

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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**Rating:** NC-17/R.. you know, it'd just be safer if you were over 18

**Pairing:** Buffy / Faith

**Disclaimer:** Joss Whedon, Mutant Enemy and WB owns 'em. I've just taken them out for an airing for a bit. The fic is for love, not money, (and I'm sure as hell not getting paid for it!) so please don't sue me. References are to both BtVS and Angel, but no infringement is intended. If you're going to archive this anywhere please do so with the disclaimer.. it'll save a whole lotta angst.

**Warnings:** Dark. Lots and lots of dark. This is not a fluffy bunny fic.

**Summary:** Set a couple of seasons ago. Faith is out of prison, living with Angel, until an unexpected call for help comes their way which forces her to face her past.

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### Chapter 1

*'Where do I take this pain of mine I run,  
but it stays right by my side  
So tear me open, pour me out  
There's things inside that scream and shout  
And the pain still hates me So hold me Until it sleeps'*

"I'm off!" Came a zealous cry from up the stairs, followed shortly by a flurry of feet, denim and black leather. The figure swept towards the door then paused, backtracked to the kitchen and, peering around for any potential witnesses, snatched the two freshly- popped slices of toast from the toaster. "Score.." She whispered under her breath.

Thinking for another moment, she dropped the jacket that was under her arm on the bench, spun towards the fridge, extracted the orange juice and with an audible 'pop', flicked the cap off, raising the full bottle to her lips.

"Taking my toast is one thing-" Faith had only barely managed to pour the juice into her mouth when a soft voice sounded from directly behind her. She jerked forward in surprise and had to work hard at avoiding spitting the liquid out again. "But you know I hate it when you drink from the bottle."

"Jeeezus man," Faith hissed, depositing the lidless bottle on the bench next to her jacket. "Don't ya know better than to sneak up on a girl trying to grab a bite on the run?" She scanned the floor for the lid and found it, some five feet away, dangerously close to the ducted heating. "You don't even need toast. Or juice." She stalked over and picked it up. In the five seconds it had taken her to retrieve it, there was, miraculously, a clean glass next to the orange juice.

"I like the idea of it." Angel said, a very subtle hint of obstinacy in his voice.

Faith snorted, filling the glass three quarters of the way. "I still dunno know how you do that -sneak up on me like you do." Angel watched her, silent the whole time. Faith jabbed a finger at her temple. "I think my slayer senses are going senile."

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He had to smile at that. "I've been alive for a long time, Faith."

"Yeah yeah yeah." She retorted, downing the contents of her glass in one go. "What, so older? wiser? More worldly? I dig, big guy, really." The latter was said between two mouthfuls of toast, so came out in quite a different way to that which was meant.

"And very able to get around slayers."

"Huh!" She chewed another mouthful. "You're just lucky you had so much experience when I came along. If I'd been around in your earlier days, you'd've been fertilising some 11th century garden." She flashed him a grin, and slapped his arm.

"I have no doubt."

Faith chuckled and jammed the rest of her toast in her mouth, waving. "Goi' ou'. 'ee 'a a'er" (roughly translated to "bye").

Angel watched her silently until she had reached the door and had her hand on the handle. He had no idea where she was going - since being released there seemed to be an abundance of things to keep Faith busy in LA. Whatever it was, she left happy, and returned happy. That's all he cared about.

Which was why he felt a twinge of guilt when he glanced at the newspaper in the waste-paper can and spoke to her back. "Someone else died yesterday."

The comment stopped Faith dead in her tracks. Angel caught the tail end of a very quiet groan. "What, is this? Cramp my style day?" She quipped, then turned around, swallowing the rest of her toast. "I thought the juice was a low blow but... man, gimme a break. You *seen* the sunshine out there?"

"Witnesses saw him run headlong into an oncoming truck, screaming."

"Awww *man!*" Faith's eyes travelled to the ceiling. "Angel! Buddy! Sunshine! Good day!"

"That's eighteen now."

"Fuck. Me.." Faith raised a hand to her forehead and scowled at the ground. "You're not going to let up, are you?" The energy of the morning seemed to drain out of her, escaping through the soles of her boots and into the polished concrete beneath her. *Goddamnit*. She swore to herself. *The day started so goddamn well too.*

Angel had been keeping abreast of the situation in Sunnydale through news, and calls. There was something there. Something *evil*. But not the kind of evil that graced the town's doors every week as part of its penance for being the Hellmouth. This was eighteen lives worth - over a four week period - each person seemingly driven to insanity and finally death, with little or no indication of attack save for a cross-shaped burn on their left temple. They had no reports of large ugly demons, no witnesses of attacks, no way to figure out how long these people had taken to deteriorate into suicidal maniacs... nothing. Empty.

With all their thinking power, the only thread they could find was a diary from the 1400s,

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that, for some reason, Anya had in her possession. It told of a town of 48 people driven mad one by one, six weeks before the winter solstice. Following the solstice, there was no reference, anywhere, to that town, or any towns surrounding it for another 200 years.

And the 21st December was rapidly approaching, without some reference to what they were facing, there was little they could do but stumble around in the dark and hope they weren't taken next.

Faith had been updated by Angel, piece by piece, for all of those four weeks. It was never going to be easy to talk about Sunnydale with Faith. He had been very careful with his wording - talking about how "they" were going "down there". He never used names. Names meant faces. Faces meant memories. Memories, well they just meant lots of remembering. And right now for Faith, remembering really, *really* sucked.

So to Faith, that's what the story was. Full of `them's, `they's, and `that place'. Detached, distant... separated from her past by the thin thread that a lack of acknowledgement provided.

Angel had been careful about it alright. He'd done it just in case... well... exactly this happened.

Faith stared up at Angel, and the look on his face told it all. A small sigh escaped her lips, but she caught herself and pretended she was clearing her throat.

"So you're going then."

He nodded.

"Fuck.." Her eyes darkened, then she shook her head, looking up at him. "What can you do though? I mean, they make that slaying shit look *good* Angel. You know, demon's worse nightmare yada yada." She paused, "..well maybe not this demon. *Yet*. But that's a definite *yet*. They'll get it. They always do." She asked again, more softly. "What can you do?"

"I don't know, but Buffy rang me last night and asked me to go."

`Buffy rang me...'

`Buffy rang...'

`Buffy...'

Faith froze. The room suddenly seemed to drop in temperature, and the colour drained from her face. This was the first time he had used a name, and goddamnit why did it have to be that one? She felt a sharp twist in her stomach and clenched her jaw, amazed at how close it was to the real thing.

"Ah." She said flatly.

Angel shook his head. Faith couldn't decide whether it was his way of saying he knew what she was doing, or his disgust at the situation. "They're struggling Faith. This time, they're really struggling. And the bodies keep piling up."

Faith shrugged. "You gotta do what you gotta do, big guy." She said simply, swinging her jacket over her shoulder in a very calculated, flippant move. "I'll wish ya luck. You'll be missed of course. But-"

"She asked for you, too."

Bombshell.

Faith had been ready to finish her sentence with some smart-ass comment like 'expect backwash in your juice when you get back', or 'don't expect me to do all your accounting while you're gone' or something of the like. Instead, any form of verbal communication disintegrated on her tongue. Suddenly, she was mute. Not only did Faith not have anything to say, she suddenly couldn't remember how to speak.

"She thought you would still be in prison - she asked me if I could break you out." Angel continued. The tiny smile on his lips at the thought of breaking Faith out of prison was missed by the slayer. Nor would it have been any consolation either, as she tried desperately to gain purchase on the spiraling whirlwind in her head.

'She asked for you...'

Angel pressed on. "I told her you had been released on parole early for good behaviour." He took a step forward, able to pick through her blankness and extract the fear from the depths of her eyes. "She's not jumping for joy at the prospect either, Faith."

"Huhhhh..." Faith croaked, her throat suddenly exceedingly sore. All his words seemed to penetrate her ears as if he were talking through a padded wall - soft, muffled, barely coherent. Her eyes darted right, then back again, looking for an escape route. This was too much. Too much for her. Too much for now. Names, places and now she has to *go* there?

Fuck that.

Faith turned her back on the pain in her stomach and the whirlwind behind her eyes. With an almost audible 'click' in her mind, her shutters slammed down, and she felt the familiar pang of nothing.

"You're fucking shitting me, right?"

"No." Angel replied. He could sense her defences, and a part of him was disappointed. "She asked for our help. Mine, and yours."

"She's lost her fucking marbles." Faith pulled at the chain around her neck, trying to relieve the suffocating pressure she was feeling. Her fingers tightened there on the finely-chiseled silver sword that rested between and just below her collarbones. "I'm not going back there."

Angel tilted his head. "There's nothing stopping you Faith. Just you."

"Hah!" Faith rolled her eyes. "Well just who died and made you fucking Mr. Calm Cool and Collected? Do you know how fulla shit that is? Wake-up sunshine. Sunnydale wasn't exactly

my crowning glory. I'm here *because* of that place." She shook her head. "I'm all for kicking the bad-ass out of me but this goes way beyond that."

"You're looking for atonement, this would be a way to show them how different you are. They're asking for your help."

"Because they're all obviously fucking insane!" She threw her arms into the air and they fell back down against her sides with a slap. The jacket that she was carrying dropped to her feet, unnoticed. "What part of 'I made their life a living hell' doesn't make sense to you? I'm supposed to be getting *on* with my life, and them with theirs. Carefree, Faith-Free. I mean fuck, could you imagine the shit I'd stir up by going back there?"

"Faith, eighteen people are dead. The last thing they are thinking about is old grudges. Right now I think they would make a deal with anyone but the devil to come to some resolution."

She snorted, crossing her arms. "What, so they're not going to hate me because they'll be too distracted with a demon? You sure know how to make a girl feel special, soul-boy."

"It wasn't supposed to." Angel snapped. With all his infinite patience, sometimes this side of Faith really pissed him off. "This isn't about you, or them. It's about you getting down there because you have the power to help them, and they need the help. People are *dying* Faith."

"Again with the *dying*!" Faith growled, and kicked her jacket into the corner. "FUCK!" Fuck she hated when he did that. "Fuck this shit Angel. I swear, if one of them *looks* at me wrong, I'm history."

"Then you'll be turning around as soon as you get there." Faith blinked. It wasn't quite the response she was expecting. Angel lowered his voice. "It's not going to be easy for anyone Faith. Least of all them. Remember, *they* had to ask *you*. You've already got one up on them."

"Well aren't I just the fucking King of the Kids then." She muttered.

"Listen." Angel closed the distance between them and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Faith stared intently at her boots. "You need to have one foot out the door. I understand that. But you can only afford one. Any more and there'll be no point."

"So why-"

"Because you're *good* Faith." This time, when she looked up Angel was smiling slightly. "You're *good*. They *need* you. You can help them and deep down, you and I both know you want to."

Faith snorted inwardly. Back with the `them's and the `they's. Nameless. Faceless. Angel had used the drawcard just when he needed to, and she had to admit, it'd worked.

"What time are we leaving?"

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## Chapter 2

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*What I've felt What I've known  
Never shined through in what I've shown  
Never free  
Never me  
So I dub thee Unforgiven*

--*Metallica*

"Hungry?"

"Huh?" Faith blinked away from her thoughts and rubbed her eyes at the stinging that followed. She'd been staring again, obviously. She shrugged. "Sure." Her voice cracked in the way it does when a person hasn't used it in a while. In Faith's case, since about 5 o'clock that evening.

Angel glanced at her from his position behind the wheel, as if to ensure the word came from her. He'd only half-expected an answer. Having tried to initiate light conversation through various meaningless comments, and failing miserably every time, Angel had simply given up. That was the problem with meaningless comments, he reasoned. Anything more and you're trying too hard. Anything less and you'd be talking about the weather.

"We'll stop at the next gas station and grab something."

"Nooooo problemo." Faith returned her gaze out of the car window - watching the road markers whiz by, white streaks on an inky road. They were comforting in their regularity. Faith needed regularity. It was the only regularity she would find for the next little while, she knew.

In prison her room-mate had asked her how she did it. Faith kept to herself for the rest of her stay, but not for want of provoking. Twice a day for almost 18 months it seemed that someone was willing to pick a fight with her. The most she would do was look at them, and that happened rarely. All that time, she had only bitten once - having become the centre of attention for one of the longer-standing residents. For Faith all it had taken was a snatch and a sharp twist, and Jack had been on her back in the prison hospital for a week with a dislocated elbow and spiral fracture to her humerus.

So the question was posed to her, the night before her parole hearing. 'How do you do it? Shut off and not let it bother you like that?'

Faith kept her answer short, simple - a true reflection of who she was at the time.

'It gets easier the more you practice.' She had answered with a shrug.

People were mistaken in thinking a person who shut themselves off felt the blissful pull of nothing. Where emotions otherwise would be, there was no vacuum. No clean, empty room. Instead, what stood in its place was sour, corrosive; a pathogen that permeated the soul like rust on iron. And like the latter, if left unchecked there was an awful amount of structural damage that could be caused, before even being noticed.

Without care, it would disintegrate altogether.

Faith had lots of practice in prison. More than enough practice in life...but since getting out, she'd been trying not to practice too much.

Sometimes though, you had to do what instinct forced you to do, before you flew apart.

On a parallel line of thought, Angel set his jaw. Sometimes, you also have to ask the question regardless of the answer you know you'll receive, if for no other reason than to show that you care.

"You alright?"

"You know me Big Guy. Five by Five."

That was the one and only conversation - if you could call it a conversation - Angel and Faith had before the familiar "Welcome to Sunnydale" flashed past them. Faith unconsciously flinched away from the window, her head snapping forward, her hair following so as to hide the expression on her face.

It was a very small movement but Angel caught it. He knew.

She was tired, and not just because they'd been driving through the night. Since embarking on their drive, she'd felt an enormous oppressive weight descend onto her shoulders. So many different things, so many people - Buffy, The Mayor, Angel, Willow, Xander, Tara, Alan Finch...

So many names.

The acid in Faith's stomach began to boil. The nothingness inside her was starting to fill.

"We're going to stay at a Motel tonight." Angel said. He chewed at his lower lip, then continued. "Buffy is going to meet us there."

Faith chuckled, a hollow, empty sound. "They sure don't waste time."

"They're- "

"Desperate, I know. I get it." Faith yawned. Then in a moment that seemed a complete splice of time, she turned to him. "It's just... seeing her again, y'know? Seeing them all again... like nothing's changed."

Angel nodded. A part of him was relieved that the Faith he knew was still with him.

"Things have changed. A lot has changed." He said. "There's a lot of hurt on all sides, and not a lot of forgiveness. I don't want you to expect things to be the way they were. They've asked you to come, but... they don't want you there. It's not going to be pleasant. But..."

Faith flashed him a sad smile. "Protect the innocent, right?" She said softly, "Fight the fight?"

A neon sign appeared out of the darkness.

"Something like that."

As they approached the motel, Angel slowed, flicking the car indicator on. As it was so late there was little sign of life, save for the lights illuminating each door and the cars parked in the lot.

And a lone figure leaning against the bonnet of one of them, a leather jacket pulled tightly across her body, breath steaming in the night.

Time resumed, as did Faith when she caught a flash of blonde hair in the car headlights. Had she been honest with herself, Faith would have realised she had felt the other slayer there before they'd even pulled in. But she had no desire to tap into the comfort of it.

"Gotcha." She said simply.

Angel pulled the car up in a spare parking space and cut the engine. The air in the car was filled with a sort of static - a little preserved time capsule of LA - ready to evaporate into the vastness of Sunnydale as soon as they opened the door. For a second, neither Faith nor Angel seemed confident in being the first to let it go.

In the next second, Faith shrugged. "Well, here goes nothing."

With her air of impervious confidence she pushed open the door of the car and stepped out, closing it - a little loudly - behind her. The night was cold - much colder than she had ever remembered in LA. Each breath turned to steam the instant it left her mouth. The familiar scent of Sunnydale assaulted her nose and she shivered, pulling her own burgundy leather coat around herself, thankful she was wearing jeans and her black boots. Tonight, in LA, she would have been wearing a tank top and shorts.

As Angel quietly left the car himself Faith took a few steps backward and forward, raising her arms up in a deliberate stretch, arcing her body left and right. She knew she was under the close eye of the figure by the car. She didn't even need to look to know.

Calculatedly casual.

She let Angel make the first move. Still ironing the kinks out of a body that had been idle for far longer than a slayer's body should, she watched out of the corner of her eye as he walked slowly towards the other figure.

Soft words were exchanged, then they slid their arms around each other in a gentle, caring embrace. Faith couldn't help but feel the corrosive feeling increase within her, and she balled her hands into fists, relishing the feeling of her nails digging into her own palm.

Somehow, in Faith's ideal world, she imagined herself presented to all the people she'd hurt, cured of all her ills like someone would present an old battered car fully restored, shiny, new hubcaps and with a new V8 engine to boot. They would marvel at her, smile at her, and welcome her in. It would be as easy as that. She wouldn't need to ask, they wouldn't need to say a thing.



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Now, on this cold December night, on the crest of yet another potential apocalypse, a couple of years later and with nothing to show but the word of a vampire, she was reuniting with one of them at a Motel. And not just anyone - Buffy. *Buffy*. Faith looked down at herself. She didn't own any new clothes, new makeup, new anything. Same face. Same person.

Not exactly the start she had in mind.

More words, and a key was handed to Angel, which he took, scanning the doors to find the correct one. He nodded, then his eyes fell on her.

She detached herself further.

Ah well.

Shit happens.

Slowly, deliberately Faith stepped off the gravel and onto the decking. Her boots clicking against the wood as she approached them suddenly seemed to be the only sound in the night. Angel nodded very carefully - perhaps in a silent vote of confidence for the dark slayer. Faith didn't know. Until she was barely 8 feet away he was positioned directly between them, but then he stood aside - revealing them finally to each other.

Faith slowed.

Buffy looked up.

It was a moment that could define itself - like this small exchange was the only reason that little pinch of time was created. Faith's skin began to crawl - itching with... something unknown. Buffy looked older. More... weathered, but still the same. Her hair was perhaps a little shorter. Tied back a little tighter. She wore a black leather jacket, a white shirt and jeans. The boots Faith remembered. The rest... well, Angel said things had changed.

Three years of heavy experience weighed on Buffy's features.

"Hey Buffy." Faith broke the silence. Always the one. Always the one to make the first move. She grinned. "Long time."

"Faith." Buffy's voice was strained. Tired. "Thanks... for coming."

Ooo.. Faith thought. *That woulda hurt.*

"No sweat, B." She replied lightly. Buffy flinched at the name, only just enough for Faith to notice. "Any chance to fight the good fight, y'know."

Faith caught Angel wince and turn away. Buffy opened her mouth to say something, then apparently thought better of it. She looked up at Angel.

"Let's get inside. We've got a lot to-" She glanced at Faith "-Talk about."

### Chapter 3

*Realized I can never win  
Sometimes I feel like I have failed  
Inside where do I begin  
My mind is laughing at me  
Tell me why am I to blame  
Aren't we suppose to be the same  
That's why I will never tame  
This thing that's burning in me*

*I am the one who chose my path  
I am the one who couldn't last  
I feel the life pulled from me  
I feel the anger changing me*

-- Korn

`Angel, I just... I'm stuck.'

`What do you need Buffy?'

`Can you come?' A pause. `I mean, I know it's a lot to ask but...'

`I'll come.'

`Thankyou.' A pause, then a sniff. `God... it's so hard here.'

`It'll be fine.'

Silence.

`I need to ask you something else-'

`What is it?'

`It's big... actually it's huge. Actually on the scale of favours I think it just about tops-`

`Buffy?'

`How hard would it be to break someone out of prison?'

A smile. `Not too hard, actually.'

`Wow...that...wasn't quite the answer I was expecting.'

`Faith's out of prison, Buffy. She was released six months ago.'

`Released?' Another pause, then an unsure `Faith was released?'

`Yes. She's living with me.'

`Wow.' Muffled voices as a hand went over the receiver. Then back. `Is that wise?'

`They thought so.'

`Do you think so, Angel?'

Silence, then `Yes, I do.'

`We're desperate, Angel. That's the only reason-`

`I know.'

`Xander's dead against the idea. Tara, Anya and Dawn don't really know her... and Willow and Giles... well I think they're just as desperate as me.'

`It's not going to be easy for her, either Buffy.'

A short, bitter laugh. `She'll love it that we've asked for her help.'

`I don't think she will.'

A sigh. `Would she come?'

`I...don't know.' Pause. `I'll try.'

`We're all staying in the house.'

`I don't think that's such a good idea.'

`We have no choice. This thing is beyond any of us. Angel I don't want her in my house, but that's the way it needs to be. No separation. And-`

`-You don't trust her.'

`Of course not. None of us do. Enemies closer, remember?'

`She's not your enemy any more, Buffy.'

`We'll see.'

`Not for the first night.'

Silence.

`I'll book a motel. I'll meet you there.'

`If I can get her to come.'

`If you can.'

`I'll talk to you later.'

Pause. `Thanks, Angel.'

click

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The three of them sat in a triangle in the motel room. Angel on the bed, Buffy in a chair by the door, and Faith in the second chair opposite buffy, arms flung over the side and legs crossed. Buffy had updated them as much as they needed, but the truth was they already knew most of it. She'd been talking with Angel almost nightly in the last week... working up the courage to ask the question, that brought them all here.

"They've almost translated the diary. There's just a few more paragraphs." Buffy said. "The problem is that there's... it's a language that doesn't seem to derive from any one particular one."

"That's odd." Angel pressed his palms together. Buffy nodded.

"Odd, and *very* hard to translate. Willow and Giles have been working almost every day since we found it."

Willow. Giles.

More names brought into the fray.

"How is Red? And the big G-Man?" Faith asked.

Angel looked at Faith in warning. Buffy linked her fingers together and clenched her jaw.

"You can ask them yourself when you see them, Faith." She said icily.

Faith pretended to ponder that comment. "I'll do that."

"Should you really have been standing alone out there?" Angel asked softly, changing the subject. It worked. Buffy's lips curled into a tiny smile. Ever the protector was Angel.

She shook her head.

"It's only ever `struck' around the city. At least.. that's what we think. Besides. I'd take the most effort for it."

"Has anyone actually *seen* this thing?" Faith asked, then added "You know... someone who's actually alive to tell us what it looks like?"

Buffy just didn't have the energy to bite at Faith's flippant tone. She simply shook her head.

"No. I've been chased by it a couple of times. I've tried to shoot at it, but nothing works. It's

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like..." Her brow furrowed at the recollection. "It's like a shadow. I don't know - it just *appears*. It doesn't seem to *move* anywhere."

"Well shit." Faith crossed her arms and leaned further back against the chair. "So what's the plan?"

"We're still... trying to figure out what it wants. We don't know what it is, and until we do we can't kill it."

Faith blinked. "Since when?" She leaned forward and regarded her carefully. "Since when did we ever have to know about something B? What happened to kill first, ask questions later?"

Buffy sighed and rubbed her forehead. It was clearly a question she had asked herself a hundred times over.

"I can't get to it. I can't seem to kill it." She said in resignation. "I've tried. It's just... never where I want it to be."

"Ah, but now I'm here." Faith wiggled her eyebrows. "And the game's changed."

Buffy smiled, a grim, pale smile, but one nonetheless. For only an instant, Faith felt a connection with the better times in her past, when she and Buffy worked together. When they were a team, and, strangely enough, when she felt most alive.

Then the smile was gone, and the moment over.

"Everyone has been staying at the house. There's a lot of room there." Buffy looked at Angel expectantly, and he nodded. Faith caught the interchange.

"I heard about your mom." She offered, perhaps still clinging to the vestiges of her semi-pleasant recollection. "I'm sorry-"

Buffy's eyes flashed, reaffirming the end of it.

"Let's not- " She interrupted, holding up a hand. "-get into details we can't get out of."

Faith knew it was her way of saying, `stay out of the past so we can get through the present'. Faith understood, although a part of her regretted that Buffy hadn't let her finish. She really did like Joyce. She was sorry she had died. Unfortunately she also understood there were some things she would never be able to give Buffy. Sympathy was one of them.

She wondered silently if an apology was another.

"Sure, whatever makes you happy."

The second look Faith received left no doubt in her mind that right now, there was nothing about this whole situation that was going to make Buffy happy.

"Stay here tonight, get some sleep. Meet me at the house tomorrow at 7pm and we'll sort out the rest."

"Whoa- " Faith's eyes darted between Buffy and Angel. "- you weren't serious about that whole, `staying together' thing, were you? I mean, what a way to put the fox with the hounds!"

"Or the fox with the chickens." Buffy said quietly. "Depends which way you look at it, Faith." Faith opened her mouth to say something more, but Buffy cut her off. "Whichever way, that's how it needs to be. This thing is bigger than any of us. We need everyone together in case..." She trailed off, but left no doubt in her meaning.

"We understand, Buffy. We'll be there." Angel said.

"The hell we do!" Faith stood up from her chair. "The hell we will!" She stared at Angel incredulously. "You said I was here to help. You said *nothing* about rooming with them!"

"That's how it needs to be Faith." Angel echoed Buffy's words, which annoyed Faith even more.

"Fuck that!" She spat. "They can all go play Brady Bunch as much as they like, but I'm not fucking buying. I mean, let's be serious here. Buffy-" She curled her lips into a snarl and stalked towards the older girl. Angel leaned forward, and Buffy recoiled back into her chair as Faith leaned close to her ear. "How would you feel sleeping next to a psychotic murdering bitch?"

Just the sound of Faith's voice so close to Buffy's ear sent a shiver down her spine, that she concealed. Faith had always been about the physical reactions. Always using herself as a weapon. Buffy had been prepared for this.

"We're way too busy with fighting a demon to worry about attacking you, Faith." Buffy said neutrally. "I only hope you feel the same." Faith pulled back, instantly frustrated she hadn't been able to illicit a reaction. Buffy shrugged. "If we defeat it however, then that's a different story." She then fixed Faith with a very fiery glare. "You'll be gone by then anyway, so it won't matter."

Faith stalked back and slumped into her chair, scowling at the wall. "Yeah, sure, whatever."

"I think it's best if we all get some sleep." Once again, it was Angel's voice that was the knife slicing through the tension. "Is there anything else we need to know Buffy?"

It was an invitation to leave, and a look of relief instantly passed across Buffy's face as she stood up.

"No, I think you know it all now. Hopefully, the rest of the diary will be translated by tomorrow night and we can start doing something more than sitting around."

"Hopefully." Faith repeated in a low mutter.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Buffy." Angel said, ignoring Faith's comment. Buffy nodded, opened the door and stepped out, closing it quietly behind her. Angel and Faith listened to her retreating footsteps, and continued to listen until they heard the whirring of a car engine

starting.

Instantly, Faith was up, stalking backwards and forwards between the door and the first bed.

"I need to get outta here." She said, running a hand through her hair. "I gotta go gut something."

"That's not a good idea, Faith." Angel said quietly. "Not right now."

"Fuck good ideas!" She snarled. "Fuck it all. This is all just *fucked up* Angel!" She shook her arms, trying to release some of the tension in them. "I shouldn't have come here."

"You're here now."

"Fucking hell! I hate this place!" She stalked over to the bed and slammed her fist into the mattress. Angel didn't flinch even though the punch landed barely an inch from his leg. "FUCK."

In a lightning fast move, Angel grabbed the sleeve of Faith's jacket and pulled her down to his eye level.

"I don't care how you do it Faith." He hissed. "If you need to beat me then beat me. But you need to get rid of this, and you can't do it out there."

Slowly, a sneer grew on Faith's face. She tilted her head back, her hair brushing against his shoulder, then reached up with her other hand and closed her fingers around his neck.

"You want that, big guy?" She whispered seductively in his ear. "You want me to beat you?" In a swift movement she was out of his grasp. She swung her leg over his, landing squarely in his lap, then lifted both legs up and locked them behind his back. "You want that?" She asked again. She pulled herself forward, grinding against him. "What about this?" Faith leaned in and took his earlobe in her teeth, biting down on it. "I bite too." She breathed.

Her hand, still on his neck, began to clamp down. Her other hand snaked up between his shoulder blades to the back of his head, her fingernails digging into his scalp.

Anyone else would have been a whimpering ball of putty right now.

But Angel... Angel made no sound.

He never did.

With a guttural growl of frustration Faith leapt off him and stalked around the bed, glaring at him the whole way. Angel didn't meet her eyes, just continued to stare ahead at the wall.

"This isn't you, Faith." He whispered. "You don't need to do this."

Whether or not she heard him, she showed no indication. Instead, she had flung her coat onto the second bed and was stretched out above the ground beside it, pumping out the first of what would be hundreds of push-ups for the night.

Angel looked down at his hands.

Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

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### Chapter 4

*I will hold the candle till it burns up my arm  
I'll keep takin' punches until their will grows tired  
I will stare the sun down until my eyes go blind  
Hey I won't change direction, and I won't change my mind  
How much difference does it make*

-- Pearl Jam

The mood in the Sunnydale household had been sombre all day, as if they were waiting for some kind of expected natural disaster to strike them all down.

Well, it was close.

Buffy was strained to the limit - as they all were - but Buffy moreso. Her meeting with Faith was surreal. Surreal and dangerous. The girl was like a giant pressure cooker with its own gravity, drawing everyone in around it before exploding. Buffy couldn't deny that she still felt it. She could feel Faith coming down the highway in that car. She could remember in vivid detail how she had walked towards them at the Motel. The clothes she was wearing, the expression on her face...

Most of all Buffy remembered the heat of Faith's breath against her ear as she'd tried to threaten her into keeping her out of the house. It was just like old times, all those games they played with each other. Pushing at each others' boundaries. Faith thought she always had the upper hand with Buffy, but Buffy knew the buttons to push too.

All this she had left out of her 'blow-by-blow' description of the meeting to the others. Wandering down memory lane where Faith was concerned may as well have been dancing the Waltz with Death itself. Despite it all, Buffy couldn't escape the fact that each time she looked at Faith, she felt the anger, the hate, the mistrust.

Most of all the betrayal.

"Will I have to hug her hello?" Anya asked, breaking into Buffy's thoughts. She looked genuinely concerned.

"None of us will be hugging her, Anya." Willow said sharply.

Buffy closed her eyes and turned her head to the ceiling. "Guys we agreed." Her tone was almost pleading. "We agreed we'd give this a shot."

"At trying to kill a demon!" Willow stared at her. "But there was *no* hugging mentioned."



"I can't believe I'm actually going to get to *meet* her." Dawn whispered to Tara.

"It's not something you should be excited about, Dawnie." Buffy intercepted the comment and regarded the two embarrassed glances from Tara and Dawn. "She's..." She struggled to find a word.

"Evil incarnate?" Xander offered.

"..not what I had in mind..."

"A cold-blooded killer?"

"...Dangerous." Buffy kept her eyes on Dawn. "She's dangerous and unpredictable. And untrustworthy."

