

Kungai  
by Helen Raven

a novel in six parts

Part Two

The first time Gunn saw Angel drinking blood was on Saturday night, after they all got back from their first training session together. The blood was in a flask at the back of one of the salad crispers, and Gunn watched as Angel poured about half a pint into a plastic beaker and then put the beaker in the microwave.

“What sort of blood is it? I mean, what from?” Gunn was looking at Angel as Angel drank, expecting to see some sign of vampire hunger or satisfaction, but there was nothing to see.

“Pig.” Wesley was still busy piling a plate with bread and cheese and potato salad and pickles. “Angel says it’s the most nutritious. That is, judging by how much he needs.”

“What do you tell them at the slaughterhouse? They’ve got to wonder.”

“I tell them I’m making black pudding. That’s a sausage made with blood.” A small smile “Crucial in giving traditional English food its fearsome reputation. I’ve probably given the men at the slaughterhouse the impression that it’s almost all we eat. I don’t know what kind of blood it’s really made with.”

“It’s made with pig’s blood.” Angel was looking at his beaker, now nearly empty. His tone seemed absent-minded, like he’d been only half-listening and was only half-replying.

“Is it? That’s fortunate.”

“There were some villages that used geese, too, but that was rare. I only heard about that. I never tasted it.”

“Was this in Ireland?”

Angel nodded without looking directly at Wesley, then finished drinking and turned immediately to the sink to rinse the beaker.

“I thought it was a good training session tonight.” Wesley’s remark seemed to be directed mostly at Angel, but with a flick of the eye to include Gunn.

Sharp: “You’re becoming predictable again. I could see what you were thinking.” Angel had already made this point during the training session itself, and more than once.

“I know. I’ll do better tomorrow.”

To Gunn, less sharp: “You weren’t... You can fight much harder than that.” Angel had said little to Gunn during the session, beyond a few direct orders.

“Charles was holding back, I think. Since it was his first session with us.”

“Yeah. You won’t have it so easy tomorrow.”

“We have to train tomorrow.”

“We will, Angel. We should train every night.”

After Angel had gone to his room, Gunn said, “I thought it was a good session, too. When he fights, you’d never guess there was anything wrong with him. And you know how to get him back when he starts to lose his focus.”

“I think his body carries him through. It has its own attention span. You learn, after a while, what’s likely to get its attention.”

“We really should train every night. Has to be good for him, actin’ almost normal for a couple of hours every day. Gettin’ out of the apartment, too.”

Gunn had spent about an hour that day, on and off, wondering what Angel did with his time during the hours he spent shut in his room. Read and sleep? And, recently, listen. Gunn had spent even more of that day wondering what he himself was going to do with his time. Wesley and Angel were the type to have the patience to sit down and just read, do nothing but read and maybe, away from all of the distractions and interruptions of the crew, Gunn would learn that he did have it in him to get so caught up in a book that he wouldn’t want to do anything with his evening except read the book. Couldn’t really imagine that, though. Keeping busy, working off energy - that was natural to him, not some story that only happened inside your head. He had to get out and earn his share of the bills, too. He had some ideas for making more of Angel Investigations, and he’d discuss them with Wesley on Sunday, to be ready to make a start on Monday.

Gunn managed to take Wesley out for a few hours on Sunday afternoon, driving up the coast. Wesley really hadn’t been happy about the idea of leaving Angel for so long. Yes, he’d leave him when he had to, for work, but just for a drive? Irresponsible. Gunn had been starting to think that Wesley really wasn’t going to budge when Angel had suggested they just call in every fifteen, twenty minutes.

They went as far as Zuma, took a walk on the beach, sat on a rock and shared a soda. Wesley said, “What would you normally be doing on a Sunday afternoon?”

“Having a game of pickup, probably. We’d go to Venice most times. There’s an empty schoolyard a couple blocks from the base, but Venice seemed more worth the ride.”

“So you’d still be at the beach. Whereas this is different in every way from my normal Sunday.”

“Yeah, I can guess. Hope we can do something like this every week.”

Wesley nodded. “Angel usually has at least one good day in a week, even if it isn’t always a Sunday.”

“Difficult takin’ time from work, though. ‘Angel’s havin’ a good day, so we’re goin’ to the beach.’ ”

Wesley looked at him, eyebrows raised. “There are evenings. What sort of work do you mean? I can’t really imagine you working nine to five.”

“Nine to five’s for guys who can show they graduated. I’d be looking at shift work. But that’s only if you don’t think you can use me in your business. In Angel Investigations.”

Wesley looked surprised, then guilty. “We don’t get enough work to keep me busy. I can’t think what you would do.”

“I’d go out and look for more work, for a start. Follow up your old cases, see if there’s more people with the same problems. Track the news, the word on the street, for people whose problems might be with demons, they just don’t know it yet. And maybe there’s people who just want to hear stories about demons, and I’ll pay by the word.”

Wesley looked very reluctant. “That’s a lot of talking to people. What could you say, to most of them?”

“You think I need to know more about demons, first? I guess it’s whether you could teach me quick enough.”

“I don’t know how much you’d need to know. You could talk to people like that all week and maybe only one would hire us. Most would treat you as if you were insane, or running a confidence trick. I know.”

“I’ve been treated worse. You just ignore it, kind of. It’s worth it for that one person who does hire us. Bein’ able to pay the rent doin’ what you want to do - always worth it.”

“I don’t think you want to spend most of your day out just chasing work. Surely. I’m earning enough doing the translations. The business was Angel’s idea and it must be two months at least since he last mentioned it. We don’t have to keep it going. You shouldn’t let it stop you from looking for something better.”

After several seconds of looking hard at Wesley, Gunn said, “Are you set against this for your sake, or my sake, or what? You really do think you can’t teach me enough, or I got the wrong image or somethin’?”

“Charles.” A long, serious pause. “I doubt if I have anything to teach you. But I’d never ask you to do that for Angel Investigations, when you don’t have to.”

Gunn frowned. “You sound like you’d be asking me to eat broken glass, or somethin’. I like gettin’ out and talkin’ to people. Figurin’em out. Tryin’ to talk ‘em round. ‘s what I was doing when I asked you out to lunch that time. Which didn’t turn out anythin’ like I’d planned.”

Another pause, with Wesley looking like he was replaying his memories of that lunch, seeing them from a different angle. Then, nodding: “You do enjoy it, don’t you? We’re so different. I hadn’t - Probably because Angel seemed to hate it in the same way I do.” Slowly: “This must be the difference that lets you... make that first move with someone.” Without taking his gaze from Gunn’s face, Wesley lifted his hand from the rock, and placed it lightly on Gunn’s arm, just above the wrist.

“I guess.” Gunn wanted to look down, to see Wesley’s hand as well as feel it. How far was he now from the point of envying everything, but everything, that Wesley touched? But he didn’t look down, because they were at the beach with people all around, and they had to look like they were just friends and when a friend touches you on the arm, you both know it’s casual, last thing you’d do is stare like it had never happened before. “Time to head home? Unless you know a place near here where I can kiss you without worrying that we’re about to have garbage thrown at us.”

Wesley smiled and stood up. “Home.”

Gunn drove. They were halfway home when Wesley said, “Given all the ways we’re different, it’s fortunate that we both happen to be a disgrace to the fine cause of Gay Pride. I know I should be blazingly angry that we can’t do something as simple and harmless as kiss on the beach, when there were straight couples all around us who wouldn’t have to think twice about it. I’ve known men who’d regard every situation like that as a chance to make a point. Take a stand. And who had very little patience with any gay man who wasn’t as angry with the state of the world as they thought he should be.”

Gunn shrugged. He’d never met anyone like that – had hardly talked to any gay men – but he could imagine. “There’s only so many battles I want to fight. Not like I’ve ever really lied about it, and I’ve never felt ashamed of it, wanted to be different. But I won’t go lookin’ for trouble.”

“Exactly. Well, I’ve frequently wanted to be different, but not because of that.”

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First thing on Monday morning, Gunn started working through the Angel Investigations filing system. Well, working through the files, anyway, ‘cos there wasn’t much of a system. All of the files contained a sheet with names, addresses and telephone numbers, most files had a second sheet giving the basis for fees and lists of hours and expenses, and some even had a copy of a printed invoice, but the title on the invoice was sometimes the only clue about what the case had involved. Yes, usually there were some scribbled notes that must have been from a first phone call (“chanting in basement”, “green gunk”) and sometimes these included a guess about what was behind the weirdness (“Vernal ritual - botched or corrupted?”, “Garnax demon?”), but if you wanted to know what Angel Investigations had found or done, you’d never get it from the files. At best you’d get a page of notes in Wesley’s handwriting about a particular demon, or a printout of a web page. Never anything as helpful as “Yes, it was a Garnax demon, and it had moved into that house in that area at that time because...”

Gunn read everything in each file, made his own sheet of notes and question on each case, then sorted the files into chronological order and in the afternoon he and Wesley went through Gunn’s questions, starting with the most-recent case. After a couple of hours they had dealt with all of the cases that Wesley had worked on, and Wesley said that he knew very little about the earlier cases. “We’ll have to ask Angel. I suppose you could look on the computer as well. I think Doyle might have kept some notes there. He was the one who really used the computer.”

“You’ve got a computer? And who’s Doyle?”

“He had the visions before Angel. He joined Angel...” A pause. “...was sent to join Angel soon after Angel got set up in L.A.” Wesley looked serious and uncomfortable.

“I’m guessing he’s dead.”

Wesley nodded. "He died saving Angel. A hero's death." A sigh. "That's all I know. That's all Angel would say. I don't know if it happened because of a vision. Or if it was a case. Or just an accident. Angel took it very hard. It's obvious from..." Wesley shook his head. "... what he won't say. I haven't been able to get much impression what Doyle was like, not from what he wrote in the files or anything else, but I think he must have been -" Wesley looked into Gunn's eyes, with a tender, admiring expression so similar to the one he'd worn at the beach that Gunn held his breath, waiting for Wesley to touch him. "I think he must have been a lot like you."

After a few seconds Gunn released his breath. "Sounds like I shouldn't ask Angel about him."

"Not directly, no."

"So where's the computer?"

The computer was an iMac, and it was kept well out of sight, in a closet near the front door. Wesley turned it on, showed Gunn the invoices and then the little he knew about looking for other files. Gunn explored on his own for a while but found nothing that seemed to be related to the cases, apart from what looked like a file of calculations for the invoices.

"Was Doyle the one who got on the internet? There was web stuff in some of the files."

"He must have been. I don't think we can do that here, though. We brought the machine from the office."

"Don't you just plug it into the phone?"

"I don't know how it works." Wesley looked slightly panicked, and Gunn guessed Wesley thought of computers the way - well, the way most people thought of demons and magic (which was kind of cute). Not that Gunn knew much himself, but now that he finally had a computer of his own, he was gonna find out how to use it properly.

Angel was only able to answer about a third of the questions Gunn asked him, and Gunn was gonna pretty much ignore most of those answers, since Angel was obviously confusing some of the early cases with later ones that Wesley had already covered. After about half an hour and fewer than ten cases, Angel's concentration dropped to the point where he didn't understand that Gunn and Wesley were talking about things that had happened in the past. He started trying to organise them to investigate the cases, and got puzzled and angry very quickly when they didn't do what they were supposed to do. Gunn made a show of getting ready to go out and work on the cases while Wesley reassured and distracted Angel, and in the end Angel went to his room after only the slightest suggestion from Wesley.

"Ask him again later. Ask him about all of those cases again. He might remember more and he's unlikely to be annoyed with you for asking again."

Gunn nodded. "Looked like that was way too much for him. I'll just ask him about one case at a time."

Warning: "That might take you weeks. And a lot of things, he'll never remember."

"Gotta try. And you know more about those cases than you'd said."

"Than I'd realised." A shrug. "He gave me details in passing, I suppose. We certainly never sat down and talked about them."

Gunn spent the rest of the afternoon working with the small set of cases he was sure about, pinpointing each case on a map of L.A., putting the details in the computer, and printing out lists. In the process, he also decided on his first plan to find more business: he was going to start by choosing three clients to contact, three neighbourhoods to investigate, and three advertising methods to test. He had ideas already for each three, but he wanted Wesley's opinion before he'd make the final choice, especially about the clients. When he'd done everything he could with those clients, neighbourhoods and methods, then he'd make a second plan and so on. No one could make him believe he would ever run out of ideas or give up hope.

Angel came out of his room early in the evening, asking about their training session, and then asking what they were talking about, what Gunn was doing. Wesley explained the plan, and Angel was interested and enthusiastic. "Why haven't we done this before? We haven't, right?"

“Because we’re both introverts. Charles is a normal person.”

Angel agreed with Gunn’s choices for neighbourhoods and advertising and his reasons for those choices, but suggested two different clients, from the early days of the business. Gunn found the files for those cases and this time Angel was able to answer almost all of Gunn’s questions. Angel was still alert when they came back from the training session, so Gunn asked him about another two cases. Then they sat around and had a beer and talked about L.A. and modern weapon-makers and sword-fight movies, until Angel said he was starting to lose track and wished them goodnight.

“You’re good for him, Charles.”

“Seem to be. Dunno why. You’d think he’d find it hard to get used to me being here. Feel lost or something.”

“Maybe he was bored. You give him the right stimulation. He did say I was too predictable.”

Gunn immediately disagreed, as he had to, but he couldn’t help feeling pleased with himself. It had been a good day, good enough to make both body and mind feel stoked and to put him in the mood for a lot of energetic sex - so he needed to find out if it had been the same sort of good day for Wesley. It had. Definitely it had.

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On Tuesday, Wesley phoned the two chosen clients that he had dealt with personally, and asked if they would be willing to speak to Angel Investigations’ new head of Business Development. One agreed immediately, but the other seemed embarrassed about having ever asked for their help. Wesley put up more of a fight than Gunn would have expected (“Yes, Mr. Jordan, maybe they were some rare type of rat and not a nest of Nebinec demons at all. But would you agree that treating with them as if they were Nebinec demons did get rid of them more effectively than treating them as if they were rats?”), but he let it go far short of a confrontation. Wesley offered to call one of the other clients they’d discussed, but Gunn said that could wait.

“I’d save your energy for getting Angel ready to make the call to his client. I got enough to keep me busy today.”

By the end of the day, Gunn had his own business cards made up, copied straight from Wesley’s and describing him as a “Partner” in Angel Investigations - whatever anyone wanted to make of that. He’d also found out (by asking a salesman in Best Buy) what he needed to do to connect their computer to the internet, and which were the best books for getting started with an iMac. And he’d also driven around El Segundo, Westwood and Fairfax, checking out the places where the demons had lived and hunted (or partied all night, or sunbathed naked), and looking for likely places to find the next pack of demons, or to meet people who might have seen them. He’d be back later in the week, when he’d learned enough about the neighbourhoods and their problems to make himself worth talking to.

In the evening after they’d trained and eaten, Gunn set to work on the computer, and within half an hour he was connected to the internet. He and Wesley tested it out by looking for the web pages that Doyle had printed, then Wesley suggested moving the computer out of the closet and onto the dining table if Gunn was going to be using it every day. “I’d rather not have it on my desk. I have a way of working. Laying things out.”

Gunn smiled, feeling affectionate. “And you’re still spooked by the thing. Admit it.”

Wesley shrugged. “If I could still type properly I’d probably think it was worth giving it the space. As it is, I’m happy enough with the results I get using pen and paper.”

Of course. Gunn hadn’t taken the typing into account, because he hadn’t seen Wesley trying to type, only using the mouse. “You must be able to get one-handed keyboards.”

“We can look into it. Or we can add ‘Head of Computing’ to your business card. Experiment with division of labour.”

Gunn laughed, then started shutting down the computer to move it over to the dining table.

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Gunn spent most of Wednesday and Thursday reading about his three neighbourhoods, both online and at the library, looking for stories that might turn out to be about demons, that would get him started with asking people about their

neighbourhood weirdness. He was concentrating on El Segundo for now, hoping to be ready to hit the ground before the end of the week.

On Wednesday evening they had their training later than usual because Gunn had his first meeting with one of the clients, in a bar a few miles from the client's home. Mostly he just let the man talk, because the guy clearly enjoyed talking about the Foa demon: how he'd realised that something very strange was going on with his new neighbour, how the police refused to see anything, even when they were staring right at the spines and the scales and everything, and how he'd found Angel Investigations from the Yellow Pages.

"I tell you, you'd save people like me a lot of time if you'd get a box entry, say something like, 'You've tried the rest, now try the only outfit in town that isn't a bunch of creepy deluded freaks.' OK, I wasn't sure right off, because they're both kind of... intense, you know? But then the way they listened, they weren't just waiting for what they wanted to hear. And the boss did a drawing with me - he started out as a police artist, right? - and the English guy found them right away in his books, said they do this, they were starting a colony in the area. Police hadn't seen them 'cos when you get up close - like when they open the door to you - they have this way of making you see them as normal. Probably wouldn't kill me just for the sake of it, but they weren't gonna be good neighbours, not once they'd all got dug in."

"Boy. So what happened?"

"The English guy did this... I guess it was a spell on the house, to make it so people could see them." A smirk. "And the boss paid them a visit. That was cool."

"He killed them?"

A shrug. "Said he got them to leave. Made sure they'd never come back. Worth every cent. Wish I could tell my other neighbours what I saved them from, though. My wife even doesn't know half of it. That's the main thing you guys gotta get past, you ask me - the fact that it all sounds so crazy."

The man was right, of course. There were any number of nuts out there who set themselves up as "vampire hunters", who could see the signs of a demon apocalypse in every extra-red sunset or every howling dog. The little freaks had kept on finding Gunn and the crew, and the way they could talk and talk... All thought they were the centre of the world, acted like the crew might not even be good enough to join their team, might not be ready to hear "the great truth". And nearly every one had had a business card. Where could you advertise, what could you say, to show sane people that Angel Investigations was the one number that they needed to call?

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Early on Thursday evening, Angel got a vision. When it hit, Angel was in his room, Wesley was on the couch with the newspaper and a mug of tea, and Gunn was at the computer checking out the websites for some of their competitors.

"Oh, damn!"

Gunn turned his head, and found that Wesley had thrown the paper aside and was running towards Angel's room. Gunn leapt to his feet, took a step in the same direction as Wesley. "Wesley, what's -" Angel cried out, and there was a loud thud, and more cries, all strangled, agonised, and urgent. Wesley flung the door open, then grabbed a plant spray from the shelf outside the door, and ran in. Gunn was just a few steps behind him.

Angel was on the floor between the bed and the open wardrobe. Now Gunn could hear a dull banging in time with the cries, and a slower, dragging noise.

"Push the bed out of the way." Wesley was pushing at the bed with his thigh, but keeping his gaze fixed on Angel. He was keeping his distance, too, and he was holding the spray up like a weapon. Gunn hauled on the heavy iron frame of the bed, and moved the bed by two or three feet. "That's fine. That's enough." The cries had stopped, though Angel was breathing heavily, almost panting, and the sounds of movement were much slower and more deliberate; Angel must be trying to get to his feet, and now Wesley had put the spray down and was moving in to steady Angel, and guide him to the edge of the bed to sit down.

"Wesley? Was this a vision? Is it over?"

“It’s over. He’ll show us, any moment now. He’ll tell us.”

And Angel was starting to mutter, seeming to shake the words out as he slammed the heel of his hand over and over against his forehead. “Protect. Champion. Tribunal. Bounty. Help. Protect. More. Champion.”

“Charles. Could you get a pad and a pencil from the bottom drawer of my desk?”

The bottom drawer held a stack of drawing pads and a box full of sharpened pencils. Gunn was holding the pad and pencil out to Wesley when Angel snatched them from him and immediately started drawing on the cover of the pad.

“A clean sheet, Angel. Use a clean sheet.” Wesley leaned in to turn over the page, and Angel carried right on drawing. He was still muttering, the same jumble of six or seven words, but from time to time his head would jerk violently to the side, like he was trying to escape from something, and each time he would give the same startled moan.

“Do you understand what he’s saying?”

Wesley shook his head. “I’ve given up trying to understand what he says at this stage. You can never see how it relates to the vision, and it’s always too vague to help us. And he doesn’t know what he’s saying, can’t comment on it afterwards, whereas he does know what he’s drawing, can recall the visions exactly. If we’re lucky he’ll be able to talk in the next stage, tell us things he hasn’t drawn, give us clues about where and when.”

They were standing one on either side of Angel, so they could see what he was drawing: a demon with large, curving horns, and with tusks that looked like they could rip through a man’s thigh. The demon in the drawing was snarling straight at them, about to leap into the attack. Angel tore the sheet off, thrust it at Wesley, then started another drawing.

“Do you know what it is? He’s exaggeratin’, right? And tell me this next drawing’s gonna show us how to kill it.” Angel really could draw. The client Gunn had met the night before had asked if Angel used to be a police artist, and yeah Angel was getting in all the details that’d get you to recognise the demon if you saw it, but the drawing was better than that: it had life to it, enough to make Gunn want to reach for an axe right there, because Angel had brought the threat that close to home.

