

Kungai
by Helen Raven

a novel in six parts

Part Three

Gunn had decided they'd be better keeping the human and the demon markets separate. They'd keep the name Angel Investigations for the human market so someone who'd heard of them from the early days could still find them, and for the demon market they'd have a new name: Wyndham Gunn. Separate phone-lines, too. The phone in the apartment would still be for Angel Investigations, and they'd use Gunn's cellphone for Wyndham Gunn.

Gunn set up two email addresses and made two websites: both very plain, but looking much more like the work of sane people than anything from their competitors; and hopefully looking different enough from each other that someone who found both sites wouldn't get them confused. He got new cards made for himself and Wesley for both businesses, and he decided to leave the street address off all of the cards and say instead just "Inglewood".

Really, they could do with an office, especially for meetings with demons - an office covered by the same type of spell as Caritas. But they just couldn't afford it. Wesley said that even when he and Angel had the office, a lot of clients preferred to meet somewhere else - a bar, usually, or a coffee shop - somewhere that they'd chosen for themselves. Gunn came up with a list of four central locations for meeting humans, so he and Wesley would be ready with suggestions if someone asked for a location. The list of locations for meeting demons started out with just Caritas, but Gunn gave himself two weeks to find them other places that were also safe, but had less noise and longer opening hours.

He'd taken a stack of his Wyndham Gunn cards along to Caritas on the Thursday before the tour, and he'd given a set each to Matt, Grouw and Piriti. Grouw told him during the tour that they'd given cards to five or six people in Caritas, and that he'd given some to people at work and to his roommates; the roommate with the largest and most complicated family had gone home for the weekend, and Grouw thought he'd probably mention the tour to his family, at the very least.

Gunn had thought they'd have weeks to wait, with him spending most days of those weeks looking for demon hangouts where he could meet clients, listen out for gossip, or at least leave a few cards. No way L.A.'s demons were gonna be lined up around the block, like they'd been lying awake nights over shaky translations and complicated research. The first call came on the Monday after the tour, and Gunn told himself it was just some kids playing a joke, seeing if the card was for real; there wasn't really a shelter for homeless demons, not even in L.A., not anywhere, and there certainly wasn't some poor, lost demon, that no one knew where he was from. Gunn called Matt as the first stage in trying to check with Grouw, and Matt told him straight-off that, yeah, there was a shelter, Grouw had spent some time there a few years back, when he'd hit a bad patch after his family had skipped town. So Gunn was wrong several ways, and they had their first case, really that soon.

The shelter was run by a religious order, tiny little demons with way too many arms, who thought the meaning of life was all tied up with travelling. Or maybe with making your way in a strange place. Gunn could live without understanding the details for now; maybe later, if it looked like they'd be seeing much more of the shelter. The lost demon was probably a kid, maybe not very bright. It had been found wandering the sewers near Universal Studios. Got separated from its tour party? Or brought to L.A. by accident, stowed away or something? First priority was finding out what it would eat, then they'd work on getting it home. The kid ate most kinds of snails, and the monks (or nuns) had found its family by Thursday - as Grouw told Gunn at Caritas on Thursday night.

They got paid fifty bucks, which the monks had said upfront was all they could afford. Not a great rate for ten hours or more of intensive research and snail-collecting, but better than nothing. Wesley hadn't wanted to take the money, thought they should treat the shelter the way they treated Anne's, and of course he was right, but Gunn really needed to hold that money: the very first earnings for Wyndham Gunn.

By the next Monday they'd had four more calls and two emails, had earned a hundred bucks more, and had meetings set up with a school and an employment agency that might just possibly lead to a very useful amount of regular work. Gunn started putting more and more of his time to learning his way around Wesley's books, building up his working knowledge of demons so he could take some of the load off Wesley. The time might come when they would have to turn away work. The time might even come when he could run an entire case on his own.

Angel was confused sometimes about their new work, especially at first. He'd see Wesley surrounded by books and he'd think it was a case like their old ones, like the visions. He'd ask how dangerous this demon was, what sort of weapons he should get ready. Wesley and Gunn explained, and the first three or four times he reacted with the same harsh disbelief each time, but then he remembered better and better. By the beginning of December, when they got their first check by mail (\$320), Angel no longer needed an explanation, but asked instead about progress on their current cases, whether there'd been any more calls. Sometimes he could help: he checked email, did research online, improved their website, and sometimes he'd surprise them with how much he knew about demons. But then he'd been around for ten times longer than Gunn.

Angel envied them the work, Gunn was sure. Being busy and useful, coming back every day with five, ten stories about the amazing L.A. that they were just starting to discover. Of course Angel would never admit to anything like envy, had to say instead that this new work was all kind of tame, compared with the good old days of Angel Investigations. Gunn saw the twist of pain cross Wesley's face, and wondered how Angel could miss noticing how hard Wesley took any reference to Doyle. Because that's what Angel meant by "the good old days": the time before Wesley, when Angel was working with his friend Doyle. If Doyle had lived and had kept the visions, would the Powers have seen any reason to save Wesley from the Kungai?

"Yeah, sure it's tame. You wanna opt out, not take your share of what it's bringin' in, you tell us. We c'n find our own plans for the money. Y'know, maybe get somethin' tame like a pool table."

Yes, Angel envied them. He had to, stuck in here without even a TV, no connection to the living, working world except what the visions forced on him. Gunn couldn't imagine how he'd deal with that himself; except that he'd do it in a way that didn't hurt Wesley.

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Four weeks to the day since Gunn had passed the first batch of business cards out to the boys, and he and the boys were in Caritas as usual for a Thursday night. Well, would have been as usual except Wesley called after half an hour to say that Angel had had a vision about a nest of vampires, Gunn shouldn't come back to the apartment but should go directly to Vernon and La Salle. Wesley was at the trunk of the car when Gunn arrived, sorting out crossbows, axes, stakes and holy water.

"The house is around the block. There are between six and eight vampires. There are people in the house, being held in separate rooms. They've been chained up, may have been there for several days. I don't know the layout of the house. We'll have to rely on surprise. Can you carry two crossbows in this time?"

"What about Angel?" Angel was still sitting in the car. Gunn bent down to look in at him, and saw him flinching away from something, acting kind of panicked - like there was a wasp shut in the car with him.

"We can't use him. He hasn't really come out of the vision, he's not seeing what's in front of him. It's as if he's trapped in a nightmare. I brought him with me in case he could identify the house from the outside. And I think he did, I think he reacted to one of the houses. But it felt as if..." Wesley was shaking his head. "Almost as if he was seeing the house as a dream that he was having inside the nightmare. As if the image only got through to him because it belonged inside the nightmare. We can't trust him to fit into any plan. Not like this."

There were three people in the house, all kids off the street, all terrified, all suffering the effects of confinement and loss of blood. They knew each other, had all been taken together two days ago, and the vampires had been playing with them; the lead vampires got even more pleasure from head-games than they did from blood. And, OK, that meant the kids were still alive, but who the hell would wait two whole days before sending a vision for them? What had Wesley said about the Powers? "Benign incompetence" versus "callous efficiency" - great choice.

Afterwards, Gunn took the kids to hospital in the truck while Wesley took Angel home in the car; best to keep the kids away from Angel, no guessing how his nightmare would react to the sight of them. Wesley was only at home for long enough to lock Angel in his room, and he joined Gunn in the waiting room at the hospital after half an hour.

"Was he difficult?"

"No. He did let me guide him. Well, push him, mostly - it was safest to stay out of range of his arms. He was fending things off. Shouting. I thought about the gag but... The noise didn't seem any worse than the TV upstairs."

“He been like this before?”

Wesley shook his head. “You’ve seen him the way he usually is after a vision. Where it’s obviously still vivid to him, the most important thing in the world. But he knows it’s about someone else. And it leaves enough of his head clear that he can take action. Ask the right questions. Work with us. When it’s Angelus... He thinks each vision is a personal invitation. That the cruelty is calling out to him. But he does come out of the visions, he does know where he is, he sees exactly how we’re stopping him from answering the call. This time... No, I’ve never seen anything like this. A vision that doesn’t let go, not after he’s finished drawing, not even after the people are safe.”

“Could be he’s like this ‘cos it was vampires?”

A shrug. “Maybe. But they’ve never had this effect before. He might be able to tell us later. Though he’s never been able to explain any patterns in the type of vision that brings out Angelus.”

Gunn had called Anne to check that she had room in the shelter for the kids. They had several hours to wait in the hospital, but then the kids were all released in the space of twenty minutes, so Wesley took two to the shelter in the car while Gunn took the third in the truck. Anne didn’t need any help, and they got home around midnight.

They didn’t try to look in on Angel before they went to bed, but Gunn understood just from the sounds exactly what Wesley had been saying about Angel being trapped in a nightmare. A nightmare happening to him, not to some poor kid, not to someone else. He was crying out and begging and flailing, like he was one of those kids, seeing the vampires coming back for him, over and over again, hearing the same terrible things happening to his friends. Crying out about so many things, in so many ways: you’d think the vision had made Angel live every second of those two days before the kids had been saved.

Once they were in the bedroom Gunn couldn’t hear Angel, not even when the light was out and he seemed to be able to hear every other sound in the apartment block. “God. Think if I listened much longer, I’d start to think I could tell which vamp was with him. How many there were. All the... All the differences.” No response from Wesley, not even a grunt; though Wesley’s body got even more tense. “Wes?” Almost a whisper. “He’ll sleep it off. He’ll be OK tomorrow.”

Angel had gone quiet by morning, but you couldn’t say he was OK. When he came out to get blood, he moved like he was half asleep, and when he looked at things, at either of them, it was like he was seeing them from the middle of a slow, calm dream, the type of dream where you accept anything that’s happening. He didn’t heat the blood, drank it straight from the flask, and then stayed kneeling in front of the open fridge until Wesley took the flask from him, wiped the blood from his mouth, and then coaxed him to his feet and back to his room. He stayed the same all day, and Wesley locked him in his room when they went out to train.

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Angel said he didn’t know why he’d taken so long to come out of the vision with the vampires; it was a disturbing vision but there had been worse, and his nightmares were usually about things that were truly personal, where he really had been there. The next vision was much easier on Angel and he came out of it within minutes, but then as missions went, this one was really more of an errand. The vision hit on Tuesday afternoon of the next week, and Angel drew a picture of a young Hispanic man sitting in a diner looking thoughtful. The diner was in Lawndale, at Marine and Freeman. The young man was thinking of doing something that would turn out badly; his new friends were not what he thought, they had sinister plans for him. He had to be told to leave town for at least two months, and going down to Carlsbad tonight to spend a few days with his sister would be a good start.

The picture, the address and the importance of leaving came during the reverberation phase, and afterwards Angel told them about the sister in Carlsbad, and about the sense of impending doom. No images, no details, but such a feeling of dread, gathering heavy around the idea of those friends. There was no immediate threat, the plans were measured in years; but they could be stopped completely if the man got out of town now. Gunn wondered what he and Wesley would have made of the vision if Angel hadn’t been in a state afterwards to explain it. A warning about an attack on the diner, maybe?

Gunn had the best Spanish of the three of them, and he went into the diner on his own while Wesley and Angel waited around the corner in the car. He told the young man - whose name he never learned - that he had a friend who was psychic, and this friend had just got a really strong message. Yeah, it was crazy, but look, Gunn had found him in the diner just like the message said, and if he really did have a sister in Carlsbad, maybe he should take it that the message

was right about everything. No, the message hadn't said anything about what the new friends were planning, what the friends really were.

The man insisted on seeing this psychic friend, which they'd expected, and he wouldn't come out to the car. The man's booth was full in the sun, so Wesley and Angel took a booth on the other side of the room, and Gunn brought the man over. Angel just told the man in English the same as Gunn had told him, but he told it like a psychic, like someone half in this world and half in another, and with nowhere near enough interest in this world to find any reason to lie about a message. Not a performance: just Angel dealing with a stranger (and this was him at his best, and with Wesley and Gunn at hand to steady him). The man said he'd think about it, that he had been wondering... He didn't say what he'd been wondering, but it looked like he'd already had some doubts about the new friends. Gunn walked him back to his booth, and then they left him to think.

No clues there about the vision of the vampires, why it'd had that effect on Angel. Gunn couldn't see anyone managing to get stuck in a nightmare about a vague feeling of doom and the picture of a man sitting quietly in a diner, so there was no point in comparing. But Gunn had been thinking about that vision a lot, and he'd started to wonder if Angel getting stuck was a message in itself: meant to be a sign to them about Angel and the visions, that something was about to change. Well... could it be a sign that all visions were going to be errands from now on, that they'd been taken off the real missions? God, Gunn hoped not. Yeah, some of the missions were tough, but he and Wesley could handle all that action and more. And Gunn needed his chance to fight back. He wasn't living on the streets any more but they were still his streets. Anything trying to move in on those streets, he needed to be right there, the first to teach it that poor and young didn't mean helpless.

Gunn set himself to wait for the next vision, didn't expect to get any further before then with thinking about Angel and signs. The next vision was eight days later but by then Gunn pretty much knew why Angel had got stuck in that vision: not a sign, not a message; just something that Angel was likely to do now, because Angel was suddenly starting to get worse.

Gunn had always been surprised and impressed by the way Angel kept his focus during the training. Outside of the training (or the visions), Gunn had never seen him stay focused for more than half an hour. He'd come out of his room, join in a normal conversation, and then gradually drift away, lose his connection with them - maybe his connection with the whole idea of having a conversation - and go back to his room. Sometimes he'd be out again within a couple of hours, sometimes not until the next day; sometimes, probably, he recovered in a couple of hours and just didn't feel like talking to them until the next day. But during the training they had always been able to rely on him to stay in focus for at least an hour, and there would be two or three sessions a week when he could last up to two hours.

In the week after the errand, there were two sessions where Angel lost his focus after much less than an hour, and only one session where he lasted two hours. That was enough of a change to be clear as a warning, but during the shortest session Angel also lost focus in a way Gunn hadn't seen before - and with that it looked like they were dealing with a whole new kind of damage. They were in the middle of acting out a raid on a house when Angel lost focus in this new way; they'd acted out a lot of raids since the mission of the vampires and their nest, because Wesley and Gunn could both give too many examples of what those vampires should have done, if they'd had any brains, or any practice at facing humans who fought back. For this particular raid Wesley and Angel were playing the vampires, with the pile of their jackets and coats standing in for one of the kids in chains. Gunn burst in, saw Angel was closest to the pile and tackled him first, and then surprised all three of them by managing to throw Angel against Wesley so he and Wesley both went down. Gunn grabbed his practice-stake from his holster, leapt forward and put his chalk-mark right over Angel's heart.

But Angel didn't roll to the side like they were supposed to once they'd been dusted. Instead, he kicked out, and with Wesley pinned under him, the kick hurt Wesley's thighs at least as much as it hurt Gunn's - enough to make Wesley yelp, anyway. Gunn picked himself up and took a second stake from the holster. "Oh, come on, Angel, I got you right in the heart. Or you sayin' we could be up against a nest where they've all started wearin' vampire Kevlar?"

Angel didn't seem to be listening to Gunn. He was crouched now by Wesley's side, helping Wesley get to his feet and talking to Wesley, too low for Gunn to hear. And all the while he was scanning the room, gaze returning to the same points over and over, like he was keeping track of another four vampire-hunters, all worse than Gunn.

"Angel! Angel, there's only Charles. What playing-field? Do you think we're in Sunnydale?"

"No. No, Willow's safe. I saw her. She'll find Giles."

“Angel!” Wesley was shouting now. “We’re not in Sunnydale. Look at me.” Angel was still scanning, stepping slowly backwards, right arm held out to guide or protect Wesley. Wesley hauled on the arm, trying to get Angel to turn. “Angel, look at me!”

“Buffy, this isn’t -” Angel had given Wesley a split-second’s glance, then fixed his gaze back on Gunn. “Later. I swear they’re safe.”

Wesley had pulled himself around to stand directly in front of Angel. His voice was calmer now. “Angel, can you look at me? Hear me. Buffy isn’t here. You’re not in Sunnydale. You’re in L.A. We’re training. This isn’t a real fight. You need to... see me.” Gunn wanted to move so he could see Angel’s face, but maybe this blocking was exactly what Angel needed to snap out.

“No, they’re not -” Angel was still urgent, had his left hand now on Wesley’s shoulder, pushing him to the side. And then he broke off and his hand fell slowly away, and a few seconds later Wesley had to take a jump backwards as Angel slumped heavily to his knees.

Gunn finally broke the silence. “Can I come over? Or’s he gonna think I’m a whole horde of vampires?”

Wesley sighed. “Your guess is as good as mine. But he’s not thinking anything right now.”

Gunn moved carefully a few steps to the side, saw that Angel was sitting back on his heels with his head hanging forward, one hand palm-up in his lap, the other on the floor. Gunn crouched down but couldn’t see if Angel’s eyes were open or closed, so he shrugged, stood up, and walked slowly over to stop at the same distance as Wesley.

“Who’s this ‘Buffy’?” They were both watching Angel, alert for any change. Wesley was right: Angel wasn’t thinking anything. Not hearing anything.

“His girlfriend in Sunnydale. She was in school with Cordelia.”

“Oh! The blonde. Is that - Was that how she died, or something? They were attacked by vampires? God, she couldn’t’ve known he was a vampire.”

“She’s not dead. I don’t know what fight he was remembering. It could have been one of hundreds. She was someone with a mission, too.”

“She still in Sunnydale?”

“As far as I know.”

“She know about him bein’ a vampire?”

“Yes, she did.”

“Damn! Now you’re gonna tell me that Cordy knew, too.”

“You know I am.”

“Would it be quicker to ask who up there didn’t know?”

Wesley laughed. “There were about ten, I suppose. Ten who knew. It surprised me too when I got there. How much they all seemed to take for granted.” Wesley’s voice changed, became harder. “Don’t mention Buffy to him. Nothing about Sunnydale. He doesn’t talk about it.”

Jeez, worse than what happened with Doyle? “Bad break-up?”

“Many things went badly wrong.” Gunn looked over at Wesley and saw that his face was even grimmer than his voice.

“OK. So what’s your guess for how long he’ll be like this? Should we try to get him home?”

“I don’t know. I’m reluctant to touch him. Falling on me seemed to be what triggered the memories. The hallucination. I don’t want to trigger another trying to get him home.”

“You OK? Sorry, he fell on you pretty hard.”

“I’ll have some bruises. Nothing’s broken.” Wesley smiled. “It was a good move.”

