

The Warrior and the Witch Halloween

Xander was excited.

No, Xander was ecstatic.

In fact, as far as Xander was concerned, he was every word he could think of beginning with E. Not that that was many, and he certainly wasn't egalitarian, not that he was even sure what that meant. Egotistical, well, that one was probably true. Eccentric? Well, maybe, after all, he was excited and ecstatic. Effluvia? Where the hell had he heard that one, and wasn't it near Poland?

The reason for this excitement? He had his Halloween costume. Now, some might imply that he was a little old to be excited by such things, a little too mature. Well, he definitely stuck his tongue out at them. Halloween was the best time of the year, when people pretended to be the things he normally helped kill. Any further thought was completely halted as he arrived at his destination.

"Buffster, Duchess of Buffonia, Buff-Meister, Buff-field heights," he started with a grin, only to be met by a firm face that wasn't showing any amusement.

"Stop," the blonde Slayer demanded. "Hand over any and all sugar on your person at this moment, before saying another word."

"But," Xander prevaricated, desperately thinking how he could escape.

"Now! Xander." The face turned from stern to a glare.

Reluctantly, the brunet boy reached towards his pockets, when there was a knock on Buffy's door.

"Buffy," Dawn, her younger sister, shouted through the door. "Willow's on the phone."

Xander was forgotten, as Buffy jumped to her feet and dashed out of the door, cursing the fact that her phone was broken.

"Quick, Xan," Dawn said, poking her head around the door. "She won't be distracted for long. Willow's not on the phone."

Xander grinned and followed the pretty girl out, and into her bedroom, where she locked the door

behind them. He sat on the floor, while she perched happily on the end of her bed.

"Half," she demanded instantly.

Xander nodded, figuring that half his candy stash was better than none of his candy stash. Besides, nothing annoyed Buffy more than him on a sugar high, than him and Dawn on a sugar high.

"I have taught you well, young one," Xander intoned in a level voice.

"Yes, Sensei," Dawn smirked, having seen Karate Kid way too many times with him.

"Dawn, Xander, you better not be eating candy! I am SO not in the mood for that right now."

The two looked at each other and giggled silently.

"I swear, sometimes I don't know which one of you is more mature. My twelve year old sister or my seventeen year old supposed best male friend."

"Dawn is," Xander yelled back through the door without hesitation. "But I'm corrupting her nicely."

"Xannndddeeerrr," Buffy groaned. "I'm gonna kill you, then Mom is gonna kill you."

"No, she won't," Dawn argued, trying hard not to laugh as Xander impersonated the faces he thought Buffy would be making. "Mom loves Xander."

"Yeah," Xander agreed, shoving a Twinkie in his mouth, so it came out muffled.

"Gaaarrgggghhhh," the Slayer yelled, only the cost of replacing the door locks keeping her from knocking the door down.

"Why don't you go and get a shower, cool off a bit, then I'll come out and we'll finish off the plans for tomorrow night?" Xander said hopefully.

After a few minutes of silence, they grinned at each other as they heard the shower start.

"So, what's her problem today?" Xander asked.

Dawn looked guilty. "I think she should tell you."

"Dawn? Come on, it's me, the Xander-man, you can tell me anything."

She sighed, and looked down at her feet as they bounced on the edge of the bed she was sitting on. In a rush, she explained, "Mom's been told to work tomorrow, and we had to cancel the party, Mom told Buffy that she would have to take me with her, and Buffy's upset about it."

Xander paused, blinking as he tried to slow the words down mentally and make sure he

understood.

Dawn held her breath, knowing he could rip out her heart right now.

"Cool," he said with a grin. "We'll get so much more candy if you are with us."

Dawn sighed happily, Xander was so wonderful.

"Some people object to giving candy to me, but with a cute girl around, we'll rake it in."

The young girl laughed happily.

"Who are you going to go as?" Xander asked curiously, un-wrapping a Jolly Rancher.

She blushed, "It's a secret."

"Ok," Xander replied, looking appraisingly at her. "I'm going as a soldier. I actually came over to show Buffy this." He pulled out a medium sized pistol, "It looks just like the real thing, but it's a water pistol."

"Cool," Dawn said. "What's Buffy going as?"

Xander smirked widely, making Dawn's heart miss a beat. "Aristocracy, she's got an old style ball gown, and a black wig."

Dawn fell back on to her bed, laughing hysterically.

"She's trying to impress her boyfriend," Xander explained.

Dawn smiled internally, "What does she see in him?"

"Dunno, tall, dark and mysterious?"

'Score!' Dawn's mind yelled. She had seen Angel once, and he had pretty much ignored her, but she knew that Xander hated him, so insulting him would get her on Xander's good side.

"Xander," Buffy interrupted, sounding a little better. "My room, now!"

Xander jumped to his feet and smiled at the girl, before dropping her a wink and vanishing.

Dawn sighed happily, and then looked depressed. 'Great, you get him alone, in your room, and you make a complete fool out of yourself, blush bright red, then laugh hysterically at your sister. Way to prove that your mature and grown up. How is he supposed to get the message that we belong together and kiss me?' She tried very hard to ignore the voice that pointed out the five year age difference, the fact that she wasn't quite sure what kissing involved, and the fact that he only thought of her as his best friend's little sister.

"I take it little miss talk-a-lot has told you?" Buffy asked with a pout.

"Yep, don't worry about it though, it'll be fun."

"Xander, she's an annoying brat."

"She's not that bad, she's fun," Xander protested. Having someone he could act like a kid with tomorrow would not be that much of a hardship. At least she talked to him, not at him.

Buffy rolled her eyes, and changed the subject. "Angel's going to be busy tomorrow night, something about a vampire holiday. It will just be me, you, Willow and Dawn."

Xander threw her a trademark grin, "Two hotties, one definite pre-hottie and me. Perfect!"

"It kinda disturbs me when you call my sister a pre-hottie," Buffy said with a frown.

Xander shrugged, "Well, in just a couple of years she's gonna be one, Buff. She's gonna leave a trail of men in her wake, all with broken hearts. Kinda like her older sister."

Buffy smiled, placated. "What did you want to show me, anyway?"

"Oh," Xander grinned. He pulled out his gun again, "What do you think?"

"Err, where did you get that?" The Slayer looked a little nervous.

"Relax, it's a water pistol," he laughed. "It's for my soldier boy costume tomorrow, I'm gonna pretend that it's a never ending gun with anti-vampire bullets."

Buffy laughed, "Kay, so we'll meet here at six?"

"Sure," he gave her a hug on his way out, shouting a bye to Dawn and Joyce as he left in a hurry.

In her room, Dawn was twirling with happiness. Somehow, Buffy still hadn't figured out that she could hear everything that her sister said, thanks to an air vent. All she had to do was stand on her chair and listen hard. He thought she was a hottie! Well, would be, but that wasn't relevant. All she had to do was make sure the only heart she didn't break was his.

Xander arrived at Buffy's house earlier than arranged, since they had been grabbed by their troll of a principal, Snyder, and forced to escort a bunch of kids through tonight's festivities. He wasn't too worried, if having Dawn would be good for his candy collection, having a bunch of even younger kids would be even better.

He adjusted his beret, and strode through the door. "'Ten Shun," he yelled.

Buffy and Joyce both jumped; then shot twin glares at him. "So you're saying that I should stick with 'Hey'?"

They both nodded, moderating the glare only a little bit. Joyce was dressed in a tailored women's business suit, while Buffy was looking fantastic in her Noble Woman's costume. He fell to his knees, and repeated his greeting from the day before, adding, "I'm in awe of such beauty, and I completely renounce spandex!"

Joyce laughed, while Buffy blushed.

"Dawn ready?" he asked, raring to go. He could hear the candy calling his name, or maybe that was the men in white coats, either way - he was ready for business.

"Dawn," Buffy screeched, causing both Xander and Joyce to wince. "It's time to go!"

The first thing that Xander saw was two black shoes, followed by two legs encased in black pantyhose. He frowned as he tried to guess the character, a black dress followed, and his eyes widened with pleasure as he saw the large square silver belt buckle. His suspicion was confirmed as the large white collar came into view. Her face was unnaturally pale, her lips enhanced by a little of her mother's lipstick, and her hair was braided tightly into two plaits on either side of her face.

Xander applauded.

"Hello Alexander," she said, expressionlessly.

"Wednesday," he greeted with a smile.

"Buffy," she looked at her sister, staying in character. "It is time for us to leave. Goodbye, Mother."

Joyce laughed softly, and restrained the urge to ruffle her youngest's hair. "Be good," she called to all three, and left for work.

"Ok," Xander said enthusiastically, "Let's go get Willow, then pick up the kids."

"What kids?" Dawn asked.

"Snyder volunteered us to baby-sit a bunch of kids tonight," Buffy explained with a frown.

"Excellent. They will make perfect victims," Dawn said, keeping in character.

"You're really good at that," Xander grinned at her.

"Don't you encourage her, Xander!"

Dawn broke character long enough to poke her tongue out at her sister.

They picked up Willow, who was dressed as a ghost. "That's not the costume I picked out for you!" Buffy announced, sounding a little upset.

Willow blushed, "It was too revealing, people could see my...you know."

"That was the point, Wills. You know, showing a different you."

Their argument continued between themselves, leaving Xander and Dawn to joke about in the back.

In a costume shop, the proprietor smiled to himself, his spell was ready.

With everything in place, he intoned "Janus, I invoke your spirit. Hear my plea. Seize the night for your own reason. Come, appear and show to us that which is infinite power. The mask transforms itself into flesh and blood. Your holy presence curdles the heart. Janus! Take the night!"

"What the hell?" Xander looked around, "Where the hell am I?"

Up the road, a beast turned and looked at him, snarling. Xander calmly pulled his gun from his holster, dropped to one knee and prepared to shoot. He had been taught to shoot first, and ask questions later, but he had taken that a step forward after the FUBAR a few weeks ago. His new motto was "Shoot first, continue to shoot, shoot last, then maybe get some answers from the corpse."

He was about to fire, when a soft hand touched his arm.

"No. The blood of an innocent shoots through the heart of the beast."

"What?" he asked, staring at the young girl standing next to him.

"The creature is not what it seems," she said serenely.

"Who the hell are you?"

"My name is irrelevant. You will put down the gun now."

He put his gun away, almost without thinking about it. The girl was looking at him through impossibly black eyes, piercing his soul. She looked to be about twelve, at least until you saw her ageless eyes, eyes that had seen as much as he had, that had faced the same darkness and bathed in it.

"We will find the others," she pronounced, as a scream suddenly echoed through the air.

Hearing it, Xander started to run, only to be stopped by the strangely gentle touch that had the power to command him. He was not used to listening to anyone, never mind some midget girl.

"We will go together."

She turned and started to walk towards the scream, hardly seeming to move, yet Xander had to jog to keep up with her.

They were stopped by a couple of vampires, who had been informed by Spike that the pickings would be good on their usual night off, so had decided to see what was going on."

"There is no innocence in these hearts, you may kill them."

Xander's gun was in his hand before she had finished speaking. It barked twice, and the heads of each vampire exploded.

"What the hell was that?" Xander asked, staring at his pistol as the bodies disintegrated.

"What sort of bullets have I got in here?" He tried to remove the clip, but found it was welded in place. He looked worried - it was an **extremely** bad plan to go into a hostile situation and not know how much ammunition you had.

"The bullets will last, as long as you need them," the girl said calmly, and started moving again.

"Wait," Xander grabbed her, spinning her around. A second later, she was free, without seeming to have moved.

"You do not have permission to touch me," she said quietly. "Do not make that mistake again."

"Who are you?"

She sighed. "My name is Wednesday." She then turned and walked off again, causing Xander to jog after her, shaking his head.

He frowned, really not liking this. He was alone, with no backup and an unknown amount of ammunition for his pistol, in a strange place, with strange creatures, accompanied by a girl that scared him more than a platoon of gooks. All he could do was sigh; he felt that she would not hurt him, as long as he did what she said.

They arrived at the house the scream had come from, and a blonde dressed in a ball gown came sprinting out. It impressed him how she managed to scream and run at the same time. He reached out with one arm, and easily caught her, lifted her and placed her in front of them.

"What's the problem, Ma'am?" he asked.

"M-M-M-M-Monsters," she shivered eyes bright with unshed tears. She took a deep breath, and prepared to scream again.

"Do not scream, you will only attract their attention."

The serene voice was the same as a slap across her face, causing her to look down at the girl standing calmly next to the large, handsome, rugged man who had stopped her. For some reason,

the girl scared her almost as much as the monsters did, but she was obviously with her burly protector, a man who would save her virtue.

"I don't like it here," she fluttered her eyebrows at him.

Xander shrugged, unconcerned, while Dawn restrained the urge to roll her eyes.

"We will get you to a safe place, Ma'am, and any others who need help."

"My Hero," Buffy simpered.

"Come," Dawn said, turning and gliding off once more.

"I don't like her," Buffy whined. "Can't we leave her?"

"No," Xander replied sharply. "She seems to be the only person who knows what is going on, and I trust her. Come on," he turned and moved off.

Buffy frowned, unhappily, and gathered her long skirts up a little, and walked after them.

"Do we have to save her?" Dawn asked quietly.

Xander just laughed.

Another of the demons, smelling them, stopped. Its eyes glowed with an eager lust for death and violence. With a loud growl, it bounded towards the three.

Buffy screamed and hid behind Xander, shaking, grabbing hold of him. He struggled to throw her off, trying to get his hand free so he could pull out his pistol but she was a lot stronger than she looked. He heard the girl sigh lightly, and step in front of him. He looked on with horror as the beast got closer, and managed to finally free his hand, reaching for his gun.

It wasn't needed. As the beast approached them, the girl knelt daintily on one knee, and stared at the approaching animal.

It continued to approach, till it got near enough to meet her eyes. It yelped, and stopped running, skidding to a halt next to her. In fear, it looked into the dark eyes and saw something it couldn't understand. She was its master, its lord, its pack leader. It did the only thing it could do, and rolled onto its back in a display of submission.

She lightly scratched the beast's stomach, and then whispered, "Come." Dawn stood again, threw a glance at her companion and the irritating woman, and continued to walk, leaving the animal behind.

Xander shrugged Buffy off. "How am I supposed to protect you if you get in the way?" he demanded, disgustedly.

Buffy, a noble woman to the core, did the only thing she could do, burst into tears.

"You heartless beast," she cried dramatically. "Here I am, miles away from home, lost, surrounded by demons of the night, my virtue at danger at every turn, and my knight turns into an ill mannered ruffian."

Xander rolled his eyes. "Your virtue's perfectly safe from me," he muttered under his breath. He couldn't think of anything worse than getting involved with someone so useless and clingy.

"Buffy!" A voice called to them. A man dressed all in black, with slicked down hair, approached them in a hurry.

Xander looked at Dawn. "Kill him?" he asked, hopefully.

She looked undecided, so Xander pulled his gun, just in case. "I can feel the blood of nations staining his soul; he is both evil and good."

"Stop!" Xander demanded, pointing the gun at the stranger.

"Xander, this is not the time," the man yelled back, still heading towards them.

Xander fired once, and the fence next to the man exploded into fragments.

"Perhaps it is the time," Angel muttered quietly, changing his mind and halting in his tracks.

"The girl says you are both good and evil; explain quickly."

"I'm a vampire, I killed, but I was cursed with a soul, I regret everything I did." As cliff notes versions go, it was superb.

He looked down, and the dark haired girl nodded. "You may approach."

Angel restrained the urge to sigh, and walked straight to Buffy. "How are you?" he asked, his voice warm and caring.

Buffy squealed and hid behind Xander again, "Protect me from the beast."

He looked down at Dawn. "This is getting tiresome."

She nodded in agreement. "You love the woman?" she asked.

Angel nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Take her, keep her safe."

"What?" Buffy demanded. "You can't leave me with this loathsome creature of the night."

Dawn looked into her sister's eyes, "Would you rather stay with me?"

Buffy gulped, opened her mouth, closed it and gulped again. "No," she said meekly.

The very faintest hint of a smile touched her face. "I thought not."

"Do you know what is going on?" Xander asked the vampire.

"A little," he admitted. "I ran into Willow, she's a friend of yours. She's a ghost, and says that something has turned you all into your Halloween costumes."

Dawn nodded quietly, while Xander said, "Oh. Who by?"

"We don't know. Willow has gone to meet Giles, he may know."

"The eyes of Janus point over there," Dawn announced quietly, moving her hand to the west.

Xander nodded, "We'll go and recon it." He looked at the vampire again, "How do I kill your kind?"

"Wooden stake to the heart, or decapitation," Angel said. He had noticed the air of competency in Xander, put it down to his costume, and so treated him with more respect than he might have normally. Besides, it never paid to annoy a man with a large gun, a short temper and explosive bullets.

The brunet boy nodded, "Do you have any spare stakes?"

Angel nodded and handed him a stake. Xander twirled it lightly in his fingers, then turned suddenly and threw it hard over Dawn's shoulder. It hit the vampire he had spotted sneaking on them perfectly in the heart, where it exploded into dust a second later.

He jogged over and retrieved it, ignoring the stunned looks of Angel and Buffy.

"If you fail to protect her, your death will be slow and painful," Xander told Angel calmly. The girl's attitude was rubbing off on him, and he liked it.

If it had been possible for the vampire to pale any further, he would have. For the first time, Xander scared him, and it wasn't a feeling he liked.

Dawn lightly touched his hand, "Come."

Xander nodded, and together they moved away, him moving silently through years of training, her hardly seeming to move at all, but managing to set the pace.

"Seven vampires are coming, you are capable of killing five, I will deal with the other two."

Xander looked a little nervous, palming his pistols. The vampires burst into view from around a corner, rushing him before he could get more than two shots off, leaving him with a three against one situation. He hoped the girl could do what she said, as he took two steps forward and launched

a powerful kick into the stomach of the lead vampire. He followed it up by smoothly staking it in the back as it bent over.

The vampires were almost rabid in their hate, they had been cut to ribbons by a mere human. They swore vengeance on him first, and Spike second. The lead vampire, a dark haired biker type with a straggly beard, growled and leapt forward, swinging his claws at Xander's face.

