

Kungai
by Helen Raven

a novel in six parts

Part One

Gunn and the other three men had been on patrol for nearly three hours when they headed into the back streets between Normandie and Western. Denker, with its row of peeling storefronts, wasn't usually part of their route, but they heard the sound of fighting from a block away. No problem figuring out where the sound must be coming from: the thrift shop in the middle of the block was the only store with any lights on.

"Grille's down. Looks like it's still padlocked."

"Must've got in through the back. Or it's a domestic."

As soon as they got close enough to see through the window, they knew it wasn't a domestic. There were at least six men in there, and they all knew how to fight. Looked to Gunn like they were set to kill each other – not to make the other side back off, choose another part of town, but to really make it final.

"Looks like business." They didn't come out on patrol to stop white thugs from breaking one another's necks. Not black thugs, neither, but make all the faces white like that, and Gunn wasn't even gonna wonder what the fight was about. "Nothing to -" Gunn was about to drive off when one of the men inside was thrown against the backing board for the window display. The board gave way, and then the man was sprawled on his back in the window, giving Gunn and his team their first clear view of any of the faces inside the store. It wasn't any kind of man there in the window: it was a vampire. Before Gunn and the other three could even draw breath for an exclamation, the vampire was a cloud of falling dust, staked with a speed and skill Gunn could hardly believe.

"Man!"

"We're on it!" The fight was about killing vampires - all Gunn and his men needed to know. Gunn put his foot to the gas and took them to the alley round the back. There was a convertible with both front doors left open, parked at an angle halfway along the alley. Gunn pulled up behind it, they leapt out of the truck and headed for the open door of the store two-by-two. They all knew the procedure, knew that the others knew it: Gunn had not needed to give a word of direction.

Jackson and Rondell were first in, took the nearest vampire, and Gunn and Taye took the next-nearest. Both vampires were gone in seconds, and Gunn and Taye were eager for their next vampire, but it seemed there were only two left and they were already taken. One was being kicked around the room by a large man, clearly a born fighter; it must have been one of those kicks that had sent that first vampire crashing through the board. The other vampire was backed against the counter that ran the length of the side-wall to Gunn's right, trying to find a way to deal with the swinging axe of a man who didn't look like he should be any kind of fighter. An accountant, he looked like, should be fussing over numbers at some desk. If the other guy was a born fighter, then this one was every skinny white guy with glasses who ever set your teeth on edge.

He was pretty good with that axe, though. It was a double-headed axe with a two-inch spike at the end, and Skinny McNumbers was using the spike to keep the vampire at a distance, keep it moving, wear it down with wound after wound, clearly waiting for his chance to take a swing at the vampire's neck without leaving himself open. He wasn't as good as Gunn would have been, though, or half of Gunn's crew. He didn't have the balance, and he didn't seem to know a chance when he saw it. Right there, after the jab to the shoulder. He should have switched the axe to his left hand, and then he could have -

He didn't have a left hand. The left sleeve of his white-white accountant's shirt was empty, folded up and pinned flat over the armhole. So that was the problem with the balance, that was why he was still waiting for his chance. Gunn asked himself how he had not seen that immediately, because now that empty sleeve seemed like the most noticeable thing in the room. Most of the time he couldn't even see it, because the man was facing the counter and Gunn could see only his back or his right side, but the knowledge of that absence drew all of Gunn's attention.

Taking on a nest of vampires with an axe when you were a skinny guy with glasses: that earned Gunn's respect even if you did turn out to be an accountant. But to go into battle with only one arm, even with your friend the fighter... Against

five vampires. That earned more than respect. Gunn was pretty sure of his own courage, but it would be a reach, it would be a big reach, to imagine himself with what this man was doing. OK, not Skinny McNumbers. Make it Skinny-and-Brave.

Gunn heard Fighter bring his vampire down, heard the strike of the stake, the sigh of disintegration. He didn't turn to look, determined not to miss a second of what was happening with the axe, but expecting Fighter to join in, bring the battle to a quick end. The vampire must have been expecting the same thing, because it suddenly ducked to the left, taking a deep wound in the forearm as it pushed past the axe-blade, and ran for the only exit. Maybe it hadn't realised that Gunn and his team were there, or maybe it thought it would be quick enough to get past them. Rondell got there first, but Gunn knew that any of the four could have stopped it. They cheered, slammed in for a round of high-fives, then broke apart and turned back to face the other men.

Gunn stepped forward, hand held out towards Fighter. Skinny-and-Brave was a few feet closer, but Gunn was aware that he hadn't put the axe down yet, so shaking hands could be awkward. Besides, Fighter's style looked closer to his own - seemed like the easiest way to approach them. "Man, that was a good fight! Who the hell are you guys?"

Fighter took a step backwards, suddenly clumsy and uncertain. And Gunn had to struggle to keep on thinking "Fighter", when the awkward movements, the wary eyes were saying "The Fat Kid". He looked like a lifelong victim, exactly the Fat Kid kind, even though the face and the body could have belonged to a male model. Gunn stopped, let his hand drop to his side, then looked at Skinny for guidance, maybe an explanation.

Skinny was bending to lay his axe down on the floor. Then he went to stand in front of Fat-Kid Fighter - and this revealed that he was at least as tall as the other man, able to shield the other's face from Gunn's view.

"It's OK, Angel. These gentlemen saw us fighting, and they came and helped us. They killed three." His voice was quiet, but it reached Gunn clearly. Gunn had never before been in the same room as an English accent. If he closed his eyes he could have been watching Masterpiece Theatre (which would have meant that he'd dropped the remote while channel-hopping). He could have been listening to Lord Stiff-Neck on the lawn drinking tea. What the hell was this man's story? What had brought him from tea on the lawn to an L.A. thrift shop?

"I - I didn't see it. Wouldn't I have seen it?" Fighter was American. No clue in his voice which state he might be from.

"You know you don't see everything. It doesn't matter. They helped us. They helped us save those people."

Gunn saw Fighter - Angel, was it? - tilt his head slowly to the side, like he was getting up the courage to look around Skinny-and-English. But then he jerked his head back, and Gunn thought he saw him shaking his head. "What - What do I -"

A brief touch of the hand to a solid shoulder. "It doesn't matter. Why don't you go and check on the car? I'll be with you in a few minutes. These gentlemen can see that you're not ready to meet them right now."

Gunn took the hint first, moved to behind the counter, well clear of the path to the door. He turned to gesture to the other men to follow him, but they were already on the move. Skinny walked his friend to the start of the corridor, keeping between him and the counter. "I'll be out in a few minutes." He waited at the door, watching. Gunn heard the footsteps and then the slamming of a car door, and Skinny finally turned to face them.

"So who are you guys?" Gunn didn't hold his hand out this time. He had no idea now what to expect from these men.

"Wesley Windham-Price." A nod towards the door. "Angel. Thank you. You're obviously very experienced. And very well trained." A pause. This Windham-Price was a serious man. He hadn't smiled, hadn't come close to smiling, even when saying thank you. "Were you... sent? Or are you here on your own?"

Gunn shrugged. "We were on patrol. Do it every night. Heard the noise. Haven't seen vampires down this way, though, since..." He looked at the others for help with the date.

"Two years? The nest on 52nd must've been two years ago." Yeah, that'd been Taye's first big fight since he joined the crew. Didn't surprise Gunn that Taye was the one who remembered.

“Then I’m very glad you kept it on your patrol route. This nest...” Windham-Price gestured with his head to the room behind him. “They were going to take over the shop. Prey on the customers. I think they could have made it last for months.”

Gunn said, “Ugly. Yeah, woulda been real ugly. How d’ you find out about it?”

“Angel - We had a tip-off.”

“Good tip-off. Y’re not short on experience either. How long you been huntin’ vampires?”

“A few years. Hunting demons. Sometimes the demons are vampires.”

“Yeah? We keep busy enough just with vampires, and there’s twenty of us.” Twenty since two months ago, two months from the previous Saturday, when Alonna had died. “How d’ you keep up?”

“We don’t try to patrol. We try to advertise, where we can.” He reached in his hip pocket, pulled out a slim wallet, put it on the counter in order to open it, and then handed Gunn a business card.

Angel Investigations.
The Experts on Demons.
For all Types of Information and Assistance.
Wesley Wyndham-Pryce.
Partner.

And an address in Inglewood, about five miles south from Gunn’s base. Wyndham-Pryce, then, not Windham-Price. Seriously Masterpiece Theatre. Seriously. “So you’re out on a case tonight?”

Wyndham-Pryce shook his head, put his wallet back in his pocket. “A tip-off. There’s no client. I hope the people would never even guess what would have happened to them.”

“D’ you get much work? What’re your rates?”

“It’s a sliding scale. For you. For anyone you vouched for. It would obviously be free.” He took a step back, looked along the corridor towards the car, then looked back at Gunn. “I have to go.”

“Sure.”

Wyndham-Pryce knelt, picked up his axe, then said, very sincerely, looking round at all four of them, “Thank you. Good luck with your patrols.” He turned and left, and Gunn and his team stayed exactly where they were behind the counter until they heard the car drive off.

Jackson said, “You hear him with ‘these gentlemen’? Jeez! You think they all talk like that?” Rondell said, “Freakiest coupla white guys I ever saw,” and Taye said, “Good fight, though. Give ‘em that. They took on five. Just the two of them.”

Gunn put the business card in the pocket of his jacket. “Let’s go. Get back on patrol.” He pulled the back door closed when he left; they hadn’t tried to set the store right, but he wouldn’t leave it looking like an open target.

When he was undressing for bed a few hours later, Gunn moved the business card to his wallet. He lay in bed and found himself working through a familiar, well-worn set of thoughts about Alonna. He was still trying to figure out why the real feelings of grief and guilt hadn’t hit him yet; wondering if it would happen tomorrow, next week? He missed her, but really only in the way he’d missed friends who’d moved away from L.A. You’d almost think he didn’t realise she was dead, like he was telling himself she’d just moved away; when she was settled, she’d write, she’d call.

Well, of course he knew she was dead. But he didn’t feel it, not properly. Shouldn’t he be torn up with the grief and the guilt, having to force himself to get through each day, to deal with other people? What did it mean that instead of that he was enjoying life more than he had in years, he was remembering how it felt when he liked himself? He had the wrong feelings, and he didn’t even feel guilty about that – he just felt puzzled.

He'd been so busy since she died. Did that make sense as a reason? Busy organising the crew, selecting deputies, setting up new training in weapons and tactics. And busy weighing up his contacts, figuring out how to get the best use out of every friend and every acquaintance. He was good at all this: making things happen, getting people to help him - and, especially, getting people to help themselves, to believe there was always some way out. Maybe he was even better at it now than he had been when the crew had first formed, out of the Skills Exchange he'd organised at the Rec Center.

Felt like a long time ago, the Rec Center: all that great energy and him right in the middle of it. Hard to believe it had only been four years ago, felt like twice that - half a lifetime, even. Hard to believe even when Gunn knew exactly why the time had felt so long: because of the vampires, because the vampires had moved in during those years, and after they moved in Gunn's whole idea of time had gradually changed. Before, each day was a chance to get things done, but after... Each day had too many hours, each minute another minute when the vampires might attack. And the crew was his crew, and he was the one who had to get them all safe to the end of every day, pull them from hour to hour while he knew the vampires would never give up, not when they had all the time they could ever want. The years against the vampires had changed Gunn's ideas about so many things, not just about time. If he wanted to sum it up, he'd say he'd gone from always seeing the possibilities in every situation and every person, to always seeing the worst.

No one had seemed to notice those changes in him. Or... Sure, Alonna could see the rage, and the suspicion, and the despair. Seemed sometimes like that was all she'd had to say to him in the last months: to tell him every thing she saw in him that wasn't right. But she'd never remind him how he used to be so different, never ask if he knew how it had happened, if he had any ideas for how to get back to the way he used to be. But why should she be the one to remind him, when everyone else had forgotten the old Gunn, the Gunn they'd followed from the Rec Center - when even Gunn had forgotten?

People had noticed, though, when he'd changed back, got all that energy, that flood of ideas. The original members of the crew recognised his old style and his old attitude, and he'd seen them teaching the newer members what to expect. He guessed - from what they didn't say, what they didn't do - that they thought he must be keeping a promise to Alonna, so they were thinking his cheerful mood was a front, an effort every day to keep it going.

No harm letting them think that, and he didn't know himself why he'd woken up on the third day after Alonna died remembering exactly how he'd felt when he knew the Skills Exchange was going to work, and with a list of twenty things he could do that same day to make life better for his crew. Could be just the fact that, for the first time, they'd been up against vampires who'd had a real plan of their own. Could be the exhilaration of surviving the major battle with those vampires immediately after Alonna had died. Even at the height of the battle, without realising, he'd been seeing and storing everything that was happening, so when he woke on that third day, he knew exactly why he believed that the fight could be almost easy when the crew worked properly together, and he could see every one of the hundred, two hundred moments when opportunities had been lost because the crewmembers didn't know well enough what to expect of each other. Possibilities. Was all about possibilities. A week before, he'd've thought of those moments and just seen them as lost - and his fault they'd been lost, each one somehow his fault. But now... Who'd be thinking "lost" when the truth was that the crew had won? They'd done so much right in that battle, and he was proud of all of them, and fired up to see everything they'd do even better in the next battle. So he was that Gunn again, the one who saw possibilities, the one who made them real. And you wanted proof of how real, then you just had to count the dusted vamps.

The vampires in the thrift shop, they'd've been easy to kill even in the bad days, when Gunn'd lost sight of how to do what he did best. But back then he'd've come away from the fight thinking that the two white guys were ungrateful, unfriendly weirdoes, and he would've let them know what he thought, probably walked out long before the English guy could've given him that Demon Expert business card. He wouldn't have been interested in them, maybe not even impressed by that Angel guy's skill or the English guy's courage; he wouldn't have given them the benefit of any doubt, not once they'd done just the first thing to bug him. And they'd done more than one thing: not asking any names, not smiling, leaving after just a couple of minutes; and that Angel turning into a stuttering dork the moment a strange black guy talks to him. That still did kind of bug him, had him making bets with himself about how different the two would have acted if Gunn and his three had all been white - seen that often enough, not hard to know the signs. But he hadn't let it bug him enough that he had to walk out, so he'd got the card and the offer of help, and he'd got to see that the English guy did have it in him to show respect. "Anyone you vouch for." Could mean more, even, that he'd said it without a smile.

So Gunn was interested in them, he was wondering about them. Yeah, there was the bet about how they'd've been different with their own kind, but alongside that he was thinking that maybe he shouldn't be so sure what kind that really was. English, with a fancy name and a missing arm. And with a friend who scares vampires but then has to be walked to the door. So they hadn't acted like Gunn would've if they'd been the ones come to help Gunn and his crew -

that didn't matter, not the way Gunn was thinking now. He didn't have to figure out everything about them, just enough to get the best use out of them for the crew. Starting with: was Wyndham-Pryce really an expert? and how much work would he really do for free? Gunn would be looking for a chance to test him out.

* * * * *

"Hello."

Just hello, not "Angel Investigations. How can we help you with your question about demons?" Maybe Wyndham-Pryce didn't believe in the hard sell. Or maybe this was also his home number. Their home number?

"Mr. Wyndham-Pryce? This is Charles Gunn. We met a couple of weeks ago in that thrift shop on Denker. You gave me your card."

"Mr. Gunn. Yes. Hello. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Is this a good time to ask if you can get me some information about a type of demon? If you're busy with paying work, I can -"

"We're not too busy. What type of demon? What sort of information do you need? And how urgently?"

"I have a friend, Anne, who runs a homeless center for teens. At Normandie and 38th, pretty near Exposition Park. She thinks there's a nest of some kind of demons living in tunnels under the park. She's heard stories from three or four different kids. She doesn't think they've hurt anyone yet, but she wants to know exactly what she should be warning the kids against, if we need to do something more."

"How consistent are the descriptions of the demons? I should talk to the witnesses myself, visit the park, but I may be able to eliminate some possibilities beforehand."

"They're pretty consistent." Gunn passed on the description Anne had given him, and the questions that Wyndham-Pryce asked afterwards sounded good to Gunn: like the guy really did know a lot about demons, like he was trying to narrow the field from a list of hundreds. Not that Gunn could give him any answers. "No, I dunno the park that well. I dunno where the tunnels go. Anne didn't say exactly where they were seen. I guess you'll have to go down there."

"When could you arrange a visit? Would tomorrow afternoon be too soon?"

Tomorrow afternoon? Boy, that was quick. Was that enthusiasm or hyper-efficiency? Or was the guy just trying to get him out of the way as soon as possible? "That'd be fine for me but Anne'll need a couple of days to get the word out to the kids. Couple of weeks, even, if you wanna talk to all of them."

"No, one or two will be enough if I can find the right pictures to show them."

"I'll call Anne, then, ask her to try for... Thursday, two o'clock? When'd you need me to let you know for sure?"

"Any time on Thursday morning. Give me your number, though, in case I have to cancel."

Gunn gave his cell phone number, and then broke the connection on that cell phone a few seconds later. No, that was not a man with any kind of supply of small-talk. Gunn had had warmer conversations with the police, even. But he had set to work immediately, so Gunn now knew that it had been a genuine offer.

Wyndham-Pryce was alone in the convertible when he drove up to the teen shelter on Thursday afternoon. He hadn't said anything to suggest that Angel would be joining him and Gunn hadn't asked - but he had wondered.

A man with no small-talk, and with no idea about dressing for the occasion. He was in a suit and tie, for God's sake. For a visit to a South Central teen shelter. And with all those old books under his arm, he didn't look like any kind of demon-hunter that Gunn would want on his team. While Gunn was still standing at the window, shaking his head, Anne had opened the door and gone out to offer help with the books; Gunn had not thought to mention to her that his demon expert only had one arm. The help was refused, but for a second there, it had looked like Wyndham-Pryce was actually going to smile.

Anne had got two of the kids, Tony and Maxine, and they were in the kitchen, drinking sodas at the table. Anne did the introductions, then Wyndham-Pryce immediately started laying the books out at the far end of the table. Gunn saw the kids exchange amused, dubious looks, and stepped in with the first distraction he could think of. "That Dr. Pepper cold? You got any more?"

Tony said, "In the fridge, man. Help yourself." A pause, then, with a jerk of the head towards Wyndham-Pryce: "Does he want one?"

Where the fuck was this Tony from? How come they never taught him? A man's in the room, you put your question to him straight. Or they'd taught Tony fine, and he was showing what he thought of book-learning? Gunn tensed up and looked at Wyndham-Pryce, waiting to see how he'd haul Tony back into line.

Very short wait, because the English man was already saying, "No, thank you." Not even looking up from his work at the table, and his voice was totally calm. Like he just didn't care? Or maybe like he'd chosen his own way of showing Tony how he expected people to behave. And Gunn wasn't thinking, "Where's your spine, man?" - like he would've with any guy in his crew. No, he was thinking, "Yeah, that works. On you, that works." And seeing a way that the suit could work too - that it might not be some middle-class, out-of-his-depth, point-scoring thing, but just part of the way this guy showed respect for clients: by being well-groomed, taking the trouble to look his best.

By the time Gunn came back with his soda, Wyndham-Pryce had finished laying out the books and had moved to the other end of the table. "Tony, could you leave the room for a few minutes, please? And please shut the door behind you."

"Uh, OK." Tony was clearly surprised, but got up immediately, and shut the door quietly as he left. If Gunn had tried something like that with Tony, the two of them would have had to go through a few rounds of joking and testing before Tony could have left. Yes, the English guy did have something, even if it was only the accent.

"Maxine, could you come over here?" Wyndham-Pryce led the way to the books, and Anne and Gunn followed too. "Is there anything on these pages that resembles what you saw in the park?" Once Maxine had started looking at the book, Wyndham-Pryce moved to the other side of the table. To watch her expression? Or just to give her more room?

"Oh!" Maxine was pointing at the second book of the five. "It was this one with the -"

"A Massiac? But please look at them all before you decide. Some of them look very similar."

Maxine did look at the others, maybe giving them more time than she would have if she wasn't already sure. Then she went back to the second book, and smiled and nodded like she was greeting an old friend. "It's this one."

"Thank you. Now -"

She grinned at him. "I'll leave the room. And shut the door. And I know, I won't say a thing to Tony."

Again, Wyndham-Pryce almost smiled. "Thank you."

Tony chose the same demon, just as sure about it. While Maxine was returning to the room, Wyndham-Pryce closed and stacked the other books, then they all sat down at the other end of the table.

"The Massiac are harmless. Beneficial, in fact: they mostly eat rats. Some moles. There's no record of any Massiac making an unprovoked attack on a human."

