

## **Broken Faith** **Broken**

The pen is mightier than the sword, or so his history teacher told him. He didn't believe her at the time, why would he have?

He'd seen swords used against vampires; he'd seen rocket launchers used against demons. How could words have that sort of affect?

But then he'd felt the pain that a few words caused him, and while the words were spoken, not written, he'd understood the point. Finally.

“We don't need you.”

Four words that changed everything in his life.

He'd always sworn that he would stand by her, by them. They were his friends, his reason, and his redemption for the crime of not saving his best friend from the vampires.

But they didn't need him. Not his *help* , they didn't need *him* .

He could no longer claim that they were “his girls”, because they had chosen not to be. It was the one thing he couldn't fight.

The only way he could have ever left them was by their choice, not his.

And they had chosen. With simple words they had destroyed him; and what made it worse was that they did it carelessly.

They were trying to protect him, and if they had said anything else, he would have accepted it, but not that.

They had made it personal, struck him where he was vulnerable, and the pain was too much.

He wouldn't allow himself to be hurt like that again. He'd remove himself from the situation.

That had always been his way of coping. He'd put up with something for as long as he could – like his home-life – then it would reach a tipping point, and he'd never let himself get into the situation again.

He was broken.

He trudged through the night, wondering what would happen if a vampire attacked. Would he die?

He'd fight, and he'd lose, because that was what he did.

Only this time there was no one around to save him, and maybe that was the way things should be. Or maybe the stake in his pocket would be used, and he'd survive.

Because that was what he did.

Even if he was broken.

He wished he was driving; then he'd be away by now. The car was as broken as he was. At least the money from the scrap yard gave him an extra cushion.

He walked into someone and bounced off, landing on the ground. He looked up. Faith.

“What are you doing here?” she sneered.

He looked at her for a long moment. She was broken as well. But she didn't know it, and she didn't care. She was so broken that that was the only state she knew, and perhaps she was fixed because of it.

He didn't want to talk to her. So he didn't.

He slowly climbed to his feet and walked off. He couldn't fix her; she didn't want to be fixed.

“What?” she shouted, moving in front of him. “I'm not good enough to talk to?”

He looked up at her. Her eyes were wild, panicked. She looked like she needed something, but didn't know what.

“I can't fix it,” he whispered. “I can't even fix myself.”

“Fix what?” Faith said aggressively. “What are you talking about?”

He sighed and stepped around her, continuing his slow, methodical walk.

“Actually,” she said as she fell into step next to him, “you can fix it.”

He looked up at her.

“I'm horny; you're not bad in the sack.”

“Liar,” he whispered.

She stopped and growled in anger.

He didn't stop.

"Come on," she said, "let's go back to my place and fuck." The word was drawled, laced with promise and desire.

"I don't want to fuck you," he said honestly. "You don't want me to fuck you. You want something that I can't give. I wish I could; I wish I could give you what you need, but I can't."

She turned so that she was walking backward, her face dancing through emotions like shadows from a fire. Anger, hurt, pain, loneliness, confidence, regret, they all flickered through her dark eyes.

"Maybe," she whispered, "I can help you."

"No," he replied sadly. "What I need, you can't give. You've forgotten that you have it. I'm sorry Faith, for a lot of things. Not sorry for sleeping with you, that would be hypocritical. I am sorry that I didn't stand more in the middle of you of you and the other girls, so you didn't seem as much as an outsider. You deserved that."

Her eyes were locked on his. She was confused now, and that was distracting her from whatever had spooked her earlier.

He chose his words with care, wanting her to leave him alone. "Goodbye, Faith. Just like everyone else, I was a day late and a dollar short." He turned the corner at the last second, when she was already past it.

He didn't run, he couldn't outrun a Slayer. He couldn't out-anything a Slayer.

She appeared back in front of him, her eyes now very angry. "Don't do that again," she growled.

He didn't stop walking, he couldn't.

Her hand shot out, catching him by the throat. She lifted him into the air.

He fought not to struggle. A vampire he would fight, but not a Slayer. There was enough of a chance, no matter how miniscule, that he might kill her.

The world needed Slayers more than it needed broken teenagers. Even a broken Slayer was worth far more than a broken teenager.

He looked in her eyes and accepted what she gave.

Her arm started to shake, tears fell from her eyes, and she let him go.

He dropped, kneeling, as he gasped for breath.

He thought about helping her, but he couldn't. She wasn't one of his girls; he didn't have any

girls. Slowly, he stood. He wanted to say something to her, so that she wouldn't feel guilty, but he couldn't.

He didn't know what to say. The jokes seemed flat. The witty retorts stale.

So he walked, because that was all he had left.

"I killed someone today."

Another four word sentence with such power.

"Who?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "We were fighting, I was going all out. He surprised me. I turned, and he didn't turn into dust."

The words were simple, and yet he could picture it. Faith flowing from one move to the next, matching Buffy, but being more so, being lost in the fight.

Surprise, followed by horror.

He took a deep breath. He closed his eyes. "You don't need me to say anything. You need to forgive yourself. But you can't."

"Why not?" she asked. The question was genuine.

"Because you don't know who you are. You've been broken for so long that you think it is normal."

"What!?" Now she was angry, now she was mad; the tears gone, replaced by fury.

He stopped walking and sat down. The fluorescent lights of the bus station cast an unhealthy pallor on Faith's face. She looked surprised that they were there.

He had what was needed in his pocket. A ticket.

"You're leaving," she stated.

"I am."

"Where are you going?"

He pointed toward the big city. "There, to start with, and then onwards."

"You'll die."

"More than likely," he agreed.

She sat beside him at the bus stop and stared at him.

“I don’t know you,” she eventually said.

“You do,” he replied. “But you know the non-broken me. You know the goof-ball, the joker. I am him. He is me. But now I am broken, and he is hiding.”

“How can you be broken?”

“Because I have no reason.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Your watcher,” he replied.

She stiffened. Then nodded. Once. She acknowledged his point.

They sat in silence.

The minutes ticked by. Somewhere, the bus drew closer.

“Can I fix me?”

He looked. The question had been so soft that he had to check that he hadn’t imagined it.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “This morning I would have tried to help; but this morning you would never have asked. It’s funny that you only ask when I can’t do it.”

“Maybe that’s why,” she whispered. “Maybe I need someone as broken as I am.”

“You are strong. You are a Slayer. You are Faith.”

“Those words don’t help,” she replied, her voice still so barely audible.

“I’m sorry.”

Silence.

Cars drove by.

People moved on with their lives.

“Why are you broken?”

“I’m not going to tell you,” he whispered. His voice held no rancor, no insult; it was just a statement of fact.

She nodded, as if she had expected that.

More silence.

Somewhere, the bus was near.

“Are we friends?”

He thought about it for a long time. Were they friends? Friendship was a two-way street. He'd tried, and he'd failed. That was what he did.

“No,” he eventually said sadly. “We were normal.”

“Normal?” she queried.

“We argued, we fucked, we tried. We failed. Normal.”

“Can we be friends?”

He looked at her. “I doubt it. You're broken. I'm broken. Tomorrow, you'll change from how you are tonight.”

“Tonight, I am broken,” she agreed. “Tonight, I see his eyes as he died. Tomorrow, I will probably run.”

He nodded.

Silence again.

A car backfired, or maybe it was a gun. They didn't flinch.

“Xander.”

He didn't look at her.

“Will you help me?”

“No,” his answer was honest and immediate. “I can't help anyone.”

“But maybe,” she whispered. “I can help you in return.”

He thought about it for a long time.

He didn't know if he wanted to be fixed.

If he was, he would feel pain. Like this, he was empty. “Fixing hurts.”

“I know.”

More silence.

The bus appeared.

It stopped.

He didn't get on.

The bus left.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Faith was broken.

"Why me?"

"Because you're the first person that can understand," she replied.

"Because I'm broken." It was a statement, not a question.

She agreed.

He stood. She did as well. They walked, silently. Not to his parents' house. Not to her motel room. To a diner.

Neutral territory.

Coffee. A table. A large tip to be left alone.

He sipped, the bitter liquid burnt him.

"Can you fix me?"

It was a plea. It came from somewhere inside her.

"Guilt?"

Her eyes fractured. Her head nodded.

Honesty; that was the only thing he could give. "You killed a human."

Her head nodded again.

"You didn't kill me."

She looked confused.

"Someone moved up to you during a vampire fight," he said. "He knew about vampires, he knew about Slayers. It was an accident. That was it."

“He is still dead.”

“You Slayed the wrong person. It was an accident. You will see it every time you close your eyes. You will see it when you look in the mirror.

“And in time, it will fade. And you will learn. But you won’t change. You fight the night. Every vampire you kill is ten, twenty, a hundred lives saved.

“One life does not wipe out hundreds of thousands of people safer in their sleep because you walked through the night.”

Her eyes were locked on him.

“You may do it again; but as long as it is not on purpose, you won’t break. Intent is what counts. He surprised you. You reacted. His fault. He knew Slayers.”

She lowered her head. Her hair draped forward. When she looked up, she had accepted.

“The council?”

“Lie,” he replied. “Say his blood was green.”

“Buffy...”

He looked at her for a long moment.

“Xander,” she said softly.

He looked at her.

She took a deep breath. Her hand was shaking slightly, her eyes were nervous.

“I...” she paused, as if unable or unwilling to go on. “I need you.”

The words hit him like a bolt of lightning.

They were honest. They were torn out of her.

They were from her soul.

“You don’t,” he protested.

“I do,” she replied slowly. “Because you know what it is like to be broken. Because inside you, is the same person you used to be.”

“Like the person you used to be?” he asked.

She froze. She looked like she was going to run.

He reached out and clamped his hand on her arm. She could break the grip, but he made the gesture anyway. To keep her here, to keep her from running.

She settled. "Yes," she whispered.

He looked at her.

"I need you."

The words were as devastating the second time as the first.

He tried to fight them.

"I need you."

"Please," he whispered. Not sure what he was pleading for.

"I need you."

He placed his head in his hands. "You'll only be able to get rid of me by saying so."

She sniffled slightly, and he realized she was crying.

"I need you."

"I'll help," he whispered.

She smiled, and in that smile was something different. She was still broken, but not as much.

Maybe they could find what they were looking for.

Maybe they couldn't.

It didn't matter.

A journey always began with a single step.

And a step had been taken.

Maybe.

Maybe they weren't as broken as he had thought.

## **Broken Faith** **Under repair**

Xander winced slightly. Faith yawned; she was playing a video game.

“You need to sleep.”

Faith nodded. “A few hours.”

“We need to get you out of here.”

Her eyes flashed, before they softened and she nodded.

“I’ll get on that.”

“How?”

“Trust me.”

“Like you trusted me?”

He nodded. Motel. Vampires could enter at will. He’d slept while Faith guarded.

He headed to the shower, and a quick wash later, he dried, deodorized and dressed. He helped himself to a donut from her fridge, and watched as Faith entered the shower room.

He sighed, and headed to school.

The library was as unchanging as ever.

“Giles, he was human!” Buffy was screaming.

“With green blood?” Xander asked, as he took a seat.

“What!?”

He took a long look at the blonde who had, only yesterday, been his focus. She was the same. He had changed.

“I was out,” he said. “Ran into Faith, who told me what happened. She was down. I went and had a

look. Body was still there, it was only when I shone a flashlight that I realized that dark patch was dark green, not dark red.”

“Oh,” Buffy said, deflating. “But...”

“So she killed a demon, not a human,” Xander said with a shrug. “Good job all round, will teach people not to sneak up on a Slayer.”

“Yeah,” Buffy agreed instantly. She smiled. “Cool, then. I’m going to get to class. Got a big history lesson to nap through.” She bounced out.

Giles looked at him for a long moment.

“The blood was red, wasn’t it?”

Xander shrugged. “I didn’t see the body. I did see Faith. She was getting ready to run. It was his fault. He was watching them Slay vampires, then he stepped out of the shadows.”

Giles nodded slowly. “Are you sure it wasn’t dark blue? I know a humanoid demon with dark blue blood.”

“Yeah, dark blue, like I said.” He stood. “Later, G-man.”

“Quite.”

Xander walked out slowly. Neither had asked what he was doing out at night.

He walked toward Snyder’s office and stopped. The secretary looked at him, and then shrugged.

He entered the office. The troll was sneering at someone at the other end of the phone. A neat trick.

“Harris,” he spat as he hung up.

“Let’s keep this simple. You want me gone, I want to go. Either you let me leave, or I make you.”

Snyder’s sneer reappeared. He pulled out a form, already filled out. He signed it with a flourish. “I hope to never see you again.”

“Yeah,” Xander agreed. He took the paper and stared at it. He smiled; it was exactly what he wanted. Freedom.

He dropped the paper on the Secretary’s desk. She told him to wait until a janitor was available. They headed to his locker. It was filled with books, crap, and a photo of him and the others. The janitor took the books, and opened a trash bag for him. He shoved the crap in the bag.

He looked at the photo for a long moment. He crumpled it up and added it to the bag. It had

nothing for him.

With every step away from school, he was convinced that he had done the right thing.

His next stop was a construction yard. They always needed help. So many people were unreliable. It was hardly a career, but it paid. And he needed the money.

He was pointed to a trailer. It was clean, inside. A small kitchen area and two desk. The man behind the second was old, maybe fifty, grey hair, clean shaven.

“Sit,” the man said.

He did.

“Name?”

“Xander Harris.”

“Hank Adams. I run this place. Aren’t you a little young?”

Xander nodded. “Yes.”

“When did you leave school?”

“Forty minutes ago.”

The man chuckled. “I have a job for you. But you are going to tell me why you need it, why you’ve done this. You lie, it’s not for you.”

Xander sighed. “There’s this girl. She’s broken. Like me. But every night, she’s out there, helping people. I can’t do much there, but I can during the day. I said I’d help her, and I will. She lives in a dive, she needs a better place. So I’ll do it.”

“And school?”

“I stayed for my friends. They’re not friends anymore, just memories. I’m good with my hands, and not stupid. But school and me? You need a mindset for it, and I haven’t had it.”

Hank nodded slowly. “Helping at night?”

He shrugged. “It’s what she does.”

“Against gang members?”

He nodded.

“You’re hired,” Hank said. And the words were sweet.

The work was hard, time consuming, and perfect. There was a clarity of thought that came when you did something repetitive and hard that required complete focus. Each bang of the hammer, each hold of a plank, each nail inserted echoed the same thing.

At quitting time, he nodded his thanks to Hank, and headed to the house where his parents lived. He entered his room, and looked around. His clothes were still packed at the motel, but he could take a few more things, now that he wasn't travelling.

He picked up a dragon; it was fragile, delicate, too breakable to have been stuffed in an overfilled backpack. Jessie, he had loved dragons. So had Xander, back then, back before he had broken.

He looked around, at keepsakes and mementoes, at things he no longer had the right to touch, to hold, and to use to remember.

He boxed them all, and made his bed. He made neat piles of his comic books, and another of the few books he had that he could now keep. Tolkien, Feist, Salvatore, books of heroes and villains, of dungeons and dragons.

His Hawaiian shirts were bagged up.

The room was now empty, bare, like him. It took several trips, but soon his stuff was piled on the edge of the grass outside that house, ready for the garbage disposal men to collect the next day.

He picked up his books, and the carrier bag with the dragon carefully wrapped, and headed to the motel.

He put the books down next to his bag, and sat on the floor, his back against a wall, and watched the lights from the game flicker across Faith's face. She was wearing shorts and a tank-top.

"Quit school," he said after a few minutes.

The lights stopped flickering. The controller was put down, and Faith's deep brown eyes turned to him. The shadows caused by the uneven light meant he couldn't see her expression. "Why?"

"Got a job. Will get paid in two weeks. We'll get a small apartment then, a home."

She tilted her head. "I'm broke." He took the figurative meaning, not the literal one, although both applied.

"You protect, I work. I can't fight, I can work. You can't work, you can fight."

"Charity?" she asked. Well, her voice asked, the word in itself was not a question.

"Partnership. I help fix you, maybe help fix me."

"What about me fixing you?" she asked, a real question this time, her face moving back slightly, further into shadows.

“Maybe this does,” he said. “Not the same as I was, never the same, but maybe, maybe I need to be needed.”

“Two bedroom apartment?” she asked.

He nodded. He reached into his bag and pulled out a paper. It was folded on the right page. “I circled ones I’ll be able to afford. The job doesn’t pay much.”

Faith grabbed it, one smooth motion of power and grace, and she was back in her spot.

There was a tenseness to Faith that he only noticed when it relaxed almost imperceptibly. It was still there, though. It made her seem brittle, like she could break, and that her break would be worse than his.

She grabbed the controller, and pressed a few buttons, before the light faded fully. “Okay,” she said, not making it clear what she was saying okay to. “I’m going to go on patrol.”

“Okay,” he agreed. She left. He showered, and relaxed. He watched mindless TV, played a bit on her console, and then stared at the ceiling.

Faith wasn’t his girl. Sure, she wanted help, but she didn’t want babysitting. He nodded, and went to the bed; it was two singles, pushed together. He separated them, leaving as big a gap as he could in the small room. He closed his eyes, and allowed himself to relax and fall asleep.

He woke, as the door opened. He could tell it was her. “Everything go okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Need to talk?”

“Nah.”

“K.” He went back to sleep.

He woke. It was seven. He dressed. Faith was asleep in the other bed. Face down. He headed out, stopped in a café for a cheap breakfast, and headed to work. He had enough money for food and to help with the motel costs until he got paid.

Work was long and hard. He didn’t complain, he learned when he could, and tried really hard to not make the same mistake twice.

He trudged back to the motel at the end of the day, stopping in a diner for some food. Faith was in the same place, and he took his spot. He picked up one of his books, it didn’t matter which one, and started from the beginning.

“Never took you for a reader.”

“Gotta find a way to pass nights,” he said. “My parents weren’t big on bonding, or spending money on anything that wasn’t booze.”

“Gotcha,” she said, and went quiet. He didn’t push, didn’t ask the obvious question. He paused, and stood. He’d checked the motel prices when he got his own key, and put exactly half the amount for the sixteen days he planned on staying on the small table on the far side of her bed.

“Sixteen days, half the motel fee,” he said. “I pay my half. Non negotiable.”

She looked at him again, part glare, but something else under that. He didn’t understand it, so he ignored it.

“Right,” she said, and went back to her game. He went back to reading.

That was the pattern for the next few weeks. He’d work hard, spend a few hours in the same room as Faith, not really talking, spend a few hours wasting time or reading, then sleep, and start again.

Payday was sweet, a Saturday morning. He’d worked overtime on the weekends. In a way, the paycheck was huge. The most money he had ever had, but in another, it was nothing.

He had responsibilities now. “Boss?”

“Yes, Alexander?”

Xander had to hide a wince at the name. “I’m going to look at apartments this afternoon. Cheap ones. Can I put you down as a reference?”

Hank stared at him. “You can,” he agreed. “You have the money for a deposit?”

“I had some savings, so yeah.”

Hank nodded again. “A man looks after himself.” He handed Xander a card. Xander took it, nodded at the older man, and headed back to the hotel after visiting the bank. Faith was still asleep.

“Faith.”

“Huh?”

“I’m going apartment hunting. Coming?”

She sat up and stretched. “Seriously?”

He nodded. She vanished into the bathroom. She emerged, and he blinked and looked at her in surprise.

She was wearing brown heels, a knee-length brown skirt, and a white blouse. Her hair was wet,

and tied back into a ponytail. “Was my Watcher’s,” she explained, looking a bit embarrassed. “I figure we want to make a good impression.”

“I was gonna go like this,” he said, in his work clothes, including his safety boots, and thick cotton shirt.”

“You look like a builder,” she agreed, “which you are. Professional, like, so that’s good, too. Put on some clean ones, if you have any. You reek.”

He nodded and took her advice. A quick shower and a change later, they headed out, walking together. Not much conversation, but then, he didn’t have much to say. The first apartment he didn’t even enter, he didn’t like it. Faith didn’t argue. The second one was better. It was bigger than he expected. Good sized bedrooms, a kitchen big enough to cook in, a small shower room and a bigger bathroom.

The agent spent half her time looking outside, practically ignoring them. “We’ll take it,” Xander said.

The agent blinked. “I’ll need six week rent as deposit, payment on the 1st every month. You take care of utilities. Two month cancellation policy. If you run out on the apartment, like the last few tenants, your stuff becomes ours.” She gestured, “which is why this is now a furnished flat.”

