



Banner by Selene

Title: Illusion's Secret

Author: Seductivembrace

Pairing, Characters: Xander/Faith

Rating: PG-13

Summary: ***Spoilers for Buffy Season 8 comic, #9 - No Future For You.*** Xander takes matters in his own hands and rushes to London in an attempt to put his foot down over the treatment of Faith.

Disclaimer: Joss said I could, so I am.

Xander watched Buffy walk away and frowned. He knew there was more to the story with Faith, but Buffy had a habit of assuming the worst – especially when she was kept out of the loop.

Willow was still talking on the phone with Giles; what little he could overhear, Giles needed a spell to break down the protection wards surrounding some rogue slayer's estate. He slipped out of the room before Willow finished with her conversation, heading in the opposite direction to Buffy.

If all went well, he could escape to his room, pack, and leave the grounds of the Scottish castle without anyone being the wiser.

He'd read between the lines, and figured Giles was having Faith do something that Buffy would neither approve of, nor condone. The only problem with that plan was the indelible mark it would leave on Faith's soul.

A soul that had already taken hits in the past.

In his room, Xander threw several days' worth of clothes in a duffle bag along with a few weapons. He wasn't foolish enough to think that he wasn't going to become a target once he left Slayer central behind.

Didn't mean he wasn't going though.

He stepped out of his bedroom, his bag slung over his shoulder, and pulled the door closed behind him. His steps were purposeful as he strode down the carpeted hallway on his way to the servant's staircase, stealth being the uppermost thought in his mind. He didn't want to explain his actions to his friends or any of the others.

Something was telling him to get to London... and fast. Hellmouth instincts that he'd done well to listen to in the past.

So he was going.

What he'd not counted on was a seemingly all-knowing, all-powerful, nosey witch of a friend.

"Willow! Hey!" he stammered out upon encountering her in the kitchen.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, eyebrow raised as she took in his duffle.

"Yeah..."

"Oh?"

"Something I gotta check out. Shouldn't be gone more than a couple of days."

He hoped.

"Does Buffy know... I mean... that you're going? What happens if a mission comes up? Who's gonna man the command center? You're her watcher now —"

"Oh please. Any one of the girls working the 'Sit Room' is more than capable of handling things in my absence. Truth be told..." His voice trailed off. He didn't want to get into it with his friend. "Never mind. Look... I'll be back in a few days. If not, I'll call... alright?"

"Xander..."

His expression hardened at her slightly whiney tone. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave her his best impression of the famed “resolve face.”

“Fine!” she pouted after several tense minutes passed. Precious minutes that he thought at any time would bring Buffy into the mix.

Which was to be avoided at all costs.

“See ya,” he tossed over his shoulder as he turned and let himself out of the side door of the kitchen. Long strides took him quickly along the stone path that ended at the garage and his means of escape.

He didn’t breathe a sigh of relief until he’d passed the waist-high stone fence that marked the magical borders protecting their stronghold. He opened up the throttle then and the bike tore down the dirt lane, kicking up a dust cloud in his wake.

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“Then I guess we’re on our own, huh?” Faith commented, laying a hand on her watcher’s shoulder.

“It would appear so,” Giles agreed.

The doorbell rang and two sets of startled eyes swung in the direction of the front door. Neither was expecting company. But then, they probably hadn’t made friends when they’d killed off Roden.

Faith pulled out a dagger; from where, Giles didn’t know. He motioned her to wait as he moved towards the door. It was daylight, and his house had all sorts of protection spells around it. Evil would be hard pressed to attack him in his own home.

Still, he’d not reached the age he had without some degree of caution.

“Who is it?” he called out through the closed door.

“It’s Xander, G-man. Open up, would ya?”

“Xander?” he questioned, even as he freed the lock and pulled the door open. “What are you doing here? That is to say... um...” He flushed slightly at asking so rude a question. Thankfully, Xander didn’t appear to have noticed his gaff.

“Thanks,” Xander muttered, settling his bag more securely on his shoulder as he stepped over the threshold. “You got some place I can store this? Hey, Faith,” he added, seeing the Slayer standing near the stairs.

"Xander. What are you doing here?" she asked bluntly.

"Nice to see you too. It's been awhile. You're looking good."

"Back at'cha."

Faith gave him a thorough once-over, and Xander stiffened at her frank appraisal. As Faith looked her fill, he silently congratulated himself for every single workout he'd endured to lose what he secretly referred to as the pre-wedding jitters weight he'd gained and been unable to shed until recently.

"So... Xander," Giles interrupted, and Xander tore his gaze away from Faith to meet Giles' questioning look.

"What? Can't an old friend drop in for a visit? Should I have called first... maybe scheduled an appointment?"

"You know you're always welcome here, Xander."

Xander barely managed to suppress the smile that threatened at Giles' pissy tone. "Wasn't quite sure there for a moment," he teased. Then grew serious as he added, "Far be it for me to interrupt whatever you two have got going on."

"We don't—"

"We're not—"

Faith and Giles protested at the same time. Both sounded equally guilty, and he knew he'd been right.

"Uh huh. Look, Giles, we need to talk." *Alone*, he didn't add.

"Well, I can take a hint," Faith announced.

"Faith, you don't have to leave," Giles told her.

"Nah... it's cool. Was headed out for a bit anyway... if that's alright?" She sauntered to the front door without waiting for an answer. At the door, she tossed her hair over her shoulder and stared at Xander. "You hangin' around for a bit, Xander? If so, we can catch up when I get back."

Xander swallowed as she winked at him. Another toss of her head, and she was gone, the door closing softly behind her. He was still staring at the closed door when he

demanded Giles tell him what the hell was going on with him having Faith kill a fellow slayer.

"Don't you think she's got enough to handle with her past being what it was?" He turned around and pinned Giles with a look. "Having her do your dirty work is going to send her right back over the edge," Xander yelled. "Is that what you *want*?"

"Xander..."

"No! It's not fair, dammit! She was paying for her crimes, trying to do the right thing by turning herself in. It wasn't her fault Angelus lost his soul and Wesley had to spring her from jail, making her a fugitive from the law. She fixed things in Los Angeles, then she came to Sunnydale and helped us fix things there too. Now you're turning her into a cold-blooded killer again. Having her do the jobs the other girls are apparently too good for."

"It's not that simple, Xander." Giles sighed and removed his glasses. Gestured with his hand for Xander to follow him into his study.

"Drink?"

Xander thought about refusing, but at the weary expression on Giles' face, figured he might need it.

"Yeah. Sure."

They settled back in their seats, Giles behind his desk. Xander gulped his drink in one, and immediately wished he hadn't. His eye watered, and his throat felt like he'd swallowed liquid fire. He coughed and gasped, pounded his chest a few times in an attempt to ease the pain.

"You're supposed to sip it, Xander," Giles drolled.

"Don't change the subject," Xander gasped.

"Fine. If you must know, Lady Genevieve, was a one-time thing. I was giving Faith an out once she completed her assignment. New passport, new identity, new country. She turned me down. Right before you turned up, as a matter of fact."

"What?"

"Like she said, there are going to be other Genevieves out there."

"And you're just going to let her *kill* them?"

“On the contrary. Faith thinks she might actually be able to help them. Bring a few back from the dark side, if you will.”

Xander sat up in his chair and leaned forward. “I want to help.”

“Xander, I don’t think—”

“I’m not asking, Giles. Faith’s not going to be able to save them all, and she’s gonna need someone besides you telling her that she’s not bad. That no one thinks less of her for doing what she has to do to keep the world safe. I’m staying, and that’s final.”

“What about Buffy?”

“What about her?”

“She’s already not speaking to me. If she finds out you’re with us, there’s going to be hell to pay.”

