



Banner by Selene

Spike jack-knifed to a seated position; his hand gripped the back of the couch to steady himself. The sheet that had been drawn up about his shoulders fell away to reveal a bare chest littered with the results from the previous night's fight. A chill ran down his spine as the recurring nightmare settled back into his subconscious. His erratic breathing slowed until it stopped completely.

And he sat there, face twisted in agony.

Though he'd not witnessed firsthand the decimation of the newly-formed Watcher's Council – and those working within – Spike was still tormented by images of murder and destruction. The loss of the Slayer and her friends was Angel's fault, and not for the first time, he cursed the vampire that had caused their deaths. Rage transformed his features, and anyone that might have encountered the vampire in that moment would have surely seen their own death, and a painful one at that, staring them in the face.

“Again?” The feminine voice wasn't without sympathy, and Spike looked up to see Cordelia standing close to the couch, a mug of blood held in her outstretched hand. “I'm supposed to be the seer here.”

Spike nodded his thanks; his anger slid away leaving the pain in its wake. Shaking hands closed gratefully around the mug as he grunted an unintelligible response to Cordelia's comment. The heated life-giving sustenance was perfect for all of two seconds. Then the image of a broken and bloodied Dawn appeared behind closed lids and the blood he'd just swallowed nearly came back the way it had gone. Only Cordelia's “you spew, you clean,” kept him from doing just that. His eyes narrowed to mere slits and he gave her his “fuck off” look.

To which she just snorted and rolled her eyes, long used to his ways by now. She left him alone to finish his meal, retreating to the small kitchenette to see to something for herself. Instinctively sensing his need for privacy while he regrouped and rebuilt against the chinks in his armor.

Spike respected that about her. How she didn't press him to share his feelings, giving him the space he needed to work through things on his own.

A half hour later, he had showered and dressed for the evening and joined Cordelia in the living room – or what passed for their living room in the small one-bedroom basement-level apartment they shared.

The place wasn't much, but surprisingly, Cordelia had applied her hand and given it a homey feel. They'd had separate apartments in the beginning of their partnership, but after the third time Spike had come to the girl's rescue – barely in the nick of time that last time – he'd put his foot down and stated in no uncertain terms that he was moving in. Cordelia had handed him a pillow and a blanket, pointed at the couch, and that had been that.

Two years later and they'd yet to get on the other's nerves.

“What's doin' for tonight, love?” Spike asked as he joined Cordelia.

“No vision, which... whole lot of 'yay' here. But, I'm still getting reports about a vigilante working our turf.”

“Slayer?”

“I don't think so. From what I've been able to get from the locals, it's a guy. Then there's the fact that we chose Phoenix because of its whole *lack* of slayer population.”

“Never mind the bloody Hellmouth we're sittin' on,” Spike grumbled under his breath.

“There's that too...”

She flashed him a wide smile and Spike couldn't help returning it. After a minute, they got back to business.

“So... vigilante, huh? Got a description?”

“No. Nothing substantial anyway. I've gotten conflicting reports, and those I've had to pull teeth to get. Some say human, some say unmerciful primal. Heck, even the non-violents are getting scared.”

“Well, I'll take a look-see about town, see if I can track down this mystery whatever it is... tell it to push off.”

“Just be careful.”

“Aren't I always?”

One delicate brow arched and Cordelia stared at Spike's chest, now covered by a dark t-shirt and the healing wounds it hid, as if to say, "Yeah, okay."

"Lock up behind me. I'll be back before dawn."

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Cordelia tried to wait up for Spike, but being up all day wasn't conducive to pulling an all-nighter, no matter how much she worried.

She'd been asleep for about an hour when she was hit with a vision. She rode it out like the good half-demon PTB lackey she was, thankful that her headaches were a thing of the past.

Now, if only the visions would come on a more regular schedule... say, when she was awake.

Clutching her hands in the sheets, Cordelia fought against the dizziness threatening to overwhelm her as images raced at warp speed inside her brain. She tried to pick out key elements, things that would prove useful upon later examination by both herself and Spike. A clearing. Two adversaries squaring off. Overly-long brunette hair, desperately in need of a cut. A patch that cut a swath across the left side of the human's face.

"Xander!" she gasped.

And promptly passed out, her energy tapped out now that the vision was complete.

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Spike stalked through the deserted streets of the seedier side of Phoenix. Apparently, word had gotten out of the newcomer to the city, and it seemed like the demon population was home and tucked in bed for the night. It was enough to make him start a fight to make whatever it was that had come to his town show itself. *He* was the Big Bad around here. Demons trembled in fear of *him*, not some upstart bent on horning in on his territory.

Another hour and still nothing tickled his preternatural senses.

He finally gave up an hour before dawn, letting out a curse before turning on his heels and heading home, taking the long way, just in case. When he was halfway there, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Something – or someone was following him. Whatever it was, it was smart, taking care to stay downwind of him. But, his heightened sense of smell wasn't the only thing going for Spike; he was also blessed with excellent hearing.

The crunch of a heel against a small twig could have been a canon firing in the otherwise silent night.

His stalker felt the same way, it seemed, because it turned and made a run for it, the element of surprise now gone.

Spike was after him like a shot, quickly closing the distance – though he noted the other’s nonhuman speed. He had the advantage there, too, in that he was intimately familiar with the terrain; his adversary, for all his speed, had to compensate as he ran.

Another minute and Spike launched himself at the person – thing – in front of him, sending both of them crashing to the ground. If Spike thought he was going to have an easy time of it, he was mistaken. His opponent went down fighting, punching, clawing, and biting.

“Ow! Bloody hell! Let go of my arm, you mangy mutt! Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to bite your betters?”

Spike sat straddling his opponent’s hips and used the arm still being gouged by sharp teeth to haul his upper body off the ground. Bringing his exposed neck closer to Spike’s fangs.

The first taste of blood and Spike jumped up to stare down at the heavily breathing creature sprawled face first on the ground.

“Xander?”

The name was barely more than a whisper. An unbelieving one at that. But blood didn’t lie, and he’d have to be dust not to recognize the taste of the blood still coating his lips. Even if it was tinged with something else, something... *primal*.

Spike waited, his body practically vibrating with tension, as Xander shifted from his belly to a crouch. The patch covering his left eye shifted, revealing two eyes that regarded him warily. The glowing green that eclipsed the normal brown hue threw Spike for a loop.

“Spike?”

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The trip back to the apartment Spike shared with Cordelia had been completed in silence. The two had walked, side by side, close, but not actually touching, each lost in thought.

Even now, with Xander and Spike sharing opposite ends of the couch, Xander had yet to say anything. Cordelia occupied the lone chair next to them; her face was trained on the cup in her hand, the coffee gone cold with her preoccupation.

“How?” The choked out word startled the other two occupants and both looked up at Xander, taking note of his confusion.

“How what?” Spike asked.

“Alive... how... both of you? How are you alive? I thought everyone was dead. Giles said—” Xander’s mouth closed with an audible click.

“You knew about our fight with the senior partners?”

Xander nodded. “It was why we were all there. In London.”

“Thought you were in Africa.” Spike watched the stillness settle over Xander at his comment.

“I... came back. They said it was important. And I... I was strong enough at that point to handle it.”

“Handle what?”

“His hyena,” Cordelia answered, remembering her vision.

Spike’s gaze swiveled to Cordelia and he waited for her to continue.

“He was possessed back in high school. Long story... but, well, I thought that Buffy and Giles... that they’d gotten rid of it.”

Xander laughed, a short bark filled with pain... and acceptance.

“Apparently, it was only caged. My going to Africa seemed to be what set it free.”

“Couldn’t have been good. Primals are an unpredictable lot.”

“Yeah, they are. But then I remembered Oz. He was able to take control of his demon, so it seemed that I should be able to do the same. I found a shaman in some place that I couldn’t pronounce even if I wanted to.”

“And your eye?”

“I woke up one day and it was just there. The shaman said I’d merged and that he could help me no more. His task was complete. So I went back to work, trying to find more slayers in Africa to send back to Giles. Then Giles called. Said there was a situation brewing in L.A. and he needed me to come home.”

Xander had been staring into space as he retold his story, but paused to look over at Spike.

“They never told me you were back, only that Angel had picked a fight he couldn’t win and we’d be left to clean up the mess.”

Spike kept his mouth shut. Telling Xander that he’d sworn Andrew to secrecy would only dredge up old hurt. Though, he was surprised the boy had actually held his tongue. He had to believe that, however. The other was too painful – that everyone had known of his return and hadn’t bothered to call, if only to say welcome back.

“Anyway, everyone got down to logistics. I wanted to tell them about me, but there was no opportunity. Buffy had stepped in and taken charge.”

“And everyone else paled in comparison,” Spike noted with sympathy.

“To them I was just Donut Boy and the all around handyman. I had no special skills that made me useful. I mean... you’ve got a room full of slayers, a powerful witch, and a super smart watcher. What’s one poor insignificant boy in a room full of super beings?” Xander had meant it as a joke, a means of poking fun at himself; instead the bitterness he felt at being relegated to the fringes of the group leaked into his words.

“Slayer was always oblivious to what was right in front of her face,” Spike commented. Though he’d loved the girl, he’d not been blind to her faults.

Cordelia wisely kept her mouth shut.

“Yeah,” Xander agreed. “I’ve often wondered why they called me back in the first place. It’s not like they needed me there. Not really.”

“You were one of the Scoobies. Slayer was gearing up for the big one and wanted you by her side.”

Xander surged to his feet, his eyes gleaming.

“They why was I off fetching dinner when it happened?” he shouted. He could feel the rage building within him and sensed more than saw both Cordelia’s and Spike’s shocked expression. “Yeah, that’s right. The reason I’m alive and everyone else is dead is because I was out of the building playing Donut Boy when it happened.”

“Oh, Xander...” Cordelia jumped to her feet, intent on taking Xander in her arms. A warning growl from him and Spike’s hand stayed her, however.

“Love, why don’t you give us a minute?” he asked, his eyes never leaving Xander.

Cordelia opened her mouth to protest, but hearing bones shift as Spike’s demon burst forth, she nodded and grabbed her purse. “I’ll just run up to the grocery store. Cupboards are kinda bare.”

Neither Spike nor Xander noticed her hasty exit.

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“Kinda rude, growlin’ at the girl like that,” Spike commented.

Xander didn’t respond, just continued to look mutinous. Every line of his body screamed fight.

Spike took a quick inventory of the living room. Nothing that couldn't be replaced. He sighed, shrugged out of his duster and tossed it aside.

“Well, come on then. Get it out of your system.”

“Get *what* out of my system?”

Spike gestured vaguely in Xander's direction. “All that piss and vinegar. Come on, Whelp. You're spoilin' for a fight, and it's not like you can hurt me. Just be mindful of the furniture, yeah?”

“I'm not fighting you.”

Xander's gleaming eyes belied the words he spoke.

“Then I guess you're gonna wind up a little worse for wear.”

Spike charged forward, not surprised in the least when Xander met him halfway. They collided together and crashed to the floor, both trying to gain the upper hand. A lamp met a premature death when the two rolled into the end table. The couch was knocked over minutes later, but otherwise managed to remain unscathed. The same couldn't be said for the chair Cordelia had been sitting on earlier.

At one point, Xander had Spike pinned to the floor, but he was sent flying over the vamp's head by a well-placed knee to his ass. Then it was Spike's turn to get Xander in a vulnerable position, straddling the boy's hips and pinning his arms to his side.

“Had enough, Pup?”

Xander snarled and snapped, bucking his hips as he tried to unseat Spike from his perch, by no means ready to yield.

Both groaned at the stimulating contact against their respective groins.

Xander went one step further and leaned up and licked Spike's neck.

Fighting was forgotten as the two tore at each other's shirts until pale skin was exposed. Spike leaned down and practically purred at the heat emanating from Xander's chest; it had been far too long since he'd been with a human. He wanted to roll and pull the boy on top of him, bask in his warmth and let it envelop him completely.

But he wasn't ready to give up the position of power just yet.

Besides, it wasn't like this meant anything – other than it being another outlet to release their pent up energies. Fighting always got him hard. And knowing the kid like he did, it would only be a matter of time before he was throwing him off and crying foul.

Spike wanted one kiss before that happened.

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*'He's gonna come to his senses any minute now.'*

The thought raced through Spike's head, but as the seconds ticked past and Xander's lips remained locked with his, the boy's tongue doing a fair job of holding its own as Spike plundered his mouth, he couldn't help but marvel that it hadn't happened yet.

Not one to waste an opportunity, Spike relaxed his tight grip about Xander's waist and resettled himself more firmly against the boy's warm flesh, bodies touching from chest to thigh. Their cocks aligned, hard bulges straining against the confines of restricting jeans, wringing a growl from Spike and a whine from Xander.

Spike thrust forward, hard enough to drive Xander back a few inches on the carpet. Swallowed the boy's moan of pleasure the action engendered.

Xander's legs shifted, gripping Spike's hips; ragged nails tore down the vampire's back hard enough to draw blood.

The barely leashed violence was Spike's undoing. It had been too long since he'd let the demon free. Not since Drusilla had it been like this. Complete loss of control. Blood and pain and mutual need. Hard and fast and so fucking good.

It mattered not that it was Harris beneath him. Harris, who seemed more than willing, practically goading him to take and take, then take some more. Unmindful of the jeans still covering their legs, Spike continued to dry-hump Xander right there on the living room floor. Hard kisses and hands that were everywhere at once. Shallow scratches from claw-like fingernails promised of blood soon to be spilled. Then deeper, harder. Rich coppery scent flooding the senses, the feel of it against cool hands. Warm, life-giving blood. Xander's blood.

A tiny hiss of pain and their mouths parted, but only for a second. Just enough for Xander to catch his breath and dive back in for more. His fingers found Spike's hair and dragged him back down for more mind-numbing kisses. More everything. Pain, pleasure – Xander wanted it all. Needed it all. He'd been numb for far too long.

Spike gave it to him. Mouth open and eager for Xander's tongue. Wanting the boy to taste him this time. It took a second for Xander to catch on but when he did...

*Bloody fucking hell!*

They rocked together. Upper torsos slick with sweat and blood, bodies straining to get closer. Teeth nipped at lips until finally Spike left off completely to trail kisses along Xander's jaw.

His attention was soon caught and held by the erratic pulse beating away in the boy's neck...

Spike didn't mean to bite Xander. But the boy was whining and keening and snapping his teeth at his own tender flesh, calling to his demon on a purely basic level, and instinct had taken over. Thankfully, Xander wasn't the least bit resistant, the smell of his cum as his body bucked beneath his, assuring Spike that he couldn't have minded *too* much. No matter what objections he might voice later.

He didn't take much; his fangs were in Harris' throat only as long as it took to come himself. It wasn't about feeding. Spike couldn't rightly say *what* it was about, and he was too sated to delve too deeply into his psyche to figure it out just then. He just barely managed to roll off to the side and onto his back beside Xander before his strength gave out altogether.

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Xander was on his back, panting, trying to control his racing heart. The sweat clinging to his body seeped into the shallow cuts marring his skin; the slight pain it caused prolonging the euphoria he was feeling.

He'd just had sex with Spike. Well, not sex in the sense that parts had been *inside* other parts. But they'd both gotten off. And beautifully. Even now, the scent of Spike's essence was doing strange things to him. For one thing, he didn't feel the constant struggle he usually had with the hyena. Like it had curled up into a ball in the corner of his mind and was taking a nice snooze. Not that he blamed it one bit.

Sex with Spike had been... pretty intense.

And he was back to the whole 'sex with Spike' thing.

"We just had sex."

"Bloody good shag." Spike smiled in memory, eyes still closed. Not even the fact that he'd spent himself inside his pants was enough to take away from the lassitude snaking through his limbs. All he needed now was a cigarette, but his duster was too far away for him to bother.

"But—"

"Look..." Spike interrupted before Xander could get any further. "Can you let me enjoy my happy for a minute before you have to ruin it with your overanalyzing? We fought, had a bit of a snog. Happens all the time."

"But—"

"Is it because I'm a bloke?"

"Er, no... not really." Africa had changed him. Xander had found that things like gender and sex didn't much matter anymore. As long as the person was willing, he was happy. Though it had

been the first time that he'd been in such a submissive role. Strangely enough, he'd not minded in the least.

"Then what? Oh...right... I get it. It's because it's *me*. Because I'm a vampire..." He ticked off a finger. "Evil." Another finger. "Soulless." Another finger. "Well, not so much soulless anymore." One finger was withdrawn, leaving just the two. "Guess I'm just down to being an evil vampire. But still—"

"You hate me," Xander couldn't help but state the obvious, completely ignoring Spike's self-recrimination. He'd not thought of Spike as a monster in a long time. Long before the vamp had offered himself up as the sacrificial lamb to defeat the First.

"Don't bloody hate you," Spike grumbled, hand falling down to rest on his chest.

"Yes you do. Ours was a hate-hate relationship. We hated most frequently. You 'Dead Boy Jr.,' me 'Whelp'. Remember?"

Xander had been half-joking, hoping to draw attention away from the subject, nowhere near ready to analyze the situation, contrary to what Spike might think. It had worked in the past, which was why Spike's sudden outburst took him by complete surprise.