Xander nodded, suddenly realizing why it was so cheap.

“Oh, and references.”

“Call Hank,” he said, handing her the card. She squinted as she took it, and then paused and looked at it again. She popped out a mobile phone, and dialed the number.

“Mr Adams, it’s Barbara from Sunnydale Realty, I’m sorry to bother you...” She trailed off. And a minute later, “Of course, sorry.” She hung up. “Hank Adams is friends with the building owner, so your references are fine. If you can pay, you can have the keys immediately.”

Xander wrote his first ever check, and tried not to wince as half his salary and all his savings vanished. Barbara, not that she had introduced herself to them, took it. “Normally, this wouldn’t happen, but friends make the world go round. So, good luck. There’s a folder on the mantelpiece with contact details of who to call if anything goes wrong.” She didn’t say anything else as she practically ran out.

“Vampires,” Faith said.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “We didn’t cause them, you try and stop them, if that means we get a really nice place on the cheap, I’m okay with that.”

Faith nodded.

Xander turned. “Let’s get our stuff.”

Faith had a little bounce in her step as she walked next to him. The motel seemed dark and dingy now, unfit for human habitation. But it was clean; he'd taken care of that. It didn't take long to pack what was theirs.

Faith handed the key in, and they walked back to their new place. He let Faith have the bathroom with the shower, and unpacked in his. It was little things, a washing machine in the kitchen that meant no more time and money in a laundrette.

The furniture wasn't great, but it was good enough. All they really needed to get was a TV. It would have to wait, though.

Faith came in and dropped on the arm chair. She stood up. "Right, I'm getting out of these clothes."

"Faith?"

"Yeah?"

"You look good."

She paused, and he could see her physically bite her own tongue. "Thanks," she said simply, and when she returned, the leather trousers and tank top were back. "I'll be back in five," she said.

Xander nodded as she left. He stood and looked around, and smiled. The room was still empty, the shelves on the book case empty. He headed to his room and pulled out the dragon. He unwrapped it carefully and placed it back on the shelf to the left of the bed. It looked a little forlorn on its own, but he liked the idea of Jessie looking over him. He sat back on the couch and took off his boots. With that done, he put his feet on the coffee table and relaxed.

The door opened, and shut, and Faith entered. She dropped a cushion on the floor, the other side of the coffee table, and sat down cross legged, and as she sat, a large pizza box seemed to appear in her hand. She grinned at him, and put a six pack of beer to the side of it. "This calls for a celebration," she announced.

He smiled and scooted down onto the floor as well. He opened a can, handed it to her, and did the same for his own. "To our apartment," he said. She clinked her can against his, and then drained it. She leaned back, and let out a huge burp.

For the first time since he had been broken, Xander let out a laugh.

Faith ran her hand through her hair and grinned. He opened the pizza box and took a slice. They ate and drank in a companionable silence.

They both ate half, and relaxed. "That was a good idea."

"Of course it was," Faith replied. "It was my idea." She mock preened, and he smiled. A slightly nervous look appeared on her face. "Look," she said, and then stopped. "I'm not good at this

stuff,” she muttered.

“Just say it,” he recommended. “I’m here until you tell me to go.”

“Right, right.” She took a deep breath. “Look, can we, well, talk about money?”

“In what way?”

“You know, adult shit, budget, bills, that stuff, so I know where we are, ya know?”

He nodded and stood. He got his pay slip, some paper and a pen, and then the pack from the realtor, and sat back down. Faith had cleared away the pizza, leaving them a drink each, and she sat down next to him.

He wrote out his salary, excluding overtime.

“That’s less?” she asked.

“I figure we have to budget for my salary, and not overtime.”

“In case overtime isn’t there?”

He nodded. “The other guys say that Hank is a good employer, and they might not get overtime, but they’ve always had their straight pay.”

“Right,” Faith agreed.

Next, Xander wrote out the amount he needed to keep for rent and utilities – the pack had some old bills in it, so he could see what they’d use.

“Right,” he said, “do we need a phone?”

“Yeah,” Faith said, before she paused, and frowned. “Actually, do we? I have no one to call, or to call me. Maybe Wes, but he’s never phoned before.”

“Me neither,” he agreed. He looked at the cable packages, “Oh, we’re gonna want T.V. eventually, and the price includes a phone.” He added that to the list.

“Cool. Means we can order pizza.”

Xander grinned.

He then added a budget for food.

“So, what else do we need?”

“Xan?”

“Yeah?”

She paused. “Can we get a savings account? Maybe put fifty in a month.”

“Sure,” he agreed. It wasn’t what he expected from her, but he liked the idea. He added that. He racked his brain, and then nodded, and put down a hundred bucks a month for clothing.

“Clothes?”

“Yeah, neither of us has much stuff, and we’re gonna need to replace things, especially for you, as your clothes can get damaged a lot.”

“I normally try and mend ’em. But yeah, would be sweet to have some new stuff every now and again, and it’s not much.”

“Can you think of anything else?”

“Maybe we should put some money into, you know, pillows and shit, make this place look like, ours, you know?”

He smiled, and added some more. It left about hundred a month, plus any overtime.

“So, this means we can go out, occasionally, right? Have some fun? Just us.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

“Sweet. Look, Xan, you sure you don’t wanna share a room, cut down on heating bills?”

He smiled. “You asked me to help, I’m doing what I can. I can’t help like that.”

Faith frowned, her hair falling over her face. “I’m still hot, right?”

“You don’t need me to tell you that, not when you can look in a mirror.”

“I kinda do,” she said with a small voice.

“Extremely.”

She swept her hair back. “So, who is this Tolkien fellow, I mean, I’ve heard of Lord of the Rings, and it’s like, epic, but...?”

He smiled and hopped up, heading to his room. He picked up his copy of the Hobbit, and returned it to Faith. “Lord of the Rings is a bit dense, this is kinda like an introduction to his worlds and his writing. I read it first, and it helped.”

Faith took the book. “I haven’t read since I was like, six?”

Xander laughed and sat on the couch, “I think twelve or thirteen, when I could start leaving my

house and go to Jessie's."

"Jessie?"

"My first friend, with," he paused, "Willow." He took a deep breath, and tried not to think about how she had helped break him. "He got vamped, I staked him, was an accident. Met the Slayer the next day."

"Fucked up, Xan."

"Yeah."

"I got the usual shtick, you know, this classy chick throws a knife at me, I threw it back, and she sprawled to the floor, not so classy, and then, you know, she laughs, but not at me. It was cool.

"We talked, and suddenly I wasn't Faith the good time girl from the trailer park, I could fight, fuck, and have fun, and life was cool for a bit.

"And then she was kidnapped, and it was like, I couldn't save the person who saved me from that life. So I ran, cause, you know, that's what I do."

"I make jokes, or maybe I did."

"Yeah, life changes you."

He swung his feet up, and picked up the book he'd been reading. Faith settled out next to him, on the floor. "Fuck, my old teachers would laugh. Saturday evening and I'm starting a fucking fantasy novel."

"Yeah, we should be hitting the Bronze, spending pocket money, and you get lucky while I strike out again."

"Fuck the past."

"Yeah, fuck the past."

They read, until Faith went to patrol. His bedroom was strange, but he slowly smiled, he'd paid for it, he'd paid for them, and he was helping.

He was proud of that. He had someone to take care of, and he needed that. The bed was bigger, a double, and after sleeping on a narrow one, it felt strange. He eventually dropped off, he had more work in the morning, and he wouldn't be late.

It was strange to rise and bathe, to get ready, and not see Faith. He shrugged, as much as he wanted to check on her, he had to have faith in her. He noticed her boots by the door and smiled.

He stopped in the office to say thanks to Hank, before he got on with his work. He looked up at a

piercing wolf whistle. And then a voice shouted, “Harris, get down here.”

He headed out, and was surprised to find Faith there. She was dressed in jeans with black boots, and a plain white t-shirt. “Hey,” he greeted her.

She held up a bag. “Figured I’d bring you some lunch.”

“You can bring me anything you want, love,” one of the guys shouted at her.

“Sweetie,” Faith purred back, “you couldn’t handle me if I was unconscious. Awake, you wouldn’t even make a nice snack, so you’re not worth my time.”

The others laughed, as the guy spluttered.

“Hey, Frank,” Xander called. “Tell ya what, I’ll bet my lunch against one of your misses’ cakes that Faith can beat you in an arm wrestle.”

Faith looked surprised at him.

“Deal,” Frank called, as he hurried down and over to them. Xander and Faith moved to a pile of pallets. Xander removed the top two. The other men gathered around, most sticking above floor level as they looked from the second story of the building they were erecting.

Faith grinned as she held out her right hand. Frank was opposite her, on the other side of the corner of the pallets.

She had a confident smirk on her face. “Go,” Xander said as they clasped hands. The muscles in Faith’s arms seemed to coil, and her hand moved inexorably forward.

Frank pulled away, looking in shock. “Fuck,” he whispered, he looked up, “So yeah, she’d definitely eat me alive.”

There was a round of laughter.

“Right, leave the lovebirds alone,” Hank ordered. Frank clapped Xander on the back, and headed out.

“So, what was that about?”

“Means you won’t get the same treatment again.”

“Xan, I’m dressed in a t-shirt that advertises my cup size I am used to comments.”

“So? That doesn’t mean that you have to accept it.”

“True,” she agreed. She opened the bag and pulled out four large sandwiches. “A Faith special, a B.L.T.” She put two near him and turned, taking the other two and sitting on the two pallets he’d

removed earlier. Xander perched against the other stack, and took a bite. He grinned at her.

“Yeah,” he said firmly.

“Awesome, right,” she said, as she dug in herself. When he had demolished it, he looked her in the eye.

“Thank you.”

“I get it, a bit, you know? I don’t hafta do it, but I wanted to.”

He smiled at her.

“So, erm, look, can I use your bank details?”

Part of him wanted to ask why. But he paused and looked at it. Could she hurt him? Yes, but he was already broken. It would make no real difference in the long term. “Yeah.”

She smiled at him and nodded. She stood, and then leaned forward and pecked him on the cheek.

“See ya later, boys,” she yelled as she walked off, a distinct sway to her hips.

“She’s the one who you help?” Hank asked.

Xander nodded.

“Is she pregnant?”

“What? No.”

“You’re a good kid, Xander,” Hank said, using his name for the first time. “So, I got a challenge for you.”

“Okay?”

“You get your G.E.D., I’ll promote you a level.”

Xander frowned. “Can I look into it first?” he asked. “I don’t want to say I’ll do something and then find that I can’t.”

Hank tilted his head. “You’ve got until Wednesday.”

“Thanks,” Xander said and got back to work. It was Sunday, so they were let off at four, and Xander headed home.

He grinned. It was home. Sure, it might not be great, but it was theirs.

He opened the door, to be met by a worried-looking Faith. “We got a problem.”

“Oh?”

She moved out of the way, and he realized that there was a lot of tweed sitting on his couch. Xander sighed and took off his work boots. “G-man,” he said.

“Xander,” Giles replied, wiping his glasses.

“I’d offer you a drink, but I’ve haven’t been shopping yet.”

“I got a few bits,” Faith said. “Coffee, no tea.”

“No, thank you.”

Xander sat in the arm chair, shifting it so that he could look at Giles. Faith perched on the arm of the chair, next to him. “What can we do for you?”

Giles frowned. “You are working?”

“Construction, yes.”

“On a Sunday?”

“Time and a half,” Xander explained. “I had to take the afternoon off yesterday, so I put more in today. How do you know we are here?”

“I’ve been looking for you for close to two weeks. Faith didn’t say you were with her.”

“You never asked.”

“I thought you would volunteer that information,” Giles said back mildly.

“Fuck that. I didn’t lie, and I only hang around because a girl’s gotta live by her word.”

Xander looked at Faith’s face in profile. He hadn’t heard her say anything like that before.

“People were worried. You could have mentioned you knew he was safe.”

“If it wasn’t for Faith, I’d be in L.A., probably working as a waiter in a diner,” Xander pointed out.

“What about your friends?”

“They broke me,” Xander said calmly. “They took away what made me, me. Friendships come and go. Ours went.”

“W-what do you mean?”

“They don’t need me. I need to be needed; it’s all I’ve got.”

“They fucked him up,” Faith spat. “So you know what, I’m fucked up too, Xan was outta here, and I didn’t blame him. But you know what? I suddenly realized that I needed him, and fuck me if he

hasn't lived up to his side of the bargain. It's his fucking money that's paying for this place, but you know what? My name is right next to his on the fucking lease.

"So fuck them, they threw him away, they fucking broke him, like I was, so like, the first time since Diana, I got lucky, and I ain't telling his secrets, you dig?"

Giles polished his glasses again. "What about your education?"

"My boss is getting me to take my G.E.D.," Xander said.

"Yeah," Faith agreed, "and we're gonna to do it together."

"You've not passed High School?"

"I only turned eighteen a few weeks ago," Faith shrugged. "I'm the same age as the blonde vampire fuck toy."

Giles winced at the description. "I'm sorry, I had no idea."

Faith shrugged. "I'm not your problem. So, we done? We're chill, I live in a nice place now, and I don't even gotta fuck the guy who's looking after me, all I gotta do is let him try and help me, and it's such a good deal, that I'm trying to help him as well. I might suck at it, but it's nice to try."

"How did you know we are here?" Xander asked the question again.

"I searched for your name, I've been doing it daily, it came up on the Cable records. I got a friend to get me your address."

"Fuck," Faith cursed. "Does this mean we're gonna get Slutty McVampire Lover, the Drone Bitch and the Red-haired Disaster coming round wanting their past back?"

Xander felt amusement at the names.

Giles shook his head. "No, I'll hide it," he said. "As long as you both get your G.E.Ds."

Xander nodded and tried to hide the anger he felt at the blackmail.

"Well, good luck," Giles said, and practically bolted from the room.

The door slammed. "Fuck," Faith groaned. "You know, I just said that G.E.D. thing to get him off my back, you know, I wanted to look good. Now, I gotta do it." She pouted briefly, "Xan, I'm gonna need a shitload of help if I'm gonna do this."

"I wasn't even sure I was gonna do it," Xander agreed. "I just didn't want him looking all tweedy at me."

"So we're both trapped?"

“Well, I got offered a raise if I pass.”

“Sweet!”

Xander nodded.

“Oh,” Faith suddenly looked proud, as she curled up on the side of the sofa. “The cable guy is coming on Tuesday afternoon, to install the phone and cable.”

He smiled at her.

“Tomorrow, I’ll see his Tweediness,” Faith continued, “Find out what shit we need to do to do ’em.”

“Thanks.”

“Like I said, you’re here, working for me, and like, it’s the first time I’ve wanted to do this shit.”

Xander nodded. “I never wanted to grow up, but you know, I got something to do now, and I gotta think about it a lot.”

“So, look, I was thinking, I got a small patrol tonight, a couple of hours, and it’s been quiet recently, how do you feel about having a nap now, and coming with me?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t want you to fight if you don’t wanna, but it would be nice, you know, knowing someone’s got my back.”

Xander stood. “One nap coming up.” He headed into his room, and yawned deeply. He undid his belt, and collapsed on the bed.

“Yo,” Xander opened his eyes to see Faith’s face inches from her own, and her hand on his shoulder. “You were out like a fucking light.”

“Tired,” he agreed.

“We need to go soon.”

“I’ll get changed.”

Faith exited his room and he changed, walking out to meet her. She was in her Slayer gear. They walked out and into the cool night.

“Most nights, I patrol with Slutty, but we kinda agreed to give each other one day off. She wanted Sundays.” Faith shrugged. “Anyway, you mind I didn’t tell you what they were up to?”

Xander shook his head. "I didn't ask."

"Yeah. I figured you wanted a clean break, and you know, they were acting all snotty, so fuck 'em."

"Part of me misses them," he confessed.

"I gotcha," Faith said after a minute's worth of silence. "It's like, the scum back in Boston, they were bad for me, bottom-feeders, the lot of 'em. But sometimes, I think back and want to be back." She paused. "I'd probably be some biker's chick, or in jail for drugs," she confessed.

Xander nodded. He didn't know what to say. "I guess we keep moving, keep trying."

"Because what else can we do?"

"Fuck 'em?"

"Yeah," Faith cheered. "Fuck 'em all."

A vampire emerged from the ground near them. Faith paused until it was clear, and then slipped in, staking it before it knew what was happening.

They continued to walk.

"Sunnydale isn't that big," Xander said, "but it's so popular that we actually manage to import vampires."

"There's probably a series of demonic travel agents, 'Hey, have you thought about Sunnydale for your vacation?'" Faith joked.

Xander chuckled. "Aren't all travel agents evil?"

"No idea, never met one."

"Neither have I," he admitted as he realized it was true. "I didn't use one when I got my ticket, I just put some money in a machine."

"That's the future," Faith said. "Human interaction to be as limited as possible."

There was a noise, he looked up, three vampires approached, carrying baseball bats. Faith bounced on the spot, and then hurried toward them. She engaged them, her legs flashing as she used her speed and strength to launch devastating kicks to their bodies and heads.

He followed her, drawing a stake. The first was down, dust, but the other two were better and one of them managed to grab her. The remaining one raised his bat. Xander stabbed him in the back. He turned to dust. Faith was already free, and the last one was gone.

She was panting slightly, as she looked at him. This is where he would be told off. She had it covered. She always did.

She took a step forward, and then, to his surprise, he was being hugged gently.

“Thanks,” she whispered into his ear.

## **Broken Faith**

### **As good as it gets**

Xander held the skirting board in place and banged the nail in. He repeated all the way down, every three feet, and as he did, he lost himself in the familiar movement. And when he did, he was able to look back over previous conversations and actions, and wince.

The last few months had worked out pretty well. They'd fallen into a routine with work, studying, and Slaying. It worked for both of them. They'd even managed to save a little, so he didn't have to work every hour available. He still did because he liked the work, but it was no longer a financial necessity.

His desperate need to fit in, to be of use, to be needed was obvious when you could look at yourself with perfect hindsight.

But as he looked at what he had done and how he had acted, he slowly started to understand just why he had done what he'd done, and what had driven him to those precise actions.

It wasn't good for his ego, but it was good for his self awareness, and he felt like he was on the cusp of understanding something important about himself.

“..nder, Xander, Xander!”

Xander looked up. “Billy?”

“Quittin' time.”

“Oh, right, thanks.”

“When you get in the zone, you work like a pro,” Billy praised as he headed out.

Xander handed in his helmet and walked home slowly. He opened the door, to the sight of Faith studying.

“Why the fuck is Paul buying so much shit anyway?” Faith grumbled.

Xander kicked his boots off, moved next to her, and looked at the paper in front of her. He smiled. “Because he still lives at home, and doesn't know how to use the washer.”

“So Paul’s a loser who had Daddy put a gym in the garage and spends all week not doing legs. Probably using his Daddy’s credit card to buy this shit as well.” She sighed. “So, it’s 3 times 16 plus 2 times 22 plus 11, so that’s like, 103.”

“Yup.”

“Damn, I might actually know some of this shit,” Faith said, her voice sounding shocked. She put her paper away.

He looked at her in surprise. She sat, cross-legged, on the table. “The big G thinks that there might be an apocalypse-type thing happening. I haven’t been that involved, but there’s this box, right, called Gavrok, or something. And in it, a fuck-ton of spiders that someone can eat, and become a demon.”

Xander frowned. “Sounds bad.”

“Yeah, G says it’s like a sixty-foot long snake with a spiked tail.”

“That’s a lot of potential leather,” Xander said dryly. Faith grinned at him.

“Not sure who or what yet, although, looking at the Mayor.”

“Wilkins?” Xander asked in shock.

“Yeah, his boys approached me the day before we moved in. Wanted to help me out. Told ‘em I already had help, and I trusted you a lot more than some weirdo in power.”

Xander frowned. “Sounds bad.”

“Yeah, guy in power wants young girl? Sure as hell I’d be paying for that. They were polite about it. So, anyway, it’s important, so G asked me to at least let you know.”

“Thanks. Do I need to do anything?”

“Not right now.”

“Part of me wants to go back,” he said softly. “Help in any way that I can.”

“Not to sound as selfish as I am, but you are. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you, and as much as I dislike Slutty, there ain’t much that can beat two Slayers.”

“True,” he agreed.

