

Day – Points of View

Rating: Hard to tell really, as I don't particularly agree with the American ratings, but I'd say you probably have to be at least 18 to read this.

Pairing: Buffy / Faith

Disclaimer: Buffy and Faith et al belong to Joss Whedon, Mutant Enemy and probably a whole lot of others. However, no copyright infringement is intended and I'm making absolutely zero money so I guess I'm safe.

Spoilers: Pretty much all seven seasons of Buffy and perhaps an occasional reference to some Angel stuff.

Notes: This piece takes place after the end of "Chosen" season 7 and I'm pretty much excluding most of the developments on Angel's latest season/seasons since I wasn't happy with that. Also, English isn't my native language, so bear with me if I suddenly misuse a preposition!

Summary: A new threat has arisen, this time in England. The gang arrives to help Giles and defeat it, but are distracted by life, death, and new alliances.

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Faith's POV:

I block deftly, about to deliver a smartass comment followed by a nasty deep-set punch, when my legs are swept away from under me and I land hard on my ass instead. Damn, he's annoying. I look up and he's grinning down at me while slowly backing away, out of reach for any retaliatory moves. Damn, he's not only annoying but knows me too well.

"Faith, concentrate please."

I hear Giles' world-weary voice coming from behind me but ignore it, too engrossed in finding a way to kick the crap and then some out of his son.

His son, yeah. That blond, grinning, scrawny - but way cute - wannabe-Watcher currently besting me in one-on-one combat is Giles' son.

Don't know who was the most surprised, me or G-man. I'd left L.A. to catch a much-needed break from...well, Cordelia mainly, and somehow ended up in England. Once there, I decided to pay Giles a visit, slightly worried as to how he'd react. But I hadn't needed to bother. He was freaked out way before I got there. Turns out he had a one-night-stand years ago while he was still in college. In the 'Ripper' era. Turns out that it resulted in a child he didn't know about for twenty-five years. Turns out that the child grew up and came looking for him. Turns out- Fuck it!

He's just nailed me again and I'm starting to feel pissed. He's not as strong, not as fast, not as tough or has as much endurance as me - goes without sayin' really - but he's damn good nonetheless. He's got about three or four black belts in various kick-ass genres, but that's not why he's puttin' up such a good fight against me. It's because he reads me. It's like he knows

Day – Points of View

where I'll attack before I even know it myself and he's takin' full advantage of it. I hate it. I don't hate him, although he pisses me off a lot - father like son and all - I only hate that he anticipates my every friggin' move. It's almost like fighting with B. Without the Slayer strength of course, or the frenzied pace.

Or the pain. Or the hatred.

Laken - yeah, that's his name, fuckin' queer, I know. Whatever his mum was on at the time I want some - doesn't look at me with hatred in his eyes. Not even when I do finally pull my act together, start concentrating, and throw him across the room or nail him against the wall; he's always got a kinda genuine laugh in his eyes. Like he's having a good time.

With me.

I don't see that look a lot in other people's eyes. Angel's, yeah, but he's hardly 'people'. Cordelia tolerates me because Angel has told her to, while Wes mainly ignores me and Fred and Gunn just hover around. And Connor... Don't get me started on that one. It doesn't suck, but it could be better. Of course any of their looks are better than the ones B shoots me. Or shot, as I haven't seen her for a while. Not since Sunnydale was sucked into the Hellmouth and we all went our merry ways after avoiding yet another world apocalypse. Last I heard she was in 'Frisco, would probably have chosen L.A. if I hadn't been there. But- aargh! All right, that's it! I'll have to kill him now.

That was my original Black Album Metallica t-shirt he just tore.

Giles' POV:

He's so graceful. I know it's a sentimental, trite and sappy thing to think, but he is. My Son. Laken Giles Sebastian. My very own flesh and blood.

Oh.

The very same blood that is as of now oozing from his nose - courtesy Faith.

"Be so kind as not to hurt him too much, Faith."

I know it hurt him when I had to confess I had no recollection of his mother. He tried to hide it, but I could tell. I sought to explain that a lot of things were different back then; that I was going through a difficult time, drinking, smoking and inhaling too much, but it still hurt him. Heck, I don't blame him, I would have given anything to be able to tell him something, say something about her, me and our time together. But it would have been a lie.

"Retreat, Laken! Retreating's always good. No shame in that."

Time together. It was a one-night-stand. No more, no less. And he knows that. As much as he would like for it to have been, and mean, more, that's what it was and we're both clear on that. Iris. I didn't even remember her name before he told me. Wonder if I knew back then?

Iris, the mother of my child. My only child. My son. I didn't know. For twenty-five years I

Day – Points of View

didn't know. And if she hadn't been dying, she wouldn't have told him and I still wouldn't know. Is it fair to hate the dead?

"No sharp objects, Faith! I'm not going to tell you again!"

He's tall, handsome, I think, and he looks like me and it's not just selfish wishful thinking. Even Faith has commented on it, saying we have the same exasperated smile and superior air that just gets her itching to hit something or someone. But she said it with a grin, thankfully. I've been a father for less than two months and am already trying to make up for more than two decades of absence and neglect. Just glad it doesn't involve protecting him against a pissed-off Slayer. My body has barely healed from my last outing to the now extinct Sunnydale.

Not that Faith would hurt him, more than she already does when they're training that is; she likes him even if he drives her nuts by being so well prepared, always one step ahead of the game. I'm proud of him. I don't really know him, but I can appreciate a good fight so I'm proud of him. Actually I'm afraid where that may lead. If I start loving him, it'll be like with Buffy all over again and I don't know if I can handle that. Again.

"Let him go now, Faith, training's over and you know his leg's not supposed to bend that way."

Buffy's POV:

So, here I am, going to England. And not because I want to. Angel sent me. Apparently he's in contact with Giles - seems like they talk a whole lot more than Giles and I do, but I'm not gonna be upset about that - and apparently hell's breaking loose over there. Makes a change. Or not. Guess since Sunnydale went to hell in a hand-basket, all the evil forces had to find another location to feast. Guess England's as good a place as the next one. I don't mind really, it's been almost a year since I last battled truly great evil and a girl has needs. God, that sounded gross, but it's true. I do need the action, I do need the fight to feel alive and appreciated, I need the adrenaline rush and the-umm-free drinks. Gotta love first class!

Is it just me, or does a gin & tonic taste better the closer you get to London? We're almost there now, circling the airport, waiting for permission to descend, and I can almost make myself believe that I can feel her. Of course I know she's there. Angel and then Giles told me that much. Why she's there, however, I can't fathom; perhaps she instinctively knew I'd be going and decided to get there first to screw with my mind? Okay, I know I'm being paranoid. You would be, too, if you'd had Faith happening to you. Hey, that rhymed!

It's not that I really hate her anymore. Not after she helped me out with that pesky First Evil problem. She really came through for me there, I admit it. I just never wanted to see her ever again. Didn't think it was too much to hope for. Guess the other kind of fate hasn't been paying attention.

I've convinced myself it'll be all right. Giles will be there and I'm extremely anxious to see him again. Even though he's not my Watcher any more, or has been for a long time, he's still the one I turn to and depend on when the going gets tough. And it pretty much always does. I know he wants me to manage on my own, but I also know that he'll never be able to back off

Day – Points of View

or walk out of my life completely. We've been through too much together for that to happen. And I doubt anyone of us would allow it to happen either way. But why she has to be there...?

We left things on a pretty well footing. She apologized, she kicked evildoer ass and she went back to L.A. I listened, didn't punch her, much, and forgave. More or less.

I can appreciate someone working for forgiveness and redemption as much as the next one - I'd hardly be in contact with Angel if I couldn't - but there's just something about Faith that irks me. Always has. I guess it just gets a little too close to home occasionally.

Not that I'd ever admit to anything of the sort. They probably all know anyway. I turn to look at Willow in the seat next to me, she's fast asleep. Xander, on the other hand, is busy flagging down a stewardess to get one more free drink before landing. He grins at me and I smile back. They insisted they come with me, saying they missed Giles as much as I do - which is true - but mainly because I know they want to look out for me and watch my back. They always have, even if I haven't always appreciated it or at times even resented them for it. They've had so many opportunities to say 'screw you' and leave, but they never have. Not without quickly coming back afterwards anyway. They must know I need them. Perhaps it's time I tell them more often.

We're descending now; I can see the runway approaching fast and feel the downward surge in my gut. And then I feel something else.

I can't believe Giles sent her to pick us up.

Willow's POV:

We're all jetlagged and antsy, especially Buffy. I'm glad we didn't have problems getting through customs or I think someone would have gotten hurt. Good thing Buffy left her arsenal back in San Francisco, certain items are difficult to explain. Like the double-headed battleaxe she's been favouring lately. We left Kennedy and Dawn in charge of the slaying back home. Dawn was excited whereas Kennedy wasn't too happy about having to stay behind, but I made sure to make up for it the night before we left. She may not be a happy camper, but she's not an unsatisfied one. I grin to myself, then turn to say something to Buffy, but she's frozen mid-step, staring directly ahead of her.

Oh God, here we go...

I turn to look in the same direction as Buffy and I see Faith, casually leaning against the wall. The expression on her face is the usual devil-may-care, but her eyes give her away. I could have seen the apprehension from miles away.

She looks good. I notice she can still pull off wearing leather pants. As we approach, she moves away from the wall, absentmindedly crossing and uncrossing her arms as if unsure what to do with them. That's the problem with wearing pants that tight, no pockets to speak of when you need them. She smiles hesitantly, looking at Xander and at me, all the while shooting not-so-furtive glances at Buffy.

"Flight okay?"

Day – Points of View

"Bloody brilliant, mate!" Xander exclaims in the god-awful British accent he's been torturing Buffy and me with since the news of our journey. "Free drinks galore!" He takes a step forward and puts out his hand, Faith smiles gratefully and shakes it vigorously. I follow suit and receive a smile as well. Then we all turn to Buffy.

She blinks quickly as if suddenly returning from wherever place her mind just took her and shakes her head lightly, putting on a small smile.

"Faith."

"B."

And with that I guess the heartfelt greetings are over for now, because in an unspoken agreement we simultaneously begin to sidle toward the exit, Faith leading the way and us following closely behind. Buffy's still looking thoughtful.

Faith's POV:

Well, I guess that went okay. No insults or punches exchanged. That must count as a success. Of course if looks could kill...Nah, I'll be fair. It really wasn't that bad, she merely looked as if she'd found somethin' mildly unpleasant in her drink and that's probably one of the better looks I've received from her in a long time. In a very long time. And she did smile. Or was that a muscle spasm?

We're driving in Giles' rather nifty sports car, Red's in the front with me and B and Xander are cooped up in the back. No words are spoken, but the tension is palpable. I can see the white of Red's knuckles where she's gripping onto the side handle.

