

~ As Time Goes By ~

by Antigone Unbound

Setting Spring, 2003. This picks up 2 years after "Gods Served and Abandoned," but I don't think it's necessary to have read that in order to understand this story.

Rating: PG for now; probably R in a bit

Disclaimers: The very fact that there are any women alive, anywhere, in this story is enough to prove that I don't own the originals.

"No...No, don't. Get away from me!" She fought, tried to push away, but the other one was relentless. "Stop it!"

"Willow...Will, Sweetie--wake up. Willow, you're dreaming."

Follow Tara's voice...That's all she had to do; she just had to follow Tara's voice and everything would be OK...

Lurching toward wakefulness, Willow reached out and grabbed onto Tara's hand as if to pull herself out of the nightmare.

"Oh God, Baby--I was having the worst dream."

"Yeah, I kinda picked up on that," came the droll reply. "Must've been the yelling and kicking." Leaning back onto her pillow, she pulled Willow's head down to her breast and gently rubbed her lover's back. "So what happened?"

"It was so bizarre, Tara... We had just fought some really epic battle--it seems like it was some kind of *uber*-apocalypse--and the whole town was just sorta sinking into this big...*pit*. And not because we'd lost, but because we'd won. I think we must have closed the Hellmouth or something, and it pretty much wiped out everything. It seemed like most people were already gone, though--like they'd headed outta Dodge before the big showdown, you know?"

Tara's voice was quizzical. "But if we'd won, why were you so upset? You were yelling for something or someone to get away from you."

Willow shook her head in distress. "Oh, that part was just *so* bizarre. Some total skank-bot with a pierced tongue kept trying to lick me."

She felt Tara pull back just slightly in order to look at her. "Some woman was trying to *lick* you?"

"Yeah. It was so gross."

"And where was I during all of this?"

"You were just sorta standing off to the side laughing at me. I wanted you to go all large with the butch, but you couldn't seem to take her seriously."

Tara's laughter was deep and full in the dark of the room. "Yeah, that sounds about right." After a moment, she asked, "So what was it like--closing the Hellmouth, ending all that evil?"

Willow thought for a long moment. "It felt extremely...*anticlimactic*."

Nuzzling into the warmth of Tara's body, she thought about how different their lives looked from the one she'd just left behind in her dream. It had been two years since they'd defeated Glory; one since besting their would-be arch nemeses, the Nerd Trio.

Now *that had been anticlimactic*, she mused to herself. Warren had shown up in their backyard the day after his humiliation at the park, waving a gun and bellowing his outrage. In this midst of his threats that Buffy wouldn't get away with it, Buffy had done just that in the form of grabbing one of the garden gnomes and winging it off of his head. The gun had fluttered harmlessly to the ground, Willow had called the police, and that had pretty much been that. Andrew had served less than two years for his part in the only-marginally Evil Plan, Jonathon had received a suspended sentence, and Warren was now firmly ensconced as someone's bitch, courtesy of the California State Correctional System.

Tara's soft voice pulled her out of her reverie. "Well, I'm not surprised the Ultimate Victory felt so hollow. I mean, we need evil."

Willow was silent for a moment. "Yeah, that makes sense...Or at least, it would make sense in some bizarre parallel universe that bears no resemblance to our own."

"No, really...Think about it, Sweetie. How do you define good if you don't have its antonym? I mean, could you really understand the concept of big if you had no concept of small?"

Willow pulled back and propped herself up on her elbow. "But Tara, aren't we fighting to eradicate evil? Like, if someone gave us the option of doing so, of wiping it out completely, do you really think we wouldn't take it?"

"Yeah, but the question's entirely rhetorical, Will. We keep fighting because it's the right thing to do, but we'll never really have to make the decision you're talking about. I mean, don't get me wrong--I'm not saying I want to invite evil over for supper sometime, or join an evil-intensive bowling league. I'm just saying that having such clear examples of bad makes us understand good more completely."

"Yeah, I guess I can understand that." Willow snuggled back into Tara's warmth. "Just as long as we keep averting the biggest of the bads."

"Agreed." After a few moments, Tara asked, "So--anything else in that dream?"

Willow struggled to remember more of that alien landscape that had just occupied her mind. "Oh, yeah--Schwarzenegger was running for Governor."

"The *Terminator*?" Tara's voice was incredulous.

"Hey--it was a dream. It's not supposed to make sense."

Other things, however, made considerably more sense. After their disastrous initial attempt, Xander and Anya had made it more or less successfully down the aisle. More, in that they had actually emerged from the event legally married, and to each other; less, in that the reception had devolved into free-for-all when a G'hornash demon tried to hit on Xander's father. The ensuing melee had left Xander with a broken nose, Giles with spinach dip on his head, and Hallifrek--of all things--pregnant.

"That drama queen gets herself knocked down at my wedding reception," Anya had fumed for days afterward.

"I think the term is 'knocked *up*,'" Xander pointed out gently and nasally.

"And now Xander can't be on top because he might mash his nose into something so I have to do all the work," Anya continued as if her husband hadn't spoken.

"Must. Gouge. Holes. In. Eardrums," Willow muttered, trying to exit the conversation.

Giles had gone back to England once more, but returned again after an even briefer stay than his first.

"You missed us," Willow had chortled gleefully.

"I did no such thing," the librarian retorted. "I'm simply afraid that Anya will not have the necessary focus for The Magic Box, now that she's settling into married life."

"Right...Because no other married woman in America works outside the home," Dawn pointed out.

Dawn was handling post-Keydom with surprising equanimity. She was also finding her way through the social maze of Sunnydale High, which--not unlike her sister--intimidated her far more than did creatures that wanted to eviscerate her.

"At least demons are up-front about their evil schemes," she pointed out after being snubbed by someone who had pledged best-friendship the week before. Dawn had finally stopped blushing whenever Tara appeared, although Willow suspected that hero-worship was still in the picture. And she couldn't fault her for that...

Buffy had ended...whatever it was that she had shared with Spike, who had left town after his pleas had failed to move her. She was trying the single life for awhile. "My decisions on that front haven't always been the best," she had observed when informing the group of her decision. Willow thought that the resounding silence which followed held more tact than reproach. The Slayer seemed to be trying to figure things out, which was good, but Willow and Tara couldn't help noticing that for someone who was always complaining about money, Buffy spent a fortune on batteries.

Willow grew drowsy, thinking about their lives and the lives of their friends over these past two years. The movie playing in her mind began to dip and slide with the force of her fatigue. She gave Tara a quick kiss and turned over so that Tara was cradling her from behind. "Night, Baby," she murmured, and began to drift back to sleep.

How did I ever sleep before Tara? Nothing can feel this good...

Suddenly, a piercing scream ripped through the night. She sat bolt upright in bed, and turned to face Tara, who was staring at her in the night. They waited, seemingly afraid to breathe, wondering if perhaps they'd imagined it. But then another shriek followed the first, and was followed by yet another.

Willow squared her shoulders and drew a deep breath.

"I'll take care of her," she sighed. "You were up with her last night."

Kyra Julia Rosenberg-Maclay was 18 pounds, 23 inches of black-haired, dimple-cheeked power. Her every move was fraught with intent, from her cries to her nursing to her napping. When she was put down in her crib, she often regarded her mothers for a moment or two, as if ascertaining that this was, indeed, the next installment in her life. Satisfied, she jammed her fist in her mouth, kicked a few times, and headed into alpha-waves. If Willow was a babbler and Tara was reflective, Kyra was conductor on the express route. She was also remarkably good humored, and tended to cry only for reasons that would make any reasonable person cranky: hunger, fatigue, and lying in one's own waste. She showed few signs of existential angst. Willow and Tara knew beyond a faint trace of a dim outline of a shadow of a doubt that Kyra was the most wonderful baby in the history of the species, and this certainty was not in the least mitigated by the fact that they had virtually no idea where she'd come from.

The evening in question, almost nine months ago, had started with no intimation of its natal outcome. The Scoobies had been hot in pursuit of a Ba'jeel demon whose civic failures included a tendency to eat small, yippy dogs. More than one of the group questioned whether this was a good use of their time, until the Ba'jeel branched out to include small, yippy children. It had attacked twice, and though in both cases the parents had managed to pull their offspring to safety, the demon had managed to abscond with a total of one foot and three fingers. Ba'jeel demons were large and surprisingly swift, with long, grasping claws for hands and two sets of

teeth, one situated immediately behind the other. All of their various bodily fluids were known to be toxic to humans, and they left a faint trail of slime behind them. They weren't attractive.

They had tracked the Ba'jeel to an abandoned meat-packing plant about ten miles outside of town, where they had discovered that this particular member of the species was something of an oddity, in that it preferred the company of others. Many others. Many Ba'jeel who seemed equally extroverted.

"It should be alone," Giles protested in a low voice. "Ba'jeel are solitary creatures."

"Demons... Demons who need demons," Dawn crooned softly, while Buffy scanned the scene in front of them. Willow wasn't at all sure that they could take the entire group, at least with the arsenal that they'd brought with them in anticipation of facing only one.

At that moment, Xander tripped over a small metal crate and sent it clanging across the floor. Anyone outside the building would probably have heard it; the approximately fifteen Ba'jeel in the room with them definitely did. They reared their heads, and began to growl in low, guttural tones.

"That can't be good," Willow assessed. Giles had told them that the Ba'jeel, if threatened, would almost certainly attack.

"Willow, Tara--quick, we need help," Buffy hissed, but the two witches had already linked hands in preparation of casting a protection spell that would buy them time.

"Give form to that which delivers all who call upon it," they chanted in unison.

The room was abruptly cast into darkness; and then two dim rays of light, each of which had a thin gold beam threading through it, began swirling and dancing as if to some music only they could hear. Gradually, the rays grew stronger and then a deep pulsing began to echo through the room. The lights suddenly coalesced, then curved into an ellipse; and for one moment they were gazing into the center of the ellipse at a landscape of ethereal blues and purples. Then it winked shut and everything went black again. When Giles switched on a flashlight, a baby was lying on the ground, naked and very displeased. The Ba'jeel were nowhere to be seen.

"What in the name of Britney Spears is *that*?" Xander muttered.

"A baby," Anya announced. "And a good trade-off, too. Far more easily killed than those big lobster things."

"We're not going to kill it," Willow snapped, turning to face the ex-vengeance demon. "It's a *baby*, for goddess' sake!"

"But we have no idea where it came from," Giles protested. "We certainly won't harm it, but we can't assume it's utterly benign."

Tara, in the meantime, had foregone this discussion and was moving toward the crying infant. Kneeling, she reached out to pick it up.

"Tara, don't!" Buffy shouted. "It might..." Here she trailed off.

"Drool me to death?" Tara asked, one eye arching in that way that told Willow she was having none of the Apocalyptic Baby talk. She lifted the infant gently into her arms and cradled it against her own warmth. Within seconds, the crying had subsided to a series of irregular gurgles.

"Hello, little one," Tara murmured softly. "And where did you come from?"

The others edged closer, as if afraid that the baby might suddenly smite them with some unseen power, or perhaps just spit up on them.

"It's a little girl," Tara said, glancing at the group. "And she looks like any other little girl."

"With one major difference being that other little girls come from their mommies' bellies, and this one emerged from a mystical light convergence," Xander pointed out.

"Not all little girls come from their mommies' bellies," Dawn noted quietly, drawing a gentle smile from Tara.

"Point duly noted," Giles acceded. He pulled off his thin sweater vest. "We can wrap her in this for the time being." Tara took it and carefully enfolded the infant within its soft warmth. Giles moved to her side. "Tara, if I might just take a look at the child." She nodded and transferred the girl to Giles' arms.

"Make sure you support her head," she added. It would prove to be an unnecessary instruction, however, since Giles wouldn't be holding her long enough to support anything for any length of time. As soon as she was resting in his arms, she began to wail again--tiny cries that pierced the darkness, and Willow's heart.

"Oh for hell's sake," Anya sniffed. "Never ask a man to do anything that requires subtlety."

Willow thought this proclamation wonderfully ironic, as she watched Anya reach out to take the baby. The cries only grew louder, though, as Anya jiggled the infant and began to sing a lullaby.

"Hush little baby, stop your cries/Or monsters will come and take your eyes.

And if that doesn't dry your tears/They'll come back and take your--"

"Oh my god,," Buffy spluttered. "Here, let me try."

And so began a sort of unofficial contest to see who could get the baby to stop crying. Buffy tried to pull the sword from the stone of weeping, but to no avail. Xander and Dawn were

likewise unsuccessful. Only when Willow stepped up and cradled the baby next to her did the wailing stop.

"Whoa...OK, that's funky," Xander said, eyes widening.

"We need to test the hypothesis. Here, Tara--you take her again." The transfer was uneventful. When Giles had taken the baby into his arms, however, the wailing began again. He immediately handed her back to Tara; contented gurgling ensued. Tara passed her to Buffy, and the room was filled with heart-rending cries. Buffy handed her off to Willow, and all was quiet.

"OK, she's not a football," Tara announced, as Willow turned to pass the infant to Xander. "She's going to get even more disoriented if we keep this up. All we know for sure is that she seems OK when either Willow or I have her. So we'll be the ones to hold her, at least for now." Willow took note of Tara's uncharacteristic group decision behavior.

"Do you--do you think she belongs to somebody?" Dawn asked tentatively. Willow could tell that the former Key was going to be heavily invested in how this all progressed.

"I don't know, Sweetie," Tara answered simply. "She seems healthy enough, but we don't know anything about her."

"Willow, Tara--have you two ever had a spell go quite that...*wonky*?" Buffy's voice was hesitant, and Willow knew why. It had been less than a year and a half since her addiction to magic, and everyone still had a hard time talking about it...

"Well, sure. There was that time when Willow nearly got Dawn killed, and before that, when she cast that memory spell on all of us, the one that made Tara move out. Oh, and don't forget about that time you and Spike got engaged, when D'Offryn tried to make her a vengeance demon."

Everyone except Anya, that is, who had a remarkably easy time talking about it.

"Thanks for the history lesson, Anya. Hey--talked to Olaf the Troll lately?"

"Willow's energy was fine during our spell," Tara broke in, looking evenly at Buffy. "It never *felt* wonky; not during any part of it."

"Right," Willow concurred, focusing on the matter at hand. "And, at the risk of missing the point, we *were* protected. Look--no Ba'jeel."

"Yes--you were casting a protection spell," Giles nodded, looking thoughtfully from one witch to the other. "How did you decide on that particular one?"

Willow and Tara glanced at each other. "It's sorta hard to explain," Willow said after a moment. "It's not something we talk about before-hand."

"Whaddya mean?" Xander asked, brow furrowed in confusion. "If you don't talk about it, how do you know what to say?"

"That's the part that's hard to explain," Tara replied, swaying softly to lull the baby. "We definitely talk about certain spells for certain situations, but if we're in some really intense moment and we need to cast together, in one voice, we just sorta...*know*."

"We first discovered it when we were trying to get away from the Gentlemen, and we couldn't talk at all." Willow looked at her beloved, remembering that first moment of contact. Tara's soft grin told her that she was watching the same internal movie. "And then when we were fighting Glory at the construction site, and we needed to help Buffy get through the throng of minions, we did it again. That was when we realized how deep it went."

Giles looked at them with heightened appreciation. "Remarkable," he said simply.

"So here, tonight--you guys just joined hands and...somehow you knew what spell to cast?" Dawn seemed dangerously close to Crushville again as she gazed at Tara.

"We never have that kind of synchronicity," Anya hissed at Xander, in a *sotto voce* that was considerably more *voce* than *sotto*. "You always...*cast* first."

"It only works under special conditions," Willow jumped in, eager to drive past that looming exit. "Like, when there's no time for consultation and we're about to get devoured, eviscerated, or otherwise inconvenienced."

"Have you ever cast this particular spell before?" Giles inquired.

"No," Tara promptly replied. "This was the first."

"And what were the words again?" the Watcher continued.

Tara looked at Willow, who could tell that her beloved felt uncomfortable saying the words again. Wrapping an arm protectively around Tara and the infant, Willow offered, "I'd rather not say it verbatim, just to be safe. Basically, we were asking for an energy field that would keep the Ba'jeel contained while we either formulated a different plan or decided to...maybe...run away," she finished lamely.

"Were you calling on a particular god or spirit?" Buffy asked.

"It's a trio of spirits, actually," Tara spoke up. "The Anadeis. They function as a collective."

"Like the Borg," Xander interjected, happy to be able to contribute something.

"Right," Willow replied slowly. "Except they don't seek to conquer and subjugate everyone they encounter. And they don't travel in a cube."

"The Anadeis offer rescue and surcease to any woman who calls upon them," Tara continued.

"Does it only protect women?" Giles asked hesitantly, as if wondering whether he and Xander had been extra luggage that could be easily jettisoned.

"No," Tara quickly replied. "The Anadeis will provide safety to anyone, but women have to be the ones to *ask*."

"So you call on a trio of female spirits to protect us all; an energy field of sorts does emerge, from whence arrives an infant," Giles summarized.

"That's pretty much it," Willow concurred. "And--again, not to be overstating the case here--but we were protected."

"Where did the Ba'jeel go?" Buffy asked, looking around as if one of them might emerge from behind a 25-gallon drum. "I mean, not looking the free equine in the oral region or anything, but was the field supposed to...*remove* them?"

"I didn't think so," Willow replied slowly, glancing at Tara for confirmation. Her partner shook her head.

"I thought it would just repel them, buy us time. But maybe it repelled them to, say, Omaha."

"And in studying this spell, you never found reference to an infant?" Giles asked, glancing at the baby which was now snuggling even deeper into Tara's accommodating arms.

"Nary a one," Willow said, shrugging.

"Maybe the baby *is* the protection," Xander shrugged.

"Yeah, that's probably it," Anya replied, tossing her head. "Look--her little hands just cry out for a cross-bow."

"You know what I mean," Xander retorted. "Maybe the munchkin houses the energy field, or something like that."

Willow was frankly surprised by the plausibility of the hypothesis, considering its source.

"OK, this seems like something we can research later on," Buffy cut in. "Right now, though, there's a little inter-dimensional baby we need to think about. Like, for example, what are we gonna do with her?"

Tara looked at Buffy and spoke with greater certainty than Willow had ever heard.

"We're going to take her home with us."

"Tara, I don't wish to sound harsh, but you can't take that child home with you." As she watched her mate turn to face Giles and gaze at him without speaking, Willow thought that the Watcher had never uttered a more doomed sentence. Only the tightening of her jaw told Willow that her girlfriend was anything besides calm and serene.

Finally, Tara replied, "Actually, Giles, we can."

This was the group's first indication that Tara would not be taking many orders where this child was concerned.

It quickly became clear that she and Tara were--there was no other word for it--mothers to this child. The infant eventually let herself be held by other members of the group, but only for brief periods of time. At night, she slept only in the crib that Buffy had dragged down from the attic and set up in Willow and Tara's room that first night.

"Do you want us to find our own place?" Willow asked Buffy, as they tugged the fitted sheet over the mattress. "We've been talking about it for awhile anyway; you know, wondering if we were overstaying our welcome by a year or two..."

But Buffy had her own resolve face, and she used it now. "Will, we still don't know jack about this baby, aside from the fact that 'Jack' probably wouldn't be a good name. To be honest, I'd feel better if we were all under one roof."

Willow had heaved an internal sigh of relief. Frankly, she wasn't sure how they could have managed to find a new home in the midst of taking care of a mystical infant. Buffy had raised a good point, however, and not just about the safety to be found in numbers.

"We need to call her something," she told Tara on the second night. "We can't just keep calling her...*her*."

"You're right," Tara agreed, gazing down at the tiny bundle in her arms. "But what?"

"Well... You always said you wanted to name a girl 'Amanda,'" Willow said slowly.

Tara turned to look at her, and her expression was difficult to read. "I know, Sweetie... But this feels different. Like, *really* different."

"You're afraid she won't... she won't stay, aren't you?"

"I don't know what I feel, Willow. All I know is that when I picture 'Amanda,' it's another child."

"I get that," Willow replied. "So--what name *does* make you picture this child?"

But Tara just shook her head slowly. "I don't know..."

Willow broached the subject with the group the next day. Giles, not surprisingly, had cautioned against naming the infant at all.

"You don't know anything about this child. You don't know where she came from, or what her purpose is. You don't know..." And here he trailed off.

"We don't know how long she'll be here," Tara finished for him. He nodded, almost apologetically.

"We do know, though, that she's been delivered to this dimension and for whatever reason is *deeply* attached to Tara and Willow," Buffy chimed in. "And from what we can tell, she's a normal human baby, at least physically. Now, I seem to remember from freshman psychology... Well, I remember a number of things, not the least of which was that Maggie Walsh had some serious control issues. But I also remember that all of the 'higher' social creatures need names, or some form of manifest identity. Otherwise, their sense of self takes a hit. And I for one do not want to be responsible for a baby's impaired self-image. Massive architectural damage in the name of fighting evil, sure... But not compromised ego development."

Willow grinned, recognizing Buffy's comments for the support they were. She also felt a twinge of sadness, though; freshman psychology reminded her of Riley... Riley and his departure for the Special Ops duty in some country that was low on amenities and high on demon-provoked insurrection. After awhile, he had acknowledged what Buffy had suspected for a few months: he was bisexual, and quite interested in Graham.

"I told him to go figure it out," she later told Willow. "But I don't think he'll be back anytime soon. It's probably for the best, though," she added, as Willow began to offer words of comfort. "That wholesome thing was starting to wear me down."

Turning her attention back to the issue of baby names, Willow spoke up decisively. "We're going to name her, and that's that. However long she's with us..." And here she turned to Tara. "...we're going to treat her like the baby she is. We're going to protect her, and feed her, and watch over her."

And love her. Willow felt, rather than heard, the words emanate from Tara. She took her beloved's hand, and smiled her agreement.

The conversation that followed was much as one might anticipate, based on the characters involved. Buffy, for all that she had traveled through the realms of darkness and vanquished creatures of unspeakable evil, tended toward names of almost hideous cuteness.

"You would really name a child 'Barbie,'" Willow marveled. "Truly, you are a troubled woman."

"Well, her full name would be 'Barbara,'" the Slayer protested. "'Barbie' would just be her nickname."

"I think it's sweet name," Tara offered, as, Buffy turned to her with a huge smile, "for a plastic doll with boobs three times the size of her feet." Looking back at Willow, she added, "We will not be throwing a Barbie on the shrimp," and seemed inordinately proud of the bad pun.

Giles suggested 'Hermione,' which elicited vast oceans of American dismissal. "Why wait for grade school?" Dawn asked. "Why not just laugh at her and knock her to the ground right now?"

Anya's ideas were thinly-veiled, to put it mildly. "'Anna' is a wonderful name," she said decisively. "Very time-honored. There's also 'Annie,' 'Enya,' and just plain 'Ann.' They're all classics, really."

Xander, surprisingly, hadn't offered up any specific names. Instead, he was peering at the baby intently. Finally, he looked at Willow and then Tara.

"What does she *look* like?" he asked simply. At the questioning glances, he explained, "Don't make her fit the name; make the name fit her."

Willow stared at him until he began to squirm. "What--do I have something in my nose?" He gave a self-conscious swipe at both nostrils.

"No; it's just that this is twice in three days that you've had a really good suggestion, and I'm..." She stopped, realizing how it would sound.

"Shocked? Awed? Yeah--me too," he shrugged.

As Tara gazed at the sleeping infant, she commented, "Well, she has a head of dark hair; that's one thing."

"How about 'Raven'?" Giles suggested.

"A little too E. A. Poe for me," Willow mused. "We have enough midnights dreary as it is."

"Hey." Dawn's voice was excited. "I know 'Kieran' means small dark one in Celtic. I mean, you hear it more for boys than girls, but still..." Turning to Willow, she asked, "Can I borrow your laptop for a minute?" With the nodded permission, she began a search for baby names. After a moment, she said, "Well, there's 'Kiera,' with the same meaning. And then..." She paused, scrolling down. "There's also the same name, spelled 'K-y-r-a,' and that means 'sun.'" She looked at Willow, who was looking at her mate, who was looking at the baby.

Tara nodded slowly at this. "Dark one, and sun...She feels like both to me." She glanced up at Willow. "I'm thinking 'Kyra.' What about you?"

Willow knelt to touch the infant's silky black hair. "I think we got ourselves a name, Sweetie." Gazing into Tara's eyes, she felt a surge of love and protectiveness that left her almost dizzy.

And we got ourselves a baby, she thought to herself. But Tara's answering kiss on her cheek told her that her beloved had heard her.

Two weeks after Kyra's appearance, Willow looked at Tara and said simply, "There are things I need to do; things only I *can* do." And Tara nodded her agreement, and her approval. Willow turned away from her and squared her shoulders.

"For I shall call upon my power, and with it, give form to nothingness," she intoned. "I shall create life where once there was none." So saying, she cracked the knuckles on both hands and settled down to her computer.

The first thing she did was issue a birth certificate. Tara was the biological mother, having given birth to Kyra at home with Anya Jenkins as midwife. Her alleged role pleased the former vengeance demon a great deal.

"You were a real trooper," she commended Tara, punching her lightly on the arm.

The decision to give the child Tara's mother's name had been a simple one. "My mother was one of the two greatest gifts in my life up to this point," Tara had said quietly. "And for whatever reason--for however long--Kyra feels like the third." Willow, who had actually been thinking the same thing, kissed Tara by way of response.

Dawn came in just as Willow was about to send the document to print. "Can I take a look?" she asked, peering over Willow's shoulder without waiting for permission. After a moment, she wheeled to face Tara.

"Oh my *God*," she whispered. "How did you stand it? How did you even survive?"

"What?" Tara asked in alarm. In response, Dawn pointed to the document on the screen, where Tara learned that she had given birth to an 80-pound, 5-ounce infant.

"And you keep hounding me for sex," she said accusingly to Willow. "As if that isn't what got me into that mess in the first place."

Willow quickly corrected the typo. "Thanks," she muttered to Dawn, as she made sure that Kyra had in fact been 19 inches and not 109.

Such logistical matters were fairly simple for someone of Willow's almost infinite computer skills. "Quite the hackage package," Tara commended her, as Willow produced yet another form confirming her legal adoption of Kyra as a second parent.

Far more sobering, though, were the emotional realities and the mystical implications. Tara had felt from the beginning that Kyra had been sent to them intentionally; that, for whatever reason, they were meant to be Kyra's mothers. Willow was somewhat more uncertain as she pondered it

all, though the crying roulette game had definitely left an impression. Her doubts were put to rest, however, a week after Kyra had joined them.

Tara was preparing the formula for her evening feeding, shaking a couple of drops onto the inside of her wrist to check for temperature, and pressing the bottom of the plastic liner against the side of the bottle to force any air out through the nipple. "Gas is just never fun," she commented, and Willow had to agree. Kyra apparently found this prologue entirely too long, and cried out her impatience for the story to commence in earnest.

Willow, who'd been rocking Kyra in a vain attempt to soothe her, glanced over at Tara to see how the preparations were coming--and stopped cold.

"Your shirt..." was all she managed to say.

Tara gave her a quizzical look, then peered down at her light blue pullover--which was now noticeably darker in two spots.

She stared at Willow, stunned beyond words. Then, eyes widening even further, she pointed and said, "*Your* shirt."

But Willow had felt it even as Tara spoke. The inspection was a cursory one; confirmatory, not exploratory.

"Willow--we're *lactating*!"

"That seems...*noteworthy*," Willow managed. "And painful, too," she added, as the fullness in her breasts became more pronounced.

The group had received this news with a mixture of excitement and disbelief.

"It's like she's totally yours," Dawn breathed, her voice filled with awe. "*Both* of yours... This is just too cool."

"Giles," Willow asked, "is there any record of anything like this ever occurring?"

"I've scanned several texts, but I've found no discussion of such a birth or such maternal circumstances. I must confess, this is all quite perplexing." The Watcher shook his head.

"Giles, that sentence took at least fifteen seconds to say," Xander commented, sighing in faux exasperation. "Now try this: 'No.' See? Compare, and save."

"Actually, Jesus of Nazareth was the product of a lesbian relationship," Anya said, matter-of-factly.

This effectively brought all conversation to an end.

Finally, Buffy broke the silence. "Jesus. *The* Jesus," she said simply, tilting her head as if considering the possibility that Anya might be, among so many other things, mentally unstable.

"Sure," the ex-demon confirmed, seemingly taken aback by all the hoo-ha. "Good carpenter. Infinitely loving and kind. A very welcome guest for all functions involving wine, bread, and fishes. I'm surprised you don't know this."

"And just where did you happen upon such...*unique* information?" Giles asked slowly, his expression suggesting that he half-hoped she wouldn't supply the answer.

"It's common knowledge in most dimensions," Anya replied easily. "And it should be here. You've heard of the rosary, right?"

"The rosary?" Tara echoed, looking at Willow in abject confusion.

"Sure--you know: 'Hail Mary, full of grace.' Well, the 'G' in 'grace' should be capitalized." She paused, waiting for the others to hop, jump, or at least stumble onto the Clue Train. When they didn't, she sighed.

"Grace wasn't an abstract concept; she was Mary's partner."

The names were different, but the slack-jawed expressions in the room were largely identical. Finally, Xander said hesitantly, "And Mary was...full of her?"

"That's the scoop. Oh, He was definitely a holy man. Just a very different nativity scene. Word on the street is that Saint Peter wasn't too cool with the women-loving-women part. I think his wife had left him for one of the other apostle's sisters," she added thoughtfully.

It was much later when Willow and Tara, left with Kyra bundled snuggly into a soft blanket embroidered with penguins. ("No rabbits, frogs, or horses," Tara had clarified the day before as she selected the item in question. "Check.")

"So we don't know where she came from, or why she's here," Willow summarized. "What we do know is that she's connected to us in some incredibly powerful way, because she cries when somebody else tries to hold her...And because we're both producing milk." She stopped and looked at Tara. "Is this freaking you out at all?"

"More than I can really convey," Tara replied. "The only thing I feel more than freaked is...*right*. I mean, *this* feels right. There's absolutely no reason why it should, and it absolutely does."

Willow looked down at the tiny creature nestled in her arms. "Yeah," she whispered. "It absolutely does."

Willow frequently indulged in a kind of retrospective imagining. She imagined that someone from the future (her actual present) had visited her when she was thirteen, fourteen years old. And she imagined that visitor showing her what her life would soon look like. How would she have reacted? When her biggest concerns were figuring out how to work tampons and avoid social embarrassments, what would she have said to a glimpse of herself staking a vampire? Conjuring transmutation spells? And of course, going down on a woman?

She had been heavy into such mental meanderings a few months earlier, as she took in the scene before her: a physician, wearing a stethoscope that twinkled brightly against her metallic blue skin as she tugged absently on one of her four ears.

Giles had arranged for this particular health care provider to give Kyra her six-week check-up. "I don't know that you want to risk going through your managed care provider," he noted when he made the suggestion. "I think it would be wise to make use of someone a bit less...*mainstream*."

"I agree," Tara said promptly, "as long as this doctor knows her stuff."

"Oh yes," Giles assured her. "Darnuth was near the top of her graduating class."

"In another dimension," Willow pointed out. "I mean, did she have to take MCAT's? Who supplied the cadavers? It feels a little sketchy to me."

"Her particular home dimension is actually quite advanced," Giles replied somewhat stiffly, as if Willow were implying that he was handing little Kyra over to some drooling imbecile.

Actually, she was drooling a little bit, but that was apparently beyond her volition and she did manage to wipe it discreetly periodically. Giles had been right, though: Darnuth was extremely bright and this was clearly not the first human infant she had attended.

"This child is in perfect health," she reported after examining Kyra for almost an hour, her voice thick with an accent Willow had never heard before. "Her lungs and heart are well-developed; her responses to noise and light are normal; she has good strength for her age. I would consider her to be in excellent condition."

"Don't you need to take any blood?" Willow asked, dreading the thought even as she voiced it.

"Such things are archaic," Darnuth replied dismissively. "I can gather all the information I need through her eyes, a tiny cutting of fingernail, and the touch of her skin."

Willow thought that it would be extremely bad form to question the doctor further on the point, but it was also difficult to imagine the check-up being so non-invasive.

"So, um...no risk of any infection or diseases?" she asked hesitantly.

"None," Darnuth answered promptly. "Of course, you should bring her back for regular check-ups."

"What about vaccinations?" Tara asked.

Darnuth handed her a small vial of purplish liquid. "Just mix this in with your breast milk and give it to her by bottle. If she has any reaction to it, just have Giles contact me." She gave Kyra one last look, and this time a tiny smile creased her blue face. "She's a beauty," she told Willow and Tara.

"Yeah, we think so," Willow said, grinning. "Hey--what do we owe you?"

"Oh, Giles has taken care of my fee," Darnuth replied with a wave of her hand. "He even got extra-crispy, my favorite," she added appreciatively.

Willow thought it best that they not explore this fee business too closely, even as she spotted another little trickle of drool emerging from the left side of the doctor's mouth.

Darnuth had been their physician ever since. Willow and Tara had both been extremely pleased with her, although they chose never to learn the noun that followed the adjective in the doctor's fee. Kyra was, to every appearance, an extremely healthy baby. In the nine months of her life, she'd never even had a sniffle. Some part of Willow found this just a little bit troubling, although she tried to put the thought out of her mind. It turns out, though, that Tara was struggling with similar fears.

"Willow, every baby catches *something*," she said quietly one night as they prepared for bed. Kyra had been with them for eight months. "Don't you think it's unusual?"

"I don't know," Willow replied with a shrug. "I don't have any point of reference. This whole baby deal is a mystery to me." She turned from the bathroom mirror to face Tara. "But yeah--I think about it."

Tara's face was troubled, her fathomless blue eyes laced with fear. "Willow, sometimes I get so scared. I mean, I love her so much, and it feels so right to have her. But..." Here she trailed off.

"But there's so much we don't know," Willow finished, as Tara nodded.

"Like--how did this happen?" Tara asked, her brow creased with anxiety.

They had researched the protection spell from every imaginable angle, and had yet to find any explanation for either Kyra's appearance or the *disappearance* of the Ba'jeel.

"Do you think we made a mistake?" Willow asked. After a moment, she added quietly, "Do you think *I* made a mistake?"

Tara looked at her, love flooding into her eyes. "Baby--that's what you're worried about, isn't it? That you somehow did something wrong; with the magic."

It was a conversation they'd had so many times before: Willow's brief but wrenching misuse of witchcraft right after Glory's defeat.

Unlike the others, she'd found herself unable to relax and enjoy their good fortune. Everyone else had the sense of having dodged their largest bullet to date; after all, they'd defeated a *god*. Willow, though, couldn't stop thinking of all the close calls, all the near misses when she could have so easily lost someone she loved...Tara, at the multicultural fair; Dawn, up on the scaffold; Beverly, being shot with a crossbow. How many more escapes before their luck ran out? Because there had to be some element of luck, Willow decided. Too many good people, smart people had died in the fight against evil for her to believe that their continued survival was purely a function of their collective intelligence and courage.

She knew that witchcraft was her most powerful weapon, and she began to search for more powerful protection spells. She had to learn more; had to be able to cast spells for anything that might come their way. She couldn't shake the feeling of vulnerability, the fear that unless she grew stronger, something would come and take away some part of the life she loved so fiercely.

"Willow, sweetie--you have to let go a little bit," Tara had urged her one night after discovering Willow asleep over a new book of spells. She had grown more concerned as one week turned into two, and then three. But Willow always insisted that it was imperative for her to study more, and she grew impatient when Tara didn't want to study with her.

One day, she stumbled upon one of the few remaining copies of Lynaeum's Aegis. It held the most powerful protection spells she had ever encountered, and she felt her face grow hot with anticipation as she read the first enchantment. With these spells, she would protect her family with greater surety than she ever had. She began to cast almost reflexively, sometimes chanting a quick spell even when the danger seemed minimal.

On a warm June evening, Tara and Dawn had decided to check out an art exhibit on campus. Willow had passed on the event, choosing instead to pore over the Aegis yet again. She could see the irritation and disappointment in Tara's eyes as she declined. Although Willow hadn't said why she was staying home, she knew that Tara knew.

She also knew that it was a full moon; a wolf moon. There hadn't been a werewolf attack in almost nine months, but Willow found herself on guard now against every imaginable danger. And so, as Tara and Dawn started out the door, Willow began to murmur a quick protection spell.

Tara turned slowly, her eyes narrowing. "Willow--did you just cast a spell on us?" she asked. Her voice was different in a way that Willow couldn't identify; but it scared her.

"No." The lie was out before she'd even thought about it. "I was just running over my to-do list for tonight." She forced a laugh. "Now I'm talking to myself--first sign you're going crazy, they say." Her own voice sounded alien to her ears: high-pitched, and hollow.

Tara just looked at her for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Dawn stood awkwardly in the door, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Finally Tara shrugged slightly. "OK. Well, we'll be back in a little bit."

As they left, Willow realized they had never parted without a good-bye kiss before. She tried to ignore how bad that felt, much as she tried to ignore how bad it felt to lie to Tara.

But it's just a little spell; something to keep them both safe...

Then why didn't you admit it? This second thought sliced through her, cold and objective and all the more unsettling for its truthfulness. For a moment, she considered running after Tara and telling her the truth; making everything right.

And then a fluke streak of rebellion and righteous indignation overtook her. She'd only been trying to protect them, and Tara had acted as if she were selling crack to preschoolers. Tara hadn't been fighting evil as long as she had. Maybe she hadn't realized just how precarious everything really was. So yes--she'd used a protection spell.

And then the phone had rung, two hours later, and Tara was saying that Dawn was in the emergency room, getting her broken arm set in a cast. Listening to her partner's shaken voice, Willow remembered the spell she had cast...Or rather, the spell she had been in the process of casting when Tara had turned to question her.

Had she chanted correctly? She quickly ran the mental tape in her mind, and felt herself go cold with the recollection. It was a Sumerian protection spell: *Protect these whom I love most dear*. Except, in her surprise--guilt?--at being overheard, she had failed to enunciate the plural; and so, she had asked for protection for the *one* she loved most dear...And that had been Tara. Dawn had been left vulnerable.

Later, as she sobbed her confession to Tara, Willow had felt as if she might choke on her desperation and her guilt.

"I just wanted to protect you both. It was a wolf moon, Tara, and...and I thought it couldn't hurt to...to *cover* you somehow; just to be safe."

"But you lied about it, Willow; you lied to *me*. I never thought I'd see the day when magic came *between* us."

"I know, Baby; and I'm so sorry. God, I'm sorrier than I can tell you. And now Dawn's been hurt because of me."

Tara had turned to face her, her eyes blazing. "That wasn't your fault, Willow. It wasn't even a wolf that attacked us; it was your garden-variety vamp, and *I* was slow with the holy water. If I'd been quicker, it never could have grabbed Dawnie." Tara's voice was filled with pain and her own demons of regret. Finally, she took Willow's hand and sighed. "Sweetie, I'm so tired, and I

have an art history exam in the morning. Can we just go to sleep? We can talk about it tomorrow."

But when the next day came, and Willow found Dawn huddled in her room crying, she felt the pull once more to take the pain away, to spare the teenager the trauma of that experience. And so she tried just once more--a quick spell to erase the memory of the night before, and replace it with the less terrifying "recollection" of breaking her arm in a freak tumble down the steps.

But she was casting from someplace far from centered. She had certainly cast under stressful conditions before, but she had never done so with guilt, sending her energy off in such unfocused fashion. She had never cast in this skulking, deceitful way, and the effects were almost predictable.

She had wanted to target only Dawn, figuring that she would explain her decision to Tara later that day. Tara might be a little upset, but surely she would understand that this was just to spare the teenager, who had already been through so much. But she was off-balance, and her energy flew out in too many directions, and when Tara called in a panic a few minutes later to say that she couldn't remember the night before, Willow knew that she had grievously compounded her mistake.

She gathered all her energy, focused on her breathing, and managed to reverse the spell within a matter of moments. She didn't allow herself the luxury of finding whether Tara would have recalled this second duplicity; she drove to campus and found her partner and told her the truth.

That night, for only the second time in their relationship, they slept apart. Tara had been so hurt and so stunned that she had stayed with a friend. Willow felt as if her heart had died, except that if it were dead, it wouldn't ache so.

"Are you leaving me?" she whispered, each word carving its way out of her throat.

Tara looked at her, the blue eyes filled with tears. "Will, if you're telling me that you will stop this, that you'll let me in on the struggle, then no--I will never leave you. But the past 36 hours have been a nightmare, and if I stay here we'll talk all night and I'll be an even bigger wreck in the morning. We will work this out; I promise you. But tonight--tonight I am exhausted and shaken and I don't trust myself to talk without being harsh. And I don't want to be harsh with you." Her voice dropped to an exhausted whisper. "Please, Willow--just give me this night."

Sometime after midnight, Willow abandoned hope of sleep. She had apologized to Dawn, apologized to Anya who--for some reason--had also been affected by the memory spell, apologized to Tara's pillow.

They spent the bulk of the next day talking. Willow finally let Tara in on the full extent of her fear that she would lose someone she loved; the thought that it might be Tara herself left her near panic.

"Baby, it just seems like we've been so lucky for so long. Look at the violence and destruction around us--how have we made it for five years without losing one of the group? I mean, we lost Ms. Calendar, and I know that tore Giles apart; it was hard enough for the rest of us. But we've never lost one of the Scoobies, not to a demon; and Tara, that just seems impossible! After everything we've done, all the creatures we've fought...I'm just so scared of losing someone, and I'm so afraid that our luck's gonna run out."

"But Sweetie, you can't do it like this. You can't control everything. Life has too many unknowns to it; I don't think we're *supposed* to have that much control over it." Tara's eyes were soft with love and understanding.

"OK, could you say anything *more* terrifying?" Willow said, biting her lip. "We're fighting every kind of bad there is, and you want me to go Zen?"

Tara laughed--a low, delightful sound that let Willow breathe normally for the first time in days. "Willow, honey, I can't really see you *going* Zen...Maybe you could just *visit* Zen from time to time."

That episode had been the darkest point, and it had brought Willow back from her obsession with protecting everyone with the most powerful magicks known. She still worried, but she forced herself to talk to Tara about it. She also spent no small amount of time contemplating the fact that she had an ally now; a partner in every sense of the word. She had seen Tara as her mate for over a year, and certainly the magic had brought them together; they knew how powerfully they could cast together. But Willow thought more, now, about just how joined they were; how much she could depend on Tara.

I don't have to be the smart one all the time. I don't have to have everything figured out ahead of time. Tara can help me. I can help her. It seemed so simple, but it tilted something in Willow that let her sleep more easily than she had in months.

Now, all this time later, Tara was looking at her with those incredible eyes, eyes that told Willow she knew what she was afraid of.

"You think you did this?" she asked. "You think you messed up the protection spell somehow? Willow, we cast it together. We would have known if something had gone wrong."

"I know," Willow murmured. "It's just that--Honey, Kyra's such a gift and I love her so much and I wanna believe she was sent to us for some *good* reason. I don't want to think that maybe she's here because I messed up."

Tara reached out and stroked her face, soft fingers warm against her skin. "Sweetie, you didn't mess up. I'm scared too, Willow. I don't know how she ended up here and why she's ours and worst of all I don't know what's going to happen." Her voice dropped to almost a whisper. "That part scares me more than anything." Then she swallowed, and lifted her head almost defiantly. "But I know that she *is* ours. And I say we keep researching and asking questions but most of all--we love her."

Willow managed a grin as she offered herself up to Tara's warm embrace. "That's the easy part, Baby."

"She fears that she cast in error; that her desire to protect her loved ones, and the mistakes it wrought, has brought this about." The voice was deep and resonant, and utterly feminine.

There was a brief pause, and then a near-identical voice commented, "Humans are bizarre creatures. Their mating alone perplexes me."

A third voice, akin to the others but more authoritative, joined in. "Comprehension is not necessary. These humans are the ideal choice." And then, in a somewhat lighter tone, she added, "But they are curious little things, are they not?"

In retrospect, Willow wondered why she'd been surprised. After everything she'd seen; everything she'd been a part of...She'd watched the Mayor turn into a giant snake. Her best friend's sister had started life as a mystical ball of energy. She herself had once dated a werewolf. And she knew that Giles and Mrs. Summers had...done it. So why in the goddess' name was she surprised?

Kyra had been with them for ten months. Willow thought at times that her heart would split open with the fierce love she felt for her daughter. It seemed incredible, really, that something so tiny could inspire and embody such vast feeling. The proportions seemed off but Willow--so very precise in matters of geometry and physics--cared not a bit.

She and Tara had definitely wanted to be mothers, but this wasn't how they'd imagined it. They'd walked into an abandoned warehouse one night expecting nothing more or less than to battle some nasties, and they'd walked out as parents. And now she simply could not conceive of her life without this tiny soul who looked up at her; followed her with alert eyes; gripped her finger as preparing to pull herself up and start walking.

She often worried about her desire to protect Kyra. Would her maternal instincts make her susceptible to her earlier obsession? How could they not? Even the thought of anything threatening her daughter made her blood run hot in her veins. But she resisted the urge to delve back into the protective magicks, mainly because Tara kept close to her on the subject.

"Willow, Sweetie, I know it's hard not to go there. Goddess, *I* feel like going there at times, just for a little insurance. But we're setting ourselves up for a huge fall if we believe that we can control everything that happens to her. We'll protect her, and we'll use magic responsibly to do so. I promise you, we'll navigate this."

And Willow, who might have expected to feel chastened somehow, instead was relieved to know that she wasn't the only one who felt the temptation. It made her feel as though Tara needed her, too, to be wise in this regard. The balance, the mutual reliance, felt good.

Their life was taking on a certain pattern and predictability. Further check-ups with Darnuth showed a healthy baby. Their dark-haired child was even-tempered and smiled often. Between the two of them, it was unlikely that Kyra would ever go hungry even if she breast-fed until she was 20 which, Willow realized, was probably a bad idea. And they had made wills in case anything were to happen to them.

Willow, normally so prudent about such things, found herself in the grip of a truly paralyzing superstition. "If we make wills, something might happen to us," she argued, supremely confident in her logic.

Tara just looked at her, her mouth crooking slightly. "That's a good point," she said after a moment. "Because no one ever dies who didn't intend to. Death never catches anyone by surprise." She gazed at Willow with an expression of simultaneous affection and subtle insistence.

"Well, I'm glad you see the wisdom of my point," Willow grumbled, even as she began the search for a lawyer.

They were as cautious as they could be, of course. They never patrolled together, because they wanted to lower the risk that Kyra would be left with only one parent. The discussions about such things had been painful beyond words, but they were also absolutely imperative, Willow realized.

"OK, so if the two of us had sailed on the Titanic and left Kyra with someone--" Willow began.

"Why would we take a trans-Atlantic trip and leave our infant daughter behind?" Tara interrupted, her tone incredulous.

"Well, maybe we just wanted to get away."

"We could get away with a little overnight to a B&B," Tara argued. "No way am I climbing on a cruise ship and waving goodbye to our little girl for like, *weeks*."

"OK, I'm not suggesting that we book a cruise for this Saturday," Willow continued, feeling just a wee bit impatient. "Trying to raise a rhetorical issue here."

"Sorry," Tara mumbled. "I just got all riled up picturing it."

"I can see that," Willow replied slowly. "Anyway---we're on the ship and it starts to go down. There's a chance for one of us to be saved, but not both. Do we stay with each other to the very end--or do we make sure that one of us survives?"

"Oh *goddess*," Tara said in a small voice. "Could you maybe throw Old Yeller on the boat too, just to make it *more* excruciating?"

"But what would we do?" Willow persisted. "What would *you* do?"

Tara looked at her, blue eyes pained. Finally, she replied, "I'd push you into a life-boat and make sure you got back to our girl."

Willow gazed back at her beloved, feeling tears sting her own eyes. "No you wouldn't, because *I'd* be pushing you."

Tara managed a smile. "Great...Can't you just see us? We're both fighting to get the other one in the life boat and meanwhile the ship sinks with us locked in mortal combat, each trying to fling the other to safety."

Willow gave a tiny grin in response. "Well, at least we'd die in each other's arms." Brushing away her tears, she added, "But you get the point, right? As much as we want to be together for the rest of our lives; as much as we want our lives to run neck-and-neck to the finish line... We have another person to think about now. And whatever else, we don't leave her alone."

"Agreed," Tara whispered, pulling Willow close to her. Willow could hear the beloved heartbeat thrumming softly against her ear. How could she ever live in a world that didn't have this sound? If she had to, could she raise a child by herself? Unconsciously, she gripped Tara more tightly to her.

Finally, Tara pulled back just slightly, enough to cup Willow's face in her hands and look steadily into her eyes. After a moment, she leaned forward and slowly kissed her cheeks, warm lips gently brushing away the remaining tears. Her thumbs trailed in their wake, stroking Willow's face with infinite tenderness.

"I love you, Willow Rosenberg," she breathed.

When Willow finally found her voice, she said, "Let's make sure all of this stays rhetorical, OK? Promise?" And she knew she couldn't really ask for such a thing, anymore than Tara could really give it. But she still felt calmed when Tara rested her lips lightly against her ear and whispered, "I promise."

One of the other more difficult discussions involved selecting godparents. Buffy knew that they had been drafting their wills, and she broached the subject with them one night after dinner.

"Listen, guys. I know that part of this whole thing is figuring out who looks after Kyra if anything happens to you. Now--as your friendly neighborhood Slayer, it's my intention that nothing happens to you. That's Plan A, right?"

Willow and Tara nodded in unison. *This is my best friend*, Willow thought. *And I love her.*

"But I know you guys have to think about it--the flip side," she continued. "And..." Here she faltered, fumbling at a loose thread on her jeans. She took a deep breath. "And I want you to know that as much as I love you both, and God knows the midget's growing on me too, so to speak...I can't be a part of it."

Willow just stared at her. "Buffy, what--"

"Willow, listen. I'll protect all of you with everything I have, but I'm the Slayer. And at least historically, that career hasn't involved a lot of retirement benefits because retirement usually takes the form of death." She spoke quickly, as if afraid that her will would fail if she let herself think about her words. "So if anything happened to you guys..." And here her will did fail, at least for a moment. "If anything happened to you, my first order of business would be to hunt down whoever did it and make them suffer in ways that testify to my immense creativity." She drew a deep breath. "But I'm more likely to die than either of you, and you can't pick someone whose job description involves nightly risk of mortality." She fell silent, her gaze never leaving theirs.

A long silence hung over them. Finally, Tara spoke; when she did, Willow could tell she was fighting tears. "Buffy, you're one of the most remarkable people I've ever known, and that has nothing to do with you being the Slayer. Your heart, and your courage--you impress me more than you know."

Willow couldn't really speak, because it just hurt too much to think about. *No wonder we don't make many other friends. Who else could understand sitting here and having this conversation?*

Buffy was blushing from Tara's words; looking at Willow, she gave a sad smile. "Just thought we should be clear."

Willow nodded. "Buffy, what Tara said...Put that to the tenth power and it goes for me." Her voice was barely a whisper.

Buffy gave her a wry grin. "I know that's a very big number, so color me immensely flattered." Then she sighed and stood up. "Now--if you'll excuse me I have to go pick up Dawn from volleyball practice, and then I'm giving my sister her next driving lesson."

Willow looked up in alarm. This was a whole different sort of peril. "You know, Buff, Tara and I could help out on the whole vehicular aptitude acquisition endeavor," she offered urgently, trying to keep the desperation out of her voice.

"God, you're about as subtle as a writer for a failing science fiction show," Buffy grumbled, flouncing out in *faux* indignation.

They had settled on Giles, Xander, and Anya. Willow was less than enthusiastic about the third member of that trinity, but Tara had been adamant. "Anya has strength and loyalty," she said over Willow's protests. "She should be a part of it."

Anya had shocked Willow (but not, she suspected, Tara) by bursting into tears when they broached the subject.

"If anything ever happens to you," she babbled through her tears, "I'll take care of her, no matter I have to do. Like, if you get bitten by a vampire and turn into unholy bloodsuckers, I'll stake you myself. You have my word. And...And if you get eaten or eviscerated or decapitated or mutilated or--"

"You're so kind," Tara managed, laying a slightly shaky hand across Anya's shoulders.

Later that evening, as the group was digging into the pizzas they'd ordered, Tara took Willow's hand. "We need to talk to Dawn," she said quietly. "After we eat, OK?"

Willow nodded; she'd noticed the girl's uncharacteristic quiet throughout the night. Half an hour later, they had managed to steer the teenager out onto the front porch without attracting much notice.

"Sweetie, we need your help," Tara began, and Willow realized at that moment that for Dawn, those were some of the most meaningful words she could hear. "Willow and I plan to be Kyra's mother for a long, long time. What we asked Giles and Xander and Anya earlier--that's a worst-case scenario. But she's going to need you regardless of what happens to us."

"Why?" Dawn asked, her upturned face pale in the dark.

"Dawnie, who knows better than you do what it's like to have an...*unconventional* start to life?" Tara asked softly. "No one will be able to relate to her in quite the same way you will, no matter how much we love her."

Willow picked up the thread. "And if the worst does happen...Dawn, she'll need you more than ever. Please promise us that you'll look out for her; help her make sense of everything." As she spoke, she found herself remembering a Sunday afternoon when she and Tara had promised Buffy that they would look after Dawn if anything happened to the Slayer.

Everything comes full circle...Who will Kyra look out for in her time?

Dawn looked from one of them to the other. Finally she nodded, almost imperceptibly. "I understand. And I'll be there for her, whenever and however she needs." She paused, and then added. "But I expect both of you to be there to shower me with gratitude and affection and maybe ice cream, OK?" She gave them a small grin. "'Cuz I don't come cheap."

Willow nodded with feigned formality. "We'll have the contract drawn up in the morning, Ms. Summers. In exchange for social and emotional services rendered, you shall receive absolutely humongous amounts of love from Ms. Maclay and Ms. Rosenberg--heretofore referred to as 'The Hot Mamas.'"

"Can I teach her all sorts of cool stuff that you really don't want her to know?" Dawn asked eagerly.

"Yes, please," Tara replied smoothly. "In fact, we've bought her her first pack of cigarettes. We were hoping you'd have her smoking by preschool."

"She'll have a tattoo before she graduates kindergarten," Dawn promised. "That's how much I love you guys." This last part seemed to catch her almost by surprise; she looked down suddenly, as if embarrassed.

"We love you too, Dawnie," Tara replied softly, laying her hand gently on the teenager's shoulder. Then she lowered her head until she could look Dawn in the eyes, and gave her trademark crooked smile. "I mean, we must love you. We just entrusted our daughter's eventual truancy to your capable hands."

"You can count on me," Dawn said with an answering grin, but even through the humor Willow recognized the utter seriousness of her promise. She gave first Tara and then Willow a quick hug. As she turned to go back inside, Willow tapped her on the shoulder. Dawn looked at her quizzically.

"Emphasis on the word 'eventual,'" Willow reminded her.

Three days later, Willow and Tara went downtown to do a little shopping, pushing Kyra in her Blue's Clues stroller. Willow had insisted on this particular one, thinking that it would encourage Kyra's own discernment and analytical ability. Tara, for her part, thought it was beyond cute, though she had surprisingly little faith that the blue dog on the plastic would further their daughter's mental capabilities.

It was a beautiful day. People smiled at them; some stopped to chat. They shared nods of unspoken camaraderie with other parents. No one seemed to bat an eye at two women pushing a baby stroller. Perhaps there was a certain amount of ignorance or naiveté involved; people assuming that they were sisters, or friends. Willow, however, chose to believe that most of them knew she and Tara were a couple and that Kyra was their daughter.

Who could look at us and not know we're in love?

All was well until they were standing at any unusually long stoplight, waiting to cross the street in search of some lunch. A short white man with a pinched face glowered at them so openly that Willow finally turned to face him.

"Can I help you?" she asked curtly.

The man looked at her with open animosity. "It's bad enough that you chose to live this lifestyle," he replied, his eyes dark with hostility. "But to bring a child into it...It's the worst kind

of abomination." He practically spat the words. Willow felt her face grow hot with anger, and prepared to verbally shred him.

"Based on Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth?" Tara asked sweetly. The man recoiled so suddenly that Willow thought he might fall into the street. She sort of wished he would. What she knew that he didn't was that Tara had been raised Southern Baptist. If this man wanted to argue Scripture, he was in for a dogfight.

By now the light had changed; people hurried by as if eager to get away from the growing tension.

"Among other verses," he finally managed.

"Let's talk about some of those versus," Tara continued in the same unassuming voice.

The man's face flushed as he looked at her. Willow had never encountered such open hatred before. He pointed a shaking finger at Tara and hissed, "Don't think I don't know what you are. Don't think I can't see the evil inside you."

This last part was almost laughable, considering that Tara was probably the most un-evil person Willow had ever met. But any impulse to laugh was choked by the sight of the man taking a step closer to Tara, his face crowding closer to hers. Willow knew without having to think about it that if he touched her, there would be profoundly serious consequences.

As it turned out, Willow didn't have to do anything--not because the man backed down at all, but because he was abruptly pushed to one knee by a force she couldn't see. He stared up at them, fear now washing across his pale face.

Looking at Tara, Willow knew that she hadn't cast any spell. At Tara's questioning glance, she shook her head quickly to say that she wasn't responsible for the sudden turn of events either.

Almost on instinct, she looked at Kyra, to make sure she was OK...and stared dumbly at her daughter.

If it was possible for an infant to have a "Don't fuck with me" expression, Kyra was wearing it now. Her tiny fist was extended and her brow was furrowed in anger or concentration or both. She wasn't crying, and didn't seem inclined to do so. Instead, her little jaw was set and she glared at the space where the man had been standing.

The man rose shakily to his feet, looking at Kyra as if expecting three little 6's to emerge along her forehead. He started to speak, then seemed to think better of it. Turning, he gave only a quick glance at the flashing "Walk" sign and practically lurched across the street.

Willow stared first at Tara, and then down at Kyra, who was now babbling happily once again. After a long moment, Tara whispered, "I think our daughter has some very special talents."

"And so Kyra...what? *Glared* at the man?" Giles' tone suggested deep puzzlement.

"She glared at him, did this raised-fist thing--and the SOB dropped like a stone." Willow knew that her own voice held more pride than an avowed pacifist's ought to. She glanced over at Tara, half-fearing the infamous Quirked Eyebrow of Mild Reproach, but her partner simply nodded in agreement. *Methinks I'm not the only proud parent in this room.*

"My word," Giles murmured. "That must have been rather disconcerting."

"It was 'rather disconcerting' in the way that John Ashcroft is 'rather conservative,'" Tara replied, shaking her head. "I mean, if you guys could have *seen* it..."

They were sitting around the large table in the back of the Magic Shop. In addition to Giles, they were joined by Buffy, Xander, and Anya. Dawn was watching Kyra in the training room. "Don't let her play with the broad-axes," the Slayer had remarked absently. Now, she looked suspiciously from one witch to the other.

"Screw disconcerted," she said flatly. "You two are downright proud of the little sorceress. Am I right?"

Willow exchanged a guilty look with Tara. After a moment, she shrugged helplessly. "But she was just so...*cute*. I mean, with her little fist, and her jaw all squared like she was getting ready to take on every homophobe in the country..."

"Plus she was in her lavender onesie, the one with the baby ducks on it," Tara added pointedly.

"Oh God, she's so adorable in that!" Buffy exclaimed. "Was she wearing the matching booties?"

"Yes, I remember when we first battled Ethan Rayne," Giles broke in abruptly. "You all looked so cute in your costumes, I could scarcely focus on the mayhem at hand." He sighed in exasperation. "But about that annoying side issue of Kyra's seeming use of magic."

"Right. Sorry." Willow reached over and took Tara's hand as Anya whispered loudly, "But she does look just too cute in that outfit." Willow gave her a quick smile, then turned back to the Watcher.

"I don't know what to say, Giles. She's never done anything like it before." She turned back to Tara. "I mean, you haven't seen anything, have you?" She already knew the answer, though; there was no way that her partner would keep such a thing from her. Tara was shaking her head.

"There's never been any indication of magical ability before." She paused, and then added, "Although I can't say I'm surprised."

"You mean, because you're both witches?" Xander asked, and then caught himself. "Oh wait--not so much with the biological connection." He frowned slightly. "I always seem to forget that."

Tara smiled at him, her eyes crinkling, and Willow wondered yet again how anyone could be on the receiving end of so much beauty and not fall completely and irrevocably in love. "Yeah, so do we." Turning back to Giles, she continued, "Kyra started out under such mystical circumstances, not to mention the fact that she's never been sick a day in her life and she virtually never cries. All babies are special, but it's not just maternal pride when I say that Kyra's *extra* special. I wouldn't have predicted this, but I can't say I'm exactly falling down in shock."

Buffy snorted. "With everything this gang's seen? If any of us *did* fall down in shock, I'd probably...well, fall down in shock."

"Good point," Willow acknowledged.

"So then what's the mojo about?" Xander asked. "What made her...*activate*?"

"For Hecate's sake, Xander, she's not a Wonder Twin," Willow frowned.

"You know what he means," Anya said impatiently. "What made her use her magics *then*?"

"It was definitely directed at this guy, right?" Buffy asked. "No chance of it just being...chance?"

"No way," Tara replied decisively. "She was just gurgling and smiling before he started in on us."

Giles cleared his throat, but when the others looked at him, he spoke almost reluctantly. "Well, Kyra did spring from a protection spell." At the words, the room fell silent.

Finally, Willow asked quietly, "So what are you saying?"

"Yeah--what's your point?" Dawn had slipped back into the main room unnoticed, and now stood defiantly in the doorway, rubbing Kyra's back protectively.

Giles looked uncomfortably from Tara to Willow and finally to Dawn. "I'm saying...Well, actually I'm just speculating...It's--it's possible that Kyra was acting to protect her mothers."

Willow felt her throat tighten at the words, and squeezed Tara's hand reflexively. "OK--I do not like where you're going with this, Giles."

"So, what--Kyra was sent here to protect people?" Xander asked incredulously.

"People...Or perhaps, Willow and Tara specifically." Giles rubbed his forehead as if fighting a headache, and then continued. "You said that the man was harassing you, denigrating you because of your relationship to each other and to Kyra."

"Right," Willow nodded. "He was saying it was bad enough that we were gay, but that to bring a child into it was just beyond immoral. You know--the usual hate-mongering." She tried to keep her voice even.

"And then he stepped closer, and raised his voice--and that's when...That's when Kyra reacted." He looked at Willow almost apologetically.

Even through her agitation, Willow knew that Giles didn't like what he was saying. The implications were too frightening.

"No." Tara's voice was flat. "A baby doesn't protect her mothers. That's not how it works."

"We've been puzzled as to Kyra's appearance since she...arrived," Giles said helplessly. "We've thought it possible that she was sent to Willow and Tara in order that *she* might be protected, but this..." He trailed off, running a hand nervously through his hair. "After this, we have to consider the possibility that it's the other way around. That Kyra is the one who is to protect *you*."

Willow watched as Tara rose and moved toward Dawn, reaching out for Kyra while she was still several feet away from the teenager. Dawn seemed reluctant to part with the child, but settled for standing as close to the mother and child as she could. Tara pressed her lips lightly to Kyra's forehead and looked back at Giles.

"I won't have this."

Willow stared at her partner. She had known Tara for over three years; they had been through more together in that span than most couples would go through in a lifetime. But she had never heard her speak so flatly; never heard her simply shut off another person. "Baby..."

Tara swung around to face her. "Willow, we're going home." When Willow opened her mouth to speak, Tara did it for her: "Now."

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The trip back to the Summers house had been a tense one. Willow ached to talk about what had happened; the possibilities and fears it raised, but for once Tara seemed to be closed off. Her answers had been terse, monosyllabic. Kyra had fallen asleep on the way home, and Willow had finally decided to wait until they had her put down before broaching the subject again. If the two of them got upset--and those were good odds--she didn't want to wake their daughter.

Only after they had both settled under the big crimson comforter did Willow turn and face her partner. "Baby--look at me." She cupped her hand gently against Tara's soft cheek. Tara sighed, and Willow thought she could feel her lover's lips trembling just slightly under her thumb. She sighed once more, and this time there was a hint of a sob behind her breath; and then finally she turned and gazed at Willow.

Willow felt her heart tighten at the fear and dread in her beloved's fathomless cobalt eyes. "Willow...This can't be happening. This can't be why she's here."

Tears stung the back of her eyes--tears for her beloved's pain; tears for her own...And the first of many tears, she thought, for whatever pain Kyra might face.

"I know, Baby...I know." Willow drew a deep breath and tried to speak with something akin to strength. "But it's just speculation at this point, right? I mean, he even said so. You know Giles--he's the one who comes up with all the various hypotheses and theories. It's--It's his job to raise all the possibilities, you know?"

Tara's eyes were helpless with pain. "I know. And I also know he's usually right." She shifted, propping herself up on one elbow. "Willow, everything he said makes sense. The man was harassing *us*, not her. And she acted to defend *us*." The anguish in her voice was piercing, almost desperate.

Willow shook her head angrily, hating Giles at that moment with what she knew was an unreasonable blame. Then she seized on an idea. "But how do we know *she* knew he wasn't threatening her? I mean, she's a *baby*, Tara. Maybe she felt a hostile energy, assumed it was directed at her, and acted to defend *herself*." Looking up at Tara's troubled face, she prayed that she was right.

Tara gazed down at her for a moment, biting her lip. Then she dropped back onto her pillow and stared up at the ceiling. "Willow, if she's intelligent enough to *sense* a hostile presence, she's intelligent enough to know where it's directed."

"We don't know that, Baby." Willow could feel new and defiant hope creeping into her voice. "Everything we've read says that babies are more aware of their surroundings--including emotional states--than we first assumed. Sure Kyra's different--there's no denying that. But there's no way we can assume that she knew exactly what he was saying, or who he was directing all his hatred to." She stared fiercely into Tara's anguished gaze, willing her beloved to believe what she had just said.

Tara furrowed her brow, biting her lip in what Willow knew was an unconscious habit when she was agitated. "Do you think so? Kyra was protecting herself?"

"I think it's a possibility, and that's gonna keep me from assuming the worst right now." They were facing each other now, so close together that Willow could feel the soft puffs of Tara's breath falling against her cheek. She leaned forward; the barest movement, but it was enough to bring her lips to Tara's. She kissed her gently, feeling her beloved's warm lips yielding to her own; accepting the comfort and the reassurance and the love. After a long moment, their lips joined in a hushed, still promise, Willow pulled back and then pressed soft kisses against Tara's closed eyes. Rolling onto her back, she pulled Tara against her, wrapping her slender arms around the infinitely precious woman within her embrace. "Go to sleep, my love," she whispered.



Willow lay awake for a long time after Tara's breathing had slowed to the deep regular pattern of her sleep. She thought about the woman in her arms, and the tiny creature in the crib nearby, and thought about what it meant to love someone so deeply, so fiercely that the finest purpose of your own life was to safeguard theirs.

*We can protect her*, she prayed to any deities who might be listening and a few that she suspected weren't. She thought for a moment, and then amended, *We will*.

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It was a subdued group that reconvened at the Magic Box the next evening. Giles had greeted Willow and Tara anxiously upon their arrival; Willow thought that he was particularly agitated when speaking to Tara.

"I can only imagine how stressful this must be," he began. "I...I hope you know that I would love nothing more than to be mistaken about...about my speculations of last night. I would never--"

"Giles, it's OK," Tara broke in, laying a hand on the Watcher's sleeve. "I know you're just doing your job. And if you're right," she added, looking at Willow, "it's best we know now so that we can plan what to do."

Except that we're hoping you're wrong. We need you to be wrong.

Giles smiled awkwardly, then rested his hand briefly over Tara's. "Thank you, Tara. As usual, you're more gracious than anyone could ask of you." Only Willow, who could feel Tara's moods as surely as her own, knew how much effort it was taking for her beloved to summon up that graciousness. She nuzzled Kyra more tightly against her chest.

After they had all settled in, half-heartedly eating the take-out Chinese, Giles cleared his throat. "It goes without saying that last night was a difficult night," he began.

"And yet you said it," Anya pointed out. "Why do people always say, 'It goes without saying' right before they say what could have gone without the saying?"

The Watcher fixed her with a withering gaze. "Because we're so irretrievably committed to pointless conversational exchanges, Anya. Much like this one, for example."

The ex-demon sniffed. "Just trying to understand you silly homos."

Willow started abruptly. "Excuse me?" she demanded, feeling her eyebrows shoot all the way up into her hairline.

"You know--people. I was just using the scientific term," Anya explained as if speaking to a small child.

"OK, so, first: it's 'homo *sapiens*,' and second: you are one. Perhaps you meant to say 'possessed-of-at-least-one-faint-*clue* homo sapiens.'" Willow's patience was in short supply.

"Can we stay on topic here?" Tara asked, her voice at once quiet and commanding. Glancing around the room, she continued. "Last night, Willow and I were discussing the possibility that Kyra was protecting *herself*." She went on to explain their reasoning.

"I like that much better," Xander chimed in enthusiastically.

"It makes sense," Buffy said, looking from Willow and Tara to Giles. "She can tell something's up; she knows something's wrong in her universe--and she acts to defend herself."

"That could certainly be the case," Giles replied slowly, then shook his head in frustration. "There's just so much we don't know, and the only person who might possibly be able to tell us can't speak yet."

Willow glared at him indignantly. "She's less than a year old, Giles! And she's a lot more advanced than *most* babies, let me tell you. Why, you can tell from the way she's trying to pull herself up that she'll probably just skip crawling altogether and go straight to walking! And another thing--"

"Uh, Will," Buffy broke in gently. "I don't think Giles was saying that Kyra's going to be in the Terrific Turtles reading group instead of the Racing Rabbits when she gets to school."

"Oh--sorry." Willow grinned weakly.

"Proud parents," Giles murmured. "Always so...*energetic* when it comes to their young." He shook his head, but Willow could feel his affection and his concern emanating through the comment. "Alright, then. We proceed without any assumptions, though admittedly we hope that Kyra was acting to protect herself."

"I can live with that," Buffy said quietly. Willow felt the reassuring squeeze of Tara's hand on hers.

*That's the only option I **can** live with.*

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"The human capacity to believe what it wants to believe is truly stunning." The deep, soft voice held neither praise nor condemnation.

"If they choose blindness, we cannot intervene." This second voice, so much like the first, betrayed its owner's uneasiness.

"The child will serve as she is meant to serve. They will learn this soon enough." And the final voice of the three, with her words, pronounced the matter closed.

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For several weeks after the Incident with the Profoundly Chastened Homophobe (as Willow came to think of it), things were calm. There were no other displays of special power from Kyra, who seemed content to watch them both with her huge, dark eyes.

She was eleven and a half months old. She was crawling like a pro (though really, Willow realized, there weren't any professional crawlers) and pulling herself up by any remotely stable object in her vicinity, wobbling like a drunken sailor home on shore leave.

She smiled often; cried occasionally; and slept through the night more often than not. She was currently an aficionado of pureed sweet potatoes and carrots, but had only disdain for peas.

She waved her hands and feet wildly to the musical stylings of Tori Amos, found kd Lang to be deeply soothing, and wailed disconsolately if Michael Bolton happened to come over the stereo.

"Well I should hope so," Anya had huffed when she learned this last piece. "You know he's part Kai'hij."

Tara looked up in surprise. "Really?"

"Oh yes. You can always tell someone with Kai'hij blood."

"How?" Willow asked, intrigued in spite of herself.

"The mullet."

What Kyra most emphatically did *not* do was bring anyone else to their knees, literally or figuratively, and Willow and Tara were both profoundly grateful for this.

"So--the Mad Pooper hasn't busted out any pint-sized cans o' whoop-ass lately?" Buffy asked one night at the Summers' house over take-out Thai.

"No," Willow and Tara replied almost in unison. They exchanged a glance, each seeing the relief on the other's face.

"And--let me go way out on a limb here--you guys are OK with that?" Dawn teased.

"Infinitely, wildly, your-adverb-here OK with it," Tara breathed, shaking her head. "I mean, it's one thing if she has to protect herself. But us? No way."

