Dry Heat

by Riverwillows73

Summary

Everything up to most of “Seeing Red” happens, BUT (and there's always that handy dandy "but", isn't there?) obviously it had a different outcome. I took liberties, I'm playing with timeliness and will push them forwards and back to suit my plot as needed (ain't that a bitch?). That's what makes it AU with a Canon backbone, most is my own creation, with some borrowing going on. Some characters will only float in and out not as main characters. “Seeing Red” doesn’t happen completely canon nor does season- what is it I've seen? Slayven? That follows afterwards in my little opus. But I have plans - oh yes, I have plans, lol.

This will be my version of the story and how I think things could have been done. There will be characters, situations and additions that weren't there and subtractions as I see fit so that is what pushes this into the "slight AU" category. It's a rough start, it does get better - I promise. Thanks for reading.

Notes

This was originally posted on another site, but I have left all my notes intact on purpose so I won't be removing references to that site in my notes. I have been re-editing this story for
grammar, etc and to make it easier to read. This isn’t a quick process, so please bear with me and I will get it all back up.

Previous Notes:
This is my first attempt at fanfic, and my first at writing something that would remotely resemble a story in a VERY, VERY long time. So please bear with me. I know it's a rocky start, and as I get more comfortable, finding my style again and back in the swing, it does get better. All constructive criticism will be welcomed. Each chapter will have Author’s Notes and rating adjustments as needed – so watch for those. Flashbacks are in italics and only a few chapters will have them.
Chapter 1

The car was quickly heading through town heading back to The Grove. Dana was at the wheel of her baby blue convertible VW Bug, and Willow was sitting with her face turned upwards to the sun enjoying its warmth. Dana sped up as they were leaving the city, and moving towards the edges of town.

As they approached a four-way stop, they both noticed a beat-up pickup truck pulled off on the opposite side of the road. A petite woman standing on the fender wearing the smallest pair of shorts either woman had seen in a long time.

They both looked at each other, and Willow shrugged at Dana, saying, “Your call, you’re driving.”

So Dana pulled over to the other side of the road in front of the truck. As they pulled up, they could hear the woman cursing loudly, and quite well.

When the engine stopped, the little female barely glanced over her shoulder, as she kept banging on some part of the engine. Dana and Willow got out of the car and approached the truck. Standing there for a few minutes listening to her cuss and bang, Dana cleared her throat.

“Motherfucker!” The young woman bellowed.
The young woman yelled loudly before she jumped off of the fender, and turned to face them. She looked Dana and Willow up and down before her eyes lingered on Willow, with a rather intense gaze.

“Well, at least you aren’t the creepy cowboy wannabes that are normally out here,” she said.

Dana and Willow looked at each other again.

“Not to state the obvious, but, uh, do you need some help or something? Call a tow truck, maybe?” Dana asked.

The young woman pulled a rag out from under the hood and smiled as she wiped off her hands. “That would be great if you don’t mind. My name’s Claudia, but everyone calls me Claude,” she said as she stuck her hand out.

Dana took her hand first. “I’m Dana and this is Willow.”

“Willow,” she said as she shook Willow’s hand, holding it just a little too long. Willow pulled back her hand self-consciously.

“Hi,” Willow said and gave a small wave.
Claude was a very petite woman with brown hair streaked with gold from being out in the sun, and she was very tan. Her features were pixie-like – high sharp cheekbones, and large, expressive eyes. Her stature only encouraged this image, as she was barely five feet tall.

Compared to both Willow – who was not tall at almost five feet six inches, Dana looked like a giant, being nearly six feet tall. Her rail-thin frame was topped off with a mop of extremely curly, blonde hair, and gold, almond-shaped eyes, much like a cat’s. No hints of brown or green in her eyes, just a rich gold.

The trio of striking women made an odd sight, as they stood along the side of the deserted desert road, staring at each other.

“So, do you need to call someone for a ride?” Dana asked as Willow shot her a look.

Claude didn’t miss it the exchange either, and said, “Umm, actually the ride would be great, it’s not far. I’m staying at Canyon Ranch, maybe five or six miles back.”

Willow sighed heavily, shifting her feet as she gave Dana a baleful look.

“No, that’s fine. It’s on our way. We’ll pass right by it,” she said. “Are you a guest or an employee?”

“Employee,” Claude smiled, “I’m the recreational guide, slash manager, slash gardener. I arrange hiking, rock climbing, nature tours to the caverns – things like that for the guests. A girl’s got to do something for fun around here. So where are you two headed? There’s not much out here but ranches and coyotes.” She said with a shrug.
Willow looked at Dana with a raised eyebrow, waiting to see how she answered without giving too much away.

“The Grove,” she said without elaborating.

“Oh…oh. That’s like a religious retreat or something, right?”

“That’s one way to put it,” Willow muttered.

Claude looked back and forth between the two. “You’re not in a cult or something are you?”

Dana laughed outright as Willow smirked before saying, “No, not at all.”

“And you’re not going to try to convert me or anything?” Claude teased.

Willow snickered at the comment, shaking her head Dana said, “No, that’s not what we do.”

“Oh, ok, good. Well, let me grab a few things, and we can go,” Claude replied.
She turned, and used the bumper to push off, grabbed the hood to slam it closed, which set off another round of very colorful cursing. She went to the cab of the truck, reached in and pulled a few things out including a backpack, slamming the door as she went. Walking past the front tire she kicked it muttering, “Piece of shit, pain in my ass…”

Willow was leaning against the car door staring at her feet, lost in thought. The look on Willow’s face made Claude stop short to study her. When Willow looked up, Claude’s face was one of concern as she was left to wonder why the pretty redhead seemed to be so profoundly sad.

“Front seat or back seat?” Willow asked quietly.

Smiling brightly to lighten the somber mood, Claude said, “I’ll take the back.”

As she moved to get in, Willow noticed how tan Claude was, and how white her smile seemed against her skin. Willow also realized she was being checked out with more than a passing interest. An obviously uncomfortable flush creep over Willow’s face, making her shift nervously on her feet and stiffen slightly. Willow opened the door, motioning Claude into the car.

“Thanks,” Claude said, tossing her backpack over the seat, and hopping in.

“Are you ok? You really should have a hat, and sunscreen, and maybe even a long sleeve shirt. You’re so fair…here,” Claude picked up her backpack and rummaged through it, saying “Take this, it will help.”

She had handed Willow a bottle of water, and taking it with a weak smile, Willow said quietly, “Thanks.”
“Hold on to your hats ladies!” Dana yelled, as the bug roared to life and she mashed on the gas pedal shooting the little car out onto the road, dust flying.

As they drove, Dana could see Claude watching Willow intently in her rearview mirror, which Willow was completely oblivious to. So lost in her own thoughts, she paid no attention to their surroundings, or the conversation being yelled back and forth around her.

Slowly turning the bottle of water in her hands, Willow was thinking about the last time she saw Tara. Claude’s open interest brought familiar old feelings to the surface; it always came back to Tara. Her throat tightened, and she felt tears building behind her eyes. Blinking rapidly trying to stop the tears that she knew would come – that always came – she began to wish she hadn’t left The Grove that day. It would have saved her guilt, memories, and the shame she always felt when her thoughts meandered back to the woman that still holds her heart. Yet again, it all came screaming back.

Tara was crying and begging Willow not to leave, her own tears streaming down her face. But what was worse was the fear Willow could see in her beloved’s eyes; the knowledge that the woman she loved more than the air she breathed, feared her. She had been so good, worked so hard, to get her dependence and reliance on the dark magicks under control, only to have it ruined in one fleeting moment.

When Willow heard the shot, and Xander screamed, she and Tara jumped off of the couch, looking out the window. Her mouth dropped open when she saw Warren waving a gun at Buffy, bellowing, his face almost purple and contorted in rage. He began firing the gun without really aiming at any target. In that instant, it all changed. Willow would not let him hurt her friends, her family.

Warren turned, and looked at her, but didn’t really see her through the rage coursing through him so heavy she could smell it. When he fired again, it seemed like everything slowed down. She could even see the bullet as it left the barrel its path traveling directly towards Tara standing next to her.

That’s all it took.
This was the one thing that pushed her over the edge; the one thing that could make her throw all
the months of work out the window with both hands. She heard herself roar, “YOU WILL NOT
HURT HER!!” and with a flick of her hand, the bullet stopped in mid-air. With another motion, she
turned the bullet around, and with all her anger, she sent it flying back at Warren.

The force was such that when it hit the gun it exploded, pushing straight through, and hitting Warren
right between the eyes blowing the back of his head off. Glass shattered everywhere from the force of
the pulse of magicks Willow sent to stop the bullet. Xander was cradling Buffy and Willow had
pushed Tara to the floor.

She stood, shaking, her eyes black and magick crackled from her fingertips, as every nerve tingled.
She looked down at Tara and saw it; that was the first time she saw fear. FEAR. Fear of her in her
lover’s eyes and it was almost an audible snap, and she crashed to her knees next to Tara,
whispering, “Oh Gods, what have I done?”

Her eyes were still black as she began to shake, sweat, and cry. She never thought she was capable
of killing another human being. Demons and vampires were one thing, but taking a human life? She
looked again at Tara and the fear was still there, the one thing she never thought she would see…

She pulled herself out of her bitter reverie when the car jerked to a stop. She started to get out, but
Claude hopped over the door pulling her backpack with her.

“Thank you, both for the ride,” Claude said as she watched Willow.

Willow smiled stiffly, and Dana said, “Not a problem. Will your truck be ok?”
“Yeah, this isn’t the first time this has happened. I’ll just have one of the guys go drag it back up here,” Claude said with a sigh.

She looked again at Willow, her head cocked to one side, as if she was trying to figure her out, and delighted at the prospect. “Well, umm, yeah, well, like I said, I arrange for day and overnight trips for hiking, and we have cabins in the Chiricahua Mountains. It’s beautiful this time of year, and cooler than the city, so umm, just to return the favor you know, if you guys wanted to do an overnight stay, I could arrange it – it would be my treat,” she said as she looked hopefully at Willow. “You know, return a good deed kinda thing?”

Willow had no idea this was all being directed at her since she was still absently staring at the unopened bottle of water in her hands.

Dana piped up, “That’s very sweet of you, should we just call the ranch or come by?” she said as she shot a look at Willow.

“Yeah, that’s great, you can stop by anytime you like. Just ask for me at the front desk.” Claude said smiling hopefully.

Dana nudged Willow, trying to draw her back to the present. “What? Umm, yeah, thank you. That sounds nice.”

“Well, we’ve got to be on our way. Thanks again, Claude. That’s very sweet of you,” Dana said as she started the car, waving as she backed out and headed down the driveway.

They sat in silence, Willow once again had her face turned to the sun with her eyes closed. Dana
noticed the tears creeping down her face and knew why without asking. Finally, she said, “You know that offer was really directed at you, right?”

With a shaky sigh, Willow said, “Actually I did, I’m not completely oblivious.” She opened her eyes, wiping the tears with the back of her hand, and stared at the landscape, as she dropped the water onto the floor under her feet.

Giving her a sidelong glance Dana said, “You have no intention of calling on her do you?”

With a sad smile, Willow replied, “None at all.”

Dana smiled sadly and patted Willow’s knee. She knew some of what Willow had been through, and it was so much so quickly over the last eighteen months for anyone, much less a young woman of her age. Not only was her heart bruised but her soul had been scarred by what happened. All the conflicting emotions that often made things harder for Willow; concentration is hard under normal circumstance, but it can be nearly impossible when your emotions are in turmoil. Dana did not envy Willow her lot in life at the moment, as they made the turn onto the long gravel driveway back to The Grove.

TBC...
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T eventually

Rating: PG-13 for language and mild violence

Angst/Drama Rating: So I guess this should be here too since much like life nothing comes easy; I'd say on a scale of 1-10 this is about a 4.

Setting: The Grove and Sunnydale

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Feedback: Sure but if you wanna rip me a new one do it by pm, please.

As soon as the car stopped, Willow felt better. The comfort of The Grove had an immediate calming effect on her. She began to feel less raw, but her thoughts were still on Tara. Wondering what she was doing, how she was doing, if she thought of Willow as much as she thought of her.

Often she woke in the night and could smell Tara as if she were in the room with her. Her perfume, and soap, sweet, and rich like honey; the smells suited the gentle young woman. Bringing back with them all the memories of the quiet, tender moments spent with Tara.
Willow shook herself to clear the memories away, and Dana watched sadly while following her into the main hall. “What do you need, Will?” she asked.

Without any hesitation, Willow responded sullenly, “Tara.”

Dana pulled her into a tight hug, and this time Willow allowed the embrace, shaking while she tried to keep the tears in check, as Dana attempted to comfort her. After a few minutes, Willow broke the embrace with a heavy sigh.

“Can we do some exercises? I just need something else to focus on,” Willow asked.

“Absolutely, would you like just you and I, or would you like me to get Lady Rowan, too?” Dana replied.

Willow thought for a minute, then nodding she said, “Yes, then you both can really run me through my paces.”

Dana left, and Willow headed outside towards the field. It had once been a baseball diamond but when the coven had taken it over they left it to grow to its natural state. Since this was the desert, the grass had, for the most part, died off, and it was now just an open field filled with scrub brush and cactus.

Some wildflowers grew, a few bright orange poppies, but not much of anything else. She walked to the middle of the field, sat down in the lotus position, closed her eyes while breathing deeply, and tried to focus.
The whole idea behind the exercises was to remain focused, not let anger cloud Willow’s better judgment; to keep a balance between her emotions, and her power, and where she draws it from. As she sat waiting, Willow’s mind wandered back over the past eighteen months.

The darkness would always be a part of Willow, but it is part she can control. In the last year, she had been taught how to control her impulses – all the things that made giving into the quick power easy. Instead let the energy dissipate, allowing only the positive side of her magic to come through.

The six months she had spent in England with Giles had been the hardest of her life. Everything that happened with Warren could be explained away, in that when he tried to take more shots the gun had failed exploding in his hand. With Buffy wounded, and everything happening so quickly, the only people that really knew what had happened were Willow, Tara, Giles the covens in England, and now Tucson that she was working with. Buffy and Xander never really saw or knew what had transpired that afternoon.

Willow had to stop practicing everything altogether. She had to relearn how to do everyday tasks without the magicks she had come to rely upon so heavily. That’s when she realized just how bad she had gotten, she no longer did the simplest of tasks without ‘helping’ it along.

It truly made her feel like a junkie; when the withdrawals began – the sweats, the shakes, nausea, the muscle pain and cramping. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced. Then there were the white streaks that had started when she was in England. They started at her pronounced widow’s peak and framed her face on either side. It made such a contrast to her flame red hair and deep green jewel-like eyes, especially being barely twenty-two.

When she thought she had finally gotten through it all though, the magicks had remained, and Giles came to her. He told her that she was unique, that being able to stop using dark magicks but continue to grow stronger was unheard of – there simply was no known case of it – ever. The council had tried to measure her powers once before when she first arrived in England, and could not find a limit. Now, if she could be taught properly how to harness and use her powers, that would make her more valuable than the Hope Diamond. Then he talked about a coven in the United States that had agreed to help her learn.
All of this ran through Willow’s mind as she sat on what would have been second base. She felt more than heard Dana and Rowan as they approached, but did not move continuing to focus. The older women slowly started to circle her slowly. The electricity in the air began to pick up making Willow’s skin tingle, and the hairs on her arms stand up.

Rowan and Dana moved in opposite directions as they began to draw their energies. Willow was now focusing on the ball of white energy that she started to envision in her solar plexus, moving it to her heart, and letting it grow until it surrounded her entire body.

First, Rowan sent a charge of energy directly at Willow that bounced off with a hissing sound like water in a hot skillet. Dana then sent a rush of energy that undulated like the heat coming off the dry desert roads in July. Only Willow’s hair fluttered, never once opening her eyes, she sent a pulse of energy that knocked both her mentors off of their feet. She continued to focus on the ball of energy at her breast letting the pain of her emotions flow out of her, as the warmth of the energy replaced it.

Simultaneously Rowan and Dana sent energy at Willow, cracking like lightning. There was a reason this field was empty, with all the energy used in this area nothing much would grow, and fires had broken out before during fledgling training sessions.

When Willow was particularly sad, as she was today, her focus was intense and she had slowly risen several inches off the ground. She rotated so she was facing both women. Energy shots passed back and forth between them for almost two hours. Then slowly the older witches began to rise against their will. Willow had gotten past their defenses, and lifted them several feet off the ground, then began to turn them upside down.

In a matter of seconds, she had them both dangling by the ankle, hands prone at their sides no longer able to cast. The three witches stayed like this until Rowan called out, “Okay, okay, all the blood is in my head, it’s hot and I’m old, you win!”
Slowly they both turned upright and were set down on their feet. Willow had started to lower herself as well, but she still sat with her eyes closed, tears streaming down her face, but no sound gave away her tears. Willow finally began to move again and looked up to see both her friends looking down at her with their concern written all over their faces.

“Sister, what disturbs you today?” Rowan asked gently as she reached her hand down to Willow.

“Nothing, My Lady; just old ghosts, as usual,” Willow said with a pained smile.

Nodding her head, Rowan spoke softly, “I see, child, always remember to breathe. It may not take the pain away, but it will make it more tolerable.” She pressed a dry wrinkled hand to Willows check. “You did very well today; you didn’t have to open your eyes once. Your progress is amazing, dear.”

Willow looked at her feet, and muttered, “For a killer,” Willow turned on her heel, and walked away heading back to the main hall.

Rowan looked at Dana and sighed. “Does she know yet?”

Dana looked down at her hands. “No, My Lady, I wasn’t sure how she would be if I told her Tara still wants to see her, if in fact, she does, now that she’s back stateside. She still seems so fragile, and Giles won’t say anything to me. I don’t know how long the Maclay girl has been hounding him but from his voice quite some time. It’s only been in the last few months that Willow has truly made unbelievable progress, that she seems to be getting strong again – and not just with her magicks, My Lady.”

Rowan sighed heavily, her brow furrowing with concern and care, “Sister, we cannot keep this from her. If the Maclay girl still wants to see Willow, still wants to…love her, and has forgiven her, we
cannot stop them. It is my understanding she too is powerful. Born and raised to it, taught to respect what the Goddess gives, and to never misuse it. If this is so, and their souls are truly mated, we have no right to cause either anymore suffering. Besides, we cannot coddle Willow forever, as much as we might like to keep her safe.”

As they began walking back to the main hall, Dana began, “That was part of their problems; Tara had been raised by a mother that was also a Sister of the Goddess. She died when Tara was a teenager, and her father and brother – I use those terms loosely – did awful things to her, My Lady. This is only what Rupert has told me, so while it’s accurate I have a feeling he left a lot out.” Dana paused, “What would you have me do, My Lady? I can drive there in a day to find her; Rupert will tell me where she is.”

Rowan thought for a moment as they entered the main hall, going directly to her office, Rowan closed the door behind them. “Sit, Sister.”

She walked around an elaborate oak desk that had the triquetra Goddess symbol and of all sorts of protections symbols carved into it. Rowan sat down heavily in her chair; she pushed at her bob of salt and pepper hair, trying to keep it out of her warm brown eyes.

Rowan’s expression was contemplative as she spoke, “I may be wrong, but I think we should test the water with both girls first. Willow is an exceptional young woman and witch, but it pains me to see her like this for so long. Obviously, theirs was an extraordinary relationship, and now we have a chance to perhaps give them back to one another. With that kind of joy in her life, can you imagine what kind of peace it would bring her? How much more her power would grow? What would the pair of them be like if we can bring them back together? You saw Willow today, not a scratch on her or us. If we can make this happen for her, we owe her that much. I fear without it, she will not fulfill the path she is destined to walk, and never be what she was born to be, Dana.”

*Two days later in Sunnydale*

The front door of 1630 Revello Drive slammed open, and Dawn bounced in yelling, “Anyone home?”
“In here, sweetie,” Came the soft tones of Tara’s voice. She turned, and smiled at Dawn, as she took a seat on one of the bar stools around the center island.

“What do you want for dinner Dawnie? We have options,” Tara smiled.

With a bright smile, Dawn asked, “Ooo, options! What ‘options’ do we have?”

“Well, I was in the garden trimming some basil today, so we could have Pasta Pomodoro. There’s also some chicken, and I could trim some rosemary, and we could have it with some roasted veggies – you have to eat the veggies though. Either sound good to you?” Tara smiled as she explained.

“What is Pasta Pomodoro? Would I like it?” Dawn asked.

“Well, it’s pasta, obviously, with fresh basil, garlic, tomatoes, balsamic vinegar; we can even add the chicken to it if you want. C’mon, Dawnie, live dangerously,” She said with a mischievous, lop-sided smile.

It was a smile that had only recently started making its reappearance, made Dawn so happy to see it. She hopped down off the stool, and hugged her friend, then said, “Sounds great, then again most anything you make is great. Do you want some help?”

Tara smiled at Dawn. “Sure sweetie, I picked up Roma tomatoes today, and they’re in the colander in the sink. Quarter them then cut them into decent size chunks. I even got a nice loaf of French bread from the bakery. We can have it as is, or I can make garlic bread. Which do you want?”
With a snicker, Dawn said, “We had garlic bread the other night and Buffy said the vamps wouldn’t come close enough to dust so maybe just plain will be good.”

Tara and Dawn both snickered at the thought of vampires running away from Buffy more than usual. Tara started to hum while she cleaned, and chopped the basil, moving on to the fresh garlic. Dawn stopped to look over her shoulder at her friend for a moment, smiling that Tara’s mood seemed to be getting better all of the time.

Dawn knew now that Tara could get through a whole day without crying, for the most part. She also knew that the nights were worst for Tara. She and Buffy had both heard her crying at night, and it broke their hearts. They just didn’t understand why Willow wouldn’t contact them, or at the very least her. Dawn sighed and turned back to quartering tomatoes for dinner.

When Tara heard the sigh, she didn’t bother to look up; she knew what it was about. Tara didn’t need to read minds to feel the emotions, as they rolled off of Dawn in waves. Dawn always had her heart on her sleeve, and maybe that’s what made Tara feel so protective of her. Tara turned and put a pot on to boil for the pasta. Dawn grabbed the chicken breast, rinsed them off like Tara had shown her, and began cutting them into strips.

Once again the front door opened, and Buffy yelled, “Honey, I’m home!” Just as Tara dropped olive oil, and garlic into the sauté pan, and the aroma started to fill the house.

“Mmm, something smells good,” Buffy said as she walked into the kitchen, and looked over Tara’s shoulder which was hard for her to since Tara had a few inches on her, so she settled on looking around her shoulder.

“What’s for dinner?” Buffy asked.
Looking over her shoulder at Buffy, Tara said brightly, “Dawn’s pick for the evening; Pasta Pomodoro. And now that you’re here – well, first go shower, you reek – then get comfortable, and you can be grill mistress, and grill us some other veggies,” she giggled.

“What did you do today? Anything fun?” Buffy asked. “How was school, Dawnie?”

Tara shrugged, and started to speak, but before she could reply Dawn said, “School is school, but I got a B+ on that biology test.” smiling broadly.

“After class, I went to The Magic Box for a few things, some sage, and whatnot – and to see Anya,” Tara said quietly.

There was a pause as Buffy looked thoughtful. “Geez, I haven’t been to the Magic Box in ages.”

“Well, you know there are t-times when I still need something for a r-ritual or something. Then Anya and I talk for a bit, I think Willow and I…” her voice trailed off.

The look on Tara’s face was one Buffy had seen so many times over the last eighteen months, and it pained her to see it. Giles wouldn’t tell her more than Willow is safe, and sends everyone her love. A fat lot of good that did, Tara had pretty much become a recluse, except for school, the few things she had been able to push her to do, and the occasional trip to The Magic Box. More often now, Tara patrolled with Buffy.

“Okay, give me a few to go shower,” Buffy said, shooting a look at Dawn, indicating Tara with a subtle jerk of her head, that inquired about how she had really been.
Dawn just shrugged, and mouthed “She seems okay.”

“What kind of veggies, do they need to be cleaned or cut?” Asked Buffy.

Dawn piped up, “Yeah Tara, which ones are they?” as she leaned into the fridge.

Buffy left the room and headed up the stairs. When she got to her room, she shut the door and leaned against it wrapping her arms around herself. “Why, Willow, why? Can’t you feel her pain?” Buffy whispered. With that, she grabbed clothes and headed for the bathroom.

Dawn had gone out to light the gas grill, so it would be hot enough by the time Buffy came downstairs. The pot was boiling, and Tara drained half the water out, and replaced it with chicken stock then dropped the angel hair pasta in to cook.

Tara then went back to cutting zucchini, and summer squash, while having Dawn clean portabella mushroom caps, so by the time the slayer got downstairs she was handed a plate of veggies; all she had to do was put them on the grill and leave them.

As Tara sautéed the tomatoes, chicken, garlic, and basil together and waiting to add the balsamic last since that’s the part she thought Dawn would like the least, she used it a bit more sparingly.

“Check the veggies, Buffy” she called.
The three women had developed a routine. After Willow left Tara fell apart, and tried to move out. Neither Dawn, nor Buffy would allow her to; they told her she was family, and family stays together. Sometimes the best families are often the one you make, and not necessarily the one you’re born into. When the time came, and Tara could bare it, Buffy had helped Tara pack up the things Willow had left behind, to be put in the attic.

There were a few things Tara kept that Buffy didn’t know about. Like Willow’s favorite shirt to sleep in, and the sweater Tara had been wearing when Oz wolfed out, a small almost empty bottle of the perfume. Sometimes when she was alone, feeling particularly sad, and missing Willow so much she would go to the boxes in the attic.

Just opening them up, she could smell her Willow, breathing in deeply, and get a small bit of comfort. Sometimes she just cried into the boxes, great sobbing, body wrenching sounds that whereas unbearable to hear, as they were to do.

So today was a good day, for the most part, no big meltdowns. Just a few tears shed here and there, all missed by those around her who loved Tara. She turned the chicken, and then added the balsamic, tossing everything together.

“Dawnie, you wanna test the pasta for me?” Tara asked.

Dawn came bouncing in from lighting the grill. “Sure, but I’m sure it’s perfect, it always is. You’re like the momma hen here; you know all the secrets, for all the best things.”

Tara looked at Dawn, reminding herself that she’s not so young anymore. She’s old enough to drive, and since school is almost over, she’ll be a junior next year. Tara nudged her with her hip, as Dawn stood next to her, “You goof,” Tara said affectionately.
Buffy came down and grabbed the plate of veggies to grill, and noticed the dining room table was already set, as she moved outside, thinking Tara must have gotten Dawn to do it.

“Go wash your hands!” Tara yelled while they did that she opened a bottle of white wine, one of her favorites. Santa Margherita’s Pinot Grigio. Not one of the most expensive but not the cheapest either, not that it mattered to her anyway.

Buffy came back with grilled veggies, and Dawn came into the kitchen. “Would it be easier if we just bring our plates?” Dawn asked, “Everything smells so good. How did you learn to cook like this?”

Tara thought for a minute, “Umm, I don’t know really. Here, and there, I like to cook for the people I love; it’s how I spoil them, so maybe that’s why.” She shrugged and smiled, as she looked at the two sisters, causing a group hug that left all three a little teary.

“Food must feed the slayer!” Tara said as she broke away from the hug, and grabbed Buffy’s plate, putting some pasta on it, and asked, “More?”

Buffy smiled quirky an eyebrow. “Do you know me? Of course more! I haven’t felt this spoiled, and taken care of since Mom…” Buffy nervously looked at Dawn, who took it all in stride.

“Yup, we’re lucky girls, Buffy,” Dawn replied.

Tara blushed and handed Buffy her plate. “This really does smell amazing, Tara.” Buffy headed to the table, followed by Dawn, and lastly Tara.
“Buffy, would you like a glass?” Tara asked holding the bottle of wine up for her to see.

“Just one, have to patrol later, and after the garlic thing, I don’t want to hear drunk jokes too.” Buffy snarked, Tara smiled and Dawn snickered.

“Can I have some?” Dawn asked. Tara looked at Buffy with a raised eyebrow.

“C’mon Buffy, I’m not a little kid anymore!” Dawn started to whine a bit.

Buffy looked at Tara, and said, “Okay, but only half a glass, the very smallest of half glasses.”

“On one condition,” Tara said, “You have to eat all your veggies first then you can have it. Seem fair, Buffy?”

“Very, you heard her, get to eatin’, missy.” Buffy agreed.

The three enjoyed their meal, talking casually about their day, having no idea everything was going to change, and what they thought they knew was only a small part of the truth. As Dawn was helping Buffy clear the table, Tara had already started doing the dishes, Buffy was drying, and Dawn putting away.
Buffy and Dawn were teasing each other when the doorbell rang, and Dawn skittered out of the kitchen yelling, “Coming!”

They could hear the door open, and Buffy had stopped to listen, “She’s signing for something, and it’s for you, Tara. Did you order something?”

Tara looked puzzled. “Not that I can think of, maybe it’s a book.”

Dawn came back into the kitchen with a FedEx envelope; she held it out saying, “Tara, it’s for you.”

“Go ahead and open it, sweetie, my hands are wet,” Tara said over her shoulder.

Dawn ripped open the seal on the envelope, pulling out the enclosed letter that was printed on the letterhead from The Coven of the Grove, and as her eyes flashed over the letter not quite understanding exactly what she was reading, but saw Willow’s name printed plainly.

“Dawnie, what is it?” Tara asked as she turned around, and saw the girl pale.

“I really think you should read this Tara, it’s important, I think,” Dawn whispered holding out the letter.

Tara wiped one hand off on her jeans and took the letter and started to read:
"Dear Ms. Maclay,

Blessed Be and Merry Meet! I hope this finds you in good spirits. Let me being by introducing myself, I am Lady Rowan Kelly, Priestess of The Coven at The Grove in Tucson, Arizona. I am contacting you on behalf of one of my initiates, Sister Willow Rosenberg."

Tara gasped and dropped the plate she held in her hand. “By the goddess… Willow.” She looked up to see the sisters staring back at her. She looked back at the letter and read aloud:

"Miss Rosenberg is unaware of our attempt to contact you. She has been with us for almost year now and her initiation is drawing near; she is safe and well, but not whole. I am hoping that you might be amenable to perhaps making a trip here at our expense to see her. Again, she is unaware of our contact, and that was my decision, should you choose not to see her.

If you would contact me here at The Grove, I would be most pleased to make arrangements for your visit. You needn’t stay on the grounds; we do have several lovely guesthouses where we could accommodate you if you like.

I also imagine this is a great shock to you, Sister. The time has come where the only thing we can now give Willow, would be for her to see you whatever its outcome. She has gone through so much, as we are told so have you, because of this separation. If we can give this gift to Willow, and to you, then the goddess will be pleased.

By all means, take some time to think this over; we will only alert Sister Willow should you decide to come. This will be the only request we send you, so if there is no reply, then we will understand.

In two weeks the majority of the members of the coven will be taking a sabbatical for six weeks, leaving maybe a dozen of us here. I don’t know if that knowledge would make you any more comfortable or not. If in two weeks time we have not received word from you, we will assume you do not wish to see her.

We hope to hear from you Sister.
Blessed Be,

Lady Rowan Kelly

Tara looked up at Buffy and Dawn, her mouth opening, but no sound coming out before she promptly fainted. Buffy rushed to catch her before she hit the floor. Dawn picked up the letter while Buffy carried her to the couch, and got a glass of water.

Dawn asked quietly, “What do you think it means, Buffy?”

Buffy began to pace as she said, “It seems to me one of two things, either it’s the first time she has been allowed to contact her, or the first time she is strong enough to see her – I’m not sure which. Damn, Giles! Why wouldn’t he just tell us! She's in Arizona for god’s sake – we could be there in less than a day! Look at what Tara has had to suffer through!”

At that moment Tara started to come around. “Stop yelling, please Buffy,” Tara said she moved to sit up, and Dawn helped her, and then sat down next to her wrapping both arms around one of hers.

“I’m okay, Dawnie, really,” Tara said unconvincingly.

“You don’t look okay,” Dawn said before she put her head on Tara’s shoulder. Buffy sat in front of Tara on the coffee table and put her hand on Tara’s knees.

Buffy looked into her eyes, trying to read Tara. “What do you want to do, Tara? Whatever you want, that’s what we’ll do.”
Tara’s eyes moved back and forth, as she was trying to think. “I-I’m not sure, I-I d-don’t know, I-I’m s-scared,” her stutter hadn’t been this bad for a long time now, and her eyes filled with tears. Buffy pulled her into a hug and held her friend while she cried as if it were the night Willow left.

TBC...
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three

Pairing: W/T

Rating: NC-17 for explicit sexual content and language – folks obviously this is gonna be girl on girl so continue to read at your own risk, you have been forewarned.

Angst/Drama Rating: I’d say on a scale of 1-10 this is about a 4.

Setting: Sunnydale

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BTVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Email: riverwillows@me.com

Feedback: Sure, but if you wanna rip me a new one do it by pm, please.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Flashback is in italics.
The next morning Tara skipped classes and went to the attic after Buffy and Dawn had left. She sat on the floor as she opened one of the boxes containing Willow’s belongings. Her scent rushed up to greet her, and immediately tears started to slide down Tara’s face. She dug around to find the awful fuzzy pink sweater Willow always wore and put it to her nose. Even after all this time her perfume still lingered on it.

It brought with it the memory of the last time Willow had worn it. Less than twenty-four hours before everything happened in her life-changing so dramatically.

They had met after classes and walked home together holding hands. The house was empty; Dawn wouldn’t be home for a few more hours, and Buffy would be arriving later still. When they came into the house, Tara headed to the kitchen, followed by Willow, pulled a coke out of the fridge, and then turned to ask Willow if she wanted anything.

Willow smirked, and responded, “There is something I want, but it’s not a drink.”

The innuendo wasn’t lost on Tara, and it made her blush. “Really? Are you hungry? I can make us something to…” she said innocently.

Willow took the can out of her hand and pressed her body into Tara and began kissing her neck just under her ear making her moan.
“I have what I want right here,” Willow said as she slipped her arms around Tara, moving her hands under Tara’s shirt running her hands up and down her back.

“That feels good,” Tara breathed as Willow sucked on her ear; her own hands began to wander up under the pink sweater. Her hands brushing the sides of Willow’s breast making her sigh.

“You know, this really is an awful sweater,” Tara said as she pulled Willow into a kiss that made them both a little light headed.

“Let’s go upstairs, my Tara,” Willow suggested.

Tara kissed Willow hard and reached up to touch her breasts finding the nipples already hard. They went quickly upstairs to their bedroom and shut the door. Tara turned pinning Willow to the door; and slide her thigh between Willows legs pressing against her already hot sex, making her squirm.

“Lift, now,” Tara said, pulling the sweater up over Willow’s head.

Willow loved it when Tara took control of their lovemaking; she ran her fingers through the long, thick blonde hair, using it to pulling her closer. In one deft movement of her hand, Tara had Willow’s bra off, leaving it to slide to the floor.

Tara leaned back to look at Willow’s naked breasts. Her peaches and cream skin with smatterings of freckles over her shoulders; the pink aureoles and the pebble-like nipples standing so hard. She dipped her head to Willow’s right breast licking in short strokes. She began to suck hard, scraping
her teeth across the sensitive skin. Tugging on the other nipple, and increasing the pressure on both making Willow moan.

Willow started blindly unbuttoning Tara’s shirt. “No fair,” she breathed into Tara’s hair. When she got the shirt open she sighed as she looked at Tara’s full breasts in her lacy purple bra taking in the sight with a wolfish stare.

Tara had pulled back so she could shrug out of the shirt, and looked at the expression on Willow’s face giggling, “You are such a breast girl.”

Willow smiled wickedly looking at her lover. “Only yours, baby.”

Grabbing for the button on Tara’s jeans, as Tara reached around Willow for the zipper on her skirt. They stepped out of the rest of their clothes. Willow tried to pull Tara close, but she sat on the edge of the bed and held Willow at arm’s length.

“Wait, sweetie, I want to look at you. I love looking at you, your beautiful skin, your beautiful breasts and…” as she looked at the deep red curls between Willow’s thighs, giving her that lusty smile that was only for Willow.

She stood with her hands at her sides shyly, fighting the urge to cover herself. Tara took Willow’s hand, drawing her closer, so Willow was standing between her knees. Tracing the tips of her fingers over Willow’s collarbone, slowly down over her breasts, teasing a line down her stomach to the dark red curls between her thighs making Willow shiver.

Tara wrapped her arms around Willow’s waist, placing her cheek on Willow’s flat stomach.
“Willow, my love, you are my sun and moon, you hang the stars in my sky, my beloved,” Tara said reverently as she looked up into Willow’s face to see her eyes shining with devotion and tears.

“Tara, you are my everything, you are the air that I breathe,” Willow whispered as she ran her fingers through Tara’s hair. “Don’t you ever doubt for one second that I love you; you are my soulmate, you have my heart. You hold my entire being in your hands, and I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Tara pulled her back onto the bed, rolling her over while she placed herself above Willow insinuating herself between Willow’s legs; their hips pressed tightly together. Both could feel the heat and moisture radiating from the other.

Tara ground her hips hard against Willow, while she nibbled on Willow’s neck, sucking her way down to Willow’s shoulder and bit her hard. Willow dug her short neat nails into Tara’s back making her growl against Willow’s neck.

“Please, Tara, please…” Willow breathed.

“Tell me, Willow, how can I please you?” Tara whispered into Willow’s ear, as she sucked on the lobe and nibbled the sensitive skin below. “I don’t know if you won’t tell me,” she teased.

“Your mouth, your hands, I want all of you, I always want all of you,” Willow whimpered.

“As you wish, sweet love,” Tara purred.
She slowly worked her way from Willow’s breast, down her stomach licking lazy patterns and nipping at the skin as her fingers drew patterns over Willow’s hips and sides; she could already smell Willow’s arousal and it spurred her on. That warm, earthy, womanly smell that meant Willow was ready sent shivers through Tara’s body every time.

Tara edged down the bed kissing the warm skin above the damp red curls, her breath making Willow shiver in anticipation. She kissed the curls, sucking gently on the wet skin; letting her tongue make short stabbing motions between the lips of Willow’s sex.

Willow raised her hips to meet Tara’s eager mouth and the slow lazy circles being drawn around her clit. Tara could feel how wet Willow was on her chin, reaching up with one hand to tweak and torment Willow’s nipples.

She ran her tongue slowly down the lips of Willow’s sex lapping at her juices, loving the way Willow tasted. She slipped two fingers inside, making Willow moan, as she slowly moved in and out.

“More, baby, please,” Willow begged.

Tara added a third finger, and Willow bucked against her hand, the walls of her sex contracting tightly against Tara’s fingers. She never stopped the circles around Willow’s clit as she had sped up to match the motion of her hands.

“Oh, god yes, please, Tara, don’t stop, don’t ever stop,” Willow moaned loudly. Tara picked up the pace again, as Willows body was bowing against the bed, every muscle tensing. Her breathe was coming in short gasps as she managed to moan, “Oh fuck, Tara, it’s so good, baby, oh sweet Christ on a crutch, Oh god, Tara, fuck! Fuck! I’m gonna cum, oh fuck, I’m gonna…”
Tara kept her movement steady, driving Willow closer and closer to her peak.

“Oh, god, yes!” Willow screamed as she exploded into orgasm.

Tara kept moving not letting the pace up since she could feel another orgasm building from deep inside as Willow’s hot sex contracted around her fingers like a being wrapped in a hot, wet, tight velvet glove.

“No more, baby, please no more,” Willow gasped, her breath ragged, as she urged Tara to move up next to her, kissing Tara hard tasting herself all over Tara’s mouth, making her moan. Willow lay there trying to catch her breath while Tara stroked her heated skin.

“Baby, how do you do that every time?” Willow panted, and then she got serious. “I never knew sex could be like this, Tara. With a look you make me wet, I can’t get enough of you, baby. Your soul, your mind, your beautiful body.”

She placed Tara’s hand over her heart. “Do you feel that?” Willow asked as Tara felt her rapidly beating heart. “It beats for you, only you.”

Tara smiled down into Willow’s face, pushing stray strands of sweaty red hair behind her ear and rubbed her nose against her little redhead’s. Now that Willow had caught her breath, she rolled over onto Tara.

“No, it’s my turn,” she said with a mischievous smile.
Willow kissed Tara possessively, as she ran her tongue around Tara’s lips, she could taste herself still there exciting Willow even more, if that was possible. She kissed Tara’s neck, nibbled at her ear, trailing kisses back to Tara’s mouth nipping at her full, sensuous lips.

Willow’s hands seemed to be everywhere all at once. Willow truly being a breast girl, had locked on to one of Tara’s nipples, moaning while she massaged both of Tara’s breasts, being sure to pay each equal attention to them both as if she would devour Tara starting from there. Her hands moved to under Tara’s ass and kneaded the skin there, Tara sighed in contentment.

Willow was leaving wet swirly trails, and sucking on the skin as she worked down Tara smooth stomach until she was just below her belly button; nipping at the tender flesh. She had already left several marks around Tara’s breasts and collarbone as Tara’s fingers played in her soft hair.

Even if no one else could see the marks, they both knew they were there; Willow had marked her territory – making Tara her prize. Tara’s fingers started to wrap tightly in Willow’s soft, fine hair pushing her lower.

“Would you like me to keep going?” Willow raised her head to ask, looking into the blue eyes that were almost violet now with lust.

“Vixen,” Tara purred.

“I always follow through, though, my little minx.” With that, Willow slid two fingers deep inside Tara, sighing with pleasure at the heat and wetness that met her fingers. “You’re so wet, baby, you feel so good,” Willow cooed.

“Mmm,” Was the only sound Tara could make.
Willow could feel the little rough, spongy patch inside and to the upper left, and began to make circles over it. Willow knew this drove Tara wild.

“Baby, please, oh…Willowtongue, please.” Tara begged.

“As you wish, my beloved.”

Willow dipped her head to the curls darkened by arousal and was in heaven. Willow swore that Tara was made of honey; she was so sweet and Willow thought it was impossible for another human to taste this good. She matched the speed of her fingers to that of her tongue while Tara moaned.

Willow sucked on Tara’s already swollen clit, making Tara pull harder on her hair. She could tell by the way Tara was moving against her mouth, and how hot she was that her orgasm was getting close. Tara’s body was so tense she was shaking. Without further hesitation, she moved faster lapping happily at Tara’s juices and flicking her clit.

“Oh, Willow, by the Goddess, please baby, mmm,” Tara moaned as she bit her lip moving her hips to the rhythm Willow’s handset.

It didn’t take long until Willow heard, “Baby, now, oh god, oh yes, oh yes, Ohhhhhhh!” and with one last shudder Tara came. Her body moving against Willow’s mouth as she sucked hard, and pushed deeper inside her lover and with the next thrust of Tara’s hips, she came again. Then she stopped moving and lay there twitching.
Willow slowed her movements giving Tara a moment before picking the pace up again. She didn’t think Tara could get any hotter, her hand was wet to the wrist. Tara’s body started tensing all over again.

“Willooow, Oh... mmm... Oh, Gods, YES!” Tara screamed as she bucked and shudder against Willow’s mouth.

Feeling Tara shudder against her fingers and mouth slowly Willow slowed to a stop and raised her head, gently kissing the insides of her lover’s thigh as she lay there trembling like a leaf in the wind.

It was Tara’s turn to reach out, her hands pulling Willow up keeping her on top of her while she shook. Willow looked down at her soulmate to see tears even though her eyes were closed.

“Baby, did I hurt you? Are you ok? Tara, what is it?” Willow asked scared she that had somehow been too rough and managed to hurt her.

Tara smiled a dreamy smile and opened her blue eyes. “They’re good tears my Willowtree, very good actually,” softly she added, “You’re the only person that’s ever made me cry.” She wrapped her arms around Willow tightly and rolled them over onto their sides.

The whole room smelled like sex, and they both dozed off with their bodies entwined, Willows head resting over Tara’s heart, Tara’s hand over Willow’s.

Tara shook her head to clear the memory away, wiping away tears that came with it. Her body responded to the memory, and there was more than a mere fluttering in her stomach. She sat there looking at the sweater in her hands, and in that moment she knew. There was no other decision she could make.
She closed the box up, went back down into her room, laying the sweater on the bed. She went into the bathroom and splashed some water on her face. When she looked into the mirror, she studied the reflection in front of her.

“You know you have to go, you have to see her no matter what happens,” Tara said aloud to herself. She wiped her face off on a towel, walking back through her bedroom she picked up the sweater and then went downstairs, picking up the phone.

TBC...
The first phone call Tara made was to Buffy. She told Buffy that she would be calling the coven next, and would be going to see Willow. Buffy had her doubts, it had been almost two years, but she knew at Tara could no more resist the opportunity to see Willow than she could not breathe. Tara told Buffy she would give her more details when she got home.
she fainted last night. She stood in the kitchen staring at it, her heart raced and she started to sweat a little, as she paced back and forth chewing on her thumb. She walked back into the living room and sat down; placing the sweater she had been holding across her lap.

Tara wasn’t sure she could do this standing up. With a deep breath, she dialed the number on the letterhead, and as it rang she almost hung up, but as she was about to a voice on the other end said, “Hello, The Grove how may I help you?”

There was silence. Tara felt like she had lost the ability to speak. “H-hello?” She cleared her throat, “Yes, I n-need to speak with Lady R-rowan Kelly, please.”

“May I ask who is calling?” The voice asked politely.

Tara took another deep breath, “T-Tara Maclay.”

“Just a moment, please.”

Tara thought again about hanging up, she was nervous and kind of sick to her stomach. Then a woman’s voice appeared on the line.

“Sister Maclay, I’m so glad you called, I was hoping you would! I’m guessing you’re still in a bit of shock, yes?” Rowan said cheerily.

Tara’s mouth was dry as the desert. “Y-yes is Willow… I mean does W-Willow really want t-to see
There was a pause as Rowan considered her words. “Sister Tara, Willow loves you so much, it is a pain for us to see her suffer. You are the one constant in everything she does. You are never far from her thoughts.”

“R-really?” Came from Tara barely more than a whisper.

“Mr. Giles has told us of the magnitude of the relationship you two share, and we believe this to be another step in the healing process undoubtedly needed by you both,” Rowan paused to let what she had said sink in. “We here at The Grove will not pressure you in any way, or try to force what may no longer be there. We do – I do, love Willow very much, and if you still care for her as I know she does for you, then please let us help.”

Tara heard only kindness in Rowan’s voice and genuine affection. With a deep breath, Tara asked, “When c-can I come?”

She could hear the smile in Rowan’s voice as she replied, “I can arrange for you to come the day after most of our coven leave on sabbatical, which will be in eight days. There will only be a handful of us here then so you two can have as much privacy as you need. Would you like to stay on the grounds, or should I arrange a hotel for you?”

Tara thought for a moment before asking, “This is a coven, r-right?”

“Yes, Sister it is.”
“I’ll stay on the grounds then if that’s okay.”

“It is more than okay, Sister. I sincerely hope this gives you both the healing you need. I cannot imagine being parted from the mirror of my soul as you both have been. Sister, I will make the reservations as soon as we hang up, where should I call with the flight information?” Rowan asked and Tara gave her the house number, hanging up with a “Blessed Be” from the older witch.

_Same Day Back at The Grove_

Willow was in her room watching the “Growing Up…” marathon on the Discovery channel when there was a knock at her door. She opened the door to find a strawberry blonde girl about her own age named Tabitha standing there.

“Hi, Tabby, what’s up?” The young woman looked like she was up to something. “You have a visitor Willow – just where do you find them?” She asked conspiratorially.

Willow looked at Tabitha like she had sprouted horns. “What are you talking about? Where do I find who?” She asked cluelessly, as she closed the door and walked with Tabitha to the main hall.

Tabitha giggled, “Mmmhmm. You’ll see, Sneaky Girl.”

Willow still had no clue as to what Tabitha meant until they walked into the hall and she saw Claude. Willow sighed and wondered what the girl wanted and why.
“Willow!” Claude said happily when she saw her.

“Uhh, hi,” Willow replied trying not to be rude.

“Hi, I’m sorry for just showing up like this, but I have today off and I wondered if maybe you would like to go for a hike, or a walk, or a drive?”

Willow wrapped her arms around her waist. “Claude, I don’t know – I just – I’m,” she sighed trailing off and looked at Claude helplessly.

“Hey, it doesn’t have to mean anything, Willow. I just thought maybe you would have a little fun, and if the other day is the norm then maybe you’re overdue,” Claude said smiling, looking like an excited puppy, “I brought you a hat, and sunscreen,” she presented a straw hat with a wide brim, and a tube of sunscreen in it, looking at Willow hopefully.

Willow covered her mouth with a hand, smiling in spite of herself.

“See, we have a smile! C’mon, I don’t bite, and just maybe you could use a friend,” Claude said and Willow looked over to see Tabitha shaking her head vigorously with both thumbs up.

Rolling her eyes, and with a sigh of defeat Willow said, “Ok, but I don’t have hiking boots,” hoping that might be a deterrent for Claude. “No problem, we can do a trail that is pretty even just put on some tennis shoes and comfortable clothes.”
“Give me a few minutes, and I’ll be right back,” Willow said before she headed back towards her room.

As she passed Tabitha, she heard, “Mmmhmm.”

Shooting Tabitha a scathing look, replied, “Not one fucking word.”

Willow came back ten minutes later wearing baggy shorts, and the loosest fitting t-shirt she owned. She had tried to find the most unattractive things she could possibly wear, and pulled her shoulder-length hair up into a ponytail.

Claude smiled as she handed her the hat and sunscreen, “You really will need both of those, I don’t wanna have to take you to the hospital.” Willow took them and followed her out.

As they were leaving, Rowan came into the hall, and asked, “Tabitha is that Sister Willow?”

“Yes, My Lady, it is.”

Rowan looked after the pair as they walked across the parking lot, in the year that Willow had been at The Grove she had never left with anyone other than coven members. “Do you know where she is going by chance?”
“Yes, she is going hiking with Claude,” Tabitha replied smugly.

“Claude?” she said with surprise.

“Yes, My Lady, apparently Sister Dana and Willow gave her a lift the other day. At least that’s what she said.”

“Oh. Thank you, Tabitha, when she gets back could you tell her I’d like to see her?”

“Of course, My Lady.”

*****

Claude took Willow to the far northeast side of Tucson, to a trail called Finger Rock. She made sure Willow used the hat and sunscreen, and then put the sunscreen in her backpack, and off they went. The first part of the trail was a steep incline that evened out after about fifty feet.

Once at the top Claude turned around to Willow. “How are you doing back there? Do you need to stop?”

Willow was a little pink but said no they could keep going. After about fifteen minutes the trail
widened, and they were able to walk beside one another, Claude keeping the pace easy.

“Stop here, look over there,” Claude pointed off to her right. “Do you see that rock? That’s how this trail got its name; see it looks like a finger pointing at you.”

Willow looked at the red rocks and quipped, “At least it’s not flippin’ the bird.”

Claude laughed and shook her head. “C’mon just a little further and we can stop and enjoy the view.”

They walked side by side for another twenty minutes, and as they rounded a turn there was a cluster of various sized rocks.

“Ok, we can stop here,” Claude said as she bent down and pulled bottles of water from her backpack along with the sunscreen. “Take a seat they’re all open,” she said making a sweeping gesture with her hand.

Willow looked around and found one she liked. One edge was still in the sun but the rest was now in shade making the rock still warm to the touch. She sat on the shaded side surprised by just how warm it was.

Claude walked over and sat on a smaller rock across from Willow, after handing a bottle of water and the sunscreen to her again. She opened the water and took a long drink while Claude watched the movement of Willow’s throat.
She held up the sunscreen, with a disbelieving look. “Really? More?”

Claude replied, “Absolutely, we have 352 days of sun a year, and one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the nation. You, my friend, are a redhead. Sunscreen should be your new best friend if you plan to spend a lot – well any really, time outside. Again, sun poisoning – hospital, not so pleasant.”

Willow started applying more to her face and arms, and she could feel that she was being watched which made her uncomfortable.

“Can I ask you something?” Claude said quietly.

Willow felt her stomach lurch, dreading the questions. “You can ask but it doesn’t mean you’ll get an answer,” she said honestly.

“Fair enough, here goes. Can I ask how, or what caused the white in your hair?” Claude asked.

Willow’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. Not the question Willow thought she would be hearing, but also knowing that she didn’t want to reveal much of anything, she chose her words carefully. “Let’s just say the last year and a half has been very hard on me so the best answer would be stress,” She answered honestly. “Why did you ask?”

“Well, honestly it reminded me of the streaks in my mother’s hair,” Claude said with no pretense. “My mom was… special. Then again most moms are, but mine had,” Claude paused as she decided how much she wanted to say about her mother’s ‘talents’. “Look, I know this is going to sound crazy, but she had a way that she could just make things happen. I can’t explain it – she had dreams too. She taught me about herbs, and how to use them,” she said with a shrug. “I have her green
Willow fixed her gaze on Claude’s face trying to read her. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

Claude smirked, “I’ve been doing some detective work.”

This made Willow stiffen, and narrow her eyes as she watched Claude.

“I wanted to know more about what goes on at The Grove; which wasn’t easy – at all – I’ll have you know. So I have an idea now of what The Grove is for, or at least I think I do,” Claude said looking very pleased with herself.

“And just what is that?” Willow asked coolly.

“Well, if what I found is true, it’s a coven, right?”

Willow avoided answering directly, “Who told you that?”

Claude sighed; she could see this wasn’t going to be easy. “Apparently, it is common knowledge among the locals that live out here, but they leave you alone and you leave them alone. Not you specifically, but ‘you’ the coven.”
Willow thought about what she was about to say, “Yes it is,” she said without elaborating.

A big smile spread across Claude’s face. “So you’re a witch then?”

Still not exactly sure where this was going, and knowing she had already admitted as much, with a sigh Willow said, “Yes, I am.”

Claude looked like she was eight, and had just been handed the keys to a candy shop.

“So what is the point of all this, Claude?” Willow asked as she narrowed her eyes again.

Claude shrugged. “Well, will you tell me what really caused the white in your hair? I know what caused it in my mother,” she said suddenly serious.

“No, I won’t. I don’t care to dwell on it, and frankly, it’s none of your damn business.” Willow said defensively.

Claude sighed again. “Ok, I won’t push. Maybe at some point, you’ll feel like you trust me, and can tell me. Everyone needs a friend, Willow.”

Willow looked her up and down, not at all comfortable with where the conversation was going. “We
should go now, and I have to get back.”

Unable to disguise her disappointment, Claude said, “As you wish.”

Willow visibly flinched, and it only made Claude want to know more about the sad, beautiful young woman with the deep green eyes that always seemed to be filled with such pain.

Half an hour later they arrived at the trailhead, and Willow followed Claude to her beat up truck. “So you got it running again. Does that happen often?” she asked trying to be a little more pleasant as they climbed in.

“Unfortunately yes, piece of shit. I had to replace the alternator,” Claude said and saw the blank look on Willow’s face. “Do you know what that is?”

Willow graced her with another smile. “Not a clue. Give me a computer and a few minutes, and I can get anywhere you want. Cars aren’t my specialty.”

“A geek then? Those are very useful skills. Well, I’ll teach you cars, if you teach me computers. I’m really good at breaking them,” Claude said as she drove back to The Grove.

Willow smiled weakly, still not sure exactly what Claude wanted, much less if she cared to find out. They rode in silence the rest of the way back. When Claude pulled to a stop, Willow pulled the hat off laying it on the seat as she got out.
“Thanks for the walk, Claude. It was nice.” Willow stood in the open door fidgeting.

“We should do it again sometime. There are tons of trails around here I could take you to. The desert really can be beautiful once you know where to find it.” Claude said as she sat in the truck.

With a sigh and shrug, Willow said noncommittally, “Sure.”

Willow turned quickly on her heel heading for the main hall before Claude could say anything more. When she got inside the doors, she stepped to one side and leaned against the wall taking several deep breaths.

As she stood there, Tabitha appeared from around the other corner and jumped. “Oh, dear gods! Willow, what are you doing there? Are you ok? You’re a little pink, did you enjoy your hike?” she asked as she smirked.

“Yes, it was lovely,” Willow said in a completely unconvincing tone, before she and started to walk away.

“Oh wait, Lady Rowan wants to see you.”

Willow looked at her blankly. “Now?”
Tabitha smiled again. “Yes, she asked that you come see her as soon as you got back.”

Willow frowned and wondered what was wrong, heading off towards the office she muttered, “Okay.”

A few minutes later she knocked softly on the door to Rowan’s office and waited for a response. Willow hoped Rowan wasn’t in her office, then she could just go shower and lay down. Her little outing had made her more tired than she thought.

The door opened, and Rowan stood in front of her smiling. “Come in child, I’ve been waiting for you. Did you enjoy your outing?”

Willow looked at her feet as she sat down. “You don’t miss a thing do you?”

Closing the door behind them, and moving to her chair behind the desk. “Not if I can help it,” Rowan said kindly. “You got a little sun, your cheeks are pink.” Making small talk, Rowan debated on if she should just plunge in with the news of Tara’s impending visit. “It seems you’ve made a new friend, yes?”

Willow shifted uneasily in her seat. “Sort of.”

Rowan tilted her head to one side. “You don’t seem pleased about it, though.”
Willow looked at her hands that were resting in her lap. “I’m not sure. She seems nice enough but,” she shrugged. “I’m not really looking for friends.”

Rowan studied her trying to read her expression. With a deep breath, she decided to just tell her and not beat around the bush. “Willow, what would you say if I told you Sister Maclay wanted to see you?”

Willow’s head snapped up at the mention of Tara’s name, and her jaw dropped. “I, I – what do you mean?” her eyes filled with tears.

“I have been in contact with Mr. Giles regularly since your arrival as you know. You also know that I am well aware of what brought you to us, as well as the details of who you were protecting, and why.”

Willow swallowed several times and picked at the hem of her shorts. “Yes, I know,” she said in a small voice.

Rowan handed Willow a box of Kleenex from one of her desk drawers. “Willow, you have become very special to me in the last year. Not because of your potential, but because of you, sweet child. Your spirit, and your stubbornness, by the gods, sometimes you’re like a dog with a bone,” Rowan said with a smile.

Willow blew her nose, wiping away tears. “But?”

Rowan sighed, “There is no ‘but’, child. Sitting here with you, I can feel your pain and anguish – some days I can taste it, it’s so strong. It weighs heavily on my heart to see you suffer.”
Willow looked at Rowan blinking rapidly, not saying anything.

“If Sister Maclay would come here would you see her?”

Again Willow’s eyes filled with tears, her breathing had sped up, and for a moment Rowan thought Willow might hyperventilate. “Yes, oh god, yes,” she said, her tears falling harder.

Rowan nodded her head in acceptance. “I didn’t want to tell you this in case Sister Maclay said no, but I took the liberty of contacting her this week.”

Willow’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, her brow crinkled with surprise. “What did she say?” Willow whispered.

Rowan smiled looking at the girl in front of her, and the hope that shone in her eyes. “If you like you can stay while I make her plane reservations.”

Willow looked confused like she didn’t believe what she just heard. “She said she’d come? Really?” she whispered as if she said it too loudly it would cease to be true.

Rowan got up and walked around the desk pulling Willow to her feet, putting her arms around the young woman. “Yes, child, she did. I’ll book a flight that will arrive the day after everyone leaves for the sabbatical.”
Willow started to shake violently, and sob tightening her hold on her mentor. After what felt like an eternity to Willow, she pulled back from Rowan wiping her eyes and blowing her nose again.

Rowan tipped Willow’s chin up so she had to look her in the eye, and stroked her face gently. “Willow, you do deserve to be happy, you know. You protected the people you love. You didn’t ask for this to happen, you didn’t go looking for it. In my opinion, you were the balance for his actions. Sometimes the goddess doesn’t wait to put balance back into place.”

Willow looked at Rowan with surprise. They had never really talked about what had happened, mostly because Willow would shut down every time it was brought up. Rowan smiled at Willow and stroked her cheek again before walking back around the desk. She picked up the phone while Willow watched, and called to book a round-trip ticket for a week’s stay in the name of Tara Maclay, leaving Sunnydale in eight days.

They were the longest eight days of Willows life.

TBC…
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T
Rating: PG
Angst/Drama Rating: Scale of 1-10 this is about a 4.5, maybe a 5.
Setting: The Grove and Sunnydale

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Feedback: Sure, but if you wanna rip me a new one do it by pm, please.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I would also like to thank my beta Sands, she has been awesome, very encouraging, puts up with me & I haven’t managed to break her yet.

Seven Days Later in The Grove

Willow was pacing in her room like a cat in a cage. She hadn’t eaten in two days – she couldn’t – the thought made her feel sick. She was worried. What if Tara still feared her? She wasn’t sure she could stand to see that look in her eyes again. What if Tara just wanted closure and had moved on? Tara had been eighteen months without any kind of word from her.
There were so many horrible ‘what if’ scenarios that played through Willow’s head that she was simply exhausted, and prayed for sleep, but somehow it never seemed to come. In less than an hour, it would be the day that Tara arrives and that thought made her physically ill.

Willow rushed into the bathroom, dropped to her knees and vomited. She hadn’t been eating so it was more like dry heaves and bile. She shifted positions so she could sit on the floor and leaned back against the bathtub for a moment, and hung her head back to stare at the ceiling. She wasn’t sure she wouldn’t be sick again but managed to get on her feet and grab a washcloth. As she ran it under the faucet she looked into the mirror and groaned. Willow could see that she was pale; there were circles under her eyes.

Willow scooped water into her mouth to rinse out the sour taste. Wetting the washcloth, she wiped off her face and neck. Hoping it would make her feel better, which it didn’t. She decided to meditate hoping this would allow her to focus and relax. She didn’t want to look like death warmed over when she saw Tara for the first time in almost two years but that seemed like that was going to be what happened.

Lighting a candle on her altar, Willow sat on her bed and crossed her legs. She shook her arms and stretching her neck from side to side before focusing on the candle. She began chanting, “This candle is myself, burning steady and true. Here do I find peace and tranquility. A place apart where I may safely meditate and grow in spirituality.” She sat doing this until she finally felt calm and centered. When she was done it was after two in the morning, so she decided to lay back down and try rest if not sleep.

That Evening in Sunnydale

Buffy and Dawn were sitting on the couch eating pizza and listening to Tara move back and forth upstairs. She had packed and repacked three or four times now. They were both pretty sure she hadn’t been sleeping, and she had only been eating when Dawn really gave her a hard time, but at least she would.

Dawn looked at Buffy and said, “Are you sure this is a good idea? She’s been a wreck for days, and I’m worried, her stutter is back Buffy,” her voice wavering.

Buffy put her arm around her little sister and sighed. “Dawnie, I don’t know, but what I do know is this. Tara hasn’t stopped loving Willow, and the whole time Willow has been gone, Tara has been going through the motions. She does what she has to, but the light in her eyes just isn’t the same. I know you’ve seen it too.”
Dawn nodded her head, wiping away the tears from her friend. Buffy’s voice stayed soft and even, as she continued. “I wouldn’t dream of stopping her, I don’t think I could be that cruel, not to Tara. We just have to be there for her, it’s all we can do.”

She hugged Dawn to close, primarily so she couldn’t see the worry in her eyes. She loved Willow, but it and been a long time since she had seen her best friend. Since Giles wouldn’t really say much, she just didn’t know what to think, and she really didn’t want either of her friends to hurt any more than they already had.

Tara came down the stairs in time to hear the end of the conversation.

She dipped her head so her hair fell into her face. “I—I don’t mean to w-worry you,” Tara said as the sisters turned to her. “It’s W-willow…I just h-have to see her. I feel like a p-part of me has been m-missing…” she trailed off.

Buffy got up and tried to pull her into a hug, but Tara pushed away from it.

“I’m ok, r-really. I just have to k-know. Is s-she gone, a-are we gone?” Tara said softly.

The sisters could hear the tears in her voice, and now Tara had admitted her biggest fear. Having said it out loud made it real — it was no longer a passing thought. Buffy reached out to her again, but Tara stepped backward, so she dropped her arms knowing better than to push. The lost look on Tara’s face was heartbreaking. Buffy knew how much Willow and Tara loved each other; it seemed like a love that people would write stories about, mythic even.

Dawn flew at Tara wrapping her arms directly around her middle. Tara put her hands on Dawn’s shoulders to push her away, but Dawn only tightened her grip. As Tara finally relaxed into the hug realizing she had no choice, she began to shake. The tears didn’t come, but it took her a long time to stop shaking, but Dawn didn’t let her go.

When Tara stopped shaking Dawn pulled back and looked into her face. “Tara, I love you, you’re my family, my friend, my mom, and I don’t want to see anything happen to you. Please promise me you’ll be ok?”
Tara stroked her face, wiping away tears. “I will be even if it hurts Dawnie, I love you too, sweetie.” She kissed the girl on the forehead breaking the embrace.

With a deep breath, Tara walked into the living room, and over to a pizza box and opened it. “Eww, anchovies, how can you eat those things, Dawn?” She said making a face.

Buffy and Dawn smiled. “I know, ewww, right? There’s another anchovy free pizza in the kitchen.” Buffy said.

Tara walked into the kitchen, and leaned on the counter taking deep breaths, fatigue and worry clear. She went to the fridge and pulled out apple juice, and poured a big glass. She looked at the pizza box for a moment before pushing it aside.

Heading back into the living room, Tara sat in the chair across from Buffy and Dawn. “Buffy, can you still take me to the airport tomorrow? If not, I can take a taxi, it’s no big deal.” Tara said.

With a smile, Buffy said, “No need for a taxi, your flight leaves at noon, right? Don’t worry, Tara, we’ll get you to the airport on time.”

There was a familiar knock at the door before it opened and Xander walked in. “Don’t look so happy to see me. I love it when girls cry at my arrival,” He said looking at Dawn and Tara.

Tara smiled weakly, and Dawn stuck out her tongue. “As if,” Dawn said.

Ignoring Dawn’s comment, he leaned against the door frame. “How’re you doing Tara? Ready to head out? If you need a ride or anything, I’m your man,” Realizing how that sounded Xander started to backpedal. “I mean not YOUR man, I am a man but, you know you’re all gay, which is perfectly fine, so you wouldn’t want a man, and I...aw geez.”

Tara smiled, and cut him off. “Yeah, Xander I got it, it’s ok. No, Buffy’s taking me to the airport tomorrow. We’ve got it all covered.”

Dawn piped up. “Me too, right, Buffy?” Tara smiled at the girl.
“I said you could go, and you will don’t worry. It’s just an airport,” Buffy said.

Xander then flopped on the couch between the sisters and opened the pizza box. “Oooo anchovies.”

Xander pulled out two slices and began to eat. Tara watched her friends with an affectionate smile gracing her tired features, knowing how lucky she was to have the family she had before her. God knew her own wasn’t worth a damn, and she gave a small shudder that Buffy didn’t miss. While conversation turned to things other than her and Willow she relaxed a little, suddenly feeling tired Tara decided she should try to sleep.

“I’m going to go to bed guys, tomorrow’s going to be a long day,” Tara said as she stood up went into the kitchen to rinse her glass out.

When she turned around Buffy was there. With a small squeak, she swatted at Buffy. “Dear gods you scared me, don’t do that!”

Buffy’s expression didn’t change; she looked at Tara closely, like she was trying to read her mind. “Tara, I just want to say, you know, if you need me I can be there in half a day to bring you home if you need me.”

Tara put her hand up. “Please, Buffy, don’t. I know you’re here, and Xander and Dawn too,” Tara looked down at the floor. “I have to see her, do you understand? If Angel wanted to see you, wouldn’t you go? And don’t tell me you wouldn’t, because I know better.” Tara cocked an eyebrow and looked determinedly at Buffy.

Buffy held her hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, I know Tara resolve face when I see it. I hope you know Dawn isn’t the only one that loves you.”

Tara nodded her head. “I know, why else would Xander show up being all ‘I’m your man’?” she giggled.

Hearing Tara laugh eased Buffy’s fears some if Tara could laugh then everything might be okay.
“Now, really I’m going to bed, I’m beat,” Tara said and hugged Buffy. “Thank you, Buffy.”

Before Buffy could respond Tara was gone. Buffy smiled sadly, she knew how miserable Tara had been, and she just wanted them both to be happy and together. She wasn’t sure either would be able to go on without the other if they didn’t work this out. Wrapping her arms around herself, she walked back into the living room and sat in the chair recently vacated by Tara.

Tara closed the door to her bedroom and leaned back against the door. She looked again at the suitcase trying to think if she had left anything out. With a frustrated sigh, she decided to go take shower hoping that would help her relax enough to sleep. She pulled a t-shirt and a clean pair of boxers out before she headed down the hall. She decided to light some of the candles in the bathroom. She chose the ones that were a lavender scent in the hopes they would soothe her like it normally did.

She brushed her teeth while the scent started to fill the bathroom, her mind was racing. She was anxious, excited and petrified all at the same time. As she stepped into the shower she let the water beat down over her face and head, saying a prayer for strength. Tara knew she was going to need all the help she could get.

Softly she whispered, “Branwen, daughter of the sea, goddess of the moon and love. I come before you to ask for your help in this hour of my need. I have been given the chance to win back my soul's mate, I ask you to help me be strong and persevere. Shine on me, Goddess of love, I thank you for hearing my plea. As I will it, so mote it be.”

TBC…
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: PG-13

Angst/Drama Rating: Scale of 1-10 this is about a 5.5 maybe a 6.

Setting: The Grove and Sunnydale

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Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: {…} and Italics are used for thoughts. I would also like to thank my beta Sands, she has been awesome, very encouraging, puts up with me & I haven’t managed to break her yet.

Sunnydale, California

Tara woke when her alarm went off at ten that morning, feeling like she had cotton in her head. She sat up and looked around rubbing her face as she got out of bed. She went to the bathroom to do her normal morning routine. After she rinsed out her mouth, she looked in the mirror and groaned. She didn’t like what she saw, but at least the circles weren’t as dark as they had been, and she also knew
there was nothing she could do about it now anyway.

She brushed her long hair and then packed the brush away along with her toothbrush. She pulled on a pair of jeans, tennis shoes, and a deep blue three quarter sleeve shirt, that also made her eyes bluer. She stood looking in the mirror, then sighed and spoke to her reflection. “Well, this is as good as it gets.”

As she headed downstairs, Dawn came up behind her and pulled the suitcase out of her hands. “I got it, Tara, go get some breakfast and I’ll put this in the car.”

Tara smiled. “Thank you, sweetie. Have you eaten yet?”

Dawn rolled her eyes. “Yes, mom, breakfast is the most important meal of the day. I know, I know.”

Feeling like there were a thousand moths in her stomach Tara didn’t think she could eat. So she poured a glass of orange juice. As she sat down in the living room sipping her juice she heard Buffy coming down the stairs.

As Buffy reached the bottom Tara turned to look at her and smiled. “How are you doing, Tara?” Buffy asked walking in and sitting across from Tara on the couch.

“Honestly?”

Buffy nodded her head.

“I feel like I’m gonna be sick,” Tara said smiling weakly.
Trying to put a positive face on for her friend, Buffy said, “It’ll be okay, you two are meant for each other.” Buffy smiled, but her uncertainty was apparently on her face, glancing at her watch she said, “Well, we should get going, you have a plane to catch, missy.”

Tara smiled as she got up heading for the kitchen. As she coming out of the kitchen Dawn came bounding back down the stairs again with a stuffed animal in her hands. She presented the stuffed bunny to Tara.

“This is Mr.Rabbity, take him with you for good luck,” Dawn said looking at Tara hopefully.

Tara smiled and pulled her into a one-armed hug. “Thanks, Dawnie. I’ll take good care of him.”

The three young women headed out to the Jeep, loaded Tara two bags, and on to the airport. There were hugs and a few tears, but Tara reminded them she would be back in a week and she would call them once she arrived. Heading towards the gate, it crossed Tara’s mind that she could not go, but as soon she saw the open door to board the flight to The Grove, that thought that was quickly dismissed.

*The Grove, Tucson, Arizona*

Willow was trying to meditate but wasn’t able to focus enough to accomplish anything. She gave up trying and decided to shower. Tara’s plane hadn’t even left Sunnydale yet, and Willow was so anxious she thought she might be sick again. As she stepped into the shower steam had already started to billow from the top out into the bathroom.

Turning the heat down a little, Willow stood under the barrage of hot water. She was worried; she wasn’t sure what to say to Tara, it had been a long time. Willow knew she just wanted to hold Tara, breathe her in, and feel safe again. She shook her head as she rinsed out the shampoo, soaping herself up and rinsing off.
Standing in her bra and panties she couldn’t decide what to wear. Clothes were now all over the bed and none of them were right, nothing looked right or fit right. Pacing again, she finally threw up her hands and muttered, “Fuck it.”

Deciding on a pair of blue jeans that hug her well, and a copper colored button up shirt that went well with her complexion and hair, she dressed. Willow brushed her hair until it was shiny, and thought about pulling it into a ponytail then decided against it. Up or down there would be no way she could hide the white so she just left it.

Heading to the main dining room, with most of the coven gone it had been scaled down. There was only one small table that had fresh fruit, bagels, a few pots of coffee as well as tea bags and water. Willow picked up a bagel and poured a cup of coffee sitting at one of the nearby tables. She didn’t really eat or drink; she picked at the bagel and kept stirring the coffee. Dana found her like this when she came in almost twenty minutes later. Dana grabbed tea stuffs and an orange then sat across from Willow. Willow looked up as she sat down, smiling weakly.

Trying to keep it light and hopeful, Dana asked, “Are you excited? Her flight will be here in forty-five minutes. Did you want to go to the airport?” Dana watched Willow swallow hard.

“I don’t know that ‘excited’ is the right word. Nervous, anxious, petrified…those are good, really good.” Willow swallowed hard again. “Yes I would like to go, Dana, I don’t think I could just sit here knowing she’s so close.”

Dana nodded. “Willow, you’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. Look at everything you’ve accomplished, how far you’ve come. That has to count for something, doesn’t it?” She reached over and covered Willows hand with her own. “If what I’ve been told is true, everything will be okay. By the goddess it will, she wouldn’t punish you like this.”

Willow shook her head disagreeing. “This whole time has been punishment, it’s the price I pay for what I did Dana. How can she ever forgive me?” She looked up at Dana. “I saw fear in her eyes, fear of me… I don’t think I can bear it if that fear is still there...” Her voice trailed off.
They sat in silence while Dana ate her orange and had her tea. Dana hadn’t missed that Willow was just playing with her food, and her cup was still untouched. The chimes from the grandfather clock in the main entrance chimed the half hour, gently Dana said, “Willow, its time. We should go now; we don’t want to keep her waiting do we?” Willow nodded her head and picked up the breakfast she never touched, carrying it to the trash.

They drove in silence to the airport, which Willow was grateful for because she wasn’t sure she could talk around the rock in her throat. When they parked Willow felt paralyzed. Her body didn’t want to do what she wanted it to, and she had to sit for a few minutes before she could actually get out of the car.

Dana waited patiently, knowing how hard this was for the young woman. When Willow got out of the car, Dana smiled reassuringly at her. “You’re not walking the plank, hon, you should be happy about this.” All Willow could do was nod, and follow stiffly behind Dana.

When they got to the airport, they checked to see if the flight had been on time, but it was fifteen minutes early.

“Let’s go to baggage she may already be there,” Dana said, while Willow’s stomach did somersaults as they headed down to the baggage area. Willow was scanning the areas as the rode down the escalator and spotted Tara.

Dana heard Willow’s gasp and put her hand reassuringly on her arm. “Breathe, Willow, she’s at the second baggage area.” The baggage belt was still turning, and she had her back to the doors, so Tara didn’t see Willow and Dana ride the escalator down.

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Tara wasn’t sure who she was looking for since she didn’t know if it would be Willow, or if she should be looking for someone holding a sign or what. She just watched the belt for her bag, and as it slowly came around something in the air changed. She stiffened, and almost missed her bag. When
Tara pulled it off the belt, she got the sensation again. It was power; very controlled and very potent. She turned around slowly and her stomach began tying itself into knots. Tara *recognized* the power.

She scanned the people standing by the doors, and immediately her gaze landed on Willow. She was shocked by the sight of her. Her body felt like it was being pulled by a magnet, and Willow was the source. Tara was drinking Willow in and was most surprised to see the two streaks of white that framed her beloved’s face. She had not expected that. Willow’s eyes were locked on hers, and she moved towards Tara.

*****

Willow felt like the breath had been knocked out of her when she spotted Tara, but now that she saw Tara, Willow’s body went on autopilot and she moved quickly toward her. She stopped in front of Tara, and the two lovers just stared at each other, neither speaking. Tara was the first to step closer, reaching out to touch Willow’s hair, but pulled back.

“Your hair,” Tara whispered.

Willow gave her a small smile. “Let me take your suitcase.”

Willow reached to take it out of Tara’s hand, their fingers touched, and both gasped as if they had been shocked. Dana kept a respectful distance, watching the exchange. Even a blind man could see the connection between the two women. Dana had never felt anything like it, it was in the air and she watched as several other people started to look around. They weren’t sure what they were looking for or was going on.

“I’m really glad that you came. I wasn’t sure you would,” Willow said as she led Tara over to Dana.

“How could I not, Will?” Tara said softly, dipping her head so her hair partially hid her face from view.
As they got to where Dana was standing she smiled brightly at the pair. She could see the strain and worry on the faces of both girls.

“Tara, this is Sister Dana Adams. Dana, this is Tara Maclay.”

Tara smiled shyly. “Nice to meet you,” she said. Tara looked up at Dana and was struck by her eyes, so much like a cat’s, but the soft blue of her aura made Tara relax; Dana was also struck by her eyes. Dana wasn’t sure she had ever seen eyes so blue and gentle.

“A pleasure to meet you, Sister Tara,” Being address by the title made Tara blush. “Do you have more bags, or shall we go?”

Tara shook her head no, so Dana led the way out. Tara and Willow walked side by side to the car in silence. Casting glances at one another surreptitiously.

Willow put the bags in the trunk of the car. “I’ll sit in back you, so you can sit up front.”

“Umm, ok,” Tara replied.

Dana could see that they were dancing around one another like ribbons fluttering around a maypole.

*******

As Willow climbed into the back seat, Tara couldn’t help watch her ass. She wanted so much to touch her that it hurt. Her nerves felt raw, she had been scared of seeing Willow, but her heart melted like it always did at the sight of her. She climbed into the front seat and belted herself in taking a
deep breath wondering what would happen next.

Willow’s heart was racing like she had just run a marathon, and now with the air on, Tara’s scent was being blown directly into her face. Willow wasn’t sure she could stand the whole ride home like that. Willow wondered if she slid over so she wasn’t directly behind Tara if she’d notice, and if she did what would she think. With a frustrated sigh, she lowered her head hoping that would help, but it didn’t.

*******

The ride back to The Grove seemed to take forever for both girls; Willow remained quiet while Dana chatted Tara up benignly. When they finally pulled in and the air was shut off, Willow let out a puff of air that both women heard. Dana gave her a look as she got out, Willow just looked at her and Tara got out quickly with a hurt look on her face as though this may have been a mistake after all.

Willow tried to catch Tara eye as she got out, and try to speak with her eyes. Tell Tara she was glad she was here but Tara wouldn’t look at her. This time Dana took her bags.

“Willow, why don’t you take Tara to see Lady Rowan, I know she wants very much to meet her,” Dana said trying to keep the two of them together as much as she could.

Willow nodded. “Follow me, Tara.” She said quietly. Instinctively she reached out her hand, but stopped just short of touching Tara, and let her hand drop limply by her side. All Willow wanted to do was touch Tara, but she just wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to do just yet.

TBC...
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: R – for rampant nudity!

Angst Rating: Scale of 1-10 this is about a 4.5, maybe a 5.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson, Arizona

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BTVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: Sure, but if you wanna rip me a new one do it by pm, please.

Willow knocked softly on the door to Rowan’s office and very quickly the door swung open.

“Come in, come in! I’ve been expecting you! You must be Sister Tara,” Rowan said as she came around the desk to give Tara a hug, and then pointed to the chairs with a sweeping gesture of her hand indicating that they should sit. “Sister, you are very welcome here. Willow can show you to your rooms in a moment to let you freshen up. How was your flight?”

Tara cleared her throat nervously. “It was good, short but good,” smiling shyly.

Willow watched the exchange between the two women, and when Tara smiled she thought she
might faint. It was the smile that had been in her dreams for almost two years now. The smile that made her heart sing. Rowan exchanged a few more pleasantries with Tara and then clasped her hands together looking between the two anxious girls.

“Sister, like I told you in my letter, there are only a few of us here right now. If you like we can have a meal sent to you in your rooms, or wherever you might like to have it, Willow can arrange it for you. I'll let the two of you go and get reacquainted.” Rowan smiled pleasantly as she stood.

Rising and moving towards the door, Willow opened it for Tara and then followed her out. After the door closed there was another knock at the door, and Dana came in looking at Rowan with an eyebrow raised in question.

Rowan smiled. “Yes, Sister, their bond is amazing. If they can push past their fears, I can only imagine what the two of them could do.”

Dana smiled. “You should have seen it in the airport – even some of the other travelers felt them. I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

Rowan nodded, with anticipation clear on her face. “You may never see anything like it again either, Sister.”

******

Willow and Tara walked side by side down the hall from Lady Rowan’s office, sneaking sidelong glances at one another, but careful not to touch.

Finally, Willow spoke, “Tara, let me take you to your rooms.”

They were entering the main hall which was now empty.

“Just let me get the key, wait here,” Willow said quietly. She touched Tara’s arm without thinking about it and pulled back like she had been bitten. “I’m sorry, uhh, just give me a minute,” Turning sharply on her heel, Willow marched over behind the desk, disappearing under it.

Tara’s skin tingled where Willow had touched her, and her stomach fluttered. Willow seemed afraid
of her, and this left Tara confused leaving her a little hurt too. First Willow’s reaction in the car, and now you would have thought she had been tasered when she touched her. Tara was staring at her feet as she thought when Willow came back with keys.

“Ready?” she asked with a smile.

Taking Tara’s breath away, Willow’s smile made her feel bold. “Y-yes, where would y-you like m-me?” Tara said knowing her statement could be taken in a few ways.

Willow did a double take, not missing the double entendre, and it made her heart skip a beat. “Follow me this way,” she said with a nod of her head, a soft smile still playing on her lips.

Willow led her across the hall, out and adjacent to the parking lot. It was not lost on her that Lady Rowan had arranged for Tara’s room’s to be next to hers, now she just hoped it didn’t scare Tara. When they got to the door, Willow put the key in the lock and pushed the door open.

“Umm, my rooms are in the next suite. I hope that doesn’t bother you; Lady Rowan thought you might be more comfortable that way. Err, that’s what she said at least.” Willow said looking at her feet shoving her hands deep into her pockets.

Tara smiled before she walked into the living room. She looked into the open door off to the left and saw her suitcases next to the bed.

Smiling shyly, Tara looked up at Willow from under her lashes. “That’s f-fine, and then you’re close to me.”

Tara couldn’t believe herself – she was actually flirting with Willow. She felt like when she had first met Willow when she was giddy just to be near her. Tara hadn’t realized just how much she had missed Willow; her voice, her smile – even just being in her presence. Motioning for Willow to follow her in, Tara walked directly into the bedroom and sat on the bed looking at Willow, who stood in the doorway looking anywhere but at Tara sitting on the bed.

“Umm, ok, good. I’ll, umm, just be next door then. I don’t know if you want to shower, or nap, or something. Are you hungry? I can get you some food, or you can watch TV; we have the Discovery Channel. There’s cable too, so of course, you can choose what you like. Umm, so I’ll just go then,” Willow babbled, and then pointed over her shoulder with a jab of her thumb towards the door finally looking at Tara.
Willow couldn’t believe she was actually standing just a few feet from Tara. The car ride had left her head swimming because all she could breathe in was Tara, and this filled her with such longing. Now, as she stood in the doorway, a part of Willow wanted to run away, but another part of her wanted to run to Tara.

Tara watched the emotions play over Willow’s expressive face and wondered if her own where mirrored the same way. “Willow, please come in.”

Willow crossed over the threshold just barely and left the door open. Willow knew if she had her way, she and Tara would be well on their way to making love; she just wasn’t sure what Tara wanted – why she had come – what she expected.

Tara had very little self-restraint left, so she got up off the bed, and walked up to Willow. Making sure to step into her personal space, brushing against Willow as she swung the door closed. Hearing an audible gulp from Willow, she couldn’t stop herself from smirking. Tara brushed against Willow again. Tara was shaking, and she could see that Willow was too, as she stared at her feet.

Tara wanted to touch Willow so badly; she stood closely on purpose so they were only inches apart, and screwing up the courage, she breathed, “Can I touch you?”

Willow’s head snapped up, and her heart did somersaults, while a whole pack of butterflies erupted in her stomach. She looked into the blue eyes she had been dreaming about every night since she went away. “Yes, please.”

Tara reached up to touch Willow’s hair, her head cocked to one side. She played with the white in Willow’s hair as she closed her eyes enjoying the warmth of Tara’s fingertips. “When did the white happen?” she asked gently.

Willow opened her eyes, swallowing hard and looking at her feet again. “While I was away in England, Giles said it was because of… the withdrawals and the magicks…and it may never be red again.” The shame was clear on Willow’s face, as she looked at her feet again.

Tara put her finger under Willow’s chin and tilted her head up to look at her. “You’re still beautiful to me,” Tara kissed Willow. She snaked her arms around Willow’s waist, pulling her close. Willow’s arms wrap around her shoulders, as they melted into one another.
Tara hadn’t known what she was going to do until she did it. Willow felt so good, so right, she felt something she hadn’t felt in such a long time – she felt whole again. One kissed bled into another, and another, and when they came up for air, they looked at each other. Surprise showing on both of their faces clearly, they just looked at one another.

Willow pulled back so she could look at Tara, and broke the silence, unleashing a babble. “Oh, gods I’ve missed you, Tara. I’m so sorry baby, can you ever forgive me? Can you trust me again? I just… I lost it. I’ve felt so guilty and ashamed; I can’t believe what I did. The thought, the sight, I couldn’t let him hurt you. He was crazy; he would have done so much worse. If he had hurt you…”

Tara put a finger to Willow’s lips and smiled. “God, I’ve m-missed Willow-babble. W-Willow I was there. I know the w-what and why. I should forgive you for what – s-saving my life? I wouldn’t be h-here if you hadn’t done what you did.”

Willow shook her head. “Tara, I saw fear in your eyes – of me,” She bit her lip trying desperately not to cry. Tara sighed and led her over to the bed where they sat down facing each other, but Willow wouldn’t look at her again.

“‘You’re right, I won’t lie. But not f-for what you think. I didn’t f-fear you for what you did, sweetie, I’m g-grateful, I’m alive. It was the p-power you tapped into to do it. I’ve only ever felt that k-kind of power once b-before,’” Tara took another deep breath. “I felt you in the airport before I saw you. As soon as I felt the power, I knew it was you. I know you, I know your energy. Even if I was blind, deaf and dumb, I would know you,” Tara took one of Willow’s hands in her own, stroking her face with the other. “Willow, look at me,” Willow shook her head no. “Willow Danielle Rosenberg, look at me!” Tara’s vehemence made Willow look at her.

“I have only been here for a few hours, and let me tell you the things I know. I know that from the moment I saw you, there was nothing I wanted more than to be in your arms. I know you have been through more than I can imagine – maybe even understand, not just because of the streaks – which are kinda sexy, by the way,” this garnered a small smile from Willow smile. “The last thing, I feel more than know. You have been gifted with an awesome amount of power. I can feel it, but unlike before there is control and balance that I can’t even begin to understand. My mother had control and power like you, but still not as strong as you. Willow, I am in awe of you,” Tara finished without a stutter.

Willow blinked rapidly not knowing how to respond. There was only one question Willow wanted an answer to, she whispered, “Do you still love me, Tara?”
Tara smiled the crooked smile that was for Willow alone. “Endlessly, hopelessly, and forever. To be honest, I didn’t know how I would feel when I got here and saw you again. It’s been almost two years, Will, but I knew as soon I felt you. I only hope that you still love me.”

It wasn’t lost on Willow that Tara’s stuttering had stopped, and that made her cry even harder, she couldn’t help herself. Willow wrapped her arms around Tara’s middle, rested her head on Tara’s shoulder and sobbed. She thought she had lost Tara for good; she couldn’t even speak and Tara gathered Willow into her lap while she cried.

When Willow finally had no more tears she pulled back from Tara, her eyes still glistening. “Tara, baby, I have never been as miserable in my life as I have been while trying to…get this under control. I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to make you sad – that’s the last thing I ever wanted. I was afraid for you, I was afraid of me, and I would rather die than do anything to you. I love you so much. There was never a day I didn’t want you, and miss you,” Willow looked at her hands, shaking her head. “I just didn’t know how to be good to you and for you after that. I think I’m learning, but I’m still not completely sure, I don’t know – Tara I’m scared.”

Tara nodded. “We should be, Willow; this is starting over – again, or the chance to try to pick up where we left off maybe. Two years is a long time, it’s almost as long as we were together.”

Willow smiled softly. “We’ve been apart one year, seven months, eighteen days, and seventeen hours.”

Tara laughed and hugged Willow to her. “Oh, My Willowtree, I feel like I’ve been holding my breath, and now I can breathe again.”

Willow clung to Tara. “Do you know how I’ve missed being called that? Would you just kiss me again?”

Tara smiled. “Try to stop me.” She eased Willow out of her lap, and down on the bed. Then she kissed Willow’s eyes, her nose, along her jawline, and finally her mouth. When she finally claimed Willow’s mouth they both moaned. Hands roamed leisurely over clothes, shyly.

Half an hour later, they were still kissing. They both wanted more, but they enjoyed this slow build. Willow’s tummy rumbled loudly making Tara giggle. “Hungry are we?”
Willow blushed. “Yes, guess I am, and umm I really haven’t been eating much for a while. I was preoccupied with so many things, on top of being worried and stressed, so you know, food doesn’t rank…”

Tara kissed her again. “Me too, sweetie, I get it. Can I shower, and then we’ll go get something to eat?”

Willow nodded. “Of course, baby, I’ll just go next door, and you can come get me when you’re ready.”

Tara arched an eyebrow. “Who said I wanted to shower alone?”

Willow’s mouth opened and closed, and she looked confused as she a blush rose quickly to her cheeks. Tara got off the bed and pulled off Willow’s shoes before she pulled her up off the bed. Reaching for Willow’s shirt, Tara unbuttoned and pushed it slowly over her shoulders. Tara released the button to Willow’s jeans, and leaned to whisper in her ear, “I really like your ass in these jeans, and I got an eyeful when you got in the car at the airport.”

Willow couldn’t believe her ears and looked at Tara as if she had sprouted a horn from the middle of her forehead. “Who are you and what did you do with Tara?”

Tara giggled, as she pushed Willows jeans down around her ankles prompting her to step out of them. “Willow, I’ve had to wait - what was it? One year, seven months, eighteen days, and seventeen hours to get my hands on the woman I love more than anything in this world. Do you think I’m gonna let you out of my sight anytime soon?”

Willow grinned widely, as Tara stepped to her so she could kiss Willow’s neck making her sigh happily. The next thing Willow knew her bra was gone; it always surprised her how quickly Tara could get her bra off when she was so inclined. Willow was standing there in her panties, and crossed her arms over her chest self-consciously; she hadn’t been naked in front of someone in a long time.

Tara pulled her arms down to her sides. “Oh no, no, no. Let me look at you, Will, my memories don’t do you justice,” Willow tried to stand there, but started fidgeting, “Ok, fair is fair.” Tara stripped off her shirt, bra, and jeans ten seconds flat.
Willow could only gape at how quickly she had done that. They were staring at each other. Willow stepped towards Tara, and raised a hand to touch but held back. “May I touch you?” Tara took her hands and placed them on her breasts with a sigh and a smile.

Tara giggled as suddenly Willow’s hands were everywhere. “I forgot you have extra arms.”


Tara gave a throaty laugh that made Willow shiver. “You do anytime you touch me.”

Willow blushed. “You’re beautiful Tara, how can I not want to touch all of you?”

Tara pulled Willow into her arms, and kissed her soundly; when their lips parted Tara rested her forehead against Willow’s. “I’ve missed you so much, Will. It was so hard, sometimes I didn’t know how I was going to get through it. I had so many questions and no one…”

It seemed now it was Tara’s turn to cry. Willow held her tightly while Tara’s hot tears rolled down her chest. Willow tried to quell the guilt that rose deep in her chest, as she listened to Tara’s sobs, knowing how hurt she must have been.

“It’s okay, sweetie, I’m so sorry baby, I never wanted to hurt you, I swear. I love you, Tara. It’ll be okay. I promise,” she led Tara to the bathroom with her arm around her trying to keep as much physical contact as possible.

She knew that her beautiful girl needed the extra contact sometimes from the many nights of holding her when she shook terrified by memories of her father and the things he had done to her and her mother. It had taken Tara almost a year before she started to tell Willow about the beatings her father doled out to all of his family. How she had been beaten so badly sometimes that she couldn’t walk and about the beating that had been the last before her mother got really sick.

Willow sat Tara on the toilet and started the shower. Willow stood in front of Tara, and she wrapped her arms around Willow’s lithe frame. Willow bent to kiss the top of Tara’s head, gently stroking her hair.
After a few minutes she said, “Stand up, love, I think the shower’s ready.”

Tara stood docilely, and Willow marveled at the difference between the woman that stood before her now shaking, and the woman who had undressed her just a few minutes ago.

Willow checked the water one more time and then turned back to Tara. “Tara, honey, I’m gonna take your panties off, ok?” She didn’t want to move too quickly so she would spook her. Willow was on her knees in front of Tara, when she looked up at her; now Tara had a slight smile on her lips, and the twinkle was back in her eyes.

She couldn’t help herself and smiled cheekily in return. “Does this make you happy?” she asked staying on her knees, her head at hip height.

Tara put her hands into Willow’s hair. “Very much,” she replied hoarsely.

Willow kissed the tops her thighs, running her fingertips up the back of Tara’s leg’s to her bottom before she stood up to wriggled out of her own panties.

Opening the stall door, she pulled Tara into the shower with her, the water falling over both of their bodies. Willow grabbed the jasmine scented soap that was already in the shower and rubbed it in her hands to get it sudsy, and then started soaping Tara’s body.

Tara leaned her back against the shower wall to give her lover access to her body, while she watched her work. Willow gently soaped her chest, stomach, and sex, coming back to pay extra attention to her breasts, which makes her laugh.

Willow looked at her, brows furrowed. “What?”

With a smile, Tara responded, “You are such a breast girl.”

Willow blushed and shrugged. “What can I say? I have the most beautiful pair in the world in front of me. Now turn around missy.” Willow turned Tara away from her so she was facing the shower wall. Willow reached around to cup her breasts while she kissed her neck and shoulder while pressing her body against Tara’s back. Tara moaned reaching back to hold Willow to her and whimpered when Willow pulled away to soap the rest of her body.
Taking Tara by the shoulders she turned her around, and switched places, so she was under the stream of water. As Tara rinsed off, Willow poured a generous dollop of shampoo into her hand and began to wash Tara’s hair gently massaging her scalp.

Tara purred, “A girl could get used to this.”

Willow whispered in her ear, “I have a lot of time to make up for. Rinse please.”

Willow quickly soaped and shampooed her body, so when Tara was done, she rinsed herself off quickly. Turning the water off, she opened the door. Stepping out, Willow then helped Tara out. Quickly, she grabbed a towel and began to dry her love off gently. Willow savored every inch of Tara’s flesh, placing butterfly kisses here and there. She stood after drying her feet, and Tara kissed her pulling her wet body against her own.

“Hey, I just dried you off!” Willow said smiling.

Brazenly Tara said, “I know a spot that’s all wet again.”

Willow gulped, as her eyes got big as saucers, trying to play it cool and failing miserably. “Oh yeah?” she squeaked.

“Mmmhmm, so what are you going to do about it?” Tara asked with a wicked smile.

Willow coughed and turned redder than her hair. “Umm, why don’t we get some food first, and umm, you know, we have to keep up our strength,” she sputtering again.

Tara gave her another throaty laugh, and sighed, “Ok, if that’s what you want,” then walked past Willow and out into the bedroom.

As Willow dried off, she could hear Tara on the phone. When she walked out of the bathroom, Tara was saying, “No, it’s good. Really, it’s good, Dawnie, I swear.” She looked over to see Willow standing there naked, and her eyes darkened with desire.
Tara covered the mouthpiece, and mouthed ‘do you want to talk to her?’, “Hold a sec ok?” Tara covered the mouthpiece again. “It’s Dawn, sweetie, would you like to talk to her?”

Willow blanched. “Umm, I don’t know, does she want to talk to me? I mean it’s been so long, and I just kinda left…” her voice trailed off.

Tara thought for a moment. “Okay, I’m back. No, it’s kinda brown here, hot too. Yeah, I know. Promise me you’ll have at least two salads while I’m gone?”

Willow smiled and shook her head as she listened. Tara was still Dawn’s surrogate mom; some things hadn’t changed while she had been gone.

“Okay, I call again in a few days. We’re gonna get something to eat. I will, I will, she’s, uh next door in her room. Yeah, I know next door. She says it wasn’t her doing,” Laughing Tara looked at Willow and winked. “I’ll tell her, I promise. I love you too, bye.”

Tara started to dress while watching Willow out of the corner of her eye. “Dawn said to tell you she misses you, Willow.”

Willow didn’t say anything, so Tara just left it at that; Willow went back into the bathroom coming back with her panties and started to put them back on.

Tara walked over and pulled them out of her hand. “Hey, I need those,” Willow squeaked.

Tara smiled wickedly again. “No you don’t,” she said, shoving them into her pocket. “Hurry up, I’m hungry.”

By the look on Tara’s face, it was obvious that she didn’t mean for food either, as she eyed Willow openly.

TBC…
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: NC-17/XXX – WARNING: This will be girl on girl sex with kinky, un-vanilla goodness and a dash of smut thrown in so be forewarned, very forewarned,

Angst/Drama Rating: So I guess this should be here too since much like life nothing comes easy; I'd say on a scale of 1-10 this is about a 3.5 – 4.5.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson, Arizona

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Feedback: Sure, hit me with it! Although if you wanna rip me a new one do it by pm, please.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I would also like to thank my beta Jasmydae for her assistance as well as being my new cohort in all the literary crimes (because I’m sure I’ll make lots) with the story.

Tara and Willow walked back to the main hall holding hands. Tabitha was at the desk in the main entrance once again, and when they came in she asked, “And who might this one be?”
Willow blushed and walked Tara over to the desk. “Tabby, this is Tara; Tara, this is Sister Tabitha.”

Both girls could see recognition slowly move over her face. “The Tara?” Tabitha said.

Willow nodded her head and smiled. “The Tara.”

Tabitha rushed around the desk and grabbed Tara in a big hug. “It is so good to meet you, Sister Tara! I hope you enjoy your time here; I’m sure Willow will,” She snickered mischievously, which caused both girls to blush.

“That’s enough, Sister Tabitha.” Dana was standing directly behind the girls.

“Yes, Sister Dana,” Tabitha responded by quickly going back to whatever it was she had behind the desk, looking guilty like a school kid caught skipping.

“Are you girls hungry? I trust so far things are going well?” Dana smiled. She could tell that both girls had been crying, but Dana had never seen Willow look so happy.

“Yes, we are. I thought I would just go into the kitchen and make something for us,” Willow said.

“If you need anything or want anything special just let me know,” She smiled a radiant smile and squeezed Tara’s shoulder before she walked away.

Willow and Tara held hands all the way to the kitchen. “What are you hungry for, baby?” Willow asked. Tara arched an eyebrow giving Willow such a look she blushed. “Other than me,” she added quietly.

“You know what I like, sweetie.” The need to touch Willow was overwhelming. Tara snaked her arms around Willow’s waist and planted a kiss on the back of her neck. She felt Willow lean into her, but moments later Willow’s stomach grumbled loudly. She backed away with a chuckle.

“Okay I get it, so go to it. You know where everything is.” Tara watched Willow move with ease
around the kitchen.

“What do you want to drink, baby?” Willow asked.

“Oh, whatever you’re having is fine.”

Willow retrieved two bottles of green tea from an industrial refrigerator and offered one to Tara. “Is green tea okay?” Tara took the bottle, popping it open and taking a long drink; Willow watched the skin over Tara’s throat move as she drank, and licked her lips.

Tara smiled at Willow’s expression. “I’m really thirsty.”

Willow knew she had been caught staring. “Yeah, this is an actual desert, so you’ll have to drink extra water or you’ll get dehydrated. Besides being unpleasant, that can…” Tara smiling at her. “Oh,” she said nervously and licked her lips again. “How would you like your sandwich cut? Would you like triangles or down the middle?”

“Triangles; they’re fun,” Tara said leaning over the counter on her elbow watching Willow make their sandwiches.

She pointed Tara toward a table set off from the kitchen, set her plate down, and then came back with two bananas, a mango, two kiwis, a magenta colored fruit that looked like a pear, and a football-shaped yellow one. She also had a paring knife, which she laid down by the fruit.

They sat close together while they ate. Touching one another seemed to be imperative, and it didn’t matter where so long as they could maintain contact. Tara kicked off her sandals and wiggled her toes up under the hem of Willow’s jeans so she could touch the skin of her leg.

Even this small contact made Willow shiver visibly, garnering a smile from Tara at the effect she was having; Willow’s skin flushed in anticipation. Tara didn’t miss the flush, watching as it reached all the way to Willow’s ears.

“I’ve missed this, Will, just being with you. You know, just us,” Tara said softly.
Willow took her hand and smiled. “Me too, Tara. Your … presence feels good, kind of like a big warm hug.”

With a deep breath, Tara asked, “Willow, what did Tabitha mean by ‘another one’?”

Willow groaned and rolled her eyes. “About two weeks ago Dana and I were coming back from town, and there was a girl whose pickup had broken down. So we gave her a ride, then she showed up here a few days later – actually the day Lady Rowan told me you had agreed to come here – and we went for a hike,” She shrugged. “No big.”

“So you like her?” Tara asked as she attempted to sound nonchalant.

Willow put her sandwich down and took Tara’s hand. “Not in the least, and definitely not like that.”

Tara nodded, satisfied by Willow’s answer and went back to her sandwich.

Willow finished first, and looked at the fruit, to decide what she wanted. Around a mouthful of food, Tara asked, “What are those two?” She pointed to the pear-shaped fruit and the football shaped one.

Willow smiled. “I thought you might like to try them. This one” - she held up the magenta colored pear - “is a prickly pear. They grow on cactuses here; they are very sweet and messy.” She leered wolfishly at Tara, her eyes sparkling as she explained. “Supposedly if you were ever stuck in the desert and could find these after you get the quills off they will keep you hydrated enough to get help, or to a town, or whatever. Now this one” - she held up the yellow one - “is a star fruit. It’s sweet, too, but look at the shape,” She handed the fruit to Tara for inspection as she cut slices off for them. “When you cut it, the slices look like stars.”

Tara turned the fruit over in her hand. “So which one do you want to eat first?”

Willow smiled. “I think we both should have a banana. The potassium will be useful. But I think we can take this one with us.” She pointed to the prickly pear.
“Why Miss Rosenberg, whatever do you mean?” Tara asked coyly.

Willow leered again at Tara. “Come with me and I’ll show you.” They giggled together while they gathered their plates, and then put them into the sink. Tara grabbed the bananas; Willow, the prickly pear and the knife.

Tara handed Willow a banana, and they both ate while they walked. Willow started to head for the main entrance, but then remembered Tabitha was there and wanted to avoid any more lengthy conversations since she could be a pain in the ass. “Hey, let’s go this way. It’s longer, but we can bypass Tabby.”

“Longer?” Tara whined.

She smiled. “Just by a minute or two, I promise. She might stop us, and I want you all to myself. Let’s hurry.” She bumped against Tara accidentally on purpose.

When they arrived at Tara’s suite, Tara headed straight for the bedroom. Following behind, Willow set the fruit down on a chest of drawers. “I’ll be right back.” She turned to leave.

“Baby, where are you going?” Tara asked.

Willow crossed the room and kissed Tara, crushing her so hard against her Tara had to pull back.

“I can’t breathe, sweetie.”

Willow looked down at Tara. “I won’t say I’m sorry because I’m not. I’m just going to grab some clothes and a few other things.”

Tara raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

Willow headed for the door and threw over her shoulder, “Just stuff…”
Because The Grove had once been a resort, and some of the suites were connected by doors that opened into the adjoining room. Theirs were paired in this fashion. Willow knew on the other side of the door in her bedroom was Tara’s bedroom, and the thought made her knees weak. She gathered some candles she kept because they reminded her of Tara. They were beeswax and smelled like honey when they burned. She also grabbed several tea lights and sconces; some sandalwood incense, matches, and a burner. She dumped all of these into a pillowcase, then opened her side of the door and set the latch to keep it open.

She knocked on Tara’s adjoining door and heard her yelp. “It’s me, baby. Open the door. My hands are full.”

When Tara tugged open the door, she blinked once, then erupted in a fit of giggles. “Are you Santa Rosenberg?”

Willow smiled and said shyly, “If you want me to be.”

Tara took the bundle from her, and let it slip to the floor. Tara put her arms around Willow’s shoulders and with one hand she gently traced her eyebrows, cheekbones, and mouth with her fingers. “Willow, you are so beautiful.”

Willow swallowed hard and looked down.

“Willow?” Tara said. “Look at me.” When Willow hesitated Tara put a finger under her chin and lifted her face up. “Do you remember what you told me after we made love for the first time? You told me that when we were alone I could not hide my face from you. That you understood when we were out in public, but you didn’t want me to hide when we were alone. You don’t have to hide from me anymore, Willow. There’s no reason. Okay?”

“Tara, I’m scared,” Willow’s eyes were so full of fear it disturbed Tara. She took Willow’s hand and pulled her to the bed. They faced each other. She stroked Willow’s cheek and said gently, “Tell me, what is it that you’re afraid of, my sweet Willow?”

With a deep breath, Willow started, “I’m afraid I’ll hurt you. I’m afraid if I let go something horrible will happen again. Everything I’ve learned to do is about control now. I’m not sure I can do this. It’s not that I don’t want to—gods knows I can’t think of much else—I’m just afraid. With everything we
didn’t get to work through…” She shook her head. “It’s like things were just starting to come together again and then… it’s been so long. I still think somehow this might all be another dream, and the thought of that is worse than your not being here at all.”

Tara nodded in understanding and the pain on her face mirrored Willow’s own. “We are so lucky; it’s like the second chance got put on hold. We may not be able to pick up exactly where we left off because so much has changed, but we can try. I want to try, do you? Can’t you feel… us? I’m not going to beg you, Willow. If your heart’s not in this, I should just go home and save us both…” She shrugged. “What have you been taught?” she asked, not wanting to give up easily.

“What do you mean?” Willow asked hesitantly.

Tara licked her lips slowly, and Willow’s preoccupied expression made her smile. “You’ve been taught control, yes?”

Willow nodded. “Okay, so I’ll guess that you’ve been taught to channel your energies and emotions when they become too much, yes? If you’re afraid of losing control we can use what you’ve learned.”

Willow nodded again, but Tara could see she still hadn’t caught on. “What’s your point?”

Tara rolled her eyes and sighed. “Okay, so since you’re not helping me pack, that means you want me to stay. You know what sex magic is right? I think we both know where this is going, and I vote for sooner rather than later.” She looked at Willow with an undisguised lust that made the room suddenly several degrees hotter. “We know that during sex energy is produced, as well as a certain amount of control loss to well, umm, you know, but it can be channeled to accomplish things when focused, or just allowed to dissipate, right?” Willow nodded. “Okay, if there are two of us, we can channel it back on course, so to speak, if it starts to go into an uncontrollable state. We have done similar things before, Willow, so we know we can do it, and this shouldn’t be any different.”

Willow frowned and shifted nervously. “But control.”

Tara covered Willow’s lips with a finger. “Willow, do you trust me?” Willow nodded. “Besides the fact that I just want to jump your bones” - this made Willow smile - “if there is trust, then we can share the responsibility of control. I trust you with my life; I always have, even when other things were in question. If we are really going to give this a shot we have to start with trust, right?” She kissed Willow softly.
Willow pulled Tara closer and ran her fingers through Tara’s hair; Tara guided Willow into her lap so she could press against her. Tara unbuttoned Willow’s shirt so she could ease it off of her shoulders as her breathing started to become quick and shallow. Willow shifted to straddle Tara, her fingers finding their way back to Tara’s long blond tresses.

Willow leaned a little closer and took strands between her fingers and ran them across her chest, down her cheek, and under her chin, her eyes closed as she enjoyed the sensation. Tara's hands wandered over Willow's back and unhooked her bra. Willow shifted a little so it could be pulled away arching forward as she pulled Tara to her. Tara trailed kisses down Willow’s neck onto her collarbone to sucking at the skin as she went; her thumbs grazed Willow’s nipples.

Willow sucked in air sharply at the contact, pulled Tara’s head up to look at her. Tara’s eyes were dark blue with a desire so plain it made Willow wet. “Are you sure Tara? If not, we need to stop now. I know everything is happening so quickly, and I want you so badly. I want the chance for us to work, and if slow is better please...” Willow's cheeks were pink with desire.

Tara smiled. “Willow, let me make love with you. Let me touch you – show you how much I love you. You’re not the only one that’s scared, Will, but if you want this too, and love me as much as I love you, we can do this.” Tara kissed Willow and moved her tongue languidly around Willow’s mouth eliciting a shiver.

“My Willowtree, my goddess, you are my world. I haven’t been able to touch you for far too long, and here you are in front of me, warm and real. Let me remind you of what you’ve been missing – of what I’ve been missing.” She nuzzled Willow’s neck. “It’s kind of our first time again.” Relief flashed across Willow’s face but quickly hardened to desire.

Willow crawled off of Tara’s lap and went to the bundle she’d brought, and began pulling things out and placing them around the room. She lit the beeswax candles first, then the sandalwood incense. She held her hand out to Tara and pulled her to her feet. She sweetly ran her hands across Tara’s shoulders, down her arms to her waist, over her hips and around to her bottom. She kissed Tara’s neck and sucked on her ear, which made her moan. Slipping her hands under Tara’s shirt Willow ran her fingertips over the silky skin of her stomach as she pulled it up nudging her arms up so she could take it off.

Willow slipped her hands up to unhook Tara’s bra and tossed it to the floor. She pulled back the sheets and pushed Tara back onto the bed. Willow grabbed the pear and knife in one hand as she moved to straddle Tara. Tara watched Willow settle on her hips; her eyes glittered and were so green. Tara moved her hands down Willow’s back to cup her bottom with both hands; the feel of Willow on top of her made her skin tingle.
As she ran her fingers around Willow’s waist she could see that she had lost weight. Willow cut the pear into four quarters and as she did so it started to drip onto Tara’s breastbone and stomach. Cutting the messy fruit into wedges Willow offered one to Tara but held it just out of reach so it would drip onto her lips before she allowed Tara to suck it into her mouth. “Mmm, that is sweet and messy,” Tara said, looking down at the magenta colored drops.

Willow nodded her head then squeezed one of the slices over Tara’s nipples before popping it in her mouth. She held the other two wedges in her hand to prevent it from dripping on the sheets, and not really making it as some of the drops were starting to roll off of Tara. Willow shifted her position so she could suck on one of Tara’s nipples, licking and tugging at it. She put the third slice in her mouth and leaned to kiss Tara.

Keeping just far enough away so that Tara would have to raise her head, she moved the messy fruit over her lips before letting her take the other half. Sitting back up she took the final piece rubbed it over her own nipples smiling as she watched Tara lick her lips then dangled the piece of her mouth; Tara pulled Willow over and bit at the wedge as Willow pulled back the other half and sucked it into her mouth.

Tara unbuttoned Willow’s jeans, pushing them down, rolling her over so she could get them the rest of the way off. Willow lay on her back with her arms crossed shyly over her breasts. Tara moved her arms aside and trailed one hand down between Willow’s breasts. She bent her head to taste the fruit sweetened skin of Willow’s nipple. Her hand moved slowly over Willow’s stomach, stopping just above the dark red curls of her sex.

Willow reached for the button on Tara’s jeans, then slipped her hand inside purring at the heat and damp that met her touch. She rolled onto her side and pushed at Tara’s jeans and panties urging her lift her hips so she could push them off.

With no clothes between them, Willow pushed Tara onto her back and straddled her again. Tara’s hair spread out beneath her; her breathing was rapid and shallow. Willow bent over and took one nipple into her mouth and caressed the other with her fingers eliciting a moan from Tara. She pulled back a little to whisper, “Have I told you how much I’ve missed you, Tara?”

Tara dared. “Show me.”

Willow kissed her hard, her tongue darting quickly in and out like a hummingbird. As their tongues played, Willow caught Tara’s and sucked on it, which caused her to shiver and electricity jump
through her stomach spiraling outwards. Willow’s mouth trailed away from her mouth to her jaw, on to her ear and the sensitive skin of her neck. She was sucking on Tara’s neck and the skin was starting to bruise.

Willow pulled back and bit her lip. She knew in the past Tara hadn’t minded and even encouraged Willow to mark her-- but that was the past. “Tara, baby, marks? Do you want them? I stopped before this one got dark, but…”

Tara cut her off, “Mark me, Willow. I’m yours.” As she pulled her back to her throat Willow growled against her neck, and pushed her hips into Tara. A growl escaped Tara's lips as Willow sucked hard on her skin; tendrils of sensation shot out from Willow’s mouth to Tara's nipples and lower.

As Tara ran her nails down Willow’s back she arched against them and hissed. A chain of bright red marks darkened around Tara’s throat and collarbone to correspond with the thin pink lines down Willow’s back. Tara watched as Willow licked her way back to her breasts, with nipples so hard and now dyed a darker shade of pink, like gumdrops ready for Willow to suck on. With her mouth on one nipple and one hand on the other, Willow shifted herself so she could ease her other hand to open the swollen lips of Tara’s sex. Tara grabbed Willow’s head, her fingers curling tightly in her hair.

Willow growled deep in her throat against Tara’s breast as she enjoyed the feel of her and the taste of her skin; it was sweeter than she remembered, even without the juice. Willow shifted again so she could have better access to Tara’s wet sex.

“Tara, you’re so wet, baby. It’s amazing,” she said huskily as she stroked Tara’s outer lips, slipping one finger inside to slowly trace figure eights around her clit.

Tara lifted her hips against Willow’s hand. “Look at me, Willow,” she said quickly as her mind started to fog with desire, she wanted to remain focused at least for a little while longer.

Willow moved from Tara’s breast to look her in the face. “Yes, my love?” Her fingers continued slowly around the slick skin.