Wesley said slowly, “I think it’s a mountain dweller, from those tusks and horns and the way the hair grows. Crawford would be the place to start looking.” Wesley left the room but came back quickly with a thick book, then sat in Angel’s chair, switched on the reading light, and started turning pages like he was on a tight, urgent search-pattern.

“Wes? Is he OK like this? What do I do if he... I dunno.”

“What’s he drawing?”

“Same demon, ‘s all. Head’s turned, looks like it’s lunging. God, he’s - You should see the claws.”

“If he tears the page out, take it from him. It doesn’t sound as if I need to see it, not for the identification.” Wesley hadn’t looked up from the book. “He’s in the stage now where he has to show us what he saw, he can’t help himself. That will ease off, he’ll slowly give up drawing. After that...” Wesley shook his head. “It depends.” A brief glance at Angel. “I think we’ll be lucky this time: he’ll be fit to talk to us.”

“You’re sure he won’t turn violent?”

Another shake of the head. “It would have started during the vision. We’d be backed against the door right now, holding him off with the holy water.”

The plant spray, Wesley must mean. It must be full of holy water. Gunn took a quick look at the bottle, which was lying on its side at the foot of the bed. Wesley might have taken off those pictures of plants and bugs, painted a cross on it or something. If Gunn was a vampire he’d take that thing as an insult, get even madder. As Angel kept on drawing and shuddering and Wesley kept on turning pages, Gunn thought about the problem of the holy water, how to give it style.

“It’s a Prio Motu.” Wesley’s voice was quiet, like he was speaking to himself. “Oh. Bugger. Angel, I hope you’ll be fit to do more than talk.”

“What’s a Prio Motu? So it’s as bad as it looks?”

“It’s Himalayan, and ferocious, and almost unstoppable. Think grizzly bear with road-rage.”

“Ouch. So no clues in that book about how to kill it, either?”

“Not really.” Wesley handed the book to Gunn, then walked past him to sit on the bed next to Angel.

“This is all about their wars and history and stuff. Jeez, they like to fight! Hey, maybe we’re supposed to slow him down by knowing all the dates. ‘What about the time the Heebie-Jeebies and the Tutti-Frutti fought for five days straight over a stray goat? Man, was that the makin’ of General Shiny-Horns, or what?’ ”

Wesley laughed, then: “I think he’s stopping.” A pause. “Angel? Angel, can you talk to me?”

The muttering and the drawing were definitely becoming slower. Suddenly they stopped altogether, and Angel slumped forward. The pencil fell to the floor and bounced once, and then the room seemed to freeze into silence, like everything inside it was tense with waiting, even the air.

Angel stirred from the slump after just a few seconds, or so Gunn guessed from the time after he had started counting his own heartbeats. He slowly raised his head to look at Gunn, stared at him, frowning, then turned quickly to Wesley when Wesley spoke his name.

“There’s a big demon. Horns. Big horns. Fangs. Fierce. Really angry. Set... Set...” Angel was moving his hand in emphasis or frustration or both. “Won’t give up.”

“I think it’s a Prio Motu. Is this what you saw? Charles, could you...?” Gunn was already holding the book out to Angel.

As soon as Angel saw the picture he leapt to his feet and grabbed the book. “Where is it? How do we find it?”

“That’s the big question. Let’s try to answer it with the other books, next door.”

Gunn led the way to the living room, Wesley brought the pad and pencil with him, and they all sat at the dining table. “So you didn’t recognise the place?”

“Tunnels. All tunnels.”

“Tunnels that you didn’t recognise. Well, that narrows it down. What were the tunnels like? Were they damp? Did they have a smell?”

At first Wesley was the one asking the questions and making the suggestions, but Gunn soon joined in. The tunnels were made of concrete, not brick. They were square, not round. Dry. Clean. Well-lit. No graffiti. No garbage. Stairways with handrails, and the handrails weren’t rusted. Racks of pipes on the ceilings. Smell might be oil. And a low but powerful throbbing sound. Something industrial, obviously, but where? Angel filled sheet after sheet with drawings of details, and finally there was a drawing that gave an impression that the tunnels were deep, really deep, and that started Gunn thinking in a new direction.

“Angel, do you know the tunnels underneath Boyle Heights, near the DWP?” Angel shook his head. “We cleaned a nest of vamps out of there a year ago. I think it all fits. We should go check it out.”

Wesley took a sword, Gunn took his axe, and Angel took a sword and a mace. Gunn drove while Wesley sat in the back with Angel and asked more questions, trying to find out who they had been sent to save and how the Prio Motu was likely to fight. Angel thought he had seen someone behind the demon, running away, but not running properly, instead moving strangely, as if already injured.

Angel knew immediately that they’d come to the right place. But it was a large place, and almost every corridor and stairway looked just like the ones in the vision. They headed downwards, keeping as quiet as possible, listening hard for sounds of growling, or sobbing - or anything. They had reached the fourth level down when Angel suddenly stopped, pointed upwards, and led the way back up the stairs. By the second level, Gunn could hear the noises too: running footsteps, panicked breathing, and a low, menacing snarl. The demon must be dragging his victim towards the stairway.



When there was only one set of stairs between them and the demon, the three of them paused and looked at one another, an instinctive sharing of courage that Gunn had seen over and over again with his crew. Gunn was about to take that crucial, bracing breath when he got a better idea, shook his head vehemently, pointed to the corridor around the corner from the landing, and immediately headed towards it, gesturing with his head for Angel and Wesley to follow.

He stopped them just past the line of sight to the stairway and whispered, “Ambush.”

The others nodded and Wesley leaned in close to Gunn and whispered, “Angel and I will go for the Prio Motu, get it away from the stairs or drive it down. You get the victim up the stairs and out to somewhere safe.” Gunn nodded, saw Angel do the same, and then they took up positions with a view of the stairway and waited as the sounds came quickly towards them.

The victim was a pregnant woman, and the sight of that, of her holding her belly, being pulled down into the earth by a monster... This was sick, the universe was sick, to let this happen. Gunn pushed at Angel’s back to get him to start the charge, but Angel didn’t move until the demon was almost at the landing - and those moments of waiting were long enough for Gunn to scare himself with the idea that Angel might have lost his focus, forgotten everything about why they needed to fight.

The woman screamed when she saw them, and Gunn had to stand and see her terrified, had to wait for Angel and Wesley to force the monster far enough away from her before he could get in and prove to her that she was safe now, it was over. He tried to help her up the stairs but she was struggling so hard, almost like she was fighting him, and nothing he said seemed to be getting through - she’d even started sobbing, and her voice was raw as she screamed at him.

“You bastards. Oh, God, you sick, sick bastards. My baby. My baby. Oh, no, please. Not an axe. Not my baby. Kamal, help me. Help my baby. Don’t let them do that to my baby. Help me.”

Gunn dropped the axe. “I’m not going to hurt you. We’re not part of this, we’re nothing to do with that thing. We were sent here to save you from it. You’re safe now.”

A second of frozen disbelief, then: “Oh, God! How stupid do you think I am? How stupid are you? You’re killing my one protector and you’re telling me I’m safe?”

Gunn didn’t know how long his own stunned silence lasted. “You’re saying that demon was protecting you. He never hurt you? He wasn’t bringing you here to -”

“Like you didn’t know that! Waiting here with your -”

Gunn leapt down the stairs and ran towards the sounds of battle. “Stop! Stop! Wesley, stop! Angel! The Prio Motu wasn’t hurting her. It wasn’t what we thought. She says he was protecting her. You have to stop. Angel, you have to stop! We weren’t sent here to fight it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jo’s baby was going to grow up to be this great prophet, but there were some people prepared to pay a lot of money to see that never happened. Kamal had been sent to protect Jo, and also to fight as her Champion in some weird Tribunal that was set for Friday night. If he won in the Tribunal, then Jo and her baby would get protection at a whole different level, so no one would be able to touch them. But the Tribunal was still a day away, and the bounty-hunters weren’t giving up, nothing like it: there were two attacks during the night, and a third early on Friday afternoon.

After the second attack they discussed moving out of the tunnels, but it would probably only buy them a few hours before they were found again (judging by what Jo and Kamal had already been through), and no one could suggest a base that would be strong enough to justify the dangers involved in moving. Kamal did not believe that there would be a massed attack: he had seen no sign that the groups of hunters were starting to co-ordinate their efforts, and for the four of them against a group of three or less, they had proved that the tunnels were a good defensive position.

Angel, Gunn and Kamal stayed in the tunnels throughout, until the time came on Friday night to get Kamal and Jo to 4<sup>th</sup> and Spring for the Tribunal. Wesley went out briefly on Friday morning to get food and blood. They set Angel outside Kamal’s cell as the last line of defence, and Kamal, Gunn and Wesley took it in turn to sit guard along the approaches. Angel’s focus wasn’t sure enough for him to be left alone on the perimeter, not for that length of time, but he could be relied upon to fight single-mindedly if he was attacked there at the cell.

Gunn's main memory of those long hours in the tunnels was of missing Wesley. The boredom of standing guard, he already knew, and the terror and elation of battle. He knew that you always spent a fair part of the time planning what you would do as soon as you got out, looking forward to that bath, that first beer, the biggest, hottest pepperoni pizza in the world. This time, though, pushing out even the thought of the bath and the beer, was the moment when he would be able to leave his post and just walk down the corridor to Wesley and sit next to him and look at him, and finally find out what they would choose to talk about first, how they would choose to touch. He knew that they would have left the tunnels before then, that there wouldn't be that clear "moment"; it would be lost in whatever clean-up followed a Tribunal, in driving Angel home. But that was the image for him of missing Wesley: Wesley standing guard alone at the other end of a long corridor.

They all agreed not to try to use Angel's car for the journey to 4<sup>th</sup> and Spring; the chances were too great that it had been found, and that they would be facing the wrong side of an ambush. So they headed out in another direction, and Gunn hot-wired the first suitable truck they came across. Kamal thought the Tribunal would have to take place somewhere underneath 4<sup>th</sup> and Spring, and they were waiting for a door to open up when the time came, but instead Kamal and Jo just disappeared from the truck. Gunn, Wesley and Angel had no idea how long they should wait, if they should even wait at all and Wesley was busy blaming himself for not knowing everything about the Tribunal when Kamal and Jo were right there, standing in the road a few yards from the truck.

Gunn drove Jo to her apartment in Silverlake then took the truck back to Boyle Heights and left it where they'd found it, a few blocks away from Angel's car. Kamal got out and made for the tunnels without a word, which was exactly what Gunn had expected; Kamal had seemed genuinely devoted to Jo, but had treated the three of them as nothing more than weapons. Jo had managed to thank them at the appropriate times, but had never managed to hide the fact that she was accepting them only on Kamal's judgement; each one of them freaked her out, and that she couldn't forgive them for the attack on Kamal.

If Angel's car had been found, it hadn't been disabled, and Gunn got them home shortly before two on Saturday morning. They were all exhausted, and showing it. Angel went straight to the bathroom, and Gunn heard the sound of the shower through the open door.

"There's a message." Wesley was standing by the desk, looking down at the phone. "Do we play it, or just accept that fact that whoever it is isn't going to get any help until tomorrow?"

Gunn couldn't imagine Wesley ever accepting any such fact. "Up to you, English."

Wesley played the message, which was for Gunn, from Anne. "Um... I hope this is the right number to reach Charles Gunn. If not, I'm sorry for bothering you. Charles, Dean and George were here for the class today and they told me what's happened. Well, something of what's happened, I'm guessing. They said they didn't know where you were, but I took another guess at that, and... um... Anyway, you know I hate to lose touch with friends so you'll give me a call, won't you?"

"It must be from Thursday, unless they changed the class to today." Gunn was wondering what they'd said to her, what they'd said that she'd worked out he must be with Wesley. "I'll get back to her tomorrow."

"It was nice of her to call." Wesley sounded uncertain, which couldn't be about Anne herself, must be about the whole issue of Gunn and the crew. They'd not talked about the crew since the day Gunn had moved in.

"Yeah." Gunn was going to say more, something to show Wesley that he wasn't bothered by this reminder, that they could talk or not talk, whatever they wanted, but at that point Angel walked, naked, out of the bathroom. He crossed the living-room without looking at them, like they weren't there, and shut himself in his bedroom. Gunn swallowed, thought Wesley had, too. Still staring at the closed door, Gunn said, "OK, he's beautiful." A grudging sigh. "Even all slouching like that, he's beautiful."

Wesley nodded. "I keep wondering what he'd be like if he could see himself in the mirror. The way people look at him, though, that's probably as good as a mirror." Then he laughed, and the tension was gone from the room. "I had been about to suggest we went straight to bed, but now that doesn't seem quite the right thing to say."

"No. No, y' can't say that just now. I'd take it all wrong." Then Gunn grabbed Wesley, kissed him hard, and held him so they could both feel exactly what the sight of Angel had done to each of them. With his lips against Wesley's cheek, grazed by stubble: "Guess we'll have to play tic-tac-toe out here till we're sure we've both forgotten about him. Need at

least an hour, I reckon, before we'd be safe to think 'bout goin' to bed." This was what Wesley wanted, wasn't it? To treat it like a joke?

Like a joke or an outright turn-on, which was fine with Gunn. Wesley pulled him into a harder, deeper kiss, and at first Gunn did wonder how much Wesley was thinking about Angel, but that didn't matter as long as it got him Wesley like this. When they were both gasping, Wesley said, "Would that be strip tic-tac-toe?"

Took Gunn a few seconds to remember where the tic-tac-toe came from. "Could be. Could be. Y' know, why don't we say we been playin' for an hour. And you lost every game." He started unbuttoning Wesley's shirt, and backing him towards the bedroom.

"Every game for an hour? That's a lot of naked I owe you."

"Don't I know it?"

Gunn undressed himself in record time, but when he joined Wesley in bed the first words he heard were: "Charles? How badly would you take it if I fell asleep in the next minute?"

"You're kiddin' me."

But Wesley wasn't joking. He was clearly having to force himself to keep his eyes open. "It was lying down. My brain feels as if it's leaking out of my head. 's 'n jet lag. I'm... I'm... But I can't..." His eyes sank closed and his breathing suddenly became much slower. Indistinctly: "You should..." Suddenly he came awake, startled, stared blinking at Gunn for several seconds, then gave a slow smile and raised his hand a few inches off the bed. "But don't fuck me. That's..." He was asleep again.

Gunn waited for nearly a minute, though he didn't know what for, since anyone could see that he and his cock were on their own. Well, for a clue about what the hell Wesley had been saying. Fucking him was what? Something he'd changed his mind about? But Wesley had been smiling at him.

So take the smile, let the rest go. Wesley had been as good as dreaming, he could have been thinking anything. Just let it go.

Gunn leaned over Wesley to take his glasses off, but then was held looking down at him, feeling the lines of the sleeping face warm and rough under his hand. Yes, Wesley could have been thinking anything. Gunn would never be able to guess the half of it. Wesley wasn't beautiful. Gunn didn't know that he was even handsome - he was so thin, so reserved, looking at him you had to see that first, either judge him or worry for him. But once you'd started to know him, you realised that just looking at his face was better than the deepest conversation you'd ever had with anyone else. Every proof of strength and doubt and passion and coldness that Gunn had found in Wesley so far, they were always there clear to read in his face. And the power of his mind, his strange, foreign thoughts - his face warned you how far you had come out of your depth.

"Turns out I like that, English. Bein' out of my depth with you." Gunn brought his face down to Wesley's as he whispered, not touching, but close enough to feel Wesley's breath. Would have thought he'd hate it. Always been top dog. But Wesley wasn't any kind of pack animal, was he? He'd read about people like Gunn, he knew the theory. But that wasn't where he lived. So how could a top dog resent what Wesley did to him? Gunn sighed and smiled. "Even when you grow a day and a half of stubble and then fall asleep on me."

He kissed the corner of Wesley's mouth, meaning just a simple goodnight, but seemed like nothing could be really simple when it was him close to Wesley: the roughness of the stubble caught him almost like a shock, so much rougher against his lips than it had felt against his hand. His lips felt the softness of Wesley's lips, too, right next to the stubble, and they were warm and moist and yielding. Gunn's cock loved the roughness, it loved the softness, it wanted to fuck both feelings and it wanted to do it now.

Gunn groaned and pushed himself away from Wesley. He lay on his back with his eyes closed tight and his hands clenched down by his side, really wanting to jerk off but pretty-sure he shouldn't. "Not under my roof," Wesley had said. Wesley wouldn't want him to jerk off. But it was Gunn's roof now, and Wesley had got him hot and then fallen asleep on him.

Didn't help, either, to be thinking about Wesley not wanting him to jerk off, because that just made him remember exactly how Wesley had been the last time. How his face had gone so hard and cold, how he'd said, "Will you use my mouth or do you need to fuck me?"

Gunn groaned again, and now he had to keep his hips from rocking, as well as keep his hands by his side. He tried to think about something else, but he couldn't find any kind of calming thoughts in reach. There was the sight of Angel naked. There was him and Wesley happily horny from seeing Angel. And there were the hours in the tunnels, the ache of missing Wesley, having the image so clear: of the long corridor, and Wesley standing alone at the end of it.

No thought that didn't lead to Wesley. That didn't lead to sex. Gunn knew he should be able to control himself, he should, but at this moment he just didn't want to. He shook his head two, three times, gave a long, unsteady sigh, then unclenched his hand and wrapped it around his cock. He thought about what Wesley might say if he woke up now, what he might do – and he let himself get so excited he cried out at the end, and made the bed slam against the wall.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wes. I know it bothers you, the idea of me jerking off. Is there... Is there any way it'd be OK?" The first thing Gunn said to Wesley when they were next both awake, early on Saturday afternoon. He'd been lying awake for half an hour or more, knowing he had to tell Wesley what he'd done. Might seem like a stupid secret, something most men wouldn't think twice about, but Gunn didn't want to keep this one, not from Wesley.

Wesley looked surprised. "It doesn't bother me in the slightest. In fact, I like the idea. As long as it's... not taking you away from me. Depriving me of a fuck I'd rather like for myself."

Gunn frowned hard, then said, "What about that first morning we woke up together? The first time I saw you with stubble. You really acted then like it bothered you."

"I was –" Wesley sighed. "I was concerned to make the point at the time that I'm tougher than you might think. I didn't want you to... get into the habit of holding back. Just because of the way I look. I want to have all of you." A sudden smile. "Once I'm sure I've got the point made, then I'll never act like that unless you want me to."

"You think I'm holding back?" Gunn was frowning again, couldn't return Wesley's smile.

"No, no, not that I've seen." Wesley reached out, laid his hand on Gunn's shoulder. "But I don't think we've done much since to put it to the test." A shrug. "And maybe we won't. It doesn't matter like that, I just want to be sure I get all of you. Whatever we end up doing."

Gunn relaxed, knowing there wasn't any problem after all with what he'd done the night before. He might still tell Wesley how he'd jerked off – or he might not – but it didn't feel any more like a secret he had to get rid of as soon as he could. And he'd just now found some other things he needed to say more.

He rolled to lie against Wesley, pushing his knee between Wesley's knees, and putting his arm around Wesley's waist. "English. Yeah, yeah, it's somethin' I've hadta think about with you: needin' to hold myself back. Get in control. But it's not 'cos of how I see you, not in the way you were saying. You gotta know you're the toughest man I ever saw. It's 'cos of..." He paused, then gave a long, slow sigh. "I think it's 'cos of some things I thought I knew about myself. And turns out I don't. Not with you."

Wesley had gone slightly tense. "Things like... that you'd never look twice at a white man?"

Gunn shook his head, pulled Wesley closer, then stroked his back. "Don't think that's any part of it. It's more... I thought I knew how I was with sex. How far I'd let it take me. How fast. Since... since before Luke, even, I'd figured out how to keep in control. Had to with Luke, so he wouldn't know I wanted – Yeah, I wanted all of him. And with girls... Y'learn the first thing about girls, y'know it's the right thing to do. Else you're just some selfish kid. Got no clue 'bout anything 'cept jerkin' off. So I thought I'd got that all figured out. Gotta be pretty damn good, even. 'n' then I meet you."

"And I make you lose control?" Wesley was smiling - looking pleased, but like there was something here he just didn't believe.

“Oh, man. You say just one word or you get this look and –” He swallowed again and closed his eyes for a second. “ ‘s like I’m back when I was that selfish kid. Worse. Like I want every real thing in the world to just go away till I can get my cock what it wants.”

“Charles.” Wesley leaned in and pressed his lips briefly to Gunn’s cheek. “You are anything but selfish. You are the lover I would have dreamed of for myself. If I hadn’t ruined myself with too many of those stupid crushes. I think... you must have set a standard for yourself that no one could be expected to keep. I’ve never seen any sign of –” A shrug. “Of what you seem to be worrying about.”

“You have. ‘n’ I reckon you will again. That morning with the stubble. ‘n’ if you’d seen me last night, jerkin’ off after you fell asleep on me. When it gets me like that... feels like somethin’s taken me over. Somethin’ outside me. Gets me so hard in seconds, I –” He took a deep breath. “Some ways it’s exciting. Course it is. Other ways... still doesn’t feel like me. Dunno if I’m worryin’. Not now, anyway. Now I’m clear how you feel ‘bout jerkin’ off. ‘bout me holdin’ back. Mostly I’m just... tryin’ to figure what it is ‘bout you that gets to me. How come I never had it happen before.”