"Oh, for the love of...!" Spike got angrily to his feet. "Bloody hell, Harris! Don't make such a big deal out of it. We fought, we fucked. It just happens sometimes, yeah? Don't mean a thing. Put it from your mind. It won't happen again, alright?"

Xander blinked owlishly as Spike storm off to the bathroom and lock himself inside. The sound of the water being turned on could be heard from behind the closed door and Xander knew that he may as well give up. Spike wasn't coming out anytime soon.

*I'll take "Jumping to Conclusions" for a thousand, Alex.*

Somewhere along the line, Xander had lost control of the conversation. Not that he'd ever really had control of it to begin with. It wasn't like he'd ever meant to say the words out loud; he'd just been reeling from the fact that he'd gotten his freak on, or sorta freak on, with Spike of all people.

And it had been good. Fantastic. Just thinking about what they'd done was getting him hard again. Had him seriously contemplating breaking down the door and having things out between them right then. *Okay, and yeah, time to nix that thought... Think Cordelia. Think Cordelia coming home and... and being pissed about the furniture.*

It was a start. It was bad enough he'd have to make his way to the ratty motel room he'd rented with a huge wet spot on his pants. He didn't need to draw attention to it by having his dick straining against the material – never mind that it didn't feel all that pleasant.

Spying his shirt laying in a heap not far from his head, Xander reached out and grabbed it. The thing fell apart in his hands, good for nothing now but a dust rag, and he used it to wipe at the drying blood on his chest and arms. His healing had kicked in, leaving nothing but scratches where deeper cuts had once been.

He stood and tidied up the mess he and Spike had made as best he could. A quick glance in the mirror to make sure that he wouldn't frighten the good citizens of Phoenix, and Xander slipping out the front door, pausing only long enough to hear the soft click as it closed. He'd give Spike some time to cool down, maybe come back later tonight, see what he and Cordelia had been up to for the last decade. They still had a lot of catching up to do.

Xander fingered the ragged skin on his neck as he walked down the hall, his feet dragging the entire time. He really didn't want to leave, not with the way things had ended between them. But, he was probably correct in assuming that time and distance were the best thing for now.

The fact that Spike had bitten him hadn't even registered on his Freak-o-meter was a thought left for another day. Say, a century or two from now.

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Cordelia had just stepped inside the apartment, arms laden with grocery bags when Spike came out of the bathroom, toweling off his hair.

“Where's Xander?”

Spike's eyes shot to the righted couch, to the lamp and chair pieces stacked neatly in the corner. His senses telling him that the boy was long gone.

“Son of a—!”

“You let him *go*?”

“It's not like I bloody well *knew*! He left while I was in the bloody shower.”

“What...? No, wait!” Cordelia held up her hand, her gaze having followed Spike's to the destruction of some of her furniture. “I don't want to know. And you *so* owe me a new chair. And a damn lamp too!”

“Didn't figure him for a runner,” Spike grumbled under his breath and plopped down on the couch, ignoring Cordelia's mini-rant.

“Maybe he'll come back?” she offered after a time, when it appeared Spike wasn't going to say anything else. Joining him on the couch, she laid a tentative hand on his knee. “Now that he knows we're here, he'll come back. Right?”

“Yeah... maybe...” *More likely, I scared him off.* “I’m gonna catch a few hours kip. Something comes up, wake me.”

“Uh... yeah... ok.”

Cordelia stood up and let Spike stretch out on the couch. She tossed him the blanket that was hanging over the back. He huddled beneath it without so much as a thank you, causing her to frown.

Something had happened between Spike and Xander in the short time she’d been gone from the apartment. Something that caused Xander to steal away without the vampire noticing, no note or word left of when – or if – he’d return.

She’d seen the brief glimpse of hurt before anger had taken over and wanted to ask Spike about it. However, she knew there was no talking to him when he was like this. He was in what she liked to call his “prickly” stage.

Better to just let him sleep off his funk, then ask him about it once he woke up.

Resigning herself to a quiet afternoon spent alone in her bedroom, Cordelia walked to the kitchen and put away the food she’d bought. Food she’d bought thinking Xander was still going to be around.

Cordelia checked on Spike when she was finished, resettling the blanket about the vamp’s shoulders. He sighed and snuggled deeper into the cushions, fast asleep.

As she closed the door to her room, she wondered where Xander was, and if he was alright.

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Xander let himself into his motel room and secured the four locks on the back of his door. His pants had long since dried from his short run from Cordelia and Spike’s place to his – which wasn’t the most pleasant of feelings – and he wanted nothing more than to strip down and shower. Then sleep for a few hours.

He’d been up all night and now part of the day. Even with the special enhancements he’d been given thanks to the hyena, he was more than ready for some down time. He just hoped he’d actually be able to sleep without waking to the soundless screams of his friends.

Visions of the burning Council Headquarters were firmly etched in his mind, and it was times like now, when he was running on his last reserves – both physically and mentally – that they manifested themselves as nightmares. He remembered every smell, every burning piece of wood, down to the last dying ember, like it had happened yesterday.

The explosion had been written off as a tragic accident. The result of a leaking gas main that had taken nothing more than an oven’s spark to set it off. The London papers had talked about it for

weeks. The emerging Council had friends in high places and heads were supposed to roll. It was just a matter of figuring out who.

Xander knew differently, however. He'd smelt something, he'd just been unable to pinpoint just what it was exactly. The scent had lingered, festering in his mind. Driving him crazy with his inability to determine what it was.

He'd stood on the fringes of the gathering crowd until the fireman had extinguished the blaze, hackles raised, eyes tinged with an unnatural green hue. He'd waited, hidden in the shadows, for someone to step forward. Perhaps take credit for their handiwork, or to do nothing more than gloat as the good guys took a hard hit. Only, no one had come, and Xander had been left with no person or persons to exact his revenge upon. No outlet for his consuming rage.

It had grown and festered, night after night as he'd stood there hidden in the shadows, staring at the remains of the building – the final tomb of his friends. He'd been unable to eat, unable to sleep. For the first time ever, he'd been thankful for the hyena spirit dwelling inside his body; it gave him strength and endurance, kept him going when the human in him wanted to curl up and just sleep. It nurtured the anger and pain, gave him a goal.

He'd just needed a starting point.

That had come innocently enough. An elderly woman who lived down the street had been out walking her dog.

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*“Come away from there, Trixie. That place is touched by evil.”*

*Xander snapped out of his trance, his gaze zeroing in on the woman and the poodle snooping on the edge of the Council's property.*

*“I'm sorry. What did you say?” He just barely managed to keep the growl out of his voice as he stepped out of the shadows.*

*“Oh my! You scared me, young man.”*

*“I'm sorry.”*

*“Don't apologize. It was my fault. I was too busy not looking where I was going.”*

*Xander smiled, hoping to put the lady at ease. He gestured with his head towards the burned down ruins. “What happened?”*

*“You're gonna think I'm an old fool, but I haven't lived as long as I have without having noticed a few things. T' weren't no accident, let me tell you. That place was touched by the devil himself.” She nodded sagely. “Take a good whiff. It's evil I say. Evil did this, not no gas leak.*

*You mark my words.” She shuffled off with a slight tug of her leash, the poodle yapping excitedly, eager to be on the move.*

*Xander stared at the woman’s retreating back, her words playing over and over in his mind.*

*‘Touched by the devil himself...’*

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A plan had been born in the wake of the woman’s departure. He’d started right there in London, ridding the city of anything “evil” that had crossed his path, human and demon alike. Night after night he’d ventured forth, submersing himself into the bowels of Hell to seek vengeance for his friends.

After London it had been Berlin. There were Hellmouths aplenty throughout the world, and it was those Xander sought out. Knowing that they were the source of the foulest evil. If he couldn’t find the ones responsible, he’d at least take out their brethren.

Xander collapsed onto the bed face first, not even bothering with the covers. The water slowly evaporating from his skin was a nice contrast from the heat of the shower, and that of the room. Record-breaking temperatures over the past few days – a norm of the Hellmouth – were sorely taxing the tiny window-mounted air conditioning unit steadily clanking away so that he barely felt the cool air wafting in his direction.

His hand closed around a pillow and drew it close. Luxuriating in the cool cotton against his face before the heat of his skin was bound to rub off on the material.

A minute later it didn’t matter as Xander gave himself up to the oblivion of sleep.

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Spike woke an hour before sunset. After filling up on a few mugs of blood, he got dressed and escaped from the apartment before Cordelia could come out of her room and harangue him some more. The woman would talk his ear off given half the chance, and he didn’t want to unintentionally vent his anger on the wrong person. Which was what he’d end up doing if Cordelia brought up the boy’s name.

Xander was the one that had pissed him off, but good. And it would be the boy that took it on the chin. Once he caught up with him, that is.

Outside in the hallway, Spike breathed deeply and was just barely able to make out the scent of Xander. The trail led to the left and up the stairwell to the ground floor and a side exit that spilled out into an alley, and Spike followed until he could go no further, prevented from exiting the building by the sun that had yet to fade over the horizon.

With nothing left to do but wait, Spike pulled out his cigarettes and lit up. He went through four in rapid succession, no sooner finishing one than he lit another.

Finally the sun set enough for him to stick to the shadows, and he stubbed out his cigarette and threw open the door, determined to find Xander.

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Even with as exhausted as he'd been, Xander still only managed to sleep for a little over five hours. Which was why he was camped out across the street from Cordelia's apartment complex, wolfing down a roast beef sandwich he barely tasted, biding his time until he thought it suitable enough to return. He didn't want to wake Spike up; the vamp was already cranky and interrupting his sleep would only result in a second strike against him.

He lingered over his chips and soda and stared up at the balconies of their apartment building.

Now there was story just waiting to be told.

The last he'd heard, Cordelia had been in a coma thanks to some thing that had taken possession of her body. And Spike... well, Spike was supposed to have gone out in a blaze of glory back in Sunnydale.

Yet they were both here, living on a hellmouth, and apparently working for the good guys.

Xander swallowed the last of his soda, declining a refill from the passing waitress. He'd held off as long as he could. If he woke Spike up, so be it.

It wouldn't be the first time he was on the vamp's shit list.

Chuckling to himself, Xander stood up.

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"*Xander!* What—? Come in, come in!"

Xander smiled to cover his wince at the decibel Cordelia managed to achieve with her greeting. He allowed her to pull him inside and usher him towards the couch.

Spike wasn't there.

"Where's Spike?"

Damn. He hadn't meant to say that out loud, and seeing the shrewd look enter Cordelia's eyes, he knew the question wouldn't go without comment.

“What?” he grouched, trying to play it off. “It’s not like I care, I just don’t want him coming in and getting pissy because I’m lounging on his bed or something. Or do you two sleep togeth...?”

Xander’s voice trailed off at the expression on Cordelia’s face; the way she looked down her nose at him, like he was so much dirt beneath her feet. He completely disregarded the sick feeling he got imagining the two together. Spike was... *not his*, he firmly reminded himself. This morning had been a thing. What had Spike said? Fighting and fucking, it just happens sometimes? Today had just happened to be one of those times.

“... earth to Xander... hello...”

Xander blinked.

“Uh... sorry. Guess I zoned out there for a sec. So, you and Spike, huh?”

“No, not me and Spike, you idiot. At least not like *that*.” Cordelia just barely managed to hold onto her temper. “We work together... that’s *all*. I get the visions; he goes out and does the dirty work. Ours is strictly a platonic partnership. Spike sleeps on the couch because it’s just easier... and quicker.” At Xander’s look, she elaborated. “Demons aren’t too keen on having one of the ‘good guys’ running around their neighborhood, messing things up. Spike gave up his apartment and moved in with me to keep me safe.”

“Oh...”

“Yes, oh. Now, *you* can tell me why Spike was all pissed off when I came back. And why did you leave, anyway?”

“Uh...”

Xander wracked his brain, trying to come up with a plausible excuse for Spike’s anger and his departure. The truth – that he and Spike had gotten groiny after wrestling around on the floor – might not be the best thing to tell his ex-girlfriend.

“... we never did get along?”

“Are you asking me?”

Xander took a deep breath and let the words tumble out. “Me and Spike had sex on your living room floor... well, we sorta had sex. Then afterwards, some things were said, Spike blew everything out of proportion and stormed off to the bathroom. I left. There. Happy now?”

“O... kay... Ummm... yeah...”

“Yeah...”

Cordelia was at a loss for words. Of all the possible explanations she'd been expecting, Xander and Spike having sex had been so far down on the list as to be nonexistent. Actually, it hadn't even *been* on the list.

"You and Spike?"

"Me and Spike."

"Oh. Well, all right then."

"It's no big deal. It happens sometimes." *No, that's not bitterness I'm hearing.*

"Sure it does. Only, it doesn't. Xander, you had sex on my floor with Spike!"

"Sorry?"

"Vamp's gonna clean my carpets too," Cordelia muttered under her breath. "So, is this a thing? You two? I mean—"

"No! A *world* of no." *Liar. Liar. Pants on fire.* "For one thing, Spike hates me." Xander sighed heavily and leaned back into the couch. "Cordy, can we just drop it? It was a mistake. It won't happen again. I just came to apologize for leaving without saying goodbye, and well... talk, really."

"Oh... Xander... sure we can."

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Xander sipped at the coffee mug that Cordelia had thrust into his hands and listened with interest to his ex-girlfriend's story.

"I'm not sure if it was a dream, or if I was actually there, but I remember telling Angel about the Black Thorn. Nothing specific... just images. Spike told me later that Angel was the one that concocted the plan to take out the members after being told that I'd died."

"Revenge?"

"I don't know... maybe. I was only trying to set him on the right path. The Powers... they told me that he was slipping, that he was losing his purpose, his reason for being. They let me go to him... I... I didn't know... Didn't think—"

"Cordy, Angel went into that fight with both eyes open." Xander laid a reassuring hand on her arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. "They all did."

"The Council didn't."

“What?” Xander’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“Spike told me... they... the Senior Partners... they’re the ones that had the building destroyed. The demons taunted Angel and the others with it, saying that none of the slayers were coming to help. That they were all alone... four against hundreds. Spike watched Angel turn to dust right before his eyes. Angel was fighting a dragon and it ripped his head clean off.” She didn’t mention Spike’s berserker rage against the remaining demons in the alley, something she’d only learned of through the vampire’s recurring nightmares.

“Oh god.” Xander hadn’t cared one whit for Angel, but it wasn’t like he’d wanted him dusted either. And poor Spike having to witness Angel going out like that. “How... how did Spike manage to survive?”

“Illyria. She did something. Sucked up herself and the demons, leaving Spike broken and alone in the alley. Luckily it rained for a week straight afterwards or he probably would have ended up dusting himself. I found him huddled in a corner, half out of his mind with hunger.”

“You found him?”

“Yep. With the Senior Partners attention diverted in London, the PTBs were able to break their hold on me. I woke up in the hospital and managed to stumble out of bed.”

“How did you get out of there?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“Angel’s son.”

Xander blinked. “Come again?”

“Angel’s son, Connor.”

“Wait! What? Some vampire—?”

“No. Connor is human.”

“Ok. You’ve lost me. Angel has a son? A *human* son? What, did he like... *adopt* or something?”

“No... it’s... a long story. Angel and Darla... they had a baby together. It was part of a prophecy. A sequence of events that got me impregnated and well... you know how *that* went. Anyway, the Powers told him I was still alive and he came and rescued me. Together, we found Spike.”

“So where is this Connor now?”

“On the east coast somewhere. We’re not sure exactly. And Spike and I don’t want to know either. Connor’s given up enough of his youth to the cause.”

What she didn’t say was that Connor had grown into a striking young man and was the spitting image of Angel. Neither she nor Spike could cope with the constant reminder of what they’d both lost.

“So, these last ten years, it’s just been you and Spike?”

“Not exactly. Connor stayed with us for a couple of years. Spike was...” *Constantly drunk.* “... difficult to manage for a long time. But ours is no life for a kid. Heck, you should know.”

“Yeah.” In Sunnydale, many a night he went home with cuts and bruises, a reminder that humans just weren’t cut out to hang with the Slayer. Even now, he didn’t escape unscathed, though with the hyena, the results of his night spent out and about didn’t last longer than the next morning.

“So, we sent him east with instructions to finish school, get a job and be ‘Joe Normal.’ He was reluctant at first, until Spike took him aside. Whatever he said did the job. When we woke up the next day Connor was gone. Haven’t seen him since. That was six years ago.”

“Then what happened? After Connor was gone.”

“We were living in San Francisco at the time. Spike was getting restless and my visions were coming less frequently. We’d just decided to move someplace north when Spike came across a slayer.”

“A slayer? Did she have a watcher?”

“No, and Spike didn’t talk about it other than to say that he’d seen her and that it was time for us to move on. So, we packed our things and moved to Seattle. Lived there for four years before we came here.”

“Couldn’t get enough of the Hellmouth?”

Cordelia snorted. “Hardly. Seattle was nice, if a bit rainy. We’d go days – *weeks* sometimes – without having to deal with the latest monster de jour. But, we go where the visions take us. And they eventually brought us here. Spike and I have been here a little over two years now.”

“But why do you stay here? I mean, it’s gotta get old...”