"And going to be on your doorstep in, ooo- " Xander looked at his watch. "Five minutes! To stay for a while! How do we all feel about this? Anyone?" His gaze swept the room. "Anyone?"

"Let's just... stay on track shall we?" Giles addressed the group for the first time that night. "We've got a lot of work to do. We made the choice to ask her here, and now we need to deal with it."

Giles, not surprisingly, was one of the group more actively opposed to the idea of bringing Faith back to Sunnydale. However, maturity had taught him that once a decision has been made, it was easier to just make the best of it. Unlike Xander, who was still sulking and fussing like a spoiled child.

As if on cue, there was a knock on the door, and the room suddenly seemed to come alive with seething tension. Buffy left a lingering look on them all, one by one, then turned to get the door.

Her fingers closed on the handle and she shut her eyes briefly. The implication of what she was about to do bore down on her with the weight of a tonne of bricks. She was letting Faith back into her home. Faith, the one who betrayed and nearly killed them all.

The one who killed a man.

The one she nearly killed.

Buffy made a sound of disgust in her throat and twisted the doorhandle. The door opened to reveal the two individuals who were going to either make or break this fight. Who would either make or break the entire group.

"Hi Angel. Faith." Buffy said quietly, looking down and stepping away from the entrance. "Come in."

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As they stepped over the threshold, Faith made a show of looking around the house. Nothing

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much had changed. It was so like it used to be it was surreal. She felt herself connecting again, but this time with the side of her she had run from - the trouble maker. The alienator. The heinous bitch. This was the person she was when she was last here.

She shook her head to clear it, and turned to Buffy.

"Where do I dump this, B?" She asked, holding up her pack. "Who's room do I get?"

"Mine."

Come again?

"Ooh.. Big sister's room." Faith grinned, simultaneously concealing her shock. "Enemies closer, huh Buffy?"

"Partly." This time, Buffy turned to face her squarely, taking the pack from Faith's hand. She smiled ever-so-sweetly. "Partly cos there's no room for you anywhere else." She left little question as to what she meant by 'for you'. That was: 'nobody else can stand the thought of sharing a room with you'. Buffy headed for the stairs. "Go inside. They're waiting for you. I'll be back down in a second."

"I'll go first." Angel suggested. Faith gestured in front of her, and he stepped forward. "Try not to provoke them."

"Yes Dad." She murmured.

As it happened, Faith ended up a fair few steps behind Angel. Basically, the plan was she'd let him walk in, say hi, make his re- acquaintances and then she'd follow. She heard the sounds of a couple of enthusiastic welcomes, some introductions, then she stepped around the corner.

All conversation ceased.

"Hey guys!" She said, oozing with false enthusiasm. She expected no response, and received just that.

There it was. There *they* were. The gang, plus a few extras. Giles in the far left corner, next to Willow and her laptop, next to... someone who's name she didn't remember, then a younger girl with dark hair, then what Faith knew from conversations to be Xander's latest girlfriend, then Xander.

Names. Names, Faces, People.

Silently, Buffy swept past her into the room and stood behind the couch. Not once did she look in Faith's direction.

"Help yourself to pizza." She gestured to the four open boxes on the table, each in a different state of demolishment. "Drinks are in the kitchen. You both know your way around."

"Nah, I'm good thanks B. Just ate. So!" Faith regarded the group and clapped her hands together. Half of the room flinched. "Didya miss me?"

"Uh.. No, actually." Xander retorted hotly. "Not in the least."

"Aww.. what a shame." Under the scrutiny of eight pairs of eyes Faith swung the chair closest to the couch around and sat, straddling it. "I missed you all."

Next to Buffy, Angel shook his head. Buffy looked up at him in a question. He seemed... sad, somehow.

"It's just been a long time... since I've seen her like this." He said at a volume only Buffy could hear.

Buffy nodded.

"You can't have him!" Anya blurted out. "Just in case you were planning on it, I'm telling you now. He's a taken man."

For a second, Faith looked genuinely confused. Then, realisation slowly dawned on her face and she tilted her head back in a loud laugh. "Who? Xan Man? You got nothing to worry about, girlfriend. I'm not after him."

"Yeah well you can't kill him either. He has... commitments!"

"Got no plans to kill him either." She paused, and tilted her head. "Unless he gives me reason to."

The room sparked, but everyone knew better to push it. Even Xander left the comment hanging, but not forgotten.

Faith gestured at Anya and looked up at Buffy. "Gonna introduce me, B?"

Buffy let out a strained breath. "This is Anya." She gestured directly opposite them on the other side of the room. "That's Tara, who you would have met. And... that's Dawn, my sister."

"Hey, kiddo!" Faith winked at Dawn and grinned. "Nice to meet ya."

"You too-" Under a sharp stare from Buffy, Dawn said nothing more. Faith saw the look and shook her head.

"Relax B, I won't bite." She said, winking again. "Red, G-man, how are ya?"

"Oh, you know.." Willow answered. "..just peachy. People dying, evil demons, living with murderers..."

Giles cleared his throat and cut across her. "We're well, thankyou Faith. A little tired perhaps."

Buffy expelled another exasperated sigh and walked around to the front of the couch, sitting down on it carefully. She was careful to position herself within reach of Faith's chair. It was a

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move noticed by her counterpart, who shifted in her seat, folded her arms on the back of the chair and rested her chin on her arms. Her legs began bobbing quickly up and down on her toes - the only visible indication she was uncomfortable.

Buffy knew she was uncomfortable far beyond what she was revealing. She could feel it.

She turned away from Faith so her fidgeting was out of her line of sight. "What else have we got?"

"O-kay." Willow too shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Well, we finally got the translation done... uh... Dawn was a great help with that." She smiled at the younger Summers sister, who ducked her head shyly. "Uh- in the translation there was reference... in the diary that is... There's a conversation in there that this...whoever it is.... Overheard between his neighbour and his neighbour's wife."

"Saying `thou shalt not covet'?" Faith interrupted, snickering. "Or is it `idolise'?" She made a great show of trying to remember, then shrugged. "I sucked at RS"

The room felt deathly silent again. Xander was glaring at the carpet. Giles took his glasses off and slowly began to polish them, Dawn fidgeted with one of the buttons on her shirt, Willow stared at her screen, Tara stared at Willow, and Anya... well, Anya just stared directly at Faith.

Angel, as usual, belied no emotion on his face. Buffy's expression was equally blank.

"My Bad." Faith muttered.

Willow's eyes darted up and glared at Faith.

"Go on, Will." Buffy interjected. "What was the conversation.?"

"Oh.. right. Uh-" Willow looked back at her screen. "Well, the conversation seems to be about the neighbour having `demonic dreams'. Then it says... the next day he um.. impaled himself on his son's sword."

"Sounds like the whole town was on crack." muttered Faith.

"Well you *would* be the expert on that." Said Xander lightly,

Faith clenched her jaw, feeling the beginnings of a fire rising in her stomach. She pushed it away.

"A-and then there's the mention of the main sales merchant choking himself to death with his bedsheets. Then... there's nothing." Willow pushed on. "So, now I'm looking for something... here-" She nodded at the computer. "- Around the same time, that might help... you know... elaborate."

"Any luck?" Buffy asked gently.

"The only thing we've been able to come up with is a couple of references, *around* the same

time, to a great shadow passing over the sun, and-

Giles continued. "-A burning village, but it says nothing about how it started."

"The passage is `A village burned from the ground.'" Tara added helpfully.

Faith finally released Xander from her stare, and blinked. "Okay, so it says the whole village was destroyed. I get it."

"No." Giles shook his head. "It says burned *from* the ground. Not *to* the ground."

"Oh."

Buffy glanced across at Faith. If she didn't know better, she would have thought she caught a hint of embarrassment in her voice. But Faith's eyes snapped across to her, and she quickly turned away.

"Willow.." Giles looked up. "Try to find some reference to `demonic dreams'. Maybe it'll help us try and find out *what* it is, at least."

Nodding, Willow punched a few letters into the keyboard and waited. The only sound that could be heard was the faint whirring click of the computer's hard-drive.

"Okay." Willow announced. "Uh... no, there are too many references. Including a link to `Max's Mushroom Hothouse'."

Faith snorted again. "Told you."

"Try-" Giles interrupted before anyone else could bite. At the moment, keeping the conversation flowing in the right direction was like trying to tread through molasses. "-Try `suicide' and `resulting in' as a subsearch."

"Okay." Willow nodded. More keys were punched, then she waited. The computer whirred, stopped, and Willow's eyes widened. "Wow."

"Got something?" Dawn asked.

"Uh... not as such..." Willow glanced up Faith unconsciously. "...I never knew they could *do* that to you."

Faith blinked. "What, drugs?" Willow nodded, still shocked. Faith shrugged. "Been there, done that." Then, at the realisation at her own admission, attempted to dilute the implications by craning her neck as if to see what Willow was looking at. "Are there pictures?" Willow nodded dumbly. "Gory? Lots of vomit?" Another nod.

"Not wanting to interrupt this fascinating cultural revelation," Xander said acridly, "-but can we please stick to what we're looking for?"

Faith shrugged again and relaxed back into her position. Willow's look of shock was replaced for a brief instant by shame, then back to the good old Willow determined frown.

It could have been five, maybe ten minutes without a word from anyone, and Faith was getting impatient. She never did the sitting thing very well. The tension was getting to her and her instinct to run was starting to permeate every corner of her thinking.

Fresh air, that's what she needed. Fresh air and a good slay.

"Hey uh- " She slapped her palms against the tops of her knees. "I hate to throw a spanner in the works of this great intellectual hive of activity we've got going here, but I'm bored."

"Gee Faith, I'm sorry- " Xander snapped. "Are we eating into your social life?" He ignored the pleading glance from Buffy and stood up, gesturing towards the door. "Because... you know, if you've got somewhere else to be..."

"Oh would you *relax* Xander?" Faith said, shaking her head.

"Well hey, if *you* have any better idea, please, go ahead!" He snarled. "I'm sure the eighteen people who've died would be really interested to hear it!"

The spark was back, but this time it began with the flash in Faith's eyes.

"Faith.." Angel whispered warningly from behind her.

Don't blow it. Was his unfinished comment.

Slowly, Faith forced herself to smile, then shrugged and looked to Giles. "No hard feelings G-man, but I'm just not a thinking kinda gal. I like doing the do. So... whaddya say you guys continue with your little scout meeting, and I'll go do a bit of recon."

Giles pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Faith," He said "I'm not convinced that that is quite the best thing to do. We haven't had much luck with fighting this demon...I just don't think it's wise to go out there without knowing what we're up against."

Go Giles Buffy thought, visibly relaxing. He'd just thrown an enormous fire blanket over the situation with his gentle honesty. She even felt Faith settle a fraction.

"G-man, I hear ya, but... you know me. Fight, then talk."

She mentioned a fraction, right?

"Yeah.." Xander scoffed. "Bet Finch knows too."

And there it was.

Buffy almost heard the `pop' as the pressure cooker boiled over. Faith shot out of her seat, eyes blazing. In fact, if looks could kill, Xander would have been dead a thousand times over. Giles, Angel, Buffy all glared at him, and he shrank back slightly from the attention, surprised.

"What?" He asked, "I've had about enough of this! Am I the only one here who actually

*remembers* what Scary Spice here's capable of?"

Perhaps for the first time in years, Buffy felt for Faith. Only slightly, and only because she was here to help them, but at least it was something. She felt the sheer enormity of the silent rage beside her, and reached across to rest her fingers against Faith's leg. It was meant to be a reassurance - an invitation to stay - but had Buffy given it more than a second's thought she would have realised that the message would have been misinterpreted. And it was. In the instant before Faith flinched away, Buffy felt her muscles quivering, ready to let fly.

"Who's Scary Spice?" Anya asked out loud.

"Anya, now's not a good time." Snapped Giles.

"I'm outta here."

"Faith-" Giles wouldn't have much luck this time.

"No." She interrupted. "You guys asked me to come here, I'm here. None of us have to like it, but that's the way it Goddamn is." She moved away from the couch. If she didn't get out in the next five seconds, she'd either punch Xander, or a wall.

The wall would win out. At least it'd put up resistance.

"You guys sit here and..." She gestured non-specifically around the room "-figure it out. I'm going to go out there and see for myself." With that, she stalked out of the room. There was the distinct sound of a slamming door, and Buffy lowered her head.

"Let her go." She murmured, then looked behind her at Angel, who nodded very slightly.

"I'll go."

With the soft `click' of the front door closing - more quietly - for the second time, Buffy turned her glare back onto Xander.

"You just couldn't resist, could you!?"

"Hey!" He said again, holding up his hands. "It wasn't *my* idea to ask her back here. In fact, I do believe I was the only one talking *sense* when I said we shouldn't!"

Willow, from her position behind her laptop, muttered "I'm beginning to wish I'd agreed with Xander."

Buffy looked at her, astonished. "We need her *help* Will. You said it yourself. Eighteen people are dead now. We can use all the help we can get!"

"I said we needed *help*, Buffy. I don't remember specifically using the `F' word."

"I don't like her.." Anya blurted again out of nowhere. "She's got a bad temper "

Xander shuddered. "You have *no* idea An."

"She could have cut you down in a *second* when you opened your big mouth back then, Xander." Buffy snapped. "You know that as well as I do."

"Self preservation instinct. She knew you would have stopped her."

Buffy raised one eyebrow in a pointed stare that shouted 'would I?' at the top of her expressional lungs. Xander's eyes darkened with his scowl. Buffy matched it.

"You were out of line, Xander. Look-" She looked around at the rest of them. "Faith's right. None of us have to like this, but we *do* need the help. Do I trust her? Of course not, despite what Angel believes. Do I think she's a demon-fighting super-force we could do with on our side?" She took a deep breath and calmed her voice. "Yes, I do."

"And what if she goes all demon-worshipping again?" Willow asked. "You know, turn into a human-fighting super-force?"

"I thought about that, Will. But this thing clearly wants to kill, and doesn't need any help to do it. I don't think it's looking for an ally."

Willow glanced across at Tara, who had been very quiet the whole exchange. She wore a frown on her face, and her brow was furrowed. Willow put a hand on her arm. "Tara? You okay sweetie?"

She blinked, and looked at Willow. "She's concealing a lot." She said. "She's very guarded." Pausing, she added. "I think she's scared."

"She's a monster, Tara." Willow said softly, turning to her computer screen. "Monsters don't feel fear."

"Yes, but, right now," Giles interjected, "She's not the one we're trying to fight."

"Anyone thirsty? I want a Sprite."

Buffy didn't look up. "In the door of the fridge Anya. Glasses in the dishwasher."

"Great!"

"How are you going, Willow?" Giles asked.

Willow shook her head, dropping her shoulders. "It's so.. wrong having her here- Oh!" She said, and straightened when she realised the true purpose of the question. "Oh.. how am I going on *this*? With, the computer? Uh- No... more references to... y'know." She said, then stopped. "Oh. Hang on."

"Willow?"

"Uh... gimme a second... Yep this looks like something..." She leaned towards the screen. "Ancient mythology... a demon feeds off the souls of men and... uh-...yes. It says 'driven mad by nightmares fed to them by evil'"



"They're driven mad by nightmares?" Buffy asked, sceptically.

Willow nodded. "Suicidal, apparently."

"Must be some nightmares."

"Of course!" Anya had returned with a tall glass of Sprite. She took a sip and sat back down next to Xander. "So terrifying you'd rather not sleep, so you don't, and you hallucinate. But you start to hallucinate your dreams, and you go mad. Vicious cycle, really. And even if you do sleep, it gets to a point where if you blink for too long you see it, which also sends you mad."

"And suicidal?" Buffy looked to Willow, who shrugged.

"You have no idea how ugly Demons can make your life." Anya said.

The others ignored the tinge of what appeared to be pride in Anya's comment. Xander shuddered.

"So why is it important the person commits suicide?" Tara asked.

"Something about dying in fear and desperation?" Willow pointed at her screen. " Somehow that's important."

Anya shrugged. "When the soul is most vulnerable. When the body doesn't want it any more. Basic demonology. Easiest to disconnect a person's soul when they're not attached to it."

Xander looked at Anya with a raised eyebrow. "Uh, An? Why wouldn't a body want it's soul? I don't know about you, but I'm quite partial to mine. I'm sure Angel prefers his where it is.."

"Yes but you're a wonderful specimen of a *stable, simple* human being, Xander."

"Simple?" He raised a finger at her, then stopped, lowering it just as quickly. "- you know, I think I'm just going to choose to take that as a compliment."

Anya ignored him. "I've seen so many people barely hanging onto their souls. Of course, most of that has been caused by the men in their lives... cheating, stealing, lying, making them feel fat... forgetting to tell them every day that they're the most beautiful thing they've ever seen." Her eyes slid across to Xander and held there, pointedly.

"The demon, Anya?" He reminded her weakly.

Tara looked across at Anya. "So, these people, when they kill themselves...?"

"Wanting to destroy your own life is as disconnected as you can possibly get, without actually being dead," Anya said. "Which would be beside the point. The point is to take over just *before* the person dies..." She raised the glass to her lips and took another sip.

Willow piped up. "There's reference here to a demon called... is it `Ammitus'?"

Anya choked, spitting some of mouthful out and inhaling the rest, sending her into a long coughing fit. Xander was immediately there at the ready, rubbing her back and watching her with concern. The rest of the group stared as Anya coughed a few more times, blinked hard, then wiped her mouth. "Oh yeah.." She said. "That'd do it."

Buffy leaned forward. "You've heard of it?"

"Hah!" Anya brandished her sprite in the air. Buffy tried not to imagine the inevitable cleaning of sticky soft drink spills on the carpet, instead making peace with her date with the sponge so she could focus on Anya's story. "Everyone's heard of it. In fact I'd say almost everyone on *both* sides of the Hellmouth have either tried to kill it, capture it or ally with it. For the most part now we just try to ignore it. It's a nasty piece of work, even in demon terms."

"Great, so... you've heard of it." Buffy continued. "How exactly are you supposed to kill it?"

Anya shrugged. "Beats me. I've never tried. I know people who have, and they've all been... well... I won't say killed because they were already dead. But.. how does destroyed sit with everyone?"

"So we're back at square one." Xander blew out a loud breath of frustration and gestured at the diary. "Except now we have a super- scary demon that can't be killed. Oh, no really that's fine. We've plenty of time to come up with something. I mean let's think about this. We have another..." He counted on his fingers. "29 people before we start getting worried, huh?"

"Oh it'll be *much* less than that."

"What?" Asked several people at once. It was an interesting sound.

But Anya just looked at them dumbfounded. "What? Tortured souls back then were nothing compared to the talent these days."

Xander pinched the bridge of his nose. "An... if you could *possibly* find a more tactful way of expressing yourself..."

Truly perplexed, she looked around at the others. The grim expressions spoke agreement, although she still couldn't understand why. "Oh come on! All this evil, human nature and the like. Back then -" She waved the diary in the air. "- The most tortured a soul would have been would be killing a neighbour's goat. Or wanting to have sex with their brother's wife."

"Anya-"

"Not like *now*. I mean, I'd know - I was *in* the torturing business. As time went on I had to become more creative, because the things I used back then wouldn't mean anything to a man these days. Back *then*, having a man wake up in a bed of cockroaches would have done the trick."

"Anya-"

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"Now I'd have to actually *turn* the guy into a cockroach. And that's *hard* work."

"Anya!"

"But *anyway*..." She continued, "My *point* is, if it's Ammitus, it'd find much more on its plate in this time. 48 people? It was probably starving. Now, self-loathing is practically instinct with humanity! with all the fodder you humans have? It'd be much less than 48."

"How much less, Anya?" Buffy asked.

"Oh, I'd say half. Maybe less. Most likely less if it finds some good ones."

"Finds some good ones? You mean it'll hunt down the most..." Willow made a face.  
"Appetising soul?"

Anya blinked, and stared at Willow. "Of course. Don't you always go for the biggest slice of pizza?"

Willow blushed furiously, and lowered her head. "I do thinking a lot. Thinking makes me hungry. Lots of chemical reactions in the brain - it's proven that you need to eat when you're thinking. Pizza's good for... brain... pow-..." She stared at Buffy, who had turned white as a sheet. "Buffy?"

"It hunts for the most tortured soul." She whispered. Her eyes darted to Giles, who suddenly straightened.

"Oh dear God." He breathed.

Buffy stood up. "I've just handed him the super-supreme."

Now it was the group's turn to stare at them. Xander leaned forward in his chair, as if that act alone would make him understand. "I'm missing something..."

"Angel... I brought it Angel."

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## Chapter 5

*Just like the curse, just like the stray  
You feed it once, and now it stays  
So tear me open, but beware  
There's things inside without a care  
And the dirt still stains me  
So wash me, until I'm clean*

-- *Metallica*

In a terrific insult by the powers that be, there was absolutely nothing for Faith to kill, maim, or otherwise cause harm to. Not even a rat. And to top it off the Bronze was closed for renovations. Not that anyone was out at night these days. Although there had been no official

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word of `demons preying on the living', the town had responded as such and seemingly initiated a self-imposed curfew.

There was nothing. No slaying, no dancing, no sex, nothing.

So that's how she ended up where she was, pacing back and forth between crypts, nursing her bloody right hand.

She did say a wall would put up a better fight than Xander.

Angel found her, not surprisingly, within an hour of her storming out of the house. Wordlessly he approached her and reached out, and Faith held her right hand towards him so he could look at it.

"Have you broken anything?" He asked softly.

"Nah."

He let her hand go, and stood, just looking at her for a few seconds.

Faith caught the question before it had even left his mouth. "Having the time of my life, buddy." She said, lightly punching his arm with her other hand. "Couldn't be happier back in Sunny-Dale."

"You *could* cut them some slack, you know." He said. "Be less... antagonistic."

She shrugged. "Why, when I can give them exactly what they're expecting? Easier on everyone."

"It's not you."

"How do you know?" She countered, eyes flashing just slightly. Angel shook his head.

"Don't play that game with me Faith. I know you better than that."

"The second this thing is over, I'm leaving." She said, crossing her arms.

Angel nodded. "I think that's the idea." He glanced back at the Graveyard behind them. "It's not safe here. We need to get back."

"Hah.. and sleep in Buffy's room?" Faith snorted. "I'd rather take my chances out-"

Any further comment was silenced when an arc of light cut through the air above them and exploded into the side of one of the crypt, sending rocks pelting away in the opposite direction.

"SHIT" Faith hissed.

Faith and Angel both ducked, then leapt away from the path as a shadow swept past them, disappearing beyond the border of the graveyard itself.

"What was that!?"

Angel stared into the darkness, wiping some dust from the explosion off his cheek. "I don't know."

Gritting her teeth, Faith started walking in the direction it had disappeared to. "I'm going after it."

"Faith.."

Faith spun. "Come on, Angel, think about it! No-one's seen this fucker so hasn't got a clue what to do about it! Let's at least get a look." She turned back around. "Just a look. Promise."

Begrudgingly, Angel agreed. Perhaps he felt, at the very least, that if something went wrong he'd be there to help. Faith had always been better kept in sight than out of it, after all.

"Just a look. Then we're gone."

They'd barely taken ten steps along the path when a crackle swept across the space above their heads.

Faith jumped to the side, gritting her teeth as the force of her body's impact with the ground drove the air from her lungs. She gathered herself up and lunged forward, her eyes searching out the source of the attack, but all she could see were the shadows created by the Graveyard lights.

"Where the hell are you?" She whispered.

Out of nowhere, a second one came, this time slicing past her right shoulder. It missed her, but she was caught off-balance in an attempt to dodge it and ended up face-down on the concrete.

"Bastard!" She cursed. "What the hell *is* this thing!?" She pushed herself onto her hands and knees and ducking behind another gravestone. "It's like it's not even *here*!"

"I don't know!" Angel yelled back. A purple flash exploded overhead and Faith heard the grunt as he too went flying, rolling at the end and jumping back to his feet. "It hasn't materialised yet!"

"Materialised!?"

Another crackle. "We can't touch it!" Angel cursed. "This isn't doing any good Faith! Let's get back to the house."

"Not a chance!"

"Faith? What are you doing....?" The last comment was question that turned mid-sentence into a warning as Angel watched Faith sprinting from behind her hiding spot, through the opening in the hedge into the larger, more open section of the graveyard. "Faith!"

"Getting my pound of shadow!"

"FAITH!"

"Angel!" The cry came from behind him and he spun around, seeing Buffy sprinting towards him. Her eyes were darting from left to right as she ran, as if looking for a trap.

"Buffy? What-"

She didn't slow when she reached him - instead grabbing his arm and yanking him back into the trees. Still with her hand on his arm she bent over, drawing in deep gulps of air.

"Angel.." She puffed. Another crackle sounded somewhere to the left of them - almost like the air itself was being crumpled like a noisy ball of paper. Buffy let go of Angel, ducked and covered her head, immediately turning towards the sound. "It's out there?"

"Faith's trying to kill it." Buffy detected a slight resigned tone to the latter part of his comment. A part of her was intensely relieved however. Faith was very good at looking after herself, and as long as it didn't have Angel, then the world could breathe for a few more days. Suddenly she felt Angel's hand clamp down on *her* arm, and when she looked up she was greeted with an intense stare. "What are you doing out here?"

"We know what it is. It's after you. You have to get out of here. Get back to the house now - I'll get Faith."

"What?" Angel hissed, but grip on her arm didn't lessen. Somewhere in the back of Buffy's mind she remembered to a time when they knew each other's physical limits completely. Angel was using that knowledge now - anyone else would be in pain with the strength he was holding on. "Why me?"

"I don't have time to explain.. you... you need to get out!" She pushed at his chest with her other arm. Another explosion, and this time it was accompanied by the sound of stone shattering to their right and Faith's taunting voice. Buffy shook her head. "I'm sorry... I brought you here. I asked you to come down here..."

"What the hell are you talking about Buffy!?"

"It feeds on souls, Angel!" She cried, looking up at him desperately as she tried to wrench herself free. "The tortured ones. It feeds on them - gives people nightmares until they die terrified and alone. That's why it's been *hunting* you! If it gets yours then it'll have enough to come to life and destroy everything!" She glanced to the graveyard where she knew Faith would be fighting to within an inch of her life... probably more. "Let me go and get her. I'll meet you back at the house. You have to go."

Angel's eyes widened. "No..." He murmured. "NO!" He lunged forward, out of the shadows. Shocked, Buffy jumped after him, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him back.

"Angel!"

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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But Angel shook himself free and continued running, his long dark coat billowing out behind him, truly casting a fearful picture. He jumped over the low hedge surrounding the Graveyard's path and crashed head-long through the second, higher one. The thick brush gave way under the force of his weight hurtling towards it, and left a man-sized hole that Buffy easily leaped through.

"Where are you *going!*?" She yelled at him, now fearful they'd be found. "You don't understand, it-"

"No *you* don't understand!!" Angel stopped, turned on Buffy and she gasped at his Vampiric features. They only came out when he was angry, or desperate. *I* don't have what it wants!"

Buffy shook her head. "What do you mean?"

Angel turned around and kept running, Buffy following close behind. "I have no burden in my past!" She heard him shout. "I came to terms with it! It won't get what it wants from me!"

Buffy stopped. "Then why-" Her lips parted. "No." She breathed. "Oh no."

---

Faith pressed herself up against another gravestone, and peered over the top. The demon was nowhere in sight. She took a calming breath and checked the upper part of her left arm - a victim of the last exploding gravestone. She'd been able to pull most of the stone fragments out of the muscle, but doubted she got them all. She could feel the sticky warmth of her own blood travelling down, dripping off her fingers.

Now she was wishing she hadn't attacked the damn door.

"Fuck this." She spat. "I don't have time for this."

Gingerly, she stripped off her jacket and pulled her t-shirt over her head, leaving the tank-top underneath. Part of her wondered where Angel had gone, but it wasn't a big enough part to give her any concern. She was used to being alone, and she was definitely used to fighting alone. Bracing it under her feet and using her good arm, Faith ripped the material up the middle, then ripped it across, creating a very crude tourniquet. She positioned it just above her elbow, tied it loosely, then grabbing one end between her teeth and the other in her other hand, she pulled. Hard.

"Shiiiiiiitt..." She hissed, her mouth full of cotton. Pushing the pain out of her mind she arranged another knot and pulled again.

The rest of the gang wanted to sit in their little Brady Bunch house and discuss the thing? Let them! It was obvious she had little to contribute to their pow-wow session. Talking bored her. Fighting was what she did - what she was here to do.

Bracing herself against the stone at her back Faith slipped her arms back into her jacket, stood up, and began walking casually, brazenly between the graves, *daring* the demon to come and find her.

And find her it did.

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At first, it seemed like the shadows of the trees were simply extending, as if the moon had just rapidly descended behind them. A quick glance upwards and Faith could tell this wasn't the case. The shadow flowed, pulsed, found form and then lost it again until suddenly it detached from the trees and moved forward - a disjointed black hole. Faith stared directly in front of her and bared her teeth in a menacing smile.

"There you are, you bastard."

When it finally gained shape, it was like light itself had no bearing with this creature, like it was simply bending the stuff around itself. Faith didn't pay much attention in school, but what little she remembered of science was that *that* was impossible.

"Come on you fucker." She breathed, then raised her voice. "Fight me, damnit!!!"

The demon stopped.

Unfazed, Faith cocked her head, sneering. "What, not used to someone fighting back?"

The shadow towering above her shifted, and Faith gasped as a face appeared. She took a step back.

It was as if she had looked into fear itself. At any one time the demon held the expression of a thousand people, all caught in the throes of some horrifying torture. Pain, desolation and terror distorted their features in a way that sent chills all the way up and down her spine. She heard a rumble, barely detectable at first but as it became louder she recognised it as a very low laugh.

Then it spoke, and the voice chilled Faith to the core.

"Ssslllayer.."

The demon's voice, like it's face, wasn't distinct. Instead, it was a jumble of hundreds of different tortured screams at different pitches. This demon didn't have vocal chords. It had chords of a different kind. It paused, as if regarding his prize. Faith swore, and ducked to the left, ready to run.

At least, that was her *plan*. But where she thought she'd moved, she clearly hadn't. The demon still loomed overhead.

"Yesss.."

Somewhere in the distance, Faith could hear someone calling her name.

Angel, hurry the fuck up

It distracted her for barely a moment, but the second her attention returned she watched in horror as streams of purple flame darted out towards her. She tried to shout, to run, to *fight*, but nothing happened. Nothing moved.



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And for an instant, she saw her mother's face.

Suddenly it surrounded her, and Faith screamed as a white hot fire pulsed through her body. Tiny tendrils of light bit into her, and unable to move, unable to breathe she felt herself lift off the ground. The crackling was so loud and the pain so great she wondered momentarily if it were her atoms tumbling apart, piece by piece.

Let me die She begged nothing in particular, *Please just let me die*

The pain inverted, and she was no longer burning, but terrifyingly cold. The purple changed to white, and Faith felt as if her very life-force was leaving her.

