

## Queen Zulu – Smitten

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**Rating:** NC17

**Pairing:** Buffy / Faith

**Disclaimer:** All character belong to Joss Wheedon and ME

**Time Line:** Bad Girls

**Summary:** Faith's killing in the alley may destroy her relationship with Buffy.

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*You put your face in front of mine,*

*All but hiding desperation.*

*Hunger leaks out of your eyes,*

*Whetting me with dark temptation.*

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It wasn't like Buffy hadn't skipped class before. It wasn't even the first time she'd skipped a test.

Climbing out the window while the teacher's back was turned was new, though.

But Faith's grin was a challenge and a dare, her raised eyebrow accused Buffy of being chicken, and the little heart she'd drawn in the mist of her breath--well, it didn't mean anything, just that there were vamps to slay, but something about it prickled at her and made her jump up, filled with a strange, dark energy. She barely even noticed Willow's protests and Xander's gape, just did what she had to do--climbed out and followed Faith.

Faith was leaning back against the warm brick wall, her smile wide and lazy and showing off her dimples. She tipped her head back and leered at Buffy, smoothly, blatantly, again with the daring--now, daring Buffy to call her on checking her out. Buffy didn't say anything this time because she'd never had the nerve to say anything before. The first time she'd noticed Faith's eyes doing the leisurely once-over, she hadn't believed it; now, it was just par for the course, just Faith, and Buffy shivered under the appreciative weight of her stare and ignored it.

As much as she could.

"Come on, girlfriend, we got vamps to slay," Faith said, and led the way. She was walking way faster than she needed to. They both were. Buffy was psyched up on the feel of Faith's eagerness, the amazing high of anticipating the slay. Adrenaline pumped through her and she fought not to break out into an exultant run, knowing that Faith would match her, would challenge her and push her until they were breathless and aching and yet still filled to the brim with that strange desire. It was partly the Slayer-instincts in her that ached for the kill, and partly it was the way Faith--

Well, it was a Slayer thing. Even Willow wouldn't understand the death-need of it, the way every vamp exploding into a choking cloud around her stake made her almost complete. Almost. It was a thing she sort of understood about Angel--he felt the same way about blood. Every time he drank from his little hospital blood-packets, he was doing what the demon inside him demanded--almost.

The demon wanted more. The demon wanted death and pain and the hot spurting feel of a torn carotid artery, pumping out bittersweet blood in time with the last of a victim's screams. Angel was burying a part of himself, denying that he still wanted that. But she knew he did--she could sense it, every time his kisses moved over her neck and he would jerk away like she burned him. And he would end it, there, tell her it was late, she should be sleeping, and she knew that when she was out of sight he would be running--running away from her. From her blood.

And until Faith arrived, Buffy had been running as well.

She'd hated that death-lust inside her. She pushed it aside and pretended slaying was only a job, a chore. She'd hidden the quick thrill of killing underneath a barrage of puns and quips. Like it didn't mean anything. Like she wasn't living for it, with it, in it...

Almost. Because she'd never given in completely. Not yet.

Sometimes, in the beginning, when she was out slaying with Merrick and then Giles, she would make her kill and then turn to them only to see them staring at her strangely, like they were wondering about her...wondering what she was truly feeling. They were probably looking for signs of it, whatever it was--the desire that filled her in hot, shuddering waves after a long night's patrol. The desire she fought against when she was alone, in bed, in the shower...

Not that there was anything wrong with it, just--she wasn't like that. She wasn't.

Oh, but Faith was.

She sauntered along the street like a goddess lowering herself enough to appear on the earth. She was wearing leather like a second skin, even in the California heat. She was probably wet with sweat inside those pants, although the filmy barely-there shirt might be compensating. Every couple of blocks she'd drop back two steps behind Buffy for a moment, and Buffy could practically feel her eyes, like hands, roaming over her ass and then down between--

Faith had taught her that the slay-lust wasn't bad, wasn't evil, in the same way that Angel's need for blood was. But Buffy knew she was the better slayer because she kept it under control. Faith was wild and careless, chasing down her high however she could, no matter what danger she put herself in. Kendra had been the exact opposite--too controlled, like a Watcher's experiment in trying to rein in a Slayer's natural tendencies. And those two extremes tore at Buffy, like one big tug-of-war, the wanting on one hand and the caution on the other.

The more she slayed with Faith, though, the more the desire was winning. Right now--right at this exact moment--she knew that if a vampire appeared, she would stake it with a smile on

her face and a quivering pleasure curling between her legs.

"Here," Faith said. She was holding a stake, its grip shiny with long familiarity in her hands. She was pointing at a manhole cover, and all at once Buffy felt like she'd been doused in ice water. Clarity and prudence returned.

"How many?" she asked.

"Six, I think," Faith said. "Come on, don't tell me you're scared?"

"Six to two? In the sewers? And you're not even sure--it could be more."

Faith shrugged, that devil-may-care gesture, and flashed another dimple-showing grin. She looked Buffy up and down again, slowly, lingering in all the right places. "I may not die happy," she said. "But it will have been close." She kicked the manhole cover off. It hit the pavement with a grand, ringing clang that would probably warn every vamp in a mile-wide radius. "Your call, girlfriend," Faith said, and dropped down into the sewer.

Lust and fear. Being good or being free. Sounds of combat drifted up, Faith's voice yelling curses, and before Buffy could make a rational decision, she was falling into the dark.

A vamp was on her immediately, huge and incredibly strong. Buffy felt the tightness in her gut that screamed danger at her, that told her she was surrounded, that was her Slayer-self tensing at the feel of vampires. She lashed out with a kick to his kneecap that sent him stumbling back with a growl. She launched herself at him, her punches exploding in his face, his ribs. She felt the crunch when she broke his nose, blood streaming down his face. His tongue darted out to lap at it, and he grinned at her, showing fangs. Buffy grabbed him when he rushed her and sent him over her hip, flying into the concrete wall. Before he could rise, she slammed her stake into his back. She felt it in slow motion, as it went through his clothes, piercing his skin, slipping through the bands of muscle, cracking a rib--and, finally, sinking into his heart. With a sound like a sigh, he dissolved into a dusty skeleton and then into nothingness.

And it was good.

She was grabbed from behind next, thick arms cutting off her breath and squeezing her ribs. She drove an elbow backwards, then leaned forwards to throw the next vamp over her head and down on her back. He leapt to his feet and swiped a punch at her that caught her high on her right cheek. Her eye watered, but not enough to blind her, and she swung a roundhouse kick into his temple, knocking him for a loop. He grabbed at her feet and pulled her to the ground beside him, and she cracked her elbow on the slimy shit-smelling floor. She scrambled closer to him, switching her stake to her other hand, wrestling him until she had his hand up behind his back. She twisted, hard, pressing at the same time, and felt more than heard the dull snap of his collarbone. He howled, all the fight gone out of him, and she drove her stake home. She was left sitting in his dust and a pool of filthy who-knew-what, in her favourite pants, no less. Her Slayer-rage was trying to emerge, clawing at the cage she'd imposed on it, but she forced herself to stop and see what was happening.

Faith was fighting the last vampire, and taking a beating. The tight confines of the sewer were no place for her wide, sweeping style, and she'd already taken the short end of the stick from

the three she'd fought first. Buffy waited until she saw an opening and shot to her feet, her stake already pointed in the right direction, and she impaled the vamp when Faith's kick sent him flying backwards.

The skeleton exploded into dust between them. Faith stared at her through the fading cloud of grit, her face twisted into an almost-snarl, her chest heaving with her rasping breath, her hands twitching around the stake she still held. Buffy was shaking, the slay-lust shrieking through her body, the ferocious energy singing like fire along her nerves. She held herself still with an effort, but she couldn't stop herself from staring at Faith, the dull flush climbing her cheeks, her pupils dilated to their full extent here in the sewer's dimness. Buffy could feel the connection between them flaring brighter than it ever had, sending cascades of ecstatic sparks down her back. She was wet with desire, and she could smell it in the air, feel it in the way that Faith's eyes were moving over her. There was something horribly, wonderfully wild in Faith's gaze.

Something that said, I want you.

And something in her wanted to answer.

Instead, she asked, "You hungry? We could maybe grab some burgers."

Faith's glance flicked away. "Yeah. That's cool." Her voice was low and husky. When she looked back, there was only the usual lazy appreciation in her eyes. Just Faith. Just good friends. Nothing strange going on with them, not that there was anything wrong with that, it was just that she--well, she wasn't like that. It wasn't even an issue. Which is why she didn't even really need to be thinking about it.

Buffy felt a surge of--something--go through her, as she bottled up all her Slayer instincts once more. Probably it was relief. She was relieved. She loved Angel; even though they could never--well, but that wasn't the point. She loved him. Not that that had anything to do with...this. There was no connection at all between the way Faith looked in her tight leather pants and cleavage-baring tank top and Buffy's relationship with Angel. So, of course it was relief.

Because it sure as hell wasn't disappointment.

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### Part 2

*You can read me like a trashy book*

*I'm barely keeping in these rages*

*So far, so clean, but I'm torn between,*

*See, I'm torn between these pages, pages.*

*I can hear the angel on my shoulder*

*And the devil on your lips.*

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The music throbbed through the walls of the Bronze, the deep bass drumming an impossible-to-sit-still-for beat. Faith grinned over her shoulder at Buffy as they swung through the doors, already dancing as she pushed through the crowd to get closer to the speakers. The hot press of dance-sweaty bodies warmed her after the cool night outside. Buffy let Faith shove open a space for them to gyrate within the heavy Friday night crush. The thunderous blare of band and audience felt like a solid thing, inside her, pulsing in time with her blood, and Buffy gave herself up to the music. She moved on instinct, feeling the brief brushes of warm strangers against her mostly-bare skin. The heat and the flashing lights whirled together, feeding a frenzy within her to move, to touch, to dance as hard as she could until she was panting for air.

Faith lifted her hands through her hair and slid them down her body to the music's pounding rhythm, inviting everyone within fifty feet to check her out. She led their eyes down from the black silk cloth she'd worn as an excuse for a top, to her tight-in-all-the-right-places leather pants, to the heavy combat boots that didn't match the outfit so much as they matched Faith. Buffy could feel the room gasp...or maybe it was her, releasing a breath she hadn't known she was holding.

Boys surrounded them, but somehow Faith's elbows managed to slam into them if they got too close. Still, the guys crowded in, but they were only obstacles to dance around, touches to avoid. Buffy closed her eyes and ignored them, stamping her heels down on their toes if they tried too hard to cop a feel. Even dancing blind, she knew every time it was Faith's fingers stroking up and down her bare back, Faith's hand settling on her hip to guide her closer for a second, for a beat, for an eternity. Every now and then, the animal fervor of the people around them pressed them together, so closely that Faith's swaying hips might ram into her ass, randomly, accidentally, the brief friction making her tremble. Even in the breathless heat, Faith's touch sent shivers through her.

But that was just the Slayer connection. If it weren't for that, Buffy could be dancing with anybody. It could have been Angel...and she was beginning to wish it was. She wanted to--well, to see him. She hadn't dropped in on him lately, and they hadn't even gone on a date since that disastrous French lunch movie. Buffy shoved away the guilt that thought provoked. Tonight was about fun.

And, really, Faith was miles ahead of Angel in the having-fun category.

Buffy felt the jangle of her vamp-alarm and opened her eyes, searching for the source of the sudden tension low in her stomach. Faith was looking, too, but she didn't pause in her dancing--if anything, her movements became even sexier. She was perfectly happy seducing the undead before staking them. Buffy twisted around, peering into the dark corners of the room, wondering where the danger was.

Angel was standing in the shadow of one of the pillars, watching her with a frown on his face, his shoulders hunched. As soon as he noticed that she'd seen him, he moved as though to leave. Buffy rushed across the floor, dismissing the boys who'd glommed on to her during the

dance.

She jumped up on Angel, wrapping her legs around his waist and locking her ankles. "Hey! You're not leaving, are you?"

Angel glanced over at Faith. "I saw you making friends."

She clasped her hands behind his neck. "I like you." She leaned in for a kiss, the coldness of his lips and tongue contrasting sharply with her pent-up heat. Her body was going crazy, the scratchy-twitch of her Slayer part demanding that she kill it kill it killit killitkillit, the pre-slay adrenaline flooding through her, mingling with the damp ache between her legs. Buffy gripped him tighter with her thighs, deliberately humping him right here in the middle of the Bronze. She felt him stir against her crotch and did it again. He was getting harder, but he stopped cooperating in the kiss and dropped his arms from around her waist, so that only her strength kept her clinging to him.

"You're not afraid of little old me, are you?" she asked.

"Buffy..." He was frowning fiercely at the air beside her left ear, his voice strained. "You know I can't..."

"I can sense this is a business trip." With a pout and a sigh, she released her legs and slid down him, feeling his erection pressed against her stomach.