“Especially one as hot as me,” Faith continued, winking at him.

“You’re on fire,” he said in the driest voice he could muster.

“Damn right,” Faith agreed. “And I’m so hot that I talked to your boss this morning, and you’ve got tomorrow off.”

“I do?”

“Yup, there’s a fair. I want to go. We’re going. You’re gonna wear your new jeans and that sweet jacket I picked up at Goodwill, and we’re gonna have a good time, understood?”

He felt his lips twist. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“Good boy.

“Right, I’m heading out on patrol. Get some rest.” She uncurled and stood, bouncing out the door.

He watched her go, his eyes drawn to the skin tight pants she was wearing and shook his head. Sixty-foot snake? He didn’t think anyone had a shovel big enough to lop the head off of that.

He pulled out his notes again. Faith was getting confident about the exams; he wasn’t. It had been so long since he had really used his brains. And the poetry was god-awful.

After another hour of study, he looked up at the TV. They hardly ever had it on, and when they did, it was on music channels. They might have been better off with a radio. As soon as the contract was up they were going to get rid of the TV package.

“Fuck it,” he muttered, and headed to the bathroom. A wash and change later and he was in bed.

He awoke in the morning, and showered and then dressed as Faith had asked. He stepped out and grabbed some cereal, and ate it as he leaned against the counter.

“Hey.”

He looked up, then had to spit some food into the sink, as he gasped and then coughed.

Faith laughed.

He turned and looked at her, properly this time and shook his head in disbelief.

“Yeah, well, I was fighting this vamp, and he had taken his jacket off, and after I killed him, I found some cash, and I was gonna share it, but then I thought that I could get you a present, and...” Faith was as close to babbling as he had ever heard her.

“You look so hot.”

Faith smiled. “Finally,” she crowed. She spun on the spot, and he gulped. She was wearing a simple white summer dress, with a narrow white strap on each shoulder, and a textured bodice.

The dress dropped to mid-thigh, and was followed by seeming miles of amazing leg, before feet

and ankles wrapped in black combat boots. Her legs were possibly his new favorite thing in the world, and the top hardly hid her shape.

“I am gonna get lynched walking with you,” he predicted.

“I’ll protect you,” she said back. “And besides, these last few months of you working hard each day and us not eating junk food has hardly made you worse looking. You look fucking solid now, not work out solid, but real, like a man, you know?”

“I think that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me, even though I still miss Twinkies.”

“Come on,” Faith ordered, as a horn blew outside. “We’re springing for a cab. I ordered it when you got out of the shower.”

He followed her, leaving his bowl in the sink, and they headed out. The cab ride took ten minutes, and he paid with a tip. He looked down as Faith’s hand grabbed his. And then they were walking together.

“I already checked, none of the fuckers are gonna be here.”

He tightened his hand on hers briefly.

They walked up a row of tents, each with a stall inside. Spotting one, Xander dragged Faith toward it, dropping her hand as they entered. He looked around, and spotted what he had hoped would be there. He nabbed it, and paid for it, seventy bucks, before Faith could protest.

For their budget, it was a bit extravagant, but he’d been working a lot of overtime.

He turned, to see Faith giving him a bemused look. “Flashback to that damn poetry,” he explained as her look turned quizzical at his chuckle. “Bemused.”

“Heh, yeah,” she agreed. He handed her the bag. She opened it, and held up the necklace. It was made of silver, with a black Celtic cross pendant that was a couple of inches high.

She put it on, and it dangled over her chest. It added a splash of dark to her white outfit. She smiled, and then held out her hand.

He took it, and they headed off. She had a persistent little smile on her face.

They played games, ate awful food, and rode on rides that would have been closed down if there was a surprise safety inspection.

They ended the day up on the big wheel, sat next to each other. As it got near the top, Faith looked at him. “I thought you were full of it,” she announced.

“Huh?”

“That it was an elaborate ruse,” she paused, “and that’s a phrase I’ve never used in conversation before.”

“That poetry is insidious.”

Faith laughed and nodded. “Yeah, so, anyway, you’ve done exactly what you said. And you know what made me realize you are genuine?”

He shook his head.

“When you bet on me. I’ve been bet on before, and you know, it was always me as the prize. You bet your fucking lunch.”

Xander blinked. “I’d never bet something that wasn’t mine.”

Faith nodded. “So, here’s the thing. I want that to change.”

“Huh?”

“Look, I’ve been the party girl, I’ve been the one in charge, I’ve been the one who fucks and fucks off. And I thought that people who didn’t were losers, you know. But then there was this guy, and he didn’t want to fuck me again. He just desperately needed to be needed, and then everything he said, he did. He didn’t promise the moon, he promised an apartment, and he just kept his word.

“And every night, I’d come home, and there was a bit of food ready for me. Fuck, there was a home that was mine, that I’d never really had, and I’d come home, and he’d be asleep, and I’d check, and he never woke up, because he was chill and trusted me.

“The past is that, and I’m far happier with it, lived it. Some good, some bad, but gone. I guess what I’m saying is, I need more from you.”

He blinked. “Like what?” he asked carefully.

“I want a boyfriend.”

“Wh-hua?” he asked again, as he practically heard his voice break.

“I’m not talking about sex, yet, I mean like today, I mean, your arm around me, holding hands, kissing, you know, the sappy shit. I’ve never done that, and I want to.”

“Not sure I’m the right person.”

“Fuck that,” Faith replied. “First, you look fucking good in that jacket, and you fill out that t-shirt nicely. Second, I need nice and reliable, and you are that. Third, I need someone who can look at me and want me, but still look respectful, and I ain’t never had that.

“And you know what, I have never, ever, wanted to wear a dress like this, and be girly, for another

man. I like leather, I like people looking at me, but I feel special when you look at me.

“So man up, have the hottest chick you’re gonna find, date the fuck outta her, and let’s see where this fucked up train ride we call life gets two crazy and broken kids.”

“That was almost poetic,” he said dryly, and took a deep breath. As dryly as he could, he said, “Oh, God no, the most beautiful girl I’ve ever met wants to date me. Woe is me.” He looked up at her. “Yes, please.”

She laughed, and slid across the space between them, straddled his legs, and then gave him a light kiss on the lips.

And somehow, it meant more than the time they had sex.

She pulled back and smirked. She kissed him again. “That’s for the necklace.”

“I didn’t do it for that.”

“Of course not. Come on, we’ll walk home, eat at that Italian joint and get some real food inside us.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The ride ended, and they exited the basket. Rather than hold her hand, he put his arm around her shoulders. He felt her arm go around his waist. And it felt good. They meandered toward their apartment, before stopping at the Italian.

They were welcomed; they’d been there a couple of times. And it was subtly different, the way Faith played with her hair, or with her pendant. As he watched her, she lifted it and kissed it lightly, while winking at him.

He felt himself blush.

Faith giggled, and then blushed. “Fuck,” she whispered, “I haven’t giggled since I was six.”

“Not a bad thing.”

“No,” she agreed. “Of course, you tell anyone, I’ll hafta hurt ya.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

They paused as the food arrived, and ate happily.

It wasn’t much of a walk back home, and they entered, still arm in arm. Once inside, Faith turned and kissed him gently again, before she entered her room.

He took off his jacket and boots, and collapsed on the couch. He absently turned on the T.V. for

some noise, and turned it down.

“Stick a movie on,” Faith called. “Something with guns and killing.”

He chuckled and found an action movie. Faith emerged; she’d changed into flannel bottoms and a tank top. She moved over, and flopped down, draping herself over him.

Sunday morning, Xander worked as he normally did.

“Have a good day?” Hank asked.

“Very good.”

“She’s a nice girl.”

Xander nodded his agreement.

“So, you dating now?”

“Faith told you that?”

“Said you were both broken kids who were doing things differently.”

Xander winced and nodded.

“You’re a good worker, Xan, you are always here early and work late, and you’re now doing work at a high quality. So congrats, I’m paying you like a Journeyman now. We’ll take care of the paperwork after you get your G.E.D.”

“Wow,” Xander replied in shock.

“Yeah, well, you deserve it. Since you’ve started, I’ve been through five other carpenters, none of which stuck it out, even though they were all older than you. Keep it up, keep working, and you’ll go places.

“I guess what I’m saying is, get your G.E.D – because I’m taking the promotion away if you fail – keep working, and I see no reason why you and that gal can’t stay together. And seriously, you might be a seven or an eight, but she’s an eleven. You are never going to find another looker like that who can look at you like she does.”

Xander rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah,” he agreed. “It’s just, you know, she is an eleven. She can do better.”

“You think so, huh?”

He nodded.

“Does she think so?”

He blinked.

“Because she’s never seemed to lack confidence in her looks.”

“Well, no,” he agreed.

“So, don’t be dumb, accept the fact that she sees something in you that she doesn’t see in other people, and don’t blow it.”

“That’s good advice.”

“Yeah, take it from the fifty-year-old on his second marriage. Keep this slow pace, don’t rush anything, and enjoy it.”

“Thanks, boss.”

“Yeah, now, get back to work. Lollygagging is costing me even more now. I’ll be in L.A. for the next week, so Jim will be in charge.”

At the end of the day, Xander hurried home. He opened the door, dramatically, found Faith still in her pajamas, looking at some of their G.E.D notes. He picked her up, span her around, and kissed her.

“I approve,” she said with a smile. “What’s up?”

“I got a promotion. Works out at five bucks an hour, after tax.”

“Wait,” Faith said. A look of concentration appeared. “That’s an extra \$800 basic a month?”

He nodded.

“Fuck,” she whistled. “Look who’s a high roller now,” she teased. She kissed. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Means we can do a bit more.”

“We should save,” she suggested. “Get a car, or maybe a bike.”

“A bike?”

“Yeah, I can be your biker chick. Also, cheaper, easier to fix, there’s only two of us, and if we want to go anywhere, we can pack light.”

“Those are not bad points,” he mumbled. “What are the bad points?”

Faith pouted. “Fine, they’re more dangerous and less convenient if you want to move shit.”

“But I can heal from broken bones quickly and you’re a Slayer.”

Faith’s pout vanished. “Neat, in which case, I’m gonna get dressed and go get a paper. We’ll see if we can find a place offering lessons, get our licenses, and be official, and all that shit.”

“Damn, I gotta pass my test again?”

“It’s an endorsement on your license,” Faith corrected, “just a quick written test and a riding test. It will be easy. We can do that first, and then find a bike we like.”

“Hmm,” Xander mused. “I drive, I get you pressed against my back, you drive, I get my arms around you. I win both times.”

Faith grinned. “Ditto.”

She bounced away to get dressed. She poked her head out. “You gonna make burgers for dinner?”

“Sounds like a plan,” he agreed.

“And get a nap so we can patrol later?”

“Yup.”

“Good.” He went to his room and took off his boots, before heading to the kitchen. He opened a cookbook and followed the recipe to make the patties, before shoving them in the fridge.

Faith bounded out the door, and he chuckled, then collapsed on the couch. He was a bit tired, but his mind was wired with the idea of having their own transport, and being able to visit places easily.

He relaxed, yawned, and drifted off.

He awoke to find Faith draped over him. She awoke as he moved. “You looked comfy,” she explained. “Found a place, we can do it in the evenings. Should take three or four weeks, a couple of hundred bucks each.

“Oh, and I forgot to tell you on Friday, I had a chat with the G.E.D. people. They’re like, super-helpful. They’ve got an exam going on in two weeks.”

“That’s close,” he said.

“Yeah, but we can treat it like a practice exam, you know? They’re chill with the idea, and we’ll then have three more months, which would be right?”

He thought. “Yeah, that makes sense,” he agreed.

“Best thing, it’s free, because we’re under twenty-one. I explained that I’m an orphan who fucked

up, and you dropped out to grow up, get a job, and you're helping me."

"That doesn't sound as good as you spend every night killing vampires."

"Yeah, I felt like an idiot, but you know, I still remember fighting, fucking, and running away. Not scared like I used to be. Every day, you know, it's a bit better."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. Every day, I feel a bit better, like I really over-reacted to what happened, I coulda handled it better."

"It's the fear," Faith said. "You had your role, and it was taken away."

He nodded.

"Right, I've been jonesing for your meat all day."

Xander laughed at the impish look on her face. He slid out from under her. "Far be it for me to keep my girlfriend waiting."

"Damn right, chef-boy. We should get you an apron; you can cook naked under it."

"Faith," he protested playfully.

"I'll put on a school girl uniform for you," she offered, a sultry look in her eyes.

"There goes standing up straight," he mumbled.

Faith laughed and moved to the doorway so she could watch him cook. He didn't know why she liked his burgers, they did taste good, but he was pretty sure anyone could cook them.

He grinned, as the rolls, salad and condiments were waiting for him. It didn't take long for him to heat the griddle and get them cooking. As he let them rest, he knocked together the rest, placing a slice of cheese on each at the proper point to ensure it melted without running off or burning.

He put three on a plate for Faith, and had two himself.

"Yeah," Faith groaned as she sat at the table. "That's what I wanted."

Patrol was quiet, too quiet, really, but at least it allowed them to hold hands and talk.

The next few days flew by, as he worked and studied with Faith. She would spend the mornings asleep, work out and practice her fighting with Giles during the day, and then study with him before patrol in the evenings.

She'd join him for breakfast and tell him stories of what they had killed the night before. There were times when he wanted to get out there and help, but he knew he was helping in a different way.

He often studied at night, but he wasn't getting into the poetry, and his eyes glazed over every time he started one – especially the ones with Latin in the titles.

“Come on, Xan,” he encouraged himself, talking over the sound of the music playing on the T.V.

“What's happening?”

Xander jumped and turned to see Faith standing by the door, a grin on her face.

“My heart beating at a hundred miles an hour,” he groaned. “I'm supposed to be looking at this damn poetry, right, but I look at the title and my eyes just blur. Some of the other poems have been good, but this one?”

Faith moved over and picked the piece of paper, her eyes scanning it. “Dude, this poem's like epic, and it's full of death and dismemberment!”

Xander blinked. “You can put that in poetry? I thought it was all, alas, alack, I'm in love, sorta crap.”

“His hanging face, like a devil's sack of sin;” she quoted. “It's like something from Robocop.”

“True,” he mused.

“Hey, an idea,” she said. “I'll read it to ya.”

He crossed his legs and looked at her attentively. “Is now a good time to admit that I fancy the teacher?”

“Yes.”

“I fancy the teacher.”

Faith grinned and started to read.

“Do we have a Latin dictionary?” Xander asked, after applauding as she finished.

“I'll get the G-man to translate it tomorrow?”

“Screw that.” Xander picked up the phone and dialed Giles' number. “Hey, G-man,” he said as the Brit answered the phone with his traditional hello.

“Xander,” Giles replied, and Xander could hear him rolling his eyes over the phone.

“Anyway, I need some Latin translated. Faith's just read me this awesome poem, and its title and then end are in Latin, and I have to know what they mean.”

Giles paused. “Okay, not a question I anticipated, but sure, go ahead.”

He reached out, and Faith passed him the poem. “Okay, it ends with, ‘The old lie, D...’”

Before he could finish, Giles interrupted with the entire line.

“I’m seriously impressed,” Xander stated.

“As am I,” Giles replied. “It translates as ‘it is sweet and right to die for your country.’”

“And it’s a lie, and he’s talking about how war sucks,” Xander said. “And he’s digging into the lies recruiters and the forces like to tell you, about how dying for the flag is somehow good, but at the end of the day, you’re still dead and you are just a name on the wall?”

He could actually hear Giles smile over the phone. “That’s exactly it, Xander.”

“Cool, thanks Giles, I appreciate the translation. We’ll probably see you soon.” After a goodbye, he hung up and grinned at Faith. “It is sweet and right to die for your country,” he repeated to Faith, “but that’s not like sweet as we use it, it’s more like, good, ya know?”

Faith grinned and nodded. “Told you it was awesome.”

He moved over and hugged her, before dropping a kiss on her lips. “Let’s rent a movie and get some Chinese in.”

The next evening, he was finishing the dishes, as Faith had cooked, when there was a knock at their door. Which was unusual because he’d never heard anyone knock on it.

Faith opened it. “Who are you?” she asked before pausing. “Yo, Xan, you know a blonde bimbo and a jock?”

“Not recently,” he called, and entered the living room.

“You better come in,” Faith sighed.

“Harmony, Larry,” he said, as looked at the two. “Not to be impolite, but what the fuck are you doing here?”

They looked uncomfortable, as they walked in. He gestured to the couch, and sat in the arm chair. Faith perched next to him.

“Nice place,” Harmony said, “And I mean that in the, you’re paying for it yourself, kinda way, not living off of mommy and daddy, like the rest of us.”

“Thanks,” he said, as dryly as he could.

“So, like, it’s the prom in three weeks,” Harmony continued, “and then the end of the year. And the committee was talking; something is gonna happen at graduation.”

He cocked his head.

“Summers, Rosenberg and Cordelia have been talking,” she explained. “Which is why we’re here.”

“Yeah,” Larry said. He paused and looked at Faith. “Fuck, Harris, out of the damn park, man.”

“Yeah,” Faith agreed with a complete lack of modesty. She put her hand possessively on his shoulder as she looked at Harmony.

“So, right, erm, yeah,” Larry continued. “Look, Rosenberg, Summers, Cordelia, they are trying to, you know, organize us, but they suck.”

“They suck so much,” Harmony agreed. “Like, as bad as me when I was in charge of the cheerleading squad. We got to talking, and we were like, who can organize us? And your name came up.”

“So, a few people saw you two at the fair, it’s not as if a hunk in a leather jacket and a hot chick in a dress like the one you were wearing don’t stand out,” Larry continued. “A load of boys were drooling over her.”

Xander frowned, and covered Faith’s hand with his own. He felt her squeeze.

“And honestly, if I’d known that under that loser persona there was a hunk who can leave school and not end up a drugged out loser, I’d’ve cut Cordelia a hell of a lot more slack.”

“Yeah, that’s the past.”

“Moving on,” Larry said, taking the hint. “We need to know what to do, on Graduation, and like, you’re voted in.”

“Are you nuts?” Xander asked. “I’m not a student, I can’t help that.”

“Pfft,” Harmony waved her hand. “You understand, and your girl’s like Summers, right?”

“I am,” Faith agreed. “Problem is, we don’t like that bunch.”

“Come on, we need you,” Harmony protested.

“Fine,” Xander groaned. “We’ve got something important to do the next few weeks, but the week before prom, we’ll have a plan and we’ll come and discuss it with you.”

“Cool,” Harmony cheered. “So, yeah, we’ll, like, get out of your hair.”

“Please do not give our address to others.”

“Sunnydale’s not that big, so people will see you, but people are not gonna, like, drop around

uninvited.”

“Cool,” Faith agreed. The two stood, and Faith escorted them out. She returned. “I know I should have offered them a drink, but, well, you know?”

“Yeah.” And he did.

After patrol, they went back to studying with a vengeance. Even their Saturday evening they studied until late, watched a movie and then fell asleep on each other the couch.

The following Monday, he arrived home to an immediate question.

“What the fuck has some ancient Greek dude got to do with triangles and why should I care?” Faith demanded. “I’m clearly too fucking dumb to understand this shit.”

He paused. She was sat on the floor in shorts and a tank-top, her hair was pulled back in a pony tail and she had a pencil behind one ear. Next to her was a bin full of crumpled up paper.

“One second,” he said. He toed his boots off and removed his jacket. He headed into the kitchen and got two cans of beer out. He popped them and poured them into glasses, before sitting down on the floor next to her. He picked up the worksheet she was looking at and glanced at the problem. Faith drained half her glass.

“Okay, Greek dude was Pythagoras. We know him, remember, crazy beard dude.”

“Oh, yeah,” Faith said, calming down. “ $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ ,” she recited.

“Bingo. So, we got a couple of triangles that are close buds. And we know some of the distances, right?”

Faith nodded. “And we have that big  $A$  divided by little  $A$  formula crap to work it out?” Her voice had changed, as the frustration was gone.

“Right, so we know that  $X$  divided by 20 is basically the same as doing thirteen divided by twenty six.”

“Yeah, and thirteen divided by twenty six is half, right?”

“Yes.”

“So it’s half times twenty, which is ten?”

Xander flipped the sheet with the answers over. And showed it to her.

“Yes!” Faith jumped up and punched the air. “Take that, you piece of shit math problem.”

