

Dafydd – The Gift Take Two

Rating: Overall R to NC-17

Pairing: Buffy / Faith

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Spoilers: Everything up to the end of Season 5

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Notes: I started writing this after asking myself "What might happen if Faith was involved in the battle against Glory?" The question first arose after I read Wlfgrl's "Reflections". You don't need to read that story to understand this one, but I'd recommend it anyway just because it's good.

Timing: Late Season 5

Chapter 1: Bad Idea

This is a bad idea.

You got a better one?

No.

Then quit complaining.

She won't want my help.

Probably not, but I'll have tried.

She'll probably kill me.

That works too.

I'm not ready.

Will I ever be?

I'm having an actual argument with myself. That can't be a good sign...

Standing in the twilight gloom of the cemetery, Buffy felt the tears falling softly from her

eyes. Every time she visited her mother's grave it felt a little more real. The initial shock and numbness had lasted for days, and it was only now that she was truly beginning to grieve.

"Hey, B."

At the sound of that voice, Buffy's grief disappeared under a tide of other emotions; shock, a flash of fear, and finally, boiling rage.

How DARE she come here!

Buffy spun round on the spot, her foot lashing out. Faith, who had expected exactly this response, didn't try to defend herself and tumbled to the ground with blood trickling from her nose.

"You shouldn't have come here, Faith! I knew you were too weak to last in jail, but you should've run. Why come to my mother's grave? To gloat?"

"I came here because I was following you, B! How would I know where she's buried? Jeez, I only knew she was dead 'cause Angel told me."

"Then why? To make my life that little bit less bearable? To try to kill someone else I care about?" Buffy snarled, tears flowing unheeded over her cheeks.

Faith looked up at her old enemy and realized, perhaps for the first time, the depth of Buffy's sense of betrayal. "Do you want me to answer that?" she whispered.

"YES!" Buffy screamed.

"I've been having these dreams, B. I think they're like those Slayer-prophecy dreams you and Giles used to talk about." In spite of having thought through what she was going to say on the journey from L.A., Faith could barely get the words out. "I never had one before. Seemed like something bad was going down in Sunnydale..."

"So, what, you thought you'd bust out of jail and try to really screw things up for us?"

Hearing the note of contempt in Buffy's voice snapped Faith's control over her temper. Surging to her feet, she grabbed the smaller girl by the shoulders and yelled in her face, "I thought that MAYBE you could use some HELP!"

Instead of fighting back, Buffy simply burst out laughing. "You thought YOU could help ME? How? By switching sides again?"

"Damn it, B, I don't how these dreams work! Maybe this whole thing isn't as bad as I thought, but I couldn't just sit there and not try to find out! You look me in the eye and tell me you got it covered, and I'll go turn myself in again." Faith half-turned away from her fellow Slayer, trying to hide the fear in her eyes.

"I've. Got. It. Covered."

"Fine!" Faith turned and walked out of the graveyard.

Told you so.

It was the right thing to do.

She'll never trust me again. Why should she?

I still needed to do it.

Here we go for three months in solitary...

"Faith."

Yards from the door of the police station, Faith spun around and saw Buffy standing in the shadows of a side alley.

"B! How'd you get here so fast?"

"Car."

"You drove? Any fatalities?" Faith couldn't help herself; the idea of Buffy behind the wheel still seemed weird.

"Very funny. You were actually going to turn yourself in, weren't you?" Buffy couldn't keep the disbelief from her voice, not that she was trying very hard.

"It's not like I got anything better to do: my diary's pretty clear for the next twenty-five to life." Faith turned back toward the police station, then felt Buffy's hand on her shoulder.

"Faith, wait."

"Why? You don't trust me, you don't want my help, and the longer I'm missing, the harder they'll be on me when I go back."

"Did you expect me to trust you after everything you've done?"

"I don't know... hadn't thought that far ahead."

"I can't take the chance, Faith, there's too much at stake..."

Faith nodded silently, turning away so Buffy wouldn't see the tears gathering.

"Come and talk to the others. If they're willing to let you, you can stay."

Faith couldn't help laughing bitterly at that idea. "Might as well turn myself in now, B. Saves time."

"Lose the self-pity, Faith, you've got no right to it. Take the chance or give up, your choice."

The dark Slayer took a deep breath. "Which way to the car?"

"How's Dawn doing?" Faith broke the uneasy silence that had settled over the Jeep.

"About as well as can be expected. She's had a lot to process lately." *Like finding out she didn't exist a year ago.* Buffy wasn't sure how, or even if, she should let Faith in on that little gem of information.

"And the others? Is Red still with that blonde girl?" Faith wracked her mind to remember the other girl's name, but came up blank.

"Yes, *Willow* is still with Tara."

"Xander?"

"Still with Anya."

"What about..." Faith trailed off.

"What about what?"

"You and Riley?" *Did I screw that up for you?*

"We broke up."

"Why?" *Please, please, please not because of me!*

"We... just weren't right for each other."

"Oh."

Silence descended for a while.

"I'm sorry about your mom."

Buffy looked across at Faith, who was staring rigidly ahead. The other woman seemed sincere. Buffy simply didn't know what to make of what was happening. She couldn't even say why she hadn't let Faith turn herself in.

As the Jeep approached 1630 Revello, Buffy was immediately worried. "Something's wrong."

"What?"

"Xander and Giles are here." Buffy pointed out the BMW and Ford.

"Great..." Faith muttered.

"Second thoughts?"

"More like fifth." *Come on, Faith, get it together!* "Let's go."

As soon as the Jeep stopped, Buffy sprang out, trying to imagine what would have brought Giles and Xander over like this. Flinging the door open, she was confronted by not only Giles and Xander, but the rest of the Scooby Gang as well. Willow and Tara were flipping through what looked like spellbooks. Anya was pacing in circles around Giles, who was assembling the tranq gun, while Xander was comparing axes for weight and reach. The only one sitting still was Dawn, who looked plain scared.

"What's happened? Is it Glory? Dawn, are you okay?" Buffy was kneeling in front of her sister before Faith had even made it into the house.

Giles cleared his throat. "Shortly after you left, Dawn had a phone call from Angel. It seems Faith has escaped."

"Just what we need, Psycho-Slayer on the loose again." Xander said bitterly, finally picking an axe and moving on to crossbows.

Buffy let out a sigh of relief that she didn't have anything more to deal with that night. "I, uh, already know about Faith..."

Various cries of "What?" and "How?" came from around the room.

"Hi guys."

Everyone turned to see Faith standing in the doorway.

Faith had known this wasn't going to be easy, but the wave of fear, hate and disgust directed at her was so intense that she took a step back before she realized what she was doing. She steadied herself against the doorframe and looked over at Buffy. "I told you this was a waste of time, B."

"Buffy, what the hell is going on?" Xander snapped.

"Guys, just calm down for a second. Hear what she's got to say, then we'll decide what to do."

"What's there to decide? This is *Faith* we're talking about!"

"Xander, just listen for a moment please." Giles didn't understand what was happening, but he'd seen Faith's mask slip a little, caught the defeated look on her face at Xander's reaction. "Faith?"

Leaning against the wall, never meeting anyone's gaze, Faith began. "A few days ago, I started have these dreams, nightmares really. I mean, I get nightmares a lot, but these were different, they weren't about me and the stuff I did. My first Watcher told me that sometimes Slayers get dreams about things they're going to face, but she didn't explain much. I heard you guys talking about them sometimes before..."

Willow finished for her. "Before you betrayed us?"

Yeah, thanks Red, really needed to be reminded of that... "Anyway, the first time I figured it was just my fucked-up subconscious screwing with me, but I kept getting the same dream over and over. Seemed like someone was trying to tell me something so I hopped the wall and headed here."

Xander snorted derisively. "Oh, you 'hopped the wall', just like that?"

"You think I'd stay somewhere like that without making sure I could get out if I had to?"

Giles silenced Xander's next remark with a glare. "Faith, can you tell us something about this dream?"

"Well, it's all pretty mixed up, but I know I'm in Sunnydale - I can see that huge neon sign on the front of the movie theatre. I'm standing somewhere high, like the top of a building, and there's this weird light, but I can't see where it's coming from. And there's blood somewhere, I can smell it. And then I'm back on the ground, and the light's gone, and I can see you guys, and you're looking down at something on the ground and crying. I couldn't just sit there and not at least warn you."

Buffy looked straight into the dark eyes as she asked, "Why not just use the phone?"

Faith's mouth twitched into a brief, wry smile. "You saying you wouldn't have hung up on me?"

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Buffy stood up. "If that's all you've got to say, Faith, go wait out back while we talk this over." Faith looked over the group once, trying to assess the chances of them believing her, and didn't like what she saw. Closing the back door behind her, she sat on the steps and lit what she expected would be her last cigarette for a long time.

"Anyone believe her?" Buffy sounded skeptical.

"No way. Absolutely no way." Xander was staring at the door as though he expected Faith to burst through and attack at any second. "How can you even ask that after everything she's done?"

"He's got a point, Buffy, Faith doesn't exactly have a good track record for honesty." Willow was managing to stay calmer than her old friend, but was still jumpy - she probably wasn't even aware that she was compulsively straightening up the books and papers on the table.

"On the other hand," Giles broke in, "she did voluntarily turn herself in and remained in jail for a year, when she clearly could have escaped almost at will."

Buffy had begun pacing nervously. "Giles, what did you think about the dream she described?"

"Well, it certainly sounded like a prophetic dream..."

"You mean big on the 'You're all gonna die!' and sketchy on the stopping it part?" Buffy knew only too well how vague such dreams were. "Dawn? Tara? Anya? What do you guys think?"

"I don't like her." Anya said firmly. "She hurt Xander, stole your body, threatened Willow-"

"We're all well aware of Faith's transgressions, Anya." Giles cut in. "The question is, can we trust her?"

"I-I believe her."

Everyone turned to look at Tara. "Why, baby?" Willow asked quietly.

"I think she's scared - of us, that we won't believe her."

"Tara, you don't know Faith like we do, you don't know the damage she can do." Xander remained firmly unconvinced.

Tara lowered her head, but refused to back down. "I know she's not the same person I met last year."

Buffy sat down beside her sister. "What do you think, Dawn?"

"I don't know. I mean, if we ignore her, and she's telling the truth then something really bad happens, but if we trust her and she's lying I'm stuck between Faith and Glory... I think Tara's right, though."

Buffy looked around at her friends. "So, what do we do?"

Sitting on the back steps, Faith had long ago finished her cigarette and was now simply savouring the night air. Occasionally she could hear raised voices from inside the house, but tried to block them out and just enjoy being free. Eventually, she heard the door open. She didn't need to look to know it was Buffy standing behind her.

"So what's the verdict?"

Buffy sat down beside Faith, carefully not looking at her. "You're staying here. Giles and Dawn are setting up a bed in the basement. We need to keep you out of sight; I'm pretty sure the cops won't be happy if they find out we're hiding an escaped convict."

Faith smiled slightly at that. "I didn't think any of you would believe me..."

"Well, we talked it over, and then I called Angel, and we decided to give you a chance to prove yourself."

"Got it. Was Angel mad I didn't call him?"

"He was... worried. I told him you'd call tonight." Looking at her fellow Slayer for a moment,

Buffy wondered what Angel saw in her that the rest of them didn't. "I suppose I'd better fill you in on what's happening..."

"Won't be able to do much if you don't, B." Faith's attempt to lighten the mood fell flat.

"Glory. Her name's Glory, and she's a god."

Faith's eyes widened at that. "A god, as in... a GOD?"

"Yeah. Seems she's stuck here in the body of a human, so she doesn't have much in the way of power - except that she's stronger than me and seems to be completely invulnerable."

"Great. So what's her deal? She just in town to soak up the Hellmouth vibe?"

"She's looking for something called the Key. We have it. We don't know what it does, but no-one thinks letting her get it would be a good idea." *I can't tell her the whole story, I can't afford to trust her that far...*

Silence reigned for a moment before Buffy spoke again. "You're not going to ask what the Key is?"

Faith, with a little help from the darkness, was able to hide her disappointment at Buffy not trusting her completely. *Like I have any right to it...* "I figure, if you want me to know, you'll tell me. Asking won't change that."

"You're right. If you show me you can be trusted, I'll think about telling you." Buffy stood up. "Mess with us, just once, and I'll kill you."

Faith heard the door close behind her, and wondered if she could manage not to screw this up again.

Chapter 2: Progress

A few days later, Giles sat in the living room of the Summers' house as Buffy tried to explain how she felt inside, how she thought she was losing her ability to love.

"There is something in the Watchers' diaries. A quest."

Buffy looked at Giles in surprise. "A quest? Like finding a grail or something?"

"Not a grail. Maybe answers. It would take a day, perhaps two."

Shaking her head, Buffy replied, "I'm not leaving Dawn. Not with Glory looking for her."

"Sure you can." Dawn said from the doorway. "What's the deal?"

"Some Slayers before Buffy found it helpful in regaining their focus, learning more about their role." Giles looked hopefully at Buffy "There's a sacred place in the desert. It's not far."

"But I can't go. I'm not leaving you, Dawn."

"If you have to go learn, I mean, if it'll help you out, I think you should do it. I can hang with the gang. I'll be okay."

"What about Faith? I can't leave her unguarded for two days..." Buffy looked anxiously toward the basement door.

"Has she broken the rules, even bent them?" Giles asked, knowing the answer was no.

"See? Even Caution-Guy thinks I'll be fine." Dawn ignored Giles' glare.

Buffy slipped her arm around her sister's shoulders. "I love you, Dawn. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I love you too." Dawn replied with a smile.

"I love you... *really* love you."

"Getting weird..." Dawn's smile got a little freaked out, but it was clear she appreciated her sister's declaration.

"Sorry. But it's important that I tell you. Weird love's better than no love."

Faith was putting herself through an exercise routine she'd formulated in jail when Buffy came down the basement stairs. The two girls had barely seen each other since Faith's arrival - Faith rarely left the basement and Buffy hadn't tried to make contact, simply looking in every so often to make sure Faith was behaving herself. Usually she found Faith exercising or simply lying on the camp bed they'd set up for her, staring at the ceiling.

"Sup, B?" Faith asked, not breaking the rhythm of the sit-ups she was doing.

Buffy stood silent for a moment, arms folded across her chest, watching Faith. "I'm going to be out of town for a day or two. Giles and I are going to do a ritual thing, has to be done someplace out in the desert."

Faith stopped her exercises and lay propped up on her elbows. "What about Dawn?"

"Dawn'll be staying with Xander."

"Right." Faith got to her feet and took position by the punch-bag. "Anything you want me to do while you're away?"

"Other than not stab me in the back? No." Buffy turned on her heel and ascended the stairs. She didn't see Faith's fingers tracing the scar on her stomach.

Faith lurched upright in her bed, gasping for breath. The tiny amount of moonlight filtering in through the basement window was just enough for her to see by.

God damn it, why are they sending me that dream again? I'm here, aren't I? And it's not as if I don't know how it goes. I told them what happens, I can't MAKE them trust me! Course, I didn't tell them all of it - even if they believed me it would break them...

She screwed her eyes shut, trying to drive away the image that always lingered after the dream. She'd told everyone that she saw them looking at something on the ground and crying, but she hadn't mentioned that she knew what it was. No, *who* it was. Buffy, lying dead on a pile of rubble.

It's not gonna happen... I won't let it...

"Whoa. Group hang time?" Fresh from her encounter with the spirit-guide in the form of the First Slayer, Buffy entered her house to find the gang pulling weapons out of the trunk in the lounge. They all looked up at the sound of her voice.

"Th-that was quick," Willow said nervously.

Buffy scoffed. "Didn't seem like it to me. Death is my gift? Ha!"

Xander tried to be reassuring. "Buffy, we need to talk."

The attempt failed, Buffy immediately went on alert. "What's wrong? Is Dawn okay?"

"Dawn's fine," replied Willow

Xander had another go. "Buffy, we care about you, and we're worried about you. The way you're acting, the things you're doing-"

"It's wrong." Anya interrupted. Willow immediately tried to calm the moment. "Wait. This shouldn't be about blame."

"Blame? There's blame now?" Buffy was completely at sea.

"No, there's only love. And... some fear." Willow's assurances weren't helped by the freaked out expression on her face.

"We're just kind of thrown by the you having sex with Spike." Blunt as ever, Anya drove right by Willow to the heart of the issue.

"The... who whating how with huh?" Buffy looked at Anya like she'd just given money away.

"Okay, that's denial. That usually comes before anger."

"I am not having sex with Spike!"

Anya nodded. "Anger."

"No one is judging you. It's understandable. Spike is strong and mysterious and sort of compact but well-muscled." Xander tried to sooth the irate Slayer.

Buffy was having none of it. "I am not having sex with Spike! But I'm starting to think that you might be."

"Buffy, I saw you. Anya too." She nodded as Xander continued, "We saw you and Spike... with the straddling."

The BuffyBot chose that moment to return from upstairs. "Spike's mine. Who's straddling Spike?"

Everyone gaped in surprise.

Buffy gasped. "Oh my god."

"And so say all of us." Xander looked from one to the other, trying to understand.

The Bot looked Buffy over. "Say, look at you! You look just like me! We're very pretty."

"Two of them!" Willow squeaked.

Xander promptly leapt to the wrong conclusion. "Hey, I know this! They're both Buffy!"

Buffy glared at him. "No, *she's* a robot. She acts just like that girlfriend-bot that Warren guy made. You guys couldn't tell me apart from a robot?" Offended didn't begin to cover it.

"Oh, I don't think I'm a robot." The Bot said chirpily.

"She's very well done," remarked Anya, prompting a smile from the Bot.

To his credit, Xander caught up quickly. "Spike must have had her built so he could program her to..."

"Oh god." Buffy felt nauseous.

Willow gasped. "Yikes! Imagine the things..."

Buffy cut her off. "No! No, no imagining, any of you!"

"Already got the visual." Xander held up his hand in shame.

The Bot interrupted the flood of disgust. "People. Friends of mine. You're forgetting the most important thing. Glory has Spike, and she's going to harm him."

Buffy paled. "Glory has Spike... FAITH!"

Xander laughed nervously. "We *were* gonna bring that up."

Anya tried to help out her boyfriend. "We were getting weapons."

"Grab 'em. We're going now. I have to kill him. FAITH!"

Faith, who had deliberately ignored the shouting until Buffy yelled for her, opened the basement door. "Jeez B, what's the ma- Oh my God!" She caught sight of the two Buffys. "Okay, did I get hit with a two-by-four and no-one bothered to tell me?"

Buffy tossed an axe to her; Faith was so surprised she barely caught it. "Glory has Spike, Spike knows where the Key is. We have to get him out then kill him. A lot."

"Buffy, we don't even know where to look," Willow pointed out.

Buffy thought for a moment. "I know where to start."

Spike, battered, cut and bleeding, hung from the chains on the ceiling of Glory's apartment. "It's that guy...on TV... what's his name?"

Glory frowned in confusion. "On the television?"

"That show... the prize show... where they guess what stuff cost..."

"The Price Is Right?" Murk offered.

Jinx piped up, "Oh, Bob Barker!"

"We will bring you Bob Barker! We will bring you the limp and beaten body of Bob Bark-"

Glory interrupted Murk impatiently. "It is not Bob Barker, you scabby morons! The Key is new to this world, and Bob Barker is as old as grit." She smiled venomously. "The vampire is lying to me."

Spike's answering giggle was barely audible. "Yeah, but it was fun. And guess what, bitch - I'm not telling you jack. You're never gonna get your sodding key, 'cause you might be strong, but in our world, you're an idiot."

"I am a god!"

"The god of what, bad home perms?"

"Shut up! I command you, shut up!" Glory's divine dignity was feeling a little punctured.

"Yeah, okay, sorry, but I just had no idea that gods were such prancing lightweights. Mark my words, the Slayer is going to kick your skanky, lopsided ass back to whatever place would take a cheap, whorish, fashion victim ex-god like you!"

Glory's extremely short fuse burned out, and she launched a vicious roundhouse kick at Spike's chest, tearing him free of the chains and sending him through the apartment door to land in a heap at the end of the hall. Getting painfully to his feet he muttered, "Nice plan, Spike..."

The elevator doors opened in the lobby of the apartment building. Spike pulled himself upright just as Murk clattered down the stairs, at the head of a pack of his scabrous brethren. "You do not insult Glory by escaping!"

Just then, the building's front door crashed open. Buffy and Xander charged in at the head of the Scooby Gang.

The fight that followed was brutal, but brief. Several of Glory's minions were killed. The Buffybot took the brunt of the damage on the Scooby side, everyone else got away with nothing worse than minor cuts and bruises.

That afternoon, Tara slipped away from the others and went to the basement. Faith was sitting cross-legged on the bed. If Faith was aware of her presence, she didn't acknowledge it as Tara walked down the stairs. Tara was about to speak when she noticed the tracks of tears on Faith's cheek, gleaming faintly in the dim light.

"Faith, what's wrong?" Tara rushed over and knelt in from of the other girl.

Faith finally looked up when she heard her voice. "Nothing, it's nothing... psycho-murderer stuff, y'know..." She smiled weakly and tried to change the subject. "So, what is it with B and vampires, huh? First Angel, now Spike. What's next, Dracula?"

"Umm..." Tara wasn't sure what to say to that.

"You gotta be kidding me!" Faith tried to laugh, but it came out more like a strangled sob.

"Faith, please..." Tara's heart ached seeing the young Slayer like this.

"I... I forgot how good all this felt. Buffy, the others, fighting beside them... just being around them. I never realized how much I miss it." The tears began to fall silently again.

Tara took one of Faith's hands in hers. "Is that why you stay down here all the time? So you won't have to see them?"

"It's not as if they want to see me. 'Sides, it feels more dungeony down here. Won't be as much of a wrench when I go back."

"Back?"

Faith laughed a little at that. "To jail. Murder Two, twenty-five to life, remember?"

Tara couldn't think of an answer to that, so she just hugged Faith, and then stood up. "Is there anything I can get you?" Faith just shook her head.

As Tara began to climb the stairs again, Faith spoke. "I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I'm sorry. For the shit I said to you last year."

"Thank you." Tara looked over at the young woman on the camp bed. "Why apologise to me, and not the others?"

"Cause you might accept it."

Chapter 3: The Big Scaredy Runaway

This is all my fault.

Willow sat with her arms around Tara as the Winnebago rumbled along the desert road. Tara was staring out of the window, her face wearing the vacant expression that had become normal after Glory attacked her.

My fault Tara got hurt. My fault Glory knows about Dawn. My fault we're running away to who knows where. All because I had to be Insecurity-Girl and run away 'cause we had a fight. Tara shouldn't have been alone...

All because I couldn't talk to her about her worries, about the magic, our relationship, why she keeps defending Faith...

Willow looked over bitterly at the dark-haired girl, sitting on the floor in the kitchen area looking blankly into space. Faith was still trying to process what Buffy had told her on the way out of Sunnydale.

Dawn was the Key. She wasn't really Buffy's sister. They'd never met before Faith escaped from jail. All those months of memories of the annoying, vivacious pre-teen she'd known two years ago were fake, a cover to protect Dawn from Glory.

A cover that was now well and truly blown.

Faith could hear Dawn and Buffy talking quietly in the rear cabin. Giles was driving, the rest were packed around the small table, with Spike opposite her on the floor. No-one was talking much.

Spike wasn't sure what to make of Faith. He knew they'd met before, the previous year when Faith had stolen Buffy's body, but she seemed only a shell of that person now. He knew nothing about her, except that the two of them vying for the title of "Least Wanted Member Of The Group" gave him an odd sense of fellow feeling. *Bollocks, I am not getting fuzzy feelings for another sodding Slayer*, he told himself, then Dawn's yelp of fright announced

that the Knights of Byzantium had re-entered the game.

Buffy and Dawn burst out of the rear cabin as everyone dropped to the floor. Arrows began to puncture the hull of the Winnebago, then suddenly a sword was driven through the roof. A second stroke followed, then as the sword came down a third time Spike leapt forward and seized the blade.

"Now would be a good time for something heroic..." he said, grimacing as the blade cut into his hands.

Buffy looked around frantically. "Xander, hatch!" She pointed at the opening in the roof. As Xander hoisted her up, they heard the sound of breaking glass from the rear cabin.

"I got it!" Faith yelled, running for the back of the vehicle.

On the roof, Buffy was holding her ground in spite of being outnumbered and outflanked, but for every Knight she dislodged from the vehicle, another climbed aboard. Seizing an axe from one Knight, she spun and threw it into the chest of another, before kicking backwards at the axeman, sending him over the front of the Winnebago to disappear under the wheels.

Faith burst into the rear cabin to be confronted with one of the Knights scrambling through the rear window. Charging in with a kick to the head, Faith knocked him off balance long enough to throw him out of the window, but was then forced to duck as a Knight climbing the ladder to the roof thrust his sword at her. As his arm came forward for a second thrust, she grabbed it at wrist and elbow, jerking him off the ladder to land in the dust behind the vehicle. He was immediately followed by the last of the Knights from the roof. Looking back, Faith could see the remaining mounted Knights dropping behind, their horses blown from the pursuit. One brought up his crossbow for a parting shot. Faith saw the shot a second too late to dodge completely, and the bolt sank into her shoulder, the barbed head emerging from her back in a spray of blood. Then the Winnebago lurched sideways and began to roll over.

Spike smashed through the door of the abandoned gas-station, desperate to get out of the sun. Buffy and Xander followed, supporting the injured Giles, then came Dawn and Faith, who still had the crossbow bolt in her left shoulder. Willow guided Tara inside, and Anya brought up the rear, clutching the first aid kit and weapons bag salvaged from the Winnebago.

Faith flopped down onto an ancient chair while the others got Giles up on the counter. Willow and Xander started to work on his spear-wound, while Buffy checked on the rest of the group. "Dawn, are you ok?"

"I-I'm fine, but Spike and Faith are hurt..." Dawn was hovering between the two, unsure who to try to help first.

Buffy tossed Dawn a couple of dressings for Spike's lacerated hands before going to inspect Faith's injury.

Faith had her hand over the wound. "I'm okay, B. Go see to Giles."

Buffy tried to remove Faith's hand. "Faith, let me look..."

"Go see to Giles!" Faith yelled, then took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, B... Look, the arrow's keeping me from bleeding too much, and this'll take time to fix properly. Help Red with G-man, then we can take care of it..."

Reluctantly, Buffy left Faith where she was and joined Willow and Xander in doing what they could for her Watcher, which wasn't much. They managed to slow the bleeding somewhat before flaming arrows began to punch through the boarded-up windows.

Everyone frantically dove for cover. Xander scuttled across the floor to a window and peered cautiously outside. "Our friends are back, and they've brought a crusade!"

Buffy grabbed Spike's arm and ran over to a large vending machine in the corner. "Willow?"

"I'm working on it!" Willow snapped from her position crouched behind the counter. She was flipping through a spell book with one hand while using the other to maintain pressure on Giles' wound.

Buffy and Spike manhandled the vending machine across the room and tipped it on its side to block the main door, then Dawn screamed as an axe smashed through the wooden wall inches from her head. Buffy dashed across the room to help her sister, but was cut off as a Knight burst through the side door and knocked her down. Spike slammed his fist into the side of the Knight's head and then collapsed screaming as the chip sent a blast of pain through him. Within seconds, Buffy had disabled the Knight, but more were battering at the shuttered windows or coming in through the side door. One, more elaborately dressed than the others, spotted Dawn and moved toward her, sword raised, but was knocked aside as Faith flung a fire extinguisher at him. The impact sent him reeling headfirst into a pillar, and he slumped to the ground, unconscious.

Glancing over at Willow, Faith was shocked to see the witch's eyes turn completely black as she began to chant. "Enemies, fly and fall! Circling arms, raise a wall!" There was a burst of blue light, and the Knights hammering at the windows were thrown away from the building. In moments, the building was cocooned in a shimmering hemisphere of energy.

Buffy helped Willow to her feet. "How long will it hold?"

"Half a day, maybe." Willow looked out of the window and saw the clerics examining the barrier. "Or until Heckle and Jeckle punch a hole through it."

Spike prodded the General with his boot. "So what's the story with King Arthur here?"

Buffy looked down at the unconscious figure, then at her fellow Slayer. "Let's get that arrow out of Faith, then we'll find out."

"Okay, much of the shaft is showing at the back?" Faith asked. Buffy had already cut away the shoulder of her t-shirt, exposing the entry and exit wounds.

Dafydd – The Gift Take Two

Spike looked at the barbed arrowhead protruding from Faith's shoulder. "Half an inch, maybe less."

"Damn! B, you're gonna need to push it through some more..."

Buffy wiped up a trickle of blood as she asked "Faith, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Faith nodded slightly. "My first Watcher was real big on dealing with your own injuries. I need another two, three inches out at the back."

"Okay..." Buffy gripped the shaft of the arrow and pushed. The shaft slid through the hole, accompanied by a horrid sucking noise and a low moan from Faith.

"Okay, okay, now cut the end off, as close as you can to the arrowhead..." Faith gasped, sweat breaking out on her forehead.

Spike moved back a few steps. "You'd better do it, Buffy, we don't want the chip kicking in and making me flinch 'cause I hurt her."

Buffy picked up the wire-cutters Xander had found in a drawer. Gripping the bloodied wood of the arrow with one hand to steady it, she placed the cutters on the shaft beside the tip and began to squeeze. If Faith felt any pain, she covered it, and moments later the wood gave way and the arrowhead fell to the floor. "What's next?"

Faith looked around at her. "Clean as much of the blood off the shaft as you can, it needs to be as dry as possible."

Buffy didn't understand, but did as she was told, wiping the blood away until the red-stained wood was exposed. "Done."

Faith closed her eyes as she said. "Okay, Spike, set fire to the shaft."

"What!" Buffy and Spike exclaimed together.

"Set fire to the shaft. That way, when you pull it back through it'll cauterize the wound."

Buffy looked over at Willow, who was tending to Giles. Willow shrugged. "In theory, it should work..."

Spike pulled out his cigarette lighter and put the flame against the arrow. The shaft fizzed for a moment as the remaining blood boiled, then the wood slowly began to burn.

Faith looked up at Buffy, who had her hand on the shaft near the fletching, the other on Faith's shoulder to hold her steady. "Ready, B?"

"Ready..."

Faith waited until she could feel the flame begin to burn her skin. "NOW!" Buffy pulled, hard. There was a sizzling sound as the flame disappeared into the wound, immediately drowned

out as Faith screamed. Buffy dropped the smouldering arrow with a look of horror and went to look at Faith's back. The skin above the wound was red and beginning to blister, but the bleeding had slowed to almost nothing. Buffy immediately set to work dressing the injuries, pretending not to notice Faith's tears and quiet whimpers of pain.

A little later, as Buffy was talking to the now-conscious General, Spike went to check on Faith. She was still in the same chair, the bloody t-shirt hanging from one shoulder. He held out the red shirt he'd been wearing over his own black t-shirt. "Thought you might want something a bit more substantial to wear. It'll be a tad big, but I figured you'd want something loose over..." he trailed off, pointing at the dressings.

Faith smiled weakly at him and allowed him to help her pull the shirt on, wincing as she flexed her injured shoulder. "How's B doing?"

"She's trying to reason with a fanatic, and that rarely goes well." Spike sighed as he sat down beside her. He started to say something, stopped, and turned to face her. "Why are you here?"

"Huh?"

"Why'd you come back? I assume it wasn't to... how did you put it... 'make me pop like warm champagne'?"

Faith hung her head, fighting back the memories of that day. "I-" she was cut off as Buffy stormed into the room.

"Willow, open a door."

"Buffy! Oi, rise and shine, luv!" Spike grabbed the catatonic Slayer by the shoulders and shook her, to no avail. For nearly thirty minutes, ever since Glory had rampaged out of the gas station with Dawn, she'd simply stared blankly into space.

"Spike..." Anya tried to voice the group's lack of faith in the vampire's approach.

"Come on, people, the girl's endowed with Slayer strength," Spike replied. "It's hardly the time to get dainty. Buffy!" He shook her harder.

Xander protested, "We tried that!"

Spike backhanded Buffy across the face, then groaned as the chip fired.

Xander dragged him away from Buffy. "Are you insane? We could be dealing with neurological damage here! You want to kill her?"

"We have to do something! I can't just sit here watching. You waste time with kid gloves - I'm willing to wager, when all is said and done, Buffy likes it rough."

Xander's arm was pulling back ready to punch the vampire when the sound of splintering wood drew everyone's attention to the corner of the room. Faith advanced slowly, a broken

chair leg in her hand. "You touch her again and I'll kill you." Her eyes held a look terrifyingly familiar to Xander and Willow.

Spike, however, was too fearful for Buffy to worry about the other Slayer. "Yeah, trying to kill people who you're supposed to be on the same side with is what you're good at, isn't it?"

With an incoherent cry of pure rage, Faith flung herself at Spike. She was almost on top of him when Willow spoke, barely above a whisper. "Separate." Spike and Faith were flung across the room in opposite directions, Faith gasping in pain as she bashed her injured shoulder. Willow glared at them, her eyes darkening.

"Buffy's out. Glory has Dawn. Sometime real soon, she's going to use Dawn to tear down the barrier between every dimension there is. So if you two want to fight, do it after the world ends, okay?" She glanced around the room, almost daring the others to challenge her, before speaking again. "All right. First we head back to Sunnydale. Xander'll take Giles to a hospital. Anya's looking after Tara. Faith, Spike, you find Glory. Check her apartment, see if she's still there. Try anything stupid, like payback or killing each other, and I will get *very cranky*. Everyone clear?"

Anya cautiously raised her hand, waiting for Willow's acknowledgement before speaking. "Um... what will you do?"

"I'll help Buffy." Willow replied simply.

"Okay then."

"Uh, Will?" She looked over at Spike. "What do we do if we run into Ben?"

The drive back to Sunnydale had been conducted in near silence, in spite of the appallingly cramped conditions in Ben's car. Since then, things had begun to look more positive: Giles' injury was properly seen to, Willow broke Buffy out of her catatonia, and Xander and Spike had obtained a volume detailing the ritual Glory intended to perform. Faith began to think they had a chance.

Then Giles told them that, if the ritual began, the only way to end it and keep the world from being overrun by demons was to kill Dawn.

Faith could feel the self-control she'd built up over the previous year slipping away. She was enraged. Ben had walked right into their midst, knowing Dawn was the Key, and brought Glory along for the ride! He hadn't even tried to warn them. Now she wanted, *really* wanted to kill him. She almost had killed Spike. Even seeing Buffy walk into the Magic Box hadn't provided more than a temporary boost.

So she'd retreated to the training room, partly to work off some nervous energy but mainly to get away from the sound of Buffy and Giles yelling at each other. It was ironic - her split from Buffy and her friends had begun when she'd accidentally taken a human life, and now the only way to prevent the end of the world might be to do it deliberately.

Xander's voice floated in from the front of the shop. "What about Ben? He's just a regular guy, we can kill a regular guy, right?" He paused, the reality of what he was suggesting sinking in. "Oh God."

You can't kill him, Xander, but I can. Faith thought. *Maybe that's why I'm here, to keep the blood off your hands.*

Faith tuned out the discussion as Anya began a pep-talk which seemed to involve a hammer and large amounts of "thinking outside the box". She began gently flexing her injured shoulder, testing the joint to see how much she could still do with the arm. She couldn't move it without pain, but the wound was holding closed for the moment.

Within a few minutes, the sound of conversation faded as people began doing rather than talking. Buffy appeared in the doorway. For a moment, it felt to Faith like she was looking in a mirror. The face may have been different, but the look in Buffy's eyes was horribly familiar. Fear, guilt, and an awful, crushing loneliness. After a moment, Buffy's face hardened, her expression slipping into the mask of resolve she displayed to the others, her eyes almost challenging Faith to say something. Faith lowered her gaze and silently left the room.

A ferocious hand-to-hand fight raged around the base of Glory's tower. Giles thrust his sword into one of Glory's minions, then wrenched the blade free barely in time to block the pickaxe being swung by one of the mental patients. Anya was hammering at another patient with her baseball bat. Spike was trying to keep as many of the minions as possible occupied, knowing he was all but helpless against Glory's brainsuck victims. Faith had become separated from the others, engaged by three of the minions at once and barely managing to stay ahead of them.

Away to one side, they could just hear the sounds of Buffy's battle with Glory. Willow and Tara were still recovering from the blast of power that had been unleashed when Willow tore Tara's mind free from the hellgod. That, and exposure to the Dagon sphere, had given Buffy an opening and, armed with the troll-hammer, she wasn't giving Glory a chance to regain the initiative.

Scrambling over a pile of debris, Faith bought herself a few seconds to catch her breath. Foolishly, one of the minions had raced ahead of his fellows and attacked her alone. He died swiftly, Faith's short sword slicing through his throat, but his friends were already moving in on her from either side. Weighing up the situation, Faith darted at the one on her right, ducking under the club he swung at her and driving the tip of her sword up behind his ribs. The blade struck bone and stuck, just for a second, but it was enough. The third minion charged in, swinging an axe in an overhead attack. Faith desperately thrust out her injured arm and caught the haft of the axe as it came down. The minion kicked at her, striking her back just below the exit wound. Faith felt something **pop** in her shoulder. She lost her grip on the axe and fell backward onto the ground, groaning in pain as she felt fresh blood seep from the wound. The minion was raising the axe for another blow when an arrow thudded into his back. Struggling to her feet, Faith saw Xander jogging toward her from the crane.

Making their way through the heaps of rubble, they dropped down behind the stack of girders

that was sheltering Giles, Anya and Spike. Xander crawled over to Giles and asked, "How're we doing?"

"It's a tie, so far. We haven't been able to get to the tower, but Buffy's keeping Glory occupied." The Watcher risked a glance over the girders then ducked again as a brick sailed past.

"There's someone up there..." Spike pointed at the top of the tower. Something was moving.

Spike, can you hear me?

Spike jumped as Willow's voice sounded in his mind. "Yeah, loud and clear."

Is there someone up there with Dawn?

"Yeah, can't tell who."

"Are you talking to us?" Xander's confusion was obvious.

Get up there. Go now.

Spike looked over at the mass of minions and mental patients guarding the base of the tower. "Yeah, but..."

Now!

Spike leapt to his feet and ran. Faith yelled "Spike! What're you-", then something *clicked* in her mind. With a muttered "Oh, shit!" she took off after him, leaving the others floundering.

Willow, whatever you've got up your sleeve, now would be a REALLY good time! Spike thought as he bore down on the mob. A second later, they suddenly flew apart, scattered in all directions. Spike never even broke stride as he pounded up the stairs into the tower. Faith, a few seconds behind him, had to deal with a mental patient who made a grab for her, before she too was climbing frantically.

"Doesn't a fella stay dead when you kill him?" Spike remarked as he emerged at the top of the tower and saw Doc standing by Dawn with a knife.

"Look who's talking."

Spike lunged at the demon, who dodged to the side and plunged his knife into the vampire's back. Spike gasped as he spun around, the knife falling free and clattering to the floor. "You don't get near the girl."

"I don't smell a soul on you, why do you care?" Doc asked, as though they were chatting over tea.

"I made a promise to a lady."

"Oh." Doc's tongue lashed out. As Spike ducked, the demon yanked his legs from under him. Before Spike could recover, Doc had him on his feet in an arm lock. "Then I'll pass on your regrets." Spike had time for one anguished look at Dawn before he was flung off the tower, Dawn's desperate cry echoing after him.

Doc stooped to retrieve his knife. "Now, where were we?"

"Get the hell away from her!"

Glory fell to her knees under yet another blow from Olaf's hammer. She looked up at Buffy and whined, "Stop it!"

Buffy returned her gaze with fury burning in her eyes. "You're a god," she spat, bringing the hammer down again, "make it stop!" Blow after blow rained down until, finally, Glory lost her hold on her body and Ben re-emerged.

"I'm sorry..." he gasped.

Buffy lowered the hammer. "Tell her it's over. She missed her shot. She ever, *EVER*, comes near me and mine again..."

"We won't, I swear..."

Buffy tossed the hammer aside and ran for the tower. Ben lay on the floor and tried to focus on breathing. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Giles approaching.

Doc turned to face this new interloper, tutting under his breath. Faith stalked onto the platform, glaring at him. "You okay, bite-size?" Dawn nodded, tears rolling down her face.

"These interruptions really are getting tiresome." Doc said in an aggrieved voice. He looked Faith over, taking in the film of sweat on her forehead, the rapid breathing, and most of all the slowly expanding bloodstain over her shoulder. "But I doubt you'll keep me for long."

Again, the tongue flashed out. Faith was taken by surprise and didn't have time to evade. The stroke hit right on target, in the centre of the bloodstain. Faith cried out in pain and fell to her knees. In a flash, Doc was on her, knife glinting in the glow of the arc-lights, licking his lips as he tasted her blood. Grabbing the weakening Slayer by her right arm, he hoisted her to her feet. As Faith raised her left hand to counterattack, he drove the knife between her ribs. His gloating chuckle died in his throat as he saw the look of triumph in Faith's eyes.

Her left hand dropped to grip his knife hand. Her right blurred forward to lock around his throat.

"I hate it when people stab me!" she hissed. Then, with a convulsive heave of her legs, she threw them both into the abyss.

Buffy was climbing the tower as fast as her Slayer muscles could propel her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of red fall past and realized it was the shirt Spike had lent to Faith. Then she heard Dawn scream from above her. Flinging herself up the final ladder, Buffy burst onto the platform to find Dawn slumped over, sobbing. "Dawn? Dawn! Are you cut? Are you bleeding?"

At the sound of Buffy's voice Dawn looked up. For a moment she just sat there, not understanding the question. Then she shook her head. Buffy broke the ropes binding her sister to the platform and pulled Dawn into her arms.

"Th-there was a demon, he had a knife... Spike tried to stop him but the bastard just threw him off the tower!" Dawn wailed against Buffy's shoulder. "Then Faith arrived... She JUMPED, Buffy! She grabbed hold of him and jumped! She's dead, and it's my fault..."

Buffy couldn't speak. As she picked Dawn up and began to carry her down the tower, she couldn't get her mouth to work.

Oh God...

Death is my gift.

It was supposed to be me...

Chapter 4: Aftermath

Spike was picking himself up out of the rubble. His knee didn't seem to be working right, but nothing seemed badly broken. A noise from above made him look up, and he saw Faith and Doc plunge out of the sky and crash through the roof of the warehouse Glory had used as her base that night.

"GILES! GET OVER HERE NOW!" Spike began limping as fast as he could toward the warehouse entrance.

Bursting inside, he saw Doc crawling out from under Faith's broken form. For the first time that night, Spike's demonic visage came forth. Snatching up an axe dropped by some minion earlier in the fight, he leapt onto the struggling demon and began hacking him to pieces.

"Fucking DIE, you traitorous, murdering son of a..."

Giles and the others arrived to find Spike, covered in Doc's sticky, blue blood, flinging down the axe as he ran to Faith. "Giles, she's still breathing!"

"Don't move her!" Giles yelled as he ran over. Spike looked at him as if he were mad.

"We've got to get her to a hospital, you pillock! Buffy, tell him!" Spike replied as Buffy and Dawn appeared in the doorway.

Giles reached down and grabbed Spike by the collar. "Listen to me! If we try to move her ourselves, we'll probably kill her! Anya, find a phone and call an ambulance." Anya was gone before he finished speaking. "Willow, Dawn, do what you can for Faith. Everyone else, start getting the dead out of sight. Spike, you can clear up... that." He gestured at the remains of Doc.

Buffy's eyes lingered on the battered Slayer before she turned and led the way out of the warehouse. As they went, Tara asked, "What about the crazy people?"

Buffy, her mind occupied with the events of the night, didn't seem to hear her, so it was Xander who answered. "They all seemed to start drifting off after Glory went down."

Inside the warehouse, Dawn knelt beside Willow as she tried to assess Faith's injuries. "Is she going to die?"

"I don't know." Willow answered without looking up. "She's breathing, and her pulse is okay, but the knife's punctured her lung. She's got a blown pupil too, so there's probably some bleeding inside the skull."

Dawn began to cry again, silently.

This is all my fault.

Anya ran back in, panting hard. "Ambulance... on the way..." She collapsed on a pile of sacks, wheezing.

The ER doors banged open. Buffy, who'd insisted on riding with Faith, was right on the heels of the paramedics as Faith was wheeled into the trauma room. One of the nurses cut her off. "Ma'am, you have to give us room to work."

"But..." Buffy watched helplessly as Faith was hooked up to monitors and IV's.

"Please, just let the help her. We're going to need some details... What's her name?"

"Uh... Faith." Buffy shook her head, trying to clear it.

"Last name?"

"I don't know. It never came up."

"You're not family then?"

"She doesn't have family on this coast. Boston, maybe."

The nurse frowned at that. "Okay. Is she allergic to any medication?"

When the rest of the gang arrived, barely fifteen minutes later, the interrogation was over, and Buffy was sitting in the waiting area, staring blankly into space.

"Buffy? Buffy?" Xander shook her shoulder gently. When she looked round he asked, "How bad is it?"

"They haven't said. Where's Dawn?"

Dawn sat down beside her sister. "I'm right here." She took Buffy's hand and squeezed gently. The others took seats nearby. Silence hung over them for a few minutes, then the trauma room doors opened, and Faith was being wheeled to the elevators. Buffy sprang up. "What's happening?"

One of the doctors answered. "We're moving her to surgery. Third floor."

Everyone headed for the stairs, except Buffy. "You guys go, I have to make a call."

Six hours later, Buffy and Giles were alone in the surgical waiting room. Spike had finally agreed to go back to his crypt and give his injuries some rest. The others had taken Tara and Dawn back to the Summers house; Dawn had almost collapsed from exhaustion and emotional overload, and Tara was feeling shaky as well - the exertion of the spell she had done with Willow, clearing the way to the tower, had been a little too much so soon after everything else that had happened to her.

"It was supposed to be me."

Buffy's quiet statement broke the silence that had settled over them. Giles turned to her in shock. "What do you mean?"

Buffy kept her eyes on the far wall. "It was supposed to be me, not Faith. I understand now."

"Buffy- "

"When we did that quest, the spirit told me that death was my gift, remember? I was supposed to die tonight. My death to give Dawn life. Faith wasn't supposed to be there. Now she's going to die, and it should be me..." Buffy looked up at her Watcher, her eyes laden with unshed tears.

Giles got out of his chair and knelt in front of her, taking her hand in his. "No-one forced her to do what she did, she made the choice. Would you rather it had been you? Would you prefer for Dawn to lose her sister as well as her mother? Faith isn't dead yet, and that means there's a chance she'll pull through. You of all people know how tough she is..." He tailed off as Buffy burst into tears.

"Buffy, listen to me. Someone or something warned Faith about what would happen tonight. It sounds to me like she was meant to be there. We both know how difficult prophecies can be to understand. If you remember, it was foretold that you would die facing the Master, but here

you are."

"I did die." Buffy sobbed. "If I hadn't, Faith wouldn't even be here. If I hadn't fallen for Angel's diversion, Kendra wouldn't have died, and Faith wouldn't be dying now. Everyone around me dies or leaves, Giles. Jenny, Kendra, Angel, Cordy, Oz, Riley, Mom... I can't take it any more."

"I'm still here. Xander and Willow aren't going anywhere. You're not alone, Buffy." Giles didn't hear Buffy's whispered reply.

"I'm always alone."

It was mid-afternoon when an exhausted surgeon walked through the doors of the operating room. Willow and Xander had returned to the hospital hours before, Anya having volunteered to watch over Dawn and Tara. Buffy was dozing fitfully on Willow's shoulder, and Willow's head was nodding. Xander and Giles were staying awake thanks to a steady supply of appalling coffee and, in Giles case, the dull ache of the spear-wound in his stomach. No-one had spoken for over an hour. Both men jumped slightly when they heard the doors open. Xander gently shook Buffy and Willow awake as Giles stood up. "Doctor?"

"Are you the family?"

Giles shook his head slightly. "We're... old friends. Faith doesn't have any family near here. Please, how is she?"

The doctor hesitated for a moment, then said, "We were able to deal with the bleeding in her skull and patch the hole in her lung, but she's taken a serious head trauma and lost a lot of blood, not to mention having a bunch of broken bones. The puncture wound in her shoulder was a pretty easy fix, that shouldn't cause any problems, but the rest... If she wakes up in the next forty-eight hours, I think she'll pull through. If not, there's really no way to tell what will happen. We're moving her to ICU, I'll have one of the nurses show you the way." The doctor disappeared in search of a shower and some sleep, and a young nurse led the four of them away.

They found Faith in a corner of the ICU. Her head was swathed in bandages; her skin seemed unnaturally pale except where it had been scraped raw by the fall. Her left arm was in a cast from the elbow almost to the fingertips and bound up in a sling to immobilise the shoulder. The outline of another cast covering her right leg was visible through under the sheets. They could only guess what injuries were covered by the sheets and thin hospital gown. The only sign of life was the almost imperceptible rise and fall of her chest. Buffy took one look at her and burst into tears.

"Can we stay with her?" Giles asked the nurse, unconsciously whispering.

"Yes, but I think you could all use some rest. Whatever happens, she won't wake up for a few hours after the surgery. You should get some sleep and come back in this evening."

"But-" Buffy began to protest, but Giles interrupted her.

"Buffy, Dawn needs you. I'll stay here and call if anything happens."

Xander put his arm around Buffy's shoulders and gently walked her out, followed by Willow.

Tara met them at the door of the Summer's house. Willow immediately flung her arms around her girlfriend, reassuring herself that the woman she loved was really back. Tara hugged her back with equal fervour before turning to Buffy and Xander. "How's Faith?"

Buffy answered. "She came out of surgery about a half hour ago. She's in pretty bad shape, but the doctor's say she has a chance. Is Dawn...?"

Anya appeared behind Tara. "She's in her room, she said she wanted to be alone for a while."

"I'd better go see her..." Buffy said as she turned toward the stairs. Xander and Anya greeted each other with an unusually chaste kiss, then Xander turned to his best friend and her girlfriend. "It's really good to have you back, Tara."

Buffy knocked gently on the door of Dawn's bedroom. Not getting a response she knocked again, and then quietly opened the door.

Dawn was sitting motionless on her bed, staring at the opposite wall. She was still wearing the dress Glory had put on her for the ritual. She didn't move when Buffy sat down next to her and took her hand, she simply asked, "Is she dead?"

"No, Dawnie, she's not dead. She's hurt really bad, but she's strong. I think she'll be okay." The lie slipped easily from Buffy's lips: she was still sure that she would lose someone else close to her. Hope seemed to have died in Buffy Summers.

"I told you..." The words caught in Dawn's throat as tears fell again from her red-rimmed eyes. "I told you I was evil. I must be..."

Buffy seized Dawn by the shoulders and turned the young girl to face her. "This is not your fault, Dawn! You're the victim in this! I don't care what the Key was, or what it was made to do, that all changed when those monks made you. My sister didn't cause any of this. You want to blame someone, blame Glory! Blame those bastard Knights! Blame the people who wanted to hurt you." Buffy gently pulled her into a hug.

"But it all started after I arrived!" Dawn sobbed against Buffy's shoulder. "Glory came, and Riley left, and Mom died. It's all me!"

"Dawn! You think it's because of you that Mom died? How can you even think that?"

"Oh come on, Buffy! She was never sick, then the big blob of energy turns up, and suddenly she has a brain tumour? You think that's a coincidence?"

"We don't know when the tumour started, Dawn." Buffy whispered, the pain of losing her mother suddenly fresh again. "It could have been ages ago. You remember when she last had

a CAT scan?"

"Yeah, it was..." Dawn trailed off, realizing she hadn't really been there at the time.

"It was when she was in the hospital after Darla attacked her." Buffy finished for her. "More than four years ago. The doctors told her it was probably there for months before she felt the symptoms. Before you were sent to us."

"But what if..."

"No what ifs, Dawn. Mom wasn't your fault. Tara wasn't your fault. Giles wasn't your fault. Faith wasn't your fault." *She was mine...*

Everyone ended up sleeping at the Summers' house, returning to the hospital that night. Spike was already there; he had arrived at sunset, sending the exhausted Giles home for the night, and was sitting with Faith when the gang arrived. In spite of Buffy's best efforts, Dawn insisted on seeing Faith. Buffy expected her sister would break down in tears, but Dawn was feeling too emotionally numb by this point. The hospital would only allow two people to stay in the ICU with Faith, so Spike took her out to the waiting area, along with Xander, Anya and Tara, while Buffy and Willow sat by Faith's bed.

"Will, I..." Buffy began to ask the question she'd been wanting to ask all day, but couldn't quite make the words come out.

Willow looked up at her. "What's the matter, Buffy?"

Buffy's expression somehow managed to combine hope and guilt. "I need you to do something for me, but I don't think you're going to want to." Willow didn't respond, she just waited patiently until Buffy spoke again. "I'm worried someone's going to recognise Faith and call the cops. Is there something you and Tara can do, a spell or something, to hide her?"

"I don't know, I mean maybe, but Buffy..." Willow paused for a moment. "You just want to let her walk after what she did to us?"

"I know, Will, but she saved Dawn's life last night, not to mention the world. Shouldn't that count for something?"

"It does, Buffy. It counts for a lot, but she killed people, remember, *human* people. She murdered that geologist, not to mention helping the Mayor try to eat our whole graduating class."

"None of which would have happened if whoever decides these things hadn't chosen her to follow Kendra." Buffy's voice was almost pleading. "Look, I'm not saying we hide her forever, just long enough for her recover." *Or die in peace...*

Willow could feel her resolve weakening. "Tara told me she was planning to go back to jail once we finished with Glory. Does it matter if the cops find her here?"

"Yes, it does. She should get some credit for it, not just get caught because she was hurt before she could turn herself in." Buffy reached over and took her friend's hand. "I just want to give her some peace, Will. I think she's earned that much."

Willow's desire to help her friend finally won out over her lingering hatred of Faith. "I'll talk to Tara. If she agrees, we'll look for something. Okay?"

"Thanks, Will."

A watch rotation was soon decided and everyone except Buffy and Spike headed off again; Willow and Tara staying over at the house with Dawn while Xander and Anya returned to his apartment. So Buffy watched Faith, looking for some sign of improvement, while Spike watched Buffy. For a long time neither of them spoke.

"I'm sorry." It was after midnight when Spike finally broke the silence. Buffy looked up at him in surprise - truthfully, he'd been so quiet she'd almost forgotten he was there. Her brow furrowed in confusion as she realized what he'd said. "For what?"

"For this." He waved his hand over Faith's unconscious form. "I should've been able to beat that bastard myself. I should've made sure he was dead the first time. If Faith hadn't followed me..." Spike screwed his eyes shut, not wanting to think about what that would have meant. Buffy wanted to say something comforting, knowing how bad she felt when a self-perceived failure got someone hurt. She remembered standing with Giles by Jenny Calendar's grave ("I wish I could have killed him for you... for her..."), but some part of her did blame Spike for this. She knew it wasn't fair, but the angry voice at the back of her mind kept repeating, *he promised to protect Dawn, and he failed*. Not trusting herself to speak, she reached out and took his hand. They sat like that for a long time.

Xander and Anya came by to relieve them a little before dawn, giving Spike time to get back to his crypt safely. Willow and Tara took over in the early afternoon, and Buffy returned that night, this time with Giles. She'd asked Spike to watch over Dawn that night, allowing Willow and Tara some time alone together, and he'd readily agreed - they were both a little uncomfortable together after the previous night. Through it all, Faith remained in a condition described by the doctors as "serious but stable".

