

# After the End

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Last-minute fic for the Femslash '06 Ficathon.

**Featured fandoms:** Buffy the Vampire Slayer

**Featured pairings:** Faith/Tara

**A.S.S Story codes:** ff

**Story rating:** PG-13

Faith stood looking out the living room window of the Summers house. The part of her mind that tried to think of anything except what was currently going on wondered how many times it had been broken and replaced. And which Summers' ownership it had broken the most times under. Joyce's probably. She'd owned the house the longest. Buffy had had it for less than two years, and it had been Dawn's for only a couple of months.

"I still think your dreams are Slayer stuff," Dawn said. "Whenever she had recurring dreams, it was always a portent of some kind."

There was a slight hesitation and emphasis around the "she". It wasn't just Dawn who talked like that, either. Faith and Tara did it too. It was usually quite clear from the context which dead girl they were referring to.

"From beneath you, it devours," Tara said. "If it's a portent, I don't think it's for anything nice."

"Portents never are," Faith said.

"They can be," Dawn said. "I don't think this is, though. What with the girls in the dreams being killed and all."

"I wish we could gather the Scooby gang," Tara said. "Giles would know what to do."

Faith turned from the window, turned around a chair so its back faced the sofa table and straddled it backwards.

"Well, he left," she said. "So we're kind of it now."

"Anya's in town," Dawn suggested.

"I'll remember that when I have some vengeance I want done," Faith said. "But for the moment, I think not."

There were a few moments of uncomfortable silence.

"So, what do we do?" Tara finally said.

Faith got up from the chair again.

"I know what I'm doing," she said. "I'm going patrolling."

Someone had cleaned the headstone on the grave again. Faith guessed she should be happy that it was being cared for, but it annoyed her anyway. She took a marker pen out of her coat pocket and, again, added "1997" and "2002" to the "2001" that was chiseled into the stone under the name "Buffy Anne Summers".

When she was done, she sat down on top of the headstone. She was pretty sure there were no vampires around. She'd been hanging out here enough in the past couple of months that word had gotten out that this particular graveyard was a really bad place to be if you were a vampire.

"Never thought I'd say this, but I wish you were here, B," she said. "I wish you'd take care of shit and just tell me which asses to kick. I'm no good at this leadership crap."

There was no answer, of course. Buffy wouldn't show up and tell her what to do, and she was stuck with the leadership crap.

"Kinda figures, though," she went on. "That after all you went through you'd finally kick it on an operating table from something as mundane as a fucking gunshot wound."

She jumped off the stone and stood looking at it.

"Tara's doing pretty good, by the way," she said. "Doesn't cry as much in the night. She's much stronger than she looks, that one. If I'd been in her situation, seeing my girlfriend shot through the heart right in front of me, I'd've gone on a fucking rampage until I'd torn the bastard who did it limb from limb. Not just made sure the police got him..."

She looked around. The place was still dead as a, well, graveyard.

"May not be here to see you tomorrow," she said. "I really should patrol the other side of town for a night or two. So you take care, you hear?"

There was no reply, just the faint noise of cars in the distance.

"Right," she said. "See you, B."

She ran out of the graveyard as fast as her legs could carry her. Maybe if she tired herself out physically on the way home she'd be able to sleep.

When Faith came back to the house, she went in the back door and to her surprise found Tara sitting at the kitchen table nursing a cup of tea. Herbal, from the smell of it.

"Aren't you in bed?" Faith said. "I thought you had school in the morning."

"Couldn't sleep," Tara said. "Camomile tea might calm me down."

Faith kept hovering in the door.

"Worried about the portent stuff?" she said.

Tara nodded. "And I miss her. That's always worst just after I go to bed."

"Yeah," Faith said. "I know the feeling."

Tara looked up at her.

"Do you want some tea?" she said.

For a few moments a snarky reply about her not drinking boiled grass was on its way out of her mouth, but somehow it died on the way.