Xander swayed back the exact inch needed to avoid the swipe, and grabbed the hand. In a smooth movement that spoke of many years of training, he jumped, pressed his feet against the vampire's chest and twisted his whole body. To his surprise, instead of destroying the shoulder, the arm ripped off in his hands, leaving him to struggle for a second to keep his balance as he half-fell to the ground.

The vampire roared in agony, and dropped to his knees.

Xander swung the arm, using it as a weapon to hit the second vampire. As his second opponent fell to the ground, he staked the first, and then grinned evilly. "One on one, my sort of odds."

The vampire looked over Xander's shoulder and seeing what had happened to his colleagues, turned and ran, as hard as he could.

Xander dropped to one knee, took aim, and removed the vampire's head from its shoulders. He then turned, and smiled in amazement.

In front of him, was a bonfire, of the sort used to burn witches during the Salem trials. The last two vampires were tied to the post in the centre, begging for mercy.

Dawn finished pouring the gasoline over the wood and looked at Xander.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette lighter, offering it to her.

She graced him with a smile, and ignoring the vampires' frantic pleas, knelt and struck the lighter, igniting the gas.

The fire raced around the outside of the gathered branches, the gas igniting the dry wood quickly. The flames started to creep up the bonfire, edging inexorably towards the two struggling vampires.

Dawn looked up, wondering what this Xander thought about her torture.

He looked down at her. "I could do with some marshmallows."

She graced him with another hint of a smile, and opened her hand. In it were two fluffy pink marshmallows.

He grinned at her, picked up a couple of sticks, took the candy and toasted it carefully. When it was suitably crisp on the outside, he offered one to Dawn, and ate the other himself.

The girl ate it innocently, almost smiling as the flames touched the feet of the vampires. A second later it was over, as the vampires burnt themselves to dust.

As one, the warrior and the witch turned and walked down the street.

"This place looks familiar," Xander said with a frown, as they stopped outside an old fashioned costume shop.

Dawn nodded, and opened the door.

They were greeted by a tall man, with a long face and short brown hair. "Ahh, the soldier and the TV star," he greeted them mockingly. "Having a good night?"

"Shoot him in the leg," Dawn said calmly, and before Ethan could react, Xander drew his weapon and did exactly that, destroying the Englishman's knee.

He screamed in agony, falling to the floor, and fainting.

Working together, Xander and Dawn cleared his counter. Xander opened the till and pulled out the money tray, discovering a surprisingly large amount. He split it into two roughly equal parts and offered one to his young companion.

She looked a little surprised, or maybe she didn't, maybe he was just reading her better. Her eyes seemed to talk to him in a way he had never experienced before.

"Keep it for me," she whispered.

Xander lifted the unconscious man to the counter, and grabbed some rope to tie him down.

As Dawn watched on approvingly, Xander moved to the back, filled a bucket with water and dumped it over the man, waking him.

"What are you doing?" he yelled.

"The eyes of Janus say that you are guilty," Dawn intoned.

"What?" If possible, he suddenly looked more scared than before.

"You have caused this, and now you will tell me how to stop it."

"No," he spat defiantly.

"What is your name?" Dawn asked gently.

He looked at her, his eyes filled with hate.

Dawn reached out and touched his damaged knee lightly, then squeezed hard. "Your name?"

"Fuck you."

Xander growled and took a step forwards. He smacked the man across the face with the back of his hand. "Mind your language in front of the lady."

"She ordered me shot, and is now torturing me, and you're concerned about my language?" The man asked incredulously, his eyes brows shooting into his hairline. "I don't believe this."

"Your name," Dawn whispered again, squeezing once more.

He screamed, and then whimpered, "Ethan, Ethan Rayne."

Dawn's face seemed to smile, although her expression didn't change.

"You like chaos," she whispered, a voice so quiet that it should not have been able to be heard, yet it filled them both, louder than a shout. "You like how it feels, don't you? I can give it to you, I will call chaos down on to you, and watch while it rips your soul into a thousand little pieces. I can make it put you back together and do it again. You can be the new Prometheus," she suggested.

Ethan's eyes went impossibly wide; the last thing he had expected was his creations to turn on him.

"How do we stop it," Xander demanded quietly. "You're better off telling her. She scares me and I'm on her side."

Dawn's fingers probed the wound, and then suddenly dug in, her nails sliding into the wound.

Ethan screamed.

"Look," Xander said desperately, "tell me how we end this, and she'll stop, I'll be able to make her stop."

Dawn took Xander's lighter and lit it; she passed the flame from the lighter to her thumb, and moved her hand back down to the wound.

Ethan screamed again as the sound of sizzling flesh reached his ears, a mere second before the pain did.

As Dawn stopped, Xander leaned in. "If you tell me how to stop it, I'll let you go, and hold her back. You'll be able to get out of town, you'll live."

Ethan was breathing heavily; his face was white and drenched in sweat. He looked down, and saw that Dawn had found some industrial solvent and was calmly undoing the lid. She moved the bottle over his leg, and slowly started to tip it.

"Stop," Ethan yelled. "I'll tell, I'll tell you," he cried. "You have to make a sacrifice to Janus at midnight; the only way to stop it is to offer him a broken heart."

He collapsed back down on to the counter, and panted. "Now let me go," he begged softly.

Dawn turned slowly, placing the solvent down on the floor, kicking it over, knocking over other chemicals as she found them. "Kill him," she whispered.

Xander shrugged and pulled out his gun. "You said you would let me go," Ethan said, trying to squirm away. "Don't you want to know why I did it, what I was getting out of it? I have more information."

"I don't care," the soldier informed him quietly, and pulled the trigger.

He joined Dawn outside, and watched as she threw a flame through the doorway, igniting the gathered chemicals and causing the building to explode.

They walked away, Dawn still gliding effortlessly.

"Why are you still here," Dawn asked quietly. "I am evil."

"No, you're not," Xander replied quietly. "You're grey, like I am. You see the world how it is, and act accordingly."

He could tell she didn't believe him, so continued. "Ethan was evil; he caused this just for the chaos it would bring. He wasn't going to tell us, so we persuaded him. The vampires before were evil, so we killed them. The beasts at the start, you said "the blood of an innocent shoots through the heart of the beast". We've killed the evil, done what we have to do. We will continue to do that."

"I like you," Dawn said softly.

"I like you, too."

"What have you done that is grey?"

"Assassinations, dodgy missions, even worked as a Merc once," he shrugged.

"Xander, Dawn," a voice yelled.

Xander turned, pulling his gun out and pointing as fast as he could blink.

A red headed ghost, wearing a revealing outfit that emphasized her chest and flat stomach, ran over to them. "Guys," she panted softly. "We know who's doing this. It's the guy who rented us our costumes; Giles is coming now to stop him."

"It's too late," Xander said quietly.

"What, why?" Willow asked, talking faster as her breath came back.

"Ethan is dead," he told her, keeping up with Dawn, presuming that she knew where she was going.

"What!" Willow asked again, stopping. It took her a few seconds to realize that her best guy friend and other best friend's sister had not stopped.

"Wait," she tried to grab Xander and Dawn on their respective shoulders.

Her hand went straight through Xander without stopping, but as she touched Dawn, she yelled as a sudden burst of pain hit her.

"You do not have permission to touch me," the girl said quietly, without stopping.

Xander didn't even look to see if Willow was ok.

As soon as she realized she was ok, she caught up with the two of them. She was relieved as Giles walked up the road, fire in his eyes.

"Giles," she yelled, attracting his attention. "Xander says that Ethan is dead."

The Watcher ran over to them, "What?"

The two looked at each other, neither of their expressions changing, yet they exchanged a smile.

"He's dead," Xander said once more.

"How?" Giles asked.

"Bullet to the brain, followed by a quick cremation."

"Who shot him?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"He caused this, because he loved the chaos. We gave him permanent chaos."

"But he is the only one who can stop this lunacy." Neither of them knew that the cockney accent he was using was not his normal one.

"He told us how to stop it."

"What?" Giles blinked. "Will you two stop moving and tell me what's going on?"

"No," Dawn replied quietly.

"I didn't think Ethan would give up his secret very easily," Giles said, struggling a little to keep up

with them.

"He didn't want to, we persuaded him." Xander was starting to get slightly irritated with the endless questioning.

"How?"

"You don't want to know," Dawn hissed, pinning him with her eyes. "The eyes of Janus said he was guilty and demanded that he pay. Pay he did."

Giles gulped, the ageless dark eyes before him scared him.

"Ask no more questions, son of Eyghon."

Giles did as he was told, wondering exactly who the hell Dawn had turned into.

Xander lightly touched her arm; somehow he knew he had permission to touch her now.

She turned and looked at him, they communicated silently for a minute, before she nodded.

"Where are the vampire and the annoying lady?" Xander asked.

Giles looked confused for a second, before Willow said, "Angel and Buffy?"

Xander shrugged.

"They are at Joyce's art gallery, it's down that road."

Without a word, the two turned and walked towards it.

Willow and Giles hung back a little.

"Who is Dawn?" Giles asked, referring to her costume.

"Wednesday Addams," Willow replied quietly. "She was the oldest daughter on the Addams family, her mother, Morticia was a witch."

"I think we can assume that she is a witch as well. Have you seen her eyes?"

Willow shook her head. "I tried to touch her, and it hurt."

Giles nodded slowly, "She is a witch, and she's dealt with things no one her age should ever be exposed to. I've seen that look before, when I was younger. Was the character evil?"

Willow thought for a second. "Not really, no."

"What about Xander? What is his costume?"

"It's just a generic soldier outfit," Willow said, confused.

"I don't think so," Giles said thoughtfully. "A normal soldier doesn't kill without any remorse like that. He's been trained that way."

"Isn't that Angel?" Willow asked suddenly, as a tall man ran towards them

He arrived in front of Dawn and Xander, but before he could speak, Xander grabbed his arm, stepped into his chest, and flipped the vampire onto his back. In the same movement, he pulled out his gun and pressed it against the vampire's head. "You left her, why should I let you live?"

Angel gulped, looking into Xander's eyes. They clearly told him that if he struggled, or gave the wrong answer, he would be dead. Again. "She wouldn't let me near her, kept screaming, then demanding stuff. I left her with her mother while I went to get her a drink. When I tried to go back in, Spike had taken them hostage, along with at least twenty other vampires. I came here to get help as soon as I could."

Xander looked at Dawn, she thought for a second, and then nodded. Xander released the vampire and re-holstered his weapon.

"Who is Spike?"

"A master vampire; he runs most of the un-dead part of the town, along with his girlfriend, Drusilla."

Xander turned back to Dawn and raised one eyebrow. To the others, the girl's expression didn't change one iota, but to him, he saw surprise, followed by a period of thought, followed by something that almost looked like pride in him.

She reached up and gently touched his face, smiling expressionlessly as he didn't move.

They turned and continued onwards.

"Ok, that is really spooky," Willow said quietly. "What the hell is going on between them?"

"Their souls match," Angel shrugged, not really concerned about it.

"Xander's seventeen, Dawn's twelve. How can their souls match?"

Giles removed his glasses, absently polishing them. "At the moment, she's a witch who's seen more than I have, and he's a soldier trained to kill. I don't believe age has anything to do with it."

"What happened to Ethan?" Angel asked.

"Dawn and Xander got there first, they know how to stop this, and he is dead."

Angel thought about it for a second, and then shrugged. A vampire, even one with a soul, didn't

feel much sympathy for a chaos worshiper who cast a spell on a bunch of children.

The two stopped a couple of shops up from the gallery. Xander leant down and listened as Dawn whispered into his ear. He thought about it for a second, and then made his own recommendations, based on the training he had received in hostage retrieval.

"Willow, come here," Xander demanded.

Reluctantly, the ghost nodded and approached them.

"Hold out your hands."

Willow did, then gasped in pain as Dawn ran her own hands over the tips, before nodding with satisfaction.

"You're going to help us take out the lesser vampires," Xander said.

"I'm a ghost, no touching," Willow argued, reminding them of her incorporeal state.

Xander smirked; he ran his hand straight through her arms. He then pulled back the sleeve of his left arm, and slid his arm over the tips of her fingers. Four thin trails of blood appeared.

"Looks like you have claws, now." The grin was pure Xander, and for a second, Willow forgot about the possession. "You can fight them, but they can't touch you."

Willow looked stunned; her knowledge of magic, gleaned from reading some of Giles' books, didn't even hint that this was possible, never mind that it could be done by a young witch so easily.

Dawn reached out, and lightly took Xander's arm. She touched her fingers to his scratches, removing the blood and healing the wounds underneath.

He nodded slowly, answering the question long before it was asked. She took her finger and lightly tasted the blood. The moment was endless for the two of them; something changed a little more, the same thing that had been changing since the start of the evening.

"Angel, you will protect the annoying woman and this Joyce. Giles, you and Willow will concentrate on the lesser vampires. Spike and Drusilla must be kept alive." Xander didn't move his eyes from Dawn's for a single second as he gave the orders.

"I don't thi..." Angel started, before he was interrupted.

"It doesn't matter what you think," Dawn hissed. "You will do as Xander told you, or you will die. The choice is yours." Like Xander, she didn't look away for a second.

Reluctantly, the souled vampire nodded.

Angel and Giles both pulled out stakes, wondering when the attack would start.

They both missed it.

Xander and Dawn stopped their soul searching and turned as one, Xander sprinting, Dawn was keeping up with him, hardly moving.

A second before they got there, Xander felt a tingle as Dawn boosted his strength. Using his advanced technique, Xander jumped, spun a full 360 degree rotation and launched the most powerful kick of the soldier's life against the locked aluminum doors.

The doors had no chance at all, the lock snapped instantly, the two panels swung on their hinges then snapped free, each flying into the nearest wall.

Xander landed, crouched, and took off again. The noise attracted Giles, Angel and Willow. Giles swore, and took off, Angel and the ghostly Willow a second later.

It took the merest glance for Xander to take in the scene; the annoying woman and her mother were tied together in the middle of the large display room. A bleached blonde vampire, and a dark haired vampire dressed in black were taunting them, the other vampires standing around and laughing.

Six vampires died almost before the sound of the door exploding hit them. Xander, still moving at full speed had pulled his pistol and squeezed off six shots, each one hitting a vampire perfectly, before the sound he had been expecting hit him. The gun was empty. He discarded it to one side, pulled out his stake and set to work hand to hand.

The boost he had been given meant that he was operating at the same speed as the vampires, something he found it truly exhilarating. He was barely aware of Willow and Giles joining him, nor of Angel protecting the Summers ladies.

A couple of the vampires moved towards Dawn, assuming that the girl was an easy target. She smiled at them, and then ducked. Over her head a large variety of knives, swords, daggers and cleavers rushed towards them, cutting them to pieces before they could blink. Those that had seen her reaction, decided to avoid her for now. She was grateful, keeping up Xander's boost was hard on her body, and she cursed herself for being young. A full grown witch would have not had this problem.

Spike was starting to worry. His poof of a sire was protecting his hostages and his forces were being decimated by a ghost and a soldier. He had long ago decided that discretion was the better part of valor, so he grabbed Dru, and threw the two of them towards a window, to escape.

With a wave of her hand, Dawn placed a barrier next to the window, causing the two vampires to bounce off.

Dawn was starting to get worried, her power was almost gone, and she couldn't keep the vampires away and still protect Xander. Her face was completely expressionless, as it had been all the time. Her eyes met Xander's for a second, as he used a vampire as a shield from the punches of another

one.

Worry flashed through his eyes, followed by understanding, followed by an order.

Dawn thought about it for a second, she had never been given an order before...Well that wasn't **quite** true, she had been given orders - but that had normally been just before that person's death. She nodded imperceptibly, and released Xander's boost.

Xander felt the tingle leave his body, but wasn't concerned; after all he had been too well trained for that. He immediately switched styles, from the power based Special Forces to Aikido and continued the fight.

Willow had started taking the direct, if icky, route to killing vampires. She walked into them and cut out their hearts. It wasn't pleasant but it was very effective.

With the last minion gone, Xander looked at his watch. He moved next to Dawn, not sparing a glance for the others.

"One of you will die." Xander informed them quietly. "Which one will it be?"

"One must sacrifice the other. I promise I will not kill the one who chooses, they will be free to go," Dawn echoed.

Spike looked at the expressionless faces of the two weakest members of the Scooby gang and shivered. Their eyes were so old, they reminded him of an ancient vampire he had once met, one that had seen everything hell had to offer, and matched it with the hell he had been through.

"Take her," he said quickly.

"I thought you loved Mommy," Dru protested, almost shocked into sanity by his betrayal.

"I do," Spike admitted, "But not that much."

Dawn waved her hand, and Spike found himself rooted to the spot. "Err, I thought you said I could go? And all things considered, I think I would like to leave now," he noted, almost politely.

He was ignored, as Xander and Dawn advanced on the scared female vampire.

"Miss Edith is scared," she whimpered.

Dawn ran her finger lightly down the vampire's face. "So she should be."

Dru turned to Angel. "Daddy, help me," she pleaded.

Angel wasn't quite sure what was going to happen, but he had guessed that it was to do with whatever spell Ethan had cast. He met his child's eye for a second, and then turned his back on her.

The female vampire felt tears drip down her face, as she realized she had been abandoned by the two beings she loved most.

Dawn punched her hand forwards, passing through the vampire's rib cage with ease, and grabbed her heart.

She pulled it out, and whispered, "Janus, your sacrifice is complete, let the masks drop."

As Drusilla turned to dust, Willow felt herself become whole again, and Buffy once again found herself the Slayer, and broke her chains with the strength she had never lost, but hadn't used.

Xander and Dawn were motionless, his hand on her shoulder as he lent her his strength.

"What the hell happened to my daughter?" Joyce demanded, looking horrified at the witch who had just ripped the heart out of the vampire.

The two didn't move, but neither could Spike.

In a grey area, that was both nowhere and everywhere, four spirits were talking.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" One of them asked.

Two others nodded, "yes."

"And you?"

The fourth nodded and seemed to smile slightly.

