

Bells

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An "Oh bugger, I totally forgot about that ficathon and it's due today!" fic.

Featured fandoms: Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel the Series

Featured pairings: Fred/Willow

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: PG-13

Buffy adjusted the collar of Willow's tuxedo. It was black, of course, with a crisp white shirt. A flower that grew nowhere on Earth was stuck to its lapel.

"I still think this is freaky," Buffy said.

Willow frowned.

"I thought you got over that way back when I first got together with Tara," she said.

The room they were standing in was not very large, but its ceiling was enormously high. One could easily imagine clouds forming up there, and being in it felt a little like standing at the bottom of a well. The walls were bare stone. Very finely cut and highly ornamented stone, but still stone. Someone had put a thick rug on the floor, to make it more comfortable to stand on. There was a full-length mirror, made out of silver and bone. It looked old. *Very* old.

Buffy looked confused.

"What?" she said.

"Oh!" she said when it dawned on her what Willow meant. "No, I don't mean the lesbian thing."

She blushed a little.

"I could hardly say anything about that, what with Faith and all. No, I mean that Fred's kind of... dead."

"No, she's not," Willow said. "She's just... sharing her physical presence."

"With a demon queen from before time."

"So did Angel. And Spike. Well, except for the 'queen' part. And possibly the 'before time' part too. And, oh, you do too, with the Slayer power demon thing."

Willow smiled at her friend.

"You're just jealous because my soon-to-be wife's demon is cooler than yours."

Buffy smiled.

"Point taken," she said. "I'll do my best to like her even when she's Illyria."

She pouted.

"But it would be easier to like her if she hadn't insisted on this bridesmaid's dress."

They both looked down at Buffy's body. She was dressed in what looked more like a bondage contraption made out of dark-red leather and rusty chrome than a dress. It entirely covered her left leg, half of her torso and her right arm. A few straps and gizmos extended across to the other half of her, but her entire right leg up to the hip and her left breast were left for everyone to see.

"Yeah," Willow said. "It is a bit over the top. But you should've seen what it looked like before I convinced her to adapt it to human bodies."

"This is meant for human bodies?"

"Uh-hu."

"Right," Buffy said, looking doubtful. "Let's just hope I won't have to fight in it. That could get messy, with all the sharp pointy bits."

In the distance, a bell started ringing. Its sound was deep and slow, and it echoed mournfully between the stone walls.

"I think that's my cue," Willow said. "We'd better get over to the altar."

Fred's dress was very white, with lots and lots of fancy fabrics and brocades and crap that Faith didn't know the name of. It was also very wide, so it was impossible to get closer than four feet or so to her without climbing the dress. Faith took a step back. It wouldn't do to rip the bride's dress with the pointy and/or rusty bits of her own preposterous outfit.

"Don't you think that's kind of... wide?" she said. "I mean, Willow will have to lean over pretty far to be able to kiss you. Or rip the dress off. Which, speaking personally, I wouldn't mind watching, but which might not be considered entirely

traditional."

Fred looked down at the dress.

"Oh," she said. "Right. That's no good."

She concentrated. Her hair shimmered blue, and the dress narrowed down to a width that'd allow a kiss without too much effort.

"Actually," Illyria said, "Ripping the bride's clothes off at the altar would be entirely traditional. To display her power and beauty. Only weak, pitiable creatures need to hide behind coverings."

She gave Faith an unabashed stare. Her gaze spent quite some time around the upper chest area.

"Your appearance is pleasing," she said.

"Gee thanks," Faith said, twisting her hips a little to push her naked breast forward. "Take a good long look while you can. People have died trying to see that boob, you know."

Illyria shimmered again, and her blue coloring went away. Fred giggled.

"You're not joking, are you?" she said.

"Prison's pretty harsh," Faith said. "And they don't put multiple murderers on the nice block."

In the distance, a deep-voiced bell started to ring. Faith looked up the ridiculously wide staircase they were standing below. Its steps were a bit too high for comfort, as if it hadn't been designed with humans in mind. Which was almost certainly the case. At the top of it she could see nothing but darkness.

"Does that mean we go up?" she said.

Fred shook her head. "Not yet," she said. "When it stops."

Faith looked around at the carving-covered stone pillars and, more distantly, the dark decorated stone walls.

"This place gives me the creeps," she said. "What is it anyway?"

"Illyria's old temple," Fred said. "From when she was entirely herself. It's tens of thousands of years old, probably."

"Shit," Faith said. "Talk about your seriously antique church."

The altar area was large, bare and also made out of stone. Everything here seemed to be made out of stone, except the people and the clothes. In the center of the altar was a ruined pillary thing, that had probably been something important once upon a time. If there was a ceiling, it got lost in the darkness overhead. As Willow and Buffy walked onto the altar, Giles was standing by the pillary thing, dressed in a voluminous black robe with a spiky rusty-chrome collar. He was intently studying the engravings on the stone.

"Hi, Giles," Willow said. "You ready to wed us properly?"

He looked up with a start.

"Oh," he said. "Hi, Willow. Yes, yes, I am quite ready. Say, have you looked at these? They are *quite* fascinating. I think there's a bit here that's a reference to the First Slayer!"