“I want you to look at me; I want you to watch me as you make me cum.”

Willow just nodded her head, swallowing hard.
“Tell me how to please you. What would you like?” she asked.

Tara’s hips were moving against her hand, and she was getting wetter by the second. “First, I want your mouth,” she breathed.

With a smile, raising her eyebrows Willow asked, “First?”

Tara ground her hips against Willow again. “Yes, first.”

Tara had a plan, she just wasn’t sure if she could do it. Willow slid down kissing her way over Tara’s taut stomach she could feel the muscles tighten in anticipation she could taste the sweat on Tara’s skin but made sure to maintain eye contact. She eased herself over Tara’s leg, gripped her hips and dove right into her lover. Tara whimpered as Willow’s tongue hit its mark and Willow groaned at the taste of her.

The eye contact was to keep Willow grounded; there was just the added bonus arousal of having Willow watch as everything played over Tara’s face. She could watch Tara squirm under her mouth and fingers, watch her skin flush then dimple as her arousal increased.

“Willow, inside baby, I need you inside me. Mmm...” she breathed. Willow slipped inside of Tara, purring as she closed her eyes. “Look at me,” Tara panted. “More, Willow.”

Willow could feel Tara’s arousal rise as she slipped another finger inside Tara; her thrusts angled upward and slowed so could she rub Tara’s G-spot with the length of her fingers while swirling around her clit with her tongue.

“More Will, I need more...”

Willow wasted no time responding to Tara’s request; she was so hot and wet it made Willow tremble with her own excitement. Tara’s increase in arousal only served to stoke Willow’s arousal as well, watching Tara’s eyes change from blue to violet. Tara knew what she was working toward, and Willow was following without question.
“Willow, more, I want more,” Tara panted again, the surprise apparent on Willow’s face.

Willow pulled her head up. “Baby, are you sure? It might hurt at first.” Willow could tell that Tara was going somewhere with this, but she wasn’t sure just where.

Tara kept moving against Willow’s fingers. “Yes, please. Oh Willow, please.”

Willow slowly slipped a fourth finger shallowly in, and Tara bucked against the addition. Tara dug into the mattress with her heels, a low groan escape from her. Willow moved slowly so she wouldn’t hurt Tara, and watched her face for indications of pain and that she should stop, but saw only Tara’s lust.

“Willow, oh sweet Willow. Oh, my sweet goddess.” Tara moaned.

Willow could tell that Tara was pacing herself. She was so wet Willow’s hand was soaked to the wrist. This wasn’t unusual, or at least it hadn’t been in the past, and it dawned on Willow what Tara might be up to.

“Tara, are you sure, love? Is that what you want?” Willow asked.

Tara smiled. “Figured me out, did you?” Her breathing was labored as she tried hard not to orgasm. Every pore alive with the sensations that radiated outward from her center.

“I think so, are you ready for more? This will hurt at for sure at first, though.” Willow never took her eyes away. She watched lust mingle with fear as Tara nodded her head.

Willow slipped her thumb into Tara’s tight sex, pulling all her fingers together in a beak-like shape. She knew Tara had never been with a man, and they hadn’t really played with toys so this was a big deal. As gently as she could she moved her hand inside Tara, using Tara’s own juices to coat her hand and stretch her. The heat was amazing; Willow never knew Tara’s body could be like this.

“Tell me when you’re ready.” Willow had never seen Tara’s eyes this shade of blue. She could still feel the barrier; she didn’t move deeper but waited as Tara’s muscles started to relax.
Willow dipped her head to gently suck on her clit, grazed it with her teeth felt the walls of Tara’s sex shudder and start to contract. Tara’s body was covered in sweat, her skin flushed, and she had gone from trembling to shaking.

“Now, Willow, now, now!” Willow pushed and curled her hand into a fist as she broke past Tara’s hymen and pushed into her sex.

Tara yelped as a white hot flash of pain shot across her abdomen. She thought she might pass out. Her hips pushed against Willow’s hand, curled deep inside her. Willow didn’t move as Tara’s orgasm hit her fingers in spurts. Tara’s sex was hot and her juices were running past Willow’s hand.

“Baby, are you okay? What do you want me to do?” Willow asked softly.

Tara had closed her eyes. “Gently, slowly.” Her body wasn’t just tingling it was melting with too many things to put just one name to.

Willow started to push into her but Tara’s sex was wrapped tightly around her wrist. She had never done this, and reading about it wasn’t the same. The books never talked about how the fist-er feels. The heat, the power of being so far inside and how connected you feel – no book could explain it properly.

Slowly she began small in and out motions. Tara made a deep guttural sound that reached deep into Willow’s belly. Willow went back to licking over and around Tara’s clit. The grip on her wrist relaxed, so Willow could rotate her hand slightly to the right and then to the left. She could feel the soft cushion of Tara’s cervix, and she couldn’t help but moan.

“Don’t stop, Willow. Please don’t stop. Oh, my gods, what you are doing is so good, baby. Please don’t stop.”

Willow smiled as she took her queues from Tara; she pushed deeper with more force. “I won’t stop sweet Tara, cum for me. Show me how much you like what I’m doing to you, baby.”

“Oh Willow, oh my goddess, faster. Oh, Willow, I’m gonna, I’m gonna…” She couldn’t say anything else because she came so hard that her muscles clamped down on Willow’s wrist to the point where Willow couldn’t move her hand, and it hurt a little as Tara rolled from one orgasm to another and another. Willow’s own juices slid down her thighs, her arousal heightened by the sensations of Tara’s body.
Tara bucked against Willow and started trying to crawl back away from her. “Out, Willow, out, I can’t take anymore,” she whimpered.

Willow waited for the contractions to slow, then, as gently as she could, slipped her hand out with a wet sucking sound. Her arm was wet to the elbow and the fluid on her hand and wrist was tinged pink with blood. Tara collapsed on the bed, trembling so much the entire bed shook.

Willow quickly retrieved a hand towel from the bathroom and rushed back. She wiped off her hand and forearm quickly, then gently began to wipe away the blood and fluids from Tara’s thighs. It was the oddest thing --she had made love to this woman for two years but her heart swelled to think that Tara had given her virginity to her. Tara’s earlier statement about it being their “first time” suddenly took on a whole new meaning.

Willow gently pulled Tara to her. She was still panting and shaking. Willow stroked her hair and covered her face with butterfly kisses. She could taste her sweat and the sweet juice of the pear. “Baby, are you okay?”

Tara shuddered and clung to Willow.

Willow remembered when she lost her own virginity. It had kind of been a letdown. She had loved Oz, and he had said he loved her too, but at the time she thought it hadn’t been all it was cracked up to be. Compared to Buffy and Xander, who seemed to be at it all the time, she just thought it was because Oz wanted to take things slowly. He didn’t kiss her for months after they had started dating, despite all the signals she threw at him.

After they had finally started having sex he was odd; he said he wanted her but there didn’t seem to be any sense of urgency, lust or passion. It had always been tender and mostly good, but she had wanted more; she wanted hot, sweaty and passionate. She wanted to crave and be craved. With Oz that just never happened.

In fairness, Oz had the whole werewolf thing to deal with, but then she found him with Veruca, that confirmed her fears that she was somehow inadequate as a lover. She hadn’t known then sex could be as passionate, consuming, tender and amazing as it was with Tara. Tara may be her first woman, but she had never felt inadequate with her.

Willow kept making soothing sounds, kissing the top of her head and gently caressing Tara while her
trembling relaxed and her breathing returned to normal. Tara kissed Willow’s chest, and she tightened her hold. “Why didn’t you tell me, baby? I could have made it more special,” Willow murmured.

Tara pulled back so she could look into Willow’s face and smiled her crooked smile. “I wasn’t sure I wanted it. I wasn’t sure I could go through with it,” She shrugged. “It sounded hot when I read about it but wasn’t sure you’d want to either. I just kinda went with it, and luckily you followed. I didn’t plan to come here and have you screw my brains out – at least not immediately.” Willow kissed her mouth gently and traced her lips with her tongue. Tara could taste the combination of her and the pears on Willow’s mouth and it made her throbbing increase pleasantly.

Willow pulled back looking into Tara’s eyes. “Tara, I’m honored. Do you know how beautiful you are, my sweet goddess? Just when I think I couldn’t love you more, you give me a part of you that no one else can say they have. My beautiful Tara, you own every part of me. Anything I do, it’s to make you happy, make you proud of me.” Willow swallowed hard and started to choke up, so she just held Tara closer.

“Willow, I don’t want to be with anyone else. Not now, not ever,” She paused. “So now you have all of me. I’ve given you every part of me that I can.” Tears began to slip from her eyes and she started to shake again.

Willow pulled at the sheets with a foot to get them close enough for her to pull up over their bodies. Maneuvering Tara so that one arm was under her head, she pulled her close. Tara put one leg on her hip so the length of their bodies remained in contact. Willow sighed contentedly as they lay there peacefully. The light from under the blinds began to change as it started to grow dark.

“Are you tired, sweetheart? Hungry maybe? You’ll be sore but that won’t last, and you’re bleeding a little that’s normal. Is there anything I can do for you?” Willow asked softly.

Tara kissed Willow’s chest, licking at the sticky spots. “I think you’ve done quite enough.” Tara was becoming aroused again; she could smell Willow’s musky scent and as sore as she was, parts of her started to tingle again. Tara’s hands started to wander down Willow’s back and over her hips, trailing circles, and shapes as she went. She rolled so she could raise herself up on one arm and look at Willow.

Willow stroked Tara’s face, ran her fingers through the thick blonde tresses. Tara placed a roaming hand on Willow’s chest to feel her heartbeat. “Does it still beat only for me?”
Willow’s bottom lip quivered. “Always. I don’t think it actually started to beat until it was beating for you.”

The love shining in Willow’s eyes left Tara feeling like she was being bathed naked in the sun. With her free hand, she touched Willow’s hair, pulled some to her nose, and breathed in. Willow stayed still, with her eyes closed, as Tara touched her. Willow enjoyed the circles being traced across her neck and breasts while her sore wrist made her smile like a cat that ate the canary.

“You look awfully pleased with yourself. Why might that be?” Tara asked before she caught Willow’s nipple in her mouth and tugged.

“Mmm, because my wrist is a little sore,” Willow smiled wickedly and watched Tara blush a deep red.

“I didn’t know that would happen,” Tara sputtered in embarrassment.

Willow’s smile broadened. “It’s okay, I kinda like it – well, there is no kinda. Tara, I have to tell you it felt amazing, you felt amazing,” she sighed softly. “Are you okay, really? This is kind of a big deal for you--an intensely big deal.” She tugged at Tara’s hair gently, so she would look at her, her face serious.

Tara was thoughtful. “Yes, it is, and oh gods it was intense. It hurt, but that stopped, and then it felt good. I mean really good; it was like I was on fire. Impaled on your fist… I couldn’t even think – it was all feeling. I want to do it again for sure, just not right away, the feeling…” Tara shook her head as she smiled ruefully, now at a loss for words. Her hand cupped Willow’s pert breast as she went back to teasing the other with her tongue.

“That’s so nice, baby,” Willow purred. Tara switched to the other nipple and slid her had down Willow’s side to her hip, tracing patterns with her fingertips. “I’m so wet for you, Tara. I’ve dreamed about this for so long,”

Willow sighed as she ran her fingers through Tara’s long, thick hair. Tara released her hold on Willow’s pebble-hard nipple to kiss her chest and make her way downward nipping at the skin of her abdomen. She could smell Willow, and it made her stomach flutter. Tara moved back up to Willow’s neck; the nips turned to rough bites where Willow’s shoulder and neck met as Tara then slowly ran her tongue along Willow’s collarbone.
She ran her hands over Willow’s hips and encircled her waist. When she looked down and saw that her hands almost met she gasped. “Willow,” she said sadly, stopping her movements. “Honey, I don’t want to hurt you.” Willow had always been petite, but now she was a good twenty pounds lighter, a sign of how hard things had been for her.

“Tara, you can’t hurt me.” She looked down at Tara’s hands. “I promise I’ll start eating more. It’s just stress – I can’t help it. Things are getting better by the second, I swear. Baby, make love to me please, I need you.” The tone of her voice, the desire, and need in it helped Tara banish her worries for the time being as she captured Willow’s mouth in a deep, slow kiss.

Tara’s fingers glided over Willow’s skin, rode the swell of her hip, teased her coppery curls. Willow’s shuddering groan buzzed under her lips. She slipped one finger between the swollen wet lips, as their tongues danced together. Tara moved slowly to draw out the sensation so the tender skin became even slicker. She looked into Willow’s eyes. “Remember, keep looking at me. I want you to watch, okay?”

Willow nodded. “Yes, my Goddess, yes.”

“My sweet Willowtree, tell me what you would like.” Tara kissed her neck. “What have you been dreaming about?”

Willow gave a throaty laugh. “Oh, so many things. We will have to stay in bed for a month to try them all, but this is a good start.” She paused. “Maybe we could, umm, I’d like to…” She trailed off and bit her lip.

Tara smiled. “Really? Apparently, we must share the same dirty mind.” A blush crossed her cheeks.

Willow snickered. “Great minds think alike.”

“Yes, they do.” Tara pulled one of Willow’s nipples into her mouth and sucked greedily at it. Trailing her tongue slowly back and forth between Willows hard nipples she ran into the little sweet patches of drying juice. Tara used her fingers to massage the swollen inner lips of Willow’s sex; Willow pushed her hips against Tara’s hand to urge her on.

Tara quickly slid down Willow’s body to grasp her hips and work her shoulders under Willow. Tara
kissed the damp red curls then traced Willow’s outer lips with her tongue so she could savor Willow’s taste. Willow’s eyes closed as she cupped her own breasts playing with the nipples.

“What look at me,” Tara said in a hoarse voice. She loved to watch Willow play with her nipples while she enjoyed other parts of her. She slipped her fingers between the swelling lips replacing her tongue as she continued to make slow circles around Willow’s clit. With a groan Willow opened her eyes to look down at her lover surprised that it turned her on even more as she squirmed against Tara’s fingers.

“Oh gods, baby, that feels so good, Tara,” Willow gasped. “Inside, please let’s try. I want to feel what you felt.”

Tara slipped two fingers inside of Willow and groaned against her clit. “Oh Willow, how I’ve missed you.” She licked up and down with little swirling motions. “You set the pace, baby, and I’ll follow.” All Willow could respond with was, “Mmmmmm, more.” Tara slipped a third finger in, as Willow’s juices flowed freely. She lapped and sucked at Willow’s sweet/tart womanly flavor.

Tara made sure she kept rubbing the rough patch at the entrance of Willow’s sex as she sucked and flicked her tongue around her clit.

“More, Tara.”

She obliged, added a fourth finger to Willow’s heat. She could feel Willow’s juices dripping over her chin. The muscles of her walls began to relax, and Willow started to ride her fingers hard.

Willow maintained eye contact, her eyes darkening to a deep emerald green. Her body broke out into a sweat and she bit her lip, nodding to Tara. Tara slipped her thumb inside and slowed the pace of her hand and tongue, letting Willow get used to the feeling of being stretched. “You’re so hot baby, so wet. Keep looking at me, I want you to watch me make you cum.” Willow’s hips rose involuntarily.

Willow panted, licking her lips. “Ok, try it.”

Tara sucked on her clit again. “On the count of three, okay?”
Willow nodded.

“One…”

Tara moved her hand a little harder, and Willow gasped.

“Two…”

She waited for Willow’s muscles to relax. “Three.” She pushed deep into Willow, then held her hand still.

Willow’s head fell back onto the pillow as she came, and she bit her hand to keep from crying out, her breath coming in short gasps.

“Look at me,” Tara whispered, and panting, Willow did. Willow’s body slowly relaxed, so Tara started moving with short strokes that made Willow arch up off the bed into almost a sitting position.

“Oh fuck, Tara, what are you doing to me?” She slammed back down against the bed her hands pulling at the sheets. “Faster, please oh goddess, Tara I’m gonna cum, oh baby, it’s sooo gooood.” Willow’s toes were pointed, her knees bent, and Tara dipped her head so she could capture Willow’s swollen clit again. Their eyes remained locked.

“Ooooooo, Ahhhhhhh, Taaar-raaa!” Willow grabbed Tara’s head, pulled her off, though her hand continued to move inside Willow. One orgasm crested into another, building quickly into another that ricocheted through Willow. The hot muscles of her sex throbbed and contracted. “Uhhh,” she whimpered. “Please no more. I’m losing my mind. You have to stop, baby.”

Tara stopped moving her hand, although the spasms hadn’t stopped yet. Once they started to slow she gently slipped her hand out of Willow.

She quickly rolled off the bed to grab the towel, then slid next to Willow, who immediately crawled onto her, shaking and kissing her chest, neck, and throat. Tara stroked her back and kissing the top of her head. As the shaking slowed she asked, “Are you ok, Will?” There was a shudder in response as Willow tightened her hold.
“Better than okay, baby. Oh gods, better than okay.” Willow shuddered again, then looked up at her. “There are so many things I never knew until I met you. You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.”

Tara kissed her tenderly, her hand in Willow’s soft hair. She gently stroked Willow’s back as she held her tight.

TBC…
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: R for a little nudity.

Angst/Drama Rating: So I guess this should be here too since much like life nothing comes easy; I'd say on a scale of 1-10 this is about a solid 5.5.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson, Arizona

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

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Feedback: Absolutely, help make me a better writer!

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I would also like to thank my beta Jasmydae for her assistance and patience while we sort through some of the muddle in my head as well as being my cohort in all the literary crimes (because I’m sure I’ll make lots) with this story. If you’ve been following along from the beginning, I said this story will be in two parts which I have decided to scrap in favor of just one continuous story; however, the latter part of the story will coincide with the last season of BtVS. However, I do plan to skip episodes that I think are extraneous and won’t further my story as well as tailor the ones I do use to fit. So in order to not spoil anything, I won’t say anything further than enjoy.
The two lovers fell asleep in a familiar position—nestled against each other with Willow’s head above Tara’s heart, and Tara’s hand covering Willow’s. Willow woke sometime later with Tara still asleep in her arms. She gently kissed her shoulder. She was sore but in a way that sent a slight shiver through her. She blinked several times against the darkness of the room.

The candles had burned down long ago, and there was still the lingering smell of sex and honey, but she didn’t want to move. She had longed for this, dreamed of this, and now she had it – had Tara – in her arms. Pulling away slightly to look at Tara while she slept, Willow softly traced the contour of her brow, down her cheek to her jawline, trying to not wake her. Tara’s lips were parted slightly in sleep, and her breathing deep, and steady.

There was a pinkness to her cheeks, and a lock of hair that never seemed to behave rested over Tara’s forehead, something Willow had always found endearing. Even in sleep, she was beautiful; the subtle lines of worry and strain eased away from Tara’s face.

“Hi, baby,” Tara mumbled as she kissed Willow’s forehead, her voice thick with sleep. “You’re not a dream.”

“No, I’m not, and neither are you,” Willow laid her head back on Tara’s chest. “How do you feel, love?”

Tara gave a throaty laugh. “I never knew ‘sore in a good way’ applied to lesbians. At least not any of the ones I knew.”

“Oh, really. And just how many is that, Miss Maclay?” Willow asked timidly without lifting her head.

“Are we serious, Miss Rosenberg? You’ve never asked that question before.”

Tara was right—Willow hadn’t ever asked, only assumed. Suddenly she wasn’t certain she wanted to know. Willow started to stammer, “I thought you were kind of new like me, but maybe not…”

Tara pulled back to look at her. "Including you, Willow, I’ve been with three girls. Would you like to know the who and the when?” she quietly offered.

Willow noticed her hesitation. Was Tara really okay with this? For that matter, was she okay with
Willow knew her own temperament—her temper and jealousy ignited easily, but burned out as fast. She didn't want to ruin the moment. But she didn't get the impression Tara had left behind a trail of broken hearts, and she had offered, after all, and didn't appear to be ashamed, so it couldn't be that bad, right?

“Yes… did you love them, Tara?” Willow asked quietly.

“Baby, was he ever nice to anyone?” Willow said as she tightened her arms around Tara protectively.

“Sometimes he could be—it just wasn’t incredibly often. It got worse after Momma died, but he was always strict, and less than—affectionate, you know? I’ve often wonder why he even had children; he never really seemed to like children or us for that matter.”

“Go on,” Willow prompted with a gentle squeeze of Tara’s hip, so she wouldn’t linger too long on thoughts of her father.

“Then Claudia Harrison was the summer after I graduated high school before I started UC Sunnydale.” Tara smiled as she seemed to be remembering, and the bitterness eased out of her voice. “She was… I dunno, it wasn’t really a relationship or love, it was a summer fling and we both knew it. Her mother had known my mother and practice together before my father found out. We played together as kids, and she knew I was leaving for school, and she was off to some ranch. It never went any further than just physical attraction.”

Willow kissed Tara’s shoulder encouragingly.

“There’s really not much to say. Claude was funny and sweet. Her mom was gifted, but she wasn’t particularly. We really had very little in common.”

Willow’s head snapped up, and she stiffened in Tara’s arms. “Claude? What did she look like?”

Tara looked down at Willow quizzically. “Why? It doesn’t matter anymore. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“Please, Tara, just tell me.” Willow started to sit up.
Tara’s confusion was clear, and she let Willow go. “Short, brunette, kind of athletic, pretty… Why, Willow?”

Willow shook her head in disbelief. “Would you maybe describe her as pixie-ish?”

Tara thought for a minute. “Yeah, I guess. Why?”

Willow groaned and put her head in her hands. “The woman Dana and I picked up introduced herself as Claudia, preferring Claude. Maybe about five feet tall, short brown hair, pixie-ish, and we took her to Canyon Ranch.”

Tara’s jaw dropped, and she sputtered, “No way, it can’t be. I mean what are the odds, Willow? I’m sure there are a lot of lesbians named Claudia that go by Claude.”

“Way. She didn’t tell you where the ranch was at?” Willow asked.

“No, she didn’t, and I didn’t even ask. It wasn’t that serious; we were eighteen. It was – we were – we knew we were attracted to each other, but we both knew it wouldn’t go anywhere, Will. We didn’t ask a lot of questions. There didn’t seem to be a point. She’s the closest thing to a one night stand as I’ve ever come, although it was more than…” Tara trailed off sheepishly. “It’s been years now,” Tara shrugged.

“I guess we’ll find out. I haven’t encouraged her; she’s the one that just showed up, and I can’t say she won’t do it again. She also offered a night in a cabin in some mountains near here as a ‘thank you’ primarily to me. Ask Dana,” Willow’s breathing came in short bursts and she could feel her cheeks grow hot. Her fingers began to fidget aimlessly around the edge of the bed sheet.

“So she hit on you?” Tara’s tone was jealous, and Willow just nodded her head. Tara grumbled as she started to get up. Pushing the sheet back, Tara stopped when she saw little patches of dark red among the magenta colored spots from the pear. She hesitated before she reached to touch one of the spots. Willow watched and saw the realization that was going on for Tara, and she decided to remain silent to let this be her moment.

“Is that mine?” she asked quietly.
“Yes, baby, it’s normal when you lose your virginity.” Willow took her hand and stroked her palm with her thumb with a broad smile.

Tara studied the expression on Willow’s face and smiled back. “Proud of, yourself are you?”

Willow nodded vigorously. “I’m the man, baby.”

Tara laughed and rolled back into the bed to pull Willow to her. “Yes, you are. You’re my man.” They giggled as they kissed.

“Mmm, I wanna shower, sweetie,” Tara said as she scooted towards the edge, groaning at the friction and pressure. Willow got up and headed for the bathroom to turn on the shower. When she came back out Tara was on the edge of the bed with a faraway look in her eyes.

“Baby, are you okay?” Willow asked.

Tara looked at Willow with unfocused eyes and her expression blank, then as rapidly as she was gone, she was back. The light returned to her eyes, and she seemed to shake free from her recollections and nodded. “I’m tired and hungry, and sticky,” She snickered.

Willow offered a hand to Tara, to help her up from the bed. “Then let me bathe you, my beautiful girl.”

Willow led Tara to the shower and opened the door. She eased Tara under the water and moved her hands lightly over Tara’s skin. The bruises on Tara’s collarbone and above her breasts stood out in angry contrast to the rest of her creamy skin. Willow felt a blush rise but didn’t stop the movements of her hands. She had put a washcloth in the shower before they got in, and as she held it under the water she reached for the soap. Working it between her hands, she got the cloth full of lather. She started at Tara’s shoulders, carefully moved over her breasts and down her stomach.

Willow let the spray rinse the soap off Tara’s back before she turned her to get the rest. Lastly, she pulled the shower head off its hook, changed the setting to one that would be gentler, and carefully rinsed away the soap from her sex and thighs. Tara stood still with a ghost of a smile around her mouth as Willow finished her ministrations. A look of love shone in Tara’s eyes.

“Willow, you’re amazing. I feel so loved by you; I haven’t felt that in a very long time.” Tara’s voice
was thick, and her eyes shimmered with tears.

Willow shrugged casually. “It’s true, Tara. I love you. You’re precious to me. You’re good for me, you’re good to me; you’ve allowed me to find out who I am. I can’t ever express how grateful I am for that,” She caressed Tara’s face, and then kissed her nose. “I’m not sure where I would be without you, and I don’t want to know.”

Tara kissed Willow, and took the shower head from her to put it back on its perch, then began to soap Willow’s body in a lather. “You’re too thin, sweetie.”

Willow hung her head a bit. “I know.”

Tara didn’t say anything else as the soap slid away, and down the drain. Willow thought she was a bit less sore of the two as they dried each other off. Tara blushed at the pink she left on the towel.

“That will stop. It lasted a few hours for me but, well, there was a lot more involved with yours,” Willow said.

Tara just nodded. “Feed me, I’m starving!”

Willow smiled wickedly. “Well, I can’t take you to the kitchen like that!” She pointed at Tara’s nakedness. “I guess I could, but then everyone would get to see what’s mine.” Willow sauntered over to embrace Tara and growled into her neck.

Tara snickered. “Possessive much?”

“Darn tootin’, nobody gets you but me,” Willow kissed just under Tara’s ear.

“It’s true, I am yours, Willow. I’ve always been yours. You know that, right?” Tara said seriously.

Willow placed her palm on Tara’s face. “Always,” She rested her head on Tara’s shoulder.

They stood holding each other, and enjoying the feel of skin on skin until Tara kissed Willow’s ear
and whispered, “Feed me.”

Willow kissed Tara’s shoulder again. “Okay, let’s go feed my baby.”

They dressed in silence, stealing glances at one another before they walked back to the main hall hand in hand. “We could go out if you want. I can get a car. Not much delivers out here. Or we can just rummage. What would you most like to do, baby?”

“I don’t wanna go anywhere; we can do that another time. I just want to be with you.” Tara squeezed Willow’s hand and smiled.

*******

Dana poured a hot pot of corkscrew pasta into a colander in the sink, then stepped away to let the steam rise before giving it a cold water bath. While the pasta drained, she cut more basil for garnish and turned back to her sauce. Taking a chunk of the baguette she had by the stove to test her sauce, she had to brace herself on the counter as a wave of sensation washed over her.

Tara and Willow had just entered the building, and short of flowers blooming in the wake of their steps their love was brighter than a fully lit disco ball at a rave. Dana chuckled with a shake of her head. It was getting stronger so they must be heading her way.

“Hello girls,” she said without turning around.

Dana smiled to herself when she heard Tara’s muted gasp at her greeting. She often forgot how disconcerting her gift could be to strangers.

“You’ll get used to it. I think she does it on purpose. Show off,” Willow teased.

Dana laughed too. “Much like you Tara, I can see and sense auras, among other things, and frankly I felt the both of you when you came in the building.”

“Ummm, I don’t know what to say, Dana. Should we go?” Willow asked.
Dana turned around, spoon in hand. “Why in the goddess’ name would you do that? Willow, what I feel is intense love, and I can see it too. My goodness, that’s just... lovely.” Dana nodded her head in approval. “I just get to bask in the extra, which is a little like being a voyeur, but I’d have to leave the building not to. Then my sauce would be ruined, and we can’t have that, now can we? I hope you both are hungry?”

“Can I help?” Tara asked.

“There are salads ready in the fridge over in the corner. There are four – pull them all out, if you would. Willow, could you grab plates and set the table, please?” Dana agreed.

“Sure. Who is our fourth?” Willow asked.

“Lady Rowan, she should be here any minute. Would you also rinse the pasta again?” When Willow came back in Dana tore two pieces from a baguette next to the stove and handed them each a piece dipped in sauce. “Here, taste. What do you think?” Both girls made yummy sounds, and just at that moment, Lady Rowan walked in.

“Good evening, Sisters,” Rowan said. “Will Sister Tabitha be joining us tonight?”

“No, My Lady, it will just be the four of us,” Dana replied. “Everything is ready. Help yourselves.” She turned the burner off under the sauce. “Willow, you can get whatever dressings you and Tara would like, and what would you like, My Lady?”

“There should be a balsamic vinaigrette in there that I quite like,” she responded. Willow nodded as she pulled out several different kinds of dressing. After the four filled their plates and grabbed their salads they sat at the same table Willow and Tara had occupied earlier.

At first, they ate in silence, Willow and Tara next to each other, Rowan at the head of the table, and Dana across from the girls. Dana couldn’t help but smile at the glow that surrounded them.

The girls were playing footsies and giggling softly, which caused both Rowan and Dana to share amused looks while noting the change that was apparent in Willow.
Lady Rowan cleared her throat. “I’ll venture to say things are going well, girls?”

With a nod, Willow wiped her mouth and said, “Yes, I think they are, My Lady. I owe you a big thank you.” She took Tara’s hand.

“M-me too, I c-can’t thank you enough,” Tara said as she blushed and dipped her head shyly.

“Girls, it was a most selfish reason. It serves my own happiness as well. Everything in life is about balance; I can see the balance you bring to each other, and also the joy. It’s beyond happiness or contentment; you’re two halves of the same coin, incomplete without the other.” Rowan paused and continued nonchalantly. “I’d also like to make another selfish gesture: Sister Tara, I’d like to invite you to stay here with us. Sister Willow’s time with us has almost come to an end, and if you are agreeable we’d like you to stay here with her for the remainder. If you like you can also take part in the exercises we have Willow do. That would be entirely up to you.”

Dana looked at Rowan with surprise, then back at the girls, quickly wiping her face clean of expression. In all the years Dana had been at The Grove such an invitation had never been extended to anyone or any couple; the offer now made, she was left to wonder why, and if this was a good thing or something more severe.

As she watched and listened other things fell into place, and it was becoming obvious to her that Tara was the faceless blonde witch that had been in her dreams for months now. However, it did not make her feel any better about the offer being extended.

Willow gaped. “My Lady, I…” she sputtered and glanced at Tara, who almost choked on a mouthful of food.

Tara looked at Willow and Rowan. “Are you serious?”

Rowan nodded and continued to eat. “Very. You see Sister Tara, as I have explained to Willow we know the importance of your relationship, even if we do not fully understand exactly why it is important. Just by coming here you have made it apparent you are willing to fight for Willow, for your bond. There is only so much we can teach, and it would seem, as with most things Willow doesn’t settle.”

Rowan paused again, her lips pursed in concentration. When she began speaking again, her words were careful, deliberate. “Are you aware Willow will graduate in January with her degree? I believe
she said she needed her studies because ‘it kept her mind busy’, and we know a mind like Willow’s must be kept very busy indeed,” Rowan’s smiled like an indulgent parent. “She has mastered above and beyond, exceeding our expectations, and with the amount of control she can now exert and the considerable amount of talent she has, we have little else to do. She has been taught the theory as well as the practice. Now armed with a greater understanding of things like the Three-Fold Law and the Wiccan Rede, it is just a matter of polishing, so to speak. I also know of your background and your mother’s, which is why I extend the invitation to you.”

Dana watched Rowan smile at the surprised look on Tara’s face. “I know lots of things, dear. You needn’t make your decision now. I believe you are still in school, but your semester should be ending soon.”

Shock washed over Tara’s face. “Yes, we have a b-break right now; I’m s-supposed to graduate in September. I suppose I could do m-my papers here, but I would have to go back for finals. Willow, why didn’t you t-tell me about school?” The gears turned furiously behind Tara’s eyes as she looked at Rowan and Willow.

Willow said softly, “You would do that? I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want, Tara. I don’t want you to feel forced into anything. You being here is more important than where I am in school. I guess I hadn’t gotten that far yet.” Willow could only stare at her plate before pushing it away, her unease with the topic clear.

“W-Willow, I want to try; we still have to figure us out. How are we going to know if we don’t try? It would be easier to do if we are together, especially right now,” She stroked Willow’s arm then turned back to Rowan. “How much longer will she be here?”

Again Dana’s eyes flitted to Rowan’s face as she looked for Rowan’s expression to say something more while revealing nothing herself.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before now? How long have you known about this?” Willow asked as she swallowed hard.

“Known? I’ve known there was little else I could teach you for some time now, child. Even the exercises for the last several months have been to reinforce what you have already learned. Willow, you are as ready as I can help you to be. I set the time frame for your departure with Rupert earlier today. I’m sorry if I have upset either of you – that was not my intention, but merely to offer you both a new set of opportunities. Perhaps to help you with a new start,” Rowan said as she laid down her fork, wiped her mouth and sat back with one hand on her chin. As she watched the reactions of the young women before her, making her eyes sparkle with hope.
“I’ll have to go back and arrange to work remotely until I have to take finals, but I would like to stay. Would it be possible for Willow to accompany me?” Tara asked with a sidelong glance at Willow, then took a mouth full of pasta, and nudged Willow with her elbow. “Please eat, baby.”

“That can be arranged. How long would you need to stay? Your ticket has you returning in a couple of days so we can arrange for you both to go back, and then return. I do have to tell you, Willow, this is much like a weekend pass. You must return so we can finish,” Rowan said with a deadly seriousness.

Willow looked up as she pulled her plate back in front of her. “Why? If I’m to leave soon what am I coming back to do?” She pushed the food around her plate before taking a small bite.

Rowan smiled. “Like everything else we have taught you, it is about control – not mine over you, mind you – but yours over yourself. Think of it as another exercise if you like, Willow.”

“I would need a few days. Three, maybe four,” Tara put a hand on Willow’s thigh. “Willow, would you want me to stay? I mean, I can go back and wait if that’s what you want; I’ve waited this long. I know going back isn’t going to be easy now or later. I also know everyone wants to see you. They’ve missed you too.”

“Of course I want you to stay; that’s not even in question!” Willow swallowed hard a few times before continuing. “I owe them all apologies and explanations. They have no idea, do they? Tara, I can do this. I can do anything if you’re with me.” The love that shone on Willow’s face for Tara was so apparent to Dana, she would have to be blind, and even then that might not have been enough. Tara looked back to Rowan and nodded.

With a clap of her hands, Rowan said, “Wonderful, then it’s settled. I’ll make the arrangements tomorrow. It has been a good day indeed, Sisters,” Rowan winked at Dana and then dug into her food enthusiastically.

With the meal finished, the girls left for their rooms. Dana finally spoke, “My Lady is there a plan of some sort? Something I should know? Why was such an unusual invitation extended to Tara, not only to stay but train? And with Willow, is Tara ready for that? Willow is intense, to say the least.”

“I wouldn’t say that I have a plan per se, Dana, but I feel the need to arm them both. Tara is Willow’s equal, even if they both don’t know it. Faced with this, I feel we should extend every opportunity to her. Dana, these girls have destinies, and we have the chance – no, the obligation – to help them attain as much skill to equal the talent they have. The Council is up to something more than just the creation of a new coven. I can feel it, Dana. It’s being whispered to me when I meditate;
the Goddess is not happy, and we know just how much we can trust The Council. Something is coming, something dark; it’s old – very old, and it’s very evil. I guess this is my effort to try to level the playing field for all of us, you could say. I can’t tell you more than that because I don’t know more than that; I’m just going where the goddess leads, Dana. It’s all I know to do.” Rowan shrugged. “Dreams – how are yours lately? Are you seeing anything? Anything we can prepare for?”

“I know, Dana. Of course, you will help with teaching Tara; she needs the best we have to offer.” Rowan put her arm around Dana and smiled reassuringly.

Dana just nodded with a weak smile in return. Her dreams of being under the earth, the smell made her want to be sick. The other images were starting to piece together but did not create a pretty picture by far. These girls were going to be tested, horribly. Their power together was palpable – there was no doubt – the consequence of such power especially to be wielded by ones so young was still an unknown. Dana knew all she would be able to do was assist and get Tara to where Willow was, and that it may be for more than their own good that she do so.

With another quick squeeze, Rowan said, “It will have to be enough for now, dear. Go rest – we are going to need all we can get once they come back from Sunnydale.”

Still troubled and pensive, Dana nodded and murmured a good night as she left the kitchen.

TBC…
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: R – for the drama.

Angst/Drama Rating: On a scale of 1-10 this is about a solid 6.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BTVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: Always

Distribution: Probably up for it, just ask, please.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: I would also like to thank my beta Jasmydae for her assistance and patience while we sort through some of the muddle in my head as well as being my cohort in all the literary crimes (because I’m sure I’ll make lots) with this story. I'd like to say in advance that Chapter Eleven will be a bit slow in coming. It's is longer than previous chapters so it's going to be a bigger task to beta and edit accordingly. So I'll say thanks for your patience now, but know it is forthcoming.
When they reached the suite, Tara headed straight for the bedroom. From the living room, Willow heard her shoes clomp to the floor, and the bedsprings squeak as Tara sat. Willow began to pace around the living room, and her palms started to sweat as she rubbed her hands on her jeans, but that only seemed to make it worse.

“Will, is something wrong, sweetie?” Tara asked in a neutral tone of voice.

Willow cleared her throat nervously and laughed nervously. “No, not at all. How about some coffee? I have some great coffee; let me get it,” she said as she rushed through the bedroom and into her own. As she came back through with supplies, she saw Tara still sitting at the foot of the bed with her head cocked to one side.

“Willow, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, really, I swear. Please come into the living room. I’ll explain myself,” Willow said as she fidgeted with her hands full.

Tara stood, and let Willow lead the way out of the bedroom. She went directly into the kitchen and started to make coffee. Willow began to sweat heavily, as Tara sat on the couch, and she busied herself without saying anything. Willow’s nervous energy was building along with the knot in her stomach, and now she was second-guessing her choice of coffee, but it was too late now.

As the coffee started to brew, Willow stood with her hands on the counter, and couldn’t meet Tara’s eyes. Tara sighed, and from the corner of her eye, Willow saw her cross one leg over the other. A formidable babble forming as fear, shame, and sadness ran through Willow like ice water.

Finally, the coffee was done. Willow doctored them to their tastes, and with a deep breath, she brought Tara her cup.

“Thank you, Willow. Now, will you please tell me what has you so agitated?”
Willow started to pace again and took several big gulps of the hot coffee. “Tara, you need—no, I need for you to know. I need to explain myself, why I did the stupid things I did. You’ve agreed to come here now and stay with me – learn with me – I owe you this much. You deserve that much. If I’m going back to Sunnydale to do the same thing, then I need to start with you. This isn’t easy for me; I’ve banged my head against this for so long, baby. I had a whole little speech prepared, and I’ll be damned if I can remember any of it. I honestly never thought you’d want to see me again.”

“Willow, please just sit, and talk to me; you’re making me nervous,” Tara said, putting her untouched cup down.

Willow finished the coffee and poured herself another before sitting in a chair across from Tara. Tara frowned. “Not next to me?”

Willow shook her head, as she sat the cup down. “I want to be able to say this to you directly Tara. I’m not proud of what I have to say, by any means,” Willow took a deep breath again. “If I can’t be honest enough to look you in the eye, and ask for your forgiveness, then what are we starting over with?”

“Willow, we talked about this—” Tara began and was cut off by Willow.

“Baby, we did, but we didn’t. I owe you this,” Willow stood again, as she ran her hands over her face, and pushed her hair back behind her ears. In a small voice, Willow started to talk.

“I think I started to lose it when Buffy died. There was so much to deal with—Dawn, patrolling, keeping it all together. I was in charge, so I couldn’t let anyone see me sweat. If I started to crack, what would happen to everyone else? Even Giles was pretty much useless, then he pulled a Houdini, and it really was all up to me. You kept me sane, baby; you were the only one that seemed to be able to cope without floundering. Then I got the bright idea to bring Buffy back. Even before I mentioned it to you, so I started to practice with small things. After Glory, I knew I could do a lot, so I kept building on that, but I didn’t realize that everything I had learned wasn’t exactly – the best things to be using regularly, if at all.”

Willow studied Tara’s face. She rubbed her palms against her jeans and reached for her coffee. After several sips, she continued.

“The little things started to become second nature – you saw – but not only that, it started to feel
good. The buildup and the rush when it was released – at first I could control it, but that wasn’t what it was about, the Magicks felt great, it relieved stress, and didn’t seem to have any consequences—it’s not like anyone would die because of a small spell, right? The more I used it, the better I felt. Tara, I realize now it was an escape like a drug because I really didn’t have any control. It controlled me. Tara, when we bought Buffy back…” Willow took a ragged breath, shaking her head, and looked Tara directly in the eyes. “Do you know what ‘Wine of the Mother’ is, and how you get it?”

“Yes, Willow I do. After the spell, I wanted to know. I knew things were starting to get out of control then. I just wanted to understand, and I began to realize just how far out of control things were spiraling. I should have said something then, but you weren’t the only one that was weak, Willow. We needed Buffy; we still do,” Tara sighed heavily.

Willow’s eyes began to tear up. “You knew, and didn’t say anything,” she replied, barely above a whisper, as she hung her head. Her shoulders rolled inward, and tears started to roll down her cheeks in earnest. Tara reached for her, but Willow pulled back and wiped the tears with the heel of her hand.

With a deep sigh, Willow went on, “As we know, it only got worse from there. The power was so sweet and so easy. I didn’t understand about balance. Really, I didn’t care. I doubt it would have sunk in, and you tried more than once to make me understand. Remember the night at the Bronze, when we fought? After that, it seemed like everyone started to gang up on me. When we brought Buffy back, and Giles arrived, do you know what he said to me? That I was a stupid girl, and I had crossed lines – harnessed forces I shouldn’t have. He called me an ‘arrogant, rank amateur’, and told me I was dealing with things I didn’t understand. He was right, I can say that now,” Willow shook her head in disbelief. “Do you know what I said to him? I told him he was right. The Magicks I used were incredibly powerful. That I was incredibly powerful, and maybe it wasn’t such a good idea for him to piss me off – not one of my more stellar moments, I know.”

Willow drained her cup and went back for a third. “Don’t you like it? It’s probably cold now. I can make you another cup if you like.”

Tara shook her head. “I’m sure it’s fine; I’m just not very thirsty, and you’re not going to sleep. Why are you telling me all of this Willow? Why now?”

Willow stirred milk into her coffee. “You’d be surprised. I want you to know exactly what I am Tara. What I can be capable of – it’s not all good. What you’re agreeing to, because if, you know, you change your mind, I would understand.”

“Willow, do we have to keep doing this? You’re sorry, I’m sorry, we’re all sorry! I have gotten past
this to forgive you, Will. I did that when I came back that night. I want us to work things out. I love you, don’t you get that? Why is that so hard for you to believe? Do you honestly think I would have waited – and yes, I waited for you – if I didn’t think we were worth saving? I’m not an idiot,” Tara said indignantly.

Willow hung her head again, and whispered, “But I’m a monster.”

Tara’s jaw dropped. “What! What did you just say?”

Willow looked up with unshed tears in her eyes. “I. Am. A. Monster.”

Tara shook her head. “Are you insane? Have you been out in the heat too long, and it’s fried your brain? Coming from a girl who was told she was a demon for most of her life, I think I can speak with some authority when I say you are not a monster. Is that really what you think, Willow?”

“It’s what I know! I may not turn into anything, or have scales and horns but I should. Tara, it kills me that I hurt you like I did. That I had the unmitigated gall to presume to know what was best for you and Buffy. That I tinkered with your memories and tried to justify it by convincing myself it was for your benefit when really it was for mine. I had no right, and there’s really no excuse for it. I’m supposed to love you and protect you from things like this, but I should have been protecting you from myself. I can stand here, and say it was the Magicks and I wasn’t myself, but ultimately it was me. I made the decision; I made the choice to…violate you.” Willow choked the last sentence out while feeling like she had swallowed something foul.

Tara stood as she threw her hands into the air. “UGH! Willow, really? I mean really?”

Willow clenched her jaw, and the muscle jumped with tension. She didn’t say anything; she couldn’t as the image of giving Tara the Lethe’s Bramble she had whispered over, floated before her eyes followed by the mad dash through the sewers from the vampire, with no one knowing who they were.

Tara rushed into the bedroom, putting her shoes back on while Willow watched unable to move.

“I can’t listen to this anymore. I’m going for a walk,” Tara said as she headed for the door.
“Tara, wait!” The slamming door was the only response. “Great way to screw this up, Rosenberg.” Willow dumped her cup out then slid down to the floor, resting her head on her knees.

*****

It was still hot, even though the sun had started to set. There were still traces of it to the west, and the mountains were now silhouettes in black against the dying light. Tara could see the main building and moved away from it at a brisk walk, that quickly turned into a run. She was not a runner, other than for her life while patrolling, and she didn’t know where she was going either, but she had to be away now.

She slowed when she came to a clearing where only scrub grass grew—there were no flowers or bushes, not even cacti. She bent over, hands on knees, to catch her breath, and realized this must be the empty baseball diamond Willow described as being where she practiced.

She looked back toward the main building to get her bearings, but it was no longer in sight. Magic hummed in the air, faint traces of once-powerful spells diminished by the passage of time. Could it really have been from Willow’s last visit, a week earlier?

She plopped to the ground, as that idea sunk in. If it was Willow—for her to leave a magical signature like that a week later, was both frightening and quite a shock. She had always known Willow’s potential was great, in part because of her relentless pursuit of knowledge, but she had no idea it could be of this magnitude.

Once again her mind started to spin as Lady Rowan’s offer to train with Willow jumped to the fore. How was she supposed to train with a witch of this caliber? She had her strengths, but Willow was so far out of her league now, it would be like swatting flies with a two-by-four.

Why would she have made such a ridiculous offer? How did Rowan know so much about her, and why did she even care? Something else was happening, and Tara wanted answers.

She didn’t doubt Willow’s power or love even as she seemed to be trying to push her away, but now she wondered if her decision to stay was wise. What was the motive behind it? Tara watched the last of the light gradually fade away before she got to her feet, and began to walk back.

*****
Willow sat with her back against the cabinets, as she tried to regain her composure. When it didn’t work, she stood and walked through into her room. She changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, grabbed several large candles, and headed into the living room of her suite.

She formed a large circle with them and then lit each one. She turned off the lights, shook out her tight muscles, and sat carefully between two candles.

She picked up the candle she had set aside for herself and began to chant, “This candle is myself, burning steady and true. Here do I find peace and tranquility. A place apart where I may safely meditate and grow in spirituality.”

Willow’s chant became steadily softer until it was only in her head, but her lips kept moving. Her thoughts slowed, and she began to feel calmer the longer she stayed focused on the candle. After some time had passed she set the candle down and closed her eyes, focused on her breathing and her chant.

Just like when she practiced in the field, a soft glow began to shimmer around her. The calmer she became the brighter the glow until she was completely surrounded by an opalescent field of energy. Colors shot through the field, danced along her body – red, blue, green, orange, violet. They pulsed as they touched her.

Willow slowly opened her eyes, smiling as she watched the colors dance. As they grew brighter her sense of groundedness increased. Her argument with Tara settled heavily on her, and everything flickered for a moment. Willow continued to relax and focus. Once again everything brightened.

*****

It was dark when Tara entered her suite. She frowned as she walked into the bedroom, and turned the lights on. The room was empty. She noticed the door to Willow’s room was ajar, and a knot of apprehension began to form in her stomach.

She eased the door open, and as light from her room flooded in she saw it was dark as well as empty. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, then waited for her eyes to adjust. A dim flicker of light came from the living room so she crept toward it.

She couldn’t believe her eyes.
Willow was sitting in a circle of lit candles. The candlelight seemed to be absorbed by the shimmer of color emanating from Willow. All the colors of the rainbow danced through the light and played at specific points along Willow’s body. Willow’s face was serene. Her eyes closed and her lips moved, but there was no sound Tara could hear. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Without thinking she whispered, “My God, Willow.”

Willow turned toward her and smiled. Willow’s smile had always been radiant, but this one was nothing short of beatific. Tara felt dizzy, grabbed the doorway to steady herself. Willow closed her eyes again, and gradually everything dimmed until only the glow of the candles remained.

Tara slid to the floor, her eyes locked onto her girlfriend. The air crackled with Willow’s energy; it was so heavy she could taste it, and it tasted like strawberries. Willow opened her eyes and leaned forward to blow the candle in front of her out. She walked over to a lamp, and just before clicking it on she said, “Watch your eyes, sweetheart.”

Tara blinked rapidly against the light, and Willow went to extinguish the rest of the candles. She left them in a circle, walked over to Tara and offered her hand. Tara hesitated, then reached for Willow. Her hand was unusually warm, and Tara couldn’t stop staring.

“Willow, what did I just see?”

Willow smiled. “I was meditating, Tara. What did you see?”

Tara touched Willow’s face, scanning it with her eyes as she looked for some other sign of change.

Swallowing hard she said, “You, surrounded by lights. I’ve never seen anything like it. Willow, does this happen all the time now? And you’re warm, warmer than normal. What – I mean how? What has happened…to you?”

Willow led Tara to the couch and sat them both down. Tara’s hands were visibly trembling, and Willow reached up to stroke her hair.

“Yes, it does. It also happens when I practice with Lady Rowan and Sister Dana, although when we
practice it’s more combative.”

Tara pulled back. “Combative! Willow, what have you been training for?”

Willow caressed her hand. “For everything and anything we might face. Tara, it’s no big surprise that I don’t exactly lead what could be called a ‘normal’ life. You don’t either, now, and that’s because of being with me. These are things I need to know, not just for my safety, but yours and everyone else’s. This is not something I play with or take lightly.”

Willow paused to look deeply into Tara’s face before she continued.

“When I was in England, Giles told me that now the Magicks were a part of me. It’s not just something I use or can use; now it’s almost like it’s part of my DNA. I’m still responsible for how I use it, and for what reasons as well as keeping it under control. I can’t let it overrun me. There’s a connectedness that I feel, and sometimes it is overwhelming, but it’s with the earth. Think of it as one big root system – it’s all intertwined and connected – stronger and older in some parts – running fast, and new in others. I guess you could say I’m somewhere in between. I can access the old, strong parts, and adapt with the fast and new too.”

Confusion and disbelief swept through Tara, as she swallowed repeatedly. “Show me.”

Willow smiled. “That’s not what it’s about, and I don’t normally do this, but for you, I will.”

Willow stood in front of Tara and closed her eyes as she lifted both hands up to Tara’s eye level. Slowly in her left hand, a flame emerged, and in her right a snowball, as Willow opened her eyes to look at Tara.

“Grab a piece of paper from the pad behind me to my left,” Willow extended her left hand toward Tara. “Now drop it into the flame.”

Tara reached forward. Willow’s hand was radiating heat. She quickly dropped the paper over her palm. She watched it curl and blacken, then disappear altogether, emitting a wisp of smoke and the smell of burned paper. A light sheen of sweat had appeared on Willow’s face, but she didn’t look like she was in any discomfort.
“Hold out your hands, love.” Tara placed her hands together, and Willow turned her right hand over, dropped the snowball into her palms. The reality of just how much power Willow could now access stomped through Tara’s brain, as she looked from the melting snowball to Willow. With a small hiss, the flame disappeared from her hand, and she went to sit back down on the couch.

“Willow, are you still human?” Tara asked while the snowball dripped from her hands. “Let me see your hands.”

Willow showed Tara her unblemished palms. “Tara, honey you’ve been with me all week. Do I not seem human to you? You’ve been in some very intimate places. Has anything changed? To answer your question, to the best of my knowledge, I am still one hundred percent human – all girl, all the time. I just happen to also be a witch, albeit a better one than when I started years ago in high school.”

“You mean more powerful.”

Willow shook her head. “That’s incidental. I’m better because I understand how it works – at least how it should work. Does that make sense, baby?”

“This is a real snowball, not an illusion?” Tara asked. She had seen enough, being with the Scoobies, to know she should be suspicious.

“Very real, taste it.”

Tara looked at Willow like she was crazy.

Willow rolled her eyes. “It’s melting in your hands, baby. Look.”

Willow got up, pinched some of the snowball and dropped it into her mouth. She stuck out her tongue so Tara could watch it melt before she swallowed.
Tara raised it to her mouth, and bit off a small piece as it melted in her mouth she tried to corral all the questions that surfaced. The biggest being if Willow had been such a danger she had to go away before, what had changed now that she was stronger.

“I can do you one better, and tell you where it’s from,” Willow said mischievously. “It’s Canadian. Ontario, to be specific. I can’t be more exact than that. They must be having a storm,” Willow winked at Tara. She took Tara’s arm and started to steer her to the little kitchen. “Drop it in the sink; it’s dripping all over the carpet.”

Tara mechanically walked to the sink and dropped it. She watched it scattered and continue to melt just as it should. “Willow, I don’t understand.”

“Tara, baby, you see auras. You cast spells just like I do. What don’t you understand? It’s no different than before,” She shrugged. “Just more of it. This is all secondary. We didn’t finish earlier.”

Tara sighed heavily. “More? I’m tired of listening to you beat yourself about the head and neck over this. What will it take for you to understand?”

“Nothing. I won’t say another word. I know the guilt is something I carry, but your being here means more to me than carrying it around. You know me, big with the guiltiness girl—I am Jewish after all. Guilt’s in my DNA. You’ve already told me you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t want to be, and you’ve more than shown me that. I have to deal with it; ultimately I have to get over myself,” Willow said with a self-deprecating smile.

Tara said skeptically, “Wow, I kinda thought it would be harder than that to get you over this.”

“Me too, but I have to believe you when you tell me that you forgive me, or at least that you can. Now it’s my job to prove you right and that it’s worth it,” Willow said with a shrug and a smile. “Can I hug you?”

Tara smiled and walked into Willow’s open arms burying her face in Willow’s neck breathing her in.

“Do you know you smell like strawberries? The room smelled that way when I came in.”
Willow stiffened.

“What? What did I say?” Tara pulled back to look at Willow.

“Nothing – no, it is but it isn’t. I’m not proud of this, Tara, but I won’t keep anything from you either. When things got bad after you left me – You know Amy and I were doing things we shouldn’t, and she took me to a dark magic dealer named Rack. He said my magic tasted like strawberries.”

Tara stepped back. “He said you tasted like strawberries? How would he know that, Willow?” She crossed her arms over her chest, not liking what she was hearing.

“No, no, Tara not anything like that – ewww, no. There was an exchange of magicks before he would give me more. Not that that sounds any better, I know. I would cast for him, and I don’t know how to explain it. He absorbed it.”

“Well, that explains some things. Dawnie told me her end of how things happened when you got her hurt. You know, I only ever met Amy as a human once, but I think I much prefer her as a rat,” As Tara started to rub her temples, Willow stepped toward her, but Tara stepped back.

Willow said quietly, “Please let me help? I know you’ve heard and seen a lot tonight. Not all of it has been pleasant, and it’s getting late. Let me take care of you? Please?”

She let Willow guide her to the couch. They sat, and Willow drew Tara’s head onto her lap. Willow’s thumbs rubbed in circles at her temples, and the tension in her head and neck started to ease away. Willow’s hands were still unusually warm, but Tara was on the beneficial end of that warmth and wasn’t going to complain.

“What else did you do for it, Willow?” Tara asked, her voice strained with dread at what the answer might be.

Shame rippled over Willow’s face. “That was it. That was when I was at my lowest, my worst. I didn’t cope well when you left.”
Tara nodded. “I’m tired, Will. I just want go to bed,” She said as she began to sit up and move away from Willow.

“Okay… Tara?” Willow’s voice was small and sad. “I can sleep in here if you’d rather. I mean, I would understand.”

Tara stood with her head to one side for a moment before she held her hand out. Everything she had seen cushioned what she had heard.

“Come to bed,” she said.

Willow gave her a small grateful smile and followed her into the bedroom. Tara started to pull on a t-shirt as Willow stepped out of her jeans.

“Skin? Please?” Willow asked hesitantly.

Tara turned to her, and nodded, tossed the shirt aside and climbed into the bed. Willow quickly divested herself of the rest of her clothing, as Tara slipped her panties off. Willow wrapped herself around Tara, resting her head on her shoulder. Her hands wandered down Tara’s shoulder as Tara’s stroked her back and hair. Willow kissed her shoulder as she squeezed Tara harder.

“I love you, Tara,” She said quietly.

“I love you too, Willow,” Tara said, dropping a kiss on her forehead.

“Good. Sweet dreams, baby,” Willow murmured as she snuggled closer, stroking Tara’s back and shoulder.

“You too, sweetie.”
Willow’s breathing became slow and steady, while Tara stroked her hair. Willow became restless in her sleep, so Tara loosened her hold and tried to soothe her, but Willow rolled away from her. She lay there awake for what seemed like hours, as question after question swam around in her head. The one she hated the most was if her own safety was in jeopardy.

Was the offer to train a code for that, or would it mean that she would be expected keep Willow on a leash for the Council? The last thing Tara remembered was watching Willow move and mutter unintelligibly before she finally dropped off to sleep.

The next thing she knew she awoke to a scream.

“NOOOO!!” Willow screamed, sitting upright.

“Willow, what’s wrong?” Tara asked blearily.

“Oh God, I’m gonna be sick,” Willow said and bolted for the bathroom.

TBC…
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: R – adult content

Angst/Drama Rating: On a scale of 1-10 this is about a 7.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson, Arizona

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. Yakkity, shmakkity - everyone here knows the deal. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure and hopefully your entertainment.

Feedback: Stroke my ego - BRING IT ON, lol

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: This section may be a little rougher around the edges but if you see glaring faults, PM-me and I'll take care of them. This chapter is also longer than previous one and I was trying an experiment with POV that I don’t think worked. Also, a line that ends a follows "***" is a quote attributed to Judy Garland.

With bated breath & damaged cuticles, here is Chapter Eleven of Dry Heat.
Tara sat up in bed and could hear Willow heaving into the toilet. She quickly pulled on a t-shirt and boxers, then headed for the bathroom. She stood in the doorway for a moment not sure what Willow would want.

“Oh, God – it has to be a God, no Goddess would do this to you,” Willow moaned into the bowl. She spat a few more times before flushing, then closing the lid to rest her forehead against the cool porcelain.

Tara walked up behind Willow and bent to stroke her hair.

“Don’t touch me!” Willow yelped as she skittered away from Tara, moving so quickly across the tile she hit the wall. When she looked around, she could see the side of the vanity and pressed herself between the wall and the cabinet.

Willow pulled her knees up to her chest protectively and folded her arms around them.

Tara could plainly see the abject terror in Willow’s eyes. Whatever she had been dreaming about still hadn’t quite left her yet, as Tara watched her sit and shake. To see Willow this way, this afraid was almost more than Tara could bear. She had never seen Willow in such a state.

Quietly she asked, “How can I help you, Will?”

“You can’t. They just keep coming back,” Willow said in a small voice.

Tara sat down on the toilet, and watch Willow – who was pale-faced and faintly green – patiently as she waited for her to continue. After a few minutes, when it didn’t seem like she would volunteer the information, Tara decided to simply ask.

“What keeps coming back? Dreams?”

Willow nodded, and then whispered, “Nightmares. Horrible nightmares.”
Tara grimaced. That much was obvious; no one wakes up from a good dream to go retch in the middle of the night.

“Can you tell me about them, sweetie? Maybe I can help,” Tara asked tenderly. Tara watched as Willow sat silent, her eyes dilated and vacant, as she stared at some point off from Tara. “Will? Stay with me, if you can’t talk about them, it’s okay.”

Tara began to worry as the silence became more pronounced, and there was no change in Willow’s demeanor. She grabbed a washcloth from above the toilet then crossed to the sink, as she watched Willow from the corner of her eye. Running it under the tepid tap until it was soaked, and then moved slowly in front of Willow. Trying not to scare her any more than she already was, Tara slowly sat down in front of her.

“Willow, honey, I’m going to touch you. Don’t be afraid, it’s just me.” Tara continued to move slowly toward Willow, as Tara placed her hand on Willow’s knee, she jumped and hit her head against the cabinet. Willow hissed at the pain, and it seemed to bring her back to the present from wherever she had been.

“I’m here, it’s just me,” Tara said as she turned Willow’s face towards her, and began to wipe it off. Tara started on her forehead with gentle strokes until she had cleaned Willow’s face. She then moved to Willow’s neck to clear it free of the sweat Willow was covered in.

“Can you lean your head forward a little, sweetheart?” Tara spoke softly like she would to a scared child.

Willow complied with the request, allowing Tara to run the washcloth over the back of her neck with one hand, while she felt with the other for what would undoubtedly be a good sized goose egg on the back of Willow’s head to make sure she wasn’t bleeding. Tara easily found the knot and winced when she felt the size of it, but at least there didn’t appear to be a cut.

Willow watching Tara unblinkingly, as she gently cleaned her up. The lack of response to pain worried Tara, and she knew that even being as gentle as she was, it had to cause a small amount of discomfort when she touched the knot, but Willow didn’t even flinch.

“A little bit better now?” Tara asked not really expecting a response, but she couldn’t think of what she should do next. Feeling horribly helpless in the face of something that it was clear Willow had been dealing – or rather not dealing with – for some time, Tara felt tears sting behind her eyes.
With a heavy sigh, Tara looked up at the sink, as she started to move away and missed Willow’s hand snaking out to grab her arm. Tara eased back into place in front of Willow, and without looking laid the cloth on the counter.

Willow’s face was more drawn than it had been the day she arrived, but with a small amount of relief, Tara could see the green tint was gone. The spray of freckled across Willow’s nose looked like they were drops of sepia ink waiting to dry she had gone so pale.

Ever conscious of Willow’s state of panic, Tara continued to move very slowly. Tara turned so she was parallel to Willow and simply opened her arms. With a speed, she didn’t think was possible, Willow was in her arms perching herself in Tara’s lap to burrow her face into Tara’s shoulder.

Tara enfolded Willow in her arms and began dropping reassuring kisses on her neck and shoulders. Willow started to shake violently. Tara could feel her shirt getting wet, but Willow didn’t make a sound as she cried. Rocking her was the only thing Tara could think to do as she murmured words of assurance. Her own tears fell into Willow’s hair, and Tara tightened her embrace, as she tried to make Willow feel as safe as possible. More than once it occurred to Tara that going through the things Willow had been forced to endure – and to do so repeatedly – would have broken a lesser person by now.

In hushed tones, Tara spoke, “Willow, you’re so strong, do you know that? I love you, precious. You are so strong, so beautiful and brave. You amaze me all the time. I love you,” Tara just kept repeating these words over and over to Willow.

Finally, Willow whispered, “I love you too.”

Tara let out a small laugh choked with her own tears, as she hugged Willow tighter. Relief rushed through Tara at the sound of Willow’s voice. At least if Willow was talking, they could tackle this – like Willow said together they could do anything, and this was no exception.

Tara pulled back to look into Willow’s face, with two fingers she wiped Willow’s tears away catching the one hanging from her chin. Tilting her face upward, Tara placed a light kiss on Willow’s lips, then guided Willow’s head back to her shoulder, as she continued to rock her gently.

Tara wasn’t sure how much longer they sat like this; she just knew she would sit there for days if
“There’s two – well now three, but it started as two,” Willow’s voice trembled as she spoke. “The first one I’ve had since,” Willow cleared her throat. “Since I k-killed Warren. The second started while I was in England, and the third started about six weeks ago.”

“Do you want to tell me about them?” Tara asked tenderly.

Tara kept rocking Willow. She held one arm around Willow’s knees so her legs were draped over her own, and the other around Willow’s back. With a quick flash of memory, she remembered being held the same way by her mother after various nightmarish incidents as a child, and how safe she felt. She only hoped it was working as well for Willow.

Willow took a shaky breath and started. “The first one is the one I had tonight. It’s horrible, Tara because it’s what could have happened. It’s what would have if I hadn’t been able to stop...him. I would have lost you, and so much more. I see the bullet hit you; I get sprayed by your blood. I can feel it warm and sticky on my face as I watch you crumble before me, and I hold you while you die. I try to bring you back, but I can’t. The Gods tell me that I cannot violate the laws of natural passing and that it’s a human death, by human means. How would that be natural?” Willow’s voice had risen to a frantic squeak.

With a pained expression Willow looks at Tara, and Tara sees the tears stream down her face again, as the images of the dream rip away at the sweet girl in her lap.

“You’re my always, Willow, I’ll always wait for you. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere, baby,” Tara said against the knot in her own throat, and couldn’t imagine what having to see Willow’s death over and over would do to her. Knowing this had been going on for almost two years, Tara felt her stomach roll with anger for what that one careless, selfish act had caused. For the second time tonight, Tara felt like her heart would break for Willow, for what she had gone through, and what she continued to go through. She could only encourage the hope in them both, that now some of this would change.

With a wavering breath, Willow continued, “Then it all goes to hell. I’m so angry, so filled with pain and rage. I go to the Magic Box and drain all the books – all the dark arts books – I can see them crawl, seeping into my very skin. My eyes and hair go completely black; I lose myself there in the agony and the pain. I hunt Warren and his little minions down like animals. At some point I start to lose steam, so I go to Rack, but I don’t just drain him, I kill him so I can continue to hunt Warren. We fight and Warren tries a few tricks, a few glamour’s that have no effect – he even manages to put an axe in my back but it still doesn’t stop me – Tara, I skin him alive after I torture him for hours.”
Willow stopped to look at Tara. Tara wasn’t sure what Willow saw in her face, but she started to pull away. Tara knew there must have been something of the shock she was feeling written in her expression.

“No,” Tara said tightening her grip on Willow. “It’s a dream Willow, and a nightmare at that, so it’s your worst fears realized — not the truth, not what actually is. Do you want to go on?”

With a sad laugh, Willow goes on. “There’s only the end of the world left next. After I…do that to Warren, I do horrible things to everyone. I leave them broken, beaten and bloody. I crush everyone I love into nothing, so they can feel a small measure of the pain I’m feeling, but it doesn’t make mine any less. I leave destruction behind me, and I find a way to end the world – end all the pain everyone is feeling. I raise a temple to end the world, all to assuage my grief over losing you. Tara, I can’t lose you, not again.”

Tara pressed a kiss to Willow’s temple and cheek. “I’m right here, Will. It’s just a dream – I swear that’s all it is.”

Tara turns Willow’s head to look at her, and gazes deeply into her face, attempting to make her understand with her eyes. Tara tried to make Willow feel the truth of her words. To reinforce them, she took Willow’s hands, and pressed them against her face and over her heart, hoping the direct contact would be reassuring to Willow. Letting the physicality sink in, that she is there and very real.

Willow threw her arms around Tara’s neck, as she began to sob. For all the quiet tears of earlier, now the room echoed with her pain, and Tara cried with her. Tara ran her hands over Willow’s naked back, over the soft skin that heaved, and shuddered under this colossal weight trapped in her mind. She gently combed her fingers through the red hair she loved so much, as she tried to offer some small amount of comfort.

When Willow finally stopped crying, Tara’s shirt was wet front and back; the back down to where she sat from Willow, and the front to just above her ribcage held her own tears.

“Feel better, love?” Tara asked as she continued to stroke Willow’s back soothingly, and she could feel Willow nod against her shoulder. “Good.”

Without any coaxing Willow offered up the next of her nightmares.
“The second is more disturbing than the scary of the Warren-mare. I’m back in Sunnydale at Buffy’s, but there is only the three of us; me, Dawn, and Buffy. There’s no you, or Xander – or even Anya. Remember at The Bronze when we were floating?” Tara nodded, smiling at the memory of the first birthday she had had that was truly happy since her mother died. “Well, I’m there in the hallway of the house, floating like that, but I have this weird black dress on, the top has this high lace collar, but is very low cut, and is showing major amounts of cleavage that we both know I don’t have.”

Tara poked Willow playfully at that but didn’t say anything.

“The skirt is in shreds like at one point it had been whole. I can hear this crazy laughter, and I hear someone crying. Here’s where it gets even weirder. There’s like a voiceover track, but it’s my voice. I see me floating there in the hallway, and at first its me – my normal face – then the voice says ‘Alone’. My face flashes and my eyes are black, and my hair is streaked with black, then the voice says ‘Insane’.”

Willow pauses to take several deep breaths. “That continues to happen, while I see Buffy moving around in the kitchen, but she’s transparent. She moves around like normal, makes a cup of coffee, but she has no expression. She just goes through the motions, then I hear my voice all voice over-y again with an even better slogan. I say ‘The Magicks whisper to her too, just like me, and it’s driven her mad, my little sister.’ Then I see Dawn – obviously the little sister – she’s in the dining room in a corner rocking and crying while I watch my face flicker back and forth between the ‘Alone and Insane’ and I float. It just loops over and over.”

Tara kisses Willow’s shoulder, where she rests her head, as Willow leans against her. Tara, well aware of prophetic dreams, wonders if this dream might be linked to the alternate outcome, like Willow’s ‘Warren-mare’. Seeing just how much power Willow had gained in the last eighteen months, would not make it unheard of for Willow to begin to see through the veils of differing realities.

Tara also knew that this could very easily lead to the madness Willow sees in her second dream. The Oracle at Delphi, The Oracles of Ammon, and even The Oracles of The Sibyls – all their histories were rife with tales of madness along with many other bizarre and tragic things. What then could this mean for Willow if even a third of those accounts were true? What would Tara be able to do to help, and was there anything she could do?

Willow accepted Tara’s silence, returning the soft kisses as she began to play with Tara’s hair. She gave a low, sad chuckle that she knew Tara felt, so she pulled back, and looked down at the front of Tara’s t-shirt.
Willow asked, “Yours or mine?”

“The back is all yours, sweetie, and I think the front is mostly mine, but some of yours mixed in there too,” Tara said with a shrug.

Willow just nodded, and said, “You’re just wet all over, aren’t you?”

Tara scoffed, “Feeling cheeky, are we? I take it you’re feeling a little better then?” Casting a serious eye at Willow as she tried to make sure Willow wasn’t doing her ‘brave little toaster’ routine that she had gotten pretty good at being able to spot.

Willow nodded. “Yeah, I’m extremely lucky. See, I have this beautiful woman,” Willow made a point to pull back and purposely began talking to Tara’s chest. “She has the most amazing blue eyes I have ever seen. I don’t know if she knows just how desperately in love with her I am. The funny thing is she always seems to find me when I think I am at my hardest to love, and then she does!” Willow then looked into Tara’s eye as she continued to speak.

“She loves me still! She holds me when I break down, and me being the girl of high-strung-ed-ness, which can be frequent when I’m stressed – ah, well, even when I’m not stressed I’m still wound a little tight. With all of those stellar attributes, this amazingly caring, smart, beautiful woman keeps telling me, she loves me. I just have to believe her, because she’s my world. Oh, and sometimes she makes me feel cheeky and sexy, and more loved than I have ever been in my life to date. I have to say to date because something will happen to reset the scale, and she’ll surprise me yet again. So I guess that makes me one very lucky girl.”

"Darn tootin’," Tara smiled doing her best Willow impersonation. As she listened to Willow words she knew Willow meant every one she was saying; it didn’t stop the blush she could feel creeping up her neck. This wasn’t a blush of insecurity at all – it was one of pleasure – that Tara had inspired that sentiment in another person, and it was given freely and repeated often. Little Tara, that had always felt less than good enough, less than worthy of love, less than special – simply less. Willow’s words made her heart swell with happiness. Just a simple reminder that she was loved by Willow and by the family Willow had made for herself that took her in as one of their own.

“I think that’s one of my favorite stories, and I want you to tell it to me often, okay?” Tara said.
“You just say the word, baby. It will grow and change as we grow and change. It will get longer, and we’ll be old, and I won’t remember the exact beginning, but you can help me, and it will take all day for me to tell it. I can think of nothing I would rather do than tell you how much I love you for the rest of our lives – wait is today a Tuesday?”

Tara shook her head knowing the thought process behind it. “It’s not May anymore either. Since we are going to Sunnydale, it’s good to know you remember that – I think.”

She kissed Willow’s shoulder again and felt her shiver. “Are you cold sweetie? Let’s go back to bed.”

Tara looked down at her own damp chest at the t-shirt she had on, and the chill was apparent.

Willow nodded, and she was looking down between the chests seeing two pairs of hard nipples in the cool of the bathroom and damp of Tara’s shirt. “I want to shower though, wash the fear and the sweat off.”

Tara placed her face back on Willow’s shoulder to inhale deeply. “Nope, I only smell sweaty Willow. I like it better when I am the cause of said girl’s sweatiness, but I don’t smell fear,” Tara even licked her shoulder, with a shrug she said, “Willowsweat.”

Willow smiled adoringly at Tara. “Be that as it may, my beloved, I can smell the fear from the dream on me. I would much rather crawl into bed next to you without that particular scent because you smell so much better. To be honest, Tara, I can’t think of anything that smells better than you do.”

Tara kissed Willow’s forehead, urging her to stand. Willow extended her hand, but she didn’t take it.

“Give me second, my left foot is numb.” Tara grimaced at the sensation of blood flowing again.

“Tara, why didn’t you say something, I could have moved. Do you want me to rub it?” Willow said as she sat back down next to her feet and began to rub.

“I didn’t feel it until you got up. Besides, my lap was the right place for you to be, sweetie. Wouldn’t
Willow nodded, as she flexed Tara’s foot that was growing pink with circulation. “Better?” Willow asked.

“Much, thank you.”

Willow let go of her foot to stand, and then offered her hand to Tara again. She gladly took it, not sure if she would be wobbly or not. Tara figured after being sick Willow’s mouth not might taste great, so she grabbed their toothbrushes, and handed Willow hers. When Tara was almost done she turned the shower on as Willow rinsed her mouth out then followed suit.

“You first, oh sweaty one,” Tara said with a smile, as she nudged Willow in.

Closing the door behind her, Tara watched as Willow stood under the hot spray. Picking up the bar of soap she worked up a lather of bubbles in her hands. Tara started with Willow’s back, massaging the muscles of her shoulders, neck, and arms that had tightened by the dream and vomiting. Prompting Willow to turn has Tara lathered her hands again. Rubbing gently at Willow’s throat and collarbone, she realized that she was humming. Her hands glided over the soft skin turning pink under the hot water, as she moved over Willow’s chest, down to her stomach.

“What are you humming?” Willow asked in a whisper.

“Hmm? I didn’t know I was, Sweetie,” Tara looked up a feigning surprise, having noticed it herself a few moments before Willow had. “Was I humming long?”

Willow nodded. “Since you started on my shoulders.”

“Oh…huh. Your hair?” Tara skated on passed the subject, but she saw Willow open her mouth and then close it again, as Tara looked through her lashes while she reached for the shampoo. She held it up for confirmation from.

“Okay, wet your hair again.” Tara concentrated on the task at hand hoping she was successfully making the humming of the song she had sung to Willow, what seemed like a lifetime ago, a non-
issue. Willow wiped water from her face as Tara poured shampoo into her hand. “I’ll be careful of your knot; I didn’t feel a cut but it might be scraped, so tell me if it stings. You may even want to take some aspirin before we go back to bed.”

Willow turns her back to Tara as she says, “You’re probably right, this one generally gives me a headache anyway. Do you want to know the last one?”

“If you want to tell me, sweetie,” Tara replied a little anxiously after hearing her two others.

“This one is short and to the point. I’m back in Sunnydale, we’re all there, but there are more people. There are all these young girls all over the place, but they have something to do with Buffy. There are also some people that are there with us – we have a coven there Tara – you and I. We’re preparing for something, it’s big because of the hell mouth – it has teeth. The ground rumbles with small tremors. We’re all scared, and we know some of us will die, but it’s just another apocalypse in Sunnydale. Nothing we haven’t done before – it’s what we do.”

Tara had been gently massaging Willow’s scalp, and despite the warmth of the water, she felt a chill pass over her. Without a doubt, she knew that this dream was going to happen. That this was part of why she was here and now why getting trained in combat magic was of the utmost importance.

“Rinse,” Tara said trying to keep her voice for sounding as scared as she felt.

As Willow finished her hair she looked through the water at Tara and smiled. “Your turn, baby, you’ve got to love the water tanks here. We have hot water for days.”

Tara smiled as they switched positions; she leaned back into the water as she closed her eyes, letting the water wash over her. Her mind raced, and she knew if she looked Willow in the eye at that moment, she would be able to see trepidation Tara now felt. Soon she felt warm soapy hands on her skin, and knew, as usual, she would have very clean breasts.

She started to laugh as her breast were being lovingly soaped again and again. The Willowhands got the hint to move on making soapy paths to her stomach and then up to her shoulders.

Willow pressed against her to soap her back, and asked, “Why are you laughing at me?”
Tara opened her eyes replying saucily, “I’m not laughing at you, sweetheart, I’m laughing near you.” This garnered her a playful swat on the bottom with soapy hands.

“Hey! Now that was completely unnecessary; we both know that you keep my breasts the cleanest in town, simply because you can’t keep your hands off of them,” She said in mock offense.

With a wide grin, Willow said, “Okay, you got me; I can’t deny any of what you just said. So I guess you found me out. I never knew I was such a breast girl, but I honestly think it’s just yours that have me fascinated. Turn, so I can do your hair, missy.”

Tara did as she was asked, thankful to not have to face Willow, because it gave her more time to turn the last dream over in her mind and try to reconcile her conflicted emotions. Willow’s words played again in her head. ‘We’re all scared and we know some of us will die but it’s just another apocalypse in Sunnydale. Nothing we haven’t done before – it’s what we do.’

Tara was so deep in thought she didn’t realize when Willow’s fingers stopped in her hair, and she had been spoken to.

“Baby? Tara, are you okay?” Tara could hear the concern in Willow’s voice.

Putting on a brave face she turned back around and smiled. “I’m fine, sweetie. I just got lost in thought for a moment,” she said as convincingly as she could.

Willow pulled her into a hug, and whispered into her ear, “I’ll always find you, baby. Always, lean back I’ll hold you while you rinse your beautiful hair.”

Trying to lighten the mood as much for herself as for Willow, Tara nipped her ear and said, “I see how it is now; is it a tough choice between my tits and my hair or is my ass in there too?”

Willow pulled back blushing in surprise. “Tara! You have to have been spending way too much time with Anya. She’s corrupted you!”

“No, I think a certain redhead had more to do with that delicious endeavor than she did. Anya just
encourages the vocabulary that goes with the corruption.”

Tara enjoyed the feeling of mischief rising, and pushed her more troubling thoughts aside, enjoying the complete lack of speech it was causing in her girlfriend. Now, she had two weapons to thwart a Willowbabble; kisses and spicy talk. Rinsing her hair out she began to feel fatigue start to weigh down her limbs, and was looking forward to getting back into bed.

Tara turned to shut off the shower and felt the cool air against her warm skin raise goosebumps. Willow handed her a towel, and she flipped her hair over while bending at the waist to dry it as quickly as possible. When she righted herself, Willow was watching her wrap her head in a towel.

Willow looked worried. “Tara?”

“How?” Tara continued to dry herself off waiting for Willow to go on.

“Is that what you think you are to me? That I, ah, love you only for your, um, attributes?”

It hadn’t occurred to her that Willow might take her seriously when she had been saucy with her. She couldn’t stop the smile that came to her lips though. “No, I don’t Willow. I’m sure it helps some, that’s the law of attraction. Just because I know you enjoy my attributes as you so delicately put it. That would be like saying I only love you for your perfect ass, and sweet …” Tara let her eyes drift heatedly down Willow’s naked body making her blush before darting her eyes up to Willow’s mouth. “Mouth or green eyes, these are part of you, yes, of course, they are. They don’t cover the volumes I can say about your soul, your strength, your devotion to the family you made, your courage.”

Tara shook her head and wrapped her towel around herself as Willow did the same.

“We really are more than the sum of our parts, Willow. I’m sorry you misunderstood me, I was teasing you. Nothing more, nothing less, love. Lighten up, my tightly wound girl,” Tara pulled Willow into a hug and rubbed her back through the towel. “Besides, I like it when you love my attributes,” She said as she kissed Willow’s shoulder.

“You are bad, when did this happen? Anya and I are gonna have words, let me tell you,” Willow said sounding indignant.
This made Tara laugh all over again, and she squeezed Willow tighter. With another quick kiss on Willow’s shoulder, she asked, “Bed?”

“Yes, bed. It definitely calls.”

Willow followed Tara out and they climbed back into bed dropping their towels as they went. Tara lay on her back so Willow could curl into her. One minute drifted into ten, then twenty. Tara could feel Willow’s breathing even out, but she could also tell she wasn’t asleep.

“Will?” Tara asked in a hushed tone.

“Hmmm,” Willow murmured.

Tara paused, unsure if she should ask, but her curiosity just wouldn’t let her rest. “You don’t have to tell me, but what did you do after a nightmare before, when you were alone?”

Willow didn’t move or say anything for a long time, then with a heavy sigh, she replied, “It’s easier to show you, and then try to explain. Let’s go to my room.”

Willow rose with slow determination and walked directly into her room without waiting for Tara. Tara watched her stiff movements with a sinking feeling, regretting her question a little, but she followed Willow nonetheless.

Willow stood next to her bed, as Tara moved next to her. Without looking at Tara, she pulled the sheets back and placed two of several pillows end to end, then walked to the other side putting another on in the same position, and lifted what would be her pillow pulling out a pillow that had a shirt on it from underneath it.

Tara immediately recognized the shirt. It was a velvety, silvery-periwinkle long-sleeved affair Willow had always loved, but it had disappeared around the time Willow left. Willow held it to her chest and lifted one of the sleeves to wave it at her.
“Hi,” Willow still wouldn’t look at Tara, and taking a deep breath she began to explain.

“The funny thing about pillows is that they hold body heat. So once I cleaned myself up, and crawled back into bed, they would get warm. I could hold my ‘Tarapillow’, and pretend it was you holding me. I could still smell you on the shirt for a while, so it was like you were there with me, and I could fall back to sleep.”

Tara blanched, as she raised a hand to cover her mouth, and had to sit heavily on the bed. The sadness that swept through her body made her feel like she was going to have a panic attack. Her breath came in short, sharp bursts, and her ears began to ring, Tara felt like she couldn’t breathe deeply enough as she bent sharply at the waist.

“Willow, sweetie, come here,” Tara choked out hoarsely after a few minutes.

Willow sat next to her still holding her ‘Tarapillow’ tightly to her chest. Tara looked at Willow with a new respect for the bravery that seemed to be never-ending in the woman she loved. She tugged the pillow from Willow so she could gather her into her arms.

“You did that for the last eighteen months whenever you had a nightmare?” Tara felt Willow nod against her.

“You are the strongest person I know, Willow. Buffy may have physical strength, but she has nothing on your spirit. Honestly, I don’t know that I could have done what you have, and that says a lot. Darling, I knew things were hard, even beyond hard, but I had no idea,” Tara choked off shaking her head.

Gaining control of her voice again she went on. “Not only do I love you Willow, but I have more respect for you than you can imagine. It breaks my heart to think you have been doing this alone all this time. I know you are stubborn, we both are in our own ways, but you don’t have to do this alone anymore. I’m here, and I refuse to leave you. My brave girl, please look at me.”

Willow pulled back from Tara slowly to look at her.

“Do you know just how strong you are? I knew how amazing you were after everything with Glory.” Tara paused, blinking rapidly and swallowed hard. “I know you took care of me – in every
way. You bathed me, dressed me, you even had to feed me. I was no more than child—a small one at that, but that didn’t stop you. You brought me back, you saved me. When I woke up in your arms to hear you say you would always find me—I had no doubt that you were my rock. Now, let me be yours, baby. Let me help you, and be there for you. Willow, I’m in this for the long haul. You can’t get rid of me that easily. I just won’t go.”

Tears spilled over onto Willow’s cheeks again as she nodded. “Tara, one of the things I’ve learned is how to ask for help. I couldn’t – I wouldn’t do that before, and it cost me so much. You can’t get rid of me either, baby. This, *us*, we’re forever. You’ll never lose me again, I promise.”

Tara smiled, kissing Willow hard, as she let her hands stroke the bare skin of Willow’s back. Breaking the kiss to pull Willow close again, Tara whispered in her ear. “For it was not into my ear you whispered, but into my heart. It was not my lips you kissed, but my soul.”**

Willow pushed herself hard against Tara, maneuvering herself back into her lap, sniffling and hiccupping. “Let’s go to bed, sweetie. It’s been a very long, long day.”

Tara just stood with Willow in her arms not surprised at how light she was, and simply carried her to bed knowing she must be exhausted. Between the lovemaking, conversations, magic, nightmares, and now letting her walls down to let Tara in closer to her than ever; the emotional drain had to be significant.

Tara sat on the bed and turned with Willow in her arms stretching out so she would have to follow suit. Once they were settled except for the occasional hiccup it was quiet. There was no real movement; they just held each other with the quiet knowledge that in the last twenty-four hours they had come to a deeper understanding of one another as people.

That their relationship was richer than it had been, somehow finer in a way neither could explain. It was different, but the same; just as they were different, but the same.

It was better, and they were better for it.

The light in the room had shifted to the grey of pre-dawn, and though tired beyond belief Tara could not sleep. She could tell that Willow was still awake too.

“You should rest, love,” Tara said to the top of Willow’s head.
“No more than you should. Tara, I hadn’t planned to just dump all of this out on you at one time like this. It’s a lot to take in, I know,” Willow countered.

“Would you have told me anyway?” Tara asked gently.

Without hesitation, Willow replied, “Yes, absolutely. I had planned to tell you all of it. Just not in one sitting. I thought I could break it up a little, so you wouldn’t run screaming for the hills – err, the Hellmouth, where ever you felt safer at.”

Tara chuckled. “No running, just loving the doofus that is you…, you really thought I would run from you?”

Willow nodded against her. “Why not? This adds an all-new layer of crazy Willow-y goodness mess to the already chocked full o’ crazy mix. A person can only take so much.”

Tara hugged Willow tighter. “And again I say this to the girl that was willing to take on her girlfriends – that she hadn’t told everyone about yet – abusive family, that had been lying to her all her life and telling her that she was a demon – you wanted to lay my dad out! – That was awesome by the way – so bring it on, this will be a light day. The girl that was a demon and the girl that’s a crazy witch, weren’t we going for the whole crazy witch thing anyway?”

Willow pulled back to look at Tara with a big smile. “Yay me.”

Tara chuckled again. “Yay us.”

Willow wiggled. “Yay us.”

They fell silent again as Tara hoped Willow would begin to doze thinking that once she did maybe she would too.

“Tara?” Willow said meekly.
“Hmmm?”

Willow cleared her throat. “I know it’s been a long day, but could we…maybe…”

Willow pulled back to look into Tara’s face, and without words, she understood what Willow wanted. What Willow needed – she needed to be touched – loved.

Tara kissed Willow slowly, once again letting her hands wander over the soft skin of her back and bottom. Tara pulled back to look into Willow’s eyes and she saw sadness, desire, but also a need for the reassurance that only Tara could give her. Tara kissed her forehead, her eyes, and the soft skin just under her cheekbones next to her ears.

For all the hurried fervor of their lovemaking earlier in the week, Tara moved with slow, deliberate strokes over Willow’s skin. Tara knew just where to touch her, to kiss her, to make her body sing. Willow’s hand matched her touch for touch, kiss for kiss. Their tongues danced together, as their fingers etched burning patterns over the increasingly sensitive skin. The only sounds in the quiet of their room were their breathing and hushed moans.

“Tara, please now.” Willow’s plea forcing Tara’s hand down her sweat-slicked stomach. Moaning again as Tara’s fingers slid into her. Tara watched as Willow shivered, and sucked in her breath. Willow wasted no time in reaching for her. Willow opened her eyes and smiled, she kissed Tara hard. Their breathing was growing ragged, as their fingers moved in time with one another and growing urgency.

“Together, Tara, I’m so close.” Willow groaned.

“Almost, oh yes, there, right there,” Tara’s voice caught. “Now, please, oh please, Willow.”

Their voices mingle in unison, as they cried out their climax together. Sensation rolling over them and gradually their breathing started to return to normal.

“Damn, baby,” Willow said in a pleased voice.
“Mmmhmm,” Tara said as she nuzzled Willow's neck.

Willow whispered, “Thank you.”

Tara understood the double meaning but said anyway, “You don’t have to thank me for making love to you, trust me, it was my pleasure.”

Willow chuckled, “You know that’s not what I meant, and I am so having words with Anya some of which might even be thank you.”

Tara laughed loudly, “What for?”

Willow kissed her neck. “Well, for one I am the recipient of your ever-increasing dirty mouth, and two you seem more comfortable with the topic of sex altogether. Not that you were uncomfortable with our lovemaking before, but you were shy about it. Well, we both were, and now you tell me things, you talk to me. Baby, it turns me on when you talk to me,” Willow shivered. “You said Anya has encouraged that, so then I think a ‘thank you’ is in order because I have to say I like it. I’m still getting used to it, but it’s a good thing and we should do more of it.”

“Damn, there goes my plan,” Tara said lightly.

“What plan?” Willow’s curiosity plain in her voice.

“It was going to be weapon two in diffusing a Willowbabble onslaught,” Tara said knowing the right combination still would be.

“What’s weapon one?” Willow asked curiously.

Tara kissed her passionately.

“Feel free to use either weapon anytime you like, baby, anytime at all,” Willow giggled.
With several more kisses, Willow’s finally settled into place, and her breathing began to slow. It was obvious she was finally drifting off to sleep. Tara made the mental note to speak with Rowan alone, and she was going to do it as soon as she woke up. She needed more answers, and she was determined to get them.

Tara looked down at Willow’s sleeping face and marveled at the girlish sweetness that belied the truth of the amazing woman in her arms. Plan in place, Tara too drifted off to sleep feeling loved and oddly happy.

TBC....
Chapter 12 - The adventures are just beginning; prepare to assume crash positions…

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: PG-13 for mild language.

Angst/Drama Rating: On a scale of 1-10 this is about a 5.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: Always

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I am feeling compelled to mention that chapters Ten & Eleven became complete rewrites which allow for a better story (I think), as well as allowing me to make 12-15 what they should be. My reason for mentioning this is as such. This could not have been accomplished as well without my former beta (Thank you Jasmydae) for chapters 8, 9 & 10. I also would like to thank my new beta foreverchanges. The music of Chantal Kreviazuk (Ghost Stories & Plain Jane); Civil Twilight; The Black Keys (Attack & Release) & Bat for Lashes (Fur & Gold; Two Suns). Of course, there are a host of others, but that will do since they were integral. Thank you for bearing with my little ramble-y monologue here.

**There are large blocks of text and dialogue in this chapter, sorry it couldn't be avoided, just thought I would warn you in advance.**

***Cerri is pronounced Kerry and is a deliberate corruption of Cerridwen (keh-RID-wen), as is the spelling of Morgian being done deliberately for Morrigan. Maeve is pronounced May-ve***
While Willow continued to sleep, Tara slipped from the warmth of the bed and showered. She stuck her head out of the bathroom while drying off to check on Willow; just to be sure she was still slumbering peacefully. Slipping on a t-shirt and boxers, it wasn’t long before Tara began pacing restlessly around her rooms. Her movements matching the tempo of her mind, as she attempted to work up the courage she needed to meet with Lady Rowan and demand some answers. Being demanding had never been one of her strong points, and Tara knew it.

Tara decided to go into Willow’s rooms, last night had really been the only time she had been in there, and she was curious about the space Willow had been calling home. She looked around the room trying to see the traces of Willow. Tara sat on the bed, while absently running her fingers over the stitching of the comforter. Looking around she saw that there were very few personal items left here and there, but nothing to make it look like a place Willow might call home.

This struck Tara deeply because it seemed even more apparent that this was temporary space – almost as if Willow were in a state of suspended animation; the body and mind still functioning, but devoid of any real warmth. For Willow to have been in the same space for a year, it seemed so cold to her, and it made her miss Dawn and Buffy.

She noticed a pair of worn sneakers with a sock sticking out of one, a few hair rubber bands laying on the dresser next to a hairbrush. Tara smiled at the sight, wandering over to pick up one of the bands before rolling it between her fingers. She could see Willow’s laptop out on the coffee table in her living room, the screensaver swirling when she looked through the bedroom door. She picked up the hairbrush casually and walked back into her room.

As she moved back into her room, Willow rolled over and grabbed Tara’s pillow, mumbling in her sleep. Looking at the mussed hair and smiling at the ramblings of her girlfriend, Tara felt a resolve settle over her. Knowing she had the courage she needed, Tara dressed then found a slip of paper and left Willow a note. As she slipped quietly out of the room she realized she had picked up Willow’s hairbrush again so instead of turning back she slipped it into her pocket as she headed for the main hall.
The heat was intense; it was an early afternoon in June, and the temperature had already risen close to a hundred degrees, it was hot you could see it dance off the asphalt parking lot. Tara listened to the cicada’s whine as she made her way across it. She was grateful when she entered the main hall for its coolness even after only a short time in the heat. Tabitha was once again stationed at the front desk, and as Tara approached, Tabitha looked up at her with a smirk. “Hi Tara, where’s Willow?”

With a weak smile, and trying not to shudder at the girl she found repellent, Tara replied, “She’s sleeping. I was wondering if I could speak with Lady R-Rowan?”

Remembering Willow’s warnings about Tabitha made Tara less than friendly, but there was something else about the girl that seemed sneaky, almost mean, she couldn’t figure out just what it was yet. Since Tara knew she was coming back to the Grove, she was sure she would be able to figure it out.

Tabitha’s expression and demeanor changed, it was obvious that she had been expecting Tara to make this request. Tilting her head to one side, she replied in a respectful tone, “Certainly Sister Tara, give me just a moment to find her for you.”

Tabitha began making calls until she found Rowan. “Yes My Lady, Sister Tara is here and she would like to see you... yes, certainly I’ll take her there now. Thank you, My Lady.”

She looked at Tara, and smiled, “Sister Tara, Lady Rowan is in her office, but she asked that I take you to the kitchen.” Tabitha came around the desk putting a hand on Tara’s arm to gently steer her down the hall.

Tara pulled back from the touch, getting an odd sensation, almost like she had just brushed against a snake. They entered the kitchens before lady Rowan arrived, so Tabitha pointed Tara to the table where Tara and Willow had been sharing their meals.

“Would you like something to drink, Sister Tara?” she asked, looking at Tara as if she expected her to bolt at any second.

“Yes p-please, some j-juice?” Tara said waiting to watch her, feeling only a little bad that she thought this girl might do something horrible like when Ethan Rayne spiked Giles’ drink and subsequently turned him into a Fyarl demon. In her experience with the Scoobies, it always paid to be careful
when someone set off your warning bells. Normally there was a bloody, ooze-y, puss filled reason.

Tabitha walked to one of the large refrigerators. “We have most types, is there any you prefer?” she asked, turning to look over her shoulder at Tara.

“Orange, p-please,” Tara replied.

Pulling out a large pitcher, and walking to the counter, Tara could see her trying to take a guess at what the length of the conversation might be, as she fished a large glass out from one of the cabinets.

Just then Lady Rowan walked in. “Thank you, Sister Tabitha, I can take care of Sister Tara from here,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, My Lady,” Tabitha said as she slipped out of the room with a look on her face Tara couldn’t decipher, but which made her uneasy.

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Rowan observed Tara’s caution around Tabitha and watched Tabitha as she made her way out of the room, before turning back to Tara.

“Shall we sit at the table, dear?” Rowan asked.

She led Tara to the large table positioned off from the main kitchen they were in. Tara followed wordlessly, and sat at one end of the table, as Rowan sat at the other. Tara had chosen her position carefully; one that would work just as well should she be viewed either as an equal by Rowan or as an adversary. Rowan did not miss this, or the body language Tara was presenting, so she chose to sit quietly waiting for Tara to begin.

Tara fought grimly to organize her thoughts and feelings, but the two questions she most wanted, no
needed, answers to were ‘why was this happening?’ and ‘just what the frilly heck was going on anyway?’ There were other questions that whirled around and begged for attention, such as ‘why had the people who had obviously gone to such great lengths to reunite her with Willow, not seen fit to clue her in on what was going on with Willow?’ and ‘just who exactly was behind all of this anyway?’ When she added these to her feelings of foreboding over the Council’s sudden interest in the formation of a coven, and the inevitable wondering over why their relationship was under such close scrutiny, Tara barely knew where to begin.

Fighting to get her thoughts under control, Tara quietly asked, “Why?” as she looked directly into Lady Rowan’s eyes.

Rowan had known she might have to answer questions for Tara and feared that she would not be the one who had enough information to satisfy her, but hoped that when Rupert arrived he could put her fears to rest.

Watching Tara and Willow together over the last few days had been an extraordinary and unique sight, and one she felt she would never see again, so with a tinge of sadness, Rowan started with what she knew.

“Tara, I can only tell you what I know, and I will tell you everything. I can try to answer your questions, but Rupert, your Mr. Giles, will have to fill in the holes,” Rowan said.

Looking back at Tara, whose eyes shone clear and blue, the line of her jaw, set, Rowan could see the strength that this shy, stuttering girl truly had when she needed it.

Rowan watched as Tara took a drink from her glass, and sat patiently waiting for her to begin. She could also see Tara wasn’t going to make this easy and did not want the adversarial tone to continue. Rowan was not Tara’s enemy, and she certainly did not want the young woman to feel that way, so Rowan got up and moved further down the table to sit closer to Tara. Far from comforting the girl, however, it appeared to make her even warier, her expression closing off almost entirely.

Rowan shook her head sadly before pressing on. “Tara, where would you like me to begin? When Willow arrived into my care? That seems most logical, and it’s what I know for a fact; the rest we can leave until Rupert arrives. I can also tell you I have spoken to him at great length. I told him that in my opinion, secrets will no longer be tolerated by either of you,” she looked unwaveringly at Tara. “nor should they be, really. You’re both adults, and frankly, coddling either of you would be patronizing and insulting.” She took a deep breath, and once again laced her fingers in front of her mouth.
“About eighteen months ago, I got a call from the Council’s motherhouse. I was given a brief rundown of what they wanted me to know. I was told they were expecting a young witch that they weren’t quite sure what to do with. She had become quite powerful they said, but had no discipline and did not understand the need for it, so she started using magicks that should have been beyond her I might add, for fun,” She frowned. “I take that back; for an ‘easy out’, would be a better way of putting it.”

Rowan paused before continuing, she knew what she had to say next would not be easy for Tara to hear. “They said this witch had killed a man, in defense of her family, with magic. In so doing, she had overloaded herself, making herself deathly ill, and in essence, needed to be ‘detoxed’. If this was a success,” she paused, “honestly Tara, what they really meant was if she survived, and that was questionable she would, she could be invaluable to the Council. I believe ‘more precious than the Hope Diamond,’ was the exact phrase… Do you mind if I get myself a drink? Would you like more juice?” Tara declined, digesting the ‘if she survived’ and the ‘Hope Diamond’ analogy.

Rowan entered with a pitcher of lemon tea and two glasses. Sitting back down, next to Tara, she poured herself a glass of tea and asked, “Where was I?” She smiled. “Oh yes, ‘invaluable.’ It was at that point I was asked to train her if she made it through. The Council always said ‘if’ when referring to Willow, but Rupert always said ‘when’. I think more than anyone else he truly believed she could do this, that if she tried she would not fail. He was right; as I’m sure you know our Willow can be relentless.”

Tara smiled at the description of the perfectionist streak in Willow.

“I promised you honesty Tara, and some of this may be hard to hear, I have to warn you. I myself can’t imagine having to go through what Willow has just to be here today. But here she is, and if you want my opinion – even if you don’t you’re getting it – it’s because of you. Her love of you, her sense of having failed you not once, but twice, and so many other things I do not fully understand. She’s driven to begin with, but you kept her focused… I’m sorry that’s off the subject.” She paused again taking a deep breath and a sip of tea.

“So they had me wait, and slowly over time she completely stopped using magic of any kind. From what Rupert’s told me, I gather it was not a pretty sight. He could barely stand to watch her at times; all he could do was try to help her if she would let him, which she very rarely did. When she was sick she could barely sleep or eat, and not just for days, but weeks sometimes as well,” Rowan glanced briefly at Tara to gauge her response to what she was hearing and preparing for what she was about to say.

Taking a deep breath, she continued, “At times they had to force her to take something for the muscle spasms that would lock her body into odd positions…positions no human body should be in while still alive according to Rupert. She would scream until she had no voice left to use; it wasn’t
until it was physically damaging her that he could force her to take anything for the pain. Rupert said she felt like she deserved it, deserved that kind of pain for what she had done.” Rowan’s voice broke, the horror of reliving those times temporarily getting the better of her.

With a heavy sigh, Rowan stopped to drink. The knot in her throat made it difficult to swallow, much less continue on. She could feel Tara’s eyes on her but could not bring herself to meet them just yet. She set down her glass and placed her hands flat on the table, breathing deeply as she gathered her thoughts. She smiled weakly at Tara, whose expression was a mixture of sadness, and something that may have been pity… or was it guilt?

“It was during this process that the white began to appear in her hair. I think it was the Goddess marking her as her own after everything she had been, done, and was now to be. The Councils expectations of her are… well… extraordinary to say the least and you have to know, Tara, their expectations include you as well,” Tara flinched and grew pale as understanding sank in. The realization of an ever-present Council meddling in her life ominously being more than unappealing, it was unacceptable.

With a heavy heart, Rowan continued, “I cannot say if they think they can get to Willow through you, or vice versa – I am not privy to that information, but if I had my way, I would keep you both here until I was. At least then I would know that neither of you was being forced, or coerced into anything against your will. I don’t really know exactly what they want, though I do have my suspicions. I also know how badly Willow wants to go home, and how scared that makes her.” Rowan paused to drink, watching Tara’s hand shook as she raised her glass, and blinked rapidly, her face betraying disbelief and fear.

“What do they want with me? I’m nothing special. Willow’s the one with all the power, she always has been,” Tara stated.

Rowan shook her head. “Tara, you are her equal; did I not say you are two halves of the same coin? That you balance one another? Let me ask you, did you still practice while Willow was away?”

Tara blushed. “Sort of.”

Rowan knew the answer but asked anyway. “How was it?”

Tara looked crestfallen when she admitted the truth. “Unfocused, pitiful, attempts. It was like my control was gone, I couldn’t concentrate. It was worse than when I was first learning, so I just stuck
“Worrying about Willow,” Tara whispered.

“Interesting don’t you think? Worrying over Willow means you lose your focus, yet thinking of you is the only way Willow could stay focused,” Rowan said like it was an afterthought, before going on, “This is my theory, based on the scraps that I am able to get out of Rupert. Willow has the drive to be the best at everything. This would naturally extend to the craft, particularly as she is self-taught – but I would guess that somewhere in her family’s history there was a witch – maybe even more than one. You don’t simply read and get the kind of power she has; there has to be a seed there that it can grow from. Growing up on the hellmouth or not. I told you, I know about you – your mother, her mother, and your great-grandmother – your line.” Rowan could see the tension etched on Tara’s face.

“What do you know about my family? Why would mention it that way?” Tara asked with a suspicious look on her face.

“Tara, powerful lines of witches are…watched, kind of like lines of royalty simply because they are rare. We are one of the larger covens in the western U.S. so when a daughter from a line like yours comes into our area, we know about it. I know about you, your mother Brigid, her sister *Cerri, your grandmother *Maeve, your great-grandmother *Morgian—I can keep going if you like, child,” The levity of Rowan’s tone belied the gravity of their conversation.

“We are by no means like the Council; it’s just a large community, the magickal community. We don’t interfere in any way, but we will always help if asked when the need is there. There are so few true witches, much less any with a familial line, we watch out for each other. No more, no less. I told you that my offers to each of you are selfish, but before I elaborate you need to understand. We do not work for the Council in any way, they call on us for help occasionally; let me make that perfectly clear to you, Tara,” Rowan said waving the spoon she stirred her tea with. “I think we could work with you to truly make you Willow’s equal if you want to be.”

Rowan calmly put more lemon in her tea, knowing that with the weight of the information just given, Tara would need a moment—that anyone would need a moment. “The only reason you aren’t already is partly that you don’t think you are, and partly because you lost the means to be trained, but again I digress. The point is that separately, or together, you two are forces that would rival the
ancient gods themselves. We know that with Willow when she is provoked to protect what she feels is hers, her talents are astounding. That would be you, and your Scoobies by the way.”

“You are more of an unknown quantity if Willow is the protector; the shield, the defender half then that would make you her opposite mate; the warrior, the sword, the justice. I daresay from the look on your face you don’t believe me, yes?” Tara nodded. “That’s what I thought, but you could be Tara. Look back at your family. You have women with the sight, the power to heal, two named for Goddesses of War—and that’s in just the last four generations! Tara, did you never wonder about this?”

Tara stared blankly as Rowan shook her head in disbelief. “Tara, do you know how you were named?”

Rowan saw the puzzled expression dance across Tara’s face and the cogs turning behind her eyes.

“My Aunt Cerri told me that it was my great-grandmother that named me, or that it was her wish that I be named Tara anyway. My mom never explained it because if my father had caught her talking about the craft…we both would have been dealt with by him. So no, we never got to have that talk.” Tara couldn’t help the bitterness that seeped into her voice, and it was not lost on Rowan.

With a brief shake of her head, Rowan said, “I’m sorry child; I didn’t mean to be so harsh. I know your background, and that was thoughtless of me. Maybe I can explain a little. Tara provided the source of all the energy/power centered on the legendary, mythical and magical center of Ireland that was inhabited by the Celts. Tara wasn’t necessarily a ‘who’ so much as a ‘what’; it was power and did take corporeal form, yet was not always tied to a human form hence being a Goddess. Maeve was a warrior Queen tightly associated with Tara in all her forms, probably as a sovereignty Goddess. They say Maeve was beautiful with blue/grey eyes, and long blond hair.”

Rowan paused, keeping her tone even, she continued, “Hmm, but it’s just a legend, right? So does your naming make a little more sense? Of course, there is also the Hindu Goddess Tara as well. There’s a lovely vow attributed to her, stating there are many who wish to gain enlightenment in a man’s form, but there are few who wish to work for the welfare of living beings in a female form. So, by choosing a female body she could work for the welfare of all beings, until such time as all humanity had found its fullness. Yet again, I digress.”

Rowan swirled the tea in her glass as she watched Tara, the gears of her mind evidently still spinning madly behind her eyes. “So you’re trying to tell me that not only am I from a line of witches, which I know but that I’m also a magical source that’s tied to a Goddess? Look, the only Goddess I ever met tried to kill me, so I’ll p-pass, thanks.”
Rowan smiled, filling her glass again, she went on. “Let’s move on to my theories concerning you and Willow, shall we? Two witches with the power and potential you two possess, well, I think the Council wants to use that to their own advantage. I don’t think it is like what you have already been doing in Sunnydale. I’ve heard rumor that they wish to create a coven of a select few witches to assist the slayer, and they want Willow to found it – I suppose on the assumption that she would be grateful enough for the assistance they gave her to want to, or they could somehow make her want to with some sort of ultimatum. There’s just something more that’s not being said, and that’s what troubles me.”

Tara starred at Rowan slack-jawed, not believing her ears. “They want us to found a coven? Willow’s never been a part of one, and I was only a child –this is ridiculous, are they insane? This is a joke, a trick? Besides, me a warrior –do you even know me? Oh, wait, no, you don’t! Willow’s the warrior!” Tara rose from her seat and began to pace. “Has she even been told?” Tara asked, incredulously.

Without pause, more questions tumbled out of Tara’s mouth. “Rowan, how many times am I supposed to let ‘The Council’ dictate to me how my life must be? Not only to dictate it to me, but also to allow them to do it without so much as an explanation for anything they want, or even without being told when it will stop? I’m not a slayer, they have nothing over me.”

Tara turned sharply to face Rowan her eyes narrowed. “Why did they keep Willow from me? From us—we’re her family—all without a word of apology? That ‘really for the best’ was bullshit and you know it! Do they even know what they put us all through? Do they even care? What if she says yes and I say no, will they demand our separation? Why can’t we just be left alone, is that such a terrible thing to want? Now, you want to tell me I’m descended from some line of ‘magical warrior Goddesses’ and Willow and I are… what exactly, superheroes?”

Shaking her head, Tara still paced, clenching her fists as she moved. Rowan could see disbelief and fear play across her features as she thought.

Tara began to rub her temples, the muscle in her jaw twitching rapidly as her fear turned to anger, her voice rising as she spoke. “It seems like there are a whole lot of assumptions being made, by men who don’t have a clue between them. I’ve seen what they’ve done to other people –people I love—and what they won’t do when they should. I won’t stand by, and let them continue to ruin our lives if I’m in a position to stop them. This is simply wrong, and I deserve better. You can’t keep this from her, you know. Willow has a right to know, a right to choose! If you really care for her, Rowan, you have to tell her.”

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Willow stepped through the doorway into sight. “Yes, I do have a right to know.”

She stood there with her arms defiantly crossed over her chest. Tara turned, and blanched, this was not how it was supposed to go.

“Will, I didn’t plan —” Willow raised a hand to cut her off. “The best-laid plans, huh Tara? How many more damn hoops do I have to jump through before I get my life back —it is mine isn’t it, and I want it! I put my life on hold for two years to make sure I had a life to go back to. Now someone else wants to tell me what I can and can’t do, indefinitely? What kind of sick joke is that? But what’s worse, it’s not only my life but the lives of my girlfriend and family as well! What happens if I tell the Council to stick it up their lily white asses and leave me and my family alone, indefinitely?” Willow was red in the face by now, and her eyes sparkled with anger.

Tara knew the look well; it was Willow’s resolve face. She tried to approach Willow, but with a look, Tara was stopped in her tracks. She started for the door. “I’ll just go,” she said sadly.

Willow shook her head, her face softening as she looked at Tara. “Tara don’t, obviously this concerns you as well; please stay. I had no idea to what degree, but I think we both deserve some answers.” This time she approached Tara, and just held out her hand which Tara took gladly. “Where were you sitting, love?”

Tara pointed to the head of the table. Willow pulled her chair out for her, before sitting on the chair next to her, on Tara’s right-hand side.

Rowan was still seated at the side, as she had been when she and Tara had first started to talk. These were not the reactions she had anticipated—the desire to simply be left alone. She had hoped that both girls would be open to at least establishing a coven once Tara was more confident in her own abilities, regardless of any affiliation with the Council. Ultimately, it was not for her to decide though, and any type of deception would follow the three fold law. She was too old to fall prey to that. Thinking of what was to come, she poured herself more tea, before filling the second glass and pushing it towards Willow.

“Willow, how much have you heard?” Rowan asked calmly.

“Clearly enough; I could hear Tara yelling as I came down the hall, about men making assumptions. It was wrong and she deserves better than this.”
Tara blushed and dipped her head as she fought the burn that slowly gathered on her cheeks. Willow started to reach for Tara’s hand and stopped short but Tara took her hand intertwining her fingers with Willow’s.

Rowan watched the two of them, and shook her head slightly, with a smile. “As I was explaining to Tara, you both have options, and while I could only tell her everything I knew, Rupert would have to fill in the blanks. Much of it was what you already know, Willow. You know what the motherhouse was like for you, what you went through. I couldn’t give exact details because I don’t know them, but I did share some of the things Rupert has told me. I promised Tara I would not lie to her.”

That really rubbed Willow the wrong way, and she gritted out, “Yet you’re happy to lie to me?”

Rowan looked at Willow directly. “Willow, I have never lied to you. Some the things I told Tara are my theories on what’s going on. No one from the Council has told me enough of anything, for me to know if my theories even hold water. Some are rumor, but since it involves the both of you I thought at this point I shouldn’t leave it out. You already know about the coven, that’s been mentioned to you. The question Tara actually asked me was, why?”

Rowan looked back and forth between the two before settling her gaze on Tara. “Perhaps, Tara, ‘Why?’ is something you should ask Willow. She may be able to tell you this Tara since I can’t. I’ve really told you all I know. I’m not holding back anything, and you of all people should know that, Willow. I think what your questions should really be at this point, are what exactly does the Council want with you both? What they would expect if you say yes and what they will do if you say no. I don’t know what they are after, but they always have a reason for the things they do, even if it only makes sense to them. They are located where Willow was first taken, so she is of interest to them, and so are you, Tara, by default. Rupert arrived late last night and will be here tomorrow to go back to Sunnydale with you. Perhaps he will be able to tell you what I don’t know.”

The girls looked at each other, and then back to Rowan who was sipping her tea while watching their silent exchange before getting up to leave the two alone. After everything Willow had told her in the last twenty-four hours she was not surprised to see her sitting with her head down, no doubt attempting to keep herself under control. The worst of it though, was that Tara was sure there was still more to hear.

Tara sat watching Willow and after a short while noticed that all the sounds around them had ceased, they were sitting in perfect silence. The telltale tingle of a spell washed over Tara, and she smiled wryly at Rowan’s discretion. Tara’s attention was once again drawn to Willow as she tried to pull her hand out of Tara’s steady grasp, but Tara wouldn’t let her. She turned in her chair to face Willow. “Look at me, Will,” Tara said.
Willow shook her head.

“Willow, Rowan has told me some of the physical stuff you went through prior to coming here, and I know last night wasn’t how you wanted to go into those things either, but it’s one more secret. I know it’s hard for you, and you don’t have to tell anyone in Sunnydale what you went through, but don’t you think you might feel better if at least I know it all? I can’t help if I don’t know, and this isn’t going to be something you can just shake off, Will. I’m still here, sweetie.”

The sadness in Tara’s voice forced Willow to look up, her cheeks stained with tears. Tara turned Willow’s chair so they were facing each other. Using her thumbs Tara wiped away Willow’s tears, for what seemed like the thousandth time in far too few hours. If this was anything like Willow’s nightmares, what she was about to hear would be just as unpleasant.

“Willow, everything happens for a reason. Yes, your life was put on hold, and by extension so was mine. I thought I was going to die when you left; I’ve only ever cried like that once before in my life, and that was when I lost my mother. Everything was only made worse by Giles and the Council. I’ve had listened to ‘She’s okay, and sends her love’ for the last eighteen freaking months, and that’s just not cool. Why Will? Didn’t you want to talk to me? Why didn’t you reach out to us – reach out to me?”

Willow’s lower lip trembled furiously while she took a deep breath, biting it as she gained her courage. “I never wanted to leave at all. I went to Giles for help; he was at a loss, so of course, he called the Council. I should have known he would, but I didn’t know where else to turn. I couldn’t stand the fear I saw in you, Tara. The fear of me, I felt like part of me died when I saw that. I decided then, that if I was capable of doing the things that I was doing so easily, I had no place in your life.”