“Buffy’s one of my best friends, and I love her. But she has this habit of seeing things through rose-colored glasses. Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty. Sometimes you gotta— sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do.” He stared hard at Giles. “I know you were the one that killed Ben. Buffy couldn’t do it, even after everything that happened. Yet, you didn’t hesitate.”

“It’s not something I’m proud of, Xander.”

“I’m not saying you should be. Just that... I understand. And it doesn’t make me love you any less. You’re still the father I never had. Nothing will change that. Faith needs to know that, whatever happens, we... me and you... still care about her. That she’s still one of the team. One of us.”

“Very well.”

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The death of Genevieve so close on the heels of her having to put down the vampire children in Cleveland, and Faith was more than ready for a little down time. Thanks to Giles, she had a few pounds in her pocket and the whereabouts of a nearby pub. Maybe if she drank enough, she would sleep untroubled by recurring nightmares.

She hoped that was the case, anyway, as she pushed open the door and took a seat at the bar.

"Gimme a beer," she told the bartender as she slapped one of the bills from her pants pocket onto the countertop. The note was snatched away and a mug of beer quickly replaced it. She liked that the man didn't hang around to make small talk; she really wasn't in the mood.

Drunk was her aim, and barring that, pleasantly buzzed would do. Conversation would just get in the way of her plan. Though, as she finished half her glass and glanced around the room, taking in the men nursing their own sorrows, maybe she'd add a no-strings fuck to her list. Getting laid always did leave her loose-limbed and relaxed.

She spotted a likely candidate in the far corner of the pub. He was alone and seemed interested enough when she caught his eye and quirked her brow in question; his mouth eased into a slight smile that hinted at teeth.

"Hey," she greeted the nameless man as she slid onto the chair across from him.
"Looking to get lucky?"

"Are you?"

"Sweetheart, luck's got nothing to do with it. Want. Take. Have's my motto. I'm just trying to decide if I want to."

Even as she said it, though, another image superimposed itself over the guy before her. Xander, in his dark Army issue-like clothing – which looked really good on his slimmed down frame, she had to admit.

Post-Sunnydale life appeared to be agreeing with Buffy's boy – she couldn't really think of Xander as her ex, or even being remotely hers, given their all-too-brief time together. But they did have a history of sorts, and maybe, just maybe, she could capitalize on that. Worst case scenario, Xander left London in a tiff and went back to Buffy and Willow, leaving her and Giles alone together in their pact.

Something akin to regret threatened at that thought, and she pushed it back to the far corners of her mind as she stood and muttered, "Never mind," to the guy sitting at the table and returned to the bar and her lone seat.

She was definitely going to need some more liquor in her to wash away the bitter taste in her mouth before she went back to Giles'.

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It was dark when Amy and a de-skinned Warren were met at the door by the blond.

"Are you *crazy*? Why did you come here?"

“Because here will be the last place they would look, you twit!” Warren snapped. “Now let us in.”

The blond stood back and just barely managed to keep the revulsion off his face as Warren and Amy crossed over the threshold. He took a quick look about the grounds to make sure no one was watching before shutting the door and sliding the bolt home.

“Come on. You can stay below. No one ever goes down there, and I’m sure Amy can set up a ward or something to keep it that way.”

The three descended the steps, the only sound breaking the eerie silence was their footfalls on the stone surface. They walked by several closed doors along the darkened hallway, but paused before the one emanating a green glow beneath the door’s bottom edge.

“How’s our guest doing?” Amy enquired.

“See for yourself.”

Amy opened the door and smiled in satisfaction. Ethan hung limply from magically-enhanced chains, his body drained of a good portion of his magic.

“You think the Slayer bought the false vision you planted in her head?” the blond asked.

“Of course she did. She’ll see the door and burst in to save the day, only to find Ethan already dead. Willow will be too weak to see through the glamour.”

“And the soldier that supposedly shot him?”

“Just as clueless as the others.”

“I hope you’re right. I don’t know why we’re keeping him alive anyway. Twilight wanted –”

“We’ve been over this before,” Warren hissed. “Amy needs his magic. Keeping my cells enervated takes a lot of resources; Ethan provides that. At least he will until I can get my hands on Willow again.”

The blond snorted but wisely held his tongue. When Twilight thought Warren and Amy’s usefulness was at an end, he’d deal with the two. Truthfully, he was surprised the man had let them live after the botched attempt stateside – Buffy should have been dead and buried by now.

Something he was none too pleased about himself.

Still, he wasn't running things yet, and until a few key people were eliminated from the playing field, he had to sit back and play the bumbling idiot.

"Fine. Whatever. Make yourselves at home. Just stay out of sight. I don't have to say what will happen if you're noticed by the others..."

The blond turned and walked off, leaving the two to their own devices. He had to be up early in the morning and needed his rest.

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Xander was fast asleep when Faith let herself into the room he was using. She'd gone through the money Giles had given her and was feeling the pleasant euphoria a decent amount of alcohol usually brought about. A good, hard ride – courtesy of Xander – and she knew she would be able to sleep without the image of Genevieve's betrayed expression haunting her dreams.

She slipped out of her clothes, letting them fall where they may, and crossed naked to the bed. Xander looked just as good without his clothes as he did with, at least what she was able to see above the sheet. Her body tingled in memory of their first time together. Though he'd been a virgin at the time, he'd definitely risen to the challenge – literally; the sex had been fantastic.

Faith felt him stir as she climbed on the bed and straddled his hips. His eye opened and he stiffened in shock to see her looming overhead, a slight smile on her face.

"Faith? Wha – ?"

His question was cut off as Faith ground her lips into his, determined to override any objections he might have. She thrust her tongue inside his mouth, heard his moan of... something... before he gave up and began kissing her back. His hands gripped her arms then moved to her back. She delighted in his strength as he tugged her down on top of him; her breasts smashed into his bare chest causing them both to groan.

It went on for several minutes, the thrust and grind of hips, hands that seemed everywhere at once, mouths swallowing down moans of desperation and need. Then suddenly their roles were reversed and Faith found herself flat on her back, Xander's face a hairsbreadth apart from hers.

"What are you doing, Faith?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?" she purred and went to reach for him again.

“Using me for sex.”

“Do you mind? I’ll make it good for you. We can do whatever you want...” Faith smiled sweetly in the hopes of swaying him. Though, judging by the thunderous look on his face, all she’d done was piss him off more.

“What I want is for you to get your drunken ass outta my bed. I’m not some dog that comes when you call it, Slayer or no. We’re not going down that road again.”

“Please, Xander. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... I could tell you wanted me earlier. What’s the harm of having a little fun?”

“First off, you’re a beautiful woman, and I’d have to be dead not to respond to you. It doesn’t mean anything. Second, I want more than a casual fling from the woman I take to my bed. I’ve done the wham. Bam. Thank you, ma’am, and it doesn’t quite suit my taste.”

“Oh.” Faith turned her head to the side, anything to escape the condemning look in Xander’s eyes, and whispered an apology. She’d obviously made a huge mistake, and the drink, combined with her feelings of guilt over the senseless death of her sister slayer, made it difficult to hide behind the thick outer shell she normally presented to the world.

His next words made her believe that all was not lost and she found herself tearing up over the unexpected gesture. And for once, she gave in to the need to be held and comforted. Clung to him as he soothed her with soft touches and quiet words until she eventually drifted off to sleep.

For the first time in what felt like years, her sleep was untroubled.

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Breakfast the next morning wasn’t nearly as awkward as Faith thought it might be. She’d woken alone in Xander’s bed, with no sign of him anywhere in the room. Dressing quickly, she’d darted into her own room to shower and change. Had walked downstairs and into the kitchen to see Xander frying up eggs while Giles had his nose buried in the morning paper.