Buffy looked down from the altar onto the vast hall in front of it. That bit had a ceiling, even if it had a few holes in it. There was also a large hole in the floor, where a very wide staircase led down to somewhere else. The hall also had lots of huge pillars, and probably enough floor space for about a million people or so. The group of their surviving friends looked very small and lost, kneeling on the hard stone floor in front of the altar. They all had neck irons, with chains running between them.

"Um, Giles?" Buffy said. "Why are the guests chained up?"

"What?" He looked up from the engravings again.

"Oh, that," he said. "Tradition, apparently. Illyria insisted. The point is to pre-

vent the guests from fleeing when they see the unshielded splendor of the bridal couple, I think."

"Hey, neat!" Willow said. A frown shortly followed.

"What does she mean 'unshielded'?" she said. "She's not expecting me to get naked in front of everybody, is she?"

"Wouldn't be more than fair," Buffy mumbled.

"No," Giles said. "As I understood it, it's a display of power. Levitate, make a bright light, something like that. You should be able to handle it easily enough."

"Oh," Willow said. "Right. I can do that."

The last peal of the huge bell faded into silence.

"Now it's our turn?" Faith said.

"Yeah," Fred said.

"So how do we do this? I just walk after you and try not to step on the dangly bits of your dress?"

"Pretty much," Fred said. "Try to look proud and beautiful."

"Hey," Faith said. "I was *born* proud and beautiful."

"Good," Fred said. She swallowed and gathered her courage. Strangely, sharing her body with a nearly indestructible ancient demon-queen hadn't made her any braver.

"Right," she said. "Here goes."

She started up the stairs.

"Oh my god!" Willow said. "There she comes!"

Fred was coming up the enormous stairs in the middle of the hall below the altar. She was closely followed by Faith, who was dressed in the same kind of surreal bondage gear as Buffy.

"I'm not ready!" Willow said. "What if I say the wrong thing? What if I freeze up and not say anything at all? What if I do like Xander and just run away?"

"Calm down, Will," Buffy said. "It's *Fred*. You know her. You love her. What's to worry about?"

"I know," Willow said. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "But there's a whole bunch of people looking at us."

"You know them too!" Buffy whispered back. "It's not a bunch of people, it's Dawn and Xander and Andrew and Vi and Rhona and... All right, you can be a little nervous about Kennedy there but don't those chains suit her just ever so well?"

Willow looked at Buffy.

"You're trying to be funny so I won't be nervous," she said.

"Yes," Buffy admitted. "Is it working?"

"Not really."

Fred stopped at the last step before the altar. Faith stopped a couple of steps further down, from where she winked at Buffy.

"I have..." Fred said in a voice so small that it hardly even carried over to where Willow was standing. Suddenly all of Willow's nervousness went away, replaced by a warm sense of love for the adorable woman in the white dress.

"I..." Fred tried again. There was a moment's fuzziness around her, and suddenly her hair and skin had a distinct blue tinge.

"I have come to claim my consort," Illyria said. Her voice was loud and clear, and echoed clearly from the huge hall's far reaches.

"It is so witnessed," Giles said, almost as loudly. "Who is it that you claim?"

"I claim a being of power," Illyria said. "I claim one who has harnessed and reshaped an ancient power. I claim one who almost destroyed the Earth. I claim as

my consort the one called Willow."

"It is so witnessed," Giles said again. "The one you claim is present on this altar."

Illyria stepped onto the altar, and stood next to the ruined pillars. Faith followed and stood behind her.

"I have come to claim my consort," Willow said. A little weakly at first, but by the end of the sentence her voice was as loud as Giles'.

"It is so witnessed," Giles said. "Who is it that you claim?"

"I claim a being of power," Willow said. "I claim one who was ancient when this world was born. I claim one who stood alone against a hostile world. I claim as my consort the one called Fred, and Illyria."

"It is so witnessed," Giles said. "The one you claim is present."

Illyria stepped forward and stood in front of the broken pillars. She held out her hand towards Willow. Willow walked up to her, and took her hand. Again, there was a brief fuzziness around Illyria.

"Until the grounds break and the skies tear apart, let us be one," Fred said.

"Until the seas boil and the sun burns out, let us be one," Willow said.

"Until the end of time itself, let us be one," they both said in unison.

"It is so witnessed," Giles said. "Your claims are unopposed. You are one."

Without really knowing how she got there, Willow found herself embracing Fred. They looked into each others eyes. Fred looked just as happy as Willow felt, and with just the same slight edge of embarrassment. Applauds and whistles came from the audience, which didn't make her feel any less embarrassed.

A white light was forming around them. Willow could feel her own power going into it, and joining with Illyria's there. As it grew stronger, they lifted off from the ground, still holding each other tight.

"Hey!" she heard Faith yell. "You've got to kiss!"

Doing so felt like the most obvious and natural thing in the world. Her lips met Fred's, and their mouths opened to each other. The light around them increased sharply in strength, and out of the corner of her eye she saw how all the people around them, both on the altar and in the hall below, looked away or shielded their eyes. She felt Fred's hand stroke her suddenly naked back, and her stiff nipples pressing against her own.

Slowly, in front of their friends and followers, covered only by intense glow of their unshielded splendor, they celebrated their union.