“Luke didn’t get stubble?”

Gunn shrugged. “He wouldn’t get it to look at. ‘n’ it’s the look of it on you. The feel, too, but that’s second to knowing how it looks.”

Wesley was looking thoughtful. “So maybe it is because I’m your first white man. And the bristles show on me. You’ve always had this kink, but you’ve never been in a position to realise it before.”

Gunn shook his head hard, very definite. “It’s you, Wes. It’s how it looks on you. Best guess I’ve got so far is... it’s about way it makes you look so distant. Because y’ know that’s a big part of you, even without the stubble. Jeez, Wes, you’re all about holdin’ back. Not in a bad way, not like you’re playin’ games. You don’t play any games with me, you always act close. But half the day at least you look so distant, and I guess then some part of me’s always half-thinking, ‘You could’ve stayed like that for me. I might’ve never dared to touch you.’ But that’s just one part of me, for some part of the day, and for the rest I’m all: ‘Course I dared. Course he said yes. He was lookin’ all cool ‘n’ English but he’d been thinkin’ ‘bout how we’d fuck.’ So –” A deep sigh. “Y’get to me. Every day. Guess y’keep me hangin’ so close to the time you said yes. ‘n’ we know that was perfect so forget I ever said any of this and don’t try to act any different. Look any different. ‘s just... somethin’ in the way I gotta have you.”

Wesley was blinking over and over, looking amazed. He made a small sound then closed his eyes for the space of three deep breaths, and when he opened them again he still looked amazed. In a whisper: “I don’t deserve any of this.”

Gunn didn’t whisper, but he dropped his voice low. “Should be me, Wes, sayin’ that about you.” Gunn pulled Wesley close, and they kissed for a long time.

Angel was already up. Gunn had been able to hear him in the living-room from the time he’d woken up himself. There’d been some tidying-up noises: shuffling of paper, drawers opening and closing. Some clattering from the kitchen. The whirl of the computer and some short bursts of typing (a big surprise to Gunn). Angel had gone quiet just before Wesley had woken up, and Gunn thought he was probably sitting reading.

“We’re not going to have sex with him just next door, are we?” Not really a question - Gunn was already resigned to the answer, knew exactly how Wesley would shake his head. “So what’ll we do with the rest of the day? We are taking the weekend off?”

“If Angel stays like this we could go out for a meal. Maybe even a film, if we can find something we agree on. Would you consider a film with the same cameraman as ‘Malcolm X’?”

“Wes, if it’s a matter of a date with you, I’d consider the same accountant. Anyway, it must have been ten years ago. And you already figured I might’ve snuck out one or two times? Even to see some piece of all-white crap.”

Wesley shook his head. “Exemptions always given for social necessity. Sometimes you just have to know what people are talking about.”

Soon after they were up, showered and breakfasted, Gunn said, “Wes? I think I’ll go over and see Anne, if she’s in. Should be back by four.”

“OK. I’ll check the paper for the film listings.”

Anne was in and could spare the time for a walk in Exposition Park. Apart from wanting to see Anne, Gunn also needed some sunshine after all those hours in the tunnels with Kamal and Jo, especially since sunshine wasn’t welcome in any room in the apartment. Gunn drove, and they ended up walking round the Rose Garden.

“Did they tell you straight off? What they say?”

Anne shook her head. “Not till I asked about you. They said you’d met some English guy. Moved in with him. Think that was all they wanted to say, but...” She shrugged. “I was surprised, asked some questions. If it was the same English guy I’d met. They were spooked. It was obvious. Kept saying they’d no idea about you. But playing it as cool as they could. There was nothing I’d hate to repeat to you or to him.”

Gunn nodded. “Yeah, they said they’d play it cool. Long as they didn’t have to pretend they were happy for me.” How bitter did he sound? Some, probably.

A few hundred yards later Anne said, “I liked him. But he’s the last person I’d think... You weren’t together back then, were you?”

“Barely met him. Didn’t know if I liked him. I don’t know how much chance you’ll have to get to know him, but... He’s like no one else I’ve ever met. He says hi. Well... ‘sends his regards’.”

They laughed, then Anne brought him up to date with the shelter, especially with the latest legal miracle from the shelter’s tame lawyers. Gunn couldn’t argue with their results and free was a great price, but he couldn’t believe this Lindsey was really the undercover idealist he seemed to be pushing to Anne. You want to help the people who really need help, you just damn well do it. You don’t choose to bide your time behind a marble desk wearing a thousand dollar suit and spend your days helping rich people to carry on doing whatever the fuck they want. If you’ve decided to go after the money, at least be honest about it. Of course, Anne might just be hearing what she wanted to hear, the man might not have done anything more than mention some news report; but from the “Lindsey did this” and “Lindsey thinks that” and “Lindsey and I are looking at ideas for Wolfram and Hart to hold a fundraiser for next year”, he guessed that Lindsey and his thousand dollar suit had some good lines between them.

“Talking about fundraising... You have to be looking for work now that you’ve... If you haven’t found anything yet, you know I can ask around.”

“Thanks, but I’ve joined Wesley in his demon business. You know, the one on his card. Hasn’t been doing well but I think I can turn it around.”

“Right. Angel Investigations. It was on the answering machine, too. The Angel part’s a person, isn’t it? It wasn’t Wesley’s voice on the machine. You said when Wesley came to the shelter that there might be two of them. And Dean told me about a fight in a thrift shop. A man who had to go sit in the car.”

“That’s Angel.” Then, sharply: “Dean told you about the thrift shop? He wasn’t even there.” So much for the crew playing it cool. Who the hell had thought it would be smart to get that story out?

Anne shook her head. “It was when we were alone for a few minutes. He seemed puzzled about what had happened. Concerned for you, I think. Wanted to know what impression I’d got of Wesley. If I knew anything more about his life. Which I don’t, so...” She shrugged. “I told him what I’d liked about Wesley, he seemed reassured. Is Angel an ex-boxer, or something?”

“What? Where’d you get that?”

“He sounds like he’s a trained fighter with brain damage. Thought he might’ve met Wesley and decided to put his prize money into a detective business.”

Gunn shook his head. “I haven’t really figured out what he did before. But he set up the business on his own. Then there was an accident that caused the brain damage. And then he met Wesley.”

“How bad’s the damage?”

“Gettin’ worse. He has good days but he can’t take care of himself now.”

“Wesley takes care of him?”

“Yeah. He stays in the apartment with us.” At Anne’s look of surprise he shrugged, then said, “I’m about used to it already. But don’t tell Dean about Angel if he asks again. Wesley won’t mind me telling you, but I don’t want the crew to get any details. They’re too angry with me. They mustn’t have anything they could use to take it out on Wesley.”

Pained: “That’s most of your friends, Charles. Some of my friends.”

“You do what you have to. I’m not at war with them, you know. Just know we need to keep out of each other’s way for a while, not force each other into doing anythin’ stupid. Few months we’ll calm down, realise the action’s moved on and no one’s checkin’ us out any more t’see how we’re takin’ it. If a reason comes along to start talkin’ again, we might even be happy to take it.”

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“So what’ve you found for us?” The paper was open on the coffee table, and Gunn could see that several listings were circled.

“For ‘us’, I don’t know. Can we see what you think of what I’ve found for ‘me’?”

“s a place to start.”

“The 5.30 show of ‘Passion Fish’ at the Nuart in Santa Monica. And then a curry at the Gate of India. Also in Santa Monica.”

“Like the curry. Need more on the movie.”

“It’s been out for a few years. I saw it in London. It’s about a soap actress who loses the use of her legs in a car accident and goes back to where she grew up in Louisiana. Retreats there. A nurse comes to work for her who’s pulling out of a bad time of her own. It’s about... when your old life’s gone, what it takes to even want a new one. Alfre Woodard plays the nurse, if that helps. And it’s very funny in places. I don’t know if you’d like it, but I’d really like to know what you’d make of it. It stayed with me.”

Sounded like hard work to Gunn, but hell, it was only two hours out of his life. “The funny sounds good. Only one way to find out about the rest. You don’t want to eat first, though? ‘Dinner and a movie’?”

“I was thinking about Angel. I always feel that the longer I leave him, the more likely it is that he’ll have a vision. And I’d rather get the film safely out of the way first. I’m sure there’s a flaw in my reasoning. I’m missing something basic in the maths. But will you humour me until I’ve worked out the proof?”

“5.30’s fine. A couple of weeks ago I didn’t think we’d ever be able to leave him long enough for either dinner or a movie.”

Wesley insisted on sitting in an aisle seat, and went out every twenty minutes to call in to Angel; which could only suggest drug business to everyone except an innocent like Wesley. They made it safely through the movie and to the restaurant, and Gunn found out that Wesley had already spoiled him for L.A. curries. They ordered the lamb dish that Wesley had cooked for them, and it tasted good but it tasted all the same, from the first mouthful right to the last. No problem with that, you’d think - unless someone had already served you a version where every mouthful had you thinking “Damn, this is good!” like you were tasting it for the very first time; where you could eat the whole portion without figuring out the trick of how it all worked together.

They didn’t talk much about the food after Gunn had given his verdict and enjoyed Wesley’s reaction. Wesley said less when he was pleased than anyone else Gunn knew, but Gunn didn’t need words when Wesley’s face got that glow, the one that made him look years younger.

“Yeah, the movie was good. Can’t say it grabbed me - I like action. But it felt real. Like the real way people... get close, don’t get close, sort of drift round each other. Gotta respect that in a movie. And it was funny, like you’d said. And Angela Bassett was in it, so it was even OK with my ‘Malcolm X’ thing.”

“Oh yes, she was the actress friend, wasn’t she? I didn’t know who she was when I first saw the film. I hadn’t thought about that.” Wesley’s voice changed suddenly from vague interest to full enthusiasm: “I thought the scene between her and Alfre Woodard in the kitchen was very interesting, when they’re talking about their different backgrounds in Chicago. Of course, I don’t know how realistic it is, but that was the first hint I’d ever seen of deeply-rooted class distinctions between black people in America. I’m not saying it’s a good thing but it gave me a point of reference - as a typical class-ridden Englishman trying to understand a country I hadn’t yet visited - and that scene made me realise that my assumptions about how black people lived, how they related to one another were much too simple. That there must be history. And layers.”

“You’re lookin’ for history, you know you’ve come to the wrong place.”

“It’s not realistic?”

“What class is a cop?”

“Lower middle.” Wesley sounded so definite, like he was stating a law of nature.

“Then that’s as far as I go with that ‘relating’. Those teachers and lawyers and doctors, they don’t come visitin’ us. All I know’s what I see on TV. Maybe Louisiana’s one thing. My part of L.A.’s another.”

Wesley nodded. “You’d said I don’t understand the inner city. Maybe I do need to watch ‘Summer of Sam’ again.”

“You just need to meet some more of my friends. Maybe a couple of my enemies.”

Over dessert Gunn said, “Wes? In the movie, with her waking up in hospital, the physiotherapy, everything. I wondered if it was different enough that you didn’t - Or maybe it even helped?”

“Different enough from what happened to me? When I lost my arm?”

Gunn nodded.

Slowly: “It made me realise how lucky I was that Angel was there. He never tried to look as if he wanted to be, but at least he was there. And I knew he’d be there the next day, too. Seeing her alone in all those scenes in the hospital, I thought, ‘I was lucky.’ ”

Wesley took a mouthful of coffee, then stared down at the cup. Gunn waited, sure that Wesley wasn’t finished, not judging by the tone of his voice, the way he was frowning, how tense his hand was holding the cup. Suddenly, Wesley raised his head, not frowning now but looking very serious. “I’d remembered that the film started like that, though. I knew it didn’t have anything of the things that are difficult for me. But I’d forgotten that scene near the end: the dream she has where she’s sitting on the dock, and she stands up and walks to him, as if she’d done it a hundred times before, as if they both took it for granted.”

Wesley paused, then smiled at Gunn - a sad smile that made Gunn wish he could take back his question. “In all the dreams I’ve had about you, I’m able to hold you properly. My dreams won’t admit yet what’s happened.” Another pause, and a shrug. “I don’t know if the scene was really supposed to be about that. It was probably about her conscious mind, conjuring up a fantasy. But everything about the way it was shot... Yes, that’s how it feels.”

Gunn reached across the tablecloth and touched the back of his fingers to Wesley’s. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. I should’ve known.”

Wesley shook his head briskly. “If I’d wished you hadn’t asked, I would have fobbed you off. Said I didn’t see any connection at all.” He pushed his hand gently against Gunn’s and smiled again, an entirely different smile. “I’m glad you asked.”

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In the last half hour of the film and throughout the meal, Angel had been distracted and impatient whenever Wesley called in, so Gunn wasn’t surprised that Angel ignored them when they got back to the apartment. He was sitting in the



armchair with a pad on his lap, drawing slowly, concentrating hard, and with some dramatic, clashing classical music playing loudly behind him.

“Angel? I’m going to turn the music down a bit.” Gunn wasn’t sure if Wesley was asking permission, but Angel carried on drawing anyway, and Gunn thought he might not even have been aware of the music.

The drawings weren’t like the ones Angel had made of the vision. Those had been urgent sketches, picking out just a few details like they were frozen in a spotlight - like Kamal’s face, or pipes on the ceiling. These new drawings filled in the whole scene - a room, a street, a forest - but all drawn very small, small enough that he could fit six or seven on the same page.

“What’s he doing?”

Wesley shrugged. “Drawing for pleasure, I think. I didn’t know he had more than one style.” A pause. “We could try to get him to move next door.”

“He’s OK. You’re still just looking for a couple of hours reading, right? Might have moved himself by the time we’re ready for bed.”

Gunn had meant to spend Wesley’s reading time working through the beginner’s book he’d got for the computer, but after a couple of chapters he learned enough to find out there were some games on the computer, and then obviously he had to try every one of them out. At some point he noticed the music wasn’t playing any more, and he wondered what game he’d been playing when it had stopped.

“What was the movie like?” Gunn started at the sound of Angel’s voice, clicked in the wrong square, and saw immediately that he would be going back to Level 1 again with the pipe-laying.

“I enjoyed it even more than I did the first time.” Wesley was so smooth at dealing with these changes in Angel; he acted like they’d just come in the door and sat down, and Angel was asking the question like a normal roommate. “I don’t think Charles will be looking to see it again, though.”

“I see why Wes likes it at lot, but... dunno who I’d see it with, apart from Wes. All my friends’d think it was too slow. Not really about anything. Not even a happy ending for the chicks. There’s just a kind of buzz we expect to get from a movie, y’know? They’d never let me forget it.”

Wesley looked amused. “I can see I’m going to learn a lot when you choose the next one.”

“I’d like to see a movie.” Angel sounded wistful.

Wesley and Angel had had this conversation before, Gunn could tell: Wesley was sympathetic but very firm. “You can’t have a vision in a cinema, Angel. You just can’t.” Angel nodded, gave a slight shrug, and turned his attention back to his drawing pad.

“What about in a car, though? Couldn’t we go to a drive-in?” Gunn saw Wesley wince, then shake himself into looking interested and optimistic. Wesley the movie snob. This was gonna be fun.

“A drive-in?” Angel looked like he didn’t want to be too hopeful. “But the nearest one’s probably thirty miles away. And what sort of movies do they show these days? Is it worth driving to Pomona to see ‘Night of the Giant Crabs’?”

“Hell, yes! ‘Night of the Giant Crabs’, Wes? Bet you wouldn’t get a chance like that back home.”

Wesley raised his eyebrows. “I wouldn’t. We don’t have drive-ins.” He leaned forward and picked up the paper from the coffee table. “Where is the nearest drive-in? I didn’t notice any when I was checking the listings.”

“I think there’s a couple out east. Closer than Pomona. Should be something online if it isn’t in the paper.”

“Could you look into it some time? I don’t know about Angel but I might need a few weeks to get myself in the perfect mood for ‘Night of the Giant Crabs’.”

Gunn and Angel looked at one another and smiled, then Gunn said, “What you been drawin’, Angel? You been workin’ on that all evening, looks like.”

Angel looked down at the pad, then frowned, held it up, and started flipping slowly back through the pages. Gunn saw more of the small scenes on the first page Angel turned, but the other five or six pages were the usual large sketches. When Angel got to the beginning of the pad he stared at the cover for several seconds, then worked through the pages again, even more slowly than before. At the third blank page he stopped and looked up at Wesley. “Is it a story? I know there are connections, but I can’t... What are we supposed to do?”

“Admire your talent, Angel, that’s all. You were listening to music. I think it must have stirred associations for you.”

Angel turned to look at the hi-fi system then back at Wesley. He nodded several times, then got to his feet, let the pad fall to the floor, and went straight to the kitchen and into his routine for feeding himself. Wesley picked the pad up and put it in the desk drawer, then sat down and went back to his reading. Gunn started the game again.

“Goodnight?” Angel was standing at the door of his room, hand on the doorknob. He looked totally disoriented, could even have been asking if it was night or morning.

Wesley a split-second before Gunn: “Goodnight, Angel.”

Gunn got himself to the end of Level 3, then paused the game and went to sit next to Wesley on the couch. Quietly: “Now that was my fault. Really lost him there.”

Wesley shrugged and laid his book on the arm of the couch. “He might have known what the drawings were about. I was curious myself. I wouldn’t have asked but then you know I’ve probably been playing it so safe that he’s got bored. You asked because you were interested. That’s a good reason. I decided long ago that the only workable criterion for judging how I’d treated him was... ‘Did I act with his best interests at heart?’ ” A heavy sigh. “For what I’ve had to do in self-defence... Well -”

“Jeez! You don’t have to justify lockin’ him in his room. Scaldin’ him a couple of times. He’s a vampire and he’s crazy. Most guys’ d chain him up and keep him like that.”

Wesley shook his head. “If it ever comes to that I’ll have to be sure I’m doing it for the right reasons. Because it’s the only way to keep us all safe. Not because I’m angry with him. Or... Or...” He swallowed. “It would be far too easy to do it for the wrong reasons.”

“Long as you do the chainin’ first. Pick over your reasons later.”

“Or work them out beforehand. I think we’ll have to chain him if we go to the drive-in. If he had one of the visions that make him violent... We couldn’t deal with Angelus in the confined space of the car unless he was already restrained.”

Gunn slumped heavily in the couch, let his head drop back, and stared at the ceiling. Going to the drive-in was supposed to be fun. A silly evening out. Would’ve been great to do with the crew if they could’ve afforded it. Imagine sitting in chains through some dumb movie, surrounded by kids in cars doing all their dumb teenage stuff. Imagine knowing this was the only way you could ever leave the apartment unless it was to train or fight.

Gunn dragged his hand over his face then rolled his head to look at Wesley. “I guess once I’ve had to deal with him when he’s violent I won’t feel so sorry for him. He’s just gettin’ what he deserves, right?”

“He’ d be the first to agree with that, I’m sure.”

“OK.” Gunn sprang to his feet. “Need a beer. Then need to get past Level 10. You wanna beer, Wes?”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You haven’t taken your eyes off the screen in at least twenty minutes.” Gunn had been aware that Wesley had stopped reading, had been moving quietly around the room. In the process Wesley must have watched enough of the game to know when he should speak, since he’d chosen a gap between levels 22 and 23.

Gunn paused the game and turned, hooking his elbow over the back of the chair. "Have you never played one of these things?"

"Not since I was in school. A friend had a BBC, I think it was. There was one term we must have spent every spare hour playing adventure games. But in those days it was like reading a book. You'd type in 'turn left' and then on the screen it would say 'You are standing in front of an archway with a rusted iron gate. Through the archway you can see...' And so on. There weren't any pictures. And you weren't against the clock."

"And then you grew out of it?"

"I think so. He made some new friends. Things changed. Games changed too, and what I saw of the shooting games didn't appeal to me. There was nothing you could say about playing them except what score you'd got. You couldn't discuss your decisions, couldn't share anything. It wasn't a discovery."

"It gonna bug you that I like shoot-em-ups? Way more than this." He nodded at the screen.

Wesley laughed and came forward to stand by the chair, his hand stroking Gunn's shoulder. "I look forward to boasting about your scores to Angel." Gunn reached up to take Wesley by the neck of his shirt, and brought him down so their lips touched.

Wesley was obviously in one of his slow and serious moods, from the amount of time he was insisting on spending just easing Gunn's mouth open. In a girl, Gunn would have found such slow-motion foreplay creepy - a bad sign about what she expected sex to be like - but with Wesley it was exciting.

"You know..." A whisper against Gunn's cheek. "Watching you play I was thinking, there must be a word for someone who's trying to decide whether to interrupt a young man... a younger man... who's in the middle of a computer game. For wondering how long you might have to wait before he'll stop and you can ask him if he's ready to take you to bed and fuck you."

Gunn gasped, then lurched to his feet and dragged Wesley towards the bedroom. "Sure there's a word. It's 'idiot'. Like there was anything to decide. Like I'd ever not be ready."