Willow took several more deep breaths, the tears still running down her cheeks. “How could I expect you to love a murderer? How can I explain to everyone else that I killed Warren and left because I was afraid of what I might do next? That if I could so easily take his life, what would stop me from hurting them as well? Look at what I did to Dawn, I almost killed her. I tampered with your mind when I should have known better. God, after Glory – how could I? Then, for my final trick, I mess with everyone’s memories to make it all better! Making myself believe I was only trying to help. You’ve said it yourself Tara, I was trying to bend everything, and everyone, to what I thought was best. What I did was unforgivable, and then to expect…forgiveness or understanding for murder, on top of everything else? Tara, how is it you are even here sitting in front of me, agreeing to be with me? I’m disgusted with myself, why aren’t you? These are the things I carry, Tara and why I’m afraid to go home is because what if I’ve lost everyone else?” Willow said, dropping her head down, her body shaking with emotion as she cried.
Tara took both of Willow’s hands, turning the palms up she leaned to kissed them as tears moved silently down her face. “Willow, I can’t speak for everyone else as far as forgiveness is concerned. I’m not sure I do forgive you yet for tampering with my memories, and I can’t say I understand why you did it either. That’s a trust issue; something you’ll have to earn back, but we both have things to do, to work at, Willow. Things fell apart so hard, so quickly—not once but twice. The last few days have been magical in more than one way,” Tara tipped Willow’s head up to look at her. “Every relationship is work, romantic or otherwise. Trust is built, and bonds grow, Willow, we are your family. I learned that when you left. Buffy and Dawn wouldn’t let me leave, and I thank the Gods they didn’t. Don’t you see? They are the family you gave me?”

Willow was blinking rapidly, and had started hiccuping from crying, “Buffy did that? Giles never told me you were still living with them. I-I didn’t think you would stay. You’re still living with them?” she sniffled as Tara nodded.

“As for Warren Mears, I’ve already told you, sweetie, you saved my life. I have no need to forgive you anything on that front. You didn’t just decide to go out at random and kill someone. There would be no excuse for that, but it could have been you he hit, as it was, he nearly killed Buffy. There could be four bodies in the ground because of him. He was the monster, Willow, and he’s where he belongs. The world is better for him not being in it. You have to forgive yourself for that, sweetie, I can’t do it for you.”

“Tara, I never wanted to hurt you. When I left and stopped using magic altogether…it was more pain than I often thought I could bear. Baby, are you sure you want to hear this?” Willow asked, looking into Tara’s eyes as she nodded.

“The physical, I never want to go through again. Both of my shoulders dislocated more than once from the muscle spasms, I’ve torn the rotator cuff in my left arm due to them. My right ankle broke, my left leg fractured - I now have a rod and six pins in it. I made The Exorcist look tame.”

Tara gasped, unprepared for this revelation.

“I couldn’t eat, it just wouldn’t stay down. More often than not, I couldn’t sleep, and when I did I would see Warren with the bullet hole in his head. There were points where” Willow had to clear her throat as she looked at her hands. “Giles would have to hold me down so I could be sedated, partly to deal with the muscle spasms because they were so severe, and partly to feed me intravenously,” Willow pulled the collar of her t-shirt down to reveal a scar Tara hadn’t noticed before now. “Partly so I would sleep - usually around the tenth day in a row mark they would make me sleep. I couldn’t focus, I would hallucinate. I don’t know how many times I picked up the phone to call you, just to hear your voice, but what was I going to tell you that would be good? ‘Hey, guess what Tara? I have to be sedated to be fed, and ooo, look, I can now set off metal detectors in airports!’ Yippee!” Willow made a twirling motion with her finger. “So I just thought you were better off not knowing
what I was going through.”

The noises had stopped in the kitchen some time ago, but Tara didn’t think they were alone. Pulling Willow into her lap Tara held her close, rocking her as they both cried. They stayed like that for an hour or more before Willow finally stopped shaking and started hiccupsing again. Tara wiped both of their faces with a spot of her shirt that had somehow remained dry. “Feel better, sweetie?” she asked gently, still sniffling.

Willow hiccupsed yet again. “Tara, are you sure about this? About me? I’m so scared; I’ve never been this scared in my life. I haven’t seen my parents in a couple of years now, which is no great surprise. They know where I am, but my mother thinks it’s just a phase of some sort again and says at least it’s not a cult. But I’ve hurt you, and I’m having a hard time forgiving myself for that. You are the last person I ever want to hurt, and I have so much I still need to explain to Buffy and Xander — Dawn too; they have no reason to ever want to see me again. If they shut me out… like I’ve shut them out, I don’t know…,” she whimpered and hiccupsed again. “You’re my world; they’re my friends and my family. I have felt so alone, so adrift. Tara, I don’t wanna be lost anymore. I wanna come home.”

Tara stroked her face and hair, kissed both her cheeks and her nose, before landing sweetly on her mouth. “Baby, we are starting over, haven’t you gotten that through your thick skull yet? You are so smart and so dumb,” Tara said, flashing Willow her trademark lopsided grin. “We’re going home tomorrow; I’m taking you home with me. I know we have to come back, but we are coming back. You’re not alone anymore Willow, I’m right here with you. Next to you is where I belong, and where I want to be—I love you, Will. And I know it’s not going to be all hugs and puppies, but it doesn’t have to be shards of glass and razor blades either, sweetie.”

Willow nodded. “Do you know how much I love you, Tara Maclay?” Stroking one of Tara’s cheeks, and then playing with her hair, she added, “There aren’t enough words for me to tell you how happy I am that you’re here, that you still want me…that you love me. I think giddy is a good word to describe how I’m feeling right now.” They kissed, tender reassurances that things would get better.

The noise in the kitchen had slowly started up again, and they could tell that there was more than one person in there. Right on cue, Dana came and rapped on the door frame.

“I was wondering if you might want some food anytime soon?” Both girls looked at her blankly, making her smile. “I thought I might have supper ready in about an hour. That would put it at 7, is that too late for you?”
The girls looked at each other, neither having realized almost three hours had passed. Both girls nodded, but Tara spoke, “I’m sorry if we made you wait, Sister Dana.”

Dana raised a hand while shaking her head. “There is nothing to apologize for Sister Tara; I just wanted to be sure you’d be hungry.”

“Is Lady Rowan still here, can we talk to her?” Tara asked. Willow looked at her questioningly trying to slide off her lap, but Tara held her in place.

“I believe she is, let me get her for you,” Dana said, before disappearing.

“The coven Will, would you want to found one? It’s far more responsibility, and there are people you’d become responsible for. Teaching them, showing them a path they can follow, and what that means. Skills they can hone, but it’s not about personal power. It’s not a commune either. I remember going to one with my mother as a little girl. It wasn’t a compound like this, I don’t remember so much structure, but I was little. If Rowan thinks it’s possible, I think we should consider it at least, keep it as a possibility. With the understanding we make the guidelines and dictate to the Council, not the other way around,” Tara looked at Willow then continued, “Sh-she said I’m your equal, Will, and that I can be taught what I’ve missed so to s-speak. There are so many things my m-mother could have taught me if only…I want to learn, Willow.”

It had never occurred to Willow that Tara might actually be interested in forming the coven, much less working with the Council. Listening to Tara, watching her face, she could see that this would mean more than just being part of a coven. It would be a way to put all the insane religious lies of her father to rest while doing what her mother had never been able to fully do. To practice openly, properly, and to truly begin to understand the extent of the gift she was given. She wouldn’t have to sneak around, or worry about violent repercussions like her mother had, and like she had until the last few years of her life, and what was more, she could do it all with Willow.

Willow knew how lucky she was in so many ways, not to mention that she was sitting in the lap of the best gift she had ever been given. Tears started again as she stroked Tara’s face. “Tara, I know it’s a big responsibility. I was shocked when it was first mentioned to me, and mortified when it was brought up again as a joint effort,” Tara started to speak, but Willow put a finger to her lips. “Not because we couldn’t do it, but I thought you wouldn’t want to, much less with me after…everything. I have no doubt we can do whatever we want. I’ve seen our spells, so I think I have an idea. Rowan wouldn’t offer to help you if it were pointless. Just promise me you’ll only do it because you want to, not because you think anyone else wants you to, least of all me. You being happy is all I ever want,” She kissed Tara, hugging her tightly. “Of course we make the rules! If we are in charge, then what we say goes, and the rest be damned. You’re the boss, baby,” She said smiling, and gently nipped at Tara’s jaw.
Rowan walked in just then. “Who’s the boss and of what?” she asked.

Willow tried again to get off Tara’s lap, but she wouldn’t let her, swatting at her knee. With a nod of her head, she indicated the seat directly in front of her that Willow had vacated. Rowan was amused by the exchange but didn’t say anything. With a sigh Willow laid her head on Tara’s shoulder, deciding to be quiet, and let Tara say what she had to say, so she kissed her neck and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“Lady Rowan, we’ve done some talking, and I’ve been thinking about your offer to train with me – bring my skills up to speed, I guess that is the best way to put it, and I’d like that. I still want answers as to what you get out of our forming a coven, and if we decide to it will be strictly on our terms. We make the rules, if we are to be the founders and the ones responsible for training a coven of people, it’s by our rules. We won’t work for the Council, or for you.”

Rowan nodded her eyes sparkling. “Sister, I would expect nothing less. You are absolutely right, if these are the responsibilities you both agree to, then you handle things as you both see fit. As for what do I get out of it? Nothing, well not nothing, I get the ability to say I helped the two strongest witches I have ever had the privilege to meet, to train and form what will undoubtedly be one of the most powerful covens in the world. So I guess I get…bragging rights.” She said with a smile.

Willow lifted her head to look at Tara. “That’s it? No, ‘someday I’ll ask you for a favor kinda thing’?” Willow asked.

“At some point, I may have to ask for a favor, but not of the ‘you owe me so you have to do this’ variety Willow, no,” Rowan said shaking her head. “I understand your suspicions of the Council. We all know I have my own reservations about doing anything for them, but the Goddess works in ways only she understands. Sometimes that is truly all there is. Willow, you were brought to me perhaps to remind me of the power of love.”

Rowan smiled and patted Willow’s knee. “In return, I was able to make it possible for you to be reminded of the power of forgiveness. As for you Sister Tara, I think maybe you were brought to me so I could help remind you of your strength. Love may not conquer all, but it certainly helps. The Goddess opened a whole new set of doors for us, didn’t she? Why don’t we all go get freshened up, and meet back here for dinner? Giles will be joining us, and we have much to discuss,” she said as she rose from her seat.

Willow stood, followed by Tara, who was still holding her hand. “Thank you, Rowan. I guess I should say Lady now?”
Rowan smiled. “If you like, child or you can wait until your training starts officially. Typically it is a year and a day for an initiate, but this is an unusual circumstance, sort of an accelerated initiation period. Don’t worry, nothing will be accomplished between now and when you return from Sunnydale, all in due time. Go, both of you,” Rowan said, shewing them out of the kitchen.

The girls left the kitchen and as they approached the main doors, they could see someone talking with Tabitha. Willow slowed their pace by tugging on Tara’s arm, just as she recognized the stranger turning to face them. A completely unapologetic look graced Tabitha’s elfin features.

“Willow, I tried…” Tabitha started to say, her tone very insincere, and both girls picked up on it.

"Oh. My. God. Tara, is that you?” Claude said, her jaw dropping.

TBC...
“Wow, Willow is Tara part of the…” Claude waved her hands around as if Tara’s appearance explained so much of their previous brief interactions. Searching for the right words, and getting her head and mouth in sync, Claude began to barrage them with questions.

“Okay, I get that. I mean, wow, Tara it’s been years. How are you? You look great. What brings you here, of all places? When did you get here?” Claude asked, obviously flustered.

“Hi Claude, um, this is…a-awkward. Arizona is where you left for? Actually, I kind of knew. Willow told me a-about meeting you, but what were the odds, you know? I’m here with Willow, she’s my girlfriend,” Tara said, as she drew Willow a little closer, making Willow beam.

“Hi, so uh, why did you come by?” Willow asked bluntly.

Smiling sheepishly, Claude responded, “Well, I hoped that I might coerce you into another walk, but ahhhh…” Claude ran her fingers through her hair and shrugged. “Maybe you’d both like to come?”

“I’m s-sorry Claude, we can’t; we’re leaving in the m-morning, and have a lot to do tonight,” Tara said.

“Oh, okay. You’ll be coming back though, right?” she asked.

Willow looked at Tara and she gave a small nod. “Yeah, we will. Tara will be coming back with me for the rest of my stay here.”

With a big genuine smile, Claude looked between the two. “I still can’t believe, of all the people it could possibly be… So, that must mean you’re studying or something here? I thought you were going to school, I mean ordinary school? Have you been studying here all along?”

Tara shuffled her feet, beginning to feel a little uncomfortable. “No, I am at UC-Sunnydale. I g-graduate at the end of August, but until I take my f-finals I’ll be here with Willow. I’ll be studying here as w-well, but it’s unrelated. How l-long have you been here, Claude?”
“Five years, this is where I left for after…that summer,” Claude said sheepishly, looking more than a little nervously at Willow. She turned back to Tara and said, “You should come to the ranch; we have some great horses that I know you’d love. I’ve been trying to get Willow out to show her around some, maybe now you can convince her I don’t bite. I’d love to show you both around if you’re up for it.”

“We really can’t today,” Willow started to say.

“Oh, no, no, I know you said you guys are leaving, but you’re coming back, so maybe when you get back? There are some great horse trails out here. Do you ride Willow? Tara’s really good; remember the cabin I told you about? We can board horses there too; I think you’d both really like it. I have some plants I know you’d love to see Tara, from my mom’s garden; you remember her garden don’t you?” Claude turned an openly hopeful expression on both girls making her puppy-like excitement at the prospect of an outing obvious.

Willow looked at Tara, not sure how to respond. “Umm, we’ll think about it, okay? I have your number, err – that is, Dana does, so I’ll get it from her, and let you know when we get back. Okay?”

“I’d like that a lot, really. So, umm, I have to run, then. You guys have a safe trip. Tara, it’s great seeing you again, please give me a call. Let me show you both around, it’ll make a nice break from all the studying, I promise,” Stepping in a little closer, and placing a hand on Tara’s arm in a familiar way, Claude added, “There’s no catch or anything, really.” She flashed another sincere smile before making her exit.

“Bye,” Willow weakly said, while Tara just watched her leave. “I told you it was her. What do we do?” Willow asked anxiously, hoping Tara could provide the answer.

Thoughtful for a few moments, Tara finally said, “She’s not psycho, or a demon—at least she wasn’t when I knew her, so I don’t know that we do anything, sweetie. We can decide l-later, we have o-o- other things to worry about right now.”

Tabitha coughed, both girls jumping slightly at the interruption, before turning to her. “I did try to stall her, but she wanted to wait. I’m sorry; she kinda wouldn’t take the hint.”

Tara laughed. “That’s Claude alright, she probably didn’t get that you were hinting, so don’t worry about it.”
“You know her? I thought she was here for Willow?” Tabitha said, acting a little confused, but once again Tara noticed there was a mean glint in her eyes. It reminded Tara of a coyote, feral and sneaky, making her plea of trying to help extremely unlikely.

“She was, and I do, long time ago though.” Tara shrugged, effectively ending the conversation.

“Let’s go, baby, we have to uhhh, let’s just go,” Willow said, tugging her out of the main hall.

“What’s wrong? Did I say something wrong, Will?” Tara asked, confusion written on her fine features.

“No, baby, you didn’t but if you haven’t guessed already, Tabby is a bit of a busybody. Until we decide how to handle the Claude situation, I would rather she not tell every last person in the compound that an ‘ex’ of my girlfriend has been hitting on her, right in front of Tabby while I just stood there,” Willow said testily.

Pulling her to a stop, Tara said, “Willow, she didn’t hit on me. It wasn’t like that, really.”

Continuing back to their rooms, Willow shook her head. “But that’s what it will become. Tabitha is… off. She’s just… I’m not sure what I mean other than I don’t trust her as far as Xander could throw her. I’m not even sure why she’s staying here,” Willow’s agitation was ratcheting up quickly. “Now Claude, and her challenge for Buffy’s ‘Worst Timing in the World’ award,” Willow stopped, the incomprehension on Tara’s face finally registering. “Baby, you really don’t see you do you?”

As they entered Tara’s bedroom, Willow continued, “Didn’t you see the way she looked at you?” She walked through into her own room, starting to pull clothes out of the dresser.

“You’re jealous, aren’t you?” Tara asked as she followed Willow, unable to keep the mirth out of her voice. She leaned against the doorjamb, crossing her arms over her chest, a smirk gracing her lips. “The same could be said of the way she looked at you.”

Willow turned to look at her, a bra in her hand, her head dropping back to stare at the ceiling. “That’s great, then we both got hit on by your ‘ex’ in front of Tabitha, of all people,” she said, as she turned back around to rummage through her clothes without really doing anything, trying instead to focus on not being annoyed by the whole situation.
Tara could hear it in Willow’s voice that she was ruffled by this, so she walked over, took everything out of her hands, and kissed her hard and long until Willow began to relax into the kiss. Tara pulled away and looked up at Willow, smiling cockily.

“You got jealous didn’t you?” Willow didn’t say anything and cast her eyes downward. “Why? You know I’m not interested,” Then she felt it roll off of Willow, her guilt was once again surfacing, and along with it, her insecurities. “I see.”

She let Willow go and started to walk away but then turned back. “Willow, how many more times do you need to hear me tell you before you believe me? You’ve got to let the guilt go, sweetie. You’ve carried this burden around with you long enough. Because if you’re feeling guilty over Warren, then you feel guilty I’m alive, that Buffy’s alive; neither of us would be if you hadn’t done what you did…I have some clippings I’d like to show you when we get back to Sunnydale; I think they might help you some. I’m going to pack.”

With that she went back into her room pulled out her suitcase, putting in it only what she would need for a few days, and then sat on the side of the bed.

Suddenly Willow was beside her. “Tara, I’m sorry. I did get jealous, but more than that I got scared that… you would leave me… that maybe you would think…”

“How dare you? Like I don’t have a mind of my own? Or what, that you’re the consolation prize, is that it? This has got to stop Willow; there is such a thing as free will, you know. Being responsible for your own actions is one thing Willow, but to project onto another person your fears is demeaning. I spent maybe two months with her when we were eighteen. Altogether, even with all the drama, we’ve been together for almost four years. Don’t do me the disservice. Trust - remember that? Trust me, when I say I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be; even if things had gone badly…I still wanted to – had to see you.”

Willow stood, shocked by Tara’s outburst, and started to back out of her room when Tara turned to her.

“Don’t you dare slink away either. Damn you, Willow!” Tara began to rub her face with her hand. “You aren’t the only one with fears and misgivings, because of all the shit we have had dumped in our laps. You aren’t the only one who has been through some form of hell because of all this. Your act was the catalyst, but you’re not the only one at fault here, Will—Giles and the Council, please take a bow—you’re not the only one who’s scared! Now for you to make grand assumptions, once again, about knowing what’s best for us both – well, it chaps my ass beyond belief!” Tara threw down the clothes in her hands and started to pace. “All because of Claude, and two months, five years ago? Really, Willow? What else is there, please tell me there is something else here I’m not getting. That I’m not seeing us being sabotaged by you?”
Willow stood, blinking rapidly while her mouth opening and closing like a fish. “You’re right, I have to deal with my guilt, and not let it rule me. I can control so much else, but that seems to always escape me; I was jealous—that played into everything else. I’m sorry Tara, I thought you’d see her as undamaged or less damaged than I am, and maybe you would want that more than me. If you gave yourself the chance to rethink giving us a chance you might want that – normalcy more. Don’t be mad at Giles, he was just following orders from the Council. I made him aware of my fears, and that’s why you got the information you got, so be angry with me. I thought I was sparing you from the worst of it, and I thought, wrongly maybe, that that would be best until I could sort through it all. I told you, Tara, I didn’t want to share the agony I was going through.”

She looked up at Tara, standing with her hands on her hips. She backed against the wall and slid down, sitting with her knees up, her elbows resting on them. “Then with the greatest of bad timing, Claude shows up, and she really is your ex, and seems more than just friendly to you, and has been to me, too, I couldn’t deal with her and the anger I felt. I wanted her gone – like marched off the grounds and told never to come back. Then Tabby…” She placed her head in her hands and groaned. “She really is this place’s grapevine. We don’t need anyone else to assist with the broadcast; she’s vicious like a…a Gila Monster,” Willow laughed through her tears.

“I keep expecting to see a forked tongue flick from her mouth; I just feel that from her.” Willow let out a mirthless laugh, and sighed, trying to get her emotions under control. “I just didn’t want you to come back to the stares and the murmurs about power—I get enough of them as it is—and that’s okay. I’m used to stares, I got that all through high school, but some are even afraid of me. Until now that’s been fine, they leave me alone,” Willow looked up at Tara, her face streaked with tears. “I don’t want them to treat you any differently because of me, and I’m afraid they will, especially since you want to stay. I don’t want anyone to hurt you, or make you sorry for agreeing to stay here with me because they don’t really know why I’m here.”

The sadness on her face and in her voice extinguished all of the indignant anger right out of Tara. She walked over to Willow, and sat down in front of her Indian Style, placing her hands on Willow’s knees.

“My sweet Willow, let them say what they like, I just feel that from her.” Willow let out a mirthless laugh, and sighed, trying to get her emotions under control. “I just didn’t want you to come back to the stares and the murmurs about power—I get enough of them as it is—and that’s okay. I’m used to stares, I got that all through high school, but some are even afraid of me. Until now that’s been fine, they leave me alone,” Willow looked up at Tara, her face streaked with tears. “I don’t want them to treat you any differently because of me, and I’m afraid they will, especially since you want to stay. I don’t want anyone to hurt you, or make you sorry for agreeing to stay here with me because they don’t really know why I’m here.”

Tara looked upward. “Thank you, Momma for giving me the strength to walk away from them, all of them; and thank you, Sweetie, I would never have been able to stay if I hadn’t met you, Will. We are doing this together, working through all of it together; we both have baggage, it would be stupid to say we don’t. Here, I’ll make you a deal; I’ll help you with yours if you help me with mine, and
together we can empty two sets of baggage with one us.”

Tara pulled Willow’s hands aside so she could look at her properly. “You and I have decided that there is an ‘us’ worth saving, right?” Willow nodded vehemently. “Then these are my thoughts, and this goes for Buffy, Xander, Anya, Spike and even Dawnie. Are you ready?”

Tara waited for Willow to respond with a nod. “Fuck ‘em if they don’t like it. I’m not trying to please any single one of them. They don’t walk in my shoes, nor I in theirs, and I don’t pass judgment when they make some royal class ‘A’ mistakes. So who are they to tell me I can’t try to mend things with the love of my life?”

Willow sat there, looking at Tara slack-jawed, not quite believing she had just heard her correctly. “And again with the ‘who are you and what have you done with Tara?’”

Tara pushed up on her knees before kissing Willow sweetly on the mouth. “Don’t think I’m not gonna call you to the mat when I think I need to, but I expect the same from you. I don’t want emotions all pent up between us—not talking – that’s what got us into the place we were before, remember? You trying to decide for both of us, I won’t stand for. It looks like we’ll be together a lot for some time to come, especially if we really want to found the coven, so we have to be able to communicate with each other on this basic level if we want to succeed. So no more of this shit, okay? Speak your mind and so will I—I’m good, but I can’t read minds,” Tara said, with a saucy raise of her eyebrow. She got up and offered her hand to Willow who took it gladly. Pulled quickly to her feet, Willow stumbled into Tara, blushing. Tara wrapped her arms around her, laying her head on Willow’s shoulder.

“What about Claude?” Willow asked, pulling back.

“Who?” Tara said as she kissed Willow again.

“Clau...” was all Willow got out when Tara looked at her directly and cocked an eyebrow. “Who?” Willow finally caught on and smiled a shy smile. “I have no idea.”

Holding Tara closer they stood kissing amidst the two rooms now strewn with clothes. A little chirping began in Willow’s rooms and she groaned pulling back. “Dinner’s in thirty minutes, should we keep packing? Did you want to freshen up since Giles will be here for dinner?”
Still, in Willow’s arms, Tara began to suck on Willow’s earlobe. “Take a shower with me,” Tara breathed suggestively, to which Willow needed no coaxing as she led her into the bathroom.

They hastily shucked their clothes as the water warmed in the shower. Tara led Willow in behind her and stepped under the spray. She turned, holding Willow tightly and kissed her hard. Her hand moved over her back, caressing her shapely bottom as their bodies moved as one; Willow tangled her fingers in Tara’s now soaked hair, tugging at it, eliciting a moan.

Tara pushed Willow against the wall and began to grind her hips into Willow, making her groan. It wasn’t long before Willow slipped to the side and turned so that Tara was now pressed against the wall. After sucking on her earlobe, Willow nibbled her way down Tara’s neck to her shoulder, swirling her tongue around, and biting her hard, causing her to gasp and whisper, “Harder.” Willow happily obliged knowing there would be a full set of teeth marks left behind. The response making her bold, she slipped her knee between Tara’s thighs making her widen her stance.

She worked her way to the other shoulder and bit equally as hard, smiling against her skin. Willow stroked her fingers against Tara’s stomach, edging her way down to play with the damp curls she found there. She could already feel the heat coming off of Tara’s skin. With one finger she leisurely slid up and back over her lips, but not entering fully. To tease her more she barely grazed the swollen hood of her clit.

“How?” Willow asked, leaning down to pull one slick nipple into her mouth, swirling her tongue around it as it hardened.

“I-Inside, please.” Tara stifled a moan as Willow’s fingers started to rub circles around her clit. “Inside, I want you inside me, Willow.”

At the request, Willow plunged three fingers deeply into Tara, aiming for the rough patch to the top and left of her lover’s entrance. Sucking at the bite she left on Tara’s shoulder, Willow set a quick pace with her fingers. She shifted so she could take the other hard nipple into her mouth and sucked none too gently on it. Pulling back to admire the marks she grinned lasciviously and growled, “So wet, so mine – always mine.”

Willow could feel Tara start to grind herself on her fingers. She looked into Tara’s eyes and noticed they were that shade of cobalt blue she so loved to see. Tara’s center was so hot, and Willow nimbly placed her thumb so she could rub on Tara’s already hard clit, garnering a whimper that rapidly turned into a moan.

“Willow, yes, just right there, don’t… oh, Gods, please don’t stop,” Tara breathed, digging her nails
into Willow’s shoulders.

“Tell me, my Tara, what I’m doing, is it good? Are you about to cum? Tell me, I want to hear you
tell me how much you like what I’m doing to you. Your body tells me, but I want you to tell me,”
Willow said, as she licked Tara’s neck, sucking on the skin just below her jaw.

“Willow, mmm, faster baby. Keep moving your thumb like that, it’s so good, oohh, just like that,
thrust upward baby,” Tara was panting now. “Nipples, Willow, use your mouth… hard.” Willow
captured one nipple in her mouth and sucked as much of it as she could into her mouth, using her
free hand to twist and tug at the other, roughly. “Oh Willow, it’s so good baby all at once… Willow,
you’re gonna make me cum, it’s gonna be so hard, keep doing…” she panted again, “What you’re,
oh now, I’m oh, now, Willow for you, dear God you make me cum so fuckin’ hard!” With a gasp
and a shudder, Tara fell limp against Willow who was grinning like a Cheshire cat at the shaking girl
she held securely against the wall.

When Tara finally looked up at Willow and saw the expression on her face, she smirked. “Pleased
with yourself?”

“Well sure, aren’t you?” Willow asked, as her eyebrows rose.

“Very much, my vixen, very much indeed,” Tara smiled, gaining her composure. “I guess you have
reason to be pleased.”

“I do, ‘cuz I’m the man, and I get to be your man, so that’s even better,” Willow said mischievously.

“We’ll just see about that.” Tara turned the now lukewarm water off, and on shaky legs, dragged her
sopping wet girlfriend out and into the bedroom, pushing her onto the bed; Tara straddled Willow,
her eyes dark with arousal.

Returning the favor, she bit Willow hard on her collarbone, making Willow suck in air hard and grab
Tara’s head. “I love it when you do that, Tara. Bite me, mark me. I’ve dreamed about your mouth on
my skin for so long…”

“You don’t have to dream anymore, Willow. I can’t get enough of you; you’re my favorite sweet.”
Tara said sincerely. “Now, I wanna make you scream, my little treat.” She smiled wickedly down at
Willow as she moved between Willow’s thighs, grinding into her.

“Fair is fair, my sweet, I want to hear you as you watch me.” Tara moved one hand to stroke
Willow, teasing her. Nuzzling her neck she whispered, “I like to hear you as much as you like to hear me, love.”

“Oh Tara, please I want you inside me, I need you there. I’m so wet for you, just touch me, and feel.” The words just spilled out over Willow’s lips, as she bit her lower lip. Tara part ed the lips to her wet sex.

“Mmmm, very wet, yes.” She slipped two fingers inside the velvet core of her lover. “Talk to me, Willow.”

“Yes, Tara, more,” she panted. “More fingers, and harder. Oh god yes, that’s it, baby.” Tara had her fingers angled upwards to be sure she was hitting the spot Willow liked best. “Fuck me, Tara, faster mmmm, harder. Oh, sweet Jesus, that’s so good, I’m gonna cum Tara, you’re making me cum so fast,” Willow gasped, as she rode Tara’s fingers, looking into the deep blue eyes that watched her every expression. “I like it when you fuck me, I love it when you make me cum, it’s so sweet Tara, I’m cumming for you, baby.” Willow’s body tensed her back arching as she slammed herself down on Tara’s fingers, begging to climaxed.

“My, we were efficient, weren’t we?” Tara giggled as she rolled off Willow to be next to her. “But I still need that shower, and it’s gonna be cold,” she pouted.

Willow rolled back on top of her and wiggled. “I think we still need a cold shower to be presentable, baby, damn! Ahh, but that’s one of the perks of being here, as it starts to get warmer even the cold water is warm so if we actually take a shower it won’t be so bad. The downside is that even the tap water is warm and chewy – ick. You’ll notice water filters everywhere around here because of that.”

Willow wiggled once more as the chirping sound began again, making her jump up. “We’re late, hurry. Giles! Oh, he’s gonna know why we’re late!” Turning bright red, Willow ran back to the shower and jumped in. Tara more leisurely followed her in, switching places so Willow could soap and shampoo while she ran herself under the spray.

“This all seems vaguely familiar…” Tara pressed a shampoo laden Willow to the wall and started licking the bite mark on Willow’s neck just to torment her.

“Baby, oh that’s nice. No! No! We can’t…uh, that is so not fair, Tara. Later, after dinner, I promise,” Willow managed to get out as Tara let her go, a wicked grin on her face. “You are bad, evil even,” she said, trying to scowl at Tara, knowing it really wasn’t working out for her.
Tara just began to hum as she watched Willow get back in to rinse the soap and shampoo away while applying them to herself. With a position switch, Tara rinsed herself clean. They quickly dried off, then dressed, and headed for the main hall.

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The girls entered the hall in a rush but were still within the acceptable range of tardiness. In the hall, with his back to the door, stood a tall, tweed-wearing Englishman cleaning his glasses, as he talked with Lady Rowan. She smiled as the girls entered, taking in their damp and flushed appearances. She laid her hand on Giles’ arm, and with a nod indicated he should turn around.

Giles turned just as Willow hit him with a bear hug. He wrapped his arms around the girl. “Willow, so good to see you, my dear. How have you been?”

He pulled back to look at her, caressing her cheek like a father would when he inspects his child. To his eyes, she was still thin but looked very happy. He looked over at Tara, pleased to see her also looking happy; he had worried when Rowan told him that she had contacted Tara. Especially when he learned that she had agreed to come to see Willow, fearing for both girls if things went badly.

“Tara, how have you been?” Giles asked, offering a hug, as he seemed to be open to physical contact.

“Good Giles, better now, how are you?” Tara answered politely, taking half a step back, not able to bring herself to hug him. Tara still felt some resentment towards him for his compliance in the events of the last eighteen months, even if Willow did defend him.

Giles smiled at seeing the stiff response, just dropped his arms casually, knowing it was somewhat deserved. He knew he had deceived her, and had that she would be less than happy about it once the truth had been presented. Dana appeared in front of the four, smiling, with a separate plate of food that had to be for Tabitha.

“Supper is ready, and I hope you’re all hungry,” Dana said before disappearing briefly.

Willow and Tara looked at one another, noticing again Tabitha’s exclusion from a meal. Dana reappeared and led the way back to the kitchen, and the table that was already set. There was a large bowl of salad in the middle, next to a large roast surrounded by carrots and red potatoes, all
swimming in a wonderful smelling broth.

Everyone arranged themselves around the table, Willow and Tara together, Rowan at the head and Giles next to Dana across from the girls. Rowan helped herself first then passed the bowl and platters off to Willow at her right, the food gradually making its way around the table. It was quiet as everyone began to eat; Dana kept eyeing Rowan for any kind of signal on what was going to be discussed.

Tara had her thigh pressed against Willow’s, and they brushed their hands together while they ate. Giles watched without comment, feeling relief at the interaction having been with Willow through some of the hardest things he had ever witnessed as a Watcher, and her friend. In an effort to try to keep things jovial, Giles cleared his throat to speak.

“Willow, have you been enjoying your studies here?”

Willow smiled. “Actually I have, I’ve learned so much, Giles, it’s been amazing. There’s so much that books just can’t tell you, nuances—even the frame of mind you have to be in to accomplish the tasks. Lady Rowan and Sister Dana have been great too,” she said, smiling at them each in turn. “Lady Rowan says I’ve almost completed my studies, that now it’s just been reinforcing what I’ve learned,” she said innocently, trying to draw Giles into giving her more information.

“Yes, she has told me that too. Have you had any thoughts on what you would like to do, where you would like to go? I assume you want to return to Sunnydale, yes?” Giles said, looking at her over the rim of his glasses, keeping his voice even.

Willow looked first at Tara and then at Rowan. Not knowing how much to say, she replied, “I have been thinking about it, but I haven’t made any decisions yet. Tara and I need to talk about that.”

“Rupert, I have invited Tara to stay with Willow until she is ready to leave, or beyond if they choose. I ask that you not inform the Council of this, as we have discussed Tara studying with Willow, as well as on her own her with us,” Rowan put her fork down as she gave Giles a look that made it clear that the offer wasn’t open for discussion. “Rupert, let me be frank. I don’t know exactly what the Council wants with Willow and Tara – I’m hoping you do – but I think the girls need to be as prepared as they can be, and I am going to help with that as much as I can. Now, I have to ask, just what does the Council want with them, and don’t tell me it’s just about forming a coven?”

Willow and Tara had both stopped eating and were watching Giles who chewed slowly before swallowing.
“As you know, the Council is very interested in Willow, and from what I can suss out - and believe me they are not the most forthcoming lot - if Willow agrees to found a coven they want it to function like a master coven for them. Something like ‘witches on call.’ With Willow’s computer prowess and her talent for magic, the possibilities are endless as far as they can see. They are playing very close to their chests, I’m afraid, and no one wants to talk, at least not to me,” He sighed, and turned to Tara. “Tara, they want you to help her. They see you as the glue that would bind, as it were. As with most anything the Council does, it is about control, and what they truly want with you both, as of yet, I don’t know.”

Looking at Willow, Tara fired at Giles, “So whose idea was it to keep me in the dark until now? Why should I do anything, even remotely for the Council, Giles? How could you help them all this time?” Her eyes were glittering with anger, and no small amount of resentment.

Willow took her hand; she could see the muscle in Giles’ jaw jump as he swallowed hard.

“You have absolutely no reason to do anything for them, Tara. They will only try to use Willow’s sense of gratitude to get her to work with them if they can. I’ve helped them in an effort to protect Willow from them as much as I can, and to get her the help she needed. ‘Keeping you in the dark’ as you put it, has been regrettable, and even awful, but I was trying to protect you as well. You see, the less you knew, the less they wanted to know about you. The Council doesn’t know Willow like I do, and they really didn’t think that she would survive the process, much less that if she did that she would still be sane.”

“So while you were ‘protecting’ us, the only thing you knew was that they want to use Willow as a guinea pig for ‘something?’ Somehow that doesn’t ring true to me, Giles, what aren’t you telling us?” Tara asked, not wanting to let him off the hook so easily.

His eyes moved around the table at the four women seeing distrust on all of their faces. “This ‘master’ coven would be controlled by the Council, they would control who is trained and how; much like they do with the Slayers, or try to at least. It would be an extension into another forum, but unlike Slayers, who are only called at the death of one, witches can be taught or cultivated through family lines like yours, Tara. I think they want a global network of witches, controlled by the coven they want Willow to found, who would be in turn controlled by them.”

“What makes them think I would allow that, Giles? Yes, they helped me and put me in contact with the coven here, but Lady Rowan doesn’t work for them, so if there is someone I should feel indebted to it should be her and the coven here,” Willow said, taking a bite of a potato. Once she had swallowed, she continued, “Tara and I agree that if we found a coven it will be ours, and we will not answer to them under any circumstances. We will not be controlled by them; besides, after all the years of helping Buffy, I don’t think I owe them anything. The help they gave me was the least they
could do.” She looked at Tara, who nodded.

Giles smiled. “I had hoped you would feel that way. If you truly are interested in founding a coven, I have some people you may wish to talk to. They are three in Sunnydale, two in L.A. and one is here; I managed to get a preliminary list of the first candidates. If we can get to them before the Council does we may just be able to beat them at whatever it is they’re playing at.”

“How can I trust you, Giles?” Tara asked. “How do I know this isn’t the Council’s plan, and you’re their inside man?”

Willow just looked at her plate while she continued to eat, knowing Tara would keep grilling Giles until she was satisfied. Tara looked at Rowan and Dana. Rowan gave her a small nod, and Dana flashed a sidelong look at Giles and nodded too.

“That’s a valid question, Tara. I daresay, some of your mistrust comes from my reticence in expounding on Willow’s condition whilst at the Motherhouse, and I can only say I was respecting her wishes,” Giles took his glasses off and began to clean them. “It was Willow’s decision to not tell you the extent of what she was going through, so I guess that makes my statements lies by omission. Once Willow is done here, and if you two do want to contact those ear-marked for the coven, I will help you do that; if you wish no further assistance from me, I shan’t meddle. My loyalties are not with the Council, and you have every right to be distrustful. As a matter of fact, I think it’s healthy when dealing with them. As for me, I guess I have to earn your trust back, Tara.” Placing his glasses back on his face he looked directly into Tara’s eyes.

Everyone at the table watched the two, and could feel something passing between them, unspoken; Tara finally gave a curt nod as she resumed eating.

With an audible exhale of breath, Rowan spoke, “Can I now assume we are all on civil terms at this point? We have much to do when you return and the fewer the distractions the better.”

Willow, Tara, and Giles looked at each other then back at Rowan and nodded. Willow elbowed Tara playfully trying to get the blonde to smile; Tara took Willow’s hand in response and gave it a reassuring squeeze. The air in the room started to lighten.

Dana had silently watched the discussion, keeping her thoughts to herself, and now seeing the auras around the table begin to relax and change in color, she was relieved for the moment. Pushing aside her worries she tried to enjoy the company and ignored the nagging in the back of her mind. Something was coming, and it would not be good.
The rest of the meal was uneventful, and as the girls cleared away the dishes Dana asked, “Would anyone like dessert? We have some fresh berries and ice cream if anyone is interested.”

Giles and Rowan opted for dessert but Willow took Tara’s hand, making an excuse that they needed to pack, and led them to their rooms. Rowan turned to Giles. “Are they always like this?”

Giles smirked, “Yes, revolting isn’t it?”

With a smile, she went back to her ice cream as they began to discuss Tara’s impending studies.

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The girls entered Tara’s suite, and Willow immediately flopped down on the bed, the tension of the dinner conversation finally draining out of her. She absently rubbed her face with her hands and breathed deeply.

Tara went to her bag, nonchalantly throwing in a few more things she would need for the trip back to Sunnydale. After a couple of minutes, she noticed Willow sit up and watch her, a thoughtful expression on her face. Tara looked at her questioningly.

Willow, being ‘little miss practical,’ asked, “Should I get more luggage from my parents’ house while we’re there? That one won’t be big enough for everything we’ll need and some of it will have to be shipped back here.”

Tara sniffed. “Gee, I thought you were bringing me back here for wild, hot monkey lovin’, but you only want to talk luggage.”

Willow blushed bright red, and stammered, “I-I was j-just trying to be helpful, baby.”

Tara gave Willow a radiant smile, before she taunted, “Gotcha.”

Willow huffed, before launching herself at Tara. “Two can play that game, missy.”
TBC...
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T
Rating: PG-13
Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 2 on the 1-10 scale, for mild nervousness.
Setting: The Grove – Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money - and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway - is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: Any and all will happily be accepted.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I would also like to thank my beta foreverchanges for all the help. This is probably one of the lightest chapters to date in terms of angst and largest in terms of sappy. I sometimes can’t help myself, so thank me now, it won’t happen again for a while. Music for this chapter was as saccharine as it should be, filled with Sarah McLachlan, October Project, Sara Bareillis, Keane & more. Also I have linked some of the lyrics to the two songs the girls’ reference here, so if you are so inclined you can hear them. Just like with all the rest, I’m making no money so please don't sue me, and if the links don't work let me know.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. – Robert Frost
Willow launched herself at Tara, catching her around the waist and using the momentum to swing her onto the bed. To Tara’s surprise Willow had her pinned to the bed using her knees to secure Tara’s elbows. Bending over so they were almost nose to nose, Tara watched a mischievous gleam flicker behind Willow’s eyes.

“You must pay, Miss Maclay. Do you know how you must pay? Hmmm?” Willow asked in a deliberately calm tone, as she slowly licked the tip of Tara’s nose before easing up on her haunches. Waiting for a response, Willow slowly began to wiggle her fingers just out of immediate sight, but enough for Tara to catch the movement.

Tara recognized the movement only too well and began to squirm in earnest. “Oh, no, no, no…you can’t be serious, Will. No, sweetie…” Tara tried to plead her way out of the tickling she knew was coming.

A wide smirk grew on Willow’s face. “Oh, yes.” Willow moved her hands to hover above every tempting, sensitive part of Tara’s body, trying to decide where to start, and all the while wiggling her fingers. “I think here will do just fine.”

With that, Willow pitched forward and began to tickle Tara mercilessly, tormenting every spot she could remember and some Tara hoped she had forgotten. Tara kicked and howled, laughing herself to tears. She tried to use her hips to buck Willow off but Willow would not be budged.

“Give?” Willow asked.

“YES! YES! I give! Just stop, my sides hurt, please!” Tara lay still as she regained control of her breathing. “You don’t play fair,” she said with a pout, tugging her arms free to wipe away the tears.

“Mmm, sometimes I do, but you like it better when I don’t.” Willow flashed a wicked grin as she hopped off Tara, then with a saunter headed to her bedroom to finish her packing; with the full expectation of some sort of retaliation. Tara could be as sneaky as she was, so Willow would have to pay close attention to her sneaky love. The smile on her face couldn’t hide the fact that she didn’t mind that one bit.

Willow spent another twenty minutes or so putting things into her bag before she sat down on the
floor staring at what she had placed there. She was going home, and she was beyond terrified. So much had changed – she had changed. Fear loomed over her as she wondered if her past deeds would be more than could be forgiven by the people that she had left behind.

Willow wasn’t sure how long she sat and stared vacantly into her bag before Tara came in, and sat opposite her on the floor. Tara waited in silence and delicately reached over to tuck a stray lock of white and red hair behind Willow’s ear.

Without looking up, Willow whispered, “I’m terrified, and in equal measure ecstatic to be going home. Have you talked to Dawn again? Do they know you’ve been invited to stay here?”

“I talked to Dawn and Buffy; they’re excited to see you. I know Buffy has told Xander, but I don’t know if there is any plan for once we get there other than for us to go home,” Tara said gently, taking the sock out of Willow’s hand to place in her bag.

Willow just gazed at Tara. “Home…” Willow said softly. “Whose? My parents are out of the country – yet again – so I can stay there with no problem. I don’t want to make things worse, Tara.”

“We are going home, to our home at Buffy’s unless you would rather not,” Tara said with a shrug. “It has been made clear that the Summers’ house had better be our first stop to avoid having one very pissed Slayer coming to look for us. Buffy may be little, but looks are deceiving as you well know, so it’s always best to avoid a Slayer pummeling in my book.” Tara stroked Willow’s cheek. “Before you ask again, yes really, verbatim from the Slayer’s mouth. You look tired sweetie, let’s go to bed. You can obsess some more in the morning.”

Tara stood, holding out a hand that Willow gratefully took, letting herself be led to the next room. Tara undressed Willow, and put her to bed, following right behind her. No sooner had Tara settled in, than she was enveloped by Willow. Tara wrapped her arms around Willow to hold her close, waiting for her to drift off, hoping she would get at least a little peaceful rest. Tara knew tomorrow was going to be a doozy of a day.

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Willow woke before sunrise laying still while her mind cleared, and blinked several times as the room came into focus in the grey half-light of the early morning. She was spooned against Tara, and lightly kissed her bare shoulder as her mind began to race, and anxiety set in. Her body hummed as emotions started to wash over her. Willow eased away from the warm body sleeping next to her,
grabbed her robe and padded into her adjoining room. Sitting heavily on her bed she took several
deep breaths before going around to the bag she had left on the floor the previous night.

Looking again around the room, it struck Willow as somehow surreal. She had never imagined
leaving Sunnydale, much less for the reasons she had, so to now be returning in fear of losing
everything she held so dear just seemed innately wrong. All the years of ‘fighting the good fight’, the
push for better ways of protecting everyone; becoming a stronger more powerful witch had all been
to keep them all safe. At first, she felt that the magicks had turned on her, that it wasn’t her fault;
then, as she started over from the beginning and learned the proper way to practice, she realized she
had in fact turned on herself. She had become her own worst enemy.

There was so much she had never bothered to take the time to learn because there was always a need
for a quicker, better way. The irony of that was not lost on Willow; ‘Knowledge Girl’ had failed to
learn the basics to keep herself safe. With a heavy sigh, Willow shook her head to clear her thoughts.
She picked up her bag, tossed it on to the bed, and decided the only way she was even remotely
going to get through this day was to start with meditation.

Silently Willow changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt before heading into her living room. Sitting
down in the middle of the room, and assuming the lotus position, Willow closed her eyes and
attempted to still her mind. She began her chant in soft tones, “This candle is myself, burning steady
and true. Here do I find peace and tranquility. A place apart where I may safely meditate and grow in
spirituality.” Willow was finding it hard to concentrate, and to make matters worse, the knot in her
stomach seemed to be growing to accommodate the bats that were hatching there.

She stopped chanting to roll her neck and shake her arms out, trying to dismiss the emotions firing
through her like electrical currents. Focusing on her breathing to calm herself, Willow tried again but
still could not still her thoughts, so she decided to use a candle to help her focus. She hadn’t so much
as opened her eyes when she felt Tara enter the room. Willow smiled, remaining where she was,
feeling the calm she hadn’t been able to achieve since she had started trying to meditate.

Tara sat facing Willow and took one of her hands, entwining their fingers. “Teach me your chant.”

Willow looked at her, scanning her face. Lifting a hand to Tara’s cheek, Willow smiled a grateful
smile and nodded as she took Tara’s other hand.

“This candle is myself, burning steady and true. Here do I find peace and tranquility. A place apart
where I may safely meditate and grow in spirituality.” Tara repeated it with her a few times to make
sure she had it.
While meditating, normally a solitary practice, they still held hands and completed the pose as normal, making themselves a shared conduit, a circle of energy that included them both. Effortlessly, their breathing made a single rhythm, and the chant grew softer as their meditation deepened. Willow’s calm grew, and as it did she began to glow an opalescent shimmer. Her first colors were sporadic and crackling, yellow seemed to be pulsing brightly before smoothing out to her normal, gentle rainbow of colors. The knot in her stomach eased, the bats disappeared, and she could feel Tara right down to her bones. Warmth and love, understanding and support. Tears started to slide down her cheeks, washing away her unease.

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Tara had felt Willow’s kiss and the bed shift as she got up. She knew her love would be stressed and emotional today. Today would either dispel or confirm all her fears. Tara rolled onto her back and just listened to Willow move around in the other room. Drawers opened and closed, Tara assumed Willow was dressing.

Soon, there was silence and it was deafening; Tara could feel Willow’s tension mount, and it screamed to her. There was little she could do to ease Willow’s fears. She couldn’t make promises that everything would be alright and that all would be forgiven. This forgiveness was not hers to give. Assurances had been made, but once face-to-face with her real family, Buffy most of all, would they crumble? Maybe everything would just fall back into place? Or would the incisions that had torn through the relationships, relationships built and nurtured through so much danger and death prove to be too deep for even the resilient Scoobies to overcome? They all had done so much for each other, been so much to each other.

The soft sounds of breathing finally cut through Tara’s own thoughts, and she could tell by the measure and repetition of those breaths that Willow was trying to meditate. Within moments she heard Willow begin a soft chant though she could not hear the exact words. Tara pulled Willow’s pillow to her, rested her head on it, and breathed in Willow’s scent. She was still relaxing in the remnants of Willow’s essence when she heard a heavy sigh and a brief pause before everything started up again.

Tara rolled over and out of bed pulled on some clothes and slipped quietly into the bathroom. She crept to the adjoining door and listened as she moved within sight of Willow. Tara stopped again. She could see the ghost of a smile flicker across Willow’s face and knew the invitation to join her had been made.

Tara sat down facing Willow and took her hand, entwining their fingers. “Teach me your chant.” Willow looked at her, smiling a grateful smile and nodded. “This candle is myself, burning steady and true. Here do I find peace and tranquility. A place apart where I may safely meditate and grow in spirituality.” Tara repeated it with her a few times to make sure she had it.
Tara had never been able to get Willow to meditate with any regularity with her before. Willow couldn’t sit still long enough; she could focus on a task when it involved life or death, school, or some part of Tara’s anatomy, but trying to get her to relax for her own good was like pulling teeth – it just wasn’t gonna happen without some pain. Tara could feel Willow’s…well everything; her fear, her guilt, her hope being choked by self-doubt and anxiety. No wonder Willow felt so overwhelmed. She had told Tara some of this but Tara could only guess at the depth to which these emotions were suffocating her.

Focusing on her own breathing and Willow’s chant, Tara began to clear her mind. Without pulling across Willow’s energy she began to feed Willow some of hers. As she felt Willow shift, she began to draw energy from her, working like a filter; feeding it back through the circuit they created. Slowly Willow began to pull energy back and they worked together like the tide – give and take, moving in a circle, first clockwise then counter-clockwise.

Their energy shifted again, becoming stronger, more potent and all-encompassing. It reminded Tara of the first glorious day of full sunshine after a long cold, snowy winter. The way the sun sinks in, flooding all the grey places that have been hidden for so long. Tara began to shimmer in a carnival of color, primarily a soft indigo hue, with all the other colors present as they should be; brighter pulses of a lighter blue and green fading in and out.

At some point, Willow had opened her eyes. She was used to seeing her own glow and had even seen Tara meditate before, but she had never seen her glow like this. She gently squeezed Tara’s hand to get her attention. When Tara opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was a wide smile on Willow’s face and the second was the glow that surrounded her. She could see the tears on Willow’s face but knew they were not related.

She looked around herself, the light she was now wrapped in, and watched the pulses of color flicker through. Tara smiled, believing that her mother would be so proud to see this. She knew what the colors represented; she remembered seeing them around her mother when she meditated and hoped that she might one day see them in herself. Indigo for intuitiveness, fearlessness, practicality, idealism, wisdom, and truth; Blue for loyalty, tact, affection, inspiration, inventiveness, caring, and caution; Green for understanding, self-control, adaptability, sympathy, compassion, generosity, humility, nature, and romance. The gifts her mother had tried to pass on and nurtured in her had not been in vain; they were now coming to fruition. In all the years her mother had been gone Tara had never felt as close to her as she did at that moment; this was the manifestation of Tara at her core, what her soul gave and shared with others – her gifts from the Goddess.

Tara closed her eyes again and her own tears fell, as she thanked her mother and the Goddess. So many trials had all led her here; to Willow, to this coven, to this opportunity, and now it was time to go home and help Willow mend bridges.
Willow immediately felt when their energy began to change. She could feel Tara pulling from her and then giving back. She felt the cycling begin, the dance they always danced. It was like when they first started doing spells together, but this was so much deeper somehow. Everything faded, everything was Tara. The way she felt, the way she smelled, the way she made Willow a better person, and feel complete. Their energy cycled back and forth, yin and yang, they're worth together not more than separate, just better. Like a taste of what would be in the glimmer of what could be.

Willow opened her eyes, awestruck at what she saw. She had always known Tara was beautiful inside and out, her gentle soul was one of the things that drew Willow to her. She had never had the ability to see auras, but she knew if she could see only one she would want it to be Tara’s. Having learned so much over the months of meditation about Chakra colors and their meanings, it was no surprise to see what was in front of her.

So many of the words she would use to describe her love floated through her mind in relation to what she was seeing. She had never needed anything to reinforce or confirm the wonderful qualities that made up Tara, yet here they were. She gently squeezed Tara’s hand, watching her closely as her eyes opened and looked around her. There was no need for words; they were all in the flow of energy they shared. She could feel Tara’s pride, her thankfulness, and that the experience was just a little bittersweet, and she knew it was because of her mother. She closed her eyes to give Tara a moment to enjoy what she was surrounded in, sending love and her own sense of pride in and thankfulness for the woman she loved back to her.

Willow just waited, letting Tara signal when she was ready to stop. Her sense of calm had never, to her recollection, been more profound. It wasn’t because of Tara; it was because with Tara.

There was a mutual sigh of contentment when they both opened their eyes. There was no need for words, speaking would have broken this very special spell. A spell of two, two that had found and lost their soulmate, only to be gifted with each other again without losing their unique syncopation.

Sunrise had stolen in while they meditated, changing the light in their rooms. It was still early and their flight wasn’t until late in the afternoon. Wordlessly they stripped and crawled back into bed to hold one another. Legs entwined they slumbered, breast to breast feeling the others heartbeat, just being. Hands stroked hair and soft skin with quiet reverence. With the shared feeling and knowledge of being right where they belonged, sleep claimed them quickly.

Willow woke to the sound of the shower turning off. Lying on her side she watched for Tara to
emerge from the bathroom. Tara walked out with a towel wrapped around her head, and her robe so loosely tied it showed a large strip of skin down to her belly button. She smiled as she approached the bed and removed the towel; she leaned over to kiss Willow giving her a view of her breasts.

“Hey, you,” she said.

“Mmmm, hey, you,” Willow purred. “Nice view to wake up to.”

“I thought you might like it. How are you feeling, sweetie?” Tara asked as she stood up and crossed to the dresser for her comb.

“Calm, ready. It’ll be okay. Thank you.”

Combing out her hair, Tara asked, “For what?”

Willow sat up, scooting to lean back against the headboard. “For being you, for this morning, for loving me.” Willow shrugged. “For everything you are that is so very wonderful and for making me so very lucky.”

Tara sat down on the bed, tossing a look over her shoulder as she finished combing her hair. “Yeah, I am pretty great aren’t I?”

Willow laughed a deep laugh and pulled Tara down onto her so her damp head was in her lap. Smiling down at Tara, she nodded. “Yeah, you are.”

Dropping a kiss on Tara’s forehead, she caressed her face, tracing her eyebrows, the slope of her nose, the line of her jaw and finally her wonderful mouth. Tara leaned up to kiss her before sitting up.

Willow got up and went to the bathroom. Looking at the time when she came out, only to find a half dressed Tara; she saw it was just before ten o’clock. Their flight didn’t leave until three.
“Hey, what about morning snuggles?” she asked.

Tara turned around. “I wasn’t sure that you’d want to, sweetie.”

Willow pouted. “There is never any reason to go without snuggles. Back to bed with you!” She pointed at the bed with full-on resolve face.

Tara undressed and sat back down on the bed settling under the sheet, partially reclined against the headboard. “Yes, ma’am, Private Tara Maclay, reporting for snuggles, ma’am.” With a mock salute, she opened her arms for a smiling Willow to move into. Willow placed herself with her head against Tara’s chest so she could hear her heartbeat, and closed her eyes. Willow wrapped her arm around Tara’s waist, squeezing tightly as Tara played with her hair.

They lay like that for a few minutes, and Tara thought that Willow might have fallen asleep again she was so still and her breathing so regular, so she rested her hand gently on her head. Willow also thought that Tara had dozed off again and with a hushed giggle she began to hum. Tara knew Willow didn’t sing, and she didn’t think she had ever heard her whistle either, much less hum, and on key no-less. Tara stayed still and listened to the tune until she could pick out just what Willow was humming.

“Sweetie,” she whispered, and Willow jumped and cleared her throat.

“I thought you were asleep,” Willow said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“I thought you were too. What were you humming?” Tara asked innocently.

“Oh, nothing really. Um, how long were you listening?” Willow asked without looking up at her.

“Well, sweetie, I heard all of it. I know you don’t sing, but I’ve never heard you hum either. What was it?” she asked the smile apparent in her voice.

“Just a song, you’re the singer, not me,” Willow responded, trying to deflect further questions.
“Finish it? I couldn’t tell what it was. Or you could just tell me?” Tara asked sweetly.

Clearing her throat again, Willow started to explain. “Well, you know, I learned a lot about music when I was with Oz.” Willow felt Tara stiffen slightly, making her look up. “Honey, I did, but this doesn’t remind me of him, no remnants of Oz at all, this is strictly music, okay?” Tara nodded.

“So, I started listening to the classics, and I really began to like Van Morrison…and this song makes me think of you…so that’s what I was humming while you were being sneaky awake-girl, listening to me and my mushy love song,” Willow said with a sigh.

“Sing it for me?” Tara asked softly, stroking Willow’s hair again.

“Um, I don’t sing,” Willow said nervously.

“Sing for me, you don’t have to sing loudly. Please?”

“You know I sound like someone trying to drown a cat, baby,” Willow said, trying to backpedal out of it quickly.

“Can you recite it to the tune? Then you don’t have to sing?” Tara knew she was pressing her luck, but she really wanted to hear Willow’s song.

Clearing her throat again, Willow said, “You’re not going to give up are you?”

“Uh uh, please, sweetie?”

With a heavy sigh, Willow said softly, “Okay, I won’t sing it but I can kinda recite it to the tune, but you know I suck at that too. Promise you won’t laugh?”

“I don’t mind. The song means something to you, I just want to hear it because it’s sweet and from you. That’s all that matters to me, and I would never laugh at that, promise.”
Coughing, Willow replied, “Okay, here goes.” With a deep breath, Willow started to quietly recite, the words surprisingly on key despite her nerves.

I can hear her heart beat for a thousand miles
And the heavens open every time she smiles
And when I come to her that's where I belong
Yet I'm running to her like a river's song

She give me love, love, love, love, crazy love
She give me love, love, love, love, crazy love

She's got a fine sense of humor when I'm feeling low down
And when I come to her when the sun goes down
Take away my trouble, take away my grief
Take away my heartache, in the night like a thief

She give me love, love, love, love, crazy love
She give me love, love, love, love, crazy love

Yes I need her in the daytime
Yes I need her in the night
Yes I want to throw my arms around her
Kiss her hug her kiss her hug her tight

She give me love, love, love, love, crazy love
She give me love, love, love, love, crazy love

And when I'm returning from so far away
She gives me some sweet lovin' brighten up my day
Yes it makes me righteous, yes it makes me feel whole
Yes it makes me mellow down in to my soul

She give me love, love, love, love, crazy love
She give me love, love, love, love, crazy love
Tara slid down so she could face Willow, covering her with kisses. Whispering in her ear, she said, “Thank you, sweetheart, I loved it, you can sing to me anytime you like. I didn’t know you liked Van Morrison.”

Willow smiled sheepishly. “Yeah. I’d like to dance to ‘Moondance’ with you sometime, under a full moon of course.”

“But of course, it wouldn’t be appropriate any other way,” Tara said with a smile. “What’s your favorite Van Morrison song?”

“Hmmm, well, there are the ones everyone knows like ‘Into the Mystic’, ‘Brown Eyed Girl’, even ‘Moondance’, and I don’t know that I have ‘a’ favorite per se. I like ‘Queen of The Slipstream’ and ‘Wonderful Remark’ too.”

“Huh, more things I never knew…” Tara kissed Willow’s cheek by her eye and whispered, “I think if I had to pick a single song that reminded me of you that would be impossible, but there are lyrics that come to mind.”

“Really? Like what, baby?”

Tara softly sang. “If the sun refused to shine, I would still be loving you. If mountains crumble to the sea, there would still be you and me. Kind woman, I give you my all, Kind woman, nothing more.”

“Led Zeppelin?” Willow nuzzled Tara’s neck. “Who knew? I guess there’s a whole long conversation about music we can have. Led Zeppelin…I would never have thought. I’ve heard you listen to music, but the classics…”

Tara laughed. “We’re not talking Chopin’s Nocturnes here, sweetie, but yeah, my mom listened to them and tons of others. I even have some of this stuff called vinyl that they pressed into discs with grooves on them that play music. They’re called records,” she teased and nipped Willow’s ear.

“Oooo, really? You’ll have to show me because you know, I just don’t believe you. That’s fantastical, and what would you play it on?” Willow teased right back. At that moment Tara’s stomach decided to growl making them both laugh.
“Ok, enough snuggling, I guess. The Tarabelly has spoken. Let me get a quick shower and we can go get something to eat.” Letting Tara go, Willow rolled over and scooted out of bed.

It was Tara’s turn to watch as Willow disappeared into the bathroom. Throwing the sheet off, she looked at the clock, surprised that it was now afternoon and got up to dress as Willow started the shower. She added the final things to her bag and closed it waiting for Willow. Sitting back down with her back against the headboard and one leg on the bed, she hummed ‘Crazy Love.’

A few minutes later, a towel encased Willow emerged, her hair still dripping as she hurriedly dressed. Heading for her room and her bag, Willow tripped over her own feet but righted herself without falling. She gave Tara an embarrassed look as she came back in zipping the bag closed.

“We still have a couple of hours before we leave, so we can take our time. Let me do something with my hair, it’ll dry quickly enough. Gotta love the desert - it virtually eliminates the need for a hairdryer. I guess we should take our bags with us and see if Giles is here, time’s a wasting and you know how he gets. I swear he’s wound more tightly than I am sometimes, must be the British thing. You’d think with all the tea he drinks he’d be a little more laid back. Maybe it’s the Watcher thing, or maybe the being Buffy’s Watcher thing. I know we’ve added more grey to his hair than he will admit to…well maybe not.” Willow laughed, combing her hair and trying not to go into full babble mode.

Tara just watched her with an affectionate smile as she continued to hum. Willow stopped what she was doing and listened. Her smile lit up the room. Holding her hand out to Tara, she pulled her off the bed into a tight hug.

“Vixen, you knew what that all along didn’t you?”

With a sweet smile, Tara nodded her head.

Willow rested her forehead against Tara’s. “I love you, you know that, right?”

“Just as much as I love you, my Willow.”

“Let’s go eat something before I get too wound up to eat.” Willow winked at Tara. They each
grabbed their bags and headed for the main hall, already preparing for what would undoubtedly be an emotional homecoming for everyone.

TBC...
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T
Rating: PG-13

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 6 on the 1-10 scale, but only towards the end.

Setting: A plane & Sunnydale – The Summers House

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money - and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway - is involved this is simply for my own pleasure. Anyone that works for/owns Ike’ Coffee shop please don’t sue me, I used your name but I’m still broke, same goes for Apple and the iTunes player & playlist features.

Feedback: C’mon, I dare ya!

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I would also like to thank my beta foreverchanges for all the help. Yes, you know how I love these. The preamble poem is original. Predominate music for this chapter; believe it or not was as heavy as the chapter itself, so I maybe it evens it all out. Janelle Monáe “The ArchAndroid” (really diggin’ it too); Supergrass; Tricky “Mixed Race” and Die Antwoord “$O$” – jury’s still out on that one. All floated in, around and about, along with lots of coffee and mango-orange juice. Also, I am using The BBJ 2 737-800 Boeing commercial jet that has 1,004 square feet (93.27 square meters) of floor space for my plane size reference circa 2000. There's a bit of trivia I've included at the end of the chapter regarding the song "I Can't Take My Eye's Off You" a.k.a. the floating song in the Bronze, so now you'll have to read it through to the end - or not. Enjoy the chapter, and the links do work as of this posting.

*** Said promised trivia. Melanie Doane, who wrote this song, wrote it about her t.v. during a large binge as a couch potato. It's not even a love song in the traditional sense. Don't believe me? Got to YouTube and search the title and look for the entry that has other song titles in it. It's live and she explains the song and sings a verse and chorus. Maybe it was done on purpose by Joss, but that would be giving him a lot of credit. ***
I left home with a devil at my back.
Now I venture home carrying the scars of my wars.
I would beg, borrow, or steal for an instant of that familiar peace.
Standing at the threshold, praying for a reprieve, armed only with hope.
The hope that there is still love here for me, peace here for me, rest here for me, a place here for me.

Willow chewed on her lower lip and rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet nervously after they had waited in line to check their few bags. As they headed for the gates to board the plane for the short flight to Sunnydale, even Giles, who was standing in front of the girls, appeared to be fidgeting. Tara slipped her hand into Willow’s, who managed a weak smile in response. With Tara holding her securely, Willow’s rocking ceased, so that was progress.

After what seemed like hours, they had their bags checked, and began to snake their way through the line to pass through security. Giles went first of their little group followed by Tara, both navigating the dreaded metal detector successfully. Willow, unfortunately, was not so lucky and inevitably set it off. Tara and Giles watched her sympathetically as they put their shoes back on. Rolling her eyes with an annoyed sigh, Willow grabbed her carry-on backpack as it passed out of the x-ray tube and rummaged through it. Pulling what looked like an ID card out, she handed it to the security guard, who was standing with a wand in hand.

The guard glanced at the card before going into a very bored sounding schpiel about being required by the FAA to scan Willow with the wand even though she had presented the card. Willow ‘assumed the position’, legs spread wide and arms out, so the guard could use the wand. As the guard moved down her now healed left leg the wand went off, and the look on Willow’s face said ‘told you so.’

The guard handed the card back to Willow, and she collected her belongings before moving off to the side. Willow looked up as she put one sneaker on; the card held haphazardly between her teeth and passed it off to Tara. She looked at the card that had Willow’s name on it, and a picture on an x-
ray of a lower leg showing a rod and pins in the bone. Tara couldn’t stop the grimace that appeared on her face as she looked at the card and realized what a permanent reminder it was for Willow.

Willow had told Tara about her leg, but this was the first time she actually had the reality of it brought so glaringly to her attention. The physically visible scars were now virtually nil on Willow, but the reality was that a rod and pins were there, and here was the proof. Tara turned to Giles and saw the question on his face; she held the card up for him to read. Pursing his lips as his face darkened; Giles just nodded and looked away. Tara handed the card back to Willow, who popped up with a bright smile after tying her other shoe.

“See, I told you it would be good to be early. This was faster than LaGuardia and O’Hare; trust me they don’t play in New York. They’re not happy with anything short of a full body cavity search, which I thought might just happen at one point; this was a walk in the park and a quick one too!” Willow said trying to make light of what had just happened.

Tara took her arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze as the three made their way to their on to the gate before boarding. Finding empty seats the three sat; as they could only wait now and hope everything was on time.

“Would either of you like some tea? We passed a little shop as we came up,” Giles asked.

“Oooo yeah, Giles. Mmm, a mocha would be great, thanks; I haven’t had a real, honest-to-goodness one in ages,” Willow responded with enthusiasm.

“Regular coffee just doesn’t cut it, huh sweetie? I’ll have one too, thank you, Giles,” Tara said, smirking at Willow.

They watched as he hurried off down the concourse.

“Does he seem nervous to you, Willow?” Tara inquired softly.

“You noticed that too? I’m not sure why he’s talked to Buffy regularly. Maybe it’s being back on the hellmouth. Flying never seemed to bother him before, so I don’t think it’s that.” Willow kissed Tara on the cheek. “I think I’ll go give Giles a hand, baby.” With a wink and a smile, she walked off in the direction of coffee and Giles.
Willow found Giles at the register of Ike’s Coffee™, paying for their drinks.

“Let me help you with that, Giles,” Willow said as she came up behind him, causing Giles to jump.

“Certainly, thank you, Willow.” Giles glanced at Willow nervously.

“Ok, spit it out, what’s got you so jumpy? I know it’s not a fear of flying,” Willow said mildly as she sweetened her own and Tara’s mochas.

Giles shifted between feet as he watched Willow intently for a moment.

Willow could tell he was trying to edit what he was about to say. She stopped stirring her coffee as she turned to Giles, full resolve face in place.

“Are you going to tell me, or do I have to get rough?” Willow said calmly.

“Uh, yes, quite. Perhaps we should go back to Tara first though. Shall we?” Giles sputtered and backed away missing the affectionate smirk that played on Willow’s lips.

Walking back to where Tara now sat reading a book, they saw her look up with a smile which quickly fell on looking at the pair.

Tara frowned; resolve face and worried Watcher’s face were not a welcome sight, especially before a flight to Sunnydale. Willow and Giles sat on either side of her; she looked first at Willow as she was handed her mocha, then to Giles, waiting for one of them to speak. Tara raised an eyebrow at Willow.

“Don’t look at me; he’s the one that’s all secret-y secret man,” Willow said pointedly.
With a sigh, Giles slouched a bit in his seat before removing his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Do you remember my offer to assist you in the creation of a coven should you both chose to do so?”

“Yes,” Willow and Tara responded simultaneously.

“I also believe I said I would not try to influence you, either way, it was your choice, and that I also had some names of people with potential that you may be interested in seeing.”

The two sat silent and impassive, waiting for Giles to continue.

“It still is your choice as to the formation of the coven. Yet I feel that now since I have had time to look over some of the names…not all would be a good fit, shall we say.”

Willow looked at Tara with a shrug and said, “Giles we haven’t really discussed it much more. I think we are strongly considering it, and Tara can correct me if I’m wrong, but we would want her to be trained more before we go through with it.”

Tara nodded. “She’s right, I have an opportunity with The Grove, and if what Rowan has told me is even marginally true, I want to train. Giles, it would irresponsible to form a coven with Willow and expect everything magically to fall on her.” Tara looked at Willow for support, and Willow took her hand reassuringly. “Giles, I’m going to assume you know if not all then some of what Rowan told me since that would make me of greater interest to the Council, yes?”

Clearing his throat, Giles responding evenly, “Yes, Tara, I am well aware of your family’s lineage, and how special that makes you magically. I’m also aware of why that would make you of interest to the Council.”

Tara leveled her gaze at Giles. “How long have you known? Never mind, then you must understand why I want to be trained well beforehand. It will only make us a more solid coven.”
Giles pulled out his handkerchief to clean his spotless glasses, an action that Willow had come to understand had several meanings, one of which was that Giles was stalling.

“Of course I agree, and I can appreciate…” Giles was cut off by the sound of the overhead loudspeaker announcing the boarding of their flight. Neither girl missed the slightly relieved look on Giles' face at the interruption or the “Thank heavens” he muttered.

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The three shuffled along to their seats on the small plane. Since the flight was short they didn’t get a full-size jet, the plane had maybe one hundred seats two to a row, which a large man in a bad suit in front of them was complaining about loudly, right along with the size of the seats.

By design they were basically sharing a row of seats – Willow and Tara next to each other and Giles across the aisle - but bad suit man was only three rows ahead of them which made both Willow and Giles groan. Just as they sat down a dark-haired child that looked to be no more than five years old went barreling down the aisle screaming, “No!” His flushed cheeks and slightly manic glee as he ran, made it apparent he was being more than a handful.

Neither girl missed Giles’ wince as the little boy made his way back up the aisle blaring, and Tara tried to hide her smile while they groused about the impending flight. In what seemed to be taking an eternity, the door to the plane was finally being shut, and the pre-flight monotone safety announcement had not yet begun; the passengers, for the most part, were restless. Tara leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes as she began to hum softly, ignoring the whole situation. As a few minutes ticked by everyone quieted down and even the little boy flopped down in his seat to play with several cars he had been given.

A good ten minutes later, when Tara opened her eyes, both Willow and Giles were staring at her, jaws slack in surprised wonder. It was obvious Tara had done something, it wasn’t a spell per se; she had just emanated a calm so palpable it reached everyone in the cabin of the small plane. Willow could recognize Tara’s energy anywhere, particularly as it had slipped gently through the cabin just like Tara herself. Giles, while he remained sensitive, wasn’t sure which of the girls next to him had caused the calm until he saw the look on Willow’s face.

“What?” Tara asked innocently, as she looked between them with eyebrows raised in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

Willow was the first to get her mind in gear and ask, “How? I’ve never seen or felt you do that before.”
Tara seemed surprised knowing that both had seen her do this before when Scooby levels got out of hand. “You have and just didn’t realize, sweetie. It’s a lot easier to do in the Magic Box, or in a dorm room, or Buffy’s. No one pays attention, that’s all. It’s nothing really, my Mother taught me. When things got really heated I could use it, and it made me feel better. I’m just more relaxed, that’s all.”

“Is it a spell?” Giles asked.

Tara’s brow furrowed as she thought for a moment. “Is what a spell? No, I don’t think so in the classical sense. I always thought it was a centering exercise she had me do. There’re no written words, it’s more a feeling and concentration. Maybe it’s the music – the humming, I think it’s an old lullaby, but I’m not sure. I focus on being calm, once I am; I imagine it rolling outwards from me. I see it all in my head; ripples like you see when you drop a stone into a stream.” Tara shrugged.

“Fascinating…,”Giles uttered.

“Do you realize you just managed to calm a plane full of people? Not two, or even the seven of us, but a plane full. Would you say there are at least fifty people on here Giles?” Willow looked around Tara to Giles for confirmation.

“Oh yes, definitely, if not more. Are you counting the crew? We can’t see them but the effect has to have been the same.” Still looking surprised, Giles agreed with Willow’s assessment.

“Okay, then let’s say, seventy-five people, most planes this size have cabins roughly over a thousand square feet, so these people are all within that same vicinity of you. Tara, that’s amazing!” Not for the first time, Willow thought if she could just bottle even some of the special qualities that made up Tara and put it on a shelf in a local drugstore the world would be an infinitely better place.

“Remarkable Tara, truly remarkable,” Giles said his face blank as he studied Tara closely.

Tara looked dumbfounded. “I’ve done what? I didn’t do anything to them; I was just trying to block the little boy out for myself.” Tara’s blush closely matched Willow’s hair color, and she dipped her head to hide her face in the old familiar gesture; one Willow had not seen much of in the last week. Not quite understanding what Willow’s point was and why Giles was looking at her so oddly, Tara continued to bore holes into her own lap.
“Will, I didn’t plan...” Tara started anxiously, as she realized what this could look like to Willow.

Willow caught Tara under the chin and gently tipped her head back up to look at her.

“Hey, what was our agreement? No hiding, right? Love, this is so not something you should hide about. You just gave a gift to every person on this plane and they don’t even know it. It wasn’t done maliciously, you didn’t hurt anyone, and most of all you didn’t realize you were doing it – it wasn’t a conscious act. How many times have you done this for me and the rest of us? Undoubtedly more times than you can count and much more than any of us knew. I bet you didn’t even hesitate, did you?” Willow could only shake her head.

With a gentle kiss, she whispered just so Tara could hear, “You never cease to amaze me.”

Giles cleared his throat before speaking. “Yes, well, Tara this is an amazing attribute for any witch to have. When you start to work with Rowan, I suggest you let her know about this. This is a skill that as we can see by example…well, the good that could come from honing a skill like this…” Giles stopped at a loss for words, as an extremely mellow sounding pilot came over the loudspeaker to welcome the passengers before the two flight attendants started the pre-flight safety instructions.

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Once the flight was in progress, Willow pulled out her laptop from her backpack and turned it on. As it loaded, the first thing that popped up was Willow’s ITunes™ player. Tara watched and saw a flurry of playlists but the one that caught her eye was one called ‘willowheart misses taraheart.’

“Will, what’s that one?” Tara asked gently.

Willow squirmed a little in her seat. Puffing out her cheeks, she said in a rush. “ItstheplaylistImadeafterwebrokeupthefirsttime.”

“Can I see it? You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but now I know a little about some of the music you like, I’d like to see it.” Tara wasn’t trying to push Willow about something like a playlist of songs, but her curiosity was immense.

Willow’s hand hovered over the mouse pad for a moment before she clicked on the playlist, then
“Will, is that right?” Tara pointed to the duration of the playlist; it was seven days long exactly.

Willow just nodded and looked away nervously as Tara scrolled down through the songs. Knowing how exact Willow was, Tara knew the songs were in a certain order for a reason. She could see the emotional tenor fluctuate through the music and it made what Willow had obviously felt apparent.

“Why seven days, Will?” Tara asked keeping her voice soft but inquisitive.

She watched the muscle in Willow’s jaw twitch as she blinked rapidly before she answered.

Trying to keep her voice even, Willow sighed before explaining, “The seven days didn’t happen until I was in England. It started out as just a playlist, and the longer we were apart the more it helped me cope, I guess you could say. Sometimes it was the only thing that helped, sometimes it was a joy to listen to, like after we got back together, and sometimes it was a sad reminder of what I’d lost. I would be so tired of feeling sick and hurting that the happy parts helped. I could lose myself and not worry; once I was ready to leave and come back to the States, it became a ritual almost. I added a song a day, and then would listen to that week and its additions.”

“You added a song a day for eighteen months?” Tara asked with unabashed surprise.

With a sad smile, Willow said, “One year, seven months, eighteen days and seventeen hours.”

Tara looked at the playlist again, noticing there was a ‘date added’ column. She saw that the second to last song that was added the day she arrived at The Grove, was “You Are My Sunshine.” The final song she recognized immediately and it had been added the day after she arrived. It was the song they had danced to the night of her birthday at the Bronze; the day she knew she had a family, the day she knew she was free of her father, that she was not evil or a demon, and that she was never, ever going back. This was the song they floated to.

“’You Are My Sunshine? Really?’” Tara asked with a smile that lit up her face like sunshine. Willow blushed and nodded. “Can we listen to this one, though?” Tara asked as she highlighted the last song, ‘I Can Take My Eyes Off You’.

Willow nodded. Swallowing hard she swiveled the laptop towards Tara. She reached into her bag
and pulled out some earbuds; as she plugged them into the laptop she handed one to Tara. Willow watched Tara place one in her ear and hit play as she placed the second in her own ear. The first two verses slid quickly into the chorus as they lost themselves in each other’s eyes, and ‘I Can Take My Eyes Off You’*** repeated over and over in their ears. Tara lovingly placed her hand on Willow’s cheek, and as Willow leaned into the hand Tara closed the space between them. The kiss was passionate but chaste, Tara funneled all her love and hope for them into that one moment.

That one kiss said everything.

Willow could feel Tara and returned those desires with every ounce of her being. Coming up for air, she rested her cheek against Tara’s; feeling Tara’s breath on her skin made her shiver and her skin tingle.

“It’s true you know,” Willow whispered.

“What?”

“I can’t take my eyes off you. I haven’t been able to since that day at the Wiccan group, and unless I go blind it will never happen. Even then I think I’ll still see you, my heart will see you. I love you, Tara.”

Pressing a kiss to Willow’s flushed cheek, in husky tones Tara said, “No more than I love you, my sweet girl.”

They pulled away from one another smiling at each other the way only lovers can, smiles that exclude everyone and everything around them – they only have eyes for one another.

“Would you like to watch a movie? I have a few on here,” Willow said, gazing at Tara as she pulled the earbuds free of the laptop. Not paying attention to what she was doing, her elbow ran over the keys, inadvertently starting a movie clip. Willow looked at Tara with a guilty expression. Tara smiled mischievously at her and with a wink, they both fell in with the whistling from the clip.

Much to Giles’ dismay, he turned to both girls looking extremely offended as they grinned and bobbed their heads along with ‘Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.’
“Really Willow, ‘The Life of Brian’? Couldn’t you have picked something better, maybe something like *The Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog*?”

Willow raised an eyebrow and with all the seriousness she could muster, said, “Well, Giles, I guess screaming ‘Run Away’ while trying to run away does seem a little redundant since that’s the first rule of being a Scooby. Besides, I don’t hate Anya that much…all of the time.”

Tara sat snickering next to her and Giles tried to continue to look peeved.

“‘Yes, well you have a point.’”

At this point, both girls guffawed loudly causing several heads to turn in their direction.

“Have you ever been known to overstate a situation, Giles?” Tara asked, getting her laughter under control.

“Only when it comes to an apocalypse, then he can’t say enough,” Willow answered smugly.

“One can never say enough about an apocalypse when preparing to thwart it, can one?” The corners of Giles’ mouth were beginning to twitch.

“By the time we got to our fourth or fifth apocalypse he had moved on to ranting instead of demonstrating something almost like indignation. I actually think Giles got offended that some Big Bad had decided to take over the world on his watch,” Willow said, trying to goad Giles into a smile.

“It is my duty as a Watcher to keep my Slayer as prepared as… oh, you know the drill,” Giles said, this time with a smile and a wave of his hand.

“Aha! See, I knew you could do it! You would think he’s allergic to happy! Not *a* happy, but being happy in general and by that, I mean smiling, not a literal happy because, sorry Giles but ewww. I don’t really want to think of you and a happy at the same time. Actually, the only person I *want* to think about at the same time as I think about a happy is right next to me, and why for the love of all that is good don’t you stop me when I start doing this?” Willow said, now beet red and looking at
Tara with a helpless expression.

Tara looked at a rather pink Giles and then back to Willow with a smirk. “I think it’s cute, and because the entertainment factor right now is so high, I just can’t help myself.”

Both Willow and Giles now looked out their respective windows with the greatest of interest and Tara began to whistle again to both of their dismay.

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The rest of the flight was uneventful; as they began the descent into Sunnydale Tara noticed that Willow looked a little uncomfortable.

“Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

“Hmm? Nothing.” Willow darted a glance and tried to keep looking out of the window while taking deep breaths.

“Willow, do you not like to fly?” Tara asked incredulously.

“No, no, the flying part I don’t mind so much, it’s the taking off and landing I don’t like. All of these images in my head of planes colliding or bursting into flames at take off are as bad as the ones of them bursting into flames at landing or wheels buckling and the plane skidding down the runway and bursting into flames,” Willow responded nervously.

Tara took Willow’s hand while directing ripples of calmness towards her. “I see a theme there, sweetie. So what’s with the bursting into flames?”

“I’m not sure…” Willow said thoughtfully. “Maybe one too many of Xander’s movies; I’ve seen ‘Apocalypse Now’ so many times I can quote dialogue with him.”

By the time their conversation was over they had landed and were taxiing into their gate. Since it was a small plane they got out on the tarmac. Willow noticed the difference in the air; the water was almost palpable compared to the dry heat she had become accustomed to. As they went upstairs into
the cooler corridor leading out of the gate, the hyper little boy went past them at full tilt, this time screaming, “ice cream!”

“At least he’s got the right idea this time,” Willow snarked.

Giles grimaced once again at the back of the screaming child’s head. “Let’s hurry, shall we?”

Reaching the baggage claim, they could hear the little boy still screaming at full volume at one end of the belt. They pulled their luggage off quickly and went in the opposite direction. They caught a taxi to the only rental car company in Sunnydale and Tara and Willow stood back while Giles rented a car.

Willow was bouncing on the balls of her feet as they waited and her expression was more than a bit tense.

“Willow, sweetie, breathe,” Tara encouraged as she took Willow’s hand again. This time she didn’t try to calm Willow though. Raising their joined hands Tara kissed the back of Willow’s hand and smiled her reassurance.

“I’m nervous, Tara.” The calm of Willow’s voice was belied by her nervous bounce.

“I know you are, and you have every reason to be. You can’t predict how other people will act, even those you know and love so well. You’ve been gone a long time. We’ve talked about this sweetie. I won’t placate you, things will be how they’re meant to be – you just have to be brave enough to face them.”

Willow nodded and stared at her shoes. Just then, Giles approached them looking tense as well.

“Yes, off we go,” he said with a feigned brightness. A young man pulled up in a shiny red two-door sports car. Willow and Tara looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

“Really, Giles?” Willow couldn’t help herself.
“It’s all they had.” Giles tried to bluster his way out from Willow’s scrutiny.

“Right, and Buffy teaches Driver’s Ed now. I should make you ride in the back and see how you like it,” Willow pouted. “Are you even sure it has a trunk?”

Getting snippy, Giles said, “Yes, Willow I’m sure it does. Now, if you’re quite finished we should get on with it.”

Willow grumbled as she walked to the back of the car, all the while giving Giles a dirty look, and muttering about midlife crises.

“I can ride in the back, Willow; it’s not a big deal,” Tara said.

“It’s okay, baby, sometimes I feel obligated to harass him. Besides, he does this every time.” Willow shrugged, knowing Giles could hear her and smiled sweetly as she put her bag in the trunk.

“Huh, it’s roomier in here than the last one,” Willow remarked. “At least I can sit up straight.”

Tara covered her smile with her hand and Giles proceeded to make what Willow called his clucking sound. Giles eased out of the parking lot with such care that even Tara gave him a look.

“See, I told you, he rents them then drives like my grandmother…if I had one,” Willow stage-whispered to Tara.

“You do know I can hear you, correct?” Giles huffed.

“Uh huh,” grinned Willow.

Giles cleared his throat and shot her a reproachful look via the rearview mirror. “Yes, well there you have it. Where would you like me to take you both?”
Quietly, Willow replied, “Buffy’s.”

More gently, Giles asked, “Are you sure Willow?”

“Yeah, Giles, I’m sure.” Willow stared at her hands while her leg began to bounce. Tara turned as much as she could in her seat and offered her hand to Willow, which she immediately took.

The ride to Buffy’s was done in silence, and twenty minutes later they pulled up in front of 1630 Revello Drive. Giles turned off the engine, and the three sat in silence, both he and Tara watching Willow for their signal to get out. Willow’s eyes moved over the house looking for changes. With a nod, Tara opened her door, getting out, and then pulled the seat up to let Willow climb out. Giles had both of their bags waiting when they stepped around to the back of the little sports car.

Willow looked at Giles and he shook his head as he set the bags down. Willow tried to smile as she moved to give him a hug. Tara was struck again by the affection that had developed between the two, and move onto the curb a little away from the pair. Willow turned back with a smile and grabbed both bags. Watching Giles drive away, she stepped up next to Tara.

“Do I get a blindfold and a cigarette?” she asked glibly.

“Since when do you smoke?” Tara asked, going along with her.

“Hey, I’m a one hot mama yama, didn’t you know?” Willow quirked an eyebrow at Tara.

Smiling suggestively, Tara stepped towards Willow. “Oh, I know alright.”

Willow set their bags down again so she could wrap her arms around Tara’s waist. Tara cupped Willow’s face in her hands and kissed her sweetly several times before holding her in a tight embrace. She nuzzled Willow’s neck, placing a few soft kisses there and she could feel Willow begin to relax some. Willow’s face was buried in her neck. Willow’s deep breaths to steady herself were all Tarascented.
“Sweetie, you know I love being in your arms more than anything, but standing here on the curb might not be the best place to continue this. Are you ready?” Tara asked gently after some time had passed.

Willow kissed her neck, and with another Tarascented deep breath she released her hold and turned towards the house. She straightened her shoulders, and they each grabbed their bag before walking up the steps to the door. Tara got her keys out and started to open the door when she felt a hand on her sleeve. Looking over her shoulder at Willow, she could see the apprehension on her face.

“What can you wait just a few minutes?” Willow asked, sounding for all the world like a small child.

“Of course.” Tara dropped her arm, waiting patiently for Willow.

Willow seemed to inspect the entire porch, turning to look all around her like she had never been there before. Willow looked at Tara and smiled weakly as she nodded for Tara to open the door. The locks turning seemed unusually loud to them both. Tara swung the door inwards and stepped inside. Setting her bag down, she yelled cheerily, “Honey, I’m home!”

Willow stepped in behind her; Tara turned smoothly to shut the door they had just stepped through. The movement could be heard from upstairs and they both looked up at the sounds. The squeak of leather in the living room made Willow jump, and she and Tara turned. Tara smiled brightly in greeting to her housemate.

“Well, well, well, the prodigal witch has come home,” Buffy said as she rose from her chair. Her expression was unreadable, and her voice even as she stood with her arms crossed over her chest. Willow jumped again as a door upstairs slammed shut.

TBC...
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T
Rating: R
Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 4 (hey, it could be worse) on the 1-10 scale.
Setting: Sunnydale

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money - and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway - is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: You’re gonna make me beg aren’t you?

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Well, I would like to thank my inimitable beta foreverchanges for being game for a fearless stunt double, Cyteach, to try her hand at being a beta since she deciding she just couldn’t wait until December for more. ^_~ I do make an X-Men© reference in this chapter, so please Mr. Stan Lee, Marvel Comics and whoever else, don’t sue me – I really don’t have anything you want anyway. Predominate music this round was Here We Go Magic – Pigeons, Kings of Leon – Come Around Sundown, Joanne Shaw Taylor – Diamond In The Dirt, and Cassandra Wilson – Silver Pony. I contemplated throwing in The 45th Anniversary of The Sound of Music, Marie Osmond - I Can Do This and Hannah Montana Forever but that just seemed like overkill. Enjoy the homecoming everyone.
monsoon [mon-soon] – n

1. any wind that changes direction with the seasons
2. the season during which the southwest monsoon blows, commonly marked by heavy rains; rainy season.

- Basically, when it rains, it pours.

1630 Revello Drive, Sunnydale, California

Tara watched as Willow let her hand go, straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin bravely. Buffy stood arms crossed, looking Willow over as if she were sizing her up for a fight.

A door slammed yet again upstairs making all three women look up, as with all the thunderous tromping only a teenager can produce, Dawn pounded down the stairs. Willow turned to face the youngest Summers sister glaring at her, arms crossed. Shoulders still straight, chin still held high, Willow glared back. Just when Willow was starting to fold, Dawn kicked her in her right shin.

“Oww!”

For good measure, Dawn kicked her in the left shin too, and with a “Humphf” flounced off into the kitchen.

“Hey, was that really necessary?” Willow hollered after her as she bent to rub her left shin. Taking a deep breath she stood up and turned back to Buffy, chin not so, high but shoulders still straight. She would take whatever Buffy had to dish out.

Buffy had an amused look on her face as she crossed to Willow, kicking her in the shin before grabbing her in a slayer strength hug. “If you ever do that again, I will put a serious hurting on you when I find you, and you know I will find you.”

“Buffy…air…breathing…issue,” Willow choked out.

Letting up on her grip some instead of releasing her, she asked, “How’s that?”
“Good Buff, good,” Willow said as she held her best friend just as tightly.

Tara sighed with relief, hiding her face with her hair as she smiled, backing out of the living room quietly. She left the two hugging and went to the kitchen to find Dawn shoving cookies into the oven.

“Mine or Tollhouse?”

“Yours,” Dawn said as she looked up at her.

“I’m surprised there are any left,” Tara said with a smirk.

“Yeah, well we flipped a coin and had Tollhouse last night instead. Let me tell you, they just aren’t Tara-cookies.” Dawn said as she tossed the oven mitt at Tara that she easily caught.

Tara had come up with a system at Dawn and Xander’s “request” along with a little good-natured pouting from Willow. This started while Buffy was gone, and anything that helped, even if it was as simple as cookies, didn’t seem like a bad thing. Each week she made enough cookies for two dozen a day and froze the dough. That way if she was in class, or if it had been a rough night of Scoobie Slayage and it called for extra cookie goodness, she didn’t have to be disturbed.

There were even nights when Tara couldn’t sleep and had come downstairs to find Xander sitting in the kitchen with a glass of milk and an empty plate of cookies in front of him. She just pulled more out, turned the oven on, and as the smell moved through the house, the rest of the inhabitants made their way down for a late night snack. No one ever asked why he was there, it was just understood. On those nights, Tara wondered where Anya thought he was, or if she knew he was gone.

When they brought Buffy back, somehow the “Cookie Dough Exchange,” as it had been playfully dubbed, remained in place. The smell of cookies late at night was like seeing the ‘Bat Signal’, one of the Scoobies was in some sort of distress. Sometimes there were tears and hugs; group cuddles with Dawn on the couch during the months that Buffy was gone, most often it was just silence – the Scooby Way.

So as usual, before Tara left, she made dough for the week leaving it for Buffy and Dawn. A sign she would be back, and things would be okay regardless of what happened with Willow; Tara would still come home.
“Gee, you guys must have tripled up some, I was only gone a week and today isn’t even dough day,” Tara teased.

Dawn bounced over to hug the older girl. “Tara-cookies are a poor substitute for Tara. I missed you. Tell me all about Tucson! What was it like? What did you guys do? Is it as hot as they say?”

Tara laughed at the barrage of questions. “I missed you too, Dawnie. Yes, it was very hot, but not like here, it might be dry but it’s still freakishly hot. Umm, I didn’t see a lot of Tucson, the Grove is outside the city itself, and we, umm didn’t really leave the Grove,” she said as she tried to skate around the obvious reason why they never left.

“Gotcha, you and Willow were in bed the whole time.”

“Dawn!”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Dawn said with a knowing look at Tara. “You are so busted! Besides, you know you can’t, because you’re as red as Willow’s hair right now. I guess the trip was a good one then,” she giggled.

Tara beelined for the fridge, sticking her head inside further than necessary to look for a drink. A good trip indeed. Willow was home, and once again their lives were taking an unexpected albeit slightly scary turn, but this one might prove to be even better than the turn that brought her this far.

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Grabbing a soda and leaving the smirking teenager to her cookie baking, Tara went back into the living room. She found Buffy and Willow on the couch, in tears and deep in conversation. Pulling up short, she started to turn around and head back into the kitchen, not sure if she was interrupting.

“Tara,” Willow sniffled and patted the seat next to her.

When she sat, Willow turned her so they could cuddle and then leaned back into her. Tara kissed her temple, giving her a gentle squeeze.
“She hasn’t looked this happy since you left, Willow,” Buffy said with a sad smile. “You know, she tried to leave, and we would let her.”

Willow nodded, as she brought Tara’s hand up and kissed it.

Softly Buffy said, “Dawn would never have spoken to me again if I had let you go a second time Tara. You’re family; we take care of our own.” Buffy gave Willow a meaningful look and placed a hand gently on her leg.

“I know Buff, and I can’t tell you how much it means to me not only that you offered, but,” Willow’s voice cracked as she looked over her shoulder to Tara, “that you stayed.” Tara rested her chin on Willow’s shoulder and nuzzled her neck.

“It happened as it should. I was supposed to stay, Buffy needed me, Dawn needed me, and I needed them too, I still do.” Tara replied.

“We still need you too, that won’t ever change, Tara,” Buffy said sincerely.

“Ditto,” Tara smiled.

Just then the door opened and Xander rushed in.

“Are they here yet?” he asked excitedly as he turned to the living room to see three women looking back at him, two of three being the “they” in question. Willow stood and took a couple of quick steps towards Xander, stopping short before she threw herself into his arms.

“Will,” he choked on whatever else he was gonna say as he lifted Willow off of her feet. Willow buried her face into his neck as he did the same. “I thought I’d lost you too,” Xander whispered into Willow’s neck. Willow started crying harder, so Xander started shuffling back and forth on his feet in a rocking motion as they both cried.

When he finally let Willow go, he gently wiped her face on his sleeve while Willow ran her hands over his shoulders with affection. Stroking her hair he said, “Will, what’s with the “Rogue” look? I mean, it kind of suits you but is it some new cool fashion statement? You know, I can never keep up with the kids today.”
“No, doofus, besides I can touch you.” Willow wiped Xander’s tears with her thumbs. “It’s a…a side effect, Xan. It may never be red again.” Willow started to hang her head, but Xander caught her chin.

“It doesn’t make you any less beautiful,” Xander said pulling her to him again.

“Ok, what’s with the “Rogue” comment? She’s back. Willow’s no longer rogue. We know where she is,” Buffy said in confusion, with a look at Tara to see if she was on the clue train somehow.

Willow and Xander turned to them with smiles.

“X-Men,” they said simultaneously.

Buffy and Tara looked at each other then stared back blankly at the pair.

“You know, “X-Men”. Dr. Xavier’s school for mutants? His nemesis Magneto? Wolverine? Jane Grey?”

Both shook their heads.

“Where have you two been hiding? There’s even a movie! Patrick Stewart, Hugh Jackman, and might I add, the very luscious Halle Berry and Rebecca Romijn?” Xander prompted.

“Oooo, yeah, Rebecca Romijn! She’s yummy,” Willow said before Tara’s arched eyebrow caught her and she started to backpedal. “Oh, no baby, I meant that in the plastic-y, Hollywood-ish starlet kind of way. She couldn’t hold a candle to you,” She said scooting over to sit next to Tara in order to grovel at close range.

With a smirk, Tara gave Willow a quick peck. “I actually know who she is, Will, and I agree she’s hot in that plastic-y, Hollywood-ish starlet kind of way. She’s very blonde.”

Willow swatted at her knee. “You knew who she was all along? Yeah, okay but what about Halle
Berry, I mean c’mom? She’s no slouch either. Can we rent this movie, Xan?’

“Sure, eye candy for us adults and I’m sure Dawnie would like it too. Speaking of, where is the Dawnster?”

As if on cue, Dawn came strolling in, cookie in hand. “What’s this about eye candy?”

“Nothing about eye candy, just a movie Willow and Xander want to rent,” Buffy groused.

Willow got up, moving towards the kitchen, as Xander explained more comic book history of the “X-Men” to a disinterested Buffy and Tara. Dawn held out the cookie she had taken a bite out of to Willow, a sign of truce.

Without thinking Willow asks, “So, did you lick it too?”

“Yup, just how you like it,” Dawn replied, they both turned bright red when they realized how that sounded.

“We’ll pretend those words were never uttered, ok Dawnie?” Willow squeaked, looking around to see if anyone else had caught their conversation.

Nodding vigorously Dawn, said, “Very okay.”

Willow took a bite and handed the cookie off to Tara, who smiled and took a bite, then handed it off to Buffy. She broke the last bit in half and handed the other half to Xander. It was a ritual with the first cookie of the freshly baked dozen—everybody split it.

“Oh my god, I forgot how good Tara-cookies are!” Willow moaned, chewing slowly.

“Feel special; we had Tollhouse last night for you,” Dawn snarked.

Willow beamed one of her overly pleased smiles. “I do, Dawnie,” Willow agreed as she moved back towards Dawn, who looked at her balefully.
“No more disappearing acts, ‘kay?”

“I promise,” Willow said as she enfolded Dawn into a hug.

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The four sat talking and eating more of Tara’s cookies, as the afternoon faded into dusk. There were some lulls where Willow had to be filled in. Like how Andrew and Jonathon had managed somehow to escape during transport from city to county jail to serve out their sentences.

“It just goes to show how incompetent Sunnydale Police force is. They are bigger morons than those two. So, they just vanished?” Willow asked, shaking her head.

“Yeah, apparently Warren had a big mouth and hit Willy’s a few times before everything happened here with a gun. No one there had even heard of Andrew or Jonathon. Tara knew they were gone, gone. She did locator spells every so often to try and find them for a while, but nothing,” Buffy said.

“It was like they vanished, Will. They had to have left Sunnydale for that kind of result,” Tara confirmed.

Inevitably, his line of conversation was going to lead everyone to Willow, and what exactly had happened to make her leave.

“Will, do you plan to tell us why you left?” Xander asked, clearing his throat.

Willow squirmed and looked at Tara. “Yeah, I do, and I would prefer to do it with everyone here so I don’t have to go through it more than once, but can we not do it tonight? We have some time before we go back; it’s been a long day.”

“Go back? What do you mean go back?” Dawn asked as she looked between Tara and Willow. “I thought you were home now.”
“Dawnie, I’m not quite done with my initiate period of a year and a day at the coven, and, well Tara can tell you her news.”

Tara looked around the room. “The Grove has offered to let me stay with Willow, for the rest of her time there, but also to train there with her too. I would become an initiate.” Tara glanced at Willow before continuing. “We’re also going to stay a bit longer so I can train up my skills because they want us to consider forming our own coven. There’s a lot more to go into and tonight may not be the best time…”

“How long will you be here?” Buffy asked.

“Umm, four days. I can finish out the rest of the semester remotely except for finals, and with my grades, it shouldn’t be a problem. We’ll be back by then, and Willow be done with the coven, so we can stay here longer before we go back so I can continue to train.”

“I’m kind of on a weekend pass, testing the Hellmouth-y waters, I guess, to see how I do,” Willow interjected, just as her stomach gurgled loudly. “I think more than Tara’s yummy cookies are in order,” she said effectively changing the subject.


Everyone looked at each other. “Will, you choose. What have you missed since you’ve been gone?” Buffy asked.

Willow thought for a bit, sticking her tongue out of the side of her mouth, her brow crinkled in serious thought. “We have to go to the Espresso Pump, but we can do that tomorrow. How about Chinese?” she answered pleased with herself, bouncing in her seat.

Tara tightened her arm around Willow’s waist in amusement. “Why don’t we go get cleaned up a little while we wait, sweetie?”

“That sounds like a good idea, baby,” Willow said as she turned to Tara with a smile.

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Following Tara up the stairs, emotions washed over Willow. When she got to the top, she saw the line of photos on the wall. There was one of Tara and Dawn at what must have been Tara’s last birthday that was grouped with one of her and Tara at the Bronze on her first birthday they spent together. There was a picture of Buffy, Tara, Willow, Xander, Anya Giles and Dawn at the Magic Box sitting around the table. Willow didn’t who had taken that picture, but thought it must have been Spike. All these happy memories were suspended around a large picture of Joyce, along with pictures of Buffy and Dawn as children.

Willow touched Joyce’s cheek, and then the picture of everyone gathered around the table. Tara had left Willow to gaze at the photos while she walked into her room. Willow stood in the doorway and looked around the room to see how it had changed. There were more touches that were definitely Tara, and most of her things were gone. She saw a few crystals perched here and there; the doll’s eye laid on Tara’s alter. The room smelled of Tara; honey mixed with sage and sandalwood, and whatever it was that was uniquely Tara; the way her dorm room had smelled, the smells Willow associated with happiness, and being safe inside their own little cocoon.

“You can come in, Willow,” Tara said softly. “You’re home.” Tara looked intently at Willow, with her head cocked to one side.

Willow slowly walked in, placing her bag by the door, then stood and fidgeted with her fingers. Tara pulled Willow further into the room, shutting the door behind her softly. She wrapped her arms around Willow, slowly moving her hands down Willow’s back.

“You sweetie, it’s still your home.” Tara kissed her reassuringly.

“Tara this is your space, and that’s only what’s right. I’ve been gone, it’s kind of like the first time I was in your dorm. It smells like you, the way your dorm room did, which is nice. I love Tarasmell. It’s just a little discombobulating, you know?”

Tara smiled. “Yes, but the bed is much nicer.”

Willow blushed as she glanced at the bed and cleared her throat. “I remember it being quite nice, actually,” an impish smile gracing her features.

Tara walked Willow back towards the bed until her knees hit the edge and they toppled over giggling. Tara pushed herself up to look into Willow’s eyes before kissing her gently. She wiggled against Willow as she was perched above her. Willow groaned into their kiss, her hands straying
from Tara's hips to grasp her bottom and pull her close. Tara rocked her hips into Willow’s continuing to kiss her languorously.

“Mmm, I haven’t had enough Willowkisses today. I’m really feeling quite deprived,” Tara’s voice deepened with desire.

“We can’t have that. I think there are laws banning that, actually.” Willow’s voice was just as husky as she looked into Tara’s eyes before leaning up to capture her mouth again. Willow tugged on Tara’s lower lip, dipping her tongue in and out without letting her catch it. Just as Tara caught Willow’s tongue and began to suck it into her mouth teasing it with her own, Xander called up the stairs that dinner had arrived.

They both groaned in displeasure at the interruption. Tara rolled off of Willow and they both lay for a minute to catch their breath before heading to the bathroom to wash their hands and faces. The cool water helped reduce some of the flush on their skin but not all of it.

When they sat down next to one another at the table, their three companions looked at them, and all smirked.

“What?” they asked in unison.

Dawn giggled, Xander just shrugged, and Buffy said, “Some things don’t change,” with a pointed look.

“Hey, we weren’t up there that long.” Willow groused, a pout beginning to form on her lips, even though she and Tara both flushed more at the insinuation.

The Scoobies ate their first meal together in almost two years, gathered around the familiar table. Laughter echoed interspersed with the conversation, the gap in time fading away. It was just another family meal. Once all the food had been eaten they migrated back to the living room to watch television.

Willow leaned against Tara’s shoulder and Dawn had her feet resting in Willow’s lap. Xander was seated on the floor in front of Dawn, her hand on his shoulder, with Buffy in the overstuffed chair, her legs stretched out so she and Xander were shoe to shoe. Willow started to drift off to sleep and Dawn was already asleep.
“I should go, it’s getting late, and I’m a working man,” Xander said as he got to his feet.

“I think I’m gonna take a quick patrol, and call it an early night,” Buffy said.

Willow lifted her head, to squint at them both. “What should we do with Dawnie?”

“I thought you were asleep, Wills,” Xander said.

“Mmm, almost but not quite.” She turned to look at Tara, who looked as tired as she did.

“Just leave her for now. If she’s still here when I get back, I’ll carry her up,” Buffy said.

Willow sat up so Tara could ease off the couch and she could slide out from under Dawn. Pulling the blanket from the back of the couch, she covered the sleeping girl up and kissed her on her forehead.

“Sweet dreams, Dawnie,” she whispered, as Dawn shifted and smiled in her sleep.

Tara hugged Xander goodnight, and he gave Willow an extra long hug before heading off. Buffy shrugged into her jacket armed with Mister Pointy to make her nightly rounds, following Xander out. Willow closed the door behind them and secured it before turning to lean against it, looking at Tara.

“Well?” Tara asked.

“Much better than I feared, that’s for sure.” Willow pushed off from the door, shuffling in front of the stairs, and grabbed Tara’s hand.

“Bed now. Shower first then bed,” she mumbled.

“That sounds perfect, sweetie,” Tara agreed as she followed behind Willow with her hands on Willow’s hips.
Reaching Tara’s room, they both pulled clothes from their bags. Willow sat heavily on the bed.

“Baby, I’m not sure how to tell them. I don’t want to hide anything but I don’t know if Dawnie should know it all. I think Buffy and Xander should know it all. I’m just concerned.” Willow’s brow knitted with thought.

“Maybe you should talk to Buffy first and ask her how much she wants Dawn to know. You can be vague, but some of it is…rough to hear. I personally think she should hear it all, but it’s not up to me, sweetie.”

“Really, you think she should hear it all?” Willow was a little surprised by this.

Tara sat down next to her and took her hand. “Yes, I do. For one, she can handle it, and why should she be the one left in the dark about some of it? What if at some point, because of something she doesn’t know, she is somehow hurt or hurts you? It’s possible, you know?”

Willow nodded. “How about this; we gather everyone together and I just start talking. Buffy can stop me if it gets to be too much. Maybe it’s a little ambush-y, but then Dawn knows I’m not trying to hide anything from her while Buffy can still put the brakes on if she feels she needs to?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Tara said with a firm nod. “Together or alone?”

It took Willow’s sleepy brain a few seconds to catch on to what Tara meant. “Oh, together or alone!” and with a sly smile she continued, “I always prefer together, haven’t you figured that out by now?”

With a smirk of her own, Tara replied, “That’s what I thought, but I still like to hear it.”

“Everything is better with Tara,” Willow said leaning forward to rub her nose against Tara’s.

Tara dropped a kiss on Willow’s nose before standing to tug Willow with her.

“Off we go, miss.”
Tara led the way out and Willow paused by the door to Dawn’s room. She quietly opened the door to see that Dawn had gotten herself upstairs since the house had been quiet, meaning Buffy was not back yet. Easing the door shut she continued after Tara to the bathroom where the water had just started. Closing the door with care, Willow began to strip. When Tara turned around she was faced with a naked girlfriend.

Tara’s eye’s darkened and dilated immediately, making Willow’s breath catch.

“That is a sight I never get tired of seeing,” she said as she made short work of her own clothing.

“The feeling is quite mutual, love.” Willow’s voice had gotten deeper, as she sucked on her bottom lip.

Tara curled her index finger, beckoning Willow to her. In two quick steps, Willow was in front of her. Willow’s eyes drank in Tara’s face, as her hands roamed over Tara’s shoulder and down her back. Shivering in response, Tara moved towards the shower. She stepped in and Willow followed.

Slowly, they washed one another from head to toe, stopping for kisses and nibbles. The water started to grow cold all too soon, and Willow got a dousing of cold water.

Hissing at the unexpected change, she cringed. “Out. Now. Cold,” she said as she turned the water off. “That never happens at the Grove, I’ve gotten spoiled. Maybe we need to talk Buffy into a bigger water heater.”

Tara giggled. “It would still get cold eventually, Will.”

“Yeah, but it would take longer. I like our long, slow showers. I like the way you look covered in soap bubbles, they way they look as they slide off your body, your nipples covered in little rivers of water…” Willow stooped to take one of Tara’s nipples in her mouth.

“Oh, my…is there…anything you don’t…like?” Tara breathed, wrapping her hand around Willow’s neck to hold her close as teased her skin.

Willow pulled away with a pop. “Not where you’re involved, my beautiful Tara.”
They decided against the clothes in favor of using Tara’s robe hanging on the back of the door. Tara put it on and Willow was immediately pressed against her, nibbling at the skin where her throat meets her neck while Tara tried unsuccessfully to focus on tying the robe around them. The two sides barely closed, leaving a wide strip of Willow’s backside exposed. Being unwilling to release Tara, Willow guided them backward to Tara’s room. Her hands moving up Tara’s back, down over her hips, the tops of her thighs, her hands never stopped moving; although she peered over Tara’s shoulder as she moved her mouth from one side of Tara’s neck to the other while they walked. Tara held the sides of the robe as high as she so they were protected from view should they ran into anyone. Willow’s bottom out in plain view she backed into the bedroom and Tara shut the door, locking it deftly.

Willow pulled the covers back and crawled into the middle of the bed patting the space next to her. Tara reached for the lights to turn them off when Willow said, “Leave them on.” Tara’s pulse sped up, as she quickly joined her love on the bed.

They didn’t hear when the front door opened. Checking the couch and finding it vacant, Buffy made her way up the stairs. She got halfway up when she stopped and listened for a moment. With a snicker, she said out loud to herself, “Some things truly never change,” before trudging tiredly toward the bathroom for her own shower before bed.

TBC...
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T
Rating: R
Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 7 for some guilt issues using the 1-10 scale.
Setting: Sunnydale

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money - and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway - is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: Of course I love it, but begging is unbecoming and anything else I could say after that just sounds bad.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: With the utmost gratitude, I would like to welcome my beta Foreverchanges back from brief hiatus. I would also like to thank Crystal for all her help and encouragement as well, you guys rock! This was an interesting chapter; it was like some of it wrote itself. I didn’t plan on a scene with Anya, yet here one is, things just work out that way sometimes. Musical inspirations during the chapter were as follows: Mumford & Sons “Sigh No More”, Neon Trees “Habit”, the single “The One I Need” by Amber Benson and James Saez (yes, our beloved Tara), and Eminem “Recovery” – particularly “Love the Way You Lie” ft. Rihanna (but it’s all good). One with the show!

1. The quality or fact of being honest; uprightness and fairness.

2. Truthfulness, sincerity, or frankness.

3. Freedom from deceit or fraud.

Willow woke first, a bit disoriented. Laying there curled around Tara’s warm body, the previous night’s events replayed in her mind. Emotion began to well up in her, quick and hot, and without realizing it, tears started to stream down her face. She had expected anger, disappointment, maybe even yelling and screaming, but none of that had happened. Instead, she got love, acceptance, and happiness. What more could she have hoped for?

Rolling gently away from Tara and onto her back, Willow tried to be quiet and to just ride out her emotions; enjoy them, home really was still home. Tara rolled over to face Willow, she was awake but didn’t say anything. She wiped away Willow’s tears and rested her hand on Willow’s heart. Willow glanced at Tara while biting her lip, and taking a shaky breath, she smiled as more tears came.

“Sweetie,” Tara whispered.

Willow turned to her and buried her face in Tara’s shoulder, while she cried silently. Tara lay back pulling Willow with her so she could wrap both arms around her. She stroked Willow’s hair and rubbed slow, small circles on her back. Finally, Willow kissed Tara’s chest and gave her a squeeze before pulling back to look at her.

“Hi,” she said just above a whisper.

“Hi,” Tara said, “are you okay?”

Willow nodded. “Everything just kind of caught up with me, you know, all at once. I wasn’t sure what last night was going to be like, and I thought it would be more…well, painful I guess.”
“How are you feeling now? Still a little discombobulated?”

“Mmm, much less so thanks to a certain beautiful blonde, that oh hey, happens to be in my arms right now. How cool is that?” Willow smiled.

Smiling wickedly, Tara asked, “So which part helped? The shower, the bed, the floor under the window? I have carpet burn now, by the way.”

Turning a bit pink, but wiggling just the same, Willow smiled back. “Aww, want me to kiss it, make it better?”

“Mmm, lots of things get better when you kiss them,” Tara purred, dropping a kiss on Willow’s lips, before playfully brushing their noses together.

“Hold that thought my little sex kitten,” Willow said. “Maybe I should just start calling you kitten, would you like that?” Willow asked as she nuzzled Tara’s neck.

“I’ll like anything you want to call me, baby,” Tara breathed as she leaned her head back allowing Willow more skin to nibble on.

Willow growled around a mouthful of Tara’s neck and tugged at it hard enough to leave a mark. “Mine.”

Tara dug her fingers into Willow’s shoulders, leaving little half-moon shapes before roughly scratching down Willow’s back. The pressure from Willow’s mouth increased as her fingers trailed over Tara’s stomach, and when her hand stopped, Tara groaned and dug her nails into the soft skin of Willow’s bottom leaving a matching set of half-moons to go with those on her shoulders.

After enjoying each other’s skin for a few more moments, Willow slid out of the bed, and snatched the robe off the floor; she held it open as an invitation to Tara. When she didn’t immediately move, Willow waved it at her again. “C’mon, my turn to walk backward.” Willow’s eyes glittered with desire. Tara threw back the covers, stretching slowly while she moved one hand down between her breasts and over her stomach to just skirt around the dark blonde hair between her thighs, before trailing her fingers over her hip.
Tara watched Willow lick her lips repeatedly during her little “stretch,” and smirked as she got out of bed. Easing her arms into the robe Willow held open for her, Tara wasted no time in pressing the length of her body against Willow. Tara dragged her short nails across the backs of Willow’s thighs, up her bottom to her shoulders, and back down again in slow but steady circuits. Willow opened the bedroom door to peer out to be sure the coast was clear, but Tara pushed her out into the hall and began walking her backward down the hall.