Angel stepped back. "We'd better sit down."

Buffy turned her back on him and headed for the couches. Angel followed her, and she tried to bury the feeling that a vampire was creeping up on her. What the hell was going on with her Slayer instincts? Angel always set off her vamp-dar, but never this much. Her goddamn spidey sense couldn't tell good from evil, just vamps from humans, and right now that was doing more harm than good. Her stomach was doing flips, and she wished she were holding a stake--and it was just Angel.

Angel dragging along his matched set of emotional baggage. What did he think, that she didn't know exactly what the risks were if she asked him to--well--help her out? She wasn't ignorant. She knew damn well there were things they could do that wouldn't make him too happy. Hanging out with Faith was an education and a half as far as that went. But what could she do? Just grab him and whisper in his ear exactly what she wanted?

She snuggled next to him on the couch and wondered if she had the nerve. Faith would. Hell, Faith could probably give Angel pointers. Heat surged through her at the thought. Okay, she could admit it, she was horny. One dance, one kiss, an afternoon of some pretty intense slaying, and she was ready to jump out of her skin.

Before she could say anything, Angel shifted to the far end of the couch. "It's Balthazar," he said.

"Dead demon," she answered. Faith was dancing with some random guy now, hanging off his neck, her head thrown back as she rode his thigh. Angel could be carved out of some broody rock for all it looked like he cared about being here. "We have his amulet."

"He's not as dead as you think," Angel said. "Word on the street puts him in the packing warehouse on Devereau. I spoke to Giles, but he said you gave the amulet to someone."

"Ah-ha!" Wesley stepped in front of them, hands on his hips. "There you are!"

Buffy leaned sideways so she could see the dance floor behind him. Faith was practically raping that scrawny idiot she was dancing with.

"...and I think we ought to establish that if you're going out slaying, you leave me a number at which I can contact you."

Buffy glanced up at Wesley. She seized him by the lapel and yanked him closer, ignoring his girly shriek. She pulled the amulet out of his pocket.

"Walking around with that thing is like wearing a target," Angel said.

"I'll keep it safe...actually safe," Buffy said, with an irritated look at Wesley.

"It might be better if I took it," Angel said. He sounded like he was trying to reason with a two-year-old.

Fury slid through her, and Buffy clenched her fists around the amulet, feeling the diamonds digging into her skin. "You don't think I can handle it?" she said sweetly.

Angel's lips thinned with anger. "You've been acting reckless lately," he said.

Buffy glared at him. "Reckless?"

He refused to meet her gaze. "Not like yourself." He paused, scowling at the dance floor. "More like Faith."

Fury boiled over, but Buffy refused to let it show in her voice. "I'll do some recon on Balthazar."

Wesley looked back and forth between them. "If I may...Balthazar is dead. Am I the only one who remembers that?"

They both ignored him. Angel stood up. "I'll tell Giles where you're going, then I'll join you."

"Don't rush on my account."

"Buffy..." Angel sighed. "Why torture ourselves when we know what a loss of control would mean?"

Buffy stared at him for a moment, then brushed past him to grab Faith off the dance floor. She felt him leave out the front door by the fading ping of her vamp-dar. Did it never occur to him that maybe she'd like to lose control for once? She wasn't the one who had to worry--her soul was firmly attached. This afternoon in the sewers she'd nearly let herself be carried away, losing herself in the slaying. Hours later and she was still on the knife-edge of the struggle,

the killing-need and the hot crashing want of the dance balanced against the sensible good-girl she was supposed to be.

And at this rate she was going to be that sensible supposed-to-be person forever.

Well, fuck that.

"Faith!" she yelled over the music. "We gotta go!"

Faith grinned at her, still hanging off her partner's neck. Buffy grabbed her by her free arm and gave a half-serious yank to detach them. The guy protested, but Faith only waved and said, "Call me!"

Buffy shouldered her way through the throng, pulling Faith by the hand even after she started following voluntarily. They stepped out into the relative cool of the alley and Buffy dropped Faith's hand, trying to shake the tingles. She paced while Faith leaned back against the door and lit a cigarette.

"You doing okay, girlfriend?" she asked. "You're looking tense."

Buffy wanted to jump up and down to get rid of some of the excess energy that Angel's appearance had caused. Instead she kicked a trashcan, nearly putting her foot through its side and sending it crashing into a wall twenty feet away. "I'm fine."

Faith nodded and blew a smoke ring. "Okay, no big, I was just asking. So what's the what?"

"Balthazar's still alive. We're going to take a look."

"Just a look?"

Buffy whirled around. How could Faith be so calm after all this--the slaying, and the dancing, and--and everything? Why was she suddenly the one who couldn't stay still for two seconds? But the tip of Faith's cigarette was wobbling, and she was smiling like she couldn't stop, her eyes gleaming underneath the kohl-dark makeup and the alley's shadows. She took another drag, her breath coming in a quick, shuddery sigh.

"Yeah. Just a look," Buffy said. "We're not going to do anything reckless."

"I shoulda known," Faith said.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

Faith shrugged and pitched her butt in a shower of sparks. "Just that you're all about the window-shopping, B."

"We'd need more fire power than none," Buffy said, trying to hold down the rage that kept wanting to take her over. She did not need any of Faith's insinuations. Not now. "And Angel's going to join us later."

"Who-fucking-hoo," Faith said. "Let's motor, then."

Buffy led the way to Devereau, not paying anymore attention to their route than necessary. She couldn't think--she was too busy playing over her conversation with Angel, and it blurred in her head, cut through with the static of her stupid (kill it) vamp alarm.

Faith touched her arm and she nearly answered with an instinctive punch. She caught herself at the last instant, and Faith smiled faintly.

"Check it out, B," she said, pointing. "That is too good."

Buffy raised an eyebrow at the sign that read Meyer's Sport and Tackle. "You're not seriously going to..."

Faith was already across the street. With a powerful kick, she shattered the main display window and climbed in through the sharded glass. Buffy stayed where she was, paralyzed. She hated the itchy danger-feel of being without a stake, but she'd meant for this to be recon only. She knew she was too close to the edge, and if she got her hands on a weapon then there would be no more excuses, no more holding back.

You've been acting reckless lately.

"When are you gonna get this, B?" Faith called, appearing at the window with a long-bow in her hands. "Life for a Slayer is very simple: want...take...have."

Want.

Buffy walked across the street and ducked under the slivered remains of the plate glass window. Faith grinned at her, already tucking a pair of nunchucks into her pants.

Take.

The knife case shone under the display lights. Buffy stepped up to it, and her fist shot out before she was aware, smashing the glass and catching the knife as it fell.

Have.

"Now how about slaying that Baltha-whatzit?" Faith asked. "New Olympic category? Most dead vamps in one day."

You haven't been acting like yourself...more like Faith...

Buffy stared at the knife in her hand. "Tomorrow...we'll have Giles and maybe even Willow--she's got these protection spells she wants to try..."

"Fuck that," Faith said. "You want to put 'em in danger? You said Angel was gonna back us up."

We know what a loss of control would mean...

Buffy gripped the knife's handle. "Are there more of those arrows?"

Police sirens wailed in the distance, getting closer.

"Come on, B, let's get out of here," Faith said. She grabbed Buffy's hand and hauled her out, running back to the shadows of the alley across the street.

Buffy looked back once, to see two cops drawing guns as they entered the store. Then she was running at Faith's side, the knife's grip steady in her sweaty palm. There was no guilt--there was only the Slayer. She matched Faith's stride, tried to pull ahead, but neither one could outrace the other. Excitement thrummed through her, like a dance beat, like lightning; electric and terrifying and something she was finally ready to move with. A hot spurt of sparks swept over her every time Faith brushed against her. In all the world, there was only the two of them, hot and quick and real, want meeting want.

Buffy's spidey sense jarred her an instant before the first vampire dropped down from the fire escape above them. There was no thought before action: she and Faith moved in tandem, kicking his feet out from under him and slamming an arrow into his chest a second later. Faith was laughing, breathless, as the breeze whipped the dust away, and Buffy found herself doing the same. This felt good; this felt right; and Faith's eyes were wide and dark and Buffy could nearly count her heartbeats by the pulse jumping in her throat.

"If they keep coming one at a time this is gonna be a piece of cake," Faith said, bouncing on her toes and making mock-thrusts with her arrow.

Buffy nodded, took a deep breath, smelling the sea and the stink of the packing plant and the gravedust of the dead vamp. "Next one's mine," she challenged, and sprinted off down the alley, Faith at her heels.

The next vamp came at them faster, the third and fourth attacked together, the fifth got in a lucky kick to her ribs that nearly knocked her wind out. Buffy's body buzzed with the constant sense of vampires lurking. She'd just staked the sixth when a hand landed on her shoulder, and she automatically bent over and yanked the arm, sending another vampire flying into a dumpster. Faith raised her arrow and plunged it down towards the vamp's chest when Buffy saw his face.

"Faith! No!" she yelled.

Too late.

The dust seemed to erupt in slow motion, starting where Faith's stake plunged into his heart, expanding in a clogging storm of powder, skin and then skeleton exploding into nothingness, and the last thing Buffy saw was the agonized look on Angel's face before he died.

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### Part 3

*She says, "Where is the place that the good souls go?*

*Where they take away, take away, the pain that they know?*

*Where are the angels, angels, angels?"*

*I cannot tell you, my little darling.*

*All my faith has fallen, fallen, fallen.*

---

The world slammed to a standstill.

The alley was empty. There was no sign, no evidence, nothing to show that Angel had been there a moment before. There was only a drift of ash in the wind; a scent of dead roses and freshly turned earth. The smell of cemeteries. Angel's smell.

Faith backed up a step, holding out her empty hands. The arrow had dusted as well. "Jesus, B--Buffy. I--I didn't know-- "

Buffy stared at the oil-stained dumpster, the indentation in the metal where Angel's body had slammed into it--where she'd thrown him. Her chest burned, her heartbeat pounded in her wrists like a hammer. She couldn't breathe. She hurt, every bruise or slash clamouring for attention. She shook her head, slowly, once, twice, then turned to look at Faith.

Faith stared back at her, her eyes wide. Something there. Regret, yes. And...fear. But, also-- pleasure. The death-lust.

Slayer. Vampire. Dead vampire.

Buffy crouched down beside the dumpster and reached out to touch the ground where he'd been. Her fingers were shaking. The grime coating the asphalt felt slick, gritty, cold. The wind kicked up sharp gusts of dirt, chilling her now that she wasn't running. The feel of vampires lurking was fading, was already gone. No more Eliminati, not tonight. They'd go back to their master and tell him how they'd lost, again. The satisfaction in that thought seemed very far away.

"Buffy--shit, I'm sorry--"

A touch on her shoulder. Warm. Trembling.

This time she did nothing to stop the instinctive attack.

She launched herself out of her crouch and smashed a right uppercut into Faith's jaw. The shock on her face was almost comic, filling Buffy with a vicious gratification. This was desire. She wanted to hurt, to destroy, anything, everything her body was begging for. She plowed her fist into Faith's gut, doubling her over. Pleasure thrummed through her, a vibration too deep to hear. Buffy grabbed Faith's head and pulled it down, bringing up her knee into her face.

She missed. Faith shoved her leg aside, spinning her around, then kicked the back of her knee and dropped her on her back. Pain flared, pale next to the red glare of her fury. Buffy flipped

to her feet and drove forward with a kick that clipped Faith's thigh even as she was backing up. Seeing Faith limp filled Buffy with a savage joy, spurring her forward. Faith's hands were up defensively, a bruise already showing on her chin, almost as dark as her makeup, her lower lip swollen as if with kisses.

Buffy rushed her, throwing wild punches, not caring where they landed. Pain roared in her knuckles with every hit, satisfying yet feeding her hunger. Faith blocked most of them, making no attempt to fight back, only to thrust her away. Buffy fought blind, the world blurred by tears. Cold air corroded her lungs, and she couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe. Lust stormed through her, every wish she'd never made, every urge she'd never given in to. She snapped a kick at Faith's chest, but Faith caught her foot and pushed, sending her sprawling again.

Faith bent over, one arm hugging her ribs, panting. "Buffy--what the hell..."

Buffy wanted to stop, and she wanted to go on forever. Faith watched her like she was a rabid dog. Buffy lay on the ground where she'd been thrown, sobbing. Faith wasn't--wouldn't let herself be--a part of this. Her eyes flicked from side to side, searching for an escape. Behind the bruises, her makeup was smudged and running. The wind whipped at her hair, leaving it a dark curly tangle. Faith clenched her hands into fists, but she was quaking, her whole body trembling. Not with fear. No. She wasn't afraid.

Faith was holding herself back.