Xander shifted uncomfortably in his chair, poking at his pad thai with ineffectual lunges of his chopsticks. "So..." he began, then hesitated, before finally plunging in. "Would it be that bad if...you know...she *was*?" Willow noticed that he didn't look at them.

She also caught the sudden set of Tara's jaw, and wondered if hers looked the same.

Xander fumbled on. "I mean--if she's supposed to protect you, doesn't that mean that she's *able* to? The Powers That Be wouldn't send somebody who couldn't do the job. Right?" He finally looked up.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. Willow gathered her thoughts, then spoke slowly. "Xander, she's a *baby*. She's supposed to eat and sleep and be the first woman President--not right away, of course," she amended.

"And parents protect their children, not the other way around." Tara's voice was quiet and infinitely strong. "Frankly, I don't *care* whether Kyra could protect us. I don't want her to have to."

Xander took a nervous gulp from his Diet Coke. "Look, guys--I'm not trying to turn a perfectly lovely evening into the Dinner of Relentless Tension. It's just that--well, Kyra came here under such wild circumstances. It's hard not to think there's a higher purpose."

"So what if there is?" Dawn's voice took Willow by surprise. "Maybe her higher purpose is to cure cancer, or end world hunger, or maybe throw Dick Cheney under a snow blower. Who says it has to be all...*sacrifice*?" She met Xander's gaze evenly. "Besides," she added, "I know a thing or two about how destinies can change. Nothing's carved in stone."

With this last part, she looked over at Willow and Tara; her expression was both defiant and collaborative. Tara gave her a warm smile in return, then turned to Xander.

"Look, I'm sorry if it seems I'm jumping all over you, Xander. It's just that...Goddess, how do I say this without sounding like a cliché?" She shook her head almost angrily. "I just love her more than I can describe. That's it. I know we found her in this warehouse and it was linked to the protection spell and we have to be aware of the quote Mystical Implications unquote, but she's our daughter. She's always *felt* like our daughter. And so to think of her very existence being about protecting us--it makes my blood almost literally run cold." She stopped and drew a deep breath and the room fell silent again.

Willow reached out and traced tiny circles on Tara's back, her thumb running an unconscious pattern over the soft green fabric. "Protection inherently implies danger," she said, looking from one concerned face to the next. "If Kyra's supposed to protect us, it means there will be danger and it'll be her role to keep us safe." She turned to face Xander. "Think of how much you love Anya. How central to your life she is...Now imagine that she was put here to keep you safe. That's her life; that's why she's here."

Her oldest friend looked at his wife, a series of emotions flitting across his somber features: fear, guilt, anger, and always, like the backdrop of a painting, abiding love. And Anya, for once, felt no need to speak. She just gave him a tiny smile and touched his face.

Finally he looked back at Willow, shaking his head. "OK, that was scary enough, and Anya's an adult. At least, she's an adult in some really important ways." Anya flicked a tiny bit of curried

rice into his hair, but the gesture held only affection. "To think about a baby having that kind of responsibility, even if some great power made it so--yeah, I'd have some major issues with that."

Suddenly Tara spoke up. "Buffy, you're being awfully quiet about this. What do you think?"

Buffy looked from one witch to the other and sighed. "I don't know what to think, and you know how good I am with ambiguities. I mean, I totally get what you're saying, Tara, and you too, Will. It wasn't that long ago that I learned my sister was some mystical Key thingy, and when I found that out, it didn't make her any less my sister. And it sure as hell didn't make me less determined to protect her."

"Yeah, I remember that part," Dawn chimed in. "I mean, as soon as you totally bitched me halfway to Omaha about spilling soda on your leather pants--I knew that you really saw me as your sister." She said it nonchalantly, but only an idiot could have missed the love that hung in the space between the two. They had grown even closer in the time since Glory's vanquishing, and certainly since Mrs. Summers' death before that.

"You still owe me for those, by the way," Buffy reminded her, and then turned to Xander. "But--and please don't jump all over me, you guys--I get Xander's point, too." She frowned suddenly, anger flashing across her face. "God, I hate this. You guys, I love Kyra. You know that. But she *did* join us under some pretty freaky conditions, and let's face it: we've all lived on the Hellmouth long enough to know that everything that starts with a grain of mystery ends up a full-blown...whatever a massive collection of grains would be. Nothing ever just happens without a reason. If something tweaks our Spidey sense, it never stops there."

A sudden realization flashed through Willow's mind, at once clear and utterly cold. "You're worried about how attached we are to her, aren't you? Because you think she's gonna get...taken away." She could scarcely say the words.

Her best friend looked at her, her expression miserable. "I don't know, Will. God, I don't want that to be true. I want this--how she got here--to be some completely fluke event that happened for reasons we may never completely understand but most importantly, we don't have to understand. Because it doesn't matter. I want Kyra to grow up and take her rightful place in our little family of surreal yet stylish demon fighters. I wanna go to her ballgames and her dance recitals and her school plays." Willow could see the tears that glistened in the Slayer's green eyes. "But I'm scared, too. I can't even imagine how much you two love her--she's your daughter, for God's sake. And if...if anything happens to her, I don't know how any of us will live with it; certainly not you two."

Tara had pushed her yellow curry chicken away from her; Willow thought she looked ill. She knew she certainly felt that way.

*But this conversation has been a long time coming*, she realized. For all of the joking and the excitement over various milestones and the endlessly wonderful topic of Kyra's abiding cuteness--none of them had really forgotten where Kyra came from. None of them had really stopped wondering what it all meant.

"Loving each other is the stupidest thing any of us have ever done," Anya announced abruptly, and then--for once--looked embarrassed at her words. Willow knew that her mortification had nothing to do with social niceties and everything to do with having used the word "love."

Her words were greeted with a dazed silence, and then Xander said weakly, "As your husband, I'd appreciate some clarification on that last pronouncement."

Anya gave a small toss of her head, as if trying to shake her habitual cynicism back to the front of her mind, but then she gave Xander a sad smile. "Has anyone noticed that we don't exactly live in Mr. Rogers' neighborhood? More than half of our time is spent doing things that could easily get us killed. Statistically, it's amazing none of us have died yet. And if any of us *were* to die, the others would grieve horribly. We would cry, and go into rages, and everything we saw would remind us of the one we lost. And even though we'd go on, we'd never, ever be the same. That's why it's so stupid to care so much about each other. We'd be much, much better off as casual friends, some of whom had sex with each other." And with that, she shut her mouth tightly and angrily brushed away a tear.

Willow thought of her struggle with the protective magics last year; hadn't she felt many of the same things?

The room fell deafeningly quiet. Finally, Tara spoke, and her voice betrayed a deep exhaustion. "You're right, Anya. You're totally right. The very fact that we're all sitting here, after everything we've done...At times it seems like our luck has to run out. But at other times--at other times I know in my soul that it's not luck. We're supposed to be here, all of us, and maybe that's something I tell myself to keep from going crazy with terror, but so be it. It works for me. And the bottom line is, it's all a moot point anyway. I don't think we get to pick and choose how much we love someone. Maybe my heart would escape a few bruising--maybe it would escape a complete annihilation--if I left all of this. Maybe if I could convince Willow to come with me, I wouldn't have to worry. Except I would, because we might be *safer*, but we're never completely safe. I don't think we're meant to be." She turned, and looked at Willow with anguish roiling in her deep blue eyes. "But Kyra...I'm not ready for her to join this fight yet; certainly not to protect *us*. I don't want that to be her life's purpose." With the words, she choked back a sob and leaned into Willow's embrace.

Willow felt her own tears spilling over her cheeks and didn't even try to stop them.

*We can fight and scream all we want, but if Kyra was sent to protect us, there's nothing we can do to change that.* Suddenly she was desperately, mind-numbingly tired.

No one was even feigning interest in their food anymore. The six of them sat in varying postures of sadness and fear and defiance.

Finally Xander cleared his throat apologetically. "So...To sum up: It's stupid to love each other, but we do, and we'll keep doing it. We don't want Kyra to have some kind of hero duty but she might and if it comes to that, each of will do absolutely everything in our power to keep Willow and Tara's daughter safe. Am I leaving anything out?"

No one spoke for a moment, and then Buffy said, "You forgot the part about Dawn still owing me for my leather pants."

Willow felt a ridiculous grin steal across her face, and looked down to see Tara smiling against her neck.

Anya said helpfully, "You know, it's been over two years, Buffy. You could probably charge her interest."

"Or she could just swim in the love-fest we have going on tonight and tell me not to worry about paying her back," Dawn suggested.

"You talk about love? I loved those pants, you juvie. Ease my pain a little here."

Some time later, Xander and Anya left. The mood, while still heavy with the implications of the night's discussion, was considerably lighter than it had been. As she reached for the door handle, Anya made everyone promise to forget that she had used the word "love." Willow and Buffy, by some unspoken agreement, approached her on either side and kissed her loudly on each cheek.

"Girl on girl action," Xander sighed. "How lucky am I? I routinely hang out, in close quarters, with five women."

"Two of whom are gay, one of whom isn't interested, and one of whom is jail bait," Willow reminded him.

"A fellow can dream," Xander replied, unfazed by the harsh light of reality.

"And you often do, dear; you often do," Anya said affectionately.

After the carpenter and his ex-demon wife left, Buffy turned to Willow and Tara. "Howzabout Dawn and I clean up?" She quickly stifled the teenager's protest with a glare. "You two must be wiped out. Besides, maybe I can just consider Dawn an indentured servant, to pay off her debt."

The four women exchanged hugs that last considerably longer than their typical ones did. As Willow pulled Dawn close, she whispered, "You and your changed destinies...How'd you get so smart?"

"I only associate with the best minds," Dawn answered. "Plus Xander."

As they prepared for bed, Willow felt the exhaustion leaving her. In its place--inexplicably, it seemed--grew a deep and insistent hunger. She stopped what she was doing to watch Tara change into her nightgown--a dark emerald green, soft and sheer; a loose bodice that she never bothered to tie. As Tara stood in front of the vanity brushing her hair, the light from the floor-lamp illuminated her features. Her breasts, always so beautiful to Willow, were even fuller now. Willow gazed at her as Tara rubbed lotion up over her arms and across her breastbone.

"Can I do that?" Willow practically whispered.

Tara turned to her; Willow feared that her love's own fatigue might make her crave only sleep. But those lips--sensual in the most ordinary of moments--curved into a half-smile that answered Willow's unspoken hope.

"Please do." She flicked off the lamp and approached the bed where Willow sat, edging herself between Willow's legs. She reached down and traced Willow's cheekbone with long, graceful fingers. Willow looked up at her for a long moment, until Tara pulled her head to her belly and cradled it there. Willow reached down and slipped her hands under the hem of the nightgown, then slowly began to inch the fabric higher. Her fingers stroked slowly over Tara's legs and then her thighs. Willow let her thumbs edge closer to that sweet warmth that had taken her, held her on so many nights and more than a few days.

"Come to bed," she murmured, forgoing the lotion she had wanted to spread over Tara's body. Now she simply wanted to stretch out her lover and lower herself to the heat of her flesh--infinitely yielding; infinitely strong.

"Yes," came the whispered reply. "Always...yes."

The exhaustion that came later was of a different kind--wrought by loving so intensely that anything else but sleep is anticlimactic. And so they slept.

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Willow looked soberly about the room. Had she forgotten anything? For all of her planning, could she have missed something?

It had to be perfect. This gathering, this occasion...Mistakes and miscalculations were simply impermissible. The stakes were too high; the import too great. This moment would never present itself again, and she knew to her core that she would never forgive herself if anything went wrong.

Today was Kyra's first birthday party.

The Summers house looked as if the goddess of party favors had anointed it her sacred temple. Streamers, balloons, twinkling lights had been strewn about with hands as generous as they were eager. Party hats and noise-makers were everywhere. Willow had tried to fasten one onto Miss Kitty Fantastico's head, but the suddenly-haughty cat had made it clear that the undertaking would not end well. "Continue with this," she seemed to say, "and there will be...*consequences*. You would not like those...*consequences*."

The birthday cake was a masterpiece of excess. "Culinary Baroque," Tara had called it: Chocolate, topped with mocha icing; tiny hearts traced out on top of *that* in a purple, almond-flavored icing. Tara had made it using her mother's chocolate cake recipe. After pouring the batter into the pan, she handed Willow the bowl and a spatula. "This is a time-honored tradition,"



she intoned. "Lick the bowl as surrogate for our daughter, who will one day claim it as her rightful inheritance."

Dawn, who had watched this work of art unfold, shook her head wonderingly. "If Kyra has more than one bite of that, she'll fly up to her crib under her own power."

For her part, Buffy had seemed both amused and befuddled by the epic preparations. "OK, you guys *know* she's not gonna remember this, right? I mean, there are pictures from *my* first birthday, but I never look at them and go, 'Ah..Now *that* was a party.'"

Willow pulled herself up to her full height and fixed Buffy with what she hoped was a marginally withering gaze. "If you're going to pooh-pooh this most glorious of celebrations, I suggest you do it elsewhere."

"Excuse me," the Slayer huffed in faux indignation, "but this is my house. If I want to pooh-pooh in my own kitchen, I will most certainly do so." She stopped then, as Willow and Tara looked at her in faint disgust. "Or, perhaps I will go elsewhere...to...you know...pooh-pooh," she finished lamely.

Now it was almost five, and the guests would be arriving soon. Willow gave the living room one last inspection, and nodded in satisfaction. The one touch of magic that she and Tara had agreed to indulge in were tiny flecks of blue and purple and gold light, floating gently around the room. "Understated, yet atmospheric," Willow had pronounced the effect.

"Can't you make them go faster?" Dawn asked. "We could have a total light show in here."

"We could also have people collapsing into seizures," Tara said wryly. "And that's just bad party karma."

The birthday girl herself was wearing a new outfit: purple overalls and a bright, fuchsia shirt with matching fuchsia booties. "My God, she looks like a walking gay pride symbol," Dawn marveled. "Or at least a crawling one." For her part, Willow wondered just how Dawn knew about such things.

Promptly at five, the doorbell rang. Giles smiled at them as he stepped inside, but his biggest grin was reserved for Kyra, nestled snugly in Tara's arms. Willow knew that he had been incredibly uncomfortable to broach the subject of Kyra's ultimate purpose; besides loving them both, the Watcher was clearly besotted with their daughter. Willow grinned as she watched Giles make inane baby noises for Kyra's consideration. She would have predicted that the refined Englishman would be stiff or, at best, slightly uncomfortable with a baby. After all, babies couldn't read; had a tendency to incontinence; and couldn't make a decent pot of tea to save their lives. But Giles had surprised them both with his obvious adoration.

A few minutes later, Xander and Anya arrived, each carrying brightly--indeed, garishly--wrapped presents. Each of them tried to wrest Kyra's attention away from Giles.

"Who's the cutest little baby until we have one?" the ex-demon cooed. "Who loves her Aunt Anya?" Xander, meanwhile, was making funny faces; or rather, what he obviously considered funny faces. Willow frankly found them disturbing, and wondered if her daughter did as well.

Dawn came and stood next to Tara. "Look at the silly grown-ups," she murmured. "Look at the big bad demon fighters acting developmentally delayed."

Soon the party was in full swing. Everyone had duly, if not enthusiastically, agreed to wear a party hat. Xander and Dawn were the designated picture takers, and if Willow were any kind of judge, they would have enough snapshots to wallpaper the Hollywood Bowl--twice. Kyra was in her usual good spirits: laughing and gurgling at the sights and sounds of her one-year commencement.

The cake was a huge hit, although Giles did grumble that it would go straight to his hips. In the silence which greeted this, Buffy finally asked, "You're sure you're not gay, right?" Kyra had not one but five bites of her cake and Willow had no doubt that they would be up much of the night dealing with an infant on an incredible sugar high. "Why not just give her some cocaine, too?" Dawn asked. "Send her right through the roof and zooming over to LA."

And then it was time for her gifts, each of which was presented with a flourish that told much of its giver's pride.

"Open my gifts first," Anya announced. "They're the best."

"How do you know?" Buffy demanded. "Maybe mine's the best."

"Maybe it is," Anya conceded, patting Buffy on the knee. "And maybe Mommy Tara and Mommy Willow would like to have sex with men."

"Let's see," Tara said with a shrug, and then leaned over to give Willow a long, slow kiss. "Hmm...Mommy Tara thinks not."

"What she said," Willow managed, making a mental note to slap Xander later for his glassy-eyed gaze.

Willow and Tara "helped" Kyra open her first present: a toy cash register. "See?" Anya said excitedly. "It makes that wonderful ringing sound and everything."

"On behalf of capitalist America, we thank you," Willow said agreeably. "And what's in this other package?" Kyra ripped into the paper and within moments had pulled out a bright yellow shirt emblazoned with the words, *"My mommies rock my world!"*

"I love it!" Tara said with a delighted laugh. "Where did you find it?"

"I had it made special at that t-shirt place in the mall," Anya replied. "Custom jobs are extra, but I figured--what the heck." And with the words, Willow realized that Anya truly loved their daughter.

"Thank you," she said, taking Anya's hand. "Really--they're wonderful."

Anya gave Willow's hand an answering squeeze, then turned to Buffy with a "Let's see what sorry-ass gift *you're* giving her" look.

"My turn," said Dawn. "Um...I don't exactly have wads o' cash, so my gift is kind of..." She trailed off as if suddenly embarrassed. Willow wondered if she had wanted to go next to get it out of the way.

"Your gift will be kind of...perfect," Tara said, smiling at Dawn in that way that Willow knew made the teenager feel important, and special. They opened the package to find a stuffed dinosaur and a framed gift certificate entitling the bearer to "Infinity + 1 Chocolate Milkshakes and Heart-to-Heart Talks."

"I figure she's gonna need some inside scoop on how to survive as a member of the younger generation," Dawn said, looking hopefully from one witch to the other.

"She's gonna need you for a *lot* of things," Willow emphasized, reaching out to hug the girl.

"Thanks, Dawnie," Tara murmured, pulling her close for a kiss on the cheek. Kyra conveyed her gratitude by grabbing Dawn's necklace and trying to stick it in her mouth.

"OK--let's see what the Xan-Man brought the world's cutest baby." So saying, he handed over yet another package. The requisite shredding revealed a toy tool set, complete with miniature hammer and several wooden pegs set into a pegboard. Kyra grabbed the hammer with obvious delight and began waving it excitedly.

"Does that come with a toy first-aid kit, to assist in the various concussions about to ensue?" Buffy asked politely.

"But wait, there's more!" Xander announced eagerly, and rose from the couch. "Gimme just a minute..." He headed out onto the porch, poking his head back in a moment later to say, "Everybody close your eyes!" They did--or at least, Willow assumed they did--and a moment later he announced, "OK--you can open them."

Willow stared at the hand-crafted child's rocking chair in front of her. She looked up at Xander, beaming proudly, and then back to the chair. "Xander...It's beautiful! You made this?"

"No, I stole it from the Peterson house down the street," he said witheringly.

"Xander, this is incredible," Tara breathed. "I mean it...This must have taken you forever."

"It's for Kyra," he said with a shrug, as if that explained everything. "See? It even says so." Sure enough, her name had been etched across the back in elaborate script and painted in with a deep crimson. Willow shook her head, and then jumped up to hug her oldest friend. "Thank you," she whispered, squeezing him tightly. Tara joined her, kissing Xander on the cheek.

"Tell Uncle Xander how much you love it," she instructed Kyra, to no avail.

Xander kissed Kyra's hair. "Well--Uncle Xander's just glad to provide you with that all-important male influence," he said through his blush.

"Excuse me?" Giles interjected archly. "I was unaware that I had been rendered a eunuch."

"Hey, Giles--you're all man," Xander hastened to assure him. "I'm just...*more* man. You know, in that red-blooded, all-American way."

"Ah yes, of course," the librarian nodded. "You'll be in charge of teaching her to binge drink and scratch herself in public. So very, very integral to her development." The Watcher snorted dismissively and then leaned forward to hand Willow his gift. She held it up for Tara and Kyra to unwrap.

"Baby Einstein!" Willow practically shrieked.

"Geez...Proud parent much?" Buffy muttered.

"No--the gift! It's a whole set of Baby Einstein books and videos! You know--they're based on the idea that you stimulate a baby's creativity in music and art and science." Willow had snatched the box of goodies from Tara and was rifling through it eagerly.

"Yes, and after you're done, perhaps Kyra would enjoy them," Giles said dryly.

"Giles, they're perfect," Tara enthused, beaming at him over Kyra's head. "Thank you so much."

"Well, I realize that she'll probably have more than enough examples of brute force," he replied, glancing significantly in Xander's direction. "I just want her to enjoy the more sublime aspects of life as well."

"Giles, you are the god of all things sublime," Willow acknowledged happily. "I've always said so." She turned to Tara. "Haven't I always said so?"

"When we first met, as soon as we got our voices back--the first thing she said was, 'Giles is the god of all things sublime,'" Tara concurred solemnly.

"You're too kind," the Watcher murmured. "And ever so witty."

"OK. My turn." Buffy shot a look in Anya's direction that could only be described as challenging, and then handed Willow a rectangular package. Mothers and daughter pulled away the paper to reveal a common doll--rendered most uncommon.

Her accessories included a miniature flask with the words "Holy Water" written in tiny print; a miniature stake with the business end prudently blunted; and a miniature broadax. A miniature cross-bow was slung across her shoulder. Her attire was both stylish and practical. The cardboard box in which she had so recently dwelt had been altered to identify her as: **"Little Baby Stake 'n' Slay."** *"She's the coolest girl on the block...**And** she totally kicks ass!"* read her bio.

Tara was shaking with laughter as Willow held the doll up for inspection. "Our little diva needs to know her history," Buffy said, crossing her arms. "And look--I made sure to get a doll that didn't have boobs three times the size of her feet."

"I helped her get the accessories," Dawn said proudly. "I especially loved the little cross-bow."

"I love it," Tara gasped, wiping her eyes. Kyra was reaching out for the doll; Willow removed the tiny accessories and handed her over. "Small parts, not good for babies," she explained.

"Of course," Buffy nodded, then added. "Besides, she's only a model. I figure when K-Bonita's about 3, maybe 4, I'll start her with the real stuff. I'm sure we can find some good youth weapons on the 'net." Willow looked up sharply to see the Slayer grinning at her. "You are so easy, Mama," her best friend said, shaking her head.

The party continued for awhile with the requisite tales of Kyra's latest achievements, although none of them were ever away from her long enough to miss out on any of the big stuff. Soon, though, Kyra began yawning and tugging her ear, the latter a sure sign of her exhaustion. Before they left to put her down, everyone lined up for a little baby snuggle fest. Anya cooed; Giles kissed; Xander made his funny faces--and that's when it happened. As the carpenter leaned forward with yet another facial contortion, Kyra's left eyebrow shot straight up into her hairline and she gave a tiny, crooked half-smile; that is, she looked exactly like Tara.

Everyone froze, and then an incredulous babble broke out.

"Oh my God--you guys, did you see that?" Dawn demanded excitedly. "She has Tara's smile!"

"And that thing she does with her eyebrow when she's thinking something she's too polite to say," Anya added.

"Truly remarkable," Giles said, grinning through his wonderment.

Willow and Tara just stared at each other. Even Tara recognized her own expression on her daughter's face.

*I don't know how this is happening. Right now, I don't even care. All I know is that my daughter looks like her mother--my mate.*

After some more snuggles and awe, they laid Kyra in her bed and turned on her monitor. Standing over her crib, Willow turned to Tara. "Can you believe that?" she asked quietly.

"No...and yes," Tara replied slowly. "It's like everything else in this whole situation: it should blow my mind, but it just makes too much sense. I don't know *why* it makes so much sense, but it does. So it's like, of course she has my grin. And if we're lucky, she'll have your nose." She leaned forward and kissed Willow lightly, then they turned back to their daughter and watched her sleep for several minutes, their arms entwined about each other's waist.

When they returned, the group turned to look at them. "Did you put her down?" Buffy asked.

"Yeah--we told her she was little and pooped a lot and didn't contribute financially," Willow replied.

"Good. Instill the self-loathing early, I say," Xander nodded.

"We were just talking about events on the supernatural front," Giles informed them, taking another slice of the hip-enhancing cake.

"Cool. Anything especially horrific? Any creature who, come spring, will threaten to annihilate the human race?" Willow inquired.

"Have you noticed that too? It's always around May that things get really tense," Buffy mused.

"Actually, demon activity seems to be at a fairly typical level," Giles noted. "Buffy's certainly being kept busy--as are we all--but nothing has emerged as particularly ominous. Everything has been routine."

"Yep," Buffy nodded. "Just your average night: lurking in cemeteries, waiting for corpses to rise from their graves as the undead, and then shoving a piece of wood into their unbeating hearts and watching them turn to dust before your eyes."

"See? Completely routine," Xander verified.

"So there's nothing unusual to report? You haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary?" Tara's voice held the surprise that Willow felt. It seemed as if there was *always* some demon or demonic activity of particular concern.

"The only thing of note has been the rash of suicides we've had over the past few weeks," Giles said slowly.

"What do you mean?" Willow asked curiously. With the exception of Glory's mind-suck mojo two years earlier, the Scoobies had rarely dealt with anything so subtle as mental health.

"I didn't notice it at first," Giles admitted. "But finally it hit me that almost every week I was reading of at least one and sometimes two suicides. That's well above average, and thus noteworthy in and of itself."

"And out and not of itself?" Dawn asked, then added, "You know, that wasn't as funny as I'd imagined it would be."

"The other thing that captured my attention is a commonality among the deceased," Giles replied.

"Why? Are they all members of some secret society? Were they all blondes? Did they all drive Saabs?" Xander seemed to be throwing darts at a mental dartboard.

"My goodness, Xander," Giles replied with a polite smile. "What creative and utterly baseless conjectures. No, the element that they had in common was that they were all actively involved in doing good."

This silenced them all for a moment. Then Tara asked, "What exactly do you mean? What kind of good?"

"Various sorts," Giles answered, turning to face her. "One woman was the director of the local women's shelter; another person was a social worker specializing in youthful offenders. One young man was a lobbyist for AIDS research funding. Another woman was a police officer, and still another was a noted philanthropist who had donated or raised literally millions of dollars for environmental conservation efforts. Each person had a well-established and well-founded reputation of working for some greater good."

After a moment, Willow suggested, "Maybe they just got burned out. I mean--seeing so much pain and devastation...Maybe the odds were just stacked too high against them and they lost hope."

"You know, police officers and therapists have a higher incidence of suicide than any other profession besides dentists," Tara added. At the others' glances, she shrugged. "I learned it in freshman psychology. I had a different section. My professor lived through the semester."

"You could be right," Giles conceded. "Still, it troubles me that none of these people--at least from what I could gather, from the limited queries I've made--had a history of depression. To my knowledge, none of them had attempted suicide before."

"But let's face it," Buffy argued, "that's not exactly something the family's gonna advertise in the obituary."

"Again, a very good point. I'm just...*troubled*. By the sudden increase, so well above average; and by the commonality among the victims."

"You said 'victims,'" Xander interjected. "Was there any sign that they were...*assisted* in their efforts?"

"No, none at all," Giles shook his head. "By 'victims,' I was referring to their being the victims of their own violence."

"Did the methods differ?" Tara asked.

"Yes," Giles replied slowly. "Gunshot; jumping; an overdose. That, at least, seems random."

"So you think maybe someone's controlling their minds? Driving them crazy?" Anya asked.

"Well, I hardly think that madness is a prerequisite for suicide," Giles frowned. "But it's certainly possible that someone--or something--was exerting a particular influence on their minds and mental states. It's undeniable that with these individuals gone, much good work has been cut far short."

They mulled this all over for another few minutes, with Willow agreeing to help Giles do more research into the topic. They were about to break for the night when the doorbell rang.

Willow looked at her watch: 9:15. Who would be at their door at this hour?

Anya summed it up nicely when she asked irritably, "Who could that be? None of us really have any other friends."

"One way to find out," Buffy shrugged, and headed to the door. She opened it, then stepped back as if slapped. Willow heard the other woman's voice before she saw her face.

"Damn, B--don't you know to ask who it is first?"

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*"A person's energy has a flow; a unity. Buffy's...grated. Like something forced in where it doesn't belong...Plus, she was kinda mean..."*

And then they had made the passage to the Nether Realms, where Tara had been her anchor, kept her tied to this plane. That place had been a place of whispers and images and figures beckoning from the shadows but she had wandered through it all without fear or distraction because Tara kept her safe...and because Tara was waiting for her back in their world.

Tara, who had pressed her palm to Willow's, looked at her with hitched breathing that Willow knew mirrored her own; Tara's face, glistening with sweat as her eyes locked into Willow's and would not look away until the entire room had narrowed and the only air was the breath that passed between them. Willow felt it in her heart at first, a dull thrumming that slid and pulsed its way down her spine and torso until it settled someplace low in her belly and throbbed there. She felt it circle and spiral within her, gaining insistence until it fractured, splintered--shooting



outward with a force that arched her back and wrenched a choked cry from somewhere deep and new inside of her. Her last sight before giving herself over to the Nether Realms was Tara's face, glowing with sweat and an almost unbearable beauty.

That night she had slept in Tara's arms as if drugged. Her entire body ached with a sweet exhaustion; her breasts felt full and swollen. The next morning they had left for Giles' apartment and found Buffy standing there in Faith's body. Even in the midst of the chaos and urgency, Willow had felt pride surge through her as she introduced Tara as the person who had figured it all out and with whose help she had conjured the katra that would help switch the Slayers back to their rightful bodies.

It was only later that night that Willow had remembered Tara's words in their entirety.

"Tara, what did you mean when you said that Buffy was kinda mean?"

Tara grew uncomfortable, glancing away to fumble with some papers on her desk. "Well, it wasn't really Buffy. I mean, that's the main thing. Even wh-when she was in Faith's body, I could tell she had a good h-heart. And now I c-can get to know *her*. The real Buffy."

"Right," Willow replied slowly. "You can get to know her because you figured out what was going on. If you hadn't, Buffy would have been killed by the Watchers Council. So yes--much gladness for the building of new friendships. But Faith--she *doesn't* have such a good heart. And she said something or did something or maybe both when we were at the Bronze; something that upset you so much you had to leave. What was it?"

Tara looked up, a deep shame etched across her features. "Does it really matter, Will? It was Faith, not Buffy, and sh-she's gone."

Will felt her heart constrict. She had such a fierce protectiveness toward Tara--this shy, amazingly powerful woman with whom, she now admitted, she was falling in love. She could never have guessed it--her evil vamp twin notwithstanding--and she hadn't been looking for it but now Tara was in her life, and it turned out there had been a room in Willow's house that had been created just for her.

Willow stepped closer and took Tara's hands. She felt the slight tremor that ran through them, and wondered at its cause. "Tara--I don't wanna make you uncomfortable. But I'd like to know what happened so that if I ever see her again I'll know exactly which spell to hit her with. I mean, should I prepare your basic unsightly rash, or are we talking sentient toilet plunger?"

Tara gave a small, low laugh--goddess, how she was coming to crave that sound--and then looked at Willow with a sigh. And finally--she had talked.

"She...she made fun of my stutter. And--and she talked about how much you and Oz l-l-loved each other. Like you c-couldn't keep your hands off each other." She wrapped herself tightly within her own arms, then looked up miserably. "I'm pretty sure she c-could tell how I f-f-feel about you."

Rage and protectiveness and the final remnants of grief slammed into her, sliding through her mind like the tiny glass pieces at the end of a kaleidoscope. All these, and one more thing she was ashamed to admit: discomfort that someone could tell their relationship was more than friendship.

*Faith knew just by looking at us?*

But all of that, everything except her love for Tara, was eclipsed in a moment, as she stroked Tara's face with her hand, trying to make those incredible eyes meet hers.

"Tara...Tara, I'm so sorry. God, that must have hurt so much."

But Tara only gave a tiny shrug, then said in a low voice, "That's how I knew it w-wasn't Buffy. I knew you would never be friends with someone so cruel."

Willow thought briefly of Cordelia. "Friends" might not be the best word, but even so...Cordelia would never mock someone for stuttering. *Plus I don't see her picking up on the gay thing.*

Tara looked up at her sharply. "But I know...I know y-you loved Oz. I know you still love him. You don't have to p-protect me from that."

Did she still love Oz? Yes, she decided.

She just wasn't sure quite how.

"Tara, look at me, please. I don't know exactly what I feel for Oz anymore. Yeah, I was in love with him. But he left. He walked out, and you walked in. And the one thing I *do* know is that I think of you a heckuva lot more than I think of him." She hadn't even realized this until she said it.

Tara held her gaze for a long moment, until Willow opened her arms in silent invitation. Tara gave her a small half-smile, then stepped into the embrace. Willow smoothed the long silky hair with both hands, breathing in the wondrous, indefinable scent that was Tara's alone.

*If I ever see you again, Faith, you are a dead woman.*

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Buffy recoiled as if she'd been slapped, her face a mixture of disbelief and dread.

"God, B., relax. Honestly--you're gonna be the only Slayer in history who dies of hypertension." Faith stood with her hands in her back pocket, weight on one leg. She was dressed in faded jeans and black leather jacket over a black t-shirt.

The moment that Faith had spoken, Willow had taken an unconscious step in front of Tara. Glancing at her partner, she knew that they were both estimating the distance to the staircase. *Please, Kyra love--don't cry right now. Sleep sound, and we'll keep the monsters away.*

But Faith had eyes only for Buffy, it seemed. She had yet to acknowledge anyone else in the room.

"Faith--what are you doing here?" Buffy's voice was low and even, but Willow could sense her friend's tension. "You wanna switch bodies? Try to resurrect the Mayor? What's the deal?"

Faith gave a low chuckle that held little mirth. It took Willow a moment to realize what it did hold: sadness.

Faith--sad? What was going on?

"B, you gotta keep in better contact with people. Heck, e-mail makes it so simple nowadays. Haven't you talked to Angel lately?"

But Willow knew that she hadn't. Buffy had finally realized, it seemed, that love could be both not enough and far too much. She and Angel could never be together, and it hurt to see him. What more was there, really?

Giles occasionally spoke to him and the group in LA, if there was need to share information. But Buffy and Angel had only spoken perhaps three times since Buffy's mother's death, and those exchanges had been short and painful.

"What does Angel have to do with this?" Buffy asked tersely.

"You know I went up there after our little...exchange program."

"Yeah. As I recall, he defended you." Buffy still hadn't moved, hadn't invited Faith inside, though Willow knew that Faith could probably have made herself at home if she had wanted to.

Instead, she looked down and shook her head. "Funny thing about people with some big-ass sins to atone for--they can be pretty understanding."

"So he--what--sprinkled you with holy water and absolved you of your sins?" Buffy asked, her smile a slash across her face. "No, wait--probably not so much with the sacred aqua thing..."

"He let me work for him," Faith broke in, and this time her voice held no sarcasm, no irony. "He thought about having me serve time for...for the murder." Here she faltered, and drew a deep breath. "And I think the guy coulda talked me into it. But he decided I could do more good on the outside. 'Free-lance champion,' he called it." She gave a small laugh. "I kinda liked the sound of it, to be honest. Thought about asking if it came with a cape. And I been doin' my part ever since. I definitely work alone most of the time, but I'm never too far from Angel and that crew. The man's my rock."

Willow watched Buffy absorb this news. Her face radiated both disbelief and hurt. *Everybody but her gets to be close to the person she loves.*

For the first time, Faith seemed to register the others in the room. "Well, lookie here...Everyone present and accounted for, except Riley. Even little sister's up late."

Willow realized with a swift shock that Faith would of course have memories of Dawn--and that Dawn would have memories of Faith. Only the teenager would know that they were of the ersatz variety.

"Hi Faith--ya skanky ho." Dawn smiled calmly.

Willow tensed for Faith's rage or, at the very least, her cruelty. But the dark-haired Slayer only frowned in mock reproach. "Now, Dawn--respect your elders. That's '*Miss Skanky Ho*' to you."

Willow sensed that the others were as uneasy and perplexed as she was. And she could feel Tara's anxiety rolling off of her in waves.

*The only time she ever met this woman, she mocked her stammer and her love for me.*

Taking a quick glance at Tara, though, Willow saw that she was also feeling...what? She was looking at Faith intently, despite her tension.

"Hey kids," Faith nodded to each of them in turn. When she came to Willow and Tara, her gaze lingered an extra moment, or so Willow imagined.

Willow connected the various threads more quickly than most people could have, and the quilt that emerged was crazy indeed.

Faith had betrayed Buffy and later switched bodies with her; she had gone to Riley's room and made love to him and heard him say, "I love you." Only Tara's keen vision had let Buffy back into her own life.

Faith and Giles...Largely teacher and student, before Faith had gone rogue on them. Giles was watching her closely now, his expression unreadable.

Faith had been Xander's first sexual partner, a fact that had hurt Willow far more than she wanted to admit. Now she just found the idea...bizarre. And then later, when Xander had gone to talk to her, thinking that the commingling of their bodies gave him special insight, Faith had almost killed him.

Anya knew of Faith only through the brief episode three years ago, but Willow could tell from the ex-demon's slitted eyes that she knew of Xander's one-hour stand way back when and was not pleased to behold the woman before her.

Dawnie...That was the wild card, of course. Faith remembered Dawn as a 13-year-old with braces and an annoying habit of trying to go on patrol with them and steal their clothing. Dawn remembered Faith as the original Girl Gone Wild, all black leather and attitude. Only Dawn knew that none of it had ever happened.

Faith and Tara? Willow knew all she needed to know about that.

And as for Faith and Willow herself...Willow remembered the early days, when she had found Faith exciting and dangerous and, she recognized now, more than a little sexy. Then came the jealousy and the hurt, when Buffy and Faith were joined at the hip--the inner Slayer circle, Willow had thought of it. And then, just as she found the courage to tell Buffy how she felt, Buffy had come to her room that night, desperate and guilt-ridden and lost. Willow's last significant encounter with Faith--in Faith form--was when Willow had been kidnapped and held for ransom: her life in exchange for the Books of Ascension. Where had she found that voice, the one that ripped through Faith's defenses; made no excuses for her, told her everything that she'd thrown away? In that moment, before Faith had hit her so hard that her lip split, she'd seen recognition flash across the dark, troubled face--recognition, and then the barest whisper of regret. And then nothing, because the room had gone black.

So many dramas, so many hurts and betrayals, and they were all tied to the woman standing in front of them. Willow felt as if she were straddling four years at this single moment in time.

No one spoke for a moment, and then Anya blurted out, "You can't have sex with Xander now! He's married. To me," she added--unnecessarily, Willow thought.

Faith regarded her for a moment, one eyebrow arched, then grinned. "No sex with Xander. Check." Turning to the proclaimed husband, she winked, "Got yourself a live one there, Dude. Don't fuck with her. Except, you know...to fuck with her."

Xander only blushed furiously in reply.

"Faith, I'm only gonna ask you one more time: what are you doing here?" Willow noticed that Buffy hadn't relaxed in the slightest, despite Faith's as-yet unthreatening demeanor.

Faith turned back to Buffy and sighed. "Angel sent me."

Buffy glared at her in abject disbelief. "Right. Angel sent you. Because he knows we have a lot to catch up on, and because he's now legally insane."

"You're right about the first part, you know," Faith replied, her gaze never leaving Buffy. "But Angel's got his boyishly handsome head on straight. He said you could use my help."

"You truly work for Angel?" Giles asked slowly.

"That's right, Watcher Man," Faith nodded.

"You sure it's not Angelus you're working for?" Xander voice was tight with anger and fear.

"Shut up." The two Slayers spoke almost in unison, then looked at each other. After a long moment, Faith turned back to Xander.

"Angel saved my life, little boy. Actually, he saved my soul, and I thought that was so far past gone it would never find another on-ramp. So don't go making cracks about him, *or* Angelus."

She had done absolutely nothing to suggest a physical attack, but Xander stepped back nonetheless. Faith looked back to Buffy. "Listen, I don't expect it to make sense. Our last face-to-face in LA didn't exactly make for a Hallmark Special. All I can say is that Angel told me to come back here because I could help out and he's the one person on the planet who can tell me what to do."

Willow looked at her closely. She sensed no threat, no warning, no ultimatum. The bravado was still there--that would always be there, she suspected--but even that was muted somehow...Muted, or perhaps tempered by other things.

*And why not? It's been three years. Haven't we all changed?*

Xander was less judgmental, less eager to play the role of moral authority.

Buffy let herself rely more on the others; sought out their opinions in advance versus their understanding after the fact.

Willow and Tara were both more confident, more willing to voice their dissent without apology.

In the span between 19 and 22, she should *hope* they'd all have grown and changed--including Faith. But Faith, for all her swagger, had in many ways been the most childish among them. Not *childlike*, as Willow realized that she herself had been, to no small degree, but childish. Unable to tolerate disappointment or frustration; unable to reflect on her behavior; unable to see anything except in the starkest black and white.

Had Faith grown up at all? On the inside?

All of this passed through her mind as Buffy and Faith stared each other down--one wary; the other...tired, it seemed. Finally Buffy stepped back and crossed her arms. "OK--so how exactly does Angel think you could help? And while we're in Sharing Time, what exactly do we need help *on*?"

"First--you mind if I sit down? Been a long day."

Buffy glanced at the others. It seemed that everyone was trying to gauge the woman standing before them, familiar yet not. A silent and very qualified assent went up in the form of slight nods and shrugs.

"Sure. Park it. You'll understand, of course, if I ask that you move slowly and keep your hands in view."

"As opposed to what? Shoving 'em down my pants to work off some tension?" Faith shrugged. "Whatever. Can't blame you for being cautious, B."

As Faith moved toward the chair on the far end of the room, Willow and Tara stepped aside to let her pass and then, by tacit understanding, positioned themselves between Faith and the stairway. *Keep sleeping, Baby Girl. We love you. Keep sleeping.*

Flopping down into the over-stuffed chair, Faith remarked casually, "I don't know what you got upstairs, girls, but I'm not here for it."

Willow froze, then stole a quick glance at Tara. "What do you mean?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant and knowing that she was about fifteen rest stops away from that exit.

"You two been nervous--even more than the others--since I got here. You keep looking toward the stairs and you made sure to put yourselves between them and me. So I know something's up there. Just wanted to let you know I'm not here to fuck with anybody's valuables." She stared at them, her gaze shifting from one to the other. Was it a challenge? An olive branch?

Finally she looked away. "Back to your questions, Buff. Angel didn't say exactly what the plans were. He just said it had something to do with all the folks offing themselves here in Sunny D."

Giles started at the words. "So the suicides aren't random? They are indeed connected somehow?"

"Apparently. Wes dug up some musty old papers that talked about it. He gave me a copy to give to you, Watcher Boy." So saying, she reached into the inside pocket of her leather jacket.

Immediately, Buffy sprang forward and hovered over her. Faith looked up, one brow arched sardonically. "Easy there, Sparky. Just gettin' some information for the nice man." She drew back her jacket so that Buffy could see the sheet of paper, and then slowly retrieved it and handed it to Giles.

The Watcher took them eagerly, all trace of wariness forgotten for the moment. "Careful, G-Man," Faith said dryly. "You're gonna burn a hole in your tweed." But Giles was already poring over the text--if a few hastily scribbled lines could be called text.

"What's it say?" Tara asked, speaking for the first time since Faith's arrival. Faith shot a searching glance her way, and Willow felt an odd mixture of protectiveness and territoriality steal over her. Faith eventually looked back at Giles, who was rubbing his cheek thoughtfully.

"Well, it's not terribly extensive, I'm afraid."

"Hey, don't sweat it, Giles," Faith reassured him. "Size is over-rated."

Willow caught Anya's grimace of possible rebuttal, and gave a silent prayer of thanks that the ex-demon didn't argue the point.

"Thank you, Faith. That's reassuring, in a profoundly cheap and licentious way," Giles said archly, and turned his attention back to the document at hand. "In answer to your eminently reasonable question, Tara, it says: '*Out of lightness shall come darkness; Out of darkness, new light.*' At least, that's the best translation from the original Goedellic."

"Goedellic?" Tara asked uncertainly.

"It predates Old Irish," Giles replied, still peering at the lines before him.

"Those crazy Irish," Xander said, shaking his head. "Always with the double talk."

"Only it's not all that double, is it?" Willow asked, curious even as she held her position. "It's more like single talk, or single and a half talk. I mean, if this is related to the suicides, it seems pretty clear--the first part, anyway. Everyone who's killed themselves was a do-gooder in some way...a light. The more they're taken out of the equation, the darker it gets. It's the second part that seems iffier."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," Giles nodded. "If, of course, Wesley is correct in believing that this...prophecy, or verse, is related to the suicides. Regardless, we'll want to study this further tomorrow, when we can look through our own library for more information."

"I swear, Rupert--if Julia Roberts showed up at your door saying you had to choose between her and your books, I don't know which way you'd vote." Faith shook her head in disbelief.

Far from being affronted by this, Giles seemed to consider the question seriously. "Well, I should think that I would ask Ms. Roberts to *help* me study the texts. Why choose if you don't have to?"

Faith nodded her approval. "Way to think outside the box, Giles--so to speak." She slapped her hands on her thighs and stood up. "OK, kids--I am off to the local No-Tell Motel for a little shut-eye. Give you guys a chance to review the night's events and decide how much you trust me."

As she reached the door, she turned back and this time she was speaking only to Buffy. It was as if the rest of them had again faded from view. "We really do have a lot to catch up on, B." She gave a small, seductive grin. "I can take it if you can." She held Buffy's gaze for one more moment, then turned on her heel and left.

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"Well *that* was...unnerving." Willow knew she was guilty of gross understatement, but right now her synapses were firing too quickly and too randomly to give the night its verbal due.



As soon as Faith had left, Willow and Tara had bounded up the stairs, as if Faith could somehow have spirited Kyra out of the house. But Kyra had been sleeping just as they'd left her--her mouth a tiny "O," her thumb curled near her head.

The conversation in the wake of Faith's departure was surprisingly brief. Willow suspected it had something to do with each of them needing some time in their own mind to mull over the night and, more to the point, think back over his or her past relationship with the other Slayer. After a few abbreviated observations, they had each gone their way for the night. The one exception to the avoidance had been Dawn.

"So Faith doesn't know about my little prenatal tour of mystical duty, it seems," she mused. "Do we tell her?"

"No." Buffy's voice was flat, and it struck Willow that it had been a while since Buffy had made such a unilateral decision. "The less Faith knows about you, the better."

Giles nodded slowly. "I'm inclined to agree. Faith certainly gave no indication of harboring any malicious designs, but I suggest we err on the side of caution."

"Or, as Buffy said, 'no,'" Xander offered with a tense grin that didn't reach his eyes. Willow felt his uneasiness. Looking back, she suspected that he had harbored more hopes for his dalliance with Faith than he had ever admitted. *If he couldn't have the good Slayer, he'd take the bad one.* But Faith had used him to work off some stress, and then cast him aside with nothing but scorn. Willow wondered if this part bothered him more than her later assault.

"O--kay..." Dawn replied slowly, blinking at the tension in the room. Willow thought of how odd it must be for her. She had seen Faith betray her sister; watched her switch bodies and try to take her life. And she hadn't seen any of it. Her feelings ran deep about it though, Willow knew. Dawn had originally idolized Faith--or so they all remembered. Including Dawn.

So they had all bid goodnight, after making plans to meet the next day at the Magic Box to discuss the prophecy. There was no mention of when they might see Faith again. Now Willow and Tara were changing into their nightclothes, after yet another check on Kyra. Tara was standing in front of the mirror, drawing a brush through her hair with long, deliberate strokes. Willow watched her, the tension of the evening momentarily forgotten.

*When we're 80, I will still love this sight. I will still sit here and watch her comb her hair and rub lotion onto her skin.* A sudden flare of panic shot over her. *Oh, goddess...Please let me open my eyes at 80 and see her. Please.* She drew a deep breath, and tried to banish the inexplicable fear.

Tara turned to face her and caught Willow staring. A slightly embarrassed smile crossed her face. *She still has a hard time believing how beautiful she is.* But she no longer ducked her head to hide behind a curtain of hair.

"Unsettling...That's one word for it." Tara came toward her and Willow stretched out her hand. Tara grasped it lightly and pulled Willow close. "How are you, Sweetie?" she breathed against Willow's hair.

*Fine--so long as I can always stay here.*

"You know, I suspect this is one of those conversations best conducted in the horizontal comfort of our bed," she replied, trying to smile.

Tara rubbed her cheek softly and nodded. Soon, they were snuggled under the big, lilac-colored duvet, laying on their sides, faces inches apart. "Will, that must have been so hard," Tara murmured. "I mean, Faith betrayed the whole group, but she *kidnapped* you...and hit you," she added, her voice hardening slightly even as she reached out to stroke Willow's lip where the blow had landed four years earlier.

Willow thought back to that night, her initial fear giving way to anger and then a sudden, sure knowledge that no matter what happened to her, she would be fine. That in some larger, transcendent way, she would be OK. *I regret that I have but one life to give for my Scoobies.*

That night had changed her, given her focus. Had Faith not taken her hostage, she might well have gone to Oxford, or Harvard, or MIT. Left Sunnydale; left the fight. Never met Tara. But in the midst of having a ridiculously large knife held to her throat, Willow had realized where she belonged: here, with these people in this quite-possibly-literally God-forsaken town. And she had never regretted it. Willow looked over at Tara. "God, that seems like so long ago. I mean, so much has happened since she was around. Everything's so different." She looked into Tara's soft eyes for a moment, then added, *"I'm so different."*

Tara gazed at her questioningly. "What are you thinking of?"

Willow nuzzled into her pillow and thought about those days and these days and the days that bridged them. "Well of course there's the linkage of girls and the linkage of one girl in particular...But I'm stronger now. Less easily impressed, you know?"

"As in, it takes more than attitude and a black leather jacket to get your attention now?" Tara's eyes were dancing with soft laughter.

"My attention, and my respect," Willow answered seriously. "I was so jealous of Faith...Her Slayer bond with Buffy; her coolness; her confidence...God, *definitely* her confidence." She looked at Tara, and her mind went back to that night at the Bronze. "What about you, Baby? I mean, you only met Faith once, but..." She trailed off, wincing as she remembered that night yet again.

"But it had a lotta bang for its very brief buck," Tara finished, her mouth tightening at the memory. "Willow, that night...Faith's energy was so *awful*. Cruel and jagged and totally hateful. And there was nobody she hated more than herself. I could tell that after five minutes. That was

another way I knew it couldn't be Buffy. The friend you described had quote issues unquote, but not like this." Tara fell silent, as if replaying the night in her own mind.

"Yeah--Faith showed her true colors that night," Willow said slowly, looking at Tara with a fierce kindness.

"Oh, you mean the whole 'wh-wh-what?' thing and the whole 'I've never seen two people more in love' thing?" Tara asked, her voice heavy with irony.

"Baby, if I'd been there, I would have...Well, I'm not sure *what* I'd have done. But it would have been very forceful." She shook her head ruefully. "I still can't believe I couldn't tell she wasn't Buffy."

"You were too close," Tara argued, but Willow knew the out was a specious one.

"I was too far away," she countered. "We'd been drifting apart for months, until one night when I look in my best friend's eyes and I don't even see that it's not her."

"But Will--her energy now..." Tara frowned slightly.

"What? Did you pick up something?" Willow felt her heart quicken its pace.

"I don't know," Tara replied slowly. "I mean, I'm not sure...But it's different somehow. At least, I think it is. Before it was all heat and anger--looking for any excuse to fight."

"And now?" Willow asked.

"Now she feels...tired. Like she doesn't *want* to fight that much anymore but it's what she knows. And the anger feels...flatter, somehow. More resigned, maybe."

Willow nodded. She had sensed the dark Slayer's exhaustion as well, but Tara's words gave her more trust in that impression. Willow knew that Tara read energies better than any of them. "So you think she's been--what--*tamed* somehow?" she asked.

But Tara shook her head quickly. "Not tamed. I don't think Faith will ever be tamed." She gave a tiny half-smile, and Willow felt that odd trace of possessiveness steal over her. Was Tara actually admiring Faith's wild side?

"But I think she's been tempered--a lot," Tara was saying. "And I really didn't pick up any hostile intentions from her. I mean, I'm not psychic or anything; it's not like I'm never wrong about this stuff. But when she caught us putting ourselves between her and the stairs--I think she really wanted us to know she wasn't going to try anything."

Willow considered this. "Well, I know Giles was gonna call Angel tonight when he got home. If Faith's telling the truth, she's been fighting the good fight for a while now."

"And deserves credit for doing it," Tara added. "But goddess knows she's gonna have an uphill battle, with all the bridges she's burned here." Tara stopped and looked at her closely. "What?"

"What, 'what'?" Willow said defensively in a masterful rhetorical feint.

"The corners of your mouth are all tight...Like you're not full-blown upset, but you're in the area code."

"I'm just worried about Faith; and wondering how everybody's doing."

"Uh-huh," Tara's mouth said, while her eyebrows said, "Tell me another one, Scheherazade."

Willow felt silly about her unease, but decided to be at least a little more forthcoming. "Faith just makes me nervous on about fifteen different levels. She's...She's the 'x' I never solved for."

Tara looked at her, confusion in her eyes. "But I thought you said you saw past her bravado now."

"Yeah, looking back at who she was. But now maybe she's somebody else. 'X' is 'y' now, and I have to solve for it all over again."

Tara chuckled softly. "My little Pythagoras..." She leaned over to kiss her gently on the lips. Willow felt a surge of need, and reached out to clasp the back of Tara's neck, pinning her lover's lips against her own. After a moment, she pulled back slightly.

"Well ma'am, yes *ma'am*," Tara murmured, her breath warm on Willow's lips. "And how might you like to work off some of that tension?"

"I think you know," Willow replied. She gripped Tara's back urgently, pulling her lover onto her so that she was covered with the incredible warmth of Tara's flesh. She loved the feeling of Tara's breasts pressed into hers. Just the image of that embrace--stealing over her at the most random times--could leave her belly twisting with desire and her face flushed. Now she cupped Tara's face and kissed her hungrily, wanting the full, soft fact of their union to quiet the roar in her head and stir a different sort of roiling.

Tara pulled back just enough to look at her closely. "Willow, Sweetie--are you okay?"

Willow only nodded, then whispered, "Tara, please. Now--please."

She saw the darkening of Tara's eyes, that shading that told her she was hungry and aching. The look that told Willow that Tara, the gentlest soul she knew, felt fierce and raw and anything but gentle at that moment.

Tara held her gaze for several seconds, and then leaned down, pressing her lips to Willow's ear, and whispered, "Yes. I'll take you, Willow. I'll have you."

Willow felt as if she might come from just the words, just the feel of Tara's breath hot against her ear and the knowledge of what she would do.

Tara shifted, gazed at Willow for a moment more, and then lowered her head to Willow's breast. There was no teasing; no slow, deliberate stroking. Tara's mouth was hot and urgent on her nipple, alternately sucking the flesh deep into her mouth and pressing it between her tongue and teeth. After a few minutes, she pulled back and pressed Willow's breasts tightly together, running her thumbs over both nipples.

"You are so beautiful," she said, her voice low and fierce. Then she lowered her head once more and sucked the other swollen nipple into her warm, wet mouth. As she did, she shifted slightly, spreading herself over Willow's leg. Willow could feel the slippery wetness soaking her flesh, grinding into her thigh.

Again came the voice, urgent and sure and powerful. "I'll have you, Willow. Now." And with the words, Tara plunged two fingers deep into Willow--pushing and searching and taking.

Willow choked back a cry and sank her teeth into Tara's shoulders. Her legs, already open to Tara's demands, spread helplessly wider in her need.

"Yes--let me have you, Willow. Let me have all of you." The fingers curled, dragging back over the ridged flesh, as Tara withdrew to her opening and danced there, teased her for just one moment, and then plunged back in, groaning as she did. Again the curling of those long, sure fingers; again the slow withdrawal; again the fierce, demanding entrance. That rhythm, the absolute certainty and strength of Tara's deep stroking left Willow at once aching and satisfied. The world narrowed to that rhythm, those strokes.

"Like this?" Tara whispered, but Willow knew it wasn't really a question. Tara knew her body; knew her groans and cries and movements so completely. She knew now that that Willow needed to be taken; needed this insistent thrusting...Just as she knew that Willow was close to coming...

The force gathered low in her belly and then pushed lower, spiraling into a liquid-fire coil that throbbed and hummed and tightened until she was burning, burning so hot and bright that everything in and around her shimmered with the heat of Tara's stroking. She would burst with this heat, she had to; she was bursting now--

And when she came, her mouth was clasped against Tara's neck and her legs were shaking with the force and she realized dimly that she was crying but she didn't really know why. The only reality she needed at that moment was Tara's flesh, warm and strong against her, and Tara's arms cradling her tight and Tara's whispers easing her back to her center.

She slept as if drugged.

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Willow and Tara arrived at the Magic Box a few minutes after five the next day, Kyra gurgling happily in her stroller. They had debated splitting up, with one of them staying at home with Kyra, but Willow had felt uneasy about being apart. "At least until we know for sure that Faith's on the level," she said tightly. She didn't know whether Faith would join them; she wasn't sure that Faith even knew about the Magic Box. But she didn't like the idea of her or Tara being alone with Kyra and vulnerable to an attack. Upon their arrival, they asked Giles to lock the door and pull the shades such that if Faith did happen by, she couldn't get in without their knowledge and one of them would take Kyra back to the training room. "I'm just not ready for Faith to know about her yet," Willow said flatly, and Tara seemed to agree.

She sank into a chair and pulled Kyra out of her stroller, then set her gently on her feet. Their daughter had apparently decided that one year was more than enough time to get the hang of walking and seemed to feel that she had already wasted too much time under the ambulatory aegis of other people. Willow and Tara would trade off keeping their beautiful child from banging into tables and chairs and random magical objects.

"Girl gets cuter every darn time I see her, and I see her several times a day," Buffy marveled. Dawn was down on the floor trying to entice Kyra to say her name.

"DAAWWNN," the teenager said slowly and very loudly. For her part, Kyra looked amused, glancing back at her parents as if to say, "Check this out. Whaddya wanna bet I can get her to stand on her head and sing the Canadian national anthem?"

Willow started slightly at the sound of a knock on the door, but a careful look from Giles revealed that it was Xander and Anya, the last to arrive. "But those kind of activities typically leave a mark," Anya was saying. "So if you really want me to use--"

"Anya, if you could perhaps wait just one second, that would give me time to hurl myself into a wood chipper such that I could die without ever knowing how you were going to finish that sentence," Giles broke in, his face grim.

"I was talking about refinishing some furniture," Anya replied, seemingly mystified.

"Oh. Do pardon me," Giles fumbled, embarrassed. In turning away to retrieve a book, he missed the very pointed wink that Anya bestowed upon the rest of them.

Willow sensed that some of the previous night's tension had dissipated. Everyone seemed more relaxed, though Buffy was still tightly wound and looked up sharply at any sound from the street.

"I haven't been able to find much more on the prophecy that Faith delivered," Giles said apologetically. "Although I must say, it does seem rather straightforward. *Out of lightness shall come darkness. Out of darkness, new light.* If Wesley is correct--that the suicides are connected to this prophecy--then it would seem that the first 'lightness' refers to the good that the victims have done and the darkness--well, that would seem to indicate the loss of those good souls. What remains perplexing--and, I confess, most troubling--is the 'new light' that's supposed to emerge from that darkness."

"Do we know anything more about the suicide victims themselves?" Tara asked, watching Kyra toddle toward Dawn's outstretched arms.

"I looked into their backgrounds as much as I could," Giles replied. "They really shared no characteristics of note except for their commitment to the greater good. They varied by age, race, gender, sexual orientation...They came from different parts of the country, and they were from divergent religious backgrounds and current practices."

"But they all did good stuff and they all killed themselves," Anya summarized neatly.

"Well...yes," Giles acknowledged.

"And you said before that they used different methods," Willow inquired.

"Right," the Watcher nodded. "The police officer shot herself; the philanthropist and the social worker slit their wrists. The AIDS lobbyist jumped from his eighth-floor apartment and the director of the women's shelter over-dosed on Tylenol and bourbon." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, clearly reluctant to continue. "And now there's a sixth case."

"What? Who? When did it happen?" The questions came from various sources.

"This afternoon," Giles sighed, holding up a hand for quiet. "It was a woman in her mid-forties; Hispanic-American, married with two children. She was apparently a great force at the literacy council. She hanged herself in her home. It seems she hadn't gone in to work, nor had she called. The first event was remarkably rare for her; the second, unheard of. They called her husband who went home to check on her and found her."

Willow noticed Xander reach across to take Anya's hand. She looked at him questioningly. "Promise me you'll never take yourself away from me like that," he said, his voice tight. An uncomfortable silence filled the room for a moment as Anya just smiled at him gently and nodded.

"Her husband said they had been married for thirteen years, and he had never known her to be seriously depressed; certainly never suicidal," Giles concluded after a moment.

"And we're absolutely sure they did this to themselves?" Xander interjected.

"There's nothing to suggest the contrary; then again, the police have no reason to *look* for any other alternatives; at least, not in great depth. None of them had enemies, for example, and none were involved in any kind of crime like drugs or extortion. But I doubt the authorities are considering more otherworldly possibilities."

"And doesn't that sorta seem bizarre?" Dawn piped up. "I mean, they *have* to notice all the weird stuff that happens in this town. But you never hear of them investigating anything, or designating a special unit, or putting out any kind of warnings like, 'Don't go out after dark because this place is crawling with vampires!' Seems pretty unbelievable to me."

"Denial is an amazing thing," Giles concurred.

"This place is beyond denial," Buffy said flatly. "This place is an alternate reality." Silent agreement greeted this assessment.

"In any case, this is the sixth suicide--or apparent suicide--within a five-week period. I did some reviewing, and learned that over the past ten years Sunnydale has averaged two suicides a year. This current rate is beyond remarkable."

"And beyond tragic," Tara added softly. Giles looked at her, nodding sadly.

Buffy suddenly leapt to her feet, her features grim.

"Buffy?" Willow whispered, fear slamming into her chest.

"Faith--she's here."

"Jeez, B--you mean to say you can smell me? Not sure what to make outta that." Faith emerged from the training room, shaking her head. "You know, Rupert, if you're gonna lock the door, you might wanna check the windows, too. Kinda like locking your convertible and then leaving the top down." She stopped abruptly as she caught sight of Tara--clutching Kyra to her chest. Willow jumped and ran to stand in front of them.

Faith stared at the three of them, looking from Willow to Tara and then--most intently of all--Kyra. "Damn, girls," she finally murmured. She stepped forward, her eyes never leaving Kyra.

Willow readied to fight, but Buffy had already jumped in between her and Faith. "Touch that child and I kill you. It's just that simple," she hissed.

Faith looked dumbly at Buffy, as if surprised to notice her again. Her eyes were wide and questioning and filled with a raw vulnerability that Willow had never seen in Faith before. "I'm--I'm not gonna hurt her," she said, her voice tight with bewilderment, as if stunned that Buffy would consider her capable of such a thing. She looked back at Kyra, and then shook her head as if to reorient herself. After a moment, she stepped back. Willow felt herself relax just slightly.

"Damn," she repeated softly. "She's...She's totally yours, isn't she?"

Willow reached behind her to take Tara's hand. "Yes. She's totally ours," she replied curtly.

Faith looked closely at Tara, and then back at Kyra. Finally she nodded. "Kid's got your eyes, T." And a tiny smile graced the corner of Faith's mouth.

Willow stiffened--at Faith's obvious interest in Kyra, her intense inspection of their child...and the term of familiarity. Clearly Faith remembered Tara.



"Faith, why are you here?" Giles' curt voice seemed to crack the bubble that had encased the four of them: Willow, Tara, Kyra, and Faith. Some change slid over Faith--or reasserted itself. She turned to face the rest of them, tossing her head casually and tucking her hands into her back pockets.

"I was feelin' lonely," she shrugged. "Wanted to see what was going down. Did a little detective work; scouted around some; and figured you'd all be here."

"You mean you can actually read?" Anya's tone was acerbic.

*Oh God, Anya--shut up,* Willow thought with dread.

But Faith just gave a sardonic laugh. "Yeah, I like to hit the library--when I'm not bangin' the locals, of course."

*Wonderful, Faith. Thank every god you ever believed in she doesn't have her powers--*

"You should thank every god in this and every world that I don't have my vengeance powers anymore," Anya practically spit. "If I did, I would--"

"Spank me? Ooh...Very promising." Then she seemed to tire of the game and turned to Buffy. "Listen, B--all I know is that Angel sends me down here to help you out. Not give you the prophecy and leave; he said to Help. You. Out. I was gettin' buggy sittin' in the hotel room. There's only so much porn a girl can watch--even a girl like me."

"You could borrow my copy of 'Lord of the Rings'" Giles said dryly.

"Thanks anyway," Faith said easily, shaking her head. "But the hairy feet kinda wig me out." She turned her attention back to Buffy. "I didn't really overhear anything you guys were saying. You--what? *Sensed* me pretty much as soon as I got here. I was gonna let you know I was here, by the way."

"And we'll just take your word on that, of course," Giles retorted. "No reason to suspect an ulterior motive."

"Fine. Suspect whatever." It was as Tara had described: Faith seemed exhausted. "I was gettin' ready to say something when you jumped up. You *did* sense me, didn't you Buff?" Her tone shifted at this last part; seemed to hold a challenge of some sort, Willow thought. But what?

"Listen," Faith continued after a moment. "If I were gonna go all homicidal on you, don't you think I would have come out of that fuckin' armory back there with something besides my good looks and this knife?" As she said this, she swiftly drew out the knife--and dropped it on the floor. "I'm unarmed now, kids. 'Course, you can always frisk me to make sure." This time Willow felt the sexual energy crackle through the room. And she desperately wanted to know its target.

All she did know was that Faith was here, in this room and in her life. Faith was standing here with Willow's child and her life mate and her best friends. She felt scared and vulnerable in a way that she hadn't in a long time. And her distress wasn't helped by what she saw when she glanced over at her family.

Kyra was stretching her arms out, reaching for Faith.

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She had battled demons of all sorts for the better part of a decade. Cast spells with only a split-second's warning; saved her friends' and her lover's lives with the speed of her thinking and her action. As the goddess was her witness, she thought later, she would never understand why she just...stood there when Kyra reached for Faith.

But her paralysis finally broke, and she lunged forward, hurling herself between her daughter and the Dark Slayer.

"Don't touch her," she hissed, not even recognizing her voice.

Faith was staring dumbly at Kyra, her eyes wide with fascination and something else that Willow couldn't discern. But at the sound of Willow's voice, she recoiled as if slapped.

"I-I wasn't gonna," she said softly, looking at Willow. But then her gaze seemed drawn inexorably back to the squirming child in Tara's arms--the child who was still leaning toward her, smiling and gurgling. Faith took a hesitant step forward; Willow noticed that she didn't seem to know what to do with her hands.

"I said keep away from her," Willow said angrily, wondering why Tara wasn't saying something along the same lines. Glancing back over her shoulder, though, she saw her partner looking at Faith with an odd expression on her face. It wasn't fear, exactly; it seemed more like...intrigue.

"Hey, fine--whatever," Faith mumbled, sticking her hands in her back pockets and stepping back with a nonchalance that was clearly feigned.

"Faith." Tara's voice was quiet, and commanding. Willow felt relief wash over her; here was her back-up. "We just don't let people hold Kyra until we feel absolutely comfortable with them. It's..." But here she stopped.

Willow stared at her dumbly. If she hadn't known better, she could have sworn that Tara had been about to say "nothing personal." What was happening here? Of course it was personal. Faith couldn't hold their daughter. Not now; not ever.

"No sweat, T," Faith replied, and Willow thought her voice held more energy than it had just a moment ago.

Tara met Willow's stare, and her brow furrowed in seeming perplexity. They looked at each other for a scant moment, and then Tara turned to the others. "I'm going to take Kyra in the back." The rest of the group nodded, clearly fascinated by the scene that had just unfolded. Tara leaned in and gave Willow a quick kiss. Willow felt herself stiffen unwillingly; felt Tara register her restraint. Again her partner gazed at her, and this time the look held what almost felt like a mild rebuke. And then she was walking away from them. Willow watched Faith watch her family until they had left the room. Only then did the Dark Slayer seem to remember why she was there. She turned back to the group and crossed her arms over her chest.

"So...Catch me up to date. What's going on in your fair burg?" she asked, looking from one to the next of them.

"Well, they built a new high school," Xander began, "and put in another Target--"

"I'm not talking about the minutes from the last Kiwanis meeting," Faith said through gritted teeth.

"Do we even have a Kiwanis Club?" Dawn asked. "Because really, I think--"

"Walk toward the sound of my voice, kids," Faith broke in sharply. "People are killing themselves here in the Dale of Sunniness. Any theories?"

Her words seemed to bring everyone back to the matter at hand; everyone, at least, except Willow. She just kept watching Faith, trying to understand the dread that was slinking through her veins. Did she think Tara or Kyra was in danger? Or was it her own well-being that felt threatened?

"We were, quite frankly, at a loss to explain the suicides," Giles was saying. "We weren't even sure they had any mystical or demonic element to them. But given the information that Wesley sent us, it seems almost certain that the prophecy is linked to these deaths." Willow noticed that the Watcher's voice held considerably less hostility than it had even a short while earlier--or so it seemed to her. Was he beginning to trust her?

"And we're sure they were all suicides?" Faith asked. "No sign of anybody getting help shuffling off that mortal coil?"

"We talked about that when Giles first told us about them," Anya replied, watching Faith with evident wariness.

So I'm not the only one who doesn't like her being here.

"And no," Giles said, shaking his head. "It appears that every person involved took her or his own life, without any physical intervention or...assistance."

"But we haven't ruled out the mental part," Buffy said slowly.

So you're willing to bring her in on this, too? You, of all people? Willow felt herself almost shaking with frustration.

"You mean, they might have been possessed? Or maybe some other kind of mental mojo was going on?" Faith mused. "That's funky."

Willow found her voice. "Yeah--hard to believe that anything evil and treacherous could go on here. Hard to believe that good people could have that goodness turned against them and end up dead because something vile had worked its way past their defenses."

"Wow," Faith nodded, looking at Willow with an innocent smile. "So blatant, and yet so unsubtle." Turning back to the others, she said brusquely, "So I assume you're all taking what the officials might call 'reasonable precautions'?"

Blank stares greeted this.

"Um, some people would say that just living in this town is unreasonably incautious," Dawn said, hands on her hips. "Did you have any particular precaution in mind?"

Faith looked at Dawn as if she were joking, then glanced at the others. "I'm talking about your current situation." When no one replied, she shook her head slowly. "You know, for a group that saves the world every spring, you guys are as dense as the President--much better grammar, of course..."

"Faith, what the hell are you talking about?" Now it was Buffy's turn to sound impatient.

"Do-gooders are killing themselves in alarming numbers, right?" Faith asked with exaggerated politeness.

"So it would appear, yes." Giles replied.

Faith shrugged. "Hard to imagine a bigger group of do-gooders than this one."

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The ride home had been a tense one. Willow knew that each of them had things to say to the other, but neither wanted to upset Kyra, who seemed especially attuned to the energy between her mothers.

And maybe neither one of us wants to start.

For the moment, they focused on Faith's rather obvious point--the one that they had all managed to avoid getting until she made it.

"Well, it makes sense," Tara said.

Willow agreed, but for some reason it bothered her to hear Tara say it.

"So what happened then?" Tara had remained in the back with Kyra until the meeting had broken up, some thirty minutes later.

"We basically made various noises of delayed enlightenment and apprehension, and then settled down to see if we could figure out anything else."

"Any luck?" Tara glanced over her shoulder at Kyra, who was gazing at each of them in turn from her car seat. Looking into the rear-view mirror, Willow thought that Kyra's expression held a kind of "Anything I should know about?" aspect to it.

"Nope. Giles, Anya, and Dawn are going to look through the books at the shop, although Giles doesn't remember reading anything like this before. I told them we'd go through our private stash."

"What about the others?"