Tara sucked and bit at Willow’s neck, as she moved them quickly, and quietly to their destination. The door closed loudly, and Tara cringed a little; all her movement ceased so she could listen. Willow kept moving though, so Tara swatted her bottom.

“Shh.”

Willow stood still. “What?”

Tara rolled her eyes. “I was trying to be sure we didn’t wake anyone up because you know, I live with other people, in a house, so we can kinda hear each other?” She chuckled at the look on Willow’s face. “You forgot about that, didn’t you?”

Sheepishly, Willow nodded. “Yeah, I guess I did. I mean, there are obviously other people at The Grove, but sound generally isn’t an issue.” She took the toothbrush Tara handed her and turned on the shower.

Tara checked the water while they brushed their teeth, and as she rinsed the remnants of toothpaste away, she slipped behind Willow to trail her fingers up and down Willow’s back and hip bones. Willow shivered under Tara’s fingers, a delightful tremor passing through her when Tara’s palms grazed her nipples. She purred and pressed back into Tara, who hungrily watched Willow in the mirror over her shoulder.

“Well, let’s see if I can help you remember how to be quiet,” Tara said, cupping Willow’s breasts in her hands and stepping back towards the shower.

******

Tara was sitting on the island in the kitchen resting her arms over Willow’s shoulders and playing with her hair, as Willow stood between Tara’s legs. They were talking softly to one another as the
coffee finished brewing, and Dawn came bouncing into the kitchen with a bright smile for the pair.

“Oooo, nice hickey, Tara,” she quipped, pouring herself a cup of coffee. She turned to lean against the counter. “Oh, how sweet, a matching set.” Dawn snickered as she looked around Tara at Willow, and blew into her coffee before she sweetened it.

Willow’s mouth opened and closed a few times, as she stepped back to let Tara off her perch on the island, before she stuttered out, “Since when do you drink coffee?”

Dawn laughed. “Willow, you don’t have to be shy; I know about the birds and the bees, you know. Got that speech and the ‘now you’re a woman’ one too,” she shuddered, “now that was embarrassing. You should’ve seen Buffy’s face.”

Willow looked at Tara, who was seemingly nonplussed. She handed Willow a coffee mug and smoothly moved to pour herself a cup. Willow looked down at the empty cup, as Dawn watched her.

“Willow, it’s love – it’s you and Tara. Do you realize you two are the best example I have of real love?”

Willow’s head snapped up, and she looked at Tara again. Tara just smiled and slid her cup over, taking Willow’s empty one.

Dawn laughed again, shaking her head. “I do know what you two do behind closed doors. I’ve listened to it loudly, and frequently, for a long time, you seem to forget. I never thought I would miss the sounds of other people making love… and that sounded a whole lot freakier than I meant it to. What I mean is, I want a love like yours, so do Buffy and Xander. They’re just afraid.”

Dawn stopped to put sugar in her coffee, her gaze steady as she spoke. “Xander is so afraid he’ll mess something up, so he messes it up; self-fulfilling prophecy there. Just look at him and Anya. Buffy…I worry for Buffy. She’s my sister, I love her, but she’s so scared to let anyone get close that I think she may miss the chance when she has it. They both envy you, they may never admit to it, but you two have set the bar pretty high for love around here.”

After taking several deep drinks, Dawn refilled her cup. Gazing into her cup for a moment, she looked at her friends, her face honest and open.
“I have learned *more* about passion just from listening to you, and not just the sex or the lovemaking. I’ve heard the nightmares, and the tears. The comfort and compassion you share is rare and constant. I’ve seen enough living here on the hellmouth to know that’s true—so have both of you.”

“Dawn…I don’t know exactly what to say,” Willow said softly, sipping her cooling coffee.

Tara was now leaning against the sink. “Dawn, don’t embellish our relationship. It’s not perfect, we have our problems, and we’ll continue to, that’s just life. All relationships do, but we want this to work; we’re just getting back on our feet again.”

“You guys, I know it’s not perfect – again I’ve seen, and I don’t think ‘perfect’ ever came out of my mouth. It just gives me hope, something to look forward to.” She shrugged.

Willow stepped to Tara and leaned against her.

With a wicked grin, Dawn continued, “Besides, I’m just glad you had clothes on when I came in, I’ve seen enough of your *ass* in the last twenty-four hours, Willow, to do me for a lifetime.”

Willow stiffened and turned a shade of red generally reserved for fruit. The mirth was apparent in Dawn’s eyes, as she casually sipped away at her coffee, and watched as Tara turned pink and ducked her head in sympathy. Willow turned abruptly to hide her face in Tara’s shoulder.

After a few minutes to let the embarrassment fade, Dawn put her hand on Willow’s shoulder to gently turn her towards her.

“Look, I don’t care if you guys make love in every room of the house…well except my room, because that’s just a bit ewww; but then the house has been filled with love – real love,” Dawn said sincerely. Her eyes filling with mischief again, she said, “If you want we can make a chart in different colors for each room and you can check it off as you go, Willow.”

Both Willow and Tara’s jaws dropped.
“Just be sure to wipe stuff down afterward, ‘cuz you know, again with the ewww.” With a smirk, Dawn headed for the stairs.

Willow looked at Tara. “Has she been hanging out with Anya too?” Willow stared at Dawn’s retreating form in complete surprise.

“That could be a fun idea sweetie…” Tara said as she sipped her coffee, looking innocently at Willow over the rim of her mug.

Willow turned, cocking her head to one side then the other, and with a shrug said, “I’m game, will we be here long enough?”

*****

Willow and Tara were walking back from campus after taking care of the arrangements needed for Tara to work remotely when they decided to stop at the Espresso Pump for lunch. They took their salads and mochas to one of the outside tables to enjoy the day, and indulge in a little people-watching. They sat close to one another; their attention focused more on each other than those moving around them.

Tara pushed the remnants of her salad away, sitting back in her chair to watch Willow as she ate. She had a hand resting on Willow’s thigh, absently moving her fingers across the fabric of the soft worn denim. Willow glanced at Tara, noticing the soft smile playing on her lips and flashed a smile of her own.

“What are you smiling at, sweetheart?”

Tara’s smile deepened. “Just you,” she said softly, “always you.” She gave a satisfied sigh and raised her arm to lean her head on her hand.

Willow put her fork down and wiped her mouth. The sunlight dappled through the awning, catching Tara’s hair and making it shine like honey. Willow swallowed hard as she took Tara’s hand from her thigh, turning it over and gently placing a warm kiss on her upturned palm before lacing their fingers together.
With a wide grin, Willow asked, “Ready to blow this pop stand?”

Tara nodded. “Let’s scoot.”

Throwing their trash away, they leisurely began walking home hand in hand.

“Let’s stop by The Magic Box!” Willow said excitedly.

“Okay…wait, you’re not going to give Anya a hard time are you?” Tara asked seriously.

“What? Wait…oh, nope, not me. No hard time giving today, we’ll save the stern talking to’s for another time, promise. I just thought it might be nice, you know, I haven’t been in ages, because, you know, first out of the country, then out of the state, and you probably want to talk to Anya. So this kills two birds with one stone, but we aren’t actually killing birds. Nope, this is all bird-friendly, and friend friendly too.”

“Will, honey, breath,” Tara giggled.

Willow took a deep breath and smiled, “Wow, I haven’t had a good babble in a long time. That felt kinda…normal in fact.” She winked at Tara.

They arrived at the door, and Willow pulled Tara to a stop as she stepped closer to her. Wrapping their linked hands behind her back, Willow put her other arm around Tara’s neck and kissed her firmly.

“What was that for?” Tara asked when they parted.

“Do I need a reason to kiss you?” Willow asked in return.

“No, of course not, I love your kisses.”
“Well, that’s a relief because I would hate to force kisses, of all the horrible things, on you,” Willow teased.

“Vixen,” Tara replied, her eyes twinkling.

That earned Tara another kiss. “All yours.”

Tightening her hold on Willow, Tara murmured in Willow’s ear, “Lucky me.”

With a contented sigh, Tara let Willow go and opened the door to the Magic Box. The bell above the door tinkled at their entrance. Willow followed behind Tara and was partly hidden when Anya came out from the backroom.

“Tara!” Anya called out happily as she dropped a box on the counter and rushed over to give Tara a hug.

At first, Willow had hung back a little, allowing the two friends some space before she stepped further into the store. She stood fidgeting with her fingers, as Anya pulled back from Tara and seemed to notice her for the first time. Willow gave one of her little waves and a nervous smile.

“Willow,” Anya said with a cautious glance at Tara who was smiling, “you’re here. When did you get back?”

“We got back yesterday afternoon,” Tara said, holding her hand out to Willow, who moved slowly to take it.

Anya eyed Willow closely. “Well, it’s good to have you back. Tara looks happy, so you both must be having plenty of orgasms again.”

“Anya, really…” Tara started.
Anya stalked over to Willow, raising her hand to point her finger. “If you hurt her again, I will take great pleasure in leaving parts of you scattered all over the seven continents. Do I make myself clear?” she asked with a sinister smile.

Willow nodded and swallowed several times. “Crystal,” she squeaked.

“Good! Really, it is nice to see you.” Clapping Willow on the shoulder, Anya walked back to her box on the counter. “So, how was Arizona, Willow? You’re awfully pale for being in the desert for so long,” Anya said with a bright smile.

The two women talked briefly, Willow eventually wandering off to look around the store to see what was new and if there were things she might need or could use. Tara filled Anya in on her plans to go back with Willow, to train with the coven there, assuring her they wouldn’t be gone permanently, but this was something she wanted to do having been given the opportunity.

Before they left, Willow had amassed a pile of things on the counter; herbs, incense, candles, and some things she thought they would need once they started to train together. Anya bagged up her items, then made her way back around to hug Tara again, and much to Willow’s surprise, Anya hugged her as well.

“Thank you, for taking care of her,” Willow said, just loud enough for Anya to hear.

“Just remember what I said,” Anya murmured, her voice deadly serious.

“There won’t be another time, I promise,” Willow swore as they parted, looking Anya in the eye.

“Good,” Anya replied with a curt nod, as she walked them to the door. She crossed her arms over her chest and watched them from the doorway as they walked away holding hands.

******

When Buffy and Dawn came into the kitchen, Willow and Tara were sitting close together at the dining room table staring at Willow’s laptop. They both looked up with smiles. Dawn came in quickly giving them both hugs before heading upstairs.
“Hey, what’s the what?” Buffy asked.

“Oh, nothing, just going over coursework for us both; we’ll be back here again when Tara graduates, then over the holidays and again when I graduate,” Willow said.

“When you graduate? Will, isn’t that a long stretch?”

“Ohh, not really Buff, I’ll be done at the end of the winter semester,” Willow admitted bashfully.

They could see Buffy doing the mental calculations, and Tara couldn’t hide the proud look that broke out on her face as a result. It was enough for Buffy to confirm her conclusions. With a wry grin, she said, “That’s early—you’re graduating early? Nothing stops The Willster’s quest for knowledge – like, ever - does it?”

“Afraid not Buff, it helped a lot actually. Kept me busy…” Willow trailed off, her eyes dropping back to the laptop screen, staring hard while the muscles in her jaw jumped. Tara brought her hand to Willow’s shoulder before dropping a kiss on her head and rising out of her seat.

“Xander called, he said he would be here at six, and that he’d bring dinner with him, so we’re probably having pizza.”

Buffy watched Willow before replying distractedly, “Uh, yeah probably, Dawn will be happy – he’ll bring anchovy.” Buffy made a face. “I don’t know how she can eat them.”

“I thought we could eat at the table again, it’s just kind of nice, don’t you think?” Tara inquired, trying to draw Buffy’s attention.

“Sure, whatever you like.” Buffy turned to face Tara with a smile. “I’m gonna go get cleaned up a bit.”

Buffy looked at Willow again; several emotions played over her face and she opened her mouth as if she planned to speak, but then thought better of it; with a soft sigh, she left the kitchen.
Tara busied herself setting out plates and glasses. She could feel the turmoil in Willow rolling through her, and wondered how much the hellmouth might be amplifying these feelings. Even she could feel a difference, and she had only been gone a week. She surmised that living there full time built a tolerance to the ambient evil. She wondered if a study had ever been done on the residents to see what effect the hellmouth had, then it occurred to her that might have been something of interest to the Initiative, or maybe even the Watcher’s Council and that it was probably something she really didn’t want to know for her own sake.

Tara moved to the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room.

“Will?”

“Hmm?”

Willow responded but did not immediately look up. When she did, Tara raised an eyebrow in question, her look one of concern.

Taking a deep breath, Willow nodded and went back to staring at the laptop screen.

“When?”

“After dinner is probably best.”

“Okay.”

With less than a dozen words spoken, they both knew that tonight Willow was going to do some explaining and that the Scoobies were going to have a lot to listen to.

******

As expected, Xander arrived with pizza at exactly six o’clock; quickly, plates and drinks were gathered so everyone could sit down to eat while it was hot. It was obvious that Willow was
preoccupied throughout the meal, but no one said anything.

Tara sat next to Willow, across from Xander and Dawn, with Buffy at the head of the table; Willow’s bag and laptop sat at the end like another guest. As the meal wound down, Willow reached for her bag to pull out a small card. Tara recognized the metal implant card; her head dipped knowing this was how Willow was going to begin. Willow pushed the small card across to Xander, then rested her chin on her hand. Tara rose, gathering the plates and went to the kitchen.

Xander looked closely at the card, confusion evident on his face.

“Will, what is this? A metal implant, what are you like bionic Willow now?” His joke fell flat.

Willow motioned that he should pass the card to Dawn. Dawn didn’t even look at the card before handing it to Buffy, her eyes locked on Willow.

Tara came back and reclaimed her seat next to Willow, folding both her hand in front of her on the table. Meanwhile, Buffy stared at the card, her face going blank.

“Would you like to tell us what this is, Will?” she asked without looking at Willow.

Willow took one of Tara’s hands, before saying softly, “It’s a metal implant card that I have to carry with me when I fly. I set off metal detectors because of the rod and six pins in my left leg.”

The Scoobies just stared at Willow waiting for her to continue; the room had gone so silent you could almost hear the heartbeats of the people occupying it.

Willow glanced at Tara, who smiled in reassurance.

“I should start at the beginning, and as I get further into this it won’t be pleasant, but I owe you guys an explanation. You all deserve to know why, why I left, why I stayed gone, and why Giles would only tell you what he did. It was all at my request, so, uhh… I don’t know about you but I need something else to drink before I start.” Willow stood, looking around the table. “Xan, a beer maybe? Buffy? Dawn?” She looked down at Tara.
“Yeah, Will, a beer sounds good,” Xander said quietly.

“Okay, last chance.” Willow was trying to keep her tone light.

Buffy and Dawn shook their heads.

“I think I’ll have one too, sweetie,” Tara said. Buffy shot her a look; knowing she didn’t often drink only served to make Buffy’s face darken with concern.

“Maybe that should be around then, Will,” Buffy commented, “and no, you don’t get one too,” she said, shooting a look at Dawn.

“Okay, then how about a coke, Dawnie?” Willow said, slipping into the kitchen.

Everyone looked at Tara, and she looked back at everyone evenly, her expression open.

“It’s her story to tell, guys,” she said simply.

Willow came back in with a tray, carrying the drinks. Stopping near Tara, she began handing them out before sitting down with her and finally handing Xander his beer.

Willow looked around the table again, and after taking a long drink began with a question. “What do you know about what happened after Buffy was shot, I mean what happened with Warren?”

Xander spoke, “The gun misfired and blew up in his face, killing him.”

Willow nodded, “Did any of you actually see Warren?”
“Well, no, I don’t think so,” Xander answered for everyone again.

Willow played with the label on the bottle and started again. “That’s not exactly what happened,” she sighed and took another swig from her beer. “When Tara and I came downstairs that day, we, we were standing looking out into the backyard. I watched him, I saw it all. We heard the yelling and the first shot from the gun. I had already started to draw on my Magicks, I didn’t even think about it, I just did it. He was firing wildly, and everything seemed to slow down. His eyes were…insane and so full of hate, I could smell it coming off of him in waves.”

Willow stopped, took several breaths, and another drink; she was staring at the table so hard a hole should have formed under her gaze.

“I saw his last bullet fire, and he looked at me. It was like something out of The Matrix, I could see the spin, and I could see the energy behind it, the path it was going to take. It would have hit Tara; I pushed her out of the way and screamed—just screamed at him, ‘You will not hurt her!’—I had just gotten her back; there was no way I was going to let this little cretin take her from me.” Willow pounded her bottle on the table and stood, no longer able to just sit. The pain in her voice made it obvious that she was actually seeing it all over again.

“I drew on everything I had learned from fighting Glory, everything I had, and I stopped the bullet. I put all my fear and anger into that one act. I turned the bullet; I pushed it back through the gun and put it right between his eyes. I watched the surprise bloom in them and the light vanish from them in less than thirty seconds. I dropped to my knees; I could feel the hatred boiling under my skin, the want to hurt him. It was starting to take over when I looked up at Tara, and I saw fear in her eyes. Then everything changed and I thought I was going to be sick.”

Willow continued to pace, her hands shoved deep into her pockets and her head down. She whispered, “Tara feared me, the one person in the entire world I never wanted to see that in…and she feared me.” Willow looked up for the first time and looked around the table.

A hardness entered Willow’s eyes as she looked around the table and a flatness her voice. “I killed him, and I’d do it again.”

Xander gripped his bottle hard, before emptying it in one long swallow. Tears ran down Dawn’s face, but Buffy’s was still a blank mask – no expression, just watching Willow pace in front of her.

“It took less than two minutes for me to dump everything I had worked for, to call on everything
dark I could get my hands on. I don’t regret what I did; I regret how I did it. If I could have stopped him before he fired the first shot I would have done it in a heartbeat.”

Willow slumped down into the chair next to Tara; everyone seemed to be holding their breath, while Willow continued.

“I called Giles; I didn’t know what else to do. I hated what I saw in Tara’s eyes, and for being the one that put it there... well to even think of it makes me sick. Giles called the Council, and they agreed to help me, so off I went to England. That’s when I decided I’d had enough of the Magicks altogether. It wasn’t long afterward that happened.” Willow gestured to the card in front of Buffy.

Buffy tapped the card. “I guess it wasn’t like when you stopped before was it?”

“No, Buff, it wasn’t. I drew on larger amounts of energy. It wasn’t even like the energy I was using when... you were gone. Because I had, at that moment, opened myself up, I was sorta like a sitting duck. I wasn’t like Tara, I didn’t know the difference in what I was using, so I had no way to protect myself. I hadn’t bothered to learn the most basic thing – how to protect myself, while I learned haphazardly how to protect you all.”

Buffy nodded as Tara pushed her beer in front of Xander. Xander took a long swallow before handing it back, and Dawn sat pale-faced and wide-eyed.

“You’re saying you weren’t ‘like’ Tara, are you saying you are now?”

Willow smiled, “Yes and no, but I’ll come to that later. This is where it gets rougher to hear.” Willow emptied her bottle and began peeling the label away from the glass.

"You guys need to know this. Both of my shoulders have been dislocated more than once from the muscle spasms, I’ve also torn the rotator cuff in my left arm because of them. My right ankle broke, and my left leg fractured, hence my nifty little card. Often I couldn't eat, it just wouldn’t stay down. More often than not, I couldn’t sleep, and when I did, I wished I hadn’t.”

Willow took Tara’s hand again. “There were points where Giles would have to hold me down so I could be sedated, partly to deal with the muscle spasms because they were so severe, partly to feed me intravenously, and partly so I could sleep – he had to make me sleep. I couldn’t focus, and sometimes I would hallucinate. I don’t know how many times I picked up the phone to call; I wanted
so badly to talk to you all, but what was I going to tell you? How could I explain over the phone? So I just thought you were all better off not knowing until I could explain, that maybe then you wouldn’t think I was a *complete* monster for what I’d done.”

Everyone sitting at the table was now in tears. Buffy downed half her beer in one swallow then offered the bottle to Dawn, who just looked at her and shook her head.

Sniffling, and wiping her eyes, Willow took a shuddering breath before pushing on. “That took six months, six of the longest months of my life. I thought then, I was finally free, and started thinking about coming back. Giles came to me and started going on about this coven in Arizona, saying that they had agreed to help me start over, to begin again. I thought he was crazy and told him so. I was done, no more with the witchy ways for me, I’d had enough and *literally* had the scars to prove it. That’s when he explained that I was *different*, fundamentally *changed*. He said the Magicks were a part of me now, and no matter where I went, that wouldn’t go away. Now I needed to be taught how to use my gift, how to control it and myself, how to be better than I was.”

Buffy’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean changed, Will, are you a demon now?”

Willow actually laughed, and glanced at Tara, remembering some of the conversations they had shared. They smiled at each other.

“Nope, one hundred percent all girl, all the time…just all witchy all the time too.”

“Will, that’s bad though, right? You left to get away from it…” Xander trailed off.

“It’s okay, Xander, really – I’m okay. I can’t get away from it; like I told Tara, it’s a part of me now, like my DNA. I can no more change *it* than you can change the color of your eyes, but I’ve learned how to be…*better,* Willow said with a shrug. “I’m *stronger* than before, but I have *far more* control. I also have more *defenses*, too.”

Willow waited while this sunk in before she got up and went into the kitchen, coming back with a bowl.

“Watch.” Willow placed the bowl under her hand and began to concentrate. The air around her
hands shimmered and slowly a snowball appeared. She looked at the Scoobies and met each of their eyes in turn so they could see there had been no change in her; no darkening of the eyes, no draw from dark Magicks. Her bright green eyes twinkled back at them. Willow held onto the snowball long enough for it to start to melt and drip.

With a wet plop, she dropped it into the bowl. “It’s real, it’s snow. You can touch it,” Willow said as she slid the bowl to the middle of the table.

“Are you going to tell them where it’s from?” Tara teased.

“Oh, sure.” Willow pinched some of the snowball off, and much like she did with Tara, she dropped it into her mouth and stuck out her tongue so they could see it melting before she swallowed it. “Ooo, this is local, well fairly, it’s from northern Colorado.”

Xander’s jaw dropped. “You can tell that from…the taste of it?”

Willow nodded and grinned.

“Mine was Canadian,” Tara said as she took some of the snowball too, and offered the bowl around the table. Dawn was the first taker, then Buffy, while Xander just watched the women around the table seems to take this all in their stride.

“Tastes like snow to me. How can you tell?” Dawn asked.

“To be honest, I can’t describe what tells me exactly, but it’s something to do with the water. It’s almost like I can taste the very moisture that formed the snowflakes. Lady Rowan says it’s an unusual gift.”

“Lady Rowan?” Buffy asked, taking some of the snowball.

Willow nodded. “She’s my High Priestess – coven leader, she’s also been the one I’ve worked with most closely. You’d like her, she looks like somebody’s grandma, but boy, don’t let that fool you. I wouldn’t want to piss her off then meet her in a dark alley. She knows more than Giles about the craft, which is saying something since I thought Giles knew it all - well maybe not all, but a lot.
She’s who Tara will train with when we go back.”

Willow fell silent and looked at her friends anxiously.

“Now you know why I left like I did, and why I stayed away. I wanted to make sure that when I came back I wouldn’t make things worse for you or for myself. Now you know it all…” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Willow, you’re back for now and you’re trying to convince me that this is all of the good? That doesn’t make any sense; you left to get away from magic, then you go to some coven to relearn everything you left to get away from. How is that good?” Xander said.

“Xander, you saw her – it wasn’t like before, and it didn’t feel like before. It’s not the same,” Dawn argued. “You can’t say what you just saw was anything like before.”

“Just because it wasn’t like before doesn’t mean it’s good either, Dawn. Buff…”

“Xander, I didn’t feel her,” Buffy said quietly.

“What?”

“I said I didn’t feel her, I didn’t feel the pull around us. Whatever Willow just did, as far as I can tell, she in no way pulled from anything dark, I would have felt that. I’ve felt it before when she went after Glory. I didn’t put it two and two together at first and when I did, well, it didn’t seem to matter, there were more important things to worry about.”

Everyone but Willow spoke at the same time.

“What?”

“You knew?”
Buffy and Willow looked at each other. A wisp of a smile played on Willow’s lips. Buffy was finally confirming what Willow had really always known.

“I knew, I just didn’t know what to do to stop her, or if it was possible, or if I wanted to. I wasn’t going to stand in the way of her getting you back, Tara. After what Glory had done, watching you…it didn’t just hurt Willow. I saw what she was studying, I had a clue and I let it slide. Willow, you seemed to be in control, I had no idea how not in control you were. I don’t even want to say I’m sorry because that would negate everything you did to bring Tara back, everything that happened after…” Buffy sighed. “I realized too late the toll it was taking on you, Willow. For that I am sorry.”

“And the fun just keeps leavin’,” Xander said as he slammed his bottle down in front of him as he got up from the table and left, and Dawn jumped when the front door slammed behind him.

Willow wiped her face and tossed the little card into her open bag. “I’m tired, I’m going to bed. Baby, are you coming?”

Tara was staring at Buffy with a look of resignation, she realized now that she wasn’t the only one who had seen Willow begin to spiral out of control without doing anything to help her. “Ah, yeah, I’m coming, sweetie.”

Willow walked behind Dawn and kissed her on the head.

“Goodnight,” Tara said, squeezing Dawn’s shoulder as she went by, but it was tinged with guilt for herself and her friend.

Dawn stood. “I should get some sleep too.”

“Night,” Buffy said softly. She was left sitting alone and hung her head for a moment as the silence crept further in and the power of Willow’s words slipped out from around her. She didn’t wait long before leaving on patrol to dust something.
Chapter 18 Part A - Secrets, Burdens, and the Truth…

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: PG-13

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 6 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: Sunnydale, California

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money - and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway - is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: I long for it, I live for it; I need it more than Spike needs blood… well, maybe not that much…

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: As always, I would like to thank my intrepid beta FC and the newest member of Team Dry Heat (LOL), Cyteach for the support, suggestions, and encouragement. The music for this chapter was almost entirely Placebo - “Battle For The Sun, Black Market Music, Meds, Placebo, Without You I’m Nothing, Sleeping With Ghosts, and One More With Feeling: The Singles 1996-2004 (funny that, huh?).” Also thrown again this time around were Feist’s “The Reminder” and the single I was listening to from the last chapter, Amber Benson & James Saez “The One I Need” from the movie “The Killing Jar”, and AWOLNation “Sail” bookending respectively.
Tara woke before Willow, the early morning light just shifting from grey, as she lay listening to the noises of the house. The air had changed, truths had been spoken and somehow instead of making it feel better, it had made things uncomfortable. Guilt was redolent, in a vortex of confusion and anger. With a determined sigh, Tara quietly left Willow sleeping, and after dressing went downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, the smell of coffee hit her nose and she knew that Buffy would be waiting; it wasn’t unusual for her to greet Tara in the morning after a stressful patrol having been too wired to sleep.

Buffy was staring out at the backyard when she entered the kitchen. Tara saw the slight tensing of her shoulders and knew she had to put this to rest before their mutual guilt tore their friendship apart.

“Buffy, we should talk about last night,” Tara said.

Buffy’s shoulders slumped, she hung her head before turning around to look at Tara; she raised her cup to her in question. Receiving a nod, she began to pour Tara a cup of the steaming brew, before adding milk and sugar.

Shame seemed etched on Buffy’s face as she handed Tara the cup. “Tara, really, what can I say? I know we’ve never talked about this, there never seemed a right time, then Will was gone and it seemed like it would be rubbing salt into both our wounds.”

Tara stared into her cup, nodding. “That’s a pretty fair assessment, Buffy. I played that time over and over in my head trying to figure out just when it started. Willow pushed so hard – was it with the teleportation of Glory? That’s when the headaches and nosebleeds started. How much harder should I have fought her on it? Should I have insisted on being involved more, so she wasn’t pulling so much energy to herself?” Shaking her head, Tara looked at Buffy sadly. “I just don’t know, I knew what she was doing too, in some cases I even helped her with spells without asking where she got them from. Could we have stopped her?”

Buffy sat on one of the bar stools, resting her head in her hands. “Tara, I don’t know. I was so scared of Glory; we had never gone up against anything like her before. We had so little to go on, and so few defenses. And that sounds even more pathetic, as the words come out of my mouth.” Buffy laughed bitterly.

Both girls were quiet, while they sipped away at their coffee. Each played the past over in their minds, answers no clearer in hindsight than they had been in the moment.

Quietly, Tara said, “Sacrifices were made; we made them to stop Glory; you, Willow, me, Giles – all of us. Dawn lost a part of her innocence, you lost so much more; Willow lost, I lost, Xander lost, Giles… I don’t know how to define what he lost when he killed Ben. We all failed Willow for one reason or another. Who gets to say who lost more?”
Buffy’s head had snapped up before Tara had finished speaking, the surprise was written plainly across her face. “What?”

Tara looked at Buffy blankly. “What, what?”

“Giles killed Ben?”

Tara nodded slowly. “I thought you knew by now. Ben probably wouldn’t have survived he was so broken – Ben begged him to do it. Ben finally did the right thing; he ceased to be her vessel. Giles simply covered his nose and mouth, Ben didn’t fight and Xander just watched. I don’t think they realized I was watching too.” Tara shuddered; the remembrance of that night would never leave her. “At first I wasn’t sure what I was seeing; everything happened so quickly, Buffy. First I was…gone, then I wasn’t; it was so loud, and I hurt. Then Willow was holding me, and I saw clearly through piles of broken bricks, Giles and Xander with Ben. Next thing you were falling and Ben didn’t seem important anymore.”

Tara sighed heavily. “I never thought I would be so apathetic about the death of another human being, but I just can’t bring myself to feel anyway else. What she did; what he stood by and allowed…I just can’t. I guarantee Giles doesn’t know I saw. If he hasn’t told you, Buffy, you can’t say anything to him, it’s his burden and if he wants to share it then let him. We all did our part to save the world that night, and as usual, the price was so much more than we thought it would be.”

Buffy nodded, her face pale in the morning light, as more burdens reared their ugly heads the night before having only eased those for one of their number.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“What good would it have done? What kind of finger-pointing would that have led to? Would that have made any of us feel less responsible for losing you, would it have made any of us feel any better? Would that have slowed down anything that happened that summer?” Tara shrugged, her own expression drawn.

“Does Willow know? Does Dawn?”

“I’ve never said anything about it until now. Again, I didn’t see the point, and I didn’t want to add another heaping helping of guilt to be passed around.”

“Well, guys, it seems I know now,” came softly from the doorway. Willow stood there, looking from one girl to the other, a soft, sad smile on her face as she looked to her left.
Dawn stepped into view. “So do I,” she whispered, tears streaking her face.

Buffy and Tara froze, their faces panic-stricken. Dawn wrapped her arms around her waist as she sniffled.

“Do we ever get a break? Aren’t we allowed to be happy? I mean, what the hell, Buffy? How much do we have to give before it’s enough? Kidnap, torture, murder, violation, death, addiction – where’s the joy? Were you guys ever allowed to just be happy – at all – ever?” Dawn shook her head in pained disbelief; to try and ease her pain, Willow pulled the girl into her arms.

Without further hesitation, Buffy and Tara crossed to the girls, wrapping their arms around them, each holding onto the other. Pulling strength from each other, from their bond, they made their way to the sofa, Buffy in one corner, Tara in the other. Dawn lay down with her head in Buffy’s lap and Willow wedged in next to Tara and under Dawn’s feet, who still cried.

“You know Dawnie, it’s funny, we never questioned what we do. It’s always been a struggle, and sometimes the lines between right and wrong do get blurred – there are no absolutes. There has been joy, even at the oddest times, but looking back at everything, I wouldn’t change it. It’s brought me to where I am now, who I am now,” Willow said.

Buffy stroked Dawn’s hair gently as she began to speak. “There were times I hated it, I just wanted to be a normal girl. Times when I felt this was so unfair, that I wanted more than to just be ‘The Chosen One’. Times when I hated Giles and the Council, I even hated Mom and Dad because it had to come from somewhere right? So which one of them was to blame? Then I look at what I’ve gained…. and believe me, it’s taken me a while to be able to see that.” Buffy looked at Willow and Tara. Willow took Buffy’s hand, even as she looked at Tara, who rested one hand on the back of Willow’s neck, the other on Dawn’s ankle.

Willow smiled at her friend’s admission, her eyes clouding as she became lost in her own thoughts once more. “That’s not to say that I’ve never wondered how my life would’ve been different, Dawn. There are so many possibilities, so many different versions of what could have been. I just know that now, this is the version I want. I want you, and Buffy; I want Tara, and Xander, and Giles. You guys are my family, I love you and I don’t want to imagine my life without you.” Willow’s voice was thick with emotion.

“Dawnie,” Tara took up Willow’s thread, “I know none of this is remotely fair, and like Buffy, you didn’t have a choice in how all of this came about. Somehow though, Buffy’s managed to surround you with people that did choose to be here, that did choose to fight alongside her. When I chose Willow, I knew what I was getting into, but really there was no other choice for me,” she finished, before dropping a kiss on Willow’s shoulder, and giving Dawn’s ankle a light squeeze. “We manage to find the joy and the light within the darkness; it’s how we all get through it. It may not always be the best or the most fun, but we choose to do what’s right sometimes, even if we can only do what is the most right out of limited options. As I was recently reminded, ‘we do it because it’s what we do.’” Tara rested her chin on Willow’s shoulder, giving Dawn and Buffy her shy smile.
“I just don’t know how you guys have done this for so long, how Giles…” Dawn sniffled some more and wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “I don’t blame him, it was just a way to be sure we’ll never see that bitch again. I’m not sorry he did it. What must it do to him though, does it eat at him?”

The older girls looked at one another.

“I don’t know, Dawn,” Buffy said, “and there’s no real way to ask either. Now we all know, and that will have to be enough. We’ve all done things, and we’ll probably all do things again, that we wouldn’t normally do to protect each other, simply because we couldn’t just stand by. That’s the grey area we’re sometimes forced to walk in, and it’s the hardest time in which to discern right from wrong.”

The room grew quiet as each girl thought about what they were willing to do for one another, what protecting each other, really meant to them.

“Are we all good?” Dawn asked. “I mean with each other, are we all good? We can’t change what happened, but we cannot let it happen again, right? Not be afraid to say something? Not be afraid to ask for help?” Dawn sat up. She looked at the three women seated around her, these women that she called sisters, even thought of as ‘Mom’ in some cases; these women were her family, and always would be.

“I promise I will, if you will,” Willow said.

Together, Tara and Buffy answered, “I will.”

“Together, we’re always strongest together, and somehow I don’t think that’s going to change anytime soon,” Tara quipped, as she hopefully raised her eyebrows at Buffy.

“Well, aren’t we just a merry little bunch of misfits? The Slayer, the Key, the Watcher, the Two Good Witches – and Xander.” Dawn jested, garnering a round of laughter from everyone. The solemn air began to lift, the tension from the night before dissipating.

Willow’s tummy gurgled loudly, which set off a chain reaction, followed as it was by Dawn, Buffy and lastly Tara, inciting another burst of laughter.

“Who wants pancakes?” Tara asked.

“Ooo, yummy funny shapes?” Dawn inquired.
Willow bounced next to her. “Those are the only kind, Dawnie,” Willow enthused, flashing a big goofy grin at Tara.

Tara clapped her hands as she rose from the couch, a smile on her face, and a twinkle in her eye. “Funny shapes it is.”

Dawn and Willow bounded off into the kitchen. Tara rose to follow when Buffy’s soft voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Hey,” Buffy said, “are we okay?”

Tara looked at Buffy and saw the strain on the girl’s face that made her look older than her young years. “Yeah, Buff, we’re okay. We learned, right?”

Buffy nodded and flashed a wry smile. ”Yeah, we learned. Always seems to be the hard way, but we do learn.”

Tara held her hand out to pull Buffy off the couch, only to have Buffy pull her into a hug.

“C’mon, let’s go make breakfast,” Tara said as she smiled, and cuffed Buffy under the chin. “Smile, pancakes.”

They walked arm in arm into the kitchen where Dawn and Willow were already pulling out supplies and chattering away like magpies.

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After breakfast, Willow helped Dawn with homework. Both Tara and Buffy stopped to look at the pair working away and shared a smile.

“She doesn’t really need the help does she?” Tara asked.

Buffy smiled. “Doesn’t sound like it; they’re arguing about methods of something I have no clue about. Although it does sound like something she was trying to explain to Janice over the phone last week, I don’t think she had a clue either.”

With a knowing smile, Tara said, “I kind of got the idea…she missed her.”
Buffy leaned against the island as she watched them argue. “We all did though, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, we did,” Tara agreed softly. “Have you slept yet?”

Buffy shook her head.

“You need your rest, Buffy. Do you work today?”

Again, Buffy shook her head. “I’ll sleep, but later. I thought maybe Will and I could go for coffee when she’s done with Dawn. You don’t mind do you?” She looked questioningly at Tara.

“Of course not, I think I’m going to go take a nap myself. Why don’t you stop at the grocery store and I’ll cook tonight. I also need stuff for cookie dough – not sure how it’s gonna hold up in the long term though, so you guys may have to get used to Tollhouse again. I can at least leave some before we go back to Tucson.”

Buffy cocked her head to one side. “You’re really going to study with Willow and the coven?”

Tara nodded. “I am. I remember my Mom sneaking us away when I was little for Sabbats and ceremonies. She never got to practice in the open, Buffy, it was always in fear. It was always sneaking around, and if Daddy found out…” Tara just shrugged dejectedly and looked at the floor. “I have the chance to do what she never could, and I’m going to make the most of it, she would want me to, I want me to.”

“Then, by all means, you should do this, Tara. Do what she couldn’t; I already know you make her proud.” Buffy smiled sincerely.

Tara nodded with a sad smile. “Thanks.” With a small wave, Tara went to Willow, who looked up with a loving smile at her approach. Tara whispered her plans for a nap into Willow’s ear and left her with a kiss before excusing herself.

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Willow left Dawn to the rest of her homework, with a smile. She had figured out pretty quickly that Dawn hadn’t really needed the help; their interaction was warm and familiar, and it made them both feel good to reconnect with one another in a simple way.

Willow walked into the living room where Buffy was flipping through the channels on the TV, not
stopping for long on any one channel.

“Hey Buff, whatcha watchin’?” Willow asked as she slipped into the armchair with a plop.

“Not a thing. Could I interest you in a lovely mocha, by chance?” she asked.

“Isn’t that our equivalent of, ‘Hey, little girl, want some candy?’” Willow asked with a smirk.

Buffy laughed. “Yes it is, little girl, now I’m buying, so are you coming or do I have to use force?”

“I’ll tell Tara on you if you try to use force on me, but hey, let’s face it, you’re buying, so not a whole lot of force needed. Give me half an hour? I need to shower and change.”

“Ooo, low blow, don’t tell Tara on me – she won’t make us cookies if you do. Okay, no worries. I should clean up too, but why don’t you go first?”

Willow bounced out of the chair and headed for the stairs, Buffy smiling as she watched her go. Willow stood outside Tara’s bedroom for a moment before gently turning the knob and easing the door open. She slipped inside; Tara was facing the door, on her side of the bed, with her eyes closed. Willow’s breath caught at the sight. Tara was sleeping peacefully, her expression calm and sweet, as she hugged Willow’s pillow to her chest.

Willow sighed contentedly and edged over to her bag for clean clothes. Grabbing her sneakers, Willow headed for the door, but thinking better of it, she quietly laid everything down and eased onto the bed next to Tara. With a light, gentle touch, she pushed a stray lock of hair off Tara’s face and bent to kiss her cheek. Tara stirred but did not wake; she just smiled in her sleep as she continued to dream.

Willow slipped off the bed and out of the room.

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Willow had replaced Buffy on the couch, channel surfing until her friend made her way down the stairs. She glanced up with a smile and turned the TV off as she hopped to her feet.

“Ready?”

“Yup, let’s roll,” Buffy said, grabbing her keys, and following Willow out.
“Goody, chocolate-y, very caffeinated-y goodness awaits! You know, I don’t get mocha-y goodness too often at the Grove. We’re kind of outside the city so driving forty-five minutes just for coffee isn’t that realistic. Maybe I should buy an espresso machine and ship it before I go back…now there’s a thought,” Willow said as they walked.

Buffy laughed at her friend’s idea, laughed until she cried, while Willow just stared blankly at her.

“Hey, Buff, you wanna let me in on what’s so funny?”

Waving her hand in front of her face, wiping away tears, Buffy tried to explain between gulps of air and laughter. “I just…got this picture…of… a bunch of witches…all hopped up on double mochas…random things floating around…”

Willow still stared.

Buffy wiped away tears before saying, “Okay, it was kinda like the mop scene in ‘Fantasia’, but…okay it was a lot funnier in my head than it actually sounds now.”

“Say, Buff, you didn't happen to do a bunch of drugs before we left, did ya?” Willow snarked.

“Nope, I left your stash alone, I swear.”

They looked at each other for a minute before bursting into laughter. Buffy slipped her arm around Willow’s waist in a one-armed hug. “I’ve missed you, Willow, I’ve missed this.” Buffy’s voice lost its humor but none of its affection for the girl beside her.

“I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed this, us, just hanging out. We never really did it after…” Willow’s face darkened at the memories.

“Will, I owe you so much, and I owe you an apology,” Buffy said.

They had arrived at the Espresso Pump, so their talk stalled as they ordered their drinks and found a place to sit. Buffy chose an outside table a little off by itself; this way they had a bit of privacy. When they sat down, Willow fidgeted uncomfortably as she waited for Buffy to speak.

“Willow, what I said last night was the truth.”
“Buffy, you don’t have to do this…,” Willow started.

“Yeah, Will, I do,” Buffy paused to stare into her cup. “How many times have you pulled me through a fight? Do you know? I can’t really say, because you’ve always been there when I needed you most, and I’ve needed you a lot. Yet you’ve always been able to come up with a spell to save me, save us. Hell, Willow! You brought me back from the dead!”

“Buffy, how often did stuff not turn out right? I mean, I even brought you back against your will!” Willow tried to argue.

“Because, Willow, you have the power to do it. Don’t you get it? You pushed yourself to get that kind of power. With no real…guidance, you took it upon yourself to be that kind of witch, the kind that has no boundaries, because you, Willow, have no boundaries. I mean that in the best way – you’ve never let anyone limit you, there’s nothing you can’t do. Everything is attainable to you if you try hard enough. You never give up, Willow. I watched you push yourself for years, it never occurred to me this would be any different for you. It just seemed to be another riddle for you to solve or a theory for you to quantify. No ‘big’ for our Willow, right? You were the most self-sufficient of us all so why would this be any different?”

“So what’s your point here, Buffy?” Willow asked, trying to keep the bitterness from her voice. “Look at what that has cost me and what it almost cost me, and it still wasn’t enough! How thick do I have to be not to learn?”

Buffy shook her head. “Willow, I understand why you did all of it. Glory had us all more scared than we had ever been before, and when she took Tara – if I could have beaten Tara out of her for you, I would have happily done that. They’ve all told me what it was like while I was…gone. How everything fell to you, to you and Tara. You have to believe me when I say I am so incredibly sorry for that. It shouldn’t have happened that way.”

“But it did Buffy, it did happen that way. We were all…broken, you have no idea! Even Spike was broken! Without you, who else was going to do it? Someone had to; no one else seemed to be able to pull it together, so I did. I pulled alright, and pulled, and pulled, and even that wasn’t enough. Not enough to keep everyone safe. There were demons on bikes; once word got out that you were gone it was a field day here, Buffy. I don’t think you really have a clue.”

The silence was thick between them.

“You’re right, Will, I don’t. I can’t know, and I can’t change that. I can’t change that I looked the other way when I should have helped you – during everything with Glory and after I came back, but I didn’t. That’s how I failed you; how I wasn’t the best friend I could have been to you. Everything felt so wrong when I came back, it was loud and bright, and I was so…different.”

Buffy dropped her head, and wouldn’t look at Willow as she continued to speak, “I was so angry
with you. I thought if anyone would have known that I was at peace it would have been you, but you were the one who pulled me out. For a long time I used that to justify my looking the other way while you fell apart, and when you tried to get away from it, I almost felt you deserved what you were going through. That it would teach you a lesson; that not everything should be at your whim.”

Buffy slouched back in the chair looking everywhere but at Willow. “It wasn’t until Tara came back, and I was shot, that I realized what a monumental ass I had been. How broken Tara and Dawn were after you left, I can’t even begin to describe, and to top it off, Tara tried to leave! She had boxes packed – if I hadn’t come home when I had she really would have left! I had to almost die again to understand a lot of things, Willow, and you talk about being the thick one.”

“I have to admit I was shocked when Tara told me she was still living with you. Giles never said, and honestly, I didn’t ask. Buffy, I was so afraid to come back here; so afraid of the mess I had made of everything. I thought I’d die the day Rowan told me Tara was coming. I was afraid it was all a dream.” Willow shook her head in disbelief. “Buffy, I can’t believe she still loves me. I know I never stopped loving her, but it’s still a little unreal for me. I can see how she’s changed, and grown, and I love it. It makes me love her all the more. Coming back and seeing all of you, we’ve all done some growing up. I’m not sure when it happened but it did. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with guilt and accusations. I don’t want you to either; it’s no way to live.”

Buffy felt so raw by all that she had needed to say for so long, but there was still one thing she had to know. “Can you forgive me, Will?”

“I can. Can you forgive me?”

“Already done.”

“Now, we just have to work on forgiving ourselves, Buff. That will be the harder part since we’re all so good at it.” Willow said with a wry smile.

Both girls sat in silence for a few moments, drinking their mocha’s and digesting all that had been said, each coming to terms with what they felt had been the truth. Finally, Willow hesitantly broke into their silence.

"Buffy…I’ve been having dreams, and I don’t know what they mean. I’ve told Tara about them, but this is the one I think we need to worry most about, okay?”

Buffy perked up and immediately went into ‘Slayer Mode’. “I’m listening to anything you have to say.”

“I have to tell you… it’s only started recently this dream. It’s not like my ‘Warren-mare’ or the other one I sometimes have - both of which I’ll maybe explain to you another time, it’s just that this one
seems important. I dream that I’m in Sunnydale, we’re all there but there are more people. There are all these young girls all over the place, but they have something to do with you; it’s like you’re leading them somehow. That’s what I don’t understand. But, Buff, there’s also…we have a coven there, Tara and I, so we have several young girls and a few boys, well they’re younger than us anyway. Some, but not all, are initiates with us, but yours seem to be slayers, Buff. We’re preparing for something, and it’s big because of the Hellmouth…it has teeth. I don’t know what all of this means, or if it’s even going to happen.”

“Wow, Will, that’s some dream you got there. Maybe taking an espresso machine back isn’t such a good idea.”

“Buffy!”

Buffy took Willow’s hand between her own. “No, I get you, Will, really, so do you think it’s that we should start expecting all of this soon?”

“That’s just it, Buff, it could be next week or a year from now. I don’t know, but I do plan to talk with Sister Dana when I get back, she regularly has prophetic dreams, it’s one of her gifts. She can help me figure it out. Once I know more, I can help you guys prepare here. That’s all I can tell you now, and like I said, Tara knows, and now so do you. I think we can hold off on telling Dawn and Xander until I can talk to Sister Dana.”

Buffy nodded. “I’ll start asking around, but for the moment, let’s just say no one has heard anything new. I’ll stop by Willy’s tonight and ask a few questions.” Thinking out loud, Buffy added, “You know, demon to vamp ratios have been kind of steady lately.”

“That’s not a bad idea, Buffy; you want me to go with you?” Willow asked, overlooking Buffy’s final comment.

Buffy could hear the hopefulness in Willow’s voice. “If Tara says ‘yes.’ And who knows, she may want to come too. She does patrol sometimes, you know.”

Willow smiled widely. “That’s my girl. Should we head back? My mocha tolerance is low these days, I’m gonna be wired for a while from that one.”

Buffy made overly dramatic sniffling sounds. “Aww, Will, I get to show you the joys of caffeine all over again, just like the first time.”

Willow giggled, then smiled wickedly. “Buffy, please be gentle this time, my first time, you were so rough.”
Buffy started to speak but stopped abruptly, playing over what Willow had just said, and blushed profusely. Willow bounced in her chair, cackling with glee, the tip of her tongue sticking out as she pointed at Buffy.

“Ah, I got you! I so totally got you!” Willow swirled the contents of her cup and drank it down. “I told you one is enough.”

A still pink-faced Buffy rolled her eyes. “Great – sneaky, mouthy, sugar high, over-caffeinated Willow, attacks. I’m gonna have to warn Tara or she’s gonna hate me, which she may do anyway.”

“So what now, Buffster?” Willow chirped.

“Oh yeah, it’s all starting to kick in. Tara’s gonna kill me, I just need to face that now,” Buffy muttered.

“Oh, I think I can come up with a way she won’t kill you, so don’t you worry about Tara.” Unfortunately for Buffy, she looked over at Willow just in time to catch the lascivious look that passed over her friend’s face.

“I so don’t want any more details. Okay, I told her we would stop and pick stuff up for supper. Is there anything special you want? I also have to get stuff for cookie dough.”

“Ooo, fresh ‘Tara-cookies,’ yummy. Umm, and her Chicken Cacciatore, God, it’s amazing, Buff. She has made it for you guys, right? She used to make it for me for my birthday.” Willow smiled a little sadly.

Buffy put her arm around Willow’s shoulder. “C’mon, it may not be shopping for shoes but it’s still shopping; let’s set you up for the meal you want. Do you know what’s in it?”

“I do, I even know the wine she liked to use best in it…does she still like the Santa Margherita’s Pinot Grigio? Err, that was to have with it, not in it; she used to like it a lot.”

Buffy smiled fondly at Willow. “Don’t worry, Will, she still does, but no, she’s never made this for us. I’ll bet because it was special for you.”

Willow smiled back a bit sheepishly. “Yeah, maybe that’s it. You know we go back tomorrow, not until late in the evening, so maybe that will be special enough.”

As they approached the store, Buffy grabbed a cart. “Are ya gonna be my hood ornament?” she asked Willow.
“Really?”

“I asked, didn’t I? Dawn just doesn’t do the job justice. Has Tara ever seen you do this?”

Willow shook her head. “No, shopping was either done in a hurry because we had to get back to her dorm *cough* to do spells *cough*, or we were rushing to get home for Dawnie.”

Buffy pulled out a cellphone and aimed it at herself and Willow with pride.

“Well, make ‘em good ones and we can show them to Tara and teach Dawnie how it’s done.”

“When did you get a cell phone?”

“When Xander put us all on a family plan, right before you got here; there are phones for you both. Guess we kinda forgot to tell you about that, huh?”

“Just a little! Oooo, can you send them to my phone? This will be so much fun.”

Buffy proceeded to get shots of Willow serving as the carts figurehead, chest thrust forward, head back; albeit a rather more clothed figurehead than any ships ever was. There was a shot of Buffy using the cart to ‘luge’ past the fresh fish and meats on ice, and the pièce de résistance – with the help of a fellow shopper – a picture of them both, which saw Buffy riding the cart down the aisles with Willow in the basket covered in chocolates and coffee, both of them grinning manically at their photographer.

Somewhere in all of the goofing off they actually managed to get everything on their list, without being thrown out of the store.

Walking back to the Summers’ house, Willow grew pensive. “Buff?”

“What’s up?

”Xander - maybe I should go talk to him, he should be home soon. I don’t want to leave with him still mad over this. I have to at least try to help him get comfortable with this, this is all part of the Willow-y goodness package.”
“I understand, Will, and I hope he does too. If not, I have a shovel. That threat might make him see sense. Here, let’s consolidate bags, and you go to Xander’s and I’ll see you later at home, okay?”

“You’re the best, Buff, I’ll see you later, tell Tara too.” With that, Willow took off in the direction of Xander’s apartment.

“Yeah, yeah…at least slayer strength is good for more than kickin’ demon ass,” Buffy muttered as she watched Willow run towards Xander’s.

*****

A few minutes later, Willow was sitting on the steps in front of Xander’s building. There had been no answer at his door, and his car wasn’t parked in its spot, so it was a safe bet that he wasn’t yet home from work. There was still plenty of time before sunset for Willow to wait. The longer she waited though, the more worried she got. If he had gone to Buffy’s, then he would have been told where she was and come for her. Or would he? With about thirty minutes left before sunset, Willow reluctantly started to walk back to Buffy’s.

She hoped Xander would just show up there and it wouldn’t be that big a deal; maybe he had to work late, or maybe he had…something. Willow walked into the house, and since it was quiet she headed upstairs to Tara’s room. The door was still closed so she eased it open again before she stuck her head in to check on Tara.

To her surprise, Tara was pulling books off her shelf and gathering the things she wanted to take to The Grove. She looked over her shoulder when she heard the door open.

“Hi sweetie, how did it go with Xander?”

“Well, it didn’t, he didn’t come home before I had to leave to be here before sunset,” Willow said.

Tara put the last book down on a stack, stood up and turned around. “That’s kind of odd, maybe he’ll show up for dinner though. That’s certainly not unusual.” She smiled and held out her arms for Willow.

Willow gladly walked into them. “I know, I’m just worried, I don’t want to leave again with him mad at me. I don’t want that between us.” She started to nuzzle and kiss Tara’s neck.

“Mmm, that feels nice, sweetheart.”

“I’m feeling a little Tara deprived, I need smoochies.”
“That works out well then because I was feeling a little Willow deprived.”

Tara walked Willow backward to the bed. Once Willow’s knees hit the end, she found herself pushed back. Starting at Willow’s knees, Tara slid sinuously up Willow’s body. She had felt Willow’s breath catch when her head had been above her lap, and speed up when her breasts rubbed the underside of Willow’s breasts until their nipples met through their clothing.

Finally, they were looking into each other’s eyes.

Tara’s voice had dropped sexily. “How about those kisses now?”

Willow squeaked and nodded, as Tara placed light kisses on each side of her mouth. Tara held herself above Willow, feasting on her with her eyes. As Tara lowered her head she held back just enough to lick over Willow’s lips and moan before diving in like a hungry man at a banquet.

Willow’s hand traveled up and down Tara’s back, but once the kisses began in earnest her hands rested on Tara’s bottom. She squeezed and tried to pull her closer. They stayed like that until Dawn called from the bottom of the stairs, asking if Tara still wanted to cook or if she should order out. A slightly foggy brained Tara said she would be down in a few minutes to cook.

“So what did you get for dinner?” Tara asked, before returning to nibble on Willow’s neck.

“Uhh, stuff…for Chicken Cacciatore…umm, that feels really, really nice…I’ve been dying for it…oh, Tara, suck a little harder, I love it when you do that,” Willow stuttered out.

With a pop, Tara released Willow’s neck. “If that’s what my baby wants, then that is what she shall have. Unfortunately, it won’t make itself, so we better head downstairs.”

With a heavy sigh, Willow released her hold and Tara got up. “Oh, but we will continue this later.”

With a saucy wink and a smile, Tara said, “But of course we will, sweetie, that’s a promise.”

TBC....
Chapter 18 B - My, my, my…looked what the cat – err Giles dragged in – and is there an ointment for it?

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: NC-17 – for the promised smut.

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 5 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: Sunnydale – The Summers House

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money – and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway – is involved, this is simply for my own pleasure and hopefully for those who are reading it.

Feedback: Alas, poor feedback, I knew ye well…

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: As always I would like to thank my beta Cyteach for all her help and encouragement. I would also like to bid foreverchanges a fond farewell and all the best in the new endeavor. You will be heartily missed. This chapter was written in transit – literally. I was traveling over the holidays so a good portion was written in airports in Tucson, Orlando, Atlanta, Nashville, and Dallas/Ft. Worth (yes, I was a busy girl). I listened to Heatmiser – “Mic City Sons”, Arcade Fire – “The Suburbs”, City and Colour – “Sometimes and Bring Me Your Love” and Goldfrapp – “Head First”. The lyrics below are from Heatmiser’s “Rest My Head Against The Wall”, and the link does work as of this posting.

***Also this is the first time I have done a chapter in parts, due to the close proximity of time frame, it was necessary because if it had been one long post it would have been far too much to read in one sitting. There are just a few hours between A & B, and overnight between B & C. Therefore chapter eighteen will have parts “B” & “C” for readability.***
I don't know when I lost my nerve
and I started a routine
and I walked across this corner
pinned my eyes to a shirt
cos I’m scared of being seen
locked myself in a stall
rest my head against the wall
still drunk I had a dream in the morning
pin myself to the chore
looking thru the cracks I saw the shadows on the tile
so I knocked on all the unlocked doors
locked myself in a stall
rest my head against the wall
and I’m not sure
that I’ve ever had the nerve
cos I’ve always felt like an easy kill
but I’m pretty sure
that I’m never gonna know
if I’m his kind of pill
unlocked the stall and wandered off
left my number on the wall…

Buffy and Dawn were in the kitchen cleaning up supper dishes when with a satisfied groan Willow flopped down on the couch rubbing her tummy. Tara came down the stairs and smiled at the sight. She sat down next to Willow, who leaned in and smiled up at her.

“That was amazing, baby, I forgot just how good, too.”
Tara kissed Willow’s temple affectionately, then reached down to take over rubbing slow circles on Willow’s stomach. Just then the phone rang loudly in the kitchen, breaking the easy calm that had settled after the girls had dinner.

“I got it,” Dawn hollered.

Tara and Willow could hear her end of the conversation.

“Hi Giles, uh huh, do you want to talk to her? Okay…okay, are you sure? Ya huh, alright, good I think. Uh, okay then, we’ll see you tomorrow, bye.”

Dawn walked into the living room wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“That was odd, Giles said he will see us tomorrow, and he’s okay. That’s it, he wanted to know if Willow was okay, I said yeah, and then he said he had to go. He sounded really tired, too.”
Buffy walked in and dropped into the chair. Just as she started to say something, there was a knock on the door promptly followed by Xander’s entrance. Willow sat up, her eyes wide with curiosity and concern at Xander’s arrival, and glanced around the room.

“Evening ladies, what’s the what?” Xander asked with forced joviality, looking everywhere but at Willow.

“Hey, Xan,” Buffy said.


Buffy and Dawn looked at Willow, then at each other.

“Are you hungry? We just finished dinner, but there are leftovers if you’re interested,” Tara said neutrally.

“Nah, thanks, Tara, I’m good. Could I talk to Willow?”
Tara looked at Willow, who made a subtle nod.

“I need to head out on patrol anyway, guys. Cookies when I get back?” Buffy asked looking at Tara.

Tara smiled and nodded. “Why don’t we go upstairs Dawnie, you can help me finish packing.”

Buffy rose and disappeared with the sound of the door opening and closing; Tara gave Xander a sympathetic pat on his shoulder as she moved past him to the stairs with Dawn in tow.

Willow sat patiently, waiting as Xander began to pace in front of her; it was apparent he was struggling with what he wanted to say next.

“Xander sit down, you’re going to wear a hole in the floor that you’ll just have to fix.” Willow sighed, “Say what you have to say.”

Xander stopped and faced Willow; he stuffed his hands into his pockets and stared at his feet.
“Will, I have, to be honest, this all just doesn’t seem like it’s of the good, but if you say it’s part of you then at the very least I have to try to be okay with it. Leaving because you have a problem, and coming back saying you now have better control of it, just doesn’t fit.” With a heavy sigh, Xander ran his fingers through his hair and faced Willow as he said, “I know you’re not my parents, Will, and I can’t compare you to them, it’s not like being a bitter, unhappy drunk.”

Willow shook her head. “No, Xander, in a way it is, but it is different; it’s needing the power so badly that I stopped caring about what I had to do to get it – what demons or spirits I might have had to make deals with. Maybe it’s not addiction in the traditional sense; maybe it’s more about being corrupted. Remember the Mayor? You’ve seen some of the Warlocks and Sorcerers we’ve been up against – they don’t look like anything with a soul or conscience, and trust me when I say some of them don’t look anything like fairy godmothers. All with the sweet and benign my hinny...”

“And it’s true that’s all a part of you?”

She nodded again.

“Then what am I supposed to say, Will? It scares me that something had you in such a way. There’s nothing I can do to help you, I can’t fight it for you – or even with you...but I have to trust you. Tara does, and after everything, if she does then I should too, right? Just give me some time to get used to the idea, okay?”
Xander looked at Willow hopefully.

Quietly Willow spoke, “You have it, Xander, and I know I’m not big with the trustworthiness right now. But think about this, Buffy said she didn’t feel a draw when I cast, doesn’t that prove anything to you? If she could feel me before, then the fact she doesn’t now should mean something too, right?”

Xander came and sat down next to her.

“Xander, you’re my best friend and we leave tomorrow. I don’t want this to hang over us, I don’t want to leave with you still angry with me. I am the magic and it is me, but the way I channel this power is so much different – it’s so much…more. I never understood when Tara tried to tell me, it didn’t seem to register until it was too late. Look at it this way; you wouldn’t go to work without your tool belt or hard hat, right? Buffy wouldn’t patrol without Mister. Pointy, would she? Just like Buffy can’t turn being a Slayer off, I can’t turn this off anymore, and just like Buffy trains, so does Tara, so do I. This makes us the best we can be and the safest we can be too.”

Willow took Xander’s hand in hers, as she looked at him evenly.

“Xander, I understand that you need time, take it. Just understand it doesn’t change, me – I’m still Willow. I hope you can reconcile geeky, spaz-y Willow with Willow the witch. In the end, there is no other option.”
Willow waited and watched as Xander processed the last of what she said. Concern still painted his face with shadows as he grappled with this new knowledge; he slowly nodded his acceptance and finally looked Willow with a semblance of his usual affection.

Willow slipped her other hand into his, holding it on her knee looking closely at her friend.

“Are we okay, Xander?” Willow asked earnestly, as she tried to hide her anxiety.

“Yeah, Will, we’re okay,” Xander said as he pulled her into a hug. Willow rested her head on his shoulder as they sat back on the couch, just enjoying the closeness of one another. It was like old times, the easiness of just being with one of your dearest friends.

They relaxed into one another and began to talk, began to laugh, and began to heal.

At the top of the stairs, Dawn and Tara sat holding hands, soft smiles on their faces.

Buffy stood up from the front porch where she had been quietly ‘not’ listening and headed towards a cemetery to start her patrol, smiling.
Dawn closed the door behind Xander with a smile, and with a happy sigh, she turned to go back into
the living room, smiling at its occupants.

“I should go to bed, guys.” Dawn pulled Willow off of the couch and into a big, long hug; repeating
her actions with Tara. “I’ll see you guys in the morning, yeah?”

Willow and Tara nodded, as they slipped an arm around each other.

“Goodnight, guys.”

“Goodnight, Dawnie,” Tara and Willow responded in unison, and then looked at each other, all three
smiling.
Willow turned to gather the empty glasses of milk and the plate of cookie crumbs to take into the kitchen; Tara took two of the cups from her and followed. Humming tunelessly, Willow rinsed the dishes before loading them into the dishwasher. Having hopped up on the island Tara watched her girlfriend move around the kitchen quietly, her motions fluid and easy; her comfort was obvious to Tara’s practiced eyes. Willow was happy, and this made Tara happy.

Willow turned to her drying her hands on a dishtowel, with a contented smile.

“Hey, baby,” Willow said softly.

Tara smiled. “Hey, sweetie. How are you feeling?” She asked.

Willow folded the towel and set it on the counter. “I don’t remember the last time I felt this good, Tara. I actually feel happy. I know we are going back to The Grove tomorrow, but that’s okay. It’s not forever – unless we want it to be, but home is still home.” Willow flashed a wide happy grin and then shrugged. “I don’t know, it could have been a whole lot worse – I guess I was expecting a whole lot worse – to be honest, I thought I deserved a whole lot worse. They all surprised me, even after I told them everything they’re still here…you’re still here.” Willow moved in front of Tara, easing her knees apart to stand between them. She cupped Tara’s cheek gently in her hand as she stared intently into Tara’s clear blue eyes, the love she was feeling written so plainly on her face.

Tara leaned in and gently brushed her lips against Willow’s. She slid a little closer to the edge of the counter while hooking her fingers in the belt loops of Willow’s jeans to pull her closer, deepening their kiss. Willow’s finger’s found their way into Tara’s hair, running the silky strands over her palms.
before she brought her hand to rest on the back of Tara’s neck to hold her in place.

Their kisses escalated from soft and sweet to fierce and lusty; they pulled apart gasping for air with their skin flushed and their eyes dilated and shiny.

“Maybe we should go finish what we started earlier, what do you think?” Tara asked breathlessly.

Willow just nodded vigorously, stepping back to help Tara hop down from her perch on the counter. Tara’s feet had barely hit the floor before she was being tugged behind Willow to the stairs. As they reached the top stair, Tara saw her bedroom door swing open gently and light appear from within.

Willow led Tara in and the room was aglow with what at first Tara thought were few dozen Tinkerbell lights, all pulsing with a warm light around the room. As she looked closer she could see they were actually individual tongues of flame. Willow closed the door behind them as she watched Tara approach one of the tongues of flame and hold her hand to it; it gave off no heat so she ran her fingers through it quickly. It shuddered like a flame would but nothing else. Taking a deep breath, Tara blew on it and again it flickered like a flame would but it didn’t go out.

Willow slid her arms around Tara from behind, kissing her shoulder and her neck while her fingers played just below the top of Tara’s jeans. Tara leaned back into Willow, her hand making its way into Willow’s hair as she nibbled on her neck.
Willow stopped kissing her, but her fingers kept moving over Tara’s skin leisurely. “The Tinkerbell spell was the inspiration. I used it to work on my focus and how specific I could be, but instead of asking for a Tinkerbell, I conjure a flame. More control, less energy, because it’s inanimate and Tinkerbells are cognizant. I have two versions, one that will burn anything that comes into contact with it and is impossible to put out; then this one that is purely for illumination; it doesn’t burn and as long as I concentrate, won’t go out.” Willow’s hands were trailing along Tara’s sides and stomach; she grazed the underside of Tara’s breasts. With gentle squeezes and pinches to the skin under her fingertips, Willow urged Tara to turn around to face her.

“Very creative of you,” Tara breathed. Tara latched on to the soft skin just above Willow’s collarbone, licking and sucking as her hands made their way to cup Willow’s bottom and firmly massage the flesh, bringing Willow up on her tiptoes with a whimper. Tara began to tug hurriedly at the hem of Willow’s shirt; Willow lifted her arms to allow Tara to pull the shirt off.

Pulling back from Tara, Willow said, “Wait, please? Let me undress you?”

Tara licked her lips and nodded her assent.

Willow began to circle her, and the tongues of flame began to dance. “Have I ever told you how beautiful I think your skin is?” Tara swallowed thickly and could only shake her head. “No? Lift for me baby,” Willow breathed as she pulled Tara’s shirt up and tossed it to the floor behind Tara. Willow rubbed her cheek along Tara’s now bare shoulders, with a contented purr that made Tara
shiver. “Silky and warm…heavenly,” Willow breathed into Tara’s ear.

Willow kissed down Tara’s spine to her bra latch, and with soft fingers quickly undid the little hooks. Flattening her tongue she licked the skin underneath where the hooks had been, sucking gently as the straps still held the bra in place. Undoing her own bra with one hand, then dropping it to the floor, she pressed herself into the newly exposed flesh of Tara’s back and groaned with pleasure as Tara whimpered. Willow gathered Tara’s hair gently and slid it over one shoulder so it fell down over her breast. “Your hair has gotten so long baby,” Willow murmured into Tara’s shoulder as she eased the straps down and her bra fell to the floor.

Tara cleared her throat and said softly, “I haven’t cut it since you left, Will.”

All of Willow’s movements ceased, and the flames stopped dancing. Willow wrapped her arms tight around Tara burying her face into Tara’s hair and taking a deep breath in. “Then when we get to Tucson let’s think about cutting our hair, you like my hair short like when we first met, right? Or maybe color or something, shed some of the past, what do you think?”

Tara turned in Willow’s arms and ran her fingers through the long red hair, with a soft smile she nodded.

“Yes, I think that would be a good idea, sweetie,” Tara said sincerely, then kissed Willow gently. Willow deepened the kiss, flicking her tongue against Tara’s lips asking permission before slipping her tongue in to coax and play, stoking their passions. Nibbling on Tara’s bottom lip, Willow then made her way along Tara’s jaw line and down her throat.
Swirling her tongue in the divot at the base of Tara’s throat, Willow sucked the skin into her mouth. “I love sucking on this spot, I love the feel of your pulse jump under my tongue, but the "jugular notch" isn’t very sexy, so I’ll have to come up with something else to call it, something as beautiful as you are, my Tara.”

Willow eased down to her knees in front of Tara, looking into her eyes as she slowly went down Willow could see Tara’s pupils dilate in the pools of deep blue. Smiling up at Tara, she kissed her stomach and again rubbed her cheeks against her soft skin, purring as her hands wandered over Tara’s bottom and thighs kneading the flesh underneath.

“I think I was telling you how much I love your skin, yes?” Willow asked as she sucked on the skin just under Tara’s belly button, her eyes cast upward. Tara nodded; her mouth open and Willow could see Tara’s tongue resting against her upper teeth as her fingers wandered through Willow’s hair. Willow tugged the button on her jeans loose with her teeth; lifting the zipper with her tongue, she sucked on it for a moment before she slowly unzipped Tara’s jeans using her teeth. Tara’s eyebrow rose as she watched, and a smirk formed on her lips at Willow’s little show.

Willow pulled the soft denim down around Tara’s ankles, and with light touches that seemed to burn as the flames began to dance again; Willow started tracing patterns up from her ankles, over her calves and up the backs of her thighs. Willow nuzzled the front of Tara’s panties and growled. “So smooth, with just a few freckles, not like me,” Willow’s eyes twinkled as she spoke and caressed Tara’s skin.

“Mmm, I’m not sure where I like best, sweetheart,” Willow looked up at Tara again, alternating between kneading her bottom and light touches over her thighs. “So soft and sweet like cream,” Willow said gripping the backs of Tara’s thighs a little harder as she pressed her nose and chin into Tara.
Tara’s breath caught, and she quickly stepped out of her jeans and began to pull at Willow’s shoulders. Willow smiled wickedly up at Tara and remained where she was on her knees. Pushing her chin against Tara again she growled, knowing just where the vibration would hit. “I love the way you smell,” Willow licked her lips. “Good enough to eat,” Willow smiled again.

The flames had started to shift color and slow to a gentle throb as Willow eased Tara’s panties down; once they were past Tara’s knees Willow let go of them so she could press her face into Tara’s wet curls. Wrapping her arms around Tara’s hips Willow ran her tongue over Tara’s sex, and she felt Tara begin to tremble.

“Willow,” Tara warned as she now stood naked before her lover.

Willow leaned back onto her heels and looked up at Tara, her cheeks had flushed and Willow could barely see any blue left in her eyes. Willow’s hands went to her jeans and as she stood, she stepped out of them. Leading Tara to the bed, Willow eased her down before crawling in next to her.

Willow’s eyes trailed over Tara reclined before her; with the utmost sincerity Willow locked into her gaze and said, “Tara, sonnets have been written about the beauty I see before me, civilizations have risen and fallen by words that grace the curl of lips like yours, men have been driven mad and to ruin trying to recapture the divinity I have before me. I have been blessed to have won the favor of a goddess, and she lies here before me,” Willow lay down next to Tara and trailed her finger along Tara’s jaw, down between her breasts, and cupped her hand possessively over Tara’s wet center. “And I will gladly spend the rest of my days making you believe every word I have just said, my darling.”
Willow’s kiss was fierce, passionate and soul-shattering. Tara wound her fingers in Willow’s hair as Willow entered her first with two fingers.

With a throaty moan, Tara’s hips rose to meet Willow’s fingers. “Oh, my sweet love,” Tara breathed into Willow’s ear after breaking their kiss. Willow moved with long, slow, deliberate strokes, coating her fingers in Tara. Willow pulled her fingers completely free from Tara and brought them to her mouth to suck on as Tara watched her.

Tara bit her lower lip, as Willow’s eyes closed in pleasure. Tara pulled Willow’s fingers from her mouth, to guide her hand back down and commanded, “More. And don’t. You. Dare. Stop.”

Willow’s jaw dropped slightly as she obeyed, entering Tara with three fingers then watching the effect on her lover’s body. Tara’s nipples hardened as she pressed her head back against the pillows with a moan. A flush broke out from her navel to her cheeks.

“Yessss,” Tara hissed her approval.

Willow dropped her head to Tara’s breast, flicking her tongue around the already sensitive skin of her puckered nipple before drawing it into her mouth.
Tara pulled on Willow’s hair to get her attention. “Uhh, Willow, faster and harder – NOW.”

Willow quirked an eyebrow and gladly obliged, Tara was so wet she slipped in a fourth finger to keep the friction going and as soon as she did Tara began to shake. Willow could feel her inner walls vibrate as Tara moved closer to climax.

“Oh Willow, I’m coming…for you,” she gasped, and as Willow continued the pace and pressure Tara began to orgasm. As she peaked, Tara began to glow while she arched her back off the bed. All of Willow’s tongues of flame went out as her control faltered and Tara’s glow lit the room.

Willow had never seen anything as erotic as the profound look of pleasure on Tara’s face, still stroking Tara she crested again into a new orgasm and as she did Tara opened her eyes to look at Willow.

Tara’s eyes had changed to the exact hue of blue her aura had when they had meditated together at the Grove. Willow watched as Tara slowly lifted her hand and placed it over Willow’s heart and once again it was like a connected circuit. With Willow’s fingers inside Tara and Tara’s hand over her heart, Willow began to orgasm.

Willow threw her head back as she emitted her own glow, her toes curled, somehow she managed to keep her hand in motion, as Tara began to crest and fall so, did she. It was no longer Tara or Willow’s orgasm it was one that they shared. She could feel the force and pressure she applied to Tara within herself. It was unlike any sensation they had ever shared before. The colors swirled and merged, arched and raced around them; sweat dripped slowly down their bodies, and it was with a
final keening moan from them both that Willow collapsed onto Tara. Their bodies stilled, breathing in gasps.

“No more, no more, no more,” Tara whimpered.

Willow gently removed her fingers from within Tara and after trying to catch her breath with what remaining strength she had, gathered Tara to her as the glow faded from them both.

“Baby, are you okay? Did I hurt you?” Willow asked a little afraid of what had just happened.

When she got no response, Willow conjured a flame again to sit above the bed as she pushed herself upright to be able to look at Tara, who was in tears.

“Oh god, Tara, I hurt you, please talk to me tell what to do. Do I need to call an ambulance?” The fear in Willow’s voice got Tara to open her eyes.

“No, not pain, good tears…I saw your soul Willow, it’s so beautiful…just like you,” Tara whispered, “I’m gonna be sore tomorrow but I think you will too, what did you feel, what did you see, Will?”
Willow kissed Tara’s temple. “You started to glow like you did at the Grove, your eyes changed too, but when you touched me, it was like we became one body. I could feel my hand inside you, inside me. It was like we were no longer separate Tara, it was…amazing. We’re always amazing, but I felt you, and I’ve never been so…connected to you, baby.”

“I’m cold,” Tara said softly. “We’re gonna have to wash these sheets in the morning. I don’t think there’s just ‘a’ wet spot either.”

Willow pulled the covers up over them giggling. “I think you’re right if you give me a little bit of time I can change the sheets, but I’m not sure I can stand at the moment.”

“Uhuh, I just wanna sleep now, baby. I want to be in your arms and we’ll take care of it tomorrow,” Tara said as she burrowed into Willow’s shoulder.

“Whatever you want, love,” Willow said softly.

“Whatsoever I want?” Tara asked a smile in her voice.
“Absolutely,” Willow answered.

“I want you to kiss me,” Tara said, turning her face towards Willow.

“Yes, ma’am,” Willow smiled, kissing Tara softly. “I love you so much, my Tara.”

“Mmmm, I love you too my Willow, so very much,” Tara mumbled sleepily.

Limbs entwined the two fell asleep quickly into a warm, deep and dreamless sleep.

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“Tara?” Willow called as she looked at the bags of things to be shipped ahead of them, noticing a familiarly shaped case but one she couldn’t recall Tara ever having before.

“Yes?” Tara called from the bathroom.
“What is this?” Willow asked as she stood with her hands on her hips and the bed sheets at her feet.

Tara walked out of the bathroom, stopping next to Willow.

“What is what?”

“That,” Willow pointed. “I don’t remember seeing it yesterday, and I know it wasn’t here…well before.”

“You’re right it wasn’t here then or yesterday. I pulled it out of the closet this morning, and I didn’t think you’d have a problem being with a musician,” Tara said with a smile, as she grabbed the guitar case and opened it to show a Fender CD-100 left-handed, dreadnought acoustic guitar.

Willow looked at the guitar and then at her girlfriend and back again. “It’s a lefty,” she said. “When?”
“Yes, it is a lefty, and I’ve been playing for almost a year now. I tutored a guy in Art History and he taught me to play in return. He’s a lefty and lent me one of his to practice with until I got my own. So that’s how I learned to play. There’s a whole sweet story about him proposing to his girlfriend, I’ll have to tell you about. We played for her, it was great, she said yes of course, very romantic.” Tara smiled.

Willow looked between the guitar and her girlfriend again faintly amused. “Well, you write with both hands so it being a lefty isn’t a total shock, I love to hear you sing, baby, so now you can serenade me. Do I send it with Xander to ship or does it fly with us?”

“It goes with us, maybe if you’re good I’ll serenade you tonight,” Tara said with a wink.

“Damn, I’m lucky. My girl is hot and smart, and hot, and a musician, and hot…” Willow teased twirling a lock of hair around her finger.

“Yes, you are and yes, she is, so don’t you forget it, missy,” Tara said with a cocky smile before she dropped a kiss on Willow’s nose, holding her close.

“We should take these down so we can have them done before we leave,” Willow nudged the bed sheets with her foot.
“Xander will be here in about an hour to take the stuff we are shipping, and Giles should be here anytime. I still wonder what was up with him; we haven’t seen him at all. I thought he would have been here some while we were back, but nope, vanishing Giles. Do you think he will finally spill about whatever it was he started to tell us and didn’t on the flight here?”

Tara snickered again. “Are we getting a little anxious, sweetie?”

Willow blushed.

“I would have thought you’d be too relaxed and sore to get wound up, honey,” Tara said as she walked back into the bathroom.

It took a minute for what she said to sink in as Willow followed her into the bathroom, then she slinked up behind Tara, unzipped her jeans and slipped her hands down onto Tara’s hips and played with the top of her panties.

“Mmm, how sore are you, baby? It is a good kinda sore, and I can never get enough of you,” Willow peered over Tara’s shoulder at her via the mirror, kissing her way up Tara’s neck.
Tara whimpered, “Not fair, too sore…maybe later?”

Willow sighed and leaned her forehead against Tara’s shoulder as she zipped Tara's jeans back up. “Oh thank god, baby I don’t think I could right now either, I need a little time to recuperate.”

Tara turned slightly and swatted at Willow’s hip. “Vixen. Go start the sheets, let me finish and I’ll be down in a minute.”

Nipping Tara’s shoulder, Willow acquiesced, “Yes, ma’am.” Before she bounced away.

Tara heard a knock at the front door but it didn’t open, so she knew it wasn’t Xander, then Willow yelled out, “Coming!”

This was followed shortly by, “What the hell Giles? Tara!”
Tara made her way down the stairs to find Willow at the bottom staring at Giles, who looked a bit worse for wear, and the figure with him in the doorway.

“Giles, hi, what’s the…what the hell, Giles?” Tara said with recognition of the figure standing slump-shouldered beside Giles making Tara as uneasy as Willow at the visitor’s close proximity.

This brought Dawn out of her room and down the stairs.

“Yes, well as you may recall the Council had a list of potential initiates for your coven and…” Giles started to explain.

“BUFFY!” Dawn yelled.

“What are you yelling for, Dawn, I’m right here,” Buffy said coming up from the basement. “Who is…”

“Talk about rode hard and put up wet one too many times, geez,” Tara muttered so Willow could hear her.
Willow just turned to look at Tara, mouth slightly agape and nodded. Turning back to Giles and his ‘companion’ with her face clouded in anger, Willow continued to glare at the pair unsure of what was coming next.

“Yes, if you’ll just let me explain,” Giles tried again. “Then this will all make sense.”

“Giles, no, not in my house, not after everything Willow has gone through,” Buffy said harshly, now that she too recognized the pathetic figure standing beside him, not looking up at any of them.

“Amy,” The four girls said in unison and thinly veiled disgust.

TBC...
Chapter 18 C - Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: R – for a little bit of language

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about an 8 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: Sunnydale – The Summers House

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money – and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway – is involved, this is simply for my own pleasure and hopefully for those who are reading it.

Feedback: I request it, I crave it, I do read them, and any suggestion or pointers are given will be taken.

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes: Well, kiddies first and foremost I'd like to thank my beta Cyteach; Crystal you're such a help, you just don't know! This chapter was written entirely to Adele's "21" - I highly suggest it, she's just amazing. This ties up the three parts that have made up this chapter bringing it to a total of forty pages and a word count of 16,911. I feel like I should sing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ to it or something, lol. Onward we go! I also have to say this is probably the darkest entry in the story yet, so be forewarned.
for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning in early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements, high ego).

2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.

3. Requires excessive admiration.

4. Has a sense of entitlement, (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations).

5. Is interpersonally exploitative, (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends).

6. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.

7. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.

8. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes

Willow shifted on her feet and stared at Amy. The form that stood before her looked nothing like the girl she once knew. Tara’s observation was spot on, even though Amy was clean and so was her clothes, there was something feral about her. Maybe it had always been there; her eyes darker than the warm brown they had been, her hair had stripes of green and blue in it, but the colors didn’t hide the coarse straw like condition of the hair. Her face was heavily made up, making her look much older, and the texture of her skin seemed to be almost as coarse as her hair, and sallow that couldn’t be hidden under the heavy eye makeup and lip color. She now had a prominent scar on her lower lip to the underside of her chin.

Amy stared from under her bangs back at the girls in front of her; her nostrils flared and subconsciously her nose twitched, as a slow smirk began to crawl across her features.

“I have to take care of this,” Willow said lifting the sheets in her hands as she turned to go to the basement.

Buffy stopped short of Giles, her arms crossed over her chest and her own “resolve face” in place as she eyed Amy, her distrust obvious.

“Giles, she can wait on the porch for all I care, I don’t trust her near Willow. I know she’s a sneaky, self-serving bitch, so why should I let her anywhere near anyone I care about at all?”

Giles ran his hand through his hair and sighed. “Buffy, I understand your reticence, but I can assure you she can’t harm anyone at the moment.”
Dawn piped up. “She’s so twitchy, once a rat, always a rat, I guess. Look at her Giles; I wouldn’t trust her as far as Xander could throw her.”

“Dawn,” Tara said, as she shot Dawn a look and kept a wary eye on the witch in front of her.

Willow topped the stairs and leaned on the door frame from the basement; she watched this unfold, and the creepy smirk on Amy’s face grow. Amy turned her head slightly as she almost sniffed the air like the rat she had once been, and spoke for the first time.

“My Willow, things have changed, haven’t they? Do you remember when we first cast together? How about the Bronze?” She inhaled deeply, although she kept her eyes downcast. “Yes, things have changed…”

Willow moved so quickly it seemed like she just appeared in front of Amy, staring at her suspiciously as she addressed Giles.

“Who bound her? This isn’t you, Giles, so who did it?”

Giles cleared his throat and spoke softly. “Rowan,”

Willow glanced at him. “Who?”

Clearing his throat, Giles answered, “Rowan bound her, Willow.”

Willow placed her finger under Amy’s chin forcing her to look up into her eyes. This made Amy start to shift, her uneasiness under Willow’s cold gaze becoming quite clear. “Lady Rowan came here to bind this one? Why? What makes this one special enough for Lady Rowan to do it herself?”

“She’s going back to The Grove with us, Willow. She is one of the witches the Council is interested in being a part of the coven should it be formed, but as you can see she’s not in any condition…” Giles trailed off and waved a hand at Amy as if that explained everything.

Willow laughed; it was harsh and cold, and so unlike Willow’s normally warm laughter.

Amy flinched under the scrutiny and laughter. Any bravado she attempted to display seeped away.

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Giles, Lady Rowan agreed to work with her in some way, didn’t she?” Willow said.

Giles just nodded.

Willow shook her head. “Giles, you have some explaining to do.”

Willow looked hard at Amy, seeing in her what could have been her own fate. “Amy, what did you let yourself do? What was so important that you lost you, hmm?” Willow’s voice was so sad.

Shaking her head again she turned her back to Amy moving into the living room. “If you like, tie her to a chair, Buff. Since she’s going back with us we have to deal with her for now. We leave in a few hours anyway and she can’t pull anything. I trust Lady Rowan’s binding far more than I would anything the Council could provide.”

Willow began to pace and really look at Giles. She noticed a bruise on his jaw and several scratches on his hands.

“Geez Giles, did she do that to you?”

“Well, yes,” Giles said as he entered the living room with the daylight coming in, dark circles under his eyes and more scratches on his face becoming clear. “It seems our Miss Madison, had err...decided to form her own little ‘coven’ of miscreants. With Rack gone, there was an open market for that kind of thing here, and while her ‘coven’, and I use that term in the loosest sense of the word, held no real power, they had intimidation and fear. She was the only one with any real potential for power.”

Giles sat in the armchair, taking his glasses off and pinching the bridge of his nose. Buffy came in from the kitchen carrying rope in one hand and a chair in the other.

“Have a seat, Amy,” Buffy said pointing at the chair.

Tara and Dawn were still on the stairs watching Amy warily, waiting for anything she might try. Amy shuffled over to the chair and sat. She continued to watch Willow with the utmost interest. Once Amy was tied securely to the chair by Buffy, Tara and Dawn made their way to the couch and sat waiting for Giles to continue.

“She bullied anyone with any potential into joining with her and then drained any of their own acquired magicks that they might have. Here on the hellmouth, as you well know, Willow, it seems to enhance even the smallest bits of latent talent. So instead of feeding off of the magicks, the way Rack had to then feed it back altered, she was simply taking. What she gave back was fear, not magicks – fear of her – she kept them subjugated to her, more or less as servants. As long as they
feared her, she could bend them to her will.”

Willow turned to look at Amy, her eyes narrowed. “How did you bind her then, Giles?”

Amy started to laugh and it was a hollow, evil sound. “Yes, Giles, how did you bind me?” her tone flippant.

“That’s where Rowan and Dana come in. They agreed to bind her after I explained what I had found her to be doing. We separated her from her coven, and gave her an offer and then an ultimatum. The offer was help, a way out of practicing by way of fear and cruelty. We tried to explain that’s not what these gifts are for. Well, ask her yourself, Willow, she’s not even a sixteenth of the witch you are, and nowhere near what Rack had become. She’s a wannabe, she doesn’t even have the power her mother had, but like her mother, she has the malice of intent.” Giles spoke softly, his voice carrying strains of fatigue.

“Why?” Willow asked Amy.

Amy laughed again. “Why else, Willow? The power! I know you liked the power Willow, so you know how it can be. Power over others, power over nature itself, bending the natural order to my will — what’s not to like about that? But you’re not the same anymore, are you, sweet Willow? What happened to you? We could have been great together, you know. We still could.” Amy then stared maliciously at Tara. “It was always you, though. I thought once you were gone, she’d see, and what a team we would make.” Amy rolled her eyes dramatically. “It always came back to you; do you know how much whining about you I had to listen to? Just when I thought I had her, you came back…” Amy spat.

Tara sat expressionlessly, but a coldness crept into her eyes that lowered the temperature in the room ten degrees with its strength. “You never had a clue, did you? Did those years as a rat teach you nothing?” She asked softly.

Willow muttered, “Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Willow cleared her throat. “Amy, I never wanted to hurt anyone. Why do you think I stopped seeing you and Rack? When Tara left, that’s what it took. I finally realized that I had started to become something I never wanted to be.”

“And what is that, sweet Willow? You finally grew a pair, only to give them back?” Amy said contemptuously.

Willow laughed sadly. “You, Amy. I never wanted to be like you or your mother. I just wanted to help people, it was when that line became so blurred and I thought I knew best for everyone…” Willow shook her head. “No one has the right to take away anyone’s free will. You would think after what your mother did to you that lesson would have been learned by you, but I guess some people never learn.”
With a growl, Amy tried to lunge at Willow but only succeeded in hopping in the chair, causing her to pitch forward towards the floor face first. Both Dawn and Tara leaped to their feet, ready to charge in Willow's defense.

Willow reacted instinctually to protect herself; a small field shimmered in front of her that stopped Amy's fall as it wrapped itself around her, holding her in place. Amy's eyes widened in surprise as she was held at a forty-five-degree angle momentarily before Buffy grabbed her.

Willow watched as Buffy righted Amy in the chair. “So you were bound by force then, weren’t you? Why are you agreeing to go to The Grove?” Willow asked and got nothing but a hate-filled stare in return.

“Giles?”

“It was either getting help here or let the Council take her back with them to do whatever it is they do to witches that prey on their own,” Giles said with some distaste.

Willow chewed on the side of her thumb while looking intently at Amy. Suddenly Dawn started to laugh, causing all eyes to turn to her.

"Don't you see it? She's in love with you, Willow, and jealous of Tara," Dawn said. "C'mon Will, it never crossed your mind? Why else would she get as bent as she did when you didn't want to see her anymore? That’s a little more than friendly, don’t ya think?"

"Dawnie, there's no way..." Willow trailed off surprised at the suggestion and looked to Tara for back up.

Tara shrugged. "She has a point, Will. Why else would she come back and dose you just to get you to go back to Rack's with her? That's a pretty crappy way to get near you, but it's one she thought would work, right?"

"Even I have to agree; maybe Dawn is on to something," Buffy said.

"You're all nuts! It was never like that between us. We cast some in high school, we were kids, we didn't know what we were doing back then, and bam! She turned herself into a rat! I didn't even know I was gay then! End of story until I turned her back. Yeah, we did some stupid things at The Bronze, but that doesn't mean anything..." Willow huffed.
Amy sat silently while being talked about like she wasn't there, her expression carefully blank.

"Will, maybe it wasn't for you, but the one person that can deny it isn't, now is she?" Tara said as she pointed at Amy.

Willow turned to Amy. "Amy, tell them they're wrong."

Amy's shoulders started to shake, and she hung her head, only to throw it back laughing, a hollow and cruel sound.

"In love with her? Willow has everything I should've had, and what's worse, after you left, she didn't even want it! Love her? She's weak! She let love blind her to what's really important, the only thing that makes any difference in this world or the next - power. All because of you, with your simpering little stutter, 'W-Willow that's n-not what m-magicks are f-for,' - how would you know? ‘Oh Amy, she has the bluest eyes I've ever seen, and the softest hair, I love her hair, and skin, oh god, she has the greatest skin,’ I listened to that drivel for hours! It's amazing I didn't drag you to Rack just to get you to shut up about her. The pair of you is pathetic!" Amy mimicked and raged.

Willow grabbed Amy's jaw forcing her to look at her. "You don't ever get to talk to her that way."

Amy spat in Willow's face.

The room grew deadly quiet, as everyone held their breath waiting for what Willow’s reaction was going to be. Slowly Willow wiped the spit from her cheek and continued to hold Amy, her grip so tight her knuckles were turning white.

"Power? You wanted power? And what? I was going to get it and just hand it over to you on a silver platter? You want to know the consequences of what true power is like, Amy? Let's take a little tour, shall we?" Willow clapped her free hand over Amy's eyes and poured out her memories of her time in England, the pain, the sickness, all of it for Amy to see. The muscle spasms, feeding tubes, broken bones.

Amy started to dry heave and gag as she was forced to relive Willow's withdrawals. Tears started to pour down her face and she began to sweat.

Willow let her go; shaking, she stumbled to move away from Amy. Tara was immediately by her side to steady Willow and led her to the couch to sit.

"Dawn, can you get some water?" Tara asked.
"I'm alright, really, I promise." Willow said her voice shaky and thin.

Dawn came back and handed the glass to Tara. Giles sat quietly watching Willow, with a wary eye.

"Willow, what just happened?" Giles asked gently.

"Nothing, I didn't hurt her or anything. I just showed her...showed her what England was like for me. That's all...she just saw it all once, like a movie – The Exorcist uncut maybe," Willow tried to joke between sips of water.

Buffy glared at Amy. "Isn't there a spell to keep her quiet? If not, I'm sure we can find something to gag her with."

"Buff, its ok..." Willow started to say.

"No Will, it's really not. We have to travel with her. Giles explain. What the hell is going on?" Tara said softly as she put her arm around Willow protectively.

"Yes, of course. Given what her options are, Miss Madison has chosen to go to The Grove and work with Rowan to release back what she has taken and once that is complete, she has agreed to be permanently bound and never practice again. She is on the Council’s list; it would appear she has family there at The Grove to help in the process," Giles said.

"After what you just saw, do you honestly believe she won't practice again, Giles? That she won't want the power of it?" Willow asked.

"Given what has just happened, no, I don't think she'll be able not to attempt to practice again," Giles responded.

"Wait, you said she has family there? Who?" Tara asked cautiously.

Giles cleared his throat. "It would appear that Tabitha Rosseur and Amy are cousins. Rosseur was Catherine's maiden name. Amy's Uncle Byron Rosseur married a woman, Jill Mayfair, who had a small amount of power, Byron, himself chose never to practice but was as strong as Amy's mother, Catherine, if not stronger though untrained. Or at least he was; he died in an apparent suicide when Tabitha was twelve. He was found in the family's swimming pool by Tabitha."

"Oh," Willow said. "What happened to Jill?"
"The last we know she was placed in a psychiatric hospital in her hometown, we believe," Giles cleared his throat. "We believe that Amy's mother took whatever power Jill had and may have even had a hand in Byron's death." Giles gave Willow a meaningful look.

Willow nodded her understanding that there would be another conversation later that would give more detail.

"Well that explains a lot," Tara said.

Willow looked at Tara for a moment. "Oh, it does, doesn't it?"

"Um, can you get us a seat on the clue train there, Will? What does it explain?" Buffy asked her eyebrow quirked in question.

Willow smiled weakly. "Tabitha is...off. That's the only way to explain it, there's just something about her that makes your skin crawl. So her being Amy's cousin would explain it, especially now." Willow pointed to Amy making her point clear.

"Giles, why is Tabitha at The Grove?" Tara asked.

"Due to the trauma of finding her father and her mother's subsequent hospitalization, she needed someone to take her in and teach her how to control the power she has. It would seem that Tabitha actually has some power and is also on the list of witches of interest. She couldn't be turned over to the foster care system for obvious reasons. Once again, Rowan stepped up to take her in." Giles began cleaning his glasses.

"So Amy comes from a long line of fruit loops," Dawn snarked.

"Dawn," Buffy said.

"She isn't far off though, is she?" Amy said with a clenched jaw. This was the first time since Willow let her go that she had spoken. Her face was slick with sweat and her already sickly pallor had only gotten worse. "Lucky me, a good ol' reunion with my dear cousin Tabby." Her voice lacked any form of sincerity or warmth at all.

"Giles, a gag, please?" Buffy asked menacingly.

"It's what she wants, Buff, just let her be, she'll shut up on her own," Willow said. "Besides, if I know Lady Rowan, her binding will have a timer in it to keep her in line until she's at The Grove."
Am I right Giles?"

"Yes, Willow, you are exactly right," Giles looked at his watch. "She should have another twenty minutes before she'll be out until half an hour before we need to leave for the flight. Rowan's quite amazing with her spell work, you know."

Willow smiled.

Everyone sat quietly watching Amy waiting for the timer in her binding to kick in before delving into just what would be happening next.

Willow leaned into Tara's embrace, slowly sipping away at the water, but her eyes never left Amy.

"Baby, what do you see when you look at her?" Willow asked.

Tara stroked Willow's cheek and turned her full attention to Amy and gasped. Everyone looked at Tara as she stared.

"I've never seen anything like it, Will. Not even when Faith was in Buffy's body. It's beyond forced, it's ruptured...or like shards forced into place, but none fit. Some are stronger than others, mostly dark, murky greys and browns. A few slivers of blue and even fewer of white." Tara turned to Willow. "Willow, I don't see how she functions, there are so many things fighting for control..." Tara just shook her head sadly.

Just then, with a gasp, Amy went out like a candle.

"Wow, that must be what narcoleptic looks like," Buffy said.

Everyone looked at Buffy.

"What? I did pay some attention in some of my classes," Buffy said defensively.

"When did they start holding class in Riley's room, Buff?" Willow snickered.

Buffy turned bright red. "Okay, okay, so it was when you made me watch 'My Own Private Idaho' and River Phoenix kept falling out, I looked it up."
Giles rose and went to the kitchen followed by the four girls. They went into the dining room and sat down around the table. Giles could be heard putting the kettle on in the kitchen. Just as the kettle began to whistle, the front door opened and Xander came in.

"Whoa," They heard Xander say before he went to find the rest of the gang. Giles had just sat down and everyone was looking anxiously at him, causing him to stop short.

"Would anyone care to explain the who with the why there's a girl tied to a chair in your living room?" Xander asked.

"It's Amy, and she's going back to The Grove with us, Xander," Willow said quietly.

"Oh, well that explains everything, then," Xander said sarcastically.

"Xander, sit down please, and I'll try to explain," Giles said.

"Sure G-Man, what's the what?"

With a grimace and a sigh, Giles began. "Before leaving England I managed to get some information about the Council being interested in Willow and Tara forming a coven. They also had been watching 'witches of interest', so to speak. They wanted to influence who would be participating in an effort to have some control over the coven. They are banking on Willow feeling some sense of gratitude strong enough to make her agree to their terms." Giles paused to take a healthy swallow of his tea.

"Which there is no chance of this happening. Willow and I have already talked about this. She feels no sense of debt, and if we form a coven it's on our terms, the Council be damned," Tara said.

"Quite right, as it should be. However, when I saw Amy's name, I thought perhaps I might make some contact with her to test the waters. I had no idea I would find her in her present state. I called Rowan at once, and of course, she agreed to help. Potentially, Amy could be dangerous, and that is the point of taking her with us. To remove that threat. So Rowan and Dana came here, and we forcefully bound Amy. She cannot cast nor will she be able to until it is removed by Rowan."

"That won't happen anytime soon will it?" Dawn asked her brow furrowed with worry.

"No, even once we get back she will simply modify it to remove the sleep timer, but Amy won't be able to cast in the near future," Giles responded, placing a hand over Dawn’s.

"So what's the plan then, Giles? What about what you said about her Uncle and Tabitha?"
"Ah yes, well we believe Amy's mother was practicing with Jill, Tabitha's mother. Now, we don't know any of this for sure, but everything points to her doing just what Amy was doing. Draining them, we don't know if Byron found out, or if she tried to drain him and he tried to stop her, but we do know Jill has been catatonic for the last decade since Byron's death. There are also indications that Amy and Tabitha may have somehow been involved." Giles took his glasses off and began to clean them as he looked around the table.

"So the screwball didn't fall far from the tree," Xander said.

"Ahh, yes, so it would appear, Xander," Giles said.

"Giles, that explains so much about Amy. It's so sad though," Willow said softly.

"Is there anything more we can do to make sure she is out of commission until you guys are safely at The Grove?" Buffy asked as she drummed her fingers on the table, obviously agitated.

"Buffy, I trust Lady Rowan. She doesn't do anything halfway, so if she bound Amy, she'll stay bound," Willow stated, with Giles' nod of approval.

"It makes me incredibly uneasy, but if both Giles and Willow trust this binding, then I'll go along with it, but I think we should be extra alert. She’s not harmless or stupid," Tara added trying to ease Buffy's nerves as well as her own.

"How much time do we have left on her timer Giles?" Willow questioned.

Giles checked his watch and rubbed his face, his fatigue plain. "We leave in an hour and a half, so she'll be out for another hour. She'll be awake for an hour, and we'll use a wheelchair to get her to the gate in case the flight is delayed and her timer kicks in again. She'll be out for four hours. Enough to cover the flight and the drive to The Grove."

"Wow, this Lady Rowan thought of everything, didn't she?" Xander quipped.

"Xan, she would trust me," Willow smiled sadly.

“Does it hurt her, when she goes out like that?” Dawn asked.

“No, Dawn, it’s like being heavily sedated and just falling deeply asleep. She’s not aware of what’s going on around her, she’s in no pain. She wakes up groggy and compliant. Rowan really did think
of everything in order to make this as easy as possible until we can get safely to The Grove.” Giles said.

“I’ve never seen anything like it, Giles; it’s kind of scary to watch. Just how strong has she gotten?” Buffy asked.

“By herself, she is a moderately powerful witch. When directing her coven, she had gotten very powerful, because she was accessing the power of twelve other people to feed her own. She will never have the power Willow or Tara has, but at that level, she was comparable to her mother; making her no small threat on the magickal level.”

Willow looked at Tara with a small smile at the mention of her power. Tara smiled back shyly, ducking her head slightly.

Buffy started to get up from the table. "Well, let's load everything up, that will kill some time. Will, why don't you, Tara, and Giles stay with the Wicked Witch of the West and we'll take care of the rest, ok? I'd just feel better knowing that if anything happens we've got our best defense at the ready," Buffy said trying to smile.

"That's probably a wise decision, Buffy," Giles said shuffling into the kitchen to pour himself more tea.

Everyone rose; Buffy, Xander, and Dawn disappeared to take care of several bags Willow and Tara had coalesced to take with them. Some Xander would be shipping after getting everyone to the airport and on their way.

"Besides, Giles you look almost as bad as Amy, so maybe you can rest for a bit before we leave," Tara observed openly.

"I'm just going to put the sheets in the dryer, baby... unless you wanna come with me for a few smoochies? I could use a hug too," Willow said as she slipped her arms around Tara.

"Aww, sweetie are you ok?" Concern clear in Tara's voice.

"I am now. I don't know what's worse, Tara, seeing her like this or knowing it could have been me. I knew her mother wasn't exactly June Cleaver but I didn't think she was Mommy Dearest from Hell either," Willow tightened her hold on Tara and rested her chin on her shoulder.

Tara stroked Willow's back trying to soothe her. "No, I imagine you didn't, sweetie, but this is the hellmouth. Things like this happen here, and it seems more bizarre than in other places." Tara pulled
back to look at Willow. "But Will, I don't think you would have ended up like Amy. Your motivation was different; ultimately you saw what it was doing to you and you didn't want that for yourself. Amy just didn't care."

"You're right, as usual," Willow said placing a soft kiss on Tara's lips. "Sheets, we can make the bed back up before we leave."

Tara chuckled wickedly. "Makes clean sheet day have a whole new meaning."

"I don't mind when the cause was anything like last night, baby," Willow pulled Tara close again so she could bury her face in her neck.

"Mmm, me either," Tara purred. "Did you really say all those things to her about me?" She asked, her natural shyness coming through.

Willow placed several small kisses on Tara’s neck before replying, “Yes, God, Tara, don’t you know how I adore you — how beautiful I think you are? Not just physically, but your soul is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen! It doesn’t hurt that it’s wrapped up in such a yummy package.” Willow wiggled her eyebrows at Tara with a goofy smile.

“You goof,” Tara said giving Willow a peck on the cheek. “Sheets. Don’t get sidetracked, sweetie.”

"Yes, ma'am, but it's so easy to do," Willow smiled as Tara led her off to the basement.

*****

After a few minutes, they were back in the living room watching Amy sleep. The cars were loaded up and ready for the trip to the airport. Now it was all about the waiting. Giles rested in the armchair, while Buffy paced in the kitchen. Dawn and Xander channel surfed to waste time.

Slowly, Amy’s fingers started to twitch, and Tara squeezed Willow’s knee. With a short nod of her head towards Amy, they watched her come back to life. They knew it meant it was time to go.

Willow woke Giles, while Buffy freed Amy from the chair and they all trooped out to waiting cars. As they pulled away from the Summers House, both Tara and Willow turned to look over their shoulders from the backseat of Xander’s car, as he followed Giles down and away from Revello Drive.
TBC...
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: PG-13 for slightly sexual situations

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 6 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson, Arizona

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money – and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway – is involved, this is simply for my own pleasure and hopefully for those who are reading it.

Feedback: Is critical, have at it. Please don’t make me beg – it’s just not pretty.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I thought after the last chapter I might need a little time before I had the next one, and it appears I was right. Before I go any further, I’d like to thank my beta CYTEACH, Crystal, your encouragement and support mean so much, and you can now put the sharp stick away – or at least stop sharpening it, that last jab left a mark ^_~. This chapter has turned out to be a “music heavy” chapter, in terms of music being used in the chapter itself, it’s also the shortest to date (I think). So click on the links, I hope you enjoy them as much as I do and see how they could fit. The music used during the chapter was Bright Eyes “The People's Key”, Iron and Wine “Kiss Each Other Clean”, Cut Copy “Zonoscope”, Sheryl Crow “The Globe Sessions”, and The Decemberists “The Hazards of Love”. The three songs Tara sings for Willow are all by City and Colour; “The Girl” aka “the proposal song”, is from the cd “Bring Me Your Love” and “Like Knives” and “Hello, I’m in Delaware” are both from “Sometimes”. These of course “technically” were even out if you want to be strict timeline wise, but in my timeline, good music is always allowed so they get godmothered in…or would that be fairy godmothered in? Whatever works. ^_~

Also the links for the songs used in the story work as of this reposting.
The Road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And must follow, if I can.
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way.
Where many path and errands meet.
And wither then? I cannot say.
– J.R.R. Tolkien - The Lord of the Rings

The strange looking little group stood staring out into the Tucson early summer dry heat, waiting for the rental car to be brought around. What an odd little group they must have seemed; Amy’s pseudo-goth look and semi-drugged stance, her arm being held tightly by Giles sans his usual tweed-y-ness, but stiff nonetheless, followed by Tara’s fresh-faced, blonde hair and blue eyed beauty, and rounded out by Willow’s peaches n’ cream girlish sweetness, holding tightly to each other's hands, and obviously a couple.

An overly cheery young man hopped out of an SUV and gave Giles a conspiratorial smile while he opened the passenger doors, onto whom Giles leveled his best British condescending sneer before ushering Amy into the backseat of the vehicle, while Tara and Willow took care of the luggage. Giles had thought far enough ahead to add Willow as a driver, and asked her to drive them to The Grove. Tara rode up front resting her hand protectively on Willow's thigh, while Giles and Amy sat in the back; Giles focused totally on Amy who appeared to doze during the drive.

The shared cautious looks between the rest of the passengers made it obvious they thought something else entirely about Amy’s docile napping. Everyone was on high alert during the drive, with Willow taking the quickest route from the airport back out to The Grove, she was able to make the drive in just under forty minutes. As Willow pulled into a parking space and turned the SUV off, a grim-faced Dana was approaching to meet them.
Opening Amy’s door, Dana spoke. “Merry meet, Sisters, merry meet, Giles. I assume you to be Amy Madison, then, yes?” She looked down at the thin young woman who didn’t respond or even look at her.

Everyone simply nodded.

“Merry meet, Dana,” Giles responded.

With a cheeky grin, Willow asked, “Did you miss me, Dana?” as she moved to the back of the SUV to start pulling bags out.

Tara giggled, “Merry meet, Sister.”

“Like a heat rash in August, Sister Willow,” Dana replied teasingly.

“She’s got your number, Will,” Tara teased as she gave Willow a wink.

“Hey, no ganging up on me! You are supposed to be on ‘Team Willow’ here,” Willow said with a good-natured pout.

“Yes, now that we have that all out of the way, where does Rowan want me to take Amy?” Giles asked archly.

“Oh, lighten up, Giles, you got her here, we can take over. Besides, you look like hell. Did she do that after we left?” Dana asked.

“Umm, well, yes we had a bit of a…disagreement, shall we say?” Giles said.

Dana smirked at Giles. “So I see. Girls, just leave any bags Amy has at the main desk. Rowan wants to see her right away, of course. She also would like to see you before dinner, Willow.”

“Sure, c’mom baby, the quicker the better,” Willow shuddered a little. “Do you want to keep the keys, Giles?”

“Uh, what? Uh no, Willow. If I need them I know how to find you, and I don’t anticipate leaving tonight at least,” Giles said as he helped to grab bags and follow Dana who now held a death grip on Amy.
With a chirp of the car alarm, everyone headed for the main entrance. The desk that normally held Tabitha was empty, and Willow shot a look to Tara as she set a bag down, and took another from her, to which Tara just shrugged.

Taking Tara’s now free hand in her own, Willow turned and said, “Well, we’re gonna get settled in, we’ll see you at dinner, I guess?”

Dana smiled sadly, and nodded, while Giles mumbled something as he waved in their general direction before moving off towards Rowan’s office following Dana and Amy. Willow and Tara again exchanged looks at the uncharacteristically curt behavior from Giles.

Making their way back to their rooms was a quick and silent little trek through the corridors of The Grove. Entering through Tara’s door, there were already several boxes waiting inside for her that had been shipped previously by Xander. Willow walked in through Tara’s bedroom and into hers to find some boxes waiting for her as well.

Dropping her bags on her bed she walked back into Tara’s room, toeing off her shoes, Willow flopped down on the bed and waited for Tara join her. Tara walked into her bedroom and smiled. Kicking her shoes off, she crawled onto the bed next to Willow and started blowing in her ear gently to make her giggle.

Willow suddenly rolled over onto Tara, kissing her soundly. Tara eased her legs open a little more so Willow could slide between them, giving their bodies better contact as their kisses grew more passionate. Tara’s hands wandered to Willow’s bottom of their own accord, kneading the flesh beneath her palms.

Willow broke the kiss with a slight moan. “Mmm, that feels nice.”

“I agree, I was beginning to feel a little Willowkiss deprived,” Tara said before nipping at Willow’s chin.

“Baby, I promise to do my best to make sure you will never be Willow deprived again.”

“Promise?” Tara asked softly.

“I promise,” Willow said sincerely as she brushed the hair away from Tara’s face and looked deeply into her eyes before kissing her.

Tara’s hand worked up Willow’s back kneading a pathway up Willow’s spine to the long red hair spilling down past her shoulders. Wrapping her finger’s around it, Tara tugged it a little, not hard but enough to get Willow’s attention.
“Mmm, yes baby?” Willow asked her eyes a little glazed over.

“Sweetie, were you serious about our hair, you know changing it or something?’ Tara asked.

Willow rose up a little to look into Tara’s face as she thought.

“Yes, I think I am. Change is good, change is painful, change is necessary, I read that somewhere, or maybe Lady Rowan said it…we are making some big changes, why can’t we do something as small as changing our hair? Cut it short, or change its color, baby it’s only hair. If we don’t like we can fix it, well when it comes to the color we can. I mean I’m not suggesting shaving your head…you won’t shave your head, will you? But you know it could be fun. Besides it grows back, right?”

Tara started laughing at the willowbabble she just witnessed. Working her hands into the back pockets of Willow’s jeans she pressed her hips into Willow.

“Yup, it grows back, and the color is just that. We can change it if we don’t like it. When?”

Willow thought for a moment and the wiggled so the keys in her front pocket pressed into Tara’s hip but not painfully so. “Well, I still have the keys, we could go now if you want, or how about tomorrow? We can make an afternoon of it? Marisol has a younger brother that I’ve met several times, and he’s a hairdresser, we could go see Bunny. I can show you around a bit; it’s down on Fourth Avenue. We’ll have fun, ooo, there’s a great restaurant there, it’s inexpensive and the food is awesome!” Willow enthused.

Tara raised her head giving Willow a quick kiss to ‘seal the deal’, before effortlessly flipping them over so she could roll off of Willow. “Sounds like a good plan, sweetie.”

Tara walked into the living room to grab her bags and bring them back into the bedroom. Willow rose up on her elbows to watch Tara move around the room while she talked.

“Wait til you meet him, he’s ‘family’, Wiccan, and a drag queen on top of being a riot. I had never met anyone like him, and coming from Sunnydale, that’s saying something. I think you’ll like Bunny.”

“Bunny?” Tara asked with a smirk and a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, I’m not sure what his real name is, I don’t think I’ve ever been told, but he does drag under the name ‘Bunny FooFoo’,“ Willow giggled, “See, I told you, he’s a riot.”
“And is Marisol here at The Grove?”

“No, but yes, she doesn’t live here; she takes care of her mother, and a niece I think. Her sister was killed, and that’s how her niece came to be with her, but I don’t really know much more. You’ll meet Marisol, you’ll like her too, she works in the stables.”

Just then the phone next to Tara’s bed rang and she sat to answer it.

“Hello…oh h-hello, My Lady…yes, she is, w-would you…yes, certainly…well, we had planned to go into the city tomorrow…yes, that works, y-yes My Lady, blessed be.” Tara looked at Willow. “I assume you know who that was?” She said softly.

Willow nodded as she slid off the bed, and reached for her shoes. Slipping back into them without untying them, she scrambled next to Tara and put her head on her shoulder.

“I’ll be back as quick as I can, baby. We still have lots of time before dinner; I can help you unpack some of your boxes if you want…” Willow’s voice trailed off in tones of awe.

Tara slipped her arm around Willow pulling her close, dropping a kiss on her head. “What is it, Sweetie?”

“You…here…with me…baby, is it wrong to feel so happy?” Willow asked quietly.

“You should never feel guilty for your happiness, and you should never take it for granted.” Tara said in gentle earnestness. “It can evaporate overnight…we know that to some degree, don’t we?” Turning to face Willow, she lifted her chin and kissed her deeply.

Slowly running her hands up Willow’s arms, Tara broke from the kiss that left them both flushed. “You should go, she probably shouldn’t have to call for you twice,” Tara whispered.

With her gaze, a little unfocused, Willow nodded. Taking a deep breath and blinking a few times before rising, Willow smiled broadly at Tara. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” Tara said as she smiled back, and watched Willow bounce out through her room. Tara heard the soft click of the door closing behind Willow from the other room.

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Sitting for a moment, Tara looked around the room; through the door into the living room she could see her guitar case. Deciding to finish her unpacking first, Tara moved slowly around putting things in drawers, here and there, while she hummed to herself. Not knowing how long Willow would be gone she took her time, set up her personal altar and placed some favorite objects around the room to make it more ‘hers’ and feel more like ‘home’. Truthfully, now being here with Willow, part of her felt that if they never went back to Sunnydale that would be fine as long as they were together.