All right, so I haven't quite gotten the whole driving-on-the-left-side part down yet, but there's really no need to mutter protection spells like that. It's kinda insulting actually. I catch B's eyes in the rear-view mirror. Oh yeah, that was totally a smile I just got. Tiny, but still a-

"Faith! Eyes on the road! Eyes on the road!" Red shrieks, hiding her own eyes behind her hands.

Whoops.

"Sorry," I grin bashfully, making a large swerve to avoid the truck ahead. "Don't worry, Will, everything's under control."

"Uh-huh," She only says, her eyes remaining hidden.

I risk a glance back at B, but she's looking out of the window now, seemingly lost in thought. I sigh inwardly.

Giles' POV:

Day – Points of View

I'm already waiting in the driveway when they pull up at the curb. And no, I didn't have some supernatural premonition telling me they were getting close, I simply heard Faith turn the corner on screeching tyres.

Why do you think I wasn't in the airport to greet them? Exactly. I have a son now, life's dear to me. Speaking of Laken, he's coming up behind me, peering curiously over my shoulder. I can tell he's excited about their arrival.

He already knows about me, about the others and the things we've done. Couldn't really hide the fact that Faith was something else when she suddenly turned up on my doorstep, and I didn't want to lie to him either. Besides, he's got the gene; that pesky little Watcher gene that automatically makes him a target and puts him in danger from anyone who's opposed to the Slayer and Watcher arrangement. That's actually a rather large quantity of the undead - and occasionally living - population of the world. That's why I'm having him stay here with me for a while; I want him to be aware of all the repercussions this new life can bring with it. At first he outright refused, claiming university responsibilities, independence, being able to take care of himself and what not, but I know the main reason is that he hasn't decided yet what to make of me. Whether he resents me or is happy to have found a father. To be honest, I haven't quite decided what to make of him either.

However, where the Watcher/Slayer issue is concerned, he seems pretty unperturbed by it all, but then again, he's only had Faith's war stories to relate to. He has still to experience it for real himself. I desperately hope it'll never come to that, but my instinct and experience tell me otherwise. Life's never that simple.

The car doors are practically thrown open and I see Willow and Xander scramble out in a great hurry. Both of them a considerably paler complexion than when I saw them last. I hear Laken snicker beside me. He had the pleasure of first introducing Faith to driving on the left. That's why he wasn't in the airport either.

"G-man!" Xander exclaims, stumbling towards me and throwing his arms around me in an exaggerated hug. "I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life! Please tell me the nightmare's over."

"The nightmare's over, Xander," I oblige with a smile as I pat his back, looking past him at Buffy who's making her way towards me, a huge smile spreading on her face. By God, I've missed her!

"Save some for the rest of us." She quips good-naturedly, pulling Xander away from me so she can take his place in my arms. I'm near tears as I hold her. Must be turning into a sentimental old sod these days.

Willow's POV:

Dinner's great, although not much is actually being eaten. We're all too busy being jetlagged or catching up to have time to eat. Drinking, however, is another matter. Isn't it always?

It was tense at first, but the tension quickly got mixed up with shock and curiosity when Giles casually mentioned that the blond, blue-eyed hunk standing next to him was his son. Could

Day – Points of View

have knocked me over with a feather and I think Buffy forgot to breathe for a few minutes. Xander was - and is - just ecstatic about the revelation, delighting in the extra testosterone that has been injected into our little group. I swear, he's looking at Laken the way he used to look at Buffy. And Cordelia. And Faith. And Anya, but let's not go there.

Giles had Laken tell the story and I couldn't help but watch him as Laken related the events of the past few months, seeing the myriad of emotions crossing his face. Regret, sadness, joy and... love? Wonder if Buffy noticed it, too, but she must have. Would've taken a blind man not to.

However, I think they'll be all right. I was anxious at first - knowing how Buffy handles any kind of competition, emotionally or otherwise - but I could see the look on her face soften when he told us about his mother. Iris was her name. She died from cancer three months ago and he's spent the better part of the last year nursing her at home. At least Joyce went quickly. I shudder slightly and see Buffy do the same.

It wasn't until she was at death's door that she finally relented and told her son about his father. She always refused to talk about it before and Laken had gradually resigned himself to the fact that he would never know. Whether it was guilt or a last minute effort to have no unresolved issues between them, Laken didn't know, but she had told him and he was glad about that. I can tell Giles is glad about it, too.

Buffy's POV:

It's almost too much. No, fuck that, it is too much! First Faith, then Laken. I don't know how to handle all of this. Preferably I'd get up and flee the house in search of the nearest cemetery, stake in one hand, Jack Daniels in the other, but I can't do that to Giles. I turn a little and can tell Faith feels the same way, but for different reasons altogether. She's just bored out of her mind, eyes distant, the drink in her hand halfway forgotten.

In only lasts a few seconds, though, then she snaps back to reality and looks straight at me. She could feel me watching her. Our eyes lock for a moment and it is as if a silent exchange is passing between us because she suddenly stands up.

"Think it's time for a little slaying, G-man. As gripping as this reunion is, it ain't going keep the vamps from gettin' down and dirty tonight." She turns to me and looks at me pointedly. "Wanna come, B?"

I'm already out of my seat, sending apologetic smiles all around as I breeze past them and out of the house.

"Do be careful!" Giles barely has time to shout before the front door slams shut behind us.

Faith's POV:

We've walked in a relatively comfortable silence for a few minutes when Buffy says almost inaudibly, "Thanks."

Day – Points of View

I smile to myself. "No problem, B." I don't have to ask what she's referring to, I'm surprised any of the others didn't notice by the amount of squirming she was doing in her chair. Can't blame her really, it was overwhelming. First me and then the whole deal with Laken. Woulda blown me outta the water, too, if I'd been her. But I'm not and never have been, except, of course, for the time when-whoa, wrong line of thought, stoppin' right here.

"So," I start hesitantly, searching for something to say to bridge the suddenly mounting tension between us. "How ya been?"

Out of the corner of my eye I see her shrug, "Oh, you know...slaying and stuff."

That's not what I wanted to hear. I know she's been slaying because that's what we do, what I wanted to know is how she has been. How she's been feeling and thinking and everything in between since we last saw each other. But I don't say that. I just say, "Cool." And we continue walking.

"This is usually a good place." I say a few minutes later, as we pause in front of the gothic looking gate that marks the entrance into Chesterfield Cemetery. "Lots of newbies runnin' around."

She only nods and I can feel her silence starting to really bug me as we swiftly climb the fence, taking out our stakes the moment our feet hit the soft, moist grass. I can't decide whether it's my presence or the news about Laken that's affecting her so much. Probably a combination.

Suffice to say, I pity any vampire we run into tonight.

And I'm dead on. I barely get to see any action at all as B practically shoves me away every time, throwing herself at whatever comes our way. I don't really mind that much, I had a good night's slaying yesterday and I've always liked to watch B kick the crap out of the undead. Better than late night wrestling on TV in my opinion. At first I stay on my toes, though, ready to jump in should it become necessary, but after a while I relax against a headstone, reaching into my leather jacket to fish out a cigarette.

"Smoking's bad for you, Faith." B whirls past me, snatching the cigarette from my lips before I can even light it and tosses it away.

"Oh man! That was my last one!" I complain, but only half-heartedly as I can't help but grin.

"Good." B says with emphasis, staking the poor vamp below her and leaping to her feet. She turns to me and is about say something when she's tackled from behind by another vampire.

"It's mind bogglin' really," I say, hoisting myself up to sit on the headstone as B proceeds to leisurely pummel her latest attacker, "that after watching you stake five of 'em already, there's always that last sucker who thinks they can take you despite all evidence of the contrary."

"Tell me about it!" Buffy gasps as she's thrown against the side of a crypt. She practically bounces off of it, her entire body connecting with the vampire's chest and bringing him down with her.

Day – Points of View

Struggling, struggling and...puff! No more vamp. It's too easy really.

B gets up, wiping vamp dust and grass from her jacket and jeans. She's all flushed and sweaty. She looks hot. I say so before I can stop myself.

To my surprise she just grins at me, looking genuinely pleased. "Thanks-look out! Behind you!"

I've already ducked, feeling the whoosh of air from the punch that went straight over my head. I sigh and reluctantly slide down the headstone, guess I'll have to work a bit tonight after all.

Xander's POV:

Laken's awesome. He gets my jokes! And he laughs at them! Really, he does! Most of them at least. He can get all Gilesy and look at me like he's dissecting something strange under a microscope, but most of the time it's like having found a long lost brother. A better looking, smarter, British-accent-speaking long lost brother, but still. I love Buffy, Will, Dawn and all, but sometimes the pms-vibes get just a little too high.

I've been entertaining him with Slayer stories since the two actual Slayers left to patrol and he appears to have been listening. Willow was on the phone with Kennedy and then went to bed shortly afterwards and Giles hovered for a while in the background before going to bed as well. So now he's all mine.

Ew. Not like that.

But it's fun. I've never really had another guy to hang out with like this. Oz and I did a little, but then that became all awkward and even after he and Will got back together, we never really picked up the thread before he left. And since then there's really only been undead guys to hang around and bond with, and even I haven't been that desperate. I prefer company with a heartbeat. And yes, I'm including Riley in this.

"So... witches, werewolves, demons, vampires, Slayers and near-death experiences have pretty much been part of your life for close to a decade?"

I nod importantly as Laken continues to study me, speaking slowly, "Fascinating." I smile modestly and begin telling him about the time I single-handedly stopped a gang of zombies from blowing up Sunnydale High. It's such a great story.

Giles' POV:

We're all pretty bleary-eyed at the breakfast table the next morning. Faith's yawning repeatedly without even bothering to hide it and Buffy's not faring much better. But at least she's attempting to be discreet. Laken and Xander both have dark circles around the eyes and I'm not surprised as I heard them talking in the kitchen for most of the night. In a way it was nice, listening to their voices and indirectly getting to know Laken a little better that way. He and Xander are sharing a room, Buffy and Willow have the other guestroom and Faith's sleeping on the living room couch, so my house is pretty crowded. But I'd be lying if I said I

Day – Points of View

don't enjoy the life and spectacle around me.

The only one who appears to have had a decent night's sleep is Willow, who's babbling happily about some cereal product or other. I reach for the coffeepot, but am beaten to it by Faith who raises an eyebrow and smirks innocently at me while pouring the last of the coffee into her own cup.

"Sorry, G-man, you wanted that?"

"Actually, I was just going to make tea." I reply with a dignified air, but then smile at the oh-so-innocent expression on her face. Buffy and Faith are not the only ones who have come a long way. At least I think they have. They haven't spoken much this morning, too wrapped up in being tired or grumpy, but I can feel that the tension between them from last night is very nearly gone. Must have been a good night's workout.