Furious, Buffy scrambled to her feet and lunged at Faith, crashing with her into the wall, their bodies pressed together. Faith's breath exploded out, a wash of cigarette smoke. They were both slick with sweat, smeared with the alley's filth. Buffy held Faith's upper arms, her fingers digging into her flesh, shivering as each harsh pant brushed Faith's breasts against hers.

Buffy squeezed her eyes shut, leaning her forehead against Faith's shoulder, her tears hot against their chilled skin. Faith was still, but her breathing grew ragged, the tension melting out of her muscles. Buffy bit her lip, concentrating on the electric feel of her silk top sliding across her nipples as they moved. With a sound--some sound, a whimper, a word, Faith's name--Buffy turned her head and nipped at the pulse fluttering in Faith's neck. Faith jerked, and Buffy's hands tightened automatically on her arms. There would be bruises there, the shape of her fingers, but Buffy was long past caring.

She let go with her teeth and sucked at the spot, moving her lips over Faith's neck and jaw. Faith moved her head, not trying to get away, but not trying to get closer, either. Anger drifted beneath Buffy's desire, a dark undercurrent, and she bit Faith again, harder. Faith's breath burst out next to her ear, making her shiver. Her mouth glided lightly over the bruise from her first punch, moving away again. Buffy flicked her tongue out, feeling the heat of blood throbbing through Faith's puffed lip.

"Buffy..." The word was whispered nearly into her mouth.

Buffy froze. Faith pulled back a hair's breadth, her eyes only reflected pools in the darkness. "What the hell, Buffy? Why are you fucking with me?"

Buffy moved closer, pressing Faith harder against the wall, feeling the frantic gush of

pleasure between her legs. "Because I want to."

Faith turned her head, looking away. "The hell you do."

Buffy let go of Faith's arm and snaked her hand down her front, over the zipper of her leather pants. Squeezed. "Tell me you don't get off on this," she said. Mocking. Harsh.

Faith grabbed Buffy's arm and swung her around, too fast for Buffy to respond, trapping her in a full nelson. Buffy lurched forward. Faith followed the motion and then hauled her back. Buffy threw her head into Faith's face, but Faith ducked away. She squirmed madly in Faith's arms, fighting and writhing. She didn't know what she was struggling for, to escape from Faith's hold or to get as much friction from the encounter as she could. She panted out curses, thrusting her ass into Faith's crotch. Finally, exhausted, she stopped, fighting her desire to melt backwards into Faith's solid strength.

"You don't know what the hell you want," Faith whispered into her ear, her voice rough. "I just fucking staked your boyfriend after you threw him at me. You think you can screw me over?" She loosened her hold with one arm, slithering her fingers down Buffy's front, mimicking her actions from before. Her hand pushed beneath the waistband of Buffy's pants. Buffy gasped as fire shot through her. Faith's fingers slipped easily into her soaking pussy, rubbing small, gentle circles around her clit with her thumb. Buffy twitched and moaned, twisting closer to Faith's hand. She could feel her orgasm building quickly, its sweet, hurtful edge knifing through her thighs, her stomach. She opened her mouth to scream--

And Faith pulled her hand away. She shoved Buffy and stepped back at the same time, so that they stood facing each other. By whatever instinct, they were both crouched into fighting stances, fists raised. Faith lifted her hand to her mouth and sucked Buffy's juices off her fingers one at a time, watching Buffy's eyes the entire time.

"Bitch," Buffy hissed, vicious with frustrated longing.

"Whatever, girlfriend," Faith said. "How would you feel tomorrow knowing you'd been fucked five minutes after Angel bit it?"

Buffy shrugged angrily. She hung on the brink of coming, needing something, anything, to get her off. Needing Faith. She was still coiled, tight, ready to lash out in any direction. Most likely, Faith's direction. But the cold and the standing were bleeding away the slay-lust, and she was falling. She tried not to look at the empty space near the dumpster. "Where do you get off telling me what to feel?"

"I don't," Faith said. "And believe me, I'm not happy about it." She relaxed, slowly, keeping a sharp eye on Buffy's fists. "This ends. Now."

Buffy dropped her fists. She let her head fall, and pressed the heel of one hand into her pelvic bone, shuddering. "Please, Faith..."

Faith stepped forward, backing her up until she was leaning back into the frigid metal. She looked Buffy up and down, the familiar wolfish leer. "What, B?" she asked. "You want me to fuck you? You want to come for me, you want me to make you scream?" She smiled, consideringly, her hand hovering a fraction of an inch above Buffy's collarbone. Buffy could

feel the heat of her hands, her body, so close, so fucking close...

"Yes," she breathed, tilting her head back against the dumpster, baring her throat.

Faith's hand closed on her neck and squeezed, lightly, but with all the threat of her Slayer strength. "It'll end like shit," she said, stroking her thumb over Buffy's pulse. Her eyes were as dark as oil slicks, and Buffy could see her wavering--the lust, the wanting.

"I don't care," Buffy said. "Get some, get gone--that's your motto."

Faith's hand spasmed shut, cutting off Buffy's breath for an agonizing instant. She stepped back. "The answer's no," she said. "Not like this. Never again like this."

"I--" Buffy stopped, wondering what never again meant, then forced it out: "I need it."

Faith turned away. "Angel was a nice guy. I'm sorry. Maybe tomorrow that'll mean something to you. I'm taking you home, and if that means hauling your ass over my shoulder, then that's how it'll be."

Buffy shook her head. Her eyes skittered over the dusty alley ground, again. "I can't--"

Faith looked over her shoulder. "You need to."

Buffy slumped back against the dumpster, closing her eyes. She was sweaty and dirty and sore; she could still feel her body singing on its slay-high, the desire washing over her. And Angel was dead. Tears burned salty trails down her cheeks. She felt Faith take her hand, warm and solid, squeezing even though her knuckles were split and bruised.

"Buffy. It's time to go home."

Buffy allowed herself to be led.

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### Part 4

*I stutter like a broken clutch*

*When you touch me too much*

*My tongue gets twisted in your twirl*

*You say I'm not your kind of girl.*

*What kind of girl should I be?*

*The kind of girl who doesn't see*

*That you're looking at me*

## Queen Zulu – Smitten

---

*Like you want to be seeing someone else*

*Somebody else.*

---

The sun broke through the stained glass windows, splashing colour over the dark wood paneling of the church. It was empty and dim. Silent.

Buffy walked up the aisle, the train of her gown hissing over the carpet. Angel stood in the shadows by the altar, waiting for her.

She reached out for him, took his icy hands in hers. The priest blessed them, named them man and wife. She raised her lips to be kissed. Angel led her past the pews.

The double doors stood open. Blinding sunlight streamed through, white-hot, glaring. She tried to stop, but Angel only smiled and tugged her forward.

He disappeared. Buffy closed her eyes; she felt the puff of dust sting her face.

When she opened her eyes Faith stood beside her, holding her hand. They walked together into daylight.

Flicker.

Faith opened the hotel room's door. It was immense, gorgeous. Blood-red satin sheets covered the bed, wide bay windows opened above the town. Below them and far away, the setting sun faded into a molten bronze sea.

Faith raised an eyebrow at Buffy, then swept her off her feet, carrying her across the threshold.

Faith let her down and leapt into the center of the bed, stretching spread-eagled, black leather on red lace. Closed her eyes. Lay as quietly as death.

Flicker.

Buffy stood next to the bed. It was bare, white, stark. The slow hum of machinery was interrupted by the pattern of electric heartbeats. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Faith was pale and drawn, her arms hooked to IVs, her breathing a mechanical whoosh of air down a tube in her mouth.

Buffy reached for Faith. The knife she held stabbed deeply into Faith's flesh, and blood spurted from her stomach. The gray hospital room filled with its coppersweet stench. The sheets turned crimson.

Flicker.

"You killed her for me," Angel said. He stood on Faith's other side, holding her hand.

The knife was wet and slick in her hands. Warm with Faith's blood.

The heart monitor stuttered, blipped, repeated. Shuddered. Stopped.

Beeeeeeep.

The knife was a stake, and it sank into Angel's chest like a stone into a calm pool; the ripples were the dust of his death.

Buffy killed him, and when it was over, Faith was still dead.

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"Buffy! Honey, wake up."

Buffy opened her eyes, squinting in the sudden flare of light. "Mom?"

Her mom sat on her bed, brushing her hair off her face with gentle fingers. "You were crying in your sleep. Bad dreams?"

Buffy rubbed her eyes, surprised to find her cheeks wet with tears. "Yeah," she whispered. "Dreams."

"How about some waffles? Nothing cheers you up like waffles." Mom smiled, but Buffy could see the worry in her eyes. "You and Faith certainly got back late last night. Not that I stayed up! And I'm not going to ask boring Mom-questions about your slaying."

Buffy smiled back, but her face felt stiff. She felt sick to her stomach, and the mention of waffles made her want to gag. She closed her eyes and lay back, covering her face with her arm. "I--I'm not too hungry."

"Are you sick?" Mom asked next, leaning forward to press the back of her hand to Buffy's cheek. "No fever."

"No, I'm just--not hungry right now." Buffy clenched a fist, concentrating on the pain of her fingernails digging into her palm. Why couldn't her mom just leave her alone? She could feel tears tightening her throat again, the scene in the alley playing out against closed eyelids. She felt drained, weak, empty; there was nothing left of last night's Slayer heat. She was back in control. She wanted to be relieved, but there was no room for it; all she could feel was the nothingness where the war had been.

"All right," Mom said. "But...if you need anything...?"

"Yeah," Buffy said, not meaning it. The weight lifted from her bed, and Mom left her room, closing the door softly. Buffy rolled on her side and let the tears come, fighting to keep quiet, hugging Mr. Gordo in a death grip. She wanted to be crying for Angel, for losing him, but the face that wouldn't leave her mind was Faith's...

Faith, bruised and hurt, looking up at her from the bottom of the porch steps while Buffy

---

opened the front door. Faith, still standing on the lawn, leaning against the tree below her window as Buffy got ready for bed. Faith, glancing over her shoulder one last time as she left, her face pale in the moonlight, while Buffy sat on her windowsill and tried to wake up from a horrible dream.

She couldn't wake from reality, and her Slayer dreams were worse.

Did Faith have the dreams?

Don't think about Faith.

Why not? You nearly--if she hadn't--

Don't think about Faith.

Buffy threw Mr. Gordo at the wall as hard as she could. She had to do something, anything, to stop the thinking. She showered, got dressed, picked up Mr. Gordo and pushed some of the fluff back inside the split seam. She was still holding him, trying to keep him in one piece, when the doorbell rang.

Her heart leapt, wondering if it might be Faith. What could she say to her? And did she have time to change? But there were no Slayer-tingles, and then Willow's voice was greeting her Mom, and she remembered that Willow had been excited about meeting her today. Buffy closed her eyes and braced herself against Willow's happiness.

There was a knock, then Willow popped her head around the door, a half-anxious, half-hopeful look on her face. "Hey, Buffy!" she chirped.

Buffy tensed against Willow's cheerfulness, and smiled back. "Hi, Willow."

"Look what I brought!" Willow plopped down beside her, dropping a sachet of herbs. "Smell."

Buffy stared at the packet for moment. "Lavender," she said, trying to sound like she was interested. The tone fell flat, and Willow gave her a hurt look before going on as if everything was fine.

"It's a little something we witches like to call a protection spell," she said, putting on a big proud smile. As if Buffy had asked. "I might be the first Wiccan to do all my casting in minty-fresh scent!"

"That's great, Will." Buffy smiled again. She felt so fucking fake doing it. It was a wonder her face didn't crack and fall off.

Willow nodded, but all her puppyish enthusiasm was gone. "So...what's up tonight? With the slayage? Are we going after Balthazar? 'Cause Giles said--"

"No." Buffy fiddled with the woven bag. She looked up in time to see the hurt look flit across Willow's face again, though she tried to hide it. She probably thought Buffy was abandoning her. "No, I mean, I'm not going slaying tonight. I can't..."

Can't risk losing control again. Can't risk letting the Slayer take control.

Can't risk going out with Faith.

"But, Buffy, as long as you have his amulet he's going to come after you. I thought you and Faith checked out his evil lair last night, and we--"

Buffy pushed herself off the bed and walked to the window, staring out. Evil lair. Like it was all some comic book game, like it wasn't for real every time she patrolled, as if people didn't die because of her-- She realized she was crushing the herb-bag in her hand and felt tears start when she saw the scatter of dried leaves and cloth that was all that was left of it. "I didn't. We didn't," she said. No. I was too busy coming on to Faith to do my job.

Just a job. Just a fuck in an alley. Just Faith.

Willow stuttered out a few more "buts" and then settled on, "What were you--what were you guys doing then?" She sounded nervous, like maybe she didn't want to hear the real answer to that question--as if she knew what the real answer was. Or maybe all Buffy was hearing was the sad jealousy in Willow's voice, because she'd been out with Faith instead of her.