Sitting down on the bed again, Tara closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She listened to the sounds around her. She could hear a dove coo outside and took another deep breath to center herself. She heard something scurry against the wall under the window, another breath. She heard the air conditioning kick on and begin to blow over the top of her head, another breath. Rolling her shoulders and then her neck, Tara opened her eyes. She felt a noticeable difference in herself being away from the hellmouth and she’d only been gone a few hours. She wondered what Buffy and Dawnie would be like if they got away, and how getting away would be so good for them.

As her thoughts turned melancholy, she picked up several of her favorite candles, a cone of dragon’s blood incense and moved out into the living room. Slowly she paced the candles around the room when she had them where she wanted them Tara went back into her bedroom and pulled out a small incense tray especially for cones. Placing the ornate brass dome on the coffee table, slowly she went around and lit her candles, turning off any lights as she went. When she got to the last candle she lit the cone from it. Tara watched the tip flare and smoke, then begin to glow. Blowing it out, Tara placed it on the stand covering it with its intricately designed dome before she picked up her guitar case and sat on the sofa.

With the lights off, the only light came from the window in the bedroom, so with the blinds closed the candles lit the living room in soft, somber light. Tara waved some of the smoke from the incense up and over her head, and then around her body, using the smoke to cleanse and reinforce protection, and love in the rooms she shared with Willow. Willow’s question about happiness, her own feelings about being away from the hellmouth and how those dear to her would benefit from it immensely although it would probably never happen, weighed heavily on Tara as she began to tune her guitar.

Being a singer, she had an ear for pitch and while she didn’t have perfect pitch, it was pretty darn close. This made tuning by ear easy for her; once she was sure she was tuned, she began to strum aimlessly with no particular melody in mind to warm her hands up. Starting with a favorite and one that seemed appropriate, and that she had been practicing prior to seeing Willow again; she started the opening chords of “All Along the Watchtower”, and sang along as she began to roll through a few of the songs she had learned over the last year.

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When Willow got outside their rooms she heard guitar music and the unmistakable sounds of Tara singing. She stood at the door listening, resting her forehead against the door and closing her eyes; then decided to enter from her own room.

Closing the door carefully so she could be as quiet as possible, she stopped at her bed to take her
shoes off. She sat breathing in the comforting scent of the incense and listened to the song Tara was currently singing come to an end. There was a pause, and a riff of random notes before another song started slow and sad. Tara started to sing softly, it wasn’t the high soft voice that sang to her almost two years ago, but a warm contralto, with a breathy delivery. The words began to sink into Willow, bringing tears to her eyes, and leaving her stuck to her bed as she listened.

Your words are Like knives
They peel my skin and pierce my soul...
Your body will burn tonight...
Though your heart may still remain cold

And I will blame myself
And I will blame myself
For holding on to what I hoped would keep you by my side
I will blame myself

The Sheets are stained with...
Memories of your soft kiss
Now this is all I have
Paper and pen to remember you with

And I will blame myself
And I will blame myself
For holding on to what I hoped would keep you by my side
I will blame myself
Can I have you?
Can I have you?
Can I have you?
Can I have you?
Can I have you?

Tara’s voice cracked on the last breathy, “I will blame myself”, and freed Willow to move towards her, to let her lover know she was not alone, her Willow was with her. She stood just inside the door out of Tara’s line of sight, one hand over her mouth and one over stomach, held in place as Tara belted out the last five lines. Willow struggled to hold in the emotion that the words and the sound of Tara's pained and emotive voice brought up in her.

There was only a brief pause, and Willow thought she heard a sob come from Tara, as she pushed into the next song.

So there goes my life
Passing by with every exit sign
It's been so long
Sometimes I wonder how I will stay strong
No sleep tonight
I'll keep on driving these dark highway lines
And as the moon fades
One more night gone, only twenty more days

But I will see you again
I will see you again a long time from now

Willow couldn’t bear for Tara to sing these sad songs; she wanted to know why, what had upset her, what she could do to ease the pain these songs so plainly embodied. So she moved forward enough to be in Tara’s peripheral line of sight and so the movement would catch her attention.

And there goes my life
Passing by with every departing flight
And it’s been so hard
So much time so far apart
And she walks the night
How many hearts will die tonight
And will things have changed
I guess I'll find out in seventeen days

Tara, turned her head, her eyes were closed and her smile sad as she sang. When she opened her eyes she saw Willow and smiled sincerely, and with a nod of her head invited her into the living room to listen to her. Willow crept into a chair across from Tara to watch her face as she played, her foot tapped and her head bobbed along keeping time with the music.

But I will see you again
I will see you again a long time from now

My body aches,
and it hurts to sing,
and no one is moving
And I wish that I weren’t here tonight,
but this is my life

And I will see you again
I will see you again a long time from now

And I will see you again
I will see you again a long time from now

With a flourish of a few extra chords, Tara finished the song and watched Willow, who was wiping at her nose, tears glistening on both their cheeks. Tara sat the guitar next to her on the couch and suddenly had a lap full of Willow. Willow buried her face in Tara’s neck and began to speak in between snuffles. “Baby *sniffle* are you unhappy, unhappy with m-me? *sniffle* We can *sniffle* g-go wherever you want*sniffle* tell me what you need, baby*sniffle*.”
Tara wrapped her arms tightly around the sniffling girl on her lap and stroked her back to soothe her. “Shh, shh, sweet love, shh. That is farthest from the truth, sweetheart. Let me explain them a little, okay? You remember the guy I told you I had tutored in exchange for the guitar lessons I mentioned, right?” Willow nodded into Tara’s neck. “Well, he was fond of that band and used one of their songs to propose with, so I listened to them a lot, and got to like them quite a bit. Some of their songs fit how I was feeling at the time, and our situation.” Tara rubbed the soft denim on Willow’s thigh, as she sniffled too.

“He proposed with music like that?” Willow squeaked, making Tara laugh.

“No, sweetie, all their songs aren’t so sad, some are actually very sweet. The one Leif used is very sweet; would you like to hear it?” Tara asked as she wiped away her own tears and reached to gently wipe away Willow’s.

Willow tightened her hold on Tara, covering her face and neck in kisses. “Tara, baby, you know I love you, don’t you? Please don’t ever doubt that. I know so much has happened – we’ve been forced through…” Tara cut Willow off with a soft lingering kiss.

“Sweet love, I know, it’s just that the sadness still lingers over it all sometimes. It will fade away, we just have to be patient, you just have to be patient with me, okay? I can forgive you, but I won’t forget, Willow. We also didn’t deserve to have decisions made for us, I won’t forget how I was toyed with by others, and neither should you, love.”

“Tara, I don’t know that I can forgive, much less forget, especially when in part it was my decisions that caused you so much pain. I have learned though, does that help any? I’ve learned so much, and I know that I didn’t do things the right way with so many things the first time.” Willow shook her head and sighed heavily. “Will you sing for me?” She asked softly.

Tara looked closely at Willow, her head cocked to one side as she took in the weight of Willow’s words before she nodded. Willow slid from Tara’s lap and back into the chair across from her, and watched as she picked her guitar up again. Tara cut her eyes at Willow in a suddenly nervous glance, tipping her head to hide behind a fall of blonde locks, as she pretended to tune her guitar again before she started.

Then she began to play and Willow sat enraptured. She watched Tara’s long, slim fingers move over the fretboard with grace and skill and then wondered how she could have missed the calluses that would have formed after a year of playing regularly. As Tara started to sing, Willow’s attention was pulled away from her hands to the song and its words. Tara sang softly with her eyes closed.

I wish I could do better by you, 'cause that's what you deserve You sacrifice so much of your life
In order for this to work.

While I'm off chasing my own dreams
Sailing around the world
Please know that I'm yours to keep

my beautiful girl

When you cry a piece of my heart dies
Knowing that I may have been the cause
If you were to leave
Fulfill someone else's dreams
I think I might totally be lost
You don't ask for no diamond rings no delicate string of pearls
That's why I wrote this song to sing
My beautiful girl

ooooo ooo ohhh ohh oh oh

Tara opened her eyes and with a smile looked directly into Willow's eyes as she paused, her eyes sparkling with affection. She beat on the body of her guitar to count out and pick up the pace of the song as she started again.

One, two, one two three four
I wish I could do better by you
'cause it's what you deserve
You sacrifice so much of your life
in order for this to work

While I'm off chasing my own dreams (my own dreams)
sailing around the world ('round the world)
Please know that I'm yours to keep
My beautiful girl

And when you cry a piece of my heart dies
Knowing that I may have been the cause
If you were to leave and fulfill someone else's dreams
I think I might totally be lost

But you don't ask for no diamond rings (Diamond rings)
No delicate string of pearls (String of pearls)
That's why I wrote this song to sing
My beautiful girl

ooooo ooo ohhh ohh oh oh

But you don't ask for no diamond rings (Diamond rings)
No delicate string of pearls (String of Pearls)
That's why I wrote this song to sing
My beautiful girl.

Willow applauded loudly, which made Tara blush. “I hope she said yes.”

Tara nodded as she set her guitar in its case. “She did. Leif had me, and two other people help him. I don’t know them, though. A girl on a stand-up bass, and this short little guy with a snare drum. We came out at the count in the song to round out the sound. Then he got down on one knee, with a ring. She cried, you know the typical proposal scene, it was all very sweet though.”

Willow stood and held her hand out to Tara. Taking Willow’s hand Tara followed her back into the bedroom, where it was cool and dark. Willow slowly undressed Tara, and with every piece of clothing, she removed she whispered “I love you” just loud enough for Tara to hear her. Willow pulled the covers back and eased Tara into the bed, before quickly undressing and joining her under the covers.

Willow pulled Tara close and wrapped herself around her until not even air could get between their bodies. She kissed Tara’s ears, her eyelids, the corner’s of her mouth, the tip of her nose, covering her face and shoulders in soft, loving kisses. Each kiss Willow punctuated by a soft “You are my heart and soul”. Gentle caresses up and down each other’s backs, across shoulders and hips, sweet kisses until they both drifted off to sleep. Wrapped together almost like they had been braided that way, they were so entwined. Taking comfort in one another, they dreamed.

TBC...
Chapter 20 - Brilliant minds think alike, and often the best of things in life come in pairs!

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: PG

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 4 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson, Arizona

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money – and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway – is involved, this is simply for my own pleasure and hopefully for those who are reading it. Also, La Indita does exist so by some off chance someone from there is reading this, please don’t sue, this is good PR, and reread the part about not having anything.

Feedback: Is critical, have at it. Please don’t make me beg – it’s just not pretty.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Well, this chapter is an interesting one. My beta, Crystal aka CYTEACH, for whom I also beta, we were both having troubles getting our next chapters underway. Anything I had was really only fit to line my cat's litter boxes with. So born of a jest, this chapter is a collaboration, we threw ideas back and forth, and played with what stuck, and set aside some of the sticky for later. We played and altered like a good seamstress on a wedding dress, passing bits back and forth. It was a fun and creative way to get things rolling again, and clear out the blockage! Let’s see if you can tell who came up with what, but we never will! I’d also like to thank Gardner Moore, aka DaddyCatALSO for allowing me to “borrow” a line (in a different color) from the original song “Blinded by the Ashes” that I built the song on the radio Willow and Tara hear on the way into the city, thank you, Gardner! So since that song doesn’t exist, apply your favorite melancholy tune to it. The music for this chapter was Cut Copy “So Cosmic (Mixed Tape)”, Phoenix “Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix”, The Postal Service “Give Up”, and OneRepublic “Dreaming Out Loud” and “Waking Up”. Cheers!
The early morning sun streamed in quietly through a crack in the blinds on two entwined bodies. The owners of arms and legs were not discernible as they peeked out from beneath the covers until one set reluctantly separated from the other. The cooing of doves and the sounds of steady breathing were the only things to break the soothing tranquility of the morning.

Tara shifted the sheets from her body and eased out from her position wrapped around Willow’s sleeping form. As was usually the case, she was the early riser, and she intended to take advantage of the quiet morning to do some meditation and get ready for the day. Throwing on a tank top and shorts, Tara set up her candles and incense in the adjoining room and slowly began controlling her breathing, almost falling back into a sleep-like trance.

After thirty minutes of meditation, feeling refreshed and centered, Tara blew out her candles and heard the spray of the shower break through the silence. Walking back through the bedroom, stripping out of her tank top and shorts as she went, Tara eased open the door to the bathroom and then the door to the shower, and slid into the stall with Willow.

“Arghhh!” Willow squealed and jumped, as her head tipped down from the spray. “God, Tara, you scared me!” she admonished but was easily appeased as she took in the naked body standing before her.

“Aww, I’m sorry sweetie,” Tara said with a glint of mischievousness in her eyes that told Willow she wasn’t really sorry at all. “How can I make it up to you?”

“Well, um, I guess you can wash my back for me,” Willow said holding out a bottle of jasmine body wash and turning around so she faced the gentle spray. Tara’s eyes drank in the sight of Willow’s lithe body, and her gaze followed the path of a single drop of water that fell from the end of Willow’s long wet hair as it traveled the length of her back and escaped over the slope of her bottom.

Not smelling the luscious scent of her body wash or feeling Tara’s lathered hands on her body after
minutes had elapsed, Willow finally looked over her shoulder to see what the hold-up was. Tara stood stock still as her eyes raced over Willow’s body, tracing the path of hundreds of droplets of water. Willow smirked and felt a warm glow of confidence in the allure that she obviously still held for Tara.

“Are you going to stand there all morning ogling me?” Willow asked seductively as she turned slowly back to face Tara. She brought her face back into the spray of the shower head and flicked her hair over her left shoulder.

Maybe it was her morning meditation, the restful sleep she had in Willow’s arms, or the excitement of the new step she was about to take, but Tara was feeling cheeky. “Hmm? No, not all morning, sweetie, but with the change in view, perhaps for another few minutes,” she replied darting her tongue out to moisten her lips.

Flipping the lid of the body wash open, Tara finally squeezed a liberal amount in her open palm and slowly rubbed her hands together to create a bubbly lather. “Come here, you,” she motioned Willow forward with a half-smile.

Tara proceeded to wash every inch of Willow’s body with love and tenderness. Then, deciding that she was feeling quite green and conservational that morning, she decided to clean herself by rubbing their bodies together so as not to waste more soap. Willow pointed out that they were already in the shower for over thirty minutes, but Tara insisted that she was helping the environment since the soap wasn’t biodegradable, and continued with her ministrations until they were both thoroughly aroused, and the water growing lukewarm – a feat Willow in all her long, hot showers had yet to accomplish.

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Willow called and spoke with Giles, apprising him of their plans, and inquiring if he needed anything while they were gone. Willow and Tara made their way down the pathway from their rooms, past a yet again empty front desk, and out into the parking lot where the SUV was still parked. Willow opened the passenger door for Tara, before placing a kiss on her cheek, then ran around the SUV and hopped in.

“Is it always so hot so early?” Tara asked buckling her belt as they exited the parking lot.

Willow snickered, “Yes, and it’s only going to get worse as the monsoons set in, then it will get more humid on top of the heat, baby.”

The road from The Grove into the city was flat and straight; Willow drove easily with one hand on the wheel and one in Tara’s, occasionally bringing it up, to press kisses to. Tara began to think about what exactly she wanted to do with her hair. Since Willow had brought the idea up one thought sprang forth in her mind and it was drastic.
“Whatcha thinking about?” Willow asked as she saw the concentration on Tara’s face as she watched the car speed by the saguaros and spindly ocotillo.

Tara glanced quickly in Willow’s direction and then back out of the window. “Oh, you know, just trying to think of what kind of changes I want to make to my hair. I can’t remember the last time my hair was shorter than shoulder length,” she admitted.

“Really?” Willow asked a little surprised, as she glanced briefly at Tara. She knew Tara used the length of her hair to hide behind when they first met because she was so shy, but thought that might have been something she developed as she was older, not something that had potentially been a lifelong coping mechanism.

Tara’s forehead scrunched up in contemplation as she thought back to her earlier childhood days and the hair mishaps she had experienced. “Yeah, really,” she finally said as she couldn’t think of anything. “Well, I mean, I wasn’t born with shoulder-length hair or anything,” she chuckled. “That would be kind of bizarre.”

“I can see the tabloid headlines now!” Willow said joining in the laughter. “‘Baby girl born at age 2: Scientists point towards shoulder-length hair at birth as evidence!’ You’d be right next to Aliens take Elvis, and the Shroud of Turin Talks!”

“Oh sweetie, you’re so incredibly silly, you know that?” Tara giggled as Willow continued to throw out headline after headline in between gasps of laughter.

“I’m quirky,” Willow admitted with a wink. “That’s why you love me, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Only one of the many reasons,” Tara admitted, her voice turning serious as she brought Willow’s hand up to her mouth and peppered kisses all over the back of it.

Tara snuggled closer to the driving Willow and reached in front of her to turn on the radio. She adjusted the volume so that it was discernible, but not too overpowering so if they wanted to continue talking they wouldn’t have to shout.

They drove in silence for about ten minutes with the desert landscape being taken in by Tara. She thought back to her first trip to Tucson and The Grove and knew she didn’t really see anything that day because she was terrified of what the outcome of her visit with Willow would be.

“I feel like I’m seeing all of this for the first time,” Tara admitted softly.

“The barrenness takes a little to get used to, doesn’t it?” Willow replied.
“It’s certainly different from the Sunnydale landscape,” Tara admitted. “But it’s beautiful in its own way.”

“I feel like every time I see something green I’m that much more grateful for it now,” Willow admitted quietly. “It’s like I had taken it for granted, you know? That it would be there and part of the environment.” Willow shrugged. “Especially after coming back from England where it was even greener than Sunnydale, but here everything was so brown, and it was summer so when I’d see something as simple as a bougainvillea or Texas Laurel, I was in awe of its vibrancy and life.” Willow smiled sheepishly at her philosophical meanderings.

“That’s beautiful, Willow,” Tara said with a genuine smile.

Silence swept inside the SUV once more as both women were lost in their own thoughts. Over the radio, a melancholy love song began to spill out through the speakers and fill the SUV.

We were summer gold and autumn red,
I never knew how my heart missed you ‘til you were gone.
The space where you belonged has grown dark and cold,
But in my memories, we were always summer gold and autumn red.

Dancing away in the rain, we were both fire and pain,
I try not to love you still but my heart knows its own lies.
Your mouth is burned into my soul,
The summer you left your imprint on my skin.

We were summer gold and autumn red,
I never knew how my heart missed you ‘til you were gone,
The space where you belonged has grown dark and cold,
But in my memories, we were summer gold and autumn red.

I still dream of you, our last night, so sweet,
So much promise laid to waste in the morning light.
Even if I had to choose all over again, I would still choose you.

Because we were summer gold and autumn red,
I never knew how my heart would miss you ‘til you were gone.
The space where you belonged has grown dark and cold,
But in my memories, we were summer gold and autumn red.

We were summer gold and autumn red,
I never knew how my heart missed you ‘til you were gone.
So much promise laid to waste in the morning light.
The space where you belonged has grown dark and cold,
Even if I had to choose all over again, I would still choose you.

We were summer gold and autumn red,
We were summer gold and autumn red,
We were summer gold and autumn red,
We were summer gold and autumn red

Smiles graced the faces of both Willow and Tara as thoughts of their splits, reunions and ever-growing love moved over their hearts and bodies, swaying gently to the music that described parts of their renewed love and relationship so eloquently.

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The desert began to give way to more urban surroundings, and soon Willow made a series of turns that put them at a four-way stop near a city park. Tara could see what looked like homeless people in small clusters under the few shade trees, some sleeping, others talking.

“Willow is that…” Tara pointed off in the direction of the park.

“Ya huh. I pretty much did the same thing. Apparently, because of the nice weather all year long, in any of the city parks, you can find groups of homeless people. A lot are mentally ill, or vets, unfortunately. There’s a big military presence here. They’re not food for some sort of demon-y beastly like they are back in Sunnydale. We’re on Fourth Avenue now, so you’ll also see kids our age busking, even in this heat.” Willow knew what had caught her attention.

“Oh,” was all Tara said.

Willow drove a few more blocks then pulled into a vacant spot along the street. Brightly painted rows of storefronst cheerily faced both sides of the street. They exited the vehicle and their hands came automatically together as the sun beat down on them and they made their way down the sidewalk in the late morning sun.

Tara’s neck swiveled from side to side trying to take in the names and displays of all of the shops. Willow merely watched Tara taking in the sights and smiled at her girlfriend. There was a second-hand store, a bar called The Pissy Bitch, what looked and smelled like a head shop as they passed it and the smell of incense wafted out, a salon and spa, a lesbian bookstore called Ruby’s Fruit, and a tattoo shop just among the few. Tara giggled as they passed the bar, and glanced in the dark
windows.

“We can ask Bunny about it, I’ve never been in, but the name makes you kind of wonder, doesn’t it?” Willow asked grinning, as they stopped waiting for the light to change so they could cross the street.

“See the tracks?” Willow pointed to tracks that ran down the middle of Fourth Avenue. “They still have a streetcar in use here. I think Marisol said it runs on the weekends, we could come ride it sometime if you like.”

“Sure, that would be fun, sweetie,” Tara said with a smile, as they crossed the intersection.

“Ooh! Here it is,” Willow squealed and pointed as they approached a small establishment with a big bay window and two window boxes full of brightly colored petunias, and two large pots of aloe on either side of the door. From the outside, Tara could see a set of waiting chairs, a front desk, and in the back, a small group of styling chairs, two of which were occupied, along with a small row of sinks.

Upon entering, Tara’s eyes were immediately drawn to a gorgeous, petite Hispanic woman dressed to the nines, who fluttered around one of the styling chairs with scissors in one hand, a spray bottle in the other hand, snapping the gum she was chewing as she traversed around the sitting woman animatedly. Her hair was a mass of intricately styled wildness, with swatches of bright pink and purple in hair so ebony it almost had its own deep blue-black hue to it—it’s appearance beyond description.

Willow’s eyes lit up when she spotted Bunny with the woman chatting amiably in her chair and she waved her hand frantically in greeting.

“Willow, darling!” Bunny acknowledged her, as she stopped snapping her gum and came to give Willow a hug, giving Tara a quick look. “Marisol told me you were back in ‘Too-Stoned’, but I wasn’t expecting you, why didn’t you call to tell me you were coming, girl?” she playfully admonished. “Let me finish up here with Andrea and I’ll be right back.”

“Take your time, Bunny,” Willow insisted as she dragged Tara to a set of open chairs and grabbed a couple of styling magazines from the spread on the table.

“That’s Bunny? I would not have guessed… and Too Stoned?” Tara asked with a raised eyebrow.

Again Willow giggled, “He’s gorgeous, isn’t he? Bunny’s so sweet too, you’ll like him. Yeah, that’s one of the less than p.c. names for Tucson because we’re only an hour from the Mexican border, partly. I think ‘The Old Pueblo’ is used by the older folks and the resorts.”
“Willow, you haven’t…” Tara trailed off.

“What?” Willow asked before realizing just what Tara was getting at. “Oh…oh no! I’m goofy enough, don’t you think?” Willow grinned. “If Bunny does, well, really I don’t think Marisol would put up with it, but who knows.”

“Quirky,” Tara smiled. “How did you learn all of this?”

“Some from Marisol and Bunny, some from Dana; Marisol and Bunny are born and raised Tucsonans, Dana has lived here for like almost fifteen years. Some I even found on the net.” Willow shrugged. “Ooh, look here, baby. What do you think about this one?” Willow asked pointing to a hairstyle that almost exactly mirrored the one she was sporting but was a few inches shorter.

Tara looked at the image and then back to Willow to make sure she was being serious. Seeing the thoughtful look on Willow’s face, Tara cleared her throat and adopted her most loving tone. “Ah, sweetie, don’t you, um, think that one’s a little like the style you have now?” she finished quickly hoping to spare Willow’s feelings.

Willow cocked her head to the side as if seeing the picture for the first time. On closer inspection, she realized Tara was indeed right and she giggled. “It is, isn’t it?” she said with a grin. “Here,” she continued handing Tara a copy of a magazine. “Help pick something out for me?”

Tara took the magazine and flipped through slowly looking for something to jump out at her. It had been so long since she’d looked for a truly new hairstyle and she began to feel decidedly out of practice. “There are so many choices,” she sighed.

“Who knew, right?” Willow replied without looking up. She wanted something shorter, but she didn’t want anything too masculine or boring. Turning a few more pages she finally found something that jumped out at her. “I found one, I found one!” she yelped excitedly. Wanting to keep her new style a secret, Willow shoved the magazine under her bottom and bounced in her seat.

Tara’s lips turned up in her lopsided smile at Willow’s enthusiasm as she continued to flip through the pages of her magazine. “So you’re not going to share, sweetie?” she asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

“Nope, not tellin’,” Willow insisted giggling. “It’s going to be a surprise.”

“Mmmhmm,” Tara nodded, still ensconced with the images. She found a few that she liked, but wasn’t convinced she could pull off any of the styles. “I’m starting to get a little nervous about this,”
Tara admitted.

Willow immediately calmed down and wrapped her arm tightly around Tara’s shoulder and pulled her in close. Rubbing Tara’s arm with her other hand softly, Willow tried to offer Tara comfort. “Baby, you know you don’t have to go through with this if you don’t want to, right? I would never try to force you into anything,” she said softly.

Tara leaned her head against Willow’s shoulder and nuzzled her face into Willow’s neck. “I know, I know,” Tara said quietly. Finding her resolve, Tara dropped a kiss on Willow’s neck and sat back up. “I’m okay,” she insisted, “Just a few butterflies, well maybe bats, actually. But I want this. Change is good, right?” she insisted placing a soft kiss on Willow’s cheek with a shy smile.

“So have you decided on what you want to get done?” Willow asked surreptitiously.

Tara laughed and leaned back from the embrace slightly bringing her eyes up to meet Willow’s. “Just what makes you think I’m going to tell you, little miss secret-keeper?” Tara teased.

Willow was going to try her best to get Tara to reveal her plans, but all devious thoughts were abandoned as she saw Bunny round the front desk and bring his client to the cash register. Hopping up, she stood bouncing on her feet impatiently, before Willow finally made her way over to the hairstylist, dragging Tara behind her.

“Well, you’re certainly a lot more chipper and bouncy than the last time I saw you, honey,” Bunny drawled with a hand on his hip. Willow’s enthusiasm was infectious, and Bunny was catching it too as he grinned brightly back at the girls. “Now, who’s the lovely young lady you have with you today?” he said as he eyed Tara more openly, appreciating her long, blonde locks.

“This is my Tara,” Willow said bringing Tara closer. “Tara, this is Bunny,” Willow said with a flourish of her hand.

“This is your Tara?” Bunny asked, both eyebrows shooting straight into his hairline in surprise, taking a longer closer look at the woman he had heard so much about from both Willow and Marisol. “Well, she certainly is a beauty, isn’t she?”

The tip of Willow’s tongue poked out from between her teeth as she replied with a goofy smile, “The most beautiful woman in the world,” she agreed.

Tara couldn’t stop the blush that spread over her cheeks at Bunny’s appraisal and Willow’s words. Her head dropped into its habituated position looking at her feet and she felt her hair cover her heated face, for what she secretly knew would be the last time.
Willow didn’t notice Tara’s moves, but Bunny, ever perceptive, did. He grabbed Tara’s hand and twirled her towards the styling chairs with a spin and a flourish. “Well, what’s your fancy today, sweetheart?” he asked as he marshaled Tara back towards one of the sinks.

“Umm, well…” Tara started to whisper to Bunny what she wanted to be done, and Bunny murmured in agreement. After washing her hair, Bunny settled her into a seat and fitted her with a protective cape. Before being spun around, Tara pointed at Willow. “You – vamoose,” she said.

“But…the heat,” Willow started to whine trying her best to stay while Tara got her haircut.

“Nope, scoot, you can come back in…” Tara looked at Bunny.

“Mmm, say forty-five minutes should do it,” Bunny stated.

Tara wiggled her finger to get Willow to come closer. Reaching out from under the cape she pulled Willow close by the shirt and gave her a deep kiss before releasing her hold. “Now scram, you!” Tara said with a wink.

“Fine, can I take the magazine with me, Bunny? Two can play that game…” Willow pouted halfheartedly.

“Sure, but don’t you dare get your hair cut anywhere else, girl. That hag down the street will butcher you, I promise,” Bunny said cattily.

With an exaggeratedly heavy sigh, Willow said, “Fine, I’ll window shop…in the heat…by myself…in the heat.”

“Bye, sweetie!” Tara yelled at Willow’s retreating figure and turned to Bunny, as she continued to describe what she wanted for her new look. Bunny pushed up his metaphorical sleeves and immediately got down to work.

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Forty-five minutes passed in a blur for both Willow and Tara. Tara sat down and gave free reign to Bunny, just stressing that she wanted her hair cut really short, but she didn’t want to see a razor or clippers at all. Tara explained that she wanted to donate to Locks of Love since the hair was coming off it could at least be put to a good use for a child somewhere.

Tara shut her eyes and let the weight of her hair fall away like the shedding of some the extra
“Doll, you can open your eyes,” Bunny said softly. Having watched the emotions play over Tara's face as she listened to the scissor while Bunny moved around her head; he could see this was something big for the young woman in front of him.

Tara opened her eyes, blinking a few times as she took the sight of herself in. Immediately she touched her hair, it looked slightly darker after removing so much of its length and thickness; more of an ash blonde and her eyes looked even bluer. Tara turned her head from side to side, then Bunny slowly turned her around and handed her a mirror so she could look at the back. The best thing to describe it as was a pixie cut parted left of center, and it surprised her how different she felt – now that she no longer had a way to hide from the world.

Tara felt a burgeoning self-confidence that she had never been allowed, or even really allowed herself to feel all the time, grow. She knew at times she was very good at some of the things she chose to do or was needed to do by the Scoobies, but it wasn’t a sense she carried with herself all of the time.

Now, that was all about to change.

“You don’t have to say anything, doll, I understand. You’re beautiful, and now everyone can see, what Willow has always seen,” he said as he turned her back around and leaned over Tara’s shoulder, facing the mirror. “Don’t you ever let anyone make you think differently,” he whispered with a fierceness that moved Tara, as he removed the cape.

Tara stepped out of the chair and hugged the man that barely came to her shoulder even though she herself was not extraordinarily tall.

The bell over the door jangled—reminding her of the one over the door in the Magic Box—and Willow came huffing in, a little red in the face from the heat, with a puff of hot air slamming against the cool air-conditioning of the salon.

“Baby, I got us something to drink because I thought you…might…be…thirsty,” Willow stopped in her tracks immediately and comically did a double take at Tara standing next to Bunny, towering over him.

“Tara?” she whispered as her eyes drank in Tara’s new look. Willow’s eyes took in the sight before her, as Tara stood there proud of her new look.
“You like?” she whispered, her hand going to the ends of her hair tentatively.

Willow’s eyes swept hungrily over Tara’s face, drinking in the beautiful visage of her lover. “You. Are. Absolutely. Stunning,” she whispered stepping closer, carelessly setting the drinks on the counter, her hand coming up to cup Tara’s cheek. Brushing her thumb over her sculpted cheekbones, Willow was mesmerized.

“Oh baby, of course, I like,” she said with a wide smile. “Your cute ears!” She giggled as she tugged on the tip of one of them. Willow continued to race her eyes over Tara’s face and then she finally stopped and took in the quiet strength spreading throughout Tara’s sultry eyes.

“I’m so proud of you, Tara. So proud,” Willow emphasized bringing her other hand up to cup both of Tara’s cheeks as her eyes stayed on Tara’s. “After everything that’s happened, after everything you’ve gone through, here you are, proud and strong. You’re so strong, my baby,” Willow declared. “To willingly go and get rid of your security blanket,” Willow smiled with a flick of her fingers at the bottom of Tara’s newly cropped hair.

Tara didn’t need Willow to point out her personal growth over the past eighteen months. It was excruciatingly painful at times, but she knew she was a better person for having been through everything, and it made being here now at The Grove with Willow so much sweeter.

Willow slipped her arms around Tara’s waist, pulling her into a long, sweet kiss. Resting their foreheads together, Willow began to play with the hair at the nape of Tara’s neck making her giggle at the light touches.

“How do you feel, baby?” Willow asked seriously.

Tara thought for a moment before looking at Willow with an unusual directness, and replying, “Lighter.”

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Willow said she wouldn’t ‘inflict’ the heat on Tara, but quietly pointed out to Bunny what it was she had seen in the magazine. Willow talked excitedly with Bunny, catching up with the man, and asking after his partner, George. She was too engrossed to pay too much attention to the red locks falling away persistently but was subconsciously aware that there was less and less weight where her hair had previously settled.

Tara watched Bunny move through the stages of his tools from spray to scissors to comb, and was now settled in with a hairdryer and a bottle of styling spray. He moved like a dancer around Willow, stopping to flick or sculpt a piece of hair into perfection. Finally, after leaning back and taking in the
final product one last time, Bunny whipped the cape from Willow dramatically and said with spread arms, “Voilà! My masterpiece!”

Willow was surprised that the Bunny was finished so quickly, but immediately took in her new look in the mirror in front of her and then twisted her head from side to side to take in the image in the mirror Bunny held behind her for a rear look.

“Wow. Look at that,” Willow said in awe examining her extremely short hair.

Her hair was parted slightly to the left and her bangs fell lightly over one eyebrow. Her hair was textured all around causing a wild and carefree look. The top was slightly shorter than the rest, with the longest parts tucked behind her ears and falling in pieces around her ears. Her hands moved slowly to touch the finished product, but Bunny slapped her hands away playfully.

“Hey! Don’t touch my perfect creation,” he admonished with a wink.

Willow giggled but refrained from playing with her new hair to appease Bunny. Her hair was short but still longer than Tara’s, who now moved to stand with her hands in the pockets of her jean shorts behind Bunny, looking at Willow with an approving smile.

Bouncing in her seat, and poking her tongue out a little as she smiled, Willow looked directly at Tara through the mirror and said, “I guess this makes you the butch one now, baby.”

Bunny burst out laughing at the surprised look on Tara’s face and the glee in Willow’s.

TBC...
Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: PG – NC-17

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 4 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove – Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money – and trust me I don’t have anything you would want anyway – is involved, this is simply for my own pleasure and hopefully for those who are reading it. Also, La Indita does exist so by some off chance someone from there is reading this, please don’t sue, this is good PR, and reread the part about not having anything.

Feedback: Yes, please and thank you very much.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Each chapter is a challenge to keep it fresh and true to the original idea that was the spark. Each chapter I take the time to thank my beta(s) because it has been with their patience, and their own creativity in allowing me to use them as sounding boards that have helped to improve my initially very rusty writing skills and make my ideas into a stronger story. Those ideas blossom and change as I write, the core story is the same, but some of the side plots have changed entirely, disappeared, or evolved into something better. I realize my idea may not be the most original, and there are shades of some of the writers that really sparked the idea in me that “hey, I could do this” and dust my rusty pen(s) off. Writers like Lisa Countrymax aka Lisa of Nine, Deb aka JustSkipIt, Aley, Tara the Phoenix, Jasmydae, ForeverChanges, CYTEACH, Laragh, Kate aka BeMyDeputy Shel aka Finey_McFlne – just to name a few. Taking the time to name all of them would potentially be at least a good half of a chapter, so I won’t bore you, I’ll just say thank you, to you for reading, and to them for inspiring me. If I didn’t name your above, but I leave you comments, don’t doubt you are an inspiration. The song below is by Civil Twilight “Next To You” – Oh, I changed “man” to “woman”, though, it fit better. Music this chapter - Wye Oak “If Children” and “The Knot” and the single “Holy, Holy” from “Civilian”, The Naked and Famous “Passive Me, Aggressive You”, and The Green Children “Encounter”.

You are my only escape
You are the reason that I wait
On the corner of this empty street
Oh I just can't wait to meet
There's so much a woman can do
And there's so much a woman can say
See I have done so many things wrong
That you should've thrown me away

I've got this second chance
I'm gonna take it
I've got this song and dance
I'm gonna take it
I've got all that I need
And I can taste it
I've got you next to me
And I don't want to waste it

You are my only embrace
You are the light that lights my face
And any fool would do the same
To follow in your trace
See people come and people go
And I know I should've been replaced

I've got this second chance
I'm gonna take it
I've got this song and dance
I'm gonna take it
I've got all that I need
And I can taste it
I've got you next to me
And I don't want to waste it
I'm gonna take it
All that I can get
I'm gonna take it

It's beautiful the way you love
The way you take me back
Here she comes around the bend
She's coming to take me back

I've got this second chance
I'm gonna take it
I've got this song and dance
I'm gonna take it
I've got all that I need
And I can taste it
I've got you next to me
And I don't want to waste it

You are my only escape
You are the reason that I wait

After the laughter died down, Tara continued to pout and look ever so cute while doing it, then Willow’s tummy let out the mother of all rumbles that got everyone laughing again. After trying repeatedly to pay Bunny, who insisted that their money was no good, he gave them both a final hug before pushing them out the door.

“So how about we take our fine selves out for a late lunch before we explore a little?” Willow asked Tara with a bump of her hips.

Poking Willow in the stomach Tara said teasingly, “You’re as bad as Xander, and I think he has a tapeworm or something with the amount of food that man puts away so regularly.”

“Hey, I am not Xander, and I do not have worms!” Willow exclaimed pulling a prodigious pout of her own.

Tara put her arm around Willow and pulled her into a kiss, sucking gently on her lower lip. Tara let go and smiled happily at Willow. “Mmm, definitely not Xander.”

“Wow,” Willow breathed, as she looked a little dazed and surprised at Tara’s open display of affection, something she in the past hadn’t done much more of than hand holding. Willow slipped
her arms around Tara’s waist and pulled her back in for another kiss. Letting one hand wander to the newly cropped locks, she broke the kiss to press several butterfly kisses along Tara’s jaw, and up to her ear.

“Easy access to those yummy ears, baby” Willow purred as she played with the hair at the nape of Tara’s neck.

“More perks to short hair, huh, Sweetie?” Tara grinned, and Willow’s stomach gurgled loudly again. Laughing again, Tara put her arm around Willow’s waist. “Let’s get you fed, love, where to?”

With a decisive nod of her head, Willow said, “There’s only one place to go and wait ‘til you taste the food. Just up the street, La Indita here we come!”

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Willow led them up the street to a rather bland looking storefront compared to the rest of the shops on the block. It was an unassuming space broken into two sections. The first where they entered had a small row of booths along the wall, and maybe half a dozen tables, then there was a half wall that allowed you to look over onto another dozen or so tables with a two occupied; but as they entered Tara could look right out to a shaded courtyard in the back filled with tables.

“Can we eat outside, Will?” Tara asked.

“Sure, c’mon it looks like we beat most of the lunch rush; maybe we’ll be the only ones left here now,” Willow said as she led the way towards the back.

A pretty young woman came out from the back; she had an apron on over a skirt and a light short sleeve linen peasant blouse.

“Hi, how are you?” She asked smiling brightly and eying them both.

“Great, we’d like to sit outside if you don’t mind,” Willow said.

“No, go right ahead, I’ll make sure the misters are turned back on for you,” she said with a smile.

Willow led the way out and picked a table in the corner with the most shade. The walls and roof were made of lattice and had bougainvillea growing up and over for covering. Just as they sat there was a sputter and the misters kicked on, causing Tara to look up as a fine mist began to blow above them. The cool mist made sitting outside immediately much more comfortable, and they both sat and enjoyed the dappled shade of the gorgeous fuchsia and emerald color of the bougainvillea.
“You’re gonna love this place, Tara,” Willow insisted adamantly. “Everything I thought qualified as Mexican food before I ate at this place paled in comparison. It was like, my whole life I was measuring the tasty-ness of Taco Bell as the epitome of Mexican cuisine and now that I’ve eaten here, now I know what all the hype was about. This is actually Michoacán Tarascan Indian to be exact, and Dana said this place regularly gets voted best food in one of the local papers.”

Tara grinned at Willow’s enthusiasm. It was definitely a refreshing sight to see, especially after all of the guilt and regret that had clouded their initial reunion, and her first visit back home and to the Scoobies. She seemed more relaxed to Tara, which in turn made Tara more relaxed.

The young woman came to their table with menus, and introduced herself as Jeannette, and asked for their drink orders. She then came back pushing a covered cart. After serving their drinks, she placed a bowl of warm tortilla chips on their table and began to combine in a plastic bowl with a similar plastic pestle, tomatoes, onions, garlic, and cilantro, then she asked if they would like their salsa spicy. After agreeing to a medium heat, she placed a few slices of jalapeño that included the inner rib and seeds to the bowl she had just mixed on the table and then asked if they were ready to order.

“Umm, I think we need a few more minutes,” Willow said as she dug into the fresh salsa. “Salsa in a jar just doesn’t compare after this.”

Around a mouthful of salsa and chip, Tara moaned, “Oh my god, that’s good. Do they make the chips too?”

“Yup and the chips and salsa are free – baby, Tostito’s™ will never taste the same after this.” Willow laughed. “I already know what I want, have you looked yet?”

Tara shook her head, then opened the menu and began to look. “What is Calabacitas Con Queso?” She asked.

“Ooo, that’s a good one. It’s squash, with corn, peppers, tomatoes, and cheese. It’s served with warm tortillas, you’d like it.” Willow nodded. “Ooo, we can share if you like, that way you get to try mine too!” Willow enthused.

“Okay, sounds like I get twice as lucky,” Tara said.

Willow glanced around before saying, “Not just twice, if you play your cards right,” and blushing.

Tara quirked her eyebrow and was about to respond when Jeannette made her way back to their table to take their orders. Willow nodded to her as she stuffed another salsa laden chip in her mouth trying to cover her blush.
Tara pointed and said, “I’d like the Calabacitas Con Queso, please.”

Jeannette nodded, smiling brightly at Tara. “My uncle grows our squash and just brought some fresh this morning, you’re gonna love them,” she said then turned to Willow, and her smile faltered.

“I’ll have the Chicken Mole Poblano, and can we have extra tortillas too, please?”

Jeannette nodded and was gone with a swish of her skirt.

“What’s that?” Tara asked as she loaded up another chip.

Willow smiled gleefully, “It’s a chocolate based sauce that can be put over meat. I don’t know everything in it but, there’s nuts, chilies, spices, and of course my beloved chocolate. Wait ‘til you try it, baby, it’ll knock your socks off,” she said bouncing in her seat.

Tara laughed at Willow’s excitement, which brought on a good-natured pout.

“Are you laughing at me?” Willow inquired as she continued to bounce and stuff salsa and chips into her mouth.

“No, Sweetie, I am most definitely not laughing at you,” Tara said as she took Willow’s free hand in hers. “I’m happy. We’ve had a good day so far. You asked last night if you should feel guilty for being happy, well, you aren’t the only one feeling happier than they have in a very long time.”

Willow stopped chewing and gazed into Tara’s eyes to see real happiness, no shadows of pain or hurt, just genuine happiness and love. She swallowed quickly, threading her fingers between Tara’s so that their palms touched.

“Love you,” Willow murmured.

“Love you more,” Tara answered.

They were sitting smiling goofily at one another when Jeannette came back with a tray full of their food. Neither pulled away immediately when she arrived and after serving their food, she gave Tara a smile and wink before taking their cups back to freshen up their drinks.

“Did she just wink at you?” Willow huffed, her voice raising an octave as she glared at the girl’s
“Um, yeah, I think she did,” Tara said with a faint blush and a pleased smirk. “Don’t worry, Sweetie, I’ve only got eyes for one girl.”

“Oh yeah? Where is she? I’m not all large with the butch, but I’ll pull hair and bite – I learned from Dawnie,” Willow said in mock seriousness, as she looked around playfully at the empty patio.

Tara laughed loudly, “Aren’t you a vicious one? Well, she’s a gorgeous redhead, and she stole my heart the first time I saw her,” she said dreamily.

Willow smiled and puffed out her chest a little. “She’s a very lucky girl,” nodding her head knowingly.

“Mmm, I’m glad she thinks so.”

“More than you know,” Willow added seriously, with a sincere smile.

With the return of their drinks, they started to dig into their food. Willow closed her eyes and moaned with her first bite. She opened a round dish with a lid and pulled a warm tortilla out. Tearing off a piece, she put some chicken and sauce on it, handing it to Tara to try.

Tara popped the filled piece of tortilla into her mouth and began to chew, her eyes growing wide.

“Oh my god, Willow, that’s amazing,” she said. Tara could taste pine nuts, and pumpkin seeds, then cumin along with some spices she couldn’t name; chilies gave it some heat and the chocolate rounded out the sauce nicely. “Oh, you definitely have to share that with me.”

“I told you,” Willow smiled widely before tearing off some more of the tortilla and scooping some of the squash and cheese into it and handing it to Tara, then taking some for herself.

Bobbing her head in appreciation, Tara rolled her eyes as she made yummy sounds. She watched Willow mix the rice and refried beans together on her plate before taking a bite and bouncing again in her seat in pleasure.

With a smile, Tara tried them separately, then followed Willow’s lead and mixed her beans and rice together. Happily going back and forth the two ate, feeding each other from their plates, chatting and enjoying their meals in general. With just bits and pieces left on the plates, they both slumped back in their chairs satisfyingly stuffed.
“Wow, that was wonderful. How did you find this place?” Tara asked as they waited for the check.

“Dana. She brought me here on one of our trips into the city. She comes to a couple of times a week into the city, and once we started to become friends, she would bring me with her, show me around a little,” Willow said as she rubbed her tummy.

Tara watched Willow’s hand, and said with a wink and a suggestive smile, “You know, I could do that for you.”

“Why, Miss Maclay, are you trying to seduce me?” Willow asked coyly.

“Hmm, that depends, Miss Rosenberg, is it working?”

“Always.”

Jeannette came to inquire if they wanted any type of dessert, recommending a tres dulce de leche, or ‘three milks’ cake that she herself had made that morning. Willow looked at Tara and they decided on a piece to split. Jeannette brought fresh drinks and a large slice of cake with two spoons.

Willow nodded to Tara for her to try the cake first, so she could watch her expression. Tara moaned sensually, closing her eyes as she slowly chewed the moist, rich and sweet cake.

“Willow, that’s like sex on a spoon!” Tara exclaimed.

With a wide smile, shaking her head Willow alleged, “You have been spending way too much time with Anya.” Then tasted her spoonful of cake and had to agree.

Tara snatched up the check after Jeannette cleared away their dessert dishes, and walking hand in hand, they made their way to the front to pay. Jeannette again winked at Tara and a little more than politely said she hoped she would see them again soon.

“If she keeps flirting with you, I might just put what Dawn showed me into good use,” Willow groused with a flare of possessiveness.

Tara laughed again, “Hey, don’t complain she didn’t charge us for my lunch.”

“Really?”
“Really, it didn’t even cost me twenty bucks with a nice tip,” Tara said, showing Willow the receipt.

“Well, at least she has good taste,” Willow huffed as she turned to glare back at the door of the restaurant. “Do you want to walk around or go back?” She asked as she took Tara’s hand.

“Let’s go back; the heat is making me sleepy.”

“Home it is.”

*****

Walking back to the SUV, they passed a girl with dreadlocks, about Dawn’s age, sitting in the shade outside of the natural food co-op with an infant sleeping in a stroller, playing a guitar and singing. Tara pulled the change from lunch and a five dollar bill out of her pocket and dropped it into the open guitar case with a smile.

As soon as Willow started the engine she rolled all the windows down and kicked the air conditioning on high. Once it started to blow cool air, she rolled the windows back up and put the car in gear. Tara scooted closer to Willow and rested her head on her shoulder and a hand on her thigh as she drove. Moving her thumb in lazy circles, Tara dozed, while music filtered softly in and around the vehicle as it cooled nicely. Willow pressed kisses onto the top of Tara’s head, and briefly rubbed her nose in her hair, giggling quietly to herself.

It didn’t seem to take as long to get back to The Grove as it had taken to get to the city. Being cautious not to jostle the sleeping Tara, Willow gently pulled the car to a stop. Sitting for a few moments, Willow rested her head on top of Tara as she slipped her hand under the one on her thigh. Bringing it to her lips she spoke softly to the sleeping girl.

“Baby…we’re home now,” she said.

When she got no response she gently stroked Tara’s head, running her fingers over her ear, and down her neck, then up under her chin. Tilting Tara’s head back slightly, Willow placed a soft kiss on her lips.

“Wake up, my sleeping beauty,” Willow said a little louder.

Tara smiled, and opened her eyes, blinking a few times. “I didn’t drool on you did I?” she asked with a sleepy smile.
“Not that I would care anyway, but to answer your question, no, no drooling. We’re home, so let’s bypass the main entrance and go right to our rooms, then we can get you a nap, okay?”

“Mmm, I wanna quick shower, wash off the hair and cool down,” Tara said as she raised her hand to her head, running her fingers through her shorn locks.

“Are you sorry you did it, baby?” Willow inquired gently.

Tara shook her head, “No, I’m really not, Will. Besides, even if I were, it’ll grow back, but I think I want to keep it short for a while, I kinda like it.”

Willow nodded, “Me too, baby, and it suits you. Ready?”

Willow rounded the SUV, and with a chirp of the alarm, she took Tara’s hand with a smile. They walked around to the side entrance and back to their rooms quickly, wanting to get out of the heat as soon as possible.

Once back in their rooms, Tara immediately started stripping off on her way to the bathroom, with Willow close on her heels. Setting the shower to cold which actually came out lukewarm, Tara stepped in shoving her head immediately under the spray of water. Willow closed the door and watched, as she leaned against the cool of the tile.

Tara opened her eyes to find Willow in pretty much the same position she was in earlier that day. Staring slightly slack-jawed at the sight of her lover, rivulets of water tracing abstract paths over her body to Willow’s endless fascination.

Bringing her hands up to her head, Tara arched her back with a moan of pleasure at the cool water as she watched Willow’s expression through hooded eyes. She began to giggle, and still, Willow gazed at Tara with open adoration. Her eyes seemed to move everywhere like she was looking for a gift she didn’t know where to begin opening.

Tara held out her hand to Willow, who took it slowly, still absorbed in watching the water that raced over Tara’s body.

“How do you do it?” she asked.

“Do what, love?” Tara replied.

“Turn me into ‘Bubba, The Inbred Redneck’? With clothes, without – especially without them – and my IQ drops like sixty points. I get so lost in you nothing else matters.”
“Sweetie, I seem to recall being in your spot this morning, so I’d have to say the feeling is very much of the mutual kind. I just hope we’re always like this,” Tara said with a shrug, as she pulled Willow into her arms, and placed a passionate kiss on her lips to reassure her.

Turning so Willow could get under the water, she released her with a smirk. “See, we could do this all day long,” Tara said as she watched Willow get wet under the shower head, making Willow giggle.

“Can you imagine how prune-y we would be if we spent all day in the shower? I mean, don’t get me wrong, it definitely has its appeal, but how would we explain it when someone finally came looking for us?”

“Hmmm, how long do you think we would have before they would start to look for us?” Tara asked with a cheeky grin as she poured too much shampoo into her hand. “Oops, here, take some.” She poured shampoo from her hand into Willow’s. “Gee, imagine how much we’ll save on shampoo and conditioner now.” She lathered up her hair and pushed it into a sudsy Mohawk. “What do you think?” Tara turned her head playfully.

“Mmm, baby I don’t really think a Mohawk is your look,” Willow giggled as she reached for Tara’s hair and began to massage her scalp.

“That’s nice,” Tara mumbled.

“Rinse,” Willow said as she finished lathering her own hair and quickly grabbed the body soap, and poured some into her hand. She soaped the front of her body up quickly, then pressed into Tara and began to wiggle against her. “Payback for this morning.”

Tara opened her eyes, then smirked. “Do I look like I’m suffering muchly? As a matter of fact, I don’t really feel very tired now either, but I’m definitely feeling something.” She wiped a trail of shampoo that was heading from Willow’s hair to her eye away. “Turn, at least rinse your hair.” She wiggled and slithered her body over Willow’s, smiling when she noticed a light flush start around her neck and shoulders.

Once Willow’s head and neck were clear of suds, Tara whispered huskily in her ear, “Cold showers just don’t seem to help any do they?” then nibbled her way down Willow’s neck to her shoulder and began to suck on the damp skin.

“I love your mouth,” Willow whimpered, “I especially love it on me.”

“That makes two of us,” Tara purred. “Let’s get out of here, already.”
Reaching behind Willow, she shut the water off. They got out quickly and dried off between kisses before Tara yanked Willow’s towel away and pulled her towards the bed. Scooting to the middle of the bed Tara once again held her hand out to Willow, who this time didn’t hesitate in taking it and crawling onto the bed with her.

Quickly rolling Willow onto her back Tara held herself above Willow grazing their nipples over each other, keeping the contact light but constant.

“Do you trust me?” Tara asked with a wicked grin.

Willow gulped and nodded, her eyes darkening as her mind raced. Tara hopped quickly off the bed and ran back to the bathroom again. She came back with the tie to her bathrobe.

“Do you still trust me?” Tara asked Willow, who nodded again, then watched as Tara tied the end around one of Willow’s wrists, threaded it through and around the headboard, pulled it taut and secured her other wrist. “Are you okay with this?”

“Y-yes,” Willow’s breathing was becoming rapid and shallow.

“Okay, you know you can say ‘no’ at any time, I won’t be upset or anything,” Tara said softly, as she lay down on her side next to Willow.

Tara began to slowly kiss around Willow’s left breast, grazing the nipple with the tip of her tongue as she made passes back and forth over her breast before sucking the turgid nipple fast and hard into her mouth. Tara could feel Willow’s body flex beneath her as Willow moaned.

Blowing cool air over the excited flesh, Tara let one hand wander down over Willow’s tummy to her thigh. Alternating between scratching, kneading and pinching the soft skin, Willow began to squirm, and pull against the cloth restraints.

Tara watched Willow closely as she dragged her nails up Willow’s thigh, around her stomach and down the other thigh. Willow was arching into her touch as she switched her mouth to the opposite nipple, using her hand to keep alternating between pinches and caresses to keep the left nipple as stimulated as possible.

“Mmm…oh…mmm, Tara please,” Willow begged, her hands clenching and unclenching.

“Please what, Willow?” Tara asked calmly as she continued her assault, now licking her way over the scratches on Willow’s stomach. “Mmm, I bet I know what you want, I can smell you, Sweetie,”
she growled as her face was inches from Willow’s sex.

“Roll over,” Tara ordered. There was enough give in the cloth to allow Willow to simply twist it as she rolled immediately in response to Tara’s command. Starting at Willow’s shoulders she ran her nails down the full length off her back, over her shapely bottom, to the back of her thighs and up again. Not breaking the skin but with enough pressure to raise little red welts. Willow writhed and moaned, arching against her hands.

“You have such beautiful skin Willow, and it’s even sexier with my scratches all over it,” Tara purred, leaning down to nip at Willow’s bottom, working her way up Willow’s back and shoulders. “Do you want me?” She whispered in Willow’s ear.

“Oh, god, Tara, please, I want you so much, baby,” Willow panted.

Tara placed Willow’s hands on the headboard and moved between her legs. “I want you on your knees,” Tara said as she began to help Willow lift herself up. Placing her hands over Willow’s, she kissed her neck and shoulders. “I love you,” Tara said into Willow’s skin. Her hands wandered down over her breast, tugging sharply at her still hard nipples, making the journey southward ever so slowly.

Willow was already shaking and sweating. “Please, god, Tara, no more teasing, I can’t –“ Willow froze as Tara entered her from behind. Using her free hand to torment Willow’s nipples, she set a slow even pace with two fingers inside Willow.

“You’re so wet, baby, it’s delicious to be inside you when you’re like this,” Tara growled into Willow’s ear as she bent over her, pressing her breasts into Willow’s back so she could feel Tara’s hard nipples press against her hot skin.

“T-Tara, oh…so…good, baby,” Willow whimpered, “Faster…please,” she begged as she started pushing her hips back into Tara’s hand.

“Yes, baby, I want to hear you scream my name when you come, Willow,” Tara’s fingers were moving faster and she had moved her free hand down to Willow’s clit. The first stroke of her fingers made Willow buck and groan. Gripping the headboard in a white-knuckled grip, Willow was trapped between Tara’s moving hands.

Tara felt Willow’s inner walls start to contract against her fingers, and Willow began to shake harder. Willow looked over her shoulder at Tara.

“T-Tara, I’m com-coming… OH GOD, TARA!” Willow bellowed as she came, hanging her head against her arm as she shook into another orgasm, and Tara slowed her fingers only for a moment before she began to pump in and out of Willow harder and faster. “TARA! TARA! OH, GOD,
TARA!” Willow yelled as she came again so hard she soaked Tara to the elbow.

Slowing her hand against Willow’s contracting muscles, Tara eased Willow back around onto her back and untied a hand so she could pull Willow free. She gently stroked Willow’s face, pushing her bangs out of her eyes.

“Sweet Love, are you ok?” she asked looking down nervously at Willow’s flushed face and closed eyes, then worked the knot loose on the other hand freeing her completely.

Willow opened her eyes, so dark green, and smiled widely at Tara, still trying to catch her breath.

“Baby…that was…much with the wow,” Willow panted out, “And you all with the ‘Grrr, In-Command Girl’…very, very sexy.”

“I didn’t push you too far, that wasn’t too much or anything?”

Willow’s breathing was now calming down, “Baby, feel free to push like that again,” she said with a full body quiver and a happy smile.

Willow’s hands then seemed to take on a life of their own, she couldn’t stop touching Tara. Kissing her urgently, flicking her tongue against Tara’s lips requesting entrance, and Tara gladly lets her in. Willow sucked on the tip of Tara’s tongue as she rolled onto Tara. Tongues gliding slickly against one another, tracing lips, mapping mouths they each knew well.

Grinding her hips and still very wet sex against Tara, Willow moaned into their kiss. Her hands traveling up and down Tara’s sides, she curled her fingers under Tara’s thigh, and breaking their kiss, shimmied down Tara’s body leaving a trail of hot, wet kisses behind. Perching herself between Tara’s creamy thigh’s, Willow eased the leg up and over her shoulder, and with a smile like a kitten in cream, she pressed her tongue slowly between Tara’s outer lips.

“Mmm,” Willow moaned.

“Oh, yes, Willow,” Tara breathed as she watched Willow’s mouth descend on her. “So good…”

Willow kept her eyes open as she started with slow, short licks up the length of Tara’s sex, flicking her clit a few times before starting the tortuously slow licks again.

Willow stopped, giggling.
“Sweetie now is not when I want you giggling. What’s so funny?” Tara questioned looking down at Willow’s dancing eyes.

“How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tara-pop?” She giggled again, and Tara groaned. “I know, I know – it’s bad, but there it is. It ran across my mind and I couldn’t help myself, and since I can’t answer the question, I’ll get back to what I was doing. Sorry, baby.”

“I can’t believe you just said that…no, actually I can, and should be surprised you haven’t…oh, yes…before,” Tara uttered as Willow resumed her slow licks.

“One lick…two licks…three licks,” Willow giggled again.

“Willow, if you hoot like an owl, so help me, I will be sorely tempted to stop you!” Tara warned through clenched teeth.

“Ohhh no, I enjoy this as much as you do, no stopping, I want a happy Tara in my bed,” Willow stressed before she went back to her slow torturous licks and flicks of Tara’s clit.

Soon Tara was rolling her hips to meet Willow’s licks from her entrance up to her clit and back again, slowly building Tara up for her orgasm. Willow felt the muscles in Tara’s thigh start to tense and quiver. Shifting enough to her let other hand in, she slipped two fingers inside a very wet Tara, and set a fast pace with her strokes.

“Willow, yes, baby,” Tara moaned. “Ohh…just like that, so fucking good, baby.”

Willow latched onto her clit and began sucking and flicking her tongue quickly over the sensitive nerves.

“Yes!” Tara said as she tangled her fingers into Willow’s hair to hold her head in place and keep her mouth from moving anywhere else.

Willow moaned into Tara, the vibration shot through the sensitive nerves, and around Tara’s body, Willow curled her fingers slightly so the tips would rub her g-spot with every stroke.

“Will, don’t stop,” Tara cooed and started to make a low sound – something somewhere between a moan and a cry, as she crested over into her first orgasm.

Willow applied more suction while slowing her fingers to let Tara ride out her orgasm, and slowly build her for the next. With several quick flicks of her tongue, Willow eased Tara into another orgasm. Easing the pressure on her clit, and keeping steady on her g-spot, Tara fluttered into yet
another orgasm.

“WILL-LLOW!” Tara cried out, and then whimpered, “No more, too much, Sweetie, no more.”

Willow eagerly crawled up next to Tara to hold her. “Let’s move to my bed, baby, it’s umm, dry,” Willow snickered. “I’m kind of in a rather wet spot.”

“Give me a minute, I don’t think I can move just yet,” Tara breathed heavily.

Willow dropped light kisses around Tara’s neck, nibbling lightly here and there, tasting the salt of her sweat on her rosy skin.

After a few moments of catching her breath, kissing Willow tenderly, Tara murmured, “Ok, let’s go, Sweetie, wet spots aren’t fun for the long term.”

Willow pulled back the cool sheets and let Tara slide in first, settling in behind her, she wrapped her arms around Tara while she continued to tremble. Dropping softer, lazy kisses on the top of Tara’s head, Willow drew circles on her back while her body calmed down. They both began to get sleepy and started to drift off, their day has been full of so many good things.

“Love you,” Tara whispered, as she began to drift closer to sleep.

“Love you more,” Willow answered, tightening her hold, and following right behind.

TBC...
Chapter 22 - Synchronicity

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: NC-17 – for naughty bits.

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 4 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove – Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. To date, I owe a crotchety 9-year-old Russian Blue named Corazon, and a bratty 3-year-old polydactyl grey and white tuxedo cat named Brogan, that are both giving me the hairy eye since I said I own them, along with a 15-year-old car. Oh, and they bratty one plays fetch, she’s my kuppy (the ex wanted a puppy, I won since the animal would ultimately be mine and a dog just wasn’t happening, but since she plays fetch I call her a kuppy – kitten + puppy = kuppy). I also own the original characters, Dana, Rowan, Claude, Tabitha (wherever she’s slithered off to), Marisol and Bunny - who is whining about his “face time”. So as you can see, I’m rolling with the big dogs.

Feedback: Make me scream – I dare ya!

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Music for this chapter: The Duke Spirit “Cuts Across The Land” – love this one lots and lots, and “Neptune”, Kate Havnevik “Melankton”, The Joy Formidable “The Big Roar”, Radiohead “The King of Limbs”, and Camille Saint-Saëns “The Danse Macabre”. As always thanks to my beta, the inimitable Crystal aka CYTEACH, for putting up with all my quirky quirks.
**Synchro•nic•i•ty**  
**Pronunciation:** /ˈsɪŋ-krə-ˈnis-ət-ē, sin-/  
**Function:** n; pl -ties;  
*The coincidental occurrence of events and especially psychic events (as similar thoughts in widely separated persons or a mental image of an unexpected event before it happens) that seem related but are not explained by conventional mechanisms of causality.*

Tara opened her eyes on a dark room, with the sensation of feather light kisses being trailed up and down her back. She smiled and didn’t move to see how long the kisses would continue, and she could play possum. Which turned out to be not long – enjoying only two more passes of Willow’s lips along her skin before the silence was broken.

“I know you’re awake, Baby. Your breathing changed,” Willow whispered into her skin.

“Mmm, I didn’t want to disturb you. It’s such a wonderful way to wake up,” Tara murmured sleepily, as she rolled over. “What time is it?”

“It’s late, close to eleven thirty. I guess I wore you out, huh?” Willow asked with an overly pleased smirk.

Tara laughed, and with a broad smile agreed. “I think between you, the heat, and the wonderful food, I was a goner.” Tara stretched and the sheet slipped down off her breasts, and she was immediately beset upon.

“Oh,” she gasped as Willow’s mouth attached itself to her nipple. “Willow,” Tara breathed as she brought her hands up to play with the shortened red locks. Willow pinned her to the bed with her body, as her hands and mouth went to work on Tara’s nipples.

Willow let go of Tara’s nipple with a pop. “You just looked so yummy I couldn’t resist testing that theory, then again I always find you to be my favorite yummy treat,” she said as she looked down into Tara’s eyes darkened by arousal. “I also changed the sheets on your bed, and to be honest I could smell us on the sheets. Now it’s time for us to muss my bed,” Willow said with a wicked, throaty laugh.

Tara kissed Willow hard, kicking the sheet free so she could wrap her legs around Willow’s slim hips, pulling her as close as possible. Hands and mouths began to wander in a dance made all the more elegant by the desire and love being shared.
Both laying naked, flat on their backs as their breathing slowed to normal, Willow played with Tara’s hand as their fingers entwined between them. Their bodies shimmered with sweat as Tara brought Willow’s hand to her mouth, and kissed the back of it. Not so discreetly hiding a yawn behind her other hand, her tummy rumbled.

“Hmm, feed me,” Tara insisted.

“You mean I wasn’t enough?” Willow asked incredulously.

“You are like having dessert before the meal, my love; and I never get enough of you,” Tara purred as she rolled over to kiss Willow’s neck and shoulder.

“Mmm, very good answer. Now that we’ve mussed my bed,” she giggled. “Shall we go get something to eat? The kitchen should be clear at this hour.”

“Yes and yes. Quite a productive day on the mussing front,” Tara agreed before she slipped off of Willow and into her own bedroom. Willow rolled off of the bed to pad after Tara and heard the shower start.

As they both stood in front of the bathroom mirror wrapped in towels, Tara combed her hair, this way and that, and much to her chagrin, she realized she had a cowlick on the crown of her head. Now that her hair was short it stuck up no matter how hard she tried to get it to lie down. She had finally had enough when Willow started laughing.

“Don’t you dare laugh at me,” Tara warned.

“You have a sprout, Baby, it’s adorable,” Willow cooed and she began to play with the chunk of hair standing upright.

“It is not cute, and what do you mean by ‘sprout’?” Tara pouted sublimely.

Willow kissed her on the cheek. “Didn’t you ever watch ‘The Little Rascals’? My dad used to watch them, believe it or not, and Alfalfa always had this cowlick that stuck up. Anyway, when I was
seven Xander put this awful fake watermelon smelling bubble gum in my hair because Cordy told him to – I should’ve known then she was evil. I had to have my hair cut really short to get it out, my mother cried. That, and the time she tried to burn me at the stake might be the only times in my life she ever showed any real interest in me, and I have one too, my dad called it my ‘Alfalfa Sprout’. When it gets a little longer it’ll go away,” Willow said with a smile.

Tara stood with her mouth agape. “Did you breathe at all?” Then shook her head and laughed.

“Just comb everything forward a bit, here let me,” Willow took the comb, and turned Tara to face her, then styled it very closely to the way Bunny had, and magically no more ‘Alfalfa Sprout’. As Tara turned back to the mirror, Willow growled and attached herself to Tara’s neck, nibbling and sucking. “See? There’s my gorgeous girl, mmmm…easy access indeed…I like, I like lots,” she breathed into Tara’s ear before she began to suck on the lobe.

“Sweetie…mmmm….that feels so good…it’s like my neck is more sensitive now,” Tara groaned as Willow made her way up and down Tara’s neck. She pulled their towels free so their skin could touch again, making them both moan with the intoxicating pleasure of the sensation.

“Baby, if you keep doing that then we won’t be leaving this bathroom, I’ll have you right here,” Tara insisted as her hands began to knead Willow’s supple bottom harder.

“Then do, because I’m not stopping,” was all Willow got out before Tara turned her quickly and pushed her up onto the vanity edge. Dropping to her knees, she grasped Willow’s hips to keep her balanced in place. Without any further warning, Tara buried her face into Willow, lapping away at her lover’s very ready sex.

“Baby,” Willow moaned and she mussed the hair she had so carefully styled just a few minutes before.

“You’re so wet Willow, god, you taste so good, I’ll never get tired of this,” Tara sighed into the still sensitive flesh of her lover.

“Getting aroused has never been a problem for us – ohh, right there, Baby,” Willow breathed heavily. “Oh god, Tara, that’s so sweet…Baby!” Willow tangled her legs over Tara’s shoulders, as she rapidly came.

Tara softly licked as Willow rode out her orgasm. “I think we might have a time record there, Sweetie,” Tara said as she looked up at a very flushed girl, resting her hands on Willow’s shaking thighs.

Willow chuckled, “Hmmm, we’ll have to see what I can do about that,” she said, resting her foot on Tara’s shoulder and gently pushing her back onto the tile. She slid off the counter, to straddle Tara.
Willow ground her hips down in a slow circle into their heated and sensitive flesh, making her moan. With her mouth on one nipple, Willow wiggled off to the side and entered Tara with two fingers.

The unexpected focused penetration combined with strong suction on her nipple made Tara come up off the floor. Willow relentlessly teased her g-spot and tormented both her nipples rapidly.

“WILLOW, OH DEAR GOD, NOW!”

With two flicks of Willow’s thumb on just the right spot of Tara’s clit, she climaxed. Willow snickered as she rested her chin on her hand and watched Tara calm down. “I think we now have a new speed record,” Willow said the pride obvious in her voice.

“Uh-huh.”

Willow started to move her fingers inside of Tara again, but Tara grabbed her hand and held it still, and Willow thought she had had enough.

“I want you to put that pretty mouth and talented tongue to much better use,” Tara said as she put her hand on the top of Willow’s head and urged her down.

“Whatever you want, my love; I want to taste you, all of you; I want to find out everything that turns you on,” Willow breathed as she kissed down Tara’s stomach, “I want to make you happy for the rest of our lives.”

Settling herself between Tara’s thighs, Willow kept constant eye contact and watched Tara writhe beneath her from the pleasure her mouth provided. When Tara could take no more she began to try and scuttle backward and away.

“No more, Willow, no more,” Tara whimpered as she lay shaking on the tile.

Willow grabbed their towels as she moved next to her and used them as make-shift blankets to cover them. Nuzzling Tara’s neck, Willow whispered, “As you wish…” She urged Tara to roll towards her, so she could wrap her arms around her.

Once Tara had stopped trembling, Willow began giggling until it became outright laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

“You don’t see the humor in this?”
Tara just looked at Willow unsure of what she was getting at.

“We’re lying on the cold tile of the bathroom floor after our third round of sex in less than twenty-four hours, and at least as far as I’m concerned, lying here on the tile with you, it’s better than the Honeymoon Suite at the Ritz Carlton,” Willow said as she tightened her grip on Tara.

Tara smiled, “I can see the humor, although a Jacuzzi tub would be nice.”

“There’s one in my bathroom,” Willow stated simply.

“How did you pull that off?” Tara asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“Well, it’s thanks to the rod in my leg. Sometimes my leg will cramp from the hip down, it can go on for a few days and the Jacuzzi helps. Really hot water, and the jets in a few good places and I’m good as new. Guess I’m not the spring chicken I look to be, huh, Baby?”

Tara's face had clouded over as she listened to the reminders of what Willow had dealt with.

“So you’re always reminded in some way aren’t you?”

“Hmmm? Yes, I guess I am, but I don’t look at it that way. It’s just an injury. I could have gotten it skiing – not likely, or from a fall – good chance of that – we know ‘grace’ is not one of my strong suits, or even out on patrol – most likely of all. I don’t need to focus on the how, it just is. Although the rod seems to be a bit sensitive to weather changes, I think it’s the barometric changes. It will ache some and make me sore.” Willow smiled before kissing Tara tenderly.

“I love you,” Tara whispered.

Willow smiled and rubbed her nose against Tara’s, “Love you too. Still hungry? I could go raid the kitchen and come back, besides I wanted to ask if maybe you’d like to do a spell with me?”

Tara snickered, “I thought we just did a spell.”

“Mmm, yes we did, one of my most favorite-est kinds of spells, I’ll have you know, but I actually wanted to do magick with you. I’ve been meaning to ask, and I know it’s been so long. We stopped when I started going all power crazy…” Willow trailed off, guilt and sorrow flickered across her face as she suddenly sat up and stepped into the shower again.
Tara sat up with a slightly confused look, wondering what had just happened to the good mood they had been sharing.

“Umm, what the hell, Will?”

Tara got up and went into the shower behind Willow. She stood toward the back with her arms crossed over her chest, as she waited for a response.

“I’m sorry I pulled away, I shouldn’t have. It’s just that it’s something I regret, Tara. I’ve wondered more times than I can count, what if we had continued to practice more together after Glory and Buffy if that in some way that wouldn’t have helped to keep me more grounded, less…hungry, less…needy. Maybe I would have felt more secure – I’ll always wonder on some level, Baby, I can’t help it,” Willow turned around to look at Tara.

“Our magic had always seemed to have that effect on me. You’re so calm and sure, it comes through even in your magic. Mine is like me, wound a bit too tight and a little spazzy. I have to make a conscious effort to have the calm you seem to have so readily. You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for, you have never believed me, but I could see it, I could feel it. You have a gift, Baby, you have control. I don’t know if your mother taught it to you, or if it’s just you.” Willow shrugged and smiled.

“I’ve learned a lot, but I think you can teach me so much more, I want to learn from you – I want us to learn together! Now that you’re here to begin training and devote the time to learning with Rowan and Dana, you’ll see. Then maybe you’ll believe me, too… Tara, a dream woke me earlier. This is a new one, and I have a funny feeling we – you and I – need to be careful. We know what we feel around Tabitha and it’s only going to get worse. I hope my dream was a lie, but if it’s not it won’t end well for her or Amy.”

Willow had grabbed the soap as she talked, washing away the signs of their recent lovemaking and quickly rinsed off. She stepped aside to let Tara get under the water.

“Explain,” was all Tara said.

Willow shook her head, “It was just flashes, snippets like Polaroids. We know Tabitha isn’t to be trusted and neither is Amy. I don’t know exactly why Tabitha is here other than what Giles said, but I have suspicions that there’s more to that story about Tabitha’s mother and father…there’s something either he doesn’t know or isn’t telling. I saw flashes of a pool, flashes of you and me with Rowan and Dana, of Amy being bound and it royally backfiring. It has something to do with Tabitha. Amy may have learned a lot of tricks from Catherine, but I just get the wiggins to the nth degree when it comes to Tabitha.”

Tara’s expression grew serious as she said, “So is that why you want us to practice together, to
“No…and yes,” Willow opened the door and pulled their towels off of the floor, handing Tara one. “I missed it; I miss the connection I feel with you when we practice. Now that I know you aren’t going anywhere if you are up for it, that’s something I would like for us to do again. I have some things I’d like to show you too.”

“Will, you outclass me on the power front —” Tara began.

“Stop saying that!” Willow snapped at Tara. “Baby, didn’t you hear anything Lady Rowan told you? I don’t want you to say that anymore, and I really, really hope you stop believing that. You. Are. My. Equal. – In all ways, even if you are being a stubborn, dummy head about it.” Then Willow giggled.

Tara stared slack-jawed at Willow’s outburst and subsequent laughter.

“Uhh…”

“If you’re a stubborn, dummy head, what does that make me?” Willow continued to laugh.

Tara’s jaw snapped shut as she thought, then she started to speak and stopped again. She cocked her head to the side and just watched Willow as she dried off, then brushed her teeth.

Looking at Tara through the mirror, Willow couldn’t read her expression.

“What?” She said and turned around.

Tara just shook her head, and handed Willow the comb and pointed to the ‘sprout’ for her to tame. Willow pulled Tara into her arms and held her. “Baby, things are going to change. I can’t say I know how, but I know, and I want you to think about this. When all of this is done, we don’t have to be on the front lines anymore, and we won’t have to be. So let’s think about not, okay? I want to go places with you, and not worry about the gang and what big bad they might be facing. I want to only worry about us. I don’t know why I know this, but things are going to go down big, everything will change for all of us. Remember, change is good.”

Willow stroked Tara's cheek, and with a wink began combing her hair for her.

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Tara had just finished changing the sheets on Willow’s bed as Willow returned with a tray of food, bottles of water and two cokes hanging in a bag off of her wrist. Kicking the door closed behind her, she leaned against it for a moment.

“Baby,” she called out.

Tara came out of the bedroom in a pair of boxers and a light blue camisole top and hurried over to a loaded down Willow.

“We have been summoned,” Willow said.

“I wondered how long we would get to fly under the radar. By who, and when?” Tara smirked as she replied.

“We have lunch tomorrow, with Rowan. She and Giles were up having tea. Giles at least looks better than he did, he even commented on my hair. I told them we both saw Bunny at his salon. Rowan said she can’t wait to see yours, I think I might have gone on a bit about your ears,” Willow blushed.

Tara rolled her eyes, “Let’s sit and eat, at some point, I have some school work to do, but I’m not off schedule or anything. I have half a paper to finish for Ancient Languages, and I have to come up with something for my Art final. I’ve been playing with so many things and none seemed good enough.”

“Marisol will be here tomorrow, so I can take you to the stables, maybe some new scenery will be inspirational, and um, there’s always Claude’s offer,” Willow said keeping her voice level. “I know a little about where she wants to take you, and it would be pretty and cooler.”

“Take us, where she wants to take us, love. Only if you wanted to,” Tara said with a shrug.

Sitting on the couch, Willow uncovered the tray. She had a turkey sandwich on wheat, and one, Tara wasn’t sure what was in it, on a baguette. She could see cheese and sprouts, but she also smelled pesto. There was also fruit salad, and two bags of chips.

“What did you bring us, and who does the shopping here? I mean I can’t imagine the amount spent on food here, and I’ve fed the Slayer and Xander regularly,” Tara said with a smile as she looked at the plates.

Willow smiled. “You can make requests if there’s something special you want, or we can simply go get it. There are a few vegans, several vegetarians, and some not. So you can always count on lots of
fruits and veggies. We grow our own here and sell what we can’t eat, I’ll show you the hothouses tomorrow, and we’ll pass two of the eight on the way to the stables. There are a few of the Sisters who like to cook, and there’s about fifty of us here at any given time, so they cook a lot at one time so there’s something for everyone. I think we’ve all gravitated to the things that interest us; I help out in the hothouses with the herbs and veggies twice a week. Some clean, Dana is one of our cooks. There’s no set meal time but by 7 am there’s breakfast, around 12 pm lunch, and about 7 pm supper. There’s a general rule of clean up after yourself in the kitchens, and for those like me, who don’t dare do anything more than sandwiches or omelets, but if several sisters came in hungry I’d offer to make something for us all. The only time there is a set meal is around a sabbat or like there will be when I complete my year and a day.”

Taking the bag from Tara she pulled out the sodas and waters and began to point around the tray. “Here we have a standard turkey sandwich, with lettuce, tomato and honey mustard for my Baby, and over here we have my own creation, I call it a PPLT, which is normally sans the sprouts but I couldn’t resist. It’s provolone cheese, pesto, lettuce, tomato, on a baguette – very yummy. I cut both sandwiches in half that way we could share if you want to. Here is some fruit salad – pineapple, green grapes, kiwi, cherries, and I think that’s cantaloupe,” she said popping a piece of orange-colored fruit into her mouth. “Nope mango, mmmm. So take what you like, halfsies?”

Tara nodded as she pulled her sandwich apart, offering Willow half. The switch made, each bit into their favorite first. Willow opened a bag of chips and handed it to Tara, then opened the other for herself. They ate in silence for a few moments, scarfing the first halves quickly. Taking a bite of Willow’s PPLT, followed quickly by Tara-yummy sounds, she commented, “Mmm, this is good. The sprouts give it a nice crunch.”

“Mmmhmm, I’m not sure what kind they are, we grow several, and they looked fresh cut, hence the not resisting,” Willow smiled.

“So about this spell, what did you have in mind?” Tara asked, getting a sense of déjá vu. Eating sandwiches back in her dorm with Willow, and asking what new spell she wanted to perform while she watched Willow lick her lips, or her mouth move as she talked, or chewed, and yearning so desperately to kiss her.

“I’m sorry, what did you say Sweetie? I was off picking daisies for a moment,” Tara smiled apologetically.

“No, you were watching my mouth,” Willow said as she smiled, “I know you, Miss Maclay.”

Tara flushed, “True, but I was also thinking back to before we had even kissed, and how unbelievably much I wanted to push you down on my bed, and just kiss you senseless back in my dorm room,” Tara sighed. “Now to think of all the places that wonderful mouth has been, it makes me almost giddy.” Her eyes glittered, and the flush stayed in her cheeks, she reached out and brushed her knuckles against Willow’s cheek. “Spell, yes, a spell. Tell me about this spell or I may dissuade you with another type of…spell.”
Willow giggled coyly, batting her eyelashes, “Why Miss Maclay, the things you say – you could sweep a girl off her feet. *This* one in particular.” Willow bounced a little in her seat. “Oh yeah, spell…it’s one I’ve been doing for a long time now – get your mind out of the gutter, missy – it’s another one that tests focus, but synchronicity too. Wait, I have things to show, so let’s finish eating first.”

The girls finished off the last of their sandwiches and set the fruit aside for later, along with the leftover drinks. Willow went into her bedroom, and Tara could hear her rummaging around. She came back with what looked like posters rolled up, one of which looked quite large. She also had a large brown bag and a large sketch pad.

Knowing Willow didn’t draw, a fact she would readily admit to, the sketch pad had Tara intrigued, along with whatever she had in the bag. Then Willow left to come back with a roll of drawing paper like would be used in a kindergarten class, it wasn’t horribly great quality, but it was on a roll so it was easy to maneuver and it was cheap.

“First, I want you to look at these and tell me what you see,” Willow said as she handed the smaller roll of what appeared to be drawings, keeping a longer one aside, until Tara opened them up.

Tara unrolled the sheets and could see many colored dots, and that there was a pattern but she couldn’t discern it. So she looked questioningly at Willow. Willow took the top one and began to back up as she talked.

“We both know I can barely draw a straight line even with a ruler, but I can visualize, and I can focus. Tell me when you can see the picture, by the way. I thought of this when I was in England. Giles had taken me to Dover to see the cliffs – yes, the white cliffs of Dover, apparently the English are quite proud of them – and we had gone to the beach. It was cold and I was standing on the rocks watching the sand swirl around the stones…”

“Stop,” Tara said as her eyes went wide. Willow was holding a remarkable copy of one of Monet’s *Garden at Giverny* paintings; it was one of Willow’s favorites. “How…”

“The swirling sand made me think, that if I could focus and control sands of differing grit, I could make the images I see. As I got better I started pulverizing and adding pastel chalks to the sands, and now I can actually make whatever I can imagine. I have to focus and concentrate, which is something I need. At first, they were nothing, and I did nothing but make a mess. So after two attempts inside I moved outside, but as my control got better,” Willow came forward and took the rest of the pictures from Tara and backed up again. “I actually began to draw.”

“Stop,” Tara said, this time she was looking at an amazing black and white of Buffy laughing, shadow and light played across the sheet, it wasn’t one dimensional and it was actually very good. Willow let the sheet drop and the next was Dawn and Xander watching t.v.; Willow slowly dropped the sheet and Tara saw herself staring out the window in her dorm, one of her studying at the table
with Dawn, the next showed her sleeping.

“Willow,” Tara barely whispered as she looked at what she saw.

“Help me with the long one, we’ll need to hang it so you can see it properly,” Willow had come back to her, and grabbed the longer rolled piece, and pulled scotch tape out of the bag of what Tara knew now must be the colored sands.

They hung the picture on the back of the door into Willow’s rooms. Then Willow covered Tara’s eyes and backed her away from the door, checking over her shoulder until picture began to come to life.

“Have you ever seen the picture of Marilyn Monroe on red velvet from the ‘50’s– actually 1949, but anyway. It’s the first nude she ever did, and well, Marilyn isn’t the subject but the pose is the same. It was the first time I saw a female nude, it was in the New Yorker on the anniversary of her death and it was shortly after the bubblegum incident with Xander. The article talked about her and the photographer, and there were later pictures, but this one stuck...” Willow said as she moved her hand from Tara’s eyes, and Tara could see herself in the same pose, her hair styled the same way, but she was most definitely there and nude.

“Willow, how? You did this with sand? Who has seen this?” Tara asked as she started to blush.

“No one but us has seen this one, Giles and a few of the women at the coven in England have seen the others. Giles has one I did of him with a book in one hand and his glasses pushed up on his forehead. He liked it so much he framed it. Dana has seen the ones I just showed to you. This is yours, you can do what you like with it, and I have others I can show you too. Some are landscapes; a lot are of you...” Willow ducked her head and shuffled her feet a little.

“It’s beautiful, Will...is that how you see me?” Tara asked in awe.

“It doesn’t do you justice,” Willow said softly.

“What does this have to do with a spell, though? Do you want us to try to do this?” Tara pointed at her ‘on velvet’ as she asked.

“Exactly! We used to be able to be in synch without trying, and I think we can be again. That’s what the bigger roll of paper is for; this is how I’ve worked it out as I’ve gotten better. I use that as a cover sheet so to speak, and using the different colored sands, I push them through it; when the sand hits the paper the dust shakes off leaving the colored dust dot behind. Dot by dot it makes the image, that’s why up close it’s all dots. I’m like an old dot matrix printer! So we have to be careful, there has to be a certain amount of force used but not a lot because this paper isn’t that thick, but it slows the sand enough so it doesn’t rip the sketch sheet behind it. I have sand of different grit so I can be pretty
specific – look at you, I even got the mole under your right breast if you look for it – I really think we could have fun with this, Baby,” Willow said as she got excited at the prospect. “What do you think?”

Tara nodded as she studied her image; she even saw a cluster of freckles on her shoulder that Willow hadn’t missed.

“Willow, how long did it take you to do this?” she asked.

“This is version 7.0. I wasn’t pleased with the others, I kept leaving things out…I didn’t want to forget anything about you,” Willow admitted softly as she shuffled her feet again across the carpet.

“What do you want to do?” Tara asked.

Willow bounced on the balls of her feet and clapped her hands with glee.

“I thought we could do something simple, since the first time nothing may come of it.” Willow held her hand out for Tara and began setting up a small area on the tiled floor of the kitchen. “I thought we could try it here since clean up would be easy, and I can control it enough so we don't make a huge mess.”

After Willow spread out several garbage bags along the far wall, she taped the sheets of paper together; one over the other then tacked the 17 x 14 sheet between them on the wall. She then had Tara sit across from her and pulled out the sands in all the colors of the rainbow.

“I thought made we could do a rose. Instead of floating one this time, we would draw it together. Unless you have an idea for something? We can try anything you like,” Willow said, the excitement clear in her voice.

Tara smiled sweetly, “A rose is perfect.” She looked closely at everything Willow had set out, the colors, and even touched some of the sands.

Willow watched her with a faint smile on her lips as Tara examined everything in front of them. “I’m ready when you are,“ Tara said.

Taking each other's hands they closed their eyes and began to breathe. Their breathing slowed and matched pace, and as they sat hand in hand, sand in differing shades of greens, reds, and pinks began to swirl in the air before them, heading towards the wall like different colored dust motes, before dropping to the floor under the paper. Next browns and blacks, and finally violet were swirling and falling. They could hear the sand hitting the paper, and when it was silent they knew their first attempt was complete.
They opened their eyes and smiled at each other, eager to look at what they might have created. Willow peeled the tape off of the sides and lifted the sheet away. Helping Tara to her feet, they began to back away until they could see the image.

What they had created was a single, thornless, lavender rose, that was just beginning to bloom, resting in a delicate pale green and blue vase that Willow had given Tara on the round cherry night table they found at a yard sale, that sat by the window in Tara’s dorm.

They both smiled goofily at one another before Tara turned, placing her hands on either side of Willow’s face before kissing her lightly on her cheeks and then her mouth.

“I knew we could do it,” Willow breathed, her eyes shining with love.

“I never had a doubt, sweet love,” Tara whispered before she rested her head on Willow’s shoulder to gently kiss her neck.

TBC…
Chapter 23 - The Tasks at Hand

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: PG-13 for the angst and implied naughtiness

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 5 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove – Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. I own nothing but my soul, and even that is only a fleeting ownership... such is life.

Feedback: My Momma always said if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all... unless it’s constructive.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Will never be complete without thanks to my beta, Crystal aka CYTEACH. Music for this chapter is as follows James Blake self-titled debut (he does an outstanding cover of Feist’s “Limit to Your Love”, the video is very interesting too), Breanne Düren “Goldmine” single, The Wombats “The Wombats Proudly Present... This Modern Glitch”, and Arvo Pärt “Alina”, “Annum Per Annum - Chant Gregorien” and “Tabula Rasa; Fratres; Symphony No. 3”.

The Tasks at Hand
Willow woke to an empty bed and the familiar scent of nag champa incense hanging in the air. She rolled onto her back with a smile and lay listening to the sounds of the morning. She knew this meant Tara had been up doing yoga or meditating, and maybe now was studying, depending on how long she had been up. She loved the smell; it somehow calmed her senses, like a warm bath or a hug. It was not something she had burned since they had been apart; because of the memories, it held of sweet mornings spent making love or cuddling while they talked about their plans for the day.

She noticed a new sound, the sound of tapping on a keyboard. Tara had been one who preferred to handwrite her papers and then do a final draft typed up, and often Willow offered to do the typing because she was much quicker, but the speed she was hearing now was none too shabby. She also remembered seeing another laptop around, but she hadn’t had time to take a closer look at it yet. It seemed that while her girl had initially dragged her feet, she was finally getting friendly with technology. Willow turned to the clock and peeked at the time, it was a little before nine a.m., she figured that Tara would probably let her sleep a little longer before coming to wake her.

Suddenly the typing stopped, and then she could hear Tara’s footsteps on the carpet. She would always know the sound of her beloved’s footsteps. Willow lay there with a faint smile, waiting. When Tara didn’t arrive, she opened her eyes and looked at the doorway. There she found Tara leaned against the door frame watching her, wearing a silly, affectionate grin of her own.

“Morning,” Willow said, as she stretched.

“Morning,” Tara responded as she joined her on the bed, cuddling close.

Willow tightened her hold on Tara, kissing the top of her head. “I missed this,” she murmured.

Burying her face in Willow’s neck, breathing her in, “Me too, Love,” Tara said as she traced her finger along Willow’s jaw, drawing her near for a kiss.

Gently rubbing their noses together, Willow asked, “Did you have a good morning, Baby? How long have you been awake?”

Nuzzling back into Willow’s neck, Tara sighed, “I’ve been up a few hours, worked some more on my Ancient Languages paper, been a bit productive. Did some yoga to help me be a bit more focused on something other than the hottie still sleeping in the next room – you know the important stuff.”

With mock indignation, Willow replied, trying to get out of bed, “A hottie? Where? Oh, I’ll drag her out by her hair!” she giggled playfully.
“You goof, I’ve got that hottie right here,” Tara said kissing Willow’s neck, as she held her in place on the bed.

“What do you mean?” Willow asked, her eyes wide. “You’re the one who said you had a hottie in your arms.”

“Hmm, seems we both have a hottie in our arms, aren’t we lucky?” Willow giggled.

“Lucky us indeed,” Tara agreed. “You’ve slept through breakfast, but we still have the fruit salad from last night, or early this morning, I should say. What time do we meet Lady Rowan for lunch?”

“Mmm, noon sharp at her office, it’s private and I guess she’s going to want to discuss the rest of my training along with yours, I don’t know. Giles may be there, Dana too; I’m really not sure, to be honest,” Willow said thoughtfully.

Peeking over Willow’s shoulder at the clock, Tara checked the time. “Goodie, we have time for more snuggles, before we have to get ready, and besides, I don’t really want to move at the moment,” she said as she settled back down into Willow’s arms.

“Good, this is where a Tara belongs, in my firm opinion,” Willow said with a smile, as she drew aimless patterns on her back. “Morning snuggles are the best.”

Slowly dragging Tara’s hand to her breast, and covering it with her own, “We have plenty of time…” Willow said, wiggling her eyebrows.

“You’re insatiable…but I always have time for you,” Tara said throatily.

*********

On the other side of the complex, an agitated Tabitha paced, while Amy fidgeted as she watched her cousin.

“It’s time. No more sniveling, no more groveling. With a little effort, we can get rid of the crone and really make something of this coven. These witches are just begging for true leadership, none of this mamby pamby ‘As the Goddess wishes’ tripe she’s been spilling for years. There’s some here with real power – we just have to harness it,” Tabitha said menacingly.

Amy began to rub her nose with a curled hand, looking very much like the rat she had been for so many years.

“Would you stop that! And you…a rat?” Tabitha laughed mockingly. “That Willow took care of…"
oh, that’s rich – what have you done with yourself, Amy? You had more potential than your mother gave you credit for, but…you’re a disgrace. Look at you!”

“At least I had my own coven, cousin. You just remember that. I’m not as weak as you think, or as stupid as they want to believe. I know Willow, I know her weaknesses, and she’s just like the rest of them – looking for the good in everyone,” Amy said with derision. “With just the right push we can have her with us, and then we’ll really be something. She has true power, she just too weak to use it.”

“She may have power, but she’s just as mealy-mouthed as that little blonde of hers. Watching everyone fawn all over them makes my stomach turn. We get rid of her and we can force Willow to see our side of things.” Tabitha sat next to Amy taking her hand, trying to be reassuring and failing miserably. “We just can’t let them finish the binding on you making it permanent.”

She dropped Amy’s hand, and rose to pace once more and muttered, “Or you’ll be of no use to me…”

Amy watched with a hard, calculating glint in her black, malicious eyes. “We’ll see, cousin, just be patient. I have a plan.”

*********

Tara and Willow rushed hand in hand, through the halls heading towards Lady Rowan’s office. Hair still damp and faces flushed, both glowing with that freshly loved shine. Standing outside her door they caught their breath quickly before Willow knocked politely.

“Enter, Sisters,” came Rowan’s voice from within.

Willow flashed Tara a smile and opened the door, going in first. Tara’s grip tightened on Willow’s hand, and she flashed a nervous smile at her lover but kept her head up even as her cheeks grew flushed. Willow knew Tara was fighting the urge to duck her head even without the covering of her hair, so she gently squeezed Tara’s hand back, and catching her eye, gave her a cheeky wink of encouragement.

“Have a seat, Sisters,” Rowan smiled brightly, as she indicated the two chairs in front of her desk, a matched set of large, wing-backed chairs, covered in butter soft, rich oxblood reddish-brown leather. The girls sank into the seats, scooting them closer together so they could still hold hands.

“Well, aren’t you the pair? Very nice, ladies…no more hiding for you, Sister Tara, I see,” she said smiling kindly.
Tara blushed and played with the ends of her hair, while Willow beamed, “She has no reason to hide, my Lady, she’s beautiful.”

“T-things are changing, My L-Lady, I thought it’s time I try s-something new too,” Tara stuttered shyly.

“Indeed, Sister, indeed,” Rowan agreed warmly, trying to put the obviously nervous Tara at ease. “Sister Dana will be joining us shortly with lunch. I thought we should discuss getting started immediately with you, Sister Tara. Willow, we’ll continue as we had originally planned, but there is something I would ask of you.”

“Yes, My Lady, anything,” Willow said in earnest.

“I would like you to help Amy. You’ve been where she is, and while I am aware of your past with her and some of the things she’s done, she is bound. I think your help could be invaluable to her, and you more than any of us, are uniquely qualified to help her.”

“But My Lady…” Willow started, shaking her head.

“My Lady, you can’t trust her. I’m sorry, but I don’t want Willow with her, much less alone with her,” Interrupting, Tara stated adamantly. “She’s done too much to hurt the ones I love.”

Nodding Rowan began, “I have to agree, Sister, that’s why I want you there as well. I understand she has abused the trust you have given her time and again, and maybe she is beyond help, but we have to try. If this fails, she will be bound permanently.”

Rowan leaned forward, as she spoke. “I think this probably is more than most would ask of the two of you given your unusual positions, but again you are unique in that you both have more experience fighting the darker forces than, I dare say, my entire coven,” Rowan stated honestly.

Willow and Tara looked at each other, Willow’s mouth opening and closing like a fish.

“Wait, you mean she hasn’t already been bound permanently? Did you not see what she did to Giles after you left? And you’re aware that she forced dark magicks on Willow without her consent? She tried to attack Willow before the ‘magickal mickey’ you gave her kicked in the day we left. Pardon me, but are you insane?” Tara asked incredulously.

Lady Rowan chuckled. “I’ve been asked that before, but I can assure you, I’m quite in my right
Tara shook her head. “My Lady, this is a bad idea. I don’t care how you want to look at this; she has endangered herself and Willow since they were teenagers.”

“Tara, that’s not exactly fair. She turned herself into a rat, and there were other things at work, it wasn’t all Amy’s fault. I’ve told you what happened,” Willow, who had been sitting quietly, added knowing what a touchy subject Amy was, and is for both of them.

“Willow, stop making excuses for her, there is something wrong with her. What she was doing with her coven only proves it. No respectable witch would do that – gain power that way – she didn’t earn it, she took it. The fact that she is willing to forcefully take from a fellow witch makes her no better than Rack,” Tara spit, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Sister Tara, I see that you have some very strong opinions about her, and I can’t force either of you into helping her, nor would I. But what if I had turned Willow away as a hopeless cause? Many would not have taken her on, given her past, regardless of the strides she had made in coming back,” Rowan said quietly.

“Willow didn’t forcefully take magick from others using fear and threats of harm; she didn’t use dark magicks to keep them at her beck and call. You’re talking apples and oranges. And she knows better, Amy was taught, however wrongly, by her mother aspects of the craft. Willow didn’t have anyone,” Tara justified.

“But I could have listened to you, Baby, and I didn’t. You tried to tell me what I was doing was wrong. I may not have been as ruthless as Amy, but we both wanted the power and the rush that comes with using the dark magicks,” Willow whispered staring at her hands she had folded in her lap.

Tara turned to Willow and tried to take her hand, but Willow kept them in her lap, head down.

“Will, you’re not her, you saw what it was doing to you, and you didn’t want that for yourself. If she hadn’t been forcefully bound against her will – which is a horrible thing to have to do to another witch – so she could even be brought here – would she have stopped what she was doing? No, she would not have. That’s the difference, you’ve learned, she has not,” Tara said sincerely.

Turning back to Rowan, Tara continued. “That’s where Willow is different and her experience valuable. Amy doesn’t want help, she wants more power and has said as much. You didn’t hear her in Sunnydale, My Lady. And you can’t tell me in the last forty-eight hours she’s had a true and meaningful change of heart. I don’t believe it, she’s up to something, and I think there’s something to
Willow’s dream,” her jaw set, and the muscles working beneath the skin showed Tara’s frustration.

“But we have to give her the chance, Tara. Even if this is the last one, she should have a final chance to prove she can change. My Lady, I want to try to work with Amy, but with conditions,” Willow said, finally speaking up.

“I’m listening, Willow,” Rowan said as she leaned back in her chair watching both girls thoughtfully. This being the first she had heard of Willow having a dream that could potentially have bearing on her initial plans.

“I won’t ever be alone with her; I have to agree with Tara there, she, especially right now, is not to be trusted. She may even be dangerous, and not just to herself. Second, I don’t want Tabitha with her, I’ll explain in a moment, My Lady, and I want her binding to be reinforced daily for our safety,” Willow stated.

“Willow, I don’t like this, tell her,” Tara pleaded, shifting nervously in her seat.

“My Lady, I had a dream the other night. It makes me very wary of helping Amy. In it ultimately we were forced to try a permanent binding and it goes wrong. It takes the four of us to stop the situation, so Dana needs to be in on all the sessions with her. She needs to have a feel for Amy, it may be one of the things that keeps us all safe,” Willow said firmly.

“Can you tell me more, Willow?” Concern etched deep shadows on Rowan’s kindly face.

“I’m afraid not, it was just snapshots, My Lady. We were in the field where I’ve been training. You, Dana, Tara and I were there to bind Amy. Tabitha shows up, and everything goes wrong, from there it was just a strong feeling of dread, and then nothing. That’s when I woke up,” Willow told Rowan.

“I see…of course I agree to your wishes, I want you both kept as safe as possible, without a question. Sister Tara, does this put you to ease at all?” Rowan asked as she watched Tara intently.

“I still don’t like this, My Lady, but if we’re doing this together, and I think that Sister Dana always being with us will help; I would feel safer for us both,” Tara said, her jaw still set.

“Of course, Sister, of course,” Rowan nodded in agreement, the new information swirling in her head, as she looked at the two young witches before her. Their hesitance and their combined experience spoke volumes to the elder witch.

Just then a knock came at the door, pulling everyone from their own thoughts on how best to deal with Amy, and for Rowan, now potentially Tabitha, who she had trusted.
“Enter Sister,” Rowan called.

Dana entered with a bright smile and a large covered tray on a cart, heading for a table set in the corner of Rowan’s office. “I hope everyone is hungry,” she said before she had looked at the concerned faces.

Willow and Tara smiled weakly, not wanting to seem rude.

“I’m sure everything is wonderful, but we should talk, Dana, maybe we can do it while we eat,” Rowan asked as she looked at Willow and Tara, who nodded.

Dana looked around the room and saw the concern on the faces there. “Oh, my.”

TBC…
Chapter 24 - Malevolence

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T – is there really any other?

Rating: R - for the “F” Bomb

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 7 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove – Tucson

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Feedback: My Momma always said if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all… unless it’s constructive.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I’d like to thank the kittenboard, all my peeps on pens for all their support, ummm, oh, gods, uh, my stellar beta CYTEACH aka Crystal, and…sorry wrong speech. She’s poking me (with a stick no less) to put these in so she can read them so this is what you get Crystal. Also in this chapter, there is some Spanish spoken and I included the translations in brackets where it is being spoken. The music for this chapter is as follows: Garbage – self-titled and “Absolute Garbage: The Best of Garbage” disc one, NIN “Pretty Hate Machine” & “Broken”, and Lords of Acid “Lust”.

malevolent (məˈlɛvələnt) – Adj
“Hold still,” Tabitha muttered to Amy.

“Is it supposed to hurt so much?” Amy whined. “Can’t we do something about the vomiting; I mean this is getting to be a little much.”

Tabitha looked at Amy in shock. “Did being a rat damage your mind? Have you heard any of Willow’s stories? You idiot, you should be in traction! I think a little vomiting you can suffer through.”

Sighing heavily, Amy continued to whine. “Can I try now; I’m starting to itch again.”

Tabitha rolled her eyes, “Try now.”

With some effort, Amy was able to cast a small spell. Flopping back on the floor Amy waited for Tabitha to begin extracting her energy and replacing it with Tabitha’s own. Tabitha stretched her energy to feel out the spell that had been used, and then feel its caster; when she had a small “in”, the exchange could begin. They were feeding off of one another like they had as children. Tabitha siphoned off the binding and replaced her own dark energy and magick into the bound energy of Amy.

It wasn’t quite the high Amy was used to, but it kept the withdrawals away to the largest degree, and let her magical signature continue to appear to be bound. The ruse was getting harder to maintain, weeks had started to tick away quickly, and Amy was getting more and more frustrated.

“You’re getting sloppy. They’ve started changing up the spells they’re using to keep you bound along with who casts them. Who performed it this time?” Tabitha inquired innocently.

“It was Willow this time like I said. She’s done it the last two times,” Amy huffed. “Look, we just need to keep them thinking that I’m really trying for a little while longer. Once Davos gets me the book, we will have the spell to really set them on their asses.”

“Are you sure he’s going to do it?” Tabitha questioned. “Because I can’t keep doing this, Amy; it’s been weeks already, and they’ll begin to notice the change in me if they haven’t already.”
“Look, he will come through…he likes what he had, and what I’ve promised to give him is far beyond his pathetic little dreams. I’ve never let him down; he, in return, always comes through for me.” Amy smiled maliciously.

The smile was quickly wiped away, as Amy turned green and jumped up heading for the bathroom. It was Tabitha’s turn to grin evilly, as she listened to her cousin retching in the next room.

“I’ll be back later,” Tabitha called, starting to head out of the room.

“Wait, where are you going? You can’t just leave me,” Amy groused loudly.

“If you want me to continue to be able to help you, you’ll keep your mouth shut. I’m going to take care of business, somewhere I can get a little recharge of my own,” Tabitha said icily.

“Take me with you,” Amy demanded.

“You know I can’t, it would be too suspicious, and if the ‘fabulous four’ are already switching spells up on us, then they suspect something – or did you forget that little fact?” Tabitha reminded Amy, as she heard her rinse out her mouth.

Amy nodded as she came out of the bathroom still looking a bit pasty, and wiping her mouth with a washcloth. “No, you’re right, I just have to be patient. Give me your cell for a moment; I need to up the ante for Davos. Time is running out, if they try a binding before I get that spell, well, we’re fucked, to put it mildly.”

“Well, duh, brainchild. This is your plan? Where is this book? Why can’t I just go get it, why do we need him?” Tabitha questioned trying to force Amy’s hand.

Amy wheeled on Tabitha, backing her into the door. “This one spell will set me up with my own coven to drain and command, cousin. They will do my bidding, and be ecstatic they could do for me – and don’t you forget it – this is make it or break it time, sweetheart. I’m going to the fucking big leagues, cousin, so get with the plan, or get off the playground.”

Tabitha narrowed her eyes, “Don’t you mean ‘we’, cousin?”

Amy smiled sweetly, “Of course I do, cousin. Just have a little faith, okay? Now give me your cell phone…please.” Phone in hand, she headed into the bedroom.
Tabitha crossed her arms over her chest as she paced, trying to hear Amy from the bedroom, as she made the call to Davos. She could only catch faint words here and there, not enough to make sense of the conversation, but Amy’s tone was frightful.

After a few minutes, Amy swept into the room all smiles as she dropped Tabitha’s phone into the palm of her hand.

“Seventy-two hours, cousin. Davos will be here with the book, and we will have our coven. We’ll have to arrange a pickup, but I’m sure you can manage that little detail, yes?” Amy spoke as if she were talking to a small child.

Through gritted teeth, Tabitha answered, “Just get him here, and I’ll take care of the rest…cousin.”

With an angry glare, Tabitha stalked to the door, letting it slam behind her as she sauntered off down the hall with an evil grin plastered on her face.

*********

Down the hall, Willow was leaning against the wall of a corridor unseen. She could feel Amy’s magickal signature and knew she was actively casting. Now she just had to prove it, then she could convince Rowan that they couldn’t wait any longer.

The sooner Willow could do this the better. She felt it in her bones that their time was running out. Amy had proven to be slipperier than they thought she would be.

Swallowing thickly, Willow said a silent goodbye to the friend she had grown up with and squaring her shoulders, she got ready to face the enemy Amy had become.

*********

Amy sat slumped on the couch in the living room as random objects started to float and swirl around her. Moaning in pleasure as she drained off some of her excess magicks from being bound via the spell Tabitha had worked for her, she felt secure in her plan.

*Seventy-two hours.*
That’s all she needed and *everything* would change for the better, she would be better. She would have surpassed her mother, she was smarter, stronger, and this finally proved that she was the superior witch. Just like she told Willow, it was all about the power and who had the most of it.

A chilling laugh echoed off the walls, as Amy began to laugh and laugh, becoming almost hysterical. Finally, as delirious tears streamed down her cheeks, swirling glasses began to shatter, pens and pencils were driven flush into walls or doors, and paper spontaneously combusted leaving bits of ash to flutter to the floor.

Malevolent glee was written on Amy’s face as things exploded all around her.

********

Tabitha quickly navigated the halls of The Grove, heading for her car. Taking a deep breath as she hit the hot summer air, picking up her pace, she couldn’t wait to get away from Amy.

Unlocking the door to her little Honda, she slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Resting her head against the steering wheel, she took a few deep breaths to steady herself before backing out and speeding out of the parking lot.

Soon, Tabitha was turning down a barely lit dirt street, passing several abandoned houses, windows boarded up and the exteriors tagged by gangs. A stray dog ran alongside her car barking and slowing she turned into the driveway of an old adobe house.

Standing next to her car, Tabitha looked around for a moment, summoning up courage, before she approached the screen door and knocked.

A little girl missing her two front teeth, of maybe eight or nine, dressed in dirty denim shorts and a t-shirt came to the door and looked at her with a smile full of mischief.

“Qué güerita?” she asked. {What little white/pale girl?}

“Necesito ver a la Abuela Javier,” Tabitha said. {I need to see Grandmother Javier.}

“¿Quién eres?” The little girl asked. {Who are you?}

“Dile Que la Bruja de Ojos grises está aquí,” Tabitha said {Tell her the grey-eyed witch is here.}
The little girl disappeared, and Tabitha could hear voices from inside. A middle-aged woman in a dirty, garish multi-colored skirt and what looked like blood on her equally dirty cream colored peasant blouse, came back and opened the door letting Tabitha in.

She was immediately assaulted with the sour smell coming from a pot on the stove. Herbs hung randomly around the kitchen drying, bottles of varying sizes full of unidentifiable liquids were littered around on shelves, and a dirty table covered in chicken feathers dominated the middle of the room.

“Follow me, güerita,” the woman muttered.

Tabitha moved slowly behind the old woman, as they went through the house and out into the backyard. Chickens roamed the yard, and an old woman was seated in front of a fire pit, stoking it with a long metal rod. The mesquite smoke filled the air, while the wood snapped and crackled in the flames. As she got closer she could feel a heat rolling back from the pit, but it wasn’t from the fire.

“Abuela, la pequeña Bruja está de Vuelta,” she said. {Grandmother, the little witch is back.}

The old woman turned to face Tabitha, her hair was very white against the rich brown of her skin, and her eyes a deep, fathomless black in her heavily lined face. She nodded and pointed to a stool next to the fire. Tabitha took the stool and moved it a bit further back from the fire.

“Abuela, I need help, I need you to let me cast here again,” Tabitha asked quietly.

“I told you last time, Güerita, no more. You’re dangerous, you have no respect,” Grandmother Javier said.

“Abuela, this will be the last time, I swear, you won’t see me again after tonight,” Tabitha promised.

Grandmother Javier studied Tabitha so closely she started to shake a little nervously under such scrutiny.

“Give me your hand,” she said.

Tabitha smiled and extended her left hand, and quicker than Tabitha thought possible, Grandmother Javier grasped her wrist tightly, and with a flash of steel, cut the tip of her little finger off. Tabitha screamed in pain and shock, as blood ran quickly down her hand, dripping into the dirt at her feet.

“There’s always a price, mi hija,” Grandmother Javier said, then pulled the metal rod she used to
stoke the fire out and placed the red-hot tip against the wound. \{mi hija means daughter\}

The smell of burning flesh permeated the air and Tabitha’s face drained of color. A clammy sweat rolled down her face, and off her pointed chin. Blood still dripped slowly from her maimed hand, as she gritted her teeth.

“Zelda!” Grandmother Javier called sharply.

Zelda appeared at the door. “Yes, mamá,” she said.

“Clean her up, and take her downstairs, give her what she asks for. She has an hour,” Grandmother Javier ordered.

Tabitha rose unsteadily from the stool, “Thank you, Grandmother,” she whispered, holding her hand close to her body protectively.

Zelda saw her hand and began laughing, “Could be worse, Güerita, so what you need?”

Tabitha listed several books, and herbs she wanted as Zelda cleaned her hand up and bandaged the tip of her finger. Zelda had started to cast a spell for the pain and Tabitha stopped her, she wanted the fuel the pain provided. Once her hand was done, Tabitha headed down to a root cellar. A pentagram was already drawn on the dirt floor, so Tabitha began to organize what she needed for the dark magicks she was about to cast.

She had very little time, so she quickly scryed for Davos and watched him procure the book Amy had spoken of. She tried to see its title but couldn’t get a clear enough picture. Then the casting began; she had paid a price, and she had no plans to let Amy take control.

Preparing to cast against her cousin, Tabitha would bind Amy again, but mark it with enough of Amy’s signature dark magicks so it would be a dead giveaway that she had been tampering with her binding. Someone, as trained as Rowan, would spot it instantly, and maybe even Willow would spot it as Amy’s doctoring too. Tabitha needed to be sure to remove any traces of her own magickal signature from the re-binding of Amy. Then Tabitha would let Amy get her everything she needed, and it would all be hers – she had enough of waiting, she had paid the price.

Her time was now, and her hour was up.

**********
Willow was waiting outside Rowan’s office when Tara, Rowan, and Dana approached after Tara’s training session. Her face was clouded over and sad.

Tara went immediately to her side and wrapped her arm around her waist, pulling her close trying to ease her obvious distress.

“My Lady, I need to speak with you,” Willow said gravely.

“Of course Willow, would you excuse us, Sisters?” Rowan said politely.

Willow spoke quietly, “No, they should be here too, it’s about Amy and Tabitha, My Lady.”

Rowan opened the door to her office, and stepped aside, “Ladies,” she said letting them enter ahead of her. Whispering under her breath, she cast a spell to keep ‘listening ears’ from hearing anything, then walked in and locked her door behind herself.

********

Tabitha arrived late back at The Grove and knew she would have to see Amy once more before her night would be over. Going quickly to her room, she removed the bandage and looked at her little finger, now missing the tip to the first knuckle, and grimaced.

The skin was angry and red as she gently cleaned it, applied antibacterial ointment, and a smaller bandage. Wiping her face clean of sweat with a washcloth, she decided quickly to do a small glamour, and unless her hands were closely inspected, no one would ever be able to tell the difference. Once again she headed slowly to Amy’s rooms.

Uttering a quick incantation, the lock on the door popped open, and without knocking, Tabitha just walked in. Looking around the room she could see Amy had been having some fun.

“Where have you been?” Amy demanded.

“Oh, dry up, I’m here now. Sit down and get ready,” Tabitha growled.

Amy’s eyes grew wide and chastened, she hastily sat in the circle of candles she had set up while she had been waiting for Tabitha’s return. Until the book arrived Amy was at Tabitha’s mercy, and she
knew when to not push her cousin.

“Tabby, are you ok?” Amy asked overly smarmy.

Tabitha’s eyes flashed and pooled to an inky black, as she smiled cruelly. “Save the sweet talk, Amy, just get ready, I think you’re gonna like this.”

Tabitha began to cast around Amy, and as Amy watched transfixed, Tabitha worked the energies around them. With no warning, Tabitha hit Amy full force with the spell’s energy. A sickly green light danced menacingly around the room. Tabitha knew the chink she had made in the previous binding, seeking it out so she could load Amy up to the gills.

Closing the spell with her own altered binding, she left Amy sighing almost sensually on the floor of her room. Catching her breath for a moment, she sat back and watched her cousin’s pleasure at the magicks she had given her. Amy sighed and undulated on the floor as if she were beneath a lover.

Shaking her head, Tabitha stood from her place next to Amy, and with a sneer plastered on her face, headed for the door.

“Goodnight, Amy,” she snickered as she left.

********

Willow’s hand was aimlessly wandering over Tara’s back as she held her close in bed.

“Will?” Tara whispered.

“Yeah, Baby?” Willow answered softly.

“Yeah, Baby?” Willow answered softly.

“Your dream, it’s coming true, isn’t it?” Tara asked cautiously.

“I’m afraid so, Baby. We just have to be careful any time we’re around one or both of them, we have to be alert. They won’t play fair,” Willow said. “Or better yet, just don’t be alone with them, okay, Baby?”