“Ah... good morning, Faith. I trust you slept well?”

There was no hint of derision on Giles’ face, no smart remarks from Xander either.

“Uh... yeah,” she replied as she slid into the seat on the watcher’s left.

“Eggs, Faith?” Xander asked her. Again his tone was carefully neutral – like last night had never happened.

“Sure.”

“Good. It’s about the only thing I know how to make,” he teased then gave her a wink.

For some reason, that made her smile, and she relaxed and told him, “Hey. You’re one up on me. I usually order out... *if* I remember to eat, that is.”

“Guess this means that Giles gets K-P duty.”

Both Faith and Xander snickered when Giles flipped his wallet on the table, never bothering to look up from the paper.

“Ordering out it is then,” Xander announced as he walked over to the table with skillet in hand and doled out scrambled eggs onto three plates.

Giles put the paper away as Xander sat down, and the next few minutes were spent eating.

“These are pretty good, Xan,” Faith complimented around a mouthful of food.

“Well, my motto’s always been, pick one thing and do it well. Eggs are my thing.”

“I have to agree with Faith. Fluffy. Moist. Just the right amount of seasoning. Very delicious, Xander.”

“The secret’s the milk,” Xander confided. “Adds a touch of buoyancy to the eggs— And can I sound even *more* girly?”

“Yeah...” Faith laughed. “But your secret is safe with us. Promise.”

Giles finished his breakfast and laid down his fork. “Speaking of secrets,” he began, causing Xander and Faith to start and look guiltily at each other. “I’ve received word of a slayer in New Orleans that may be in over her head.”

“When do we leave?” Xander wanted to know.

“Xander, are you sure you wouldn’t rather—?”

“No.”

"I gathered as much," Giles sighed. "Our flight leaves Heathrow at noon. I suggest you two go pack. I'm not sure how long we'll be away, so several days' worth of clothes would probably be best. I'll clean up here."

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It wasn't hard to find the slayer once they landed in New Orleans. After settling into their respective rooms, Faith had done a quick sweep of the city, hoping to let off some steam throwing down with an evil undead or two. Instead, she came across the slayer in question – a girl who appeared barely out of diapers. Which was an exaggeration on her part, but the pre-teen chick kicking butt and taking names made Faith feel ancient by comparison.

Scary given that she was on the low end of the twenties spectrum herself.

Still, the girl could throw a mean punch, especially when riled, and it was only after Faith had taken several pot-shots that she took off the kid gloves and let the younger slayer have it. She was all for reforming Miss Wanna-Be-Bad, but not at the expense of having her face rearranged.

Faith went on the offense, interspersing pointed remarks about the mistakes the girl was making as she began deflecting each punch or kick that was attempted, following them up with ones of her own, whose aim was far more accurate. It wasn't long before the younger slayer was tired and out of breath, silently calling a halt to their fight by bending at the waist and resting her hands on her knees as she sucked air into her lungs.

"Ready to talk now?" Faith inquired, barely winded, and was pleased to see the girl nod – if somewhat resentfully. She stepped back and relaxed her stance into something a little less threatening and commented on the girl's fighting style to help salvage her bruised ego.

"Thanks," the other slayer replied warily. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Girl, I wiped the floor with your ass. Of course I'm good. So," Faith began before the teenager could get her back up again. "You want to tell me why you think you can use your new-found powers for your own benefit. And don't give me that crap about no one being strong enough to stop you. I wrote the book on that, and I'm a tough act to follow. A very tough act," Faith added, so the girl would get her meaning.

The girl looked mutinous and Faith didn't think she was going to talk. As it was, she just stood up, cocked her hip as she crossed her arms over her chest. Sneered as she replied, "What are you, my mom or something?"

"Please," Faith snorted. "More like your guardian angel. I'm your one chance at a get-out-of-jail-free card. If you don't shape up, and fast, you're gonna find yourself brought down by a wet team."

"What's a wet team?"

"They're like the secret police of slayers. And if you think you can take them on and come out on top... guess again. They've got a serum that makes your strength just up and disappear, and they'll use it too. See if they don't. Where's your watcher at anyway?"

"Off playing the slots most likely," the girl muttered under her breath.

"Ahh... one of those," Faith nodded in commiseration. "Well, come on. I'll take you to meet a real watcher. Maybe see about finding you a new one. Giles isn't going to like hearing that yours has a gambling problem."

Faith turned and started walking off.

"What makes you think I'm gonna come with you?" the slayer called out.

"Because if you don't, I'm gonna finish giving you that ass-kicking you deserve, truss you up, and sling you over my shoulder. Either way, you're coming with me," Faith replied, not bothering to turn around. She hid a smile when the young slayer fell into step beside her. "So, you gotta name?"

"You're so smart, don't you already know it?"

Faith shook her head and rolled her eyes. *Was I ever this much of a pain in the ass?* she thought to herself. Then laughed because she knew she was... and then some.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Faith grinned. "You just remind me of someone, that's all."

"Oh yeah? Who?"

"Me."

"Oh."

"And the reason I asked you for your name was because I wanted to give you a chance at a start fresh. Clean slate and all that."

The two slayers walked in silence for a time. Neither looked at the other, instead, their senses were tuned to their surroundings, inbred instincts telling them to be on the lookout for anything amiss. It wasn't until they were almost back to the hotel that the younger slayer spoke.

"Jessica Underwood. Jessi for short."

"Nice to meet you, Jessi. My name's Faith. Faith Lehane."

"Faith, huh? What kinda name is that? Did your mom not like you or something? She one of those religious zealots?" Jessi joked.

Faith winced. "My mom was an abusive drunk. I skipped town as soon as I could so I wouldn't have to put up with her shit. It was right after I became the slayer."

"Sorry."

"Don't sweat it, kid. It was a long time ago. I've got a new family now... sorta. Friends too, I'd like to think. It ain't perfect, but then, what is? We've got each other's back when it matters."

"Must be nice. Everyone *I* know thinks I'm a freak. The kids at school... they... they laugh at me because I'm... I can't... I can't control it. This." She shook her hands in front of her to emphasize her point. "This *strength*. Power. Whatever you want to call it. So I..."

"Do your own thing because it's easier than trying to fit in," Faith finished. "Rebel because you think that's what they're saying about you anyway. Pick fights with anyone and anything, because at least then, someone is paying attention to you..."

"Yeah," Jessi sighed.

"What about your parents? Aren't they —?"

"I don't know who my parents are."

"Ahhh," Faith replied, as if that explained everything. And it did, really. The girl had probably grown up as a ward of the court, in and out of foster homes her entire life. "Well, we're here," she announced a moment later as she stopped before a rundown motel. "Giles is kinda stuffy, but, deep down, the man's got a heart of gold. Xander is... Xander's an okay guy too. They just want to help. So do I, so give them a chance, alright?"

"Yeah... okay."

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"It's me again. I come bearing your mark," Lieutenant Molter announced as she stepped into the clearing. Truthfully, she was rather wary of speaking with Twilight again - especially after their latest setback.

She'd been informed by her mole that Xander, the Slayer's new watcher, had gone missing. No one seemed to know where he'd disappeared to, and her man on the inside wasn't among the Slayer or Willow's close circle of friends.

The only thing they knew for sure was that Xander had left not long after Buffy reappeared back at the castle following the Genevieve-Roden debacle.

"It's about Xander," Molter began. "We've lost him. He left the compound without anyone being aware. Now he's off the grid."

She felt a chill go through her as Twilight suddenly appeared before her. Even with his mask firmly in place, she could feel the heat of his stare. It unnerved her, but she forced herself not to flinch as he stopped before her.