I clear my throat and simultaneously all look up at me. "Well, I think it's time I tell you all why I've asked you to come here." I can see fatigue being replaced by interest in five pairs of eyes.

"The basics are this: at the next new moon, which is a week away for those of you who don't know, a cult of vampires is attempting to resurrect an old shaman who was sacrificed at Stonehenge approximately 1400 years ago. The shaman in question isn't particularly evil - not by our standards anyway - but he's tremendously powerful. Once resurrected, their plan is to force him to perform a ritual that will allow them to walk the earth during the day."

"Like a super protective sun screen?" Xander offers helpfully and I nod a little wearily. "Yes, Xander, something like that."

"Vampires in broad daylight?" Buffy sounds sceptical, happily munching on a roll. "How interesting. Is that really possible?"

I take off my glasses, they are in dire need of a good cleaning, and say simply, "No reason to wait around to find out, is there?"

I notice various degrees of shrugging and eye-rolling around the table as they start taking interest in their breakfast again. Not quite the reaction I was hoping for. "Really, I assure you, this is a serious matter that requires all of our attention?"

"Sure, Giles, we got it. Evil shaman hijinks." Buffy smiles distractedly, reaching for another roll. "Vamps getting a tan, big bad."

I'm about to point out the deeper aspects of this matter when Faith interrupts me. "Really, G, it does sound a little...ya know, minor?" She stuffs an entire croissant into her mouth - much to my disgust - and proceeds to speak with her mouth full. "It's nod loike we haben't don stuff like thad befor."

Willow's POV:

I feel almost sorry for Giles, but even I find it hard to take the threat seriously. With all the

Day – Points of View

hellish creatures we have faced, defeating a shaman and a cult of vampires sounds positively lightweight.

Out of loyalty I attempt to offer him some moral support. "Well, you know it really could be very dangerous. Not-not, in a First Evil, Gloria, end-of-the-world and it's gonna be painful kind of way dangerous, but in a still very dangerous way. Vamps during the day. Uh... bad..." I look to Giles, but he doesn't seem too impressed by my contribution.

"Day or night, what's the difference?" Faith's clearly not impressed either, reaching across the table to grab an apple. "All it means is a little more work for me and B." She halts abruptly, frowning as if just realizing the thought doesn't really appeal to her. And I'm right. Settling back on her chair she says, "Ya know, B, that might actually turn out to be bit of a drag. Always slayin', never havin' time to enjoy yourself." Buffy arcs a knowing eyebrow at Faith who relents with a small crooked grin. "All right, enjoy yourself in other ways than slayin'."

Buffy nods, still unconcerned, "That's true. As much as a little slaying every night keeps a girl all young and chipper, doing it every night and then again after sunrise would undoubtedly cause some split ends." She leans back in her chair, putting her arms behind her head and gazes up at the ceiling. "So I guess we might as well nip this in the bud before Faith and I will be applying for early retirement."

The rest of us turn to look at Giles. He's clearly befuddled, cleaning his glasses so hard I fear they might break. "Yes, well, then... I guess that's settled. I... I appreciate your... your enthusiastic response." He rises with a pained look on his face and walks out into the kitchen. I can hear the kettle being filled.

Buffy's POV:

"So...?"

"So..."

It's one of the longest conversations Laken and I have had yet. I decide to remember my manners, do mom proud, so I add a softly spoken, "Well..."

"Indeed."

Damn, Laken can play this game as good as the next one. Well, he would, wouldn't he? Being Giles' son.

Giles' son. It feels weird just thinking it, wonder how I'll do once I actually have to say it out loud. Am I jealous? Yes, but that's not what bothers me most. I do feel a little threatened, but I know I'll always have an important place in Giles' heart; nothing can change that. No, it's the sadness I feel that's really getting to me. I can't explain why I feel it or for who it is I feel sad. Knowing me, it probably will turn out to be for myself eventually, but right now I just feel melancholic and sad. It's like I've lost something dear to me.

"So he was your Watcher?"

Day – Points of View

He startles me, but I decide to give him credit for taking the first step. "Yes. And friend." Don't know why I threw that bit of information in there, too, but it felt important somehow.

"What about this one?" This time we're both startled by Willow who sweeps into view, turning coquettishly before us as she treats us to the sight of the latest skirt she's trying on.

"It's nice." Laken offers.

I decide to top him. "It's very nice, Will."

"Just like the seven other nearly identical skirts you've already tried on." Laken mutters under his breath, but Willow has already disappeared back into the changing room.

It's a testament to just how troubled my mind is that I'm currently in a London fashion boutique on Oxford Street without the slightest desire to do any browsing and shopping. Laken doesn't want to be there either, but Willow and I made him accompany us.

Faith wanted to drive. Enough said.

"Will this be much longer?"

I take quick stock of the surroundings; Willow's just discovered a new rack with skirts, Faith is alternately holding up a pair of light brown, dark brown and black leather pants, utter concentration on her face, and Xander is leaning across the glass counter, practically drooling into the cleavage of the tense looking shop assistant.

I turn to Laken. "Might be a while."

We both sigh.

We stand in silence for a moment, side by side, arms crossed, watching Faith and Willow slip in and out of the changing rooms in various states of undress. If I'm not much mistaken, Laken is somewhat less bored now. Xander joins our ranks shortly afterwards. He's definitely not bored.

He nudges Laken in the side. "Look at that?! Is that outfit legal?" He's referring to, of course, Faith. To my great surprise Laken ignores him and turns to me instead, saying out of the blue, sincerity in his voice, "It's been good meeting you, Buffy, Giles has told me so much about you. I'd like for us to get to know each other better."

I blink, thrown at first, wondering briefly if he's coming on to me, but then I see the look in his eyes and smile. A little hesitantly to start with then wider and say with genuine warmth, "Thank you, Laken, I'd like that, too."

Xander's POV:

That. Just. Can't. Be. Legal!

Is it hot in here?

Faith's POV:

I'm sharing a much needed cigarette with Laken outside Giles' house. Damn mister look-I've-got-a-stick-up-my-ass is making us smoke outside in the garden. Throws a hissyfit if we light up in the house. It's a really nice evening, though, quiet and warm with the occasional bird singing. Pure Kodak moment. Me and B will be off slaying soon, but until then it's great to just kick back in pleasant company.

"So..." I exhale slowly, studying the pale spiral of smoke ascending the heavens. "The verdict?"

"Thumbs up all around." Is Laken's languid response, patiently waiting for me to pass the cigarette back to him. "A vision to behold."

We're talking about my new leather pants. They're tight I'm tellin' ya, but not too tight to accommodate a nice swift roundhouse-kick. I know, cuz I tested it in the shop. Shop assistant wasn't happy.

"Five by five then?" For some reason, Laken really detests that expression so naturally I have to use it every chance I get.

He hesitates for only half a heartbeat before saying, "They're... worthy of instant approval."

Laken and me get along really well. We both don't use any more words than necessary and there's none of that tension between us that always seems to be between me and practically everyone else. The slate between us is clean. Also, ever since the rest of the gang arrived, we've both been a bit on the outside, a bit like outsiders. Me, because of my past with them; him, because of not having one.

I look at him as he stares toward something in the distance, blue eyes very faraway and thoughtful. He's really cute, an intriguing combination of rugged rebel and British nerdiness. Sounds odd, I know, but it's true. A tattooed bookworm with a stubble, wearing leather and contacts. A bit like Wesley, but a cool one. I'm not gonna make any moves on him, though. Not just because the G-man in not so many words told me he would spend the rest of his life hunting my sorry ass down if I did, but because we're friends. And that's more important to me than a quick roll in the hay nowadays. It might come as a surprise to some, but I don't have that many friends so I've decided not to jeopardize things with the ones I do have. Hey, whaddya know! Sometimes you do learn from your mistakes.

Besides, there's something else standing in the way as well.

Her.

We only shared that one kiss in a dark alley such a very long time ago, but I can still persuade myself that I can recall every sensation. Every taste, every mingled breath, every hesitant touch.

It blew me away back then, but still I'm dying to feel it again.

Day – Points of View

Hmm... Maybe you don't learn from your mistakes after all.

I'm convinced B hasn't forgotten about it either, although I can imagine she's spent a lot of time trying to do just that. It's not as if she's ever as much as remotely touched upon the subject, but sometimes - it's rare I admit - but sometimes there's this look in her eyes when she looks at me that can't help but make me wonder.

And then I wonder if she wonders, too.

Giles' POV:

I'm reading up on Rhoathgar, the shaman the vampire cult is intending to resurrect. Even if the others haven't quite grasped the gravity of the situation, there's no reason why I should let their laissez faire attitude affect my own preparations. Apparently he was a very colourful man, enjoyed skinning people alive. A lot. It always has to be so crude, doesn't it?

We briefly considered, well I briefly considered, if we should just kill the vampires before the new moon, but it was decided that we might as well get rid of the shaman while we're there or some other cult might attempt to do it later when we've all gone our separate ways again.

Our separate ways.

Aren't things supposed to get easier the more you do it?

"They've gone to patrol now, said they'd be back in a couple of hours."

I look up to see Laken stand in the doorway, a crumbled pack of cigarettes in his hand. I frown. He grins. "Xander and I are going out, Willow might be coming, too." He hesitates, "You care to join us?"

I'm touched, and surprised, even though I can't tell how much of is truly sincere and how much is him being polite. It's hard to tell with British people, I should know, as Buffy has informed me of that fact repeatedly the past seven plus years.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I think I'll stay here and continue my research. It might seem trivial to you, but someone has to do it."

I honestly didn't mean it as a reproach, but he shuffles a little uncomfortably, looking slightly ashamed. "Well, yes, about that... If you want, I can help you with it when I get back." He scratches his cheek thoughtfully as he inspects the various books and drawings laid out on the desk in front of me, "Might be fun."

I smile, hoping he can tell I'm being sincere, "I would appreciate that very much. As the saying goes, two minds work better than one." Frankly, I don't have that much reading left and could be done in an hour or so, but I decide to postpone it until he gets back. With all the people in the house, all of them a whole lot more interesting than me I'm sure, I haven't had much time alone with Laken lately. At least I hope that's the explanation and not that he's actively avoiding me.

Day – Points of View

"Okay then, I'll be going now. Don't work too hard." He throws an inscrutable smile my way then disappears out into the corridor, yelling for Xander to get his lazy arse off of the couch and come join him before hell freezes over.

My son. The diplomat.

I must encourage him to spend less time with Faith.

Buffy's POV:

It's a slow night. Very slow. We did run into a weird looking frog thingy demon when we entered the park, but since then there has been no action whatsoever. It's a toss up whether I'm pleased or disappointed. Faith, however, has no such qualms, complaining loudly about the lack of undead activity.