Gunn had put his fingers in Wesley often enough by then that he knew the feelings that got him worried most that he was hurting Wesley, and he also knew he wouldn't get an answer either way from asking Wesley. Wesley never really seemed to hear the question, would just grunt and shake his head, and push against Gunn, far harder than Gunn would have dared. Gunn wanted to take the head-shake as a simple no ("No, no, of course you're not."), but it wasn't, it was raw impatience. But Wesley only got impatient with the question, not when Gunn went slow and careful, so Gunn did what he'd done before when it was just his fingers, and stroked and coaxed and opened Wesley as carefully as he knew how; then he pushed his cock in slowly, so slowly, using the width of his thumb and counted heartbeats to pace himself, fighting every second against the urge to slam in as deep as he could go, get his cock as much of this incredible feeling as he could.

Once he was all the way in he lay on top of Wesley like he was exhausted at the end of a race, finally giving up control over his breathing and letting himself pant and gasp against the crook of Wesley's neck, and moan whenever Wesley clenched around him.

He thought, "Wesley, I love you. I love you," then gathered himself and stretched forward to kiss Wesley's shoulder. He moaned again at the taste of Wesley's sweat and then when he felt Wesley's pulse under his tongue. Wesley sighed, and lifted his head back to roll his cheek against the curve of Gunn's skull; and Gunn felt the working of Wesley's back muscles all the way down his body, nearly to his cock. He pushed forward to meet the movement and found himself rocking his hips against Wesley's. He was still pressed in tight, but even so he could flex and twist and ride; and soon he was wondering if he was really feeling what he thought: that Wesley was changing around him, getting fitted to his shape, and fitted so well that anyone who went inside him from now on would know that there was just one cock that he wanted. Not really possible, not really, but didn't you have to imagine something almost-impossible when you heard the change in Wesley's voice? After all those slow, wondering moans and sighs... to bring him so quickly to such sharp, wild cries of total excitement.

Gunn didn't want them to come yet, he wanted to learn how to fuck Wesley, a real, slippery, pumping fuck. He didn't want to have to wait until the next time, even if that would be just this same night. He slowed then stilled, and lay on Wesley like he had before. Their bodies gradually became almost calm, Gunn's more quickly than Wesley's.

“You’re right, I’m an idiot. To think I waited so long, when I could have had this.”

Gunn laughed quietly, then said very quietly, “Wes? This is the best thing I’ve ever done.” In bed, Wes would think he meant. But Gunn could also believe, in that moment, that the two of them were doing something that the world needed, that they were taking their part in something secret and important.

“Oh, Charles.” Hushed. “Yes.”

Gunn kissed Wesley’s neck again and they murmured at one another for a while, falling silent whenever Wesley’s muscles tightened along the length of Gunn’s cock – trying to push him out, but instead making him want to stay forever - and afterwards they were more urgent each time, more direct, almost competing in telling each other how good this was feeling.

With each contraction, the throbbing in Gunn’s cock took longer to fade afterwards from insistent to just hungry. Soon there wouldn’t be anything except insistent. They couldn’t lie and murmur for much longer. One last open-mouthed kiss, almost a bite, and then he lifted himself off Wesley’s back. “Wesley. What sort of fuck do you want me to give you? What are you ready for?” Really: how hard can I take you and know I won’t hurt you? But he still didn’t trust Wesley to answer that question properly.

“I want you to make me feel it for a week.”

Gunn closed his eyes, bit his lip, and thought as hard as his body would let him. Finally: “OK, I’ll give you that on one condition...” He waited until Wesley grunted for him to continue. “You have to keep lettin’ me know what you like. And what you don’t like. You go quiet on me, I’ll think you’re lettin’ me do something I’ll regret.”

Breathless: “I won’t go quiet. I’ll let you know everything.”

Gunn only found one thing Wesley didn’t like: Gunn trying to make him come, when he wanted Gunn to be working only on the fucking. “Not now. Not now. Don’t need it like that. Too much. Wasted.” For what he liked he used even fewer words, but Gunn would have believed the pleasure in his voice even without any words.

Afterwards there was a long, long time where Gunn’s mind felt wiped clean, like it would never think again. He was still inside Wesley, though being pushed out fraction by fraction now that he was softening; and the idea that he couldn’t make himself stay seemed like the saddest thing in the world. Wesley was tense underneath him, heart pounding, and Wesley’s noises now were close to begging.

“Now?” Gunn shifted so that he could reach his hand around.

“Yes. Please.”

Wesley’s coming was quick and violent, punching the breath from Gunn’s chest, and also pushing Gunn’s cock the rest of the way out of Wesley’s body. Gunn sighed, slumped along with Wesley, and lay thinking about what they’d done, what it made him.

This was a different league. Fooling around with your best friend; once in a while - a long while - getting the mood to suck off the first guy you found who was close enough to the look of that best friend. Never looking for more, not usually even a name. That was kids’ stuff, almost. Safe. Close to home. This was a different league. The Gunn who’d led the crew never could have suspected that anyone - let alone himself - could be truly, tenderly in love with that part of another man’s body. Gunn see how it was going to be, how it would drive him near-crazy sometimes: so many hours in every day when he simply couldn’t be where he wanted.

“Charles, can you lift up? I want to turn over.”

The longest kiss in the world. They were both drenched with sweat, thighs, chests slicked together, hands sliding where they couldn’t grip.

“Is it always like that?” Gunn felt like his voice sounded different. Deeper. Or slower. Needing more room. But different somehow, and it would be saying new things.

“God, no.” A pause. “Like what, though? What aspect were you thinking of?”

What aspect? An “aspect” of fucking? Wesley cracked him up. “The aspect where when I said it was the best thing I’d ever done, I didn’t know the half of it then. Oh, Wes, could be you’ll wish you’d never got me started.”

“No, never. Never.”

Some time later Gunn said, “There’re other aspects?”

Wesley looked for a few seconds like he’d forgotten what they’d been talking about. Then: “Well, I’m not often in the mood to feel quite this sore afterwards. I feel a hundred and fifty percent fucked. Usually a hundred percent is enough.”

“C’n I ask how sore? Or you gonna just grunt at me again?”

“Throbbing beautifully. Very much awake. But hoping you’ll help cover for me in our next few training sessions.”

Gunn laughed. “Cover for you? Angel’s gonna get a surprise you’re walkin’ tomorrow, after what he must’ve heard.”

Wesley pulled a face. “I’m also hoping that this falls straight into one of the many chasms in his memory.”

“Yeah, and the next fifty times. You think he puts his pillow over his head? Or maybe his ear to the door.”

Firmly: “I do not think about that, at all. Perverse, Charles. As long as he says nothing, we do not ever need to think about that.”

Gunn couldn’t tell how much Wesley was joking, acting the uptight Brit while they both knew they got a charge from the idea of Angel. On the other hand, the idea of Angel trying to ask them about their sex life was way too much. Jeez, what would he say to Gunn now? “Wesley smells different. He’s sore. He’s thinking about what you did, nearly as much as you are.” Yeah, Wesley had a point, whether he was joking or not. Gunn raised himself up on his elbow, acting indignant. “Perverse? Comin’ from the guy who doesn’t like shoot-em-ups?”

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Gunn was out for most of the day on Monday, getting his face and card known around El Segundo, Westwood and Fairfax, and going to Glendale to meet his second ex-client over the guy’s lunchbreak. He got back to the apartment a couple of hours after dark, just in time for the training session.

“How come you never mentioned Wes is a crack shot with the crossbow? Guy I met today said you took out a whole nest of those flying Xuaxi demons for him. Didn’t miss once. We gotta be workin’ that into our act.”

Wesley was shaking his head. “That was a very unusual situation. How many fights have you gone into, knowing that you’ll have that much warning before you need to change to a close-range weapon? If there might not be any warning, then you have to go into the fight with a sword. Or an axe. That has to be your choice.”

“What about if you’re good enough with the crossbow that you stop it ever getting to close range? Like you did with the Xuaxi.”

“It takes two hands to reload a crossbow. I think you’re asking a lot from my one shot. Against the Xuaxi we took all of our bows, ready-loaded. We knew we’d be able to lay them out ready, and my sword. That’s really not going to happen again.”

“Man, you both been takin’ this like there’s some tax on usin’ y’r imagination! What happens is we all go in with loaded bows - swords on our backs or whatever. Angel and I do the reload, keep you supplied. Ditch the bows if it’s goin’ to close-quarters. Plenty of time.”

Angel looked at Gunn, his expression unreadable. Wesley scratched his head for a few seconds, looking at some point on the floor, then, without enthusiasm: “Yes. It’s worth trying.”

“Angel? What do you think?” Angel just shrugged and nodded. “Then we’ll start workin’ on it tomorrow, yeah? Bring the bows. Have to start simple with the targets but we’ll soon figure out how to get Wes some real practice.”

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Wednesday afternoon, Gunn got a call on his cell phone from someone calling himself Merl. Slow, creepy voice - made Gunn think of a lizard.

“Yeahuh. Heard you were asking round. Got one of your cards. Think we could do business, the money’s right.”

“What kind of business?”

“I hear things, man. Like I heard you were asking round, what you were asking. I tell you for free, that Macuju ain’t in Fairfax anymore. Gone to New Mexico. Where in New Mexico, now that’d be on the meter.”

Gunn hadn’t used the term ‘Macuju’ when he’d been talking to the kids and the bums in Fairfax, although that demon had been Wesley’s prime suspect for the mounds of crushed rats. OK, this Merl could be useful. But he’d have to meet Gunn’s face-to-face test first. Gunn didn’t do business with someone who was only a voice on the phone, especially not that voice.

“Don’t need more than gone. Gone’s good. Buy you a drink, you tell me how you heard? We go on the meter, I wanna know what’s under the hood.”

A slight pause. “You know Caritas, right? Off La Brea near West 8th. Down the stairs. Tomorrow night, round nine.”

“How’ll I know you?”

“Don’t need to. You take a seat at the bar. I know you.”

“A Special on ‘mysterious’. You run that every Thursday?”

“Fine. Black leather jacket. ‘bout as much hair as you. Good enough?”

“Guess I’ll find out tomorrow, won’t I?”

Gunn was close to the address Merl had given, so he drove around straight away to check it out. The door was closed, but the colour of its paintwork, the design of the sign above, and the condition of both suggested that this was a dive bar that most guys would be happy to bring a date to. Safe enough neighbourhood, too. Be better to see it at night, see that the guys and their dates weren’t cannibal bikers or anything, but it really didn’t look like more trouble than he could get himself out of - and he knew his way around trouble.

Back home, Gunn learned that Angel had taken the online search for a drive-in into his own hands and had discovered that the nearest was about 15 miles east, in La Puente. Angel didn’t want to see any of the four movies that were showing that week, but he and Wesley had gone far enough in making plans that they’d discussed the need for chains. Angel had apparently accepted Wesley’s argument immediately and the two of them had moved straight on to details of design and materials. Gunn found himself chilled by the sight of Wesley’s neat technical drawings; he didn’t even want to touch them. White folks. This is how they do all the things they do. It put the next day’s meeting with Merl into perspective: a piece of routine; reassuring, even - a slice of ordinary.

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Gunn took two or three seconds to believe what his eyes were telling him about Caritas, and then he turned reflex-quick to check his exit up the stairs. A set-up. It was a fucking set-up. Those couldn’t be people in there, they had to be vampires. He checked the exit: still clear. OK. He had time to check the layout. Figure the players. Maybe he’d come back with Wesley and Angel and just torch the place. Or maybe they’d need to shake it down first, find out if there was more.

He went a couple of steps inside, to the left of the door away from the vamp bouncer, keeping his back to the wall. Scanned the room, trying to print it in his mind like Angel would have with a vision, every detail to carry back to Wesley and all the while he was held like a bowstring, watching for the signal to be given and the trap to be sprung on him.

Minutes passed, and his mind started refusing to be impressed with the details of such a variety of demon forms; not because of overload, but because it was fixing more and more on the details that looked just like a regular karaoke bar, which had to be the most incredible part of the whole scene. This was either the cleverest set-up ever, or the craziest. They'd got it all exactly right, they'd got demons who could really look like they were doing this. Like it wasn't about... Yeah, round of applause for the gutsy lady. "I will survive." No argument, with those teeth.

A ripple ran through the audience and Gunn inched back towards the door - but no, they looked like they were just settling deeper in, like now torching the place would be the only way to get them to take their eyes off the stage and the three youngsters who'd just bounded onto it grinning like idiots. Well, the vamp looked young, barely out of high-school, and unless that tan was from a bottle, it must only be a few months since he'd had a pulse. For the gecko-looking thing and its chunky blue friend, Gunn could only make guesses around human liquor laws and the body-language that went with human adolescence.

Most of the audience recognised the song from the first notes, started laughing and applauding, but until the chorus Gunn only knew that he'd heard it before. Walk Like a Man. It was, yeah, it was. Holy shit. The moment when you know you've seen everything. And they were good. Tight. The gecko, in the middle, was right there with those is-that-a-girl high notes, and the vamp and the blue one had their movements perfectly synchronised, and perfectly judged between tribute and parody. But wouldn't you have to practise that in front of a mirror?

Gunn didn't laugh, didn't even smile. Too weird, way, way too weird. He did raise his hands to applaud at the end, but then got caught in a loop of "Look at yourself, what the fuck you doing?" against "Showin' I'm big enough to admit they earned it..." and by the time he emerged ready to applaud (but in a cool, seen-it-before way, like a talent scout), the ultra-smooth MC demon was bringing on the next act.

OK, so he didn't know what this was. But it wasn't about him. Not one of those vamps even cared there was a human in the room. Forget stakes and holy water: show 'em karaoke and maybe they didn't even want the blood, couldn't even smell it. Who the hell knew this? Was there a word about it anywhere in all of Wesley's books?

Not much chance of using the karaoke thing in a fight, but still a discovery that deserved a beer. Yeah, he'd take a seat at the bar (that one close to the door, clear line to the exit), and wait for bald, mysterious Merl.

Merl was a demon. Well, of course he was. But until he heard that voice and turned round, the thought that a demon had called his cell phone had just not entered Gunn's head. He'd had this picture of a little old guy with sticking-out ears, ex-jockey, who now just smoked and watched too many old movies. Cheaper tastes than Gunn had expected, too: domestic beer, not something spent ten years in a barrel. Though Merl himself looked like he might've just crawled out of his own barrel and he didn't like eye-contact (which suited Gunn fine).

As for the Macuju demon that Gunn had been asking about in Fairfax, Merl fed Gunn some disgusting story about the West Coast market in demon crap - really, the actual piles of shit - and this scooper he knew who'd been following the Macuju around for years, though New Mexico was just too far. Gunn didn't care much if it was true or not. If the Macuju had left then none of this mattered, and Merl was entitled to keep his methods to himself; Gunn wouldn't trust anyone who didn't know when to lie. As long as Merl told enough of the truth when it mattered; and as long as he was just as deadpan and plausible if anyone ever asked him questions about Angel Investigations.

"What about a Prio Motu in town? You heard anything about that?"

"Oh, the Prio. You missed him, too, man."

"Where'd he go?"

"Who knows? He was holed up by the Water and Power for a few days. I heard of ten or more went in after him, never came out. Stone killers, the Prios. Word was, he was on some kind of war mission to do with a prophecy."

"Friends of yours after him?"

"Friends of nobody. You got prophecies, you always got vested interests, you get bounty-hunters. Way it works. Why you looking for the Prio, anyway?"

"You need to know that?" A mild challenge.

“No. Right. So we’re in business?”

“Could be. Tell me how to reach you, we’ll set the meter case-by-case. Got nothin’ for you right now.”

Merl nodded, didn’t try to set a minimum rate, so Gunn bought him another beer; he was taking his own beer slowly, in no hurry to leave.

“You know those three who were up earlier? Doing ‘Walk Like a Man’?”

“Oh, yeah. The Three Musketeers.” Without enthusiasm.

“They in here a lot?”

“Seems like it. Since about a year ago.”

“Were they always that tight? Or’d they treat this as their practice room?”

Slowly: “Well... None of them was anything special when they used to sing on their own. Then they were suddenly like ‘an act’. Must’ve taken some serious time out of their surfing.”

“They surf?” Where, for God’s sake? When must be well after dark.

A shrug. “Matt, anyway. Family’s got this beach house. Sounds like he lives there. And Piriti and Grouw, most weekends. Can’t see them getting out to the water, can you? Not during the day, anyway.”

Matt wasn’t a vampire? Unless Gunn was making all the wrong assumptions about which one was Matt, and why Piriti and Grouw couldn’t use the beach during the day. “His family’s OK with all this?”

“Wouldn’t be if they knew. Or maybe they would if they knew Piriti and Grouw are the only reason he goes to any of his classes. They’re more scared of him having to get a job than he is.”

Gunn laughed. “What about Piriti and Grouw? They got family in town? And which one’s which? Who was the one doin’ most of the singing?”

“That’s Piriti. Yeah, he’s got family in town. Very traditional. They think Piriti and his brother are out right now digging their cave... castle thing, fancy enough to make a really big female want to lay her eggs in it.” So Piriti was the gecko. Made sense. He looked the eggy type.

“Where’s his brother?” Gunn couldn’t see couldn’t see another gecko demon in the room.

“Sleeping? Hunting? Sometimes he digs. Some weekends they all dig. They like the digging and looking for the special rocks. Just don’t want the eggs.”

“And Grouw’s family?” The chunky blue demon. Kind of had the look of some big piece of furniture. A dresser, maybe. Been given a couple of coats of cheap paint and thrown down the stairs a few times.

“They don’t feature. Except he’s got a sister. Half-sister. Older. Works security in one of those, ah, correctional dimensions. Come here with them a couple of times. Didn’t sing. Family big with you?”

Gunn’s turn to shrug. “It’s a place to start. You see many vampires in here?”

“Some. Few groups come in - talk like they’re childe-packs. Always kind of rowdy, don’t fit in well. Or the odd lone bloodsucker passing through town, wants to see for himself. Like I said, they don’t fit in.”

In that case, there were no vampires in the bar, not one, just a lot of people who’d somehow decided they liked to hang out with demons. Though he shouldn’t say “just”, because that idea was actually much stranger than the idea about vampires and karaoke. The karaoke thing couldn’t really make any difference to anyone, but all these people knowing about demons, acting almost like they were friends with demons... That was serious. It was real. Not something you’d mark by going and ordering a beer. Something you’d have to go off and think about, maybe for days.



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At first Wesley thought that Caritas was Gunn's idea of a joke, and the more Gunn tried to convince him with details, the more Wesley laughed and shook his head.

"A Chachaspe demon in the same room as a Hull demon? They've been fighting over territory, in at least three different dimensions, since they first worked out which way round to hold a pointed stick. Your Grouw, the big blue one, he's a Hull demon. When he meets a Chachaspe demon like Piriti, all he sees is the makings of a hard-wearing set of gecko-skin boots and gauntlets."

"What, so I picked a bunch of demons at random from your books? Looked around for the stupidest idea for stickin' 'em together? Wish I had that kind of time on my hands. And what d' you think I did tonight, if it wasn't what I'm sayin'?"

Wesley didn't reply immediately, looked slightly wary and very puzzled. "Well, I thought you must have met this Merl person in an ordinary karaoke bar, but..." Shaking his head slowly. "I don't see how you could have seen what you thought you saw. It has to be something else."

"Then come along tomorrow night and work it out for me. You tell me it's a year-round Halloween party, then I'll just guess that Merl's really two little old guys stacked on top of each other. But hey, it's a free country. Can't argue with the fact that the little old guy on the top knew about Kamal."

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"This is astonishing."

"Not rubber suits, then."

"There has to be... I don't know. How do you impose 'A benevolent disposition, at least to the level of sainthood' as a door policy?"

"Not too well, if I got in. Couldn't be the karaoke? Acts like some sort of spell on them?"

"Well, it's having the opposite effect on me. I don't know. This is astonishing."

"So how d'we figure it out? We do want to figure it out, don't we?"

"I suppose we ask. But that might be the most dangerous thing to do. Maybe it all works on everyone already knowing the rules. What do they do to intruders?"

"Yeah, well, we're the only ones gawpin', far's I can see."

Clear alarm on Wesley's face, and then he turned his back to the room, tilting his head like that would hide him even further. "You're right. We need to blend in."

Gunn laughed. "Maybe not tonight, Wes. You look like you'll need a week to scrape all the gawp off your face. You know, we might get away without asking. They have to talk about the rules here sometimes. Like that couple on a date. If it was her first time here, she'd have to say something like 'Oh, yeah, that must be one of those spray things you told me about. Where they pump out the sedative.' " He shrugged. "Hour or so, few times a week. Merl hears enough here, should work for me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gunn and Angel had been working slowly but steadily through the case files and were now back to about four months before Wesley arrived. On Saturday night, after training and dinner, they tackled the next three files from the stack while Wesley settled down with a book.

"Huh. Wolfram and Hart. Small world." Gunn hadn't looked at the files since he'd first made his list of questions.

"What's that?"

Gunn pushed the file across the table to Angel. “There’s a note here at the end. A question. ‘Wolfram and Hart again?’ That’s a law firm that’s doin’ charity work for a friend of mine who runs a homeless shelter. Anne. Wes’s met her. D’you know what they had to do with this case?”