In the small hours of the morning, Buffy was returning to Faith's bedside from the bathroom when she saw a familiar figure at the nurses' station asking where Faith was.

"Angel?"

Chapter 5: Dreams and Visitations

"Angel?"

A moment later she was running into his arms. The vampire just had time to brace himself

before impact. Buffy hugged him ferociously before stepping back a pace. "Where were you? I kept calling, and I just got the machine..." In spite of the circumstances, Buffy couldn't help smiling at the sight of her ex.

"I know, I'm sorry. We were... uh... out of town, on a case. "Angel wasn't going to try explaining about Pylea in public. "We got back a few hours ago, and Cordy found your messages." In spite of her smile, he could see that Buffy had been through the wringer recently. "How are you doing?"

Buffy let out a little laugh. "I wish I knew..." She took Angel's hand. "Come on, I'll take you to see Faith."

Giles rose from his chair as Angel came in. Their greeting was civil but a little awkward; the matter of Jenny Calendar's death and Giles' torture still hung between them, in spite of their best efforts. Both were quick to return their focus to Faith.

Angel had known from Buffy's phone calls that Faith was in bad shape, but seeing her was still a shock. In the near-silence of the ICU, he could hear her heart beating steadily, but he knew that was only part of the picture. The last time Faith had been in this situation, she had stayed unconscious for eight months. There was no telling how long it would be this time. "Has there been any change?"

Giles shook his head. "The doctor came by to check on her while you were away, Buffy. He told me that Faith's vital signs are stable, she's just unconscious. If her condition hasn't deteriorated by morning, they're going to move her to a regular room. There's nothing more they can do, we just have to wait."

"Buffy, what the hell's been happening here?" Angel asked, keeping his voice low to avoid the possibility of the nurses overhearing.

Buffy was silent for a moment before replying. "Really long story."

Giles rose from his chair, saying "I'll leave the two of you alone..." but Buffy interrupted him.

"Actually, I'd kinda like to get some air." She turned to Angel. "Feel up to a patrol?"

Angel scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Giles. "My cell phone number. Call me if anything happens?"

Willow lay gasping for breath, her eyes glittering and unfocussed, as Tara moved to snuggle in beside her. They had gone to Willow's house after Buffy and Giles had relieved them at the hospital at sunset - their dorm room was missing a wall after Glory's visit. The only thing on their minds had been rest, to recover from the physical and emotional strain of the previous few days, but once the two witches had settled into bed they had found they couldn't keep their hands off each other, in spite of one of Tara's being in a cast. If Willow had been thinking clearly, her psychology studies would have told her that sex was a normal life-affirming response to a dangerous and traumatic situation, but Tara's efforts had virtually reduced her mind to the "fire bad, tree pretty" level.

Tara placed a soft kiss on her girlfriend's cheek and couldn't help but giggle at her glazed expression - the combination of codeine for her broken hand and the endorphins flooding her bloodstream after hours of sex had left Tara feeling slightly intoxicated.

Willow turned to her, a slightly indignant expression on her face. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, I-I'm sorry sweetie, it's just... you looked so spaced out!" Tara replied before giggling again.

Willow managed to pout for a whole two seconds before laughing herself. "Well you know who's fault that was, don't you?" she said, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend. She leaned over and kissed Tara gently, then lifted her head again, her expression suddenly serious. "I love you, Tara. I can't remember the last time I said that..."

Tara silenced her with a swift kiss and said "I love you too, Willow. And you don't need to say it. You saved me, you brought me back." She wiped away the tear trembling at the corner of Willow's eye. "That doesn't mean it's not nice to hear," she finished with a smile.

Willow smiled softly and laid her head on the pillow again. "We should probably get some sleep now."

Tara's only response was a sleepy "Mmhmm..."

"This feels weird."

Angel turned his head to Buffy and looked at her carefully. "What does?"

"Patrolling. With you." Buffy stopped and leaned against a gravestone. "I thought it would be like back in high school, but it's not."

"It's been two years, Buffy. We're not the same people we were then."

Buffy laughed bitterly. "You got that right..."

Angel perched himself on the next gravestone along. "Why didn't you tell me what was happening? Didn't you think I'd help you?"

Buffy was slightly taken aback by not completely disguised look of hurt on Angel's face. "I know you would, but we promised to keep our distance, remember? Besides, it didn't seem necessary. I mean, I knew Glory was dangerous, but we seemed to be dealing. Even when Faith showed up, I thought we could handle it. Then it all just blew up... God, it's been less than three days since Tara was attacked! It was all so sudden..."

"I wish I could have been here for you."

"Sounds to me like you've had some stuff of your own going on." Buffy looked over at him. "They really made Cordy queen? She must've loved that."

Angel laughed quietly. "You have no idea. Except the part where they were going to kill her, of course."

Buffy looked at her watch. "It'll be dawn soon. We should get back to the hospital. You got anywhere to stay?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead. I could always go to the mansion..."

"If you want, you could stay at my place. There's a bed set up in the basement, Faith was sleeping there. It's not much, but it's pretty much sun proof."

Angel smiled gently. "Sounds great. It'll be good to see Dawn again..." He trailed off, remembering. "I've never met her, have I?"

Buffy shook her head ruefully. "Takes a bit of getting used to."

The branches rustled gently in the warm summer breeze. Faith stood silent, her eyes closed, soaking up the warmth and the mingled scents of the woodland.

"I think one of us is supposed to be in there."

Faith turned at the sound of the voice, her eyes snapping open. Buffy was standing a few yards away, gazing down into an open grave. Her outfit chilled Faith's blood: black leather jacket, black t-shirt, red leather pants - the same clothes she had worn the night they fought at Faith's apartment. Looking down at herself, Faith realised she was wearing her clothes from that night too. The scar on her stomach began to throb slightly.

"We in my head or yours?" Faith asked, trying to control her fear as she walked over to stand beside her.

"Isn't that my line?" Buffy smiled weakly for a moment, then her face became solemn again. "This is here for a reason."

"You think? So we don't even rate a headstone..." Faith snorted in disgust. "How come these scenes always star you and an open grave? You think the PTB're trying to tell me something?"

"I don't think it's here for you, Faith." Buffy said sadly. "I think I've out-stayed my welcome. I'm not supposed to be here any more. You were right, Sunnydale is supposed to be your town." She took a step toward the edge of the grave, and Faith grabbed her arm.

"Don't even think it, B! I didn't do all this just to let you go now!"

"Please stop calling me that..." Buffy tried to step forward again, but Faith pulled her back. "Faith, this is how it's supposed to be. You're the Chosen One now..."

"I DON'T WANT TO BE THE CHOSEN ONE!" Faith screamed, spinning Buffy around to

face her. "I'm not like you, I can't do it alone..." Buffy wrenched her arms free of Faith's grip and pushed the younger girl away. Faith stumbled and fell to the ground.

"The Slayer is always alone, Faith. That's how it's always been, ever since- "

"Fuck that! Who cares how it's always been?" Faith scrambled to her feet, her eyes widening in shock. In the brief moment she'd lost sight of Buffy as she fell, Buffy's outfit had changed; instead of the clothes from their pre-graduation battle, she was wearing a long, almost funereal black dress. Behind her, Faith could see that a headstone had appeared at the other end of the grave.

Buffy Anne Summers

1981-2001

Beloved Sister, Devoted Friend

She Saved The World A Lot

"We can't fight our nature, Faith. Take care of the world, okay?" Buffy stepped backward over the edge of the grave. Faith darted forward and grabbed her wrist, but couldn't keep her balance against their combined momentum and they both tumbled in...

Buffy snapped awake, her eyes darting around as she tried to get her bearings. Realising she was in her bedroom, she sat up slowly, trying to calm the pounding of her heart. She looked over at the clock: 12:42 pm. She'd been asleep for barely four hours. She'd been looking forward to getting Angel settled and being in bed soon after sunrise. In retrospect, she should have foreseen the complication...

Spike. In her house. Alone with her sister. Angel hadn't been pleased by that revelation, and Spike wasn't happy about the object of his affections having her ex as a house guest. There had been a lot of glowering and muttered threats before she finally got Spike out of the door and Angel into the basement. The confrontation had woken Dawn from a night of fitful sleep, and she hadn't felt like going back to bed, so the sisters had shared an early breakfast before Buffy headed upstairs. Once in her bed, however, Buffy had been unable to settle, tossing and turning for hours until exhaustion overcame her.

As her heart-rate returned to normal, Buffy slipped out of bed and headed for the shower. She tried to put the images from her dream out of her mind as she washed off the sheen of sweat it had caused. The sweat washed away easily; the residual disquiet was more persistent.

Buffy's sense of unease only grew as she went downstairs. There was no sign of Dawn. Her bedroom door had been wide open, showing a clearly empty room, but she wasn't in the living room or kitchen. Buffy was about to start calling Dawn's name when the slightly ajar basement door caught her eye. She found Dawn sitting on the camp bed with Angel, talking quietly. Dawn was smiling for the first time in days, and started giggling as she saw Buffy.

"You two getting acquainted?" Buffy asked, wondering what had her sister so amused.

Dawn's giggles burst into full-fledged laughter as she said, "Angel sang Barry Manilow!"

"Can we please stop dwelling on that?" Angel pleaded, without much hope - he'd been trying unsuccessfully to get Dawn off the topic for nearly an hour.

Buffy did her best, but within seconds she was laughing harder than she had when she heard about Harmony and her "minions". As much as he wanted to feel put upon, Angel was glad to hear the two Summers girls laughing; he had a feeling that there hadn't been much laughter in the house recently.

Eventually, lack of air forced an end to Buffy's laughter, but she still couldn't look at the vampire with a straight face. "I'm sorry, Angel, but I really needed that."

"Well, as long as my public humiliation was in a good cause..." Angel said, smiling fondly. Buffy was about to ask for details when they all heard the phone start to ring. Buffy ran up the stairs and into the kitchen, snatching the phone from its cradle on the wall.

"Hello?"

"Buffy, it's Tara. She's awake!"

Chapter 6: Two By Four

"Buffy, it's Tara. She's awake!"

For a moment Buffy just stared at the phone, not quite comprehending what she'd heard. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dawn appear at the basement door, her expression questioning. Shaking herself out of her daze, Buffy replied, "We're on our way."

As Buffy hung up, Dawn walked slowly toward her, afraid to ask what the news was. Buffy stepped forward to meet her sister and wrapped her arms around her. "She's awake, Dawnie. She's okay..." Neither realized they were crying.

A few minutes earlier

"Can you still smell smoke?" Willow asked, sniffing the air.

Tara concentrated for a moment, then replied, "Maybe a little, but only because I know it's there."

"All that smoke, just from burning a few herbs..." Willow muttered.

"Do you think we used enough Lethe's Bramble?"

"I hope so, I didn't want to use too much and give everyone in the hospital amnesia." Willow's nose wrinkled slightly as she sniffed again.

"That probably wouldn't be a good thing." Tara agreed. Suddenly, she grabbed Willow's arm. "Look!" She pointed excitedly at Faith.

Willow looked over and saw why Tara had become so excited. The wounded Slayer was

slowly flexing the fingers of her right hand, the one that wasn't in a plaster cast. A few moments later, her eyelids fluttered briefly, then slowly opened.

Faith blinked several times, trying to focus, before she looked around the room. It took her a moment to spot the two witches sitting by the window. "Hey," she said, her voice weak and slightly slurred. "Did we win?"

"Well, the world didn't end, so yeah," Willow replied, her voice slightly distant as she tried to hide the ambiguity of her feelings at seeing Faith regain consciousness. Tara just smiled shyly and waved her cast.

Faith suddenly jerked up off the pillow, trying to sit upright. "What about B? Is she okay?" The memory of the dreams she'd had, of seeing the gang weeping over Buffy's body, ran over and over in her mind. *They won in the dream, but she still died...*

Tara smiled reassuringly. "Everyone's fine. I-I mean, we were all upset about you getting hurt, but now you're awake..."

Faith subsided onto the pillow, relief washing over her face. As she lay down again, she finally noticed the casts and bandages covering her. "This looks like it should hurt..."

"There's morphine in the IV," Willow said, pointing at the line running into Faith's arm.

"Oh. So that's why I sound hammered. It's good." Faith's old crooked smile appeared for the first time since her arrival weeks before, then disappeared again. "How long was I out this time?"

"Uh, not sure. What month is it?" Willow asked Tara, unable to resist having a little fun at Faith's expense.

"Willow!" Tara gave her girlfriend a playful slap on the arm.

"Sorry, I couldn't help it." Willow smiled unrepentantly before turning back to Faith. "It's been two days."

"I'd better go tell the nurse you're awake." Tara turned toward the door.

"Can you call Buffy, too?" Willow asked. "I think one of us should stay..."

"Sure, sweetie." Tara kissed Willow briefly and left the room.

As soon as the door closed, Willow's face hardened. "I want to know what you're planning, Faith."

Faith's eyes, which had been drifting closed, opened again. "Uh, planning?"

"What're you going to do now that we've beaten Glory?"

"Well, I'm guessing sooner or later, someone here'll recognize me and call the cops, so- "

Willow cut her off, shaking her head. "No, they won't."

It took a moment for what Willow had said to register in Faith's morphine-clouded mind, then confusion registered on her face. "Huh?"

"Tara and I did a spell. No-one's going to call the cops."

Faith's eyes widened in surprise. "You did that for me?"

"I did it for Buffy. She asked me to hide you for a while, while you recover."

"Oh." Disappointment flickered across Faith's face for a moment. *Why the hell would Red do anything for me? Damn it, Faith, quit feeling sorry for yourself!* "Well, thanks. I'd rather not be healing up in the prison infirmary."

Willow arched an eyebrow. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, it's just..." Faith paused for a moment, wondering how best to explain. "Back when I first went inside, a few people tried to play 'pick on the new girl'. I put a couple in the infirmary, and everyone's left me alone since, but if I'm laid up like this they might try to settle some scores..." *And I've had enough knives in me to last a lifetime...*

Willow's eyes narrowed. "Get back to the point, Faith. What are you going to do?"

"Go back, I guess." *But I don't want to... No, I have to.*

"Okay, then." Willow sat down again, the stern expression on her face softening somewhat. After a moment, the door opened, and one of the doctors came in to take a look at Faith. He had just finished when Tara returned.

"I called everyone, they're on their way." Tara perched herself on the end of the bed.

Faith smiled weakly at her. "Careful, Blondie, you keep this up and I'm gonna start thinking people like me!" Tara returned the smile shyly. Neither of them saw Willow's eyes narrow.

When Buffy and Dawn got to Faith's hospital room, Giles had already arrived and was waiting with Willow and Tara. The bed was empty.

"What's happened? Where is she?" Buffy asked, panicked.

Giles answered, his voice soothing. "It's all right, Buffy. The doctor took her up for a CT scan a few minutes ago. She'll be back soon."

Buffy visibly relaxed, as did Dawn. The two sisters sat down on the edge of the bed to wait. After a moment, Buffy asked, "Any luck finding a spell?"

Willow smiled slightly. "Found it and cast it. It was pretty easy, really; we'd already looked into using it once before."

"W-we found it a while ago, when we were looking for some way to hide Dawn from...", Tara said, breaking off before she uttered Glory's name. "It sorta masks the person it's cast upon, makes people see what they expect to see. I-I mean, we'll all still see Faith 'cause we know her, but the staff here should just see her as a patient. If a cop saw her we might have a problem, 'cause watching for escaped prisoners is sorta their job, but..."

"We never cast it on Dawn because Glory had already seen her and didn't know she was the Key, so we didn't think it would help - it doesn't work against mystical senses so anything that could sense the Key would still know it was her." Willow finished, babbling slightly.

"Thank you, both of you." Buffy said, smiling at the two witches.

Giles cleared his throat. "Buffy, what are you doing? I know we kept Faith hidden before, but she has done what she came here to do..."

"I know, Giles." Buffy sighed. "I just want her to have a chance to get well again, before the cuffs go back on." Giles looked at her curiously for a moment, but remained silent.

Xander and Anya arrived a few minutes later, and soon after that, the group decided to wait outside in the corridor "where the chairs live", as Xander put it. Half an hour passed, then an hour. Xander was returning from fetching coffee when the elevator doors opened, and Faith was wheeled out, looking tired but a little more alert than before.

Buffy and Dawn ran to meet her, Dawn practically pouncing onto the gurney to hug Faith. Buffy's greeting was more restrained; she simply squeezed Faith's uninjured hand once and smiled.

A nurse quickly returned Faith to her room, while a doctor with "Michael Wilson M.D." embroidered on his lab coat gathered the waiting Scoobies. "I'm sure you're all anxious to talk to Faith, but what she needs most at the moment is rest. Don't get me wrong, it's great that you've all been watching over her while she was unconscious, but now she's awake I don't want her getting disturbed too often. No more twenty-four hour vigils, okay?"

"She's going to be all right, isn't she?" Buffy asked anxiously.

Dr. Wilson smiled gently. "I think she'll be fine. She's already making excellent progress. I'm going to go over her condition with her now, and then you can see her, but only fifteen minutes. She needs to rest today, so anything else will have to wait until tomorrow."

"Got it." Buffy replied, the others nodding and murmuring their agreement.

Wilson nodded once and disappeared into Faith's room. Buffy sat down again and hugged Dawn. "She's going to be okay..."

Everyone sat in silence for the next few minutes, digesting the news, before Dr. Wilson came back out. "You can go in now. Fifteen minutes, remember?" The various nods seemed to satisfy him, and he left them to it.

Faith was back in her bed looking a little shell-shocked when Buffy led the others into the room. Seeing the expression on the other Slayer's face, Buffy immediately went back on alert. As the other six tried to arrange themselves around the bed without crowding it, Buffy perched on the side of the bed. "Faith, what happened?"

Faith gave a wry smile before she answered. "The doc was telling how many bones I broke; I never really thought about how many there are before."

"How are you doing? And if you say 'five by five' I'll break your other arm!" Buffy said, smiling weakly.

Faith laughed briefly, then winced as a jolt of pain penetrated the painkillers in her system. "More like two by four, as in 'hit with a', but I'll live."

"How bad is it?" Dawn asked quietly.

"Ah, I'll be fine, Bite-size. Doc says I'll be here for a few weeks, which means I'll be out in two max with the whole Slayer healing thing." Faith's attempt to laugh off her condition didn't work.

"Please, Faith, I want to know..." Dawn said. *How bad did I get you hurt?*

Faith sighed once before acquiescing. "The arm took the worst of it. I broke one of the bones in the forearm and a few little ones with big-ass names in my hand. Dislocated the shoulder, too, which messed up the arrow wound again, but there wasn't any real nerve damage so it should heal up fine. I cracked my skull, but they took care of the bleeding, and the swelling's gone down so that's all good." She patted her plastered-up right leg. "Broke my shin in two places and cracked the kneecap, but they'll all heal. Punctured lung's all stitched up. A few ribs got cracked, but nothing serious. Other than that, it's just cuts and bruises, nothing I couldn't have gotten on patrol."

Tears welled in Dawn's eyes as Faith ran through the list. As she finished, Faith looked over at the younger Summers and said as sharply as her tiredness would let her, "Hey! Knock it off, Bite-size! We took on a hell-god and we're all here for the "We Kicked Her Ass" party. Sounds pretty good to me."

Dawn sniffed a little and nodded. Giles put his hand on her shoulder and said to Faith, "We should probably let you get some sleep. Dr. Wilson was quite emphatic about that."

Faith chuckled at that. "Yeah, it's weird. I sleep for two days and wake up wiped, how twisted is that?" Everyone laughed a little awkwardly.

Buffy turned to the others. "I'll catch up, guys, I just want a minute..."

As the door closed, Faith suddenly remembered something. "Hey, is Spike okay? I remember him going off the tower right before me..."

"He's a bit beat up, but still in one piece." Buffy replied. "He twisted his knee pretty badly when he landed but he's in way better shape than you - he hit that big heap of rubble and

rolled down the slope, so he didn't just slam into the ground."

Silence reigned for a moment, then Buffy spoke again. "Thank you."

"What for? After what I did to you before, this was the least I could do." Faith's eyes dropped at the mention of their past. "I never thought I'd get a chance to start squaring things with you, B, I had to take it."

"Faith, we are so far past square right now... You saved my sister. She's all I have now."

Faith shook her head slightly. "It's not enough, B. It can't be enough..."

"It is to me." Faith was about to object again, but Buffy touched her finger to the dark girl's lips, silencing her. "I can't forget what you did, and you *really* shouldn't, but I forgive you."

"Okay." Faith began to smile, but it turned into a yawn halfway through.

Buffy laughed gently. "Sleep. Now. I'll be back tomorrow, and Angel will be by after dark tonight."

Faith perked up at that. "Fang's in town?"

"Yeah, I called him when you were brought in here, but he only got the message last night, and he came straight here."

"Cool! I don't think they'll let me send him a visitor's pass for a while after I get back, y'know."

Buffy nodded slightly and left the drowsy Slayer in peace.

Giles and the others were waiting just down the corridor. Buffy joined them and motioned them into a corner where they wouldn't be overheard. "Giles, can you take Dawn home? I want to run by Spike's crypt and let him know Faith's okay."

Giles ignored Xander's eye-rolling as he replied, "Of course."

Buffy paused for a moment. "I'd like you all to come over tonight, ten o'clock. There's something I need to talk to you all about. Actually, Giles, can we use the Magic Box? I think we could use some space."

"Of course, Buffy." Giles replied, half-suspecting what was on her mind.

"What's up, Buff?" Xander asked. "Spider-sense tingling?"

Buffy shook her head. "Nothing like that. I'll explain tonight." *I really don't want to have this argument more than once.*

Chapter 7: The Question Before The Court

Spike had just switched on the TV and settled into his battered armchair when the door of his crypt opened, the rusty hinges squeaking. With a sigh, he set down his Bloody Mary (real blood) and turned looked around at the visitor. Seeing Buffy silhouetted against the afternoon sky, he relaxed - he really wasn't in the mood to deal with demons.

"Don't you ever knock?" he asked, more out of habit than genuine annoyance.

Buffy smiled slightly as she closed the door. "How's your leg?"

Spike took a sip of his drink and regarded the injured limb, propped up on a footstool. "Sore, but not as much as yesterday. Should be fine in a day or so."

"Good." Buffy paused for a moment, feeling a little awkward in Spike's company. "Faith's awake."

Spike looked around at her. "She going to be all right, then?"

Buffy nodded. "It'll take a while, but everything's fixable." Buffy hesitated before bringing up the real reason she was there. "Spike, I've asked everyone to meet at the magic shop tonight at ten: there's something I need to talk about and I'd like you to be there."

Spike drained his glass before answering. "All right."

For a moment Buffy thought he was going to say something more, but he kept silent - until she opened the door to leave. "Will Angel be there?"

"Yes, he'll be there."

There was no reply.

The door opened, creaking slightly. Faith stirred, half awake. Her eyes opened blearily, but she came full awake quickly as the moonlight shining through the window revealed the face of her visitor.

"Hey, Fang."

Angel sat down in a chair by the bed. "How're you doing?" His usual stoic expression masked a mixture of pleasure and concern over seeing Faith and worrying about her condition.

"I'm okay. I got a bed, three meals a day, and morphine on demand. What more does a girl need?" Faith smiled slightly. She shifted a little, trying to find a position where she could face Angel more comfortably, and winced as her broken ribs protested.

Even in the semi-darkness, Angel spotted her reaction. "Are you using the morphine?"

"Just enough to let me sleep," she admitted.

"Faith..."

"You ever see someone on a morphine crash?" Faith looked him in the eye, a hint of fear showing on her face. "I have. I'm not gonna put myself through that, 'specially not in solitary."

Angel tried to reassure her. "They wouldn't let you take that much, Faith."

The Slayer just shook her head minutely. "Not gonna take the chance. 'Sides, I'm a Slayer, got the whole high-pain-tolerance thing."

Angel wasn't happy with that, but decided to drop it - he knew how stubborn Faith could be and he didn't want to upset her while she was healing. "You're definitely going back to jail, then?"

Faith just looked up at the ceiling for a moment before answering. "I have to. Still got a lot of time to do, and I don't think my little breakout's gonna go down well with the parole board."

"You could try to hide, maybe go for the border," he suggested.

"No." *But...* "No. I can't stay out, I'm not ready." Faith tried to fight down the pleading voice in her mind. *But I don't want to go back.*

"You don't sound too sure of yourself." Angel reached over and took her hand gently.

"I'm sure. When things got bad, I wanted to..." Faith squeezed her eyes tight shut, but a tear still escaped. "I wanted to kill, Angel. When we realized what Ben had done, what he was - did B tell you about him? He *was* Glory, and he never even tried to warn us... I wanted to cut him open, see his blood pour out..." The tears began to flow freely down her cheeks. Somewhere deep in her heart, she raged at showing such weakness in front of anyone, even Angel.

Unable to hug the crying girl for fear of hurting her, Angel leaned over and gently cradled Faith's cheek with his hand. "I doubt you were the only one, Faith."

Faith looked up at him, her eyes glittering in the moonlight. "It's not the same, Angel. I can't let myself think like that, I can't take the chance, and I still -"

Angel finished for her. "You don't want to go back."

Faith shook her head once. "No, I don't, and that's why I have to."

As ten o'clock approached, Buffy nervously paced the length of the Magic Box. The atmosphere in the shop was already tense, and they were still waiting for Xander and Anya. Spike was sitting on the counter and glaring at Angel, who was seated on the stairs up to the gallery, seemingly lost in thought. Giles, Willow, Tara and Dawn had taken seats around the table and were talking quietly.

It was a couple of minutes after ten when the bell over the door rang, announcing Xander and Anya's arrival. Xander was about to offer some lighthearted greeting when he spotted Angel

and Spike. His jaw snapped shut, and he wordlessly took a seat beside Dawn so that he could glower at both vampires without moving his head too much. Anya joined him, her silence displaying an unexpected level of tact.

Everyone looked expectantly at Buffy. She stopped pacing beside the steps to the front of the store and turned to face them, her body held stiffly upright, arms crossed over her chest.

"Thank you for coming, all of you. There's something I need to talk to you all about, and I'd rather get it over with in one go. It's about Faith, what's going to happen to her." Buffy took a deep breath and asked the question. "Do we send her back to jail, or keep her here?"

There was a moment of shocked silence in the room, then Willow spoke. "Buffy, you're not actually suggesting we let Faith stay free, are you?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting, Will." Buffy looked over at her, a hint of desperation in her eyes. "Look, I know how you guys feel about her, but I think she's earned another chance."

"I guess life really doesn't mean life any more." Xander said bitterly.

Giles cleared his throat before he spoke up. "Personal feelings aside, Xander does have a point, Buffy. Faith has been convicted of a crime and sentenced accordingly."

"I know, Giles, but what she did here should mean something, shouldn't it?" Buffy cast her eyes over her friends, searching for any sign of support.

Xander shook his head in disbelief. "So, what, she actually does her job for a change, and she can get away with murder?"

"She'll never get away with it." Everyone turned to look at Angel. "She'll be carrying it with her for the rest of her life. They can't do anything in jail that's as bad as what that memory will do to her."

"Oh, big surprise," Xander snapped. "The bloodsucking demon's on the side of the murderer. You want to get in on this too, Bleachboy?" He glared at Spike.

"Xander!" Dawn snapped. "How can you talk about her like this? She saved us all! If she hadn't been there I'd have been sliced open up on that tower!"

No one noticed Spike's face darken. *Was I even there? My sodding knee says I was, but no one else seems to remember...*

"You got an answer for that, Xander?" Buffy said harshly.

"Look, I'm as happy as anyone that Dawn's safe, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna forget about Faith trying to kill half the people in this room." Xander shoved his chair away from the table and started pacing.

"H-has..." Tara began, her voice faltering. "Has anyone asked Faith what she wants?"

"She doesn't want to go back." Angel replied.

"There's a shock..." Willow muttered sarcastically.

Angel continued, ignoring the redhead's comment, "The thought of being free scares her. She's afraid of what she might do if she's not locked up."

"Okay, *Faith* is talking sense." Xander observed from the corner, a look of surprise on his face. "Giles, isn't that a sign of the apocalypse?"

Giles just glared at him and said nothing.

Buffy turned to face her friend and asked, "Why are you being like this? Two days ago you were sitting outside the operating room waiting for Faith and now you're acting like she's the enemy again."

"It's a lot easier to be nice about her when she's unconscious, and I don't have to worry about her strangling me again," Xander retorted, his expression angry, and almost hurt.

"Is being in jail helping her?" Tara asked, partly to distract Buffy and Xander from snapping at each other and partly because no one else seemed to be considering it. "I-I mean, can they help her?"

"I doubt it." Buffy replied. "They can't help her deal with being a Slayer, and that's what this is really all about. If she hadn't been a Slayer none of it would have happened, she never would have even come to Sunnydale."

"And you think you can help her?" Giles questioned, his expression neutral.

"Maybe. I don't know, but I think we're the only people who can."

Willow looked at Buffy sceptically, "So you're saying she's our responsibility now?"

"Maybe ours." Buffy allowed. "But definitely mine. I mean, I know she made a lot of mistakes, but I could have tried harder. I could have helped her if I hadn't been... distracted." She didn't look at Angel.

Xander came and stood by her, wanting to draw a line under their argument. "Buff, you can't blame yourself for what Faith did. You're the one who stopped her, remember?"

Buffy closed her eyes for a moment as images of that final fight at Faith's apartment flooded her mind. "I remember, Xander, believe me I remember..."

"I hate to break up the moralising," Spike interrupted. "But can we keep Faith around? I mean, are you planning to hide her in the basement permanently, and just wheel her out when there's slaying to be done?"

"Okay, now Spike's talking sense, this is officially the Twilight Zone!" Xander joked as he returned to his seat, trying to lighten the mood.

"I hadn't actually thought that far..." Buffy admitted. "Is there some way we can get the cops to stop looking for her?"

"Bribery often works." Anya offered.

"It also means giving people lots of money we don't have, Ahn." Xander reminded her.

"Well, screw that."

Spike had a thought. "What about Red? Could you mess with their computers, keep them off our backs that way?"

"Guys, we're not talking about hacking the Sunnydale coroner's office here." Willow replied. Her expression wasn't encouraging. "I'd have to get into the LAPD, the California Department of Corrections, probably some federal databases since she escaped."

"Can you do it?" Buffy asked, her voice almost a whisper.

"Maybe, with a lot of preparation and some magic thrown in. Or I could end up sharing a cell with Faith for the next twenty years."

Buffy's shoulders slumped and she sat down on the steps, defeated.

"What about the Council?" Dawn's question surprised everyone. "I mean, they're always going on about how much pull they have with the government, maybe they can do something?"

Xander's derisive snort left no doubt about his opinion. Anya put her arm around his shoulders and asked, "Do they even know she's escaped?"

"They know." Giles replied. "They were monitoring her, from a distance - I don't think they wanted to chance another confrontation with Angel or Buffy. Quentin Travers contacted me the night Faith arrived here. I told him what had happened and convinced him to leave the matter in our hands."

"Do you think Travers would help?" Buffy asked.

Giles took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We might be able to convince Quentin, but whether he could persuade the rest of the Council..."

"I-I thought Mr. Travers was head of the Council," Tara said, confused.

Shaking his head, Giles replied, "Quentin is in charge of the Operations division. He's responsible for the Slayer, and the various tactical units the Council has scattered around the world. There are three other divisions: Training, Research and Logistics. The Council itself is made up of the four divisional heads and the Chairman - I suppose you could say he's the head of the Council, but there's really no one person in charge."

"But the Council could do it?" Buffy asked, not really interested in the finer points of bureaucracy.

Giles nodded. "Almost certainly. They may be the only people who can, or at least the only ones we have access to. Assuming, of course, we decide to do this. Are you sure you've thought this through, Buffy? If Faith turns on us again, I'm not sure there will be any way we can bring her back."

"I've thought about it, Giles, believe me." Buffy answered. "But what if I die? Can we be sure there'll be another Slayer called? If not, Faith'll be all there is. You want to just leave her in a cell until we need her? We might as well just paint "In case of emergency, break glass" on the prison gates!" She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Giles, I shouldn't be shouting at you..."

"It's all right, Buffy, We've all had a rather trying few days, it's only to be expected that we're all on a short fuse." Giles looked over at the staircase. "Angel, you've been... monitoring... Faith since she was arrested. What do you think?"

"She wants redemption, and she knows she has to earn it. She thinks she can only do that in jail, but I think, in the end, it'll just end up hurting her." Angel took an unnecessary breath, and continued. "She's a Slayer. She knows that there are things in the world that she was chosen to fight. Sooner or later that's going to start gnawing at her. I think the only way she can truly redeem herself is by fulfilling that destiny, and I think it should be here, where she can face her past."

Buffy stood. "So, do we agree? We contact the Council and see if we can make this work?"

Silence reigned for a moment as everyone looked at Willow and Xander. Finally, Xander spoke. "Look, I just want to go on record as saying that I don't like this, but I'll give it a shot."

Anya looked puzzled. "You're not going to argue any more?"

"Ahn, it wouldn't help. Besides, if Buffy and Giles think this can work, then I'm willing to believe them." Xander looked around the group. "Just remember; if this goes wrong, you're all in for a rousing chorus of 'I told you so!' before I bleed to death."

Buffy smiled her thanks before turning to Willow. "How about you, Will?"

Willow frowned and said "Okay. Just as long as we don't have to trust her. Or like her."

"Thanks, guys." Buffy turned to her Watcher. "Giles, make the call."

"I think I'll leave it for a couple of hours, Buffy, it's not much past six in the morning in London." Giles said, looking at his watch. "I doubt Quentin will be more likely to help us if we wake him up."

"Do we tell Faith?" Tara asked.

Buffy shook her head. "Not until we know if we can make it happen or not. I don't want to get her hopes up." Everyone nodded, some more enthusiastically than others. Angel's brow furrowed in thought and Buffy spotted the change immediately. "Something wrong?"

"Maybe. I just thought of a complication, or a possible one. Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

Angel stood and walked over to the table. "Willow, if I give you a name could you use it to track down an address on your computer?"

"Yeah, sure." Willow replied, her tone curious, as Angel wrote something in a notebook, tore the page out and handed it to her. She read the name and asked, "Who is this?"

"He's... an old acquaintance from L.A. I think he's in Oklahoma these days. That's where he was heading last time I saw him." Angel walked over to Buffy and gave her a quick hug. "Speaking of L.A., I think I'd better be heading back."

"You sure you can't stay another day or two?" Buffy asked. "I'm sure Faith would like to see you again."

"I'm sure. I left Cordy and Wes babysitting a crazy physicist - don't ask. I should at least drop in before I head for Oklahoma."

Buffy nodded her understanding and walked with him to the door. Angel looked deep into her eyes and whispered, "If you need me, you know I'll be there for you, right?" She smiled at him and nodded. Another brief hug, and he was gone.

Chapter 8: The Proposal

Come on, show yourself, you little bastard... The crossbow pistol was leveled at the corner of the wall, its target still veiled in shadow. She circled to the right, hoping to get a clear shot...

There was a blur of movement from the shadows, a gleam of light from feral eyes and sharp teeth. Her finger tightened on the trigger and the bolt shot forth.

"Damn it!" Cordelia shouted to no one in particular as her shot ricocheted off the marble floor of the Hyperion lobby at least two feet behind the rat, which scuttled off into the shadows by the basement access. Muttering curses, she began to reload.

"Hey, Cordy."

"YAAGH!" Cordelia jumped as Angel's voice sounded behind her. "God, Angel, didn't anyone ever tell you not to sneak up on people with crossbows?"

"Sorry." Angel chuckled at his friend's look of chagrin. "If the rats really bother you that much, you should just call in an exterminator."

"Oh no, this is personal. I'm gonna get them all, especially that one with half its ear missing." Cordelia turned to glare at the basement door. "Oh yeah, rat-boy, your time is coming." She walked over to the reception desk and put down the crossbow. "Speaking of nasty little rodents, how's Faith?"

Angel sighed at the venom in Cordelia's voice. "She'll live. She has a lot of bones that need healing, but she'll be okay." He sat down on the circular couch. "She did a lot of good, and

she damn near died in the process. Would it kill you to just give her a chance?"

Cordelia looked over at him, her expression unforgiving. "If last time's anything to go by, it might. In fact, I seem to remember that it almost did get you killed."

"People change, Cordy. I did a lot worse than anything Faith tried."

"Yeah, well, Faith isn't you." Cordelia replied, before changing the subject. "You should probably go see Fred; she's been asking when you're coming back every time we've looked in on her."

Angel stood and looked up toward the balcony. "Has she been out of her room at all?"

Cordelia followed his gaze. "No, she just sits up there and writes on the walls. Wes says it's 'either some of the most advanced math he's ever seen, or it's complete gibberish'."

Angel started up the staircase. A few steps up, he paused and turned back. "I'm going to have to leave again as soon as it gets dark."

"What?" Cordelia asked in shock. "You just got here! Where are you going?"

"Oklahoma. There's someone I have to see... about Faith." Angel replied as he disappeared up the stairs.

Who the hell's in Oklahoma? Cordelia wondered before realization sunk in. *Oh God, not him!*

Quentin Travers was in his office, sipping his tea and leafing through Giles' report of the final battle with Glory when the call came. He was, to say the least, surprised to hear Giles' voice. "Is everything all right, Rupert? It must be almost one in the morning over there."

"Nothing untoward has happened, Quentin. Buffy and I want to talk to you about Faith." Giles replied.

"Miss Summers?" Travers' tone was questioning.

"Hello, Mr. Travers." Buffy's voice came over the line. "We've been discussing what should happen her now, and we think it would be better all round if she stayed in Sunnydale."

Travers' eyes narrowed. "Miss Summers, I agreed not to move against Faith on the understanding that she would be returned to custody once the situation with Glory was resolved."

"We're aware of that, Quentin," Giles said, a little sharply. "And if you've read my report, you'll know how important her presence proved to be."

"Yes, Rupert, your account of Faith's actions makes for interesting reading." Travers flipped open the file and re-read Giles' description of Faith's injuries. "However, this does not alter the fact that Faith is a convicted killer and has shown herself to be dangerously unstable. She is

entirely capable of "

"I know what she's capable of, Quentin!" Buffy interrupted. "I also know that things could have been a lot different if Wes and your hit squad hadn't blundered in. And if the Council had told us that Gwendolyn Post had gone crazy, maybe Faith wouldn't have stopped trusting us in the first place!"

No one spoke for a moment after Buffy's outburst, then Travers sighed quietly. "What exactly are you proposing, Miss Summers?"

"Faith stays here with us. Being in jail isn't helping anyone, it's just punishing her. She's already made the decision to change, and who better can help her better than people who actually know who and what she is?"

"Think about it, Quentin." Giles added. "Six months ago you didn't have one Slayer to call on. This way there can be two of them guarding the Hellmouth. You know it makes sense."

"With you acting as Watcher for both of them, I suppose." Travers said dryly.

"You think it's a good idea to send someone new?" Buffy asked. "Didn't work out too well last time."

Travers thought for a moment, then asked, "Assuming the Council approves this plan, what will you be wanting from us?"

Buffy replied, "I want you to get the cops off Faith's back. I don't care how: parole, pardon, whatever, just so long as she isn't looking over her shoulder the rest of her life."

"Very well, I'll put your proposal to the Council." Travers said. "If I were you, though, I wouldn't get my hopes up. I'll contact you once a decision has been made." He hung up before they could reply. For a few moments he sat at his desk thinking, before he got up and left the office.

His assistant was at his desk going through a report on vampire activity in Eastern Europe when Travers called to him. "Julian, I'll need to speak to the head of our North American section and someone from the legal team with a good knowledge of American law. We may have some business to conduct in California."

Julian picked up the phone and began dialing. "The Summers girl, sir?"

"When isn't it the Summers girl?"

Dawn knocked again on the crypt door. Again, there was no answer, so she pushed open the door and stepped inside, taking a moment to savour the cool air after walking through the afternoon heat. "Spike?"

There was no sign of the vampire on the upper level, so Dawn stuck her head through the hole in the floor and called again. "Spike? You here?" *Where the hell else would he be?*

"Niblet?" Spike appeared in her field of view, shirtless, limping slightly and covered in dirt. "What're you doing here?"

Dawn put on her best teenage pout. "What, I can't come visit my guardian vampire? And what the hell are you doing, anyway, mudwrestling?" *Ooh, hello lusty wrong thoughts...*

"Eh?" Spike looked puzzled for a moment before realising what she was talking about. "Oh, I decided to do some re-modeling down here. Look, if you want to chat, can you come down? I don't like tackling the ladder while my sodding leg's acting up."

Dawn nodded and scrambled down the ladder. Looking around, she immediately noticed a pickaxe and a stack of wooden planks beside a hole in what had been a wall. Moving closer, she could see the hole was actually a tunnel, roughly ten feet long and shored up with timber. She turned to the vampire, an unspoken question on her face.

"Decided to put a back door in." Spike said. "After Glory's little wankers nabbed me, I wanted a way out I can use in daylight, without bursting into flames. If I'm reading the plans right, I should hit that big electrical service tunnel in another twenty feet or so."

"I never knew you could do this kinda stuff." Dawn remarked, gesturing at the tools and timber.

Spike looked a little sheepish. "I picked up a thing or two while I was digging for that Gem of Amara trinket..." Looking around for something to change the subject to, Spike finally noticed the bag hanging from Dawn's shoulder. "You back at school?"

"Yeah, even world-destroying Keys need an education."

Spike laughed, then picked up his pickaxe again. "Look, Niblet, it's not that I'm not happy to see you, but I'm a tad busy, so..."

"I just wanted to thank you, for everything you've done for me the last few weeks. I know everyone's been going on about Faith, but I haven't forgotten about you. Buffy hasn't either; she's just been so caught up with worrying about Faith and taking care of me, and then Angel showed up... I came to thank you, for both of us." Dawn stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. "I'd hug you, but, well, eww..." She indicated his grimy state.

Spike chuckled as he said, "Thanks, Niblet. Now scamper off home before Big Sis starts panicking again."

With a last smile, Dawn climbed the ladder again. Spike hefted his pickaxe and disappeared into the tunnel.

The sun had just set when the phone rang.

"Angel Investigations, we he-"

"Cordy, it's Willow."

"Oh, hey, Will! How are you?"

"Still a 'Great Big Lesbo,'" Willow deadpanned.

Cordelia grimaced. "You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Someday. Probably. Hey, is Angel around? I've some info he asked me to find."

"Yeah, he's in the kitchen packing blood for his little road trip." Cordelia covered the mouthpiece. "ANGEL!" When he emerged from the kitchen, carrying a freezer bag, Cordelia handed him the receiver. "It's Willow."

Angel placed the bag on the counter and put the receiver to his ear. "Hi, Willow."

"I found him. At least, I think it's him - the name's right and he moved in around the right time. He's in a town called Heyburn, just off I-44, about sixty miles east of Oklahoma City."

Angel jotted down the address. "Thanks, Willow, great work. I really appreciate this."

Buffy quietly opened the door to Faith's hospital room. The dark Slayer had her eyes closed, and for a moment Buffy thought she was asleep. Then she noticed the earphones, almost invisible under Faith's dark hair, leading to a small cassette player on the bedside cabinet.

As Buffy sat down on the edge of the bed, Faith opened her eyes. "Hey, B!" Faith smiled her old crooked smile as she stopped the tape.

"How're you feeling?" Buffy asked.

"Not so bad. I get these dizzy spells once in a while, but the doc says that's normal after a bad knock to the head. Everything else just aches. By the way, the food in here sucks!"

Buffy laughed at that. "Yeah, I remember." She cast her eye over the small stack of tapes by the cassette player: The Clash, The Ramones, The Jam, The Sex Pistols. "I see Spike's been by."

"Yeah, he dropped in just after sunset. It's not my usual thing, but it's not bad."

"Well, if you get tired of it, I brought you a few things." Buffy held up a carrier bag and took out a bunch of grapes. "You can't be in hospital and not have grapes, it's like a rule or something." She pulled out a selection of comic books "Also, a little light reading." Buffy couldn't help laughing as Faith's eyes lit up. "I got Xander to pick them out; I wouldn't even know where to start. And finally..." Buffy took out a small stuffed panther, which she tucked under Faith's uninjured arm. "From Dawn. She wanted to come with me, but she started back at school today and she's got a lot to catch up on before finals..."

"It's okay. Tell her I said thanks - and please don't tell the others about this, I got a rep to

protect!" Faith grinned, idly stroking the stuffed toy.

"My lips are sealed! Slayer's honour."

Two nights later, Angel walked into a bar in Heyburn. Trying to ignore how out of place he looked, he looked around for his quarry, and finally spotted him sitting at the end of the bar. Angel walked up behind him, grateful that the bar didn't have one of those long mirrors for him not to show up in.

"Hello, Lindsey."

Chapter 9: Asking The Right Questions

"Hello, Lindsey."

The former lawyer's head jerked up in surprise. He turned on his barstool to face the vampire behind him, a decidedly unfriendly look on his face. "What do you want?"

Angel had the decency to look uncomfortable as he replied, "I was hoping we could talk."

"You think we have something to talk about?" Lindsey tossed a couple of bills onto the bar and turned to walk out. "What was it you said? Oh, yeah, it was 'Don't come back.' Well, that one goes both ways - I stay out of your town, you stay out of mine." He headed for the door.

Angel followed a step behind him. "I need an expert opinion, and you're the only expert available. Believe me, I'm not happy to be here."

"So you're going to turn up every time Wolfram and Hart hits you with something you don't see coming? I told you before, I'm out. It's not my problem any more." Lindsey pushed through the door, out into the cool night air.

Angel waited for a moment before following. "Actually, this *is* your problem, seeing as you helped create it."

Lindsey paused, his hand on the door of his truck. "What're you talking about?"

"Faith."

Surprise passed momentarily over Lindsay's face before the mask of indifference settled into place again. "I thought she was in Stockton."

"She was. She broke out to help deal with Sunnysdale's annual apocalypse." Angel walked over to the truck and leaned against the side.

"And you want me to find some way to keep her out?"

Angel shook his head. "Actually, we've got that covered. I need to know if Wolfram and Hart

are going to come after her."

"Which part of 'not my problem' don't you understand?" Lindsey opened the truck door, and barely got his fingers out of the way as Angel slammed it shut again.

"You don't like me, that's fine. I don't like you either." Angel leaned in close, his voice dropping to a threatening whisper. "And let's face it, we've got history. You hurt my friends, I cut off your hand and locked you in a wine cellar with Darla and Dru. You want to walk out on that, be my guest. Hell, I'll hold the door for you. But *you* dragged Faith into our little dynamic, and now you're going to help deal with the fallout."

"As I recall, she didn't need to be dragged into anything." Lindsey said, refusing to be intimidated. "As soon as she found out you were the target, she couldn't take the job fast enough."

"So your defence is that you took advantage of a messed-up teenager? Not helping your case, Counselor!"

"You think I'm trying to make a case here?" Lindsey snapped. "You're the one on the epic journey to redemption. I just want to get on with my life."

"The sooner you give me what I want, the sooner I leave you alone."

"All right." Lindsey fell silent, working the possibilities out in his mind. Finally, he shrugged. "I think she'll be okay."

"Are you sure? She screwed you guys over pretty badly."

"You're asking the wrong questions." A hint of irritation entered Lindsey's voice. "Wolfram and Hart, the firm, the Senior Partners, don't care about Faith one way or the other. From what I read in her file, they looked at trying to recruit her after she went rogue, but they decided she was too unpredictable to be useful. Beyond that, she's just a Slayer - killing her would just mean another would pop up somewhere. It would be a waste of effort."

"So, if that's the wrong question, what's the right one?"

"You're confusing the firm with the people in it. You should be thinking about who within Wolfram and Hart has a reason to go after Faith." Lindsey gazed off into the distance, a wry smile on his face. "You keep making the same mistake. You think of Wolfram and Hart as this evil monolith with one goal. That may be true for the Senior Partners, but the rest are just people, and they've each got their own agenda. The only people with a reason to go after Faith are the ones who ended up looking stupid after she didn't kill you. That's me, Lee Mercer- "

"And Lilah." Angel broke in.

"Exactly. I'm out, Lee's dead and Lilah's got enough to deal with. She's vulnerable, and she knows it. Everyone knows she came off second best at the evaluation, and until she secures her position in Special Projects, she can't afford to use the firm's resources to go chasing some private vendetta. If she's half as smart as I know she is, she'll be throwing herself into every assignment that they give her, which probably means you. Watch your back."

"Always do." Angel stepped away from the truck. "Thanks, Lindsey. I won't be back."

"Good." Lindsey opened the door and climbed in. As he put the key in the ignition he turned to face the vampire again. "Lilah probably won't come at you directly, she'll go for the people around you." He drove off before Angel could respond.

Buffy had been patrolling for hours without success, and she was just wondering if there were any demons left in Sunnydale when she heard a scream. *Finally!* She thought, taking off at a run. Rounding a corner into an alley she came upon two vampires closing in on a teenage girl. "Oh, I'm sorry, is this a private party?"

The vampires snarled in rage and charged her. Buffy looked over to the terrified girl and snapped "This is the part where you run!" before darting to one side as the lead vampire threw himself at her, his momentum sending him tumbling into a pile of garbage bags.

The second vampire's more cautious advance was no more successful. Buffy's foot lashed out, the toe of her boot catching him just below the kneecap. As the demon stumbled, clutching at his knee, Buffy kicked him smartly in the side of the head, knocking him to the floor.

The first vamp was on his feet and charging in again, arms outstretched to grab her, but Buffy easily ducked under the attack and, seizing his shirt and belt, tossed him headfirst into a wall. The second vamp was picking himself up when Buffy's knee crashed into his chin and sent him sprawling again, an easy mark for her stake.

The remaining vampire was struggling to get up, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, when Buffy reached him. As she grabbed him by the collar, the vampire seized the first object that came to hand and lashed out. The broken bottle sliced through Buffy's lightweight jacket and into her left arm, just below the shoulder.

"Ow! Damn it!" Buffy slammed her fist into the vampire's face, her blow fuelled by anger and unexpected pain. The dazed vampire collapsed against the wall and was staked a moment later.

Tucking her stake back into her pocket, Buffy shrugged off her jacket and inspected the wound. It hurt, but the cut didn't look to be a deep one. The vampire's intended victim had fled, so Buffy decided to call it a night.

Dawn was dozing on the couch when Buffy opened the front door, but woke up as Buffy crossed the living room and switched off the television. The teenager yawned hugely as she sat up, and it was a few seconds before she noticed the bloody tear in Buffy's sleeve. "You okay?"

Buffy shrugged, immediately wincing as the movement sent pain buzzing along the cut. "It's just a cut, Dawn, I'll be fine."

Dawn took her hand and began to lead her toward the stairs. "Come on, let's get it cleaned up."

"Really, Dawn, I can take care of it. You should be in bed, anyway."

"Buffy!" Dawn glared at her sister, her face set in her version of Willow's "resolve-face". "Would you stop it? I know you get hurt, and I wanna help. We have to take care of each other now - isn't that what Mom would want?"

Buffy felt tears form at the mention of their mother, but held them back. "Actually, I think Mom wouldn't want us to have to deal with stuff like this, but you're right," she said grudgingly, following Dawn up to the bathroom.

Buffy stripped off her jacket and shirt as Dawn collected the first aid supplies. Having first washed away the congealing blood, Dawn cleaned the cut out with antiseptic, ignoring Buffy's faint gasps and winces as the stinging liquid cleansed wound.

"You sure it doesn't need stitches?" Dawn asked, gently dabbing the wound dry and examining it critically.

Buffy shook her head. "It's not that deep. As long as I don't pull it about too much it'll heal in a couple of days."

"Okay." Dawn tore the backing strips from a sterile dressing and carefully positioned it over the wound so that the edges of the cut were held together. "There, all fixed up."

"Thanks, Dawnie." Buffy smiled and used her uninjured arm to wrap her sister in a loving hug. "Dawn, there's something we need to talk about..."

A little concerned by Buffy's tone, Dawn stepped back and looked her sister in the eye. "What's the matter?"

"They're probably going to let Faith out of the hospital before she's fully healed, so even if she does end up going back to jail she'll need somewhere to stay for a while before that..."

"She's staying with us, isn't she? I mean, I assumed she would be." Dawn said.

Buffy smiled at her sister. "Yes, Dawnie, she's staying with us. It's just, we need to think about where everyone's going to be sleeping. I mean, we have three bedrooms, but..."

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Buffy, it's okay for you to move into Mom's room. I know it'll be weird, but we can't just not use the biggest bedroom, right?"

"You just want to get your hands on my room, don't you?" Buffy teased.

"Hell no!" Dawn replied, smirking at Buffy's look of shock. "I've just got my room set up the way I want it, I'm not moving now. Besides, it'll be way funnier putting Faith in your 'shrine to girliness'."

"My what?" Buffy's eyebrows shot up her forehead.

"Oh, come on Buffy! Your room looks like it came out of a doll house."

"Unlike yours, which was clearly modeled on the city dump!"

"That is so not true!"

"I think that's why you don't want to move, you're afraid you'll have to clean up!"

"Oh, that's it! I am never helping to patch you up again, not even if you're bleeding to death..."

Giles had just finished showering after his morning run when the phone rang. Cursing under his breath, he pulled on a bathrobe and went to answer it. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Rupert." Quentin Travers' voice came over the line.

"Whether or not it's a good morning depends entirely on why you've called, Quentin." Giles replied dryly.

"The Council has reached a decision."

"Already? It's only been four days since I called you."

"Sarcasm is not a laudable trait in a Watcher, Rupert, especially one responsible for two Slayers." Travers replied, a touch irritably.

Giles almost dropped the phone in surprise - he hadn't let himself hope for a positive outcome. "They agreed?"

"Yes. Faith is to be returned to active duty as soon as she recovers, under your charge." Travers said, his voice completely neutral. "The details are being taken care of now. Speaking of which, one of the details is in Sunnydale, and since you and your associates are on the scene, so to speak..."

"Yes, of course." Giles jotted down a few notes as Quentin explained. "That shouldn't be a problem, we'll take care of it."

"You'd better be right about Faith, Rupert. I've stuck my neck out on this one, don't make me regret it." Without another word, Travers cut the connection.

When Buffy arrived at the Magic Box for her regular training session, she found Anya re-arranging the candle display, while Giles was going through the order book. "Hi guys!"

"Hi Buffy." Anya replied absently, her attention completely focussed on getting the perfect balance of cedar- and pine-scented candles.

"Hello, Buffy." Giles looked up from his work. "If you'd like to get warmed up, I'll be with you in a minute."

Buffy nodded and was soon limbering up in the back room. After a few minutes Giles appeared in the doorway. He immediately spotted the dressing on her arm. "You're hurt?"

Buffy paused her exercise and glanced at her arm. "Ran into a vamp with a broken bottle last night. It's just a cut, my jacket took most of it. It'll be fine in a day or so."

Relief showed on Giles' face. "As long as you're being careful. The fact that you've defeated some extraordinary opponents doesn't make vampires any less dangerous."

"I know, Giles." Buffy began her warm-up sequence again. "I learned that one last year. Got my own stake in the stomach, remember?"