"Buffy and Xander are gonna patrol." Willow intentionally refrained from mentioning Faith's plans, wondering why even as she did.

"And Faith?" Tara asked after a moment's silence.

"Faith, I assume, will either kill something, fuck something, or both." Willow could feel her lip curling in hostility. Am I over-reacting? Doesn't she see how scary this girl is?

Tara looked at her in disbelief, and then shook her head. "Willow, what is wrong with you? I've never seen you like this."

"Like what? Assessing someone's past actions and making reasonable inferences about their current behavior?"

"Sweetie, I get that you don't like Faith. And I get why. But it feels like you--" Just then, Kyra began fussing in the back seat. Tara sighed and turned around, reaching back to stroke the little cheek. "Hold on, baby girl. We're almost home."

Further discussion was tabled until they had reached the Summers house. They fed and bathed Kyra, snuggled with her for awhile, and finally put her down. Willow had hoped their normal routine would ease her tension a little bit; instead, she only felt it build as she replayed the various Faith Highlight Reels in her mind even while she was washing Kyra's infinitely precious toes.

At 8:30, she settled in for her own bath. When she emerged into their room, Tara was looking at her expectantly from their bed.

"Can we please talk about this now?" Her tone was soft, but Willow knew how resolute Tara could be. And didn't she want to air her own grievances, explain her side?

"Yeah, that seems like the adult thing to do." She sighed and plopped down in bed. "Tara, it scared me to death when I saw Kyra reaching for Faith. It scared me to death just having Kyra and Faith in the same room."

"I know, sweetie. And I understand it. But Faith hasn't done anything since coming back that makes me think she wants to harm any of us." Tara's voice was maddeningly calm.

"But do we wait for evidence? Doesn't her track record make you think we'd better be a little extra cautious?"

"Cautious, yes. But Will, I thought you were going to take her head off today."

"Why wouldn't I? Don't you remember what she did to everyone? And that whole knife-to-my-throat thing? You haven't forgotten that, right?"

Tara looked at her with a mixture of hurt and anger. "Of course I remember it! She hurt you, Willow--I could never forget that!"

"Forget, no. But maybe forgive. Especially since you weren't there; you didn't actually see it happen. Maybe it doesn't have the same...impact on you."

Now it was only anger that flared in the blue eyes. "That's bullshit, Willow! Someone hurt you--whether it was yesterday or 1985, it makes me crazy."

It was an overture, even through the anger. Then Tara continued. "But Willow, maybe the fact that I didn't know Faith during her Sunnydale heyday makes it easier for me to see the person she is now."

Willow dropped her head, trying to hide the tears that were pricking against the back of her eyes. Why am I crying? Why am I so scared? "But today--when Faith reached for Kyra...I went ballistic, and you--you spoke so very reasonably to her."

Tara was silent for a moment. "And you felt like I was undercutting you? Not supporting you?"

Willow nodded.

"First of all, I'm sorry. I never meant to do that, and I know it sucks. So, again: I apologize. And secondly, neither of us wanted Faith to hold Kyra, OK? Neither of us were going to let that happen."

Willow felt a sudden, albeit slight, calming at the words. They had been united in that element.

"The other thing is, I don't really think Faith was reaching for Kyra. At least, she wasn't until Kyra reached for her. Willow, you have to believe me--if I thought Faith intended to harm Kyra at all, I'd drop her myself."

Fear and frustration made it hard for her to speak. "But Tara, do you really think Faith is going to announce her intentions like that? I mean, she says she's here to help, and we just--what? Trust her?"

"No, not automatically. Faith has done some horrible things; I know that. But we also know that Angel trusts her--didn't Giles tell us he talked to Angel earlier?" Willow nodded reluctantly. Angel had confirmed what Faith had told them the night before.

"So that's got to count for something. Will, of course we keep our guard up; we stay alert. But we also at least consider the possibility that Faith has changed and wants to make some amends."

Willow was silent for a moment. "Tara, Baby, I know we're supposed to believe in atonement. I mean, look at Angel. And he made Faith look like someone caught smoking in the girls' room. But..." She shook her head in frustration. "She just did such a number on all of us, Tara. We trusted her, and she betrayed us in the worst ways. Now she's back and Angel says she's different and yeah, I guess she feels sort of different but she's still Faith...She still has this weird power to her. And it scares me, what she might do with it. Who she might hurt."

Tara pulled her close and cupped her face in her strong, soft hands. "Willow, my love, you have to believe me: nothing is as important to me as you and Kyra. You two are my family; you're my life. If Faith can help us find out what's going on, and maybe work out some karma in the process, I'll be happy for her. But that means nothing next to you, OK?"

Willow looked at her, Tara's beloved image blurry in her gaze. She drew a shaky breath. "But what happens if Faith tries to do something to you? What if she thinks you trust her, and she turns that against you?"

Tara just smiled and shook her head. "Willow Rosenberg, do you honestly think Faith can hurt me when I'm married to the strongest woman I know? What could she possibly do to me?" She leaned forward and kissed Willow gently on the lips, then planted soft kisses on her cheeks, in her hair.

"Lay down, Sweetie. Let me sing you to sleep."

Willow nodded and let Tara guide her shoulders back onto the bed. Curling her back into Tara's warmth, she pulled Tara's arm close about her, so close that Tara chuckled.

"Will, I can't sing if I can't breathe."

"Much as I love your voice, Baby, I'll take proximity over acoustics tonight." She felt Tara grin against her shoulder, and tried to relax. She thought about peaceful moments that she'd shared with Tara; willed herself to focus on them and take comfort in them in the midst of this crazy

time and she was succeeding, she knew she was succeeding, there were so many incredible moments and she was in the middle of their first picnic, three years ago and she was feeding Tara some of the orange slices she had packed and Tara was licking the juice off of her fingers and smiling up at her...but now there was something else in Tara's eyes now; she was looking at something over Willow's shoulders and Willow knew before she turned to look that she would see Faith standing there, grinning and dropping down onto the blanket, making herself at home.

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It was a tense, distracted group that gathered at the Summers' breakfast table the next morning. Willow couldn't remember her dreams, but she knew that they hadn't been pleasant and she knew that she still felt extremely uneasy about Faith. Looking across the table at her best friend, she could tell that Buffy was still thrown by Faith's appearance as well; at least, she assumed that's why she was about to pour orange juice on her Cheerios. A quick "Hey!" from Dawn rescued the circular bits of whole-grain goodness.

Tara was standing at the stove, watching the pancakes with what Willow thought was undue attention. Or was that just her perception? They had begun the morning with their usual kisses and languid embraces and murmured, sleepy plans for their day. Soon, though, Willow felt all of her previous tension stealing back over her, and had answered Tara's query with a vague mention of a rough's night sleep before disappearing into the bathroom. Why didn't I tell her I was still worried? Am I afraid she'll think I don't believe her? That I'm being weak?

Tara had made pancakes every Tuesday morning since they had moved into the Summers' house. By now she could make practically every funny shape imaginable, including most polygons, a number of hooved mammals, and a remarkably good rendition of American Gothic. Dawn, who alone seemed relatively unfazed or preoccupied, held out her plate in anticipation.

"Hey, what's that?" she said with a tinge of accusatory disappointment, pointing to a pancake with a number of seemingly random protrusions.

"Dolly Parton in profile," Tara answered after a moment's consideration, then grinned at Dawn, who grinned back in ready forgiveness.

Willow thought back to two years before, when Dawn had learned that she hadn't, in fact, sprung from her mother's womb but was instead a ball of mystical energy, given human form by a bunch of monks from an order that almost certainly didn't have a local chapter. In the midst of Dawn's hurt and rage and fear--all of which were made a thousand times worse by Mrs. Summers' death--Tara was the one person who could most consistently anchor Dawn back to this life, and convince her of her place in it. Of course, it hadn't hurt that Dawn had been completely smitten with Tara at that time.

Tara hath charms to soothe the savage beast...

"OK, so here's another question for this wise group's learned consideration," Dawn said, slicing off what appeared to be Dolly's ass. "Yours too, Buffy."



"You know, you could have a great sense of humor if you were only funnier," Buffy replied brightly. "So what's weighing on that tiny Chiclet you call your brain?"

"Well, from what we can tell, Faith doesn't know about my fantastic, once-in-a-millennium debut, right? So--do we tell her?"

"Why?" Willow asked quickly, feeling herself stiffen. "There's no reason for it." She forced herself to look only at Dawn, but she and Tara were far too connected for her not to feel the blue eyes gazing at her steadily.

Buffy was nodding in agreement. "If Faith doesn't know--and it looks like she's still watching the wrong channel--I don't know why we'd bring it up."

"Any chance it could be important?" Tara asked, and again Willow had the feeling of being undercut, left out on her own, even though her rational brain--And isn't that supposed to be a very big part of my very big brain?--knew that her partner was only raising a possible consideration.

She was glad when Buffy was the one to ask, "How? I mean, why would it even come up?"

"I don't know," Tara shrugged, setting down with her own pancakes, both of which resembled little carb-intensive cows. "I'm just trying to cover all the bases; make sure we don't end up ad-libbing something that could be important." She looked at Willow, and though she could see the concern in Tara's eyes, Willow also saw the reassurance. She managed what for her was a tiny smile and reached out to squeeze the long, tapered fingers.

"Does Angel know?" Willow asked, trying to make herself see the issue from at least a reasonable facsimile of multiple perspectives.

"Yeah," Buffy replied in that one voice that only came out when she was talking about her former lover; the person she'd once let herself believe she would spend her life with. "I told him the summer after we took down Glory."

"But he promised not to tell anyone, right?" Dawn asked around a mouthful of ample Partonian goodness.

"Right," Buffy agreed promptly. "And," she quickly added, as if to forestall a question, "there's no way he would break that promise. He didn't tell Faith, or anyone else."

Willow had no trouble believing the Slayer. If Angel made Buffy a promise, he would never betray her.

"Well, from what we can tell, Dawn's origins have nothing to do with the current situation," Tara said after a moment. "Unless we find out otherwise, I'd say we vote the Discretion ticket."

Willow felt her uneasiness abate slightly; she didn't want to end up in a situation where she reflexively argued one side of whatever Faith issue lay before them while Tara argued the other.

"Maybe though..." And here Dawn trailed off. The others looked at her expectantly. "Maybe we could use it as a test situation; see if Faith tries to do anything, you know...funky with it."

Silence greeted this idea for at least 1.37 seconds until Buffy burst out, "Are you crazy? I mean, more than usual? You wanna--what--use yourself for bait?"

"Buffy, think about it," Dawn said, leaning toward her sister. "What could she actually do with the information? The portal's closed; using me as a Key was a one-shot deal. Now I'm just plain old Dawn."

"You're not plain," Willow broke in. "You're special, and not being the Key anymore doesn't change that because you are so--"

"Um, really appreciating the affirmation, Willow," Dawn interrupted her. "But I'm not putting myself down or feeling sorry for myself here, and I know that has to be a big relief to everybody. My point is, I'm a former Key. We had to keep my identity secret then. Now the info doesn't really mean anything except that I never actually pooped my pants, which is more than any of you can say." She tossed her hair in faux haughtiness. "But we let Faith in on the secret, act like we still wanna keep it a secret, and see if she tries to do anything with it."

"No. Absolutely not," her sister said flatly.

"Oh, very good, Buffy." Dawn sat back and crossed her arms. "Close that mind and lock it up tight. Pat Robertson will be so proud."

"Dawn, why would we even--"

"Isn't everyone trying to figure out if Faith is for real?" Dawn interrupted. "She starts out a Slayer, fighting the good fight."

"With unnecessarily come-hither apparel and thinly-veiled rage, yes," Willow granted her, feeling her shoulders tightening again. "But then--"

"But then she sold out; went over to the Mayor," Dawn finished for her. "Basically caved in to her fears; didn't trust us or herself enough; needed to feel more special than she did. Yeah, I remember it all as if I'd really been there."

"Didn't exactly book passage on the USS Atonement after that," Buffy said, her voice a challenge.

"I know--she switched bodies with you. And that was awful, I get it--not to mention really weird, because I remember thinking at the time that you were spending way too much time in the bath. I couldn't figure out what you were doing in there, just sorta...murmuring to yourself, like..." Here

she stopped, and Willow watched the brightest of metaphorical light bulbs go off over each and every head at the table--including, she was sure, her own. She glanced at Tara, who stared back at her.

"Oh. My. God." Buffy breathed. "You don't think she really..."

Willow shook her head regretfully, trying to end the transmission of the ever-so-naughty images flashing across her mental screen. "Oh yeah. I really, really do. I think she really-"

"Don't say it!" Buffy shouted. "I can't live in a world where those words are spoken aloud."

They all sat silently for a moment; as much, Willow suspected, out of shock as their desire to lessen Buffy's horror.

After a moment, the Slayer muttered, "And I thought her sleeping with Riley was the down-payment for the house in Ickyville..." Finally she squared her shoulders and sat up. "OK, let's act as if this never happened, shall we? Great. The point is, Dawn, Faith has way too many marks in the moral debit column to trust her with that info."

"But what can she do with it?" Dawn asked again. "And besides, do you really think Angel would send her here if he didn't trust her?"

OK, good point, Willow admitted reluctantly. But probably not the one that sits easiest with your sister...

Buffy, though, was silent. Willow knew she was wrestling with about twelve inner demons at one time. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm, and very quiet. "Here's what scares me: is there any chance, any chance at all, that the information could still hurt you?" She stared at Dawn as if Willow and Tara weren't there.

Dawn gave a little smile, meeting her sister half-way at this new, less dictatorial approach. "I'll tell you what: we tell Giles about the idea, see if he has any reason why it would hurt to try it. I promise I'll go with whatever he says. So long," she added quickly, "as you don't try to sway him."

After a long moment, Buffy nodded. "OK. It's a deal. But if there's any sign whatsoever that Glory and the monks could still be players in this--"

"We drop the whole idea," Dawn said agreeably, turning back to Dolly's bosom as Willow and Tara exchanged silent glances of admiration: Dawn had negotiated that plan pretty well. "Glory and the Monks..." the teenager was saying. "Didn't they play out at Red Rocks last fall?"

"Whatever happened to those monks, anyway?" Willow asked, glad for a moment of lightness.

"I heard they went to LA and worked for a TV guy who did these weird, sci-fi kinda shows--space travel, stuff like that. Some guy who likes toadies telling him everything he's doing is gold, even when it totally blows."

"I can't imagine working for somebody like that," Tara mused.

"Who here can imagine working for anyone?" Dawn asked, taking a slug of milk to aid Dolly's breasts in their journey. "Let's face it, guys, we live pretty well considering that Willow's the only one with a steady income. If she didn't do computer consulting, we'd be screwed."

"Hey, we need our free time to fight evil, not be a cog in the capitalist machine that is currently devouring the country," Willow replied with a shrug, focusing on her Golden Grahams. Her income was the thing that kept them all afloat, and no one but Tara needed to know that her "consulting" often took the form of hacking helpful yet discreet amounts of money from the private accounts of several big business moguls.

"Is this wrong?" she asked Tara one night as a Mobile oil executive unwittingly donated \$2000 to their health insurance fund.

"If it is, I finally see the lure of evil. Color me on swell terms with my conscience," Tara replied promptly.

Tara herself did some tutoring ("Why do people insist on implying when they should infer? And when did spelling become passé?"), while Buffy and Dawn worked part-time at the Magic Box. Buffy had tried giving private self-defense lessons but found it too frustrating that her clients couldn't bounce back from a dislocated shoulder and that they were reluctant to pay her for actually giving them the dislocated shoulder.

"Sissies," she huffed.

So Willow covered many of their expenses, while they tried to save the money from Joyce's will for Dawn's college fund.

"If I even go to college," she once said with exaggerated disinterest.

"As opposed to what?" Buffy asked, her voice veering dangerously close to the "Do as I say, not as I slay" range. "Selling crack?"

After a hasty council with Tara and Willow, the next exchange between the Summers sisters pertaining to the younger's future ended with Buffy saying, "Listen, Dawn, I want you to go to college. But you need to do what you need to do. Hard as it is to admit, I guess it really is your business." Two weeks later, Willow caught Dawn looking through brochures for several state-system universities.

When Kyra arrived, Willow had stepped up her on-line financial enhancement activities (as she liked to call them).

"Honey, I know you're careful and all, but...Be careful," Tara said one night after a Morgan-Stanley broker gave what was really a very nice contribution to help offset the cost of the new roof.

"Baby, now more than ever I wanna make sure we're all secure," Willow said, turning from the cool blue glow of her laptop to the more inviting hues of Tara's eyes. "And if I have to steal from people who make seven figures a year and live off the fat of corporate welfare, I'm willing to do it. I've covered my tracks with enough cyber-detritus to choke a horse, and believe me--there are plenty of rich people in this country. I'll never need to hit the same person twice. Besides," she added sweetly, "who's gonna suspect a nice little lesbian of high-finance techno-piracy? We're too busy throwing potlucks and shopping for Birkenstocks."

Glancing around the table now, Willow felt a warmth steal over her as she considered her family. They'd been through more mayhem and tragedy, on a more epic scale, than most people would ever know.

And yet here we sit, eating pancakes and drinking milk. I love these people.

"So what's on the agenda?" Dawn asked.

"Well, you're gonna go to school and amaze the rest of the junior class with your remarkable poise and fashion sense," Buffy replied.

"Sucks bein' me," Dawn muttered. "Talk to Giles about my idea...And don't be all biased and everything."

"I promise," Buffy said with what Willow thought was transparent insincerity. "You can join us after school. The rest of us will keep trying to figure out what's going on with the suicides." Willow felt her tension start to return, albeit in somewhat diminished form. She and Tara would finish consulting their own books here at home; maybe fit in a little snuggle time...

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They hadn't found anything in their books, but the snuggling had been quite good, accompanied as it had been by two very satisfying, creatively-induced orgasms.

"I like this tele-Scooby work plan," Willow murmured. "Much easier on gas."

"And much easier to stroke each other's naked bodies here versus the shop," Tara added.

"Yeah, 'cause we've never done that," Willow grinned, pressing a kiss against Tara's breast.

"Right, because using a place of commerce for quick, sweaty lesbian sex would just be so..."

"Very, very hot," Willow declared confidently.

Tara pulled back just slightly and looked at her. "So...Are you feeling a little less angsty about--about our conversation last night?"

Willow was glad that Faith's name hadn't been used, and she had no intention of uttering it herself.

"Well, I'm still cautious...But yes, I'm less of the angst and more of the 'Get the job done' at this point."

"Glad to hear it," Tara murmured, pulling her close for a soft, warm kiss.

After an early dinner, they headed to the Magic Box where they had agreed the night before to reconvene. Faith had assumed the invitation included her, and promised her own attendance. When they arrived, however, the Dark Slayer was nowhere to be seen. Willow grabbed Buffy and pulled her aside.

"What did Giles say? About the plan?" Even as she asked, though, she knew the answer. The anxiety in Buffy's eyes made the outcome abundantly clear.

"Why did we ever teach her to speak?" the Slayer asked, shaking her head. "Encourage her to think?"

"So Giles gave it the thumbs-up?" Willow asked, slightly surprised. She knew the Watcher to be a cautious man by nature and experience. Although she admired Dawn's perseverance and negotiation, she hadn't really expected the idea to go to launch.

"I think you'd better start hacking some more money, Will," Buffy said grimly. "If Dawn doesn't go to law school, I'll eat my stake."

"Well, she's a smart--hey! Whaddya mean, 'hack some more money'?"

"Yeah, I told him about it when I got here for my shift," Buffy continued, as if Willow hadn't spoken. "I assumed he would shoot it down right there, but he just gave that annoying 'Hmm...' noise of his and then disappeared to 'ascertain all relevant facts,' as he put it. Comes out of his study about two hours later all excited. He swears there's no harm that can come of it. Then of course Dawn shows up and she's just completely gloating about it all. Starts tossing out some ideas and the next thing I know they're laying out a plan. My little sister is plotting with my Watcher." Buffy pressed her lips together in a tight grimace. "It's all very inappropriate."

"Buffy, you know Giles would never OK this if there were any danger to Dawn." She paused, looking at her friend. "You do know that, right?"

Buffy sighed. "I know. Believe me, I made him run through the facts about five times."

"And if it were anyone but Dawn, you'd be saying it was a great idea," Willow pointed out.

"Well, I wouldn't be pasting little gold stars in my Day Planner if you or Tara or Xander were doing it...or Anya," she added, almost as an afterthought. "But you're right...The fact that Dawn's the main character leaves me extra nippy cold."

Willow nodded in understanding. She had no siblings, and Tara wasn't exactly close with Donnie. But she knew that Buffy and Dawn shared something special, even beyond that of most tight sisters. "So what's the plan?"

"What? Oh...Later on, Dawn's gonna create some alone time with Faith--even just a few minutes to talk. She's going to make some reference to being the Key...Just something casual, as if she assumes Faith already knows. Then she'll stammer a little and eventually, quote unquote reluctantly tell Faith the whole story."

Willow mulled this over. "It's a good plan, Buffy. Subtle, but effective."

Buffy nodded glumly. "I know. I just still wish it weren't a plan at all." She looked at Willow and frowned.

Willow was silent for a moment, then said, "Y'know, a lot of it depends on how well Dawn can lie."

The two women looked at each other.

"Faith's toast," Buffy said, in a voice that suggested she almost felt a little sorry for the Dark Slayer.

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After Buffy had resumed her research, interrupted by frequent snorts of displeasure and pointed glances in Giles' direction, Willow walked back to the far corner to where Tara was playing dolls with Kyra. Actually, the singular would be more accurate: the only "doll" that Kyra had ever shown any interest in was the severely mutated (and much improved) slab o' genuine molded plastic that Buffy had given her, "Little Baby Stake 'n' Slay." Kyra liked to slay such varied unholy creatures as her stuffed Barney, any picture of Britney Spears, and a George W. Bush chew toy that Willow had ordered off of the internet. "Bye-bye!" she called out as she dispatched each victim.

(Willow had paid for all of these things, including the internet purchase, as she realized that stealing was fraught with moral implications and certainly not something to be done lightly or joked about.)

In addition to "bye-bye, Kyra could say "Mommy" (for Tara) and "Mama" (for Willow). Among her other verbal acquisitions: "no" (which she used infrequently but effectively); "dink" (when she was hungry)' "bed" (when she was tired); "Dah" for Dawn, and, most wonderfully of all (at least for Willow and Tara), "Bub": her version of "Buffy."

"I am the Chosen One," Buffy hissed. "I've averted an apocalypse every year. I took down a god." She stamped her feet and glared at them. "I am not 'Bub the Vampire Slayer'!"

"But why does she drop it to one syllable?" Willow asked Tara after they figured out what Kyra meant. "I mean, even if they can't say the word properly, kids typically try to match the cadence." (Research was her forte; she knew her developmental milestones and most subtleties thereof.)

"Who knows?" Tara grinned, wiping her eyes after yet another of Buffy's attempts to change Kyra's pronunciation, this time using a cookie as a bribe. "I just love the fact that Buffy doesn't seem to realize that her name in and of itself is a riot. Really, what was Joyce thinking?"

"Haven't we all wondered..." Willow admitted.

"So what's up?" Tara asked now, looking up from the carnage. Willow filled her in on Giles' decision and the agreed-upon plan.

"But maybe Faith just won't show up," Willow added hopefully, wondering if Tara would be disappointed in her words.

Her partner, though, just shrugged. "With Faith's track record, I'm not putting money on any particular pony."

Willow should have known, however, that she would jinx herself. The Dark Slayer walked into the Magic Box just before 8:30.

"You're late," Anya said accusingly, which even Willow had to admit was a little hypocritical since Anya most definitely hadn't wanted Faith there at all.

"Had to go to Mass. What'd I miss?"

It was hard to gauge the reception Faith received. Willow thought she had detected a slight thaw the day before, but she couldn't imagine that anyone would say they actually wanted Faith involved.

Willow felt herself tightening yet again, hoping that Kyra wouldn't reach out for Faith. But her daughter was busy staking Britney--"Bye-bye!"--and didn't look up.

After a slight pause in which everyone basically looked at each other, Giles stepped forward. "At this point, we have no new information. We're...quite at a loss."

"And that whole 'Hey, aren't you guys superheroes?' piece? That sink in yet?" Again the face was unreadable. Her hands were folded across her chest; her head tilted in the familiar pose...and yet something was different.

What?



"Uh, yeah," Xander replied self-consciously. "Feelin' kinda slow on the uptake for not thinking of it, but it does seem like something we should maybe talk about."

"So let's talk," Faith shrugged, reaching out for a chair. Just then she spied Tara and Kyra, both of whom were now looking at her. Her face softened for an instant, then she looked up at Willow and stepped back, shoving her hands into her back pockets as if daring Willow to accuse her of malicious intent.

"Hey," she said quietly, nodding at Tara and Kyra.

"Hi Faith," Tara replied evenly. Kyra, to Willow's chagrin, was now smiling at Faith.

"So...whatcha playin', kid?" Faith asked nonchalantly, even as she craned her neck to get a better look. A quizzical look crossed her face, and then suddenly, something akin to pure delight danced through her eyes. "Is that a Slayer doll? Get out!"

"Yeah--that was Buffy's idea," Dawn replied, watching Faith carefully.

Faith looked at Buffy, not even trying to hide her approval. "Mad props, B," she nodded. "Not exactly a mass market kinda thing, but still...Very cool."

For her part, Buffy seemed to be having a hard time meeting Faith's eyes. She'll never look at a bathtub the same way ever again.

Just then Kyra staked Barney--"Bye-bye!"--and looked up at Faith. Her arched eyebrows seemed to ask, "How'd I do?"

Faith grinned hugely. "Nice form, kid--you got potential."

Willow had never seen Faith like this--smiling without bitterness or spite; looking at someone with open affection. She felt torn between fascination and her enduring suspicion.

"We should get to work," Buffy interjected abruptly. Faith pulled her gaze away from Kyra--with effort, or so it seemed to Willow--and settled herself into a chair, slouching back and crossing one ankle loosely over her knee. The child-like expression was gone.

"So...Anybody feelin' suicidal?" she asked conversationally.

"You know, you have very little tact," Anya said, with what was clearly an absolute lack of irony. Silence greeted this accusation, and then Giles cleared his throat.

"Though Faith's question is perhaps lacking in subtlety, it is a valid one. It seems imperative that we all be aware of any sudden changes in our mood; any sense that we aren't...ourselves."

"The victims...Nobody close to them noticed anything, right?" Tara asked, looking up.

"No," Giles promptly replied. "And all but one of them were in significant relationships--solid ones, from all reports. So it's unlikely that such a change would have gone unnoticed."

"Which would make it seem like a pretty sudden thing, then," Willow noted, trying to pull her attention away from Faith and focus on the issue at hand. "I mean, descent into a despair so profound that ending your life seemed like the only option--ya gotta think the mate's gonna notice."

"If something like that hit you, I'd know almost as soon as you did," Tara said, looking at Willow intently.

"You too," Willow said, feeling her throat tighten.

I know when the evening news has hit you extra hard, Baby. I can feel you to the bone.

She looked back at the group to see Faith shoot a quick glance from her to Tara, then shift in her chair as she caught Willow's eye.

"So...seems like this bad boy--or girl--works pretty quickly," Xander mused.

"We still don't know, though, whether there's any physical presence," Giles interjected. "Does this malevolent force actually manifest corporeally, or simply exert mental control from a distance?"

"And he just said...?" Xander asked, looking as he always did to Willow for clarification.

"Bad thing show up in person, or just whack telepathically?"

"Thank you."

"I don't suppose we'd be lucky enough to have a common object among them," Buffy asked, half-hopefully. "No packages delivered from a fake address; no dining at the same restaurant the night before..."

"Right," Faith put in. "This evil force sends absolute, gut-wrenching despair by way of shrimp scampi."

"Hey, that's really helpful, Faith," Buffy said brightly. "Almost as helpful as your own ideas and theories...Oh, wait--you don't have any."

"Sorry, B," Faith shrugged. "Just tryin' to picture hell on the half-shell."

Faith apologized? I mean, even sort of apologized? What's going on here?

The Dark Slayer didn't seem demoralized by this, however; she had moved on. "Well, Giles--any such luck? Any quote unquote mysterious thread connecting our victims?"

"Aside from their genuine commitment to doing good, it would appear not," the Watcher said regretfully. "There's no evidence that any of them were friends, though some or all of them may well have met at various philanthropic functions. They all lived and worked in different areas of town, and there's no sign that any of them belonged to the same faith congregation or any other social group. And insofar as actual objects are concerned, I certainly can't discern or imagine what that might be." At this, he rubbed his eyes and stared off.

An uncomfortable silence ensued, broken shrilly by the ringing of Anya's cell phone, beeping out the chorus to "Money, Money, Money." They all jumped slightly, and then Anya glanced at the caller ID.

"Ooh--it's D'Andre, from the Business Guild," she said excitedly. "I should take this." So saying, she stepped into the training room.

"Anya knows people in the Sunnydale Small Business Guild?" Tara asked in surprise.

"Anya is in the Guild," Giles replied with a rueful smile. "The moment she learned of it, she insisted that it was the perfect civic opportunity."

"She's been a member for over a year; says she's gonna run for office next year," Xander added proudly.

"Treasurer?" Willow asked innocently.

"Need you ask?" came the dry reply.

All joking stopped, however, at the sight of Anya reappearing before them. The ex-demon looked shakier than Willow had ever seen her; at least, outside of a major battle.

"Ahn...?" Xander had risen and moved to his wife's side. "What is it?"

"It's Trevor," she said flatly.

"Trevor...?" Xander asked hesitantly.

"Trevor St. Andrews," Anya said sharply, glaring at him. "I talked about him."

"Right," Xander replied hastily, though Willow suspected he didn't actually recognize the name. "What about him?"

But Willow already knew; she could tell Tara did as well, from the wrenching look her partner gave her.

"He's dead." And with the words, she walked shakily over to the table and sat down.

"He killed himself, didn't he?" Dawn asked quietly.

"Yes." Anya reached out an unsteady hand to grab her glass of water, then withdrew it. "His partner found him in their home. He hanged himself in the attic."

"And we have reason to believe that this was not an ordinary suicide?" Giles asked, then shook his head. "As if any suicide is ordinary..."

Anya shrugged, and brushed at her eyes. "He was one of the better people I've ever known, and I've been around for a long, long time." She looked up at Xander. "He bought the Espresso Pump last year. His employees loved him, from what I hear--better than average pay; managed to work in some benefits. And he insisted on going fair trade, even though it cost him to do it." She smiled suddenly. "I ran a few numbers for him; told him he'd keep a good profit margin even doing it half-way: make the visible effort, but hold onto some of the old producers...But Trevor wouldn't hear of it. I once asked him just what kind of capitalist he thought he was, and he said, 'The kind that doesn't need to retire at 40 because I've gouged and cheated everyone I came into contact with.' And the way he said it...Well, I thought that was...admirable."

With the words, Willow realized that for all of her financial ferocity, Anya really did respect what St. Andrews stood for, the integrity he showed.

"Plus he was active in a bunch of volunteer stuff," Anya continued. "The food bank; breast cancer funding. And I don't mean the occasional check and appearances at fundraisers. He was involved; he worked."

"He was involved in breast cancer research?" Willow asked, surprised. She looked at Tara, whose own mother had died from breast cancer, and wondered what she must be feeling.

"I asked him about that, too," Anya replied. "I said, 'I should think a gay man like you would be working for AIDS money. Did someone you love die from breast cancer?' He seemed a little startled at first--you know, gave me that look I've seen about a thousand times since losing my powers--but then he said he hadn't. He said that so many lesbians had worked for AIDS causes that he thought it might be nice to give a little something back."

As Anya talked, Willow could feel something shift in her thinking, her attitude. Before, it had been another problem that they would need to solve--a sad problem, to be sure, and somewhat different in nature, but a problem nonetheless that they would need to research and resolve. The risk of their personal involvement, of course, had put a different light on it, but even then the fear had been mixed with familiarity: they were at risk, just in a new way. But it was clear that Anya had been very fond of Trevor St. Andrews; felt his loss and mourned it. Even Willow, who had never met the man, realized that someone special had been taken away.

"And now he's killed himself," Buffy said flatly.

"With a little help--directly, or indirectly," Willow added. Looking at Anya, she felt a gentleness for the ex-demon that she had never experienced before.

A very uncomfortable silence prevailed for several minutes. Finally Anya broke in, "This is just unacceptable. I mean, yes--innocent people suffer all the time. Usually, though, we don't know them so we save them because it's the right thing to do. But Trevor was a good man, and I knew him. And I want to inflict harm on whoever did this to him."

"We'll figure it out, Ahn," Xander said gently. "We'll go to his funeral and we'll pay our respects to his partner and we'll find out what happened."

Anya just nodded and rested her head briefly against Xander's chest. Another painful silence filled the room as everyone considered this new development and Anya's obvious distress. The group had always looked at Anya with a certain curiosity--her bluntness, her seeming avarice, her unwillingness or inability to learn the niceties of social behavior. They knew she loved Xander, but other "soft" emotions seemed a rarity. Had it made them see her as somehow less human? A strong personality, to be sure; but not terribly...deep? If so, they had clearly been mistaken. Anya was grieving this man.

"I'm sorry, Anya." Tara's soft voice filled the room. "He sounds like a good man; and it sounds like he liked you. I'm sorry you won't have more time to get to know him."

Anya's eyes, looking at Tara, were bright, glittering. "Thank you," she said softly. "You're just a remarkably kind woman, Tara."

All of us can slay demons, but Tara's the one who knows how to heal. And then she caught Faith looking at Tara again with that same searching gaze, and her anger flared anew. What do you want with my family?

"Ahn, honey, do you wanna go home?" Xander asked, stroking his wife's hair.

But Anya straightened abruptly, and rubbed an impatient hand across her eyes. "No. I want to find out who's doing this and what this prophecy is all about and I want to exact a little revenge. No, not of the demonic variety," she added, as if expecting the reaction that was indeed forming in the room. "I mean old-fashioned justice, meted out in human form."

"Then let's get to it," Tara replied, her voice soft but very strong. Kyra had been watching Tara intently during this, and now nestled up against her. Tara pulled her close and kissed her dark hair, then stood and walked over to the back shelf of books. "I think we may have some works here that we haven't checked yet."

Tara's actions served as a kind of catalyst for the rest of them. Willow moved to join Tara, while Dawn bent back over her book. Giles stood, clutching an old text with the title "Dementia Externalis" etched in crimson. "I'm going to make some tea. Would anyone else care for some?"

"Howzabout some bourbon, straight up?" Faith asked. Willow noticed that Faith had been quiet during Anya's revelation and reaction. She didn't know the ex-demon except to realize that she probably didn't like her and that this was probably due to Faith having devirginized Xander. Well, and trying to kill him later, Willow thought, but she suspected one was very close to the

other in Anya's moral universe. Did Faith feel any compassion for her? Any abstract sense of loss over the death?

"I drank all the booze," Dawn replied, looking at Faith.

"Oh really? You've been growing up with a bang, haven't you?" Faith asked dryly.

You don't know the half of it...But you will.

"Yeah, well, they were just so glad to get me off the meth, they didn't complain much." Dawn regarded Faith with an odd mixture of openness and challenge. Willow "remembered" how Dawn had idolized the Dark Slayer. Did any of that remain?

"In that case, I think I'll grab a soda. You got any around here, or do I need to make a run?"

"Actually, I think we're out," Giles said. "We usually have some in the refrigerator, but Dawn goes through it. Mixes the Coke with her rum, you see."

"Gotcha. Well, there's a convenience store on the corner. Anybody want anything?" Faith pushed her chair back and began to head toward the door.

"I'll go with you." Dawn announced, and Willow stole a glance at Buffy. Whoa...I don't think that's the scenario she had in mind.

"Gonna protect me against all the scary things between here and the corner?" Faith asked, looking at Dawn with amusement. "I can handle myself."

"I'm sure you often do." Dawn replied coolly. Willow saw Buffy drop her head as if completely engrossed in her book. "I just feel like getting out of here for a few."

Faith looked at her for a moment more, then shrugged. "B, OK if little sis takes a walk with someone of my reputation?"

Was she being sarcastic? Or did she really want Buffy to be alright with Dawn accompanying her?

Willow watched Buffy struggle with the decision for a moment, before shrugging with what she knew to be feigned nonchalance. "I'm sure you know that if anything happens--"

"You'll throw me down and have at it. Check." Faith turned and headed toward the door.

Well that was a weird way of putting it...

Faith and Dawn left, and Xander turned to his friend. "Buffy, are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, I know Dawn's gonna 'let it slip' that she was the Key, but still..." They had filled in Xander and Anya about the plan when they first arrived that night. Anya thought it made perfect

sense ("She'll yammer it to every demon between here and San Luis Obispo," she declared confidently and, Willow thought, at tad happily) while Xander was more concerned. Eventually, though, he had seen its advantages.

"No, I think the entire idea is a bad one," Buffy replied. "But it seems like events have already been put into motion." And here she glared at Giles, who stood with his back to them.

"Buffy, I can feel your disapproving gaze and really, it's unnecessary," the Watcher said with great dignity. "Though I agree that Dawn's decision to leave with Faith is a bit...unexpected."

"If they're not back in ten minutes," Buffy said, "I'm going after them."

"Well that doesn't make much sense," Anya replied. "Faith could have totally killed her by then." As Buffy looked up aghast, she hastily added, "More importantly, though, she doesn't have any reason to. She may think the information's useful, but hurting Dawn would make no sense."

"Right...because Faith's actions always adhere to the strictest rules of balance and rationality," Buffy said through gritted teeth, and Willow could tell her friend was already regretting not calling a halt to Dawn's exit.

Tara sat down next to Buffy, holding Kyra on her lap. "Buffy, you have to let her do this. Let's face it--Dawn's got a will like yours. She goes on instinct. If you had shot her down on this, or forbid her from going with Faith in full view of all of us, she'd just come up with something more dangerous, just to prove she could do it."

"Does the girl have to take every risk she sees?" Buffy stood, and walked over to the window, peering out into the relative darkness of a Sunnydale street.

"Yeah--her role models are such cautious people," Willow said dryly.

"Hey, there's a difference between risks taken in the line of duty and ones that you just pluck off the existential cafeteria counter," Buffy said heatedly. "She's got to learn the difference."

"Yes, let's all shout about this," Giles interrupted, stirring milk in his tea. "That way when they return, Faith will be able to hear all about the plan from several feet away and then act with her customary volatility." He looked down at Buffy, his eyes gentle. "I share your concern. If they're not back within ten minutes, one of us will go after them, alleging a desire for some unique convenience store delicacy."

"Ooh--those hot dogs," Xander enthused. "With a little cheese sauce, and..." He looked around. "What--don't tell me you've never tried them."

The anxiety and back-up planning proved unnecessary. Dawn and Faith returned a few minutes later. Willow tried to assess the teenager's mood, but Dawn was simply smiling around big slugs of her grape Slushie.

"Everything go OK?" Buffy asked anxiously.

"Just like clockwork," Faith replied with small salute. "We walked to the store, made our selections, paid for them, and returned." She glanced at Dawn. "There was one kinda tense moment--"

"What happened?" Buffy demanded, her mouth tightening dangerously.

"Well, it's hard to talk about...See, Dawn thought they were out of grape flavoring."

"You know how I am about my Slushies," Dawn cut in.

"I'm tellin' ya, B, you coulda cut the tension with a knife. But they refilled it, Dawn stood down, and we made our way safely back up the street," Faith finished, taking a swig from her Coke.

Willow knew it would look suspicious if the meeting closed immediately after this, but it was hard to focus when all she wanted to do was hear the details. She didn't doubt for an instant that Dawn had played her part, but how had Faith reacted?

After another half an hour of increasingly frustrating research--they were still coming up empty--Giles took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily. "I think we should call it a night. I'll call Wesley later, and discuss the situation, but frankly I think we're all exhausted.

"Oh, but I hate to stop reading the dusty volumes of ancient, cryptic works that leave me feeling even more inadequate than usual," Xander said with faux regret.

"There is one other point, however," Giles continued. "As Faith brought to our attention, we must be especially vigilant about our own moods and mental states. We must rely not only on our own self-awareness, but on that of those closest to us--each other. This is especially true for people who live together."

"So we're supposed to watch each other like psycho-hawks?" Buffy asked doubtfully. "I mean, I get that we need to be on our mental toes, but couldn't we get just a little wiggy from the observation itself?"

"Right," Willow chimed in. "Like, there's all this evidence in quantum physics that shows how just the act of observing something affects that thing's behavior and lots of social scientists say that that totally applies to humans, only more so, and here I'll stop going on and on about this but you get the idea." She looked over to see Tara gazing at her affectionately.

"I appreciate your point," Giles nodded. "I don't mean to suggest that we place each other under 24-hour observation. Indeed, it actually helps that the suicides were so sudden. There's less risk of subtle changes that go undetected. No, I'm thinking more of trying to be with one another as much as possible."



"What about you?" Dawn asked, turning to the person who had been more of a father than the man who thought he actually was, but never bothered to call.

"I spend most of my days here, and I often see all or some of you in the evening," he replied, smiling at her fondly.

"But there's still empty space in that schedule," Buffy countered. "You live alone; you sleep alone."

"You don't know that," Giles said indignantly.

"The blow-up doll can't talk," Faith said. "Girl's got a point."

"What about you, Faith?" Tara asked softly. Willow felt the anger creeping back up over her. Why had Tara been the one to point it out? Why had Tara thought of it?

Faith suddenly seemed uncomfortable again, but moved to cover it with her typical bravado. "Hey, nobody's gonna hack into this brain. I don't think I qualify."

"That's debatable," Giles replied quietly. "Yes, you've made many serious mistakes, Faith, and you've hurt a great many people. But the mere fact that you're working with us now makes you a possible target."

If she is working with us...

"Seriously, kids, I don't think--"

"Why don't you move in with Giles?" Dawn suggested brightly.

Exclamations of "What? I seriously doubt--" mingled with "Are you mental? No way." General confusion reigned for a moment before Buffy broke in.

"I think it's a good idea." She gazed at Giles for a long moment, and Willow realized that her purpose was two-fold: first, and most importantly, was to keep Giles safe. But if Faith were living with him, it would also make it much more difficult for her to pull off any betrayals or suspicious maneuvers.

Giles seemed to grasp her point, and he sat down heavily. "I...I suppose you may be right," he managed, looking at Faith.

"I think you just wanna put the moves on me," Faith said, tossing her head.

"And if you'll excuse me, I need to stock up on antibiotics in hopes of protecting myself from the ungodly infections you've no doubt picked up in your travels," the Watcher retorted sharply. "Just sharing glassware probably renders me vulnerable to syphilis."

"Yeah? You ask me, a good case of the clap might lighten you up, G-Man. 'cuz it's pretty clear..."

Gradually, though, both of them settled into the idea, albeit with great reluctance.

"It must be understood, however, that I won't have strange men traipsing in and out at all hours of the night," Giles warned her.

"No problem, trust me," Faith retorted. "You just make sure you put the toilet seat down."

"What? In my own home? I shall do whatever I want with my toilet."

"Didn't need to hear it, Giles; really didn't..."

The two of them left much the same way, with Giles driving Faith to her hotel to pick up her few belongings. Willow watched them go, bickering as they went.

"And again I ask--is this a good idea?" Xander stared after them worriedly. "I mean, we're still not sure Faith's with us for real. What if she plans to hurt him?"

"Giles wouldn't agree to it if he didn't trust her at least that much," Buffy argued, though Willow wasn't sure of that. She knew how much Giles would risk to keep them all safe.

"How do we even know Faith isn't behind all of this?" she asked bluntly.

"Because Angel sent her. We know that," Buffy replied flatly. "And I...I called him myself earlier today." They all looked at her in surprise. "I needed to hear it from him," she went on as if she hadn't noticed their looks. "He really believes in her; believes she's doing the Atonement Tour and fighting the good fight. I don't like it, but I believe him. At least, I believe he believes it...And let's face it, he knows a thing or two about atonement and second chances." She looked at them. "I think it's worth it. And with her there, Giles won't get thrown into the Pit of Despair without someone noticing it." Then she shook her head and sighed. "Believe me, people--I am not entirely comfortable with this."

"I think she's sincere," Tara said suddenly. "It's more a feeling than anything, and I'm not saying we let our guard down, but I think she really wants to help out here."

There was a silence while everyone considered this. Since Tara had joined their group, it was clear that she had earned particular respect for her ability to read people. It was an intuitive feel, honed by experience, that had nothing to do with magic and everything to do with her essence. It was something that Willow absolutely loved about her partner. So why was she so annoyed right now?

"Dawn, what did you find out?" Buffy asked. "Did you talk to her?"

Her sister nodded. "We were just walking along, and I was making small talk about how it's always so crazy around here and nothing is ever what it seems to be." She paused. "I thought that was just a very nice ironic touch, given the circumstances."

"It would make a good story," Tara commended her.

"I hope so. Anyway, she's basically agreeing with me; talking about how living around here prepares you for anything except happiness. She seemed kind of embarrassed after she said that, come to think of it....So I say, 'Yeah--you'd think that being a Key would have me immune to shock.' And then I stopped suddenly, and she says, 'Being the key to what?' And I just sorta muttered that I meant Buffy was the key--key to stopping evil, key to fighting vampires. But I could tell she wasn't buying it. She says, 'Either that was a Freudian slip and fishnets, or you just said something you shouldn't have.' And I act all agitated and offer up some really lame explanations, but I can tell she's not buying it."

"And she 'coaxes' you into telling her," Buffy said, a grim set to her mouth.

"No! That's just it!" Dawn said, leaning forward excitedly. "I'm getting ready to spill, and she stops me! She says, 'Listen, kid--I dunno what's going on, but I do know you're not supposed to be talking about it. So--don't talk about it.' I couldn't believe it. I started in, saying that I really didn't mean anything by it, and she just stops right there in the middle of the street, grabs me by the shoulders--man, that girl is strong!--and says, 'I mean it. Don't talk about it. Whatever it is, it's not supposed to hit the airwaves. Let's just drop it.' She stares at me, like she's really wanting to make her point, and then she just turns and shoves her hands in her coat pocket and asks what I'm getting at the store. Man, she was so cool!"

And the adoration is back, Willow thought. She looked at Tara and her heart sank. Her partner was smiling at the news.

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The conversation when they all got home was not one of the more pleasant ones Willow had ever had. She and Tara put a sleeping Kyra in her bed and headed downstairs to the sound of Dawn's rapturous voice.

She couldn't stop talking about Faith.

"She was just so cool," the teenager said, reaching for a brownie.

"Really? The first 235 times you said it, I thought you were saying she was just a fool," Buffy commented dryly. "But apparently you think highly of her."

"C'mon, you have to admit, you didn't really expect her to do what she did." Dawn's tone was just this side of gloating.

"True," Buffy acknowledged grudgingly. "Of all the scenarios I pictured, this wasn't one of them."

"And it definitely means she's on our side," Dawn continued. "Otherwise, she'd have wanted to know the whole scoop."

"Whoa--easy there, Biscuit...Just hold on a minute," Buffy warned her exuberant sister. "I'll admit, this is a strong piece of evidence for the defense. But I'm not ready to jump on the Faith Train of...Faith just yet."

"Fine," Dawn said, rolling her eyes. "Let's give her some truth serum. Face it, Buffy--you just don't want to believe in her."

"That's not true," Buffy protested. "It would be great to have Faith on our side, and actually be able to trust her. Right now we're spending half our time trying to figure out the prophecy and half our time trying to get a bead on Faith. Believe me, I'd love to cross that second one off of our 'To do' list. I just don't want to let our guard down and then be sorry."

Dawn just shook her head. "So what will it take for you to trust her?"

"I don't know," Buffy muttered, shrugging. "Maybe I start with not distrusting her. Can I abstain from voting for the time being?"

"As long as you at least consider cutting her a break," Dawn said.

"The thing is, Dawn, you weren't there," Willow interjected, drawing sharp looks from Tara, Buffy, and especially Dawn. "OK, I know--you remember being there; it's just like you were there. But maybe--maybe the monks went sorta easy on that memory; maybe they kinda figured it wasn't a big deal. You know, compared to the hell god thing they were focusing on, anything else seemed like small potatoes." Even as she spoke, however, she could feel the hurt coming from Dawn and Buffy; worst of all, she could feel the first glimmerings of disappointment from the one whose opinion meant the most.

"Or...Or maybe I'm psychotic," she finished lamely.

"Willow, I remember all of it," Dawn said angrily. "I remember having Faith over for dinner and how much she loved talking about being the Slayer...Mom said Buffy never really talked about it. And then she came over for Christmas and we stood out on the porch and watched it snow--me, Mom, and Faith, while Buffy went off to help Angel. And I remember how Buffy looked when she came back that one night and said Faith had tried to pin that guy's death on her; how she went to Giles behind her back." She paused, glaring at Willow. "And I certainly remember graduation day and that whole unfortunate snake incident. I remember every piece of it, Willow. So don't stand there and tell me I just read the Cliff Notes version so I don't really know how bad she can be."

Willow nodded miserably. "I--I know, Dawnie. I'm sorry. I--I just don't want us getting burned again."

Dawn looked at her searchingly. "Honestly, Willow--you're as hostile as Buffy. Why?"

Willow just stared at the floor, wanting this whole episode to be over. Suddenly she felt Tara's hand on her back.

"I know you were there, Dawn. But Faith attacked Willow; she held a knife to her throat. That kind of stuff doesn't exactly wear off overnight." Willow felt the ice fire around her heart easing a tiny bit.

Dawn relented slightly. "OK, I get it. But if we don't believe Faith can change, then we're being hypocrites because she looks like a shoplifter compared to Angel. Buffy, you went out that Christmas to tell Angel that, remember? When he believed that all of the awful things he did as Angelus just couldn't be overcome, no matter how hard he tried--you were there to talk him out of it. So do we have to have some freak meteorological event to at least give Faith a chance? Maybe a localized torrential down pouring of hamsters?" She looked from Buffy to Willow. "Maybe it's Faith's turn. Maybe it's her turn to have someone forgive her and invite her in."

She's right. She's absolutely right. I said some of the same things to Tara last night. So why am I so miserable about this?

Willow started abruptly. Did she actually want Faith to fail the test? Was she willing to have them lose a valuable ally because she--what? Wanted to be proven right? Couldn't let go of her anger and her insecurity?

She looked up to see Tara gazing at her curiously, brows arched in silent question.

Willow attempted a smile. "Hey, we're all kinda fried," she said, her voice sounding hollow to her ears. "It's been a rough night. We, uh...we should all get some sleep and come at this fresh in the morning."

"Sounds good to me," Tara nodded, rubbing her back. "Let's take a break."

Standing, Willow looked down at the teenager, who was gazing back at her, her expression troubled. "I'm sorry, Dawnie--I know I'm a little wonky where Faith's concerned." Nice understatement, Rosenberg.

As they made their way upstairs, she heard Buffy asking curiously, "You know, we never really talked about graduation. What exactly do you remember?"

"Mostly I remember Mom saying, 'Oh my God--she burned this one down, too!'"

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As they undressed, Willow could feel Tara's eyes on her. Finally she sighed and dropped onto their bed--this bed where they had had so many conversations over the last two years; made such wonderful love, and so often. Now she felt lost, drifting.

"I'm sorry," she muttered morosely. What exactly am I sorry for?

"Willow, what's wrong? Is there something else, something besides what we talked about last night?" Tara's voice held no judgment, only invitation and warmth.

"No--I don't think so...Maybe..." She trailed off, trying to remember the last time she'd felt this miserable for no truly compelling reason.

"What is it, Sweetie? Do you know something you're not telling me?" Now there was anxiety in the voice.

"God, Baby, no," Willow assured her quickly, taking Tara's hand in her own. "I just feel all weird and worried and...and angry around Faith." She looked at Tara, knowing that her words didn't capture everything, yet unable to discern what was hiding in the shadows.

"Well, she did betray you. She betrayed all of you, and in some pretty horrible ways."

"Yeah, but everybody else--at least, everybody except Buffy--seems willing to at least consider that she's changed. I...I just look at her and want to claw her eyes out." Willow's head sagged. Suddenly she felt almost unutterably exhausted.

"I thought you'd want her to pass the test. It means we have another person on our side...a Slayer, no less. Isn't that a good thing?"

Her anger flared anew. "Didn't you hear what Buffy said? I'm not the only one who wants to play it safe."

"Safe, yes. Paranoid--not really." She could hear frustration crackling in Tara's voice, but her own resentment overtook her.

"Paranoid? You think I'm being paranoid? What happened to 'She did betray you' and 'She held a knife to Willow's throat, Dawn'? I thought you understood." She could feel her anger pouring off of her in waves.

"Willow, calm down. You'll wake Kyra." Tara's eyes were flashing now. "OK, I'm sorry I said 'paranoid.' That was wrong, but--"

"You mean, 'wrong' as in you're incorrect, or 'wrong' as in it wasn't very nice?" Willow was standing now, trying to keep her voice low.

"Both, dammit. But even you admitted that you're taking this a little too far, and you don't know why. I just want to figure it out." Tara shook her head in frustration. "I've never seen you like

this, Willow--telling Dawn she wasn't really there; maybe even hoping Faith would fail Dawn's test..." Here Tara's voice trailed off, as if wanting Willow to give her the answer to that uncertainty.

"Of course I wanna be able to trust her," Willow argued. Really? You'd really be happy to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Faith was sincere? "I'm just a little more cautious than you and Dawn, apparently. And yes," she added, raising her hand, "I admit I'm a little touchy on the subject. But can you at least try to understand why I'm touchy?"

Tara shrugged helplessly. "I'm trying to understand, Will. That's what this whole conversation's about. But it seems like you don't even know for sure."

Willow sat back down, her shoulders slumping. "You're right," she said, and her voice was barely a whisper. "I don't know for sure, and I'm sorry. I'm...Tara, I'm just so tired." She felt as if she could barely keep her head steady; the exhaustion was rolling over her like warm, heavy sand.

Tara gazed at her for a long moment, and finally leaned over to shut off the light. In the darkness, she reached out for Willow and pulled her close.

"We'll figure it out, Will. We'll figure out what Faith's up to and we'll figure out if there's anything extra going on for you. OK?" And she pressed a kiss to Willow's forehead.

So now I'm something to figure out, too? But she only nodded, and whispered, "I love you, Baby. That's the one thing I'll always know." And then she dropped into a sleep so profound that she wondered dimly if she had been drugged.

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The next morning, Tara left for classes while Willow stayed home with Kyra. She tried to focus on the web page she was creating for the used bookstore that had just opened; she tried to find comfort in all of Kyra's infinitely wondrous moods and movements. But she was restless. At one point Willow tried to read to her, but Kyra just wanted to play with her Slayer doll.

"Great. Go for the action. Maybe Faith'll come over and teach you some moves." Kyra looked up at her with quizzical, slightly wounded eyes, and Willow felt hot waves of self-recrimination wash over her. "Oh goddess, sweetie--could Mama be any more of a freak?" Kyra just tilted her head, as if giving the question serious consideration.

Dawn came home from school shortly after 3:00, by which time Willow was thoroughly rankled and sick of it. She didn't want to feel this way. She knew--or at least, some part of her knew--that she was holding onto her distrust and resentment more than the situation warranted. And yet every time she thought about letting go of the anger and even considering the possibility of Faith's good intentions, some surge of fear and defensiveness shot through her.

Not yet. Maybe in a few days, but not yet. I just wanna be sure...

"Whatcha doin'?" Dawn asked cheerfully, heading into the kitchen. "Teaching the the next President how to hack?"

"Trying to improve her relationship with strained peas," Willow replied grumpily. Kyra looked up from her high chair, jaw set defiantly against the attack from Planet Gerber.

Please don't let Dawn start in about Faith--

"So I was thinking about Faith."

Thus ends my experimentation with prayer.

"I know you feel all weird about her being here, and I know she held you hostage. I understand why you don't trust her," Dawn continued, seemingly unaware of Willow's tension.

"But..." Willow forced herself to meet Dawn's gaze with a smile.

"But I was thinking about when she met Kyra for the first time," Dawn replied, sitting down next to Willow with a glass of orange juice and some fig Newtons. "Remember how Kyra reached for her?"

No, Dawn...I'd completely forgotten about my daughter reaching for the woman who wanted to kill me. "I remember."

"Well, maybe it means something." Dawn leaned forward, her eyes bright. "Maybe Kyra has some kind of--I don't know--sixth sense about people. I mean, remember how she took down that jerk who was hassling you and Tara? She knew he was giving you a hard time; she picked up on his energy..."

"Dawn, I think you're making a lot of assumptions about what exactly was going on in Kyra's head," Willow protested. Her own head was beginning to throb.

"Will, c'mon...You have to admit something funky happened there. The guy starts giving you a hard time; next think you know, Kyra's pointing at him and he's down. Coincidence? I think not--and neither do you."

"Right, OK--but that doesn't mean Kyra's some kind of psychic, or that she can read people's souls," Willow said, shaking her head. "Dawn, I get that you want to trust Faith and yes, it's great that she said what she did last night. But I'm not gonna start using my daughter as some kind of litmus test, alright?"

"I'm not talking about waving her around like a Star Trek tricorder," Dawn argued. "I'm just saying, I think it means something that Kyra seems to be taking to Faith. Even last night, she was grinning and everything."



"Well sometimes she cries when I'm with her, Dawn. Does that mean I'm a bad person? Kyra's trying to communicate some deep-seated, mystical knowledge of my essential nature?"

Dawn looked at her, taken aback. "Of course not. All babies cry; I know that. I'm just saying--"

Willow pushed her chair back roughly. "Dawn, I know you're just trying to help, but I'm tired of talking about Faith. Actually, I am sick unto the seventh realm of hell of talking about Faith." She reached down and hastily undid Kyra's bib, then pulled her out of her high chair. "I'm going to take my daughter out in her stroller and we're going to play in the park. And if anybody sketchy comes toward us, I'll just shove Kyra in their face and see if she starts beeping." Five minutes later, she was out the door, Dawn's anxious apologies fading behind her.

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When she returned, a little over an hour later, she had calmed down...a bit. She walked in to find Dawn nowhere in sight.

Must be upstairs in her room. She thought about going up and apologizing, but her head was still throbbing and all she really wanted was to take a nap. Tara would be home in half an hour; maybe she'd be willing to take over for even an hour; just so she could get a little sleep. Then she'd feel like herself.

I'm just tired. The suicides; Faith...I just need some rest.

When Tara arrived, she gazed at Willow in concern. "Sweetie, you look wiped out. Are you OK?"

Willow nodded, but the exhaustion was almost unbearable now. Really, if she could just get a nap...

"Yeah, I'm totally zonked. I thought I slept alright last night but maybe not..." She managed a weak grin, hoping she looked passably endearing. "So, I know that this is usually your day to do your work while I take care of Kyra, but--"

Tara stroked her face, her eyes anxious. "Honey, go upstairs. Get some sleep. I'm in good shape with my paper and I don't have any tests this week. You rest, OK? I'll take care of Kyra."

Willow sank into the arms that were wrapping around her. So warm...I could fall asleep right here... She pulled back just enough to kiss Tara on her cheek, then rested against her shoulder.

"Thanks, Baby. I think a nap'll take care of me..."

Just then Buffy came through the door. "OK, don't kill me..."

Willow and Tara stared at her. "We promise, no homicide," Tara said charitably. "But what exactly did you do?"

Buffy tossed her bag onto the table, then sank into the couch. "Well, I was working this afternoon and poor Giles looked like his favorite tea cozy had been used to mop up beer."

"What happened?" Dawn asked, heading down the stairs. She didn't meet Willow's eyes.

"Apparently his favorite tea cozy had been used to mop up beer," Buffy replied, shaking her head.

"Faith?" Tara asked, and the pounding in Willow's head increased.

"Faith. She said it was just laying there on the counter; she thought it was some kind of fancy British dishrag." Willow heard Dawn's laughter behind her. "Anyway," Buffy continued, "Giles was going on and on about how if this kept up he wouldn't need any evil force to convince him to kill himself."

"And now we reach the point about us not killing you," Willow interjected, trying to keep her voice light even though she knew what she was about to hear.

"So, I invited them over for a video and some take-out later," Buffy concluded, looking apologetically from one of them to the other. "Xander and Anya are gonna do a light patrol; mostly recon," she went on. "But I can stay home tonight and maybe it'll be good for them to have a little buffer..." She trailed off.

"A Buffy buffer," Dawn noted. "Does this mean you're easing up a little on the Faith factor?" Again she avoided Willow's eyes.

"I thought about what you said," Buffy acknowledged, at which point Dawn pretended to slump over in a faint. "No need for the theatrics, please. I just figured it wouldn't hurt to chill out a little and watch a movie; you know, nothing of the 'all fraught with huge import'-y variety." She glanced over at Willow. "Will--you OK with that? I know you and I have been the two biggest holdouts so far. I mean, I'm not suggesting a group hug or anything..." She looked at Willow, uncertainty in her eyes.

Willow forced herself to speak evenly. "I think it sounds like a good idea--even if it's just to make sure Giles doesn't go 'round the bend. I'm fine--although I could fall asleep standing here, which would be absolutely no commentary on how interesting I find you." Her laugh seemed to come from far away. "Tara, Baby--you sure it's OK for me to take a nap?"

Tara was looking at her with concern. "Of course. C'mon--Kyra and I will tuck you in."

Upstairs, Tara leaned over and kissed her forehead. "That was a very gracious thing you just did, Sweetie."

Willow could barely manage a nod. "That's me...Gracie McGracious." Tara chuckled, that low throaty sound she adored.

"Love you, Will," she murmured softly, and stroked her cheek.

"Love you too..." A little nap. A little nap and I'll be fine...I'll charm Faith's pants off...

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She woke up with a start, her heart pounding.

Was I dreaming? What about?

A glance at the luminous face of her watch told her that it was 8:17. Straining, she could hear muted laughter downstairs.

Why didn't Tara wake me up? She stood groggily. Her headache had abated slightly, but she felt disoriented. Afternoon naps had always done that to her, unless they involved making love with Tara and then falling asleep afterward. On those occasions, she woke knowing exactly where she was, and how much she belonged there.

She rubbed her eyes. I'll just brush my teeth and get my bearings a little bit. Instead of going into the bathroom, though, she found herself walking to their bedroom door. She hesitated just a moment, then eased it open quietly, not really sure why she was being stealthy.

She padded down the stairs, stopping halfway to peer down into the living room. But no one was there.

Where were the voices coming from?

Taking a few more steps, she first recognized Tara's soft voice coming from the kitchen, just on the other side of the wall from her.

"...together for almost four years now."

There was a pause, and then a low, husky voice asked, "And it's working? I mean, you never get...itchy?"

"No." Tara's answer was swift (too swift?) and certain. "We're good." Willow tried to breathe; it felt as if her chest were going to explode. And her headache was coming back...

"Damn, T...You're like, married." Was Faith mocking them? Mocking her?

"In all the important ways, yeah--we really are."

"And Kyra--she's both of yours?" Why was Faith asking questions about her family? And why did she, Willow, feel almost paralyzed? Why wasn't she striding into the kitchen to stand by Tara's side?

"Yes. I carried her, but we're both her parents."

There was a pause, and still Willow couldn't seem to make her legs work. Then Faith's sultry voice echoed back to her.

"So...you always like women?"

There was another pause, and then Tara replied, "I've known I was gay for a long time, yeah."

"And you're gonna make this work? Like, even when things are tough, you're gonna stick with Willow?"

Her head was pounding; it was getting harder and harder to hear them. She could feel her reality tilting and reeling; she tried to get her bearings, but everything seemed so far away and hazy. Tara--Tara seemed farthest away of all.

Tara must have answered, because Faith asked, "And it's good? I mean, it's good...with a woman?"

She had to move--she had to get to the kitchen. Everyone else was gone, and Tara and Faith were standing in the kitchen and Faith was asking about being with women...

The pounding was almost unbearable; she could barely keep her balance. She reached the bottom stair and heard Tara say:

"You won't know till you try."

And then Willow had rounded the corner and she was standing in the doorway of the kitchen and she watched as Faith reached out her hand and stroked Tara's cheek...And then she tangled her fingers in Tara's long, silky hair, pulling her close.

"Show me," she whispered, eyes burning, and pulled Tara to her.

Willow died as Tara groaned with the urgency of that kiss.

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Willow stared for one second at her beloved--kissing Faith, running her hands up the muscular back. And then she gave a strangled cry and turned to run back up the steps.

"Willow? Willow, come back!" Tara's voice, calling after her. As if she still loved her.

Of course. Of course it had happened. Hadn't she known it? Even through all her trust; even through all of Tara's words...Hadh't she known Faith would come and take her? Because she wanted to, and because she could.

She barely registered Tara starting up the stairs after her.

Because she was Faith. She was strong and sexy and confident and she wore clothes that showed off her muscles and her curves...She didn't hide behind silly t-shirts and fluffy sweaters. She was the Slayer--dark and sensual and fierce. She wasn't some computer geek who dabbled in magicks.

"Will, wait! Talk to me!"

You told me you wouldn't let anything happen to me. You told me you'd protect me.

She slammed the door to their room, locking it behind her.

Her mind was finally clearing. She could see now; things finally made sense. The pounding headache had disappeared.

Faith was here. Angel had sent her because he knew she was supposed to be here--in their lives; in Willow's home. It was Faith's turn--hadn't Dawn said so? Tara could offer forgiveness; Tara could invite her in.

Willow...Willow was no longer needed. She had served her purpose; her time was over. She had loved Tara enough to make her her mate, but that wasn't where Tara belonged--not ultimately; not when it really mattered.

Tara would go to Faith. She would offer Faith redemption and she would give her that incredible warmth; the warmth that made it seem as if you would never be lonely or scared or ashamed ever again.

Tara was banging on their door now, rattling the knob futilely. "Willow, Baby, you have to let me in. You have to talk to me."

Why would she call me 'Baby'? She doesn't need to pretend anymore.

She grabbed their bathrobes off the back of the bathroom door. Tara's--silk, a deep lavender; a color that made her eyes almost too blue to bear--had her lingering scent of sandalwood soap. But it was too delicate. Her own bathrobe was a green one--basic terrycloth: nothing sexy; nothing enticing. It would serve the purpose. She yanked the tie out of its loops.

I don't belong here anymore. There's no reason for me to be here.

She walked to their closet and began rifling through her clothes. Her long braided rope belt was dangling from her brown corduroys.

"Dammit, Red--what's going on in there? Open the freakin' door!"

Why would Faith try to intervene? Tara was her redemption; Tara would take her in and love her and heal her wounds...

She tied the robe sash tightly onto the belt, tugging them absently as she considered the height she would be using. The balcony off of their room...The wrought-iron railing...She felt sure the length of her "rope" was sufficient. She didn't want to strangle to death; they could get to her before she died and then she'd have to do something else. Why were they even trying to stop her?

"Willow, you're scaring me! Please--are you OK? Willow, open the door!"

They were going to wake Kyra if they weren't careful.

Kyra...Hadh't her daughter reached out for Faith? Dawn was right--Kyra saw something Willow couldn't. She saw that she belonged with Faith; that Faith would take Willow's place and she and Tara would raise her.

Kyra saw it. Why hadn't she?

She walked out onto the balcony. Bending over, she tied one end tightly around the base of the railing.

"Willow, I'm gonna bust this door down if you don't open up."

She really should hurry. Faith was so strong...

She fashioned the other end into a slip-knot and draped it around her neck, tightening it securely. Behind her, she heard Faith slamming into the door.

I love you Tara...

Another crash, and the door began to splinter.

And I love you, Kyra...

She threw one leg over the railing, and then the next, standing for one moment clutching the railing behind her.

One more crash, and they were in the room.

I will always love you...

She stepped out into nothingness, barely hearing Tara's scream behind her.

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The wrenching grip came not to her neck but her wrist, as Faith grabbed her, cursing. "Jesus Christ, Willow, what the fuck..." She was straining against the railing, holding onto Willow's left arm with both her hands.

"Willow...Oh God..." Tara's voice was coming in broken sobs.

Willow was only dimly aware of being pulled up and back over the railing. She didn't fight; she had no fight left in her. Faith yanked the belt from over her head and steered her back into the room she shared with Tara.

Tara embraced her fiercely; she could feel the beloved heart pounding through the thin shirt, thrumming against her own. You said you loved me. And then Tara pulled back slightly, taking her face in her hands.

"Willow, can you hear me? Baby, talk to me, please..."

Willow gave the barest nod, and then said, "It's OK, Baby. This is how it's supposed to be."

And then the tears started--sobs so fierce and so wrenching she could barely breathe.

"OK...It's OK..." Tara's voice sounded so far away, even as she was leading Willow to the bed and easing her down, kneeling before her and taking her hands.

"Jesus, T, what the hell--"

"I don't know. I have no idea except that Willow was--oh, god...I almost lost her." Tara dropped her head into Willow's lap for a moment, and then rose to move next to her on the bed.

This was our bed... The sobs were abating slightly. Now she was edging toward numbness--not the cold clarity of moments before, but a deadening, something to give even a moment's reprieve from the agony that awaited her.

"Faith, go downstairs; the others will be back soon. Tell them--tell them what happened. But no one is to come up here, do you understand me? I need to talk to Willow alone, and I don't want everybody up here firing questions at her, OK?"

"You got it." And then Faith was out the door, pulling it shut and resting it on its broken hinges.

Tara looked at her, pain and confusion etched across every line and shadow of her beautiful face. "Willow, honey...Can you talk?"

Willow stared at her, misery choking the breath out of her. "I saw you," she whispered. "I saw you with Faith."

Tara's eyes held only confusion. "Well--right. We were talking in the kitchen."

"Nobody else was here." Still she whispered.

"That's because Buffy and Dawn left to pick up dinner, and Giles remembered he'd left his wallet at the Magic Shop. He went back to get it. They'll all be back any minute. Willow, I don't understand..."

"And you didn't wake me up," she mumbled, unable to look at her beloved.

"Sweetie, I was worried about you. I came up here, twice. But each time you were sleeping so soundly; you didn't even move when I spoke to you. I wanted to let you sleep."

"So I went downstairs and I listened on the steps and I heard Faith ask you about being with a woman and...and you said she'd have to try it and then I walked in and she kissed you." Willow bent over with the image, her stomach roiling. "And you kissed her back, Tara." She could barely say the words.

Tara recoiled sharply, then took Willow's face in her hands. "Willow, look at me. Look at me!" Willow jerked with the urgency of Tara's voice, and forced herself to look into the blue eyes. "I don't know what's going on here, but that never happened. Willow, Faith never kissed me! And I certainly never kissed her!"

Why would she lie? I saw her...

"Willow, I think whatever attacked those other people attacked you. Somehow it found you and chose you and made you see something that never happened."

"I heard you, Tara--I heard you talking to Faith."

"Yes--we were talking. She was asking me what it was like to be in a committed relationship and how I knew this was right for me; how I decided to do it."

"She was saying you were bored with me. She said you must get itchy. I heard her." Anger was stealing over her. Hadn't she given Tara everything? And now Tara would lie to her; act like she was crazy?

"My love, we will figure this out, but something has been torturing you; eating into you. Yes, Faith and I were talking about committed relationships, and what makes them worth the risks and the work. We talked about how you stick with it in the tough times. And yes, she was asking how I knew I was a lesbian. But Willow, there was no kissing. None; nothing. Willow, you have to listen to me: I have kissed exactly one woman in the last five years and that woman has been you. I will kiss exactly one woman for the next fifty years, and that woman will be you. Think, Baby--come back to me, please..." Tara's voice was equal parts desperation and determination.

Willow felt her anger receding as quickly as it had flared. Terror took its place. She was whipsawed by the emotions ripping through her. She looked into Tara's eyes, wanting to believe



her more than she had ever wanted anything...But she had seen them...She had seen Tara kissing Faith.

Or had she?

She remembered the pounding in her head; the way everything seemed to tilt and spin, how hard it had been to breathe...Everything had seemed far away, even the railing to the stairway. Had she imagined it? Oh goddess...please say I imagined it...

"Tara...Baby...What's happening to me?" She collapsed into Tara's arms, feeling the fierce kisses on her hair.