Xander laughed. "I'm gonna take a shower." He took his glass with him. He'd learnt long ago that unattended beer (and food) tended to be Shanghaied by Faith.

"I'll get the food going," Faith agreed. "Thanks, Xan."

He smiled at her, and headed to the shower. He was in a really good mood now. There was something really good about helping, but at the same time, he was starting to realize that being needed wasn't everything. He didn't need to dedicate everything to it. If Faith was good for one thing, it was her confidence.

Sure she had issues as big as his, but underneath that was someone who would always be able to drag herself back from the edge, no matter how close to it she got.

And he was paying attention to that confidence. He had lost his own, and was rebuilding it. He was good at carpentry. He worked hard, and he was a good provider. Some of the really good carpenters got paid a very serious amount of money, and if he followed his vocation, paid his dues, and became a Master, he could make some serious cash, even without going to college.

Sure, if he didn't have Faith, he would have to devise another way of dealing with the things that liked to go bump in the night, but that was a good thing. It meant he wasn't feeling as dependent as he had when they had first got together.

He really didn't want her to leave, and he wanted to see where this journey was gonna take them, but he would never allow himself to fall into the almost depression-like state that he had been in when Buffy, Willow and Cordelia had told him they didn't need him.

He wasn't that person, and didn't want to be that person. He was becoming an adult and he was damn proud of that achievement.

"And I'm pretty sure you would be, too, Jessie," he said softly, looking up at the ceramic dragon. He grinned. "They might not be as big, but I reckon Faith has better tits than Cordelia."

He could hear Jessie's denials ring in his ear, before he took his shower.

The Saturday of the test started a little cool, and Xander showered and dressed in comfortable clothing. He exited his room, to find that Faith was prowling back and forth. She'd only done a quick patrol the night before, and looked wide awake.

And both wired and extremely nervous.

"Xan, do we have to do this?" she asked, as she looked up at him. "We're five by five as we are."

"If you score better than me, I'll get the apron. I score better than you, you break out the school girl uniform."

Faith almost stumbled, and met his eyes. She laughed suddenly, and moved over and hugged him. She buried her face in his neck, and he ran his hands around her waist. For the first time in ages,

the urge to say something stupid was strong, but he resisted. Jokes had a time and a place, but this wasn't it. Well, not the stupid sort anyway, they were both trying to leave their pasts behind and become more.

“Faith, you've studied for this test, and it's just a practice anyway. We'll go, take it, and see how much more we need to study, and what to focus on. The next time, we'll kick its ass from here to the big city.”

“Yeah,” Faith said, as she exhaled and then stood back. She looked at him hopefully for a second, before she gave an exaggerated sigh. “Fine, if you're not gonna say it, I am. We'll slay the test!”

He blinked at her for a second, and then laughed.

“One of us has to say something like that,” she said, her lips pursed. “Now, you get some breakfast on, while I go and get dressed outta my run-away clothes.”

“Okay,” he said, and watched her leave, because frankly, the run-away clothes involved tight leather, and he was all for that.

He headed into the kitchen and got some eggs going for breakfast, and then put some bacon on so they could take some sandwiches with them for lunch.

He put a couple of slices of bread in the toaster, and timed it so that the eggs were done the same time as the bread, and called out for Faith. She turned up, wearing slacks and a blouse, the cross he'd given her on top.

“Good impressions, right?”

He nodded and put the plate in front of her. Out of their original budget, the only thing they'd gotten wrong was the food budget. That had eaten into their spare money before he'd got the pay rise. A Slayer's appetite was huge.

After breakfast, he did the dishes while Faith made her specialty sandwiches. With their lunch packed, he took Faith's hand and they walked out.

Outside their apartment, casually resting against his truck – a Ford that could probably eat most other vehicles on the road – was his boss. “Hank?”

He nodded. “Faith, Xander,” he said. “You are living up to your word, so I figured I'd give you a lift.”

“Thanks,” Xander said, “but you didn't have to come out all this way just for that!”

Hank smiled, and opened the door. There was enough room for the three on the front seat. Faith went in the middle, and then rested against his shoulder.

“Thanks for this,” Faith said, as Hank entered. “It's because of my man that I'm still here. I was

ready to bolt this morning, school and I never got along, but I knew he'd talk me out of it, and he did."

Hank chuckled.

"Of course, now I gotta get a better score than him. There's a bet riding on it."

"Oh?"

"Hey, he's my boss," Xander complained. "There are some things he doesn't need to know."

"Yes, dear," Faith agreed, a mocking little tilt in her voice, "I get a higher score than him; he cooks in just an apron for me." She paused. "He wins, well, I'm gonna break out the white blouse, Mary Janes and short plaid skirt, and we'll see what a bad girl I can be."

"Faith," he whined, as he shifted, the thought of having a boner in his boss's car just enough to get his mind off of the thought of Faith dressed like that.

Hank was laughing. "That's one way of encouraging each other."

"If normal worked for us, I'd be in school back east, and he'd have never left. Of course, he'd still be with his shit parents and massively unhappy under the class clown act, and I'd be the biggest bitch this side of the Atlantic."

"A lot of folks are different," Hank agreed. "It's what you do with the difference that counts."

"Growing up is hard," Faith sighed.

"It doesn't get much easier." Hank indicated and pulled into the Sunnydale Adult Education car park. "Good luck."

"Thanks," they both said, as they exited the cab and entered the building.

"My, how wonderful it is to meet you. Two kids fixing their mistakes the old fashioned way with gumption and hard work."

"Erm, thank you, Mayor Wilkins," Xander said in surprise. To say he was shocked to see the man in front of him was an understatement. He was wearing a red sweater with a white shirt under it, and some casual slacks.

"Not at all, young man. Why, when I heard from Doris here that two of our youths were taking their G.E.D today, I just had to say good luck. Doris was a dear and informed me that this is a bit early for you, so it is just a warm up, but that doesn't matter. You are taking another step to becoming good citizens."

"Thanks," Xander said, feeling more than a little wigged out.

“Well, I won’t keep you anymore.” He smiled. “Remember to vote Wilkins,” he added, and walked out.

“That was fucking weird,” Faith mumbled.

“Come on, you two,” the woman he now knew was called Doris said with a gesture. Inside a large classroom, two desks were set up.

“Mayor Wilkins has always been a big supporter of Adult Education,” she explained. “He’s helped fund this center.”

“Oh,” Xander said.

“Well, here we go. We’re going to start with Language Arts.”

Xander sat, and at her word, turned over the paper.

“DULCE ET DECORUM EST,” was the header of the first page. He looked at the first question, and smiled.

They paused for a break, both deciding that they would rather kept going, as they wanted it over and done with.

When they had finished, Doris looked at them, her face straight. “Make yourselves a cup of coffee, while I grade the last exam,” she said.

They headed to the waiting area. “Fuck, eight hours of tests. I’ve never sat so damn still in my life!”

“I kept wanting to get up and fix the skirting,” Xander agreed. “Shoddy workmanship.”

Faith laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Ready to put on a show for me?” she asked. “I’ll get some ones and fives!”

“You see, there’s the difference,” he teased. “You come out in a school girl uniform and I’m gonna be putty anyway.” He paused. “Mentally, at least.”

She kissed him, quite chastely, and then let go of the hug. He turned and put a couple of quarters in the vending machine. The room seemed to fill with nervous energy as they waited. They looked at each other, but neither seemed to be able to break the tension. Even the bad coffee didn’t help.

The door opened and Doris appeared with a sad look on her face. He grabbed Faith’s hand. “What areas do we need to concentrate on?” he asked.

She sighed. “I’m disappointed,” she confessed. “I thought I’d get to see you again, but seeing as you both passed, I guess I won’t.”

Xander felt his mind shut down for a second. He had to shake himself to get it to wake up.

“What?”

“You passed.”

“Both of us?” Faith squeaked.

“Both of you,” Doris said with a wide smile.

“Even me?” she checked.

“Even you.”

Xander whooped as he stood, and lifted Faith and swung her around, before hugging her tightly. Faith hugged him back as hard, as she laughed. “We did it!”

“See, I told you that you aren’t dumb,” he said happily.

“I passed because you sat through all my tantrums, all my insecurity, and was with me every damn step of the way.”

“Hey,” he said mildly, “who was there when I was doubting?”

“Me,” she said smugly. “We did it, Xan.”

“You both did very well,” Mayor Wilkins voice called. He entered the room; he’d changed his sweater from earlier. “In fact, both of you would have scored in the top ten percent of your class, had you stayed in school. It is clear that you’ve both studied very hard.” He paused and offered his hand. Xander shook it, and was surprised to find it felt normal, and not creepy at all.

Faith shook his hand as well.

“Now, as I’m delighted that you’ve both passed, I’ve written you both a letter of recommendation for college.”

“I could go to college?” Faith asked, her voice very small.

“You could, there are many reputable student loan companies, and I have left the details with Doris.”

“You want to go?” Xander asked Faith.

“Maybe,” she mumbled. “Kinda, a little, dunno, would like to at least look at it.”

“Well, I don’t want to. I’d rather keep working and get on with my career. But, you know, we already have a place, we’d probably be able to swing the cost of the tuition...”

Faith was suddenly wrapped around him tightly.

The mayor chuckled. “Well, I’m sure you would prefer to go to a discotheque rather than hang about with an old person like me.” He paused. “Oh, and as you’ve both done so well, I see no reason why you can’t receive your General Educational Development certificate at the Graduation in two weeks. I’ve already talked to Principal Snyder and he is utterly delighted at your progress and looks forward to seeing you.” The mayor smiled once more. “Once more, many congratulations,” he said as he walked out.

“And from me,” Doris said, as she left them alone.

“Hey, you okay?” he asked, as he sat down. Faith looked at him, with tear-shot eyes.

She hiccupped a little laugh. “Yeah. It just hit me, you know, everything. That I’m here, I’ve got a future, and I’ve got a man whose first thought was how to help me get to my dreams.” She smiled. “Life, you know, it’s good.”

“Apart from the upcoming apocalypse?”

She snorted. “Faith the Slayer ain’t going down to anyone, not when Faith the Slayer has a real home to go to.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”

They both walked out, and got their scores in an envelope as they said goodbye to Doris. Outside, it was a gorgeous day that seemed that little bit brighter than the previous few weeks.

To their surprise, Hank was there again. This time, so was Giles.

“Congratulations,” Giles said. “Mayor Wilkins informed me that you had both passed.”

“Thanks, G-man,” Xander agreed.

“I agree. Not bad for a trial run, eh?” Hank asked.

Xander rubbed the back of his neck. “I think we were both using that excuse to take the pressure off.”

“Yeah,” Faith agreed. “I’d’ve been upset if we’d failed after all the studying we’d done. Xan practically taught me half the stuff in there.”

“What scores did you get?” Giles asked.

Xander handed him the envelope. “We haven’t looked yet.”

The Watcher opened it, and smiled. “Wow, considering that a pass is 2250, you both did exceptionally well. Faith, you got 3040, and you did really well in Math.”

“Ha, take that crazy beard dude with a triangle fetish,” Faith cheered. “So, what about my X-man?”

Xander had to keep his face still, even as his inner child geeked out at both the possessive phrase and what she had called him.

Giles sighed. “Xander, you studied for this, right?”

He nodded. “A lot.”

“Have you ever studied for a test before?”

Xander opened his mouth, and then shut it. He thought. “Only when Willow made me, and I was normally too concerned with slacking off and making jokes.”

“And this time was different?” Giles asked.

“Sure, I said I’d do it, and Faith was there working hard, I couldn’t let her, or Hank, or more importantly, myself down. They believed in me.”

Giles took off his glasses and polished them. “I’ll bet it never occurred to you that you were easily passing high school, and that if you studied more, you could get on the honor roll?”

“Huh?” he asked.

Giles sighed. “Teenagers,” he mumbled.

“Your teacher is trying to tell you that you’re smart, and if you’d put this dedication into school work, I’d be down a carpenter, and you’d be heading to college.”

“No,” Xander said, “College was never for me. I need to be moving, using my hands.”

“Well, your lowest score was 720 out of 800. In your language, and God only knows how, considering how you used to butcher my mother tongue, you scored 796.”

Xander felt his mouth drop open.

“Woohoo!” Faith cheered. “Way to go!”

He turned and grabbed Faith. “Thanks,” he whispered into her hair. “For helping fix me.”

“We did each other,” she whispered back. “And you win the bet.”

“Well, congratulations. Xander, Faith, please drop by tomorrow?” Giles asked.

They both nodded and said their goodbyes as Giles got in his car and drove off.

“That was a bit weird,” Hank pointed out.

Xander nodded his agreement. “G-man is the librarian. I spent a lot of time avoiding work in there,” he replied.

“Anyway, and this is your boss pulling rank, we’re going out for dinner to celebrate.”

“Do we need to change?” Faith asked.

“You both look fine.” They piled in to the Ford, and were driven to a slightly clichéd-looking Mexican restaurant. Inside, Xander was surprised to find Harmony, as well as an older woman there. They joined them at a table that was in the corner.

“Hey Xander, Faith, like, congratulations,” she greeted them.

“Suddenly, you knowing where we live isn’t a surprise,” Xander said dryly.

Harmony grinned. “So, you know my step-dad, and this is my mom, Charlotte.”

“Charmed,” the older woman said, before she looked impish. “I’m looking forward to hearing all the true stories about my daughter at school.”

“Mom!” Harmony yelped.

“I haven’t been there for a while, and before that, we weren’t really friends,” Xander said, “and I’m not one to pass on unsubstantiated rumor.”

Charlotte pouted, while Harmony looked relieved. Without looking up from the menu, Hank asked, “Does your expression mean that we wouldn’t approve?”

“Dad,” Harmony protested. She groaned, “Look, maybe I’ve been a bit of a bitch, but I’m still, you know, growing up and all that.”

“Enough of this,” Charlotte said. “Dirty laundry should be dealt with in private.”

“I dunno, it’s a bit like a free show,” Faith pointed out. “Besides, seeing parents that care? Bit weird for both of us.”

“Agreed. My parents care dramatically, as long as it’s for a bottle of Jack.

“But as a subject change was requested, how did you know it was congratulations?” Xander asked.

“Because if you failed, Dad was gonna take you to a dive and get you plastered.”

“You’re not that rich,” Faith interjected, causing a laugh.

A waitress popped by, and Hank ordered a barrel of bottles of Mexican beer. The waitress didn’t blink at the underage people at the table, and went to fetch it. The half-barrel, full of ice arrived almost instantly.

Faith reached out and snagged one, popping the cap with her thumb, and took a long drink, draining half the bottle. She relaxed, and leant against Xander. “That’s better,” she said with a long sigh. “Last week, we studied until eleven, and fell asleep watching a shitty movie.”

“Worth it,” Xander said, as he opened a bottle the conventional way, with the bottle opener attached to the barrel, and offered it to Charlotte, who took it with a smile. He did the same for Harmony and Hank.

Faith waited until Hank had a beer. “True. Who’d have thought that studying paid off?”

“I meant that I got to sleep with you in my arms,” Xander said.

Faith turned and looked at him. “Cheesy,” she informed him. She reached up and touched her lips to his. “Sweet, though.”

“So, what happened to you, Xander? Because, honestly, you were, like, the class clown with bad dress sense.”

“I still have bad dress sense.”

“Which is why I now buy most of his clothes,” Faith agreed. “I might not be a clothes horse, but I know what I like on my man.”

“As for me...” Xander said. “You won’t repeat this?”

Harmony looked serious. “I promise.”

“Very much so,” Hank agreed, “she’s given her word.”

“And breaking my word means no allowance,” Harmony said, “and grounding, and it’s the prom next week.”

“In short, I lost myself, and didn’t know what I was doing. So I was all set to skip town, bus ticket and all, and I met Faith on the way.”

“I was having a bad time as well, and was about to do something just as stupid. We got to talking, and decided that we could either do the thing that seemed natural, which would be something stupid, or try something different.”

“So I quit school, and went begging to Hank.”

“Who took a gamble and got a damn reliable carpenter out of it. Worked out for me.”

“And us,” Faith agreed. “So yeah, we basically just try and do things differently from our instincts. “I know Xander wanted to dance after we got the results, but instead, he realized that having a hot girl pressed against was better than any damn solo dorky dance.”

“Damn straight.”

There was a round of laughter. “Right, we ready to order?” Hank asked.

“Sure.”

“And it’s our treat, and if you’ve seen some of the blouses that Harmony wears, you’ll understand why we say order what you like.” Charlotte tucked some hair behind her ear. “They do great steaks here.”

## **Broken Faith**

### **Clearing up loose ends**

Xander changed from his work clothes and met Faith, who was waiting by the door for him. He took a deep breath.

“Nervous?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry, I went to see G earlier, and he’s not expecting any of that lot to be there this evening.”

Xander relaxed a little. “I need to face them at some stage.”

“I’ve got no real wish to face those bottom feeders back home. Problem is, you’ll probably bump into them around here sooner or later.”

“True.” They headed toward Sunnydale High School to meet up with Giles first, and then the Prom Committee, which included Harmony and Lance.

Faith took his hand and squeezed. She laughed suddenly. “Those bottom feeders wouldn’t recognize me. Faith, being girly?”

“Faith having self-confidence,” Xander retorted.

“That too. Would still kick their asses, but would celebrate with my man instead.” She moved in front of him, walking backwards at the same pace. “Speaking of which, you can stop watching your words a bit.”

“Huh?” he asked.

“You are allowed to call me your woman, you know? Coz that’s what I am. And I know I am other things as well, but I’m fucking proud that we’ve done adult shit. Anyway, my point is, you’ve gotten good at thinking before you speak, but you can still be a little spontaneous, ya know?”

He hopped forward, caught her waist, and lifted her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he kissed her, hard. And then slid his hands down and cupped her rear. She kissed him back, tensing her legs so that she rose up, her arms around his neck.

When breathing was an issue, she pulled back and looked down at him. “Forceful, I like it, remember that I’m a Slayer, Xan, not a china doll.”

“A slayer with an incredible rear.”

“So, you wanna tap that rear?”

Xander felt his face go bright red, as Faith laughed delightedly. She unwrapped her legs and stood. He reluctantly let her go. She grinned, and reached up and pecked his cheek. “I’ve never done that,” she whispered. “Might be something I give the guy I think I’ve fallen for.” She turned and marched off, her hips swaying as she raised both arms and lifted her hair, before letting it drop.

Xander whimpered and bent slightly. His jeans were a little too tight for him to be comfortable. “Think unsexy thoughts, think unsexy thoughts,” he chanted. “I’m might see Snyder.” That worked. He hurried up and caught up with Faith.

Old him would have either made a joke or accepted Faith’s win. “You still owe me a schoolgirl look. And I have this awesome pair of tight shorts that will look great with my tool belt and work boots.”

Faith actually stumbled. “You are serious?”

“There’s this dark-haired wildcat that I’m falling for,” he said, deliberately using her words, “so why not?”

“This conversation is not over,” she announced as they entered the school grounds.

“Serious déjà-vu,” Xander muttered, as they climbed the few stairs and entered via the main doors. He paused, and looked at the corridor. “Heh.”

“Heh, indeed,” Faith said. “Come on.”

They headed toward the library.

“Harris,” an overly familiar voice called.

Xander froze, and he felt Faith tense next to him. The small form of the principal made its way over to him.

“I had a phone call from the mayor,” he said, a faintly dissatisfied look on his face. “When you left school, I expected you to either come begging back, or ending up a drugged-out loser.

“Instead, you got a job, and then got your G.E.D. with a very high score. You grew up, Harris, and stopped being a slacker. Congratulations.” The principal took a deep breath. “The mayor wants you to attend the graduation, and I agree.” He took another breath. “And I want to offer you the both the chance of attending the prom.”

Xander felt absolute shock at the offer.

Snyder gave a twisted little grin. "It's up to you."

"Thank you," Faith said. "We appreciate the offer."

"Good to see you again, Harris," Snyder said, and walked off.

"Sir," Xander blurted as the man left. Snyder half turned. "Thanks." Snyder nodded and moved off. "Christ," Xander exhaled. "Didn't expect that."

"Me neither," Faith agreed. "Do you want to go? Get me all dolled up?"

"Honestly, if you're gonna get dolled up, I would rather go somewhere nice."

"Good point. Very good point. You don't wanna, you know, rub it in, you know, that you have this hot chick?"

"I would, only with people who I'd enjoy making jealous." He paused. "And a place where we don't have to act like kids to get a drink."