The speaker nodded slowly, and the four suddenly became two.

The grey area disappeared, and Xander and Dawn looked around the room. They smiled at each other, or thought that they did; they were both as expressionless as they had been before.

Xander picked up a stake and moved towards Spike.

"You said you wouldn't kill me," Spike said nervously, trying to work out why he couldn't move. With the witch gone, the spell should have vanished as well.

"Dawn said that, not me."

"Xander," Buffy said. "You said you would let him go."

Xander looked into Spike's eyes for a second, and the vampire saw the answer before the movement.

"Shit," was his last word before he vanished into dust particles.

"No, I didn't. She said that," the tall teen said to Spike's remains, indicating the smaller black-clad figure near him.

Buffy looked enraged; she wasn't sure why, but they did not do what he had just done, they kept their word. She walked over and slapped Xander, or at least tried to. Xander simply swayed backwards, tapped her arm to throw her off balance a little, and then pushed her towards Angel.

"Don't try that again," he advised her quietly.

Giles looked closely at the two of them, "Why is the spell still working on you?"

"It's not," Dawn explained, just as quietly.

"You're still a witch, Xander just brushed Buffy off with ease, so I would be inclined to say it was still working."

"We were possessed not by people, but by spirits," Dawn whispered. As before, her voice seemed to echo around the room, bouncing off the walls and into their ears. It was a voice of madness and sanity, everything and nothing.

"Ethan called forth the owners of the masks that we wear. Buffy was caught by the spirit of a 17th century noble woman, and was completely useless, it didn't matter whose memories she would get. Willow had a ghost's spirit, and as ghosts do not have memories, kept her own.

"Xan was possessed by the spirit of a soldier, an eternal warrior. The spirit made the decision to give him the most appropriate memories to ensure his survival, a thirty year veteran who had done everything and been trained for everything.

"I got the spirit of the Witch. Wednesday Addams is a fictional character, and does not exist, so I received the powers and ability of a witch who was burned at the stake in the Salem witch hunts.

"As I ended Ethan's spell, I cast another one to allow me and Xander to talk to the spirits before they left, or rather, the Witch spirit cast the spell to talk to us. The Warrior and The Witch liked each other.

"The Witch and the Warrior offered us a choice," Xander took over, moving next to Dawn. "They could leave us, like the spirits had left all of you, or they could try a merger. They would try and give us the powers and abilities of the people we had chosen as our costumes.

"We chose to merge. We both now have their skills and abilities, along with a bit of their personalities, but the rest is all us. They gave us a huge gift, to allow us to survive on the Hellmouth."

"The spell lasted for five years, and was gone in a second. Xander and I talked to each other. We didn't need sleep, didn't need food and we found what the spirits found."

"What is going on between you two?" Joyce asked, not liking the vibes she was picking up between her twelve year old daughter and her older daughter's seventeen year old male friend.

"Nothing, for now." Dawn replied calmly.

It was not the same as when she was possessed - she could smile if she wanted to, she was in complete control of herself, but the actions she made felt natural to her now. Communicating with Xander without an expression was so much easier, and she knew now that they would be together. "I will start going out with him when I am fifteen. We will turn into a serious couple when I am sixteen, and we will get married when I am eighteen."

Xander nodded in agreement. He too was the same, but different. He could remember assassinations and countless training sessions, he could remember jungles and deserts, and he could also remember growing up in Sunnydale.

The others looked stunned, so the two walked out. Both prepared to wait for what they wanted.

As Dawn had said, they started dating when she reached fifteen, limiting themselves to some kissing, but nothing else. By the American scale, they moved up a base each time Dawn reached a birthday. It was frustrating at times, especially since none of their friends ever accepted the relationship, but they were honest to themselves and to each other.

When Joyce died of a brain hemorrhage, they left town together shortly afterwards, even though Dawn was, technically, underage. They made love for the first time, in a hotel in New York on Dawn's seventeenth birthday, and made plans to get married a year later.

Until her mother died, they had tried to keep fighting with the other members of the Scooby Gang, but things had changed too much for that to continue.

Faith had arrived, broken, and had been saved by having developed a friendship with Xander and Dawn. For the first time, she had been adopted into a family. Dawn was her younger sister and Xander her brother. She had tried to sleep with the tall brunet shortly after meeting him, but he had told her very firmly that he was Dawn's, and only hers, for eternity. That admission ultimately gave her the confidence to confide in him, and in Dawn also, as she realized that despite how very strange the younger girl was, inside, she was still a loving young girl.

Buffy hated their situation, and Joyce reluctantly accepted it.

The Mayor had been defeated; based on the Soldier memories, Xander had procured and used an M136 AT4 anti-tank recoilless rifle. Blowing the snake into more parts than anyone could count. He had been relatively certain that something used to take out 70 ton tanks would probably be effective against a snake creature the size of a school bus.

It had been a very close thing, after all. The others had not really had a plan at all, and had simply

turned up at the Graduation to fight. Xander and Dawn had discussed it and came up with a plan. Xander talked to his classmates, organizing them so that they were ready, while Dawn prepared herself.

The Mayor had made his speech, then started to change. The students followed Xander's orders to the letter, fighting the vampires and giving him, and through him, Dawn, the time they needed.

Dawn cast her spell; all it did was hold the giant snake still.

Xander had aimed the AT4 and the now ex-Mayor had exploded into small bits, scattering his bloody remains across the school walls and lawn. With a slight smile on his face, Xander had dumped the weapon, drawn his handgun, a Glock .357 and aimed carefully. A second later, the Mayor's toady, the troll known as Snyder was dead, another casualty of the endless wars between the gangs on PCP that haunted Sunnydale.

He turned, and then ran forward as Dawn's eyes rolled into the back of her head; blood was pouring from her nose, and she collapsed.

Xander caught her, and carefully picked her up. He held her close as he carried her first to his car, then from the car to her room.

He carefully wiped the blood from her face, and placed her into bed. Using very few words, he explained to Dawn's mother what had happened, and why her daughter was unconscious. He had then refused to leave her side till she awoke.

Willow and Joyce had both pleaded with him to eat, to move, to do something: he refused. Buffy tried ordering him, and he had ignored her. She tried violence, and found herself staring at expressionless brown eyes over the barrel of his gun. She was left in no doubt that he would pull the trigger.

Dawn awoke two days later, coincidentally at the same time the rest of her family was in the room. She looked at them for a second, and then turned to Xander. They looked at each other for a brief second, before Xander nodded, stood up and slowly walked out of the room. Ten minutes later, he was asleep in his bed.

"He needs to sleep, he's been up for nearly three days without rest," Dawn explained quietly, her voice was slowly returning to normal. "He knows I am OK, so he's gone to lie down."

After Buffy had left, Joyce had stayed and sat down on the bed next to her youngest daughter. This was a conversation she really wasn't ready to have with her oldest daughter, and most definitely not her pre-teenage youngest.

She asked if Dawn had meant what she had said, that night. Her daughter had tilted her head to one side, and then spoke calmly, as one adult to another.

"Yes. I told you that we spoke for the equivalent of five years. I grew up then, Mom. I know

Xander, now; I know how he thinks, what he thinks, why he thinks. I know everything he has done, and why he did it. I know about Buffy, Angel, Willow, Giles, Owen, the hyena, the mantis, everyone who has died, everyone who has lived. I wasn't the only one, Mom, Xander grew up as well.

“We had to work to control the memories we both received.

“I can remember being burnt at a stake, and Xan can remember being shot in the back.

“I can remember being married, giving birth to a wonderful boy. He never had anyone special.

“We agreed to wait when we got back, not because of a lack of love, or our age, but because of you. Because of our friends and family. I stopped being twelve the same time Ethan cast the spell, and Xander stopped being seventeen. We will do things by the book, because we have all the time in the world.

“I will never go through being a teenager again; I already have done so, twice. Once hundreds of years ago, and once again, inside a formless grey bubble.

“I will never wonder about boys, about whether or not I am attractive. I am, and I know it now. I have a man who loves me. I have nothing to worry about, except Xander.

“He is the one who will be called a pervert for the next five or six years. He is the one who will be celibate, who will not kiss another girl for years to come. He is the one who will have to turn down people his age. He is the one who will sleep alone, in that awful house, with no one to turn to when his nightmares start. He is the one who will wake up, drenched in sweat, and know that the girl he loves is asleep in a pink bed, across town, trapped in a body too young to help him.

“But, I know I will be there when I can, I will pick him up when he falls, I will console him, I will make sure he doesn't retreat.

“We are putting ourselves through hell, so you better believe that when I can, I will make it up to him in every possible way.”

It had been a very different Joyce who walked downstairs afterwards, poured herself a whiskey and spent the entire afternoon and night trying very hard to come to terms with what had happened to her youngest daughter. The only thing she had concluded was that she hated Ethan Rayne more than she thought possible, for what he had done. She was both glad and angry that Xander had killed him. Glad, because it meant he would not ruin any more lives. Angry, because she wanted to kill that monster herself, as slowly and painfully as she could, to really make him paying for destroying the innocent and trusting young girl her daughter had been.

With a great deal of reluctance, she had given Xander her trust once more, and when Dawn reached fourteen, a standard gynecological exam had proved that he was worthy of that trust.

Faith had left Sunnydale with Angel, not because she loved him, but because she felt she could do

more good away from Buffy. She still drunk and flirted, but never lost control.

Willow found Tara, after Oz had come and gone, and became happy, and Buffy started dating a vampire called Caleb, who was dark and mysterious.

Glory, a hell goddess, had been easy to defeat. The spell that made people forget that she was Ben had no effect on Dawn, and when she told Xander, he had simply walked up to Ben one night, and shot him point blank in the face.

That had been the beginning of the end of the Scooby Gang. Willow and Buffy, who had been slowly pushing the two away since that Halloween, said that they could not fight alongside them any more, that they were not fighting the good fight, and being white hats. It hurt them both, but they drew on the experiences of their spirits, and simply moved out on their own and continued to fight evil wherever and whenever they found it.

They traveled the country; no one questioned the two of them being together. One look into Dawn's eyes and people realized that she was older than she looked. They saved the world, a lot, and grew closer, yet never seemed to smile or look happy.

And now, now they were heading back to Sunnydale. Faith had called them and requested their aid. The Scoobies apparently had an enemy they couldn't beat, Buffy seemed to be going around the bend, a load of potential Slayers had been gathered in one place, and the Watchers Council was in ruins. Hearing that, they had decided to help out.

Dawn was finally reaching the peak of her powers. The lifetime of training the Witch had given her meant that she understood the threefold rule, and knew how to use magic far better than Willow could ever dream off. Xander, too, had continued to train, and while no where near as strong as a Slayer, (without Dawn's boost anyway), he was easily skilled enough to win any fight that might occur.

"What are you thinking about, love?" Dawn asked softly.

Xander could have smiled, but didn't. "I was thinking we should send Ethan a thank you note one of these days."

The Warrior and the Witch Homecoming 1

It was the eyes that gave it away. It was always the eyes. They stared, into the shadows created by the setting sun. The body moved freely, expertly. The rifle was stripped, checked, cleaned and reassembled. Food was ingested. The eyes didn't move.

Killing was easy now. It used to be hard. It started because of order, then because of want, then for revenge. Now, because he wasn't sure what else to do. It was his job, his life.

The sun slunk lower in the sky, as if embarrassed by what it saw, the folly playing out beneath it.

A movement to the side, a countdown. One minute. Tick followed tock followed tick followed tock. Once he would have been nervous, once he would have been scared. Now he was resigned. Maybe, just maybe, a tad hopeful. That it would end, that this would be the last time. That he would get to lie down and just sleep, sleep for ever.

He was moving, as silently as the others. From tree to tree, cover to cover. The eyes changed. Now they were moving, scanning, watching. Enemies. Fighters. Guerillas. Up ahead, a POW camp, guarded. They were going to get their people out. They had to.

Gunfire. Loud, raucous, gunfire. The serenity destroyed by chaos.

See an enemy, raise the rifle, shoot, move on. Always move on. One, two, three, four, too many to count. Swing, shoot, duck, shoot, run, shoot.

The tower, a machine gun. A grenade. The tower looks like a second sun for a brief moment, but there is no time.

Through the gates, follow the briefing. Left, left, straight on. Through the door, that's him, the man in the uniform, he's the one.

Raise the rifle, ignore the pleas, the begging, prepare to pull the trigger.

The man knows, he can see his death coming.

It's all in the eyes.

Xander's entire body clenched as he sat up suddenly, drenched in sweat. He panted hard, the nightmare slowly receding.

"Shh, Honey," Dawn whispered. She put her hand on his back, stroking for a moment, before pulling him into a deep hug. "It's ok, Xan, I'm here."

He fought for a moment, not recognizing the comfort, but then the smell kicked in. The scent of her hair, of her skin, and he remembered. Remembered who he was. He relaxed into her embrace, laying them both down.

It was the best thing about their relationship. They were strong for each other. He outweighed her by nearly seventy pounds these days. The constant fighting doing things to his physique he only dreamed of as a teenager. Now over six feet tall, he looked down on her by a good few inches. None of that mattered now. Now he was still scared, still spooked. He buried his face against her neck, curling around her, receiving the comfort he so desperately needed.

She whispered to him, telling him how much she loved him, how much he meant to her, smiling her words to him. She stroked his back, just the way he liked it, keeping it straight on the border between soft and hard. She was there for him; she would always be there for him.

Just as he was there for her, when her nightmares sent her screaming into the night. When the pain of the fire licking her feet was too much to bear. When all her hope was lost, when she realized that she wouldn't be saved. That was when he returned the favor, when he held the smaller girl to his chest, stroked her back, and spoke eloquently of his love for her.

And that's what they were, two people who had made a life defining choice, not for themselves, but for the good of others. A Witch and a Warrior, old beyond their years.

Saviors and Heroes.

She smiled suddenly, remembering a conversation five years ago, with her mother. 'You better believe I'll be there for him when I can be.' The smile changed a little, from comforting, to an expression with a hint of naughtiness.

She could feel him relax, the horror fading. It was time to replace those memories with something a little better for him. Her hands slowly curved, the palms leaving, letting the finger tips trail. He shivered lightly, not yet realizing what she was doing.

The tips moved again, leaving the nail in contact with his smooth skin. It was soft and warm, covering the rock hard muscles underneath. She dragged the tips of her nails along it, scratching.

He tensed slightly, now he understood. Now he realized exactly how she planned to take his mind of the nightmare. She could feel his smile against her skin; feel his hands start to move, to wander over her sides.

Hands that could field strip a rifle, while he was blindfolded. Hands that could throw a knife with

deadly accuracy at any target. Hands that could load a rocket launcher in his sleep. Hands that were, right now, finding just the spots she never knew she wanted to be stroked, but was damn glad he was doing so.

He was stronger than she was, bigger. Yet with ease, she lifted him, rolled him onto his back, and straddled him.

He was hers, now, and for eternity.

She looked down into his eyes; the warm dark pools of expression that she knew were her property. Her own green eyes showed the trust and love she felt for him. She shook her head a little, allowing her long straight hair to fall between them, to tickle him slightly. She knew he loved her hair, loved the way it felt rubbing over his skin, the illusion it gave as she peered at him through it.

Her hips met with his, through the shorts he was wearing, and the tap pants that matched her white camisole. She rocked, gently, her hands over his heart, loving the way it made his heart beat faster.

This was about him, tonight. Normally it was about her, he loved to hear her scream, loved to taste her. She knew he had a ridiculous ratio in his mind, that she should come three times to his one, and normally she was happy with that, it made her feel loved, cherished and incredibly sexy.

Not now, not tonight. This was her turn to show that she worshipped him, that she found him as attractive, that she wanted him to have his mind turned to mush. She wanted the power, and she was going to get it.

Her hands shifted down, stroking the smooth muscles of his stomach, tracing the outline she could barely see, before sliding up her thighs, her sides, to her chest.

She cupped her breasts, smiling tenderly, feeling his reaction jump against her intimately. She leaned forwards, dragging her self along him, her hair sliding over his face as her head moved past him. She offered herself, and then gasped as he took advantage. His hot mouth played with the silky material, playing the same game she was. His tongue lightly swirled, barely touching the soft skin through the silk material.

Slowly he leant forwards, coming more into contact, nuzzling. His hands clamped firmly onto her waist, holding her in position, bent over him, as he went to work. Licking, biting, sucking, all through the material. He explored each curve, bend and peak as if it was the first time, listening to the soft panting sounds that told him louder than a scream that she was enjoying it.

She slammed her hips down, back against him, leaning up, regaining control. Her eyes smiled at him, a silent message he grinned at.

She kissed his chin, his neck, smiling as he moved his head, automatically making himself more vulnerable. She nibbled the pulse point, playfully, liking his growl. She kissed down, over his

collarbone, leisurely taking her time to kiss every part that her hand had stroked earlier. Soft, feather light, dry touches that threw his mind around the bed, as she continued inexorably down.

She slid down his legs, giving herself the room she needed, as she kissed his stomach, loving the way the muscles contracted, as the pleasure she gave took control. Her hands slid up his thighs, to his shorts. A spell, simple magic, aged them in an instant, turning them to dust, freeing him, allowed her to continue without interruption.

She continued to explore his stomach, swaying a little, allowing the hard peaks of her chest to rub against him, knowing it would drive him mad, the silk and the hardness intimately pressed against him.

She moved down, again, her hair sliding after her, moving her head up so she was hovering above him. He twitched the feel of her hot breath against him an agonized torture.

She met his eyes, smiling as they told her she didn't have to do this, that it wasn't necessary. It was totally necessary; she needed the power over him, needed to hear him scream that he was hers, needed to taste him, to consume him, to own him. His eyes widened as he saw, and then understood. He was hers; he had been for five years, no one else. There had never been anyone else. There would never be anyone else.

She pulled her hair back, out of the way, not wanting anything between them as she maintained eye contact. Her mouth opened slowly, a dainty tongue lightly licked the sensitive peak, tasting it.

His groan was uncontrollable, and gave her the confidence she needed to continue, to know that he was enjoying so much.

His thoughts left him completely, as a soft hand cupped him, raised him, and the beautiful lips that he loved kissing so much, enveloped him completely.