"Willow, my love...Oh, my love...This thing almost took you..." Willow heard the strangled sob in her beloved's throat and felt her heart begin to beat again for the first time that night. "I swear, we will find this thing and we will stop it."

But that conversation...

She pulled back, searching Tara's eyes desperately. "But what I heard--what I really did hear, Tara...Why would Faith be asking you those things if...if she didn't want to take you away from me?"

Tara managed a tiny, almost hysterical smile through her tears, leaning forward to kiss Willow's hair, her cheek, her lips. "Oh, Sweetie...Faith was just telling me, in her very indirect way, what I already knew." That crooked smile, those eyes filled with relief and fury and oh, so very much love...

"Willow, Faith's totally in love with Buffy."

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Willow felt...

Oh God...what did she feel?

Sick? Disoriented? Embarrassed?

It didn't happen. It didn't happen. It didn't happen.

For a few moments, that was all she could think of, cradled in Tara's arms and breathing in the clear, rich scent that was Tara's alone.

Tara wasn't kissing Faith. She's not leaving me. It was that...thing... Tara's not leaving me. Throughout, Tara was silent, stroking her back and gently kissing her hair.

Finally she felt calm enough to pull back and look at Tara, whose pale face was drawn with the vestiges of absolute terror.

"Tara, Baby...I'm so sorry--" she began.

"No. No apologies." Tara's hands trembled against her cheeks. "None. Something took you and played on your worst fears."

"Fear, singular." Willow's voice sounded tiny in her own ears. "My worst fear: that I would lose you."

"Willow, is it gone? I mean, do you still believe that..." She trailed off, eyes darkening painfully.

Willow gave what she knew only the most generous of judges would call a laugh. "You mean, do I still believe that you were kissing Faith in our kitchen? Really not."

"Are you sure? Because sweetie, if this thing is still working on you, I wanna know. If there's any part of you that believes something's going on between Faith and me, please tell me so I can--"

"No. I promise, no." Willow shook her head disbelievingly. "But Tara, it was so real. I mean, I saw you--" She took a shuddering breath, feeling nauseous at the memory of something that she knew now had never happened.

"But you know it was a hallucination, right?" Tara asked, biting her lip with worry.

"I know." Willow sighed, and then looked at Tara grimly. "But Baby, I was feeling insecure before that. From the moment Faith got here, I felt funny."

"Yes, but you two have a history--"

"Right," Willow went on, determined share the scary parts. "A history that would suggest a certain level of caution. But Tara, I went drove past the town of Caution about twenty-four hours ago, and it only got worse the more Faith proved herself. I was upset that she didn't jump on Dawn's big revelation; I mean, she couldn't have been much more convincing. And I was upset. Here we have some proof that someone really powerful is on our side, and I'm furious. "

Tara just looked at her helplessly for a few minutes, then asked, "When did it get really bad? I mean, was there a particular point when it felt like--I don't know--you were crossing into some other territory?"

Willow pondered for a moment, then said slowly, "I don't really know. I mean, I didn't really let myself be honest with myself about what Faith did, coming through with Dawn, or maybe I'd have a better sense of it. I was upset on our walk home, and then of course I made things ever-so-much better by basically negating Dawn's existence." She felt a stab of remorse, remembering the teenager's face. "I woke up this morning feeling all irritable; I know I was impatient with

Kyra. Like, I got upset when she wanted to play with her Slayer doll instead of read." She was embarrassed to admit it, but Tara had a right to know. "And I was so tired..." She looked up suddenly. "Tara, I definitely noticed that. I mean, I usually have energy to spare--as you've often told me at one in the morning--but last night, and today...God, it was like I was dead on my feet. Oh, and the headaches! I had one last night, but I thought it was just tension. This afternoon it was throbbing. When I woke up tonight, it had eased up a little bit but as soon as I heard you and Faith in the kitchen..." Here she stopped, flushing with pain and embarrassment.

Tara kissed her gently, reassuringly. "It's OK, Willow. If we switched places, and I saw you kissing someone else...Oh Sweetie, you'd be talking me off the ledge right now."

Willow gave a tiny smile. "Yeah...It pretty much made the Hellmouth and vampires and the giant lizard ripping out of the mayor's head all seem like drawings in a Highlights magazine." She stopped suddenly, remembering. "But Tara, there wasn't any talking. I mean, I heard you, but there was absolutely no way that anything you said could have made a difference. When I was on the steps, Baby, my head was pounding and my vision seemed all wonky and I couldn't breathe, and after I saw...after I saw what I didn't see...for a moment, I just died. But then I got totally calm. By the time I was up here, with the door locked, I was on automatic pilot. I mean, I was thinking, but what I was thinking was that this was the right thing to do. It was the only thing to do. Faith was better than me; she wanted you and she took you; you were supposed to be with her. You were gonna offer her the whole forgiveness thing that Dawn was talking about. And I remembered Kyra reaching for her and that just seemed like one more piece of evidence that I was supposed to...to just go. My time was over; I was being replaced."

She said all of this in a remarkably calm voice, but tears were winding down Tara's face. "Willow...I don't know that I've hated anything before, but I hate this thing. To make you think that; to make you believe that I should raise our daughter with someone else..." She shook her head helplessly.

As she'd spoken, though, Willow had felt her strength returning. It was as if she were finally shaking off the remnants of a horrible dream, and it felt good to have some perspective on what had happened. Yes, she was insecure about some parts of her life, but there was also some other force that had pushed her to the level she'd reached. Now it was out in the open, and it was becoming--at least, for the most part--a puzzle to be solved. She stood up abruptly. "Tara, we need to tell the others. We need to tell them what happened."

Tara hesitated, then said, "Willow, sweetie, I don't know if you remember, but after Faith--after she got you in here, I told her to go down and tell the others. I thought we had to tell them something, but I didn't want them coming up here and--"

"Baby, it's alright. I mean, I'm pretty much mortified beyond belief, but now we have some pretty important information. This can help."

Tara looked up at her, tears hanging unshed against her lashes. "But the price...The price was so high. Almost more than we could pay."

Willow smiled at her gently. She felt suddenly galvanized. Dodging a bullet will do that for a person... "I know...But it didn't happen. Yeah, it was one of my closer calls and definitely my most miserable one, but I made it. And we need to tell the others about it."

Still Tara hesitated. "Willow...What do you want to tell them about what...provoked you?"

OK, that's a buzz-kill...

"Oh...you mean, thinking that Faith was out to steal my partner and that I would have sworn I saw you kissing in the kitchen?" she asked weakly.

Tara nodded apologetically. "I mean, I'm no more excited than you are to give the details, but I'm not sure how we go half-way with this." She looked at Willow searchingly.

Willow sat back down. Her headlong flight back to mental health had been tackled behind the line of scrimmage, but even as she groaned inwardly, thinking about the discussion about to follow, she knew there was no other way.

"Tara, I think we gotta be honest. I mean, it's not like there's an actual infidelity we need to discuss--this is all about our fears. This is about me telling my closest friends that I feel really insecure about Faith and that I guess I always have and apparently I'm not as together as I want them to think because I just hallucinated a scene of utter betrayal and humiliation, to the point that I tied a bathrobe sash and a belt together and stepped off a balcony." She needed no mirror to tell her that her smile was a hollow one. "Piece of cake."

Her attempt at humor, though, ended as she watched Tara bend over slowly and put her face in her hands.

"Tara...Hey, Baby, it's OK. It didn't happen, alright? I mean, that's what I kept telling myself a few minutes ago."

Tara nodded silently, then took Willow's hand. "You're right. We need to talk to the others. I'll...I'll follow your lead. And remember: no matter how...exposed you may feel down there, it's nothing compared to what almost happened. OK? That nightmare is over, and we beat it. We didn't lose you."

Willow leaned forward and kissed Tara--to offer her strength; to draw strength from her. Then she stood and headed for the door.

She paused with her hand on the knob and looked back at Tara. "Faith's really in love with Buffy?"

Tara gave a tired laugh. "I don't think she knew how obvious she was being...I think she's only just now starting to get it herself."

Willow shook her head. "Knowing Faith, I'd expect her to just walk up to Buffy and plant one on her."

But Tara just smiled. "Maybe she would if it were just about lust. Not this. Faith may take on demons without batting an eye, but love--love scares her death."

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Descending the stairs, Willow was reminded of the wonderful scene from "Benny and Joon," where Mary Stuart Masterson comes down to breakfast one morning and knows from Johnny Depp's expression that her brother has told him about her schizophrenia. She gives a brittle smile and asks, "Having a Boo Radley moment, are we?"

The eyes that looked up at her were a mosaic of fear, guilt, confusion, and uncertainty.

"Well," she said brightly, "what's new with you guys?" When no one laughed, she gave a small sigh and continued down the steps. She had expected a barrage of questions, but apparently Faith had put the fear of...well, Faith in them, because no one started in.

That, plus they probably have no idea what to say. I know I wouldn't.

After a moment, Buffy came up to her. She gazed at her wordlessly for a moment, and then grabbed Willow tightly and pulled her close. "This thing is toast," she whispered fiercely into her ear. She gave one final squeeze, and then stepped back.

Willow drew a deep breath. "So...So you know I tried to kill myself?" I can't believe I'm saying these words...

Giles stepped toward her, his face drawn and anxious. "And we're assuming--well, we're hoping, I suppose, that you were under the influence of whatever has been preying on the others."

Willow gave him a tiny smile. "It's true. This was definitely mystical in nature." She could almost feel the collective relief in the room.

They'd rather deal with a hell god than actual, profound depression. The first one's easier to vanquish. And too, she realized, each of them would blame themselves even more if it turned out that Willow had been battling something that horrific and they'd never noticed.

"But guys, don't fool yourselves," she continued. "This thing doesn't put an ad in the paper. It figures out what your weak spot is and it nails it...Crawls inside and takes over and you don't even realize what's happening until it's too late."

"What do you mean?" Dawn asked, her brow furrowed.

I thought you might ask that... She drew a deep breath and looked at Tara, who was standing beside her holding her hand. Her beloved gave her a gentle smile, her eyes steady, and soft with love.

"I...I, uh..." Just say it. "I was feeling uncomfortable with Faith from the moment she arrived. I was suspicious, and angry, and even though I didn't realize it at the time--I was threatened." She made herself look at Faith, who gazed back steadily, her expression unreadable.

"Listen, Willow, I know you've been through a lot with Faith," Dawn began.

"It wasn't about that; at least, it wasn't just about that. I told myself that's what it was, but by earlier today I should have known it was more. Faith was proving herself, which should have been a relief to me. And instead it just made me resentful. I couldn't figure it out. Then this afternoon, I was just whipped; like, wiped out way beyond ordinary fatigue. When I woke up, I felt all disoriented, and the headache that I'd had earlier? It had eased up a little but then it started in again almost right away. Anyway, for some reason I decided to sneak down the stairs. Why wouldn't I just come bopping down and say hi? Why the cloak and dagger? Then I hear Tara and Faith talking in the kitchen, and I start feeling really weird...It was like I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't speak, and I couldn't move."

Looking at the others, she could tell they were beginning to pick up the exact nature of the vulnerability she'd spoken of. Buffy asked, in a strange, tight voice, "What were they talking about?"

Willow hesitated, not daring to look at Faith. She hadn't thought about this part. The others might wonder why Faith was talking to Tara about being gay. Faith herself would probably not enjoy getting into the specifics.

"Just general stuff," she finally said. "You know--life on the Hellmouth; some of the big bads we've faced." She felt the reassuring squeeze of Tara's hand in hers. "The thing is, I felt completely threatened. When I could finally move, I walked into the kitchen and..." Here comes the big finale... "I saw Faith kissing Tara."

She raised a hand to forestall the howling. "Only, it didn't really happen. It absolutely didn't happen. But I saw it. And I headed back upstairs and by the time I'd reached my room I was totally calm."

Looking around, she could see what a delicate situation they were in. With anyone else, people might well wonder if there actually had been something going on. But one of the things that they all knew, they all believed without a moment's questioning, was that Tara loved her and would quite simply never do that. It was, she realized, a function of their unique lives that they could more easily envision a demon or some other malevolent force causing her to hallucinate than they could Tara being unfaithful.

She glanced at Faith, who looked so profoundly uncomfortable that Willow actually felt sorry for her. She drew a deep breath and finished. "So I came upstairs, locked the door, made a rope, tied it around the base of the railing and then my neck, climbed over the railing, and jumped."

Buffy, she realized, had clenched her fists, even as her eyes glittered with unshed tears. Dawn looked horrorstruck. Giles muttered an almost inaudible "My God." And Faith just looked at the floor.

"Faith and Tara were yelling, trying to come in but nothing they said registered to me. Finally Faith broke the door down; she reached me just as I jumped. She grabbed me by the wrist, and hauled me back up over the railing." Here she stopped, and turned to look squarely at Faith. "She saved my life, you guys. She was quick enough to get to me, and strong enough to hold on." She took a hesitant step toward the Dark Slayer, and reached out a tentative hand. "Thank you," she whispered. "And I'm sorry."

Faith stared back at her for a moment before taking her hand and giving it a casual shake. "Yeah, well, we won't be doing any hugs will we? 'cause I need some prep time if we will."

This time Willow could actually let herself smile at Faith's nonchalance and bravado. They were her protection as surely as brains and babbling were hers.

She heard Tara coming up behind her, resting her hand on her back even as she said, "She's right, Faith-if you hadn't been here, we'd have lost her."

"Or maybe nothing would have happened in the first place," Faith said with a small shrug that didn't quite convey the indifference she was trying to effect.

"I don't believe that," Willow replied promptly. "I think if it hadn't been you, it would have been something else; some other insecurity of mine. You were just a handy tool."

"I'm a tool?" Faith asked, indignation radiating off of her. "OK, now I'm really pissed."

There was a long silence before Giles murmured, "Willow, I don't know what to say. I--I'm so sorry you went through this."

"Me too," she replied matter-of-factly. "But the good thing is, now we know something about it. We have at least a little idea of how it works."

Giles looked at her, nodding slowly. "You're right," he mused thoughtfully. "Of course, I wouldn't have had you go through this for anything, but the fact does remain that you are, at least to our knowledge, the only person who has survived this."

"I know," Willow nodded. "Maybe we can start figuring this thing out, now that we know something about it."

"I agree," Giles said. "If you're up to it, Willow, perhaps we could discuss what seem to be the essential elements...?"

"Definitely. I'm all about the essential elements." She gave him a grin, glad to start in on the puzzle and move away from the disturbing "One of us almost killed herself" talk.

"Yes, but first, if I may..." So saying, he stepped over to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "I can't imagine how any of us would have gone on had we lost you," he murmured, and then hugged her gently.

"Thank you," she managed to whisper around the lump that had risen in her throat. Guess we're not quite done with that "almost killed myself" talk.

Stepping back, she was suddenly engulfed in a fierce embrace that barreled in from her left. "I should have known," Dawn said, her voice thick with self-recrimination. Willow hugged her back for a moment, then turned to the others.

"No," she said emphatically. "First of all, no 'I should've seen it's.' You guys did notice something was off, and you asked me about it. But this thing started picking up steam earlier today, and then the exhaustion hit. I didn't enter State 4 Loopiness until I woke up."

She gave the others a recap of what she had just told Tara.

"And you say you felt disoriented?" Giles asked slowly.

"At the end. I mean, I figured it was just post-nap syndrome; you know, your clock's all wrong?" The others nodded. "But then I found myself heading toward the door and down the stairs--even though I had fully intended to throw some water on my face and brush my teeth."

"So even though Faith and Tara weren't talking about anything funky, you--you saw something?" Buffy was glancing from Willow to Faith. Willow suspected that had it been anyone else but Tara, her best friend would have fully believed there had been kissage. As it was, she knew that Buffy believed her.

"Right." Although there had been some funky talk. Faith had been asking how Tara knew she was gay and if Tara were right--and her girlfriend was the most astute observer of the emotional world that Willow had ever known--then the object of her affections had been not Tara but Buffy herself.

"So we know this thing can tweak at least one of your senses," Dawn picked up the thread. "It starts out messing with your thoughts, but at least with you, Willow, it actually affected your physical perception."

"Oh, yeah," Willow nodded, still bruised by the image. "And guys, once it gets you, you're gone. I mean, the entire episode after I woke up lasted maybe ten minutes. By the time I got to my room I was beyond any kind of discussion. It's not like I was in this avalanche of despair; I just



knew to my bones that this was the right thing to do. It wasn't just about thinking I had lost Tara--I mean, I assumed I had. And I didn't want to live in that world. But it's like I also completely believed that Faith was supposed to take my place. I just needed to get out of the way. I was perfectly calm by the time I got to our room."

A heavy silence draped over the room; none of them seemed to trust their own voice. Finally Tara spoke. "You guys, we were feeling all comfortable and secure because we assumed that if we love the person and we're around them all the time, it won't get us. Well goddess knows I love Willow, and it got her."

Buffy turned to her, her face desperate. "So what do we do? I mean, everybody gets headaches sometimes; everybody gets tired." She looked from one person to the next, helplessness and rage radiating from her eyes. "I need something to fight."

Willow looked at her best friend. "I think the first order of business is for each of us to sit down and do some serious thinking about what our biggest fears are. I mean, it's pretty obvious that I have a few issues around being replaced; not being exciting enough." She felt Tara's hand resting protectively on her back. "If we can't each be honest about what scares us most--and I'm not talking big bads, here; I'm talking about those mean, nasty voices way deep inside--then we're screwed. Because I'm here to tell you --it knows. And it doesn't play fair."

Faith, who had remained almost totally silent for this conversation, now spoke up forcefully. "What are you talking about? Being in touch with our feelings? Man, I hate that crap."

It was a testimony to the tone of the evening that no one made a sarcastic remark about this. "Well, I don't think group therapy is in order," Willow replied, "but if you don't know your own stuff, that same stuff will bring you down in a big hurry."

Faith greeted this news with more silence. What's going on in that head of yours?

They spoke for a few more moments, and then decided to disband for the night. "I'll tell Xander tomorrow," Willow said, dreading the conversation. "He and Anya need to know about this."

As Giles and Faith walked toward the door, Faith pulled Willow back just a bit behind the Watcher. "Glad you're OK, Red," she said simply. "We need you. And Tara--I don't even wanna think about it." Then she was gone.

Several minutes later, after another hug from both Buffy and Dawn, Willow stood facing Tara in their bedroom.

The last time I walked through that door, I meant to kill myself.

Tara came over to stand in front of her, taking her hands. Her eyes looked darker than Willow had ever seen them.

"Baby?" she asked, her fatigue giving way to anxiety again.

"We need to talk about this."

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"We need to talk about this." Tara's voice was tired, but steady.

Willow herself certainly felt tired, but a little less steady than she did five minutes ago. "But--but we did talk about it, Tara. I told you about the scary vulnerable stuff, and then I went downstairs and told everybody else about the scary vulnerable stuff and I think that's just about enough of the vulnerable scariness for one night, don't you?"

Tara's eyes were gentle with love and what Willow recognized as amusement at her nonlinear speaking style. But when she spoke, she was firm. "Willow, we need to talk--you and me, in a little greater depth than we did earlier. Sweetie, at that point we were just reassuring each other about what did and didn't happen, and then we needed to tell the others. Which reminds me--I think you need to tell Xander and Anya first thing in the morning. We had a couple days' warning with you, so if it goes after anybody else, I don't think it'll get to them in the next few hours. But I'd rather not risk a longer wait."

"I agree," Willow replied, wondering what Xander and Anya would do with this information. Then her mind snapped back to Tara...Tara wanting to talk about the two of them. "So--what are you thinking about?"

Tara reached over and took her hand, kissing her palm gently. "I'm gonna check on Kyra again, OK? Let's get ready for bed, snuggle in, and get comfortable. Sound like a plan?" Willow nodded--You know this needs to happen. You can do this--and moved into the bathroom to brush her teeth.

A few minutes later Tara joined her. "Sleeping like--well, a baby...which works out pretty well, actually."

Willow looked at her and grinned around a mouthful of toothpaste. "Hey," she fumbled, "maybe it wudn a bad guy adder all." Tara looked at her quizzically. "Maybe I'm wabid." And she began spitting out huge flecks of paste. "Look--I'm foaming at the mouth!"

Tara shrank back, covering her mouth. "God help us! It's the Old Yeller demon--back from Disney to curse us all! Oh my God...No...It's got me!" She lunged forward, bypassing the brush and squirting toothpaste directly into her mouth, then slurping some water from the tap. Within seconds, she and Willow were spitting and frothing--down their shirts, on each other, randomly amongst the linens. They were howling with laughter when Buffy and Dawn burst into the room.

"What's going on? We heard weird noises and--" Buffy stopped so suddenly that Dawn crashed into her from behind. The Summers girls took in the sight before them.

Willow glanced at her partner, and then down her own shirt. "Um...Tara and I think we might be rabid." Dawn giggled behind her sister.

Buffy just stared at then, and then shook her head sadly. "Looks like you two will have to be neutered."

Dawn leaned forward and whispered, "Um, Buffy--that's not what you do with rabid dogs."

"I wasn't talking about the rabies." She looked from Willow to Tara in mock indignation. "I must say, I'm disappointed in you."

"So are we," Tara promptly replied. "Crest-fallen."

Three intelligent women groaned in unison, and then two of them turned to leave. "I told you it wasn't a scary weird noise," Buffy told Dawn accusingly.

"How many weird noises typically come out of their room?" Dawn hissed back, and Willow was grateful that she didn't hear the reply.

They gave the bathroom a cursory cleaning, brushed their teeth with no further sign of rabies, and changed into their bedclothes. Willow started to reach for her bathrobe, and then remembered her sash. Wordlessly she walked to the other side of their bed, picked up the discarded "rope," and disentangled the tie to the robe.

I would have missed it. I would have missed everything... Her life with Tara; raising Kyra; perhaps having other children...Buffy and Dawn and Xander and Giles and even Anya, she would have missed all their lives and joys and pains. For a moment the scope of the horror, so barely averted, made her heart clutch.

"The human mind is not meant to bend around so many things in one night," she said softly, her back to Tara. The room was silent, and then she felt Tara's arms sliding around her waist from behind. A small shudder passed between them--from her to Tara? from Tara to her?--and she turned and traced her finger over Tara's lips. "If Faith hadn't caught me--I would never have kissed you again."

Tara gazed at her for a long moment, and then leaned forward and kissed her--urgently, fiercely...Over and over, catching Willow's lips with her own, until she pulled back with a groan. "I would have died there with you, Willow," she said simply. "I don't care if that sounds melodramatic or clichéd--I would have died when you did."

But Willow, for all that her heart ached at the words, shook her head firmly. "No, Baby...No, because of Kyra. Remember? Whether it's the Titanic or some malignant force or cancer...if one of us dies, the other has to stay." She ran her fingers over the beloved face, and finally kissed her mate gently on the cheek. They rested there for a moment, until Willow said, "I think you said something about talking...?"

Tara nodded, and slowly stepped back away from her. She drew a deep breath, and turned and slid under the covers of their bed. Willow walked around to the other side and did likewise.

"Willow, sweetie, I just want to understand it all; how this hit you. And what it means for us, too. And--well, I'm not exactly immune to insecurity myself. I want us to know as much as possible, because there may be a time when we don't have the luxury of a good long talk in bed and I don't want us scrambling to wonder what the other's feeling." She looked at Willow anxiously. "Does that make any sense?"

Willow nodded. "Yeah...Yeah, it does. And I wanna know what scares you most, Baby. I do."

"But...?" Tara asked resting her hand on Willow's.

"But Tara, we're talking about feelings here, and I've felt a lot in my life. I mean, everybody does. People feel, they feel lots of things and I've felt some of them, too; I mean, I've felt my friends lots of times--" She stopped abruptly, taking in Tara's arched eyebrows. "Oh, not--not felt, as in felt up, or anything like that." Oh dear God, what are you trying to say? She took a moment to locate her point and began the arduous task of walking toward it. "Tara, feelings and fears are so nebulous. They change and shift, you know? Like, clearly I have issues here, but I am more confident than I used to be. And things change day by day, too. I think...I think I'm afraid that we're all gonna try to be mind-readers here, and we can't." She knew her own gaze mirrored Tara's moments earlier. "Does that make any sense?"

Tara's smile was gentle. "Yeah, it does...And let me say how glad I am that you don't make a habit of feeling your friends. But it's a good point: you guys are tight. You've been through so much in the way of adventure, but I don't know how much of the non-mystical scary stuff you talk about."

Willow considered this. "You know, Buffy and I used to. I think now we just sort of assume that we know each other."

"And you do," Tara said quickly. "But like you said, fears and insecurities change. Do you still know Buffy's? Does Buffy even know what scares her most?"

"Way back when, it was about being the reason for her parents' divorce. And I think she's always felt sort of alone; you know, being the Slayer. Like maybe she's got one role in her life and we'll get tired and move on because we can."

Tara nodded thoughtfully. "That doesn't surprise me." She squeezed Willow's hand tightly. "Sweetie, I know what you mean. You can't just pin your fears down at one point in time and press the 'Pause' button. They shift, and flow. And no matter how close two people are, no one can always know exactly what the other one's going through."

"Right," Willow said. "And sometimes, you don't know they're trouble spots when they start. Like, sometimes you get a little twitch; you feel a little anxious about something. Do you analyze every single feeling as it hits? Because sometimes they pass--they check into the Psycho-Motor Lodge, order a little take-out, and check out the next day by noon. But sometimes they stay--maybe lurking in the background a little bit. You think they're a minor character, and then suddenly the action seems to be taking place around them."

Tara grinned ruefully. "I know. It would be really nice if our Big Issues, capital 'B,' capital 'I,' announced themselves as such upon arriving."

"Wankers," Willow said resentfully.

"What I do know," Tara said after a moment, "is that Faith hit you really hard. Or maybe I should say, what she represents. Willow, can you talk about it?"

Willow sighed. This is important. It blows, yes...but it's important. "Faith...Faith hit Sunnydale like a tornado--constant movement; so much power. Everything just got caught up in her path and we all ended up landing someplace very, very different from where we started."

"Buffy didn't like her at first, did she?"

"Not really. Ironically enough, Xander and I were just in awe of her. I mean, we knew Buffy was really strong and super-cool, but in this different way, you know? Buffy was all designer fashion and bright colors and Sunnydale mall, and here was Faith: leather, dark hair, and about as far from stultifying suburban conventionality as you can imagine." She looked up to see Tara regarding her curiously. "What?"

"Willow, did you have a crush on Faith?"

Willow bit back the denials that came rushing to her lips, begging for immediate deployment into this danger zone, and made herself consider the question. "I don't know," she finally replied, and knew she did so honestly. "I mean, I certainly didn't think so at the time. I know I envied her...at first because she was so cool, and then because she and Buffy shared this Slayer thing and I felt left out. Like I had been so excited to be invited to Buffy's party but when I got there I realized my gift was some stupid toy while the new girl had what Buffy really wanted."

Tara looked at her steadily, mouth quirking slightly. "OK, you realize that that has about twenty-seven different elements to it, right?"

"Oh, yeah...But Tara, I never thought of what I felt as a crush."

"What about a crush on Buffy? You felt replaced..."

Could anyone else sit here and have a conversation like this and be so centered? "No, I really don't think so. It was jealousy of the 'Hey, that's my best friend' variety."

"I get it." Tara smiled. I know you do, Baby.

"And then she slept with Xander, and I thought I was immune to Harris-related injuries at that point but I went straight to the bathroom and cried." She looked up suddenly. "It's like Faith was everything I wanted to be and she took everyone I wanted to be with."

"But not Oz."

"No, not Oz." Funny how we can talk about him and he's just a bit-player in all of this. "I think Oz found her interesting, but I never picked up any sparkage between them. Of course," she added, almost as an afterthought, "I think if he had been the one to go to her hotel room that night, she would have hit on him. But I don't think he would have responded."

"But her knowing he was with you--that wouldn't have kept her from hitting on him?"

"Kinda doubt it..."

They were quiet for a moment, and then Tara asked, "Willow, did you actually think that Faith was interested in me? I mean, before you started down the steps?"

Ow...and ow. "I don't think I thought about it consciously..." She sighed. "But I do know that I was completely freaked when Kyra reached for her in the Magic Box. I felt very, very protective."

"Well, she's our daughter, Sweetie."

"But not just protective of her, Tara. I felt like my whole family was being threatened. Not physically--and again, this is all in retrospect--but I don't know that I really thought Faith would hurt Kyra at all. There was a part of me that didn't want our daughter to like Faith."

"It felt like a betrayal?" The voice was soft.

"God, I feel so stupid...But when Dawn was going on and on earlier about how we could trust Faith because she'd passed this test, she brought up Kyra reaching out for her. She said that Kyra must be a good judge of character, because she dropped that guy downtown. And instead of considering it, I just...I burned inside, Baby."

Tara nodded slowly. "I have to say, Will--I thought the same thing Dawn did. Especially after Faith didn't try to learn Dawn's secret. I did wonder if Kyra knew something we didn't."

"And I could see you thinking it, Tara. I knew you were thinking about it, and that just made me crazy. Except I didn't realize just what flavor of craziness it was...not until earlier tonight." She looked at Tara anxiously. "You believe me, right? I mean, I wasn't holding out on you, or suspecting you..."

"I know, Willow...I know." Tara reached up and stroked her face gently. "But Sweetie, it seems like it's not just about worrying that Faith had designs on me. I mean, at the risk of sounding flip--so what if she did?"

Willow stared at her. "What do you mean, 'so what if she did'? Tara, if Faith wanted you--"

"What? If Faith wanted me...what? She could get me? It was all over? Willow, it doesn't matter what Faith wanted; all that matters is what I want. I mean, unless she tried some kind of trick or mind control, she could feel whatever she wanted and it wouldn't make any difference." She

tilted her head down slightly so that they were gazing directly into each other's eyes. "Willow, I think you were worried that if Faith did want me, you didn't have a chance."

Willow felt herself tearing up. She's right. She remembered what Buffy had told her about Faith's philosophy: Want, take, have. And at some level she had assumed that if Faith wanted Tara, she would take her and have her. She pressed Tara's warm palm into her cheek, and finally gave a small nod.

"I..I guess I thought that if she wanted you, it was all over. She's so strong, and sexy, and confident..."

"Actually, Will, she's not. At least, not where relationships of any sort are concerned."

Willow looked at her in surprise, considering this.

"So you were thinking--" Tara pressed on.

"But I wasn't...Thinking, I mean. You're right, Tara, but this was all taking place behind the scenes. I just thought I was being quote unquote cautious." She sighed, dipping her head. "But in my gut...I guess I assumed that if she turned her eyes on you, I didn't have a chance."

"You thought that it would be mutual, or it would turn mutual." Willow nodded. "Sweetie, when you thought you saw Faith kissing me in the kitchen--was she just planting one on me, or was I responding?" Tara's voice was so soft, but that image would always shake her. It shook her now.

"You--you were definitely into it. She started it, but..."

"But I reciprocated."

Willow nodded miserably. "That's what killed me, Baby. Hearing you--Thinking I heard you...responding to someone else. Responding to Faith."

Tara stroked her hair, then tilted her chin and kissed her gently. "You know it didn't happen, right?"

"I know." Her voice was tiny. "But I can see it--hear it--so clearly." But even if Faith did want her, she couldn't have her. Tara doesn't want that. "You're right, Baby--as long as you don't find her attractive..."

Silence.

OK, this is the part where you're supposed to jump in and emphasize that you definitely don't find Faith attractive.

The silence endured for a moment longer, and then Tara said, "Will, we're supposed to be completely honest here."

Oh no...

"Willow, I do think Faith's an attractive woman." She took Willow's face in her hands. "Sweetie, stay with me. I'm not saying I was attracted to Faith. I didn't fantasize about her; I didn't think about her at all in that way."

"So why do I feel sick to my stomach?" She hadn't thought she had any raw emotion left in her that night, but she was wrong.

"Well, probably because of everything that's happened tonight. Willow, I'm not trying to make it worse--God, just the opposite. But I don't want any secrets between us, and I think you'll actually feel better knowing--"

"Knowing what?" Willow broke in. "Knowing that some version of my worst nightmare is actually true?" She could feel the hysteria creeping into her voice.

"No." Tara's voice brooked no interruption. "I'm telling you the truth so that you can let go of any fear. I'm not going to hide this from you, and I want you to understand that it doesn't have the power to hurt us." She gripped Willow's hands fiercely. "Listen to me, Willow. I'm not attracted to her; I'm saying I do think she's attractive."

Willow's stomach roiled. "And the difference between those two would be...?"

"If I were attracted to her, I'd be thinking about her sexually. Wondering what it would be like to be with her. And I'm not, Willow. I'm absolutely not. Do I think she's an attractive woman? Yes, I do. And so do you."

That brought her up short. "What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

"Willow, look at the words you've used to describe her: powerful, strong, sexy...Those aren't exactly neutral adjectives, you know."

"So you think I'm attracted to her?" She was trying to follow Tara's line of thinking, but her emotions kept cutting in on that line.

"No--at least, I don't think so. But I do think that both of us...register Faith as an attractive woman. And Willow, as long as it doesn't develop into something else, I don't think that's a problem. I mean, don't you notice women?"

Willow forced herself to consider the question--and was forced to acknowledge that she did. Not in the "Come home with me now, vixen" kind of way, no; but she did--what was the word Tara used?--register them. Whether it was someone's face, or athleticism, or just her general bearing, Willow did notice some women in ways that she didn't notice others, or certainly men.

Looking at Tara, she knew that her beloved already knew the answer to her question. "See what I mean? Both of us can find another woman attractive, and not desire her. Does that make sense?"



And finally--it did.

"OK...Climbing onto the clue train now, baggage fully stowed in its overhead compartment." She managed a tiny grin.

Tara laughed outright. "Sweetie, you can keep your baggage right out in full view; that way we know what's in it. Mine too," she added, before leaning over and kissing Willow slowly.

"I guess it just feels weird to think about noticing other women," Willow mused. "And talk about it."

"Yeah, but it's gonna happen. And there will probably be a time for each of us when we are attracted to someone else. I can't imagine it right now, but I plan to spend the rest of my life with you and I think that it happens got pretty much every long-term couple. Making this work--it's not about having absolutely no reaction to anyone else. I think it's about choosing, day after day, to spend that night with each other." She broke off suddenly, as if self-conscious about her speech.

Willow, though, was pondering her words and decided that, like Tara, she couldn't imagine actually being attracted to someone else right now--but over the course of decades, wasn't it bound to happen?

And Faith...Yes, she did find Faith attractive. She didn't crave her; didn't think about being with her...But Faith was a strong, sexy woman who just looked good in leather. And that was OK.

A possibility came to her suddenly. "Tara, I wonder if part of what tweaked me, way down in the basement of my unconscious--which apparently makes very few journeys upstairs--wasn't just that worrying that Faith was attracted to you and possibly you to her. Maybe I was upset that she wasn't attracted to me." She shook her head as she thought about it. "I mean, what am I--chopped pate?"

Tara grinned at her. "Witness one of the great singularities of lesbian love. When we think someone's trying to horn in on our partners, we also get jealous that she's not trying to horn in on us."

Willow, feeling about seventeen pounds lighter than she had for the last ten minutes, relaxed into Tara's arms as they nestled back against the bedstead.

"Everything running smoothly in the incredible engine that is your mind?" Tara asked after a few minutes of contented silence.

"Well, I won't pretend that this has been inherently enjoyable...But I am glad we talked it out. There's a part of me that knows you don't want anyone but me, and there's this other part that just feels so...insubstantial, I guess, at times. Like, I know about computers and I happen to have some skill with magic, but that tough, lived-hard-and-have-the-scars-to-show-for-it thing...not so much." She felt Tara nod against her hair. "It's like I have seven years of feeling more and more

like I have something to offer; something good. But there were fifteen years before that when everything just seemed to point to me being awkward and dressing funny and being totally into things that no one else found even remotely interesting."

"The clay's really damp then," Tara mused.

OK...And I think I'm non-linear... "Uh--not really following you."

Tara shifted and looked at her. "I think our minds are like clay tablets. You can always make marks on them, but in the early years--the clay's really damp and the stuff that gets written on it then...that stuff gets imprinted really deep. Doesn't mean that's all we are, but it takes energy to make new lines on it."

Willow paused for a moment, wondering if her timing would be alright. Finally she decided to venture it. "What about your tablets, Baby? What got written on yours? I mean, I think I know a lot of them, but as we just discovered--all sorts of nooks and crannies in Chateau de Personal Issues."

Tara's sad smile carved a new place in Willow's heart; some extra space where love tumbled over and spread. "You think I don't get uncomfortable, thinking about you noticing Faith? Or anyone else all sleek and muscular?"

Willow pulled back and looked at her quizzically. "You worry about that, Baby? Body image stuff?" It was so difficult for her to imagine...Tara had curves and an incredible softness that took her, welcomed her. And the way she looked in tight sweaters...

"Willow, haven't you noticed how...petite everyone is around here? Buffy, Dawn, you...you're all so...compact. Sometimes when I'm around you, I end up thinking I'm going to break the furniture because everyone else feels so tiny."

This was an absolute news flash to Willow. "You feel like you're too big? Tara--" And then she remembered that what Tara needed now was the chance to talk about it. And Willow herself needed to know this; she needed to know the full story, instead of rushing in to make it better. But God, those sweaters...

"Wet clay, remember--Donnie always used to call me fat and clumsy. I wasn't athletic at all; I hated gym class. God, all these miniature Amazons running around. I spent half my time hating them and half my time lusting after them. And now I spend all my time with a bunch of people who fight for a living. And yeah--Faith being so muscular...It's hard to think you wouldn't compare us and think, 'God, Faith's so strong, and she moves so well.' Sometimes I feel like I'm just...lurching around, trying not to get in the way."

Willow was stunned. She knew that Donnie had teased Tara--and worse--when they were younger. And yes, Faith's athleticism was attractive--but not in any way that diminished Tara. Willow didn't consider herself much of a fighter, but apparently Tara did.

"I guess I've always been ashamed of my shyness, too. I mean, I can look at anybody else who's an introvert, and I think, 'Well, that's just who they are.' But me...And you guys are so quick and glib. God, sometimes it feels like you have a team of people writing for you. And I still stutter sometimes..."

Willow couldn't help herself. "Baby, you know I just find that endearing, right?"

"I know," Tara replied a little sadly. "Sometimes, though, I'd like to be the strong, confident one; the one everybody looked at when she came into the room." She stared pensively for a moment, then shook her head. "Willow, I swear--for the most part I'm OK with all of this. I know you love my body; I'm feeling better about it. And being shy--that's just who I am. Given that who I am is who you love, how bad can I feel about it? But we're talking over our insecurities here and I wanna be honest."

"I know, Tara. And I wanna make everything better, but I know I can't. I'm just glad you know I do love you, and your body, and your shyness. Besides, I also know there's some closet vixen in there that nobody else knows about, and that's a huge turn-on." She was rewarded by a crooked smile.

"So...We know that we both grew up feeling insignificant, in lots of ways," Tara began. "And that it's still sometimes hard to believe that someone we admire and respect so much would be ga-ga over us. But... It also sounds like we both know that other person does love us. And I think that's gotta serve as a pretty powerful healing force."

Willow considered all of this for a bit. Finally she ventured, "OK, so we know a lot about our insecurities. Are those the same as our fears? Not to be splitting hairs here, but it seems important."

"No, I think you're right," Tara said thoughtfully. "I think they're related, but also distinct in some ways. Like, maybe our fears are the end results we dread most, and our insecurities are what we think will lead to them."

"OK, nice distinction, Samuel Webster," Willow commended her. "So--any fears we haven't talked about? Aside from losing each other?"

Their eyes locked for an instant before they said almost as one: "Losing Kyra."

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Willow had never tied one on before--the kind of monster drunk that left you hugging the toilet and praying to seventeen deities and your grandma's ghost just to make the heaving stop. She'd never had to face the next day's mortification, where everyone stares at you and the thought bubble above their head reads, "Do you have any idea what you did last night? Or whom?"

She was relaying this to Tara the morning after That Night.

"Baby, it just feels so awkward to see everybody. I'm afraid they're gonna walk on eggshells around me, or just stare at me."

Tara put down her brush and turned to face her. "Willow, sweetie, in the first place, you were attacked by some very cruel, very powerful bad guy--or bad girl--who got into your mind and played with it. You didn't get three sheets to the wind and throw up in your roommate's ski boots. And in the second place, you faced everybody last night. I mean, everybody except Xander and Anya."

"You know," Willow mused, "for once I like knowing how blunt she is. Like, she'll just say whatever she's thinking and that'll be it."

Tara gave a wry smile. "You're looking forward to Anya's bluntness? Next you'll be telling me you're joining the Log Cabin Republicans."

Willow crinkled her nose in distaste. "I wasn't that far gone..." She grew sober, though, as her thoughts returned to the day's events. "I know you're right. I just feel so...exposed."

Tara's eyes grew soft and she reached out to tuck a piece of Willow's hair behind her ear. "I know. I think I'd probably feel the same way. After my birthday, when I found out I didn't have demon in me--it's like 95% of me was so happy and relieved. And I definitely felt closer to this group than I ever had...but then this other part just wanted to crawl under a table because my own little version of the Jerry Springer Show had walked right into the Magic Box. But Willow, you heard them. You know that their main concern was that you were safe. And besides--you watched Xander turn into Dracula's spider-eating bitch. I think everybody in the Scooby circle has spent some time on the Mortification Metro." She smiled suddenly and rested her forehead against Willow's. "It's not like I don't take you seriously, sweetie. I know it feels awkward. But I'm just..I'm so glad you're OK that anything else feels infinitely manageable."

"Good point," Willow murmured. Then she pulled back slightly. "But holy awkward conversations, Hot Girl, meeting up with Faith one-on-one should be big fun: 'Good morning, Faith.' 'Hey Red--how ya doin?' 'Oh, pretty well, considering that last night I thought I saw you kissing my partner. And you?' Jeez..."

"I know, Will...but you'll handle it."

"How--with my trademark eloquence?" Willow looked at her forlornly.

Tara kissed her gently on the tip of her nose. "With your trademark combination of honesty and truly unique, if nonlinear, style of phrasing."

Willow sighed. "Speaking of conversations, I need to have one with Xander and Anya--this morning. Are you OK alone with Kyra?" She felt her stomach clench. We won't let anything happen. We won't.

Tara seemed to sense her sudden tightening. Probably because she feels it too... "Yeah, I'm clear for the day. I don't have any students, so I thought I'd go into the Magic Box and hang out there."

"Strength in numbers?" Willow ventured.

"Something like that," Tara said grimly. "I talked to Buffy earlier; she wanted to keep Dawn out of school today but Dawn told her not to be, and I quote, 'an even bigger spaz than you already are.' I think Buffy'll be glad when school ends; they only have two more weeks."

Willow sat on the bed and slipped on her shoes. "Xander's working on that new cathedral on the south side of town, I think. I'll take him some coffee and have The Talk."

"And Anya will be at the Magic Box--do you want me to tell her?"

"Oh God, would you?" Willow asked, relief washing over her. "I mean, I'm sure she'll have her two cents' worth when I see her, but I'd love to skip the original presentation." She looked up in sudden curiosity. "What do you think Anya's is? Her fear, I mean?" There was a time when she would have answered her own question: "Having no money." Now, though, she didn't feel terribly inclined to joke about it. Not after her own experience; not after seeing the ex-demon's grief two nights ago.

Tara shook her head slowly. "I don't know, Sweetie. Maybe losing Xander?"

Willow considered this for a moment. "Do you suppose that's what it is for all of us? Losing the person we're closest to?"

"Maybe," Tara mused. "I mean, all of the insecurities we talked about last night--we've had them for awhile, but now the worst-case scenario involves losing each other or...or Kyra." It hurts just saying the words, doesn't it? It hurts to think them. Tara drew a deep breath and plunged on. "The question is, would it work the same for everybody? I mean, would Buffy fear losing Dawn?"

"And what about Giles and Faith?" Willow asked. "Like, Faith has some deal with Buffy, OK--but she couldn't really talk about losing her. And who would Giles be afraid of losing? In high school he was afraid that Buffy died. I mean, we all sorta carry that one around..." She trailed off, remembering all the times that Buffy should have died and yet somehow dodged the bullet that had her name on it. Xander had saved her that first time, but how many other times had she been so close to death that she could feel it whispering as it pressed up against her? Had Willow even let herself think about it?

Tara gave an exasperated sigh. "You know, we have about fifty thousand questions, plus or minus two, and virtually no answers."

Now it was Willow's turn to comfort. "We'll figure it out, Baby--we always do."

Tara gave herself up to Willow's arms. "I know I'm not much with the fighting, sweetie, but right now--I want something to stake."

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Her conversation with Xander went much as she anticipated. She would have preferred to talk to him in a quiet, secluded place, but urgency dictated that they be accompanied by jackhammers and cranes and the dulcet tones of two men whistling at women who walked by.

"Does that ever work?" Willow asked Xander as he got the OK to take a break. (It helped that they had staked the foreman's attacker behind the cinema two years ago. He didn't ask much about Xander's occasional departures.)

"Does what work?" her friend replied, slipping off his helmet.

"Making lewd comments at women. I mean, does any hot babe ever hear them and go, 'Hey now--that's a pretty good offer! I think I'll have sex with you!'"

"No, but two weeks ago a woman walked over and told those same guys that their lives would be easier if they'd just drop the pretense and admit they loved each other. They've doubled their efforts since then." He grinned hugely at the memory. "So what's up?"

Willow took a deep breath. "Xander, something pretty...funky...happened after you left." And she proceeded to tell him the entire story. Much as she wanted to leave out the "I saw Faith kissing Tara" section, she didn't. Funny how that feels scarier than trying to kill myself. As she could have guessed, though, Xander honed in on the latter element. By the time she told of Faith grabbing her wrist and hauling her back up over the railing, he was sitting down, his eyes wide with shock.

"Will...God, Willow, you almost..." He couldn't seem to finish the sentence.

"Yeah, I really, really did almost..." She offered a faint smile but she could tell he was beyond humor. "But I didn't, OK? Faith got me and Tara talked me through it and I'm OK now, I really am. Xander?"

He stared at her. "It's just...I mean, we've all been about a shim away from the big sleep more times than I can count, but this...This thing had you ready to do its work for it." He ran his fingers through his hair as if trying to steady himself. "How many time have we fought, Will? I mean, in-the-trenches, kill-or-be-killed kinda fought? And we almost lost you to...to this." He shook his head. "I hate this thing," he muttered.

Willow sat down beside him and took his hand. You're a good man, Xander Harris.

Sometimes she forgot that they had been the original Scoobies--the two kids in the school who knew that the new hot girl from LA had a life way beyond the scope of pep rallies and proms and Pradas. The two kids in school who risked their lives to help that new girl. At first Willow

thought it was random: she ended up on the inside because of her very ill-advised walk in the cemetery. Over time, though, she came to believe that she was meant to be in this fight. Not chosen like the Slayer was chosen, but not just some girl who could have been any other girl, either. For all her insecurities, she did believe this. Xander had rushed in with more confidence, but she had watched that confidence take so many hits over the years. "If we were a Star Trek episode, I'd be the guy who goes out onto the planet's surface first and gets eaten by the big slobbery thing with sixteen eyes," he told her somewhat drunkenly one night a few years ago.

She thought now of how she would react if their roles were reversed: what if she were hearing that he had tried to kill himself last night? That only an act of superhuman strength and quickness had saved his life? She gripped his hand more tightly. You're not expendable, Xander.

"Me too," she finally murmured. "I hate it too. But Xander, until we get more information we have to use what we do know. You have to be on your guard. You have to know what your weak spots are; your Achilles' heels. It played on my insecurities about Faith, and my fear of losing Tara, and it took the express route into my psyche. It works fast; really fast."

Xander gave a laugh that held no humor. "Oh, well that should be easy. 'cause I really don't have any insecurities. I've always been so confident of my special place in the world."

Willow ached for him. "I know," she said softly, squeezing his hand. "But you have to talk them over with Anya, OK? I mean, we're all a little wiggy about this. Put us together, and you've got the Crayola 64-pack of Neuroses and Insecurities."

"Well I get to operate the built-in sharpener, OK, because I am good with tools." He looked at her. "Anything else? Fears, self-doubts, headaches, and exhaustion?"

"They suck, but those last two may be the closest things to tangible symptoms we have."

Xander nodded. "That's actually helpful. I got my weak spots, but I'm usually pretty clear in the physical well-being area. You know, when I'm not afflicted with mystic syphilis."

"Good. And you have to talk to Anya, too--find out what her vulnerabilities are."

Xander stood and rubbed his neck. "I think I got a pretty good idea, but I'll make sure we talk about it some more tonight." He shook his head. "Odd thing is, she doesn't really think she's in that much danger. She said a couple of nights ago that she wasn't enough of a white-hat to show up on this thing's radar."

Willow wasn't surprised by the ex-demon's assessment; she was surprised to find how vehemently she disagreed with it. "Xander, she won't be named ambassador any time soon--I mean, ambassador to someplace we don't want to get into a war with. But she's in it; she's in the fight. and she always comes through."

He shrugged. "That's what I keep trying to tell her. You say Tara's talking to her now?"

Willow glanced at her watch: 9:37. "Should be. Tara wants to spend as much time with people as possible right now, even if it's not a fail-safe."

"I get it," he nodded. "If you can't trust your own mind...God, Willow, that's scarier than anything with fangs." He shoved his hard-hat down over his unruly hair, then pulled her into a tight hug. "Leave me, and I will track you down...Plus I'll have Tara with me. We will not be happy."

"Gotcha," she whispered.

Please be careful, Xander.

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Willow hit the Magic Box after running a few errands. She ran what she hoped was a passable on-going diagnostic on her own mental health. How do you use your mind to see if your mind's OK? What she did know, however, was that she felt good physically, she wasn't tired, and she didn't feel her blood pressure ratchet up whenever she thought of Faith. She remembered what she had "seen" last night in the kitchen, and while she was flooded with embarrassment, and that image would always shake her to her core, there was no vestige of last night's belief, her utter conviction that Faith was interested in Tara and would take her away.

And so what if Tara thinks she's attractive. She is attractive. But Faith and Buffy? Buffy had never shown any sign of interest in becoming a Friend of Dorothy. Willow knew that a lot of women, especially at their age, had some curiosity about being with a woman, even if they truly and honestly identified as heterosexual. If Buffy herself had such questions, Willow never knew about them. Yes, her best friend had enjoyed quasi-flirting with Tara on a couple of occasions, but always in a verbal way that Willow knew was meant only to provoke her own reaction. But Buffy registered a big flat line on her gaydar.

Faith may be in for a world of hurt if she's really got it bad for Buffy...

Such were her thoughts as she walked into the Magic Box and spied Tara in the back feeding Kyra. Their daughter gave an enthusiastic endorsement of the Gerber banana mixture, but voiced her reservations about the peas by spitting them out with a force that might as well have said, "Be gone from my sight, foul legume." Willow stood grinning at the sight for a moment, basking in the sunlight that bathed the shop and enfolded her in its warmth.

"Please tell me you're not crazy anymore."

We now return to our regularly scheduled chaos.

"Hi Anya. Yes, I am filled unto bursting with mental health on this fine California day. If you'll pardon the redundancy," she added, turning to face a very anxious-looking ex-demon.



Would Anya have showed any more discretion if there were customers in the store, she wondered. Probably not.

"Good. Because I just don't have it in me to go to your funeral." The words were absurd; and the sentiments absolutely genuine. "Tara told me what happened. You should have known you were nuts, though, as soon as you thought Tara was kissing Faith."

"I told you, Anya," Tara piped up, a spoonful of bananas hovering in front of Kyra's mouth. "By the time Willow actually realized what she was afraid of, it was too late." Kyra was leaning forward, her mouth open expectantly.

"It's just so ridiculous, though, to think that Tara would cheat on you. I mean, kissing Faith right there in the kitchen? Really."

"Anya, you have to understand this," Tara continued, the spoon still poised outside of Kyra's grasp. "Willow didn't think about what she saw--she felt it. She knew it. Down to the core. There wasn't any analysis or discussion." Kyra kicked impatiently. "If we don't catch it before that time, you'd better hope someone's with you. Oh--sorry baby girl!" She brought the spoon to Kyra's mouth, as their daughter's eyes grumbled, "Whenever it works for you, Mom."

"That's why it's so important to be on our guard," Willow said, picking up the thread.

"It may move on, though," Anya pointed out.

"What do you mean?" Tara asked quizzically.

"Well, none of the other victims knew each other, so they probably didn't have any reason to share the information with the others. Not that they had time to share it," Anya added, her mouth settling into a grim line. "But this is a big group, and Willow lived to tell the tale. Maybe it'll figure out we're onto it and look for someone else; someone who couldn't know about it."

"That would be nice," Willow murmured, and then felt guilt washing over her. "For us, I mean."

"Then again, it may be royally pissed off that Willow got away and it'll hunt us down with even greater malevolence," Anya continued. "You never know about these things."

"You're always such a comfort," Willow said weakly.

"Well, I was going to be all nice and speak softly and ask if I could get you some tea or something, but Tara said that would probably just send you right back to Whackville."

"I didn't put it quite like that," her partner murmured as Willow gave her a wry grin.

"Tara's quite wise," she said solemnly. "We should all listen to her."

"I always do," the ex-demon proclaimed, earning a blush from Tara and a surprisingly affectionate smile from Willow herself.

"So where's Giles?" she asked, going over to give both her girls a kiss.

"Oh, he's talking to Wesley again," Anya announced, tossing her head. "Honestly, you'd think they were going to a bunch of LA leather bars, as much as they talk these days."

"So, speaking up quickly in an attempt to pretend I didn't just hear that, he won't be alone too long will he?"

"Buffy and Faith are with him; at least they were this morning." Willow's stomach tightened again in anticipation of their meeting. "And Xander called to say he'll be coming over for lunch. Says he wants to make sure he's in close contact with me--you know, that protective boyfriend thing and all. As if I don't spend as much time protecting him..." She shook her head affectionately, then looked up as a customer walked in.

Thank god she convinced Giles to get rid of that bell.

"Hello, and welcome to the Magic Box," Anya said brightly. "Please let me know if I can be of any assistance." The dark-haired man smiled and nodded, then moved into the literature section.

We do grow and change; all of us, even Anya.

The ex-demon turned back to them and whispered, "White man in his mid-30's; gay, from his shoes and the muscular build. Lots of disposable income. Chat him up about gay things. The sense of shared community will make him feel more obligated to buy something."

Not necessarily in leaps and bounds, mind you...

"Uh, we'll just wait and see if he needs anything," Tara replied hesitantly as she tried the strained peas again, to a grim-faced Kyra's profound displeasure.

"Fine," Anya sniffed. "Drop the beautiful crystal ball of capitalism and watch it shatter on the floor beneath you. No problem. I'll just go and get a broom."

Xander came in about an hour later. Willow thought that the kiss he gave Anya was especially long and tender. Anya touched his face gently, then said, "Hello, my handsome husband. I'm not feeling crazy, and neither is anyone else, at least as far as I can tell. What about you?"

"As sane as living on a Hellmouth permits you to be," he replied promptly, hugging her. Glancing around, he asked, "Where is everybody?"

We're going to be asking that a lot in the near future...

Anya gave him a quick rundown. "Buffy's going to pick up Dawn after school; I suppose Giles and Faith will come back here."

Xander rubbed his face. "You know, I'm all for the chocolately Scooby goodness, but we can't watch each other 24/7."

"I don't think we have to," Tara replied thoughtfully. "I think the main thing is that we keep a close eye on how we're feeling and we talk about anything that's tweaking us. I mean, no, we don't want to wander off on some solitary weekend vigil in the hills, but at least we have a sense of how it works."

They all looked up as Faith entered the shop, clutching a paper bag. "Giles is grabbing some lunch," she said, as if anticipating their question. "I wasn't hungry, and there's only so much Cream a girl can take."

Willow did a double take until Tara murmured, "I think she means the rock group."

She had anticipated being anxious, and self-conscious, and embarrassed. She hadn't anticipated being just a little glad to see the Dark Slayer. But she didn't want anything to happen to any of them--including Faith.

"Hi Faith," she said quietly. "Glad you're here."

The other woman gave her a long, appraising glance, then nodded. "Glad you're here, Red. Helluva night." Then she looked at Kyra and once again--this time without the accompanying paranoia and jealousy--Willow noticed that her eyes softened just a bit.

"Would--would you like to feed her?" She felt eager to make some overture, and she knew that Faith felt a pull to Kyra. She had spent part of the morning considering what levels of contact would feel OK to her. But Faith just pulled back and shook her head emphatically.

"And have her go all Linda Blair on me too? Look at her." And indeed, their beautiful, precious girl had flung, spat, and otherwise hurled peas all over her bib and part of Tara's sleeve. "But, uh, I picked her up something." She tossed the package nonchalantly onto the table.

Willow opened the bag to find a Justin Timberlake doll smiling at her with excessive dental perfection.

"I figured she'd know what to do with it," Faith shrugged.

Kyra squealed and reached out for the doll. "Let Mommy wash it off first," Tara said, pulling out a tiny cleansing pad. "Standard operating procedure," she smiled up at Faith.

"Hey, I'm all about avoiding the plastic cooties," Faith replied, seemingly unoffended.

As soon as Tara had given the doll a thorough wiping, she handed it to Kyra, who studied it for a moment and then grabbed her spoon.

"Bye-bye!" she sang out, plunging the eating device into Justin's defenseless chest.

"Hey, the kid can improvise--very cool," Faith nodded approvingly. She seemed unable to stop grinning at Kyra, and then caught herself. "So, hey, I'm gonna go train a little, OK? Work off some steam."

Willow watched her go, then looked over to see Tara watching her. "If you want to go talk to her, I think you should."

"What do I say to her?"

"Willow, you did have reason to resent her when she came. You still do; none of that's been wiped out. Sweetie, there's enough history within this bunch to keep three therapy groups meeting on a constant basis. You don't have to make it all better; just be honest and see where she meets you."

Willow drew a deep breath, then stood and walked back to the training room. Halfway there, she turned. "If she tosses my ass outta there, please rub it for me."

Tara grinned, her eyes sparkling. "Toss or no toss, I'll rub your ass." Kyra looked up quizzically, as if hoping to add this new word to her vocabulary. "Plenty of time for that later, baby girl," Tara murmured, giving her a kiss.

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When Willow walked through the door to the training room, Faith was working on a series of kicks that would drop an NFL lineman. I would just not want to be on the receiving end of that.

The Dark Slayer stopped abruptly and turned to face her. "If you're working on sneaking up on someone, Red, I gotta tell you: not your strong suit."

"No," Willow said, blushing furiously. "No to the sneakage. I...I just wanted to say that I was sorry. For giving you such a hard time and wanting you to mess up and getting all wonky and paranoid." The words fell out of her until she stumbled to a stop.

Faith looked at her, her expression unreadable, as she grabbed a towel and wiped sweat from her face. "No problem," she finally replied.

Really? Gotta disagree...

"Faith, I was wrong. I should have--"

"Trusted me? The last time you saw me I switched bodies with Buffy and did some serious fucking with her life."

"But you came back..To town, I mean. You could have left and you didn't." Willow finally let that fact mean something to her.

"Yeah, so...Anyway, the time before that, I had a knife to your throat and I punched you around."

"Well, no, that wasn't much fun." She squirmed at the memory.

"Red, you'd have been completely nuts to trust me." She shook her head and walked to the small refrigerator, taking out a can of Diet Coke.

"But Faith, it went way beyond reasonable doubt. I was scared of you, and not because you could snap me like a tiny little twig." She took a deep breath. "I thought that if you wanted Tara, you could have just taken her. And yes, there was some big nasty playing with my mind, and it would have messed with me some other way if you hadn't been around--but you were around, and I ended up losing to every fear I've ever had about you."

Again that enigmatic look, until Faith finally threw up her hands. "I don't get it. If you weren't afraid I'd bust you up physically, what the hell worried you?"

"That you would take Tara," Willow replied simply.

"Short of draggin' her by the hair back to my cave, Red, what exactly could I do?"

Willow noticed that she didn't argue the possibility of being attracted to a woman. "I was just afraid...I was afraid that you were all strong and powerful and you'd set your sights on my girlfriend and just...you'd just take her."

"Right. Because Tara's so helpless and naive." Faith snorted. "You gotta give her more credit."

"Well, yeah--that's partly where the mental wockery comes in." She was feeling more and more like an idiot.

"Listen, Gandalf, even if I had set my targets on your babe--which I didn't, by the way--no way am I getting anywhere with her. Girl loves you something goofy." She took a long pull from her drink.

"And again with the diminished capacity footnote," she said weakly. "Faith, even in my most insecure moments--and believe me, they are many and gigantic--I'd never believe that Tara would just kiss somebody else; that she wouldn't even talk to me about being attracted to her. I just wanna say I'm sorry for going so far above and beyond the call of skepticism." When Faith didn't reply, she added, "And to say thanks--again--for saving my life." She turned to go.

Well that was fun.

"Red...Listen, I'm not tryin' to stonewall you here." Interesting choice of verbs... "I just don't want you going all crazy with the regret and guilt and second-guessing. It's a shitty way to live." She shoved her hands in her back pocket. "Been there; still doing that."

"I know," Willow said quietly. "But Faith, you are turning it around. I mean, I can see it; everybody can see it. Heck, Kyra likes you, so that has to mean something." Funny to hear those words coming from me.

Faith looked at her, her face suddenly taut with agitation. "But what if I fuck it up? Again, I mean? What if I let Bu--people down?" She stopped, and then gave an abrupt round-house kick to a poor tacking dummy that had really done nothing to deserve it. "I hate this touchy-feely shit. We're supposed to 'be in touch with our feelings'? Bite me..."

"Listen, Faith--I know you don't exactly like dining at the Vulnerability Cafe, but--"

"When all the meals taste like shit, Red, you don't keep a take-out menu on hand, you know?"

"So you starve?"

Faith gave a mirthless laughter. "You grab hot dogs at the convenience store."

Willow didn't know how to respond to that. Finally she said, "It can be different this time, Faith. Being a part of this group; being friends with Buffy..." Faith looked up sharply. "It can be different."

Maybe went too far on that one... But finally Faith plopped down on the couch and shook her head. "I dunno, Merlin. I napalmed a lotta bridges. Some things go way beyond a rosary and some flowers."

"So you do what you can," Willow said simply. "And you know it may not be enough."

Faith looked up with eyes that were far too old for her. "I'll fight anything in this fucking world, girl. Odds are I'll kick its ass. But this stuff...Atonement, and knowing what scares me--"

"Do you know, Faith?" Willow broke in. "Do you think about what scares you most of all?"

Faith stared at her.

"Every fucking day."

Willow was pondering how to reply to this when the door to the training room swung open. Tara looked from one of them to the other.

"Giles is here. He has news."

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Willow looked at Faith as Tara turned to leave. "Did you know anything about this?"

Was Faith holding out on us?

But Faith just shook her head and headed toward the door. "I know he was on the phone with Wes the whole damn morning. Every time I walked through the room, seemed like his accent was getting thicker. He seemed psyched about something on the way here; he just didn't go into specifics."

She wonders if Giles was holding out on her.

"What were you doing during all the British talk?" she asked curiously.

"Watching cartoons," Faith replied without an ounce of self-consciousness.

"Which ones?" Willow found it fascinating that while she had been agonizing over her meeting with Xander and certainly with Faith herself, the Dark Slayer had been glued to the Cartoon Network.

"Power Puff Girls," Faith said promptly. "Those babes kick ass."

Shoulda known it wasn't Blue's Clues.

They emerged to find Giles looking impatiently at the 40'ish African American woman purchasing several crystals and two books.

Y'know, Giles, we really do need to have people in the store at least some of the time.

"Thank you, and have a nice day," Anya said sweetly. As the customer left, she exclaimed gleefully, "One of those books was set to go on discount next week!"

"How capitally capitalistic of you, Anya," Giles sighed. "Could we possibly close the store for even a few moments? I'd rather not be disturbed."

Anya looked at her watch. "It's mid-afternoon on a Wednesday; one of the lowest traffic times in retail...OK. But just for half an hour." She walked over to the door and flipped the store sign, pulling down the blinds as she did so.

"Where's Buffy?" the Watcher asked, moving to a side table to make some tea.

"Probably picking Dawn up from school," Tara replied, checking the clock over the counter. "You found something?"

"From my conversation with Wesley this morning, yes," he replied, clearly excited. "You know, he really has loosened up quite a bit from that stuffy, fastidious little man I first met," he added, methodically arranging his pot, cup, and lemon slices and giving an annoyed glance at the tea

packets scattered about on the table. "Really, is it too much to ask that you keep these alphabetized as I requested?"

"Well, you set such a good example for him of how laid back a Watcher can be," Xander remarked dryly.

"Oh, thank you. I rather think so. Anyway, he has really quite extensive connections to the Los Angeles demon underground, and after considerable effort, he almost literally dug up a character named Bedtherall who has heard of a creature very much like the one wreaking such havoc here."

"Bet Wesley met him in a leather bar," Anya said, nodding.

"What?" Giles looked up, startled.

"Nothing," Anya replied, tossing Willow a conspiratorial wink.

"What did this Bed-whoever tell him?" Willow asked, then grinned. "'Bed-whoever'...Heh..."

"I'd prefer to wait for Buffy and Dawn's arrival before going into the specifics," Giles replied, glancing at his watch.

He's scared. They're not even late, and he's imagining the worst.

"They'll be here soon," she said reassuringly, at which point Buffy and Dawn walked through the door.

"George Bush will impeached soon," she added hopefully, to no apparent avail.

"Bub!" Kyra's voice gurgled out like a bottle of cold grape soda popping open.

Faith looked at her quizzically, and then back to Buffy. An immense grin slowly split her face. "That's her name for you? 'Bub'?" she asked delightedly.

"No," Buffy replied a little too quickly. "She said 'Bug, because--"

"BubBubBubBubBub!" The extended arms and eager smile made further denial pointless. Buffy sighed and went over to pick up Kyra.

"Bub Summers--the greatest vampire slayer of all time!" Faith chortled. "I didn't think you could get more intimidating than 'Buffy,' but I slouch corrected."

Wait a minute--did Faith just call Buffy--?

"Looks like Giles here has something to report," Buffy said frostily. "You wanna hear about it or stand here and laugh at me all day?"



"Laugh at you all day, B," Faith replied, as if surprised Buffy needed to ask. "No contest, even for a high school drop-out like me."

Giles gave a quick recap of what he had shared thus far. "This Bedtherall directed Wesley to an ancient text--"

"Why are they always ancient?" Xander piped up, crossing his arms. "We always have our noses in these musty old books that were written before humans harvested the power of fire. How come we never get any books marked, 'Copyright 1987, Acme Supernatural, Incorporated'?"

Giles paused. "A legitimate question, Xander, albeit one of surpassing irrelevance at the moment."

Willow could feel a slight but welcome shift in the room. Finally there was something that might help them. This awful sense of stabbing out blindly, wondering if the next thing you battled would be your own mind, had left them all on edge and disoriented. The danger was still there--Where? Xander's mind? Buffy's? Tara's?--but any light, no matter how small or flickering, would give greater illumination than they'd had thus far.

"So spill, G-Man," Faith said impatiently. "What is this thing?"

"It's quite old, apparently. There are records of its attacks dating back to ancient Rome, certainly before the birth of Jesus. It has been known by many names, often depending on the time and place of its appearance, but each appellation carries some element of despair. It came to southern France in the mid-18th century, for example, and was known as 'Mort du Coeur': Death of the Heart. Keep in mind, though, that it may have attacked any number of other times besides those that we know of, and it was never recognized as something mystical or demonic."

"So how did anyone ever recognize it?" Tara asked curiously.

"I suppose through the same means as we did: people who were already involved in demon fighting, who took notice of suicides that seemed to afflict only those committed to the greater good."

"Same M.O.?" Xander asked.

"Yes. It appears to..well, to feed off of the lightness of these souls, or rather the darkness that their deaths create."

"Wait a minute," Willow said, ideas tumbling in and out of her mind. "I thought we were dealing with a prophecy. Isn't that pretty much by definition about the future? This thing has been around longer than Strom Thurmond."

That brought them all up short for several moments. Finally, Dawn said tentatively, "Maybe our demon and the prophecy aren't related, or at least not the same thing."

Faith frowned. "I dunno, D--seems like a helluva coincidence."

Willow saw Dawn's barely-disguised beaming upon earning a nickname from Faith.

First Tara; now Faith. We gotta see if Sunnydale High has a gay-straight alliance.

"Besides, this thing is only taking out 'light,' Xander pointed out. "And it's certainly creating darkness."

"But out of it will come new light?" Tara mused. "When have we ever heard of a demon being in service to some ultimate goodness? I mean, I'm assuming the 'new light' is good."

"So maybe this prophecy is talking about some new light that emerges from darkness," Anya offered, "and it doesn't really matter what the darkness is."

"But it also says the darkness will come from light, and that's what this demon is doing," Buffy countered.

"Maybe the demon's just a pawn in this," Willow said thoughtfully. "It's doing its typical joy-suck deal, but this time it's caught up in something that's gonna use it."

"Oh, that should go over well," Anya said, rolling her eyes. "Demons love being played."

"I dunno..." Buffy seemed to be struggling with some elusive idea. "Maybe--maybe light needs darkness; you know, to give it meaning, or...or renew it. Like, a forest fire is devastating; it wipes out everything in its path, right? But the soil ends up richer afterwards. Maybe it's like that."

Whoa...Look who's going philosophical on us.

They all considered this. "That's an incredibly steep price, Buffy," Giles finally said. "Certainly, sacrifices are often demanded and made in the quest to vanquish a demon. But to say that sacrifices must be made to feed some evil? Even in the service of its ultimate defeat?"

The shop was silent for a moment until Xander said, "That has about 173 implications to it, Buffster, and I don't like any of 'em."

"What started what?" Dawn piped up suddenly. "This feels like one of those logic questions: 'A can only sit next to B on the bus if C is facing west, but C can only face west if neither A nor B is carrying a book bag.' How do we know?"

Another long silence filled the room until Buffy finally said, "OK, let's shelve that for now. What else do we know about this thing? Like, oh--how has it managed to stick around for so long?"

"It appears that this creature disappears for long stretches of time."

"How long?" Willow demanded.

Giles gave a regretful shrug. "No one really seems to know. It seems safe to assume that there have been appearances that were not recognized as demonic in nature."

"But that's not really the main thing, is it?" Tara asked. "We're pretty sure this is it, we know it's here. My question is, where does it go when it's not trying to take good souls?" Willow felt her lover's hand reach out and close over her own.

"We're not sure," Giles admitted. "Perhaps it hibernates, or some demonic equivalent thereof."

"Why Sunnydale?" Buffy asked suddenly.

Everyone stared at her. "Um, because bad stuff always happens here, Buffy," Xander said, as if explaining why the sun went away to a three-year-old.

"Right. Hellmouth--ooh, scary...But this thing feeds on good people. Wouldn't you think that it might pick someplace a little more...wholesome? Like, isn't there probably a really nice town in Iowa somewhere?"

"Maybe...Maybe it needs people whose light has been...forged, somehow," Tara said slowly. "Tested--you know? I mean, not to suggest that people in Iowa don't face awful challenges..."

"But if you're gonna be a do-gooder in Sunnydale, you'd better have the chops," Dawn said thoughtfully.

"Exactly," Tara nodded.

Buffy turned to her Watcher. "Giles, what about the other times this thing showed up. Same kinda deal?"

Giles scanned his notes again. "I can't speak with certainty on every appearance, but yes--there are at least four occasions that we know of where darkness prevailed with particular malignancy--dictatorships, slavery...And this creature always showed up in the very heart of it."

"Where it knew it would find good people fighting a battle with really long odds," Buffy said.

"So the white-hats need to have a little extra bleach," Xander mused.

"Anything else on this thing?" Faith asked grimly.

She hates this metaphysical stuff. She wants something to kill.

