blurred in the rain like ink under a wash of tears.

Xander was used to Spike pulling him places - it was sort of necessary if they hoped to get anywhere. Xander was always distracted, mind wandering in circles, trapped in cocoons of safe thought and busy spinning lies for him to believe. Sometimes his soul wandered too, drifted over rooftops and peered

into people's windows, watching humans, watching *humanity* as it pushed and struggled against the inevitable pull of death. Sometimes with dignity, sometimes without. Sometimes beautiful, though often ugly. But at the end of the day, everyone was the same, struggling to push through a life that they may not like but felt was their right to keep.

Xander had to be pulled because he wasn't one of them. Life was too big, too frightening, too *red hot thrumming energy* sitting right there, right in front of him, a chance, a gamble. One that Willow, Buffy, Anya and Giles lost. People who were smarter, braver, *better* than him lost their chance at more. A chance he could still *take*. It scared him, no, scotch that, it *terrified* him. He was the one who had to be tugged, always looking around him and determinedly Not Looking at the life sitting before him, colours so bright they made his eyes hurt and a cacophony of sounds he'd been deaf to for a long time.

For the first time in *so fucking long*, he wanted to be a part of it. Wanted to swim in that brilliant blinding

colour and scream along, throwing his soul into the collective will to live, the will to survive and cling to what you're given and cherish it while it lasts. And this thing with Spike, this new family he's spun around himself - it might not last. It might give him pain, flood his mind completely, leave him drowning and surrounded by the dead sunflowers - crumbling, twisted, drained, gaping black expanse in his middle and no colour left. But even if it did? Xander wanted the chance to live it while it lasted.

On an unremarkable night in Amsterdam, cold, wet, his mouth tasting of smoke and coffee, something changed. Xander picked up his pace so that he and Spike walked side by side and Spike turned, smiled, leant in closer so their lips touched. The world around them stilled. Balance, an equilibrium found in the middle of beautiful, heaving chaos.

Xander didn't have a full mind to offer Spike and Spike didn't have breath to offer Xander. But Xander finally realised that they both had other things to offer each other.

Love being one of them.

Epilogue

Click

Hey guys – it's, uh, me. Xander. The others are writing letters to you but I thought I'd record a message thing because you know me, man of few words. The written kind, that is. Plus the grammar would be all to hell and Giles, I know you'd turn in your gr ... okay. That wasn't a very clever phrase to pick. I still forget sometimes. That you guys are – you know. It's been two years and sometimes I still pick up the phone to talk to you, Wills.

So. It's funny because I have all these things to tell you and I just ... crap. Okay, I'll tell you about how

the others are. Note I mean 'the others in the gang', I'm not talking about the others as in 'the Voices'. Not that I hear voices. I mean, sure, I have a not-so-healthy dose of the wacky, but I'm not American Psycho or anything.

Dawn. Well, she's grown. Upwards, that is. She's a tiny bit taller than Spike now, which is pretty hilarious. Particularly when you point it out. He's started wearing these huge leather boots with the two inch lifts so he can still growl at her without having to look up. Not that he growls at her a lot – she's the one to yell at *him* most of the time. It's about the cigarettes and second hand smoke, mostly. He gets all pouty and storms off, telling her that he'll 'do what he sodding likes'. But he only smokes on the balcony now, so, be proud Buffy – Dawn can kick his ass just as well as you can.

Uh, let's see ... so, she's doing really well at school. No problems. Lots of friends, a boyfriend who was interviewed and screened and threatened, though not exactly in that order. I totally gave him the shovel talk and Spike actually bought one to

emphasise the point. Dawn didn't speak to us for two days, but it was worth it. The look on her face when she caught Tara giving him her own version of the 'hurt Dawn and Die' talk was priceless.

Tara. She's – well, I think I can see the Tara you saw, Wills. She's more comfortable with us now and *man*, if she weren't gay and if I weren't ... well, whatever I am. Yeah. I'd so have the hots for our resident witch. She's great. And she's *doing* great. She got a job working at this kindergarten for kids with magical abilities. Think Hogwarts with play dough. She's made some friends at work; Sandra, Caleb and Marie come over for dinner sometimes, so it's nice to have some people come around to remind me that there people exist outside our little group. Tara nearly went out of her mind the first time they were going to coming to dinner – she was barking orders in the kitchen and she actually scared Spike into wearing a tie. Seriously.

Which brings me to Spike. You have to hand it to me – my segues have improved. So, Spike. He's ... still dead. Still leaves wet towels on the floor,

doesn't clean the blood out of his mugs and he's banned from using the remote 'cause he throws it at the wall when he doesn't like whatever's on TV. So, not much has really changed with him. Except that whole 'he's my boyfriend now' thing. Is boyfriend the right word? Not really. He doesn't buy me flowers and he's the cheapest guy I know when it comes to restaurants. I know what you're thinking Anya and no, I'm not his manbitch. Sorry Giles, I'm sure this is totally grossing you out and you're probably cleaning those glasses up at the pearly gates right this second. Hey, could've been worse. I could have gone for the *other* vampire staying at the Hyperion hotel. No offence Buff, but broody cavemen of doom just aren't my thing.

Okay, so this all leads back to me, which was what I'm supposed to be talking about anyway. I got a job. I design and make furniture, toys of the totally innocent variety ... that sort of thing. Get paid really well for it, and I'm my own boss so there's not much chance that I'll get fired.

There are good days. Days when the sun sings. Only,

it doesn't literally *sing*, still not that crazy, it's just a phrase I picked up from this book. Wills, get ready to say 'I told you so', because I do that now. I do books. Not that I *do* books because woah, serious paper cut issues there, but since we moved I started on that whole reading thing you always talked about. And shock, horror, Armageddon and locusts, Xander Harris had discovered he actually *likes* reading. I'm not reading Tolstoy but yay me for actually knowing who he is. I mostly read paperback novels – mysteries and detectives, not so much with the harlequin romance. Because sure, gay now, but 'quivering manstick' is enough to turn anyone off. Sometimes I tease Dawn about the one I found in her room just to watch her shoot the Glare of Imminent Death #304 – a freakish imitation of Spike's Glare of Imminent Evisceration #219.

Have you noticed how I sort of wander off topic? I thought it had to do with my new 'special' status, but Spike told me I never shut up way before everything that happened. What was I saying? Oh, right.

Good days, of which there are plenty. There are bad days too, but I'm getting used to them. Sometimes I get ... I don't know. Sort of hyper aware and distant all at once. It feels like I'm sitting in this bubble and everything around me is sharp and too loud, faces and movement that's all too much at once for me to take in and all I want to do is get the fuck away.

Last year I tried to ignore it was happening – just get over it, suppress it. I nearly went over the edge. One night I just got up and walked out. Spike found me on one of the beaches, I think. I had walked. I can't really remember much, and he's never talked about it. Spike's good at dealing with me when I get like that. I think he takes comfort in knowing I need him. 'Cause I do. Need him - love him, even. And some days, I'm pretty sure he loves me. It's not a 'and they lived happily ever after' deal but it's good. Hope that doesn't squick you guys out too much.

Uh, so that's everything. The rest of the gang, good days, bad days and a lot of inane stuff in between. Huh. Inane, insane. I never thought about that before.

Signing out, this was the inane and insane Xander. I miss you guys every day and I think I always will. But I'm learning to accept that – yup, Mr. Denial is finally starting to get used to all this. And you know what? I think I'll be okay. I think ... I think we're all okay.

Click

The End