“That goes for you too, you know,” Tara whispered as she tightened her grip on Willow, and nestled further into her shoulder.
“I think I can do that, Baby,” Willow said with a smile.

“Do you think she’ll go back to Sunnydale?” Tara said, thinking out loud.

“Who, Amy? Probably, it’s her home. As for Tabitha, I guess maybe Amy will take her with her,” Willow said thoughtfully.

Nodding her head, Tara continued her questions. “Do you think Tabitha has a clue that she’s under suspicion too?”

“At this point, I don’t really know, I don’t think so,” Willow said softly, as she kissed Tara’s temple. “Let’s get some sleep; we’ll deal with this tomorrow. Lady Rowan won’t waste any time with this, Baby.”

Tara nodded again and kissed Willow’s neck. “You’re right, it’s been a long day. ‘Night, Sweetie.”

Willow smiled, “Goodnight, Baby, love you.”

A soft smile graced Tara’s lips. “Love you too.”

TBC...
Chapter 25 - The Training of Miss Tara Maclay

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: PG-13 for the acidy tummies

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 7 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove – Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. I own nothing but my soul, and even that is only a fleeting ownership… such is life.

Feedback: I live for it.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Well, my kittens, today is a momentous day. Dry Heat turns one year old. I had no idea when I started this last June, that, A) I would still be writing it a year later, and B) I wouldn’t be done with it yet! What an interesting experience this has been. Thank you for continuing to read my little opus, I hope I’m able to continue to entertain you. As ever, thank you to my beta, you put up with me, Crystal, enough said. Music for this chapter, Moby “Destroyed”, Solstice “Illusion”, Tiesto “Club Life Vol. 1 Las Vegas”, and BT “These Humble Machines”.

The Training of Miss Tara Maclay
“Concentrate, Sister,” Rowan commanded Tara, as she concentrated on the tongue of flame she had stopped and was floating before her. Slowly the flame stopped dancing and shimmered for a moment before being encased in ice with a hiss. At that moment, the ice dropped to the floor shattering and evaporating.

Dana stood off to the side; she had been watching Rowan with Tara for the last half hour and marveled at how far Tara had come in the last six weeks. Her focus was impeccable, and her strength was just as Rowan had said it would be, equal to Willow’s. Rowan had been correct, given the right encouragement and training, once she believed in herself, Tara truly was a formidable witch.

Unsure of just how long she had been with Rowan, she could only guess a few hours at the least, judging by Tara’s sweat-soaked t-shirt and pink face. The workout space was as humid as Baltimore in late July and smelled of ozone from the spells being cast about. Tara’s element was water, anything thrown at her was quickly shorted out beyond use, encased in a spell of Tara’s own design, or simply frozen solid.

“Very good, and again,” Rowan said this time sending the flame at Tara with more speed and not just floating it. Tara’s arm shot out to stop the flame. Again it hovered, shimmering violently as it was covered, then dropped to the floor to disappear in a puff of steam.

“Again!”

Two flames shot out at Tara to meet the same icy fate. Sweat slowly dripped down her brow to roll off her chin. Her cheeks flushed with concentration and exertion, her bangs plastered to her forehead as she continued to cast.

“Again!”

This time, Rowan gave Dana a subtle nod. With a flick of her wrist, Dana shot a bolt of electricity at Tara’s head breaking her concentration. The flame danced again and Tara dropped to the floor to avoid the bolt. Without thinking Tara shot back at Dana, encasing her in a swirling, thick mist that hovered around her even when she moved, effectively crippling her.

Tara had designed a spell, with Willow’s help, that allowed her opponent’s body’s own moisture to fuel it – blood, sweat, tears, venoms – all of it turned against the owner and would keep them
immobile behind a dense, freezing mist that grew more painful the longer it was left in place to feed on its target. With Dana disabled, she quickly doused the flames.

“Excellent, Sister!” Rowan called as she clapped, “Enough for today, we ran a bit over our schedule anyway.”

Approaching Tara, she offered her hand, and a towel, helping her from the floor of the gym. “You have to remember even though concentration is paramount, a fight won’t always be one on one. In the heat of battle, you also have to be aware of those around you.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Tara said wiping her forehead, slightly out of breath. Turning to Dana, Tara uttered an incantation to release her.

“You are aware that is cold – and mean – correct?” Dana huffed, her ears and nose were red, and her teeth chattered.

“Kept you still didn’t it?” Tara asked cheekily, wrapping the towel around her neck. “I could have given you a bath and shorted you out yet again, Sparky.”

Rowan smirked as the mental image of the doused Dana, looking very much like a drowned cat, from just a few days prior, danced in all their mind’s eyes. The three were now exiting the gym and headed back to the main part of the compound.

“That was not remotely funny, and you know it, Tara,” Dana whined.

Tara laughed, “But you standing in a puddle stopped the bolts, didn’t it? C’mon you have to admit, it was a little funny…” Tara held her up thumb and forefinger, just a little apart, as she laughed.

“Now, Sisters, no fighting, and Dana you have to admit it was quick thinking,” Rowan gently chided.

“You’ve both been spending too much time with Willow,” Dana huffed to more of Tara’s laughter, as she blew on her hands to warm them.

“My Lady, forgive me, but how is it I look like I tried to run a marathon, and you have barely broken a sweat?” Tara asked.

“It’s all about channeling and pacing one’s energies, Sister, and I have been doing this a lot longer than you, but you will learn. To change the subject and let Dana pout some more,” Rowan teased. “Tara, how do you think things are coming with Amy?”
Tara’s face clouded over at the mention of Amy’s name. Wiping away the sweat from her face and neck she bought time as she chose her words carefully.

“My Lady, something is not right. For someone as enmeshed in the dark arts as she was, she seems to be having almost no withdrawals. I’ve only heard about what Willow went through and in comparison… Are we sure she is staying bound properly? I just think we’re being toyed with by her yet again.”

“What about you, Dana?” Rowan asked.

Clearing her throat, Dana began, “My Lady, I know it’s different for everyone, but I would have to agree that she seems to be having an awfully easy time of it. I can also see why Tara mistrusts her, My Lady, there’s just something about her…”

“I see,” Rowan said nodding thoughtfully. “Do you think she is somehow casting in secret?”

Dana and Tara looked at one another, before answering in unison, “Yes.”

“I was afraid of this. I would like to talk to Willow again before I make any judgments, but I agree, Sisters, there is something off about her. Do you think she is being helped?” Rowan looked at them both as she asked.

Dana nodded as Tara spoke, “Yes, My Lady, and I think we all know by whom. We have to be very careful, we have to remember Willow’s dream.”

“I haven’t forgotten, child. Believe me, I haven’t forgotten,” Rowan answered darkly.

“My Lady, what will happen with Tabitha? We know she is the one helping Amy, she’s going against a direct order from her Lady. She can no longer be trusted,” Tara said quietly.

Both Dana and Rowan’s faces clouded over at their mutual thoughts of what would have to be sanctioned against the pair.

“Tara, child, she would also have to be permanently bound and banished from the coven. She will no longer be accepted by any respectable coven. The same as will Amy, they will no longer be able to practice,” Rowan uttered morosely.

“But, My Lady, if they are finding a way around the daily bindings for Amy, how can you be sure
she will no longer be able to practice?” Tara wasn’t letting the subject drop easily.

Rowan stopped and turned to Tara. “Child, we take it from them, we leave them with no talent to use. The ceremony doesn’t just bind them; it strips them of their power. That’s why it is so rarely used. Most witches, when faced with this as their punishment, decide their current path is not worth being stripped. They are completely ostracized by the magickal community.”

“My Lady, I just get the feeling, that whatever they are planning, that would be the best outcome we could hope for. They will fight – they are fighting,” Tara stressed.

“Yes, child, I think you’re right,” Rowan said sadly.

*********

As they approached Rowan’s office, they saw Willow standing by the door, fidgeting nervously and looking anxious. Tara immediately went to her, taking both Willow’s hand into her own.

“Will, what is it?” Tara asked, her voice tight with concern.

“My Lady, I need to speak with you,” Willow said gravely.

“Of course Willow, would you excuse us, Sisters?” Rowan said politely.

Willow spoke quietly, “No, they should be here too, it’s about Amy and Tabitha, My Lady.”

Rowan opened the door to her office, and stepped aside, “Sisters,” she said letting them enter ahead of her. Whispering under her breath, she cast a spell to keep ‘listening ears’ from hearing anything before she entered.

Tara was sitting on the edge of her seat in one of the wing backed chairs, watching Willow as she paced and rubbed her forehead. Dana perched on the table off to the side in Rowan’s office, and once Rowan was seated, Willow had the floor.

“She’s casting, My Lady. I felt her, we have to stop her now,” Willow blurted out.

“I assume you mean Amy, yes?” Rowan asked rhetorically. “You know that should be quite impossible, you bound her yourself.”
“Yes, My Lady, it *should* be. Every spell can be broken or augmented; she and Tabitha have found a way to augment the binding,” Willow said before flopping into the chair next to Tara.

“I *felt* her My Lady; I’ve cast with Amy enough to know her magicks. At first, it was weak, then Tabitha left and I felt it grow.” Willow leaned forward and put her head in her hands for a moment. “She’s played us…again.”

“Will, how were you anywhere near enough to feel her?” Tara asked.

“I was in the corridor down from her room; I had come in from greenhouse five and was heading to our room when I felt it. In the beginning, it was just someone casting, that must have been Tabitha, and then I felt Amy. I stopped out of view and waited; I thought I couldn’t be right. They must have argued, I could hear their voices but not what they were saying, then Tabitha left and she wasn’t happy.” Willow looked around the room at everyone as she spoke.

“My Lady, the three of us were there when she was bound late this afternoon. Willow did the binding, and it was a sound spell,” Dana said on Willow’s behalf.

“I have no doubt of the spell or its caster, Dana. What I want to know is how are they getting past it? If it’s Tabitha, then she is more adept than she’s been given credit for. If they’ve been doing this all along, what are they plotting?” Rowan inquired, looking at everyone for ideas.

“Power,” Tara said simply. “My Lady, I’ve said this before, Amy told us in Sunnydale it’s what she wants.”

Willow nodded. “She’s right, My Lady; the day we left, Amy went on and on about it being the only thing. If she’s convinced Tabitha that together they can somehow gain power…well, if she could bully and sweet talk a coven, then her cousin should be simple.”

“We’ve left them alone for the last six weeks to hatch some sort of plan, My Lady,” Dana said. “Amy is dangerous, we must act quickly. I’ll agree with Willow, we can’t wait now.”

The room fell silent, as they waited for Rowan to make a final decision. With a sad nod of her head, she agreed.

“We have tried, Sisters, but we knew it may come to this. I need to know how deeply Tabitha has been involved. If she is willing to betray her coven, for whatever it is that Amy is promising her, whatever type of power play they intend to make, then she is just as dangerous,” Rowan stated.

“My Lady, we can’t wait, we must act quickly…I know this and…I feel this,” Willow tried to
convey the depth of her worry.

Rowan nodded in acquiescence. “I understand, Willow. I need to do some investigating first, I just can’t make a snap judgment here, you have to understand that.”

“My Lady, I don’t think we have time anymore, please be swift about this, remember Willow’s dream, please,” Tara plead.

Rowan looked at Dana who had been listening as the three of them bandied the subject of time about.

“My Lady, I agree with whatever you ultimately decide. However, I will agree time is of the essence. If Amy and Tabitha find out beyond a shadow of a doubt that we know that, well there is something to know, it may be our undoing,” Dana replied.

“Indeed, Sisters, indeed... give me seventy-two hours, and I will have the confirmation I need for us to move forward with a full breach-marked binding,” Rowan pronounced.

“Yes, My Lady,” was murmured by Dana, Willow, and Tara.

“Well, I think that’s enough for one evening, don’t you?” Rowan asked as she rose from her chair.

Willow and Tara rose with her and excused themselves to head back to their own rooms, leaving Dana alone with Rowan.

“I know what you’re thinking, Dana,” Rowan said as she turned her gaze toward Dana.

Dana looked at her wide-eyed for a moment, then shrugged. “My Lady, how can you know if I don’t?”

“You think I shouldn’t wait and should do this tonight, you agree that we can’t wait anymore,” Rowan remarked.

Dana thought for a moment before replying softly, “Maybe I do, My Lady, but I will abide by whatever you think is best. You will be fair, and whatever happens will be as it should.”

Rowan smiled sadly, “Indeed...as it should be.”
Tara went back to the room to shower, while Willow went and gathered food for them. Tara was still standing in the middle of her bedroom in a towel when she returned. Willow let out a wolf whistle as she stood with her hands full looking at a Tara still damp and bending over a drawer. The hem of the towel rose up, dangerously close to giving Willow an unhampered view of her girlfriend’s naked bottom.

Tara shot a look over her shoulder and watched Willow lick her lips. Smiling rakishly, Tara dropped the towel and proceeded to rummage for clothing longer than actually necessary, bending and twisting before Willow's eyes.

When she finally slipped on a pair of shorts and a thin tank top, Willow was still standing frozen in place watching her.

“Wipe your chin, Sweetie, you’re drooling,” Tara laughed.

“Ahh, what? Food…I brought…yeah,” Willow shook her head to clear it, only making Tara laugh that much harder.

“Why don’t you take a quick shower and I’ll set everything up, okay?” Tara suggested.

Willow nodded as she handed off the items in her hands. “I need to cool off anyway,” she muttered.

Tara laughed again, which made Willow smile. “I love that sound,” she said just before she dropped a kiss on Tara’s lips, then skipped away.

Tara’s smile grew as she watched Willow bounce off towards the bathroom. Unpacking the bag Willow brought with her, she saw salad, pasta with marinara sauce, what smelled like garlic bread, and even a small shaker of Parmesan cheese.

Tara set out plates and silverware and was pouring glasses of water for them when Willow came back into the living room.

“That was quick,” Tara observed.

“You said to be quick, so I was extra efficient. Besides, I know I smelled faintly like one of the greenhouses, and ‘Eau de compost’ just isn’t in this year,” Willow grinned.
“Did you want something other than water, Sweetie?” Tara asked.

“Umm, no water’s good for now,” Willow said as she sat down and Tara came in with their drinks.

They dished out food onto their plates and began to eat, and Willow handed Tara the cheese. “This is special for you, shake it and tell me what you see.”

Tara took the small shaker, and as she shook it she could see it also had crushed red pepper flakes mixed in.

“You remembered,” Tara said with a smile.

“Of course I did, and now there will always be a shaker for you –70/30 red pepper to cheese mix, just like you like it.” Willow’s eyes glowed with affection, as she popped a cucumber slice into her mouth.

The rest of the meal was eaten mostly in silence; random bits of each other’s day was shared. Willow cleared away their dinner dishes and loaded the dishwasher in the little kitchen. They each were supposed to spend the next two hours studying before going to bed.

At about the hour and a half mark, Willow neatly put her work aside and simply began to watch Tara. She had her chin on her hand and a faint smile playing on her lips, Tara held out trying to finish the last bit of her paragraph before stopping what she was doing to look at Willow.

“What?” Tara asked.

Willow stood up and held her hand out to Tara. Dropping her pencil into the book she had open, Tara set everything on the coffee table, and taking Willow’s hand, she let herself be led off to the bedroom.

******

Willow’s hand was aimlessly wandering over Tara’s naked back, the sweat still drying on their skin as they lay holding one another.

“Will?” Tara whispered.

“Yeah, Baby?” Willow answered softly.
“It’s coming true, isn’t it?” Tara asked cautiously.

“I’m afraid so, Baby,” Willow said. “While this makes me ten shades of unhappy, we’ll do what we have to do. Power hungry often equates to short-sightedness, and Amy’s never been the sharpest crayon in the box. It all works in our favor, Baby.”

“When did they start coming true?” Tara inquired shift in Willow’s arms to look at her.

“In England, shortly before I came back. Nothing quite like this, though, not this important,” Willow replied.

“Do you think she’ll go back to Sunnydale after she’s been bound?” Tara said, thinking out loud.

“Probably, it’s her home, but if this happens – when this happens – we’ll have to warn Buffy, she’ll have to be watched,” Willow said thoughtfully. “Just because she can’t cast doesn’t mean she won’t try…she just can’t be trusted that’s all.”

Nodding her head, Tara continued her questions. “Do you think Tabitha has a clue that she’s under suspicion too?”

“At this point, I don’t really know, I don’t think so,” Willow said softly, as she kissed Tara’s temple. “Tabitha’s harder to gauge, but I’ve always trusted her less – and that was before I knew she was Amy’s cousin.”

“Trust is a funny thing, it’s given and taken for granted, earned and lost, to be earned again. But somehow there always has to be something innately trustworthy about a person. It can be faked, but that’s like a glamour – eventually the truth side of trust comes through, you can only fake it for so long,” Tara whispered.

“Very true, and the ones that you never trust, there’s always a reason that comes to light, isn’t there?” Willow said. “Let’s get some sleep; we’ll deal with this tomorrow. Lady Rowan won’t waste any time with this now, Baby.”

Tara nodded again and kissed Willow’s neck. “You’re right, it’s been a long day. ‘Night, Sweetie.”

Willow smiled, “Goodnight, Baby, love you.”

A soft smile graced Tara’s lips. “Love you too.”
TBC...
Chapter 26 - Boom, Boom, Pow

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: R for the acidy tummies & language

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 7 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove – Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BTVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. I own nothing but my soul, and even that is only a fleeting ownership… such is life.

Feedback: If you’re up for, it’s always appreciated.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I know this took a lot longer than I anticipated, so I apologize. Getting into my groove at the new job was part of it, and part of it was a bit of writer's block. I will try to resume the bi-monthly posting schedule but I may have to cut back to monthly posts. I just wasn’t sure how I was going to relay some of what I wanted to convey. I’m hoping this was worth the wait, everyone, thanks for sticking around.

Music for this chapter: Emilie Autumn “Laced and Unlaced”, Tori Amos “Abnormally Attracted to Sin”, Star Anna and The Laughing Dogs “Alone in This Together”, Aimee Mann “Lost in Space”, Skylar Grey “Invisible” (single), and Yael Naim “She Was A Boy”.

48 hours later
Rowan sat at her desk, staring at the phone, almost willing it to ring. The sun had long set from view as the moon rose, the first rise of a waning crescent, into the darkening night. She was waiting for the call to confirm the request that she knew was not going to be refused. She had Dana gathering everything they would need, and Tara and Willow preparing for what would take place. A full breach-marked binding. The first such binding to be performed by any coven in over one hundred and fifty years; the first set of witches dangerously reckless enough to require such an act.

As she pulled herself from her thoughts the phone rang. She took a deep breath and picked the receiver up from its cradle.

“Yes…yes, I understand. The Watcher’s Council has been following her as well. Amy Elizabeth Madison, daughter of Catherine Angeline Rosseur, daughter of Anne Marie Holcomb. Tabitha Elise Rosseur, daughter of Jill Rose Talbot, daughter of Roseanne Emily Warren. Yes…they’re both hereditary, cousins as well. She was found in Sunnydale and bound by myself, Sister Dana Addams, and Rupert Giles of the Watcher’s Council. Tabitha has been here at The Grove since she was twelve, and left in our care.”

Listening to the voice on the other end of the line Rowan rubbed her hand tiredly over her face. The red tape and formalities for the governing body of the Witches Committee were just as bad as the Watcher’s Council. The only difference was the Committee was actually effective at what it did and less meddlesome in what it tried to do.

“Yes… I understand. It shall be done and recorded. Yes… thank you. Blessed be.”

And with a phone conversation that lasted less than ten minutes, Rowan had the verdict and consent of the Committee to move forward with the full breach-marked binding of both Amy and Tabitha. She would inform everyone in the morning that they would indeed be binding both girls in less than forty-eight hours. It wouldn’t be easy and it could potentially be dangerous given those they had to bind.

With a deep, bone-weary sigh Rowan stood slowly from behind her desk and uttered a small prayer of sorts.

“As the Goddess sees fit, so shall we do, we walk our path guided by her light, blessed by her spirit in times of doubt and gifted with her strength in times of need…”

Rowan crossed to her door, opened it and stepped through to leave.

“Goddess, be with me now, I am in desperate need of you…” she whispered as she shut the door behind her and made off towards her rooms.

*******

60 hours

The smell of paint thinner and oil paints permeated the air, and the soft sounds of a paintbrush being dragged across the canvas and the tapping of keys echoed lightly through the two suites. The
morning had been eventful for the girls. Dana had appeared early to wake them with a summons to meet Lady Rowan in her rooms as soon as they could be dressed.

The request only surprised Willow in that she had been to Rowan’s actual rooms a handful of times over the entirety of her stay at the Grove. Having a good idea what it would be about, upon Dana’s departure she quickly woke Tara. When Tara started to playfully pout about the lack of snuggles, in hushed tones Willow explained that they had to hurry directly to Rowan’s room. The serious look on her face had been enough to motivate Tara into moving quickly.

Now though, they were back to their routine – everything had to appear normal – it was one they had developed over the last six weeks for when they studied. Today was one of the days of their week they worked on academics not associated with witchcraft.

Often they would study together, but they were both working on final projects, and Tara’s was more involved. She had set her easel up a few weeks ago under the large skylight in her rooms to take advantage of the natural light, so she could work as the impetus struck.

Willow had finished writing the last of the code she needed for her final and had a row of three laptops set up with the code she had programmed running through its paces on the two, while the third laptop monitored for glitches.

Willow stood and stretched, rolling her neck and shoulders. She went to the kitchen and grabbed two bottles of water. Opening one, she took several long swallows, and then wiped her hand off on her jean shorts as she picked up the other bottle and headed to where Tara was working.

Moving quietly across the carpet, Willow stopped in the doorway and leaned against the frame to watch as Tara painted. Tara was barefoot in white painters pants covered in swipes and splatters of paint along with a white t-shirt equally as abused. The paint had been smeared along her nose, running across her forehead, and up into her bangs that now stood on end coated in black and blue paints.

“Thirsty?” Willow asked softly.

Tara’s eyes flickered up briefly from the canvas in front of her. She stepped back, staring hard at the painting. With a nod, she came around the easel and approached Willow with a bright smile.

“Are you hungry too? Can you stop and we can have some lunch while we’re at it? Careful, I opened the top a little so it would be easy to get off with paint covered hands,” Willow said as she handed Tara the bottle.

“Can you give me fifteen more minutes? I actually think I just might be finished with it. We can go together and get something to eat,” Tara said as she glanced at the clock that hung in the kitchenette.

Willow nodded. “Yup, I’ve got stuff running and it won’t be done for a bit, so we can leave it and go eat with everyone else,” she reached out and played with the tufts of hair covered in paint. “I like your fancy new do, blue suits you,” she giggled.

Tara reached up, touching the now stiff hair. “Hmm, maybe I’ll leave it for you then, but I want to clean up and change. I don’t think the Sisters would appreciate paint smudges everywhere on a trail that leads right to me.” She winked at Willow before dropping a quick kiss on her cheek and turning back to her easel.
Willow watched as Tara picked up a brush from a can next to her easel and rubbed it rapidly against her pants leg, and then swayed back and forth in front of the canvas. Her eyes moved carefully over the image in front of her, before choosing her color to work with, picking places for perfecting. A fond smile eased its way across Willows’ face as she watched, before turning and retreating to her computers.

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Half an hour later Willow and Tara walked hand in hand down the hall towards the main dining room. Lunch would have just been set out and people starting to trickle in and congregate.

Passing the desk at the entrance, they noticed a familiar body leaning against the desk chatting Tabitha up and laughing, much to their mutual surprise.

“Claude,” They said in surprised unison.

Turning to face Willow and Tara was a brightly smiling Claude. Willow and Tara looked at one another, neither being able to hide the surprise or curiosity.

“So, what brings you here, Claude?” Willow asked, trying not to sound too snarky.

“Wow, Tara, your hair! I’ve never seen it so short, it looks great. I’m supposed to be meeting a Mr. Rupert Giles for lunch. He called the ranch and left a message a few weeks ago. Do you know him?” Claude guilelessly asked.

Both girls nodded. “Yes, he’s a good friend; did he tell you why he wanted to meet with you?” Tara asked. Willow shot Tara a knowing look.

“No, but he asked questions about mom, and whatnot,” Claude said as she started to shuffle a little nervously.

“Well, don’t worry, he won’t bite,” Willow replied with a smile.

“We were just on our way to eat, but since you’re meeting Giles, I guess we’ll catch you later then,” Tara said with a smile.

Claude flashed another bright smile. “Definitely, it was good to see you both.” Her face fell, and a wistfully envious expression crossed her features as she watched them walk away.

Heading quickly to the dining room, and not speaking until they entered the room, Willow gave Tara a questioning look.

“You know what that’s about, right?” Willow asked quietly.

“The coven, but Claude never really practiced,” Tara frowned.

“If she somehow has been brought to the attention of the Watcher’s Council, there’s a little more to dear Claude than she lets on, or maybe more than she even wants to know, baby. Giles wouldn’t have called her here for nothing,” Willow said as she made her way to the long buffet table to look over what had been set out.
Tara bit her lip as she nodded. “I know, but really I never felt anything from her, and she never wanted there to be anything. I know her mother had some power and could grow just about anything, even if it was three-quarters dead when you brought it to her. She always had the prettiest roses, and part of the hedge in her yard was nothing but honeysuckle and jasmine...she had more than just a green thumb.” Tara giggled. “She was a “plant whisperer”. My mama used to tease her about it.”

“Well, maybe there’s something to that, maybe a little of that rubbed off on Claude and she could be helpful in the greenhouses here or something. I know green witches pride themselves on their abilities to grow plants and herbs,” Willow said as she shrugged.

Tara frowned slightly, and with a shrug, handed Willow a plate. “I don’t know, I guess we can pester Giles about it later and see if he spills.”

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66 hours

That evening, Tabitha stomped into Amy’s room to hear retching coming from the bathroom. Her mouth quirked into a cold smile as she listened; sauntering over to one of the few remaining chairs left, she turned it to face the bed, and perched herself on it, waiting for Amy to show herself.

The bathroom door slammed carelessly open, and Amy wobbled out holding her head. Her skin had taken on the pallor of old parchment, and her eyes were just pits of blackness that almost looked like they had been punched into her skull.

“Hello, cousin, not feeling well today?” Tabitha asked in a saccharine tone.

“What the fuck does it look like to you?” Amy snarled.

“When does your man show up? Something is going on. That Englishman sent for the brunette, Claude, who was sniffing around Willow before she brought her sweet little blonde here. Claude and the Englishman had lunch today; when Willow and Tara saw her, I could tell that they know something.”

Amy rubbed her head as she slowly made her way over to the bed, easing down on it.

“Davos and I have already talked; he’ll be here by two o’clock tomorrow. Then we move forward, and get what we deserve.” Amy lay back on the bed and clutched a pillow to her chest.

Managing a modicum of sincerity, Tabitha asked, “Is there anything I can get you, Amy? Some tea perhaps, water maybe?”

Looking over the pillow at her cousin, Amy’s mouth twisted cruelly. “I bet you just love this, don’t you? No, dear cousin, I’m just dandy, thank you. By tomorrow evening I’ll be spectacular, don’t you worry your pretty little head about me.”

Tabitha’s expression grew closed and her eyes cold. With a curt nod of her head, she swept out of
the room with a slam of the door. Standing on the other side she could hear Amy cursing at the pain the noise had caused, and with a pleased little smile, she headed back to her rooms at the other end of the wing.

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Tara led the way into her rooms, which was the way that she and Willow were currently living with the adjoining door between the two suites open – they just floated back and forth at will. The main living areas served as workspaces for them to work on school, while the bedrooms were fluid. It didn’t matter which bed they were in so long as they were together, and they were always together. Reconnecting even in their silence, knowing that the other was only a few feet away, was reassurance enough of their bond.

They had always been very affectionate with one another when they were in private, and it carried over into the almost constant hand-holding when they were in public. They felt most at ease that way, and it was even more so now. It was an unspoken agreement; they loved one another and they didn’t care who knew.

Willow noticed that an envelope had been shoved under Tara’s door. Stopping to pick it up she saw it was addressed to them both in Lady Rowan’s flowing script.

“Baby, we have something here,” Willow said holding up the envelope for Tara to see.

“Open it, sweetie.”

Willow tore into the envelope and quickly read the note inside. “It looks like we are to meet her and Dana at twelve thirty tonight in the training fields,” she handed the note over for Tara to read. “It’s time then, she must have gotten confirmation from the Witches Committee.”

Willow ran her hand through her hair as she watched Tara read the note.

“That makes sense, a waxing moon is a good time for a binding, banishment, and protection spells too. I wonder if Amy and Tabitha know yet what’s going to happen to them. I know it’s still early, but maybe we should start to prepare, so we can get up and do a cleansing before we go out,” Tara said thoughtfully.

Willow sat on the couch, and kicked off her sandals, then patted the space next to her. Tara toed off her sneakers, pulling off her socks and stuffing them inside before she joined Willow.

Snuggling into one another they immediately joined hands. Willow nuzzled Tara’s neck, dropping a few soft kisses on the soft skin.

With a sigh, Willow said, “That’s a good idea, baby. Maybe we should meditate a little tonight before we lay down to nap, just to be a little more in tune with each other. We don’t know what exactly is going to happen, and I think we should be prepared for anything. We’re dealing with Amy here.”

Lifting Willow’s hand to her lips, Tara smiled a sad smile. “It’s for the best Willow. She’s left us no choice and she’s had the chance to avoid this. I know she is your friend…”
“Was,” Willow interjected.

“Okay, was your friend, so I imagine this has a whole different meaning for you, baby. Just know you did what you could to help her and she didn’t want it, okay? You didn’t fail her Willow, she failed herself.” Tara rested her head on Willow’s shoulder.

“I never dreamed that when Amy, Michael and I started dabbling in high school it would ever come to this. I really thought that she had learned from what her mother did to her, but I was so wrong, baby, so wrong. It may not be what she wants, but it’s what she needs. In a way that sounds hypocritical coming from me, but when the lifeline was thrown, I grabbed on. I had too much I didn’t want to lose forever.” Pulling Tara closer Willow dropped a kiss on her temple.

“I love you, Tara.”

Shifting to look Willow in the eye, Tara gently placed a hand on her cheek. “I know you do, sweetie, just like I love you.” Placing several soft kisses on Willow’s lips, Tara then eased back into the couch. “We should get started soon so we can get some rest.”

“You’re right, we should get prepared.” Willow sighed. “How about I’ll let you gather stuff for a cleansing, and I’ll get the bedroom ready for us to meditate in? We got to have to have our game faces on when we get there.”

Tara pulled Willow close for a long sweet kiss, then their mouths pulled apart with a slight pop. “Sounds like a plan, sweetie. Off we go.”

Willow just looked at her for a moment before she stood up. “Off we go to work ourselves up into a witchy little frenzy – yay,” she said sounding less than thrilled at the prospect.

Tara rose and swatted her behind. “Look at it this way; it’ll be stories to tell our grandchildren.”

Willow whipped around to look at her, surprise written all over her face, she squeaked, “Our grandchildren?”

“Definitely our grandchildren,” Tara said with a sincere smile. Willow opened her arms, and Tara walked into her embrace.

Willow pulled her in and kissed her hard, they broke apart breathless, eyes dilated and shining. Willow played with the soft wisps of hair at the nape of Tara’s neck. Smiling mischievously she said, “Our grandchildren,” her tongue poked out a little as she smiled and hugged Tara tight.

“Maybe there’s something else we can do to get in tune with one another,” Tara whispered in Willow’s ear.

With a throaty laugh, Willow’s eyes gleamed brightly. “Lead the way.”

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72 hours
Willow and Tara made their way out to the training field just as the sliver of a crescent moon rose almost directly overhead. They both were dressed in loose white cotton ceremonial gowns.

Tara’s was embroidered with a triquetra Triple Goddess knot, and it alternated with the Lover’s Knot along the edges of the collar, sleeves and bottom hem in twisted threads that changed color from deep emerald green to cobalt blue with a golden shimmer to it.

Willow’s gown was almost identical except for the style of the knot and the color of the threads. Instead of the standard triquetra Triple Goddess knot, hers were the swirl pattern for the Triple Goddess, alternating with the Lover’s Knot. And Willow’s threads were a deep, almost blood, red and a rich purple that was twisted together.

Dana and Lady Rowan were already waiting when they arrived; they were dressed in similarly ornate ceremonial robes, with Rowan’s being the most ornate.

“Merry meet, and blessed be Sisters,” Rowan said solemnly, and Dana simply nodded.

“Meet meet, My Lady,” Tara and Willow responded.

“Rupert has been sent to fetch Amy, and Tabitha received an invitation similar to the one you both were given. Neither girl knows the exact nature of their summoning. Dana and I have taken the liberty of setting up the circle, and when they arrive we can get started without delay. They should be here shortly girls, I hope you are prepared.” Rowan’s face was grave when she looked at Willow and Tara.

“Yes, My Lady, we have prepared knowing this won’t be pleasant,” Tara almost whispered.

Willow cleared her throat. “My Lady, I fully expect Amy to fight and I wouldn’t be surprised if Tabitha does as well. Not being pleasant, I think will be an understatement, but Tara and I have faced worse.” There was a note of pride in her voice as she slipped her hand into Tara’s.

Speaking for the first time since their arrival, Dana said, “I’m sure you have, being practicing witches living on the hellmouth.”

As they spoke, going over what would take place and the spell that would be used, Giles arrived with Amy. A lone figure could be seen making its way towards them in the night. Soon, Tabitha could be distinguished in the soft light of the lanterns that had been lit around the circle that had been drawn.

Giles’ robe was as ornate as Dana’s, while Tabitha and Amy wore simple white robes of an initiate. The four faced the circle at which point Rowan lit a white candle approaching the group of six people to stand in front of them and began to draw a protective circle.

Rowan spoke as she lit a yellow candle, “Let it be known that this circle has been cast. All who enter the Circle may do so in perfect love and perfect trust. Guardians of the East, I call upon you to watch over the rites of the Coven of The Grove. Powers of knowledge and wisdom, guided by Air, we ask that you keep watch over us tonight within this circle. Let all who enter the circle under your guidance do so in perfect love and perfect trust.

She then moved to the south and lit the red candle waiting in place, and said, “Guardians of the South, I call upon you to watch over the rites of the Coven of The Grove. Powers of energy and will, guided by Fire, we ask that you keep watch over us tonight within this circle. Let all who enter the
circle under your guidance do so in perfect love and perfect trust.”

Moving next around the circle to the west, Rowan lit a blue candle saying, “Guardians of the West, I call upon you to watch over the rites of the Coven of The Grove. Powers of passion and emotion, guided by Water, we ask that you keep watch over us tonight within this circle. Let all who enter the circle under your guidance do so in perfect love and perfect trust.”

Finally approaching the north she lit the yellow candle, intoning, “Guardians of the North, I call upon you to watch over the rites of the Coven of The Grove. Powers of endurance and strength, guided by Earth, we ask that you keep watch over us tonight within this circle. Let all who enter the circle under your guidance do so in perfect love and perfect trust.”

Motioning Tara forwards Rowan asked, “How do you enter the circle?”

Tara approached with the grace and confidence born of years of practice, and responded in a clear strong voice, “In perfect love and perfect trust in the light and love of the Goddess.” Rowan anointed Tara with ceremonial oils.

The process was repeated until everyone had entered the sacred circle. Amy and Tabitha were loosely surrounded by Dana, Willow, and Tara, as Giles was helping Amy to stand upright.

“My Lady, what’s going on? This isn’t the usual time for a ritual or celebration,” Tabitha asked, her suspicion plain as her eyes darted around to the people surrounding her.

Rowan moved to stand in front of the group. Her presence and power easily felt as she began to call her magicks to her. Her face set in hard lines, and the air fairly cracking around her, she cut an imposing figure as she began to speak, facing Amy she began.

“Amy Elizabeth Madison, daughter of Catherine Angeline Rosseur, daughter of Anne Marie Holcomb, you have proved time and again you are a danger to yourself and others. You have repeatedly defiled the true meaning and intent of a practicing coven by using it for your own gains.”

Turning to Tabitha, she almost spat, “Tabitha Elise Rosseur, daughter of Jill Rose Talbot, daughter of Roseanne Emily Warren, you have betrayed your coven, engaged in machinations to overthrow your priestess for your own gain to the detriment of the other members of the coven. You have also proven to be a danger to yourself and others.”

Straightening to her full height, Rowan set her jaw, her eyes cold as she stared down both young women. “I hereby decree, under full consent of the Witches Committee, that you are both to have your powers bound permanently, and be banished from this and any coven until the end of your lives natural or otherwise.”

Dana approached first Tabitha and then Amy, tying sashes around their waists that had the rune Aegishjelm – the Helm of Awe, a binding rune & the tri-runes of Hagel, Jera, and Rad to bind and return negativity – painted onto them.

Tabitha stood slack-jawed and stunned, just watching what was happening, looking back and forth between Amy and Rowan. Amy pulled away from Giles’ grasp with a murderous look on her death mask of a face.

The five began to chant, “The darkness you have created is bound to you. You own your darkness. You may no longer share this darkness with others. Your negative energy shall be destroyed, and
your evil will forever be banished from this world. Maiden, Mother, and Crone, earth, air, fire and
spirit we ask of she who commands our obeisance for her blessing. We bind all powers; we banish
all powers and energies never to return, never to do any more harm to themselves or others. By the
rule of three by three, we bind Amy Elizabeth Madison, daughter of Catherine Angeline Rosseur,
dughter of Anne Marie Holcomb. Tabitha Elise Rosseur, daughter of Jill Rose Talbot, daughter of
Roseanne Emily Warren.”

By this time Amy was shaking with laughter. Energy had already been building in the air around
them when Amy turned to look at them, her eyes as black as pitch.

“Do you really think you can bind me?” She laughed hysterically. She began to draw energy
forming a nasty looking black and red orb in her hand. “C’mon Willow, do you really think you’re
up to taking me?” With a flick of her wrist, she flung the orb not at Willow but at Tara.

Tara just smiled and shook her head as she caught the orb. As she held it, it changed to the
opalescent light blue of her power. With a smirk, Tara lobbed it over to Willow. Willow juggled it
between her hands. Turning it from flame to ice, to a rose, then to a rock and dropping it to the
ground at Amy’s feet.

“Amy, did you honestly think we expected any less from you? You’re easy to figure out, you’ll go
for what you think will hurt us most, but you have no idea what you’re playing with here, little girl,”
Willow said her voice deadly serious.

Rowan, Dana, and Giles continued to chant, moving together and clasping hands.

With a screech of anger, Amy began firing orbs of energy at Willow and Tara, only to have the same
thing repeated. Willow threw rocks, roses, snakes, lizards, rats, and gerbils at her feet while she and
Tara laughed.

Amy screamed at Tabitha to help her, but her cousin seemed to be rooted to the spot where she
stood.

With another frustrated screech, Amy began to levitate, “Enough playing! I WILL NOT be bound,
much less by you, Willow Rosenberg.” This time she shot pulses of entirely black, oily-looking
energy at Willow.

Willow blocked the pulse and fought back with a continuous pulse of green-white energy, forcing
Amy back to the ground as she began to tire.

Panting heavily, Amy pulled another trick from her arsenal and all of a sudden just appeared next to
Tabitha. Placing one hand on her head, she seemed to feed on her. Tabitha began to drop to her
knees, as Amy’s cackling grew louder. When Tabitha keeled over onto the ground, Amy whipped
around to face Willow and Tara.

“Bring it on girls,” she said. Her eyes had gone completely black; the whites were completely gone
and seemed to spark. She rubbed her hands together; black magicks crackled and shot off little bursts
of energy.

“You really don’t want to do this, Amy,” Tara tried to encourage her.

“Don’t you get it? There is nothing else, you twit! And I’m gonna go down fighting and drain the
two of you while I’m at it,” Amy laughed.
“Amy, she gave you one last chance, and we both know it’s me you want. So here it is, I’m giving you one free shot, bring on your best because you’ve stepped into my world.” Willow’s voice lacked inflection, and her expression was blank.

“Baby,” Tara started to plead.

Willow looked at Tara and gave her a wink. “It’s okay, really, go see if you can help Tabitha. I can take her out since this is the way she wants it.”

As Tara started to move away, Amy shot another nasty, oily, black pulse at her knocking her down. Tara writhed and cried on the ground.

“That was your first mistake, bitch,” Willow menaced. Without hesitation, she dropped into a lotus position.

“What are you gonna do, Willow? Meditate me to death?” Amy taunted and laughed.

Amy began to wind up like a pitcher about to throw a baseball when she was struck by a shot of energy from Willow that sent her flying.

Dana, Rowan, and Giles continued to chant, while Tara just laid on her back trying to catch her breath. Bolts of energy began to shoot between the two witches with increasing rapidity. You could smell the ozone in the air, and the hair on everyone’s arms was standing on end. Tara managed to get upright and into a lotus position.

Willow had knocked Amy around the circle. She was bleeding from a cut on her lip, both of her eyes were starting to swell closed and blacken, while her left arm hung at an odd angle. Willow had never even opened her eyes or moved from her position. Willow shot another beam of energy that picked Amy up off of her feet and held her suspended.

Suddenly, another shot of white energy shot from Tara to mingle with Willow’s energy. Amy let out a wail of pained rage and began to fight them both back. The energy around her began to spark and turn nasty shades of red, purple, green and black. Swirling like a viscous tidal pool, Amy began pushing against their combined energies, forcing them back.

Willow and Tara both began to rise and move towards one another in the meditative positions. They rotated to face one another once their knees gently touched; they calmly raised their hands to join them. As one, they sent a burst of golden light that hit the pulse Amy had sent their way.

And, with an ear-rending howl, and one final thunderous crack, Amy was gone in a shower of sparks.

Slowly they lowered back to the ground, still holding hands, they opened their eyes. Tara blinked rapidly in stunned surprise at Willow, who burst into tears and dropped her head into her hands.

By now Rowan, Dana, and Giles had stopped chanting and just watched Tara, Willow and where Amy had been. No one had quite expected this end to things.

Tabitha was still crumbled off to the side, for all intents and purposes a vegetable. Quickly, Willow wiped the tears from her face and looked at Tara.
"We had no choice, right?" she pled.

"She left us no other choice," Tara said softly.

Willow nodded and stood. Holding her hand out to help Tara up, she looked over at Tabitha with sadness, tears welling up again in her eyes.

"Rowan, can you dismiss the circle, please? We’ve had enough for one night, you can deal with Tabitha." Tara said as she put her arm around Willow’s shoulders to hold her close.

Without hesitation, Rowan began to close the circle. Repeating the process counterclockwise, releasing the guardians of the four points and extinguishing the candles as she went. With a final, “I declare this sacred circle closed. So mote it be,” the circle was now closed.

Without a backward look, Willow and Tara walked away.

Willow clung to Tara’s arm that had been around her shoulders, and tears still rolled unchecked down her cheeks. Tara continued to stare ahead blankly, as they trudged on autopilot back through the field, and towards their rooms. Shuffling through the halls they arrived at their door, and just stood staring at it. The only sound that echoed gently off the walls was of Willow’s soft sniffling.

“Baby, you know it’s not over now, right? Now we go back to Sunnydale,” Willow whispered.

Finally moving to open the door, Tara tightened her hold on Willow. “Yes, sweetie, I know.”

TBC…
Chapter 27 - Consequence

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: R for the acidy tummies & language

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 7 on the 1-10 scale.

Setting: The Grove – Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BTVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. I own nothing but my soul, and even that is only a fleeting ownership… such is life.

Feedback: If you’re up for, it’s always appreciated.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Special “Thank You’s” on this chapter go to CYTEACH for her never-ending enthusiasm and pom-pom’s, Ariel for being my sounding board & encouragement, and Azirahael for helping me to keep my Giles, Giles-y and all three of you for arguing and putting up with me. Music for this chapter City and Colour “Little Hell”, Feist “Metals”, Nicola Roberts “Cinderella’s Eyes”, September “Love CPR”, and Hope Sandoval & the Warm Intentions “Through the Devil Softly”.

con·se·quence [kon-si-kwens, -kwuh ns] noun

1. the effect, result, or outcome of something occurring earlier:
2. an act or instance of following something as an effect, result, or outcome.
3. the conclusion reached by a line of reasoning; inference.

Just after seven the next morning, an insistent knock sounded at the door to Willow’s suite. Tara jerked awake and looked over at the still sleeping Willow, gently kissing her temple before easing out of bed. Smoothing her hair down, Tara shrugged into a robe, sliding the bedroom door partially closed behind her. Half asleep and a little irritated, she stumbled over to the door.

The knocking came again, and answering the door Tara found a weary and disheveled looking Giles standing before her. Tara leaned against the door, looking up at Giles, and for a moment just blinking at him sleepily before motioning for him to enter.

“What can I do for you, Giles?” Tara asked dully, as she sat down on the sofa.

Giles took off his glasses and rubbed his face as he sank down into the chair opposite her. He sat quietly as if he didn’t know where to begin with what he wanted to say. His expression was dark as he began to speak.

“Tara, I was hoping to speak with you and Willow both, would that be possible?”

“Willow is still sleeping, Giles, and I don’t really want to wake her. What happened last night – this morning – whatever, was difficult on her – on us both. We never thought the binding would turn out this way,” Tara said sadly, looking at her hands.

Giles nodded, and his voice trembled slightly, “I’m sorry, Tara, but I really must insist,” he said before he cleared his throat. Giles lowered his head and pinched the bridge of his nose, looking pained as he did so.

Tara stared hard at Giles for a moment, and then with a sigh and a terse nod of her head, she rose to go to the bedroom.

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Easing the door open just enough to slip in, Tara moved smoothly through the doorway, shedding a soft, diffused light into the room. Standing in the shadows, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the half-light, Tara smiled warmly as Willow’s sleeping form became clear to her.

Tara dropped her robe on the edge of the bed, and then eased back in next to Willow. Willow immediately sensed her warmth and moved towards it, wrapping an arm around her waist. Nuzzling her face into Tara’s neck, Willow began to slowly climb towards wakefulness.

“Sweet Love,” Tara whispered.

Willow kissed the skin beneath her lips, and groaned, “Hmmm.”

“Love, I need for you to wake up. I know you’re tired, but Giles is here, and he asked to speak with us both,” Tara said quietly.

“Don’t wanna,” Willow mumbled sleepily.

Tara tightened her hold on Willow and kissed along her brow. Rubbing her hand slowly up and down Willow’s back, she encouraged her to wake up.

“I know, Love, but it seems to be important. Giles doesn’t look good, Will. We can come back to bed after he leaves, I promise,” Tara coaxed.

Willow pulled back to look Tara in the eye, while Tara gently stroked her hair, and then leaned forward to kiss Tara sweetly. Grumbling, she rolled away and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Tell Giles I’ll be out in a few minutes, please, Baby? I want to get cleaned up a little,” Willow said over her shoulder, her voice still raspy from sleep.

“Sure, take your time, Sweetie. How about I start some coffee in the meantime?” Tara asked.

“That sounds great,” Willow said, with fatigue and sadness dripping from her voice.
Rising from the bed, Tara donned her robe again, and murmured, “Love you, Will.”

Turning to look at Tara from the bed, Willow smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I love you too, My Tara.”

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Tara came back into the living room and walked directly into the kitchen, starting the routine of making coffee. As she worked she avoided eye contact with Giles.

“Giles, should I make some tea for you? Or will coffee be okay?” Tara asked, finally looking at him over the counter.

“Coffee will be fine, Tara, thank you,” Giles replied solemnly.

“Will said she would be out shortly. Giles, what is so important that we had to be disturbed? It’s still early, couldn’t whatever it is have waited?” The shortness of Tara’s tone made Giles grimace and made him shift slightly in his chair before he turned to face her.

“I apologize for disturbing you both after last night, but something rather alarming has come to light, I’m afraid,” Giles began.

The door to the bedroom swung inwards, and Willow stood in the doorway, pale and drawn. She looked from Tara to Giles, then made her way to the sofa and sat down, curling her legs under her. “Good morning, Giles. I take it from the way you look, this isn’t a social call – and you look like hell by the way.”

“Yes, well,” Giles cleared his throat, “I won’t beat around the bush, girls. It would seem that Amy and Tabitha had arranged with a young man from Amy’s coven to have a book brought to her.”

When the coffee machine finished, Tara brought in three cups and handed a cup to each before sitting herself next to Willow with her own. They both moved towards one another automatically, seeking out the comfort that only their contact provided. Their hands entwined, as they both looked at Giles with tired, sad eyes waiting for him to continue.
“A young man by the name of Matthew Davos seems to be one of the more loyal members of Amy’s coven. We found a cell phone with text messages outlining a plan to meet for the exchange of this book. In exchange for – what we can deduce – a magical high in much the same manner as Rack offered. This seems to be something Amy did for her most her loyal members.”

“And you want us to do exactly what about this, Giles?” Willow asked bluntly.

Clearing his throat once again, Giles removed his glasses start to cleaning them, but dropped his handkerchief and just gave up, flopping back into the chair again.

Willow nudged Tara. “Aborted glasses cleaning, this is so not going to be much with the fun.”

“It would seem the exchange is to take place at two o’clock this afternoon. We would like you two both to arrive, and take possession of the book from Davos. If possible, you would then lead him here back to the coven.”

“So basically, you want us to be decoys?” Tara said angrily. “Don’t you think we’ve done enough in the last twenty-four hours?”

Giles looked pained as he responded, “Yes, of course, I do, girls. However, the matter of the book remains – in the wrong hands it is terribly dangerous. Without Amy and the hellmouth, it is most likely Davos will have no real power of his own and will quickly lose possession of the book to someone with considerably more sinister designs for its use.”

“Just what is this book we are retrieving Giles? Why is it so important that we get it?” Tara asked suspiciously.

“It appears that Amy and Tabitha planned to use some of the spells contained within it to overthrow this coven. Alas, there are things brewing in Sunnydale…that may require the use of such powerful spells.” Giles cleared his throat nervously, gulping at his coffee.

Giles stood and began to pace, running his hand carelessly through his hair before he spoke again. “Girls, I won’t lie to you, I owe you both more than that. Davos doesn’t know what Tabitha looks like, which will work in our favor. It is also extremely doubtful that he would know you either, Willow,” he said, removing his glasses and gesturing to Willow.

Giles stopped to look at Willow, who simply shrugged. “If we were to ‘keep up appearances’ – a ruse if you will – we can dupe the young man. And we need a young woman about the right age to
do this, which is where you come in, Tara.” Giles chewed on one of the arms of his glasses and looked thoughtful for a moment. “Do you plan to return to Sunnydale in the near future?”

Tara and Willow looked at one another. Tara gave a subtle nod, keeping her face impassive.

“We haven’t discussed it in great detail yet, but we think it’s time for us to return, yes,” Willow said.

“Willow, let’s not dance around one another, shall we?” Giles said looking at them both keenly. “The book is more…grey than dark magick. It is both powerful and old, which is what makes it extremely dangerous. I believe it could be invaluable to help defend Sunnydale, just as I think you both will.”

“What do you know Giles?” Willow asked.

“Buffy will need you now more than ever. Not just you, Willow, but you as well, Tara. You are two halves of a whole,” He replied enigmatically.

Tara set her untouched cup down on the coffee table and began to nervously rub at Willow’s hand entwined with her own.

“Giles, you hope we intend to form a coven, and take it to Sunnydale don’t you?” she asked morosely.

Willow tightened her grip on their hands, raising them to kiss the back of Tara’s in an attempt to comfort her. “Giles, did I miss you getting hit in the head again? We are just barely out of being initiates ourselves! Leading a coven…being responsible for other people…not just teaching them, but leading them? Having to control them if things get out of hand? Let’s not get all with the crazy here. This is big, Giles, I just don’t know about all this…we don’t know.” Willow looked to Tara for confirmation, who nodded and wrapped both her arms around one of Willow’s.

“Willow, around the world as we speak, young girls are being killed. They are potentials, girls that have the ‘possibility’ of one day being a slayer. Whatever is going to happen has already started, and you both are needed. I have found an initiate here willing to go with you, and you will need her skills. There is also a young woman named Abigail that has shown up on Buffy’s doorstep asking for you both. She says she was sent there by her Aunt.”
Willow and Tara looked at one another grimly. “Sweetie, its beginning isn’t it?” Tara asked.

“From beneath you, it devours…” Willow whispered, taking a deep drink of her coffee. She looked directly and calmly at Giles.

“Alright, Giles, what do we need to do? And don’t pull any of your Watcher crap with me, I know you too well for that,” Willow said sternly, her resolve face washing over her features.

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As Willow drove towards their destination at, of all places – a library in the city, they discussed what Giles had told them. This book was supposedly compiled in 1493 by Alphonse Cattanei, rumored to be a cousin of Vannozza Cattanei; the mistress of Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia and the mother of his three children: Cesare, Giovanni, and Lucrezia.

*It was supposedly written for Tomás de Torquemada, the First Grand Inquisitor of Spain during the Spanish Inquisition. It was used to catalog a cross-section of spells as they were encountered by the Inquisition and then used in evidence against those charged as Jews, witches, and heretics. Cattanei had been appointed by and was a devoted follower of Torquemada – known as “The Hammer of the Heretics” – the cruelest and bloodiest of the Inquisitors, killing thousands during his reign of terror.*

“How are we g-going to know this guy, Will?” Tara asked, a slight stutter making an appearance.
“I have Amy’s cell phone, we’ll text him when we get there, and then I guess we just look for the creepiest guy around,” Willow said matter-of-factly. “Baby, you don’t have to do this. I can do this, I can be Tabitha for an hour or so… don’t worry, okay?”

“Will, it’s not fooling the ‘creepy guy’ that has me worried. I just have some… m-misgivings about this book. We don’t know what to expect, that’s what w-worries me,” Tara said honestly.

Willow pulled the car over and turned to Tara. She took both her hands and looked her in the eye. “If you don’t want to do this, we will turn around right now. I won’t have you so upset that you stammer, in a situation that I have some control over. Is it something you feel? We know he was mixed up with Amy, so he isn’t exactly high on the trust-o-meter – tell me what it is, Baby.”

Tara tried to smile, but it came across more like a grimace. “I can’t put my f-finger on it.” Her eyes slid closed as she drew a deep calming breath. “I’m worried, that’s all, w-we can’t let our guard down.”

Unhooking her seatbelt, Willow leaned across to give Tara a number of reassuring kisses. Tipping Tara’s chin up slightly, Willow looked Tara directly in the eyes and smiled. “We can do this, and do you know why?”

Tara smiled and shook her head.

“Because we’re strong,” Willow said.

“Strong like Amazons?” Tara asked.

“That’s right, Baby, strong like Amazons,” Willow affirmed with a wink and a smile.

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Willow started to fidget as they waited parked in front of the library. Davos was to send a text once he was there to meet with Tabitha and hand over the book. This ploy should work since Davos, having never met Tabitha, would meet Tara and be none the wiser. Tara could get the book and have him follow her back to The Grove to get his ‘reward’. Using the excuse that Amy was being
watched too closely to come herself, ‘Tabitha’ would be waiting for him.

Tara was playing with the radio when Amy’s cell phone sounded. They looked at each other, and then at the phone as though it might bite them. Willow’s hand shook slightly as she picked it up to read the text.

She looked up at Tara. “He’s here,” she said.

Taking a deep breath, Tara nodded. “I’m ready, Will. Where is he?”

Quickly texting back, they didn’t have to wait long for a reply. Willow looked through the windshield and scanned the small amount of foot traffic coming and going in front of the library. Her eyes locked on a tall, well built, pasty young man in khakis, a polo and Ray Bans.

With a nod of her head, “That’s him - in the khakis,” Willow murmured.

Tara followed Willow’s line of sight, “He looks so… normal,” Tara replied.

“Baby, if there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years, it’s that they always do. I don’t recognize him, but I’ll still hang back so he doesn’t notice me,” Willow said, twisting around to grab a baseball cap from the backseat. She flashed Tara a quick smile and picked up the phone to send a text back.

“Get your game face on, I want to get this over with,” Tara huffed.

“You and me both, Baby, you and me both,” Willow sympathized.

Tara climbed out of the car and started moving casually towards the waiting Davos. Willow waited a moment, before getting out and creeping around to keep an eye on the pair. She kept close to the SUV, leaning against it and pretending to be on the phone while watching Tara as she approached Davos.

“You’re Davos,” Tara stated to the young man in front of her.
He turned to look at Tara, and eyed her up and down. “You’re Tabitha?” he asked.

“No, I’m your fairy godmother. Where’s the book?” Tara demanded.

Davos almost snapped to attention under Tara’s scrutiny. “It’s in my car, just over there,” He said, pointing to a row of cars in the lot.

“Let’s do this, Amy’s waiting,” Tara remarked tersely.

Willow watched them speak briefly and then saw Tara throw a quick glance over her shoulder before following Davos into the parking lot. Willow began to cautiously draw energy and followed at a distance. They stopped by a nondescript small black sedan.

Tara crossed her arms across her chest, narrowing her eyes. “So the book, where is it?”

Davos smiled like a smitten schoolboy as he hurried to open the car. “Here…it’s right here, just like I promised.”

Tara snatched the book away from him as he continued to ramble.

“So, when do we do this ‘take over’ thing? When do I get to see Amy? She – ahh, we have a deal, you know? I bring the book, and she would, uh take care of me when all this goes down. When she takes over,” he said as he started to puff up menacingly, and moved in closer to tower over Tara.

Willow watched Tara take the book from Davos, and could tell by Tara’s subtle body language that something about the conversation was starting to go downhill. When Tara looked up at Davos, her shoulders started to slump as though she were going to cringe away from Davos as he invaded her personal space.

Then Tara seemed to catch herself, narrowing her eyes and standing up straight. Willow had let her energy drop to focus on her love and began to pour her energy into her. Tara subtly cocked her head to one side as though she was listening to something and her whole body’s demeanor changed again.
“Look, I don’t tell you anything, you give me the book – that’s all. If Amy wants you to know something she can fill you in, and if you expect any kind of – whatever it is she promised you – then you’ll just shut up, and follow me back to The Grove,” Tara spat.

He started nodding agreeably, having been suitably chastised, while he played with the keys in his hand. Tara said something then turned on her heel sharply and moved quickly towards the car imperiously.

Willow watched as the young man wiped his face nervously and leaned against his car. He watched Tara go, so Willow began to pull her energy back and slip back to the car out of his sight. Willow walked quietly up behind Tara at the SUV, making her jump.

“Willow, don’t do that!” Tara squeaked and slapped at Willow’s arm in surprise.

“I’m sorry, Baby; I didn’t mean to scare you. Are you ok? Was it okay that I sent you energy? We didn’t really talk about it beforehand and it just, it seemed like maybe you might be in need of a little help right then – I wanted to help, and I didn’t want to just appear, I thought that it would blow your cover and make everything worse with the explaining and getting him to come back…” Tara cut Willow off with a short sweet kiss.

“Love, you were right on time, I was starting to get a little nervous. Let’s go and I’ll explain on the way, ‘Mr. Creepy’ is waiting,” Tara said.

Willow opened the door for Tara, then jogged around and climbed into the driver’s seat. She saw Tara putting the book in the back seat far away from her. As they pulled out of the parking lot, Willow saw Davos’ black sedan pull up behind them and follow.

“Okay, so spill, what happened back there?” Willow asked.

“Everything was fine until we got to his car, then when I felt the book I got distracted. Willow, Giles was right about its power…Davos wanted to play twenty questions about Amy – I think he may have a little crush – and kept asking things I had no clue about. That’s when I felt you, and if I’ve ever bullied someone in my life it’s him, but I think he liked it. I might have channeled some of Donnie there, which is kind of repulsive if I think about it,” Tara shuddered at the end of her own babble.
“I take it he wasn’t asking after her health, then?” Willow asked sarcastically.

“No. He wanted to know who else we had as far as a coven, and how soon it would be before we took over. How long he would have to wait, I have no idea what ‘things’ she may have promised him. Your energy just allowed me to tap into my ‘inner bully’ and stay focused. He is used to being pushed around, so I demanded the book and told him if he wanted whatever he had been promised, he would shut up, follow us, and I’d take him to Amy,” Tara said with a rush of breath.

“Poor schmuck, who knows what Amy promised him. Boy, is he in for a surprise. I have to agree with Giles though, I didn’t feel anything coming off of him as far as real power,” Willow offered.

“No, but he has this way of being intimidating… I think he would have been one of her bullies, Will. The energy just allowed me to pull on the uncaring coldness that I picked up from Tabitha from before – well from before the binding,” Tara looked at Willow, smiling wanly. “Let’s hurry and get back, I want a long hot shower.”

“Sure thing, Baby, once we’re out of the city I’ll speed up a bit, okay?” Willow entwined their hands and lifted Tara’s hand to kiss the back reassuringly.

Tara settled back into the seat, and leaned into the head-rest, watching as the scenery sped past outside the car window.

“At least this is nearly over. Um, Will can you feel the book, or is it just a ‘me’ thing?” Tara asked.

“No – I can feel it too, it’s like it, it – buzzes to me. Or maybe like a constant low hum, but it’s not insistent, or creepy – it’s just there in the background. I wonder what could be in it there that Amy thought she could use? I guess Giles will tell us once we get it to him. What do you feel, Baby?” Willow said thoughtfully.

Tara thought for a moment, “A hum – yes, that’s a good way to put it. Almost like a t.v. channel that has snowy, poor reception turned down very low…” she said softly as she continued to stare out the tinted window.

Willow glanced over. “Are you okay, Baby? You were great out there, by the way. He’s still behind us, so he doesn’t have a clue. Amy’s cell hasn’t gone off either, so I think it’s all with the hunky dory. We just call when we get close, and they’ll meet us, take him and the book and we are done – at least for now.”
“Will, I think the book is ours now. Giles may want to look at it, but I think it will be our responsibility,” Tara said turning to look seriously at Willow.

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Willow murmured with a pout. “So how do you feel about leading a coven, I mean really feel?”

“That doesn’t seem to really matter much now, does it? It seems like we’re needed, so we finish our initiate period a week from Friday under the light of the full moon, very fortuitous for us. Then back to Sunnydale?” Tara stated more than asked.

Willow frowned as she thought for a moment. “Yeah Baby, I’ll give Buffy and Xander a call to let them know we’ll be back in Sunnydale a little earlier than we thought we would be, and we’ll be bringing friends. Giles has found someone for us to bring with us from here, so that’s at least the three of us plus the girl waiting for a coven. It seems we’re acquiring witches left and right.”

“Sweetie, let’s just deal with the next week. I’m sure Lady Rowan will have some answers, and so will Giles, okay? Let’s just get rid of Amy’s little butt monkey, and then we can deal with getting ready for Sunnydale. Do you think you’re ready to go back?” Tara asked.

Willow started giggling, and Tara looked at her, eyebrow arched.

“You said ‘butt monkey’,” Willow snorted and giggled some more, before clearing her throat, trying to look serious. “Yes, we will ‘de-butt monkey’ ourselves and then deal with our impending return to the delights of Sunnyhell,” she burst into a fit of giggles again.

“I’ve been spending too much time with Xander, haven’t I?” Tara asked through her own giggles.

Willow nodded sagely. “Could be worse, Baby. We’re almost there; you want to give Giles a call to let them know things went off as we hoped?” Willow checked her rearview mirror and began to giggle again. “‘Butt monkey’ is still in tow so we’re good.”

“You are so bad,” Tara scolded as she called Giles.

“That’s why you love me,” Willow chirped.
“One of the many reasons, love,” Tara said smiling affectionately, her earlier concerns seemingly forgotten.

Ten minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot of The Grove. Davos parked next to them, and it seemed almost like Lady Rowan, Dana, and Giles materialized out of thin air. Tara retrieved the book from the back of the SUV and handed it promptly to Giles for inspection.

Lady Rowan, with Dana at her side, had already cornered Davos. “Matthew Davos, you are now faced with several options…”

Willow and Tara didn’t even look back as they headed into the main compound, and away from whatever would transpire for Amy’s butt monkey.

TBC…
Chapter 28 - Exhale... for Now

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Rating: NC-17 – there’s a tiny bit of plot at the beginning, but the rest is smut – I promised one of my betas smut and here it is in all its smutacular glory – and yes smutacular is a word – why? Because I said so.

Angst/Drama Rating: This is about a 4 on the angst-y/drama scale, about a good strong 9 on the smut scale.

Setting: The Grove – Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BTVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. I own nothing but my soul, and even that is only a fleeting ownership… such is life.

Feedback: Is greatly desired if you like or don’t like what you have read.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Praise for my poor betas Cyteach, Ariel, & Azirahael that had to weed through all the smut – it’s a dirty job (lol), but someone had to do it – especially pages and pages of it. Music for this chapter Zola Jesus “Conatus”, Tori Amos “Night of the Hunters”, Alice in Chains “Jar of Flies”, A Perfect Circle “Thirteenth Step”, Enigma “MCMXC A.D.”, Maroon 5 “It Won’t Be Soon Before Long” & “Hands All Over”.

There is the good and the bad, the great and the low, the just and the unjust. I swear to you
Willow and Tara entered through Willow’s suite. Kicking her shoes off immediately, Willow walked directly into her bedroom and sat on the bed. Tara bent to pick up Willow’s shoes and followed her, but stopped and leaned against the door frame.

Mechanically undressing, Willow stared ahead into space, her lips pressed into a thin line; the gears of thought spinning wildly behind her tired eyes. The only sound in the room was the rustle of her clothing as she undressed.

Concern clouded her features as she watched; Tara asked gently, “What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours, Love?”

Willow didn’t answer immediately; instead, she stood to take off her jeans and then slumped back down onto the bed. Willow rested her elbows onto the tops of her thighs, lacing her fingers together as if she were about to pray. Willow looked at her feet, her expression unreadable and her voice tremulous as she spoke.

“You asked me if I thought I was ready to go back to Sunnydale, and I asked you about leading a coven. Neither of us gave a direct answer. You said that it isn’t really about what we want but about what we’re needed to do. I feel the same about going back to Sunnydale,” Willow stopped to look up anxiously at Tara.

Resting her palms on her knees, Willow continued, “If you’re asking if I think I can handle being there again, then the answer is yes. I’m not the same girl I was in so many ways, Tara. After being here with you the past two months – the ways we’ve both grown have become so very clear me. Feeling ‘us’ again, ‘our’ magic – what has always brought us together, bound us to one another and made us strong, Sweetheart,” Willow’s countenance lit with sincere love, as she met Tara’s eyes. “I have no doubts about us – none. We can do this.”

Willow stood and began to pace in her underwear, while she rubbed the back of her neck in thought. She stopped and turned to Tara, fear flashing for a moment in her eyes. Willow sat down and patted the spot next to her on the bed. Tara sat and waited for Willow to organize her thoughts.
With a deep breath, Willow began, “Baby, I asked you to think about this once before, and I really mean it this time. When we stop whatever it is we are so in the need for in Sunnydale, do you think that maybe you would be able to…to walk away from the slaying? Leave Sunnydale behind altogether? Maybe even at that point disband the coven we have to form – so it’s just you, and me, and a chance at a life?” Willow smirked ruefully. “I won’t say ‘normal’, because we know too much – I also have a feeling things will try to ‘find’ us, so I don’t think it will ever be too tame, but maybe not be the general frontline wacky craziness and danger anymore, either.”

Tara tightened her grip on Willow’s hands, and looked at their joined hands as she spoke, her voice quiet but firm.

“Willow, I have seen things I would never have dreamt I’d see in a million years – demons, hell gods with scabby little minions, even sociopathic misogynistic nerds, and I’ve almost lost the people I hold dearest to me more times than I can count. I know that we ‘have’ to do this in Sunnydale, and I do have my doubts. Not about us, love, but about the responsibility we will be undertaking. I think I would be foolish not to be concerned.”

Shaking her head, Tara let go of Willow’s hands, rubbing her forehead with one hand. Willow’s throat tightened as she watched Tara. The flashes of emotions that played over Tara’s face made the anticipation of her words hard for Willow, who was trying to keep from panicking, so she could let Tara speak. Breathing deeply, Tara gazed at Willow openly as she voiced her concerns.

“Will, I think this – whatever ‘this’ is, will make our choice for us. It feels like a lot of terrible things are going to happen – they’ve already started to. Love, I’ll go where you go, I don’t want to lose you again. Bad things do seem to find us, but we also have a nasty, stupid habit of going looking for them, and then poking them with sharp, pointy sticks – literally,” Tara smiled lopsidedly.

Willow sighed loudly with relief, climbing into Tara’s lap and resting her head on Tara’s shoulder. Wrapping her arms around Willow, Tara nuzzled her neck while she tightened her hold.

“Sweet Love, my life is with you. With you I’m happiest – I feel like I’m whole. I don’t need to chase vampires – well, let’s be honest, get chased by vampires – but an ongoing life as bait doesn’t really have much appeal for me either. We have to make the best choices for us, and I know Buffy and everyone will understand if we step back or away altogether. We knew what we were getting into when we agreed to join and ‘fight the good fight’ – it was our time, but that time is coming to an end,” Tara pulled back to look at Willow, she gently rubbed their noses together and dropped a kiss on her lips. “Everything changes, Willow, and so have we.”

Willow nodded. “Change is good, change is painful, but change is necessary.”
“Change is good, change is painful, but change is necessary,” Tara repeated with an approving nod. “Who said that?”

“Lady Rowan,” Willow said with a smile. “So now that I am half dressed and in your lap, why don’t we go give my nice big tub a try and wash away some of the last twenty-four hours, what do you say?”

“I say it would be perfect if you were completely naked, but we still have time to work on that,” Tara replied saucily.

“If you follow me and lose your clothes, I’ll lose the rest of mine,” Willow wiggled her eyebrows as she hopped off Tara’s lap and headed from the bathroom. Just before she walked in, Willow tossed her bra over her shoulder, and it landed directly on Tara’s head.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Tara muttered as she struggled to get out of her clothing as fast as possible.

“That’s the idea, Baby,” came the giggled response from the bathroom.

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Steam swirled and danced in thick rising spirals around the bathroom on-air heavy with the scent of lavender and jasmine. There was a soft hum from the jets positioned strategically around the Jacuzzi tub. Tara reclined at one end and Willow at the other. They enjoyed the beat of the hot water against their skin and rubbed each other’s feet. Willow worked her way up the back of Tara’s calves, one stroke at a time, in slow, firm circles, while Tara worked gently on Willow’s once-broken leg, loosening the muscles.

Willow noticed the slight frown on Tara’s face as she moved gently around one particular area near one side of her knee. “What is it, Baby? Did I miss a spot shaving?” she asked lightly.

Tara looked up sheepishly. “No, Sweetie, it’s nothing, really.”

“Tara, Baby, I know better, what is it? This particular ‘Taraface’ doesn’t say that ‘it’s nothing’,” Willow cajoled, as she rested Tara’s foot by her hip.
Tara didn’t look at Willow, and with a small sigh replied softly, “It must be one of the screws in your leg…I can feel it. There’s another one down here, too.” She said moving her hand down to just above Willow’s ankle.

Willow smiled sadly and nodded. “Yes, there are six pins total with the rod, Baby,” taking Tara’s hand she slid it up her leg to another point to the opposite side of her knee. “This is the only other place where I can feel them. The first time I noticed them was when I was shaving once the cast came off. Then I cried for the rest of the day.”

Tara’s lower lip trembled slightly as she let go of Willow’s leg, then she opened her arms. “Come here, Baby.”

Willow slid around to Tara and was enfolded in her embrace, her back to Tara’s chest. Tara squeezed her tightly and dropped kisses along her neck and shoulder as she held Willow.

“Tara, it’s okay, I know we’ve only talked about this a little, but there are only a few times that I even remember it’s there. Since you’ve been here I’m taking better care of myself again – you take care of me too,” Willow turned in Tara’s arms so she could face her, stroking her cheek she said, “Baby, don’t worry about it, okay?”

Tara nodded, although her eyes had welled up with tears listening to Willow speak. Willow kneeled up and pulled Tara to her, wrapping her in a tender hug.

“Baby, what is it – it’s not just my leg. What has you so upset, Sweetheart?"

Tara choked on a sob and shook her head. “I guess everything is just catching up to me. Amy and Tabitha at the binding, then the bullying for the book – all of it, Will, I still feel a little overwhelmed, I guess.” Tara pulled back to look up at Willow. “This is really going to happen, isn’t it? We’re doing this aren’t we?”

Willow sat back in the hot water, moving so she could wrap her legs around Tara’s hips, pulling her in close. Grabbing one of the sponges floating in the tub, Willow started to squeeze the warm water over Tara’s back. Keeping her tone soft, Willow acknowledged Tara’s fears.

“Yes, Baby, it really is. Tara, Love, it’s okay to be scared about what’s coming – it’s an unknown. You know how much I like my charts, and plans, and different colored pens, but there’s no way to plan or chart for this. What pens would I use for this? So we can only rely on each other, and what
we’ve been taught here. The last few weeks have been extremely intense – between school, training together and separately – we have to believe we’re ready. If we don’t believe, we can’t expect anyone else too either, and then we’ve already lost. Baby, I won’t lose you – not again, okay?”

Tara sniffled and wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. “You sound so sure, Willow, so calm. Are you scared?”

Willow reached over the side of the tub to turn the jets off, and the bathroom suddenly became quiet except for the sound of the water lapping at the sides of the tub and Tara’s sniffles.

“Tara, I’m petrified! I’m learning to slow the spazz, though. Right now there’s no reason for me to freak out. I don’t know enough yet, so I’m taking a page from your lesson book, my beautiful girl. I’m being calm, so you can spazz all you need to, okay?”

Tara laughed in spite of herself. “I didn’t know I had an ‘inner spazz’ too.”

Willow kissed Tara sensually, waiting until she felt her respond before she pulled back to speak. “Well, you’ve had a spazz in you and you’ve been inside a spazz, so it’s only logical that at the very least the tendency would develop.”

Tara raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I think I’m long overdue to be inside of a certain redhead spazz I adore.” Smiling wickedly, she said in a throaty voice, “Let me take you to bed, Love.”

Willow smiled. “I thought you’d never ask,” she said as she popped the stopper on the tub to let it drain, never taking her eyes from Tara’s.

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Tara stood carefully and stepped out of the tub; turning to Willow, she offered her hand, smiling as she helped Willow step out. They stood before one another, water drops racing down their bodies, and for a moment they just wrapped their arms around each other. Bodies still warm and slick from the hot water, and bath oils, they seemed to slide into place like a key fitting into the right lock – so easily, so naturally.

Taking time to gently pat their limbs dry, holding hands, they walked back into Willow’s bedroom. The afternoon had begun to fade into twilight, and her room was beginning to darken. Candles had
already started to spring up in copious amounts throughout both bedrooms, and with a wink at Tara and a small gesture from Willow’s hand, all the candles in her room lit at once.

The room was bathed in the soft warm glow of candlelight from Willow’s favorite type – beeswax. This lent the soft scent of honey to the lavender and jasmine oils that coated their skins and perfumed the air from the steam that had rolled out from the bathroom with them.

Again, Tara offered her hand to Willow, and with the other hand, she pulled the sheets back. Tara smiled as she eased Willow down onto the sheets. She pulled the sheets all the way down to the foot of the bed before climbing in too. Taking hold of Willow’s ankles, she nudged them apart and knelt at Willow’s feet.

Willow folded her arms behind her head and watched Tara as she began to move her hands slowly up and down her calves, kneading the warm flesh. Tara lifted Willows once injured leg and placed it in her lap, stretching it out as she massaged the foot and Achilles tendon.

Tara kissed the instep and worked her way up to the ankle, where she could feel one of the pins. Delicately, she licked at the hard protrusion and warmed muscle under her tongue, gently sucking the skin into her mouth. She watched Willow from under her lashes to make sure she wasn’t hurting her. She rubbed her cheek up Willow’s shin to her knee, and swirled her tongue around the second pin she felt, working over to the third, nipping at the skin as she went across Willow’s kneecap.

Willow’s breathing had picked up and become shallow as she watched Tara work her way up her body slowly, finally sitting between Willow’s thighs. Willow’s eyes were dark and her pupils slightly dilated. Tara smirked, and slowly ran her hands down and back up the insides of Willow’s thighs, stopping just short of touching the red curls, but letting her thumbs skim close to the skin there.

Willow’s hips lifted involuntarily, to meet Tara’s hands and encourage her touch. “Tara, please don’t tease. I want you – I always want you – don’t make me beg,” Willow urged softly, as she moved her hands from behind her head, splaying her fingers into the sheets.

“Baby, I like it when you beg for me. I like it when you beg and tell me what you want, how you want me to please you,” Tara replied in a sultry voice. “I know you like it when I beg for you too, love.” Tara kept her hands moving gently up and down the silky skin of Willow’s thighs slowly as she spoke.

Willow growled, rotating her hips in front of Tara. “Touch me, slowly with your fingers.”
“And where would you like me to touch you?” Tara asked innocently.

“You know where, its right in front of you,” Willow growled again.

“Love, there are several lovely parts of you to touch that is right in front of me, you’ll have to be more specific, please,” Tara smiled and batted her eyelashes.

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?” Willow narrowed her eyes as she looked at Tara, who nodded and smiled sweetly.

Willow closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Fine, I want you to rub my clit in slow circles, and then enter my pussy with your fingers – happy now?”

“Extremely, and you will be too, I promise,” Tara said as she did exactly as Willow had asked. At Tara’s first touch of Willow’s clit, she moaned and raised her hips to push against Tara’s fingers. Tara smiled widely as she watched Willow start to move against her fingers.

She leaned over Willow to kiss her, entering with her fingers as she did so, moving slowly, building Willow up. Trailing kisses along Willow’s jaw, Tara nibbled on her earlobe and the tender skin just behind her ear making Willow moan. Tara kissed and licked her way down to Willow’s breasts, sucking on the skin – leaving a trail of dark marks along her way.

“You’re mine,” Tara growled as she rubbed her breasts against Willow’s. “Say it.”

“I’ve always been yours, only yours, forever yours,” Willow responded breathily.

“Tell me, Willow, what do you want? You’re so wet, Baby. Do you want my entire hand, do you want my tongue? Tell me,” Tara pressed Willow into answering her explicitly again.

Willow slowed her grinding against Tara’s fingers, trying to catch her breath. “In the second drawer on the right there’s something I want us to try,” she panted. “Actually I wanted to try it on you, but looks like you get to go first.”

Tara raised her head from the nipple she had been sucking on to look at Willow with a raised
eyebrow. Willow nodded. With one last suck on the already hardened nipple, Tara removed her fingers from Willow and slid off the bed.

Pointing to the drawer, she asked, “This one?”

Willow nodded enthusiastically. “In the box,” she said as she played with her nipples while she watched Tara open the box and look inside.

“What is it?” Tara asked curiously. “I mean I know ‘what’ it is, but what’s the rounded part for?”

“It’s a ‘Feeldoe’, and that part is for you or me, depending on who’s using it. The bulb-like part fits inside you, presses your ‘G-spot’ while you’re inside me, and the ridges rub your clit – that way we both can enjoy it,” Willow said as she watched Tara’s expression.

“So it’s a strap-on without the strap,” Tara said as she continued to gaze into the box, her head cocked to one side.

“Exactly, bring it and come here,” Willow said.

Tara took the red dildo out of the box and rolled back over to Willow, who took it and put it aside for the moment.

“We know I’m wet and ready, but what about you, Baby?” Willow asked as she pulled Tara on top of her and groaned. “I love the feel of you on top of me, have I ever told you that?”

Tara shook her head, holding herself up on her elbows, as she looked down at Willow, her eyes closed when Willow ran her fingertips down her spine. Grasping her bottom, Willow crushed their hips together.

“Hey, we don’t have to, if you don’t want to,” Willow whispered in her ear.

Tara rolled her hips, and kissed Willow hungrily, nipping along her jaw to breathe hotly against Willow’s ear, “We can try it, we might like it, there are lots of things to try that we might like, we have time.”
Tara rolled them both onto their sides as they kissed, and Willow’s free hand gravitated to her breast, massaging and tweaking the nipple. Sliding her thigh between Tara’s legs, she pressed it up for Tara to grind against. Willow shifted down enough to twirl her tongue around Tara’s nipple, and then gently sucked it into her mouth while keeping her thigh in place.

Grazing the tip of Tara’s nipple with her teeth, Tara rolled harder against Willow’s thigh, her own juices now started to coat the already oiled skin. Tara worked her hand between their pressed bodies to slip inside Willow and make slow, firm circles around her clit with her fingertips.

Willow pulled back from her nipple with a pop. “Gods, Baby! That feels so good…kiss me,” Willow demanded. Slipping her own hand down Tara’s smooth skin, Willow eased past Tara’s damp curls and eased a finger between them. She made small gentle circles around Tara’s clit, feeling her grunt into their kisses and push her hips forward.

Willow pulled back from the kiss. “Tell me what you want Tara – two can play this game,” Willow said as she moved her finger faster.

Tara closed her eyes and rolled their bodies again so she was on top of Willow. “Why don’t we give your toy a try?”

“Really?” Willow asked excitedly.

Tara nodded. “What’s it made of?”

“Silicone, they have a whole website, I’ll show it to you later, this one also vibrates too, so I thought that might entice you a little more, since I wasn’t really sure how you would feel about it,” Willow started to babble excitedly. “Me or you?”

Tara sat up. “Me.”

“My you are feeling butch,” Willow teased. When Tara sat up Willow rose with her, which put Tara’s nipples right at mouth level for Willow. She wrapped an arm around Tara’s waist, immediately latching her mouth onto one of Tara’s hardened nipples.
“Baby!” Tara yelped in surprise. Willow’s other hand made sure the other nipple was not left unattended, quickly moving to tease it in time with her mouth. Tara wound her fingers into Willow’s still damp hair holding her in place, throwing her head back to enjoy the sensations shooting from her nipples to her clit.

When Willow felt Tara’s breathing change from the stimulation, she pulled back and looked up. Tara looked down at her with deep indigo eyes shimmering with lust. Taking the toy in hand, Willow looked again up at Tara. She nodded and eased her thighs apart.

Willow slipped two fingers between her swelling lips, coating them with her wetness, taking the time to slowly enter Tara, giving her several strokes that made her moan. Tara bucked against Willow’s hand and grabbed her shoulders trying to ride her fingers.

Willow smiled mischievously up at Tara, withdrawing her fingers, as she coated the smaller end with Tara’s own juices. “Not yet, Baby. This is going to be cold, okay?”

Tara reached down and parted the lips of her sex so Willow could slide the rounded end inside of her. Gently, Willow began to ease it into Tara, who whimpered then groaned as it slipped in place to rest against her g-spot.

“Are you okay?” Willow asked.

“Uh huh, it was cold at first, but it feels kind of nice,” Tara said looking down at Willow’s hand still wrapped around the shaft. “It’s definitely warming quickly,” she groaned as Willow turned the vibrator on.

Tara sucked in a quick breath, and with a subtle motion of her hips, Tara pushed forward. Willow smiled up at her and loosened her hold enough to let it slide in her hand, tightening her hold slightly as Tara pulled back.

“What do you think, Baby?” Willow asked, watching Tara’s hips still moving.

“I think I’m gonna like this,” Tara’s voice had gotten husky. “So will you,” she said as she leaned forward to kiss Willow, pushing her back on the bed with her body.

Holding herself up on her hands, Tara pressed her hips down, the base of the shaft between them so
Willow could feel the vibration against both of their sensitive areas of skin. With a slow grind, she kissed Willow, slowly flicking her tongue in and out of her mouth, dipping deeper until Willow caught it between her teeth and started to suck on it.

Willow’s hands roamed over Tara’s shoulders, and down her back. She wrapped her legs around Tara’s hips to grind them harder together, forcing a moan from both tense bodies. Their breasts rubbed together and the vibrations ricocheted out jolts of pleasure. Willow scraped her nails up Tara’s back, and she arched into it.

“Will? Turn off the vibrator, Baby, it’s making me numb,” Tara asked.

“Well, that just won’t do,” Willow slipped her hand between them and with a press of the button it stopped buzzing and Tara sighed.

“I want to be in you, Will, drop one of your legs,” Tara ordered.

Rearing back on her knees once Willow had disentangled herself, Tara grabbed Willow’s hips and pulled her closer. Tara looked at the sight below her; Willow was flushed pink, her eyes dark and glittering in the half-light of the candles, her mouth swollen from their kisses.

“You look so sexy, like this Willow,” licking her lips, Tara’s voice was thick with desire. “Nipples hard, spread beneath me, your skin is flushed…show me how, Sweetie, I wasn’t exactly one for playing with stick before, I don’t want to hurt you,” Tara said.

Taking Tara’s hand in hers, Willow wrapped both their hands around the shaft before rubbing the tip between the swollen lips of her labia a few times coating the tip. As the tip rested at her entrance, Willow shuddered, her eyes flickering closed briefly in anticipation.

“Push forward slowly, Baby, as wet as I am you’ll slide right in,” Willow panted.

Tara eased her hips forward and slid easily into Willow and bottomed out. Willow grunted when the dildo hit her back wall, and arched her back. Nodding vigorously, she rested her hands on Tara’s shoulders and smiled. Tara started to pull out and felt the ridges rub her swollen clit while the bulb inside her pushed against her g-spot. With a sharp intake of breath, Tara shivered as the toy slid deep into place within them both.
“Oh, Baby, I think we’re gonna like this toy,” Tara said as she picked up her pace and lengthened her strokes.

“That’s it, Tara, harder, please,” Willow gasped.

Tara changed her position slightly; she got up on her knees and took one of Willow’s legs onto her shoulder. Gripping Willow’s hips as she pulled her lover close as she deepened her thrust. Sweat started to roll down her back as she moved faster.

“Oh god, Willow, this feels good! Tell me it feels as good for you as it does me,” Tara panted between thrusts as she came, shaking as a single drop of sweat rolled off of the tip of her nose to hit Willow’s stomach and roll downward.

Willow was tweaking her own nipples while Tara watched. “Baby, don’t stop, it’s so good, you’re so good. You’re so fucking hot, Tara. That’s it, Baby, fuck me harder, take me, Baby,” Willow whimpered.

Tara growled and really started to thrust harder into Willow, her grip on her hips turning her knuckles white. Willow was rolling her hips to meet Tara’s thrusts and holding her breasts, eyes squeezed closed as she moaned.

“Oh, Tara, oh god, fuck yes, Tara, Baby, Tara!” Willow came moaning and quivering beneath Tara.

Tara threw her head back and slowed her thrusting a little as Willow rode out her orgasm. Not done yet, Tara moved Willow’s leg, her hand resting on the trembling muscles of her thighs.

“Roll over, Willow, get on your hands and knees, I want you to really scream for me,” Tara commanded as she stopped and pulled out of Willow.

Without hesitation, Willow swung her leg around Tara so she could get up. She was barely into position before Tara entered her with a swift, sure thrust. She wrapped her arm around Willow’s waist and hauled her upright.

Willow reached behind her to grab hold of Tara’s hair as she rode her. Tara kissed and bit at her shoulders, one hand gliding over slick skin to Willow’s breasts, moving between them to twist and torment the nipples. The other hand stroked Willow’s clit in firm circles.
“Tara, you feel so good, I love how you love me, you make me feel so good, Baby. I’m coming, ohh yesss,” Willow heaved, trying to suck air into her lungs.

Tara bent them both forward, and Willow hung her head low. Tara held on to one of her shoulders, licking down her salty back, keeping her thrusts even. She urged Willow down further so her ass was in the air; grasping Willow’s hips again she picked up the pace.

“Willow, there’s nothing better than loving you, fucking you, making love with you, I love it all. Making you whimper and scream, there’s nothing better I swear to you.” Tara grunted, speeding up. “Willow, I’m gonna come again.”

Her thrust sped up again and Willow got up on her arms, to push hard back into her. The air was filled with moans and grunts as Tara came.

“Tara, just a little more, oh my god, don’t stop, don’t stop,” Willow pleaded. In a last rush, holding on to Willow’s hips, Tara pushed into her hard and fast. “That’s it, Baby, oh, oh yes! TARA!” Willow screamed as Tara collapsed against her back and they both came one more time.

They flopped onto their sides together, the toy still buried deep inside Willow as they both shook and gasped for air. Tara wrapped her arm around Willow’s waist and just held her as they recovered; their bodies coated in sweat, jasmine, lavender and the combined musk of their lovemaking.

“Well, damn,” Tara said.

“Uh huh,” was all Willow could manage.

“Good pick, Baby,” Tara panted lightly as she carefully pulled out of Willow. She then eased the toy out of herself and laid it on the nightstand.

“Uh huh.”

Tara chuckled and wrapped herself around Willow. She used her foot to pull the sheets close enough to grab. Willow managed to roll her well-sated body to face Tara, and kissed her deeply, holding her tightly.
“You’re the best, Baby,” Willow muttered.

Tara smiled like the cat that ate the canary. “Uh huh.”

TBC…
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T


Angst Rating: Scale of 1-10 this is about a 5.5.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BTVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: As ever, is always welcome.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my betas: Cyteach, Ariel, & Azirahael. I don’t think they understand how much their insights & suggestions help to keep my process flowing as it should, so I say thank you for joining me on this little excursion. Music for this chapter - Phantogram “Nightlife” EP, Coldplay “Mylo Xyloto”, St. Vincent “Strange Mercy”, Florence and The Machine “Ceremonials” deluxe edition (highly recommend, btw) and Jane’s Addiction “The Great Escape Artist”.

Regrets collect like old friends
Here to relive your darkest moments
I can see no way, I can see no way
Tara awoke several hours later with a start, she had been dreaming, and as the gossamer threads began to slip away, she could only remember the howls of rage, fear and the taste of her own blood in her mouth. She tried to lie still while she calmed her racing heart, staring at the ceiling and trembling.

Willow stirred next to her, sensing Tara’s unease, and pulled her close in a sleepy embrace. “Baby, what is it?”

Curling into the safety of Willow’s arms, Tara nuzzled her neck and whispered into her skin, “A dream, that’s all, Love, just a dream.” As she spoke she realized she had bitten her tongue while she slept.

Willow pulled back, muttering a few quick words; a small, dim flame appeared over her head allowing her to look at Tara closely. The soft light seemed to help Tara calm down more, while Willow stroked her hair, but as she did so, she noticed blood in the corner of Tara’s mouth.

“Baby, did you hurt yourself? There’s blood on your mouth,” she said and gently wiped at the corner of Tara’s mouth.

“I bit my tongue, that’s all, I’m okay,” Tara said tightening her hold on Willow.

“Do you want to tell me what it was about?”

Tara looked up at Willow and replied quietly, “I don’t really remember now, I just remember being afraid mostly.”

Kissing her forehead, Willow looked down at Tara in the flickering light that danced gently around them, casting shadows over them both. “Baby, I think our dreams are only just beginning. You’ve always had them, but I think it’s something we need to prepare ourselves for as much as we can. I haven’t had a dream for a few weeks, but they don’t exactly work on a schedule, you know?”
Tara nodded and kissed Willow’s chest. “Maybe we should look into wards. The kind we can place around our room when we get back to Sunnydale, maybe the house too.”

“I think that’s a good idea, Baby. I don’t think there is going to be any such thing as over prepared. Maybe we need to actually look at the book we gave to Giles; it might be able to tell us some things, give us a place to start even.” Willow started to move her hand lightly up and down Tara’s back as she spoke.

“Are you hungry, Love?” Tara asked.

“Famished,” Willow said with a grin. “But what about your tongue, do you really want to eat?”

Tara smiled ruefully. “I’m starving too, and I want to brush my teeth and rinse my mouth out. Maybe if we eat something soft, and not too spicy, I’ll be okay – I really want this taste out of my mouth.”

“What my Baby wants, she gets. We can make sandwiches, we could even do PB and J’s, that’s super soft. Go light on the jelly, or we could even do peanut butter and honey. Honey is a natural antibacterial, so it might even help a little.”

Willow started to babble on softly about the merits of honey when Tara began to giggle and hugged her tightly again. Peppering her chest and neck with kisses, Tara inched her way up to look Willow deeply in the eyes.

“Willow, I Love you so much.”

Willow’s features softened at the words, and she stroked Tara’s cheek with her knuckles and traced her thumb over the delicate skin of Tara’s lips. “Just as much as I Love you,” she replied sweetly.

Willow scooted down the bed just a little so she could rest her head over Tara’s heart and listen to the steady rhythm against her ear, while Tara rested her hand over Willow’s heart. Both could feel the beats that were as sure as the tides, and just as soothing to their souls. Fingertips skimmed gently over warm skin, as they lay in each other’s arms, simply basking in the nearness of the other.

Eventually, Tara stirred again, and Willow raised her head to look at her. “Time to get up, Baby?”
“I think so, Sweet Love. My mouth tastes truly wretched,” Tara said making a face.

“Okay, Sweetheart, go brush your teeth, and I’ll get us some clothes and we can go to the kitchens for something to eat,” Willow murmured before she nuzzled Tara’s neck, pressing kisses to the warm flesh beneath her lips.

“Mmm… keep doing that, and I might just forget about going for food,” Tara purred as she tilted her head back to give Willow better access to her throat.

“Taraskin is just so darn tasty, how can I help myself?” With a throaty chuckle and a quick lick of Tara’s neck, Willow teased. “But you’re right – out with you before I become more inclined to start licking other parts of you, and we never make it any further.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Tara replied cheekily.

“Baby, it’s NEVER a bad thing, believe me, I can think of few things I’d rather do, but we have to realistic. We wouldn’t survive on diets of Willow and Tara for very long, despite how pleasurable it might be to try,” Willow chuckled. “So again, I say off with you, oh temptress of mine – just hurry back.” Willow kissed Tara tenderly and then rolled gently away to get out of bed.

“Yes, darling,” Tara replied trailing a finger down the exposed skin of Willow’s back, and with a chuckle of her own as she left the bed.

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The girls were sitting chatting quietly at the large table in the kitchen, where they had shared many meals in private since Tara had arrived when Giles strolled in.

“Good evening, Willow, Tara, I trust I find you both well this evening?” he asked pleasantly.

They smiled and nodded at him as he went to the stove, he rinsed out the kettle before filling it to make a pot of tea. Once he had everything in order, he turned to face them.

“I was hoping to have a word with you, if I may. It doesn’t have to be right this moment, but perhaps
tomorrow morning? Would say, ten-thirty tomorrow be acceptable to you both?” Giles inquired.

Willow and Tara looked at each other; Willow shrugged and Tara nodded.

“Excellent, I’d like to discuss the book with you, as well as the other witch that was on the Council’s list. Lady Rowan and I have met with her, and the young lady would be amenable to joining your coven and going back to Sunnydale. I hope you don’t mind that I took the liberty?” Giles said somewhat apologetically.

Willow shook her head and sniggered. “Giles, you knew we would do this, didn’t you? Or had a good idea we would, at least, go back to Sunnydale.”

Giles took out a handkerchief and cleaned his glasses. “Well, I could hope, but I wanted to be prepared, and to prepare her should she be contacted by The Watcher’s Council. At the very least, to let her know what they’re truly like before they make a move, and make themselves known to her.”

Willow nodded, and her face became serious.

“Just who is this woman? I mean it is a ‘she’, you’ve just said as much,” Tara asked a little pointedly.

“Yes, it is a she, her name is Claudia Harrison. Her mother was quite an accomplished green witch, it seems, and while it doesn’t appear that Claudia has practiced, she has quite some talent of her own. I think someone that can grow spell ingredients in a matter of days will be of great use to you,” Giles finished just as the kettle began to whistle.

Both girls sat with the jaws agape. Looking at each other before looking back at Giles, Tara was the first to recover. “Giles, tell me this is a joke.”

Giles’ brow creased in confusion, as he watched the curious reactions from Willow and Tara. “Tara, my dear, I’m quite serious. She’s really quite good, we went out into the greenhouse and over the course of the hour, she revived two dying saplings and convinced several other plants to flower. She’s a bit rough around the edges I’ll admit, but she has the ability,” Giles countered seriously.

“Lovely,” Willow muttered as she stuffed the last of her sandwich in her mouth. Then with a hasty shove of the plate away from her, she chewed quickly and stormed out.
Giles stared after Willow, and then looked to Tara for an explanation. Tara quickly finished her sandwich in two bites, and put their plates in the dishwasher.

“Not now, Giles. I’ll explain in the morning. Good night,” Tara said as she left abruptly.

Giles turned and poured himself a cup of tea, staring into its depths. With a snort, he muttered, “I thought they would be happier about this.” He took his cup and the pot of tea, and sat at the empty table, sipping at the hot brew. Rubbing his eyes and shaking his head, Giles rested his chin in his hand as he stared at the doorway Tara had rushed out of just moments before.

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Willow strode down the hall trying to calm herself and attempting to stop this new information ruffling her any more than it already had. Tara rushed after her and rounded the corner at one end of the hall as Willow turned the corner at the other end.

“Will!” she called out. “Willow, would you wait a minute, please?”

Willow sighed and stopped in her tracks. Turning to wait for Tara, Willow leaned against the wall, closing her eyes and breathing deeply.

Tara skidded around the corner so quickly she almost knocked Willow over. Now with Willow wrapped in her arms, and pinned against the wall they were using to keep themselves upright, Tara scanned Willow’s features trying to discern her mood.

“Willow, what was that all about? Please tell me you’re not still jealous of her?” Tara implored.

“Tara, she keeps turning up like a bad penny! I don’t know, I mean maybe I am still a little jealous, but now-now I’m supposed to be happy about taking her to Sunnydale with us? I mean, she’s your ‘ex’ for cryin’ out loud! How would you feel if we had to take Oz back to Sunnydale with us?” Willow saw the look on Tara’s face, something that looked faintly like fear, and then jealousy flashed across her features. “Okay, bad example – but what I saw on your face isn’t just being scared of him, so tell me I’m wrong!”
Tara let Willow go and simply took her hand. They walked back to their rooms in silence. Tara led Willow back into the bedroom, which still smelled faintly of sex, and Tara yanked the sheet from the bed and held it close to Willow’s face.

“What do you smell on this sheet Willow? It’s us – me and you, our Lovemaking. Just a few hours ago I told you there’s nothing better than loving and being Loved by you, and I meant it. I’m only going to say this once, and then never again, so hear me loud and clear. I Love you, and I have absolutely no interest in Claude or anyone else, whatsoever,” Tara snapped the sheet loose from the bed and whipped it around Willow pulling her close so they were face to face, wrapped in the scent of their Lovemaking, and making it so Willow couldn’t move away from her. “You’re mine, and don’t you ever forget it. She could dance naked all day, every day and it would still be you I want. You’re mine, just like I’m yours – do you hear me?” Tara kissed Willow ravenously, the force making Willow respond.

Willow tangled her fingers in Tara’s short soft locks and returned the fervor of her kisses. They broke apart, lips swollen from the crush of their kisses, panting and aroused all over again.

“Loud and clear,” Willow said, her eyes dilated as she stared at Tara’s mouth. “But I still don’t have to like it,” she said nuzzling Tara’s neck, making her way up to suck gently on the fleshy lobe of Tara’s ear.

“Agreed, but if she can somehow help us, then we need her. Who knows Willow, you might even like her,” Tara teased, turning her head towards Willow’s tantalizing mouth.

Willow pulled back to look at Tara. “Now that’s just crazy talk,” Willow pouted, pushing out her lower lip dangerously.

Tara sucked the lip between her own, biting down on it gently, then growled, “Mmmhmm, come with me, we have another bed to muss, my vixen,” she said giving some slack to the sheet around Willow, walking them backwards through the adjoining door and into her rooms.

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10 am came quickly for Willow and Tara after a heady night filled with Lovemaking. Once again, they sat at the table in the kitchen finishing breakfast, Willow sitting in Tara’s lap while whispering to one another and feeding each other their last bits of toast. Willow was sipping at Tara’s orange juice, and Tara sipping at Willow’s coffee, when Dana came in, empty coffee cup in hand.
Rolling her eyes at the abject sweetness before her, she began to grumble good-naturedly. “Can’t you two give it a rest already? My gods, it’s a good thing I’m not diabetic because the two of you would have put me in a coma weeks ago!”

The girls giggled, and Willow put her arm around Tara’s shoulder as she looked at Dana. “Aww, c’mon Dana, what would you rather have? Me ‘Pre-Tara’ or now? Be honest,” Willow goaded Dana, knowing the game they were playing.

Tara laughed outright. “Yes, Dana, be honest since you yourself, told me just what a barrel of fun Willow wasn’t.”

“Hey!” Willow squeaked.

“Tara, you got me there; Willow could suck the pity right out of the party, let me tell you. True talent there,” Dana teased.

“I thought I told you two no ganging up on me!” Willow tried to pull away from Tara, who had wrapped her arms around her waist. “You get no more smoochies, missy.”

“But, Baby,” Tara began to whine.

Dana snorted loudly trying not to laugh. “I’m soo sure, Willow! I bet you twenty dollars you can’t go one hour without kissing Tara.”

Tara looked at Dana like she had just kicked her kitten. “Now, why would she want to do that?”

Dana laughed so hard she spit coffee across the counter. Once Dana had herself under control, she wiped up the counter and refilled her mug. “I don’t know which one of you is more lovesick; I’ve seen teenagers that aren’t as bad as you two,” Dana said shaking her head.

Willow relaxed back into Tara and rested her arms around her shoulders to play with her hair. Tara looked at Dana and beamed. “No, we’re just happy, there’s nothing wrong with being in Love and happiness, is there?” She looked at Willow and they rubbed noses, smiling goofily at one another.
Dana groaned, and coughed loudly to get their attention. “Well ladies, I did come with an ulterior motive, as much as I love teasing the two of you – and believe me, it does make my day sometimes – Giles asked me to come find you and let you know he is with Lady Rowan and to for us to meet in her office.”

Without thinking about it, Willow dropped a kiss on Tara’s lips before standing up. “Then off we go, duty calls, and calls, and calls.”

“See, I told you!” Dana hopped from foot to foot, pointing at the pair laughing.

Tara stood up and stuck out her tongue like a child. “Don’t push it, Sparky, we’re still training later this afternoon,” She warned.

“Fine, fine! You don’t play fair,” Dana said throwing her hands in the air and scowling, following slowly behind the pair.

The three walked and chatted amiably, and when they approached the door to Lady Rowan’s office, Tara knocked. Giles opened the door, and as they entered, they could see that the table in the corner of Rowan’s office now had chairs around it and the book was sitting in the middle of the table looking much like it did the day they got it from Amy’s henchman.

Rowan was already seated at one of the chairs and smiled when they came in.

“Come in, Sisters. Have a seat, I trust you slept well?” She asked looking at Willow and Tara, who, as usual, were holding hands.

Blushing, they both replied, “Yes, My Lady.”

“Excellent! Well, Rupert, I believe this is really your meeting, so I’ll let you do the talking,” Rowan smiled at Giles.

As Willow and Tara sat, Willow commented, “Gee, Giles, this feels sort of like a Scooby meeting, just without most of the Scoobies.”
Giles cocked his head to one side. “Yes, Willow, I suppose you’re right. We are a few, uh, ‘Scoobies’ short, aren’t we?”

“Oh, yes, let’s get started, shall we?” Giles said as he snapped into research mode. “Well, to be quite honest, we don’t know anything more about the book, because, you see, we can’t open it. Rowan has tested a number of theories and it doesn’t appear to be cursed, or that a spell is keeping it closed. It simply won’t open.”

Willow and Tara looked at each other before looking around the table. Dana looked confused, and Rowan had her usual serene, knowing expression.

“So if you can’t open it, then how was Amy going to open it?” Willow asked.

“You said it’s not bound by a curse or a spell, so then it must only open for the right witch. So the book is of no use to us? Will and I did all of that for nothing?” Tara shot back.

“No, Tara, I don’t think for nothing. I think for you,” Rowan said. “Sorry, Rupert.”

“That’s quite alright, what Rowan means, is that she and I have come to the conclusion that, although Amy set the book’s delivery in motion, it was never for her and would have never worked with her. Tell me, girls, what do you feel from the book?” Giles asked.

The girls looked at one another again, and Willow was first to speak, “It’s sort of a hum; we talked about it on the ride back here, didn’t we, Baby?”

“It’s low and constant, enough to raise the hair on your arms, but not entirely uncomfortable, like background noise,” Tara said.

Giles and Rowan looked at one another, and Rowan nodded at Giles. “Girls, would you humor me, and would one of you try to open the book for us?”

Tara and Willow reached for the book together, pulling it towards them to rest between them on the table. They both stared at the worn leather of the cover that if it had at one time had anything embossed on it, had long ago faded away. With one last glance shared between them, Tara tried to
Everyone seemed to be holding their breath and watched as the book opened easily in front of Willow and Tara. Giles and Rowan looked at one another. Giles reached over and closed the book with one finger.

“Willow, would you humor me and try to open the book?” he asked.

With a nod and a quick glance at Tara, Willow picked up the book, and holding each side, pulled the cover apart, opening it somewhere in the middle. Giles and Rowan looked at each other again, and Rowan smiled.

Willow handed the book to Giles; he looked at the page and shook his head, passing the book off to Rowan. Rowan turned a few pages, examining them, and then passed the book to Dana. Dana glanced at the two pages facing her and shook her head. Dana handed the book back to Willow, who glanced at the page and the text on it, setting the book between Tara and herself.

“Well, Giles what is it?” Willow asked.

Giles looked at Rowan before he removed his glasses and sucked on one of the arms for a moment. “Rowan, would you tell us all what you saw when you looked at the book?”

“The pages I looked at were completely blank,” Rowan said softly as she looked around the group.

Giles nodded, “They were for me as well, nothing more than empty parchment.”

Tara and Willow looked at one another again. They both looked down at the book. Tara sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest, as her face darkened with concern. Willow opened her mouth, and then snapped it shut and looked at the book again.

“Giles, it’s plain as day, I can see the text here. Tara, Baby, what do you see?” Willow asked as her voice rose an octave.

“I can see the text, too, Love. What language do you see it in?” Tara asked. “What dead language
would you consider to be your strongest suit?"

“Well, I’m good at Sumerian but better at Latin. What do you see?” Willow asked her voice now getting small as she started to get worried.

Tara leaned forward again to look at the text and flipped a few pages. “I see some Irish Gaelic and some Latin too. Will, read this paragraph here and tell us what you see and in what language,” Tara urged.

“O-okay,” Willow looked hesitantly at Tara, then at the spot marked by her finger. “It – it’s part of a joining spell, but for a lot of people – so they unite power. It’s in Latin, what do you see?”

“I see a spell that joins power among a group of warriors for battle, it’s in Latin,” Tara said sitting back in the chair, looking at Rowan and Giles.

“Giles, what does this mean?” Willow asked.

Before Giles could answer, Tara cut him off. “I told you Willow, the book is ours, and we’re responsible for it now.”

Pointing his glasses at her, Giles asked in surprise, “So you knew when you gave it to me?”

Tara shook her head and looked evenly at Giles. “We didn’t know for sure, but we did talk about it on the way back here. I just got this feeling, Giles. I had no idea it wouldn’t open for you, much less appear to be blank. My mother told me about books like this when I was a child. Books written by witches or covens of great strength, or in this case, extracted from witches, if what you told us about its origin is true. Mama told me that throughout history they would only surface when they were needed and only work for certain predestined witches; it’s some sort of built-in safety measure, my mother thought they were just myth, and so did I.”

“Well my dears, it would appear that the myth it isn’t, and to my knowledge, these types of books only present themselves to witches of great power or during unusual times of need. So, it would seem, that you two are destined to be the witches to wield this book in this time of need,” Rowan intoned. “Its arrival seems to be incredibly fortuitous since you’ll both be initiated and returning to Sunnydale.”
“Yes, we’ll be going back along with the young lady you met last week, Rowan,” Giles remarked. “The girls have agreed – to at least for whatever they are needed for in Sunnydale – to form a coven.”

“Miss Adams will be a wonderful addition, then,” Rowan said with a smile. “Girls, you are as ready as I can possibly make you. You have such greatness between you, and I have no doubts in either of you.”

“Thank you, My Lady,” Willow acknowledged.

“My Lady, your faith in us is reassuring, honestly, but that doesn’t make me any less apprehensive about what we’ll be facing. We have no idea what we’re going up against,” Tara said quietly.

Dana, who had watched everything in silence, finally spoke, “My Lady, I plan to accompany them. I know I hadn’t mentioned this before, but I feel it’s – my duty shall we say – to be a part of whatever this will be.”

Everyone looked at Dana in surprise. Rowan simply nodded her acceptance as she reached out for Dana’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Of course you will, Sister.”

“Thank you, Dana, it means a lot to me – to us – that you want to come, but are you sure you know what you’re getting into?” Tara asked.

With a wry smile, Dana looked at both Willow and Tara. “Someone’s got to keep an eye on you two. Making kissy face all the time won’t get anything done.”

Willow smiled reluctantly, taking Tara’s hand, she snarked right back at Dana. “Don’t make me ‘sic’ her on you, Sparky; she’s already threatened to short you out once today,” Tara smirked and looked at Dana with an arched eyebrow.

“Well, then that’s settled,” said Giles. “More about, Miss Adams then; I’ve already mentioned to you both that she’s a hereditary green witch. Better than she gives herself credit for, I might add. Since you plan to accompany us, Dana, perhaps you can work with her on the other aspects of the craft she may not have been privy to, due to her lack of formal training?”

Dana nodded, while Willow scowled. Giles seemed to ignore Willow’s look as he continued to talk.
“She has some herbs she plans to bring with her, so I thought she and I might drive back to Sunnydale to accommodate whatever it is she would like to bring with her. She says she has quite the selection of herbs, so I thought we could go through them before we left and bring the best with us,” Giles continued excitedly. “You three can fly back if you like, or join us.”

Willow snorted disgustedly, and by now had slouched in her seat with arms crossed, trying unsuccessfully not to look sullen.

“Willow, dear, whatever is the matter?” Giles asked.

“We sort of…” Willow said in a low voice. “I know Claude,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Will,” Tara admonished. With a loud sigh, she continued, “Yes, we both know Claude – she would be the one Dana and Willow picked up coming back in from town before I arrived,” Tara admitted. “I also knew her, and her mother as a teenager, her mother and mine were friends and practiced together some…and we dated briefly before I left for Sunnydale.”

Dana started to guffaw. “Wait – she’s the one that just showed up that day and offered you the cabin when we gave her the ride, right? So she’s Tara’s ex and she hit on you, Will? Oh, that’s just good stuff, guys,” Dana continued to laugh.

Willow shot Dana a thoroughly irritated look. “I think I just might join you both for training this afternoon, Sparky.” Hearing this Dana sobered up quickly, knowing what a handful the pair would be after all the teasing, regardless of how good-natured it was.

Rowan covered her mouth with her hand as she chuckled at the situation, coughing lightly before she looked seriously at the girls. “This won’t be an issue, will it girls?” she asked gently.

“No, My Lady,” they both replied.

“She’s harmless really, and we’ve only seen her twice, one being the day she was here to meet with Giles. She hasn’t pushed anything – she wouldn’t. She really is a nice girl,” Tara said in Claude’s defense, even though Willow shot her a look she chose to ignore.
Removing his glasses quickly to clean them vigorously, Giles muttered, “Oh, dear Lord.”

TBC…
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst Rating: PG-13 and you might need a hanky.

Setting: The Grove - Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: If you have a moment and the inclination, drop a line.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I’d like to thank my betas for this chapter Julie aka Ariel and Richard aka Azirahael. Part of this chapter would not have come out as well without a conversation I had with Julie, I owe you for that Julie, thank you so much! This may be another of the lighter chapters, especially as they will get fewer and farther between, and perhaps it’s an odd conversation I have our girls have, but for some reason felt possessed to broach the subject. Then again maybe I was just a sappy hormonal, PMS-ing mess – and maybe that’s TMI. Music this chapter: Noel Gallagher “Noel Gallagher’s High Flying Birds”, Nero “Welcome Reality” (Deluxe Edition), and Sara Bareilles “Kaleidoscope Heart”.

In the morning it comes, heaven sent a hurricane
Not a trace of the sun but I don't even run from rain
Beating out of my chest, my heart is holding on to you
From the moment I knew
From the moment I knew

You are the air in my breath filling up my Love soaked lungs
Such a beautiful mess intertwined and overrun
Nothing better than this, oh, and then the storm can come
You feel just like the sun
Just like the sun

And if you say we'll be alright
I'm gonna trust you, babe
I'm gonna look in your eyes
And if you say we'll be alright
I'll follow you into the light

Never mind what I knew, nothing seems to matter now
Ooh, who I was without you, I can do without
No one knows where it ends, how it may come tumbling down
But I'm here with you now
I'm with you now

And if you say we'll be alright
I'm gonna trust you, babe
I'm gonna look in your eyes
And if you say we'll be alright
I'll follow you into the light

Let the world come rush in
Come down hard, come crushing
All I need is right here beside me
I'm not enough, I swear it
But take my Love and wear it over your shoulders

And if you say we'll be alright
I'm gonna trust you, babe
I'm gonna look in your eyes
And if you say we'll be alright
I'll follow you into the light

A worse for wear Dana walked into the kitchen followed by a smug looking Willow and Tara. She headed for one of the large refrigerators and pulled out several bottles of water, immediately guzzling one down.
“You guys suck, let me just mention that one more time,” she said between gulps. “I think I have frostbite on the toes of my left foot, and I know I have a large blister on my ass from you Willow,” she groused, pulling at the singed and blackened hole in the seat of her jeans and giving the pair a thoroughly irritated glare.

Willow reached for one of the bottles only to have Dana swat her hand away, and pull the others in close. “Get your own.”

Tara started to laugh. “Hey, you gave as good as you got, and you know it, Sparky. This shirt is ruined and that’s all your doing.” She said pointing to the missing sleeve of one arm.

Snickering slightly, Willow added, “We just came out of it a little better this time.”

Opening her third bottle of water and drinking more slowly now, Dana shot right back, “I don’t want to hear it. May the Goddess help anything that comes up against the likes of you two even on a good day!”

Quickly putting the two already empty bottles in the recycling, she grabbed the fourth bottle and stomped out of the kitchen followed by the sounds of laughter.

Willow opened the door and bent over to peer into the refrigerator, the squealed when she felt a finger stroke the skin of one of her butt cheeks. “Hey!” She turned around to find Tara right behind
Tara laughed wickedly. “It appears you have a hole in your jeans too,” she said wrapping her arms around Willow. “And in a very interesting spot, will you bend over some more for me?” She asked and let one of her hands wander back down to play with the hole.

Giggling, Willow rubbed her hands on Tara’s upper arms and raised an eyebrow. “You only want me for my body; I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to figure you out.”

Leaning in to kiss her neck, Tara purred, “Baby, it’s not just your body I’m after,” she massaged Willow’s bottom, playing with the hole in her jeans. “But it certainly doesn’t hurt that you’re in such a delightful little package.”

Willow threw her head back and laughed. “You’re awful, missy…I like it!” she said smiling at Tara.