Anne said, "What about a provoked attack?"

"They will fight. And they can kill with those teeth and especially those claws. Normally it will take direct provocation. They don't eat humans, they don't compete with humans. The only real danger is if you get too near a clutch of their young by accident. And at this latitude they're fertile all year round. But if you know where the entrances are to their tunnels, and you don't go closer than about twelve feet, then you won't bother them. And they won't bother you."

Gunn said, "Are they intelligent?"

A brief shake of the head. "Probably not. No one really thinks they have a spoken language. And if you take one away from the group, it..." He shrugged. "It goes into a catatonic state within a few days. Dies within a month. So there are no records of one... learning to play chess, say."

Maxine: "God, that's sad! I mean, I need my friends, but... That's beyond pathetic."

"It's quite common among demons who appear to have evolved under -" A pause and then the flicker of genuine enthusiasm was gone from his voice and he was back to business. "But that's pure speculation. Do you know where the entrances are to the tunnels? Or do you know how thoroughly the area has been surveyed?"

Maxine said, slowly, "I've definitely seen one entrance. But when I saw the demons, they were way the other side of the park from there. So there's probably others, right?"

"Probably. Are there areas where you're confident that there aren't any entrances?"

Tony and Maxine said together, "Yeah, most of it."

"I can start looking for surveys and other reports on the park. But it might be months before I can come back with anything definite. Can you avoid the other areas until then?"

Tony: "Hell, man, we can avoid them forever. No need to put yourself to that work."

Maxine: "Or we can look for that stuff ourselves, the surveys. If you tell us where to start."

Again, Wyndham-Pryce insisted on carrying his own books. Anne walked him to the car, waited while he put the books on the back seat, then shook his hand, thanking him for the third time.

"My pleasure." Finally, a smile, though a brief one. He took another of his business cards from his breast pocket and handed it to Anne. "Call me if you need more information about the Massiac. Or on anything relating to demons."

"I will." She turned to Gunn. "Thanks, Charles. You won't forget next month?" Gunn shook his head, and then Anne was on her way back indoors.

Wyndham-Pryce had definitely passed Gunn's test. He'd shown that he'd meant it about working for free, and he'd shown that he really did have something Gunn could use for his crew. Watching him at work, Gunn had decided that this wasn't one just to be kept in reserve for an emergency, but that it was worth trying to bring in, almost as part of the crew, and today, if possible. Could be he had knowledge about vampires that could help improve the whole way they worked. When the three of them had come outside, Gunn had immediately taken up position in front of the driver's door.

"Man, you really are an expert. How long d'it take you to find all that?"

"A few hours. Your descriptions were good."

"What would you normally charge for that?" Gunn tilted his head. "In the middle, say, of your sliding scale?"

Wyndham-Pryce looked shocked, shook his head sharply. "No. It was my pleasure."

"Just wondered. Case I ever meet someone who could pay you what you're worth."

Another shake of the head. "No. I don't -"

"Well, will you at least let me buy you a coffee? Or lunch, if you haven't eaten already. You like Mexican? I know a good place between here and your office."

"We don't have an -" For several seconds he looked at Gunn, almost frowning. Sizing him up? Wondering, probably for the first time, what sort of person he was? "I haven't had lunch. Thank you."

The restaurant was almost empty. Gunn picked a table for them by the window. "You don't have an office?"

Wyndham-Pryce looked up from the menu. “Not any more.”

“So the address on your card? Is that your apartment? Or Angel’s?”

“It’s both. It hasn’t been a good year for the business. We’ve had to save money any way we can.”

Gunn recommended the tacos very strongly, ordered them himself, but the other man chose the meatball soup. Didn’t even order anything to drink, saying he preferred water. Come on. No one preferred water.

Wyndham-Pryce had ordered the soup because it was the easiest thing to eat with one hand. Gunn figured that out the moment he picked up his first taco. Sure, you could eat a taco with one hand, but it would be even messier than with two hands. No, there was no way Wyndham-Pryce was going to eat a taco in public, not while he was wearing that suit, and probably not ever.

They talked about the teen shelter, about Anne, about how Gunn had got involved with the shelter, and about the crew. Gunn gave him most of the history, though he didn’t mention Alonna, and he didn’t admit to just how deep the despair had got after the vampires had moved in, or how long it had lasted, or how recently it had ended. Maybe Wyndham-Pryce guessed though, from some of his comments when Gunn was describing the changes he was now making, and those he was planning. The comments the guy made weren’t being critical, it wasn’t like he was wondering why Gunn hadn’t made those changes years ago - more that he wanted to understand how Gunn kept up that pace. Gunn explained that he’d just got a lot of ideas, all at once a few months ago - hoped he always would have ideas, of course, but no, this was at least twice his normal pace, and though it was great, it was also good to think he’d be back to normal in a few months.

Gunn had smiled as he’d admitted his limits, partly to himself, thinking that the Gunn from the bad times never would have admitted he had any limits, and partly at the English guy, expecting some recognition that Gunn had seen the real point of those comments. But Wyndham-Pryce just looked more serious, frowned even, though he looked down at his water-glass and not at Gunn. Gunn was on the verge of deciding that he’d made enough allowances now for the man being a foreigner, not knowing how to behave, and that there really was a problem with the guy’s attitude, then Wyndham-Pryce raised his head, looked straight at Gunn again, and asked a question about the new weapons training that showed how carefully he had been listening before. The man was already interested in the crew, really interested, already had ideas (“Had you thought...”, “Angel always says...”). Gunn would ask him over dessert how much he could help, him and Angel, set a date for their first visit to the base.

“The flan’s good here. I always have the flan.” He did always have the flan, but this time he’d thought through the practicalities, made sure he was recommending something the other guy could eat.

“I don’t have much of a sweet tooth.” Gunn could have guessed that. He thought the man had the thinnest face he’d ever seen. How bad had that year been for their business? Had there ever been a time when he had had flesh to spare? “I would like a coffee, though.”

Gunn waited until after they’d gotten a refill of coffee. “I like the way you work. You and Angel. I mean, I’m seriously impressed. What would you think about teaming up with me and my crew? Whatever way we can figure out. Like coming on patrol sometimes? I’d like to know what you think about the way we do things.”

Gunn saw a gleam of startled pleasure, but it was over in a second, and then Wyndham-Pryce was shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Gunn, but we couldn’t do that. It’s not...”

“Charles.” Gunn shrugged, disappointed, but still confident he’d be able to keep Wyndham-Pryce in reserve. “I guess you don’t need more unpaid work right now. Better to get out, look for business.”

“It’s not that. It’s Angel. He couldn’t go on patrol with you.”

“With us? ‘cos of -?” Gunn nodded slowly, feeling bitter but not sure yet how much he was going to show it. “Yeah, I had a bet he wouldn’t’ve been like that with a white guy. Guess he didn’t help you with any of this Massiac work?”

“No! No. That isn’t - He couldn’t go on patrol with anyone. I wouldn’t be able to make him understand what you were doing. Certainly not well enough for him to keep focused on it for several hours. He wouldn’t be any use to you.”

Sounded like an excuse to Gunn, and not a good one. “He seemed pretty focused in the thrift shop.”

Again, the shaking head. “He was acting on a tip-off then. The tip-offs... They show him pictures of what he has to fight. He can focus on those pictures, but you can’t rely on him for anything else.”

How could anyone take that seriously? Gunn couldn’t, not for a second, not when he’d seen the big man fight. That was a picture, if you were talking pictures: of a body that was nature’s gift to the world, of fighter’s instincts that Gunn would trust with his own life. “I could draw him a picture of a vampire. You must have hundreds in those books of yours.”

“Mr. -” Wyndham-Pryce closed his eyes briefly. “Charles.” Slowly, quiet and very definite: “Sometimes he doesn’t know who I am. You can’t work with him. I’m sorry.”

Gunn found that he was able to feel guilt after all; not yet over Alonna, but here, over this man he hardly knew. What he’d seen in the thrift shop, yeah, that should’ve told him straight off that there was something seriously wrong with Angel. But he had taken the man’s reaction personally, let it bug him enough that he was never gonna go looking for an explanation that said he just had to ignore it ‘cos this was one white guy who couldn’t be held responsible for his actions. So he’d refused to see the signs that “Angel Investigations” was one badly-injured guy with glasses, an axe and a lot of old books, very far from home, doing anything, doing the damndest things, but still failing, inch by inch, to do whatever he’d promised himself that he’d do for his friend Angel. No, he’d seen all that and thought nothing except, “Weird guy, alright. But I bet I can still get some use out of him.”

“No. No, it’s me who’s sorry. I – I guess it should’ve been obvious. But... what’s wrong with him?”

“Brain damage. It’s a degenerative condition.”

“There any cure?”

“No.”

“Shouldn’t he -” A pause. “Will he have t’go into an institution?”

Flatly: “It would kill him.” The look of bleak determination on that thin face was chilling. “Having to deal with other people, new people. He would be lost. At least with me... He does always know that he should know me. If he didn’t have even something like that to focus on, I think he would be lost, completely lost, in less than a month.”

Gunn tried to reassure himself that at least nothing he’d done had made things worse for the man. He’d been pleased to help Anne, hadn’t he? And pleased that Gunn was impressed enough to ask for more. That would still count for something, wouldn’t it, even when Gunn had done so badly at taking no for an answer? He swallowed, took a mouthful of coffee. “But he has good days?”

“Oh, yes. But they don’t run to a schedule.” Wyndham-Pryce paused, finished his own coffee. “That’s why you can’t fit him in to your patrols.”

Gunn nodded, some way to being reassured. The man didn’t blame him for asking or for the way he’d asked; the bleakness was gone and he was all business again. Gunn said, “I was gonna say it wasn’t just Angel I had in mind for the patrols. You can handle yourself. But you got enough goin’ already, don’t you?”

A brief nod of the head. “I wish I could see more of what you’re doing. But I couldn’t leave Angel alone for that length of time.”

Angel wasn’t just the man’s friend, Angel was his lover. That was the only reason Gunn could imagine why a person would hold so strong for someone who wasn’t family: if they’d made some serious, serious promises to one another, long ago. And they weren’t family - one look could tell you that, even before you heard the voices and knew the names. How long had they been together? And where had they met? And were the good days good enough that they could still be lovers? No, no, that couldn’t be something to hope for, that would have to be worse than having nothing: getting into bed with someone you loved, knowing that the next morning he might not even remember your name. No one could be that tough, not even a man who would fight demons for a living when he only had one arm. Gunn had been through rough times, really rough, yet he couldn’t imagine for a second how this man coped - on his own in a foreign country, with no crew, no family, with nothing. And now Gunn felt that he had to know, he had to know everything - or he’d be trying to imagine, and didn’t that usually get you something far worse than the truth?

“Are you - The two of you - I mean, is he your...?” Gunn had already started to ask the question when he realised that he might be wrong. He had no idea how a straight Englishman was likely to react if you called him a fag, but there probably wasn't any kind of straight man who took that well. Too late - he'd already gone too far to pretend he'd meant something else.

Wyndham-Pryce looked faintly puzzled while Gunn was trying to figure out how to put his question, then his eyebrows shot up, and then he threw his head back and laughed. There wasn't any edge in his laugh, no kind of dig at Gunn – he just thought it was the funniest, funniest idea. Then, shaking his head: “Me and Angel?” and he burst out laughing again.

Gunn had never felt so glad to be wrong. And not just wrong about the two of them being lovers, but wrong about what the Englishman's life must be like – because a man who could laugh like that wasn't worn down to the metal, nowhere near. Gunn shrugged, and grinned, and just sat back, enjoying the sight. The man looked totally different when he laughed. Not like another person, but so much younger. With each new peal of laughter, Gunn got closer and closer to deciding that he liked Wyndham-Pryce. Before, he'd been interested in him, to get something out of him. Now he'd given up on getting anything, but he'd also got past feeling guilty about being blinkered and selfish, and he'd got past the morbid curiosity - and he just liked him for how he laughed, and for the care he'd seen him take of his friend, and for the help he'd given Anne, and the real interest he'd shown in Gunn's crew, and for wearing his best suit when he was working for nothing and his clients were all street kids.

Finally the laughter subsided to the point where Gunn knew he had enough of the Englishman's attention to be able to shrug again and say, “Well... Y'know... Just seemed like...”

“No, no, I can -” He was clearly trying to suppress his laughter, but it kept breaking through. “If you knew Angel... Me and Angel. He's... Nothing would make him think of me like that. Believe me.” Now he was just smiling - and Gunn liked him when he was just smiling, too.

“Yeah, you convinced me.” A broad smile, and then Gunn turned serious. “But, Wesley, it's a hell of a thing you're doin' for him. You know that's why I asked, right? That's a hell of a thing to do for a friend.”

Wyndham-Pryce shook his head, now entirely serious himself. “He's saved my life, more than once. We go back several years, to before the damage started. It was the only thing I could do.”

Gunn nodded. “I get it.” A pause. “You know you can call me if you need help with... I dunno. Another nest of vamps in a thrift shop.” The exact opposite to what taking the guy out to lunch was supposed to achieve. But Wesley needed the help, and the crew would enjoy the fights, like they had the one in the thrift shop.

“Thank you. And you know you can call me if you need research on demons or anything else I can do from the apartment.”

They went in different directions on leaving the restaurant, and Gunn drove home wondering how long it would be before they'd meet again, and smiling as he thought of yet another thing that he liked about Wesley, or as he remembered the exact moment when Wesley had burst out laughing.

Making friends with a middle-class white guy - a new experience, definitely, or it would be, when he knew for sure that they were friends. Wesley had become formal again at the end, warmer than he'd been with Anne, but not by much. He held out his hand, thanked Gunn for the meal, and it felt like the end of a business-meeting. A good meeting, but that's all that you think afterwards: “Yeah, that was a good meeting, that was worth doing.” You don't drive away wishing the meeting had been longer, wanting to know what the other guy thought about a hundred things that had nothing to do with business.

There were rough patches on Wesley's hand, calluses, probably, from the weapons training he'd said he and Angel did every day. Every good day, that'd be.

Gunn decided that he even liked the formality. It was part of the man's style, like the suit; it was how they did things, where he came from. And, OK, with the formality and everything he could be pretty sure that Wesley wasn't gonna do anything that assumed they'd gotten to be friends. Nothing like calling to suggest another meal (“I'm going to be in your area around lunchtime.” “I've found something that might help you with your ideas for locating nests.”), but if

Gunn called, did the in-your-area thing, then Wesley wouldn't need persuading, not like he had this first time. He'd call in a couple of weeks, maybe, before the end of the month.

* * * * *

Wesley called late on a Tuesday night in the last week of the month. Gunn wasn't on patrol that night, and was hanging out in the workshop along with about half the crew.

"Charles? It's Wesley Wyndham-Pryce. I need help. Right away."

"Yeah, what's happenin'?"

"Angel's had a tip-off. About a demon that's about to rise in Fairfax. But Angel... I can't take Angel. And if it's really an adult Lurgan, then I'm going to need help."

"How much help? Four men? Eight? What sort of weapons?"

"Four should be enough, even for an adult. Swords. And some crossbows, if you have them."

"Where d'we meet? We gonna need a plan, or 's it obvious what to aim for?"

"It's not obvious, I'll need to brief you before we go in. If we meet at Packard and South Hayworth. That's two blocks away from the house."

Gunn didn't ask for volunteers. He told Jackson, Vince and Eladio to grab a blade and a crossbow each, and to jump in his truck; he would explain on the way.

Wesley was already there when they arrived, standing by his car with his sword at his side. He had two books laid open on the hood, and he used a flashlight to show them the pictures of the Lurgan in its different forms: dormant, ambulant, and with its digestive apparatus deployed. Each form was disgusting and disturbing in its own way.

"It's probably been lying dormant in the garden for weeks. The most likely location is under one of the trees. I think we should try to force it out, from a distance, using the crossbows. Then three should keep it occupied from the front while the other two try to take out both of its nervous systems at the same time."

Wesley's lower lip was split, and swollen badly enough to affect the sound of his voice. Gunn now thought he'd noticed the difference over the phone, but then he'd put it down to the tension and urgency. Of course, Wesley was tense, and he was urgent, but he'd also been punched hard in the mouth, probably some time in the last few hours.

"Sounds good. Who does what?"

The Lurgan was under the second tree, and it erupted from the soil like it had been waiting for them. If they'd been closer to the tree, testing the ground with a sword or an axe, then those first few seconds might have been very different for them. But using the crossbow meant they were well out of its range when it burst out of the ground, and they had time before it reached them to work out what was front and what was back, and the fight was over in a matter of minutes.

Gunn and his team celebrated with their usual high-fives, and Gunn didn't think for a second of including Wesley. You could tell at a glance that it wasn't his style, and he didn't seem offended - probably he was relieved.

"Well done, everyone. You made it look easy." Wesley was walking towards the street. "I don't think the family even woke up." Gunn checked, and the house was still in darkness.

They started to follow Wesley out of the garden, though Vince hung back. "We just gonna leave it there?"

"It attracts insects when it's above ground. Some animals, too. It'll be gone by morning." Wesley's voice was losing the warmth that it had held when he was congratulating them, but the change didn't sound to Gunn like a deliberate return to being formal, not a natural part of Wesley's English style. The change didn't seem deliberate, more like Wesley was preoccupied, like his attention had switched to some point a long way from them and the garden.

The difference became even more obvious to Gunn when they reached the truck, and Wesley leaned his sword against the tailgate, and turned to shake hands with each of the other men, thanking them. This was Wesley's formal style and it was sincere and focused, and warm if you knew what to listen for. Gunn hung back so that he would be last and would have a chance to say more than "Hey, any time."

"Thank you, Charles. I don't know what I would have done." The feel of the calluses of Wesley's hand struck Gunn's nerves more strongly even than the first time; why, he didn't know, because half the crew had hands the same or rougher, even some of the girls. Must just be because it was so unexpected, seeing how Wesley still looked more like an accountant than anything else.

Not been stupid enough to come out here on your own. You know that much, right? "What would have happened if we weren't here?"

"It would have eaten the family. Eventually. Or rather, finished eating, eventually." Wesley knew far too much about what would have happened; Gunn could see it in his eyes.

"Well... Good thing you got a tip-off, then. You got a good source." Gunn thought of something, and frowned. "They didn't have any pictures to show Angel this time? That why he -" Gunn broke off as Wesley flinched, turning his head sharply to the side and taking a step backwards. Then he seemed even more startled by his reaction than Gunn was, and in the process of trying to recover he knocked his sword over. Gunn retrieved it for him, handling it carefully to avoid getting demon gore on either of them.

"Thank you. I have to go."

"Sure. Been a long day. Now you really know you can call for help at any time." Gunn grinned at him, but Wesley had become distant again, and the change was more noticeable even than in the garden; he just nodded at Gunn, and was already turning away.

The men were in high spirits on the drive back. Gunn was happy to join in when prompted, was proud of them all, but now he had a preoccupation of his own and he didn't put his usual energy into the celebrations. Angel had hit Wesley. Something to do with the tip-off. Was it because Wesley had suggested calling Gunn for help? Had Angel seen that as an insult? And in that case, what would Angel do when Wesley got back to the apartment with his books and his sword? Wesley shouldn't go in there alone. But Gunn couldn't follow him straight there, not when he had the others in the truck. For all he knew, Angel might be bad enough that he would have to stay with Wesley all night. And besides, he was sure that Wesley wouldn't want him to tell anyone about Angel.

He dropped the men off at the base, asked Jackson to take his weapons and clean his sword, and headed out again straight away. Wesley's apartment building had seen better days, but hadn't given up all hope. Their apartment was on the third floor, at the end of the corridor.

Wesley came to the door in seconds, but opened it slowly. He looked dazed with exhaustion. "Mr. Rodriguez. I'm sorry. I know..." He blinked. "Charles? Charles. What are you - I must have -" He shook his head. "I'm sorry. If I did something to -"

"You did a buncha things made me think I should come check you're OK. And don't tell me you're fine, not when you've got the neighbours complaining. Let me in." Wesley stepped back, and Gunn closed the door behind himself. "Has he tried to hit you again? I mean, since you got -"

Behind a door at the far end of the living room, something was snarling, and there were irregular, muffled thuds, in time with the worst of the snarling, like the thing in the room was throwing itself against the walls or door. Gunn stared at Wesley, appalled. "Tell me you've got a dog."

Wesley shook his head, then broke eye contact, sighed, and backed slowly away into the middle of the living room.

"How long's he been like this?"

"Since the tip-off. The pictures... Something about the pictures. They affected him badly. It happens sometimes. I don't - It's hard to tell why."

"I'm guessing he doesn't know who you are."

“I don’t think he knows who he is.”

“He’s locked in?”