Gunn smiled back. “Wasn’t bad. Look, let’s wait till the hour’s up. See how we feel then about movin’ him.”

They settled in to wait, sitting against the wall opposite Angel. They were getting good at waiting together, were now comfortable with any length of silence. They started off this wait, though, by talking about tactics and equipment for house-raids, and had been talking quietly for about five minutes when Angel slowly raised his right hand to drag it back through his hair, lifted his head, blinked at them as they were standing up, and then finally got to his feet.

“We’ll do one of the raids - Wesley and me against Charles - then the sword-work and hand-to-hand. And if we have time, I want to get Wes some practice with a moving target.”

“Angel.” Wesley had come to within a few feet of Angel. He sounded curious rather than concerned. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“The last thing I remember? What do you mean? We’re training. We drove over here.”

“So... the last thing you remember is the drive over?”

Angel shrugged. “I think I remember it. Were you talking about that school? But that’s not why you’re asking. What’s happened?”

Wesley explained, not mentioning Buffy or Sunnydale, just saying that Angel seemed to be having a hallucination of a fight he must have had in the past. His way of describing how the hallucination had ended was to say that Angel had “shut down” - not passed out, he’d still been conscious on some level.

“You were like that for about ten minutes and now you’ve just pulled out of it.”

Angel was shaking his head, looking confused and worried. “I haven’t done this before?”

“Not that we’ve seen.”

“It - Couldn’t it have been a vision? I don’t always remember those afterwards. Do I?”

“It wasn’t a vision. Was it?” Wesley had turned to Gunn for confirmation.

“No, man. Nothin’ like a vision.”

Angel swallowed and looked at the ground. “I’m getting worse.”

“It’s too early to say. Maybe it’s a reaction to all the changes in the last month. Getting used to the new types of cases we’re working on. We’ll see what happens when things have settled down.”

Angel looked up at Gunn, giving a lopsided half-smile. “That’s how I know I’m getting worse. When Wes has his list ready of things that are going to ‘settle down’.”

Gunn didn’t know what to say to that. Yeah, it looked to him like Angel had already got used to the new cases. But he wasn’t ready, no more probably than Wesley, to take on the idea of Angel getting worse. Not right now. Not here. Anything he said now was gonna be the wrong thing. He and Wes needed to act the same on this, they needed to be working together – so it’d be best to stall Angel till they’d got home and done some serious talking.

Looking at Angel, you couldn’t guess that his mind was breaking down. Or Gunn couldn’t, he couldn’t begin to imagine what Angel must be going through. How much would you think about it, wonder about the times when you weren’t yourself, you were something that had to be locked away for safety? Wonder how much longer you’d even understand what was happening? Though maybe Angel wouldn’t think anything, wouldn’t wonder anything, not on his

own. If Wesley didn't tell Angel that he'd been lost for a day, or ask him the last thing he remembered, then maybe he wouldn't know. Seeing how he'd come round like that, gone straight in to planning the raid... He'd probably just jump from one clear moment to the next, and he wouldn't know if the moment was an hour long or just five minutes, he wouldn't know if the gap was two hours or two days. Gunn didn't know if he'd want Wesley to tell him. If it was him instead of Angel. He might want Wesley to lie.

"Wes just doesn't like to jump to conclusions. You know how he always starts out with three different translations. Likes to have three different references."

Angel said to Wesley, "What are we waiting for, then? Two more hallucinations? Or one hallucination and another vision I don't pull out of?"

"I don't know. But we are waiting."

Gunn said, "Are we gonna train? It's still early."

Wesley and Angel checked with one another, then Wesley said slowly, "I don't know. I'd rather Angel didn't fight any more tonight. Whatever triggered the hallucination might still be close to the surface. But will you coach Charles and me, if we train?"

They couldn't do the raid properly with just two, so they did twenty minutes of swordplay and ten of hand-to-hand; and after that Angel had reached his limit so they took him home.

In bed that night, Gunn told Wesley what he'd been thinking about Angel. How, left on his own, Angel probably wouldn't understand enough to worry about getting worse.

"I know. I think that every time. But when he first started getting lost. Having gaps between his lucid periods. Well, back then we couldn't avoid talking about it. We had no idea what to expect. And whenever we've talked he's insisted that he wants to know. That he doesn't want to hide from what's happening. And he wants to help us work out what to do."

"If he does that again tomorrow, are we gonna keep on trying to train with him?"

Wesley shrugged. "He can coach us."

"We're gonna need more than half an hour each time. And we're gonna need someone else to fight. More than one, to make as good a fight as Angel."

A sigh. "Let's wait and see."

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Angel didn't have any more hallucinations before the next vision, or even the vision after that, but over that time his lucid periods got steadily shorter. Angel kept asking if he'd had another hallucination, if he'd done anything else, and on the 20th of December they had to tell him that he'd got trapped in a vision for nearly a full day. They also had to tell him that they hadn't been able to make any sense of his drawings or of what he'd said or of the frantic way he kept touching his face, and his arms and legs. The drawings just showed people lying asleep, maybe in hospital, and when Angel saw them he couldn't suggest anything except checking hospitals, which Gunn and Wesley had already done.

The three of them had Christmas dinner together. Or, at least, they had dessert and a drink together when Angel came out of his room late in the afternoon, long after Wesley and Gunn had finished their main meal. Wesley got Angel a sweater and Gunn got him a stack of glossy magazines (as a joke) and a couple of books that Wesley had suggested. As Gunn expected, Angel's first reaction on seeing the gifts wasn't pleasure but guilt that he hadn't bought them anything. Gunn did better than Wesley at shrugging the guilt away. "Nah, you can owe us. You think you'll sneak out and go late-night shopping, or do it all on Amazon?"

Gunn's main gift to Wesley was a couple of bottles of fancy strong wines. Very English, Wes said the wines were, and the only sweet thing he'd ever mentioned getting a craving for, maybe twice a month he'd get it, at about eleven at night, when one small glass seemed to be exactly what the day needed. Gunn had thought about getting Wesley something to wear: more, something that he would always wear, that would be against his skin all day, on his hand, or

against his throat. But he couldn't afford anything that would be good enough, or really imagine how he'd make it seem natural, giving jewellery to Wesley. Maybe next year, when he'd had more chance to find out if Wes would really be glad to get jewellery, not just wear it to be polite.

Wesley got Gunn a joystick and the latest Tomb Raider game, which showed Gunn that Wesley must have been keeping close track of which games sites Gunn was visiting, because Gunn was sure he'd never said a word about the game to Wesley. Gunn played for most of the evening while Wesley read and listened to music, and then they shared a glass of Wesley's Madeira. The wine wasn't really Gunn's idea of sweet, but he loved the taste of it from Wesley's mouth.

Two days after Christmas, Angel had a vision that brought out Angelus. The vision hit near midnight, and Angel was in his room. They hadn't practised with the chains and gag since that first week after the Hollywood-and-Wilcox vision, but Wesley and Gunn knew each other's strengths and signals so much better now; they had Angelus in the chains before his sounds became human enough to be recognisable as words.

Another terrified "she", an address near Caritas. Something was waiting for her, something that could never see her as anything but food. And what food. Such a store of flesh, the sweet, the salt, the bitter. Bones to chew, the meats to swallow, and the hot, rich juices. A feast. A feast to last for hours, satisfy for days.

They had to wait and listen to every word, couldn't tighten the gag until they knew that the vision was over and Angelus wouldn't tell them anything more. Gunn was brutal with the gag, and he knew it and couldn't feel anything like guilt; not just bruising but blood, as Angelus fought and Gunn didn't care that the vampire was inevitably going to lose, didn't care how often or how hard lips or tongue got trapped, got forced against the sharp teeth. He'd had to listen - knowing he couldn't kill - so now he was taking that hungry mouth and he was making it feel.

Once Angelus was gagged they used crosses and holy water to drive him back against the bed, and then they tightened the chain that was fastened to the frame and held Angelus by his neck and wrists and ankles. They left enough slack to give him about six inches of movement as he lay on the floor: enough for comfort, Angel had said, but not nearly enough to give Angelus any options for escape. The gag worked like it was supposed to: they could hear the sounds of rage in the living room, but not in the hallway or out in the street.

The demon had dragged the poor girl up the side of the building. They'd heard the screams - weak, muffled - followed them to the alley, then seen the trail of blood up the wall. Just in time. Just barely in time. Gunn climbed up the wall first, since his two hands meant that he had to be quicker than Wesley. When he got through the window, he saw the girl, and she was lying on her side at the far side of the room. He ran towards her at the same time as he was reaching for the sword strapped to his back, but then the demon jumped him and threw him, and grabbed him and bit him. His arms were held fast and he couldn't get his feet under him, and he was yelling at the girl to run, get out. And then Wesley was there and the demon had a spike through the top of its head. The girl hadn't run, had gone for Gunn's sword instead, though she could barely hold it up with the wound in her side.

They went down the stairs and Wesley broke through the padlocked door then drove them to the hospital. The girl was seen immediately then taken away; sounded like she'd be in for the night, at least. Gunn's bites were going to need stitches but they didn't need them urgently, so Gunn and Wesley settled in for more of their waiting.

When Wesley came back with his second set of magazines, Gunn said, "I wanted to kill him. Angelus. When he was - When he was talking like that. About how good the girl would... taste. I could feel the axe in my hands. Wanted to take his head off." Wesley just nodded, like Gunn was talking about something harmless, about changing the colours on their website; not about wanting to kill their roommate. "So, you ever felt like that?"

Wesley shrugged. "It's just words. Yes, they're terrible words, but they're not the same as actions. I might despise someone because of his words, want to avoid him. But to want to... do something in return. Something that can't be taken back. That has to be about what he's doing. Or about what he's - About his failures."

"So you've never seen him when he's like that and thought, 'He's evil. Solid through. The world shouldn't have any place for him.' It's not natural that - That he's not dead. Wanting to kill him, that feels natural."

"You're not -" A sudden look of concern. "Do you need me to stop you doing it? You have to be kept away from Angelus? From Angel, even?"

"No, I can -" Gunn sighed and shook his head. "I just - How can you not feel anything?"

“You’re assuming...” A long, frowning silence, then: “I can’t get angry with him. I can’t get angry. For hundreds of reasons. So there are some things I don’t feel.”

“You feel sorry for him.” And Gunn couldn’t feel more than mild exasperation.

“That’s - A small part of it. It should get easier for you. I think. You’ll tell me if it doesn’t?”

As they expected, Angel had not turned back by the time they got home. If he’d been quiet they might have opened his door to check, but they were barely inside the apartment when they realised Angelus was still there.

In the morning, however, they did have to check. Gunn stood ready with cross and holy water, and Wesley unlocked the door and pushed it wide open. There was a grinding of chains, a grunt or a gasp; and the sounds were coming from the right place, by the floor on the far side of the bed, so Angelus hadn’t got loose during the night. Wesley took the holy water from Gunn and stepped into the room, and Gunn followed.

Angel was struggling, at the limit of his movement; Gunn could just see his bound feet, trying to gain purchase on the floor. And he was making more of those sharp sounds deep in his throat. Trying to get to his feet, tell Wesley to hurry up? Wesley rounded the foot of the bed, stopped abruptly and then flinched back.

“God, is he still -” Gunn sprang forward, cross held up to control Angelus and protect Wesley - and Angel made a choked sound of pure terror, and struggled against the chains in helpless panic, desperate to get away from Gunn. Gunn quickly moved back to behind Wesley, but Angel’s panic seemed beyond reach. “Oh, God.” A whisper. “He shouldn’t - He should just be...” Angel should just be a bit shaken, kind of guilty and ashamed. Nothing like this.

“I - I - We have to get him out.” Wesley dropped the holy water on the bed and crouched down with his hand held out; he moved slowly forward on his knees, murmuring reassurance, like he was trying to give help to a wounded animal. Angel’s noises did get quieter, but no-one who could see his eyes would think the change meant that Wesley had managed to gain his trust. No, he was quiet because he was frozen in place, bracing himself for something unimaginable. Or could he imagine it all too clearly? Gunn couldn’t tell, not from the expression in Angel’s eyes, but when Wesley reached out for his face, Angel closed his eyes so fast. Turned his head away so hard. Looked to Gunn like he knew, exactly. In Angel’s mind, Wesley was the thing that made him live his nightmares.

Wesley loosened the buckle on the gag, talking all the while in the same gentle tone. There was blood on the leather, and at the corner of Angel’s mouth and on his chin. And bruising, all along the side of his face. Wesley fell silent, leant over to ease his hand under Angel’s head and slide the gag out from under, then sat back on his heels and didn’t move for a long time. Gunn wanted to say he was sorry, for the blood and the bruises, but this wasn’t the right time to say anything.

Angel gradually got calmer, or maybe he was just exhausted. His eyes were still closed, but he had given up on the fight. No longer trying to brace himself, no longer trying to get away.

Wesley reached into his pocket for his set of keys to the padlocks, then leaned over Angel again and opened the lock at Angel’s neck. Angel flinched violently when Wesley first touched him, trembled for several seconds, then slumped again. Gunn knew that Wesley was going to release Angel’s arms next, and he didn’t make any move to stop him, but he got the holy water from the bed and took up position. Not needed: Angel kept his hands behind his back even when they were free, never looked for a second like he was about to spring up and attack Wesley.

When Wesley was finished he got to his feet, took several steps back, and then stood looking down at Angel, frowning hard, rubbing his forehead with the heel of his hand. Gunn could hear him breathing. After about a minute: “Charles? Could you heat up some blood for him?” Wesley hadn’t taken his eyes off Angel.

“OK.” Gunn headed towards the door. “You’d better have this.” He held the holy water up in front of Wesley, and Wesley took it. “You’ll stay there, right? Not get any closer.”

Angel opened his eyes when Gunn put the beaker of blood down on the floor. The blood was only a few feet away, he must be able to smell it, had probably been able to smell it before Gunn had even brought it into the room. Angel looked at the blood, then at Gunn (starting to tremble), then up at Wesley (starting to inch away). What did he think, that the blood was poisoned? Was it even possible to poison a vampire? What the hell could you do with a beaker of blood that could make a brave man so afraid?

Wesley dropped to his knees. Quietly, gently, but still an order: “Angel. Drink it before it gets cold. Drink it. Sit up and drink it.”

Angel stopped moving, stared at Wesley like he was trying to guess what Wesley was planning. Then he slowly sat up and reached for the beaker, still staring at Wesley, and very slowly lifted it and started to drink. After three or four mouthfuls he closed his eyes, not tight-shut, more... resigned. Waiting. Like he'd decided he couldn't guess what Wesley was going to do. He couldn't stop him. Wesley was simply going to happen. He didn't open his eyes again when he emptied the beaker, but bowed his head and turned his face away, like he was trying to curl around himself.

Wesley stretched out to take the beaker from Angel's hand then moved back again, taking himself further away, almost to the foot of the bed. Silence, then a long sigh, then: “Charles. I don't know what to do.”

“Think we have to leave him. Looks like he wants to hide from us. Kindest thing is to let him. But leave the door open. Give him a chance to hear you workin' and...” Gunn shrugged. “You know, being you. Not whatever he... thinks he needs to hide from. And if the door's open we won't need to do the police-search routine whenever we wanna check on him. Can't have helped. Not like he's gonna turn nasty and come stormin' out. Is he?”

Wesley shook his head slowly. “I don't know. I don't know anything about him. Not like this.” Pained, pleading: “Angel. This isn't -” A sigh, then Wesley swallowed. “You're right. We should leave him.”

They went to the kitchen together and Wesley washed the beaker while Gunn started making the coffee. When Wesley had finished Gunn immediately left off and turned to put his hand on Wesley's shoulder.

“Wes. Wes, how you doing? You know none of that was about you.”

Wesley nodded and gave a shaky sigh. “I know. But it's terrible to see him like that. No matter what it's about.”

Gunn put his arms around Wesley and held him close, and felt how much Wesley needed to be held. Like their first evening - three months ago - when Angelus had hit Wesley in the mouth. How much would it have taken out of Wesley to deal with this on his own? “You did everything you could. Everything. You know you always do.” Wesley said nothing; became tense for a few seconds, then slowly relaxed and after that Gunn thought he could feel him recovering more quickly with each breath, and was expecting almost to the second the moment when Wesley raised his head.

“We ought to get down to work.”

Gunn nodded and released his hold. “Yeah, we got deadlines. Think I should cancel my meetings for this afternoon, though. Not right to leave you alone with him.”

Wesley looked thoughtful, then shook his head. “No, don't change anything. I can call you.”

They worked together on research in the morning, and after lunch Gunn left for an afternoon of meetings and legwork. At about four, when he was well clear of the meetings, Wesley called and asked if Gunn would mind staying home from Caritas that evening.

“God, hadn't thought about that. Thursday evening. Sure. He's not gotten any better?”

“I think he's still curled up in the gap by the wardrobe. I haven't looked since you left. He's not... It's more that it's one of those days when I really need to cook a curry. As if it was a Friday night. And it's not the same without you there to help eat it.”

Wesley needed to go to the store and really didn't want to leave Angel alone, so they arranged the time for Gunn to come back and take over. Gunn called Matt, who turned out to be still visiting with family in Palm Springs. Grouw and Piriti would still be at Caritas, though; Matt had talked to Grouw the night before, and they'd been joking about choosing the duet. Grouw turned his phone off while he was at work, so Gunn left a message.

Gunn took a look in Angel's room while Wesley was out, and Angel was still hiding in the corner between the bed and the wardrobe. Maybe he was asleep? No, if he was asleep he would be completely still. The movement of his back had to be a slow trembling, not breathing. Wesley asked, when he got back, if Gunn had checked on Angel, and then they

didn't talk about Angel again until long after they'd eaten, when Gunn had come back to the couch with their third beers.

"I think now that I will not argue with him the next time he suggests that he's getting worse."

Gunn had to laugh; Wes could surprise him every time with the way he put things. "Nah, bet he recovered hours ago. He's just goin' on with this in case we missed his point." That got a smile from Wesley but there wasn't much else to smile about. "We don't have to guess what triggered this one, do we? It was the chains. Did you know he'd been chained up and tortured for real? He has, hasn't he? Must've been why he got trapped in that first vision, too. With the three kids."

Wesley shrugged, then nodded. "Probably. Yes, I knew. That was one of the reasons I was uncomfortable at first about the idea of taking him to the drive-in. But when his main reaction seemed to be to want to use his experience to help us deal with Angelus..." Another shrug. "I didn't think he'd forgotten what it was like. But I thought it must be true what I'd heard, that he'd... recovered quite quickly. I can't imagine now how anyone could recover, if it was like that."