“What else are we gonna do? Forever is a long time to sit around and do nothing. And, Spike’s kinda grown on me. For all his rough exterior, he’s one giant marshmallow on the inside.”

“A marshmallow?”

“Yeah... you know. A big softie.”

“Spike? A *softie*? You’re kidding me, right?”

“Well, he does have his moments... Okay, a lot of them, actually. But then, so do I.”

“Trust me, Cordy, I know *all* about *your* moments.”

“Hey!”

“What? I’m just saying. You weren’t known as ‘Queen C’ for nothing.”

Cordelia’s eyes narrowed and Xander thought for a minute that maybe he’d gone too far. Then she crossed her arms over her chest and stuck out her tongue. Xander laughed and the noise sounded odd to his own ears.

The thought was sobering.

He looked at his watch and sighed. “I should probably get going.”

“Oh? Do you have to? Spike’ll be home later after he finishes patrolling. We could hang out. Sorta like old times.”

“How about you run the idea by your roommate first? If Spike doesn’t have any objections, I’ll swing by tomorrow night. Maybe we can go out to dinner... catch a movie or something.”

“That’d be great, though I seriously doubt Spike is going to put up a fuss. He was pretty pissed that you left without saying goodbye. I’m sure he’ll be sorry that he missed you.”

“Sorry he couldn’t bash my head in,” Xander muttered under his breath.

“Xander!” Cordelia smacked him on the arm with the back of her hand.

“Ow! That hurt!”

“It was supposed to, you ass. Come on, I’ll walk you to the door.”

At the door, Xander pulled Cordelia close and gave her a hug. Surprisingly, she clung to him just as tightly as he did to her. He was reluctant to pull away, but forced himself to do so.

It was time to hunt.

He leaned back and stared intently at his ex. She looked beautiful as always; her face was as unlined as his. He frowned as her words came back to him then.

*Forever is a long time to sit around and do nothing.*

He opened his mouth, then changed his mind. Definitely a thought for another time. Right now, the hyena was goading him to action.

He needed to leave.

Xander tucked Cordelia's hair behind her ear and bent down and brushed his lips across her cheek.

"I'm staying at the Meramont Inn. You can leave a message with the front desk and I'll get it."

"Alright."

"I'll see you tomorrow night then. Maybe."

Xander stepped back and turned away; he spun back around when Cordelia called his name. He stood there waiting as she bit her lip in indecision.

"What is it, Cordy?"

"It's just... you should know... Spike blamed Angel for Buffy's death and... he hated himself for it. Still does. He said some things to Angel while they were fighting in that alley. Unforgivable things... and then Angel was just gone... and Spike... he couldn't take them back."

Xander nodded. Spike's situation was not unlike his own.

"There's something else. Spike and Angel, they were... you know..."

"What?" At her pointed look, he practically shouted, "You're saying Spike and Angel...?"

"Were together? Yes."

"But..." *They hated each other.*

Cordelia ignored Xander's incredulous look. "They'd settled their difference and... well... you know how vampires are... familial bonding and all that." She laid a hand on Xander's arm. "Just... go easy on him, okay? Spike's—"

"It's ok, Cordy. I understand. Believe me..." *More than you'll ever know.*

Another peck to Cordelia's cheek and Xander turned and jogged down the hallway towards the stairs. He'd swing by his motel room and pick up a few additional weapons first.

Then, maybe if he was lucky, he'd come across Spike while he was out.

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Spike stood across the street outside the building and stared at the entrance. Hoping that if he glared at the doors long enough, Xander would emerge. A cigarette dangled from his hands, forgotten.

He'd lost track of the time while waiting.

Finally cursing himself for being such a git, he tossed what remained of his latest cigarette to the ground to join the pile of others, stomping it out as he stepped off the curb and crossed the street. He wasn't sure why he was putting it off – going up to Xander's room – or why he wanted the confrontation in the first place.

Getting into a fight wasn't going to resolve anything. And it wasn't like he and the boy ever indulged in meaningful conversation.

*'You're just takin' the piss because Harris blew you off after some halfway decent frottage,'* his inner voice snarked.

*'T'weren't halfway decent,'* Spike snapped back. *'Was bloody good. Kid's got a mouth like a vacuum.'*

*'He's warm, too. Not like those vamp tramps you've reduced yourself to taking and staking.'*

A smile tugged at the corners of Spike's lips at the remembered feel of Xander beneath him. How the heat emanating from his body seemed to seep into his cool flesh.

“Bloody hell.”

Spike glanced down, and sure enough, he was hard. Which made him angry. He growled and nearly yanked the front door of the motel off its hinges as he let himself inside. Not bothering with the desk clerk, Spike instead strode purposefully to the staircase. He leapt up the steps, taking two and three at a time, his nose sniffing out the boy's scent. It came as no surprise that Xander took the stairs rather than the elevator; he'd want to control his environment as much as possible, which was hard to do in a rickety box suspended by a mere cable.

As he neared the door that smelled distinctly of Xander, he could have let out a roar of frustration. The boy wasn't in.

Rather than turn around and go back the way he came, Spike removed a slim black case and unzipped it. The lock pick set had been a gift from Cordelia.

“Sometimes a situation will call for a little stealth,” she'd told him at the time. “I can show you how to use it.”

“Bloody well know how to use a lock pick. What I'm wantin' to know is how you do, Princess.”

She'd gone quiet then, the whispered words when they came driving home how alone in the world the two were.

“Charles showed me.”

He'd thanked her rather awkwardly and escaped from her apartment before they'd both been reduced to blubbing messes. When he'd shown up later – after a satisfying patrol – they'd both acted like nothing had happened, burying the pain beneath outwardly smiling faces. If they sat close to one another on the couch while they watched television, and Spike's arm casually slipped around her shoulder in a show of solidarity and comfort, it wasn't remarked upon.

Spike's conscience bugged him for all of two seconds before he stuck the tools in the keyhole and manipulated the lock. The door swung open and Xander's scent washed over him. He slipped inside and shut the door; his eyes scanned the room taking note of the sparse furnishings.

There were no personal items in sight. He opened drawers, all of which were empty save for a bible in the bedside drawer – compliments of the motel, probably. Two large duffle bags were lying against the wall beneath the window on the far side of the room and upon further inspection revealed one that contained clothes and the other weapons.

He took a quick peek in the bathroom and noticed a small leather bag that contained Xander's toiletries. Nothing was left lying about.

“Smart boy,” Spike muttered under his breath. Xander could be in and out of the room in under a minute if need be.

As if his words suddenly conjured the boy, Xander was there, standing in the open doorway as Spike came out of the bathroom.

“Spike.”

Xander's tone was neutral enough, which just served to fan the flames of Spike's anger, simmering as it was beneath the surface. His nostrils flared, and as they did so, he caught a whiff of Cordelia's scent.

All this time he'd spent waiting, Xander had been off making time with the girl.

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Xander watched Spike stiffen. Heard the growl in the second before his demon burst forth. The vamp was obviously pissed off – the clenched fists and flexing jaw were a dead giveaway – and directing that anger towards him for some reason.

Apparently, Spike was more upset than Cordelia let on because he'd left without saying anything. But, it wasn't like Spike had encouraged any more conversation given that he'd slammed the bathroom door, practically in Xander's face.

And now that he thought of it, what the hell was Spike doing in his room anyway?

Which pissed *him* off... and made him wonder about that “no invite” clause. Guess motel rooms didn’t apply. Either that, or he’d not made a home of the place.

But, Xander didn’t have time to think about any of that because Spike let out a roar and charged.

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If Spike thought he was going to stand there and just take it... well, he had another think coming. He wasn’t the Zeppo, or the Donut Boy any longer. Hadn’t been since Africa. And while he might not come out on top – Spike had been in the game a lot longer than he had – he *was* going to make his presence felt.

Xander felt the hyena surge up inside him, rising to the challenge. He stood calmly in the doorway until the last possible second, then darted inside the room and out of Spike’s way. Spike careened out the door and slammed into the wall in the hallway.

The impact didn’t faze him in the least; if anything, it just made him madder.

It was too bad that Xander didn’t realize the reason behind Spike’s rage. That the cloying scent of Cordelia had sent the vampire into a jealous fit of which even *he* was unaware. That the thought of the two of them had been together all this time while he’d spent it waiting – *pinning* – for the boy to come home.

A red haze of hate and rage blanketed Spike’s gaze, his demon taking over completely at the boy’s perceived rejection. His head snapped over his shoulder and pinned Xander in place before he turned around and walked calmly inside the room and shut the door.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Spike told him, his voice low and even, as he calmly removed his duster and tossed it aside.

“Yeah... well, you shouldn’t have broken into my hotel room. But what’s a little B & E between friends?”

“Oh, you have no idea...” his voice trailed off and he took a menacing step closer.

Xander missed the play on words, but then it was too late. Spike dove forward and tackled him to the bed.

Even though Xander had a slight advantage in the weight and height department, apparently Spike hadn’t gotten the memo. His struggles barely moved the vamp straddled across his hips and he couldn’t get the leverage with his arms to break Spike’s hold. Disgusted with how easily he’d been subdued, Xander renewed his attempt to get free – not even Spike’s warning growl was enough to stop him.

But then, it wasn't like he could actually hear it given all the shouting and cussing he was doing. He was so distracted by that, and his inability to break free, that he didn't sense Spike closing in on his neck until his fangs broke the skin.

His yelp could have passed for a whine; it turned into a throaty moan when Spike settled on top of him and he felt a distinct bulge dig into his own rapidly filling cock. Spike thrust against him, still sucking at his throat and it was like last night all over again.

The fight went out of him and he bucked beneath the vamp. Let out a whimper of need as their cocks brushed together again. Xander spread his legs allowing Spike to settle more firmly against him and when that wasn't enough, wrapped them around the vamp's back, pulling him closer. He renewed his efforts to free his arms and managed to get one loose.

His hand went to the back of Spike's head and grabbed a fistful of hair, but instead of yanking Spike away from his neck...

*"Harder!"*

Xander pushed his fangs in deeper.

Spike did for a second, taking and taking. Everything the boy wanted to give him. Soon, though, the taste wasn't enough. As sweet as Xander's blood was, he wanted more. Wanted what had been denied him before: Xander taking him all in, hard and fast, and oh so deep.

He tore his mouth away with a war-like cry; blood dribbled down his chin and splattered on Xander's shirt as Spike knelt above him on all fours.

Xander was mesmerized by the sight of him. His hand lifted of its own accord to swipe at the blood – his blood. Spike didn't move as Xander brought his fingers to his mouth and licked them clean, just stared at him intently through amber colored eyes. He'd tasted his own blood often enough over the years, but never like this.

A hint of Spike was mixed in – faint, but there – and that made it all the more sweeter. He wanted more, went to lift his hand but found it seized. Growled at being denied for the entire time it took Spike to resettle his weight atop him and attack his mouth.

It was like before, only it wasn't. There was urgency, a need to possess and be possessed. To lay claim.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Xander wondered what he was doing, what *they* were doing. That it was Spike he was doing this with. Buffy's Spike. Angel's Spike.

Never his Spike.

Spike abandoned his mouth suddenly, leaving Xander gasping in some much-needed breath, only to have it catch as his shirt was ripped away and tossed aside. Spike attacked his bare chest with

hands and lips, eliciting mewls of pleasure and cries for more. And harder. And please, Spike. God, yes. Right there. Then, bite me.

Which Spike did. And often. Shallow bites that bathed his skin red as his mouth trailed lower and lower.

A pop of a button and a slide of a zipper, and his cock sprang free and into Spike's waiting mouth, causing Xander's hips to buck involuntary. Hands fisted in pale blond hair and held Spike in place as he pumped and fucked and generally tried to suffocate the vamp with his dick. And Spike was licking and sucking and swallowing him down, not put off in the slightest.

Was in fact pulling Xander's jeans down his hips, as he did so, finally shredding the material like so much paper when they wouldn't cooperate. Cool hands wrapped around his balls, testing their weight, kneading them, softly at first, then harder once he realized Xander could take it.

And Xander encouraged it all with dirty little words and phrases that would have had him blushing in the past. Before Africa.

"Christ! Gonna... Spike... I'm... I'm gonna come."

Then he was, and Spike was drinking him down as Xander spent himself inside the vampire's mouth.

Spike wasn't done with him however, because Xander had no sooner come down out of the rafters than he was bent nearly in half, his legs splayed wide, as the vamp tugged at the fastenings of his jeans and freed himself. His eyes grew wide as Spike positioned his cock at his virgin hole – and yeah, he'd had sex with other males but he'd always topped before now – and pushed his way home.

Xander yelped and whined and tried to break free, to unseat Spike, but it was no use. He felt his insides tear and forced himself to relax. To take Spike in.

He was *so* kicking the vamp's ass when this was over. Hell, he had lube in his bag and it wouldn't have taken but a second to grab it.

But then Spike hit a spot inside him and he didn't care what Spike did, as long as he hit that spot again. And again.

God love him, he did. Over and over, until his flaccid cock showed signs of renewed interest. Xander decided to help it along and went to take it in his hand.

It was batted away with a fierce growl from Spike.

"*Mine!*"

Spike's cool hand settled around his cock, and Xander was inclined to agree. So long as he continued to stroke it like he was doing. The growling thing he was doing was nice too, vibrating through his body as it was.

Thick cock in his ass, a hand stripping his own cock like there was no tomorrow, and Xander was on sensory overload. He could feel the beginnings of a second orgasm building. Spike must have sensed it too, because his pace kicked up a notch and he began jerking Xander off even faster. When the vamp nuzzled the virgin side of his neck, Xander didn't pause in exposing it.

"Mine," Spike growled against his throat, and Xander nodded his agreement. *Yes, yours... anything. Just let me come again... Please, Spike. Oh... yeah... right there. Fuck! Coming...*

"Spike..."

But that was okay, because Spike was coming too. Hips thrusting erratically as his cool seed splashed against Xander's insides.

This time collapsing on top of him when he was through. Dead weight, literally, but Xander didn't mind.

Hell, if he thought the first time was fantastic, this round was off the charts – he was entitled to a little cuddle time.

Before he shoved Spike off him and demanded to know what the fuck *this* fuck was all about.

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Xander waited only as long as it took Spike to shift off him and collapse face first on the mattress before getting up off the bed. He stood and spied the tattered remains of his jeans on the floor and wrote them off as a lost cause. There was no way he'd be wearing them again.

*'Should make him buy me a new pair of damn jeans.'*

Raiding the pockets of the various humans and demons he came across on a nightly basis kept him clothed and fed with a roof over his head. But just barely.

His movements were a bit jerky – a combination of his rising anger as the seconds ticked past without one word from Spike and the lingering tenderness of his ass – as he crossed the room to his duffle bag and pulled out a fresh set of clothes, all the while thanking his lucky stars that he was no longer entirely human. Even now, he could feel his body begin to repair itself.

He dressed in silence, a small part of him hoping that Spike would open his mouth and ask him to stay. But he didn't, and Xander moved to the second duffle and began rifling through it for weapons. As he did, his anger consumed him.

*'Doesn't mean a thing...'*

Spike's words from the night before taunted him as he armed himself to the nines. He had to get out of there, and fast. Before he did something he would likely regret.

Better for him to take out his frustration on the baddies lurking about outside. Leave the one *inside* for another time. Say, when he wasn't feeling quite so homicidal.

He ignored Spike as he crossed the room and headed for the door. And it wasn't like the vamp was making with the conversation – or the objections to him leaving his side – the entire time it took him to dress and gather weapons, so it came as a surprise when he reached the door and Spike's voice rang out.

“Just where the bloody hell do you think you're going? We're not done yet.”

*'Now? He asks me that now?'*

Xander stopped, counting to ten before he trusted himself to turn around.

Spike was standing now, arms crossed over his chest. Eyes changing from blue to gold and back again.

Xander allowed himself a brief moment to look his fill. Felt his dick twitch in response as he eyed the vamp from head to toe. Spike looked good. Damn good.

“I'm going out,” he snapped. “And if you're *smart*, you won't be here when I get back.”

Spike took a threatening step forward and Xander let loose the dagger that seemed to materialize in his hand, reacting instinctively to the implied threat. If it had been a stake, Spike would have been dust, given where the point imbedded itself in his skin and the fact he'd been too slow to prevent the attack.

Spike stumbled back and landed on the bed, his hands clutching the hilt.

“I'm not the Zeppo, Spike,” he warned, voice low, eyes flashing brilliant green. Ignoring Spike's bellow of pain and rage as he ripped the dagger free from his chest. “And I'm *not* your damn fuck toy either!”

Xander turned and strode off without a backward glance, slamming the door in his wake.

By the time Spike managed to stagger to his feet and right his clothes, Xander was long gone.

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Spike spent the remainder of the night looking for Xander, but had no luck. All he found was a trail of dead bodies, human and demon alike. The human bodies surprised him; the Slayer and her lot had never gone for that particular brand of justice before. Choosing instead to leave the humans engaging in criminal activity for the police.

But then, Xander wasn't hanging with the Slayer these days. Probably had his own moral code he lived by. Not that Spike cared one whit who the boy marked for execution. Evil was evil in his book – it didn't matter the face it wore.