"Ohh.. God!!" She yelled, but her mouth barely made a sound.

And then the intensity dropped, and she felt her feet touch the ground. The vortex surrounding her had lessened, but she still couldn't move. Her whole body shook , and as the cold faded with the light, a voice resonated deep within her - deeper than her mind, her soul... deeper than time itself.

*You are mine.*

It disconnected, and, like a rag-doll Faith crumpled to the ground.

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## Chapter 6

*Crawling in my skin*

*These wounds they will not heal*

*Fear is how I fall*

*Confusing what is real*

-- *Linkin Park*

Reality can be a cold, hard thing to handle. Before the moment of truth actually sets in there can be numerous attempts at rationalisation, at disbelief... the point where all those 'get out of jail free' cards that a person thinks they hold get thrown into the fray, hoping, pleading with the Ether that one of them will work.

But when the truth finally does reveal itself, and that sting rises up through the stomach, tingling down the arms and up to the neck, somehow it takes a person back to youth. Suddenly they feel like that time when they were five, and they were caught writing on the walls in permanent ink.

For those first few seconds, it's all about the walls, the ink, and the scolding received for doing it. Funny, how something like that can invoke the same feelings as an imminent apocalypse.

Buffy's lungs were burning by the time they reached the other side of the graveyard. The flash had illuminated the sky - they had both seen it - and they knew. They knew it was over.

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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"Faith!" Buffy's eyes snapped up from the path as she heard Angel call her name. Just beyond him lay a dark figure. In two strides he had closed the distance and he crouched down next to her, hands reaching out. "Faith..."

Buffy was only a few feet behind, and she ran around Angel to the other side of Faith's body. Faith lay on her back, her legs bent, right arm outstretched and left hand resting on her abdomen. Her eyes were tightly closed, her fast breaths puffing short bursts of steam into the air.

She was shaking.

"Faith.." Angel repeated, placing his hand against her forehead, then left cheek. "Come on." Buffy knelt down and his eyes rose to meet her. "She's freezing."

Angel's features had returned to normal, but his eyes still held the desperation she had first seen in them when he'd realised what was happening. Desperation and... fear. Angel was afraid for her. Buffy, through a multitude of experience, had learned to trust Angel implicitly. The combination wrought havoc on Buffy's conscience. Angel was afraid for Faith. Concerned for Faith.

A part of her felt ashamed.

She looked up and down Faith's body, suddenly unsure of herself. If it were any of the others *she* would be holding their hand, trying to rouse them. *She* would be the one using her physical contact to pull them out. Somehow, it... this... just... didn't seem right. She felt the part of her holding her back. The part that screamed at her to look at *who* this was, and remember... remember all the things they'd done to them.

She felt the other part of her hating her for it.

"She's bleeding." She said, when she saw the blood streams down the back of Faith's left hand. Angel reached over and lifted the lapel of her jacket, wincing at the smell that only he could detect.

Blood. Lots of it.

"We've got to get her to the hospital." He leaned over Faith's body and slid his arms underneath her. He lifted her carefully - and both he and Buffy started when a weak groan left her lips as the motion caused her injured arm fall to away from her stomach and dangle awkwardly outwards.

"It's okay Faith, you're safe." He said softly. "Just relax."

Apparently, there are a couple of rules when handling an injured slayer. Number one, if you're too close to them when they regain consciousness, and they're likely to be disoriented and *not* in love with you, you're likely to come out with a few bruises. Number two; if you're going to carry them, make sure they know about it, or are unconscious with absolutely no likelihood of coming to mid- transport.

Rule number three... if that slayer is Faith, you're better off waking her up and letting her

walk herself, or you're likely to lose a limb.

Angel had yet to encounter any of the Rules.

Faith's eyes shot open, and her breathing quickened in pace. Angel felt her body tense completely in his arms.

Buffy...well Buffy was learning Rule number three right now. And she was learning fast.

"Angel let her go." She said quickly, "Put her down."

"She needs a doctor Buffy." He simply said.

Buffy shook her head. "Angel, trust me. You need to put her down now."

Before he could act on the second warning Faith growled, kicked up, locked her legs around Angel's neck, and sent a cracking punch towards his jaw. Angel doubled over in pain, hands darting to his face. It was the release Faith needed and in a final move she flipped off him, landing awkwardly on her feet and backing up with her left arm hanging loosely beside her, her right fist raised, glazed eyes glaring at them both.

"Faith!" Buffy cried out, holding up her hands. Faith stood, blinking the disorientation away and shaking her head every few seconds. The action was causing her hair to flick haphazardly across her face, which made her look... wild. Feral. Buffy felt a pang of... guilt? Sympathy?

There was something about that picture, with Faith standing injured and shivering in the shadows that etched itself into Buffy's mind. And it would stay there, regardless of how long it took her to accept it.

Buffy shook her own head and inhaled deeply to clear the image from her immediate thoughts. She knew that if this wasn't handled properly Faith would fall back on her instincts and simply run. That would prove difficult for them all.

"Faith, stop." She said more softly. "It's just me. Me and Angel."

Slowly, the ache in her arm focused some clarity into Faith's consciousness. The threatening figures before her began to take more shape.

`Just me.'

`Me and Angel.'

"What..?" Faith finally croaked. She tried to draw into recollection, to bring out something, *anything* that could place her whereabouts, and why she was there. All she could find was darkness. Faith blinked harder, unclenched her right fist and lifted her hand, rubbing furiously at her forehead.

This wasn't the Faith she knew. Buffy's frown deepened, and she closed her eyes briefly. This wasn't Faith the murderer, the heartless, fearless loveless weapon. That Faith would have been long gone, rather than risk appearing unsure. Attacking Angel, yeah, well, Buffy could live

with that. Instincts were heightened in Slayers - even the animal ones. Faith had used a viciousness that only came from a wounded animal believing it was trapped. At the most basic level, Buffy understood. And it was that understanding that drove her now.

"Faith, I'm going to come closer." Buffy closed the distance between them even further, so there was only a foot between them, and Buffy could whisper her next words without having to worry that Faith wouldn't hear it. "But I'm not going to hurt you."

Faith didn't acknowledge Buffy, nor did she retreat any further. She just continued rubbing at her forehead, stopping when she touched a raised mark on the left side of her face. With a frown, she pulled her fingers away to look at them, then pressed down on it again, repeating the process as if looking for blood.

It was just above her left cheekbone. Buffy didn't need to see it to know what it was, and the knowledge made her sick to her stomach.

Faith had been marked.

In that instant, Buffy chose to forget about the betrayal, the lies, the hurt. She silenced the voice screaming at her to come to her senses, to *realise* who this was... to *realise* what she'd done. She chose to forget it all. Just for a moment. Just for the chance to be the one to bring back the person, the *one* person who truly understood her.

"Faith it's okay." She murmured, and reached out.

It was a motion that would spell the end of them. Or perhaps the beginning - who knew. There was such power in hands. Such a bond could be created by the simple gesture of taking another person's hand. Buffy could have grabbed Faith's sleeve, or her forearm, but she didn't. She would remember that. She would also remember the iciness of Faith's skin as their fingertips finally connected, and connected for the first time in years.

But most of all she would remember the connection itself. The link re-established between them in such a simple gesture, for such a simple purpose. The way Faith looked at her as Buffy's fingers curled around the side of her hand and she felt it - the power of another slayer - the vulnerability of a lost girl.

"I'm sorry..." Buffy whispered.

It was a moment not to be forgotten, regardless of the fact that only seconds after the words left Buffy's mouth Faith would break the contact, yanking her hand away and glaring. Perhaps it was for that very reason Faith stalked past her, mumbled an apology to Angel, and kept on going.

Perhaps that's why none of them said a word until they reached the hospital.

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## Chapter 7

*Hold on*  
*Hold on to yourself*

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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*For this is gonna hurt like hell*

-- Sarah McLachlan

"Summers residence."

"Hey Giles, it's me." Buffy said, wearily, into the phone. She had held back to call the house as Angel took Faith to get her treated.

"Buffy!" There was some murmuring in the background, then Giles' voice was back. "Where are you? Did you find Angel?"

Buffy sighed, leaning against the wall of the hospital corridor. "Yeah, I got to Angel."

"Buffy... what's wrong?" There was a pause, then "Where are you?"

Reaching a hand to her face, Buffy pressed her fingers against her closed eyes. "It wasn't after Angel." She pressed a little harder, as if punishment for not realising it sooner. "Ammitus was never after Angel." Her voice caught in her throat.

"I don't understand."

Thank you Giles, Buffy thought. Thank you for not seeing it, just like I didn't.

"Angel has accepted his past for what it is. His soul is... clean, I suppose you could say."

"Where are you Buffy?" He asked for a third time.

"At the hospital."

"Are you alright?"

Buffy nodded absently, then only half realised Giles wouldn't have been able to interpret that. "It attacked Faith, Giles."

"Oh...dear...is she alright?"

She blew out a loud breath. "Her arm is cut up and she's got a few other bruises, but she's okay. As for the rest, well..." Buffy closed her eyes again, and the picture of Faith standing before her - injured, disoriented - appeared behind her eyelids. Scowling, she shook the image loose with a quick jolt of her head and forcibly replaced it with another - Faith's face the night Buffy had come after her, ready to kill her to save Angel. It strengthened her resolve just a fraction. "I don't know. I don't know when it's going to start, how it's going to start and what I'm supposed to tell her."

"Does she know how... it works?" Giles asked carefully.

Buffy shook her head. "No, I haven't told her any of the details."

"Good. It's important that it stays that way. I'll talk to the others."

It was a difficult see-saw of consequences Buffy had to juggle. The more she moved away from worrying about Faith, the more she moved to worrying about Sunnydale. Whichever way she looked at it the reality was bearing down - the guilt and responsibility driving her into the lino tiles of the hospital floor.

This wasn't one girl's life. This wasn't *Faith's* life. It wasn't about that. It was about a demon coming to life and destroying half the state.

Really, it was.

"I don't understand..." She whispered.

"Buffy?"

"It was just... too easy." Buffy walked slowly down the corridor until she came to a set of visitor's chairs. She slumped down into the closest one, resting her elbows against her knees. "It's all so sudden, as if... this was it's intention... I just..." She searched through the last two weeks, trying to come up with some indication that could have pointed her in the correct direction a little earlier. Suddenly, she roused a memory and her eyes widened. "Oh God..."

"Buffy?" Giles' voice was low, expectant. Concerned. Confused.

"Oh... God." She repeated, then threw herself back against the chair, balling her free hand into a fist and jabbing it against her forehead. "It was. It was after her all along."

"All... along? But Faith's only been here for one day."

"I can't believe I didn't see it..." She murmured. She let out a snarl of frustration and drove her fist into her thigh. "I can't believe I didn't *see* it!"

"Buffy-" Giles said shortly. "You need to tell me what is going on and you need to tell me now, or I can't help you."

"Argh! I should have *known!*" She clenched her teeth together so hard anyone walking past would have thought she had bit into the phone. "That night, when I got close to it, remember?"

"I remember you telling me."

"I never saw it, Giles... I just... was running, and I knew it was behind me... then, it was as if it was *inside* me. In my head. I could feel it there and there was nothing I could do but keep running..." A sob escaped her lips and she covered her mouth in an effort to conceal it and regain control. "I thought I'd been marked too. But when I didn't find a burn I assumed it had just... missed me."

There was a long silence on the phone. Buffy imagined Giles sitting at their desk with his head in his hand.

Then

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I thought you'd start treating me like I was crazy!" Buffy said, a little too loudly, soon after which lowering her voice at the attention she received from further down the corridor. "I thought you'd think it had got to me like had got to everyone else."

Another long silence. Buffy could feel her heart sink into her boots. Maybe.. maybe if he could give her a chemical strong enough, she could start to clean the ink off the walls. And right after that, he could give her something strong enough to reverse time, so she could save Faith. Maybe even Sunnydale.

"Okay." He said, an underlining forgiveness sneaking up the wires to Buffy's ears. Funnily enough, it was a cold consolation. "Okay, so how do you know this has something to do with Faith?"

"Because the very next day was the first time I had the thought to bring them here."

"You think it was influencing your thoughts?"

"Of course!" She snapped. "Don't you!?" She rose to her feet and stalked back to where she had stood before, her body agitated at where her mind was. "The thing puts *nightmares* in peoples heads, Giles. It drives them to *kill* themselves. You don't think it would be able to call up someone else's memory and influence them to act on it?"

There was a sigh on the other end of the phone. "You have a point."

"I thought at the time- " She stared desperately at the ceiling. "I thought at the time it was because I was clearly unable to fight it... I was looking for other solutions. I thought that's why their names sprang to mind. *God* how could I have been so stupid?"

"You couldn't have known that's what it was after, Buffy." Giles said carefully. "What's done is done, and we'll make the best of it, just as we always do."

Buffy sighed. She would always be thankful for Giles. He was the one person she could tell the truth to - tell him her fears, show him her doubt, and not worry about the gang disintegrating into a disorganised blubbering mess. She turned to face the wall, pressing her fingertips against the cool concrete.

"I know Giles, it's just... this time I can't help wondering if we've met our match, you know?"

"It'll be fine, Buffy." Came the soft, resolute, English-accented assurance that she was looking for. Buffy allowed herself to relax into it for a moment, until the sound of a baby crying brought her back to reality. "We'll have some more for you when you get back."

"We'll be there as soon as we can."

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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Giles hung up the phone, dropping his head.

"Giles?" Willow ventured gently, "What happened? Is... is Buffy alright?"

Slowly, Giles pulled his glasses from his face and began to polish them again - a habit he seemed to have picked up when he was thinking. Or worried. Or both.

"Ammitus attacked Faith."

There was a collective intake of breath around the room.

"Oh." Willow blinked. "Oh- that's... bad."

"It *is* bad." Giles repeated in clarification. Willow's tone was so close to being a question even Tara and Dawn shot her a look of astonishment. Willow's eyes cast downwards guiltily. Giles replaced his glasses on his face and sighed. "We think it was after her before she came here."

"But...how would it have known?" Tara asked.

Giles glanced at Anya, who was busying herself doing... something distinctly *other* than actively listening to him. Like playing solitaire.

"In one of Buffy's encounters with the demon, she said she thought it managed to.. connect with the thoughts in her mind."

"Likely." Anya said, without looking up or stopping what she was doing.

At Dawn's look of panic, Giles smiled reassuringly. "She's fine. She thought she'd been attacked, but showed no other signs of it, so assumed it had... *missed her*."

"Highly *unlikely*."

"Anya," Giles drew a short breath in frustration. "If you're going to participate in the conversation, I'd appreciate it if you would play a more active role, or.... not participate at all."

Her eyes flashing with impatience, Anya dropped the deck of cards in her hand and looked up. "You want to talk about participation? Why not ask Buffy why she didn't think it'd be a good idea to tell us about her little *encounter*! I think that would have been pretty helpful, don't you?"

"She thought we would think she was..." He held out his hands. "Crazy."

"Exactly my point!" Anya exclaimed. "And we wouldn't have listened to her when she suggested bringing Scary Spice here, and we wouldn't be sitting here now about to count down the days to death and destruction!"

"Her name's Faith, Anya." Tara said quietly. "And she's in trouble."

"Yes she is." Giles agreed, thankful that at least one other person was able to see reason. "Buffy thinks Ammitus chose Faith specifically."



"You mean..." Willow began fearfully. "She's it? She's the total?"

Giles pursed his lips. "I guess time will tell." He said. "Whether or not we lose anyone else."

"Great!" Xander clapped his hands together. Everyone in the room jumped, except Anya, who was back to busying herself with solitaire. "Faith becomes the instrument of evil. The *key* to destroying the world." He looked around. "Déjà vu, anyone?"

"Xander that's *enough!*" Giles barked. "I've had enough. We've *all* had enough."

"I haven't had-"

"Anya, you too."

"What...?" Xander looked imploringly at Willow, who shrugged, kindly.

"You have been a bit... super-Faith-hating." She said. "Which I.I totally get, but... now we have to figure out how to stop the world from ending, y'know?" Her face brightened. "But the second we save the world, you just... feel free to go *right* back to it!"

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. "Tara, could you...?" He gestured at Dawn with his head and Tara nodded as soon as she understood. With a quick poke to the younger girl's ribs, she urged her to her feet and grabbed three of the boxes of cold pizza.

"Help me with this, Dawn? We're going to need a lot more space."

With a slight scowl on her face at being targeted for dish duty Dawn grabbed the rest of the leftovers and followed Tara into the kitchen. As soon as Dawn was out of earshot, Giles leaned forward, addressing the remaining three.

"Number one, any moment from now Faith is going to begin suffering something that none of us could possibly imagine. She won't understand it, and she won't be able to hide from it, and on *top* of that she knows she's in a house full of people who don't trust her, or like her." For his second point, he stared directly at Xander. "Number two, we need to save her, because she came here to help us, despite everything that's happened, and we owe her that. Not only as another human being, but as a friend. A friend of Angel's, who *does* trust her and *does* like her." He lowered his voice. "We're all going to have to put aside our prejudice, just as she will."

Xander opened his mouth immediately to retort, but the idea died on his lips as the gravity of Giles' words hit home. Slowly, he closed his mouth again and slouched back in his chair, beaten. Giles too leaned back, immediately returning to the information Willow had gathered about Ammitus' past.

It was, however, Xander who broke the silence first.

"How do we stop it?" He asked. "I mean, it got Faith. It's over."

"Well, not *technically* over." Anya corrected him. "It's not technically over until Faith gives

up her soul."

"You mean, until she kills herself?"

Anya pondered that for a moment, pursed her lips then nodded. "Yep, I'd say so."

Willow shook her head sombrely. "How long do you think... we have?" She looked between Giles and Anya, hoping for a semi-pleasant answer from either.

"A normal person? Three days" Anya said simply. Then she paused, clearly in thought. "A slayer? Maybe five days. Not sure."

Giles nodded. "Right. Anya I need to you tell me as much as you possibly remember or know about Ammitus. Willow, I need to know more about how, *exactly* it takes hold of a person's soul. We'll just have to find a way of disconnecting Faith from Ammitus, or Ammitus from Faith. Whichever comes first."

"What about... you know, the rest of Sunnydale?" Xander asked, only this time his tone did not hint at anything other than a serious question.

"Thankfully the two are tied together at the moment... we don't have to take two separate paths. If we save Faith, we delay Ammitus. Maybe even annoy it a little." He leaned back. "It's also vital that none of you talk to Faith about what is going to happen. She doesn't know what to expect, and frankly, I think that's best."

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to know that I was a ticking time-bomb, ready go insane then kill myself...." Willow shook her head. "Wow, I'd hate to be her right now."

"So would I..." Giles whispered. "So would I."

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## Chapter 8

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *From here on in, I take enormous liberties with Faith's life. Enormous. Huge. I make assumptions, create scenarios, basically put my spin on how I think she grew up. I've tried to keep as true to what I know of the character through the episodes, but if I've stuffed something up, I apologise.*

*By no means am I saying that this is the be-all and end-all of Faith's life, that I'm right and everyone else is wrong. This one.. just works for this fic. There's a lot of...dark stuff suggested, so pretty much the rest of this I'm calling NC-17 or R.*

*Thanks*

*Tiz*

*Lying awake, watching the sunlight  
How the birds would sing  
As I count the rings around my eyes  
Constantly pushing the world I know aside  
I don't even feel the pain  
I don't even want to try  
I'm a Lonely Girl I'll tell a tale for you...*

--Pink

In the hospital, Faith, having waited half an hour to be seen and concerned more than seventy per cent of the other casualties by her distinct lack of attention to the gash on her arm, now sat in on a guernsey in a little curtained-off cubicle in the ward. She stared blankly ahead as a doctor in his mid-twenties began the arduous process of cleaning the blood and debris from the larger wound, and the smaller scratches surrounding it.

The process took a good ten minutes, though to Faith it could have been ten seconds. The first time she gave any sign of non-catatonic life was when he finished, and stepped around to face her.

"I've cleaned the wound out," He said. Faith looked up. "There were a few fragments of rock in it." Pausing, he glanced back at the wound. "How did you say this happened again?"

"Got a little too close to.... An explosion." Faith answered carefully. Somehow, she didn't think telling him what was in her arm was the remnants of someone's gravestone would have gone down especially well.

The doctor nodded. "I'm going to need to put some stitches in. Have you had stitches before?"

Faith snorted. "You're obviously new here." Seeing his confused expression, she raised her hand in a silent apology. It *had* been years. "Yeah, I've had them."

"Good, so you know what to expect." He pulled his tray around to Faith's left side. "I'll just go and get the anaesthetic-"

"No drugs."

"Ah...This is a fairly painful procedure Faith. The cut is deep, and-"

Faith looked at him sharply. "I know, I've had them before. I know what it feels like. I don't want any anaesthetic."

"O-kay." The doctor blinked, clearly taken aback. She watched him hovering, uncertain, around the tray of surgical equipment. Faith had to cut him some slack. The wound was ugly, and he was young. However, there was something about that picture that gave her a hint of satisfaction. After all, she could write a book titled 'How to toss consummate professionals off their perch in 25 words or less'. In fact she was only a second away from suggesting *he* take the anaesthetic, when he nodded a second time. "Okay. It's important you don't move while I'm doing this, alright?"

Nice recovery.

"I know."

As the needle made its first puncture, and Faith squeezed her eyes shut and grit her teeth against the searing pain, she pulled up the image she had been waiting for.

Buffy... apologising to her. To *her*.

The fingers of her right hand dug into the mattress under her as the doctor came in for a second pass. At Faith's abrupt intake of breath he stopped, but she shook her head sharply.

"Don't. You Dare. Stop." She hissed.

She had always been the one to make the first move. *Always* been the one. *She* held the cards. *She* made the rules. *She* dictated the play. Since when was it up to Buffy? Since when did she have that right?

The needle dug in again.

FUCK!

Her cry echoed within the walls of her mind so loudly she wondered if perhaps the doctor could have heard it coming out her ears. What was this? The fucking rehabilitated slayer outreach program? What was she apologising for?

Unable to find purchase on her thoughts, Faith turned her attention to the pain. On each needle pass she let the fire of it flow through her - consume her - take up residence in her head and banish all other feeling from her body.

It made her feel at peace.

*Hey, Kid! Get over here*

Faith's eyes snapped open. "Huh..?"

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" The doctor asked, not taking his eyes off his work. Faith glanced up at him suspiciously.

"Did you?" The second word trailed off into a wince as he pulled in stitch number ten.

"No I said nothing." He pulled upward again. "Are you sure you don't want- "

"No!" Faith growled and turned away. "How many times do I have to *tell* you no!"

"Faith, I'm only trying to do my job here..." He said gently.

Faith sighed and closed her eyes again. "My Bad. It's just... been a rough day."

*Kid! Get the fuck over here!*

What?

*What, are you deaf?*

"What the fuck?" Faith muttered, then turned on the doctor, ready to throttle him. "I thought I told you not to fucking give me- "

But the doctor was gone. With lightening speed her right hand darted to where her stitches should have been, but there was nothing there either. Lifting her arm revealed no marks, no blood, nothing. The skin was unbroken.

"What the fuck is going on?" Faith called out.

Instantly alert she pushed herself off the bed and swung open the curtain around it, raising her arms - ready to attack anyone and everyone that would come her way.

The only problem was, there wasn't anyone coming her way. Or going her way. Or... anyone *anywhere*, at all.

*KID!*

Faith blinked. The voice was coming from further down the emergency ward. She squinted down the rows of beds and, sure enough, right down the end was a bed surrounded by curtain, just as hers had been. Narrowing her eyes, Faith began jogging toward it.

*Mom?*

Faith growled and stepped up a gear. This wasn't fucking funny. This was beyond funny. Someone was going to pay with their balls.

*I told you not to fucking call me that! Fucking hell, how many times do I have to tell you!*

With a snarl Faith's hand reached for the fabric and tore it away from the rails. The blue material dropped away from her eyes to reveal...

The kitchen at her old house.

"What the fuck?" She hissed again.

Faith spun around, expecting to see the emergency ward behind her, but found no trace of the hospital.

"But the teachers at school said- "

Faith's head snapped around at the sound of a child's voice.

Her heart stopped.

A woman in her twenties stood, towering over a small, dark-haired child who would have

been no older than 6. The woman was holding a bottle of what looked like vodka in one hand, and a crumpled child's drawing in the other. She was unsteady on her feet, waving the picture in the child's face.

"No..." Faith raised a hand to her mouth.

*Faith!*

Out of nowhere, a hand snaked around her waist and pulled her away.

"Hey!" She shouted, as she was pulled out of the cubicle. "HEY!" But the hand wouldn't let go, despite Faith's best efforts to duck out of it. Failing that she began to claw at the arm with both her hands, kicking and writhing in an attempt to break free.

"Get *off* me!" She hissed, trying to twist around to see who it was while at the same time becoming acutely aware of an increasing ache in her left arm.

"Faith! Hey!" The voice cut across her again.

"GET OFF ME!!!" She screamed.

The arm released her. Faith opened her eyes.

And saw Angel.

Faith blinked. It had been a dream, that's all. A nightmare. A fucking horrible, sadistic... hang on. Why was she asleep in the first place?

"You passed out."

Oh.

At that point, Faith noted that she was distinctly horizontal. Lifting her head she peered down at her feet, and saw the doctor standing with his back right up against the curtain, eyeing her carefully. Her head dropped back onto the pillow.

"You okay?"

She turned to Angel, wincing when she saw the scratch marks that criss-crossed his forearms. "Guess I owe you another apology, huh?"

One corner of Angel's mouth turned up in a lop-sided smile and he shook his head. "You'd think I would have learned by now, to wait until you wake on your own."

"Nah," Faith said casually, even as she waged an internal battle with her recollection, trying not to play out the scene she would have witnessed had Angel *not* woken her up in time. "Just throw a bucket of cold water on my face and step back. That's known to work." She winked. Almost as an afterthought Faith reached up and ran her fingers over her left arm, finding gauze and thicker strapping to hold it in place. Then, her face set in a grimace she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, nodding at the doctor. "Nice job, doc. Hardly feel a

thing."

He stepped forward, cautiously, his eyes darting between Angel and Faith. "I've written a prescription for antibiotics." He held out the piece of paper and Angel took it from him, folding it up in his fingers. "You'll need to get it printed from the front desk."

"Thanks." He said.

The doctor continued. "You'll need to take one twice daily. They're strong, so make sure you have them with food. Once with breakfast, once with dinner. Don't take more than one, and expect to be a little queasy for a couple of days. And-" Nervously, the doctor fumbled in his coat pocket and pulled out a business card. He handed it to Angel as well. "-just... keep them in mind."

Angel looked down at the card, read it, frowned, then handed it back. "That's not necessary." He said.

"Look, a lot of people have raved about it. It has a very successful record. If you could just-

"I *said*," Angel repeated, his voice teetering on threatening. "It isn't necessary."

"Right. Well." The doctor flicked both his eyebrows up in silent resignation and pulled the curtain open. "If you change your mind, just look up the hospital. They have it on record."

Angel's voice had returned to its normal, calming tone. He nodded. "Thanks for your help." Then he glanced at Faith, who was already on her feet, tilting her neck from side to side in an effort to alleviate some of the tension in her shoulders. "Buffy's waiting for us."

"Oh. Sure. Buffy. Yeah. Right." Faith muttered.

---

"So what was it?" She asked as they turned the corner from the emergency ward. "The number for a drug rehab place?"

Angel started and stared at her. "How did you know?"

"Like I said, been there, done that." Faith simply held up her hands. "The way he was looking at you and me? I reckon he thought you were my dealer."

Angel had to chuckle at that.

Faith flashed him a big smile. Not a grin, not a sneer, but a genuine, uninhibited smile. Angel relaxed into it, and once again he was reminded of how glad he was he had taken the time to fight for her. Everything he had seen since they had left that protective bubble of the car was so... *Anti* Faith. It was the `old' Faith. It was... a façade that he could see through in a second, yet was afraid she couldn't. The longer she stayed away from the person she had become, the more he had worried. Now he felt his worry ease, just a fraction. These brief moments he knew would remind her, at least unconsciously, that she was more.

Just like Faith, to bail herself out at the last minute.

Faith had managed to conceal the nightmare from Angel better than she even knew. Her reaction when she came to in the graveyard had been so similar to the one in the hospital that Angel didn't know the difference. She had no idea where the memory came from, why her mind felt it necessary to dredge those images out of the silt and flash them up in front of her eyes like a bright fucking neon Burger King sign.

Did it have something to do with that... thing? Faith shuddered at the memory of the graveyard, drawing a sideways glance from Angel.

"You okay?"

"Five by Five."

They rounded another corner, and almost immediately something floated gently across Faith's subconscious - something... vaguely comforting. With all the switching off she was doing, she didn't even see it coming. She'd definitely felt it before, but couldn't quite place it. It seeped into the cracks between her disjointed, agitated thoughts, calming her long enough to pull away from them.

Buffy, who had since returned to her seat, lifted her head. and turned towards the doors at the end of the hallway. She had felt... what had she felt? Discontinuity. Uncertainty. And a dark.. edge... that she knew instantly to be distinctly *Faith*.

Buffy lowered her head again, pressing her thumb and middle fingers to each temple as she began to grapple with some truths of her own. The connection that, despite them both, was slowly materialising back into existence was torturous. It brought with it feelings and an implicit trust in the other that was unavoidable. She couldn't explain it, any more than she could break away from it, but it was rooted so deep that only the deepest kind of hurt could result from it.

The deepest pain.

The war within Buffy spoke of that very pain - showed how that implicit trust had burned her. It threw up pictures of death, violence, fighting that had been the result of Faith. Faith's betrayal. Faith's evil. Another part of her showed pictures of *her* betrayal. Her inability to see what was in front of her. Her jealousy.

She rose from her seat, waiting, only seconds before Faith and Angel appeared through the doors. Faith had put her jacket back on, so her arm was concealed. Just like Faith - your enemy mustn't know your weaknesses. Buffy sighed.

No two people were so different than she and Faith.

And yet so fundamentally alike.

All that passion they exerted, all that fear they commanded. All the times they pushed the boundaries. One of them would have crossed it, eventually.



Buffy knew that.

As they approached Buffy could see Faith was troubled, though she was trying to fight it. She had that... crease between her eyebrows that only appeared when she was trying to stop thinking. Buffy remembered that look. She remembered it from the countless conversations after Alan Finch's death.

Damnit, why didn't she act on it then?

"Hey guys." Buffy said, wearily. "How did it go?"

Faith's expression was instantly replaced by a nonchalant smile. She shook a small white bottle in front of her face, which rattled in a very pill-reminiscent manner. "Druuugs." She waggled her eyebrows.

"Just some stitches, some antibiotics." Angel offered.

Buffy nodded, her eyes not leaving Faith's face. "How are you feeling?"