"Sure," she said. "Thanks."

She sat down at the table as Tara started to fuss around with boiling water and measuring dried herbs.

"So how was patrol?" Tara asked.

"Boring," Faith said. "It's like all the vamps and demons went away. It's, like, *safe* out there."

"You know," Tara said, "some people would say that was a good thing."

"It worries me," Faith said. "It's unnatural. Like all of them are just waiting for something big to happen."

Tara put a steaming mug of pale brown liquid in front of Faith.

"The calm before the storm," she said.

"Yeah," Faith said. "That."

Tara sat down and drank a little from her own mug.

"We'll stand against it," she said. "That's what the Slayer and her friends always do, right?"

"I'm not half the Slayer she was," Faith said. "What if I'm not enough?"

Tara put her hand over Faith's.

"You'll do fine," she said.

Faith drank from her teacup. It tasted better than she'd expected.

"And I have a witch by my side, just like she had," she said.

Tara frowned. That wasn't the response Faith had hoped for.

"I'm nowhere near as powerful as she was," Tara said. "Really."

"But you can *use* your power without going bugfuck crazy," Faith said. "So I'd call that a win."

Tara's eyes dropped until she stared down into her teacup.

"I still wish she was here," she said.

This time it was Faith who put her hand on Tara's.

"Hey, I didn't mean it like that," she said. "I just meant that I'm really glad to have you here, ok? I mean, I wouldn't blame you if you just took off and got yourself a safe, ordinary life somewhere. This doesn't have to be your fight any more."

"Yes it does," Tara said. "After Glory, there never really was a choice."

She drank from her tea again, guardedly looking towards Faith.

"Besides," she added, "I couldn't leave Dawn. She's already lost far too much."

"Fuck, yeah," Faith agreed. "Three deaths in the family when you only have a mother and sister really has to suck."

She drank deeply from the tea. It was nice, but it lacked... something.

"Do you think this stuff would go with bourbon?" she said.

Tara shook her head.

"Rum's all right, though," she added.

Faith looked at her, teacup frozen halfway to her mouth.

"You've tried?" she said.

"Sure," Tara said. "Also brandy, calvados and tequila."

She visibly shivered.

"I really don't recommend the tequila," she said.

"For some reason I always thought you didn't drink," Faith said.

Tara shrugged.

"I just don't do it very often," she said.

Faith looked at her, and for once their eyes met and held.

"Do we have any rum?" she said.

"Yes," Tara said. "But as you said, I have to go to school tomorrow. So I'll go to bed now."

She got up and carefully rinsed out the cup she'd used. Faith looked on in silence.

Tara stopped in the doorway on her way out of the kitchen and looked back at Faith.

"Maybe..." she said.

"Maybe what?" Faith said.

"Maybe we could try out the herbal tea and rum on Friday, after Dawn's gone to bed?"

Faith felt a smile spread over her face.

"Yeah," she said. "I'd like that."

Later that night, as she was about to fall asleep, the room and bed that used to be Buffy's didn't feel quite as lonely as usual.

A few days passed. Faith got a job, as a counselor at the new Sunnydale High School. She found that hilarious, considering that she'd never even gone to high school. Although maybe that was a point. "Hey, kid, I skipped school a lot and I wound up in prison". Not a bad argument, actually. Plus, the principal was kind of hot. For a guy.

Patrol kept being easy. It really was like every vamp around had suddenly decided to skip town. Which worried Faith more than she was willing to admit even to Tara. When the nasty shit left town, something *bad* was coming down. She increased her patrols as much as she could, skipping out on sleep every now and then in order to try and figure out as early as possible what was about to happen.

Which was how she missed the Friday night sort-of not-date with Tara.

"Oh," she said when she came home at about 2am and found Tara sleeping in the living room couch with a cold pot of tea and an unopened bottle of Jamaican rum.