Giles suppressed the memory of the fear he'd felt that day, and changed the subject. "I had a call from Quentin this morning."

Buffy stopped abruptly and turned to face him. "And?"

"The Council has agreed to your proposal, Buffy. Faith can stay here." Giles winced as Buffy leapt over and hugged him harder than his ribs were comfortable with.

"God, I can't believe it!" Buffy said, releasing her hold on her Watcher and smiling brightly. "Travers actually came through for us!"

Giles smiled slightly at that. "I must confess, I was a little taken aback as well. I don't know how he persuaded the rest of the Council." Giles sat down on the bench under the windows. "Buffy, there is something we need to do here in order for this plan to work."

Buffy sobered slightly. "What is it?"

"We need to find out if Faith ever had a dental examination here, and if she did then we need to switch the records for another set that the Council will provide. Quentin already has someone dealing with her records in Boston, and it seems she never had an examination while she was in jail. He wants us to get a copy of any records on file, including computerised records, and send them to him. He'll then send us forged records to put in their place."

"Looks like Will and I are gonna be doing some breaking and entering." Buffy said with a slight frown. "I hope Will's okay with that. She really isn't happy about Faith being here."

"She'll come around, Buffy." Giles said soothingly. "You know as well as I do how passionately Willow holds her views on others. Breaking down her mistrust and anger will take time, but will happen."

"I hope you're right, Giles."

Faith was sitting up in bed when Dawn poked her head around the door that evening. "Hey,

Bitesize!" she called as she saw the younger girl.

Dawn was at the bedside in a flash, hugging the dark Slayer. After a few moments, she took a step back and looked Faith over. The bandage around her head was gone, as was the sling immobilising her left shoulder. "You're looking so much better!"

Faith broke into her characteristic lopsided smile. "Yeah, they took the stitches out of my head this morning, and my shoulder's healing great so they say I can use it a bit now. They're gonna take some more X-rays of my hand and leg in a couple of days to see how they're healing. The docs keep telling me how amazing my recovery is, but it doesn't seem to bother them much; I guess Red and Blondie's spell really works, huh? Hey, is B with you?"

"I'm here." Buffy said as she came through the door. "I stopped off at the nurses station to make sure you're behaving yourself!" Buffy pulled a chair over to the bed and sat down, while Dawn perched on the bed itself. She held out a small bag to Faith. Faith opened it, a little nervously, and pulled out a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste. "I wasn't sure if they'd given you one, but I didn't remember seeing one in here so..."

"Thanks, B."

"Please don't encourage her! She's so overprotective already, it's like having three parents at once." Dawn said with a mock scowl.

"You shouldn't take chances with dental hygiene." Buffy said, glaring at her sister, before looking back at Faith. "I mean, have you even seen a dentist since we first met?"

Faith's expression clouded as Buffy spoke. "Once. Uh, the Mayor made me see the one he used..." Faith's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Oh God, please tell me it wasn't Dr. Fredericks!" Buffy burst out. Faith stared at her in surprise. "What? I'm sorry, but the idea that I sat in the same chair as a wannabe demon snake gives me the wiggins!"

Faith surprised everyone, including herself, by bursting out laughing at that. "You're safe, B, this guy had a weird name, Russian or something."

Gotcha!

It was after midnight when Buffy and Willow approached the office of Dr. Raymond Laskowski, DDS. A brief incantation from Willow had the lock open, and the two of them slipped inside. Buffy immediately began going through the files while Willow started up the computer.

"I can't believe I'm actually doing this." Willow grumbled. "Okay, I've broken into the morgue a few times, and I've spent a lot of time in other people's computer files, but this..."

"Will, I've said thank-you like, a hundred times." Buffy replied. "Besides, we finally found out what Faith's full name is."

Willow giggled. "Yeah, that was almost worth it."

Buffy pulled out Faith's file and moved over to the photocopier. By the time she had finished making the copies and returned the file to its' rightful place, Willow was into the patient database and pulling up Faith's records. A few seconds later, the data was copied onto a disk, and Willow was busy erasing any of her intrusion.

Eight days after the break-in, Buffy and Willow were back in the dentist's office, switching the old files for the new ones Travers had supplied. Six days after that, the doctors finally agreed to release Faith from the hospital.

"Christ, it's good to be out of there!" Faith exclaimed as the Jeep pulled away from the hospital. She was in the front passenger seat, which was pushed all the way back to accommodate the cast on her leg. The fracture in her kneecap was taking the longest to heal, and the doctors had told her that even with the "extraordinary progress" she was showing it, would be at least another week before the cast could come off.

"How's your hand?" Buffy asked, without taking her eyes off the road for a change.

Faith flexed her fingers slightly before answering. "Still hurts a bit, but all the bones are back together. I just gotta take it easy for while."

A slightly tense silence settled over the Jeep. Once the emotional turmoil of the battle with Glory had receded, some of the old awkwardness has crept back between the two Slayers. Both felt it, both hated it, but predictably, neither would talk about it.

Finally, Faith broke the silence. "Uh, B..."

"Yeah?"

"What happened about the hospital bill? I mean, I don't have insurance or anything..."

"Oh." Buffy wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved at the new topic of conversation. "Giles took care of it. He's charging it to the Council - expenses incurred during world-saveage."

"It feels weird, y'know. You working for them again." Faith's eyes wandered over the seemingly endless stream of neat, suburban houses. "After all the shit they pulled, I didn't think you'd ever go near them again."

"Yeah, well, they had the information we needed about Glory. Basically, we agreed to stay out of each other's way." Buffy glanced over and noticed Faith surveying the view, her expression slightly pained. "Something wrong?"

"I just realised, I've hardly ever seen your street in daylight." Faith replied with a bitter smile on her face. "Once when Giles came and got me before we all skipped town ahead of the Bitch God, and..."

"What?"

"Christmas Day." Faith turned her head away, hiding the tear trembling in the corner of her eye. "You were still out with Angel, and your mom and I just sat and watched the snow falling. I never thought snow could be beautiful."

"What's wrong with snow?" Buffy asked, turning the corner onto Revello Drive. "I mean, I haven't seen it very often, but I always thought it was pretty."

"Bad memories."

"What do you mean?" Buffy knew she was pushing, but just for once she wanted to get inside Faith's armour.

"When it got cold in Boston, we had to choose between heat and food. My mom couldn't pay for both, not without cuttin' into the liquor budget." Faith laughed briefly, joylessly. "Maybe all the Jack Daniels kept her warm."

"I'm sorry, Faith." The words sounded trite even to Buffy's ears.

Faith barely even noticed Buffy had spoken, her eyes gazing into a past Buffy still barely knew anything about. "Every Christmas, she'd be passed out by noon. And then, I'm sitting there in your house, and I'm watching the snow, and it's beautiful. Best Christmas of my life." The dark-haired girl hung her head. "So, of course, I find some way to fuck everything up." *And I never got to apologise to her. I never even thanked her.*

Buffy pulled up in front of the house. "That's all over now, Faith. Come on, let's get you inside."

It took a little while to get Faith settled into Buffy's old room, and as much as Buffy had objected to Dawn's 'shrine to girliness' comment, she had to admit that Faith did look a little out of place in the midst of the pastel colour scheme. Once Faith was comfortable, Buffy went down to the kitchen to fix them both something to eat. She was searching for something other than peanut butter to put in a sandwich when Dawn got home from school.

As usual, Dawn's first port of call was the kitchen. "Hi, Buffy! Did they let Faith out?"

Buffy pulled her head out of the cupboard. "Yeah, she's upstairs." Beckoning Dawn over, she lowered her voice. "Giles got the package this morning."

Excitement flooded Dawn's face. "Have you told her yet?"

"No, we just got back. Give me a hand with this, and we'll talk to her together."

The two sisters soon put together something resembling lunch. Buffy picked up the tray and said to Dawn, "It's in Mom's- my room, on the dresser." Dawn raced off upstairs, as Buffy followed at a more sedate pace.

"Here you go. Hope you're hungry." Buffy said, setting the tray on the bed beside Faith.

"What am I saying? Of course you're hungry."

"Thanks, B." Faith picked up a sandwich and took a huge bite from it. She ate with obvious pleasure, but her face soon grew solemn again.

"Something wrong?" Buffy asked.

"Look, Buffy, thanks for doing all this for me. I just don't want to get too comfortable, y'know. Stockton doesn't have room service."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem." Dawn stood in the doorway, holding a large envelope with UPS markings.

Faith replied with her mouth full. "What do you mean?"

Buffy sat down on the bed beside Faith. "They don't tend to lock up dead people."

Faith's blood froze. *What the hell? She's gonna kill me? Why now? Why not just let me die?*

Buffy, oblivious to what was going through Faith's mind, took the envelope from Dawn and pulled out a sheet of paper, which she handed to Faith. Quickly scanning the text, Faith saw a lot of Spanish that she couldn't begin to translate. The only thing she recognised was near the top. Her name. "What's this?"

"That, Faith Amanda Shaw, is your death certificate, or at least a copy of it." Buffy replied, smiling broadly.

"B, what the hell is going on?"

Buffy giggled at Faith's agitation. "Well, from what I understand, it began when an tourist driving through Mexico picked up this girl hitchhiking near Ensenada. American, brunette, twentyish, ring any bells? Anyway, they're driving along, when the girl suddenly goes nuts about something he said and pulls a knife. There's a struggle, the car swerves off the road and into a ravine. The driver comes to pretty quick and gets out, but she's still unconscious and trapped when the gas tank goes up. She's so badly burned up they have to ID her from her dental records. The description the tourist gives the Mexican cops matches an escaped convict from California they've heard about, so they pull her records to compare, and they get a match. Which means that Faith Shaw died in a car wreck in Mexico last week, and can't really be put in a cell."

"What? How?" Faith's capacity for rational thought was swamped under a tide of conflicting emotions.

Buffy laughed out loud at the look of utter confusion of Faith's face. "I think I just explained the 'what'. How? Well, we got in touch with the Council, persuaded them to help, and they set this up. Willow and I switched your dental records here, someone else did it in Boston, and they set up a new identity for you."

The fog of confusion was lifting now, slowly replaced by a single distinct emotion, and not the one Buffy was expecting. "Why?"

"Because you earned a second chance, and we were able to give it to you." Buffy reached out to take Faith's hand, but the younger Slayer snatched it away, the anger she was feeling pouring out across her face.

"And you never bothered to tell me, to ask me if this is what I wanted? What the hell were you thinking, Buffy? I'm a murderer, remember?" Faith was practically snarling now. "How could you be this stupid?"

Dawn took a faltering step forward, her face ashen. "Faith, what's wrong?"

"I'm a killer, that's what's wrong! You think you can just wave some magic wand and make that go away?" Faith shook her head angrily. "

"It'll be different this time, Faith. We'll be here to help you if you need it." Buffy tried to make her voice soothing, but it came out with a hint of desperation.

"Damn it, B, it's not safe! I need to be locked up some where, I can't take the chance that I..." Faith turned her head away from the two sisters, unable to finish the sentence.

"You're a Slayer, Faith. You have a chance to make a real difference." Buffy stopped trying to soothe the situation and began to fight fire with fire. "Do you want that, or do you want to sit in a cell and hide from what might happen?"

Dawn sat down on the other side of the bed. "You saved my life, Faith. I trust you. I believe in you."

Somehow, the look of faith, for want of a better word, on Dawn's face cut through the anger and the undercurrent of fear roiling through Faith's mind. For a few, long moments she was silent, then she slowly turned to face Buffy again. "You sure this is a good idea?"

"I'm sure." Buffy replied. *I have to be sure. I need someone else.*

Faith forced a slight smile. "So, who am I? You said something about a new ID."

Dawn pulled another sheet of paper out of the envelope. "Your new birth certificate."

As soon as she saw the name on the certificate, Faith's eye widened in shock, before closing tightly as she fought off a swarm of unwelcome memories.

"What is it?" Buffy asked, totally confused. She already knew the name, having gone through the contents of the envelope as soon as it arrived, but she looked again in any case, wondering if she had missed something. "Faith Emily Harper. So? I mean, Emily isn't really you, but-"

"Emily Harper was my first Watcher." Faith interrupted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Buffy practically leapt off the bed, her face distorted with fury. "Those bastards! They couldn't just do what we asked, they had to find some way to make it hurt! I'm gonna-"

Faith cut her off again with a wave of her hand. "It's okay, B, it was just a shock." *A really*

big, nasty, Kakistos-shaped shock...

Buffy calmed slightly, but her fists were still clenched so hard the knuckles were white. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Faith looked up at her with a sad smile on her face. "Miss Harper was... she was more like a mother than my mom ever was. Having her name feels kinda right."

"Okay." Buffy relaxed again. "In that case, pleased to meet you, Faith Harper."

"Welcome to Sunnydale." Dawn added. "It sucks, often literally."

"Speaking of things that suck, don't you have homework?" Buffy asked, slipping into 'Mom' mode. Dawn just rolled her eyes toward Faith and headed for her room, leaving the two Slayers alone.

Buffy sat down again on the bed and looked Faith in the eye. "This must all be a bit... Are you okay?"

Faith nodded, with less than complete conviction. "Yeah, I think so, it's just..."

"Just?" Buffy prompted.

"I'm scared, B." Faith said in a whisper. "What if I fuck up again? What if I can't do this?"

Buffy gently laid her hand on Faith's shoulder and smiled slightly. "Do you want it to be different this time?"

Faith nodded silently.

"Then it'll be different." Buffy said. "I'm not saying it'll be easy, you'll have to put some work into winning over Xander and Willow, but you can do it." *You have to. We need you here. I need you here.*

Chapter 10: A Question Of Xander

"Hi, Anya, thanks for coming." Buffy held open the front door and waved the former demon through to the lounge. "Was Giles okay with you leaving the store in the middle of the day?"

"I told Giles I'd seen a dominatrix outfit in that Goth store on Robson Avenue, and I wanted to get it before Xander finished work. He started stammering and turning that funny purple colour - he couldn't get me out of the door fast enough." Anya sat down on the couch and cast a slightly apprehensive eye over the pile of folders and paperwork on the coffee table.

"Anyway, it's pretty quiet at the moment. Sunnydale people just don't seem to understand how the capitalist economy works. So what's the big mystery, and why didn't you ask Willow or Xander to help with it?"

Buffy perched herself on the corner of the table, the slightly forced smile with which she had

greeted Anya fading away. "I've, uh, I've got a problem, and I thought you would be the best person to ask about it." She picked up a file.

Giles looked up as the bell over the door jingled. "Welcome to the Ma- oh, hello Willow, I didn't expect to see you. I thought you and Tara would be enjoying your free time now that college has finished for the summer."

Willow tossed her bag onto the research table as she replied. "She'll probably be here soon. My mom wanted the two of them to have a 'getting to know you' talk while we're staying at the house. You might want to keep the chamomile tea handy - maybe the scotch too."

"Yes, of course." Giles had only met Sheila Rosenberg a handful of times, but the woman always left him feeling in need of a stiff drink.

"Thanks, Giles." Willow beamed at him. "Hey, do you mind if I have a look through some of the magic books while I'm here?"

Concern washed over Giles' face as he looked across at the young witch. "Of course not, Willow. Is something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, no, nothing's wrong!" Willow said. "It's just, with no school and no Big Bads on the horizon, I thought I'd dust off a few old projects."

"Oh, well, help yourself to the library. Is there anything in particular you're looking into?"

Willow's eyes dropped to the floor, and for a moment she was the nervous sixteen-year-old Giles had first met. "Well, I was, uh, I was kinda hoping to find something I could use to restore Amy. I haven't really tried anything for months, and now I have the chance..."

"Yes, of course. You might want to start with the *Codex Aemellianus*. It has a lot to say about the older shape-shifting magics."

"I'll give it a shot." Willow skipped up the staircase to the balcony, pulled a heavy tome from the shelves and began flipping through it. *Restoration, restoration... why couldn't one of these guys have invented the index?*

"So, basically, you're telling me I'm broke?" Buffy asked, laying the last of the folders back on the coffee table.

"You're not broke - not yet. But you do have a definite money problem and it's going to get worse." Anya sat back and looked over the notes she had taken one more time. "Your mom made arrangements so that you and Dawn would be secure, at least until you graduated college, but her medical bills pretty much wiped all that out. With what you're paying to keep this house running, I figure you've got three, maybe four months before..."

"Before I'm completely screwed?" Buffy stood up and began pacing. "God, I never thought I'd

miss being in high school."

"What about your dad, could he help you?"

Buffy snorted derisively at the mention of her father. "He still hasn't replied to the message we sent him when Mom first got sick. I don't think he even remembers we exist."

Anya easily noticed the pain underlying the venom in Buffy's tone - she really wasn't as insensitive as she let on. "Maybe the monks did something to his memory to keep him out of the way while Glory was around."

"Or maybe he doesn't care about us anymore." Buffy shook herself slightly, forcing herself out of the foul mood she was falling into. "I guess I'm gonna just have to get a job. So much for going back to college next semester..."

The two young women were silent for a few awkward moments, neither knowing what to say. Finally, Anya picked up her bag and stood. "I'd better be getting back."

"Thanks for coming, Anya. At least now I know what I'm up against." Buffy walked with her to the door.

"How's the evil twin doing?" Anya whispered to her, inclining her head toward the stairs.

"Anya, please..."

Anya sighed melodramatically. "All right, how is your friend and comrade-in-arms?"

"Going quietly stir crazy, I think. She's stuck upstairs most of the time - the doctors told her to stay off her feet as much as possible."

"Is she going to be like this much longer?"

"She's having an x-ray in a couple of days. It's supposed to be just a status check, but I'm hoping she'll be healed enough for the cast to come off." Buffy lowered her voice. "I think she's just frustrated. Now that she's going to be an active Slayer again, I think she just wants to get on with it."

"Good. As long as she leaves Xander alone, we'll be fine. I may not be a vengeance demon any more, but I still know people."

Buffy smiled slightly at the threat. "I don't think you need to worry. Faith's not really interested in return visits."

Anya nodded silently, and opened the door. As she walked away down the road, she began mulling over an idea.

Buffy closed the door and headed up the stairs. The door of what had been her bedroom was wide open, as had become normal since Faith had moved in - whether it was because Faith

was trying to show she wasn't hiding anything or because she simply liked knowing she could leave the room any time she wanted, Buffy didn't know. The dark Slayer was, as usual, lying on the bed, flipping channels on the small TV in a vain effort to find something that could hold her attention for more than a few seconds.

Faith looked up as she caught sight of Buffy. "Hey, B."

"Hi. I was just gonna make some lunch. What do you feel like?"

"I'll have whatever you're having. You know me, I'll eat anything." Buffy was turning away when Faith spoke again. "B."

"Yeah?"

"I heard you and Demon-girl talking, about the whole cash sitch."

"Don't worry, I'll think of something."

"I can help. I've got some money put away."

Buffy looked at her in surprise. "How?"

Faith's eyes dropped as she answered. "The Mayor. He set up an account for me, back when..." She bit her lip and continued. "I blew a bunch of it on stuff I didn't need, but there should be a few grand left. I wasn't planning on using it again, but if you need it..."

Buffy stood silent for a moment as the thought of what even a couple of thousand dollars could mean warred with the memory of what Faith had done to gain the money. Finally she opted for the most neutral response she could muster. "I'll keep it in mind."

"Okay."

"Giles! I'm back!" Anya yelled as she opened the door of the Magic Box.

Giles winced, his ears ringing. "Yes, thank you Anya. I actually hadn't made the connection when you came through the door."

"Aren't you going to ask me how my shopping trip went?"

"I think, in this case, ignorance may well be bliss." Giles started cleaning his glasses rather vigourously.

Glancing around the shop, Anya spotted Willow up on the balcony, engrossed in one of the books. "Oh, hey, Willow." No response. "Willow? Willow!" The witch's head shot up, a surprised expression on her face. Anya glared at her. "I said 'hey, Willow'. I was trying to be friendly."

"I'm sorry. Hi, Anya." Willow replied, her attention already drifting back to the book in her

lap.

"What is it with people?" Anya moaned. "They tell you to be more friendly, they tell you to act more human, then when you make an effort, what do you get? Nothing!"

Giles sighed. "It's all right, Anya. We've all noticed the effort you've been making recently. Willow's just... engrossed in her research."

"Research? There's research?" Anya looked up at him, worried. "Is something happening? Is there going to be another apocalypse? Because, I've told you before, I'm not doing another apocalypse until after Thanksgiving at the earliest."

"It's nothing like that. Willow's just looking for a way to help Amy."

Anya's brow furrowed in confusion. "Who's Amy?"

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew." Giles gently guided Anya toward the counter. "Amy was a friend of Willow's in high school, a witch. She turned herself into a rat to avoid being burned at the stake a mob of the townspeople during their senior year, and Willow hasn't been able to break the spell."

"Wow, I'm sorry I missed that one." Anya smiled for a moment, then her eyes shot wide open. "Wait a minute! Witch-burning, angry townsfolk... was there a demon that appeared like two little kids?"

"Yes, how did y-" Giles didn't get a chance to finish.

"What happened to it?" Anya snapped, her expression more intense than Giles could ever remember seeing it.

"Well, I-I found a spell to reveal the demon's true form and Buffy killed it."

"Yes!" Anya pumped her fist in the air. "Hallie is going to freak! I mean, there were rumours, but there've been rumours before. No one actually believed..."

Giles was hopelessly lost. "Anya, what are you talking about? Who's Hallie?"

"Halfreck. Old friend. Vengeance demon, specialises in neglected and abused children. She's had it in for that thing since it started the Children's Crusade!"

"A demon was responsible for that?"

Anya rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, Giles! A bunch of kids march off across Europe to capture Jerusalem? You really think humans are stupid enough to come up with that one by themselves?"

Giles just looked at her, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

"Good point. So Buffy killed it, huh? And now Willow's trying to fix her friend?"

"Indeed. Now that she has some free time, she decided to make a concerted effort at reversing the spell. I recommended she start with the Codex Aemellianus, and she hasn't moved from that spot since."

"That's nice." Anya looked up at Willow, whose fingers were gently tapping the black leather covering the book as she turned a page. *I could have sworn the binding on the Codex was red. Oh well...*

When Xander arrived at the Magic Box after work, he found the whole of the Scooby Gang (or at least, the people he considered to be the Scooby Gang) already there. Willow and Tara were helping Dawn with a post-final assignment, or 'big waste of time' as Dawn was referring to it, Anya and Giles were tidying up the store, and Buffy was just coming out of the back room after a workout session.

"Hey! You're early!" Anya skipped over and kissed him, before suddenly jerking back. "You didn't get fired, did you?"

"No, Ahn, I didn't get fired." Xander replied in his most patient voice. "We had to close down early. There's been a problem getting some of the structural supports from the supplier, so we're pretty much stalled until that gets fixed. It could be a week before we can start up again."

"I can't believe they're actually building another school on top of the Hellmouth." Buffy grumbled. "I mean, I'm a professional Hellmouth guardian, you'd think my opinion would count for something."

"Well, it might, if you could actually tell anyone about it." Tara offered.

"So, does this mean you get to slack off for a few days?" Dawn asked.

Xander shook his head. "Actually, no. The boss found a quick job we can do while we're waiting. The city council finally decided Glory's tower's a danger to public safety, so we start dismantling it tomorrow." Xander was silent for a moment, thinking his next words over. "Speaking of new beginnings, Anya and I have something to tell you."

Anya looked up at him in surprise; she hadn't expected this tonight. "Now?"

Xander looked deep into her eyes and nodded. "I think we waited long enough." He turned to face the others. "We're getting married."

There was a moment of stunned silence, then total pandemonium broke out around the table. Buffy and Willow raced to be the first to hug Xander, nearly knocking him off his feet in the process. Giles settled for slapping the young man on the back as he went to hug Anya. Tara broke into one of her radiant smiles as she, too, embraced the bride-to-be, while Dawn opted to pile in behind Buffy and Willow.

"When did this happen?" Buffy asked as she let go of her old friend.

Xander blushed slightly. "I actually proposed in the basement here, just before we went in against Glory, but with everything that happened that night it didn't seem like the right time to tell you all, and then we just... kept not telling you. Then I came in tonight, saw you all here together and I thought 'What the hell are we waiting for?'"

"Quite right, too." Giles remarked, clapping the young man on the back. "We should celebrate. Anywhere but the Bronze."

"Willy's it is, then!" Xander quipped, laughing at the look of exasperation on Giles' face.

Buffy looked over at Dawn. "Our place? We don't have much party stuff, but we could stop off on the way..."

"You don't think we'd be disturbing Faith?" Tara asked, gathering her things together.

Giles relied, "Actually, I think she might welcome a little disturbance at the moment."

Xander was about to object, but he caught the silent plea in Buffy's eyes. "Okay, sounds like we have a plan!"

As they all headed out the door, Anya asked, "Does this mean I get to wear the ring now?"

"Yes, Ahn, you get to wear the ring now..."

Faith was reclining on the couch, her injured leg propped up on the coffee table, when the front door opened and Dawn burst in. "Hey, Bitesize! Big sis with you?"

Dawn, who had been about to run up the stairs, turned suddenly at the sound of Faith's voice, her expression wavering between excitement and annoyance. "What are you doing down here? You know you're not supposed to use the stairs when there's no one else in the house. What if you fell? Huh?"

"Dawn, my leg doesn't even hurt any more. We both know I'm just playing along with the docs to keep B happy, so just ease off, okay?"

"I know, I know, I just don't want to see you in a heap on the ground again."

Faith's reply was cut off before it began as Buffy led the others into the house, carrying several bags of drinks, snacks and decorations. "Whoa, did I forget somebody's birthday?"

Buffy and Xander were both about to answer but Anya beat them to it. "We're getting married!" she burst out, her engagement ring glittering in the light as she waved her left hand at Faith.

For a moment, Faith was taken completely aback, but she soon rallied. "Okay, you better be talking about you and Xan 'cause, no offence, but you're not my type."

"Very funny, Faith." Xander retorted, while Anya just looked confused for a moment.

"Hey, I got to take my laughs where I can get them." Faith smirked. "Seriously, congratulations."

"Uh, guys?" Willow cut in from the back of the group. "Heavy bags, not getting lighter..."

"What? Oh, right." Buffy began moving some of the bags into the kitchen.

An hour later the living room was decked out with streamers. Anya was regaling Buffy, Dawn and Giles with the story of how Xander had proposed (complete with more detail than any of them felt was necessary) and Tara and Willow were dancing together, lost in their own little world.

Xander was in the kitchen microwaving some popcorn when he heard something behind him. Turning around, he realised it had been the sound of Faith's crutches on the kitchen floor. "You want something?"

"Just needed some air." Faith replied, heading over to the back door.

"Fine." Xander turned back to the microwave.

Faith took hold of the door handle, but stopped short of opening the door. "I meant what I said."

"What?"

Faith kept facing away as she spoke. "I meant it. I'm happy for you."

A humourless laugh escaped Xander's lips. "Is that supposed to mean something?"

"Maybe. I know you hate me, I know I hurt you, but-"

"What, you're going to apologise now?" Xander cut in, his voice scathing.

For the first time, Faith turned to face him. "Would it help?"

"Since when does it matter to you, anyway? You've never cared what anyone thought of you."

You have no idea what I care about... "I care because Buffy cares. She thinks I've got a chance here, but it can't work if she has to choose between me and you guys. I'll leave town before I let that happen, but I really don't want to go, so I have to at least try to make things right here."

"So very noble of you."

Faith pulled the door open. "Go be with your friends, Xander." She was outside and closing the door before he could reply.

Out on the porch, Faith gingerly sat down on the steps. Fumbling in her pocket, she pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and a lighter. The acrid flavour of the smoke filled her mouth,

but couldn't drive out the bad taste Xander had left behind.

A few minutes later, she heard the back door open, but ignored it.

"You know those things will kill you." The fact that it was Anya speaking came as a surprise, but Faith still didn't look at her.

"I started in jail, just for something to do. Besides, I'm a Slayer. You think I'll live long enough for cancer to get me?"

"You upset Xander." It didn't take a Slayer's acute senses to detect the undercurrent of naked hostility on Anya's voice.

Faith took a long drag on the cigarette before responding. "Yeah, I'm good at that."

Anya sneered. "No, Spike is good at it. You're an expert."

"What do you want, Anya?"

"Just stay away from him, okay?" Anya's voice was harsh, almost shrill. "We're happy together, we're getting married, you can't have him!"

Faith finally turned to look at her. "Have him? What are you talking about? You think I want another roll in the sack with him?"

"I've been told all about you, Faith! The whole 'Get some, get gone' philosophy. Well, you're not going to be 'getting some' from Xander, not this time!"

"Anya, I do not want Xander! And even if I did, do you actually think he'd ever touch me again?"

"No, but... that's not the point!"

Faith just stared for a moment, then she suddenly burst out laughing. "Oh my God! You actually think every girl that meet's Xander want's to get his pants off, don't you?"

"They do! You had sex with him, Willow and Cordelia were both heading that way... okay Buffy never tried anything, but she wouldn't notice a good catch if you nailed him to her..."

Faith tossed her cigarette on the ground and stamped it out. "Okay, look, let's just get this straight now. Yeah, I screwed Xander, and it was fun. And yeah, the only thing I regret about it was kicking him out the door the way I did. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't done that, but it was more than two years ago." She hauled herself to her feet and picked up her crutches. "You can't change the past. You either deal with it, or you don't. The most I'm ever going to want from Xander is to be his friend, and I don't think that's ever going to happen, so just take a chill pill and go cheer up your fiancée." With that, Faith headed back indoors, leaving a rather confused former vengeance demon behind her.

Chapter 11: Brave New World

What the devil is the matter with that girl? Giles glanced over the customer's shoulder to see Anya still pacing the floor of the Magic Box, making minute adjustments to the displays.

The ex-demon had been acting strangely since the engagement party. Giles knew that something had happened that night, something involving Faith. Moments after Faith had entered the kitchen, Xander had come out glowering, obviously angry, but he had concealed his feelings as soon as he rejoined his friends. Giles had just barely spotted the change, and the others all seemed oblivious.

All but Anya. Giles was watching for a reaction from her, and he didn't have long to wait. She had immediately realised that something was wrong, that something had happened between him and Faith in the kitchen. After a few moments she had left the room, searching for Faith, Giles assumed. Faith had come back soon after, her face a mask of indifference, and had spent the rest of the evening sitting quietly, always slightly outside the circle of the group. Anya didn't come back for some minutes after that, and when she did appear she had seemed unusually contemplative.

Since then, Anya had been rather distracted. She spent most of her working day fiddling with the displays or simply prowling around the store. At least half a dozen times, Giles had been sure she was about to ask him something, but each time she had simply muttered something about stock levels or pricing. Frankly, she was getting on his nerves.

As the customer left the store, leaving the two of them alone, Giles decided he'd had enough. "For God's sake, Anya, would you just spit it out?"

Anya's head jerked up. "What? Spit what out?"

"Whatever it is that's been bothering you all day." Giles switched the kettle on and began hunting for the teabags.

"Oh, right, a metaphor..." The attempt at humour fell flat. "I... I want to know about Faith."

"Faith?" Giles looked up momentarily from filling the teapot. "I'm not sure I understand. What exactly is it that you want to know?"

"I want you to tell me about her." Anya sat down at the research table and began picking fretfully at her nails. "I mean, I don't really know much about her. I know she helped the Mayor with the whole Ascension thing, and I know everyone was really scared when she came out of her coma last year, but I don't know who she is... Am I making any sense?"

"I think so." Giles carried the teapot and two mugs over to the table and sat down. "I suppose I ought to start at the beginning. Faith arrived in Sunnydale at a very bad time. Buffy was still mourning for Angel, and we were all rebuilding our relationships with her after she ran away that summer. Buffy also had to help her mother come to terms with learning about her other life. I think we were all too busy holding the group together to think about integrating anyone new into the mix. Not that Faith had much choice about when she arrived, she had been pursued all the way from Boston by a vampire called Kakistos-"

"Kakistos? As in 'Worst of the Worst', cloven feet, that Kakistos?" Anya broke in.

"You know of him?" Giles asked, surprised.

"Giles, I was a demon for over a thousand years. Kakistos was legendary when I was just starting out."

"Yes, well, in any event, Kakistos had killed Faith's Watcher. Faith managed to escape and she fled here, hoping Kakistos wouldn't follow." Giles poured the tea before continuing. "Unfortunately, Faith had inflicted a disfiguring injury on him, and he wanted revenge. He managed to corner Faith and Buffy, but they were able to destroy him."

"And..."

Smiling gently at Anya's impatience, Giles continued. "The Council decided that Faith should remain here and work with Buffy. Faith could be a trifle... abrasive, at times, but things were progressing quite nicely until that harpy Gwendolyn Post appeared."

Anya was startled by the sudden venom in Giles' voice. "Who's Gwendolyn Post?"

"She was a Watcher." Giles sighed. "I vaguely recognised her name. She arrived on night while Buffy, Faith and I were patrolling and announced that she had been send as Faith's new Watcher. What I didn't know at the time was that she had been expelled from the Council shortly after I came to America. She was here looking for a demonic artifact, the Glove of Myhnegon. To make matters worse, it was right then that Xander discovered that Angel had returned and Buffy was hiding him from the rest of us. Post took advantage of the general atmosphere of mistrust to set Faith against Buffy - classic divide and conquer tactics. Eventually the deception was revealed and Faith worked with Buffy to defeat her, but the damage to their relationship was enormous and they never managed to repair it.. After that Faith was always more distant."

"Sounds like you're making excuses for her." Anya said, watching Giles critically.

The Watcher shook his head. "That's not my intention. Faith made some very serious mistakes that year, but she was not the only one."

"Go on." Anya sat back, sipping gently at her tea.

"After that, we rarely saw Faith apart from when her Slayer duties required it. There was a period after that Christmas when I hoped she and Buffy making some progress, but it came to nothing in the end. It was during this period that Xander's 'encounter' with Faith occurred." Giles automatically began polishing his glasses. "Fighting has, or at least had, a tendency to get Faith rather... stimulated. That night, she was involved in a rather awkward engagement with several of the Sisterhood of Jhe. Xander helped her extricate herself, and Faith's libido did the rest. I suspect that a great deal of Xander's hostility toward her stems from that night."

"What do you mean?"

"To Xander, that night had a real meaning; he later said that he felt they had a 'connection' because of it, but I think that Faith simply found him... convenient."

Anya frowned. "She used him?"

"In essence, yes. Had Xander not been available, I expect she would have found another... companion. Coming so soon after his break-up with Cordelia, I don't think Xander was emotionally able to accept that it had simply been a one night stand for her." Giles paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts before proceeding. "Shortly after that, everything went to pieces. There was an accident - Buffy and Faith were engaged in a running battle with a number of vampires when they encountered a human in an alley. Faith reacted on instinct and staked him before Buffy could stop her."

Anya nodded. "The Deputy Mayor, I remember hearing about it."

Giles sighed. "It wasn't the first time such an accident had happened, but I can't recall an occasion that had such dire consequences. The two of them initially feigned ignorance of what had happened, but when Faith suspected that Buffy was about to confess, she pre-empted her and told me that it had been Buffy who killed Mr. Finch. Fortunately for Buffy, I spotted the deception. By that point I had been dismissed from the Watchers and Wesley had arrived, so I was working unofficially, but I hoped to deal with the matter without involving him or the Council. Angel was assisting in that regard, but somehow Wesley got wind of what had happened and called in the Council's retrieval team - trying to assert his authority, I suppose. In any case, it backfired; Faith escaped. Eventually, Buffy and I convinced Wesley to allow Faith to remain here, subject to certain assessments, but it was too late. I think Faith had become convinced that none of us could be trusted or would ever value her, so she allied herself with someone who she thought would."

"The Mayor."

Giles nodded. "Exactly. Not long afterward, Faith's defection was revealed. She captured Willow during a raid on City Hall and came very close to killing her. She did murder Professor Lester Welch, although that actually worked in our favour."

"Excuse me?" Anya looked bemused.

"His death drew our attention to his work, exactly the opposite of what Wilkins had intended. We learned that he was only invulnerable until he Ascended, something we might never have discovered in time otherwise."

Anya nodded her understanding. "So what happened with Faith?"

"She poisoned Angel, to distract Buffy from preparing for the Ascension. We discovered that there was a cure for the poison, the blood of a Slayer. With some help from Willow and her computer, Buffy tracked Faith to the flat Wilkins had set up for her, intending to feed her to Angel. In the end, Buffy stabbed Faith with her own knife and Faith jumped off the building onto a passing truck. Buffy resorted to using her own blood to save Angel."

"He fed on her?" Anya asked, not quite believing what she was hearing.

"By that point, Angel was delirious, I don't think he had much conscious control of his actions." Giles didn't sound entirely convinced, but Anya let it go. "In any case, Buffy

recovered, and while she was at the hospital she learned that Faith had survived but was in a coma. We defeated the Mayor, and a few months later, Faith woke up. You know what happened from then on."

Anya nodded. For a few moments, she was silent, thinking over what she had heard. "What about before? Before she came to Sunnydale?"

Giles shook his head slightly. "I don't know very much, except that she's grew up in Boston. Faith never really talked about her background. I didn't even know her last name until we started working on her new identity. She opened up a little more to Buffy, at least in the beginning, but Buffy never revealed what she had said except in the most general terms. "

Anya thought this over, then got up from the table and began working again - really working, not just fiddling like she had been doing. After a minute or two, she turned to Giles again. "Why did you trust her, when she came back?"

"I saw fear." Giles' voice was barely above a whisper.

Anya hadn't known what answer to expect, but that certainly wasn't it. "Fear? That's it? She walked into a room full of people who'd happily kill her and you didn't *expect* her to be scared?"

"I have never seen Faith afraid before. None of us have, except Buffy. Tara was right - Faith was afraid that we wouldn't believe her, afraid of what would happen if we didn't." Giles began clearing away the tea things as he spoke. "The fact that she not only felt that fear, but came all this way to face it, made me take her seriously."

Anya nodded slowly, the focussed, objective expression she had tried to maintain through Giles' history lesson softening into sympathetic concern. "Do you... do you think she'll be okay?"

"I really wish I knew." Giles leaned against the counter, his shoulders slumped; suddenly, he looked awfully tired. "I've tried to reassure her, and Buffy, but the truth is that she's in for a very difficult time. She'll have enough to deal with facing her own demons, but so much depends on other people..."

"Other people meaning us, the Scooby Gang?"

A tired nod. "Yes, all of us, but particularly Xander and Willow. If either of them begins to actively oppose Faith's presence here, it will tear Buffy apart."

"We'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen, then, won't we?" Anya replied, her usual tone of forceful good cheer reasserting itself.

Giles smiled back at her. *One down.*

"Damn it, B, just let it go, already!" Faith pushed through the door to the Magic Box a few days later, walking unaided and practically vibrating with annoyance.

Buffy came through the door right after her. "Faith, you heard what the doctor said! You shouldn't be straining your leg yet. Just because the cast's off, that doesn't mean you're done healing."

Faith span around to face the older Slayer, ignoring the irritated glare that Giles was shooting at the pair of them. "There was nothing on the x-rays, there's no pain, everything's five by five. The doc was just coverin' his ass 'cause he couldn't believe how fast I heal."

"Okay, fine, just don't come running to me when your leg snaps off!"

"B, think about what you just said for a sec."

"Thank you for shopping at the Magic Box, please do come again." Giles said in his best 'genial shopkeeper' voice, as he handed a bag to a middle-aged woman, who was looking rather warily at the two Slayers. "Please ignore the bickering children."

The customer beat a hasty retreat past a sheepish Buffy and an openly smirking Faith. For a moment Giles wondered if the previous three years had actually happened. "Well, if the two of you have had enough fun alienating my clientele, what can I do for you?"

"Sorry, Giles," Buffy said as she sat down at the table and pulled a newspaper out of her bag. "We were just at the hospital getting Faith's cast taken off, and she decided she'd rather come here than go home and rest."

Faith growled. "Okay, B, let me spell it out for you. Hospital. Cell. Basement. Hospital again. Bedroom. Noticing the pattern? I'm tired of being cooped up!"

"Yes, well, you're certainly looking better, Faith." Giles said, trying to smooth the waters.

"Thanks, Giles. Now I just need to convince Hawkeye here." Faith indicated Buffy with a nod of her head, then caught Giles' look of confusion. "Hawkeye Pierce? You never saw M*A*S*H? I just lost all respect for you." She stalked over to the table and flung herself down on a chair.

Giles shook his head and changed the subject. "Is there something interesting in the newspaper today?" he asked Buffy.

Buffy answered without looking up from her reading. "If there is, it's not in the want-ads."

"You're looking for a job?" Giles asked, a little surprised.

"Yeah, it turns out Mom was right; bills really don't pay themselves." Buffy's tone was the one Giles had come to know as 'I'm scared but I can't let anyone see it'.

Giles put his hand on his Slayer's shoulder, seeking to reassure her. "Buffy, if you need money, I can help you."

Buffy looked up at him and smiled weakly. "Thanks, Giles, but I've can't live on handouts forever. Of course, if something doesn't turn up soon, I might not have an option."

"I take it the search isn't going well?" Giles asked, giving her shoulder a final squeeze before returning to the counter.

Buffy snorted. "Seems like as soon as a potential employer hears the words 'college dropout' they can't give you less attention."

"Hey, at least you made it through high school." Faith remarked, staring up at the ceiling. "Right now, I got the choice between slinging burgers at the Double Meat Palace or pouring mochas at the Espresso Pump." She looked over at Buffy. "I think I'll go for the mochas - no stupid uniform, no burger grease in my hair."

In spite of herself, Buffy couldn't help laughing a little. "Sorry, I just can't see you as a waitress, Faith."

"It's either that or I get leathered up and find myself a street corner, and my conscience doesn't bug me *that* much."

"There must be something else you can do, some skill you have." Giles protested as Anya emerged from the basement, carrying a clipboard.

Faith shot him a look the screamed 'Are you serious?' "Giles, there're three things I'm good at; Slaying, screwing and shakin' it on the dance floor, and I think those last two are kinda connected."

"Oh, sex talk! That's always fun! Giles turns such funny colours." Anya burst out - this was much more interesting than stocktaking.

"Yes, thank you, Anya, but we are not actually discussing sex." Giles said with an air of long-suffering dignity. "Faith was simply expressing her pessimistic view of her job prospects."

"What can I say? I'm a specialist." The younger Slayer shrugged.

Giles suddenly had an idea. "What about Xander's construction site? Perhaps he knows of some vacancies there, and both of you certainly have the strength and stamina for construction work."

Buffy thought about the idea for a moment. "It's worth a shot. What do you think, Faith?"

"Yeah, why not. Might cause a few problems, though."

Buffy looked confused. "What do you mean?"

Faith laughed. "Come on, B! You and me, tight jeans, getting all sweaty, lots of bending and flexing. I'm just saying, some guys might find that a bit distracting."

"You think?" Buffy blushed and smiled slightly.

"I told you, B. Hot chicks with super-powers."

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!*

Spike stood in the electrical tunnel and surveyed his handiwork. From the outside, a ventilator grill covered the steel door. A concealed catch released the grill, which could then be swung aside to allow access. With the grill closed, the door was all but undetectable.

No more tossing a blanket over my head and dashing for the sewers. Spike locked the door, set the grill in place, and swaggered off down the tunnel, whistling tunelessly. I wonder if Willy's does a lunch menu?

The world span around her.

Air rushed past her face.

Faith hit the ground shoulder-first, automatically tucking her head in and bringing up her arms, guiding herself into a roll that had her coming upright within a second of landing. Her opponent was already following up, however, and as Faith came to her feet, she was forced to defend against a savage series of kicks. Step by step, she was forced to give ground. As she blocked strike after strike, Faith desperately searched for an opening to counter-attack, but her assailant was just a shade too fast. A final kick penetrated her defences, slamming into her just below the ribs, knocking her over backwards and driving the air from her lungs.

"Are you okay?" Buffy was immediately on her knees beside Faith, her expression worried. "It's too soon, I said it was too soon for you to be training again, you'll get hu- "

Faith cut her off with an impatient wave of her hand. "I'm fine, B. I'm just really out of practice." Accepting Buffy's offered hand, Faith got to her feet. "You've been workin' on your kicks - that last one was a killer."

The two girls began slowly circling each other once again. "So, you didn't do much training while you were in jail?" Buffy asked, launching a quick jab that Faith easily avoided.

"I worked out a lot, there wasn't much else to do, but that's pretty much it. The prison system isn't big on teaching convicts unarmed combat." Faith's counter-attack forced Buffy back a few paces. "I haven't had a real training session since..."

Buffy relaxed her combat stance as Faith tailed off. "Since when?"

"Since the last time I trained with you." Faith half-turned to stare out of the training room's small, high windows. "I can't believe that was barely two years ago, it feels like a lifetime."

Buffy stepped up beside Faith and slipped her arm around the taller girl's shoulders. "I know what you mean."

Faith forced a slight smile. "You want to show me how to do that throw you did earlier?"

"Giles, can I talk to you about something?" Anya asked as she totaled up the day's takings. Buffy and Faith had left an hour previously. The two Slayers had emerged from the training room looking thoroughly energised; Faith in particular had a spring in her step that Giles couldn't recall seeing since before the death of Alan Finch. The sparring session seemed to have finally convinced Buffy that Faith's knee was fully fit, and the two of them were going out on patrol together that night.

Giles looked over at her from the display case where he was replenishing the crystal selection. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just... why don't Slayers get paid? It's a violation of basic capitalism, the exchange of currency for goods or services. Slayers provide a service, and they get squat for it!"

"Somehow I don't think capitalist economics were a major consideration when the system was set up, Anya." Giles replied dryly.

"Maybe not, but it still doesn't make sense." Anya said, refusing to be put off. "If a Slayer's working a full-time job just to keep going, she's going to be physically and mentally tired before she even gets to the important stuff, and that's bad for everyone. So why does it happen?"

Giles replied, a little defensively. "It's never been an issue before."

"Why not?"

"Normally, a Slayer would live with her Watcher. Potential Slayers begin training years before they are called, and over that period, they are gradually separated from their families. The Council supplies the Watcher with extra funds to meet the Slayer's living costs." Giles took off his glasses and pulled out his handkerchief. "That didn't happen with Buffy. The Council didn't find her until after she was called, and by that point, it was too late to begin the separation process. Since Buffy was living with her mother, I couldn't think of a way to get the money to her that Joyce wouldn't notice, so I used it to improve our resources, the library for instance. After Joyce found out that Buffy was the Slayer, I offered to pass the extra money on to her, but she refused - I think she wanted to keep some part of her daughter's life exclusive to her. Once Buffy severed her links with the Council, the point became moot in any case. Besides, even with separate grants for Buffy and Faith, there wouldn't be enough to maintain Buffy's house, especially with Dawn to consider."

"So why can't the Council give them more? I mean, how many times has Buffy stopped the end of the world?"

"Whether or not the Council can do it isn't at issue, Anya." Giles replied, his voice revealing a hint of frustration. "The question is whether they will. Getting the Council to agree to Faith remaining here was unlikely enough. Persuading them to provide a salary for the Slayer, it would be a complete break with tradition."

"Oh, screw tradition!" Anya snapped. "It's stupid and unfair. You basically get paid to read books and give advice, then send them out to do the actual work!"

Giles glared at her.

"You know what I mean! They're the ones who go out every night and risk their lives. They shouldn't have to worry about bills as well."

"Oh for God's sake, Anya!" Giles snapped, finally losing his temper in the face of the tirade. Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself. "I'll talk to Quentin, see if something can be done. By the way, I agree with you, I just don't have a say in the matter."

"B, catch!"

Buffy span around, her hand automatically reaching out to grasp the stake Faith threw to her. The vampire at her feet was trying to get up, but she casually kicked him under the chin, sending his head snapping back as he slumped to the ground again. Before the vampire could even lift his head, she plunged the stake home.

Faith, meanwhile, had slammed one vampire headfirst into a gravestone and was driving the other toward Buffy with a string of kicks and punches that left the demon unable to do anything but block and retreat.

Retrieving her own fallen stake, Buffy sent it flying into the chest of the stunned vampire with a snap of her wrist. As a particularly powerful kick from Faith sent the remaining vampire tumbling backwards, Buffy took the opportunity to toss the other stake back to her friend. Faith sent a nod of thanks her way and lunged at the vampire, dusting it before it could react.

"Just like ridin' a biker." Faith remarked, smiling broadly. "You think we should've let one go? Y'know, spread the word that the Chosen Two are back in business?"

Buffy chuckled. "I think the news'll spread on it's own. If you want, we can stick a notice on the bulletin board at Willy's." Laughing and joking, the two Slayers continued their patrol.

Unseen behind them, a vampire emerged from behind a crypt and walked briskly off in the opposite direction.

A little later, the vampire entered an abandoned warehouse near the docks. Ignoring the enticing smell of blood coming from the half-dead prostitute chained in the corner, he headed straight for what had once been an office.

Settling himself in an old swivel chair, the vampire put his feet up on the desk and replayed what he had seen in his mind.

So, you're back.

Chapter 12: Old Wounds, New Wounds

Buffy rolled over in her bed, curling the pillow around her ears as she did so, determined not to wake up yet in spite of the noise. It was no good. She sat up, flinging the covers aside.

What the hell is that?

As the cobwebs slowly dissipated from her brain, Buffy was finally able to make sense of what she was hearing. Someone was in the shower. Singing.

Staggering out into the corridor, Buffy encountered her sister looking groggy and definitely not amused.

"Coffee?"

"Coffee."

Ten minutes later, Faith came bouncing down the stairs and into the kitchen, towelling off her damp hair and humming something discordant. "Mornin', guys!" The Summers sisters looked up from their mugs of coffee, glaring balefully at her. "What?"

"When did you become a morning person?" Buffy's tone of voice made the term sound like an obscenity. "You hated mornings! You were never awake before ten unless you hadn't been to sleep yet! It's six-thirty a.m.! And you, with the showering, a-and the singing!"

For a moment, confusion dominated Faith's face, then her eyes widened. "Oh God, did I wake you guys up?"

Dawn actually growled. "Why were you even awake?"

"Sorry, I kinda got into the habit while I was inside. I can't seem to sleep past six these days." Faith poured herself a cup of coffee and perched herself on the counter. "I just figured I'd take a shower."

"Did you have to sing?" Buffy asked.

"Hey, I was in a good mood!" Faith replied, rather defensively. "That was the first really good shower I've had in forever!"

"What's so good about it?" Dawn wondered, before swallowing half her mug of coffee in one go.

"Uh, let me see, no cast on my leg I gotta keep dry, water that's actually hot, real water pressure, no one-eighty pound chicas checkin' out my ass." Faith ticked the points off on her fingers. "Trust me, you cannot understand how good it felt."

Buffy nodded her grudging acceptance of that point. "Okay, but in future, if you're gonna sing, could you pick something that you didn't learn from Spike? What was that, anyway?"

"*Anarchy In The UK*, I think." Dawn murmured.

Buffy stared at her sister with a mix of surprise and genuine horror. "And you know this how?"

Dawn shrugged. "Spike and me spent some time discussing music once."

"God, please don't tell me you liked it!" Buffy's voice was almost pleading.

"Hey, easy on the Pistols, B!" Faith cut in. "This stuff's classic."

"So what are you guys doing today?" Dawn asked, trying to divert the Slayers onto a less contentious topic.

"We'd better go see Giles when he opens the Magic Shop, seeing as we're awake." Buffy replied, with a pointed look at Faith. "He's probably dying for a report on Faith's first patrol. You?"

"Meeting Janice at the mall." Dawn hopped off her stool. "I think I'll take a shower, assuming there's any hot water left."

"Hey! Wrong Slayer!" Faith's protest fell on deaf ears.

Giles took a deep breath as he began to dial; this was one phone call he was not looking forward to.

The phone was answered before the third ring. "Travers."

"Quentin, it's Rupert Giles." The Watcher just managed to keep his nervousness from showing in his voice.

Travers tone implied that the call came as a pleasant surprise to him. "What can I do for you, Rupert? Is there something afoot on the Hellmouth?"

"Er, not as such. Quentin, I need to talk to you about the Slayers' maintenance stipend."

"Rupert..."

Giles didn't even notice Travers had spoken. "I'm afraid I have to ask if it can not only be re-instated, but increased substantially."

"Rupert..."

"The fact is that given their current circumstances, particularly with Buffy's sister to consider, the traditional stipend will not be suff-"

"Giles!" Travers voice cut Giles off like a guillotine.

Giles heart jumped up to his mouth. "Yes, Quentin?"

"I can begin the payments as soon as you provide me with the account information." The senior Watcher's voice was completely devoid of the steel it had possessed a moment earlier.

"You agree?"

"Rupert, I've had the arrangements in place since I learned that Joyce Summers had passed away. Including a second Slayer in them was hardly difficult."

Giles couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. "You mean you were prepared for this months ago? Why didn't you say anything?"

Travers sounded like a long-suffering parent explaining something obvious to a slow-witted child. "Come now, Rupert. If I had come to you with this without any word from your end, what do you think Miss Summers' reaction would have been? Or yours, for that matter?"

Giles couldn't argue with that. "All right then, but why are you doing this at all?"

"Because it is the most sensible course of action, Rupert. Also because, notwithstanding popular opinion on the subject, I hold Miss Summers in some considerable regard, and I feel that she should be supported." Travers allowed a degree of warmth to show in his voice.

"I must say, you hide it well." Giles replied dryly. "I'll set the accounts up and pass on the details to you."

"I'll be waiting for your call."

"Thank you, Quentin." *What are you up to?*

"I'm not doing this for you, Rupert." Travers cut the connection.

In the outer office, Travers' assistant, Julian, silently put down his own handset.

When Giles arrived to open the Magic Box that morning, he was surprised to find Faith and a semi-awake Buffy waiting for him on the doorstep. "You're rather early. Is something wrong?"

Faith suppressed a chuckle as Buffy explained about how she had been woken that morning. "I'll be fine. I just need a workout to get the blood pumping again."

Giles more-or-less contained his amusement at Buffy's state. "Perhaps this will perk you up a little." He said, as he let the two Slayers into the store. "I spoke with Quentin Travers this morning. He's agreed to renew the traditional stipend provided for a Slayer's living expenses."

"What?" Buffy didn't understand.

Giles rolled his eyes. "He's going to start paying you."

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute! Paying us? And you said this is traditional? How come I never heard about it before?"

"Buffy, your circumstances were... different. You were still living with your mother. After she

found out about you, I offered to give her the money, but she refused. Had you been living with your Watcher, as is usual, you would have known."

"Yeah, B, how'd you think I paid for my motel room?" Faith pointed out.

"I never really thought about it..." Buffy seemed a little lost. "Giles, why now?"

Giles hesitated a moment before answering. "Because I asked him." He raised a hand to forestall Buffy's protest. "Buffy, he had already made the arrangements, he just didn't think you would accept the money if he offered it on his own initiative. Anya persuaded me that I should talk to him, and here we are. If you don't mind me saying so, you don't seem as pleased as I expected."

"What? No, I mean, money good, and thanks for wanting to help, but..." Buffy paused to get her thoughts in order. "I'm just worried about giving the Council any more leverage."

"I had thought of that." Giles replied. "It's up to the two of you, but I would urge you both to consider this offer seriously. You can't deny that the money would be useful, especially with Dawn to consider. At the very least, it would give you some time to secure your own financial support."