Buffy crossed her arms, holding herself tight, holding herself in. Nothing left to let go of. Nothing left of her. "We--Faith...she staked Angel," she said, her voice cracking. Accidentally! her mind insisted, but she didn't say it. And it was my fault. I did it. If I hadn't been so fucking reckless...

"Oh, my God!" Willow jumped up and rushed over to her, turning her around. "And I'm going on about protection spells...which are stupid anyway...I mean, I thought something was wrong, but--oh, Buffy, I'm so sorry. Are you okay? No, dumb question, of course you're not, and--oh. I suck at best-friendness. You can fire me if you want. But don't. No--I--what happened? Did Faith--no, shut up, offer silent sympathy, or--Buffy...oh my God..."

"She staked him," Buffy whispered, staring over Willow's shoulder, out at the lawn where Faith had stood last night. For how long? An hour? Two? Why? Because of what Buffy had--had done to her? She shifted, aware of a low heat starting between her thighs. Because of what they'd almost done. But...

Not like this. Never again like this.

"Buffy..." Willow peered at her, touching her arm. "Faith's--I mean, you know how she is. And you, I don't even know what to say. Is Angel really--gone gone? There's nothing we can..." Willow trailed off, gesturing vaguely to finish the thought, and shrugged. "A spell, maybe?"

"I never knew why he came back," Buffy said. What was the point? She killed him because she had to, and he came back. Something brought him back. There had to be a reason. Was it just so that he could die again, uselessly, stupidly?

"Here...sit down." Willow patted her gently, herding her to the bed. She sat down, and Willow faced her cross-legged, holding her hands. Buffy stared at their clasped hands. Faith's hands

were warmer...stronger...and her touch was--

Buffy felt her face warm, and she pulled away from Willow's grasp. "I'm sorry. I can't--I can't think. I just--"

There was a sudden tingle in the pit of her stomach, and Buffy looked out the window again. Faith was striding across the lawn, her hands stuffed into her jeans pockets, staring at her feet. Her face was veiled by the long, loose fall of her hair. She took the porch steps in one leap. Buffy forced herself to stay still, not to go rushing downstairs. There was a long pause before the bell rang.

Willow raised her eyebrows, but when Buffy didn't go to answer the door, she just sat with her, being silently sympathetic. Buffy ignored her and listened while her mom let Faith in, Faith's polite but gruff responses, then the Slayer-soft footsteps on the stairs. There was another long pause while Faith stood outside the bedroom door and Buffy waited, straining to hear as much as she could. Willow stared at her as if Buffy was lost in thought.

Finally, Faith knocked. Willow jumped. Buffy squeezed her hands together in her lap, the Slayer-nearness sparks growing. There was no danger, no spidey-sense, and yet she could feel her body revving up, tickling anticipation through her. She cleared her throat. "Come in."

Faith opened the door and stepped in, glancing around the room with mild interest, like she'd never seen it before. Buffy stared at her hands.

Willow stood up and positioned herself between the two of them, trying to play the protector, as if she had a chance if the two of them decided to get into it. Buffy blushed at her lap and wished that Willow would leave, that she hadn't shown up, that Buffy hadn't told her anything about last night...but at least she hadn't told her everything.

"Hello, Faith," Willow said. Her voice was icy.

Faith's head whipped around. Buffy refused to look up, though she knew Faith wanted to meet her eyes now. To ask why the hell she'd said anything to Willow--and why she hadn't told the truth.

"Hey, Red," she answered, calmly enough.

"That's quite the shiner you've got," Willow said. "Bad luck patrolling?"

Faith cracked her knuckles. "You could say," she said, and this time her smoky voice was edged and hard.

Buffy risked a peek at Faith. Her eye wasn't really black, but enough that you could tell--especially if you knew how fast Slayers healed, and what it took to hurt them for longer than a day. Her lip was still swollen, too, only slightly, and maybe it was the sort of thing you wouldn't notice unless you were close...kissing-distance close. Her makeup didn't help, either, the dark eye shadow and the wine-red lipstick showing off her injuries more than hiding them. She was wearing black jeans and a red t-shirt under her jean-jacket, a lot less revealing than yesterday's clothes, but still tight and sexy and--

"So...you ready to motor, B?" Faith asked.

Buffy tensed. "What?"

"Last I checked, we still had one not-so-dead demon to make deader," Faith said.

Willow's gasp was almost too soft to hear. Buffy and Faith both did.

"Balthazar," Faith said, quietly. "You're not leaving all the fun to me, are you?"

"Fun?" asked Willow. "You still think that you're going out there to get hungry and horny?"

Faith shrugged and stared at Buffy.

"Buffy's not going," Willow said. "And after--after last night I don't think you should even be here, let alone asking her to go with you! You--you're--well, I'm not going to say what I think, because I'm nicer than that, but I think you should leave."

Buffy felt Faith's anger growing, a match for her own, as if their connection was more than just a warning system. She could feel Faith's muscles straining as she flexed her shoulders, the dark energy moving through her. It filled the empty places inside her where she'd carved away at the limits of her control, and Buffy found herself leaning towards Faith. She wanted to touch her again--she wanted to slay again--she wanted.

"Fine," Faith said. "But if I go alone--I might die..." She raised an eyebrow at Buffy, then turned on her heel and walked out of the room.

Willow gave Buffy a look, and followed Faith down the stairs.

Buffy snuck to the half-open door, where she could watch them without being seen, and listened.

"This is not the time for your games. Buffy needs help." Everything in Willow's voice implied that Faith was not the one to be offering it.

Faith stared at her for a long moment. "I think you're wrong."

"I'm her best friend. I've known her--"

"You don't know about this. This is a Slayer thing."

"Yeah? Who's wrong now?" Willow crossed her arms. "Faith, maybe you can shut off all the emotions that you want. But Buffy's not like that."

Faith glanced back up the stairs, and Buffy knew she knew that Buffy was listening. "Okay, listen, Red, let me explain it to you the way I see it. Buffy has always let Angel live because he's good. But he was still a vamp, and one slap-and-tickle too many and we'd all be out gunning for him. This is what Slayers do, and if I hadn't, she would have--maybe not now, but some time. It happened before, it could happen again."

Willow shook her head. "Just because you dusted him doesn't make the problem go away."

"It does for me."

"You don't get it, Faith. You killed her soulmate."

Faith snorted and moved to the door. "No, Red, you don't get it. I...don't...care."

And the door slammed behind her when she left.

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### Part 5

*I've been swallowed up by greed,*

*I've been spat upon by lust.*

*If they ain't playing with your money,*

*they're playing with your trust.*

*And I'm trying so hard to stop sitting still*

*To gather the juice that's been spent or been spilled*

*To find a spark in myself that hasn't been killed*

*Cause if Death doesn't get you then Life surely will.*

---

Willow came back into the room, looking like a puppy that knows it's done wrong, but hoping to be forgiven anyway. Buffy stared through her. She wanted to pretend that none of this was happening, that she was a normal girl without a Slayer's senses, a Slayer's desires.

It was impossible. She felt like someone was shuffling across the carpet and then poking her--she twitched with each staticky spark, her nipples hardening with unwanted excitement. She hunched forward, as if hiding her arousal from Willow could somehow erase it from her mind.

"Faith left," Willow said, sitting beside her. "Do you want me to stay with you tonight?"

Buffy shook her head. "No..."

"I don't think you should be all by yourself," Willow said. "It doesn't have to be all about--I mean, I could just tell your mom it's a sleepover. And if you needed anything..."

"No." It came out stronger this time, and Willow winced. "I mean, I--I just want to be alone," Buffy said. "For tonight, Will, okay? I don't need anything, I don't--it's not you; it's--I can't be

around people right now. It's too soon."

Willow nodded cautiously. "Okay," she said, in a tone that was anything but okay.

Buffy knew Willow wanted more reassurance than that. She wanted Buffy to comfort her, to convince her that everything was going to be just fine. Add that duty to the Slayer's calling: make sure everyone was feeling empowered in their ability to help her. Which wasn't fair. Willow didn't mean it like that--she was trying to be a best friend, as she saw it, and make sure Buffy wouldn't turn Juliet the instant her back was turned. But more than anything it felt like an obligation. As if not being okay meant failing some test of friendship.

"Thanks," she said, and turned back to the window.

Willow got up, and hesitated for a long moment. "Well...I'll see you, then. Monday? For school?"

Buffy nodded. The sparks weren't going away. She rubbed her arms, where all the little hairs were standing up.

"Okay, well...bye." Willow gathered up her protection spells and left the room with one last pleading look back, closing the door behind her.

As soon as she was gone, Faith swung herself up into the tree and leapt to the roof. She pushed the window open wider and dropped inside, as lightly as a panther. She tossed her jacket aside, restlessly flexing her hands. All the air seemed to go out of the room as Buffy watched her approach. The brief static sparks came quicker, closer together, until her body hummed like a live wire. She forced herself not to squirm under Faith's predatory gaze, not to cross her arms to hide the rapid rise and fall of her chest. And the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra.

"So you want to be alone?" Faith asked, placing one fist on either side of Buffy's hips, invading her personal space. She leaned forward until there was only a breath between them.

"Faith..." Buffy wanted to explain, but the words wouldn't come. They were lost in Faith's eyes, that dark angry stare. Worse than angry. Hurt. Betrayed.

"Because I fucking well wouldn't want to mess with what Saint Buffy wants," Faith said. "She's so fucking perfect, what she wants must be what's right."

Buffy pulled away from Faith, her breath catching in her throat, moving backwards on the bed. Not enough to get away. Not nearly enough...and she refused to think about why she wasn't running, fighting, escaping. Faith followed after her, as Buffy knew she would, and shoved her sharply down on her back. Buffy twisted out from beneath her, pushing back. Faith lay half on top of her, grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head, squeezing hard enough to hurt. Not hard enough that Buffy couldn't break her hold, if she tried.

She didn't try.

"What she wants isn't always so perfect, though," Faith muttered, her eyes raking Buffy's body, her warm weight holding Buffy down. Her clothes smelled like smoke and sweat, her

hair like cheap bar soap. Buffy closed her eyes and turned her head, as if that much denial could save her--as if everything could be right again if only she could believe this wasn't happening.

But it was, and she wanted it, and Faith knew it. Faith grasped her chin and turned her back, waiting for Buffy to open her eyes. When she did, Faith let go. Her hand drifted lower, to explore underneath the hem of Buffy's silky tank top, brushing feathery strokes over her stomach and side. This chaste touch was even more exciting than yesterday's rough intimacy, and now she couldn't blame their slaying for the tight, shaky delight building somewhere south of Faith's roaming hand. They stared at each other, Buffy's lungs working in short, sharp pants, Faith's deeper breaths pushing her breasts into Buffy's.

For a long moment it seemed that Faith would go no further, or would ask before she did, but then her eyes darkened with lust or anger or the memory of last night, and she squeezed harder at Buffy's trapped hands. Faith kissed her, her lips almost violent, and yet somehow soft. Buffy arched off the bed, her head held between her raised arms, her body trapped by Faith's tender hand and Faith's leg overlapping hers.

Faith's tongue stabbed into her mouth, and Buffy gasped with surprise. It had been so long since she'd been kissed by someone living. The heat of Faith's mouth took her breath away. She expected Faith to taste of cigarettes, but instead her breath was sharp and minty. Faith pressed her more firmly into the mattress, her hand moving higher, one finger sliding along the underside of Buffy's breast, into the soft hollow of her armpit.

Cautiously, Buffy allowed her tongue to meet Faith's, closing her eyes to better concentrate on the feel of the kiss. It was almost like sparring, in some strange way--circling and maneuvering for position, seeing who could come out on top. She was sweating and panting and nothing but sensation and desire, and that was like sparring also--at least, sparring with Faith. Faith's hand circled back again, higher this time, pushing Buffy's shirt up to her collarbone.

All of the sudden Faith's fingers pinched her erect nipple, hard. Fire and pain exploded inside her. Buffy bucked off the bed, her shout muffled by Faith's mouth. She reared up into the kiss, fighting a little to twine Faith's tongue firmly around hers. She wriggled, trying half-heartedly to free her arms, but Faith's grip was steady on her wrists. Her fingers grew gentler on Buffy's breast, soothing the hurt, leaving only the hot throb of pleasure. It spread, joining the slick wetness between her thighs, where Faith's strong leg rested against her pussy.

Buffy bucked up again, slowly, but more forcefully, and Faith gasped into the kiss. Her hand started moving downwards again, over Buffy's stomach, descending to where they were nearly joined together, and Buffy writhed, waiting for it, waiting.