And it wasn't like he could claim he'd not done the same. There was no small shortage of thugs in Phoenix to keep him supplied in fresh human blood. It seemed almost nightly he was interrupting some human at their worst, draining them dry as penance for their aborted crimes. His demon thrilling at the fear pervading his victims' bodies in their final moments of life.

Surprisingly, his soul offered up no protests either.

Sometimes he wondered if he even *had* a soul anymore. Or if he'd lost it long ago in a rain-soaked alley.

Towards dawn, Spike gave up looking for the boy and debated going home and listening to Cordelia rant versus going back to Xander's motel room and taking him to task for the hole in his chest.

No one had ever said he was smart...

Smiling with evil intent, he headed back to Xander's motel room.

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Spike's temper, already at the boiling point because he'd been unable to find Xander, grew to epic proportions when he returned and realized the boy was still gone. He was still out there. Somewhere. And pointedly avoiding him.

Xander had to know he'd return. That things between them were far from settled.

Now, with the sun up, it left him stuck inside the motel room twice in as many days.

It mattered naught that he really had no reason for being pissed off – discounting the boy's fuck and run, and the dagger to his chest. That if anyone had a right to be bent out of shape, it was Xander.

But then, Spike had never claimed to be rational either.

He spent the remainder of the morning pacing the tiny motel room, ears attuned to the slightest noise that would signify Xander's return. Cursing under his breath as he chain-smoked his way through the remaining cigarettes in his pack.

By lunchtime, Spike knew Xander wasn't coming back.

He gave a brief thought to what Cordelia was going to say – prompting a quick jaunt to the lobby to make a phone call, only to be told that she hadn't seen Xander, not since he'd left sometime

early last evening after the two of them had played catch up. He'd hung up before she could interrogate him further. Or jealousy could rear its ugly head and he demanded to know just *how* they'd caught up.

If he remembered correctly, the two of them used to date.

The climb back to Xander's motel room had been a slow one, and the walls bore a few holes where his anger had gotten the best of him.

By late afternoon, he'd worn a hole in the carpet from his continual pacing.

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"You want to tell me what's going on?" Cordelia demanded in her no-nonsense tone. She'd not said anything when Xander turned up on her doorstep just before dawn without so much as a hello, demanding to be let in. Then she'd gone one step further and lied to Spike about Xander being there – which she *so* was going to deny to her grave.

She'd let him in and pointed towards the couch.

He'd no sooner sat down than he'd fallen asleep. Leaving him be, she'd retreated to her room until lunchtime – a new record for her. It was only as she emerged from her room to see Xander awake and staring broodingly at the television screen that she'd decided enough was enough.

"No."

"No? Xander..."

Her hands settled on her hips and she gave him her best "tell me now or *else*" look. Totally lost on him, given that he'd yet to look her way.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Don't want to talk about what? The fact that you're here and Spike is there? In *your* motel room." At his startled look, she laughed. "Oh, please... like I couldn't figure out for myself that that was where Spike was going when he took off outta here last night."

"It's not— we're not—"

"Uh huh... *right*," she interrupted. "So, you two have a lover's tiff?"

"Anyone ever tell you you're a bitch, Cordy?" There was no malice in his voice, only resigned acceptance.

“All the time,” she told him happily, and settled next to him on the couch. “So, spill. I want all the juicy details. Wait... maybe not *all* the details. But, if I’m gonna catch shit from Spike, this needs to be worth it.”

“No.”

“*Xander*,” she whined.

“Give it a rest, Cordy. I’m not talking about me and Spike. Not that there *is* a ‘me and Spike’. There’s not. I told you last night, it was just a thing. Wouldn’t happen again.”

*Only it did. Boy, did it ever!*

*‘Shut up! Not helping here!’*

And now Xander knew he was starting to lose his mind; he was arguing with himself.

Cordelia’s quirked brow said it all, but for once she kept her mouth shut.

Xander breathed a sigh of relief when she let the matter drop, facial expressions aside. He’d forgotten how tenacious she could be. Besides, he was reserving all of his anger for the person that deserved it.

He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t just gone back to the motel once he’d finished his patrol and settled things with Spike right then. He knew his parting remark would ensure Spike’s being there.

*Oh, please, you know why.*

Arguing would lead to fucking, rather quickly in his and Spike’s case, it seemed. And he didn’t want to be just an itch that Spike needed scratching. Forgive him if he wanted a little something... *more*.

Which just boggled the mind, given that he was talking about Spike.

He wanted more from Spike?

*‘Ok, it’s official. I’ve lost my mind.’*

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Xander let himself into his motel room, wary of the vampire he knew to be lurking inside. The nose didn’t lie, nor did the hairs on the back of his neck. He was on alert, giving due respect to a fellow predator. Plus, there was that whole dagger to the chest thing he had going for him, not that he regretted doing it at the time. Or now. Spike had deserved it, and it wasn’t like the steel blade could have killed him. Hurt like a bitch, sure, but no lasting damage.

No, he'd been proving a point, nothing more.

He expected to be attacked – not literally, he hoped – as he walked inside, so it was with something akin to surprise that he managed to step inside without word one from the vampire.

Thinking that he'd caught Spike still sleeping, his gaze went straight to the bed. Only to have his brows draw together when it revealed no sign of him, the bedcovers untouched. He walked further into the room and stopped suddenly, swinging round to stare in confusion at the vamp huddled in the corner, gazing unseeing at the wall in front of him.

“Spike?” Xander called out, saying his name again when he didn't respond. “Spike?”

The third time he called Spike's name, Xander was kneeling in front of him, hands closing around the leather covering his shoulders and gently shaking. Worrying when the action produced no acknowledgment of his presence.

He was half tempted to smack Spike across the face to get a reaction – hey, it worked on people with hysterics, didn't it?

But Spike wasn't having a hysterical fit. He was just sitting there, face devoid of all expression, knees drawn to his chest and held in place with his arms. If Xander didn't know any better, he'd think the vamp was shivering. Impossible, given the whole vampire thing and Spike's lack of truly needing warmth.

Xander couldn't have said what made him draw Spike into his arms, but when he felt the vampire plaster himself against his body, he knew he'd done the right thing. He landed on his butt from the impact, barely managing to remain sitting upright. Spike's legs were straddling his thighs and given how close the vamp was trying to get – like he was determined to burrow inside Xander's own skin – it was a matter of course that their groins were smashed together. His body instantly reacted to the nearness, his cock beginning to harden within the confines of his jeans.

He gave up the fight with his dick when Spike began nuzzling his neck where he'd bitten him earlier – who knew how sensitive that particular area would be? – and just barely managed to refrain from tightening his grip on Spike's waist and thrusting his hips upward. Spike wasn't behaving in typical fashion and his actions weren't the least bit sexual. Something Xander confirmed when he laid a hand against Spike's crotch and felt no telltale bulge in his pants.

*Down, boy*, he ordered his own cock. Snorting to himself when it blithely went about its own business. Not that Xander could blame it for having a mind of its own. Spike, with his mouth pressed to his neck, tongue and lips running over the barely healed marks there, wasn't helping in the least.

Figuring the easiest thing to do would be to go with the flow and ride out Spike's weird behavior, Xander laid back against the worn carpet, taking the vamp right along with him. It hadn't been the most comfortable position, sitting upright without any means of back support, 150-plus pounds of softly growling vampire plastered to his front and nuzzling at his throat.

Arms wrapped loosely around Spike's back, Xander lay there for the longest time. Long enough for Spike's lips to cease their movements, sniff his neck a few minutes longer, then go completely still atop him.

He'd fallen asleep – at least that's what Xander figured Spike had done.

Well, there was no way he was going to lay on the floor while Spike slept sprawled on top of him. Or so he told himself. Ten minutes later and Xander still hadn't moved.

There was something to be said for actually getting a chance to hold the prickly vampire without him being aware.

It was... nice.

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“Morning, sunshine,” Xander teased, and got what he thought was a “sod off” in reply. It was hard to tell given it was mumbled against his neck. Or more like growled.

Note to self – Spike was not a morning person. Er, vamp.

He felt Spike shift against him, felt him nuzzle into his neck, and groaned to himself as his dick decided – again – to stand up and take notice. He didn't bother telling it to behave, especially when Spike's own distinct bulge began to press into his groin. There were just some things he had no control over. It was a shocker to find that it included his body's physical reaction to the blond vampire.

However...

I am *not* having sex on the floor again, Xander thought, and he either voiced it out loud, or Spike was now a mind reader, because Spike stilled and eventually levered himself up until he was straddling his hips.

Spike looked like he was back to being pissed again, which all things considered, was better than the blank nothingness of earlier. Xander went to ask him about the trance thing but was cut off by Spike's abrupt question. Xander's hand went automatically to the patch resting comfortably over his left eye, was brushed away by cool fingers before it could encounter the worn satin.

A second later, it was drawn over his head and tossed aside.

Xander was amazed by how vulnerable he now felt. The patch had been a constant since England. A reminder. A penance.

It was because he'd still been wearing the patch upon his arrival in England those many years ago that his friends had no inkling of what had happened to him. He'd been relegated to the hired

help, and part of him had been pissed off. Angry that his friends, his *family*, hadn't noticed any change in him.

The shame he'd felt, still felt to this day, from the things he'd muttered under his breath as he'd stormed out of the house and away from the group.

Xander shoved Spike off him and scrambled to his feet to retrieve his eye patch. Secured it back in place just as the other invaded his personal space. He watched, warily, as Spike stopped, cocked his head to the side, and stared at him. Like he was looking into Xander's soul.

"Don't you think you've beaten yourself up enough over their deaths?" Spike asked, one brow quirked in enquiry.

"Like you've got room to talk," Xander snorted. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared back at the vamp. "And what are you, a vamped Dr. Phil now? What's it to you what I do?"

"I don't know," Spike replied honestly, relaxing his aggressive stance. And he really didn't know. Or why he cared. Other than he recognized so much of himself in Xander.

So much bitterness. Towards himself and the fates.

His hands dug into his pockets, searching for his smokes and lighter, but only managed to produce the second, forgetting that he'd blown through his pack of cigarettes searching, and then later waiting, for Xander. With a frustrated snarl, he dropped the lighter back in his pocket and strode to the bed to sit down.

Spike knew Xander was watching him, waiting for some answers. He could practically feel the tension in the boy's body. Unfortunately, he didn't have any.

Sighing, he bent over and began unlacing his boots. It wasn't until he'd taken his duster off and thrown it into a chair and started on his shirt that Xander spoke.

"What are you doing?" Xander's voice was higher than normal as Spike's shirt was removed to reveal pale skin littered with various cuts and scrapes, some of them caused by him. He swallowed hard when Spike started on his jeans, pulling them off and kicking the discarded heap in the same direction as his other clothes; they landed half on the seat and hung down to the floor.

But that wasn't what held Xander's attention.

No, it was the sight of Spike, uncaring of his nudity, calmly sliding into his bed.

"Spike...?"

"Still a bit worn out. Don't mind if I catch a few more hours kip, do you, Xan? You can watch TV, won't bother me none."

Xander watched, jaw hanging somewhere down around his knees, as Spike turned on his side, grabbed one of his pillows and inhaled. Deeply. He found himself mimicking the vampire's deep breath, smelling... him. Spike was smelling him, and making a weird rumbling noise – much like the sound he'd made when nuzzling his neck a bit ago – as he snuggled down into the pillow and stilled.

He wasn't sure if he should be more shocked by that, or by the fact that Spike had called him by name. Well, *almost* by name.

Minutes ticked by before Xander managed to tear his gaze away from the lump on his bed. He walked over towards the chair and let out a sigh. Spike was just as sloppy now as when he used to share Xander's basement with him. He grabbed the jeans dangling off the edge of the seat and folded them first before replacing them on the chair. Did the same for the shirt too.

His stomach growled suddenly, and he realized that he'd missed breakfast. With Spike asleep, it wouldn't hurt for him to dip down to the convenience store on the corner and stock up on some supplies.

He paused at the door, calling over his shoulder, "Just gonna grab a quick bite to eat." Then shook his head at his foolishness, doubting that the vampire had heard.

Still, at least Spike couldn't complain he'd left without saying goodbye.

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Xander wasn't expecting to wake up in bed with Spike practically plastered against his side, an arm and leg thrown over his body possessively. Then again, he'd not planned on even *being* in bed. But, after the first hour of watching daytime television – which was boring and beyond stupid, to say the least – he determined that the bed would be much more comfortable than the straight-back chair he'd been sitting on. It was... marginally.

He must have fallen asleep sometime during Oprah.

The short nap had him feeling well rested, which was a surprise in itself. He'd never slept during the day before and figured the brief respite would have left him more tired than usual.

Maybe Spike's presence in his bed had something to do with that.

He lay there for a bit, waiting for the vampire to awaken, half listening to the news now playing on the local television station. The female newscaster went on, complete with dramatic pauses, about the city's latest doom and gloom; the stories barely sparked his interest except to pass the time.

Until she came to the last one.

Xander sat up in bed abruptly, his eyes glued to the screen, displacing the vampire curled up next to him – who was a little less than pleased at being jolted but went right back to sleep.

The report was innocuous enough, a double twin kidnapping – one set of boys, one set of girls. Both identical. Both pre-pubescent. The rarity of the event was probably the only thing that had warranted the story even making the evening news.

He'd been right in assuming Zepheus was here. The proof was the missing children. Now he just had to find the bastard and put an end to him once and for all.

Xander tried to nudge Spike awake but got only a muffled complaint about it still being daylight and he was bloody tired.

“Come on, Spike,” Xander wheedled as he shook the vamp’s shoulder. “Wake up. Or, at least give me Cordy’s number. It’s important.”

“Cell phone... duster pocket...”

Xander rolled his eyes at the sleepy reply and climbed out of bed. He found the tiny phone, still marveling that Spike would even carry one around.

“Gotta be Cordy’s influence,” he mumbled under his breath as he scanned the list of saved numbers. There were two: “Home” and “Cordy cell.” Xander started with the second.

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“It’s about damn time you called me, Blood Breath! Do you know how *worried* I’ve been?” Cordelia shouted into the phone before Xander could get a word in edgewise. “Xander’s—”

“On the phone, Cordy,” he interrupted calmly. “Spike’s with me.”

But Cordelia was just getting warmed up and apparently hadn’t heard him.

“... When I get my hands on you...”

“Uh... Cordy?” Xander tried again. And again. Finally taking a page from his ex’s book and shouting like a shrew into the phone. “Cordy, it’s Xander!”

“Xander?”

“Yes. Spike’s with me. But, that’s not why I called.”

“What is it?” she asked, her tone going from aggravated to concerned in the blink of an eye.

“Have you had any visions lately?”

“Visions?”

“Yes. Visions. A demon... big, probably six feet, give or take. Dark skin, bald. Tattoos. Looks human enough except for his eyes. Think Shaquil O’Neal... only meaner.”

“Sha-who?”

“Basketball player. He— never mind. Just... have you had any kind of visions involving a behemoth of a man and two sets of twins?”

“No... why?”

“Damn...” he muttered to himself. “I was hoping for a bit of a break. What’s the point of having a seer on the ‘good guys’ team if she doesn’t ‘see’?”

“Xander, what is it? What’s wrong?” Cordelia could sense Xander’s impatience, and something else. Worry, perhaps even fear. Which was why she ignored his last remark. “Xander?” she called again when he didn’t answer her.

“What? Oh, sorry, Cordy. Look, lemme kick Spike outta bed and then we’ll come over. I’ll explain things then. If I’m right, we’ve a few days yet before the shit hits the fan.”

“Alright. I’ll be waiting...”

Xander said goodbye and hung up. He walked back to the bed and took perverse pleasure in yanking the covers off Spike, who vaulted to his feet ready to do battle, cursing a blue streak at having been woken so abruptly.

“Gonna have to take a rain check,” Xander replied with a chuckle mid-tirade. “Only *this* time it’s gonna be me fucking you.” Which effectively shut the vampire up and made his dick start to swell, Xander couldn’t help but notice when he glanced down. “Here...” he snapped to cover his own body’s response, flinging Spike’s jeans towards him. “... Put these on. We’ve got a baddie to track down.”

A few minutes later, the two left to meet up with Cordelia.

Surprisingly, Spike had offered no protest to Xander’s comment – whether he’d been kidding or not, Xander wasn’t quite sure – which gave him plenty to think on as he as Spike walked quietly towards the vamp’s home.

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“Well, isn’t that wonderful! I vote we move back to Seattle. Give up this Hellmouth crap,” Cordelia grumbled. “I mean if it’s not one demon, it’s another. Can’t we just put a sign on the thing that says ‘Closed for Good’?”

Xander had given them a brief rundown of his last confrontation with Zepheus. How he'd been working one of the Hellmouths – in all places, Africa – and caught wind of the demon's plan. He'd managed to stop the portal from opening, but had had to sacrifice one of the twins to do so. Greater good, Spike had muttered; Cordelia had nodded. And he'd felt a weight he was carrying for the last year lift slightly.