"He's got a point, Buffy." Faith piped up after an uncharacteristic bout of silence. "We're not exactly flush right now."

Buffy grimaced, but nodded. "Okay, Giles. Just don't expect me to trust him."

"Of course not. Travers is certainly expecting to derive some personal benefit from this, a degree of loyalty from the two of you at the very least." Giles began setting up for the day's business. "Even so, I think you've made the right choice. I can't promise you a fortune, but it should certainly help."

Buffy gasped in pain, doubling over as a melon-sized fist slammed into her stomach, knocking the wind out of her. Stumbling back, she tripped over the corpse of a second demon, the base of her stake still protruding from its eye socket. She fell hard, wrenching her leg as she went down, coming to rest slumped against the alley wall.

The demon she was fighting loomed over her, its corpselike skin seeming to have an eerie glow in the moonlight. From this angle, the ring of small horns around its head looked almost like a crown. Behind it, Buffy could see Faith trading blows with the third demon, blood trickling from a cut beneath her eye.

Buffy barely had time to gather her wits before she had to fling herself aside, rolling across the alley floor to avoid a brutally powerful kick. As the demon turned to follow her, she lashed out with her foot, catching the creature in the side of its knee. The demon roared in anger and pain, the force of the blow knocking it off balance for a second, enough time for the Slayer to get to her feet and pull back a few paces closer to Faith.

The brunette was hammering punch after punch into her opponent's head, gasping in pain

every time she struck with her left but keeping up the barrage regardless. Infuriated by the constant pounding, the demon went for a reckless, all-out attack, trying to smash her to the ground in one huge blow. Faith ducked sideways, grabbing the demon's arm and using the leverage to propel it headfirst into the wall. Shifting her grip a fraction, she increased the pressure and the demon's neck snapped.

As the demon Buffy had evaded turned to follow her, it saw its other comrade collapsing to the ground and the two Slayers positioning themselves for a co-ordinated attack. Somewhere in the depths of its primitive brain a survival instinct kicked in, and the demon turned and ran.

Both Slayers were instantly charging in pursuit, but after a few seconds Faith realised that Buffy wasn't beside her any more. Looking back, she saw the older girl had pulled up, leaning against the wall and rubbing her injured knee. "B! You okay?"

Buffy shook her head. "I can't run. Get going, I can't keep up with you."

"The hell I will! I'm not ditching you like this!" Faith ran back and put Buffy's arm around her shoulders, taking as much of the weight of the injured leg as she could.

"We can't let that thing get away..."

"Wasn't it you that told me the first rule of Slaying was 'Don't Die'? We got two, and I don't think number three's gonna be goin' anywhere but home right now." Faith gently led her out of the alley. "Besides, my wrist's killing me." She flexed the abused joint, wincing as she did so.

Casting a quick glance over their battered selves, Buffy cracked a rueful grin and asked, "How do you feel? Hungry and horny?"

"Hungry, hell yeah." Faith chuckled at the reference. "Horny, not so much. How 'bout you? Craving one of those low-fat yoghurts?"

"More like a bottle of aspirin." Buffy gasped as she took too much weight on her twisted knee. "Why is there never a cab around when you need one?"

Faith raised an eyebrow.

"Oh yeah, Sunnydale, right." Buffy muttered. "Stupid Hellmouth."

Some time later, the front door of 1630 Revello opened to admit two battered Slayers. Buffy was able to walk unaided again, but was still limping, while the cut below Faith's eye was now surrounded by a livid purple bruise, and she was nursing her sprained wrist. Both were sporting numerous bruises and scrapes.

As the two young women gingerly removed their jackets, Dawn emerged from the kitchen in her pyjamas. With a gasped "Oh my God!" she ran to help them.

"What you doing up, Bitesize? It's after two." Faith asked, her voice sounding exhausted.

"I couldn't sleep. I came down for some hot chocolate. And quit calling me that." Dawn replied, looking closely Faith's battered cheek. "Sit down, I'll get the first aid kit."

Faith protested, "It's okay, nothin' a hot bath and some sleep won't fix." But Dawn ignored her and hurried up the stairs.

Buffy let out a rueful laugh. "Don't bother, Faith, you can't stop her when she's in 'Doctor Summers' mode."

"You got any idea what those things were?" Faith slumped onto the couch and began examining her wrist.

"Not a clue." Buffy replied, wincing as she removed the boot from her injured leg. "I know I want something more than a stake next time I run into one, though."

"You got that right. Think we should call Giles about it?"

"Nah, let him sleep. We can give him the details in the morning." Buffy joined Faith on the couch. "You want to flip a coin for first go in the bath?"

"You take it, I'm gonna put an ice pack on my wrist." Faith reluctantly stood up and headed for the kitchen. "Maybe we should get another bath put in?"

Buffy smiled. "How about a hot tub out back?"

"Oh yeah, now you're talkin'. Bikinis, bubble jets, a couple of margaritas - all you need to work the kinks out."

"Yeah, well, if Travers actually comes through, we might even be able to afford it someday."

Just then, Dawn came clattering down the stairs again, laden with antiseptic and dressings. She set the first aid kit on the coffee table and began cleaning Buffy up. "What happened?"

Buffy winced as Dawn dabbed antiseptic on a particularly nasty scrape on her arm. "Just your typical Friday night in Sunnydale."

The following morning, the two Slayers were at the Magic Box a little later than normal. Xander was there measuring for some new display cases Giles wanted made, and he was the first to notice the residual marks of the previous night's combat. "Whoa, what happened to the other guy?"

Overhearing the comment, Giles left Anya to mind the cash register and hurried over to join them. "Are you injured?"

"We're good, just a little sore." Buffy said, sitting down at the table. "Giles, we ran into a group of demons last night, ones I've never seen before."

"Can you describe them?"

"About six feet tall, greeny-grey skin, no hair, really muscley. They had this circle of little

horns around their heads."

"Wicked aggressive, too." Faith added. "These guys were a handful, Giles. Strong, fast, they had these bony lumps all over, 'specially on their hands. Felt like getting hit with a sledgehammer."

"Any ideas?" Buffy asked her Watcher.

"Well, they sound familiar, but I'll need to do some research, so I suggest the two of you get started on your training session, and I'll join you when I have something."

"Maybe this'll help." Faith took something from her pocket and tossed it to Giles. "Snagged it off one of the dead guys last night."

Giles examined the broken piece of horn. "Yes, this should prove useful. Well done, Faith."

The two Slayers headed into the training room and, after some warm-up exercises, were soon sparring. The previous night's combat didn't seem to have left any lasting effects beyond bruising - Buffy's leg and Faith's wrist were just a little sore. Faith, in particular, was fast regaining her old fluidity of movement now that she finally had a practice partner capable of matching her.

Buffy snapped off a high kick, taking her weight on the leg she'd injured the night before, testing the limb. Faith ducked under the attack, coming upright just in time to meet a left hook. Faith turned her block into a grapple, trying to use her superior height and reach, but Buffy managed to hook her legs out from under her and send them both crashing to the ground. Buffy landed on top, straddling Faith's waist and pinning her arms.

"Jeez, B, if you wanted me between your legs that bad, all you had to do was ask!"

Back in high school, a flirtatious quip like that from Faith would have put Buffy off-balance for a moment, giving Faith time to break free. Now, she simply laughed.

"Sorry, Faith, that trick doesn't work any more." She laughed as she pressed the younger Slayer's wrists into the practice mat. Then she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye...

Faith's tank top had ridden up slightly, exposing the scar on her stomach.

Buffy leapt to her feet, her expression shifting from triumph to panic in the blink of an eye. Faith sat up, confused. "B, what's the matter with y-" She broke off as she realised exactly where Buffy was staring. She quickly pulled her tank back down, covering the scar.

Buffy covered her face with her hands. "Oh God, oh God, oh God..."

"Buffy, it's okay."

"No, it's not!" Buffy stared at her old enemy, her eyes wild. "It hasn't healed! Two years and it hasn't healed!"

Faith strode over and grabbed Buffy by the shoulders. "It's just a scar, B, and I'm glad it's there."

"Glad?"

"Yeah, it keeps me honest; reminds me how bad I got. What I made you do."

Buffy pulled away and sat down on a bench by the wall. Her whole body was shaking. "I guess some wounds never heal..."

Before Faith could reply, the moment was broken by Giles opening the door. His attention was focused on the book he was holding, and he didn't see the Slayers pulling themselves together before he spoke.

"Is this what you fought?" he asked, holding the book out to the two girls.

"That's our guy." Faith said, examining the old woodcut. Buffy just nodded.

"As I thought. It's called a Borilarg. They were bred as pit-fighters by a particularly nasty collection of demon nobles. After their masters were overthrown, they escaped and have appeared several times across Europe and Asia. I've never heard of them in the Americas, though. They are, as you said, highly aggressive and very dangerous in hand-to-hand combat. How many were there?"

"Three." Buffy said, aggravation leaking into her voice as she focused on the matter at hand. "We took down two of them, but the third one took off, and we lost it. I hurt my leg, I couldn't keep up."

"I figured we should stick together." Faith interjected, sounding uncertain.

"Of course you should." Giles reassured her. "All the same, we ought to find and eliminate the remaining Borilarg as soon as possible. I'll call Willow and Tara, perhaps they can perform a locator spell."

"Okay, good." Buffy picked up her sweatshirt and headed for the back door. "I need some air, I'm gonna go for a run." She disappeared out of the door before Faith could say anything.

Buffy had never been a particularly enthusiastic jogger. She knew it was an important part of her training regime, but she usually preferred something more varied. Occasionally, however, she would welcome it. When the stress of being the Slayer, the guilt for her failures, real or perceived, became too much for her, she would slip out of the house and just run. For a little while, she could dull the pain.

This time, however, running took her back to the pain, back to the source. Back to Faith.

Over an hour later, Buffy returned to the store to find Willow and Tara sitting at the research table, a map laid out in front of them and their usual mystical paraphernalia scattered around. From the training room, came the sound of Faith laying into the punchbag with even greater

vigour than normal. Anya was scurrying around performing some minor chore, while Giles and Xander were going over the designs he had sketched out for the new display cabinets.

Buffy accepted the bottle of water Anya passed to her with a nod of thanks and sat down on the stairs, watching the two witches work. After a few minutes, the noise from the training room ceased, and Faith emerged. She stood leaning against the counter, looking over at Buffy. The older Slayer couldn't, or wouldn't, meet her gaze.

"Got it." Tara said quietly, putting down the horn fragment Faith had retrieved. The others all quickly joined the witches at the table.

"Uh, Buffy..." Willow said, her voice hesitant. "You said there was one that ran off?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I think he has some roomies." The redhead pointed at the glowing spot on the map, in the warehouse district near the docks. "Look's like there's seven or eight of them left."

"Great." Buffy sat down heavily in one of the chairs. "Feel like some four-on-one, Faith?"

"Hey, you're not actually planning on going in there alone, just the two of you?" Xander questioned, disbelieving.

"Yeah, come on Buffy, this is what we do! When something big shows up, the whole gang goes in together." Willow added, clearly distressed. *Please don't start shutting me out again, Buffy!*

"They're right, B, we could use some people watching our backs on this one."

Buffy smiled slightly at her two oldest friends. "Thanks, guys. It's just... now that Faith's here, I don't want you to feel like there's pressure to help me fight."

"What pressure? My best friend's going into a building full of monsters. No pressure here." Xander's joke lightened the mood a little.

Giles cleared his throat. "Do you want to bring Spike in as well? It would mean waiting until after dark before we attack, but his fighting skills would certainly be useful. In any case, Borilarg eyes are rather sensitive, they see very well in the dark but they're easily dazzled, so it's unlikely they'll venture out in daylight."

Tara's eyes lit up on hearing that. Turning to Willow, she asked, "What about that light spell you were working on, sweetie? The one you tried to turn into sunlight?"

"Good idea, Tara." Giles commented. "I trust there won't be any trolls involved this time?"

Willow mock-scowled at the barb. "I said I was sorry..."

Buffy looked a little uncertain. "Uh, Will - this spell isn't going to create actual sunlight, is it? 'Cause Spike and sunlight don't go well together."

Willow shook her head, a little chagrined. "Not a problem. I thought I could make artificial sunlight if I got the wavelengths right, but it looks like there's a mystical component to real sunlight which is what affects vampires, and I haven't been able to duplicate it."

Buffy nodded, suppressing her emotions and focussing on the job. "Okay, Xander, can you do a drive-by on the warehouse, look the place over?"

"Sure."

"Be careful, don't get too close. Giles, Will, Tara, Anya - try to find out anything else we can use against these guys. I'll go talk to Spike."

Faith cut in there. "I'll do it, I could use some sun anyhow. 'Sides, you should probably call Bitesize and let her know."

"Faith..." The other Slayer was gone before Buffy could even begin.

"Watch it, daylight comin' in!" Faith shouted as she opened Spike's crypt door.

Spike climbed through the opening to the lower level, muttering, "Bloody Slayers, can't a bloke get a moment's peace..."

Faith smirked at his annoyance. "Good to see you too, Sid."

Spike couldn't help smiling a little at that. "Something you wanted, *Nancy*?"

"Gang's got a job to do tonight, wondered if you want in? Nest of Borilarg demons we gotta take down."

"Borilargs? In Sunnydale?" Spike's eyebrows rose. "How many?"

Faith shrugged. "Seven, eight, maybe more. B and me took down a couple last night, now we're goin' after the rest."

"Sounds like fun. When and where?"

"Meet at the magic shop, right after sunset."

"See you then." Spike paused for a moment as Faith turned to leave, then asked, "You okay, Slayer?"

"Five by five."

Yeah, right.

"I don't see anything." Buffy observed, looking across to the abandoned warehouse from the

alleyway where the gang had assembled.

Willow pulled the still-glowing map from her coat pocket. "The spell says they're still in there."

Buffy turned to face the others. "Okay, you all know the plan. Faith's with me, Spike and Giles go in the back way and stop them getting out. Will and Tara, light the place up and whatever else you can think of. Xander, Anya, look after them and make sure we don't get surrounded."

Everyone nodded or murmured their understanding, and Buffy led them out of the alley toward the warehouse.

As the Slayers reached the main door, they could hear muffled grunts and growls coming from inside, dispelling any doubt they had that there were a number of Borilarg's inside. Wrenching the door open, they burst inside.

Within, they found the warehouse almost pitch black. Hardly any of the glow from the streetlights outside penetrated the filthy windows, and most of the meagre illumination came from a small fire in one corner, around which most of the demons were gathered.

Buffy and Faith charged immediately, hoping to capitalise on the moment of surprise. Their initial target barely had time to get to its feet before Buffy's axe was swinging at its head. It managed to block the blow, knocking the blade aside with a sweep of its arm, but the desperate defence left the demon wide open to Faith's sword, which sliced deep into its stomach.

Just then, two things happened at once; the warehouse light up like someone had switched on an arc lamp, and a splintering crash from the back announced that Spike had made his entrance.

The seven remaining demons recoiled from the sudden burst of light. The two nearest the back door turned, seeking an escape into the darkness outside, and found what looked like two humans baring their way. Roaring their anger and bloodlust, they charged.

"'Raaaaarrrrgggghhhh' to you too, pillock." Spike retorted, pulling his sawn-off twelve gauge from under his coat and discharging both barrels into the nearest demon's face, nimbly dodging aside as the massive corpse crashed to the floor. A couple of steps behind the vampire, Giles rolled his eyes at Spike theatrics and brought his sword up to engage the second demon.

Squinting in the light, the main pack of Borilargs charged the Slayers en masse. Dodging the initial rush, Buffy and Faith fell into a defensive pattern, trying to keep the attention of all five demons and give the others the chance to act unmolested, all the while probing for an opening they could exploit.

Between them, Spike and Giles made fairly short work of the Borilarg they were facing, splitting its attention and wearing it down until Giles was able to land the killing blow. One of the demons noticed them heading over to reinforce the Slayers and bellowed a warning to the others.

Spotting an opening, Faith dove forward, plunging her sword hilt-deep in the chest of one of the demons. It dropped to the floor immediately, but before she could wrench her sword free another Borilarg stepped up behind her and flung her into a pile of old packing crates. Seeing this, Buffy's guard dropped for a moment and one of the demons she was fighting kicked her legs out from under her.

As Buffy scrambled backwards and tried to regain her footing, two of the Borilargs harried her, one charged toward Faith, who was on her knees and shaking her head trying to clear it. The last decided to break out through the group of humans clustered in the doorway.

Anya raised her crossbow and fired at the oncoming demon. The bolt sank deep into its thigh, causing it to stumble forward onto its knees. Xander sprang forward, swinging his axe down, but the Borilarg was too quick and seized the axe haft with both hands before he could complete the blow. Anya ran to help, battering at the demon with the butt of her crossbow, while Tara began muttering frantically, trying to find a spell to help.

Faith was climbing unsteadily to her feet when she was seized by the throat and hoisted off the ground. Struggling to break the hold, she was slammed into the wall.

Buffy was on her feet again, but her two opponents had boxed her in against the wall, and with no room to maneuver she was fighting desperately just to hold the demon's off. Willow grabbed Tara's hand and reached out toward them, her eyes blackening. Without warning, one of the demons was jerked into the air and flung across the warehouse into the far wall, the masonry crumbling under the impact. The demon dropped to the floor and lay still.

With one opponent gone and the other momentarily stunned by what had happened, Buffy looked around and saw Faith being repeatedly hammered against the wall. Raising her axe, she flung the weapon across the warehouse, to sink into the demon's back. The creature collapsed, releasing Faith, who fell to her knees, gasping for air.

Anya's constant battering finally angered the demon she and Xander were engaged with enough that it took one hand off the axe to try to swat her away. Seizing the moment, Xander twisted the axe, wrenching it free. Before the demon could respond, he brought the blade down and clove its skull.

Stepping in to meet the last Borilarg's attack, Buffy ducked under its first swing and drove her fist into its stomach. Around her she could hear running footsteps as the others rushed to join her. Suddenly, the Borilarg stiffened, then slumped to the ground. Behind it stood Faith, her bloodied sword in hand. "Thanks."

"Back at ya, B." The two Slayers stood over the fallen demon, suddenly uncomfortable with each other again now that the fight was over.

"Bloody hell, Willow!" Spike commented from by the far wall, where he was prodding the Borilarg Willow had flung into the wall. "Looks like you broke this one."

Willow ignored the remark and pulled the map from her pocket. "That looks like all of them."

"Good work, all of you." Giles said, breathing rather heavily.

"I don't know about you guys, but I could sure use a drink." Xander said, resting his axe against his shoulder. "It's Saturday night, who's up for hitting the Bronze?"

Buffy looked uncertainly at Giles. "I don't know, I... we should probably patrol tonight."

"To be honest, Buffy, I think you and Faith have earned a night off." Giles replied, to everyone's surprise.

"Chill, B." Faith wiped off the blade of her sword and tossed the weapon to Giles. "I'll do a sweep, you go enjoy yourself."

Tara took a few steps toward her. "You should come too, Faith."

"Nah, I'm not really in the party mood. I got some things I need to do anyway." Faith turned and walked briskly out of the warehouse.

"Faith not in a party mood?" Xander wondered. "What's that about?"

*In Flanders fields the poppies grow
Beneath the crosses, row on row.*

Where the hell did I hear that?

The lines of gravestones, once so familiar, seemed almost alien now. Walking between the rows, Faith finally began to see them for what they were, not just scenery in a habitual battleground. For the first time, she looked at the names, wondering who they were, while she searched for one in particular. Under a small group of trees, she found it.

"Hi, Alan."

The headstone was a simple granite block, the inscription almost terse: Alan David Finch, 1965 - 1999.

"Look, I know you can't hear me, and I know, if you could, you probably wouldn't want me here, but I gotta do this, okay?" Faith composed herself for a moment. "I'm sorry. Not that I killed you - I mean, I'm sorry you died, but it was an accident. I got careless, but I didn't mean t-

She turned away from the grave, fighting down a spike of anger.

"I'm sorry I acted like it didn't matter. Like you didn't matter, like it was okay 'cause I was still ahead on the numbers. You died, and I didn't want to care, but I need to tell you; I did care. I do care." Faith wiped a tear from her eye. "I'm sorry."

A piercing scream rent the night air coming from the other side of the boundary wall.

"Sorry, Al, duty calls." Faith set off at a run, leaping onto a bench by the wall and using it as a

springboard to carry her over.

She practically landed on the cluster of struggling people on the other side. There was a teenage girl, bleeding from the neck and screaming her lungs out, with a vampire holding onto each arm and a third looking up from her neck to glare at the interloper.

"Slayer!" He flung the girl away, tearing her from his companions' grip and sending her stumbling into the wall. "Kill her!"

"But..." One of the vampires began to protest, but she was silenced by a glare from the leader. Unheeded, the girl scrambled to her feet and fled.

Faith plunged into the fray, catching the vamp leader squarely in the chest with a powerful kick, then spinning around to drive her elbow into the face of the vampire coming in on her left. The reluctant vampire, advancing cautiously on Faith's right, tried to launch an attack while the Slayer was preoccupied, but fell victim to a barrage of punches that left her sprawled in the road.

The leader, having regained his footing, leapt at Faith. Ducking under the attack, she grabbed him by the throat and the waistband of his cheap imitation-leather pants and threw him. He landed on his back on a garbage can, which collapsed under the impact, leaving the vampire in a dazed heap on the floor.

The vampire Faith had elbowed came in swinging. Faith evaded with a back-flip that sent both her steel toe-caps crashing into his jaw and finished with her next to the female vampire, who barely made it to her feet in time to see the stake coming in, but not in time to avoid it.

The clatter of metal announced that the leader was freeing himself, so Faith wasted no time in re-engaging the remaining vampire she'd just kicked. He was clearly inexperienced, and within seconds, Faith slammed him chest-first into the cemetery wall and plunged her stake into his back.

The leader got to his feet, realised he was alone, and took to his heels. With an infuriated cry of "Get back here!", Faith took off after him. The pursuit didn't last long. As she rounded a street corner, Faith saw the vampire wrench open the door of an old van. Before she could catch up, it had sped off.

"Cheater!"

In an office in another abandoned warehouse, no more than a quarter of a mile from the Borilarg lair, a vampire sat behind an old desk and contemplated the problem of the Slayers. Having two to deal with was enough trouble without a fiasco like this...

His second in command entered with office. "Everyone's accounted for, Lucas."

The vampire rose from his chair and faced his lieutenant. "Any other losses?"

"No, just the two fledglings."

Lucas gave a curt nod. "That's something, at least. Assemble them, Sean, and let's get this over with." Taking a small wooden box from his desk drawer, he followed the other vampire out into the main part of the warehouse, where the other inhabitants of the nest were gathering in a ragged circle. The painted-over windows kept out every hint of the dawn.

Lucas strode into the middle of the circle. "As most of you already know, Rick and Melissa, the two newest members of our little family, were killed tonight by one of the Slayers. Now, I thought we were clear on this subject. One Slayer is bad news, two is worse, and I can tell you from personal experience that the second one is not someone you want to mess with without a damn good reason! This is why I gave what I thought were very clear orders regarding the Slayers - you are to avoid all contact with them, even if it means abandoning a kill. We'll deal with them when we're ready - anything else is suicide!"

He turned to face the vampire in the cheap leathers, who hadn't noticed Sean coming up behind him. "So I'm curious, Miles; what exactly did you think you were doing attacking a Slayer with only two fledglings for backup?"

In a flash, the lieutenant had Miles' arms pinned behind his back and was pushing him out into the middle of the circle.

"Hey, come on, boss!" Miles babbled, panic flooding his voice. "She was on her own, and she looked like she'd been in a fight already! I thought we could take her!"

"And you thought that was enough of a reason to defy my orders," Lucas replied, his voice absolutely even as he opened the box and removed the two objects inside. "As a result of which, you cost me three soldiers and potentially led a Slayer to our home."

"Three? Boss, there was just the two of them, Rick and Melissa..."

"And you, Miles." Lucas jabbed the point of the syringe through into the vial and drew out a full measure of the clear liquid. "I can't allow this sort of insubordination to go unpunished."

"Boss, no, please, I'm sorry!" Miles pleaded as Lucas advanced on him, struggling all the while in Sean's vice-like grip.

"Miles, you're a vampire, a blood-drinking creature of the night. Show a little fucking dignity." Lucas plunged the syringe into Miles' heart and injected the contents.

Miles shrieked. Sean released his grip and Miles collapsed to the floor, writhing in agony. The other vampires looked on, their expressions a mix of fascination and horror as he thrashed around, clawing at his chest and screaming. The process took nearly a minute before, with one final convulsion, Miles exploded into dust.

Lucas replaced the syringe and the vial of holy water in the box. "I hope there won't be any further misunderstandings."

A cool breeze flowed over the dark waters of the Thames, bringing a degree of respite from

the heat of London in July. Julian leaned against the wall overlooking Tower Pier, gazing south across the river.

"I must say, Mr. Graves, I was surprised when you asked to meet me here."

Julian turned at the sound of the voice, its tone firm and patrician. He saw a smartly dressed man in his mid-sixties. "I apologise for the choice of location, sir, but I felt that this meeting ought to be discrete."

"Oh, I completely understand." The old man replied. "What surprised me was that you called me at all. You are Quentin Travers' assistant, indeed some would call you his protégé, and it is well known that Quentin and I have been... rivals... for some time. I have to wonder why you of all people would contact me."

Julian's eyes dropped and he fidgeted nervously. "Recently, sir, I have become concerned with several of the decisions Mr Travers has made. You are aware of what occurred during his visit to Sunnydale?" The old man nodded. "And you know that he persuaded the Council to allow the rogue Slayer to remain at large, and even used Council resources to change her legal identity?" Another nod. "Neither of these events served to bolster my confidence. Moreover, I have recently learned that Mr Travers has begun a regular transfer of funds from the Operations division to the Slayers."

"It has always been Council policy to provide for the Slayer during her service." The old man observed.

"This goes considerably beyond the usual stipend, sir." Julian replied, his face grim. "Not only is this money being paid directly to the Slayers, the sum he is providing to each is equivalent to the salary of an experienced Watcher. It is my belief that Mr. Travers' disregard for our procedures and traditions has consistently weakened the authority of the Watcher's Council over the Slayer. How long can it be before the potential Slayers currently in training learn of this? If something is not done, and done quickly, I fear that the Council's control over the Slayer line could be irrevocably damaged."

The grey-haired man looked out over the water, lost in thought for a moment. "You raise some valid points, Mr Graves, but I fail to see why you have chosen to raise them with me. I have no real power within the organisation, and my influence is hardly what it once was."

"That may be true, sir, but in spite of your recent... difficulties... your name is still respected among the Watchers, and you have the ear of a number of influential people. I can't go to the Council with this on my own, but with your support, perhaps something could be done."

"And what exactly do you envision that something would be?"

Julian paused, knowing that he was about to commit himself. "The Council must be persuaded to confront Mr. Travers and, if possible, bring him back into line with our proud tradition. If that should prove impossible, I can see no option but his replacement as Head of Operations."

The old man gave a sly smile. "By you, perhaps?"

"If that is the decision of the Council."

The old man laughed inside at Julian's transparent attempt to hide his ambition, but a lifetime of political manoeuvring let him keep his face neutral. "You are aware that Quentin is an ally of the Chairman?"

Julian gave a curt nod. "The Chairman is not all-powerful. If necessary, he too can be replaced."

So that is how you are baiting your hook, is it, Julian? "Very well, Mr Graves, I shall consider what you have told me and contact you when I have decided how to proceed. In the meantime, should you learn anything more that concerns you, I trust you will inform me?"

"Of course, Mr. Wyndham-Pryce."

"My God, that's a lot of shake!" Tara's voice conveyed a mix of astonishment and horror as she stared at the enormous chocolatey concoction the waitress had just set on the table in front of Dawn.

The teenager giggled, stirring the brown liquid with the straw. "Are you sure Willow's okay?" she asked, looking over toward the bathrooms. "She's been in there ages."

Tara took a sip of her iced mocha, relishing the chill after the August sun and followed Dawn's gaze, her expression shifting to one of tolerant amusement. "She'll be fine. She knows she can't handle three mochas in one morning, but she just can't help herself."

Dawn couldn't help smiling at the flash of pure adoration in Tara's eyes as she talked about her girlfriend. A sudden thought flashed across her mind. *How come I'm okay with that? Why didn't the monks make me homophobic? You'd think they'd hate the idea of two women in love.* With a mental shrug, she tossed the question aside, knowing she'd never get an answer. "So, what's it like living with Willow's parents?"

"Not what I expected. I mean, her dad barely notices us at all, a-and her mom treats me like some kind of counter-culture icon." Tara looked bemused for a moment, before her faced melted into a smile. "But it's worth it."

"And Mom hasn't tried to burn either of us at the stake yet." Willow said from behind them, enjoying a moment of uncharitable pleasure as the two at the table started in surprise. "Which is progress."

As Willow slipped into the vacant chair at the table, Tara leaned over for a welcoming kiss. She blushed as she noticed Dawn smiling at them. "I'm sorry, we'll be good now."

"Don't you dare!" Dawn replied, her smile widening. "I've really missed seeing you guys together."

"Yeah, we have been kinda absent lately." Willow said, sheepishly.

"It's okay, you guys deserve some alone time after what Glory did to you." *Because of me.* Dawn fought down the spark of guilt and forced a mischievous grin onto her face. "Just so

long as you remember to put clothes on once in a while."

"Dawnie!" The two witches protested simultaneously. "We're not... we don't... it's not like..."

Dawn burst out laughing as their faces burned. "Methinks the ladies protest too much!"

"Anyway," Willow said forcefully, "how're things at Slayer Central?"

"Kinda weird. Living with Faith, it's... it's taking some getting used to."

"What do you mean?" Willow asked.

"Well, for one thing, morning person. It's not like she wakes Buffy and me up, but she's always awake ages before us, and way too perky for that time of the morning, even when she's been out patrolling 'til God knows when." Dawn shuddered at the thought. "And the doors! She never shuts her bedroom door, not even when she's changing. I mean, she closes it a little, it's not like it's wide open, but still..."

"Dawnie," Willow asked, her face mock-serious, "have you been peeking? 'Cause we've talked about this..."

"What! No, no!" Dawn blurted out. "No, God, that's... I mean, it's not like I have a problem with, you know, I mean I love you guys, and I think you're great together and more power to you, but no, still liking the boys here!"

Tara and Willow made an effort to control their amusement at Dawn's babbling, but couldn't keep themselves from laughing. "What was that you said about protesting too much?" Willow got out between giggles. Dawn glared for a moment, then she too began laughing.

Willow was the first to regain her self-control. "So, has Faith told you what the open-door policy's for?"

"No, she hasn't said anything." Dawn answered. "Me and Buffy have talked about it, but we haven't asked her yet."

"Maybe she's just trying to be open?" Tara suggested.

"Can't get much more open than Faith." muttered Willow.

Tara ignored the interruption and continued, "I mean, maybe she's just trying to show she isn't hiding anything?"

Dawn considered the idea. "Could be. The best idea I could come up with was that she just hates closed doors. You know, after being in prison and all. But I don't get why she'd do it. I mean, it's not like we're monitoring her all the time, demanding to know where she's been and what she's been doing."

"I know, sweetie, but she might feel like she has to prove something." Tara said. "I'm sure she just wants you to feel comfortable with her around."

"Yeah, I know, it's just taking some time. I mean, I was just getting used to it just being me and Buffy, and now there're three of us in the house again, like when Mom was alive, but not." Dawn's face clearly showed her sorrow. "Sometimes I'm glad, 'cause it's not so quiet any more, but sometimes it just reminds me that she's not there, you know?"

Willow immediately wrapped her young friend into tight hug, while Tara took Dawn's hand in both of hers and squeezed comfortingly.

After a few moments, the embrace broke and the three girls separated, Dawn wiping tears from her eyes. "Thanks, guys."

Willow seemed reassured, but Tara caught something in Dawn's demeanour that bothered her. "Dawnie, is something wrong? S-something else, I mean?"

For a second, Dawn was ready to deny it, but the look of honest, open concern on Tara's face broke down her reservations. "I don't know... it's Buffy and Faith."

"What about them?" Willow asked, rather more sharply than she had intended, immediately on edge. *I knew something would go wrong, I knew it!*

Dawn, distracted by her worries, missed both the cutting tone of Willow's question and Tara's warning glance to her girlfriend. "I don't know, something changed a couple of months ago, after you guys took out those demons in the warehouse. I mean sometimes they're fine, great even, laughing together... you remember how Buffy was when she got the letter to say she had been re-admitted to college? It's like that, and then other times it's... it's almost like when Mom and Dad were getting divorced. They both get really quiet, barely even talking to each other, and at the same time they're both going out of their way to be nice to me."

Tara's heart ached at the distress in Dawn's voice. "Do you have any idea what's upset them?"

"No. And I don't think Faith does either. It's like she's as confused as me about it!"

In the absence of any real information, Tara went for raw optimism. "I'm sure they'll be okay, Dawn. Remember, they've got a lot of history, but they'll work it out."

"D'you think?"

"Absolutely." Tara glanced over at Willow, hoping for some support, but the redhead stayed silent.

Dawn managed a watery smile. "Yeah, I guess you're right." She gulped down the rest of her milkshake. "C'mon, we don't want to miss the movie."

As they gathered their things together, Tara quickly whispered in Willow's ear. "I could've used some help there."

"I'm sorry, I just couldn't lie to her."

Dafydd – The Gift Take Two

The music stopped. Faith rolled over on the bed and saw Buffy standing by the door, her finger on the 'Stop' button of her stereo.

"Thought I'd stop by."

Faith sat up, a cocky grin on her face. "Is he dead yet?"

"He's not going to die." Buffy replied, her voice cold. "It was a good try, though. Your plan?"

"Uh-huh. The Mayor got me the poison. Said it was wicked painful." Faith got off the bed and stood facing her enemy.

"There's a cure."

"Damn. What is it?"

"Your blood." Buffy felt a surge of vengeful joy as she saw Faith's mask slip for a moment, surprise and fear showing on her face. "As justice goes, it's not un-poetic, don't you think?"

Faith began stalking forward, closing the distance between them. "Come to get me? You gonna feed me to Angel? You know you're not going to take me alive."

"Not a problem."

Faith smiled, almost glad that it had finally come to this. "Well, look at you. All dressed up in big sister's clothes."

"You told me I was just like you." Buffy advanced into the middle of the room, and the two girls began circling each other slowly. "That I was holding it in."

"Ready to cut loose?"

"Try me."

"Okay then." Faith stopped, less than a yard from her adversary, the air around them practically crackling with barely suppressed energy. "Give us a kiss."

Buffy jerked upright, struggling frantically to free herself from her bonds, until she realised that it was just her covers that had become tangled around her. Breathing heavily, she lay back and tried to drive the nightmare away.

It didn't work. Shortly after three in the morning, Buffy gave up and began pulling on her clothes. Around her, the house felt claustrophobic.

At the top of the stairs, Buffy paused, then silently moved the few feet to Faith's door.

The younger Slayer was lying on her side, facing the window. Even asleep her body seemed tense, a tension Buffy recognised growing in herself. For a few heartbeats, Buffy just stood there watching. Then she turned and crept down the stairs.

As she heard the front door close, Faith opened her eyes. After a moment, she reached out to the bedside table and picked up the stuffed panther Dawn had given her. Clutching it tightly, she pulled the covers around her and tried to sleep.

The gravestones had a cold gleam in the moonlight. Branches rustled quietly in the night breeze, which carried a faint tang in from the sea. Beyond that, the cemetery was silent but for her own footsteps.

"Haven't seen you 'round here for a while, luv. Something up?" Buffy jumped as Spike sauntered out of the shadow of a crypt right behind her, smirking as he lit up a cigarette.

"You ought to know better than to sneak up on people with weapons!" Buffy snapped in reply, brandishing her stake to emphasise the point.

Spike just laughed. "Actually, I'm surprised I managed it. What's the matter, Slayer? Mind not on the job?" When the blonde just turned and began to walk away, his demeanour changed. "Buffy!"

She stopped and turned to face him again. The smirk and swagger were gone, replaced with worry. "I mean it. If you're distracted, you shouldn't be out here. There're plenty of things that'd just love to take a bite out of you, and right know you wouldn't even see them coming."

"Things like you, for instance?" Buffy regretted the words as soon as they were spoken, hating herself as she watched Spike recoil from her as though she'd slapped him. "I'm sorry, that wasn't fair."

"You're damn right it wasn't!" Spike snarled. "Listen, Slayer, I know you've had a tough time of it the last year, but I've had it with being your whipping boy!"

"Spike, please... I'm sorry for what I said, and I'm sorry I've been avoiding you lately. You deserve better after everything you done for me." Buffy sat down on a gravestone, unable to meet his gaze. Suddenly, she gave a bitter laugh. "God, who'd have thought I'd actually care that I hurt your feelings?"

Spike's anger melted as he saw tears gleaming in the moonlight. "Buffy, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Everything. I don't even know any more." Buffy stared up at the moon, the tears coming more freely now. "I don't understand this. It felt like everything was great, and nothing's changed, but now everything hurts."

Spike perched beside her on the gravestone, silent.

"I forget about Mom." The girl's voice was flooded with guilt. "That can't be right, can it? It's only been six months! I live in her house, I sleep in her room, in her bed, and I can go days without thinking about her! What sort of person am I if I can do that?"

"Buffy..."

She ploughed on, barely even aware that he'd spoken. "And Faith! God, I owe her so much... I thought I was past everything she'd done, I should be, but..." For the first time she looked Spike in the eye. "Sometimes, I see her, and the first thing I think is 'Murderer!' And in that moment, I hate her. I hate what she did to me."

"Do you hate me like that?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You never betrayed me." Buffy cut Spike off as he was about to protest. "Adam doesn't count, I had no right to expect loyalty from you then."

"So she betrayed you, and you wanted her dead."

"Worse." Buffy's voice dropped to a whisper. "I wanted to kill her." The tears flowed faster. She didn't resist as Spike put his arms around her and held her as she wept.

Eventually, the sobbing slowed and stopped. Spike gently released his hold and brushed a few loose strands of hair away from Buffy's face. "Feeling better?"

"Kinda. Thanks."

"Any time. Look, what you said about loyalty... you know you have it now, right?"

Buffy nodded. "When did you turn into someone I could talk to?" she asked, smiling faintly at him as she wiped the tears away.

"Not a bloody clue, luv. Still can't quite believe it's happened." Spike stood up and smoothed out the back of his coat.

"You were right." Buffy's voice was almost a whisper. "What you said to me, at the house, before we went after Glory. I don't think I'll ever love you."

Spike looked away, the words hurting even though he had already said them himself. "I know."

"Sometimes I wish I did." Spike looked back at her in surprise. "I know you'd always be there for me, and for Dawn."

Spike just nodded, unable to speak.

Buffy got off the gravestone and put her hand gently on his shoulder. "I don't love you, but I do trust you, Spike."

"Well, that's something." Spike turned his face away from her, hiding the tears.

"Look, I'm going to go visit Mom's grave." She reached out and took his hand. "Walk with me?"

Spike gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "As my lady wishes."

As they walked off into the darkness, Buffy said, "Remember the old days, when things were simple? I wanted to kill you, you wanted to kill me, Mom still thought I was a delinquent... you ever miss that?"

"No. You had this really annoying habit of beating the crap out of me, remember?"

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Roger Wyndham-Pryce said, gazing at collection of weapons in the displaycase. "The burial horde of Raedwald, King of the East Saxons. You can say whatever you like about our pagan ancestors, but they certainly knew how to give their leaders a good send-off."

"Yes, sir." Julian Graves replied. "I trust you are aware that the identification of Raedwald as the occupant of the grave is at most an educated guess?"

"That's quite correct, Mr. Graves. And completely irrelevant to our meeting." Wyndham-Pryce turned from the display and began walking briskly through the galleries of the British Museum. "I have discussed the issue of the two Slayers with several of our esteemed colleagues, and they agree that there is cause for concern. However, they will require more definite information about the situation in California before they will be willing to act. Can you arrange for some discrete surveillance?"

"I've already made the arrangements, sir. One of our regular intelligence-gathering units is scheduled to go on leave in two weeks. I can easily re-direct them to Sunnydale and ensure that their reports come to me personally."

"Good. Contact me as soon as you have any information."

On the stage a trio of twentysomething girls were strumming their guitars with more enthusiasm than skill and singing off-key, while on the floor below, the Saturday night crowd danced, talked, laughed and drank. Faith took a sip of her drink and swept her eyes over the crowd once more, the shadows on the balcony wrapped around her like a cloak.

"Never thought I'd see you up here on your own." Xander said, walking up to lean on the railing beside her. "Shouldn't you be down there with a half-dozen guys drooling all over you?"

Faith never took her eyes from the scene below. "I'm working."

"Working?" Xander asked innocently.

"Patrolling."

"That's funny." Xander's voice took on a more sarcastic tone. "Patrolling looks a lot like getting tanked at the Bronze."

Faith's eyes flickered to him for an instant, anger flaring in their depths. "There's nothing happening on the streets, so I figured I'd come see if anyone's trying to hunt here. And it's Diet Coke." She raised her drink to him in a mock toast.

Xander bit back the angry response that was his first instinct and tried to set aside his mistrust for a moment. "You're flying solo tonight?"

"B's studying with Red. She's got some big catch-up exam Monday, they've been hitting the books pretty hard." Faith tossed back the last of her drink. "Anya with you?"

"Yeah, she decided to hit the bathroom as soon as we got here."

"Cool." Faith searched her mind for a way to keep the tenuous conversation alive, but came up with nothing. "Okay, then. If you guys are going to be here keeping an eye on things, I'll get back out there. Anything kicks off, page me." She turned and hurried away.

Xander watched her push through the crowd and mentally kicked himself. *Damn it!*

"Lucas, are you sure about this?" Sean asked, nervously pacing the floor of the warehouse office.

Lucas pulled on a battered leather jacket and replied, his voice patient, "Yes, I'm sure. I haven't left the nest in far too long, Sean. I want to smell the night air again. Besides, I don't want the troops to see me spending all my time in here, it's bad for morale."

"I know, I just wish you'd let me come with you."

"I have been on a hunt before, Sean, I know how it's done. Remember, you're my second in command, not my bodyguard."

"Why can't I be both? And are you sure it's a good idea to bring the kills back here?"

"Sean, we need recruits. Planting them and waiting for them to sprout isn't working. The Slayers cover all the cemeteries, check all the new graves - we're not even getting one in ten through. We have to control the process, or we won't get anywhere."

Sean sighed in defeat. "You're right, I know. Just be careful, okay?"

"How bad is it?" Buffy asked, her voice a whisper.

Willow put down the sheet of paper and smiled. "It's fine, Buffy. You're going to get through this exam no problem." She took a quick look at the clock on the library wall. "I think we covered everything, you want to call it a night?"

They quickly packed their books away and headed off in the direction of Willow's dorm. Willow chattered happily about the topics that they'd covered that evening, while Buffy

remained almost completely silent, her eyes constantly scanning the darkness. Finally, she spoke. "Thanks for doing this, Will, I know you've got a lot on right now."

"Hey, what are best friends for?" Willow replied, her pleasure in teaching clearly evident. "Besides, if the last one's anything to go by, I definitely want you at my next graduation."

"Of course I'll be there! I just might not be graduating with you."

Willow glared at her friend for a second, slightly annoyed by the doubting tone in Buffy's voice, before the 'Resolve Face' slipped into position. "Sure you will, you'll be sitting right beside me, complaining about the commencement speaker and waiting to be attacked by monsters."

Buffy laughed quietly at the image her friend had conjured. "God, I never thought I'd say this, but it's great being back at college!"

"Yeah, I'm glad you're here." Willow slipped her arm around her friend's shoulders for a brief hug. "I wasn't sure you'd be coming back once the paycheques started rolling in."

"It was kind of a shock just how much they were sending me..." Buffy acknowledged. "I still don't want to count on the Council's money, though. I figure I'll put aside what I can and try to finish college before they decide to screw me over again."

"Sounds like a plan." Willow agreed, sharing Buffy's lack of trust. "What about Faith, is she doing anything apart from Slaying?"

Buffy shook her head, her earlier good cheer dissipating. "I don't think so. I mean, I get why she doesn't want to go back to high school, but it kind of cuts down her options. Sometimes, it feels like all she does is train and patrol."

Willow easily picked up the undercurrent of tension in Buffy's demeanour. She stopped walking and turned to face her friend. "Buffy, is something wrong? Something about Faith?"

The response she got was barely audible. "I think it's something about me."

"I don't understand."

"Why can't I forgive her, Will?" The mask Buffy had constructed crumbled under the witch's concerned gaze, and the heartache she had been concealing began to show through. "After everything she's done, I should forgive her, shouldn't I? I want to, but... What's wrong with me?"

"Oh, Buffy..." Willow wrapped her arms around her friend. "There's nothing wrong with you! I mean yeah, I'm really glad she saved Dawn, and I'm all for the world not ending, but she did that sort of thing before, remember? She helped us close the Hellmouth, and that was, what, three weeks before she joined up with the Mayor? Maybe this is your Slayer-sense warning you to watch your back."

"No, she's different now, I know she is." Buffy whimpered, sounding almost as if she were trying to convince herself.

"Maybe she is." Willow said, not wanting to contradict her friend in this state. "Look, Buffy, whatever happens, I know you'll do the right thing. And I'll be there to back you up, okay?"

Buffy nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes. "What would I do without you, Will?"

"No point asking the question, 'cause it's never going to happen."

With a final sniff, Buffy set them walking again. "Come on, I'm pretty sure there's another blonde out there waiting for some Willow-time." She managed a giggle as the redhead blushed. As they walked away, she turned the conversation to less personal matters. "How's the magic research going? Any luck finding a spell to fix Amy?"

"Nothing yet. Hecate's invocations are really hard to break unless you're the one who cast them. I've got some possibilities still to look at, though, and you wouldn't believe some of the stuff I found while I was researching."

"Interesting stuff?"

"Oh yeah, and some of it'll be really useful. You know, if I can ever make it work..."

The area around the intersection of Third Street and Pacific Drive had never been one of Sunnydale's showcase neighbourhoods, and things had only grown worse when the bakery closed in the 1960's, depriving many of the residents of their jobs. Now the neighbourhood was the nearest thing Sunnydale had to a real slum. Low-rent apartments stood side-by-side with abandoned buildings, and from the outside, it was often hard to tell which was which.

When she first came to Sunnydale, Faith had been drawn to those few blocks. The area was almost an anchor for her, a reminder of the home she'd left behind across the continent, and whenever she had patrolled alone she almost always included a sweep there.

This was her first visit since her return. She had avoided this part of town since coming back to Sunnydale, afraid that it might still feel like home, that it would tell her she hadn't really changed, that this was till where she belonged. As she walked slowly along the poorly lit streets, Faith could feel the sense of deprivation and hopelessness washing over her, clinging to her skin.

No! This isn't who I am any more. I got out, and I'm staying out! I'm just here to do my job.

Suddenly, Faith's reverie was interrupted by a squeal of brakes from around the next corner, closely followed by a scream that was abruptly cut off. Breaking into a sprint, Faith rounded a corner in time to see a vampire bundling a young woman into the back of a battered grey van, while her date was dragged toward the van by two others. As soon as the woman was inside, her captor sank his fangs into her neck. Faith whipped a stake out of her belt and charged.

At the sound of her footsteps, the vampires looked up in surprise. Lucas yelled, "Leave him!" and pushed his companion toward the van, before seizing his victim's head in both hands and twisting savagely. The young man fell into the gutter, his head flopped to one side at an

impossible angle. Lucas jumped into the back of the van, pulling one of the doors shut behind him. His companion was still outside, paralysed by the sight of the Slayer bearing down on him.

"Come on!" Lucas yelled, and the vampire turned to the van, but it was already too late.

Faith crushed him against the back of the van, repeatedly slamming his head into the closed door before driving her stake into his back. As the van began to move off, Faith tried to scramble inside. Lucas' fist shot out from the darkness inside, and Faith just barely managed to dodge, but in the process she lost her balance and was left clinging to the edge of the closed door with one hand, one foot trailing on the road as her other hand desperately sought anything to grab onto. Before Lucas could pull back, the hand closed on his arm and pulled, yanking him toward the door. Faith's eyes widened in horrified shock as the street lamps illuminated his face. Lucas snarled and flung another punch at her face. It hit home squarely on her cheek, and she was too stunned to resist, losing her grip and tumbling onto the road in the van's wake.

Giles was relaxing with a cup of tea and *Paradise Lost* when he heard a tentative knock at his door. A look through the peephole showed a rather shaken Faith on his doorstep. Giles quickly unlocked the door and opened it.

"Hi, Giles. Uh, can I come in?" Faith asked awkwardly.

"If you need an invitation, then no." Giles replied, years of painful experience overriding his immediate concern for Faith. He held the door open for her as she crossed the threshold. Gesturing for her to take a seat on the couch, Giles returned to his armchair. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Faith remained silent for a moment, trying to find some way to explain what had happened. "I'm sorry I bothered you, it's just... something happened on my patrol tonight. I ran into this group of vamps. I-I knew one of them."

Giles' expression of professional detachment immediately turned to concern and sympathy. "Faith, I'm so sorry. To see someone you know, who's suffered that fate, it's always difficult."

Faith interrupted him. "That's not what I meant. I knew him... after he died."

Lucas watched as two of his vampires unloaded the woman's corpse from the van and took it into the warehouse. He turned to the fourth member of his hunting party. "Hannah, take the van. Dump it somewhere out of sight and torch it. The Slayer's seen it, we can't risk keeping it." Hannah nodded once and got back behind the wheel.

Turning on his heel, Lucas stalked through the warehouse to his office, noting without surprise that Sean was already there. Closing the door behind him, Lucas finally let his anger at the night's events show.

"Not a word, Sean, not one fucking word!"

"Are you sure it was him?" Giles asked, his voice devoid of emotion.

Faith nodded. "I think so. I mean, I only saw his face for a second, but... yeah, I'm, sure." She kept her eyes fixed on the coffee table, unable to meet Giles' cold, professional gaze.

"The others will have to know. You'd better get home now, get some rest. Tell Buffy I want to see both of you at the Magic Box tomorrow, ten o'clock. I'll call the others and let them know to be there."

"Yeah. Okay. Goodnight, Giles." Faith let herself out. Climbing the steps from the small terrace outside Giles' flat, she tried to fight off the wave of despair that washed over her.

I'll never be free of him...

"How can you eat that?" Buffy asked, her face contorted with disgust.

Dawn, sitting next to her sister on the couch, looked at her in confusion. "What?" She asked, around a mouthful of cold pizza. "I like anchovies, okay?"

Buffy looked slightly queasy. "Yeah, I can accept you liking them, but on cold pizza? You're starting to eat like Xander."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Buffy's response was cut off as the front door opened, and Faith walked in. Buffy got off the couch, her worries about her relationship with the other Slayer suddenly returning. "Faith, hi! I-I looked for you, but... big town, two people, you know."

"It's cool, B."

"You want some pizza? It's got anchovies." Dawn asked, trying to break the tension.

"No, thanks. Buffy, Giles wants us at the Box tomorrow, ten a.m. I ran into something tonight, Giles wants everyone to know."

"What happened? Are you hurt?" Buffy asked, alarmed.

"I'm fine, just wiped. I'm going to take a bath and sack out." Faith disappeared up the stairs without waiting for a response.

In the living room, silence reigned for a moment before Dawn spoke. "You think she's okay?"

"Yeah." Buffy nodded, as much to convince herself as Dawn. "She's okay, Dawnie. Whatever"

she ran into, we can handle it." She turned back to face Dawn. "I'm pretty tired too, I'm going to get some sleep. Don't stay up too long, okay?"

Buffy kissed her sister goodnight and began climbing the stairs. Before she had reached the top, she could hear the sound of water pouring into the bath. *God, if the demons knew how much Faith likes bubble baths, they'd die laughing*, she thought. As she reached the top of the stairs, her attention was caught by movement beyond the open door to Faith's bedroom.

Her breath caught in her throat.

The room was gently illuminated by the table lamp beside the bed. Faith was facing away from the door, getting undressed. As Buffy stopped, mid-stride, she pulled her shirt off and began to pull her sports bra over her head.

Standing in the doorway, Buffy was transfixed by Faith's movements, the way her muscles moved under her skin, the interplay of light and shadow over her body as she tossed her shirt and bra aside and began to remove her jeans. Stepping out of them, she leaned over to pick up her bathrobe from where it was lying on her bed, the generous curve of her breast coming into view, the light gleaming softly on her pale skin.

Buffy forced herself to close her eyes and step away before Faith could turn around. As quietly as she could, she fled to the sanctuary of her own bedroom. Leaning against the door, she took a deep breath and tried to calm her racing heart.

What the hell was that?

Willow and Tara were the last to arrive the following morning, both witches looking like they were barely awake. They quickly joined Xander, Buffy and Dawn at the table, accepting the cups of coffee Xander offered with murmured thanks. Giles and Anya were both occupying themselves with minor jobs around the shop. As the witches seated themselves, Faith appeared from the training room. Anya took a seat next to Xander as Giles began, "Thank you for coming, all of you. Something rather unusual happened on Faith's patrol last night. Faith?"

Giles stepped aside and leaned against the counter. Faith came to stand by the table, radiating anxiety. "I was patrolling down near Third and Pacific, and I ran into a bunch of vamps. They were trying to grab this couple off the street and haul them off in a van. They took off as soon as they saw me."

"Okay," Xander interjected, "not the standard M.O., but vamps aren't exactly unusual..."

"I knew one of them, I think he was the leader." Faith's voice failed her for a moment. "He... he used to work for the Mayor."

"Oh." Xander kept his expression carefully blank.

"I thought we got all of them on Graduation Day." Buffy said, her voice low.

"So did I." Xander agreed. "All the ones who were there, at least."

"So who is he?" Anya asked.

Faith took a deep breath. *Just focus on the facts...* "His name's Lucas, Lucas Miller. I only met him a couple of times, but if anyone was going to survive G-Day, my money'd be on him."

Buffy looked directly at Faith for the first time. "Why?"

"He's a thinker, a planner. Doesn't have the usual vamp impulse-control issues, either. He's dangerous. The Mayor thought a lot of him, used him for a lot of special jobs. That's why I hardly saw him. He was down south somewhere making sure that spider-box got here on time when I..."

"Switched sides?" Willow finished, her voice harsh.

"Yeah." Faith had seen Willow flinch at the mention of the box. "He only got back about a week before Graduation."

"And now he's here again." Giles said from behind her. "Do you have any idea as to why?"

Faith shrugged. "Revenge, maybe? Most of the Mayor's vamps were with him 'cause he was the big nasty in town, but I had a feeling Lucas actually believed in the guy. He might have a grudge against you guys."

Tara spoke for the first time. "What else do you know about him?"

"Just what I told you. The Mayor wasn't into giving out background, and I never asked."

"I've contacted the Council to ask for any information they have." Giles put in. "Hopefully, we'll hear from them in a day or so. In any case, we should begin looking for information here as well."

"Yay, research." Xander said without a trace of enthusiasm.

"Watcher diaries, Giles?" asked Willow.

"Yes, that would be a good place to start." Giles picked up a stack of old volumes and began handing them around.

Buffy stood up. "Meanwhile, I'll go see if Willy's awake yet."

