

Mutual Assistance

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Started for a ficathon, but got replaced with something else since I was waaay too late getting this one actually finished.. Then it eventually got finished for another ficathon.

Featured fandoms: Angel the Series, Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Featured pairings: Fred/Tara

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: R

"Get out more!" Cordelia told her. "Sheesh, if you're going to stay cooped up in your room like this you might as well have stayed in Pylea! Go meet some people!"

Cordelia had a point. Intellectually, Fred totally understood that. Being alone in a hotel room writing equations on the walls wasn't much different from being alone in a cave writing equations on the walls. Except the hotel room had better food and a shower. She really should get out of it. She knew that. But the world outside was big and noisy and strange and scary. Even though she had lived in it most of her life, it had changed while she was gone.

And, more importantly, *she* had changed while she was gone. The physics student who thought the world made sense and was basically safe no longer existed. In her place was someone who knew that the world didn't make sense, who knew that at any time one might fall through a crack in reality into a nightmare world full of demons. Who knew that that safe, bright world she'd known was nothing more than a shell, a thin layer of sanity covering up an abyss full of vampires and magic and lawyers.

She didn't quite understand how anybody who knew what it was really like ever dared go outside. Unless they were heroes, like Angel and Cordelia and Wesley and Gunn.

Still, Cordelia had a point. She really should try to get out a little. To get those things she could never get in Pylea but which were available here. Tacos, if nothing else. So she gathered what courage she had, dressed up a little, got one spray can full of mace and one full of holy water and ventured out.

The first time she walked around the block, and when she got back to her room she was shivering with fear and drenched in sweat. Post-traumatic stress disorder, her mind told her as she cowered under the bed. It's a bitch.

The second time she got a little further and wasn't quite as badly off when she got back to the hotel. The third time was better still, and it wasn't that long before she could go into a safe, impersonal Taco Bell and order herself some tacos. They weren't very good, but they were hers.

But she couldn't stop there. Cordelia had told her to meet people, and since Cordelia was very very pretty and a hero, Fred was sure that she knew what she was talking about. So people-meeting would have to happen. Which meant going to a bar. Fred knew that much. She'd seen it on TV lots of times.

The first place she tried was too noisy and dark and full of flashing lights. The second place was full of pushy men who tried to hit on her, as was the third and the fourth and the fifth and in the sixth she even had to mace a guy who wouldn't take no for an answer. But she kept trying. If nothing else, it helped make her more used to being out of her room.

And then, finally, she found a place where no loud obnoxious men intruded on her personal space. The music was decent and not too loud, and there were always pretty girls with lots of piercings behind the bar. Fred could sit there for hours, drawing equations on the bar napkins and beer mats. The first few times she went there, occasionally someone would try to talk to her. They usually left after a little while, looking as confused as Fred felt. It wasn't until she saw two women kissing in a back booth that it finally dawned on her what kind of place it was. Which made her feel a little embarrassed at her own obliviousness, although suddenly the very confusing

conversations made a lot more sense. She should've known better. It wasn't as if she was entirely new to that side of life, after all. It was just yet another thing that had got left in that cave in Pylea.

She kept going to the bar, of course. It was almost as much of a safe place for her as her room at the Hyperion. The staff and the regulars knew her, would greet her when she arrived and occasionally talk to her a little. She had her regular booth in the corner farthest from the door where she'd sit and read or write or just think, drinking tea or complicated drinks depending on her mood and the time of day. It was nice, regular and without surprises.

Until they day she got there and someone was sitting in her booth.

The girl in the booth was pretty. She had long blonde hair and a cute face. As far as Fred could see above the table and through her billowy clothes, she had a nicely curvy body. There was a cloudy pink drink with an umbrella and a burned-out sparkler in it standing on the table in front of her.

And she was sitting right in Fred's spot.

"Um," Fred said. She wasn't sure how to handle this. She wanted the girl not to be there, but at the same time she knew that the booth wasn't really *hers*. It was the bar's, and the bar was a public place. So Fred had no right to tell people not to sit there.

The girl looked up. Her eyes were as confused and frightened as Fred felt. Which made Fred feel a lot better, although it didn't make it the least bit easier to ask the girl to leave.

"C-can I help you?" the girl said.

"You're, um, kind of in my, um, seat," Fred said. She could feel herself blush.

"Oh!" the girl said. She hastily started gathering up her coat and purse and drink.

"I-I-I'll move," she said.

She looked so forlorn that it made Fred hurt inside.