"Hey," she said and as gently as possible shook Tara's shoulder. Tara's eyes opened, and for a moment the most beatific smile Faith had ever had coming her way could be seen. Then it faded into Tara's usual friendly smile.

"Hey," Tara said. "You're late."

"I'm sorry," Faith said. "I forgot about our... arrangement."

"No, that's all right," Tara said. "Patrol is important."

"Even when I don't find anything?"

"Even then."

Faith couldn't help smiling.

"I'd offer to make more tea," she said. "But I *really* suck at cooking, and I just want to go to bed anyway. So, uh, rain check?"

Tara nodded. "I'm pretty tired, too. I'll just head for bed."

She made to get up from the couch, and in her half-sleeping state almost fell over. Faith made to steady her, and somehow ended up carrying her.

"I'll take you to your room," she said. Tara was soft and warm in her arms, and she smelled faintly of frankincense.

"I'll be heavy," Tara mumbled.

"Slayer strength, remember?" Faith said. "It's no problem."

She headed up the stairs, taking great care not to bang either Tara's head or feet into something on the way.

"Faith?" Tara said.

"Yes?"

"Can I sleep in your room?"

Faith nearly dropped her.

"What?"

"Just sleep, really. It's... I'm not used to sleeping alone. I just keep listening for her breath and it takes ages to fall sleep. If I could hear yours..."

A strange mixture of protectiveness and disappointment flowed through Faith.

"Of course," she said. "There's a spare mattress. I'll make it up and sleep on the floor. You take the bed."

"Thanks," Tara mumbled.

As far as Faith could tell, she was asleep even before they got to the room. But she did as she'd said anyway.

Faith knelt in front of the headstone. This time, her additions to the dates hadn't been washed away.

"Sorry it's been so long," she said. "There's some weird shit going on and I've been trying to figure out what. It's not going so well, what with me not being so clever to begin with and not having a Watcher to help me."

"Well, that's what happens when you torture people," a voice said from behind her. "They don't stay around to help."

Faith rose and spun around so fast she almost left scorch marks in the grass. A short, slender, blonde girl was standing a few paces away.

"Hello, Faith," Buffy said. "You look tense. Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Buffy," Faith whispered.

"Hey, you remember me," Buffy said. "Should I be flattered?"

"But you're dead," Faith said. It was almost as much a question as a statement.

"Indeed I am," Buffy said. "Third time's the charm, I guess."

"So... why? How?"

Buffy smiled at her and every so slightly fluttered her eyelashes. Faith suddenly remembered with painful clarity just how bad a crush she'd used to have on her.

"Can't a girl just drop by to visit an old friend?" she said.

"After she dies, in general, that'd be a no," Faith said.

"You're right, of course," Buffy said. "In fact, I'm here to deliver a message."

"A message? From who?"

Buffy shrugged.

"Oh, you know," she said. "The same place as always. All cryptic and vague and stuff."

"Right. So what is it?"

Buffy crossed her arms over her chest.

"What was the first thing I ever tried to teach you?" she said.

"No stories about naked alligator wrestling?"

"After that. About Slaying."

Faith shrugged.

"Don't die," Buffy said. "Dignity doesn't matter. Courage doesn't matter. Honor doesn't matter. What matters is that you don't die, so you can come back and fight another day."

Faith nodded. "Yeah, I remember."

Buffy came closer. Not close enough to touch or smell, but closer.

"You need to do that now," she said. "What's coming in the next few months, it's more than you can handle. It's more than anyone can handle. So butt out. Take Dawn and Tara and leave town. Gather forces, and come back later when you're ready."

Faith stared at her.

"That's it?" she said. "You came here from the afterlife to tell me to *leave*?"

"Pretty much," Buffy said.

Faith took a step back.

"You're not Buffy," she said. "I don't know what the hell you are, but you're not her."

Buffy's eyebrows rose and she smiled.

"You think I'm not me?" she said. "You want me to prove myself? All right, then."