"It's not like I'm askin' much, is it?" She looks at me, gesturing dramatically. "I risk my neck every night and do you hear me complainin' 'bout it?" I'm about to open my mouth to reply, but she shoots me a look and continues, "No, you don't. In rain or snow, I'm always out there kicking ass. But when you really need to let off some steam..."

I ponder briefly as she rants on if I should point out that with most of her time as a Slayer being spent in California, the amount of snow she's been dealing can hardly amount to a lot more than one Christmas night several years ago, but I decide it isn't worth the effort. I smile to myself as I recall that Christmas, it was a simpler time back then. Even with Angel's I'm-evil-and-have-to-kill-myself act it was a beautiful night. It was just before everything turned really ugly.

I throw a surreptitious glance at Faith who's still grumbling though somewhat less agitated. She was the cause of all the ugliness, she- I stop myself. No, that's not true. She became the loaded gun in a room without exits, but I would still have been able to put the safety back on if I'd acted differently. But I didn't.

It's taken me a long time facing up to any kind of responsibility for the whole sordid affair and her behaviour after waking from the coma made any further soul searching seem irrelevant. But that was then.

They all insist she's changed, especially Angel, and I trust his judgement. Besides, I know it's true. True remorse and regrets are hard to feign for more than a few hours before it gets old and she's not that good an actor. She never was; I have always been capable of reading her in ways that I'm pretty sure no one else ever could. It's a Slayer thing, I guess. Only problem is, I suspect it works both ways.

"Hey, B! Where diddya go?" I'm brought back to the present by Faith's hand waving me in the face. "Earth to B! Any extra terrestrials out there lookin' for trouble?"

"Cut it out, Faith," I slap her hand gently away from my face. "I was just thinking."

"What about?"

Day – Points of View

Her question catches me off guard and it takes me a moment before I can answer, "Oh, you know, the usual, evil shaman, cultic vampires and such."

She crosses her arms, raising an eyebrow, "Uh-huh."

We stand like this for a while, only about a foot apart. Talk about my being able to read her, right now I don't have the foggiest clue as to what she's thinking and the look in her eyes isn't helping.

But then it changes.

"Look, B, if there's somethin' you want to say to me, somethin' we should talk about this time's as good as any."

I nod slowly in agreement.

"So is there?" she asks with more patience than I thought her capable of.

"Yes," I practically whisper. "But I don't know what yet." Which is true. I don't.

She takes a deep breath before exhaling slowly and for a second I swear a look of disappointment flickers across her face, but then it's gone and she steps away from me, giving me a friendly albeit slightly resigned smile, "Okay, B, whenever you're ready." She turns around and starts to walk away and I suddenly feel very alone.

Willow's POV:

The music is pounding ferociously and most of the communication has been minimized to a yell in the ear or a meaningful look conveying various requests and responses. The place reminds me of the Bronze, and I get all nostalgic, except that it's slightly bigger and appears to have a decidedly smaller undead clientele.

I've been out dancing, first with Laken - who's a pretty good dancer when the mood strikes him, and it really didn't - and then Xander. I swear he's actually become more coordinated on the dance floor after losing an eye. I told him as much, and he just smiled. It felt great letting go a little, just moving with Xander and the music. After all we've been through. I think we deserve a bit of a break from time to time. The only thing that would make it better is if Kennedy was here; I miss her even if I don't let it on all that much. She's as different from Tara as she possibly could be and I think that's good. For the both of us. If I were to carry on with a Tara-substitute, it wouldn't be fair on either of us. I sigh to myself, mentally counting down the days till I'll see Kennedy again. She gets so reckless when I'm not around.

It's past four in the morning when we emerge from the club, all three of us sweaty, far from sober and in the ultimate high spirits. Xander and Laken briefly debate where to go to grab something to eat, but I put my foot down, saying a girl needs her beauty sleep more than a soggy kebab. Xander's about to object when Laken suddenly changes his mind and agrees with me, stating we've been out long enough and should return back to Giles'. Xander relents with a shrug and we slowly walk down the dimly lit street, hands in pockets and all lost in

thought.

The air is cool but not cold and the peace of quiet is pure balsam for my head after the noise explosion in the club. We've strolled leisurely for about twenty minutes when the first hesitant bird begins to sing delicately, quickly followed by a dozen or two of its nearest and dearest friends.

"You all right?"

Laken starts just the slightest, shouting me an unreadable look with those blue eyes of his, "Yeah sure. Why'd you ask?"

"It's just that you've been chain-smoking since we left the club," I answer, nodding at the newly lit cigarette between his middle and index finger. "What's that? Number fifteen?"

He does a patented guy-shrug, "Does it matter?"

It's obvious he's not in the mood to talk and I decide to let it go. It's not really any of my business anyway. I turn to glance behind us to check on Xander when Laken's voice draws my attention back to him, "It's just... You know, I promised I'd help him, but then I just lost track of time..."

He trails off and I rack my brain, trying to figure out who and what he's talking about. It occurs to me that this really only can involve Giles so I open my mouth, saying a little hesitantly, "I'm sure he'll understand."

Looks like I've hit the nail on its head because he abruptly turns to look at me intensely, "You think? Cos I don't want him to think I did it on purpose or anything." He looks straight ahead again, seemingly speaking to himself, "I wouldn't do that. Not now. Not to him."

I smile to myself before taking his arm and giving it a reassuring squeeze, "Don't worry about it, Laken, he'll understand. Giles' been dealing with the bunch of us for years, he's the master of understanding and forgiveness." I chuckle sadly and quietly, losing myself in the past, "He's had to be..."

"Hmm..." Laken replies noncommittally and I turn around to look at Xander, "Back me up here, Xan- Xander?"

There's absolutely no sign of him behind us. The street is empty and a faint mist swirling down the street and around our knees is making it difficult to distinguish what is real and what is just shadows. A few leaves dance lazily in intricate patterns further away before the breeze moves on, ruffling our hair in a cold caress as it passes us by.

"Xander?" I call out cautiously, suddenly very aware that it's very early morning and we're completely and utterly alone. I reach out in my mind, but sense nothing.

"Are we in trouble?" Laken speaks softly beside me, exhaling quietly as he does so. I swallow, feeling cold sneak up on me from no discernible source. "I think we might just be..."

Day – Points of View

Buffy's POV:

The alley is one of your run of the mill spooky, dirty, bound-to-house-creatures-of-the-undead variety kind of alleys and Faith and I have our stakes out and ready even before we step into the shadows. I hear the gentle dripping of water from somewhere ahead of us, but the shadows and steam from the sewers makes it impossible for me to see the source. It's moist and very chilly, but Faith is walking silently beside me and I can sense a faint warmth emanating from her. It's comforting.

An unpleasant smell of rotting garbage assaults our noses as we approach an open dumpster. We exchange a look, both having felt the familiar tingling sensation down our spines that indicate the presence of something undead. I'm about to signal what I think we should do, but don't even have the time to raise my hand before Faith leaps up and takes a headfirst dive into the dumpster.

I'm torn between a sigh, a smile and an exasperated curse when movement behind the dumpster chases all other speculations from my mind. Instinctively I move forward; there's a vampire all right. But not in the dumpster.

She rushes out from her hiding place in the shadows between the dumpster and the alley wall, taking a direct lunge at me. I easily sidestep, grabbing her as she passes and using her own momentum to slam her into the opposite wall. Just then I notice additional movement out of the corner of my eye further down the alley.

"Faith!" I call out. "If you're not too busy playing dumpster-diver, would you get your ass out of there and lend me a hand?"

I hear something mumbled in reply, but am distracted by the vampire from earlier having recovered enough from her wall-kissing to advance on me and launch a lucky blow that is hard enough to make my head spin.

"Be right there, B!" Faith has in the meantime leapt out of the dumpster and sweeps by me, heading straight for the place I detected movement seconds earlier. My opponent uses my momentary distraction to get in another punch, and I decide to get back in the game before she gets any ideas as to how this is going to end.

Left, right, knee in the groin, uppercut and stake. The vamp's no more, but she did manage to leave a gross amount of dust on my brown suede jacket. That's just unforgivable. Before I can contemplate it further, a noise behind me makes me spin, stake raised, only to lower it a split second later.

It's Faith of course.

"So ya got it?" she says matter-of-factly, busy brushing off dust. "Got mine, too. Ugly son of a bitch, I tell ya-what?" She looks at me inquiringly, realizing that I've been staring intently at her. "Do I have somethin' in my teeth?"

"Actually," I can't stop the grin from spreading on my face as I close the distance between us, reach out and remove a few pieces of have-seen-better-days lettuce from her hair, "it's not so much your teeth that's the problem."

Day – Points of View

"Ya hilarious, B," she scoffs and rolls her eyes, but to my surprise doesn't move and allows me to remove what appears to have been a once fine Caesar salad from her long dark hair.

I give her a smile, "That's what acting rash will do to you." She shrugs in response, but does look a little embarrassed.

"Just miscalculated, is all. Could happen to anyone."

I give her another smile and I get a small grin in return. That's when I realize my hand is still entangled in her hair, no longer picking out dinner leftovers, but gently stroking the back of her head. Faith seems to realize it, too, at that moment because the look in her eyes changes ever so slightly, but too subtly for me to be able to read. I suddenly feel strange. I feel like I'm frozen to the ground unable to move and as much as it freaks me out, I'm well aware part of me doesn't want me to either. In fact, my hand seems to be the only thing left under my control as it continues to caress her hair and occasionally neck, carefully but without hesitation.

The look in Faith's eyes is no longer subtle, it's bordering on an all-consuming fire and I instinctively knows she's searching for something in my gaze to decide her next line of action. And then apparently, she sees it.

I know what's going to happen before she even moves and I close my eyes in anticipation or sheer reflex just before I feel Faith's lips softly touch upon mine half a heartbeat later. They're incredibly soft, softer than any lips I've ever kissed before. She presses a little harder now, her hands settling gently on my hips, pulling me slowly but insistently against her. I allow her, letting out a small gasp when I feel her tongue tease my lips, her desire unspoken but clear.

Without conscious knowledge, or so I later tell myself, my right hand slips down to her neck, holding her close in our kiss, while my left begins to tentatively caress her leather clad back. She moans against my lips and I feel a hot surge through my entire being. My knees go strangely weak and my head begins to spin even faster than when the vampire punched me, causing confusion and fear to suddenly announce their presence. The need to push Faith away floods my mind. I desperately need a timeout, but instead I part my lips slightly and she doesn't hesitate, easing her tongue into my mouth, intent on devouring me from inside.