"Nah," she said, shaking her head. "You stay right there. I can sit on this side."

She sat down on the other bench in the booth, across the table from the blonde. It felt weird. She couldn't see the door.

"T-Thanks," the blonde said. She put her stuff down again.

Fred didn't know what to do. She kept looking in every direction except the one where the girl was sitting. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the intruder do exactly the same. She gathered all the courage she had and turned to the intruder.

"I'm...", they both said at exactly the same moment.

There was another awkward silence.

"...Tara," the other girl said.

"I'm Fred," Fred said.

Tara's gaze lowered to where Fred's tight t-shirt strained around a decidedly female chest.

"Fred?" she asked.

"Short for Winifred," Fred said.

"Ah," Tara said. "You come here a lot, then?"

"All the time," Fred said.

"I don't," Tara said.

Suddenly it just got too much for Fred. It felt like the walls were falling in on her, and as if people were crowding her from all directions. Which wasn't true, of course, but the basic parts of her mind didn't really care about that. They just wanted out.

"I've got to go," she said. Hastily she gathered up her notebooks and papers and, clutching them closely to her chest, she ran out of the bar.

This is stupid, she thought when she'd got in under her bed in the hotel again. I'm a grown woman. I survived five years in a demon dimension. Being in a bar talking to a pretty girl shouldn't make me want to hide under the bed. I should get out of there, get back into the world. Talk to the girl. Maybe dance with her or something. Not hide here under the bed. As lifestyle choices went, hiding under the bed sucked.

Besides, she'd already covered all the walls she could easily reach from under there with equations and formulas.

She drew a deep breath. Tomorrow she'd go back to the bar. If the girl was there again, she'd talk to her for at least ten full sentences. With nouns and verbs and adjectives and pronouns and stuff.

Her heart beat like crazy when she came to the bar the day after, and she had to take a break and calm herself down before she managed to pull the door open. Steeling herself, she walked with determined steps up to the bar.

"A large bourbon, please," she said.

The bartender girl's eyebrows rose.

"Bourbon?" she said. "At noon? That's not your usual, dear."

Fred smiled uncertainly.

"I need something to calm my nerves," she said. "Or possibly just knock them out."

The bartender put a glass on the top of the bar and started filling it with bourbon.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with that cute blonde sitting in your booth, would it?" the bartender said.

Fred's heart jumped into her throat and she could feel herself blushing intensely.

"Um," she said.

"That's all right, dear," the bartender said. "It's none of my business anyway. Enjoy your drink."

"Thanks," Fred said. She reached for the glass. Her hand was shaking too badly to hold on to it.

"Um," she said again. "Could I have a straw, please?"

Without a word, the bartender put a drinking straw in her glass.

"You, um, left this behind yesterday," Tara said when Fred sat down in the booth. This time, Tara had sat down with her back to the entrance, so that Fred could take her usual spot.

"Thanks," Fred said. It was one of her notebooks, a plain black one with blue-lined paper.

"I thought you might want it, so I came back," Tara said. She was talking rapidly, as if to get the words out before she lost her courage.

"I hadn't missed it yet," Fred said. "But I would've, soon. So thanks."

"I can go, now, if you want," Tara said. She had her stuff all organized to be easy to pick up and carry away, Fred saw. Somehow, that made her feel much less threatened.

"Nah," she said. "You stay as long as you want."

Tara smiled. Her entire face shone up when she did so, like the sun peeking out from behind heavy clouds.

"Thanks," she said. "I don't know LA and I'm getting a little tired of going to new places."

"So you're not from here," Fred said.

Tara shook her head.

"Just visiting," she said.

"So," Fred said, "how do you like it?"

"It's very big and smelly and noisy and full of people."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" Fred said. "All those streets with crowds along the sides and all the cars roaring and honking and fuming, and..."

Suddenly she could see it before her inner eye. All the people. All the things. All the movement and stress and unknown things and...

Her head swam. Her breath came short, and dizziness made the room spin.

"I-," she said. "I think I have to go now."

Tara frowned, worried. "Already?" she said. "But you just got here. Are you all right?"

Fred shook her head.

"I'll see you," she said. "Tomorrow?"

"Sure," Tara said. "Tomorrow. Are you sure you don't want help?"

"Very," Fred said. "I just..."

She didn't even manage to finish the sentence before it just got too much, and she could stop herself from rushing out of the bar.