"I've done a fine job of corrupting you."

They entered the library. Giles had some classical music on, and was reading from a book that looked like it needed a Slayer to move.

"Now I'm conflicted," Xander said to Faith.

"Oh?"

"Part of me wants to use my education and greet the Tweed-meister in his natural language, but the other part of me still finds his reactions funny."

"True, but that ways lies dorkiness, donut runs and Hawaiian shirts."

"Indeed, so, maybe a homage, rather than a full-on descent?"

"That's allowed."

"I'm afraid it's hardly going to work when you use the word homage in the correct context, as I will know you are teasing me, rather than having the unsettling feeling that you really don't know better," Giles said without looking up.

"I think the man with a taste for unfinished wool just scored a point against me."

"He did."

"Bollocks," Xander sighed. "There, an English swearword." He took a seat, as Faith spun a chair

and straddled it, leaning on her arms.

“Again in context,” Giles murmured. “We’ll civilize you yet.”

“He’s making it hard,” Xander said.

“Not the same way I do, I hope,” Faith purred.

“Not even close.

“Okay, Giles, I hear that there’s another apocalypse on the horizon, which I am now sure is going to happen, as Snyder was just nice.”

Giles closed the book. “Ahh yes, he did mention the prom. I will reassure you that it was entirely his idea.”

“Scary,” Xander intoned.

“Right, to make a long story short. We think the Mayor is going to perform a ritual to become an Old One, a demon of phenomenal power. And as part of that, he is currently invulnerable.”

“He is a really nice guy,” Xander said. “And not creepy, which, in a weird way, makes me really concerned.”

“Yeah, I shook his hand, and didn’t even feel anything from my Slayer senses.”

“I wonder if that is because he is so supremely confident.” Giles shrugged. “There will be a magical eclipse, and while he is becoming the demon, vampires will probably take advantage of it.”

“What’s your plan for killing him?”

“Well, the only thing I can think of is massive explosions. I am going to get Buffy to entice him into a trap.”

“Wait,” Xander interrupted. “You are going to blow up part of the school?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m going to have to take part now. How are you for explosives?”

“Good, surprisingly. I’ve got some fertilizer and done a lot of research, and called a friend or two from back home, who might have spent time in Ireland.”

“And a stoichiometric formula?”

Giles gaped at him.

“That’s a point back to you,” Faith cheered. “What’s the word mean?”

Xander grinned at her. “It’s a word the demolition guy at work uses a lot. He said that it’s the measure of air and fuel needed to make things go boom.”

“Sweet.”

“A concise definition,” Giles said. “And I did forget that ‘making things go boom’ is part of construction.”

“So I need to sort out the students to help protect them from the vampires?”

“Pretty much, yes.” Giles passed them a manila folder. “Everything about the graduation ceremony is in there.”

“Thank you,” Xander said. He took it, and stood. “We’re going to have a preliminary meeting with the Prom committee. Faith and I will work on the plans for the next few days, and let you, and them, know what the plan is.”

“Thanks, Xander. And once again, congratulations to both of you. I am extremely proud.”

“Thank you,” Xander said softly, for both of them, as they walked out. “That was kinda fun.”

“It was. And you know what, I kinda like the feeling of pride I have right now.”

“Me too. Positive parental influence, it’s nice.”

“Which means we’re gonna have to stay in touch with him?”

“You know what we should do?”

“What?”

“Get some English tea and learn to make it properly, and maybe some crumpets.”

“I like this wicked little sense of humor you’re developing.” She leaned up and pecked him on the cheek.

They entered a classroom, to find it half full of students, gathered around various desks.

“Xander, Faith,” Harmony yelled cheerfully, as she rushed over, and gave them both a hug.

“Thanks for coming.”

“What the hell?” Cordelia Chase yelped. “I thought you’d jumped town.”

“Oh, did I forget to mention that to you?” Harmony asked sweetly, as she winked at Xander and Faith. “Like, my bad.”

“Cordelia,” Xander, said with a nod.

“So, rumor has it that Snyder’s invited you two to the prom. You gonna come?”

“We talked about it, but probably not,” Faith said.

“Why not?”

“Because if I’m gonna get him all dolled up in a suit, I’m gonna want him to myself.”

“What she said,” Xander agreed. “Only replacing the pronouns with the correct gender.”

“Also, we’re a bit past smuggling cheap booze in to parties,” Faith added.

“Pity,” Harmony said with a pout. “Still, less competition for Queen that way.”

“Have I entered bizarro world?” Cordelia demanded. “You know each other?”

“Deffo,” Harmony agreed.

“You don’t like anyone who doesn’t shop a Gucci, never mind Goodwill.”

“Yeah, fuck you, bitch,” Faith said, her voice calm. “So what if we do, at least it’s our own money we do it with. And frankly, you fucking preppies go through so much clothing that it’s like shopping on Fifth Avenue in the local Goodwill.”

Harmony shrugged, “Their style might be simple, but it works, and besides, Xander rocks the rugged construction worker look.”

“Damn right,” Faith said smugly. “And we were just discussing the shorts, boots and tool belt look on the way here. A gal’s gotta enjoy what she’s got.”

Harmony fanned her face dramatically. “Bitch,” she said with no heat.

“Anyway, shall we talk about why we are here?”

“I guess,” Harmony said, as she moved back.

Xander moved over in front of the desk, and looked at all the students. “Yes, shit is going to go down. Sensible thing would be for you all to catch the flu.”

“We can’t miss graduation,” Chris Epps said, “Sunnydale by-laws from the seventies means we don’t graduate until we attend the ceremony. Besides, we’d attend anyway. Sometimes, there are things you just gotta do.”

“How long has this fucker been planning this?” Faith wondered out loud.

“The shit is going to come from his Mayorness.” He held up a hand. “And yes, we’ve met him, he

is a really nice guy, and ask yourself this, how many nice guys do you know that are a success in politics?”

The people who had been about to protest subsided, some looking sheepish.

“Faith and I are going to look through the plans and come up with something,” Xander continued. “In the meantime, Harmony, I need you to start a new fashion trend.”

Harmony blinked. “I can do that.” She paused, and then smiled. She turned, “See, I told you we needed to get someone who can give us realistic jobs. What’s the trend, because I can even pull off Hawaiian shirts?”

“Nothing quite as wild as that. I’m gonna suggest religious iconography.”

“Huh?”

“Crosses, Stars of David, plenty of religious jewelry.” He reached out and lightly tapped Faith’s necklace. “It would be even better if you could work out a way of using them as epaulettes as well.”

“No problem,” Harmony stated with confidence. “By the time I’m done, you’re gonna think that this is a Catholic school.”

“Speaking of which, you know where I can get one of those cute little schoolgirl skirts? I owe my man a bet,” Faith asked.

Most of the males in the room stared at Faith. Xander moved his arm and pulled Faith closer. “Mine,” he growled.

“I love it when he gets all possessive,” Faith smirked. “So, yeah, make with the fashion, and we’ll see you on Thursday with some real plans.”

“Sweet,” Harmony exclaimed. “Thanks, guys. And Faith, I’ve got one you can borrow. And it’s easy to clean if it gets, uh, like stained.”

Faith nodded, and they turned and walked out.

“Wait,” Cordelia called, as they were in the hallway.

“Yes?” Xander asked.

“What do you mean, ‘yes’?”

Xander shrugged.

“You just vanish, and then turn up, acting all friends with that ditz.”

“I think we are actually friends with Harmony,” Faith said after a few seconds. “Which is admittedly strange.”

“And you!” Cordelia yelled. “You knew where he was all the time.”

“You were all being bitches,” Faith replied. “And not one of you asked.”

“Come on,” Xander said to Faith.

Cordelia pushed past them and stood in their way. “I’m not done with you.”

Xander looked at her. She was still as beautiful as he remembered, but he had no emotional attachment to her any more. He hadn’t really even thought about her in ages. “I am sorry about what happened; you didn’t deserve that.”

Cordelia looked shocked.

He walked past her, Faith going the other way, before she could recover.

“So,” Faith said innocently. “What happened?”

“We we’re dating, Willow and I were captured, I thought we were gonna die, so I kissed her. We were found, Cordelia ended up with a piece of rebar through her stomach.”

“Right, new rule,” Faith said. “We both screwed up a lot, so we can’t take offence about shit that happened before that night we found each other. And I say that because if that’s your deep and dark secret, you’re a fucking boy scout compared to me.”

“I think I know that,” Xander said. “And you’re right, the past is that.”

Faith grabbed his arm and held it close. He was in no way able to ignore the feeling of her generous bust against his arm.

“Come on, let’s go plan.”

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“Fucking teenagers,” Faith groaned as he arrived home. There was a beer ready for him, as she relaxed on the couch.

He shrugged, removed his jacket and boots, and then toppled directly onto her. She didn’t make a sound, as one hand went under him, and she shifted them both so she was draped over him. “I might be stronger, but you’re bigger, and if we’re gonna chat,” she explained without finishing her sentence.

“So, Cordelia couldn’t keep her whore mouth shut, so B and W were all in my face today, and then it turns out that a load of kids actually liked you, and as they now know that we are together, they

were asking me to give you the congrats for passing the G.E.D. and not, you know, being a fucking failure.”

Xander chuckled.

“And practically all of them want us to come to the damn prom.”

“That’s probably because Harmony and the other seniors want us to go,” Xander mused, “and the rest of the kids are just following along.”

“Oh,” Faith said, before she poked him. “I prefer my version where others saw through your jokes and realized that you are a good man, so we’re sticking with that, okay?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“So, what are we gonna plan to keep these kids safe.” She paused. “And not that I don’t dig the confidence, because I really do, but, can you do it?”

“Yes,” he said. “I was possessed by the spirit of a soldier last Halloween. Got a few memories, and I was digging through them today.” He scooted out from under her and grabbed some paper and a pen, and started to explain what he had come up with.

Faith had simply draped herself over his back, so she could read over his shoulder. Which didn’t do that much for his concentration, as he could feel her pressed tightly against his back, and he was pretty sure she wasn’t wearing a bra.

She whistled as he finished. “Right, no arguing from you, we’re going to advanced second base.” She turned him, whipped her top off, and kissed him really quite seriously.

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After work on Thursday, they headed back to school. “You know B and W aregonna be there?”

He nodded. It was fine, it might hurt a little, but he could deal with it. He paused. “I can deal with it,” he told her. “When I’m working, I can think clearly. I had a ton of issues with the lot of them, and I’ve worked through a lot. I was crushing so hard on Buffy, had a holy-shit-Willow’s-a-girl moment, and Cordelia had big tits and was my best friend’s dream girl.”

Faith laughed.

“And you know what word I associate with them now?”

“No?”

“Boring.”

“Really?”

“Yup, not one of them would announce second base and then pounce on me. Everything with them is tied up in, well, practically the entire Western Culture.”

“And then you have me, who thinks, fuck that.”

“Exactly.”

“And what if I change?”

“Pfft,” Xander said, as he turned and crowded her against a wall, one of her feet raised so that it was flat against the wall, and he straddled her knee, well aware of the damage she could do. Her arms went up and rested on his shoulders. “First, we’ve changed,” he told her, “both of us, grown up a bit, but we ain’t gonna grow up much more. Why should we? We’re young, soon we’re gonna have transport, and we’ll take off and see the country for a couple of weeks, before I go back to work and you get ready for college.”

“Secondly, the way things are going, if you do change, I’m gonna be right next to you, changing as well.”

“But you’re talking about surface things, and that ain’t important.” He tapped her chest, over her heart, “because inside here, inside your heart and soul, is a kick ass wildcat, and you are never gonna lose that.”

“Fuck, Xan,” she whispered, “I swear you are the only guy in the world who understands me, and it’s kinda scary, in a way, but fucking great in another.” She tightened her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. She sighed. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

He took her hand, and they strolled into school. Rather than avoid the issue, they headed to the library, to find Giles alone. The elder man looked up. “They are waiting for you with the prom committee.”

“You wanna come? I’m gonna explain what I’m planning.”

“Honestly, no,” Giles replied instantly. “This is going to be an American soap opera.”

“Probably,” Xander agreed. “It won’t be as gritty and dark as EastEnders, and we all have shiny teeth and clear complexions.”

“And the girls have great boobs,” Faith added. “And we all look like we’re well past jailbait.”

“Indeed,” Giles said dryly.

“Oh, that’s just not fair, that accent is far better suited to dryness,” Xander complained.

“True,” Faith agreed, tapping her finger to the corner of her mouth. “Personally, I prefer yours, though. It’s a little more obvious that you’re teasing. I might know you, but others, not so much.”

“I guess. Come, Giles, let us brave the horrors of teenagers in their natural environment.”

“If I must.”

“You must.” The three of them walked the halls to the prom committee. Xander opened the door and entered.

He froze, as Buffy stormed toward him, drew her hand back, and launched a punch. He braced for the pain, when Faith moved like a blur of dark hair. She caught the fist, diverted it, kicked Buffy’s legs out, and smacked her face into the floor. “I don’t know what the hell you are thinking, you stupid bitch, but you do not get to touch Xander, let alone try and fucking punch him. And seriously, resorting to violence without a word? Grow the fuck up, you stupid child.”

Faith dropped Buffy’s head.

“Thanks,” Xander said to her.

“Wow, she can get me angry,” Faith sighed. She looked at Giles. “You win another point.”

“Hurrah,” Giles said blandly, as he looked disdainfully at the now-embarrassed Buffy.

“And seriously, attacking someone we asked to come here, totally un-cool,” Harmony pointed out with a sniff. “But hey, Faith was cool. Hi guys!”

Xander looked at Harmony’s blouse, complete with silver crosses embossed up and down the collar and shoulders. “Nice.”

She smiled happily at him.

“Right, the G-man might have an unnatural affinity for all things tweedy, but he’s also got some really eclectic skills. He’s come up with half the plan to deal with the large issue, and believe me, this ceremony is gonna go down in history.

“But what can we, we poor graduating class do to live up to this infamy?” he asked rhetorically. “We just can’t let a teacher have all the fun, right?”

There were some nervous chuckles as the students gathered around. Willow, Buffy and Cordelia stood near Giles at the back.

“We’re all aware of the fact that Sunnydale is, somehow, the gang capital of the world, with a seemingly endless stream of thugs that come around, so many, in fact, that we’re pretty sure they get imported.”

“We’re just that damn lucky,” a guy who Xander barely remembered said.

“Indeed. Now, we are all aware that violence begets violence,” he continued, “and as staunch graduating students, we wouldn’t want to go around that, would we?”

There as some weird looks. “Which is why we’re gonna prepare for a prank.”

“A prank?” Harmony asked.

Xander reached into the bag on his shoulder, and pulled out a plastic device that looked like a video game gun. “This,” he said, “is the MasterSprayer 3000. It’s got a range of thirty feet. Before the graduation, the senior class is gonna have a pre-party at Harmony’s house.”

“Yay,” Harmony cheered.

“At lunch time today, I had a chat with Father Michael Crook at St Martin’s. Turns out, he was a bit of delinquent in his youth, and he appreciates a good prank, especially when it doesn’t harm any humans. So he’s gonna pop by and say a few words before we come to the ceremony.

“And if those words happen to be over Harmony’s swimming pool, and we all fill up the water pistols, well, it just means that our water prank will be sanctified by God himself, and no politician, no matter how powerful, will be able to deal with that.”

“I, like, totally win,” Harmony crowed. “I told you that he’d come up with something.”

Xander chuckled. “Some of the gang members might be tough, so we’re not fighting, our job is containment, while the expert does the fighting.”

Faith smiled and bowed demurely. “I’ve got plenty of experience,” she said confidently, “and if they are distracted, it will be the biggest slaughter since a bunch of clever Greeks left a giant horse in front of the gates of Troy.”

“We can help fight,” Lance said. “We’re strong.”

Faith moved over and grabbed Lance. She twisted slightly, and then raised him over her head, one hand on his chest, the other grabbing his trousers between his knees for balance. She pressed him a few times, before putting him down. “Any of you do that?”

All the boys looked at her in shock, as they shook their heads.

“And that’s why,” Xander finished. “So, any questions?”

“Shouldn’t we bring guns?” one of the guys asked.

“Two problems with that,” Xander replied, “and I did think about it. The first problem is that these,” he made his voice dry, “drugged up gang members on P.C.P.,” he returned to his normal voice, “won’t even feel them. The second problem is that if you miss, you hit one of ours. If you miss with the water pistol, why, then, someone gets a little wet and it’s all just a big laugh.”

There were plenty of nods of agreement.

“What about others who are visiting?” one of the girls asked.

“I’ll be explaining that at the party,” Xander said.

“What about the police?” Another girl asked.

There were several snorts from students. “I’m sure that we’ll see our hard-earned tax dollars at work just after the problem has been dealt with,” Xander said, trying to keep his tone level.

“Now, the more important question,” Harmony interrupted. “How do we get you guys to the prom?”

“You don’t,” Xander said, going for his dry tone again.

“Almost as good as Giles,” Faith praised with a grin.

“Seriously, our idea of a good night is the local Italian.”

“The prom is, like, the celebration we got through school,” Harmony said. The other students were nodding their agreement.

“I didn’t, though,” Xander pointed out.

“Yeah, but that’s coz you were friends with geckos.”

Xander closed his eyes, and thought desperately. “Do you mean chameleons?”

“That’s the one! I’ve always been a bitch in school, they hide their bitchiness.”

Xander chuckled. “There’s also the practicalities. We don’t have the money to blow on new clothes for one night, or do any of the other things that tradition dictates.”

“We’ve got a bunch of suits that’ll fit you,” Harmony said breezily, “and, like, my wardrobe has enough prom dresses to fit out the entire graduating classes, I’ve got one that Faith would look awesome in.”

“Faith would look awesome in a sack,” Xander pointed out with a sigh, as he saw Faith grinning at him.

“Yeah,” Lance agreed. “And a bunch of us are sharing a limo, there’s easily enough room for two more.”

There were several sounds of agreement from other students.

“Fine,” Xander groaned. “Please tell me that the theme isn’t tacky.”

“Well, I like tack,” Harmony said with a pout, “but I was outvoted, so we’re going traditional.”

“We’ll come. But do not spike the damn punch.”

“Why not?”

“Because you always find the cheapest booze to do it with, and it tastes like shit.”

There was a round of laughter.

“So we can spike it with decent stuff.”

“No, cheap booze makes the fruit taste bad, expensive booze should not be wasted on fruit!”

“Man has a point,” one of the football players muttered. “No wasting good booze on punch, no ruining good punch with crap booze.”

“Well, I suppose that means I won’t end up drunk, and apologizing to everyone, puking, and ending up sleeping somewhere I shouldn’t,” Harmony said happily.

“You’ve thought about that way too much,” Faith stated.

Harmony waved her hand airily. “Right, meeting’s like, over.”

It was a much happier group of students who walked out. As they did, Xander noticed that they had all experienced strong religious conversions, judging by their clothes.

At the end it was only Harmony, along with what he once referred to as the Scooby gang. “You guys want me to stay in here, moral support and all that?” Harmony asked.

“You are a blonde bimbo, and a bitch,” Faith said. “You probably don’t eat enough, and you’ve clearly spent more time in-fighting and plotting than actual learning.” Before Harmony could react, Faith continued, “So just why I like you, I do not know.” She reached forward and hugged the blonde. “But I do.”

“Cool!” Harmony said and giggled. “In that case, I’ll wait in my car; I’ll give you two a lift.”

“Thanks, Harmony,” Xander said. The girl smiled, raised a finger at the others, and sashayed out.

“Xander, an excellent plan,” Giles said. “I was concerned about how to protect the students. And Faith, where does the horse come from?”

“Dunno originally, but it was mentioned in the Illiad, by the epic story telling Greek dude Homer.”

Giles tilted his head, “Is that how you remember the Greeks?”

“Weird triangle dude with the funky beard,” Xander agreed. “Pythagoras.”

“Greek with way too much time on his hands, who believed what he could see,” Faith added, “Aristotle.”

“A good mnemonic,” Giles praised. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Faith.”

“Five-by-five, G-man,” Faith agreed.

That just left the five of them, three one side, two the other. The door opened, and Oz appeared. He looked around, and spotted Willow. “Hey,” he greeted. “Sorry I’m late.” He looked around and spotted Xander. He shrugged and nodded.

Xander nodded back.