Wesley nodded. “I have to, when he’s like this. I had to, before I could leave.”

“Is he likely to hurt himself?” Wesley shook his head. “Is there anything you can do to calm him down?” Another shake. “Then you know what I think?” Wesley opened his mouth, looking determined, almost fierce, probably expecting a lecture on what would really be best for Angel. “I think you and I should have a couple of beers and spend the next hour trying to pretend we have normal lives.”

A still second, then another, and then Wesley burst out laughing, sounding relieved, and sounding like maybe he’d just decided he liked Gunn too. Liked his style, for sure. Gunn grinned like he had at the restaurant, but pleased with himself too, this time, because this time the joke had been deliberate.

“I haven’t got any beers.” Wesley had stopped laughing quite quickly, but his smile was almost teasing.

“Then I’ll go get them. Wha’d’ you like?”

“Anything as long as it’s cold. And not Corona.”

“Cold and not Corona comin’ right up.”

Wesley was waiting with the door open when Gunn came back with the beers, and he looked so much better than he had the first time Gunn had seen him in the doorway, like he’d had twelve hours sleep in the meantime. Some of that effect might be down to the fact that he’d changed his clothes, or at least changed his shirt. He’d been wearing something dark before - a dark grey? - but he’d changed it for a cream shirt with a button-down collar. The fight hadn’t been that difficult, or that messy, certainly not enough to make Gunn uncomfortable about staying in the same clothes; but then his day had been nothing compared to Wesley’s.

The armchair looked like it was Wesley’s, with a paperback book open face-downwards over the arm, so Gunn took the couch. Wesley pushed the armchair close to the couch before he sat down.

“What you readin’? Almost looks like it was published this century.”

Wesley put his beer on the floor, picked up and closed the book, then leaned forward to put it on the coffee table. “It’s Angel’s. He’s back on Ellroy again. I don’t think it’s good for him.”

“Not by the sound of things.” Angel was still snarling, still throwing himself at the walls. “But we were gonna do that normal life thing. You had one once, right? You were an accountant, or something. Big office downtown. Wall-to-wall suits. Maybe even regular hours. Before you found out about demons.”

Wesley’s reply was a good ten seconds in preparation. Gunn watched Wesley amuse himself with a succession of benign thoughts, and discovered that Wesley had at least four different types of half-smile. Finally: “Something like that.”

“Yeah. As in ‘Nothing like that. Not even for a day.’ You gonna tell me you were born knowing about demons? You were in the demon-expert stream from kindergarten up?”

“I learned to read from ‘A Child’s Treasury of Verses about Child-Eaters’.” This time Wesley kept his face so straight that Gunn was almost taken in. What must it be like in England, if they all had that kind of sense of humour? Maybe they found it easy to tell, with each other.

“OK. Forget the normal life. How d’ you come to America? How d’ you come to L.A.?”

He’d come for the demons, of course, but to Sunnydale of all places. Something about a Hellmouth, one of the wonders of the demon world.

“Well, Sunnydale’s gotta have somethin’ goin’ for it. Been up that way a couple of times. Never heard of any reason to get off the freeway.”

“It doesn’t have much to recommend it. I didn’t achieve what I’d hoped. What about you? Having a normal life, that is?”

Gunn learned more about Wesley in the process of talking about himself than he had when trying to get Wesley to talk - Wesley asked a lot of questions, and most of those questions were revealing. He came from money or... if there wasn’t a lot of the money any more, it was at least very old. He was the only child. He’d gone to some fancy prep school, all boys, and Gunn couldn’t believe how young he’d been when they first sent him there, away from home. But he said he’d liked it there; it wasn’t as bad as it sounded. He’d gone to college in London, majoring in eastern languages or something. He loved languages, he even knew some demon languages. He’d started to find translation work in L.A., pointed out the stack of manuscripts on his desk.

They had nothing in common, except that they hunted vampires and demons, and except that they liked one another. They listened to one another. Properly. They remembered. Gunn had never suspected that he could be interested in theories about demon migration, but Wesley, Wesley’s enthusiasm, made him see why it was worth arguing about. They had both nearly forgotten about Angel; sometimes when the sounds from the room changed, Gunn would glance towards the locked door, but Wesley now seemed able to ignore everything.

Gunn didn’t think of Wesley as skinny any more, and couldn’t imagine now how he’d first thought of him as just a typical skinny white guy with glasses - no, as the ultimate skinny white guy with glasses. Wesley was like no one else that Gunn had ever met or seen, and he wasn’t skinny, he was lean, fined down. Gunn found himself studying Wesley’s face, trying to work out how it gave the impressions that it gave. Seen from the front, Wesley’s face was so narrow, it seemed to be made up entirely of long, straight lines, fitted together almost without the need for curves. Very formal. Very serious. And then he turned his head and suddenly his face was all curves: that nose that made Gunn think of a fin, and the jut of his lower lip, almost a pout. The contrast made Gunn want to smile, and seemed to sum up everything that Gunn admired and liked about Wesley.

Wesley’s hand: that offered a contrast too, though not one to make Gunn smile. He hadn’t really noticed Wesley’s hand before, during the meal, but now he knew the touch of the palm - and he could call it up, the nerves of his own palm were remembering it - and Wesley was sitting with his hand resting on the arm of the chair, close enough that Gunn would scarcely need to lean forward in order to touch it. Delicate was the word that kept coming to Gunn’s mind, but that wasn’t right because it was a strong hand, capable. But the fingers were so long, the palm so narrow, the setting of the joints so clear, so neat - it was a hand meant for fine work, and detail. Alright, it was a beautiful hand. Beautifully made. Was that such a strange thing to notice about a friend? To think, “Wesley has beautiful hands.” And then to realise that what you’d thought was some standard phrase. The normal way of thinking something like that about a friend. No. Thinking about Wesley’s hands was a serious matter. Much easier just to watch his face, wait for him to smile, show a new angle on that lower lip.

“I’m sorry. It’s bad enough that your eyes have glazed over. But that I must not have noticed for five minutes... You should stop me immediately.”

“No. I was thinking about what you were saying. So what is the evidence that they used to live in rivers?”

Wesley smiled at him, then got to his feet. “That was all of five minutes ago. You need another beer.”

When Wesley sat down again, they clinked bottles and the backs of their hands touched. Gunn felt the warmth of that brief contact as clearly as he’d felt the roughness of Wesley’s palm.

“What about Angel, then? What happened to his normal life?”

Slowly, dryly: “That was well before my time.”

“When did the brain damage start?”

“About six months ago.”

“Was it sudden? Was he injured? Was he in an accident?”

“I think it was an accident. It happened just before I arrived in L.A.”

“Had he come ahead? To move your business from Sunnydale to L.A.?”

“We weren’t working together then. But yes, he set up in L.A. about a year ago.”

“He must’ve had quite a network here already. What with the tip-offs and everything.”

Sombre: “I think there were big plans.”

“But why’s he still gettin’ the tip-offs? Especially when it - They must be able to see he’s not the man he was. They shouldn’t be showin’ him those pictures. You’re the only one they should be dealin’ with.”

“It’s that or nothing. And for that family in Fairfax tonight...” Wesley shook his head. “It can’t be nothing. They won’t deal with me at all. It has to go through Angel.”

“They won’t deal with you? Is that...” Gunn shrugged. “I dunno, ‘s that ‘cos of you bein’ English? They don’t know what to make of you, with the accent?”

“Maybe. Who knows what they’re thinking? There’s nothing I can do about it. I just have to live with it.”

“That the official line on bein’ English? Don’t tell me it’s in your Pledge of Allegiance.” Smiling, sure that Wesley would know that he hadn’t thought Wesley was talking about being English, and that he didn’t mean any disrespect. The chance had just been too good to miss.

“It’s the chorus of our national anthem.” Again, the straight-faced delivery. Even as he was laughing, Gunn wondered how often people believed Wesley when he did that.

They drank in silence for a while, or at least, they drank without speaking: Angel didn’t seem to like the sound of Gunn’s laughter: his tone had become raw, almost hungry. Again, Wesley ignored the sounds, but Gunn found himself dragged back towards serious thoughts.

“Wesley? When did you lose your arm? You don’t have to tell me. Was it back in England?”

Wesley shook his head. “It was here in L.A. Six months ago. I was tracking a Kungai demon. Angel arrived just in time to stop it from killing me. He got me to hospital. And then he helped me when I got out.”

“Was he acting on a tip-off, when he arrived just in time?”

“He was.”

“And you said he’d had his accident before you came to L.A. So he was already...”

“It wasn’t noticeable back then. Not really. I don’t think anyone knew that the effects would be this severe.”

“And it’s gonna get worse?”

“I would think so.”

“You know you’re gonna have to get some help. Or you’re gonna crack up. Doesn’t matter how tough you are. This isn’t -”

Wesley raised his bottle of beer in salute and smiled with open affection. “This is helping a lot. Not just the beer. Thank you.”

“Any time. In fact... Why don’t we do this every week? Tuesdays’re good for me, I’m not on patrol. Hey, we could even start earlier than midnight!”

“Around seven? I’ll get the beer.”

“Deal. And I don’t have to tell you what to do if he gets another tip-off.”

“You don’t.”

“And how long’s he gonna be like this? I can stay tonight. I can drop in a coupla times a day.”

Wesley shook his head. “He’ll sleep it off. Don’t worry. We’ve been through worse. This...” He touched a knuckle to his swollen lip. “I got careless. I know how to make sure it doesn’t happen again. You don’t have to worry.”

“I’ll head off when I’ve finished this, then.” There was less than an inch of beer left. “You gonna be able to get some sleep?”

Wesley nodded, turned to point towards a door at the other side of the living room, opposite Angel’s. “Another wall. An inch of solid wood. And an year’s supply of industrial hearing protection. It makes all the difference.”

“Wesley, I do like your attitude.” Gunn finished his beer in one mouthful, put the bottle on the coffee table, and stood up. “I oughta get a start on the sleepin’ myself. Been a long day.”

At the door, Wesley thanked Gunn again, and started to raise his hand. Gunn shook his head firmly, and stepped forward, smiling, to put his arms around Wesley. He heard - and felt - Wesley give a small sound of surprise, and then felt the pressure of Wesley’s hand, warm against his back.

Low, in Wesley’s ear: “You take care, English,” and then Gunn stepped back, and found a completely new expression on Wesley’s face: shy, amazed, pleasure. Gunn felt an expansion of heat in his chest, so strong and sudden it was almost painful, and then, a heartbeat later, a jolt of heat between his legs. Oh, god. Of course. Why hadn’t he realised before? He didn’t just like Wesley, he didn’t just want to know him better - he wanted him.

Oh, man. This was too much. Time to leave. Really time to leave. And time to pray that Angel did sleep it off, didn’t get another tip-off, because Gunn was going to need all of a week to work this one out. He opened the door. “Take care, yeah?”

“And you. Until next Tuesday. What beer don’t you like?”

“It’s all good. Night, Wesley.”

Gunn needed to spend at least the next hour just thinking. Shouldn’t do it when he was driving. Couldn’t do it parked in front of Wesley’s apartment, because Wesley might look out and notice Gunn hadn’t left. There was an all-night diner a few blocks away. He might as well do his thinking over a coffee or a Coke.

There were four other customers. Gunn sat in the window, as he always did; he didn’t like being at the back of a room if he could help it. The waitress said the apple pie was good, and he ordered that as well as a coffee.

So why hadn’t he realised before? It had started over the meal, hadn’t it? OK, the wanting, the obvious wanting, that had just happened, but to drive away wondering if Wesley liked him - a man he’d spent barely two hours with - to be planning for the next meal, the next time he’d call, that was about wanting to be close to Wesley. Wanting Wesley to let him in. And tonight, his reaction to the touch of Wesley’s hand - Jeez! to just the sight of Wesley’s hand. Memorising every new expression on Wesley’s face. Yes, Charles Gunn, those are strange things to be thinking about a friend.

He hadn’t realised, because Wesley was white. He’d never wanted a white man before, not really, not one he’d actually met. Hadn’t wanted many black men, but when he had... Well, he hadn’t thought about it before, never had any reason to, but feeling so close to Luke, and then feeling drawn to the others, afterwards, part of that had to be because of what they shared, what was understood. White guys, even the ones on the crew, the ones he trusted with his life, you knew they lived in a different world, always had, always would. There was always a distance, and he’d never been in the same room as a white body that had made him imagine being pulled across that distance.

And then there was Wesley, and the distance was thousands of miles, and God knows what else, but here he was, with his cock pleading with him to drive back those few blocks, and have Wesley open the door to him again, and then do whatever it took to show Wesley that they needed to be naked together.

Now that it had happened, though, it seemed completely natural. Not in a way to make him think that it should have happened before, that he just hadn't been looking properly at any white guys, but because it was Wesley and Wesley was clever and brave and funny and surprising, and Wesley liked him and appreciated him, and Wesley's face never looked the same to him twice. Gunn had to know if the rest of Wesley's body was as finely made as Wesley's hand, and so far everything he'd seen and felt through those carefully-chosen clothes told him that it was. How could he sleep, how could he think, how could he make himself do anything else, until he'd seen Wesley naked? Learned everything he could learn about how Wesley was made.

Why didn't he drive back, knock on the door? He hadn't been gone long, Wesley wouldn't be asleep yet, might not even be in bed. But if he was in bed, would he hear, what with the inch of solid wood, and Angel, and everything? And if he did hear, what would happen? Would he say, "I knew. I knew you'd come back. I would have gone after you, if it wasn't for Angel."? Or would he look dismayed and shocked, and suddenly exhausted again, and say, "But you know I'm not like that."? And ask Gunn to leave, and say it would be better if he didn't come back?

Gunn would wait, rather than have that happen. He would wait until next week. Having Wesley ask him to leave, that would be terrible, terrible for them both - and Gunn had no idea how Wesley was likely to react. Wesley hadn't given him any clue, except to laugh for a minute straight at the suggestion that Angel was his lover. And, OK, Wesley hadn't been offended, but wouldn't you think, if Wesley was at all interested in men, that he'd've seen that question as a clue about Gunn, said something since to follow up on it? Or maybe he was only interested in middle-class white men, like he must have been with - he must have, right? - at that all-boys school of his. But that didn't have to be fixed, tastes didn't have to be fixed. Gunn had learned that for himself just that evening, so why couldn't Wesley, too? Give him another week. Or two weeks. Or however many evenings he needed of beers and jokes and open, obvious affection.

Gunn was sure he was important to Wesley. Totally sure. Hell, you'd think Wesley'd never been hugged before! There had to be a chance that Wesley just hasn't realised yet. Next week he might realise and Gunn'd be looking out for the moment when he did. Or he'd figure out how to play it if Wesley didn't seem to realise, so it didn't freak him out when Gunn made his move, and he didn't ask Gunn to leave.

Gunn thought he could cope OK if Wesley didn't want him. Been turned down before, got over it fine. But he was gonna make that move sometime. He had to hear Wesley say it, whether it was yes or no.

* * * * *

Gunn spent a lot of that week thinking about Wesley and smiling, whether he was thinking about the jut of Wesley's lower lip, or about Wesley teasing him about having had a normal life as an accountant, or about what might have happened if he had gone back, if he'd found Wesley waiting for him. He managed to save the most complicated, distracting thoughts for the times when he was alone, and while he enjoyed those times, he didn't find himself resenting the time he had to spend with the crew. He wasn't painfully counting down the hours until Tuesday evening. Instead, he felt like he was sailing through the week, surging forward on a wave of energy and enthusiasm. He'd felt almost as good for most of the last few months, since he'd regained his sense of purpose and direction, his belief in possibilities; and Wesley, Wesley's face, Wesley's mouth, every line of Wesley's fine body... So many possibilities there, and all so close, he just had to reach out to touch them.

Wesley called Gunn on Monday afternoon. "Charles? It's Wesley." Gunn knew immediately by the tone of Wesley's voice that he was not calling on business.

"Hey, Wesley. Everything OK? We still on for tomorrow?"

"I wondered what you'd like to eat. If you won't have eaten beforehand."

"Pizza?"

"What kind of pizza do you like?"

"Don't like anchovies. Or spinach or pine nuts or anything that looks too healthy. Just regular pizza but no anchovies."

"OK." Sounded from Wesley's voice like he was smiling. "I think I can arrange that."

"So how you been?"

“Good. We’ve both been fine. You’ll probably be able to meet Angel tomorrow. He thinks he remembers you.”

Angel. God, yes, there was Angel. Gunn had hardly thought about Angel. Well, Angel was a fact of Wesley’s life. If you wanted to learn how Wesley was made, you also had to learn how to cope with Angel. Maybe Angel would even give Gunn the opening he needed with Wesley; hard to imagine how, but he might.

“Yeah? What sort of pizza does he like?”

“He doesn’t eat pizza. He’ll have eaten before you arrive. We probably won’t see much of him. Even at his best, he’s not sociable.”

After he’d broken the connection, Gunn spent the next five minutes trying to decide whether or not Wesley had been deliberately trying to tell him what to expect from Angel when they had their Tuesday evenings. Reassuring him, even, that they could plan on being alone. But that was probably just what anyone with a difficult roommate would do. Gunn shouldn’t take it to mean that Wesley had given any thought to what might happen when they were alone. Wesley might not have thought about him at all in the past week, except to wonder what to feed him.

* * * * *

Wesley looked wonderful. He was wearing a blue shirt with the top two buttons undone, and with the sleeve rolled up. His forearm was perfect, everything Gunn had imagined to match that perfect hand. And the ledge of his collarbones, and the gap between them... Details that Gunn hadn’t dwelt on during the week, because they hadn’t been important to him in the past. But on Wesley, the sight seemed so intimate, so promising – like Wesley had greeted him with a kiss on the lips - that Gunn suddenly wondered how easily he would recover if Wesley did turn him down.

“Angel? This is Charles. Do you remember him from the thrift shop on Denker?” Angel was almost at the other side of the room, standing at the entrance to the kitchen. There was a smell of fresh tomato sauce and Gunn guessed that the two of them had been standing talking while Wesley cooked.

Angel stared at Gunn, looking like he was concentrating hard. There was no trace of the awkwardness that Gunn had seen after the fight. Wesley had probably prepared him for this meeting. And of course this was his home. “You came through the door. You killed the vampire who was going to - There were more of you.”

“Yeah. Me and three of my crew. It was Rondell, though, who killed the vamp who was tryin’ to escape.”

Angel frowned, but Gunn couldn’t tell if the frown was outright puzzlement or just a deeper concentration. Wesley was in the kitchen now, opening the fridge. Gunn watched Wesley fetch and open two beers, and held out his hand to take the first bottle. Gunn had assumed that the second bottle was for Angel, since Angel wasn’t holding a drink, and when Wesley raised the bottle and drank from it himself, Gunn was surprised enough to turn back to Angel and see how he was reacting to such a deliberate snub. But Angel didn’t seem to have noticed anything about Wesley getting beers; he was still staring at Gunn with the same frown.

“Do you remember Charles?” Wesley had come out of the kitchen and was standing almost between them, slightly closer to Angel.

Slowly, still staring at Gunn: “I remember them by the door. Was there shouting? You don’t shout. But I don’t remember... You said he was at Fairfax. In the garden. That he killed the Lurgan with a sword. And the others, too. But I don’t...” Finally, he looked at Wesley, now clearly puzzled. “Was there shouting? Would I have remembered if there had been shouting?”

“There wasn’t much shouting. But you wouldn’t have remembered anyway. You weren’t there. You had to stay here.”

“But I saw it. I saw it in the garden. I knew about the sword.”

“You remember the pictures they showed you. The Powers. You remember what I told you afterwards. About how we killed it with the crossbows and the swords.”

“Does he know I wasn’t there?”

“He knows.”

“Did you tell him?”

“No. He knew already.”

Angel nodded slowly, then looked back at Gunn. “I wasn’t there. Wesley told me.” Gunn wasn’t sure if Angel was talking to him, or to himself. Angel didn’t seem to be expecting a reply, so Gunn just nodded in return, and then took a long swallow of beer.

Wesley had been absolutely right: this man couldn’t have gone on patrol with them, not even on one of his best days, when he was well enough to face another person without flinching. The poor bastard. What would have happened to him without Wesley? At best, he’d be in an institution somewhere, lost, probably terrified. At worst... On the streets. Starving. Definitely terrified.

But you wouldn’t guess, to look at him, that he was so far from being able to fend for himself. You couldn’t guess. He looked so healthy, so much in control. And it wasn’t just the body, it was the presence. Angel gave the impression of being a good four inches taller than he actually was, and he gave off a charge strong enough to bring a shiver to the skin of Gunn’s arms and stomach. Most of that shiver was sex, but it was a sexual reaction that brought no feeling of pleasure to Gunn; instead, it felt like an assault.