"Well, it appears to feed off of the light of its victims, and then it disappears. Again, we don't know exactly where it goes when not...feeding." Giles looked up slowly. "But we do know that it takes ten lives and then disappears."

"Ten?" Buffy asked sharply. "How many does it already have?"

"That we know of? Seven." He paused, clearing his throat. "Willow...Willow would have made eight."

Was that just last night? Had she really stepped off of their balcony less than twenty-four hours ago?

Tara's voice was quiet and utterly commanding. "Here's my question: Is Willow immune? I mean, can it hit her again?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," Giles said apologetically. "We don't have any record of anyone surviving an attack."

"I'm so special," Willow said brightly, trying to lighten the mood.

"I didn't need proof of it," Tara muttered darkly, squeezing Willow's hand tightly.

"We were talking about it earlier this afternoon," Willow continued, feeling acutely self-conscious. "You know--whether it'll target someone else in the group, or move on where nobody knows to look for it."

"Maybe if it knows we're being extra-vigilant...?" Dawn said tentatively.

"That may well be," Giles acknowledged. "One of the unknown elements in this is whether it operates under any kind of time constraints."

"That would be a bonus," Xander nodded. "Definitely made things a little easier with Glory."

"And if not--great," Buffy said in frustration. "We walk around paranoid until three more people kill themselves. Then we get to deal with the guilt."

No one seemed to know how to reply to this. Then Dawn looked up suddenly. "OK, so there are seven deadly sins, right? Is there any kind of--I don't know--ten saintly virtues? Like maybe this demon's collecting specific good stuff."

"That's a great theory, Dawnie," Tara said, "but the seven deadly sins are part of Christian theology. This thing predates Jesus."

Willow nodded. "That would have given us some good info--compare the seven suicides here; see what might be next. I think my virtue would have been academic preparedness," she added.

A gaping, awkward silence greeted what Willow thought had been really a nice example of black humor. Looking at Tara, she saw pain in the blue eyes and a forced smile that fell well short of those eyes.

Buffy pulled Kyra more tightly against her and said in a small voice, "It's gonna take us a while before we can really get on the Sardonic Train around you trying to kill yourself, Will."

Xander nodded. "Give us at least until RJ Reynolds admits that smoking can be bad for you, OK?"

Willow smiled apologetically. "Sorry, guys. Just trying to be all with the cool humor."

"Yeah, well, you're the original spaz of the group, so just forget about it," Dawn said, crossing her arms and glaring at her. "Stick with babbling."

"Anything else?" Buffy asked after a minute.

"No, that's it for now. But it does give us something to go on," Giles replied, rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah, it does," Willow said softly. "Thanks...for all the digging, I mean."

He looked at her, eyes creasing with his slight smile of acknowledgement. "It's...absolutely imperative that no one here be lost," he said simply.

There was a moment of quiet connection among them all then--glances exchanged; fingers entwined. Even Faith showed no sign of impatience, or discomfort. She just crossed her arms and nodded which was, Willow suspected, her way of saying: Count me in.

And then Anya stood up and asked, "It's been almost forty-five minutes. Can we resume our attempt at solvency?"

"Please do," Buffy replied. "Somebody here's gotta keep us outta debtor's prison. I mean, besides Willow's quote unquote computer skills," she added with a grin.

"My generosity is boundless," the ex-demon said, reaching into her pocket and tossing a quarter onto the table. "But don't get too comfortable with it," she added over her shoulder as she moved to change the sign and lift the shades.

"What was that?" Buffy asked, turning to Faith, who was shaking her head and laughing.

"Bub.' I think I'm gonna have you an ID bracelet made with it. Tell the engraver I want the prettiest writing he's got." The Dark Slayer was looking at Kyra and grinning widely.

"OK, smart ass, let's see what she calls you. C'mere," Buffy sniffed, beckoning Faith to kneel beside her where she held Kyra on her lap.

Faith gave a quick glance at Tara, who in turn looked at Willow. It's time. And Willow gave a nod of permission.

Faith knelt down beside Buffy, her eyes getting just slightly larger as she looked at Kyra.

For her part, Willow watched Faith's dark head so close to Buffy's. It may never happen, but God--they'd be beautiful together.

Buffy cleared her throat dramatically. "Kyra, this is Faith. Can you say 'Faith'?"

Kyra gave a huge grin and tilted her head. Then she reached out one tiny hand and rested it on Faith's cheek.

"Fate."

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"OK, did that last part wig you out just a little bit?" Willow asked quietly. They were driving home from the Magic Box, Kyra napping in her car seat.

"Oh, yeah," Tara nodded, glancing in the rear-view mirror. "I'd say a little bit and then some."

"I mean, 'Faith' isn't that far from 'Fate,' at least in a one-year-old's vocabulary. But still..."

"But still..." Tara echoed. "If we were any other parents and our little girl said something like that, we'd be all, 'Oh, isn't that cute!' Instead, we have to wonder if it has any Grand Meaning, capital 'G,' capital 'M.'"

"Do you think anybody else was thrown?"

"Well, judging from the way Faith's eyebrows shot all the way up into her hairline and halfway down the back of her head, I'd say she was. Buffy and Dawn did a double-take, too. I don't think anybody else noticed."

Willow played the scene over in her mind. "Could you tell what Faith was thinking?"

Tara frowned, thinking. "I'm not sure. I mean, part of me thinks she was freaked. But another part..."

"Another part thinks she thought it was kinda cool," Willow finished.

"Right. Faith's been drawn to Kyra since she first saw her," Tara mused. "I think if she believed she had some connection to her, that would make Faith herself more...legitimate, maybe; or worthwhile." She paused again, and stole a glance at Willow. "Does that freak you out, Will?"

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "I mean, I don't think I have the wiggins about Faith anymore, but it's like..." She struggled for words.

"Anything that involves Kyra gets your spidey senses tingling," Tara said, reaching over to take her hand. "Me, too. I mean, it would be one thing if Kyra just...knew something about Faith. It's the idea of her being involved at all that takes me over the edge." Her mouth tightened, the way it always did when she thought of Kyra as anything but a typical one-year-old.

"Exactly," Willow nodded emphatically. "It would help so much if only Kyra could talk. I mean, really talk." She caught Tara's look. "I'm not thinking about using magic at all! God, Tara, I would never do a spell on our child!"

"I'm sorry," Tara said, grimacing as she squeezed Willow's hand. "I just...This whole thing is so crazy, Willow." Her voice, always so calm, was agitated now.

This is taking a toll on her, too. I've been so caught up in my own stuff...

They turned in to the driveway on Revello and killed the engine. Moments later, Kyra was asleep in her crib, thumb poised just beyond her mouth, ready to spring into action if called upon.

"Buffy invited Giles and Faith over for dinner again, since last night was--interrupted," Willow reminded her as she stretched out in their bed. "I thought maybe this time I'd try to be a little more social." This earned an arched eyebrow from Tara, who gave a yawn as she snuggled in next to her.

"I'm glad you can smile about it, Sweetie. Just give me a bit to get my heart out of my throat whenever I think about it, OK?" Willow nodded against her hair, then drew a deep breath.

"Tara--Baby, I'm scared. About what all this means. I mean, somehow we get Kyra last year. We're still not sure why." She felt Tara stiffen next to her. She hates this conversation. "We do a protection spell, and there she is. A year goes by, and then Faith shows up on her birthday, with this prophecy..."

"Willow, don't."

"Tara, we have to talk about this. The last few days have been crazy, but we can't pretend like Kyra's completely separate from all of this."

Tara sat up now, tight lines of anger creased around her mouth. "Willow, for all we know she is completely separate from all of this. It--it could have been a total glitch; some kind of freak overlap in casting from different dimensions."

That's what she wants. That's the version she wants.

"Or--or maybe she was sent to us because she's endowed with some powerful magical ability and we're going to teach her," Tara continued obstinately.

"Tara, we asked for protection and there she was." You think I don't hate this, Baby?

"No. Not you, too. Don't start this 'Kyra was sent to protect you' crap." Her words vibrated with anger.

"I'm not saying she was sent to protect us," Willow said, trying desperately to find the right words. Maybe there aren't any. "I'm saying she didn't come to us in any kind of typical way and we don't know what that fact means."

"I do," Tara said flatly. "It means we're supposed to be her parents." She stared at Willow as if daring her to challenge that statement.

"Baby, I know that. I absolutely know that." She reached out and stroked Tara's face, her eyes beseeching her beloved to trust her heart, trust her intentions. Finally, some of the tension eased from Tara's eyes. After a moment, she snuggled back down into Willow's arms.

"I'm sorry," she said again, her voice muffled against Willow's heart. "I just can't stand this. Sometimes I let myself forget all the other stuff and the only thing I see is our little girl. We could be any two parents, going about our typical lives, raising our daughter."

Willow's heart twisted in her chest. "I know," she whispered. "Me too." She hesitated, unwilling to push the matter, but decided to forge on. "Tara...Baby, do you think we should tell Faith? About Kyra?"

Again, the stiffening. Willow said nothing, just waiting for her mate to come to her. Finally Tara asked, "Why?"

"Because she's in on whatever's going down. And if Kyra is involved in any way--"

"She's not." Again the absolute flatness in that voice that normally hummed with warmth.

"Tara, even if this Big Bad stuff has nothing to do with Kyra, Faith could be extra protection. I mean, having another Slayer looking out for our girl..." She trailed off, not sure whether to push the issue. She was well aware of the irony in her being the one to advocate trusting Faith. But she was strong, and she did seem completely taken with Kyra. Willow couldn't have imagined the Dark Slayer having such a reaction to a baby. That could be a powerful combination...

"I just don't know, Willow. I trust Faith, and yet...It's like, once the words are out there, there's no taking them back. Besides, I don't think Faith would protect Kyra any less, not knowing how she came to us."

Willow considered this. "You're right. There's no reason to believe that telling her about that night would make her care more."

Unless Kyra's origins do have something to do with the prophecy, and Faith needs to know that... But that conversation would have to wait.

"I'm not saying 'no,'" Tara said, extending what Willow recognized as an olive branch. "Let's just hold off for now--OK?"



"OK," Willow said, pressing a kiss into Tara's warm hair. "Holding off for now...and--and holding on...just...holding..."

She drifted off into a far better nap than yesterday's counterpart.

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Dinner that evening, while not complicated by a suicidal psychosis, was nonetheless not the most relaxing one Willow had ever enjoyed. The strain of self-vigilance was taking a toll, even in light of that afternoon's helpful information.

Willow fed Kyra, and then she and Tara took her out for a long stroll. Every so often, Kyra would point at something and grunt forcefully. Whenever she did, Willow found herself holding her breath. What was she afraid of, she wondered? Wasn't it possible that Kyra was just...pointing and grunting?

After a very dirty diaper ("I think she's mocking us," Willow said. "Look at that grin.") and a bath, Willow rocked her while Tara sat curled up on their bed, smiling at her family. To Willow, this was quite simply the best part of any day. Finally, she went down for what Willow hoped would be the night.

A little after eight-thirty, Giles and Faith appeared, holding three pizzas and some bread sticks from Dominoes.

This was not Dawn's favorite brand of pizza.

"Are we sure they're not demonic?" she asked. "Ever since they hired Donald Trump for a spokesman, I've had my suspicions."

"I don't know about the corporation," Buffy replied, plopping ice into glasses, "but his hair sure didn't come from this dimension."

"Maybe that was part of the deal he struck with the forces of darkness," Tara suggested. "They promised him untold riches, but in exchange he had to let an old tabby cat crawl up onto his head and die, its shiny, bushy tail sweeping right across his forehead for all eternity."

"So what do we have?" Willow asked, peering into the boxes.

"One veggie, one Meat Lovers, one Hawaiian," Faith replied, taking a fierce bite out of an unsuspecting breadstick.

Complaints, anyone?

"So...Kid's down for the night?" she continued, with what Willow thought was exaggerated nonchalance.

"Yeah," Tara replied, smiling at Faith. "And if we're lucky, it stays that way."

"Right," Willow echoed. "Because a full night's sleep? Not exactly a surplus in the first year."

They all started at the knock on the door.

"Xander?" Dawn asked in surprise as the carpenter and his wife walked into the house.

"Giles mentioned the dinner; thought maybe we could join you?" He waved a 6-pack of beer and some chips as his offering.

"The more the merrier," Willow replied, then added, "Unless you're talking boils. Then you really don't want many at all."

"Thanks. I'll, uh, keep that in mind," Xander replied tactfully.

There won't be enough.

"Is there enough?" he added, glancing at the pizza. "We should have brought something else."

"Booze, caffeine, and carbs," Buffy shrugged. "I think we're covered. And if we come up short--there's always instant mac and cheese."

Watch them try to pin this on me.

"Buff, how's the patrol lately?" Xander asked, biting into a thick slice and wiping the sauce from his chin.

"Faith and I figured we'd go out later; check things out."

"You want back-up?" he continued, taking a swig of beer.

Willow watched the two slayers exchange a glance. "I think we got it covered," Faith replied. "You should stay home; attend to your marital duties."

"They're not duties; they're honors," Xander replied, planting a gallant kiss on Anya's chip-filled hand. The ex-demon favored him with a delighted smile.

Probably just as well they don't ask me. When was the last time I kept up?

"Anything extra-special yucky in town these days?" Willow asked conversationally, thinking--not for the first time--how surreal their lives were. No "Did you hear the Pattersons got a new SUV?" for this group.

"Aside from our bad boy? Or bad girl?" Buffy amended. "Naw--just the usual assortment of vamps and scaly things."

Right. Awful, disgusting things...

"And much poofage was accomplished?" Willow continued.

"Exponential poofage. Faith here got a Sehnath demon without even looking--whipped an axe back over her shoulder. Very cool."

Willow took note of Buffy's praise, but chose not to comment on it. She could have that conversation later. Clearly, Faith's reaction to Dawn's "news" had made an impact on Buffy.

Faith, however, had also noticed the words; and if Willow didn't know better, she could have sworn the woman blushed. "Yeah, well, I saw its reflection in the window; took my best shot. Anyway, B took out the other two, so I figured I'd better start pulling my weight."

The last time you faced a Sehnath, you had to be rescued.

"How's life down at the site, Xander?" Tara asked, reaching for a Hawaiian slice. Willow loved how her partner always noticed Xander; always made him feel included.

Two slayers. I guess things are bad...

"Well, we're working on a cathedral, which is kinda cool because it's gonna be beautiful--not some sterile office, you know? But it also means you sorta have to keep the profanity to a minimum."

"You're under orders to watch your language?" Willow asked, a little surprised.

"There's nothing official. It's just--I mean, it's a church, for...well, for God's sake," Xander replied, shrugging. "There's sort of a built-in censorship."

How welcome would people like me be in this beautiful church of yours?

"Anyway, it's nice being on the other side of town for a change. The Dale of the Sun is bigger than you think. Word has it there's actually a world beyond it, too."

"Have you noticed how we always seem to stay on the same few blocks?" Willow asked. Seemed sorta weird...

You wanna get out of here? You can.

"And life in the trenches of capitalism?" Willow asked, knowing this was the easiest way to make Anya feel included; that, or asking about her top ten vengeance curses, a list that was constantly under revision.

"Making the world safe for profit," the store manager promptly replied.

"Right--because that's always under threat," Dawn commented, rolling her eyes.

"Go ahead--scoff," Anya said, tossing her head. "Just don't come running to me when all the doctors are sub-par because we've removed the incentive to excel."

"That's a bit of an exaggeration," Giles countered, taking a long pull of his own draft. "You could hardly argue this that country's health-care system is in thriving condition."

And here's another conversation that I have exactly squat to contribute to.

"You want to go socialist? Be my guest. Me, I'll be a part of the rising tide that lifts all boats." Anya crunched decisively on a chip.

"Um, somebody may wanna tell the millions of uninsured citizens that their boats are lifting," Tara said wryly. "They may be too busy going into work sick to notice."

Oh God, not this again.

"Guys? Before this degenerates into one of those talking head shows on Fox or CNN, where everybody shouts and nobody listens, maybe we could just agree to disagree?" Xander's voice was almost pleading.

Willow normally loved a good debate, but this time she agreed with her friend. Everyone was tired; everyone was on edge. They could have this conversation anytime.

Other conversation, though, didn't come that easily. They chatted about a few current events, and then talk seemed to die out.

"We should hit the streets," Faith said, looking at her chunky watch on the thick black leather band.

"You're right," Buffy nodded, glancing at her own slender time-piece on a thin strap of gold links. "Almost time for the undead to start getting their jollies. We don't wanna miss the fun."

Within a few minutes, the pizza boxes had been crushed and folded and the glasses and plates put in the dishwasher.

"Sure you don't need any help?" Willow asked, secretly hoping Buffy would say no. She wanted to curl up next to Tara, in the room next to their sleeping daughter.

"Thanks, Will, but we got it. If we need any help, we'll...um...we'll..."

"Scream like big sissy girls," Faith finished, tossing back the last of her Diet Coke.

"Right. The signal to send help: big screaming sissy noises." She pulled on her jacket and turned to Giles. "You OK for the night?"

"What? Oh, yes. It's helpful, knowing that this demon does take at least a bit of time to wreak its full havoc."

Moments later, both slayers were out the door.

I'd probably just fall behind again.

It's always like this.

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"Tara, did tonight feel sorta weird to you?" Willow asked later, around her yawn.

"You mean, tense? Or something else?" Tara stood in front of the mirror brushing her hair.

"I don't know," Willow frowned. "I can't really put my finger on it. I just..." She trailed off uncertainly.

"Are you worried one of them is affected somehow?" Tara asked, setting down her brush and turning to Willow with troubled eyes.

Willow shrugged. "Could we tell? I mean, I'd take a pulse on this whole group if we weren't all a little stressed, but..." She gave an exasperated sigh. "See, this is where I hate this."

"I hear you, Sweetie," Tara said, covering her own yawn. "But let's face it--normal for this group is a decidedly relative thing."

Willow nodded in rueful agreement and slid under the covers, patting the far-too-empty space beside her. "And how are you feeling, lovely life-mate o' mine?"

"After the last couple of days? Very, very tired." She held up a hand. "But no headache, Will. And not a tired of the 'Oh God, I could drop right here' variety."

Willow just grinned. "Busted. But hey--"

"Better safe than sorry," Tara finished, throwing her arm over Willow's chest and kissing her shoulder. "I agree. Night, sweetie--I love you."

"I love you, Tara. So much." She breathed in Tara's rich, clean scent and drifted off.

Willow worries about me. So much...

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The next day, Tara had two classes and a tutoring appointment. ("If this kid can't distinguish metaphor from allegory by the time I'm done with him, I'll turn in my 8th-grade spelling bee trophy," Tara said grimly as she pulled on her boots.)

They had arranged their schedules so that one of them could be with Kyra at all times, which meant that Willow often worked at home. She spent that morning running errands, including a trip to the grocery that was punctuated by Kyra's absolute enchantment with the fruit section. The two of them enjoyed a casual lunch al fresco (bottled water for the mother; a nice apple juice with just a hint of fruity aftertaste for the daughter) before Kyra went down for her nap.

Just before two, Willow decided to drive to the Magic Box and check in with the others. "Mommy's just feeling a little paranoid, sweetie," she said as she tucked Kyra into the car seat.

When she strolled in with Kyra, she was forcibly reminded of the old saying: "Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not really out to get you."

Giles and Anya seemed to have carried over their philosophical discord from last night. Anya kept casting disapproving glances at Giles' back, while the Watcher made various pointed references about what he deemed "price gouging."

Buffy and Faith emerged from the back room, and both women looked worn out. Willow reminded herself that they had been out on patrol the night before; she hadn't even heard Buffy come back. But now everything took on added significance. She unzipped Kyra's light jacket and kissed her head, watching as her child toddled straight over to Buffy and Faith, Slayer doll in hand.

"So--how's everybody doing?" she called out brightly. So brightly, in fact, that several faces turned to her in puzzlement.

She's wondering about me.

"Fine," Anya replied after a moment, "unless you count Mr. 'Anya's a Robber Baron' over there," with a curt nod in Giles' direction. There were only two patrons in the shop; after witnessing this exchange, one hastily bought a scrying mirror while the other mumbled an indistinct farewell and left.

"There. See? You've chased off the customers." Anya crossed her arms and glared at the Watcher.

"Me? I should think that your on-going, not to mention shrill, commentary left them curiously disinclined to spend money in such a welcoming atmosphere," Giles retorted, rubbing his eyes.

"And you two?" Willow continued, turning to the Slayers even as she realized that she might be making something out of nothing.

"Late night," Buffy said, sinking into a chair. "Ran into a whole nest o' vamps on our final sweep."

Willow nodded sympathetically, then asked, "But...um...Nobody's feeling kinda crazy? Right?" Very good, she told herself. Very subtle.

"Willow, you can't expect us not to get at least a little fatigued, with everything that's going on," Giles said, a trace of irritation in his voice. Then he added, in a considerably softer voice, "I'm sorry. There was no need to snap at you."

"But you're OK?" Willow continued.

He smiled gently. "Yes. Just wishing we knew more. And thank you for asking."

She's wondering about me.

"I think we're all kinda zapped, Will," Buffy continued, looking at Faith, who nodded in agreement while her eyes never left Kyra. "But nothing of the wiggins variety."

"Do we know where Xander is?" Willow asked, feeling like a hall monitor but not sure if she could relinquish the badge without dire consequences.

"I talked to him half an hour ago," Anya piped up from behind the counter. "He's going to pick Dawn up from school and stop by the bank on the way here."

"Good," Willow nodded. As stressful as it was to keep track of everyone, she felt better knowing that each person was usually with at least one other person. "Tara's coming by after her tutoring session."

"We should reserve a suite of rooms at the Sunnydale Ramada and move in together," Anya sighed.

"Not a chance," Faith shot back. "I'm gonna pick up some class, bunkin' with Giles."

"Meaning what? You'll lift your pinky when you scratch yourself?" Buffy asked sweetly.

"Whoa...Don't rush me there, B."

Willow pulled the latest copy of Byte magazine out of her bag and settled in to read, glancing surreptitiously at the two slayers. Kyra had climbed up onto Buffy's lap, investigating her necklace. After a moment, their conversation turned to various battles, and some of the demons Faith had tangled with in Los Angeles. She noticed that neither of them mentioned Angel. She also noticed that Faith's eyes were practically dancing as she exchanged war stories with Buffy, and that Buffy's were not exactly dissimilar.

But was it for the same reason? The more she thought about it, the more easily she could see Faith's attraction to Buffy. She'd wanted so desperately to be on the inside--with the group, to some extent, but Buffy was clearly the main attraction. It went beyond admiration, or being sisters-in-arms. Buffy had been her greatest hope and her ultimate downfall, because Faith couldn't let herself trust that she was important. With the choices she made, she got Buffy's attention the only way she knew how: by becoming her enemy. And now they were creating some kind of new beginning. They had forged an uneasy alliance that had gotten easier surprisingly quickly.

What about Buffy, though? Willow knew that her best friend felt an ultimate loneliness about being the Slayer. With Faith, there was someone who understood: to the bone, from the gut. Willow could listen to Buffy until the end of time and she could offer sympathy and confidence and respite, but she couldn't offer empathy. How much did Buffy crave that? Beyond what she ever really let on? But that was far different from sexual attraction. Buffy might see Faith as a sister, or sister warrior.

Or could a shared destiny transcend that, create a bond that led to a partnership that Buffy would have never even considered otherwise?

And did Buffy have any idea whatsoever that Faith had fallen for her?

"So I finish up a sweep and grab some take-out, and all of a sudden this vamp jumps out from behind the dumpster out back," Faith was saying, "I'm absolutely whipped, right? All I wanna do is get back to the hotel and eat my Kung Pao. I was so pissed off, I staked him with a chopstick."

"How'd it work?" Buffy asked curiously.

"I'm here, aren't I? Just one big 'Poof,' then dust."

"Poof!" Kyra shouted.

"Right," Faith grinned. "Poof!" She bent toward Kyra, both of them laughing, dark hair tumbling over both sets of eyes.

No one will ever take her down.

"Revenge is a dish best served cold, Dawnster." Willow turned at the sound of Xander's voice.

Is it?

Not like me. I get beaten.

"What's up, Dawnie?" Willow asked, immediately concerned.

"Oh, that skank-ho Christie totally ruined my painting," the teenager said, rolling her eyes as she plunked her back-pack on the table. "I was working with oils, and she 'accidentally' nudged my



elbow as I was putting in these deep burgundy touches. They were just supposed to be touches, mind you, but now it looks like I pulled a van Gogh on my nice little bouquet of wildflowers." She sighed with the infinite angst of a teenage artist.

I know what would get her.

"You want me and Big Sis to bang some heads?" Faith offered casually.

I could probably manage that.

"I mean, we wouldn't have to really bust her up," Faith amended, looking to Buffy for confirmation.

That's what I'm good for.

"Thanks, but no," Dawn said after a moment in which she seemed to give serious consideration to the offer. "Sometimes it just sucks being a teenager."

But it's never as bad as my life, is it? I make sure you don't forget that.

"Youth is wasted on the young," Giles noted, sipping his tea.

"What's wasted on the old?" Xander asked curiously.

"Bangin' hot sex!" Faith promptly replied. "Right, Giles?"

The only things I've ever been good at are things they all laugh about.

You have no idea. You don't know what it's like to be this lonely. Not this kind of lonely, where options dwindle day by day...

"Yes, well, when I'm not watching Masterpiece Theatre, I'm watching Masturbate in Peace videos. Really, what are my other options?" His voice was frosty.

Or they're afraid of.

"Hey, good one, G-Man," Faith said admiringly.

Why two? Why two slayers?

"Yeah, look who's getting all with the naughty talk," Dawn added, eyes wide.

I'm a joke to them. They can't imagine me having a life...

I'm a joke to them. Nothing but a crude joke...

"Whatcha up to?" Dawn asked, glancing at the two slayers and Kyra.

"Me and your sis were swapping war stories," Faith replied. "Looks like K-Biscuit here's pickin' up some tips."

She could teach her.

"We've made a lot of money today," Anya announced abruptly, and a little loudly.

"Oh-kay...Well, great," Xander replied after a moment. "Now we can buy that yacht we've been saving up for!" He gave a short laugh.

At least she contributes something tangible. What, exactly, do I do?

He's embarrassed. I embarrassed him.

"Seriously, Anya, that is good," Willow said, suddenly feeling oddly protective of the ex-demon. "I mean, you really do keep this place going."

Right. Because my attempt to expand to something new was an embarrassment. What made me think I could open a shop? Anya's the real owner now; in the ways that matter.

"I mean, it'll always have Giles' inimitable stamp upon it, of course," Willow amended, wondering if she had hurt his feelings.

She knows you're weak. She knows you want to be more than you are. You need a young woman to salve your bruised ego.

They know I'm weak. They've already had to send two other slayers because they know I can't make it.

Willow's trying to make me feel better. She feels sorry for me.

The uneasiness that had lain over Willow since last night was cresting, stretching into an as-yet undefined horror. Something here--someone--was wrong, so completely wrong. The conversation, in fits and starts...

Willow was right about Faith being here, but she had the wrong reason.

The fatigue was palpable; there was an exhaustion she couldn't locate.

Did you think that opening a shop would keep you young? Did you hope this would become a gathering place, where you would have to be invited?

Was this the time for a spell? Even if it were cast upon her dearest friends, without their knowledge?

I'm the one they don't need. Look at me, I'm ridiculous. My little boots and perfect hair and worrying about my tan lines...

They don't fear me anymore. They never ask my advice. When was the last time I did anything except embarrass Xander?

She couldn't, could she? If only Tara were here...

I fought against using computers because I knew they could replace me. So silly, yesterday, with all my talk of 'an ancient text.' As if that would remind them that I was useful...

Or she could ask their permission. She could just say right upfront that she was worried; that she had a bad feeling she couldn't pin down.

She's tough. She's the real fighter. They picked me by mistake Even Kyra knows it: 'Fate.'

"Guys," she began. "This may sound sort of weird--"

They have work to do. Real work.

Look at Xander watching her. He's proud of her. He deserves someone like her...

Willow knows something's amiss. She's really such an intelligent girl. You have to leave; let them do their work.

Well, maybe not a lesbian, but someone smart and kind.

She could take my place. She should take my place. Look at everything she already knows...

Did she hear a chair scrape against the floor? She was trying to look everywhere at once, but she couldn't.

Who was it?

How much do I think about vengeance? I still spend my time thinking of ways to get even...

Willow knows something. For once in your life, do the right thing.

"OK, this may sound really weird, but something's wrong."

Go. Go now. There's still time to do the right thing.

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She couldn't watch them all at once; she had to do something--

"I'm sorry, but I just remembered that I left something back at my apartment. I really should go; I'll be right back."

That's right. Just do it; don't make a scene. They have work to do.

Giles? But wait; no...

Too much; there was too much energy. She had no choice; she had no time.

"Yeah, hold that thought, Will. My water's back in the training room."

Buffy?

"Stop!"

The roar of her own voice surprised her. She took in the faces around her--stunned, guilty, ashamed.

"Everyone here who thinks we'd be better off without them, raise your hand!"

She'd try it the Muggle way first.

"Will, what in the name of Bob Villa are you talking about?" Xander's voice held equal parts shock and fear.

"I--I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Willow."

"Yes you do." Her voice was deadly quiet.

Yes. Giles.

Who else?

Willow prayed that no one walked through the door. Could she keep track of them all if there were a distraction?

"Who else? People, listen to me. It's here. I know you believe what you're saying to yourselves right now, but so did I." She scanned the room again: Xander was still shocked; so was Dawn--she thought.

She stopped when she took in the two slayers.

Her dearest friend just wasn't that good of an actor.

"Buffy," she practically whispered. "Buffy, listen to me."

"Will, it's just a bottle of water." But the voice was completely unnatural now. Even Xander and Dawn could tell; and so could Faith.

"B, listen to me--I don't know what's going on in that head, but kick it out." Desperation rippled through her voice, along with another emotion that Willow recognized. She had heard it in Tara's voice two nights ago.

Could there be anybody else?

Willow would have been eight; as it was, this demon needed three more good souls. One good sweep this afternoon, and it would have eaten its fill.

"It's not me," came a quiet voice from behind the counter. "I'm not somebody it would come after."

"Ahn," Xander breathed, and Willow thought his legs might buckle. And then he was practically vaulting over chairs to reach his wife.

Of the three, Willow thought that only Buffy would pose a serious flight risk. But Faith had inched closer; was ready to use force if love didn't work.

"I know you're only trying to help, Willow, and it's very kind of you, really, but you have to acknowledge--"

"Stop it, Giles! Whatever you're thinking, it's wrong."

"How could you know that? You have no idea what I'm thinking." The Watcher's voice was heavy with exhaustion and loneliness.

"You're thinking that you're obsolete; that you have nothing to offer anymore. You're thinking you're too old, and you can't keep up, and you should just get out of the way."

Giles looked at her, stunned. "Well, not in so many words, perhaps..."

She swung around. "Buffy, you were thinking that Faith should take your place, weren't you? That she was a better Slayer than you and that's why she's here."

Willow wondered dimly if she had invoked some kind of magical assistance without knowing it. And then it came to her: she knew these people. When she realized they were affected, she knew what shape it would take, what dirges would play in their minds.

"And you're thinking you're an embarrassment, aren't you?" Xander asked Anya, a gentleness in his voice that Willow had heard only once before, on their wedding day. "You're thinking I could find someone better."

"You could," came the tiny reply, and Willow felt her heart break for this woman she herself had denigrated more than once.

She looked around again, and for the first time, was glad to see confusion on her friends' faces. Gone were the expressions of absolute certainty she had seen only moments before.

"I...I just think--I think Faith would do a better job than me." But her voice was wavering now.

"Fuck that." The words were a hiss. "Don't you even think about leavin' me to face this shit on my own."

"Or me." Dawn's face was white with terror; she seemed beyond tears.

There was a long silence. Willow heard a pounding that seemed to grow within her own ears, and she realized she was holding her breath.

"Dear Lord," Giles finally whispered, and sank into a chair.

"It was gonna take all three of us," Buffy muttered, leaning over as if to keep from fainting. Faith's hand hovered just above the small of her back for one moment, and then haltingly came to rest on the thin blue silk of Buffy's shirt. Buffy made no move to end the contact.

Willow felt her own equilibrium returning, and for one sweet moment let relief wash over her.

And then frozen fire shot through her.

"Where's Tara?"

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"This crap doesn't make any sense."

How many times had she heard that refrain?

"I don't know why I even have to learn this stuff," the grating voice continued. "I'm a business major. I'm gonna go straight into my dad's company when I graduate."

Tara mentally congratulated herself again on having quoted a fee ten dollars over her usual hourly amount when the well-dressed young white man with the "Bush/Cheney 2000" patch on his back-pack had stopped her in the English building last month. "This guy down my hall says you're the best tutor he ever had. I need your help."

She didn't like Blake Mansfield, but she took her work seriously. So seriously, in fact, that she had reached deep within herself and reluctantly prevented him from telling his professor in his first paper, "I don't always give myself enough credit. I guess you could say I suffer from self-defecation."

He had pulled himself up--or rather, Tara had pulled him--to a safe 'C' and she would be well quit of him in two, maybe three weeks. He'll graduate and make sixty thousand his first year. How much did that social worker make--the one who killed herself?

"Because good communication skills will enhance your success in any endeavor," she now said rotely. "Asshole," she mentally added--not so rotely. She could feel her frustration building--with Blake; with all of these students who never seemed to question the good fortune that they had been born into.

"So..." Blake began with an air of studied nonchalance that served only the opposite purpose. Tara's ears pricked up immediately. "You seein' anybody?"

You have got to be kidding me.

"Yes," she said simply, after a moment. "Now, we were discussing narrative perspectives. As Gaye Nau Carr talks about in her text, the primary--"

"You two serious?"

"Blake, I really don't want to talk about--"

"Because, you know, if he's not doin' it for you--"

"She does, Blake. She does it for me very well. And stop dropping the 'g's' on your gerunds."

Ah, the look. How best to describe it? "Shocked titillation," she decided.

"Whoa...You're a ..." He seemed unable to say the word.

"Lesbian," Tara helped out. "Lesbo. Dyke. Yes--a big one." She felt uncharacteristically irritable. She didn't like Blake, but she was a little surprised by the acerbity of her reaction. "Can we return to the topic of your writing?"

"Oh--sure." He shifted noisily in his chair. "Hey, listen...I didn't mean to offend you," he began.

"No offense taken," Tara lied, then realized she wasn't exactly sure what had offended her.

His entire being, she decided. Picking up her red pen, she stifled a yawn. I should've turned in about an hour earlier last night.

The rest of the tutorial passed uneventfully, though Tara was aware of Blake casting her sidelong glances. If he asks about our sex lives, or if I've ever thought about being with a man, I will rip his face off.

As they wrapped up and set their next appointment, Blake cleared his throat awkwardly. "So, um--you ever think about--"

"No!. I haven't thought about it in years, and I'll never think about it in the future." God, people could be so--

"Raising your fee?" he concluded shakily, after a moment in which Tara imagined him stitching the left side of his face back on. "Because you really could." He slung his bag over his shoulder. "See you Tuesday," he added, and practically sprinted out of the student union coffee shop.

Oops.

Tara sighed as she made her way to the counter to order another mocha to go. Perhaps that would wake her up a little. She paid for her drink absent-mindedly and returned to her booth. Maybe he'll think next time before he makes a bunch of assumptions...

Maybe he wouldn't.

She sat down and considered her options. Ordinarily she'd walk the two miles downtown, especially on such a beautiful day. But her legs felt like lead today.

God, I could go for a nap. I'm just--

She sat up abruptly. Exhausted?

OK, now you're being paranoid. Fatigue was to be expected. How could she not be tired, with everything that was going on? But she wouldn't call it exhausted.

A headache? Maybe just a small one, but she suspected it was eyestrain. She was almost certain she needed glasses.

And besides, Willow had described a killer headache. This hardly qualified.

Was she a target? She knew that she fit the entry requirements for being a White Hat. But would it really come for her?

It came for Willow. Her beloved Willow, whom she'd come so close to losing two nights ago. Willow, who would have died if Faith hadn't been there.

I couldn't have saved her. Faith, though, had managed both to reach Willow and pull her back to safety, catching her before the rope snapped--

Oh goddess. She felt faint again, as she had so many times since that moment; as she did whenever she watched that moment in her mind. Sometimes, against her will, she imagined Faith being just a fraction of a shade too late, and she saw Willow's body jerk with the force--

No. No, it didn't happen. But it could have. It would have, if not for Faith. And why had she jumped? Because she believed Tara would leave her. Willow had "seen" her kiss Faith. Willow had watched it happen; seen her worst fear come true.



You did this to her.

"Whoa--the big nasty evil thing did that," she replied aloud, drawing some curious glances.

True, but you didn't see it in time.

She shook her head in frustration. Guilt wouldn't help anything.

Thank the goddess for Faith...Poor Faith, who loved a woman who might not be able to return that love. Faith, who had the strength and the speed to reach Willow, because God knows Tara didn't.

There's not an ounce of fat on that girl. What would it be like to move that quickly? To be in such perfect shape?

Tara? Tara had practically lumbered to the window. She had a sudden memory of 9th-grade dodge ball: Tim O'Reilly, hitting her in the rear. She felt the sting, heard the sharp "thwack" of the ball smacking against her shorts. "Couldn't hardly miss it," Tim gloated, to a chorus of laughter.

Now you're just feeling sorry for yourself. You call that suffering?

I don't call it fun, she answered silently.

People go through lots worse.

"How about getting slapped around on a weekly basis?" she muttered in reply to herself.

Yeah, Donnie beat on you. And Daddy beat on Donnie. At least your mother loved you.

And at least if she died, Kyra would be in better shape than Tara herself was after her mother died.

At least you got out.

Nothing would ever make her go back there, to that cold harsh place where people made fun of her and home was no sanctuary. She'd worked so hard to get away...

She'd left, and they'd come after her, with tales of demons and how she'd hurt people if she didn't come home where they could keep an eye on her. That lie had been stripped bare, and she took another step into her life with Willow.

And then Donnie had come after her, with a whole new horror story that threatened to drag her back.

Finally, she had gone to them, to put that time and place behind her. She'd faced her old family with her new one and at the end of that day she'd left exhausted but free.

She didn't talk much about that time, though she knew Willow would listen and hold her and love her through it. But that conversation was exhausting, and there was still some quiet, superstitious part of her that believed that giving voice to it gave it power, breathed new life into embers best left to fade into ash.

And now, two years past that showdown, one of the things she just found it easier not to talk about was the fact that every now and then old ghosts came to her in her sleep; ran cold fingers over her when she least expected it. There was one bone-dry voice that roused itself from its deathbed--randomly, fleetingly--to whisper: You still belong to me.

But this was her home now, she reminded herself as she sipped her mocha, still not moving from her booth. This was where she belonged and no one could make her leave. Willow was her home; Willow, whom she loved passionately, fiercely, wildly.

Just like Daddy loved Mom.

She jerked back as if slapped, her heart slamming into her ribs. "No," she whispered. "It's different."

He had a wife he loved. They were expecting a child--one he loved as much as you love Kyra.

"That doesn't make us the same," she answered herself.

He let himself believe she loved him...

"She did love him."

For one, brief period. She loved him for the best moment of his life, and then she got tired of him.

"That's not how it happened."

She got tired of him and left and he went back to that cold place, all alone.

"No--he lied to her to try to keep her." Tara knew that the people in the next booth were looking at her, but she didn't care. They couldn't understand.

Because he knew she wouldn't love him the way he loved her. Because she was bright and joyful and beautiful and he was plain and dull. Of course she got tired of him.

"No. It wasn't like that."

Someone so vibrant...She wasn't meant to be with someone like him. She found someone else...

Oh goddess--she was tired. Just a nap, just a respite to clear her head, which was hurting worse now...

Wait--yes, the headache...

Does Willow see it? You talk to her about facing her fears and how you'll never leave her, even if you do think Faith is kinda hot. You act like you have it together, but you don't tell her, do you?

The headache was important.

Willow doesn't know how scared you are, does she? You can't tell her, because if you did, she'd worry about you.

She felt disoriented, unsure why she was having this argument with herself. She shook her head as if to clear some space. She was just tired, and if her head would quit hurting...

Willow, who fights demons and vampires and helps save the world. She'd have to worry about you, too. Worry about you feeling scared...

No. Think. She was just tired...

In the middle of some battle, her mind might wander and that's all it would take. You're amazed, too, aren't you, that no one has died yet? What if Willow's the first? What if she dies because she's thinking about you instead of the vampire that's about to sink his teeth into her neck? Beautiful Willow, falling cold and lifeless to the ground because she was wondering if you were OK. Wondering if you were scared of turning into the man who raised you or if you were worried because you don't look like Buffy or Anya or any of the other girls who wear tight pants and show off their stomachs...

"This is crazy."

Right. This wasn't her.

Oh goddess, it hurt.

Poor Tara's upset. Poor Tara feels fat. Poor, stuttering Tara...

She stabbed blindly into her bag to grab some aspirin, hands shaking. Pulling out the small plastic bottle, it took her a moment to see it clearly. It took her another moment to see the note folded and taped onto the side. She recognized Willow's writing.

Baby, do you have a headache? What are you thinking?

See? She has to worry about you enough as it already is.

Are you feeling shaky? Are you tired?

What if she's thinking about this when she's attacked? How will you explain it to the others?

Tara, this thing works so quickly. If you have a headache, or if you're tired, please call me!

How will you explain it to Kyra?

She gave a small cry, heedless of the nearby patrons who were now staring openly. Then she shook her head again, fiercely. Willow was trying to reach her. She looked back at the note, squinting. Her head was throbbing.

Tara, if you're thinking anything along the lines of me being better off without you, STOP IT! Even if you can't stop it, b/c I know it's not that simple, JUST HOLD ON! KEEP READING THIS NOTE, OVER & OVER!

Kyra, left with only...you. Because Willow died...

Tara stared at the note, some tiny voice on a far shore of her mind screaming at her not to look away. If she looked away, she was gone.

Don't. Blink.

Tara, if you're reading this I want you to call me. I'll be home until 2, & then I'm going to the store. Get to a payphone. See? I taped 2 quarters to the aspirin bottle.

See how she worried about you? What doesn't she see, because she's thinking of you?

Pay phone. Yes--there was one, on that wall. But it was so far away, and she was so tired. And her headache--had she even taken the aspirin?

The aspirin. The aspirin held Willow's note. Willow's note held her. She dragged her eyes back to her lover's writing, her mind shrieking with the effort. Everything hurt so bad...

She drew a deep breath, and rose slowly to her feet. One more breath, and then she took a shaky step forward: quarters clutched in one hand; Willow's note in the other.

Are you really going to be that selfish? Willow's working on something so important. You're going to call her now? Distract her? Inconvenience her?

She stared at the note again, reading the lines over and over, making her way blindly to the phone.

I LOVE YOU, BABY! I NEED YOU!

How long did it take her to reach the phone? How many times she she trip over something, or someone? And no one offered to help.

You're embarrassing yourself. If Willow could see you, tripping and lurching like this...

And then she was there, and the receiver was in her hand, and she was somehow forcing the quarters into the slot with awkward, stupid, fumbling fingers and then she had punched in the numbers and it was ringing...Oh God, please pick up--

There's still time. Leave. Let her do her work. Don't let her see you like this.

--and finally Anya answered but her voice sounded worried and dim and Tara heard herself say, from someplace far outside her own mind:

"Tell Willow I need her."

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It took Xander exactly twelve minutes to hurtle his very used Mercury down Safuega and then Watson and finally onto campus, Buffy shouting directions. The Slayer had only been pulled back from her own brink a few moments before Tara called, but insisted she felt well enough to go.

"I know where the union is," she said, turning to Xander. "You drive; I may need back-up. Willow, keep Tara on the line."

Later, Willow wouldn't be able to recall exactly what she'd said. She knew only that they were words of love and assurance and reality; mantras that she tried to cast over Tara like a cloak. She thought briefly of using some sort of spell to wrap Tara's mind in a safe cocoon, but she couldn't risk any mistakes and she didn't want to break voice contact for even the few seconds it would take to utter the words.

At first, Tara could mumble little beyond, "I'm still here." Gradually though--far too gradually for Willow's taste--her voice grew stronger. By the time she let herself sag into Buffy's arms, Tara was able to whisper, "You used the crimson-colored pen. Guess you meant business."

Xander took the receiver and placed it gently back onto its cradle as Buffy rested her head briefly against Tara's. None of them moved for a moment, oblivious to the stares. Finally, Tara squeezed Xander's hand.

"Take me to Willow."

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Just let me see her. Just let me see her. Willow had stayed on the line with Tara until Xander and Buffy's arrival; she knew her partner was safe. But she wouldn't know it--in that deepest, most demanding part of her heart--until she looked upon that beauty with her own eyes.

Which she did approximately twenty minutes after they hung up. Anya locked up the Magic Box ("Money doesn't matter right now," she said, at which point Willow feared that Anya had been possessed all over again) and they removed as a group to the Summers residence. She knew that Kyra was unsettled by her own distress. Her little brow was furrowed, and the dancing eyes had grown clouded and uncertain.

"It's OK, sweetie," Willow crooned softly, rocking Kyra tightly against her chest. "Mommy's just a little stressed." Kyra pushed back slightly in Willow's arms and gave her a look that said, "No shit, Sherlock."

When Xander and Buffy walked in with Tara, Willow finally let herself trust that this day would not be the very worst day of her life. "Baby," she said simply, and walked over to Tara with Kyra in her arms. Surprisingly strong arms enfolded her, enfolded their daughter, and she decided that it would be folly to ever, ever leave that embrace. Tara's arms tightened around her. Oxygen becoming an issue, she thought, and couldn't care less.

Is this how Tara felt the night before last? How did she stand it?

"Willow, I'm so sorry," Tara choked out.

"Don't," Willow whispered, heart twisting. "You have nothing to be sorry for." She breathed in Tara's essence, reminding herself that she would get to wake up to it tomorrow, and the day after that. "There is exactly one creature responsible for this, and we'll bring it down, I promise you."

Tara finally pulled back just slightly, kissing Kyra on top of the head. The tiny eyes were laughing again, looking first from one mother to the other. Wrapping one arm tightly over Willow's shoulders, Tara addressed the group. "Buffy told me it hit you guys, too. I'm so glad you're OK."

Willow finally gave her thoughts permission to visit the other people in the room. None of them had a scratch on them--and Willow didn't know if they'd ever looked worse.

All these bloodless wounds...

Taking in the scene before her, Willow secretly admitted to herself that she was surprised by the choice of targets. She wouldn't have considered Buffy, Giles, or Anya to be the vulnerable ones. Maybe it knew that. Maybe it knew that I was more worried about Xander and Dawn and Faith.

The only person who didn't look stunned or traumatized was Anya, who now seemed almost perky. "Yes, I was one of its targets," she said breezily. "What with my work as a do-gooder and all."

Xander shook his head, holding his wife's hand with exquisite tenderness. "Yes you were, Ahn--and let's make sure you're never a target, ever again, OK?" Anya looked at him and smiled serenely. After a moment, he added self-consciously, "I gotta say--I kinda figured I'd be on the hit-list. Let's face it, kids--behind this confident, manly persona, I've been known to feel just a wee bit insecure."

Dawn looked at him in surprise, and then nodded almost guiltily. "I...Me too. I thought I was vulnerable. I mean, I have my issues."

"Apparently we all do," Buffy said dryly.

Giles sighed. "I should hardly have thought myself prone to such insecurities, but I was obviously mistaken."

"Maybe you just never thought what you did worry about would end up looking quite like that," Tara said softly.

Giles gave her a look of surpassing gentleness, and appreciation. "It was indeed horrific," he replied simply.

There was an awkward silence. What do you say, Willow wondered, after you've seen someone's worst fears? She felt as if she had caught a glimpse of some deep, private part of them that they had never volunteered to share.

Giles? They had joked about the age difference. We joked about him being old. How lonely did he really feel? Did he wonder if he would ever find a partner? Did he lie awake and worry about growing old alone?

Anya--how many times had Willow rolled her eyes and made sarcastic comments about the acerbic ex-demon? True, her feelings had softened over the last two years. She knew Anya truly loved Xander, and she had proven more than once the worth of her heart. But Anya was still...Anya. Abrupt; tactless. And apparently, now, capable of feeling deep shame.

And her best friend...Buffy actually felt that Faith could replace her? Should replace her?

As if reading her thoughts, Buffy said morosely, "I feel like I'm standing here in my psychological underwear." Faith was silent, but her eyes shimmered with some deep and very powerful emotion.

This thing has pissed off the wrong people.

"Yes," Giles concurred ruefully, "I feel as though I've quite exposed myself." A brief silence greeted this. "As it were," he added belatedly.

"I'll be taking that visual to the grave," Xander muttered.

"Well I feel great," Anya said cheerfully. "Apparently I pass moral muster."

"Ahn, honey, can we give your loving husband just a few minutes to get his heart out of his throat before we order a balloon bouquet? I would've lost you." His already drawn face whitened.

Willow echoed his sentiments in her mind, squeezing Tara's hand almost convulsively.

"Can I just voice my official opinion that this thing sucks?" Dawn said tightly. "In the past forty-eight hours, I've almost lost my sister and four friends." She bit her lip. "I freakin' hate this thing."

"I'm her friend," Anya smiled, leaning forward and patting Dawn's hand. "Probably related to all the good I've done."

After a moment, Giles rose from his seat on the couch and began pacing.

He's in problem-solving mode. Willow was glad for the shift. A part of her--the biggest part--wanted to whisk Tara upstairs and spend the rest of the day locked in an embrace so tight that nothing bad could ever insinuate itself into that union. And all of the implications, what she had learned about these people she held so dear...

But now--now they needed to work. How many times had they asked their feelings to wait while they attended to some impending doom? She was not unaware of the irony of that fact in this particular case.

"Hey, great trick with the aspirin bottle, Will," Xander offered suddenly. Willow had explained it to the others on the ride here.

"Yes, Willow, you should be commended," Giles said warmly.

"Think I just did that," Xander pointed out.

She looked into Tara's fathomless blue eyes, reminding herself yet again that those eyes would gaze upon her tomorrow, hold her in their warmth. "It's true," Tara murmured. "It was the only thing that kept me here."

Willow swallowed heavily, pushing the terror away. "Yeah, well---there are a couple more around here," she replied. "I put one on your pillow, in case you came home for a nap. And there's one on the medicine cabinet in our bathroom, plus one on the fridge."

Xander looked at her curiously. "Why? Did your attack leave you craving pickles or something?"

"Oh, no pickles," Willow muttered under her breath, and caught Tara's smiling eyes. She knows. "Well, see, when Tara settles in to take an afternoon nap, she sometimes likes a little coffee mug of vanilla ice cream with a shot of orange juice on it."



There was a brief pause, and then Dawn announced, "OK, now that's unnatural."

"I just wanted to cover the bases," Willow said, her eyes never leaving Tara's.

"When did you write them, sweetie?"

"When I got up with Kyra last night. I was thinking about everything, especially this Big Bad. That's when I got the idea."

Tara's lips brushed over her hair. "That's my girl," she whispered. "Always thinking."

Dawn had now risen as well and was virtually impersonating Giles in her pacing. "OK, so--what have we learned, Dorothy? What do we know about this?"

"We know that it works incredibly quickly," Giles said thoughtfully. "Last evening, I felt somewhat...peckish. But I attributed it to fatigue. And the fatigue itself seemed reasonable. We don't exactly work banker's hours."

"That's how it was with me," Buffy chimed in. "And I felt OK on patrol; maybe a little wired."

Wonder what that was about...

"Well, I'm usually a bit impatient," Anya volunteered, and Willow heard a silent chorus of agreement go up around the room.

"But this afternoon...I didn't notice anything being off as it happened," Buffy continued. "You asked if I was OK, Will? I would've passed a lie detector test when I said yes."

"That's the really scary part," Willow nodded, moving to the couch with Tara's hand still wrapped tightly in her own. "When you're in it, it's like--of course this is the way it is. Of course I'm 'Your Insecurity Here.' Of course everyone would be better off without me."

"Even with your heads-up, Sweetie, it took everything I had to call you." Tara shook her head, and then looked up suddenly. "But it knew I had a note. I mean, it was playing on my fears just like we talked about, but when I saw your note, it didn't miss a beat."

"What do you mean?" Giles asked sharply.

"I mean it...incorporated the note right into the barrage." Tara stared off, remembering. "As soon as I read your first line, Will, it wove that right into the monologue."

"Fascinating," Giles murmured.

"And not even remotely of the good. This thing can adapt as it attacks?" Xander asked incredulously. "Oh yeah. This creature is definitely off my Christmas card list."

"Don't make assumptions about religion, Xander," Anya reminded him. "It's not right." She nodded with the assurance of one secure in her morality.

"And I'm guessing it's not too pleased with us, kids," Faith said suddenly. It was the first she'd spoken since their arrival at the house. Willow noticed that she stayed close to Buffy's side. There was no production about it; just silent, steady connection.

Whither she goest...

"As far as we know, this fucker--sorry D--was batting a thousand before us," Faith continued. "Everybody before us was found after the fact, right? As in, they were alone when they did it?"

"That's correct," Giles nodded.

"And I was trying to be alone," Willow joined in. "You guys crashed in, and if you hadn't been a Slayer, Faith, I'd have been toast." She felt Tara's tighten on her shoulder.

"So this thing is probably not used to having its nefarious plot thwarted by a bunch of meddling kids," Xander said slowly.

"It misses Willow two nights ago--" Anya began.

"And decides to try for the White Hat trick today," Buffy finished grimly.

"At which point it goes oh for three," Dawn mused, then looked at Tara. "How long would you say your attack was, Tara? I mean, start to finish?"

"It was pretty quick," Tara replied thoughtfully. "I didn't really notice feeling tired until about midway through the tutorial, and even that wasn't anything beyond ordinary mid-afternoon drowsiness. It didn't keep me from focusing or anything.

"What about the headache?" Buffy asked. "Mine started this morning but it built up slowly. I took a couple of aspirin--it actually felt better for a little bit. It didn't pick up real steam until--I dunno--three or four hours after I first noticed it."

Tara shook her head. "Mine was different. It came a little bit after the yawning started, and it hit hard and fast.

"I wonder..." Giles said slowly, rubbing his jaw. "Is it possible that this force moved to Tara after we were free of it?"

Silence greeted this conjecture.

"Were you feeling irritable, Tara?" Dawn asked.

"A little," Tara admitted. "But Blake's always a little irritating. Was it anything extra? Maybe...It's so hard to look back on what you were feeling when you know what came afterwards. Like, that knowledge skews your recollection."

"OK. Let's think. It needed three more, and almost had us," Anya said.

"It would have had us, if Willow hadn't recognized something was off," Buffy stressed.

"It's true," Xander muttered, self-recrimination etched on his face. "I didn't pick up on anything."

"Me either," Dawn replied softly, her voice at once acquitting Xander and indicting herself.

"Maybe I'm extra-attuned to it," Willow suggested. But this wasn't her focus at the moment. "The point is, it didn't get you guys. So it moved on..." She felt nausea waving up over her again.

"It moved on to Tara," Giles concluded. "If, however, it truly has the capacity to act in the moment, to adapt to emerging conditions--and I believe it does, based on Tara's experience--then it would almost certainly know that Tara would be on guard."

"Yeah, but so were we," Buffy argued. "Again I say: if Willow hadn't been there, we'd be dead."

"But I wasn't with Tara," Willow practically whispered, as the guilt she had so far managed to keep at bay slammed into her and shot into her gut. Oh Baby...I left you alone...

"Willow, don't." Tara's voice was soft but insistent, pulling her back. "Sweetie, you said it yourself: there's only one creature responsible for this. You were with me, Willow. You thought of the notes; you saved me."

"I should have been with you in person," Willow argued miserably, tears pricking her eyes. "I was worried enough to put notes on aspirin bottles, so why not just make sure we were together?" Maybe they should wait to have this conversation in private, but she was too distraught to stop herself.

"Because you can't be with me all the time, Willow." Tara spoke with finality. "You took precautions with me, but if you hadn't been at the shop today, we'd have lost Buffy, and Giles, and Anya." She leaned closer, closing out everyone in the room. "Willow," she whispered, "you can't do everything."

Willow just nodded. She knew that this conversation wasn't over, but she also knew that this wasn't the time to focus on her guilt. She drew a deep breath.

"Right. OK. So--we have reason to believe that when it couldn't get you guys, it headed for Tara." Will I ever be able to say those words without feeling like I'm going to vomit?

"Who is sure to be on her guard," Dawn continued. "Instead of selecting someone else who would be easier pickings. I mean, three would have sealed the deal, right? We don't know where

it goes after it has the ten, but we know that's the number. So it makes a big grab and comes up short. So if it sees that we can stop it not just once but twice--and save four people in the process--why not go someplace else, get someone else? We can't be the last of the good guys in this town."

"Maybe it was revenge," Faith said slowly. "Maybe, when it got blocked twice--the second time by the person it lost the first time--it decided to get personal."

"Oh good," Buffy said, sighing. "It can read our worst fears, and it's pissed at us."

"Then we're even," Faith replied. "Cause I'm sure as hell pissed at it." Buffy looked at her in surprise, but Faith wouldn't meet her eyes.

Giles came to stand behind his chair, hands resting on its back. "Yes, well, we have to at least consider the possibility that it has taken a particular interest in us. What else do we know? Or rather, might we speculate?"

"We have huge teeming colonies of the latter; less of the former," Willow said in frustration. "But here's a thought: Was it trying to get the last three this afternoon because there's a clock ticking somewhere?"

"Makes sense," Buffy nodded. "But then we're back to why it would go after Tara when other folks would be easier targets."

"So either there isn't a time element, or any member of this group has special value to it--be that revenge, or some other aspect," Giles mused.

"OK, that 'some other aspect' part doesn't really thrill me," Xander said, crossing his arms in exasperation.

"I may have special value," Anya said to no one in particular. "Based on my work as someone who does a lot of good."

"Here's another question," Tara interjected abruptly. "Not that I'm thrilled to add another unknown to the equation, but--does this thing need to make physical contact with its victims?"

"I was wondering about that myself," Giles replied. "Have there been any constants, any elements that show up across all cases?"

"There were two guys in the Magic Shop earlier today when things started to heat up," Anya pointed out.

"Yeah, but seems like we'd already been infected or attacked or whatever you wanna call it," Buffy countered.

"And I'm pretty sure I hadn't seen them before," Willow added.

"Part of the problem is that we don't know exactly when the infection took place," Buffy mused. "We all ate Dominoes last night; God knows I could imagine them being at the undead heart of some evil plan. But that doesn't explain you, Will."

"And since you didn't start showing symptoms until after the Big Bad got smacked down at the Magic Box, Tara, we're thinking it didn't infect you at the same time it infected Buffy, Giles, and Anya," Dawn added.

Willow had a sudden and very discomfiting thought: What if Tara's rigidity about Kyra's origins was a symptom of the attack? What if the Big Bad itself was making her so stressed about it? But Tara had been tense about that subject ever since the Smackdown of the Unknown Homophobe. She knew they needed to talk about this; she also knew that broaching the subject now would be both a tactical error and not terribly sensitive to Tara's feelings. Tonight. We have to talk about this tonight.

"That's right," Anya was saying. "It came for Buffy, Giles, and me. Three do-gooders."

"Yes, Anya, you're clearly a being of superior moral fiber," Giles sighed in exasperation. "The kind of person who would lower her prices, for example, in cases of true need."

"Hey, I'm not bucking for sainthood," she replied incredulously. "My God, man..."

"OK, so we don't know when the attacks took place; we don't know if this thing needs to have physical contact with its victims or take physical form itself, and we don't know why it went after Tara instead of an easier target," Xander summed up. "What else?"

"Here's one," Buffy said, looking around. "Does survival grant immunity? I mean, are the five of us in the clear now? And Question 5 sub B: Does the immunity come with special knowledge? To wit: Willow's spidey senses in the shop?"

"Immunity," Willow mused. "It's like we just won some challenge on 'Survivor.'"

"Hey, did you guys watch this past season?" Xander broke in. "'Survivor: Ash Island'? That was great!"

"Yeah, it really was," Tara enthused. "For the first time, there were people that I could relate to."

"I thought so too," Buffy marveled. "It was almost uncanny, now that I think about it."

They considered this for a moment, then continued.

"So Will--what rang your bell in the shop?" Faith asked.

She stays as close to Buffy as she can. Does she even think about it?

Aloud, she replied, "I don't know that there was anything extra going on, guys. I mean, the conversation last night felt a little awkward; stilted, you know? And then today, it was worse. It's like, I was definitely watching closely. Hence my wonderfully subtle questions about group sanity."

"You asked if anyone was crazy?" Tara asked, one eyebrow arching sharply.

"Yeah, well, see above re: subtlety," she mumbled. Tara squeezed her hand and gave her a look of supreme adoration.

My family is safe. Everyone's here, and they're safe.

"So it's hard to know whether you picked up stuff because you were looking for it, or because you picked up some Extra-Demonic Perception as a parting gift," Buffy noted, as she shifted, and ran her fingers through her hair.

Willow took in Faith's observation of the motion; the slight flush of her face.

Oh, girl...

"But I did feel like the energy was off, and I don't know that that's entirely due to vigilance," Willow added. She was growing desperate to find some weapon; had she in fact picked up on something that was flying below the human radar? Or was she simply in tune with these people? She cast her mind back over the afternoon. There had been something intangible in her assessment. "You know what?" she finally continued. "I wonder if I picked up on stuff because we were in a group. Like, the whacked energy was synergistic."

"As if each of us were slightly out of tune," Giles mused.

"And when I heard you all together--whoa, a symphony of supreme atonality," Willow nodded.

"It's an interesting hypothesis," the Watcher replied slowly, chewing the stem of his glasses. "And one that suggests that we continue to work in groups as much as possible."

"Especially if there is any extra wattage that comes from surviving this," Dawn added. Willow looked at the teenager with heightened appreciation. There was a time when the girl would have flounced off to her room: terrified that this might come after her; offended that it hadn't. Now, though, she was applying her not-inconsiderable mind to the problem at hand.

"OK, so we have a 'Maybe' on the superpower deal, with a big asterisk attached to the 'Group' factor," Xander continued. "What about the basic immunity?"

"Well, I have no proof, but I'm thinking 'yes,'" Willow said after a long pause. "I mean, I was around all of you, at one point or another, this whole day. And I didn't feel a twinge, not anything."

"Then again, neither did we," Dawn pointed out. A crashing silence greeted this.

"Dammit!" Buffy's voice was harsh. She kicked--and thoroughly destroyed--a nearby footstool. "We can't keep this up! The tension alone will kill us! We've dodged five bullets so far--when does our luck run out? Are we immune? Is it coming after my sister? My friend? Faith?" As she flung out the last name, she turned to face the Dark Slayer.

Willow had the sudden sensation of voyeurism, as Faith and Buffy locked eyes for a moment; and then Buffy turned back to the group. Faith, though, took a deep breath and stared at the ground.

"We'll figure it out, Buffy," Willow said. Once more with feeling, Rosenberg. In truth, she was frustrated too. They still knew so little about this force. Yes, they had beaten it five times, and if they stayed close together, they might all make it out alive. But how to protect other people? How would they all feel, reading of another suicide, and then another, and then the final one? Knowing that this creature was out there, and they had done nothing to stop it?

"Sorry guys," Buffy muttered after a moment. "I just hate this, you know? I mean, we all do, but..." She trailed off.

"You need something to hit," Faith finished for her. "Me too." She finally looked at Buffy, and again Willow felt as if she had intruded on some private moment. There was definitely some kind of energy between the two Slayers. But what?

"Um, I can't really volunteer to be hit," Xander said after a moment. "Because you'd pretty much wipe my well-formed nose off my face. But I can fix that stool for you."

"Then that makes you more useful than me right now," Buffy sighed, plopping back down in her seat. "And no, I'm not feeling all wonky, guys, so don't worry. I just feel like we have about 753 more questions than answers right now."

"Hey, we only learned about this prophecy five days ago," Tara reminded them. "It's just been a very...active five days."

"OK," Willow announced abruptly. "I'm making an executive decision because, well, I'm feeling very forceful right now."

"Go Will," Dawn murmured with a grin.

"We're all stressed out. All of us have come close to losing someone--multiple someones--we love over the last forty-eight hours." She deliberately made no exception of Faith. "Can we just take a break? I mean, even for a few hours?"

"Now? Just step away from this?" Giles' voice was incredulous.

"I'm not saying we go to Disney World for the weekend," Willow said placatingly. "But we're all frustrated and stressed and I don't know that hashing it out any more right this very minute will do any good. I do think, though," she added, "we should stick together." This last part was difficult, because what she most wanted was to make everyone go away while she went upstairs with Tara and Kyra for the next seven years. But she was worried about Xander, and Dawn, and yes--Faith. She wasn't sure why exactly she felt that the rest of them were safe, but she did. If Faith was right, though--that the Big Bad was taking this personally--she felt better with them in a group, at least for now. Theoretically, Buffy could look out for Dawn; Giles could keep an eye on Faith; and Anya would keep constant watch over Xander. Probably with an on-going narrative of her good deeds... But if her synergistic energy hypothesis held any water, it would be easier to detect changes en masse.

"I dunno, Will," Buffy said slowly. "I mean, even if we don't talk about it for a few hours, we'll still all be thinking about it."

"I agree. I don't think we can just make it go away. But we've been going over the angles for a while now and I just think we're all getting frazzled. Why don't we get some dinner? Why don't we go out for dinner? Yes, we'll all be worried. Those of us who have been attacked will worry about those who haven't been, and vice-versa. I'm gonna be looking at Tara every two minutes to make sure she's OK--"

"And vice-versa," her partner added, blue eyes laughing. Oh goddess, Baby...You're still here. You're safe. My family's safe.

"But it can't hurt to be someplace besides the Magic Box, work, or home," she continued. "C'mon--when was the last time we all went out?"

"If I'm in that question, the answer's a big ol' 'Never,'" Faith replied promptly.

"Good point," Willow graciously acknowledged. "Seriously, guys. Let's get some foodage. It might actually be almost...fun." Or maybe just not excruciating, which would be almost...fun.

"What is this thing you call 'Fun'?" Buffy asked. "I have heard the Old Ones speak of it, yet I know it not."

"We get dinner and then call it a night," Xander mused. "I could get behind that plan."

"Yes--we eat and then go home so I can watch over you," Anya replied. "You know, since I've already been picked and I survived."

"No." Wow--I'm really getting all with the group butch here, aren't I? The others turned to her questioningly. "We stick together, at least for tonight. Four of us got attacked today, and I don't want that thing having any chance for a soliloquy in anybody's mind, at least not without mass viewing."



"But I think Xander and I would be fine by ourselves," Anya practically whined. "I mean, we have much comforting to do. You know, the drama and hormonal surge of a near-miss?"

"No," Willow insisted forcefully. "I think we need to be together tonight."

There was a brief silence, and then Anya sighed. "Fine. I can see you've got your Formula 409 face on."

"That's my 'Resolve' face," Willow corrected her indignantly.

"Whatever. One of those carpet things you lesbians are always on about," Anya sniffed dismissively.

"Thank you. I suppose," Willow added. "Let's figure out where to go." At that moment, she caught sight of Faith, who was looking distinctly uncomfortable. Was she being hit with something? Did she feel awkward about the upcoming overnight?

"Wherever it is, let's keep it cheap," Buffy said easily, with the briefest glance in Faith's direction.

She doesn't have any money. And Buffy figured it out.

"In fact, Anya, maybe you should pay," Dawn added helpfully. "I mean, it would be a good thing to do." She smiled brightly at the ex-demon.

Anya recoiled as if the teenager had suggested she enter a convent. "You have issues, young lady," she huffed, flouncing toward the door. "Big, huge, festering issues."

Dawn winked at Buffy and reached for her windbreaker.

Turning, Willow looked anxiously into Tara's eyes. "Baby, is this OK? I mean, are you up to it?" The last thing she wanted was for her beloved to think that she wasn't devastated by the day's events.

"Sweetie, I understand," came the soft reply, as Tara pressed her lips to Willow's palm. "I think it's a good idea. Besides, we'll have our own time tonight." The light blue eyes darkened just a shade.

"Oh yes," Willow breathed. "Our time. Yes, and then a little more yes." I am the luckiest woman in this or any dimension. She looked up to see Faith gazing at them wistfully, before looking away in embarrassment. This time, though, Willow felt no agitation or jealousy. She simply gave thanks for what she had, and hoped that Faith might look into someone's eyes one day and see what Willow herself saw in Tara's.

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"I am stuffed like a Thanksgiving turkey," Xander groaned as they stood in the parking lot of Simone's Seafood. "Excellent choice, kids."

Eight sated adults and a sleepy child were in various stages of post-gorge bliss, although Kyra seemed to have grasped that she was getting the short end of this particular culinary stick. She had wolfed down some avocado and shredded turkey before they left the house, and Willow fed her raisins and Goldfish throughout the meal, but both of them thought that shellfish might be too rich for her little belly. Kyra, though, kept glancing suspiciously at the succulent bits of lobster, crab, and shrimp that lay strewn about their plates. By the end of the meal, she looked positively disgruntled.

"And thanks for picking up the tab, Giles!" Willow enthused, affectionately linking her arm through his. The Watcher had insisted on paying for everyone, with one admonition: "If anyone holds back in order to be polite, I shall be offended."

Yeah, like that's gonna happen...

"Yes, thank you!" Anya practically gushed. "I had no idea a near-suicide would leave me so starved!"

"It was like watching the Pacific Ocean get depleted before our very eyes," Buffy marveled. "Which, actually, isn't so good, is it?"

"All I know is, I love seafood," Faith announced, rubbing her tummy.

Don't look at Tara. Don't look at Tara. Don't look at Tara.

They piled into two cars and drove back to Revello Drive, stopping by first Xander and Anya's house and then Giles' flat so that various toiletries and changes of clothes could be retrieved. "Grab enough for a couple of nights," Willow instructed, wondering yet again when she had become such a top.

Dinner had been surprisingly enjoyable, considering that five of them had given serious thought to taking their own lives in the last forty-eight hours.

We're so used to living in danger that we grab onto anything that reminds us we're alive. She suspected that if they spent all of their time in full recognition of their daily peril, their heads would explode.

The conversation had been a mixture of general conversation and gallows humor. Willow detected none of the awkwardness of the previous night. It was an odd dynamic, to say the least. None of them could joke about anyone else's near-miss, but as the hours passed, each intended victim was more inclined to make what could only be described as defiantly, morbidly ironic references to her or his own experience.

"Well, sure I'm embarrassed about you guys seeing my Slayer-specific insecurity," Buffy admitted, cracking open a crab claw. "I'm just glad you didn't find out about my participation in the sex addicts group..."

"Buffy, that's not funny," Dawn hissed.

"She's right," Giles added, spooning up the last of his lobster bisque. "And I say that as someone who is much, much older than all of you and thus far more knowledgeable about such things."

"You're not helping!" Dawn said, glaring at him.

"What's that? You'll need to speak in my good ear."

We all use humor to cope with this. Willow glanced around at these people she held so dear. Better than crack, I guess.

But she and Tara would be having a far more serious conversation later, she vowed.

She wouldn't exactly say that Faith had maneuvered her way next to Buffy; indeed, if there had been any conscious effort, it was certainly well-concealed on the Dark Slayer's part. And yet the two always seemed to end up side by side. Had Buffy noticed it?

What was going in Faith's mind? What was she making of the targets thus far? Did she assume that she was safe because she wasn't worth taking? And how much had Buffy's near-miss heightened Faith's feelings about the other Slayer? Faith was clearly protective of Buffy. Had the latter picked up on that surge?

And as always, Faith had kept one eye on Kyra. Willow remembered her own initial suspicion as if it were a thing of the distant past. Now she felt faintly heartened by the attention her daughter received. A Slayer, another Slayer, who clearly doted on their daughter? Worse things had happened.

As they filed into the house, Xander asked, "OK, so we're having the Queen Mother of sleepovers. Where's everybody gonna fit?"