"Sane, actually." She answered lightly. "Well in control of all my faculties." She finished with a tilt of her head and a sweet smile. "I think it lucked out on me, B."

"Let's hope so." Buffy smiled slightly, an action that seemed to surprise the hell out of Faith who had to pretend to stare at something near the exit in order to hide her shock. Buffy looked up at Angel. "I've called a cab. It's waiting for us out the front."

"There's still a long time before dawn." Angel said. "You two go back, get some rest. I'm going to have look around and see what I can find."

Buffy shook her head. "Angel I don't think that's a good idea-"

"And I *second* that!" Faith interjected, staring at him incredulously.

"I can find out much more out there than I can in the house." Angel said. "There are enough people working on theory. There are places I can go that no website has access to. You know that." His last comment was directed at Buffy, who nodded slowly.

"Be careful." She said gently, then turned to Faith, who still glaring daggers into Angel's shoulder. "Come on, let's go." Buffy turned to go, paused, and turned back for a moment. "I won't bite."

"Yeah, but I might." Faith grunted. "Fox with the chickens, remember?"

This time, Buffy didn't turn to make her next comment, but she knew Faith heard it.

"I seem to remember fox with the hounds."

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## Chapter 9

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

---

*I would like to visit you for a while  
Get away and out of this city  
Maybe I shouldn't have called  
But someone had to be the first to break*

*We can go sit on your back porch, relax  
Talk about anything, it don't matter  
I'll be courageous if you can pretend  
That you've forgiven me*

-- Darren Hayes

Right now, in Faith's eyes, everything was fairly well fucked up.

In the last 36 hours she'd agreed to go back to the *one* place she couldn't even have talked about a week previously, she'd met back up with the 'jolly' little gang of troopers after years of trying to hide from them, she'd been attacked by an evil invincible demon, she'd had her left arm sliced open and a weird-ass tattoo burned into her temple, and now she was stuck, *alone*, in a cab. With Buffy.

Less than three feet between them.

And it would have been even less than that, were Faith not pressed into the passenger door so hard she practically melded with the chassis. She thanked herself inwardly that she'd picked the right side. She'd be having a little more trouble with a bandage, nineteen stitches and a whole lotta pain in her way.

Had a person asked a week ago what Faith wanted most out of her 'redemption', she would have painted a picture much like this. She would have smiled, and described a scene where she was back in Sunnydale, fighting side by side with Buffy and the gang, leading the charge against the Hellmouth. The fact was, her relationship with Xander, Buffy, Giles, Willow and even Cordelia, though tempestuous at best, was the closest thing she had to a stable family. Naturally, she reasoned, she would want that back, regardless of the amount of water under the bridge.

Now however, as she sat in silence picking at a thread on her jeans, Faith couldn't have wished to be further away. She had come face to face with the water, and it was turbulent and high and full of dangerous debris. No bridge could be built over it, she was sure of that. Had she delved into her memory a little further than yesterday, she would have remembered it.

Just goes to show what you don't see when you're not looking too deep.

The warm comfort floating around her subconscious was making her uncomfortable. Funny, how alien and wrong something can feel when your entire life to date has been lived at the opposite end of the spectrum. Each time she felt it she pulled away from it, and shrank further away from the figure to her left.

Internally, Faith was turning into a heavyweight World Title Fight. In the blue corner was the part of her that drew from connection she and Buffy had - the one that craved proximity, that wanted to joke, laugh, fight, talk, cry, love and be loved and just *be* everything Buffy wanted.

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

---

In the red corner was the hurt and the mistrust and the rejection and the enforced solitude and the attitude that had driven her away.

But further into the murkiness of Faith's mind was the real power. There lay the voice that whispered throughout the fight - taunting, teasing - speaking of how Faith wasn't good enough and never would be. Never for Buffy. Never for any of them. She was a murderer, nothing more. Nameless, faceless... lost.

It was that voice that always lay in the back of her mind, telling her that her `promotion' to Slayer was the universe's way of completing a job meant to have been finished long ago - somewhere in the moments between her being born and taking her first breath - which hadn't been because some higher power was late. Or forgot. Or was too drunk to notice she wasn't supposed to live any longer than that.

After all, what better way of getting rid of a pyromaniac than locking them in a warehouse full of fireworks with a lighter and an unlimited supply of gasoline?

Each time she survived a battle the voice would say `well that was lucky' or `fate's not paying attention again'. Each time she slipped further and further into the darkness it would say `you may as well, there's no other purpose for you'. It was that voice that was the automatic shrug in her shoulders and the `who cares' on her lips.

Unbeknownst to Faith, it was that voice that Ammitus had heard, and he himself had begun to speak through. And the blue corner was losing. Badly.

Faith closed her eyes, trying to block out the silhouette of her. Trying, just for a moment, to pretend she was alone.

*Buffy? Oh... God.-*

*You didn't think I was going to find you, did you?*

She advanced on Faith, who could do nothing but cower further and further back on the bed, eyes daring to look up only fractions of a second at a time before returning to the floor.

"Buffy let's talk." Angel's voice, ever calm sounded from behind Buffy and she spun around.

"Oh I don't think talking is in order right now."

"Faith needs help" He said simply. Faith could feel their eyes on her, so she turned her shoulder into their line of sight and hid behind the hair that had fallen forward over her face.

"Help?" Buffy snapped. "Do you have any idea what she did to me?"

"Yes."

*Faith?*

"Do you care?"

"She wants to change. She has a chance to- "

"No. *No* chance. Jail."

"Do you think that'd help?"

"...Buffy?"

Buffy turned, her lips twisted in rage and her eyes burning,. Faith stood before her terrified, but resolved. This is where it would start. This is where she wanted it fixed most. Here, with B.

"I'm so s- "

But Buffy cut her off. "You apologise to me," She snarled, her voice shaking with pure hatred. "I will beat you to death"

*Faith? You okay?*

Faith felt like a child again, trembling, unsure. An old pain, starting from a space somewhere around her middle, began to spread out through her body - twisting, churning with loathing. She tilted her head, spreading her arms wide. Maybe this would help make it right. Maybe this would do it.

"...Go ahead."

Something touched Faith's hand, and she flinched away, staring at blank space where the contact had come from. Her left arm had started to ache. What was going on?

*Faith. Hey, Faith, we're here*

There it was again, but the pressure was firmer, more like a squeeze, on her arm. This time Faith wrenched her hand away and the momentum carried her arm into the air, until it hit an invisible barrier. She cried out as pain shot through her wrist and arm, her eyes snapped open and she found herself staring at the back of a car seat... in....

"Faith we're still in the cab." Buffy's voice was soft and calm, and momentarily sounded foreign to Faith's ears, after what she had just heard. "We're here." Faith blinked harder, took another look around her and shook her head. Buffy's door was open and she was standing on the road, bent over with her head still in the cab. "You okay?"

The cab. The cab. The hospital, the cab.

"Yeah. Sure." Faith said quickly. She unfastened her seat belt and swung open the cab door, easing herself out. "Must've dozed off." She said casually, rolling her shoulders. "All that demon fighting you know."

Buffy paid and thanked the cab driver, then turned and headed for the house. "What happened to hungry and horny?" She called flippantly over her shoulder.

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

---

"fraid you've got Sister Faith tonight, B." Faith answered with a half-smile while desperately struggling to rid herself of the fragmented images in her head. "No sex, no supper."

Faith heard Buffy's laugh, but it didn't do anything to calm her. She realised now why she was so bothered. That was the last time Buffy saw her. Then... in Angel's bedroom. On the rooftop. All that hate, that disgust. Was it still in there now?

Of course it was. Why should she expect any different?

"Faith?"

Faith looked up. Buffy was standing in the doorway, facing her.

"I think I'm gonna hang back here a sec, B. Chill out."

"No. No you're not." Buffy said firmly.

*No. No chances. Jail.*

Faith cringed and instantly her eyes dropped to the grass. Okay, yeah. It was a dumb idea, especially with that thing out there. Desperate. Desperately dumb.

Buffy moved down a step. "Come into the kitchen. I want to check your stitches - see if you blew any in the cab."

"It's fine, B." Faith resisted the impulse to step away from her by focusing her attention on the light scattering through the trees, spilling onto Buffy's lawn. "Hardly feel a thing." She echoed the same words she had said to the doctor.

If only it worked as well on Buffy as the rest of the medical profession.

"Relax Faith." She said, gentler this time. "If I know Giles, he'll have beaten the others into shape while we were away. They shouldn't give you any more trouble. Come on." She accentuated it this time by jerking her head in the direction of the door.

Unable to formulate an argument against it, Faith followed, silently wishing Angel would hurry the hell up and get back there.

---

Buffy had artistically avoided leading Faith through the living room where she knew the rest of them were. Now it was drawing closer to midnight, Willow had taken the initiative to send Dawn to bed. Despite all Dawn's protestations to the contrary, school was just one of those things that was utterly non-optional... and as Willow had pointed out, would continue to be so regardless of how likely it was the world would end.

No longer requiring the necessary verbal dancing and abstract reasoning that comes with having a young teenager in the same room, the conversations and the research had begun in earnest, but with Faith rapidly advancing to the title of 'lab rat', Buffy didn't believe participating in the conversation was a particularly good idea.

Reason number two for taking her into the kitchen.

As much as Faith was trying to hide it, Buffy had noticed a darkness growing across her features that had already begun when she walked out of the emergency ward with Angel. Buffy wasn't sure, but she guessed the dreams had started there. A small panic began to rise from her stomach at the speed of it all, but she pushed it aside. This was Faith. Faith was... a slayer.

Watching Faith standing in her kitchen, slowly take in her surroundings, registering familiarity in every corner still seemed surreal to Buffy - almost like Faith had been simply superimposed into her line of sight and wasn't actually *there*. Faith's clear discomfort added to the illusion. The way her shoulders were pulled up slightly, the way she never looked up for long. At the very least, by the time Buffy spoke she would have been *exceptionally* familiar with the tiles.

"You should eat something." She said.

At first, Buffy thought Faith was simply ignoring her as the comment itself didn't stop her kitchen survey. She was about to make it again when Faith shrugged.

"Nah, not hungry." She straightened all of a sudden and blew out a tense breath. "I should be... training... or, over-" She waved her hand in the vague direction of the lounge room. "- there, thinking or, researching or whatever the hell it is they do."

"Not tonight, Faith." Buffy shook her head. "Tonight you should be eating, and resting."

The sound of an open palm smacking the kitchen bench reverberated throughout the lower level of the house. Unconsciously, Willow's eyes lifted to the ceiling, hoping the noise hadn't woken Dawn.

"Just who the fuck died and made you my mo-" Faith stopped mid- sentence, her mouth still open as if her brain had tripped over the word itself. Buffy, who had called on all her inner reserves *not* to jump a mile high, watched Faith battle with it, then finally give up and snarl, turning away. "Just forget it."

Wordlessly, Buffy opened a cupboard and brought out a square vacuum- sealed folded bag. She could have bitten on that comment, but experience and a few more years had taught her that retorts like that were less about the person they're aimed at, and more about the person they're coming from. Even if that person was Faith. Perhaps especially so.

Placing the bag in the microwave, Buffy started the timer, then leaned back against the fridge with her arms crossed, waiting.

Pop

Faith's eyes darted up.

"Angel worded me up before you guys left." She said, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "He said you were a fiend."

Faith seemed not to notice she had just had the imperial rug pulled out from under her, she simply stared directly at the timer. Besides, by the time the smell of buttered microwave popcorn filled the kitchen, Faith's stomach had well and truly given her away.

"Man I could knock back a tonne of that stuff." Faith laughed. "On my first day out, y'know..." She paused for a second to ensure Buffy knew what she meant and that she didn't need to explain herself any further. "I got back to Angel's and he had... bought me-" Measuring with her hands, Faith depicted a box somewhere of the order of two feet long by one foot wide, by one foot high. "-this huge, factory box of it. I went through over half in like... two days."

Buffy was thankful the conversation had been drawn away from the direction it was otherwise heading, and allowed herself a wider smile. The microwave beeped loudly indicating the end of its cycle, and Buffy couldn't help but chuckle at the look of pure anticipation on Faith's face.

Pulling out a bowl, she opened the microwave again and, after a moment's thought, deposited the popcorn - bag and all - in it, and slid it across the countertop to Faith.

"Enjoy your feast, slayer." She said wryly.

"Oh, but I will... slayer." Faith responded, in kind.

And for the briefest of instants, the air in the kitchen became charged, but the static wasn't enough for them to notice.

Yet.

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## Chapter 10

*I tried so hard And got so far  
But in the end It doesn't even matter  
I had to fall To lose it all  
But in the end It doesn't even matter*

-- *Linkin Park*

It sounded funny, but Faith loved the `squeakiness' of freshly popped popcorn - how you could press the kernel between your teeth and it would squeak. Then there would be that burst of butter and salt - two of her three basic food groups - which would tingle in her mouth and just leave her wanting *more*.

For a good five minutes, Faith was as comfortable as she had ever been. Sitting cradling a giant bowl of popcorn, blocking all images out of her peripheral vision, she could have been anywhere and she would have been content.

Until a glass of clear liquid deposited itself directly in front of her.

Faith stared at it, chewing slowly, then her eyes flicked upwards. "What am I looking at

here?"

"Water." Buffy said simply, then turned around and poured herself a glass. "You'll need it. For the popcorn. You know, salt... thirsty..." Buffy trailed off. "Don't tell me you're immune to salt."

Faith chewed a few more times, then grinned openly.

"Salt and I are good friends." She said. Buffy made a face, and Faith noticed, almost absently, how the contentment had not stopped quite as abruptly as she'd thought. "I usually wash it down with something... stronger, anyway."

Buffy laughed softly, raising the glass to her lips. "What happened to sister Faith?"

"Hey!" Faith spread her arms wide. "Even sisters take communion, B."

"Oh you're-" Buffy shook her head in exasperation. "Fine. But this is a PG-rated house, so you're not allowed to know where I get it from."

Faith nearly spat out her mouth of popcorn, and made a deliberate show of it. "PG?" She asked incredulously. "B, what happened?"

"Dawn happened."

"B she's like..." Faith stopped. Exactly how old was Dawn anyway?

"Less than 21." Buffy said curtly, crossing her arms. Faith snorted.

"You're kidding me... Oh *man*..." She chuckled and tossed another few kernels of popcorn in her mouth. "B, she's a kid. If she hasn't found it already, she's probably got her own stash."

The comfort between them began to turn, and in the instant before Buffy opened her mouth Faith knew there was no way to stop it.

"Not every kid thinks like you did, Faith."

And there it was, ripped away from her. Faith chewed around the popcorn in her mouth slowly. Suddenly she seemed to have lost her appetite.

Fuck.

Closing her eyes she leaned on her hand and rubbed her fingers across her forehead. She should have known better than to expect to maintain a normal, civilised conversation with Buffy. She should have known better than to push the boundaries like that.

*Get that? Or you gonna make me repeat myself?*

An image of a man's face flashed across Faith's mind. Fat, hairy. Filthy wifebeater and tracksuit pants that were dotted with holes. An ever-present sheen of sweat.



## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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The girl, barely eleven years old, rolled her eyes. "Chill, Big Man." She said, waving the bag in her hand. "I take this down to Spank, by the Clement, get the four grand, take it down to Josies, tell `em I'm Casper's daughter and get the smack off `em. It's a cinch."

He pointed a greasy, fat finger at her. "And?"

"Don't talk to nobody but Spank and Chuck. I *get* it. Now fuckin shut up. I'm goin'." She spun around and stalked towards the door.

"Oi get over `ere kid. I'm not done wit you yet."

The girl's hand froze on the doorhandle. "Don't fuckin call me that."

"Or what?" She felt him sneering into her back. "You gonna get sesame street on my ass?"

She turned slowly, advancing two steps back into the room, towards the pungent stench of body odor, beer and vomit. "Or.." She hissed through clenched teeth. "The next time you're high I'm gonna cut off your balls and feed `em to ya."

*Faith...*

Faith started, and looked up.

"Hey." A hand was on her arm. Buffy was beside her.

"Uhh.." Faith took a step away from the bench, and lifted her arm up, away from Buffy's hand to scratch the back of her neck. Fuck, she could still *smell* him.

"Look Faith- " Buffy started "I didn't mean- "

Faith's eyes darted up and she shrugged. "Hey no sweat." She said quickly. "I'm kinda beat so I think I'm just going to head up and- " She gestured vaguely in the direction of the stairs.

Buffy seemed to pause, as if about to say something more, but she either thought better of it or Faith was totally off-track. She ended up nodding slowly.

"Know where you're going?"

"Yeah, unless you've redecorated in the last few years."

"Well I usually have Mum's bed, but... I thought Willow and Tara and Xander and Anya could fight over it."

"Ah." Faith barely even registered the innuendo, and certainly wasn't in the frame of mind to act on it. "So it's still on the right?"

"Yep."

"Cool. Okay. Night B."

"Night Faith."

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Willow, Tara, Giles, Xander and Anya all had signs of cabin fever - so much so that when Buffy entered the lounge she thought she was walking into a room full of caged animals. Xander was having an argument with Anya over *why* it was possible to become stuck in *solitaire*, and that it didn't mean that the game was flawed. Willow was leaning back in her chair, eyes closed and palms pressed hard against her temples, and although Tara's hand was resting lightly on Willow's knee, she was busy flipping erratically through the diary, her mind completely elsewhere.

Giles had taken off his glasses and was resting his forehead on the back of his hand, flipping through one of the many texts he had brought across with him.

Buffy did feel sorry for them - they *were* the think-tank of the operation, however that reason was only secondary to the fact that frankly, nobody felt safe out at night any more. They had operated on this pseudo-curfew for the last two weeks, when it was clear the killing wouldn't stop, and now the antsy-ness between them had become firmly rooted.

Giles was the first to notice Buffy's presence and he frowned.

"Where's Angel?" He asked, the sound snapping the others out of their stupor.

"He went looking for more information." She flicked both her eyebrows upward. "You know, *unofficial* channels."

There were several responsive nods. Willow eyed the empty space over Buffy's shoulder.

"Where's..."

"Upstairs. Gone to bed."

"Sooo..." Xander pursed his lips and flared his nostrils, then finally asked the question. "*..how is she?*"

A short glance to Giles yielded the ever-so-slight nod - a *`yes that was me'* gesture. Buffy licked her lips.

"She's... okay. The stitches are in. The cut will heal in a couple of days."

"Go Slayer strength." Willow cheered half-heartedly. Buffy simply smiled back. At least it was *halfheartedly*.

Tara's eyes rose from the diary. "What about... the rest?"

That question drew a deep breath from Buffy and she looked across to the other witch, slowly expelling it.

"I think they've started. I can't be sure, but... she fell asleep in the cab and nearly jumped

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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through the roof when I tried to wake her. And then before-" Buffy's eyebrow's furrowed as she recalled the way Faith had just stopped... trance-like... only moments before. "She seemed to phase out for a second."

"How do you know that's not just her...thing?"

Xander shifted uncomfortably in his seat which gave Buffy the distinct impression he had been intending to say something else. Buffy found herself glancing at Giles again.

Go big man.

"There are some other things I've noticed as well. It's just -" She shrugged. "I just know."

"The whole... *slayer sense* thing?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Something like a whole lot of things, thought Buffy silently, *that none of you will understand.*

It was going to happen at some point soon, and the fact that Anya started it only seemed fitting. She was, in fact, quite amazed at the contagiousness of it. She had commented several times on the various viruses and diseases that paled in comparison. Even ebola got a mention.

But it started with Anya, then Xander caught it, Willow and Tara almost simultaneously, then Giles followed.

Buffy seemed immune. After all, yawning just wasn't her thing.

"I think..." Giles began, rising from his seat and stretching out the kinks in his back. "We would be far more productive if we pick this up again tomorrow morning. Have a fresh start."

With a collection of creaks and groans the other four stood up, and the yawn phenomenon was passed in reverse order.

Giles and the others began the arduous task of tidying, but Buffy hung back, frowning. An uneasiness had begun to settle in her mind, only in the last couple of minutes, and specifically in the corner that was marked 'Faith - do not cross'.

She began to walk away, but stopped when Giles cast her a withering glance. "I'm going to check on Faith." She said, gesturing with her head towards the stairs. "Make sure she's... asleep."

Willow glanced at Buffy sceptically for an instant, but seeing the expression on Buffy's face opened her mouth in an understanding 'o' and continued packing up her laptop.

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*You're not gonna run, Faith*

Faith stood with her back to the sound, her insides crawling and a soul-numbing ache permeating her entire body. She knew Buffy would come for her, regardless. Now she'd been

found there wasn't a chance in hell Buffy would let her go.

"What do you want to do... you want to throw me off the roof?" She asked, then laughed bitterly, "Again?"

"Any reason why I shouldn't?"

No, no there isn't Buffy. There's no reason why you shouldn't. Faith turned.

"There's nothing I can do for you, B. I can't ever make it right."

Buffy narrowed her eyes. The fire hadn't dulled, not even a little bit. "So you're just going to take off again, leave us to clean up yet another one of your messes?"

Faith's eyes pleaded with her.

"It'd make things easier for you."

If I wasn't here. If I never came here. If I could wipe me out from your mind B I'd do it... I'd do it in a second if it would make it better... make you not look at me that way.

"Until you got bored with the whole guilt thing, decide to come back and *shake* things up?"

"That's not gonna happen."

*Faith...*

"You're right, it's not."

"Angel said there was no way you would give me a chance."

Her eyes flashed, and Faith recoiled before the words left her mouth. "I gave you *every* chance!" She barked. "I tried... so hard to help you. And you spat on me. My life was just something for you to play with. Angel, Riley, *anything* that you could take from me you took. I've lost battles before, but nobody else has *ever* made me a victim."

She was unable to move, to do anything other than stare at Buffy, forced to hear... to *feel* the things she had said. There was nothing there between them anymore, just hate, anger, and spite. Betrayal. Mistrust. All those words. All those words she knew were reserved for her.

What did she have to lose?

"And you can't stand that!" She countered, suddenly finding a scrap of courage to share the war she was raging in her mind. "You're all about control. You have no idea what it's like on the other side. *Nothing's* n control. Nothing makes *sense*. There's just... *pain* and *hate* and nothing you do means *anything*, you can't even-"

"SHUT UP!"

Faith felt what remained of her conviction simply melting away to nothing.

She was nothing.

"Just tell me how to make it better..."

*Faith, hey. Wake up Slayer*

Her surroundings seemed to be sucked into a giant vacuum of space so quickly that time itself could have been ripped apart. When they regained their equilibrium Faith found herself standing on another rooftop... another building. She blinked for a second, disoriented, but as soon as she turned her eyes forward found the familiarity.

Buffy's angry face. The hatred. The disgust.

Faith looked down.

The knife.

She swore she would never forget how easily the blade slid into her stomach. Faith remembered looking down at it, just as she was doing now, and the blade stuck out just enough that she could see her reflection in it. A great picture of evil vanquished - the monster watching the life ebb from their own body. Seeing the image of what they had created.

"You did it-" She murmured in awe, watching her mouth move in the exposed sliver of blade. Ding Dong...

A part of her felt immense relief.

"You killed me." Then she looked up - away from it. Away from the monster. And in that instant she forgot how much it hurt to be hated, hunted, alone. In ultimate defiance, she threw Buffy away from her and staggered backwards, closer... ever closer to the edge until her heel came into contact with air. She stared down at Buffy, and steeled herself for the fall. "Won't help your boy, though."

*Faith, come on*

As the air behind her gave way under her weight, something grabbed her hand. A dull ache in her left arm was beginning to overtake the one in her stomach. She was held, suspended, and confused. Trapped. And hurt. And goddamn it if she didn't get out of there right now, she'd be used for an antidote.

*Faith it's me.*

She struggled mercilessly against the hold, kicking her legs out and wrenching her hand away, swinging her other fist in the empty space in front of her.

Until she connected with something.

"Wha-?" Faith's eyes snapped open, unfocused and disoriented. Last she knew she'd been... falling. Stabbed. Stabbed in the stomach by Buffy... who was... directly in front of her.

"Faith!"

Faith's eyes immediately widened and she flung herself backwards, only barely registering the wall at the end of the bed that met her back at high speed.

"Get the fuck off me!" She shouted, the rest of the breath thrown out on impact.

Buffy shot upright and backed away, her own hand held against her cheek.

"Faith stop." She said, trying to force as much calm into her tone as possible. There would be a bruise there, in the morning, she was sure about it. "It was a nightmare, that's all. You're in my house, you drove from LA last night..." Faith's eyes shone in the darkness of Buffy's room, and her heaving shoulders were punctuated by sharp breaths. Buffy took another step away. "Faith I'm going to turn on the light, so you can see."

Her fumbling fingers found the switch and she flicked it on, without waiting for Faith's opinion on the matter. Buffy told herself it was because she wanted Faith to see where she was, but had she been truthful to herself she would have acknowledged the part of her that was... afraid... Faith would do something regrettable.

The room instantly brightened, and Faith flinched away from it, hiding once again behind the hair that had fallen onto her face. Buffy was able to see her now - her knees were drawn tightly against her chest, her arms trapped protectively between her thighs and torso.

"Faith." Buffy started again. "It was just a dream, that's all." Faith was clearly getting increasingly worse. What had she dreamt, to react that badly? She gestured around the room. "You're safe, see?"

She turned her head and started when she saw a figure in the doorway.

"Dawn go back to your room."

"But Buffy- "

"Dawn..." Buffy closed her eyes, raising a hand to her forehead. "I don't have time to argue with you. Please."

Dawn stalked away, and Buffy sighed. "Teenagers," She muttered, half to herself and half to distract Faith from any remaining visions of her dream. She moved slowly towards the door, pulling it closed with a soft click, then turned back to Faith. "Sometimes I just wish- "

Buffy stopped cold.

Faith had straightened her legs, and now Buffy could see her hands, and her eyes, all focused on the same place. Fingers pressing up against her tank top as if that very act alone was what was preventing her intestines from spilling out onto the bedspread. Her eyes, seeking, searching for the blood she *knew* should be there.

Buffy's heart hit the floor.

That's what she had seen. That was what Faith's nightmare had been. Running from Buffy. Buffy killing her.

"Faith I-" She whispered, but found herself unable to finish the thought. What was she going to say, sorry? It was only a dream? It didn't really happen? It turned out alright in the end? Reliving her nightmares from the past. That was the line - that was this demon's MO. Buffy was prepared for nightmares. She was prepared for the monsters under the bed, the bogeyman in the closet, the being chased naked down the street by William Shatner...

Nothing could have prepared Buffy for the possibility *she* would be part of those dreams. And not just any part. The starring role. The one who did the deed.

She would never forget the night. She could remember it, even now, right down to the cracks in the concrete surface on the roof. She could have mapped it out in a second. She remembered the fighting, the struggle, and most of all the sick feeling that spread instantly through her entire body as the knife slid so easily.. so *cleanly* into Faith's stomach.

Suddenly Faith glanced upward, as if noticing Buffy for the first time. Her eyes sparked a recognition, and her fingers loosened, falling gently away from her body.

"Uh..Hey."

Buffy had wanted her dead then - so much. It had seemed like the right - the *good* - thing to do. She had told herself that then. She had told herself she was the one to do it. The protector of all humankind. The Chosen.

What was The Chosen doing now?

"You okay?" Buffy asked, still staring at the place under Faith's black tank top that she knew the scar lay.

"Yeah good." Faith answered quickly. "Just didn't feel so good for a second there."

Buffy sighed again softly. She allowed Faith the lie. How couldn't she?

"The guys are going to call it a night." She ran a hand through her hair. "It was getting like the next Cold War down there. Everyone could do with the rest."

Faith nodded, then swept the room with her eyes. "Do you want me to- " She raised her eyebrows, and Buffy stared at her, confused. "Couch." She said.

"No. No of course not." The conviction wasn't as close to the forefront as she had wanted, but Buffy's mind was still reeling from the question. Did Faith feel like she was intruding? Did she feel out of place?

Buffy mentally kicked herself. Hard. Idiot. Of course she did.

"I'll be back in a sec." She said, then signed and threw a weak smile in Faith's direction.

"Need anything?"

"Nah."

"Okay." Buffy turned and opened the door, pausing to switch off the light.

"You can leave it on." Faith said suddenly, almost *too* suddenly to be a casual request. But by the time Buffy looked over her shoulder, she found no indication of it in Faith's face. "I'll wait." She said simply.

Buffy nodded, then quietly exited the room, closing the door behind her.

She had only taken two steps when she stopped, leaned hard against the wall and dropped her head. She closed her eyes, but could only see Faith, cowering at the end of the bed, hiding from her.

She had told Angel, when she had come to find Faith and drag her - or so had been her intention - kicking and screaming to jail, that she couldn't be in their "club" because she hadn't killed anyone. But really, that was just a technicality, wasn't it?

Buffy has seen Faith's eyes moments after she'd stabbed her. She had pretended not to see it - not to notice. But she'd seen the surprise, the disbelief. The sadness.

And the relief.

And that was what scared Buffy now, most of all.

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### Chapter 11

*So tell me why you've chosen me  
Don't want your grip  
Don't want your greed  
I'll tear you open, make you gone  
No more will you hurt anyone  
And the fear still shakes me  
So hold me Until it sleeps*

-- *Metallica*

As soon as Buffy's foot left the last step she was on a rampage. Funny thing was, she didn't even know why. Seventeen steps ago she was still in shock, still reeling from the image of Faith cowering from her, from her own conjured images of Faith's inherent death- wish that was obvious now, yet something she mistook at the time for something... evil.

Despite all the healing, despite the help exchanged, there was still that undercurrent of misunderstanding from both sides, that always threatened them. Always marched them down the path to self- combustion. Buffy didn't know what it was like to be Faith, and Faith didn't know what it was like to be anything else.

Both too proud. Both too independent. Both too stubborn.

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Buffy remembered the night they had broken into the weapons shop. She remembered 'Want. Take. Have'. God, she would have done anything for her then. She remembered the tingle up her spine as Faith had breathed the words to her. The way her eyes flittered along the length of the crossbow, then along the length of *her*. Which one. Which one did she want? Which one could she have?

She could have taken either, that night. For a few brief moments, she even did. At the Bronze, just dancing. Just the two of them. Buffy had never felt anything like it, and the connection scared her. It was like a magnet - utterly undefinable but full of this attractive force that just seemed to have no end. When they spoke it was never for long enough. When they were together it was never close enough.

They drew closer, but so close they polarised. Suddenly they were flying apart from each other with just as much fury. Just as much intensity. They hated each other with the same passion that had brought them together. Where they once couldn't speak for long enough they couldn't cut each other deep enough. They couldn't hurt each other fiercely enough. They couldn't *betray* each other enough, to make it count.

So Buffy killed Faith to destroy her.

And Faith didn't die to spite her.

Yet here she was - years later - changed, reformed, here when she was asked. Helping when it counted, despite all their history, despite all their *hurt*. Looking out for the people who couldn't look after themselves. The innocent. The vulnerable.