He'd gone on to explain how later he'd found out that even without taking the boy's life, the ritual would not have worked. That only the Phoenix Hellmouth could be opened in such a manner. He didn't explain the condemnation in the watcher's eyes – nor did he have to. Spike had just seemed to know. Cordy, too, for that matter. Both had said the same thing however. That it wasn't his fault. That they'd have done the same thing in his place. "Can't second-guess yourself, boy, or you'll wind up dead."

And suddenly, the weight was gone. The guilt he'd been carrying on his soul absolved by the two sitting in front of him.

So, Xander had gone on to explain his leaving Africa and returning to the states. How he'd not bothered to hurry to Phoenix to tip Zepheus' hand, seeing as the ritual called for a specific full moon – the one they were due to have in a few days. He'd wandered the country, like he'd wanted to do before he got stranded in Oxnard what seemed a lifetime ago, staying in one place only long enough to soak up a bit of local color and get rid of a few baddies, pocket their stolen cash, before moving on.

He'd been in Phoenix for two weeks now, careful to keep a low profile so as not to alert Zepheus to his presence. Not that it would have mattered to the demon either way; he was single-minded in his attempt to open the Hellmouth and hearing of Xander's presence in the city wouldn't sway him either way.

"Funny, pet," Spike smirked, catching Cordelia's pun, even if she didn't.

"Huh—?"

"Nothing."

"I'm just saying..." she griped. "You were evil once and it wasn't like you made a habit of trying to bring hell on Earth. What is it *with* these demons nowadays?"

"Guess they didn't get the memo," Xander told her.

"Didn't get much of anything... least of which is brains. I mean, *hello*... Hell equals no people. No people equals no food. Why is this so hard to understand?" She sat back in her chair in a huff. "Not that I'm condoning the killing of innocent people," she added as an afterthought, just in case the two mistook her meaning. "Bad ones, sure. Makes our lives a bit easier."

Xander couldn't help but laugh.

“That’s my Cordy. Always looking out for everyone’s best interests.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she grinned.

“So, I guess we have to do this the old-fashioned way,” Xander told them, steering their conversation back to Zepheus and his attempt to open the Hellmouth. “I should probably head out. See if I can sniff out the bastard. I found him once. Shouldn’t be too hard to do it again.”

Spike stood as Xander did.

“Take your cell phone, Spike. If the Powers decide to become more forthcoming, then I’ll give you a call.”

“Yeah, ok.”

Spike wandered into the kitchen to retrieve his phone from where he’d left it charging on the counter. He dropped it in one of his pockets and walked to the door.

“Don’t wait up, love.”

“Uh huh,” Cordelia muttered under her breath. “I seem to be getting a lot of that lately.”

Xander was almost out the door when he remembered.

“I’m just gonna use the bathroom a minute.”

Spike nodded. “I’ll wait for you outside,” he replied, fingering his cigarettes.

Xander mentally breathed a sigh of relief that he’d managed to get Cordelia alone without Spike getting suspicious. He went through the motions of walking towards the bathroom as Spike walked out the door and pulled it closed behind him. His sensitive hearing – which wasn’t quite as good as the vamp’s but got the job done – picked up the sound of the outer door closing and he turned towards Cordelia.

“Does Spike have spells?” he asked without preamble.

“Spells?”

“Spells. Trances. You know? Where he sits in a corner and stares off into space?” he gesticulated wildly with his hands.

Cordelia’s expression softened as it dawned on her what Xander was saying. She got up from her chair and laid a hand on Xander’s arm.

“I told you Spike’s had a rough time of it. He—” She wasn’t sure how to proceed. Or what to say to make him understand. “I guess you could call them nightmares. Or daymares. Sometimes

Spike... he gets trapped in the past and he ends up reliving Angel's death. Usually when he gets upset." *Or worried*, she didn't add.

"He..." *What, Xander? Plastered himself to you like a little girl? Nuzzled your neck like he was inhaling his own scent?* "I held him. And he fell asleep."

"Good. He doesn't sleep enough as it is."

"Does he... does he remember? You know, after?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Probably." Cordelia pulled her shirt aside and showed him her neck. "Kinda hard to hide these from him."

Xander stared at the faint marks on her throat and just barely managed to contain his growl.

Jealous. He was jealous of Cordy. Jealous that Spike had bitten her. His nostrils flared and he leaned in to inhale Spike's scent. Wanted to eradicate it from her skin. And barely caught himself in time.

"But you said—"

"We're not. We weren't." Her hands released her shirt. "This was... he needed something to keep him grounded. Here. A sense of..."

"Belonging," Xander whispered.

"Yes. Spike was alone in the world. Angel... everyone was dead, Xander. And Spike wanted to be too."

It pained Xander to think of Spike like that. The vamp had always been larger than life, even when he was chipped. He'd seen glimpses of Spike's softer side, though. The emotions even his demon had been unable to suppress. Xander had discounted them at the time; he couldn't upset the truths that had been ingrained since meeting Buffy and had taken everything she and Giles had said as gospel.

"I better go. Spike's probably wondering where I am." He turned and walked to the door; Cordelia's words stopped him before he could open it.

"It wasn't just me, Xander. Connor got his fair share too. When Spike closes in on himself, his scent on us would always bring him back. He needed that. Needed us."

Xander nodded, not turning around. It still didn't help the jealousy twisting his gut into knots.

He'd gotten his answers. But, all they did was create more questions.

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The night ended up being a bust. Spike had tried tapping a few of his contacts for information on a new demon in town, or whether they knew anything about the twins' kidnapping. He'd been met with shoulder shrugs and negative shakes of heads.

Xander wasn't giving up though. He had the scent of the demon memorized. He'd find the bastard and this time he'd kill it.

By mutual agreement, they went back to Xander's apartment.

"Gonna take a shower," Xander mumbled wearily as he trudged off to the bathroom.

Spike quirked his brow at the boy's back and debated joining him. Actually took a step in his direction before stopping. The door closed and Spike sighed and turned away, shrugged out of his duster and dropped it haphazardly over the back of the chair. There'd been not one whiff of pheromones being given off from Xander, his tone of voice announcing his intent free of any innuendo.

The water came on and Spike could imagine Xander in his mind, wet hair plastered to his head, hands braced on the tile as he let the water rain down on his body. A body that Spike had become intimately familiar with, though he'd yet to fully explore it at his leisure – something he'd have to remedy, and soon.

His hard-on was no surprise; he'd been half hard since engaging in a bit of rough and tumble with the boy a few nights ago.

The torture lasted for a good ten minutes. Ten minutes of Xander's quiet moans of pleasure easily discerned by preternatural hearing. Ten minutes of imagining Xander's hands soaping every inch of his body, the suds sliding off a sleek frame to run down the drain. Ten minutes spent debating joining Xander in the shower and sod the lack of formal invite. Wanting... *needing* to be the one to produce those breathy little sounds the boy was making.

It was a wonder Spike hadn't spilled himself inside his jeans.

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Xander walked out of the bathroom and was smacked in the face with Spike's arousal. His nostrils flared and he could feel his own dick start to swell beneath the towel wrapped around his hips. Though he forced himself to ignore it as he muttered, "Shower's free."

The tension was palpable as Xander crossed to what he deemed was his side of the bed and made to climb beneath the covers. Purposely avoided looking at Spike as he did so. He heard Spike stand, and for a minute, Xander thought he was going to approach. Then he seemed to change directions.

There was a soft click as the bathroom door shut.

Xander let out a sigh, dropped the towel by the side of the bed and slid beneath the sheets. He wasn't quite sure why he was relieved. Maybe it was the certainty he felt that if they'd given in to the urge, it would be much more of the same. Not to say that the same wasn't hot, or damn good. His dick would attest to that. *I want more*, flitted through his mind.

He was too tired to examine that thought, however. The hot shower had also done much to ease the ache in his muscles and it wasn't long before he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

So he didn't hear Spike jacking off in the shower, how he groaned Xander's name when he shot his load on the tile in front of him. He didn't feel the mattress dip as Spike slid into bed beside him and snuggled up against his side, how his lukewarm body did much to relieve the oppressive heat in the room when it wrapped around him.

"nite, Harris," Spike murmured, then closed his eyes and joined the boy in slumber.

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Though still asleep, his body sought more of the caress to his back and flank. Large hands kneaded his flesh, making him purr slightly. The gentle petting went on for some time, until he became used to the touch and once more succumbed to the pull of sleep.

Then lips and tongue did their best to rouse him. He hung there, balanced on the edge of wakefulness and slumber. Muttering nonsensical words as his body was licked, kissed, and nipped with a questing tongue, soft lips, and blunt teeth. No part of his body was left untouched or unexplored.

A rumbling growl erupted when he felt his ass cheeks parted and a moist finger probe his ass. Circling. Circling. Getting him to relax enough for it to slip inside. Slow and easy, and again he became accustomed to the sensation. Body growing heavy and sinking deeper into the mattress, further into sleep.

The second and third finger caused no more ripple in his sleep pattern than the first. It was only as something larger pushed against him and into him that he stirred a bit. Unconsciously slid his legs farther apart. More stretching than before, but in a good way. He clung to sleep, even as his body commanded that he wake and appreciate the in and out motion, the constant brushing of his prostate, the body draped over him. Covering him from head to toe. Enveloping him.

He felt safe. Love. Protected.

Not since...

*Angel.*

The name skidded through his subconscious... but, was voiced aloud. Husky with sleep and need.

He felt the body above him freeze mid-thrust and moaned plaintively. Came awake to the scent and feel of Xander surrounding him. In him, at least partially.

He wanted more. Wanted to be filled like he hadn't been in far too long. Wanted the warmth of Xander's body pressed against his back. To feel the heat of it sink into him and relieve the cold that never seemed to dissipate.

*"Xander..."*

But Xander was moving. Up and off the bed. Into the bathroom, where it took all he had not to slam the door. He turned on the water and stepped beneath the spray before the heat managed to kick in. Not that he felt it, or cared one way or the other. His thoughts ringing with earlier taunts.

*Buffy's Spike. Angel's Spike. Never your Spike. Never yours...*

Over and over, until he was ready to pound on the tiles in agonized frustration.

*Damn me for a fool. Told me sometimes a fuck is just a fuck. Should have listened to him. Stupid to think that he could really want me.*

Xander stayed in the shower long after the hot water ran cold, hoping that Spike would have gone back to sleep by the time he felt calm enough to emerge. When his teeth began to chatter, Xander reluctantly turned the taps off and climbed out of the tub. Wrapped a towel around his hips and listened.

No sound came from the outer room and Xander breathed a sigh of relief. Then took several more to gain composure.

*Play it off, Xan-man. No need to let the vamp know you took a stake to the heart. Just be cool.*

He opened the door and nearly jumped out of his skin at seeing Spike, vamped and looking decidedly pissed off, standing in the doorway.

*Oh yeah... real cool.*

Trying to recover as best he could, Xander shouldered his way past Spike – a very naked and very hard Spike – and out into the room. The clock on the bedside table said it was past time for him to eat, and his stomach growled right on cue.

"Gonna grab something to eat," he told the fuming vampire, capitalizing on the timely noise his stomach had made. "You want something?"

"You offerin', pet?"

The husky purr floated across the room and Xander's mind screamed a resounding, *Yes!*

“No! I mean, that is, I’m offering to pick something up for you. There’s a place down the street that makes wings... even that onion thing you thought no one knew about.”

Spike’s eyes remained narrowed on the boy’s back. Who managed to slip into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt – all without turning around once. Rather pissed him off, though he couldn’t exactly pinpoint why.

Or why Xander was suddenly ready to beat a hasty retreat.

Things had been progressing quite nicely a bit ago. It had been a good long while since he’d been woken up so pleurably. Too long, in fact.

“You wanna tell me what’s going on? Why this sudden desire to stuff your gob?”

“I’m hungry.”

Xander nearly cheered when his stomach chose that moment to reinforce his announcement. He sat down in the chair and pulled on socks and shoes. Refused to look Spike in the face and have the vamp see his pain.

“Weren’t all that hungry a bit ago,” Spike pointed out.

“Yeah... well... now I am.” *Smooth, Xan. Real smooth.*

Apparently, Spike thought so too. He crossed the room and braced his hands on the arm rests, leaned in close to Xander.

“What say we go back to bed? Finish what we started before we grab a bite to eat.”

Xander stood, forcing Spike to either back up or fall on his ass. “Maybe later.” Though that probably wasn’t going to happen; Xander Jr. had gone into hiding now that Spike had made his true feelings known. Acting as a stand-in wasn’t quite giving him those warm and fuzzy feelings.

For Xander, tomorrow night couldn’t come fast enough now. He’d kill Zepheus, avert the apocalypse, then beat a hasty retreat out of Phoenix. Go back to his solitary existence and forget about the emotional drama of the last few days.

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What Xander hadn’t counted on was Cordelia’s interference. Or maybe it was her take-no-shit attitude. Whatever it was, if he thought that lunch had been an ordeal with him and Spike sequestered inside his motel room, neither of them talking or doing much of anything except randomly peering out the window to see if the sun had set yet, then he hadn’t counted on his ex’s propensity for making a bad situation worse.

Not that it was malicious on her part.

Although, as he glanced up at her from beneath his lashes and saw the half smile playing about her lips, Xander figured he might have been wrong about the malicious part.

She looked entirely too pleased with herself.

“Not hungry?” Cordelia asked cheerfully, looking first at him and then Spike, just before biting into the piece of deep-fried onion she held in her hand. “I have it on good authority that these are your favorite, Spike.”

She got a grunt for her effort. Either by him or Spike, Xander wasn't quite sure. He wasn't in the mood to talk, and apparently, neither was the vampire.

“Look. There's nothing wrong with us taking the night off, right?” Cordelia pouted. “I mean, this Zepho guy can only perform the ritual tomorrow. I say, we have some fun. Eat, drink, and be merry.”

*Leave it to Cordy to oversimplify things.*

“Hardly call sitting in this sodding excuse for an eatery, then topping the night off with two hours of chick flick ‘merry,’” Spike grumbled. He pushed his food around on his plate for a minute, finally gave up on eating altogether, and reached for his beer. Alcohol was the only way he'd make it through the night.

“I suppose we can forgo the movie and hit Halo's. Shake our collective groove thang instead. We'll just need to swing by the apartment so I can change first.”

Spike opened his mouth to argue but at a pointed look from Cordelia, wisely refrained from saying anything. He'd learned long ago not to bother when it came to mentioning the girl's attire.

Xander was equally quiet, but for entirely different reasons. If he could have begged off going to a club, he would have. He wasn't much in the mood to socialize. But Cordelia had put her foot down about spending some time together catching-up and hadn't taken no for an answer – from either him or Spike. Hence, the three of them sitting together at a local eatery, him and Spike practically ignoring each other, while Cordelia did all the talking.

Still, a crowded club where he could disappear among the masses was much better than the previous alternative. Maybe he could even find someone to help take his mind off the vampire. The hyena perked up at the thought of a different kind of hunt and Xander finished his own beer and stood abruptly.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” he asked.

An hour later, the three were wending their way through the overcrowded nightclub.

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The room was filled with clouds of second-hand smoke; sweat and sex hung heavy in the air. The patrons were an equal mix of human and demon causing Xander's hackles to rise, but a reassuring hand from Cordelia kept him from acting upon the potential threat. That and Spike didn't seem too nonplussed that there were anything other than humans mingling about.

"It's a mixed club," she whispered near Xander's ear. "Don't worry. The bouncers here are more than equipped at dealing with any altercations that might arise."

"You come here often?"

Cordelia shrugged. "The place is a good source of information."

"That's not the only thing it's good for," Xander commented, spying a petite redhead at the bar giving him the eye. "I'm gonna get a drink. I'll catch up with you and Spike in a bit." He ducked into the crowd before Cordelia could protest, or Spike, who was in the lead, noticed his departure.

"Gimme a beer," Xander told the bartender once he reached the counter and got the man's attention.

"Bottle or tap?"

"Tap's fine."

Xander glanced down at the girl at his side and forced himself not to shudder at her simpering look. Instead, he gave her an appraising once-over and brought forth a smile. "What are you drinkin'?" he asked, noticing her half-empty glass.

"Sex on the beach..."

*Of course you are.*

He barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Although, it wasn't like he'd picked the girl for anything other than her being the first thing that had grabbed his attention.

His beer arrived and he ordered a refill of her drink and dropped a twenty on the bar. The beer tasted watered down, but he wasn't about to argue. He wasn't planning on getting drunk anyway.

"Thanks. You didn't have to do that. My name's Crystal, by the way."

"Alex."

"So, Alex, you wanna dance?"

"Sure."

The girl turned and headed towards the dance floor, and Xander fell into step behind her, one hand coming to rest on the small of her back.

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Cordelia didn't know who she was more frustrated with – Xander for schmoozing his way through a good portion of the women in the club, or Spike for drowning his... *whatever* in drink.

“If it bothers you that much, why don't *you* go dance with him,” she finally snapped, having had enough. At Spike's incredulous look she added, “Oh *please*. Subtle you are not. If it wasn't so dark in here, I'd be able to see the green.”

“I'm not jealous.”

“Yeah. Okay. Then I guess that blond guy Xander's now got his arms wrapped around won't bother you, either, huh?”

Cordelia watched as Spike's head snapped around and his gaze zeroed in on Xander. She suppressed a smile as he abruptly stood and stomped off, leaned back in the booth and sipped at her wine.