Angel stared at the sheet, frowning, then shook his head. “That’s Doyle’s writing. I can’t... Or is...? A law firm... No, I don’t know. Wes?”

Without looking up from his book: “I don’t know, either. You’ve never mentioned any law firm to me.”

Gunn was looking through all of the earlier files. “He said ‘again’. Maybe it’ll come back to you if we can find them in another case.” But there was no other reference. Gunn shrugged. “Well... it’s a large firm, from what Anne says. Must be large enough to make the world seem small.”

When they had finished with the three cases, Angel sat in his armchair and took up his own book, and Gunn plugged the headphones into the computer and threw himself into the middle of an interstellar war.

“Charles! Get the pad from the desk!”

Gunn tore the headphones off as he was launching himself out of his chair. How long had he been playing? As long as an hour? Behind him he heard a long, pleading cry of pain, then harsh panting that was broken almost immediately by another cry, shorter this time but raw, shocked, and then panting again, much harsher, like Angel’s throat was tearing itself apart.

“Oh, fuck. Fuck. Oh, fuck.” Wesley wasn’t surprised or panicking, more dismayed and resigned. “Not the pad. Get the net. And the pikes.” Wesley’s worst-case procedure for controlling Angel when a vision made him violent; when Gunn had insisted on a briefing the previous Sunday, he hadn’t imagined they’d be putting it into practice so soon.

The net was large, at least twelve feet across, weighted all around the edges with lead crucifixes. Gunn flung it over his shoulder and grabbed two seven-foot pikes from the weapons cabinet. He turned back to the centre of the room to see Angel, twisted sideways across the arm of the chair, go suddenly limp and then roll slowly out of the chair to fall heavily on the floor. Wesley had just started pushing the couch out of the way, towards the kitchen; they had to clear the area around Angel before they could use the net. Wesley had already moved the coffee table against the far wall, so Gunn put the pikes down and dealt with the armchair, hauling it right across the room and using it to block the path between the dining table and the window.

Gunn could hear that the next state was starting - the “reverberation phase”, Wesley had called it. Angel was muttering, the sounds becoming less like growls and more like words with each breath, and he was shifting against the floor, slow movements with the same rhythm as his voice. Gunn hadn’t seen Angel’s face since the vision had started, but he thought he would have known just from the tone in the voice that there was a creature in the room now that would take deep pleasure in killing him.

“Good. That’s good.” Wesley had finished pushing the couch out of the way and was coming over to Gunn, reaching out to Gunn’s shoulder for one of the double-sized crucifixes that marked the corners of the net. Gunn nodded, then took the crucifix for the other corner, and they quickly unfolded the net and draped it out. Keeping such a large net from getting caught or tangled took concentration, and while they were handling it Gunn saw Angel only in his peripheral vision, as the restless shape that had to be centred under the net.

By the time they had the net laid properly, Angel’s words had become clear enough that Wesley could understand them; Gunn could see the change in the direction of Wesley’s attention. “Fetch my pike for me? I need to listen.” Gunn nodded, but Wesley was already turning away, moving back along the edge of the net.

Wesley had said, describing this stage, “It’s as if he’s trying to press himself into the floor, especially his head and his hands.” He’d never heard of any other vampire doing anything like it, could only guess that it was a memory of being buried. From the description, Gunn had imagined some frantic scrabbling, a dog grubbing for a bone, imagined himself having to hide from Wesley his disgust at the sight of Angel writhing helplessly on the ground. Instead, Wesley should have said, “He looks like the king of the panthers, stretching himself after the best kill of the year.” Or: “He looks like the ground’s in love with him, like he knows it worships every inch of his body. Like they’re getting ready to fuck for days.”

Wesley had told Gunn that the vampire might get an erection and Gunn had imagined that as another part of the disgusting helplessness. But instead it made the vampire seem more powerful, more frightening. It wasn't aware of the net, of the two humans standing over it. Even if its eyes had been open, Gunn knew that it wouldn't have seen them. There was nothing in its world except a vision of someone in terror, and its own rich pleasure in that terror.

Gunn wanted to kill it. Or wanted to leap forward and drag Wesley away to safety. Wanted to do both, felt fierce and urgent for both. But he wouldn't. He couldn't. Because someone was in danger, and the vampire held the only hope of rescue. Gunn had to let Wesley stay where he was, down on one knee listening, at the edge of the net but much too near. All he could do was lean in to place the pike on the floor by Wesley's hand, then stand ready with his own weapon waiting for the next stage, determined above everything to keep Wesley safe.

"It's our world. It's everywhere. It's a nectar. Drink. Hollywood and Wilcox. Close enough to... Drink. Needs you. She's so scared!" On a growl like triumph, back arching off the floor. "So scared. And they're just... They're nothing, they don't know the first... Imagine if that was... An alley. She's screaming in an alley. Yes. Ah, yes. There's always more. But they don't know." Laughter, quiet, admiring. "They don't know she's for the beast! And she'll think... She'll think she deserves the beast. Could do more with her but... Yes, it's rich. Feel it. Hollywood and Wilcox. Singing. Close. In our world. Hollywood and Wilcox. Our world. You know." The voice and movements had become slower and slower, like the vampire was falling asleep.

Without taking his eyes off the vampire's face, Wesley took a grip on the pike and got to his feet. "Get ready, Charles. As soon as he's standing, we drive him towards the room. Don't think twice about injuring him. He's got plenty of time to heal."

The vampire was still for maybe five seconds, then it tensed like it was listening for something, opened its eyes, saw them both, and then in an instant was on its feet and launching itself, snarling, straight at Wesley. The net probably saved Wesley's life. If the vampire had been able to keep that speed, if it had its hands free to seize Wesley... It was fired by raw appetite in those moments, would have ignored any injury, and Wesley would have been down. But the net slowed it down and got in its way and distracted it, and when Gunn and Wesley moved in with the pikes, it felt the stab-wounds enough to want to avoid them. It backed away, snarling more fiercely than ever, trying to get out of the net but just stumbling on it, getting more tangled, confused, and angry. After they got it shut away it set up a howl of outrage and threw itself against the door over and over. They could hear the howling even out in the street.

They couldn't find any sign of any frightened woman in any alley near Hollywood and Wilcox. There was one alley they couldn't check properly, but that couldn't be the alley for the woman, not with all the cops and with the tape and the crowd. Unless... Was she screaming because of those two poor bastards still pasted to the wall behind the dumpster? Had a demon done that? (And if not a demon, then what the hell else?) Were those two supposed to kill the demon, but they'd failed and now it would be after her? In this alley, after the bodies and cops and crowds had gone? Or somewhere near? The vampire had seen her screaming, had said Hollywood and Wilcox. Wesley said the vampire couldn't lie, not in that stage. So they must be in the right place, just a couple of hours early.

Or a couple of hours late. Why was "she" more important than those two crushed by the dumpster? Why weren't they worth a vision? Wesley didn't know, except he'd never thought the powers could see everything. Maybe they didn't know the men might fail. "If you think about the timing, Angel probably got the vision exactly at the time the men were killed. They didn't know until then that she needed help."

They moved the truck to where they'd be able to see when the alley was clear again, then did another search on foot of all of the other alleys, this time looking for any sign of a demon's tracks, any hole where it might be living. There was nothing, so they went back to the truck to drink coffee and wait.

"Wes, how the hell d' you ever get through one of these on your own? I know you told me he was one of the worst, but he was enjoying it so much, every part of him. It was... And how can you see that and then worry about anything in how you treat him? I—" Shaking his head, over and over. "No, not 'him'. It's a thing. Even thinkin' of it with a name, I'm not gonna give it even that much. It should spend every second it knows who you are down on its knees, every fucking second trying to understand why you don't kill it!"

Wesley sighed and dragged his hand over his forehead. "You'll probably see some of that tomorrow. And you'll probably get bored with it just as quickly as I do."

"But how? How did you control that thing on your own?"

“It’s much easier if he’s in his room when the vision hits. The first time it happened we were still in the old building. There wasn’t a lock on his door, even if I’d thought of that. I had no idea what he was likely to do.”

“So wha’ d’ you do?”

“I ran out of the building before I even found out that he speaks when he’s on the floor. Spent the night in a hotel, praying that he’d have changed back by the morning. I think he must have changed back in just a few hours. The damage to him from the visions was so slight in those days, we had no idea. And he’d spent most of the night, after he’d changed back, convinced that Angelus must have killed me and dumped the body in the sewers. So we made him a room we could lock. And it wasn’t until he’d had another three visions - normal visions - that I could persuade him to come out of his room and give me some more training.” A shrug. “There are many reasons why he usually spends most of his time in his room.”

“And it’ll be gone by morning?”

“I think so.”

“How d’ you tell, then? I’m not lettin’ you open the door on that thing.”

“I talk to him. There probably was a time when Angelus could have pretended to be Angel, but not any more. They’re both too fractured now.”

After another round of the alleys, over a second coffee as bad as the first, Gunn said, “I want us to chain him up. I don’t wanna go through that again.” Saying “him” as a way of meeting Wesley partway. An inch, maybe, compared with the mile he was asking from Wesley, but it was he could spare.

“What do you mean, chain him up? You can’t mean all the time. Charles, this was so far from being representative.”

“And how ‘representative’ was the time when he got to hit you? The last time I heard him tryin’ to break through that door.” Just a month ago, almost exactly. “He only has to get through once. Have us make one mistake. We should keep him in chains. Chain him to the floor or into his bed and gag him when we have to leave him like this - or find some way to live with knowing that we killed the poor bastard who’ll one day go in to try to shut him up.” Gunn kept talking even as he watched Wesley turn his face hard away, as he watched Wesley flinching. He knew he was right. And it was for Wesley’s sake more than anything else that he was right.

A long silence and then Wesley turned his head back slightly, not enough for Gunn to see his expression. Very quietly, to the floor of the truck: “Not all the time. Please. I couldn’t live like that. It would turn me into... I couldn’t live like that.”

Just as quietly, not a challenge: “How could you live?”

Wesley sighed, then turned his whole body towards Gunn. “When he’s on the floor. Before the net or instead of the net. We’d have time. We could get the gag in place around his neck, then fit it once we’d got him fixed to the bed-frame. After that phase was over and he’d stopped talking.”

Gunn nodded, relieved and grateful. “It’ll be easier, Wes, on all of us. Might not even need to use the pikes any more.”

“No. Maybe. But we were -” Another sigh. “I’ll tell him tomorrow. I have to explain to him before we start getting any of the equipment.”

Gunn knew that Wesley didn’t need to be reassured about Angel’s reaction - Angel would agree instantly, like he had about the drive-in. Wesley wanted to tell Angel because he needed to know he was being fair to his vampire. Gunn should probably be thinking now that Wesley was a fool. Fooling himself, in the worst way. Instead Gunn was thinking that he admired Wesley more than ever: for his self-control, how he insisted through everything that he would stay the person he wanted to be, how he tested every idea against that. Gunn didn’t understand why it was so important to Wesley, but then he didn’t need to understand. Being in love with Wesley was so much about being in love with all that was different about Wesley.

The cops left around two a.m., and after three it felt like they were the only people within four blocks who were awake, especially if you made that awake and sober. They gave up at seven when the groups of clubbers started to emerge,

blinking, into the new light of a Sunday morning; and Gunn easily persuaded Wesley to take in breakfast on the way home, a proper breakfast with a view of the ocean. They were both too tired to worry much about the vision. Maybe the powers had got it wrong all along, and “she” had saved herself by just deciding to walk a different route. There probably was a demon in the area, but there had to be a smarter way of dealing with it than another eight hours of stake-out.

The apartment was quiet. No sound at all from the vampire’s room.

“You don’t have to do this now.” Gunn put his hand on Wesley’s arm – just barely touching, when what he wanted to do was force himself between Wesley and the locked door. “He can’t’ve had less sleep than you. I were you, I’d say he can wait.”

Wesley shook his head and raised his hand ready to knock on the door. “If he’s heard that we’re back and then we don’t let him out, then he’ll think the worst about what Angelus must have done. It’s less work just to get it over with.” He knocked three times, quietly: one roommate checking on another. “Angel? Are you awake? Should I come in?”

A sound like something taken by surprise, then, uncertain: “Wesley?”

“We’re back, Angel. Should I come in? Do you need anything?”

Slowly: “Wesley, I - Can you tell me? I - I don’t know what he did.”

Wesley nodded to Gunn. “He’s changed back.” He reached for the key and put it in the lock. “Come in if you like but let me deal with him. At least until we see how he’s reacting to you.”

Angel was on the other side of the room, must have been huddled in the corner between the wall and the far side of the bed; Gunn had heard him scramble to his feet when Wesley opened the door. He looked a wreck, hair matted with sweat, chest and stomach streaked with blood. He was wearing the same cut and bloody shirt, now hanging open - maybe torn open. Trousers torn open too, enough for Gunn to see a triangle of white, to see that Angel wore briefs, the same as Wesley. Semen as well as blood was smeared on the cold skin, Gunn would bet his life.

Wesley had walked straight over the heaped net, showed no hesitation about approaching Angel. Gunn kicked the net out of the way while keeping his eyes on the vampire, and then stood ready just inside the door.

“Wesley, you -” Angel raised his hand, looked like he wanted to step forward. “He didn’t hurt you. He didn’t? Your friend -” Angel swallowed, gave a jerk of the head in Gunn’s direction, definitely not looking at Gunn. “He didn’t hurt your friend?”

“No, Angel, he didn’t hurt us. We were ready for him.” And at that Angel fell back against the wall, then slid down it, slumped so low in his corner that Gunn could only see the top of his bent head. Wesley knelt down next to Angel and leant forward briefly to touch his shoulder and Gunn had to force himself to stay by the door and let it happen. How could Wesley even want to be near him in that state? Wesley shouldn’t want to, he shouldn’t. Part of Gunn – a large part – was thinking of Angel as “it” now, wanting to take his name away. It was dangerous, it was just too dangerous, to let yourself think of that thing as a person. But he’d fall back into that habit, he could see it, the first time Angel made a joke with Wesley.

“What did he do?” Angel had raised his head, was searching Wesley’s face. Wesley sat back, propped his elbow on the bed, and calmly told Angel how the vision had arrived, what the vampire had said, and how he and Gunn had spent the night. Angel knew nothing at all about the vision, was asking Wesley what the demon had looked like in the vision, if the dumpster had appeared in it; and he couldn’t accept that Wesley didn’t know what had pushed the dumpster, or that there’d been no rescue, no sign even of who the vision wanted them to rescue.

Wesley soon gave up trying to tell Angel about the theories he and Gunn had formed during the night. “We’ll take you there, tonight, if you like. So you can see for yourself what happened.” Wesley stood up. “Charles and I are going to get a few hours sleep. We’ll be finished with the bathroom in a few minutes if you want to have a shower. Just throw that shirt away.”

They didn’t take Angel to the alley that night, because Angel wasn’t in a state to be taken to the alley, not even when he’d had a whole day to recover. He did manage to shower himself, they heard him when they were getting ready to sleep, but very early in the process of dressing himself he lost track of what he was doing, and for the rest of the day he

was far out of reach. When Wesley went in to check on Angel early in the afternoon, he found Angel wearing only a coat, but with all his clothes emptied out of the wardrobe and drawers onto the bed. Angel was picking through the clothes, Wesley said, not like he was looking for something, but like he was sorting them into groups. It was hard to tell if he knew Wesley; he didn't seem puzzled to see Wesley in his room, but his responses to Wesley's questions were so off-track he might have been seeing and hearing Wesley as someone else entirely.

Later in the afternoon he began talking to himself, always quietly and never for long at a time, but Wesley and Gunn both got very distracted by waiting to see what tone his voice would have next; mostly the tone was anxious, even openly frightened, but sometimes it was cool, sometimes casual, and sometimes affectionate.

They talked for a while of going back to the alley without Angel, not wanting another stake-out but needing to do something, since the Powers weren't going to help them out with any kind of follow-up vision. Damn, but that would be useful: "Yeah, you definitely missed it. And so you know for the future: we're never gonna give you more than twelve hours' warning." So they'd nearly resigned themselves to at least four hours of stake-out when Gunn got the idea of looking online for clues about the Hollywood-and-Wilcox demon, and found very quickly that the two bodies behind the dumpster were not so much "poor bastards", more "career criminals" (and not dainty white-collar crime, neither). Put a big question mark against the theory that those two were any part of keeping "her" safe and put a casting-call out for some new theories.

Death by dumpster. It still sounded like a demon's work. Maybe it was another situation like the Prio Motu, where the demon was protecting her and Gunn and Wesley were supposed to help. But when? And where? Be a lot simpler if Angel could draw them a picture of what she had been scared of. If his drawing matched up with the mug-shots for those two behind the dumpster, then that would mean that the demon had saved her, that it was over. But in that case, the vision had been sent at least an hour too late. Could that be the reason it had brought out the vampire - because it was a totally fucked-up vision, in every sense? God knows. There were no other reports of any strange, demon-shaped incidents in that area, either good or bad

"What's your gut feel, Wes?"

"That it was last night, whatever it was."

"Yeah, me too. We sure enough of that, though, to be able to sleep soundly tonight?"

A long silence, then: "I can't decide that now. Things look different in the day. I'll have to find out how I feel when it's night."

Half an hour later Wesley had decided one thing about how he felt: that he wanted to cook a stroganoff for dinner. He went out to get the groceries he needed, and on his way did yet another round of the Hollywood-and-Wilcox alleys to see if any part of the puzzle became clearer in daylight. It didn't.

After they had eaten and done the dishes, Wesley checked whether Angel was awake, then heated a beaker of blood and took it in to him. Gunn heard Wesley urging Angel to drink, then urging him to get dressed, even choosing a set of clothes for him and getting him started with putting them on. Angel said nothing that Gunn heard, didn't even thank Wesley for the blood. When Wesley came out of the room, he stood for several seconds with his hand on the door-handle, clearly thinking, then turned the key in the lock.

"Is he in another stage, or something? He's not about to turn back?"

Wesley shook his head. "He's so dazed, I think there's a risk he might wander out into the street while we're gone." A sigh. "I'm sorry, Charles. It's going to be another long night. I have to be sure."

"I know." Wesley sounded like he'd only just made his decision, but Gunn had seen it coming over the last three hours: Wesley had got more and more restless, the cooking the only thing that seemed able to hold his concentration. Of course they had to be sure, even if their gut feeling was the same as before. What type of men would decide that the chance to save someone's life wasn't worth a few hours of lost sleep?

At 2 a.m., after a jaw-cracking yawn, Gunn said, "Wes. If we're gonna do this tomorrow, too, we're gonna have to sleep all day. And what if Angel gets another vision? We could do this for a week and still never know. Maybe in that time, if we'd just kept on with our normal work, we coulda saved someone else."

A long, long silence. “And if we read in the news tomorrow that it happened half an hour after we went home?”

Gunn said slowly, “Have you ever had a vision go wrong before? You and Angel?” Wesley nodded and closed his eyes hard. “How’d you deal with it? You ‘n’ him?”

Wesley opened his eyes. “Mostly we didn’t talk to each other until the next vision.”

“You blamed each other?”

“I didn’t blame him.”

Gunn frowned. “He blamed you?”

“Well, he must have.”

Never again. Or Angel would have Gunn to answer to. “How much would you blame me if I pulled the truck out and took us home right now? What would that do to us? To you and me?”

Wesley looked startled, and turned to stare at Gunn. “How would you feel, then, when you read about ‘her’ in the news?” He truly wanted to know.

“Terrible, but... I’ve had members of my crew die and sometimes I knew that if I’d made a different decision then maybe, probably, they’d still be alive. But all you can do is make the best decision with what you know at the time. And if you don’t know anything and you still got to make a decision, then you tell yourself that life’s a bitch and you toss a coin.” As simple as that. Wesley didn’t need to know how many times, over how many years, Gunn had felt close to drowning in rage and guilt and despair before he let himself accept that he would never be able to turn himself into the person who always knew the best thing to do, that he would have to keep on putting his people in the hands of stupid, brutal luck. “I think that’s where we are now. ‘cept I don’t wanna toss a coin. Giving this up’s a terrible thing to have to do, but you know we’d have to find a reason to give it up, sooner or later. And I’m sure enough now that it’s more important for us to get back to our lives. If...” He sighed. “If it goes wrong, we’ll get each other through it. Won’t we?”

After a lot of frowning, Wesley said, looking straight forward, out into the street, “I wonder how many arguments you’ll win with me next weekend. I’m going to get nervous of even getting in the truck with you.”

Gunn wanted to reach over and touch Wesley’s hand, hold it if Wesley would let him. But Wesley’s hand was on the seat by his right thigh, and reaching across Wesley’s body for it wouldn’t be the same thing at all. Instead, he put his hand on Wesley’s back, over his left shoulder-blade. “We’ll get each other through it. We’ll get each other through anything.”

Angel was asleep when they got back, stretched out on the floor beside his bed. He was looking almost like the vampire had looked just before it had leapt to its feet, tried to throw itself at Wesley. Wesley wanted to put the clothes away, thought it might help Angel get back to normal if the room was back in order when he woke up. They couldn’t get to the wardrobe, though, with Angel lying in front of it, so they laid the clothes neatly over the chair instead, and Wesley set out another change of clothes at the foot of the bed.