Whereas with Wesley... Gunn turned his head, found Wesley looking at Angel with an expression of mild interest and approval. Well, Wesley was a man who probably had the opposite of presence, who didn’t command attention at first sight, but when it was Wesley’s body that called out to his, then the reaction seemed natural as breathing, and just as necessary. What was the difference? Just that he liked Wesley, maybe more than liked him? Or some chemistry thing, that you could never really understand?

Wesley was turning to look at him, and Gunn had to look away, back at Angel, not ready to face Wesley when his feelings were so close to the surface. Trying to find something to say to Angel, something that might move Angel on from that unnerving stare... Well, he’d thought beforehand that Angel might be a useful distraction from Wesley. In the past day he had only managed to think of three things he could try saying to Angel, so he gave himself five seconds and then chose the least unpromising. “Wesley says you’ve been feeling better this past week.”

If anything, Angel’s stare became more unnerving, harder to read. Gunn was about to use his beer again as a way of breaking eye-contact when Angel suddenly took a step forward and said very abruptly, “Wesley wants you to be here.” Then he turned and walked away, heading straight for his room and closing the door behind him.

“Goodnight, Angel.” Wesley was perfectly calm and friendly, like he was saying it to a normal roommate at the end of a normal evening.

Gunn took that drink, then dragged a hand slowly over his head to the back of his neck and gave a deep sigh. “Meaning he doesn’t. Doesn’t want me to be here.”

Wesley shook his head, very definite. “I don’t think he meant it like that at all. I think he meant that he’d noticed that I’ve been looking forward to this evening. It was his way of trying to make you feel welcome.”

Gunn pulled a face. “Jeez.”

Wesley nodded. “I know.”

Then they laughed and stepped forward to clink beer bottles, and Gunn finally saw the full meaning of what Wesley had said, as something about Wesley and himself - not just about Angel. Wesley had been thinking about him, enough for even Angel to notice. OK, he mustn’t read too much into it, but it was good to hear; even if they would only ever be friends, it was good to hear. And they would be friends, wouldn’t they? Strange that in all the time he’d spent that week smiling over what he liked about Wesley, he had somehow not realised how much he was missing his company. Yes, he wanted to take that last step forward and reach out to undo the next button on Wesley’s shirt, but more than that, he wanted an evening of pizza and beer and talking; he wanted the evening that Wesley had been looking forward to.

“I never thought you’d be making pizza. The dough and everythin’?”

“It’s the first time I’ve really tried to cook with only one hand. Do more than just heat. Angel... Well, food doesn’t feature with him. And when it’s just for yourself...” Wesley shrugged.

Gunn nodded towards Angel’s door. “I can see you’d think twice about havin’ friends around.”

“If I had any other friends in L.A. In California. I’ve only even -” He frowned down at the kitchen surface. “And that doesn’t really count.”

“What doesn’t?”

Wesley looked at him, head tilted, like he was sizing him up. “You’ll think I’m making it up.”

“Now I just gotta know what you think is gonna sound weirder to me than this.” Gunn gestured around the room with his beer bottle.

Wesley paused, then gave one of his half-smiles. “OK. Do you watch television?”

“Yeah?” Gunn thought it was an odd question, then looked over his shoulder to check, and realised Wesley didn’t have a TV. Not in the living-room, anyway.

“Have you ever seen a show called ‘Cordy’?”

“The ditzzy chick with the mouth out to here?” Gunn tapped his fingers high on his own cheekbone. “Sure. Who hasn’t?”

“Me and Angel. He’d heard about the show, though. Showed me some magazines. We knew her in Sunnydale. When she was in high-school. I took her out to dinner once. And apart from lunch with you, that’s the only time I’ve eaten socially with someone since I came here.” Wesley wasn’t bitter; he sounded like he’d only just noticed the fact himself.

“And you say dinner with Cordy doesn’t count? Have to wonder what would count.”

Wesley shook his head. “We weren’t friends. We had a stupid crush on each other for a few months, then we finally worked up to...” He swallowed. “Kissing. And that put a stop to it for both of us.”

“Yeah? It was that bad? Was she not...? Well, I suppose in high-school -”

“No, no, it wasn’t - It just didn’t work. Imagine anything you like. It couldn’t be any more excruciating than what actually happened.” A quarter-smile this time, lopsided and wry.

“So what’s she like? Apart from what I’m not going to imagine.”

“She’s sharp. Very good company when she wants to be. Says exactly what she thinks, which saves a lot of time.” A shrug. “There’s a lot to admire about her, including the smile.”

“You must wish -”

An abrupt shake of the head. “I don’t think about it. It was out of the question then, and now Angel wouldn’t want to see her again. Even at his best, he’d think it was pointless, he’d be - And she could take a lot in her stride, but... Why would she?”

“Right. You don’t think about it.”

Another shrug. “It was just a stupid crush.”

Wesley and Cordy. Cordy in high school. That gave Gunn a lot to think about. A white woman. No. A white girl. But it hadn’t worked out. Really hadn’t worked out. He’d said they weren’t even friends. Did that mean Wesley was basically gay? Did it mean his chances with Wesley were better than Cordy’s because he and Wesley were friends? Or did it just mean there was no wonder Wesley’d been looking forward to the evening, if Gunn was the first friend he’d made since he came to California?

“Why don’t you have a TV? Does it bother Angel too much? The pictures?”

Wesley and Angel both preferred to read. Angel hadn’t had a TV even before the accident. Wesley got his news from the newspapers, would always rather see a film in the cinema, had no idea about TV shows. His family had never had a TV, his fancy school hadn’t let them watch TV, and nothing he’d heard since had made him want to start. “What do you like to watch, then?”

A good question, since it was six years since Gunn had been to see any film that wasn’t by Spike Lee, or didn’t involve Denzel or someone else from “Malcolm X”, and it was nearly two years since he’d started steadily crossing TV shows off his list. “The worst of them I just won’t watch. I leave the room. ‘E.R.’ - I’m outta there. I see those credits, the way they have all of the whites first, leave the black men right to the end, and I’m reachin’ for my axe. Keep my mouth shut, though. Well, mostly. Nowadays. You gotta watch somethin’, right? Crew needs their ways t’wind down. If they can manage to ignore that shit, then...” He shrugged. “I ignored it for enough years. Not like I’m doing anythin’ about it like writin’ to the networks. They’re only stupid TV shows. You could sort out every single one, and it wouldn’t make any difference to what’s happ’nin’ on the streets. But I see now what they do, how they do it, and I’m not gonna sit and suck it up like everythin’s OK.”

Wesley asked him more about the worst shows, if Cordy’s show was crossed off his list, and then whether he’d seen “Summer of Sam” - Spike Lee’s latest - and what he’d thought of it. It wasn’t Gunn’s favourite, but he had certainly enjoyed it more than Wesley, who had walked out after less than an hour. “There were too many stupid, inarticulate people having the same stupid, inarticulate conversations over and over again. I’m sure it’s very true to life, but when a film’s giving you a pounding headache, you know you have to leave.”

Gunn could see Wesley’s point, but thought he would have got more out of the film if he’d been closer to that kind of background, and while Wesley was rolling out the dough and constructing the pizzas, he explained what the film had to offer if you’d grown up in the inner-city.

“I thought it must be something like that. But I’m not going to see it again.”

“No, no reason you should. Fuck, I wouldn’t try to watch ‘Eyes Wide Shut’ again, even if you told me there were a hundred good reasons.”

“I didn’t see that. I’ve been boycotting Tom Cruise since ‘Top Gun’. Was that the last film you walked out of?”

The subject of films and actors they hated kept them occupied very happily while they were eating and for long afterwards. They didn’t agree entirely on any of the films or actors, and some, the other had never even heard of, but at least they didn’t disagree entirely, either. Gunn thought it would be years before he would be able to predict what Wesley would hate, or what they would both like, but the learning was gonna be fun, every step of the way.

Gunn turned down a third beer around ten p.m., because he was driving, and Wesley didn’t get another for himself, but made coffee - and remembered that he’d bought some flan. He brought out two but then ignored his own, and Gunn ate the second without bothering to check with Wesley; he felt that he knew at least that much about how Wesley’s mind worked.

Coming up to midnight, Gunn knew it was time for him to leave, if he was going to leave. Wesley had done nothing that could give Gunn any real encouragement, but also nothing to make him give up, either. Everything new that Gunn had learned could be taken in several ways, from the story of Cordy and the terrible kiss, to Wesley’s opinions on the attractiveness of various film stars (Judy Davis, Susan Sarandon and Laura Dern - very attractive. Tom Cruise and Patrick Swayze - rodents foisted on a too-tolerant public). From the first time that Wesley gave one of those opinions, Gunn kept waiting for Wesley to ask who he found attractive (ready to say “Angela Bassett and Danny Glover”), but Wesley never asked. But was that a clue in itself, even his main clue? Maybe Wesley already thought he was gay, and was leaving him to bring the subject up in his own time?

Gunn had decided that his own time might as well be now. Wesley just wasn’t going to give him any more clues. There was no point in waiting. And he had an idea for how to play it, and he did think - mostly from the way they’d been able to disagree about films - that they’d get through OK, even if Wesley had to turn him down. And Wesley was sitting there, close enough to touch, with blue shadows across his collarbones, and the hollow between them gleaming moist and warm.

“What were you thinking?” Wesley must have been waiting, just letting him think, for well over a minute.

Gunn smiled, and shook his head. "Not important. 's gettin' late, though." He stood up, followed by Wesley, who walked him slowly to the door, asking about times and food for their next evening.

At the door, Wesley turned to face Gunn, smiling fondly and starting to reach out for him. Gunn didn't smile back, but put one hand on Wesley's arm, near the shoulder, and the other hand on Wesley's waist. "Wesley. If I don't do this it's gonna bug me all week. You told me to imagine, and I have been." And he drew Wesley close and kissed him, keeping the pressure light, so light, and keeping his mouth closed.

Gunn felt Wesley's start of reaction at every point where their bodies touched. Wesley gasped and clutched at him, and Gunn held Wesley more tightly, and moved his head so his closed lips could trace the line of Wesley's open mouth. Just for the few seconds in which he couldn't stop himself though, because he knew that Wesley gasping was most-likely just from shock.

Gunn drew back, but he didn't let go his hold on Wesley's arm or waist. Wesley wasn't trying to pull away, and he didn't seem to be shocked – but he did look confused, and yeah, like he thought something bad was happening and it was gonna get worse. So what was the bad thing for him? Being kissed by a man? Being kissed by his friend Charles? Or just something happening that he hadn't at all expected? When Gunn saw that look on the face of someone he cared about, his instinct was to hold tight, offer reassurance through his body, but that wouldn't be reassuring for Wesley right now.

"Well, if I was Cordy, I wouldn't want to stop there."

Wesley frowned for a second, and then his expression started to clear, like he was gathering together the reasons why the story about himself and Cordy might explain what Gunn had done. Then his expression suddenly changed again, became wary. "And if you weren't Cordelia?"

Slowly, almost a whisper: "Then I really wouldn't want to stop." He drew Wesley close again, also slowly, so there wouldn't be any surprise this time, so Wesley would have all the chance he'd need to pull away. But Wesley met him with a long groan, and with real need, not how Gunn had been imagining him at all. Sure he'd imagined Wesley wanting him, course he had - but always that he'd play it cool, play it English, there wouldn't be more than a couple of seconds where he couldn't help himself. The difference, with the heat of Wesley pressed against him, with Wesley's mouth open and hungry under his... The difference showed him that he hardly knew Wesley at all. He was about to have sex with a friend he still barely knew. Anything could happen. It was... not frightening exactly, but serious and real and with a charge of pure excitement that Gunn hadn't guessed at when he'd been imagining.

Wesley suddenly drew back, though, after far too short a time. Had it been ten heartbeats? Twenty? Wesley's expression was much worse than wary now: it was a pained disbelief. Gunn reached out for him, acting now on that instinct to reassure, but Wesley drew back further. "Is this..." Wesley swallowed, again pulling further away. "Is this a joke?" Not a challenge or an accusation, but a real question, asked out of real doubt.

Yes, this was serious. For both of them. This was real. "Oh, Wesley." Gunn shook his head hard, over and over. "I've been wantin' to do this since the first time I made you laugh. It's anythin' but a joke." Then he paused and gave a long, shuddering breath. "Unless you want it to be?"

Wesley made a small sound, deep in his throat, then almost threw himself at Gunn, and then they were swaying, staggering, pushing one another off balance as they struggled to get inside one another's skin. At first their struggle involved every part of their bodies that could be made to touch without them breaking the kiss, but after Gunn backed Wesley against the door, the struggle became concentrated on their erections.

When the gasping was on the verge of becoming panting, Gunn did, somehow, manage to break the kiss. "Wesley. Wesley. C'n we slow down? God, I - I've spent half the evenin' thinkin' about gettin' you outta that shirt. Gettin' to see you properly. Kinda imagined we'd save it for your bed." But Wesley was shaking his head, and he was frowning, looking really uncomfortable. Nothing simple, like he just didn't want to slow down, and Gunn went with the first guess he found. "Y' don't take men to bed? Y'like it best like this?" He was curious, not sure yet if he should be offended.

Another shake of Wesley's head, almost violent. "I can't - I can't let you see me. You can't see what happened to my arm. If you still want to go to bed, we can't put the light on."

Gunn couldn't reply for several seconds, too angry with himself. No, deeper than angry: disappointed. A whole week he'd been thinking about Wesley's body, and he hadn't come close, not for a second, to wondering how Wesley felt about that body. He'd do better from now on, he would. "OK." He leaned forward and touched his lips lightly to Wesley's. "C'n we go now, then? I still need t'get you outta that shirt."

Wesley looked so relieved it was almost painful to see. What had he thought Gunn would do? Settle for a quick hump against the door and then leave? Or just leave, 'cos it grossed him out having Wesley talk like that about the arm?

Wesley led the way, turning out the lights in the living-room before he opened the door. The bedroom was small, with just enough room for the double bed, chair and nightstand against one wall, and the wardrobe and chest-of-drawers against the other. The window was at the far end, opposite the door, and the curtains were open, letting in the light from the street. The light was bright enough that Gunn could see the outline of the furniture, but too dim for him to read any expression on Wesley's face.

"Is there anything else you can't let me do?" They were standing by the side of the bed and Gunn had his hand at the neck of Wesley's shirt, just barely touching but he could feel the third button grazing his palm, and the ledge of the collarbone almost sharp under his fingertips. "Can I take your shirt off? What can I do?"

Wesley brought his hand up to cover Gunn's. They had both calmed down a lot since they had come into the bedroom. "Yes, of course you can. It's just... Don't touch... my shoulder. Don't... pull anything rough across it. Apart from that, you can do anything." He moved his hand to Gunn's chest and curled his fingers around the neck of Gunn's T-shirt; Gunn closed his eyes as Wesley's knuckles pressed against the base of his throat, hard and warm. "It's more what I can do. I can't undress you. Not with what you're wearing. I'd end up half-strangling you. And after that..." An uneven sigh. "I don't know what I can do." He lifted his hand away, then let it drop by his side.

"This is the first time for you since...?"

Wesley just nodded, or that was what the movement looked like in the dim light.

Gently, wanting to reassure: "Then we'll both be finding out what we can do. Look, why don't I...?" He let go of Wesley's shirt, took a step back, then shrugged out of his jacket and then his T-shirt, letting them both drop to the floor near the foot of the bed. He was about to move back to Wesley when he decided that he might as well make things as simple as he could; and he sat down on the bed to take off his shoes and socks, and then shucked the rest of his clothes.

It was exciting, suddenly being naked in front of Wesley, even if Wesley couldn't see him; he was reminded, all over again, that they hardly knew each other. Wesley obviously found it exciting, too: he stepped forward to pull Gunn into a kiss, already starting to breathe heavily again. Gunn groaned at the first touch of Wesley's body against his bare skin, and groaned again as Wesley's hand left his shoulder-blade and began to move slowly down his spine; he couldn't remember another time when he'd felt like this, aware of every inch of his skin.

Wesley was the one who broke the kiss, though he still kept a tight hold on Gunn. "I'm still wearing my shirt."

"Well... I could do somethin' 'bout that if we'd just let go of each other for five seconds."

"Five seconds?" Wesley made a sound like he was weighing his options, then let go and took a step back. "I'll be timing you."

Of course Gunn wasn't going to hurry like that, not when he'd been looking forward to this all week. If he'd been able to see Wesley properly he would probably have taken even longer - whenever he'd imagined this, he'd given himself long pauses to drink in each new sight, and to tell Wesley what the sight was doing to him - but now it was enough to work steadily downwards, learning Wesley's body simply from the brush of hair against his knuckles, from Wesley's shiver as he moved past the edge of the ribcage down to the smooth, yielding skin of Wesley's stomach. He pulled the shirt out of the waistband, undid the last buttons, then carefully lifted it clear of Wesley's left shoulder so it could fall across Wesley's back, then finally pulled it off Wesley's right arm.

"Should I hang it up?"

A shake of the head. "No. Leave it with yours."

Gunn reached back without looking and let the shirt fall, then dropped to his knees and started unlacing Wesley's shoes.

Wesley made to step back. "You don't have to."

"You set me a deadline, English. And now you're tryin' to get in my way?"

Wesley laughed. "You made me lose count."

"Get in my way and then blame me. Is that a good start?"

As soon as Wesley had stepped out of his trousers and underwear, Gunn pushed them out of the way, then knelt up, put his hands lightly on the outside of Wesley's thighs, just below the hips, and then went still, looking up at Wesley naked in the light from the street. The room seemed full, suddenly, with the sound of their breathing.

Gunn couldn't see much, but he could see enough to wonder why it had taken him so long to want a man like this one. Those long, fine lines... They knew him. They spoke to him. They made him feel unsettled and wanting, and calm and completed, both at once.

And he could also see enough to understand why Wesley wanted the light off. Even a pinned-up sleeve was still there as a sleeve, giving your eye a good part of what it expected to be seeing. But with the shirt gone there was no distraction, no disguise, and yes it was a raw shock to see an arm with nothing on the opposite side, nothing at all.

Wesley must still hate to look in the mirror. Because six months wasn't long. Not to get used to something so wrong. Wrong, that was, because it shouldn't have happened, shouldn't ever happen. Some people would think it was ugly, wrong that way too. Maybe most people would think that. But not Gunn. Right now, he couldn't imagine how he could find anything about Wesley that wasn't perfect to him.

"I'm too thin. I know." Wesley sounded resigned.

Gunn moved his right hand on Wesley's thigh, stroking hard with his thumb. "That's kind of what I thought the first time I saw you. But God, have I got used to it! Lean. That's what I'd call you."

"Oh." A satisfied sigh. "I like that." Wesley pushed his hips towards Gunn, probably more from instinct than asking outright and Gunn didn't need to know which, because either way he'd still be reacting with the same rush of hunger. Learning the difference for when it did matter – that would come in time.

"I guessed." He was leaning forward, pulling Wesley closer, and then Wesley's cock was inside his mouth, deep inside his mouth, and Wesley was crying out, and clutching at his shoulder. Gunn didn't mean to suck Wesley off, not yet. He just needed to know him, to learn him, to taste him and hold him and be shaken by his pulse. Wesley seemed to understand this very quickly: he became still again, apart from the small choked sounds he made when Gunn flexed his tongue or swallowed.

In the first moments Gunn had thought that he could stay like that for hours, for as long as Wesley would let him, but within a minute all he could think about was the state of his own cock, pulsing exactly in time with Wesley's, it seemed, and desperate, desperate to be touched. Wesley sighed as Gunn released him and stood up, and then they were pressed hard together, gasping into one another's mouths, almost as urgent as they'd been at the front door.

"Do you...?" Wesley paused for breath. "Do you still want to go to bed?"

Gunn frowned, struggling to cool his brain enough to understand the question. Bed? Did he want to go to bed? He wanted to feel like this forever - nothing else seemed important. "I don't - What do you want?"

Slowly: "I think we should. It'll make it seem real."

The other half of Gunn's brain suddenly woke itself up. Not like it'd been drenched with cold water, but interested, with questions of its own. "It doesn't seem real? I can still feel the size of you in my mouth. How's it not seem real?"

"You're still here. You shouldn't - You didn't leave when I thought you'd have to. And it's too much that you'd been thinking about this too. It's too much to believe."

"You mean you'd been thinking about us in bed? Us going to bed? Just this evenin'? Or all week, or -?"

Wesley was shaking his head. "I wouldn't presume. I thought you just... That you must be like that with all your friends. I was just wondering when you'd call me 'English' again. And wondering who might be lucky enough to take you to bed."