The heat I sensed earlier is now coming off of her in waves and I absently wonder if she detects the same from me, but then I lose all thought as she starts to lightly suck on my tongue, pushing her thigh against me. I press against her as I part my legs just a fraction, she presses back against me. I swallow a choked moan, unsure if it's coming from her or from me.

The lack of air is making me dizzy, but I forget about it as her hand slips up underneath my jacket, touching the material of my top.

And then I wake up.

Drenched in sweat, face down in my pillow, with the covers tangled between my legs.

Faith's POV:

Day – Points of View

I block deftly, about to deliver a smartass comment followed by a nasty deep-set punch, when my legs are swept away from under me and I land hard on my ass instead. Damn, he's annoying. I look up and he's grinning down at me while slowly backing away, out of reach for any retaliatory moves. Damn, he's not only annoying but knows me too well.

"Faith, concentrate please."

I hear Giles' world-weary voice coming from behind me but ignore it, too engrossed in finding a way to kick the crap and then some out of his son.

His son, yeah. That blond, grinning, scrawny - but way cute - wannabe-Watcher currently besting me in one-on-one combat is Giles' son.

Don't know who was the most surprised, me or G-man. I'd left L.A. to catch a much-needed break from...well, Cordelia mainly, and somehow ended up in England. Once there, I decided to pay Giles a visit, slightly worried as to how he'd react. But I hadn't needed to bother. He was freaked out way before I got there. Turns out he had a one-night-stand years ago while he was still in college. In the 'Ripper' era. Turns out that it resulted in a child he didn't know about for twenty-five years. Turns out that the child grew up and came looking for him. Turns out- Fuck it!

He's just nailed me again and I'm starting to feel pissed. He's not as strong, not as fast, not as tough or has as much endurance as me - goes without sayin' really - but he's damn good nonetheless. He's got about three or four black belts in various kick-ass genres, but that's not why he's puttin' up such a good fight against me. It's because he reads me. It's like he knows where I'll attack before I even know it myself and he's takin' full advantage of it. I hate it. I don't hate him, although he pisses me off a lot - father like son and all - I only hate that he anticipates my every friggin' move. It's almost like fighting with B. Without the Slayer strength of course, or the frenzied pace.

Or the pain. Or the hatred.

Laken - yeah, that's his name, fuckin' queer, I know. Whatever his mum was on at the time I want some - doesn't look at me with hatred in his eyes. Not even when I do finally pull my act together, start concentrating, and throw him across the room or nail him against the wall; he's always got a kinda genuine laugh in his eyes. Like he's having a good time.

With me.

I don't see that look a lot in other people's eyes. Angel's, yeah, but he's hardly 'people'. Cordelia tolerates me because Angel has told her to, while Wes mainly ignores me and Fred and Gunn just hover around. And Connor... Don't get me started on that one. It doesn't suck, but it could be better. Of course any of their looks are better than the ones B shoots me. Or shot, as I haven't seen her for a while. Not since Sunnydale was sucked into the Hellmouth and we all went our merry ways after avoiding yet another world apocalypse. Last I heard she was in 'Frisco, would probably have chosen L.A. if I hadn't been there. But- aargh! All right, that's it! I'll have to kill him now.

That was my original Black Album Metallica t-shirt he just tore.

Day – Points of View

Giles' POV:

He's so graceful. I know it's a sentimental, trite and sappy thing to think, but he is. My Son. Laken Giles Sebastian. My very own flesh and blood.

Oh.

The very same blood that is as of now oozing from his nose - courtesy Faith.

"Be so kind as not to hurt him too much, Faith."

I know it hurt him when I had to confess I had no recollection of his mother. He tried to hide it, but I could tell. I sought to explain that a lot of things were different back then; that I was going through a difficult time, drinking, smoking and inhaling too much, but it still hurt him. Heck, I don't blame him, I would have given anything to be able to tell him something, say something about her, me and our time together. But it would have been a lie.

"Retreat, Laken! Retreating's always good. No shame in that."

Time together. It was a one-night-stand. No more, no less. And he knows that. As much as he would like for it to have been, and mean, more, that's what it was and we're both clear on that. Iris. I didn't even remember her name before he told me. Wonder if I knew back then?

Iris, the mother of my child. My only child. My son. I didn't know. For twenty-five years I didn't know. And if she hadn't been dying, she wouldn't have told him and I still wouldn't know. Is it fair to hate the dead?

"No sharp objects, Faith! I'm not going to tell you again!"

He's tall, handsome, I think, and he looks like me and it's not just selfish wishful thinking. Even Faith has commented on it, saying we have the same exasperated smile and superior air that just gets her itching to hit something or someone. But she said it with a grin, thankfully. I've been a father for less than two months and am already trying to make up for more than two decades of absence and neglect. Just glad it doesn't involve protecting him against a pissed-off Slayer. My body has barely healed from my last outing to the now extinct Sunnydale.

Not that Faith would hurt him, more than she already does when they're training that is; she likes him even if he drives her nuts by being so well prepared, always one step ahead of the game. I'm proud of him. I don't really know him, but I can appreciate a good fight so I'm proud of him. Actually I'm afraid where that may lead. If I start loving him, it'll be like with Buffy all over again and I don't know if I can handle that. Again.

"Let him go now, Faith, training's over and you know his leg's not supposed to bend that way."

Buffy's POV:

So, here I am, going to England. And not because I want to. Angel sent me. Apparently he's in contact with Giles - seems like they talk a whole lot more than Giles and I do, but I'm not

Day – Points of View

gonna be upset about that - and apparently hell's breaking loose over there. Makes a change. Or not. Guess since Sunnydale went to hell in a hand- basket, all the evil forces had to find another location to feast. Guess England's as good a place as the next one. I don't mind really, it's been almost a year since I last battled truly great evil and a girl has needs. God, that sounded gross, but it's true. I do need the action, I do need the fight to feel alive and appreciated, I need the adrenaline rush and the-umm-free drinks. Gotta love first class!

Is it just me, or does a gin & tonic taste better the closer you get to London? We're almost there now, circling the airport, waiting for permission to descend, and I can almost make myself believe that I can feel her. Of course I know she's there. Angel and then Giles told me that much. Why she's there, however, I can't fathom; perhaps she instinctively knew I'd be going and decided to get there first to screw with my mind? Okay, I know I'm being paranoid. You would be, too, if you'd had Faith happening to you. Hey, that rhymed!

It's not that I really hate her anymore. Not after she helped me out with that pesky First Evil problem. She really came through for me there, I admit it. I just never wanted to see her ever again. Didn't think it was too much to hope for. Guess the other kind of fate hasn't been paying attention.

I've convinced myself it'll be all right. Giles will be there and I'm extremely anxious to see him again. Even though he's not my Watcher any more, or has been for a long time, he's still the one I turn to and depend on when the going gets tough. And it pretty much always does. I know he wants me to manage on my own, but I also know that he'll never be able to back off or walk out of my life completely. We've been through too much together for that to happen. And I doubt anyone of us would allow it to happen either way. But why she has to be there...?

We left things on a pretty well footing. She apologized, she kicked evildoer ass and she went back to L.A. I listened, didn't punch her, much, and forgave. More or less.

I can appreciate someone working for forgiveness and redemption as much as the next one - I'd hardly be in contact with Angel if I couldn't - but there's just something about Faith that irks me. Always has. I guess it just gets a little too close to home occasionally.

Not that I'd ever admit to anything of the sort. They probably all know anyway. I turn to look at Willow in the seat next to me, she's fast asleep. Xander, on the other hand, is busy flagging down a stewardess to get one more free drink before landing. He grins at me and I smile back. They insisted they come with me, saying they missed Giles as much as I do - which is true - but mainly because I know they want to look out for me and watch my back. They always have, even if I haven't always appreciated it or at times even resented them for it. They've had so many opportunities to say 'screw you' and leave, but they never have. Not without quickly coming back afterwards anyway. They must know I need them. Perhaps it's time I tell them more often.

We're descending now; I can see the runway approaching fast and feel the downward surge in my gut. And then I feel something else.

I can't believe Giles sent her to pick us up.

Willow's POV:

Day – Points of View

We're all jetlagged and antsy, especially Buffy. I'm glad we didn't have problems getting through customs or I think someone would have gotten hurt. Good thing Buffy left her arsenal back in San Francisco, certain items are difficult to explain. Like the double-headed battleaxe she's been favouring lately. We left Kennedy and Dawn in charge of the slaying back home. Dawn was excited whereas Kennedy wasn't too happy about having to stay behind, but I made sure to make up for it the night before we left. She may not be a happy camper, but she's not an unsatisfied one. I grin to myself, then turn to say something to Buffy, but she's frozen mid-step, staring directly ahead of her.

Oh God, here we go...

I turn to look in the same direction as Buffy and I see Faith, casually leaning against the wall. The expression on her face is the usual devil-may-care, but her eyes give her away. I could have seen the apprehension from miles away.

She looks good. I notice she can still pull off wearing leather pants. As we approach, she moves away from the wall, absentmindedly crossing and uncrossing her arms as if unsure what to do with them. That's the problem with wearing pants that tight, no pockets to speak of when you need them. She smiles hesitantly, looking at Xander and at me, all the while shooting not-so furtive glances at Buffy.

"Flight okay?"

"Bloody brilliant, mate!" Xander exclaims in the god-awful British accent he's been torturing Buffy and me with since the news of our journey. "Free drinks galore!" He takes a step forward and puts out his hand, Faith smiles gratefully and shakes it vigorously. I follow suit and receive a smile as well. Then we all turn to Buffy.

She blinks quickly as if suddenly returning from wherever place her mind just took her and shakes her head lightly, putting on a small smile.

"Faith."

"B."

And with that I guess the heartfelt greetings are over for now, because in an unspoken agreement we simultaneously begin to sidle toward the exit, Faith leading the way and us following closely behind. Buffy's still looking thoughtful.

Faith's POV:

Well, I guess that went okay. No insults or punches exchanged. That must count as a success. Of course if looks could kill...Nah, I'll be fair. It really wasn't that bad, she merely looked as if she'd found somethin' mildly unpleasant in her drink and that's probably one of the better looks I've received from her in a long time. In a very long time. And she did smile. Or was that a muscle spasm?

We're driving in Giles' rather nifty sports car, Red's in the front with me and B and Xander are cooped up in the back. No words are spoken, but the tension is palpable. I can see the white of Red's knuckles where she's gripping onto the side handle.

Day – Points of View

All right, so I haven't quite gotten the whole driving-on-the-left- side part down yet, but there's really no need to mutter protection spells like that. It's kinda insulting actually. I catch B's eyes in the rear-view mirror. Oh yeah, that was totally a smile I just got. Tiny, but still a-

"Faith! Eyes on the road! Eyes on the road!" Red shrieks, hiding her own eyes behind her hands.