And in doing so she had become that which she'd come to save. Buffy had seen it, only minutes before. Vulnerable and unsure, terrified and alone, recoiling from her attacker, and all Buffy could do was remember her from back then. Remember the fights and the lies and the betrayal ... it was all she could think about. It was all she could comprehend. It was her reference point, always close to the forefront. 'Now' Faith to Buffy was no different to 'then' Faith. She wouldn't *let* her be any different. It wouldn't matter how much she had changed. Damn it, she was always going to be that girl who brought Buffy's life to bear. Who offered her everything in one instant then snatched it away the next.

Right now, Buffy couldn't decide if she was angry with herself because she felt for Faith, or if she was angry at herself because she didn't feel *enough*. She certainly didn't do enough. She sure as hell didn't know enough.

So instead she tore into the lounge room like a hurricane... a contained hurricane at that, churning and whirling up its own fury. It's own steam. Had Faith not been upstairs in full slayer-hearing of anything spoken or acted upon above 8 decibels, Buffy would have raged. She would have stomped. She would have thrown something. She would have been level 5, *serious* storm damage capable of ripping a house apart and depositing it inside out and back to front in some remote village on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

Only Tara, Willow and Giles remained, each at various stages of tidying. When Buffy's thunderous face marched its way toward them, all three stopped. Willow and Giles inched back. Tara, however, stared directly into the eye of the storm, and asked the question.

"Buffy...how's Faith?"

"Not great!" Buffy whispered in a foreboding sing-song. "Not fantastic. Messed up, actually."

Giles nodded slowly. The turbulence inside Buffy spiked. He was always so... goddamn *knowing*. He always *knew* everything! Nothing was new to Giles. Nothing was original. Nobody said or did anything that was outside his expectations. Why couldn't he, just for once, behave surprised?

She growled deep inside her throat and pointed at him.

"I've had enough!" She snarled, only too acutely aware of the slayer hearing that could have been tuned in. She didn't need to raise her voice. The tempest brewing on her face and in her eyes spoke volumes. "I'm pulling the plug. I'm telling her what's going on."

And there it was - the surprise, the confusion. The concern.

"Buffy, you can't."

Buffy would have revelled in it, were it not for the fact that she was too busy trying to force aside that strange feeling she had encountered earlier. The one that told her Faith was asleep again. Asleep and dreaming. Her eyes flashed.

"The *hell* I can't!" She snapped. "Do none of you *realise* what is happening to her!?" Her eyes darted across to Willow, then Tara, who stood utterly mute in front of her. "Because she sure as hell doesn't. All *she's* got are all these really... horrible... memories flashing around in her head and she doesn't even know *why*!" She flung her arms wide. "She is being *destroyed* from the inside by this thing and we're not even giving her a fighting chance to stand up for herself!"

Tara and Willow moved together and each took half a step away from the fuming force in front of them. Giles, however, squared his shoulders and closed the last book on the desk.

"I'm afraid it's more complicated than that- "

"How?" Buffy let her arms fall back down to her sides. "How Giles? Have I been missing for the last four weeks? Did we suddenly hit the information jackpot in the last.." She made a show of looking at her watch. "..Ten minutes?"

"Yes." Came a voice from behind her.

Buffy spun around to the source, and like a beam from a lighthouse her fury redirected itself wherever her eyes landed. Angel stood just outside the room, his hair wet and dots of rain on his black coat.

"It's vital to all of us, including Faith," He continued, taking a step inside. "That she doesn't know what's happening."

Buffy gaped. She couldn't believe she was hearing this. She *wouldn't* believe it. Not from

Angel - the champion of lost souls. The protector of the hunted. She narrowed her eyes.

"So...How are we supposed to stop it?" Willow asked gently.

Angel's eyes rested on Buffy for a fraction of a second, then darted away.

"We don't."

In the next instant the thunder simply melted away from Buffy's face, leaving stark, open-mouthed outrage. "What!?" Her eyes flashed and she advanced on him. "Coming from *you*?" She stopped barely an inch from his chest and glared upwards. "What is wrong with you?"

Angel sighed. "Believe me Buffy, I'm not happy about this either, but it's the only chance we have." He shrugged his coat off his shoulders and folded it over one of his arms, but when it was clear Buffy wasn't going to move from her position he raised his eyebrows. "Can I come in?"

She didn't respond - merely stepping away from him, glaring at the carpet so intently it almost should have been smoking. What the hell was he talking about? *leave* it?

"Angel." Giles said, stepping out from the desk. "How did you go?"

Angel pursed his lips and lowered himself slowly onto the couch, draping the coat between his knees. He stared at the coffee table for a moment, then looked up.

"Faith's it." He said.

Had they really thought about it, all of them would have realised how unsurprising that news was. They practically knew it, from the moment Giles had relayed the news that Faith had been attacked. However, there was something about the finality of hearing the words - of truly *knowing*, that made it so much more difficult. It indicated a picture far bigger than the life of one person. Bigger than the lives of the eighteen people already dead. This was bigger than all of them.

Giles' shoulders immediately slumped. Willow and Tara exchanged another glance, and Willow looked away, shaking her head. Buffy, her back still to the room, still trying to formulate some understanding of the situation, turned around.

"Everyone's jumpy out there. They know something's coming."

She heard the carefully-veiled uncertainty in his voice. She also knew who he was talking about when he said `everyone'. Slowly, she moved from behind the couch and dropped down into the seat that Faith had occupied only a couple of hours ago.

`Everyone' to Angel meant demons. Vampires. Undead. All those types who found living near the Hellmouth prime real-estate; not too far from home, and an all-you-can-eat buffet just across the road.

Faith was it.

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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"Angel." Buffy said carefully, "What about Faith?"

Angel cast her a sideways glance. "I know." He said softly. Linking his fingers together he bit down on his lower lip. "It doesn't get any prettier." He sighed. "We have one chance - slim at best - to kill Ammitus *and* save Faith."

"How?" Willow asked, before Buffy could. Buffy was still struggling to understand how Angel's comment about things not getting any prettier tied in with having a chance to save Faith

"It was hard for me to even get an idea of who we were up against. Hardly anybody is talking." He leaned back. "It's a force to be reckoned with. It revels in people's torment. For the most part it exists outside our plane, which is why we can't touch it out here." He bit down on his lower lip, drawing it into his mouth for a moment before letting it go. "It's been around for a *long* time. It's had no real enemies, nothing that's even come close to it." Another glance to Buffy. "Ammitus is...by all accounts...very self-assured, and equally... perverse."

Buffy blinked. She hated that word.

"Perverse...how?"

"It's been said that, if the "show" is good enough- "

"The *show*?" Buffy repeated, perhaps a little venomously, moving forward in her seat.

"Buffy, that's how he sees it." Angel said quietly. "He likes to watch the dreams he is creating. Especially just before-" The side of his mouth twitched uncomfortably "-he takes the soul with him."

"What, so...the dreams...he *watches* them!?" Buffy hissed with disgust. "That's...vile"

"Ammitus is pure evil, Buffy." Tara shifted on her feet. "Vile would be well within its realm of possibility."

"While it is watching," Angel continued. "It is the only time, before it rises and destroys everything in its path-" He lowered his voice "-and believe me, it does... *destroy* everything-" Buffy saw Willow wince at Angel's subtle reference to the possibility of their impending demise. Angel either seemed to not notice, or choose to ignore it. "-that it is vulnerable. It's the only time it coexists in...the same plane as the person it is hunting. It can be hurt. Hopefully killed." He raised both his eyebrows and hunched his shoulders briefly. "The moment Faith knows why she's having these dreams, Ammitus will just simply wait. It won't come out, which is the only chance we have to kill it."

Buffy shook her head. "But... how can Faith kill it if she doesn't know it's going to be there?"

"Faith can't kill it."

"Okay." Buffy held up her hands, impatience seeping off her tongue once more. "Okay now you're just talking in tongues. You're telling me we can't tell her about Ammitus because otherwise it won't show up in *her* head, in *her* dreams, which is the only time it can be

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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killed...." She turned her head to the side but kept her eyes on Angel. "But Faith isn't the one doing the killing. Am I missing something here?"

"Ammitus wouldn't appear until the point where Faith wouldn't have the strength to fight back. That's why it is so careful about the dreams and how it orders them."

"I'm still not following."

Willow immediately straightened. "I am." Her eyes darted to Giles, then Angel, then back to Giles, who nodded slowly. "Buffy, remember when Glory took Dawn, and you... you know..."

"Lost it?" Buffy shrugged, pretending it was old news, but the reference still stung. It certainly was one of the weaker times in her life. "You had to get inside my head and-" She stopped. "Willow you can't be serious!" She said incredulously. "You had a hard enough time with me, you couldn't go in there-"

"Oh no." Willow vehemently shook her head. "Me in Faith's head? No thank-you." Willow shuddered, made a face, then shuddered again. "I'd rather.. go... after Ammitus myself with a...a feather duster.". Tara glanced at her sceptically, mouthing `feather duster?'. Willow shrugged. "Besides," She continued. "She wouldn't let me in, and I'm no match for Ammitus in someone else's head. It's too much of the physical."

"So... *who*..." She began, then her confusion dissolved. Her mind... her heart recoiled in fear. "No.." She murmured, shaking her head "No... you can't be serious?"

Angel nodded. "There needs to be an established connection to-"

"Angel have you been *asleep* for the last few years!?" Her eyes pleaded with him. "There is no connection any more!"

"Keep it *down*." Giles said suddenly, interjecting with his own level of concern. "She might hear you."

Buffy looked at him like he was stupid. "She's asleep. She won't hear a thing unless someone tries to wake her up." She held up her hands. "But that's not going to be me because she might be right at the point where I stab her again and... y'know... she might forget not to retaliate."

"How do you know she's asleep?" Tara asked carefully.

"I just-" Buffy snapped, then stopped mid-sentence. "No." She said. "I know what you're doing. No. This? This isn't a connection. Not a good one-" She stared down at Angel's boots, and furrowed her eyebrows deeply. "Not a... life-saving one." Buffy looked up at him again, her head once again shaking, almost of its own accord. "We're always fighting. Angel. You scratch under the surface and we're always trying to kill each other."

"It's the only way, Buffy." He said softly. "And regardless of its nature - and I don't believe it is as bad as you say it is - your connection with Faith is the only thing we have."

"But it's all guesswork and assumption!" Buffy said, rising out of her seat. "It's assuming I can

get into Faith's mind in the first place,-"

"-we can do that for you." Willow and Tara answered in unison.

Buffy's head snapped around. "Well so what if you can?" She retorted hotly. "We're assuming number one, she won't see me and figure it out, number two, Ammitus will be there, and number three, it'll wait for me to show up!"

Angel lowered his gaze. "Ammitus will be there." He said. "For it, Faith's life is a show well worth watching." He looked up at Buffy, clearly saddened by the thought. "And she won't see you - we'll see to that. But you're right - Ammitus won't wait for you." He paused. "You have to wait for Ammitus."

Buffy's eyes widened. "No. No!" She said, backing away and shaking her head. "No. Do you know how... how *wrong* that is?" She stood up sharply, pacing across the carpet to the opposite wall. "Angel..." She looked across at the others. "Giles... you can't... it's wrong."

Angel glanced across at Giles and tucked his hands back under his coat. "Faith told me once she shared a dream with you, where you were both in it but-"

"She was in a *coma*!" Buffy said, her voice rising in pitch. "And we were in her *apartment*! And that was the *first* time! The last time I was in Faith's head I-... we..." She closed her eyes and remembered the grave. The knife. "...it wasn't Happy Valley." Opening her eyes again she jolted the image out of her mind sharply. "Besides-" She continued. "We're not talking about sitting around discussing the latest bedspread patterns in Vogue magazine... What *you're* talking about is giving me a backstage pass to the 'Faith's Top Ten Most Horrible Life Experiences' show!"

"Buffy It's not like that-" Giles attempted, poorly, to cast his vote. Buffy simply railroaded him with a glare.

"What if that were your head!?" She snapped, then spun around to the couch. "Angel, what if it were yours?"

She could tell by his expression, the lines on his forehead, the way his eyes darkened long enough for her to see the truth in them, that Angel understood. Angel had always been very private about his life. Not even Buffy knew the true extent of the things he had seen... things he had done. But she saw, in those few seconds, that he understood everything about what going forward with this plan meant. What it meant for Buffy, yes, but most importantly, he understood what it would mean for Faith.

Buffy wasn't just picking up her diary and reading a couple of more intimate pages. Buffy would *see*. She would *hear*... she would *feel* it all.

"It's the only way." He murmured. "It really is."

Buffy's heart sank.

Angel closed his eyes, and Buffy watched the emotions playing across his face. He raised a hand, and drew his thumb and forefinger lightly across his eyes, then opened them again.

"If there were *any* other option, Buffy, we'd be doing it. Believe me."

"If Faith finds out..." Buffy breathed. "If Faith finds out I've been in her head she'll..." she trailed off. It was time to stop. Time to stop forcing the `now' Faith into the `then' Faith mould. The decision revealed the truth - that Buffy didn't know. She had no idea how Faith would react. Not now.

But Angel knew. He knew it and he said it with his final comment - the one before the plan was set in motion. The one before not one of the five of them had anything more to say.

"I hope she doesn't, Buffy." He said quietly. "I really hope she doesn't."

---

Buffy climbed the stairs back to her room, her heart impossibly heavier than it had been on her way down. She stopped at the same place - the wall just before the door - and leaned against it. Bracing herself for more lies. More deceit. Bracing herself for Faith. Knowing what she was being asked to do.

Angel's words echoed in her head. It was the *only* way, wasn't it? Of course it was. For Angel to suggest something...like this...he just wouldn't.

She had seen Faith's relationship with Angel... it was something... different. Something she hadn't seen, certainly not from Faith anyway. There wasn't an attraction, or a clearly defined friendship, but there was... a reliance. From both sides. Buffy knew about that - she had it with Angel for a long time. It was the sort of thing that unavoidably arises from the number of times they had saved each others' lives.

Buffy felt the guilt again, tearing her apart, pulling at her morality, tying it in a knot and forcing it to look back on itself, to judge itself. Take a look in the mirror, Buffy? Were you really that righteous?

Her fingers rested on the doorhandle for a moment before she found the strength to turn it. As the door opened, Buffy's eyes were automatically seeking her. Looking for reassurance that she was still with them. Faith had fallen asleep again, her knees drawn tightly to her chest and her arms wrapped around herself. Buffy frowned. She hadn't even used the blankets.

Angel had known, before Buffy could even fathom the purpose of Ammitus' choice. There had been no question in Angel's mind the demon would be after Faith. There were clearly parts of her life she must have shared with him.

Parts she would have never meant for Buffy to know.

And even beyond that... parts she wouldn't have wanted anyone to know.

Faith cried out, muffled screams and whimpers, like a child's. Buffy crossed the short distance to the bed, her fingers finding the blanket folded at the foot of the mattress, drawing it out, pulling it over Faith's legs, not daring to cover any more for fear she would wake up feeling trapped... smothered. Slowly, carefully so as not to make noise Buffy sat down on the edge of the bed.

She was facing away from Buffy - toward the wall - but her dark hair splayed across the pillow behind her head, rather than covering her face like it so often did... not letting her hide...not letting her conceal herself from the world. Faith's eyes were squeezed tightly shut, her mouth twitching between scowls and silent sobs. Deep lines were etched across her forehead.

There was no peace with Faith tonight.

Buffy was reminded of all those times she'd seen Dawn sleeping, how innocent, how peaceful she looked. She'd never seen that expression on Faith's face. Not even when she was in a coma. Even unconscious, hooked up to life-preserving machines that pumped artificial life *into* her, that fought the fight *for* her, she had that crease between her eyebrows, as if she were in a constant state of unrest.

Unbidden tears sprang to Buffy's eyes as the sheer weight of everything descended upon her shoulders. She had been jealous of Faith's expressiveness, her inhibitions. She had been uncomfortable with the intensity of their bond. Had she given it more thought... taken more time... she would have seen the same fear in Faith, having tried once to get into Faith's mind, and being met with solid resistance.

But instead of fighting on she gave up, she just pushed back - stepping away. Shutting the doors.

Everything Faith was - everything Faith now tried so hard to fight against seemed to gain more shape in Buffy's mind. How could she have judged? How could she have been the judge of a life she didn't know, couldn't imagine... couldn't even *begin* to imagine?

How could she have tried to take that life?

Unconsciously, Buffy's eyes wandered down to Faith's abdomen, where she knew the scar lay; concealed always by clothing and yet still as clear as the night she had caused it.

Another cry, and Buffy's eyes snapped back to Faith's face, her hand immediately reaching for the fabric of Faith's black tank top. She knew better than to make any gestures more sudden or more overt than that. She had no intention of waking Faith this time.

"Faith.." Buffy whispered, lightly running her fingers from the back of Faith's hand to her elbow. Faith's restlessness didn't ease - nor did she expect it to. Her breathing was still erratic, her face still reflecting the horrors she was witnessing behind her eyelids. But for an instant, that connection Buffy had run so hard from had reversed, and she was hit with the sudden, overwhelming need to understand Faith. To help her. To be there for her, just as Angel had.

Tilting her head, Buffy moved her hand to Faith's cheek and brushed it gently with the back of her fingers.

"Faith..." She said again, for no other reason than to hear the name leave her lips with no hint of spite, no anger, no disgust. Her fingertips ran slowly over the creases in Faith's forehead, gently, so important not to wake her. So important not to let her see...



Reality closed in on Buffy with a stifling force, pushing at her freshly unearthed link with her fellow slayer. It yanked her away, coldly, harshly, reminding her of all the things she was going to do. All the things she was going to see. The trust...the past... the mind she was going to violate, because she had to.

Because she had to.

Buffy took a deep breath, letting it out very slowly before she stood up from the cot and stepped away.

"I'm sorry..."

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### Chapter 12

*Dear Dear Diary I wanna tell my secrets Cause you're the only one that I know Who'll keep them*

*Dear Dear Diary I wanna tell my secrets I know you'll keep them And this is what I've done...*

*--Pink*

Shouts rang out all the way down the small street in South Boston - both a man's and a woman's voice, swearing, crashing, slamming of doors. It wasn't uncommon in these parts. In fact, it was almost a daily occurrence. Someone was always shouting about something in this street, perhaps a symptom of having too many low-cost rental flats jammed far too closely together inside several ten-storey concrete shoeboxes.

In an alley dividing two of the high-rises a small figure scurried, between cars, dumpsters and bags of garbage, out of sight of most anyone who cared to look. Those who did look would have seen a dark-haired girl of no older than seven, sporting jeans a few sizes too big, and a bright purple and pink tie-died t-shirt. The white sneakers on her feet were almost unrecognisable as white, and barely recognisable as sneakers. In one hand she carried a white plastic bag with a couple of books and some pencils, and in the other was clutched a rolled-up piece of paper that she held with unlimited care, ensuring she wouldn't crease it by gripping it too tightly.

At the sounds of the shouts she stopped, craned her neck and eyed a window on the fourth storey of the building to her right. There was another crash, someone swearing and then suddenly, two storeys higher and five apartments along the window exploded outwards, sending shards of glass plummeting to the bitumen in front of her. The girl took a hesitant step backward, as if expecting something else to follow - a body maybe? - but when nothing did, she threw one more glance at the first window, switched the rolled-up paper and plastic bag between her hands and resumed running.

She dodged the glass under her feet, darting out of the alley and swinging around to the front of the building, up a concrete path to a set of stairs at the very edge of the block. The soft slapping sound of her shoes connecting with steps as she flew up all four flights echoed against the concrete walls. Out of the stairwell, right, then all the way down to the other end she jogged, past the large pile of clothes, several books and a stereo outside 417 that still

blocked half the corridor, and would continue to do so until the occupant's boyfriend eventually came home.

She stopped at 425, lowered her bag of books to the concrete and reached into her oversized pockets for her keys. The keyhole was at chest hight for adults and a full arms' length from her, but she pushed herself onto her tip-toes and jammed the key in with as much force as she could.

But before she even had the chance to turn the key, the door swung powerfully open, not giving her enough time to regain her balance from having her entire bodyweight leaning against it. She stumbled forward, taking all her concentration to *not* end up with her face in the carpet. Somewhere between losing and regaining her footing her hand had clamped down on the rolled-up paper, putting a deep set of creases in the middle.

The smell that wafted through the door made her nose crinkle. It smelled a mixture of alcohol, cigarettes, off baked beans, and sex.

To the girl, it smelled distinctly of home.

"Get the fuck inside."

A hand grabbed a fistful of her t-shirt and yanked her forward, throwing her off balance again and this time, the paper fell out of her hand. She gasped, her head snapping around to where it rolled on the floor, and she made a futile attempt to reach forward and retrieve it. She only received another yank in response.

"Kitchen, *NOW*."

Doug gave her a rough shove away form the door. With an expression somewhere between indignation and silent resignation at what was to come she walked slowly through the lounge room, past the couch, stepping carefully around several empty beer bottles. She heard the rustling of her plastic bag being retrieved from outside and paused, listening intently to any sound that would indicate he had picked up the other, more important item..

"Kid how many fucking times do I gotta say it?!" Doug bellowed. The sound made her flinch. Spurred on by the threat in his voice she half jogged, half shuffled the rest of the way through the open living area into the kitchen.

A woman sat on a stool by the bench, her hands wrapped protectively around a bottle of cheap gin. Her head was bowed, but the moment the little girl entered the woman looked up, in that semi-glazed glare the girl knew so well. Almost in slow motion she watched her straighten to her full height, draw in a deep breath and rock slightly backwards, as if she were the wolf trying to blow down a house.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing!?" She seethed, the stench of alcohol spewing out with every word. "You're asking for it you little bitch I swear."

The girl's eyes turned down to her shoes, then she jumped again when the sound of books and pencils slamming onto the kitchen lino heralded Doug's entrance. He stormed past her, deliberately knocking her shoulder on the way.

"It's fucking true." He thrust the loose piece of paper out towards the woman, seething. The girl craned her neck again to ensure it was the picture they were looking at, but her shoulders slumped in dismay at the creases now crossing it. Doug spun around and glared at her, jabbing at the paper. "Who the fuck is this!?"

"He lives across the street." She said, "I...I was drawing it for him cos he didn't have nothing to put up on his walls."

"Since when have you been hangin' around strangers huh?"

"He's not a stranger!" She shouted. "I know him - I see him every day on my way from school."

"So you drew a picture of you and some old guy, and you signed it `Kid'?" He snapped. "What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

The girl glanced between the woman and Doug, and eventually settled on staring at the benchtop somewhere in between them both.

"But mom the teacher said-"

The woman lurched forward with almost impossible speed for someone so drunk, nearly knocking her stool over. "I told you not to fucking call me that!" She hissed, pointing harshly at her. "Fucking hell, how many times do I have to tell you!"

The girl's resolve did not waver. "But the teachers said-"

"Fuck the teachers! What would they know? Just because I gave birth to you doesn't make you my fucking responsibility!" She snarled again, taking a step away and glancing at Doug. She shook her head. "Do you know how hard it was to *explain* to your teacher why the fuck you had `Kid' written on your paper!?"

"But... that's my name." The girl said softly.

The strike hit the little girl's cheek before she even saw it coming. She fell backwards, but her hands and arms were already ready to break her fall. She blinked up in time to see the woman towering over her, her left hand balled into a fist and the gin held firmly in her right hand.

"Don't be an idiot." The woman spat. "I don't even know your name." She lifted the bottle to her mouth and poured a generous amount past her lips, swallowing with a grimace and slamming the bottle back on the bench. "I told you to make up a fucking name, and stick to it! How fucking hard is that? Do you know what happens when teachers start asking questions?" Crumpling up the drawing, she threw it at the girl. "Social security gets involved. They take you away, and I lose my fucking payment for keeping you in this house."

She shook her head again and made a face of utter disgust, swigging deeply from her gin. Then, in the next instant she seemed to forget the young girl had ever been in the room, plastering her best lewd smile on her face and beckoning Doug toward her with one finger. Doug, equally ignorant, chuckled huskily, closing the distance between them with small,

over-emphasised steps.

Still on the floor of the kitchen the girl slowly reached for her picture, taking it into her hands and beginning to unwrap it, but without a second's hesitation Doug's arm swooped down, snatching up the paper, crinkling it tighter and tossing it in the bin without so much as *glancing* in her direction.

Perhaps not so equally ignorant, after all.

"Don't even *think* about getting it out." He muttered. He pushed himself against the woman roughly, sliding his hand up to cup her breast. "Now, where were we?" He growled in her ear. Then, as if as an afterthought he kicked at the ground, connecting with the small girl's ankle. "Get the fuck out and leave us alone." He snarled. "And don't come out until tomorrow morning or you'll wish you never fucking breathed."

Rolling onto her stomach, away from the hate and the anger and the sight of her mother getting it on with Doug, *again*, the girl rose to her feet and padded softly back through the lounge room, into the corridor and around to the right where her room - no bigger than a small study and jam-packed full of junk - awaited her.

And she didn't come out. Not for dinner, for the bathroom, not even for a glass of water.

Not until the next morning.

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She returned from school the same way as yesterday, but this time she didn't go straight home. The girl instead darted across the road to a smaller block of apartments, slipped through the fence behind it and into another alley. This time, she wouldn't lose her prize to Doug and her mom.

She could tell he was there from the small cloud of cigarette smoke that, by all appearances from a few yards away looked like it was seeping out of the walls themselves. However, a few more steps yielded a small alcove, reserved for the garbage dumpster that nobody ever bothered to store there and instead left a few feet away, up against the wall. In the interim the alcove had become home to an elderly man, or at least *seemingly* elderly. Years of homelessness always age a person more than their share of years. For the most part residents and visitors to this area of town kept well away from him, casting him aside as a homeless bum who had more than his share of screws loose.

She approached him boldly - a wide grin plastered on her face. The moment the old man saw her he gave a `whoop' and grinned back.

"Princess!" He puffed around his half-burned cigarette. "How was school?"

The girl shrugged, dropping her plastic bag of books and pencils on the step. "School's school." She said nonchalantly. The grin faded only slightly, however it was soon replaced with a sly, mischievous glance at her hand. The old man tilted his head to the side and peered at her.

"What's you got there?"

Then the brilliant grin was back - he had noticed her prize. She held out her hand, and out of the sleeve of her cardigan dropped a sizeable chocolate bar. The man blinked.

"Ooo where'd you get that one then?"

"I took it on my own!" She stated proudly, nodding. "Gots it from the corner store."

"Bet they never saw you coming, princess."

"Nope!" She said triumphantly, breaking the chocolate bar in half and ripping the packet open. She passed him the larger half, turned around and dropped down onto the concrete step beside him. "Not even *close*."

This had become almost a daily routine. They would sit in amicable silence for several minutes - he would puff away at his cigarette and munch on anything she had managed to steal for him, and she would sit and simply stare at the wall opposite her, enjoying the time to herself.

This time, however, the silence lasted barely a minute, before she turned to him and stared.

The old man broke into a smile and took a long puff of his cigarette, only turning to blow the smoke outward rather than into her face. "What's on yer mind, Princess?"

She continued staring at him, seeming to battle with the question in her mind. Then, she blinked and tilted her head.

"What's your name?" She asked finally

The old man, unfazed by the nature of the question, simply grinned. "Beats me."

She frowned. "But what do people call you?"

"Oh, everyone's got a name for me." He shrugged and bit into the chocolate, relishing it with an enthusiastic `mm-mmm'. He swallowed then leaned across to her. The girl wrinkled up her nose at the unwashed, unkempt smell of body odour mixed with old cigarettes and alcohol that surrounded her, but she didn't move away. "Most of `em I got no time for."

"So...what can *I* call you?"

"You can call me whatsoever takes yer fancy, princess."

She contemplated his comment for a moment, her face thoughtful. Then, she turned to stare at him, her eyes taking in every detail, ever line, every missing tooth. They travelled down the length of his old brown coat, his dirt-stained grey trouser pants, and his fading blue shirt. They paused again at his worn-out black shoes. He looked like he could have been one of those important, business people, who had just stepped out of his office building in his suit one day, sat down on the pavement and never got up again.

Then, her eyes flicked across to the garbage bag that held all of his "special" things - as he

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called them - shoved in the corner of the alcove he spent his time in, out of sight prying eyes. He had always kept it tightly closed, but today it was half-open and she could see the corner of a soft, thick blanket, a torch, and a bright yellow box of Cheerios.

Her eyes brightened.

"I want to call you Cheerio." She said, matter-of-factly.

He seemed surprised, for a moment, and a brief look of concern crossed his face when he realised where the word had come from. Immediately, he reached for the bag, his unsteady hands - bordering on panicked - bunching up the plastic and hiding its contents once more away, further into the alcove, out of sight.

She looked at him and smiled, catching his hand with one of hers on the way back to his lap.

"It's okay." She reassured him. "I won't tell nobody."

The man simply stared at her, as if unsure whether a seven year- old's word could be trusted. Then, he broke into another big, toothy grin.

"Cheerio it is then." He said with a `whoop' gesture. "Cheerio." He tried the name out again. Yes, he could certainly get used to it. He leaned in closer. "So, what shall I call you?"

The girl frowned. "Well...I don't know."

"But you gotta have a name! A princess like you?:"

She nodded, thinking back to how he had rationalised it.

`Everyone's got *a* name for me...'

She licked her lips. "Well, my mom says I don't got no name cos she can't remember what the nurses put on that..." Her small brow furrowed. "...piece of paper that's what proves to the gov-nent I'm born."

Her mind suddenly diverted to her mother's words. `I don't *care* what you call yourself, just find somethin' and stick to it.'

"...And she says she don't care what I calls myself s'long as it's the same an' no-one gets spicious what might tell the gov-nent on her so I get taken and she loses her paycheck. So I figures I call myself Cassie at school after that pretty lady on TV everyone's talkin' bout an' Doug mom's boyfriend thinks is hot an' wishes mom was as hot as her..."

`And don't fuck it up by changing half way through.'

"..But I don't really like the name cos I want my own and mom and Doug calls me `Kid' all the time. Can't remember when they called me anything else."

`Because if the government finds out and takes you away from me, then I lose my money, and I'll come after you so fast that you'll wish you weren't fucking *born*.'

She shrugged. "So I guess you and me's the same an' it don't matter what you call me." She frowned and looked at him earnestly. "S'long as it's not `kid' cos I hate that name."

`...and if you *ever* tell *anyone*, I'll drown you in the fucking Charles river.'

Cheerio nodded. Unbeknownst to anyone but him, this conversation was one of the most sobering in his life. Here was this girl, barely seven years old, holding her own against a world that thought nothing of her. Here she was. Unafraid. Cheerio had learned many times over that the human race was, for want of a better word, down- right fucked. This girl - this one, small, scraggly, dark-haired girl, gave him hope.

"I'd be much obliged, little Miss," He began, bowing his head. "If you let me call you Faith."