The sounds continued for hours, before they both fell asleep again, no nightmares this time, just the exhausted sleep of two lovers.

This was the time of day that Dawn enjoyed the most. She sipped her coffee slowly, enjoying the feel as the hot decaffeinated beverage warmed her body. Xander was in front of her, cooking them some breakfast. She loved to watch him, the way his smooth muscles would tense and relax as he moved around the small kitchen area of the condo they were staying in.

She sat at the breakfast bar, dressed in the same camisole set she had been wearing the night before, that she had stripped off when things started getting really interesting. He was wearing a new pair of boxers.

The scene of domesticity had been repeated hundreds of times already. He would always cook her breakfast, even though she was a better cook than he was, it was one of his little ways of showing just how much she meant to him. She loved it, as she loved him.

They never talked in the morning, there was no need, they knew what each other was thinking. Their ability to read each other had increased over the years, but they had worked on showing some emotions, not so much for themselves, but so they could integrate more appropriately with society.

It had been very hard for Dawn to go to school, and Xander to start working, when neither of them felt like saying anything above a whisper, and even then to keep it as short as possible. They had both learnt, the hard way, that talking could cause problems.

Dawn's execution had been arranged when someone had overheard her talking about witchcraft. Xander had been shot in the back for refusing to follow an insane colonel's orders.

Xander placed a plate in front of her, and leant against the counter, smiling gently. "Are you ready to see your sister again?" It was the first words they had spoken out of the bedroom for over a week.

A hint of a smile flashed through her eyes. "Yes, I can't wait to see Faith again." Her voice had matured, so that it was now smooth as honey, and had a tendency to wander up and down Xander's spine, pressing all of his buttons.

Xander laughed softly, reached over and pinched a slice of bacon from her plate. "I meant Buffy."

Dawn batted his hand away playfully. "You said sister," she pouted at him.

"Real, not adopted," Xander clarified. Their expressions were not needed, but like their voices, carefully cultivated.

"Not really. She'll freak, try and hit either me or you, you'll get out of the way or I'll zap her. She'll shout, scream, stamp her foot, and then run to the nearest vampire for sex."

Xander grinned at her. "You forgot the jumping to conclusions," he advised her dryly. "I'm obviously a demon, you're possessed, still."

"Ahh yes," Dawn grinned. "The working of my sister's mind has yet to be upgraded from an infectious disease."

Xander blinked for a second, then applauded. "Men in Black?"

"Yep." She drank the last of her coffee, and placed her chin on her hands and looked at him.

"Do you ever regret leaving?"

Dawn shook her head instantly. "You have no idea how close I came to turning Buffy and Willow into rats. Every time they started that same conversation, I just wanted to scream, hex them, run out, find you, and kiss you senseless and hope that nature would overcome your self control."

He laughed, "You hardly helped out with my control. Some of those tops you wore were so loose

you had to hold them to your shoulders.”

“I know,” Dawn admitted calmly. “You were the one who wanted to follow the rules; I was horny as hell, so I figured that if I had to suffer, you would as well.”

“I’m not sorry I waited,” Xander said softly, suddenly losing his joking smile. “It means I can look in the mirror in the morning, and not be disgusted with the person I see. I know you are older than you look, that you’re 17, going on 22, going on 47, but you were still in a body that was five years younger than me and was still going through the beginnings of puberty.”

Dawn reached out and took his hand, stroking it gently. “I know, Xan. I did appreciate it, honestly. I did have some fun with you, but only because I knew how safe it was. Whenever I was scared, or alone, you were always there to make me feel warm and protected.”

They looked at each other, their silent communication so much faster than words. “Think we’ve practiced enough?” Xander asked with a grin.

“Hopefully,” Dawn replied. “Let’s get dressed and get this over with.”

Xander’s clothes had changed dramatically since his teenage days. The bright Hawaiian shirts had vanished, as had the various clown pants. He now wore specially tailored khaki combat pants, a dark blue button up shirt and brown boots. An aviator style jacket finished off his look.

Dawn smiled, looking at him. She had chosen the outfit for him, in fact, every outfit for him since she reached fourteen. He had the worst taste in clothing she had ever seen, and had been grateful for someone to tell him what looked good and what he should wear. In her opinion, which was backed up by the looks he got, he was hot.

Of course, she had more trouble getting ready herself. As she had said, she was really looking forward to meeting Faith again. They hadn’t seen her for a year, and the odd telephone call from wherever in America they had been was never enough, especially not for two people who relied so much on reading expressions.

She was not looking forward to seeing her genetic sister, and said sister’s best friend. They had spent several years trying to talk her out of being in love with Xander, and refused to listen when she had explained, time and time, again that she was his, as he was hers. They hadn’t listened, and had tried everything possible to break them up.

The one time they had insulted Xander, she had lost her temper and frozen them both in place for several hours, while she went over to his parents, and spent some time just cuddling with him. After that, they had stopped talking about him, and talked about how it wasn’t good for her, that she should live her life like a child. Their errant hypocrisy and self interest would not have been obvious to a thirteen year old, but it stunk to heaven with the experience of a 42 year old witch looking at it.

She had no idea what they had done to Xander, what they had used to attack him, but knew it had

been hard. She would sometimes find him sitting in a chair, rigid with tension, looking into the distance. It was in his eyes. Every time, she had climbed into his lap and looked at him, openly, lightly, stroking his face. He would slowly relax, slowly offer her the hint of a smile she was looking for, and slowly remember how much she loved him.

She pulled on a pair of Capri pants, matching top, and a brown leather jacket. Walking normally had been another skill she had been forced to relearn. She had worn long skirts for several years, simply to hide the fact she didn't need to move her legs. Like Xander, she pulled on a pair of brown hiking boots, finishing her outfit.

She walked into the kitchen, and smiled as he stood, his eyes telling her exactly how attractive he found her. She found herself regretting that they had to go now, when the bed was still within reach.

They walked out of the condo, down the elevator and into their car. It was one of the few things Xander had insisted on, and after sitting in it, she had agreed instantly. The BMW M5 was a luxury sedan that she had never thought she would sit in. Exactly where Xander got the money was something she had agreed she didn't need to know. She simply presumed that it was a job he had done when he had been away for several nights. Since that time, he had never worked, and they had dedicated all of their time to fighting things that went bump in the night.

Xander let her drive, since she had learnt in the car, and was totally at home in it.

"I need a drink," Faith muttered to herself. "Why the hell am I babysitting a bunch of whiny, wannabe Slayers, while B is out socializing with her latest vampire fuck-buddy."

"Vi," she yelled. "You're dropping your shoulder. Try it again."

The Slayer in Training groaned, pulled back, then started the movement again. She was grateful, though, that Faith was actually bothering to give them some serious training. Buffy had always been too busy running around like a headless chicken, to bother with anything as boring as actually making sure her troops were ok. Giles did his best, but he was no more than an average fighter at best. He knew how to train them; he followed his text books to the letter. He just had never had the experience to show where the text books might be wrong.

Faith, however, was different. The dark haired Slayer had lived and breathed fighting for the past few years, and was a tornado when she attacked. As far as she was concerned, the text books missed a lot of moves that might not have been fair play, but which were often the difference between victory and bleeding to death. She had taken it on herself to try and train the girls, after they had lost one the first night she was here.

All that time spent with Angel and Xander was paying off, as she helped the girls use what they had to survive first and foremost, and to win, second.

To the girls, Faith was what they wanted to be. She was cool, hot, incredibly sexy, and had a

wicked sense of humor that could have the most innocent man stuttering like a teenager in seconds. The fact that she could also majorly kick ass was a bonus.

None of the trainees understood exactly why Buffy and Caleb were dating; they weren't even sure if he had a soul.

Vi looked up, as a silver BMW pulled to a stop outside the house on Revello Drive. Kennedy, her current fighting partner, turned as well, and admired the car. Her father had looked at getting one once, before deciding on a Mercedes.

Their admiration continued as a tall brunet stepped out of the car and surveyed the surrounding area casually.

A slim girl stepped out of the driver's door; she walked around the car slowly, joining the man as they started to walk towards the house.

Behind the girls, Faith looked around to see what was causing the distraction, and blinked. A huge smile lit up her face, a genuine smile, as opposed to her normal smirk.

Faith squealed with pleasure, and started to run. Her Slayer powers allowed her to vault the fence with ease, and a second later, she thumped in to Xander's body, hugging him tightly.

He slid his arms around her, pulling her close, and stroked her back gently. "It's good to see you, Faith."

Faith released the boy, and grabbed the younger girl, hugging her tightly as well. "I missed you, Faith," Dawn whispered into her ear.

The dark Slayer stepped back reluctantly, almost afraid they would vanish if she let go.

Dawn reached out slowly, and ran her fingers down the girl's cheek. Slowly, she smiled at the older girl. The finger contact allowed Faith to read what she was thinking, what she was feeling, how Dawn felt about her. It gave the Slayer the same ability Xander had all the time.

The Slayer beamed at Dawn. It was impossible for her to control her emotions when this happened, it always made her feel so incredibly special that Dawn trusted her so much, that she gave her this gift freely.

Dawn dropped her hand slowly, allowing Xander to take her place. He too, reached up, with the back of his hand, and brushed his fingers against her cheek.

Dawn reached out and lightly touched both of their hands, facilitating the contact Xander was offering.

Once more, Faith was almost overwhelmed with a feeling of complete love and acceptance from her only true family. Angel and the Fang Gang might be close friends, but Dawn and Xander were her personal saviors, the people who had decided that the angry, scared runaway was worthy

enough to join them.

Both of them gave Faith a slow smile, not much as compared to most people, but on their normally expressionless faces it meant so much.

She hugged them both again, not saying a word, knowing it wasn't necessary. She pulled them into the house to catch up and tell them what had happened.

“What the hell was that?” Kennedy asked, shocked.

“Don't you mean, who the hell was that?” Molly asked.

“Whatever,” Kennedy said dismissively. With Faith out of sight, they all quickly decided to have a rest and enjoy the remainder of the late autumn sun.

“What happened here?” Xander asked, looking around at the trashed room. All of Joyce's nice furniture had been replaced with cheap pieces of crap. One of the windows was boarded up, and there were several holes in the wall.

“They can't afford a handyman to fix all the damage,” Faith explained quietly. “I paid for a plumber to come in to fix the shower, but I'll be damned if I pay for anything else.”

They both smiled at her, guessing that Buffy hadn't exactly been grateful.

“You don't have to stay here,” Dawn offered. “We have a spare room.”

Faith smiled again, “Thanks, guys. You have no idea what it is like living with so many teenage girls, and not being allowed to beat the shit out of them.”

“Why didn't you get your own place?” Xander asked, remembering at the last minute to frown as well.

“I'm not exactly made of money,” Faith replied sheepishly.

“What happened to that account I set up for you?”

“Oh, that's for emergencies only. I wasn't going to use that for something as frivolous as hotel accommodation when there is a couch I can use here, free of charge.”

Xander looked annoyed, an expression that Faith had never seen on his face before, and she took a slight step back.

“You are my sister,” he said firmly, looking the dark Slayer in the eyes. “That money is replaceable, you are not. I don't want to hear about you getting hurt because you had a bad night's sleep, got me?”

She nodded reluctantly.

“Money is not an issue, Faith. You risk your life day in and day out to save this planet; you deserve the good things in life.”

Again, she nodded, looking down a little.

Xander reached out and pulled her into a hug again. “I meant it,” he whispered. “You are the most important person in the world to Dawn and me. We don’t want you dead for any reason.”

Hearing those words, it took all of Faith’s self control not to break down in tears.

“What the hell are they doing?” Buffy asked Willow as they walked up the street towards the Summers residence, scowling at the SIT’s who were lying around, relaxing.

“Err, sunbathing?” Willow asked.

“Why aren’t they training, or something? Faith run out on them already?”

“Are you expecting visitors?” Willow changed the subject, Faith’s help still being a sore spot between them, as she spotted the expensive car parked outside their house.

“Nope,” Buffy frowned. “I thought I had all that bank stuff sorted out, I’m not on final notice on any of my bills either.” Looking worried, the Slayer and the Witch picked up the pace a little.

“I’ve suddenly got a feeling bad things are going to happen,” Molly announced, watching the two girls head into the house. She jumped up with a grin, “And I don’t want to miss it.”

The other trainees grinned, and joined her. They sneaked towards the house, sitting under the open window so they could hear perfectly.

Inside the living room, Dawn tensed. “Xander, they are here.”

Xander nodded slowly, and looked Dawn in the eyes.

Faith watched quietly, she could almost see the small signs of life drain from the two of them. The little inflections that told her so much vanished, as they regained complete control over their actions. She knew that it was a self defense mechanism, and that it was likely that the upcoming confrontation would be unpleasant.

Despite being offered a place to stay, and being here at their personal request, Faith was totally on Dawn and Xander’s side. She had been shocked that they had waited so long to consummate their relationship; she would have been jumping Xander from about five minutes after puberty had made the relevant biological changes necessary to facilitate such an action.

As she always did, the small blonde Slayer entered the house first, closely followed by her red-headed companion.

“Faith, what’s the problem?” she demanded, shifting immediately into aggressive mode, ignoring the dark couple dressed in similar clothes.

Faith smirked, the bright smile gone as her own defenses came in play. “No problem, B. Good news in fact, I asked for some backup, they were willing to provide it.”

“What?” Buffy demanded, incensed. “You had no right to do that! I’m the Slayer! I run this thing, not you.”

“And doing such a good job at it,” Faith retorted. “We lost one potential the first night I was here, and she wasn’t the first.”

“They died because they were stupid,” Buffy announced dismissively.

Outside, the potential Slayers looked at each other, shocked.

For the first time, Buffy and Willow looked at the two sat comfortably on the couch. They looked vaguely familiar. “I’m sorry,” Buffy said, quite obviously not sorry in the slightest. “But you’ve wasted your time. Your help, what ever that may be, is not required.”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with you, Buffy,” Xander said quietly. “Faith asked for our help, and that is what she is going to get.”

Buffy paused, as the level voice brought back memories she had hoped to never bring up again. She looked at the girl next to him, the bright green eyes and long hair, set in a face that had matured into a sophisticated beauty, was that of her sister, albeit a few years older.

Beside them, Willow had gone white upon recognizing the two.

“We don’t need you,” Buffy spat. “My boyfriend’s a better fighter than you’ll ever be, and Willow’s a more powerful witch.”

For a brief second, Faith thought she saw a glimmer of amusement flash in Dawn’s eyes, but it was gone before she could be sure.

“Then why haven’t you defeated this bad guy yet, and why are you losing your troops?” Xander inquired softly, neither his face nor his tone gave any inkling to what he was thinking.

Buffy took the question as if he had shouted it in her face. As if she was talking to a five year old, she mocked, “Because it is a non-corp-eral...non corp..it’s a ghost. And the people died because they were stupid.”

Xander looked at her, neither his face nor his eyes told her anything, yet she got the feeling that he was rolling his eyes at her. “Do you have any idea how to lead troops? How to make sure they fight their best?”

“Of course,” Buffy replied. “I’m the Slayer.”

There was a brief silence that could have been interpreted a number of ways. Faith chose to interpret it as a stunned silence.

“What training have you introduced?”

“Look,” Buffy was rapidly losing her temper. “I don’t have to answer your questions. I’m the Slayer, I think it’s time you left.”

Next to her, Willow was staring at Dawn, “After you left, I found that you had been holding me back. I could have handled a lot more spells than you would let me. Why?”

“You did not have the experience to properly handle those spells,” Dawn replied serenely.

“Yes I did,” Willow snapped. “You were just jealous and holding me back so I wouldn’t be better than you.”

The red-headed witch felt both pairs of inscrutable eyes on her. They seemed to burrow deep into her soul, examining, then deciding what they found was unworthy.

Simultaneously, Xander and Dawn stood, and walked to the door. “Coming?” Xander asked Faith.

“Where the hell are you going?” Buffy screamed at them.

They ignored her, and walked out, joined a few seconds later by Faith, who was holding a single bag with some clothes in it.

“That’s it?” Xander asked his total control still in place.

Faith nodded, slightly embarrassed, sensing Xander’s disapproval more than anything else.

“Faith,” Vi, called after them, running over to them.

Faith paused and turned to face the girl.

“What about our training?”

Faith looked at Xander for a second, and after he nodded, she grinned. “We’ll turn it up tomorrow.”

“Meet us at Giles’ tomorrow morning at ten,” Xander told the girl, interrupting smoothly.

Vi nodded, wide eyed as she got a much closer look at the one they had heard Buffy get very upset about.

Her eyes stayed on his face, as he turned and climbed into the car, Dawn and Faith following him.

As the car drove off, Vi walked back over to the other potentials.

“Well, what did he say?” Molly asked.

“We’ll meet them at Watcher’s place, tomorrow at Ten.”

“You will do no such thing,” Buffy spat, having walked around the corner. “You will do as I tell you and nothing else. They are not wanted or needed.”

“But,” Vi tried to argue.

“I’m the Slayer! You will do as you are told.” With that, the blonde turned and walked back into the house.

“Are you going to go?” Molly whispered.

Vi shot a look at Kennedy, then said, “No. Not at all.”

Molly nodded in understanding, and let the subject drop.

“Do you know what has happened to her?” Dawn asked Faith quietly. One of the reasons for the luxury car was the excellent noise suppression.

Faith shook her head, “No. Basically, Willow turned up in L.A. last week, asking for some help. I wasn’t doing anything important, so I volunteered to come. I was hoping I could try and make friends with B. After all, we are the only two Slayers around.

“When I got here, I found that Buffy didn’t know I was coming, and she was really pissed about Willow asking me to help out. It was only when Willow argued with her, and got her to talk to Caleb about the situation that she reluctantly let me stay.

“She’s a disaster, Xan. You have no idea how bad it is. She orders everyone around, leads us into situations that even I can see is a trap, and then blames everyone else when things go wrong.

“Caleb patrols with us occasionally, and is a pretty good fighter, but he seems to spend all his time encouraging Buffy in her so-called ‘plans’.