“Just so we’re clear, no violence.”

“Lucky,” Buffy mumbled with a glare at Faith.

Faith sighed, and Xander wrapped an arm around her when she didn’t respond. “Proud of you,” he whispered into her hair. He looked at the other four. “If we’re just gonna glare, we’re gonna head out.”

“I’ve got dinner ready,” Faith told him.

“Wait!” Buffy yelled, as they started to move. “What the hell?”

“I said that,” Cordelia muttered.

“Look, you guys told me you didn’t need me,” Xander said. “At the time, I went through a major crisis of confidence, and I was ready to skip town. I stumbled across Faith after she killed that demon, and she still thought it was a human.”

“Yeah, we argued, talked, and realized we were both fucked up,” Faith added. “So we decided to see if we could fix each other.” She cocked her head. “Honestly, I think he’s fixed me, and done a pretty good job of fixing himself, but he’d say the opposite.”

“So, anyway, the past is gone,” Xander said. “I am sorry for any worry, not a huge amount, but a bit.”

“I’m not sorry, but I don’t really like any of you,” Faith said cheerily.

“You can’t go,” Willow yelped. “You promised me.”

Xander smiled at her sadly. “You let me off that promise when you agreed with Buffy,” he said gently. “I had to find my own path, and my own future.” He took a deep breath. “Look, I know you didn’t do it out of malice or anything like that, so I’m really not angry. But I was upset and hurt, and I know you didn’t realize. And I think it was that that hurt, you know? That you didn’t realize that you broke me, I know, now, that I overreacted, that everything was too much, but it doesn’t matter. That’s the past, and we are all moving forward.”

Willow looked devastated.

Faith groaned, she turned and punched him in the arm, lightly, “You’re a damn do-gooder,” she muttered. “Look, it doesn’t mean we can’t try and be friends, but honestly, if you talk down to me, or to him, it ain’t gonna happen. You wanna be friendly, I’ll reciprocate.”

They headed to the door. “So that’s it, you’re just gonna walk out?” Buffy demanded.

“Yup, we’re both said our pieces, you know where we are coming from, we’re open to being friendly in the future, but that will have to be friendship with the people we are slowly becoming, now who we were. Door’s open, if you want to step through it.” Xander paused. “Later, Oz.”

The boy nodded, and they left.

Xander exhaled. “I feel good.”

Faith laughed and hugged his arm. They headed out to the car park, where Harmony was perched on the hood of a Lexus.

“Not exactly my style,” she said with a smile, “but it’s comfy and looks good.”

Xander sat in the back, letting Faith ride shotgun. It was pretty roomy. “You know, you need a cute little cap, Harmony,” he teased. “Home, please.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Harmony called back, as she drove out of the school parking lot.

“That makes me the official bodyguard,” Faith said. “I need some sunglasses.”

Harmony popped a button on the roof of the car, an opening folded down, and a pair of sunglasses dropped out. Faith grabbed them and put them on. She pressed a finger to her ear. “Control, come in.” She paused. “Have picked up the pretentious butt-wipe, we are proceeding to next destination.”

Harmony laughed, as Xander pouted.

Faith leaned over and looked back, and shot him a grin and a salute.

“As I’m still the boss,” he said portentously. “You shall be punished later.”

“Oh?”

“Yup, I shall tan that pretty rear of yours.”

“And what about the punishment?”

Xander found it very difficult not to go to his happy place.

Faith pulled back, “He keeps forgetting that I’m more adventurous than him,” she told Harmony.

“I wish I had your confidence,” Harmony sighed. “I just end up giving blow jobs to get out of trouble.”

Xander went silent, and looked out the window. He pretended he wasn't listening.

“Ahh, yeah, I was like that a few years ago,” Faith agreed. “Before I learnt to fight, it meant that if I did get in trouble, I could deal with it. I then took control of my sex life back. And I thought that was what I wanted, until I found something more, something deeper. It's weird, you know?”

“No,” Harmony sighed. “Fighting is hard, though.”

“Maybe I should show you some moves?”

“Really?”

“Xan, you mind sitting on a chair and watching two girls rolling on the floor and getting all close?”

“Tease,” He replied.

“Not if I'm willing to follow through,” Faith pointed out. “Take us to your place, Harmony.”

“Go ahead. I have an imagination formed by Tolkien. Sure, it means Harmony will be Galadriel and you'll be Arwen, and both of you will have pointy ears, but it's better than no imagination.”

“Huh?” Harmony asked.

“He just called us two of the most beautiful Elves in The Lord of the Rings,” Faith explained. “I'm halfway through the second book.”

“You read?” Harmony asked.

“Yeah, I'm surprised, too.”

Harmony pulled into their driveway, and they headed through the house to the back garden. Xander took a seat on a deck chair and settled back.

“Right, first thing. The guy is in front of you.” Faith moved in front of Harmony. “Kick him in the shin, especially if you have pointy shoes. As he moves, knee him in the crotch.” She demonstrated slowly, and then let Harmony do the same. “When you knee, make sure you put your hips into it.”

Harmony made the movements a few times, as Faith corrected her.

“Right, next. Come on, Xan, let me hit you a few times.”

“Yay,” he said dryly.

“You’ll get to grab my boobs.”

“Yay,” he said again, changing his tone.

Harmony giggled. “Behind me,” Faith said, “and grab.”

He walked behind her, “Hey, sweetie,” he said, mimicking a drunken slur. He put his arms around her in a bear hug, and did indeed slide his hands over her breasts.

“Right, in most cases, he will be stronger than you,” Faith explained. “Normally, you just shoot your hand forward, and then back, into his stomach.” She demonstrated, Xander made an “Oof” sound, as he let her go. “Again,” Faith said.

He moved and grabbed her again.

“If that doesn’t work, then watch this.” Faith stomped on his instep, hard, but not as hard as he knew she could. She then twisted, and her hand shot under her, and fortunately, for any future Harris, she pulled the punch.

“Wow,” Harmony whistled.

“Wow indeed,” Charlotte called. Xander looked up, to see here with a tray loaded with four drinks.

“You should join in, Mom,” Harmony said. “Faith’s showing me some self-defense moves.”

“So I see,” Charlotte said. She offered them all a drink, and then sat down as they did.

“Oh,” Xander said, “I kinda volunteered your pool and house for a pre-graduation party.”

“That’s fine,” Charlotte agreed. “Harmony told me that people are having a weird feeling about it, and that you’re helping.” She paused. “I’m having a weird feeling, as well.”

“Xander came up with the idea of a holy prank. We are all going to have big water pistols, and a priest is popping over to bless the pool,” Harmony added.

“That sounds harmless,” Charlotte agreed.

“It’s often been noted that gangs on P.C.P. have such powerful hallucinations that they believe that the holy water is affecting them.”

Charlotte’s eyes cleared and she smiled. “Good idea, harmless, but they believe it. I’ll order some of the water pistols.”

“Cool, Mom.”

Xander finished the drink.

“So, is it my turn to have my boobs caressed?” Harmony asked.

“No,” Faith said. “My man, my boobs.” She didn’t look upset, just amused.

Harmony pouted. “That bit looked fun.”

“It was. Which is why I’m being selfish about it.”

“Meany.”

“Yeah,” Faith agreed. “Come on, Mrs K, you can have first go.”

“Oh, my,” She said, as she stood up. She looked at Xander. “Does the same answer go for me?” she purred.

Xander felt himself go red.

Faith laughed. “Oh, a cougar wants my boy-toy. Come, Xan, grab the lady.”

Xander shook his head as he moved behind Charlotte, he grabbed her, making sure he missed her chest.

“Now, stomp on his instep,” Faith called. “If you’re wearing heels, you might be able to break a bone, and you can then take the shoes off and run.”

Charlotte did, he felt her trainers, but as he was still wearing his work boots, it wasn’t painful, but he released her a little.

“Now twist, and as you do, sink down, so his arms are around your shoulders, and you are free. Then, use everything you have to smack into his crotch. But don’t you dare hit him!”

Charlotte performed the movements, and then grinned as Xander released her. “This is gonna be fun,” she said. “While you get Harmony through that move, I’m gonna quickly go and sort out dinner for five. You two don’t get to leave without being fed.” She trotted off.

“Well, I think we’ve been told,” Faith said to Xander.

“Oh,” Harmony exclaimed. “You don’t know the gossip!”

“What gossip?”

“It turns out that the Chases haven’t been paying their taxes. The IRS has seized everything, even Cordelia’s prom dress!” She looked gleeful.

“You want some advice, Harmony?” Xander asked.

“No,” she said with a pout, “Cause I can tell it’s gonna be adult advice, and good advice, and it

will make me feel like the shallow bitch I am, and probably take away my gloating.”

Xander and Faith both laughed. “I think that’s why I like you,” Faith declared. “You know what you are.”

“Go on, then, Xander, hit me,” Harmony sighed.

“You should let Cordelia borrow one of your dresses.”

“But I don’t like her, she’s not a real friend like you guys, she’s just a fellow school bitch.”

“So, think of it like this. You could know she is humiliated and not at the prom. Or you can help her, and never mention it to her again, but every time you meet, she will know that it was you that saved her reputation.”

“Oh,” Harmony said. “It’s like, being classy, right?”

“Yeah.”

Harmony thought for a moment, the expression looking a little foreign on her face. “And we’ll either end up proper friends, or if we don’t, I’ll know that I did a good thing?”

Xander nodded.

“Wow, that’s, like, super sneaky revenge, and, others will realize, and I’ll look good, especially if I don’t rub it in, or be a bitch about it. Is this what growing up is like?”

“A little,” Xander said. “None of us are saints, sometimes we need a different reason to help others, and finding that is a way of talking yourself into doing the right thing.”

“That makes loads of sense,” Harmony said with a nod. As Charlotte rejoined them, she looked at her mom. “I’m gonna go phone Cordy, tell her she can borrow any of my dresses,” she said, and dashed off.

“Okay, how did you two perform that miracle? Her gloating was getting so bad I was contemplating pushing her into the pool!”

“Xan just framed it in a way she could understand,” Faith said.

“Thank you. I’m going to give her some positive parental reinforcement when she goes back.” Charlotte sighed and tucked her blonde hair behind her ear. “It’s my fault, of course. My divorce took up most of my attention for three years of fighting, while I took the cheating bastard to the cleaners. It was only when I met Hank that I started to look at the air-head I’d managed to mis-raise.”

“She’s a good girl inside,” Faith said. She shrugged. “I wouldn’t be friends with her otherwise.”

Charlotte smiled.

“But enough talk; let’s go back to why we’re here and not snuggled on a couch. Stand like this, Mrs K.”

It was late when they got home, after an entertaining evening, and he headed straight to bed, while Faith went for a patrol.

## **Broken Faith As a couple**

Xander finished work at lunchtime on the Saturday of the prom, and headed straight home. He showered, and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. He collapsed on the couch, just as Faith wandered, bleary eyed, into the living room. She was in a pair of what looked like his boxers and a tank top. She dropped into his lap, and rested her head on his shoulder. "Patrol ran late," she murmured. "Some asshole was fucking with Hellhounds because he couldn't get a date. I ended up slaying the damn hounds and then broke his jaw for being a dick."

Xander laughed softly.

"Anyway, it was just luck that I spotted one as I was coming home."

He stroked her back, and tried not to think about the fact she was obviously not wearing a bra.

"This is nice," she mumbled. He felt her drift off again, and settled back, and allowed his mind to drift.

Faith shifted, and then yawned and stretched. She kissed him lightly. "You make a great pillow. And we're gonna have a follow up discussion on that subject shortly. I'm gonna get dressed and have a shower. I left you some lunch in the fridge."

"Thanks."

She stood and sauntered away from him; he watched her leave and then headed to the kitchen for some food.

They walked over to Hank and Charlotte's mansion, and were greeted by a Harmony who looked to be on an immense sugar high. "Xan, we left a tux in there for you," she pointed. "And some shoes, Dad got your size from when his secretary ordered your work boots. Games room is through there, Faith and I will see you in four hours. Oh, and I dropped Cordy her dress off earlier. Being classy was fun. See you later." And with that, she was gone, Faith in tow.

"Oh," he said.

"Come on through, Xander," Hank called. "The Diamondbacks are playing."

"You're a baseball fan?"

“Dad was a fan; so I’ve always supported them.”

Xander took a seat on the arm chair next to Hanks, and took the beer that was offered.

“It takes about 3 minutes to put a tux on, so you may as well enjoy the game.”

Xander couldn’t remember the last time he had watched any baseball, but the rules and boredom soon came back. They got some snacks, and hotdogs, at the bottom of the fifth, which helped the second half.

Charlotte joined them after a while, sitting next to Hank. She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“What’s that for?”

“For putting up with Harmony,” she said dryly. “I know we’re a package deal but, she drives me nuts at times. Faith has the patience of a saint.”

“Faith has a twisted sense of humor,” Xander corrected.

Charlotte laughed. “Yeah, that’ll do it. Anyway, they will be ready on time, if only because Faith is stopping Harmony from going to overboard.”

As the game finished with a win for Arizona, he left a happy Hank and put on the tux. While it was lower-class, he appreciated the clip-on bow tie. He checked in a huge mirror, and was surprised at himself.

His hair was a little longer, but looked good, and he had shoulders he didn’t really remember having. They were the result of spending all day carrying heavy planks of wood around, and then using the air gun to hammer them into place.

He walked back into the games room.

Hank smiled, as Charlotte whistled. “Well, it’s a good thing my daughter knows that Faith is a great fighter, or she might be tempted.”

“Nah,” Xander replied with a laugh. He wasn’t Harmony’s type.

“We’re ready,” Harmony called from the top of the stairs. Xander headed back out to the entrance hall, as Charlotte joined him a second later, camera in hand.

Harmony was wearing a light green strapless dress that was tight around her waist and fell gracefully to her ankles. Matching heels peeked out from underneath. Her hair was loose, and curled subtly under her ears, as it draped over her shoulders.

“Wow,” he said with appreciation. “You look great.” He paused. “And where’s your date?”

“Oh, he’ll be in soon, with the limo,” she said as she hit the bottom step. “I’ll do another entrance

for him, but I wanted to check I look good first.”

“You do.”

“And I wanted to watch you as Faith came down,” she added cheerfully.

A noise drew his attention and he immediately forgot how to breathe. The dress was far more demure than he had expected. It was a floor length royal blue dress, with an embroidered elongated sheer bodice, and three-quarter-length sleeves, with a V-neck. Her hair was pulled back into a bun. The only jewelry she was wearing was the cross he had given her. Even her ears were bare.

She glided toward him, blue pumps peeking out the bottom of the dress.

He suddenly remembered that breathing was of the good. She looked at him, her expression neutral, and he could see the soft touches of eyeliner highlighting her brilliant brown eyes and the extra reddish tinge to her lips.

“Fuck me,” he whispered automatically ducking the swipe that came from Charlotte. “Every time I think I understand how beautiful you are, you change something and completely blow everything out the water.”

The neutral expression faded, and the smile, a smile he suddenly realized was only ever given to him, appeared. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out the surprise he’d nipped out at lunch for the previous day.

“But, that cross doesn’t suit the dress.”

“You gave it to me,” Faith said, as if that was the best reason in the world to wear it.

He moved his hands forward and opened the box. Faith gasped softly, and Xander forgot his nervousness. They were here, in someone else’s house, in borrowed clothing, and all of the hosts were definitely wearing items far more expensive than the silver cross he was offering.

Faith immediately removed the bigger one, and turned, so that he could put the silver one on her. He slid his hands up, and brushed her neck, caressing her smooth skin as tenderly as he could, as he managed to hook the necklace on the second try. She turned under his hands, and met his eyes again, and she didn’t need to verbalize anything, he knew, he understood.

She gave him a crooked little smile, as her hands reached up and brushed his shoulders. “Mine,” she whispered.

“Yeah.”

“So that’s what you meant when you said that the price doesn’t matter, but the thought!” Harmony said.

For a second, Xander was embarrassed, until he saw that Faith was laughing. “Tramps like us, baby we were born to run,” she whispered. Her smile turned impish, “I let you in, you are my friend, and you guard my dreams and visions.”

“If only you could also remember my lessons on tact, and time and place,” Charlotte moaned.

“You gotta remember, Harmony,” Faith explained, turning in his arms once more, and leaning against his chest, “that we’ve never had money. I’m trailer park trash with an alky mum and a dead dad; he’s got two alkies for parents. So yes, I know we can’t really afford presents like this, but it is obvious Xan got it for me, and that he’s looked at what prom dresses are generally like, and I know that it means another Sunday morning when he’s got up and worked for me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Harmony said, “I didn’t mean anything, it was just, so beautiful.”

“You’re an airhead,” Faith said with a little smile, “but you’re growing up.”

“A little,” she agreed and rolled her eyes. “Still can put my foot in it, though.”

The doorbell rang, and Harmony made an ‘eek’ sound, before she dashed up the stairs. Hank moved over to the door, and opened it.

“Er, is Harmony ready, sir?”

“Come in,” Hank said with a sigh. Xander returned the nod he was given as Mitch Fargo entered, in a tux as well. He was carrying a box in one hand.

“I thought about that,” he whispered.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Faith replied as softly. “I prefer this.” She played with the cross. He watched, and only let his eyes drift down to her cleavage once or twice. Maybe three times, but certainly no more than four.

Harmony made an appearance at the top of the staircase and descended slowly, as Mitch smiled. “You look great,” he praised. “I got you this.”

“Thanks,” Harmony replied as she took the white corsage, and then turned to her mother to pin it. Mitch and Charlotte both looked a little surprised.

“Right, photos,” Charlotte said. Xander moved Faith back, and out of the way. “Don’t you two go anywhere, you’re next,” she announced. She made the two teens pose for them, and they did, they were both good looking, and in expensive clothing, but Xander felt that they had no real chemistry.

“Don’t look at the camera, look at me,” Faith whispered some advice. “Forget it exists.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

They moved in front of the stairs, and as Faith suggested, he did look at her, and it was easy to forget the rest of the world existed, when her eyes were looking at him like they were. He reached out, and took her hand, raising it so that he could kiss the back, while keeping his eyes locked on hers. He really wanted to kiss her properly, but he didn't want to muss her make-up.

She moved her hand and took possession of his, she leaned in, "Face the camera," she exhaled, and as she did, she turned and he caught her smile out of the corner of his eye, and it evoked a similar response in him.

"Happy?" Faith asked.

"Very," Charlotte agreed. "Right, it's time for you kids to get going."

"Don't worry, Mrs K," Faith said, "we'll look after ya girl."

Xander hid a chuckle at the expression on Mitch's face, but was surprised by the pleased look on Harmony's.

The limo was white and gaudy, "We're gonna have to find how we can get you to look good and wear dresses on a bike."

Faith laughed. "Now that's my sort of thinking," she approved. She headed in first, pausing just long enough for him to admire her rear, before they scooted up. Inside, it was luxurious, but tacky at the same time. The seats were leather, but not actually that comfortable.

"Yeah, definitely biking it next time," Faith murmured. They didn't really join in the conversation as they picked up another three couples. The limo pulled to a stop outside the main entrance, which allowed them to pile out. Xander went first this time, so he could help Faith out. Not that she really needed it, she had too much core strength to be off balance, but he liked having his arm around her.

"This is Mrs K's dress," Faith said quietly, as they queued at the entrance. "The prom dresses were more before-me, nice, but a little revealing, and tonight ain't the night for it."

"I like revealing dresses, but you do look utterly stunning like this. Elegant."

"Xander, you like me in anything," Faith pointed out.

"And out of it as well."

Faith elbowed him in the stomach, but she had an amused cast to her face. She turned and kissed him on the cheek. "I did say you should stop filtering. My mistake," her tone was teasing.

They entered through an arch way. "Fuck, we shoulda said no, and gone down the Italian," Faith murmured.

"I can put up with this as long as I have you to look at."

“Sweet, but corny.”

“Wanna do the traditional swaying to music?”

“You just want to get your hands on me.”

“Of course.”

“Good. I’ve been wanting to run my hands over the tux since I saw you.” They moved over to the dance floor, and joined several others.

To his complete lack of surprise, Faith was a far better dancer than he was. He tried not to think and just responded to her.

“Good boy,” she whispered into his ear as they finished the third dance. They headed to a table, and joined Harmony, Mitch, and a bunch of other people.

“When did you learn to dance, Xander?” Harmony asked. “I mean, I expected Faith to be able to, but you were looking good.”