She blinked, then screwed up her face.

"But that's a *word*!" She said, pouting. "You can't name me after a word that's cheating!"

He laughed. "Sure I can - you named me after a breakfast cereal!"

She seemed to ponder that, then broke into a tiny, cheeky smile. "'Spose I did." She giggled. "Why Faith anyways?"

Cheerio simply smiled. "You'll figure it out some day."

He'd worded it so she wouldn't understand, but would perhaps a few years later, when the meaning behind it could be dealt with with something more than childhood understanding. What he had done, was pay her the highest compliment he knew how to give. But he couldn't have her finding out about it now.

`Faith' grew suddenly serious - far more serious than any child should be - and pointed at him. "You gots to keep it secret cos I'm not sposed to tell anyone I don't got no name."

Cheerio smiled, a sad smile.

"Safe with me, Miss Faith." He said. "Safe with me."

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"HEY!"

A shot rang out loudly, echoing backwards and forwards, up and down the street, the rain carrying it all the way to the ground. The dark figures scattered like startled rats. Each ran in their own direction, off into the shadows, away from the man with the gun.

He moved closer, leaning over to inspect the damage in what little light was offered by the early evening. A sudden movement in the corner of his eye made him turn, and only barely miss a whirlwind of dark, matted hair scramble past him, her short legs scabbling for purchase on stone pavement drenched by the downpour.

"Hey.. whoa..." He said, squinting into the darkness and spying a small gap between the wall

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of their apartment building and the dumpster in the alley.

She beat him - a girl no older than eight - finding the damage first, her arms flung out, grubby hands reaching, desperately seeking life in the crumpled mass of battered limbs and blood.

"Cheerio.." She whimpered, sobbing. "Cheerio wake up."

Tracks of dust mingled with rain and tears lined her face. Her hands pulled at his clothes, angrily yanking at the lapels of his tattered brown jacket. "*Come on..*" She begged, punctuating each syllable with a jerk. The old man's head, twisted at an impossible angle, simply lolled back each time she tried. Eyes lifeless. Body bloody.

The man who had disturbed the peace, and ultimately stopped the beating, knelt down close to the gutter, which was now beginning to run a shade of red.

"It's just some old homeless guy, kid." He said, almost sympathetically. "Nobody'll miss `im."

As if registering him for the first time he watched her release her hold on the man's jacket. Her hands and clothes were now stained with his blood, her face having caught bubbling spatters that still seeped from a cut above his eyebrow and out both nostrils.

"My name is *Faith*." She snarled, leaning back into a crouch, her hand still resting gently on the homeless man's body. "An' he *wasn't* some old homeless guy. His name was Cheerio." Her eyes filled with fresh tears and she wiped the back of her hand across her nose, smudging his blood across her upper lip.

Slowly, she turned to him, and the man would swear over and over again in years to come that he had never seen such an angry, haunted look in a child's eyes. Now, at this angle the man could see a bruise that traversed the length of her right cheek, sneaking across the space beneath her eye. There were grazes on both knees, and deep blue indentations in her left arm. Finger-shaped marks.

"You should've killed `em."

The iciness of that girl's voice struck him to the very core.

"Killin's for scum." He said quickly, then flicked his eyes up the wall to the first level apartment window, studying it closely for any sign he had been seen. "Hey, do you live up there?"

The little girl thought around that question, then her eyes, and voice hardened.

"Nope."

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Faith shot upright in her bed, flinching unconsciously at the creak that resonated through the room. Wiping her hands furiously down her body, on her arms, her legs, her tank top she blinked the vestiges of the dream away, trying to force the feeling of his blood from her hands - the sick grinding of his head flopping on a broken neck.



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Fuck... what was she doing?

She wiped at her face, shuddering. It had taken her days to realise his blood was on her face. Fuck...

She was going to be sick.

Unceremoniously throwing the blanket off her body Faith staggered to her feet, lurched across the carpet and flung herself at the door, yanking it open with no time or inclination to do so quietly. She was only concentrating on two things - one, keeping the contents of her stomach down, and two, remembering where the hell the upstairs bathroom was.

She heard Buffy call out to her softly as she threw herself into the corridor but didn't even register it. One arm wrapped around her stomach and the other up against the wall for support, Faith called on all the reserves of brain function she had and pictured the house in daylight...

Right.

Carpet gave way to cold tiles, and Faith couldn't help but remember how cold the pavement had felt against her bare legs that night. She'd thought it was just the rain, but it hadn't been. His blood had been everywhere. All over the pavement, running through the gutters, all over her.

She half walked, half stumbled the extra distance to the toilet, her hands reaching out, bracing herself against the seat. It took barely a second for her brain to connect to her stomach, and she vomited violently, over and over again until she had nothing but bile to expel and barely the energy to hold herself upright. Her fingers still held tightly to the toilet seat even as she slumped in an untidy heap onto the cold floor, bone-tired but too afraid to close her eyes, just in case the images would be there, waiting for her.

Where were they coming from? Why now? She'd managed to file all that shit away in the 'do not open, EVER' section of her head a long time ago. She hadn't thought about him in years. Almost ten years.

Fuck, it was like she was a gram away from a fucking overdose.

"..Faith?"

Faith flinched at the voice, holding up her hand in defence of herself, or perhaps defence of the picture she painted. Unfortunately with one less hand to steady her she unbalanced and her other hand slid away from the toilet, hitting the tiles with a slap and folding her body away from the voice.

"Go back to bed, B-" She rasped, the vile taste of stomach acid mixed with old popcorn dancing across her tongue, enticing her to be sick again. Of all the people in the *world* she didn't want her to be here. She didn't want Buffy to be here. Miss pristine existence. Miss perfect fucking life. "this is my shit."

She felt as filthy as she had been that night, like his blood still stained her, covered her hands and arms - sticky, semi-congealed. The dust that stuck in her eyes.

Buffy moved into the bathroom, and reached down to her, touching her arm gently. Too gently. Too fucking gently for her. Faith flinched away, hiding herself from it.

"Get...the fuck... away from me Buffy."

Buffy didn't move. Instead, she leaned forward again, reaching out, resting a hand on her shoulder. "Faith let me help you."

But this time Faith jerked forward, pushing Buffy away from her, wiping a hand savagely across her mouth.

"I don't *need* your help!" She snarled. "I don't fucking need it!"

Her eyes burned brightly with the fire she knew inside her so well. The one that told her she was nothing. She was alone. She was worthless. The fire of self-loathing, the one that screamed for people to hear and yet isolated her so far away from them at the very same time.

Buffy was too gentle. Not rough enough. Not rough enough for what she deserved.

She had to get out.

Scrambling to her feet, Faith flung herself out of the bathroom door and sprinted down the hallway, a shocked Buffy only having moments to decide whether to follow her or not. But by the time the decision was made there was the scrambling sound of bare feet pounding down the stairs, and a door slamming.

And Faith was gone.

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### Chapter 13

*You spend all your time waiting  
For that second chance  
For a break that would make it okay  
There's always some reason  
To feel not good enough  
And it's hard at the end of the day  
I need some distraction  
Oh beautiful release  
Memories seep from my veins  
Let me be empty  
Oh and weightless and maybe  
I'll find some peace tonight.*

-- Sarah McLachlan

Barely half an hour had passed since Faith's disappearance and the house was already unnaturally abuzz with activity. Unnaturally only because it was abuzz at 3am. All the lights downstairs and in the upstairs hallway were on, and Giles, Willow, Angel and Tara all moved

cautiously around, as if the very air would shatter if they spoke too loudly.

Xander emerged from upstairs yawning and scratching a hard-to-reach spot between his shoulder blades. He ran a hand quickly over his scruffy hair to improve his 'just-out-of-bed' appearance and frowned.

"What's going on?" He asked.

Buffy's faced was drawn tight, and her eyes were strained. "Faith's gone." She said.

"Surprise surprise." Xander's arm fell back down to his side. "Well, there goes the world." He shook his head even before Buffy had a chance to glare at him and blew out a loud breath. "What time...when did she go?"

"About half an hour ago." Buffy said. "She'd... just woken up from a nightmare and totally... flipped out. Xander-" Her eyes pleaded with him. "Can you just... put a lid on the 'I told you so's?" She wiped a hand over her face. "I don't think I could deal with that right now."

"This changes things a little." Giles suddenly said, having paced backward and forward in thoughtful silence up to now. He frowned, looked across at Willow and pursed his lips. "Does Faith need to be present in order for us to begin?"

Buffy's eyes widened. "Begin? Begin...." She bunched up her shoulders as if her following word would be 'what?'

Willow didn't so much as glance in Buffy's direction, and nodded. "They've shared dreams before over distances. It...can be done, yes."

"What, *now!*?"

This time Giles turned to Buffy. "If we don't know where she is, we're blind." He looked across at Angel. "This is happening awfully quickly."

Angel nodded carefully. "I know. Faith has a lot of... history." He pursed his lips. "Maybe Ammitus is playing also on Buffy's relationship with her, I'm not quite sure."

"It would make sense." Willow said. "I mean... Buffy's hatred for Faith"

"I don't hate Faith." Buffy snapped harshly.

"Okay... you..." Willow thought for a minute, then her eyes brightened. "...strongly dislike her and don't trust her as far as Xander could throw her?"

"I could *so* throw her further than I could trust her!" Xander exclaimed, scowling at Willow like a spoiled child. "But thank you for the vote of confidence in my physical prowess."

Willow caught a nervous glance from Tara at the brewing storm and raised her voice. "Uh...well what I meant was we *all* feel the same about Faith, Buffy, but... you... you know... Ammitus found your head first."

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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"Either way-" Giles interrupted. "-we need to do something about it now or we might lose our only hope of saving them both. Do you have everything you need?" He asked Willow and Tara.

They both nodded.

Buffy shook her head.

The room ignored her.

"It's all been prepared." Tara offered, standing up and gesturing towards the stairs. "I'll go get it."

Buffy's shoulders sagged, and she ran a hand through her hair. "Someone remind me again why I agreed to this?" She asked, then held the hand up before anyone had a chance to answer her. "That was a rhetorical question, by the way."

Tara returned, a pouch in one hand and a jar of what looked like sand in the other. Buffy raised an eyebrow at both items but said nothing. After this long, she had learned never to ask because the answer never sounded attractive. There was something about standing in a circle of powdered newt droppings that could really spoil a person's day.

"We'll need to...uh move the table." Willow said, glancing between Giles and Xander.

"Oh, so *now* I'm chosen for my superior physical capability." Xander mumbled. He wasn't granted a response, which Buffy knew he wouldn't have been expecting, and helped Giles move the coffee table to the back of the room.

"Ohhkay." Willow said, taking the jar from Tara and popping it open. She dipped her hand into it, whispering an incantation under her breath as she slowly withdrew a pinch of the powdery substance and tossed it onto the rug.

Tara waited three tosses, then joined in, opening the pouch she held and circled Willow, pouring the brownish-red and equally powdery contents in a tight circle around her, her own lips silently moving with different words.

Then they both stopped, closing their eyes, moving closer and chanting together, under their breath so Buffy couldn't hear. Buffy asked herself for the hundredth time whether what she was doing was the right thing. Spying on Faith's secrets, her dreams... It *was* wrong. She turned to Angel, her eyes asking, *pleading* with him to tell her there was another way. There was something else they could be doing to stop this.

"Buffy." Willow said, without opening her eyes. "Step into the circle."

Angel nodded seriously, shattering Buffy's last minute hopes of salvation.

Taking a deep breath, she shot a quick glance at Giles, then crossed the distance to the two witches, forcing the implications of what she was about to do into the dark, untouched and untouchable areas of her mind. Again without opening their eyes both Willow and Tara took half a step backward, outside of the circle, leaving exactly enough room for Buffy to stand

between them.

"Step inside Buffy." Willow repeated.

The moment Buffy entered it she felt the magic, pulsing around her with its own ethereal viscosity. It was times like these that she understood how exciting it could be to command such power. She could understand how someone could become addicted to it, be corrupted by it.

"Close your eyes." Tara whispered.

Buffy's eyes slid closed, until there was nothing but darkness and their voices. Almost immediately, like a cobra being teased from a basket with a lilting flute, the voices stirred a cold, dark yet enticingly uncontrolled presence that Buffy recognized straight away.

It was the one she felt every time she was close to Faith.

The chanting increased in volume, and in turn the presence amplified. It swirled around Buffy's subconscious, moving away from the place she had come to accept their connection to be, and began to settle in the more prevalent sections of her mind. Places where she could almost *touch* the darkness. Like it had form itself. Like Ammitus itself was knocking on her own mind's door.

For an instant, she saw the flash of a child's face, screaming, crying, calling out for help, a garbage bag open in front of her. Crumpled sketches... drawings laid out in a circle - a boat, a bird, a cat. In her fist she grasped the tattered remains of another drawing, in the same hand, of an older man and a child, sitting on a step, smiling.

Buffy gasped. The cries escalated, louder and louder, overwhelming loss and loneliness echoing in her mind until she could barely think herself.

And was that... a box of Cheerios?

"Stop..." She whispered. "I can't..."

Willow opened her eyes. Tara increased her chanting to match Willow's disconnection. "Just.. concentrate on the things you know. Let Faith into your mind, but don't let her take over your mind."

Buffy squeezed her own eyes shut. "...Please don't make me do this."

But Willow and Tara linked hands, both eyebrows furrowing, concentrating harder. Buffy pushed the sound away, but jerked bolt- upright as the feeling of strangers hands roaming her body tingled up and down her spine.

"Oh God..."

Terror, grief, abandonment, fear all flowed through her like a giant jolt of emotional lightning. Tara and Willow changed pitch, tilting their heads in concentration.

And the guilt. God, the guilt.

She'd been so alone.

Then suddenly, Willow and Tara's voice stopped dead, and as intensely as it had started the influx of emotions vanished, giving way to a vague, only slightly painful background radiation. Buffy raised a shaky hand to her head.

"How...did it go?" Willow asked tentatively. Tara still had her eyes closed.

Buffy swallowed heavily. If she concentrated hard enough she could have sworn she could feel blood all over her. Something about a snapped neck?

"I think... you know I think it worked." She said shakily, looking up at Willow who was watching her with a concerned expression. Behind her Tara placed a gentle hand on Buffy's shoulder and she flinched, turning her head and offering an apologetic smile. "Sorry, just a little jumpy." She said, side-stepping away from them. "You know? I... think I'm going to get a glass of water."

Without waiting for a response Buffy left the lounge room, her face troubled. She walked evenly through the kitchen, almost on autopilot around the bench, opened the cupboard above the stove and pulled out a glass. One step to the right, fridge. Open door, pull out chilled filtered water, pour into glass, replace.

And that was where autopilot ended.

Buffy slumped onto the bar stool, her arms forming a protective circle around her glass of water and her shoulders hunched. She was trying desperately to make sense of it. The fury in which Faith had woken startled even her. Although she had felt the unease before Faith had woken, she hadn't experience enough to recognise it as such, and had still been half asleep when Faith had stumbled past her bed.

In the bathroom... she had been white as a ghost. As if she had *seen* a ghost. Her features were drawn and haunted and terrified to the point that the body had kicked in on instinct and shown self- defence, rather than fear.

And Faith had run from it. Again.

And in the darker, more holistic picture, their one chance at finding and killing Ammitus was running only a few feet behind.

It was done. The connection was well and truly established. And now, she sat back...and waited? What? Went and grabbed her popcorn and diet coke and settled in for the show?

Buffy wondered if those things she'd seen only minutes before was a glimpse of what Faith had seen. That thought alone sent a jolting shudder through her body. Of course they had been.

"Buffy."

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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Her eyes darted up, finding Angel in the doorway in front of her. Immediately her resolve cracked, and her face crumpled for an instant before she quickly regained control, knowing in her heart that her relationship with Angel was no longer that which it used to be.

"Angel..."

"I know." He said solemnly. He turned his head, staring behind him and then back at Buffy. "What happened?"

She shook her head. "I don't know... I just...she woke from a nightmare and I found her throwing up in the bathroom. I tried to help her and she flipped out on me."

Angel sighed. "She's not ready Buffy."

Buffy stared at him for a moment. "What, to face what she's facing? I know that!" She snapped. "But she has no choice!"

"I wasn't referring to that." Angel said quietly.

"Oh..."

"I meant she's not ready to accept *you*."

"Oh."

"...or your friendship."

This time, Buffy paused in earnest. She looked up at him, momentarily confused, then her face calmed and she nodded very slightly. She knew what Angel meant.

She had wanted to comfort Faith. She had wanted to make things easier for her, to help her...but it was too late for that. It had been too long gone since she had cast Faith aside with little more than a half-glance and shown blatantly that she was utterly disinterested in her side of the story... that there was nothing she could say or do that would change anything - that she would always be evil, always be bad.

There was so much healing to do now, that providing Faith any physical or emotional comfort seemed a bit contradictory. Especially considering all the physical...all the emotional damage they had caused each other.

Buffy tilted her head. "I thought you would have gone after her." She said.

"I will." He answered her, nodding. "But I know Faith needs her time. Ammitus will be concentrating on her now. He won't be out roaming." He took a few more steps into the kitchen, stopping opposite Buffy. "I wanted to make sure the spell worked..." He paused, glanced at the ceiling and back down again, looking slightly uncomfortable. "...and that you were okay."

Buffy sighed. "I just...don't know what to be around her." She said softly. The girl's face flashed into her mind, then vanished again. "We're either fighting, or running." She lowered

her head. "All the time."

"It was never going to be easy, Buffy. You said that to me yourself."

"I know, but..." She stared intently at her glass. "-seeing her here. Having her here... part of me feels like she never left, you know?" She flicked her eyebrows up and looked back at him. "Part of me is glad to have her back, and the other part is... still expecting her to ride *in* on Ammitus' back and destroy us all."

"Do you forgive her?" Angel asked.

Buffy blinked. "What?"

"Do you forgive her...for what she did."

"I-uh..." Buffy closed her eyes. Images of her in her apartment, laughing off a murder - a death she caused...her with Angel, taunting Buffy as she was held, chained against a wall...images of Graduation - Faith's instrumental part in it all, and images of Angel himself, dying and in insurmountable pain all flitted across her mind. Then... her mother. Her body. Riley. Buffy looked up at Angel, her forehead creasing. "There's just so much..."

"What would you say to her?" He asked. "If you had the chance to."

"God...I'd.." Buffy lowered her head again. "I guess I'd want to make her understand all the hurt she caused.."

"She understands. She sent herself to jail, Buffy."

"So what!?" Buffy shouted, slapping her hand down on the counter. The water rippled in her glass. "She spends a couple of years in an institution and comes out all squeaky clean!? Suddenly all her victims sit around and say `oh, Faith is out of prison. Let's forget about the things she did and invite her around to our place for tea and cookies!'" She punctuated her last word with an insincere clap of her hands, and rose from her stool, gesturing at Angel. "Angel after everything she did.. everything she did to *you*!?" She shook her head. "How can you stand there and pretend it never happened?"

"I know it happened."

"And so do I!!" Tears pricked Buffy's eyes. "But the difference is I remember the feelings. I remember how much it all *hurt*!"

"And you want to make her hurt too?"

"YES!" Then as if listening to that opinion for the first time, paused, lowering back down onto the stool. "No. I mean-"

Suddenly, out of nowhere Buffy's consciousness split in two. In one part of her mind she was arguing with Angel, and in the other she was...standing on a rooftop...watching a fight. The kitchen was warm, but the rooftop was cold, and the combination was wreaking havoc on her brain. Buffy's frown deepened and she pulled her head back. Angel stared at her, concerned.



"Buffy?"

"Uh...I think..." She swallowed, shaking her head as if trying to dislodge one of the realities.

Angel reached across the counter and placed a hand on her arm. "Close your eyes." He said. "It'll be easier." She did, and she leaned into the counter, steadying herself as the rooftop reality took over her senses.

Buffy's blood ran as cold as the night air the moment she felt the concrete under her feet. She'd recognise this place anywhere.

"That's mine!"

"You're about to get it back."

Buffy pulled her robe tighter around her, glancing left and right, then back at the two figures across the way, watching them throwing kicks and punches at speeds only capable of slayers. She advanced on them until she could *see* the fear in Faith's eyes, and the utter, controlled hatred in her own.

Realisation shot through her like fire, and instantly Buffy knew... she *knew* there was nothing she could say now that could possibly hurt Faith more than she had this night...

This night Buffy told her in *no* uncertain terms that she was hopeless, that she would never be anything more than evil. She would never be anything more than the scum of the Earth. There was no future for her. There *would* be no future for her. And what's more, nobody cared enough to come out and save her, because they all agreed.

"Man, I'm gonna miss this." She heard Faith say.

Buffy's eyes widened as her counterpart swung at Faith with that knife...

"No!" She cried out, lunging towards them. But there was no way she could stop it. She was close enough to see...practically *feel* the knife slide into Faith. She saw the blood, *Faith's* blood pause almost suspended near the wound and then spill out, over the blade, over Buffy's hands.

And she heard the words spoken loudly in those hands, the curses pouring out of the blade into Faith's heart. Heard the accusations screamed, over and over again in her own eyes.

Here Faith, take this knife and look at yourself. See what I think of your life? See what importance I place on your existence? Now Faith, now look at it. Watch your life...your existence ebb away like I think it should. I've killed you Faith. I am so right and you are so wrong and you will die tonight and the world will be free of your evil.

And she saw Faith's reflection in the blade. How desolate, how much desperation was written on that face. How much sorrow. How much relief. For an instant, she saw the little girl.

Tears pricked Buffy's eyes. Oh God.. what had she done?

"No Faith.." She choked, spinning around, turning her back on her own disgusted glare. Pain flitted across Faith's features as she bent over, clutching her stomach. Automatically Buffy reached up to the dark face before her. She was desperate to smooth the pain away... take it all away. "Faith I'm so sorry..."

But Buffy's fingers passed directly through her as if she were a ghost, unable to connect. Unable to comfort.

"You did it-" She murmured. And that smile, that small, sad smile.

Buffy's heart contracted painfully in her chest. Her hand darted to her mouth, catching the first sob as it escaped. "I know I did..." She said softly, reaching back towards Faith's cheek with her other hand. She knew she wouldn't be able to touch her but somehow she hoped the proximity would soothe the pain. "I know.."

It didn't.

Faith took a step backward and shoved her attacker away, hands pushing unseen through Buffy's body, leaving the attacker on the ground behind them and Buffy barely inches from her face.

"You killed me."

She watched Faith's face change, harden and grow cold. Watched her steel herself for the last few feet, the small climb to the edge of the rooftop. Buffy could see the injury overwhelming her now, in a way she hadn't been able to see from the ground.

"Still won't help your boy though." She said.

Then she saw another change - one she had surely missed the first time. Buffy stepped closer towards her.

The smile...the smile was back. "Should've been there B-" She murmured, "-Quite a ride."

And as she watched her fall away from the roof - fall to the truck below, sealing her fate for at least another 8 months, Buffy thought she understood. That was Faith's way of saying she should have seen her life, should have been in her shoes. Should have known that she'd never get the better of her. Never Faith. Faith always had the last word.

"I will be there Faith." She promised the darkness "We'll find a way."

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"Buffy?"

Buffy's eyes snapped open and she sat upright, taking a moment to absorb her surroundings. Angel was still standing in front of her, concern marking his face, his hand resting just to the left of Buffy's, just out of reach.

"You okay?"

Buffy nodded. The tears still felt fresh in her eyes - the image of Faith falling away replaced with the memory of her running towards the edge of the roof, watching the truck disappear down the road with Faith's broken body on the back of it. She remembered the feelings she had in those moments. She remembered the realisation of what she had done. She remembered the sadness, the fear of what not having Faith's body meant for Angel, and she remembered feeling the guilt. That guilt that she still carried with her, though glossed over a hundred times with all those things Faith had done.. to *her*.

"Yeah," She murmured. "I was... she was dreaming about the night I... you know." She flashed a weak smile that faded instantly. "Angel..." She stood up and stepped away from her stool. "We have to find her."

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### Chapter 14

*I linger in the doorway  
Of alarm clock screaming  
Monsters calling my name  
Let me stay  
Where the wind will whisper to me  
Where the raindrops  
As they're falling tell a story*

*In my field of paper flowers  
And candy clouds of lullaby  
I lie inside myself for hours  
And watch my purple sky fly over me*

-- *Evanescence*

She'd spent a fraction too long with Cheerio this afternoon. He'd been happy because she'd managed to steal him a packet of cigarettes - and although they were twice the strength he usually smoked and the taste reminded him of petrol fumes he took them with his giant smile. She had gone for the bright yellow box. To match his Cheerios.

It was a gift from *her*, his Princess. His Faith.

And he would smoke every damned one if it meant he died of a heart attack in the process.

She had been becoming more bold with her petty thieving, too. Having started with small things like crisps and chocolate bars to have moved on to cigarettes and dirty magazines, she was certainly developing an appetite for the criminal. It made her feel untouchable.

It made her feel like she could do anything.

She heard nothing from the other side of door 425 when she pushed her key into the lock. Now, she didn't need to stand on tip-toes to do it - despite having to still stretch her arm up she could do so without committing herself to the swing of the door.

As she entered she could hear soft, muffled giggles from further inside. Her mom and Doug

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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must be drunk again. Dropping her plastic bag full of books, pencils and homework by the door, she pulled it shut behind her and stepped over the scattered shoes, around the corner into the lounge room.

Her mom lay sprawled on top of Doug on the couch, laughing at nothing, just disintegrating into giggles as soon as there came anything close to silence.

The girl shuffled her feet, and leaned against the wall. Doug glanced up and grinned.

"Hey... Kid..." He slurred, a glazed look across his face.

Her eyes traveled from him, to her mom, to the beer bottles on the carpet, to an obscure white powder on the tabletop. There, they held, and she took a step forward, craning her neck to see what it was.

"It's coke, honey." Her mom answered the girl's unspoken question. "Doug got it for me...and *fuck* it's better than that cheap shit I've been drinking all this time." She shook her head, bracing her hands against Doug's chest and pushing herself upright, but slightly overcorrected and slid back against her armrest. With a considerable amount of coordination and effort Doug also pulled himself into a seated position. Her mom pointed in the vague direction of the half-empty bottle of gin on the carpet beside her foot. "Fuckin' waste, with this stuff around." Gesturing at the table she snickered. "You should try this, honey. Fuck...it'd take you places you'd only dream of."

The girl glanced at the powder again.

Like...out of here? She silently thought.

Doug smiled wider. "Good shit, kid." He grunted.

Then her mom flashed Doug a smile. "Isn't he just the greatest?" Giggling, she dropped her hand onto Doug's groin and kneaded, *hard*, her giggle giving way to an open laugh as his eyes rolled heavenward and he leaned back into the couch.

The girl made a face and turned away, intending to leave the room, but her mother's voice stopped her.

"Where the fuck d'you think you're goin', huh?" She demanded, redirecting the girl's attention to the couch. She had moved her hand away, folding forward to take in another line, and Doug's erection was pushing up against his tracksuit pants like he'd stuck one of the empty bottles of beer down there. He growled, snatching at her mom's hand, trying to guide it back, but she simply swatted it away, concentrating on slicing the coke like he'd taught her. "Later, baby." She promised huskily.

"Come on baby... you know you want it." He leaned into her, sliding his own greasy hand up between her thighs, fingers teasing. "Some o' this?" He attempted to wiggle his eyebrows, but thanks to the lines he'd already had he could only succeed in controlling his muscles to raise, then lower. Once. "We've never done it high before."

She shrugged him off irritably.

"I'm not done *gettin'* high, so you'll just have to fuckin' hold on a sec."

"Fuck, Jaz!" He shouted, slamming his back into the couch. "Fucking tease. You can't just leave me like this..." As if to emphasise his point he pulled at his waistband and peered down at himself. "They're going blue!" He reached for her for a second time with his free hand, intending to pull her over to him so she could look herself.

But she was having none of `it'. "Fuck *off!*" She said, shoving Doug away. Unable to respond in nearly enough time he simply toppled over, coming to rest with his head jammed up against the arm of the couch. Jasmine scowled again.. "I *said* later, alright? Fucking-" Then eyes snapped up to the girl, whose own eyes immediately widened in fear. "Get her to fucking suck you off." She sniggered to herself, catching her own thought before voicing it. "She'll need the practice."

A laugh left Doug's mouth that was half way between a scoff and a snort, and the girl could see spit flying from his lips in all directions. He stared incredulously at her mom's face for a good minute, just laughing, chuckling... pausing...

Then he turned to the girl, and raised an eyebrow.

In her mind, many, *many* times over in so many years to come the girl would have run. She would have just picked up her stuff and run for it. Out the door. Out a window. She wouldn't have cared. But here, in this reality, where it happened, with nothing...not even a real name to hold her tight to the world, the little girl froze.

"How's about it, kid?" He leered at her, already rising from the couch, the beer bottle sticking straight out. "Whaddya say?"

She shook her head.

"Oh go on you wuss!" Her mom slurred, giggling. "I do it all the time. Consider it.. my *birthday* gift to you. My boyfriend's dick. Yours to be fucked."

The girl blinked, suddenly completely distracted, and peered around Doug's approaching form, at her mother's face.

"What? Yah you heard me. Eight years ago today I squeezed you out of my fuckhole and hoped to all fuck you weren't breathing. And look at that- you were." When that answer didn't seem to compute with the girl, she laughed, then added "What?" with a punctuated shrug. "Want a fucking medal or somethin' for living this long?"

The girl's eyes darted up to the calendar that hung on the wall. A naked woman with enormous breasts and no panties stared back at her as she straddled the engine of a car, black oil dripping from her body.

Today was December 14th.

She stared at it until Doug's shadow distorted her line of sight and his hands reached for her shoulders, turning her sharply towards him...

"Come on, kid. Let me make a woman outta you." He growled.

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head furiously, trying to pull away. She could feel the fabric of his tracksuit pants fall to his ankles, bunching up against her own shins. She could feel the heat of him close to her right ear, and once again she tried to duck, escape. He simply jerked her forward again. The end of his dick slid past her cheek. She could feel it - hot, wet. Sticky. It left a mark on her skin.

She gasped, terror ripping through her, unable to see, unable to move, unable to scream.

"Your mouth, you idiot. It goes in your mouth. Just like sucking a lolly pop."

`No' she mouthed, shaking her head, then pressing her lips together as hard as they would possibly go.

"What's that?" He hissed. She didn't answer. She didn't open her eyes. Tears slid unbidden out from under her eyelids. "I didn't fucking *hear* you. What did you say?" When she didn't answer for the second time, he buried a hand in her hair and yanked it back so she would look up at him.

Her knees buckled. She fell forward against him, feeling the hair on his legs tickling her face. Completely limp. If she was completely limp he wouldn't be able to move her, to control her...to make her stand where she didn't want to be...

"Don't make me hurt you you little fucking bitch."