They were both far too tired for sex, and even if they hadn’t been, Gunn thought that the argument and the decision might have made the situation difficult. They weren’t angry with one another, but they were too serious, much too guilty to be able to look for pleasure for themselves. They needed to hold one another, though, and were pressed tight when they fell asleep, and also when they woke up.

“Will you tell Angel about the chains today? If he’s well enough. How we’re gonna start usin’ them.”

“As soon as I can. I’ll call you when I’ve done it. We can decide then exactly what equipment we need.”

Gunn nodded. “I thought I might go back to that bar this evening, after training. For about an hour.”

Quietly: “Be careful.”

“You’re the reckless one, English.” Gunn was smiling. “And then when I come back, I was hoping you’d fuck me. If you think I’m ready.”

The effect on Wesley's breathing was instant. "I think by now there's only one way to find out."

\* \* \* \* \*

Angel was waiting for them in the living-room when they came out of the bedroom. He was sitting at the desk looking at the files, dressed in the clothes Wesley had laid out on the bed.

"Who took my clothes out? Are we moving somewhere? Do we need a different apartment now?"

The last thing Angel seemed to remember was Gunn playing at the computer on Saturday night. Wesley had to tell him all about the vision again, but this time Angel was able to discuss it on the same level as Wesley and Gunn. He agreed with what they'd decided: said he'd be interested to see the area, but thought they should all trust that the visions were as urgent as they felt; if a vision expected them to wait for a week, then wouldn't it have to be a different type of vision, totally different? Angel was worried about them having to deal with Angelus, but in a practical way, not cringing and ashamed like he'd been when he was still wearing that ruined shirt.

"We - Charles has a better idea for how we can handle Angelus. With the two of us, we can control him properly." And Wesley explained about the chains and the gag.

"A gag? But you shouldn't need that. The chains should mean that he'd never get close enough to be able to bite you."

"It's not because of the teeth. It's because of the noise he makes. He can snarl and howl for hours. When the neighbours complain about it I have to tell them I'm looking after a friend's dog."

Angel looked surprised and offended. "You've never told me that."

"There was nothing I could do about it on my own. Especially not since we have to let him speak." Wesley's tone changed, became very quiet. "Have you been gagged before?" Angel nodded, frowning. "It's worse than being chained?"

A long, sombre pause, then Angel shrugged. "Don't ask me, ask any of the people Angelus gagged. Have you worked out how you're going to do it? The chains, too."

"Not yet. We thought you might have some ideas. Maybe we could adapt the designs for the drive-in."

Between the three of them, they produced a first design over breakfast. Gunn bought the equipment during the day, and then they tested it out in the evening's training. Angel refused to try to behave like Angelus did during the reverberation phase, just lay still on the floor during the two minutes Wesley had set. The beginning of the attack stage felt to Gunn like any other training bout, and he was taken completely by surprise when Angel turned into the vampire, which happened when they'd covered about half the distance to the rail they were using to stand in for the bed-frame. The vampire wasn't as savage as before, was almost quiet; but it still fought them like they were the animals, like they couldn't win because they were just food, and this time Gunn could feel it thinking about what it was going to do to them, how it would teach them. Wesley had to burn it to get it to open its mouth for the gag, and it still struggled so hard against them that Gunn nearly lost his grip on the buckle. The last minute showed them that the gag really did work; the sounds from that throat were still ugly, still promising a terrible death, but it couldn't make them loud enough to bring the neighbours.

"Wes, do we - The training's over, right? Do we try to get it down to the truck, take it home? Or do we keep it here till it turns back?" The vampire had become completely still, was hanging against the rail with its eyes closed.

"I think we -" Wesley broke off because Angel was back. In all his years of facing vampires Gunn had never seen that before: the demon giving way to the human. Why should that be so disturbing? Why didn't he just feel relieved?

Angel was staring at Wesley, jerking his head and tugging against the chains - not hard, like he was reminding, not complaining - and Wesley took the hint straight away. Wesley removed the gag first, but Angel didn't speak till he was completely free, and he couldn't speak in his normal way because his mouth was bruised.



“I think we need a line around the throat. You need a better way of getting him moving. And we have to find locks that are easier for Wesley to close.” Wesley got out the drawings, they produced a second design and then they put in an hour on their sword-work, like they were a normal team, a crew of three friends.

They went home to clean up after training and then they all headed out again. Wesley took Angel in the convertible to look at alleys, and Gunn drove his truck to Caritas. Gunn had hardly thought about Caritas all day, hadn't made any plans. Now he would have to set himself up for an hour of undercover in a bar, in one of the few times when he wanted to be completely alone. Left to himself he would have driven out somewhere and spent an hour thinking about their fight with Angel, about the bruises he'd left around Angel's mouth. He could still feel that fight in every muscle.

When he'd killed the vampire that had used to be Alonna, he hadn't felt rage, just sadness, like this was something he'd done a hundred times before. If he'd had dreams about having to do that to Alonna he couldn't remember them, but they all knew, in the crew, that any one of them could be turned, and they all knew that the only thing to do with the vampire was kill it. Dealing with Angel as a vampire, he had felt rage: he wouldn't show a scrap of mercy, he'd make the vampire suffer. And then a night or a minute later, he wasn't dealing with Angel as a vampire any more, but with Angel as whatever he was. Not human but maybe a person. Sometimes a person. A person he almost liked. A person he could see was brave, keeping to a hard, hard duty. The person who'd saved Wesley, been there for Wesley in the hospital, brought Wesley home. Wesley didn't hate the vampire, or not like this, not with this rage. Wesley wouldn't have left bruises. Or, he'd know he'd left them for all the right reasons, because there was no other way.

But he was thinking like Wesley had been born perfect, like he'd known from the start how to keep the two of them separate in his mind. Angel one thing, and the vampire – (Angelus. Try it. Past time to try it.) – and Angelus as something else. Was selling Wesley short to think that'd come easy to him. He'd worked at it, he must've worked at it, like he'd worked at learning to fight. So this was Gunn working on it. This was how it started with him.

Caritas was quieter than he'd seen it before. He got a beer and sat at a table by the bar; and tried to look like a karaoke fan when he was still thinking so hard about Angel and Wesley and bruises that he could hardly tell one song from another. He'd stay for the full hour, anyway, though he wasn't in a good state to notice much of anything; didn't matter, when he could always come back another night.

After he'd been in the bar about twenty minutes, a human came up to the table and asked if any of the other seats were free. Gunn waved his hand to say “go ahead”, only looking away from the stage long enough to see if the guy asking was human or demon. When the next song started, Gunn turned his head to watch the MC leading the previous singer off to the side for one of those short, serious conversations. He watched for a couple of seconds, then as he was turning back to the stage he noticed that the other guy at the table had also been watching the MC, must have watched just a second longer than Gunn. That made Gunn look closer at the guy, and it turned out that the guy was Matt, the human from the Three Musketeers. Gunn checked the room for the other two, but Matt was on his own, at least for now.

Matt wasn't paying any attention to the current song, but was looking through a thick stack of paper, and rolling a pen around and around the middle finger of his right hand. Gunn guessed he was choosing a song, and this must mean the others weren't gonna be joining him. If it was gonna be the three of them, wouldn't they do the choosing together or even have chosen something before they arrived?

Gunn leaned forward. “You sing sometimes with a Chachaspe demon and a Hull demon, don't you? I saw you doin' ‘Walk Like a Man’ last week. Was quite an act.”

“Oh. Hey. Thanks.” Casual, almost automatic. That was probably because he'd been concentrating on the list of songs, because in the next second he looked properly at Gunn and said, “I haven't seen you sing, have I? Are you new here, or you just don't sing?”

“Both. Just found this place last Thursday.”

A nod and a smile. “So you come back for the beer, the sounds, or the sights?” He gestured with his head around the room.

Gunn shrugged. “Well, the sights, mostly.” A slight pause and he pulled a face. “Sorry. I just diss half your friends?”

“Kinda, but you get to do that your first few visits. Normally five, or six if you're willing to try ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ on your own. So how d' you find us?”

“Guy gave this address to meet him. Never showed. Practical joke, I guess.”

“Girlfriend brought me, year or so ago. And someone had brought her, and so on. Word doesn’t seem to spread that far, though.”

“What she tell you? About where you were goin’? Were you freaked?”

“Oh, she said demons and karaoke. And the psychic host, and everything. I thought she was joking. Still thought it was a joke for the first hour. Some all-year Halloween thing. Then I went to the men’s room and...” He shook his head. “No way those were costumes. Then I was freaked. But I was freaked enough to get up and sing with Carla and...” A shrug. “They were a good crowd.”

“Yeah, I got that too.”

“Hey, d’ you mind if I - It’s Matt, by the way.”

“Gunn. With two ens.”

“Hi. D’ you mind if I get back to this?” He pointed at the list of songs. “I don’t get my sheet in soon, I could be here all night.”

“Sure.”

Over the next few minutes Gunn half-watched Matt as he scanned the pages, stopping a few times to make a note on a small sheet of paper. Then he flipped the book closed, studied his sheet of paper while twirling his pen at double-speed, flipped the book open again, turned the sheet over and filled it in, and took the book and sheet to the bar.

“What you goin’ for?”

“‘Can’t Buy Me Love’. The Beatles. You know, ‘I don’t care too much for money.’ S’what I need a readin’ on. I’m doin’ this accountancy course and yeah I can see it makes sense, but would I be better doing something I liked? You doing something you like?” Really wanting to know.

“Yeah. Haven’t made any money from it yet, though.”

“Wha’d’ you do?” Gunn gave Matt one of his cards; he’d been thinking this move over while Matt had been busy choosing a song. Matt read the card then did a double-take. “Oh, wow! Seriously, man? This isn’t just your joke on this place? Good joke, anyway.”

“Seriously.”

“So that’s how you knew Piriti’s a Chachaspe and Grouw’s a Hull. Was gonna ask.”

“Well, I didn’t know, but my partner did when I described them to him. Now, he really did think I was joking. Said they shouldn’t be friends.”

“God, no, they should hate each other. Or despise each other, maybe. It was months before they’d take the risk of meeting away from here. Didn’t know what they’d do to each other away from the spell. Made me stand between them with stun guns.” He shuddered. “That was seriously weird. Things they should warn you about when you start making friends with demons.”

“But they were OK?”

“Yeah. They’re friends. That seems to be more important than... But without the spell here, Piriti wouldn’t ever have let Grouw get close enough to talk.”

“D’ you know exactly what type of spell it is?”

A shrug. “Not exactly. Some kind of anti-violence thing. Works on all types of demons. Maybe there’s hundreds of ‘em. I dunno. That the sort of thing you deal in?” He tapped Gunn’s business card.

“Not so far. Mostly it’s been humans who’ve been having problems with demons. But there’s gotta be at least as many demons havin’ problems with humans. Or with other demons.”

“At least.” He laughed. “Hey, if you could get Kersa off Marianne Faithful and back onto Doris Day, you’d earn a hundred bucks, easy, from every demon here.”

“Is that Kersa up now?” Gunn hadn’t been listening to the host’s introduction.

“No, that’s Illis. Kersa’s over there, by the stage. You can see the spines on her head, got a line of silver through them.”

They settled to listening, and the few times they did talk, it was only about the songs and the singers. Gunn enjoyed himself, while swearing he would never, ever get up on that stage; yeah, he was an extrovert, but not that kind of extrovert. After a while the host took a turn (a special request, he said), with a song that Gunn was sure he hadn’t heard before, all romantic and yearning. “You go to my head. And you linger like a haunting refrain. And I find you spinning round in my brain. Like the bubbles in a glass of champagne.”

It was about him, about all the stages of him falling in love with Wesley. And exactly, totally, about how he’d felt that first morning after, sitting in the diner looking out of the window. Feeling like his whole body was glowing with how good they were together, knowing they could be sweet together, and fierce, and everything in between. And they were. They were.

No, it wasn’t about them. Not really, not when you heard the rest of the words. It was too one-sided, and too romantic, too fizzy and carefree. “Get a hold of yourself, can’t you see that it never can be?” No, he’d been luckier than that, he’d known he was important to Wesley, right from the moment he had realised what he wanted. “This heart of mine hasn’t a ghost of a chance, in this crazy romance.” Made it sound like it was just a game, just fun. Not something that would change your whole life inside a week. Make you understand for the first time how a man could want to be fucked.

Not about them, but closer than anything else he knew, and the mood - if you took the words as just sound, put in your own meaning - the mood was everything he felt when he looked and looked and looked at Wesley’s face. He needed to be with Wesley now. They might not have the sex they’d planned for tonight. Angel might have found something in the alleys, and they’d all be spending the night working. Or Wesley might be angry about Gunn giving Angel bruises from the gagging, or just too shaken by that whole fight - like Gunn had been before Caritas had wound him down. Didn’t matter. He had to be where Wesley was. He shouldn’t be here now.

The song was finished. He’d applauded, hadn’t he? He hoped so. He checked his watch, saw he’d been in the bar nearly an hour. Wesley should be home. Unless Angel really had found something and they’d gone straight in, without him. No. No, Wesley would have called.

He drained his beer, then turned to Matt. “I have to get home. Sorry. Hoped I’d catch your turn, but I have to get back.”

“No problem. Y’won’t be missing anything. You’ll be coming back, yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Wesley was home, on his own in the living-room, stretched out on his back on the couch and listening to classical music, really listening to it, no book anywhere near him. He started to get up but Gunn told him to stay put.

“I’m guessing he didn’t find anything.” Gunn was kneeling beside the couch, with his forearm pressed against the warmth of Wesley’s left side, and with Wesley’s fingers resting lightly on the inside of his wrist. Wesley’s erection looked to be in about the same state as Gunn’s: on a good simmer, no idea yet of getting urgent.

Wesley shook his head slowly. “Nothing at all that said demon. A few drops of blood from the alley with the dumpster, that he said didn’t come from either of the two. But just a few and he couldn’t tell how long they’d been there.” A shrug. “There’s nothing for us to do.”

“Is he OK about what we did in training? Are you?”

“Well, no one would be happy about it. But he’s not angry with us. It’s easy enough to tell when he’s angry. I think we’re over the worst. What about you? I was - Of course, I know you’d be careful.”

Gunn had thought at first that Wesley was asking about the fight, then realised he meant Caritas. “Didn’t really need to be.” Gunn told Wesley the little that he’d learned about the spell, and mentioned that he’d given his card to Matt. “You don’t have a problem with that, do you? Idea of us doin’ work for demons.”

“Not in principle. I’d be surprised if any demon would really consider us, though, given what we’ve been doing so far. And I’d want to take the address off the cards.” A brief laugh and then he smiled up at Gunn. “You know I’d never go looking for work if left to myself. Not until I’d been out of translation work for maybe a month. It’s an amazing idea. You’re full of amazing ideas.” Suddenly very serious. “And you do it. You go out and you make people want to talk to you. Charles. You’re wasted on us.”

Gunn wanted to be all cool and gruff and shrug it away, but didn’t manage more than getting a slight twist to his smile. “Yeah, you can decide how much I’m worth when I’ve actually got us some business.” Then his smile faded and he turned as serious as Wesley, and slowly brought his right hand over and laid it on top of Wesley’s hand. Almost in a whisper: “Bed?”

Gunn had thought he was completely ready to get fucked, thought Wesley was way overplaying the older, more-experienced man. No one could need that much reassurance, no one could be that frightened of a slightly new experience, maybe a little pain. And then Wesley started pressing in and within seconds Gunn was rigid with shock and gasping at Wesley to stop. How could Wesley’s cock feel so huge and hard? Feel so blunt. Blunt like a weapon. Feel brutal. Like it had a mind of its own. Or no mind at all. It could split him in two and never notice. He’d taken more from Wesley’s fingers, he knew he had. But they had Wesley’s mind, they were completely Wesley. The cock pressing in had felt like it didn’t know him.

They were sorry, they were both sorry, they said it over and over. Wesley said they shouldn’t try again, not that night: Gunn was too tense now, it would be even worse.

“Is it always like this? Was it like this for you? You thought you were ready but you couldn’t guess how it would really feel?”

“I - I’m sure we didn’t think about ‘ready’. It was very difficult. I hoped it would be much easier for you. Easy.”

“Did you try it again with him?”

Wesley nodded.

“How long did it take before it got easy?”

“I can’t remember. I did get used to it. But we didn’t know what we were doing. We were young. I’m sure neither of us guessed there was anything to know. I did hope I’d learned enough to make it easier for you. I should have told you I’ve never...” Wesley sighed, frowned deeply. “No one’s ever wanted me to be their first before. I’m sorry.”

Gunn shook his head. “I panicked, that’s all. Must’ve, I dunno, taken in more prison stories than I realised. Oh, jeez, Wes! I didn’t mean - You were -” But Wesley had only looked slightly surprised, maybe even just puzzled. “Just for it to feel so different, when I loved your fingers, right from the start. Must be some part of me that still thinks it’s a big deal. That’s what I wasn’t ready for. Not this time.”

They got done with saying sorry and turned to kissing and stroking, and soon they were on a noisy, biting, bucking ride from one side of the bed to another. Afterwards, when Gunn was lying in his usual position curled over Wesley’s right side, he said, “Wes? Do I feel tense to you right now?”

“No. Why? Have you got a muscle cramp?” Wesley sounded serious, really concerned.

“Muscle cramp! English.” Gunn rolled his head to press his lips to Wesley’s ribs, then relaxed back. “I don’t want to wait until tomorrow. I want to try again tonight. It is a big deal and I want it now. Unless you’re about to fall asleep on me.”

“I’m wide awake. We may need to negotiate about ‘now’, though.”

Gunn felt the same clutch of shock when Wesley started pushing in, but he told himself it was panic, told himself some of the reasons, and he fought through it. All the way in, the cock felt huge, impossible, not-Wesley, but at some point what had been threatening and frightening started to become pure excitement, the most intense adventure. Almost too much, almost, to be so stretched, so full; to feel the effects of the fucking spreading further and further, like the cock could turn your whole body into nothing but sex. There was pain, but it didn't frighten him like the first time; he knew from the start that it wasn't going to get worse, it was just about how stretched he was right now, not a warning that the next inch could split him in two. A clean pain, part of the adventure. He couldn't speak.

Wesley was able to speak, though, at least at first. Once he was full in, he held still and pressed himself the length of Gunn's back, kissing Gunn's neck, gasping Gunn's name, and calling Gunn his darling. The word startled Gunn, seemed to hang like a hailstone in his brain, with his heart shivering beneath, waiting for the fall. The word belonged in a different world, the world of the song, too neat, too romantic. That world couldn't cope, not for a second, with what Gunn was doing now, what he was feeling from this cock pushed deep in his ass. But Wesley kept on saying it, even as he started rocking against Gunn like Gunn had done his first time inside Wesley, and he was saying it with the same hunger, the same amazement that Gunn could hear in his own cries and gasps - and the word was changed for Gunn then, seared from the heat of their sex till it was as tough and fierce as anything they were doing or feeling.

Gunn was as impatient as Wesley that he didn't want to be touched during the fucking: he didn't want the distraction, and he'd much rather have Wesley use his arm to give more power and control to the fucking itself. He'd expected to come by Wesley's hand, with Wesley still half-hard inside him; because that was how it had always been between them so far, and he did love to feel Wesley come that way. But then he would have missed Wesley's mouth working above his own hand, and their fingers together circling and rubbing his hole, feeling it so slick and tender and aching.

"Did you know you were calling me 'darling'?"

"Well, of course." Surprised: "Haven't I before?"

Gunn shook his head. "Kind of the last thing a big, axe-handly street-nigger expects to hear from a white guy."

Wesley winced. "It's an insult. I'm so sorry."

"No, it's..." A long pause. "It's special. I thought I knew how you loved me. Didn't know that sometimes you loved me like that. You surprise me, Wes."

"But I always love you like that. Almost from the moment I really knew you wanted me, the moment I knew you'd want me again. Then you went from being kind, handsome, determined, inspiring, observant Charles to being all of that and mine in one word." Wesley smiled, suddenly teasing. "And I'll bet you haven't even decided yet if I'm your 'boyfriend'."

Gunn made like he was alarmed. "Hey, don't pressure me, man! I told you I don't get serious with guys from out of state." No, he didn't have a single word like that to describe what Wesley meant to him, though it wouldn't ever be "darling" unless living with Wesley managed to bleach every drop of street out of him. For other people, Wesley was going to be his "partner". For himself... He discovered new things to describe in Wesley every day. There wasn't ever going to be one single word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gunn next visited Caritas on Thursday night, and by that time he'd done a lot of thinking about how Angel Investigations could set itself at a larger market. He'd started by thinking about ways they could try to reach demons as well as humans, wondering how much they'd have to keep their work for humans separate from their work for demons, what sort of changes they'd need to make in their approach. Separate phone lines, maybe, with separate machines, and different messages on each machine. And then he'd listened to their outgoing message for the first time, and that had got him thinking a whole new set of thoughts about Angel Investigations and what it might be for.