A pause while Gunn reshaped some of his memories, especially of the last few hours. "Did you think it was a man?"

"I thought it could be. I thought you might have someone in your crew. You seemed..."

Someone in his crew? A man in his crew? Like the crew would stand for that. But he got a charge out of the idea of Wesley thinking about it. "So your guess was as close as mine was about you and Angel." He released his hold on Wesley's back, and took hold instead of the arms of Wesley's glasses, starting to lift them clear. "Are we going to bed, then, English?"

Wesley got in first, slid over to the far side, near the window, and then sat waiting with his right knee raised and his hand resting on the knee, looking almost as formal as he did in his best suit. Gunn slid in next to him, raised his left knee to the same angle, and reached over to cover Wesley's hand with his own and pull Wesley's leg close against his. Wesley sighed and leaned against him, pushing his face against Gunn's shoulder.

"For a moment there, I thought you were havin' second thoughts, or somethin' . You looked so serious."

"No! Oh, no. Just trying to work out how to warn you that... Well, I can't lie on my left side, for example. That it is going to make a difference."

Gunn took his hand off Wesley's knee, moved it slowly down Wesley's inner thigh. "But you didn't want us to stay standing up."

Wesley's hand was on Gunn's thigh now, following a similar path. "That's for something quick in an alley. No, not always, but I don't want us to act as if we won't be seeing each other again. If we'll be doing this again, if you'll be spending the night, we have to learn what I can do."

Wesley's breathing had gotten more and more uneven as their hands had moved steadily lower, and then they finally took hold of one another, and it was many minutes before Gunn could really form a thought about what Wesley had said, let alone put that thought into words. The angle between hand and cock was awkward, for both of them, so there were many things that neither of them could do, but it wasn't about proving anything to do with technique, it was about paying attention - noticing, and remembering, and responding. It was a conversation, and they matched and pleased one another in here just as well as they did out there over beer and pizza.

"This isn't really a fair test of what you can do."

"I'm prepared to cheat. Sometimes."

"Wesley. I want to kiss you all over. The backs of your knees, everything. But if I've got all night to do that, then right now I wanna lie down with you and hold you tight as I can and I wanna feel you come. We can make it better next time but for now I wanna have that."

Wesley immediately nodded and started disentangling his arm and then sliding down to lie on his back. Gunn stretched out on top, fitted his mouth to Wesley's, then reached down to work his right hand between their stomachs and wrap it around both cocks.

Wesley came first. Gunn felt the gathering, was ready for the frozen stillness, the pleading, astonished moan, the sudden hot pulse against his skin. But he wasn't quite ready for his own feeling of astonishment - that he and this man could have nothing in common, could hardly know each other, and yet decide to do this together, and become closer in a few minutes than if they'd been friends for ten years.

Wesley was the first to speak afterwards. Slowly, voice still roughened: "Definitely the right thing to do."

"Yeah. Oh, yeah." A long sigh. "You want me to move?"

"Some time in the next half hour, maybe. You're a good weight. Not too thin."

“Not lean, that’s for sure.” Gunn raised himself enough that they could kiss again - and the kiss felt different to him from all the kisses they’d had before: more casual, but much more intimate. Their bodies knew that they had rights to one another now; they’d earned them, and here was Gunn’s first taste of that difference.

“Guess I should call my crew. Before they try to call me.”

“They know where you are?”

“Nah. Got my cellphone. But I’m always tellin’ ‘em how they gotta check in. So we know we can set the defences for the night. I made the rules, so... Haven’t had a chance before, t’set an example.”

“Because you always know when you’re going to be out all night?”

“Pretty much.” In fact, he hadn’t dated anyone - not staying-the-night dated - since the vampires moved in. Since Denise. But those kinds of details could wait for another night. “I’ll make the call next door, OK?” He started getting out of bed.

“OK.” Wesley’s voice was quiet, almost a question; he must be wondering what Gunn didn’t want him to hear. Gunn wasn’t planning on saying anything beyond the fact that he wouldn’t be back until morning, but for now it just didn’t feel right to talk to his crew while he was naked in the same room as Wesley, while Wesley was lying in the bed where they’d had sex. Because that would make it seem like it wasn’t a big deal - and it was a big deal to him, and it would be a very big deal to his crew. He would explain to Wesley, but not tonight. He just didn’t want to get into any of that tonight.

Eladio answered the phone, and Gunn told him as planned that that he wouldn’t be back until morning. Eladio didn’t ask where he was, though Vince or Dean would have, and would have been told that it was none of their business. Gunn went to the kitchen to get a couple of beers from the fridge, and returned to find that Wesley was still lying there with the covers half-off, but with his arm now stretched out across the sheet.

“D’ you wanna beer? Hope so, ‘cos I already opened them.”

Wesley sat up quickly - very quickly, suddenly very alert. “You went to the fridge?” Definitely alert, almost alarmed. Was he worried that Gunn might have disturbed Angel somehow, that Angel might have come out of his room and found Gunn wandering around naked and sticky? But wouldn’t the phone call be more likely to wake Angel, not someone fetching beers?

“I shut the door ‘n’ everythin’. Do you want one? If we’re gonna talk all night.”

Wesley suddenly smiled and relaxed, and held out his hand. “Not all night. Unless you can talk while you’re kissing the back of my knee.”

Gunn had just got settled with his left arm around Wesley’s waist, when Wesley said, “Actually... Could you hand me my glasses and put the bedside light on?”

“Sure. What d’ you need to check?”

Wesley didn’t reply until he had his glasses on, and until he’d looked at Gunn for what seemed like a minute. “Exactly how lucky I am. I always want to be able to see you. From now on.”

“Yeah?” Gunn felt like he couldn’t stop smiling. “That’ll be good. Does this mean that you... That you’re OK about -”

Wesley was shaking his head. “No. Not really. I don’t know how we...” A sigh. “Angel... When I first came out of hospital, before we knew each other well enough to know how to - He had this way of managing not to see it. Maybe more for his own sake than for mine, but it helped. And...” Another sigh, harsher. “I have these things I have to do to get dressed. I couldn’t bear anyone to watch. In the morning, I’ll have to ask you to look away.”

“You got it. You c’n ask me to do anythin’. Don’t havta tell me why.”

“Charles. Thank you.”

They got settled again and drank for a while in silence, clearly both enjoying the sight of each other, and of their bodies against one another. Gunn was thinking that, with the way he felt now, he didn't ever want to have sex with anyone else. Don't want to have his arm around any other waist. Feel any hand except Wesley's on his thigh. Still barely knew this man but right now... If he wasn't in love with him, then he didn't know what love would feel like, how a heart or a body could manage to feel anything more than this.

So what were they going to do? If they both felt the same – and Gunn thought they did – and if they still had those feelings in a week or a month? How much were they going to let it change their lives?

“What will Angel think of me stayin' the night? Will it freak him out? Freak him further out, guess I should say.”

“I - I don't -” A sigh and a long pause. “I think that's his problem.”

“You think he'll have a problem with it?”

“I have no idea. But he's not in a good position to question anyone else's choices. And it's none of his business.”

“And you're gonna tell him that?”

“Yes. Ten or twenty times, if necessary.” Angel had made some bad choices? Gunn was curious, but he'd ask some other time; he and Wesley must have a hundred better things to talk about tonight than Angel. Well, make that ninety-nine, because the next thing Wesley said was: “So when was the first time you made me laugh?”

Gunn shrugged. “When I asked if you and Angel were ‘dating’.” Not that he would have used that word at the time if he had managed to complete any of his sentences, but he used it now because he wanted to make the whole idea ridiculous. Wesley was his. Even if the rival was only there in his own imagination, Wesley was his.

“Oh, yes. That time.” A fond memory for Wesley, clear in the tone of his voice.

“So he's completely straight, is he?”

Thoughtful: “I don't know that Angel is ‘completely’ anything. As far as that goes, he was involved with a girl when I first met him. A classmate of Cordelia's.”

“Was that how the two of you met?”

“More or less.”

Some time later, Gunn said, “I can't get over the idea you'd noticed me too. Like you'd even put in time wonderin' who I was dating. I'd been lookin' for anythin', for you to give any sign I might have a chance with you. And I still swear I got nothin'. I mean, way you talked about Cordy! And then all that about Susan Sarandon and Laura Dern. You couldn't've given me one clue?”

“That would have meant that I was hoping. And I wasn't. I couldn't. So I told myself to forget about it and just look forward to the evening. Which I did.”

“Man. I couldn't forget about it. I had to try. Was prepared to wait a few weeks. Y'know, pickin' up clues. But I wasn't gonna forget about it till I knew I had to.”

Slowly: “I can scarcely imagine doing that. Have you always found it easy, making that first move with someone?”

“Didn't say it was easy. Not with you. But, yeah, been told no often enough I know it won't kill me.”

“No? People say no to you?” Disbelieving.

“Strange, huh? Well, you said no to Cordy.”

A groan. “That's not quite -”

Gunn interrupted, firmly. “That’s gonna be my version. And how she came to L.A. to try to forget you. I’d have to wish her luck with that.”

Wesley laughed so hard he nearly spilled his beer. “Yes. I may borrow that version when you’re not using it. I do like your ideas about my sex life. Maybe we should just decide that they’re all true.”

“If you can promise me Angel’s gonna know he’s met his match, then sure.”

* * * * *

When Gunn woke the next morning, he knew straight away where he was, whose bed, and God, what a wonderful fact to wake up to. He was facing away from Wesley and their bodies weren’t touching, so he rolled over, arm reaching out - and found that Wesley was sitting up in bed, and wearing a robe that felt cool and thin.

“You up already? What time is it?”

“It’s about nine. I had to go and check on Angel.”

Gunn hauled himself upright. “You tell him about us? How’d he take it?”

“He took it very well.” A shrug. “In fact, he insisted I’d already told him. He said he already knew when he met you last night.”

“Oh. What you think that’s about?”

“It’s about the damage to his brain. There’s nothing to read into it. He does strange things with information.”

“OK. You had a shower too? Your hair’s still damp.”

“I usually get dressed before I check on him in the mornings. But that didn’t seem right when you were still asleep.”

“What about shaving?” Gunn smiled, and reached out to place his hand on Wesley’s face and rub his thumb along Wesley’s chin. “Just wondering how long each morning I’ll get to see you with the stubble.”

Wesley smiled back, and pushed against Gunn’s hand. “You like stubble?”

“I like you. I like every new thing about you I couldn’t’ve guessed. This makes you look so different. ‘n’ I could already stare at you for hours.”

“Different how?”

Years younger. And hopeful. Innocent, kind of. Like he’d never been hurt. And his mouth... Against the stubble his mouth looked so red and full. It looked so tender.

Gunn had been horny from the moment he’d woken up: a steady, all-over horny, no real focus, happy just to simmer. But looking at Wesley’s mouth, thinking the words to describe it, and suddenly Gunn was burning up with wanting to fuck that mouth. Not just fuck it but claim it, make it know there was only one cock in the world that could ever be real to it. God, so fierce, the wanting so fierce Gunn was shocked he could feel it - like it came from nowhere, like it came from someone else. He tried to push the feeling down, tried just to feel how he had when he first woke up.

“Oh, different like... Not lookin’ anythin’ like an accountant. More like how I’d’ve imagined a demon expert would look. If you’d asked me before I saw you at work in your suit. With your books. Y’know, doin’ it your way. ‘s kinda sexy, though, t’see that you’re both.”

Wesley looked shy and pleased and uncertain, and Gunn caught his breath as the blood slammed into his cock, thought he might’ve rocked like he’d been punched. His hand had started to shake and he took it away from Wesley’s face, not trusting himself now to touch Wesley.

Course this wasn’t from nowhere. Course it came from him. Was it...? Was it Wesley looking different, but acting the same? Seeing Wesley gone distant, every line in his face a warning to keep away, that you couldn’t know him? Seeing

that and needing to break through, needing it fierce. And right to need it, 'cos when he was through Wesley would look at him like he was now: like he was thinking this was too good, he couldn't believe it, he hadn't let himself hope. Looking at Gunn like that, while his face was still giving the same warning to everyone else in the world. So Gunn was hooked, through his cock, his heart, his throat. And Wesley had no idea, because Wesley expected nothing.

"As long as you like the accountant, too. Because that's the only part I can ever see. I mean, sitting here, I was never going to do anything except watch you sleeping. But I still had to bring my Sanskrit Grammar in with me, pretend it was an ordinary day. The demon expert would have done better."

The book was open face-downwards in Wesley's lap. Gunn touched the spine, and struggled to keep his voice even. "Is this for the translation? The one you have to finish today?"

"Yes, I've been -" Wesley broke off, and stared at him, frowning. "What's wrong? You sound as if you're in pain."

Gunn shook his head, made his best try at casual, a grin, even. "It's the stubble. Got me so hard, so fast, I could - Too hard. Want to take you." He closed his eyes, swallowed. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it. You don't have to..."

"You think I'll be worried that you want me?"

"Like this, yeah. The moment you touched me, I'd be - I'd be so far past bein' able to think about you. It'd be bad. Let me deal with it."

"No." Steely. Ice-cold. Another aspect of Wesley. Another aspect Gunn hadn't suspected until it was looking right at him. "Not under my roof. Will you take my mouth or do you need to fuck me?"

Gunn gave a raw cry, clawed back the covers, and seized himself, desperate - now beyond wanting anything specific, even beyond wanting Wesley, aware of little except the furnace between his legs. He was vaguely aware of Wesley crouched over him, trying to pull his hand away, get some purchase on his bucking hips, but it would have taken maybe three men, each with two strong arms, to make his hips and his hand stop what they were doing.

By the time it was over, he had slid halfway down the bed. He lay, gasping and quivering, while Wesley slowly licked the come from his belly - feeling the rasp of stubble and the cold tracing of glass and metal along with soft, liquid warmth, and feeling like he was the one who had been claimed, and thoroughly, thoroughly fucked.

They kissed for a long time, while Gunn's pulse slowed to the same steady pace as Wesley's. "What about you? What do you need? I've never done that with a man. Fucking. Not yet."

Wesley was shaking his head. "It can wait. Everything. Until this evening. I mean, I can wait. For whatever we're both in the mood for. This evening. I have to deliver the translation before five. So... any time after six?"

"OK, I'll -" Gunn swore and banged his head hard, twice, back against the pillow. "I'm on patrol. And tomorrow, too. Every night except Tuesdays and Fridays."

"What time do you finish?"

"Two? Three? Depends what's out there. Oh, damn!"

"What's the matter? Come over when you're finished."

"And make you wait up like that? When it could be any time? You've got work, you've got Angel. You can't do that every night."

"Then why don't you call when you're ready to come over? I'm a light sleeper. I'll be awake then when you arrive. Except..." A sudden frown. "If Angel gets a tip-off and we have to go out. If I don't answer after fifteen rings or more, that's what's happened."

"Then I'll call the next morning. Maybe meet you for lunch? If Angel's OK to be left that long."

Gunn left the apartment just after ten, after he'd had a shower and shared a coffee with Wesley. He didn't go straight back to the base, but stopped at the same diner, partly to give himself more time, but mostly because he still needed

breakfast. Wesley had nothing but the plainest vanilla yogurts, and Gunn needed something sweet in the morning, something with carbs. He sat in the same window booth as he had the previous week and ordered coffee and apple pie, same as then too – wanting the same there, to mark how everything else was different. Wesley had said yes, and everything, everything was different.

When the pie arrived, Gunn sank his fork into it, broke off a good chunk - and then left the fork on the plate, left his coffee to go cold. What was food when he could live for a month on this sizzling, amazed, excited feeling? The feeling seemed larger than he was, all the time bubbling up right in the core of him, and pushing out and up, up to his throat. And his throat... His throat was glowing with remembering the shape of Wesley in his mouth; and it was like the memories were just seconds old, not hours. Gunn sat and stared out the window, and found he couldn't stop smiling.

Once he was back at the base, he did managed to act normally around his crew. Not difficult, really, since all he had to do was imagine how they'd react if they knew exactly why he was smiling. The day had its quiet moments, and on an ordinary day he would have had ten different ideas for filling the quiet, depending on who was around; and none of the ideas would have involved taking the truck out and parking a few blocks away, and sitting for half an hour doing nothing but be in love with Wesley.

The third quiet time was around seven in the evening, and he knew, driving back, that it would be the last one that day. From here on it was the evening meal, then the week's finances, then preparation for patrol, and then out in the truck again, but not alone, not able to stop and close his eyes and see his skin against Wesley's – this picture, and that picture, and this moment – and oh how they were different, and how well they fit. But after patrol... He'd be able to go back to Wesley's bed, after patrol.

Unless Angel got a tip-off, and Wesley had to go out.

The idea made Gunn go cold, froze the bubbling inside him, and twisted the frozen shards. A night alone in his own bed: ordinary the day before, welcome rest at the end of a full day; now, unnatural, hardly bearable. He wouldn't go to bed alone, if he couldn't go with Wesley; he'd spend the night in the truck outside their apartment, not waiting for him even, just needing to be there. What would Wesley think, though, if he did come back and find Gunn waiting? Would he think Gunn was crazy, scary crazy?

No. No, Wesley would understand. Wesley felt the same, didn't he? "Not under my roof." That was the same feeling. They had to be together, they had to be close. That fierce, for both of them.

But what if it was a bad tip-off, one of those that meant Angel had to be locked in? Wesley would call, wouldn't he? Ask for help. He wouldn't try to go out on his own? The ache of need inside Gunn turned suddenly into the sharp pain of real fear. Wesley might. He might go out on his own. He must have done it in the past, because Angel had got like that before, hadn't he?

Yes, he'd gone out on his own and he'd come back. Because he was tough, and smart, and Angel had taught him well. And Gunn already knew that Wesley was smart enough to ask for help when he needed it.

But this time Wesley knew that Gunn would be on patrol. That might stop him from asking, if he thought the crew might be doing something as important as the tip-off. Gunn should have thought of that, he should have told Wesley straight away that the patrol didn't make any difference, that he could call any time. Well, he'd tell him now.

Gunn counted at least twenty rings before Wesley's phone was picked up.

"Yes."

"Angel. Uh... It's Charles. Is Wesley there?"

"No."

"Do you know when he'll be back? Do you know where he's gone?"

A long pause. "Wesley comes back."

"That's right. Did he take his sword? Or his axe? Did you have a tip-off?"

Another pause, even longer. "He was late."

"Late? For the tip-off?" Then more slowly: "Or do you mean he was late with the translation? Is he out delivering his translation?"

"When he comes back."

Gunn spent at least ten seconds trying to make sense of Angel's reply, then gave up. "Can I leave a message for him? Can you write a message down?"

"Write a message?"

"Yes. Angel, please tell Wesley he can always call me if he needs help. It doesn't matter if I'm on patrol." Gunn couldn't hear any sounds of writing. "Will you be able to tell Wesley that?"

"Tell Wesley?"

"Tell him to call me tonight if he needs help. Please, Angel, will you write it down? Show Wesley the message when he comes back."

A sound that might have been a yes, and then Angel hung up. OK. So the chances of Angel passing the message on were obviously zero. But he might still tell Wesley that Gunn had called; and then Wesley would probably call back.

Wesley didn't call back, and Gunn spent the next few hours feeling as distracted as Wesley had seemed a week ago after they'd killed the Lurgan. All Gunn's attention was on that apartment in Inglewood - like Wesley's must have been - and he was willing Wesley to be there, almost praying for it. Let Wesley be there, safe. And let Wesley be there, waiting for him.

Gunn had promised himself at the start of patrol that he'd hold out until at least two a.m., and he kept that promise. He got the team back to base, told them as they were getting out of the truck that he would be away for the night, and then drove straight out again.

Wesley answered before the phone had even finished its first ring. "Charles. I got your message. Are you on your way?"

"Fifteen minutes."

Wesley must have been watching for the truck, because he was standing in the doorway, waiting. Once they were inside the apartment, they stood just looking at one another for long moments - the space of four breaths? five? - and then they reached out for one another. Gunn had been looking forward to this all day, remembering and imagining, but from the first touch, Wesley's lips so soft, opening so slowly, he realised he'd been remembering almost nothing of how it really felt to be Wesley's lover. His mind, his imagination couldn't get close to this: the reality of Wesley here, now, with the night ahead and neither of them knowing what would happen between them. Would he ever learn to remember? Or would he be amazed like this every time?

Wesley was in his robe, but he hadn't gone to bed yet; he'd been sitting up, reading and waiting. The robe was for speed. He unfastened it and shrugged out of it as soon as they were in the bedroom, and then they both took their time over undressing Gunn.

"Y'know, I can't believe Angel gave you the message. Had he written it down?" They had just got into bed, and were sitting, half-turned towards one another.