Whoops.

"Sorry," I grin bashfully, making a large swerve to avoid the truck ahead. "Don't worry, Will, everything's under control."

"Uh-huh," She only says, her eyes remaining hidden.

I risk a glance back at B, but she's looking out of the window now, seemingly lost in thought. I sigh inwardly.

Giles' POV:

I'm already waiting in the driveway when they pull up at the curb. And no, I didn't have some supernatural premonition telling me they were getting close, I simply heard Faith turn the corner on screeching tyres.

Why do you think I wasn't in the airport to greet them? Exactly. I have a son now, life's dear to me. Speaking of Laken, he's coming up behind me, peering curiously over my shoulder. I can tell he's excited about their arrival.

He already knows about me, about the others and the things we've done. Couldn't really hide the fact that Faith was something else when she suddenly turned up on my doorstep, and I didn't want to lie to him either. Besides, he's got the gene; that pesky little Watcher gene that automatically makes him a target and puts him in danger from anyone who's opposed to the Slayer and Watcher arrangement. That's actually a rather large quantity of the undead - and occasionally living - population of the world. That's why I'm having him stay here with me for a while; I want him to be aware of all the repercussions this new life can bring with it. At first he outright refused, claiming university responsibilities, independence, being able to take care of himself and what not, but I know the main reason is that he hasn't decided yet what to make of me. Whether he resents me or is happy to have found a father. To be honest, I haven't quite decided what to make of him either.

However, where the Watcher/Slayer issue is concerned, he seems pretty unperturbed by it all, but then again, he's only had Faith's war stories to relate to. He has still to experience it for real himself. I desperately hope it'll never come to that, but my instinct and experience tell me otherwise. Life's never that simple.

The car doors are practically thrown open and I see Willow and Xander scramble out in a great hurry. Both of them a considerably paler complexion than when I saw them last. I hear Laken snicker beside me. He had the pleasure of first introducing Faith to driving on the left. That's why he wasn't in the airport either.

Day – Points of View

"G-man!" Xander exclaims, stumbling towards me and throwing his arms around me in an exaggerated hug. "I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life! Please tell me the nightmare's over."

"The nightmare's over, Xander," I oblige with a smile as I pat his back, looking past him at Buffy who's making her way towards me, a huge smile spreading on her face. By God, I've missed her!

"Save some for the rest of us." She quips good-naturedly, pulling Xander away from me so she can take his place in my arms. I'm near tears as I hold her. Must be turning into a sentimental old sod these days.

Willow's POV:

Dinner's great, although not much is actually being eaten. We're all too busy being jetlagged or catching up to have time to eat. Drinking, however, is another matter. Isn't it always?

It was tense at first, but the tension quickly got mixed up with shock and curiosity when Giles casually mentioned that the blond, blue-eyed hunk standing next to him was his son. Could have knocked me over with a feather and I think Buffy forgot to breathe for a few minutes. Xander was - and is - just ecstatic about the revelation, delighting in the extra testosterone that has been injected into our little group. I swear, he's looking at Laken the way he used to look at Buffy. And Cordelia. And Faith. And Anya, but let's not go there.

Giles had Laken tell the story and I couldn't help but watch him as Laken related the events of the past few months, seeing the myriad of emotions crossing his face. Regret, sadness, joy and... love? Wonder if Buffy noticed it, too, but she must have. Would've taken a blind man not to.

However, I think they'll be all right. I was anxious at first - knowing how Buffy handles any kind of competition, emotionally or otherwise - but I could see the look on her face soften when he told us about his mother. Iris was her name. She died from cancer three months ago and he's spent the better part of the last year nursing her at home. At least Joyce went quickly. I shudder slightly and see Buffy do the same.

It wasn't until she was at death's door that she finally relented and told her son about his father. She always refused to talk about it before and Laken had gradually resigned himself to the fact that he would never know. Whether it was guilt or a last minute effort to have no unresolved issues between them, Laken didn't know, but she had told him and he was glad about that. I can tell Giles is glad about it, too.

Buffy's POV:

It's almost too much. No, fuck that, it is too much! First Faith, then Laken. I don't know how to handle all of this. Preferably I'd get up and flee the house in search of the nearest cemetery, stake in one hand, Jack Daniels in the other, but I can't do that to Giles. I turn a little and can tell Faith feels the same way, but for different reasons altogether. She's just bored out of her mind, eyes distant, the drink in her hand halfway forgotten.

Day – Points of View

In only lasts a few seconds, though, then she snaps back to reality and looks straight at me. She could feel me watching her. Our eyes lock for a moment and it is as if a silent exchange is passing between us because she suddenly stands up.

"Think it's time for a little slaying, G-man. As gripping as this reunion is, it ain't going keep the vamps from gettin' down and dirty tonight." She turns to me and looks at me pointedly. "Wanna come, B?"

I'm already out of my seat, sending apologetic smiles all around as I breeze past them and out of the house.

"Do be careful!" Giles barely has time to shout before the front door slams shut behind us.

Faith's POV:

We've walked in a relatively comfortable silence for a few minutes when Buffy says almost inaudibly, "Thanks."

I smile to myself. "No problem, B." I don't have to ask what she's referring to, I'm surprised any of the others didn't notice by the amount of squirming she was doing in her chair. Can't blame her really, it was overwhelming. First me and then the whole deal with Laken. Woulda blown me outta the water, too, if I'd been her. But I'm not and never have been, except, of course, for the time when- whoa, wrong line of thought, stoppin' right here.

"So," I start hesitantly, searching for something to say to bridge the suddenly mounting tension between us. "How ya been?"

Out of the corner of my eye I see her shrug, "Oh, you know...slaying and stuff."

That's not what I wanted to hear. I know she's been slaying because that's what we do, what I wanted to know is how she has been. How she's been feeling and thinking and everything in between since we last saw each other. But I don't say that. I just say, "Cool." And we continue walking.

"This is usually a good place." I say a few minutes later, as we pause in front of the gothic looking gate that marks the entrance into Chesterfield Cemetery. "Lots of newbies runnin' around."

She only nods and I can feel her silence starting to really bug me as we swiftly climb the fence, taking out our stakes the moment our feet hit the soft, moist grass. I can't decide whether it's my presence or the news about Laken that's affecting her so much. Probably a combination.

Suffice to say, I pity any vampire we run into tonight.

And I'm dead on. I barely get to see any action at all as B practically shoves me away every time, throwing herself at whatever comes our way. I don't really mind that much, I had a good night's slaying yesterday and I've always liked to watch B kick the crap out of the undead. Better than late night wrestling on TV in my opinion. At first I stay on my toes, though, ready

Day – Points of View

to jump in should it become necessary, but after a while I relax against a headstone, reaching into my leather jacket to fish out a cigarette.

"Smoking's bad for you, Faith." B whirls past me, snatching the cigarette from my lips before I can even light it and tosses it away.

"Oh man! That was my last one!" I complain, but only half-heartedly as I can't help but grin.

"Good." B says with emphasis, staking the poor vamp below her and leaping to her feet. She turns to me and is about say something when she's tackled from behind by another vampire.

"It's mind bogglin' really," I say, hoisting myself up to sit on the headstone as B proceeds to leisurely pummel her latest attacker, "that after watching you stake five of 'em already, there's always that last sucker who thinks they can take you despite all evidence of the contrary."

"Tell me about it!" Buffy gasps as she's thrown against the side of a crypt. She practically bounces off of it, her entire body connecting with the vampire's chest and bringing him down with her.

Struggling, struggling and...puff! No more vamp. It's too easy really.

B gets up, wiping vamp dust and grass from her jacket and jeans. She's all flushed and sweaty. She looks hot. I say so before I can stop myself.

To my surprise she just grins at me, looking genuinely pleased. "Thanks-look out! Behind you!"

I've already ducked, feeling the whoosh of air from the punch that went straight over my head. I sigh and reluctantly slide down the headstone, guess I'll have to work a bit tonight after all.

Xander's POV:

Laken's awesome. He gets my jokes! And he laughs at them! Really, he does! Most of them at least. He can get all Gilesy and look at me like he's dissecting something strange under a microscope, but most of the time it's like having found a long lost brother. A better looking, smarter, British-accent-speaking long lost brother, but still. I love Buffy, Will, Dawn and all, but sometimes the pms-vibes get just a little too high.

I've been entertaining him with Slayer stories since the two actual Slayers left to patrol and he appears to have been listening. Willow was on the phone with Kennedy and then went to bed shortly afterwards and Giles hovered for a while in the background before going to bed as well. So now he's all mine.

Ew. Not like that.

But it's fun. I've never really had another guy to hang out with like this. Oz and I did a little, but then that became all awkward and even after he and Will got back together, we never really picked up the thread before he left. And since then there's really only been undead guys to hang around and bond with, and even I haven't been that desperate. I prefer company with a heartbeat. And yes, I'm including Riley in this.

Day – Points of View

"So... witches, werewolves, demons, vampires, Slayers and near-death experiences have pretty much been part of your life for close to a decade?"

I nod importantly as Laken continues to study me, speaking slowly, "Fascinating." I smile modestly and begin telling him about the time I single-handedly stopped a gang of zombies from blowing up Sunnydale High. It's such a great story.

Giles' POV:

We're all pretty bleary-eyed at the breakfast table the next morning. Faith's yawning repeatedly without even bothering to hide it and Buffy's not faring much better. But at least she's attempting to be discreet. Laken and Xander both have dark circles around the eyes and I'm not surprised as I heard them talking in the kitchen for most of the night. In a way it was nice, listening to their voices and indirectly getting to know Laken a little better that way. He and Xander are sharing a room, Buffy and Willow have the other guestroom and Faith's sleeping on the living room couch, so my house is pretty crowded. But I'd be lying if I said I don't enjoy the life and spectacle around me.

The only one who appears to have had a decent night's sleep is Willow, who's babbling happily about some cereal product or other. I reach for the coffeepot, but am beaten to it by Faith who raises an eyebrow and smirks innocently at me while pouring the last of the coffee into her own cup.

"Sorry, G-man, you wanted that?"

"Actually, I was just going to make tea." I reply with a dignified air, but then smile at the oh-so-innocent expression on her face. Buffy and Faith are not the only ones who have come a long way. At least I think they have. They haven't spoken much this morning, too wrapped up in being tired or grumpy, but I can feel that the tension between them from last night is very nearly gone. Must have been a good night's workout.

I clear my throat and simultaneously all look up at me. "Well, I think it's time I tell you all why I've asked you to come here." I can see fatigue being replaced by interest in five pairs of eyes.

"The basics are this: at the next new moon, which is a week away for those of you who don't know, a cult of vampires is attempting to resurrect an old shaman who was sacrificed at Stonehenge approximately 1400 years ago. The shaman in question isn't particularly evil - not by our standards anyway - but he's tremendously powerful. Once resurrected, their plan is to force him to perform a ritual that will allow them to walk the earth during the day."