“The potentials are pretty good really, and they could be turned in to a great team. They’ve got heart. Well, most of them, anyway. Kennedy, one of those girls, is currently dating Willow, and has her nose so far up Red’s ass that you have to look down Willow’s throat to see her eyes.”

Xander turned and flashed her a grin. It wasn’t quite a pre-Halloween grin, but for Faith, having never seen that, it was very effective.

“Does Giles know what is going on?”

Faith shrugged lightly. “I’ve only seen him once, and he looked a little strange.”

Xander nodded thoughtfully.

It was with a degree of surprise, that Faith realized that they had pulled up outside of Giles' apartment block.

Silently, the two partners climbed out of the car, leaving Faith to shrug and join them.

Giles looked up from the thick tome he was reading and sighed a little. A small glass of whiskey rested on the arm of his chair, and he was dressed in a comfortable pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

He stood, reluctantly, as someone knocked on the door, and walked over, opening it without bothering to check who it was.

“Xander? Dawn?” he asked, these two people, with Faith hovering behind them, were probably the last two guests he expected to have to entertain.

“Please, come in.”

The three young adults followed the older man into his apartment. Xander's hand was on Dawn's elbow, ostensibly guiding her, but in fact using the contact to allow them to talk to each other silently. There was something wrong with the Watcher; not his clothes, although the lack of tweed was shocking enough, but something in his eyes. A light that used to shine so brightly had almost been extinguished. He looked like a man adrift from everything he held dear.

Xander sat Dawn down on a chair, shot a quick look at Faith and Giles, and walked into the kitchen.

“So,” Faith started, finding the silence a little intimidating. “How're things, Jeeves?”

Giles smiled faintly, not having heard that nickname in a long time. “Fine, fine. How are you?”

“Just peachy,” Faith replied dryly.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Faith and Giles wishing that Xander was back. Dawn, who had asked Xander to leave them, spent the time examining the British Watcher closely.

Xander returned, and handed Dawn one of the two mugs he was holding. He passed the other one to Giles, moving his alcohol well out of the way.

With a very surprised look, Giles sipped the tea. “My heavens,” he whispered, “when did you learn to make proper tea?”

Xander smiled faintly. “Dawn likes it.”

Giles nodded and sat forwards. He took a deep breath, holding the mug of tea in front of him as a bit of a shield. He ignored Faith for now, remembering how close the three of them were, and so

did not have a problem saying this in front of the dark Slayer. He wanted to say this first, before he lost this chance.

“I believe that I owe the both of you an apology. I’ve recently had a great deal of time in which to think thrust upon me, and with hindsight, my behavior to you both was below what I would expect of myself as your friend, and as a human being.

Once he started talking, Giles found that he couldn’t stop. “When I arrived in this town, I was so pleased to have a Slayer, so pleased that I was actually an active Watcher. Buffy wasn’t quite what I expected, but I found myself liking being her Watcher even more than I had thought I would. She was remarkably human. I did find it very difficult to deal with both you and Willow, and your insistence with joining along in her Slaying efforts. That said, it was with a sense of pride that I watched all three of you deal with the vampires and demons that infest this little town.

“But, Buffy was my Slayer. I don’t think I can explain properly what that means; it’s like a Father-Daughter relationship, but so much more than that. She was everything to me, so, against my better judgment, I found myself siding with her again and again. So much so that it became a habit. When it came to prophecies and the like, I was in charge; I used my intellect to its fullest. I am ashamed to admit that when it came to personal interactions in your group, I didn’t apply the same full concentration.

“With Buffy so against your relationship, and doing everything in her power to destroy it, I’m afraid that I let her emotions color my own conclusions. What I failed to do is research your case, to find out exactly what had happened, and make my own decisions based on that.

“Things have now changed, and I have been forced to realize that Buffy believes that, as the Slayer, she no longer needs me and that she can take control over everything. Ironically, I find myself in a very similar situation to the one you both experienced. Knowing that you can help, yet your pleas to do so being ignored.

“It is this exclusion that has forced me through this introspection, and all I can say is that I apologize profusely for my behavior.”

Faith watched silently as Xander and Dawn looked at each other for a second. Without a single sign, they both moved out at once, and lightly held Giles’ hand.

Rupert Giles had been involved with magic from a young age; his reputation as a teenage tearaway still existed as cautionary legend in parts of London. He had completed spells during which he had been possessed by a God, and had read extensively on subjects in many different languages and arts.

He had never felt or read about anything that came close to this.

The Watcher was hit with a barrage of emotions. He felt the understanding, the forgiveness and the affection the two expatriate Scoobies held for him.

Everything went through him with crystal clear clarity. It resonated deep inside his soul, and he knew without any doubt that everything he felt was real, everything was true. He was truly forgiven for his actions.

“Oh my,” he whispered, as they released him, sitting back. A thought struck him, and the expression on his face turned horrified. “Is this how you talk to each other?”

“More so,” Dawn replied softly.

“And we tried to take that away from you?” The expression of self loathing on Giles’ face was almost heart rendering.

“You’re forgiven,” Xander reminded him gently. “For everything.”

The British Watcher grasped his cup of tea, and drank deeply. “Thank you,” he whispered finally. He found it hard to admit, but he wanted the feeling from them again. The wonderful feeling of someone touching your very soul and passing you a message of understanding and forgiveness.

“Now,” Xander smiled at him, an expression that Giles remembered with more fondness than he had judged at the time. “What’s happened to Buffy and Willow?”

Giles took another sip of his tea, placed the mug down, and slowly polished his glasses.

Both Dawn and Faith could sense Xander’s amusement, and as he looked up at the boy, Giles, for the very first time, could as well.

“Yes,” he said dryly. “I am going into lecture mode.”

The self-deprecating joke actually caused Xander to half smile, half smirk at the older man.

“I guess it started shortly after you left. Buffy was out on patrol one night, alone, and ran into a Vampire. This Vampire then proceeded to beat Buffy in their fight with remarkable ease. Instead of killing her, however, he told her he’d let her live if she agreed to go on a date with him.

“Buffy agreed, and they agreed to meet the next day. As she normally did Buffy told me all about this the next morning, and I advised her against meeting the Vampire.

“Sadly, but predictably, Buffy failed to take my advice. By all accounts, the date went extremely well. They had a good time, and dated again. A few weeks later, Buffy arrived at my apartment with an almost visible glow. It seems that this Caleb, as I later found his name to be, did not suffer any adverse reactions to intimacy.”

Dawn and Xander looked at each other for a second. Again, Giles realized that they were rolling their eyes at each other, in a disgusted manner. It was remarkable to him just how expressive they could be, with the tiniest of movements. He found himself envying the two of them, envying the deep relationship they both so obviously enjoyed.

“It was about four months ago when events first began to deteriorate. We all started to receive nightmares, as something played on our innermost fears. A few weeks later, the Watchers Council sent some of its potential Slayers to stay with us. Shortly afterwards, a bomb ripped through the headquarters of the society, crippling us.

“It was shortly after those events, when Buffy started to take more and more command, and when I queried her ideas, she accused me of working against her, of standing in her way, and told me to get out. I tried to argue with her, but she was most stubborn. The only contact I had was with the Potentials, but in the end, she stopped me even doing that, accusing me of putting ideas in to their heads.

“I left town, which I admit was the wrong thing to do, but my emotions were in turmoil, and went back to England. I worked with a few of the remaining members of the council, to start the rebuilding, and returned to Sunnydale, reinvigorated and eager to help with the battle. Unfortunately, I arrived the day after Faith, and when I walked in, Buffy accused me of abandoning her, and stated that I was the cause of her losing a potential Slayer the night before.”

Giles watched as Xander and Dawn looked at each other. He could almost see them speak now. After they had let him in, he found that what he had initially perceived as a lack of expression was in fact a highly sophisticated form of telepathy.

“What about Willow?”

Giles sighed once more, “Another of my failures, I am afraid. With your departure, Willow turned to me for magic lessons. I tried to continue along the same path that you had, Dawn, but was distracted by my duties as a Watcher. I tried very hard to keep going in the correct direction, but she moved away from me as fast as she could. Her intellect allowed her to pick up magic relatively easily, and she believed that she was superior to me. That she could understand things faster. Eventually, she accused me of holding her back, and taught herself. She has become extremely powerful.”

Dawn nodded calmly. “She has more power than she should have. How did she acquire it?”

Giles frowned. “I don’t know. It just seemed to appear whenever we need it. She said that she was channeling the earth itself, as a Wiccan.”

“Willow is not a Wicca,” Dawn stated emotionlessly. “She has too much turmoil in her heart and mind. Wicca is a very peaceful, harmonious and balanced way of thinking and life, which promotes oneness with the divine and all which exists.” Her voice had changed slightly, giving it a very slight teacher-like feel. “To be a Wicca is to be a healer, a teacher, a seeker, a giver, and a protector of all things. You walk this path with honor, light and integrity.”

Giles absently polished his glasses again, returning them slowly to his nose. The distraction gave him a few seconds to collect his thoughts. “I believe you may be right,” he said cautiously. “Willow and Tara separated after Willow used a spell to remove a memory from her mind.”

Faith silently pulled her legs up, settling in a little more comfortably. Normally, she had very little patience for deep discussions, but she was finding this history lesson fascinating.

“Does Willow not believe in the law of threefold?”

“No,” Giles said, a look of surprise on his face as he realized he had never considered the questions.

“What’s the law of threefold?” Faith interjected, her voice carefully modulated to avoid breaking the mood that had been fostered.

“The Wicca religion is based on two cardinal rules, and one advisory belief,” Dawn explained with a look that Faith knew was a smile. “‘An it harm none do, what you will,’ is the first. It basically means that you can do what you like with magic, as long as it doesn’t hurt any living thing. Second, is ‘The law of three fold return,’ which means that anything you do for good or ill is ultimately returned to with three times the power. Finally, the advisory belief is that if a spell fails to reach its target, it rebounds on to the caster. This would not be a problem if the spell was designed for good, but if it was evil, it could easily backfire.”

Faith nodded, as did Giles, who had never actually heard the basic tenets of the witchcraft explained so clearly and concisely.

“Are you a Wicca?” Faith asked the long haired girl.

Dawn thought for a second, trying to find the best way to phrase her reply. “In a way, yes. I believe fully in the laws of the religion, I have seen too much happen not to believe. But I am not a pure Wicca. I chose to fight for what I believe in, and as such, walk a very thin path. I believe that self defense, and the defense of my fellow man, is more important than absolute adherence to the rules, and that these rules are mainly guidelines. I will kill demons, vampires, even evil humans, yet I would not cast a spell for my own gain.”

For a second, both people watching her saw a hint of the young girl Dawn had been before, as she whispered, “Besides, I can not jeopardize my soul, it already belongs to Xander.”

The only movement he made was to lightly touch her hand, but it was enough. Dawn broadcast to Faith and Giles a little of what she was receiving from him, the absolute love and devotion, and again it humbled the Watcher, while it warmed the Slayer.

“What is Willow, then?” Faith asked, as she saw Xander lightly remove his hand.

“I’m not sure,” Dawn admitted. “She has much more power than I do.”

“And you’re not worried by this?” Faith asked, showing that she was herself worried.

“Are you worried when you fight a Kungai Demon?” Dawn asked back.

“A little,” Faith admitted, to Giles’ surprise. He couldn’t remember the brash woman ever openly

admitting a weakness when she had first been here. “But I’m pretty confident I can beat it. It might be a lot stronger, but I have the skill to take it down.”

Dawn just offered her a very faint smile. It took Faith a few seconds to realize what the smile meant, before she relaxed and laughed softly.

“Back to Willow, then,” Xander intervened smoothly. “What happened to Tara?”

“Well,” Giles continued from earlier. “Willow begged Tara’s forgiveness for the spell, and they tried to work past it. I believe that, from your description, Dawn, that Tara was a true Wicca, and that she worked very hard to keep Willow on the right path. Unfortunately, however, she died, during an altercation with a group of demon raisers called the Trio. Willow took her death hard, and skinned the person who shot her alive.”

If Giles expected Xander and Dawn to be shocked by this revelation, he would have been severely disappointed. Revenge was an emotion they both understood extremely well.

“What exactly are we facing here?” Xander asked, moving the conversation back to the enemy they were facing.

“Do you remember when Angel almost killed Buffy? Just before it snowed for the first time?”

Dawn and Xander looked each other in the eyes. They both shared the memory of the two of them playing in the snow, and their first, very chaste, kiss.

“A little,” Xander said. “First Evil, or something?”

“Exactly,” Giles replied. “It seems that it is back, along with the group of priests, called Bringers, or Harbingers, who worship it. It seems bent on staying in this realm this time, and we are left with the question of how to kill something which is non-corporeal.” Giles would wonder for sometime why his usage of ‘non-corporeal’ would make Xander and Dawn give a hint of a smile, and Faith laugh.

Xander looked at his watch, a little surprised to see how much time had passed. “Giles, we are meeting some of the Potentials here tomorrow at ten am. I want you to have some advice ready on dealing with both the Harbingers and the First. Contact anyone you can think of who might have experience or ideas. I’d also like to see anything and everything you can dig up on its methodologies, behaviors and motivations.”

It was the first time that Giles was able to see what Xander had become, what he had done with the experience and training bestowed on him by the warrior spirit. “Yes, Xander,” he agreed.

The three said their goodbyes and left, all noticing that Giles had changed. His eyes were alive with purpose and dedication. He was needed again, and was obviously much better off for it.

The Warrior and the Witch Homecoming 2

Many years ago, before a chaos mage played with his life, the scene on Xander's couch would have been enough for many fantasies. Not that there was anything sexual about it - there wasn't. It was just that the idea of two drop dead gorgeous girls sitting together would have sent his teenage mind into a fantasy that could have lasted several days. Those thoughts didn't even cross his mind these days.

One of the women was his partner, his life, in a way that no one else could understand. When they were apart, he could feel her emotions, whether she was happy or sad, excited or scared. When they were together, he knew what she was thinking, could hear her thoughts as clearly as his own.

The other was his sister, the one who understood his upbringing, because she had been through it herself. He could see in her the excitement and passion that she put into everything she did. It was not enough for her to enter a room; she had to explode into it, making herself the centre of attention. Her self-destructive side had been curtailed, her gregarious side encouraged. The result was a proud woman who could kick ass like no one else.

Faith and Dawn.

Faith's eyes were laughing, her lips curved in to a smile. Dawn looked expressionless, but if you knew her, she was laughing as well. A slight hint of color in her eyes, the occasional quirk of a lip.

"Xander," Dawn whispered, for Faith's sake not his, "sit and talk to Faith. I'm going to start cooking." She paused for a second, and then continued, "No, I don't need any help."

Xander smiled faintly, a mere ghost of an expression. He took her place, as she walked into the small kitchen area.

"Can Dawn cook?" Faith looked a little surprised.

"Much better than I can. The witch was an accomplished cook, although we didn't realize till last year. We presumed she couldn't, so I cooked everything. The first time she did, was when I was away for a few days. When I came back, she took over the role, and I've never eaten better."

"Wow, Xan, a full sentence."

Xander's eyes laughed with her.

"Xander, what happened when you went away for a few days? I know you left, and when you came back you had money. It kinda worries me."

Faith suddenly felt the full force of Xander's personality and mental strength aimed at her for the first time. It was a disturbing experience for her, especially considering that she had faced demons and vampires without a qualm for the past five years. The little hints of Xander vanished from his face as the warrior aspect of his personality took complete control.

Dawn wandered back into the living room and dropped a light kiss on his cheek, and, without a word, went back to cooking.

When Faith looked at him again, he was back to normal, not a hint that anything had changed. "Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," he whispered softly, with a slight look of apology echoing around his face.

"I'm worried about you and Dawn." The dark Slayer wasn't going to back down. "It would kill you both, if you were arrested."

Xander contemplated her for a brief moment. He thought about telling her about the friends in high places they had, the influence they had, the protection they could call on, should they ever need it.

"I did some work for the CIA," he said quietly. "That particular time, I was flown into Columbia, dropped off, had a little walk through the jungle, performed a small favor, wandered out and came home. Since then, we've been under contract to continue to do what we do."

"You're paid to fight?"

Xander nodded.

"Cool!"

"Dinner's ready," Dawn called, she had heard and felt the conversation, and decided that he had given her enough information.

They sat around the table. It was a little more formal than the dark Slayer was used to, but she didn't feel uncomfortable.

"What do you think of the Potentials?" Dawn asked Faith.

"They're good kids," she replied, ignoring the fact that she wasn't much older than most of them. "But, it's a little weird. During the day, they're fine. At night, on patrol, they seem to follow Buffy around like little sheep, agreeing with anything and everything she says or does."

Dawn nodded slowly, as if something had just been confirmed in her mind.

Xander knew that she wasn't ready to talk, so he smoothly changed the subject.

It had been simple for Molly and Vi to persuade Kennedy that she should spend the day with Willow. A little bit of applied flattery and reverse psychology had left the rest of the S.I.T's with a day off, and an order to stay at home. It was less than two minutes after Buffy, Willow and Kennedy had left before all of the Potentials were walking to Giles' place.

Faith and Giles were waiting for them outside, next to a rented people carrier. They offered no explanation of where it had come from, or who had paid for it, they merely told the girls to get in.

Giles drove them, a little too slowly for Faith's taste, to a warehouse in the business area of Sunnydale. The simple press of a button on the remote control in Faith's hand opened the rolling shutters, and they drove in, to find the interior in total darkness.

A sudden hum of electricity preceded halogen bulbs pumping light into the area, which was followed by a gasp.

Spread out in front of them was a military style training area. Fitness equipment was laid out around the corners of a large open padded area. At the front, the two people from the day before stood, completely stationary.

"Line up." The command came from the male, in a voice that should have been normal, but wasn't. It carried the weight of command and authority.

The girls formed a single line, shoulder to shoulder, a little intimidated, although they weren't quite sure why.

"Faith?" the tall, brunet man asked.

The girl beamed, as she realized what he wanted. "Any rules?" she purred.

"Keep the Slayer strength down, I'm not going to boost."