"You want to go back to using the net?"

"Oh! What I want..." Wesley sighed. "You know what he'll say when he's in a state to be asked. That there's nothing more important than keeping Angelus under control. He'll probably say it's even more important now. Now he's getting worse. Because something new might be about to happen with Angelus. So we can't go back to using the net. We'll just have to get used to this. Assuming he's always like this afterwards." Another sigh, then Wesley's voice lightened slightly. "We will get used to it. You'll see. You'll probably be sick to death of curry by then, though."

That night Gunn was dragged out of a deep sleep to find the main light was on, and Angel was standing in the doorway of their bedroom. Wesley was already awake. He must have been lying against Gunn's back, but now he was pushing himself up, talking to Angel in a voice still thick with sleep. Gunn became instantly alert, started to sit up, ask what was wrong.

"There's nothing wrong, Charles. You should go back to sleep. I think Angel just needed to see our room."

"Oh." Angel was looking around like he'd never seen the room before, maybe never seen a bedroom, even. He seemed puzzled by the two of them, as well, and also by the living room. The main light was on in the living room, and he kept turning his head and checking. That it was still there? "Why?"

Mild, and now fully awake: "What are you looking for, Angel?"

"You have someone."

"Yes. His name is Charles. You usually know him."

Angel seemed to believe Wesley, became immediately much less puzzled, or at least less troubled. "Is he the reason we moved? Have we moved... with him?"

"We haven't moved. Not since December when we moved out of the office and moved in here. And that was long before we met Charles. You sound as if you don't recognise this apartment. Is that right?"

Angel sighed, and dragged his hand back over his hair. "I don't know. Have I been here all the time? I thought I... We were somewhere else. Somewhere far. For... for a long time. Much longer than we've been here. I was... I was there. And this seems... I don't know myself here."

"Well, you've been here all the time. Over six months. But you had a very difficult vision yesterday. And then a hallucination. So you could say that you were somewhere else. And I wouldn't be surprised if you felt as if you were there for years."

Angel nodded slowly. "What was the vision? I don't remember."

"Why don't you go back to your room, and I'll come through in a minute and tell you about it. If we talk here we'll stop Charles from getting his sleep, and he already knows about the vision."

Wesley was away for nearly an hour. Gunn dozed, on and off, had many small, strange dreams about Angel being in their room, Wesley and Angel in Angel's room, sitting on the floor in the space between the bed and the wardrobe. Every time he woke, he seemed to go through the exact same process of realising where the dreams had come from. He was awake when Wesley returned, couldn't possibly sleep once Wesley and Angel had started laughing.

"So where was he? Couldn't've been all bad, way you were laughin'."

Wesley sighed. "He was back in hell, which is what I thought. He doesn't remember directly, of course, but when I told him how he'd reacted, he said he must have thought he was back in hell. So he would have thought we were the pair of demons guarding him. They all tortured him sometimes. In different ways."

Gunn stared at Wesley for about five seconds. "You really mean 'hell'? Not just a way of speaking? He was in hell? Actual hell? With pitchforks and..."

"Probably not that that hell. But, yes, I mean it. He was held in one of the demon dimensions. Not quite one of the prison dimensions like the dimension where Grouw's sister works. But close enough. Probably worse."

"What did he - How did he get sent there?"

"He opened a gateway to it. And got sucked in."

"Because of a vision? You got him out?"

"No. This was in Sunnydale. Before the visions. Before I met him. He was... brought back eventually."

"Sunnydale. Oh. How long was he there?" Well, that would be a reason for keeping off the subject of Sunnydale.

"A few months in our time. But time passes differently in most of those dimensions. At least for the prisoners. For him, it was a hundred years or more."

"A hundred years? A hundred years of being chained up like that? Tortured by demons?"

Wesley nodded.

"Fuck! No wonder he was - If he thought he was back there."

"I'm wondering if he thought he'd never left. Even when he's relatively lucid... Talking to him just now it was obvious that his grasp of time is getting worse and worse, his grasp of things happening in a sequence. He kept on talking about the feeling that he'd just come back from a long time somewhere else. I think that was like an aftertaste from a dream. A weight in his mind. Or maybe a shape where the weight used to be. Still pulling at him, even when he's lucid." Wesley was shaking his head. "And the Angel we found in there this morning... I don't think he has any grasp of time. I don't think he understands anything except being afraid. He's walled up in some closed section of our Angel's mind. Completely closed."

"Did you ask him about whether we should use the chains again?"

Wesley nodded. "He said we have to use them. And he said we had done everything we could afterwards. From what I told him. There was nothing his guards could have done to make him trust them. It was kindest to let him hide. Maybe take the chain off the bed before we left him. Clear everything away. He'd be frightened to see us handling the chain, but it would be easier afterwards."

"OK. I'll - I'll find out how to go easier with the gag, too. I made a mess of him."

"He's healed now. He doesn't even know."

"God. Never thought I'd want to have someone hold a grudge against me." Seemed much longer than one day, since he'd been wanting to kill Angelus. "What were you two laughing about?"

"Um... Some things that happened back in the old building. Arguments we had, mostly. And then we were talking about books. He was looking for something to read. We talked about books we were ashamed to admit we liked. Books

we wouldn't read in public. But I throw those away once I've read them, so I gave him 'The Loved One' and a collection of Wodehouse stories about Hollywood. And told him about my ideas for a Literary Tour of L.A. Which currently is too obviously simply an excuse to quote at length from my favourite English humorists."

"Sounds like you got him almost back to normal by the end. Did he say whether we did the right thing leaving his door open? We gonna have to get used to him wandering in here every time? Good thing we were just sleeping."

"I'll ask him. We can always lock our door. But... I don't know what he'd have done tonight if he'd found the door locked."

It was always about Angel. Of course it was. And of course when Wesley did ask, Angel wouldn't even remember that he'd barged in on them. "Guess he'd've knocked. Vampire senses. He'd've known we were in here by hearing us breathing."

* * * * *

When the year 2000 ended and 2001 began, Wesley and Gunn were fully absorbed in giving Gunn a slow, serious, silent fuck. They had decided not to join in any of the looking back or looking forward. 2001 was obviously going to be difficult where Angel was concerned, but then 2000 had been brutal to both of them in different ways. Still, here they'd found each other and they were so good together. Didn't need saying, and they'd agreed to spend the night saying nothing.

In the first week in January, Angel had another hallucination during training, thought he was back in some other fight, and two days later, on the Saturday, Angel went through the entire day without knowing who Gunn was, not even during their training session. He seemed only slightly puzzled by Gunn's presence, paid little attention to Gunn himself, but watched carefully whenever Wesley spoke to Gunn. Three times that day, after about ten minutes of watching, he said to Gunn, "I should know you. Shouldn't I?" and each time Gunn said, "Yeah, we've met before. But there's no real reason you'd remember." At this rate, Angel would be useless for training by the end of the month.

On the Wednesday evening of the following week, Wesley was working late on a translation while Gunn was trying yet another search idea for finding a clue to that "hospital" vision. Gunn was nearly as alert as Wesley now to sudden noises from Angel, so when the agonised cry came from behind the closed door, they were both on their feet in the same instant. Wesley ran straight into Angel's room while Gunn went to get the chains, but called out after a few seconds that Angel hadn't changed, they didn't need the chains. Gunn dumped the chains outside the door and went to stand next to Wesley and see what Angel was drawing.

"Hey, that looks just like - And he's saying Vernon and La Salle. That's where the nest was. Jeez, how many of that nest did we miss? And looks almost like they've snatched the same kids."

Wesley was nodding. "I hope the rest of the nest haven't taught themselves even more from that raid than we have. Taking the same kids... That feels to me like a deliberate rematch. We're going to need a lot more than surprise this time."

"Yeah. Only plus is, now we know the layout. They can't've changed that."

Angel's drawing became slower, then stopped. Gunn leaned forward and took the pad from his hands. "It does look like the same kids. What was the one with the blood all over his eye? Jed?"

"Jed, yes. And that might be more than a rematch, it might be part of the sadism. To take them again. From what we know -" Wesley broke off because Angel had suddenly stood up and started to urge them towards the door.

"Vernon and La Salle. There's a nest of six vampires. They've got three kids chained up in separate rooms. We'll go in with the crossbows, clear what we can. Then you two get the kids out while I deal with the rest."

They collected the weapons-chest and were out of the apartment in a minute. They might not have the advantage of surprise but they had Angel, and that made the odds look much better. On the drive over, Wesley told Angel that this looked like the remains of the nest from their mission at the beginning of December, and Gunn described the layout of the house.

The house was empty, the door still broken and open from their first raid. From the look and smell, it hadn't been empty for all of those weeks, but it was empty tonight. Angel insisted it was the right house, went to each of the rooms where they'd found the kids, reacting to each room with horror and recognition.

"Angel..." Wesley's voice was uncertain, almost wary. "Is it possible that it wasn't really a vision? Maybe that's why you got stuck in it the first time? Because something went wrong when they were sending it? We know strange things happen sometimes."

Angel shook his head hard. "It was a vision. We must be too early. They haven't come back yet. Or maybe they're out now, taking those kids."

Gunn got his phone. "Then we'll make sure we find 'em first." He called Anne and asked about the three kids. They'd hardly set foot outside the shelter since they were rescued, and they were all there tonight. "Can we come over and see them? Shouldn't need more than a minute. Friend needs to check they're OK. M'friend Angel, y' know?"

Anne was waiting for them. The kids were watching TV, but she'd already spoken to them and on her signal they headed straight up to her office. Gunn didn't know if she'd arranged the privacy for the kids' benefit or because of what she'd heard of Angel, but it was a good call. Angel seemed freaked out by the shelter, the closest Gunn had seen to how he'd been in the thrift shop. Keeping his gaze straight ahead or on Wesley, refusing to look at people he didn't know unless he understood exactly what business he had with them. Gunn bet that everyone in the shelter who saw him was thinking "cop with the worst kind of attitude". Except for Anne and the three kids, who were thinking "brain damage".

Angel recognised the kids immediately, started to lecture them on keeping safe, staying off the streets until... He trailed off quickly, looking so confused that Gunn thought he might be about to shut down like he did after a hallucination, not just do his usual drifting away.

"Angel! I think I know how we can answer this." Wesley had got at least some of Angel's attention back. "If Anne can find some paper and a pencil, can you draw any of the vampires? Did you see enough of them? If we recognise them as the ones we killed in December, then we'll know that there's been a mistake and that the danger is over."

Angel nodded, and Anne showed him to her desk and pointed out the pad and pencils. While he was drawing, the Jed kid came over to Gunn and said, "Heard you used to be with the guys who do the self-defence here." The tone was friendly, maybe even admiring.

"Yeah. Left a few months back." With a lopsided smile, like he was making a simple joke: "Why? Anne have to warn you not to say you'd met me?"

Jed laughed, no edge to the sound at all. "Everyone's heard how we got here. Who we owe. So we were swapping vampire stories at the first class and Rondell..." Another laugh. "He said George had just lost the bet on how quick you'd lose your touch. Big money!"

"Yeah, that's George."

At the sound of tearing paper they both turned to see Angel passing the sheet to Wesley, and Wesley already nodding. "This is the sire." Wesley held the picture up to Gunn and Jed, and then to the other two kids. "Isn't it?" They all agreed that it was, and Wesley, Gunn and Toni told Angel that they'd seen that vampire die. Wesley said there was no revivication that could work with ashes. The vision was a mistake. Or it was supposed to be telling them something else entirely. For tonight, anyway, they could all sleep soundly.

"Apart from a few nightmares about tomorrow's fundraiser. Good thing you did this tonight, eh?"

"That's tomorrow? Hey!" Gunn was excited for Anne and for the shelter, and surprised to realise how long it had been since they'd last really spoken. "Don't need to have nightmares. What could go wrong?"

"Let's see... What about my dress? Or my speech? Or no one showing?"

"Never gonna be a problem. Not with you. And not with your mega-lawyers. Call you at the weekend, OK, and you can tell me how much I was right."

When they got home Angel sat down at Wesley's desk with a drawing pad and wouldn't stop drawing vampires until all six had been accounted for. He had gone from confused to puzzled back at the shelter, and was now mostly angry.

"It was a vision!"

"I know, Angel. We all saw that. We all heard it. I don't want to think it was a mistake, either. But if we're supposed to work out what else it was about..." Wesley shrugged. "I'm not in any state to do it tonight. And I don't think the message is urgent. Not in that way. Why don't you have a hot bath and a large glass of scotch - and sleep on it?"

* * * * *

Gunn had been very right about the fundraiser. Anne said she'd even managed to enjoy it. Wolfram and Hart wouldn't have the real figures for another few weeks, but Lindsey was confident that they'd made her at least two hundred thousand and she was trying very, very hard not to make any plans yet for spending it.

"Were the kids OK after Wednesday night? Sorry we did that to you guys."

"Looked like you had to. You figure out what was going on?"

"Not yet. Angel keeps at us to work out a clue. Two new clues a day, he'd like."

"Is he always like that? Like he was on Wednesday?"

"Um... He's not often that freaked out. But he was freaked out 'cos he knew where he was and what was happening. So you kind of saw him at his best."

"Intense." A pause. "He's amazing to look at. C'n I say that t'you now? Which shouldn't make any difference to how terrible it is, but... Does seem like even more's being lost."

"I guess. Different if you see him every day. Not 'lost' - always know exactly where to find him, drawin' away in his room, same as ever."

Angel had a vision a few hours after Gunn spoke to Anne, and this vision was straightforward in practical matters but raised some awkward questions. The vision was of a pair of twins at 8612 Whitworth Drive, about to sacrifice another pair of twins to the demons Chanlir and Chelva. The vision brought out Angelus, but it also kept Angelus stuck inside it. There was no clear end to the reverberation phase and Angelus didn't turn violent - didn't notice Wesley or Gunn, didn't really notice the chains - so they waited and listened, and decided when he hadn't said the address again for at least a minute that the reverberation phase must be over.

By that stage, Angelus's voice was dropping to a lazy murmur and there wasn't any immediate need to gag him - but anything might happen later, and Gunn found a whole new way of being creeped out when Angelus didn't fight the gag but arched his neck in welcome, and then worked his mouth on the leather with a pleasure that showed itself along the full length of his body. Was this because there was a gag in the vision? Or just the mood the vision had put him in, got his body needing to bite?

They were guessing that the demon-worshipping twins were human, which meant they should be subdued with the net, left with nothing worse than, say, a couple of broken ribs. They guessed right, and they were good enough with the net that the fight was over in seconds - nothing broken, hardly even a bruise. The other twins were shaken but not physically harmed and they just couldn't decide what they wanted to do about pressing kidnapping charges, so Wesley collected every demon-related artefact in the house and was very convincing as the person who would hear within minutes of the purchase or theft of any item connected with any demon that invited sacrifices. What else could they do? Except trust the Powers to intervene if there was ever a next time.

Angelus was still there when they got home, but they could see at one glance that he'd come out of the vision, he was aware of them. Gunn was surprised that Angelus hadn't been snarling from the moment they entered the apartment, and then even more surprised when Angelus, seeing them standing at the foot of the bed, didn't act like he wanted to kill them but like they were all friends. Friends who'd been playing a game, and now he was giving hints that it was time to set him loose: small jerks of his head, shifting his hands, just to remind them where to find the padlocks. And he didn't doubt for a second that they would set him free; the noises from its throat were: "C'mon, guys. When you're ready." Wesley and Gunn looked at one another, speechless, then turned in step and left the room. The noises stayed friendly

for two or three minutes (“Nice try, but you know I’m not falling for it.”), and then they suddenly changed to the snarling.

In bed, Gunn said, “So what do we think? Does it mean anything, that he got stuck in the vision? And what kind of game was he playing there?”

“I think... We’ll have to ask Angel when he gets back. About the game, that is. Reading between the lines with the visions... I don’t think we’ve got enough there yet to even make it worth asking. I’ve just realised, though, that I’ve never actually seen him change. He goes into his room in one state. Or we lock him in his room. And by the time the door opens again, he’s changed. But I’ve never been there when it happens.”

“Except the two times he’s shut down. When we were out training. That stopped the hallucinations, got him back to normal. Maybe that’s always how it happens.”

“That would make sense. I don’t think I’ll be checking on Angelus every five minutes, though, just to find out.”

When they opened the door in the morning, they heard sounds that they knew instantly as terror. Angelus was gone, and Angel was in hell.

“Could you heat the blood again?”

Gunn hesitated. “Wes. Sure, I’ll do it but I’m not leavin’ you alone while you take the chains off. I’m gonna watch your back like last time. We don’t know him.”

“No. Of course.”

Angel had said that there was nothing his guards in that hell could have done to make him trust them, and with that, Gunn would just have gone for speed, to get out quickly and leave him alone. He wouldn’t have wasted any effort on trying to reassure Angel, because Angel was going to think the worst of anything they did. But Angel had also said that Gunn and Wesley had done everything they could, and maybe that was what Wesley had heard most clearly: that nothing they’d done was wrong. Wesley knelt down to approach Angel like he had before, talked to him the same as before, made every move so careful, so gentle; and Angel trembled and turned his face away, like he had before.

“Let’s take the chain off the bed now. I’ll take it out of the room when I go to get the blood. Then we can leave him straight after we’ve fed him. Less like jerking him around.”

Wesley agreed, Gunn unlocked the chain, and then they unwound it from the frame. Angel made choked sounds, and each time Gunn looked down at him on the floor, he’d moved another stage towards drawing himself into a protective ball. Again, Wesley had to order him to drink. They decided to leave the door closed but unlocked.

“You OK?” This time Gunn didn’t bother with the coffee but went to stand next to Wesley while he was rinsing the beaker.

Wesley turned to look at him and nodded, serious, but not shaken – not nearly as bad as the first time. “It’s easier when you know what to expect. When you know that all you can do is what you think is right.”

Gunn nodded in return. “And you’ve got that down. I mean, being fair to him. When he couldn’t ever notice. Been watching you do that for months.”

Wesley shrugged. “I notice. Have to live with myself as much as him.”

“I know. Loved you for that before I even knew what I was really seeing.”