"Anything to get away from the books, huh?" Dawn muttered, already scanning one of the diaries.

Buffy smiled without much humour. "Pretty much. You coming, Faith?"

"Sure."

Hours later, Faith returned to the Magic Box alone. The visit to Willy's had been a complete bust; the snitch knew nothing and had nearly died of fright when Faith walked in. After that, Buffy had gone to see if Spike had ever heard of Lucas, while Faith opted to look around town on the off chance she spotted the van Lucas had used. That search, at least, had turned up something - the burned out remains of the van, dumped in a side street. The brunette was feeling thoroughly despondent. She had been brought face-to-face with a past she had thought she was finally leaving behind, whatever progress she thought she had made with the rest of the group seemed to have evaporated, and she had no idea where Lucas was or what he was planning.

Faith was just putting her arm out to open the door when she became aware of the voices from inside. Several of them, apparently engaged in a heated discussion. As the door opened, the bell jangling, the voices stopped dead. Everyone turned to look at her. "Hey, guys. You got anything?"

"Er, no, I-I'm afraid we haven't." Giles said, taking off his glasses and reaching for his handkerchief. "Did you have any luck?"

"Found the van. They ditched it."

Xander closed the book he was reading and tossed it onto the stack on the table, oblivious to Giles' pained expression. "This is hopeless. Faith, are you sure you don't know anything else about this guy?"

"You think I'm holding out on you?" Faith snapped, reacting to the hostile note she thought she heard in his voice.

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Enough!" Giles slammed his book down on the table. "I'm sorry. Look, we've all had a frustrating day, let's call a halt. Everyone take a book or two with you, look through them at home, and we'll meet up again in a day or two." There was a general chorus of agreement, and people began reaching for bags and jackets.

"Oh! Tuesday night, the Bronze!" Willow said suddenly. "We're still on for that, aren't we? Tara's birthday?"

"Yes, of course." Giles replied. "Are we still meeting there, at eight-thirty?"

Everyone nodded, and Buffy said, "Faith and I are going to do a quick patrol after sunset, then we'll be there"

The gang filed out of the Magic Box, discussing their plans for the party. Faith brought up the rear, in silence.

"Faith, talk to me." Buffy said, the first words to pass between the two Slayers since they had left the house on their pre-party patrol. "I know something's bothering you, you've barely said a word since Sunday."

"I'm leaving." Faith's voice was calm, almost subdued, but to Buffy's ears it seemed to resound in the night air, echoing back from the walls of the narrow alley they were walking down.

"What?" Buffy stopped dead in her tracks and grabbed Faith's arm, spinning the younger girl around to face her. "Leaving? What? Why?"

"Because this isn't working, B!" Faith wrenched her arm free and stepped back. "This whole me being here thing, it's not working!"

"Faith, what are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on, Buffy! The only person here who doesn't have a problem with me is Spike! A frickin' vampire!"

Buffy took a step toward her, one arm half-outstretched. "Faith, I don't understand..."

"Fine! Let me spell it out for you." Faith paused a moment for effect. "I'm still the bad guy. That's still how you guys see me. I've tried to change that, but I can't. Nothing I can do will ever make up for what I did to you. The only way I can get past it is if you guys let it go, and you won't. Or can't. And you know what, I can't even blame you. You've got every right to curse me 'til the day I die and then dance on my grave, but I'm through trying to play Brady Bunch with people who hate me!"

Buffy's face was distraught as she reached out to her old enemy. "We don't hate you, Faith. It's hard, but please, you've got to give it more time..."

"Why, Buffy?" Faith dodged back out of reach. "Every time Willow looks at me she remembers me holding a knife to her throat. I tried to kill Xander. Anya and Tara are caught in the middle, trying to be nice to me without turning against the people they love. Giles wants to be all open-minded and welcoming, but you'll always be his Slayer, and he'll never forget that I betrayed you! And you... don't even try to deny it, B. You think I haven't noticed, but I have. I've seen the look in your eyes sometimes. The same one you had when you stabbed me!"

Buffy staggered back a pace, tears beginning to roll down her cheeks. "Oh God, Faith, I'm so sorry I let it come to that..."

"Yeah? Well, right now I wish you'd finished the job!" A scream pierced the night. "God damn it!" Faith took off at a run, barely aware of Buffy's faltering steps behind her.

Bursting out of the alley, Faith sprinted across the road and scrambled over the fence into Sunnydale Park. Ahead, she could see a vampire feeding on a feebly struggling woman.

Sean cursed mentally as the dark Slayer charged down on him. *First Lucas, now me! How the hell does she know?* He tightened his grip on his intended victim. When Faith was less than ten feet away, he hurled the woman straight at her.

Faith darted to the side, stumbling momentarily as her foot caught on a flailing arm. Sean was

already turning to run, but Faith's momentum carried her on, and she ploughed into him, Slayer and vampire tumbling to the ground in a tangle of limbs. Sean finished up on top and was bringing his arm up for a punch when Faith lunged forward, head-butting him in the face. Taking advantage of his momentary disorientation, she flung him aside and began getting to her feet. Unfortunately, she hadn't thrown him as far as she wanted, and Sean was able to kick her legs out from under her, then swing his leg back the way it had come, driving the heel of his combat boot into the side of Faith's head. The Slayer landed flat on her back, her senses reeling. Mindful of his orders, Sean left her there and began to retreat again, but had got barely ten yards when Buffy burst out of the trees, hurdled a park bench and slammed straight into him.

The elder Slayer was on her feet in an instant, the tracks of tears on her cheeks distorted by the enraged snarl on her face. Before Sean could properly regain his footing, Buffy was on him, fists and feet swinging relentlessly, powered more by the raw emotions coursing through her than any hint of technique. For a few moments, it kept Sean off balance, but no more.

As Buffy brought her fist back for another punch, Sean's leg lashed out and caught her in the stomach. As she doubled over, the vampire grabbed her by the throat and slammed her backward into a tree with all the force he could muster. Buffy's head crashed into the trunk, and she collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

For a moment, Sean debated whether to finish her off, but Faith was on her feet again, stake in hand. Sean ran.

Faith skidded to a halt beside Buffy. The blonde Slayer was lying on her back, her eyes shut. "Oh God, Buffy, wake up, please..." Faith reached out a trembling hand, her fingertips gently touching Buffy's cheek.

Buffy's eyelids fluttered for a moment, then opened. "Ow. That hurt."

Faith breathed a deep sigh of relief. "Are you okay? Do you need a doctor?"

"No, I'll be okay. Barely even a concussion." Buffy sat up slowly. "Did you get him?"

"No, he ran. I couldn't leave you like that."

Buffy gave a sarcastic snort. "Couldn't leave me. That's funny." Faith was about to say something, but Buffy cut her off with an angry wave of her hand. "I don't want to hear it." She pointed to the woman Sean had dumped, who was trying to get to her feet. "Let's get her to a hospital, then we've got a party to go to."

About the only good thing Buffy could say about the music at the Bronze that night was that it wasn't aggravating the dull ache in her head. The pain had receded since she had arrived at the club, and now she barely noticed it. The pain of her fight with Faith was proving harder to subdue.

Skirting the edge of the dance floor, Buffy took a moment to watch Willow and Tara dancing happily together, as oblivious as always to reactions, positive or otherwise, of those around

them. She and Faith had agreed not to mention what had happened that night, so as not to spoil the celebrations, and both Slayers had been putting up a façade of good cheer.

Leaving the happy sight of her friends dancing, Buffy wove through the crowd until she was standing by Faith, in the shadows beneath one of the staircases. "We need to talk."

"We really don't."

"Faith, I'm sorry for what said. Please, talk to me?"

Faith looked down at the smaller girl, her dark eyes glinting in the lights. "What's there to say, B?"

"You could say you're not leaving." Buffy whispered, her voice full of desperate hope.

"I'm not." Buffy's burst of joy died as Faith continued. "Not until we deal with Lucas. He's part of my past, I shouldn't just leave you guys to face him. After that, I'm gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know." Faith shrugged. "The Council'll probably think of something - there's got to be other places that could use a Slayer."

Buffy placed her hand gently on Faith's shoulder, the touch almost ephemeral. "There's no way you'll stay after that?"

"What have I got to stay for, Buffy?" Faith whispered. Gazing intently at Buffy's face, she unconsciously took a step forward. "What do you want from me?"

"I..."

Faith took another step, drawn in by the pleading look in Buffy's eyes. After a moment, she leaned forward, and their lips met.

Chapter 15

God, I love doing this. Tara said to herself. *Slow music, dance floor not too crowded, and Willow. Most of all Willow.* She slowly ran her hands down her girlfriend's back until her fingertips skated across the top of the redhead's buttocks. Willow murmured appreciatively, moulding her slender body against Tara's curves, her breath hot on her lover's neck as she slid agile fingers up into her silky blonde hair. Tara moaned softly as Willow's fingertips gently massaged her scalp.

Tara was always slightly amused by the Scoobies' reactions when she and Willow danced together. They thought it was sweet, romantic, with a hint of bravery thrown in. They didn't understand what an intensely sexual experience dancing like this was for the two witches. It was foreplay, a long, intense build-up of tension that always led to a night of explosive passion. She shivered with excitement at the prospect. Willow felt the flicker of movement run through Tara's body and giggled quietly against her neck, then playfully nipped at her earlobe. "Getting excited, baby?"

"Oh God, yes!" Tara whispered back, her voice breathless and husky. Willow laughed again, the sound muffled in Tara's hair as she placed a line of kisses up the side of her lover's neck. "Maybe I should back off a bit? I mean, we can't have the birthday girl running off this early, can we? Should I go sit down?" She took a tiny step back, just enough to break the contact between their bodies.

"Please stay, I'll be good..." Tara whimpered as she pulled Willow to her again. Like you're not as wound up as I am, Rosenberg! She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself a little. As they began to dance again, Tara attempted to distract herself with another of her favourite activities - people-watching. If the Scoobies' reactions to her and Willow were amusing, the reactions of strangers were fascinating, both in range and intensity. As the two witches slowly circled each other, Tara let her eyes drift over the crowd. She wasn't disappointed.

A few feet away, another couple were dancing. The woman was looking at them over her boyfriend's shoulder, but hurriedly looked away as Tara's gaze fell on her. Over by the wall was a small group of UC Sunnydale students, who Tara recognised as members of one of the fundamentalist Christian groups on campus, regarding the witches with a mixture of disgust and disdain. Continuing her circuit, Tara almost groaned in despair at the gang of lust-fuelled high school boys openly gawping at them, then barely avoided laughing out loud as she spotted Anya, apparently regaling Xander, Giles and Dawn with one of her excruciating 'Back when I was a vengeance demon' stories. Behind them, toward the back of the club, almost lost in the shadows under a staircase, Buffy and Faith were kissing. Standing on the staircase was one of the few women Tara knew in the college Lesbian Alliance, Beth McAllister, who looked like the stereotypical 'butch dyke' but was actually-

Tara's brain caught up with her eyes and she did a mental double take. Peering into the shadows, she tried to find... there! No mistake about it, Buffy and Faith were sharing what looked like a heart-meltingly tender kiss. Suddenly, Tara's view was obscured as a group of teenagers walked across her eye-line, heading for the exit. By the time she had a clear view again, both Slayers had disappeared.

Buffy's head was spinning. One moment she was almost in tears, despairing at the thought of Faith's departure, the next Faith's lips were on hers, and, after a moment of shock, all she could do was feel. Instinctively, she reached out, and her fingertips brushed against Faith's, then slid softly up the younger girl's arms.

What am I doing? Buffy pulled away, stepping back and taking a breath, trying to stop herself from shaking. "Faith, what're- "

"Oh God!" Faith cut her off, panic flashing in her eyes. "I'm sorry, B, I don't know what happened..." She started backing away.

Buffy took half a step toward Faith, almost reaching out to her as she spoke. "Faith, no, wait, what's happening?"

"I'm sorry, it was just... everything, and..." Faith replied, backing away.

"Just, forget about it, okay, please?" She turned and was swallowed up by the crowd, leaving

Buffy standing alone in the shadows.

Faith pushed her way through the throng to the back exit and out into the alley behind the Bronze. Crossing the alley with a few brisk strides, she slumped forward against the wire-mesh fence, gripping the metal as she gulped down deep breaths of the cool night air, not noticing the wire twist in her grasp.

Why the hell did I do that? It's not like things weren't screwed up enough before! Faith wiped away tears she was barely aware had been shed and tried to at least look as though everything was normal before heading back to the party. As she slipped back into the nightclub, one thought gnawed at the back of her mind.

Just for a moment, before everything went to hell, she was sure she had felt Buffy kiss her back.

Tara barely managed to get the door of their dorm room closed before Willow was almost crushing her against it, her kiss conveying all of the frustrated desire the redhead had built up over the course of the party.

After she had spotted Buffy and Faith kissing, Tara had tried to keep a subtle eye on them, but she hadn't had much luck. The Slayers almost seemed to be avoiding each other, always managing to keep someone between them and rarely speaking to each other for the rest of the evening, in spite of the surreptitious they kept shooting each other. Tara didn't know if there was something wrong between them, something that complicated what looked to her like a potentially great partnership, but she didn't have to think back that far to remember how secretive she and Willow had been in the beginning. Even so, she couldn't help trying to indulge her curiosity, but the rest of her friends (and especially Willow) had succeeded in distracting her enough that wasn't able to concentrate on the Slayers. Now, as Willow began pulling her skirt up around her hips, she was having a hard time concentrating on anything.

Hours later, the witches lay entwined together in their bed, hovering on the edge of sleep as their sweat-streaked bodies cooled. Willow rolled over slightly, snuggling closer against Tara, and winced.

"Ow." Tara murmured, opening her eyes. "Unh. You got me all sticky."

"I didn't hear you complaining." Willow replied, blushing as she gingerly peeled herself free from the gooey spots covering Tara's body.

Tara's face flushed at the memory. "Like I could ever say no to you when you're doing *that* to me." Glancing down at the discoloured patches on her skin, she shook her head. "We've got to stop eating ice-cream in bed."

Laughing softly, Willow lay back down as close to her lover as she could without actually touching her. "Yeah, yeah, you say that every time..."

"I know." Tara sighed, then flipped the sheets back and sat up. "Come on, let's go clean up."

"Tired." Willow protested sleepily, trying to pull the covers back over her.

"Me too, sweetie, but think about how icky we'll feel in the morning. Besides," Tara leaned over to whisper huskily in her girlfriend's ear, "don't you want to get me all soapy?"

"Oh, Goddess, help me!" Willow moaned as she rolled out of bed and grabbed a towel.

After a long, hot and highly pleasurable shower, the witches wrapped themselves in bathrobes and sat on their bed as Willow blow-dried Tara's hair. Glancing at the clock on the night stand, Willow remarked "It's lucky neither of us has an early class tomorrow, we're both going to be like zombies in the morning."

Tara smiled, looking back over her shoulder. "I don't care, I wouldn't have missed tonight for anything."

"Happy birthday, baby." Willow whispered as she leaned forward to capture Tara's lips in a brief, loving kiss. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Tara sat silently for a moment as Willow started up the dryer again, then she asked, "Willow, if I tell you something, will you promise me you won't say anything about it to anyone?"

Willow hurriedly put down the dryer and scooted around so that she could look at Tara face to face. "What is it? Tara, is something wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, sweetie, really I am." Tara reassured her. "I just want to make sure you won't tell anyone about this."

"Okay, I promise, what's the big secret?" Willow asked, scenting gossip.

"It's about Buffy and Faith. I-I think there's something going on between them."

Willow looked confused. "Going on? I don't... no! You don't mean...?"

Tara nodded. "I saw them kissing at the Bronze earlier."

"No, no, no..." Willow backed away, horrified. "Tara, this isn't funny."

"Willow, what's wrong?"

"I can't believe this! She's doing it again!"

"Who's doing what?" Tara asked, lost. "Sweetie, you're not making any sense."

"Faith! It's just like last time! She turns up, helps us for a while, then she starts sinking her hooks into people and before you know it, they're not your people any more!"

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sure that's not what she's doing."

"You don't know her!" Willow cried out, tears welling up in her eyes. "Why won't you believe me?"

"I do believe you, Willow. I know how much she hurt you, but she's changed."

"No she hasn't! Don't you see it?" Willow scrambled off the bed, ashen-faced. "She's even taking you away from me!"

"Willow!" Tara felt a flicker of anger. "How can you say that? No-one could take me away from you!"

"Then why are you always on her side?"

"It's not about taking sides, Willow, I just think she's earned another chance."

"Another chance to do what? Cut my throat?" Willow turned away, bracing herself against a table covered with jumbled up witchcraft supplies. Tears began to burn their way down her cheeks.

Tara shook her head in frustration. "Look, Willow, I know you have some issues with Faith, but if this is what Buffy wants-"

"It's not! Not this, it can't be!" Willow cut her off, wiping her eyes free from the tears. As her vision cleared, she spotted a sprig of Lethe's Bramble lying half-buried under toppled stack of books. Without thinking, she reached out and grabbed it.

"Forget."

Dawn screamed.

Faith dropped her toothbrush with a curse and burst out of the bathroom, flying down the stairs with a clatter of boots. She barely kept her balance as she skidded on the wooden floor of the hallway, then dashed into the kitchen, almost colliding with Dawn as the teenager emerged from the basement, soaked to the skin. Faith took a step back from the growing puddle at Dawn's feet. Now that she wasn't running, she could hear the sound of gushing water. "What the hell happened?"

Dawn's only reply was to growl "Buffy!" and storm out of the kitchen, leaving a trail of water behind her. Faith watched her go, a little taken aback by the display of anger, then hurried down the basement steps. Her jaw dropped.

"Uh, B..." Buffy was standing on a box, a wrench dangling limply from one hand. Above her was a water pipe, apparently the only one that wasn't currently pouring water into the basement. "Buffy? Where's the cut-off valve?"

"I don't know." Buffy replied without turning around.

"Okay..." Faith silently watched the slowly rising water level for a second.

"Well, you're not going to find it standing there. Come on, let's go look before we have to buy life jackets."

After Xander and his buddy Tito the plumber had left, Buffy sat at the kitchen counter reviewing the estimate for the re-pipe job the house apparently needed. *God, how much stuff like this did Mom deal with without me noticing? How self-absorbed was I?*

Faith sat down opposite her, sipping a mug of coffee. "How bad is it?"

Buffy showed her.

"Ouch! At least we can afford it."

"I can afford it." Buffy said sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm paying this myself. You're leaving, remember?"

"Well yeah, but it's not like I'm shipping out tomorrow!" Faith replied, pushing herself away from the counter. "Or is that what you want? Do you want me to go now?"

"No, that's not what I meant..." Buffy said, fighting down the flush of anger and sadness she felt at the thought of Faith leaving her. "Look, it's my house, it's my responsibility."

"And as long as I'm living here, I'll pay my share." Faith sat down again, trying to control her own emotions. "I told you I'll stay in Sunnydale until we kill Lucas, and we don't know how long that'll take, so unless you kick me out of the house, I'm going to help you keep the place going, okay?"

Buffy nodded sadly. "When are you going to tell the others you're going?"

"I'll talk to Giles once Lucas is dust, get him to talk to the Council about a new assignment. The rest... I think I'll just go, be easier for everyone."

The phone rang. Faith picked up. "Hello? Oh, hi Giles... You have? Okay, we'll see you later." She hung up. "Giles got the Council's report on Lucas this morning. He wants us all to meet up at the magic shop after it closes tonight."

"Okay."

An awkward silence hung over the Magic Box that evening as the group gathered. Willow kept sneaking brief looks at the two Slayers, trying to detect any sign that there was something happening between them, but saw nothing. Buffy and Faith hadn't spoken to each other since they had arrived and taken seats on opposite sides of the table, their body language

defensive and uncomfortable.

"The Council haven't been able to find any information on Lucas before October 1999." Giles said quietly, not surprised by the looks of shock and disbelief his statement provoked.

"What do you mean, they can't find anything?" Xander's outburst drew a mocking laugh from the vampire perched halfway up the balcony steps.

"You think the tea-and-tweed brigade keep a file on every vampire in the world?" Spike sneered. "They've got enough trouble trying to keep tabs on the ones that actually count for something."

"I guess they don't know much about you, then!" Xander snapped back. "Why is he even here?"

Spike let out a low growl, inaudible to anyone else in the room. *One of these days, whelp, I'm going to remind you just who you're dealing with...*

"He's here because he might know something useful." Buffy replied, her tone weary. "So what do we know, Giles?"

The Watcher gave her a grateful nod as he sat down at the research table and opened a slim file. "All we really have is that Lucas Miller arrived in Chicago some time before October 1999, and began assembling a cadre of vampires. They maintained a very low profile, and disappeared altogether earlier this year, presumably when they came to Sunnydale. There's nothing at all about Lucas' origins or what he was doing before what Faith's told us."

Faith couldn't help noticing how everyone avoided looking at her. "What about his vamps?"

"Mostly, they're the usual, unremarkable vampires. Perhaps possessed of a little more self-control than the norm, or better disciplined by their leader. The only one of note is this fellow." Giles pulled a photograph out of the file and slid it to the centre of the table.

Faith picked it up, her eyes widening in surprise. "B, check this out!" She passed the photograph across. As Buffy took it, Willow saw their fingertips touch, and Faith jerked her hand away. The others, intent on Buffy's reaction to the picture, didn't notice.

"That's him!" Buffy exclaimed as she saw the picture. "Giles, we've seen this guy, we fought him the night of Tara's party."

"You dusted him?" Willow asked, hopefully.

"No, he got away." Buffy answered, a mixture of annoyance and shame colouring her voice. "He held us off, then as soon as he saw an opening, he made a break for it. He's good, Giles."

Anya raised her hand. "Who is he?"

"Sean Curran." Giles replied. "He's some sort of vampire warrior-"

Spike interrupted. "Bloody mercenary is what he is."

Giles looked around at the vampire. "You know him?"

"Know of him." Spike corrected, with a pointed glare at Xander. "Met him once in Italy, but we didn't exactly make small-talk. He fights for any demon that can't or won't do it themselves, as long as they can afford him. Used to be some kind of army type, I think."

"Yes, he joined the U.S. Army during World War Two as a paratrooper. He disappeared, presumably died, while on leave from his unit in Germany in 1947. The Council first took note of him in the early 1950's."

"Has he ever fought a Slayer?" Buffy asked.

Giles sighed. "Possibly. He was in Stockholm in 1984 when the then-Slayer was killed, but I can't say whether he was involved."

"What happened?"

"Again, we don't know. She went out on a routine patrol and never came back." Giles said, masking his fear of the same fate befalling one of his Slayers. "Her body was never found; the Council could only be sure she was dead because another Slayer was called."

"So now what?" Buffy asked. "We've got one vamp without a past and another one who's a hired gun... fang... whatever. Why did Lucas come back here? Is he just trying to play King of the Hellmouth?"

Willow pulled her laptop out of her bag. "This is probably a coincidence, but I might have something here..." She flipped the screen up and opened a file, before turning the computer around so the others could see the screen. "Faith, is this him?" she asked, her voice totally neutral.

Faith's jaw dropped as she saw the picture on the screen. "Oh my God, you found him!"

"Faith, are you sure?" Giles was stunned.

"Yeah, I mean the hairstyle's different, but everything else... that's him I swear! Damn, Red, what did you do?"

"I Googled him." Willow looked around at a sea of blank faces. "Google? Internet search engine? I got bored yesterday, so I typed in 'Lucas Miller', just for the hell of it. I got a few hundred hits, but this one kinda stood out; it's from the on-line archive for the Sunnydale Press."

"He was in the paper?" Buffy wondered in disbelief. "He was alive, here?"

"Sorta. It's his obituary." Willow span the laptop around to face her again and read from the article. "We are saddened to report the death of Sunnydale's first-born, Lucas Joshua Miller, on November 16th, 1927, at the age of 28. Mr Miller was apparently the latest victim of the wild dogs that have recently plagued our community."

"Sunnydale's first-born." Buffy whispered.

"He was born here, he died here... Giles, do you think he's been here the whole time?" Faith asked, not quite believing the idea herself.

"It's possible, but its very rare for a vampire to stay in one town for so long, especially one the size of Sunnydale."

"Welcome to small-town America, Giles." Xander remarked. "It's the only home he's ever known. I think he wants it back."

"And to do that," Buffy said, "he has to get rid of us."

The following Monday, Willow caught up with Buffy in the campus refectory. Both Slayers had left to patrol immediately after the meeting at the Magic Box, and Willow was desperate to talk to her best friend face to face, to try to figure out exactly what was happening. They secured a table in a quiet corner and chatted for a while, talking about classes, Xander and Anya's growing preoccupation with wedding plans, Dawn's high school experiences. As the conversation went on, however, Willow began to realise that she was doing most of the talking; Buffy's responses were brief, almost terse, as though she were running on autopilot. Every so often the Slayer would seem to snap out of it, like she was making a conscious effort to be more talkative, but after a few minutes she would lapse back into her distracted state.

"Is something wrong, Buffy?" Willow asked, concern showing on her face.

Buffy, who had been staring off into space, seemed to have barely heard the question. "Huh?"

"I asked you if there was something wrong." Willow repeated. "Something about Faith, maybe?"

"Faith? No!" Buffy replied, rather too quickly. "What made you say that?"

"Well, you've been kinda tense and distracted the last few days, especially when she's around. I thought maybe something had happened, like you had a fight or something." Willow studied Buffy's reactions intently. There was no slight blush, no lowered eyes, no gentle half-smile, none of the signs Buffy usually displayed when a new relationship was mentioned. There was something, though, something in her voice.

"No, we're not fighting." Buffy replied, still rushing slightly. "Faith's really wound up about this whole Lucas thing, I guess maybe I'm just feeding off of that."

"You're sure? You know you can talk to me, about anything, right?" Willow reached out and took her friend's hand. There was a definite undertone in Buffy's voice, but she was trying to mask it.

Buffy managed a wan smile as she looked down at their interlaced fingers. "I know, Will. I'll be fine, honest." *I hope.*

"Okay, then."

They talked a while longer, until Buffy had to leave for a class. Willow dropped Faith's name into the conversation a couple more times, just in passing, but got no reaction apart from that same undercurrent in Buffy's voice. It wasn't until her friend was walking away that she finally worked out what it was.

Sadness, tinged with longing.

"There you are!" Tara said, smiling warmly as she finally located her girlfriend.

Willow jumped in surprise, almost losing her grip on the enormous dictionary she was flicking through. "Tara! You scared me!" She quickly lowered her voice as her exclamation echoed through the UCS library. "I thought we were meeting downstairs."

"We were, a half-hour ago."

Willow checked her watch. "Oh gosh, Tara, I'm sorry! I musta lost track of the time."

Tara smiled again, calming her apologetic girlfriend. "It's okay, sweetie." She glanced at the pile of books scattered around Willow's laptop and notebooks. "Eastern European languages? Are you talking classes behind my back?" She asked with a mock glare.

Willow giggled at that. "No, it's magic stuff. I'm trying to modify a spell, but I'm having some trouble with the incantation."

"A spell?" Tara's face clouded. "Why didn't you ask me? I would've helped."

"Oh, I know you would!" Willow said quickly, realising she'd hurt Tara's feelings. "It's just... This is kinda personal. Unfinished business, you know? I need to do this for myself."

"Is this why you've been hitting the spell books so hard the last few weeks?"

"Yeah." Willow reached out and laid her pale hand on Tara's arm. "I'm sorry I've been so cloak-and-daggery lately, I just don't want to get anyone's hopes up, y'know? If this works, it could be kinda big."

After a moment of consideration, Tara nodded her understanding. "You know I'm here if you need me, right?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Do you want to stay here and work on it some more?" Tara asked, hoping the answer would be 'no'.

Willow shook her head. "My head's starting to hurt, I need some girlfriend time." She quickly packed her notebook and laptop into her bag and began picking up books to return to their shelves.

Walking back to their dorm across the night-shrouded campus, the witches chatted quietly about their day, always keeping a cautious eye on the shadows. As they entered their room, Tara suddenly asked, "Do you think Faith's okay? She seems even quieter than usual lately."

"I hadn't noticed." Willow replied, trying to hide the flash of panic she felt whenever Tara mentioned the dark Slayer. Unconsciously, her eyes flickered across to the small ziploc bag of Lethe's Bramble sitting on the table. Again she forced down the guilt she felt at playing with her lover's mind. *I'm so sorry, baby, I didn't know what else to do...*

Faith switched off the TV and turned to look at Dawn, curled up beside her on the couch. The teenager was sound asleep, her head resting on Faith's shoulder. They had started off just sitting together watching a movie, but at some point Dawn had moved up next to her. Faith had no idea when she had fallen asleep. For a moment she just sat and watched Dawn sleeping, a look of complete peace on her face, and marvelled that she should ever receive such complete trust. Finally, reluctantly, she gently shook the young girl awake. "Dawn? Come on, Bitesize, I gotta go patrol."

"Umph." Dawn forced her eyes open. "What time is it?"

Faith checked her watch. "Bit after eleven. Look at you, sixteen years old and you're flaking this early on a Friday night. You oughtta be ashamed of yourself."

Dawn stuck her tongue out and slowly got to her feet, just as Buffy entered the living room and asked, "You ready, Faith?"

"Five by five."

Dawn watched them pull on jackets and check their weapons, listened to Buffy's admonition not to stay up too late, and locked the door behind them. Then she headed upstairs to her room, pulled an old book from her bag, and started reading.

"I don't like this."

"I don't care."

"It's not right, spying on our own people like this."

"Look, it's bad enough that we're missing our leave, I'm not putting up with you whinging as well. The Council said to keep the Slayers under surveillance, and that's what we're doing."

"I'm just saying..."

"Well don't. Hang on, the door's opening. Log it. Slayer 1 and Slayer 2 leaving the house, on foot, 2317."

A quiet 'bleep!' from her computer roused Willow from her daydream. *Does it still count as a daydream at 2 a.m.?*, she wondered, then dismissed the thought as she picked up the laptop and looked at the screen.

Oh my God! That's it!

Okay, slow down, Rosenberg, check it first, don't get too excited yet...

Okay...

Okay...

It's done. It's done! "Yes!"

A groan from the other end of the bed jerked the witch's head around and made her realise that she had spoken aloud. Tara's head emerged from a jumble of sheets and pillows. "Willow?"

"Sorry, baby, I didn't mean to wake you."

"What are you doing?"

Excitement won out over contrition as Willow crawled back under the sheets "I fixed the spell! It's finished, I can cast it!"

"Now?" The tone of Tara's sleep-laden voice left no doubt as to what she thought of that idea.

"No, not now." Willow snuggled in against Tara, wrapping an arm around her. "I'll do it tomorrow. I'll have to go out of town for the day, maybe Sunday too. And if this works," she planted gentle kiss on Tara's lips, "when I get back, there's going to be some celebrating to do." *After I give Buffy what she really wants.*

"You realise how hard it's going to be on her when you leave?" Faith stopped in mid-stride and turned to face her blonde counterpart. "What?"

"Dawn. Losing you is going to break her heart."

"That's low, B."

"I mean it! I saw the two of you together earlier, you're more like a sister to her than I am right now."

"That's not true!"

"It is, and I'm glad." Buffy said, her tone softening. "I have to be the parent now, I can't be her sister all the time. I'm glad she has someone else, someone to look up to."

"You want me to be her role model?" Faith asked, incredulously. "Damn, B, I thought you liked her!"

"I do! Don't you get it? She adores you. You saved her life."

"And that's all she sees, me taking a swan-dive off that tower. She doesn't get the other stuff, she doesn't remember it the way you and Red and Xander remember."

"Or maybe she doesn't care about it any more."

"Well, she should." Faith began to march off through the cemetery, but was brought up short by Buffy's next question.

"Why did you kiss me?"

"B, would you please forget about it..."

"No! Faith, it's been nearly three weeks, and you still won't tell me anything!"

"There's nothing to say! Things were getting crazy, and I just acted. That's what I do, remember? Wait, stop, think, no, no, no, ring any bells? I'm the poster girl for impulse-control issues. Who knows, maybe it was my subconscious trying to remind us both that I'm not playing with the full deck. Now can we drop it and go take out those vampires over there?" She pointed over Buffy's shoulder.

On the road outside the cemetery, a black van rolled to a stop. A concealed camera began filming the slayers as they tore into the hapless group of vampires.

"This is bad..."

"It's a complication, that's all."

"Are you kidding? That's Faith! Last time she was around, I nearly got eaten by a giant snake!"

"Cool it, Shortround, everything's gonna be fine. They're just a couple of girls, we can handle them."

"No, Warren, they're not just girls, they're Slayers!" Jonathan pushed himself away from the console in the back of the van. "Two Slayers is a whole different game."

"We'll be fine! Know your enemy, remember. We'll study them, learn their weakness, and take them down. And then we'll rule Sunnydale!"

Andrew nodded, smiling his excitement. "Cool."

Angel walked across the lobby of the Hyperion, automatically skirting the sunlight areas without even looking away from the book he was reading. He was just placing his mug of

warmed O+ on the reception counter when he heard the front door open. Looking up, he saw Willow smiling at him from the doorway, with a large sports bag in her hand and a book back hanging from her shoulder.

"Willow. Hi."

"Hi." Willow put down the sports bag and waved, a little awkwardly, and walked across the lobby to meet him.

"Is something wrong? Is Buffy okay?"

"Buffy's fine." Willow replied, trying to reassure him. "I was just in the neighbourhood, so I thought I'd drop in, say hello. Nice place you've got here, very... roomy."

"Thanks. It's good to see you, Willow. Can I get you a coffee or something?"

"I'll have to pass, I'm about at my caffeine limit for the day. Could I get a glass of water, though?"

"Sure." Angel turned toward the kitchen, quietly surprised at how happy he was to see Willow again. Few people knew it, but he'd missed the redhead's quirky sense of humour and stream-of-consciousness babbling for months after leaving Sunnydale, and he was pleased to have an opportunity to catch up with her. He didn't see her reach into her shoulder bag, so he had no idea what was happening when the tranquilliser dart bit into his shoulder.

Angel tried to turn, but his knees buckled under him and he collapsed against the counter. "Willow! What're you- "

Willow adjusted her aim and fired again. The dart struck Angel in the throat, and within seconds he was flat out on the tiled floor. Willow shot him again, just to be sure, then dropped to her knees beside the unconscious vampire and began pulling manacles out of her bag.

"Okay, girl, step away from the vamp!"

Jerking her head around in surprise, Willow saw a young man she didn't recognise advancing on her from a side door, carrying a bizarre-looking axe. Right behind him was Cordelia, her eyes practically bursting from their sockets in shock at what she was seeing. "Oh my God! Willow?"

Gunn rounded on her in surprise. "Wait, you know this psycho?"

"Yeah, she's an old friend from Sunnydale. Willow, what the hell are you doing?"

Willow was frantically clamping manacles around Angel's wrists, ignoring the axeman bearing down on her. "We have to get the chains on him! I don't know how long the tranqs will keep him out!"

Cordelia was hurrying across the lobby. "But, why- "

"Cordy!" Willow snapped. "There's no time! Would you please just trust me?"

The look of desperation on her face did more to convince Cordelia than any number of words. "Okay, Gunn, give us a hand." The seer snatched up a set of chains and began immobilising Angel's legs.

"What? Are you serious?" Gunn retorted, staring at his friend in disbelief.

"If Willow thinks it's important, then I believe her. She knows what she's doing," Cordelia assured him, while shooting Willow a look that said 'You'd better be right about this'.

Minutes later, they had attached all the manacles and chains Willow had brought with her and Angel's arms were fastened behind his back with his legs chained together. Willow took a step back and looked over their handiwork. "Okay, that should do for a while. We need to get him someplace secure. Do you have any more chains? We can't risk him getting loose."

"Why?" Gun asked, feeling the need for an explanation. "He's not dangerous."

"Not yet," Willow replied, "but he will be."

Twenty minutes later, Willow stood in the lobby, facing the assembled members of Angel Investigations. Angel was chained to a workbench in the basement, still unconscious; Wesley had examined the darts she had used and said he was unlikely to come around for at least another hour.

"Okay, Miss Blast-from-the-past, how about you tell us why you came in here and shot our friend?" Gunn said, radiating hostility. Wesley, Cordelia and the rather jumpy Texan girl who'd been introduced as Fred stayed silent, but their expressions echoed the question.

"Yeah, right, explanation time..." Willow began pacing, her voice trembling slightly from nerves and adrenaline. "I fixed the curse."

"I don't understand, fixed in what way?" Wes asked.

"I got rid of the perfect happiness loophole. It'll restore Angel's soul permanently, no get-outs."

"You mean..." Cordelia whispered, not quite daring to believe it.

Willow nodded, smiling. "No more Angelus. Ever."

Gunn, whose mood had rapidly shifted from anger to confusion, asked, "No more Angelus, I like the sound of that. So why did you have to shoot him?"

Willow gave him an apologetic look. "I probably didn't, but I just didn't want to risk it."

"Risk what?" Cordelia asked.

"Oh, you know, I ask Angel if I can chain him up, he asks me why, I tell him I'm going to restore his soul permanently, the knowledge that he'll soon be free gives him that one moment

of perfect happiness and then Angelus rips my heart out and leaves me to appreciate the irony in my final moments."

"Oh. That." Cordelia swallowed nervously, not enjoying that image. "Good call."

"Um, excuse me?" Fred raised her hand. "This might be a stupid question, but why do you need to chain him up at all? I mean, can't you do this curse thing on him any time, without him even knowing about it?"

"Not really." Willow's nervousness returned tenfold. "You see, I can't cast the new curse on top of the one he's already under, it'll only work if it's actually restoring his soul. Which means I've kind of got to remove his soul first."

"You can do that?" Cordelia burst out, looking at Willow with a new respect, and a hint of fear.

"I think so." Willow replied, not noticing the extent of Cordelia's reaction. "Actually, I'm hoping Angel's going to do it for me. I found a spell that can make someone re-live a memory. I'll take him back to the last time he lost his soul. If I can make it intense enough, hopefully he'll believe he's actually there and poof! Perfect happiness. Then I cast the new curse and everything's peachy."

"So, you're planning on letting Angelus out?" Gunn said. Receiving a nod in reply, he looked around at Cordelia. "More chains?"

"Oh yeah." They hurried down to the basement.

Willow began taking spell ingredients out of her sports bag and laying them out on the counter. After a few moments, Wesley tapped gently on her shoulder. "Willow, could I speak with you for a moment, please?" He motioned her toward the office. She nodded and followed him inside.

Closing the door behind them, Wesley turned to the young witch, concern etched on his face. "Willow, I didn't want to say this in front of the others, but are you sure this is wise? Extraction of a soul is a very serious and difficult procedure. The only people I've ever heard of that have succeeded are a few orders of dark mystics, and even then only the highest adepts have ever attempted it. Using dark magic on that scale is incredibly dangerous, and that's without the moral considerations."

"I know, Wes, that's why I'm not doing it their way. The whole point of this trip down memory lane is to avoid the icky stuff. I'm hoping that it'll be easier 'cause Angel's dead, so his soul doesn't really belong there anyway. No dark magic needed."

"And if your memory spell doesn't work?"

"Then I guess I'll owe Angel a big apology when he wakes up." Willow gave him a reassuring smile. "Relax, Wes, I can handle this. You're not the only one who's grown since Sunnydale High." As she opened the office door, she turned back to him for a moment. "By the way, whatever it is you've been doing lately, keep it up. It looks good on you."

As Willow finished laying out her equipment, Cordelia and Gunn returned. "Okay," The seer said, "Angel's about as secure as he's going to get. You ready, Willow?"

"Almost." Willow didn't look up as she replied, intent on checking that everything was in order. *Invocation, candles, Orb of Thesselah...* "I'm good to go." She walked out from behind the counter and faced them all again. "Okay, here's the plan. In a minute, I'll go down and do the memory spell. While I'm doing that, Wes, could you make sure I've got everything laid out right? I think it's all there, but you never know."

The ex-Watcher nodded. "Of course."

"Thanks." Willow smiled briefly. "Now, I need a couple of other people to help me with the curse. Cordy was there last time and Wes has all his Watchery occult training, so I think they'd be the best for that job. Which means you guys," she indicated Gunn and Fred, "get to watch Angelus."

"Oh." Fred whispered, her face growing pale.

"Yeah." Willow replied, a hint of guilt seeping into her voice. "I'm sorry, but we can't risk leaving him unguarded. Do you guys have a tranquilliser gun?"

"Yes, just a minute." Wesley disappeared into the office, returning with two pistols, which he handed to Fred and Gunn.

"Great. If you even suspect that Angelus is starting to get loose, shoot him." Willow let some of her own terror of Angel's other self show as she looked intently at the two appointed guards. "Remember, Angelus isn't your usual vampire. It's like comparing a wild dog to Hannibal Lecter. Everything Angel knows about you, he knows, and you don't know him at all. Don't take any chances."

"Uh, Willow?" Cordelia asked, her voice unusually hesitant. "What if the new curse doesn't work? I don't want to be all doubty, but..."

"It's okay, Cordy." Willow stepped over to the counter and pulled a second Orb and a piece of paper from her bag. "Plan B. The original curse. If the new one doesn't work, I put Angel back the way he was and no harm done." *Except to my pride.* She put the spare orb and incantation back in the bag and looked around at the others. "Questions? Comments?"

"Sounds like we got a plan," Gunn replied, various nods indicating that he spoke for everyone.

Willow gave a slight nod of her own in acknowledgement and took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. "Okay, then. Wes, can you start checking things and looking over the new incantation? I'll go give Angelus his wake-up call."

The Magic Box wasn't packed, but the afternoon business was certainly brisk as Faith arrived. Giles was discussing the relative merits of amphibian eyeballs with a customer, while Anya stood beside the cash register like a tigress guarding her cubs. The Watcher glanced over as

Faith came through the door, politely excused himself from his customer, and walked over to meet her. "Hello, Faith. Is everything all right? I wasn't expecting you and Buffy until this evening."

"I'm good." Faith flashed a smile so brief it was barely noticeable. "B's taken Dawn to the mall, so I thought I'd blow off some steam before training. You mind if I use the back for a bit?"

"No, no, of course not." Giles handed her the key to the training room. He watched as she wove through the scattered customers, exchanging a brief greeting with Anya, and let herself into the back. For a moment after she disappeared from view, he was lost in thought, then a new question from the eyeball enthusiast forced his attention back to the day job.

As was often the case, the rush of customers disappeared as quickly as they had arrived, leaving the store deserted except for the staff. Giles set Anya to tidying up some of the displays and headed for the back room.

Faith was using a wooden practice sword, running through sequences of strikes and parries, advances and retreats. Giles was sure the Slayer was aware of his presence, but she gave no outward sign. For several minutes he stood in the doorway and watched in silence, evaluating her technique. Her movements were swift, precise, absolutely controlled.

Too controlled.

There was no life in Faith's actions, none of her trademark passion; her movements were almost robotic. Occasionally she would begin to loosen up, only to immediately rein herself in, her body tensing until her muscles were taut with the strain. Giles was reminded of how Buffy had described Kendra's fighting style, but he knew that she would think this was even worse. Kendra fought her enemy, but Faith was fighting herself.

A sequence ended and Faith paused, as though finally noticing her audience. She tossed the sword onto a bench and picked up a towel, wiping the sweat from her face. "You know, if you were any other guy I'd think you were checking me out."

Ignoring her comment, Giles came fully into the training room, closing the door behind him. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about." Faith didn't meet his eyes.

"Don't treat me like an idiot, Faith!" Giles snapped, his face colouring momentarily. "When I was watching you just now, I could barely even believe it was you. There was nothing there, no energy, no commitment. You were pulling yourself back the entire time." He removed his glasses and sat down on the end of the bench, forcing himself to calm down. "I know there's something wrong. You and Buffy have been walking on eggshells around each other for weeks. I had hoped that you could resolve whatever it is yourselves, but that clearly isn't the case, so now I have to know: what is happening?"

"So, what, you figure it's got to be my fault? Is that why you're asking me, not her?" Faith cursed herself as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

Giles' only reaction to the barb seemed to be disappointment. "No, Faith, I am asking you because you're here."

Faith seemed to deflate, slumping down onto the bench. "I'm sorry, Giles, I just... I don't know what you want me to say."

"How about the truth?" Giles suggested, his tone softening the bluntness of his words. "You of all people know how important it is for a Slayer and her Watcher to be honest with each other."

"Yeah." Faith was silent for a long moment, her head bowed. "I'm leaving Sunnydale."

"I beg your pardon?" Giles pulled back in shock.

Faith looked up, her eyes pleading with him to understand. "I have to, Giles. I'm just screwing things up here, for everyone. It'll just be better if I'm gone."

"Faith, that's not true..."

"Yes, it is!" The Slayer snapped back, shooting to her feet. "I can't do this any more! I can't keep trying to prove myself, 'cause it'll never be enough. I can't keep watching you guys split in two over who trusts me and who doesn't. If I'm out of the way... things'll be like they were before I came back."

"You've spoken to Buffy about this, I presume?"

Faith nodded, unconsciously turning away slightly, hiding her face. "She keeps trying to talk me out of it. I asked her not to tell anyone."

"Why?"

"I'm not going 'til we've killed Lucas. I promised B that much. Once he's dust, I'm just going to disappear."

"And go where?"

A shrug. "There's got to be somewhere the Council can find for me. Vamps everywhere, right?"

Giles just sat and looked at her for a moment, taking in the hunched shoulders, the bowed head, the barely perceptible shiver. "There's something else." It wasn't a question.

Faith looked up in surprise, her eyes haunted. Giles met them with his own steady gaze. For a long moment, he watched Faith struggle with herself, trying to break out through her own defences. Finally, she turned to face him completely again. "I'm scared, Giles."

"Of what?"

"Me. The old me." Faith pushed her hair back, both hands pressed against the sides of her head. "She's still in here, whispering to me. Telling me it wasn't my fault, that I was the

victim, that I can't trust you. Every time one of you looks at me like I'm still her, I can hear her." She sat down again, straddling the bench, facing him. In spite of the autumn heat and her recent exertions, she looked chilled. "I'm scared I'm going to listen to her someday."

He looks so peaceful...

Willow broke off her preparations for a moment and looked down at the unconscious vampire. Angel was lying on his back on the workbench, his head turned slightly toward her. The shock and anger that had been on his face when she shot him had faded, leaving his expression blank. *Like he's asleep. Or dead.*

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Willow jumped as Cordelia's question broke her out of her reverie. The seer was standing halfway up the basement steps, leaning on the stair-rail.

"Yeah, uh, I think so," Willow replied, her voice wavering slightly. "I'm just... nervous? Scared? I don't know, I had it all worked out, but now I'm actually here... It's Angelus, you know? I'm actually going to let him out, and he'll be right here, and-"

"I get it." Cordelia said simply, walking down the rest of the stairs to stand beside the witch. "I can't tell you how many nights I've lain awake wondering if he'd be the one waiting for me at work the next day."

They stood silent for a moment, reliving past terrors, and then Cordelia spoke again. "What did Buffy say when you told her about this?"

"I, uh, I haven't told her yet." Willow said, looking away. "I didn't want to get her hopes up, you know?"

"Are you trying to get them back together?" Cordelia's face was serious, and not entirely friendly.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Maybe. I saw how Angel was when he first got here. I don't want him to go through that again."

Willow felt anger flare through her. "Hey, it wasn't easy on Buffy either, you know! He left her, remember?" She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. "Look, Buffy's had it rough the last year. If I can give her back the love of her life then I'm not going to apologise for it, okay?" *And if it gets Faith off her mind then that's perfect.*

"All right, God, Will, take it easy! I not against Buffy being happy, I just don't want to see Angel get hurt again."

"Okay, then."

Cordelia looked down at Angel's sleeping face again. "Look, Will, whatever your reasons, and even if this doesn't work, thank you. It means a lot that you tried." She hesitated for a

moment, then wrapped her arms around the surprised witch. Willow froze in shock, then awkwardly hugged back, not quite knowing how to deal with such an open display of affection from her childhood tormentor.

"Okay, let's do this." Willow disentangled herself.

Cordelia nodded with a brief, tight smile. "Right, I'll go get the others."

Willow had finished laying out the few items she needed for the spell by the time Cordelia returned with Fred and Gunn a few minutes later. She was carefully drawing a symbol on Angel's forehead. Looking up from her work for a moment, she could easily see Fred's agitation, as the other woman constantly fiddled with the tranquilliser pistol she gripped in her right hand. Setting down her pen for a minute, Willow went over to the anxious young woman. "Are you okay with this?"

Fred jumped slightly at the sound of her voice, the gun almost dropping from her fingers. "Oh, I-I-I'm sorry Wesley showed me how to use this but I don't know I'm not sure if I'll be any good I mean I've never used one before and I know all about ballistics and everything but that doesn't mean I'll get it right and what if I miss and Angel kills us all?"

Oh my God, she babbles more than I ever did! Willow couldn't quite keep her amazement from showing, but she quickly replaced it with what she hoped was a gentle, reassuring smile. "You'll be fine, okay? Just don't shoot anyone but Angelus and everything'll be peachy."

Fred nodded, her lips twitching briefly into a nervous, but determined, smile. Willow patted her on the shoulder and turned back to Angel. Gunn was leaning over him, examining the half-finished design on the vampire's forehead. "What is this, some kind of weird-ass bird?"

"It's a raven." Willow picked up her pen again and shoed him out of the way.

"Okay, so what's it doing on my guy's head?"

Suppressing an exasperated sigh, Willow mentally counted to ten before answering. "It represents Munin."

"Moo-what?"

"Munin. It's from Norse mythology. Odin, the king of the gods, was said to have two ravens called Hugin and Munin, Thought and Memory, who flew all over the world collecting information for him."

"So you're calling this guy to show you Angel's memory?"

"That's the plan."

Gunn took a couple of steps away from the witch. "This guy isn't going to be coming *here*, is he?" Spotting Cordelia and Fred's surprise at the apprehension in his voice, he continued defensively, "What? I don't like birds, okay? All beady eyes, wings flapping everywhere, beaks coming to poke out your eyeballs."

"He'll walk into a nest of vampires, but this creeps him out." Cordelia's voice held a touch of the old mockery, and even Fred had to suppress a giggle.

"Hey, I saw that Hitchcock movie, don't be telling me that guy didn't know something."

"Okay!" Willow spoke with rather more force than was strictly necessary, making them all jump. "I'm sorry, but could guys just... not be all jokey right now?"

"Sorry, Will.

"Sure."

"Sorry."

"It's okay, I'm kind of nervous." Willow said apologetically, lighting the candles on either side of Angel's head with a trembling hand. The atmosphere in the basement became sober again, the shadows seeming to deepen in defiance of the new light from the candles. The vampire's skin held a corpse-like pallor in the flickering glow, and for the first time in the years she'd known him, Willow saw Angel as truly dead. "Okay, okay, I'm ready."

Fred and Gunn moved out to one side, making sure they had a clear shot if need be. Cordelia turned away as though to leave, but instead sat down halfway up the steps. Willow looked up at her, a question in her eyes. "You're not going to check the curse?"

"It looked okay to me," Cordelia replied, "and anyway, Wes can handle the details better than me. Besides, I want to be here, I think you could do with some moral support right now."

"Thanks." Willow managed a weak smile as she opened an old book, the leather creaking as she found the incantation. She paused for a moment to gather herself, and then, holding the book open with one hand, she placed the other on the side of Angel's head and began to chant in a language full of long, rolling vowels and guttural tones. There was a burst of blue light that momentarily overwhelmed the shadows, dazzling everyone.

Willow walked across the lobby, the daylight outside a constant tingle across her skin that she barely even noticed. She raised the mug to her lips and the taste of pig's blood filled her mouth, warm and rich yet unsatisfying at the same time. The front door opened and she saw herself standing there in the light. Greetings were exchanged, then came the hornet's sting of the first dart. Shock and confusion poured over her, echoed by rage from the demon within.

It worked. I'm in.

For a few heartbeats, Willow watched as Angel's unconscious mind replayed those few moments over and over again, then she cautiously tried to direct the flow of memories further into the past. Sights and sounds from the previous few days flickered past. She pushed harder. The images flowed past like water, and suddenly she was falling, out of control.

Buffy stood over her in a dark alleyway, glaring down at her with anger and suspicion.

Across a crowded city square, Drusilla glanced back at her from the midst of a group of people, her eyes sane and so very afraid.

A huge, horned demon loomed ahead of her, standing in a field of corpses.

Get control, get control...

Faith pounded on her chest, begging for death.

Spike swaggered across the street toward her, Drusilla on his arm, the fresh blood on their lips gleaming in the light of the burning city.

Jenny Calendar's flesh was soft and warm in her grip as she snapped her teacher's neck, the vertebrae parting with a sickening crackle.

Oh God... Willow's senses reeled as the tide of blood and death poured over her.

"So then the teacher comes over to me and he's, like, all concerned and I'm *totally* dying from the trying not to laugh 'cause this *thing* is just hanging there on the end of his beard and wiggling whenever he talks!" Dawn laughed, wiping a tear from her eye as she got out of the Jeep and retrieved her shopping bag.

"That's nice." Buffy replied absently, getting her training bag out of the trunk and walking toward the Magic Box.

The blank tone in Buffy's voice punctured Dawn's good humour. Jogging a few steps to catch up, she asked, "Were you even listening?" Getting no response, she waved her hand in front of Buffy's face. "Hello? Earth to Buffy?"

"Huh?" Buffy blinked, confused, as though she'd just been woken up.

"Buffy!" Dawn whined. "You've been like Miss Anywhere-But-Here all afternoon. This whole shopping trip thing was your idea, and you said you wanted some family time, but you haven't listened to anything I've said! What's the matter?"

Faith's leaving Sunnydale. Walking out. Abandoning us. Abandoning me. "It's nothing."

"Oh, come on, Buffy!" Dawn stared at her with a gaze that seemed older, wiser and more penetrating than she ever remembered.

"I'm sorry, Dawnie, I was..." Buffy floundered for a moment. "I was remembering what it was like when Mom took us shopping." Stamping down on her guilt at using the ir mother's memory, she put her arm around Dawn's shoulders and started them off again toward the Magic Box. "I didn't mean to mess up our day together."

Dawn shrugged. "It's okay. I guess I was kind of remembering her too some of the time. Like the way she always bought a box of Oreos first thing..."

"And you always ate most of them." Buffy teased, smiling at the memory.

"Yeah." Dawn walked on in silence for a few moments, then asked, "Do you think it'll ever stop hurting?"

"I don't know, Dawn." Buffy sighed. "I'm not even sure I want it to. I mean, wouldn't that mean we didn't miss her any more?"

"I guess, but Mom wouldn't have wanted us to be sad all the time, would she?"

"Of course not," Buffy replied automatically. "She'd want us to move on, be happy. I just don't know how to do that without forgetting her."

"Well, if you figure it out, let me know, okay?" Dawn asked with a sad smile as she reached the magic shop. Buffy hugged her for a moment before leading the way inside.

Pushing back a wave of nausea that threatened to overwhelm her, Willow fought for control of the memories streaming past her. *Stay calm, stay calm, find something to focus on... the Judge! That's it, focus on the Judge, focus on that day...*

The torrent of images stopped so abruptly that Willow's fragile control almost snapped. There was a moment of disorientation as she adjusted to the new perspective on a scene that she had replayed in her nightmares so many times.