That went quite well, Fred thought as she lay safely staring up at bedsprings. It was easily ten entire sentences. A conversation, even. That made sense. *And* plans to talk again. Plans that hardly even scared her. For some reason, there was something deeply not scary about Tara. It would be as hard to be afraid of her as of a cute little bunny.

Mind you, bunnies could be nasty. So maybe not feel *too* safe.

"Hey," Tara said when Fred arrived the next day. "You came back."

"I said I would, didn't I?" Fred said.

They were back in the same seats as before. One on each side of the booth, the table safely between them.

"Do you want to say why you run away like that," Tara asked, "or should I just pretend you don't?"

"I had a bit of a bad time," Fred said. "Takes a while to adjust to life again."

She gathered as much courage as she could.

"Why are you here yourself?" she said.

"Oh," Tara said. She looked a little sad, all of a sudden.

"I broke up with my girlfriend," she said. "She... turned a bit nasty on me. Did some stuff I couldn't forgive."

She looked down into her drink and slowly stirred it with the pointy end of the little umbrella.

"I moped a lot," she went on. "A friend told me to go here. Go to gay bars. Pick up a cute girl or two. Do the rebound thing."

Fred smiled tentatively.

"So have you seen any cute girls?" she said.

Tara looked up at her.

"Oh yes," she said. "Loads."

"So it's working, then," Fred said.

Tara blushed a little.

"You're the first one I've actually talked to," she said. "I'm... kind of shy."

"Oh," Fred said. "I'm flattered, I guess."

She also felt singled out. Special. Looked at.

Suddenly, her head was spinning again. She gritted her teeth and swore at herself. Not now, damn it! This running away from a perfectly ordinary conversation was getting really tedious.

A hand descended on her shoulder.

"Hey," Tara said. "What can I do?"

Again, it got too much for her. Again, she grabbed her stuff in a hurry and ran for the door.

That's it, Fred thought. I'll spend the rest of my life under this stupid king-size hotel bed. I'll ask Angel and Cordelia to bring me food sometimes, and books so I can do research for them. Stalk out to the bathroom when needed, with all the lights turned off so I can't see the big scary spaces. If the weird old hermits in the middle ages could live their entire lives on top of stone pillars, I can spend mine right here. At least it's warm and dry.

Someone knocked on the door to her room.

"Sure," she shouted.

The door opened, and she could hear someone walking into the room. It didn't sound like either Angel or Cordelia.

"H-Hello?" a timid voice said.

Fred frowned.

"Tara?" she said.

The steps approached the bed, and Tara knelt next to it. She looked in. Her head was the wrong way up, from Fred's point of view, and her long hair all hung down to one side.

"I-is this where you run to?" Tara said.

Fred nodded.

"Cosy," Tara said. "Mind if I join you?"

Cosy?

"In here?" Fred asked.

"Uh-hu," Tara said.

"But it's under the bed."

"Best place to be, sometimes. If you're there, then you know the monsters aren't."

Fred giggled.

"Sure," she said. "Come on in."

Tara turned around so her head and feet pointed the same way as Fred's, and then she scooted in under the bed. They lay there in silence for a while, looking at each other.

"Why are you here?" Fred said when she couldn't contain her curiosity any longer.

"Couldn't let the cutest and most fascinating girl I've met in LA just run away, could I? I followed you."

"Oh," Fred said.

"What now?" she added, after a short pause.

"I have *no* idea," Tara said.

"You have no idea?"

"Nope. The friend who told me to go here and pick up girls suggested a want, take, have philosophy, as well as avoiding talking and concentrating on stuff involving several kinds of grunting sounds. But that's just not me, you know."

Fred laughed.

"You're kind of funny," she said.

"But safe," Tara said. "And not too shabby looking, I'm told."

Fred shook her head.

"You're very pretty," she said.

Tara smiled her sunshine smile again.

"Thank you," she said. "You're very pretty too."

Fred tried to smile but wasn't sure if she succeeded.

"Not much use of that under a bed," she said. "It's not exactly the best place to meet people."

"But the people you *do* meet there tend to be kind of interesting," Tara said. "I think."

Tend to? Fred thought. How often does this girl meet people under beds? It's got to have happened a bunch of times, for there to be enough data points to form a tendency.

"Can I ask you something?" Tara interrupted her train of thought. "And if you don't like the question, we'll both just pretend I never asked?"

"Sure," Fred said. "That'll be easy. I'm never quite sure what really happened and what was only in my mind anyway."

Tara looked startled.

"Oh," she said. "That's not good, is it?"

"Not so much."

"I'm sorry."