The trainee Slayers looked on in surprise, as their teacher prowled onto the mat in front of them, her eyes sparkling with excitement. It was exactly the same way she walked into a nest of Vampires - creatures that had no idea what they were facing.

The dark haired man was still expressionless, although Faith and Giles could see how amused he was. He shrugged off his jacket and handed it to the girl next to him. The girl reached up and touched his face for a second, before she took several steps back.

Xander undid his shirt, removing it and tossing it neatly to the girl.

Faith looked appreciatively at him. If he hadn't been her adopted brother, the sort of fighting they were about to engage in would have a very different outcome.

The S.I.T's exchanged wild glances. They hadn't expected the sun-tanned torso, and certainly hadn't expected so many muscles and scars. It was the scars that caused them to re-evaluate him instantly; they spoke of combat experience, of years of facing things that they were still nervous just thinking about.

Faith moved first. Without warning, she jumped forwards, her left foot kicking out, aimed at his chin.

Xander swayed back the bare two inches necessary to allow the foot to fly past his face unimpeded. He dropped to the floor, his left leg snapping out in a sweep kick at Faith's support leg, causing the girl to use her momentum from the kick to turn it into a back somersault.

Xander continued the flowing motion of the takedown, straightening up to come to a rest facing the girl, in the exact same position he had started in. He paused, in no hurry to rush in and attack.

Faith couldn't help herself. She knew she was playing to his strengths, that he was forcing her to do all the work, to attack him, but she simply didn't have the patience to play the same game he was. The Slayer took several quick steps forward, and launched a combination of short close-in punches at his torso.

Xander swayed, avoiding a few and blocking the others. He almost smiled. Faith had improved dramatically over the past year; he could recognize some of Angel's style superimposed over what he had taught her, and it seemed to be working surprisingly well. His musing was proved right a second later, as he fell for a faked punch to the midsection and received one to his jaw, instead.

He shook off the pain quickly, and used his height advantage to leap straight through her defenses and knee her solidly in her breastbone.

Faith gasped and flew backwards, curling up as she landed and rolled backwards, then pushed off with her hands and ended back on her feet.

Xander moved first this time, confident steps devouring the gap between them, followed by a blistering combination of punches, kicks and elbows that looked deadly and tested Faith's reflexes to the limit. He had forgotten just how much fun it was to fight a Slayer. He had asked her to tone down her strength, so that he could walk away from the fight without needing major surgery, but had said nothing about the Slayer speed and ability. It was one of the few chances he had to use every skill he possessed, to throw it all into a non-world-ending confrontation.

Faith jumped to one side, and launched a kick to his stomach; he blocked it, and jerked back hard to avoid the follow-up kick that would have remodeled his nose and moved it to the back of his head.

She was having as much as of a good time as he was, for the same reason. Xander was better than she was; he had been her primary teacher, molding both the natural talent possessed, and the Slayer talent with which she had been imbued, into a warrior that scared the opponents she fought. She wanted, needed, to prove to herself that she had improved, that she was getting nearer to him.

The brunet warrior represented the level to which she aspired. There was a curious freedom given her, to know that she could use everything on him, and not have to worry about hurting him, because Dawn would always fix him up if either of the two made a mistake.

The fights continued for five minutes, till both of them were sweating, their bodies gleaming in the hard light as they battled. Eventually, they pulled apart. Faith bowed respectfully, as a student to a teacher, a gesture Xander returned with equal respect.

"You've improved," Xander said, his smile obvious to his opponent, if not to their audience.

"Thanks," she grinned, proud of herself.

Xander walked back to face the girls, who had sat down shortly after the fight had begun, and who had watched in awe as Faith, the girl they thought was the absolute best fighter possible, had fought a normal human, and hadn't put him in hospital.

"My name is Xander Harris. This is Dawn Summers."

He ignored the looks the girls gave each other as they recognized the surname. "Giles will tell your our history later, and will answer as many question as he can. Please, do not ask us anything related to the past, we will not respond. I have been training Faith for five years, and if she had used her full Slayer strength, her first punch would have ended the match. Slayer strength is extremely useful, but without technique and practice, it is as much a liability as it is a gift."

"Why?" Vi asked, looking a little confused.

"There is always something or someone stronger than you are. If all you have is strength, when you finally meet that person, you are in trouble. If you have the technique to back it up, there is always a way you can either win, or keep yourself alive long enough for back up to arrive, or for you to escape."

Faith lightly rubbed the sweat off her skin, and walked over to Dawn. "That's the longest speech I've ever seen him give," she confided in a low voice.

Dawn smiled in the way that only those close to her could see. "This isn't the first time he's given it," she said softly. "Change 'Slayer strength' for 'guns' and it's similar to the last one."

"When did he do that?" Giles asked, entering the conversation after watching the two spar, and marveling that neither one had been injured in any way..

"I can't tell you," the girl said simply, in such a way that it left the other two in no doubt that they would get no further in the conversation.

Giles and Faith looked at each other, both curious, then turned to watch as Xander began to put the SIT's through their places. He worked with them for several hours, testing them mercilessly to see what they could do.

"Xander's pleased," Dawn announced suddenly, to Faith and Giles. "He says that you've done a good job with them, and that they have a lot of potential to work together and be an effective fighting force."

Faith flushed with pleasure at the compliment.

"You can tell what Xander is thinking?" Giles asked, his insatiable scholar's curiosity piqued at her unexpected statement.

"If I concentrate hard enough, and he does as well, we can talk anywhere up to around 30 meters; after that, it's not possible. At the moment, he's starting to get hungry, so if you'll excuse me, I'll go and get some food for everyone." She didn't wait for their acknowledgement; she simply walked out the building, to their car.

The SIT's who watched her go with interest quickly regretted it, as Xander made them pay for their lack of attention.

"I am still not quite used to that," Giles confessed to Faith.

"Their ability to talk to each other, or the fact they don't give a shit about anyone's reaction but each other?"

"Both," Giles said with a sigh.

"You were never around them in the early days," the brunette said softly, her eyes on Xander. "It was almost painful to watch at times, they have a deep seated need to be in each other's company. They carry with them not just their own scars, but the scars of their spirits and their previous lives, too. On top of that, they had the reactions of their friends and family who couldn't understand the connection they had, or the pain they were feeling. They rely on each other to protect their sanity. The relationship they have isn't healthy by normal standards; it's obsessive and completely consuming, but it works for them. They are completely dependent on each other for everything they need.

"And the funny thing is, I envy them. They have complete and absolute trust in each other, in a way that only they can understand. When Dawn walked out, Xander shivered a little, as they disconnected from each other," she mentioned the almost unnoticeable movement she had caught. "But he knows she will be back soon.

"You know why they are so scary, why so many demons avoid them?" she asked her former watcher.

Giles shook his head, he wasn't even aware that the two had a reputation.

"Because they know that they have to kill both at once. If they only kill one, they know that they are signing their own death certificate, because the Devil himself would not be able to stop either of them from getting revenge. I've seen Xander get into that mood, exactly once, and this is more

than enough for me. A year ago in L.A., Dawn was knocked out by a Voynok demon, you know, one of those blue demons with the horns, and Xander went insane. I think he felt the communication between the two of them stop, and thought she had died.

"He stopped for a second, and for the first time since I have known him, he showed what he was thinking. His eyes were blazing with rage and hate; he walked through the vampires he was fighting as if they didn't exist. You could almost feel the violence radiating off him. Angel pulled out of the fight; he realized that Xander was going to kill everything that stood in his way, friend or foe, living or dead.

"The Voynok taunted Xander, but he paid no attention. He finished off the vampires, then attacked the demon. It wasn't much of a fight, as Xander simply ignored the punishment he received, and beat the demon to a pulp, crippling it; he wanted it to live like that, as punishment.

"He walked over to Dawn, and dropped to his knees. A single tear dropped down his face, and I was getting ready to grab him, Angel was too, 'cause we thought he was going to do something stupid, when Dawn woke up. The smile on Xander's face was one of pure joy and relief. I'd never seen him look like that before, and I haven't since. They hugged endlessly, before Xander walked back over to the demon and killed it, putting it out of its misery.

"We found out later that it wasn't dead, it had nine lives, but it decided to never get anywhere near Xan again, and spread the word to the demon community."

Giles had a slightly surprised look on his face, as his keen intellect swallowed everything that had been said.

"I went back to school, last year," Faith explained dryly. She correctly interpreted his stunned silence at her concise explanation. "I've got enough credits to graduate next summer. I'm hoping that this thing will be over by the end of next week, so I don't miss any classes."

Giles blinked, and then offered her an apology. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to imply anything."

Faith shrugged lightly, not taking any offence. After all, she hadn't really ever given the other Scoobies any reason to think she was interested in anything other than partying and good times.

Dawn returned with several crates full of food floating behind her. The sight was met with a mix of grateful relief and surprise by the SIT's. Relief that they could finally have a break, and surprise because while they knew she was a witch, knowing was very different to seeing.

"Ok, you've got an hour. This afternoon, we'll do some fitness work."

The girls groaned in unison, and quickly ran over to the food. They each filled their plates to the full, and went to sit around Faith and Giles.

Xander and Dawn lightly touched each other, reestablishing contact, picked up their own food, and walked out of the back, not really wanting to be around the upcoming discussion.

"Ok," Molly said, after she had demolished her first roll. "Who are they?"

Faith sighed, wishing that Xander hadn't dumped this on them. "They are known as the Warrior and the Witch," she started, hiding a smirk as Giles jumped slightly. Obviously, he had heard of them, he just hadn't realized who the two really were. "They've spent the last twenty months touring the country, putting out supernatural fires and generally saving the world. Xander is my brother, Dawn is Buffy's sister."

"How come we've never met them before?"

"Buffy and Willow hate them. They only came to help out because I asked them to."

"Why?"

"I'll answer that, if you don't mind, Faith," Giles interrupted. "Five years ago, on Halloween, a chaos worshipper cast a spell on Sunnydale. He turned everyone who had purchased a costume from his store into the outfit they were wearing. Xander was dressed as a soldier, and Dawn as Wednesday Addams, a fictional witch. The spell didn't work quite as the caster expected. Those people were possessed not by characters, but by the spirits who had inspired the characters. After Dawn and Xander worked together to break the spell, they were offered a choice. They could return to normality, or they could merge with the spirits who had possessed them. They both chose to merge, so that they could help to fight against the darkness more effectively. As a side-effect of the spell, they had effectively spent years in limbo, learning to deal with their new powers and memories, and fell completely in love, while doing so.

"When they finally came out, it was obvious that they were no longer themselves, and Buffy and Willow didn't like it. In an instant they had essentially lost their best friend and their little sister. What was worse, from their thinking, was that as far as they could see, on the outside, Dawn was twelve and Xander seventeen.

"They went through hell together, dealing with all of our reactions, with Faith being the only person to accept it, till Dawn grew old enough for them to be able to be together. As soon as Dawn reached 16, they left town, and started fighting on their own.

"Xander is a warrior. A truly incredible fighter. He is highly skilled in many martial arts and most weapons, as well as tactics and leadership. Dawn is a witch, with forty years of practical experience, backed by a millennia's worth of theory."

"Wow," was the general understated comment. "How come they always look blank?"

Faith smiled slightly, "That was the first question I asked them. They grabbed my hands, and showed me exactly how they were communicating; somehow, it gave me the ability to read them. The expressions are there, they're just completely hidden, if you don't know what to look for." She paused, then asked, "What do you think of the training, so far?"

"Amazing," Vi replied, after exchanging looks with the others. "Not that you were doing a bad job,

Faith, but Xander really knows what he is talking about."

Faith smiled with pride.

"Faith," Molly suddenly frowned. "At the start, when he asked you to not use full Slayer strength, he said something about a boost. What's that?"

"Well, Dawn can use her magic to boost Xander. It's tiring on her, but it gives him Slayer-like speed and strength. You've all seen me in full flow, right?"

They all nodded eagerly.

"It's pretty awesome," Shannon said.

"Xander is beautiful to watch, every move is almost like ballet, the most graceful dance you've ever seen. I've seen him take on nests of Vampires that I'd think twice about going anywhere near, and win. When you combine the boost with his incredible technique and ability, you can see why he is called the Warrior."

Over in the kitchen area, Xander and Dawn were leaning against the counter; the smaller girl was resting against his chest. His hands were stroking up and down her back.

"They've been tampered with," Dawn whispered, or maybe she didn't. When they were like this, neither of them were sure if they were talking verbally or mentally.

"They're programmed to follow Buffy when on patrol, to do what ever she tells them, to pretty much revere her."

"Can you do anything about it?"

"Already have. I cancelled the spell. It's not instantaneous, but by this evening, they should be able to regain some of their own personalities."

They stayed silent for a bit longer, communing in pure emotion.

Eventually, they moved back into the training area, where Xander called the SIT's back for the afternoon session.

Throughout everything, Xander led from the front, doing everything they did. The few times Buffy had taught them anything, she had barked orders and expected them to understand and follow her instructions instantly, while sitting in a chair, watching them. The contrast between the two of them couldn't have been any bigger, as was the difference in the response that they received.

When they had finished, at last, Xander gave the Potentials a couple of cell phones. "These will only call our phone. Use them if you get in trouble."

Giles drove the tired, but excited, girls back to the Summers' residence. They were fortunate to

arrive home before Buffy, Willow and Kennedy.

Meanwhile, Xander, Faith, and Dawn drove back to their condo. Dawn decided to start to teach the reluctant Faith how to cook, while Xander got in the shower.

After dinner, they sat around, Dawn reading from a large book, while Xander and Faith talked about what had happened over the past year.

It was around 8 pm when Xander's phone rang. He answered it, and at the same time, Dawn put her book down and pulled her boots on. She walked over to a closet and pulled out a suitcase.

"Err, sir, it's Molly," the voice at the other end of the phone said. "We're about to attack a warehouse and, uhm, we, uhm, think it's a trap. We're kinda scared, sir."

Xander smiled faintly, amused at being called 'sir'. "Where is the warehouse?" He listened as the girl told him, and when they expected they would arrive there.

"Don't worry," Xander said firmly. "We'll be there."

"Thank you, sir," Molly said, just before hanging up.

Dawn opened the suitcase, and Faith's jaw hit the floor when she saw the assortment of weapons it held.

Xander walked over, pulling out his favorite two favorite .45 Glock Model pistols. They disappeared under his jacket, quickly followed by several knives and a short sword. A smaller gun went into a holster around his ankle, a couple of hand grenades attached to his belt, and a couple of stakes followed.

Dawn pulled out a single .40 Glock Model 27 and put it under her jacket. A knife and two stakes followed it.

The tiny inflections that showed her what the two were thinking vanished, as they fully immersed themselves in their acquired personalities.

"Do you need anything?" Dawn asked, her voice eerily quiet.

Faith pulled herself together, and ran into her room. Her own weapons consisted off several stakes and a large knife. She was as curious as hell to know where they had got all the weapons, but knew it would be useless when the two of them were like this. She'd ask tomorrow.

Xander and Faith ran down the stairs at full speed, the elevator ignored as it would take too long. Dawn floated behind them, keeping up without seeming to move.

They exploded into the car park, Faith following Xander as he ignored the BMW and leapt into a battered old jeep. Faith jumped in the back and looked around for Dawn, only to find the girl already in the front passenger seat.

Xander gunned the engine, slammed the car into reverse and released the clutch. The powerful jeep jumped backwards, in a straight line, till Xander spun the wheel hard, nudged the brakes, sending the car into a spin. He applied opposite lock to the wheel, depressed the clutch and shifted to first. He jammed the accelerator to the floor, the car jumping out of the spin, continuing in the same direction, only now facing the correct way.

The brunet paid scant attention to the laws of the road as he drove as fast as he could. In the back, Faith was laughing loudly in pure exhilaration. Fast driving, with the promise of a good fight at the end, was the best thing in the world for her. The only thing that would make it better would be a partner to have fun with, afterwards.

At the warehouse, Buffy and Willow shot each other smiles of good luck. Caleb had told her that there were Harbingers inside, and that they should be able to take them out.

"Follow me," Buffy commanded, and took off.

Reluctantly, the SIT's followed.

Buffy smashed down the door and charged in, Willow right behind her. They found themselves in a large, empty warehouse, a solitary Bringer standing beneath a single bulb.

The attackers slowed to a halt, the SIT's glancing left and right nervously. They could tell it was a trap, and wanted to get out of there.

"Welcome, Slayer," the Bringer hissed.

Buffy shrugged, and started to walk forward, figuring that she could at least kill him. The Bringer smiled and pulled out a small remote control, pressed the button, and steel shutters dropped down over the door behind them. The entire warehouse was suddenly engulfed in light, as electricity flowed through every bulb. In front of Buffy and the Potentials were twenty Bringers, each armed with what looked like small machine guns. And every single one was pointed at them.

"Bye, bye," The Bringer said with a smirk. Around him, the guns started to fire.

Faith hung on for dear life as they took a corner on two wheels, entering the warehouse district.

Dawn closed her eyes and concentrated. "Twenty of them, with guns. Steel shutters at the entrance. There's a door on the left side, and no interior walls. The SIT's are in front of the shutters."

"How do you know where the SIT's are?" Faith shouted.

"I read their energy signatures earlier," Dawn whispered back. Despite the noise and wind, Faith

heard her perfectly. Dawn's voice would not be interfered with by mere atmospheric conditions.

"How thick are the walls?" Xander asked.

"Not thick enough," Dawn whispered dryly, fully aware of what he was planning.

Willow pulled all her magic together, and used it to form a shield in front of them. The bullets impacted, dropping to the floor harmlessly as they lost their kinetic energy.

The redheaded witch jerked each time a bullet hit, fully aware that she couldn't keep it up for long.

The Bringers poured on the fire, quickly changing clips when they ran out of bullets. They were aware of the witch's power, and were quite prepared to simply drain it.

Faith ducked as she finally realized that Xander had no intention of stopping. There was a huge lurch as the thin brick wall tried to absorb the energy of the fast moving Jeep. It failed miserably and resigned itself to exploding in a spray of mortar and brick as the heavy duty army vehicle entered the building.