Buffy paused, hands on hips. "Let's see...What about this: Willow and Tara stay where they are. Dawn, you bunk with me, and Xander and Anya can have your room."

Dawn turned to face the married couple. "Fine. But if you even think about doing anything that involves the exchange of bodily fluids..."

Xander looked horrified; Anya, thwarted. But they both nodded.

"Giles, you mind bunking on the couch?" Buffy continued.

The Watcher gave a wry smile. "Considering that I've spent nights in Xander's basement, I should hardly consider your couch incommodious."

"You spent nights in Xander's basement?" Faith asked, one eyebrow arched in consummate suspicion.

"They don't like to talk about it," Buffy replied, leaning over to "whisper" to Faith. "They grew apart when Xander learned to read on his own."

Faith nodded sympathetically.

"And we have an inflatable mattress up in the attic," Buffy went on. "Faith, howzabout you crash in my room with me and Dawn?"

Faith hesitated for a moment, looking uncomfortable.

"Is there a problem?" Dawn asked, surprised.

"No--no problem," Faith answered, but her grin seemed forced. "I just...You know, in case anybody snores or anything."

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Right. You fight the worst that hell has to offer, and some nocturnal wheezing tweaks you? And to this I say: Cope." But her tone held no anger.

Somebody won't be getting much sleep tonight...

It was only a short time later that they all moved to their various accommodations. Everyone was tired, that was clear. "We can pick this up in the morning," Buffy announced, stretching. "Willow--good call on the break."

Willow felt herself blushing, and remembered yet again how far she had come. At first she had been eager just to tag along on Buffy's adventures. The discovery that she had something to offer had been an unexpected perk. Now, years later, she was able both to recognize necessary adjustments and advocate for them. And her recommendations were taken seriously. She still carried that girl in the plaid jumper with her, but her wardrobe had expanded considerably.

Maybe there's room for all of me...

There was, of course, the requisite jostling over the bathroom. "Put the freakin' seat down, Xander!" Dawn's voice bellowed through the house.

"Oh, sorry...That was me," came the apologetic British reply.

Tara chuckled as she and Willow headed upstairs. Kyra had fallen asleep on the ride home. "Well this should be an interesting night's sleep for pretty much everyone involved," she said softly. A few minutes later, Kyra was settled into her crib. She kicked out, twice, as if to ensure

that she had full range of motion should she need to leap up out of her bed, and then gave a heavy sigh, burrowing in. Tara gazed at her as she pulled the light blue blanket up to the tiny shoulders.

"Sometimes I think my heart would crack wide open if I loved her anymore. And then the next morning I love her more, and my heart has adjusted just fine." The blue eyes were soft as they turned to Willow.

Oh goddess...We need to have that conversation...And we also need to talk about today...Is there a 'Pause' button handy?

"Tara," she began uncomfortably.

"I know," came the quiet reply as they backed out of their daughter's adjoining room, Tara pulling the door gently closed. "We need to talk."

"Um, yeah."

Tara sighed. "Didn't I say the same thing to you, like, two nights ago? God, Will--last week at this time we were getting ready for Kyra's birthday party. Demon-induced suicide really wasn't on our reading list." She shook her head. "Let's get ready for bed and have this discussion where we do all our best work."

Willow grinned in spite of herself. "Exposition and processing should never supersede good dental care," she nodded. Two brushings and flossings and a well-deserved bathroom break later, they were comfortably ensconced in their bed.

"So how you feelin', Baby?" Sometimes the simplest questions were the best, she decided.

"I'm guessing pretty much like you did, except maybe less so," came the thoughtful reply.

Willow looked at her quizzically. "Less so? What do you mean?"

Tara shifted. "Well, you were the first, Sweetie. And you came so close...God, it still wrecks me to think about it. But today's big grab...Well, I was part of a group effort; at least, to some extent. It's like the whole experience got...diffused, somehow. You know?"

But Willow could only shake her head. "Actually, I don't. I mean, I'm seeing it from the perspective of someone whose world only makes sense to the extent that you're in it. So when I think of it going after you, it just wipes me out."

Tara took her hand, pressed it lightly to her lips. "I know, Willow...It's just that...Well, maybe part of it is that I feel less exposed than you did. You were sort of front and center that night, remember. But today--well, today we were all standing out there on stage, you know? We all did our little mortification monologue." She paused for a moment. "This may not make much sense,

and I can't be sure because, well, I wasn't in anybody else's mind. But I think my attack may have been different; even from the other three today."

As if I weren't worried enough... "How?"

"Can you remember how yours talked to you? I mean, not just content, but how? Like, do you remember any specific thoughts?"

Willow felt her stomach clench with the memories. "Um...Not likely to forget them any time soon." Her laugh was brittle.

"I know it hurts, Will. Believe me, I'm not keen on rewinding that tape myself. But it feels important somehow." Tara rubbed her back gently, holding Willow to this safe place with the touch.

"Well...I remember thinking, when you and Faith were banging on the door and you called me 'Baby,' that you didn't need to do that. You didn't need to lie." She looked up to see Tara blanch. "And...and I remember thinking that I loved you, and Kyra--right before...you know..." Tara's hand tightened over her own, and then she looked sharply at Willow, brow furrowed.

"Willow, was it you talking to yourself? I mean, saying 'she doesn't have to lie to me,' and 'I love you, Kyra'?"

"Yes. Definitely." She could still hear her own voice, muttering in her ear and pulling her toward the railing. "That would be the first-person singular."

"Yeah, well, mine was second person, thank you very much," Tara nodded, biting her lip. "Or at least, it started out with a little back and forth, but then went into attack mode pretty quickly. It's like I was arguing with some part of myself, but there were definitely 'you's' involved."

Willow considered this. "Do you think that matters?"

"I do. I'm not sure exactly how, but it seems like a different...route, you know? Like a full-frontal assault, instead of my own ideas gradually turning against me."

"So...Why? What's with the different strategy?"

"Well, it seems like you guys had stuff simmering for a while. It sounds like the other three started feeling it last night...the irritability, the fatigue. And it continued to build up today. But Will, I really don't think I got hit until about mid-way through my lesson with Blake. And then it just slammed me with a literal vengeance. So maybe it was in a rush, or pissed off. Because it started off with all sorts of denigration."

"Like what?" Willow asked, her voice soft.

"Yeah...I figured you might ask that." Tara's smile was equal parts sadness and fatigue. "Oh, just your basic fun stuff: being unlovable; being bad; being unattractive..."

"Tara Maclay, don't you dare go all general on me now--" She broke off as Tara recoiled slightly at the sound of her last name. "It's about your family, isn't it?"

Tara nodded, pulling her knees up close to her chest as if anticipating a blow.

"I was thinking about you and Kyra, and how you're my family now and I was safe here and how much I loved you--and then this crazy thought popped into my head: 'Just like Daddy loved Mom.'"

Willow looked at her in shock. "Tara, that's ridiculous! I mean, not to be all disrespectful or anything, but..."

"I know. At least, I know now. But that's when the battle really picked up." Tara rested her cheek against her knees and closed her eyes.

"So it hits you in your weak spot," Willow said slowly. "That your family will somehow still manage to drag you back."

"That actually ended up in second place," Tara countered with a humorless laugh. "The hands-down winner in that particular race was that you would get hurt because you were distracted worrying about all of my insecurities."

"Oh God..." Willow breathed.

"Yeah...It started off, I think, trying to make me feel guilty about your attack. 'You did that to her.' I remember it so clearly...But I managed to fight that one off. Not because I hadn't felt it, but I'd already wrestled with it and I knew I definitely hadn't kissed Faith and I just thought I was being self-indulgent...fretting about myself and my guilt complex instead of focusing on the problem." She turned again to face Willow with a sigh. "Then were some lovely memories involving body image. That was fun. And I started remembering being in that house, and how screwed up and angry and cold everything got. Then I reminded myself that I got out and had a new family, and that's when it started in with how much my dad--or at least, the guy who raised me--loved my mom and look what happened there. Then it segued seamlessly into how I told you to be honest about your insecurities but I don't talk about my family...Because if I did, you'd worry and you might get distracted and you could..." Here she broke off, huddling tightly into herself again.

"Die," Willow finished quietly. Show your face, you son of a bitch! "I'd get distracted and something would kill me."

"Right." The word was barely a whisper. "And how could I possibly explain to Kyra that I'd gotten her mother killed?" A small shudder rippled through her.

Where were the words to wipe the afternoon away? Wasn't there something to make this just...disappear?

Apparently not. There were only silent kisses pressed into soft blond hair and murmurings of love and reassurance. But Tara would hold onto her own horror show just as Willow would hold onto her own. Tara would never forget believing she would cause Willow's death; Willow would never forget seeing Tara kiss Faith.

They sat in silence, huddled closely together, for several minutes.

"Tara, you know--please tell me you know--that you can tell me anything? About your family; how you feel about yourself...All of it. Of course I worry about you, Baby, but I also know you're more together than broken." Tara pulled back slightly to look at her questioning. "What I mean is, we're all broken, at least a little bit. That's what I figure, anyway. I'm still kinda broken around the unpopular, dorky thing; you're still kinda broken about your family and--for reasons I just do not understand--your body. But..." She trailed off in frustration. This felt so supremely important, but the words were putting up a fight. "Tara, I've been thinking about it and here's my hypothesis: If either of us were totally damaged goods, we sure as heck wouldn't be fighting against the forces of darkness and winning. I mean, do you know how many people would just think we were the coolest thing since cool beans if they knew what we did? OK, maybe not the snot demons and such, but still--we're, like, heroes, Tara. And...And I know it's not about other people thinking we're cool or getting all validated from everybody else, because, hello: if there's a hole in the bucket, no amount of outside water's gonna fill it up. But still--I think we have to know, at some level, that we're not totally screwed up because if we didn't we wouldn't even step up to the plate and yes, I know I'm mixing my metaphors but so be it." She finished sounding far more indignant than she'd realized she felt. She paused to draw a breath, and then looked at Tara uncertainly. "Am I making even one tiny Chicklet-sized bit of sense?"

"Yeah, Sweetie; I think so." Tara's eyes were beginning to clear, just a little.

"It's like...People talk about trying to slay their personal dragons, but maybe the trick isn't to slay them so much as...as negotiate a truce: 'I won't try to vanquish you, and you don't try to sabotage me.'"

Tara looked at her thoughtfully. "Negotiate a truce? You mean, make peace with our psyches?" Her laugh now was richer than the last two or three versions. "It's a crazy idea, but it just might work."

She could feel Tara edging back to her. I will always find you, Tara. Always. A slightly gentler silence fell over them again.

Finally, Tara spoke, almost reluctantly. "Will, I still think there's something to the difference between my attack and the others. If I were betting, I'd say it was either angry or in a rush; maybe both. It started lecturing me, taunting me, so head-on. It was basically saying, 'You shouldn't bother Willow' and 'You'll have to explain it to Kyra.' And I'm telling you, Willow, as soon as it saw your note, it just improvised. It worked your note right into the diatribe."



Willow nodded slowly. "Tell you what: tomorrow we ask the others about it; how this hit them. The same kind of questions, OK? See if it looks like this thing is getting impatient. Because if it is, maybe it'll get sloppy, too. We could talk to people about listening to the voice, seeing how it talks to them. If," she added, "it goes after anybody else here. And that just opens up a whole other batch of complications."

"Sounds good," Tara nodded. "Goddess, am I tired." She stretched, running her fingers through her long hair.

That is just such a lovely sight...

As they settled down under their blankets to assume Cuddle Position, Willow said, "You know, I get that you have a whole early childhood/adolescent hell that whacked with your self-perception, Baby, but really...How could you not love your body?"

She felt Tara smile against her hair. "How could you think you're a dork, Willow? And a non-sexy one at that? God, Sweetie, sometimes when we're walking along I'll fall back a step or two just to look at your cute little butt."

Willow pulled back to stare at her. "You do? You make up excuses to look at my...rear?" The word was almost a squeak. Tara's throaty laughter washed over her--sweet, and a little naughty.

"Remember last week? We were coming out of the party rental store? We walked about five yards and then I stopped to tie my shoe. You kept walking for a few 'cause you were looking the other way and didn't realized I'd stopped."

Willow thought back. "Yeah, I remember that."

"Sweetie, I was wearing sandals. Nothing to tie." Tara laughed again; this time naughty overtook sweet and jumped out into the lead.

"Well I am just...scandalized, Ms. Maclay," Willow finally replied, and was glad to see no recoil from Tara now. "I do believe you were objectifying me."

"Oh yeah--totally," Tara nodded, seemingly more than pleased to cop to the charge. "Whatcha gonna do about it, girl?"

Well now that's just a challenge...

"I could do a little objectifying of my own--within a completely loving and committed relationship," she added.

"But of course," Tara nodded. "Still--kinda makes a girl wonder what you have in mind..."

Willow hesitated, just for a second. "Tara, are you sure you're..." 'In the mood'? That sounded sorta clichéd...

"You know, ten minutes ago I'd have said most definitely not," Tara admitted. "But goddess, Willow--we haven't made love all week. We've been majorly with the cuddling and the comforting and the processing but not so much with the erotic. And I'm missing the erotic, I have to say."

Had it been a week? Yeah...It really had. How very unacceptable. And she herself was certainly feeling that twisting, tugging in her belly. Ever since Tara had stretched, and her breasts had been outlined under her nightgown, Willow had been having the naughtiest thoughts...

Does Tara know that always turns me on? 'cuz really, it seems almost strategic...

"Oh, Baby--I would so very much like to show you all the ways that I absolutely, positively adore your mphh." Words came to a crashing halt as Tara rolled over onto her back and pulled Willow onto her, kissing her fiercely.

"Less talk. More tongue," came the simple request.

I can do that...

And do that she most certainly did. Their lovemaking had always been of the Baskin-Robbins variety: so many flavors; so many options. And she could feel Tara's urgency rolling off of her.

We're alive. It could have so easily gone the other way, but it didn't.

She luxuriated in the feeling of Tara's warm, full body now rocking gently under her own. Her hands slid under the nightgown, playing just-this-side-of-tickle against Tara's ribs. She propped herself up on her left arm, letting the fingers of her right hand graze closer to one full, sweet breast. She knew Tara's nipples were already hard; she had seen them darken under her gown. And now...Now, as her thumb swept along the underside of the taut flesh and closer to that swollen nub, she heard the tell-tale hitch in Tara's breathing.

Oh, I love this part...

She slid her hand back away, just long enough to shift her weight and pull Tara into a sitting position. Blue eyes gazed at her, fierce and expectant, as Willow pushed the gown up and over her head, tugging it off over the outstretched arms. Tara's fingers were snapping open the buttons to her own nightshirt. After the last had been undone, she edged the garment back over Willow's shoulders.

Willow just gazed at her for a moment. "God...I just never get used to how beautiful you are." Then she pushed Tara back down onto the pillows, hovering over her for one moment before lowering herself into the sweet warmth of those breasts, that belly.

Nothing...Nothing could ever feel this good.

She felt her own nipples press into Tara's as she tilted her lover's head back in order to taste every bit of her lips, her jaw, her neck. Even as she wondered if she should slow down, she felt Tara grip her shoulders and push her lower. Willow acquiesced, until her mouth was poised just over one full breast. Oh, I will have all of you... Tara's fingers tangled in her hair, urging her to take her breast into her warm mouth. But Willow resisted, just for a moment...And then she relented, and closed her lips hungrily over the taut, swollen nipple. A muffled groan greeted her.

She sucked fiercely, needily--first one nipple, then the other and then back again. She felt Tara's legs fall helplessly open beneath her.

Oh, my girl is so hungry for this... She could feast on this her entire life, and never be full.

After a few moments, she felt Tara shift beneath her. Ah--I know what she wants.

She reluctantly pulled her mouth away from Tara's breast and leaned forward until her her lips were pressed against her lover's ear. "Roll over, Baby," she whispered. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

Tara gave a slight nod, and Willow slid back, feeling Tara twist beneath her.

She loved this view...Tara's long, tapering back that flared out to such wonderful, strong hips...hips that were now rocking back expectantly, needily.

"I know what you want, Baby," Willow whispered. "You want me in you--don't you?"

"Yes. I want to feel you slide into me, Willow," came the hoarse reply.

Willow remembered the first time she felt Tara take her, take the fingers that pressed and slid and pumped into her. "I never dreamed I'd like that," Tara said later, flushed. "But you...It's...God, it's so good how you take me..."

Willow edged forward again, letting her breasts press into the surprisingly muscular back. No one knows how strong you are...Nobody sees your muscles ripple like I do, like I see when you're rocking back onto my fingers... She slid her hand down over the full, round hips and then further still, down until she felt the warmth of that place...

She teased that opening, knowing that Tara was already wet; knowing that Tara could take her so easily whenever she finally plunged into her. Ah, but not yet...Not yet...Still such pleasure just from tracing tiny circles closer, and closer to where she would go. She heard Tara's groan of impatience.

"Soon, Baby...Soon..." She knew she'd pay for it later--later tonight; later that week--but it was a payback she was willing to make. For now, Tara was completely hers, stretched out under her and open for her, wanting her...

"Willow, please," came the whispered plea.

"Shh, Tara...There are people here...So many people...We can't let them hear anything. We have to be so quiet..." Tara looked back over her shoulder, shooting Willow a glare of simultaneous reproach and arousal. Willow's fingers traced closer, and then stopped, poised just at the very edge of Tara's opening. "Even when...even when I..." And she plunged, deep, into that wetness and that heat, watching through a haze of lust as Tara's back arched and her hips rocked back against her. "Even when I take you, like this..."

There was a choked moan as Tara pushed back into her. Her fingers were gripping the sheet, flexing convulsively. Willow swallowed heavily and watched Tara rock and grind to the rhythm she set. We are so good at this...

She pushed again into the warmth; felt the warmth welcome her, close around her. As she reached the deepest, hottest place, she curled her fingers back and dragged them over the ridged wall close to Tara's opening. After plunging into her lover again, and then again, she stopped suddenly and withdrew her fingers. Tara groaned her frustration.

"Shh, Baby. We have to be so quiet." Willow reached down to spread herself open and then pressed herself into Tara's thigh. She had to bite back her own cry, dropping her head to Tara's back. She took one moment to savor only that sweet feeling, and then she plunged into Tara once more. Sweat ran between her breasts and Tara's back; Willow felt herself sliding over the smooth flesh with every thrust.

"Do you want to touch yourself?" It was a game they played. Not exactly Willow giving Tara permission to stroke her own clit, but somehow that element--Tara waiting until Willow suggested it--made the moment even sweeter, thicker with heat and need.

Tara nodded, looking back at Willow once more, biting her lip. Then she shifted slightly, raising herself just enough to slide her hand beneath her and reach down, to that swollen nub that Willow had taken into her mouth and teased so many times. Willow knew when she had reached it. She knew from the shuddering of Tara's breath; from the quickened rocking her hips.

"Does that feel good, Baby? Touching yourself like that while I fill you up, plunge into you?"

"You know it does," Tara groaned. "It's so good with you, Willow."

"Shh," Willow whispered. "What if someone heard? We can't make any noise, Tara...No matter how much you wanna moan; no matter what you wanna do when I pull out like this...and hold, here, just barely touching you...and then pump back into you." She watched the muscles in Tara's back twist and writhe as she took Willow into her. Willow pumped steadily now, nipples dragging across Tara's back. "That's right, Baby...Look at how you spread yourself open for me." Her left hand was gripping Tara's bicep, squeezing the firm muscle fiercely.

"No one can hear us, Tara...And you're so turned on, and so wet...Feel how I slide into you...So easy...So slick..."

Tara groaned into her pillow. "That's right...You wanna moan, don't you? I can tell you're getting close...You're squeezing on me; pushing back at me...And you wanna cry out so bad, don't you?" Her own wetness surged out of her, coating Tara's leg as she rocked herself into that sweet, firm flesh.

"You gonna come for me, Baby? Shh...Shh...I can feel it...That's right--take me. Take me all the way, Tara. Take everything I have. It's all for you."

She loved this--thrusting into Tara and then teasing her on the way back out, just to her opening...Playing with that sensitive flesh while Tara stroked herself and bucked beneath her...All the way back, and then--ah, yes--the push, the plunge back into all that wetness, so slick and warm, that clenched around her.

And Tara...So close; she could feel it...Just another stroke...And one more...

And then that twisting, shuddering spasm that ripped through her, brought her hips off of the bed until Willow's fingers were buried so deep within her that Tara couldn't possibly take more...until Tara's one last push forced Willow just...slightly...deeper.

Oh God...This...Always, this... They hung together in that moment, entwined and joined, inextricable.

Finally they both collapsed, Willow's breasts and belly pressed wetly against Tara's back. After a long moment, she gradually eased her fingers out, away from all of that sweet cream. It always felt so cold, in that moment, away from the heat. She watched as Tara pulled her own hand away. The back of her hair was damp with sweat.

"I love you, Tara," she whispered simply.

And then Tara rolled over suddenly, her eyes dark with what Willow recognized as hunger. How many times have I seen that expression? And always, the deep answering ache in her own belly.

Tara grabbed Willow's right leg and pulled fiercely, tugging until Willow was straddling her belly. "You. On me. Now." Tara didn't give sexual orders often, but when she did...Oh, she was so good at it. She was clearly in no mood to tease. She was hungry, and Willow would feed her.

Without a word, Willow edged herself to the top of the bed until she was poised just over Tara's mouth.

"Give it to me," Tara commanded her. "I need to have you, Willow."

The full, soft lips...lips that were stronger, more forceful than anyone else could realize at the sight of a shy smile...Willow lowered herself to those lips, and choked back a groan.

Tara was the last person to brag about herself but Willow knew it to the bone: Tara had a gift for using her tongue and mouth and lips to take Willow to such beautiful, decadent places. The

thoughts she had; the images that played in her mind as that tongue stroked over her stiff, throbbing nerves and back, further, to reach the wetness that spilled out of her.

"Drink me, Baby...Drink all of me..." Willow clutched their headboard, grinding desperately into that urgent, searching mouth, welcoming the tongue that probed into her so knowingly, so demanding. Oh my...I cannot last long...

She looked down, and her eyes locked onto Tara's. The blue eyes grew so dark when she was turned on, so fierce and hungry.

Oh goddess...What's she doing to me? She was helpless with need, so close to her own release...And still Tara stroked her, relentlessly, circling her clit and sucking just the tip into her mouth before releasing her and sliding back to pull more of Willow's cream onto her tongue.

"Tara...Baby, I can't take it...So good...Tara, I'm so close." She could feel it, the coiling that started low in her belly and spiraled out, white-hot and relentless, expanding until it pressed against her throat and her fingers and most of all, sweetest of all, against the heat of that place where she joined with Tara and it was so good, it was--oh--incredible and no one, God, no one could know how this felt...

And then she was shuddering, wrenching as her climax ripped through her taking every bit of doubt and fear and stripping it bare, leaving something clear and white-hot and pure in its wake. She reached down, not even sure how she managed to breathe, and caressed Tara's hair as the waves finally began to recede. She saw the sweat that was trickling down her arm; didn't bother to wipe it away.

This is what we make...all this heat...

Finally she shifted her weight, feeling her legs precarious beneath her, and flopped down next to Tara. Her beloved looked at her, her expression serious, and uncertain. Willow felt a sudden spasm of fear.

"Willow, did--did you come?"

Willow pressed her hand to her mouth to smother her laugh and in so doing, breathed in the scent that could still leave her head spinning. "I kinda think so, yeah," she finally managed.

That night they both slept better than they had in a week.

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"Gabrielle, will you help me? There's a spot I can't reach."

"Where?" came the innocent query.

"Right...there." Xena's voice was low and sultry in the steamy air. Willow and Tara watched from their own sunken bath tub, Tara nestled between Willow's legs as Willow ran the soapy sponge over her glistening shoulders.

"There?" Willow listened to the water trickling over smooth skin. Xena's? Tara's?

"A little lower...You're really close. Can you reach it now?" The trickling of the water grew to a splash. "Should I shift so you can get it? Here--let me spread my legs a little bit more...Oh, right there...That's good."

The water gushed over the side of the tub.

"That feels so good, Gabrielle."

"You taught me, Xena...You always know how to reach where I need it most."

Willow strained to see Gabrielle's shoulders arching with her movements. The water was cascading to the floor, splashing and spilling and...

Willow sat up with a bolt. Dammit!

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, keeping her grumbling largely inaudible. Lousy bladder...

Then again, she realized, wetting the bed wouldn't exactly be sexy. Funny how wetness could be so hot or so gross, depending on the context.

Moments later, she emerged from their bathroom, stifling a yawn. Maybe a little snack...

Sex always left her hungry. It was probably just as well she didn't smoke marijuana. If she and Tara made love while she was high, she'd plow through everything in the refrigerator and head into the yard to forage for roots and berries.

Hope Dawn didn't finish off the Cinnamon Teddy Grahams... A few Teddies, a little cold milk, then back to a warm bed to snuggle up against a beautiful woman who had just made her climax so hard she was pretty sure tectonic plates had shifted.

Just 'cause we live on the Hellmouth, no reason to pass up the creature comforts... As she eased the bedroom door closed behind her and turned toward the stairs, she was surprised to see a lone figure standing at the end of the hallway. Her eyes adjusting to the changing light, Willow made out the lithe form of Faith, staring at...the wall?

Willow stood uncertainly for a moment, and then took a hesitant step forward. What's she doing? What's she looking at? Willow glanced over the house in her mind's eye. That wall--that wall was filled with pictures of the Summers family.

Faith was standing in a dark hallway in the middle of the night gazing at pictures of Buffy.

Willow knew enough not to come up on Faith by surprise--if that were even possible. "Hey."

It was one syllable, uttered softly, but Faith spun around as if Willow had hurled a barrage of accusations against her.

"Hey Red." Her voice was the high-pitched, hollow breathiness of someone who has just been busted. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Just getting a little three a.m. snack. You?" I mean, besides gazing at the girl you're besotted with?

"Oh, had to make a late-night bathroom run." Willow opted for silence, and it worked. "I, uh...I was just lookin' at some pics." She shifted uncomfortably, hands automatically searching for her back pockets but finding only the smooth cotton of her shorts. After a moment, she crossed her arms over her chest, and looked down. "They look so...normal."

Willow would have expected Faith to utter the word with disdain, but perhaps this dim hallway muted and shifted everything because she could have sworn the voice held sadness, and just a faint trace of longing.

"She was so pretty."

'Was'? Wait, what did she--

Joyce.

Faith had been goddess knows where when Joyce died.

"Best Christmas of my life was the one I spent here," she continued quietly. "I had, like, jack to bring for gifts. Whole way over here on Christmas Eve, I told myself I'd only stay for dinner, and then head out for a little holiday action. 'cause, you know--that's what I do." Willow could barely hear her. Faith might as easily have been talking to herself. "But then B has to go save Angel and she asks me to look out for her mom and Dawn. What was I gonna say? I tell her no problem. And then it hits me: I'm so fuckin' glad to have a reason to stay, I coulda died. I mean, otherwise I woulda had to leave, 'cause that's what I'd said I was gonna do. But now...Now she needs me. So I have to stay." She shook her head with a wry grin. "I slept in B's bed that night...big fluffy comforter and these sheets with little flowers on them; little pillows with matching covers. Christ. Joyce wakes me up the next morning with freakin' cinnamon rolls. Buffy comes home just in time to see me scoopin' out the little plastic frosting container like a five-year-old. Laughed her ass off." Her face had softened throughout the telling. She was silent for a moment, then added, her voice hardening, "Things went to hell pretty soon after that."

Willow felt as if she were walking blindly through a collection of rare glass. She knew absolutely that one misstep could shatter this quiet suspended time. Finally she offered, "Joyce



always knew what to do. I mean, we're out crashing and banging and tearing through Sunnydale in the name of truth, justice, and the American Way--and at the end of it all, Joyce was always waiting with brownies and that concerned look of hers...You know, the one where she tilts her head just slightly and her eyes look all worried about you."

Tilted. Past tense, Willow.

Faith nodded. "Yeah. And you know what else? She had a pair. I bust into the house the next year and take her hostage; basically terrorize her in her own home. And I'm goin' on and on about how unfair everything is and what a bitch her daughter is, and she just looks at me and says, 'Were you planning to slit my throat any time soon?'"

Well, go Joyce...

"I mean, I coulda snapped her like a twig, and she's just starin' at me like she's almost bored. And I thought, 'No wonder your daughter's the coolest cube in the ice-tray.'" Her arms tightened as if she were trying to hug herself. "I threatened to kill her. Christ.

"Well, no--that probably wasn't your best moment." For all of the obvious reasons, plus one more: it had put a barrier between the two Slayers that made reconciliation impossible, at least for a long, long time. Willow had seen what Buffy did to anyone who threatened her family. Faith had crossed another line with the act, one that was to Buffy as unforgivable as killing a stranger in an alley. After a moment, she asked, "Faith, why did you come back? To the church, I mean. If you'd have kept going, no one would've found you. But you left the bus depot and...Buffy switched you guys back again."

Faith gave her a dry smile. "I hear you and T had something to do with that. Nice work."

Please don't hurt me.

"Why'd I come back..." Faith stared off as if watching that day play out on the dimly lit walls. "You think I didn't ask myself that question about a thousand times? Maybe I thought I could save those people and then ride off in a blaze of glory. Or even stick around; try out the new wheels." She looked at Willow. "But you know what? I think I knew B would get loose. Even from those Council pricks. I mean, the girl always pulled it out. Chips are down; two out in the bottom of the ninth; every other cliché you can think of...and she always came out on top. She always saved the day. The freakin' Road Runner never dodged that many bullets. So if I figure she's gonna show up...Yeah, why come back?" She tossed her hair, and some of the old Faith crept back into her voice. "Maybe I just liked my rack better than hers."

"Yeah, that was probably it," Willow nodded. Faith shot her a grin, seemingly grateful for the out.

She's like a frightened woodland creature. You can hold your hand out with some food, and invite her to come to you, but don't go crashing into the forest to chase her. You couldn't catch her, and you wouldn't want to.

"I sent a card," Faith said abruptly.

Willow snapped back. "What?"

"After Joyce died. Angel was the one who told me. I mean, this was a long time later."

A card? Buffy never said anything...

"I didn't sign it," Faith added, as if reading her thoughts. "Just wrote 'Sorry about your mom' and slapped a stamp on it."

Buffy had mentioned that one. "I don't know who it's from," she said, perplexed. "But...it's nice to know people still think of her."

"She got it," Willow said simply. "She liked it."

Faith nodded. "Good. That's....good." She fell silent.

"Faith, it's OK," Willow heard herself saying.

The Dark Slayer looked at her questioningly.

"The way you feel about Buffy."

A deafening, gaping, yawning chasm of silence greeted this proclamation.

Oh God...She's gonna kill me right here in the hallway. Two nights ago she saves me; tonight she kills me. Make it quick. Nothing involving the knees, please. I watched that inspirational movie about Gale Sayers and it showed his knee getting blown out and that just looked so--

"No, Red, it's really not. It's about 75,000 things, but OK is definitely not one of them." Faith's voice was that of one utterly accustomed to disappointment.

"But why?" Willow asked, a little surprised but mostly relieved that Faith didn't launch into a thousand denials. "I mean, sure it's complicated. Believe me, I know this kind of complicated from the inside out."

Faith shook her head dismissively. "No offense, chica, but no you don't. You knew Tara was into you from Day One, didn't you? Be honest."

Willow thought back to those early days...Tara, always ready to cast, to talk, to stay up long after they were both incoherent with exhaustion.

"Because I could see it," Faith continued. "I was with you guys, what--fifteen minutes at the Bronze? And the way she looked at you...C'mon. You knew that if you said the word, she'd light up like a Christmas tree. What do you think I'd see on Buffy's face?"

Willow didn't know what to say. Faith was right. Even before Tara said it, Willow knew she was hers. Willow's fears had been about her own heart, her own courage. She looked at Faith helplessly.

"In case you haven't noticed it, Red, all of B's exes walk on three legs. Me? I'm the one with the great rack, if you'll remember."

Willow sighed at the irony. Faith could walk into any lesbian bar on the West Coast and pretty much have her pick of beautiful women. But the one woman to whom she was most powerfully connected, with whom she shared a destiny--that woman slept a few feet away from her tonight and walked in a different land during the day.

"It's not just the boy thing," Faith went on. "I mean, let's face it: I'm sexy as hell. Maybe I could pull it off." The bravado, though, was of the drive-by variety. "But look at her, Willow. She's, like, sunshine. All with the cute little clothes and knowing what fork to use at dinner and drinking wine that doesn't have a screw-on cap. I'm...I'm the trashy cousin who gets drunk at Thanksgiving and makes everybody uncomfortable."

"God, Faith, could you reduce things to more of a stereotype?" Willow asked, exasperatedly. "So you and B--I mean, Buffy--come from different sides of the track. You really think that matters to her? Because if it did, she sure as heck wouldn't be hanging out with Xander."

"Girlfriend, I can't even let myself think about this stuff, OK?" Faith's voice was adamant. "God, talkin' about it just makes it worse."

Willow, who had on several occasions in her life found herself talking about her hopes and fears without any memory of having made a conscious decision to do so, found this a difficult concept to grasp. "Wait...How...I mean..."

This cogent narrative effectively conveyed her point.

"So I'm five, right? And Christmas is comin' up. Mom used to get all these catalogues in the mail--clothes, jewelry, house stuff...You name it. And she'd just sit there and look through 'em for hours at a time. Drinkin' whatever booze was on sale down at the corner, and circling all this stuff with a big red felt-tip marker. Like she was gonna order any of it. Like we could afford anything more than a pair of socks or a dish towel. And she'd push one across to me and say, 'Here, Faith--don't you want to look through these? See what you wanna ask Santa to bring you?' What the fuck was that?" Faith clenched both fists helplessly, then drew a deep breath as if to steady herself. "In the first place, I already knew the big guy was bogus; or if he was real, he sure didn't think much of me. And in the second place, why set me up like that? Make me want stuff she knew I wouldn't get? I just shoved 'em back at her and went back to watching TV. I didn't let myself look at one damn thing."

"Because you knew you wouldn't get what you wanted," Willow finished quietly.

"Right." Faith suddenly looked exhausted in the shifting light. "There are some things that girls like me just don't get. So you don't even look at the catalogue."

Willow took this all in, trying to imagine a little girl whose inebriated mother urged her to make wishes she knew wouldn't come true. A little girl who figured out, so very early, which stores she could go into and not be laughed out of.

Silence fell over them again for a few minutes. Finally, Willow ventured hesitantly, "But you let yourself look at Buffy."

"Let myself look at her...Oh, yeah..." Faith leaned back against the wall and slid down slowly until she was sitting, arms propped over bent knees.

Willow cautiously sat as well, crossing her legs and gazing at Faith who was now shaking her head.

"Believe me--wasn't my original game plan," she laughed mirthlessly. "I gotta say, when I first saw B, I couldn't believe she was a Slayer. I mean, she seemed so...proper."

Willow could think of many occasions on which Buffy had been anything but proper. Guess Faith missed that whole contaminated beer incident.. This, though, was hardly the time to bring it up.

"But then I saw her in action. Damn, Red, she's good. I mean, Best of the Best kinda good."

"The greatest vampire slayer of all time..."

"The whole time I've known her, there's been exactly one time that I knew, flat-out knew, that I could take her," Faith added.

"When was that?" Willow asked, curiosity greatly piqued.

"This afternoon. When we--when you--figured out that the son-of-a-bitch had gotten her. I knew that if she made a break for it, I could take her. 'cause no way was I losing her; not like that."

Willow remembered Faith's expression; how she had shifted just slightly, enough to reach Buffy if the latter tried to leave. What must have been going through your mind...

"Anyway, I get to Sunnydale and figure out that B's the real deal. At first, I just wanted to be part of the team, you know? I saw how you tight you guys were; seemed cool."

"But then you started wanting something different," Willow ventured softly.

Faith ran her hands through her hair, clenching and releasing it in turns. "Yeah. I liked it when it was just the two of us." She broke off suddenly and punched her thighs. "Christ...I feel like such

an idiot. I had this huge flaming crush and didn't even know it and now I'm sitting here in the middle of the night playing True Confessions with this chick I beat up a few years ago."

"Yeah--same chick whose life you saved two nights ago. Though for future reference," she added, "I prefer the term 'broad.'"

"Gotcha," Faith grinned reluctantly.

"So when did you figure it out? How you felt, I mean?"

"A helluva long time after anybody else livin' my life would have. I can be a little slow on the uptake with these things. Tell you one thing, though--when Xander told me Angel was back and he saw them kissing...That pretty much made my head explode. But I just told myself I was pissed because she didn't trust me enough to tell me. Right." She shook her head. "Had nothing to do with getting all twisty and hot and crazy in my gut when I pictured them together."

Willow remembered her own brief stint in the Scooby psychiatric ward. Even while Xander was railing against Buffy, going on and on about how wrong it was, he was trying to kiss her. And Willow let him.

"Yeah, I think we all had our wonky moments during that time," she said uncomfortably.

"The moon must have been in Fucked," Faith agreed. "Anyway, we get through that patch and then there's Christmas and I just wanted to freeze it, you know?" She looked at Willow helplessly. "But I guess it doesn't work that way, does it? B got more involved with Angel, and I just kept trying to keep some piece of her just for myself. But the shine had worn off. All that nifty newness of having another Slayer...Seemed like it just kinda faded. And all I wanted was to be special again."

Why's that so important to all of us? Here they were, saving the world and leading exciting secret lives that 95% of the population could only begin to imagine...and they all worried that they could so easily be replaced.

"And I could see things falling apart. It was like the world was in hyper-drive and I was just running through mud. I was tryin' to keep up and I knew I couldn't."

"Maybe that's why," Willow said softly. "You knew you couldn't and so...you couldn't."

"Which came first: the chicken wing or the omelet? Feels like I choked on both of 'em." She rubbed her hands along her face, then looked back at Willow. "Hell, Red--you think I don't know I backed the wrong damn horse every race? Wilkins...He was a crazy bastard, but he cared. I know that sounds fucked, but it's true. He told me once that even if Buffy marched into his office and offered her services, he'd tell her he already had a Slayer. And that was about the nicest thing anybody ever said to me." The dark eyes glittered. Even in the dim light, Willow felt slapped by the pain she saw there.

"Next thing I know, I'm standing in that cafeteria swapping you for those freakin' spiders, which were just about the grossest things I'd ever seen. And Wilkins is gonna eat 'em. And part of me's thinking, 'What the hell am I doing?' But I had to choose--right then. I knew I coulda stayed and been one of the good guys again. Sure, it woulda been different, but you guys were all about second chances, right? I mean, look at Angel. Then I hear Wilkins calling my name, and..."

Willow remembered that night with perfect clarity. She remembered that the Mayor had had to call Faith's name twice before she turned to go with them. That moment...Was that the one? Or were there smaller ones, littered throughout that crazy time, each one barely recognizable as such?

"And you left," Willow finished.

"I left," Faith nodded. "A couple of weeks later, B and I are duelin' to the death on my rooftop and she shoves my knife--tell me that isn't poetic justice--right into my gut. Last thing I remember seeing, as I stepped back off the balcony is her face. B, lookin' absolutely, 5-alarm freaked. And I tell myself: She's goin' crazy 'cause she thinks she killed me.' Like I didn't know it was about Angel. And that's what I told myself as I fell onto that truck."

"We never thought you would wake up..."

"And when I did, what's the first thing on my to-do list after I figure out what date it is? I head right back to B's place. By that time I'm all about the rage. Wasn't till I got to LA that I finally started to figure it out. After damn near killing Angel and Wesley." She rubbed the back of her neck and sighed as if reliving the pain of all those battles.

Willow finally let herself ask the question that had been nipping at her mental heels since Tara had first told her of Faith's feelings. "You said Angel really helped you turn things around. Did he help you figure this out, too?"

Faith gave a slow grin. "Can you effin' believe it? One night I was just goin' off about how unfair the whole thing was, how Buffy had the life I wanted and it wasn't my fault Kendra'd gone and gotten herself killed so that I was called. Oh, yeah," she nodded at Willow's reaction, "he did not take kindly to that observation. Just gives me one of those looks where he stares at you and gets, like, extra grim. Said it wasn't Kendra's fault, either, and that I might, quote, 'Want to drop that line of thinking,' unquote. Then he starts talking about how there's nobody we hate as much as the people we love, and the minute he says the L word, I start freaking. Freaked most of the next couple of weeks, as I recall. But he was right. We talked about it some more; I mean, after I came back from two weeks of screwing every guy I could get my glands on. He tells me about Darla who, I gotta say, makes me sound like...like...Hell, like you or T, for God's sake."

Willow was human enough to be flattered.

"This was last year. When this whole prophecy thing came up, he sends me to Sunny D to help you guys and to deal with this head-on."

"So how's the head-on plan going?"

"Well, let's face it, Red--hasn't been much time for quiet walks in the woods or lookin' up at the stars," Faith pointed out.

"A valid consideration, and once again I'm thanking you for your intervention. But Faith--what are you gonna do? I mean, I don't think Buffy has any clue how you feel."

"How'd you figure it out?" Faith asked, not quite masking the anxiety in her voice. You're afraid it's all over your face, aren't you?

"It was Tara, actually. She read between the lines when you guys were talking in the kitchen. She's pretty good with that whole emotional intuition thing," she added.

"Guess so." Faith nodded appreciatively. "You really think B doesn't know?"

"I really don't," Willow replied honestly. "You know that point I just made about Tara? Yeah, well, less so is Buffy, especially when it comes to realizing people can fall for her."

"Jesus," Faith sighed, shaking her head. "What the hell am I gonna do, Red?"

"I don't know," Willow said softly. "I really wish I did."

They sat like that, in silence, for a few more minutes. Finally, Faith stretched her arms up over her head and rose gracefully to her feet. "Well, right now I'm gonna go back to be. I'm gonna go back into B's bedroom and pray I don't sleepwalk for the first time in my life."

Willow stood, somewhat less easily, as her right foot had fallen asleep. "Same here. Oh, except, you know--not with the desiring Buffy part, because...eww." She grinned awkwardly, wanting to offer some words of parting comfort, but deciding against it. Faith would probably barf.

"So...g'night. And--lemme know if you need anything." That seemed safe. She turned toward the stairs.

"Red?" Faith's voice was hesitant.

Willow turned, surprised. "Yeah?"

"About tonight..."

"I tell anyone and you'll break four fingers and an ankle?" she guessed.

"Right," Faith nodded. "I mean, not really...Just seemed like something I should say."

"Understood. 'night, Faith."

"Night, Willow."

Half an hour later, nicely sated with the last of the Teddy Grahams, Willow crawled back into bed. Tara rolled over in her sleep and flung an arm over her waist. Those two can have their Super Powers. I'll take this; every time.

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When morning broke the next day, Willow thought for one brief moment that she had dreamt the entire conversation with Faith. She quickly dismissed the possibility, though: her dreams were never that linear.

If I'd dreamt it, Faith would have been wearing a motorcycle helmet and speaking in Danish. Plus that cheese guy would've shown up somewhere...

Everyone shuffled in to breakfast in varying states of consciousness. Anya looked as if she had emerged from REM fully functional and ready to solve for pi, while Xander had the appearance of someone who might easily put his pants on over his head if not gently instructed otherwise. Giles emerged from the bathroom holding his glasses in one hand and in so doing bumped into the door frame. "Bloody hell, who put that there?" he mumbled.

Faith looked remarkably relaxed, Willow thought. She had expected the Dark Slayer to be tense, as if waiting for Willow to jump up from the table and yell, "Faith loves Buffy!" Instead, she greeted Willow with a small, wry grin and a nod, then padded over to the refrigerator. She pulled out a bottle of Diet Coke and poured herself a tall glass.

"Soda first thing in the morning?" Xander asked incredulously, digging into a heaping bowl of Corn Flakes.

"Right...Because coffee is such a natural thing to drink," she replied with the barest of glances in his direction. "And don't even get me started on that tea thing of yours, Watcher Man," she added in response to Giles' disapproving glance.

"That's rather a noxious attitude to take," he huffed.

"That's rather a noxious thing to drink," she retorted, tossing back large, gulping swigs of the extremely, unnaturally carbonated beverage. "Pass the Flakes, flake."

"So what's on everyone's game plan for today?" Buffy asked, as if hoping to forestall an escalation of Trash Talk in the AM. "Are we hanging together?"

"God, much more of this and our menstrual cycles will synchronize," Anya muttered. "Not yours," she added, to a mortified Giles and Xander.

"Not really much for walking along the beach in soft focus," the carpenter said, shoving his hands in his pockets as if the moon goddess herself might try to take up residence in his pants.



"Well, it's a lovely, class-free Saturday," Willow offered. "I was hoping Tara and I could steal a little family time." She reached out to take Tara's willing hand. Because we need to talk.

"I'm all about family values," Tara promptly replied. "Pat Robertson and I were talking about it just yesterday." She expertly flipped a rhomboid pancake onto a large plate, followed in quick succession by a trapezoid, a pentagram, and a very nice likeness of Munch's "The Scream."

"We can help out with research this morning," Willow added, not wanting to appear remiss in her Scooby commitment. "I was just thinking about a little picnic this afternoon."

"Then all of us will gather at the Magic Box later this morning?" Giles asked, sipping his tea and biting delicately into a piece of toast. "We can share register duties."

Xander cleared his throat hesitantly, reaching out for Anya's hand. Willow noticed that the ex-demon seemed far less ebullient this morning. "Um, Ahn and I are going to Trevor's funeral this afternoon," he said, looking at his wife regretfully.

A silence draped over the kitchen like a stifling blanket. Willow could feel each of them remembering their own close calls, or those of the ones they held dearest. And an unspoken question hovered disquietingly, accusingly: How many more?

"Of course," Giles finally said, resting an awkward hand on Anya's shoulder. "Anya, I'm very sorry. I know that you liked and respected him a great deal."

"Yes," she said simply, her voice unusually small. Willow had a sudden memory of Anya after Joyce's death: bewildered at the grief, unsure of what to do with it. For all of the pain that the demon had witnessed--inflicted--over the years, the human was left paralyzed in the face of it.

"Anya," she said suddenly. "Sometimes the partner or family will ask that money be sent to a cause or a charity, instead of flowers. See if his partner did that, and we can make a contribution."

Anya looked up at her in surprise, and unmasked gratitude. "I will," she said quietly. "Thank you."

Breakfast ended soon afterwards, with Dawn dragging Faith toward the sink. "We call this 'dishwashing liquid,'" she said slowly. "Let's learn about it together, shall we?"

After the requisite production involved in getting a small child fed and changed, and packing up a diaper bag with snacks and drinks and Handi-Wipes and Kleenex, Willow, Tara, and Kyra set out for a stroll in the park. The two of them had decided early on that they wouldn't use magic to ease any of the logistical pains of child care....although the dirty diapers had presented a strong temptation. "Tara, c'mon," Willow argued. "Something that hideous requires supernatural intervention. You think Samantha on 'Bewitched' changed Tabitha's diapers?"

"Will, you realize that that was a TV show, right? Not known for its starkly realistic depictions of modern life."

"Or so they would have us believe," Willow muttered darkly.

In the end--as it were--they had agreed that they could use a minor sensory spell to block the more horrific olfactory elements. All else, though, was done as humanity has done it since the first infant gazed up at the first parent and expressed some version of the universal dictate: "Make everything OK for me."

Today was a beautiful day--typical southern California. They reached the park and spread a blanket out on the warm earth. Kyra pulled out her Clifford the Big Red Dog book and proceeded to read it--upside down. She seemed to enjoy it most that way. Tara was relaxed, watching their daughter with abject adoration. Willow hated to spoil everything, and she knew without question that she had to.

"Will, whatever it is--please tell me. I'm not especially in the mood for surprises these days." Tara's voice broke through her reverie: clear, insistent.

It's a good thing I can't see myself cheating. I could never keep a secret from her.

"You're not gonna like it," she began cautiously.

"Well, that part seems pretty clear, judging from the lovely shade of dread you're currently wearing," Tara replied, bemused.

Willow drew a deep breath. "Tara, we need to talk about Kyra. Where she comes from; how she fits into this." She watched, groaning inwardly as ice slid down over features normally vibrant and warm.

"I think we already did," Tara said, her voice thin.

"No, we didn't," Willow countered doggedly. "We've talked about talking about it; we've talked around it; and heaven knows there have been other hot topics every night to lead off the evening news...But we can't put this off any longer, Tara. It's...It's irresponsible not to talk about it."

OK, maybe not the best word choice...

And indeed, Tara was glaring at her as if Willow had accused her of child neglect. "Are you saying I'm irresponsible about Kyra?"

"God, Baby, no! I'm just saying that--Tara, we have to look at certain facts." She wondered if this was how Giles often felt, refusing to let them pretend that the Boogy Man might just be the most benign thing in town at the moment. She leaned forward, clasping Tara's suddenly cold hands in her own. "Tara? Baby? Please talk to me."

The face that turned to her was chalk white, save for red lines of anger that flared across her cheeks like slashes. "I am sick of this, Willow," she practically hissed. "I'm sick of having my family--at home, here--get fucked with by these bastards who hide out in heaven or hell or somewhere in the ether and just throw us like logs into some giant fire...watch us snap and burn and die, just to feed the flames. I am sick of it!"

Willow sat back, stunned. She had never seen Tara so furious, venomous.

"A bunch of monks make Dawn the Key. They make my aunt a Protector. Knowing full well that they could suffer and die; knowing we'd love them and grieve. God, it just goes on and on, Willow. Buffy and Angel love each other, and then all because of some curse they didn't even know about, sharing that love rips Angel's soul away from him and Angelus kills Miss Calendar before Buffy has to kill him. We're pawns, Willow, getting moved around on some board we aren't even allowed to see. And it stops here." She gripped her arms tightly, as if warding off some feeling that threatened to rip her apart from the inside.

Kyra watched all of this in frightened silence, gazing from one mother to the next as if willing both of them to stop talking in scary voices.

Willow wanted to babble, wanted to flood Tara with a deluge of arguments and persuasions and reassurances. The instinct that she was honing, however, made her choose her words very, very carefully. "Tara, Baby, believe it or not, I agree with you. I hate feeling like our lives are getting jerked around; like some force out there could shuffle us around and we wouldn't even know it. But...But at least we have Dawn, and Beverly. I mean, I know it sounds weird but...well, didn't we come out ahead?"

Tara just shook her head. Finally, she whispered, "Willow, it's Kyra. Our daughter."

Willow's heart cracked open at the words. When she trusted herself to speak, she said, "I know, Baby. That's why we have to find out. We can't just sit here and hope everything's OK. Tara, she didn't come to us through natural means. And we know she has some kind of power; we saw her use it."

Tara turned to her, her eyes desperate. "But maybe it was just a glitch, Will. Maybe...maybe somehow Kyra was created from the force of the spell and that's where she came from. Maybe there's nothing more to it than that."

Willow just sat quietly. She knew Tara didn't really believe the words, as desperately as she wanted to.

"Darnuth checked her out, Willow. She's never found any evidence that she's anything other than a normal, healthy baby. Something would show up, wouldn't it? If there were anything strange going on?"

"Tara, Baby, Dawn and Beverly could say the same thing." She hated this role, hated being the person trying to persuade Tara to look beyond the blissful surface and consider more ominous possibilities about their child.

Tara sat in stony silence for several moments, fear and resentment rolling off of her in waves. Willow thought she might choke on the ferocity of her partner's dread. Finally she turned to Willow and asked in a tiny voice, "What do you want to do?"

OK. Next step... "Tara, Baby, she came to us when we called on the Anadeis." Willow drew a deep breath. "I think we should invoke them again."

Tara pulled back, shaking her head anxiously. "Willow, what if they take her?"

"Tara, I think they're the ones who sent her to us. Why would they take her? And if they wanted to, couldn't they have done it already?" She reached for Tara again. "Baby, we'd be naive not to think that they might be involved somehow. We have to use our heads here, as well as our hearts."

Tara's eyes narrowed to slits. "You think I'm being irrational? I love her too much? I should analyze her a bit?"

The furrow in Kyra's brow deepened as she watched this exchange. She returned to Clifford, but kept glancing anxiously up at her mothers.

Willow felt her own anger flaring. "And what? I don't love her enough? I'm being too rational? Is that what you think?"

Tara stared at her defiantly for a half-second, then closed her eyes and released a shuddering breath. "No...God, no, that's not what I think. I just...Will, I've never been as scared of anything in my entire life as I am of losing Kyra. Sometimes I watch her sleep or I watch you feeding her, and I think my heart's just going to shatter. Willow, my life has never been so complete; I never dreamed it could be so complete. And every time you talk about digging deeper into where she came from, I feel like I'm watching some horror movie where the person decides to check out some weird phenomenon and you just want to scream, 'Get out. Don't look at it. Don't poke at it. Just run; go home and lock your doors.' That's how I feel now. Will, we're supposed to keep the bad stuff away, not throw open the front door and invite it in."

"Tara, do you think I haven't thought about just packing her up and leaving this whole Scooby scene behind? But we can't, Tara. Things find you if they're supposed to find you."

"So you aren't afraid at all? You'd feel comfortable, right now, invoking them, hearing whatever they have to say?" Tara's voice was softly challenging.

Willow stopped cold. She had been in the position of trying to persuade Tara but now, as Tara herself posed the scenario, she had to confess: not at all. She most definitely did not want to call up the Anadeis and say, 'Hey--what's up with our daughter?'"

"No," she finally whispered. "Tara, I don't want to do this at all. I can think of about 3,672 other things I'd rather do, including vote for George Bush and have a pelvic exam on public access TV. I'm not even one bit comfortable with this."

"But you think we have to do it," Tara finished quietly.

"Yes," Willow replied, squeezing her hand. Kyra seemed to have settled down slightly during the last exchange, her tiny brow clearing just a bit. "Yes, to find out what we can. Tara, it's true: knowledge is power. If there is anything involving Kyra, I don't want us to be the only ones who don't know it."

Tara stared at Kyra as if the force of her gaze would stop time, stop all of this. Willow could see tears sparkling unshed in the cobalt eyes. Finally she turned to Willow.

"Let's do it."

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They returned home shortly after this, calling the Magic Box to say that they weren't sure when they could make it and yes, they were fine and no, they weren't exhausted. They did, however, ask Buffy to come home to baby-sit.

"After us, she's the person I feel most comfortable having Kyra," Tara said. "Any force would have to go through her, and we both know how easy that isn't."

When the Slayer returned, she looked at them questioningly. "You two didn't call me home so that you could take a quote unquote nap, did you? Because I'm all about quality time, but--"

"Buffy, we're going to try to find out more about where Kyra came from," Willow cut her off. "And whether she has any connection to this prophecy."

Buffy's gaze turned sober as she looked from Willow to Tara, and then back. "Do what you need to do. Nothing will come near her," she said quietly. Willow swallowed heavily, and she and Tara retired to their own room.

They researched their own extensive archives on anything pertaining to the Anadeis. There wasn't much beyond what they already knew: they were a trio of spirits, almost infinitely old. They were assumed to be female, but since no one had ever seen them, there was no certainty to be found. It was quite possible that gender didn't apply to them, but one thing was definitely true: they could only be summoned by women. Men could be included in the protection, but they could not invoke them directly.

Without discussion, Willow and Tara had summoned them last year: Give form to that which delivers all who call upon it. Now, though, they weren't asking for protection so much as information. Finally, they pieced together a summoning chant designed to bring them into contact with the spirits, rather than being sent some protection as the spirits' proxy.

They joined hands, a small, unscented votive between them and tiny shreds of oak bark, sycamore leaves, and juniper berries forming a crescent to their western sides. They gazed at one another for a long moment, Willow trying both to center herself and reassure Tara.

"She's ours, Baby," she whispered, feeling Tara's hands tighten upon her own. They drew a deep breath as one, and then chanted together:

"Those who offered safety ere now:

Hear our question; back your vow.

You who sent protection before:

Appear before us, we implore."

Willow could feel the energy humming in the room before she ever heard a word. When she opened her eyes, she saw a pale blue light shimmering above the crescent. There were no forms discernible, but Willow felt the trio of spirits as surely as she felt her own heartbeat.

"We thought you might wish to speak to us."

The voice was deep; resounding, almost. And yet utterly feminine. Willow heard a great antiquity in its depth.

"What would you say to us?" came another voice, this one seeming both younger than the first and still ancient.

Willow glanced at Tara, their hands still clasped. Should she ask the first question, or wait for Tara? She watched her partner square her shoulders, and she held her tongue.

"We want to know if you sent Kyra to us; and if so, why." Willow marveled at the steadiness in her beloved's voice.

"We do not call her by the name you gave her." This voice seemed the youngest of the three, though it, too, rippled with age.

"I don't care what you call her," Tara replied evenly. "She is Kyra, our daughter. All we ask is whether you have information we should have."

"Of course we do, child," came the eldest voice. "We did send her; we chose you among a thousand others."

Willow's heart slammed into her chest. "Why? Why did you send her?"

"Because she is the Guardian. She will grow into a woman who shall guard other women; she shall make the way safe for others who must come."

Tara's hands were squeezing hers so tightly Willow could feel her fingers whitening. "What do you mean, 'Guardian'?" Tara asked, her voice dangerously quiet.

"Her life's work will be to battle those who would harm the women who will come to power. There are those not yet born, their mothers only children now; those children will have children who will create a new balance of power. Certain forces will not welcome that change. They will fight that change. And the Guardian will ensure that they do not succeed. The Guardian will serve to protect these women. She will face many battles, of many kinds."

Willow pictured her daughter--tiny, perfect--asleep downstairs and thought for a moment that she might vomit. She saw agony etched equally across Tara's beloved features.

"Why?" Willow finally whispered. "Why send a child? Why not send a full-grown woman to do this battle?"

"Because she must learn, across the rolling luxury of time, of many things. She must know fear, in order to learn courage. She must know vulnerability, to become invincible. She must know weakness, to reach her greatest strength. This is the path of the Guardian." So spoke the second of the spirits.

"She's not a Guardian," Tara practically roared. "She's our daughter!"

"Whom you have solely as a function of our plan," came the youngest ancient voice. "She is no more truly yours than any child on the street."

And finally Willow, too, was shocked into rage. "Fuck. You." She spat the words. Fury and terror eclipsed any misgivings she might have had about cursing a trio of immortals.

But there was no rain of fire, just a maddeningly calm voice. "We do not dispute your love for the child. Indeed, that love shall protect her, teach her compassion and humility; temper her power."

"Well here's a thought, you three-headed freak show," Willow retorted. "If we're supposed to look out for her, why'd you let us almost get killed? Tara barely made it; I wouldn't have made it if Faith hadn't been there."

"And you suppose, do you, that Faith's appearance here is by chance?" The second voice was almost...amused.

"Can you say 'Faith'?"

"Fate."

Willow squeezed her eyes shut, rocking slightly. Of course. Hadn't she suspected something from the beginning? The connection; the obvious affection that transcended simple fondness for an endearing child?

"We acted through the vampire to send the Dark One to you," continued the second voice. "She loves the child, fiercely, though she scarcely understands it herself. She will protect the child with her life. She will forfeit that life, if necessary, so that the Guardian may reach her full power."

Willow could feel Tara trembling across from her.

"You seem distraught, my dear," came the eldest voice. "Do you not realize the good, the power, that the Guardian represents? The power to protect so many women who are so vital to creating the world you would most want your daughter to live in? She will be an instrument of such beneficence and courage."

"Do you really think that matters?" Willow asked incredulously. "Honor? Pride? You're saying our daughter is destined to be a warrior; that her life will be filled with danger and pain." She broke off, suddenly hopeful. "Is she immortal herself? These battles she's supposed to fight--is she protected from harm herself?"

Maybe I could handle that. Maybe I could handle that.

"I am sorry, my child, but that we cannot guarantee." The eldest voice seemed truly regretful. "It is not within our power to create an immortal. Believe me, though, we share the same hope: that the Guardian grows to adulthood safely, and happily."

"Stop calling her that!" Tara shouted. "Her name is Kyra!"

"As you wish," came the imperturbable voice. "We have endowed Kyra with strength and knowledge beyond that of the average human. She shall not fight unprepared."

"She won't fight at all," Tara hissed. "You think you can shove her into this idiotic battle of yours and not even guarantee her safety?"

"You presume to speak so?" came the youngest voice. "When you yourselves fight and risk?"

"Because we choose to," Willow replied angrily.

"As if your meeting with the Slayer was by accident." The second voice was utterly calm.

Willow reeled at the thought. Had there been a destiny? Of any sort?

Perhaps. But she had chosen, in a hundred conscious moments and possibly a million more unconscious ones, to fight; to stay and work and risk...everything.

"No," she said flatly. "We may have been thrown together, but you'll never convince me we had no choice in the matter."



"My child, why do you argue? Can you not see the power she already possesses? Imagine the good that she will bring. Would you rob her of that honor?"

"You wanna go all womyn power, let's see you get off your ass and do it yourselves. Lazy hags," she added.

Two voices rose in sharp protest, and then Willow had a dim but abrupt sense of having just been spared an ugly death as the eldest voice merely chuckled. "We chose you well, Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay. None will dare threaten this child without your fury making them regret the attempt. No, we cannot fight as humans do. Heavens, child...With all the forces conspiring for darkness, are you not glad for those of us who conspire for good?"

"See, it's that whole 'conspire' thing that gets me," Willow said bitterly.

"You seem to suppose that the Guard--that Kyra would refuse this role," the second immortal commented. "Do you think that your friend wishes she were not the Chosen One, the one who fights such battles?"

"I don't know," Willow answered honestly. "But I think she would've liked the choice."

"We would all like many things," came the youngest of the ancient voices. "But that is rarely our luxury. We have had to wait for such a time as we could call the Guardian into being; we had to wait for the prophecy and the coming time of the new powers."

Willow's head snapped up at the word. "Prophecy? You're talking about...?"

"But of course," came the second voice. "There is darkness emerging now from what was light. Upon the completion of its task, the dark force shall give full rise to the new light."

"What do you mean, 'full rise'?" Tara demanded, her eyes glittering with an anger Willow had never seen before.

"The Guardian--"

"Kyra!" Willow shouted.

"Kyra, then...Kyra now has but a fraction of the power she will have when she is fully realized as the Guardian. We sent her to you, upon your calling, because we recognized that you would be her best protectors, her best teachers. But she could not claim full power, regardless of her age, until the evil that now walks among you has claimed his tenth victim."

Willow looked across at Tara. We think as one, my love.

"So if this malevolent force doesn't take its tenth victim...what happens to Kyra?"

She wondered if she felt a slight ripple in the energy about them.

"Such a thing cannot happen," the youngest voice said, her voice adamant. "This force needs only three more good souls, though it cannot take any that it has already afflicted and lost."

"But if it did?" Tara persisted.

The eldest voice echoed evenly about them. "Then Kyra would become as any other child. But this cannot happen, my dear. The prophecy has clearly foretold--"

"How 'bout you shove that prophecy right up your incorporeal asses?" Willow said, a tiny, determined smile beginning to make its way across her face. "I think we're done here."

And again, her mind linked with Tara's: Be ye banished. Linked hands descended onto the votive, an angry hiss filling the room as the flame died, protesting. She felt the spirits rip away from them.

She locked eyes with Tara.

"We have work to do."

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Willow gripped Tara's hands tightly. Downstairs she could hear Kyra and Buffy laughing.

"This is our loophole, Baby," she said excitedly. "This is how we give the royal kiss-off to the Powers That Wanna Be." She scrambled to her feet, half pulling Tara after her. "C'mon. We gotta let the others know." In two steps, she had crossed to their bedroom phone and punched 4 on the speed dial.

"Hello, and thank you for calling--"

"Giles, it's Willow."

"Willow, is something wrong?" The Watcher's voice grew tense.

"No, everything's OK. Well, not OK, obviously, because there's a Big Bad on the loose and five of us have been this close to suicide in the past three days but--"

"Willow, you know I'm concerned about my advancing age. Please don't let me die before you reach your point. You'd never forgive yourself."

"Oh yeah. Right. OK, Tara and I contacted the Anadeis and got more information." The exchange, and its contents, tumbled over and through her mind. She bit her lip against the fear.

Focus.

"I need you to come over when you close up the shop."

"Of course. Would you like us to come over now? Faith and Dawn are with me."

"No, Buffy's still here. I'll leave a message on Xander's cell phone. Thanks, Giles." She rang off and turned expectantly to Tara, whose earlier determination now seemed dimmed.

"Tara? Baby? What is it?"

"Willow, what do we do?" Her beloved's voice was thick with fear.

"We'll figure it out." How many times had she uttered those words?

Sometimes I even believe them.

But Tara was shaking her head. "How? We're no closer to figuring this out than we ever were. Yes, we have some minor details but if it goes off in search of three other people, we have no way of stopping it." She hesitated, and Willow could suddenly see the pallor in the beautiful face. "Willow, it works so quickly. God, the only reason we're alive is because the Anadeis sent Faith and you are pretty much a genius."

Willow just stared at her helplessly. Tara was right. What could they do? Unless it attacked another of them, they had no way of finding it.

What does "finding it" even mean?

They had no idea if it took physical form; no idea how it infected its victims. But what could they do--just sit back and hope somebody else did something? The thought was alien to her. And even if they surrendered in this battle, Kyra would still be drafted into the later war.

"I don't know, Tara," she practically whispered. "But...But we have to stay focused. We have to stay focused, and..." She trailed off. And what? All she knew was that if she let herself register the full scope of this task, she might collapse. "We...we have to--"

We have to what?

She stared helplessly at her mate.

Tara reached for her suddenly, eyes glistening. "Oh God, Will...I'm so sorry. You had to drag me through this whole deal. I didn't want to look. I didn't want to know. And you knew we had to ask." Tara's voice broke, and then she squared her shoulders and stared intently into Willow's eyes. "Sweetie, it's OK. I'm with you. We'll figure it out."

Willow sank into the warm arms as she heard her own words echoed back to her.

"We're her mothers, Willow. We'll protect her."

She just nodded into Tara's shoulder. They stood there, huddled together for several minutes, until Tara finally pulled back and looked at her steadily. "Let's tell Buffy."

Now she's trying to keep it together for me.

They walked down to the living room to find the Slayer on the floor fending off several dive bombings from Kyra, in which Kyra herself was the projectile of choice. As if by unconscious agreement, Willow and Tara halted in the doorway and watched their daughter tumbling over and into and onto the Chosen One.

"OK, you need to work on your stealth, because giggling when you attack? Not the best strategy. On the other hand, they'll probably be so busy cooing over you that you'll dust 'em before they can say, 'Oh, isn't she cute?'"

"Our daughter will not fight!"

This is what Willow wanted to say. But then she felt Tara's hand on her arm, and looked at her partner. Tara slowly dragged her gaze to meet Willow's eyes, and in her own there was something Willow couldn't read...Sadness? Fear?

"And another thing: you have to learn to tell when someone's trying to sneak up on you. Lots of things give people away...Sometimes you can pick out their perfume. Like, if someone always wears sandalwood, you'll know if she's standing in the doorway watching you."

Buffy turned and fixed them with a blinding smile. Willow, though, was too busy trying not to cry as Kyra ran toward them.

"Mommymama!" She said it as if it were one name; as if they were one parent.

Buffy had expanded her sixth sense repertoire to include feelings. "Will? What is it?"

She couldn't speak. She simply gathered her daughter up in her arms and held her tightly. Kyra, usually so animated, didn't struggle against the desperate embrace.

I'll just hold her like this for the next ten years. I won't let her go and this won't happen.

"Sweetie, I'm going to fix Kyra a snack, OK?" Tara's voice wrapped itself around Willow's breaking heart like a velvet cord, binding it gently back together. A look into the endless blue eyes told her that Tara herself felt anything but calm. Her hands were steady, though, as she scooped Kyra into her arms and kissed her fiercely on the cheek.

Kyra shot a questioning look between her mothers, eyes wide and trusting.

She reads us like a book. And she assumes that whatever it is, we'll make it OK.

Her arms felt achingly empty the moment Kyra shifted into Tara's embrace and they turned toward the kitchen. She suddenly had no idea what to do with her hands.

This is ridiculous. They're in the next room.

"Willow." Buffy's voice sliced through her paralysis. "Talk to me."

Drawing a shaky breath, Willow turned to her best friend. "Kyra's supposed to fight." The words shifted the floor beneath her and she sank into a chair for fear of dropping where she stood.

Buffy stared at her, then scrambled over to kneel before the chair. "What do you mean?" she asked urgently, squeezing Willow's hands. "She's supposed to fight?"

The room gradually stopped spinning. My partner and my child are in the kitchen. My best friend is right here. I can do this.

She made herself meet Buffy's eyes. "The Anadeis...We summoned them and they said they sent her to us to watch over and raise until she became..." Here she faltered. Buffy just sat silently, though the pressure of her fingers told Willow that her patience was hard-won. "Until she became the Guardian. It's this woman who's supposed to watch out for and protect some other women...Women who are going to become very strong and--I don't know--change the balance of power, somehow. Anyway, Kyra's supposed to protect them from all of the bad guys who will not be thrilled by this development."

Am I talking in future tense or conditional tense? There was something meaningful in the difference, but she would not allow herself to think about what it might be.

Buffy exhaled slowly. "God, Will..."

"God. Goddess. Any number of deities. All of whom apparently feel the absolute right to muck with our lives." Anger crested again, rushing through her blood.

"And this is related to the Big Bad?" Buffy asked, still holding Willow's hands.

"Oh yeah. That's another little sliver of joy. We pretty much knew this guy was part of the prophecy that Wesley found, right? Well, Kyra's apparently the new light. He takes his ten souls, and she graduates to Guardian."

"What? At the age of one, Kyra becomes a master fighter?" Buffy's voice was incredulous.

"Oh, of course not. And of course they're not going to send an adult to do this, one who can make her own choices. What fun would that be? OK, so here comes Dish Number Three in the Buffet of Big News: Faith's not here by accident. Apparently she's Kyra's protector and...mentor, I guess, until Kyra's old enough to fight."

Buffy sat back slightly, her face a tilting mosaic of emotions, many of which didn't go well with each other.

She's hurt that it's Faith and not her. Willow wasn't surprised, but this was hardly a focus for her right now.

Apparently Buffy realized this as well. She leaned forward again, her face grim. "What else did they tell you? Does she have super-powers? Will the Anadeis be looking out for her?"

Willow felt frustration rolling through her. "Apparently she has--or will have--extra strength and resiliency, but they couldn't guarantee her safety. No, they just plunk an infant down in the middle of their grand plan and sit back."

Buffy gave a derisive snort. "Ever notice how all the big names in the mystical world never actually put their own lives on the line? They're more than happy to deploy any and all of us, but somehow they're always just...unavailable for the actual fighting."

"Tara and I chose to get involved with all of this. We knew the risks. But Kyra...Buffy, she's just a baby." She broke off at the sound of laughter from the kitchen.

Again, she felt the reassuring grip of her best friend's hands. "Willow, we'll stop this thing. Kyra doesn't become the Guardian until this Big Bad gets it ten good souls, right?"

Willow nodded. "They said if it didn't--and they were definitely not excited about that plan--Kyra would turn out to be like any other kid. Only cuter and smarter," she added, then said sheepishly, "I sort of made up that last part myself."

The Slayer flashed a defiant smile. "You mean we have the chance to piss off a Big Bad and a trio of wannabe puppeteers? If I weren't wearing silk, I'd drool."

Willow's answering grin was weak but sincere. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Buffy," she said suddenly, gratitude spilling over her heart.

"And that's what I call the Queen Mother of Rhetorical Questions," her best friend answered easily. "OK, so we have to find a way to stop Sunnydale's latest visit from Some Scary Place Not Found on Any Triple-A Map."

Willow's earlier helplessness returned with a vengeance. "How, Buffy? We have no idea how to stop this thing."

Buffy tossed her head. "Yeah, yeah...A few years ago we had no idea how to stop the Mayor, who turned into a giant snake that snapped up people like Triscuits. We had no idea how to stop Adam, who squashed everything we threw at him. How were we ever going to stop Glory? She was a god, for Peter, Paul, and Mary's sake. And out of all of them, who now walks the earth in stylish yet tasteful apparel?"