"So what did you want to ask?" Fred said in order to change the subject. "Or possibly not ask."

"Would you like to go out with me?" Tara said, very quickly, as if to get all the words out before her courage failed her.

Fred looked at her for a little while. Her hair had fallen to the floor and revealed a nicely shaped ear that hadn't been visible when she stood up.

"Go out?" Fred said. "Like a date?"

Tara blushed. "Yes," she said. "Like a date. I'm sorry, it was a stupid idea, I..."

"Yes," Fred interrupted.

Again, Tara's entire face brightened and transformed into beauty as she smiled.

"Really?" she said.

"If I can," Fred said. "I mean, I really *do* want to, because you're pretty and nice and Cordy would be so proud of me for dating except maybe not so much for dating girls but anyway it probably wouldn't be a very long date because as soon as there were any people I'd panic and run away and hide and I'm babbling again aren't I?"

"You do the cute babbling thing very well," Tara said.

Fred felt herself blush.

"Thanks," she said. "I don't mean to."

"So you do want to go out?" Tara said. "With me, that is? If you can?"

Fred nodded.

"Good!" Tara said, smiling. "Will you be ready by six tomorrow night?"

"Yeah, sure," Fred said. "But, what about,..."

Tara put a gentle finger across her lips.

"Try not to worry, ok?" she said. "I'll take care of it."

And with those words she scooted out from under the bed and left.

Fred spent much of the next twenty-four hours trying to figure out exactly *how* Tara thought she'd fix Fred's PTSD reactions. There were several options, of course, but most of them would take too long to be a real option under the circumstances. By lunch, she had boiled the less unreasonable options down to either drugs or magic. She wasn't too keen on either, but decided that she'd at least give whatever it was a try.

After she'd made her mind up about that, she started panicking about what to wear. She'd have to wear something. Well, obviously *something*, but something pretty. And sexy. But not too sexy.

She scurried out from under the bed and over to the wardrobe. She didn't even *know* what clothes she had. Cordelia had brought them all, and Fred had so far just reached in and grabbed something clean. Now, for the first time, she actually looked at the clothes.

And frowned. There was a *lot* of them. In many various styles. Clearly, this would require a rational and scientific selection process.

She grabbed a pen and started sketching a clothes-selection algorithm on the wall next to the wardrobe.

Flowers, Fred thought as she stood in front of the door the note had directed her to. I should have brought flowers instead of chocolates. I don't know if she likes chocolate. She might be dieting. Or allergic.

A taxi had arrived at the Hyperion, and a confused Cordelia had taken the note the driver had to Fred's room.

"I have a date," Fred had said, by way of explanation.

"What kind of date sends a cab, and a note with directions to a room in a fancy hotel?" Cordelia said. "With directions on how to get to the room via a service entrance and a freight elevator?"

Before Fred had had time to explain that it was really very kind and thoughtful, what with her people phobia and all, Cordelia did a double take.

"You have a *date*?" she had asked. "*You* have a date? How did *that* happen?"

Bringing a gift had been Cordy's suggestion. Or, rather, order.

And of course Tara might be allergic to flowers just as well as to chocolate so, really, they were no better in that regard. Summoning what little courage she had left, Fred knocked on the door.

"It's open," she heard Tara's voice say from inside.

No it's not, the overly logical part of Fred's brain protested. This door is quite obviously closed. If it was open, it wouldn't block my vision or stop me from entering.

"Oh, shut up," she told her brain, opened the defined-as-open door and walked inside.

"Do you like it?" Tara asked a little later.

They were lying under the room's large four-poster bed. Tara had had the hotel staff put blocks of wood under its legs to make it a little roomier, and also put in a bunch of pillows. An incense cone smoldered under the head of the bed, several thick candles provided light. Two bottles of wine waited in a bucket, and delicious smells stalked out from six covered trays standing on the floor next to the bed.

"Um, wow," Fred said.

Tara smiled.

"I'll take that as a yes," she said.

Tara wore a dress. A red, slinky dress that very nicely accentuated the curvyness inside it. In Fred's opinion, it was a very nice and very distracting dress. So distracting, in fact, that her brain didn't even try to fit functions to the curves. Particularly not the ones visible through the low-cut front.

"I hope you'll like the food," Tara said. "I have no idea what you like or if you're allergic or anything, so I kind of panicked and ordered a little bit of everything."

"It'll be fine," Fred said, keeping her eyes averted from the distracting curves. It was impolite to stare at girls' breasts. She'd learned that some time, although she couldn't remember when. Or from who.