A crossbow bolt sailed across the shopping mall. Beside her, the towering presence of the Judge turned toward the tiny Slayer on top of the coffee counter. Buffy lifted the rocket launcher onto her shoulder. Even as she dove for cover, Willow felt Angelus' mixture of rage and perverse pleasure that *his* Slayer was going to succeed where armies had failed.

Slowly, carefully, Willow picked her way back her way backward through Angel's memories of those terrible days, until she reached the night of Buffy's seventeenth birthday. From behind Angel's eyes she watched as her friend stumbled into Angel's apartment, soaked to the skin and shivering from the cold. The witch worked her way through the memories of that as quickly as she dared, fearful of losing control again, perhaps irrevocably. Embarrassment at seeing her best friend in such an intimate setting blended with a strange feeling that she was being unfaithful to Tara, as though it was Willow who lay atop Buffy's naked body rather than Angel. *Will I ever be able to look at them the same way again?*

Eventually, vampire and Slayer lay still in the narrow bed. Angel managed to stay awake until Buffy's steady breathing and slow, relaxed pulse told him that she was asleep, then he too succumbed to physical and emotional exhaustion. Willow caught a few fragments of half-remembered dreams, then Angel stirred again. For a moment, poised between sleeping and waking, he was at peace, his victims no longer screaming in the back of his mind. All he knew was that he was warm, he was safe, and he was with the woman he loved.

Then the pain started.

Willow protected herself as best she could, but still it felt as though her heart was being bathed in fire. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the pain was gone, and Angelus was breaking free. But only in the memory.

Come on, Angelus, work with me here...

Willow back-tracked, going over those few moments again and again, feeding more and more power into her spell, but to no avail. Angel's soul remained stubbornly in place.

Damn it! Willow paused for a few heartbeats, forcing herself to reconsider, even though she already knew what her decision would be. Releasing her grip on Angel's mind, she flipped over a page in the book, revealing a slip of paper that bore the incantation she had hoped she wouldn't have to use.

It only took a few seconds to recite the words. Angel's eyes snapped open, panicked and desperate as he stared up at her. "Willow... No!" Eyes glowing yellow, he convulsed in his chains, the workbench groaning ominously for a moment before he subsided, eyelids fluttering closed again. When they re-opened, a moment later, it wasn't Angel looking up at her.

"Illusion becomes reality. It is done." Willow's voice was quiet, calm, almost frighteningly so. As she watched Angelus' face form that knowing smirk, her fear drained away, replaced by contempt and hatred. *You're mine now, asshole!* "Would you give us a moment, please?"

"I don't think that's..." Gunn started to say, but broke off in shock as Willow turned toward him and he saw her face clearly. "Okay, sure, whatever you say. We'll be right outside." Fred followed him without a word. At the top of the stairs, he paused and whispered to Cordelia, "You used to pick on her in school?"

"Yeah."

"Damn." Gunn glanced back at Willow. "You better hope she doesn't hold a grudge."

The basement door closed behind them, and Angelus finally spoke, a mocking laugh in his voice as he stared up into Willow's black eyes. "Well well, the Little Red Witch is all grown up."

"It's been a long time, Angelus."

"Depends on your perspective. I can tell you've been busy, though. Then again, you always were the studious one."

"And you always liked surprising people. I figured three darts would keep you out for longer. I'm glad you're awake, though, 'cause we're never going to get another chance to talk."

"Willow, I'm hurt." Angelus' voice was that of a friend betrayed. "You don't really think I'm going to leave you dead, do you? Not after seeing how beautifully you'd turn out."

"Angelus, either you're even more arrogant than I already thought, or you're really, really stupid." Willow said, a hard, vengeful smile playing across her lips. "Have you even asked yourself why I'm doing this?"

"I'm guessing you finally got bored with your little Sabrina knockoff and realised you can't live without me."

Willow felt the anger blaze deep inside her, a dark tide rising from the depths of her heart. How dare this vampire, this lower being speak to her in this way? "You know, any other day that might have hurt, but not today. You know why?"

"Enlighten me."

"Because once I'm done with you I'm putting you back in your cage, and this time I'm throwing away the key. So this is my last chance to do this. Infero Doloram!" She clamped her hands to the sides of Angelus' head, and immediately he convulsed in his chains, screaming in pain. "This is for Buffy, and Giles, and Miss Calendar, and Theresa, and everyone else you killed or hurt. This is for the nightmares, the days we spent wondering if you'd ever come back. And for my fish, you didn't think I'd forget them, did you?"

Willow released her grip and Angelus' body went limp. The vampire glared up at her, watching her eyes. Abruptly, he laughed. "Do they have any idea who you really are? Do you?"

"You never did know when to shut up, Angelus. That's why you lost. That's why you'll be spending the rest of your life watching Angel help people. That's why you're nothing." Willow turned her back on him and climbed the stairs. Opening the door, she found Gunn and Fred right outside, clearly worried. She walked straight past them, saying, "He's all yours."

"What the hell was happening in there?" Gunn burst out.

Willow didn't even look back. "I needed closure." Her voice made them shiver.

When Buffy walked into the back room of the Magic Box, Faith was hammering at the punchbag, her hair hanging in limp strands plastered to her skin with sweat. She cast a glance over her shoulder as the door opened, nodded a brief greeting, and resumed her assault. Buffy watched her for a moment, observing the power and ferocity of her attack, before she turned away. Neither girl spoke as Buffy quickly changed clothes and began her warm-up routine.

After a few minutes, Faith ended her attack with a final, resounding kick. Panting for breath, she sat down on a bench, picked up a bottle of water and swallowed several mouthfuls as she watched Buffy stretching.

Buffy broke the silence, uncomfortable under Faith's scrutiny. "Been here long?"

"A few hours." Faith replied, shrugging. "I got bored back at the house, figured I might as well do something useful."

"Feel like sparring for a while?"

"Yeah."

"Sure you don't want a breather?"

"I'm good." Faith took a last gulp of water and rose, uncoiling herself in one long, serpentine movement. Her sweat-stained T-shirt clung to her skin as she rolled her shoulders, working out a few kinks as she walked to face Buffy in the middle of the practice mats. They cautiously circled each other for a while, trading blows in brief, sporadic exchanges, testing their defences.

"I told Giles."

Buffy stopped moving, her arms raised in a guard position. "Told him what?"

"That I'm leaving."

"Burning your bridges already, Faith?" Dropping her guard, Buffy half-turned away, a bitter smile on her lips. "Little early, don't you think?"

"It's not like that, B."

"Yeah, right."

"Look, he asked what was bugging me, so I told him. Besides, he needed to know he'll be back to one Slayer sometime soon."

At every word, Buffy felt the shard of ice in her heart twist a little deeper, sadness and fear gnawing at her. Somewhere inside she could feel a spark of the old anger, and she welcomed it, fanned the flames, used it to burn away the pain. Her voice held a harsh note that surprised even her. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, Faith."

"Buffy..."

"I think you're scared." Buffy turned back to face her, the mask of anger securely in place. "Scared you won't follow through when the time comes. Maybe if you tell enough people about it, you'll have the guts to run."

Faith backed off a step, taken aback by the fire she saw in Buffy's eyes. "Why've you got to make this so hard, B? I'm trying to do what's right here!"

"Right for who?"

"For you! God, I thought it was natural blondes that were supposed to be dumb!" Faith stopped for a moment, wrestling with her own anger as Buffy glared at her, speechless.

"Look, Buffy, me and the guys, it's never going to work. Xan and Will are never going to be happy with me here, and you need them a hell of a lot more than you need me."

"Who do you think you are?" Buffy's voice was a low, dangerous growl. "Who the hell do you think you are? What gives you the right to decide what I need, what's best for me? You arrogant, selfish bitch!"

The punch came out of nowhere, a hooked blow that snapped Buffy's head around and staggered her. It took her a moment to regain her balance before she could turn her head back toward Faith, anger temporarily swamped by disbelief.

The shock of her fist striking Buffy's face seemed to end Faith's burst of anger as suddenly as it had started. "Oh shit! Buffy, I'm sorry- "

As soon as the word passed her lips, Faith knew it was a mistake, but by then it was too late. Buffy's face twisted into an enraged snarl as she lashed out. Faith managed to block the first punch, and the second, but the third got past her guard, leaving her exposed, then a vicious kick struck her just below the ribs. The force of the kick knocked her off her feet and she fell hard, her head striking the bench. Sparks of light flooded her vision. Dazed from the impact, it took her a moment to realise that the attack had stopped. Cautiously, she lifted her head and looked around.

Buffy was on her knees in the middle of the room, weeping.

Willow strode across the Hyperion lobby, the darkness bleeding away from her eyes as she mentally consigned Angelus to history. Cordelia and Wesley were waiting for her by the reception counter, looking over the magical paraphernalia laid out on its surface. Willow headed over to join them, only to stop dead in her tracks as a demon in a lounge suit emerged from the office. "What the hell?"

Wesley glanced up from his work for a moment, unperturbed. "Willow, this is Lorne. He's a friend of ours."

"Hiya, sweetheart, you must be the one behind today's little shindig."

"Uh, Wes, help me out here..."

"Lorne is an empath. He should be able to tell us if the spell is successful."

"You don't think I'll know if it worked?" Willow asked, growing defensive.

"I'm you're you're quite capable, Willow. I just didn't see reason to chances where Angelus is concerned."

"You've got a point," Willow conceded, still eyeing Lorne warily as she joined them at the counter. "You guys ready?"

Cordelia nodded. "Just like last time, right?"

"More or less, just without the vamp attack, the dead Slayer, the kidnapped Watcher or the bookcase landing on my head." Willow replied, smiling as she lit the candles. "Let's go..."

"Enough, enough, please!" Lorne pleaded, covering his ears as a discordant rendition of *Memory* echoed in the basement. "It's him, it's Angel. You did it."

"I changed my mind," Willow whimpered. "I want Angelus back."

"Hey!" Angel objected, still chained to the workbench. "I've been drugged, chained up, de-souled, tortured and re-souled in one afternoon. That doesn't do much for your singing voice."

"What singing voice?" Cordelia put in, unable to keep an ecstatic smile from forming. Gunn, too, was trying to contain his happiness, not mention amusement at Willow's first experience of Angel's passion for Barry Manilow. To his credit, he just about managed not to laugh as he unlocked the chains.

"I'll go pour some blood." Fred said, trying to smile at Angel and Willow simultaneously. Gunn helped Angel upright, patted him on the shoulder with a "Good to have you back, bro," and followed her out. Wesley, Cordelia and Lorne weren't far behind, leaving Angel and Willow alone in the basement.

"I really don't know how to thank you, Willow. The work you must have put in on this..."

"You're welcome. I mean, it's not like I *wanted* there to be a chance of your evil twin popping up again. And honestly, it wasn't as complicated as I expected; the hard part was getting the meter right. Stupid gypsy magic, half the power's in the rhythm of the chanting."

Angel hugged her. "You're incredible, you know that?"

"It's been said before." Willow smiled cheekily, then she grew embarrassed. "I'm sorry about, you know..." She mimed gripping the sides of his head.

"It's okay, really, I get it. He deserves a hell of a lot worse."

"I think having to watch you do your hero thing qualifies." Willow nodded. "So... are you going to call her?"

Angel thought for a moment. "I don't know. I mean, how do I explain this? Would she believe it? I'm not even sure *I* believe it."

"I can do the explainy bit, if you want?"

"Thanks. I think it's going to take a while to get my head around this."

"No problem. I'll make the call."

As she emerged from the basement, Willow was intercepted by Lorne. "Can I have a minute?"

"Uh, sure." Willow replied, glancing around nervously. "What's up?"

"I don't know. That's the problem. People sing for me, it lets me see their soul, help them find the right path. When Angel 'sang', everything was confused, like Fate didn't know what he was supposed to do. You've thrown the universe a curve ball here, kiddo. There's going to be consequences."

"Are you saying I shouldn't have done it?"

"No, I'm saying I don't know what's going to happen because of it. Be careful, okay? You're a sweet girl. I just hope you know what you're messing with."

"Buffy, you're starting to scare me here." Sitting on the bench, Faith stared at the other Slayer. She didn't know quite when Buffy had stopped crying, but it had been a while, and still Buffy knelt silently on the floor. "Come on, B, the catatonic look doesn't work on you. You're too strong for this crap, I know you are."

That finally provoked a reaction, a bitter humourless laugh. "You think you know me? That's almost funny."

"At least it got you talking again."

"Stop it." Buffy hissed, shaking her head angrily. "Stop acting like you care about me."

"I do care."

"Liar. If you cared you wouldn't walk out on me."

"You just can't wrap your head 'round this one, can you, B? I'm leaving because I care. There's just something about you and me, we can't be around each other for long without hurting each other. I hit you, you hit me, next thing you know someone gets a knife in the gut, and this time, it might not be me. I won't let that happen again."

Buffy finally looked up, her eyes still tearful. "I don't get why it has to happen at all."

"You think I do? Maybe the world can't handle two Slayers at once. Maybe it's just you and me, I don't know. I just know we can't take the chance again."

"Scared, Faith?"

"Damn right I'm scared," Faith snapped back, "And if you took your head out of your ass for a minute, you would be, too." She checked herself with an effort. "You see what I mean? We can't even talk without getting pissed at each other."

The door to the shop clicked open and Giles appeared. He saw the two Slayers, how they were sitting, and stopped. "What's wrong?"

"We're just talking, Giles." Buffy replied, trying to sound convincing. "What's up?"

"Oh, er, Willow's on the phone looking for you. She seems quite excited, she said you weren't answering your cell."

"Damn, I must have left it in the car." Buffy got to her feet, surreptitiously wiping at her eyes as she followed Giles out to the counter.

Faith stopped in the doorway, looking for Dawn. The teenager was sitting at the research table, flicking through a book she'd bought that afternoon. She had taken one look at Buffy

and known she was upset, and was now looking questioningly at Faith. The Slayer walked over to the table and sat down beside her young friend, whispering, "I'm sorry, Bitesize, old habits, y'know?" Dawn was about to whisper something back, when Anya handed the phone to Buffy.

"Hi, Will, what's up? Will... Will! Slow down, you're not making sense." They saw Buffy's eyes widen, shock washing over her face. The phone began to slip from her fingers.

"Buffy, what's the matter?" Giles asked, alarmed by the change in her demeanour.

"Willow... she's with Angel." Buffy said, her voice wavering as if she didn't quite believe that she'd heard correctly. "She, she fixed him, his soul... it's permanent, she found a way..."

"Good Lord!" In that first, stunned moment, Giles was the only one who could speak.

"So, you're going to L.A., then?" Dawn asked, unsure how she felt about the idea.

"I don't know..." Indecision was all over Buffy's face. "What about you, a-and patrol, and... everything?"

"I'll take care of it, B." Faith said, feeling happy, sad, confused and not understanding why.

"But..."

"Go."

Buffy lifted the phone again. "I'm on my way." She handed it to Anya and raced outside.

Anya was checking the day's takings when there was a knock on the shop door. She glanced up, waspish comment at the ready, and saw Spike outside. With a roll of her eyes she walked over and unlocked the door. "Yes?"

"You're not here on your own, are you?"

"Giles is in the basement with Xander, moving boxes. What do you want? I'm busy."

"Nice to see you too, pet. Just finished a poker game, thought I'd drop in and see if there was any quality violence on the cards."

"Cash or kittens?"

"Cash, this time. Slayer's not about, then?"

"No. Faith's taken Dawn home, and Buffy's on her way to Los Angeles."

"Hell- A? What's happened, Peaches got stuck up a tree again?" Spike chuckled.

"Willow managed to fix his soul so he can't lose it again. Buffy's on her way to the tearful reconciliation sex." Anya glanced back at the counter for a moment, remembering that

moment of incomprehension when Buffy told them the news. "Willow's getting pretty powerful, isn't she?"

When she turned back, Spike had vanished.

Chapter 17

"Doesn't it ever rain in this bloody country?"

"Will you shut up about the sodding weather! For fuck's sake, Ryan, you've been banging on about it ever since we arrived!"

"Don't tell me you're not bored with sun, sun and more bloody sun?"

"Of course I'm bored with it, we're all bored with it, we just don't feel the need to whinge about it every five minutes!"

"Touchy."

"That's it, I'm switching shifts."

"Hang on, I see something... Slayer Two and the kid approaching the house, on foot." "No sign of Slayer One or the car?"

"Nope. Wonder where she's got to."

"Do you think they're going to get back together?" Dawn asked, breaking a silence that had endured since she and Faith left the Magic Box. She opened the door of the house and went inside.

"Don't know, I guess so." Faith answered, following her. "I mean, it's Buffy and Angel, right? The great tragic romance thing. They'll probably make it way more complicated than it needs to be, but yeah, I think they still love each other, so why not?"

"Yeah, I guess." Dawn didn't sound particularly enthusiastic about the idea.

"You okay with all this, Bitesize?" Faith asked, her own thoughts on the subject pushed aside by the melancholy tone she heard in Dawn's voice.

"Yeah, I'm..." Dawn began, only to break off as she saw the concerned look on Faith's face. "I don't know. I just... I keep remembering all the Angel trauma from last time around. I don't want to see Buffy go through all that again."

"Well, maybe it won't be like that this time. The whole vamp thing's old news, and it's not like he'll be going evil again, so maybe they'll just be happy together?" *Why don't I feel good about that?*

"Maybe."

"Okay, Bitesize, come on, spill it."

"Spill what?"

"Whatever it is that's bugging you."

"It's nothing, it's stupid... Angel's in L.A., Buffy's here. You know what they say about long distance relationships, and that's for *normal* people, how'll they- "

"Oh ,Dawnie! B's not going to run out on you, no way!" Faith hugged her. "You thought she was going to run off to L.A. to live with him?"

"Maybe, I don't know..." Dawn said, her eyes tearing up. "I'm scared of losing her, Faith."

"Not going to happen, Bitesize. This is Buffy we're talking about, remember? No was she's going to take off like that."

"She did it before."

"That was different, it was..."

"It was about Angel."

"Okay, yeah, but..." Faith paused. "Look, Dawn, people change, okay? B's not going to just walk away from Sunnydale, and she's not going to leave you on your own, right?"

"Okay."

"Good. Look, I've got to go patrol, you okay fixing some pizza for yourself?"

"Yeah, but what about you?"

"I'll hit the DMP later. Don't stay up too long, okay?"

Buffy barely remembered to turn off the engine before she sprang out of the Jeep. She'd spent more than twenty minutes trying to find the Hyperion, her nerves fraying more with every passing moment. It had seemed that she could hear a clock ticking away in her head, counting off the seconds as they slipped by, lost forever. Now, as she pushed open the hotel door, she was suddenly apprehensive.

Cordelia was sitting at the reception counter, filing her nails, while behind her, Wesley was engrossed in one of his books. Cordelia looked up briefly as Buffy entered. "You took your time."

Buffy barely seemed to notice that she'd spoken, she was so busy looking around the lobby. "I got stuck in traffic, then I couldn't find this place."

"Hello again, Buffy." Wesley said, putting his book down. "You're looking well."

"Yeah, you too. Where is he?"

"He's upstairs with Willow, helping Fred pack. I'll go and tell him you're here."

"Thanks." Buffy watched him disappear up the stairs, then sat down on the circular couch. After a moment, she asked "Who's Fred, and why's he packing?"

Cordelia put her file down. "Fred's a girl. She's the one Angel rescued in Pylea."

"That's the place they made you queen of, right?"

"Yeah." Cordelia's voice took on a wistful note for a moment. "I'm taking her and Willow over to my place tonight, give you and Angel some space."

"Thanks."

Cordelia sat quietly for a moment, watching Buffy nervously toying with a strand of her hair, then she came out from behind the counter and walked over. "Look Buffy, I know you and Angel have the whole tragic romance thing going, but there's something you need to know."

"What's that?"

"If you hurt him, all the Slayer powers in the world won't be enough to save you."

For a moment, Buffy just stared at her, startled by the vehemence in her voice, and then Angel came hurrying down the stairs. Behind him were Wesley, Willow and a dark-haired young woman. Buffy sprang up from the couch, slipped past Cordelia and ran to him. They met at the base of the stairs, flinging their arms around each other in a desperate hug. Moments later they parted, each taking a step back.

"Hi."

"Hi."

There was a long moment of silence, Buffy and Angel gazing at each other and the others standing around uncomfortably, before Cordelia spoke. "Okay, I think that's our cue. Will, Fred, grab your stuff, we're out of here."

Wesley agreed. "Yes, I think I'll say my goodbyes as well. Buffy, Willow, good to see you again."

He was already gone when Buffy tore her eyes away from Angel. She was just in time to catch Willow as the witch tried to slip away. Buffy almost threw herself at her friend, not noticing how Willow stiffened up as she hugged her. "Thank you, Will, thank you so much!"

Willow hugged her back, awkwardly, disengaging herself as soon as she could. "I'd better get going. Have fun, okay?"

A few moments later, Buffy and Angel were alone. They stood silent for a moment, watching each other, then Angel spoke.

"Would you like some tea?"

Faith's pulse echoed in her ears as she raced through the cemetery, her eyes fixed on the vampire ahead of her. She was barely aware of her surroundings, had lost all track of where she was. The world had ceased to exist. There was only the vampire, the Slayer, and the slowly shrinking gap between them.

The vampire, sensing that her pursuer was only a few yards behind, turned suddenly and darted around the corner of a mausoleum. Faith didn't even try to follow. She jumped, kicked off a handy tombstone, and flipped herself onto the mausoleum's gently sloping roof. Rolling to her feet, she ran across to the other side and leaped, sailing fifteen feet through the air before crashing down on the vampire's shoulders. They tumbled to the ground, rolling over and over together.

Somewhere in the whirl of bodies, Faith lost her bearings, and her grip on her stake, allowing the vampire was able to take the initiative. Faith found herself on her back, pinned down, with the vampire's fangs bearing down on her. She didn't have time to pull out another stake. Lurching upwards, she drove her forehead into the fanged mouth. There was a flash of pain as a fang sliced open her skin, then the vampire was jerking away, blood streaming from split lips. A kick to the head bought Faith the seconds she needed to draw a stake and drive it through the vampire's back.

Faith picked herself up and wiped the blood from her forehead. The cut stung, but it wasn't bleeding enough to be serious. Pressing the sleeve of her black denim jacket against the cut, she looked around, trying to figure out where she was. That was when she heard the clapping. Peering through the darkness, she realised that she was less than a hundred yard from Spike's crypt. Spike was sitting on the roof, applauding. Faith headed over.

"Nice move, Slayer, you should sell tickets."

"Very funny. What are you doing up there, anyway?"

"What, can't a bloke enjoy the view from his own home?" Spike said defensively, dropping off the roof with a whiskey bottle in his hand.

"Are you drunk?"

"Not yet." Spike took a swig. "But I'm working on it."

"What's the occasion?"

Spike let out a bitter laugh. "Buffy's with Angel, probably doing her damndest to shag the soul out of him, see how good Red's mojo really is. Therefore, in the grand tradition of love's losers everywhere, I am getting royally wankered." He tipped another couple of shots worth down his throat, then waved the bottle at her. "You want some?"

"No, thanks, I don't use the hard stuff." *Too many memories.*

"Suit yourself. I just figured you might need some, what with you being in love with her as well."

"What did you say?"

Well, this feels familiar. Angel took a sip of his tea and put the mug down on the table, wincing slightly as the sound echoed in through the Hyperion's kitchen. Across from him, Buffy sat fidgeting in her chair.

"So..."

"So..."

"Yeah."

"Quite a day, huh?" Buffy said, forcing some brightness into her voice.

"Certainly was." Angel agreed. "Willow's getting pretty impressive these days."

"Tell me about it. Sometimes I think that one day it'll be me backing her up."

They both laughed at that for a moment, then the awkward silence descended once again.

"Nice kitchen."

"Huh?"

"You have a nice kitchen. Roomy."

"Thanks. It's a bit over the top for me, though; I just need a microwave to heat the blood. Fred's pretty much the only one who comes in here."

"She cooks?"

"It's more of a science project, searching for the perfect taco recipe." Buffy couldn't help but smile at that idea. "So what's her story? How come she's living with you?"

"She'd been living in a cave in Pylea. We brought her back, and she decided to stay and help us."

"No family here?" "Her parents are in Texas. She didn't have anywhere to go, and it's not like I'm short on space here."

"True. Lots of pacing room in this place."

"Yeah."

"Angel, what's happening?" Buffy asked abruptly, unable to stand the small talk any more. "I've been thinking about this moment, God, I've been dreaming about it for years, and now it's here and..."

"Nothing's happening."

"Yeah! I mean, I wasn't expecting us to just start tearing our clothes off in the lobby, but... we didn't even kiss." "Did you want to?"

"Yes!" Buffy replied, then checked herself. "Maybe. I don't... It was never about wanting to kiss you in the old days, I *needed* to, and now..."

"Now we don't need to."

"I don't understand it!" Buffy's eyes were tearing up. "I still love you, I know I do, but it's different now, and I don't know why."

"You think maybe we moved on?"

"You feel it too?"

"Yes." Angel reached across the table and took her hand. "I'll always love you, Buffy, but I don't think we're *in* love any more."

"Wow," Buffy whispered, working the idea over in her mind. "We moved on. When did that happen?"

"I don't know." Angel said, a rueful smile on his lips, then he noticed Buffy's expression changing. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm..." Buffy began, then her face seemed to crumple and the tears began pouring out.

"Buffy, what's wrong?"

"When Willow called, I thought I was getting you back, I thought someone was coming into my life instead of leaving it, and now you're not, things are just the same as they were."

"What are you talking about? Who's leaving?"

"Faith."

"I am not in love with Buffy."

"Course not. My mistake."

"I am not in love with Buffy!" Faith repeated, glaring at Spike. "For one thing, she's a *girl*."

"Well spotted. I didn't think you'd be so uptight about this. I mean, look at Red: sweet, innocent little teacher's pet, all textbooks and fuzzy jumpers, and as soon as Dog-Boy does a runner, she heads straight for the alternative lifestyle section." Spike waved a finger at her. "Now you, on the other hand, from what I've heard I'd have expected you to be a lot more flexible, and yet here you are, trying to deny everything."

"Okay, first of all," Faith kicked him "Oz was a good guy, so quit being so hard on him! You like having a killer inside you, but I'm guessing it screwed him up in the end, and I can relate, so knock it off! Second, I AM NOT IN LOVE WITH BUFFY!"

"Balls."

"Spike, I'm warning you- "

"Oh, give it a rest, Slayer, I can see it all over your face. You've got the look."

"What look?"

"The 'I lost my heart to Buffy Summers' look."

"You are so full of it."

"Don't argue. I've seen it on Peaches, I saw it on Xander a few times back in the old days, I got sick of the sight of it on Captain America and I've felt it creep across my own sculpted features on more than a few occasions. I can spot it at a thousand yards, and you've got it plastered all over your face."

"Shut up! And give me that!" Faith snatched the bottle and gulped down a mouthful.

"Hey, take it easy, that's single malt and it's older than you are!"

"Faith's leaving Sunnydale?" Angel asked, surprised.

"She says she has to, that it's better for me if she goes." Buffy wiped some of the tears from her eyes, only for them to be immediately replaced. "There's this vamp in town, he used to work for the Mayor. Once we kill him, she says she's going. I don't think I can take losing her again, Angel."

"I don't understand, I thought you were getting along great."

"We were, we still are a lot of the time."

"What's changed?"

"Nothing. That's the problem. It's like none of us can let go of all the old stuff, and now Faith's scared that me having her around is driving Will and Xander away. She says I need them more than her, so she's going to leave. She's right, I need them so much now, but I need

her too, Angel. And I can't talk to the others about it because she made me promise not to tell them. The thought of losing her hurts so much, and it's like the only way I can deal with the pain is by getting angry with her, and then..."

"Then what?"

"Oh God, Angel, I beat her today! Before Will called, we were sparring, and then she said she'd told Giles she was going. I guess that made it seem more real, somehow, and then there was the pain, and the anger, and I started hitting her! I kicked her halfway across the room, and she wasn't even fighting back!" Buffy stared across at him, shame and panic pouring from her in waves. "What am I turning into, Angel?"

Looking into her reddened, puffy eyes, Angel saw the fear and the pain, and, underneath it all, a young heart breaking. Understanding hit him like a freight train. He got up, moved around the end of the table, and slipped onto a chair beside her. "Does she know how you feel?"

"I don't even know how I feel." Buffy sobbed. "I mean, how can I be this upset at losing her and then beat the crap out of her?"

Oh my God, you have no idea, do you? Taking Buffy's hand again, Angel put his other arm around her shoulders. "Can I make a suggestion?"

"Please."

"Take some time to yourself to work through this." Weighing his words carefully, the vampire continued. "Just sit down, on your own, and listen to your heart. And don't be afraid of what it tells you."

"Nice you can still lay on the melodrama," Buffy said with a weak smile.

Angel smiled back. "I'm serious. Figure out what you want, and talk to Faith. Let her know how much you're hurting."

"Okay." Buffy wiped her eyes again. "You got somewhere I can crash tonight?"

"I think we can find somewhere habitable."

"Look, I care about her, okay, that's all." Faith insisted, jabbing her finger toward Spike as he sat beside her against the outer wall of his crypt, her words slurring slightly. "I want her to be happy. Doesn't mean I'm in love with her."

"If you say so," Spike replied, the knowing smirk back on his face.

For a moment Faith contemplated yelling at him again, but in the end she just swallowed another mouthful of scotch and thrust the bottle back at him. "It's not like it'd matter, anyway. Hell, you'd stand more of a chance with her than me."

"Oh that's bloody charming, that is. Kick a bloke when he's down."

"Well it's true. At least you've got the right gear in your pants. You really think B'd be caught dead getting nasty with another girl?"

"Why not? At least you're not a murdering demon."

"No, just a murdering human." Faith's voice was bitter.

"You don't seem that murderous these days."

"It's still there, though. No-one ever forgets."

"I guess that means we're both beneath her, then."

Faith snorted. "Hah! I wish. Did I just say that?"

"I tried to tell you," Spike replied, smirking more than ever.

"God damn it! I don't need this, not now." Faith snatched the bottle back and took another swig.

"Love's bitches, both of us."

"Well, here's to Cupid, the little bastard." A thought struck her. "Is he real?"

"Don't know. Might be."

"You know what, we should hunt him down and kick his ass."

"Now you're talking." Spike took a drink and returned the bottle. "I'll hold him down, you shove that sodding bow right up the little bleeder."

"I'm down with that." Faith drained the last of the scotch. "Ugh. Empty bottle. Not good."

"Don't worry," Spike said, scrambling to his feet and walking unsteadily to the door. "I have more."

Chapter 18

It was the smell that first penetrated the fog surrounding Faith's consciousness, a sour, acrid odour that burned her nose and turned her stomach. She groaned, and the sound seemed to echo in her head, the waves of pain sending her stomach into further convulsions.

What the hell happened?

The memories came back in a flood: Buffy's departure for Los Angeles, meeting Spike in the cemetery, the Scotch, the sudden comprehension of what she was feeling. Going into the crypt. More Scotch. Slayer and vampire wallowing together.

Please God, let me have clothes on...

Forcing her eyes open, Faith tried to raise her head. For a moment, her cheek was stuck to the stone lid of the sarcophagus, before it slowly peeled away. Relief at finding herself still clothed was swamped by nausea as she tried to force herself upright. Sitting upright, Faith saw Spike, sound asleep in his battered armchair, a half-empty bottle of whisky cradled in his lap. That was when she finally noticed the pale shafts of sunlight filtering through the crypt's tiny windows. She checked her watch.

5:52 a.m.

Son of a bitch, I left Dawn alone!

Trying to ignore the pain and dizziness, Faith scrambled off the sarcophagus and over to the door. For a moment, she fumbled with the handle, then she was outside, one hand shading her eyes against the dawn light. She barely remembered to pull the door closed before staggering toward the nearest clump of trees. Clutching a trunk, she fell to her knees and spilled the dregs in her stomach onto the grass.

"Hannah isn't back, is she?" Lucas asked as Sean walked into the office, closing the door behind him. Outside, he could hear his vampires settling down for the day.

"No."

Lucas sat down on the edge of his desk, shoulders slumped, facing away from Sean. "She's gone, then."

"Maybe she couldn't get back before dawn." Sean suggested, trying to offer some hope. "She could be holed up in a cellar somewhere, or coming in through the sewers."

"Do you really believe that?"

"No, I guess I don't."

"She was my first, did you know that? The first one I sired in more than seventy years as a vampire, and now she's gone." Lucas stood and turned to face his second. "What happened?"

"Her group was making a kill when one of them spotted the Slayer coming in. Hannah told the others to get clear while she drew the Slayer off."

"Which Slayer?"

"Faith."

Lucas slumped for a moment, then his fingers clenched around the edge of the desk. He was on the verge of flinging it across the office when Sean knocked him back against the wall and held him there. Lucas tried to break free but was shoved back against the brickwork. Leaning in close, one arm pressed across his leader's throat, Sean whispered "Listen to me! I get that she was important to you, but this isn't the time. When you're alone you can shout and scream

and destroy things, but you do not do it where the troops can hear you!"

"Still thinking like a soldier, *Sergeant*?" Lucas' voice was harsh, but his body relaxed a little in Sean's grasp.

"I *am* a soldier, Lucas. That's why you asked me to come here. I thought you were someone worth following, that's why I said yes. It's not like you're paying me, remember?"

With a rueful nod, Lucas slumped into his swivel chair and looked across at the former paratrooper. "Nothing's going right here, is it? It was supposed to be simple. Come back to Sunnydale, quietly build up some numbers, kill the Slayer and take back the town. Then that treacherous whore shows up, she spots me on the hunt and between her and the other one we're barely gaining strength at all. And now they've taken Hannah."

Sean sat down in the chair opposite. "Why are you doing this, Lucas? Why risk coming back here?"

"It's my home, Sean. Do you remember what that feels like? Where are you from?"

"Milbank, South Dakota."

"Ever been back?"

"Since I was sired? Only once."

"I hardly ever left Sunnydale. Born here, raised here, died here, and then the Mayor recruited me straight out of the grave. This was my world. And the Hellmouth... do you remember the first time you felt its pull? I lived with that feeling for seventy years, bathed in it, and I never once even realised what I was feeling until it was gone."

"You know that if you kill the Slayers there'll be another one. Maybe two."

Lucas shrugged. "Doesn't mean they'll come here. We never had one before that damn Barbie doll arrived, and the Hellmouth was still here then. If one comes, I'll deal with her then. These two have to die, especially Faith."

"Why? Because she's alive and your mentor isn't?"

"He gave her everything." Lucas' voice became low and harsh, anger showing on his face. "She'd been ignored, humiliated and used. He took her in, treated her like his own daughter, and now she's back with them like it never happened. He's dead and she's playing house with his killer."

"All right, then. We need a new strategy."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, Lucas, this whole secret build-up plan sounds good in theory, but we have to feed, and if we want to keep our instincts honed we have to hunt. Every time we're out there we're exposed and in this town, that means we're going to keep losing people."

"I suppose so."

"This way's been tried before. The Master, Spike, Angelus, and where are they now? The Master's dust, Angelus is in L.A. playing hero and Spike works for the Slayers."

"So what's your alternative?"

"She's back."

"Which one?"

"Slayer Two, just coming up to the house. Still no sign of Slayer One."

"God, she looks rough. Wonder where she's been?"

"If the Council get off their arses and send the new gear over, we might actually have some idea."

The sun was still low in the sky when Faith crept into the house. Slipping off the cheap sunglasses she'd picked up at a convenience store, she looked around in the subdued light.

Okay, no blood, no wreckage, this is good...

There was a pizza box on the living room table. Faith lifted the lid and then stepped back hurriedly, her stomach flip-flopping as the smell of cold anchovies washed over her. For a moment, she thought she was going to bring up the water and aspirin she'd bought with the sunglasses, but the moment passed and, legs still a little rubbery, she went to check the kitchen. Finding nothing out of place, she moved upstairs.

Faith silently opened the door to Dawn's bedroom and poked her head around the corner, letting out a relieved sigh as she saw Dawn sleeping peacefully, her dark hair fanned out like a shadow across the pillows. It suddenly came home to Faith how much she was going to miss Dawn, how much she'd come to care for her in the previous six months. Eyes glistening in the faint light that filtered through the curtains, Faith slipped silently from the room.

Withdrawing to her own bedroom, Faith quickly stripped off her grimy patrol clothes and tossed them into a corner. For a moment, she was about to leave her jacket with the rest, but the smell emanating from the sticky yellow spatters on the denim convinced her otherwise. She wrapped her bathrobe around herself and, trying not to move her throbbing head, she crept down to the basement and tossed the jacket into the washing machine. Passing by the kitchen on the way up again, Faith remembered hearing something about orange juice helping with hangovers, so she opened the fridge and swallowed half a carton before heading for the shower.

A quick blast of cold water left her shivering, but soothed the pounding in her head a little and

cleared some of the muzziness. Switching to hot water, Faith began shampooing the filth and crypt dust from her hair.

The combination of hot water and aspirin quickly began to relieve the headache and, her worries about Dawn laid to rest, Faith was no longer able to avoid thinking about the previous night.

Damn it, B, why now? Of all the times to make me feel like this... Faith leaned her head against the wall, tears mingling with the water flowing over her skin. *It wasn't going to be hard enough before, is that it? You had to make it harder? How can I leave you now?*

She straightened her back, her face becoming harder, more determined.

Because I have to. If I really care about you that much, I've got to go before I drag you down again.

Faith didn't get out of the shower until the water ran cold. The towel felt rough on her skin as she dried off, then wrapped a bathrobe around herself. Using a fresh towel to dry her hair, Faith left the bathroom and nearly collided with Dawn. "Whoa! Hey, Bitesize, didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, I just really need the bathroom..." Dawn said rapidly, trying to slip past her.

"Okay. Hey, wait up a sec..." Faith grabbed Dawn's arm. "You were okay last night, right? I got caught up chasing a vamp, lost track of time. I'm sorry."

"No-no, no problems. Had pizza, did some homework, watched some TV." Dawn replied, bouncing place. "Faith, I've got to go..."

"Cool. Look, I'm going to sack out again for a bit, I'm feeling kind of screwy."

"Yeah-sure-okay!" Dawn said, slamming the door shut.

"I love Sunday mornings." Anya murmured, snuggling up against Xander and resting her head on his chest. "Every other day one of us has to go to work, we barely have time for any sex before breakfast. But Sundays... we've got nowhere to be and no one to see. Hours of orgasms. Isn't it great?"

Xander didn't respond, and got poked in the ribs. "Ow!"

"You weren't listening," Anya pouted. "It's like we're already married."

"Sorry, An. I was just thinking about Buffy."

"Buffy? I'm talking about sex and you think of Buffy?"

"I'm worried about her," Xander replied quickly. "This whole Angel thing, it's a bad idea. He's just going to hurt her again."

"Hurt her how?" Anya asked, her old 'Avenger of scorned women' instincts kicking in.

"I didn't mean... it's not like he abused her or anything - well, except when he was evil - but the whole thing was one long drama even when he wasn't trying to destroy the world. Angel's like trauma with hair-gel, but Buffy keeps getting drawn back to him, and every time, she gets burned."

"She seemed pretty miserable without him, when I got here."

"You never saw her *with* him."

"So you're saying she was happier after he dumped her? Is that why you don't like him?"

"He's a vampire, An, that's all the reason I need."

"Well yeah, sure, but with Angel it sounds more personal. Are you having feelings for her again?"

Xander let out a 'God, not this again' sigh. "No, An, Buffy's my friend, I don't want to see her get hurt again. I never saw that much of it, but Will told me Buffy was always miserable when she was with Angel. The only time I've ever been happy with the guy was when he left, that proved he cared about her. I don't want to go back to hating Angel, I'm too busy hating Spike."

"You do know we wouldn't be together if it wasn't for him?"

"What?"

"It's true. If Spike hadn't kidnapped you and Willow, Cordelia wouldn't have caught you being a typical unfaithful male, I wouldn't have come to exact vengeance for her, I wouldn't have lost my powers and got stuck here without a date for the Prom."

"Oh my God..." Xander whispered, horrified. "Anya, if you truly love me, never mention this again. Ever. To *anyone*."

"Okay." Anya mentally filed it under 'Blackmail'. For a few moments she lay silent, then she rolled on top of Xander and sat up, straddling his waist, smirking as his eyes fixated on her breasts. "Enough talking. I want orgasms."

The dorm should have been a sanctuary, somewhere comforting and familiar into which Willow could retreat from the confusion that surrounded her, but instead it felt empty, desolate. Tara was absent, and without her the room was almost unbearably quiet.

Willow dropped her back by the door and flopped onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling as she tried to make sense of the previous day.

Spending the night at Cordelia's apartment hadn't been nearly as uncomfortable as Willow had

feared. Her former tormentor was every bit as acerbic as she had been, but she'd lost the old spiteful edge to her voice, and Willow sensed a commitment and humility in her that hadn't been there at school. Fred had been a little disconcerting at first - her combination of fearsome intelligence and bouts of baffling eccentricity took a little getting used to - but she was certainly interesting company. And then there was Dennis, the literal phantom roommate...

All in all it should have been an enjoyable diversion break from the Sunnydale routine, and yet Willow had been on edge all night. Any time her mind wandered she would find herself assailed by the memory she had gained of Buffy and Angel's night together, the feeling of her best friend writhing naked beneath her. The power of Angel's desire that night was so intense that Willow feared she would never be free of it. For hours she had fought against her need to sleep, not wanting to relive the experience in her dreams, but eventually the stresses and exertions of the day had overwhelmed her. Thankfully, if her subconscious had raised the matter, she didn't remember it.

The Buffy had arrived on Cordelia's doorstep early that morning. Willow had been genuinely shocked by her friend's demeanour. She had hoped - expected - that Buffy would be overjoyed to have the love of her life returned to her. Pushed ruthlessly to the back of Willow's mind had been the fear that it wouldn't work out and Buffy would be heartbroken, or angry with her for interfering. It had never occurred to Willow that her friend would simply be... empty.

Buffy had barely spoke all the way home. Normally Willow would have been all in favour of Buffy concentrating on her driving, but today she was desperate for some indication of what was going through her friend's mind.

What do I do now? I can't help her if I don't know what she's feeling. I'm going to lose her again!

Willow curled herself into a ball on the bed and let the tears come.

Dawn was sitting in front of the TV, flicking through channels in search of anything that wasn't either hopelessly bland or broadcast straight from the Bible Belt, when Buffy came through the front door, still in the training clothes she'd worn when she rushed from the Magic Box the previous day. Dawn flicked off the TV, interrupting a particularly manic evangelist mid-rant. "You're back! Why? I figured you and Angel would want a couple of days together, at least."

"We're not together, Dawnie."

The weary sadness in Buffy's voice brought Dawn to her feet, confusion and concern appearing on her face. "You're not? How come? I thought you guys had, like, the forever thing."

"We're..." Buffy hesitated, fumbling for an answer. "We're just not in that place any more."

"But-"

"Dawn, please, don't." Buffy whispered, a hint of desperation in her voice. "I really don't want to talk about it right now."

"Yeah, sure." Dawn replied, her voice doubtful. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine." Buffy replied. "Yesterday was kind of a long day. Is Faith around?"

"She went back to bed, she said she wasn't feeling so good."

"Oh. No problems last night?"

"Nope. Just did some homework, watched TV and went to bed." *Same as every night*, Dawn added silently. "Faith said not to wait up for her."

"She wasn't back when you went to bed?"

"No, she was out late. Real late, like after two. What?" Dawn hurried on as she saw the look of annoyance cross Buffy's face. "I got up for a glass of water, okay? Anyway, Faith wasn't back. And..."

"And what?"

"I -I think she was drinking."

"Drinking? How do you know?"

"Buffy, I'm in high school, I've seen people with hangovers. I'm not sure, Faith just looked like hell this morning."

"Okay, I'll look in her after I've had a shower, make sure she's all right."

A quick shower and fresh clothes left Buffy feeling more comfortable physically, but her emotional turmoil was far harder to quell. She stood on the landing outside Faith's room, and it was a moment before she could make herself look through the always-open door. The curtains were closed, leaving the room in a kind of false twilight. Faith was curled up in the middle of her bed, the sheets wrapped tightly around her.

What have you done to me? Buffy wondered. *A year ago I hoped I'd never see you again, and now I'm terrified of you leaving. Why does everything I do seem to drive you away?*

She was turning away when Faith opened her eyes. "Buffy?"

"Hi Feeling better?"

"Yeah, thanks." Faith replied with an awkward half-smile. "Got to love being a Slayer - you get some twenty-four hour bug and kick its ass in six. How come you're back so soon?"

"No reason to stay." Buffy managed to keep her voice under better control than she had with

Dawn. "Me and Angel, we're not going to happen again."

"God, I'm sorry B." *Am I?*

"It's okay, I should've figured it out before now, our moment's gone. How was patrol?" Buffy tried changing the subject. "Dawn said you were back late."

"Yeah, sorry about that. This vamp had me chasing her half way across town before I nailed her."

"Been there." A faint smile flickered across Buffy's lips. "You sure you're okay? Dawn's got this crazy idea that you got drunk last night."

"Why'd I do that, B?" Faith asked quietly.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

There was a moment of silence, the two Slayers watching each other, before Buffy broke away. "I'd better go do some studying."

"Five by five."

The door opened, rousing Willow from the fitful doze she'd cried herself into. Sitting up on the bed, she saw Tara struggling through the door with an overflowing laundry bag. Tara's attention was completely focussed on not spilling clothes all over the carpet, so it was a few moments before she realised she wasn't alone in the room. "Sweetie, you're back! You should have called, I'd have waited for you."

"I'm sorry, we got started pretty early, so I didn't want to wake you. Besides, Sunday morning's good for laundry."

Tara's smile faded as she caught the hesitant note in Willow's voice. "What's wrong? I thought the curse worked fine."

"You know about that?"

"Dawn called me last night, I think she was lonely. She told me." Tara replied, a little hurt that she'd had to find out second-hand. "Did something go wrong?"

"No-no everything went okay, Angel's safe for good. It's just Buffy... I thought she'd be happy. I mean, she got the love of her life back, but she's just... cold, I guess."

"W-What if he isn't?" Tara asked. "The love of her life, I mean. Maybe there's someone else-"

"Someone else? Who?" Panic shot through Willow's mind. *Oh God, she's remembering!*

"I don't know, I was just wondering. Or it might be something else, like it's the wrong time. Love's never simple."

"You're probably right." Willow replied, relaxing a little. "I just wanted something good to happen for Buffy for a change, and now it just feels like a waste of time."

"No!" Tara sat down beside Willow and wrapped her arms around her. "You did a good thing, an amazing thing. Angelus is gone. I am so proud of you, baby." Willow gave her a brief smile, then laid her head on her girlfriend's shoulder.

They sat like that for a little while, and then Willow reluctantly disentangled herself and stood up. "Come on, we'd better get these clothes folded." She was just bending over the laundry bag when she felt Tara's arms loop around her waist.

"I missed you last night." Tara's voice was a seductive whisper, her breath tickling the back of Willow's ear.

"I-I missed you too, but shouldn't we-" Willow's protest died on her lips as Tara began nibbling the side of her neck. Spinning around in Tara's arms, Willow captured her girlfriend's lips with her own. Tara giggled into her mouth and took a couple of backward steps, pulling Willow with her until they toppled over onto the bed.

As Tara began gently stroking her back, Willow slid her hand up to Tara's breast, caressing the soft mound of flesh. Tara let out a quiet moan and whispered, "You're such a breast girl."

"I don't hear you complaining." Willow shot back with a smirk, fingers stroking Tara's hardening nipple.

...Buffy arched beneath her, crying out as her nipple was pinched between inhumanly strong fingers...

Willow jumped back, snatching her hand from Tara's breast as though she'd been burned. She backed away from the bed, clutching her hand and whispering "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Tara was on her feet a moment later, reaching out to her. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Willow flinched as Tara's fingertips brushed her shoulder. "I couldn't help it."

"Couldn't help what?" Tara's voice became more anxious. "What happened? What did I do?"

"No, no, it wasn't you, it was me, the spell I did."

"I don't understand."

Sitting carefully on the edge of the bed, Willow tried to gather her scattered wits. "When I was in L.A., I had to make Angel remember losing his soul, the night he slept with Buffy. I went through it with him, his memories, everything. I keep getting these flashbacks of what it felt like... being with her."

Tara watched her silently for a moment, taking in the hesitation in her voice, her shortness of breath, her refusal to make eye contact. When she spoke, her voice was terribly quiet. "You

liked it."

"What?" Willow's head snapped to look at her, but Tara had already turned away.

"I always w-wondered if you were attracted to Buffy," she said bowing her head, hiding the gathering tears. "I mean, who wouldn't be? She's beautiful, loyal, a superhero."

"No, Tara, that's not what I meant!" Willow's voice was rising in pitch, taking on an edge of panic. "This isn't me, it's coming from Angel!"

"What do you mean?" Tara was doubtful.

"It's all his feelings, his memories of that night. I got it all from him and now I can't shake it off."

"Do you want to?" Tara's softly-spoken question hit Willow like a body blow.

"What?"

"Some part of you obviously doesn't want to let go of the memory, Willow, or you wouldn't keep bringing it up."

"Tara, please, you've got to believe me-"

"It's okay, Willow, I understand." Tara said, her voice subdued and tinged with a terrible sadness. "You can't help the way you feel." She picked up her jacket.

Willow leapt to her feet and put a hand on Tara's shoulder. "Baby, wait, don't go..."

"Willow, please." Tara opened the door. "I need some time to think."

"I love you."

"I know." Tara didn't look back as the door closed behind her.

For a heartbeat Willow stood motionless, then a voice deep inside her snapped, *Don't just stand there, moron! Stop her!* Her eyes fell upon an open box of spell ingredients by the wall, and a ziploc bag of Lethe's Bramble.

"Okay, Sean, we'll do it. Are you sure you can get the gear?"

"Yes. It'll take a bit of time, but I know some people who can get us what we need. It won't be cheap though, Lucas."

"I'm sure we'll find some way to get the money."

"I already have one."

Chapter 19

The Saturday after Buffy returned from Los Angeles, Faith brought the bike home.

Dawn was sitting at the dining room table, trying to concentrate on her trigonometry homework, but unable to keep her attention from wandering to her sister. At the other end of the table, Buffy was reading one of her history textbooks, but her mind clearly wasn't on topic. Every few pages she'd come to a halt, not turning a page for minutes at a time before backtracking and re-reading the same section again. The notepad beside her on the table was unmarked after more than two hours. As Dawn watched surreptitiously, pretending to feed an equation into her calculator, Buffy's eyes yet again lost their focus on the page in front of her, gazing off into a vista that probably existed only in her head.

Why won't she talk to me? Dawn asked herself for what must have been the fiftieth time since her sister returned home. *I know something's wrong, and it's not just the 'Angel Blues' again. Maybe I should call Willow, I bet Buffy would talk to her.*

Before she could give the idea any more thought, Dawn became aware of a snarling engine approaching up the street, the sound very different from the family cars and SUVs that populated Revello Drive. She was about to push the distraction from her mind again when the engine noise quietened, just in front of the house. Dawn got up and looked out of the front window in time to see a blue racing bike pull up beside the Jeep. Buffy got up and joined her, Dawn's activity having broken her out of her reverie, and they watched as Faith took off her helmet and shook out her hair. By the time Faith had dismounted and walked up to the front door, the Summers sisters had recovered from their surprise and were there to meet her.

"I didn't know you could drive," Buffy said as she opened the door.

Faith just shrugged. "I knew enough to stay on the road, I just didn't have a licence. I figured I might as well learn how to do it legally, so I started taking driver's ed a couple of months ago."

"You never said anything."

"Didn't see any reason to," Faith replied, ignoring the faint accusatory note colouring Buffy's voice. "I just wanted something to do while you guys were off getting educated. Besides, my own set of wheels could come in handy."

"Sure it's not about wanting something hard and throbbing between your legs?" Dawn asked, smirking at shocked look on her sister's face. "Oh, you were so thinking the same thing!"

"I was not!" Buffy tried to inject some outrage into her voice as Faith laughed, but all she could feel was the sudden ache in her chest. *She's getting ready to leave. How long do I have? What do I do?*

Dawn and Buffy weren't the only ones studying that afternoon. Willow was immersed in writing a psychology paper when the phone rang in her dorm room. "Hello?"

"Willow? It's Giles." In the background Willow could hear Anya, apparently trying to persuade a customer to invest in a fertility idol.

"Hey, Giles, what's up?"

"I'd like everyone to come over to the shop this evening after closing, and I was hoping you could do some research for us beforehand."

"Something Hellmouthy going on?"

"Possibly, I'm not sure as yet. There's a report in today's paper about a pair of so-called animal attacks that took place over the last few nights, both on homeless people. Could you take a look at the coroner's report and see if you can find any salient details?"

"Sure, no problem." Willow closed down her word-processing program opened the Web browser, an anticipatory smile playing across her lips. "I'll see you tonight with gory details."

"Thank-you for shopping at the Magic Box, please do come again," Giles said with his best salesman's smile as he held the door open for a pair of wannabe witches, then closed and locked it behind them. Flipping the sign over to 'Closed', he muttered, "Bloody customers, I thought they'd never leave."

"Now Giles, remember: the customer's always right," Willow teased from her seat at the research table with the other Scoobies.

Anya snorted. "Customers are morons. Slow, stupid, time-wasting, stingy morons."

"So, Giles, what's the big bad for this week?" Xander asked, trying to nip Anya's rant in the bud.

"Actually, I've no idea. I take it none of you have taken much interest in the newspapers over the last few days?" Receiving only shaken heads in response, Giles picked up a couple of newspapers from the counter and brought them over to the table. Each one had a story circled in red. "Two homeless people were found dead this week. The authorities are suggesting that they died of natural causes and the bodies were then fed on by feral dogs or coyotes, but the man who found the first body told a reporter that it looked more like a cougar attack. I've asked Willow to look at the coroner's report. Did you find anything?"

Willow pulled a folder from her bag and handed it to Giles, who opened it and began laying the papers and photographs inside on the table. "Definitely not a coyote. The bodies were slashed up by some kind of claw, then a lot of the muscle tissue was bitten away, presumably eaten. The coroner said that the bites were all wrong for dogs or coyotes, or a cougar. They look more like shark bites, lots of big, cutting teeth. Also, the claw patterns are wrong. See here?" She indicated one of the photographs. "All the claw marks occur in sets of three. Cats and dogs have four claws on each paw."

"So what are we thinking? Werewolf?" Xander asked.

Willow dismissed that idea with a brisk shake of her head. "The last full moon was on Halloween, a week before the first death. Besides, it's still the wrong number of claws."

"So, we're looking for a werewolf with a finger missing on each hand, who's learnt how to break the moon cycle." Xander joked. "Or maybe, possibly, it's something else."

Buffy looked up suddenly from the photograph she'd been studying. "Were the victim's brains missing?"

Willow gave a slight shudder. "No, why?"

"I thought maybe it could be a hellhound."

"What's a hellhound?" Faith asked.

"Something we had to deal with while you were being evil." Willow's reply lashed across the table like a whip, leaving total silence in its wake. Everyone looked at Faith, seeming to duck slightly in their seats as though expecting a bomb to go off, while Tara laid a restraining hand on her girlfriend's arm.