His other hand dug into her left arm, gripping tightly, fingers boring into her skin, pressing into ligaments and tendons and muscles so hard it made her cry out. He lifted her up to him, back to the height he wanted, pressing her mouth against the tip of his erection so that she could *taste* it... but she was sobbing now, her little body shaking with fear, her legs utterly useless.

"STAND UP!" He bellowed, slicing his hand across her cheek. She fell to the floor instantly, rolling onto her side, bunching herself up, shielding herself from him.

And as he reached down, as he pulled her upright for the third time and pressed her body against him, proving she couldn't get away, *proving* she was small, insignificant, that he was in control...she shut off her mind, and remembered the woman.

December 14th

December 14th

Today is my 8th Birthday.

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Faith jerked awake, instinctively rolling away from her position, pulling herself semi-upright and vomiting yet again, expelling the dream from her body. The taste of him from her mouth. Her hands, fingers pressed into the grass leaving dark prints in the dew. Her breaths came in

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## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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short gasps - her entire body shook with the cold that had settled over Sunnydale, bringing with it the first real signs of winter. Her mind reeled, her body following closely behind as she pushed herself weakly to her feet and stumbled a few steps backward, only falling to her knees again, silent tears streaming down her face, arms wrapped around her body, shivering.

What was the date.

What the *fuck* was the date.

"Faith?"

---

"Buffy?"

Buffy's eyes flew open, and she sat up immediately, without even registering who it was, breathing heavily, legs scrambling to remove the bedspread from her sweating and overheated body. In a flurry of feet, sheets and encased goose down she scrambled off the bed, lurched across the room and bent over her knees, bracing a hand against the wall.

"Buffy... Buffy it-it's me." A hand touched her shoulder and she flinched instantly, spinning around, sidestepping the contact with a semi-feral hiss.

"Don't touch me."

---

"Faith it's okay.. it's just me."

Angel reached for her again, this time trying to move around so she could see him. Without needing to focus on her face she simply fell away from his shadow.

"I *said* don't touch me!" She snarled. "Get the fuck away from me."

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"It's just me... you know..." The voice remained soft, but had now taken on an edge of hesitance. "Your ol' pal Wills?"

But Buffy ignored her, turning back to the wall, arm reaching once again for the support of something inanimate... something stable.

"What's the date?" She demanded.

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Angel frowned. "It's not important right-"

"Tell me the fucking date!!" Faith shouted, her voice fading into a hoarse cry at the end, her breath puffing out in thick clouds of steam. Her lips were beginning to turn a shade of blue, matching the beds of her nails.

Angel glanced away.

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"It's the 14th, Buffy. It's...a week to the solstice."

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### Chapter 15

That I would be good  
Even if I did nothing  
That I would be good  
Even if I got the thumbs down

That I would be loved  
Even when I'm numb myself  
That I would be good  
Even when I am overwhelmed  
That I would be loved  
Even when I was fuming  
That I would be good  
Even if I was clinging

-- Alanis Morissette

Fuck.

It had crept up without her knowing. It had managed to rear its ugly head in the worst way... the *worst* way possible. It made her sick.. made her shake almost as violently as the cold made her shake. It hurt in places she couldn't even describe - as if the wounds themselves from so long ago had just been ripped open, and the salt of raw memories rubbed furiously into the flesh. Ghosts of bruises...shadows of aches ... Usually, she'd be drunk, or hungover, or high for this. It was the one true commitment she had made to herself - she would be completely physically and mentally AWOL for this day.

And it had arrived, without her knowing.

"What, so they're sending you after me?" She snapped, twisting her lips into a cruel smile.  
"They're playing the Angel card, huh?"

"No card." He said. "I came alone."

She looked up at Angel, and knew he knew. Of course he knew - she was in a file somewhere. All her records...were somewhere, filed away. She'd told him the importance of forgetting this day almost as soon as she knew he'd known it. She'd never told him why, and it had never been necessary. But as he stood there, in front of her, his lips slightly parted as if contemplating something, she felt a sure stab of fear, and knew that if he said it, she would go. She would run.

Either that, or she'd kill him.

"Faith." He whispered.



Don't Angel. Her soul silently pleaded. Please don't.

"Where are you going?"

It hit her with an immense wave of relief. Her body, her *being* relaxed for only a moment, but it was a moment nonetheless. It told her he understood. Despite *everything* else, he wouldn't stoop that low and offer her the same plaintive courtesies that too many people just threw away as a line, without even realizing their implication.

'Happy Birthday, Faith. Really. Have a *wonderful* day.'

She stepped towards him boldly, pouring everything she had into her words. She had played this card so many times in her youth. She would play it again with ease.

"Let's go home, Angel." She said, placing both hands on his chest, smiling seductively at him. She pushed him back against the wall of one of the crypts, and stepped either side of him so that his legs were trapped between hers. "Come on, there's nothing more we can do here, right? We came, we saw....let's split this popsicle stand." She pressed herself against him, breathing hotly into his ear. "They're fine without us. They wouldn't miss us if we... you know..." Smiling briefly against his neck, she bit down softly into his flesh, relishing the goosebumps that rose on his skin. Faith moved back to his ear, and whispered "..Got in that car and drove back to LA?"

Angel sighed, but didn't offer her the answer she was after.

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to be here, with Ammitus wandering around." He murmured.

The resulting growl that emerged from her lips would have made anyone's blood run cold. Even his.

His words had been hollow in her ears - she wasn't an imbecile. She knew something was happening. She may not have been an A-grade student, but one thing she scored 100% on was her ability to hide away from her past. She was an expert. There were things pushed so far into the musty, cobwebbed part of her head that not even *she* could gain access to, regardless of whether she'd wanted it or not.

And all of it.... *all* of it - Cheerio, her birthday... it was coming back. All springing forth from that part of her. She sure as hell knew *she* wasn't asking it to.

Faith pushed herself away from him, eyes and face as dark as the night, glaring, breathing out large puffs of steam that made her look like an injured raging bull.

She backed away until there was a good two yards between them, then flung her arms wide.

"What, like now?" She drawled, stalking back and forth in front of him. "You see Ammitus out here, maestro?" She stopped, narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. "Wanna know what I think?" She hissed, lowering her voice. "I think it's had me." Jabbing a finger to the scar on her temple she craned her head forward. "I think the fucker got me."

"We don't know that Faith."

"What, do you think I'm stupid!?" She snarled, taking another step away from him. "You think I don't know what's going on? Why *suddenly* all this shit is sitting in my head?"

"We don't understand anything fully- "

"FUCKING BULLSHIT!" She yelled. "There is shit in here that I would have never..." Her resolve cracked for barely a second, images flashing in front of her eyes. Cheerio... God, what Doug had done to him... all because of her... Faith snarled, her teeth bared, "I would have NEVER have brought up again on my own! What is it doing, huh?" She demanded. "How does it work? Do I keep seeing this until it's over? Does it come kill me in my sleep? What the fuck happens, Angel?"

"We don't know- "

"BULLSHIT YOU DON'T KNOW!" This time, she bordered on screaming. "BULLSHIT! How long is it?" She crossed her arms. "How long before I top myself? Is it all seven days? Or do I go earlier!? How does it happen?"

"We don't know!" Angel stepped towards her, undeterred by her flinch. "Faith.. we don't know." He sighed, bringing a hand to his brow, warding off the anger... Shaking his head in silent resignation, knowing he could never ask for her to be anything less than angry with him. "There is a lot we don't know."

It stopped her dead in tracks.

In all her rage... all her fury, Faith couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for Angel. He, who had been there for her when nobody else would... who had done everything she needed...who had fed her nothing but popcorn only because that's what she *wanted*, and now, he couldn't help her. For whatever reason, she knew he couldn't do it.

It left her utterly deflated. Devoid of energy. Devoid of fight.

She sighed.

"Angel, if I'm gonna go crazy and top myself, I don't wanna do it here." She closed her eyes. "Not around them. Not around B- "

She felt the air shift as he approached her, and two protective hands clamped down on each of her shoulders.

"You're *not*, do you hear me?" Angel whispered. "They won't let you. *I* won't let you."

"You sure about that, Angel?" She asked softly. "They have a lot of reason to hate."

"They have equal reason not to."

Faith laughed. "Now I know you're full of it."

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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Despite the sarcasm in her tone it was, at the very least, a laugh.

He smiled. The problem was, unbeknownst to Angel, Faith was beginning to believe her own words. Parts of her had already shut down - parts of her had already ended it.

She didn't know her father.

She didn't know her name.

And that...that day...was how she found out it was her birthday. And how old she was.

That was who she was, in this life.

What a waste of a fucking life.

---

"So...what happened?"

Buffy, slumped forward on the couch with the posture of someone bone-tired and still in shock, uncovered her bleary eyes and dropped her hand to rest between her knees.

"I don't know." She said. She hadn't been able to sleep a full night in over a week now, and this was only adding to the problem. "I'm either clearly *there*, like... I'm able to move around the dream...see things from different angles." Her mind flashed back to her standing barely inches from Faith's face as the other her plunged the knife in. She shivered. "The last one I wasn't... *in* there, it was more like I was watching it from outside... like a movie." Buffy cringed inwardly at her own description, remembering that little girl... the man... movies were entertaining. What she'd seen was horrific. She glanced up. "How long has Angel been gone?"

"Oh... not even an hour." Tara said, then smiled reassurance. "They'll be back soon."

Buffy simply nodded, her shoulders sagging a fraction further.

Giles frowned. "Can you be more specific? Give us an example of what you've seen?"

What!?

Her eyes flashed and shot up to him, "No." She said, fixing him with a steely glare.

Giles winced. "Buffy you don't have to be specific, but... just.. a little more specific than this would help."

Her lips twitched as she reigned in her instinct to stand up and yell at him to mind his own goddamned business. Instead, she took a deep, silent breath and returned her stare to her bare feet.

"Okay." She said, linking her fingers together. "The first time...she was dreaming about the night I stabbed her-"

"Again?" Willow asked, incredulously. Buffy nodded.

"I could... walk around inside the dream. Like... this `second' me had been there when it had happened. I walked right up to her...them..." Buffy's eyebrows furrowed and she gestured non-specifically with her right hand. "...me." She continued, "I stood *directly* in front of... me, and the knife went *through* me - the actual me-" She pointed at herself "-into Faith. I was... like a ghost."

"Wow..." Willow jerked her head back in a mixture of shock and surprise, then, clearly realizing how that might have been taken, quickly moved to clarify. "I mean... wow... how... weird. How... that would have been awful."

Buffy released her from any further verbal backtracking with a small smile and a gentle nod. Willow closed her mouth and glanced across at Tara, then down at the floor.

"Any sign of the Big Bad?" Xander asked.

Buffy sighed. "No... I don't know... I wouldn't even know what to look for. *Where* to look. Besides, I was kinda distracted by the watching me stabbing her part."

"..Which you were right to do..."

Buffy looked sharply to Xander, and shook her head. He opened his mouth to say something else but Giles, who had been paying no attention to either of them, interrupted.

"And the second one?"

Buffy turned away.

The second one. She rolled her shoulders uncomfortably.

"The second one...I had no control over where I was." She said. "I wasn't even *there*. I was just... watching. I couldn't move around."

Her fingers clenched tightly around each other. Because if she *had* been able to move, that man would have had his spiritual head divided from his shoulders. Several times over. She narrowed her eyes, and chewed on the inside of her cheek. For a moment she considered telling them that today was Faith's Birthday, but thought far better of it very quickly. No wonder Faith had never told them. Or celebrated it.

"He's watching." They all turned. Giles was staring into a smaller, older and far dustier book than any the others remembered. He drew in a deep breath, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and cleared his throat. "When a demon wants to enter the minds and dreams of the mortal, it must first open the dreamscape to the ethereal plane. There the dream is played out as a vision, and enables the demon to move around, unrestricted by the constraints and limitations of a mortal mind." He glanced up, then back down. "However, it is important to remember that in making this transition, the dream can be viewed by any other entity on the same plane at that time, and, in the same way, opens the demon to attack inside the dreamscape."

"Ugh." Willow shuddered. "What is that, the demon handbook?"

Giles flipped to the cover, dusted it lightly with his fingers and nodded. "Volume three, actually."

"So Ammitus knows it could be attacked." Tara said softly. "That must be the weakness Angel was talking about."

Giles raised both eyebrows and expelled another short breath. "So it would seem."

"But it's still watching."

"Well why wouldn't it?" Xander asked, looking around at them. "I mean, it's been doing the whole world domination thing for over a thousand years. It's not suddenly going to get all self-conscious and worried."

"Perhaps it is confident a mortal wouldn't be able to join the dreamscape with it." Giles suggested. "Or, perhaps there are so many planes it is highly unlikely two demons would meet on them, unless someone is trying to seek it out."

"Or maybe... it hasn't read the handbook?" Willow offered. At Giles' raised eyebrow, she looked away. "I know... it probably *wrote* the handbook."

"What *I* don't get..." Xander piped up again. "-there are all these records of it appearing, throwing the world into darkness, destroying souls, yada yada... But then clearly everything goes back to normal... So, who puts it back in its box?"

"Does nobody realize what time it is!?" The occupants of the room all turned to find Anya, looking tired and more than a little grumpy, standing in the entrance to the living room. She glared at Xander. "It's 4:30am. We usually have sex now."

Xander blushed several shades of deep scarlet, and sunk back into his chair. "An, we can't.." He said quietly.

"Of course we can't! You're not up there!" She folded her arms. "I can't exactly have sex with myself now, can I?"

Giles cleared his throat. Willow and Tara covered their mouths in muffled giggles. Even Buffy had to smile. Xander's face and neck were now the solid colour of his socks, and despite his best efforts at appearing calm, the tiny beads of sweat appearing on his forehead gave him away.

"An!" He began, overenthusiastically. "-nice of you to join us. Please, have a seat. We were just discussing the great evil that is about to rise and destroy us all."

Anya's eyes darted left, and right, then she frowned. "How is that better than sex?"

"Anya." Giles' voice cut through the air again, slicing the humour in half. He had a wonderful knack at doing that, and despite the reckless self-centeredness Anya so often displayed, deep down she was pulled into line with the rest of them every time he did it. "Perhaps you could

help us."

Anya leaned up against the doorframe, arms still crossed. "What?"

"Ammitus has come... to life... several times now." Giles peered down at the demon handbook.

Xander straightened, happy for the subject redirection. "What Giles wants to know, is why doesn't it just stay alive? Why does it keep having to go through the same old 'find 30 tortured souls and only *then* can you burn down the city' routine? Why the winter solstice? Why every four hundred years?"

Anya's eyes shot to Buffy's, and in that short space of time Buffy knew she had at least some of the answers. She raised both eyebrows in a silent plea and Anya frowned, taking a step into the room.

"Well... I don't *know* any more than what I told you all before." She paused, glancing back at Buffy for a moment. "Except, well, it's a story, and you know what I think about stories..."

"Anything would help us right now, Anya."

"Okay." She said, "Okay. Well, I said that nobody really knows much about Ammitus." She paused. "I wasn't *completely* telling the truth." She shifted her weight on her feet and almost... *almost* looked guilty. "Thousands of years ago Ammitus was actually the... let's say the lapdog of the one who judged all souls."

Giles nodded.

"You mean the devil?" Asked Willow.

"No..." Anya shook her head. "The devil was evil."

"But he was a demon."

"Not *exactly*." She made a face, then shook her head again. "No, not really. He was his own entity. He was... well, he was *neutral*." She paused, staring at some indefinable point on Xander's arm rest. "Ridiculously... painfully... *neutral*." Then suddenly she blinked, and looked up again. "I wasn't around at that time, but the word was that getting him to form a fast opinion on *anything* was the greatest torture of them all." She rolled her eyes. "You talk about the cosmic scale? Well *he* created it. And he studied it *meticulously*. And it took forever for him to make a decision."

Buffy frowned. "What decision?" She asked.

"He was the one who decided which... direction everyone goes when they die."

Xander twisted around in his armchair. "Kinda like a giant... soul accountant?"

"Yes!" Anya said triumphantly. "Yes. Exactly - that's a good name. I'll call him the Accountant." She nodded once to confirm her own decision. "People who died came to him,

he weighed up their goods and bads, then decided which way they'd go."

Xander tilted his head forward, and pointed up. "Pearly gates?" Then pointed down "-or Fire and Brimstone?"

"Something like that."

"And *he* weighed up each decision?"

"Yes."

"On the cosmic scale..."

"Congratulations Xander!" Anya clapped her hands together once, scowling in frustration. "-you have understood the last five minutes of the conversation! Yes-" She repeated. "-On the cosmic scale."

Xander ignored her impatient sarcasm and nodded, genuinely thoughtful.

"Is there like... this huge waiting list?" He asked. "I mean, if you have to bring out the cosmic scale for *everyone* who's ever died..."

From the dark expression on Anya's face at *yet* another question, it was fortunate that Tara was more than qualified to answer it. Anya's mouth had opened to pave the way for her second snide retort, but Tara simply smiled, raising her hand slightly in an indication she would handle it. Anya's mouth snapped shut.

"Time doesn't work the same way on the ethereal plane." She explained. "It doesn't follow the same rules."

"Ah."

Silence descended on the room. Xander still wore his thoughtful expression, and nodded every so often as if he was still trying to absorb the conversation, and would come to minor clarifications in his head every few seconds. Anya's hands had moved to her hips and she was staring pointedly at him, *daring* him to open his mouth again.

Finally, when it was clear he had nothing further to ask, and that she wasn't going to get the satisfaction of shooting him down, she turned away and lowered her hands, clearing her throat.

"So *anyway*-" She continued, "In that time there were a lot of people on the negative side of their cosmic scale. Hell was... well it was getting full. He created Ammitus to dispose of the souls so 'the devil', as you call him, wouldn't get cranky."

Willow frowned. "Couldn't he have... you know... standardized it? Like a 'half up, half down' thing?"

"Hah!" Anya scoffed, crossing her arms again. "Not a chance. And that was the problem. He didn't give *anyone* any chances. Yes or no. Up or down. That's why he needed Ammitus to

help him clean up."

Buffy shivered. The idea of someone *creating* this... it made her feel ill. It didn't matter what Anya said... Surely something that neutral couldn't have created something this evil.

"And that's where the *know* stops and the *think* begins." Anya pursed her lips. "The ancient rumour is that there was a woman who had died, and came to be judged, as they all do. The accountant pulled out his cosmic scale and began to look at things-" She made a disinterested face, shrugged and waved a hand. "Usual story, the Accountant pulls out all her goods and bads and looks at her life, and, well, quite simply falls in love with her."

"Oh gee, how romantic." Xander muttered.

"You should take some tips." Anya snapped. Xander winced, knowing that his comment would rear its ugly head again sometime soon. But Anya carried on, giving Xander at the very least a 20 minute respite.

"The problem *was*...The cosmic scale was... skewed in the direction of the Fire and the Brimstone. No matter how hard the Accountant looked, he couldn't balance it the other way. After an insufferable length of time he thought he had figured a way out, but by the time he got back to her Ammitus had already done it's job."

"Ouch." Xander winced again.

"That's one way of putting it." Willow breathed, cringing.

"The Accountant turned on Ammitus and cursed it, pretty much confining it to wander around the ethereal plane." Anya shrugged. "To return to Earth it had to seek out its own souls to devour, and had to have a certain number or a certain soul, and the only time it could do this would be to reach its quota before the winter solstice." She sighed. "Problem was, Ammitus couldn't judge - it was never allowed to. So basically, it had to get the person do give up their soul voluntarily."

"And the winter solstice part?" Willow asked.

Anya made an `aha' gesture with her finger. "That was the clincher. You see, the cosmic scale seesaws for everyone. Well, most people." She corrected. "Sometimes you'll get people who are just... *bad*. Most of them are men, did you know that?" She flicked Xander a sideways glance, but he didn't bite. She scowled. "A lot depends on their most recent acts, it weighs them against history. I was more involved in the *negative* part of the cosmic scale. The fact that they weren't going to be tortured as much as they clearly deserved was sort of... Balanced by the fact that I knew they'd be going straight to Hell."

"Aaaand the winter solstice part?" Xander repeated, shifting uncomfortably.

Anya shrugged. "For some reason the winter solstice was when most people's cosmic scale was on the upper. Something about the whole... giving thing. Winter, shortest day of the year, something like that... it's hard to commit murder when your fingers are frozen to your meataxe."



## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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"So Ammitus has been cursed into finding people who hate *themselves*, at the hardest possible time."

"Basically." Anya frowned. "And the Accountant hasn't been around for eons. Again, rumour has it he's been hiding out, trying to revise the cosmic scale ever since. Unfortunately, in the meantime his lap-dog has got a little too good at what it does. It goes after demons *and* mortals alike. After so long it would be mighty powerful."

"And what's been stopping it?" Buffy asked. "What's been sending it back to the ethereal?"

Anya drew in a deep breath and expelled it loudly. "Beats me." She said. "Could be part of the curse, who knows. I didn't hear anything about that part." She glanced up at Giles. "Well, that's me. Can I have sex now?"

Before Giles could answer, and anyone could see the colour creeping back into Xander's cheeks, the front door opened softly, and two dark figures crept in.

Buffy immediately rose, turning to them, taking a step forward.

Her heart lurched.

Angel's arm was wrapped protectively around Faith's shoulders. Although his body shielded her from them, Buffy could see the top of her head, tendrils of bunched wet hair falling forward, covering her face. Hiding it from light. From them. Just as they were passing the entrance to the living room Angel glanced up, and offered Buffy a look somewhere between 'not now' and 'be back soon'.

Buffy's forehead creased in a deep frown.

"Buffy-" Giles pulled her attention away, and she turned around. He lowered his voice, glancing unconsciously in the direction Faith and Angel had just disappeared - up the stairs. "You'll be able to tell when Ammitus is watching. It will be in the dreams you can move around. Like the first dream." Buffy shivered. After all that... them on the roof - Buffy watching her kill Faith again. Ammitus had been watching the whole time. "It's important that you don't look for it." He continued. "It shouldn't be able to see you, but if it gets even a hint we know, it will simply wait."

Buffy nodded distractedly.

"Stealthy. I get it." She murmured, looking back to the stairs with that same frown.

She should have known.

She should have *felt* Faith arrive

But she had felt nothing.

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In the all night Café  
At a quarter past eleven

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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Same old man  
Sitting there on his own  
Looking at the world  
Over the rim of his teacup  
Each tea lasts an hour  
Then he walks on alone

So how can you tell me You're lonely  
And say for you the sun won't shine  
Let me take you by the hand  
And lead you through the Streets of London  
I'll show you something  
That will make you change your mind.

"You're quiet today, Princess." Cheerio said, puffing on his cigarette. "What's got you down?"

She lowered her head. Strange, she had been thinking the same thing of him.

"It was my birthday the day before yesterday." She said.

"Ah!" He turned to her fully, and patted her on the shoulder. "Happy Birthday... is that why I didn't see you?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah that's why. I had a... party."

For show and tell in school last week a girl had told the class about how she'd had a party. The girl had thought it was a pretty stupid idea for show and tell because everyone *from* the class had gone to the party, so they all knew what happened. Everyone except her of course. But she hadn't been expecting any different.

Cheerio grinned wider and opened his mouth to say something, but suddenly she frowned deeply, and shook her head.

"I didn't have a party." She said. "I only said I did cos it seemed like the right thing to be doin' when it's your birthday." She sighed. "Sorry for lyin'."

Cheerio shrugged, as if he'd known she had been from the beginning. "No sorries needed Princess."

"I mean-" She continued, barely even registering the response. "Why'd I have had a party without tellin' you.." She glanced up. "When you'd be the only person I'd wanna invite?"

If he had been able to speak at that point, he would have been cut off by the sound of heavy movement against the fence. As it was he had just been blown away by the words that he barely even noticed them himself, until the girl's hand rose and pointed in their direction. Cheerio looked over his shoulder, and sighed.

Four men were approaching them, dark attire blending in with the late afternoon. All looked like they would tower above anyone who stood in their way... and there was surely no chance

of that. Not with sticks so black and fierce hanging from their belts. Not with expressions so dark they could almost have been walking shadows.

They made her instantly nervous.

"Who are they?" She whispered.

Cheerio didn't seem surprised by their appearance. "They're men who work for other men." He said, shuffling to the left a fraction, away from them.

"Why are they here?"

He was silent for a moment, as if simply taking stock of the situation. Then he looked her up and down, his eyes coming to rest on her deeply bruised cheek. "Workin".

She blinked in confusion. "But...what's they got to do with you?"

Cheerio's expression grew distant again - in the way it had been much of the afternoon. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. There are things a princess like you should'a never seen." He said softly, then blinked and nodded, as if confirming that he was happy with the way he had explained it. "Things that Cheerio woulda felt less of a human bein' if he hadn't pointed out to somebody."

"What do you mean?"

And suddenly, some internal resolution seemed to be at once reached and the Cheerio she knew was back. It confused her.

He simply winked. "I know you'll figure it out in time."

The men stopped barely a yard from him, cutting off any path further down the laneway. The girl eyed their faces. "Are they your friends, Cheerio?"

"Hah!" He laughed. "No, they're here on business." He cocked his head to one side. "You *are* here on business?"

"We are." The one closest to them said. The girl couldn't help the shiver that ran up her spine - his voice sounded like a block of lead being run across a cheese grater. "Dunno why he'd bother with a Bum, but we do what we're paid to do."

Cheerio snickered to himself, puffed the last of his cigarette and blew the smoke up towards them.

"Princess, meet Harry, Charlie, Boris and Moe."

She continued her study. All had their arms hanging by their sides, just above those sticks...like the cowboys did in those gunfights that she'd seen on TV when Doug watched it.

"With or without the girl." `Boris' muttered. Cheerio waved a hand at him.

"I don't like them." The girl breathed. "They don't smile."

"Neither did you when we first met." Cheerio grinned at her. "Only judge people by whats they do. Not how often they smile. Take Boris here for example - " He gestured upwards and winked. "-bet there's a brilliant smile in there just itchin' to bust out!"

`Boris' didn't seem to keen on sharing. He lifted his arms and crossed them over his chest.

"*With*, or without the girl, old man." He warned again. "We don't have all day."

Cheerio sighed again, puffing once more on his cigarette before expertly flicking it out so it landed half an inch from on of their shoes.

"Neither do I, so `t seems." He murmured. He nodded, then squinted up at them. "Five minutes?"

The girl's heartrate quickened. Five minutes? Five minutes for what? And what's-

"Princess...Can you do me a favour?"

She stopped her train of thought immediately, turning her eyes to the weathered old face. He gestured behind him with his head.

"Take out the trash?"

She blinked. She didn't even know Cheerio *had* trash Peering behind him she scanned her eyes over the area, looking for a pile of papers, epty cigarette boxes... chocolate wrappers...

"Where's the trash, Cheerio?"

He laughed. "You got no eyes girl? In the corner!"

She froze.

She didn't even need to look before all her joints locked up, refusing to move, her blood running cold. Her eyes flicked between Cheerio and the four men, as if doing that alone would extract answers out of either of them... explanations of what was going on. Why all the secrecy?

Her sense of foreboding grew.

He was giving her his...

"No." She said finally, shaking her head. "No that's not trash."

Cheerio put on his best chiding tone, but being poorly practiced when it came to her made it seem utterly out of place. "You sure've got no eyes have you?"

The girl drew in an audible gasp. A panic settled in her heart. Why? Why was he giving her-

## Tiz – Untill It Sleeps

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She noticed his eyes dart very quickly up to the men then back down again before his face softened, and for an instant she caught a flash of... fear? "Come on Princess...Help old Cheerio out." He nodded reassuringly. "Take the trash. But I don't want it in the dumpster there - take it down to the one around the corner. You know where I mean."

The panic began to rise.

He *was*!

No!

"No.." She echoed her internal cries, which turned her tone resolute. "I'll wait for these men to talk to you."

"This is an adult conversation." Cheerio shook his head. "You can't."

"No!" She repeated, this time in fear and frustration. A sting lodged itself at the back of her throat and she felt her nose begin to run and hot, angry tears prick her eyes. She stared at him pleadingly. "Please let me stay. I won't be no trouble. I'm good at not listening."

She saw him glance up again at the men, who had inched closer but had made no move to indicate to her what they wanted.

Cheerio had known what they wanted. He had known from the beginning... he'd been expecting them from yesterday afternoon.

He knew it was over.

So he did the only thing he had left to do.

Tilting his head, he smiled at her. "Come here, my Princess." He whispered.

He reached out - his shaky hand stretching across the gap between them, fingers trembling with old age and too many cigarettes. She stepped towards him with no question - with limitless trust; took his hand and threw herself into his arms so hard any other old man might have fallen over...but he didn't. Not him. Not Cheerio.

"Please don't send me away.." She breathed into his ear, afraid the men would hear her. His arms tightened around her body.

In that brief, broken moment it was the safest she had ever felt in her life.

She pressed her face into his shoulder, oblivious to the smell that kept so many people barely within four yards of him on a normal day, and her tears spilled out onto the fabric, washing through the dirt.

"Please... I'm scared."

The arms around her loosened, ripping her away from her safety and depositing her squarely into reality. He moved his hands to her shoulders, pulling her back from him. She had

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expected him to be angry with her. She had expected the glares and the curses she was so used to.... at her weakness for crying... for being afraid...

But he was still smiling. That smile that told her everything was going to be okay.

"No need to be scared, my Faith." He told her. "It's all in the trash. You take it with you."

The men had moved even closer - an oppressive shadow just to the left of Cheerio's shoulder.

"But they're your things..." She stuttered out between erratic sniffs and sobs not even she could control. They're your special things..."

He shook his head. "They used to be." He whispered "You're my special thing now." He brushed her hair behind her ears and smiled. "Don't cry my Faith." He said. "Don't cry."

It wasn't a curse. It wasn't a demand. It didn't follow with a fist, or a kick. It was a simple request, that she not hurt. That she not be sad for him.

The girl bit down on her lower lip, drawing into her mouth, sucking in a deep breath to calm her sobs, determination written all over her face. She would stop crying. She would do it because he asked her to. She was grown up. She was old enough.

"...That's my girl."

The words came unbidden to her. She barely even had time to take stock of what she was saying, as if the aching feeling rose up from her chest and simply spilled out of her mouth. They sounded foreign to her own ears, having never been uttered in her household, not once, since she had remembered.

"I love you Cheerio."

His eyes brightened brilliantly, and one last `whoop' left his lips as he punched the air with his right fist.

"I love you too, Princess." He said. Then pointed at the corner. "Take out the trash."

Finally, she nodded, stepping past him, the ache now burning... spreading all the way out, into her arms, her hands which shook almost as violently as his did, her fingers closing around the garbage bag that had been his.

But she wouldn't cry.

She pulled it away, gathering it up and taking a hesitant step backwards. The corner of the alcove now looked cold and empty, like a house that had had all the furniture removed. But the occupant was still sitting on the steps, watching the removalists drive away, nodding, smiling when she moved past his shoulder to stand before him.