"What's wrong?" Tara said. "You look bothered?"

"Oh, it's nothing," Fred lied. "I'm just not used to this sort of thing."

Tara laid down on her back, which hid some of the distracting curves but rather emphasized others.

"It's too much, isn't it?" Tara said. "I'm coming on to strong. I'm sorry. I've never been any good at the coming-on thing."

Fred rose up on her elbows as far as the underside of the bed allowed.

"No!" she said. "You're doing fine! It's just that... I was taught it's not nice to stare."

Tara looked at her.

"Stare?" she said.

Fred managed to force a grin-like smile while she nodded.

"At what?" Tara said.

"Your... um..." Fred gestured in the general direction of Tara's chest.

Tara's eyebrows rose in surprise and she looked down onto herself.

"You want to stare at my breasts?" she said. "But they're kind of droopy and not very nice at all."

"No!" Fred said again. "They're gorgeous, as far as I can tell. Very..."

Her voice faltered while she cast around for a word that was sufficiently flattering without being too blatant.

"...lickable," her mouth said before her brain could stop it.

Tara turned to look at her.

"Lickable?" she said.

Fred felt a burning blush spread across her face.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Are yours? Lickable, that is?"

Fred shook her head.

"No," she said. "They're just... small."

She made an effort to wrench her mind back to less tingly territory.

"Don't you think we should eat before the food gets cold?" she said.

"I chose stuff that'll be just fine cold," Tara said. "But if you're hungry..."

She lifted one of the lids, revealing a large bowl of strawberries and another with whipped cream. She picked up a strawberry, laid back down on her back and placed it into her cleavage.

"...just go ahead and eat."

Fred felt her blush expand down her throat, and also change character. Where had first been an oh-god-this-is-embarrassing kind of blush, it was quickly turning into a oh-god-am-I-really-doing-this variant. Which was a lot nicer. She moved forward and stuck her face into the valley between Tara's ample breasts. She smelled slightly of soap and incense. Slowly, Fred bit the strawberry in half, squeezing a little juice that trickled further down Tara's chest.

"Very nice," Fred said when she'd swallowed the half strawberry. "But I think it would be even better with the whipped cream."

Tara's face was flushed too, she noticed, and her breath was coming a little quicker.

"I guess you'll just have to try that too, then," she said.

"Might mess up your dress," Fred said. "And my top."

Tara's hand moved around to Fred's back and toyed with the grip on the zipper.

"There *is* a fairly straightforward solution to that," she said.

Fred couldn't think of anything to say to that, so she just smiled and started taking Tara's clothes off.

"I'm sorry I have to go home," Tara said the next morning. "But I have an exam I really can't afford to miss."

She was standing next to the bed, a dressing gown casually thrown over her shoulders and not hiding all that much. Fred was sitting on the edge of the unused top of the bed, pulling her jeans on and wishing she could find her underwear.

"I'm sorry you have to go home too," she said. "This was really nice."

"Yeah, it was," Tara said.

It was the first time in over five years I didn't spend a night alone, scared out of my wits or both, Fred thought.

"I, um," Tara said.

Fred turned to look at her, jeans still unbuttoned. She looked nervous.

"Um, I'd really like to see you again some time, and I really like you," Tara said, "but..."

To her own surprise, she felt more relieved than disappointed at the "but".

"But when you get home you'll try to get back together with your ex," Fred guessed.

Tara nodded. "If I can," she said.

Fred finished buttoning the jeans and stood up. She walked over to Tara and gave her a firm but not too intimate hug.

"Of course you can," she said. "You're irresistible when you do the coming on thing. Just walk up to her, tell her to kiss you and let the rest follow naturally."

Tara smiled.

"Yeah," she said. "Me in my long black coat, striding into Willow's room and asking her to kiss me. That'll work."

"You won't know until you try," Fred said. "Let me know how it works out, ok?"

"I will," Tara said. "You're a great person, you know that?"

"Thanks," Fred said. "Talk to you later, then? And thanks for tonight."

The day seemed unusually bright as Fred walked down the road towards the Hyperion. In a good way, that was. Warm and sunny and shiny and nice. She took the front door out of the hotel, and even smiled at the doorman as he greeted her. The people in the street seemed less like potential monsters than they had the day before. She knew now that the world could be nice, in a soft and warm and lovely Tara way. She felt content inside.

She felt so good, in fact, that it took two entire blocks before her courage failed and she ran the rest of the way back to the safety under her own bed.

But still, she thought. It was progress.