They both heard the sound at the same instant--the creak of floorboards under someone's feet. Mom, coming upstairs. Buffy moaned, once, a frantic sound that Faith ignored. The footsteps came closer--the top of the stairs--down the hall--Buffy whimpered again, more urgently, as they heard the footsteps approach the room. For a moment it seemed that Faith wouldn't stop, that the insistent, bruising kiss would never end and Mom would walk in on them and--

Faith growled and rolled off her. Buffy barely had enough time to sit up and yank her shirt down before her mom opened the door. Buffy held her breath, her face flaming. Faith lay

behind her on the bed, her head propped on her folded arms, the mask of indifference firmly in place once more.

"Buffy?"

"Yeah, Mom?" Buffy wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, a quick, furtive movement, rubbing away any trace of Faith's lipstick.

"I wanted to see how you were doing...any better since this morning?"

Buffy nodded. "I'm fine. But there's a demon--Faith and me are getting with the slaying tonight. We won't be late."

Mom smiled knowingly. "Ah. Of course. You're going out slaying."

"Yeah," Buffy said, suddenly going cold. Had her mom heard them? Why the wink-wink, nudge-nudge agreement? "What do you mean?"

"Not going out to the Bronze again?" Mom asked, raising her eyebrows. "Because it occurs to me that the battle of good and evil is an excellent excuse to get out of having a curfew, don't you think?"

"Oh--yeah--great," Buffy said, with an uneasy laugh. "Good one, Mom. I'll have to use that one of these days. Destiny."

"Hmm," Mom said. "Well, you be safe. Nothing too dangerous."

"Don't worry, Mrs. S," Faith said, not getting up. "I'll keep an eye on her."

Buffy wondered if that was a promise or a threat. There was nothing in Faith's voice to suggest she'd meant anything more than exactly what she said, but on the other hand, it was Faith. And maybe she thought that this, between them, meant something; but Buffy wasn't so sure.

Mom shook her head, leaning against the door jamb. "I meant both of you, Faith." She eyed Faith affectionately. "Okay. Enough mothering. I guess you two know what you're doing. I'll see you tomorrow."

When she left, Buffy sprang up as if the bed was on fire. Know what they were doing? She had no clue what was going on, or why she'd let Faith go so far, or why she'd been such an active, willing participant--knowing what she was doing was about the last thing on her personal list of achievements. How could she go out slaying like this? She'd--she'd lose control--worse, she'd lose herself; and someone could get hurt or killed--

And someone had. How could she forget that? Forget Angel? A day later and she wanted nothing more than to see where Faith would take this, if only they weren't here. In her room, where she'd so often kissed Angel goodnight--in her room, where her mom had very few worries about walking straight in. If only it weren't them--if she never had to face Willow or Giles or worse, Xander--if she'd never known Angel, or thought, childishly, that she'd found true love--if only--

With a disgusted noise at her own thoughts, she started digging through her drawers for an outfit more appropriate for slaying. No matter what the danger to herself, Faith was right--she couldn't send her to Balthazar alone. If Faith died--

But her brain stuttered away from that thought.

She found a bra and a thicker shirt, and turned around, about to order Faith out while she changed, then realized how useless that would be. Acting before she could think about it, she stripped off the tank top.

The swift hiss of Faith's breath stopped her and she looked over. Faith had sat up and leaned against the headboards, and was watching her, but she was bright red. If it had been anyone else, Buffy would have thought she'd embarrassed them, but Faith? She blushed herself and quickly put on her clothes. She thought about changing her pants, as well, because right now she was in serious need of some new panties...but no matter how cute an embarrassed Faith was, Buffy wasn't ready to go that far. Faith was frankly staring at her, breathing hard, and now she was cupping herself over her jeans and rubbing, slowly, rhythmically. Their eyes met, but Faith didn't stop...in fact, her hand sped up, pausing every now and then and her whole body would go still for an instant and she would release a short, sharp sigh.

Buffy didn't know how it happened, but she was on the bed again, and this time Faith was beneath her, and her hand covered Faith's. She let Faith guide her, but used the angle and her better leverage to apply more pressure. She watched the small twitches in Faith's expression, the open, hungry look in her eyes. When Faith tried to go faster, Buffy pulled her back, keeping the steady rhythm.

Faith grunted and lifted her hips, her eyes sliding closed. Buffy touched the cleft in the middle of her lower lip and Faith looked at her again--now, desperate, her hand limp beneath Buffy's.

This was entirely within her hands, literally, and she didn't know if she could--

But Faith didn't give her time to think. She surged forward, burying her lips on Buffy's neck, sucking and biting, humping Buffy's hand wildly. Buffy gasped, tipped her head back, matched the movement of her hand to Faith's frenzy, felt the liquid heat through the crotch of Faith's jeans. Faith groaned, one long release of air, and rested leaning against Buffy, both of them sitting facing each other on the bed.

When she looked up, a single strand of dark hair, sweat-dampened, trailed across her cheek, and Buffy brushed it aside. This close, she could see that the last of Faith's black eye and swollen lip were healed. And Balthazar awaited them.

"I'll go with you," Buffy said.

Faith pulled her closer and kissed her. It was shorter, sharper, sweeter than before. It felt good; it felt right; it felt like giving in, giving up. It felt like forgetting.

"I'm scared," she said, eyes closed, millimeters from Faith's lips--imagining a million different scenes, not knowing if she wanted anything other than this.

"I know," Faith replied, and her kiss told Buffy that she was scared too.

Buffy didn't know whether they were talking about Balthazar or them: one, the other, or both.

And maybe, in the end, it didn't matter.

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### Part 6

*Sickened by the season, I am smitten with you.*

*Saddled with this treason, I am smitten with you.*

*All I want, all I want is to hold you*

*Instead I hold my breath.*

---

They were both quiet as they left Buffy's house, carrying enough weapons between them to make up an arsenal. Tonight, there would be no breaking and entering, no stealing, no hot, sweaty--well, nothing that happened last night. Tonight, they'd get in to Balthazar's warehouse, slay, go home, and act as if everything was fine.

Buffy wasn't sure when she was going to stop playing make-believe with herself. She didn't know what was worse--that it was so easy to imagine that her life could go on as normal without Angel, or that she was starting to wonder whether she was pretending at all. Maybe Faith was real and Angel was the lie; maybe she wasn't the person she thought she was. Maybe she was only the Slayer, and she'd been holding herself back. Was still holding herself back.

But she didn't want to let go of whatever normalness she had left. Boyfriend. That was normal. Okay, souled undead two hundred year old boyfriend, less normal--but somehow giving up on the idea of boy-meets-girl-happily-ever-after love and exchanging it for the girl strutting ahead of her like she owned the shadows...it made her heart freeze, then start up again double time. Remembering the heat of her kiss, the rough-gentle touch of hardened fingers on her breast, the--

She still hadn't had any release. Two days, the slaying, the dancing, Faith's body on top of hers, that kiss...the look on Faith's face as she came, fierce and shuddering and sucking on her neck like she was the last drink of water in the desert...

Buffy shook herself. This would not be about the slay-lust. Not tonight. Control. Concentrate--

Faith's confident stride faltered for a moment, then she took off in another direction, picking a side street that went out of their way. Buffy opened her mouth to ask why, then realized Faith was detouring them around the alley--that alley. Tears sprang to her eyes and she bit down on a breath that might have been a sob. She'd hurt Faith so badly there. Not just the fading

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bruises like green-yellow fingerprints, over Faith's tattoo, that she'd seen when Faith took off her jacket. Those were nothing to a Slayer. But Buffy knew she could never go back to that alley without remembering how she'd attacked Faith, offering her body to be used if only she could use Faith too--and for Faith, that was worse.

Not like this. Never again like this.

What did that mean?

And who was she grieving for?

Not Angel.

How could you cry for dust when you had hurt someone living so much worse? Buffy ran an angry hand over her cheeks, pushing away the tears, and hurried her steps for a moment until she was walking beside Faith, close enough that their sides brushed together. Buffy reached for Faith's hand, taking it in hers, feeling the shivers that she called the Slayer connection. Another lie. She'd never felt this with Kendra. It was just so much easier to have a mystical explanation when she didn't want to admit that what she was feeling was attraction. Faith had once claimed that she'd felt it too, the tingle-hum of their touch, and since she'd never met another slayer, how could she know? The lie was easier, had been easier. Buffy kept her eyes on her feet, wondering if Faith would pull away. She was half-aware that she was drawing idle patterns on the back of Faith's hand with her thumb, feeling the softness that was such a contrast to her callused palm.

Faith didn't look at her, but she allowed their hands to stay clasped, their fingers linked. They still said nothing, but the silence felt easier. They reached Devereau without meeting any vampires, and Buffy calculated that with the six or so they'd staked in the sewers, as well as those they'd fought last night, Balthazar didn't have enough minions left to stand a competent guard. She was just beginning to think they could reach the warehouse without a fight, when a figure stepped from the shadows.

There was no warning, not a single twitch of her vamp alarm, but Buffy had a stake in her hand before he took another step. She noticed, though, that she'd used her free hand, not willing to let Faith slip away even for this.

"Slayers?" The voice was hesitant, nervous.

"And what if we are?" Faith asked. She stopped in her tracks, her hand moving inside her jacket to touch the handle of the knife Buffy had stolen yesterday. Buffy refused to carry it, but Faith had convinced her it was no good returning to the scene of the crime. Reparations would have to wait.

The shadows shifted, and a man stepped out into the streetlight. His adam's apple bobbed convulsively, and he licked his lips, flinching and looking over his shoulder at every sound. Sweat beaded his upper lip. "If you are, I've come to find you," he said. "I--I have information. Valuable."

"Sorry, pal, we were just on our way to another party," Faith said. "If you know us, you can damn well wait to talk until tomorrow. Right now, the Slayers gotta slay."

"No--I can't--I'm, I--he'll kill me--and, I can help you. Now. Tonight." He twitched again, ready to bolt, as they heard a trashcan falling over, and some drunk's faraway yell.

Buffy shifted impatiently, but Faith squeezed her hand, and she sighed. "You have a name?"

"I'm, uh, Alan Finch. The--the Deputy Mayor."

Faith snorted. "And you figure that means something to us?"

Alan straightened. "You don't know about--" He stopped. "Promise you'll protect me. Promise he won't get to me, I--he's, uh--"

Buffy glanced at Faith's stony expression, then pressed her hand in return before going forward to meet Alan. "Who do you need protection from?"

"The Mayor," Alan whispered, his eyes darting back again, as if he thought they'd be overheard in the deserted alley. "He's, I can't tell you, not unless you promise me--"

"Okay, we promise, we'll keep you safe," Buffy said, ignoring Faith's skeptical look.

"He's evil."

"So are a lot of people," Faith said with a dismissive shrug.

"I can--I know his plans. He's going to become a pure demon, destroy the city. Y-you need me."

"And we should trust you why?" Buffy asked.

"I can prove it," Alan said. "If you need to trust me...I can tell you, tonight, you're fighting Balthazar. And he has your Watcher."

"Giles?" Buffy asked. Fear grabbed her with cold fingers.

Alan nodded. "Him, too. The Eliminati kidnapped them from your school library."

Buffy turned to Faith. "We need to get there. Now."

Faith nodded. "And this guy?"

"We have to keep him safe." Buffy shrugged. "It's been too long since the last apocalypse, I knew it." She looked back at Alan. "You'll have to come with us."

Alan nodded, and gave a sickly grin. "I don't think it will work...you probably can't stop him...but--" He shrugged. "At least when he eats us I'll know I did the right thing. That's comforting, don't you think?"

"One big old ray of sunshine," Faith said. "Let's get going." She prodded Alan into walking ahead of them.

Buffy slipped back into her spot at Faith's side. She wanted to hold her hand again, but with Alan there, she didn't know if she'd be rejected. Tentatively, she held out her fingers, stroking Faith's arm. Faith looked down at their hands, quickly, then looked around the alley as if she were scouting for danger, but she took Buffy's hand and held it. It felt so good--secure, comforting; and it was more than just the warmth of Faith's skin. It was the fact that she'd allowed the touch.

Buffy was keeping most of her senses alert for anything that might be sneaking up on them, and for Alan Finch--because snitches were not to be trusted, no matter what information they claimed to have--but at the same time, she was intensely aware of Faith's nearness. Yesterday's wild abandon was gone, replaced by something equally passionate, but more controlled. This desire was hers, and it was about time she realized it. Acknowledged it.

Alan stopped abruptly, interrupting her thoughts. "This is it," he said.

"Let's take a look," Buffy said, staring up at the dirty windows, looking for the best way up.

Faith gave her an unnecessary boost up on to the boxes, and if her hands lingered on Buffy's ankle too long, then now was not the time to be thinking about it. Faith leaped up beside her. Buffy wiped a clean spot in one glass pane, and she and Faith peered in.