Tara smiled back before she stole a kiss. “Mmm, are you hungry? Looks like H & H doesn’t apply just to Slayers. I’m starving,” Tara leered at Willow.

“How do you know about Hungry & Horney?” Willow asked surprised.
“Willow, please, I lived with Buffy for almost two years, Xander has a bad habit of putting his foot in his big mouth, Dawn eggs Xander on to put that foot in his big mouth, and Anya is my best friend.” Tara pulled back to look at Willow. “Honey, I may be nice, but I’m not naïve or innocent,” Tara leered at Willow again and let her hands wander over her back and bottom. “You should know that by now, Sweetie.”

Willow’s breath caught as Tara’s wandering hands were working a magic all their own. “Baby… uh…I just didn’t think that phrase would have come up, it’s kind of a ‘Faith’ thing…” Willow pressed herself into Tara, staring at her mouth, and started to rub herself lightly against her. “I didn’t mean to imply that you’re naïve and I do know you’re not innocent…” Willow lunged forward and caught Tara in a passionate kiss.

They pulled apart with a pop at the sound of a discreet cough, to find Marisol stand in the doorway blushing lightly.

“You two may want to, uh, take it to your rooms,” she said good-naturedly.

“Sorry, Marisol, we got a little carried away,” Willow said as both she and Tara blushed. “We were just going to make something to eat. Are you hungry?” she said as she moved away from Tara.
“How’s Bunny?” Tara asked trying to steer them away from having been caught making out by some unsuspecting coven member – again – and not the first time by Marisol.

“I just came for a drink, and he’s good. Funny you should ask about him, he asked about both of you, but you specifically, Tara. He said he hadn’t seen the two of you in a week or so, and quote ‘wants to know where his bitches are’ unquote,” she had made the little quotation signs with her fingers before she paused to laugh for a moment.

Tara nodded and smiled brightly. “Oh, he’s whining again, it’s not like we haven’t seen him or anything. I guess we should go see him before we leave. Do you think we could take a trip into the city tomorrow, Will? He’s being such a drama queen.”

Marisol laughed and nodded. “Of course he is, but I wouldn’t trade my Baby brother for anything.”

“Although sometimes he knows exactly what to say when you need to hear it most; that’s a very wonderful gift to have,” Tara remarked with a wistful smile.

Willow cocked her head to one side as she looked over her shoulder at Tara, her expression questioning. Tara just smiled at Willow, and she nodded, going back to pulling out sandwich stuffs.

Marisol was mixing tea and lemonade together in a glass, nodding as she replied, “He always has,
even when we were kids,” with a chuckle and a shake of her head she said, “Hey! He said he is going to come by tomorrow and go riding with me. You’re welcome to join us again. I’m beginning to think he comes out here more to see you two than me.”

“That would be great. What time?” Tara asked.

“He’s coming early while it’s still cool, he’s going to be here at seven,” snickering a little Marisol continued. “Would that be too early for you?”

Blushing to the tips of her ears, Tara answered, “No, I think I can make it.”

“Good, I’ll let Bunny know tonight, and we’ll see you in the morning. Will you be coming too, Willow?” Marisol asked.

Willow snorted as she pushed a stuffed sandwich in front of Tara. “Not likely. They’re all with the big and the bitey…um, that would most definitely be a ‘no’.”

Marisol just looked at Willow for a moment. “Okay then. Goodnight, girls.” And with that, she left the kitchen.
Tara was scarfing up her sandwich, and giggling at Willow as she ate. She paused between mouthfuls, “I could teach you to ride, Sweetie. Did I promise to once before, remember? This could be our chance.”

Willow eyed Tara suspiciously. “How about I just make you breakfast when you get back, and you go play with the big, bitey ponies? That sounds a lot better to me, safer, I like that plan a lot. Don’t you, Baby? You like my hands, and they’re attached to my arms, so you know, gotta have those, right?”

Tara laughed and shook her head. “This is your one get out of jail free card, okay? We’ll start out slowly, but it can wait if you promise me.”

Willow smiled brightly and kissed her cheek. “I promise, have I told you I Love you lately?”

Tara cocked an eyebrow. “That won’t get you out of your promise Willow, but no you haven’t. I Love you too, Sweetie.” She winked at Willow and continued to eat.

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Several hours later, lying naked and sweaty in each other’s arms with satisfied grins plastered on their faces, Willow pulled back and looked deeply into Tara’s eyes. She looked like she might say something, then changed her mind and shifted back into place.

“Sweetie, what were you about to say?” Tara asked.

“Nothing, it’s nothing, Baby,” Willow said.

“Willow, you know I Love the way your mind works, and I can tell there’s something you want to ask, so ask.”

Willow sighed, “It’s silly, really.”

“If it’s silly then share it with me,” Tara said propping herself up on one arm to look up at Willow.

“Baby, do you think we have too much sex?” Willow asked sincerely.
Tara chuckled, but then saw Willow was serious. “You ask me this after we just had sex?”

Willow shrugged sheepishly. “Well, I don’t really have anything to compare it to, I mean my only other relationship it wasn’t as... *consuming* as it is with you. It’s like I crave you, and sometimes if I could just sink right into your bones I would be only too happy to do it.”

Willow shifted so she could sit up and face Tara. With a gentle stroke of her cheek, she continued, “I guess I’m afraid you’ll think that it’s all that it is, just sex.”

Tara sat up, and took Willow’s hand in hers, entwining their fingers. “Will, where is this coming from?”

Willow shrugged again and wouldn’t look at her. “I dunno, it just seems like we’re always being ‘caught’ fooling around, and I know we’re young and kinda supposed to be a little sex obsessed, but it’s not just sex to me…” Willow trailed off and looked away.

Cocking her head to one side, Tara studied Willow, choosing her words carefully. “To answer your question, no, I don’t think we do. I think we have just the right amount for us. I think every relationship is different; I don’t have a lot of experience either Will, but I kind of think there are different... *categories* of sex, you know?”
Willow shook her head as she finally looked at Tara again. They sat with the sheet swaddled around their hips, naked from the waist up.

“I think we’re lucky, Will, we have them all. Sometimes we’re slow, sweet, and tender and it nurtures our relationship, sometimes we’re passionate, soul-shaking and deep – it bonds us, and other times it's hot, sexy, and raunchy, just plain... Fucking. But it’s always Lovemaking; I’m always, always making Love to you. No matter how we need it to be right at that moment. It’s never casual or careless. That’s where I think we’re lucky, we have them all, we can bring all those aspects together, we can use toys or play games and experiment, or not. It can be just about getting each other off, or it can be a way that we get closer to one another. Do I make more sense now?”

Willow smiled shyly, “Yeah, you do, my beautiful girl. I guess… I guess I’m afraid that sometimes the intensity of it – my intensity – would be overwhelming for you.”

Tara smiled her easy lopsided grin, eyes sparkling. “Will, I get what you mean about craving you. Sometimes I just need to have my hands all over you and it’s like an imperative – like breathing – so sometimes I think we do melt into each other a little bit.”

Willow nodded. “It’s like I left part of me with you and took part of you with me… a happy little exchange… or a little gift for each other. So it doesn’t bother you?”

“Does what bother me?”
“That we seem to be caught in pda’s – a lot?”

Tara fell into a fit of giggles, and after she got herself under control she looked at Willow, who simply looked confused.

Arching an eyebrow and exhaling, Tara answered matter of factly, “You know, Will, at one point it would have, even not so long ago, and I would have been more embarrassed about it. But I Love you, and I know everyone here at the Grove is very accepting of us, the Scoobies Love us and we may – no, undoubtedly will at some point – run into those that aren’t as accepting, but I’m not going to let that make me hide. I’ve done enough hiding, I spent almost twenty years hiding, and I think that’s plenty long enough. Love is Love, in all its many joyful forms, and I want to be joyful with you.” She smiled at Willow and kissed the palm of one of the hands she was holding.

“Will, you have to remember we’re also still kind of in our ‘honeymoon phase’, granted for the third time, but we have…unusual circumstances. Sweetie, I Love you, I Love what we do together in bed or out. I want us to be affectionate with each other – I want that for us always.”

Willow was quiet for a moment, as her mind began to race she pulled her hands back, twisting the sheet in her fingers. “Tara, I didn’t have a lot of physical affection growing up. My parents were gone more often than not, and neither have ever been very ‘touchy’ people. I guess I’m afraid of being too much or needing you too much.” Willow closed her eyes and sighed deeply. “I don’t want to be that kind of girlfriend. I know we’re just starting again, but I want to do it right this time, I want this to be the last time because it’s forever.” She shrugged helplessly and dropping her head to stare at her hands.
“Willow, Sweetie,” Tara put a finger under Willow’s chin. “Let’s just agree now that you didn’t get enough touching, and I got the wrong kind, okay? We can’t fix that, we can’t make up for – not really – and while I don’t see myself ever getting tired of the level of affection we share, I can promise to be honest with you. As long as we’re forthright with what we’re feeling, keep talking and being open with one another, we’ll be alright.”

“Baby, do you remember when I told you about my nightmares?” Willow murmured, and Tara nodded.

Willow licked her lips nervously, the sparkle in her eyes dimming as she grew somber. “The one that truly makes me fearful isn’t the Warren-mare, Baby, it’s the one where I hold you in my arms while you die. Tara, honey that strikes fear in my heart.” Willow had subconsciously started tying little knots into the sheet as her distress continued to grow.

“I couldn’t stand to lose you, and you’re here, you’re really really here and now I’m terrified. I’m afraid I’ll do something that pushes you away after you’ve accepted so much, but what’s your limit? Everyone has one, when will I be too much for you? When will I lose you?” Willow’s voice kept rising in pitch and she grew more frantic as she finally began to pour out her heart. Shaking her head she continued, “I can’t, I just can’t, not again. It would be too much; I just couldn’t stand it, Tara. Not this time, if you leave, then there would be nothing left of me, it would be more than I can bear, Tara. I, I just can’t…”

Tara gathered Willow to her quickly, laying them both down and sheltering Willow safely in her arms, not able to endure watching Willow’s heartache grow anymore. “Shh, shh, Sweet Love,” she said trying to soothe Willow who had begun to shake and cry. “Willow, Love, it’s okay, shh.” Tara began to rub small circles on her back to try to calm her. Hearing the heartbreak in Willow as she
sobbed, Tara couldn’t help but cry with her Lover in sympathy.

When Willow was finally all cried out, Tara spoke to her softly. “Willow, I can’t promise nothing will ever happen to me, that would be foolish. And you’re right, everyone does have their limits, but you can’t push me away – I won’t let you.” Tara stroked Willow’s hair. “In the last few months we’ve been together again, have I given you any reason to doubt that I Love you? That I want to be with you? That I don’t return your affections just as intensely?” she asked.

Having calmed down to occasional hiccups and sniffles, Willow shook her head against Tara and in between hiccups replied, “No.”

“Will, I have a… profound need for you in my life, you are embedded so deeply in me, that I would move heaven and earth to get to you. Willow, I waited for you without even knowing if I should! Now that I know that for sure, without a doubt you want me, there’s nothing that could keep me from you. Cling to me, need me, want me, Love me, oh my Willow… there’s nothing in this life or the next that could keep me away from you.” Pulling back Tara tipped Willow’s chin up and kissed her passionately.

Parting for air, Willow searched Tara’s face before whispering, “Tara, I just get so scared sometimes.” Willow hiccupped.

“It’s okay to be scared, just talk to me, Willow. I want you to bring your fears and burdens to me, and I’ll do the same. That’s all part of being in a working relationship, right? We lean on one another; we strive together so we can be something better than we would be otherwise, okay?” Tara said as she stroked Willow’s cheek tenderly.
Willow nodded, leaning into Tara’s touch. Tara covered Willow’s face with warm, gentle kisses. Holding Willow tightly so their bodies were pressed flush, Willow’s hiccups faded away as her breathing grew even, and Tara thought she had fallen asleep.

With a sniffle, Willow reached for the sheets and pulled them up around their bodies. Nestling back into Tara’s embrace, she whispered into Tara’s ear, “It’s me and you against the world, Baby.”

Tara chuckled gently. “That’s right, sweet Love, and we’re unstoppable.”

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The following morning, just as she promised Willow had made breakfast, they were joined by Bunny and Marisol. They were chatting amiably about looking forward to their initiation ceremony that would happen the following night and their return to Sunnydale.

Bunny sat sipping coffee, his plate almost empty. “Well, my little darlings, will we be losing you forever? Or do you plan to come back?” he asked.
Willow was shoveling omelet into her mouth and swallowed hastily. “Well, I don’t think we have really made a decision yet. We have some things to take care of in Sunnydale, right Baby?” She said as she looked at Tara and took a bite of toast.

“She’s right; we thought after everything’s taken care, and we’ll be done with school, we would make a decision on where we wanted to be,” Tara said with a smile, as she stroked Willow’s back while she ate.

“I don’t have to remind you, that you’ll always have a home here,” Marisol added, smiling fondly at them both.

Willow smiled around mouthfuls, and replied, “We know, and we Love it here, everyone has been really great.”

Tara nodded as she sipped at the orange juice she and Willow were sharing, while she picked around her plate, pulling out a cheese covered mushroom. “We’ve talked about a few things, and we know we have options and here is one,” she shrugged. “Nothing’s set in stone, but even if here isn’t where we settle we’ll always come back to visit.” She said with a smile and popping the sticky mushroom into her mouth.

Bunny sniffed disgustedly and eyed them both. “I see how it is.”
Willow and Tara looked at one another and then back at Bunny blankly.

“You bitches are gonna run back to California, and forget all about Bunny, I can see it now.” Feigning hurt Bunny rested his hand against his heart while he spoke as though he was truly wounded.

Willow laughed loudly, and Tara just gaped at him. “Bitches?” she said.

“Mmmhmm, carry your fine asses back to wherever it is you’re from. Bon voyage,” he said with a dramatic wave of his hand. “It’s not like the girls here don’t need some new eye candy, and trust me some of the sisters here are just plain scary, but fine, don’t worry about little ol’ me.” He said with a snap of his fingers, the mirth in his voice barely concealed.

Tara pointed directly at him and with a raised eyebrow shot back, “If anyone is being a bitch it’s you, so stop your whining, we haven’t even left yet. You know that you would be welcome wherever we decide to be. Marisol did he completely miss our conversation when we rode this morning because I could have sworn he was there.”

Willow guffawed and shook her head, and mumbled, “Oh, you pissed her off now,” as she continued to wolf down her omelet.
“I am so not getting in between the two of you; you’ve been at it all morning. I don’t know what has gotten into you both. Tara, you’re normally so sweet – well, when your face isn’t stuck to this one’s,” Marisol jerked her thumb towards Willow. “They’ve been fighting like brother and sister all morning!”

Tara and Bunny both turned to Marisol and said in unison, “Like sisters.”

“I cooked, so don’t drag me into whatever you guys have been up to this morning,” Willow pleaded and waved her fork around.

“Bitch please, you’re just as guilty,” Bunny teased. “I thought we were tight.”

“Bunny, I…” Willow’s eyes widened comically as she started to sputter, but Bunny held up his hand cutting her off, then turned away to sip delicately at his coffee again, pinky raised.

Tara burst out laughing, and soon everyone around the table was laughing to the point of tears. Bunny was waving his napkin, trying to fan himself and Marisol had her head in her hands. Willow and Tara wiped at their eyes with their napkins.
“Bunny, Sweetie, I will miss you, that’s for sure,” Tara said as she wiped at her tears.

Willow nodded. “We mean it though, you are both more than welcome wherever we end up, and we do expect visits.” She said drying her eyes.

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away from my girls,” Bunny said sincerely, as he reached for one of each of their hands.

Bright, but faintly sad smiles were shared between the three of them, and as the moment passed so did that topic of conversation as everyone finished their breakfast.

*****

Everyone helped clean up after breakfast was done, and then the foursome left the kitchen heading towards the main entrance, to see Bunny and Marisol off. As the group entered they saw Giles and Rowan together talking to another person not immediately visible.

Bunny pulled Willow into a long heartfelt hug, and he turned to Tara and opened his arms. Stepping into his arms, they both started to get a little emotional.
“No tears, darling. Do you remember what I told after I cut your hair?” Bunny whispered to Tara.

Tara nodded. “That I’m beautiful and strong, and I don’t ever have to hide again.” She said as a tear slipped down her cheek.

Pulling back to look at her, Bunny smiled. “Exactly,” he wiped away Tara’s tear. “We are a special breed, you and I, so we can’t let each other forget how special we are. I know what I know, and I know I may never see you both again once you leave, darling.”

Tara started to refute Bunny’s words, but he just held up his hand. “Little Sister, Marisol may have the more obvious gifts, but I have my own. Just know that you are Loved and it will be hard. I want you to promise me that you won’t believe the words of something you can’t touch, okay?”

Tara nodded, and they held each other again briefly. Bunny opened the circle of his arms to Willow and the three stood for a moment in a group hug. Finally letting each other go, Bunny pulled away and watched as Willow and Tara stayed in each other’s arms.

He looked at Willow carefully. “Did you hear what I told her, Will?” she nodded. “It goes for you too, please be careful, won’t you?”
They both nodded again. Bunny cupped their cheeks and smiled brightly. “It’ll be worth it, it always is, isn’t it? Love you.” Blowing them both kisses he left with Marisol.

Willow & Tara watched them depart, each with an arm around the other’s waist.

“I think he knows,” Tara said.

“It wouldn’t surprise me, Baby. Marisol said he’s had dreams since they were children. So maybe he’s sensitive and getting some hints about what’s going to happen too,” Willow said quietly.

Tara just nodded, and they turned around but now they could see who the person Giles and Rowan had been talking to was. Willow stiffened for a moment, and with a deep breath relaxed again. Tara smiled and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

The little group stopped speaking and turned to Willow and Tara. Rowan, Giles, and Claude stood before them.

“Girls, you both know Claudia Harrison,” Rowan said. “She’s going to be staying with us until everyone leaves for Sunnydale.”
“Hi, Claude,” Tara said with a smile.

“Hi,” Willow said tightly.

“Hi, guys,” Claude chirped brightly.

“Yes, we thought this would give us a good opportunity to decide what to bring with us to Sunnydale. Dana has decided to fly with you both, and Claudia and I will leave early enough that we all should arrive around the same time,” Giles informed them.

Pulling Tara closer to her, Willow said, “Good, so everything’s planned?”

Tara just smiled and rested her chin against Willow’s shoulder. Claude didn’t miss the possessive gesture and dropped her head to hide her smile.
“Yes, preparations for your initiation are already in place for tomorrow evening, and I have left some instructions for you both at your suite, girls,” Rowan said with a smile. “Tara already learned so much from her mother; all we really had to do was get her up to speed in combat. It’s going to be wonderful to initiate you both.”

“Tara, your mother was quite thorough in your training, from what I have been told,” Giles said as Willow smiled proudly.

Giving Tara an affectionate squeeze, Willow looked at her. “She always knew more than she gave herself credit for, so now she has the proof from someone other than me.”

“Tara was always with my mom and hers, so I know they taught her lots. Even when we were little kids she could do things I never could, so I just played out in the garden and watched her make flowers bloom with our moms, it was really neat to watch.” Claude said. “I remember after we watched Snow White she always tried to get a bluebird to sit on her finger.” Tara and Claude giggled.

“Yeah, that never quite happened did it?” Tara said. “You don’t give yourself enough credit either, Claude. You could make flowers bloom, and bring plants back to life. I know you and your mom both are ‘plant whisperers’.”

Claude’s eye’s twinkled with mirth as she laughed. “Gosh, I haven’t heard that in years. Do you remember that hedge we used to play in? I don’t know how many times we fell asleep under it and my mom would run us out of it.”
“I do, I even told Will about that hedge, it was something else,” Tara replied fondly with a nod.
“How is your mom?”

Claude’s face fell a little and her smile turned sad. “I lost her last year,” she said softly.

Tara moved to put a hand on Claude’s arm. “Claude, I’m so sorry I didn’t know.”

“How could you? At least it was quick; she was killed in a car accident. This kid, not even out of high school in one of those souped-up little cars that sound like a weed whacker on crack. He sideswiped her and pushed her into an electrical pole. He wasn’t even hurt…walked away with only scratches.”

“Oh, Claude,” Tara said as she pulled her into a hug.

Willow shuffled her feet as she watched the whole exchange, meanwhile, Rowan and Giles had quietly drifted away leaving the girls to chat amongst themselves. Tara pulled away from Claude and slipped her hand back into Willow’s as silence settled around them.
Claude smiled bitterly, and sighed heavily, “Dad’s still at the house and he still keeps her garden. I went home after I saw you both when I met Mr. Giles for lunch. He putters around, but I know he’s lonely. The house just doesn’t feel the same, you know?”

“What happened to the kid?” Willow asked curiously.

The muscle in Claude’s jaw jumped a few times as she gritted her teeth before answering her. “Nothing really, he got away with it. He was a minor so they took his license until he’s twenty-five, he had to do community service and attend classes. I don’t think it hurt that his family has money. I know they bought him out of any real punishment.”

Both girls gasped in shock. “Claude, that’s beyond unforgivable. I’m so sorry.” Willow said as she gave Claude’s arm a comforting squeeze.

“Well, enough about that,” Claude replied with a sniffle, rubbing at one of her eyes as she tried to hide the tears in her eyes. “Can you point me in the direction of Mr. Giles? We still need to talk plants,” She said as she tried to smile.

“Sure, why don’t we take you to Lady Rowan’s office? That’s probably where they disappeared to,” Willow offered with a sad smile of her own. “You should probably know where that is anyway because if you have any questions and can’t find Giles, she would be your man…err lady, uh, you know what I mean.”
Tara picked up one of her bags and put one of her arms around Claude’s shoulders. “C’mon, you.”

Willow picked up the other and gave Claude a sympathetic pat on the back. She sniffled again and nodded, letting herself be led. Walking abreast of one another they walked quietly through the halls to Rowan’s offices. Willow and Tara waited a few more minutes with Claude until she calmed down, and then they left her outside the door to knock when she was ready.

Holding Willow’s hand tightly as they walked away, Tara looked back over her shoulder at Claude leaning against the wall and wiping her eyes.

“Will?” Tara whispered.

“What, Baby?” Willow asked.

“Love you,” Tara answered looking at Willow meaningfully.

A ghost of a smile graced Willow’s mouth. “Love you too, Baby.” She said wrapping her arm around Tara’s waist.
Without another word, both lost in their own thoughts, they made their way back to their suite.

TBC…
Chapter 31 - Commitment

Chapter Summary

Chapter Thirty
Pairing: W/T

Angst Rating: PG-13 w/minimal angst

Setting: The Grove - Tucson

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Feedback: If you have a moment and the inclination, drop a line.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: As always I’d like to thank my wonderful team of betas for arguing with me per the norm. Crystal, Julie and Richard, you guys are awesome! Music for this chapter The Black Keys “El Camino”; Azure Ray “Drawing down the Moon”; The Horrors “Skying”; and The Maine “Pioneer”.

commitment noun  
\kə-ˈmit-mənt\  
1 a : an act of committing to a charge or trust  
2 a : an agreement or pledge to do something in the future; especially  the state or an instance of being obligated or emotionally impelled
As Tara opened the door to Willow’s rooms, they found an envelope on the floor addressed to Willow. The ornate script on the front was easily recognizable as Lady Rowan’s. Handing off the envelope, Tara walked through into her suite to retrieve her own. Meeting in the middle, they both sat on Tara’s bed to open them.

Inside on formal parchment bearing the Coven’s insignia were instructions on a specific ritual cleansing bath. They were also being required to participate in a vision quest beginning at one minute after twelve with the start of the new day. Until the quest had been completed and they had been initiated, they were also to abstain from any physical intimacy and fast for the next twenty-four hours. They would need to meet Marisol at the sweat lodge on the eastern side of the compound’s grounds, and she would tend the ritual fires and be on hand should anything go wrong.

Willow walked back into her rooms, returning shortly with two bottles of water, handing one to Tara. Tara smiled as she took the bottle and continued to look over the list of herbs required for their bath. With a nod and a quiet mutter to herself, she rose and went to her alter and picked up the boline she used for harvesting herbs.

“It’s best if we gather them ourselves. Do you have Epsom salt?” Tara asked looking over the list again.

Willow nodded. “Of course I do! It’s good for sore muscles, and with my leg, I keep it around. Give me a minute and we can go to the hothouses to collect what we need.”

Willow dropped a kiss on Tara’s lips and then skipped off to her room. She came back carrying her own boline and several cloth drawstring bags. She waved the bags in front of Tara wearing a silly grin, poking the tip of her tongue between her teeth. “I made them myself just for collecting herbs.”

Tara smiled back, and with an affectionate stroke of Willow’s cheek said, “They’re perfect, Sweetie. I didn’t know you’d gone all Martha Stewart on me. You’re cooking, and now you sew too! What’s the world coming to?” she winked at Willow as they headed for the hothouses.

“Well, we know it’s probably gonna end when we get back to Sunnydale, and hell hasn’t frozen over yet, so as long as the earth isn’t spinning backward on its axis, I think we’re alright,” Willow said with a smirk.
Tara rolled her eyes playfully, as she took Willow’s hand. “Hmm, you have a point, Sweetie. Just as long as you don’t turn into Oprah, I can deal. That would just be too much.”

Willow laughed. “What’s wrong with Oprah? It’s because her name is Harpo spelled backward, isn’t it? You never did like “The Marx Brothers”. They’re classic, I’m telling you.”

Tara bumped Willow with her hip. “You can keep “The Marx Brothers” and I’ll keep “I Love Lucy” then we’ll both be happy.”

“You really do have a thing for redheads, don’t you?” Willow smiled mischievously, swinging their entwined hands between them. They moved out of the cool of the main compound and out into the summer heat.

Tara pulled them to a stop, and stepping close to Willow, she rubbed her cheek against Willow’s and purred, “There’s really only one redhead I have a ‘thing’ for, and she drives me to distraction on a daily basis.” Taking her tongue she slowly traced the shell of Willow’s ear, before blowing in it gently.

Willow gulped and swallowed several times; shifting from side to side, she squeaked, “Baby?”

Tara pulled back and looked at the light flush blooming on Willow’s cheeks, and the darkening of her eyes. Smiling wickedly, she scolded, “Ah, ah, ah. We have to behave ourselves, remember?” She dropped Willow’s hand, turned and sashayed away, knowing that Willow would be watching the swing of her hips as she went.

Watching Tara go, Willow stood rooted to the spot. Finally gathering her wits and cooling her libido, she called loudly, “When did you become such a tease?”

The only response was Tara’s warm laughter as it floated back to Willow before she jogged quickly to catch up.

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A few hours later, having split the list, the girls came back with the fresh herbs, each neatly packed away in its own little bag. A pink-faced Willow plopped down on the couch in Tara’s suite. Tara took the herbs from Willow and went into her kitchen, coming back with cold water for them both.
Tara held her water bottle to Willow’s cheek, to help her cool down.

“I’m okay, Baby. They call them hothouses for a reason,” she said with a wink. “I haven’t been working in them as regularly lately, but, uh, I’ve been preoccupied. That and it’s summer here. When I first got here it was summer too, I thought I was gonna die from the heat.”

“What else, Will? What was it like for you when you came back from England?” Tara asked gently.

Willow was quiet for a moment. “Well, Giles came with and stayed for the first two months I was back. Then I made him leave; he was driving me nuts. I didn’t really talk to anyone other than Lady Rowan and Dana – that didn’t change much for a long time. Dana introduced me to Marisol because she’s in both the hothouses and the stables, and Bunny was here one day when I went to the hothouses. Bunny being Bunny, he kind of introduced himself, then stayed for lunch, and well, how can you not like Bunny? So they became the only people I talked with regularly. I spent a lot of time in my room working on school, or spells or meditating. I was just trying to keep myself busy.”

Willow hung her head a bit and took Tara’s hand in her own. “Giles had gone to Sunnydale after leaving me here, and he called to check on me. I grilled him about how everyone was – how you were in particular. Then I threw myself into studying, and then I would obsess over you. It was kind of a cycle. I couldn’t bear to ask if you were seeing anyone, even though I was dying to know,” she shrugged. “I still kept to myself mainly. There were some whispers about why I was here, and I’m sure you can imagine who was doing the whispering.”

“Tabitha,” Tara muttered disdainfully.

“Mmmhmm,” Willow nodded.

“No one approached you? No one tried to be friends with you?” Tara asked.

“Some did, and no one avoided me outright. I know that I scared some of the members once the abbreviated version of my story became known, others even asked lots of questions, but I didn’t seek anyone out. I guess it became apparent I wasn’t really very interested in being social,” Willow gave her a wry grin. “I mean, how many times would you try before you gave up on someone that always tells you ‘no’?”

Tara nodded, giving Willow a sad smile. “I made a few new friends while you were gone. Tutoring and taking lessons from Leif forced me to get out of the house. Which was good, I needed that… and
I needed Buffy not to kill me, so I agreed to it,” she looked at Willow sheepishly. “I think you’d been gone about six months by then. I even thought about going back to the Wiccan meetings, and I went so far as to go to campus one afternoon, but as I stood outside the door I could hear some of the voices from inside. It was Cheryl and Nicole still yammering away. Nothing had changed so I turned around and walked away.” She shrugged.

“I ended up at the Magic Box with Anya that day, and we started to spend a lot of time together; we actually talked a lot, about everything, not just you and Xander. Things finally started to get easier, if not better for us both. Anya was still so upset after “The Wedding That Wasn’t”. And I still missed you like crazy; I never stopped missing you Willow. I wanted to know something – anything, what you were doing, how you were…” Tara said and dropped her head.

Willow took Tara’s bottle of water and set them on the coffee table. She turned to face Tara, curling one leg under her.

“Look at me, Tara,” Tara raised her eyes. “I was miserable, I was lonely, I was heartbroken – all the sad, trite, lovelorn adjectives – that was me. So I did what I do best. I studied. If I kept my nose in a book and my mind busy then I wouldn’t have time to listen to the things my pesky heart kept whispering to me. I wouldn’t have to think about everything. That’s how I was. All of that changed the day Dana and I picked you up at the airport. The ride back here was sheer torture!” Willow said.

Tara smiled her sweet lopsided grin, and asked, “Yeah, what was up with that? I thought you had brought me all the way here to tell me you didn’t want me anymore because you looked like you were going to toss your cookies or something.”

Willow sighed and blushed lightly, hanging her head. “I could smell you, Tara. I was sitting right behind you and the air conditioning was on, so it was blowing your perfume, a-and your Tara-ness right in my face. I thought I was gonna pass out; it was wonderful and agonizing all at the same time. I didn’t know how things were going to go between us, and there I was being cocooned in you. The scent that had helped me get through so, so many of the most horrible nights of my life. It was overwhelming, to be honest, and you smelled so good, Baby, I thought I might actually cry sitting behind you. I was just trying to keep it together.”

Tara stroked Willow’s cheek with the back of her hand. “Gee, then I was no help at all that day, was I? I couldn’t help myself, I kept pushing you at every turn until I got us alone, and even then I didn’t let up,” she said.

“Aren’t you a little glad you didn’t let up?” Willow asked.
“Oh yes,” Tara replied before leaning in and kissing Willow gently.

Willow climbed into Tara’s lap. They sat cuddling and sharing soft kisses while they talked about their time apart. They had talked briefly before, here and there, about what it was like, but this night felt right to lay it all bare. They both knew there was no more time for secrets, no more time for hiding – that time had passed long ago. Now was a time for honesty.

Willow eventually got up to go to the bathroom and came back carrying Tara’s guitar case. “Will you sing for me?” she asked tentatively, hope written all over her face.

Tara smiled, and with a nod, reached for the case. Willow handed it over then clapped giddily. She scurried off into the kitchen and came back with more water, then settled in the chair across from Tara. Willow bounced in her seat while Tara tuned her guitar.

“What would you like to hear?”

“Whatever you want to play for me, Baby, I love to hear you sing, and I especially love when you sing to me,” Willow said smiling, her eyes shining with delight.

“Okay,” Tara said strummed a few chords, warming up her hands as she thought. “I’ve got the perfect one for you.” Nodding, Tara went into the song, a sweet and light melody.

If I can make your heart
Feel always loved
I would give my whole world up
For you to feel always loved

If I can make your heart
Feel always joy
I would walk a thousand miles
For you to feel always joy

If I could make your heart
Feel always loved
I’d give my whole world up
For you to feel always loved

If I can make your heart
Willow applauded and bounced in her seat and began to chant, “More, more, more!”

Tara laughed and went into a series of songs for Willow. Singing some of the ones they had talked about so many happy mornings ago. Tara played for Willow for over an hour before she took a break. After several much-needed gulps of water, she set aside her guitar and once again had a lap full of Willow.

Pressing kisses all over Tara’s neck and face, Willow giggled. “No one’s ever serenaded me before you,” she said between kisses.

“And the only one that should ever be serenading you is me,” Tara growled playfully as she began to return the kisses.

The kisses quickly got heated, and hands started to wander over pliant, willing flesh. Willow pulled away with a groan and looked at Tara apologetically.

“Baby, I know I started it, and you know I don’t want to stop, but we have to,” she said.

Tara nodded, but her eyes were dilated slightly and were the deep cobalt blue that signaled her arousal. She lunged at Willow, who wrapped her legs around Tara’s hips and the kissing resumed.

“Baby, please, we have to stop,” Willow panted with Tara almost completely on top of her.

“You’re right, love. Our initiation is important, we have to stop,” Tara said and dropped her head to Willow’s chest, taking several deep breaths. Pulling away she leaned back slightly over the arm of the couch, closing her eyes and dropping her head back – which also pushed her breasts out and highlighted her hardened nipples through her thin t-shirt. Hearing a low growl, suddenly Willow was attached to her throat sucking and nibbling at the warm, silky skin beneath her lips.

Willow’s mouth incited electric tingles to race up and down Tara’s spine. Tangling her fingers in Willow’s hair and tugging hard enough to get her attention, Willow pulled back with a pop and looked down at a squirming Tara. Willow’s eyes were a dark green with flecks of golden brown in them, her mouth pink and kiss bruised as she quickly licked her lips.

“Willow, please don’t make this any harder than it already is,” Tara begged, her breathing ragged with desire.
Willow nodded again and crawled off of Tara. Standing, she ran a hand through her hair and over her face. She turned to Tara and pointed to herself, “Me here,” she pointed to the chair and sat down. “You there,” she pointed to Tara and then waved her hand at the couch. Tara just nodded looking at Willow dolefully.

They sat in silence eyeing each other and taking gulps of water until they calmed down. Tara packed her guitar up quickly and left the room to put it away. When she came back into the room, Willow had moved into the kitchen and started sorting through the herbs they had collected.

She had rinsed the rosemary, sage, lavender, lemon balm, and peppermint, and set them aside. Tara leaned over the counter and watched Willow work. Willow carefully pat the herbs dry, then pulled the flowers from the lavender and de-stemmed the rosemary, lemon balm, peppermint and sage for their leaves. When she finished, Willow had five neat piles in front of her on the counter; she looked up at Tara and winked.

“Can I help?” Tara asked.

“Of course,” Willow chirped. “Under the sink in the bathroom I have carrier oils, grab them along with the mortar and pestle and I’ll start chopping these up.”

“Sure, Sweetie.” With a smile, Tara disappeared and came back with her hands full.

Emptying her arms onto the counter, she pushed the mortar in Willow’s direction, who began dropping herbs into the mortar. Tara, holding a different bottle of oil in each of her hands, she turned to Willow.

“I didn’t know which you would want, so I grabbed the sweet almond and the Vitamin E. I saw several other bottles of scented oils already made, did you make them too?” Tara asked.

Willow stopped dropping in the herbs and looked at Tara, with a shy smile and a nod she said proudly, “I grew the roses, mint, lemon balm and the lavender myself, and then infused the oils. They have tons of fruit trees here, so I could get the orange blossoms anytime – and they smell amazing when they’re fresh cut. Eucalyptus trees grow here all over the compound, so yeah, I’ve made them all over the last year or so. I mix a couple different mints with the eucalyptus and it makes a great massage oil for sore muscles,” Willow blushed lightly. “Do you want to mix in the sweet almond oil while I crush stuff down?”
Tara looked at Willow for a moment before nodding. “What other things have you studied, Willow? I never pictured you as a gardener, but here you work in the hothouses and you seem to really enjoy it,” she said and began to slowly pour oil into the mortar while Willow was crushing herbs to make a thick paste. The air around them quickly became pungent with the wonderful scents mixing together, the oil binding them all together but adding no scent of its own.

“I feel connected when I work with the plants, you now? Nurturing something, diggin’ in the dirt, even,” Willow giggled. “Then you have the chance to care for something that will be beautiful and grow strong or food that will feed the compound with something fresh and organic.” She shrugged. “I learned to use herbs in part to make my own tinctures and teas. Then I found out I’m really good at it, too – balms and lotions, all sort of things. Our soap? I made it; the lotion you said you like too,” she said with pride. “I buy the bases, but the scents, colors, and oils – they’re all done by hand – mine.”

Tara beamed at Willow. “You’ve learned so much, Willow. It’s wonderful; I just wish I had been with you.”

Willow stopped mixing and looked at Tara. “But you were with me. When I learned something new and mastered it, you were with me. I imagined a little Tara learning all these things, and remembered how you tried to teach me,” she smiled wistfully and then said softly. “I wanted to make you proud.”

Tara took Willow in her arms, “You do, Will, and I love seeing everything you’ve learned. That now you get it – you understand! Sweetie, it’s just one more thing that we can share on a whole new level.” Kissing Willow gently, she rested her forehead against Willow’s. “Just another beautiful facet of you I get to learn about, love.”

Willow sighed and closed her eyes, basking in the love and affection that rolled off of Tara in waves. “We have so much to learn, Baby, and we’ve both come so far,” she pulled back to look at Tara as they stood in each other’s arms. “When we go back to Sunnydale, it’ll be just another final exam.”

Tara threw her head back and laughed. “Oh Willow, is everything school for you?”

Willow smiled. “Well, I’m working on several degrees, you know,” She nuzzled Tara’s neck. “I plan on working on my degree in “Tara” for a very long time though. I’ll take a degree in Tara Studies. Get a B.A.” Willow smirked.

Tara raised an eyebrow. “And B.A. stands for?”
“Boob Appreciation, of course,” Willow grinned, her tongue poking between her teeth.

Tara nodded sagely. “I wholeheartedly approve of that educational goal,” she leaned forward to tease Willow. “There’s a lot of work to do in that degree program, and it’s very intensive.”

Willow groaned dramatically, “Oh no, not work!” she smiled seductively. “Hmm, maybe I can take another course in ‘Applied Tara Sciences’ – one where I can give extremely ‘hands-on’ demonstrations to my professor – in private – for extra credit too?” Willow wiggled her eyebrows.

Tara squeezed Willow close. “Mmm, I hear that it’s a very select class, only room for one very special student.”

“Do you think I’ll make the grade?” Willow asked her voice deepened with desire.

“I think you have the best of chances,” Tara purred. “And, as the professor, I do enjoy a motivated student.”

“Lucky me,” Willow giggled as she pecked Tara on the lips. “We should get back to work, we don’t have long, and uh… maybe we should take separate baths.”

“Yes and yes, we should probably try to get some sleep too, this won’t be easy,” Tara agreed, letting Willow go; she turned back and picked up the oil. “You pour and I’ll mix now, okay?”

“Perfect, Baby,” Willow said with a nod.

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Tara sat on Willow’s bed, fresh-faced and pink from her bath in a thin, loose-fitting v-neck t-shirt and an old pair of comfortable boxers. After combing her hair, Tara tossed the comb on the dresser and turned down the cool crisp sheets, crawling in to wait for Willow. She had started to doze lightly when she heard Willow at her dresser. Tara opened her eyes in time to see Willow’s shapely bottom slipping into a pair of very short running shorts and a dark blue sports bra that made her skin look all the more rosy from her hot bath. When Willow turned, she smiled at Tara before she grabbed her clock to set the alarm.
“You’ll have to wear this little outfit for me another time, love. It’s very appealing,” Tara said raising her eyebrow suggestively, as she pulled the sheets back to welcome Willow in.

Willow put her clock down, then crawled slowly on her hands and knees across the bed. “Anything for you, Baby.”

Tara smirked up at Willow as she leaned over to kiss her. Willow lay down next to her and they wrapped their arms around one another to rest before the vision quest.

******

A few hours later the alarm went off, and Willow slipped out of bed to shut it off. Holding the clock in her hand she sat back down and rubbed her eyes sleepily. She rubbed Tara’s thigh through the sheet, yawning widely.

“C’mon, Baby, we’ve got to get up.”

“Mmm, okay, Sweetie,” Tara mumbled.

Willow went into Tara’s room and pulled out clothes for Tara and grabbed their robes from the bathroom. Dumping the clothes on the bed, she pulled out some clothes for herself and stripped down.

“Baby,” she said as she stood naked by the bed with her hands on her hips. “Baby, look,” Tara cracked an eye in Willow’s direction. Turning her head to get a better look, she blinked rapidly taking in Willow’s naked form.

“I’m up, I’m up,” Tara said as she sat up and scooted over to Willow. She pointed to her lips and Willow happily dropped a kiss on them.

“I grabbed you some clothes,” pointing to a small pile next to Tara’s robe, Willow turned to get dressed.
Tara smiled dreamily as she watched Willow. “Can’t I just watch you?”

Willow giggled and looked over her shoulder. “Sure you can, but you still have to get dressed. Then I’ll get to watch you.”

Tara shrugged chuckling. “Fair is fair.”

******

Walking hand in hand they roamed quietly through the compound to the east side. Leaving the building, Willow turned on a flashlight and Tara carried their robes. After the long hours in the heat of the sweat lodge during the vision quest, the air would feel cold to them even if it was actually warm.

They just followed the smell of wood smoke as they rounded the building and saw a figure working carefully around a large fire. The closer they got, the more the scents of cedar, sage, and sweet grass rose to meet them.

Moving closer to the figure stooped over the fire, they could see an altar set up about six paces from the door to a dome hut covered with animal skins. Standing up straight, Marisol turned to them and smiled.

“Good morning, Sisters.”

TBC...
Chapter 32 - Foreboding

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst Rating: PG-13 w/angsty, premonition-y type flashes to the future - & then a party!

Setting: The Grove - Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: Always – all kinds, but constructive is preferred.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I’d like to thank Richard aka Azirahael for serving as beta this round. If anyone has questions about anything in this chapter feel free to PM me, they are accurate & factual. There are really only two bits of music this round, The Antlers “Burst Apart” and The Orb disc one of “The Orb’s Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld”, and “Little Fluffy Clouds” was on repeat during writing the vision quest. I’d also like to thank the “Encore” channel for late night showings of the seminal “The Alfred Hitchcock Hour”.

Fore·bod·ing [fawr-boh-ding, fohr-] noun

1. A prediction; portent.
2. A strong inner feeling or notion of a future misfortune, evil, etc.; presentiment.
“Good Morning, Sister.” The girls replied in unison.

Marisol smiled at the pair and reached for the robes in Tara’s arms. She set them aside on a low-backed wooden bench behind her that faced the fire. Moving to the altar she came back with a large Abalone shell that had a mixture of the cedar, sage and sweet grass in its center. Marisol carefully removed a small, hot ember with iron tongs and placed it in the bed of herbs. As it began to smoke she blew on it gently to get more of the herbs to catch and smolder.

Turning, she went back to the altar to retrieve a large feather, and then approached Tara and Willow, the smoking shell held in front of her.

“Sisters, this is a sacred place. The circle has been drawn and as you enter the lodge, you enter another realm. Many cultures believe that smoke purifies, that it can remove negative energies, and it can carry our prayers to the Goddess,” Marisol said solemnly as she looked at each girl in turn. “In preparation to enter, I ask that you take the feather and fan the smoke over your head seven times and towards your heart seven times. This is so that you may enter with a clear mind and an open heart to be ready for whatever the Goddess may have in store for you.”

Marisol smiled and offered the feather first to Tara. Tara glanced at Willow, before returning Marisol’s smile and with a steady hand accepted the feather. Waving the smoke towards her head, Tara closed her eyes and began to clear her mind and focus on her breathing. The herb mixture, a heady mix of sharp, sweet and pungent scents, brought back memories of standing very still beside her mother around a sacred circle as a Child. The herbs mixed with the smell of wood smoke immediately set her at ease, and she moved the feather through the smoke and over her heart.

Opening her eyes, Tara smiled peacefully at Marisol, as she handed back the feather. Marisol waved the feather through the smoke several times, encouraging the herbs to continue to smolder and to cleanse it before handing off the feather to Willow. Willow took the feather reverently from Marisol as she stepped towards her. Closing her eyes Willow waved the smoke into her face and up over her head. She took in a deep lung full of the scented air, and as she exhaled a plume of smoke rose from her mouth. Opening her eyes she moved the richly scented smoke over her heart and looked over at Tara, who smiled encouragingly.

Willow’s eyes shone with tears as she completed the task. With a light snifflle, she handed the feather back to Marisol, as emotions flooded her body. With another deep breath, she allowed the emotions to crest and fall. No tears fell, but Willow stood up straighter, her shoulders squared, a look of pride on her face. With a nod to Marisol, the quest was truly about to begin.
“Sisters, since it is just the two of you, you can sit close together or not, your choice. When you enter, you’ll move clockwise around the pit before sitting. Once we enter I’ll arrange the stones and that signals that the ceremony has begun. We are to have four endurances of forty minutes each,” Marisol said earnestly. “At the end of each stage of the ritual, you can come out. If you go around the barn in front of us, one of the pools is lit and available if you want to jump in to cool down; somehow I don’t see you two as the traditional rolling in the sand types.” She smirked, the girls giggled and the mood lightened a bit.

“Was each stage explained to you?” Marisol queried.

Nodding, Willow spoke, “The first round is for recognition of the spirit. The second round is for recognition of courage, endurance, strength, and honesty.”

Tara picked up where Willow left off, saying, “The third round is spiritual growth and healing and the last round centers on recognition of knowledge, that we may gain wisdom.”

Marisol beamed at them. “Very good, Sisters. Then let’s begin, shall we?”

The girls nodded and turned to face the door to the low roofed lodge. With a sweep of her arm, Marisol bade them welcome and enter. Willow followed Tara in, once inside, they stood for a moment letting their eyes adjust to the half-light. They both had to stoop to walk through the door and into the lodge. The lodge was maybe six feet tall and fifteen feet wide, and very obviously a permanent structure.

The floor was polished blonde wood the walls were made of rough cut wooden planks with saplings lashed and bent to form the dome. A pit was recessed into the floor leaving a built-in step-down and made a built in place to sit. There were several large candles placed around the outside of the pit providing a small amount of light.

Marisol followed them in with heated stones and closed the flap to the door. She laid the stones out in the pit in the direction of the four corners, as they glowed brightly. A small bucket with a dipper was already waiting by the pit.

Marisol gave a last look at the girls, and they watched her intently, as she took the dipper full of
water and poured it over the stones. The rocks hissed and popped as steam began to fill the room. The candlelight flickered and the shadows grew long around the walls. Marisol repeated the process until the room became hot and humid, the temperature has risen a good fifteen degrees.

Both girls sat with the legs crossed, watching as the flames from the candles cast shadows that danced hypnotically around them. Willow took her t-shirt off and sat in a sports bra and shorts; her skin already flush from the heat of the steam.

Marisol poured more water over the rocks increasing the heat again just as the girls became accustomed to the room. The flames flickered again and Tara found herself staring off at a peculiar set of shadows. They seemed to be swirling of their own accord and not in response to Marisol’s movements.

“Will,” she whispered.

“Yeah, Baby?” Willow answered.

“Watch,” Tara said as she pointed to the movement at the far side of the lodge.

Marisol had heard the exchange and turned to look as well. The three witches sat watching the shadows swirl and morph into images along the wall. An “M” followed by a question mark swirled several times then faded away. Next came the image of a group of people in a circle, followed by a mushroom cloud that loomed for several long minutes before them on the wall. Slowly ghastly forms faded away and the shadows became just shadows again.

“Sisters, our first round is complete, you are welcome to leave to lodge briefly before the next endurance,” Marisol said quietly, although she was still watching the far wall where the shadows had played just moments before.

Tara stood first and held her hand out to Willow. They both left the lodge and were followed out by Marisol. She went to the side of the bench Willow had sat on, and opened a cooler neither of the girls had noticed before. Offering the pair bottles of chilled water, they each took them gratefully.

Tara sat next to Willow and they both drank deeply from their bottles. Willow held Tara’s hand and they sat in silence watching the stars in the inky blackness of the night sky. Willow pointed upwards and Tara caught the last of a comet flaring its last light across the canvas of stars.
Marisol tended the fire and prepared more stones for the next round, drinking water herself. Once she had the stones ready, she turned to Willow and Tara. “Sisters, it is time.”

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The next second and third endurances were uneventful, quiet periods of meditation, and by the time they entered the lodge for the fourth round, both girls were now just in sports bras and shorts. Their waistbands dark with sweat, but neither girl had yet to make use of the pool. It was by an unspoken agreement that they would wait until the end.

This time instead of sitting Willow lay down and Tara followed suit so they lay head to head on the warm wood. They both lay listen to the hiss of the rocks as Marisol, for the last time repeated the process of building heat and steam.

Sweat rolled from their bodies, as they slowly slipped into a trance state staring at the ceiling of the lodge. Their breathing began to sync, and the sensation of floating swept over them, as once again the shadows grew long and jagged – dancing of their own accord over the ceiling.

The rocks never seemed to stop hissing in the background as the temperature climbed. Images began to pop in front of their eyes. They saw Dawn in a crypt with a stake in one hand, tears rolling down her cheeks as vamp dust cascaded around her. They saw Andrew and Jonathon standing next to a seal they didn’t recognize and watched as Jonathon fell over dead.

More images fired rapidly before their eyes. A ragtag group of girls, Faith with Angel and a weary-looking Buffy digging a hole in her backyard; they saw themselves walking grim-faced as energy crackling all around them. Giles, Dawn, Xander, and Anya all armed for battle.

The flashes started to come so quickly they began to blur into one another. The gnawing knot of fear began to grow in their bellies; the dread and fear of being hunted down one by one to be weeded out in that moment became an overwhelming reality. All they had left were sounds – screams of pain, roars of rage and fear, the clang of metal on metal and the sickening sounds of ripping flesh and breaking a bone.

With a thud, Willow and Tara hit the wooden floor of the lodge and all of the candles blew out. Tara rolled off the ledge onto her hands and knees and began to dry heave. Willow and Marisol scrambled over to her. After Tara gained some semblance of composure, Willow helped Tara to her feet. She stood unsteadily and clung to Willow in the dark.
Marisol went over to the flap and opened it, letting in the cooler early morning air and some light, carefully leading Tara through the doorway and out of the lodge, Willow got Tara over to the bench and sat her down. She grabbed more water from the cooler and urged Tara to drink.

Tara looked at Willow and gasped. “Baby, what is it?”

“Your eyes, Will, they’re… pearlescent. A-and your nose…” Tara whispered, wiping under Willow’s nose with her first two fingers. Holding them out Tara showed Willow the blood on them.

“Baby, your eyes too,” Willow breathed as she grabbed her shirt she’d left on the bench earlier to stem the flow of warm blood that now dripped off of her chin and pressed it to her nose.

Marisol had followed them out and moved off to the side where there was a first aid kit. She snapped an emergency ice pack into use. Moving to Willow she knelt down to place it on the back of Willow’s neck. They both looked at Marisol, who gasped as she looked into their eyes.

The bench faced east, and as Willow and Tara looked at Marisol, the sun’s first rays broke over the mountains. The sky was bathed in hot cherry reds and sherbet oranges, as the sun filled the morning sky. The rich, velvety blue of the night turned into glorious lavender as the new day dawned. Marisol was given her first look at the pair since they all had entered the lodge for the last round.

“By the Goddess, your eyes…” Marisol whispered as she stared at the girls as they glowed golden against the backdrop of the vibrant sunrise. “Can you see?”

They both nodded.

“How many fingers do I have up?” Marisol held up four fingers.

“Four,” Tara said.

“Fawr,” Willow replied from behind her wadded up shirt.

“Willow, let me see your nose,” Marisol asked.
Willow removed her shirt from her nose and looked down at the large patch of blood on the fabric. She looked at Marisol, who turned her head side to side, felt the bridge of her nose, and checked her pulse and the back of Willow’s head for any injury. Turning next to Tara, Marisol did the same, checking her pulse and the back of Tara’s head for any injury.

“You were both floating almost a foot off the floor. Are you sure you both can see okay? I can’t really tell by your eyes, they’re… well a little hard to judge by at the moment,” Marisol said the concern evident in her voice. “What happened in there?”

“I feel fine, Marisol, really,” Willow said softly avoiding the question, and Tara just nodded, still a bit pale and sipping water.

Marisol got the hint and dropped the subject. “Will, you’re not bleeding anymore and other than your eyes, you both seem alright. Why don’t you go to the pool, it’s heated but it will still feel cool after being in the lodge. I’ll be close by while I take care of things here, just holler if you need me, okay?” Marisol urged.

“Okay,” they replied in unison.

They picked up their robes, their hands easily finding its mate; they walked the short distance to the barn. Once around the barn, the pool was surrounded by a low wall and directly across from the side of the barn. They reached a small gate and moved into the pool area. Hanging their robes over the wall, they pulled off their shoes and quietly waded into the warm water.

Willow slipped under the water and swam out into the middle of the pool. When she surfaced she looked for Tara as she trod water. Tara broke the surface close to Willow, and they just looked at each other for a moment. Easing through the water back to where they could put their feet on the bottom, they stood shoulder deep, and as if of a single mind they moved into each other’s arms, shaking like leaves in the wind.

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Minutes slipped away as Willow and Tara floated weightlessly on their backs in the pool. Their mood somber, they spoke little, still feeling the strong connection to one another, words weren’t necessary. With prune-y fingers and toes, they got out of the pool to dry off.
They were coming out of the gate as Marisol came around the barn to meet them. “How do you guys feel?” she asked looking between the girls.

“Better,” Tara said.

“Calmer,” Willow added.

“Good, your eyes are back to normal now too. Lady Rowan asked that you meet with her before the initiation ceremony that starts at sundown. Don’t worry about anything you leave out here; I’ll see it gets back to you. In the meantime why don’t you go get some rest; I’ll have something light sent to your rooms shortly, even if you aren’t hungry try to eat a little, okay?” Marisol suggested.

“Thanks,” Willow said.

“Thank you, Marisol,” Tara said softly.

*****

With heavy steps, they made their way slowly back to their rooms. Closing the door Willow leaned against it and watched Tara cross the room to the couch. She lay down on the couch facing Willow and smiled tiredly. Just as Willow opened her mouth to speak there was a polite knock at the door.

Willow’s mouth snapped shut and she opened turned to open the door. Giles stood in front of them smiling and holding a tray of food.

“Good morning, Tara, Willow. Marisol asked that I bring breakfast to you, given that I was passing by,” he said with a smile. Giles crossed from the door to the coffee table in front of Tara. “I trust your quest was enlightening?”

Willow followed and sat down next to Tara. Taking the cover off of one of the plates, Willow speared some of the eggs and handed the fork to Tara. Tara took the fork, and Willow just shrugged when she looked at her.

“That would definitely be one way to describe it,” Tara said. “We should probably talk to you about
some of it later.”

“Of course, I imagine you’re both exhausted. I’m sure it was quite a stressful ordeal.” Giles replied.

“Stressful not exactly…not what we imagined certainly, then again we didn’t know quite what to expect. We think some of what we saw may be important,” Tara answered.

“Really? Important? How so?” Giles curiosity was piqued.

“We think some of it may be a warning, and some may have already happened, even potentially be put in motion. We’re worried about Dawn and Buffy,” Tara said as she speared eggs with the fork and handed it to Willow.

He looked at them both, watching them load the fork and pass it back and forth feeding one another. He also noticed that Willow had yet to say anything and when Tara spoke she kept using “we”.

“I see, well, I’ll call them right away. If anything is amiss, I’ll be sure to let you know right away,” Giles said as he continued to watch them as they both just nodded. “Yes, well, get some rest. I’ll see you both later.”

“Thanks, Giles, that would be great, we’ll see you later,” Tara said around a mouthful of eggs.

Giles smiled as he stood and moved towards the door. “If you need anything just let me know.”

“We will,” Tara said and both girls looked at him and smiled as he left.

“I’ve had enough, Sweetie, I just want some sleep now. How about you? Are you ready for bed?” Tara asked Willow placing her hand on Willow’s leg and gently stroking it. Willow nodded as she took a drink of orange juice and then handed the glass to Tara.

“Let’s go, Baby,” Willow whispered.

Setting the glass down, Tara rose and held her hand out to Willow. Hand in hand they went into her
bedroom. They stripped, just letting their still damp bras and shorts drop to the floor and climbed into bed. Settling into their favorite position, they fell asleep quickly; limbs entwined and Willow’s head over Tara’s heart, while her hand rested over Willow’s.

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They both were startled into wakefulness by the sound of the phone ringing next to the bed. Tara rolled away and grabbed at the receiver before it could ring again shrilly.

“Hullo,” Tara mumbled sleepily.

Willow scooted over behind her and kissed her shoulder while Tara listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

“M’kay, thanks we’ll be there soon.” With a big yawn, Tara hung up the phone and lay back down.

“Who was it, Baby?” Willow asked.

“It was Dana. Apparently, we’ve slept the day away, Sweetie. Sunset is in two hours, and she thought she should give us a wakeup call,” Tara replied snuggling back into Willow’s arms.

“She does, it was very thoughtful. Did you set an alarm?”

“No, I forgot. I just wanted to be in your arms,” Willow said softly.

“She does, it was very much of the mutual kind. Then again that’s my favorite place to be,” Tara murmured into Willow’s neck.

“And that’s always of the good,” Willow said with a smile.
“Always of the good,” Tara murmured into Willow’s ear as she began kissing Willow’s neck and nipping at the skin just enough to make Willow start to squirm. She ran her fingers lightly down Willow’s spine, over her hip, down her thigh and back again.

Willow groaned, wiggling against Tara’s mouth. She gave Tara a sharp swat on the behind that cracked loudly in the quiet of the room.

“Hey!” Tara whined.

“I know I didn’t hurt you, Baby and we don’t have time for your antics, Little Miss Tease,” Willow said raising her eyebrow as she dared Tara to argue with her.

Tara grinned wickedly and licked Willow’s chin, nibbling her way up to her ear. “I wasn’t teasing, Love.”

Willow tittered nervously, and sputtered, “I, well, we, um have to, you know, go see, uh, Lady Rowan and it’s almost, uh sunset,” pleading with her eyes, Willow continued, “So, you know we should be good, and um, you know just get ready, we don’t want to keep her waiting and this is important, so you know maybe we should, um…”

Tara laughed and squeezed Willow tight against her. “I love making you all tongue-tied! You’re right, and we’ll have time later to ourselves,” she yanked the sheet back and shot out of the bed. “The last one to the shower’s a rotten egg!”

Now it was Willow’s turn to yell as she bolted out of bed and after Tara. “Hey!”

*****

Leaving Lady Rowan’s office, Willow looked at the garments in her hand, turning them over again with a disgruntled expression. She held an extremely small pair of what could loosely be called running shorts and bandeau in white.

“Do you think they could have found something smaller for us to wear?” Willow groused.
Tara giggled. “Well, at least they gave us the option of being skyclad or not, some would have expected it, Sweetie.”

Willow turned bright red. “I know! I would have passed out if I had to be naked in front of a bunch of people I don’t know; I mean there are men in this coven! And Giles!” she squeaked. “Even in England, we managed not to cross that line. It would just be too creepy, and besides, no one gets to see Tara-goodies but me.” Willow said with a decisive nod.

“Ditto, Love,” Tara said. She slipped her arm around Willows' waist as they walked, and Willow’s immediately went around her shoulders.

Hastily making their way to their rooms, they rushed in and went straight into the bedroom to change. Tara was bent over and Willow was topless when she stopped to ogle Tara, who was completely naked. Tara turned and found Willow staring with her mouth open. Tara’s eyes twinkled with mischief as she struck a pose for Willow.

“Is there something you like?” she asked, and Willow nodded and licked her lips. She sauntered over to Willow, and trailed her hands around her waist and played with the button on her shorts before popping the button free.

“Do you like what you feel?” Tara whispered huskily.

“Yes,” Willow murmured, finally putting her hands on Tara’s hips and kneading the flesh.

Tara slipped her fingers under the elastic of Willow’s panties, pushing the shorts and panties down to puddle around Willow’s feet.

“I can’t wait to get you alone later, Willow, can’t wait to put my hands on you.” Tara breathed into Willow’s ear while her hands wandered to Willow’s bottom, cupping the firm muscle and causing Willow to rise up on her toes.

“I love you,” Willow said looking deeply into Tara’s eyes.

Tara smiled and kissed Willow tenderly. “I Love you too, Sweetie, but now we have to hurry.”
As the sun began to set, the coven gathered in the field where Willow and Tara had practiced, and the field where they went against Amy. Willow and Tara watched as a sacred circle was drawn, and when the sun began to set a bell was rung, deep and sonorous.

Willow and Tara walked barefoot, hand in hand towards the circle along the path to the circle of the coven. They were met by Lady Rowan, who smiled warmly at them both.

“Willow, how do you enter this circle?” she asked.

“In perfect love, in perfect trust,” Willow answered.

“Tara, how do you enter this circle?” Rowan asked as she turned to Tara.

“In perfect love, in perfect trust,” Tara answered with a smile.

Stepping back several paces to the altar, Rowan turned to address the coven. “Today, I have the singular pleasure to initiate not just one but two extraordinary witches. Ladies, what is the whole of the law?”

In unison, Willow and Tara replied, “Do what thou wilt lest it harms none shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the Law. Bide the Wiccan Rede you must, in perfect Love, in perfect trust. Eight words law fulfill:

“Do what thou wilt lest it harm none”. Lest in your own defense it be, ever mind the “Rule of Three”. Follow this with mind and heart, merry meet and merry part.”

Rowan turned to the altar and picked up a copper bowl with oil in it. The oil was a mixture of
sandalwood, camphor, orange, and rose.

Rowan began to anoint Tara, who recited as she was anointed. “I am a child of the Goddess, and I ask her to bless me.”

Rowan touched her thumb to Tara’s forehead. “What say you, Child?”

“May my mind be blessed so that I can accept the wisdom of the Goddess.”

Rowan touched oil to Tara’s eyelids and asked, “What say you, Child?”

“May my eyes be blessed, so I can see my way clearly upon this path.”

Rowan touched Tara’s nose, “What say you, Child?”

“May my nose be blessed, so I can breathe in the essence of all that is Divine.”

Rowan anointed Tara’s lips, “What say you, Child?”

“May my lips be blessed, so I may always speak with honor and respect.”
Rowan touched oil to Tara’s breastbone. “What say you, Child?”

“May my heart be blessed, so I may love and be loved.”

Then Tara held out her hands so Rowan could place oil on the back of them. “What say you, Child?”

“May my hands be blessed, so that I may use them to heal and help others.”

Next Rowan touched oil just below Tara’s belly button. “What say you, Child?”

“May my womb be blessed, so that I may honor the creation of life.”

And finally kneeling to Tara’s feet, she placed oil on the soles of them. “What say you, Child?”

“May my feet be blessed, so that I may walk side by side with the Divine.”

Rowan then kissed Tara on both cheeks and stepped back while she spoke, “Mother Goddess, answers to all mysteries and yet mysteries unanswered; in this place of power I open myself to your essence. In this place and in this time I am changed,” Tara closed her eyes as she recited the word and
unbeknownst to her, she began to glow with energy. “I breathe your energies into my body, commingling, blending, mixing them with mine, that I may see the divine in nature, nature in the divine, and divinity within myself and all else.”

Rowan turned to Willow, who began again with the supplication, “I am a child of the Goddess, and I ask her to bless me.”

When Willow was completely anointed, Rowan kissed her on both cheeks. She moved back to the altar and placed the bowl on it. She turned and watched Willow with an affectionate smile as she finished reciting, “Mother Goddess, answers to all mysteries and yet mysteries unanswered; in this place of power I open myself to your essence. In this place and in this time I am changed,” Willow stood straight and proud, quite aware of the glow that both she and Tara were giving off together. “I breathe your energies into my body, commingling, blending, mixing them with mine, that I may see the divine in nature, nature in the divine, and divinity within myself and all else.”

“You both have chosen to walk the path of the Goddess, to listen and obey; to teach and give guidance, to nurture and love. Most especially, to fight to protect those who cannot protect themselves, and for the greater good of all, even in the face of immeasurable odds. Do you understand and accept this path?”

“We do,” Willow and Tara answered.

Rowan nodded. “Then with this understanding and this willing pledge before the Goddess, I Lady Rowan Kelly, the High Priestess of this coven, do hereby welcome you, Willow Rosenberg, and you, Tara Maclay into The Coven at The Grove. Welcome, Sisters, merry meet and merry part and merry meet again.”

Rowan held her arms wide and smiled as she hugged each girl. Dana appeared with robes of lavender. Each with a deep wine colored trim along the sleeves and the neck, as well as thick black Celtic knot stitching that matched the robes worn by the rest of the coven. Dana took a moment to help the pair into their new robes.
Once in their robes, Dana hugged them as well and with a wink and a grin, greeting them. “Welcome, Sisters, merry meet and merry part and merry meet again.”

Willow and Tara turned to face the coven still glowing. Giles, in a robe of light blue, was the first to welcome them, and the rest of the coven followed suit. Once everyone had been greeted, Rowan gave Willow and Tara the honor of dispelling the circle and leading the coven back to the hall for the celebration.

TBC…
Chapter 33 - The Art of War

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst Rating: PG but you may want a hanky at the end

Setting: The Grove - Tucson

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters from BtVS, they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved this is simply for my own pleasure.

Feedback: Always – all kinds, but constructive is preferred.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I promised this would not go unfinished, and I meant it! Thanks to everyone who is reading this and my never-ending gratitude goes to my wonderful betas Julie aka Ariel and Richard aka Azirahael for their help and support. I have decided that since I also have “Penny Arcade” that I’m working on, and I want to work on chapters for both stories, so I plan to limit myself to one chapter each and try to post to each once a month until further notice. Music for this chapter is as follows: Dead Sara “Dead Sara”, Florence and the Machine “MTV Unplugged”; The Black Keys “El Camino”, Explosions in the Sky “Take Care, Take Care, Take Care”, and Snow Patrol “Fallen Empires”.

Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent’s fate.
Confront them with annihilation, and they will then survive; plunge them into a deadly situation, and they will then live. When people fall into danger, they are then able to strive for victory.

- Sun Tzu - The Art of War

During their meeting with Lady Rowan prior to the start of the evening, she had explained how both parts of the ceremony would work, as well as what their places would be at the feast. As Tara and Willow led the coven back into the main hall, the ripple of excitement raced through the coven as they celebrated the induction of the two new Sisters. Willow and Tara sat to Rowan’s right, while Dana and Giles sat to her left. Rowan’s seat was placed at the center of the most ornately carved of three very large and highly polished oak tables. They all were carved with the same knotwork that adorned the robes of the coven.

The tables had runners down the middle that were designed with the same knotting from the robes. Each dyed in the same lavender, wine, and black colors that represented the coven. Against the backdrop of dimmed lights and large pillar candles spread over the three tables, shadows played merrily in the corners, and along the walls like children playing hide ‘n go seek. The room felt magical and inviting. On either side behind the tables for the coven, were ordinary tables that held platter upon platter of all sorts of delicious foods to choose from.

Everyone seated at the main table with Rowan was served first, following feast traditions. Rowan said a blessing and led the toast welcoming Willow and Tara once again to the coven. Once she was seated and her table served, the rest of the coven made their way to the tables to serve themselves. As everyone began to eat, the room was filled with the quiet sounds of cutlery and plates, and soon small areas of relaxed chatter slowly grew. Several members of the coven made sure the group at Rowan’s table was well taken care of during their meal.

As the evening wore on, the ceremonial formality faded away in favor of a more casual and easy going atmosphere. Finally, the food had all been cleared away from the tables, but some mead – honey wine – was still making its rounds. Much like most things at The Grove, when possible the coven made it themselves. There were no hives at The Grove, instead, the coven had a standing agreement with a local beekeeper; bartering their organically grown vegetables for honey. As the mead flowed, people grew more relaxed, and of course, more social.

Conversations in small clusters ran the length tables, with some members moving up and down along the tables to speak to one another. Once the meal had concluded and the evening had become more social, Willow and Tara moved their chairs into a position where Tara could sit with her legs draped over Willow’s lap and one arm resting around Willow’s shoulders. Willow had her arms securely around Tara’s waist, holding her close.
Coven members that the girls had become close with, had moved chairs to join them in conversation, and when the girls were approached by others, they both spoke cheerily to their fellow witches. It became apparent though, that Tara was doing most of the talking for the pair, just as she had been since the end of the vision quest. This did not go unnoticed by Dana. Rowan and Giles had already borne witness to this unusual turn of events.

Dana leaned over to Giles and whispered softly. “Is it me, or is Willow unusually quiet?”

“Ah. So you’ve noticed that as well?” He smiled. “When I brought them their breakfast, after the ritual this morning, they were like this. They share a look, and then Tara speaks for them. I spoke with Rowan, and she seems to think some of it may be a side effect from the… whatever… exactly happened with them during their vision quest,” Giles said.

Dana nodded. “Did you notice Tara’s stutter. Or should I say the lack of?”

Giles raised his eyebrow as he smiled. “Indeed… her confidence, it seems has greatly increased. It’s not only happening with the members she has gotten to know and befriend during her stay here either. In the past, she would have been far more uncomfortable in the social settings like this, and her stutter would have become more pronounced with the people she didn’t know well.”

“But it doesn’t appear that Willow has become shyer, it’s like she is just calmer, more at peace and less nervous than she was somehow. If you think about it, in a way that’s a form of confidence she didn’t have before either. It’s almost like they’re linked in some way.” Dana observed.

Giles cocked his head to one side, as he and watched Willow and Tara talking with Marisol, Tomas, and Ricky. Marisol said something that made the girls laugh, and as the conversation resumed Willow hugged Tara to her. Without any seeming self-consciousness, Tara dropped a kiss on Willow’s cheek and began to play with Willow’s hair affectionately, before she continued to chat on animatedly with the small group.

“It would seem you’re quite right, Dana,” Giles replied.

“Will wonders never cease…” Dana mused. “Do you think it will be permanent?”

“We shall see,” Giles responded with a smile.
Rowan turned to the pair, having overheard bits and pieces of their conversation. She had also been watching the girls throughout the evening; observing as they interacted with each other and the rest of the coven. When she had met with them earlier in the day, she had noticed this change in their dynamic but was completely unconcerned by it.

“What are you two hens clucking about?” She said to Dana and Giles, not unkindly.

“Well, My Lady, we…uh, well we were talking about the change in Willow and Tara,” Dana answered.

“And?” Rowan asked.

“I just thought it was unusual. Considering their personalities before, and what they were like when I first met them, I would have thought their roles would have been reversed. More in line with what I already knew them to be like, My Lady,” Dana replied.

“It is interesting, isn’t it? They were already so close to one another before the ritual; it has simply brought their relationship to another level. The security they’re now feeling, within themselves and one another not just as lovers but friends, it’s carrying over. To me, Sister, it does make sense. Willow can slow down and just be, and Tara no longer feels like she has to hide herself away. Ultimately, Sister, they are just… good for one another,” Rowan said.

“I concur with Rowan, it’s not unusual for witches that practice together and are…intimate, to blossom as it were, and have their bond grow deeper as they continue to practice. Besides, Willow and Tara are young and still growing as women, perhaps this is just another step in their evolution towards the exceptional women and witches they will become.” Giles added thoughtfully.

“Rupert is right Dana; we know they are more than special. We’ve seen it in their time here with us; now they aren’t afraid to let everyone else see what we already know,” Rowan concluded with a smile.

Dana watched the girls for a moment longer before nodding in agreement. She saw but love, happiness, and calm in their auras.

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The evening ticked away, and as the clock edged closer to midnight, the girls rose, made their goodnights and left the remaining members of the coven to continue socializing. In no particular hurry, they made their way back to their rooms. Arriving at their door, Tara let them in through her rooms.

They moved quietly into the bedroom, gently undressed one another, leaving their new robes neatly hanging behind the door, before making their way to the shower. No words were spoken as they reverently bathed one another; washing away the little dabs of ceremonial oil still left on their skin. Hands moved lightly over silky skin – not to arouse – but simply to soothe.

They knew that tomorrow they would be returning to Sunnydale. They would begin to train the witches that had made their way to Buffy’s door; bringing Giles, Dana, and Claude with them as well. The many months they had spent at The Grove, all the hard work, all the spells learned, and the hours upon hours of training would now be put to the final test.

The time had come to prepare for the fight.

Leaving the warmth of the shower, and having gone through their nightly routines, they crawled naked under clean, crisp sheets. Willow and Tara lay looking at one another, reading each other on a deeper level. They had no need to speak; their souls spoke loud and clear to one another, saying all that they needed to say.

Tara stroked Willow’s cheek with the back of her hand, before leaning in to kiss her tenderly. Tara’s hand trailed down Willow’s neck and over the smooth, pale skin of Willow’s shoulder before she rolled Willow onto her back. Willow brushed Tara’s bangs out of her eyes. Her arms snaked around under Tara’s arms as she held herself above Willow. Starting with a slow grind of her hips, Tara kissed Willow deeply. With wandering hands and infinite care, they began to make love for the next several hours. Touching, tasting, reaffirming and drawing their strength from one another.

In the half-light just beginning to brighten their room, shortly before dawn they fell asleep wrapped tightly together. Each knew this might be the last bit of uninterrupted, peaceful rest they would be getting for some time to come. With bodies exhausted by loving, and free of worry, they slept.

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The morning had come all too early. Having once again boxed their important belongings up to send to Sunnydale, Willow helped as they were loaded in the back of the truck that Giles and Claude
would be driving. Once they had the truck all loaded up, the pair would then start the drive out just
after noon. The flight that Willow, Tara, and Dana were taking didn’t leave until 5:20 pm and arrived
in Sunnydale at 6:45 pm.

Willow and Tara had put a few odds and ends in the backpack with Willow’s laptop; it being the
only thing they planned to take with them on the plane. Dana had even put her belongings in the
truck along with the plants Claude and Giles had decided could potentially be most useful. Dana kept
a small bag and a book to go with her, and after the group had lunch together, they saw Giles and
Claude off.

Willow and Tara decided to nap some before their flight since they hadn’t got much sleep before
going up to pack the things they had brought or acquired during their stay at The Grove. In the end,
it worked well, their boxes plus Dana’s two would serve to help pen in the plants and keep them
from sliding around the bed of the truck.

******

Dana spent her last few hours making her way around the compound saying goodbye. Once she had
made her rounds of the coven, she went to find Rowan. She wanted to spend her last few hours at
The Grove with her mentor and friend. They had been discussing Dana’s dreams for weeks now,
and Dana hoped to glean any new insight into them that she could, before leaving for Sunnydale.

Before Tara had arrived, Dana had dreamed of her. She had dreamt of a young blonde witch that
would change everything – change Willow – and bring power with her. She had also been having
disturbing dreams of death, and dirt. Knowing now from Giles that potential Slayers from around the
world had been turning up dead, Dana felt it was safe to say that her dreams of death were related.
They held warnings about things that were coming, shades of old evils to fight against.

One thing Dana hadn’t counted on was how close she would become in such a short time with Tara.
The effortless affection she felt for both Tara and Willows was simple to understand – they were
easy to love. When Willow first arrived at The Grove, Dana had been a shoulder for Willow to cry
on, a confidante and friend. This is what made her feel she had to protect Willow, her sweet
vulnerability, but beneath that vulnerability hid a core of steel.

But the camaraderie that had developed with Tara was that of equals. During her training Tara, the
power she sensed deep within her, let Dana know the truth about what an incomparable warrior Tara
was becoming having now been given the chance, and that she would be unlike anything anyone
had seen in generations. It just reminded her of Rowan’s promise that Tara would, in fact, be
Willow’s equal, and she was.
She spent her remaining hours with Rowan talking about her feelings for the girls, about what her role should be in their coven, and to them. Rowan had told her that there were now three other witches waiting in Sunnydale. Two had been there for some time, and one more had arrived yesterday morning. As it stood, including themselves, Willow and Tara would be starting with a coven of seven.

Rowan reassured Dana as best she could, though neither knew exactly what Dana would be facing in Sunnydale. Rowan reminded her that if she needed anything, she was just a phone call away, day or night. Together they had gone through Rowan’s personal library and sent a box with Giles of things they thought would be useful along with Giles.

The time slipped by them quickly, and before long there was a knock at the door. When Dana opened the door to Rowan’s office, they found Willow and Tara standing hand in hand, their faces solemn and a little pale. Willow had her backpack slung over her shoulder, which she set on the floor as they entered.

“My Lady,” Willow said. She swallowed several times before she continued. “My Lady, I just wanted to say thank you, thank you so much for… just everything.” Her eyes began to glisten with tears, and her lower lip trembled.

Her voice clear but soft, Tara said, “My Lady, she’s right. You gave us back to one another – you gave me My Willow – my family back. You made it possible for us to move forward in a way we couldn’t, and no one else was able to help us do. “Thank you” just isn’t enough.”

Willow rushed into Rowan’s arms and hugged her fiercely. Rowan stroked Willow’s back as her tears finally broke loose and she sobbed.

“Hush, child, hush,” Rowan cooed as she held her. “Willow, child, it has been my singular pleasure to help you both in any way that I could.”

Rowan looked at Tara’s tear-stained face, and lifted her arm, inviting her into the embrace. Without hesitation, Tara stepped forward and was welcomed into the bear hug by both Rowan and Willow. Dana bowed her head, turning away from what felt like a private moment.

Rowan kissed the tops of the girls’ heads before letting them go. Willow and Tara stood before her with their heads down and sniffling. Rowan placed a warm hand under both chins and lifted their faces to her. Smiling affectionately, she kissed each of them on the forehead.
“You two mean more to me than I ever would have imagined possible. Having you here, getting to know you have been nothing less than a joy for me. I guess I was just at the right place at the right time, and lucky enough to have you both grace my life,” Rowan said. “So the feeling is mutual girls, very mutual. I won’t say goodbye to you, because we will see each other again, I know it. So I’ll say merry meet and merry part and merry meet again.”

Smiling sadly Willow and Tara replied in unison. “Merry meet and merry part and merry meet again, My Lady.”

The girls simply nodded and wiped at the tears on their faces. Everyone finally turned back to Dana, who had managed to fade quietly into the background. Dana looked at them with a questioning expression, Willow and Tara nodded solemnly and moved back towards the door. Willow stopped long enough to grab her backpack, and then she and Tara were gone.

Dana paused for a moment before following them and pulled an envelope from her own bag. She held it for a moment and took a deep breath before she handed it, Rowan. Rowan looked at the envelope and then at Dana with a raised eyebrow.

“If... if anything should happen... those are my wishes. I know you’ll follow them,” Dana said quietly.

Rowan smiled sadly and nodded slowly.

“She said, ‘Merry meet and merry part and merry meet again, My Lady,’” Dana said.

Rowan replied softly. “Merry meet and merry part and merry meet again, Sister.”

With a quick embrace, Dana bolted out the door and off down the hallway as well. Rowan sagged against her desk, holding Dana’s envelope tightly to her chest. Sadness, fear, and worry were written all over her face as the brave façade broke and tears flowed freely.

When she finally stopped, she looked at Dana’s letter and saw the envelope stained with her tears. She moved around her desk and tried to pat it dry. Tossing it aside, Rowan cradled her head in her hands, for now, it was from that fear she cried for her loved ones.

TBC…
Chapter 34 - Homecoming

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst/Drama/Smut Rating: PG

Setting: Sunnydale – The Summers House

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters or dialogue that is borrowed from BtVS; they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy et al. All original characters are in no way connected to them except by me in this forum. No money is involved; this is simply for my own pleasure, and hopefully, the people reading too.

Feedback: Like silence in a movie theater – it’s golden.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: This note is a little more important than the others I normally leave since it serves as a reminder. I mentioned early on, that at some point I was going to play heavily with the episode timelines to suit me. Up to this point, it has just been pushing things further out than they happened on the show. Well, welcome aboard because here it comes. I may use bits and pieces of episodes as backstory in this and upcoming chapters. What I use may not be in the order it was done on the show, so don’t expect that. Ok, you have been forewarned, lol. I’m also unveiling the new banner for the story, so pretend there was a drum roll. As always I’d like to thank you for reading and Team Dry Heat (that never fails to amuse me): Crystal aka CYTEACH; Julie aka Ariel, and Richard aka Azirahael – you guys are the best. Italics are for emphasis. Music for this chapter Ane Brun – “It All Starts With One”, “Spending Time with Morgan”, “A Temporary Dive”, and “Changes of the Seasons”, and Nina Kinert – “Pets & Friends”.

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[Image of the banner for the story]
All the great voyagers return
Homeward as on an arc of thought;
Home like a ruby beacon burns
As they crest wind, scale wave, soar air;
All the great voyagers return.

“The Homecoming” - Barbara Howe

The plane touched down in Sunnydale fifteen minutes early. The flight had been a short one, at just under two hours, and the plane was a ‘puddle jumper’, the smallest commercial plane available; it was almost identical to the plane the girls had flown on to Sunnydale months ago. When the plane taxied to a stop and everyone was given the clear to disembark, Tara, Willow, and Dana waited for everyone else to get off. The flight only had about thirty people on it, so they had been able to sit wherever they liked.

Once they were all out on the tarmac, Willow closed her eyes and paused to just breathe in the air. Tara slipped her hand into Willow’s and gently raised her hand to place a soft kiss on the back. Willow opened her eyes and smiled at both Tara and Dana. They could feel the change in the air; it was heavy with moisture from the sea and magickal energy from the Hellmouth. Pointing to the stairs that led off the runway, she shifted her backpack and Dana led the way inside.

They were the last to come out of the door into the cooler air of the terminal, and since they had no bags to pick up, the three made their way right to the doors of the airport. Standing off to the side, Willow texted Buffy to let her know their flight had landed early. Buffy texted that Xander was already on his way, so the little group decided to wait in the cool of the airport and people watch.

They didn’t have to wait long before Xander wandered into the airport and looked around. Willow hopped up and ran to him with a squeal. Xander looked in the direction of the sound, catching her up and swinging her around in a hug.

“Will!” Xander laughed holding a giggling Willow in his arms.

“Ooo, Xander! It’s so good to see you!” Willow squealed excitedly.
Willow brought him over to Dana and Tara. Xander immediately pulled Tara into a warm hug. Then holding her at arm’s length, he tugged affectionately at her shortened locks. He cocked his head to the side and studied her for a moment before he nodded in approval.

“Well, hey there pretty lady, look at you,” he said with a smile.

“What do you think, Xan?” Tara asked as she pushed her bangs out of her eyes.

“I think you look great,” he said with a squeeze of her shoulders.

Xander turned to look at Dana, with her unruly blonde hair and golden, cat-like eyes. She stood taller than he did. “Well, who do we have here, Will?”

“Xander, this is Dana. She helped train Tara and me at the coven. When we started making plans to come back to Sunnydale, well, she felt that she should come with us. So here she is. Claude will be coming with Giles; they haven’t gotten here yet have they?” Willow inquired.

“Claude? We have another guy?” Xander asked hopefully, shaking hands with Dana.

“Umm, no it’s short for Claudia,” Tara said with a smile.

“What do you mean another?” Willow asked as they made their way out to his car.

“Well, Jacob showed up looking for you before the twins did, and then there’s Andrew, but I don’t think you can really count him as a guy,” he said.

“Andrew? You mean Warren’s little butt monkey?” Tara asked incredulously. “When did he and Jonathan show back up?”

Willow and Xander both snickered.
“Yup, that be the one,” Xander said rocking up on the balls of his feet. “He’s more of an unwilling guest than any real use anyway. Jonathan was with him, but now he’s… not.”

“Explain the ‘not’ part. Wait, do I really want you to explain the ‘not’?” Willow said with raised eyebrows.

“Well, about a week after Jacob showed up looking for you two, we found Andrew when we were out patrolling. Uh, how much do you know about what’s been going on here in lovely old Sunnydale since you left?” he asked seriously.

Willow and Tara looked at one another, then at Dana who shrugged.

“I know what you know,” Dana replied to the questioning glance.

“Which means not so much. We know potential slayers have been turning up dead mysteriously all over the world, Giles told us that. We know there’s some big bad brewing, and it’s old and mean and not here to snuggle,” Tara replied.

“Uh, yeah, well that’s a good start. Maybe I should let Buffy fill you in. Are you folks hungry? Let’s stop and pick up some food on the way home. How does pizza sound?” Xander smiled, as he dodged away from the subject. Xander opened the passenger door for Dana and the girls slid into the backseat cuddling up immediately.

The girls shot knowing looks at one another as they recognized Xander’s ‘avoid-y dance’ for what it was – there was something he didn’t want to tell them. Dana watched Xander curiously, as he kept his gaze averted while he fiddled with the radio before pulling out to head back towards Sunnydale. Tara slipped her hand into Willow’s and squeezed reassuringly.

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“Are we trying to feed a small army or what?” Dana asked looking at the boxes of pizza split between her and Tara’s laps, and the dozen bags of drinks and salads Willow had around her ankles and in her lap.

Xander smirked. “You could say that. Potentials can eat, and we have to feed everyone at Buffy’s. I can guarantee you there will be at least three potentials there as guards.”
“Guards?” Tara asked in surprise.

“Yeah, we have to keep Dawn and your ever-growing witchy fan club safe, although Jacob seems to be pretty handy in that department. And here we are, home again, home again,” Xander replied.

Everyone got out of the car and started walking towards the door. Dana and the girls stopped and looked at one another then back at the house. Xander didn’t notice he was now walking alone as he passed through the protection spell that had been cast around the Summers’ house. The spell shimmered like a soap bubble briefly when he crossed through it.

When he got to the door he realized he was alone and turned around. Tara held her hand to the spell’s boundary, creating what looked very much like a glass door. She pushed and it swung inwards as though it were on hinges. After Dana and Willow passed through, she entered and in effect, shut the door she had created.

The door to the house was yanked open and a slight young man with chestnut colored hair and striking grey eyes rushed out, looking panicked. He rushed past Xander and immediately started to draw energy into a crackling orb in his hand. Tara quickened her pace, putting herself between him and Willow, and literally took his orb from his hand, dispersing the energy.

“I think you really need to calm down before someone gets hurt accidentally,” Tara said with calm authority. “I’m Tara, and I’m the one that breached your spell. You must be Jacob?”

The young man nodded curtly, looking between Tara, Willow, and Dana with a wary eye. Willow stepped forward with her hand out.

“Hi, I’m Willow. This is Tara, my girlfriend, and that’s Dana. You were the first one to arrive looking for Tara and me, right? We’ve been looking forward to meeting you,” Willow smiled brightly.

“I’m so sorry, My Ladies,” Jacob said his eyes wide in recognition. “I didn’t mean to offend you, I had no idea you had already arrived. I simply felt the breach, and panicked,” Jacob apologized and ducked his head in respect.

“That’s a solid spell, Jacob,” Tara encouraged. “We can reinforce it later. What have you been using to power it?”
“Andrew,” Jacob replied with a smirk.

“Andrew?” The girls asked in unison, looking at each other in dismay.

“I helped Giles find the spell that allows Andrew to charge several large quartz stones that we have stashed around the perimeter of the house, like rechargeable batteries,” Jacob replied with pride.

“Nice, so do you power it at all?” Willow asked.

“Once a day I have to key it to me, but that’s all. I act like a human alarm system should it ever be breached. We use Andrew as an ongoing power source since he doesn’t really do anything else but whine and eat hot pockets. Faith thought it would put his “bitch ass” to good use, as she put it.” Jacob smiled and used his hands to form air quotation marks around Faith’s description of Andrew.

“Faith?” Willow squeaked, looking at Tara incredulously.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Tara muttered. Her look of annoyance matched Willow’s.

“Hey, guys the food’s getting cold. Let’s take this inside and you can compare notes with Jake while we eat,” Xander suggested. He threw a glance over his shoulder and tried to hurry into the house.

“Oh, you so have some explaining to do, mister. Xander, you didn’t tell us Faith and Andrew were here!” Willow yelled as she whacked him on the arm when she walked by, then Tara cuffed him on the back of the head, and Dana who punched him in the shoulder.

“Hey!” he griped at Dana.

She smiled wickedly and said, “It seemed like it might be deserved, and I didn’t want to be left out of the fun.”

“Great, now you too,” he rolled his eyes. “Okay, okay. I may have left that tiny little detail out, but I distinctly remember saying that we should talk once we got back here,” Xander said as he went out
of his way to avoid any further blows from angry women.

“No, you said Buffy would explain. So what’s your excuse now?” Willow groused.

“Aw, C’mon, Will! Cut me some slack, there’s been a lot going on, and honestly, Faith was not on my radar,” Xander pleaded as he walked into the dining room to set down still warm boxes of pizza.

“Really? I didn’t think she was ever off of anyone’s radar,” Tara said.

“That’s all part of my charm, Blondie,” Faith said as she sauntered into the dining room.

Everyone turned to face Faith. Jacob swallowed rapidly and blushed before exiting quickly; Tara looked at Faith and raised an eyebrow in silent question at his behavior. Willow crossed her arms over her chest while narrowing her eyes. Dana eased off to the side, watching closely as everyone in the room became tense.

“Long time no see, Red. How’s it hangin’?” Faith asked leaning casually against the door frame, one hand on her hip. “Is that pizza?” She asked, peeking around the two women that blocked her view of the pizza-laden table.

“Yeah, it is. There should be enough for everyone, is Buff around?” Xander asked. He scooted out of the other doorway and away from whatever was about to happen between Faith, Willow, and Tara.

“Yeah, B’s out back with the little Slayer tykes,” Faith said, holding eye contact with Willow.

“So when did you show up, Faith?” Willow asked her voice flat.

“I played taxi to the twins a few days ago. Plus ‘The Fanged Wonder’ thought I might wanna get in on some of this,” Faith smirked.

“You mean Angel sent you? And to ‘get in’ on what exactly?” Willow asked.
“Why didn’t he just send them on their own?” Tara asked suspiciously, putting her hands on her hips. “What do they need you for?”

Faith eyed Tara closely before she realized who Tara was. Her eyes widened. “Whoa, you definitely got in touch with your inner butch, didn’t you?” She said moving towards the table opening pizza boxes to see what kind they were, picking up one with extra pepperoni. “Fang boy said something was gonna go down here in Sunny D, so here I am. ‘Sides, the twins – they don’t talk.”

Willow’s hands clenched into fists and she stepped towards Faith. “Watch your mouth, Faith,” She growled.

Tara wrapped her arm around Willow’s waist and pulled her close to soothe her. “What are you leaving out, Faith? Why don’t they talk?” Tara asked ignoring the jibe.

Faith took a breath and continued with a little less attitude. “I dunno why they don’t talk, you can ask ‘em yourself. They’re around here somewhere. They showed up in L.A., Queenie saw ‘em comin’ and told me I had to be the one to bring ‘em ‘cause she knew they needed to be here with the two of you.”

“Interesting…” Dana spoke softly for the first time.

“And who might this tall drink of water be?” Faith asked looking at Dana a little too intently.

“This is Dana; she came with us from The Grove. You may not want to piss her off Faith, she helped train Willow and me. In combat magicks,” Tara smirked.

Faith raised her eyebrows when she looked at Dana again, who narrowed her eyes and rose to her full height to peer down stoically at Faith. Looking up at Dana, Faith laughed and winked at her, then eyeing Tara once more, Faith smirked. “Things is changin’ all over, ain’t they, Blondie?” she said as she plopped down in a chair holding the pizza box in her lap.

Willow was still shooting daggers at Faith when the back door opened and slammed shut.

“Tara! Willow! Where are you?” Dawn yelled.
“In here,” they replied in unison.

Dawn squealed and rushed in capturing both girls in a big three-way hug. In minutes, Buffy stood in the doorway smiling. The door opened again and several other bodies filtered into the house, following the sounds of chatter and the scent of food.

“Alright, Dawn, let them go already,” Buffy teased. “It’s my turn for hugs,” She laughed hugging her best friends tightly.

Willow sat, still watching Faith warily. Tara sat down in Willow’s lap, pulling pizza boxes towards her, looking for the one with pepperoni and black olives for her and Willow to share. Finding her box, she chatted with Buffy while she ate. No one paid any attention when the front door opened. Two more additions joined the growing group of people trying to fit in the small dining room.

“Pizza! I’m starving!” Claude said, announcing hers and Giles’ arrival.

Someone had managed to bring plates and napkins in at some point during the initial hellos and chatter. The dining room was quickly filling with more bodies than it could hold comfortably. Buffy whistled loudly to get everyone’s attention.

“Why don’t we migrate into the living room, there’s more room, and it looks like we have a few new faces and introductions to make,” Buffy said picking up her box of pizza and soda.

The group shuffled into the living room, while Dawn and a girl with shoulder length chocolate brown hair; and pierced nose and eyebrow passed out drinks. Willow and Tara took the loveseat, as people started to fill up the space around the coffee table holding the pizza boxes.

Fifteen people were spread around the living room, all munching on pizza. A boy and a girl sat off to the side along with Buffy, Jacob, Claude and Dana in chairs. Xander, Dawn, and Giles had claimed the sofa. The girl with the piercings and a light-skinned African American girl with pretty green eyes sat on the floor next to one another; Faith had pushed Andrew out of the recliner, so he joined the group on the floor.

Murmurs of “Can you pass me…” and “What’s on that one?” filled the room while everyone settled down to eat. Eventually, the meal began to wind down as everyone ate their fill.
Buffy wiped her hands on her napkin and looked around the room. “Will, why don’t you make your introduction and then I’ll make mine,” she said with a smile.

Tara handed Willow a napkin, and she nodded wiping her mouth. “Sure, well that’s pretty easy,” Willow pointed at Dana. “On the other side of Tara, we have Dana, and next to her is Claude. They came back with us from The Grove, and for those of you who don’t know, I’m Willow and this is Tara,” She said with a smile and a wink at Tara. Tara took her hand and kissed the back of it smiling.

Buffy smiled affectionately at the pair. “Okay, here on the floor next to you, Will, we have Charity, next to her is Veda,” Buffy pointed to the girl with the shoulder length brown hair and facial piercings, then the African American girl. “You guys already met Jake,” she said smiling. “Over here we have the twins, Livy and Stephan. The twins don’t speak, they hear fine though, just so you guys know,” The boy and girl with strawberry blonde hair, and sweet, cherubic faces grinned shyly and waved. “Then we have Andrew over here,” Buffy pointed to the short young man with blonde highlights, “Oh, and hiding over there in the corner in the recliner is Faith; she’s the other slayer,” Buffy said with a jerk of her thumb in Faith’s direction.

Faith rolled her eyes and muttered, “Gee, thanks B.”

Willow gave a little wave to the room, and Tara nodded, replying in unison, “Hi.”

Charity made a point of reaching her hand out for Willow to shake. “Hi, it’s nice to meet you.”

Willow shook her hand politely, but when she had to tug her hand back she shot Buffy an uncomfortable look. Tara briefly narrowed her eyes at the girl, and Dawn gave Charity a not so subtle kick in the leg. Claude and Faith snickered and then looked at one another.

Buffy shot Charity a disapproving glare, then looked at Willow and Tara said, “The twins and Jake are here for you and the coven. Veda and Charity are potentials, as I bet you guessed.”

Willow rested her hand on Tara’s thigh and sat back. “Will and I are here with our coven of witches that we’ll be training. We’re also here to help Buffy in any way we can. Since it seems like some of you have some excess energy, it would be great if you could help Claude unload the plants and herbs she brought with us,” Tara said looking pointedly at Charity. “She’s our herbalist, or will be,” She said with a smile.

Willow nodded. “Since it’s still early, once you get all the plants arranged outside, Claude, why
“Great!” Charity said with a little too much enthusiasm and a big smile, not taking her eyes off of Willow.

“Um, I meant the coven, Charity,” Willow said as politely as she could.

“Oh,” she said as her smile faltered.

“You don’t have time anyway,” Buffy replied, further shooting Charity down. “Once you guys help unload whatever Giles and Claude need help with, Faith will take you back to the barracks. You two are done with your rotation here, who’s up next?”

“Vi and Tammy,” Charity answered.

“Okay, remind Tammy not to forget her pillow and stuffed lion this time, I won’t go back for it at 4 am again,” Buffy said brusquely.

“Barracks?” Willow and Tara asked in unison.

“Do you guys do that all of the time?” Veda asked.

“What?” They replied, then looked at each other and giggled.

“Yes, they do,” Dana answered for them with an affectionate smile.

“I think it’s cute,” Claude added.

“Me too,” Dawn said happily.

“Since when do you have barracks, Buff?” Willow asked with a grin.
“People have started leaving town – lots of people. The building next to The Magic Box has been empty for ages now and it used to be a gym,” Buffy replied.

“So we kinda liberated it, yo,” Faith interjected. “We needed the space, it has showers an’ whatnot, so Xan Man hooked it up. He got it all set up; water, electric and bunk beds for the Slayer tykes. He even got the little brats cable.”

Buffy shrugged. “It beats having another twenty plus people all crashing around here. Once Jake showed up, he put a cloaking and protection spell on the building to keep them safe, and he and the twins stay here. Faith stays there at night, along with Andrew and Anya, and we pull two girls for three-day shifts here at the house for added protection with me. They train with me while they’re here too.”

“You have that many girls?” Dana said amazed.

“Wow,” Claude whispered.

“The only thing it don’t have is a kitchen, so Anya gets to play ‘Mrs. Garrett’. Gotta feed the little tykes, ya know?” Faith smirked.

“Several girls already had watchers and were training. Buffy is using their expertise as well to train those still at the barracks,” Giles said. “Buffy has also informed me that the twins and Jake rotate casting the spells there; they work together to keep the signature from staying the same for too long.”

Tara nodded. “Making it harder for another witch to pinpoint the caster, which in turn it makes it harder to find the location of the potentials. So far it’s working, and everyone is staying safe?”

Buffy nodded again. “They train all day, either at the barracks or with either Faith or me. Sometimes both,” she said solemnly. Making eye contact with Willow and Tara, Buffy added. “We’ll talk later. I need to fill you both in on lots of things.”

“They seem to keep coming too. With people leaving, we’ve, uh, “liberated” futon mattresses for padding, and sleeping bags,” Xander said. “I’m surprised by the few that have stayed. The pizza place is one, the grocery store and the drug store too.”
“Seems like they’ll be the last to go, but they will go, Buffy,” Tara said sadly.

“Yeah, they will,” Buffy replied calmly. “That’s what will be safest.”

“The more that leave, the closer it will be,” Dana added morosely.

“And we’ll be ready,” Willow and Tara said in unison.

“We have to be,” Buffy said firmly.

Claude hopped up clapping her hands. “Then let’s get started, come on girls. Let’s do this!”

The group dispersed; people went to start their tasks. Dawn, Andrew, and Xander picked up empty pizza boxes and generally cleaned up. Willow, Tara, and Buffy stayed in the living room, waiting until everyone had left. Buffy seemed to be lost in her thoughts, her expression blank as Willow and Tara watched her.

“Buff,” Willow said quietly, trying to draw Buffy back from her thoughts.

Buffy looked at Willow and Tara; her eyes troubled and pained. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“We can only do our best, and hope that it’s enough, Buffy,” Tara replied.

Buffy nodded. “You know not everyone will make it; it’s inevitable.”

“We know,” the girls answered.

“So where’s Spike, Buffy? I thought he would be skulking around by now,” Willow asked with a smile.

“Spike’s gone,” Buffy replied, as her face darkened.
“Where did he go?” Willow asked.

“No, I mean he’s gone – dusted.” Buffy looked up at them.

Both girls sat in shock for a moment, surprised that someone had finally gotten the best of Spike after all this time.

“How?” they asked in unison.

“You know, you guys have really got to stop doing that,” Buffy said with a sad smile, taking a breath she continued. “It was Dawn. She overheard Xander and I arguing about him after… well, you know, and she went to his crypt. She didn’t tell me for days after she’d done it.”

“Oh my God,” Willow breathed and looked at Tara.

“She was so angry, and he was drinking. She cornered him and asked if it was true, he started crying and trying to apologize. She said he didn’t even realize that she was staking him,” Buffy said softly, looking at her feet.

“We know,” they said.

Buffy’s head snapped up, confusion clear in her expression. “Did she call you?”

“We saw it. We saw Dawn in tears, but we didn’t see it until a few days ago, and it made no sense until now,” Tara said.

“I don’t understand,” Buffy said.

“Part of what we had to do before we joined the coven was a vision quest,” Willow said. “We saw it during the vision quest.”
“More accurately, we saw Dawn in tears, and dust falling all around her. We had no idea what it meant though,” Tara added quietly.

Buffy sniffled and looked away, the muscle in her jaw jumping as she grit her teeth trying to keep control of her emotions.

“You loved him, didn’t you?” Willow asked gently.

“No…I don’t know…maybe. After what he tried to do I didn’t trust him – I just couldn’t deal with him,” Buffy laughed grimly. “Dawn did what I’ve never seemed to be able to do.”

Willow and Tara went to Buffy; Willow wrapped her arms around Buffy in a hug. “It’s for the best, Buff. There was a reason for it.”

Tara stroked Buffy’s hair. “We don’t see it now, but there had to have been a reason it was Dawn. Has she talked about it anymore?”

Buffy let go of Willow, shaking her head. “No, she says there’s nothing to talk about.”

The front door opened and Claude came, in followed by the others talking and smiling. She took one look at the serious faces that greeted her and stopped in her tracks. Buffy quickly wiped her face, all traces of her turmoil gone in an instant.

“Are you good?” Buffy asked Claude.

“Uh, yeah. Everything is as good as we can make it. I was wondering if you had a hose, I need to water my babies,” She said, trying to smile and lighten the mood. “Faith said she and the Slayer tykes are ready to go too.”

Willow rolled her eyes at hearing Faith parroted, and snorted, “Slayer Tykes.”

“Will, can you?” Buffy asked making absent-minded hand gestures. She wiped her face again and walked out. She looked at Willow and Tara. “Later?” They both nodded.
“Sure. Follow me, Claude. We can’t have any poor little plants dying on us now, can we?” Willow chirped.

“Is she okay?” Claude asked quietly.

“She will be,” Tara said. “C’mon, let’s go water your babies.”

The three girls walked through the kitchen and out into the backyard. Willow and Tara looked around at the abundance of herbs. The porch rails were covered in window baskets, and the other dozen and a half of other assorted pots were filled with medicinal and cooking herbs, along with a half-dozen whiskey barrel pots containing some of the larger shrubs.

Smiling at each other, they went over to the water spigot that had a two hose adapter. Tara handed Claude one hose and she took the other; while Claude watered her ‘babies’ Tara watered the rose bushes and her small herb garden. Dawn must have remembered to water the garden, keeping it alive while she was gone. There was no chance it had been Buffy; she had such a notoriously black thumb that she had even killed fake plants.

Willow sat on the ground close to where Tara was watering and began to meditate. The scent of Roses, lavender, and rosemary wafted into the air deliciously, helping to calm and center both girls.

It was going to be a long night.

TBC…
Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst/Drama/Smut Rating: PG-13 for light innuendo

Setting: Sunnydale – The Summers House

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Feedback: Is all I can ever ask for.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Well, hello everyone, so happy you’re here. Let me start by saying that there will be a temporary hiatus on the story while I have surgery and recover. The story has not been abandoned, never fear, and hopefully while I recover I’ll be able to work on the next chapters as usual. Now with that out of the way, I’d like to thank my beta Crystal aka Cyteach for all her help through this chapter. Music was as follows: The Smashing Pumpkins “Oceania”, Eva Cassidy “Simply Eva”, Metric “Synthetica”, and A Place to Bury Strangers “Worship”.

I know what I have given you. I do not know what you have received. - Antonio Porchia
After turning off the light, Willow slid into bed next to Tara. Tara opened her arms and Willow snuggled in close, wrapping an arm tightly around Tara’s waist. They lay quietly in each other’s arms, with the steady drumming of Willow’s heart under Tara’s hand, and strong rhythm of Tara’s heartbeat under Willow’s ear.

“What a day, what a day,” Willow whispered; she knew Tara was not yet asleep.

Tara kissed the top of Willow’s head while she tightened her embrace. “Yes, Love, it has been. Lots to take in, isn’t it? Can you believe little Dawnie, though?”

Willow traced aimless shapes along Tara’s lower back and hip as she spoke. “In a way, I can, Baby. It really drives home for me, at least, that Dawnie isn’t that little girl I always see in my head when I think of her anymore. She’s almost eighteen… an adult, and I think we all need to come to terms with that quickly, one way or another.”

“Mmmhmm, like Buffy, said, Dawn did what she never could. We really don’t know what Buffy’s reasons were, what stopped her for so long. I mean, she could have done it at any time, long before they were... involved, so what always stopped her? I just wonder what the price was for Dawnie, what this has done to her. The worst part of all is that I think in a way Dawnie loved Spike,” Tara said thoughtfully. “And now, now there’s all of this... end of the world stuff happening all over again.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine, honestly. Maybe we should talk to her, or just you know, let her know that we’re here if she wants to talk about it,” Willow said pulling back to look at Tara in the half-light of the orange glow pouring in from the sodium-vapor lamp outside of their bedroom window.

Tara smiled and stroked Willow’s hair. “I think that’s a good idea, Will.” Tara leaned in to kiss Willow softly.

Willow hummed lightly. “Tara-kissage… the best there is,” she said.

Tara laughed gently and nuzzled her nose against Willow’s. “We should sleep, Love. The research starts tomorrow, and we also have to start the training of our coven.”

Willow nodded, turning her head to yawn sleepily. “I was actually hoping we could recruit Dawnie into the research fold tomorrow on a permanent basis. We have too much to do on our own, and we
won’t be able to be the workhorses this time, and neither can Giles. He has a lot to do with the gathering of the potentials. Dawn is our best, most reliable option; Xander can help, but you know how he is.”

Tara began to stroke Willow’s hair again. “You’re right, and I think Buffy won’t put up much of a fight about it anymore now either. I just wish Dawn hadn’t had to prove herself that way.”

Willow gave Tara another squeeze. “I know, Baby, me too. Buffy has tried so hard to shelter her from even doing research for so long,” Willow said thoughtfully. “You know, I was younger than Dawn when I cast my first spell, Buffy, too, when she started slaying… I guess you don’t get much of a childhood when you grow up on the hellmouth.” Willow sighed heavily and yawned. “We have to be realistic, too; we need her, and we wouldn’t have to watch her every move, you know?”

“I agree,” Tara replied her hand stroking Willow’s back gently.

With a few more soft kisses, the girls began to slip into sleep. Their last thoughts of the day were of what tomorrow would hold and all they had to do. Willow was making lists sleepily in her head as she fell asleep. They had to test the skills of Jacob and the twins and work with Dana to begin their training accordingly. There was also the matter of getting Claude up to speed with spell ingredients as well.

During their earlier conversation with Buffy, Willow and Tara had been brought up to date on all the new weirdness that she and the potentials had been dealing with in their absence. On top of all the details of training with the coven, they also had to find out more about the blind minions and the Nosferatu-esque vampires that kept springing up like cockroaches.

This was just the beginning of the end – again.

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The sound of laughter and the smell of coffee wafted up the stairs and through the house. Willow tied a knot just above her belly button in the linen shirt she was wearing, as Tara slipped on a blue t-shirt and Willow watched her dress. Willow slunk up behind her grinning mischievously, and eased her hands into the front pockets of Tara’s shorts and kissed her neck.

Tara tilted her head to give Willow better access to her long slender throat. Willow nibbled and
sucked on her neck while Tara purred her approval, and reached back to pull Willow’s hips tight against her. Willow growled and sucked harder on her neck just below her ear, and quite in plain sight. Tara knew she would be sporting a bright new love bite on her neck when Willow was done, and she couldn’t care less.

“Mmm, someone woke up feeling frisky this morning,” Tara chuckled at Willow’s insistent mouth.

Pulling away from Tara with a loud pop, Willow nipped again at her neck. “I woke up next to you, what more do I need?” she replied sweetly.

Tara laughed and turned in Willow’s arms, kissing her soundly. “Suck up,” she laughed.

Willow wiggled her eyebrows as she cupped Tara’s bottom and gave it a firm squeeze while she smiled wickedly. “Ahh, but you have such wonderful things to suck.”

Tara laughed loudly. “You are horrible, Willow!”

“And yet, you love me still,” Willow teased, the picture of innocence.

“I do, you know that I do,” Tara replied in a husky purr.

Willow kissed her once, barely brushing their lips together, but what started out as a simple kiss quickly grew into a heated make-out session. Tara had unbuttoned Willow’s shorts and slid to her knees as she pulled the knot free from Willow’s shirt. She was pressing wet kisses into the warm skin of Willow’s tummy, working her way lower, when a loud knock at the door stopped her.

“Guys?” Buffy called through the door.

With Willow half dressed and Tara on her knees in front of her, they froze like deer in headlights. Looking first at each other and then at the door, they were both willing the door not to swing open.

“Yeah,” Willow squeaked out quickly then coughed and tried again. “Yeah, Buff, what’s up?”
“Breakfast is being made, you might want to come down before it’s all gone,” Buffy said.

“We’ll be right down,” Willow called out.

They heard Buffy’s footsteps as she moved away from the door, and once she was gone they burst into laughter. Several minutes passed before they got themselves under control enough to make their way down the stairs. When they came into the kitchen they made a beeline for the coffee pot. Looking into the dining room they could see Stephan, Jake, Xander and two young women they had yet to meet.

Livy was at the stove cooking an omelet and turned to smile at the pair. She pushed a small dry erase board at them that asked what kind of omelet they would like. Willow picked up the board and noticed that it still had a cord attached to it when she turned it over, which made her snicker.

Both Livy and Tara looked at her in confusion, and Willow just shook her head waving off their unspoken question. Willow told Tara to just get whatever kind she wanted and they could share before she wandered off to find Dana. After a quick circuit of the downstairs, she went out into the backyard.

She found Claude pruning herbs with Dana bundling them to be hung to dry, and Buffy sitting alone in the sun. Her head was tilted back and her sunglasses on. Willow walked over to Buffy, her shadow falling over her friend. Buffy slid her sunglasses down her nose to look up at Willow; there were circles around her eyes making the stress she was feeling obvious.

Willow pushed Buffy’s bangs off her forehead and smiled down gently at her. “Hey.”

“Hey, Will. Sleep well?”

Willow nodded. “You don’t look like you slept at all though.”

Buffy smiled sadly. “I didn’t.”

“You have to rest, Buffy,” Willow scolded and sat on the wide arm of the wooden lawn chair.
“I know, but there’s just so much to worry about, Will. Giles left this morning, and he’ll be back in three days with two more girls,” she whispered with concern. “I was thinking after breakfast, maybe I could take you and Tara to the barracks. To see if there’s something more we can do to keep everyone safe while they’re there?”

“Sure, Buff. We can do that. I’ll ask Jacob what spell they’ve been augmenting and we can do some tinkering of our own,” Willow grinned. “We want everyone as safe as possible.”

Buffy looked relieved and some of the tension she was radiating eased as she slipped her hand into Willow’s. Willow sat down next to her in the grass keeping Buffy’s hand in hers, turning her face towards the sun as well. They sat like that for several long moments enjoying the warmth and each other’s presence.

Willow gave Buffy’s hand a gentle squeeze before she let it go and rose from her spot, walking over to where Dana and Claude were working quietly. The closer she got, the more she could smell the different herbs that had already been trimmed and prepared to hang for drying.

“Good morning, Sisters,” Willow greeted them.

Dana was sitting Indian style in the grass, and looked up from the bundle she was tying the thread off on. “Good Morning, My Lady.”

“Good morning, My Lady,” Claude replied as she looked up with a smile from the sage she was trimming.

“Do you have any idea how odd that sounds?” Willow giggled. “I keep expecting Lady Rowan to pop up out of nowhere like she always did.”

Dana and Claude laughed with her. “Well, Willow, it’s what you and Tara are for all intents and purposes. You’re both now leading and training your own coven. We should get the others used to saying it,” Dana said seriously.

“Although, technically Jake will be the only one you can hear saying it,” Claude chuckled lightly.

“There will be others,” Dana said knowingly.
Willow raised an eyebrow. “How many more will there be, Dana?” She asked curiously.

Dana didn’t look up, she just kept bundling herbs. “There are three more that will be here with us, but…” she shrugged.

Claude looked at Willow surprised. “How does she know that?” Then Claude looked at Dana. “How do you know that?”

Willow’s smile was tinged with sadness before she winked conspiratorially at Claude. “She just knows, and she’s more reliable than Xander’s magic eight ball. Take my advice; listen to her when she says stuff like that,” she said trying to lighten the mood Dana’s pronouncement had made and deftly made a subject change. “After breakfast, Tara and I are going to the barracks with Buffy. When we get back, I’d like for us all to get together again. Tara has some ideas on what herbs we’ll need immediately for healing, and what we’ll need for spellwork, Claude. I’d also like you to help us test the others, Dana.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Dana replied respectfully.

Taking her cue from Dana, Claude said with a smile. “Yes, My Lady.”

Willow walked back towards the house shaking her head and chuckling again. She reached for the doorknob just as Tara opened it. They both jumped back a bit and then giggled at each other. Willow reached out to take Tara’s hand as she stepped through the doorway.

“I was just coming to get you. Our breakfast is ready, Sweetie,” she said with a smile.

“Good, I’m starving!” Willow said with a grin. “Hey, Baby, after we eat wanna go take a look at the barracks with Buffy? She asked if we could check out the spell they’ve been using to hide the potentials.” She picked up two glasses of orange juice from the island and followed Tara.

Tara had picked up their plate, with a large omelet oozing cheese and mushrooms and taking up most of its surface in one hand, and their forks in the other. “Sure. I’m curious to see what spell or spells they’ve been using. I keep thinking it must be more than one.”
Just as they sat, everyone else at the table rose and began clearing their plates away. Xander stopped before them with two girls in tow. With a flourish, he pointed at Willow and Tara who both stopped with forks midway to their mouths.

“These fine ladies are Willow and Tara. They are our Wiccans of Witchery… our Mistresses o’ Magicks… Priestesses of Prophecy… Vixens of Voodoo… wait, you guys don’t do voodoo, do you? We really don’t need zombies on the hellmouth too… again,” Xander shuddered as he rambled on enthusiastically.

Willow and Tara looked at each other with amused expressions on their faces.