Vi and Molly suddenly relaxed, smiling at each other. They then casually walked back to the steel shutters covering the door and took a seat on the floor, prepared to enjoy the show. They were soon joined by the other SIT's, except for Kennedy.

Willow felt her power was almost drained, when the noise of the newcomers' arrival distracted her.

Dawn floated out of the car before it had stopped, taking in the scene instantly. She saw the amount of power it had taken the redhead to maintain the shield and mentally rolled her eyes. Half the guns swung to face her. She held out her hands, as she hovered ten feet off the ground, and cast a spell. A second later, twenty small pins appeared in her hand.

The Bringers looked at their weapons in shock as they suddenly stopped firing, their firing pins removed.

Xander skidded the car to a stop, and almost grinned as Faith vaulted out of the back of the jeep, somersaulting over him and the windshield. The dark Slayer approached the first Bringer, her knife in hand, with an almost palpable eagerness that was her trademark.

Xander knew that he would never beat Dawn's dramatic rise or Faith's exciting gymnastics, so he simply opened his door and climbed out. He ran forwards, his Glocks appearing in his hands. The guns seemed to act independently as they barked repeatedly.

It took several seconds for Buffy and Willow to realize what had happened, and for Willow to drop the shield. "Get 'em," Buffy yelled, and took two steps before she realized that her army was sitting comfortably, backs against the wall, with smiles on their faces.

"What the hell are you doing?" she screamed, confusion on her face.

Molly pulled out a bag of Gummi Bears, took a handful, and passed them to the girl next to her. "Enjoying the show," she replied.

"Yep," Vi continued. "It's not as if they need our help."

Buffy, Willow and Kennedy turned, facing the chaos before them.

Dawn was still hovering, her gun in hand, and picking off Bringers carefully, each of her targets receiving a double tap between the eyes.

Faith was in full out attack mode, apparently having acquired another knife from one of the bodies that surrounded her, and she was using it to devastating effect.

Xander had replaced his guns, and was now using his short sword. His movements seemed almost balletic as he jumped from one victim to the next, leaving a trail of dismembered and disemboweled bodies in his wake.

The SIT's hardly had time to finish their snacks, as the last Bringer took off for the new exit created by Xander's driving, but was stopped by Xander's, Faith's, and Dawn's daggers hitting him from three different angles.

Faith laughed loudly as the henchman died. She had almost forgotten exactly how much fun it was to fight with Xander and Dawn.

"What the hell are you doing here? I told you we didn't need your help!" Buffy shouted.

Xander ignored her completely, walking over to Dawn first. He touched her face, the intimate gesture allowing him to check in the most complete way that she was unhurt. Reassured, he headed towards his ex-friends, no expression on his face, but giving off the impression of anger.

Dawn moved over to Faith, repeating Xander's gesture, checking that she wasn't hurt. Once she was assured that her sister was unhurt, she broadcasted it to Xander. She was the only one who was able to see the slight relief in the young man's walk.

"What happened?" he asked.

"What?" Willow demanded.

Xander ignored her. "Molly, what happened?"

The SIT got to her feet. For some reason, she no longer held the blonde Slayer in such high

regard. Memories of mistakes, mistakes that caused deaths and injuries, shot through her mind. She found herself getting angry at the waste, at herself for following her, at everyone, but most of all at Buffy, for betraying their trust in her ability to lead.

"General Disaster, over there, got a message about this warehouse and ordered us to attack it. We got here, and she charged straight in, without any kind of plan, at all. There was just one Bringer in the light that we could see; she went to attack, and that's when he dropped the shutter behind us. Then the lights turned on, and all the Bringers we couldn't see before then started firing at us. Willow threw up a shield. That's pretty much where you came in."

Xander nodded his thanks.

"What?" Willow demanded, looking at Dawn. The redhead could tell that the expressionless witch was looking at her with contempt. "I saved everybody! If it hadn't been for my shield, we'd all be dead."

"You think, because you have power, you have wisdom," Dawn whispered, her voice echoing around the warehouse. She held out her hand and let the firing pins from the guns drop to the floor.

Willow flushed bright red, part from anger, part from embarrassment.

"I asked what you are doing here," Buffy demanded, getting into Xander's face.

"Rescuing you," Xander replied quietly. He turned on his heel, walking towards the jeep.

The SIT's, looked at each other quickly, and ran after him. "We're coming with you," Molly announced.

"WHAT!?" Willow and Buffy demanded in unison.

Xander turned to one side and pulled out his cell phone, called Giles and arranged for him to bring the people carrier around.

"We're going with Xander and Dawn. We're here to learn how to be Slayers, not to get killed by an idiot," Molly shouted back, aware that she was now the spokesperson for their group.

"You will stay with me! I'm the Slayer!" Buffy ordered imperiously.

"So is Faith," Molly retorted. "And you don't see her walking around with her head up her ass. She called for help and tried to make sure we weren't killed. What was it you said? Oh yeah, that our friends have died because they were stupid. We wouldn't trust you lead a parade; you've treated us like kids, refused to help us get better and blamed us for your own incompetence. Screw you, Buffy. We spent the day learning how to fight, with a professional who knew what the hell he was talking about. We want to learn more, so that even if we don't become Slayers, we can help to fight."

"I ordered you not to go!"

Molly rolled her eyes.

"Buffy!" a new voice interrupted, running towards them.

"Xander," Dawn hissed, her voice still filling the large warehouse. "It has no soul."

Xander smoothly palmed his gun and swung to face the incoming being. There was no hesitation in his actions; it was as natural as taking another step. He automatically targeted on the beast's heart.

"No," Buffy cried, jumping in front of the gun.

"Move," Xander growled, trying to be as intimidating as possible.

The result was impressive, because the Slayer paled dramatically and took several steps backwards. "That's Caleb, my boyfriend," she said quickly.

"He has no soul," Xander repeated Dawn's words. "He needs to die."

"He's good!" Buffy screamed defiantly. "He's helped us for years."

"He has no soul.

"And he's our friend," Willow said, moving with Kennedy in front of the vampire.

"The function of wisdom is to discriminate between good and evil," Dawn whispered. She touched Xander lightly, and he nodded.

"Get in the car," Xander whispered to the Potentials, as Giles pulled up outside. "Tell him to take you to the training area. We'll meet you there." He passed Molly an electronic keycard. "Use this to enter."

"Yes, Sir," the girl replied respectfully. The SIT's walked out, half hoping that they would never see the Slayer and Witch again.

Xander, Dawn, and Faith walked over to the jeep, started it up, and left the four remaining 'guardians' where they were, not giving them a backwards glance.

"Don't worry about it, honey," Caleb spoke first. "You can prove them wrong, tomorrow. All of you."

"How?"

"I just heard a rumor that the First has a weapon that can defeat him, and he's going to be bringing it to the Hellmouth tomorrow, so he can destroy it. It's called the Scythe," he explained

Buffy instantly perked up. She smiled happily and leaned across to kiss her boyfriend. "Let's go home, so we can plan on how to get hold of it."

"Xander, who does this place belong to?" Faith asked. When they had arrived at the warehouse, they found two full barracks and a kitchen in the area the two of them had wandered off to earlier.

"A friend," Xander said calmly. "Get the girls to take one of the dorms, and then get something to eat. You're in charge."

"Where are you going?"

"To get backup."

Xander and Dawn walked into the cool night air. She wrapped her arms around him, and rested her head on his chest, listening to the reassuring thump of his heart.

Xander wrapped one of his hands in her long hair, playing with it gently. With his free hand, he pulled out his cell and dialed the third speed dial number.

The only sound on the other end was a clicking noise, normally associated with answer phones.

"Alpha tango tango, six one three four two oh. Harris, Alexander L. Authorization: Omicron Persei eight. Extension four oh three."

"Voice print recognized, authorization code accepted, connecting to extension."

Xander waited a second or two.

"Xander, my boy, how are you?"

"I need backup."

"That bad?" the voice asked.

"The Hellmouth is no longer safe. The Slayer is under the influence of a soulless vampire. We have a non-corporeal entity causing havoc, and the bad guys are using semi-automatic's"

"Is there any good news?"

"I've started to train a new group who could turn out to be extremely effective."

"Excellent. What do you need?"

"The corn-bred cowboys."

"They hate being called that."

The silence from Xander's end indicated the amount he cared about that.

"They'll be in Sunnydale in the morning. Where do you want them to report to?"

Warehouse six-seven-four-nine."

"Good luck, Mr. Harris."

Xander folded up the phone and kissed Dawn's hair. "Ready to go back and be Mom to a bunch of teenagers?" Xander asked, as at the same time, he sent his love through their bond.

"You know, some of them are the same age I am, even older."

"Biologically, maybe," Xander agreed.

"I'll go in, you go and get us three some clean clothes for tomorrow. We'll give the girls some money to go shopping tomorrow."

Xander nodded and kissed her, before going to do as she asked.

Dawn walked back into the building, part of her mind strengthening the connection to Xander, so that she could keep an eye on him, and vice versa. She paused outside the kitchen, as voices reached her.

"Did you see how cool she was?" one of the Potentials said.

"Faith?" a voice Dawn recognized as Molly's asked

"No, Dawn," the other one said. "Willow might be this uber-powerful bad-ass, but Dawn just flew out of the car and disabled all their guns. So what does that make Dawn, if she had to rescue Willow and Buffy? She was totally awesome."

"What about Xander?" Molly replied. "I could watch him fight all day; it's a pity he's taken, 'cause he's really cute."

"Thank you," Dawn said quietly as she walked in to the kitchen. "He's also my fiancé," she continued, deliberately putting a small smile on her face.

Xander was taking the SIT's through a new set of training moves the next morning; Faith had joined in, while Dawn and Giles talked in a corner.

They were interrupted by the doors opening, and six well built young men entered. They were each carrying two large canvas duffle bags.

The brunet warrior walked over to face them, stopping at parade rest. Dawn was next to him a second later, with no one quite sure if they had seen her move or not.

Faith didn't like the look of this, and moved behind them as backup instantly, the SIT's joining them barely a moment later.

The lead man dropped his bags, which made a distinctive metal clinking sound. He walked up to Xander, his expression as blank as the man he was approaching.

The other men copied his movements.

There was silence for a second, before the newcomer snapped to attention, and said, "Colonel Finn, and the 1st ADC, reporting for duty, sir."

"It's good to see you again, Riley," Xander said quietly, holding out his hand.

"It's damn good to see you again, Xan," Riley replied, ignoring the hand and hugging Xander. He released him, and then turned to Dawn. "Ma'am," he nodded his head to her, his tone respectful.

A tiny smile appeared on the girl's face, and she reached up and kissed him gently on the cheek.

Riley's eyes widened, as the effect of the kiss and the contact rocked through him, leaving him with a goofy grin on his face.

He was suddenly pushed to one side as a giant of a man brushed past him and lifted Xander high in the air, before giving him a huge bear hug.

"It's good to see you too, Ox," Xander allowed a full smile to reach his face.

Ox, or Michael Torland as his birth certificate called him, placed the man down, and turned shyly to Dawn. "Ma'am," his tone was the same as Riley's.

Dawn laughed softly, and pulled him down so she could kiss his cheek as well. Ox blushed like a thirteen year old, and backed away.

The greetings were repeated for each of the members.

Giles walked over and held out his hand. "Hello, Riley."

Riley smiled and shook the watchers hand. "It's good to see you, too, Giles."

"Ok, people, listen up." Xander's voice didn't change in volume, but he attracted everyone's attention anyway. "Girls, this is Riley Finn and his team from the ADC. I've asked them here for backup while we take down the first. They are the best fighting unit in the Army, charged with the jobs that would make the Marines run in fear."

"You would say that," Riley joked. "You trained us."

Xander allowed another faint smile to flicker over his face. "Thank you, Mr. Finn. They have been fighting the night for the past three years, with one of those years based here on the Hellmouth.

They have saved the world many times, showing sometimes suicidal bravery."

"Hey," Ox grinned. "We resent that; we were following you at the time."

"Anyway," Xander moved on quickly. "Boys, these young ladies are potential Slayers; I'll leave it to Giles to explain the implications involved with that. I've been training them for two days and their potential is as high as yours."

The newcomers nodded, knowing that when Xander made statements, he always backed them up.

"Now, what did you bring with you?"

Riley grinned, "Sam, you wanna tell him?"

Sam moved over to the first bag and pulled it open. He grinned at the boxes that fell out. "An arsenal, Xander. An arsenal."

"So," Molly said with a grin, as she relaxed, stretched out on the floor. She was using her sweatshirt as a make shift pillow, and was enjoying the whole not-moving business as much as was physically possible. The morning, once the soldiers had arrived, had been spent in an intense physical fitness workout, which, to the girl's disappointment, the guys didn't find that hard at all. "How do you guys know Dawn and Xander?"

Instinctively, the soldiers looked to Riley. The sandy haired colonel smiled faintly. "Ok children, gather round and Uncle Riley will tell you a story."

"Goody," Ox grinned childishly. He folded his long legs and sat by Riley's feet, looking up at him with an expression of innocence – which fooled no one.

"A long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far from here," Riley started, only to be interrupted by someone's shirt hitting him in the face. "Ok, ok," he capitulated.

Xander was patrolling the west side of Sunnydale. It was nearly 2am, and he was alone. He sighed imperceptibly. Dawn was probably lying in bed worrying about him. She understood the need he had, the desire inside him, to fight, to patrol, to make a difference. She understood it as much as she understood that no matter how powerful she was, her mother wasn't going to let her spend the night in a graveyard with a guy five years older. And, considering how Buffy and Willow had originally reacted to the revelation that the two of them had chosen to bond with the Halloween spirits that had possessed them, patrolling with either of them was completely out of the question.

Accordingly, Xander took his frustrations with the situation out on any vampire unlucky enough to get near him. He might not be able to match them in strength, but was more than able to do so in technique.

His normal method of taking them down was to shoot them in the knee caps, and then stake them. It wasn't exactly a fair fight, but, then again, he really didn't care. Demonic parasites hardly deserved the effort.

Tonight, he'd been a little less direct. There was something enjoyable about fighting something that didn't collapse in tears when you destroyed its shoulder, rendering it completely useless. The last vampire he had come across had started to wish he'd never become a vampire - a few minutes of agony later, the question was moot, as he was no longer was.

Xander wandered out of the graveyard, heading towards the next one on his list, one he knew Buffy hadn't checked, yet. He stuck to the shadows, moving silently and smoothly as to blend in with the background.

The brunet paused, remaining hidden. He blinked, once, twice, and then decided that what he was seeing was not an illusion. In front of him, a bunch of soldiers were fighting a couple of vampires, using what looked like a glorified taser. They weren't doing a very good job, as the weapons seemed to take an age to recharge.

He sighed, a little irritated, and jogged over to the fight. The first vampire was staked through the back before he even knew Xander had arrived. The second turned, and was kicked hard in the stomach for his troubles, bouncing off a tree before collapsing to the ground. Xander brought the stake down on to his back, dusting him in an instant.

"Who the hell are you?" one of the soldiers snarled, obviously annoyed.

"Name and Rank, soldier," Xander barked. His face was covered in camouflage paint, hiding his age.

"Finn, Riley, Captain," the soldier replied automatically, before his brain could kick in.

"What is your mission, Mr. Finn?" The way Xander didn't use his title gave Riley the impression that Xander was a superior officer.

"That's classified, Sir," Riley said. He was being polite just in case this stranger, who had taken out a couple of vampires with surprising ease, was a superior.

"Great," Xander mumbled. "A black ops outfit on my territory."

He glared at Riley for a second, and then said, "I'd suggest returning to base tonight, and preparing for an inspection." He then turned on his heel, and marched off.

"What do we do now, sir?" Graham asked Riley.

"We return to base and tell Walsh what happened," Riley decided after a seconds thought.

Xander stormed back to his apartment. It wasn't much - a small one bedroom place with a combined kitchen/living room, but it was all he could afford. He picked up the phone, and pulled

out a number from his acquired memories.

The only sound on the other end was a clicking noise, normally associated with answer phones.

"Alpha tango delta, one nine eight five oh. McCorrick, Michael J. Authorization: Sirius Capricorn four. Extension four oh three."

"Voice print not recognized, voice override authorization code accepted, connecting to extension."

Xander waited a second or two.

"Michael McCorrick has been dead for years," a voice stated.

"He got better," Xander replied dryly.

There seemed to be a sigh from the other end of the phone. "People don't normally get better from a shot to the back of the head, and if they do, the blocks mean they can't remember the codes."

"I have a pulse," Xander informed him, a vague hint of a smile on his face.

"Would you care to give me an explanation?"

"A form of possession," Xander said slowly, the soldier's memories stating that he could trust this guy. "I was dead, I was given an opportunity to come back and help out someone who needed it, and I took it."

This time the voice sighed audibly. "What's the problem?"

"Why is there an army black-ops unit in Sunnydale, California?"

"There shouldn't be, that's outside of the Army's mission."

"There is, and they were under the command of Riley Finn. They were facing V's with a glorified taser. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were trying to capture them."

The voice swore audibly. "I'll phone you back shortly, Mr. Harris," the voice said calmly, having already traced Xander's number and gotten his name from the telephone company registries. The voice hung up, and then spent a few minutes staring into space.

He had no doubt that Xander/Michael was telling the truth. All employees working for him had a magical block in place that stopped any demon that possessed them from accessing the secret codes.

Eventually, he smiled. His number one agent was back in town, and according to Harris' driving license, was eighteen years old again. It was about time some of this supernatural crap worked for him instead of against him, for a change.

"Nancy," he said into his intercom, "I want everything on an army black-ops outfit in Sunnydale California dealing with the Supernatural, and on a Riley Finn, ostensibly with the U.S. Army. It's top priority."

"Yes sir," his personal assistant replied instantly.

Four hours later, Xander was disturbed from his sleep by his phone ringing.

"Yeah?" he asked groggily.

"You were right. Can you meet someone today at midday, at Sunnydale army barracks?"

"Sure," Xander replied.

"You wouldn't know anything about a rocket launcher going missing from the local base last year, by any chance? Or about a school principal hit with a bullet, which ballistics tells me was fired from the edge of a Glock's range?"