"I think he started to. He'd filled two pages of my notepad with drawings of swords and axes by the time I got back. I knew something had happened. So it was a matter of asking questions until I found the right one. Or what seemed like the right one. You had called, hadn't you, to make it clear that I could call you for help tonight if Angel got a tip-off?"

"Yeah. I thought, since it was the first night you knew I was on patrol..."

"That's what I guessed. Thank you." A brief pause. "I'm surprised Angel picked up the phone. It must have been a strange conversation."

“Conversation not really the word. He said you were late, though. Was that with your translation?”

Wesley nodded. “I couldn’t concentrate. All I wanted to think about was you. Especially... wondering what we would be in the mood for tonight.” Wesley’s voice had suddenly gotten rougher. “Do you want to fuck?”

Gunn shook his head. “I’m not ready. I mean, I do. Hearing you talk about it, God, yes. But -” He swallowed. “Do you like it? Hasn’t it gotta hurt?”

“It’s not the easiest thing to get used to. I don’t often want it. But I do with you. When you’re ready.”

“I haven’t been with that many men.”

“No, neither have I.” A half-smile and a raised eyebrow. “Both women and men seem to find me equally resistible.”

“I don’t believe that. I think you just never noticed them comin’ on to you. I bet you picked up the strangest ideas about how people behave with their friends.”

They both laughed, then Wesley said, “So what are you usually in the mood for, when you do go with men?”

Gunn shrugged, then said slowly, “To find out what he’s like, I guess. If he feels the way he looks he would. See what his style is - how it fits in with the rest of him. Usually seems to end up with us suckin’ each other off, though. What about you?”

A sigh. “When I’m in the middle of a ridiculous crush on a dashing man who doesn’t seem to know I exist, I’m always in the mood for something slow and serious. However, the ones who do notice I exist are always in the mood for the opposite - which is better than nothing, of course. But did you ever come away wondering if he’d done it for a bet?”

“A bet? With you? Means you’re paranoid and you never looked in a mirror. Or... Yeah, could be you’ve met some real shitheads in your time.” Wesley did look easy to hurt, had to admit. Sort of look that might bring out the worst in a lot of people.

Wesley smiled. “A few, but probably not like that. If it helps, I think I’m less paranoid than I used to be.”

“But you still like it slow and serious?”

“I certainly did last night. Though it was this morning that really stopped me concentrating on the translation.”

“Will you settle for slow and serious tonight?”

Wesley shook his head. “Not ‘settle’.” A pause. “I - Can we try it without speaking? If that’s not too strange. Words... Sometimes they don’t know how to be serious, but touch...” He knelt up, laid his hand on Gunn’s left cheek, then leaned forward to press his lips against the other cheek. A few seconds only, then he drew back and looked at Gunn, eyebrows raised, slightly uncertain. Gunn nodded, and brought his hands up to touch his fingertips to his own lips and to Wesley’s and then they moved into a kiss, and Gunn started to discover just how serious Wesley had meant, and how slow.

After it was over, Gunn found that it was a long time before he even wanted to speak. Felt like their silence was a shield held over the two of them, and he didn’t want to push it aside.

Finally, though: “I’ve never done that before. Not on purpose.”

Wesley drew a deep sigh. “Neither have I. When I thought about it before, when I was having one of my crushes, it was... I’d never really talked to them, anyway. I hadn’t thought the difference it would make, with someone I could talk to.”

“What difference did it make?”

“I think we could do this every night forever. And still be amazed by one another.” A sigh. “I’d say there’s a good chance we’re in love, except I don’t really believe it can happen this quickly.”

Gunn raised himself on an elbow and looked down at Wesley, smiling slightly. “That the most you’ll ever bring yourself to say?”

Wesley nodded, with a similar smile. “Until I’ve allowed myself enough time to be sure. You can wait five years, can’t you?”

“Five years of this?” Gunn put his fingertips to Wesley’s lips, then ran them down Wesley’s throat to his chest, while Wesley arched his head back and sighed. “I dunno... You’re askin’ a lot, man.”

They laughed, and kissed, then returned for a while to their silence.

Wesley was the one who spoke next. “Have you been in love with a man before? Is it something you look for? With men?”

“I was in love with my best friend when I was sixteen, seventeen. Pretty standard, I guess. Luke. Woulda done anything for him. We fooled around a coupla times. But for him it was just somethin’ to do if he didn’t have a real date. And I guess I let him think it was the same for me. And then we grew apart, anyway. Used to be, every new thing, it almost didn’t count till I’d been able to talk it over with him.” Gunn shrugged. “And then, two years later, and it feels like a chore catchin’ him up on the last six months. But he was the first person where I thought everything about him was wonderful: his eyebrows, sound of his voice, way he wore his clothes. Shape of his head. Most of the men I’ve been with, they’ve had something of him.”

“Was he black, Luke? I’m just assuming.”

“Yeah. And all the others. And yours were all white?”

“Yes.”

“I guess that’s kinda interesting. So what about you? Bein’ in love with a man, I mean?”

Wesley shook his head. “Nothing real. Nothing more than my stupid crushes. Nothing I ever did anything about. The first few times I thought I was in love, but...” A deep sigh. “It was just what I wanted to think. I can see that now.”

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Wesley had bought a selection of doughnut-holes for Gunn’s breakfast. “You said you needed something sweet, and I’m afraid I made my choice in the end according to the visible amount of sugar. I hope there’s something in there that’ll feel like a proper breakfast to you.”

“Oh, man.” Gunn ate two straight away, then took a drink of coffee and licked his fingers a couple of times. “Y’didn’t just choose sugar, you chose powdered sugar. That’s a jump-start. Swear it goes into my blood right through my taste-buds.”

“Is that what you’d usually have?” Wesley was having one of his vanilla yogurts. “Or is there something else you’d like even more?”

“Usually have some kind of Danish. If it’s a really good Danish then it feels like it’s three kinds of sweet in one. The filling’s gooey so you could almost drink it, but then the pastry’s got a crunch to it. And on top of that there’s icing!”

Wesley was smiling at him, obviously amused. “You’ll have to show me what to look for. Do you think a person could judge how good a Danish was without ever having to eat one?”

“I’ll eat almost anything with icing and enjoy it. Soon’s I find a bakery that gets the filling and the pastry just right, they seem to go out of business. Get me somethin’ with icin’. I’ll be happy.”

“What about powdered sugar? What else do you like with powdered sugar? Because I like...” Wesley stepped forward, gaze fixed on Gunn’s mouth, and raised his hand to brush his fingertips lightly along the lower edge of Gunn’s bottom lip. Gunn opened his mouth, touched his tongue to Wesley’s fingertips, and tasted sugar.

“You like messy eaters? Wouldn’t have guessed.”

“You look...” Wesley’s gaze moved back and forth between Gunn’s eyes and mouth. Gunn could see him working hard not to smile – but he was failing.

“I look...?”

Wesley’s eyes were gleaming with a weird kind of innocent wickedness. He caught his lower lip in his teeth, then suddenly released it and gave one of his half-smiles. With a quirk of his eyebrows, almost in a whisper: “ ‘Sugarlips’.”

Stern: “Well.” Gunn put his hands out to take Wesley by the waist, and pulled him close. “I might’ve let you get away with that if I thought you meant anythin’ good by it. But since you already told me...”

Wesley interrupted him. “You’ll make me eat my words?” And then Wesley’s lips were on his lips, and Wesley’s tongue was pressing sweetness onto his tongue. The kiss continued long after all of the sugar was gone.

“So... You gonna have to eat ten cans of anchovies now? T’get your system back into balance?”

“Five cans. I think I got you to eat most of it. Of course, next time you might be more determined. Do you think I should prepare for twenty cans?”

“Probably. Depends exactly what words I have to make you eat.”

“Well...” Again, that gleam of wickedness that looked like it was a completely new expression for Wesley’s face. “I know quite a lot of words. What if the next time I say it in Ossetic? Or proto-Bantu?”

“Don’t fool y’rself, Wesley. You’re always gonna get that look right before you say it. I’ll know. I’ll always know.”

Wesley looked thoughtful. “I think I can get rid of the look. If I practise in front of the mirror for a day or two.”

“Yeah, you do that. While I’m teachin’ myself the words for ‘sugarlips’ in every language you know.”

“Except for Tifinagh, obviously. Where there’s no word for sugar. For anything sweet. Or Dirkou, where there’s -”

“No word for lips, right? Now, do I ever wanna hear you speak that?”

“You need to be able to rub things that we don’t have. I can read it. Some of it. But I don’t really know what it’s supposed to sound like.”

“You serious now?”

Wesley nodded. “I had to learn some for a case we had a few months ago. I’ll have forgotten most of it in another few months. We did manage to communicate, though. It was interesting.”

“Did you get paid?”

“We did. Eventually.”

“Enough?”

“I think so.”

“Don’t get rid of the look, English. Don’t practise. But how much d’ you really not like sugar?”

Wesley smiled. “You were just right. You made me want more, when I usually want less.”

“More.” On a long, wondering sigh, and then they were kissing again. Gunn couldn’t imagine how he was going to make himself leave. He was teaching his first self-defence class at Anne’s shelter. And Angel was going to want to come out sometime, get something to eat. But letting go of Wesley, stepping away from Wesley... Not fair to expect him to. Just not fair.

* * * * *

Gunn arrived at base that morning knowing that he was going to leave his crew. He had been making the decision steadily over the last day, since the previous morning when he'd woken up with Wesley for the first time. Most of that process hadn't been conscious, but when he had woken up that morning, with Wesley, still asleep, fitted loosely along the length of his back, he'd found the decision there, fully-made, and he knew exactly how it had been put together.

The only way he could stay with the crew would be if they could accept Wesley, him and Wesley, and accept the fact that he would always put Wesley first now. If Wesley called, needing help with a case, with one of Angel's tip-offs, then Gunn was gone, whatever the crew had been doing; he would be useless to the crew, from the moment he got that call. Course they wouldn't accept that, what gang would? They needed a leader they could trust. A leader they could be proud of. Yeah, if they met Wesley one-on-one, most of them would end up liking him, enough to admit - in private - that he had his own kind of style, they could sort of see how he was right for Gunn. But in public... Wesley was a curse on the crew, impossible for them to face down. Their leader had chosen a freak. And someone so far from being a part of their world, you'd have to think that Gunn had looked at all the crew and decided he wanted the opposite. Gunn was better than any of them at putting on a front, toughing things out, and he couldn't think of any way for them to handle it; there wasn't enough front, not in the whole of L.A., to tough out a disaster like Wesley. Gunn would have to go.

Not really a big deal. The crew would be fine; they'd take care of each other, he'd shown them how. Wesley needed him more; and he needed more of Wesley.

He didn't know where he'd go, or when, couldn't see much beyond the ugly showdown that was surely coming. Vince would get in there first, with Elton as his chorus; he'd been looking for a chance, Gunn had seen that months back. Best just to choose a day, call them together and tell them, not wait for Vince to bring the fight to him. And Vince would be expecting a fight, would be relying on it, even. But there was nothing Gunn needed to keep, nothing for him to fight about. It was over. Already over. No matter what they said about him, about Wesley, he should just walk away.

Next week, maybe. He might tell them next week. He needed to explain things to Wesley first, because he knew Wesley had no idea what was brewing with Gunn and the crew, and that wasn't something you should learn about afterwards. Wesley should know Gunn had already decided to leave, that he'd decided it before the showdown, and that the decision had been easy. And Gunn wanted a change to talk properly with Wesley about how they were going to arrange things once Gunn was free of his crew; which meant, really, how they were going to arrange things around Angel. How much of Wesley's time did Angel need each day, to help him keep hold of who he was? And how much did it disturb him, to have a stranger in the apartment? Angel might need months before he could cope with Gunn being there for the entire day. Wesley would want a chance to plan how to deal with Angel, of course he would.

Gunn found himself thinking a lot about Alonna as he did his rounds of the base that morning. Thinking about Alonna, and also suddenly seeing everything and everyone almost with the eyes of a stranger. Such a difference it made, to know he'd be leaving all this in a matter of days. Would he have made a different decision if Alonna was still here? Would he even have got to the point of making friends with Wesley? Not that Alonna would have warned him off Wesley or anything, but so many things would have to be different, for her to be there; made it hard to just wonder what she would think or want. But if everything had happened with Wesley in the same way, would he have told her about Wesley by now, and about Angel and all the things that Wesley shouldn't have to face alone? Well, she would have asked by now, where he had spent the last two nights. Would she understand? Would she make it easy for him to leave? Or try to make it impossible? If she'd guessed about him and Luke, or any of the other men, she'd never said.

She'd probably tell him he wasn't thinking straight, he was taking things way too fast. Maybe this Wesley was worth leaving the crew for, but how could he know that? What did a few fights with demons, a few beers, a few nights in bed really teach you about a man? They had so little in common - and maybe that was even all there was to the thrill they were gettin' from each other. Nothing to do with love, with fitting well - just the kick of something so new, that you'd never thought you'd be doing. There might even have been a hundred warning signs already, all saying this was never gonna work, and all missed because they didn't understand each other well enough even to read those signs.

Yeah it was fast, Gunn knew that. Be better if they could give themselves a couple of months, at least, before making any big decisions. Easy to say that: "take it slow". Easy if there weren't the tip-offs, there wasn't Angel. If Wesley was someone he could show to the crew, casually, without lying, bring to the base once in a while on their way to or from a date. Like he had with Denise. But since Wesley was what he was - and Angel, and the crew - Gunn was looking at just days to decide between them.

He didn't know Wesley. Hardly at all. But there was only one way to find out how real it was, whatever was happening between them, and he wasn't gonna let that go, not for anythin'. Not for anyone.

If he'd said that to Alonna she would have told him outright that he was thinkin' with his dick. He was tryin' to make it sound like one of his great, cool, help-everyone projects but the real reason he was leavin' all his friends and everythin' he'd worked for was his dick. 'cos his dick had somehow taken a fancy to this English guy's body.

So what if it had? If he could tell his dick who to like he wouldn't have decided any different. Wesley was a good, brave man. Even if things didn't really work out for the two of them, they'd still manage to do some good. Gunn would still be doing what he believed in. He didn't know if it was the best choice, like the perfect choice, but you couldn't ever know that. But he knew it was a good choice: not stupid, not a mistake. He might not have been able to convince Alonna just by telling her, but after enough time she would have seen for herself.

Dean and George were giving the self-defence class with Gunn that afternoon at Anne's shelter. Afterwards, when they were having a soda with Anne in the kitchen, Dean said, "And Gunn's got a new honey. Who we haven't met yet. Takes off every night. Including tonight, right? When you even gonna tell us where you're going?"

"When it's any of your business. Which looks like bein' never. You know my cell phone. You know I don't turn it off."

George said, "Never? We're never gonna meet her? What's she scared of? South Central? Or a bit of dust?"

"Still none of your business."

George said, "I know! It's Julia Roberts, isn't it?" And he and Dean fell about laughing, and then started swapping names. Gunn shrugged at Anne and let them get on with it, waiting for Cordy's name to appear, and wondering if he'd be able to keep himself from reacting. But they gave up the joke after just a few film stars, and didn't move on to TV.

As Anne was walking them to the door, she turned to Gunn and said, "How's that English demon guy? Have you seen him since?"

"He's good." Gunn could hear the hushed tenderness in his own voice, quite beyond his control. But Anne just nodded, barely interested, and the others hadn't even been listening.

Gunn brought his team back from patrol shortly before three, and this time he did more than his fair share of stowing the weapons before he called Wesley; he hadn't left the crew yet, and he shouldn't start to act like he had.

Wesley took eight rings to answer. "Charles?" Breathless. Wesley must have been asleep.

"We've finished patrol."

"Fifteen minutes?"

"Yeah. Or less." Gunn broke the connection and put the phone back in his pocket. "Good patrol, guys. See you tomorrow morning."

"Where the hell you goin', man?" Eladio, sounding amused, and not like he was expecting an answer. Gunn just raised a hand, taking his leave, and walked out of the weapons room without turning around.

"Haven't you heard? She's none of our business. Not seeing as he never turns his cell phone off." Vince, not amused at all.

So they'd been talking. Next thing they'd be tailing him. Gunn shrugged, and carried on down the corridor. Walking away. He'd already made this decision. He was walking away.

* * * * *

Gunn woke in the night needing to go to the bathroom, but when he opened the bedroom door, he saw immediately that Angel was in the living-room, and he closed the door again, almost by reflex. Angel had been crouched down by the bookcase next to the window, must have been reading the titles in the light that came through the open door of his room.

Gunn wondered if Angel had heard the opening and closing of Wesley's door, wondered if he himself would hear Angel returning to his room, so he would know when it was safe to go out. Then he shook his head sharply. Safe to go out? Oh, come on. He wouldn't be much use to Wesley if he couldn't learn how to deal with Angel. He didn't have to make friends with the man - probably couldn't be done, anyway - just needed to be able to reassure him, and he could start by trying what Wesley did, being calm and patient and straightforward.

He pulled on his trousers and T-shirt and opened the door again. Angel was still by the bookcase; he turned his head when Gunn closed the door, but turned back after just a glance, his attention on the books like he'd already forgotten that Gunn was there.

"Angel. Hello." Trying to sound friendly. Or better than polite, anyway.

A grunt. Absent-minded rather than hostile. Probably.

While he was in the bathroom Gunn wondered if Angel would still be in the living-room when he came back, or whether he would have retreated to his room. Turned out that Angel was still there, which had to be a good sign, didn't it? Angel had taken some books out and put them on the floor between himself and his room, but he was still looking for something. What did someone like that read? Had it changed, as he'd got worse? And could you tell, from what he was reading, whether the next day was going to be good or bad?

Gunn walked slowly across the room to within three feet of Angel, with Angel's door to his right. Angel's room looked to be at least twice the size of Wesley's. Even standing right in front of the door, Gunn couldn't see the bed, just an armchair and a lamp, and pictures on the walls.

"Angel?"

Angel turned his whole body in one slow, smooth motion as he looked around and up at Gunn. A cat. He'd moved like a cat. And the stare, yes, that was as cold as a cat's. Gunn fought to suppress a shiver as Angel got to his feet with the same slow grace. Or was it the same slow menace? No. He mustn't start thinking like that. He'd be no use to Wesley if he started thinking like that.

"I've been here a lot this week. I'll probably be here even more from now on. All day, sometimes. Wesley says you keep to your room anyway but it has to make a difference to you how much I'm here. I don't want it to be a problem. If there's anything you need me to change, then you should tell me. You can tell me."

The stare. Unblinking. Was that Angel's answer, in itself? Don't talk to me? You're not Wesley, so you don't talk to me? How long should he wait, though, before taking that as Angel's only answer.

Suddenly, with no warning: "Wesley smells different." Gunn gasped, took an involuntary step backwards. Angel didn't seem to notice, continued without any pause. "He smells warmer. Lighter. He's happy. He can be happy."

"Oh, can he?" As instinctive as his step backwards, the need to challenge anyone who stated any claim on his Wesley, like he'd never had those ideas about being calm with Angel, being reassuring. "He's got your -" The door had closed behind Angel, leaving Gunn standing in the dark. Under his breath: "He's got your permission, does he?"

Gunn went back to bed and lay staring up at the ceiling. His heartbeat had nearly returned to normal before it occurred to him that, again, Angel had not meant it like that at all. Instead, he'd meant... What? That Gunn being there wasn't a problem for him, that he'd put up with anything if Wesley would be happy? Or he might not even have meant it as an answer to what Gunn had said, any more than he'd seemed to the other times they'd spoken. Maybe that was simply all he had to say to Gunn: that he'd noticed the effect Gunn had on Wesley.

But what a way to say it! To claim you knew a man's scent, knew it well enough to notice changes. And to make that claim to the man's lover. That was truly a crazy thing to do. No more crazy, though, than not knowing if you'd been to fight a Lurgan demon in a garden in Fairfax. Gunn couldn't say he hadn't been warned. He should've been prepared for that and worse. He shouldn't've reacted. Shouldn't've taken it personally. Wesley would've been... No, probably not angry with him, but he would have to have been disappointed.

Gunn turned over onto his side, then slid his hand slowly across the sheet, where the first thing it met was Wesley's hand stretched out towards him, palm upwards. Gunn laid his hand gently across Wesley's palm and wrist and Wesley

made a small sound of agreement or recognition, and Gunn felt immediately warmed and calmed, while knowing that Wesley was deeply asleep, and the sound meant nothing at all.

Gunn dreamed about Angel, although afterwards he couldn't remember anything except an unsettling presence, and a sense of something left incomplete. Soon after they woke in the morning, he said, "Wesley? Has Angel given you any more idea yet how he feels about the two of us? Has he... behaved differently towards you since we got together?"