"Lieutenant Molter. You disappoint me..."

"I'm sorry," she babbled out an apology as Twilight laid a gloved hand on her shoulder. "We'll find him for you. I can have our guy try and probe the others if you'd like."

Twilight paused in meting out his punishment. Though he didn't tolerate mistakes, he couldn't keep killing off all his acolytes without consequence; he needed foot soldiers to lay the groundwork for his master plan. Only then could he reveal himself and fulfill his destiny.

"Very well," he allowed. "See what the girl can find out, and find me Xander. Now that he's out in the open, I'm hoping to persuade him to my side."

"Yes, sir. Right away. I'll... uh... just be going..."

Twilight watched the woman turn away and practically race back to the helicopter that had brought her to him. The rotors whirred to life, and a minute later, the helicopter was lifting off and headed back the way it came.

He mulled over the news he'd been given.

He should have struck when Buffy and her friends were vulnerable after Sunnydale's implosion. But being found out before he was ready to reveal himself had stayed his

hand. A mistake on his part, because Willow had teleported them to Scotland before he'd been aware and her wards were too strong for even him to penetrate.

It was one of the reasons he'd allowed Amy to have her fun with Willow. Killing off the powerful Wiccan would have made his plan easier to implement. That hadn't come to pass, however, and now he was back to either Buffy or Xander.

With Xander outside the protective barriers of their stronghold – or so he could safely assume – he was leaning strongly in that direction. Though born on the Hellmouth and having survived seven years in the Slayer's company, the boy had no supernatural abilities, no penchant for magic. He was human... and fragile.

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The Chinese take-out store wasn't far from their motel, so Xander felt safe enough leaving for the ten minutes it would take him to retrieve their dinner. What he'd not counted on was the nearly limitless resources of the Initiative – or whatever it was the covert government sect was calling itself these days.

He forced himself to remain calm when he saw the two men tailing him reflected in the window of one of the shops he was walking by. Even though they wore plain clothes, their haircuts and distinctive bearing gave them away. The sidewalk he was on was fairly crowded, thankfully, and he used that to his advantage as he picked up his pace and ran across the street just before oncoming traffic prevented them from crossing.

Xander gave up all pretense then, dropping his dinner as he took off running.

What he'd not factored on was that the two goons behind him had friends. As he passed the next alleyway, he was grabbed by someone in the shadows and hauled further into darkness. Something covered his mouth and nose and Xander could smell something on the rag.

Chloroform.

He held his breath, hoping to stave off the effects of the drug – all to little avail. He began to get lightheaded, and spots appeared before his eyes. The world threatened to go black, but just before that happened, something slammed into him and his attacker, sending them crashing to the ground.

There was a ringing in his ears – probably from the blow to his head – and he heard what he thought was a female voice raised in anger, and possibly some fighting. He tried to hold on, get to his feet and make good his escape while everyone's attention was diverted.

He tried, but the ground rushed up to greet him and he passed out.

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Faith knocked out the last of the three military goons that had attacked Xander, and could only thank her intuition that told her to go after him when she'd found him gone from the room he shared with Giles. The immediate threat seen to, she hurried to Xander's side to see how bad the damage was.

"Xander? Xander, wake up."

He was unconscious, but breathing – none too worse for wear, in her opinion. His patch had shifted off his eye, and Faith was able to see the damage that had been done by Caleb. As she cupped his face and lightly ran her thumb over the hollowed out socket, she was surprised that he'd not had Willow magic it better for him.

Surprised, but secretly pleased.

He acknowledged that he wasn't perfect, wasn't whole. He wore the patch with pride.

Xander Harris had grown up.

Shaking herself from her silent musings, Faith glanced over at the unconscious men. It wouldn't be long now before their buddies showed up. She needed to get Xander out of there and back to their motel.

She tried one more time to rouse Xander with little success. She grinned suddenly at the beating his male ego was about to take with her having to sling him over her shoulder and carry him off to safety. But then, she'd always had a warped sense of humor.

Faith grunted as she hefted Xander up off the ground. He weighed a lot more than his slimmed down frame indicated, and it took her several tries before she was able to get enough leverage to carry him fireman style and start back to their motel.

"My god, Faith, what the bloody hell happened?" Giles demanded when he opened the door to her repeated kicks.

"If I had to guess, I'd say the government's been tracking our moves. The guys that attacked Xander looked like GI Joes to me at least. I knocked them out and grabbed Xander. Came here. Damn, he's heavy."

"Well, let's get him settled on the bed."

Faith eased Xander down on one of the two beds in the room and Giles set about trying to wake him. He got a moan for his efforts and then Xander's eyelid slowly fluttered open.

"Ooohhh... my head," Xander groaned. "Giles?" he asked as his eye slowly came into focus and he saw the watcher leaning over him. "Wha... what happened?"

"Faith found you being dragged into an alley. She rescued you."

"Oh... great. Saved by a girl... *again*. My pride can't take much more of this," he whined as he tried to sit up, felt his head start to pound, and flopped back against the pillow. "Ow..."

"Yeah... well... slayer here. Kinda in the job description," Faith smirked.

"Don't remind me," Xander grumbled, gifting her with a mock evil glare.

Faith rolled her eyes and pinned Giles with a look. "We need to get out of here. Now. There's no telling what kind of backup those boys have."

At that point, Jessi piped in. "What about me?"

Giles started to speak but Faith cut him off. "We can't leave her here," she told him pointedly.

"No... you're right. We'll have to travel on the ground until we can secure the appropriate papers for Jessi."

"I have an ID," Jessi announced.

"Which is all very well and good," Giles told the young slayer. "But the type of identification I'm referring to will get us out of country undetected... or relatively so," he added. He would have to look into adding magic to their repertoire in order to improve their odds of remaining anonymous. The ease with which they'd been found was rather alarming.

Though it didn't explain the government's sudden interest in them, and more specifically, Xander. Something he would have to ponder over at a later date.

"Faith, take Jessi and gather your things. I want to be out of here in ten minutes." He turned to Xander then and added, "Do you think you can make it to the car?"

Xander's gaze hardened and he ignored the pain in his head as he sat up on the edge of the bed. "Help me up."

Ten minutes later the door to Giles' motel room was smashed in and a group of six men dressed in military fatigues stormed inside.

"It's empty, ma'am," the leader announced into his headset a moment later.

"Shit," Lieutenant Molter cursed. "Tell me your men were able to plant a tracer."

"That's a negative. They were ambushed and knocked out before they could complete either of their objectives. We think it was a slayer."

"Fine!" Molter snapped. "Return to base. I'll get the geek squad to try and track their movements."

"Yes, ma'am."

~*~*~*~*~

When they were driving through Tennessee, Giles' cell phone rang. He pulled it out with a bit of juggling on his part and surprise flitted over his features at seeing the caller id.

"Hello?"

"Giles, it's Willow. There was an attempt on Buffy's life."

"What? My god... Is she alright?"

"She's fine. Satsu took the dagger meant for Buffy."

"And Satsu? Is she —?"

"She's fine too. I was here, thankfully," Willow told him. "Giles, it was Renee."

"Renee?" Giles asked, not understanding.

"Yes. We were betrayed, Giles. By one of our own. We've got her locked up in detention and I'm going to try and probe her mind to see who she's working with. I wanted to call you first."

"Good. That's... good. It... uh... sounds like you have everything in hand there. Keep me posted as to what you find out..." Giles' cell phone beeped once indicating a second caller. "Listen, Willow, I have to run. Someone else is trying to ring through. Give my best to Buffy. Goodbye."

"But, Giles..." Willow began, but she was talking to a dead line.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Xander asked from the front passenger seat.