Giles and Wesley were tied together and guarded by a few vamps, being interrogated by a grossly obese thing in a bath of god knew what. Buffy made a face. "We got five vamps and one demon in serious need of a Stair Master," she said. "If we can free Giles, he can take two. The annoying guy will probably get in the way. Three for us is no problem, but I'm worried about melted-wax guy."

"He has telekinetic powers," Alan said, from where he was huddling in the spaces between the crates. "And if he gets his hands on the amulet, he'll have worse than that."

"You still got it?" Faith asked.

Buffy nodded. "He doesn't need to know that, though." She gave a shaky sigh and glanced back inside. Balthazar was screaming something about kneecaps. "Okay. We have to--"

"Wait," Faith said. Buffy felt the press of her hand and felt her knees nearly give out. Faith had reached for her. "Buffy..."

She called me Buffy... She looked into Faith's eyes, saw worry there, tenderness. When had that happened? God, she wanted to kiss her. She could feel the Slayer stirring inside her, the slow calm spreading from Faith's hand struggling against the hard pulse of want.

"You have the fucker's amulet, you shouldn't be in this fight," Faith said. "We can't let him get it, right? That's kinda the whole point."

"You're not doing this alone," Buffy shot back. What if Faith were hurt--or worse-- "And I can't let--I mean, I need to do this, too." She looked down, saw their hands, and turned her head away. This couldn't be about the Slayer. Not if she wanted it to work out, for them to stay together.

Oh, God. Is that what she wanted?

What about Angel? Was that love?

If it was, then what was this?

Fuck, she wanted to slay.

Faith frowned. "And what about double-agent guy?" she asked. "How long's he going to stay safe if we're both off getting killed? You need to get him to Giles, see what he says."

Balthazar screamed, and Buffy jerked her hand away from Faith to check her weapons. She felt Faith tense and knew she had wrecked the moment. Again.

Why couldn't she do the right thing, for once? What would it take?

Control.

Buffy forced herself to meet Faith's eyes. "I don't want you to get hurt."

Faith shrugged, the bad-girl image back in place. "It's a little late for that."

"I meant, I don't want you to get dead," Buffy said. She took Faith's wrist in her hand. She didn't grab, she didn't hold tight, and her fingers were light and cool against the hot pounding of Faith's pulse. Faith lowered her arm. Buffy didn't let go.

"What the fuck do you care?" Faith whispered. "You don't care."

Buffy shook her head helplessly. "I do," she said. Her fingers traced fever paths on Faith's skin.

Faith yanked her arm back, jerking Buffy towards her, off-balance. She fell into Faith, and Faith kissed her, hard. Buffy returned the kiss, not caring whose teeth got in the way. Only caring about how easily Faith's tongue made her forget herself, how warm the night felt now, when before it had been so cold. She swallowed Faith's grunt when she bit down on her bottom lip, and whimpered when Faith returned the favour. They didn't hold each other, didn't trap each other with a bodies too strong for themselves, and Buffy wanted the kiss to go on forever because it felt like all she had left.

When Faith wrenched away from Buffy's lips, a thin line of blood, darker red than her lipstick, stained her mouth. "That's what you fucking care about," she spat, and jumped down off the crates. She threw a disgusted look at Alan, and walked around the front of the warehouse.

"I can take 'em, hard and fast and now," Faith said, almost to herself, but Buffy could hear every word.

She wanted to call out, "Wait! Stop! Think!" but she was frozen. She saw Angel's face crumpling into dust, she saw Faith, drugged with passion, coming as she leaned into her

shoulder.

The Slayer said, Want. Take. Have.

Buffy clenched her fists, crouched on the crates, said nothing. Control.

It's like I let go and became this force. I just didn't care anymore.

Faith looked up at her, once, for the last time. Buffy closed her eyes.

I want to care.

I'm afraid.

"Who has my amulet?" Balthazar shrieked. "Give me the name!"

Faith's boot connected with the door. It splintered and crashed off its hinges, silhouetting her in the light spilling from the building.

"The name is Faith," she said, and walked inside.

Alone.

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### Part 7

*Solitary girl I have been*

*Living in a cell made of skin*

*Sealed inside myself, nothing gets out or gets in*

*I can't feel what you feel*

*Show me the way to my heart.*

---

Buffy could only watch as Faith sauntered into the warehouse. She couldn't think, couldn't move, couldn't even run away. Her entire world narrowed to that single point. Only the slamming thud of her heartbeat proved that she wasn't a ghost, she was real, but the icy wind had turned her to stone. Every action seemed to slow to a standstill and race forward at the same time, faster than light. Her body was straining, muscles trembling, as her Slayer-self raged beneath the surface, ramming the walls of her control, fighting to move and hurt and kill.

She couldn't. God, not now. She couldn't give in to that want, that aching desire. The hot, slippery fury building inside would erase her, make her forget whatever shreds of her normal life were left. It would mean forgetting Angel. As soon as she followed Faith, there would be

no going back. No more pretending. And it was all happening so far away, and she couldn't do anything to stop it, and Faith was facing half a dozen armed Eliminati with only a stake and a smirk.

"The Slayer," Balthazar wheezed.

Faith nodded. To all the world, she looked calm, casual, almost bored, smiling faintly at the vampires that surrounded her and the enormous demon in the tub in front of her. It was an act. Buffy could sense it; she nearly gagged under the nauseous weight of Faith's fear. It crawled through her, like ants inside her skin, tightening in her stomach and cutting off her breath.

Giles was craning his neck, looking around the warehouse. Searching for her. He expected her to rush into the fray from some unpredictable direction. Charging to the rescue. The good slayer. Have a cookie.

Buffy closed her eyes. Balthazar screamed again, this time in triumph. The vampires growled and chuckled, their swords ringing as they drew them out of their scabbards. The easy, measured tread of Faith's boot heels continued across the cement floor. What Buffy sensed wasn't fear of death, or pain. In a perverse way, Faith welcomed pain, and some night when she came off worse in a fight she would welcome death too. Buffy knew that like she knew herself.

Wesley was begging and pleading, his whimpers and cries grating on Buffy's ears until she wanted to cringe and run, not stopping, never stopping, no matter how she hurt. No matter if she killed herself running. Deeper than the slay-lust lurked the part of her that thrived on the tiny hurts and wounds that slaying brought. That was what she feared; that was worse than death. Knowing that some day her own body would turn traitor on her.

Faith's fear, though. That was different. Buffy could nearly taste it in the air, her Slayer senses coming alive whether she willed it or not. Garbage and meat scraps from the rendering plant. Sea-salt and motor oil from the docks. The tinge of rot and damp earth, the thick soupy odor of Balthazar himself, and the tang of Faith's worry.

Buffy could read Faith's concern in the set of her shoulders, the tilt of her head, the tense muscles of her back. Faith twined her fingers together and cracked her knuckles, shrugged a kink out. She was frightened, not for herself, but for Buffy. She glanced at the vamps holding Giles and Wesley. She walked between them and grabbed them by the scruffs of their necks, yanking them away. She slammed one into the wall and the other into a clatter of metal shelves. A third vampire moved forward to guard the watchers, but Giles crunched his face with a head-butt and he fell.

Buffy turned to the wall, huddled against it, and slammed a fist into the brick. Mortar crumbled beneath her fist. She gave an angry cry, halfway between a glad shout and a denial. Faith couldn't be worried for her. She didn't want that. Didn't want this. She didn't. She'd never been truly afraid, not since being Called, but now her mind was frozen, memories and dreams ripping through her--

Faith with a knife in her gut, blood juicing slick and warm over her hand--laying pale and horribly still in the tomb of her hospital room--

Faith freed Giles and Wesley with a sword dropped by one of the Eliminati. She raised it and headed straight for the nearest vamp. She was, by no means, the swordsman that Buffy was, but she understood sharp steel better than even Giles; and, oh, God, she was beautiful to watch as she fought, smooth and free and ferocious. She whirled around, ducking the vampire's blade, getting close enough to hammer him with punches. For a moment, she had the upper hand, wild and powerful, and then the vampire struck her face with the pommel of his sword. He gashed open her cheek, and blood flowed down over her face, droplets spinning off as Faith's head whipped back. He paused to gloat, and she sliced his head from his shoulders, so fast that it hit the ground before it dusted.

--the fading bruises on Faith's cheekbone, the cold alley last night--

The Eliminati came at her from all sides now, but Giles beheaded the one he'd knocked down, and Wesley tripped another as he stumbled out of the way. Faith battered her sword against a third vampire's, trying to break through by strength instead of finesse. There was a clash of metal, shrieking, and suddenly Faith's sword went flying. Not pausing even for a breath, she smashed through the vamp's guard and burst his ribcage with a stake. He shattered into dust, the remnants swirling around Faith as she turned to the others. They were wary, now, only four of them left, but Balthazar's shrieks drove them forward, and Faith was panting, her eyes wide and desperate, and still Buffy couldn't move. This was wrong, all wrong. She was the Slayer. Her blood was pounding, her eyes hot, and she stuttered on the edge of action. She wouldn't let her body's desires to overwhelm her mind. She was too close to the edge, too close.

--Faith's frantic kiss, teeth and lips and pain and pleasure--Faith's fingers buried inside her, her body melting on the verge of orgasm--

Three Eliminati attacked Faith together, the fourth dueling with Giles, and she nearly went down under the strength of their charge. She yelled, the pained cry forced out of her. Buffy bit down on a scream until her lip bled. Please God she wouldn't lose Faith, or herself. Please God, not the way she'd lost Angel, please God...

--ashes and lust and dark eyes dying, faded roses and gravedust, Angel bursting into nothingness at the end of her stake--her lover, dying--

Dying--

Faith was dying.

The madness came.

Buffy flung herself through the window, smashing the glass, shards raining down on the fighters below. She landed full on an Eliminati's back, and her stake found the perfect spot between the ribs, sliding through muscle and meat. She knew the instant the wood splintered his heart; the knowledge came to her through senses that weren't her own, that she had never known. Satisfaction flooded through her, more primal than anything she'd ever felt.

She was up before he even dusted, and suddenly she and Faith were back to back, both facing vampires, both breathing hard with fear and adrenaline and exertion. Buffy could feel every twitch of Faith's muscles pressed against her, telegraphing her plans. They attacked as one,

fighting heedless of any pain. Buffy felt the vampire's blows, but they only goaded her forward. Bruised and bleeding, Faith struggled behind her. The Eliminati were growing bolder, sensing weakness; the salty tang of blood was in the air, and they slavered as they approached. Only two left, Giles's sword bringing down his opponent, but Faith was fading and Buffy was trembling, high on the slaying, careless, leaving herself open if only it meant one more kick connecting--one more fist smashing open the vampire's face--anything for the pain, the thrill, the kill. Then her vamp was dusted and Faith's disappeared a moment later and Buffy was clawing her control back.

Balthazar lifted one hideously puffed arm and pointed at Faith. The air between them shimmered, and suddenly Faith was flying towards the pool.

"Faith!"

The scream didn't even sound like her own voice, but Buffy's throat was raw with it as she sprinted across the warehouse. Balthazar was laughing, his hand connecting with Faith's throat and squeezing. Faith struggled, bringing up her hands to knock Balthazar's arm aside, but she was too weak. Buffy bent over as she ran and grabbed up another loose sword, hurling it like a javelin straight towards Balthazar's chest. He lifted his other arm and telekinetically knocked it aside. Buffy used his distraction to reach the tub and break his hold on Faith. She jabbed her stake deep into his hand, feeling the loose give of his flesh. Faith fell to the floor. Buffy broke the line holding up the lighting rig. It fell into the water, and suddenly the room was full of the stink of frying meat. Balthazar shrieked, the sound of it going on for an entire minute before his body stopped sizzling and he lay still and smouldering in the remains of his pool.

Buffy backed away, shaking, then knelt beside Faith. Balthazar lifted his head and hissed, "Slayers...you think you've won...when he arises, you'll wish I'd killed you all." Again, he slumped, and stopped moving.

"Faith..." Buffy could feel herself shivering, as if she was feverish. Fear and lust. She crouched over Faith, forcing her shoulders not to tremble--she could feel Wesley and Giles approaching, their heartbeats resounding in the echoing space. The human-smell of them was strong in her nostrils. Wesley still stinking of fear. Faith was alive--her heartbeat was slow and regular--but Buffy needed her to wake up, to reassure her that everything would be all right. To kiss her and hold her, skin on skin, heat and sweat mixing to prove that she was alive, she was real, she was Buffy. Not lost.

Slowly Faith opened her eyes and Buffy helped her to her feet, but she had no idea which of them was supporting the other. Faith was cut in a dozen places, her jeans ripped and bloodstained, her shirt hanging open across her ribs. Buffy could feel the deep tiredness in her muscles that spoke of strains and sprains.

Giles reached out to her, resting a hand on her shoulder, and Buffy flinched away from his touch. She saw the look of surprise and sadness cross his face, but she couldn't help it. She couldn't stand his touch--she still wanted to slay--only Faith's arm around her was holding her together. The feel of her body warmed Buffy in the freezing air of the warehouse, making her feel human once more.