"A little," Xander admitted.

"Excellent," the voice sounded cheerful. "You are coming back to work for me?"

"Not yet," Xander said slowly. "There are other circumstances that are in the way."

"Your relationship with Dawn Summers?"

"Exactly." He wasn't surprised that the voice knew, the voice always knew, it was his job.

"We'll talk again when she's older," the voice said, as he hung up.

Xander turned over and went back to sleep.

He woke at eleven, took a quick shower and drove to the military base. He still had his uncle Rory's car, and loved the feeling of the wind in his hair. He pulled up at the gates, as an armed guard walked over to him.

"You're expected in that building over there," the guard pointed. The note on his clipboard had described Xander, and his car, perfectly, and given him firm instructions on what to do.

Xander nodded and drove over to the building. He climbed out of his car and walked through the door, and immediately ducked to dodge a fist flying towards his head. He reacted automatically and kicked out, catching his assailant in the stomach, before bringing his knee up hard against the nose of the soldier, who had bent over invitingly, while gasping for breath.

As the soldier's head flew up, he grabbed him by the chest and used him as a shield as he entered the building.

The soldier had an accomplice, so Xander threw the body at him. He moved after it, and quickly disabled the second guard with ease, leaving him on the floor, his arm broken.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harris," a man in a two star general's uniform said, moving into the light. "I was told to make sure that you hadn't lost any of your skills."

Xander shrugged, putting the broken nose and arm he'd just inflicted out of his mind. "What can you tell me?"

The general motioned him over to the table, where a man in a suit was going over some paperwork. "This is Steve Anderson, and I'm Thomas York."

Xander looked down at the table.

"Your black-ops group is called the Initiative. Its purpose is the capture and study of preternatural creatures, and it is under the command of a Dr Margaret Walsh."

"A civilian?" Xander asked, a little surprised, although it didn't show in his face.

"Indeed," Anderson continued. "Apart from the fact it's totally outside the Army's mission parameters, there are a few other things that have come up that are strange enough for us to be interested. A lot of the Army's top behavior modification people are involved, and we're not sure why."

"Super soldiers?" the general asked.

"Possibly," Anderson replied.

"What are you going to do about it?" Xander asked.

York and Anderson exchanged a long look. "Our orders are to shut it down. The general who authorized it is meeting with the boss at the moment. He was pulled out of bed at five AM and flown to Washington. His support for the project has, I'm sure, been rescinded by now."

Xander nodded. "It might be nice to have a group here; you do know it's a Hellmouth?"

Anderson nodded, "What are you suggesting?"

"We eliminate the project, but keep the soldiers on; I'll train them to fight properly."

"General?" Anderson asked.

York looked thoughtful. "You think you can make them effective?"

Xander nodded, once.

"All right, then, do it," the general said, wishing he could smoke.

This morning he'd been relaxing, on leave at his home, just outside Memphis, Tennessee, with thoughts of spending the evening watching the Volunteers. He'd then received a phone call from someone so high up the chain of command that he got a nosebleed even thinking about him. The Initiative had been explained quickly, and he had been ordered to ensure it was not there, and never had been there, as quickly as possible. The army had been extremely embarrassed to find out that another agency had found it playing in areas it shouldn't be, and was determined to clean things up as smoothly as was possible.

He'd been given a dossier, on his direct flight here, about the man he was meeting, and it defied belief. The man had been dead and now, had evidently come back in a new body. Even though the general knew a little about the supernatural, this was a little much. He'd arranged the surprise at the front door; to see if it was true, because there was no way an 18yr old would be able to take out two of the base's top fighters.

Xander's offer was interesting. While a black-ops group like the Initiative was not allowed; the general could see the benefits that having such a group trained could offer.

The army had found out about supernaturals a few years earlier, and the information was still extremely classified. The people in the know were content to take their time, making sure their response was right the first time, and that there would be no messy mistakes - something the Initiative would certainly have been. With a specially trained group of hunters, they could offer them to other groups, as a kind of apology and regain lost pride.

York stared at Xander, and then nodded, "That would be appreciated."

Anderson shrugged lightly, and moved on, "The Initiative's main base is under a campus at Sunnydale University. We don't expect any major trouble."

"We need to keep this as low profile as possible," York continued.

"Ok," Xander nodded. "Just the four of us, we won't get any real attention. A general and his aide visiting a nephew wouldn't be out of place."

"Four?" Anderson asked.

Xander simply nodded again.

"Four it is," York said simply, a look to Anderson saying he would explain later.

Xander picked up a map, and looked at the address. "Four thirty?" he asked.

The two others nodded, as Xander placed the map back down, and walked out.

"Who the hell is he, Tom?"

"A ghost, Steve," the general sighed. "To be honest, I'm not quite sure. He's been involved with this sort of shit for more years than we've known it even existed. He works directly for the boss,

and only through the boss. I was told that he was shot, in the back, some years ago. The colonel who did it was relocated to the Arctic base - without any clothes. He died of frostbite a few weeks later."

Steve winced.

"Exactly," Tom continued. "According to the parts of the record I could see, he was in most of the major conflicts before being recruited.

"Now, he's back, in a body that's not his own, and from what I heard, the boss was so happy, he smiled.

Steve shuddered. "Why did he say four?"

Tom grabbed a chair and sat down. "He's going to be bringing a," he flipped through a report, "Dawn Summers with him." He looked up, meeting the spook's eyes.

"What ever you see between them, ignore. All we know is that she has something to do with his return, and that she is a genuine witch. She's thirteen."

"That's a little young."

"No shit," General Anderson agreed. "However, the boss informed me personally that their relationship was supernatural, and not to make any comments. And as I like these stars on my collar, I'm going to follow that exactly."

Xander waited for Dawn outside her school. She climbed into his car, and they drove off without a word, not even exchanging a look. He drove competently through Sunnydale, heading towards the university campus, before they stopped in a quiet area and finally embraced.

"Hey," Dawn whispered softly. Her voice was heading back towards normal now. The tinges of insanity and eternity were fading each day as she learned to control it. "What's happened?"

Xander explained as concisely as he could about the Initiative, and how he had used the Soldier's memories to get what he wanted. When he had finished, he looked at Dawn, to find her looking proudly at him.

She reached out her hand, and softly stroked his cheek, the only truly intimate physical contact they allowed each other.

The effect on Xander was obvious to her, hidden lines of worry disappeared from his face, and he seemed to relax.

Dawn sighed softly, hating the stupid body she was trapped in. She desperately wanted to comfort him more, but knew that he was still a little freaked by that fact she was still going through

puberty, and was underage. She reluctantly agreed that it was right, if only because a part of her was still thirteen, despite the other memories she had.

Xander moved the car back into gear and they drove off, their hands lightly touching occasionally.

They arrived exactly on time. General York and Mr. Anderson *A/N: smirk* pulled up at the same time.

The first sign that Anderson and York had that they were right to follow the advice regarding Dawn was when the girl stepped out of the car, and glided next to Xander. She was wearing a long skirt that completely hid her legs, but it was obvious to the two trained observers that her movement was too smooth for her to be using them.

Xander nodded, almost imperceptibly, at the general and the spook, and took the lead.

As they approached the door, Dawn held up her hand and made a slight pushing motion. The heavy door swung open, the security lock disabled.

Anderson's eyes went wide, before he swallowed reflexively. He was more of a desk jockey than a field agent, and until now, his knowledge of the supernatural was limited to theoretical examples.

He'd never seen a witch before. His mind quickly pulled out scenarios of what she could do against them, and if he should recommend that she be captured.

The last thought was quickly squashed, as he felt her turn and stare at him for a second. He fought to keep his face expressionless, under that strange gaze. The girl was as expressionless as the boy, but gave the impression there was an inferno hidden behind the green eyes.

He immediately decided not to recommended capturing her, remembering exactly who was backing Xander, and felt the gaze move from him. He sighed, almost imperceptibly, with relief.

Xander entered the building first, not carrying any obvious weapons. He looked around, a hidden smirk on his face, as shocked soldiers, posing as students, jumped to their feet.

"Where's Finn," Xander commanded, falling into his 'officer' persona with ease.

Agent Forrest took one look at Xander's expressionless face, then at the angry face of the two star general behind him, and gulped.

"In the shower, Sir," he replied, not even attempting to pretend he wasn't a soldier.

"I would suggest you get him, now," Xander hissed icily.

"Sir, yes, sir," Forrest half-shouted, before running up the stairs.

"Gentlemen," the general said to the others. "Consider yourselves reassigned to Mr. Harris here, effective immediately." He nodded to Anderson, who handed one of them official transfer papers.

"Yes sir," Graham said. A quick glance at the paper showed the orders were signed by someone who was so high they couldn't normally be seen without a telescope.

"We'll talk later," Xander told him quietly. "How many people are downstairs?"

"Don't answer," Riley snapped as he tore downstairs. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, his hair still dripping with water.

"I beg your pardon?" The general snapped.

Riley blinked, not having noticed him in his hurry.

"Sorry sir. That information is classified."

The general sighed audibly. "First off all, soldier, you have been reassigned. Second, we all have top secret clearance and above." Technically, Dawn didn't, but the general assumed that Xander was not going anywhere without her, and after seeing her open the door, he was happier with her around as well.

Anderson passed another piece of paper to Riley.

Riley looked at it, and blanched. "Sir, Sorry, Sir."

"How many people are downstairs?" Xander asked again, his face showing no sign of acceptance of the apology, or if he had been insulted in the first place.

"Eight scientists, twelve guards, and Professor Walsh."

"How many prisoners?"

"Six, sir. Five vampires and one currently unidentified demon."

Xander nodded, and looked at Dawn. She pointed to a corner, and a second later the hidden door opened, revealing an elevator. "Mr. Finn," Xander announced, his use of those words were all the confirmation needed for Riley. This was the guy from the previous night – even though he only looked to be around 19-20.

"You will accompany us downstairs, while the others will wait here. Patrols are cancelled for now."

Graham had passed Riley the paperwork, putting them under Xander's control, so he nodded, while wondering what the hell was going on.

The five of them took the elevator down to the subterranean base.

"The cells first," Xander told Riley, who nodded.

The general and spook looked around with shock at the hidden complex, wondering exactly how much money had been siphoned off into this project.

They stopped at the first full cell; it contained a blond female vampire, tied down to an operating table. "Xander Harris, what the hell are you doing here?" it asked, in a voice that could only be described as extremely annoying.

"Open it," Xander told the nearest scientist calmly.

"Er, I can't do that without Walsh's authorization."

"Walsh is no longer in charge here," York told him.

"I meant her physical authorization, sir. She's the only that knows the out-of-hours access codes."

Xander lightly touched Dawn's shoulder.

The girl concentrated hard, and a second later the electric lock sparked, opening the door.

Xander walked in and palmed a stake from his pocket. A second later, Harmony Kendall's body was a small pile of dust on the table. He hadn't said a word, merely executed the vampire.

"Sir," one of the scientists complained, "you've just destroyed millions of dollars worth of time and experiments."

Xander turned to face him, not a single expression on his face.

The scientist suddenly decided that it would be better for his life if he didn't complain in the future.

Together, the warrior and the witch walked and floated down the corridor, the scientists and the guards following them, and eliminated all the vampires. The demon didn't die when Xander staked it, so he drew a short sword from his coat and chopped its head off, ignoring its plea's for mercy.

"Walsh's office?" Xander asked Riley, who, a little disturbed by the executions, took him straight to the boss' office.

"Welcome," Maggie Walsh said sourly, having watched them on the close circuit TV. She had tried to frantically call her boss, only to find that he was no longer available, and that she should expect her new superiors shortly. "Can I ask why you have just destroyed years of expensive research?"

"What were you planning to do here?" Xander asked, ignoring her question.

"We were working on ways to modify the behavior of HSTs, so that they couldn't hurt humans."

"Why?"

Maggie looked blank, "What?"

"Why?" Xander repeated calmly.

"So we could use them," she shrugged carelessly.

"And that's it?"

"Yes," the professor said firmly.

"She's lying," Dawn announced flatly, speaking for the first time since she had arrived, her voice echoing around the room, as she consciously tried to make it sound as eerie as possible.

Maggie blinked, "She's an HST, grab her," the command was instinctive. Anything not normal was, to her, by definition, an HST. The excitement of having one that looked so human made her forget for a second exactly who was in her office.

One of the guards reacted to the command, and took a step towards Dawn, reaching for his gun.

Dawn didn't move, or blink. She didn't even feel sorry for what she knew was about to happen.

Riley's mouth dropped open, not quite sure he could believe it as he watched Xander move so fast he could hardly keep track of him.

The young man growled, the first sign of emotion Riley had seen, and grabbed the arm heading towards the gun. He bent it in a way it was not meant to go, causing an audible snapping noise, before throwing the guard across the room and into the wall.

Riley Finn decided to never even think about threatening the girl; it was obvious that the idea enraged the young man here, who was changing everything they had taken for granted about this operation.

"Margaret Walsh," the general said formally, not really wanting any more personnel injured for following idiotic orders. "I hereby relieve you of the command of this facility, and revoke any authorization you have over the personnel of this base."

The other guards, hearing this, and seeing their fallen colleagues, made the wise decision to agree with the general.

"Dawn?" Xander asked softly.

The two looked at each other, giving the distinct impression that they were communicating.

Dawn took a step back, and focused on Walsh.

Walsh gulped; the blank face suddenly seemed to be the most frightening thing she had ever seen, a fear that intensified when she thought she saw a hint of sadistic humor in the girl's eyes.

"Great goddess,

Hear my plea!

I need the truth,

So mote it be!"

"What were you planning?" Xander asked the professor again.

"To take over," Walsh said, her eyes looking shocked as she realized she couldn't control her mouth. "We were going to build the perfect soldier, part demon, part vampire, part human. He would be mine, and do what I say. We'd build more, an army, and nothing would stand in my way."

"What about the troops?"

"My first victims. I have been drugging them, making them totally reliant on me for their strength and skills, preparing them for eventual modification. When they were ready, and totally addicted to the drug, I was going to use their brains to make my super soldiers."

Riley looked incensed.

"You betrayed us," he spat.

"And it was easy to do," Walsh almost smiled. "Small time country boy, out of his depth, you never questioned anything, you just followed orders like a good little boy."

To Xander's hidden amusement, Riley took several quick steps forwards and punched his ex-boss as hard as he could.

Xander looked down at the now unconscious woman, contemplating what to do with her.

Dawn placed her hand on his shoulder, and waited.

Reluctantly, he nodded.

The young girl knelt daintily, and placed her hand on the woman's forehead.

A deep silence filled the room, that didn't seem quite natural, followed by a strange pressure, as if they were sinking into the earth, till they all felt a crack.

Dawn stood, and watched.

Maggie opened her eyes, and giggled to herself.

"Lots of men in pretty uniforms," she said gleefully as she looked at the guards. She crawled over to a bin, and found a ribbon that had been used as a wrap around an official document.

"Pretty," she announced as she started to play with it.

A flicker went through Dawn's eyes, before she collapsed.

Xander caught her instantly, lifting her against his chest, one arm under her knees, the other around her shoulders.

"What happened?" the general asked, "Is she alright?"

"She wiped Walsh's mind," Xander explained. "Dawn regressed her to around the age of six, and she'll stay like that for the rest of her life."

The others exchanged shocked looks, and gulped. The punishment seemed extremely harsh to some of the guards and scientists, but they knew better than to try and argue.

To Riley Finn, it was simply justice. No one messed with his team.

The blond field unit commander still wasn't sure what was going on. He'd never expected the Initiative to be cancelled so dramatically after only a month's existence. He'd told Walsh about Xander, the strange soldier they had met, but she had dismissed him, sure in her place in the chain of command.

There was obviously a lot more going on in the Army, regarding HST's, than he knew about, and the way that Xander had arranged for the dismantling of the whole operation in less than sixteen hours spoke of extremely powerful friends who trusted him.

Now that he knew his ex-superior had been drugging him, his opinion of her had changed dramatically, from a visionary to one of a crazy lunatic.

He also made a quick mental note that he owed Dawn a favor. It was a pity he couldn't ever tell anyone about it, because it would certainly get the word out not to mess with his boys.

"Dawn's used too much power; she's not used to a small body," Xander continued after a pause. He didn't explain the cryptic comment.

He turned to the general and the spook. "Can you get rid of all the equipment from down here? Leave the cells, they may come in handy."

The general nodded, "It will be done tomorrow."

“I’ll need some doctors to look at the people here, see what damage has been done by these drugs.”

“You’ll have the best. Give me a few days, and I’ll arrange for a complete physical at the base.”

"Riley," Xander turned. "I need somewhere to let Dawn sleep this off."

"Yes, sir," Riley said, making a mental note to try and find out exactly who this kid was, and why a two-star general was obeying him. "She can sleep in my room."

Xander nodded a farewell to the other two, and followed Riley back up the elevator, and up the stairs to the soldier’s room. It was as tidy as a dormitory, the bed fully made.

Riley turned back the covers, allowing Xander to place the girl down, remove her shoes, and then tuck her in. Xander placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

They walked back into the living room, silently, where every member of the initiative was now gathered, wary expressions on their faces.

"What's going on, Riley?" Forrest asked.

Their leader looked to Xander, who nodded his permission. "Take a seat guys, this may take a little time."

When he had finished explaining about Walsh, and the drugs, they looked horrified.

"Who are you, Sir?" Graham asked, his curiosity overriding his inbuilt sense of decorum.

"Xander Harris," he replied emotionlessly, giving the impression that he wouldn't be explaining any more.

"What are we going to do now?"

"The same as you have been doing, only instead of capturing the monsters; I'm going to teach you to kill them, before they kill you."

He was surprised at the sudden cheer he received.

"We've lost five people in four weeks, trying to capture them," Riley explained. "I'm sure everyone here wants some payback."

“Breaks over,” Xander interrupted Riley. “Back to work, people.”

In the final part of the Warrior and the Witch: Homecoming.:

The First comes for a chat with Xander and Dawn

Betrayal

Boost problems

Poor Willow,

Poor Buffy