* * * * *

Gunn got back from a long Monday afternoon of legwork to learn that they were being evicted. The neighbours downstairs and in the apartment next to Angel’s room had complained to the apartment manager about the noise, gone as far as threatening to move out, and the apartment manager had paid Wesley a visit. Gunn didn’t think he would have done any better with the guy than Wesley. Kind of awkward that Wesley had told the neighbours the story about

looking after a friend's dog, since he'd had to start off by admitting that he'd lied - even if the new story meant that he hadn't broken the no-pets clause after all.

In the new story, Angel had epilepsy because of a head injury, and he wasn't responding well to medication and he also had bad mood-swings, with surges of rage. The apartment manager was sympathetic, in his way; people did get sick, and sick people had to live somewhere. But Wesley admitted that the noise was sometimes bad, that it was getting worse (more frequent, definitely), that there was nothing he could do to control it; and that, if he'd known it was going to get this bad, he'd have thought properly about neighbours and noise when he'd been choosing an apartment. They were going to get a 30-day notice before the end of the week.

"Oh, shit. What he say about a reference?"

"He'd recommend us, apart from the noise. He'd have to tell the truth about the complaints, but he'd do his best for us."

"Like they'll hear anything after 'eviction'. Damn. Would have been worse, though, before Wyndham Gunn."

"That helps the bank reference. But we're going to need a lot more than that to look respectable. And I don't think our card and website are fit reading for humans."

"Who says we have to rent the apartment from a human?"

Gunn had only been half joking but he wasn't going to say anything when he could enjoy watching Wesley laughing, and then take credit for Wesley's new optimistic mood. "I think Lilah Morgan would give me an employment reference. That should be respectable enough for anyone. I'll ask her when we have our meeting on Wednesday."

Angel already knew about the eviction, and he was guilty and withdrawn and difficult. He refused to go training on Monday night, saying he thought he was close to having a hallucination - thought he might be having them more often than Wesley realised, maybe every day, while he was in his room. Wesley and Gunn went training on their own, and when they got back they found the gag and some of the chains lying on the floor in the living room. Their bedroom door was wide open and Angel was asleep on top of their bed, fully dressed, sprawled face-down. He'd been going through their clothes: drawers and doors were hanging open, Wesley's robe was draped over the foot of the bed, and some of his shirts and jackets were on the floor by the window, looking like they'd been thrown there.

"Oh, boy. It's gonna be a great month. Every day, he's got a new trick."

Wesley was slowly hanging his clothes up. "Do you want to start locking our door?"

Gunn picked up a shirt: the white shirt Wesley had been wearing the first time they'd met. "Give him a second chance. Not like it's deliberate. Even if it was, I guess he's entitled."

Wesley nodded. "In his situation - even a fraction of his situation - I'd probably be very drunk right now."

"Yeah? I'd be out with my friends - I could find any - lookin' for trouble. Any shape."

Wesley placed his hand on Gunn's chest, then slowly slid his hand around Gunn's back, under his jacket. Almost a whisper: "I would consider it an honour to come and post bail for you. And for up to..." A pause for calculations. "Four of your friends."

Gunn laughed, rested his hands lightly at Wesley's waist, and said in Wesley's ear, "You're actin' like you're certain he's not gonna wake up. Be a first if we were that quiet."

A long sigh. "You made me forget him." Wesley tightened his hold, then let go and stepped back. "I'll wake him up."

Angel woke quickly, was aggressive for the first few seconds, then simply grouchy and defensive; he stalked back to his room like he'd just discovered they'd lured him out under false pretences. He was nearly as unpleasant in the few minutes they saw of him the next day, but at least he kept out of their bedroom.

The eviction notice arrived on Wednesday, but by the time it arrived Wesley had already had his meeting with Lilah Morgan, and she'd been so helpful and positive that he came back all fired up with the idea of the move as a chance to choose somewhere properly. Gunn didn't want to burst Wesley's bubble - looking through the apartment listings would

do that soon enough - so he treated the notice like it was good news, and suggested they give it the place of honour on the refrigerator door.

Angel's mood improved at some point after Wesley got back from the meeting and he was able to join them for training. During the drive over he asked their opinion - quite calmly - about the ways in which he was getting worse, and how the changes were likely to affect them all. He wanted to know how many hours of training he'd been able to give them so far that year, and when they worked it out he insisted they had to find new training partners, should search at the same times as they looked for a new apartment.

Gunn mentioned the eviction to the boys at Caritas the next night, and how Wesley's sick friend was getting worse, and that he and Wesley were looking for the makings of a good fight - not treating any of it as a big deal. A fact of life that might make it more difficult for him to join them at the club or for the weekend nest-building, but not like some soap-opera crisis or anything, and he could see the lighter side quick as anyone.

They spent most of the weekend (or so it felt) looking for apartments and discussing what they were going to tell potential sparring partners about what they needed out of a training session and why. Did they have to make it clear immediately that the training was not sport for them, that they expected to use it in earnest at least every week? Probably better to say nothing until they'd had at least one session together and discovered if they really had anything to offer one another. Going to be difficult, finding sane people who would take them seriously, and keeping clear of survivalists or vigilantes or whatever else L.A. had to offer in the way of testosterone and paranoia.

Late on Sunday afternoon Angel got a vision while he was in his room. The chains weren't needed but he got stuck in the vision, and Wesley and Gunn couldn't make sense of it on their own. The drawings had to be of a movie set: the narrow, cobbled streets, the branched gas-lamps, the terrified woman's long, full dress, her hat with the bird's wing. One drawing was just of her face, close up as she screamed with shock, and in the others she was running down the dark, empty street, clearly hampered by her skirts, and unable to stop herself looking back. She fell at least twice, she lost her hat after one of the falls, but she seemed to be widening the distance. In the last drawing she was nearly at the end of the street and you could see that there were people in the next street, a man and two women walking past, just silhouettes with hats, and she had seen them too and was reaching out and calling for help.

Not just a movie set - more like a scene from a movie, since everyone in the drawings was in costume. Was the vision about the whole production, not just about that particular scene? Maybe playing that scene was reviving unquiet spirits. Or something. Angel's words were all about that scene, about her terror, how the thing she was running from was enjoying her terror, seemed to think she would never get away. So it probably was about the scene. Angel didn't give any name for the production or the studio or the actors (and neither Gunn nor Wesley recognised the actress in the drawings), but there couldn't be that many costume dramas filming at that moment - never were many, not in L.A. Finding it should be easy; getting on the set would be another matter.

They could not find the movie. They went out and bought all the trade papers and a stack of gossip magazines, and Wesley read into the night while Gunn did every search he could think of online, took out trial registrations for every "insiders' database" he could find; and there simply wasn't any costume drama of the right era filming in L.A. that week. Wesley thought there might be one in Prague - but that was just a comment, not a suggestion about booking a flight.

Could it be a scene from a movie that had already been made? A movie playing at the moment and something was going to happen in the theatre during that scene? Or it was about the actress, so they really had to figure out who she was? They went through the full movie listings and there was nothing, and they went through the papers and magazines again and didn't see that face or get a reminder of any name. They went to bed and tried to sleep, and then Wesley thought the vision might be about a movie showing on TV that week so they got up and did another hour. They only stopped when they realised that Angel had fallen silent: if he'd recovered then he might be able to give them the answer immediately. He was asleep - stretched out on the floor underneath the window - and they couldn't wake him up, but they were ready to admit now that they had no idea what they'd do with this TV movie if they found it, and that sleeping was the best thing they could do with the hours before Angel was fully recovered.

They got up at their usual time on Monday morning and Angel came out just as they were about to start work.

"Did I have a vision? I woke up on the floor."

"Yes, you had a vision. It's something to do with a film, but we couldn't work out what film. Or where we're supposed to be." Wesley passed the drawings over to Angel.

Angel stared at the first drawing, the close-up, then flicked it aside, letting it fall to the floor, and quickly went through the other drawings in the same way until he was left holding the last sheet. "This was a vision? Last night?" He seemed held still with some kind of shock, no trace of the urgency that Gunn would expect about an unsolved vision.

"At about five o'clock yesterday afternoon. Do you know the film? Are we too late?"

Angel was shaking his head. "It's not a film. This was Prague. I think it was 1860. I chose her. Druscilla chose the street." He looked down at the drawing, tore it in two, then watched the pieces fall to the floor. "When... she got close enough to see their faces, she screamed so hard half the lacing was ripped out of her corset."

"Angelus." Wesley swallowed hard. "You had a vision about Angelus. Do you - Do you think they're warning us that he might get loose?"

Gunn said, "Could be there's something wrong with how we're chaining him. We need to get quicker? Not even give him those six inches?"

"Do you think it's as simple as that? Angel?" Wesley wasn't disagreeing with Gunn, just asking Angel's opinion, but Angel was staring so hard at the floor that he might not have heard either of them. Gunn and Wesley stood nearly as still as Angel, waiting.

When Angel finally raised his head, he looked straight into Wesley's eyes. "You'll kill me." Wesley nodded. Angel turned his head abruptly in the direction of the kitchen, took a step and nearly slid on one of the drawings, then knelt and quickly gathered them up. Wesley held his hand out for the drawings, but Angel took them into the kitchen, dropped them in the trash, then set about heating some blood. Gunn heard Wesley give a long, quiet sigh, then Wesley sat down at his desk and picked up his pen.

Gunn remained standing and folded his arms. "So what is wrong with how we're chaining him? What we gotta change?"

Angel shrugged. "Get quicker. Put the chain on the bed and leave it there. Put more locks on the door. Make sure he can't get out the front door or the windows. Never put your weapons down while he's in the apartment."

"The windows? Like putting bars up? Gonna need some story to square that with the apartment manager." Gunn wasn't arguing, just trying to plan.

"Or we could use magic." Wesley was reaching for a book from the shelf next to his desk. "Sigils embedded in the window-frame. A barrier spell. That would stop anyone getting closer than about a foot."

"You can do that?" Wesley had mentioned magic to Gunn a few times, but always as something that other people did.

"If I can't, someone can."

"That take care of the doors, too?"

Wesley shook his head. "It's a complete barrier, so it would stop any of us going through the doors. We'll make the locks a priority with the new apartment."

"Sound OK, Angel?" Angel shrugged and said nothing, which Gunn took as a yes. "I'll get the chain. Put it on the bed right now."

Angel came into the bedroom before Gunn was halfway done, and the two of them finished the work with Angel still saying nothing. As they were pushing the bed back against the wall, the phone rang on Wesley's desk. Had to be one of Wesley's translation clients, so Wesley would probably be busy for the next half hour discussing ten different ways of looking at a single sentence.

Quickly, while they still both had their hands on the bed-frame, Gunn said, "How will we know? When it's time to kill him. How much further does he have to get?"

Angel frowned at Gunn. "Further than what? You do it before he kills."

"I'm thinkin' that Wes' got used to..." Gunn shrugged. "Livin' with some risks. 'cos he had to, when it was just him. But whatever the two of you agreed on back then, I bet it doesn't look the same now. With me here and you gettin' worse."

"Wesley knows what he's doing. You think he'd hesitate?" A challenge.

"Not for a second, once his alarm'd been triggered. It's where his alarm's set that I'm talkin' about."

A long pause, then Angel said slowly, "I don't know where it's set. If he took risks, I wasn't there when it happened. You'll have to ask him."

Gunn nodded briefly. "Yeah. I'm gonna argue this with him till we've both got set to the same point. You want us to tell you afterwards what point we decided?"

"No. It's best if I don't know. So Angelus can't know either. Argue it soon."

Gunn let go of the bed and stepped back. "Yeah. The vision. We'll be done by tomorrow."

Wesley was still on the phone but he wasn't talking translation - unless he'd just been given a lead for a client in a whole new league. "Thank you. Yes. I'll call him right away. That would make so much difference. Thank you." After he'd put the phone down Wesley turned to Gunn, looking almost dazed with surprise and relief. "Isn't that incredible? I wouldn't have guessed she'd give us a second thought."

"I just came in at the end. Who was it?"

"Lilah Morgan. She's heard of an apartment in Lawndale that sounds very promising. It's on the second floor, and one bedroom is on the corner of the building, doesn't share any walls with rooms from other apartments. The room underneath it's a storeroom, and the couple in the apartment above are practically deaf. She's told the property manager about Angel and the noise, and he said there had never been any complaint about noise from that room, not even when his sister's three boys were sleeping in it."

"Lawndale? What's the rent?"

"The same as we're paying here. And it's available from the beginning of February."

"Call him now!" Gunn shook his head slowly. "Lilah Morgan. Wonder which one of us she's sweet on."

Wesley almost giggled and definitely blushed. "It's not me, so it's either you or Angel."

"She's met Angel?"

"She's seen a photograph. Of the two of us coming out of the old building, apparently."

"Well, I don't think it's me, either. She didn't tell the property manager about the vampire seer thing, did she?"

"No. She said we used to work together until he got the head injury. And I had another partner now, working on our investigations side."

"Just 'business' partner?"

Wesley shrugged. "She said the bedrooms were both large double rooms. But I can't see that as a real hint about us."

"Wha'd' you wanna tell the property manager about us?"

Wesley looked hard at Gunn, not uncomfortable, just assessing. Finally, with a quick lift of the eyebrows: "Nothing. What about you?"

Gunn nodded. "I'm good with nothing. Maybe if it was completely separate from our work, but... I spend about half of each day tellin' people how smart you are, how you can find out anything. You're exactly the expert they need. And

you are, and I love sayin' it. But I'm not ready to find out how much business we'd get if I knew all the time I was sayin' it they were thinkin', 'Yeah, yeah, course you'd say that. He's your boyfriend!' Not ready. I'll tell the truth if they ask outright. But they don't ask."

Wesley nodded. "It'll be my name on the lease. My references. I'll introduce you as my partner when we go to see the apartment. If he asks, he asks."

They saw the apartment that evening, and the property manager - a young Korean guy called Gavin Parks - didn't ask them anything except whether it was the type of apartment they were looking for. He wasn't rude, exactly, but very brisk and detached, like they should all know they didn't have to convince each other, because Lilah Morgan had made it a done deal.

Back home, while Wesley was filling in the application for the new apartment, Gunn received his own call with good news. Grouw had mentioned their training problems to his sister Yan, and she'd asked if they'd be interested in sessions with some of the other guards from her work. She thought she'd be able to find them enough partners to keep up a couple of sessions a week. The demons would come to L.A. - making use of the generous travel allowance in their contracts - and wouldn't expect anything more for their time than maybe a bowl of noodles or a beer at Caritas. They'd do it for the exercise, the change of scenery, and because they'd be plain curious about Wyndham Gunn.

Could be perfect. Endless supply of tough demons, all with years of their own training in fighting and controlling other demons. Wow, think that they could learn with two sessions every week. Use the rest of the week to keep in shape. Perfect, except...

"Grouw, you're a star. And Yan. C'n I wait till Wes gets home and then get back to you? Oh, hey, where is it Yan works, again?" Wesley had been listening to the conversation anyway, and was now looking at Gunn questioningly. Gunn raised his hand, meant as a signal that Wesley should wait for something.

"It's Ussur."

"Ussur, yeah." Gunn pointed at Wesley, wanting him to memorise the name and then get into research mode; and Wesley nodded, and started by writing the name down. "Wes shouldn't be too late. Hell of an idea, Grouw. Thank you."

"So what do you want to know about Ussur?" Wesley was opening a battered old book about three inches thick.

Gunn glanced towards the closed door of Angel's room then said quietly, "How they treat their prisoners. I don't want to think that Yan and her boyfriend would... do whatever was done to Angel. But if the prison where they work is even a tenth of that, then we can't have anything to do with them. Can we?"

Wesley looked shocked. "No. No. Of course not. I hadn't thought of that. You liked them. And she's doing this because you're Grouw's friend. It's a real favour, from all of them."

"Yeah. Hope I can still be his friend if we have to say no. God, couldn't tell him the real reason." Or what if Grouw knew about his sister, the things she did, and thought it wasn't a big deal? That's be even worse. No, leave all that till Wesley had their answer. And don't even think about the effect it might have on their business. "Anything I can do?"

An hour later they had found references to Ussur in three books. The books described it as a terrible place, but largely because of the nature of its inmates: all so dangerous they had to be kept in permanent solitary confinement, no contact through the centuries of their sentence with anyone except their guards. And it was part of the sentence that the guards would only ever treat them as objects to be contained, not acknowledging any aspect any prisoner's identity - not talking, not listening, not showing any awareness that the prisoner had a history, or that one prisoner could be distinguished in any way from another. Gunn and Wesley agreed that this treatment could be considered a form of mental torture - punishment, definitely - but when Angel thought they were his guards and shrank from Wesley in terror, it wasn't any kind of silent treatment that he was remembering.

Refusing to be provoked, refusing to have any emotional reaction to a prisoner you knew was a monster, day after working day... The guards of Ussur must have some serious self-control, and Wesley and Gunn couldn't see any reason, from any of the books, to have reservations about training with them.

"We should tell Angel, though, before we get back to Grouw. He doesn't know yet, does he, that we've met those guards?"

Gunn shook his head. “Just knows Grouw has a sister from out of town. If he even remembers who Grouw is these days.”

“I’ll see if he’s lucid. Could you bring the Radnor over and keep it open to that page?” Wesley knocked on Angel’s door. “Angel? Can I come in?”

A pause, then footsteps, and Angel opened the door. “What is it, Wesley?” Impatient.

“Charles and I may have found some people to train with. For the times when you’re not able to train.”

“Wasn’t it just -” Angel frowned, seeming puzzled. “How long have you been looking?”

“A few days, that’s all. Charles’s friend Grouw has just called with an interesting idea, but we want to discuss it with you before we take it any further.”

“Why?”

Wesley took a deep breath, then released it. “Have you ever heard of a prison dimension called Ussur?” Another frown, then Angel grunted a no. Wesley gestured to Gunn to pass the book to Angel. “Could you read that page? It’s the fullest description of Ussur that we could find.”

Angel read, expressionless, then gave the book back to Gunn. “So?”

“Grouw has a sister who works as a guard in Ussur. Charles has met her. She may be able to arrange for us to train regularly with some of her colleagues. We think it would be very valuable training.”

Angel stared at Wesley, then at Gunn, then back at Wesley. “Are they duals?”

“Yes. All the colleagues we’ve heard of, anyway.”

A long silence, then: “I don’t want to meet them.”

“You won’t. They won’t come here. You won’t train with them. But you don’t think... it’s wrong?”

A fractional shrug. “They could be different.” To Gunn, sharply: “Did she frighten you?”

“She would in a fight. Talking with her over a meal, she made me laugh.”

“Do it, then. Nothing to do with me.” Angel turned away and shut the door.