"Well, he asks about you. That's different. I've never really known him to show interest in someone before."

"What does he ask?"

"Nothing very specific. He says, 'Tell me about Charles,' and I start telling him my favourite things about you. The censored version. Until he begs me to stop."

"No, seriously."

"That is more or less what happens. He doesn't beg me to stop, he's just not listening any more. And I try to keep to the type of facts he's able to keep clear, and try to build on what I've already told him and find out what he does remember."

"Why do you think he's asking?"

"Because he knows you're important."

"You don't think he might get jealous? I dunno. Threatened. Just weird."

"In what way?" Puzzled.

"You said he'd never think of you like that. But it's got to make him look at you differently. Has he been askin' about you and other men, me and other men? Anything like he's started takin' notice?"

Wesley shrugged. "He's not like that." A sudden smile. "And his tastes run to blondes, anyway. He wouldn't look twice at either of us."

Somehow that bothered Gunn more than anything he'd been imagining about Angel's attitude to Wesley. Wesley could smile about it, but Gunn could see that it did matter to Wesley, that Wesley had spent far too much time thinking about Angel's tastes. "Did you ever wish he would? Was he ever 'dashing' enough to be the type of man you had a crush on?"

Another shrug. "Well, you can't help having some reaction, can you? He's beautiful. So beautiful it's frightening sometimes to look at him. But I can't have a crush on someone who actively dislikes me, and..." A sigh. "I made a very bad first impression in Sunnydale. That didn't really change until he first started teaching me to fight. After I got out of hospital. I remember when he started talking as if I was going to stay." A sigh. "But then there was so much happening, I was too tired even to notice that he was still beautiful. And then there were other things to think about and we'd both seen too much. It would have been a very stupid crush, anyway, even by my standards."

"But you still think he's beautiful? 'So beautiful it's frightening'?"

"You really don't? I thought everyone wanted him."

"OK, yeah, he's impressive. But I can't have a crush on someone I can't talk to. I'd never want to be close to him. I wanted to be close to you, wanted to talk over everything with you, before I even realised what I really wanted from you."

Sometime later, Wesley said thoughtfully, "That probably was what I felt when I first knew that he didn't actively want me to go away anymore. I mean, that I wanted to be close to him. Or just wanted to be important to him. For some things. That he would take me into account sometimes. And then a month or so later that just didn't matter, and I hadn't even noticed the change. I'll never know what he thinks of me and it doesn't matter. As long as I know how to work with him."

Gunn thought that he knew more than Wesley in that case, because he knew that Angel thought about what made Wesley happy. So Wesley was important to Angel. And Angel must know exactly what Wesley had done for him, what would have happened to him without Wesley. He should tell Wesley what he knew about Angel. How he knew. Because whatever Wesley said it must still matter enough that it would make him happy to hear it.

But he wasn't going to tell Wesley, couldn't bring himself to - because he was jealous. Not stupidly jealous, and he knew he'd get over it, once he'd seen Angel a few more times, not in the middle of the night, once he'd seen again how Wesley was calm, and patient, and nothing more. But for now he didn't want to give up any of his share of Wesley's attention, not even to give Wesley good news.

* * * * *

Gunn wasn't patrolling that night, since it was a Friday; Tuesdays and Fridays had been his nights off since the beginning of the year. Wesley was going to cook them a curry, and had been almost indignant when Gunn had offered to get something to go.

"You shouldn't have to take care of the food every time. Just because this is the only place we can meet. I can get anything you want."

"I want a proper Friday-night, end-of-the-week curry. This is for me. If you hate it, we'll negotiate about 'to-go' for next Friday." Wesley did agree, however, that it was Gunn's turn to buy the beers.

Gunn left the base shortly before half past six, and recognised within a minute that he was being tailed by Vince, who had pulled out of a side-road a few blocks from the base. Gunn decided to stick to his plan for stopping to pick up beer; depending on where they both parked, it could give him a chance to shake Vince, or to confront him. As it turned out, he shook Vince, but this was surely only the beginning.

Wesley was wearing a blue shirt with two buttons undone, the same blue shirt that he'd worn on Tuesday, and Angel was standing in the same position just outside the kitchen, where he'd been watching Wesley working on the pizza; but this time Angel had a beer, and he smiled at Gunn and greeted him by name.

"Angel!" Gunn recovered quickly from his surprise, and found he was genuinely pleased to see the man. "Hi." Maybe Angel didn't remember anything of what had happened during the night, not even the fact that Gunn had got angry with him, and that he had a right to resent Gunn for that.

Gunn still couldn't think of anything to say to Angel, but this time he wasn't stressing about it. Angel wasn't staring at him. They'd stand and drink their beers and watch Wesley chopping and crushing, and if they found a real reason to talk to one another, then they'd talk.

"Shouldn't you be singing the National Anthem, Wes? When you're cooking the British national dish? Show the proper respect?"

"That's for Chicken Tikka Masala. For Lamb Pasanda I just bow once in the direction of St. Paul's."

Angel gave a brief laugh then turned to Gunn. "Do you think of it as all bangers and mash, fish and chips? British food."

Gunn shrugged, doubting whether he'd ever thought about it at all. "I guess."

Angel nodded. "I did too until I got to know Wes properly. And I've never seen him go near any of that. But when it comes to curries... I swear I've heard him ordering them in his sleep. When did that happen, Wes? I mean, the last time I was in England - Well, that was a long time ago."

Wesley shrugged. "I don't know. When we got out of India? Before I was born, probably. My mother's parents were born in India. They had their favourite Indian restaurant in London. They used to take me there as a treat from school. I don't know when the taste spread to the general population."

Gunn said, "You can get a curry here in L.A., can't you? I thought there were plenty of places." And then he remembered that Wesley hadn't eaten out in L.A., apart from their one Mexican meal.

“You can get a perfectly acceptable curry. There’s a place in Santa Monica I’ve been back to more than once. But I haven’t found anywhere where they really seem to care, where they’re doing anything new. Nowhere that I’d bother to tell people about.” He shook his head slightly. “Not that there are many like that back home, anyway. Most of the time when I order in my sleep, I’m in Tabaq in Balham, before it went upmarket.” He sighed, stared into the middle distance, and looked wistful.

Gunn and Angel looked at one another, raised their eyebrows, and smiled. Gunn couldn’t feel jealous of Angel any more, couldn’t connect this smiling man with that freaky conversation in the middle of the night. They’d be fine, the three of them. They’d make it work.

Wesley had stopped looking wistful and had opened the oven, releasing a wave of moist heat, and then taking out a baking tray. “Is that eggplant?”

Wesley nodded. “Aubergine. I like the texture you get with this. The crispness from the skins. Next to the pulp.” A sudden smile. “Like you and your perfect Danish.”

With a similar smile: “I like the sound of that.” Then Gunn turned to Angel. “What’s your idea of the perfect Danish? Or don’t you have a sweet tooth either?”

But Angel was looking at some point on the wall opposite, didn’t seem to realise that Gunn was talking to him. Gunn looked questioningly at Wesley, wondering if he should ask again, but Wesley shook his head, and then asked Gunn what they did about meals back at the base. Gunn had just started to answer when Angel drained his beer, put the bottle on the counter with a thud, and stepped back.

“Another?” Wesley gestured towards the fridge.

Angel shook his head, frowning slightly, took another step back, then turned and went to his room.

“Good night, Angel.” Wesley’s usual calm tone.

A pause after the door had closed, then Gunn said, “I’m sorry.”

Surprised: “What about?” Wesley took Angel’s bottle and put it in the box for recycling.

“I think I lost him. Askin’ you about the eggplant. Cut him out.”

“No, he’d just reached his limit. There’s not much you can do, deliberately, to either lose him or keep him. I never know what’s going to catch his interest like that.”

“Has he been like that all day?”

“God, no. His limit’s about half an hour these days. He was very, very quiet today. I thought he’d disappear when you were due to arrive. Not start a real conversation.”

“I guess he likes the smell of curry.”

“Maybe. Or it might have been something to do with you. Seeing you again after he’d been asking about you. I suppose we’ll find out when he’s seen you a few more times. When I’ve cooked a few more curries.”

When they were sitting down, waiting for the rice to cook, Gunn asked Wesley what else he missed from England, apart from curries that were worth telling people about.

Slowly: “Well, I miss London. I miss city walking. Having walking as a real option. And as part of that I miss public gardens. Knowing you’re never more than five minutes away from somewhere you can sit and be quiet without having to buy a coffee. And I miss the feeling that every square inch around me has been used by humans. Over and over again. That it’s been noticed, recorded, and changed.”

“The history thing, right?”

Wesley frowned. "I supposed it sounds as if I'm saying I don't like L.A. because it's so new - and that's not true, I do like L.A. and the newness is a large part of what I like about L.A., it's refreshing. It's more... being used to a country that's so small you really can work over every inch. And a country that feels as if it was made for humans, as if it likes having people in it." He shook his head. "I don't get that feeling here. Sometimes the opposite. " A shrug. "It's what you're used to. You'd probably find England claustrophobic. Worn out. But it unnerved me in the first few months. There was too much obvious 'landscape' around Sunnydale. Lying out there, muttering to itself. L.A.'s much better. It's almost domesticated."

After some seconds, Gunn said, "Is that what you always say when people ask how you like California?"

"I tell them I like the weather and the ocean. The feeling that everyone's starting again. Making it up as they go along. It sounds that strange, does it, my reaction to the landscape?"

"The muttering, English. That's gotta throw people. You really think it's alive? Is this a demon thing? Something they teach you?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if it was alive. But for now... let's say it's just a way of speaking." A smile. "If it will stop you worrying about me and the muttering."

"I wasn't worrying, I just - No one talks like that. It's either, 'Hey, nice view,' or, 'Jeez, it's worse than Barstow.' When you look at things that differently... Do have to check sometimes what you mean and what you don't mean. But you like the ocean? That doesn't matter?"

"I love the Coast Highway. There was about a month, when I'd got confident enough about driving again, when I didn't have to think twice about leaving Angel for the afternoon because I knew he'd be able to call me if something happened. That was the closest I've ever come to getting a tan."

"I can call you if something happens. You can leave him with me for as long as you like. Why don't you go out tomorrow?"

Wesley's immediate reaction was a flicker of dismay, followed by an almost-convincing combination of surprise, gratitude and regret. "It wouldn't be the same now, without you. I wouldn't see the ocean, or enjoy the sun. I'd just be working out how quickly I could get back to you."

On some level Gunn did believe what Wesley was saying, but there was something else, something Wesley wasn't saying. Did Wesley not trust him to look after Angel? What did Wesley think he'd do wrong? Or was it the effect the change would have on Angel? Gunn opened his mouth to ask Wesley directly, then decided to let it go; maybe Wesley just wasn't in the mood to explain to Gunn how little he still understood about Angel. "Well, the offer's always there."

At Gunn's first taste of each of the three curry dishes, Wesley asked, "What do you think?", each time in the same tone, like he was talking to another expert, wanting to test his own ideas about what had gone wrong.

"I think you'll be cooking this every Friday, until you beg me to give you a night off and get us something to go. C'mon, you know it's ten times better than anything I could have had. I haven't even been to that place in Santa Monica."

"No, I'll do something else next time."

"One other thing. You gotta keep the eggplant and the cabbage or I'll start thinking I imagined them."

"Imaginary curries." Wesley nodded. "That's a good sign. Show me proof of three dreams and I'll get you registered as an honorary Englishman."

Gunn laughed. "Yeah? What does that get me?"

"Oh." A brief pause. "The ability to identify another Englishman's class background in under a minute. A sensitivity to embarrassment so acute it could actually kill you. Nothing that would be useful to you, especially not here in L.A. What about being an honorary Angeleno? How far do I have to go?"

There Gunn was an expert, and he played it very, very tough, not budging even through all the evidence Wesley wanted him to hear. Wesley making steady progress? No way. Gunn did wonder, after one of their noisier exchanges, what it was like for Angel, sitting alone in his room, listening to a besotted couple teasing and flirting for hours on end. How many times a day did he have to tell himself that he was glad to hear it, glad of every sign that Wesley was happy?

When they'd finished doing the dishes, Gunn opened beers - their first from the pack he had brought - and they moved to the couch. Wesley asked about Gunn's schedule for the weekend, whether they'd be able to spend either day together.

"Yeah, that's a good question. There might not be any schedule. I thought I wouldn't have to tell you until at least next week, didn't want to worry you, but I haven't told my crew yet where I've been spending my nights. When they've asked I've just told them it's none of their business. But one of them tailed me here tonight - or he tried, I shook him after a couple of miles - so if he brings in some others and gets his act together tomorrow night, then I'm looking at a showdown in the next couple of days." A brisk shake of the head. "Don't worry, I'll take them back to base. You won't have them waitin' on the doorstep or anythin'."

"Charles?" Sharp alarm. "What sort of showdown?"

Matter-of-fact, on a sigh: "They won't be happy when I tell them about you. None of them. Even the ones who've fought with you. Vince, he'll be the one who'll say it's bad enough I'm a fag, how can they trust me after that, but that I won't even choose my own kind, I must always've been lookin' for some fancy white boy to take me off the streets. Doesn't matter if he really thinks that, if anyone there really thinks that. They all know that's what it looks like, and Vince'll talk it up like it's the betrayal of the century. They'll never let it go."

"Oh, God! I didn't - I hadn't - Charles!" Wesley swallowed, took several gasping breaths, and when he spoke again, there was a tremor in his voice. "What are you going to do?"

Gunn shrugged and smiled, and squeezed Wesley's shoulder hard, intending uncomplicated reassurance. "I'll step down straight away, not give Vince a chance to get started. Practically got my bags packed already. I'm not the right person to lead them any more. I don't care enough, not now. It's not a big deal. Wes, don't look like that." Wesley looked like he might pass out, or throw up. "It's my choice. It wasn't even difficult. Wes, don't."

Wesley had closed his eyes, turned away slightly, slumped, with the heel of his hand pressed to his clammy forehead. Gunn stroked his back. "Wes. English. Come on. It isn't a big deal. I know I should've told you earlier, but I thought I'd be able to wait till next week. I'm doing what I want. Decided on it days ago." Wesley's reaction was just guilt, wasn't it? The shock of imagining what the crew would say about them. Not some complicated English thing from Wesley's past?

Wesley suddenly lurched to his feet, stood hunched over, swaying slightly. Gunn got off the couch, about to urge him to sit down, lie down, but Wesley gave a ragged sigh, let his hand fall to his side, then took a step forward, past the coffee table, his gaze fixed on the door of Angel's room. Gunn followed him for three or four steps, then stopped as he saw that Wesley was recovering his steadiness, his height; and as he started to wonder exactly what Wesley was doing, and why.

Wesley was going to tell Angel something. Or maybe ask Angel something. Was this about Wesley and Angel, about something between them? Or was it about whatever Wesley had - or hadn't - told Angel about Gunn, about himself and Gunn? But Wesley didn't open the door and go in to Angel. Instead, Gunn heard the sound of the key turning in the lock, and then Wesley crossed the living-room, went into his own bedroom and closed the door. The key was gone from the lock of Angel's door, so Wesley must be hiding it; Wesley was protecting Angel, locking him safely away from Gunn. Gunn moved forward, took up position a few feet from Angel's door, and waited for Wesley to come out of his room.

Wesley walked towards Gunn, still very pale, but no longer dazed and shaken. Instead, his gaze was too clear: bleak, determined, resigned.

"So tell me." Gunn's tone was a match for Wesley's expression. "What the two of you've been doing."

"Nothing. Not that. It's..." A sigh. "Angel is a vampire." Wesley's voice was quiet, as clear and bleak as his face.

Gunn didn't feel surprise, not a glimmer, or feel annoyed with himself for missing all of the clues. You see a supremely gifted fighter who can move like a cat, you don't immediately think vampire. Or when you're told that he doesn't really eat. Or are given hints that he's older than he looks. Or when you hear him snarling like a hungry animal. You don't think it, not when the vampire is in the care of the person you most admire.

He'd been jealous of a vampire. He'd got angry with a vampire, when he was alone with it in the middle of the night. He'd joked with a vampire about English food.

Gunn hardly knew what to think, or what to feel, or where to start with his questions.

"What you've told me about him. About you. Was any of that true?"

Wesley shook his head. "It's all true. I've never lied to you, Charles. I wouldn't lie to you. But I've been waking up every day thinking, 'Today. I'll work out today how to tell Charles everything.' How to tell you properly."

"That you're messing with somethin' that's gonna get you killed? And not just you, most likely. He's got you thinkin' you've tamed him? 'cos a couple of times he could've killed you and he didn't. Man, you better change your card. 'Expert on demons. But understands fuck all about vampires.' You can't ever be anything to him except a meal."

"No, of course I haven't tamed him. But I didn't need to. He's been different from other vampires for a long time. You've seen for yourself that he's different. He's never going to hurt anyone else. He helps people now. We help people."

"What I've seen is he's pretty-much crazy. That your 'different'? The brain damage. You sayin' that's what it takes to 'tame' a vampire?"

"No, it's not the brain damage. It's not because of something missing, it's because of something special he's been given. It's because he has a soul, when other vampires don't. He was given back his soul about a hundred years ago, and he became a person again as well as a demon. So he has a conscience and remorse, and he's able to have feelings for people other than just hunger. With the soul... he doesn't feed from people. He tries to atone. He's completely different."

"Yeah, right. You ever think to ask him what he was like without it? Or you just take his word for everything? 'Oh, no, Wes, I'm different, I've got a soul. You don't have to worry about me for a second.' "

"I didn't ask him, and he would never tell me not to worry about him. He knows I've read about him, all of the important accounts of what he did when he had no soul. He was know as Angelus then. He was one of the worst. And no one is more horrified than Angel by the knowledge of what Angelus did. I've seen him desperate to atone."

"And that's what you live with?" Gunn raised his hand, pointed over his shoulder at Angel's door, but without taking his eyes from Wesley's. "That's what you had a crush on. That's what you think is beautiful. You know exactly what he's done and here you are protecting him? That's sick, man. You gotta know it's sick."

"What I know is that he's Angel now. He is not Angelus. I might not have believed either, just from what I'd read, but when I saw how he behaves, what he does as Angel, then I believed. Charles, the first time you ever saw him he was fighting vampires. Helping people. That's his whole purpose now. And helping him... It's the most important thing I've ever done."

Meaning: I'll never choose you over him, even though you'd choose me over your crew. But Gunn had known that already, when he'd thought Angel was nothing worse than crazy.

"And the accident? Whatever's happening to his mind. Or is that how the soul thing works?"

"No, he got his soul back a hundred years ago. I think he's always been withdrawn. Avoided people. But he could more than take care of himself. Getting the visions last November... I think it was an accident. And the effect they're having on him, that's probably an accident too."

Impatient: "What visions?"

“The tip-offs. They’re not ordinary tip-offs, not from contacts here in L.A. They’re visions that he gets of people in danger from demons, people we have to help. They’re sent by...” A shrug. “ ‘The Powers That Be.’ That’s how Angel always puts it. He thinks they’ve had plans for him, maybe for some time. I don’t know. I just know that we do help. All those customers at the thrift shop. The family in Fairfax. Angel saw what would happen, as if he was there.”

“You’re saying he’s some kind of mystic now? He’s got his soul and he’s atoned and he’s become a vampire saint. Floating above everything in a world of his own?”

“That would be the Hollywood version. What I’ve seen...” Wesley shook his head. “I can’t find out exactly what’s happening to him, but when a vision hits him... They slam into him, like a wrecking ball. Like a bolt of lightning. They take over his nervous system, won’t let go until everything’s over. I think each one burns something out, leaves him more fractured. I don’t know where it will end. Probably with him lost to everything except the visions.”

“Or killing him?” Trying to sound as sombre as Wesley, when he’d always think that a vampire dying was the best end to a good day.

“I don’t know. I don’t know if brain damage can kill a vampire. I don’t know why the demon in him can’t repair that type of damage when it can heal almost anything else. I’ve read everything I can find, but I can’t see any patterns in how the visions affect people. Except for the humans, because they do die, sometimes within months. He might stabilise, the demon might be doing more than I realise. It’s only been six or seven months. I think for some people it did get easier.”

A long, long pause. “And if he doesn’t? Stabilise?” Or die. “If he gets worse than he was that night he hit you. How you gonna cope when you daren’t even go near him? When he never knows who you are?”

“I don’t know yet, but I know that I will cope. What else would I do? When there are people we have to help.”