She wouldn't cry.

"Remember the dumpster around the corner." He whispered. She nodded. "And don't look

back. Promise me you won't."

She *wouldn't* cry.

"Promise."

He smiled again, but this time there was no enthusiasm, no cheekiness, no spark. It was simply... resigned. Sad. It made him look as if he had aged ten years in the last five minutes.

She *wouldn't* cry.

"Go now."

She turned around, pulling the bag with her, fingers clenching tightly into the plastic as she forced the tears to stay away. There was very little light left, but she could still make out the path through the fence, out into the open. Out where he had ordered her to go.

"Goodbye, Princess." She heard him say.

And following those words came the first sound of many she would never forget as long as she lived. The sound of metal striking flesh, bone, concrete. Cries for mercy, pitiful sobs, prayers for him... for her... then nothing. Nothing but cold metal on a broken body.

And a child's heart shattered into a million pieces.

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### Chapter 17

Skipping stones, we know the price now  
Any sin will do  
How much further, if you can spin  
How much further, if you are smooth  
Are you on fire From the years?  
What would you give for your  
Kid Fears?

-- Indigo Girls

It was with no jerk that Faith woke this time. Her eyes opened slowly, bringing her stumbling into consciousness with tears ready... waiting to spill out. Her entire being ached with loss so much that it overrode all instincts to fight through the disorientation and identify where she was. She didn't make a sound, she didn't will the tears away... She couldn't have mustered up the strength even if she'd wanted to. They fell one by one, silently, dropping off the bridge of her nose, soaking her pillow.

That last image of Cheerio, smiling sadly at her before he sent her away with all his worldly possessions, had been one she'd historically drawn upon only in her darkest of days. Completely preserved over the years, unmarred by mental embellishment or perspective, she could call it up perfectly every time like a screen capture of a movie. Even though her eyes were open she could see it in the darkness... hear his whispered goodbye in every rustle of

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wind, every *sound* that the early morning called up.

And fuck...it hurt. It hurt like hell.

If she could have defined a point in her life when she remembered feeling such a strong connection with anyone, it would have begun with him. Cheerio - a homeless man who she'd never really known - had taught her how to love.

And in the same fucking day, he'd taught her never to love again.

She remembered Doug's face when she ran home for the last time, his comment when he saw her - blood-soaked and sobbing. The satisfaction... the *evil* satisfaction he had gained...

*"Well I see that's that fuckin problem dealt with."*

Faith shuddered. Even at eight years old she had understood from the moment she had arrived. She had pieced it all together. Social services had come knocking on their door, and Doug, fearing he'd lose his share in the profits, had gone after the source. That was what Cheerio had meant.

He had died for her.

He had been beaten to death, for her.

For an eight year old, the world could have ended and it would have felt infinitely better.

For Faith, now, even the prospect of feeling better practically *spelled* the end of the world.

---

"Buffy?"

"Huh.." Buffy slurred. Angel's voice, mixed with the cool bench surface pressing against her left cheek gave her enough focus to pull her away from the dream - images fading into the background as the kitchen materialized in front of her.

The kitchen? Since when was she in the kitchen?

Slowly, groggily, she sat up, disentangling her fingers from the material of her shirt, relaxing the pressure she was exerting against the spot just above her heart.

She blinked once, twice...

Then, instinctively she looked down, just to ensure it was still there.

And in the next instant the images rushed back at her in a great, rolling wave and she quickly covered her face with her hands, clenching her teeth. "Ouch" She hissed. "Ow."

"Buffy what's wrong?" She felt his hand on her shoulder, firm, yet caring. "Are you hurt?"



Buffy wanted to hate him for it. She wanted to grab him and scream at him that of course she wasn't hurt. *She* wasn't the one who needed the help, or the comforting. The one who needed all the help was upstairs, alone. What were they doing?

What were they *doing*!?

All of Buffy's own memories... the mother who loved her, the friends she had, her memories of birthday parties that were so full of laughter and fun... now seemed so.. *insulting*. Faith had never known what a birthday party was. All that time she hadn't even known when her *birthday* was. The way she had found out...beaten and molested with her own mother's blessing.

And that old, harmless, homeless man... who had cared so deeply for her... tried to protect her to the very end... had been killed barely two days later.

Another piece to the puzzle - that memory, just as Buffy had been joined with Faith's mind, of a little girl in utter agony. The items spread around her must have been from the man's garbage bag. Buffy must have seen her just after she'd walked away.

It was all so... surreal. So painful that Buffy felt only numbness.

She shivered.

"How did I get here?" She asked, deliberately avoiding Angel's question.

He didn't pursue it. "You..." He paused, trying to find the best explanation before settling on the simplest. "-passed out."

"Oh." She then made a deliberate show of looking around. "And...the kitchen? Comfy."

"Faith is upstairs." Angel said quietly.

"Oh."

"I just-" Angel frowned uncomfortably. He looked almost guilty, glancing away for a moment as if second-guessing himself. "I didn't think it was a good idea-"

Buffy shook her head, cutting him off with a wave of her hand. "'Oh no...It's fine."

"You don't mind that-"

"No!" She cut him off again. "Not at all. Faith... and me... dreaming all dark and disturbing, not a good mix. So-" She said, turning the conversation to the safer realms of `greater implication'. "Did Willow and Tara come up with anything else that would help us against Ammitus?" She drummed her fingers against the bench top. "I still don't know what I'm supposed to do when he shows up."

Angel nodded. Buffy leaned her head forward, waiting for some form of verbal follow-up, but upon receiving none she raised both her eyebrows and slid her palm across the bench towards him.

"Yes to finding more about Ammitus, or yes to how do I kill him?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head slightly in apology. "We still don't know how best to kill him." He clarified. "But Tara and Willow have both had experience in traveling through the Ethereal plane, and they're going to try and find the Accountant."

She blinked. "Tara and Willow... are going to try and find the Accountant."

"Yes."

"Who is somewhere...in a great, expansive, otherworldly plane."

"Yes."

"According to a two thousand-year-old rumour."

"We don't have a lot of choices, Buffy." Angel lifted his hand and scratched the base of his neck. "Anya has no reason to believe the rumours are false."

Okay. 5am. She was being deliberately argumentative. Buffy passed her own hand wearily over her face.

"I know..." She sighed. "It just sounds like trying to find a needle in a haystack."

"It is." He said. "Except the needle is microscopic and the universe is the haystack." Then quickly, he added "I'm confident they'll find him. I'm just not sure how long it will take them."

The same picture of the old man's sad face flashed in front of Buffy's eyes. She winced.

"We only have six days before this thing hits the fan." She murmured. "I don't even know if Faith has six days."

Funny, she thought to herself. Even when she tried to think of the bigger picture, it all seemed to come back to Faith.

"What is she seeing?" He asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

And there it was again - the question. Inviting her to share a burden that wasn't hers. For a moment, Buffy rationalized that perhaps Angel already knew - that his relationship with Faith would have extended to some, if not all of her past. She looked up at him expectantly, searching for the glimmer of that would sit behind his pupils...that would tell her he had seen it too.

But all she saw was a soft concern, one that comes from a good friend who wants to know, but doesn't.

She dropped her eyes, and shook her head.

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"Angel, this doesn't feel right." She whispered. "I can't do this... I shouldn't be seeing these things."

There was no sign of disappointment, or surprise she didn't answer his question. Just a small nod..

"Why?" He asked softly. "Because of the past?"

"Yes because of the past." Buffy's eyebrows flicked upwards. "You can't exactly call our history `sharing caring'."

"Not sharing, no."

She furrowed her eyebrows at his omission of the second word. "*Or* caring, Angel."

"I'm not sure about that."

What would have normally disintegrated into a shouting match fizzled at the soft expelling of a sigh from Buffy's lips. "We hated each other. We tried to kill each other. Several times." She shook her head. "Have you forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten." Angel said, resting his fingertips on Buffy's arm.

"Then-" She waved her hand in a random pattern, indicating for Angel to `join the dots' himself.

"Did you care about Faith?"

Uh... wrong dots.

"Of course I did..." She said. "Until she decided to betray us and destroy the world."

"Really?"

Frustration flashed across Buffy's face. "You were *there* Angel. You saw what she tried to do."

"That's not what I meant." His fingers slipped away. Buffy looked up at him, momentarily confused. Then she nodded.

"Did I stop caring about her..." She closed her eyes, the hurt still fresh in her heart.

Someone had once told her that you could never truly hate a person you hadn't once cared about. They were the only ones who could truly hurt you - take your insides and twist them around until you couldn't breathe with the pain of it all. Faith had done that to Buffy... so many times over...it had bombarded her pillar of trust, pulling it down into dusty rubble at her feet.

And Buffy had hated her for it. So much so it consumed her until she had tried to take Faith's life.

But even still, when she found out Faith was out of prison, underneath the fear and concern was still something soft... something warm that felt, at the very least, happy for her.

It was only now that Buffy was giving that part of her more voice.

"No." She whispered, finally opening her eyes and blinking through a sheen of tears. "No I didn't."

"Then you're wrong, Buffy." One corner of Angel's mouth turned up in a faint, lop-sided smile. "Of all people, you're the only one who could be seeing this."

Buffy made a face *"Nobody"* should be seeing this." She snapped. "There's nobody right to see this. Angel...if Faith finds out- " She shook her head, glancing at the ceiling. "-it won't matter. With who she is... all she's seen-" Her eyes darted back to Angel. "I couldn't imagine how it would feel to know someone had been in my head watching all the time."

"Buffy I won't lie to you." Angel placed his other palm against the bench, tensing up his body in an external show of his sudden discomfort at the suggestion. "I hope she never finds out." Then he let out a short breath and shifted his weight. "But we don't know enough to be sure she won't."

"Come to my funeral?"

Angel laughed softly, and took a step back.

"I'm going to see how the others are going." He said, as he moved towards the frame dividing the kitchen from the lounge room.

Buffy didn't need to ask again. The truth was, nobody really knew what would happen. That had been the attraction of Faith for so long - the unpredictable streak in her that left everybody guessing. However, there was little doubt in anybody's mind that if and when Faith did find out, the storm, in whatever form it took, would be utterly ferocious.

Angel paused.

"Don't forget, Buffy." He said, turning his head only slightly - enough perhaps that she would appear in his peripheral vision.. "- that she cares about you too."

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## Chapter 18

Blackened is the end  
Winter it will send  
Throwing all you see Into obscurity

Death of Mother Earth  
Never a rebirth  
Evolution's end  
Never will it mend

Never

-- Metallica

So many forks. So many choices, so many decisions.

How could it have gone wrong like this?

Practiced fingertips ran softly over the beam of a small set of ornate scales, stopping at one of the pulleys that hung from the left end. They closed carefully over the thread that wound through it and pulled, a breath held on intake as expert eyes slid across to the small bowl on the right side of the scales, watching, gauging the distance, measuring rise or fall.

The bowl lowered.

The breath released, fingers falling away as a pair of shoulders slumped forward again.

Not enough.

Eyes rose, staring forward into endless darkness, searching for answers yet again, as those fingers traced over the very familiar surface of a wooden table that hadn't been left once, since it had been created.

As usual the darkness yielded no answers. An old lamp, hanging, suspended by nothing above the right side of the table continued to burn its soft yellow light, as it always had. The wooden chair creaked with each movement, as it always did.

Eyes and fingers returned to the scales, determined. Resolute. As they always were.

There must have been a way. There *must* be a way.

*I have found her*

Fingers paused, eyes widened at a voice that until now, had become a distant memory, and a painful one at that.

"How did you find me?"

A chuckle, deep from the pits of hell, assaulted the Accountant's ears from all directions. That was the way of things here - sound didn't travel in the neat lines that it did in the mortal realm. Thoughts remained unspoken. Here, neither applied.

His fingers automatically sought out the table's surface, finding stability in the imperfections he knew so well.

*That is not important. I have found her. You must release me*

A growl of disgust sounded from the depths of the Accountant's throat. "I will do no such thing." He hissed.

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*You will have no choice. You are bound, as am I.*

Still, the Accountant didn't look up. "She is not with you now." He said.

*A matter of time* The thought was filled with extreme confidence, and evil arrogance. *She will come*

"I hope beyond all hope, Ammitus." His fingertips pressed into the tabletop. "That she kills you."

This time, the laugh was full-blown, resonating everywhere inside and out of the Accountant's manipulated space. The Accountant didn't so much as flinch. He simply moved his hands to the base of the scales and pulled them toward him.

*She will not. I have been watching* There was a pause, then a sick intake of breath that sounded like a soul being ripped from its body. *You should see it. It is... Beautiful*

"You disgust me."

Ammitus chuckled again.

*I am your creation. Do not forget.*

"I am not afraid of you."

*Then you are a fool* It hissed. *I will return before solstice, and you will die*

And then it was gone.

The Accountant stared down at his scales, eyes traversing the intricate pulley system, the decorated framework and bowls. He could still feel her breath against his ear, her whispered plea that he understand, that she see who she was... *what* she was. The touch of her lips against his, the ghosts of her caresses...

She had been a *slayer*. She had lived to hunt. She'd been trained to kill. The scales had already been balanced against her, but he'd come so close... *so* close to finding a way around...

And Ammitus, Ammitus had destroyed it all.

**NO!**

There are no exceptions, master.

Damn you, Ammitus.... DAMN you! You KNEW I was trying

What I knew is that you were getting *pathetic* and *weak*. It is not my function to save souls. Nor is it yours. You should do well to remember that.

No more! No more! I will use you no more!

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It couldn't be, surely. It couldn't have found the key. He had never considered it possible. But... if it were true...the balance of power would be thrown so far into chaos the repercussions were immense - Ethereal and mortal realms alike.

The Accountant made a decision.

One hand firmly on the base of his scales, he flattened his other palm against the table, and rose from his chair for the first time since he had created this place.

He would find the slayer. He would find her and kill her himself.

---

I'm so tired of being here  
Supressed by all my childish fears  
If you have to leave  
I wish that you would just leave  
Your presence still lingers here  
And it won't leave me alone

These wounds won't seem to heal  
This pain is just too real  
There's just too much  
That time cannot erase

-- Evanescence

### Chapter 19

It was something that, despite all the signs to the contrary, Buffy had never even considered - at least not on a superficial level. She chewed on it, long after Angel had left the room, staring down at her interlaced fingers.

It *was* the truth.

But yet again, the truth failed to explain the past.

There was no explanation for how much they had hurt each other. Buffy had spent too long intellectualizing...so long rationalizing why Faith had always been evil...always been bad. To be presented with anything contradictory was at best confusing, and at worst? Incriminating.

She *had* cared about Faith, but been afraid at the strength of her feelings - the connection that had drawn them so close together. She hadn't been able to define it in a context she was comfortable with, so she had run from it, just as Faith had tried to run with it. They had run. They had both run. They had run in the wrong directions.

"Buffy?"

Buffy glanced up, finding Willow leaning up against the doorframe, eyes flitting around the room - the posture of someone who wasn't sure they should really be there.

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"Will..." Buffy said, then attempted a weary smile. "Thought you and Tara were out chasing the Accountant person."

"Not yet." Willow said softly. "Still have a few... things... you know... spell things." She took a breath and attempted to continue. "To organize, that is."

"Ah."

Willow's eyes darted down to the tiles, then up to the bench. "How are you doing?"

"Sick of hearing that question." Buffy snorted and shook her head, "I'm not the one living these things." She said, staring back down at her fingers. "I'm not the one who's lived this. I'm just...a bystander."

Willow didn't respond straight away - in fact it was long enough that Buffy could have been forgiven for believing she had left the room. Eventually, however, her voice cut across the settled silence - ever uncertain.

"I'm not going to ask what, Buffy... but... how bad...you know...?"

"Bad." Buffy whispered, still not looking up, remembering the little girl, walking away from her old, homeless friend and protector, knowing what was about to happen. "Willow you have no idea how bad."

Buffy's eyes lingered a fraction longer, then slowly lifted, to find her friend watching her carefully.

"It doesn't excuse what she did." Willow said, determined. Resolute. As if she was saying this to remind Buffy of a past she might have forgotten.

As if she needed to.

Buffy shook her head immediately. "No-" She agreed. "No. I know Wills. It doesn't excuse all the things Faith did."

Another pause, then Willow's expression softened.

"...But it helps to explain it?"

At first Buffy was uncertain of the nature of Willow's question. But slowly, Willow's mouth turned up in a tiny, understanding smile, and Buffy felt a small, unexpected sob escape from the depths of her throat she caught silently with a hand against her mouth.

"Yes." She whispered, swallowing past the growing lump in her throat. "God Wills... it does. It really does."

Willow nodded slowly. "Does it help *you*?" She asked.

Buffy heard all the questions hidden in that superficial version. It spoke of all the misunderstanding, the need for forgiveness, the lack of resolution... Willow had known



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Buffy's side of things , but now, perhaps, they were beginning to see Faith's.

She smiled.

"Yes I think it does."

"You and Faith." Willow rubbed her thumb against her palm absently. "There's an...energy between the two of you."

Buffy nodded. "I know."

Willow frowned, and there it was again - nervous discomfort - shifting uncomfortably on her feet, eyes darting around the room. Buffy's eyebrows flicked downward.

"Wills?"

"I just-" She began, glancing up at the ceiling. "-I guess I just... would you ever, you know..."

"Act on it?" Buffy asked. Willow nodded. Buffy knew she had always joked with her about this topic, but also knew Willow would never have seriously entertained the possibility. She shrugged. "I feel... an intensity around Faith I've never felt with anyone." She continued, thoughtfully. "I've wondered more than once what would happen if I actually went with it and didn't-" Her own memory threw up the recollection of Faith and her dancing that last night at the Bronze. Unconsciously, her tongue darted out to lick her lips. "If I didn't, you know-"

Suddenly, another shiver passed down Buffy's spine. Her eyes widened in surprise even as her waking vision blurred and flickered.

"I have to go..." She murmured, flattening her palms against the bench and pushing herself up out of her stool.

"Buffy?" Willow's voice cut through the semi-reality. Buffy shook her head.

"I have to go."

---

The feeling of a vision darkening weighed so heavily in Buffy's eyes she was convinced for the last few seconds before she reached her bedroom door, that she was going blind. Her fingers fumbled for the doorknob and found them, clumsily, noisily turning it. As soon as the door had opened Buffy was seeking her out - looking for the figure, searching for confirmation she was still with them.

Faith was curled up again on the cot, this time facing away from the wall - towards her. It seemed strange she would find Faith this way - Buffy wondered if perhaps Angel had hinted that she would be sleeping alone tonight. Faith normally be turned, hiding herself. Concealing the truth. The light that spilled into the room from the corridor had cast a soft illumination onto Faith's features, softening them and making them look as peaceful as Buffy could remember ever seeing them. She felt her mouth turn instantly dry.

Want.

Take.

Have.

"If I didn't... think so much." She breathed, absently and very belatedly finished her own sentence, even though Willow wasn't with her. "I would..."

As she stared, she couldn't help Angel's question creeping into her mind, and her resigned answer. It had been so hard to answer him then, a floor below, with all the past and the pain stuffed in the distance between them. Now, contrary to Buffy's logic and sense of emotional reason the closer she was to Faith, the easier it was to feel... if she just closed her eyes for a moment...

But there was that girl. That girl, heartbroken, kneeling by the old man's body, staring resolutely at his battered, almost unrecognizable face...just staring as if that would somehow make him open his eyes.

It occurred to Buffy, that she had never seen Faith cry. Not once, not one tear. With all they had seen, with all they had done, together and to each *other*, she had never seen it.

"It's just some old homeless guy, kid."

Buffy turned. Another man - no older than 35 - with dark, scraggly hair and broad shoulders was crouching beside her, long coat wrapped around him and gun held loosely in his hand. His head was tilted slightly to the side, a mixture of surprise and confusion on his face. Buffy understood that well. After all, what child would be around such horror?

"Nobody'll miss `im." He said. It sounded like comforting a child was not something he was experienced in - the words tumbled out of his mouth with little feeling, little sincerity attached to them.

"My name is *Faith*." And Buffy saw the girl's eyes immediately fill with tears... saw the crease that appeared between her eyebrows, her mouth open just a fraction, watched those small shoulders sag...

Even so many years younger Buffy knew that face - the one that spoke her pain.... Shouted to the world how much, how *fiercely* she was hurting.

If it was listening.

"An' he *wasn't* some old homeless guy. His name was Cheerio."

Tears formed in Buffy's eyes despite herself. This was a side she had truly never seen of Faith. This little girl... her emotions were so plain to see, so *raw*. Hurt, betrayal, fear... so easy to pick - so clear. Not concealed by walls or defensive barriers, just... *there*. But then...

Buffy watched the girl's face pause, her fingers unwinding from the material of Cheerio's tattered jacket. Finally, inch by inch she turned her head, her lips curling into a snarl until she

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was staring right through Buffy - through her to the man behind. Buffy could clearly see the bruise that covered the left side of her face. She knew it was the one given to her by Doug on her Birthday.

Faith's face flickered, then she blinked, all the remaining tears dropping onto the pavement by her worn sneakers.

Oh no.

"Hey Faith... Hey..." Buffy murmured to the air - realising too late she was trying to coax something out of nothing. It was too late Too long ago.

So she simply continued to watch, as those few moments passed in seemingly slow motion, endlessly drawn out over the seconds it would have taken that last tear to fall from a small girl's cheek to the concrete. That last tear - taking with it the last of her love, the last of her trust, from the deepest parts of her inexperienced heart and lost soul, all bundled up into a tiny droplet of salt and water, worth everything in the air, but nothing more than added moisture the moment it hit the ground. A lost life scattered in a droplet with the rest of the rain.

And nothing more came. From anywhere. Only the coldest, emptiest expression was left.

"Oh Faith.." Buffy murmured, one hand instinctively reaching out toward her. Her fingertips passed clean through the image of Faith's younger self, unable to comfort, unable to care.  
"..Faith..."

This must have been it. This must have been the day love and compassion were completely overrun. The day the old Faith had died, and the Faith that Buffy knew - cold, hard, driven by anger and hatred - rose to the surface.

God... she'd been so young...

Out of nowhere the air seemed to become intensely cold, causing a shiver to shoot down Buffy's spine.

Then it contracted, warped, realigned and suddenly, crouched before her, scared and alone and unsure was Faith... older Faith. *Her* Faith - the one she knew -staring through Buffy, desolate, alone, bruised and bloody.

What the-?

"You should've killed `em." She growled, nearly inhumanly. The sound reverberated in Buffy's mind and reminded her of a time she was standing in Faith's apartment, asking her how Angel was. How she had shot him...hurt him. How she was waiting for him to die...

Buffy hadn't been expecting this. Not here. Not then. Not this Faith.

*Killing's for scum*

Buffy froze.

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It was a voice that commanded absolute terror in every syllable.

Her head snapped around before she had given it an order to, as her eyes what had originally been a shadow cast by the east building swirled into a formless blackness.

Ammitus.

*You hate it, don't you slayer?*

Buffy swallowed hard, hoping beyond hopes that Willow and Tara had done their work with the invisibility spell.

*You hate what you are*

She heard Faith whimper, and saw her flinch away out of the corner of her eye, and suddenly invisibility didn't matter. Her instinct became to rise up and confront Ammitus. She wanted to throw everything and more at the evil it represented... rip it to shreds for all the things it was doing...drive it away, destroy it...

But she knew that now was not the time. Now *couldn't* be the time. She didn't know what to do. She didn't know how.

Fuck it, she didn't know.

*Buffy?*

By the time Buffy turned fully around, Faith had disappeared. The gutter, the concrete and the rain all began to fade into the background and Buffy found herself having to step heavily to one side to stop her from toppling over entirely. Carpet met her bare feet, and the sight of a silhouette, drawn up on her cot, bundled up against the wall.

"Buffy what are you doing?" Faith's hoarse voice rose from her own shadow, her eyes shining softly with...

Were they...?

No, she *had* never seen Faith cry. Not once, not one tear.

Which made it so much harder to look at her now.

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## Chapter 20

*Beating me down. Beating me, beating me. Down, down. Into the ground. Screaming so sad. Beating me, beating me. Down, down. Into the ground.*

-- Korn

Faith's world was lurching – teetering between any one of so many emotions and the absolute,

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stale murkiness of numb. Every time she closed her eyes – or thought any deeper than simple things like `live', `breathe' and `where the fuck am I?' she would see it. Some part of her life. So many fucked up things she'd buried far away from her instant recollection, and yet were being brought out of her now as if they had all happened yesterday.

She drew her knees closer to her chest, her fingers clutching tightly at the pillow she was sitting on. She could feel the damp in the pillowcase under her right palm – a reminder of the tears that she had only just been able to control.

It scared her as much as it had angered her. It had been so long since she had cried like that.

"Want me to turn on the light?" She heard Buffy ask softly.

Faith knew the remnants of tears would still be in her eyes - Buffy would have seen them already. It wouldn't matter if she lifted a hand to wipe them away, she still felt. She still ached. She still hated it all.

"Suit yourself."

Buffy turned, her fingers automatically reaching for the light switch. Then, she paused, closed her eyes and let her hand fall away. With seemingly so little in the world right now for Faith, the shadows were the only things truly protecting her.

"I came up to-" She stopped herself from saying `check on you', and diverted her own thoughts straight away. "catch a few hours sleep."

She saw Faith tilt her head. "Standing up?"

"No," Buffy answered with a small smile, stepping further into the room. "I'd only just walked in when you woke up." She closed the door behind her, plunging the room, and her lie, further into darkness. "Must have been noisier than I thought."

Amidst the same shadows, Buffy could let herself believe there were no eyes narrowing in suspicion, no uncomfortable shift on the cot – nothing indicating the scenario she had just made up was received with anything less than utmost acceptance. She shuffled carefully to her own bed, arm outstretched, stopping when her fingertips met the mattress. They brushed over her pajamas, remembering the haphazardly- arranged pile she had dumped them in when she had left her room that day.

Funny, the things your mind holds on to, when the rest is racing so fast and hard in the opposite direction.

*She had run so hard... so hard and so fast away from that apartment, believing Doug would be right on her heels...that if she stopped for even a moment his big hand would clamp down on her shoulder, dragging her back the smoke and alcohol and sex and drugs and hate. She believed it so fiercely that for the final ten minutes, before her legs lost the last of their strength, she could hear his footfalls behind her...his breath hot against her neck.*

*So she ran, still stained with blood and dirt and tears, ears echoing with the sounds of Cheerio dying...echoing with Doug's words...*

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*There was no home for her any more...*

A creak to her left jolted Buffy to reality, and out of the corner of her eye she saw a shadow sweep past her, heading towards the door.

"Faith?"

"This is stupid B. I'm going to hit the couch." Faith's hand reached the doorhandle and she turned it without hesitation, flooding the room again with light from the corridor.

"Don't be stubborn Faith." Buffy half-snapped.

And again, the moment – the connection – was shut out.

"I'm not being stubborn. Just realistic." Faith shrugged lightly. "Sorry B, but let's face facts – you don't want me to stay in your room any more than I want to be sleeping here."

Buffy glanced at the thin blanket draped over her other arm. For an instant, she contemplated fighting it. Regardless of whether Faith felt comfortable in her room, she firmly believed it was the safest place for her to be, and as strange as it felt having her there, Buffy had to admit there was something oddly...comforting...in knowing the dark slayer wasn't far away.

But it was useless. Faith had switched off and Buffy knew it.

"Giles and the others are down there." She offered, rather weakly.

Faith smiled a wicked smile, but even the wink that followed didn't hide the emptiness in her eyes. "Yeah, well, they need a break." She wiggled the blanket as if making a point. "They'll clear out when I get down there – you watch."

Buffy watched the door close, and the room darken yet again. In the minutes before her eyes adjusted to the change, she could see nothing at all, and imagined herself standing in the Ether waiting for Ammitus, not knowing when it was coming, from where, but most importantly... not having a clue how to fight him.

She didn't bother turning on the light, or putting on her pajamas. She just sunk down onto the edge of the bed, sighing and pressing two fingers against her eyelids.

For the thousandth time that night, Buffy felt frighteningly out of her league.

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It was only a matter of time. Rule number one of stealing was avoid striking the same place too quickly. Faith had been taking bits and pieces from the corner store on and off for several months – it was a wonder Beno – the fat, stupid shopkeeper hadn't noticed earlier.

"Hey!" She heard from behind her. She stuffed the chocolate bar further up her sleeve and pretended he wasn't shouting at her. For an instant, she thought she'd got away with it too, until a fat stupid but incredibly heavy hand landed squarely on her shoulder. "Finally got you,

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you little fucking sneak." He growled triumphantly. Faith tried to struggle out of his grip but he grabbed her arm on the way past. She winced as fresh fingers dug hard into older bruises.

"Let go `a me!" She shouted. "I ain't done nothin'"

"Ha!" Beno yanked her around to face him. Instantly a memory surfaced an instinctive stab of fear, and she recoiled away. "I'm not letting you go \*anywhere\*."

"She said she hasn't done anything."

The voice was smooth, deep, even and more than a little familiar. Faith closed her eyes and could see his shadow...the rain...his gun.

~~Nobody'll miss him~~

Beno jerked her arm, holding it up and away from her body.

"This brat's been stealing from me for months!" He snarled. "There's no way I'm letting her go. I'm calling the police and they're arresting her."

"On suspicion of?"

"Theft! Shoplifting!" He jiggled the arm and heard a distinct crackle of a chocolate wrapper. With an icy smile he reached down her sleeve with his free hand and pulled the item out. "See?"

"It's a three musketeers bar." The dark voice said, tone indicative of the trivial nature of the accusation.

"I don't \*care\* what the hell it is!" His voice increased in volume. "She's a \*thief\*!"

The shadow moved past him, and all Faith could see were the tails of his long coat, heard the scrunching of a chocolate wrapper and the infuriated grunt of Beno.

"Not today she's not." He said simply. Still with her head down she heard the sounds of coins being tossed onto the counter. "Eighty cents?"

"Eighty dollars! For all the rest she's taken."

The coat swirled around suddenly. "You're lucky you're even getting this." He snapped. "Rough handling of a child in public earns you a jail sentence."

"You can't be serious!" He sounded truly cheated...robbed of his chance.

"Oh I'm serious. Take the money, lose the girl, and walk away from this one."

As if feeling his prize slipping away from him, Beno's grip on her wrist tightened to agonizing levels – to the point she believed her hand was going to pop off with the build-up of pressure. Then, his fingers opened outward, leaving Faith's arm to fall back to her side with a soft `thud'.

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"Smart man." He murmured. She felt the stranger's palm rest against the top of her head, and gently nudge her forward. "Come on." He said gently, leading her out of the shop and onto the street.

Her instinct has been to run. But she hadn't. He had come out of nowhere; at a time when she had nothing, and no-one.

A three musketeers wrapper flitted across the road, dancing in and out of the gutters with the breeze.

She had left with him that day.

She would never go back.

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