Giles eyed his phone message. His security system at his home in London was linked to his cell phone and was set to alert him with any type of activity, and it had just gone off.

"Nothing... maybe something. Hang on, I need to pull over."

Giles steered the car to the curb and parked, then began typing on keys to see what was going on at his home. There was a brief glimpse of a huge brownish-black blob that was captured by one of the cameras.

"Well?" Xander prompted.

"We need to get back to London. There's someone I need to see."

"Who?"

Giles didn't answer Xander's question as he checked his mirror and pulled back on the road. "Look inside the glove compartment," he told him instead. "I need directions to the nearest airport."

"Airport? Giles, you said..."

"I know, Faith," Giles replied, glancing at the Slayer in the rearview mirror. "I wouldn't have mentioned it if I didn't think the situation was urgent."

"Urgent? Giles..." Xander began again. "Tell us what's going on."

"Very well. Just... just look at the map. I'll explain along the way."

~*~*~*~*~

"So you're in cahoots with demons? The same demons that we... that Buffy killed? *Those* demons?"

"We were set up," Giles sighed wearily. "Both of us. Someone is pitting us against each other."

"Aren't we already against each other?" Faith called out from the back seat.

"Of course. But you're missing the point. Someone is manipulating us."

"And you're just gonna believe whatever this demon tells you?" Xander asked. "I mean, these guys aren't exactly known for their honesty, if you know what I mean."

"We've called a temporary truce."

"Truce?" Xander snorted. "Yeah... cuz that's worked out so well for us in the past."

"Xander..."

"What? I'm just saying..."

"I'm very well aware of the questionable motives of demons, Xander. I have been doing this for quite some time. But, as a wise man once said, 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' We both have something to gain by finding this Twilight character. So for now... yes, we have a truce, and we'll honor it until such time as—"

"It bites us in the ass?" Faith concluded.

"Yes. Thank you, Faith."

"Hey, I'm with Xander on this one," she informed him, but added when Giles appeared ready to launch into another diatribe, "but, if it's what you think is best... I'll play along. We're in this together. We're a team, right?"

"Yes. A team," Giles agreed.

"A team," Xander echoed. "But I get to be the person that tells you 'I told you so'."

~*~*~*~*~

"I'm gonna kick his ass!" Xander yelled as he paced Giles' library. "All this time... and he... Argh! He is *so* dead!"

"Weren't you the one that said that demons couldn't be trusted?" Giles deadpanned. "They could have been lying."

"Well, there's just one way to find out," Faith interjected. "I say we load up and confront the little shit."

"If what they say is true, we can't just go barging in there. Amy is sure to have some type of wards surrounding the place."

"Then it's a good thing you're still dabbling in the magic, isn't it?" Xander commented. "What about Jessi?"

"I say bring her. She needs the experience and it'll be good having another slayer at my back. Who knows how many of them Andrew has managed to convert to his way of thinking."

"I'll just gather a few things I might need," Giles told them. "Xander, Faith, there are weapons in the chest over there. We're taking the company jet, so there'll be no problems with customs. I'll send Jessi down to you."

Giles walked out of the library and headed upstairs. On the way to his room, he stopped in front of the room he'd given Jessi to use and knocked.

"Hey," she greeted as she opened the door.

"Hello. We're taking a trip to Italy. There's a possible situation brewing there. Faith requested you come along. Do you feel up to it?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Erm... good. They're in the library. You'd better hurry if you want a choice of weapons."

~*~*~*~*~

Getting into the slayer stronghold in southern Italy wasn't as difficult as Giles had expected. Willow and Buffy must have done a number on the witch if the weakness of her protection wards was anything to go by.

The four slipped inside the side entrance and debated whether they should go up or down.

"I vote down," Xander whispered. "If Amy and Warren are here, they're not gonna risk being seen by the slayers."

"Unless the slayers have gone rogue too," Faith commented. "Then it wouldn't matter."

"We'll give them the benefit of the doubt... for now," Giles told them. "Faith, take the lead. Head downstairs. Everyone... stay close together."

It took them a few minutes to reach the bottom since Faith stopped several times to listen. Her heightened senses lay relatively dormant; either no one was there, or they were really good at masking their presence.

"Hold up," she hissed as she reached the bottom.

"What is it?" Xander whispered in her ear.

"Look." She pointed to one of the doors that had a green glow spilling out onto the floor beneath it.

"G-man, what do you make of that?"

"I'm not sure."

They crept forward in a single line, weapons at the ready.

"It's unlocked," Faith whispered, when she tried the knob.

"It's a trap," Xander told her.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Giles interjected. "There's a lot of magic emanating in and around the room. It could be any number of things."

"Well, we won't know unless we try it."

"Faith! Wait!" Xander hissed.

But Faith had already opened the door.

"Oh my god," Xander gasped. "That's—"

"Ethan," Giles whispered.

Giles hurried forward even as he incanted the necessary words to break the magical bonds holding Ethan in place, so was there to catch the mage when he fell.

"'ello, Ripper. Fancy seeing you here."

"Ethan. What? How?"

"Now's not the time, old friend. We... we have to get... away from here. Before she taps into my magic again."

Giles nodded and slung one of Ethan's arms around his shoulder. Xander stepped forward and grabbed the other.

"Faith..."

"On it. Jessi, you're with me."

The five retreated the way they'd come, their steps hurried as they sought the side exit. Near the top of the steps Ethan began chanting.

"Ethan—" Giles began.

Ethan wasn't listening however. A moment later, Giles felt his energy sapped when the mage grabbed his hand. He gasped and stumbled a step before catching himself, drawing Faith's notice.

"No. It's alright," Giles managed to get out at seeing her murderous expression. "He needs strength. He's protecting us. Just... just go. Hurry."

"I hope you're right, Giles," Faith muttered, but turned around and led them up and out of the stone fortress.

~*~*~*~*~

He had to admit, his "brother" had been right – he'd needed to forget his old life in order to fulfill his destiny. He had power beyond his wildest imagination now, and like Adam promised, he did like it.

He liked it a lot.

Too much to let it all slip away with the emergence of a slew of slayers inhabiting the planet – his ex-girlfriend at the helm. He'd felt the spell when it had occurred even though he'd been on the opposite side of the globe at the time, and had frowned at the possible implications.

With his plan so close to fruition, now was not the time to match wits with a constantly growing number of slayers. But they were an unknown factor and couldn't be left to monopolize his playing field; they had to be dealt with. Which was why he was pitting the girls against the reorganized branch of the Initiative, with an odd demon species thrown in here and there to keep the Slayer and her band of friends from guessing his game.

He'd evolved so much the past year, outgrowing the secondary behavioral modification chip Maggie Walsh had implanted in his brain. He'd studied tactics and counter-tactics, had assimilated every known military stratagem into his cerebral cortex; he could hypothesize his opponents' next move with a 99% confidence rate.

The military thought he would be the tool to wipe away the slayer population and he'd let them think that. Secretly though, he'd been twisting things around, making puppets of the organization that had enabled him to reach his full potential – all without them being aware.

Twilight indeed.

It was laughable, their gullibility... and their fanatical behavior. Zealots with a cause, ready and willing to martyr themselves if necessary.

A purge was definitely in order; when he was finished, he could begin anew. He was close now, so close that one small mistake on his part would result in the failure of his objective.

"I won't let that happen," he promised himself. "I will fulfill my destiny and take my place as the natural ruler of the new world I will create."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

"Ease off, old man," Ethan grumbled. "I don't think I'm quite ready to shuffle off from this mortal coil just yet. It was just a bloody spell."

"And a powerful one at that," Giles reasoned as he ignored Ethan's griping and helped him to his feet. "You've barely recovered from Amy's machinations. Forgive me if I'm a little concerned."