Faith flinched at the venom in Willow's voice, but after a moment she looked over at Giles again. "Okay, if it's not a wolf or a hellhound, what is it?"

"Er, yes, well, at the moment the list of suspects is rather long." If Giles noticed how tightly Faith's hands were clenched on the table, he didn't show it. "Hopefully, with the information Willow has brought, we'll be able to narrow the field a bit."

"Okay, you guys hit the books, Faith and I'll do some legwork." Buffy said, hurriedly rising from the table. "We'll check out the scenes, maybe hit Willy's."

"You're just about ready to go, aren't you?" Buffy asked quietly as they walked through the park late that night.

"Don't start with me now, B."

"I'm just saying." Buffy's voice dripped with false sincerity. "You had the attitude, now you've got the bike, you're all set to ride off into the sunset."

"We're on the West Coast, B, you want me to ride off a cliff?"

"Jokes. I'm trying to tell you how I feel and you're making jokes."

"Didn't you see what happened at the magic shop?" Faith stopped walking and grabbed Buffy's shoulder, turning her around until they faced each other. "That's how it's always going to be if I stay. It doesn't matter how either of us feels."

Buffy suddenly looked very small, very young to Faith's eyes. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't want to fight you, Faith, I just keep... Can we at least be friends again?"

"When were we ever friends, B? We were getting there, maybe, but then I screwed up and killed someone, remember?" Faith turned away and started walking again.

"And what about after you came back?" Buffy called after her. "That didn't mean anything to you?"

"It was too late, Buffy." Faith replied, turning back to her. "It's always been to late for us, we're- B, get down!"

Following Faith's line of sight, Buffy looked back over her shoulder and saw a winged shape plunging down at her from the darkened treetops. She tried to duck out of the way, but it was too late, and an outstretched claw ripped through her leather jacket and carved lines of fire into the back of her shoulder.

Faith managed to dive out of the way as the demon swooped past and rolled to her feet in time to see it arc up into the trees, looping around to grab a branch and perch there, looking down at them. It took Faith's eyes a few seconds to penetrate the web of shadows cast by the trees, and more for her brain to make sense of what she was seeing.

The demon had large, feathered wings and the legs of a bird of prey. It lacked arms, and its head and torso were those of a beautiful human woman, her face twisted into a snarl that revealed rows of sharp, triangular teeth.

"What the hell are you?" Faith pulled a stake from her belt, readying herself for another attack, but after a final snarl the demon launched itself upwards and disappeared into the darkness. Faith watched it go and then, keeping a wary eye on the sky, she ran over to Buffy. "How bad is it?"

Buffy lifted a hand to the wound and it came away slick with blood. "Damn it, I liked this coat."

"B, this isn't the time to embrace your inner prom queen." Faith tore the bottom from her T-shirt and pressed it against the wound. "Come on, we've got to get you to the ER."

"No," Buffy said, gasping with pain as she tried to move her right arm. "No hospitals, just help me get to Giles' apartment."

"Are you crazy, B, you're bleeding all over the place!"

"Fine, don't help, I'll do it myself." Buffy stormed off, one hand clamped over the wound.

"Buffy, wait!"

"How the hell did Andrew summon that thing?" Warren griped as he watched the Slayers walk away on the van's video system.

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "He probably started thinking about breasts in the middle of the

ritual. I'm just glad we made him do it outside the Lair, I hate to have been stuck inside with that thing."

"Good thing you're asthmatic, Shortround. He can forget about setting up his incense burner indoors ever again." Warren switched off the monitor and scrambled into the driver's seat. "It's not the demon we wanted, but it should keep the Slayers occupied for a while. Let's go see if the Demon-Lord's come out from behind the couch yet."

A tired-looking Giles opened the door. "Good Lord, what happened?"

"Demon," Buffy hissed through gritted teeth as she stepped into the apartment, helped by Faith, who held a bloody rag to Buffy's shoulder. "Flyer, came out of nowhere."

"Is it dead?" Giles asked as he retrieved his medical kit from a cupboard.

"No," Faith replied, an angry look on her face. "Bitch flew off when it realised we were going to fight back."

"Right, well, we can try to identify it later. First thing's first, Buffy, would you please take off your jacket and sit down?" Giles handed her a pack of painkillers.

Buffy complied, biting back a groan as she pulled the jacket from her shoulder. The back of her shirt was a bloodstained mess, tattered strips of cloth hanging from the ragged holes torn in the shoulder. She sat down straddling Giles' desk chair and tossed back a handful of pills. "Might as well cut it off, Giles, this shirt's had it."

"Yes, yes, quite. Faith, would you do the honours while I prepare some antiseptic?"

"Sure." Faith picked up a pair of scissors and made a series of cuts, until she was left with a patch of reddened cotton stuck to Buffy's skin with half-dried blood. This she gingerly peeled away, wincing in sympathy with every gasp of pain. The bra strap beneath had been slashed in two, the ragged ends lying across the three deep gashes running in parallel over Buffy's shoulder blade.

"Oh my..." Giles whispered as he came back from the kitchen with a bowl of antiseptic and boiled water. "Buffy, you should be at the hospital, I don't think you realise how deep these wounds are."

"Giles, believe me, I know." Pain was breaking through into Buffy's voice. "I've been through this once with Faith, okay? If I go to the hospital I'll be there for hours and Dawn'll freak. Just stitch me up, okay? I'll heal."

"As you wish. Faith, would you bring the desk lamp over here?"

Opening a pack of sterile gauze, Giles began cleaning the wound. He could feel Buffy tense up, forcing herself to hold still as the antiseptic burned her torn flesh. Standing beside him, Faith held the lamp up to get the best illumination of the wounds. As the cleansing went on, Buffy began to whimper, almost inaudibly.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Giles saw Faith gently place her hand on Buffy's uninjured shoulder, her thumb stroking the skin. At once, the whimpers subsided and Buffy seemed to relax. Glancing up to Faith's face, he saw that her attention hadn't wavered from her examination of the cuts. *Good Lord, does she even realise what she's doing? Could they be...*

As though she'd suddenly become aware of his scrutiny, Faith eyes flicked over to him. Giles hurriedly look back down at what he was doing. "I-I think that should do it. I'll get started on the stitches."

Giles worked quickly, putting a series of small stitches into each cut. By the time he'd finished, the bleeding had almost completely stopped. Once he'd covered the wounds with a sterile dressing, Giles stood back. "How does that feel?"

"Better, I think. Thanks."

"Of course. I'll go and find you something to wear instead of..." He waved a hand at the rags that had been Buffy's shirt.

"Are you okay, B?" Faith asked once Giles had gone upstairs.

"It'll be fine."

"That's not what I meant. I'm mean about earlier, what you said about us."

"Can we not talk about this tonight, Faith? Right now I just want to go home and get some sleep. Then tomorrow, we find this thing and kill it."

"You will do no such thing," Giles said from the stairway. He came down into the living room, carrying a button-down shirt, which he held out to Buffy.

"Giles..."

"No, Buffy. I'm your Watcher and for once, you're going to listen to me." Giles voice was sharp and determined. "Those wounds go deep into the muscle. If left alone they'll heal, but if you aggravate them you could cause permanent damage. You might never have full use of that arm again, and need I remind you that you're right-handed?"

"He's right, Buffy, leave this one to me, okay?" Faith said, a hint of pleading in her voice.

Buffy looked from one to the other, searching for any sign of willingness to compromise and finding none. "Okay, fine, I'm benched." She put on the shirt and sat down on Giles' couch to button it up.

Giles breathed an inner sigh of relief as he seated himself in his armchair. "Good. Now, tell me what happened."

The Slayers looked at each other for a moment, then Buffy began. "We didn't find anything at either of the two death sites, so we headed out on a regular patrol. We were in the park when it hit us."

Giles nodded. "Go on."

"I didn't see it coming. Faith... Faith spotted it and tried to warn me but I wasn't fast enough. I didn't get a good look, I just saw wings and claws."

"Faith?"

"I never saw anything like this one, Giles," Faith replied. "It didn't have arms, just the wings and legs with big claws on the end, and its body looked like a woman."

"Good grief..." Giles went over to his bookcases and pulled out a battered volume. After rifling through the pages to find the right place, he handed it to Faith. "Is this what you saw?"

Faith examined the picture, an ugly, wrinkled figure with bat wings. "No, ours wasn't this ugly. The wings had feathers, and the human part... the thing looked like a cross between an eagle and a porn star."

"Are you sure?" Giles asked before he could stop himself. "I'm sorry, of course you are, it's just that this is one of the few creatures I was certain I'd never find in Sunnydale."

"Uh, Giles?" Buffy asked. "What is it?"

"A harpy?" Anya scoffed at the meeting Giles called the following day. "Have you been drinking?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Giles, we're eight thousand miles from the Aegean, why would a harpy travel this far?" Anya ploughed on right through Giles' protests. "And even if one did, there's no way it would attack two healthy young humans, Slayers or not. Taking a sick sheep is about as adventurous as they get."

"Yes, thank-you Anya, I am familiar with the dietary predilections of the ordinary harpy. Unfortunately, it would seem that we are not faced with an ordinary one."

Anya's scorn vanished. "Wait a minute, are you saying the Three Sisters are here?"

"One of them, at least, judging by Faith's description of what attacked her and Buffy last night."

"Hello?" Xander cut in, waving a hand as he tried to break open what had become a two-person meeting. "For those of us who can't remember the Crusades, what's a harpy?"

Xander had addressed the question to Giles and Anya, but it was Tara who answered first. "It's a creature from Greek myth, the head and body of a human and the wings and claws of a bird or bat. I think they were supposed to be agents of the gods."

"Quite right, Tara," Giles said, removing his glasses and reaching for his handkerchief. "In the earliest writings, they were said to have the bodies of beautiful women and the wings and claws of birds, but in later accounts, they were described as being hideously ugly. They were occasionally used as agents of vengeance, but their primary role was as servants of Hades, the ruler of the underworld, who sent them to retrieve those who failed to die at the appointed time."

Failed to die... Buffy shivered and wiped the film of sweat from her forehead. "Okay, that's the hype. What's the truth?"

"Harpies are one of the lesser demon breeds that were left behind when the Old Ones lost their grip on our reality. They are generally small, ugly-"

"Think of a ninety year old bag-lady who's been dead for a month," Anya cut in. "Except harpies smell worse."

"- and, as Anya so eloquently put it, they are virtually harmless." Giles continued, pretending to ignore the interruption. "They're scavengers, feeding on carrion or taking old, injured or diseased animals. Encounters with humans are very rare; harpies have never been reported beyond the eastern Mediterranean and they're normally confined to a handful of rocky islands in the Aegean Sea, between Greece and Turkey."

"Wait a second, if harpies are supposed to be small and ugly, what attacked Buffy?" Xander asked.

"As I said, most harpies match the later Greek descriptions. However, there have always been sporadic reports of three that are rather more impressive, and are very likely the source for the earliest accounts. No one is sure where they come from, only that when one dies another appears. They are known collectively as the Three Sisters, after the three harpies of myth. They are very rarely seen. Some accounts suggest that they only make themselves known when their lesser kin are under threat, usually from human encroachment. What seems certain is that they are strong, aggressive and highly territorial, and it seems that one of them had found its way to Sunnydale."

"I just don't get it." The disbelief was plain in Anya's voice. "Why's it here? No-one's even seen one in centuries."

"I'm at a loss to explain, Anya. However, the creature is in Sunnydale now, and as long as it remains it will continue to attack and kill. It sees us as trespassers."

"So how do I kill it?" Faith asked quietly.

"From what I've read so far, there are no special methods required," Giles replied, removing his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. "I suspect that the real challenge will lie in finding it and bringing it to battle, since it seems to favour surprise attacks and withdraws when the advantage is lost. Most likely, we will need to locate its nest."

"Research. Yay." Xander spoke for them all.

"Okay, it's official," Xander tossed the book back onto the research table, hours later. "I've been hanging out with you people for way too long."

The others, spread out around the shop with their own books, looked up at him. "Excuse me?" Giles asked from the office nook by the counter.

"I just read a paragraph in Latin, and I understood it." Xander explained, rubbing his temples.

Giles couldn't suppress a slight smile at that. "Perhaps we should take a break and compare notes before Xander's brain liquefies completely."

There were a few muffled laughs at that, and everyone began to congregate around the table again. Willow dropped into a chair beside Buffy and whispered, "Are you okay? You're looking kind of pale."

"What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine, I just didn't sleep much last night," Buffy insisted. "Couldn't lie on my back."

"Ouch." Willow winced in sympathy. "Does it hurt a lot?"

"It's not bad, it just kind of burns sometimes."

Giles was the last to join them at the table. "Would anyone care to begin?"

No one spoke for a few moments, then Xander broke the silence. "I didn't find anything much, just the basics: harpies nest in high spots, cliffs or mountains, and the nests tend to be pretty gross."

Anya snorted. "Well, so much for my big revelation."

"Yes, I'm afraid I had no more success either." Giles said, irritation colouring his voice. "Did anyone find anything else?"

"Just some links back to the old myths," Tara replied apologetically. "All the books seem to go over the same stuff."

"Damn it!" Buffy shoved her chair back from the table and began pacing.

"Chill out, B, we'll find this thing."

"Yeah, at least we know the kind of place to look for," Xander added, a little alarmed by Buffy's reaction. "We'll get some maps out, start looking for nest sites."

"What about magic?" Faith wondered, looking across at Willow and Tara. "You know, a locator spell or something. It worked for those gladiator demons a couple of months ago."

"It won't be that easy, Faith," Tara explained, a worried look crossing her face as she watched Buffy suddenly stop pacing and grab hold of a bookcase, her eyes staring at the floor. "Back then we had that horn to work with, if we're looking for a specific demon type we need

something connected to it."

"We could do a general demon-detector, but that'd give us dozens of hits," added Willow.
"The more precise you try to be, the more you need to work with."

"Okay, so I hit the park again, maybe it lost a feather or something. Point is, B, we're just getting started." Faith got up from the table and walked over to Buffy, who was still holding onto the bookcase, her eyes screwed tightly shut. She didn't respond. "B? Buffy?"

Buffy toppled over sideways. Instinctively, Faith reached out and grabbed her arm, her right arm, stopping the fall with a jerk. For a moment Buffy hung there, and then Faith lowered her gently to the floor as the others clustered around them. Buffy's skin was deathly pale and drenched with sweat.

Anya covered her nose. "God, what is that smell?"

Faith had a flash of insight. Rolling Buffy onto her side, she saw fresh blood staining the back of her shirt. She ripped the fabric away and peeled back the dressing. Buffy's stitches had been torn open when Faith grabbed her arm, and blood poured from the wounds, mingling with streams of stinking, yellow-green pus. "Giles, call 911!"

Chapter 20

"Dawn Summers?"

Dawn leapt from her chair in the ER waiting room as soon as the doctor called her name, the others a few steps behind. "Is she okay?"

The doctor's face said it all. "Your sister's very sick, Miss Summers, she's suffering from acute septicaemia."

"Septi-what?"

"Blood poisoning. The cuts on her back are badly infected, and the bacteria have spread into her bloodstream. I have to ask; the wounds were stitched up, but we've got no record of her being here recently. Who treated her?"

"I did." Giles said quietly. "Buffy didn't want to come here. I was sure I'd cleaned the wounds thoroughly." *Or did I get distracted by the way Faith was touching her?*

For a moment the doctor looked angry, but then her expression shifted to one of resignation. "For what it's worth, I think you did. We could barely find any trace of the original infectious material, but what was there was..." She shook her head in disbelief. "I've never seen a microbe count that high outside of a lab experiment. Whatever attacked her must have been standing in something absolutely foul."

"But she's going to be okay, right?" Dawn's voice was rising, panic seeping in.

"I think so. I'm not going to lie to you, I can't be sure of anything at this point. Looking at the

pathogen levels in her blood, I'm amazed your sister's even alive, but she's still fighting and we're going to help her do that. We're giving her medicine to control the fever and antibiotics to fight the infection, and we'll be moving her up to an isolation room soon to keep any other infections away from her. That's all we can do for now, except wait."

"Can we stay with her?"

"Yes, you just have to observe some basic precautions, you'll have to wear face-masks and gloves. Isolation's really more about keeping the infectious patients isolated from each other. I'll get one of the nurses to show you where to go."

"Thanks."

It was Faith who broke the silence after the doctor left them. "Okay, here's the plan. Xander, can you stay here with Dawn, make sure she's okay?"

"Sure."

"Good. Everyone else, back to the Magic Box, we've got to find this bitch before B's on her feet again."

"Faith, I agree we should kill this demon as a matter of urgency," Giles said cautiously, "and I'm sure we all appreciate your enthusiasm, but it's hardly wise to rush into this."

"Think about it, Giles. You know B, she'll go after this thing as soon as she can walk again, just to prove she can. Let's not give her the option. You guys hit the research, I'll meet you there after I get some stuff from the house."

"Anyone would think you actually care," Willow muttered. She didn't even see Faith move. One moment she was standing there, the next she had Willow pinned against the wall with her hand around the witch's throat.

"Don't fuck with me today, Red! I'm not in the mood!" Faith dropped her and stormed away, brushing aside a security guard as she went.

"You're telling me she's not still a psycho?" Willow growled, rubbing her bruised throat.

"It serves you right for baiting her at a time like this." Giles retorted, looking at her with genuine anger. "Come on, we've got work to do."

Willow pointed to a spot on the map. "What about Dracula's castle? It's been abandoned for over a year now."

Giles considered it for a moment. "It's isolated, high up with a good view over the town. We'll add it to the list. Well remembered, Willow." He circled it on the map.

"That makes, what, ten possibilities already?" Anya asked.

Tara consulted her notebook. "Thirteen, and we've only been working a half-hour."

"We have to find some way of narrowing down the options, some kind of favoured nest site, or we'll be checking them for weeks." Giles walked over to the counter and began looking through the books piled on top.

After a moment, Willow joined him. "Giles?" Her voice was no more than a nervous whisper.

"Yes?"

"About what happened, at the hospital... I'm sorry." She looked over her shoulder at Tara and Anya, making sure they weren't listening. "It's just Faith, she gets under my skin, makes me say things, do things. I can't help myself."

"Willow, I appreciate that your history with Faith is rather fraught, but surely you can see the effort she's made over the last six months?"

"I don't trust her, Giles. I can't, not after what happened last time." There was a touch of desperation in Willow's voice, almost as though she was begging him to understand. "I liked her, I felt sorry for her, but she betrayed us all, and now she's living in Buffy's house? Buffy's just lost her mom, and Riley, I don't think she's being careful enough with who she lets in."

"You have to have faith, if you'll pardon the pun. Let yourself see the changes. Buffy's-" Giles stopped short as a car door slammed shut outside the shop. A moment later the front door banged open and Faith walked inside. For a moment, everyone stared at her in shock. The neutral colours she'd been so careful to wear since her return were gone, replaced by combat boots, black jeans, a crimson T-shirt and a black three-quarter length leather coat, with a sports bag slung over one shoulder.

"Oh yeah, she's really changed," muttered Willow as Faith strode across the shop floor. She didn't so much as look at any of them, she just crossed to the training room and disappeared inside.

Giles waited for a minute and then followed her. She'd already taken several weapons from their racks on the wall, and as Giles walked in, she took down a throwing axe, flipped it up into the air to test its balance, and put it and several like it into the bag.

"Faith, please, listen to me. I can see how much this has upset you, but rushing into the hunt won't solve anything. We should gather more-"

"Did you find the nest yet?" Faith pulled a short sword from its scabbard and examined the edge.

"No, but-"

"The why aren't you reading something?" Faith slammed the sword back into its sheath, slung the bag of weapons over her shoulder and took an eight-foot spear down from the wall.

She was almost at the door before Giles regained his wits enough to follow her. "Faith, wait, where are you going?"

"Just do your job, Giles, let me worry about mine."

Willy had never really understood why the demon population seemed to stay home on Sundays. Not that he was complaining; he might not take a lot of money on a night like this, but at least it was quiet. He took a moment to survey tonight's clientele. Two vampires, a hulking N'lquith and a pair of Phrexan Gnawers picking over a plate of bones.

One of the vampires decided to call it a night and tossed a couple of tattered banknotes onto the bar to settle his tab. "Be seein' ya, Willy."

"Yeah, drive safe, Carl." Willy's attention was already back on wiping the surface of the bar when by the time Carl pulled the door open and was sent flying backwards to land on one of the cheap tables, which crumpled under the impact. Faith stalked through the door and kicked it shut behind her.

Oh crap! Willy's blood ran cold at the expression on her face. "S-S-Slayer! What brings you to my humble establishment? I-Is your friend with you?" There was a hint of desperation in his voice. *Please, God, let the sane one be here!*

"Nah, just me tonight. Looking for some info."

The other vampire, who had been sitting in one of the booths at the far end of the bar, tried to slip out through the back door, but had barely made it half way when Faith snatched a throwing axe from her belt and sent it spinning across the room. The vampire collapsed against the wall, clutching at the axe embedded in its leg and groaning. Faith's voice was cold. "I didn't say anyone could leave."

The N'lquith snarled defiance at her, the fringe of clawed tentacles around its mouth flaring. Willy recognised the display as a challenge and tried to control the situation. "Come on, Slayer, we don't any trouble tonight, do we guys? It's Sunday, it's God's day, you know, peace and goodwill and-"

"Shut up, Willy." Faith's eyes scanned the room, coming to rest on each of the demons in turn. "I'm looking for a harpy - wings, claws, big tits, you know what I'm talking about? The bitch hurt someone I care about, and I'm guessing one of you assholes knows something that'll help me find it."

The N'lquith's snarl deepened to a roar and it began advancing on her, the Gnawers following after a moment's hesitation. Faith whipped a short sword from under her coat. Willy's eyes flicked between the enraged demon and the Slayer, and he dove for cover under the bar.

There was a crash of breaking furniture, followed by the sound of fists striking flesh. The Gnawers high-pitched squeals blended with the N'lquith's roar, and then came an agonised scream. Willy grabbed the shotgun he'd bought when he first opened the bar and barely looked at since. It wasn't even loaded - the unopened box of cartridges sat on the shelf beside the gun. Willy got the box open, but his fingers were trembling so badly that the cartridges kept slipping from his grasp.

Everything suddenly went quiet. There was a moment when all Willy could hear was his own panicked breathing, then came the sound of footsteps crunching on broken glass, getting closer to the bar. He finally got a cartridge into the gun and was fumbling for another when he heard the footsteps reach the bar and stepped up onto it. A hand reached down, fastened around his throat and jerked him upwards. The shotgun fell from his grasp as he was lifted from his hiding place, choking in the inhumanly strong grip, and slammed down onto the bar, the side of his head striking with such force that stars danced in front of his eyes. An instant after his vision cleared, the tip of a sword was stabbed into the wood an inch from his nose, blood from the blade spattering his face.

"Just you and me now." Faith's voice came from just behind his ear, but he couldn't turn his head to look at her. "Time to talk."

"Oh God, oh God, oh God, please don't hurt me!" Willy's voice was almost a shriek. "I don't know anything, I swear!"

"Not what I want to hear, Willy." Faith flipped him over onto his back and sat down straddling his chest. Willy almost screamed when he saw her face; one side was covered with a mask of blood from a cut on her forehead, but there was fire in her eyes. "You've got your little rat nose into everything demonic that happens in this town, so spill it!"

"I swear to God, any god, no-one's said anything about a harpy in town! You gotta believe me!"

"Tick, tock, tick, tock..." Faith pulled the sword free from the bar and began swinging it like a pendulum in front of Willy's eyes.

"Please! I'll do anything, I'll talk to every demon in Sunnydale if I have to, I'll find out where this thing is, just please don't kill me!"

Faith didn't respond for a moment, she just stared down at the snivelling bartender beneath her. "You hear something, you call me, got it? The house, the magic shop, wherever. And don't try to run," She rested the tip of the sword on his nose, applying just enough pressure to bring a droplet of blood welling to the surface, "You don't want to make me hunt you down." In one smooth movement she stood up and jumped off the bar, leaving Willy gasping for breath in her wake.

Buffy looked almost peaceful, if the array of machines monitoring her pulse, her temperature, feeding her with drugs and fluids could be ignored. The only outward sign of her torment was the sweat gleaming on her brow. Every so often there would be a flicker of movement behind her eyelids as her mind moved from one fevered dreamscape to another, but otherwise she lay still.

"She's going to be okay, isn't she?"

"Sure she is, she'll back home bugging you about your homework in no time." Xander put his arm around Dawn's shoulders. "The docs just need a while to do their thing, but they'll get her

up and running again."

"Assuming they get the chance." They both jumped as Spike opened the door. "How is she?"

Dawn managed to smile at him. "She's got septi... sep..."

"I know what's wrong with her, Bit, I could smell the taint as soon as I got out of the elevator. I asked how she's doing."

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?" Xander recovered from his surprise and anger enough to speak.

"Word's out, monkeyboy, there's a sickly Slayer lying here all helpless and ripe for the plucking. Half the demons in town know about it already and the rest'll have heard by dawn."

"So you thought you'd come down and play the white knight?" Xander scoffed, closing to within inches of Spike. "I don't think so. Buffy's been here like this before, and we didn't need help to keep her safe. You're not needed, and you're not welcome."

"Listen, pinhead, you may have got Angelus to back off, but what if this time it's an eight-foot Hadro demon that doesn't speak English. Then what're you going to do, bleed on him?"

"Stop it!" Dawn's anger couldn't fully conceal the added misery she felt at seeing them at each other's throats. "What if she hears you? If you want to fight, do it somewhere else."

"I don't want him here," Xander insisted, not willing to back down.

"It's not about what you want Xander," Dawn replied. "It's about what's best for Buffy, and the more people are looking out for her, the better. Spike can stay."

"Relax, mate, I'm not going to steal your lunch money." Spike pulled up a chair on the opposite side of the bed from them and sat down.

Spike was still there when Willow arrived the following morning, slumped in his chair, well away from the sunlight filtering through the blinds. "Spike! You're here, i- in daylight?"

"Came in last night, sat with Dawn and the demon-magnet for a bit. The light's not too bad right now." Spike glanced at the window, a joyless smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, before returning his gaze to the pale figure in the bed. "Might sting a bit later, when the sun moves round."

"How's Dawn holding up?"

"How do you think? Her dad's forgotten she exists and her sister's in the same place their mother visited on the way to her grave."

"Buffy's not going to die. She's sick, I know, but I checked her chart before I came in. Her temperature's stopped climbing, heart rate and respiration are stable, she's holding her own."

"She's not getting any better, though, is she? She's not winning."

"Well, no, not yet, but it's been less than a day since she came in. It's just going to take a bit of time, that's all."

"Don't count on it, Red." Spike didn't bother trying to hide his despair. "She's giving up. She's tired of it, the violence, the pain, all of it." *Just like I told her.*

"Don't say that!" Willow was torn between anger at what Spike had said and fear that he might be right. "Buffy's going to be fine! She doesn't give up, she just... stumbles once in a while, and she always gets back up."

"I hope you're right, Willow. God, I hope you're right." *This is no way for a Slayer to go.*

"Of course I'm right." Willow insisted, laying her hand on his shoulder. "I'm knowledge-girl, remember? I'm always right."

Spike looked up at her and rubbed away a tear. "Thanks, Pet."

"Any time." Willow gave his shoulder a final squeeze before letting go. "Look, why don't you take for a few hours. Get some sleep, something to eat."

"I'm all right," Spike snapped, then tried to cover it with false nonchalance. "Don't think I could eat anything anyway. The smell's put me right off. Bad blood, sticks in the nose."

"You don't have to pretend with me, Spike. Buffy'll be okay until you get back. She won't be alone, I promise."

It wasn't the words themselves so much as the sympathy with which they were spoken that convinced him. "What about you? Will you be alone?"

"Tara's coming soon. She just had to talk to her T.A. about something first."

"Life goes on, eh?" A trace of bitterness ran through Spike's voice, but he seemed to pull himself together. "Look after her, love, I'll be back soon."

For a while after he left, Willow sat in the chair he'd vacated and just watched her friend, listened to the faint sound of her breathing and the beeps and clicks of the machines around her. The stillness of the room lent the sounds a hypnotic quality, and Willow practically jumped out of her seat when a nurse came in to check on Buffy's condition. "Oh, hello. Did your friend leave?"

"Yeah, it's my turn now. Has she woken up at all?"

"No, she's still out of it. We're giving her a mild sedative, anyway. It'll help her focus on healing. Sometimes she says something, a few words, but it's just the fever talking."

"Can I touch her?" Willow realised how that sounded as soon as the words were out of her mouth, and clarified, "Hold her hand or something?"

The nurse stifled laugh at the embarrassed look on Willow's face. "Sure, sweetie, just remember to change your gloves if you leave the room, okay?"

Willow stayed in the chair for a few minutes after the nurse left, then she slipped on a pair of the gloves and sat on the edge of the bed, holding one of Buffy's hands in both of hers. "Hurry back, okay? There's so much that's been happening, and ever since Faith came back it feels like you're slipping away. I need my best friend." She reached out to push a stray lock of hair from Buffy's forehead.

"...Faith..."

Willow froze, her fingertips almost brushing Buffy's skin, as the name slipped past her friend's lips. "Buffy? Can you hear me? It's me, it's Willow."

Beads of sweat began to form on Buffy's forehead. The sound of the heart-monitor began to speed up, mirroring her accelerating heart rate. She suddenly flicked her head to one side, her face tight with pain. "... stop... please..."

"Buffy, it's okay. You're safe, Faith can't hurt you." Try as she might, Willow couldn't keep her voice calm. She reached out to cradle Buffy's head in her hand, to provide some kind of reassuring touch, but inside she felt helpless.

"... wait... please... don't..." Buffy twisted her head away, breaking the contact, writhing from side to side as though trying to escape.

What is she doing to you? She won't get away with it this time! I'll tear the flesh from her bones, I'll-

"... don't leave me... need you..."

Willow recoiled, jerking up from the bed as though she'd been dragged upright by an invisible hand, as Buffy finally lay still. She slumped back into her chair, her head in her hands. *She's done it. She's taken you away again.*

The door clicked open and Tara burst in, flushed and breathless. "I've got an idea!"

It was the silence that Dawn hated the most. Ever since her mother had died, the house had seemed quieter, as though her passing had left a hole in the air that had yet to be filled. For a while after Glory's defeat, Faith had brought some life back into their home, but even that had faded, and now, with Buffy away, it was worse than ever.

Dawn dropped her school bag by the door walked through into the kitchen. Dirty dishes were piled up in the sink; Faith barely came home for long enough to eat, let alone clean up, and Dawn simply couldn't muster the will to do anything so mundane. She was trying to decide what to do about the rumbling in her stomach when she heard the distinctive clatter of Faith's boots on the stairs. Slamming the fridge door shut, Dawn ran to intercept her. Faith was already at the door, pulling her jacket on. She had bandage on her hand and a string of bloody

bruises across her knuckles.

"What happened?" Dawn pointed to the injuries.

"Demon didn't want to talk to me," Faith replied, as though it didn't matter. "I just came back to clean up."

"You're going again?"

"Haven't found a harpy yet, so yeah."

"I was hoping you'd stay for a while, maybe have dinner with me?" Dawn said hopefully. "I'll make pizza, without anchovies."

"Sorry, Bite- Dawn. I'm sorry, Dawn, I've got to keep searching."

"Faith, please," Dawn begged. "I don't want to be on my own. Stay with me?"

"I can't." Faith opened the door and bolted.

Footsteps, doors, muted voices; the hospital corridor seemed quiet, anyone who stopped to listen for a moment would realise that there were noises everywhere. None of it mattered. None of it penetrated Faith's consciousness. The only sound she heard was a slow, regular 'beep', muffled by its passage through the door, which came from the equipment monitoring Buffy's vital signs.

"You can go in, you know."

Faith jumped as Giles spoke, just behind her. "God, Giles, you scared the crap out of me!"

"My apologies, I assumed you heard me coming," Giles said, looking through the window at the unconscious Slayer inside. "As I said, you can go inside and sit with her."

"I can't," Faith replied, too quickly, with a shake of the head so fast it seemed like a convulsion. "I can't be that close to her, not like this. Look at her, Giles, it's just tubes and machines. It's not her. It's not Buffy. She shouldn't be like this."

Giles turned to face her, taking in the bloodshot, dark-rimmed eyes, the lank hair, the pale skin. "When did you last sleep?"

"Couple of hours yesterday."

"You used to be a better liar."

"Thanks, I think."

"Faith..."

"Don't." Faith's head dropped, her eyes staring at the floor. "How can I sleep when she's like this?"

"Faith, it isn't your fault that this happened."

"Yes, it is!" She turned on him, tears glimmering at the corners of her eyes. "I screwed up again, Giles. We were patrolling together, but we started fighting. I was doing the whole storming off thing when we got attacked. If B hadn't said something to make me turn around, I never would have seen it coming. As it was, I saw the damn thing too late. I was supposed to be watching her back, but I didn't do my job, and now she's here, she... she could be..."

"She isn't going to die," Giles said firmly. "She's getting the necessary treatment, and she's a Slayer. It's only a matter of time before she recovers. At the moment, I'm more worried about you. You seem determined to work yourself into the ground."

"Spare me the lecture, Giles, I don't want to hear it." Faith snapped, turning to leave.

"Everyone has their limit, Faith," Giles called after her. "You've barely stopped for four days. How much longer can you keep this up?"

Faith rounded on him. "As long as it takes to find this thing!"

"And then what? There won't be any point finding the harpy if you're too tired to fight it." His voice returning to its usual measured tone, Giles laid a paternal hand on her shoulder and tried to make her understand. "I know how strong an influence guilt can be, but right now Buffy and Dawn need you alive and healthy, not bleeding to death in a demon's lair. They need you to do what's right, not what makes you feel better."

"What if I can't?"

"Fake it." Giles couldn't help grinning at the look of shock his words provoked. "That's what I do."

"You're kidding!"

Giles shook his head, growing serious again. "Faith, we all experience moments of weakness, times when we feel we can't do what's expected of us. I find that if you act as though you're equal to the task, others will believe it, and their belief will help you through. Can you do that?"

"Maybe." Faith visibly pulled herself together. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good. Come on, everyone's gathering at the Magic Box to compare notes. Spike will be here soon to keep an eye on Buffy."

"Maybe we should test it again, just to be sure?" Tara held the vial up to the light again, looking through the clear blue liquid as though searching for a sign of impurity. Willow quickly wrapped both her hands around Tara's and carefully guided it back down to the

research table.

"We tested it three times, Tara, it's safe. It may not do anything, but it's safe."

"What is that stuff?" Anya asked, staring suspiciously at the vial.

"It's- " Willow began, but was interrupted by Giles and Faith entering the shop. Giles joined them at the table, but didn't sit down. Faith just leaned against the counter, not looking at anyone.

"Thank you all for coming," Giles began, removing his glasses and reaching for his handkerchief. "Does anyone have anything to report?"

"Body." Xander's voice was flat and emotionless, the voice of someone trying very hard not to care. "My crew found her at the site this morning. Middle-aged woman, looked like she'd been walking her dog when the harpy got her. The leash was still in her hand."

"You're sure it was the harpy?" Giles asked, although he knew Xander wouldn't have mentioned it unless he was.

"I've seen enough of the pictures. Either it was the harpy or we've got a copycat."

"Damn!" Faith pushed away from the counter and began pacing. "The new Hellmouth High claims its first victim, and the place isn't even open yet. How many's this?"

"Eight. Pretty soon even Sunnydale people are going to figure out something's happening." Willow couldn't make herself smile at her own joke.

Faith just nodded. "Tell me you got something, guys."

Willow and Tara looked at each other for a moment, then Willow said, "We've been working on something, but it's not exactly to do with the harpy- "

"What?" Faith's shout practically rattled the windows. "What the hell are you doing wasting your time when- "

"It's for Buffy!" Willow cut her off, green eyes burning with anger.

Faith stopped dead in her tracks, all the momentum snatched from her. "Oh. Sorry. I'm sorry, guys, I'm wound kinda tight right now."

"It's okay, Faith, I understand." Tara replied, accompanied with one of her gentle smiles.

Giles finally took a seat, looking intently at the two witches. "Willow, what exactly have you been doing?"

"Giles, I know you said last year that magic and medicine don't mix, but I think we've come up with something that'll work. Have you ever heard of the Tears Of Purity?" Giles shook his head, and Willow continued. "It's a spell, well, more of a potion really. Anyway, it's used to purify water, get rid of the bugs, you know? Blood's basically water with things floating in it,

so we thought, maybe we could use it to clean out Buffy's blood. We tinkered with the spell a bit and we came up with this." She held up the vial.

Giles took the vial and examined the liquid inside. "Well, it's certainly an innovative idea, but how can you be sure it's safe?"

"We tested it, Giles, it's fine."

"Tested it?" It was Giles turn to get angry. "You mean you exposed yourselves to an elixir that could have killed every blood cell in your body?"

"What? No! We took some blood samples and tested it on them." Willow was rather offended. "It didn't seem to do anything, but then our blood isn't full of bacteria. It's not like we're talking about zapping a tumour out of someone's head, Giles," she continued, a pleading tone entering her voice, "It's just an injection. Worst case, it doesn't do anything, and maybe it'll help."

Giles looked at the vial again, turning it this way and that, the liquid inside sparkling in the light. Finally, he handed it back to Willow. "Very well, Willow. I don't see the harm in trying it. Good work."

Willow blushed slightly. "It was Tara's idea really, I just helped with the research."

The phone rang. Giles looked at it in surprise for a moment, then went to answer it. "Hello, Magic Box - what? I'm sorry, could you slow down... oh. Yes, she's here." He held the handset out to Faith. "Willy would like to speak with you, he seems somewhat excited."

"Thanks." Faith took the handset. "What've you got, Willy?"

"First of all, I just want to make it clear that I'm not holding any grudges about what happened, the damage, the nose-slitting thing. I'm not even going to send you the dry-cleaning bill for my pants, so-

"Now, Willy!"

"Okay, okay. Jeez, what is it with you Slayers? You're always so impatient. Look, I think I've found where your harpy's hiding out. There's a house, the roof caved in after the quake we had back in '97, never got fixed. There was a nest of Paknar demons that lived there, but they disappeared last week. I've got some guys saying they left town in a hurry, and they've seen something with wings hanging around out there."

"Where's the house?" Faith gestured to Giles for pen and paper. "Okay, got it, I'll check it out. This better not be an ambush, Willy, I'm pissed enough as it is." She hung up before he could reply. "What's a Paknar demon?"

"Scavengers, carrion eaters," replied Giles. "Why?"

"Willy says a group of them went AWOL right around the time the harpy showed up."

"That would make sense. The smell of rotting meat would attract the harpy, and Paknars, even

a number of them, would be no match for one of the Three Sisters. They're about as inoffensive as demons get, if you don't mind occasional body-snatching."

"Sounds like an honest-to-god lead," Faith mused, re-reading the address. "Anyone know how I get to this place?"

Xander answered. "Yeah, it's at the south end of Crawford Street, off on the left."

"Crawford Street." Faith's voice caught in her throat.

"Might as well call it memory lane, huh?"

Eyes on the road, eyes on the road...

It didn't help, just as she'd known it wouldn't. Faith could no more keep herself from looking at the mansion than she could keep her own heart from beating. It dragged her eyes from the darkening street ahead, raising ghosts that had never truly been laid to rest.

Faith, a word of advice: you're an idiot!

To kill without remorse is to feel like a god.

By the order of the Watcher's Council of Britain I am exercising my authority and removing you to England, where you will accept the judgement of the disciplinary committee.

I think we know everything she knows.

Psych!

Kill me, you become me. You're not ready for that - yet.

She pressed down on the accelerator, urging the Jeep past the overgrown garden and on to her target.

The house was a two-story colonial-style structure, the collapsed roof and discoloured walls making it look like a rotten tooth silhouetted against the evening sky. Faith got out of the Jeep, slung her bag of weapons over her shoulder, loaded her crossbow and moved in.

The fluorescent lights made Buffy's skin look even more pallid and unhealthy than it was. Tara put her bag down on a chair and quickly retrieved the vial and a sterile syringe from an inside pocket. She handed them to Willow. "Could you? I'm not good with needles."

"Sure. Keep a lookout, make sure no-one's coming."

"Right. Good luck."

"Yeah." Willow pushed the needle through the vial's rubber cap and began drawing out the blue liquid.

"All clear," whispered Tara from the doorway.

"Okay, then." Willow took a deep breath and began injecting the potion through the IV running into Buffy's arm.

The attack came with almost no warning, just a rustling of feathers that sent Faith diving headlong to the ground. The harpy swept over her and was coming around for another attack as Faith got to her feet. She raised her crossbow and fired, but the hurried shot barely clipped the demon's wing and did no damage except to dislodge a few feathers. It did, however, convince the harpy to pull up, soaring overhead. Faith considered trying to reload, but already the harpy was arcing down for a third strike. *Guess this must be the place.*

"Are you feeling okay, Willow?" Tara asked as they waited, or hoped, for a reaction from Buffy.

It took a moment for the question to register with Willow, her concentration as so focussed. "Sorry, what?"

"W-well, it's just that you seem a bit calmer now, more relaxed, since we did the spell."

Willow thought about it for a moment. "I don't know. I guess, maybe... Is it the spell?"

"It could be," Tara said, thoughtfully. "Sometimes doing a purification spell can help to purify the caster, get rid of any negative energy surrounding them. You have been kind of cranky the last few weeks."

"I know, I'm sorry." *Sorrier than you'll ever know.*

Buffy groaned, distracting them both. The readings on the machines around her began to change, her temperature climbing, her heart rate accelerating. The ever-present film of sweat on her skin deepened, droplets of fluid forming all over, streaming down her face and soaking into the surgical robe she was wearing, and her body was racked with a series of convulsions.

Oh God, what did we do?

Faith burst through the door in a cloud of dust and splinters. She could hear the harpy screeching its frustration outside. Slinging the crossbow over her shoulder, she pulled an axe from her bag and began looking around the house. *Let's see what you're protecting.*

The ground floor was a putrid mess of rubble, refuse and animal remains, and it didn't take Faith long to head upstairs. The staircase creaked alarmingly, but was largely intact she didn't see any signs of collapsing under her weight.

About half of the roof was left in place, though most of it was sagging so much that Faith was sure it would collapse if she breathed too hard. There was a flash of movement overhead, and she realised that the harpy was flying in tight circles around the house, still screaming at her, moving too fast to get a good shot with the crossbow.

"Get down here, bitch! Afraid to take on someone who sees you coming? Come on!" Faith's taunts made no difference. She dropped the weapons bag, pulled back the string of the crossbow and was reaching for an arrow when she saw the nest, almost invisible in a shadowed corner, and the three mottled eggs it contained.

Gotcha!

"What do we do? Should we get a doctor?" Willow was teetering on the edge of complete panic as she watched her friend thrashing about in front of her. The monitors showed Buffy's temperature as being above 106 degrees and her heart rate nearing 200 beats per minute.

The decision was taken out of her hands as a pair of nurses burst through the doors. One of them rushed to try to hold Buffy still while the other stuck his head back out into the corridor and shouted for a doctor.

Suddenly, Buffy wrenched herself free of the nurse's grip, twisted onto her side and vomited a stream of oily green slime onto the floor, then flopped back onto the pillow. Colour began to return to her face as the monitor readings dropped back to their normal range.

The egg shattered as the arrow punched through it, the thick fluids inside spilling out and soaking into the garbage that formed the nest. The harpy shrieked its rage and plunged down at Faith, who ducked to the side and swung her axe in an upward arc that almost connected with its leg. She barely had time to turn around before the demon was on her again. Any semblance of caution had been abandoned; the attack was relentless, claws slashing at her stomach one moment and stabbing toward her throat the next. A claw ripped through the sleeve of her jacket, missing her arm by a fraction of an inch. Faith brought the axe up to fend off the assault and suddenly found both sets of claws wrapped around the haft, trying to yank it from her grasp as the fanged mouth snapped at her face. The momentum of the attack knocked her over backwards. She let go of the axe and kicked upwards, knocking the harpy away and giving her time to regain her feet. She heard a clatter as the harpy dropped the axe, and turned to face the next attack.

There was a crack, and the floor gave way beneath her. For a split second, it felt as though she was suspended in mid air, then she dropped into a pile of refuse in what had been the living room. The landing knocked the wind out of her, and it was a few moments before she could move. As she picked herself up, she could see the harpy looking over the edge of the hole she'd made in the ceiling, and she began looking for something she could use as a weapon. Her foot touched something and it shifted, making a metallic scrape.

The harpy spread its wings and inched closer to the edge. In a moment, it would drop through

the hole and be on her. Faith dropped down on one knee, snatched up the length of copper piping and flung it upward. The makeshift spear flew through the hole in the ceiling and struck the harpy low down in the abdomen. The demon screamed and toppled backwards, dark blood streaming from the end of the pipe.

Faith ran up the stairs, heedless of the risk of collapse. At the top she snatched up her axe without breaking stride. The harpy had fallen against the remains of a wall and was struggling feebly, unable to right itself with the pipe protruding from its flesh.

Faith raised the axe above her head and brought it down on the demon's body, wrenched the blade free and struck again, and again. Finally, when there was nothing left of the harpy but a bloody ruin, she dropped the axe, wiped the blood from her face and turned away, toward the remaining eggs.

Chapter 21

"Do I really have to use this thing?"

"Do stop complaining, Buffy, it's only until we get to the car." Giles replied as he pushed the Slayer-laden wheelchair across the hospital car park.

"Yeah, think about it for a sec, Buffy," Dawn added. "How often do you get driven around by your Watcher?"

"It's stupid," Buffy grumbled. "I'm completely fine!"

Giles sighed. "Try to see things from the doctors' perspective. Your fever only broke three days ago. The idea that you could be back to full health so soon does seem a little far-fetched, so let's humour them, shall we?"

"I know, I know, I just want to get out of here."

"Here we are." Giles brought the wheelchair to a halt beside his convertible, and was just about to open the door for Buffy when she sprang to her feet, vaulted over the door and settled herself in the passenger seat, looking up at him with an expression of complete innocence.

"So, did anything interesting happen while I was out?" Buffy asked as they drove away from the hospital. "Apocalypses, demon cults, anything?"

"Nothing of immediate importance, I'm afraid," Giles replied, catching the impatience in her voice. "Faith slayed the harpy, as you know, and apart from that it's just been business as usual for the last few days."

"What about that thing at the bank?" Dawn piped up.

"Well, yes, there is that, but I'm really not at all sure what to make of it." Seeing the question form on Buffy's lips, Giles pre-empted her. "Earlier this week there was an incident at the bank. The papers quoted an eyewitness who said that a large man wearing a leftover

Halloween mask attacked the guards, distracting them while two or three people wearing black took all the loose cash from the tellers' drawers."

"You think this mask guy was a demon?"

"It's certainly possible. The guards weren't able to stop it, whatever it was."

"Ooh, it beat up some rent-a-cops, big whoop. You could do that."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Giles replied, arching an eyebrow. "In any event, we should probably take a look at it. Willow's trying to get hold of any information the police have, perhaps something that will tell us if it was a demon or just rampant steroid abuse."

"Demons robbing banks? I turn my back for five minutes..." Buffy fell silent for a few moments. "Nothing else, right? Faith's been okay? She's been handling everything?"

Giles glanced over at her. "Yes, she's been fine. Didn't you know?"

"I haven't seen her." Buffy turned her head away, watching the houses stream past in the fading daylight. "I-I guess she's been busy, you know, with patrolling and looking after Dawn."

"Hey, Clark, look at this," Ryan said. "Slayer One's home."

Clark roused himself from his 'Anywhere But Here' daydream and looked out through the heavily tinted window of the minivan they were using that day. "That's a relief, I was starting to worry about her."

"Yeah. You think Slayer Two'll calm down a bit now?" Ryan wondered, watching as Buffy, Dawn and Giles got out of the car and made their way to the front door. "She hasn't looked too happy lately."

"Does she ever? And before you start getting all sentimental, just remember who you're talking about."

"Right." Ryan paused for a moment, thinking, then turned to his older, more experienced colleague. "What are we doing here?"

"It's called surveillance, Ryan. It's in your job description, remember? That bit of paper you got when you joined the Council?"

"You know what I mean. We spent months tracking that werewolf pack in Canada. We should have had a few weeks back home after that, but we got sent here instead, and all we do is sit in cars and watch the house. If Mr. Travers thinks this is important enough to keep us out here, why hasn't he sent us the gear to do the job properly?"

"Ours not to reason why, Ryan."

"Bollocks," Ryan retorted. "Think about it, Clark. We got pulled off our normal duty cycle, we haven't got the gear to do the job properly – actually, we don't really know what the bloody job is. And we haven't heard anything from Travers himself, it's all come from his assistant. We're watching the Slayers, for fuck's sake. You don't think Travers has a personal interest in this?"

"Meaning what?"

"I'm not sure this job's kosher."

"Don't even think about it, mate." Clark snapped. "If there's some kind of political cat-fight brewing back home, then we need to stay well out of it."

"But- "

"I mean it! Look, Ryan, I've been doing this job nearly twenty years, and every time I've someone from our side of things try to get political they've got arse-fucked with their trousers on. We've got our orders, they came through the proper channels with i's dotted and t's crossed, so we carry them out, and if someone higher up the food chain's trying to pull a fast one then it's not our business. We do the job we've been given, and if it's dodgy, then we weren't to know. Don't ever try to play the game with those arseholes, mate, you'll be hung, drawn and quartered before you know what's hit you."

"Welcome home!" Buffy was barely through her front door before Willow pounced on her with a hug that almost knocked the unprepared Slayer off her feet. Behind her, Buffy could see Xander, Anya and Tara waiting in the living room, and a stack of pizza boxes on the coffee table.

"Hi, Buff, come on in," Xander said, opening one of the boxes. "We figured you'd want some real food after all the crap the hospital's been feeding you. Pepperoni and mushroom, guaranteed not to help your recovery."

"Uh, thanks, I think..." Buffy replied, gently disentangling herself from Willow and moving into the living room. She stopped as she saw Faith standing a little apart from the others. "Hi."

"B. You good?"

"Fine. You?"

"Five by five." Faith shrugged and headed for the door, sliding past Giles and Dawn as they came inside. "I'd better go patrol."

"Now?" Buffy asked, sounding hurt.

"Lots of bad guys out there, and they're not gonna kill themselves." Faith picked up her denim jacket and opened the front door.

"Faith, wait a second!" Buffy rushed after her, out onto the porch.

"What?"

"I just wanted to, you know, thank you." Trying and failing to make eye contact, Buffy went on, "For looking after Dawn."

"Whatever." Faith turned on her heel and walked away.

"Faith!" Buffy's call went unheeded. She watched Faith go, brushing a tear from her cheek, then went back inside.

"Oh, Giles, I've got something to show you," Willow was saying as Buffy came into the living room. The witch put her laptop on the table beside the pizzas. "The police had a digital copy of the bank's security camera footage from the time of the raid."

"Well, it's good to know the cops are spending my tax dollars on decent computer security," Xander said, only to receive a poke in the arm from Willow. "Ow!"

"Actually the firewalls were pretty solid," Willow informed him with a look of wounded pride. "I've just got some moves they didn't see coming."

"I bet Tara says that a lot," Anya joked.

"Yes, thank you, can we please concentrate on the possible demon?" Giles said. He and Buffy sat down on the couch, while the others clustered around. Buffy stifled a yawn.

Willow frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just tired." Buffy insisted. "I haven't been sleeping well. You know how I am with hospitals. Come on, let's see the movie."

Willow started the video file and they all watched in silence as a huge figure wrought havoc in the bank's lobby, distracting everyone while three figures in black clothes and balaclavas rifled the cash drawers.

"So, demon?" Buffy asked once the clip had ended, a faint sigh in her voice.

"It would appear so," replied Giles. "An M'Fashnik by the looks of it. They're mercenaries, creating carnage and destruction for the highest bidder."

Willow looked over at him "A mercenary? You think Faith's old buddy Lucas is behind this, maybe replacing that other guy, what was his name?"

"Sean." Buffy replied, almost whispering. "His name's Sean."

"It's possible," Giles conceded. "But I'm not sure a vampire as apparently cautious as Lucas would use an M'Fashnik. They can be rather... volatile, killing their employers for the slightest grievance."

"I don't think the guys in black were vamps, either," Xander put in. "I mean, even if those clothes gave them enough sun-protection, they just don't look right. Will, can you rewind the

tape or whatever it is you... thanks. Look at the way they move." He pointed at the screen. "This one's not too bad, but the other two, the shorter ones? They're acting like extras in a bad commando movie. I bet if the recording had sound they'd be going 'hut, hut, hut!' or something."

Giles nodded. "So the question is, what kind of arch-villain can command an M'Fashnik and yet appear so..."

"Lame?"

"Where is he?"

The vampire felt his nose break as he was thrown face-first into the alley wall. He reeled backwards and tripped over an old wooden pallet, but had barely hit the ground before he was lifted up again by Faith's boot smacking into his ribs. Spotting a manhole cover a few yards away, the vampire tried to drag himself in that direction, but Faith grabbed hold of him, picked him up and slammed him up against a dumpster.

The vampire spat blood into her face. Faith wrenched him off his feet, over her head and down onto a garbage can, crumpling the metal cylinder. The vampire cried out in pain as ribs broke under the impact. He rolled out of the wreckage and lay on his back on the floor of the alley, staring up at the stars as he tried to gather his wits, but before he could move, Faith was kneeling over him, her knees pinning his arms to the ground.

"C'mon, you know who I'm talking about. Lucas Miller, Sunnydale's new arch-vamp, the guy's got to be making some waves." Faith pulled a small, plain metal cross from her pocket and dragged it across the vampire's throat, raising a smouldering welt.

"Fuck you!"

Faith's expression twisted and she stabbed down with the cross, driving the long lower arm into the vampire's throat, all the way to the crosspiece. The vampire shrieked and thrashed beneath her as smoke began to curl from the wound.

"That's got to hurt. Better think of something useful."

The flesh around the cross blackened, and flames began to lick from the wound. Faith jerked her hand away as her fingers were scorched, then scrambled back as the fire spread until the vampire exploded into dust.

Faith picked herself up from the alley floor, cursing under her breath. God damn it, someone has to know where Lucas is! I've got to find him so I can-

Run away? The mental voice even sounded like Buffy.

No, that's not- I can't stay, especially the way I feel about her.

Then why not just go? Grab some spare clothes, get on the bike and just ride.

No. I can't just run out on this. Lucas is part of the mess I made. I have to deal with it, then I can go.

Liar. You don't want to leave. You're dragging it out, hoping something'll happen to let you stay.

Faith rounded a corner and ran straight into a wall of muscle. Unprepared for the impact, she stumbled backward and fell, looking up at a green, reptilian demon wearing jeans and a lumberjack shirt, its hands supporting a large cardboard box the shape of a table top which was propped on one shoulder.

The demon snarled at her, baring its fangs in an obvious attempt to scare her off. Faith just flipped herself upright and launched a kick at its chest. With both its arms occupied, the demon wasn't able to block and was knocked back a couple of paces.