"Buffy." Giles' voice was calm and soothing. She looked up at him, and now there was

understanding in his eyes. He knew. He'd known all along that this could happen to her--that her control could break. "Do you have the amulet?"

She nodded, and reached in her pocket to draw it out. She handed it to Giles quickly, trying not to cringe when their hands brushed together. Wesley looked like he was about to say something, but Giles' glare, for once, shut him up before he got started.

"We've discovered how to destroy it," Giles said, still speaking slowly and gently, as if she would startle if he made the slightest wrong move. "Like Mynhegon's glove, it can be destroyed with the Living Flame. Wesley and I can do that tonight. The Eliminati will not rise again."

Buffy nodded again, once, sharply. She couldn't meet his eyes, or look at Wesley at all. Faith's breath was hot against her shoulder, and their sweat made their skin slide together where their arms were bare. Buffy had to move, to escape, something. The coldness was fading from the warehouse, and Faith's body growing hotter. Buffy knew what she wanted now. It seemed like forever since she'd known, and since she'd denied herself. This had to end, the molten flow of want easing like lava inside her veins. Let Giles and Wesley leave; she wanted, she needed Faith. Now, please now.

Faith stood straighter for a moment. "Take the weasel with you," she muttered.

"Who?" Giles asked.

"The guy. Some snitch found us. Alan Finch."

Buffy waved an arm towards the door. "I left him outside."

They found Alan Finch hunching behind a pile of trash, trying to blend in with the alley. Giles put a vise grip on his shoulder. "You'll come with us."

Alan nodded his acceptance.

"And, Faith," Giles said. He glanced at Buffy, then continued. "I trust you two to get yourselves home and see to whatever ails you."

He wasn't talking about their injuries. Buffy looked at her hands. Her fingers were still trembling, and she made fists to hide it. She didn't want Giles to know. She didn't want anyone to know. She wanted, but only on her terms.

Faith waited for Giles to drag Wesley and Finch along the alley back to the main streets, heading for the library, and then she collapsed once more against Buffy's side. Showing weakness. Something she would never have done a week ago, two days ago. Vulnerable. Open, ready, waiting.

Buffy gave a shuddering sigh and pulled Faith close, holding her up as she led the way to the motel.

### Part 8

*You put your face in front of mine*

*And breathed a wordless conversation*

*Good intentions, true regret*

*Cannot eclipse love's desperation*

---

The night outside the warehouse was cold. After frying Balthazar, the electricity was out for the entire block. Thunder rumbled in the distance, the days of unsettled weather coming to a head in the approaching storm. Buffy held Faith and was held by her; they waited in the darkness for a full minute after the last of Wesley's fussy questions and Giles' sharp retorts faded in the distance. Lightning cracked sharp and immediate, leaving behind green afterimages and a sharp ozone smell.

It was time to get under cover. It was the deepest part of the night, and they both smelled of blood and fear. There were no guarantees that some random vamp wouldn't stumble over them and have his one lucky day. They were closer to the motel than to Buffy's house, and they turned to walk that way without so much as a word spoken between them. Buffy felt she would never speak again. She had lost her words somewhere back in the warehouse, in the madness of slaying. The world screamed at her, more real, more immediate than it had ever been, her Slayer sensitivity keyed to a fever pitch. Even in the blackness, she could sense their route. Above them, the clouds shone silver, oppressive with unshed rain.

They were covered in vamp dust, the grit of it mingled in the slickness of their blood. Buffy was sure the smell of it was going to drive her crazy, like some unsettling aphrodisiac. Faith's body next to hers felt as hot as an oven, dangerous, delicious. Buffy wanted to lower her head to touch her lips to Faith's skin; taste the salt of her sweat, take in that heat as if she could warm herself with kisses.

Faith's arm tightened around her waist and Buffy was sure she felt the same--that they had edged towards this ending for too long. No interruptions. No holding back. Buffy had given herself over to the Slayer side of herself and she was still alive, still breathing, still wanting. Angel was gone and that hurt. It would always hurt. But it was time she let herself move forward. She had given up his ring and now she would give up, if not his memory, then at least the hold that his love had on her. Her mind was whirling in circles, but foremost among her thoughts she knew she couldn't cheat Faith. Not after last night. She had to show her that this was real, between them, no matter what tomorrow brought. This was more than any Slayer thing. This was desire.

The seduction came in months of looks, appraisal, jokes, innuendo; it came from learning each other's bodies on the training floor, the way they moved and fought and breathed, the taste of their mingled sweat after a bout of wrestling. The foreplay was two days of battles, of dancing, of wandering fingers and rough kisses stolen in dark alleys. It had taken Buffy by surprise, but she was ready for it now. Ready for Faith.

The motel was dark and Faith fumbled with her key for what seemed like forever. Lightning slammed behind them but neither turned around. The world was forgotten. Buffy held Faith from behind and waited patiently for Faith to unlock the door. It didn't matter. They would be together soon, so soon.

If Buffy had ever imagined this--which she hadn't, because, no, she wasn't like that--she would have imagined it hard and fast, like so many of Faith's stories, like the hasty touch of fingers in a bathroom stall in the Bronze, like the hardness of a crypt wall against her back. She would have imagined something as meaningless and empty as Faith's motel room, slamming into walls, the dresser, the doorknob digging into her lower back, as if only bruises could make this real, as if pain was the only thing sharp enough to outline all the crashing ferocity of their passion.

They both stripped when the door was closed behind them. Buffy watched Faith's silhouette and felt her body throb with desire. Oh, yes, please. Now. But she still had no words. Faith led the way to the bathroom, leaving the door open and the lights off. With the storm rumbling closer, there was no way to tell if the power would have worked, anyway. It didn't matter. Their breathing quickened as they stared at each other. Slayers didn't need lights.

They washed first, sharing the shower, not because it was sexual but because Buffy was sure they couldn't stand on their own. They clung to each other, arms around waists. The touch of skin on skin was electric even now, far away from the fighting, the slaying. Buffy closed her eyes to see Faith better; to see her unmarked by dark bruises and sword cuts. Faith's breasts pressed into hers with each breath, and Buffy could feel her nipples hardening as the water eased the friction between them. The touch of her was so good, so needed. Buffy let her lips rest on the junction of Faith's neck and shoulder, remembering last night in the alley, the slow slick taste of skin that she'd taken without permission. Now, Balthazar's fingerprints raised angry welts across Faith's neck, and Buffy kissed them softly, willing them away. Her lip stung where she'd bitten it, but that at least reassured her that this was no dream.

The water ran hot for only a few minutes, but it was enough to staunch the blood and shed the scent of fighting; enough to let Buffy believe that they had arrived at this point in some other way; enough that the steam could veil their nakedness as they dried off and Faith slowly drew her into the dimness of the bedroom.

If Buffy had ever imagined this, she would have thought of Angel--the only experience she had to judge by. She would have imagined that Faith secretly shared Angel's gentleness; that Faith would give her a small reassuring smile and whispers of I love you. Buffy's night with Angel was the only time she had felt that inexplicable sensation grow until it filled her mind with pleasure and seemed to go on forever but ended too soon.

Oh, but Faith was nothing like Angel.

She wrapped her arms around Buffy from behind. They were both warm from the shower, but somehow Faith was always warmer. She moved Buffy forward, pressing her face down on the mattress. Buffy could smell old sweat and older sex on the sheets, and she didn't care. All that mattered was Faith's hand bearing down on her shoulder, the weight of her nearness, hovering behind her. Faith climbed on to the bed and straddled her. Buffy shuddered as she felt the dampness between Faith's legs as she nudged her pussy against Buffy's lower back.

Buffy turned her head to the side, not fighting, only wanting to watch Faith's face above her. Faith's fingers trailed down her back, then returned more slowly, tracing the outline of knotted muscles. She pushed her thumbs into Buffy's back, finding the tightness along her spine and under her shoulder blades and easing it away. Faith's fingers were long and slender, pressing slow and deep into her muscles, working heat and excitement into her back. Buffy hummed into the blankets and waited, waited, knowing, trusting. She listened to Faith's breathing, the flutter of her heartbeat. Buffy let her eyes drift closed, lost in the sweetness of Faith's touch.

Faith leaned forward and moved her hair to one side, exposing the skin. Buffy moaned when Faith kissed her there, her mouth open and moving over her neck. She stretched, giving Faith easier access, silently begging for more. Faith sucked on her pulse until it raced beneath her lips, and Buffy's breath hitched with each movement. Faith's hands were still on her shoulders, massaging, and her kisses wandered over Buffy's throat. Buffy gasped and pressed upwards, feeling Faith's nipples peaked against her back, the wetness between her legs increasing as she swayed against Buffy's ass.

"Oh, Faith..." The words came as naturally as breathing. Her voice wasn't lost, after all.

Faith's teeth found her earlobe, her tongue swirling into the sensitive flesh behind her ear. "Buffy..." she whispered, almost too softly for Buffy to hear, even so close, even with Slayer hearing. As if Faith didn't want to be caught saying her full name. Her hands were moving lower now, down Buffy's sides, feeling the curve of her breasts. Lower, and her arms slid beneath Buffy, both reaching for the junction of her thighs. Her fingers reached and then pressed upwards.

"Ah!" Buffy writhed on the bed, pinned between Faith's hands below and her thrusting hips above. Their bare legs moved together on the smooth sheets. Buffy gasped as Faith slid a single finger between her pussy lips, too gently, slowly outlining her opening. Faith drove her pelvis down again, harder, and suddenly Buffy was floating on sensation, but it was too soon. "Wait...not yet..." She twisted around until she was facing Faith, her finger slipping out. Buffy lifted her arms and pulled Faith close for a kiss, pouring all her emotions into it. Faith's weight on top of her was incredibly erotic, and her mouth was warm and wet.

The kiss started as if they had all the time in the world, licking and sucking on lips and tongues; but it grew hotter, harder, Buffy now burying her hands in Faith's thick hair and whimpering into her mouth. Faith returned her fervor, and Buffy wanted to cry with the longing that rushed through her. She cupped Faith's face, being careful of the sword-slash on her cheek. She tasted her tongue, deepening the kiss, drawing Faith's breath into sighs. Buffy's body sang with arousal, the memory of Faith's fingers entering her urging her on.

Buffy reached for Faith's breasts, stroking them, then rolling over so that Faith was beneath her. She didn't pause, but started kissing her way down Faith's neck, still rubbing her breasts, reaching for her nipples and pinching and rolling them between two fingers.

"Yeah..." Faith breathed, again, softly, as if speaking was forbidden.

Buffy followed her fingers with her tongue, licking over Faith's taut nipples, then sucking them into her mouth. Faith hissed, running her hands over Buffy's hair, stopping short of holding her head in place. Buffy pulled harder, creating a vacuum with her mouth, until Faith

was whimpering with every breath. She moved from one peak to the other, fingers and mouth dancing over Faith's flesh, amazed at the pleasure surging through her as she worked to make Faith squirm.

Buffy reached between them, her fingers exploring, and Faith's breath exploded near her ear. "Here?" Buffy asked. Faith only nodded, her eyes wide and dark. Buffy slid her fingers slowly into Faith's wet heat, feeling her swollen folds and slick fluid. Faith nodded again, closing her hand over Buffy's, guiding her.

"Inside," she muttered, watching Buffy intently. "Please, Buffy."

"Yes." Buffy extended one finger, then two, slowly, slowly. Faith swallowed hard, her hips moving in time with Buffy's rhythm, then speeding up.

Faith rolled suddenly, until she was on top, kneeling over Buffy and moving up and down on her hand. "More..."

Buffy did as she asked, pushing a third finger past the second knuckle deep inside Faith, working her thumb over her hard clit. Faith nodded again, helplessly, her head hanging, her hair a tangled shadow falling over her shoulders.

Buffy watched Faith's face, waiting for the open, hungry look she'd worn when Buffy had cupped her through her jeans. She wanted, needed to see that look again--all of Faith's barriers disappearing, leaving her more beautiful than ever. Buffy wanted to see Faith's eyes darken and finally close when she couldn't control herself any longer, as Buffy's fingers dissolved all her rational thought. She wanted to feel Faith's walls tremble around her hand as she twisted her wrist with every thrust, and her mouth open as she cried out Buffy's name.

If Buffy had imagined this, she would have known their joining would be entirely different from the coldness of Angel's erection as he slid inside her. She would have imagined a fire that burned like the touch of Faith's body against hers on the dance floor, as hot as her anger when they fought side by side, as bright as her laughter. She would have imagined pleasure and pain in equal measure, because she and Faith could only clash every time they came together.