Giles relented and let Ethan go once they were on their feet, but immediately clapped on again when Ethan stumbled and would have fallen.

"Maybe I'm just a little tired," Ethan conceded.

"I'll second that," Xander added. His legs felt like jello and he had his arm draped around Faith's shoulder so that he, too, could remain upright. The spell had drained them, much more than the last time.

Jessi jogged up. "So, we did it? We beat the bad guy?"

"You bet your ass we did," Faith replied, a wide smile on her face. Despite being bone-weary, she was still juiced from the spell and her body practically vibrated with restless energy.

Xander chuckled and even Giles cracked a smile.

Her smile disappeared, however, when she suddenly remembered their audience.

As did the others.

Together, they turned and confronted a seething, scythe-wielding Buffy and a frowning Willow, and the small army of slayers flanking the two.

Between them lay the body of Riley.

Otherwise known as Twilight.

~*~*~*~*~

One week earlier

“Do you think we’ll be safe in London?” Xander asked as the jet reached cruising altitude and the pilot gave the all clear to remove their seatbelts.

“We’re not going back to London just yet,” Giles replied.

His eyes strayed to the mage in a deep, restorative sleep on the chair across from him. He’d not seen Ethan since the Initiative had taken him into custody, and in that time, the man looked like he’d aged a good dozen years. Seeing him, Giles couldn’t help but feel remorseful; he’d known what the Initiative was like, but had been too consumed with anger – and betrayal – and had given Ethan over without a moment’s hesitation.

“We’re not?” Faith questioned.

“No. Whatever we’re dealing with, it’s bigger than Andrew, or even Amy and Warren.”

“How’s that?” Xander asked, his brow knitted in confusion.

“Because the Initiative is involved,” Giles replied.

“But, we already *knew* that,” Xander interjected. “Buffy said as much when she rescued Willow.”

“The Initiative is the least of your worries. It’s the Slayer’s ex that is the real problem.”

Three pair of eyes zeroed in on Ethan as he attempted to sit up in his chair, found himself too weak and reluctantly settled back into his previous position.

“Angel?” Xander asked, bewildered. “What does *he* have to do with anything? Last we heard, he was fighting the good fight in LA, even if he *was* using an evil law firm to do so. Has that changed? Is Angelus back?”

“No,” Ethan managed to wheeze out. “It’s not Angel who I was referring to, but Riley.”

~*~*~*~*~

"Still no luck?" Buffy asked, having spied Willow's chagrined look as she disconnected her cell phone.

"No, and I'm not able to determine his whereabouts with a locator spell either. It's like something is blocking my magick."

Willow frowned, causing Buffy to frown with her.

"What?"

"Not to brag or anything, but I'm a pretty powerful Wiccan now. Whatever it is that's blocking me is strong. I want to say it's rooted in the dark arts, but it's not. Not quite. There's something there that's not entirely good, but it's not purely evil either. Still..."

"And nothing from Xander either?"

"No."

It had been Willow that had informed Buffy that Xander had left their stronghold, repeating his story of him having to check something out and that he'd call in a few days. Unfortunately, a few days had passed and there'd been no phone call. Repeated attempts to try and reach Xander on his cell phone had been met with nothing but Xander's voicemail.

Now Giles had disappeared.

Throw in Renee's defection and Buffy was ready to grind her teeth in frustration.

"Well, keep trying."

Willow nodded and Buffy left. She needed to see her sister before she went to bed.

~*~*~*~*~

Xander was stretched out on the bed he'd been given, his hands clasped together beneath his head. The house was quiet; everyone had gone to bed after reaching a decision about dealing with Twilight.

Faith had wanted to call in Buffy.

He and Giles had been equally adamant about not involving her. They had everyone they needed to perform the spell - Faith to fill Buffy's previous role and Ethan to cast the spell.

But still she'd balked, citing a laundry list or reasons why she couldn't be the one.

Xander had read between the lines though.

Faith still didn't think she was worthy.

Ethan had been the one to convince her, going so far as to say that it was a good thing that she - *and* he - weren't without their faults. That the spell they were going to use on Riley would need to tap into their darker side in order for it to work.

She'd finally agreed, her shoulders slumping as Ethan's words struck a nerve, and Xander could have banged his head against the wall in frustration. While they'd researched the spell, Faith had taken Jessi out to patrol.

"Do try to keep a low profile, Faith," Giles had warned. "I don't want the other slayers here in Paris to discover our being here."

She'd not answered and Giles had sighed after she left then helped Ethan to bed. The man was still weak, even if he was steadily improving.

Xander had taken up residence in the living room and stared at the television unseeing while he waited for the girls to return.

It had been several hours later, but they had returned - unharmed.

Thankfully.

He'd not liked the look on Faith's face when she'd left.

Their patrol must have gone well because the two had chatted animatedly as they'd come in and trudged up the stairs to the room they shared.

He'd waited another hour before turning off the television and seeking his own bed. If Faith figured out he'd been waiting up for her, there'd be hell to pay.

A floorboard creaked somewhere down the hall and Xander froze, waiting. Ethan and Giles had warded the unused safe house, but the spells were only as good as the next person strong enough to counteract them.

There was a brief, muffled knock at his door, but it opened before he could call out "come in".

Faith seemed a little lost standing there, though she tried to hide the fact by leaning against the doorjamb and giving him an appraising look.

Xander just rolled his eye.

“Can I come in?” she finally asked when she didn’t get her hoped-for response.

Xander sat up and patted the place beside him. She hesitated for a minute before nodding as if she’d reached a decision with herself and walked over and sat down. Her body remained rigid and Xander laid a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back to lie down next to him, his arm wrapped loosely around her body. A shudder went through her as the pent up energy seemed to drain away.

The hard Slayer was gone, leaving behind a confused little girl.

One seeking confirmation of her worth.

“Mind if I sleep here tonight?”

Xander nodded his consent; his lips brushed against her temple.

Nothing else was said and eventually they both closed their eyes and slept. Neither seemed to mind the cold, or the fact that they’d not bothered to get underneath the covers.

~*~*~*~*~

For three days, Giles was a practical no-show, spending his time either researching the spell and the secondary one that would track Riley, or helping a less-than-pleased Ethan, who he’d confined to his room on mandatory bed rest.

Any day now, Xander expected a lightning bolt to erupt from the mage’s fingertips and zap Giles in the ass. The thought had him chuckling, earning him a curious look from both Faith and Jessi.

“What?” Faith asked.

“Nothing. Just imagine that Ethan is about sick of Giles’ mothering.”

The three were taking in the sites of Paris – a deserved vacation, they’d all rationalized, and it wasn’t like Giles was around to say no – and had stopped for lunch at a local bistro.

Faith snorted. “Are you kidding? Those two are like peas in a pod. There’s definitely some history there.”

“Wha? Huh?” Xander stammered.

"You can't tell?"

"Tell what?"

Faith quirked her brow.

"Are you saying... Giles? And Ethan? No! You're pulling my leg!"

Later that night when Giles finally emerged from Ethan's room to retrieve their portion of the Chinese takeout he ordered, Xander couldn't help but watch him covertly.

Or so he thought.

Faith's laughter proved otherwise, causing his face to redden when Giles went into disapproving librarian mode and frowned in his direction.

"Is there something you needed, Xander?"

"No! Ah... no."

"Very well." Giles included the two slayers when he added, "Ethan has managed to locate Riley. Another day or two, and we'll have everything we'll need to perform the spell."

"Will Ethan be recovered enough to do it?"

"He will if I can keep him in bed."

Faith's lips twitched and Xander could feel his face redden yet again. Damn Faith for putting the image of those two together in his head.