"We help the helpless." That had to put off at least as many people as it reassured. No one wants to think of themselves as helpless, sure as hell don't want to be told they're helpless. Yeah, you've been scared shitless since you had the bad luck to find out that demons are real, but you also had the guts to do something about it: to believe what you were seeing, to wonder how often it had happened before, and to go looking for other people who knew demons were real. That's not "helpless", that's just knowing when you need to get an expert. OK, so Angel Investigations might end up putting themselves in danger for you, but Gunn would bet anything that when people called they didn't expect heroes,

didn't expect heroics, any more than they would when they called a plumber. They wanted a solid opinion, and then at least one plan of action.

Wesley said that the message was from before his time, that Angel and Doyle had always answered the phone like that. He had himself, at first, when the calls for Angel Investigations still outnumbered the calls for his translation work.

"Is that the only type of work you guys have ever wanted to do? The out-and-out rescue missions, close as you can get to the visions? When they're so desperate they're way past pride, come begging the big heroes to save them?"

Wesley was truly shocked, looked at Gunn like he couldn't believe what he'd heard. "Charles, what are you - You know we have to help people. We do help people. It's why we're all here."

"Dumping that message, that way of looking at the business... You'll still get the rescue missions - those poor bastards'll still be able to find you, still realise they've got the right place. But you might start to get people who don't think they're desperate, don't wanna deal with heroes, just lookin' for someone who knows the territory. Even down to..." Gunn shrugged. "I dunno, someone who isn't in any kind of trouble, just wants a go-between. Got a business meeting with a demon, wants to know how to behave. If I find there's work out there that isn't life-or-death, would you do it? Or show me how to do it?"

"It isn't..." Wesley frowned and shook his head slowly. "It isn't about making money. We do have a mission. What if we're so busy with your business meetings that the person who really is desperate can't get through?"

"Wes, it wouldn't be any different from dealing with the visions. You know more than anyone about checking in. About always bein' ready for the person who really needs help. And you wouldn't diss money if you'd lived some of the places I've had to live. Yeah, we'll draw the line, but that desperate person needs us to be able to pay the rent. Pay the phone bill. Would you do it, the small stuff? Or is it... You'd rather stack shelves?"

"I'd do it. I think I'd do it. If I could. Someone wanting advice on how to behave, I'm the last person anyone should ask."

The next big question was where Gunn should start with breaking them in to the not-helpless end of the market. He needed to find out what reasons people could have for taking an interest in demons (reasons that didn't involve hurting someone else, or scaring someone else, or harassing a harmless demon - or breaking any other rule that Wesley or Angel or Gunn came up with between them). And then he needed to find out where people started looking when they were interested in demons, and what expert services they might be willing to pay for. Where would he find the people and their reasons? Caritas, obviously - main reasons there probably curiosity or boredom, but might be good for picking up rumours of other reasons. Wesley suggested the specialist bookstores and his translation clients, said he'd call and see which of them would talk to Gunn.

"You sure you want me to talk to them? Aren't they gonna expect me to know about books? Speak all those languages?"

"I'll explain you're from a different side of the business. And I'll tell you what I know about each of them. I wouldn't ask them the right questions, not in the way that you would. I'm not looking for ways to change."

All three bookstore owners agreed immediately to talk to Gunn. No need to make an appointment, drop in any time, sure, that week would be fine. The translation clients either said no or said they'd have to check and call back, and by Caritas-time on Thursday night only one client had said yes, with a meeting arranged for the following Tuesday.

"Lilah Morgan. One of my best clients. We meet at least once a month."

"In the public library, like she's set for Tuesday?"

Wesley nodded. "They have rooms for people who need to be able to shut themselves away in order to concentrate. Study carrels. She books one of those."

"Huh." Maybe she had something as bad as a mad vampire back in her office, too. Wesley wouldn't have asked her, of course. "So what's her deal?"

“Prophecies. She’s part of a small research team of financial analysts. They can get funding for anything that might predict how the markets will behave.” Wesley shrugged. “She says the scrolls are right often enough to make the team’s future secure. She seems rather paranoid but then I don’t know the financial sector. And I don’t know who she hired to investigate me before she gave me the first manuscript, but he found out about Angel.”

“Everything about Angel? That you’ve been workin’ with a vampire?”

“And the visions, too. ‘The vampire seer’. An object of some curiosity in the prediction business, apparently.”

“She wants to check me out. That’s why she agreed to the meeting.”

“That and trying to discourage us from offering our services to her competitors. I’m sure she’d rather our business stayed undeveloped.” Wesley smiled suddenly. “I think you’ll enjoy the meeting even if she’s determined not to help you directly. She definitely has a different perspective.”

Matt, Piriti and Grouw were all at Caritas when Gunn arrived, so it looked like he’d been right when he’d guessed that Thursday was one of their regular nights. Gunn got his beer then dropped by their table to say hi to Matt.

“Oh, hey! Y’ came back.” To his friends: “This is Gunn. With that card I showed you.” The two demons nodded at Gunn, looking much like Gunn would have if a friend had introduced him to a middle-class guy who claimed to be an expert on life on the streets; sometimes you just have to accept that your friend has his blind-spots and agree to play nice (unless provoked). “You staying? Wanna pull up a chair?”

“OK with you?” The demons weren’t going to say no, but they’d want to be asked. After they said it was OK, Gunn found a chair and joined them, sitting between Matt and Grouw. He asked them if they’d sung yet, what they were going to sing, and they warmed to him while they were telling him about the Talking Heads song that they were breaking in.

“ ‘ Houses in Motion’. Y’know it?” Gunn didn’t.

“No idea what it’s about, but it’s got this great bounce goin’ between the main vocals and the backing, ‘specially in the chorus. Matt knew, soon as he heard it, that we had to do it.”

Gunn asked Matt how he’d found the song. “My mom. It’s from, like, the seventies, or something. She was playin’ it in the car the last time we went to Palm Springs. ‘s our favourite album for driving now. Good strong beat, words you can argue about for hours.”

Gunn grinned. “Can’t wait to hear it.”

All of the nine or ten songs that they heard while they were waiting were love-songs - some hopeful, some grateful, some regretful, but all more-or-less sweet. The new song fell into this warm bath like a wind-up toy with a whole box of fizzing bath-salts strapped to its back. The beginning was strange, jarring, too much contrast between the angular rhythm and Matt’s smooth, almost-spoken vocals. “For a long time I felt, without style or grace, wearing shoes with no socks, in cold weather.” And what the hell was it about? “And as we watch him, digging his own grave.” But by the time Piriti and Grouw took over with the chorus the rhythm had snapped out of angular into crisp and catchy - yeah, perfect for driving. Gunn wanted to join in - most of the room did, judging from all the in-seat dancing.

Gunn bought them drinks. They wound down quite quickly: pleased with themselves, full of ideas for what they’d do better next time, but with enough of these on their score-card that they didn’t need to talk it all over right now. When people came over to the table to congratulate them on the new song, one of the three would usually introduce Gunn (as a non-singer who looked like becoming a regular); and then afterwards they’d explain to Gunn who he’d just met (or escaped meeting).

When the time got past eleven, Gunn started thinking about heading home. Grouw might have seen him checking his watch, had maybe planned this already with Piriti, because Grouw suddenly turned serious, leaned towards Gunn and said, “So this business you’re in? Where you been, to get to be such an expert on demons?”

“I been on the street, most of the streets in two, three miles from here. Keeping me ‘ n’ my crew from goin’ down to vampires. Yeah, got a problem with vampires. Month ago, hadn’t even met another type of demon.”

Grouw shrugged. “Vampires. Yeah. So what you think you can do here? How many ‘Demons for Dummies’ books you read in that month?”

“I’m not the expert. Matt told you that, right? It’s my partner. He’s English, ‘s read more books, knows more languages than you can imagine. What I’ve seen, he can learn any language. First time I worked with him, it was because of some humans who’d seen some Massiac demons and got scared. He explained how they were harmless, how you could make sure no one bothered each other.”

Grouw was shaking his head. “Don’t know the Massiac.”

“They’re in tunnels in some parks. But that’s what I think we can do. And more, but don’t you think it’s worth an expert to learn how not to get bothered? Or do the bothering?”

Grouw looked at Piriti then Matt, then back at Gunn. “We’ll need to meet him.”

“Of course. Be better someplace we can talk. This is... I’ve only ever heard him listen to classical music.”

Matt said, “We’ll be at my place most of Sunday. Redondo Beach. Between two and three?”

“OK. Great. Wha’d we bring?”

Piriti had been silent but now came straight in with: “The lyrics to ‘Houses in Motion’ translated into formal Chachaspe and into family Chachaspe, and into Hull. A list of all of the demons he’s met in the last twelve months, with names, dates and places. And the plan for a tour of L.A. likely to appeal to a Sas Vanna, including at least fifteen stops.”

Gunn nodded then raised his hand. “Have to write that down.” He went to get a request-sheet and a pen from the bar, then wrote what he remembered and checked it with Piriti. “The lyrics’ll be on the net, right?” Right. “So, where in Redondo Beach?” Matt gave him the address and his phone number, then Gunn folded the paper, put it in a pocket, and sat back and looked at the three of them, smiling slightly. “Y’do this a lot, do you? Checkin’ the new guys out? Like you’re the big committee, runnin’ half the town. Havta say, y’got it set up nice, with those secret identities. Hadn’t guessed for a second, till you just now broke cover.” What, was he supposed to act like it came natural to him, taking orders from a bunch of kids?

They glared at him, then Matt and Piriti gave near-identical snorts of amusement and were suddenly completely relaxed. Piriti said, “‘Secret identities’. We should change the name of the group.”

“What’re you now?”

“‘The Reasons’. The Three Reasons, for short.”

“That works, too.” Well, not really, but what was he, their manager?

Matt said, “We don’t use it. Why don’t we use it?”

“‘cos then we couldn’t change it when we found a better one.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Grouw was still glaring at Gunn, maybe even harder now he was on his own. Gunn met his eye and turned serious, waited for him to see that there was nothing here meant as a challenge. An invitation, that’s all Gunn meant, that it was time for them all to give up some of the bullshit, lighten the load. Finally Grouw said, “We got friends here. Be on us if you turn out to be a pair of assholes.”

“I know. Do the same myself. Well - If I was ever in a good enough mood to give the assholes a chance.”

Grouw nodded, not smiling. “Sunday, then.”

“Sunday, yeah.” Gunn got to his feet, put on his jacket, and picked up the pen to take it back to the bar. “Thanks, guys.”

\* \* \* \* \*



Gunn couldn't believe how nervous Wesley got about Sunday: really anxious and obsessive, especially about the translations. Gunn spent a lot of Friday working with Wesley on the tour of L.A. Wesley produced a rough design first thing in the morning, and Gunn brought his local knowledge, did the research on the web, suggested improvements, and typed up the design through its various versions. Gunn also typed Wesley's list of demons, which they had out of the way by midday on Friday.

The translations, though, Wesley had to do by hand and on his own, and Gunn saw him go through at least ten versions of each. Of all the things that Gunn tried with Wesley to get him to chill, only sex worked, though it worked very well, not only during, but for hours afterwards. And Wesley wanted to chill, got annoyed with himself, with the hair-trigger alarm in his brain. Still, Gunn would wake every morning to find himself alone in the bed, and Wesley next door in stubble and robe, refusing to admit how long he'd been back at work.

When Angel was having a good day (or a good half-hour), his reaction to Wesley's state was half-concerned, half-amused. He'd bring Wesley a mug of tea, ask him how much longer he needed before he'd realise that he'd got it perfect the first time, and then usually check with Gunn what Wesley was working on, and why. Gunn told Angel about the plans to reach a larger market and Angel needed just as much persuading as Wesley; but Gunn had expected that, and was much softer-hitting and more patient than he'd been with Wesley. During the other times, not so good, Angel seemed so sensitive to Wesley's anxiety that he wouldn't even come into the room. He'd open the door of his room and then see Wesley and stand there for ten, twenty seconds, looking surprised and bewildered, like someone he trusted had just yelled at him for no reason. Then he'd back away, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, and shut himself in. Maybe he could feel Wesley's tension directly, smell it, from the far side of the room. Or maybe it was enough that Wesley had not turned at the sound of the door, that somehow Wesley did not know that he was there.

On Sunday morning at about eleven, Wesley showered, shaved, and dressed in his best suit; and emerged almost relaxed, certainly no worse than a on healthy "alert". The suit. Must be the suit.

Gunn had expected the group to look surprised when they saw Wesley, but then he hadn't told them about Wesley the fighter, just about the books and the classical music. They acted at first like they'd all agreed just how to behave: very polite, like they were being taken out to dinner by friends of their parents. Gunn wondered about trying to break the ice, then decided that he was the only one who was feeling uncomfortable with the inch-thick company manners. The ice would melt in its own time, or he'd just get used to working like this.

They asked Wesley where he wanted to start, and he suggested that Piriti and Grouw should read his translations, and then they might have questions for him. Grouw was slower than Piriti to admit to being impressed, but Gunn thought that was just because he and Wesley had more difference in their ideas about what the song meant when it was in English.

"Yes, it could mean that. In which case I would render that line as 'Max fyd, mer hayr, agan surg vic.' I also thought it could mean..." In the course of his work Wesley had considered interpretations of the song that had never occurred to the group, and they obviously thought they'd already had every possible argument about "I'm walking a line - I hate to be dreaming in motion." For a minute or so they seemed like they might forget Wesley and Gunn were even there, but Matt brought them back and asked about the tour plan.

Wesley gave out copies of the plan and talked them through it, explained that he'd aimed for a balance between the familiar and the exotic, making some assumptions about the background and interests of this Sas Vanna and what he might find familiar or find exotic. The tour had views, it had history (human, Sas Vanna, and generally-demonic; heart-warming, thought-provoking, scandalous, or just weird), it had food (human and Sas Vanna), it had driving, it had walking, it had wading, it had museums, and it had trash. Gunn didn't care about this Sas Vanna, he knew a hundred people who'd sign up for that look at L.A. and so did the group, judging by all the laughing and nodding and starts of surprise.

Grouw said, "What are you doing the weekend after next?"

A brief look at Gunn, expressionless apart from raised eyebrows, then: "I have no idea. Why?"

"My sister Yan's in town with one of her boyfriends. They're both Sas Vanna. Half Sas Vanna. D'you want to come along and test out your tour? We'd do the meals and everything. Try to make it worth your while."

Wesley looked briefly stunned, then went straight into flustered. He bent his head, fumbled with his papers, then cleared his throat hard before raising his head. Gunn had seen that determined, apprehensive expression several times now, and knew exactly what Wesley was going to do next.

Yes, he was handing over the copies of his list. “You shouldn’t decide anything until you’ve seen this. Most of these demons I met for no more than five minutes. And at the end of that time they were dead.”

Shock, and then all three scanned urgently through the pages of the list, mouths dropping open at the length. Matt was the first to recover. As apprehensive as Wesley: “Any Chachaspes? Or Hulls?”

“No. And no Sas Vanna.”

Grouw was glaring again. “Like he’d tell us if he had.”

“Better believe he would. He’s kinda stupid like that. Lie to save anyone except himself.” All four looked at Gunn, the group surprised and thinking, Wesley surprised and annoyed. Gunn raised his eyebrows and said to Grouw, “Ask him why. Why he had to fight them.”

Grouw checked briefly with Piriti, then: “So why?”

“Because they were harming or threatening people. Innocent people, who had offered no provocation whatever. We had to save the people.”

“That’s people as in humans.” Piriti was stating a fact, very certain.

“Yes. It’s what I was trained to do.”

Grouw said, “Harming humans how? Most of yours’d scream murder if me or Piriti walked past on the other side of the street. You trained to ask questions? Or just told the human’s always right?”

“I can take you through the list. You can decide on the degree of harm and on how I was trained.” A pause, then Grouw shrugged and nodded, and Wesley told them about the Photh near Houston, back in November.

By April, they’d heard enough. “OK. Even if there was a Hull on your list... You gotta right to protect your kind, when it’s like that. But it isn’t just demons who harm humans, nothing like. Why’n’t you protect humans from humans? Or do you?”

Wesley was shaking his head. “There’s a police force for that. The demons I’ve fought... You could say that they chose to operate in a place where they cannot be brought to the law. Or is there a parallel system that I haven’t heard about?”

Piriti said, “Not for anything on that scale. Not involving humans. Or not as a system?” The question was for Grouw, who nodded. “There are rumours of groups of residents - like my family - having to do what you do if someone’s getting stupid with humans. We have to live here.”

“And of course they don’t think to take nets, so they’ve no chance of bringing their target back alive.” Grouw’s tone had changed completely, was comfortable, like this was something he’d said a hundred times before.

Matt must have felt the change too, since the relief seemed clearer in his voice even than the teasing. “Well, I guess they haven’t heard all your sister’s net stories. Not even once.”

Grouw shrugged. “She makes half of them up.”

“Yeah. But which half? And which half makes them up?” Piriti was making a joke, not asking any real questions, and the other two laughed like it was a good joke, and then Grouw turned to Wesley and asked him again about the weekend after next.

“I see now why the translations were getting to you.” They had stopped on the way home for ice-cream and a walk on the beach. “That was kind of a dirty trick. Like asking you to translate ten different songs.”

“I don’t think it was deliberate. It’s just their favourite song at the moment, they couldn’t name another song if you paid them. And they like not knowing what it means, it makes it more of a game.”

“Yeah, more about the music. They’d said something like that.”

“It was an interesting problem. Tedious for you, though, I’m sorry. ‘Walk Like a Man’ would have been much more straightforward. So I’m stupid, am I?” There had been scarcely any pause or change of tone; the question must have been right there waiting, maybe for every minute of the last half hour.

“Well, I’d have to think very carefully before I sent you undercover. Most people try to think their way around trouble. Y’know? You’re either waitin’ for it. Or headin’ straight at it.”

“I’ve never had good results trying to avoid it. And it’s rarely as bad as you’d imagined. Telling yourself you can avoid it... You can make yourself a thin layer of feeling safe. But really you’ve just bought yourself another day of living in fear.”

“So you’d rather take the chance of having every demon in L.A. after you than live in fear for a day.”

Wesley shrugged. “There are many different kinds of fear. And I know I did the right thing: in killing the demons and in telling the boys. For me, it’s taking responsibility for my actions. Is that so stupid?”

Gunn shook his head. “I’d never expect you to do anything else. No one would, who had even the first idea about how to read your face.”

Wesley sighed. “I see. No undercover, then. What do you think of the boys? Do you like them?”

“Sure. Think they’re a great team. Don’t you?”

“They’re delightful. But I don’t think I could spend an entire day in their company. They’re just too young for me. Too boisterous. I’d get bored and want to be home with my book. And I don’t behave well when I’m bored like that.”

“Really?”

“I sulk.”

Gunn laughed. “What excuse d’ you wanna make, then? I still wanna go. And we have to, anyway, for the business. We’ve got two weeks – I know you can make me into Mister Junior Demon Expert in that time.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Gunn did enjoy his meeting with Lilah Morgan, although the two of them decided to hate each other pretty much on sight. No, not “hate”, it wasn’t nearly that important, to either of them. But Gunn read her with one look, down to the bones, knew they couldn’t have respect, they couldn’t have trust; and that also wasn’t important, because they both knew that they needed each other. So they smiled, and agreed, and were tirelessly interested, and both made the game so easy to play that they could have continued for twice the time.

She seemed sincere, though, in the good things she said about Wesley. She said a lot of the translators she worked with could be arrogant and defensive, and that Wesley’s modesty and honesty were refreshing. He’d only made one serious mistake that she knew of, and she knew of it only because he’d called her as soon as he’d realised. Too late, for that particular prophecy, but she hardly ever reminded him of that mistake now.

If she did deal directly with demons, she was never going to give him any details that he’d believe (“Yes, but only among the fabulously wealthy. And they all live in the sheltered dimensions. Taxes. The travel expenses would ruin you, before you could hope to see any return.”). The one thing that he did learn from the meeting was that he didn’t want to do business with people like her, even if that was the end of the market with money to burn, and even if he’d had a hope in hell of getting any more of her type to take meetings with him. You couldn’t deal with people that rich and stay clean. You just couldn’t. So he could forget all that and concentrate on Caritas and the bookstores, concentrate on looking for other leads in the part of the market that kept itself to this dimension.

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Angel had a vision on Wednesday, just as they were starting their training session. The vision didn't bring out Angelus and didn't give Angel too hard a ride, so he was steady and lucid once he was free of the reverberation phase, and was able to tell them immediately that he knew the location: a water-tank built on the site of an abandoned convent. Wesley said that the demon in the drawings looked like a Thrall, in which case the figures in the robes were probably human worshippers who had been dragged under its spell and the vision must be telling them to kill the Thrall, which would free the worshippers from the spell.

"What'll happen if they're not freed?"

Gunn had put the question to Wesley, but the answer came from Angel. "With what we've got here, they'll hack each other to death. There's at least two groups in there. It felt as if they were fighting over how to worship it."

"Hey! Our big chance to get mixed up in a religious war. What're we waitin' for?"