“Thanks,” Xander replied. “It’s all down to my partner, she makes me look good.”

“True,” Faith agreed with no trace of modesty. “But it helps having a guy as strong as he is.”

Xander looked at Faith. “Drink?”

“Please.”

“Harmony, Mitch?”

“Please,” Harmony said, as Mitch shook his head negatively.

Xander walked along to the punch bowl, and added a small amount to a glass, and tasted it. He was relieved that it didn’t taste of anything but fruit and lemonade. He poured three glasses, and picked them up. He turned, and saw Guy Matthews approaching Faith. He chuckled to himself, and moved out of the way, and took the long way around.

Faith didn’t need a White Knight to save her from other men.

He watched her shake her head, and then sigh. Guy reached out with a hand, and Faith caught it, twisted violently, slammed his head into the table (which Xander was pleased to see didn’t buckle) before she stood briefly and tossed him into a dark corner, and sat back down again. The whole thing took less than three seconds.

He handed Harmony her drink, as he sat back next to Faith, and gave her hers. “Thanks,” she said.

“Have fun?”

“I’m more relaxed,” she agreed. “Wanted me to leave the loser and get with someone who drives a vintage Chevy.”

“Ouch,” Xander said dryly.

Faith rolled her eyes.

“He’s been a jerk since Cordelia embarrassed him,” Harmony announced. She looked excited at what she had just seen. Mitch, on the other hand, looked more than a little scared of Faith.

“B and the others just arrived,” Faith said. “Cordy’s dating Wes.”

“Huh, thought he had gone back to Britland.”

“Nah, he’s just been out the few times you dropped in. I think G doesn’t really like him that much.”

Harmony and Mitch got up to dance, leaving the two of them to be able to talk quietly. “Oh, and B and Angel have split.”

“You know,” Xander said, “I’m pleased, but I expected to feel pleasure, and I don’t.”

“Come on, I wanna be back in your arms for a bit. We gotta find a way to pass the time.”

“Having you in my arms is never just a way to pass the time.”

Faith dragged him up, and turned, her arms resting on his shoulders. “That one got to me,” she said with a little smile.

He smiled, “Can I muss your lipstick?”

Faith laughed, her head going back. She nodded firmly, and he pecked her. “That’s hardly a muss.”

“True, but we’re being the classy ones, remember? Making out on the dance floor is hardly that.”

“True,” Faith said with a put upon expression. “The things we do,” she teased.

They paused as the music changed. “Hey, Faith, you mind if I dance with Xander?” They both looked up, as Cordy stood adjacent to them, Wesley next to her.

“Fine,” Faith decided after a few seconds. “I guess I can dance with Wesley for one dance.” She moved away, and started to dance, standing a good foot away from him. Cordelia didn’t seem to have the same problem, as she danced a lot closer. For the first time ever he wasn’t even tempted to peak down her dress.

“Thanks,” she said after a few moments.

“What for?”

“Because there is no way in hell that Harmony would just grow up,” Cordelia stated. “If she did have the idea on her own to lend me a dress, she would never, ever act classy about it.”

Xander shrugged. “You’re welcome.”

Cordelia sighed softly. “You went and grew up, didn’t you?”

“A little, not there yet.”

“Come on, the Cliff Notes?”

He sighed, and steered her around a dancing couple, a blonde dancing with Jonathan Levinson.

“I was down anyway, I had you sniping at me, deservedly, while Willow had no problems at all with Oz. And then Buffy, Willow and you said you didn’t need me, and it broke me. I’d built up this mythos in my mind, of how you were all my girls, and that I’d protect you to the end. That shattered, and I didn’t know how to handle it, so I ran. I bumped into Faith, and we realized we were both broken. I found a different way to help, and then found my self-respect and some balance. I patrol with Faith when she’s out alone, and the rest of the time ensure that she has a home to come back to.”

Cordelia nodded. “Faith’s always been good at fighting, but recently, she’s been untouchable. There’s a calmness about her that wasn’t there before, and I think it’s because she’s no longer fighting just for the fun of it.”

“Good.”

“So, a carpenter, eh?”

“I like working with my hands.”

“Xander, look, I’m sorry I was such a bitch about the whole thing. Yeah, you shouldn’t have done it, but on the other hand, you thought you were about to die. I get that. It’s just, no one cheats on Cordelia Chase, she is the one in control.”

“Yeah, I understand that now.”

“I think you do. Can we be friends again?”

“Can you handle Faith?”

“New Faith? Yes.”

“Then sure.”

He steered her over to the bored looking Faith, and stiff looking Wesley. “Swap,” he said to Faith.

“Thank god,” she murmured, as she took Cordelia’s hand and started to dance.

“Wes.”

“Xander. Congratulations on your exam results.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t mind that I am seeing Cordelia?”

“No skin off my teeth, mate,” Xander replied easily.

“Yes, er, thank you.”

“So, what are your plans?” Xander asked politely.

“I don’t know. I am thinking of heading to the city.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I’m afraid that I’m bit of a *persona non grata* in Watcher circles, and I’ve heard some interesting stories. I was planning on inviting Faith, originally.”

“Yeah, she’s more interested in college.”

“Good. A strong education is important.”

“Not for everyone,” Xander replied.

Wes opened his mouth and then shut it. “No, not for everyone.”

Faith returned and nodded. “We’re five by five.”

“What does that mean?” Xander asked curiously. “I’ve been meaning to ask that for ages.”

“I used to hear it on old radio shows,” Faith explained. “Just means things are going well. She talked, I listened, we’re chill. Told her she can pop around.”

He smiled, and slid her closer.

“And that was mainly because you didn’t even try and look down her top.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty, but she’s not you.”

“Not many girls are.”

“Only one girl is.”

“True.” She moved, sliding a leg behind his, and tripping him. He fell backwards, as she caught him and kissed him while being bent over. She heaved him back up, as the music changed, to a far rockier number. She took a few steps back, her eyes locked on his, as she started to move to the music. He stood there, entranced.

Her moves bordered on violent as she spun and weaved to the music, each movement catching the beat with breathtaking precision. He could almost see the vampires she was fighting, as he mentally completed the dance moves into the martial arts moves that they were pulled from.

And each time she moved, she was a little closer, a little more intense. In time to the end of the music, she hooked a leg around his thigh, and raised herself, so she could look down at him. He braced, as she moved her hands to his face and kissed him hard.

He broke the kiss, as a round of applause broke through into his hearing. Faith let herself down, and turned, acknowledging the applause, as she took his hand and lightly tugged him back to her seat. He sat, and she settled on his lap.

“That was brilliant,” he told her. “And honestly, the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Faith smiled. “I did that once, fight in a nightclub. This was different. It was for you.”

“And I really appreciated it.”

“Faith,” Harmony gushed, “That was incredible!” She was practically vibrating in front of them. “You were so graceful, so powerful!”

She was interrupted as Jonathan Levinson appeared on the stage. He looked far more confident than he had in the past, which Xander put down to the vaguely familiar short blonde girl he’d been dancing with.

Xander found his attention wandering as a list of awards and winners was read and prizes given out. He stared at the ceiling, and tried to get into the same mindset he did at work, where he was able to think clearly. He suddenly sighed as something on the ceiling caught his attention. “Crap.”

“What?”

“I’m gonna have to talk to Willow. Just had an idea.”

“’kay,” Faith replied. “This is dull.”

“Yeah.”

The final award was for Buffy, as the class-protector, and Xander and Faith both joined in the applause.

“Can we get out of here, now?” Faith asked hopefully.

“There’s hours to go yet,” Harmony pointed out.

“Let me talk to Willow, and then we can leave.”

“Cool,” Faith said with relief. “We can grab a pizza.”

Xander walked over to the table where Buffy, Willow, Oz, Wes and Cordy were sitting. Buffy was glaring at him, Cordy smiling, Willow looked scared. “You mind?” he asked Oz.

The boy shook his head, and Willow slowly moved toward him. They started to dance. “How does the sprinkler system work?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve seen a sprinkler system maintain the lawns.”

Willow’s eyes flickered, before an astonished look surfaced. Suddenly she jumped forward and hugged him. He looked at Faith helplessly. She was frowning, before she sighed exaggeratedly.

Willow eeped and jumped back. “Sorry,” she said, blushing.

He groaned under her breath, and took her off the dance floor to an empty table, he grabbed two chairs and made them face each other, and sat down.

“Sorry,” She apologized again. “It’s just, I suddenly realized what you meant, and it was really clever, and obvious, and no one else had thought of it, and it’s gonna really help, and I know how I can boost the power and we can get your priest friend to bless the main tank, it’s refilled from the mains, but to start with, it should really help with the vampires and I really really missed you.”

He took a deep breath, and reached out, lightly touching her shoulder. “Breathe, Willow.”

She took a breath, “And then now I don’t even know you, and it’s my fault, and I know it’s partly because I let you take all the blame from when we kissed, and it was a really good kiss, and I felt guilty, so I hid, and I listened to what you said the other night, and I understand, I really do, and I’m still proud of you, but I still miss us, and I’m scared of Faith, coz she’s all strong and sexy and can dance like that, and look graceful, and she looks at you like you look at her and I’m jealous, and nothing has felt right since that night, and I can remember what your face looked like when we said we didn’t need you, and you left and it was scary, but I convinced myself it wasn’t like that, and you left, and I know I was wrong, and I’m really, really, really sorry, and I really, really want to be friends again, and I promise never to do that again.”

He closed his eyes, he could feel that she meant every word, and she brought back so many memories of them growing up together, and the friendship that they had enjoyed. He opened his eyes.

Willow stood suddenly. "I know," she said, and marched away from him. He watched her go, ready to chase her, only, she headed to Faith. Faith looked surprised, and stood, moving toward Willow. Willow actually grabbed her and started to dance. Faith looked surprised, and as they turned, Xander saw the resolve on Willow's face. She seemed to be talking as fast as she had with him.

He watched, checking to see if there were any signs that Faith wanted him to interrupt. She didn't give any, so he stayed away and made his way back to his normal seats. Harmony was looking a little worried, and Xander hid a groan. There was far too much drama on display.

"No," he said firmly. "You are our friend, Harmony, we would never dump a friend."

"Thanks, Xan," Harmony breathed. "Come on," she said, as she grabbed him, moved into his arms, and started to slow dance with him. "Mitch is being a bit of a creep," she said softly. "He wants to leave as well, as he's booked a motel room."

"Yeah, we're gonna grab pizza and watch bad movies, wanna come?"

Harmony gave a hiccup-like laugh. "Me, leave before the announcement of the Prom King and Queen?" She paused. "You know what? It's meaningless, even being bitchy has been boring this evening. I thought it would be special, you know, but the only time it's been exciting was when Faith was dancing, and that was because you two weren't being kids."

Xander chuckled and hugged her. "We can stay and support you, if you'd like?"

"Nah, I wanna watch a movie where people swear a lot, bad guys get killed, and the good guy has muscles on show." She paused. "I always end up watching chick flicks with my friends, and I'm so fed up of them!"

Faith moved over and joined them, as Willow practically skipped back to her seat. She put her arms around both of them. "I think we're friends, now," she said, "Kinda, I think she explained why she was so nervous around me, and apologized for being rude. I'll know for sure when I've re-wound the conversation and ran it at half-speed." She paused. "She said she saw it in your eyes that you forgave her."

"I did. Harmony wants to watch one of your favorite movies and eat pizza."

"You two finish dancing; I'll go order a cab and a couple of pizzas." Faith vanished.

"She wanted to get out of here as well," Harmony stated. She put her head on his shoulder. "I feel safe with you," she said quietly. "And I think that's because you don't wanna do me."

"True," he agreed lightly. "Parties can be fun, but they need to be with people you are comfortable with."

"And not people I've been a complete bitch to for the past four years?"

“Pretty much.”

She lifted her head, and moved back. She headed toward the stage, and grabbed the microphone. “Hi,” she said, as the music came to an abrupt halt. “I know you’re all thinking this is gonna be about voting me Prom Queen, but it’s not. I just want to say that I know I’ve been a huge air-headed bitch to all of you since we started, and I’m sorry for that.” She nodded into the stunned silence, before she grabbed the microphone again. “Oh, and vote Cordelia for Queen.” She walked off the stage, and grinned. Xander moved with her, and they exited the hall, catching up with Faith.

By the time they were outside, the taxi was waiting, and they spent the rest of the evening lounging around, drinking beer, eating pizza and taking the piss out of the movie.

It was a fun ending to the evening.

---

Xander awoke and for a second, everything seemed normal. That was until he realized his right hand side felt very warm, and that someone was lying on him. His hands were on her back, and he could feel just how incredibly soft and smooth her skin was. He didn’t need to open his eyes to know it was Faith.

It took him another few seconds to realize that he had let Harmony have his bed last night.

Faith yawned softly, and snuggled. “You awake?”

“Can I say something cheesy?”

“Knock yourself out.”

“If I open my eyes, it might be a dream.”

“A fucking sexy wet dream,” Faith corrected. “I don’t star in normal dreams.”

Xander laughed.

“While we’re talking, I’ve cleared a drawer and some space for you. You’re moving in here. I’ve never slept in a bed this way before, and I’ve decided I like it. You don’t have much of a choice.”

“Oh, god no, anything but that,” Xander dead panned.

“You are just warm enough,” she continued, as if he hadn’t spoken, “and extremely comfortable to sleep on.” He felt her leg drift up, as she switched position slightly. “This is emotional,” she whispered, “and I never confused sex with emotions. It makes me vulnerable.”

“It does,” he agreed. “But I think I’ve learned that you have to have faith in yourself at the very core, because you can’t base a relationship on the other person. You have to have something inside

you to offer.”

“Yeah.”

“I’d be devastated if we didn’t make it,” he whispered, “but I will never be broken again.”

Faith shifted, and he opened his eyes, as she drew the covers up, and sat on his stomach. He could feel that she was wearing panties, but nothing else. The covers covered her, tucked under her arms, which she rested on his chest, as she leaned forward. “You’re saying that if it ain’t good, we should splitsville?”

“We should try and fix it first, but if it’s broke, then we move on, keep fighting and searching for what makes us happy.”

“Another girl might take that a different way,” Faith murmured.

“Not you, you know that I’ll fight for us with everything I have.”

“You’re giving me freedom.”

He shrugged lightly. “I want you. I want us. I want you to want us. But not if the price is your, or my, happiness and not if you, or I, confuse safety, comfort and familiarity with that thing that is special.”

“That thing that I feel when I’m alone with you?”

“Yeah.”

Faith leaned down and kissed him, slowly and intimately. “Your problem is that I’ve got my claws in you now, and I don’t release.”

“Good.”

He slid his hands up to tug down the covers, when he remembered just why he was in here in the first place. “Harmony,” he grumbled. “I guess I’ll get some breakfast started.”

She kissed him again, lightly. “Good plan, now dress for me.”

He slid out from under her, and realized he didn’t have much in the way of clothing in here. He shrugged and pulled on the shirt from last night, and nothing else. He had at least hung the tux carefully.

Faith wolf-whistled.

He shook his head at her, and headed to the kitchen. He had a hankering for pancakes, so he opened a recipe book and started. He turned on the kettle at the same time.

Faith joined him. Her hair was tied up in a pony tail, and she was wearing shorts and a tank-top. He poured her a cup of Slayer-strength coffee, and himself one that was merely human strength.

“Is that coffee I smell?” Harmony asked as she walked blearily into the kitchen. “Sorry, I had to borrow one of your shirts.”

She was wearing one of his work shirts, and probably just her underwear underneath. “That might be a good look for me,” Faith murmured. “Yeah, coffee. Instant.”

Harmony held out a hand until a cup was placed in it. She sniffed, and then took a sip of the hot liquid.

“If you want to wake up, try Faith’s.” Xander kept the evil smirk off his face until she wasn't looking at him.

Harmony looked curious as she held out her hand. Faith chuckled as she passed her’s over. Harmony took a sip, and then her eyes widened. “Why not just inject raw caffeine into your veins?”

Faith re-appropriated her cup, and continued to sip it.

Harmony shuddered. “So, I was thinking,” she said, “that last night I ended up in a guy’s bed, a guy I went home from the prom with, and now I’m wearing his shirt.” She paused and grinned. “So it’s kinda how I expected last night to go, only I smiled at myself in the mirror this morning.”

“I felt myself falling back last night,” Xander admitted. “Like, all those teenagers are contagious. I didn’t once think of the electricity bill.”

Faith laughed. “Teenagers, the result of the communicable disease called life.”

Xander dropped some blueberries into the batter and put a pan on the stove.

“How many are you making?”

“A lot. They’ll all go.”

“Xan makes great pancakes,” Faith explained. “So I tend to eat as many as I can.”

“What about getting fat?”

“You spend some time with me running through those self defense moves and you won’t have to worry about it.”

“Deal,” Harmony said.

Xander poured out three ladles-full, and then started passing them out as they were cooked, ensuring he took care himself as well. Experience had shown that a pile of pancakes placed in

front of a hungry Faith tended to vanish before he was able to snag some.

“God, that was good,” Harmony sighed, as she passed on another one. Faith nabbed it immediately, and it was a few more rounds before they ended. He was pleased he’d judged it right, as he had no more batter left.

Faith took the plates and started to wash them in the sink, then the pans, as Xander made another round of coffee.

There was a weird melodic beeping noise, and Harmony dashed out of the kitchen, returning with the clutch purse she had the night before, and pulled out a pink mobile phone. “Hi, Mom... Yeah, Xan made awesome pancakes.... Can you, about half an hour? We’re gonna practice self-defense... Okay, I’ll tell him.” She hung up. “No work this morning, or rather, Dad considers looking after his daughter important work.”

“He is the boss,” Xander said dryly.

“Exactly. Mom’s gonna pick us up.”

“Wanna share a shower, Xan?” Faith purred.

“It’ll take far longer than 30 minutes if we did. I’d spend that time just making sure your boobs are clean.”

“A dirty job, eh?”

“That I have to do.”

“If you two have finished flirting.... Can I borrow some clothes, Faith?”

“Sure, come on. Xan, you can shower and dress in your old room for the last time.” The two girls exited, and the door to what was now their room shut. He headed into his, and sighed. The bed was a mess. He stripped it and put all the sheets in the washing machine, but didn’t turn it on, as he didn’t want to disrupt the showers.

Back in his room, he took a hanger and hung the dress that was draped over the back of the chair. With the room looking sane again, he had a quick shower, and dressed properly. Harmony was waiting for him, wearing a pair of Faith’s jeans and one of her t-shirts. She smiled at him.

“Hey,” he greeted her, as she sat on the arm chair.

“So, like, did the G.E.D. studying teach you all the words you’re using?”

“A lot. We had to really study some poetry; I thought it would be dull, but you know, some of the sarcasm and descriptions were really good. And that was the secret, it was finding something in it that we liked.”

Faith exited the bedroom, the dress slung over her arm; she was running a brush through her hair.

Xander jumped up and added the dress to the other hanging outfits. Harmony's phone rang, which was the signal. They headed out, and Charlotte opened the trunk for him to put the clothes in. "We'll get them dry-cleaned."

Xander nodded and jumped into the back of the car, next to Faith.

---

The week before graduation passed quickly. They had their first motorcycling lesson. While he was merely adequate, Faith handled the machine they were learning on with experience and style. So much so that, rather than wait, they booked her for a test the next day, which she passed. It was going to take him another few weeks before he felt comfortable, but there was no real hurry.

Which meant that on Saturday, they walked to the Kendall mansion and met up with every student from the graduating class, who were standing around the swimming pool, along with a man in full religious regalia.

The priest was a thin and tall man, with soft blue eyes, and a calm mien. "While unusual, I can bless the swimming pool," he said, his voice reaching all the students gathered around easily.

"But the absolute best way to make it Holy is a baptism. Is anyone willing to do that, right here and now?"

"How much better?" Xander asked.

"About as Holy as you can get," Father Michael assured him.

There seemed to be no one willing, so Xander sighed. "Fine. My parents were too busy getting drunk to get me baptized. But there are some things I am not willing to promise."

"I quite thought that would be the case," Michael said, and there was perhaps a degree of smugness about him.

Xander pulled off his t-shirt and kicked off his boots, before removing his jeans. Before anyone could comment, he hopped in the cool pool and shivered slightly.

The father entered the water in his full vestments. "Your full name?" he asked.