"Ah..." He coughed. "Okay. Anything you need us to do?"

"Not really. Although, I would prefer it if you didn't go traipsing about Paris. We're trying to keep a low profile."

"Right! Lock down. Got it."

Giles' eyes narrowed at Xander's comment, but he didn't say anything as he grabbed his food and returned to his nursing duties.

Xander waited until he was out of sight before throwing a fortune cookie at Faith's head.

~*~*~*~*~

"Buffy, I think I may have something..."

"Xander?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so. There's a huge concentration of magick centering in New Mexico, and not the good kind either... and it's building."

"Let me get the girls. Give me twenty minutes."

Willow nodded and Buffy left to change, grab her scythe, and rally the other slayers.

~*~*~*~*~

"Pull over here, Xander. Any closer and we'll give away our position," Giles informed him at a look from Ethan.

Xander parked and they all got out.

"Jessi, your job is to provide protection for us once we start the spell. Faith will keep Riley busy, but he may have acolytes lurking about."

"Gotcha."

"Over there, Xander." Giles pointed to a small clearing in between two trees.

Xander nodded and walked off, a box of supplies in his hand. The others weren't far behind.

They didn't waste any time starting the spell, Xander pausing only long enough to give Faith a reassuring squeeze before taking his place in the circle.

Faith moved off after giving Jessi instructions on how to watch out for the three. Riley wasn't too far away, from what Ethan had been able to determine. She moved carefully through the trees, hoping to conceal her approach, and to bide some time before the spell kicked in.

An invisible force slammed into her back, lifting her off her feet, throwing her against a tree. She heard the distinct sound of ribs cracking but ignored it as she got to her feet.

He was there, still wearing his mask.

Twilight.

She wiped at the blood trickling from her mouth with the back of her hand.

“That all you got, Soldier Boy? I get a better workout from a just-risen fledgling.”

“Faith,” Twilight intoned. “Why am I not surprised? Though, I have to admit, I expected the real slayer.”

“I am a real slayer, asshole. You’re the lab rat experiment. You people don’t know when to leave well enough alone. Messing with things you don’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand. And soon the world will realize—”

“Spare me the song and dance,” Faith interrupted. “Look, are we going to fight or what? Personally, I find this little chit chat thing a bit boring.”

“Ready to die so soon?”

“Please. As if you could ever kill a slayer, even with your government upgrades.”

Twilight tiskied. “Now it is you that is the one underestimating me.” Twilight extended his hand and squeezed.

Faith felt the effects around her neck, felt her air cut off, and kicked out, her hands trying to remove the invisible force slowly choking her to death as she was lifted from the ground by an invisible force.

Then all hell seemed to break loose.

His acolytes appeared, and at a gesture from him, attacked.

Right as the spell took effect and Faith felt Xander, Giles, and Ethan’s presence fill her mind. Heard Ethan speak a bit of Latin and the constricting pressure around her throat abruptly subsided.

“It is as I said; you do not comprehend the power inherent in the Slayer. You trifle with the balance, human, and that is not to be allowed.”

Faith raised her hand and the soldiers abruptly froze.

“You should have learned from your mistakes,” Faith informed him, invoking the voice of the First Slayer.

Faith had every intention of killing Riley, finishing things once and for all, but then he pulled off his mask. She heard a gasp from somewhere off to her right and turned to see Buffy and Willow and about a dozen slayers standing behind them.

The cavalry, it appeared, had arrived.

Then he was hurling untruths in her direction, claiming that she'd gone rogue and was trying to kill him. That she'd been building up an army with the help of Andrew and was just biding her time.

And Buffy was buying it.

Riley was put on hold as Faith was suddenly confronted with an enraged Buffy. She could just make out Riley's smirk before Buffy was on her, attempting to take a pound of her flesh with just her hands.

Faith didn't want to hurt Buffy, but neither did she want Riley to get away. Another spell, this time from Giles, got Buffy off her and flying through the air.

Which pissed Willow off, and the slayers waiting in the wings.

It appeared to be an all-out war then, Willow and Faith - with Ethan assisting - began hurtling spells back and forth, and when Faith didn't fall, the baby slayers got in on the action.

It was a well-choreographed dance, but they were no match against the combined forces of Ethan, Giles, and Faith, along with Xander's heart, which tempered the effective dark magicks Ethan was using.

One final spell and Buffy, Willow and the slayers were immobilized and left fuming as Faith turned, once more, towards Riley.

"How?"

"Because right is on my side."

Faith blocked everything Riley threw at her, closing the distance until she stood in front of him.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, and her voice carried none of the slayer with her this time, just a girl that regretted doing what she had to do.

'It's okay, Faith.' Xander's voice, reassuring, enabling her to drive her fist into Riley's chest, right where his heart resided.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Jessi held up the first aid kit, intent on administering first aid, at the same time hoping to diffuse the tense standoff between Buffy and her gang still hampered by Ethan's spell and the people she'd come to think of as her friends.

"I've got the first aid kit," she said.

"Here. I'll take that," Xander replied. He'd seen how Faith was guarding her midsection even in her post-fight high and knew hell would freeze over before she'd actually admit to being hurt.

Especially with Buffy glaring daggers in their direction and vowing retribution once she got free.

"Faith. Come here," he told her, drawing her attention away from Buffy. He held up several ace bandages. "Uh, Ethan, you might want to ix nay the freeze spell."

Faith, thankfully, did as he asked, and stood docilely enough as he lifted her shirt to see the damage, though she cast furtive glances behind her as Ethan whispered a few words in Latin and Buffy and company were released. Xander winced upon seeing the bruises marring her flesh and did it again when she flinched briefly as he began wrapping the bandage around her ribs.

"Sorry," he murmured.

In response, he got fingers gently carded through his hair, a silent acknowledgment.

"Xander?" Willow cut in.

"Not now, Willow," he snapped, refusing to cave to the accusation in her tone.

"Xander's right. This is neither the time nor place to have this discussion," Giles conceded. "Buffy, I need you and the slayers to go to Rome. Andrew has Amy and Warren secreted away in the dungeons there."

"Nu uh—! Wait! Huh? Andrew," Buffy stammered. "Nerd Andrew? Impossible!"

"Entirely possible," Ethan drawled.

Buffy frowned, hand on her hip. "I thought you were dead."

"Buffy!" Giles chided.

"What? It's not like he's one of the good guys. Halloween costumes, spelled candy. Giles, he turned you into a *demon!*"

"I've seen the error of my ways —"

"Yeah, right," Buffy muttered.

Ethan gave a weak laugh.

"Buffy," Giles interrupted. "Rome. Now." He turned to Willow. "Willow."

"Fine," Buffy snapped. "We're going. But this isn't over." She flounced away to stand with Willow and the other slayers. A moment later they were gone as Willow teleported them away.

"Phew!" Jessi murmured, letting out a pent up breath.

"I'll second that," Xander added, smiling at the young slayer. "Tense much?"

"Oh yeah," Jessi agreed. "Those are your friends?"

"Yeah. They can be a little overwhelming."

"I'll say."

Xander finished wrapping Faith's ribs and stood. "I hate to say it, but Buffy's right. It's not over. Do you think we might be underestimating Andrew? Maybe we should go after Buffy and the others and give them a hand."

"Andrew does have a lot of slayers at his disposal," Faith added. "More than the small contingent Buffy took with her."

"And if he's brainwashed them somehow..." Xander continued.

"Willow might be hard pressed to break the spell before Buffy and the others are injured," Giles concluded, sighing. "Damn."

"You guys got enough mojo to Samantha us to Rome?" Faith asked.

Ethan winced, Giles frowned, Xander laughed.

"Who's Samantha?" Jessi asked.