Quietly: “Alone.” Gunn knew what it was to face danger, to be willing to die for something important. But he always faced the danger with his crew; they gave each other courage, and recognition, and comfort, they made the fight a pleasure as well as a duty. Wesley was alone. Every scrap of courage, he had to summon for himself. He didn’t expect recognition or look for comfort; you could tell that from his helpless astonishment at any sign that someone had noticed, that someone cared. And yes he would cope alone, with Angel and with fight after fight, until one or the other killed him.

“Yes.” With a small nod, and an expression of such flat resignation - a complete acceptance of the absence of hope. Gunn stepped forward and put his arms around Wesley, wanting to show Wesley that there was hope, that everything would be different now they were together.

Wesley gave a brief, wavering exhalation, touched his hand lightly to Gunn’s back for a moment, then let it drop. “Charles. Please. Please don’t bring your crew after him. I swear, if I think he could harm anyone again, I’ll kill him myself. Please. You can forget you ever met us.”

Gunn stepped back, found Wesley suddenly avoiding his eyes. Was Wesley ashamed of asking, of pleading for his vampire? Or did he think he knew too well how Gunn would answer. “You think I’m gonna leave you?”

Now Wesley looked at him, with that terrible hopeless certainty. “You said alone. I know you can’t stay. Of course you can’t. Not now. I’m sorry. I should have - I should never have -”

Gunn drew him close again. “You should’ve had another couple of weeks. To work out how to tell me in your own time. I’ll go into the base first thing tomorrow and tell them straight off. No point in waiting now. I don’t want you to be alone for a second longer than you have to. C’n I stay here for a few days? Haven’t had a chance yet to start lookin’ for somewhere to live.”

“Charles!” Wesley slumped against him, clutched at him, breathing harshly, like he was close to tears. Gunn held Wesley steady, soothed him with near-wordless murmurs. Eventually Wesley said, almost in a whisper, “Why? He is a vampire. Why would you...”

“The same reason you told me about him the moment you found out what was happening with my crew. Even though you thought I’d leave you. Because we love each other. If something’s important to you, if you believe in it, then I do too. I know I’ll get to see for myself that Angel really is different. But for now it’s enough that he’s your vampire.”

A pained groan. "You can't give up your friends because of me. You mustn't. I - I - How can I be worth it?"

"I'm not giving anything up. I wouldn't be with the crew forever, anyway. And this way I get to do somethin' just as important, and I get to do it with you. You can't honestly think I'd want things any other way. As for givin' things up, what about you, with Angel and the visions? When d' you ever ask yourself if he's worth it?"

"It's not..." Wesley raised his head, seeming genuinely puzzled, like he was taking what Gunn had said as real questions, not just a way of arguing. "I know I didn't give up anything. What else would I do?"

Well, he could have a life of his own. But maybe Wesley wouldn't know what to do with one of those. Gunn did find it hard to imagine Wesley without Angel, doing things just because he wanted to. "Wesley? When was the last time you asked for something for yourself? What would you ask for?"

"Well, I'd ask you to stay for more than a few days." A small, uncertain smile. "But of course you'd want somewhere of your own. Angel's easier to live with than you'd think, but I don't know if you could say that about me."

However long it had been since Wesley had last asked for something, it sounded like he'd been turned down. And probably the five times before that, too. Gunn shook his head, smiling. "Can see we're gonna have to work out a system. Make sure we won't both try to be tactful at the same time. I don't want a place on my own, not when I want to spend every night with you. I just said because you'd know better than me if Angel could cope with having me living here." A shrug. "It is gonna seem crowded sometimes."

"I know. But I think Angel wants to cope with the two of us. He keeps asking why you're not here, when you're coming back. And he can't understand why I let you leave." Softly, almost a whisper: "So you will stay?"

"Of course I'll stay."

They kissed for a long time, sighing and murmuring and shifting against one another, but becoming aroused only slowly. Too much adrenaline, Gunn decided. Far too much to think about, for both of them.

He'd be living with a vampire. Helping to protect a vampire. What would the crew make of that? Well, what would anyone? Gunn wondered if there was anyone outside this apartment who knew the truth about Angel Investigations.

"Should we let him out? Tell him what's happened?"

Wesley frowned for a few seconds, then shook his head. "No, I don't want to deal with him right now. I'd much rather deal with you, in our bed."

Gunn's cock reacted so fast, it seemed to happen even before he'd really noticed what Wesley had said. "So it's 'our' bed, now?"

Wesley looked briefly surprised, then slid his hand down to Gunn's ass and pulled him close, his breathing starting to catch up to Gunn's. "And you're a romantic. I wouldn't have guessed."

Gunn growled, partly playing it tough, mostly excited; and he pushed himself against Wesley. "This feel like 'romance' to you?"

Slowly, deliberately: "Tell me. What you want to do with me, in our bed. What do you want to do differently, now that it's ours?"

Gunn imagined everything they'd already done, slower, faster, harder, again and again, forever. Every inch of their bodies used for sex - no reserve, no distinction. And nothing between them except sex, nowhere they met except the bed. "Everything." Gunn's voice was unsteady; his throat felt half-closed by the pulse thudding through it.

"Everything?" Wesley raised his eyebrows, seemed to change his mind at least twice about what he was going to say. "Starting with what?"

"Don't know yet. But starting now." Gunn tugged at Wesley's belt, backing him towards the bedroom.

“And now?” Wesley was kneeling on the far side of the bed, waiting for Gunn. “Do you know now? What you want to do?”

Gunn knelt opposite Wesley, just close enough to touch. “Get inside you. But it’s still too - Have to take that slow and serious. But I want...”

“Do you want...” Wesley reached down for Gunn’s hand and lifted it level with his open mouth. “Do you want to make a start?”

Gunn wasn’t sure what Wesley meant - but he wanted everything of Wesley, no questions. As soon as he nodded, Wesley leaned forward and took Gunn’s middle finger into his mouth. Gunn groaned at the sight, closed his eyes at the heat and wetness, then opened his eyes again as soon as Wesley pulled away and slowly lowered his hand.

“Have you ever done this before? Put your fingers inside someone? Do you know what to expect?”

“Just to myself.”

“Then you know.” Wesley let go of Gunn’s hand and then put his arm around Gunn’s chest and pulled himself close - bracing himself, almost, though he wasn’t tense.

Gunn reached behind Wesley with both hands, and felt first with his left hand so he wouldn’t waste any of the wetness from his right. The first time he’d ever done this with someone else, and he was going to do everything he could think of to make it good. After he’d switched hands, he didn’t try to press in immediately, but slowly circled and rocked, wetting the muscle, and feeling like he was warming it, softening it, learning what it wanted. Wesley sighed, and opened his mouth against Gunn’s neck.

Even warmed and softened, the muscle was very tight, and if he’d been trusting only to the feelings from his hand, Gunn would probably have stopped before the first knuckle; but everything else was telling him that this was right for Wesley, more than right. So he kept on, as deep as he could get, with Wesley moaning and sweating and gasping his name. For a while, Gunn tried to give them both a chance to calm down, so they would make it last, so he could take in more than a fraction of the reality of being allowed inside Wesley; but Wesley’s reactions made that impossible.

“Well, I wouldn’t argue with anyone who called that everything.” Wesley sounded far beyond relaxed, like he might never move again. They’d fallen sideways across the bed, still tightly locked in the same grasp; Wesley was on his left side, but seemed comfortable enough against the support of Gunn’s arm.

“Was damn close.” A contented sigh. “Couldn’t be what you expected, though, when you called me romantic.”

“I call romantic whatever reminds us that we can make each other almost forget to breathe.”

Gunn laughed. “Yeah, OK. You know, just a second or so before you called me that, I’d been thinking we probably wouldn’t have sex tonight. We’d be too strung out after what we’d been through. What you’d told me.”

Wesley nodded. “I mainly wanted to get away from Angel. Away from where we’d been when I knew you’d have to leave me. I thought we’d lie and talk. It’s early. By our standards, it’s very early.”

Gunn smiled. “Hardly touched our second beers. They’d still be nearly cold.”

“You want to get them, don’t you?” Wesley sounded amused.

Gunn shrugged, then nodded. “Friday night. Some things I expect like you expect your curry.”

“I can understand that.” Wesley arched up, away from Gunn’s arm, and they slowly disentangled themselves, then both went into the bathroom. It was the first time they had been in the bathroom together, the first time they had seen themselves together in a mirror, and they stood and stared, and placed hands to see the contrast.

“You are one fancy white boy, English. Couldn’t argue with Vince about that, he wanted to take that line. People are gonna think we got some kinda black/white, street/silver-spoon thing goin’. Gonna take one look ‘n’ think they know all about us.”

Wesley frowned briefly, shook his head. “They’ll know I got lucky. And they’ll wonder how you manage not to see...” A flicker of the eyes in the mirror towards his left shoulder, and then he was staring into Gunn’s eyes. “How do you manage?”

Easily and truthfully: “I don’t think about it.”

“Not even now?”

“I think about not hurting you. And I think about how I love everything about you, every part of you. If you don’t want me to think about anything else, then I won’t.”

A pause, then Wesley started to turn towards him. “Do you want to see?”

Slowly: “If you’re ready.”

Wesley nodded. “Be careful if you touch it. I know you’ll be careful but please don’t stroke it. Almost anything moving against it feels wrong.”

“I’ll be careful.” Gunn put his right hand on Wesley’s side, turned him the final inch, settled his left hand on Wesley’s chest, then took his first direct look at the damage. There were clear lines of scars, still looking jagged and raw to Gunn, a long way to go before they’d be faded down to white. Even though the lines were clear, it was difficult to count them - they crossed too many times, changed paths too abruptly. Looked like a battleground – a hard fight, a long fight, to make the best possible use of the skin that was left around the empty socket. Probably it was well done. Probably it was all that could be done. He refused to think about anything else but the doctors bent over the night’s new problem, their concentration, their determination. He couldn’t bear to imagine anything else about that night.

After about a minute he raised his head. “They took good care of you, it looks like.”

“I think so. I don’t remember much. Angel probably scared them.”

“Do you still need me not to see, the rest of the time?”

Wesley shook his head. “Not anymore. Thank you.” A sigh of surprise and relief. “I’ve had nightmares about that. Not about you seeing it, the nightmares were months ago. About anyone seeing it. But that turned out to be easy.”

Gunn got the beers while Wesley turned out the lights in the kitchen and living-room. Angel was still awake, or at least, the light was on in his room, showing as a line under the bottom of the door.

“You really gonna leave him like that all night?” They were at the door of the bedroom, with Wesley just about to lead the way in.

“It’s the safest thing to do. By tomorrow he should have forgotten most of what he overheard. There’s less chance then that he’ll be difficult to deal with.”

“You think he overheard much?”

“Yes, everything.”

Wesley’s reply had been so casual that it wasn’t until they were settling themselves against the pillows that Gunn started really remembering what they had said, and thinking about what Angel must have overheard. “Wesley, you said you’d kill him! How the hell’s he gonna forget that?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. He already knows what I’d do. We’ve talked about it several times.”

Gunn could only stare at Wesley, thinking maybe for the fiftieth time, “What is your life like?” Finally: “Is he scared of what’s happening to him? How much does he understand?”

“Less and less, I think. To both questions. When we first realised that it was getting worse...” A deep sigh. “We were both scared. But then we found out that we could cope.”

After several minutes silence, Gunn said, “Did Angel have a vision of you? When he saved you from that demon.”

“The Kungai. Yes. It was his first vision. He didn’t know until then that he’d been given them. And it was the middle of the day. So he had to deal with all of that, head out on his own. As soon as I could afterwards, I started going out with him. It was the only thing to do. He taught me how to fight. We even managed to keep his detective business going.”

Wesley’s voice was neutral, but Gunn saw the implication: that Angel could have been in time to save Wesley’s arm. He wondered if Wesley and Angel had ever talked about that.

“Were you rooming together the whole time?”

“He had an office at first. With a good-sized apartment underneath it. He took me home from the hospital. Gave me his bed.”

“How did that happen, if he didn’t like you when you met in Sunnydale? Was that because of the high-school stuff? Cordy and everything.”

“No, I was -” A pause. “I wasn’t at my best in Sunnydale. You wouldn’t have thought much of me either.” Another pause. “I’m sure he would have preferred never to see me again. But I think he felt guilty. You know. About the vision. That he wasn’t five minutes earlier. And he probably thought I’d head straight back to England, that he’d be rid of me in a week or so. But we couldn’t afford that building for very long. Really couldn’t afford to have an office. So we moved in here a couple of months ago.”

“When did you decide that you were staying? In L.A. with him.” Gunn felt cold, thinking of all the ways he and Wesley could have missed meeting each other.

“I don’t remember deciding. I’d been trying not to think about my future. Even before -” A sigh. “Angel started... having problems with other people. As if anything that wasn’t in the visions was a waste of his time. Almost as if it wasn’t real to him any more. So I started dealing with clients for him. Soon he couldn’t drive. Couldn’t collect his blood from the slaughterhouse. But he could still teach me to fight.”

“Lucky for him he decided to bring you home from the hospital.”

“Well, except that he thinks the Powers arranged it. That it wasn’t luck. That he didn’t really decide. He talked like that a lot when we first moved in here. I don’t think he -” Wesley was tense, protesting, and talking to himself rather than to Gunn. “I mean, when you remember that he was there. He saw everything. He saw me -” Wesley swallowed and sighed. “He seems to like the idea of a plan, that there’s someone in charge, that everything is for the best. I can see that he’s got a lot invested in that, and maybe I did once, but...” Shaking his head. “Why shouldn’t it all be an accident? Angel coming back from hell. Getting the visions. The Kungai. Everything. Given the choice now, I’d always prefer benign incompetence over callous efficiency. I expect that’s selfish. Yes, he was lucky. Let’s leave it at that.”

Angel coming back from hell? No, that had to be just another of Wesley’s ways of putting things. Like the muttering landscape. After about ten seconds, Gunn said, “He can’t imagine you not being here, Wes. That’s why he doesn’t think about what he’s saying.” That and the brain damage, but Wesley didn’t need Gunn to say something that could be taken as a joke.

“Used to say. And I can’t imagine either. It’s the most important thing I’ve ever done. So they wouldn’t have needed any plan to get me to stay. I would have said yes if they’d asked.”

Gunn stroked the length of Wesley’s thigh. “If they’d known to ask. It was all an accident. There’s nothing to think over.”

Wesley sighed and leaned against him. “Oh, it’s good to hear someone else say that. Even knowing you were never going to disagree with me, it’s still good.”

“You’ve been alone too long, English. It’s not good for you.”

“Ah.” A long, contented sigh. “Now we’re talking again about how I got lucky. You should never have noticed me. I’m not your type.”

“You’re not a ‘type’. C’mon, call me Sugarlips in ten different languages.” And Wesley did, with a kiss or six between each language. When they were back leaning against the pillows again, Gunn said, “D’you mind me calling you Wes? Or is Angel the only person who does that?”

“Well, until today. But I like it. And it’ll probably mean that when you call me Wesley, you’re annoyed with me. Which is always useful to know.”

Gunn laughed. “Is that what Angel does?”

“He definitely used to. Now I think it’s more a matter of what he remembers about me on a particular day. If he doesn’t really remember we’ve lived together, then it’s Wesley. Or nothing.”

“What you gonna call me? When you’re annoyed with me.”

“That could simply never happen.” Not serious, too smugly confident. When they’d finished laughing, Wesley said, “I’ll think of something.”

Gunn suddenly turned serious, surprising even himself. “Then what about what we are to each other? What do we call that? Are you my lover, my boyfriend, my partner? What? If anyone asks?”

“Are you thinking about tomorrow?”

“I suppose. I’ve never had to decide before. I mean, ‘boyfriend’. It’d be OK for a girl to call you that, I wouldn’t think twice. But for me... You’re not a boy. And ‘lover’.” A sigh. “Sounds too neat. All packaged like it’s something safe. It’s not packaged, it’s... everywhere.”

“Um... I like both, actually. To be able to say that about you. ‘My boyfriend Charles’. I could say it a hundred times a day and still be amazed.”

“It sounds OK when you say it. ‘I’m Wesley’s boyfriend.’ ‘I’m Wesley’s lover.’ God, yes, I like that too. But... ‘He’s my boyfriend.’ ” Gunn shook his head slowly, pushing the word away, then more briskly, realising. “You know, I think it’s the idea of saying it in just one word. What you are. I don’t want people to think they know. Because they don’t.”

“But ‘my boyfriend Charles’ is OK?”

“I don’t care what they think they know about me. And being anything to you. Having a place in your life. No complaints about whatever describes any part of that. ”

* * * * *

The next morning, Wesley unlocked the door to Angel’s room as soon as they were both dressed, before he’d even put the coffee on. Gunn stood guard immediately outside, in case Angel remembered too much and was difficult - but Angel was asleep.

“Can I see?”

Wesley made to open the door again, then paused for several seconds, and then moved away from the door, shaking his head slightly. “I’d rather ask him first. He can be very private about some things. It was months before he let me see him drinking.”

Gunn nodded, not surprised. Of course Wesley would respect for his vampire’s privacy. “D’you think he’ll be like that with me? That it’ll take months?”

Wesley shrugged. “He’s different now. His perception of other people is different. Most of the time he’ll probably think that you’ve always been here.”

Gunn got back to the base shortly before eleven, and immediately started rounding up Jackson, Rondell and George, his three deputies. He came across most of the crew in the process, and Vince and Elton were looking at him with active suspicion, though from what Gunn could judge they were either keeping it to themselves so far or not finding any takers.

“OK.” They were in Gunn’s bedroom. Gunn had started packing. “I’m gonna step down. I can’t head the crew any more. I’ll be tellin’ the whole crew as soon as we’re finished here.”

“You’re not just steppin’ down, you’re bailin’! What’s goin’ on with you, man?”

“I’ve met someone. Someone I have to be with. Can’t do both.”

“Just like that? Not even gonna try? Not even gonna bring her down here? How’d you ever meet someone who can’t see what it is you do?”

“Yeah, how the hell can that work?”

“It’s already working.” To Jackson: “And I met him the same place you did. In the thrift shop on Denker. Fighting a truckload of vampires.”

Jackson: “But that was - You’re shittin’ us?” Gunn shook his head.

Rondell: “Tell me it’s the big guy. I mean, we could -” He looked at Jackson, gave a small shrug. “I could see you might give that a try. You know, for a week or something. But, fuck, man, no one has to know.”

“It’s not the big guy. It’s the other one, the English guy. And everyone has to know. Because I’m movin’ in with him today. I’m leavin’.”

“So every night this week, you been...”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Jesus!”

“But he’s - Shit, man, how can you? What’d he do to you?”

“Make me happy. Make it worth giving up this.” A flick of the hand towards the door, meaning the whole base, all of them. “Putting up with this!” He jerked his chin forward, meaning their expressions, their reactions. “So I step down in half an hour, what you gonna do? Show me you’ve got a plan.”

Between them they did put together a plan, while Gunn finished packing. They chose Rondell to replace Gunn, and decided to bring in Vince as the third deputy. Better to have him on the inside. And he had initiative, thought on his feet, no shortage of courage. Perfectly good choice.

Jackson fetched Vince from the weapons room, and his reaction to the news was everything Gunn had expected. “A fag? That kind of fag? Damn, you fooled us good.” To the others: “Must’ve been pleased with himself, huh?”

Rondell, sharply: “Leave it. He’s gone. And we’ve all gotta act like we’re cool with it. Like there was nothin’ to know, there’s nothin’ to talk about. ‘cept he’s met someone and yeah it’s a surprise, but that’s life and who can blame him. We got somethin’ good here and most of that’s thanks to him, so we keep doin’ what we all know how to do.”

Gunn took his bags down to the truck while Jackson, Rondell and George called the crew to a meeting in the kitchen. Gunn made his announcement, then handed over to Rondell. Rondell immediately introduced Vince as a new deputy, and the four of them then presented a united front of brisk indifference, like no one could be expected to notice Gunn’s departure, like no one cared enough about his announcement to consider it a surprise. Gunn matched their indifference, and the questions and comments were few, and easily neutralised.

Rondell walked Gunn to the truck. With his hand on the door-handle, Gunn said, “Good work. You’ll do fine.”

“Yeah, we will.” Dismissive, unsmiling.

“You can call me, you know. Got somethin’ you wanna check out.”

“Sure.”

“You gonna badmouth me all over town?”

“You know we’re not. No point. Not gonna pretend we’re, like, ‘happy’ for you, though. Y’ pitch that one on y’r own.”

“Figured.” Gunn opened the door, swung himself into the cab. “Good luck. I’ll ask after you. And keep out of your way.”

“Yeah.”

Gunn saw Rondell standing, watching the truck, until he turned the corner and was out of sight.

*** End of Part One ***