Xander groaned. "Alexander Lavelle Harris."

"We are gathered here today, in the direct sight of God and his Holy Choir to witness the death and rebirth of Alexander Lavelle Harris. Alexander, do you swear to fight the devil and all his minions, in any way you can?"

"I do," Xander swore.

“Do you renounce Satan and all his Minions?”

“I do,” Xander said again.

With a surprisingly firm grip, the priest took his head, “Then, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I baptize you, as a warrior of God in all His glory.”

Xander was then dunked under the cold water, and raised up again.

“That was it?” he asked,

“Know your audience,” the Priest replied dryly. “You’re all teenagers, you have the attention span of gnats.”

“Yo, Father,” Faith called. “Can I get the same thing?”

“Of course, my child.”

Faith kicked off her boots and socks, and then wriggled out of her tight jeans. Xander turned and growled at some of the comments and whispers from the crowd of students gathered around.

“Remember that I was just christened as a warrior of faith, as well as a warrior of God.”

Faith dived in, swam through, and rose like a goddess in front of them, her long hair slicked back, and her t-shirt transparent and showing her black bra.

“Your full name?”

“Faith Patricia Lehane.”

The Priest ran through the short ceremony again, and baptized Faith. As she rose, she had a small serene smile of confidence on her face. She shifted over and hugged him, draping herself against him.

“Know what?”

“What?”

“I had a moment, under there.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Got something important to tell you,”

“Oh?” he asked again.

“It’s a good thing,” she assured him. “And all yagotta do to hear it is be there this evening.”

“That, I promise.”

“Good.”

Xander laughed and nodded at the Priest. “So, this water is good?”

“It isn’t going to get any holier.”

“Well, fill up then,” Xander yelled to the teenagers who had been watching, muttering and giggling in low voices.

With a direct command to kick them into action, they all ducked their water pistols in. Xander moved to the edge of the pool, and heaved himself out in a single movement. He gave himself a mental pat on the back as he managed it, as he’d wanted to be able to do that for years. He turned, to find Faith giving him a challenging look, as she held out a hand. He braced, bent his knees, reached and grabbed her hand, and then lifted slowly, before exploding, making sure to use every part of his body in unison.

The wet Slayer slipped out of the pool and landed neatly on the side. “Nice,” she said. They turned, and lifted the Priest out together.

“Thank you,” he said, as he was handed a large towel from Harmony, who had several. Xander and Faith each took one.

“Come on, Faith,” Harmony called, “I’ll dry your hair.” She dragged Faith away, after picking up her clothing.

Xander finished with the towel and dressed, just as Cordelia moved over and poked his chest. He looked at her.

“Working for a living clearly agrees with you.”

“Applied laziness,” he explained. “I hate fetching materials, so I just grab a lot at one go, and get on with it.”

“That, and Faith is incredibly strong.”

“That too,” he agreed, amused. “Thank you, Father.”

“You’re one of God’s warriors, Xander, and that doesn’t mean you have to be at the front line. You know what they call a soldier at the front line with no support?”

“No?”

“Dead.”

Xander winced. “Yeah, not going to happen.”

“I’m always happy to help,” the Priest continued. “Not all of us are capable of being direct, but

this sort of thing, and the curious blessing of a water tank earlier, that is something I can do.”

“Once more, thank you, all help is gratefully accepted.”

“I’m going to head off, and get a warm bath and out of these wet robes. As dramatic and fun as it was, normally we just need a few drops on the forehead after a lot of study. I think Our Lord will understand and forgive the slight deviations.”

“I’ll see you to your car,” Xander agreed, and they moved off, Xander giving Cordelia an apologetic look.

Once the Priest had departed, Xander returned and filled up his MasterSprayer, and then a few smaller water pistols, a couple of small water balloons, and then a water bottle. He put on his graduation gown and checked in the reflection provided by the patio doors that he looked okay.

His hair was a bit of a mess, and he went to fix that, when Harmony appeared with a brush and a gleam in her eye. He was sat on a garden chair and his hair attacked before he could protest. “There,” she pronounced.

“Thanks,” he said dryly. The noise level was high, as everyone was getting their gowns on. He turned, and climbed onto the small diving board. He walked to end. “Right, listen up,” he yelled. “I want you all to get into groups, no less than three, no more than five. Move.”

He watched as a simple job became anything but, as people started to get into arguments about who would team up with whom.

“Fuck this,” he muttered, and hopped back on to land. He quickly moved through the students, plunking them into arbitrary groups, physically in some cases, until everyone was roughly grouped. And while there was some grumbling, no one made any serious complaints. He re-took his stand. “Right, you are in groups for a single reason, to protect each other’s backs. All you are going to do is stand in a circle, and as the,” he coughed, “gang members come close, you’ll shoot them. They will react to what they believe is acid, and will move back. That will give Faith enough time to get to them, and disable them.”

“And don’t even fucking think of abandoning your group,” Faith added. “Because I guarantee that someone on their own will be picked off like a fucking antelope that’s left the pack with a bunch of cheetahs hunting them. They are faster, stronger, and don’t really feel pain.”

Xander chuckled under his breath. “With that said, let’s get this show on the road. I’ve got far more important stuff to be doing this evening, so we’ll get the unpleasantness out of the way.”

“Like me!” Faith called cheerfully.

There were some chuckles that Xander joined in on. “Yeah,” he agreed.

There were some more chuckles and cat-calls as the students wandered out in their groups and got in to one of the armada of cars that were parked outside.

“What about me?” Harmony asked softly.

“You’ve got my back,” Xander said. He was pretty sure he didn’t actually need anyone, but as Harmony was a friend, he was going to protect her, like he would anyone else.

Harmony beamed. “Right, let’s get this show on the road.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come?” Charlotte asked fretfully.

“No,” Harmony said. “This is something I gotta do, Mom.”

Charlotte hugged Harmony, and then hugged Xander and Faith. She didn’t say anything else, just watched as they got in the car and Harmony drove them away.

As they arrived, the students were making their way to the seats in front of the podium. Willow and Cordelia were waiting for them.

“Everything is ready,” Willow said. “Buffy will be getting him inside, Giles has the switch and Oz is going to turn on the sprinkler system.”

“Right,” Xander agreed. “You both ready?”

Cordelia opened her gown slightly, showing her water pistols.

“Harmony is with us,” he continued. He waved her closer. “And seriously, more than anyone else, I expect the three of you to stick together!”

“What about you?” Willow demanded.

“Asking my X-man to stay still if I’m in the shit is pointless,” Faith pointed out. “So, much better to accept that up front.”

“But,” Willow started.

“No buts, Red,” Faith said with a sigh. “I trust him to have my back, and anyone else who needs it, that’s part of what makes him him.”

“Oh, right, sorry,” Willow mumbled.

“Come on,” Xander said, and wrapped an arm around Faith’s waist. She leant against him slightly, as they took seats at the front. There were five clear for them.

“Relax,” Faith whispered. “I’ve told you, Faith the Slayer has something to fight for, now. She’s not going down, and fucked if I’m letting you go down without me enjoying it.”

Xander hadn’t realized he was so tense. The opening speeches had been particularly dull, and while he had plastered an attentive expression on his face, especially as Snyder was talking, he

was waiting for the real show to start.

The mayor started a speech, and as he did, it started to go dark.

“Don’t die,” he whispered to Faith.

“Ditto,” she replied. “You still gotta hear what I realized earlier.”

Snyder looked on in disbelief as the mayor turned into a snake.

“Fuck,” Xander muttered. “In your groups, collapse the chairs,” he yelled. There was a noise to the side, and a large group of vampires appeared.

Faith didn’t hesitate as she sprinted over to them, removing her robes as she did, a stake in each hand.

Xander ran forward and crashed into Snyder, knocking him back as the Mayoral Snake crashed into the ground, narrowly missing his feet. The principal’s head bounced off the stage, knocking him unconscious.

Xander bundled him off the stage, and then under it, for safety.

He removed his robes and pulled out his MasterSprayer. He looked around, and was relatively pleased.

The vampires looked confused at the organized resistance, but before he could continue, his instincts told him to duck, so he did. The heavy tail of the mayor swept over his head. Xander turned, to find the snake right next to him. He stumbled as the stage splintered under the weight, the movement throwing him against the snake.

There was a strange sizzling sound, and the snake made a weird hissing sound, and glared at him.

“Huh,” Xander muttered. He shrugged, and shot the snake – which gave off the same sizzling sound.

“Oi, Snake-face!” he heard Buffy yell. “Why not pick on a real challenge, The Slayer.”

For a second, Xander wanted to smack his face. There were *two* Slayers, one of them his girlfriend. He absently shot the snake again with another stream of holy water, before jumping back out of the way of a flick of the huge tail.

There was a soft put-put sound as the lawn sprinkler system activated, that quickly grew into a curtain of rain. The Mayor shuddered slightly, before chasing after Buffy.

Xander surveyed the battlefield again. The students were roughly in their groups, the Vampires were keeping their distance from the holy spray while trying to avoid Faith.

They weren't having much luck, as Faith was tearing through them with an economy of movement that he had never really seen from her before.

It took five minutes before the sprinkler system died down, and there was a rough cheer from the remaining vampires.

"Stay sharp," Xander yelled, heading toward his group. "They are going to start strafing now."

A vampire appeared in front of him. He sprayed the female vampire in the face. She screamed and grabbed her face. Xander pulled out a stake and calmly ended her existence. She dusted, and allowed him to move back to the others.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "this is better than speeches."

"Is this really the time?" Cordelia asked, as she held her MasterSprayer like an assault rifle.

"Yes," he replied. "Being relaxed but on guard is better than being tense. Right, let's move, slowly, to the left, so that we're the first line."

"Are you nuts?" Harmony asked.

"Probably. I have a distinct feeling that I'm in love with a girl who can tie me into a pretzel."

"Oh, good, that's alright then." They slowly moved. Cordelia and Willow first, moving together, Xander and Harmony following, Xander checking his six carefully as he went.

"This will do. Look sharp." The first group of vampires seemed to realize that the Holy Sprinkler system was done and had coordinated themselves. They attacked, to find three streams of Holy Water in their faces. As they dropped down, Xander looked around again, and saw that Faith was busy, so he popped forward and stabbed the three of them.

"You have any more of them?" Harmony asked, "Just in case."

He handed one of his spares over, and went back to looking around. The other groups were doing the same thing, only without the stabbing, and he had yet to see any casualties. He could practically feel the confidence building in the students.

He turned, as Angel appeared next to their group. He opened his mouth. Harmony squeaked and shot him out of reflex. He immediately vamped and fell to the ground. "Die!" Harmony screeched and stabbed him in the chest. Angel dusted. Cordelia turned her head to look, a second later.

"Nice one," she said in surprise.

Xander turned away, and swore to himself that he would break down in hysterics later, as he told Faith how Angel had been staked by Harmony Kendall of all people.

He looked around again, and seeing that they were safe for a few seconds, he turned and hugged

Harmony. "Well done," he told her.

She grinned at him, before she retook her position. Across from him, he could see one guy look panicked as his pistol ran out. It looked like he had forgotten he had a finite resource, and had wasted it.

"You three keep together," he ordered, and started to sprint across. Exactly as Faith had predicted, he was instantly picked out. He got the first two with burst, but the third ducked, and punched him.

He managed to absorb some of the blow, and dropped down. The vampire screamed, and looked at his hand in disbelief.

Xander suddenly realized it must have been the result of his baptism earlier. He was still Holy. He jumped up, slapped the vampire, and staked him. That done, he headed back over and arrived just in time launch a stream at an attacking vampire.

He handed over his main Soaker. "Be fucking careful," he snapped, "Only use it as you have to, not to impress people."

"Sorry," the boy muttered.

Xander looked around again, and spotted that Faith was surrounded by fifteen vampires. He stared for a second, as Faith was dealing with them, before he realized that they had ganged up on her, and if she fell, the rest of them would be in a lot of trouble.

There was a huge explosion in the school gym.

Xander ran forward, pulling out his two handgun water pistols, "Everyone, help Faith!" he yelled. "Get some revenge in!"

The students broke formation and ran forward, some spraying Holy Water as soon as they got near.

The group of vampires howled, as more and more Holy Water was poured on them. Faith ducked and span, staking them, and as she stabbed the last one, the eclipse ended, and bright sun light filled the area.

There was a strange silence, as everyone looked at each other.

"Anyone dead?" Xander asked.

People looked around, and no one said anything.

"Anyone missing a member of their group?"

Again, silence.

“W-what happened?” Snyder called, from the stage. “I remember...”

“Gas explosion,” Xander called back. He tucked the handheld water pistols behind him, hiding them. “It was causing hallucinations.”

Snyder paused, and shook himself. “Yes,” he murmured. “I remember the hallucinations.” He paused. “And I remember you, Harris, flying at me.” He paused again. “You saved my life,” he said in surprise.

Xander shrugged.

“Thank you.” He paused. “I think I’m going to my office, and have a sit down. I don’t think I want to be the principal here anymore.” Snyder slowly walked away.

Xander turned, to find Buffy, Giles and Oz jogging toward them.

He felt Faith slide against him. He shot her a quick look; she smiled at him.

“Right,” Xander yelled. “We did it, people! Not only did we graduate, we got to blow part of the school up as well.”

“Three cheers for Xander and Faith,” Jonathan Levinson yelled. “Hip-hip.”

The Hurray that followed was huge, and Xander tightened his arm around Faith. As the cheers finished, the groups broke up, and a bit of a party kicked off, aided by some of the boys revealing that they hadn’t just smuggled water pistols in.

“Did Angel help?” Buffy asked softly.

“Didn’t see him,” Xander lied with a straight face.

“I guess he already left,” Buffy sighed. “Probably for the best.”

“So, are we done?” Faith asked. “Big bad defeated, students safe, loads of vampires dusted?”

“I believe we are,” Giles agreed.

“You,” Faith said, poking Xander in the chest.

“Me?”

“You. I have been on the longest dry spell since I discovered sex,” she said, continuing to poke him. “I have been so horny that I’m shocked I don’t have permanently wrinkled fingers!”

Xander saw Buffy, Cordelia and Willow all blush.

“So we are going home, and you are going to deal with my horniness properly. Is that in anyway

unclear?”

Rather than answer, Xander bent over and picked Faith up over his shoulder. “Later,” he called, and headed out.

“Xan,” Harmony called. He looked at her; she chucked him her car keys. “We’ll expect you for dinner.” She had a huge smile on her face.

Xander checked his watch, they had plenty of time. “Okay,” he said back, and started to jog off. “Dinner tomorrow, right? That give us, like, 28 hours.”

Faith twisted and regained her feet, and took his hand.

“No, you horndog!” Harmony screeched while the girls around her blushed harder. “Tonight! My house, dinner, tonight!”

Faith twisted and regained her feet, and took his hand, and the jog became a run. “Fine, then. We don't have any time to waste!”

He drove them home, and they passed what looked like most of Sunnydale’s police force heading in the opposite direction – late, as he had predicted.

Xander floored it, now that he no longer had any concerns about law enforcement.

He pulled to a stop, and they both headed in.

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Xander panted softly, he could feel Faith panting as well, on top of him.

“Xan?”

“Hmm?”

“You know what I realized earlier?”

He opened his eyes, and then reached out and lightly brushed her sweaty hair from her face.

“Hmm?”

She took a deep breath, and met his eyes. “I love you.”

The words shot through him like electricity. “Earlier,” he whispered, “Harmony asked if I was crazy. I replied, ‘I have a distinct feeling that I’m in love with a girl who can tie me into a pretzel.’”

Faith laughed softly.

“Faith?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

Faith’s smile was simply the best thing he had ever seen. They were silent for a bit, as they relaxed. It felt like a weight had been lifted from his chest.

“Why’d you lie to B earlier?”

Xander chuckled.

“What?” Faith asked.

He grinned impishly at her.

Faith drew herself up and straddled him, there were no covers hiding his view this time, but he fought not to get distracted. “You know how Angel likes to do his surprise-here’s-Angel routine?”

Faith nodded.

“Harmony doesn’t know Angel. He appeared, she hit him with Holy Water, he vamped, and she staked him.”

“Harmony Staked Angel?” Faith asked.

“Yup.”

“Harmony. Staked Angel,” she repeated for confirmation.

“Uh-huh. And she was shrieking like a little girl when she did it.”

Faith collapsed, her face going into his neck, and she started to laugh and laugh.

He held her, and joined her. “His last expression was of such shock,” he continued.

Faith laughed harder.

“No one else knows, Willow and Cordelia were facing the other way, and we’ll never tell.”

“Yeah,” Faith said, and giggled again. She heaved herself back up.

“Right, important words passed, anecdote given, time to prove I’m still a teenager.”

“Huh?” Faith asked, before his hands moved to her hips and he shifted her back. “Oh!”

Several hours later, they shared a shower and got dressed slowly. They headed into their living

room. “Faith?”

“Yeah?”

“You buy a V.C.R?”

“Nope.”

“Then why do we have one?”

Faith turned and looked. It was wrapped with a red ribbon, and had a video tape inside it. Xander shrugged and undid the ribbon, and plugged it in to the power and TV.

They settled on the couch, as he pressed play and turned the TV to the correct input.

“Alexander, Faith,” the mayor appeared. “If you’re watching this, then alas, my plan to become an Old One has failed.

“I am totally convinced, Alexander, that my defeat is your fault. Sadly, I cannot hate you for it. When Faith accidentally killed my traitorous number two, I felt for sure that she would join my side, and with her, I would have been unstoppable.

“Instead, you both chose to grow up and become productive members of society, and that is something that, as mayor, I can’t do anything but applaud.” The now-deceased Mayor smiled. “And Faith, you found the strength to overcome your insecurities and have become a remarkable young woman.

“I applaud you both.” He actually did, clapping seven times. “Now, I was thinking about what I could do for a nice young couple, and it finally came to me. Faith, you have a full Mayoral Scholarship to college, and guaranteed acceptance. It cost me a few favors, but I hardly need them now, do I?”

“So, once more, congratulations, and I hope you both live long and happy lives.” The video ended, showing static.

“He was a really nice guy,” Xander said, shaking his head.

“Yeah, but you know, happy to be here, not fighting against you.”

“Me too. And not just because of the sex.”

Faith laughed and nudged him. “Shit, Xan, I’m going to college. First in my family, ever!”

“And you’ll end up teaching me stuff, while you study.”

“Hell yeah,” Faith cheered, and pounced on him. She paused after a few minutes, “Shit, we need to get to dinner and return Harmony’s car.”

Xander made a whining sound.

“I know, me too,” Faith grumbled. “Come on.”

“You drive,” Xander said, handing her the keys.

“Hell no,” Faith replied, handing them back. “Even Slayer recovery hasn’t dealt with the deluge after the drought.”

Xander felt pretty proud, but kept it off his face. They drove toward the mansion and pulled up. Harmony dashed down the stairs and hugged them both, before grabbing their hands and dragging them to the garage.

Charlotte and Hank appeared out of it.

“Xander, Faith,” Charlotte said. “My ex had his typical mid-life crises, which included his twenty year old secretary.” She reached behind her, and pulled a large blanket off of a shape. It revealed a gorgeous Harley Davidson softail classic. “And,” she continued, “a motorbike. I took it in the divorce, and since then, it has sat in here, gathering dust. Hank prefers his trucks, I don’t want it, and neither does Harmony.” She grinned, “So, when Harmony got back this afternoon, and explained how you two ensured no one died, and even saved the principal, I sent off the paperwork to the DMV, and it’s now yours.” She chuckled the keys, Faith caught them, and then looked at them in disbelief.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, wow,” Faith exhaled. “I mean, thanks, really, you have no idea what this means to us!”

“You not only saved my daughter’s life, but you’ve been an incredibly positive influence on her.”

“Hey,” Xander said. “We did that because we like her, not for a reward.”

“Xander,” Harmony said, as she hugged him. “Say, ‘thank you’, and shut up.”

“Thank you,” Xander parroted, as he realized it was very good advice.

“Right, food,” Hank said. “I’ve got the BBQ on, and we have some steaks going. You can drive it home later.”

“Yeah,” Faith agreed. “Come on, Xan,” she said, locking her arm with his.

“Excuse me,” he said to the other three, as he cheered, picked Faith up, and span her around.

“Grand Canyon?”

“For our holiday?”

He nodded.

She pulled herself toward him and kissed him firmly. “Yes.”