"Like a super protective sun screen?" Xander offers helpfully and I nod a little wearily. "Yes, Xander, something like that."

"Vampires in broad daylight?" Buffy sounds sceptical, happily munching on a roll. "How interesting. Is that really possible?"

I take off my glasses, they are in dire need of a good cleaning, and say simply, "No reason to wait around to find out, is there?"

Day – Points of View

I notice various degrees of shrugging and eye-rolling around the table as they start taking interest in their breakfast again. Not quite the reaction I was hoping for. "Really, I assure you, this is a serious matter that requires all of our attention?"

"Sure, Giles, we got it. Evil shaman hijinks." Buffy smiles distractedly, reaching for another roll. "Vamps getting a tan, big bad."

I'm about to point out the deeper aspects of this matter when Faith interrupts me. "Really, G, it does sound a little...ya know, minor?" She stuffs an entire croissant into her mouth - much to my disgust - and proceeds to speak with her mouth full. "It's nod loike we haben't don stuff like thad befor."

Willow's POV:

I feel almost sorry for Giles, but even I find it hard to take the threat seriously. With all the hellish creatures we have faced, defeating a shaman and a cult of vampires sounds positively lightweight.

Out of loyalty I attempt to offer him some moral support. "Well, you know it really could be very dangerous. Not-not, in a First Evil, Glory, end-of-the-world and it's gonna be painful kind of way dangerous, but in a still very dangerous way. Vamps during the day. Uh... bad..." I look to Giles, but he doesn't seem too impressed by my contribution.

"Day or night, what's the difference?" Faith's clearly not impressed either, reaching across the table to grab an apple. "All it means is a little more work for me and B." She halts abruptly, frowning as if just realizing the thought doesn't really appeal to her. And I'm right. Settling back on her chair she says, "Ya know, B, that might actually turn out to be bit of a drag. Always slayin', never havin' time to enjoy yourself." Buffy arcs a knowing eyebrow at Faith who relents with a small crooked grin. "All right, enjoy yourself in _other_ ways than slayin'."

Buffy nods, still unconcerned, "That's true. As much as a little slaying every night keeps a girl all young and chipper, doing it every night and then again after sunrise would undoubtedly cause some split ends." She leans back in her chair, putting her arms behind her head and gazes up at the ceiling. "So I guess we might as well nip this in the bud before Faith and I will be applying for early retirement."

The rest of us turn to look at Giles. He's clearly befuddled, cleaning his glasses so hard I fear they might break. "Yes, well, then... I guess that's settled. I... I appreciate your... your enthusiastic response." He rises with a pained look on his face and walks out into the kitchen. I can hear the kettle being filled.

Buffy's POV:

"So...?"

"So..."

It's one of the longest conversations Laken and I have had yet. I decide to remember my manners, do mom proud, so I add a softly spoken, "Well..."

Day – Points of View

"Indeed."

Damn, Laken can play this game as good as the next one. Well, he would, wouldn't he? Being Giles' son.

Giles' son. It feels weird just thinking it, wonder how I'll do once I actually have to say it out loud. Am I jealous? Yes, but that's not what bothers me most. I do feel a little threatened, but I know I'll always have an important place in Giles' heart; nothing can change that. No, it's the sadness I feel that's really getting to me. I can't explain why I feel it or for who it is I feel sad. Knowing me, it probably will turn out to be for myself eventually, but right now I just feel melancholic and sad. It's like I've lost something dear to me.

"So he was your Watcher?"

He startles me, but I decide to give him credit for taking the first step. "Yes. And friend." Don't know why I threw that bit of information in there, too, but it felt important somehow.

"What about this one?" This time we're both startled by Willow who sweeps into view, turning coquettishly before us as she treats us to the sight of the latest skirt she's trying on.

"It's nice." Laken offers.

I decide to top him. "It's very nice, Will."

"Just like the seven other nearly identical skirts you've already tried on." Laken mutters under his breath, but Willow has already disappeared back into the changing room.

It's a testament to just how troubled my mind is that I'm currently in a London fashion boutique on Oxford Street without the slightest desire to do any browsing and shopping. Laken doesn't want to be there either, but Willow and I made him accompany us.

Faith wanted to drive. Enough said.

"Will this be much longer?"

I take quick stock of the surroundings; Willow's just discovered a new rack with skirts, Faith is alternately holding up a pair of light brown, dark brown and black leather pants, utter concentration on her face, and Xander is leaning across the glass counter, practically drooling into the cleavage of the tense looking shop assistant.

I turn to Laken. "Might be a while."

We both sigh.

We stand in silence for a moment, side by side, arms crossed, watching Faith and Willow slip in and out of the changing rooms in various states of undress. If I'm not much mistaken, Laken is somewhat less bored now. Xander joins our ranks shortly afterwards. He's definitely not bored.

Day – Points of View

He nudges Laken in the side. "Look at that?! Is that outfit legal?" He's referring to, of course, Faith. To my great surprise Laken ignores him and turns to me instead, saying out of the blue, sincerity in his voice, "It's been good meeting you, Buffy, Giles has told me so much about you. I'd like for us to get to know each other better."

I blink, thrown at first, wondering briefly if he's coming on to me, but then I see the look in his eyes and smile. A little hesitantly to start with then wider and say with genuine warmth, "Thank you, Laken, I'd like that, too."

Xander's POV:

That. Just. Can't. Be. Legal!

Is it hot in here?

Faith's POV:

I'm sharing a much needed cigarette with Laken outside Giles' house. Damn mister look-I've-got-a-stick-up-my-ass is making us smoke outside in the garden. Throws a hissyfit if we light up in the house. It's a really nice evening, though, quiet and warm with the occasional bird singing. Pure Kodak moment. Me and B will be off slaying soon, but until then it's great to just kick back in pleasant company.

"So..." I exhale slowly, studying the pale spiral of smoke ascending the heavens. "The verdict?"

"Thumbs up all around." Is Laken's languid response, patiently waiting for me to pass the cigarette back to him. "A vision to behold."

We're talking about my new leather pants. They're tight I'm tellin' ya, but not too tight to accommodate a nice swift roundhouse-kick. I know, cuz I tested it in the shop. Shop assistant wasn't happy.

"Five by five then?" For some reason, Laken really detests that expression so naturally I have to use it every chance I get.

He hesitates for only half a heartbeat before saying, "They're... worthy of instant approval."

Laken and me get along really well. We both don't use any more words than necessary and there's none of that tension between us that always seems to be between me and practically everyone else. The slate between us is clean. Also, ever since the rest of the gang arrived, we've both been a bit on the outside, a bit like outsiders. Me, because of my past with them; him, because of not having one.

I look at him as he stares toward something in the distance, blue eyes very faraway and thoughtful. He's really cute, an intriguing combination of rugged rebel and British nerdiness. Sounds odd, I know, but it's true. A tattooed bookworm with a stubble, wearing leather and contacts. A bit like Wesley, but a cool one. I'm not gonna make any moves on him, though. Not just because the G-man in not so many words told me he would spend the rest of his life hunting my sorry ass down if I did, but because we're friends. And that's more important to

Day – Points of View

me than a quick roll in the hay nowadays. It might come as a surprise to some, but I don't have that many friends so I've decided not to jeopardize things with the ones I do have. Hey, whaddya know! Sometimes you do learn from your mistakes.

Besides, there's something else standing in the way as well.

Her.

We only shared that one kiss in a dark alley such a very long time ago, but I can still persuade myself that I can recall every sensation. Every taste, every mingled breath, every hesitant touch.

It blew me away back then, but still I'm dying to feel it again.

Hmm... Maybe you don't learn from your mistakes after all.

I'm convinced B hasn't forgotten about it either, although I can imagine she's spent a lot of time trying to do just that. It's not as if she's ever as much as remotely touched upon the subject, but sometimes - it's rare I admit - but sometimes there's this look in her eyes when she looks at me that can't help but make me wonder.

And then I wonder if she wonders, too.

Giles' POV:

I'm reading up on Rhoathgar, the shaman the vampire cult is intending to resurrect. Even if the others haven't quite grasped the gravity of the situation, there's no reason why I should let their laissez faire attitude affect my own preparations. Apparently he was a very colourful man, enjoyed skinning people alive. A lot. It always has to be so crude, doesn't it?

We briefly considered, well I briefly considered, if we should just kill the vampires before the new moon, but it was decided that we might as well get rid of the shaman while we're there or some other cult might attempt to do it later when we've all gone our separate ways again.

Our separate ways.

Aren't things supposed to get easier the more you do it?

"They've gone to patrol now, said they'd be back in a couple of hours."

I look up to see Laken stand in the doorway, a crumbled pack of cigarettes in his hand. I frown. He grins. "Xander and I are going out, Willow might be coming, too." He hesitates, "You care to join us?"

I'm touched, and surprised, even though I can't tell how much of is truly sincere and how much is him being polite. It's hard to tell with British people, I should know, as Buffy has informed me of that fact repeatedly the past seven plus years.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I think I'll stay here and continue my research. It might seem trivial to you, but someone has to do it."

Day – Points of View

I honestly didn't mean it as a reproach, but he shuffles a little uncomfortably, looking slightly ashamed. "Well, yes, about that... If you want, I can help you with it when I get back." He scratches his cheek thoughtfully as he inspects the various books and drawings laid out on the desk in front of me, "Might be fun."

I smile, hoping he can tell I'm being sincere, "I would appreciate that very much. As the saying goes, two minds work better than one." Frankly, I don't have that much reading left and could be done in an hour or so, but I decide to postpone it until he gets back. With all the people in the house, all of them a whole lot more interesting than me I'm sure, I haven't had much time alone with Laken lately. At least I hope that's the explanation and not that he's actively avoiding me.

"Okay then, I'll be going now. Don't work too hard." He throws an inscrutable smile my way then disappears out into the corridor, yelling for Xander to get his lazy arse off of the couch and come join him before hell freezes over.

My son. The diplomat.

I must encourage him to spend less time with Faith.

Buffy's POV:

It's a slow night. Very slow. We did run into a weird looking frog thingy demon when we entered the park, but since then there has been no action whatsoever. It's a toss up whether I'm pleased or disappointed. Faith, however, has no such qualms, complaining loudly about the lack of undead activity.

"It's not like I'm askin' much, is it?" She looks at me, gesturing dramatically. "I risk my neck every night and do you hear me complainin' 'bout it?" I'm about to open my mouth to reply, but she shoots me a look and continues, "No, you don't. In rain or snow, I'm always out there kicking ass. But when you really need to let off some steam..."