Now with the two of them steered in the right direction, maybe she could make something of the night, perhaps glean from the patrons the whereabouts of this Zepheus character.

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Spike prowled up behind Xander and slid a possessive hand on the boy's hip and plastered himself against his backside. He peered over Xander's shoulder and flashed a bit of fang at his dance partner. The male's eyes narrowed at having his territory horned in on, but thought better of protesting, much to Spike's disappointment. He was in the mood to go a round or two.

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Though not human himself, Jeff didn't have the wherewithal to go up against a vampire. It still didn't stop him from leaning in close and whispering his phone number in Alex's ear, just to hedge his bets. He turned and walked away amid the other dancers. Took maybe three steps before stopping and throwing a wink over his shoulder.

One could hope. And given the annoyed expression on Alex's face at having been interrupted, he just might get lucky.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

“What are you doing, Spike? I was dancing with that guy.”

“Yeah, well now you’re dancing with me. You got a problem with that?” Spike purred in Xander’s ear.

Xander froze. Uncaring of the dancers crowding around him, and the bouncers patrolling the club, he turned around and gripped the lapels of Spike’s duster, brought him forward until they were nearly nose to nose. His eyes flashed green as he snarled, “I do mind. Leave me the fuck alone.” Then he shoved Spike away and stormed off. It was time to find Cordy and say goodnight.

She was waiting for him, her mouth open and ready to argue, but Xander cut her off.

“I’m leaving, Cordy. If I stay here— ” He ran a hand through his hair, careful not to upset his patch. “Look, I’ll swing by your place tomorrow. We can finish this thing with Zepheus then.”

“Xander—”

“Cordy, don’t. Alright? Just— just don’t. You told me to cut Spike some slack, and I am. But if I stay here, all bets’ll be off. We’re gonna end up fighting.”

“Xander, I—”

“Hey, now, none of that,” Xander told her; seeing that she was near tears, he pulled her into a hug.

“I really thought you two would work things out,” she sniffled into his chest.

“Guess we just rub each other the wrong way. Always have, always will.” He leaned back and kissed her forehead. “Sorry I ruined your evening. We still friends?”

“Of course we are, silly.” She glanced over Xander’s shoulder and saw Spike headed their way. “Uh oh. Spike’s coming back to the table. You might want to go before he gets here.”

“Yeah. You’ll be okay?”

“Of course. I’m used to him acting like a wounded bear. He’ll get drunk and sleep it off. Be good as new tomorrow.”

“Alright. See ya.”

Xander smoothed a stray lock of hair behind Cordelia’s ear, gave her a half smile of reassurance, then slipped out a side exit.

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Xander took maybe a handful of steps when he heard the door open behind him. He froze, waiting to hear the sound of Spike’s voice – either in anger, or that cajoling tone of his.

What he got was the slight whine of his previous dance partner, the human-looking demon he'd picked up in a half-hearted attempt to forget about Spike and how he'd wound up playing second fiddle to the memory of Angel. The "Hey! Wait up!" was like fingers down a chalkboard, grating on his nerves.

Guilt made him hesitate, however. Enough so that the demon closed the distance between them and settled his hands on Xander's shoulders.

"Want to get out of here?"

"I'm already out of here," Xander snapped a bit peevishly. He just wanted to slink off and lick his wounds, go home, grab a few weapons and take out his frustrations on the evil populace. Not deal with the mistake that was this Spike look-alike.

"I see that," Jeff whispered near his ear. "What I meant was, do you want to get out of here with me? My place isn't far. Just a few blocks away, in fact. We can be there in no time."

The hands running up and down Xander's arms, the not-so-subtle nudge at his backside, left no doubt as to what they'd do once they got there.

"It's not the vampire, is it?" the man asked when Xander didn't answer him right away.

"Spike?" Xander asked, incredulous. "No. Me and him—"

"'Cuz you guys were putting off some pretty serious vibes." His words belied his actions, however, as the demon slid his hands down along Xander's side and leaned in. "But, if he's got no claim on you...?"

"No..." Xander let his body relax against the other male's, felt a hard cock nudge against his ass. He turned around and shoved the demon up against the wall. Their lips smashed together, Xander quick to take advantage of the other's startled gasp, thrusting his tongue inside with hard angry jabs.

Grunts and moans filled the otherwise silent alley for several minutes as they groped and kissed, until Xander tore himself away with an angry curse. The guy just wasn't doing it for him. In his mind's eye, all he could see were blue eyes and a sardonic smirk staring him in the face.

"Look, man. Jeff, right?" Xander began, then paused for a moment to run a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. I'm not a cock tease, but—"

"I'm not him."

"Yes. No..." Xander's voice trailed off. "I just—"

"Hey. No sweat. Can't blame a guy for trying."

The demon looked him up and down, wiggling his brows, and Xander couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah. I'll see you around."

"If I thought you meant that..." Jeff said sincerely.

Xander smiled sadly and walked away.

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Jeff stared after the guy's retreating back and sighed wistfully. He debated all of two seconds about returning to the club before exiting the alley himself, but in the opposite direction.

An early night was definitely in order, especially at having been witness to the vampire's possessive anger. If the blond caught him reeking of the boy?

Well, he liked his parts just fine where they were. A solitary night with his hand was a small price to pay for keeping it that way.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Spike was walking back to Cordelia when he saw Xander sneak out a side exit. He'd just reached her side when he saw the demon Xander had been dancing with do the same and his eyes narrowed with some unnamed emotion. His temper, already at the boiling point, threatened to explode.

He had every intention of following after the two, and would have, but then Cordelia grabbed his arm. She gave him "the look," and he mentally cursed the fates at their timing even as he caught her up against his chest. The vision slammed into her body, and Spike felt her jerk once and go still as she gave herself over to it; after so many years of having them, she'd learned the less she moved, the easier it was to handle, and the only thing she had to deal with when it was over was a strong need to sleep.

"All done, pet?" Spike asked when he heard her moan plaintively and felt her nod against his shoulder. "Well, let's get you out of here and settled at home. Got a bit of time yet, yeah?"

"Yeah," Cordelia wheezed around the pain, something she'd not felt in a good long while when she had a vision, more than grateful when Spike easily swung her up into his arms and shouldered people out of his way to reach the front entrance; she didn't think she could stand, much less walk, out of the club.

It wasn't until they were settled in the car and driving home that Cordelia was able to talk. Spike listened as she told him about her multiple visions.

"I don't like it," she finally finished.

"Me either. You've never had more than one scenario at a time before."

“Maybe the Powers are trying to tell us something.”

“Yeah. Like it’s a bloody trap.”

“*Or*, a diversion.”

“Either way, let’s get you settled in bed, and I’ll go see what’s what.”

Cordelia sighed and closed her eyes, letting the soft rumble of the vehicle lull her to sleep.

Ten minutes later, Spike had parked the car and was ushering Cordelia into their apartment building. He tried not to jostle her too much as he descended the stairs to their apartment. She was probably going to have the mother of all headaches given the multitude of visions, and he didn’t want to contribute to her pain.

After a bit of fumbling, he got their front door open and the girl settled in bed. She didn’t move as he stripped her down as much as he dared before pulling up the covers. Her pain pills were in the bedside drawer and he shook two out of the bottle and set them on the counter, filled a glass of water and set it beside them.

Spike paid Cordelia one last glance, satisfied with her deep, even breathing, before he strode from the room and let himself out of the apartment.

It was time for him to go play hero.

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While Spike was seeing to the people in Cordelia’s visions on one side of the city, Xander was inadvertently on the other – which put him in just the right place to catch a glimpse of Zepheus.

“Got you now, asshole,” he smirked from his position in the shadows.

He took a quick inventory of the weapons at his disposal; of the lot, his short sword and silver-tipped dagger were probably going to be the most useful. The stakes and holy water he was carrying wouldn’t do a thing but piss the giant off.

Xander just prayed that he could best Zepheus with the skills he had. He’d hate to have to kill one of the kids to prevent the demon from opening the hellmouth.

But he would.

Four lives were a small price to pay to prevent the destruction of mankind, even if it would weigh heavily on his conscience.

Zepheus slipped inside an abandoned building and Xander followed behind him after a few minutes had passed. He paid special attention to the ground in front of him, careful not to trip

over anything. The demon had ears like a bat and could pick up on the slightest noise. Thankfully, Zepheus' good hearing wasn't quite as exceptional as a vampire's, or the battle would have been over long before it even got started, since the demon would have easily picked up his rapid-fire heartbeat.

Xander crept closer, and as he did so, he could hear the faint trace of crying. *The twins*, he thought, not unpleased. Their pitiful whining would help mask his approach.

He wasn't surprised to find the door Zepheus had entered through locked, though it had still been worth a shot to check.

"Plan B," he muttered under his breath, and began circling the building looking for another way inside.

It took a bit of maneuvering on his part, but Xander finally managed to get in through an unlocked window on the second floor. He dropped lightly onto his feet and then nearly blew his stealthy approach when dust flew up into his face and made him sneeze.

He froze and waited, his head cocked slightly to the side as he listened intently. There was no flurry of pounding footsteps racing up the stairs and in his direction and Xander breathed a sigh of relief. He'd not been found out.

Several more minutes passed before he chanced moving, holding his breath as he took that first tentative step. The floorboards didn't creak, thankfully, and he gained confidence as he left the office and made his way out into the hall.

The children's crying got louder the closer he got to the stairs; Xander just prayed they kept at it until he'd slipped down the steps and found another place to hide and wait for an opportune moment to confront Zepheus.

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"What?" Spike snapped into the phone. He'd debated not answering the thing when it vibrated in the pocket of his duster, but figured it had to be important for Cordelia to call him post-vision.

"Spike! It's Xander. Zepheus—"

Spike barely deciphered her sleepy pain-filled ramblings, but got enough to determine that Xander had found their Big Bad and it wasn't looking good for the boy.

"Where, Cordy? Where's Xander?"

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Spike flew across town, angered that Xander had attempted to take on the demon by himself, but no less scared, worried that he wouldn't get there in time, and he'd end up burying another of his

friends – acquaintances – whatever the hell it was he referred to Xander as. They weren't enemies; *that* much he knew.

Familiarity with the city made it easy for him to get to the place Cordelia had indicated fairly quickly. As he drew close, he could hear the sounds of a fight – groans and shouts of triumph, the clank of steel. It all collided together with the sounds of crying and pleas for help.

He broke through the door, game-faced and ready to play. Only to freeze at the sight of Xander suspended from who he could only assume was Zepheus' hand, his other arm drawn back, ready to plunge his dagger in the boy's stomach.

“NO!!” he screamed and forced himself to move, to get there in time. Knowing that he wouldn't.

Spike watched helplessly as the breath left Xander in a rush as the blade sunk all the way in to the hilt, how his eyes rolled up in his head before they closed. A girl's scream drowned out Xander's frantic heartbeat.

Then anger took hold and he heard nothing at all save his own battle cry as he launched himself at the dark-skinned giant.

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When Spike crashed into Zepheus, Xander was abruptly released and hit the ground with a dull thud. He didn't look to see if the boy would be okay, he couldn't look. His sole focus was the demon before him who'd recovered from his attack and was now eyeing him with deadly intent.

Spike just smirked in a manner that said, “Bring it on.” His yellow eyes were blazing with his own righteous fury as the two warily circled one another, both vying for an opening to land a blow.

“I'd think you'd be happy, my opening the Hellmouth. You're a vampire, a demon like me. We could *rule* this city. We could rule the entire country,” Zepheus snarled.

“This is my town. *My* Hellmouth. And I like things just fine the way they are here.”

With lightning-quick reflexes, Spike sprang forward and slashed his claws across the demon's face, smirking when Zepheus jumped back in surprise, one hand going up to cover the wound.

“Ow. That hurt!”

“It was supposed to, you git,” he sneered. Another lightning-fast move by Spike and Zepheus had a matching set of marks on the other cheek.

Though his opponent was large, Spike had speed on his side; he'd use that to his advantage and stay out of the other's reach, wear Zepheus down with body shots until he tired.

The only drawback to his plan, though, was the time factor. He needed to end the fight, and quickly, if he wanted any chance at saving Xander. His gaze darted about the room, trying to find something to speed things along, and came across the spell components scattered on a table set up behind the demon.

He fainted in, ducking under Zepheus' outstretched arms, and raced to the makeshift altar. Animal body parts, roots, and other various magic paraphernalia went flying as Spike swept his arm across the table. He ignored the demon's bellow of rage as he picked up the spell book and proceeded to tear the pages to shreds. When he was finished, he dropped the hefty volume and chuckled at the confetti at his feet.

If nothing else, he'd averted Zepheus from performing the spell to open the Hellmouth.

"Guess that takes care of that."

Spike didn't have long to wait for Zepheus' reaction. The demon ran towards him, exhibiting a fair bit of speed for someone his size. Spike glanced around, looking for some type of weapon and spied a ceremonial spear leaning against the wall behind him. He palmed the weapon and turned back to confront his opponent, just as Zepheus launched himself over the table. Spike was ready, the spear held aloft with a firm grip. He easily evaded the demon's outreached arms and as Zepheus flew past, drove the spear tip into his chest – and hopefully his heart – careful to let go so he wouldn't be dragged forward with the demon's momentum. He wasn't quite sure if he hit the mark though, he'd never come across a demon like Zepheus before.

Zepheus crashed to the floor behind him and Spike was on him like a shot.

"That was for Xander," he growled as he stood over the fallen demon. Then he leaned down and snapped the spear handle in two. He held the stake-like weapon in his hand for a moment before driving it through the demon's eye, killing him instantly. "And that's for me. You picked the wrong town and the wrong boy to mess with."

Rather than gloat over his victory, however, Spike turned away and hurried towards the two sets of twins shackled in the corner. His human mask was once more in place.

"Gimme a minute to check on my friend and I'll see about getting you free," he told them, and was thankful to hear an abrupt end to their crying spell.

Though, with the sudden silence, the faint beating of Xander's heart was like a death knell.

"Xander!" he shouted and was beside the boy in an instant, carefully cradling him against his chest, mindful of the dagger still embedded in his stomach. Blood covered the lower half of Xander's shirt and was slowly seeping down into his pants, and for the first time in his life, the smell of it sickened Spike.

He rose awkwardly to his feet, with Xander's body draped over his arms, and nearly slipped in the huge puddle of blood on the floor.

“Oh, pet,” he whispered, horrified, and deathly afraid. “Hang on, love. Spike’s gonna get you to the hospital. They’ll get you fixed up in no time. Just see if they don’t.”

He hurried forward, only to stop at the sight of the four kids still huddled in the corner. He couldn’t leave them there; they were sitting ducks for anything that might get curious about the overpowering smell of blood and decide to search the building.

Cursing his soul and the Powers for making him one of the good guys, he backtracked to the table and gently laid Xander down on top of it, then set about finding a key to the chains. He started with the demon corpse, and for once in his life, luck was on his side as he found the key in Zepheus’ pants pocket. Spike palmed it as he jumped to his feet and rushed to release them.

“Stick close to me, yeah? Gonna take my friend to the hospital and someone there can call your parents.”

“I want my mommy!” one of the girls whined pitifully.

Spike struggled not to roll his eyes – or yell – as he knelt down and spoke softly to the girl.

“I’m gonna get your mommy, poppet. But first, I need to take care of my friend. He’s hurt really bad and needs a doctor to get him all better.”

“We’ll come with you,” one of the boys said as he latched onto the girl’s hand. “To the hospital, and then you’ll call our parents, right?”

“First thing. Promise.”

At their tentative nods, Spike stood and headed for the door. For the first time in his life, he prayed, hoping that he’d get to the hospital before Xander bled out.

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Spike kicked the automatic doors when they wouldn’t open fast enough, shouting for help and “bloody now!” Something in either his tone or his expression seemed to convey the seriousness of the situation and doctors and nurses came running forward. Spike carefully placed Xander on the gurney that was wheeled forward.

“What happened?”

“What’s it bloody well look like?” Spike snapped, barely controlling the urge to contain his demon. “He’s got a goddamn knife in his gut. Fix him! *Now!*”

The doctor nodded and began shouting out orders for labs, meds, and other things that went right over Spike’s head.

“We’ll take it from here,” the doctor said to Spike then turned away and bellowed for four units of universal donor blood to be brought to Bay 1 immediately as he supervised the stretcher being wheeled through a second set of doors.

The waiting room was eerily quiet in the aftermath of the hospital staffs’ departure. Spike happened to glance down and saw that he was covered in blood, on either side of him were the twins, looking much the worse for wear. Those lingering about, their expressions wide-eyed and speechless, seemed to think the same.

“Come on. Let’s get you settled so I can have someone call your parents,” Spike told them and ushered the four to an area clearly designated for children – given the much smaller seats and the few toys scattered about on the nearby tables.

He didn’t bother to ask their names; all he had to do was mention to someone that he’d found the missing twins and that they were in the ER waiting room; the cops and the parents would come running.

“Are you guys hungry?” Four heads nodded mutely. “Okay. I’ll see if I can scrounge up some snacks then. Back in a jiffy. Don’t move. And don’t talk to anyone. *Got it?*” Again four heads nodded sagely in reply.