Their night of looking for a non-existent costume-drama movie suddenly caught up with Wesley, and he went to bed as soon as he’d finished the application for the new apartment. Gunn stayed up playing at the computer for another couple of hours, but that evening the game seemed tame compared with what he was imagining about the fights he and Wesley would have with the duals, and he did his worst yet in the game. He also had the excuse of being distracted by good thoughts about the new apartment and by bad thoughts about coming to that agreement with Wesley over when they would kill Angel. They should talk in the morning, first thing, while they were still in the bedroom with that extra door between them and Angel.

In the morning, as soon as he was sure Wesley was fully awake, Gunn sat up in bed and said, “There’s something we need to work out.”

Wesley looked alarmed, and quickly levered himself up. “What am I doing wrong?”

“God! No!” Gunn reached out and put his hand over Wesley’s, and kept it there while he told Wesley what he’d been thinking, in much the same way as he’d told Angel.

Wesley started nodding immediately. “Yes, of course. On the day he gets loose, we can’t afford to find ourselves arguing about whether this is the time.”

“So where has your alarm been set up to now? What did you two agree?”

“Oh.” A sigh. “That at the first warning that he was breaking free, I should run. Grab a crossbow and run. Wait somewhere safe with a view of the door - like the end of the hallway - and kill him if he came out. He refused to let me plan for... what would happen if he killed me while we were inside the apartment.”

“What? How could you plan for that?”

“If we were always locked in whenever we were in the apartment. And I used holy water or crosses to make sure he couldn’t handle the keys. But he said I had to be able to run. And that none of my ideas for the holy water and the crosses would slow him down by even ten minutes. If I wanted to protect people from him, my best chance was to run.”

“Damn straight.”

“Otherwise we talked as if... he’d get to the point where he knew it was time. He’d tell me to do it. Or a vision would tell us both.”

“A vision?” They had to be thinking the same thing now, about the last vision. “No, they’d make it clearer than that, wouldn’t they? They’d show what would happen now. What he’d done in Prague... That was just a warning.”

Wesley nodded. “I’m happy for us to treat it as just a warning. But we should start carrying stakes all of the time in case he breaks free while we’re still chaining him. And we should keep at least two crossbows right by the door and be ready to run.”

“Yeah. Starting this morning. What if he doesn’t come after us, and he changes back in a few hours? How can we know that it’s safe to go back? Or did you have a signal worked out?”

“I’d decided I’d wait until the next morning and get close enough to the door to be able to talk to him. Angelus is clever in his way and there was a time when he could have pretended to be Angel. But now he’s too fractured, he’s lost his skills for dealing with people, even more than Angel has. When you talk to him it’s always too obvious that he’s enjoying himself. You saw how ashamed Angel was the morning after that time we used the net, how worried he was about what Angelus might have done. That was all he could think about. Angelus couldn’t make a convincing pretence of feeling like that, not even for the chance to kill us both.”

“Hmm. I’d need him to do somethin’ else to prove it, ‘fore I’d get closer’n twenty feet or give up my crossbow. Like... have him chain himself to the bed. Need to find out if he could close those locks himself.”

“We’ll test that this morning. Good.”

“Yeah. Good.” Gunn relaxed and smiled. “Thought that’d be much tougher to sort out.”

“Why? It’s the sensible thing to do.”

“Guess... I was thinkin’ how much you deserve a break from bein’ sensible. Must sound like I’m ripping holes in what you been doin’ so far. You know it’s nothing like that?”

Wesley turned his head and bent to press his lips to Gunn’s shoulder. “You know how many times each day I’m made aware of how lucky I am? I know how much I need you.”

* * * * *

Over the next week Wesley’s application went through as expected, and the lease was settled to start on Monday the 12th of February. Yan asked when they were looking to start training with the guards, and they decided they’d be ready by the week after the move.

They got used very quickly to keeping their stakes at hand whenever they were in the apartment. They didn’t have to chain Angel during that week, but hardly an hour seemed to pass without some reminder of how quickly he could now change. Angel had some form of hallucination every day, and they could be triggered anywhere, at any time. The hallucinations that started when he was in his room were usually very quiet, and sometimes they didn’t realise that he was having one until they knocked on the door and tried to talk to him. Angel seemed less concerned now about how he

was getting worse, was less and less likely to ask them what he'd been doing, how many gaps he was having – even when the gaps must have been obvious, like the times he woke up on the floor.

Gunn was beginning to wonder if they'd already seen the last time when Angel would be lucid after a vision. Seemed so long since he'd been able to tell them what the vision meant and then join them in the mission – join them in a real mission, anyway, with someone really there to be rescued. His last lucid vision had been that strange repeat of the vision of the three kids in the nest at Vernon and La Salle; and maybe that was why the vision had been so strange, because it was trying to tell them something about Angel, not about the mission. Was that the rule, that any vision about something that had already happened was a warning about Angel? Or about Angelus?

On the morning of the last Tuesday of the month, Gunn got a call from Anne. There was something weird happening with some cops in the area, suddenly making life impossible for the kids on the street, and yeah, she'd taken it to the precinct house, and if he and Wesley had time to come by the shelter, that'd be the easiest way for her to explain just where things got weird. Gunn and Wesley did have time, would be over in half an hour. Anne said that Rondell might be at the shelter when they arrived. "George too, maybe. They've been in on this, helping us. I told them I was going to call you and they're... dealing with it. Just so you know."

Gunn was ready to meet Rondell again, he wasn't gonna stress over it, but yeah, he was glad when it turned out that Rondell wasn't at the shelter - for Wesley's sake, mostly. They went up to Anne's office and she told them the trouble had started about two weeks ago and seemed to be getting worse. Kids had been showing up at the shelter desperate to get off the streets, saying they'd been threatened by some scary, scary cop, chased even, or beaten. All the kids swore they'd been doing nothing wrong, except maybe looking like what they were: young and homeless.

Anne had called Rondell, asked if they'd been getting the same trouble. They hadn't, but they came to talk to the kids, asked around on the streets, and found that these scary cops were just in Precinct 89, nowhere else, and that no one could remember seeing any one of them before two weeks ago. The precinct still had its regular cops, that most of the kids got to know by sight after a month or so on the street, and the regular cops were treating the kids the same as ever. Though maybe some of those regulars had got kind of smug, and when was the last time anyone had seen one of the regulars out working at night?

Rondell and his crew figured out which streets the scary cops had been seen in most often, found safe places where they could take up watch, and after four nights they'd collected badge numbers for seven of the scary cops, and could describe each of those cops well enough for the kids to be able to recognise the ones that had threatened them. Anne went to the precinct house to make complaints against the seven officers, giving the details of all the threats to the kids. The cop on the desk took down the names, times and places, but by the third he was laughing and shaking his head, telling her the kids must be playing a joke on her - because there weren't any officers with those numbers assigned to the precinct. Anne had asked Lindsey the lawyer for help and he'd got back to her just the day before saying exactly the same as the cops: that the kids must be playing her for some reason, because those badge numbers all belonged to officers who were dead. He'd given her the list of the names and when they'd died, and she didn't try to argue with him but went straight to the library and looked for newspaper reports on the dead officers. She found reports of five of them, all with photographs, made copies to show to the kids and to Rondell's crew - and of course they'd recognised all five cops. So what the hell were they dealing with here and how could they stop it since obviously they weren't going to get any help from the law?

Wesley said, "I think we can take it that they're not vampires. Which essentially leaves us with zombies, and then the questions are: who is controlling them, and with what, and from where? If we can break the control, the zombies will... return to their natural state."

"They've gotta know about this at the precinct house. Way the regulars're leavin' the streets at night. Bet it comes from there."

"I agree. But the material for the spell that's controlling them, that could be located anywhere. And we have to find that material in order to destroy it and break the spell."

"Could be anywhere, huh?"

Wesley pulled a face. "Within the area of the precinct, probably. The range is usually limited to a few miles. There are spells that can reveal how another spell is being cast. That would be the most direct way of answering our questions, though it may take a few days to find a suitable spell. And a suitable person to cast it. We'll almost certainly need to get

close enough to one of the zombies to cast our spell around it. And then once we've found the source, we'll need a strategy for the raid."

"Sounds like Rondell and the crew are the best bet for getting us close. They know where to wait. Sure they'd be up for the raid, too."

Anne said, "Can I tell Rondell what you're planning? I know he'll call today to see what you said."

"Go ahead. Uh... he and the crew aren't likely to try anything in the meantime, are they? Go out 'n' try to bag a zombie? That'd be a bad idea, right, Wes?"

"A very bad idea, especially if you consider that they're experienced and fully-equipped police officers as well as zombies."

Anne smiled. "I'll put it to them like that. Should make them think. When will you know how long you'll need?"

"By this evening, I think. I'll call you by ten, at the latest."

Wesley had sounded confident with Anne, but as soon as they got in the truck he sank deep into troubled thought, frowning hard at the dashboard and sighing frequently.

"We got that much of a problem?"

"No, no, not really." Wesley's tone was distracted but lighter than Gunn had expected. "Just wondering if I should forget about looking for something myself and call in a full magic-user straight away. Since I'll probably have to do that anyway. How selfish - and irresponsible - is it for me to want to find out for myself what our options might have been? When a full magic-user could do it all for us in a fraction of the time."

Gunn laughed. "Man, you should've told me how much you loved researchin' spells. I'd've been lookin' for work for you right from the start."

Wesley closed his eyes briefly and gave a tired-sounding sigh. "It's not like that, Charles. This would be such a good opportunity for me to take a measure of my..." Another sigh. "My current limitations. I wouldn't trust any test I set myself."

"Oh. Why'd you need a test? You workin' towards a diploma or somethin'?"

"I have a diploma, but I might not be entitled to it since I lost my arm. I want a test to see how much useful magic I can still do. If the answer is 'almost none', then I'll know for the future that we'll always have to bring in a full magic-user. And my instincts tell me that this would be a good test. But it's definitely not the most efficient approach to dealing with the zombies."

"You can't just work around things? See you do that all the time. I'd've thought it was like cooking."

Wesley shook his head. "When a spell says to do something with your left hand, that's rarely an optional detail. As I've discovered. Some types of magic involve creating a... projection of yourself in a realm of ideas, so you can manipulate other ideas in that realm. Or that's what it feels like, anyway. But it seems I can't get there anymore. I don't fit."

Gunn felt his guts twist at the thought of how he'd laughed, teasing Wesley about loving to research spells. He didn't know what to say, didn't trust himself to say anything right now; he'd trust himself to hold Wesley, needed to hold him, but he knew the moment would be gone by the time they got home. "But there's other spells? Where it doesn't matter?"

"There are, and ideally I'd like to give myself four hours, say, to look for as many suitable spells as I can find. Spells that would do what we need, that is. And then I'd like a few more hours to see if any of them are within my capabilities. Bearing in mind that I was far from being an expert even when I was whole. I enjoy the theory but I'm uncomfortable with much of the practice."

Gunn shrugged. "Don't think we're in a big hurry, are we? You should do it. Zombies haven't come close to really hurting anyone. Aren't likely to, either, now everyone knows to stay off the streets. Extra day won't make any difference."

“You think so?”

“Yeah.”

Wesley nodded and relaxed, and Gunn decided that he hadn't been totally wrong before: Wesley was looking forward to this piece of research, even though the result might be bad news for himself.

Wesley also had Wyndham Gunn work to do that day, and by ten o'clock, when he'd arranged to call Anne, he'd only been able to spend three hours researching the spells. He had found four possible spells, but they either required a left hand or too much expertise or both, and he'd decided that there was hardly any chance of finding a spell he could perform, even if he looked for another three hours. He told Anne that he was going to ask someone else to perform the spell, and they might be able to cast it the next night.

“Who you gonna ask?” Wesley was still just saying “a full magic-user”, hadn't mentioned any names to either Anne or Gunn.

“You haven't met any of them.” Wesley was getting into his jacket. “I'm going out to ask them now. I'll be gone for at least an hour, maybe two or three.”

“Or you could just phone?”

“There's an etiquette. Someone in my position has to make the approach in person. Can I take the phone? In case Angel has a vision.”

Gunn passed Wesley the cellphone. “These people dangerous? If they're that touchy. Maybe you need to call in too.”

Wesley shook his head. “They can be unnerving. Especially if they've got company. But if I'm out of contact for two hours, it's most likely because I've had to join in one of Cameron's endless games of charades.” A sudden smile. “And any attempt to rescue me from that would be taken very badly.”

Gunn never formed any plan of waiting up for Wesley. There wasn't any point, and he wouldn't expect it from Wesley if he was the one out working late, but he did find himself putting off going to bed. He'd never yet got into that bed (their bed) without Wesley, and the idea felt wrong enough for him to keep deciding on one more game. From the rate at which his yawns increased, he would probably have given in around one a.m., but Wesley got back soon after midnight, tasting of marzipan and smelling of wood-smoke, and rather pleased with himself for succeeding with the very first magic-user he'd visited.

Gunn spent at least two hours with this magic-user during the next night, knew he must have heard Wesley call the guy by name ten or twenty times; but somehow Gunn found it impossible to remember anything about him, except that he was an ordinary-looking white guy. If you took your eye off him for more than... maybe five, ten seconds?... then when you looked back you just didn't recognise him, would swear you'd never seen this particular ordinary-looking white guy before. Gunn thought he could see Anne, Rondell and the others having the same problem; and making the same decision to keep it to themselves. Wesley was the only one who used the guy's name.

First, Gunn, Wesley and Rondell drove the guy around and showed him all of the hiding-places that the crew had used when they were collecting badge numbers, so he could choose the best location for casting the spell. He asked a lot of questions about how regular the zombies were at patrolling each street, and at the end he chose 37th Street, between Western and Normandie, where the hiding-place gave good views of the approach and was easy to get into, and where zombies had been seen between two o'clock and three o'clock on at least four nights.

Back at the shelter, Wesley helped with preparations for the spell, which involved about half an hour of intermittent banging, splashing, grinding and chanting from behind the closed door of the kitchen. Everyone waiting outside acted like they couldn't hear anything, and Gunn reckoned they'd all decided the same: that it was obvious right from the start that if you made one joke, you'd have to make hundreds more. Gunn took the chance to make his first real move in the direction of peace with his crew, going over to Rondell and asking him if there were any new cops on their streets, if they were still able to use the same system to keep clear of cops during the patrols.

Rondell didn't seem to need more than a couple of seconds to decide that Gunn wasn't trying any kind of dig, and soon they were able to move on to what had changed with the crew itself: new people who'd joined, what they'd done to

mark the holidays, new ideas they were trying, new problems. George joined them and the talk became more about telling stories: the best moments of the last few months, and then, more and more, good moments from the months and years before that. They didn't ask Gunn anything about the changes in his life, not even to mentioning that they knew he'd saved those three kids from the nest. But he'd known they wouldn't ask, and knowing had made it simpler for him to start with the peace-making; he didn't have to get any story ready about how he was earning a living, how he was fitting in with Wesley's friends.

"You still play pickup on Sundays?"

"Most Sundays yeah."

"Got room for one more?"

Rondell and George looked at one another, then Rondell said, "Sure. So you haven't got onto... what is it? 'Cricket'?" Could almost be taken as a genuine question. A mild dig, by Rondell's standards.

"Pickup's still good for me. Give me a call, yeah, when you're plannin' to go out?"

There was only room for three in the hiding-place: the magic-user, Wesley and Rondell. They drove over to 37th Street for one o'clock, leaving Gunn, George and the rest back at the shelter. Gunn had suggested that he and George could take the other car and wait a couple of blocks over, but Rondell said that if the zombies saw them parked and went to deal with them, that might throw off the plans for the spell. So Gunn was at the shelter waiting again while the action was somewhere else; but at least this time the crowd of them waiting could go into the kitchen and get sodas and snacks.

"Action" probably wasn't the right word, anyway, not from what Wesley had said. Watching an ordinary-looking white guy making a circle on the sidewalk with a potion that just looked like iced tea, then making another circle inside the hiding-place and sitting inside it where he could look out at the sidewalk, and then waiting and waiting for the zombie to walk along the sidewalk and into the circle. Even with the business of the magic-user having to keep on anointing his face and his hands with the potion while he waited, you were still looking at the demon-hunting equivalent of ice-fishing.

All of the action would happen inside the magic-guy's head, nothing to see from the outside. When the zombie stepped into the circle, the guy would get to see the spell (or feel it, maybe - Wesley's description was really confusing), and the guy would know the type of spell, and the spell would guide him towards its source. Rondell would keep a lookout for the cops and then do the driving, and Wesley would act as liaison for the guy, like he'd been doing all night.

At about a quarter after three, Rondell called Gunn to say that he and Wesley had just run the spell guy home - Wesley was walking him up to his apartment right now, and then they'd be coming back to the shelter. They'd tracked the spell to some hidden room on the third floor of the precinct building, and he reckoned they'd need at least a day of hard thinking to figure out how to get in there and break the spell and get out, all without being arrested or maybe shot.

You couldn't say Rondell and Wesley had bonded or anything, but they'd made a start on learning how to work together, and they each took their parts quite naturally in telling the story of tracking the spell. The source or focus for the spell was a small statue of Granath, a god of zombies, and the spellcaster must be keeping this statue in an entirely closed room, because the spell couldn't be cast under any form of natural light, not even moonlight. The spellcaster was driven mainly by feelings of anger (not greed or revenge or power), and there was animal fat and blood on his hands, and a lot of sweat. The statue was definitely on the third floor, about twenty feet off the centre of the building, towards the south-east corner.

So... who was gonna walk up there and wander around knocking on walls until he found the hidden room? For the "walking up" you'd need someone who looked like he belonged in a precinct building (outside of custody), and that ruled out every one of them in the shelter or with the crew back at base. And looking like you belonged would only get you so far once you started knocking on walls, unless you were lucky enough that the third floor was deserted at night. Difficult, and it had been a long, strange night, and they soon stopped trying to think about it properly and were just making joke suggestions about storming the building. They agreed to call it a night, meet again the next evening, and get in touch if any of them had any ideas during the day.

When they got home Wesley went straight to his bookcase, pulled out a book and laid it on his desk, then stood for a few seconds about to open it but with his hand still an inch away - and then he shook his head and put the book back.

“Wrong book?”

“I don’t need to know more about Granath. Not right now.”

“Nah. He’ll still be there in the morning.”

Wesley got the book out again over breakfast and read the main points of the spell out to Gunn. Gunn asked him to stop at the first mention of entrails (“I wanna enjoy my Danish.”), but read the full description himself over his second mug of coffee.