I ponder briefly as she rants on if I should point out that with most of her time as a Slayer being spent in California, the amount of snow she's been dealing can hardly amount to a lot more than one Christmas night several years ago, but I decide it isn't worth the effort. I smile to myself as I recall that Christmas, it was a simpler time back then. Even with Angel's I'm-evil-and-have-to-kill-myself act it was a beautiful night. It was just before everything turned really ugly.

I throw a surreptitious glance at Faith who's still grumbling though somewhat less agitated. She was the cause of all the ugliness, she- I stop myself. No, that's not true. She became the loaded gun in a room without exits, but I would still have been able to put the safety back on if I'd acted differently. But I didn't.

It's taken me a long time facing up to any kind of responsibility for the whole sordid affair and her behaviour after waking from the coma made any further soul searching seem irrelevant. But that was then.

They all insist she's changed, especially Angel, and I trust his judgement. Besides, I know it's true. True remorse and regrets are hard to feign for more than a few hours before it gets old

Day – Points of View

and she's not that good an actor. She never was; I have always been capable of reading her in ways that I'm pretty sure no one else ever could. It's a Slayer thing, I guess. Only problem is, I suspect it works both ways.

"Hey, B! Where diddy go?" I'm brought back to the present by Faith's hand waving me in the face. "Earth to B! Any extra terrestrials out there lookin' for trouble?"

"Cut it out, Faith," I slap her hand gently away from my face. "I was just thinking."

"What about?"

Her question catches me off guard and it takes me a moment before I can answer, "Oh, you know, the usual, evil shaman, cultic vampires and such."

She crosses her arms, raising an eyebrow, "Uh-huh."

We stand like this for a while, only about a foot apart. Talk about my being able to read her, right now I don't have the foggiest clue as to what she's thinking and the look in her eyes isn't helping.

But then it changes.

"Look, B, if there's somethin' you want to say to me, somethin' we should talk about this time's as good as any."

I nod slowly in agreement.

"So is there?" she asks with more patience than I thought her capable of.

"Yes," I practically whisper. "But I don't know what yet." Which is true. I don't.

She takes a deep breath before exhaling slowly and for a second I swear a look of disappointment flickers across her face, but then it's gone and she steps away from me, giving me a friendly albeit slightly resigned smile, "Okay, B, whenever you're ready." She turns around and starts to walk away and I suddenly feel very alone.

Willow's POV:

The music is pounding ferociously and most of the communication has been minimized to a yell in the ear or a meaningful look conveying various requests and responses. The place reminds me of the Bronze, and I get all nostalgic, except that it's slightly bigger and appears to have a decidedly smaller undead clientele.

I've been out dancing, first with Laken - who's a pretty good dancer when the mood strikes him, and it really didn't - and then Xander. I swear he's actually become more coordinated on the dance floor after losing an eye. I told him as much, and he just smiled. It felt great letting go a little, just moving with Xander and the music. After all we've been through. I think we deserve a bit of a break from time to time. The only thing that would make it better is if Kennedy was here; I miss her even if I don't let it on all that much. She's as different from Tara as she possibly could be and I think that's good. For the both of us. If I were to carry on

Day – Points of View

with a Tara- substitute, it wouldn't be fair on either of us. I sigh to myself, mentally counting down the days till I'll see Kennedy again. She gets so reckless when I'm not around.

It's past four in the morning when we emerge from the club, all three of us sweaty, far from sober and in the ultimate high spirits. Xander and Laken briefly debate where to go to grab something to eat, but I put my foot down, saying a girl needs her beauty sleep more than a soggy kebab. Xander's about to object when Laken suddenly changes his mind and agrees with me, stating we've been out long enough and should return back to Giles'. Xander relents with a shrug and we slowly walk down the dimly lit street, hands in pockets and all lost in thought.

The air is cool but not cold and the peace of quiet is pure balsam for my head after the noise explosion in the club. We've strolled leisurely for about twenty minutes when the first hesitant bird begins to sing delicately, quickly followed by a dozen or two of its nearest and dearest friends.

"You all right?"

Laken starts just the slightest, shouting me an unreadable look with those blue eyes of his, "Yeah sure. Why'd you ask?"

"It's just that you've been chain-smoking since we left the club," I answer, nodding at the newly lit cigarette between his middle and index finger. "What's that? Number fifteen?"

He does a patented guy-shrug, "Does it matter?"

It's obvious he's not in the mood to talk and I decide to let it go. It's not really any of my business anyway. I turn to glance behind us to check on Xander when Laken's voice draws my attention back to him, "It's just... You know, I promised I'd help him, but then I just lost track of time..."

He trails off and I rack my brain, trying to figure out who and what he's talking about. It occurs to me that this really only can involve Giles so I open my mouth, saying a little hesitantly, "I'm sure he'll understand."

Looks like I've hit the nail on its head because he abruptly turns to look at me intensely, "You think? Cos I don't want him to think I did it on purpose or anything." He looks straight ahead again, seemingly speaking to himself, "I wouldn't do that. Not now. Not to him."

I smile to myself before taking his arm and giving it a reassuring squeeze, "Don't worry about it, Laken, he'll understand. Giles' been dealing with the bunch of us for years, he's the master of understanding and forgiveness." I chuckle sadly and quietly, losing myself in the past, "He's had to be..."

"Hmm..." Laken replies noncommittally and I turn around to look at Xander, "Back me up here, Xan- Xander?"

There's absolutely no sign of him behind us. The street is empty and a faint mist swirling down the street and around our knees is making it difficult to distinguish what is real and

Day – Points of View

what is just shadows. A few leaves dance lazily in intricate patterns further away before the breeze moves on, ruffling our hair in a cold caress as it passes us by.

"Xander?" I call out cautiously, suddenly very aware that it's very early morning and we're completely and utterly alone. I reach out in my mind, but sense nothing.

"Are we in trouble?" Laken speaks softly beside me, exhaling quietly as he does so. I swallow, feeling cold sneak up on me from no discernible source. "I think we might just be..."

Buffy's POV:

The alley is one of your run of the mill spooky, dirty, bound-to-house-creatures-of-the-undead variety kind of alleys and Faith and I have our stakes out and ready even before we step into the shadows. I hear the gentle dripping of water from somewhere ahead of us, but the shadows and steam from the sewers makes it impossible for me to see the source. It's moist and very chilly, but Faith is walking silently beside me and I can sense a faint warmth emanating from her. It's comforting.

An unpleasant smell of rotting garbage assaults our noses as we approach an open dumpster. We exchange a look, both having felt the familiar tingling sensation down our spines that indicate the presence of something undead. I'm about to signal what I think we should do, but don't even have the time to raise my hand before Faith leaps up and takes a headfirst dive into the dumpster.

I'm torn between a sigh, a smile and an exasperated curse when movement behind the dumpster chases all other speculations from my mind. Instinctively I move forward; there's a vampire all right. But not in the dumpster.

She rushes out from her hiding place in the shadows between the dumpster and the alley wall, taking a direct lunge at me. I easily sidestep, grabbing her as she passes and using her own momentum to slam her into the opposite wall. Just then I notice additional movement out of the corner of my eye further down the alley.

"Faith!" I call out. "If you're not too busy playing dumpster-diver, would you get your ass out of there and lend me a hand?"

I hear something mumbled in reply, but am distracted by the vampire from earlier having recovered enough from her wall-kissing to advance on me and launch a lucky blow that is hard enough to make my head spin.

"Be right there, B!" Faith has in the meantime leapt out of the dumpster and sweeps by me, heading straight for the place I detected movement seconds earlier. My opponent uses my momentary distraction to get in another punch, and I decide to get back in the game before she gets any ideas as to how this is going to end.

Left, right, knee in the groin, uppercut and stake. The vamp's no more, but she did manage to leave a gross amount of dust on my brown suede jacket. That's just unforgivable. Before I can contemplate it further, a noise behind me makes me spin, stake raised, only to lower it a split second later.

Day – Points of View

It's Faith of course.

"So ya got it?" she says matter-of-factly, busy brushing off dust. "Got mine, too. Ugly son of a bitch, I tell ya-what?" She looks at me inquiringly, realizing that I've been staring intently at her. "Do I have somethin' in my teeth?"

"Actually," I can't stop the grin from spreading on my face as I close the distance between us, reach out and remove a few pieces of have-seen-better-days lettuce from her hair, "it's not so much your teeth that's the problem."

"Ya hilarious, B," she scoffs and rolls her eyes, but to my surprise doesn't move and allows me to remove what appears to have been a once fine Caesar salad from her long dark hair.

I give her a smile, "That's what acting rash will do to you." She shrugs in response, but does look a little embarrassed.

"Just miscalculated, is all. Could happen to anyone."

I give her another smile and I get a small grin in return. That's when I realize my hand is still entangled in her hair, no longer picking out dinner leftovers, but gently stroking the back of her head. Faith seems to realize it, too, at that moment because the look in her eyes changes ever so slightly, but too subtly for me to be able to read. I suddenly feel strange. I feel like I'm frozen to the ground unable to move and as much as it freaks me out, I'm well aware part of me doesn't want me to either. In fact, my hand seems to be the only thing left under my control as it continues to caress her hair and occasionally neck, carefully but without hesitation.

The look in Faith's eyes is no longer subtle, it's bordering on an all-consuming fire and I instinctively knows she's searching for something in my gaze to decide her next line of action. And then apparently, she sees it.

I know what's going to happen before she even moves and I close my eyes in anticipation or sheer reflex just before I feel Faith's lips softly touch upon mine half a heartbeat later. They're incredibly soft, softer than any lips I've ever kissed before. She presses a little harder now, her hands settling gently on my hips, pulling me slowly but insistently against her. I allow her, letting out a small gasp when I feel her tongue tease my lips, her desire unspoken but clear.

Without conscious knowledge, or so I later tell myself, my right hand slips down to her neck, holding her close in our kiss, while my left begins to tentatively caress her leather clad back. She moans against my lips and I feel a hot surge through my entire being. My knees go strangely weak and my head begins to spin even faster than when the vampire punched me, causing confusion and fear to suddenly announce their presence. The need to push Faith away floods my mind. I desperately need a timeout, but instead I part my lips slightly and she doesn't hesitate, easing her tongue into my mouth, intent on devouring me from inside.

The heat I sensed earlier is now coming off of her in waves and I absently wonder if she detects the same from me, but then I lose all thought as she starts to lightly suck on my tongue, pushing her thigh against me. I press against her as I part my legs just a fraction, she presses back against me. I swallow a choked moan, unsure if it's coming from her or from me.

Day – Points of View

The lack of air is making me dizzy, but I forget about it as her hand slips up underneath my jacket, touching the material of my top.

And then I wake up.

Drenched in sweat, face down in my pillow, with the covers tangled between my legs.