“Uhh, yeah… anyway Will, Tara, this is Vi and Tammy. They’ll be here with us at Casa Summers for a few days doing their rotation.” Xander pointed to a lanky redhead with hair cut in a bob and a darker shade than Willow’s, and a blonde that could have been Buffy’s twin.

“Hi,” Willow and Tara replied politely and then began to eat their omelets.

“Okay girls, let’s go find Buffy,” Xander said, and the two potentials waved goodbye.

“Oh, she’s in the backyard, Xan,” Willow said around a mouthful of food.

“Thanks, Will,” Xander smiled as he left.

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Walking through Sunnydale with Buffy was a little unnerving. Everything was silent. There were no sounds of traffic or children playing in the distance; no televisions turned up too loud or radios blaring – no signs of human habitation at all. It seemed even the wildlife was aware; there were murders of crows on telephone wires all over but they still did not utter one sound.

Willow and Tara walked hand in hand, while Buffy still had her dark sunglasses on and her hands shoved deep into her pockets. As they approached downtown, they finally saw two other people in the distance hurrying towards a car and leaving quickly. Willow threaded her free arm through one of Buffy’s and pulled her close trying desperately to impart some comfort to her friend while gaining a little of her own.
Buffy slowed her pace a little and smiled weakly at Willow and Tara. “It’s been like this for a little over a month now.”

“But that’s good, right? I mean, we can just focus on keeping us safe, right?” Willow tried to sound hopeful and failed.

Buffy tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace, and silence fell between them again. They arrived at the door of the gym down from The Magic Box, and Buffy held her hand to the door. It glowed for a moment and then the audible sound of a lock opening was heard and the door swung inward on its own.

“Giles and Jake figured out a way to also have the spell recognize us and only us,” Buffy said as they walked through the door.

“What happens if the spell doesn’t recognize the person at the door?” Tara asked.

“Well, for one it sends an alarm all through the barracks,” Buffy replied.

“And we come runnin’, Blondie,” Faith said as she appeared armed with three potentials behind her armed to the teeth as well.

“So it tagged us as we walked in too?” Willow asked, and Buffy nodded. “How is the spell being keyed to everyone?”

Buffy shifted for a moment looking uncomfortable. “You might as well tell ‘em, B,” Faith said.

“Thanks, Faith,” Buffy said tightly. “The only way they could come up with to be that specific was blood, Will.”

“Blood and what?” Tara asked coolly.

Buffy and Faith looked at each other. “Just blood,” Buffy said.
“We all pitched in a drop, an’ Ol’ Tweedy and The Broom Crew have been usin’ that,” Faith added.

Willow raised an eyebrow. “‘The Broom Crew’?”

Faith rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you ain’t that dense, Red. You know, your little groupies.”

Willow and Tara both roll their eyes at the term “groupie” being applied to their coven. Willow shot a glare at Faith, who just smirked in return. Willow crossed her arms over her chest, refusing to play Faith’s game. Taking a deep breath and turning her back on Faith; Willow moved next to Tara and slipped her arm around Tara’s waist.

“Well, that’s one way to do it, I guess. It would definitely make it very specific, but blood magic can still be fooled, it can still go wrong,” Tara said. “All it would take is one drop from any one of you in the right place or the wrong place, rather…”

“And you’d all be done for in a matter of minutes,” Willow finished. “No passing go, no collecting two hundred dollars, just a couple of really dead slayers and a gym full of potentials.”

Looking at one another, something passed between them silently. “We can do better,” Willow and Tara responded in unison.

Buffy sighed with relief and agreed. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. I knew you guys would have a better solution once you could check it out, see where it could be made stronger.”

Faith laughed. “Bet you never thought you’d be head of security did ya, Red?”

“Well, someone has to be the brains of the operation, anyone can be the brawn,” Willow snarked.

“Hey! Slayer standing here! Right exactly here!” Buffy groused.

“Sorry, Buff. You know what I mean,” Willow said, then turned to Tara. “Baby, what are you thinking? I hope are your ideas for a new spell are maybe some with a little less with the icky blood
Tara nodded, then took Willow’s hand and began to walk away. They started walking down along one wall, and when they got to the corner, Tara stopped and looked up. In the rafter, you could just barely make out what looked like a small sachet. Scanning the corners, they began to pick them out in the corners of the rafters placed strategically.

“How many more rooms are there?” Tara asked.

Buffy thought for a moment. “There’s here, the workout space, what Xander turned into a dorm for the girls, then a rec room, the weight room, and the bathrooms. Did I leave anything out, Faith?”

“Nah, you got it, B,” Faith said.

“How many more windows and doorways are there?” Willow asked, tapping her index finger against her lips as she thought.

“There’s a wall of windows in the weight room,” Buffy said as she thought.

“An’ at least two doors to every room, yo’,” Faith added.

Willow and Tara walked to the middle of the room and continued to look up at the exposed beams of the ceiling and the pattern they made, looking for anything that might be significant to the spell.

“Are all the ceilings like this? Exposed beams?” Tara asked.

Buffy and Faith looked at one another. “Umm, I’m not sure. I don’t think I ever paid any attention.” Buffy answered. “Faith?”

“Got me, I don’t spend a lot of time starin’ at the ceilings,” Faith said with a shrug.

“Let’s have a look then,” Tara said with a nod.
She and Willow made a quick circuit of the room, pointing here and there as they went before moving on to the other rooms, studying the ceilings and door frames all the while. Buffy produced a notebook and several colored pens from somewhere for Willow, and now they were back in the main room.

Willow and Tara were sitting with their heads close together. Willow would write furiously, and then Tara would make little sketches of each of the rooms. They both were making notes around the sketches; they would pause to look at one another as if they were having a conversation.

Buffy, Faith and several of the potentials had gathered around to watch Willow and Tara go back and forth without ever actually speaking a word out loud. Looks and gestures took place of actual words between them, as they worked through several pages of notes and sketches.

One of the new potentials sat on the floor and watched them entranced. She was a striking older girl dressed in denim and moccasins. Luminous deep set brandy colored eyes stared intently, from smooth russet colored skin complemented by long jet black hair in a braid that fell to her waist.

“Do they always work like this, so well with one another, in silence?” She whispered up to Buffy reverently.

With a wry smile, Buffy answered softly. “They do. Willow and Tara just keep getting better and better together, too.”

“My unci (pronounced oon-chi) and my tunwin (pronounce to-weeh) could work like that,” she said.

“And you said what?” Faith asked.

“Sorry, my grandmother and my aunt; my grandmother was a healer and she taught both my mother and my aunt. I can remember playing in the kitchen while they worked like that. It’s fascinating to watch,” she answered.

“Joanie girl, you got some screwy ideas about fun, lemme tell ya,” Faith replied.

Joanie smiled. “I don’t know, Faith, maybe you do.”
Tara’s head popped up and she looked over the group that had gathered for a moment before she locked eyes with Joanie. Willow stopped and turned to look at Joanie too. She cocked her head to one side and studied Joanie specifically; turning back to look at Tara, they both rose and approached the little audience that had formed to watch them work.

Once before the group, they both sat down in front of Joanie, whose eyes had grown large as she watched them move towards her. Tara smiled up at Buffy, and Willow continued to study Joanie intently with a soft, knowing smile on her lips.

“We have some good ideas here, and they’ll be strong,” Tara said excited and a little breathless.

Willow offered Joanie her hand, palm up, and when Joanie rested her hand atop Willow’s, the air around them crackled and sparkled for a moment. Joanie sat shocked, looking at their hands still resting together, speechless.

“And Joanie’s going to join us,” Willow said confidently.

“Will, she’s a potential,” Buffy said obviously confused at what was happening.

Tara smiled and shook her head. “That may be, but that’s not why she’s here, Buffy…”

“She’s here for us,” Willow finished her sentence again. “That is if you’d like, Joanie, we would like to train you with us and the rest of our coven.”

Everyone was quiet while they watched the trio. Willow held out her other hand palm up to Tara, who rested her hand on top of Willow’s and Tara then offered her hand palm up to Joanie. Again there was the sparkling and the air shimmered around them. The potent scent of sweet grass and sage filled the air around them quickly.

Joanie looked up at Buffy and Faith. “I think maybe I should go with them.”

TBC...
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst/Drama/Smut Rating: PG, no smut, no angst

Setting: Sunnydale

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters or the occasional bits of dialogue that are being borrowed from BtVS; they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy et al. All original characters are in no way connected to BtVS except by me in this forum. No money is involved; this is simply for my own pleasure, and hopefully that of the people reading too.

Feedback: If you write it… I will read it…

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I’d like to thank everyone for all of their well wishes while I recovered from surgery. I’ll try to keep to a regular posting schedule, but things are a bit tight right now and I have to go elsewhere to get a wi-fi connection, so please be patient. As always, I would like to thank my ever patient and encouraging beta Crystal aka Cyteach for all of her wonderful help. Music for this chapter was The Autumn Defense “The Autumn Defense”, A Silent Film “Sand & Snow”, Niki and the Dove “Instinct”, and Straylight Run “Straylight Run”.

Hiding places there are innumerable, escape is only one, but possibilities of escape, again, are as many as hiding places. – Franz Kafka
After Joanie’s announcement, she gathered up her belonging to join the coven at the Summers house. The foursome left the barracks with Buffy and Joanie carrying her bags. Willow carried the notebook with all of the brainstormed ideas and sketches of the barracks clutched close to her chest. It already held a good deal about what she and Tara could use to augment the wards for concealing and protecting the potentials.

Buffy and Willow chatted animatedly while the girls walked, and Buffy’s mood seemed lighter on the trip home. Tara observed Joanie while they walked trying to gauge how she was handling her new change in status. Her alert dark eyes moved continuously, taking in her surroundings as they walked into the more deserted residential areas of Sunnydale. As they made the turn onto Revello drive, Joanie’s gaze caught Tara’s. Tara raised an eyebrow in silent question, and Joanie just smiled.

Covering the last block and half to the Summers house quickly, the girls bustled into the house. They found the other members of the coven sitting in the living room with Dana, who had a notebook on her lap, scribbling away furiously. All conversation stopped and everyone turned to look at the girls.

“So, who do we have here?” Claude asked.

“This is Joanie, everyone,” Tara said. “She’s a potential.”

Dana cocked her head to one side, giving Joanie a once over. “But she’s meant for us.”

Willow nodded and grinned broadly. “Bingo! You get a gold star!” she teased. “Joanie came as a potential, but her ‘potential’ is not for just slaying so she’s joining us here.”

Buffy took Joanie’s bags, wandered off to the basement door and disappeared. Claude stood up and approached Joanie.

“Hi, I’m Claude,” she said offering her hand with a smile.

With a relieved smile Joanie shook her hand. “Hi.”

Tara pointed to Jake who was stretched out on the floor looking up at them. “That’s Jake,” then
motioning to the twins sharing the loveseat. “That’s Livy and her brother Stephan, and last but not least we have Dana. She and Claude came with us from the coven in Tucson. If you have any questions and can’t find me or Willow, she’s your girl,” Tara smiled.

“Hi,” Joanie said again with a small wave to the group.

Buffy reappeared and put her hand on Joanie’s arm. “I put your bags downstairs; there’s an empty dresser and I’m sure someone can help you get settled in. There’s not a ton of room down there, but it’s got bunk beds like the barracks, and you get your choice on the open set of bunks so you should be alright.”

Livy grabbed her whiteboard and wrote on it, ‘I’ll help, come with me’. Joanie, to everyone’s surprise, asked Livy if she and Stephan could read sign language. The twins both smiled and nodded excitedly; Livy tossed the whiteboard at Stephan. Her hands moving in a flurry of gestures as she led Joanie off to the basement.

Willow rocked on the balls of her feet and looked happily surprised by this unexpected turn of events. “Well, this is turning out better than we thought.”

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Later that afternoon, Buffy was outside with Vi and Tammy running them through exercises with weapons. Dana had the growing group of young witches on the grass leading them through a group meditation.

Tara and Willow were sitting on the couch surrounded by several large tomes open at differing points. One of Willow’s legs hung over Tara’s and she swung it gently. Tara had the notebook they had been making spell preparations in, and a book was in Willow’s lap as she bent over to see what Tara was writing.

“Nope, we’ll want to use this instead, Baby,” Willow said pushing her book forward and pointing to the text.

Tara nodded, crossing something out to add the change, and chewed on the end of the pen thoughtfully; she sat back and reading over the page in front of her. “Will, I think this is going to work… and really well.” She looked at Willow smiling proudly.
Willow nodded. “Plus it uses energy instead of blood – and we know blood can be taken leaving the body behind, but energy… if something significant happened to anyone, their energy would change or dissipate altogether. We’re not just talkin’ about the pms crankies here, either. This is almost on a… a soul level.”

“Exactly! This would detect demonic or magickal possession – it would definitely block any little bumpy potentials. This will catch almost anything that altered their natural state of being!” Tara said excitedly. “It would be like taking soul fingerprints. Will, I don’t think this has ever been done!”

Willow nodded as she pointed at the notebook page in front of them. “Those would all be something that altered or disrupted their energy even when their blood would remain theirs. Tara, you’re right, we may have made something completely new. A complete magickal first! We’ve gotta show this to Dana, she’ll flip!”

Willow wiggled gleefully, kicking the leg crossed over Tara’s. “If this spell works like we plan, we can even use the ward here and the battery spell will eliminate the need for… Andrew.” She said his name as if she had sucked on a lemon. “Then he can stay at the barracks or wherever Buffy wants to put him.”

“Wherever Buffy wants to put who?” Buffy asked as she walked into the living room.

“Andrew,” Tara said as she looked pleased with herself. “We’ve got two spells. The one you wanted for the barracks – which we also think would be great for here just as a precaution with all the people coming and going – and we have a spell that would eliminate the need for the human battery.”

“Excellent work from my two favorite witchy mojo workin’ gals! One less person here is all of the good, too, we’re running out of space,” Buffy said. “Xander is moving Dawnie into my room so Dana can have hers, and there’s still one open bunk downstairs. I’ll get Faith to look into uh… creatively reappropriating a few more air mattresses for here, and if we need them, for you guys.”

Both girls nodded. “We’d like to keep the coven close. Dana said we’d have three more and that was before we got Joanie, so we have two to go. Air mattresses or sleeping bags may not be a bad idea, Buff. Any new arrivals can crash down here in the living room with the rotating potentials,” Willow replied.

“We want Dana in on this, and we can get the supplies for these spells before it gets too late today. We can do the barracks while we’re there and drop Andrew off. He charged the crystals today so
they’re set for now, and we can wait to do the battery spell until tomorrow or the day after,” Tara added.

“Let me shower and we can go get whatever you need,” Buffy said.

“We can just go now, why wait? You can meet us at the barracks if you really have to, or I don’t know, we can walk ourselves home, Buff,” Willow teased.

“Humor the Slayer, okay? Go ahead and I’ll meet you at the barracks,” Buffy said seriously. “Besides, how many witches can say they have personal escorts from a Slayer?”

“We appreciate your concern, Buffy, really,” Tara said as she rolled her eyes. “But we are big girls, you know.”

“Again with the humoring of the Slayer, okay?” Buffy said, her own resolve face sliding into place.

Tara held her hand up in surrender. “Fine, fine. We’ll see you in a bit.”

Buffy jogged up the stairs, and in due course, the shower was heard. Willow picked up the notebook in Tara’s lap and set it on the coffee table. She wrapped her arms around Tara’s shoulders and pulled her in for a gentle kiss. Sliding her arms around Willow’s waist, Tara maneuvered Willow onto her lap as they kissed tenderly.

Minutes later they were interrupted by a loud clearing of a throat. They pulled away slowly from each other to turn and see their coven staring at them. Some looked on with grins, some with smirks, and one gazing at them with a slightly dazed expression. Joanie was blushing profusely, and Claude stage-whispered that she should get used to it, making her blush harder and giggle. Dana nudged Jake in the ribs so he would stop staring with glazed over eyes.

Willow slipped from Tara’s lap to stand, straightening her shirt. “Uh, we’re just about to go to the Magic Box.”

Dana cocked an eyebrow. “And you’re supposed to get there by sucking face?”
Both girls turned bright red. “Watch it, Sparky,” Tara teased. “You’re coming with us.”

“Oh, joy,” Dana muttered crossing her arms and rolling her eyes. “A googly-eyed extravaganza.”

“We think we have the perfect spell for the barracks, and we will be able to use it here too. We’ve also got one that for sure gets rid of battery boy,” Willow said ignoring Dana’s teasing and handing her the notebook with the spell.

“Really?” Jake asked, his curiosity snapping him out of his lust induced haze, as he tried to read over Dana’s shoulder. “What are you going to use?”

“We’ll explain it all when we get back; I think it’s something we all can take part in for charging the crystals for the perimeter around here.” Willow was now bouncing in place, her enthusiasm clear.

“The cloaking spell is one of our own, Willow’s and mine; we think it’s gonna be perfect for what we need. Plus, we’ll have the perimeter here covered… it should make us pretty much invisible to most anything,” Tara explained to the coven proudly.

“Excellent, this should be interesting,” Dana said reading the page in front of her, then turning to the group she smiled. “These two have come up with some of the most unique and effective spells I’ve ever seen.”

Hearing Dana’s praise, the rest of the group looked on in open curiosity and with a new level of respect for their Ladies. She had shared stories from the confrontation the girls had with Amy and Tabitha, but they had yet to see them in actual action. This new prospect of real spell casting stoked the little coven’s enthusiasm.

Buffy bopped down the stairs freshly showered. “I thought you two were leaving?” She said with her hands on her hips.

“We got a little sidetracked, but we’re ready to go now,” Willow smiled, blushing lightly.

Claude coughed something that sounded suspiciously like ‘making out’, and the group snickered.
“We also decided to bring Dana along for the extra help and power,” Tara added. “Where’s Andrew? We can drop him off too.”

“Why don’t we take Vi and Tammy with? Then we can get all of the potentials at once; their shift here is over anyway,” Buffy said.

“He was in the backyard watching the girls train,” Claude supplied. “I’ll go get them.” With that, she disappeared out through the kitchen.

Claude returned quickly with the two potentials and Andrew in tow, the latter who was munching on a Hot Pocket. “You needed me for something?” He asked.

Andrew had been keeping a low profile since Willow and Tara’s arrival. Staying out of Willow’s way seemed to be the best way to avoid any confrontation about his part in Warren’s little plan to take over Sunnydale that ultimately culminated in the attempt on Tara and Buffy’s lives – accidentally or otherwise.

The foolish, senseless act of a petty, cruel, selfish man-child; it had pushed Willow over the edge in order to save her lover. It precipitated an almost two-year absence from the Scoobies on the part of Willow. It had been made very clear to him on their arrival three weeks ago that he might fare better to stay away from both witches or he possibly could end up a toad.

“You’re going back to the barracks permanently; you can make yourself useful there. Wills here has pulled your plug, energizer bunny, no more battery duty for you,” Buffy said. “So grab your stuff and be quick about it.”

Andrew paled and looked nervously between Willow and Tara, who watched him dispassionately. Tara slipped her arm around Willow’s waist while she stared him down coolly.

Snuggling closer into Tara’s embrace, Willow asked quietly when Andrew didn’t appear to be moving. “Didn’t she say to get your stuff?”

Andrew nodded, hastily moving towards the basement door giving Willow and Tara a wide berth as he went. They could hear him scurrying around downstairs, and he came rushing back in with a gym bag over his shoulder.
“Okay, let’s head out,” Buffy said ushering Andrew and the potentials through the door, leaving Dana to follow, with Willow and Tara falling into step behind Buffy.

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Once the group arrived at the barracks, Andrew and the potentials veered off to go inside. Buffy, Willow, Tara, and Dana went to the Magic Box, and Buffy let them in. Tara and Willow began pulling stones off of the shelves and placing them on the table. Tara went behind the counter, looking for a ball of twine and scissors Anya kept there for packages.

“Buffy, can you take Dana downstairs and look for some large chunks of copal? She knows what it looks like and we’ll need it for the spell,” Willow said.

“Sure, is there anything else we should be looking for?” Buffy asked.

Tara shook one of the cardboard boxes, making a rough count of the stones in it. “Umm, some more bloodstone if there is any, and large chunks of clear quartz, as clear as possible, if you can find some.”

Buffy and Dana nodded and disappeared downstairs. Willow was making groups of stones: quartz, bloodstone, and amber. Tara had retrieved a couple of white taper candles and had just sat down when Anya appeared out of thin air.

“And just what do you two think you’re doing with my stock?” She asked with her hands on her hips.

“Hello to you too, Anya,” Tara replied as she blessed one of the candles.

“We’re making amulets for the new protection spell on the barracks and the house,” Willow replied. “I’m glad you’re here, you can take part in the ritual so we don’t have to do one just for you.”

Buffy and Dana walked back in with several large chunks of stones and two boxes of smaller loose stones that rattled as they approached the table. Dana sat down at the table and put the two boxes in front of Tara.
“I got the bloodstone, and I also found some onyx; I thought that would be a good balance for the quartz,” she said.

“Who is she?” Anya asked as she eyed Dana closely.

“Oh, right. Anya this is Sister Dana Addams; Dana this is Anya, she’s a vengeance demon,” Willow introduced them. “Dana came with us from the coven in Tucson. She’s helping us with our coven here.”

Dana stood and held out her hand. “Nice to meet you,” she said. “I’ve never met a vengeance demon before.”

Anya looked at Dana’s hand, then at Willow and Tara crossly. “So she’s here to help you two thieves steal my stock?”

Willow rolled her eyes. “Yes, Anya, she’s here to help us steal your stock because we have nothing better to do with our time than plot the slow demise of the Magic Box due to petty theft.”

Dana shrugged and sat down, while Buffy shook her head. “Lighten up, Anya. You benefit from what they’re doing since you’re staying in the barracks.” Buffy sat down while picking up one of the tapers and twirling it. “It’s not like you have a large client base right now anyway.”

Anya sighed dramatically. “Rub it in that my profit margin has dropped drastically recently. It won’t always be that way, and they’re taking away potential profit…”

“Ahn, this is important and it’s in your best interest to let us do this. Consider it the barter system. You need the protection spell that we will be providing for you, and in turn, we need the supplies to do said spell,” Tara said evenly.

Anya threw her hands up. “Okay, okay! Continue to steal from me and reduce my revenue potential,” She said before she pulled up a chair and plopped down next to Buffy. “Whose spell are you using?”

“Theyrs,” Dana pointed at Tara and Willow. “Tara and Willow devised one of their own that should really be quite amazing,” Dana smiled as she cut lengths of twine to wrap the stones with.
“Buff, how many potentials are there?” Willow asked.

“We have twenty-one so far,” Buffy replied.

“Okay, so we have twenty-one potentials…” Willow trailed off. “Six in the coven, plus…” Using her fingers, she ticked the others off for a head count. “And another eight of us, okay so that’s thirty-five and we need to double that for here at the barrack and then the house.”

“You forgot to count Andrew, sweetie,” Tara said quietly.

“Right,” Willow muttered. “Andrew. Buffy, why is he here?”

“You’re never gonna believe this, Will,” Buffy grimaced. “Not long after you guys went back to the coven they came back. He and Jonathan tried to open this seal, and he killed Jonathan to do it…” Buffy started.

“He killed Jonathan?” Willow squeaked in surprise.

“Yeah, so of course this seal is under the high school, but apparently Jonathan wasn’t enough. Xander and Dawn caught him out trying to buy large amounts of blood to try the ritual to activate the seal thingy again and brought him back to get the goods on what he knew when they found him sneaking around,” Buffy said.

“Did he?” Tara asked as she tied a knot in the twine she had wound around a cluster of stones. “Know anything?”

“Not so much,” Buffy sighed.

“And a seal under the high school – a seal of what?” Willow asked. “Boy, what other fun stuff did we miss?”

“The seal of daffodils or something like that,” Buffy snarked. “But that’s when we figured out what
we’re up against, and the first potentials showed up, and Jake had already been here for a week. We also got our first meet and greet with the long-lost, twice removed granddaddy with the bumpy then too – it was not pretty, Will,” Buffy stopped twirling the candle.

“The First…” Dana said softly.

Buffy nodded. “Nothing like getting your ass kicked, to make your ass hurt,” she said self deprecatingly. “That’s when Giles came up with the idea to use Andrew for the spell on the house and he became our very own little Eveready.”

“I don’t like him. He’s whiny and I’m pretty sure he’s gay; he also has an unnatural obsession for that fellow Warren and hot pockets,” Anya said as she absently played with some of the twine Dana had cut.

Everyone stopped what they were doing to look at Anya. Willow and Tara looked at each other, then Buffy at the mention of Warren’s name.

“Hot Pockets?” Dana asked with one eyebrow quirked.

“Yes, he and Faith constantly fight over them. It’s obvious she’s toying with him. I don’t understand the fascination; I mean they’re not even that good,” Anya said with a shrug. “He’s also constantly going on about being ‘evil’ and the ‘dark side of the force’ – what ‘force’?”

Dana shrugged and went back to sealing the twine with wax from one of the white tapers Tara had blessed. Buffy was now trying to juggle several of the sealed bundles of stones; Willow was watching her closely before she grabbed one of the bundles as it flew in the air.

“Buffy, please, not toys. We need these,” Willow said calmly.

“Sorry,” Buffy said sheepishly. “What do the stones mean anyway?”

“Well, the quartz is an amplifier and so is the copal, that’s why we have the big chunks. We’ll place those around to help the overall spell,” Tara said.
“The quartz in the bundles is to amplify the energy of the individual holding it,” Willow added.

“The bloodstone is sometimes called “The Hero’s Stone”. We thought that would be appropriate since we’re capturing energy from Slayers, potentials, and witches,” Tara smiled softly. “And it’s not like we haven’t done a little world saving on our own.”

Willow smiled sadly. “One or two times,” she said softly. “And the amber is to capture the energy and store it so we can place the bundles. Oh, and the onyx is to counterbalance the quartz.”

“Right, so it doesn’t pull too much energy from the person during the spell,” Dana said.

“That was Dana’s idea,” Tara smiled at Dana.

“Wow, you guys thought it all out,” Buffy said.

“Yes, very clever,” Anya said. “Can I see the spell?”

Tara tied a knot in the bundle she had, then handed Anya the notebook with the spell she and Willow had built. Passing the bundle to Dana for sealing, she started on another.

“This is really quite unique,” Anya remarked. “You two built this spell?”

“Uh, yup,” Willow replied while she continued to count out stones to be bundled, and Tara smiled at Anya, passing off another bundle to Dana.

“Well, good on you both for an effective spell,” Anya said overly enthusiastic.

“It really should be,” Dana said. “These two are very creative with their spellwork. The things they come up with…” she shook her head and smiled. “One of the reasons I love working with them.”

Willow and Tara smiled brightly at Dana. “Right back at ya, Sparky,” Tara said with a wink, she
then looked at Buffy and Anya. “Can you give us a hand making the bundles?”

“So now you want me to help you steal my profits?” Anya asked incredulously.

“All right, fine… barter system… spell,” Anya sighed.

Willow pushed sets of the stones in front of Buffy and Anya. They sat quietly tying the stones together and passing them off to Dana to be sealed with wax. Soon they had all the bundles complete, and while the wax cooled, Willow and Tara gathered herbs and sand to complete both the battery spell and the protection/shroud spell for the barracks and the Summers house.

“You ready, baby?” Willow asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” Tara answered and then looked at Dana. “Shall we?”

“We shall,” Dana replied her arms full of crystals.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Willow smiled.

******

Once all the potentials had been gathered in the main room of the barracks, everything was set up to capture a bit of everyone’s energy. Dana led everyone through a meditation to focus and raise their energies, and then Willow and Tara performed the spell to key the bundles to each unique person. With that aspect of the spell complete, it was time to perform the second part to shroud and protect the building.

“Hey, baby?” Willow said as she pulled Tara aside.

“What’s up, sweetie?” Tara replied sliding her hand into Willow’s.
“I think maybe we should test this spell out so we know it works,” she replied.

“Okay, what did you have in mind?” Tara asked.

Willow waved Buffy over. “What’s the what, Will?” Buffy asked as she approached.

“You?” Tara squeaked. “No, no, no, no.” She said shaking her head.

“I won’t be here much so I can be added later. Faith and I will be your guinea pigs.”

“Now wait just a sec there, Legs. I ain’t volunteerin’ for nothin’,” Faith snarked.

“What’s a matter, Faith? Can’t you handle it? Okay then, what do you say, Buffy? Me and you?” Dana said taunting Faith.
“I didn’t say that either, Stretch. I can handle anything you can. Count me in,” Faith groused.

Dana smirked at the girls, who smirked right back. “So what will happen once the spell is in place?”

“Well, similar to the one now that will bar entry, but ours will also force out anyone not included in the spell,” Tara said. “We just don’t know yet exactly what the “eject” part will look like.”


Dana and Faith sat apart from the group, watching while Tara and Willow cast the second part of the spell. As soon as they spoke the last part of the incantation around everyone’s energy clusters, there was a loud crack and the sound of an air raid siren. Around Faith and Dana, the air began to swirl like a cyclone; the door flew open and they were both thrown out of the door, landing unceremoniously on their rear ends.

Buffy ran over to the doorway. “Are you okay?”

Dana slowly picked herself up from the pavement. “Well, I’m alive,” she said rubbing her bottom.

“Try to get in,” Tara called from inside the circle where she and Willow had cast the spell.

Dana tried to walk through the doorway and was tossed back about fifteen feet landing once again on her butt. The doorway had sizzled with a blue light, and part of her clothes was singed and smoking.

“Well, I can tell that part must be Tara’s,” Dana muttered.

“Faith, you give it a try,” Willow said as she and Tara approached the doorway.

Faith gave a run at the door, trying to force her way inside. The doorway sizzled again, but this time bolts of electricity shot around Faith’s arms and legs, shooting her clear across the walkway and into the brick wall of another building. The imprint of her body was left in the brick and mortar, and she crumpled into a heap.
Dana and Buffy rushed over to Faith with Willow and Tara close behind.

“Whoa,” Tara murmured.

“That was cool,” Willow said putting her arm around Tara’s waist. “Good job, baby.”

A very pale Faith was now standing up, but she was leaning heavily on Buffy. Her clothes were smoking and so was the top of her head.

“Well, that was some shake n’ bake,” Faith muttered.

“Looks like we’ve got a winner,” Buffy said looking at Willow and Tara.

“That’s because we rock,” Willow said with a big grin, and Tara nodded. “We can just add their stones now, and then we’ll just rinse and repeat the second half of the spell when we get back to the house.”

“Are you alright, Faith?” Tara asked.

“Nothin’ a little Slayer healin’ can’t cure,” Faith said trying to smile. She tried to walk but her legs gave out, and Dana caught her. “Oh, dude… I think I need to go lay down.”

“You two just hold tight and let us add you here, okay?” Willow said.

“We’ll come to get you when we finish, and then we can get Faith inside so she can get some rest,” Tara added.

Dana shooed them away as she helped Faith sit back down resting against the wall. Willow and Tara turned on their heels to hurry back inside the barracks.
Within minutes Dana and Faith had been added to the spells surrounding the barracks, and by the time Buffy carried Faith inside to a bunk, she was already in a deep sleep. With Faith out of commission for the night, Buffy went around the barracks making sure everything was under control.

She found the girls in the rec room waiting for her and watching a few of the potentials playing a first-person shooter game on one of the consoles there to help keep them occupied. The group was just about to leave when Tammy came running into the room and almost trampling Dana, who was already on her feet.

“Buffy!” Tammy panted.

Bracing the girl and keeping herself upright, Dana asked, “What’s your hurry, girlie?”

“It’s Charity,” Tammy said nervously.

Buffy rolled her eyes and groaned. “What did she do now?”

“You’re not going to like this,” Tammy stalled.

“Tammy, just tell me please,” Buffy said with a sigh.

“She, well, Buffy…” Tammy shuffled in place. “Charity talked Lisa-Marie and Celeste into going on a patrol.” She finally spit out.

“You couldn’t just spit that out!” Buffy said. “How long ago did they leave?”

“I came straight to you when they left, so maybe ten minutes,” Tammy answered.

Buffy looked to Willow and Tara, who were already on their feet and ready to go, then she asked, “Which way did they go, do you know?”
“Don’t worry about it, Buffy, we can find them,” Tara said slipping her hand into Willow’s.

“Great, let’s go,” Buffy said through clenched teeth. “I am so gonna kill her.”

TBC...
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst/Drama/Smut Rating: Starts out PG-13 for a bit of blood and works its way to full-on NC-17

Setting: Sunnydale

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters or the occasional bits of dialogue that are being borrowed from BtVS; they're owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy et al. All original characters are in no way connected to BtVS except by me in this forum. No money is involved; this is simply for my own pleasure, and hopefully that of the people reading too.

Feedback: If you wanna write it, I like reading it.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: As always I’d like to thank my beta Crystal, especially after being “forced” to read pages and pages of smut, over and over again (such a hardship I’m told J ). And for Richard aka Azirahael, this smut is for you my friend, you asked for this type of scenario, so you got it! Music for this chapter was Flyleaf “Horizons”, Ellie Goulding “Halcyon”, The XX “Coexist”, and Bat for Lashes “The Haunted Man” (all of which I recommend).

The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires. - William Arthur Ward

*****
Love is like a friendship caught on fire. In the beginning a flame, very pretty, often hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering. As love grows older, our hearts mature and our love becomes as coals, deep-burning and unquenchable. - Bruce Lee

“Tammy, you stay here, okay? Don’t let anyone else leave, and if they have a problem with it tell them to take it up with me,” Buffy scowled as she moved towards a weapons chest near the door. She rummaged through the large box and then grabbed a short sword. She tossed stakes to the three witches.

With a flick of Tara’s hand, a bright neon pink light appeared and bobbed cheerfully in front of her. “Take us to the missing Potentials,” Tara said and the light swirled for a moment before it zoomed away.

“Follow that Tinkerbell!” Willow said with a goofy grin, then turned to Tara. “I’ve always wanted to say that.”

Tara smiled warmly and kissed Willow’s cheek, the gesture made Buffy roll her eyes. Taking the lead at the door, Buffy rushed off into the steadily darkening evening. The group followed Tara’s ‘Tinkerbell’ closely; it led them quickly to a park near the rebuilt high school. It was surprisingly well lit, and the three potentials were clearly visible caught between the swing set and a jungle gym.

Much to their misfortune, the Potentials were surrounded by a quintet of uber vamps. The foursome watched for a moment and it became clear that the Potentials were being toyed with. The vamps were taking swipes at them; cutting them enough to wound while providing maximum pain, but not to immediately kill. Looks of grim determination hardened the features of Willow, Tara, Buffy, and Dana as they moved swiftly towards the Potentials.

Willow and Tara rushed ahead of the group, and without words, they began to cast. The air around them began to crackle with energy as they prepared their spells. Willow hit one vamp with a cyclone of flame and watched it burst into flames but not fall to dust. It charged at Willow bellowing its pain and rage. Willow began to cast again as the vamp bounced off of the shield she quickly formed around herself.

Dana had levitated the vamp that was tormenting Celeste away; it hissed as it clawed at the air trying to reach Dana as it rotated out of reach. It also became obvious that Celeste was hurt the worst of the three Potentials. She was crumpled on the grass, barely sitting upright, bone white and bleeding heavily from deep a wound on her thigh. Several nasty gashes on her back continued to weep blood, although they were slowing.
Tara’s spells were more effective, however. She hit one vamp with her ice spell, drawing moisture from the vamp itself; she turned it into an immobile solid block. Turning in one smooth movement, she cast at another vamp. The bolt of electricity hit and began to fry it from the inside out as the creature hissed and popped before it exploded loudly.

Buffy rushed through the cloud of dust without hesitation and sprinted towards the frozen vamp. With a graceful yet powerful roundhouse kick, she shattered it into pieces. Not missing a beat, Buffy continued to close in on the last free vamp.

Buffy was giving as good as she got with the remaining vamp, obviously working out some frustrations on it. She was going for all the creature’s soft spots – of which there weren’t many. She repeatedly went for its knees, throat, and eyes – anywhere that should have been soft and painful.

Tara turned to help Willow, but the overpowering scent of ozone and burning flesh filled the air. She watched as Willow sent another snake-like tongue of flame to dust the vamp as it clawed and howled while battering bodily at Willow’s shield.

Willow and Tara raced towards one another, and quickly joined hands. Taking a combined shot at Dana’s floating vamp, they dusted it in one go. Then Willow and Dana dashed over to the injured potentials. Dana immediately began to work on stemming the flow of blood from Celeste’s thigh, while Willow wasted no time going to work on Lisa-Marie, who was bleeding from a stomach wound and holding her right arm at an awkward angle close to her body.

Charity was plainly in shock – all wide glassy-eyed, and with a complexion the color of Elmer’s Glue. The blood dripping from her chin came from a deep laceration that ran from her eyebrow – her piercing now missing – to her cheek, making her pallor all the more apparent.

Tara yelled for Buffy to duck, sending a shot at the vamp Buffy was fighting, hitting it with a bolt of electricity causing it to cease its attack. That gave Buffy enough time to draw her short sword and separate its head cleanly from its shoulders.

As the dust cleared, both girls sped towards the small cluster around Celeste and Lisa-Marie. Dana had stopped Celeste’s bleeding, but she had passed out from the pain. Willow had done an unmasking spell to reveal just how much damage had been inflicted on both girls.

“You!” Buffy grabbed Charity by her shirt collar and shook her violently. “Do you see them?” she pointed at the two seriously injured girls. “This is all because you had to be a big shot!”
“I… I…” Charity stuttered.

“If you ever pull a stunt like this again, so help me…” Buffy raged.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Charity gasped out, and then she dropped to her knees to vomit loudly at Buffy’s feet.

“Buffy, let her be,” Tara said putting her hand on Buffy’s arm. “At least for right now we have other things to worry about. We’ve got to get Celeste and Lisa-Marie back to the barracks and we’re going to need her help to do it safely.”

“This is so not over,” Buffy said staring down menacingly at the heaving girl.

“Uhh,” Charity moaned as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Tara, help me with Lisa-Marie.” Tara put her hands on Lisa-Marie’s shoulder from the back. “Your shoulder is dislocated, and I think your arm is broken too,” Willow said. “Your stomach wound isn’t too bad, in comparison. Now fixing your shoulder, we can do that, but well, that’s gonna hurt. But it will at least feel a little better than it does now.” She tried to smile, unconvincingly at best.

“We can get your arm taken care of after that, okay, sweetie?” Tara spoke to the girl gently.

“Okay, on the count of three,” Willow said looking the girl carefully in the eyes and waited for her to nod in agreement.

“Okay, here we go, I’ll make it quick,” Willow placed her hands on Lisa-Marie’s shoulder, “One… two…,” With an almost imperceptible nod, she and Tara forced the girl’s dislocated shoulder back into place, the girl shrieked as it was shoved back into place.

Tara placed her arm gently around Lisa-Marie’s waist comforting the wounded teen as Lisa-Marie took deep breaths trying to keep herself calm. Willow gently wiped at her tears and smiled half-heartedly, trying to soothe her as much as possible. “It’ll be better now, I promise. Okay?” The girl looked at her with a tear-stained face as she nodded again.
“Buff, we need to get them out of here, and like now-ish,” Willow said. “Dana can levitate Celeste, and Lisa-Marie can walk back. We can close in around them, but we need to be ready just in case; it’s just… Celeste really needs a doctor. Buffy, her leg…” Willow shook her head sadly.

Buffy looked down at Charity sitting in the grass holding her knees close to her chest. “Hey, snap out of it, we need you. She needs you,” she said harshly.

Dana used a spell to ease both girls pain, as she levitated Celeste carefully. Lisa-Marie stood close by as the other four surrounded them cautiously. Willow then encased Dana and the two injured girls in a shield as an extra precaution after watching Charity stumble repeatedly, she knew she would be of no real help. The group slowly made their way back to the barracks. Willow and Tara could feel the anger rolling off of Buffy; her crossed arms and silence was only more proof.

Once they arrived at the barracks, a hasty call was placed immediately to the Summers house to arrange transportation for the injured. Shortly after Xander arrived at the barracks, Celeste was bundled into the back of the car with Dana and Lisa-Marie riding shotgun. The nearest functioning hospital was almost an hour away, and Xander had no time to spare on the clock.

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The barracks were all abuzz with rumors about the mayhem during the evening’s events after the group made it back. Even Faith managed to crawl out of bed to try and help with Celeste and Lisa-Marie. She also quickly got the busybodies in hand with a few sharp words and barely veiled threats before she shuffled her way back to her bunk. The rumors were only made worse when Buffy remained angry and silent letting Willow and Tara run the show until the three were ready to go back home with the next shift of potentials.

Buffy hadn’t said any more to Charity and watched at a distance as Willow and Tara patched her up and sent her to bed. They were hoping this would give Charity some time to regroup before Buffy confronted her again. Her overzealousness and foolishness had possibly cost them the life of a Potential at worst, and a serious, maybe permanent injury at best, and to one that she had called a friend no less.

******

Willow, Tara, and Buffy walked back home with Coya and Mimi. The Potentials walked ahead of the pensive trio, trying their best to remain alert as they had been taught. Willow and Tara were hand
in hand, while Buffy walked with her hands jammed into her coat pockets and her brow furrowed in thought.

“Buffy...” Willow started.

“Don’t, Will.” Buffy said tersely. “Don’t defend her. She went off half-cocked, and we had to clean up her mess.”

“I’m not saying what she did was a good thing,” Willow replied. “But look at her, Buff; she’s all broken up about it.”

“As she should be, but she’s definitely feeling the cost of her actions,” Tara added.

“And so am I!” Buffy answered bitterly. “Like I don’t have enough on my plate, that I need her stupidity added to the mix!”

“No, Buff, you don’t. But I doubt this is what she had planned either; it was incredibly careless,” Willow said. “But we’ve all been careless at one point or another. The cost is going to be really high for Charity, and even higher for Celeste. She’s in horrible shape...” Willow took a deep breath and pulled Tara close to her. “Tara may be the only one that’s been that bad.”

Tara smiled sadly. “Yes, you’ve died, Buffy, and don’t get me wrong, that’s beyond harsh,” Tara put her hand on Buffy’s arm gently. “But you’ve never been trapped inside your own body. That’s its own special sort of hell.” Her expression grew distant for a moment, and Willow slipped her arm around Tara’s waist, dropping a kiss on her shoulder as they walked.

Buffy looked at the pair, her confusion written clearly on her face. She wasn’t picking up on what they were getting at, so she waited for them to continue.

“Buffy, you have the use of all your limbs,” Willow said softly. “The truth is Celeste could lose her leg – it’s that bad, Buff. Imagine what that would be like for you as a Slayer, and then imagine what it would be like to do that to another Slayer,” Willow shook her head miserably. “Charity has to live with that, knowing she’s responsible for that kind of pain and suffering.”

“Oh,” Buffy murmured. “I didn’t know it was that bad for Celeste.”
“Lisa-Marie will be okay once her arm is set, but they’re all gonna have scars,” Tara said. “Buffy don’t forget it wasn’t all Charity either. She may have been the ringleader, but the other two made the choice to go with her, they could’ve said no.”

They arrived at the house and led the Potentials inside. Joanie and Livy were sitting in the living room signing back and forth in a very animated conversation. Making quick introductions to the young witches, all the girls went into the kitchen for some food, leaving Willow, Tara, and Buffy standing in the foyer in front of the stairs.

Reading Buffy’s mood, Willow and Tara decided to head into the kitchen for something to eat, leaving Buffy to slowly climb the stairs to her room with her thoughts. Her expression even more concerned than it had been, as she digested the new information about Celeste. She was going to have to handle this a little differently, but she knew she couldn’t just let it go.

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The chatter stopped when Willow and Tara walked into the kitchen, and everyone looked at them curiously. Ignoring the girls, Tara went over to the refrigerator, and Willow headed for the pantry. Tara immediately began pulling out the stuff for salads and found some leftover fried chicken from the previous night. Willow came back with macaroni and cheese, and a can each of corn and green beans.

While Willow pulled out pots and began opening the cans and setting the water to boil, Tara had her hands full with fresh vegetables and the chicken she had pulled from the refrigerator. Tara set everything on the island, and she quickly went to work on making two decent sized salads. The group of girls already had two large bowls, one filled with popcorn and the other with chips that they were grazing from while getting to know each other; the group had stopped to watch the pair as they began to cook.

“Wow, I thought only we ate like that,” Coya observed.

Tara looked up from slicing a tomato and smiled. “We found out at when we were at the coven after major casting we can really put some food away too.”

“Usually happened after combat exercises, not just the big spells,” Willow added. “Seems like we need to replenish our energy just like Slayers and Potentials do and eating everything in sight is one of the fastest ways we can do it.” She smiled and popped a slice of tomato into her mouth, then fed a
slice to Tara.

Tara dropped a kiss on Willow’s mouth before she began to chew, and Willow hummed her pleasure with a smile. Turning back to the stove she added the noodles for the mac and cheese before she stirred the vegetables that were beginning to heat up.

Tara had their salads ready and handed one to Willow. They both leaned against a counter and began to scarf them down while everything else finished cooking. Willow stirred everything again before she polished off the last of her salad and retrieved a bowl to put the mac and cheese into.

Tara turned off the vegetables, then started to plate up food for them. Putting vegetables and chicken on the plates, she waited for Willow to add the cheesy noodles. Willow grabbed utensils and another drumstick as she passed the plate of cold chicken to gnaw on as they made their way to the dining room table to eat in peace.

The four other girls had watched them move effortlessly around the kitchen, managing to never get in the others way while being efficient as they made their supper. Livy signed to Joanie that they always seemed to move that way. Almost like it was choreographed in its ease and practiced movements. Joanie played interpreter for Coya and Mimi, as the four took their bowls of snacks to the living room to watch some television and leave the two older girls alone.

*****

After they ate, Tara made a plate for Buffy and left it in the refrigerator after she put a post-it with her name on it. Willow cleaned up the pots they used and then loaded them into the dishwasher. She was drying her hands as Tara bent over to stash Buffy’s plate away in the refrigerator.

Quickly tossing the dish towel aside, Willow moved behind Tara so that when she straightened up, she could wrap her arms around Tara’s waist. Letting the door ease shut on its own, Tara leaned back into Willow and rested her hands on top of Willow’s. Tara closed her eyes and murmured her approval while enjoying the soft kisses and nibbles along her neck.

Tara turned in Willow’s arms, and she tenderly stroked Willow’s face from brow to chin. She kissed Willow’s mouth at one corner, and then the other before pressing her lips fully in a sweet kiss against Willow’s. Sinking her fingers into Tara’s short silky locks, Willow held Tara close as the kiss went from light and sweet to passionate.
They both moaned softly into the kiss and tightened their hold on one another. Tara stroked Willow’s back, caressing her lightly. As their kisses grew in want and need, Tara’s hands wandered down to rest on Willow’s bottom, pulling their hips closer together.

The loud sounds of laughter from the living room broke in on their little world, forcing them to part. Breathing heavy, Willow and Tara gazed at each other with soft loving smiles. Tara stroked Willow’s cheek again and gently grazed her thumb over kiss-swollen lips.

“Take me to bed?” she asked.

“My pleasure,” Willow replied entwining her hand with Tara’s.

They walked into the living room and all the conversation ceased in the room again amid the sounds of canned laughter coming from the television. Ignoring the gawking cluster of girls, Willow and Tara quietly made their way to the stairs and disappeared. Once they had disappeared from view, Livy’s hands moved in a flurry as her cheeks reddened and Joanie burst out laughing.

“What? What did she say?” Coya asked smiling at the laughing pair.

“That it was time to break out the earplugs,” Joanie replied still snickering.

“Huh?” Mimi asked slightly confused.

Joanie turned off the television and rose with Livy, who signaled for the two Potentials to follow them downstairs.

“Let’s just say the walls are thin around here,” Joanie said, and Livy, whose cheeks flushed even more and her eyes twinkled, nodded her head vigorously.

*****

Willow carefully closed and locked their bedroom door. Turning, she watched as Tara, already topless, shimmied out of her shorts and panties then lay down naked on the bed. Resting her hand on her stomach, she began to absentely draw slow circles on her skin as she watched Willow in silence.
Willow’s eyes traveled the length of Tara’s nude body stretched out before her. Licking her lips, she tugged her shirt out of her own shorts, pulling it free and lifting the tank top away as quickly as she could. She kicked her shoes free and continued to undress; within seconds she joined Tara on the bed.

“Baby, I know I’ve already said this like a million times before, but you are so beautiful,” Willow said softly.

Tara smiled sexily. “You just want me for my body,” she teased.

Willow scooted over and lay on her side facing Tara. Taking the hand that had been on Tara’s stomach, she gently kissed the palm, then the tips of each finger, sucking on them lightly. Willow placed Tara’s hand on her breast as she leaned forward to nuzzle Tara’s warm neck.

“Just one of the many, many reasons, my beautiful girl,” Willow murmured as she kissed Tara’s ear and nibbled on the lobe.

Willow started to place hot open mouthed kisses along Tara’s shoulder and throat. She took small bites of the skin and sucked on them just hard enough to bruise. A thin dark trail of love bites left in the wake of her mouth now appeared on Tara’s fair skin.

Tara pulled Willow closer to her and cupped her breast, rolling the nipple between her fingers. She tugged not so gently at it every time Willow left a new mark on her. Willow’s hand drifted up to one of Tara’s exposed breasts, her nipples already a dusky rose in color, hard and taut. Willow caressed the skin, and subconsciously Tara started to roll her hips, as her breathing became more labored.

“Gently,” Tara breathed as Willow toyed with her nipples. “They’re sensitive.”

“Aww, are we feeling a little hormonal, darling?” Willow asked before moving down over Tara’s collarbone.

Willow quickly made her way down to capture the nipple she wasn’t playing within her mouth. Willow moaned, and so did Tara. Willow grazed her teeth over the sensitive flesh, swirling her tongue around the areola as Tara’s hand grasped the back of her head to hold her mouth in place.
“Yes,” Tara mewled. “We have a little less than two weeks before I cycle, Love.”

“Mmm, then I’ll be a week behind you,” Willow mumbled into Tara’s chest.

“Can we talk about something other than our cycles right now, Sweetie?” Tara panted.

“How ‘bout we not talk at all?” Willow growled, temporarily releasing the nipple before sucking at it again hungrily.

“Yeah… not talking… good,” was all Tara could manage.

Willow could feel Tara moving next to her, and she pulled her head away from the nipple she was deliciously teasing to latch onto Tara’s mouth. The kiss was deep and passionate; their tongues slid over one another, slipping from one mouth to the other. Tara had turned onto her side and pressed her body flush against Willow’s, her hands pressed flat and tight against Willow’s back as though she were trying to mesh their bodies together.

Finally, their kisses slowed to allow for air and for hands to wander over already exceptionally sensitized skin. They let their touches stoke their desire for one another higher and higher, while they nipped at each other’s lips, shoulders and necks.

Willow shifted, sliding her leg between Tara’s, who immediately began to grind against the firm muscle of Willow’s thigh. Willow groaned again, feeling Tara’s heat and wetness coat her skin; she dropped her mouth back to Tara’s throat, this time sucking hard at an already bruised spot.

Tara gasped at the sensation of Willow’s mouth on her skin and rolled her hips harder and faster against Willow’s thigh. Willow knew that in her hormonal state Tara would be able to come from this and having her nipples tormented if she let her continue, so she eased her thigh down and away, much to Tara’s whimpered discontent.

“Willow,” Tara whined.

“Yeah, Baby?” Willow answered innocently.
“Don’t tease,” she pled.

“Baby, have I ever left you unsatisfied on purpose?” Willow asked seriously.

“Well… no… but Will,” Tara took Willow’s hand, grazing the tips over her trembling skin and pushed Willow’s fingers inside her. “See how hot I am for you, Baby?”

With a groan, Willow licked Tara’s collarbone and sucked on the skin there as she pushed her fingers as deeply as she could inside Tara. Feeling for the rough patch inside, she began to massage it, causing Tara to bite down on her shoulder and hiss.

“Ohh, Baby, yesss,” Tara moaned.

“You feel so good, Tara,” Willow breathed. “You’re so wet, Honey. I absolutely love it when you’re like this, how… deliciously you throb around my fingers.”

“It’s you, Willow. You make me this way, you make me feel this way,” Tara said as her muscles clenched against the fingers massaging her inner walls. “Soo good, Love, so very good,” She murmured as she looked deeply into Willow’s eyes.

The heat from their bodies was making them slick with sweat as they pressed as close to one another as they could; it beaded along their brows and down their backs. They stroked each other, panting and shaking, but once again Willow stopped, pulling them back from complete release.

“Will-low!” Tara whimpered.

Willow chuckled. “Baby, trust me?”

“Of course. What are you up to?” Tara asked, cheeks flushed and supremely frustrated.

“I wanna play a little,” Willow smiled.

Tara smiled back. “What exactly did you have in mind, Darling?” she asked cupping Willow’s breast
Willow closed her eyes for a moment enjoying the feel of what Tara was doing to her before responding. “I want my turn with our new toy,” she said a little shyly.

“Your turn?” Tara asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“Mmmhmm,” Willow nodded. “What do you think about that, Sexy?”

Tara’s eyes flashed with unbridled lust as she nodded in return before she pulled Willow in for a positively steamy kiss. Raking her short nails down Willow’s back all the way to her bottom, Tara kneaded the firm muscle beneath her hands.

“I think you should fuck me, Willow,” Tara husked into Willow’s ear.

Willow groaned from deep in her chest at Tara’s words and had to take several breaths to calm herself before she could move. Flipping them so Tara was flat on her back, Willow ground her hips into Tara making them both sigh with pleasure. Tara brought her legs up to wrap around Willow’s hips while Willow held herself up on her arms looking down into Tara’s face as she rolled her hips. Willow smiled then held herself still.

Tara cocked her head to the side as she looked up into Willow’s sweetly smiling face. Tara placed her hand against Willow’s flushed skin and stroked her cheek tenderly. Shifting off to the other side of Tara, Willow took the hand and kissed the palm.

“Love you,” Willow whispered.

Tara smiled up at her. “You know I do, Sweet Love,” she replied.

Willow dropped one more kiss onto Tara’s lips, and then she slipped from the bed and went for their box of toys stashed in the armoire. Tara wiggled as she watched Willow move across the room, enjoying the fluidity and beauty of a naked Willow.

After rummaging in a box she pulled from deep in the back behind some clothes, Willow turned
around with said toy in hand, smirking. “Lights?”

Tara shook her head. “I wanna to see your face.”

Willow blushed lightly, causing the skin over her chest and shoulders to glow adorably and make Tara laugh loudly. “What?”

“You have a bright red sex toy in your hand, but when I tell you to leave the lights on, that’s what makes you blush?” Tara teased.

“Oh, yeah, huh?” Willow murmured, tilting her head to one side as she considered the situation. “Well, a girl has to have some modesty left.” She pouted playfully.

“Nope, not here, and definitely not right now,” Tara replied firmly. “That should have been checked at the door as soon as you locked it, baby,” Tara leered.

Willow crossed the room in two quick paces, diving for the bed and Tara. Stashing the toy under a pillow, she began peppering Tara’s face and neck with kisses, and Tara started to giggle. Then letting her hands wander down Willow’s back, Tara pulled her in to kiss her in earnest. Their mood went from playful to horny to needy in mere seconds flat.

Tara rolled them over and straddled Willow’s hips. She began to swivel her pelvis over Willow’s in tight circles for maximum friction and contact. Willow raised her knees so Tara had something to lean back against, and trailed her hands up Tara’s flat tummy to cup her breasts. Willow let go of Tara for a moment and grabbed the pillows and pushed them behind her as best she could so she was semi-reclining.

Now propped up, Willow let her hands wander again. She gently traced Tara’s shoulders and collarbone, up and down the length of her long, slender neck. Willow smiled as Tara’s eyes darkened to a deep blue while she massaged her breasts and rolled her nipples between her fingers just hard enough to make her moan.

One hand wandered down to the curls between Tara’s legs, and Willow began to stroke her wet sex. With a soft touch that deliberately grew more firm, Willow built Tara back up. As Tara got more aroused, she rubbed herself against Willow harder, increasing the pressure on Willow’s clit as well.
Willow’s hands now concentrated on Tara’s nipples, pulling, pinching and rolling; trying to draw as much sensation from them as she could. Tara covered one of Willow’s hands with her own, and then shifted slightly so she could ease her own hand down between their grinding centers.

Leaning over, Tara sucked one of Willow’s nipples into her mouth as she pinched Willow’s clit firmly. Holding it for a moment before letting go, and rubbing small circles around it; Willow moaned and lifted her hips to push back against Tara’s hand.

Tara smiled against the nipple in her mouth. Sliding her fingers down, she circled Willow’s entrance before pushing her fingers just inside her, not entering her fully. Pulling back out she repeated her teasing until Willow began to whimper.

“I’m not the only one who’s hot and wet, Honey,” Tara whispered just loud enough for Willow to hear.

Willow just nodded, her pupils dilated with desire. She picked up the toy from where she left it now exposed since the pillows had been moved, and handed it to Tara, breathing heavily.

“What the honors?” she asked breathily.

Tara just smiled as she moved off of Willow’s hips, dragging her thigh across to tease. She used the two fingers she had been teasing Willow with moments ago, she began to tease her again. Slow soft strokes around her clit and occasional pinches increasing its sensitivity, followed by firmer strokes around her entrance, just dipping inside the hot dampness. Willow’s couldn’t keep her hips still; every time Tara started to enter her they rose in a silent plea for Tara to enter and fill her.

Once her fingers were well coated with Willow’s own juices, Tara held the toy up so Willow could watch as she coated the end that she was going to slip inside her. Willow moaned and closed her eyes. Then she felt something cool pressing against the superheated skin of her entrance. Tara was rubbing that end against her, warming and coating it even more.

“Ready, Love?” Tara asked.

Willow nodded. “Whenever you are, Baby.”

Tara smiled, then tilted the toy and slipped the end inside Willow. Holding it firmly, Tara let Willow
become accustomed to the pressure before she began to move it inside Willow a little. Willow bucked against the toy, biting her lip at the fullness she felt.

“Feel good, baby?” Tara asked licking her fingers and knowing from her own experience that it would be rubbing Willow’s g-spot.

“Oh yeah,” Willow panted, and opened her eyes, dark green with golden flecks in them, to gaze at Tara. “Are you ready?” she asked.

Tara nodded and lifted herself over Willow again. Making sure the pillows were still going to keep Willow in the semi-upright position, Tara began to kiss her. Willow’s hands slipped around to Tara’s back to hold her close as they kissed. Tara pulled back just enough so that their nipples could brush against the already slick skin making them both moan.

Tara reached down for the toy now sticking up at an angle from Willow’s center and aimed right for her. Placing the tip at her entrance, she eased down on it a little. Willow put her hands on Tara’s hips to help guide her. With a few strokes, Tara worked her way down the shaft, groaning once it was buried completely inside her.

“How does it feel, Baby?” Willow asked watching Tara’s face.

Eyes closed, Tara nodded as she eased up a little, the motion causing the end inside Willow to move. “Oh,” Willow squeaked.

Tara looked down at Willow from her angle and smiled cockily. “Uh, huh.” She moved again a little harder this time.

“Oh, Tara,” Willow breathed.

Willow leaned forward to capture one of Tara’s nipples and suck on it hard. She used her hands to urge Tara to move again, as they developed their rhythm. Willow switched nipples, stoking Tara’s pleasure with her mouth as well as the toy between her legs. Tara rolled her hips causing the end inside of Willow to rotate with her, and forcing a low guttural noise from deep in Willow’s chest.

“Baby, do that again,” Willow begged before she latched back on to an unattended nipple.
So as she rose, Tara swiveled her hips just enough to cause the rolling sensation inside Willow. Willow’s hands scratched down Tara’s back, leaving her own set of marks. Tara’s hands rested on Willow’s shoulders, as she clutched at her and sped up her strokes, rolling her hips in time with their thrusts.

“Oh, Willow,” she moaned.

“I love you on top, Baby,” Willow gasped. “You’re so sexy, Tara. So gorgeous.”


Willow reclined further back into the pillows so she could brace her feet on the bed and push back with more force. Tara was bent slightly forward over Willow, who clawed down Willow’s front so now she had a matching set of marks, front and back.

“Yess,” Willow hissed between clenched teeth.

Tara started tweaking Willow’s nipples, and this got even more forceful thrusts from her lover. Large round drops of sweat rolled down both Willow and Tara’s neck and between their breasts. Willow pushed back harder into the pillows so she could really snap her hips and push harder into Tara.

“Oh, gods, yes, Willow!” Tara yelled.

“Oh, Tara, you’re so good!” Willow said.

“Will, I’m gonna…” Tara moaned loudly.

Willow picked up the speed of her thrusts again and howled. “Yes, baby, yes! That’s it, Tara, come for me, sweetheart!”

And with a long keening sound, Tara came so hard, she drenched them both. She shook so hard that her vibrating body set off Willow’s orgasm. Collapsing on top of Willow, Tara continued to pant and
shake in Willow’s arms. It was all Willow could do to clutch at Tara while she rode out her own tremors.

Several minutes later, they were still wrapped tightly around one another waiting for their breathing to finally return to normal. Willow gently stroked Tara’s back and began to kiss her neck lovingly. Tara’s hand wandered up and down Willow’s arms, caressing her lovingly.

“I love the way you look when you come,” Willow whispered.

Tara just giggled and buried her face in Willow’s neck, and then she finally looked at Willow. Pushing damp hair out of Willow’s eyes, she kissed her nose and said, “You’re pretty damn hot when you come too, Sweet Love.”

Willow got a mischievous look in her eye and rolled them both over, keeping the toy still deep inside Tara earning a low growl from Tara. Willow pulled her hips back slowly and eased forward into Tara gradually. Tara closed her eyes and whimpered, her breath becoming shallow again. Willow moved her hips again, using a few short deep strokes to tease Tara, who looked at her biting her lower lip. Tara shuddered against Willow and lifted her hips to take in as much of toy sprouting from Willow as she could.

“Wanna go again?” Willow asked.

Tara wrapped her legs around Willow’s hips and smiled wickedly. “I do seem to recall asking you to fuck me earlier.”

Willow growled and with a quick snap of her hips said, “My pleasure.”

TBC…
Chapter 38 - So It Begins

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst/Drama/Smut Rating: A strong PG-13 and a good 7 on the drama-meter.

Setting: Sunnydale

Disclaimer: I in no way, shape or form own the characters or the occasional bits of dialogue that are being borrowed from BtVS; they’re owned by Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy et al. All original characters are in no way connected to BtVS except by me in this forum. No money is involved; this is simply for my own pleasure, and hopefully that of the people reading too.

Feedback: Of course, as usual.

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: Ok, so remember how I decided to mess with time? And how about my having Dawnie turn Spike into ashtray fodder while Willow and Tara were boning, I mean honing their skills at The Grove in Tucson (sorry I couldn’t resist)? I also felt no need to include a misogynistic preacher as a minion for something that could be scary enough without that thrown in the mix. So that cut out the entire Spike sideline from my season seven and this would roughly be placed around the time of the “Lies My Parents Told Me” episode. As always I’d like to thank Crystal for all her help, she’s the bestest! Music for this chapter was just Alexisonfire’s “Death Letter” EP.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit. "Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful.

The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams
The sun was shining brightly, and in one corner of the backyard, Buffy was occupied with training the two potentials she had brought home with her the night before. Dana was putting the coven through their paces as well. They were divided into two teams of two; one would practice their defensive spells and the other would practice their attack spells before alternating and starting again.

Claude was off with the plants, crooning to them gently as she watered them, coaxing them to grow and flower for her. She had quickly become adept at summoning the root systems of even the smallest amount of vegetation around her to create traps and snares so thick even Buffy and Faith could not free themselves or get through them.

The air was thick with the smell of ozone and smoke; the clash of metal on metal rang and echoed off surrounding empty houses. This was all in the background as Willow and Tara lay captivated with one another; their deep red sheets swaddled around their limbs. Tara was propped up against the headboard, and Willow’s head was resting on Tara’s stomach as she stroked her hair.

“When did morning happen?” Willow asked drowsily.

“After the moon went down,” Tara teased.

“Mmm... I never want to forget how good this feels, baby,” Willow looked up at Tara smiling as she spoke. “Us. Together. It’s all the magic I will ever need.”

“And there was plenty of magic, Will,” Tara smirked.

Willow snickered and slid up Tara’s body to kiss her. They held each other tight, getting lost in the closeness they were sharing. Willow was drawing little-entwined hearts up and down Tara’s tummy while she snuggled closer into her side. They started to talk about what they were going to do with the coven when a blood-curdling scream rose from the backyard.

The girls jumped up from the bed, dressing hastily, and still barefoot they ran down the stairs and outside. When they burst through the back door, they found everyone crowded around a crumpled Dana. She was curled into a fetal position, her hand in fists on either side of her head as she continued to wail.
“Get out of the way,” Willow yelled, as she dropped to her knees beside her friend.

Willow reached out to touch Dana and with a final shrill cry, Willow was flung back a good six feet with a loud hissing noise.

“Willow!” Tara screamed rushing to her side.

“I’m okay… I’m okay,” Willow gasped as she started to sit up; Tara wrapped an arm around her to help her while holding her, she pushed Willow’s bangs out of her eyes, studying her closely. Willow’s hand made a subtle move towards Dana, as she mouthed silent words.

Dana lay silent in the grass breathing heavily, her eyes screwed tightly shut and sobbing. Claude reached out to touch her mentor, but this time she hit a shield. She tried several times to push through a field that just shimmered down the length of Dana’s body each time she touched it, showing that it surrounded her completely. She looked up worriedly at Willow and Tara.

“It’s okay, Claude. I did that,” Willow rasped, still trying to catch her breath. “Baby, would you look at her aura and tell me what you see, please?” She asked looking at Tara.

Tara nodded and reluctantly let Willow go to move in front of Dana. She sat down looking at her friend with sad eyes. “Everyone, I need you to back away. I want to make sure no one else bleeds in,” Tara instructed.

The curious and wary group moved quickly behind Tara, to surround Willow and Buffy. Buffy herded them back another ten feet to make sure the area was as clear as possible for Tara. There was a watery shimmer over Dana as Willow removed the shield she put around her.

Sitting in lotus position, Tara began to take deep breaths, tuning everything around her out so she could focus on Dana. The minutes ticked by as Tara sat before the moaning Dana. Eventually, Tara turned to look at Willow and just shook her head. Willow joined Tara on the grass next to Dana and began to speak to her softly. “Dana, sweetie, can you talk to me?” she whispered gently.

Dana whimpered like a kicked puppy, her breath coming in great hiccupping gasps. Her hands were still wound into claw-like fists at her temples, her hair threaded through her fingers as she pulled at it as a counterpoint to whatever pain she was already experiencing.
“Dana, hon, I’m going to touch you,” Tara said. Willow slipped her hand into Tara’s before Tara gently laid her palm to Dana’s head.

Willow and Tara stiffened, sitting rigidly upright as Tara touched Dana’s mind. Their jaws snapped shut and they too began to whimper as their mind’s eyes were assailed by a tidal wave of horrific images. A hidden Egyptian-looking tomb and a crimson bladed scythe clutched in the hands of an ancient woman, held out in offering.

Whiplash flashes of young girls lying broken and bloodied in an underground cavern. Hundreds upon thousands of uber vamps snarling, blood-soaked and ripping through potential after potential. Then the coven, Willow, Tara, Buffy and the rest of the Scoobies all mangled, torn, and unnaturally still. All the while a horrible horned demon with fathomless black eyes watched, maniacally cackling in malicious glee.

With a strangled cry Willow and Tara fell back onto the grass breaking their connection with Dana. Buffy and Claude rushed over to the collapsed girls. They were gasping and twitching, all the color had drained from their faces leaving their skin looking grey and putty-like. Buffy knelt between them, and stroked their sweaty faces murmuring over and over, “Please be okay, please be okay.”

“Quickly, I want you to gently move them all inside,” Buffy said decisively. “Coya and Mimi, I want you to move Dana, I want to lessen the chances of a magical backlash from her again. Jake and Stephan, you take Tara, Joanie, and Claude, you take Willow. Move them up to their rooms, but be gentle with them, we don’t know just how badly they may really be hurt.”

Everyone still seemed frozen in place and wide-eyed with fear. “Don’t just stand there! Move!” Buffy shouted clapping her hands.

The group snapped to attention and began to scurry about in an effort to follow Buffy’s orders. Livy ran to hold open the back door, as the pairs began to carefully move the unconscious women inside. Once the three were safely ensconced in their rooms, Buffy sat down on the top stair. Resting her head in her hands, Buffy rubbed at her temples as she waited for her friends to wake.

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Hours later Buffy was still holding her post outside the door to Willow and Tara’s bedroom, and the door to Dawn’s room where Dana was staying was also within slayer hearing. Claude quietly came to check on her, offering to allow her to take breaks, which Buffy refused grim-faced as she paced between the two doors listening intently.
Claude stayed with Buffy on and off throughout her watch, allowing her bathroom breaks and forcing her to eat something. It had grown dark, and they were both slowly eating sandwiches when Buffy’s head snapped up and turned towards Willow and Tara’s door. Swallowing hastily, she dropped the food in her hand to the plate she was holding and stood to face the door. Her head tilted to one side, listening and waiting for more movement from inside.

Buffy turned to look at the door to where Dana lay too, tilting her head in the other direction as she now listened to something she heard there. Her eyes darted from door to door, watching to see which one opened first. The door to Willow and Tara’s room slowly eased open, and a deathly pale Tara stood swaying in the doorway. Her eyes were ringed so dark they almost looked bruised, making her lips stand out vermillion against the skin so white it looked like marble.

Buffy rushed forward, as Tara lurched dangerously and wrapped her arm around Tara’s waist. “Whoa… easy there, Tara, are you sure you should be up yet?” Buffy asked, her voice rife with concern.


“Tara, you can barely stand,” Buffy said gently as she held her friend upright.

“No, need a bath,” Tara replied shaking her head drunkenly. “Need to do a cleansing,” she said taking a deep breath, her words coming hard. “Need you to get Willow too.”

“Tara…” Buffy started again.

“No, Buffy, she’s right,” Claude agreed. “She wants to do a cleansing bath, it’s not hardcore or anything but it will help. Maybe someone should do one with Dana too.”

Claude pushed passed the two and went straight for Willow on the bed. “Do you have any blessed soap, Tara?” she called.

“S’in the bathroom… under the sink,” Tara managed as Claude gathered Willow in her arms and carried her the short distance to the bathroom.
Buffy followed Claude in with Tara in her arms. “I can do the rest,” Tara said. “Just put her in the tub.”

Claude gently put Willow in the tub, propping her head against the tile as she moaned, and then rushed to the sink pulling the doors open and looking inside. “What am I looking for?”

“The blue Tupperware box,” Tara said, her words coming easier. Holding onto the wall she sat on the side of the tub close to Willow. “Willow makes the soap herself.”


Claude snatched the box out and slid it across the floor so it hit the side of the tub. “I just need to get in with her, Buffy. Can you bring our robes? They’re on the back of our bedroom door.”

Buffy nodded then rushed out. Tara climbed into the tub next to Willow and pulled the curtain closed behind her. She slowly undressed and slid down next to Willow. Buffy came back with their robes and waited just outside the curtain. She could hear Tara struggling a bit with Willow’s clothes, but she also saw the heap that was Tara’s shorts and t-shirt on the floor.

Moving with some effort, Tara managed to get Willow undressed none too gently. Fortunately, they both were only wearing shorts and t-shirts. Another heap of clothes hit the bathroom floor before she started to run water in the tub.

“Tara, I’m here,” Buffy said quietly. “Do you need anything?” She heard Willow whimper again, and she bit her lower lip listening to her friend’s pain.

“No, Buffy, we’ll be alright,” Tara replied, her arm inching out under the curtain and towards the box of soap. “When we’re done, we need to get Dana. Willow and I should be able to help her by then though,” Tara’s voice was almost a whisper.

“I’ll be right outside, okay?” Buffy said. “You don’t even need to yell, just talk loudly and I’ll be able to hear you.”

“Thanks, Buff,” Tara replied dropping the open box to the floor.
Two hours later, the damp bandeau and shorts from their initiation ceremony, Willow and Tara were wrapping a bra and panty clad Dana in towels and grabbing their robes, to lead her back to her bedroom. The three sat on the bed in silence, still holding each other’s hands. Willow slowly stood, and quietly left to come back moments later with a braided smudge stick of multiple herbs.

She sat on the floor in front of Tara and Dana and lit the end until it glowed. Blowing on the end, Willow got the herb wand to release a steady stream of fragrant smoke. Standing, she offered her hand first to Tara. Once she was steady, Willow began to wave the smoke around her body using the smoke to add another layer to their cleansing baths.

Tara did the same for Willow and together they used the smoke to further help Dana. The air in the room was redolent with sage, cedar, and sweetgrass, and charged with energy. When Tara opened the door a wall of smoke rolled out into the hallway.

Buffy immediately appeared in the doorway coughing. “Are you guys okay?” she asked using her hand to fan the air in front of her face.

Willow and Tara bookended Dana on the bed, and all three looked beyond tired but a hundred times better than they had just a few hours ago. Dana smiled weakly at her. “I think we’re all okay, Buff,” Willow said.

“How do you know it was The First?” Buffy asked.

“It’s The First,” Dana smiled sadly, shivering and pulling her towel tighter around her shoulders. “He wanted to play with me a little, and got a piece of Will and Tara in the bargain.”

“Can you tell me what exactly happened down there?” she asked. “I mean, everything was fine one minute and the next very much with the not.”

“It wasn’t just your run of the mill glimpse of things to come type vision because there was a grain of truth in the lies,” Dana replied with a sigh. “Because I’ve been having these ever so wonderful dreams full of little bits and pieces in them for months now. How many reasons do you want, Buffy?”
“How much can we believe?” Buffy asked as she began to pace. “Which part is the lie and which part is the truth?”

“That we can figure out, but this is getting worse,” Dana said regretfully.

“What about you, Will? What did you see? What do you know?” Buffy turned to Willow.

Willow studied her hands as she began to speak. “It was just flashing, but they kept coming and coming so fast it was nauseating. Buff, there’s also something we need to look for, that part wasn’t a lie.”

“That was the grain of truth,” Tara said softly and took one of Willow’s hands between both of her own. “Buffy, look the rest isn’t important. There’s no reason to tell you what might happen, and really we don’t have to, you already know what’s on the line here.”

“We just have you to get to the tomb,” Dana said. “But right now, what I really need is to sleep.”

“Claude made soup. She thought you guys might be hungry after… after whatever that was out there, and it might help,” Buffy gently. “She was actually really great, she kept checking on me while I waited for you guys come around.”

“We all should have something, we need to keep up our strength,” Tara added.

Dana put a hand on each girl’s knee. “You’re right, we can’t let it know we’re hurt. Is there another robe I could borrow?” she asked as she started to stand, Willow and Tara, rising with her, each letting Dana lean on them.

Buffy moved quickly to help as well since none seemed too steady on their feet yet. “Slowly,” She disappeared coming back with a thick fuzzy robe to offer to Dana. “We’ll do this slowly, okay?” her voice gentle. “After you eat, is there anything else that would help you?”

“Meditation,” the three said in unison.
“What do you need me to do?” Buffy asked.

“Nothing. We can manage,” Tara answered.

“Maybe we can have the coven meditate with us?” Willow asked. “The added energy might help, what do you think?” Tara and Dana nodded in agreement.

“Okay, so we have a plan,” Buffy said walking slowly as Dana leaned on her. “I’ll gather everyone up while you guys eat.”

“You don’t have to, they already know,” Tara said.

Buffy looked over her shoulder at Tara with a raised eyebrow. “We didn’t summon them or anything like that, Buffy. They’re our coven, they will know that they’re needed,” Tara replied.

“If you say so,” Buffy muttered.

“She does,” Willow replied, her arm around Tara’s waist, as they followed Buffy and Dana slowly down the stairs.

The group made their way into the kitchen where Claude was standing before a huge pot of soup, humming as she stirred in herbs. Steam swirled above it along with the wonderful scent of homemade chicken soup. Claude turned to look at everyone as they entered, and without missing a beat, reached for three mugs.

She carefully ladled broth into the mugs, handing one to Dana, Willow, and Tara. “If you want something more, this is actually a soup, so I can get you a bowl,” she smiled sheepishly. “I thought broth might be best at first.”

“It’s really good, Claude,” Willow said and she sipped at the broth again.

“Gosh, that brings back memories,” Tara said with a smile. “It tastes just like your mom’s.”
Claude blushed lightly. “Well, I had a good teacher,” she said as she handed Buffy a large bowl of the thick soup. “It’s just, that after what happened this afternoon; I thought comfort food would be good for everyone. We all kind of had a scare.”

Willow and Tara bobbed their heads in agreement as they continued to gulp down the broth as quickly as they could. Dana smiled appreciatively at Claude, who had been looking at her expectantly as she slowly sipped from her mug. Claude turned back to the pot with a smug look on her face.

As Willow and Tara finished their broth, they went for bowls and followed Dana into the dining room. Claude brought her a small bowl as well as some crackers before leaving the four to eat. Buffy sat at the head of the table and kept looking between Willow and Tara on one side of her and Dana to the other.

“Okay, what gives?” she asked around a spoonful of soup. “What tomb do I have to find?”

The three looked at each other, and Willow cocked an eyebrow at Dana to let her know this was for her to explain. Dana shifted in her seat, and with a sigh, looked Buffy in the eye.

“I honestly don’t know,” Dana answered. “I don’t know where it is yet.”

“Then how am I supposed to find it?” Buffy squeaked in surprise.

“Look, it’s not like I get to have a magic roadmap or there’s a flashing neon sign that says, ‘Hey, look kids it’s over here!’, Buffy. For all I know, we may have to find it for you, or send you after it, wherever there is,” Dana sighed heavily.

“So it’s not even in Sunnydale?” Buffy asked.

“Yeah, it’s here, Buffy, I can feel it,” Tara said as everyone looked at her. “The tomb didn’t look like your standard mausoleums though, it was different.”

“Different how?” Buffy asked curiously.
“Like a pyramid. It’s old, Buffy, and I know I’ve seen it somewhere here before,” Willow said softly. “I’m just trying to remember where though. It’s not like I haven’t spent more time in all the cemeteries in Sunnydale, with the exception of you and the people buried there, than I’d care to admit,” Willow rolled her eyes. “I think we need to start with Restfield though; it’s old but a lot of it no one cares for anymore.”

“She’s right, one side of the tomb is completely over-grown,” Tara added. “The ground may not even be consecrated.”

Buffy looked at Dana. “Hey, they gave you a place to start, and I’ll draw the tomb for you in the morning,” she said tiredly. “I don’t know where else to point you, but you’ve got to be careful. We can’t lose you over something stupid.”

The foursome ate quietly for a few moments. Soon the effort started to wear on Willow, Tara, and Dana. They had already eaten what they could, and Buffy’s bowl was empty as she waited with them.

“Are you ready?” Tara asked looking between Willow and Dana.

They both nodded, and the three slowly started to clean up after themselves before Buffy waved them away. When they walked into the living room the rest of the coven was there waiting for them with blankets to wrap them in for extra comfort. The Twins, Claude, Jake, and Joanie formed a circle around Willow, Tara, and Dana. As they had been taught, they raised a circle of energy to help them heal and replenish.

Buffy stood in the doorway watching and mulling over the witches’ words. Old tombs were her specialty after all, and there were only so many really ‘old’ cemeteries to go through. Willow had mentioned Restfield specifically. Starting to fidget as she watched the stillness of the meditating group, she decided to get the two potentials and go for a little walk.

Silently, she slipped from the room, and with the potentials in tow, from the house.

TBC…
Unexpected Guests…

Willow slipped into bed next to Tara, her lips cool and minty from toothpaste. Tara rolled onto her side, and Willow did the same so they were facing one another. Tara gently ran her index finger from
Willow’s temple down to her chin before leaning in to kiss her. Willow wrapped her arms around Tara as she rolled onto her back taking Tara with her, and they settled into each other’s arms.

“Baby?” Willow asked softly.

“Yes, Love?” Tara replied.

“Do you think we’re odd?” she asked. “I mean do you think this is odd?”

Tara pulled back to look at Willow. “I’m not sure what you mean by odd, Willow. Explain.”

“This… us…,” Willow waved a hand around the room. “I mean, it’s no wonder The First attacked when you think about it. We take out a few of his overly fang-y buddies just when they were starting to have a little bit of fun with a few overzealous potentials, so he kind of had to get back at us,” Willow said. “You know, “eye for an eye” and all that kinda stuff.”

“Okay, I get that, but what do you find odd?” Tara replied.

“See, that’s just it!” Willow said frowning. “What did we do afterward?”

Tara looked blankly at Willow as she thought for a moment, then recalling their evening with a lascivious smirk, looked at Willow with a quirked eyebrow.

Sighing heavily, Willow continued. “We patched the newbie’s up, came back here, had dinner and made love like we would do on any other night, right? Like there wasn’t anything we should remotely be concerned about.”

“But Will, the fighting, it wasn’t something out of the ordinary. Together or separately, we’ve done identical or almost identical things on hundreds, if not thousands of nights by now. Like you said, it’s what we do,” Tara said as she slowly moved her hand in circles on Willow’s back as she tried to comfort her since obviously, Willow was getting upset. “What should have stood out about this night? The type of vampire, or that you and I did more of the fighting this time?” Tara continued softly looking her carefully in the eye. “What’s really upsetting you, Willow?”
“I don’t wanna be The Big Gun, Baby,” Willow’s eyes filled with tears and her voice small. “Nothing good ever comes of it.” Her lower lip trembled as she looked fearfully into Tara’s eyes.

Tara pulled Willow to her tightly. “You aren’t doing this alone, Love. I’m here with you; we’re a team and we have help,” Tara kissed Willow’s temple. “It’s okay to be afraid, Will. We should be, and you’re making sense. I doubt this will be the last time something like this happens. I mean, at least until all the fighting is finally all over.”

“I know we are facing a lot, but this time it just feels different somehow, you know?” Willow whispered.

“Sweetie, there has always been a lot to lose. That has never changed, but normally it’s Buffy that’s the one wearing her big girl pants and the t-shirt with the big bulls-eye painted on it. Apparently, we made this thing worried,” Tara replied. “It just got to Dana first.”

Willow nodded her head and nuzzled further into Tara’s shoulder. “We’re running out of time, Tara. We’ve got to find the scythe, we can’t keep waiting,” she whispered. “The First won’t.”

“I know, Love, I know,” Tara said then kissed the top of Willow’s head and tightened her grip on her. They both were silent, taking comfort in the nearness of the other until eventually sleep claimed their weary minds and exhausted bodies.

******

Willow bopped down the stairs and into the kitchen. There she found Buffy scowling at the floor like it had wronged her horribly and Faith looking… like Faith. Tara had an unusually filthy look on her face and to say that she did not look happy was an understatement.

“Uh, hi guys,” Willow said suspiciously as she grabbed a coffee mug and filled it.

Everyone was looking anywhere but at her, and as she put milk and sugar in her coffee, she very calmly asked, “Would anyone like to tell me what the frilly heck is going on with all the sourpusses?”

Faith shuffled her feet and actually looked a little bit nervous as her gaze flitted back and forth between Buffy and Tara, while Buffy’s gaze was steady on Tara. Tara sighed heavily and crossed
her arms over her chest, her face darkening even more.

“Go ahead, Faith. Tell her,” Tara said her voice oddly icy, and Willow looked at her sharply with concern.

Faith ran a hand through her dark hair and opened her mouth to speak, then stopped. She cocked her head to one side then the other, and for a moment she had the pained look similar to Xander’s when he has a thought before she looked at Willow and gave up. She plopped down onto one of the stools with a forlorn expression and began to speak.

“Look, Red, there ain’t no nice way to say this, so here goes it,” she said looking at the countertop. “Seems like Charity has got the hots for you somethin’ fierce.”

“Uhhh, okay,” Willow said with a shrug. “That’s inconvenient, sweet and I’m sure she’s a nice girl, but I’m very much with the taken.”

“Yeah, well it seems like brainchild thought, you know, that she might be able to you know,” Faith hesitated, and looked pleadingly at Buffy.

“She thought what, Faith?” Willow sighed in exasperation and set her mug down with enough force to cause the hot liquid to slosh out onto the counter. “Spit it out for cryin’ out loud, you’re making my tummy all acidy,” she said as she snatched up a dish towel to wipe up the mess.

“She thought that if she could impress you enough, you might leave me for her,” Tara said evenly.

“She what?” Willow squeaked as her eyebrows rocketed up her forehead in surprise. Willow looked at the three women and began to laugh. She picked up her mug and laughed again taking a sip. “Oh, C’mon, guys, it’s ridiculous. She really thought that – about me?”

“That whole little vanishing potentials versus big nasty smackdown was ‘cause she was tryin’ to impress you, Red,” Faith said quietly. “It just wasn’t supposed to go down that way though, yo.”

Willow leaned against the refrigerator, shock written all over her face. “That can’t be…” she whispered. “How stupid could she be?” Willow said with a mix of sadness and anger. “I mean, I know how it is to crush on someone, but me? Why?” She looked around at her friends, and then a light bulb almost literally went on above her head. “Baby, you know I’ve never given her any reason
to think she remotely had a chance.” Willow put down her cup and went to Tara, pulling her arms from her chest to step into her and press against her gently.

“I know why she would crush on you, Will,” Tara said quietly, a soft sad smile quirking her lips. “And I know you’ve never led her on either.”

“Good,” Willow replied looking deeply into her eyes.

Willow wrapped Tara in her arms and kissed her softly. She held the kiss until she felt Tara start to respond before ending it. Turning in Tara’s arms and holding them around her, she looked at both Slayers with a hard glint in her eyes.

“She almost got herself and two other innocent girls killed for her ego trip – for nothing – less than nothing,” she said. “I want as little contact with Little Miss Stalks-A-Lot as possible. This is not a joke, regardless of what she thinks.”

Buffy nodded. “Not a problem, Will. I’ll make sure she won’t do rotations here anymore.”

“Yeah, we can make sure the little nimrod is scarce for you and Blondie,” Faith added with a nod.

“Then we’re done here,” Willow said crisply, turning to Tara she softened. “Baby, come upstairs with me?”

“Sure,” Tara murmured and let Willow led her away.

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After a long cuddling session that led to a nap, the girls were refreshed and ready to work with their coven. Loud voices were the norm coming from downstairs during much of the daylight hours, so Willow and Tara were taking their time making their way back downstairs. It wasn’t unusual for there to be some racket from the potentials or the coven at that time in the afternoon, and everyone was getting used to the new and varying definitions of “quiet”.

“Willow… Tara!” Buffy yelled up the stairs. “There’s… visitors here for you!”
Willow and Tara looked at each other puzzled; unannounced visitors on the Hellmouth, in general, were not a good thing. Forgoing shoes as had become their habit of late, they started downstairs. They were at about the halfway point when they heard an unmistakable voice.

“Where are my bitches at?” Bunny said haughtily. “They didn’t tell me they were coming to live in some sort of lesbian commune.” He sniffed as he eyed Buffy.

Buffy looked amusedly at the immaculately made up little man flitting around her living room, touching things here and there. Marisol had made herself comfortable on the couch and just rolled her eyes. “Your gaydar sucks, little brother, she’s not gay. Now, will you please just sit down and stop being rude?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my gaydar, thank you very much,” he sniped back, eyeing Buffy again with a perfectly shaped raised eyebrow.

“Uhh, not so much with the girl on girl lovin’ here…” Buffy started to protest.

Halfway down the stairs Willow and Tara had heard Bunny’s voice again, and looked at each other and grinned. With a simultaneous shriek of “BUNNY!” they rushed the rest of the way down the stairs.

Bunny turned on his heel, his smile blinding and arms opened wide. “There’s my bitches!”

Marisol and Buffy watched in amusement as the trio babbled at light speed animatedly at each other throughout a long hug. Hands flailed, fingers were shaking, but mostly hugs were repeated amidst a lot of laughter.

When they calmed down, Willow and Tara noticed Marisol sitting patiently on the couch smirking at them. The girls squealed again and rushed at her with outstretched arms to pull her off the sofa into another round of bone-crushing hugs.

When the love-fest had abated, Buffy was standing looking slightly uncomfortable at the group. Tara sat on the sofa with Bunny and Marisol, each on one side, and Willow rushed to Buffy’s side pulling her over.
“Guys, this is Buffy Summers, best friend extraordinaire and The vampire slayer. Buff, this is Marisol Campos and her brother Benito, or better known as the fabulous Miss Bunny FooFoo,” Willow said grinning broadly and bouncing on the balls of her feet happily.

“Bunny FooFoo?” Buffy said looking at Willow.

“It’s what he does drag under, and he’s amazing! He has better legs than Cordelia did in high school, Buff,” Willow replied, then noticed Tara’s quirked eyebrow and began to blush furiously.

“Drag?” Buffy asked again.

“I’ll explain later,” Willow said smiling.

“Buffy huh, and that’s your real name? Glass houses, girl, glass houses,” Bunny retorted cattily.

“And Bunny is any better you sawed off little…” Buffy started replying.

“So what brings you both here?” Tara asked cutting off any further verbal sparring between the pair before Buffy got really upset and things – or people – accidentally got broken.

Taking her queue from Tara, Willow tried to help keep the conversation light and upbeat when she saw Buffy’s eyes narrowing. “Yeah, I kinda doubt you came all this way to visit the lovely Hellmouth just because you missed us.”

“Well, actually Lady Rowan wanted me to bring you a book that got left behind. She said it was important and you both would need it,” Marisol replied as she pulled an old large book from the bag at her feet. Jabbing her thumb in Bunny’s direction she continued. “He just came along to annoy me.”

“You’re not the only one,” Buffy snarked under her breath.

Bunny shot Buffy a look, and Tara took the book from Marisol. Opening it she began to look through it, recognizing it immediately. “It’s the grimoire only we could read, Will,” she said as she looked up at Willow seriously.
“Oh,” Willow replied breathlessly and started twisting her fingers anxiously in front of her.

Buffy noticed the change in Willow’s demeanor, and put a hand on Willow’s shoulder giving her a questioning look; Willow just shrugged and smiled weakly.

Marisol moved to the chair to allow Willow to sit next to Tara as she looked through the book. Tara had been thumbing through it when she came to the spell they had first seen back at The Grove. The spell for empowering.

“A book only you could read?” Buffy asked curiously.

“Yeah, Buff,” Willow said looking up at her. “We had to do a little sneaky recon to get the book. It was meant for Amy, one of her creepy little minions found it and was in the process of delivering it when Tara and I pulled the switcheroo on him. It turns out that even if she had gotten her evil little hands on it she wouldn’t have been able to use it.”

“The pages appeared blank to everyone but Will and me,” Tara added. “Even Giles had no luck.”

“Whoa, not even Giles, huh? That must’ve gotten his tweed all in a knot,” Buffy snickered. “Well, what is it exactly?” She asked looking at Tara. “Please don’t tell me it’s another prophecy… I don’t do well with prophecies.”


“Battle Magic?” Buffy squeaked.

Willow and Tara looked at one another, holding a silent conversation with their eyes. Willow nodded, and they both looked at Buffy.

“Yeah, Buffy,” Tara said and glanced at Willow who smiled. “This book, well it’s special, and it has been passed down through a long line of witches… warrior witches.”

“Warrior witches?” Buffy questioned.
“Yes, girl, warriors,” Bunny sniped. “Don’t you know these two are legendary?”

“HUH?” Buffy, Tara, and Willow replied simultaneously.

Bunny rolled his eyes as he crossed his legs and smoothed out the non-existent creases in his slacks. “There have always been witches that have fought against evil. Just like Slayers, but not,” Bunny said with a melodramatic sigh. “Magick… is an E. O. E., girlfriend,” he smirked.


“Yes, girl,” Bunny said. “The last pair of witches to use the book saved the world too.” He smiled sadly at Willow and Tara, and it was a look Buffy didn’t miss.

“They died though, didn’t they,” Buffy asked.

The atmosphere in the room was heavy, and Bunny cleared his throat. “Yes and no.”

“What do you mean, ‘yes and no’?” Willow asked. ”Either they died or they didn’t.”

Bunny reached across Tara to pat Willow’s hand soothingly. “Will, you know better than that,” he smiled. “I also know you read much of the history of Siobhan and Petra Dahl; you know the story.”

“But that’s just a legend!” Willow replied.

“So are Slayers, and witches, and all the things that go bump in the night,” He smiled again. “We know better than that though, don’t we, girl?”

“So what’s the deal with Chevy and Peter?” Buffy asked. “What made them so special?”

Bunny rolled his eyes. “Siobhan and Petra. Siobhan was her clan’s healer and Petra came from what
now would be Greece. We think they met in 1880, but there’s nothing about either of them separately before then.”

“They met while traveling in what is now Indonesia, Buff,” Willow continued. “They fell in love and fought alongside one another until 1883. The last spell they did was to stop an apocalypse that resulted in the volcano on the island of Krakatoa erupting in August of that year.”

“Thousands of people died. Some from the blast and storms caused by the volcano’s eruption. There were survivors. There was a coven that lived on the island, and a slayer that lived to see The Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the century before meeting an… untimely end,” Bunny added looking directly at Buffy.

Buffy looked at Bunny with narrowed eyes. “What are you getting at?”

“I’m not ‘getting at’ anything. The Watcher’s Council isn't the only ones to keep track of certain vampires of note. William the Bloody has, or I should say had quite the reputation,” Bunny said looking at Buffy evenly.

“It’s true, Buffy. All of that was in the accounts of the eruption I read,” Willow said trying to diffuse the tension growing between Bunny and Buffy.

“But what happened to the lovebirds?” Buffy asked.

“During the spell, it called for them to… merge… in order to harness their strength,” Willow answered.

“If that’s some sort of code for hot sweaty…” Buffy started.

“What?” Willow squeaked. “NO! No, it's not code for… anything,” she said turning a lovely shade of tomato. “They basically became one being and that being caused the eruption that closed the Hellmouth. There was nothing left after that, so we don’t know anything else after the eruption took place.”

“Oh… okay,” Buffy said blushing herself. “But what do they have to do with you two?”
“Now that’s the fifty million dollar question, isn’t it?” Bunny answered with a coy smile. “What’s your take on reincarnation, sweet cheeks?”

“Uhhh,” Buffy mumbled as she stared at Willow and Tara. “Reincarnation?”

TBC…
Chapter 40 - And the beat goes on...

Chapter Summary

Pairing: W/T

Angst/Drama/Smut Rating: PG-13 and a good 7 on the drama-meter.

Setting: Sunnydale

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Feedback: Please?

Chapter Notes

Author’s Notes: I’m not sure if anyone is still interested in this story at this point, and I had always planned on finishing it. Unfortunately, RL and a severe case of writer’s block had other ideas. However, I am taking advantage of while I can. I really only envision three or four more chapters before this is completed anyway. I don’t have a beta for this, so if you find anything glaring pm me and I’ll fix it. Music for this chapter is Alabama Shakes “Sound and Color”, Banks “The Alter”, Alicia Keys “Here” and Florence + The Machine “How Big, How Blue, How Beautiful”.

The Time Is Drawing Near
Bunny’s question hung in the air as the gears in Buffy’s head began to spin. She looked at Tara and Willow for several long moments, before taking a deep breath and smiling softly to herself.

“Reincarnation?” Buffy asked quietly as she eased back in the chair and folded her hands together in her lap. “Do you actually know who I am?” She asked Bunny and Marisol.

Bunny and Marisol looked at each other before turning back to The Slayer, waiting for her to continue speaking.

“Let me ask you this. How many times have you died and been brought back?” Buffy asked seriously.

Bunny’s eyes widened and he looked at Marisol. Marisol stared owlishly at Buffy and shook her head in the negative.

“See, I’ve already died twice,” Buffy stated. “And it seems like I just can’t stay that way. Each time I come back, I come back as me, so I kinda feel like this whole gig is a little more like the mob, you know?” she looked around at everyone and did a very poor Al Pacino impersonation. “Just when I thought I was out; they keep pullin’ me back in.”


Buffy looked over at Willow and could tell by the look on her face what was going through her mind. She smiled at Willow and winked. “Coming back from the dead isn’t a walk in the park, and I should know! As for reincarnation… well, I’ve seen too much to say no outright, but I guess I just can’t let this life go.”
Buffy eased back in her chair, crossing her legs and while looking at Marisol and Bunny closely. The metaphysical tone of the conversation, volleying back and forth between Bunny and Buffy, much to the surprise of Willow and Tara. Neither had really talked much to Buffy about her thoughts on the afterlife and her lack of one to know honestly where their friend might stand or what she might actually believe in if anything.

As the flow of the conversation kept rolling around the room, Tara took a moment to slip out of the room and up the stairs to the bedroom she shared with Willow. Tara went to their closet and began pulling out the books she and Willow had brought back with them from Tucson. As she was leaving the bedroom she met Dana on the stairs.

“Just who I was looking for!” Dana said as she looked up at Tara from her spot on the stairs.

“Are you okay?” Tara asked.

“Yes, I think I found something,” Dana said as she and Tara began to make their way back down to the first floor.

Willow turned her head to watch them both make their way down the stairs, as Tara went directly back to her seat with Willow. Claude came through the front door heading directly for Dana, passing her what looked like a “Triple AAA” roadmap. “Excellent, Claude where did you find one?” she asked.

“Mr. Giles,” Claude replied with a smile. “Man, is he wound too tight!” she said laughing.
“That’s our Tweedy Englishman,” Buffy said with a fond smile. “Whatcha got there?” she asks Dana while pointing at the paper in her hands.

“I asked your Tweedy Englishman for a map of the area,” Dana said. “I think we can do a type of location spell because there is no way that the pretty, shiny, pointy toy doesn’t give off some sort of signature.”

“Like weapon-location, like bats?” Willow asked. “Bat’s use echolocation to get around and if we can weed out the natural hell-mouthy type vibes we might be able to locate Buffy’s new toy!”

“Wait, what do bats have to do with a map?” Claude asked a little confused.

“Willow knows a spell to locate and classify all the demon presences with the help of a map of Sunnydale,” Tara explained. “We can modify that spell and filter out other echoes that might intrude because most cemeteries are on consecrated ground that will help us narrow the echoes and compare to rule certain types of echo signatures out, like a bat using echolocation, right, sweetie?” Tara finished.

Willow grinned and moved to squeeze in next to Tara. “Bingo, baby,” Willow said then kissed Tara’s cheek sweetly. “Dana, why don’t you gather everyone and bring them up to speed? Tara and I can gather the ingredients for the spell and meet at The Magic Box.” Willow finished.

“Why The Magic Box?” Dana asked.

“We’ve warded the house with a potent spell and that might interfere with the sorting out of power, demons and other magick that we’ll be trying to filter – we don’t want to miss our signatures as well,” Tara answered.
“Plus, since we came back from The Grove Tara and I have made The Magic Box and “Club Slay” no-fly zones for the baddies.” She said smiling proudly. “I planned for Claude though, her magick is earth magick so we can use her energy to rule her out and it will be easier to see if we aren’t sitting right on top of it,” Willow added.

“No fly zone, Will?” Buffy asked.

“Yup, given the circumstances and the potentials dying, Tara and I manage to cobble a couple spells together to basically make them disappear off any map used to try and find the Hellmouth. If you don’t know it’s there you can’t find “Club Slay” at all, it’s like a magical and energy dead zone.” Willow said taking a breath before finishing. “Combined with the alarm spell that will eject anyone it’s not already keyed to, it’s as safe as we could possibly make it. The Magic Box has a masking spell so that anything inside no longer broadcasts its presence to any of the many things that come to or out of the Hellmouth.” Willow explained.

“That really neat, Willow!” Claude said. “So that’s why you needed all my lemon verbena, right?” Willow nodded. “That and all the white heather I could find,” Willow said with a sigh and a shrug. “Thought I’d cover as many repelling options as possible for the baby Slayers.”

“Gee, Will, I guess all the time you two spent in your room wasn’t just for witchy lovin’, you guys were actually busy!” Buffy teased.

Willow and Tara both flushed bright red. Willow raised her chin and said, “Trust me, there is plenty of lovin’,” she said flushing brighter still. “However, we do have our priorities.” She sniffed haughtily.
This garnered a round of laughter from everyone in the room. Tara kissed Willow’s cheek and gave her a sly wink.

Willow waited for the laughter to die down before looking at Marisol and Bunny for a moment, “You are both more than welcome to come along, I have a feeling there’s a reason you two, in particular, were sent here,” she said.

Marisol nodded, “Yes, I doubt Our Lady sent us here for the weather.”

Bunny stood gracefully. “Well, girls let’s get this show on the road. The humidity is bad for my hair.” He said as he patted his expertly coiffed head daintily.

“Do you need an escort, Will?” Buffy asked

Willow and Tara looked at one another. “Sure, Buff, but you’ll have to stay at Club Slay with the rest of the Slayers so we can identify you all once the spell starts.”

“You keep calling it that, when did we decide on that name?” Buffy whined.

“Oh, Dios mío,” Bunny muttered, and Marisol swatted his arm.

“Play nice or I’ll send you home, hermanito,” Marisol scolded.
“And on that note, we should probably head out, right Will?” Tara said as she began to stand from the chair, pulling Willow with her.

“Magick waits for no one,” Willow said smiling. “Dana, we’ll see you and everyone else in about an hour. The sun should be setting by then too, so we can do this tonight.”

Dana nodded and she and Claude left going into the kitchen and out into the backyard. Willow and Tara were already heading for the door, Tara carrying the large book she had brought downstairs earlier.

“It’s going to be a long night, isn’t it?” Willow asked.

Tara nodded. “I think that might just be an understatement, sweet love.”

Willow opened the front door for Tara, with Marisol and Bunny following right behind Tara with Willow bringing up the rear. “Yay.” She said sarcastically.

The group casually walked down the street as if they didn’t have a care in the world. In less than twenty minutes they arrived at The Magick Box. Pushing open the door the bell above it tinkled in greeting.

“Hello and than – oh, it’s just you,” Anya said see Tara and Willow walk through the door.
“Good to see you too, Anya,” Willow snarked.

“And who is this?” Bunny asked as he held the door for his sister.

“Bunny this is Anya, Vengeance Demon, and manager of The Magic Box. Anya, this is Marisol and Bunny Campos,” Willow said indicating each to Anya who stuck out her hand in greeting. “I met them in Arizona, Marisol is part of the coven there and Bunny is her brother.”

“Aren’t you just fabulous, and very obviously gay,” Anya said with a wide smile, shaking Bunny’s hand excitedly. “I’ve heard all about you from Tara.”

Bunny shot Tara a look that said “What in the damn hell?!?!” and Tara just shrugged.

Anya moved over to Marisol and shook her hand with significantly less enthusiasm. “Nice to meet you. Hope you didn’t come here to die.”

“Die?” Marisol squeaked.

“You’re not going to die, Mari, don’t listen to her,” Bunny said giving his sister a wink.

“Well, now that we all know who we are, we need supplies for a spell,” Willow said and went to the shelves.
“You have to pay for that,” Anya said.

“Put it on my tab,” Tara said with a raised eyebrow.

“Fine,” Anya huffed and went back behind the counter. Watching Willow and Tara as they pulled jars down and began to mix the ingredients she made a list of everything they used.

“Are you two making up spells again?” Anya asked. “I have no idea what you are trying to locate but you’re really throwing the net out there, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” Willow said smirking.

TBC…
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Author’s Notes: So this is my version of the episode “Touched”, season 7 episode 20, just to give you an idea of where in the canon timeline we are now at in my world. The chapter isn’t quite the whole episode only about two-thirds of it but that will be wrapped up in the next chapter. Other than that, I have none really. No excuse for the delays other than life getting in the way and sucking away most motivation to write for pleasure. Shit happens and I’m trying. Honestly, there are only a few more chapters left (I know, I keep saying that, but I mean it this time!) – three maybe four at most and then an epilogue that I may or may not use. No beta all mistakes are my own, please pm me anything glaring, and this may read horribly, but I thought it would be appropriate to upload it on the anniversary of the last time I posted something! No music for this chapter either, now on with the chapter.

Chapter Notes

Angst/Drama/Smut Rating: PG and a good 8 on the drama-meter.

Setting: Sunnydale

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Feedback: If you feel so inclined.

I have a plan, And it ’s a good plan!
Tara smirked as well at Willow’s reply and when she looked up, Anya was once again looking at her with a raised eyebrows. Although this time she looked more worried than curious now.

“What exactly are you looking for?” Anya asked quietly.

Willow stopped crushing the resin she had been working on using a mortar and pestle to crush the hard chunks into a fine powder and crossed to the shelves that lined the wall close to the front of the store full of dried herbs, resins and even questionable things floating in several shades of gross, semi-transparent viscous fluids.

“Honestly, Anya?” Willow asked as she looked up at Anya over the resin she had been crushing into powder.

With an exasperated sigh, Anya replied, “Of course honestly! If I know what you are trying to find maybe I could help!” Anya threw her arms up in the air in frustration. “Hello! Eleven hundred year old demon here!”

Willow rolled her eyes and looked at Tara, who just smiled at her. “You opened that door, you get to close it!”

“Gee, thanks,” Willow stage whispered to Tara.

“Everything,” Willow answered Anya vaguely.
Willow then carefully pulled several more armfuls of jars from various shelves around the shop while Tara gathered a dozen stacked clear quartz bowls. They had been tucked behind an unusually large clear glass bottle holding something that looked suspiciously like human eyeballs floating in a gelatinous, sickly yellow substance. Moving the large jar back into place after carefully removing the bowls, Tara began separating the bowls as she crossed back over to the large, circular table that normally held the books The Scoobies were using to research the latest “Big Bad”.

“Care to elaborate?” Anya sniped at Willow.

“I think with a few tweaks, I can use the same spell to Thespia that Tara and tried back when we were up against Adam and The Initiative,” Willow replied. “I think with a few slight changes to the wording I can get the spell to show us all the energies in Sunnydale by type, human, demon, even and most hopefully, inanimate objects like weapons that have magical signatures too.” Willow smiled. “As long as Thespia is willing and likes our offering.”

While Tara and Willow were otherwise occupied, the rest of the members of the Coven began to arrive. Dana quietly whispered to Tara, and at her instruction began mixing the three oils that were waiting for preparation.

Tara continued crushing herbs and mixing in small amounts of the oils that Dana had prepared, putting her work neatly into several of the half-dozen quartz bowls she had lined up in front of her next to the ingredients. Willow had taken the rest of the bowls and was still mixing various roots into the powdered resins that were otherwise ready to boost the efficacy of the spell.

Bunny slowly wandered around the shop taking it all in as Marisol had immediately gravitated to the bookshelves. As she stood in front of the bookshelf closest to where Willow, Tara and now Dana were mixing ingredients for the location spell, Marisol practically drooled over the ancient tomes Giles had acquired in his tenure as Buffy’s Watcher and part owner of The Magic Box.

“Well, I have only ever heard of, how do you have copies of them?” Marisol asked in an awed tone.
“Giles is Buffy’s Watcher so he has access to the Council’s extremely vast, and extremely old libraries when they aren’t being total bastards about everything. I also do a good bit of trade here in the store and I still have some contacts from my demon days that can always use a buck.” Anya replied with a wistful sigh. “And some of those aren’t copies, much less for sale, sweetheart, try o-r-i-g-i-n-a-l-s! With copies, things get diluted not so with originals written in virgin’s blood on human skin.”

“Can I read these?” Marisol asked holding an armful of books and a gleeful expression on her face.

“Since you are a friend of Tara’s, I’ll allow it, but if you spill anything on it, you bought it and frankly I don’t think you can afford even one of the titles you have your grubby little hands on,” Anya replied bluntly. “Be careful, Little Witchy-poo.” Anya slowly wiped the counter by the register down keeping a watchful eye on Marisol.

Marisol put a few of the books back on the shelf but kept three in her arms. She then spied little reading nook that had a bean bag in the corner between two of the larger bookshelves, and after getting seated she began to read. Bunny wandered over to the table to watch the three witches working away on a suitable offering and then the needed spell ingredients.

Almost an hour later the bell over the door sounded as Claude came in carrying three bags and gave one to Dana and a larger one to Tara. She was followed by the missing members of the Coven. Jo, Jake, Claude, and the twins moved quickly around the table. Dana cleared her throat loudly while looking pointedly at Marisol still nestled on the bean bag and looked to be reading two of the three books at the same time.

“You might want to join us, Sister,” Dana said just loud enough to get Marisol’s attention since the cough hadn’t worked.
“How many?” Bunny asked looking at Dana.

“How many? How many what?” She replied.

With a heavy sigh, Bunny answered, “How many books is she reading?” as he stood and started for the reading nook Marisol was ensconced in currently.

“Two,” She answered as Bunny floated by her in the direction of his sister.

Bunny waltzed over to his sister and promptly took both books from her hands and moving them behind his back out of her reach.

“You are being summoned, I’ll keep these safe for you,” Bunny replied smoothly moving back to the table where two bookmarks had appeared on the table in front of where he had been sitting. He shot a glance over at Anya who was carefully dusting the shelves of herbs.

“Thanks, dollface. She can take care of books, I promise,” He said with a smirk.

“Those are reference materials and not for sale, and she really doesn’t want to piss Giles off by spilling something on one of his favorites,” Anya turned around and replied simply. “It’s in my best interest to avoid that if I can and I can.” With a small shrug she turned back to the shelves she was dusting.

Bunny turned back around and to no one, in particular, said, “I like her, she’s a keeper.”
Tara smiled, “Me too.”

Willow just mumbled something and pounded the pestle a little harder on the chunk of resin she was currently working on and looked up, smiling sweetly at Tara. “Anya and I are… a work in progress.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Anya laughed. “Another way is, we hate each other, and maybe an even more honest answer is she is overprotective of her childhood best friend and I will never be good enough for him in her eyes… but that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop loving him.” Anya finished quietly and moving further towards the front of the store away from everyone else.

Tara started to go to Anya and Willow put a hand on her arm to stop Tara from going to offer comfort to her friend. Willow slid the mortar and pestle over to Jo and whispered instructions her. Then wiping her hands on her jeans, she walked over to stand just behind Anya.

“I don’t hate you, Anya,” Willow said softly and with a deep breath continued. “But you weren’t wrong about the overprotective part. Anya, you’ve put up with a lot from Xander over the years and well, me.” Willow put her hand on Anya’s shoulder urging her to turn around, she wanted to say this to Anya while looking in her eyes. “But if I am honest with you, and Xander, you are the best thing that has ever happened to him. You love him, faults and all and believe me I know his faults. You love him in a way I can’t and never have been able to because my heart was meant for another.” Willow turned to look at Tara over her shoulder and smiled as her lover smiled at her encouragingly. “You have to understand that for so long it was just he and I that kept it together for each other. Before Buffy, before Anyanka, before we knew what really goes on in Sunnydale, so it’s hard for me to admit that you can give him the things I can’t.” Willow looked down at her hands and took several more deep breathes. “I know that I can’t change the things in my past and how awful I have been to you, but I can do better in the future.” She looked at Anya. “I’m sorry if I ever made you feel “less than” or “not good enough” for my best friend who I know is still mad about you after all this time and all his screw ups. I will try to be… kinder… to you because you deserve it. You have earned your place among the Scoobies just like Tara has. Actions speak louder than words. I told Tara once before that she was essential, not just to me but to all of us and so are you.”
Anya burst into tears and pulled Willow into an awkward hug. Willow tried to pat her back soothingly and managed to turn them so she could look helplessly at Tara. Tara quickly crossed over and simply put her arms around both of them which only made Anya cry harder.

Dana and the rest of the Coven finished up the last steps to prep for the spell. Everyone took one of the quartz bowls and carried them into the training room. Jake and Claude moved the mats from the floor to expose the concrete, and Dan started to draw a circle. Jake and the twins were placing candles at the cardinal points and Jo went behind them adding crystals.

Willow and Tara came in with the map Claude had given them and they spread it out neatly before them. Then the Coven went to the Slayer In Training’s rooming house that used to be a gym that was a short walk from the store. Jo pulled a plastic bag with a dozen bars of soap in it and handed it to Willow out of her backpack.

“I used your recipe for a cleansing soap because I like that you used lavender and sweetgrass for the scent and made some just to have and use when I wanted. I guess I knew we would need it,” Jo said with a wry smile.

“Excellent!” Willow chirped happily. “Sometimes it seems like the only way to wash a day off is to completely cleanse yourself. That why I chose those two scents, they just smell clean to me and they are mild enough to not overpower.”

Willow handed everyone a bar of soap and a towel and then the coven split off to the men’s and women’s locker rooms so everyone could take a cleaning bath before the spellwork to be done.

Forty-five minutes later everyone was gathered around the circle in the training room at The Magick Box. With a quick explanation from Willow of what they would be required of them during the spell. At Tara’s signal, Dana closed the circle and felt an almost electrical frisson along her skin as the magicks had already started to gather. With a wave of hand Willow lit all the candles around the circle and Tara began the spell.
With a flick of her wrist, Tara lit the offering to the right of the map. Willow picked up the bowl of mixed resins needed to blow over the map and took a handful. Passing the bowl to her left everyone took a handful and passed the bowl around the circle.

“Thespia, we walk in shadow, walk in blindness. You are the protector of the night. Thespia, goddess, ruler of all darkness - we implore you - open a window to the world of the magickal beings in Sunnydale. We beseech you on behalf of the Champion of The Powers That Be and aid her in their fight. With your knowledge, may we go in safety. With your grace, may we speak of your benevolence.”

After the count of three heartbeats, the Coven as one blew their handfuls over the map and waited to see what happened. At first, it seemed like the spell had failed but then a 3-d image of the map of Sunnydale appeared above all their heads. Slowly other colors began to reveal themselves. Reds for the average humans, blues for witches, greens for demons, periwinkle for fairies, a muddy red for vampires, pockets of black for magical dead zones and bright white for magical objects.

Based on the map they were standing in a “dead zone” reassured Willow and Tara that their masking spells were still holding. They found three locations, all in cemeteries, that were apparently housing magical artifacts. Restfield had the brightest light, but Sunnydale Cemetery and Evergreen Cemetery also had less bright white lights.

Willow and Tara looked and each other and smiled brightly, their idea had worked far better than they thought it might. And now they had a place to start in finding Buffy’s new toy, and from the brightness of its magical signature, it was going to a whopper!

Dana and Claude were looking in awe at the display of power they were seeing before them. Who would have thought to use that spell this way? Who would have thought it would work?? They caught each other’s eyes as they both turned to look respectfully at the two young women leading their Coven.
If either had any doubts about the ability to lead and channel a Coven properly, they were now at rest. Neither had ever seen anything like these powerful women that hadn’t even reached their magical peak yet. What an exciting time to be a witch!

TBC…

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