Willow gave an uneasy glance at her own outfit: Hello Kitty meets Benny's Thrift Store.

"OK, scratch that," Buffy said, following her gaze. "Who now gulps mochas with a regularity that would clearly suggest addiction if we were inclined to label people?"

"That would be all of us," Willow promptly replied.

"Exactly," Buffy nodded. They sat quietly for a moment, sharing a look that captured what seven years of shared triumph and heartbreak can render.

A rustle from the doorway broke the moment. Willow looked up to see Tara smiling at them, one eyebrow slightly arched. "Buffy, if you're proposing to my life mate, I really do have to protest."

"And risk an ass-kicking by an uber-witch? I'm no fool." Buffy rose gracefully and walked over to where Tara stood, cradling Kyra protectively in her arms. She wrapped mother and daughter in a tight, quick embrace. "We can do this," Willow heard her whisper.

There were moments of perfect beauty in the midst of perfect terror.

"Bub!"

And there were moments of perfect timing. Buffy pulled back and groaned. "It's Buh-fee," she said emphatically, and turned to Willow. "You teach her to do this, don't you?"

"If I say yes, is the proposal off?" Somehow we will get through this.

They spent the next forty-five minutes playing with the unbearably cute child before them, who gave no appearance of being at all concerned with prophecies and Guardianship and balances of power. All she had to do was whatever she wanted, and she was infinitely adored for her choices.

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By the time Giles, Faith, and Dawn arrived, Willow had let herself believe once more that success was possible. She had left a message on Xander's cell phone, giving no details but asking only that he come over when he and Anya could do so. She wondered how the ex-vengeance demon was coping with her grief.

Kyra had gone down for a quick nap. ("Not too long," Tara cautioned, "or we'll never get her to sleep tonight.") This fact made conversation easier in its execution, but not in its content. Willow and Tara repeated what they had been told, up until the point about Faith.

The group's reaction was, as she had anticipated, outraged. "She's a baby," Dawn said, incredulous. "How could they pin this on a baby?"

"I've noticed that ostensibly higher powers often show utter disregard for those actors whom they cast in their roles," Giles said, frowning.

For her part, Faith kept glancing upstairs as if wishing she had visual proof of Kyra's well-being. Buffy leaned over and said quietly, "Nothing's gonna happen to her. Those freaks want her as safe as we do."

Faith shook her head in disdain. "If they're all about you two raising her, why'd they almost let you die?"

Willow exchanged a quick look with Tara. "Funny you should mention that," she began hesitantly. She could see Faith tensing with the words. "Seems you're part of this little prophecy as well."

Faith looked from Willow to Tara and back again, shock written on her face. After a moment, though, it was replaced with something else.

Pride.

"So...I'm part of a prophecy," she mused. "Little ol' me, part of a prophecy. Kinda makes a girl wanna get new clothes." She turned to Buffy with exaggerated formality. "Hello, my name is Faith. I play a vital role in an ancient prophecy."

"Oh God, we're gonna be hearing about this for awhile, aren't we?" Buffy muttered.

"No need for a huff, Buff," Faith said placatingly. "I'm sure you're very important here, too." She looked back at Willow, her expression quickly turning serious. "So what exactly do I do? And please say it involves kicking ass."

"Well, they said that it was no coincidence you were here. Like, they knew you could save me and I could save Tara." She hesitated, unsure how to phrase it all.

"And I'm not exactly going out on a limb here when I say there's something else, right?" Faith asked, impatience edging into her voice.

"No, you're not. They said that Kyra wouldn't become the Guardian until this Big Bad takes ten souls. And after that, she'll need to be taught...How to fight, things like that."

"What--I'm not in charge of etiquette?" Faith asked. "I'm shocked, and a little hurt, I gotta say." She shook her head sadly, and then her expression turned all business. "And now--as much as you don't wanna say it...what else?"

Tara gazed at Faith, her eyes clear and gentle. "They said that you would protect her. That...that you would sacrifice your life if it were necessary."

Faith merely tightened her lips and nodded slightly.

She was expecting this.



Buffy, though, looked as though someone had slapped her. "What do you mean, sacrifice her life?"

The Dark Slayer replied casually, "That means if push comes to shove, I push the kid out of the way and shove the bad guy down the stairs."

"And you go with it," Buffy replied, so quietly that Willow could barely hear her.

What's going on inside your head? What in goddess' name are you feeling?

Faith just looked at her steadily. "Like you wouldn't do the same thing, B."

They exchanged a stare-down for the ages, until Buffy finally crossed her arms and turned to Willow. "Did these invisible Gorgons say that Faith has to work alone? Or does she get to have a lovable sidekick whose wacky hijinks lend some much-needed levity to the drama?"

Willow looked at Tara, then back to her best friend. "I...I don't know. Faith, we haven't even asked if you wanted to be involved in all of this."

Faith shifted her weight onto one foot and tossed her hair--a move Willow now recognized as designed to convey a nonchalance she didn't feel. "Hey, if the wenches on high said I'm supposed to protect her, I'm supposed to protect her."

"Right," Buffy snorted. "Because you always do what you're supposed to do."

Faith ignored this. "OK, so how long a gig we talkin' about?"

"Um...they weren't really clear about that." Because we sorta hung up on them. "I got the impression it wasn't exactly a weekend seminar type of thing."

Even as she spoke, Willow realized that Faith would gladly stay for as long as possible.

"And then it hits me--I'm so fuckin' glad to have a reason to stay, I coulda died."

To belong? To be close to Buffy? To know, beyond a doubt, that she had a good and critical role to play? Willow was amazed that Faith could maintain anything even approximating neutrality.

"Yeah, well, I'll have to get an extended leave from Angel, then...Like, a really extended leave."

Things shift so much. Now Angel's a role player.

"But the point is pretty effin' moot, right?" she continued. "Because we're gonna stop this joy-suck guy before he gets his next three white hats, so the prophecy gets bumped off the rails and Kyra grows up learning how to change tires, not change the world. Right?"

"That's the plan," Tara said quietly.

"Does this prophecy say anything about me turning the prophecy on its ear? 'cuz that would be pretty cool." Faith's voice held its old swagger.

"No," Willow replied quickly. "In fact, the Anadeis were not even remotely excited when we brought up what would happen if we stopped this."

"Pissin' off the higher-ups?" Faith asked, delighted. "That's my kind of fun." Willow caught Buffy's quick nod.

You are more alike than either of you realize.

Her attention, though, was diverted by a knock at the door, followed by Xander and Anya letting themselves in. They were both dressed in dark clothes. Willow noticed that Xander's hand never left his wife's back.

She forced herself to remember that other people were hurting as well. "Anya--hey. Thanks for coming. How are you doing?"

The ex-vengeance demon looked at her through red-rimmed eyes. "I've been better. But I'm certainly better than Trevor's partner right now. I don't even know how the man is standing." She glanced at her husband. "I've already told Xander that if he hurts himself, I'll dig him up and kill him all over again."

Xander smiled gently at his wife, and then looked at the group and shrugged. "Who could resist that sales pitch?"

"We really appreciate you both coming over," Tara said, stepping over to offer Anya a hug. "I know this has been a hard day."

Even in the middle of this, she remembers to be kind.

"Well, your message sounded pretty urgent, Will," Xander replied. "And even if you hadn't called, we would have come over." He sighed heavily, exchanging a grim look with Anya. "We have some news of our own."

Oh, goddess...

"It got Number Eight this afternoon."

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Why do I ever let myself think that things can't get any more desperate?

Xander's revelation stunned them all into silence. That silence, though, was remarkably brief.

"Are you sure?"

"How'd you hear?"

"Any chance it's not our guy?"

"Are you sure?"

The need for certainty quickly eclipsed all other questions.

"We're not a hundred percent certain it's our Big Bad, but the story sure sounds way too familiar," Xander said, obviously not pleased at having to share this news. "Her name was Lydia Thompson. She was the priest at the Episcopalian church on Pacula. We heard about it on the news. She was married; had been for eighteen years. Had three kids: 15, 12, and 7. They talked to three parishioners who said she'd been in great spirits just the day before. News said nobody knew of any depression or suicide attempts in the past. I figured we'd better head over here and get cracking with the hacking, see what we could find out."

"You're right to be alarmed," Giles admitted, "but it's possible this is an unrelated death. The suicide rate among clergy is regrettably high."

"As opposed to the other kinds of suicide rate?" Buffy asked as Willow sprinted upstairs to grab her laptop.

"Point taken," came the Watcher's reply.

Moments later, they were clustered tightly about the small screen, jostling to see any scrap of information.

Please don't let it be him. That would mean only two more...

In Sunnydale, though, saying "Please" only rarely got you what you wanted.

"No history of serious mental illness, at least insofar as formal treatment is concerned," Giles murmured, summarizing. "No apparent legal, medical, or financial difficulty. And," he added, rubbing his eyes tiredly, "a singular history of good deeds." He turned away, shaking his head.

"Look at all those awards," Faith whistled, moving in to take Giles' spot. "No doubt about her hotel room in the afterlife."

"Many a socially renowned person has been found to have some horrific skeletons in his or her closet," Giles pointed out, staring out the window. "But I agree--there's certainly no reason not to believe that she was indeed a good and giving soul."

"God..." Buffy muttered. "This is so not what we wanted to hear."

"Well, yeah," Xander replied, eyebrows arched. "I wasn't exactly expecting folks to turn synchronized somersaults of joy." He looked at her curiously. "Why the extra glumminess?"

Everyone glanced uncomfortably at Willow and Tara. Willow sighed and quickly summarized the afternoon's revelations, Xander and Anya growing more distraught by the moment.

When she finished, Xander sat down heavily. "Of course. Of course Kyra's involved. No way does she miss out on the fun." After a moment he looked up. "So how do we stop it?"

I would give anything to hear that subject raised in something other than the interrogative.

"Behold the brick wall into which we repeatedly slam," Buffy said in obvious frustration, hands on her hips.

A quick rehash of their knowledge to date proved to offer nothing new.

"Well, we know that if you survive one attack, you're basically immune," Anya pointed out, with a worried glance at Xander.

"So that means everybody here's safe except Dawn, Faith, and me," Xander finished. "Think it's saving the best for last?" he added, flashing a very large and very insincere smile.

"Except I don't think Faith will be a target," Tara said. "I mean, they have her pegged as Kyra's protector. If they didn't want anything to happen to Willow or me, they wouldn't want anything to happen to Faith, either."

"Great. So we're expendable," Buffy grumbled. "I'm not part of the prophecy, and I'm one of those folks on the Away Team that you just know isn't making it back to the ship. My vanity and I are deeply offended."

"Way to focus on the essentials, Buffy," Willow noted, bemused, though she knew that her best friend was only trying to lighten the mood.

"Much-needed levity," indeed...

"Tara's probably right," Anya said, crossing her arms anxiously. "That leaves Xander and Dawn."

"Eight down, two to go," Dawn said softly, looking at Buffy's drawn countenance.

They could all handle danger to their own lives, Willow realized. We don't lose it until someone we love is threatened.

She suddenly noticed that Giles hadn't spoken in several minutes. With a sense of gathering--heightening--dread, she watched the Watcher intently until he met her gaze. Discomfort flashed through his drawn features.

"Giles? What are you thinking?" she asked, knowing as she did that the major stockholders in her psyche really didn't want to hear the answer.

"Please understand, both of you," he began reluctantly. "I realize that of course you want to protect your daughter. Of course that's your greatest concern."

"But...?" Tara asked, her jaw tightening.

"I think we need to consider the possibility that we may not be able to stop this prophecy from coming to pass," he finished heavily.

No one else could bring themselves to say it.

"Giles, we have to stop it," she protested, even as the realization crashed into her brain: He's right. Hadn't she known it, really, from the moment the Anadeis blithely passed on their information? But she couldn't say it, not even to herself. She felt Tara's hands tightening on her shoulders.

"We can't let them turn Kyra into some tool to use in their battle," Dawn said heatedly.

"Not to mention letting two other innocent people die," Xander added. "We protect people, remember?"

"You act as if I raise this possibility because it brings me pleasure to do so," Giles snapped, his eyes burning angrily. "As if I don't love that child myself."

An awkward silence followed this, until Dawn finally offered softly, "I'm sorry. I know you want to protect her."

Xander nodded. "Yeah, what she said....Sorry."

"We're all on edge," Giles said tersely. "And certainly I recognize that both of you may be targets. I'm just trying to consider the practical aspects of this."

The room fell silent again. No one seemed able to meet anyone else's eyes.

"But it's not just about practicalities, is it?" Tara asked quietly.

"What do you mean?" Anya demanded, but Willow noticed that Giles' only reaction was a tightening around his mouth.

"You're right, Tara. It's...rather a habit you've developed." He smiled mirthlessly, then looked at both of them squarely. "I fear that this entire scenario is more complicated than any of us want to admit."

What's he talking about? She saw that Tara, though, was looking at him steadily even as her fingers trembled slightly upon Willow's shoulders.

"It's tempting to forget that the Anadeis sent Kyra to you in the first place. They didn't pluck her out of the upstairs nursery and inflict this upon her. Wait, please," he said, holding up a hand to forestall the protests already swelling. "Please do not think for a moment that I'm justifying their actions. I'm only attempting to point out what may be uncomfortable considerations."

Even in her fear, Willow felt for the Watcher. This was so often his role.

As if reading her mind, Giles snapped off his glasses, tossing them aside, and ran an exhausted hand over his eyes. "There are times that I loathe this work," he muttered as if to himself. Then he sighed, and met their eyes once more.

"You asked for protection--thank heavens you did. And the Anadeis responded. We were indeed spared. In the process, they delivered a beautiful and very singular child into our lives and our hearts." The Watcher drew a deep breath. "Did any of us truly expect that it would end there?"

Willow glanced worriedly at Tara even as her own heart picked up its already frenetic pace. She half-expected her mate to explode in protest. Her partner, though, seemed to be waging some very private battle. She could feel Tara's energy moving, shifting...Was it possible that the volatility, so quick and visceral in their earlier discussions, was abating? Even slightly?

Baby? What's happening?

She realized that others in the room were focused on Tara at this moment as well. Had they also noticed her particular animus for this topic? Whatever the reason, all eyes were trained on Tara's aching beautiful face. With a closer look, Willow saw two tears wending their way over the curve of her beloved's cheek. They moved with surpassing slowness, as if realizing that they were forging some new reality within their creator.

Finally Tara met her eyes, and Willow felt a harsh stinging against her own lids. "I didn't expect it," Tara whispered. "I just hoped."

Oh God...I know...

Willow swallowed heavily. "Me too, Baby," she answered, her throat aching. "But--but it's more complicated, isn't it?"

Tara nodded mutely, and closed her eyes. Willow gripped her fingers tightly. Stay with me, love.

After a moment, Tara gazed at her again, and Willow saw a quiet, surging determination within the cobalt depths. She leaned down unexpectedly and kissed Willow gently on the lips. Their eyes met--I can do anything with you--and then Tara straightened and turned toward the group.

"I think you're probably right, Giles," she said quietly. "But the implications scare my heart practically out of my chest."

"I can only imagine, Tara," the Watcher replied, so softly that Willow wondered if any of the others could even hear him.

"So--let's talk about those implications and I'll try to keep the terror at bay. Willow?"

Willow nodded, tightening her grip on Tara's fingers.

Giles fixed both of them with a long, intense gaze. "We will protect this child," he said softly. "Please believe me."

I believe you'll try, with everything you have.

The Watcher turned to face the others, and his voice took on some measure of his typical steadiness. "The first...implication that comes to mind is that Kyra, according to the spirits who sent her, is destined to play an important role in the events to unfold years from now."

"Right," Tara said, looking at Willow for confirmation. "They said there would be women in the future who will apparently be incredibly powerful...as in, 'change the way things are run' powerful. But their mothers are only kids themselves right now."

"And at least some of the Grand Pooh-Bahs of the future won't take very kindly to a change in the status quo," Xander offered, in what Willow suspected was an overture to Giles in the Watcher's efforts to navigate this painful conversation.

"Right again," Willow nodded, never loosening her grip on Tara's fingers. "That's where...where Kyra's supposed to come in. She'll protect them."

Again with the future tense...

"Do we have any other details?" Buffy asked, frowning. Willow could see her best friend struggling to walk a very fine line: commit to the goal of stopping this Big Bad and be prepared for...the alternative. "Like do we know how many of these women there are? Or how Kyra will know who they are? And is there one Guardian per Future Uber-Girl, or is Kyra, like, the chaperone for the whole group?"

Willow glanced uncomfortably up at Tara. "Um, we didn't really get into all of that," she said reluctantly. "We--uh--well, when we learned that Kyra wouldn't become the Guardian unless this Big Bad takes ten good souls, we, uh, decided pretty quickly that we should probably try to focus on--"

"We hung up on them," Tara said simply.

"You hung up on them?" Dawn asked incredulously. "Three immortal spirits with heaven only knows what kind of power, and you just...disconnect?"

"Pretty much," Willow acknowledged ruefully. Seemed like a good idea at the time...

Giles shook his head. "I don't know whether to chastise you for your rashness, or--"

"Pony up some props," Faith grinned. "Bet they pissed their robes."

"Willow called them lazy hags," Tara added. "And I think there was some mention of shoving the prophecy up their asses."

"They made me cranky," Willow said defensively. "All disembodied and bossy."

Buffy looked at her with open affection. "And this from the girl who volunteered to leave her lunch seat the first time I talked to her."

Giles permitted himself a tiny smile. "Kyra will not be inclined to suffer fools gladly," he said. "Not with the two of you as role models." The smile faded quickly. "It would be wise, though, to try to procure more information. It could prove necessary to contact them again."

"Do you think they'd answer the phone?" Anya asked skeptically.

"They will if they think Willow and I have accepted Kyra's role," Tara said quietly.

This effectively brought an end to the quasi-merriment.

"Which brings us back to that possibility," Giles replied. "If this prophecy is true, these women will be in danger and Kyra will be both trained and destined to protect them."

He left that point hanging in the air until Willow reluctantly picked it up. "You're saying that these women might die if Kyra isn't acting as their Guardian."

Another thick silence fell over the room. Finally Tara sat down, running her hands through her hair in what Willow knew was a nervous habit. "She's a baby, dammit."

"But--if she were to become the Guardian," Giles began, "she would not face her duties until she had been trained."

"No--I mean, yes. I know that. Even the Anadeis aren't going to send a toddler out to do their business. What I mean is, she can't talk for herself. She doesn't have any voice in this. She gets this job hung around her neck and we can't even ask her how she feels about it." She gave a short, bitter laugh. And then she looked up at the two Slayers, her gaze intent.

"Buffy--would you be the Slayer if you had a choice?" Tara's voice sliced through every periphery, every detour. "Would you, Faith?"

Buffy shifted uncomfortably and looked at her chosen counterpart. Faith's expression, though, was unreadable.



"Tara, I know what you're asking," Buffy started hesitantly. "And I wish I could answer it, I really do. But it's...God, I don't even now how to look at it. I can't imagine not being the Slayer, but would I have chosen it? I mean, starting with an absolutely blank slate?" She looked helplessly at Tara and then Willow. "If I weren't the Slayer, would I even know any of you? We moved here because I burned down my last school, for heaven's sake. And Dawn--" She looked anxiously at her sister, who suddenly appeared smaller somehow, and very vulnerable.

Faith doesn't know, remember?

"Dawn's life would be almost as different as mine," her best friend finished simply. "And when I think of it like that--"

"It's a no-brainer for me," Faith said abruptly. "If I wasn't the Slayer, I'd be doing God-knows-who back in the South Side. Odds are I'd have dropped out in the eighth grade." She flashed a sudden, wry grin. "Angel made me get my GED."

Everyone looked at her in surprise, a reaction she clearly didn't miss. "For real. Said I couldn't work for him unless I did it. You shoulda seen it...Fred tutored me in math and science, Wes took care of English, and Angel his own historic self covered social studies. I'd come home from patrolling, either totally wiped out or jonesin' to party, and he wouldn't let me until I showed him what I'd learned that day. Talk about your committed faculty...They totally got me through it."

Nice work, Angel...

"Anyway, point is, pretty much every good thing I ever got, I got because I was the Slayer. Pretty much every good person, too," she added, looking studiously at nothing.

The Slayers' words were beating against the smooth pane of Willow's mind, cracking and splintering the utter conviction she'd felt as she broke off contact with the Anadeis. It had seemed so clear, less than three hours ago: They would stop this Big Bad, prevent the prophecy from coming true, give Kyra a normal life.

Right...Because that's so clearly what we all want...

And there were two innocents yet to be taken. Even if Kyra weren't involved, they would try to stop the unfolding of this story.

But the women who would be left unprotected...What about them?

Another profoundly discomfiting thought occurred to her. "Tara...Suppose we do keep Kyra from becoming the Guardian. Isn't there a chance she'd resent us for it?"

A survey of facial expressions gave immediate evidence as to who had already considered this option: Dawn, Buffy, and Giles.

"More than she'd resent us for standing back when we could have made her life safer?" Tara asked incredulously.

"I don't know, Baby...I'm not saying we shouldn't try to stop this thing. Of course we should. It's just..." She trailed off, floundering. Speaking was always so much more difficult when she felt that Tara might be using a different dialect.

"You wouldn't necessarily have to tell her," Xander pointed out.

Willow found this option very tempting for about two seconds, and then dismissed it. A glance at Tara told her that her mate was back on her side of the fence--at least on this issue.

"I can't imagine keeping a secret like that," Tara said, shaking her head. "And besides--great secrets of birth and destiny? Kinda have a way of leaking out."

"It's true," Buffy nodded. "One of us would take her out to celebrate her high school graduation and drinks would be involved and disclosures would be made."

"Nice passive voice, Miss Bronte," Dawn snorted, rolling her eyes.

"Why are you getting drunk at our daughter's high school graduation?" Willow demanded. "You're not getting her drunk, are you?"

"We could buy her one lousy drink, couldn't we?" Faith asked, shooting Buffy a questioning glance. "Like, some frou-frou thing with an umbrella?"

"A daquiri," Buffy promptly suggested. "Celebratory and suggestive of impending adulthood, but without the binge implications of beer or shots."

"And while we're on the subject, whatever will we wear?" Giles broke in. "Formal wear is so hot in June...Honestly, if we could return to the subject at hand?"

"At hand is our collective mouth," Buffy replied. "Even if you didn't go for full disclosure on philosophical grounds, odds are one of us would blurt it out or--even worse--she'd find out about it in some random fashion, thereby fucking with her entire sense of self."

"I gotta say--if I found out that I had been born as part of some big mystical hoo-ha and nobody told me--like, for years...I would be pretty pissed," Dawn said with studied nonchalance. "Just hypothetically speaking."

Willow remembered the teenager's reaction at finding out days later that she was the Key. Pissed? Definitely. Pretty? Not so much.

She caught the glance exchanged between sisters. "Yeah. Makes sense," Buffy said, after an awkward moment.

"Oh-kay...And moving right along, acting like nothing weird just happened," Faith began, giving the Summers sisters a bemused glance, "here's a hypothetical situation for you. Red--let's say that when you were a baby, your mom somehow knew that you were gonna pull off some kickin' Wiccan mojo. And that you were gonna end up hangin' with this crowd," she added with a faux-disapproving toss of her head. "She convinces your dad to move away from Sunny D. You never meet the Slayer. You never get mixed up in any of this." She crossed her arms, fixing Willow with a stare. "Are you pissed at her?"

Willow could barely wrap her mind around such a scenario. If she'd never met Buffy...

I might never have met Tara.

"God...I-I can't imagine it," she finally replied. "What would my life even look like?"

"But are you ticked?" Faith persisted. "Just thinkin' about it?"

"Well...Yeah," she admitted. "Because I love my life. I mean, I could stand a little less carnage and a little more paid vacation, but couldn't we all?" She shook her head. "God, the TF alone seals the deal for me." She caught Tara's quick smile and felt a familiar but always welcome warmth splash over her heart.

"Excuse me? What's a TF?" Xander blinked.

"Tara Factor," Willow replied, feeling the blush steal up over her cheeks. "It's this variable I use to describe Tara's impact on my life or on any given situation." The others stared at her in open bewilderment. "Like, if getting caught in traffic exerts a life quality impact of -5.8, the TF mitigates it; pulls it up to a -2.3. Or...Or, if I'm drinking a double-mocha/mint chip shake, the TF takes that experience from a +4.3 to a +6.7. And yes, I am a love-sick freak of epic proportions but I don't care. Je ne regrette rien," she added defiantly.

"Truly, there is but one Willow Rosenberg," Buffy marveled, to general consensus. "Pretenders to the Willow throne, be warned and be gone."

"Lovesick and effin' lucky," she heard Faith mutter.

"So, to get back to your point, Faith...Yeah. I'd be angry." She cast an anxious look at Tara, who was clearly struggling with this.

Willow knew that her mate valued free will above all other human rights and responsibilities except perhaps love--and she would probably argue that those two, if genuine, need not be in conflict. Certainly her own experience--learning that her father had deceived her mother, manipulated her mind, all in the name of love--had created an even greater antipathy to any interference in any person's journey.

But didn't they also have a duty to protect their child? Keep her safe until she could make this decision for herself? That wasn't an option, though, was it?

I don't suppose they offer delayed admissions...

"I think we're forgetting something," Dawn broke in suddenly. "We're assuming that if we don't derail this train, Kyra gets thrown into the fight and she won't have anything to say about it." She glanced around, disbelief in her eyes. "Guys, c'mon--this is Kyra we're talking about! We've seen what she does with strained peas. Do we really see anybody saying jump and her asking how high?"

Willow had a sudden image of Kyra raising a tiny fist to that wretched homophobe, her little brow furrowed, dark eyes flashing. And then that image shifted, fast-forwarded to an adolescent, hands on hips (Why do I see three piercings in her left ear?), one eyebrow arched, Tara-style, as she asked, "And I'd be doing this--why?"

A fierce, wild pride ripped through her. Their daughter was strong. She would be such a remarkable woman...

Beside her, Tara gave a tired but genuine chuckle. "That is a most astute point, Ms. Summers," she said appreciatively.

"It's true," Giles replied slowly. "They haven't created some automaton. We've already seen ample evidence of her very distinct personality."

Faith shrugged. "So maybe the kid grows up, learns how to fight at the feet of the master--and her lovable side-kick," she added, with a gracious nod in Buffy's direction. "And then says, 'I think I'll take up flower-arranging instead.'"

Buffy gave a harrumph and a stationary flounce. "I'll try to keep up, Don Coyote."

"Quixote," came the immediate correction from Willow, Tara, Dawn, Giles, and--Willow smiled to notice--Faith.

"I knew that," Buffy replied unconvincingly. "The point is, Kyra could do a lot worse in the tutorial department. Let's face it--we've got a pretty impressive faculty right here. Faith is her primary teacher and protector, but we're all gonna be here for her."

"Takes a village..." Faith said, hands in her back pocket.

You want to stay so badly...

"So if she decides she does want the Guardian gig, she can decide it for herself and we'll all help out," Dawn concluded. "And if she doesn't, Anya will have her ready to take on Wall Street."

"Take on?" the ex-demon snorted. "She'll own it."

"Maybe that's part of what scares us," Tara said. "The distinct possibility that she would choose it." She drew a heavy breath and laced her fingers slowly through Willow's once more. "But...that would be her choice."

Willow's heart and mind were whirling, thoughts and fears and hopes tilting like tiles in a kaleidoscope. They had navigated and survived this conversation: What if Kyra were to become the Guardian? Tara was still frightened--as was she--but they were both less fragmented, reactive.

And the love she felt for these people who loved their daughter...

"We've got a pretty impressive faculty right here..."

Buffy had been hurt, she knew, at the revelation that Faith was Kyra's destined protector and mentor. But she had swallowed that, pledged her loyalty and support in whatever capacity she could best serve.

"Kid could do a lot worse..." Indeed she could.

All of this, though, was a far cry from being excited at the prospect of their daughter becoming a warrior, regardless of the cause. And the two innocents...

Xander seemed to be reading from the same page. "But...OK, all of this is good and important and very solidarity-building. Yay, team. But we're still gonna try to stop this guy, right? I mean, the prophecy aside, we're talking about two innocent people, not to mention everyone who loves them. We don't think we should just sit back and watch this play out like a movie of the week, right?" He asked this last part with palpable uncertainty, and Willow could understand why.

Of course they would try to protect these last two people; even more urgently, if that were possible, considering that Dawn and Xander might be targets. And yet...What would it mean if they did avert the prophecy's fulfillment? What of the women to come? Who would protect them?

She was snapped back to the moment by Giles' voice. "Your question is a good one, Xander," and Willow realized that it was testimony to the solemnity of the moment that Xander didn't make a bad joke at the pronouncement. "I don't see that there's any debate on that point. I, for one, refuse to believe that we best serve the cause of good by watching two good people die."

Tara nodded. "I know people talk about sacrifices to the greater cause, but even if Kyra weren't involved in this, I couldn't sit by and say, 'Well, they had to die. It was all part of the plan.'"

Echoing in the background of this discussion of good and how best to serve it, Willow realized, was the growing fear: This may all be a moot point.

"So we fight," Xander nodded. "Now if we only knew who, how, and where."

"Minor details," Buffy said, swiping an exhausted hand across her eyes as she tried to bite stifle a yawn. "But for now, I am well and truly wiped out. Please, someone--get me horizontal."

Willow caught Faith's involuntary gulp.

"You speak, albeit tackily, for all of us," Giles said dryly. "I suggest we retire."

"You--with me," Buffy practically barked to her sister.

"You--with me," Anya echoed to Xander, though with far different implications.

Ew...

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A short time later, as she drifted off to sleep in Tara's warm, strong arms, Willow dreamt of a dark-haired young woman with a long, jagged scar on her right shoulder, who wielded a sword with almost infinite grace and surety, laughing as she did so.

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Willow took a long drink of her orange juice and cast a surreptitious look around the table. Breakfast that morning was a study in emotions that at first glance seemed mutually exclusive.

Everyone was agitated about the possibility of Kyra becoming the Guardian and facing such danger; they were certainly outraged at the Anadeis' presumption. Yet there was an undeniable sense of pride as well, that she was meant for such powerful good and they would all play some part in shaping her.

Everyone was committed to stopping this Big Bad. Yet there was a palpable helplessness that surpassed anything Willow had experienced in her extended tour of demon-fighting duty.

Tara, Buffy, Anya, Giles, and Willow herself could rest assured that they would not be targets of this creature. And yet the fact that it had gone after Tara after its defeat at the Magic Box suggested that it took considerable offense at that defeat, and that meant that Dawn and Xander were in particular danger. Faith? Willow frowned. Would the Anadeis protect the Protector? Or was that truly within their power and purview?

She also knew that something had to break soon. They were researching every text they could find; contacting every source they had cultivated over seven years. Yet still they knew virtually nothing, and they could scratch the adverb when it came to information on how to defeat the beast.

Meanwhile, the strain was showing on everyone's face. Xander had called off work in order to be with Anya and the others and Buffy had kept Dawn out of school. How long could they maintain that kind of life? Willow knew that everyone secretly longed to be doing...something. But what?

At least she and Tara had one possible course of action. They could try to summon the Anadeis again and try to learn something more.

Better leave room for some crow, she thought with a twinge of anxiety. Would the ancient trio even answer the summons, after the previous night's...rudeness?

She and Tara had discussed it briefly before joining the others that morning. "I think we have to try, Will. As good as it felt to jerk them around a little, we need to know what they know." Willow had nodded in reluctant agreement.

Drawing another shot of sustenance from Minute Maid, Willow now broached the subject. "So, uh--we need somebody to watch Kyra this morning."

"Taking a break to hit the Sunnydale boutiques?" Xander queried.

Willow gave a mental glance over their wardrobe. "If we were looking for a good time, shopping wouldn't be our first choice. Or our tenth," she added. "We're dialing up the Anadeis again."

"As much as I admired your declaration of independence, I trust you'll exercise somewhat more discretion in this encounter?" Giles asked wryly as he sipped his Earl Grey.

"Discretion is our new middle name," Tara promised solemnly.

"Hey--what is your middle name?" Dawn broke in suddenly. Willow grinned in spite of her tension as she watched Tara shift uncomfortably in her chair.

"It doesn't matter," she mumbled, in a supreme and willful missing of the issue. "So--can anybody help out?"

Faith and Buffy exchanged a quick look. "B and I gotcha covered," came the easy reply. "I gotta practice up. I mean, if it comes to that," she added hastily.

"And I'll keep an eye on her," Buffy said around a mouthful of cereal, nodding at Faith. "'Cause this big Protector gig? That also includes diaper duty."

Faith's eyes widened in alarm. "Shit," she swore softly.

"Frequently."

"And we'll forge on across the vast tundra of nothingness that has been our research," Xander offered sardonically.

"I suggest we close the shop," Giles interjected, drawing a profanity from Anya that impressed Willow with its thoroughness and descriptive force.

"The whole day?" she demanded incredulously.

"We need to devote all of our energies to this," Giles replied firmly. "And besides, Anya, it's a Monday."

"Plus, it's the right thing to do," Dawn added helpfully.

"I can see this whole good soul crap is gonna bite me in the ass for a while," the ex-demon said grimly. "OK, fine."

A few minutes later, they were clearing the table. "Shall we leave for the Magic Box in, say, ninety minutes?" Giles asked, peering at his watch.

"Sure," Anya retorted. "We can watch all the patrons stroll by on their way to spending money elsewhere while we look up stuff in books that smell like ancient ear wax."

"You couldn't have just let us die, could you, Will?" Buffy murmured as she gazed at Anya in revulsion. "You had to save us so we could live to hear her say that."

"A little help with the dishes, Saw Boy?" Dawn asked, grabbing the carpenter by the wrist as Giles shook his head and called first dibs on the downstairs shower.

"Baby, we should get started," Willow said, reaching for Tara's hand.

"We'll stay in Kyra's room," Buffy said, glancing at Faith.

The four of them made their way up the stairs. Sorta like a double date...except one of us doesn't realize it.

They all crept quietly into Kyra's room. The tiny creature at the heart of an ancient prophecy slept soundly, her little rump arched slightly as if preparing to moon the universe.

Three things hit Willow in close succession. First was the almost unbearable ache of adoration that flooded her whenever she watched Kyra sleeping. Second was the fact that Faith had chill bumps running up and down her arms. And third was the fact that Buffy was gazing at Faith as the Dark Slayer gazed at Kyra.

Some day I will find a way to ask you about this.

"You worried, Will?" Buffy asked, catching her glance.

"Not really. I mean, I'm stressed, but I don't think they're gonna try to take her or anything. We seem to be passing parental muster."

Buffy nodded. "Makes sense. Well, we'll be right here."

"And anything that comes near the kid will be terminated in--whaddya think, B...Four seconds?"



"The first three of which will involve a quip of some kind," Buffy confirmed. "Good luck, you guys."

Within a few minutes, Willow and Tara had reassembled the setting from the day before. Taking a seat, Willow reached across for Tara's hands. "Hope they pick up," she muttered anxiously. Tara's worried gaze matched Willow's sentiments. "Ready, Baby?"

"Let's do this," Tara replied, her jaw set.

Drawing a deep breath as one, they chanted the summoning spell. For several seconds there was no sound at all besides their own breathing and the quiet hiss of the candle. Willow gave serious consideration to adding a plaintive "Please?" but thought it might unbalance the spell. Plus, it sounded desperate.

And then the same faint shimmering presence filled the room. Willow held her breath; she could sense Tara doing the same. After a moment, the eldest voice said with what Willow could have sworn was amusement, "I believe we were...how do you say it now...disconnected yesterday? Probably because you banished us from your presence," she added.

"Yeah, um, about that..."

"It was foolhardy," came a second voice, which Willow recognized as the (relatively) youngest member of the tribe.

"We were rash," Tara said in a quiet, steady voice.

How does she manage to sound humble and proud at the same time?

"We were upset to learn that our daughter would face such danger," she continued. "I think you could understand that."

"Your fear is not our concern," came a third voice. "We wish to ensure that the child is raised well, and you dare to banish us."

"You sent her to us in part because we would feel so strongly about her," Tara replied evenly. "The desire to keep your child safe--there aren't many feelings more powerful than that."

"We do understand," the eldest voice echoed. Willow suddenly had the distinct feeling that grandma sometimes got a little fed up with her daughter and granddaughter. "I would suggest that we discuss what you summoned us to discuss, rather than use our time to volley recriminations back and forth."

"Works for me," Willow said brightly. Why can't I sound more...majestic?

"You have had time to consider what we told you?" This from the middle voice.

"Yeah. We're not exactly thrilled, but we're not completely bat-shit about it." Very majestic, Rosenberg. Words for an ancient scroll, indeed.

"'Bat-shit' is, I assume, an undesirable state of mind?" asked the youngest of the trio, without any trace of humor.

"Right," Tara answered, with a reassuring squeeze of Willow's hands. "We're still scared, but it sounds as if you don't want her hurt any more than we do."

"Heavens no, child." The eldest voice sounded almost hurt. "She is special beyond words, as is her destiny."

"Hence our fears," Tara said simply

"Would you rather we not have sent the child to you at all?" the second of the trio queried.

"Of course not! But you had to know that we would love her."

"We depended on it," the eldest voice replied.

"And loving her meant that we wouldn't be thrilled at the thought of her being in danger," Willow continued.

"This child will be better prepared than any of you ever were, and look at your own success," the eldest of the trio countered. "You have persevered through heart and intelligence and love. Look at all who surround this child. Do you really fear that she will possess these qualities to any lesser degree?"

"Of course not," Willow protested. "We just don't want her to have to fight."

"And thus your efforts to stop the creature that now reaps its harvest," the youngest spirit said, with just a faint whiff of derision.

If you took shape, I bet you'd look like Anne Coulter...

"Yes," Tara replied, in that same measured tone.

"Does this thing even have a name?" Willow broke in, frustration overtaking her as she thought of their blind efforts to date.

"Some call him Despair," came the eldest voice. "Some call him Truth writ large, so large as to obliterate the ignorance that lets humans move through each day believing that there is a purpose to their lives."

"What do you call him?" Tara asked.

"We have no need to speak of him, or give him any appellation at all," replied the second voice. "He is a means to our end."

"And we would fight him even if Kyra weren't involved," Tara shot back.

"Of course you would," the eldest spirit acknowledged. "This is what you do. We did not truly expect otherwise."

"And of course you won't help us with that," Willow said bitterly. "You're more than happy to let innocent people die and let innocent children fight your battles."

"Willow, honey, let's not upset the nice immortal spirits who came to visit," Tara whispered through gritted teeth.

"Words like 'happy' have little relevance to us," the second entity replied. "There is only our purpose."

"Well, our purpose is to save innocent lives," Willow countered.

"And how do you intend to save these people?" the eldest spirit asked, not unkindly. "It is incorporeal. It cannot be seen or heard. You were there, Willow, when it attacked your friends. But what did you detect? You felt no cold chill, no rustling of mystical leaves. You know these people. You sensed a change within them, not the air around them. And when you defeated it-- did you see it depart? No. It left, and found you, Tara. And you were also blind to its arrival. As are all its attacks. Child, we do not possess its secrets. We do not know when it will attack, or whom. Would we tell you if we did? I suspect not. But these words are truth."

Dread, cold and implacable, slid into Willow's stomach. If they were telling the truth...

"I can't accept that," she finally said, hearing the tremor in her own voice.

"Don't accept it," the eldest voice echoed softly. "Fight it. But you will not win."

"So these people are just...lost?" Tara's voice shook with helplessness.

"Yes. They are good people who shouldn't die. And they will. Just as good people die every day."

Willow thought she might weep, that two more souls of such grace and purpose would be stripped from the world and all who loved them.

"But what about the good they might do?" Tara protested. "These aren't random people. They've already done so much to help others. Who knows what else they might bring about?"

"They have already honored the gift of life more than most," the second voice agreed. "And that will need to suffice."

"But the people left behind?" Willow cried. "They think that their partners and parents chose to leave them!" Even as she toyed with the idea of explaining it all to those survivors, she dismissed it. Who would believe them? And where would it go from there?

"It is indeed tragic," came the eldest voice. "Some will make peace with it. Some will tell themselves that it was some latent insanity. Perhaps some will even discern a pattern behind so many inexplicable losses, and pursue the truth in their own fashion. But you are correct: It is likely that at least some of those left behind will believe that their love was insufficient to keep the beloved near. And it will grieve them beyond words."

"It's not fair," Willow said, knowing she sounded childish and not caring.

"It certainly is not," the youngest spirit replied. "Existence is a roiling mass of unpredictability and unknowing sacrifice on altars not built by human hands, not made to any deities freely worshipped."

"OK, Mary Sunshine, we get the point," Willow snapped.

"Weep for those lost, child. Grieve. And then serve the good you know." The eldest voice was almost human.

"Easy for you to say," Willow whispered.

"I know."

A long silence stretched out, blanketing the room with implications and questions that had no possible answers.

Finally, Tara's hands squeezed hers once more and she murmured in a soft, steady voice, "So we fight. We quite possibly lose. And Kyra becomes the Guardian."

"A Guardian much beloved, well-trained, strong and wise," the second spirit replied.

"Why can't you wait? Let her choose?" Willow asked desperately.

The eldest voice answered, as if uncertain about the point: "But she will choose--in her own time."

What?

"What?" Tara echoed.

"Of course she will have her choice. It is our belief that she will choose to serve as the Guardian."

Willow and Tara exchanged an incredulous glance. "Oh-kay..." Willow began slowly. "What's the trick?"

"There is no trick, child." The eldest spirit now spoke in a patient voice as if explaining that the sun really doesn't go away at night. "Raise Kyra well. Watch over her. Let her learn from all those who love and surround her. Let Faith act as her Protector and mentor. Allow Buffy--what an unfortunate name!--to work closely with Faith. Those two are linked, I believe. Let Kyra take risks but exercise reasonable caution. Let her become all of the person she can best and most fully become. In other words--be her parents."

Could this really be true?

"So you're not going to force her to take this job?" Willow persisted, still afraid to trust this new and wildly welcome piece of information.

"What do you suppose we could do?" the second voice asked. "Throw her bodily into battle? Kyra's powers are meaningless if not freely chosen."

So we finally agree on something...

"How will she know she's the Guardian?" Tara asked cautiously. "Not that I'm saying she'll choose this after she finds out."

"Of course not." Again Willow could hear something akin to amusement.

"We will not leave," came the distinctly humorless youngest voice. "We will stay close. We will speak to Kyra and tell her of her role when she is ready to hear."

"But shouldn't we tell her?" Willow interjected. "Shouldn't we be the ones to break the news?"

"The 'news' will only be marginally so," the second spirit replied. "She will have a sense from a very early age that she is different from other girls."

"I can help her with that," Tara muttered, and this did indeed earn a small chuckle.

"You can help her with all of this," the eldest said. "I told you before: we chose you well."

There was another, briefer silence, and then the eldest suggested, "Perhaps it would be well for you to consider what we have told you. Talk to your friends in the next room, who are watching over Kyra so well and so fiercely. And go fight your fight, as you must do."

"We will," Tara replied simply.

"We can contact you again?" Willow asked, still half-afraid to believe what they had just learned.

"Of course. I suspect that you will have other questions for us, to be posed in your profoundly singularly way."

"Um, thank. I guess," she amended.

"We leave," the eldest murmured, and the room was silent again.

Willow stumbled to her feet, pulling Tara into a tight embrace. What were they feeling? Relief, certainly, that Kyra would have a choice, but grief and helplessness as well, at the full realization that they might well be unable to stop all of it from unfolding. They held each other close for several minutes, and then reluctantly pulled apart.

"We should tell them," Tara said, nodding in the direction of Kyra's room. Taking Willow's hand, she led the way.

A few minutes later, the two Slayers had been fully apprised. Like Willow and Tara, they were both relieved and disheartened. "We'll fight however we can," Buffy said quietly. "That's all we can do."

"Well, you definitely got the thumbs-up, Faith," Tara said. "We're supposed to let you work your training magic."

"And Buffy, you're supposed to work with her," Willow couldn't resist adding. "They said you were supposed to help Faith."

"Don't even think about asking me to make you coffee," Buffy grumbled. "'cuz I don't do that."

"Just fetch me cool drinks when necessary, cabana girl," Faith said airily.

They could hear the others still rustling around downstairs. "Guess they haven't left yet," Willow said, glancing at her watch. "Not to state the obvious or anything..."

"Scooby Standard Time," Buffy replied, rolling her eyes. "Giles is probably ready, but by the time Anya gets done with her hair, and Xander and Dawn are finished swiping at the dishes and splashing water all over the floor--" She broke off suddenly, fear washing across her face.

Willow realized it almost as soon as Buffy did.

"They were alone."

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Oh god...

Buffy and Faith tore down the hallway and took the stairs two at a time, Willow and Tara a few steps behind them. They skidded into the kitchen, finding nothing but clean dishes drying on a rack. A dash to the living room showed it to be empty as well.

"Fuck," Faith muttered under her breath.

"Dawn! Xander!" Buffy's voice was thick with fear.

Glancing to her left, Willow instinctively flung open the front door, not really expecting to find--  
Xander and Dawn standing together, eyes wide.

Buffy pushed frantically past Willow. "Don't do it!" she shouted hoarsely.

The carpenter and the teenager exchanged a furtive glance, then looked back guiltily at the quartet before them.

"Xander, Dawnie--listen to her," Willow implored, though her sheer terror had abated with the knowledge that the two Slayers could easily stop them even if they tried to bolt.

"Maybe she's right," Dawn finally whispered. "Maybe--maybe we shouldn't be taking out the trash."

Glancing down the sidewalk, Willow could see two cans standing smartly at attention, awaiting the transfer of their contents.

"Buffy, relax," Xander said, a grin creasing his features. "We're been with Anya or Giles or both the whole time. Anya helped us with the dishes. Heck, I even showered with her," he added conspiratorially.

"Thanks for sharing," Faith replied, taking an instinctive step backward.

Dawn piped up, "And while I did not shower with--"

"Don't say it!" came five voices, united in a new and altogether different kind of horror.

"My point is, my itinerary looked a little different from Xander's, but I've been Suzy Social all morning too."

"OK. Good." Buffy drew a deep breath, then looked up sharply. "But this little detour? Very foolish, kids." She glared at Xander with particular feeling, and Willow knew that the Slayer held him responsible for this foolishness.

"Hey, I asked Xander for help," Dawn replied, catching the look. "It was a five-minute trip."

"Which wouldn't be a problem if the threat in question moved with all the speed and agility of George Bush's brain," Buffy shot back. "But we know how he works."

"Hey, I'm sorry," Xander said, raising his hands. "My bad."

"It's just...You guys know better," Buffy said, hands on hips.

"C'mon--let's not stand out here and argue," Tara suggested, linking her arm companionably through Xander's. "Whatever will the neighbors think?"

"That we're a real bunch of freaks," Dawn nodded, sounding rather proud of the fact. As they turned to go back, Willow caught another glance between Dawn and Xander, one that smacked of something other than "Oops, we goofed up."

What's going on here?

They trudged inside to find Giles and Anya waiting for them. "Oh--there you are," the Watcher said with obvious relief. "Each of us thought you were with the other."

So you planned this little side trip? Willow's internal threat system went from yellow to orange.

"Well, we're all together again," Xander replied smoothly. "And really, kids--we can't let so much time go by between visits. People just drift apart when they don't see each other regularly. So, Willow and Tara...News? Updates?"

Willow frowned for a moment. You aren't off the hook, Xander Harris. But she proceeded to fill in the others on their conversation with the immortal trio.

"So Kyra gets to choose?" Dawn asked, her voice reflecting some of Willow's initial disbelief.

"That's what they said," Tara nodded. "Though they seemed insufferably certain that she would choose to be the Guardian."

And they were probably right, Willow realized. Look how she would grow up; who would be shaping her...Catching the others' expressions, she knew they were thinking the same thing.

"Well...it wouldn't surprise me," Buffy said slowly, casting an apologetic glance at Tara. "I mean, her role models are sorta...active."

"Yeah," Xander added tentatively. "It's not like we'd be in much of a position to say, 'Kyra Rosenberg-Maclay, you put down that broadsword right now and go back to leaf collecting.'"

"I know," Tara said heavily. "I just...It scares me." She squeezed Willow's hand, then fixed Faith with a sudden, urgent gaze. "Faith--if it comes to that, we'll need you. I mean, really need you. Promise us you'll come through. Please."



Willow was startled to hear her soft-spoken mate issue such a directive. This is just a whole different level of danger.

Faith looked squarely first at Tara, and then Willow. There was none of the typical bravado or sarcasm in her eyes, or in her voice when she replied, "I promise. She gets everything I have." She turned to Buffy and added quietly, "I'll need your help, B."

"Everything I have."

Willow felt everything else dropping away for one suspended moment: the four of them held together in a tight circle. The four points, with Kyra at the priceless, precious center.

She'll learn from such amazing women...

And then, again, she felt some sort of energy--heat?--shimmer between the two Slayers. Or was she imagining it?

Someone shifted behind her, and Willow wrenched her attention away from this inner circle, turning to look at the others.

"Willow...Tara...Each of us will do our part, should this prophecy come to pass," Giles offered simply.

"Yeah," Dawn jumped in. "I mean, we may not show up in the prophecy credits, but we'll be there. I'll have a thing or two to teach her about having an unusual start to life."

"And I'm not exactly Super Power Boy, but Uncle Xander will be there to help her with...Well, I'm not sure, exactly...but I'll be there." He shrugged awkwardly, shoving his hands deep into his jeans pockets.

"You'd better be there," Tara said softly, favoring him with a patented Tara-smile: lop-sided, and so very gentle.

"And I'll teach her what to do if someone tries to fuck her over," Anya put in decisively. "As Dr. Seuss wrote, 'Oh, The Tortures You'll Know!'"

"Um, I think that's 'Oh, The Places You'll Go,'" Willow ventured hesitantly, casting a worried look at her mate.

"Sure. That's what it ended up as," Anya said darkly. "But the original? The illustrations alone..."

"Right, well, we'll review her reading list in due time," Tara broke in, returning Willow's gaze. "But for now--thank you. All of you."

"Though the previous caveat still applies," Giles added. "We hope that this is a moot point because our primary goal is to stop this creature."

"Um...about that," Willow began, and felt the reassuring warmth of Tara's hand on her own. "They basically said we couldn't. Stop him, I mean."

"Excuse me?" Buffy broke in. "We can't? As in, we're not allowed, or we're not able?"

"That would be Door Number Two," Tara said regretfully.

"OK, now that just pisses me off," Faith muttered.

"They said to go ahead and try, but we wouldn't succeed," Willow put in.

"They're taunting us," Xander spluttered.

"I don't think so," Tara replied slowly. "It was more...logical, I guess, or philosophical. Like, they knew we'd try to stop him because that's what we do, and we'd definitely try because Kyra's involved, and they're not going to try to stop us. They just know--or they say they know--that this is one bad guy we can't stop. We kept saying it wasn't fair and they...They didn't exactly find that a news flash," she finished, looking at Willow who nodded in agreement.

"But why do they need the ten deaths in the first place?" Dawn asked. "Why not just send Kyra a few years ahead of these women she's supposed to protect and let her decide when the time is right?"

"They said he was just a tool," Willow shrugged. "'A means to an end,' I think, were their exact words."

"Do we know if they actually wrote the prophecy?" Xander asked.

"That has been my assumption," Giles nodded. "Although of course it's possible that some other source is responsible for the prophecy and these spirits simply appropriated it for their own uses." He chewed thoughtfully on the stem of his glasses.

"That seems like a dicey proposition," Buffy countered, shaking her head. "They would have to depend on this guy showing up at the right time, and there's no sign that he makes regularly scheduled appearances, right?" She glanced at Giles, who nodded in confirmation.

"But maybe it works the other way around," Anya offered. At the others' confused expressions, she explained, "Maybe they wait until he shows up--whenever that is--and then start the heads rolling."

"Except Kyra came just over a year ago," Tara pointed out, "and the suicides didn't start until last month."

"Pisser," Anya replied petulantly.

"Speaking of which--timing, not urination--do we know yet if there's a deadline here?" Dawn asked, but Giles shook his head regretfully.

"I'm afraid not. Similar to his appearances in this dimension, the time between attacks shows no discernible pattern."

"So then, going back to the connection between the prophecy and this Big Bad--would these wencholas, with all their talk about What Will Be, really leave the timing up to chance?" Buffy demanded skeptically.

"Doesn't seem to fit," Faith mused.

"OK, let's go with the theory that they wrote the prophecy," Willow said, trying to sort all of the elements in her mind. "'Does that mean they sent this freak in the first place?'"

"If they did, that really blows their claim to goodness right outta the water," Xander replied, eyes widening.

"Hey, they're more than willing to let ten people die now for some future good," Dawn pointed out.

"But to create something that reappears, endlessly, over the course of centuries if not millennia?" Giles asked incredulously. "I agree with Xander--and yes, I realize that that fact is apocalyptic in its own right--that such an act would make them the basest of hypocrites."

"Alright, how about this?" Anya began. "Our latest Big Bad is independent of the prophecy, at least where origins are concerned. He shows up on the Anadeis' radar, for whatever reason, they decide he would be perfect for the role of Prophecy Boy, and the curtain rises."

"OK, that could fit," Willow nodded, "but Dawn's right: why mess with a prophecy in the first place? Why build the ten souls into it?"

Giles looked at her uncomfortably. "Is it possible that these latest victims are the price for--for the greater good?"

"You mean the price for Kyra," Tara said flatly.

"By extension--yes." The Watcher's voice made it abundantly clear that he didn't enjoy this line of thinking at all.

Oh goddess...not that, too. How many things would they have to explain to Kyra? Willow pictured their daughter, sleeping only a few yards away, and felt overwhelmed at the thought of all they would have to say to her over the years. Maybe it'll make the sex talk seem like a snap...

"Before we saddle the kid with another burden, let's back up a step," Faith said decisively. "I think we gotta focus on what we do know and how we can use it."

"That'll be a shorter conversation," Anya muttered.

"Faith's right," Buffy nodded. "Until we have some idea of where and who this guy's gonna hit, all of this speculation doesn't amount to a hill of fresh-roasted coffee beans."

"All we know is that it gives no warning aside from exhaustion and a headache and that it moves so fast it's scary," Xander offered.

"Leaves no trace, can't be seen, felt, heard, or smelled," Dawn continued. "We'll leave out taste," she added.

"We always do," Giles said dryly.

"Could we try to track down the most likely targets?" Tara asked. "You know--figure out whose moral resume makes them a good bet?"

"It's possible," Giles acknowledged, "though one wonders exactly what we would tell them, and certainly whether they would be inclined to do anything with our story aside from have us forcibly and understandably removed from the premises."

"Maybe a PSA," Anya suggested.

"Sounds kinky," Faith said approvingly.

"Sadly, no," Anya replied. "A public-service announcement. You know, those spots on TV where supposedly real people talk about real problems, and then this avuncular man does a voice-over to tell you what you can do about it."

"And what exactly would our spot say, Ahn?" Xander asked, looking at his wife with a mixture of bewilderment and affection. "'Have you been feeling suddenly and desperately suicidal, despite a lifetime of good deeds? You might be the target of a demonic creature who feeds on moral souls. Be careful, and buck up!' I dunno..."

"Yet again, I'm forced to agree with Xander," Giles said. "I can appreciate wanting to reach as many people as possible, Anya, yet I can't imagine such a thing proving successful."

"Just trying to help." The ex-vengeance demon sounded distinctly demoralized.

"I know. I appreciate it," Willow replied, and meant it. For all of Anya's foibles, Willow knew that she loved Kyra fiercely.

"Will, you said you might be able to work some computer magic, come up with some ideas about the next attack, based on what we do know?" Buffy said hopefully.

Willow looked at her glumly. "I've run every possible program and model imaginable, and believe me, there are quite a few. There just aren't enough data to give us any kind of useful picture."

Faith gave an exasperated sigh and plopped down on the couch, shaking her head. "Dammit, even if we could figure out a way to attack it, we don't even know where to find it. This is like a bad fucking dream, where you know you need to call someone and you keep trying, you keep walking up to the phone and you plug in a few numbers but then you forget, or something distracts you and you lose your place, and time just keeps slipping away and the next thing you know you're in a strip bar." She glanced up quickly at the bemused faces around her. "Um, that last part may be just me," she mumbled.

"Faith's right," Willow said, rubbing her temples. "Well, maybe not the strip bar, but everything else. We're flying blind, with absolutely no sign of a working instrument panel any time soon."

Frustration and near-desperation rippled through the silence that followed. Willow could feel everyone growing more dispirited, trapped in the Summers house with myriad speculations and zero good info.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dawn lay a surreptitious hand on Xander's arm, and looked up to see yet another silent glance flow between them. OK, what's going on? But before she could ask, Xander had cleared his throat self-consciously.

"Um, guys? You know that whole part about not being able to find it?"

"Why?" Faith tiredly, head sunk in her hands. "You got it tucked away in a tool-box somewhere?"

"Ha! Tool-box...That's good." His nervous laughter ended with a sharp poke in the ribs from Dawn. "No, no tool-box. But we may have an idea of how to get its attention."

Now he certainly had their attention. "How?" came a veritable chorus. Buffy's voice, though, offered up a quieter but somehow more compelling question: "Who's 'we'?"

Xander shifted nervously. "Uh, that would be the Dawnster and me," he answered, his tight grin never coming within shouting distance of his eyes.

Buffy's eyes, meanwhile, had narrowed to slits. "And just what were you discussing?"

Xander's nervous shifting had grown even more so, if that were possible. "OK, see, we were talking about all of this earlier, when we took out the trash, and we were saying how we needed to do something, but we didn't know what, and part of why we didn't know was because we don't know how to locate it and, you know, sometimes you have to try something different, even if that sounds sorta wacky and nutty at first because--"

"Oh for heaven's sake, Xander," Dawn broke in, rolling her eyes. "The whole town's gonna die of natural causes before you get to the point. It boils down to three simple words." She looked at Buffy and drew a deep breath. "Me. Xander. Bait."

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Some ideas are greeted with great enthusiasm. Listeners jostle and clamor for the chance to be involved.

Other ideas are greeted with cautious interest, as potential participants weigh the relative risks and benefits.

Still others are greeted with derision, disdain, and disbelief. The only question, really, is finding an adverb that adequately captures how spectacularly ill-advised this plan is.

And then there was Xander and Dawn's idea.

Watching the scene unfold, Willow suspected that the Wright Brothers' little drawings had been greeted with less vociferous discouragement.

And that had science going for it.

Anya and Buffy, predictably, led the outrage brigade.

"You fell off a beam at work, didn't you?" Anya demanded, hands on hips. "No, wait--someone misfired one of those nail guns and sent a big metal projectile right into your frontal lobes. You know, you've combed your hair to cover it very realistically."

"You're in the gifted program at school, and you came up with this?" Buffy asked Dawn incredulously. "Who's considered average--Paris Hilton?"

Willow heard the fear behind the outcry. Looking at the others, she tried to gauge their reactions. Her gaze froze on one person in particular. Giles was conspicuous by his silence. His face, though, was drawn and tense.

He already thought of this. He would never suggest it, but he thought of it.

And her own reaction? She realized that in the midst of her fear, she was...proud.

Proud that these two people had thought of such a thing, were willing to do such a thing. It was so easy to overlook them both, amid the Slayers and the witches and the Watcher and the ex-demon, especially since Dawn was no longer the Key. But Dawn's request before the showdown with Glory had proved to Willow that she knew the meaning of sacrifice.

And Xander--always tagging along, it seemed, never playing a starring role. So willing to pass judgment on others; so much less inclined to turn that lens upon his own soul and psyche. But she had never, ever doubted his courage. She never would.

"Listen, if we could just turn down the volume from 'Metallica concert' to 'high school football game,' that would be helpful," the carpenter was saying.

"Right. Very good. Let's have perfect acoustics for this plan that involves USING YOU AS BAIT!" Anya was glaring at her husband.

Forget the Big Bad and suicide, Xander. Your wife's gonna kill you herself.

"You guys, would you just hear us out?" Dawn pleaded. Willow noticed that Faith had moved just behind Buffy, standing in silent support. She also noticed, though, that Faith wasn't exactly shouting her opposition to the plan. Mostly she looked angry and helpless.

Dawn turned to her sister. "Buffy, think about it! This is our only shot to get this guy. Do you really see any other option? Unless Wesley has another source he hasn't told us about, we'll never figure this thing out in time to stop it. He needs two more--let's make him an offer he can't refuse."

"No. Absolutely not." Willow had never heard Buffy's voice sound so flat.

"Buffy, c'mon," Xander said exasperatedly. "We can't just sit back and hope for the best."

"Yes, actually we can," Anya broke in. "We can keep studying and trying to figure it out and above all we can choose not to make ourselves sitting ducks and put ourselves out there with a freakin' apple practically stuffed in our mouth. And by 'ourselves,' of course, I mean you two!"

Xander looked at his wife helplessly, then turned to face the rest of them. "OK, what about you guys? What do you think?"

Oh, shit...

Because she wasn't really surprised, was she? Eight had been taken. All of the Scoobies had been attacked except two. You didn't need perfect scores on your SAT's to see the implications. But did that mean she supported the idea? On the one hand, success would spare Kyra the duty of Guardianship--although apparently Kyra could spare herself that life if she so chose.

But we could make it a moot point... And that, she realized, was the cause for her desperation: she knew, as surely as she knew that she would keep fighting, that Kyra would choose to fight as well.

She was shaken out of her reflection by Buffy's vehement, "It doesn't matter what they think."

Excuse me?

"Whoa, B." The reluctance in Faith's voice was matched only by its quiet insistence.

Buffy wheeled to face her counterpart. "What--you think this is a good idea?"

"I dunno," Faith replied, her mouth tightening even as she shrugged. "Lotta kinks to work out to see if it even is a plan. But I think we need to give everybody a vote, especially those two." She jerked her head in the direction of Dawn and Xander.

Buffy glared at Faith for a moment. "I thought you understood," she practically whispered.

"More than you know, B," came the miserable reply. The two Slayers locked eyes--Buffy's face accusing; Faith's, impassive.

"Just listen to us." Dawn's urgent voice broke the silence.

Buffy turned her back on Faith. "Go ahead, Dawn. Tell us about this wonderful plan." She addressed her sister but she was staring at Xander. Once again, Willow realized, her best friend was holding her oldest friend responsible for putting her sister in danger. He was the only person in the room that Buffy currently resented more than Faith.

To his credit, Xander didn't expend energy trying to defend himself. He returned Buffy's gaze steadily, and when he spoke, his voice was calm. "First of all, we're not talking about wandering off in the middle of the night to roam the streets of Sunnydale," he began. "You guys would be nearby the whole time. And we certainly wouldn't be carrying, oh, knives or guns or cyanide tablets in our pockets."

"This is ridiculous," Anya muttered. "I can't believe we're even talking about this."

"Ahn, it's been barely a week, and we're already desperate," Xander replied, and now frustration spilled out in his voice. "We're hiding here, under constant surveillance from each other, listening to the news and just waiting for the next one, and the next one. We read and we study and we consult and we don't know shit!" He broke off helplessly, then added, "She had three kids, Anya. We knew he was here, but we didn't know what to do, and now three kids have no mother. God, you remember how Trevor's partner looked. Can we really just sit here and...hope?" He reached for his wife's hand, but Anya showed no interest in sharing it.

"You were talking about your plan, Xander," Buffy broke in. "You were assuring us nothing could go wrong."

"Lay off him!" Dawn said angrily. "I'm not ten, and he didn't talk me into running with scissors. I suggested this in the first place."

"And he just went right along with it?" Buffy asked, eyes narrowing to slits.



"No, he actually suggested that he try it by himself," Dawn retorted. "And I reminded him, as I seem to need to remind you, that I've been speaking in complete sentences for quite some time now. I'll make up my own mind."

"Like hell you will," Buffy shot back, her voice rising. "If your complete sentences made any sense then maybe I'd--"

The crackle of the monitor brought this lovely exchange to an abrupt halt, as one and then another plaintive cry reached their ears, followed by a long, shuddering intake of breath and finally a full-out wail of no small fury.

"You woke Kyra!" Buffy and Dawn accused each other simultaneously.

"Oh, very good," Willow sighed. "Say it a little louder, just to make sure her nap is irretrievably over." The two sisters glared at each other in silence now, but it was too late. The cries went on unabated until Tara gave Willow a rueful glance and stood up, shaking her head. "I'll get her, Sweetie. You stay here and see how Round Two goes."

The room fell silent as Tara left. Looking back at the others, Willow tried to rein in her own frustration, but she'd only had that one drama class and her performance in "Death of a Salesman" had been uneven at best. "Sorry," came two sheepish voices after a moment.

"Everybody's stressed, I know that," she replied diplomatically, although she did allow a tiny bit of martyrdom to slip into her tone. "But can we possibly discuss this a little more calmly?"

Agreements of varying enthusiasm greeted this request, and then she heard a slight padding on the stairs. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw Tara heading toward them, bobbing a still-restive Kyra against her shoulder. She was frankly surprised: she had assumed that her mate would try to rock their child back to sleep in the chair upstairs. Tara, though, had other plans.

"I'm just going to walk her around down here for a bit," she said casually, but Willow recognized her plan. No one would want to get too hostile if Kyra were in the room. Catching Tara's eye, Willow gave her a wink, to which Tara responded with a conspiratorial grin.

We may not get her back down as quickly, but it's worth it to stop a full-scale escalation.

"So. We were talking about our plan," Dawn began, speaking in studiously measured tones.

"Yes," Anya said tersely, just this side of a whisper. "Your very, very bad plan."

"And again I say: what choice do we have?" Xander replied. "Do any of us just want to sit around and wait?" Anya's hand shot quickly into the air.

"We're not doing nothing," Buffy protested. "We've been researching 'round the clock."

"OK, so let's narrow our definition of 'doing,'" Xander countered. "Let's really make it an action verb. What have we done?" Even Buffy had no answer for this. "Giles--do you see us having any kind of breakthrough in the immediate future? I mean, really?"

The Watcher spoke for the first time, and when he did it seemed to Willow that he selected his words with great care. "No, Xander, I don't. I've exhausted every contact I have; consulted every possible text. Put simply: I can't imagine that we would learn anything that would prove immediately valuable."

Buffy turned upon him with the look of the supremely betrayed, but he forestalled her with a raised palm. "Before you verbally and perhaps physically eviscerate me, Buffy, allow me to ask you a question: Would you not do the same thing, were you in their position?"

"Rhetorical question, Giles," she replied through gritted teeth. "I'm not in their position."

"So there's no need even to consider it?" the Watcher continued. "Because I think that as frightening as this certainly is, it represents the only tangible course of action available to us. I also think that, as Faith pointed out, there are other votes to be considered."

"My vote's the same as Buffy's," Anya chimed in. She had moved to Xander's side, and now clung to his arm as if she might physically restrain him from doing anything not to her liking. Willow had a sudden image of Xander strolling about casually, trying to catch this demon's attention, with his wife draped over his back, shouting invectives against both demon and husband.

"Stop it," Dawn implored, then glanced at Kyra and took a moment to steady herself. "Buffy, I know you want to protect me. Anya, you want to protect Xander. I get it. But if you physically hold me back, then you'd better be prepared to explain to Kyra just why she's the Guardian: because we were too scared to do anything."

Oh, that's gonna go over well...

And true enough, Buffy recoiled sharply. "Don't you dare try to lay a guilt trip on me!" she practically hissed. "Kyra gets to choose, either way!"

"Fine. So what if she doesn't want to do it, but feels like she has to, out of duty? We'll have to tell her that we had at least a shot at getting her off the hook but didn't try it. And if it turns out she does want to be the Guardian, we'll have to tell her that part of why she has these powers is because we let two innocents die."

"It's not that simple," Buffy protested, but Willow could see the internal battle raging behind the stung response.

"I think it is," Dawn shrugged. "If you didn't want me thinking for myself and being a part of all this, you should have shipped me off to boarding school a long, long time ago. Where I probably

would have gotten expelled for truancy, what with grabbing the bus back here to fight demons and all," she added.

Buffy looked desperately from Dawn to Xander and then back again. It seemed to Willow that both Buffy and Anya had the look of women who know the scales have tipped and are completely at a loss as to how to right them. Unexpectedly, Buffy turned to Faith.

"What do you think? Really?"

Faith's raised eyebrows asked for confirmation that Buffy wanted an honest answer. At the silent nod, the Dark Slayer drew a slow breath. "I think it's our best shot, B. And I think it sucks that it's our best shot." Again, Willow had the sense of everyone else fading away, including Tara and herself this time. There were only two very powerful women: one asking what she didn't want to ask; the other saying what she didn't want to say.

"Well I still think it's the most asinine idea I've heard since JFK put the top down on the convertible," Anya broke in bitterly. "Not that it apparently matters."

"Ahn, honey, it does matter," Xander replied gently. "But this is about the bigger picture." He hesitated, and then added, "Besides, it's the--"

"You tell me it's the right thing to do and I will castrate you with a butter knife," Anya interrupted him flatly. "Asshole."

A thick and very uncomfortable silence fell over the room, as the shift to acceptance was tacitly registered. Willow looked at Tara, who was looking at Kyra, who was blinking at each of them in turn with sleepy eyes that stubbornly refused to turn off the TV when this particular drama was airing.

"So what do we do?" Willow finally asked. Part of her wondered if she should feel guilty: Xander and Dawn were undoubtedly motivated to no small extent by their desire to protect Kyra.

Put it on my tab, she thought with a sigh. By now everyone owed so much to everyone else that if they ever tried to sort out the check, their heads would explode.

And they would do this anyway, she realized. Because it's what we do.

"Well, we didn't exactly have hours to hammer out the details," Xander began, "but we think it's a pretty good bet that it would love to have another go at the Scoobies."

"Remember, as far as we know it's never failed before," Dawn added. "Isn't that right?" She glanced at Giles.

The Watcher nodded. "Given its incorporeal nature and the remarkable dispatch with which it works, it's not surprising that it has eluded simple detection, much less failure, over the course of its existence."

"And he just said what?" Xander asked, mystified.

"Bad thing invisible, very quick," Willow translated.

"Your theory is a reasonable one," Giles continued, chewing the stem of his glasses thoughtfully. "It made what many would consider a bold move in going after the three of us at the Magic Box. When that failed--thanks to Willow's discerning eye--it moved straightway to Tara."

"Where it seemed to be in a definite rush," Tara concluded, sinking into an overstuffed chair. Their daughter showed no sign of drifting off, but instead nuzzled deeper into Tara's arms. "It was...I wouldn't say sloppy, exactly, but it was crude, I guess. With you guys, it seemed like the whole thing started pretty much without your really noticing it, and then it just picked up steam--really quickly."

"Yeah, that sounds like my little trip through the Fun House," Buffy nodded grimly.

"And it seemed like it was definitely your idea--to kill yourself, I mean. Because it was the right thing to do."

"Ask me how sick I am of that phrase," Anya muttered.

"With me," Tara continued, "it was a lot blunter, and it definitely felt like someone else was talking to me. I..." She scowled for a moment, remembering. "Like, it was my idea, or it picked up on my insecurities enough to feel like my idea--but it started out, at least, like someone else's. There was a lot of second-person stuff going on."

"If he's been doing this for honkin' centuries, you'd think he'd have the sales pitch down cold," Faith mused.

"So either he was having an off day--which, let's face it, seems unlikely," Willow said, "or he was just a wee bit depleted by the time he got to Tara."

"Which in turn suggests that he needs at least some period of time to replenish his energy after an attack." Giles mulled this over.

"That would be nice," Buffy said slowly. "Giles--how long between attacks? On average?"

The Watcher consulted his copious notes. "Let me see...Just over two days."

"And the priest died yesterday," Dawn continued. "So if it holds true to form, we're looking at late tomorrow or early Wednesday."

"Good...That's good," Anya murmured.

"Because it gives us time to strategize, or because you think you'll talk me out of it?" Xander asked, looking at his wife suspiciously.