"Slayer!" There was real anger in the demon's voice as it realised who it was fighting. It shifted its grip on the box and swung it at her. The blow was incredibly swift for such a cumbersome object and the box was so big that avoidance simply wasn't an option. Faith flung her arms up to cover her head and braced herself, but the impact was still shocking. She was dimly aware of the sound of breaking glass as she was knocked to the ground, her head spinning. It took her a moment to remember which way was up, and by the time she'd freed herself from the wreckage, she wasn't able to do anything but stare at the demon's retreating back as it ran off.

"Son of a bitch!"

Buffy sat up in her bed, casting aside sheets already in disarray from hours of tossing and turning. She turned to look at the clock on the nightstand; the glowing red digits read 4:26. Rubbing tired eyes, she got to her feet.

At the top of the stairs she glanced through the doorway into Faith's bedroom. The open curtains let in more than enough light from the street lamps to show that the empty bed hadn't been slept in. Is this how Mom felt every night? Buffy closed her eyes, her throat suddenly dry and tight as anxiety washed over her. Where is she? Is she okay? Will I always feel like this after she's gone, not knowing where she is, what she's doing?

Buffy didn't bother switching on the lights as she crept barefoot down to the kitchen, picking her way through the familiar shadows of her home. She got a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. The cool liquid slid down her throat, washing away a little of the tension. She bent over the sink to refill the glass.

"Death is your gift."

Buffy jerked upright and saw a paint-streaked face reflected in the window. She span around, the glass slipping from her fingers, but the kitchen was empty.

The glass hit the floor and shattered, the sound seeming to emphasise the surrounding silence.

Buffy slumped forward, leaning against the counter, her heart pounding. What's wrong with me? Moments later she heard running footsteps on the stairs, and Dawn appeared in the doorway.

"What's happening? I heard- "

"It's nothing, Dawnie, I just dropped a glass. Could you turn the light on, please, and be careful - there's probably pieces everywhere."

"Are you okay?" Dawn asked as she flipped the switch.

"Yeah, just being a klutz. Go on back to bed. I'll clear up in here."

"But- "

"Bed! You've got school in the morning."

Dawn left with a typical teenage 'Why me?' roll of her eyes. Buffy waited until she heard her sister's bedroom door closing, then lifted her foot and turned it over to look at the shard of glass embedded in the sole, crimson blood seeping out around the edge. Why doesn't it hurt?

"This isn't good enough!" Roger Wyndham-Pryce snapped.

"Sir, I'm aware that our operation hasn't produced a great deal of information so far, but I'm afraid it couldn't be helped." Graves replied, trying to soothe the older man's irritation.

"There was a bottleneck in our supply chain, surveillance equipment was in short supply."

Wyndham-Pryce wasn't mollified. "Surely, given your position as Travers' assistant, you could have made sure that some of what was available was sent to our team?"

"Yes, sir, I could have, but I felt that would have been unwise." Graves held up his hand, forestalling another outburst. "Sir, please, listen to me. We can't afford to do anything that might attract attention to what we're doing. If Travers should learn of it before we have the information we need to move against him, well... I'm sure you can imagine the consequences."

Reluctantly, Wyndham-Pryce agreed. "Quite so, Mr. Graves. However, the longer a clandestine project of this kind goes on, the greater the chance of discovery. It is a delicate balancing act, and one in which I am completely in your hands."

"I understand, sir. Rest assured, matters are proceeding. The new equipment will arrive in Sunnydale in the next two or three days, and the team will have instructions to install it as soon as possible."

"Very well. Inform me when the first report arrives."

Buffy practically sleepwalked through classes the next day, tiredness and confusion combining to keep her in a daze from which it seemed nothing could bring her out. She met Willow and Tara for lunch as usual, but barely said a word.

She got home that afternoon to find Faith in the kitchen, hunched over a steaming mug of black coffee and looking like she'd just crawled out of bed. "Hey."

Faith looked up at her and gave a tiny nod, the movement just enough to reveal a fading bruise on her face. "B."

"Trouble on patrol?"

Faith just shrugged. "Demon."

"Yeah, I guessed that much. What happened?"

"I got hit with a TV."

"A TV?"

"One of those big flat-screen ones. The demon was carrying it, still in the box." The impatience in Faith's voice became coloured with anger. "Came around a corner and ran into the guy. I kicked him, he whacked me with the TV and took off."

"Did you catch him?"

Faith just glared.

"Right. Well, what did he look like?"

"Big, green, kind of lizardy."

"Sounds like the one from the bank," Buffy said. Faith looked surprised at that, so she continued, "Willow got hold of the footage from the security cameras. She showed us last night. After you left."

"I told you, B, duty called."

"What did I do?"

"Don't know what you're talking about, B."

"Crap. I know things have been kind of tense lately, between us, but you couldn't come by the hospital once? And as soon as I get home, you take off and stay out all night."

"Don't start with me, B. I'm not in the mood." Faith drained her mug and headed for the door.

"Why did you come back?" Buffy's question pulled Faith up short.

"Come back?"

"To Sunnydale."

"I already told you- "

"Tell me again."

"It was the dreams, B. Someone up there had me dreaming about Hellslut and the tower and everything."

"What else?"

Faith shrugged. "What do you mean?"

"Tell me the rest." Buffy grew impatient.

"There is no 'the rest', B."

"Don't lie to me, Faith."

"Screw you!" Faith snapped, turning away and heading down the hall.

"Tell me!" Buffy shoved her into the wall, blocking her escape. "God damn it, Faith, just tell me!"

"It was you, okay!" Faith screamed right in Buffy's face, driving her back a step. "I saw you. You were dead, you won but you died. Happy now?"

"You came back to save me?"

"Yeah."

Buffy stared at her, suddenly not sure of anything. "Why... after everything, why would you do that?"

"Because I'm an idiot!"

"Stop it!" Both Slayers jumped at Dawn's shout. She stood in the front doorway, her school bag hanging from one shoulder.

"Dawnie," Buffy began, "I didn't hear- "

"Don't," Dawn cut her off, the rage in her voice contrasting with the tears shining in her eyes. "Don't treat me like a kid. You think I don't you two keep fighting? I don't know why, and you know what? I don't care! Fix it!" She fled up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door.

For a long moment neither Slayer spoke, then Faith whispered, "I didn't want you to die."

"So you came to take my place?"

"Better me than you, B." Faith turned away and followed Dawn up the stairs.

Buffy stood watching her go. She didn't react when she heard Spike's voice. She knew he wasn't there.

"Every Slayer has a death wish."

Up in her room, Dawn pulled the ancient book that had occupied so many of her thoughts lately from under her bed.

I've got to do something, make them talk to each other instead of yelling to avoid it. But can I really summon a demon? Even for this?

Xander put the tray down on his coffee table and handed mugs of tea to Willow and Tara, then sat down beside Anya. "Okay, Will, this was your idea. What's up?"

"It's Buffy. We have to help her."

"Help her with what?" Xander asked. "Do we even know there's a problem?"

"You saw how she was last night."

"She just got out of the hospital, Will. She could have died, I think we can cut her some slack if she's not herself."

"I think something fell on his head at work." Anya said. "He says he wears his hard hat, but I'm not sure I believe him."

"I wear the hard hat, An."

"Then how can you think nothing's wrong?"

Xander's shoulders slumped. "I don't. I just don't know what we can do about it. How can we help her when we don't even know what's wrong?"

"Do you think it's Dawn?" Tara wondered. "Looking after her, I mean. It's a lot to deal with on top of college and Slaying, and it must remind her of her mom a lot."

"It's more than that, Tara," Willow replied, her voice hesitant. "I... I think it's about Faith."

Tara looked unhappy. "Baby, I know you don't like her, but-"

"Tara, please," Willow said. "Just listen. When Buffy was in the hospital, before her fever broke, I heard her say some things. I know she was probably delirious, but..."

"What did she say, Will?"

"She said 'Faith, don't leave me,'" Willow replied, having to fight to get the words out. The others just sat there, shocked.

Anya snapped out of it first. "Faith's leaving? When did that happen?"

"She has been acting kind of weird lately," Xander said, thinking things over. "I mean, when Buffy got hurt she was climbing the walls, and then when Buffy came home it was like she couldn't get out of the house fast enough."

"Do you think there's something going on between them?" Tara asked.

"No," Anya said firmly.

"Yeah, I've got to go with Anya," Xander added. "Buffy and Faith? I can't see it."

"That's not what I meant." Anya said, her voice sharp. "I didn't mean nothing is happening, I meant something isn't happening."

Xander looked at the two witches. "Is anyone else confused?"

Anya snorted her impatience. "There's something between Buffy and Faith, but it isn't happening, it's not moving, it's just sitting there."

"An-"

"Hands up everyone who spend eleven hundred years with emotionally damaged women? Oh look, just me."

Willow shot Xander her patented 'You're marrying her?' look, and asked Anya, "So, what's not happening between them?"

"How would I know? I did vengeance, not therapy. All I know is that it's messing both of them up, and Dawn's probably catching the fallout."

They all looked at each other for a moment.

"So what do we do?"

"It doesn't get any easier, does it?"

Sean, sitting in the driver's seat, looked across at Lucas. "What doesn't get easier?"

"Waiting. You've planned, you're ready, and now you just have to wait." Lucas shifted in his seat, moving for its own sake. "I always thought it was easier for the ones in charge; the Mayor never seemed to get nervous, whatever was happening."

"Lucky for him."

"You must have had a lot of times like this, during the war."

Sean just nodded.

"Looks like there's going to be another one. A war, I mean. Afghanistan. The whole country's fired up."

"That'll change when the bodybags start coming home. This country's got rich and comfortable. Weak. People don't have the stomach for a real fight any more."

"What do you mean?"

"Lucas, I went into Normandy with the 82nd Airborne, parachuted in the night before the landings, us, the Brits, the Canadians and all the rest. In the first twenty-four hours, we lost over ten thousand men killed, wounded or missing and we were glad to have got off so easily. Nowadays a few Marines get bushwhacked in some African fleapit, and the whole Corps gets called home like a dog. People seem to think they can win a war without anyone dying."

Lucas gave a wry smile at that. "Trying to tell me something, Sergeant?"

"Yes," Sean replied without a trace of humour. "No matter how well tonight goes, no matter how much equipment we buy in, some of us aren't going to live through this thing. Even if both Slayers die, you might go with them. Can you handle that?"

Lucas met his gaze without flinching. "Yes."

"Good." Looking down the street, Sean saw a set of headlights approaching and started the engine. "Here we go."

Weaklings!

The M'Fashnik glared at the three children who had employed him, his contempt turning to rage. "You pitted me against the Slayer! For that I will kill you!"

"Hey, no fair!" Jonathan whined. "We didn't know she was gonna be there. And you broke our TV!"

"Silence!" The demon kicked over a table, scattering toys in all directions.

"Careful with the collectibles, dude!" Warren cried, rushing forward to protect them only to be seized by the throat and lifted into the air.

"You owe me, tiny man. You will bring me the Slayer's head, or I will rip out your spine and beat you to death with it!"

"Okay... okay..." Warren managed to gasp. "Just let me breathe!" The M'Fashnik dropped him, and he went on. "Just give us a minute, all right? Let us figure out just how to do it."

The three of them went over to the other side of the basement and began whispering. The demon watched them, wondering how his contacts had dared to send him here. Finally, Warren came back brandishing a slip of paper.

"Here's the Slayer's name, address and phone number," he whispered, slapping the M'Fashnik on the arm as though they were old friends. "You want her head? May the Force be with you."

For a moment, the M'Fashnik contemplated tearing Warren's own head off, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. It snatched the paper and stomped away up the basement stairs.

Note to self: Find the idiot who sent me here. Kill him. Eat his children.

"Please have a seat, Miss Summers," the doctor said as Buffy entered the office.

"Thanks."

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"I'm having trouble sleeping." Buffy hesitated before elaborating. "I'll lay there for hours, and I'm exhausted, but I can't keep my eyes closed."

"And how long has this been happening for?"

"Nearly a week, since I woke up in the hospital."

"While you're awake, do you spend a lot of time worrying about things?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"It sounds as though stress is a major factor here. You've certainly had a lot to deal with over the last few months, with the loss of your mother and your recent injury. I recommend trying to minimise the stress factors in your life wherever possible – I know it sounds obvious, but it just examining the problem can be beneficial. In the meantime, I'll prescribe some pills to help you sleep." The doctor pulled out her prescription pad and began scribbling on it.

"They're fairly strong, so make sure you stick to the stated dosage, and above all, don't mix them with alcohol."

"Thanks."

"A few good nights' sleep should help enormously," the doctor said, her voice as reassuring as her years of experience could make it. Buffy didn't seem to respond, so she asked, "Was there something else?"

"What? No, no, nothing."

"Buffy, please. Whatever you say to me stays in this room, you know that."

Buffy still hesitated before answering. "I... I've been hearing things, voices, people talking to me. You probably think I'm crazy..."

"Far from it, I'm not at all surprised." Trying not to smile at the shocked look on Buffy's face, the doctor went on. "You're not schizophrenic. You haven't been sleeping, so obviously you haven't been dreaming. Dreams are a vital part of your psychological defences. They allow you to work unconscious thoughts, worries, and fears in a safe environment. The process is so important that if your mind can't do it while you're asleep, it does it while you're awake."

"You're kidding?"

"Not at all. Most people, if prevented from dreaming for a week, would be hallucinating freely. If all you've experienced are a few voices in your head I'd say you're holding up quite well. Once you start sleeping and dreaming normally, the voices will stop."

"So, they're dreams?" The doctor completely missed the fear in Buffy's voice.

Buffy answered the phone on the fourth ring. Dawn watched her greeting Giles with forced cheerfulness in her voice. The conversation was brief, then Buffy hung up and walked to the base of the stairs. "Faith!"

"Yeah?"

"Giles wants us all over at the magic shop ASAP. There's been another robbery."

"Okay, I'll be right down."

Dawn went over to her sister. "Can I come?" she asked, not quite pleading.

"Dawn..."

"Buffy, please, I just want to help."

"I'm not sure that's-"

Dawn interrupted, pointing at the front door. "Is it supposed to be doing that?"

The doorknob was slowly turning one way then the other. Buffy reached out to grasp it, and then the door burst open, knocking her back into the dining room.

Dawn screamed as the M'Fashnik stormed through the door. It thrust an arm out and flung her out of the way, sending her straight at Buffy and putting them both on the floor. "Slayer!"

"Right here!" Buffy replied, scrambling out from under her sister.

The demon looked at her. "You are not the Slayer," it snarled, before being slammed into the doorframe as Faith threw herself headfirst down the stairs at it. For a few seconds she held the

advantage, but then the demon landed a punch to her stomach that lifted her off her feet and dumped her onto living room floor.

Buffy charged in, launching a flying kick at the demon's back. It staggered under the impact, swinging its fist around in a wild backhand stroke that she easily ducked under. She followed up with a string of punches to the body, but first one arm, and then the other was grabbed. She wasn't able to get a grip of her own on the demon's arms, and a moment later, she was sent flying out through the front doorway to land in a heap on the path.

The demon stared after her, its huge fists gripping the doorframe. "You are not the Slayer! What are you?" Before she could reply, the tip of a sword burst through its chest, and it slumped to the ground, revealing a still-shaky Faith behind it.

Faith pulled the sword free and handed it to Dawn. "Thanks, Bitesize." Dawn took it, looking at the blood-soaked blade with a slightly squeamish expression on her face, and went to clean it off while Faith walked over to Buffy. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"Man, I hate when they come after you at home. Isn't that our job?"

"You are not the hunter. You are the lamb." For a moment, the Master's words filled Buffy's ears, and she instinctively spun around, looking for him.

"B?" Faith asked, worried. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Buffy replied, too quickly. "Nothing, just making sure there aren't more of them. Come on, let's get Reptile-boy here moved, Giles is waiting."

"Sure." Faith followed her inside, watching her with concern.

"So there's been another robbery? Another bank, same M.O.?" Xander asked a short while later, as they all sat around the table at the Magic Box.

"Er, no, I'm afraid not." Giles replied. "It was an armoured truck, in Oxnard, shortly before dawn today, and the attack was altogether more sophisticated. The truck was boxed in with other vehicles, all stolen, and the doors were blown open with explosives. Both the guards were killed."

"Okay, bad, but it doesn't sound spooky," Willow said. "Shouldn't we be letting the police handle this one?"

Giles took off his glasses. "The police statements say the guards' throats were torn out. It would appear that the police in Oxnard lack the same level of wilful obliviousness one finds in the typical Sunnydale officer."

"Vampires. Lucas and Sean?" Buffy wondered.

"Sounds like it was well planned," Xander put in. "Just the way a guy like Sean would do it."

Faith cursed under her breath. "Great. How much did they get?"

"Around fifteen thousand dollars." Giles replied. "The truck had already made several deliveries."

"Why would a vamp want that kind of money?" Dawn asked.

"I'm not sure I want to know." Buffy pushed her chair away from the table and began pacing. "Two big robberies in a week - anyone think they're connected?"

Giles shook his head. "It does seem like an enormous coincidence, but I must confess I can't see any link between the two."

"Me neither," Xander agreed. "One's almost a comedy, the other one's as professional as it gets. It's like playing 'Six Degrees Of Kevin Bacon' with demons."

"So there's someone else," Tara said, more to herself than anyone else.

Giles gave a sigh. "It would appear so."

The trip back to Revello Drive passed in silence.

"Mind if I grab a soda before patrol?" Faith asked as they entered the house.

Buffy flopped onto the couch, still in the same bleak state as when she'd left the Magic Box. "Sure."

Faith and Dawn went into the kitchen. Faith took a can from the fridge and headed for the door, while Dawn began preparing her dinner. After a moment, she heard Faith's voice, low, almost a whisper. "Bitesize?"

Dawn moved to the kitchen door and saw Faith standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking into the living room. She walked over to join her. "Yeah?"

"Keep the noise down, okay?" Faith pointed toward the couch, where Buffy had slumped over onto the cushions, fast asleep.

"You're not going to wake her?"

"No, let her sleep, she needs it," Faith said. "I'll go solo tonight."

"Okay," Dawn said, reluctantly. "Be careful."

"You got it. Go, eat."

Dawn returned to the kitchen, but had barely got her pizza out of the freezer when she realised Faith was talking again. She almost replied before she realised that Faith wasn't talking to her. After a moment's internal debate, she crept through to the rear of the living room and peeped around the corner, wreathed in shadow.

Faith was sitting on the edge of the coffee table, whispering to Buffy, one hand gently brushing a few strands of hair from her face. "I'm sorry, B. For everything, everything I did, everything I said. I know me leaving's going to hurt you. The way I feel about you, it'll hurt me more, but I have to go. I won't risk dragging you down with me again." She leaned over and gently kissed Buffy's cheek, then stood up and left the house.

Dawn just stood there in the shadows for a moment, stunned, then she hurried upstairs. She took the old grimoire and its associated talisman from their hiding place, her mind made up.

Chapter 22

As soon as she heard Dawn's bedroom door close, Buffy opened her eyes and sat up, blinking to clear her vision. *Did I hear... did Faith say...?* She looked toward the door, trapped for a moment by indecision, then grabbed a jacket and ran out into the night.

The street was deserted, Faith had vanished. Buffy looked up and down the road, hoping against hope that she'd appear by magic from the shadows, then picked a direction at random and started walking. Her mind echoed with what she'd heard, or thought she'd heard.

Faith has feelings for me?

No, I imagined it, I must have.

But why would I...

She's leaving, it's upsetting me...

But I felt her kiss me...

Did I?

Why would I imagine it?

Do I want it to be true?

The same thoughts ran around in Buffy's head for hours, through streets and alleys and graveyards. She didn't know when the music began, it seemed as though it had always been there, and it felt like the most natural thing in the world when she began to sing, pouring her heart out even as she was attacked by first one vampire, then another and another.

**I've been making shows
Of trading blows
Just hoping no one knows
That I've been**

**Going through the motions
Walking through the part
All to hide the aching in my
Heart**

As her enemies' ashes scattered on the breeze, she cried out to the night sky.

**I think I finally see
The problem here is me
I shouldn't even be
Alive**

What the hell is going on? Faith turned the corner toward the Magic Box and immediately had to dodge out of the path of a streetsweeper, who went tangoing by holding his broom like a dance partner. She was reaching for the shop's door when she heard the voices inside.

What can't we face if we're together

You'll never be a part of that. A poisonous whisper crept through Faith's mind, brining tears to her eyes. For a moment she leaned against the doorframe, putting her mask back in place, then she pushed the door open just as the singing stopped. "Okay guys, what's the story? Last night I had a pair of vamps singing for mercy, and now there's a guy cross the street doing show tunes about his dry cleaning. Someone want to clue me in?"

Everyone froze as she came in. Giles cleared his throat and said "Ah, yes, well, actually we were just, er, tossing a few theories around. I think some research is in order."

"Great. Book me."

Okay, remember, act excited. This is all very weird, and totally not something I knew was coming.

Dawn burst into the Magic Box and ran over to the gang, who were still seated around the research table. "Oh my God, you guys will never believe what happened at school today!"

"Everything went *West Side Story*?" Faith asked without looking up from her book.

Dawn's look of disappointment was only half-faked. "I gave birth to a pterodactyl," she replied, a little put out by how calm everyone was. "So, you guys too, huh?"

"Yeah," Xander said. "Been there, sung that. What was your number about?"

"Math." Dawn sat down with them at the table, sneaking looks at Buffy and Faith whenever she could. Both seemed engrossed in what they were reading, but Buffy at least looked tense and uncomfortable. Faith just looked bored. "So, any idea's on what's caused the Broadwayathon?"

"Not yet," Faith muttered, "but if I end up doing *Cats* down Main Street, something's going to die."

"Oh come on," Dawn said, surprised at the anger in Faith's voice. "Don't you think it's kind of cool? Songs, dancing, what's wrong with that? It might even help some people, you know, bare their souls?"

"... and what about the silk pyjamas? I don't even own silk pyjamas!"

"Enough!" Giles flung up his arms in despair, finally bring a halt to the torrent of complaints Xander and Anya were pouring out at him. "Both of you, stop! I understand that your little matinee performance was disturbing, but there's more at stake here than your artistic pride!"

The underlying anger in Giles' voice stopped them both in their tracks. Xander turned to him, agitation replaced by uncertainty. "What's the matter, G-Man? It's just people singing and dancing, right?"

"No," Giles replied, his anger subsiding. "There have been several deaths reported, people burned alive."

"As in burnt up? Somebody set people on fire? That's nuts!"

"I don't know," Anya muttered. "One more verse of our little ditty and I would've been looking for a gas can."

Giles ignored her. "Well, clearly emotions are running high. But as far as I can tell these people burnt up from the inside, spontaneously combusted. I've only seen the one. I was able to examine the body while the police were taking witness arias."

"Okay, but we're sure that the things are related, right?" Xander said. "The singing and dancing, and burning and dying."

"I can't be certain of anything, though it would be an enormous coincidence if they weren't connected," Giles replied. "We've got a few leads, but nothing definite. Buffy and Faith are checking the local demon haunts - at least, they're supposed to be. Neither of them seems to be particularly focused at the moment."

Anya just rolled her eyes at that, as though Giles was simply stating the obvious, but Xander was watching him a little more closely. "You know something, G-Man. What's going on?"

"It's... it's private."

"No, it's not. We all know there's something wrong with those two, and if it's affecting their work, it puts all our lives at risk, not to mention everyone else in town." Xander paused for a moment, taking some of the venom out of his voice. "Look, when one of us has a problem, we all help, that's how it works."

"You're right, I know, it's just that they wanted to keep this between themselves as much as possible." Giles took off his glasses and began massaging the bridge of his nose. "Faith's leaving, and Buffy isn't taking it very well."

"What?"

"When?"

"Why?"

The detached, Watcher-trained part of Giles' brain wondered how two people could say three things simultaneously. "Faith is leaving. She thinks that her presence here is alienating Buffy from the rest of us and harming us as a group."

"And Buffy's not happy about it?" Anya asked.

"Buffy is extremely upset, although she's been trying to hide it from everyone. I think she's trying to protect Dawn as much as anything."

Xander mentally reviewed Buffy's recent behaviour. "When did all this start?"

"I can't say when Faith made her decision, but I learned of it while Buffy was visiting Angel."

"But that was weeks ago!" Xander protested. "If Faith's so hot to skip town, how come she's still here?"

"It's the vampire, isn't it?"

Giles nodded, surprised at Anya's insight. "Yes. Faith sees Lucas as her responsibility, the last loose end from her first time in Sunnydale. She intends to leave as soon as he's destroyed. You've noticed that she's recently been appearing later and later in the day? From what little Buffy's said to me, I'm certain that Faith has been staying out until dawn every night, trying to find something that will lead her to him. I'm starting to worry that she'll go after him on her own."

Anya's eyes widened. "You mean take on Lucas, Sean and who knows how many more by herself?"

"Why not?" Xander said. "Faith's never been big on forward planning."

"Great!" Anya threw up her hands. "So either Faith gets herself killed, or Lucas gets dusted and Faith leaves. Either way, Buffy's going to be a wreck."

"So what do we do?" Xander asked after a moment's pause.

"I don't know. I don't know!" Frustration and anger began to creep into Giles' demeanour. "I'm a Watcher, my Slayers need my help, and I don't know what to do!"

"The sun sets, and she appears. Come to serenade me?"

"So you know what's going on?" Buffy closed the crypt door behind her and walked toward Spike.

Spike laughed a little. "Well, I've seen some damn funny things the last couple of nights. Six hundred pound Shurago demon making like Yma Sumac - that's going to take some shifting." He brandished a bottle of whisky. "Drink?"

"A world of no." Buffy brushed some of the dust from the raised platform around the edge of the crypt and sat down. "So, any idea what's causing this?"

"Oh. So that's all. You've just come to pump me for information."

"What else would- " Buffy stopped herself. "No, not saying it."

"Well, don't let me bore you with small talk," Spike snapped, opening the door. "Don't know a thing."

Buffy closed her eyes for a moment, head bowed, then stood up and began walking to the door. Spike stopped her, putting his hand on her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." Buffy shook his hand off and went to leave, but Spike slammed the door shut ahead of her.

"Tell me."

It was the gentleness in Spike's voice that broke through. Buffy's shoulders began to tremble and she covered her face with her hands, hiding her tears. "It's Faith..."

"What about her?"

"She's leaving me, Spike. She's leaving Sunnydale and I don't know if I can take losing her! She's been so cold lately, she barely even talks to me, but it's like the only time I even feel alive any more is when I'm with her!"

"Oh bloody hell!" Spike snatched up the whisky bottle and flung it across the crypt. "Look, Slayer, I get that you don't want me, but coming in here and moping because you can't have the one you DO want? Forget it, that's a step too low even for me."

"Spike, what- "

I died, so many years ago...

The Magic Box was a lonely beacon on a darkened street as Buffy arrived, long shafts of light filtering through the blinds and casting narrow beams across the road. Inside, Xander, Anya and Giles were at the table, surround by piles of books, while Willow and Tara worked at the

counter behind a heap of magic supplies. A series of muffled thumps from the back room told her that Faith was training.

"Hey Buff," Xander said. "Get anything out of Spike?"

"Nothing helpful." Buffy looked around. "Where's Dawn?"

"We took her home about an hour ago, she said she was tired," replied Willow. "Don't worry, we checked the house, everything's locked down tight."

"Okay. Thanks. Have you guys come up with anything?"

Giles put his book down. "Possibly. We've come across a few accounts of similar events, all of which seem to revolve around a particular demon."

"And get this, the guy has to be summoned," Xander put in. "This isn't just random, somebody brought him here."

Buffy growled with disgust. "What is it with people summoning demons? Hasn't anyone figured out that it never ends well?" She took off her jacket and dropped it on the end of the counter. "So, any idea who's playing Dark Lord today? Lucas, the guys with the bank demon?"

"Nothing more than supposition, I'm afraid," Giles replied, flexing his shoulders. "However, Willow and Tara are working on something that should prove useful once we actually track down the demon."

Buffy looked across at the two witches with something very like relief on her face. "Thanks, both of you. I don't know what I'd do without you." Tara blushed and ducked her head, while Willow smiled at her. Neither of them saw Buffy's eyes flicker toward the training room door. "I'm going to go work out for a bit, okay?"

Faith didn't seem to notice when Buffy entered the room, her attention was completely focused on the punchbag. Buffy watched her for a few moments, then began changing into her training clothes. All the time, a few lines that Spike had sung ran over and over through her mind.

**You're scared, afraid of what you feel
And you can't tell the one you love, 'cause then you'd have to deal**

Buffy sat down on one of the benches. *Spike thinks he knows what I feel? I don't know what I feel anymore. The one I love? Was he talking about Faith? She looked up at Faith, who was practically snarling as she launched another kick. I look at her, and all I feel is pain. How can that be love? And she acts like doesn't care about anything anymore. Or anyone. It's like the last time.*

Last time, when she was hiding-

Faith launched a last flurry of punches and stepped back, turning her head around fast to catch Buffy staring at her. "You want something?"

Caught by surprise, Buffy stammered out, "I-I-I thought maybe you'd like to do some sparring, I mean, if you want..."

"Sure." Faith dropped into a fighting stance. Buffy sighed and went over to join her.

They circled each other for a while, then Buffy made a slow, clumsy attack that Faith evaded without effort, replying with a kick that knocked her sideways. "Come on, B, that all you've got?"

Buffy took a step back, stung as much by the venom in Faith's voice as by the bruise on her ribs. She attacked again, with the same result. The cycle continued, each half-hearted attack drawing a single blow in response, each one at barely less than full speed and power, followed by an insult. Eventually, Buffy over-extended her arm on her attack. Faith grabbed it and threw, slamming Buffy down onto the floor hard enough to knock the wind out of her. Before she could catch her breath, Faith was on her, twisting her arm behind her until her shoulder burned. "Quit fighting like a girl, B."

Faith released her grip and stood, turning away. A second later, Buffy's foot slammed into her legs, knocking them from under her and dumping her on her back. Buffy had her pinned down in moments, tears pouring down her cheeks. "Stop it!"

Faith sneered. "Stop what? You're the one wasting everyone's time! You want to train for real, give me a call."

"I know what you're doing!" Buffy grabbed her by the shoulders, her knuckles turning white. "Stop trying to make me hate you! I'll never hate you!"

"You can do it, B. Just like riding a vamp, it'll all come back."

"Faith! Stop hiding and talk to me, tell me why you're doing this."

"Just being me."

"I heard what you said, when I fell asleep on the couch."

Faith froze for a split second. "What're you talking about?"

"I heard you. You said you were leaving because of the way you feel about me, and then you kissed me."

"You've got a weird imagination, B..." Faith tried to sound dismissive, but her voice was wavering.

"Why did you kiss me at Tara's party?" Buffy demanded, watching a hint of panic creep into Faith's eyes.

"What? I was just... I was..." Faith's voice cracked as she gazed up into Buffy's eyes, seeing the anguish there fully revealed for the first time. She fell silent, the mask slipping from her face.

Buffy watched the arrogance and attitude drain away, leaving Faith looking as scared and alone as Buffy had ever seen her. Without making a conscious decision, she lowered her head until her lips brushed across Faith's. Faith's body tensed for an instant, then seemed almost to melt away, relaxing completely as her lips began to move. Supporting her weight on one arm, Buffy began to stroke Faith's cheek as the kiss deepened.

After what seemed like hours, Buffy lifted her head and looked down at Faith, whose cheeks were wet with both their tears. "I know you felt that too."

"Get off me!" Faith flung her arm out, knocking Buffy aside, and scrambled away.

"Faith?" Buffy regained her footing, pain and confusion welling up inside her. "What's wrong?"

Faith picked herself up, turning to face Buffy as fresh tears streamed down her face. "God damn you, Buffy!" She burst out through the back door and disappeared into the night.

Everyone was still engrossed in their work when Buffy emerged from the training room, back in her street clothes. She'd dried her tears, but her eyes were still red and puffy. Willow was just looking up when Spike burst through the front door, propelling what looked like a human-sized puppet ahead of him. "Lookie bokie what I found!"

"Is-is this the demon guy?" Tara asked.

Spike shook his head. "Works for him. Has a nice little story for the Slayer, don't you? Come on, then. Sing."

Music rose in the background, but instead of the expected song the demon's voice was almost conversational. "My master has the Slayer's sister hostage at the Bronze because she summoned him and at midnight he's going to take her to the underworld to be his queen."

Giles rolled his eyes, as if to say 'not that one again'. "What does he want?"

"Her." The demon pointed at Buffy.

Spike began, "If that's all you've got to say, then-" but the demon broke free and fled before he could finish. "Strong. Someday he'll be a real boy."

"Dawn's in trouble," Buffy whispered to herself. "Perfect."

Willow had gone deathly pale. "Buffy, I'm so sorry, we thought-"

"It's okay. Not your fault, you didn't summon this thing. Is your spell thing ready?"

Tara nodded. "A-almost, we just need a few more minutes."

"Okay, I'll go to the Bronze, make sure Dawn's okay. You guys follow soon as you can."

"What about Faith? Where is she, anyway?" Xander asked, looking toward the back room.

"Forget Faith, she's gone." Buffy pulled on her coat.

"What?"

"Don't worry, Slayer, I've got your back."

"I thought you wanted me to stay away." Buffy's voice was heavy with bitterness. "Isn't that what you sang?"

"Awww, Spike sang a widdle song?" Xander sneered.

Spike almost snarled. "Fine. I hope you dance 'til you burn. You and the little bit."

As Spike stormed out, Giles turned to her. "Buffy, you shouldn't go alone, we still don't entirely know what we're dealing with. Just wait a few minutes, or contact Faith."

"It's Dawn, Giles. There's no time." Buffy ran out before he could respond.

Giles stared after her for a second, then went over to the counter. "Finish your work." He picked up the phone.

Damn it, damn it, damn it! Why did she do that?

Faith slammed her fist into the alley wall, the rough brickwork tearing at her knuckles. For a moment she watched blood welling up in the tattered skin. *Figures. Everything with B ends in blood and pain.*

Her cell-phone rang, startling her out of her reverie. For a moment she almost ignored it, then dug it out of her pocket. "Yeah? Giles? What... I'm rolling." She stuffed the phone back into her jacket and tried to run for the Bronze, but for some reason her legs wouldn't move faster than a purposeful walk. Somewhere close by she heard a guitar start up, and then the words were coming out.

**When this began
I had nothing to say
I was so lost in the nothingness inside of me
I was alone
So I let her in, only to find
That she's found another way to send me out of my mind
And now I know**

**That all the agony her words revealed
Is the only real thing that I've got left to feel
Nothing but pain
Just stuck, hollow and alone
And the fault is my own, and the fault is my own**

**I want to heal, I want to feel what I thought was never real
I want to let go of the pain I've held so long
Erase all the pain till it's gone
I want to heal, I want to feel like I'm close to something real
I want to find something I've wanted all along
Somewhere I belong**

Across town, Buffy heard the same guitar music, felt her own words rise inside her.

**And now there's nothing to say
I can't believe I didn't see what was in front of my face
I was confused
Looking everywhere only to find
That it's not the way I had imagined it all in my mind
So what am I
What do I have but negativity
'Cause I can't justify the way my friends are looking at me
Nothing to lose
Nothing to gain, hollow and alone
And the fault is my own, and the fault is my own**

**I want to heal, I want to feel what I thought was never real
I want to let go of the pain I've held so long
Erase all the pain till it's gone
I want to heal, I want to feel like I'm close to something real
I want to find something I've wanted all along
Somewhere I belong**

Streets apart, the two Slayers' voices merged into a single refrain.

**I will never know myself if I must do this on my own
I will never feel anything else, until my wounds are healed
I will never be anything till I break away from me
I will break away, I'll find myself today**

Buffy reached the main door to the Bronze and kicked it open, just as Faith did the same with the back door. Their eyes met across the dance-floor and they stopped in their tracks.

"Well, what have we here? A double feature."

The languid, almost contemptuous voice dragged both Slayers' attention to the stage, where they saw a terrified Dawn, dressed in a ball-gown, seated next to a smirking, red-skinned demon in a shiny blue suit.

Buffy stalked into the nightclub, Faith mirroring her on the other side. As she reached the pool table, Buffy asked the demon, "You got a name?"

"I've got a hundred."

"Well, I ought to know what to call you if you're going to be my brother-in-law."

Dawn gasped. "Buffy, I-"

"Don't worry. You're not going anywhere." Buffy's face was like stone. "I am."

"What?" Faith and Dawn burst out together.

Buffy ignored them. "Deal's this. I can't kill you, you take me to Hellsville in her place."

"No way, B."

"Shut up, Faith."

The demon chuckled. "And what if I kill you?"

"It's been tried. Never sticks."

"We'll see." The demon snapped his fingers, and half a dozen puppet-men emerged from the shadows, fanning out around the Slayers

Instinct took over. Buffy and Faith moved back to back, staying close together. It was over in seconds, the six puppet-men lying dead or unconscious on the floor. Buffy tried to move toward the stage, but Faith grabbed hold of her arm. The lethargy that Buffy had shown at the Magic Box was gone, and this time it was Faith that was thrown across the room, skidding to a halt by the stage steps. She was on her feet again in moments. "You're not doing this, B!"

"You don't get a vote!" Buffy yelled back as the rest of the Scooby Gang arrived through the wreckage of the main doors. "You're the one walking out on me!"

The demon's smirk widened, and once again electric guitars could be heard, loud and discordant. Everyone was looking at Buffy, but it was Faith's voice that joined the music.

**You pretend everything is what you wanted to see
And I'm exactly like what you had always thought I should be
So I pretend to forget about the killer that I am
Acting like it never happened just 'cause you say I can
But I can't pretend this is the way that I'll stay
Why can't you see the truth?
I can't pretend I'm who you want me to be, so I'm**

**Lying my way from you
I want to be pushed aside so let me go
Let me take back my life, I'd rather be all alone**

**Anywhere on my own, 'cause I can see
The very worst part of you is me**

Faith turned to the other Scoobies, some of her old resentment burning in her eyes.

**I remember what you thought of me
Remember all your whispered talk of who I ought to be
Remember coming back and hearing it from them again**

Her head snapped back around to face Buffy, and she began circling the other Slayer.

**But you pretended up a person who was fitting in
And now you think this person really is me
And I wish it could be the truth
But the more you push the more I'm pulling away 'cause I'm**

**Lying my way from you
I want to be pushed aside so let me go
Let me take back my heart, I'd rather be all alone
Anywhere on my own, 'cause I can see
The very worst part of you is me<**

On the last line, she grabbed Buffy by the shoulders, standing so close she could feel her breath on her face and Buffy could see the pain and self-loathing in her eyes, her voice falling to a whisper as faint wisps of smoke drifted from her. The others watched, unable to speak.

Slow clapping from the stage broke the silence. "Now that was a performance from the heart. Not quite the fireworks I had in mind, though."

"Get out," Willow growled.

"Hmm, I smell power. More than you realise." The demon stood up. "I guess my bride-to-be and I should be on our way." Dawn shrank away from him.

Giles' voice was as cold as Willow's had been angry. "That's never going to happen."

"I don't make the rules. She summoned me, she wears my talisman." The demon waved his hand at the pendant around Dawn's neck.

Faith turned away from Buffy. "I don't care."

"Too bad." The demon took Dawn by the arm.

"Get your hands off her!" Faith leapt toward the stage.

The demon's smile became malevolent, music rising again in the background. In one movement, Willow and Tara raised their hands, intertwined around a crystal. "*Silentium!*"

A pulse of white light shot out from the crystal like a shockwave, overtaking Faith in mid-air and leaving dead silence in its wake. The demon's mouth flapped uselessly for a moment

before Faith crashed into him. By the time Buffy reached the stake, Faith had yanked a stake from her coat pocket and driven it into the demon's eye.

Willow let go of the crystal. It hit the floor and shattered, the sound breaking the silence and the spell. Buffy ran over to Dawn and flung her arms around her. Dawn collapsed in tears against her. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

"Why, Dawnie?" Buffy whispered, clutching onto her sister as though afraid she'd slip away again. "Why did you do it?"

"I didn't know what would happen! I thought it was just songs and people saying how feel," Dawn sobbed, her voice muffled against Buffy's shoulder. "You were both so unhappy, and then I heard Faith say she was leaving, and I just wanted us all to be happy again. You've got to make her stay, Buffy."

"I don't think I can..."

"Please!"

Blinking tears away, Buffy looked around, but the stage was deserted. "Where is she?"

The others, who'd been transfixed by Dawn's outpouring, seemed to break out of a trance. Tara said, "She didn't come this way, she must have slipped out the back."

"Get her back, Buffy." Dawn whispered, releasing her grip on her sister. "I don't want to lose anyone else."

Buffy got to her feet. "I will, for you."

Dawn shook her head. "For you."

In the alley behind the Bronze, Faith collapsed against the wire fence, trying and failing to hold back the tears, and the words that came with them

**I'm so tired of being here
Condemned by all these doubts and fears
And if I have to leave
I know that I should just leave
But instead I still linger here
Like I can't leave you alone**

**These wounds won't seem to heal
This pain is just too real
There's just too much that time cannot erase**

**If you cried I'd wipe away all of your tears
If you screamed I'd fight away all of your fears
And I'd hold your hand through all of these years**

**And you would have
All of me**

Her head jerked up in surprise as Buffy's voice answered hers.

**You used to fascinate me
Like a diamond in the night
Now I'm trapped behind a pain I cannot hide
Your face it haunts
My once pleasant dreams
Your voice it chased away
All the sanity in me**

**These wounds won't seem to heal
This pain is just too real
There's just too much that time cannot erase**

**If you cried I'd wipe away all of your tears
If you screamed I'd fight away all of your fears
And I'd hold your hand through all of these years
And you would have
All of me**

Faith stood and walked toward her, their voices blending again.

**I've tried so hard to tell myself that you're gone
That though you're still with me
I've been alone all along**

Less than an arm's length apart, they reached out to each other.

**If you cried I'd wipe away all of your tears
If you screamed I'd fight away all of your fears
And I'd hold your hand through all of these years
And you would have
All of me**

As the final notes died away, their lips met, the salt of their tears dissolving in the kiss. Both of them knew that the others were watching from the doorway, but in that moment they were the only people in the world.

Then it was over. Faith broke the kiss and stepped back. "I can't, I'm sorry..."

She ran.

Chapter 23

"What do we do now? How do we fix this?" Xander's voice was hushed, but the question

seemed to echo around Buffy's kitchen, hanging in the air between him and Giles. The Watcher was on the verge of replying when the door opened and Anya walked in, shutting it behind her.

"How are they?" Giles asked.

"Dawn won't stop crying. Tara's sitting on her bed holding her. Buffy's still sitting on the couch, not talking. It's not like she's catatonic, she just won't say anything. Willow's still trying, but I don't think she wants to talk to any of us right now."

"What the hell happened tonight?" Xander's voice left no doubt of his incomprehension. "Buffy and Faith making with the smoochies? What's that about?"

"Okay, Xander, here's how it works," Anya said as, though talking to a child. "When two people care about each other very much- "

"An! You know what I mean. When did Buffy jump on the gay-train? Shouldn't there have been signals, or a memo or something?"

Giles shrugged. "There weren't any with Willow, if you recall."

"Okay, good point, but Faith? Of all the girls in Sunnydale she chooses Faith?"

"Yes, I've been pondering that myself and, to be honest, I can't think of a more likely candidate, except perhaps Willow." Giles saw the look of amazement forming on Xander's face and pre-empted the question. "Xander, for all their history together, Buffy and Faith share something unique just by being Slayers."

"There's some kind of mystic bond between them?" Anya asked.

"I don't think we need to bring in the supernatural to explain it. The simple reality of what being a Slayer means is something that we can never fully understand."

"Why not?"

"Because we can leave," Giles replied, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. "Any one of us can walk away from this life, the dangers we face, at any time. You have skills that could find you work in any town in the country. Willow could transfer to practically any university in the English-speaking world. I could ask to be reassigned without even leaving the Council."

"You think we'd do that?" Xander was hurt and a little angry.

"No, I don't, you've all proved your dedication and loyalty many times over. My point is that we have a choice. Buffy and Faith will never have that luxury; Buffy learned that very painfully when she ran away after sending Angel to hell. The Slayer is drawn to the darkness in the world, and it to her. Neither of them will ever be free of it. They may react to it in different ways, but they both carry the same burden."

"So it's a comfort thing? Buffy wants Faith because Faith knows how she feels?" Anya asked.

"No, it's more than that," Xander replied, his eyes losing focus as his mind worked, making connections he'd never made before. "You saw them tonight, this whole Slayer bond thing's just part of it."

"I have to agree," Giles said. "There's a genuine depth of feeling on both sides, that much is obvious now. Their shared understand is just a foundation for that, not the whole. I wish it were That would make helping Buffy through this loss a great deal easier."

"She hasn't lost anything yet." Xander said, grabbing his jacket and heading for the back door.

Anya grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

"Find Faith, stop her from leaving."

"You don't even know where to look!"

"I've got an idea."

"For God's sake be careful out there!" Giles called after him, and then he and Anya were left alone. For a short while they just looked at each other, unsure what to do next, before they heard footsteps on the stairs.

They found Tara standing at the living room door, talking to Willow. "Dawn's asleep. I put a blanket over her - I thought I should leave her in peace."

Hearing Tara's voice seemed to bring Buffy back to herself. "Thank you, Tara, all of you. I'm sorry I've been such a mess tonight, I'll be okay now. You don't have to stay."

"It's okay, Buffy. We're here for you."

"Will, please, I'd really like to be alone right now, okay?" Buffy looked at each of her friends in turn, trying to seem strong again. "I'll be fine, really."

Willow looked at Tara, hoping she would have some idea of what to do, but Tara was as helpless as she was. She felt Giles' hand on her shoulder; the look on his face told her the truth she'd refused to accept from herself. *There's nothing more we can do here. Arguing with her won't help.*

She hugged her friend, whispering "Call me if you need anything, okay?" into her ear. Buffy didn't return the hug, and her nod in reply was perfunctory at best. The others mumbled goodbyes and headed for the door. Buffy's last words did nothing to inspire hope.

"Turn the lights out, please."

Colours swirled in the liquid, orange, amber, brown, flecks of light glinting on the surface. Faith raised the glass and the scent of cheap whiskey enveloped her, overwhelming the odour of sweat, smoke and stale beer that permeated the bar.

This is where I belong. This is my world, and that's never going to change. I'm such a moron, thinking I could ever be a part of hers. Her world's clean and bright and shining, and people like me aren't even allowed to look in the window in case we smudge the glass. If I let her let me in, I'd taint everything I touched, bring it all down, bring her down, down here with the dirt and the stink and the sleazy guys checking me out. They're the ones I belong with; the ones who get you drunk then take you outside and fuck you up against a wall. Time was, that's all I wanted. Should've kept it that way. Simple.

Maybe if I try it again it'll all come back to me.

Maybe it'll take the pain away for a while.

She set the glass down hard, some of the untouched whiskey slopping over the side onto the stained, pitted wood of the bar.

That won't stop it coming back.

She sensed someone moving in behind her and waited for whatever crude pick-up line was coming.

"Faith."

The voice was about the last she expected, or wanted, to hear. "How'd you find me?"

"Wasn't hard. I figured you'd head for the rankest dive you could find."

"Get lost, Xander, I don't want to hear it."

"And look how much I don't care."

A hand dropped onto Xander's shoulder. He looked around and was confronted with a flabby, pockmarked face, the mouth split by a sneer that revealed three kinds of teeth: rotten, broken and missing. "The lady wants you to leave her alone. Beat it or get beaten."

"The 'lady' could put both of us in the ground without breaking a sweat," Xander replied, looking with obvious disgust at the grimy paw on his shoulder. "You going to move that or wait 'til it crawls off on its own?"

The would-be 'rescuer' snarled and brought his other hand up for a punch, but Xander ducked to one side and planted a short jab onto a crooked nose covered with burst veins. The thug staggered back, blood trickling down his face. He pulled a switchblade from his pocket, but never got a chance to use it. Faith's boot struck him in the stomach, knocking him over backwards. His head struck the edge of the pool table and he slumped to the floor.

Faith looked around the bar, at the circle of suddenly hostile faces. "Great, just great." She stormed out, with Xander right on her heels. She rounded on him as soon as they were on the street. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Do you have any idea the mess Buffy's in right now?"

"Yeah, I know. Tonight's top story: Faith screwed up again."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"The only thing I can do. Go home, get on the bike and get out of your lives for good."

"Run away again, you mean."

"Is your brain loose or something? I'm the problem, you're the solution. I get out of town, then you, Red and Giles get Buffy back on her feet. That's how it works. You're pretty good at it, remember?" She walked away, only to be brought to a halt by what Xander said next.

"We're not in high school any more, Faith!"

She stopped for a second, pulling her old attitude around her like a cloak before she turned.

"Yeah, sorry, I keep forgetting, seeing as how I missed graduation."

"Not going to work, Faith. Points for effort, though." Xander tried to put more reason and less aggression into his voice. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but things have changed a bit since those days. We don't get to hang out in the cafeteria then go to the library after school and bug Giles, or sit around all day watching Indian soap operas. You didn't see what happened to us the year after school finished. We all drifted apart; Buffy and Willow were in college, Buffy had Riley and the Initiative, Will had witchcraft and Tara. Meanwhile, I was stuck in my parents' basement, and Giles was going around in circles in his apartment. We let it happen, and it nearly killed us all."

"Yeah, but you fixed it, right?"

"Pretty much, but we're not in the same place we used to be. We can't be, we've all got jobs or college or kid sisters to look after. We help, we hang, but we can't be there for Buffy same way we used to be. She needs someone who lives her life, Faith. She needs you."

"No, she-"

"I know what I saw tonight, Faith. When she was kissing you, it was like she was free, like this weight had been taken off her and she could just be Buffy again. I haven't seen her like that in so long I almost didn't recognise it. If you really care for her, you won't take that away from her."

"It can't, it won't work. You and Red, you don't want me here."

"I'm the one asking you to do this, Faith. I'll talk to Willow, I'll bring her round. It might take a while, but she wants Buffy to be happy. You make that happen and she'll be okay." He took a step toward her and placed his hand on her arm. "This is your chance, Faith. Time to decide if you're going to run from yourself all your life, or are you going to be a better person. It's your choice."

He walked away.

The Summers' house had always seemed painfully beautiful to Faith, a place of happiness and love that she could touch but never hold on to. Now, as she stood on the driveway looking up at the house, it was suddenly terrifying.

Her bike stood beside her, its polished blue shell gleaming in the streetlights. She reached out, fingertips brushing the fuel tank. *I could just go. Climb in the window, grab a bag and some clothes. I could be two hundred miles away by dawn. I'd never have to see that pain in her eyes again.*

Except I'd see it every time I closed my eyes, and I'd never know if I could have taken it away. But what do I say to her? How do I do this?

She let herself in and stood in the darkened hallway, listening to the silence and trying to figure out what to do.

"You're back."

Faith jumped as Buffy's toneless voice sounded in the living room. From the doorway, she could see Buffy sitting on the couch exactly where the others had left her, silhouetted against the window. "God, Buffy, you scared the crap out of me! What're you doing sitting in the dark?"

"Do you care?"

"Of course I-" Faith cut herself off, refusing to take the bait. "Look, Buffy, can we talk?"

"Just go, Faith. Forget Lucas, forget me, forget everything. Just go."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"I just said- "

"No, I don't mean tonight, or tomorrow or the next day," Faith said as she went over and sat down on the coffee table. "Do you want me to leave?"

"You know I don't, but I can't take the waiting and hoping any more."

"Ask me to stay."

"Faith..."

"Please, Buffy, I need to hear you say it."

"I want you to stay."

"Why?"

"Because you make me feel like I'm alive!" Tears sparkled on Buffy's cheeks. "It's like I've

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found something I hadn't even realised I'd lost, and now I'm so scared of losing it again, and everything- "

Whatever Buffy had been about to say was smothered as Faith kissed her. Buffy froze for an instant, taken by surprised, then she abandoned herself to it.

Finally Faith broke the kiss and gasped, "Okay."

"Okay?" Buffy asked, confused, hopeful and afraid of that hope.

"Okay," Faith replied, smiling even as her eyes filled with tears. "Okay. I'm staying."

"You are? But what about all the things you said, about Willow, and Xander, and everything? What's changed?"

"I have. Whatever it takes to make this work, I'll do it. I'm not leaving you, Buffy, I- "

It was Faith's turn to be silenced by a kiss. When they released each other, after what seemed like days, they both had reddened eyes and cheeks smeared with tears, but neither could stop smiling.

"Wow!" Faith said, her eyes a little out of focus.

"Big wow," Buffy agreed. "I guess we should probably have that talk."

"Yeah."

A short while later, the Slayers faced each other across the kitchen counter, each clutching a steaming mug.

"So..." Buffy began nervously. "How... how does this work? You and me?"

"I don't know. I've never been that big on relationships before, you know? I guess I'd like to take things kind of slow, if that's okay with you?"

"Sure! I mean, I want to do this right, not have it be some 'get some, get gone' kind of thing."

"Okay, yeah, good. So, how do you want to do it? Go slow, I mean."

"Well, what are you doing tomorrow night?"

"I don't know, patrol, maybe meet the guys at the Bronze... wait a second, are you asking me out? As in, on a date?"

"Well, yeah," Faith replied. "I mean, that's what couples do when they start out, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but we're not exactly like other couples, are we? We already live together, and we've kind of shot past the dating stage to the big-time emotional trauma."

"I know, but we're Slayers; we're never going to be exactly normal, are we? I just thought it'd be nice to try doing the relationship, getting to know you thing."

Buffy thought about it for a moment. "Yeah, it would. I'd like that." She was about to say something more, but yawned. "Sorry, it's not you, I promise."

Faith was already yawning herself. "No problem, Buffy, it's kind of late. Let's get some sleep - we can talk dates in the morning."

"Okay." Buffy drained her mug and walked around the counter to stand by Faith. "So, if we're starting in first-date mode, does that mean no more smoochies?"

"Not a chance!" Faith replied with a wolfish grin, wrapping her arms around Buffy's waist and pulling her close.

Buffy sank into the warmth of her embrace, eyes closing as she tasted Faith's lips again. A slight noise made her open one eye a fraction, and what she saw sent her jerking back, away from Faith. "Dawn!"

Faith snapped her head around to see Dawn standing in the hallway, still in the ball-gown she'd somehow acquired the previous evening, her bloodshot eyes staring at them in disbelief.

"You... you... are you... you can't do this if you're leaving! I can't stand it!"

Buffy rushed to her sister. "No-one's going anywhere, Dawnie."

"She's right, Dawn, I'm staying."

"You are? And the two of you are..."

Buffy looked back at Faith. "Yeah."

Dawn's squeal of delight had both Slayers covering their ears. "Oh my God, I can't believe it! I love you guys!" She flung herself at Faith, almost knocking her off her feet with a hug that meant more to Faith than she'd ever have dared to hope. Almost immediately Dawn was reaching out for Buffy as well, drawing her into the embrace.

"Okay, okay, time we all hit the sack," Buffy said, her voice lighter than it had been in weeks. They all trooped upstairs, and Dawn quickly disappeared into her room, leaving the Slayers alone.

"Quite a night, Buffy," Faith said, one hand caressing Buffy's cheek.

Buffy smiled, putting her arms around Faith's waist. "I've had worse."

They kissed one last time, and then turned away to their respective bedrooms. Faith was just about to open the door when Buffy called to her. "Faith?"

"Yeah, Buffy?"

"Call me B."