She jumped up and sat on a headstone.

"That one time we danced in the Bronze, you fondled my ass," Buffy said. "I pretended not to notice while we were on the dance floor, but later when we were alone I grabbed hold of you and gave you a really bad kiss."

Buffy parted her legs a little and leaned back just enough to emphasize what little chest she had.

"Later we shared better kisses," she said. "And in an alley behind the bus station, your mouth was the first one ever between my legs."

"So you have her memories," Faith said, trying hard not to show exactly how spooked she was. "That doesn't make you her."

Buffy closed her legs and leaned forward.

"Well," she said. "It was worth a try. What gave me away?"

"She would never give up in advance," Faith said. "Not even if God himself told her to. She might retreat to gather forces, but she'd damn well try to fight first."

The thing that looked like Buffy jumped down from the headstone.

"I'm just trying to do you a favor," it said. "Remember that later."

"Sure," Faith said. "I will. What now?"

The Buffy-thing looked her straight in the eyes.

"From beneath you," it said. "It devours."

As soon as the last syllable had left its lips, an inhuman scream came from all around. The Buffy-thing swelled up, and in a moment burst like an over-inflated balloon full of blood. Involuntarily, Faith dodged and covered her eyes.

Nothing hit her. When she looked up again, there wasn't a single trace of the Buffy-thing. Not even footprints where it had been standing.

Faith came home to a completely thrashed living room. It looked like a tornado had blown through the room, throwing everything around and smashing the furniture.

Tara met her in the door.

"Don't blame Dawn," she said.

"I wasn't going to," Faith said. "What *happened*?"

Dawn was sitting on the floor next to the overturned sofa, her knees pulled up under her chin. She looked like she'd been scared half out of her wits but didn't want to admit it.

"Mom came to see me," she said, her voice filled with sullen defiance.

Faith looked at her, startled. "Joyce?" she said. "You saw Joyce?"

Dawn nodded. "And she spoke to me. She said that things are going to get very bad soon, and that we can't trust anybody."

"We can't trust?"

Dawn nodded. "That's what she said. She also said that she'd taken a great risk in coming here, and that she wouldn't be able to again. So she said if I see her again, then it's not her. I don't really understand what she meant by that."

"I think I do," Faith mumbled.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tara start and glance her way.

"Well," Faith said. "Let's get this place cleaned up, shall we? I want dinner, and I bet you two have homework and crap like that to get done."

"*Homework*?" Dawn protested. "A day like this, and you want me to do *homework*?"

Faith reached down and helped her get on her feet.

"Trust the under-educated ex-convict," she said. "That shit is important. After we stop the end of the world, I want you to have a good life."

Dawn looked sullenly at her.

"What if the world does end?" she said.

"Then you don't have to do homework," Faith said. "But for now, you have to. Get started."

Dawn stomped up the stairs towards her room.

"You saw something too, didn't you?" Tara said.

Faith nodded. "Something that looked like Buffy came to me in the graveyard. Wanted me to give up, stop fighting and leave town."

"Willow came to me in the library," Tara said. "She tried to talk me into... joining her."

Faith spun around and looked at Tara.

"Join...? *Kill* yourself?"

Tara nodded.

"It wasn't her," Faith said, panic rising in her chest. "Even if it seemed to know everything she knew, talk like her and everything. It wasn't her, and you can't do as it said!"

"I know it wasn't her," Tara said. "Willow did some bad things to me, but she'd never do that."

Muscles Faith didn't remember tensing slowly relaxed.

"So something wants me gone and you dead," she said. "Should I feel insulted?"

Tara shook her head. "If you die, there'll just be a new Slayer. If you just go away and don't fight, there'll be no other Slayer to replace you."

Faith thought about it for a moment.

"I guess," she said.

Together, they started cleaning up the room.