A moment later, the ground left their feet as Ethan showed them he still had plenty of magic left in him.

~*~*~*~*~

“Good thing we arrived when we did, huh?” Faith told them and immediately launched herself into the fray.

“Faith!” Xander called out, but she was gone.

Jessi was hot on her tail.

“Jessi! Dammit! Giles –”

“They’re slayers, Xander. They’ll be fine.”

“But –”

“Trust me,” Giles said, placing a reassuring hand on Xander’s shoulder. “Or better yet, trust them.”

Xander sighed. “I do, it’s just...” He stared at the bedlam before him and prayed nobody got hurt.

Then it was Giles’ turn to gasp as Ethan went tearing off as well, hurling spells left and right as he tried to reach Willow’s side and displace the group of slayer’s surrounding her.

“Guess we should try and find Andrew,” Xander muttered after several minutes spent watching the others fight.

While Buffy, Faith and the other slayers were busy trying to subdue Andrew’s slayers without hurting them, and Willow and Ethan worked together to counter Amy’s spells, Giles and Xander snuck into the castle to locate Andrew.

“Which way?” Giles asked.

“It’s Andrew. Where else would he be but command central?”

“Good point. Lead the way.”

Xander took off at a run, thankful for his daily workouts and the extra pounds he’d shed that kept him from doubling over with a stitch in his side. Surprisingly, Giles huffed and puffed behind him but was keeping up.

The door was locked, naturally, but a few clipped words by Giles gained them access. Together, they stepped through the doors and were immediately beset by a half-skinned Warren wielding a sword and a gun.

Warren took aim and fired and Xander staggered back as he was hit in the shoulder. Pain blurred his vision but he was able to make out Giles tackling Warren to the ground and divesting him of his weapons. It left Andrew to him – not too hard, he thought, even with his bum shoulder.

Or so he hoped.

“You’re ruining everything!” Andrew screamed as he launched himself at Xander.

Xander barely had time or energy to deflect the dagger aimed at his heart. The tip slashed across his upper arm and he cried out in pain as he fell back against the wall. His injuries made him too weak to deflect a second attack, and Xander could readily see his death in Andrew’s crazed expression.

He closed his eye and waited for the inevitable.

Another shot rang out and Xander opened his eye to see Andrew standing before him, his face frozen in shock. One side of Andrew’s head was a mess of blood and brains spilling out from a rather large hole. Xander ignored him as his feet gave way and he slid to ground; his head turned in the direction the shot had come from.

Giles was stretched out on his stomach, a smoking gun in his hand.

“Giles?”

“I had no choice.” His voice was filled with regret.

“No, you didn’t,” Xander agreed quietly.

It took Xander a minute, but he eventually managed to get to his feet... just as Faith burst into the room.

“Xander!”

“Over here.”

“Oh my god. You’ve been shot!” Faith exclaimed and hurried to his side.

“Just a flesh wound,” he joked, wincing as Faith took his arm and wrapped it around her shoulder and hauled him to her side.

"Just a flesh wound, my ass. We're going to the hospital. Now. Giles!" She pinned the watcher with a look.

"I'll find Ethan."

~*~*~*~*~

Xander woke with a groan that displaced his... *bedmate*?

"Ah, Xander, you're awake."

He squinted towards the end of the bed and recognized—

"Giles?" he croaked.

The body attached to his side snuggled closer. He craned his neck and recognized Faith's dark mane of hair.

"She refused to leave your side once you came out of surgery," Giles offered by way of explanation.

"Surgery?"

"The doctors had to remove the bullet in your shoulder. Appears it was lodged too deep to make do with just a local sedative. Don't worry though. The surgeon said you should make a full recovery."

"I don't remember."

"Well, yes. You, erm, kinda passed out. Shock, I believe. You'd lost quite a bit of blood."

"Please tell me Faith didn't carry me again," Xander groaned.

Giles' lips twitched. "It was either her or Buffy."

"Great. Now I'm *really* never going to live this down."

Giles ignored Xander's whining and changed the subject. "The others are waiting outside. Would you like me to send them in?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Giles left, and a moment later Buffy and Willow came in.

"Hey, Xander," Willow greeted him. Buffy offered a shy wave. Their eyes strayed briefly to Faith then were back on him.

"Um, hi."

"So...? You and Faith?" Buffy asked, her expression curious rather than hostile like he'd expected.

"She needed... *needs* me," he told her; his hand reached up to caress the sleeping slayer's cheek.

"But I need you too. We do, me and Willow—"

"Buffy, he's right," Willow cut in. For the first time in she didn't know how long, her friend actually looked happy. She wasn't about to stand in his way, or let Buffy do it either.

"Hey. It's not like I'm never going to see you guys again. The castle's not very far from London. We'll visit. Or, you guys can."

"Giles was going to ask you to oversee Rome," Willow announced, then immediately covered her mouth with her hand. "Oops. Um, maybe I shouldn't have said that. Forget I said anything."

Xander laughed. "It's alright. I'll talk to him about it."

"You sure this is what you want?" Buffy asked, gesturing to him and Faith.

"Yes. I'm sure."

Buffy nodded. "Alright." She turned to Willow. "Come on. Xander needs to rest. We'll be back tomorrow... if that's okay?"

"Of course it is. You can bring donuts."

"I doubt donuts are on the list," Willow laughed. Relented when she saw his pout. "But, I'll see what I can do."

"You're the best, Wills."

Willow darted forward and gave him a brief hug, mindful of his healing injuries, then slipped out of the room. Buffy offered a cheerful wave and made to leave.

"Buffy?" Xander called out, when her hand was on the door. "I'm sorry... about Riley."

She didn't turn to look at him, which made him feel even worse.

The silence seemed to hang in the air.

Finally she turned and looked his way. She wasn't the slayer in that moment, and Xander truly felt for his friend.

"Giles explained everything to me. Even the stuff that happened in London. I guess I kinda overreacted about that, huh? As for the Riley thing - it's not your fault. And, as much as I'd like to, I don't blame Faith for what she had to do either. You'll tell her that, when she wakes up?"

"You should probably tell her yourself."

"Xander, in case you haven't noticed... Me and Faith? Don't exactly get along. Besides, she'd never believe me."

"You don't know that."

"Maybe. We'll see..." Buffy sighed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay. Hey! Don't forget those donuts."

Buffy laughed. "Donuts. Check."

"Bye, Buffy."

"Bye, Xander."

Buffy left and Xander looked down at Faith.

"You can quit faking now. She's gone."

"Hmmm?"

"Oh stop. As if you didn't wake up the second Buffy walked into the room. Which means you heard everything... even the apology she'll probably never say to your face. And that was for the stuff that happened in London, not the other."

"If you say so."

"I know so."

"Right. And when did you develop a brain?"

"About the time I came after you."

Faith offered no protest and snuggled closer to Xander on the hospital bed. "So? Rome, huh?"

"I don't know. It depends."

"On what?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Because, I'm not going to go unless you come with me." Xander waited for Faith to say something. "Faith?"

"You really want me to go with you?"

"Of course I do. I'm sure you were here when I told Buffy just that."

"Yeah, but—"

"But nothing. Either you come with me, or I don't go."

"Xander."

"Faith."

"Fine. I'll come, but only if Jessi comes too. I can't leave her... well, you know."

"Yeah. I do. Now, I'm all achy. I'm going back to sleep."

Xander smiled when Faith closed her mouth and settled in.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" she asked after a bit.

"Nah," he denied. The slight pain was worth it as long as he got to hold her.

"Liar," she laughed, but didn't move away.

“Hush. Sleeping now.”

“Sleeping now,” Faith agreed.

Surprisingly, sleep came easy for both of them.