Spike stalked off to the registration desk and got there just as the nurse hung up the phone.

“Look. The kids I got with me? They’re the one’s that’s missing. Can you, uh, call the cops or something? ‘m sure their parents will be glad to have them back. Oh, and they’re hungry. Can you get ‘em some snacks or something?”

“Sure, Mr. umm...”

“William.”

“Sure, Mr. William.”

“No. Just William.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. William,” she stammered. “How... that is... where...?”

“The guy I brought in a minute ago found them, I reckon, and got stabbed for his trouble. I found him on the street a few blocks over. I think he was trying to get here. The poor sap just couldn’t make it though. I took it upon myself to bring him in and see that the niblets got reunited with their families.”

“Oh! I say! That’s very brave of you.”

Spike shrugged. “Anybody woulda’ done it. Just happened to be at the right place at the right time. So? You gonna call?” Spike nodded towards the phone.

“Yes. Yes, of course. And, if you want to take the children to the cafeteria, I’ll call ahead and tell them that you’re coming. Just have the children pick out whatever they feel like eating.”

Spike heaved a sigh at having been relegated to the task of babysitter, but didn’t argue with the woman. Truthfully, he didn’t think that the four would go with anyone else except him. Besides which, he needed to talk to the kids, tell them to speak as little as possible about who – or what – had kidnapped them. He turned away as the woman started dialing and rejoined the twins waiting quietly in the corner.

“Come on, kids. Let’s go get something to eat. They’re calling the cops and your parents should be here shortly.”

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“So, who saved you?” Spike asked again.

“Xander did,” they all shouted at the same time.

“And who happened along and saved Xander?”

“William did.”

“Good. You all just stick with that story, yeah?”

Four heads nodded obediently, and Spike smothered a grin. They were too cute by half.

“Now, eat up. Your parents are probably on their way.”

Ten minutes later, there were frantic cries from two sets of parents, and what sounded like a herd of elephants racing down the hallway.

“Cavalry’s arrived,” he muttered under his breath, just before the door burst open and the place was flooded with cops and openly weeping humans.

Shouts of “Mommy!” and “Daddy!” mixed with cries of “Oh, thank god!” and Spike stood up from the table and stepped back out of the way, hands held up in a gesture of surrender as the group swarmed the table they were sitting at.

“Xander saved us,” one of the girls piped up as she was lifted into her father’s arms. “And William saved Xander,” her twin finished, pointing at Spike. “That’s William.”

The cops stopped giving him the evil eye – which Spike had found rather amusing – and relaxed their stances. One even walked forward and held out his hand.

“You must be William,” the cop announced somewhat drolly as they shook hands. “Who’s Xander?”

“Guy that took one in the gut rescuing these kids apparently. He’s in the ER right now.”

Which was where Spike wanted to be himself.

“Do you know what happened?”

Spike shook his head. “No. Happened along these cuties a few blocks away from here. The guy was hurt in a bad way. Lost a lot of blood.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. But, I’m glad you were there. It’s a pretty heroic thing you did.”

“Nah... That boy down the way is the real hero. Saved these kids and gave those parents a happy ending.”

“Yeah,” the cop commiserated. Normally, the missing person’s bodies were found several weeks later, dumped in a ditch. And he’d have to be the one to inform the families of their loss. “Well, anyway. We appreciate what you did. I’m sure the Smiths and Thompsons do as well.”

The cop turned to watch the family reunion taking place, and Spike took the opportunity to slip away and out of the limelight. He needed to get back to Xander.

As he walked down the hall, he pulled out his cell phone and called Cordelia. Their conversation was short and to the point.

“I’m on my way,” she announced once he finished his brief explanation.

Cordelia hung up, amid his protests for her to stay in bed and rest.

“Stubborn bint,” he grumbled as he slipped the phone back in his pocket.

Though, truthfully, he was glad she was coming. He wasn’t quite sure what he would do if the boy didn’t make it. Already he could feel the black pit of despair looming in the distance, threatening to engulf him, much like it had when his sire died.

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As soon as Cordelia arrived, she and Spike disappeared to one of the waiting rooms in another wing of the hospital. Spike had given the impression to the hospital staff that he was just a passerby and had lucked upon Xander in the streets. To sit around in the ER waiting room for word of his prognosis would throw that assumption right out the window, and force him to answer questions he couldn’t – or wouldn’t – answer.

They spent the next several hours alternately pacing or sitting quietly, their hands clasped tightly together, reluctant to venture forth and ask someone about Xander’s condition; they didn’t try to find Xander in one of the hospital rooms either, knowing that his injury was extensive enough to warrant surgery that in all likelihood could last for several hours.

“You want to talk about it?” Cordelia asked after Spike sat down from his latest round of pacing.

“No.”

“’cuz you can, you know. Talk to me. If you want.”

“Leave it alone, Cordy.”

“I’m just saying. This is me, doing the supportive friend thing.”

Spike growled.

The room got quiet.

“Is it because he’s a guy?” Cordelia asked out of the blue several minutes later. “Xander, I mean.”

“*Cordelia...*”

“Because there’s nothing wrong with it,” she hastened to add. “Being gay I mean.”

“m. *Not*. Gay.”

Cordelia laughed at Spike’s abrupt manner. “If you’re screwing Xander, or *want* to screw Xander, you’re gay. You’re a guy. He’s a guy. Hence, gay.”

“Pet, ‘m a vampire,” he replied, his exasperation evident. “We’ll screw anything on two legs. Doesn’t make us gay, so much as omnisexual. Besides, we don’t think in terms like that. Being gay’s a human distinction.”

“Pfft. Whatever.” She laid her head against his shoulder; she was tired and he made a halfway decent pillow. “So, you and Xander?”

“There *is* no me and Xander.” Spike forced himself not to bite his friend’s head off. He loved the girl like one of his own, but she could be a dog with a bloody bone sometimes.

“But there *could* be?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Would you just drop it already?” he sighed.

“Angel’s dead. He would want you to—”

“I said *drop it*, Cordelia!” Spike snarled; he jumped to his feet, displacing Cordelia in the process, and stormed out of the waiting room.

“He’d want you to get on with your life, Spike,” she whispered quietly to his retreating back. “Angel wouldn’t begrudge you your happiness.”

Though she spoke softly, Cordelia was pretty sure Spike could still hear her. What mattered though was whether or not he’d actually listen to her; the vamp wasn’t one to heed her advice. Time passed – an hour, and then two – without a sign of Spike, and Cordelia sighed and stood, stretching the kinks out of her weary body.

Her and her big mouth. She really hoped she hadn’t driven Spike away from the hospital.

After ten years, she should have known not to broach the subject of Angel. Nothing sent Spike flying off the handle quicker than bringing up his sire’s name. But the vibes Spike had been giving off since Xander’s sudden presence in Phoenix were like nothing she’d ever seen before. He’d been snarky to the extreme, a complete one-eighty to the way he normally behaved. Spike spending the last few days almost exclusively with Xander was the most telling.

Growing restless, Cordelia left the waiting room and started wandering the hospital. It was pure chance that she happened upon a couple of nurses discussing Xander several minutes later, and she loitered in the hallway to glean details of his condition.

She got one better – a room number.

She did a quick scan of the hallway and spotted Xander’s room behind her, and she walked backwards the way she came, so she could keep her eyes on the nurse’s desk.

Inside the room, Cordelia gasped at Xander’s condition. The patch was gone, which took away from his rakish air. His hair was combed back from his face, accentuating how pale he really was. The drab hospital gown he wore did nothing to hide the healing bite marks on his neck. She gasped upon seeing them, knowing what they meant.

Spike had marked Xander as his.

It didn’t make any sense. Why then was Spike putting up such a stink about being with Xander? He obviously took some measure of comfort from Xander’s presence.

Staring down at Xander, she couldn’t help but be surprised by her ex. Xander had been strictly heterosexual when they’d parted ways not long after graduating from high school. She could see him getting past the gender thing – all of his friends were dead, so he didn’t have to worry about what anyone might think – but the vampire thing was another matter. Xander’s feelings about vampires were well known among the gang. He’d nearly alienated Buffy with his hatred for Angel.

Yet he’d allowed Spike to bite him. Repeatedly, from the looks of things.

Relatively reassured about Xander's condition and not wanting to get caught in the room, Cordelia moved forward and gave Xander a quick kiss to the forehead.

"I'll be back later," she told him, though he probably didn't hear her. At the door, she cast one last glance over her shoulder and slipped out of the room, back to the waiting area.

She had a lot to think about, not the least of which was that Xander had lied to her – Xander had done more than just hold Spike when he'd had his spell. At some point, the two had bonded.

It explained a lot, now that she thought about it. Spike was feeling guilty, Xander confused. However, whereas Xander had seemed willing to go with the flow and had actually seemed solicitous of Spike's welfare, Spike was doing everything in his power to deny the connection they'd made.

But something must have happened recently, because now Xander was just as adamant in his refusal to be anywhere near Spike. With the threat Zepheus posed gone, there was no reason for him to stick around now either.

No reason at all.

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Xander woke with a dull ache in his stomach and annoying beeps ringing in his ear. He sat up and immediately fell back against the pillows, groaning. He must have been hurt more seriously than he thought for it to take so long for him to heal; since merging with his hyena spirit, he'd found himself recovering much like a slayer would, with the pain of an attack all but a distant memory the next day. He'd never had cause before to test the limits of his healing abilities, but put being run through by a dagger on the list of things not to do again in the immediate future.

The aftermath hurt like a bitch.

"Ah... you're awake, Mr. Doe," a nurse commented, intruding on his thoughts. "You gave us all a bit of a scare with the extent of your injuries. But, just between you and me, that was a really brave thing you did."

"Brave?" he croaked out; his throat was dry and made speaking difficult.

"Saving those kids."

"Oh..." Xander was careful to mask his confusion.

"Anyway. You just lie back and rest. Let your body heal. You've got some IV meds that are masking the worst of your pain and they tend to make you a bit groggy."

"Yeah. Okay."

Xander closed his eyes and listened as the nurse bustled around the room for a bit. Only when it seemed she was satisfied with whatever she saw, did she finally leave. He waited a few minutes more before attempting to get out of bed. The IV was the first thing to go – he needed his heightened awareness at full capacity – and he yanked it from his arm. He cringed, waiting for an alarm to sound, but nothing happened; the pump continued to work, only it spilled the medicine that should have been going into his arm out onto the floor.

The hospital staff didn't know his name and that would make it easier for him to disappear relatively unnoticed. He wanted to be gone before someone came and started a round of twenty questions. His type of work, the evil that he constantly dealt with, couldn't be brought into the light of day. Joe Normal wasn't ready to hear that there really *were* monsters lurking about at night.

A quick search of his private room revealed his pants folded neatly – if still a bit bloody – and tucked away in a bag, and he dressed hurriedly then edged his way towards the door.

The pain medication began wearing off as his body quickly metabolized the foreign fluid in his blood stream and Xander couldn't help but draw in a breath as the pain of his sustained injuries started to hit him full force. If he didn't leave soon, he really *was* going to be confined to bed.

'*Suck it up and get the hell outta here,*' he told himself. Taking a calming breath, he proceeded to do just that.

Xander opened the door a crack and peeked outside. Several nurses were clustered at a desk several feet away chatting amongst themselves. Careful to keep one eye on them and another on his escape route, he eased out of his room and slowly made his way in the opposite direction towards the stairwell. Every step he took hurt, but there was no way in hell he was staying in the hospital.

With Zepheus also apparently taken care of, at least according to the good news from the nurse, and what little he remembered from his – and Spike's – encounter with the demon, there was no need for him to stay in Phoenix either. His job was done and it was time to move on. *A new Big Bad to find and send back to hell,* he silently told himself.

He determinedly ignored the voice that called him a coward, as well as some other not-so-nice names. He preferred to think of it as a strategic retreat. Lick his wounds and live to fight another day and all that.

Hailing a cab wasn't difficult and he had the driver wait while he grabbed his two bags from his motel room; the weapons he'd had with him last night he wrote off as a loss. It took him longer to cash out with the front desk clerk than it did to gather his things. Experience had taught him how to disappear in a hurry.

"Bus station," he told the driver after he climbed into the back seat again and shut the door.

The cabbie nodded and pulled off without a word.

Xander closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headrest.

His conscience nagged him for leaving without telling Cordelia goodbye. But he had her address stored in his head and promised himself that as soon as he got to wherever he was going next, he'd sit down and write her a nice, long letter.

“Thanks! Keep the change.”

Xander handed the man a twenty when they arrived at the bus depot. His belongings in hand, he shuffled forward to the ticket booth and bought a one-way ticket to Boston. The pain medication was all but gone from his system and every step he took caused bursts of agonizing pain to shoot up his belly and spread outward.

He'd decided on Boston on the short taxi ride from the motel; he'd never been so far north before and figured the city was as good a place as any to call home for a month. It also had an international airport hub that would make it easy for him to get out of the country in a hurry if needed.

The all aboard sounded and Xander spared one last glance at the Phoenix Hellmouth before he climbed the steps of the bus and hobbled down the aisle all the way to the back row, his bags slung awkwardly over either shoulder. He put as much distance between himself and the smattering of early morning stragglers making the cross-country road trip with him. His stomach really wasn't feeling too hot and he closed his eyes and attempted to sleep to escape the unending throbbing as the other passengers settled in their own seats.

The engine cranked up, and before long, he felt the bus back out of its parking space and turn onto the road. It slowly gained in speed as it headed out of town.

Xander sighed for what might have been.

The steady drone of the diesel engine eventually coaxed him into a fitful sleep.

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*Two months later...*

Xander stepped out of his apartment and trudged through the snow-covered sidewalk to the corner store. Being born and raised in Southern California, snow was something of a novelty for him, which was why he'd made the impulsive decision to spend the rest of the winter season in Boston rather than move on after his allotted month – he couldn't seem to get enough of the stuff. While the locals were bitching and moaning under their breath about the latest storm front headed their way, Xander was eagerly looking forward to the dark clouds looming overhead.

The blizzard promised to be a doozy; the weatherman was predicting nearly two feet of snow, so Xander was off to stock up on supplies for the expected lie-in. It began to flurry on his way to the store and by the time he'd filled his shopping cart and been rung up, the light snowfall had

turned into a steady stream of large flakes that began to stick to the snow already covering the ground. He smiled as he walked, ended up chuckling with pleasure when the snow hit his face and melted, leaving tiny wet splotches on his cheeks and forehead.

To the casual observer, he appeared young and carefree, without a care in the world.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

He'd not done much smiling his first month in Boston; it had been a rough four weeks and denial was a place he'd fast become familiar with. Better that than the long, agonizing nights of solitude he'd endured, and continued to endure.

It was one of the reasons it had taken him so long to write Cordelia. Just the thought that Spike might be privy to what he might say had made it difficult to put pen to paper.

But he'd done it, like he promised himself he would. With the Christmas holiday only a few weeks away, Xander figured Cordelia would either have gotten the letter this past week or would be getting it in the next few days or so. He'd been deliberately vague regarding his whereabouts, telling her only that he'd moved on to the next crisis on his figurative list, and that he was sorry for leaving like he had, without so much as a word goodbye. He'd left no return address on the envelope, but had promised to write again, and soon.

Xander walked up his steps and shuffled the bags into one hand so he could fish his keys out of his pocket. As he fitted his key in the slot, his neck began to tingle. He glanced around but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

*Huh... Weird.*

Shrugging, he stepped inside and shut the door.

His apartment wasn't something to write home about, but it was his, at least for the next two months. He'd even done the festive thing and bought a miniature Christmas tree that came with its very own tiny ornaments and set it on the two-seater table in the kitchen.

After he'd put his groceries away, he grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and took his customary spot on his futon and turned on the television. With nothing but time on his hands, he settled in to watch the Star Trek marathon that was running on the SciFi channel.

The snowstorm continued, and it wasn't long before he noticed a bite in the air and snuggled beneath the blankets on his makeshift bed. The furnace only seemed to work half the time, which was why he'd gotten the place so cheap – it being smack dab in the heart of the city. He'd not minded though, just bought a few extra blankets to cover his bed; he'd bunked in far less savory places that hadn't actually boasted a roof over his head and intermittent heat.

He was into his third episode in as many hours when a terse knock sounded at his front door. His senses went on full alert – especially given that he didn't know anyone in Boston. He damn sure wasn't expecting anyone either.

Figuring that it was probably some religious zealot – he'd been blessed with a few showing up on his doorstep, it being so close to the holidays – Xander didn't bother to move from his spot. The knocking didn't let up, however. In fact, if anything, it became more insistent.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and Xander finally rose and walked to the corner chest that housed his weapons. Whoever was out there was about to get a rude sendoff.

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“Look, I'm not interested—” Xander began before his door was even opened. The words died in his throat once he caught sight of his visitor. “Spike?”

“Invite me in, Harris.”

“What are you doing here? I mean... uh... how did you find me?”

Xander couldn't believe that Spike was standing on his doorstep – willingly at that.

“Can we talk inside? I'd rather not carry on a conversation on your front doorstep,” Spike sighed. “Please?”