Faith didn't bother patrolling that night. There hadn't been a single vampire to slay for over a week, and she had a feeling that whatever it was that had started to mess with them was done for the day. She cleaned up after the dinner Tara cooked for them, and headed for bed early. For a day with no violence, it had been surprisingly tiring. It was with a sense of relief she slid between the cold sheets.

"Can I come in?"

Tara was standing in the doorway, clad in a dressing gown and with her hair hanging free.

"Sure," Faith said. She scooted over to the far half of the bed, to make room for Tara to sit.

She didn't. She came in and closed the door behind her, but remained standing next to it.

"Earlier," she said, "when I told you about what happened in the library, you were really scared that I'd kill myself, weren't you?"

"Yeah," Faith said. "I was."

"Why?"

Faith rose up on her elbows and stared at Tara.

"What do you mean *why*? Of course I don't want you dead!"

"Yes," Tara said. "But I kind of got an impression that your reaction was more personal than that. As if you were afraid to lose me."

Faith was silent for a very long time. Or, at least, what felt like a very long time.

"I was," she finally said. "I am."

"I've been so busy missing Willow," Tara said, "that I didn't realize until just now how much I've come to appreciate you."

"Thanks, I guess," Faith said, feeling quite disappointed. She'd hoped for quite a bit more than "appreciate".

"If this had been normal times, and we had been normal people," Tara said. "I would've tried asking you for a date."

"I would've said yes," Faith said.

Tara smiled. "That's good to know," she said.

"This thing that came to us today," she went on. "I think it'll try to work on our insecurities and personal weaknesses. So in order to fight it, we'll need to be as happy and content as possible."

Faith nodded. It made sense.

"So this mourning we've been doing will have to end, as soon as possible. We have to move on, and fast. Because I have a feeling we don't have much time."

Faith nodded again.

"So I'm going to skip all the asking for dates and worrying about feelings and tentative finding out and cautiously getting closer, and simply ask if I can sleep in your bed tonight."

It took a second or two for Faith to grasp what she'd just heard, and even then she didn't quite believe she'd understood it right.

"I sleep in the nude," she said.

Tara pulled the cord holding her dressing gown shut and let the whole thing fall to the floor. She stood there, naked and beautiful as an ancient statue of some voluptuous goddess.

"I know," she said.

Faith couldn't take her eyes from her.

"You're not really planning on sleeping much tonight, are you?" she said.

"No," Tara said. "Not really."

Faith pulled the blankets aside and invited her in.

"We could go to Canada," Dawn said at breakfast a few days later. "You two could get married, and then you could adopt me."

"I'm *much* too young to be your mom," Faith said.

Dawn bounced back and forth in the kitchen, somehow managing to make pancakes without burning or spilling anything. Faith was wolfing down a freshly made pancake. Tara was sitting next to her, leaning on her shoulder. Faith felt as if she ought to wake up at any moment, that things couldn't really be this good for real. But somehow they really were.

"Are you going on patrol tonight?" Tara said.

"Yeah," Faith said. "Some vamps might have come back, and I heard a rumor about some strange dudes with sewn-up eyes that I want to check out."

The doorbell rang.

"I'll take it!" Dawn said. "You two just keep snuggling."

"Snuggling?" Faith said. "Is that what we're doing?"

"It sure is," Tara said. "Snuggling and being insufferably cute."

"Well," Faith said. "As long as I'm insufferable my reputation should survive."

Dawn came storming back into the kitchen.

"Look who's here!" she shouted.

Faith and Tara looked up to see Giles walk in, followed by three girls none of them had seen before.

"Hey, Giles," Faith said. "Long time, no see. What's with the harem?"

"I'm afraid that I bring grave news," Giles said. "A very great evil is at work, and has been for some time. It aims for nothing less than the destruction of the entire line of Slayers, and it may well succeed."

Faith smiled.

"Don't worry," she said, and for once she felt as confident as she sounded. She put an arm around Tara's shoulder.

"Me and my witch here, we'll kick its ass."