“Y’know, I’ve got an idea. For getting into the building. Kind of had it last night but I didn’t wanna say back there.”

“I would have thought you’d say anything anywhere. What’s the idea?”

“We send Angel in. If we can catch him lucid. ‘cos he c’n look a lot like a cop. And if there’s blood with the entrails - and I’m guessin’ that’s why the spellcaster’s got blood on his hands - then he should be able to smell it, find the room quicker than anyone. And he c’n fight his way out, they won’t be able to hold him, and he wouldn’t even notice if they shot him. Yeah, I know it’s a gamble on him stayin’ lucid. But if he does go off track I suppose you could go in and get him, say he’s your poor, crazy cousin.”

Wesley said nothing for a long time, just frowned hard at a point above Gunn’s left shoulder, and worried at his lower lip with his teeth. Finally: “We’d have to be very careful how we put this to the others. Nothing about Angel being able to smell blood.”

“They know how well he can fight. They’ve seen how much he looks like a cop. Makes sense just with that.”

Wesley said slowly, “I’ll tell him the idea in his first lucid period today. See how much he understands, and then if he remembers it next time. After that, if we assume that he will be lucid at some point during the night, we could drive down to the precinct after midnight, say, and wait for that lucid period to arrive.”

Angel decided not to walk in the main door and try to bluff his way past the front desk, but to find a window to get in at the back of the building. There was a window on the second floor open about six inches, nearest light two windows over to the left. Angel climbed up quicker than most people would have taken the stairs, then ten minutes later Wesley and Gunn heard gunshots inside the building, and three or four very long minutes after that, Angel came crashing out of a window on the fourth floor and put a spectacular dent in the roof of a parked Toyota. Gunn took them straight home, not hurrying; they were sure they hadn’t been seen, but they couldn’t afford to be stopped.

Angel told them what had happened, while he was cuffing himself onto the chain around the back seat. The scent of blood had been easy to track and had taken him straight to the captain’s office on the third floor. The captain had been at his desk, had pulled his gun the moment Angel had mentioned Granath, emptied most of a clip into Angel’s chest, and then he’d pushed aside a filing cabinet and led Angel right to the hidden room. You’d have thought the captain was a zombie too, the way the fight just fell out of him when Angel destroyed the statue. The other cops in the building still kept all their fight though, and Angel had taken another shot on the way out. Wesley called Anne and then Rondell and told them that Angel had destroyed the statue; both asked him if Angel had run into any trouble, and he said no. Rondell was going to spend an hour driving the precinct, looking for any sign that the zombies were still around; he thought they should do another night’s watch from the hiding-places too, before they gave the all-clear.

Angel stayed lucid through most of the drive home, but had to be guided up to the apartment. The hallucination probably began soon after they started patching him up, but they didn’t realise until they finished with his back and got him to turn over, and then they saw he was rigid from fear, not from pain. They agreed afterwards that they shouldn’t have been surprised. OK, so Angel had already had one hallucination that night about being in hell, when he’d woken up in his chains in the back seat of the car; but they shouldn’t’ve assumed he was kept to some kind of ration, or that it could only happen when he was in chains. The hallucination in the car had been short (just over four minutes and then he shut down) but he was still deep in the second one when they left him, after they’d finished undressing him and managed to get him under the covers. They both hoped he’d soon be able to sleep again and that his dreams would be peaceful, give him some escape.

Rondell called Gunn on Saturday to tell him that the zombies seemed to be gone: he’d had the crew watching for them all of the previous night, and the surest sign had to be that some of the regular cops were now back on the streets.

“Good work, man. Bet you’re bustin’ to get back on patrol, though. None of us really made for standin’ watch.”

Rondell laughed. “You too.” Then, curious: “Tip-offs with you, isn’t it? Don’t even have to patrol.”

“Well... last-minute tip-offs. Other extreme.”

“Guess it takes both. Call you tomorrow morning, yeah, if we’re shapin’ up for the game of pickup?”

Gunn told Wesley the good news about the zombies, if he hadn’t already gathered from hearing Gunn’s side of the conversation.

“They’re talking to you again. Your crew.” Wesley sounded even more relieved and pleased than Gunn.

“Starting to. Not ready to say your name to me yet, but starting to.”

Wesley smiled and shook his head. “I don’t blame them. I’m the reason you’re... not there anymore. That’s too much to make up for.”

“Nah. Couple of games of pickup with ‘em - maybe just the one tomorrow - and they’ll remember how much of a pain in the ass I can be, have ‘em lining up to thank you for gettin’ me off their backs.”

Wesley started to give the smile that Gunn expected, then something went wrong. “Pickup?”

“Yeah, they still play on Sundays. Seemed the best way of keeping things moving. Can’t leave it all to Anne. Why, we got something planned?” Wesley shook his head, but still looked withdrawn, and kind of puzzled. “You got some beef with pickup?”

Slowly: “No. No. That’s excellent progress, if they’ve invited you to join them. I would never have predicted it a week ago.”

“Me neither. But somethin’s bugging you.”

Wesley looked at him, then sighed. “It’s too stupid to be worth telling you. But I think I’d rather have you knowing that...” Another sigh. “That I’m capable of coming up with such utter nonsense that just has to be ignored. Rather than having you waste a second of your time trying to guess at something that would make sense.”

Gunn couldn’t help grinning, loving how this man could surprise him with the things he thought, with the words he used for the things he thought. “Can’t wait.”

“Well... I really am pleased that you’re talking to your crew again. It’s... haunted me that you had to make that choice.” Gunn nodded, to show that he understood and believed. “But when you said ‘a game of pickup’ I suddenly had this image of you... going back to your crew.” He rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead, while Gunn’s mouth dropped open. “And you don’t have to say anything because that image doesn’t come from anywhere. The only thing that’s bothering me is... not understanding my own thought processes.”

Deeply sceptical: “A game of pickup?”

“Yes, exactly. If you’d said you were going to patrol with them once a week. Or join them for weapons training...” A shrug. “And I’m simply glad, and relieved. But pickup...” He shivered. “I’m still getting the image. Ridiculous.”

A long, long silence, then Gunn said, “C’n I take you to bed? You won’t let me say anything...”

Wesley’s nod said, “God, yes!”, and they stood up and pressed themselves together, and had their hands under one another’s shirts before they reached the bedroom door. They didn’t get to the bed, not that first time, didn’t get more than a few inches away from the door. More than anything, they struggled not to break the kiss, used the door for support while their hands were tugging at belts and knots, working together first to get Wesley’s pants down, then Gunn’s. They didn’t break the kiss when Wesley slid his fingers into his mouth, when their tongues were almost fighting, both so fierce with the need to get the fingers wet. The kiss was nearly as fierce after Wesley had taken his

fingers out, but then it froze on a gasp when Wesley parted Gunn and slowly started pushing into him. After Wesley was full in, Gunn got his fingers wet the same way, and pushed into Wesley just as slow and deep.

They ended up on the floor. Maybe still in the same kiss, Gunn wouldn't be surprised. They got rid of their clothes in a lot of stages, long gaps in between, and when they were finally naked they lay entwined and quiet, their mouths closed, just barely touching. Eventually, though, they felt the carpet and a chill, and they got into bed.

"I shouldn't even ask, should I, if you're OK with me playing tomorrow?"

Wesley shook his head. "The rational part of me - such as it is - was always OK."

"I'm glad you told me. Even though you thought it was stupid."

Wesley smiled and drew himself even closer. "So am I."

Rondell did call on Sunday morning, and Gunn drove off to meet the crew at the Venice courts soon after he and Wesley had eaten lunch. As he'd expected, he got more than one person asking him if he was looking to come back to them, always put just enough as a joke; they probably all had different reasons for asking, but none of them took it any further after getting his "Oh yeah, any day now." Gunn might have had more problems with keeping his temper if he wasn't also dealing with the fact that any mention of the idea of "going back to his crew" now seemed the quickest thing to get him horny for Wesley. Mostly, though, he enjoyed the game, enjoyed it for the exercise and the sun and the company like he enjoyed the nest-building with the boys; didn't matter, anymore than with the nest-building, that part of the reason he was there was to get something done.

He got back to the apartment around four, full of energy and confident about finding Wesley ready and waiting to be taken back to bed. He ran up the stairs, and was turning the last corner when he heard Wesley's voice, above and close, and tense and urgent. "Charles? Don't come up. It's happened."

Gunn stopped where he was at the bottom of the last flight of stairs. Wesley was standing at the top with his back to Gunn, his gaze fixed at some point along the hallway, and with a crossbow held to his side. There was a second crossbow leaning against the wall by Wesley's leg. "Oh, Jesus. When? How long have you been here?"

"About an hour. No, don't come up yet. I need you to go to the trunk of the car and get the crossbows. There should be two. And some stakes."

"Got it." Gunn ran down to the car, got the crossbows and four stakes, and ran back. They lined all of the spare crossbows against the wall, and Gunn got into position by Wesley's side, ready to hand him the bows when the time came.

"Did it happen when you were chaining him? How far did you get?"

Wesley shook his head and Gunn heard him swallow. "It's worse than that. There wasn't any vision. I was at the desk reading. He was in the room with the door open, he'd been very quiet. Then I heard him moving around. Suddenly at first, then slowly. Deliberate. Though I didn't think of it like that at the time. And then he said..." Swallowing again, then very slowly: "'Fee, fie, foe, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman.' And he was coming towards the door. Even if I hadn't heard the words, I would have known it was him from the tone of his voice. I was running before he was even in the room. I didn't look back. And the other things he said, before I could get out..." A tight, shaking sigh. "I thought I knew but... Nothing can prepare you for that. For what he'll do with what he knows."

"What did he say?"

Wesley just shook his head, then after a short silence he said, "I keep thinking... For most of the time after you left I'd been reading on the couch. If I'd been there instead of the desk... What you'd've found when you -"

"Don't, Wes." Gunn touched his hand gently to Wesley's back, but kept his tone very firm. "I don't hear anything. Are we sure he's still in there?"

"I would have heard it if he'd gone out of one of the windows. He wouldn't attempt that, anyway, not during the day. He'd be jumping straight into direct sunlight."

Gunn nodded. "So what'll he be doing?"

"I don't know. Waiting inside the front door, I suppose, in case we're stupid enough to go and check on him. He was making quite a lot of noise for the first ten or fifteen minutes. Then nothing."

"Breaking things?"

"Tearing books, I think. I'm fairly sure we still have a computer."

"Have you tried talking to him, since he went quiet?"

"Several times. The first time he - I think he was pretending that he was Angel. So he could... take a different attack. The times since then, there's been nothing."

"So we wait. Until he talks to us."

Gunn couldn't hear any sound at all from the apartment. If it'd been a human sitting in wait for this length of time, you'd have heard him shifting position, at least once. Scratching or sighing or something. With a human, you could use a mirror to check inside the door, get a look without having to get too close. Were they going to both stay here when the sun went down? Or should they split up, have one outside covering the windows? And if so, which one?

"This is what that vision was warning us about, isn't it? That one of him in Prague."

Wesley nodded. "It must be. And it did make us put the crossbows by the door. If he didn't know I was out here with them... He'd be miles away by now."

"Yeah, but just until he changed. Then he'd make his way back. So that's - Oh, God. Unless the vision was warning about more than this? That he won't change back this time?"

Wesley took a deep breath, then said, "Yes. That's possible. Very possible, since this happened without a vision. In which case there's no point in waiting here. We have to go in. And we should do it before sunset."

Gunn went first, a couple of yards ahead of Wesley. They were gambling that the fight Gunn was going to have with Angelus would last long enough for Wesley to get in position for that crucial shot. Gunn was expecting Angelus to be out of sight behind the door, knew he'd have to leap into the room if he was going to avoid getting jumped, but Angelus turned out to be in plain view, the first thing Gunn saw when he got in range of the doorway. Angelus had moved the armchair over to the front door, maybe ready to wait for hours for Wesley to do the stupid thing, but he'd had fallen asleep while he waited, and he was wearing his human face in sleep.

Wesley stood at a safe distance with the crossbow while Gunn very quietly got the net, a pike, and the handcuffs. Angelus showed no sign of waking while Gunn covered him with the net, or when Gunn hauled the chair around to face into the room. The route to the bedroom could have been clearer - Wesley's chair, right in the way - and getting Angelus to even start moving in that direction... Well, standing in front of him jabbing with a pike wouldn't have been Gunn's first choice of technique. But Angelus would have to see that Wesley was ready to kill him if he didn't cooperate, and he was smart enough to play easy for now. Save the fight for another day.

Wesley said quietly, "Wake him up," and Gunn stabbed with the pike, an inch or more deep into the pale stomach where the black shirt hung open.

Angelus jerked awake with a snarl, though he still kept his human face. He saw Gunn and lunged at him, arm moving up to deflect the pike, but the net brought him short almost immediately. A few seconds of surprise and realisation and then he vamped up in a blaze of rage and started tearing at the net.

"Make one move to take that off and I'll kill you." Wesley's voice wasn't loud but it was hard and clear, and Angelus paid attention. He stopped struggling with the net, stared at Wesley like he was sizing him up, did the same with Gunn, and then slowly lowered his arms.

Gunn said, "When I tell you, you're gonna walk slowly towards me. I'll tell you when to take each step. If you make just one move on your own, we'll kill you. You understand?" A nod and a growl. Gunn took two steps backwards, came up against Wesley's chair like he'd expected and pushed it out of the way with his right leg, keeping his eyes fixed on

Angelus. "Take one step forward now." Angelus took the step and the net moved with him, rasping and clattering as it was dragged over the back of the armchair.

When Gunn finally had Angelus lined up with the bedroom door, he stepped to the side, into a patch of sunlight near the window. "Now you're gonna walk into that room. Take the next step now." He got Angelus in and past the bed. "Now turn ninety degrees to your right. Now take one step forward. Next, when I tell you, you're gonna sit down on the bed with your back against the footboard and your legs kept straight out in front of you. Move slowly, starting now." Angelus kept on doing what he was told, not even giving those low growls any more. "Next, you're gonna move your arms back, through the footboard. Yeah, you're gonna have to make some slack in the net to get your arms back that far, and you're gonna do that by pulling at the net a bit at a time, so you're pulling it back over your head. Small movements, you're gonna keep to. Nothing more than an inch at a time. And you'll keep your hands down by your side at all times. Start now."

The process was laborious and Angelus started growling again. A different growl, lower but tighter, like he was past the haze of anger and he knew now just what he was going to do to them. When Angelus had finally got his hands far enough through the bars of the footboard, Gunn motioned to Wesley and they both entered the room and took up positions either side of Angelus's back. Gunn got the cuffs on quickly, no problems working them through the holes in the net, and so they soon had Angelus how they were used to dealing with him: chained into the frame of the bed.

They backed away into the living-room. Gunn gestured that he was going across the room, and left Wesley standing guard by the door. Gunn went first to the desk, where he wrote a message for Wesley saying that they needed to put a spyhole in the door so they didn't have to stand open guard day and night, because Angel might take days to come back and after this they'd have to keep him locked in all the time. No point putting it off, so he was going to go straight to Home Depot to get all the equipment. Next he put the notepad with the message on the seat of the armchair, fetched the spare crossbows and put them on the seat, and then pushed the armchair over to just behind where Wesley was standing. He held the message up for Wesley to read, Wesley nodded, and Gunn left immediately.

After Gunn had drilled the hole in the door and fitted the spyhole, they closed the door and checked the view, then, after an exchange of messages, went back into the bedroom for Gunn to haul the bed across to the far side of the room. Angelus was lying on his side now, and he was back in his human face; his expression was some sort of hoarded resentment, but he didn't look at them. Wesley told Gunn later that Angelus had slowly slumped over about ten minutes before Gunn got back, but he hadn't seen the moment when the face changed.

When the door was closed again and they had both nodded that they were happy now with the view, Wesley turned to put his crossbow down on the armchair, then they looked at one another, finally letting the reaction show, and stepped forward at the same moment to hold one another tight.

Wesley was the first to release his hold, taking a deep breath. "I suppose we'd better see what he was doing while I was out in the hallway."

They did still have a computer, and there was no obvious sign of damage in the living room; the books were still on the shelves, the scroll that Wesley was translating for Lilah Morgan was still in one piece and still readable. They checked their bedroom next, and as soon as they opened the door they saw that the vampire had done at least one thing: he had torn the arm from Wesley's best jacket and placed the arm on the bed; slightly bent, the cuff hanging about an inch over the side. Wesley gasped and took a staggering step backwards, looking like he was going to throw up. Gunn grabbed him and started leading him to the couch.

"Wes, Wes, it's OK. I've got you. It's OK."

Wesley was struggling weakly against Gunn, looking back towards the bedroom with an expression that was almost desperate. "No. No. I've got to -"

"You've got to forget it. Don't let him - Don't go back in there. I'll deal with it. Get rid of anything he's touched. Come on. Sit down. I've got you."

Wesley did sit down, heavily, lay with his head tilted back and his eyes closed. Gunn held his hand (which was noticeably cold) and gently rubbed his thumb over Wesley's wrist. Eventually Wesley opened his eyes, but he wouldn't look at Gunn, not properly, kept his gaze fixed on Gunn's hands.

After a while Gunn stopped waiting for Wesley to look up. "Can I get you anything? Some tea?"

Wesley shook his head, then after a second squeezed Gunn's hand and raised his eyes to Gunn's. "A beer would be very good, after we've killed him."

Gunn was surprised. "We going to? So he's never gonna change back? It's that obvious?"

A sigh, then: "I don't know. I'd want to wait and see, anyway, how well we managed to deal with him. If we could make it worth the risks, to get the visions."

"Won't kill him today, then. Beer still good, though?"

"Maybe with dinner. If I can manage to eat anything."

"You OK for me to..." Gunn gestured with his head towards the bedroom, and Wesley nodded.

Angelus had torn the left arms out of all five of Wesley's jackets and put the jackets back in the wardrobe with the left sides facing outwards. Gunn couldn't find the other four arms anywhere in the bedroom. He decided immediately that they'd get Wesley new jackets, he wouldn't even ask Wesley if he wanted to get the jackets mended. He got a trash bag from the kitchen and stuffed the jackets and the arm into it. On his way to the front door he glanced down automatically as he passed Wesley's desk, like he was in the middle of his usual routine for emptying the garbage, and he discovered that Angelus had put the other four arms in Wesley's waste bin, just dumped as far as Gunn could tell, not arranged.