It was the please that made Xander cave and open his home – and possibly his heart – to the vamp getting pelted by snow.

Neither said a word as Spike stepped over the threshold and Xander shut the door. Xander couldn't help but think that his apartment shrank in size with the vampire there; Spike had a way about him that seemed larger than life.

“Want a beer?” he asked to cover the awkward silence.

“Real beer, or that watered-down piss you drink?”

“What do you think?”

“Watered-down piss.”

The two shared a smile.

“Yeah... alright. Whatever you have is fine.”

By mutual agreement, they settled on either end of the futon. The Star Trek marathon was still playing on the television and Xander stared at the screen, though if asked later, he wouldn't have been able to say what the episode was about.

His sole focus was on Spike. How he picked at the label of the domestic beer bottle and dropped the pieces of paper on the floor. How he shifted in his seat attempting to get comfortable. How he opened and closed his mouth several times as if to speak.

"I take it Cordy got my letter," Xander finally asked when he couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"She cried," Spike blurted out. "When she got it. You just disappeared and she thought... we thought... you were gone forever."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, you'll have to take it up with her. She was pretty pissed. Still is, if you wanna know the truth."

"And you?"

The words were out of his mouth before Xander could stop them. He could have kicked himself with how pitiful he sounded.

"Harris, if I would have found you that first month, I would have chained you up and shown you what it means to belong to a vampire."

Xander's heart rate kicked up a notch and his dick twitched. Thankfully, Spike didn't call him on it. Who knew he had a bit of a masochistic streak?

"I don't belong to you, Spike," Xander sighed, saw Spike's jaw clench when he happened to look that way. "You said it yourself, sometimes a fuck is just a fuck. We fucked. No strings. End of story."

"Do you really believe that, Xander?"

"I wasn't the one that called out someone else's name while we were in bed together."

*Damn, I didn't mean to say that out loud either, Xander thought. Unfortunately, his mouth seemed to have a mind of its own.*

"What?"

Unable to sit still any longer, Xander got up and paced the floor. "Look, what does it matter?"

"Xander—"

“No... really. It’s okay. I get it— *got* it. We’re cool.” He abruptly changed the subject. Inviting Spike in was a bad idea; he’d been so close to closing that particularly brief chapter of his life. Now Spike was here and the hurt that had been a constant ache was back with a vengeance. He needed something else to talk about, and Cordelia and her hurt feelings seemed a safe enough topic. “So— Cordy. How much groveling am I going to have to do? Is she still in Phoenix?”

“I didn’t come here to talk about Cordelia,” Spike growled as he stood as well. “I came here to resolve this thing between us. I thought—”

“Us? There is no us, Spike. You said it yourself—”

“I know what I bloody well said.”

“Then what are we arguing for?” Xander’s voice rose to match Spike’s.

“Because you’re a pig-headed git.”

Xander chuckled mirthlessly.

“I’m a pig-headed git? *I’m* a pig-headed git?”

“Yes.” Spike ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “I lied, okay? It wasn’t just a fuck. Not sure what it was, but it wasn’t just a fuck. I felt—” *Whole, complete*, he didn’t say. “But, I could see you starting to freak out that first night and figured it would be best all around not to overanalyze what happened. Blow it off as a one-off. Then it happened again, and you gave yourself to me.”

“No—”

“You bared your throat to me and my demon took that as acceptance,” Spike talked right over Xander’s denial. “And you said yes. So I took, and you gave, and it was bloody well perfect. What little there is left of my soul tried to ignore it after you were gone, figured you were better off not knowing, and as much as the demon hated it, I had to let you go.” Spike finally sat down, his shoulders slumped in dejection. “I can’t be with you, Xander, knowing you’re gonna die someday. You’re the last bit of my past, and I’d turn you before I lost you. And you’d hate me. Just as I’d come to hate the thing that I created. Me and Cordy, we’ve got eternity staring at us in the face. The Powers made sure of that.”

The room was deathly quiet in the aftermath of Spike’s confession. Xander stood there, his jaw nearly scraping the floor.

Spike was worried about him dying? He couldn’t help it, he started laughing.

“Spike, I’ve got a thousand-year-old hyena spirit inside me. I don’t think I’m going to be dying anytime soon,” he laughed.

“What?”

“The eye, the healing abilities, the enhanced senses? That was her making herself at home in my body. I’m probably as immortal as you and Cordelia are, though I won’t be testing that theory with any daggers to my gut anytime soon. It seems I’m not immune to pain. All the surgeons did in that hospital was aide my recovery along.”

“Were— were you ever gonna tell us?” Spike demanded, eyes gone a flinty yellow.

“I did. I told you that first night that I’d merged with the hyena. I didn’t think I had to spell it out for you. You’re a vampire for chrissakes! I thought you’d know.”

“Like I’ve seen a lot of demon possessions in my time,” Spike snorted in rebuttal.

“What does this have to do with anything anyway? There’s still the matter of you calling out Angel’s name. I’m not going to be some substitute because you can’t have who you really want.”

“When did I—? Aahh... so *that’s* why you got shirty. That why you left too?”

Xander nodded stiffly and Spike sighed. “Xander, I was dreaming. I woke up with a hard-on and you stomping off to the bathroom. I never once thought of you as a replacement,” Spike confessed.

“I’m no Buffy, or Angel. I’m just me. Xander. A guy that wore a patch over a perfectly good eye because he felt guilty for getting his friends killed.” He awkwardly gestured to the eye no longer encumbered by the patch. Sometime in the past month, he’d quit punishing himself. His friends would have wanted him to move on with his life, so he had. The last tiny piece of the Zeppo he’d been clinging to was dead and buried.

“Yeah? Well, I doubt I’ve got the soul I worked so hard to get. I still get my rocks off on the hunt – whether it’s human or demon. I scared away Angel’s son by telling him I was going to end up fucking him if he didn’t leave. And if you think *that’s* bad, I was ready to tear out Cordelia’s heart because you spent time with her, rather than me.”

“Really? Wow! That’s just... Uh, Spike, you *do* know she’s my ex-girlfriend. Emphasis on the ‘ex’. There was a reason why we broke up. If I remember right, it was your fault... sorta.”

“I never said it was rational. I’m just... I want you to know, I’m not perfect. Never claimed to be. I’m a product of my past. Just like you. I know you’re not Buffy or Angel... or even Drusilla. You’re Xander... you’ve been a bloody thorn in my bloody side for what seems like forever.”

“Just so there’s no misunderstanding.” Xander’s lips twitched.

“Pet, I think we’ve had enough of those to last the next hundred years. Now, can we go to bed? It’s past my bedtime and I’ve barely slept since you left. And this heart-to-heart has plum wore me out.”

Xander watched as Spike began shucking his clothes, letting them fall where they may. He hid a smile as he stepped forward and pulled on the bottom of the futon so that it converted into a bed.

Spike slid beneath the covers and Xander stripped out of his own clothes and climbed in beside him.

“Any chance I can talk you into coming back to Phoenix? Boston’s bloody cold this time of year,” Spike grouched as he cuddled close to Xander.

“I thought you didn’t feel the cold.”

“Harris, there’s bloody snow on the ground.”

“So?” Inside, Xander was silently laughing. A whining Spike was a funny thing to witness.

“Suppose we could stay here,” Spike mumbled. “Just means we won’t be getting out of bed until the snow thaws.” He plastered himself to Xander’s chest and sighed happily. “Damn you’re hot.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Everywhere?”

“Later,” Xander laughed. “You look like you’re about to keel over from exhaustion.”

Spike grunted. “Your bloody fault.”

“Of course it is.”

“You’ll be here when I wake up?”

“Right here, watching Star Trek,” Xander agreed, picking up on the anxiety Spike couldn’t hide.

“Good. Because I was serious about those chains.”

Spike fell asleep moments later, and Xander smiled at the vampire in his arms.

True to his word, Xander was there when Spike woke up a few hours later and went willingly as the vamp drew him forward for a kiss.

“Taste good,” Spike murmured against his lips.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. What time is it?”

“About nine o’clock.”

“Prolly should call Cordelia. Though, now that I think about it, I should make you do it. As a matter of fact...”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes. And don’t even try giving me the puppy eyes.”

“But...”

“Suck it up, Harris. It’s just Cordelia,” he smirked.

“Easy for you to say.”

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it?” Spike laughed. He continued to do so as Cordelia reamed Xander a new one, only stopping once he promised to come home, preferably before Christmas.

“See you in a few days, love,” Spike told Cordelia, having finally taken pity on Xander and pried the phone away from the boy’s ear. He hung up on her outraged protests.

“That warrants some kind of reward, don’t you think?”

“What did you have in mind?” Xander asked.

Spike leered and Xander delved beneath the covers to show his appreciation.

“Ahhhh... bloody hell, Harris. That’ll do.”

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## Epilogue

*“I’ve changed my mind. I’m not going.”*

Xander’s mutinous words were what led to their current stalemate. Not that Spike minded much; he loved a good tussle the same as any vamp. Besides, he had no doubt he would change the boy’s mind again.

He stared down at Xander’s bare chest painted in blood, almost hypnotized by the random pattern it made. The scent was overpowering in the small apartment and he’d not realized how close to the surface his demon had been until he licked his lips in appreciation at the sight and cut his tongue on a fang.

The body beneath him tensed.

Spike focused on Xander's face and saw eyes tinged an unholy shade of green and staring transfixed at his mouth. He leaned closer, smirking, as he teased the boy with the blood he could feel dribbling down his chin.

"Want it, pet?"

The desperate, high-pitched whine, so full of need and want, nearly made Spike come.

"Tell me what I want to hear," Spike demanded. He couldn't resist the slight thrust of his hips as added incentive. "Tell me..." He cajoled in his most irresistible voice; he had no qualms about bringing out the big guns if it got him what he wanted. He was a bastard that way.

"*Spike...*"

"*Xander,*" Spike purred back. Thrust himself against Xander again.

"Asshole," Xander snarled, even as his eyes closed, his expression a mixture of pain and pleasure at Spike's teasing.

Spike grinning, sensing Xander on the verge of caving. A drop of his blood fell on the boy's lips, and when he saw the tongue that darted out and licked it up, Spike knew he'd won. His body relaxed slightly and a moment later, he was on his back with Xander looming over him.

"Say it," Spike demanded one last time.

"Alright. Fine. I'll go. Happy now?"

"Ecstatic!"

"Good," Xander replied, ignoring Spike's smirk. "Now shut up. It's my turn on top."

Spike opened his mouth to object, but found it filled with Xander's tongue as he claimed his lips in a possessive kiss. By the time Xander's fingers found their way to his ass, Spike wasn't even sure what he'd been trying to object to.

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When they checked in at the airport, Xander wasn't surprised to find their flight to Phoenix delayed by a few hours. It was snowing. Not much, but enough to have the ground crews constantly scrambling to clear the various runways so that they wouldn't have to cancel the remaining flights out that day. So, naturally, Spike wasn't in the best of moods as they settled into their chairs at the gate and prepared to wait.

Sighing, Xander leaned his head back against the wall behind him, closed his eyes, and figured he'd take a nap to pass the time. He would have been able to, but the vampire sitting next to him

kept fidgeting – little movements that had a booted foot nudge his ankle, an elbow graze his ribs.

The thigh pressed into his own was deliberate though.

He cracked one eye open and saw the smirk on Spike's face. Saw him gesture with his head towards the bathroom and knew what he was thinking and how he'd like to pass the time.

Xander's nose crinkled in distaste. He *so* wasn't doing it in there.

Giving a slight shake of his head, he closed his eye again, only to open both – abruptly this time – and hiss between his teeth when Spike leaned over his lap on the pretense of reaching for the newspaper strewn on the opposite seat, boldly grabbing his crotch as he did so.

“Spike,” he growled in warning just loud enough for the vampire to hear. A furtive glance around the nearly deserted airport revealed no one watching their exchange.

*Thank god.*

Spike, the bastard, just leaned back with paper in hand, deliberately ran his palm along the length of his erection, then had the nerve to blink at him with faux innocence.

His eyes flashed, and his breath caught when Spike's did a rapid change from blue to yellow and then back again. Desire slammed into his gut.

“Bathroom. Now.”

Xander was surprised he was able to get the words out of his mouth. He stood and grabbed his bag and headed in that direction.

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Spike had no sooner walked through the door than he was slammed up against the adjacent wall and his mouth ravaged. Xander was muttering things like “bastard” and “tease” in between each kiss, and he had the wherewithal enough to turn the lock before he was manhandled over to the counter.

He hadn't exactly planned on things going quite like this, but he wasn't about to stop it either. Especially when it looked like he was about to get the ride of his life.

Before he knew it the lube he kept in his duster was out on the counter, said duster was off and hanging over the hand dryer, and his jeans were yanked down around his ankles. Surprising, because he was sure Xander's hands had never left his body.

The loud crack of a hand meeting bare skin was like a gunshot, echoing around the deserted bathroom. Spike was so shocked that it took him a moment to register first, that Xander had spanked him, and second, the pain associated with the rather hard smack.

“Again,” was out of his mouth before he could stop it, not that Xander seemed to have heard or cared because his palm had landed again, this time on the opposite cheek.

“Got me here in a bathroom. A *bathroom* of all places,” Xander muttered under his breath, his hand never letting up his punishing pace.

Spike took it. Went so far as to watch Xander in the mirror, smiling at the concentration on the boy’s face. Xander was so determined in his discipline that Spike couldn’t help but lean into each hit. His demon went to a happy place, basking in the attention and affection.

Yeah, he was a twisted fuck.

“... good mind *not* to fuck you. Manipulating me like this.”

Spike started to rear back at that, really ready to protest now, but Xander’s forearm to the back of his neck kept him from doing so.

“Xander? Pet?” Spike tried to get Xander’s attention, but he was in the moment, eyes locked on Spike’s ass and what was probably now a lovely shade of red. The boy had a lot of strength behind each blow.

Thankfully, though, Xander was just talking to hear himself talk, because he left off punishing him to reach for the lube. Spike’s eyes widened at the cursory slick down Xander gave his dick and just barely managed to bite down on his lip and contain his yell as the boy lined up and forced his way in.

The pain was indescribable; the *burn stretch tear* felt so damn good, Spike could only melt into the countertop as Xander proceeded to use his body. His own cock, crushed against the hard marble surface, only heightened his pleasure.

He was on a hair trigger, ready to explode at the slightest provocation, which is why it came as a shock when Xander suddenly stilled above him. Spike lifted his head and saw Xander’s pained expression in the mirror.

“I hurt you,” Xander said to his unasked question. There was no mistaking the smell of Spike’s blood on the air. He made to pull out but Spike stopped him with a staying hand to his hip.

“Feels good. Don’t stop.”

“But—”

Spike used his other hand to grab Xander's and place it on his dick, proving to him in the only way he could. The hardness he could in no way hide. "Please don't stop."

Xander didn't, but the intensity of the moment was gone. The violence of Xander's mindless possession suppressed by his iron will. Spike pouted and made a mental note to have a discussion with the boy about demons and their occasional need for pain. He said nothing as Xander fisted his cock in time with his thrusts – long, deep strokes that had Spike gasping for breath.

"Flight 209 to Phoenix, Arizona, now boarding at gate 31."

Xander froze at the overhead announcement, and Spike could have killed the fates for intruding on his fun.

"Plenty of time," Spike muttered. Smiled when Xander nodded and got back to the business at hand.

They both heard the sound at the same time. Someone was at the door, trying to push it open.

Spike's cry of completion was muffled by the hand that suddenly covered his mouth as he shot all over the counter and part of the mirror. The boy had bitten him, hard enough to break the skin. He felt Xander tense behind him a beat later, heard the guttural moan against his throat as his own orgasm hit.

For all of two seconds they basked in the afterglow.

Spike would have basked longer, but Xander's eyes widened comically as the noise at the door sounded again, more urgently this time. He pouted as Xander pulled out and started readjusting his jeans, only to stop and grab frantically for the paper towel dispenser to wipe himself up.

"Hurry up," Xander hissed when Spike continued to lay there, staring at him in the mirror. "We're gonna miss our flight."

Spike sighed and reluctantly pushed away from the counter and set himself to rights, much like Xander had.

"Ready, pet?" he asked when he was finished. Saw the boy nod. "Right then. I'll go first. Make sure the coast is clear and whatnot."

Spike got another earnest nod and a frantic shooing hand gesture for him to go. He couldn't resist stealing a kiss, and smiled against Xander's lips when the boy melted against him.

Xander came to his senses soon enough, though, and shoved him away, pointing with his finger towards the door as he dipped into one of the stalls.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Xander's face was still beet red when the plane leveled out.

"I can't believe you told that guy the door was stuck. I mean, even *I* heard the click as the lock was turned."

"Yeah, well your hearing's better than most, innit? Wanker didn't hear a thing. Besides, he had to piss too bad to voice any objection."

"But still..." Xander frowned and latched onto the other thing that was bothering him. "It was a public bathroom, Spike."

"Yeah. So?"

"So, I'd like to keep my exhibitionist tendencies to a minimum, if it's all the same to you. And I say again. Public. Bathroom. One word. Ewwww."

"Guess this means our membership into the Mile High Club is out, huh?"

Spike quirked a brow and waited.