For most of the drive out to the water-tank, they were talking over the problem of having to fight the human worshippers. There were a lot of these worshippers, they were heavily armed, and they all seemed determined to fight to the death. How could you defend yourself against a mob like that, and not run the risk of killing one of them? More than one. Yes, they could all three live with the guilt, they would see it as an accident, but what to do about the police? Angel couldn't turn himself in, Gunn wouldn't (not for an accident, and not when it was obvious you couldn't tell the cops one word of the real story), but Wesley... Wesley was really disturbed by the idea that he might start to think of himself as above human law. No, he wouldn't turn himself in over the type of accident they were discussing - for the same reasons as Gunn - but he knew that having made that decision once, he would find it all too easy to make again.

Angel listened seriously to Wesley having all these doubts, but Gunn couldn't help laughing at him. "Wes, you couldn't slide down that slope if it was waxed to a shine. You might think you got a look of psycho vigilante, but I havta tell you that image gets trashed the second you open your mouth and start worryin' like that. Anyway, we're gonna sneak in, do that left-and-right thing to slip behind the Thrall 'n' split its head. They won't see us before it's all over, and if they do, one of us'll get through in time. Save y'r worrying for some other buncha dopes."

They did sneak in, and Gunn got around behind the Thrall and split its head open before the worshippers had noticed any one of them. The worshippers didn't seem to notice them afterwards, either. Very strange, how they acted once it was over, not like they'd been freed, more like they'd just switched to another spell. No "Where the hell am I? Who're all of you? What's with the robes and the swords? And, oh God! what's that dead thing stuck in the floor?" They just dropped the swords, shrugged out of the robes, then made for the stairs, like they'd all done this ten, twenty times before.

On the way home Gunn called Matt to tell him that Wesley wouldn't be able to come on the tour. "He's giving me the background, though. The stories. Not sayin' it'll be just as good or anythin', but should still be fun. That's OK, yeah?"

That was fine. "Gonna be at the club tomorrow?"

"Should be. Around nine?" Gunn had already planned to go to Caritas on the Thursday night. The boys had obviously seen enough on Sunday to decide that he and Wesley weren't a pair of assholes, and Gunn hadn't wanted to push for any more than that at the time. But he didn't want to wait until the tour before he did the follow-up, found out if they really did know people in Caritas who could use an expert like Wesley.

"Great. See you then, man."

They were on a table at the far side of the room, and they'd kept a chair free for Gunn. He'd just missed seeing them sing "Wouldn't it be nice?" and their next song should be either "Werewolves of London" or "Looking for the Heart of Saturday Night". Piriti was choosing all the songs tonight, their way of making up to him for the hard week he'd had at home.

Matt asked after Wesley, and Gunn told them that Wesley had been reading some stories in Chachaspe. "He thought, from the title, they were going to be about dreaming - still got the song in his head - but they're mostly about dealing with strangers."

Later, Grouw asked Gunn if he knew how Wesley had lost his arm. "That was one of the demons he said he didn't kill. From near the beginning of the list. The Kungai."

“Oh. But he made it sound like...”

“Yeah. Well, he would.”

Matt said, “Was it an accident?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to talk about it, either.”

Gunn shrugged. “Don’t know much about it. Was before I met him. Think he nearly died.”

A sombre silence, then Grouw said, “But he was back. Saving his humans again. Couldn’t have been much more than a month after.”

“Like I said, he’s stupid some ways.”

“Is that why he hired you? To help with that side? You’d been doin’ the same, right? With vampires.”

“He didn’t hire me. He’s my partner, he’s not my boss. But, yeah, that was how we met. First obvious thing we had in common.”

“What else do you have in common?” Piriti sounded curious, slightly puzzled.

“Enough to like working together.”

Grouw said, “You gonna become an expert, like him?”

“Not a chance, with the languages. I learn a tenth of the rest, I’ll be doin’ well. He’s been studyin’ his whole life. And he loves to study. I’m more about gettin’ out, gettin’ things moving.”

Piriti grinned and said, “Like you’d be doing now, if the three of us’d stop talking about our ‘happy’ songs and let you get down to business?” Matt and Grouw laughed, and all three looked at Gunn expectantly.

A few seconds, then: “That was only about half a dig, yeah?”

Grouw shook his head. “Not even that. We put you through the secret identity thing. Know you didn’t do all that work so you could listen to us argue, and then give up another weekend. Thought you’d’ve called us on Monday, or something.”

Gunn shook his head. “Yeah, I’m that pushy, but Wes said... So you’d be OK about Wes and me talkin’ to your friends here? Not asking for introductions or anything. But if we handed out cards and people asked you about us, you wouldn’t, like, warn ‘em off?”

“Only for your sake, ‘cos some guys you don’t want calling. No, we’ll do more than that. We’ll tell you ‘bout who we know, not just in this crowd. You know, what we’ve heard, where you might start. And put the word round.”

Matt said, “For what the word’s worth, coming from us. There’s only so much respect a kickin’ Talking Heads chorus’ll get you in this town.”

“And some of us still get sent out to collect bark whenever the conversation might get interesting.” Looked like Piriti’s hard week had mostly been about getting treated like a kid. “ ‘nother few years I’m gonna have to move to a different dimension, change my name and pretend to be a fifth-brooder, just so I can find out what proper gossip sounds like.”

“Yeah, but you’re not sneakin’ off without us. Respectable fifth-brooder can’t travel without his entourage. Like, his mysterious Hull personal trainer.”

“And his tame human that he raised from a puppy. Look! I can carry eggs in my mouth.” Matt opened his mouth wide, looking every inch the eager puppy proud of his new trick.

When Piriti had stopped giggling, he turned to Gunn and said, “So when d’ you want to start? We could come round some evening. Spend a solid hour or two fillin’ you in.”

“Um... Be great, but have to be somewhere else.” Gunn pulled a face. “Got this roommate situation.”

“Oh God, roommates!” Grouw nodded and sighed. “What about Wesley’s place?”

“No, he’s got the exact same situation. ‘s a long story. Angel, guy who founded the business. He and Wesley go way back. But he got sick, had to stop working. And he’s sick in a way that...” Gunn shook his head hard. “He can’t have people in the apartment.”

Grouw was the one who broke the silence. “You’re saying he’s your roommate too? This sick guy. You and Wesley sort of lookin’ after him?”

“Sort of. Way it worked out. Like I said, long story.”

Piriti looked almost scared. “Is it really tough?”

“No, not really. He’s not whiny or anything. Just some things you have to work around.”

Matt shrugged. “My place then. Or how d’ you feel about getting your hands dirty? Piriti’s got this project he needs to work on. Home improvements thing. That’s what we got planned for Saturday afternoon. I know, weekends again. But it’s the best time when we’re all free.”

“Sounds good. Where’s the project? I need to bring anything? Work-clothes? I’ll see what Wes is doing, but it’ll probably just be me again.”

Wesley was asleep when Gunn got home, but nearly choked on his breakfast coffee when Gunn told him about the plans for Saturday. Finally he got the laughing and spluttering under control, but then just stood and shook his head for the longest time.

“Charles. I don’t know what I expected when you came to join us. This isn’t supposed to happen, not even with your talent for meeting people. Two humans building a nest for a Chachaspe! There may be fifty people alive who’d understand what that means. And none of them would believe it.”

Gunn smiled. “That’s another reason you’re not coming? ‘cos you couldn’t tell anyone about it?”

“I’d much rather hear about it. Leave the minute-by-minute details to my imagination.”

Gunn thought he had some idea of Wesley’s imagination, but he was taken completely by surprise when he got home early on Saturday evening to find Wesley extremely horny. Wesley definitely wouldn’t let him change his clothes or shower off the sweat and grit. Wesley wanted him in the bedroom, immediately.

Gunn had never seen a lover so hungry for his skin. Wesley pressed himself against Gunn, slid over him, around him, the movements too slow and determined to be called restless, but constant, always pushing for more. Gunn found it exciting, maybe even more so because none of it seemed to be meant for him, done to make him feel good, not even the kissing. This was all about Wesley; this was something between Wesley’s imagination and Gunn’s skin.

Afterwards, Gunn said, “So it gets to you like your stubble gets to me? The idea of me nest-building with demons.”

“No, I wasn’t even really thinking about that. Just about you out in the sun. With your new friends. Your hands in the earth. I can still smell the sun on you.” Smiling: “You weren’t thinking about me at all, were you?”

“Um. Not really. We were busy. Lots to talk about. Piriti’s brother was there. New songs. And some really old ones. Finding more money for beer.”

“You had an ordinary day with friends.”

“Well, one way to look at it. Just yesterday you were all woo-hoo about the wackiness of me getting to help with the nest. Sounds like you’re over that.”

“Anything but. You did have a good day, though? They are friends?”

“Yeah, it was a blast. They’d’ve driven you crazy but they make me laugh.”

“I’m glad.” Wesley raised himself up on his elbow and looked down at Gunn, studying Gunn’s face, watching his own hand as it stroked Gunn’s head.

Gunn could feel Wesley becoming excited again. He lifted his hand and touched his fingers to Wesley’s lips, then laid the back of his hand against Wesley’s throat. “Love the way you show you’re glad. How you gonna be next weekend, when we’ve been out all day havin’ fun with your tour?”

“Well, at the risk of sounding conceited, that probably won’t be an ordinary day. And you’ll be thinking of me too much. Today was... I don’t know. Imagining you as if we hadn’t met yet. Or as if I was the sun on you, I was your clothes. You were doing all of these normal, simple things, nothing to do with me. But I could feel your body as if I was the air around you.”

“Wow. English. Wow.” Gunn slid his hand around to the back of Wesley’s neck, and drew him down into a long kiss. “But now I’ll be thinkin’ of you whenever I’m out in the sun. Know that’s the opposite of what you need to imagine. But you’ve told me now.”

Wesley shook his head. “Enough sun. Enough songs. Enough sand under your nails. You’ll forget me until it’s time to collect the empty beer-bottles and head for home.”

Much, much later, when Wesley was at least a hundred percent fucked, and they’d slept for about half an hour, and had just agreed that they would get up and shower (but not yet): “So you met Piriti’s brother? What’s he like?”

“God. Incredibly shy. Would only speak to Piriti, and in Chachaspe. Think that was mostly because I was there. They look like they’re identical. But you can tell them apart in a second just from the way they hold themselves.”

“Were they physically affectionate with one another?”

“Oh, boy! Practically makin’ out. I was gonna get to that. How’d you know?”

“I’d wondered, from what I’d read about the Chachaspe. And other species where the males from a generation raise the children together. Scarcely even meet the females. Their sex drive has to work differently from ours. I’ve never seen anything written about the females having a need for physical bonding. Not with anything. But any number of scandalised footnotes about the way the males behaved with each other. I couldn’t find out if it was overtly sexual, though.”

“Matt said it wasn’t. I asked him when the two of us were goin’ for beer. He said Piriti doesn’t understand sex as somethin’ you’d do for fun. With another person. For him sex is all about the nest. Somethin’ about the smell of eggs in the nest. He doesn’t have fantasies about it, he doesn’t wanna do it. But he gets spooked at the idea of having to sleep apart from his brother. And, yeah, that’s what it looked like when I looked again.”

“I’m glad we’re not Chachaspe.”

“They seemed happy together. But yeah. The brother asked at the end if he could come along next weekend. Could see that was a big surprise to Grouw and Matt. Course we said yes. And he couldn’t cope with that, was gone into one of his tunnels.” Gunn had snapped his fingers to show the speed. “Nearly killed us, stoppin’ ourselves from laughin’ at him.” He laughed now, and Wesley too. “Just hoping Grouw’s sister and the boyfriend are OK with him. Everyone says I’ll like the sister. Grouw says she’s a jewel.” Gunn sighed. “Kind of sweet, isn’t it? He must really miss her when she’s away working.”

Dinner, about an hour later, was a tuna salad. Or “tyoona”, as Wesley kept on calling it, said he never stop calling it because he liked to think that the language he spoke was English, and he could see no good case for abandoning his standards, even if it did take him half an hour to make himself understood whenever he placed his order in Subway. Gunn loved Wesley’s rants, wanted to take him straight back to bed.

“You just like being difficult.”

“I am the soul of reason. The people behind me in the queue at Starbucks are grateful to me for explaining so thoroughly why ‘small’, ‘medium’ and ‘large’ are entirely adequate to the task of describing a range of three sizes, and that the management’s decision to defect to the G word and the V word can be seen only as a ludicrous and unhelpful pretension.”

“Grateful, yeah?”

“Indeed. They always show a lively and touching interest in where I’m from. And in how soon I’m going back.”

Gunn had just started his slice of pie when Wesley said, “Grouw’s sister. Tell me again what work she does.”

“She’s a prison guard. They really have whole prison dimensions?”

“They certainly do. You know, I don’t think Grouw was saying she was a jewel. I think he said ‘dual’. As in dual control, dual nationality. Have you ever heard him order tuna?”

“So what’s that mean? I guess she’s got two sets of paperwork or something, if she works in this other dimension.”

“She’s got two bodies. She’s a dual-body demon. One body would be a Hull, the same as Grouw. And the other body would be a Sas Vanna. Her boyfriend is probably a dual as well. They’re very popular for security work. You get two guards for the price of one. Or at least less than the price of two.”

Wesley had to be joking again. Didn’t he? “You saying there’s gonna be four of them on the tour? Damn! but the boys are getting their money’s worth. I thought we’d fit in two cars.”

“If she was born here, then you’ll just see her in the combined body. They can only split in some dimensions, and never in the native dimension.”

Gunn stared at Wesley. “Show me some pictures.” Wesley brought three books to the table, but the first was enough to convince Gunn. “But this looks like the combined body’s just about the same size as each of the separate bodies. It doesn’t add up. Or is that ‘cos of how it’s drawn?”

Wesley shook his head. “There are theories about where the mass comes from or goes to. All impossible to test. You’re going to meet two dual-body demons next weekend. That’s very exciting.”

“Exciting enough that you could come along and not sulk? About not being at home with your books.”

“Maybe too exciting. I’d stare. Ask inappropriate questions.”

“Ask them to do tricks?”

“Very possibly. If the boyfriend wasn’t born here then maybe...” Wesley swallowed then shook his head sharply. “No. I will stay home. But can I give you some questions to ask in case the subject comes up?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Gunn was out on the tour from Saturday evening to Sunday afternoon. Wesley had worked out the schedule very carefully, setting a suitable time of day or night for each item and also making time for sleep. The night was firmly booked for the walking and the wading and also for breaking into museums and cemeteries, but there was a surprising amount that they could do during the day if they used Wesley’s methods for keeping out of sight of humans. Wesley had said they were really all Angel’s methods – from Angel’s knowledge of L.A.’s tunnels and of safe routes into useful and interesting places - but Wesley must have remembered pretty much everything that Angel had ever told him about how to make good use of L.A. when you couldn’t get caught in the sun.

Matt and the two Chachaspe demons hit their limit at about four in the morning and went back to Matt’s place to sleep, leaving Gunn on his own with three (or could be five) fearsome-looking demons. They voted to leave the cemetery for another weekend, and instead decide over noodles what to do with the rest of the night. Gunn was the only human in the



noodle bar; the demons, mostly Hulls, showed very little surprise, but Grouw warned him not to visit the bar on his own, or not just yet.

“Like I said, I used to work here. If there’s someone on shift who remembers seeing you here with me, you’ll be fine. Took three, four visits before I knew there’d be someone who recognised Matt. And he’d never try it, anyway, but you’re different.”

“How long d’ you work here?”

“Couple of years. Evening deliveries for a couple of years before that. I left about a year ago when I got the job in the garage. I’d had enough of working shifts.”

Gunn nodded, then asked Yan and her boyfriend Chaudoy if they worked shifts. They did, but the schedules were very regular and the entire dimension was geared to the shift system; you didn’t get that sense of being cut off, forced against the flow of normal life.

“Are you on the same shift?”

“No. We could ask for a transfer. But we’ve both been in our current shifts for several years, and we’ve got other friends and lovers fitted around them.” Yan suddenly grinned wide enough that Gunn could see all three rows of teeth. “It’s a very delicate ecosystem.”

Gunn smiled. “You’ve got more than two shifts, right? Or you’d never have got to meet.”

“Three. We knew each other by sight, from changeover. Like this.” She gestured at herself and Chaudoy. “But we didn’t meet each other’s Sas Vanna until recently. There was an escape -”

“Attempted escape.” Still a sore subject, from the way Chaudoy had muttered the words to his bowl of noodles. Or maybe it was a joke between them.

“And all shifts from our sector were put on the capture. So that’s how we saw each other working.”

“You liked each other’s style?” Could have been him and Wesley.

Grouw laughed. “Mostly they liked each other’s Sas Vanna. They’d’ve been combined at shift-change. For the briefing.”

“Oh. So you work separated?”

Chaudoy looked more surprised than Yan. “You haven’t met many duals?” He pronounced it “jewel”, too. Gunn shook his head. “We only combine at work when we need to pool information or reach a joint decision.”

“What about away from work?”

The two duals looked at each other, then Yan said, “It depends what we’re doing.”

“Do you - Do your Sas Vanna and your Hull have separate dates?” Gunn winced. “Sorry. None of my business.”

“Not what Grouw says.” Then she flashed another grin, and then shrugged. “My Sas Vanna, my Hull and I have different tastes. Can’t remember the last time even two of us agreed on someone.”

Now Gunn wanted to ask about the two of them coming on this weekend. Yan had been born here - in Florida - so she’d have to stay combined all weekend. And sounded like Chaudoy wouldn’t look at her twice when she was combined; and her combined form didn’t want any part of him. Guess she really wanted to see Grouw, Chaudoy really wanted to see L.A. Imagine: a weekend away with Wesley, and Wesley not wanting him, not at all. Gunn shivered and changed the subject, made another suggestion for what they could do next.

They decided, in many slow stages, to go to the Hollywood sign - take in the view for a while, maybe stay and see the sunrise. Soon after they’d decided Yan said to Grouw, “Where’s the nearest place I can get cigarettes? Is it still that

little store on Sunset?" Grouw nodded and Yan made to stand up, but Chaudoy - who was nearer the door - put his hand on her arm.

"I'll go, if it's just a couple of blocks. Just tell me where." Grouw gave directions, and then the demon across the table from Gunn was a full Sas Vanna, just like the pictures in Wesley's books, and there was another type of demon, taller, thinner, and all scarlet and scaly, walking away from Gunn towards the door. Gunn hadn't seen them split apart, and he had been looking straight at Chaudoy at the time. Felt almost like there'd been no split, more a straight switch, one demon taken off, and the two put in. All three were wearing completely different clothes.

Of course he was staring. The Sas Vanna laughed at him, Grouw smirked, and Yan shook her head. "You'd think he was going for a record. Like there was a prize. Anyone lets slip that they've never seen a dual before, then it's just a matter of time."

Gunn managed to stop gawping. "Don't blame you. Good trick." What the hell did it feel like, doing that? "D' you have different names? Or are you all 'Chaudoy'?"

"Depends who's doing the calling."

They paid the bill and left as soon as the scarlet demon came back. Gunn didn't see the two combine again. He was talking routes with Grouw while the others were getting into the back seat, and that must have been when it happened.

Yan had needed cigarettes so she could sit and smoke while the sun came up, and it was a good sunrise, definitely the right thing for them to do. They barely spoke as they waited, not like they'd had enough of each other, but like they all had enough thoughts that they were happy to sit and be quiet for the last half hour of the night. Gunn thought about vampires. About visions. Things down in those streets that most people wouldn't believe. And watching over the streets something even stranger. Impossible to guess at the choices, the reasons, the limits behind the visions. Pointless trying. People were alive down there who would have been dead. See that, know that, and you've got all you need.

Matt had left the door unlocked. They were all fast asleep: Matt sprawled on the couch, and the brothers curled around one another underneath the table. Yeah, a few hours of that would be good before they set out for the daylight parts of the tour. The duals took the main bedroom, Gunn won the coin-toss and took the single bed, and Grouw slept on the floor behind the couch.

Gunn was tired, but found himself lying awake thinking about Wesley. Mostly. Thinking some about his crew. If Wesley had come along, what would be different? Maybe nothing about the tour, maybe they'd've had the same vote about noodles and the sign. But what would be different right now? Probably, he and Grouw would have given Wesley the bed, wouldn't need even to talk it over, because Wesley obviously needed privacy more than them, being the oldest, and so English, and with his injury. And Gunn would have told Grouw that he'd sleep on the floor in the single bedroom. He probably would have slept on the floor, too. The bed was too small for both of them. But large enough for them to hold each other for a while. To kiss. To talk about how much their lives had changed, how happy they were that their lives had changed.

And that lead to thinking about his crew, how he was here because he'd left his crew. He wondered what his crew had imagined would happen to him when he left. Wesley so uptight, so out of place, his only friends would have to be other uptight white guys, like Angel, or even weirder. And Gunn the token black, nothing at all to say to half of Wesley's friends. God, how bored would he be, how much would he be longing for the next time he'd get sent out to kill a demon? Gunn would probably have to let his crew go on imagining just that, since he could never tell them the truth about even the dullest five minutes of his new life. He was in a house full of demons, two next door who could kill him in a second, take half his arm off with one bite. But he would sleep as sound as Matt was sleeping downstairs on the couch. He'd met Wesley, and everything in his life had changed.