Wesley's hand seemed warmer. They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Gunn said, "It happened in a bedroom?"

Wesley nodded. "I'd tracked the Kungai to an apartment. One-room. The last time I saw my left arm, it was lying on the bed. In exactly that position. It's hardly the first time I've thought about it, of course. The shock was... realising that he'd been there too. Angelus. Thinking how much he must have enjoyed it."

"So they're not separate? You always both talk like they are."

"Oh." A long, exhausted sigh. "I don't know any more. That bastard in there can't really be Angelus. He's still got his soul, I'm sure of that, even now. I think he must be... the part of Angel that's furthest from remorse. Because they do share the same memories. Or they share memories up to the start of the brain-damage. So Angel must have the memories of... every aspect of the other's sadism. He does know what it's like to adore inflicting pain. Pain or terror. He always knows. But when he's whole he's also sincerely horrified by those feelings, and that's what's stronger. Before the brain-damage he was always whole when he had his soul. Now... we're having to take our luck with whatever fragment of him we get."

"Luck. Yeah. You know, whatever happens - Whether he changes back or not. We can't ever leave him unlocked again. If he can do this without any warning... Fuck, Wes! If he hadn't done that 'Englishman' thing, if he'd just walked in on you without saying anything!"

Wesley was looking sick again. "You've no idea how glad I am right now that he is a sadist. That he'd rather take the chance to scare me than make sure of getting my blood."

"No. Think I've got some idea." Gunn swallowed. "D' you think he'd've made you into a vampire? Maybe... to set you up for me?"

Wesley looked startled. "I hadn't -" Slowly: "Maybe. But my gut feel is that he'd regard me as a waste of blood."

Soon afterwards Wesley went to look through the spyhole, while Gunn checked whether the vampire had left anything for them in the bathroom and the kitchen. Angelus was lying quietly in the same position, might even be asleep; and the bathroom and kitchen were clear.

They phoned out for pizza, which was Wesley's suggestion and a big surprise to Gunn. He'd decided early on that Wesley would rather take a pint of pig's blood than get any kind of to-go food (probably partly being a food snob, partly trying to save money, and partly being paranoid about anyone coming to the apartment). But tonight Wesley was finally ready to have someone else do all the work.

The sun went down shortly after they'd placed their order, and when Wesley next looked through the spyhole, the room had got so much darker he could only barely see that Angelus was still on the bed. Gunn unlocked the door and turned the light on while Wesley covered him, crouched down with the crossbow. Angelus certainly seemed to be asleep, didn't react at all to the noise or the light.

They allowed themselves just one beer each with the pizza, having even less idea than usual what the next few hours would bring. Wesley asked Gunn about the game of pickup and Gunn told him about the questions and how he'd reacted to them, and also that he'd enjoyed the game and knew the crew'd be fine about asking him again.

"Don't think I'll go every time, though. Once a month's enough to keep things easy. And Wes, we gotta get you a cellphone. You can't get stuck like that again." No argument from Wesley, though they talked about whether they should use the new phone as a second number for Wyndham Gunn, or use it as the main number for Angel Investigations. Using it for Angel Investigations would make the most sense since they'd have to change the number anyway when they moved apartments. They agreed they'd been neglecting Angel Investigations since Wyndham Gunn had taken off, that Gunn should spend at least an extra four hours each week trying to build the business up again.

After dinner and another look at the sleeping vampire, Gunn booted up the computer so he could get a start on those four hours with a web search. And then maybe a couple of hours of Tomb Raider. Wesley needed his reading-time on the couch more than ever; mustn't let himself get spooked about reading on the couch because of what might have happened with Angelus. Gunn opened the browser, reached behind the keyboard for his pen, looked up at the screen again - and leapt back with a raw cry, and with such force that he knocked his chair over.

"Charles! What's -" Wesley had thrown his book aside and was getting to his feet.

"No!" Gunn shouted the word, made it an order. "Stay! You don't wanna see."

Wesley didn't sit down again, but he didn't make any move to come closer. "He's done something, hasn't he?"

Gunn nodded. "He - In my web browser. He made it so it loads up with a porn site. Really nasty. Sick."

"Ah. Yes. He's something, isn't he?"

"Like you said, you can't imagine."

"Are you OK? Is there anything I can do without... coming over?"

"No. It was the shock. I know how to get rid of it. Though if you'd be ready to share another beer with me when I'm done..." Wesley nodded, with a very small, grim smile, then sat down again and reached for his book.

Gunn bent to set his chair back on its feet, then closed his eyes as he sat down again, unable to look at the screen even for the time it would take to switch to another window. He guessed that Wesley was imagining child porn, actually hoped he was. That would be foul - but foul in a random way, not like it was any comment on the two of them. Instead, Angelus had given Gunn an amputee fetishist site. A site for gay men. Like that was the reason he was with Wesley. Like that was the only reason. And he had set it up specially for Gunn, hadn't he? He knew Gunn would be the one to find it. Wesley was right, you couldn't imagine what Angelus could do - not till he was doing it to you.

Gunn opened his eyes, and clicked on the first bookmark on his list as the quickest way to get that hideous page out of his browser. But the browser didn't switch to the L.A. Times: it started loading a second amputee site. Oh, Jesus, had he done this to all of Gunn's bookmarks? Gunn didn't dare to try another, but decided to deal straight away with the first problem Angelus had left him. He went through the process of changing the settings for the browser, concentrating fiercely on not seeing or reading any part of the current page. He changed the startup page back to Google, checked the other settings but didn't find any more surprises from Angelus, and gave a ragged sigh of relief when he finally got back to the safety of Google.

Now he was going to have to check all of his bookmarks. He deleted the ruined one for the L.A. Times and created a new one, and then started working through the rest of the list. Angelus hadn't touched the other bookmarks at the top level, but there was something waiting for Gunn inside almost every sub-folder. Angelus had added bookmarks to yet more amputee sites (or Gunn assumed they were amputee sites - he was deleting the bookmarks immediately, without loading the page), and he'd given them titles like "Hot Fantasy - Pompous Neurotic Bent over his Books" and "Man on Boy Action - Cowering in the Closet". Again, Gunn tried not to read them, but he had to read them if he was going to

find them and delete them; it wasn't until some dark, sleepless hour that night that he realised there was a way he could have avoided reading them, if he'd been willing to delete all his bookmarks in one go.

When Gunn was finished he got the beer and took it to the couch. They shared the beer, then touched and kissed and murmured – even laughed. Soon they started to get breathless, though, and they drew apart, looked at one another, then shook their heads and sighed the same resigned sigh.

Gunn said, “Yeah, last thing we should do is spend the night in the bedroom. The one room in the apartment where we wouldn't hear him. Have to save it up. I'll take first watch.”

“OK. Make it midnight to four. I'll do four till eight.”

“Yeah, that's tonight. But how many nights we prepared to save it? Not lookin' to live like this.”

“No. It would be impossible. We'll work out something better, when we know more. Maybe in the new apartment we could... I don't know... set up a microphone in his room, put speakers in our room. He couldn't get free without making some noise. And I'm a light sleeper.”

“I know. Hey! What about a baby monitor? We could get one of those tomorrow. Think we'd be OK then to go to bed. Put some more chains on him. Lock all the doors. And take all the keys and weapons into the bedroom with us.”

“Yes. But we'd also need something to keep him away from the windows. A layer of garlic, maybe.” Wesley smiled suddenly. “Or very thick curtains woven from garlic bulbs and crucifixes. Drapes, that is. But I suspect IKEA only does those on special order. We'd have moved apartments by the time they arrived.”

Gunn laughed, but a few minutes later he found he had an idea. “You know what you said about drapes? We don't need IKEA. We c'n make them like you made the net. But put the crosses all over, not just round the edges. Close enough together that he can't touch any part of it.”

Wesley looked impressed. “That's a good idea. And not just for curtains. Once we've got the protection spells in place in the new apartment, we could use the nets on the floor in each doorway. It might not stop him, but it would slow him down. And give us some more noise, especially if we put some bells in with the crosses. We'd know then, if he was trying to move one of the nets.”

“Yeah, I like it.” Gunn laughed again. “Wacky crafts project. We'd have to take away all his shoes, though. Maybe all his socks, too.”

Wesley nodded. “Of course. Or go further and take out everything except the bed. Keep him naked.” Wesley was serious.

“Would slow him down, that's for sure. But us too, maybe, arguin' for half the day about how often we really need to be checkin' at the spyhole.” And then, still laughing, they were touching and breathing hard again - and then shaking their heads and deciding that they were not safe together on the couch and Gunn should go and play his computer game.

Wesley got up to go to bed shortly before midnight, and Gunn stopped the game, took his headphones off, and started up the browser. Working on that search was definitely the best way for him to keep awake and alert.

He was avoiding using his bookmarks, he knew he was. In the first hour he found two new sites that looked promising - and he didn't add them to his bookmarks. He felt cold, just thinking about opening any of his subfolders. Some day soon, when they had Angelus properly chained up, lying on the floor without an inch of slack, there would have to be a time when Gunn knew Wesley was going to be gone for at least half an hour; and then Gunn would put on his heavy boots and go in there and give the bastard... Well, not a fraction of what he deserved. Couldn't do it if Angelus was naked though, and Gunn would have to hold back from going for the face. Not because it was too much, but because Wesley mustn't find out. Soon. Angelus was gonna get it soon. Gunn's throat was tight, the need pressing up in him to deal out the pain to the place it belonged.

How could Angel even have thoughts like that about Wesley? Even with going crazy, his mind coming apart, his brain shouldn't be able to start a thought like that, let alone bring it out as words. Finding words in him for despising Wesley. 'cos yeah, it was as bad as that. With all Wesley had done for Angel, and the way he'd done it, never counting any cost. There shouldn't be anything, not anywhere in Angel, that could hold dark thoughts about Wesley.

And only about Wesley. There hadn't been a single word about Gunn. Like Angel thought Gunn was damn-near perfect, couldn't find one dig he could make about Gunn himself. Not even trying a shot over the race thing. "Prissy College Boy Seeks Buck Nigger" – nothing close to that, not even for one bookmark. And nothing about how Gunn had left his crew. Nothing about his new friends being demons. Nothing either about what Angel must know about Gunn and Wesley and sex - from the sounds he'd heard and from the scent on them. Nothing at all about Gunn. Just Wesley, alone in his sights. When, if there was any justice, any reckoning of who Angel owed, it should've been the other way round.

Unless... Had Angel left Gunn alone because he'd forgotten everything about him? Even forgotten that he was black?

Hard to imagine forgetting that, but... If Wes was right about how Angel's mind worked, maybe Angelus just didn't know the things that Angel knew. Angelus used to, he and Angel used to share memories, but the damage from the visions had split them apart. So Angelus didn't really know about Gunn coming to live with them, nothing about Gunn's crew or the demons or anything else. All Angelus knew was Wesley. Not difficult for him to work out from their bedroom that Wesley was living with a man, and probably an easy guess that this man was the one who used the computer; but no clues to anything else about the man, nothing that could be used directly as a weapon. Just that he had sex with Wesley. Maybe loved Wesley.

Yes. That was possible. So it might not have been a deliberate choice, to aim only for Wesley. Might make a very slight difference to where Gunn aimed his boots. The next time Gunn found a promising new website he added it to his bookmarks – and dealing with his bookmarks hardly bothered him at all now, so he retraced his steps and added the other two sites that he'd avoided adding earlier.

"Wesley?" The first sound of any kind from Angel's room. Gunn raised an eyebrow and checked the clock (2:38), then walked over in his own good time to check Angelus was still in place on the bed. Angelus must have heard his footsteps, and Gunn thought he could see Angelus lifting his head, trying to raise himself on an elbow. "Wesley? Wesley, please. What happened?" Gunn went back to the computer and carried on with his search. Nice try at anxious, but you're workin' the wrong market. "Wesley? I can't - Wesley?" Angelus made a big show of giving up almost the moment he heard Gunn walk away; his voice sank so low, sounding so hopeless like he might never speak again. Unless, of course, Wesley came up real close, bent to listen.

"Charles?" (2:45) Seven minutes gone by. "Charles, is it you? Is it - Has something happened to Wesley? Did I - Please. Don't let me - Charles?"

OK. So maybe that really was Angel. If Gunn was right about why none of the bookmarks had been about him, then it couldn't be Angelus calling him Charles. And if he was right then that meant the change wasn't permanent after all, and Gunn and Wesley would be able to take things a bit easier. Looked like the Prague vision had only (only!) been warning that Angelus could appear at any time, not warning that there'd come a day when he wouldn't change back. Bad enough, yeah, but they had experience of dealing with Angelus, of keeping him safely chained and locked in his room; and of sleeping soundly even while he was there.

Gunn couldn't be sure for himself if Angel was really back. Wesley was the one who knew how to judge. But then as long as they got him properly chained up, Gunn didn't see any reason why Wesley should have to stand that four-hour watch.

Wesley hadn't got into bed, was lying fully dressed on top of the bed with a blanket bunched up around him. He was a light sleeper, like he'd said, and he only needed a few seconds to come fully awake and start asking Gunn exactly what Angel had said. They armed themselves with a crossbow and a pike, and Gunn opened the door.

"Wesley! You're safe. But -" A long pause. "It was bad?"

"It could have been very bad." Wesley explained what had happened, though he left out the details of what Angelus had said and done; when he described the beginning, he just said he "heard Angelus talking to himself". Angel listened without asking any questions, hardly showed any reaction except to close his eyes tight, then tighter, and turn his face to the mattress.

When Wesley finished, Angel opened his eyes, looked at Gunn then Wesley, and said quietly, "What are you going to do?"

“Obviously, we have to keep you locked in from now on. We’ll keep you chained. Although, if we can find a way to monitor you, and if we can fit good locks on the doors and windows, then we may be able to dispense with the chains. A lot depends on what we can do to the new apartment when we move there in two weeks time. We’ll be taking some other new precautions, but I don’t think they’ll affect you directly.” Angel nodded slowly, then closed his eyes again. After about ten seconds Wesley said, “Should we kill you?”

Angel gave no sign that he’d heard Wesley, and when he finally opened his eyes, he said, “How could it happen? How can my soul not matter any more?”

Wesley gave a sad, resigned sigh, then explained his theory about Angel’s memory and how it was being broken into pieces by the brain-damage. Angel didn’t challenge any part of what Wesley said. “We could have asked that same question every time he appeared when you had a vision. But because the visions are so violent - not just in their content, but in the way they take you over... After the first time he appeared, didn’t it seem almost inevitable that sometimes the visions would have that effect? I think that we were, in fact, seeing the same process of fragmentation, but now we’ve reached the stage where it can happen without the violence of a vision.”

Slowly, Angel nodded. “What do you think will be next? What else could I do?”

“In practical terms, I think we’ve seen the worst. As long as we can keep you locked in. In other terms...” Wesley swallowed. “I don’t know what I can say. I’m sorry. Is there anything we can do?”

Eventually: “Do your best with the visions. Keep up the training. Don’t ever listen to him. And... can you try to live a normal life?”

Gunn said, “Never have yet,” and felt amazed when Angel smiled.

In careful stages, covered by Wesley with the crossbow, Gunn got Angel clear of the net, out of the handcuffs, and into the chains. They didn’t gag him; it wasn’t necessary, and besides, they needed him to be able to speak if he got a vision. They left the light on.

In bed they held each another tight for comfort, neither making any move towards sex. Gunn said, “I’d want to die. Spend the rest of my life locked up... If you asked me like you did him, I’d’ve said, ‘Yeah. Do it now.’ How can he face it?”

“I think... because of the visions. He thinks they’re his chance to atone. Given to him deliberately because the Powers believe in him. Believe that he can balance out his years as Angelus. If he took death as an escape - when his victims had no escape - then he’d be truly damned, he could never be forgiven. And he needs that hope. He can’t bear to... close his account, not when there is still a chance.”

“So if he stops having the visions, we kill him?”

“We could. Maybe... wait for six months or so after they stopped. See if he started to heal.”

“You think they’d do that, the Powers? Find someone else?”

“It’s possible. I don’t believe, in fact, that the Powers have any particular interest in the state of his account. He’s not a... not a project for them, just an instrument, and they’re only interested in results. If we fail to give them results, yes, I’d expect them to... let us go. Certainly bring someone else in.”

“Hmm. Hope the two of us are gettin’ double-credit for all this. Not like we got anythin’ to atone for.”

Gunn felt the gust of Wesley’s amused snort against his collarbone. “What would you use the credit for? Save it up for the time we need to rob a bank?”

Alonna. He’d trade it in for the promise that Alonna was at peace. Or that - somewhere - she was getting another chance. “Well... was gonna say to buy a few lucky breaks. But then I guess they are lookin’ after us. With the new apartment. Lots of good work. S’pose we’re about even.”

* * * * *

They kept Angel chained to the bed throughout their last two weeks in the apartment. For the first week he was fully chained, but then the monitor and the spyhole showed them that there were, after all, some reliable patterns in Angel's state of mind, and they started relaxing some of the restraints.

Wesley was the one who noticed these patterns, since he had the monitor by his side most of the time he was in the apartment. Angel talked to himself a lot, Angelus too, and this meant that Wesley was usually fairly sure of Angel's state of mind at any time, and could tell very easily when the state had changed. After a few days, Wesley realised that, except when a vision hit, he had never heard Angel switch immediately from one state to another: there would always be a quiet period in between. Sometimes the quiet period was only a few minutes long, sometimes it was several hours. Wesley started going into the room to check on Angel at the beginning of each new quiet period, and he always found him either asleep (eyes closed, completely relaxed) or shut down (eyes half-open, body still slightly tense).

By the Friday night Wesley had heard and seen enough to be confident that Angel would always remain in any given state until he either fell asleep or shut down, or until a vision hit and changed his state by force; and this meant that Angelus could not appear without warning after all. They could enter his room when he was Angel - either lucid or in hell or hallucinating or in a vision - and they would be quite safe because they would have at least five minutes to leave the room after he fell asleep or shut down. By the Saturday night Gunn was also convinced, and on Sunday morning they released Angel's neck and right arm from the restraints, which was enough that he could hold the beaker and raise himself to drink. The relaxation in the restraints was also enough to allow him to read, and when he was next lucid he asked them to bring him some magazines, and he asked for the last two or three books that Wesley had enjoyed (or that he'd hated - anything as long as they hadn't bored him). They put Angel back in the restraints before they went to bed, and then released him again in the morning.