She would not have imagined tears. Faith's eyes brimmed with them even as she squeezed her eyes shut and she cried out, and they rolled down her cheeks as she rode Buffy's hand. Faith gasped, her muscles rippling with effort, drops of sweat trickling down between her breasts. She was soaking wet, and Buffy thrust her fingers faster, using all the strength in her arm, anything to keep Faith shaking and calling out her name. Faith gave one last shuddering thrust and froze, her inner muscles working hard around Buffy's hand. "Ah--Buff--Buffy..." She leaned forward, panting.

Buffy reached up to brush away Faith's tears, but Faith shook her head and pushed away her hand. "Your turn," she said, with all the cockiness and bad-girl attitude she could muster. It rang false. Buffy wanted to ask what was wrong, but then Faith was kissing every inch of her, her mouth searing Buffy's body. Buffy's hips lifted off the bed instinctively, her flesh quivering under Faith's assault.

Faith licked her way over Buffy's stomach, dipping into her bellybutton. Buffy moaned,

clutching the sheets in her hands. Faith breathed over the wet trails, raising gooseflesh, and crawled lower.

"Faith...oh, God..."

"Shh, B, it's okay..." Faith placed a kiss just above her pussy, and then moved down. She spread Buffy's folds with her fingers and took one long lick. Buffy shuddered, heat flashing through her entire body. Faith sucked on her lips, both sides in turn, drinking down the liquid that coated Buffy's thighs. Her hands were busy, too, flicking over Buffy's clit until her head was thrashing back and forth, small moans catching in her throat. She was so close. Every action that had led to this moment flashed in front of her--the Slaying, the Bronze, Angel, and Faith, always Faith, at her side, kissing her, teeth and lips and tongue, sucking hard on her clit now, oh, yes, Faith, Faith--

If Buffy had imagined this--

Oh, if she had known--

She could never have imagined this--

At last, she thought, oh, love, at last, and then the rapture overtook her and she disappeared into pure sensation, pure pleasure.

"Faith!" she screamed, or thought she screamed, because she was nowhere near her voice. She was lost, falling, forever, exploding into nothingness and then returning. "Oh god, oh god, Faith, yes--yes--"

It lasted for an eternity and slid away like a forgotten dream. "Faith..." Buffy sighed, and wanted to say so much more, but she could only say Faith's name, over and over, like a prayer.

Faith's hands slowed, her tongue lapping up the last of Buffy's come, and rested her forehead on Buffy's stomach for a moment. She lifted Faith until they lay side by side once more.

If Buffy had imagined this, she would have pictured them as inexhaustible, rising to greater and greater heights with each orgasm, stroking joy from each other's bodies until the night dimmed with the coming dawn. She would have thought of stamina greater than lust, of want and desire stronger than fatigue.

But they were both injured, exhausted from three days of almost, almost. Faith's cuts had faded to angry red lines across her ribs, her bruises to blue-green blotches on her skin. Buffy felt her strains return to her, the overextended muscles and pulled tendons. The sheets were warm with their loving, the rain pattering a soothing rhythm on the roof. Their enemies were dead, their desire sated, and their bodies nestled together so easily. So right.

Faith was still kissing her, her hands drawing idle caresses on her skin. Buffy pulled the blankets over them and returned the kisses, slow and warm. Faith sucked on her tongue, her hand resting on Buffy's stomach, rubbing small circles. Buffy sighed, tasting herself on Faith's lips. She stroked her fingers down Faith's back, feeling her shiver when she reached the ticklish spots near her waist. They took their time, the kisses lingering, the long looks drawing

out.

If Buffy had imagined this, she would have imagined an act as tender as a knife blade, as uncaring as a memory.

Instead there was only this. Small touches. Soft lips. Fading into sleep.

Not an ending, but a beginning.

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### Part 9

*My fingers search for you while I sleep,*

*Looking for something to keep.*

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Waking up, Buffy could feel the night ending, dew settling and the wind dying down. It was about half an hour to sunrise, the most dangerous time for vampires, when their hunting luck could run out with the first stabbing rays of the sun over the horizon. This was the true Slayer's hour, the time to catch stragglers sneaking home to their crypts and sewer tunnels.

She stirred, trying to figure out what had broken into her sleep, then she heard the soft hiss of a zipper. She rolled over, blinking at the room. All the clothes that had been strewn around, on the floor and the furniture, were gone. Faith was standing at the foot of the bed, completely dressed, a full duffle at her feet. She'd just zipped up her leather coat.

"Faith--" Buffy stopped. Panic tangled up her thoughts until she couldn't speak. For the first time in forever, she had no idea what was going on behind the darkness of Faith's eyes. She was different. No makeup. Hair twisted into a knot on her head. Torn black jeans and runners. She looked so young, and Buffy was amazed to remember she was that young. Sixteen, if that. So easy to forget that when all Faith showed was the attitude, the swagger, the cleavage and the confidence.

She wasn't showing that now. Faith couldn't even meet her stare. She hesitated, then picked up the duffle.

"Wait!" Buffy sat up, pulling the sheets tight around her shoulders. She'd never felt so naked in her life. "Where are you going?" She didn't expect Faith to answer. Hopelessness settled around her heart like a lead weight. This was what it came to, after all. Get some and get gone.

Like Angelus, her mind suggested, but that lie was too easy to tell herself. Faith wasn't acting like that, mocking and cruel. If anything she looked scared, or hurt. As if there were some things that even Slayer healing couldn't touch.

"I can't do this, B." Faith's voice was rough and Buffy thought at first she'd been smoking too much, but the room didn't smell of cigarettes.

"Do what?" Buffy whispered, holding back tears. Of course holding back. Faith hated clingyness. So hold back. Don't let her know, don't let her see. She'd only be contemptuous if she saw.

Faith shrugged. She looked at the duffle like she wasn't sure why she was holding it. Buffy had never seen her stand so still. "I gotta go," she said, telling herself as much as Buffy.

"No." Buffy felt the denial burst out, angry, almost a shout. Couldn't Faith see that she needed her?

Faith's eyes flickered to her face. Buffy clenched her jaw against the wails that wanted to break free. Faith's face was swimming in front of her, masked by her tears, and that wasn't fair, because if this was the last time Buffy saw her she had to see her clearly. She blinked, and then the tears were flowing, hot and salty. Oh, please no. Please say she isn't going, it's not fair. It's not fucking fair.

"I just can't," Faith said, and started to turn away, as if all she wanted was to escape. As if she wished she'd been quieter, or faster, and Buffy had slept through her departure and woke up in an empty room without even a note.

"Promise me you'll come back," Buffy said. If it was the only guarantee she could get, she had to have it--she knew that Faith wouldn't break her word. And if Faith promised to come back, then Faith was promising not to get dead in the meantime. "I'm not saying soon," she said, trying not to sound as desperate as she felt. "I'm just saying...some day...just don't leave me forever."

Faith stopped at the door, resting her forehead against the jamb. She carried her duffle in one hand, but she set it down and looked back. "I'm not some saint you should be waiting for."

Buffy felt the tears burning her eyes, but she forced herself to speak past the lump in her throat. "That's not what I asked."

Faith picked up her duffle and grabbed the doorknob. Buffy thought she would leave without another word, but Faith paused again. She didn't turn around, and spoke mostly to the door. "I promise, Buffy. I'll come back, some day."

And she was gone.

The door swung open in the cool, wet breeze of morning, the fresh scent of it pushing away the heavy warmth of their night together.

Buffy thought about running after Faith, about chasing her down--she thought about screaming and raging and forcing Faith to stay--because she had to stay, she couldn't just leave--but she was shaking too hard to move. She slammed the door closed and buried her face in the pillows. She cried into the sheets that still smelled of them, together. Why did this happen? God, what was wrong with her?

Buffy poured her sorrow into the bed she'd shared with Faith. Finally, when she was wrung empty and dry, she washed her face with cold water. She went to the front desk and paid the

overdue charges, and checked out in Faith's name. She walked home without watching where she was going and climbed into her room through her window. She cried herself to sleep again, remembering Faith's words in the alley.

Not like this. Never again like this.

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Buffy slipped into the library after her last class on Monday, seeking sanctuary in its cool dimness. She'd managed to avoid Willow and Xander for most of the day, but Giles had cornered her in the hallway during lunch and asked her to join them after school. When she saw Willow and Xander sitting at the table, both of them looking solemn, all she wanted to do was turn around and walk straight back out. She was not ready to talk about this, about any of it.

"Hey, Buffy," Xander said as soon as she approached, his usual enthusiasm toned way down. "I, uh, I wanted to say something. You know, for Angel. I don't know what, 'cause, um, I never really liked--ow!" Xander turned a hurt look on Willow. "I mean, I'm sorry. Willow told me."

"Yeah, sorry, Buffy." Willow gave her a worried look. "I know you probably didn't want me to go blabbing about it, but well, I--I told Xander and Giles. Not--everything, you know, but I hope that's okay."

Buffy shrugged. What did it matter if everyone blamed Faith for Angel's death? She was gone now. "Where's Giles?"

"In his office," Xander said. "You sure you're okay, there, Buff?"

She met his gaze for a moment. Dark eyes. She looked down again. "Fine."

Giles emerged from his office, flipping the pages of a book he held. He glanced at Buffy over his glasses and set the book on the counter. "Buffy." She looked up at him, wondering if she was imagining the gentleness in his voice, or the questions in his eyes. "I wanted to tell you that I have destroyed Balthazar's amulet. However, I also have some disturbing news."

"What's the what?" Xander asked. "Wesley found some other dead demon cult leader we need to kill just a little bit more?"

Giles glared at him. "No. Thankfully." He reached beneath the desk and pulled out the paper. "Our deputy mayor has had an...unfortunate accident."

Buffy picked up the paper and read the headline.

"Okay..." Xander said. "Some of us are still a bit out of the loop."

"The deputy mayor, Alan Finch, came to us Saturday night with information regarding the Mayor," Giles said. "Wesley and I interviewed him for most of Sunday, and I believe it's fortunate indeed that we reached him before whoever caused this 'accident'."

Buffy tossed the paper on the table and stood up. "Okay."

"Okay?" Willow echoed. "But what about the Mayor's plan?"

"Balthazar's dead, the amulet's gone, we learned everything we're going to from snitch-boy. There's nothing else to say."

"Buffy..." Giles hesitated. He peered closely at her, searching for signs of the slay-madness that had overcome her. Buffy stared back at him, silently begging him not to say anything in front of Xander and Willow. Giles was the only one who suspected the truth. That this wasn't about Angel at all. He'd seen her with Faith, the way Buffy had leaned into her as if she was the only solid thing left in the world. Like a life-saver tossed to a person sliding under dark waters for the next-to-last time. And in the end, he was her Watcher, not the arbiter of her social life, so he said nothing.

"If that's all, I'm-I'm going to patrol." She pushed through the library doors.

"Buffy! Wait up!" Willow followed her out into the hall. Buffy stopped and waited for her, knowing that she couldn't duck Willow's questions forever. "I know you're hurting, Buffy, but you can't just shut us out. We want to help you. And you didn't-I mean, you didn't even mention Faith."

Buffy crossed her arms and looked down. "No."

"Well, I think...I mean, what are you gonna say to her? How can you even go after the Mayor with her if all this stuff is sitting between you?" Willow reached out and touched Buffy's arm, her face open and earnest.

Buffy hated the pity she saw in her eyes, and even worse, knowing that Willow's jealousy of Faith would prevent her from ever accepting the truth. "It doesn't matter anymore, Will."

"Of course it does!" Willow threw her hands up and paced back and forth in front of Buffy. "I know you couldn't, like, be with Angel, but you still loved each other. And Faith killed him!"

"She's gone," Buffy said dully. Love Angel? Yes, she had. But that was so long ago. Now there was only Faith...and she wasn't even here. Buffy couldn't even tell her how she felt. "That's why it doesn't matter. She left."

Willow gave her a confused frown. "Faith just left?"

"She's gone," Buffy repeated. "Will...the Mayor is just one more big bad. I'll take him down when the time comes."

Willow shook her head. "But, Buffy...this can't be like last summer. You can't go all absent-Buffy on us. You can't forget your duty because of what Faith's done."

"It's not like that!" Buffy burst out. Not the way Willow thought, but she was right anyway. Buffy still had to be the Slayer, no matter what the risk, no matter that Faith wasn't here anymore to understand her, to share the risks...and the rewards. Why did she have to go?

## Queen Zulu – Smitten

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Willow sighed. "Angel came back from hell for a reason, right?" she asked. "You always believed that. So don't let his death be meaningless this time. You have to deal with this." Willow took her hands and waited until Buffy looked her in the eyes. "Promise me, Buffy. I know you have to go through the bad stuff. But promise me you won't let this hurt you forever."

Faith will come back. She said she would.

Buffy nodded. "All right, Willow. I promise."

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They all passed the summer like that.

Waiting for a promise to be kept.