"Talk you out of it?" Anya replied, sounding almost hurt. "Of course not. I am now completely excited about the entire idea. I may videotape it, actually."

"Right," Xander muttered, clearly unconvinced.

"Actually, we shouldn't use that time to strategize," Tara pointed out. "If we want to get him when he's not at the top of his game, we need to send him an invitation sooner rather than later."

"That's true," Giles nodded.

"Here's another point," Tara continued. "This thing has been out there for awhile, right? So he has to know his own strengths and vulnerabilities, including the fact that he needs some R&R between attacks. So why go after me when he knows he's not at full strength?"

"Because he was pissed," Xander shrugged. "Like we said: we foiled his nefarious scheme, and he didn't like it."

"Yeah, he was angry," Tara acknowledged. "But he was also arrogant. Arrogant enough to act on that anger, even when he knew he wasn't at the top of his game."

They considered this for a moment. "Well, if you had just gone 0 for 3 and your batting average only dropped to .999, you'd be pretty cocky too," Xander offered.

"Exactly," Tara concurred. "Either he figured he could still pull it off, even at diminished capacity, or he knew that at the very least he wouldn't be captured."

"So perhaps we can use that hubris to our advantage," Giles mused.

Faith shook her head. "OK, not to be all downer girl or anything--unless it comes with an outfit that shows off my legs," she amended thoughtfully. "But what do we do if he does come calling? I mean, we can keep you two safe," she added pointedly--as much for Buffy's benefit, Willow suspected, as for Xander and Dawn. "But what refreshments do we serve him when he shows up? We can't see him. We can't hear him. I'm not up for licking him. So--what happens then?"

Xander glanced at Dawn, and then fixed Willow with a nervous grin. "That's where you and your lovely partner come in, Will."

"Looking for some 11th-hour magic?" she asked, though she had already begun to consider the possibility before Xander brought it up.

"Either that, or he wants you to bust out a little girl-on-girl action when this Bad Boy shows up, and maybe distract him so we can throw a net over him," Faith interjected wryly.

"Easy there, Penthouse girl," Buffy said, rolling her eyes.

"Hey, let's not be hasty," Xander broke in. "Gotta be willing to think outside the box!"

"No, actually, we don't," Willow retorted indignantly. "In fact, I do my best work in the box!" She saw Faith's approving grin by the light of her mortification.

"She really does," Tara chimed in helpfully.

"A modest cottage on the coast," Giles murmured wistfully. "Perhaps a small terrier, loyal and utterly incapable of human speech..." Kyra was giving her mothers a look that said, "Something naughty just happened, didn't it?"

Buffy turned back to Xander. "You were saying...?"

"OK, yes. It's of the magical variety. Will, is it possible to do some kind of containment spell once we get him here?"

"You mean, like trap him?" Willow asked skeptically.

"Right," Dawn nodded. "There must be something. I mean, you guys know oodles of magic."

"That's just what we told those Watcher guys when they called us up and asked about our Magical Proficiency Level," Tara commented, stroking Kyra's dark hair.. "We said, 'We're at the 'Oodles' level.'"

"Thanks for the compliment, Dawnie, but I dunno," Willow frowned. "It's one thing when the spirit or demon is physically present. But this guy doesn't leave a trace except for exhaustion, headache, and raging suicidality--all of which are housed within the targets."

"Maybe we bind them," Tara suggested.

"How would we know if it worked?" Anya demanded.

Tara hesitated. "Well, if they continue to feel like killing themselves, even after we've effectively stopped that option..."

"That sounds like fun," Faith muttered.

"People live with despair every day," Tara shrugged. "Some fight it off; some lose the fight. It wouldn't be fun, but it would be relatively temporary."

"Small price to pay," Xander said grimly.

"We're gonna have to hit the books to see what's out there," Willow cautioned. "I'm not even saying it's possible."

"Hey, beating this guy feels more possible than it did an hour ago," Dawn reminded her. "We gotta try it. How long do you need?"

"First of all, do we have an ETI?" Anya asked. At the puzzled glances, she added, "Estimated Time of Idiocy."

"Sooner the better," Xander said, studiously avoiding Anya's exasperated sigh.

"I agree," Giles nodded. "What were you planning to do?"

Dawn shrugged with what Willow suspected was feigned nonchalance. "We figure he's already got his eye on us. All we have to do is give him an opening."

"And if he's been listening in on all of this?" Buffy asked.

Huh...

No one seemed to have considered this.

"Then we're fucked," Faith eventually replied. "In every possible way, with a variety of implements."

"OK. Let's just let ourselves believe for the moment that our lives haven't been tapped," Willow sighed. "Just to keep from shrieking and upsetting Kyra. He may be cocky and he may be pissed, but I still don't know if he'll make a run for you with us around."

"Wait a minute," Buffy interjected warningly. "Our presence is non-negotiable."

"I'm not saying we take in a double-feature at the Cineplex," Willow replied. "But we've pretty much been sitting on each other for the last three days. We've made real sure that Xander and Dawn are never alone. I say we pull back--close enough to maintain some visuals but distant enough to give the illusion that they're on their own."

"I don't like this," Buffy muttered.

"That's a shocker," her sister retorted, rolling her eyes.

"I'm serious, Dawn," Buffy said, her voice shot through with sudden anguish. "This thing is so beyond scary I can't describe it. I went from feeling a little tired to a bit of a headache to knowing, I mean knowing, that I should kill myself. If Willow hadn't been there, I'd be dead. So would Giles and Anya and Tara. So I'm sorry if I seem a little high-strung about this but this guy scares me more than anybody I've ever faced. And now we're talking about setting you out in the open while we hide out in the background and hope we can get there in time. Do I like this? No. Not one damn bit."

The outburst took everyone by surprise, Dawn most of all. The teenager wrapped her arms tightly about herself and then took a hesitant step toward her sister. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I am. But we have to do this."

Buffy just shook her head, spent. Exhaustion rolled off of her in waves. "I know," she sighed. "But don't bust my chops for trying to make this as non-lethal as possible. OK?"

"Gotcha," Dawn said, giving Buffy's arm a quick squeeze. "If I bust your chops one more time, I forfeit the right to borrow your pants."

"You never had that right," Buffy countered grimly. "Ante up something meaningful."

"Laundry duty for a month."

"Now you're talking." The Slayer sighed and turned to face the others. "Guys, what can we do to up the safety quotient on this deal?"

Willow had been considering that very question during the exchange. "Between magic and technology, I think we can keep them pretty well covered."

"Setting aside the 'pretty well' part of that--what are you thinking about?" Buffy asked, frowning.

"In the first place, we don't have to be in the next town," Willow explained. "It's possible that in the next room is an option. Secondly, we can rig up listening devices and hidden cameras, and I know that Tara and I can come up with something that'll add another layer of observation to it."

"What about tranq guns?" Xander suggested. "I mean, I can't imagine either of us outrunning either of you," he explained, glancing from one Slayer to the next, "but just in case we make a break for it: you pump us full of something to help us sleep. For a long time."

Buffy looked at Faith, who nodded her tentative agreement. "Makes sense, B. Both of us are fast, and both of us are good shots. I can't see 'em getting away from us, even if they tried."

"We cover every point of ingress and egress." Anya's voice took Willow by surprise. "No way in or out that we don't have someone stationed at."

"Good plan," Buffy said quietly, gazing at Anya.

"So Dawn and I will sit here and basically reminisce," Xander continued. "Talk about the old times; foes we've vanquished and all that. Maybe we mention you guys being out. Maybe, more than anything, we think about what we've done, try to feel it, the good and the bad. We're hoping he's not listening to us right now, but it seems like he can hear us--like, the scared parts."

"I agree," Giles nodded. "Try to focus on that as much as the plan itself."

"I know we're working under a deadline here, but we're not doing this until everything is completely set up and we do a run-through or ten," Buffy stated, her tone suggesting that disagreement would not go well.



"No, that makes sense," Willow agreed. "We have to look into spells anyway. None of this means anything if we don't find a way to keep him here."

"How long are we talking about?" Xander asked, but Willow could only shrug.

"As long as it takes and no, I know that's not an answer." She glanced at her watch: 1:20. Kyra could probably be induced to head back to Naponia, but she would just wake up again for lunch soon anyway. "Let's break for food intake. Tara and I will feed Kyra and see if she wants to go back down, then we'll hit the books."

"I can help watch her," Giles offered, his smile casting a sudden and welcome light over his worn features.

"Sounds good," Tara replied gratefully.

"Great," Anya said brightly, her voice taking on its usual tone. "A nice relaxing lunch before throwing open wide the door to self-destruction. I think I'll have a BLT."

Willow stood and walked over to her mate. She gazed at her family, the defining truths of her life, sitting in one overstuffed chair.

"Looks like we're on."

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A few minutes after seven that night, Willow and Tara emerged from their bedroom, utterly spent...Not, Willow reflected, for the reason that typically accounted for such a state after such an action.

They had retrieved three armloads of books from the shop and returned home to hole up in their room. They had hoped the drive might lull Kyra back to sleep, but she had been uncharacteristically recalcitrant, fussing every time they tried to put her back down. Finally, Giles offered to take over. "You two have other obligations at the moment," he said matter-of-factly, dropping to the floor with surprising agility.

"Are you sure, Giles?" Willow asked. "Because we--"

"I'll help too," Dawn announced, taking a seat beside the Watcher. "If I don't keep an eye on Jolly Roger here, he'll be feeding her kippers before you can say, 'My word, that's bloody awful!'"

"Of course," Giles replied archly. "I wouldn't want to spoil her appetite for the pork rinds entree."

"Listen, guys, she's really wound up--"

"No wonder you're worried, Tara, with these two on the job," Buffy nodded from the doorway. "I'll supervise." She walked over and plunked down on the floor, leaning in to nuzzle Kyra. "Let's discuss recent events in the former Soviet Union, shall we?"

"Bub!" Kyra gave her tacit blessing.

"Buh-fee," came the exasperated plea. "You can say it: Buh--"

"Oh, is Aunt Bub getting peckish?" Faith asked, sauntering into the room with a Diet Coke in her hand and a grin on her face. "Don't worry, K-Biscuit. We'll check out the latest gangsta rap on TV."

"Like hell you will!" Willow shot back, aghast.

"Chill, Will. I'm just jo--"

"Hell!" Kyra shouted cheerfully. It was the happiest she'd been all day. Profanity appeared to agree with her.

"Very nice," Tara muttered. "Maybe we can buy her her first pack of cigarettes tomorrow."

"Don't pay any attention to the foul-mouthed bad lady," Faith murmured soothingly to Kyra. "She's very troubled."

"Where are Xander and Anya?" Willow asked, hoping desperately to stem this truly regrettable tide.

"Xander's playing Sergeant Rock." Buffy looked up from the Good Dog, Carl book she'd been perusing. "Will, do you know the mother in this book leaves her infant daughter with a Rottweiler? Seriously. She just says, 'Watch the baby, Carl!' and then leaves. Who knows if she's even named the kid? So Carl gives the baby her bath and feeds her and keeps her out of trouble. Then Mom stumbles in from whatever crack house she's been frequenting and gives Carl a pat on the head." Buffy looked up, pursing her lips. "Somebody needs to call Social Services."

"It's a step up from the dingo she used with her first kid," Faith pointed out.

"Meanwhile, back at Chateau d'Original Point?" Willow demanded. And they say I ramble.

"Oh, right. Thanks for reminding me, Potty Mouth. He's prepping stuff on the military side of things. Anya, it goes without saying and yet I say it, is with him."

"I guess she's mostly support," Dawn mused. "I can't really see her in the military."

"Nah, but I betcha the military's been in her a couple of times," Faith offered absently. At the looks of abject horror, she added, "What? It's not like I cursed in front of a child. Now that's inappropriate."

"OK, then, we'll get our research on," Willow said, drawing the tattered remnants of her dignity about her. "And, uh--thanks. Really."

"No worries," Buffy replied easily. "We'll do our best to undo the trauma of hearing her mother talk like a sailor home on shore leave."

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Five hours and innumerable cross-checks later, Tara looked at Willow. "I think it might work," she said, her voice a mixture of hope and exhaustion.

"It'll have to," Willow replied simply. "Otherwise, they're sitting ducks for nothing." She reached for Tara's hand. "Let's tell them."

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"Hey, we were just thinking about dinner!" Xander called out in an unnaturally bright voice as they descended the stairs.

Still catching hell, are we?

Kyra was still up, and showed no signs of tiring of the full-on attention she was receiving. Everyone was sitting on the floor around her, courtiers to the worthy queen. Willow, though, had a sudden urge to hold her daughter, and Kyra gave no protest as she swooped her up and kissed her.

"Any luck?" Anya asked. "Or better yet, did you find something that proves we shouldn't do this?" Buffy said nothing, but Willow suspected she was secretly hoping the same thing.

"That would be a 'yes' to the first part and a 'no' to the second," Willow said, and wasn't even sure how she herself felt about that fact.

"What do you have?" Dawn asked quietly, with an almost imperceptible squaring of her shoulders.

Willow sank down into the couch, cradling Kyra gently. Tara took the seat beside her. "OK--first of all, this whole thing depends on the Big Bad showing up in the first place," Willow cautioned. "If he opts for pragmatism over pride, this is all a moot point. He'll take somebody else, and there's no way we can track him."

"I guess it would be tacky to hope it does," Anya muttered, rising to her feet and beginning to pace.

"Tacky--but understandable," Tara acknowledged, smiling up at her gently.

"So let's assume that he does come after you guys," Willow continued. "We realized that if we did trap him, we couldn't destroy him without...well, you know..."

"Destroying us," Xander supplied, his grin not quite reaching the level of "Credible."

"I believe that's what the medical profession refers to as 'iatrogenesis,'" Giles commented dryly. "In extremis, no less." He stood and took a seat in one of the larger chairs.

"Right. So we had to find a way to trap him and move him to some other container that we could destroy--all without you guys going...well...nuts," Willow finished weakly.

"I'd like to vote for non-craziness," Dawn offered decisively.

"Kinda thought you would," Tara nodded. "So most of the typical binding spells wouldn't work, even the three we found that deal with intangible phenomena."

"So far I'm hearing how this won't work," Anya broke in tersely.

Willow bit back a retort. She would probably react the same way if Tara were in Xander's role, if not more egregiously so.

"Right. So we kept looking," she said. "And I think we've found a way to trap him without trapping you guys in there with him. We set the bait, get him to bite, and then when we know he's taken the hook, we pull you guys out. It's the ultimate bait-and-switch."

Anya glanced around. "I think I speak for all of us and most of Sunnydale proper when I say: what the cuddly fuck are you talking about?"

"We know that your psyches are the bait, right?" Tara asked. "All the insecurities, despite the evidence? Pardon my bluntness, but we need to let him get a taste of those. But there's a way to extract your minds from your bodies once he's in there."

Six pairs of eyes looked at them in open confusion.

"Were you guys consulting the ancient texts of cannabis?" Xander demanded, peering at them suspiciously.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the mind supposed to stay put, not go traipsing around like Jack Kerouac out on the psychic road?" Buffy asked skeptically.

"In the long haul, of course," Willow replied. "But there are lots of cases of people voluntarily leaving their bodies for a short time. This would be sort of an altered consciousness, except we'd be the ones operating the switches."

"Why not leave us in there, if we know you can stop us from killing ourselves?" Dawn asked frankly. "It's trapped, and then you pull it out."

"Because when it's in you--either or both of you--it's already physically contained," Tara explained. "Yes, it can jump ship pretty quickly, but it is housed, to some degree. Keeping it in you makes it easier to bind it before transferring it to the final container. This way, we're less worried about losing it in transit."

"It'll also be far less unpleasant for you," Willow added. "And far briefer."

"I got no problems with that," Xander said gratefully.

"OK, setting aside the 'whoa' factor for the moment," Buffy said, "where exactly would their minds go? Is there, like, a mental Marriott they'd check into?"

"See if they have cable," Dawn quickly put in.

Willow grinned. "Actually, they'll be guests of Chez Scoobie. We pull them out of their bodies, and into ours."

An atonal chorus of incomprehension greeted this pronouncement. Buffy's voice won out, more by virtue of vehemence than coherence. "Wait a minute--if they're in us, where do our minds go?"

"Hosts stay in their own mind," Tara quickly answered. "You just...scoot over a little bit."

"How does that work?" Anya demanded.

"Actually, if you're open to it, there's plenty of room," Willow replied. "The only way it wouldn't work is if you actively deny them access."

Tara picked up the thread. "We'll get the hosts prepped, put you in a receptive state of mind. You'll feel a slight rippling along your brain, front to back. That's your guest, checking in at the front desk."

"Well of course I'll be receptive," Anya huffed indignantly. "I would never keep Xander from entering me."

"That's just what the 75th Tank Division said," Faith murmured.

"I'll set up a lovely spot for you," Buffy assured her sister. "No room service, though."

Willow glanced uneasily at Tara. "Um, actually, Buffy--Dawn's mind won't be staying with you."

"What? Why not?" Buffy looked from one of them to the other, clearly unimpressed with this news.

"Because we need you to be ready to intervene with Dawn or Xander in case anything goes wrong," Tara replied evenly. "You're a Slayer. We need your speed." She turned to Faith. "And we need you to be in charge of Kyra. We're hoping she sleeps, but we're not leaving her alone. If anything goes near her and you haven't seen it before--kill it."

"You know I will," Faith answered quietly, then turned to her counterpart. "B--you feel OK going solo on the watch?"

Buffy seemed to be waging an internal battle between protest and acquiescence. Finally she gave a grim nod. "I can handle it."

Tara continued, in her same steady voice, "So, Xander is sent to Anya, and Giles--you hold onto Dawn."

The Watcher's reaction was hard to discern. Did he feel shunted aside as an inferior fighter? Or was he honored to be responsible for Dawn's mind?

His only reply was a soft, "Of course."

Buffy gazed up intently at her Watcher. "If anyone's brain is big enough to hold her, it's yours."

Giles gave her a gentle smile and a barely perceptible nod, then turned to the former Key. "You shall be safe, Dawn. I promise."

Dawn crossed her arms and fixed Giles with a faux put-upon expression. "Let me guess--I have to think in complete sentences, properly punctuated."

"If you could, yes."

"Will, what are you and Tara doing during all this?" Xander asked.

"We're operating the controls. Pulling you guys out, binding this guy, and then transferring him to a container that will hold him and let us thoroughly and gleefully blast his ass back to hell," Tara said mildly.

"Gotcha," Xander replied slowly, looking at Tara with mixed respect and fear.

"OK, back up," Faith said, raising a hand. "How will we even know our boy's in there?"

"We thought about that," Willow nodded. "It's way too risky to sit back and just...observe. No matter how well anybody knows either of you, the signs are too subtle. We need to know not just that he's in there, but how far he's in there so we know when to get you guys out."

"That's where the other mental magic comes in," Tara continued. "With your permission--we'll be watching your minds."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Faith mused.

"Boundaries don't count for much in this plan, do they?" Dawn asked wonderingly. "You're gonna read our minds?"

"Not read so much as watch from a safe distance," Tara explained. "It'll be sort of like watching a monitor, seeing if any 'blips' come on in the form of extreme self-criticality, fatigue, or headache."

"About those blips," Xander began hesitantly. "Just how descriptive will they be?"

"We won't know exactly what you're thinking," Tara replied with an understanding smile. "We will know if you're thinking something in the 'Bad' family--bad beyond ordinary funk. But the details--not so much."

"And so much relieved," Xander breathed, then scrambled to his feet and went to Anya's side.

Right--I march down here and say I saw Tara kissing Faith, and he's worried about privacy.

"We will, though, get a very specific read on the emotions," Tara emphasized. "That part's imperative."

"Makes sense," Dawn allowed.

"So you two are monitoring them, and if our guy really takes the bait, you pull them out," Faith summarized.

"Right," Tara nodded.

"Are you guys splitting the duties? One of you per one of us?" Xander inquired.

"No," Willow replied, shaking her head. "Both of us will be watching both of you."

"And should he attack only one?" Giles asked quietly.

The implications of that hung in the air for a moment, until Tara said, "There are a few scenarios here. If he hits one and goes far enough, we should be able to get him. That would actually be the easiest situation. Scenario Number Two: he sees it's a trap, in which case he's probably not going to go for the other person, no matter how arrogant he is. He bolts, we can't catch him. Next case: he hits both of you at once. That's what I'd put my money on, frankly. He's done it before with us and I think the fact that it's two Scoobies, and the final two he needs, just makes it way too tempting."

Everyone let that sink in, then Buffy raised her hand. "Next question: if you pull them out, won't this guy come with them? He gets in their minds--why wouldn't he come along for the outing?"

"Excellent question, Miss Summers," Willow commended her. "This thing isn't supposed to be there. It's sneaky and devious and it plays on what's already there, but it's not a part of the original mind. When you guys shook it off, it didn't stay with you. It headed off for my girlfriend, for which, by the way, I still owe it great heaping doses of pain."

"It's sorta like pulling a tablecloth out from under the cutlery," Tara suggested. "Really nasty, corrosive cutlery."

"Uh, excuse me?"

"Yes, Faith--you have a question?"

"Yes, ma'ams. What sort of container are we talking about? Do we have the raw materials here on hand, or is a quick trip to Home Depot in order?"

"Right," Anya scoffed. "We're talking about trapping an ancient demon. We probably have to make a perfectly circular box from the oldest cedars of Lebanon and have it blessed by an Ashkenazi eunuch. I'm sure that Home Depot is just--"

"Tupperware."

"Excuse me?" And then Anya, miraculously, was speechless.

"Yep. When we were researching the spells for intangible phenomena, all three of them said that you shouldn't use a natural container."

Tara nodded. "It's true. One of them said that they only draw strength from the organic elements of any vessel."

"So we figured, what's more unnatural than Tupperware? Besides Angelina Jolie's relationship with her brother, of course."

"Unbe-freakin'-lievable," Xander muttered, shaking his head.

"And do we burp the Tupperware after trapping this demon?" Giles asked dryly.

"How do we know it's big enough?" Buffy demanded.

"The spells said that the dimensions of the container weren't relevant, so long as it does physically exist," Willow shrugged. "You know--it can't be a zero by zero by zero kinda deal."

"Size doesn't matter," Tara agreed. "As soon as we transfer it, Will and I do our final work of the night: we banish it to a hell dimension."

"Shouldn't we just destroy it?" Dawn asked.



"Too risky," Willow said. "We're not quite sure where the energy would go. It's not like some vampire that turns to dust."

"So we sacrifice the Tupperware to the cause?" Buffy asked, her voice pained. "Damn this wretched fiend!"

Willow exchanged another glance with Tara. "I think that about covers it," she said, feeling the drain of the last few hours catching up to her. She also wasn't used to being on stage in such uninterrupted fashion. "Xander--what about the military paraphernalia?"

Xander gave a business-like nod. "Me and Anya went over to our place earlier and picked up some stuff. A couple of tranq guns, three miniature microphones, and six hidden cameras so you guys can keep a close eye on us without being in the room."

Faith nodded approvingly. "I like it. Nice blend of force and espionage."

"Thank you," Xander replied, giving a half-bow before Anya's scowl stopped him in mid-descent. "Anyway, there's some other stuff we brought along, depending on where we set up the scene. We figured we should go for limited entrance and exit possibilities."

"Definitely," Buffy concurred. "Especially if I'm gonna be watching both of you juvies." Willow could see Buffy struggling to keep her fear at bay. She and Tara had also discussed whether Buffy's pride would keep her from admitting it if she wasn't sure she could watch both her sister and her friend.

"I don't think so," she told Tara. "Three or four years ago, maybe. Not now. I think Joyce's death taught her a lot about her limits."

"So where's our best option?" Faith asked, popping to her feet and glancing around. Buffy followed suit.

"I suggest the kitchen," Giles proposed.

"Where we keep the sharp knives?" Buffy asked, arched brows suggesting that in her mind, she was slapping Giles forcefully.

"We would remove any such risks," the Watcher replied in a slightly exasperated voice. "The kitchen has only two means of exit: the open archway into the living room, and the door to the back porch. Windows are difficult to reach, placed as they are over the sink. Moreover, they can be locked."

"Did you go through a stalking phase you never told me about?" Buffy inquired suspiciously.

"As can the front door," Giles continued, as if the Slayer hadn't spoken. "Both would slow down any efforts considerably."

"What about the upstairs hallway?" Dawn suggested.

"Too many doors to too many rooms," Xander countered.

"What about a bedroom?" Anya offered. "One door, one window." She glanced at the others. "The room we've been staying in--Dawn's room--doesn't have its own bathroom, so that makes for a pretty narrow playing field."

Buffy turned to Willow. "Would the psychic transport hit any snags going through walls?"

"God, what if my brain gets stuck in dry-wall?" Xander asked, horrified.

"We already thought about that," Willow assured him. "We kinda figured we'd be at least one room away. So no problems on that front." She looked at Tara. "What do you think?"

Tara shrugged. "I think it would be fine for our purposes. Buffy, what about you?"

The Slayer paced for a few seconds, frowning as she thought. "We nail some boards up over the window, make the door the only way out. And a thorough sweep of the room: no pills, nothing sharp, we take down the mirror to get the glass out of the room." She let out a slow breath and looked at Faith. "I think it's our best option." The Dark Slayer nodded her agreement.

"OK. And our final decision: when?" Dawn's voice was remarkably calm.

"It'll take at least an hour to fix the room," Xander said.

"We'll need about half that to prep both the hosts and you two," Tara added.

"And a few dry runs," Buffy continued. "To make sure everybody knows where they are and what they do."

"So maybe a nummy dinner, preps, and cue the atmospheric music?" Xander suggested. "Sounds like a true Scooby evening to me."

But Willow shook her head. "First of all, Tara and I are wiped. We need to be sharp and focused when we do this. Secondly, we did a little research on when the human mind is thought to be most vulnerable."

"And what did you learn?" Giles asked with interest.

"4:26 am," Tara replied apologetically.

"What?" Dawn yelped. "AM, as in 'Absolutely Moronic'?"

"Sorry," Willow shrugged. "We're just the messengers."

"So we thought we should go ahead and order dinner, get everything set up, and then crash early. We do the physical set-ups tonight, and the mental ones then. We wake up around 3:30, get everybody in position, and mentally prep you Dawn, Xander, Anya, and Giles. And then, at about 4, Dawn goes back to her room--her original room--to talk to Xander while Anya ostensibly can't sleep and goes to the kitchen to get a snack."

"I dunno," Xander frowned. "Won't it seem a little odd that the Dawnster and I are having a heart-to-heart at 4:30 in the morning?"

"What?" Tara asked with feigned innocence. "Neither of you could sleep. Xander, you heard Anya get out of bed and decided you didn't want to worry her with your worries. Dawn, you're up, too, and on your way to the bathroom you see Anya leave your old room. You decide it might be nice to talk to the one person who could understand how you feel. Neither of you are immune, you're scared...Maybe he's awake. You knock, he's up, and you go in for some sincere emotional sharing."

"Besides, anybody who watches this group for more than twenty minutes is already gonna think we have some odd habits," Willow pointed out.

"But that brings up the most important thing," Tara said, looking from Xander to Dawn. "Setting the bait. As much as possible, you two have to believe that you're really doing this--not as part of a plan, I mean. We'll help get you into that psychological space a little bit, but we can't hypnotize you."

"Why not? Faith asked curiously. "Wouldn't that make it easier?"

"We thought about it," Willow admitted. "We were hoping that we could put you into a trance and give you a hypnotic suggestion that you wouldn't respond to anything that made you feel bad about yourself. Problem is, this stuff works on what's already in there. It just turns up the volume a lot and twists it into some really nasty psycho-pretzels. How do you tell the mind not to listen to itself, or what it thinks is itself?"

"I'm getting a headache from all this meta stuff," Buffy complained. "Isn't there something I can stake?"

"We'll go out tomorrow and just brute force our way through the neighborhood," Faith said comfortingly. "Knuckles draggin' right down on the ground."

"Anyway, the idea is that we'll help ease some of the self-consciousness and fear," Tara continued. "But you'll still be in charge. So as much as possible, get into it."

"And try to avoid telling yourself stuff like, 'Don't think that,'" Willow added. "When we talk in negatives to ourselves, the mind tends to get a little oppositional."

"Where'd you learn that?" Dawn asked, looking at her in surprise.

"I took another psych course last year," she shrugged. "One where the professor survived the semester."

"Anything in particular we should think about?" Xander inquired.

Tara nodded. "It's kind of a dual thing. Reminisce over all the good stuff you've done, but let yourself feel any insecurities you have around that."

"Finally. A task I feel completely comfortable with," the carpenter said, his smile equal parts ironic and sad.

There was a brief silence, and then Buffy crossed her arms across her chest and drew a deep breath. "Let's get to work."

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At ten o'clock, they were ready to turn in. Kyra had eaten her dinner and after considerable rocking, singing, and general statements of adoration spoken in soothing tones, finally dropped off to sleep. They had moved her crib close to the bedroom door that led to the hallway, so that Faith would be optimally positioned. "Precious, if you decide you'd like to sleep all night, we would never, ever hold that against you," Willow murmured hopefully against her dark hair as she lay her down on her back.

Dawn's room had been rid of anything that might possibly be used to hurt oneself, including a #2 pencil in need of sharpening. Cameras had been strategically placed throughout the room, with one viewing monitor located right outside the door and another close to Willow and Tara's bedroom so that Faith could follow the action. Microphones were set up connecting the room to receivers worn by Buffy, Giles, and Anya. "If he shows up, we'll know it through our mind work," Willow told them. "Anya, Giles--once we pull them out and into you, ditch the receivers. You won't need them at that point."

They had also rehearsed various scenarios in considerable detail, until everyone felt at least passably comfortable with their roles. Willow gave brief thanks that this group was accustomed to doing bizarre things at a moment's notice.

She had a sudden flashback to that time in her life when a big night meant staying up past her curfew to watch a special on the Discovery Channel, volume kept low to avoid parental detection.

Ooh, I was a wild one...

Finally, Tara said softly, "I think we should call it a night. We've prepped as much as we can. Everybody has their alarm set for 3:30?" At the answering nods, she continued, "We'll meet outside our room and get you guys ready. Any final questions?"

The glances that slid through the air were a mosaic of anxiety, affection, and love. Really, there wasn't much to say. Hadn't they stood on similar thresholds in various constellations over the years? Tomorrow, if all went well, they would look at a new day with new possibilities, no one more than Kyra--who would be supremely unaware of all that had just transpired.

After a moment's silence, Willow said simply, "Let's all try to get some sleep."

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I knew I should try to get some sleep, but it just wasn't happening. Anya, on the other hand, would've slept through the Second, Third, and Fourth Coming.

At least she didn't sleep through mine.

Yeah, we had sex. Go ahead and laugh. Everyone thinks we're just two horn-dogs, all body and no mind. God knows, Anya's shared a little more about the details than I'd prefer, so I can see where they'd get that idea. But the fact is, it's one of the deepest ways we connect, and I don't care how hokey or clichéd that sounds. When we're together, everything else just fades to black, and I know that if I die tomorrow, I had a woman who loved every part of me with every part of her. How many people can say that? Really?

Was I scared? Yeah. But not for the reason you'd think. Everybody was so worried about our safety, me and Dawn's. Everybody had been attacked, so they knew how scary it was and how fast it worked. But we had enough safeguards to keep Michael Jackson from doing anything crazy. I didn't really think we'd hurt ourselves.

Here's what I was afraid would happen: nothing.

Down in my gut, I was afraid it wouldn't attack me because I wasn't good enough. I wouldn't have enough yummy moral goodness to make it take a bite. It was like some really parallel universe version of not getting picked for dodgeball.

Dawn, I figured, would make good bait. She's just 16, but she already has more guts than I do. I'm pretty sure she thought about killing herself when she was the Key, just to make sure Glory didn't get the chance to use her.

So I was lying in bed, watching this freak-show of a movie in my mind. It comes for Dawn, and everyone's racing around trying to save her and trap this fucker...and I'm just sitting there. Big dumb Xander. Hey, it would be easier to capture it that way, if Willow and Tara's plan worked. They could focus on Dawn. Afterwards, everybody would make a show of how relieved they were I was safe. Nobody would say anything about me not getting picked. It would just hang there, like all the other times I tried to be noble and brave and...heroic. I'd make a joke, and everyone would be glad the awkwardness had passed. We'd celebrate, and I'd stand there laughing, knowing I was the only one in the whole group that this guy didn't want. Because I'm not good enough.

That's what I was afraid of.

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I knew I should try to get some sleep, but the prospects seemed dim indeed. Within a few hours, I might well be asked to hold Dawn's mind safe within my own.

I was, I confess, slightly wounded at first, when I learned that I would basically be acting as a repository instead of fighting. As I thought on it, however, I realized that fighting in this instance would look very different than it typically did. For all that I struggle with my age amidst this sea of supremely fit young people, I do have an abiding faith in my mental capacity.

In many ways, Buffy would have the far more difficult task. She was to fight, true--but only if there was fighting to be done, and there might well not be. How hard would it be for her to stand by, watching--wanting to act, yet having to await a command to do so.

The thing that I dared not share with anyone, despite the fact that they are more truly my family than any persons with whom I share blood: my ambivalence about Kyra's role. Yes, of course we had to do what we could to save the remaining innocents. And of course I would sacrifice my own life in a moment to protect that child. But were we perhaps robbing her of something that she would have chosen? True, we had been told she could choose not to fight, but we had no evidence that if we stopped this prophecy, she could choose otherwise: to be the Guardian, in spite of this night's actions.

I have never been fond of children, I openly admit it, prone to shrieking and incontinence as they are. But Kyra was something altogether different. To be sure, the fact that she was Willow and Tara's made her special to me; yet it was more than that, I knew. Whatever her path would be, this child was special, and almost painfully beautiful to me. I looked at her, and I believed to the deepest chambers of my soul that she would change all of us. She had already changed me.

I found myself thinking about the women whom I have been graced to know: Buffy, Jenny, Willow, Tara, Dawn...Even Anya, for all her crassness, has a strength and a passion to her soul and she has proven herself worthy.

And Joyce. Always, my thoughts came back to Joyce. Would I ever grow accustomed to walking into that house and not hearing her voice? I hoped not, actually, for that moment would signal her final death to me.

I rolled onto my back, and stared with unfocused eyes upon a ceiling dark and distant.

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I knew I should try to get some sleep, but odds were better that I'd become a driver's ed teacher. Beside me, Dawn was snoring, a habit she has never admitted to but one she's been doing since she was a kid. Our trip to the Grand Canyon, when we rented that camper? I was ready to throw her right down into the Colorado River.

I sat up in bed, staring out at the moonlight. I was ready to jump out of my skin, worrying about tomorrow. I knew I needed to let her grow up, but did that always have to involve mortal peril? Somewhere out there a younger sister was complaining to her older one, "You're not the boss of me!" And I wasn't Dawn's, but God...

Looking around, I saw Faith sitting up on her mattress on the floor, arms wrapped around her knees. I couldn't tell what she'd been looking at, but she didn't seem surprised that I was up.

We sort of looked at each other for a minute...It seemed a little surreal, actually. Then she nodded to her left--inviting me to join her. I slid out of bed, and Dawn flopped over into my warm space. Girl never broke REM. I tiptoed over to Faith--I'm not sure why I was so secretive--and settled down on half the mattress.

"Stressed?" she whispered.

"You could say that," I muttered.

"B, she'll be OK. You know that, right? We got 'em so covered, there's no way anything can go wrong. Worst case scenario: the guy gets away or doesn't show up at all. But Xander and Dawn? Hell, the President should be so well protected. Or not," she added. Faith was wearing a wife-beater that had seen better days, but somehow I felt more exposed.

"I know I get a little heavy with the over-protective stuff," I admitted, realizing that talking to Faith in the dark somehow made it easier to open up.

"Well, she's your kid sister," she shrugged. "And with your mom gone...B, you know the kid's always adored you. Hell, back when I first came to town--"

"She didn't exist."

It was time to tell her.

"Hey, I know she baked your buns at times, but that's kinda harsh." I could see her looking at me with an odd expression.

"No, I mean she really didn't exist." And then I proceeded to tell her about Dawn being the Key. I was so far beyond questioning her that I wondered why I hadn't done it before.

Maybe because we'd been on Full Alert with everything else.

When I finished, she just stared at me. "No lie? All that stuff I remember?"

"All made up by a bunch of monks. Believe me, it took a long time to convince her that she was real--you know, in the ways that mattered. But did that stuff actually happen? No."

"Then her tagging after us, wanting us to teach her some moves...Damn." She looked up over the end of the bed to where Dawn had resumed snoring, and shook her head.

I'm not sure why I said it, but I did. "You know she had a huge crush on you, right?"

Now she looked back at me, and her brown eyes were so wide I almost laughed. "No shit? D had the adolescent Ellen on? Sonuvabitch..." After a minute, she turned that cocky grin on me. "Can't argue with the girl's good taste." And I just grinned back at her.

Then I looked up at Dawn, and all that churn-y, acid-y stuff started back up. Faith grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "B, listen to me. She'll be OK."

It actually felt good to have something to hold onto. "I know. God, I must sound crazy, especially to someone who's never pulled big-sister duty."

Faith was quiet for so long that I thought I'd made her angry, and that thought upset me more than I would've expected. Finally, staring at nothing, she said in a voice so quiet I could barely hear her, "Actually, I have."

And then it was my turn to go silent, because I had no earthly idea what to say. I think my mind almost literally froze. All I could think to do was squeeze her hand back, to let her know I had heard her.

After a minute, she said, "His name was Brian. He was three years younger than me, almost to the day."

I knew enough about verb tenses to know then that Brian was dead.

"What happened?" I finally whispered.

She still didn't look at me. Just stared off into the moonlight. "Mom always called me the 'wild child.' One day I ask him, 'Hey Bri--you a wild child, too?' And he just looks at me, all thoughtful-like, and says, 'No, I think I'm more of a mild child.' Kid must have been all of seven at the time. Thought I hung the moon, God knows why. I let him tag around with me. Didn't beat him up as much as I would've if he'd been a jerk, probably." She grinned suddenly. "Kid could charm the fuzz off a peach, too. He'd bat those long eyelashes of his and Mrs. Mazurski at the corner store would end up putting two or three extra things in the bag." Then the grin faded.

I just sat there and held her hand while she tried to watch the scary part. Finally she said, "He was walking to school one day when he was ten and some drunk in an SUV mowed him down in a crosswalk." Her voice was so flat you'd have thought she was reporting the weather, but I knew that she was screaming inside.

"I wasn't with him because I didn't go to the same school. Hell, I didn't go to my school more than half the time. I get back home from hanging out later that night and Mom's absolutely ripped, crying about her little boy." She turned and gave me one of the saddest smiles I've ever



seen, and I've seen a few. "I don't think she got the irony about the alcohol." Looking back out the window, she added, "I just kept thinking, 'If only I'd been with him.'"

"Faith, it's not your fault," I said, trying to keep my voice low. "You said yourself, you didn't even go to the same school."

She looked back at me. "Right. It's not my fault. I was just a kid myself, right?" She leaned forward, so close to me that I could smell her hair. "Just like it's not your fault your mom died, B. No way, no how. Except that part of you thinks it is. Hell, part of you knows it is, when you're not busy telling everyone you're OK. Am I wrong?"

Finally, when she was that close to me, I saw the tears that she wouldn't let herself cry, and I knew where they were coming from.

"You're not wrong," I whispered. We just stared at each other. I remember wanting to hold onto her somehow, but I didn't know what to do. Finally I just wrapped my arm through hers and hugged her that way. We sat holding each other like that for a long time, watching the moon and remembering.

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Later, when it was all over, none of them would be able to say exactly what happened. With everything that they had all been through, all the narrow escapes, this particular night would remain largely a blur, for many reasons.

Failure. Success. How did she even define those terms now?

"I hope I'm morally tasty enough," Dawn said, ostensibly as a joke but with what Willow knew was genuine fear. They had been her last words to Willow before everything began, and they kept coming back to her now as she stood beside the grave and tried to remember again how this had happened.

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They had assembled at the designated time, Willow giving surreptitious glances to her friends and trying to guess who beside herself and Tara had actually slept. Dawn was the only one who looked remotely rested.

The mental preparations went remarkably smoothly. Xander and Dawn responded well to the quieting spell, although Xander kept trying to make jokes that weren't funny. At least no one patronized him so far as to laugh at them. Giles and Anya were sufficiently receptive to their own mild inducement. As Willow had expected, Anya's mind was scrambling to set up the best room possible, while Giles was clearly trying to create a more relaxing environment within his own psyche.

At 4:00, Anya left their room. At 4:01, Dawn knocked on the door. Thus began one of the most excruciating waits that Willow had ever endured. Do I really want him to come? Do I want two people I love to suffer? But it's our only chance...

"I feel like a voyeur," Tara whispered as she, Willow, and Buffy watched on the monitor. Per the instructions, Giles and Anya waited off to the side, hearing but not viewing the conversation. Faith was positioned a few yards away, standing guard with unflinching vigilance over a sleeping Kyra.

In Dawn's room, the one that Xander and Anya were currently sharing, the carpenter and the former Key chatted. Xander sat propped up against the head of the bed, while Dawn assumed a comparable position at the foot. For a few minutes, the conversation was somewhat stilted as they spoke first of past victories and then their current possible vulnerability. Willow could hear the artifice in Xander's voice in particular. She recalled his performance in the talent show, back in their sophomore year, and thought that that performance had been the more credible.

Eventually, though, they both relaxed somewhat, and soon thereafter a palpable shift emerged. Xander leaned forward and looked at Dawn conspiratorially.

"Have you stopped to wonder why we haven't been hit?"

Will knew Xander well enough to know he'd been thinking about this. It wasn't news to her, nor was she surprised by Dawn's response.

"Sure. I mean, if it's all about taking the best and then you're not on the guest list..."

"Right. Like, we're supposed to be happy it hasn't attacked us, because it feels so awful. Heck, I don't want Anya going through what I went through. It killed me, seeing her like that."

"But it's like being tired after a volleyball game," Dawn nodded. "You're sore and you're wiped out and you've got bruises in weird places. But you'll take that over feeling fresh as a summer's eve because it means you played."

Now they were getting to the heart of it.

"So, like...maybe it thinks we're not good enough."

"Yeah, but come on--we've done a lot of pretty impressive stuff," Dawn argued, in a voice that fell five yards shy of convincing.

"Right, but always as side-kicks," Xander asserted, then grimaced. "OK, talkin' only for myself here, Dawnster, but I'm not exactly confident that most of the great moments in Scooby history would've transpired had yours truly been in charge."

"Hey, you're the one who saved Buffy's life when she drowned fighting the Master," Dawn countered. "I managed to get myself taken hostage by Harmony, of all the losers. And Buffy had to come rescue me--again."

If Willow had let herself hope that this time, the Big Bad would show up in dramatic fashion, one definitive moment standing out in bold relief to announce his arrival, she was destined to be disappointed. What she did feel, though, was a slight shift...a nudging at the corner of her mind; a kind of whispering that seemed to hope she wouldn't hear. With a quick glance at Tara, she knew that her mate had felt it, too. It was quiet--but it was there.

It was a new sadness, a new fatigue, and Willow could feel it growing, pushing to reach new corners of its hosts. The demon had picked them both, and even though Willow knew that it would have been easier to trap it had it hit only one, some little part of her was glad that neither of them would struggle with the implications of that fact.

But that little part was also temporary--because this would be tougher.

"He's here, isn't he?" Buffy whispered tersely, and Willow nodded. She spared only a quick glance at Giles and Anya, but it was enough to see the tension in Anya's rigid posture, in Giles' drawn features.

"When do you get them?" the Slayer asked, tightening her grip on the tranquilizer gun.

"Not yet," Tara replied, shaking her head. "He's not in far enough."

But he was getting there, Willow knew. She could feel it in her mind, and she could hear it in the change that took place between Xander and Dawn. Whereas only moments before, they had been talking openly and easily, now each was growing quieter, getting sucked into the rancid eddy that swirled in their minds. The talk grew halting, and finally died.

When Xander started to push himself off the bed, muttering a barely audible "'scuse me just a second, Dawn," Willow shot out her hand to Tara's.

"Leave the pain. Take shelter," they chanted as one. With a tightening of their hands, they pulled their minds in unison--and felt Xander's psyche sliding from his body and into Anya's. A quick look at the ex-demon told her that they had been successful. She stood trembling, running one hand tenderly down her cheek to rest her fingers against her lips.

"Get Dawn," Buffy hissed, and this time Tara nodded. They clasped hands again, chanted again, pulled one more time...and Dawn's mind--or what had infected it--pulled against them.

Willow felt a snapping within her head, a resistance both subtle and insistent, and then a sharp pain.

She recognized the fear that shot through Tara's hands. She was sending the same fear. Dawn's mind should have slid away at Willow and Tara's effort. The worst thing that should have

happened was a premature trigger finger: pulling Dawn out before the demon was fully encased. It wasn't supposed to hold onto her. It wasn't supposed to fight back.

"What's happening?" Buffy demanded, anxiety turning to fear in the space of the question.

Willow didn't answer her. Instead, she took a deep breath to center herself, looked at Tara, and began anew.

"Leave the pain. Take shelter." Tara's hand tightened upon hers, and once more they pulled Dawn away from herself.

Buffy looked desperately at Giles. "Is she--"

The howl that tore through the house should not have come from a human. It certainly shouldn't have come from a slightly built teenager.

Willow had never heard such a scream before. It held the ceaseless anguish of a father whose son insisted, grinning with the adolescent conviction of utter invincibility, that the roads were navigable; the dread of a woman, two weeks after her commitment ceremony, who watches her surgeon walking toward her and knows that the cancer is back; the despair of an old woman who saw her husband ripped away and now waits for rescue that will not come while food dwindles and water rises.

The scream went on; lasted beyond all breath.

Willow watched the monitor in horror as Buffy kicked in the door to the bedroom. In that half-moment, before the Slayer reached her sister, Dawn's head lolled to the side as if staring directly at Willow and Tara. A grin--grotesque and leering and triumphant--split the beautiful features. Willow felt as if she were watching the creature feed.

I am, she realized.

"Trap it now!" Giles hissed, as Buffy grabbed on to her sister and cradled her desperately in her arms. But there was no struggle. Dawn didn't fight; she didn't try to escape; she didn't do anything. She simply slid to the floor, eyes wide and unseeing.

"It's gone," Tara said hoarsely, mouth quivering, and Willow knew it to be true. Willow glanced back to where Faith was standing tensely in the doorway to their own bedroom. She knew that the Dark Slayer wanted to be by Buffy's side. She had heard that awful cry; knew its source. "Stay there," Willow barked, and then by silent accord, she and Tara moved together to the bedroom doorway, where Buffy was calling uselessly to her sister.

"Dawn...Dawnie, c'mon, talk to me. Dammit, Dawn, look at me!" Willow had never heard such agony in her friend's voice.

"It got her," Willow whispered to Tara, fighting the nausea that roiled through her.

"No," Tara argued, grabbing her shoulder and turning her away from the scene, away from Buffy's hearing. "Willow, Dawn's still alive!"

Willow looked back at the crumpled figure splayed awkwardly in Buffy's arms. She still drew breath. There wasn't a drop of blood on her. And what--if anything--was left of her mind?

"Xander?" Giles whispered, appearing behind them.

The carpenter's body slouched like a forgotten puppet against the bedstead.

"Still with Anya," Willow managed.

"Keep him there," the Watcher ordered grimly. Willow heard the sudden catch of his breath as he took in the scene before him..

This isn't right.

Willow watched helplessly as Giles took a step toward the two women.

"Buffy...We have to get her to a hospital." Willow wasn't sure if the Slayer even heard him.

Tara shook her head, tears spilling over her cheeks. "He's not in there, Willow. He took her, and--and then left."

None of this should be happening.

"It saw what we were doing," Willow muttered, unable to believe what she'd just watched. "It...It grabbed Dawn. We failed."

What have I done?

"Sweetie, we'll get her back," Tara said, as if Willow didn't know her, couldn't hear the desperation behind the assurance.

Who did I think I was, trying to pull this off?

"How, Tara? If she's gone, totally gone..."

I thought I could help. I thought I could play my part.

Something cold was stealing over Willow's heart and her mind, something that had nothing to do with her grief and guilt about Dawn. Something else was there.

You thought you'd come back and show everybody you'd changed.

"Tara..."

You haven't changed. Not where it counts.

"Tara, I think it's still here." She snaked out her hand again, and felt warm fingers clasping hers--not to chant, but to anchor.

Look at what's happened since you came back...

"How can you tell?"

"I don't know. I just feel it--like in the Magic Box."

They put you back here because they're not worried about you. They knew you wouldn't be a target--even without the prophecy.

Tara peered at her anxiously. "Could it be Dawn?" she whispered.

But Willow shook her head. Dawn was...empty. There was nothing left to prey on. She cast her mind to Anya, but Xander was still safe.

You thought you'd impress her.

"Then who?"

"Fate."

"Tara, it's Faith. It has to be."

Buffy looked up sharply. "But the prophecy," Giles began.

You thought maybe she'd fall in love with you.

"I don't care," Willow shouted, pushing past Giles into the hallway, Tara barely a step behind.

Faith wasn't standing in the doorway anymore. Willow didn't see her until they crossed the threshold of their room. The Dark Slayer was gazing down at Kyra, who was standing in her crib, gazing back up at her. The tranquilizer gun lay forgotten on the floor.

Something was different about the scene, something other than Faith, but Willow had all she could do to focus on the situation before her. "Faith..." Willow heard the trembling in her own voice.

"She's so beautiful, Red." Faith's eyes never left their child.

"And she'll need you, Faith," Tara added softly. "If she turns out to be the Guardian."

"If? Nah...No 'if' about it, kids."

Time to go.

"Then you'll help her, right?" Willow asked. "Just like you promised."

You let yourself believe it, didn't you? Christ...

"Faith, Dawn was...Something's happened to her. Buffy's gonna need you more than ever."

Faith looked at Tara, eyes narrowing.

You brought this here. She'll blame you.

"It's true," Tara continued. "She's alive, but she's hurt...in her mind."

But Faith was no longer looking at Willow or Tara. Her gaze was locked on something behind them. Turning slightly, Willow saw Buffy, ashen-faced, staring back at her counterpart.

For the first time, Faith's voice wavered. "Buffy...I'm sorry."

"No." There was no inflection to the word, nothing but a flat denial of...what?

"B, you see how things are, right?"

She can barely look at you.

"I see that you're thinking of leaving Kyra. And that's not OK."

If you're serious about this, go now. She can't stop you. She's wiped out.

"Faith, she's right." Tara's voice grew steadier, more persuasive. "Our daughter needs you."

Look at her. This has killed her. You killed her.

"Please, Faith," Tara continued, drawing the dark gaze back to her own. "I know what you're thinking. We all do--remember?"

Tara's a good person. Willow wouldn't make it without her. They're joined, at the soul...

Willow felt Buffy's hand on her elbow. "Can you take him?" she whispered.

Willow looked at her in surprise. "Where would we put Faith? Her mind?" she muttered, frowning.

You bring nothing but pain. Do you really think your mom would have drunk so much if you hadn't been such a fucking loser?

"Put her in me."

"Buffy, no. We haven't prepped you, and--"

"I can hold her. Will, I'm not going to lose them both."

Buffy's mom was so proud of her.

"Let me hold her, Will. Send her to me."

Willow gave her best friend one last, searching look, and finally nodded. "Distract her. I'll tell Tara."

"Faith--look at me." The Slayer's voice was commanding, insistent.

Nowhere else you'd rather look, is there?

"B, just let me go. For the first time, everything makes sense."

"Right. Just like I knew it made sense to me a few days ago." Buffy took a step toward the Dark Slayer.

Behind Faith, Kyra watched everything unfold with her large, dark eyes. Willow had a dim memory from barely two weeks ago, hoping that Kyra would sleep through Faith's arrival for fear that she had brought all of her anger and resentment and vengeance with her. And now they were trying to save her--in part because she might well be crucial in Kyra's life path, but mostly because they had all come to care about her. Faith, though, had no such love to spare for herself.

Go. Go now. She's too hurt to stop you.

Buffy took another step closer. "Faith, you stopped me then. I knew you were behind me, and I knew I couldn't take you."

That was because she's supposed to live. You're not.

As quietly as possible, Willow pulled Tara back until they were standing almost in the hallway, and whispered the plan. Tara's eyes went wide, but she nodded grimly.

"We'll only have the one shot," Willow cautioned in a low voice.

"Right. That's a new twist to Scooby life," Tara muttered, shaking her head.

You have to go. You're wasting time, looking at her.

"B, listen, you should get back to Dawn."



"Giles has her. She's not going anywhere." Buffy's voice didn't waver; didn't falter at all.

She could never love you. Look at you--you're a low-class whore.

"Faith, you're not going. If I have to fight you to keep you here, I will."

She feels sorry for you. Go, dammit--do the right thing for once in your sorry, wasted life.

And still Kyra watched, in utter silence, though Willow thought for one moment that she had seen one tiny hand raised and--impossibly--soft light spilling out of her fingers, as if they were casting the most insubstantial of translucent, silken threads.

But then the image was gone, and there was only a small child frowning at the two women who waged some largely unseen battle before her.

Tara glanced to her right. The container was where they had placed it.

"Faith, it's pretty simple. I'm not letting you through."

Willow was surprised that the demon hadn't left at the moment of his discovery. "Fine, you arrogant SOB," she muttered. "Pride will go before your big, nasty fall."

"B, you got no firepower," Faith pointed out, looking at Buffy's empty hands. "C'mon. Let me go. You know you have to."

"No," came the reply through gritted teeth. "I know you've been hit by the same bastard that took my sister. I'll get her back, and I won't let him take you in the first place."

Why are you stalling? Just to look at her a little more? To feel even worse about what you can't ever have?

In the hallway, Willow looked at Tara, heart cracking open with the exquisite pain of too much love. "We can do this," she choked. "For Kyra."

Tara nodded, swallowing heavily. "And for Dawn."

Together, they drew one deep, shuddering breath.

If you love her, if you really love her, do this. Now.

But why was it so hard to move?

"Faith, I need you to stay."

Hands clasped, fingers tightened with the surety of knowledge beyond experience...

Go. You have to go. Don't look at her. You'll just fail, fuck up, like you always do.

"Faith, I won't let you go."

Let her remember you with respect. Let her be proud of you, at least, for this one thing.

One more breath, and then--

She couldn't move, she was held there as if rooted...

"Leave the pain. Take shelter."

Go! Don't let her see you like this!

And then a pulling...

Faith...come to me.

And then Faith's tortured mind poured into Buffy's, taking her breath away, as grief and fear and love so sharp it tore through the fabric of her soul spun and fought and finally came to rest.

"I have her!"

"The hunter, preyed upon;

The possessor, possessed.

Now be delivered to us."

Darkness, thick and implacable, crashed out of Faith's body, pulsing with malignance and damnation and every nightmare that Hope had ever endured, in one brief and endless moment.

Willow and Tara grabbed it up, the grotesque energy, and threw it into its cage, that ridiculous thing that somehow held.

"To the hell of your nature, we consign you; now, and forever."

Sweat was pouring from each of them, rendering their clasped hands slick. But that force held as well--as it always had.

A disembodied hiss swirled up around them, growing, threatening to reach into each of them and drink their sanity...and then died, leaving only a silence that somehow seemed louder.

The vessel was gone. There was no trace of it ever having been there.

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They attended first to Xander and Faith--the simplest tasks. With a few muttered syllables, each mind was returned to its body.

Xander was stunned, disoriented. When he saw Dawn, he clutched his stomach and dropped to the floor beside her, where Giles held her with infinite gentleness, murmuring softly against her hair.

Faith looked at Buffy with helpless gratitude and burgeoning fear. Willow knew what she dared not ask: Do you see it now? How I feel about you?

And then Buffy, Faith, and Giles bundled Dawn into the car and drove her to the hospital.

Xander stood silently, but Willow knew that soon he would give voice to his guilt, and they would offer what solace they could. Anya just stood close to her mate, one hand resting protectively on his back. Willow knew that she would struggle with her own guilt: guilt over her relief that it was Dawn, not Xander, who now lay mutely on a hospital stretcher.

Willow and Tara went back to their room, Tara holding Kyra tightly against her. They dropped onto the bed, neither of them willing to put Kyra back in her crib yet. Willow gazed at their daughter, relief fighting with guilt fighting with love.

You will never understand fully what happened here. What was done to spare you, and spare others.

She glanced at the clock on her side table: 5:16. had they really been asleep two hours ago? And Dawn...

We'll bring her back. Somehow we will bring her back.

They were beyond words, both of them. They just curled up against each other, Kyra nestled safely between them.

At 5:32, the phone rang sharply, jolting them out of their temporary refuge. Tara pressed a kiss to their daughter's forehead and leaned over to pull the receiver off of its cradle.

"Hi Giles," she answered, looking anxiously at Willow. "How's Dawn? Have they--" She broke off, frowning. "Oh...OK, that makes sense. What about--"

Again she was interrupted. This time the silence endured until Tara's expression changed and Willow knew that some new chord had been added to the night's cacophony.

"What? But that's...Are you sure?" She listened for several minutes, knuckles tightening against the dark green receiver.

Willow reached out fearfully, taking Tara's hand and asking questions with her eyes. Finally, Tara hung up without saying goodbye, and turned to face her mate.

"Tara...Baby, what is it?"

Tara gazed at Kyra, who smiled up at them. Her beloved's voice was barely a whisper.

"There were two suicides earlier tonight. The work of the demon, Giles is certain." She looked up at Willow, and the tears finally came.

"Kyra was already the Guardian when he came."

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Dark green blouse; black trousers. I think that's appropriate. Right?

It had been four days since they lost, and won, and lost again.

Dawn had been subjected to a rotating alphabet of tests: MRI's; CAT scans; PET scans...None showed any physiological damage. There were no lesions; no tumors. Her brain circuitry worked fine. Neurotransmitters--catecholamine and dopamine and serotonin and norepinephrine--were all at normal levels. Her pupils reacted to light, but she never followed anyone with her eyes or made any sign of recognition or reaction.

"What happened to this girl?" the attending ER physician had asked incredulously, Giles told them later. Their response: "We don't know."

On the third day, the neurosurgeon shook her head helplessly. "According to everything we can see, she should be walking and talking."

"Except she's not, Buffy replied tersely. "She's lying in a hospital bed, staring at the ceiling." Willow rested her hand on her best friend's back, but there was no response. Buffy had rarely left the hospital, hadn't slept more than six hours total since the attack.

Dawn showed no voluntary or purposeful motor movement. She didn't resist being turned, being washed, being dressed. There was no act of will whatsoever.

There was no sign of Dawn.

Now, four days later, Willow and Tara had decided to attend the funerals of the final two victims. Both ceremonies had fallen on the same afternoon, so Tara went to Brandon's; Willow went to Magda's. Her name was Magda, Willow thought, buttoning the blouse with fingers that shook from exhaustion and the tides of emotion that crashed against her at random. She was Magda, and he was Brandon. They were real people, just like the other eight.

Anya and Xander watched Kyra for the afternoon. "Say a pra--say something for me, Will," Xander requested quietly as they were leaving the house. "Just...whatever feels right."

Except nothing felt right, not right now.

Why go? It wouldn't bring them back. Was it guilt? That they hadn't saved them?

"I think it's about acknowledging that they lived," Tara said when she and Willow discussed it. "I think it's about saying to the universe, 'We know these people lived, and we know why they died.'"

At the cemetery, a few people cast Willow questioning looks, having no idea who she was or why she was there.

I'm here to honor her. I didn't know her, but I honor her.

Willow watched as a husband, two daughters, two parents, three siblings grieved for someone they believed had chosen to leave them.

It wasn't her choice! Willow wanted to scream. She was killed for the very reasons you loved her so much.

Would these survivors, ripped through with anguish and recrimination and a thousand unanswered questions, ever know the truth?

She could only wonder.

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Life at 1630 Revello Dr. lurched on...

Surreal.

Numbed.

And above all...guilt-stricken.

It followed all of them, hung off their clothing like a stench. The air was thick with it, and each of them carried a certainty that his or her sin was the most unforgivable of all...

I hid. While Dawn was getting...when he went for Dawn I was hiding in my wife's mind, useless. And now she's gone and she might not ever come back. I was so worried about whether or not I'd be worthy, and when it all went down--I was hiding.

I should feel bad. I do feel bad. But most of all I'm relieved because Xander's safe. Everybody else is miserable and I'm just so glad that if it had to take anybody it didn't take Xander. Which means it took Dawn.

I should have known it would be too much for her. She's been thrown into so many horrific situations and we lost sight of the fact that she's a teenager. Did I forget that she's not her sister? I am the closest thing she has to a father, and I didn't protect her.

Buffy was in her own isolated realm of hell. No matter what anyone said--and all of them had tried to say it at various points--Buffy would always believe that this was her fault. She didn't rail about it, she didn't lash out, she didn't cover herself in sackcloth and ashes. She just walked through the days saying virtually nothing, and nothing at all that didn't concern Dawn. She walked through her nights, Willow knew, pacing and staring out the window. She'd come upon her once, when she woke to go to the bathroom, and Buffy was standing at the far end of the hallway, arms crossed across her chest, looking out at the night. Willow had a flashback to an almost-identical moment a week ago, when Faith was the restless one. This time, though, there was no intimate moment, no whispered vulnerabilities. Buffy had heard her, somehow known it was Willow even with her back turned. "I'm fine, Will. Just needed a moment."

"OK. You know if you need anything..."

"I know. Thanks."

And that was that.

Faith...?

Without there being a need to discuss it, Faith stayed at the Summers house instead of moving back in with Giles. She kept a close eye on Buffy. And yet some tiny voice in Willow's mind whispered that she would bolt. Rage, guilt, helplessness--those they had in abundance. But there was nothing to fight now except despair, and Willow frankly didn't know if Faith had the arsenal for that battle. She also knew, though, that Faith looked upon her duty to Kyra with utter solemnity and honor. And she knew that at least some part of Faith would yearn to hold tight to Buffy--to anchor her, to be her friend even if nothing else.

But the vulnerability, the exposure...Had Buffy learned of her feelings while she held Faith in her mind?

How could she not? Tara knew it looking from the outside.

Would Faith feel so exposed that she just decided to go? Would she tell herself that it was best for everyone, and just leave a note on the kitchen table?

We need you, Faith. Don't you dare duck out now just because there's nothing to kill.

And that was why, when she overheard two familiar voices in the kitchen well past midnight after the funerals, she didn't have a lengthy, complicated debate with herself about the ethics of eavesdropping. She simply padded to the bottom stair and listened.

"...two of 'em. I'll get the rest tomorrow, now that I know where they hole up," Faith was saying.

With a swift shock, Willow realized that the Dark Slayer had been patrolling.

"You should take somebody with you," Buffy replied quietly. Willow could hear the exhaustion that practically choked her words.

"Hey, I know it's a smaller sweep, but I'm still getting--"

Buffy's voice was sliver thin, and utterly commanding: "You really think that's why I don't want you going alone? To up the kill ratio?"

There was no reply to this, and Buffy continued, "'cuz the nightly haul is pretty much the last thing on my mind these days, Faith."

"I promise I'll be careful, B," Faith finally managed.

"No, you'll take back-up," Buffy countered. "Please--I can't..." Her voice broke, just slightly. "I don't have it in me, Faith. Not another..." She trailed off again, and this time the silence endured.

After several moments, the utter quiet compelled her to risk a look around the doorframe. Buffy sat limply at the table, head sunk into her hands. Faith stood behind her, one hand squeezing her shoulder while the other gently stroked the long blonde hair. Willow ducked back into the hallway and drew a deep breath. She had violated their privacy, and the scene had left her shaken. But now she knew that Faith wouldn't leave.

Willow and Tara...Their feelings ricocheted from guilt to sadness to rage. There was no sense of victory in defeating that creature that took so much from so many. No, there would never be another funeral like the ones they had attended, but that offered scant comfort when they went to visit Dawn.

"Is your mind back in the hospital too?" Willow asked sadly, five nights after the attack. They were sitting in bed, the room lit by two flickering candles. The light jasmine scent of Tara's body lotion mingled with the sandalwood of the candles. For Willow, their bedroom was the only room in the house these days that felt like a refuge instead of a trauma ward.

Tara nodded, the light in her eyes turning to almost unbearable sadness. "I just keep seeing her, Willow. Just laying there, absolutely still."

They had gone to the hospital earlier, as they'd done every day, hoping that perhaps there was something they could do or say that would bring Dawn out of it. This time there would be some glimmer of recognition. This time Dawn would squeeze their fingers, just barely, but enough to let them know she was there. So they held her hands and stroked her hair and told her stories--ridiculous stories, to make her laugh, and loving stories, to make her feel.

"God, remember when Xander tried to intimidate that Lorokh demon into giving us information by shoving him up against a wall? And the demon was so intimidated that he peed all over Xander's shoes?"

"Or when Giles keep seeing that same woman in the Espresso Pump, and he thought she was really attractive, and so he finally decided to just go for it and ask her out and it turns out that she had decided to enter the convent at St. Helen's? I think he still believes she just made that story up to avoid saying no."

"Dawnie, please wake up. Or if you don't feel like waking up yet, just squeeze my fingers, OK? We're right here, Dawn; we love you so much..."

"I know, Baby," Willow replied heavily. "Dawn's always in such a hurry, she's always running around or talking ninety miles an hour and now...Now she doesn't move at all." She shook her head angrily, swiping at her eyes. "This is so wrong, it's so completely screwed up and wrong and I don't know what to do." She looked up at Tara desperately. "Baby, what if she never gets better? What if she's stuck there, in nothing? Or--or worse yet, what if she's in some kind of awful tortured place? God, Tara, I feel like I'm going to scream and if I feel like this, what must Buffy be going through?"

"And she still hasn't talked to you about it?"

"Nothing." Willow ran her fingers through her hair, remembering every conversation that Buffy had aborted before anything of substance could be addressed. "She always says she's OK, and then shuts down, or talks about going to the hospital. I know she blames herself. God, we could throw a guilt smorgasbord in this house and feed the entire West Coast. Tara, I still can't believe this happened." She felt the tears pricking at her eyes again.

"Oh Sweetie..." Tara moved to slide under the comforter, and then held out welcoming arms. Willow gratefully gave herself up to the warmth. "Willow, honey, I know..."

She nuzzled closer, breathing in Tara's rich, singular essence, drawing comfort and strength from the embrace. "Baby, do you think we should have stopped her? Stopped them, I mean? Dawn and Xander?"

"Will, they're not kids. They had the right to try."

"But we knew that things could go wrong. There were so many unknowns in it all." She had played every scene over in her head so many times...

She felt Tara's sad smile against her hair. "Sweetie, when have any of our plans been foolproof? And yet almost all of them worked out, without major casualty. Wasn't it just last year that you couldn't stop thinking about how lucky we'd been so far?"

She remembered the desperate searching, the utter imperative of finding every protection spell that existed because their luck couldn't hold, not over and over again as it always had. "So you think the odds caught up to us?"



Tara gave a slight shrug. "I don't know. I'm not saying I'm sure we did the right thing. But we've pulled off so many miraculous escapes that it's no wonder we assumed we could pull off another one. And I think, above all, that we believed it was the right thing to do."

Willow thought about this for a few moments, and then asked quietly, "What are we going to do, Tara? If she doesn't get better?"

Tara was silent for so long that if Willow hadn't known better she would have thought she'd dropped off to sleep. Finally she said, "I don't know, my love. There's only one thing that I do know: we won't let her stay there. If it doesn't look like modern medicine can do anything, we'll intervene. Somehow, some way. But we won't leave her there."

Willow nodded, swallowing around the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. "Scoobies aren't the type to wait around and let the action come to them," she whispered.

Goddess, what's going to happen to our family?

As if picking up on the anguish, Kyra gave a small cry from her crib in the next room. Willow and Tara usually alternated nights of getting out of bed and attending to their daughter, but these days they both needed to be close to her, just to ensure that she was indeed healthy and safe.

They had talked briefly about Willow's perception on the night of the attack, that Kyra had somehow been involved in Faith staying where she was. "I know it's impossible, Baby, but I could have sworn I saw some kind of...light, or wave, coming from her."

But Tara just shook her head. "I don't think it's impossible, Will. I think it was the first sign of her receiving her powers, and I think we are in for a multitude of moments just like that one."

Now, Tara bent to rub her back, humming softly. Kyra kicked out with little feet, tiny mouth in a frown of surpassing displeasure. She wasn't fully awake, however, and Willow fervently hoped she wouldn't get there. Kyra didn't cry often, but she most definitely did not like anything messing with her sleep. Her lungs had offered powerful testimony to that fact on several occasions over the last year. Within a few moments, though, her brow had cleared and she was beginning to breathe more steadily. Finally she gave a huge sigh, kicked out once more, and dropped back off.

They stood there for several minutes, not wanting to risk waking her up and yet unable to pull themselves away from the sight of their daughter at such peace, in such safety. Eventually, though, they turned to each other with a slight smile and eased out of the room.

Sliding back under the covers, Tara asked bluntly, "Do you really see her rejecting it?"

"Of course not," Willow sighed. "OK, so she gets to choose...Good. I mean, really. That makes me a little less pissed. But look at this family, Tara." She gave a dry laugh. "Every single one of us has killed at least twenty demons. We've saved the world, for Hestia's sake, and in sort of a recurrent fashion."

"But it's not just that," Tara replied slowly. "I think...When I look at her I feel like I can see it in her--the fighter, I mean."

Willow had a sudden flash of her dream: a young girl, fighting for all she was worth.

Tara gave Willow a nervous smile. "This may sound really odd...but I dreamt about it."

Willow felt a tiny chill slide up into her belly. "What do you mean?"

Tara took Willow's hand in her own, and Willow clutched at the warmth it offered. "I--I saw Kyra, in a dream. I mean, she looked about 19 or 20, but I just knew it was her." She broke off, biting her lip. "She was fighting."

"And loving it."

Tara looked at her, stunned. "Yeah, but how did you--?"

"And she had a scar."

Willow felt a tremor run through the soft, warm flesh. "Yes." It was almost a whisper.

"I had the same dream, Baby. I saw her too."

They stared at each other, fingers entwined, for what felt like a very long time. Why am I surprised? Of course we had the same dream. Of course. Maybe it was prophecy, or maybe they were just so in tune that they held the same fears.

Finally Tara drew a long, slow breath. "You know what else I saw?"

Willow could only shake her head.

"She was really good."

Willow saw the beginning of a very tentative smile edge across the beloved features, felt the beginnings of that same smile on her own. "She was, wasn't she?" Pride stole over her heart, spreading its singular warmth.

Their smiles widened, fed off each other as if each woman was giving her mate permission to feel some glimmer of something positive.

"Did you see the way she handled that sword?" Tara asked, eyes widening.

"Yeah, and the part where she did that standing jump?"

"Oh my God, wasn't that amazing? Hey, was that an athame she had in her left hand? It looked like it had some kind of Native American symbol carved into it."

"So you think she's ambidextrous?"

"Maybe enough to wield two weapons."

They were both grinning now, imagining their daughter giving holy hell to whatever dared piss her off. After a moment Willow reached out and cupped Tara's face.

Our daughter. My mate.

Cobalt danced and swam in front of her own eyes.

This is the life we choose. I would choose no other.

Tara took her hand and pressed light kisses against each fingertip. Leaning close to Willow's cheek, she whispered, "One of us should learn how to sew."

Huh?

"Huh?"

Tara pulled back just enough for Willow to see the crooked grin sliding across her face. "Do you have any idea how many holes she's going to rip in her pants? In her shirts? In pretty much everything she puts on? I don't really see her throwing many tea parties, Sweetie."

"If she does," Willow mused, "they'll be the only full-contact tea parties on the block."

They lay quietly for several minutes, each enjoying the unexpected respite. Who would've thought that talking about Kyra as the Guardian would leave us...happy? But for once she was disinclined to examine a thing too closely. It just felt good to laugh again.

They dropped off to sleep that way--smiling amidst fear; hopeful amidst despair. Battles large and small awaited.

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THE END

(For now)