Most of the time Angel was in hell, which wasn't surprising since every time he woke up, he found himself in chains. He never spoke when he was in hell, but he flinched and he trembled, and for Wesley the sounds were as clear as words. Wesley and Gunn tried to leave him alone when he was in hell, going in only to feed him, but they couldn't do anything about the fact that he could hear them through the door; he reacted particularly strongly to laughter, and to footsteps approaching his door.

After they relaxed the restraints Angel was slightly more likely to wake up lucid, and within a minute of waking up lucid he would usually call for Wesley. The first few times, he called because he was anxious and confused and needed to be reassured about Angelus. But he soon managed to remember what Wesley had been telling him about how reliable his patterns were, and he also remembered that Wesley would be listening to the monitor. After that he would still call for Wesley, but only to ask for news of the day's work or to compare opinions of the book he was reading.

Gunn thought Angel called for Wesley because he was lonely, but Wesley thought he was just bored: Angel was too much of an introvert to seek company just for the sake of it, but he did need some variety and stimulation. Wesley sympathised as he himself could be sent into a mild panic at the idea of even as much as ten minutes in a waiting-room without a really good book to hand, and he would break off his work without hesitation, prepared to give Angel any amount of time he needed. Once Angel realised he was sometimes interrupting Wesley's work, he told Wesley to bring the work in with him, to read it out and explain what he was doing and thinking. Sometimes he got interested in the problem and made useful suggestions, but at other times (especially with translations) he drifted off to sleep, or he picked up his magazine (maybe pointedly, maybe absent-mindedly - Wesley said he could never tell). If Wesley hadn't been working when Angel called, then they usually talked about books.

During the second week, Wesley discovered yet another aspect to Angel's patterns - an exception to his tidy rules about the changes of state, but not a dangerous exception. Angel could switch directly from a lucid state to a hallucination, but this only seemed to happen while he was reading. Presumably each hallucination was triggered by some scene or image in the book. Wesley was hardly ever able to guess from Angel's words and expressions what a given hallucination was about, let alone guess what might have triggered it. Sometimes Angel vamped up during a hallucination, at other times he was aggressive and hostile, but Wesley had decided by the end of the week that he wasn't dangerous in any type of hallucination - because he was totally absorbed by the images in his own head, not even aware that he was chained. Exactly like the reverberation phase of a vision, and Wesley knew from experience that even Angelus was harmless in that state.

Angelus appeared four times during those two weeks, and Wesley gradually got the impression that Angelus had also started thinking that he was back in hell - but it sounded as if he enjoyed it there, as if he admired the guards for the way they tortured Angel, and he fully expected them to let him out now he was Angelus again. He got angry (but not savage) when he wasn't released and he would entertain himself during the wait by planning or reminiscing. Wesley couldn't

bear to listen to what Angelus said; he turned the monitor off and adopted a system of checking in for five seconds every half hour.

* * * * *

Angel had two visions in the second week. The first vision came on Tuesday afternoon and dragged Angel out of hell and into a tunnel under a UCLA dorm. The second vision came early the next evening, when Angel had been quiet and asleep for half an hour. The address was Hollywood and Wilcox, which was the same address as that strange vision that might or might not have been connected to the two guys who died behind the dumpster. In this new vision there was another “she” who needed help - “they” were after her, and “she didn’t know”. This time, however, she had a face: Angel drew a young woman running like she knew her life depended on it. Very young she looked, all angles. “They” weren’t so clear, just two vague shapes running after her. Two arms and two legs each, looked like, proportions pretty-much human. Probably vampires, though Angel wasn’t saying; just “find her, stop them, they mustn’t have her”. Angel was lost in the vision and quite agitated; Gunn and Wesley had to get him fully chained again before they could leave him alone in the apartment, and his agitation made the chaining more difficult than it had ever been with Angelus.

Once again, they spent a good part of a night at Hollywood and Wilcox, with nothing to show for it. They gave up at three a.m. and then decided that they needed to eat and soon settled on noodles. Soon after the food arrived, Gunn said, “D’ you think they’re about the same thing? This vision and the one back in October. There’s a nest or something in the area? We need to check out every building? Or every manhole.”

“Probably. Since we failed the first time, they would still be there.”

“Kinda slackers, though. What they been doin’ between now and October? Away on vacation? Or on some vamp health-kick? Detoxin’ on steamed vegetables or spinach or something. Only allowed one pint of blood every four months.”

Wesley gave a brief half-smile, then shrugged. “There might have been more killings. Maybe there’s something special about this girl.” He shook his head slowly, over and over, looked deeply uncomfortable. “I don’t know how many times I’ve had to tell myself that life is arbitrary. That it’s impossible for anyone to be entirely consistent, you’d go insane if you tried.” A pause, then: “Yes, I prefer your diet theory.”

“I’ll get searching. Come back when it’s day. Talk to people. Unless it’s something else totally and we’re missin’ the point like we did before.”

“That’s also possible.”

They ate in silence for a while, then Gunn said, “Unless it’s not a different girl. Maybe it’s exactly the same vision. Like with the three kids and the nest. Only it looked different, because this time he didn’t vamp up and he was able to draw it.” Wesley didn’t look convinced but Gunn carried on. “No, I think that was the night it really happened, back in October. Whatever it was with ‘her’. The dumpster had to be part of it. But tonight... Nothin’ happened tonight.”

“It’s hardly a precise address. We could have been patrolling the wrong alley.”

“Precise enough. We’d’ve heard her screaming, like we did when that girl got dragged up the wall. I tell you, it’s all in the past. ‘n’ I think I’ve figured out what that’s about.” He explained his theory that visions set in the past were messages about Angel.

Wesley was interested in the idea, as long as they didn’t take it as a convenient excuse to give up on a vision. When they failed, they should face that full-on. “So what would the message be, then? Do you think it’s significant that it brought out Angelus the first time but it didn’t this time? What do we look for?”

“Don’t get the feel they can control that - if he vamps up or not. Why would they ever make him vamp up, make him so he doesn’t draw? Same with gettin’ lost in the vision.”

“But you said you thought the second vision with the nest was a message about how often he was going to get lost in the visions.”

“Yeah, and they chose that one to repeat because it was the first vision where he did get lost. They were pointin’ out what was different about it.”

“And what’s different about Hollywood-and-Wilcox?”

“Well... it was the first time since I came onboard that we couldn’t figure out the mission. If they’ve been listenin’ in on us, maybe they’re tellin’ us that, yeah, they will stop the visions if we don’t get the results.”

Wesley sighed and looked sceptical. “I don’t know. It was also the first vision where the two of us had to deal with Angelus together. When you saw what he was like and decided that the net wasn’t good enough. Maybe it’s about how we’re dealing with him now. And if so, is it warning or congratulations?”

“Don’t see them botherin’ with congratulations, but, yeah, take your point.”

Wesley shook his head. “My point’s just... that it’s the type of warning that you can usually only make sense of after the event. Guessing at the meaning beforehand, trying to fit facts around it... I think that can be dangerous because it skews your perceptions and it might stop you noticing something really important. But it does make perfect sense as a way for the Powers to try to send that type of message. If they stopped to worry about whether or not we’d actually understand the message... well, they’d probably never get any visions sent.”

Gunn laughed. “OK. I’ll go easy on the guessin’. Check out the area tomorrow, like we said.”

On the way home they passed a movie theatre, and as they waited at the next set of lights, Gunn said, “He never did get to go to the drive-in.” He hadn’t realised until he said the words how much it sounded like Angel was dead.

A pause, then, quietly: “No.” Wesley must have heard the same finality in the words.

“There isn’t any point in takin’ him now, is there? I mean, yeah, we were gonna chain him anyway, but...”

Wesley was shaking his head. “He’d be lucky if he followed even ten minutes of the film. I dread to think how many hallucinations it would trigger. Or what he’d make of the trip as a form of torture.”

Gunn nodded, then was quiet for a few blocks. “Wes? What would you say about getting a VCR? TV, yeah, but mostly a VCR. To rent movies.”

A shrug. “Yes. Why not?” Wesley seemed slightly surprised, and like he couldn’t really see the point.

“Can’t see the two of us gettin’ out to the movies again either. Know you’re happy reading. I’m good with my games and everything. But I could really cope with goin’ on a few more dates with you. Even if we have to stay in for ‘em.”

Now Wesley was definitely surprised, and definitely pleased. “I’d like that. We don’t do much... relaxing together, do we? Apart from the obvious.”

“Don’t do much relaxing, period. We’re always on duty ‘cos of him. You, especially. Time we did somethin’ for ourselves. Get the TV right after we move, yeah?”

“A house-warming present to ourselves.” Wesley was smiling. “And an incentive for me to buy that new suit.”

“A suit? You sayin’ you’d get all dressed up for our dates?”

“Of course.” The shock looked and sounded genuine. “It’s how one shows the proper respect.”

Gunn laughed. “Respect! English, you’re somethin’ else. So what’ll it show if I’m in the same old T-shirt.”

“Oh.” One of Wesley’s best half-smiles. “A dashing self-assurance that promises very well for the later portion of the evening.”

* * * * *

Wesley got the keys to the new apartment first thing on the Monday their lease started, and he and Gunn spent the next few days setting up the security measures they needed for Angel. Wesley hired the same magic-user to place the protection on the windows, and Gunn got the same effect of feeling like he’d never seen the guy before. The barrier on

the windows was based on momentum, Wesley said, and couldn't be crossed by any object with momentum greater than that of an air molecule; no vampire or human was capable of moving slowly enough to get through it. Before the magic-user started work on the spell Wesley had opened all of the windows by an inch and had angled the blinds, and if they ever wanted to make any other change to the windows, they would have to get a magic-user in again to take the spell down for them.

For the door to Angel's room, they fitted a spyhole, a lock and two bolts, they removed the doorknob from Angel's side of the door and replaced it with a blank plate, and they covered Angel's side of the door with crucifixes that were positioned so he shouldn't be able to touch any part of the door. They didn't expect to make much use of the spyhole, because while Gunn was shopping around for their TV and VCR he'd got the idea for something better than the spyhole: a video baby-monitor. He fixed the camera to the ceiling in the corner by the door, and set the screen on a high shelf just to the left of Angel's door, where they could see it from almost any point in the living-room. Now Wesley would be able to check on Angel without having to leave his desk. They still had a use for the audio monitor since they could carry those receivers around with them, and Gunn set up a bracket in the centre of the ceiling ready to take the microphone when they finally moved it out of the other apartment.

They'd decided they could leave Angel out of the chains, but only if they made sure there was nothing in his room that Angelus could use as a weapon, or that he could use to try to break down the door or disable the monitors. This meant no furniture, not even the bed, no pictures on the walls, just the mattress and some clothes, and they'd have to give him a drawing pad and some crayons or charcoal (not pencils), and yes, they could safely let him have magazines and paperback books.

Without the bed, they would need another method of chaining him in place. They were still going to chain and gag him when he vamped up during a vision, and for all they knew there might be other times when they'd have to keep him chained for weeks. Gunn got two steel plates with rings attached, and fixed the plates to the floor along the wall opposite the windows, ten feet apart, and clearly within the camera's field of view. With an eleven-foot chain between the two rings, they should be able to give Angel the same level of comfort and the same absence of options as he'd had when he was chained to the bed.

They'd agreed they also needed a form of restraint they could make Angelus put on himself while they stayed at a distance, and they weren't happy with the idea of having him cuff himself to the bolt-rings, because it would be too difficult to tell from a distance whether he'd really closed the cuffs. Wesley and Gunn argued about designs for a couple of days, and then Wesley mentioned the problem to Angel, and Angel immediately suggested that they use manacles that were sprung at the hinges so that they would always be gaping open if they weren't properly padlocked shut. They could use chains from the ceiling, which would give them the clearest view of everything that Angelus was doing, and make it more difficult for him to mislead them or to brace himself against a wall. Long chains, to within a foot or so of the floor, which would make it more difficult for him to try to use his weight to pull the bolts out of the ceiling. Long enough, too, that he could sit down, maybe even sleep: not out of consideration for Angelus, but for when he changed back. Gunn got the chains and manacles made, fixed them up and tried them out; and that was the last piece of work they needed to do on Angel's room.

They moved Angel and his mattress between three and four on Wednesday morning. They'd got the mattress into the bed of the truck around midnight, and then they'd waited for Angel to reach a co-operative state, which would mean either lucid or in hell - and what they got was hell. They took him down with his hands chained behind his back and his coat draped over his shoulders, and secured him in the cab with the coat on his lap. Wesley rode in the bed of the truck to avoid crowding Angel, though he sat immediately behind him and whenever Gunn looked back he seemed to find Wesley with his hand raised, just about to touch the glass. How long was it gonna take for Wesley to accept that Angel couldn't be reassured, not in hell, for him to really accept it so he'd stop always feeling like he should be trying?

At the other apartment they took Angel in first, padlocked him directly to the ring furthest from the door, locked and bolted the door, then went down to get the mattress. They put the mattress against the far wall, just to the right of the hanging chains and in clear view of both the camera and the spyhole, and Gunn laid Angel's coat across it while Wesley put the magazine, books and drawing pad on the floor at the other side.

Wesley heated some blood then released Angel while Gunn stood guard with the holy-water. Wesley had hoped the routine would help Angel: being released, then fed, then left alone. Very hard to tell. Angel seemed numbly resigned, almost beyond fear. Gunn had seen it start a few minutes into the journey in the truck, when Angel had suddenly stopped reacting, stopped looking, and since then he'd either had his eyes closed, or had his gaze fixed on some point just in front of his knees.

Wesley stayed in the apartment to watch over Angel, particularly to see if he still had the same reliable patterns, and Gunn went back to the other apartment to finish getting things ready for the movers. Gunn took a last look at the screen on his way out, and saw that Angel was turned even further towards the wall, seemed curled even tighter. Should they have made him go over to the mattress? Probably, but it looked too late now.

They'd hired the movers to deal with the furniture, except for Angel's bed which they were giving to the shelter, and the move was all finished by lunchtime. Their bedroom was large enough to take Angel's wardrobe as well as their own, and they put Angel's chair and side-table in the living-room, just to the left of his door and facing the screen. Gunn moved the boxes himself, then they both dismantled Angel's bed and took it to the shelter – and apart from the spyhole still in the bedroom door, that left the old apartment clear of every trace of the three of them.

Gunn took the truck and went to Best Buy to get the TV/VCR combo that he'd picked out, while Wesley took the car and went to join Blockbuster and rent their first couple of movies. Gunn was expecting an art-house and maybe a Spike Lee, and was initially rather suspicious when Wesley arrived home with "Dumb and Dumber" and "Jaws". OK, so he'd put it kind of strong about the sort of movie he and his crew had always been looking for when they needed to relax, but did Wesley really think he couldn't cope with anything more serious? But he soon realised that Wesley hadn't given nearly that much thought to what Gunn might enjoy (just to what he probably wouldn't hate), and Wesley really did think that whole business in "Dumb and Dumber" with the bird's head - from the way it was cut off, to taping it back on and selling the bird to a blind kid, to the fraud getting top-billing on "America's Most Wanted" - well, he honestly did think it was comic genius.

As far as they could tell, Angel had been in hell all day. He'd slept several times, but each time he'd woken up terrified and bewildered. The arrival of the furniture had woken him from his first sleep and driven him to make his first real movement in the new room, scuttling to the corner furthest from the door, where he pressed his hands to the wall, hid his face, and trembled. Wesley turned the monitor off while the movers were present, but wasn't surprised to find Angel still in the same position when they left. When Gunn had finished with the boxes they went in to install the audio monitor and to feed Angel again, and this time they did move him over to the mattress and gently pointed out his coat and showed him that he could read or draw if he wanted. Of course, he just hid, first curled against the wall, and then for all of the rest of the day under his coat.

Having Angel hidden under the coat meant they couldn't see how much they were frightening him with the sound of the movies and of them laughing and arguing and jumping with shock. Gunn wondered a couple of times how much Wesley would have let the sight of Angel hold him back, how often he'd've been checking the monitor if Angel didn't have the coat. Maybe without the coat, Gunn would never have discovered that his classy, movie-snob Wes could slide half-off the couch from laughing at a frozen-tongue gag. Way more fun to watch than the movie, but they'd have to talk soon about taking the coat away, about whether they should give Angel back his bedding after all. Because if Angel could use the coat to hide from them, so could Angelus.

They had the talk about the coat soon after they woke the next morning, and they decided to take it away as soon as possible. The sounds from Wesley's audio receiver were unusual: grunts and gasps, and maybe glossy pages being turned. Surely even in hell Angel couldn't get that scared by a magazine. Probably a hallucination, then.

No. A new treat, thanks to the video monitor: the sight of Angelus masturbating. He was lying on his back on the mattress with his trousers and shirt open, and with the magazine propped open against the wall. If Gunn hadn't been able to see what Angelus was doing with his right hand he would have said the vampire was in the reverberation phase of a vision; there was the same power and the same appetite, lazy, cat-like, expressed through every inch of the body. Wesley blushed fiercely and fumbled, coughing, to turn off his receiver. Gunn watched for a few seconds longer, enough to see Angelus take his left hand off his nipple and move it to the magazine, not turning the page but stroking the surface, it looked like. Gunn did not ever want to know whose picture Angelus was looking at. The coat was nowhere in sight.

"So... be pretty sick, huh? T' get any kind of turned on from seein' that." Gunn had got turned on, enough that Wesley would be able to see it if he could bring himself to actually face Gunn.

Wesley gave an abrupt movement of his head, like he was trying to shake something off. He opened the refrigerator and got out a yoghurt. After he'd closed the door, he stood with his hand still pressed to the white surface and said, "We won't do anything about it. Not from that."

"Leave him with the magazine, you mean? Yeah, be petty to take it away. He's stuck in jail. Wha' d' we expect him to do?"

Now Wesley turned to look at Gunn, but stepping backwards, too, till he was against the counter. Gunn couldn't stop himself from glancing down, and he found exactly the bulge he'd expected. "No." Wesley swallowed. "I mean we won't touch each other. We won't use it. Never, when it's from seeing that."

Gunn nodded. "Yeah. We don't need that. But y' know we can cope OK with admitting it? Don't have to pretend we're like... I dunno... monks or something. It don't mean anything."

"No. No, you're right, it doesn't, does it?" Wesley looked serious and thoughtful for a moment longer, then smiled suddenly at Gunn, and then stepped forward to the refrigerator again, to open the freezer compartment and take out the coffee. Gunn went looking for the filter papers, which turned out to be several cupboards away from where he remembered unpacking them.

They decided to use Wesley's established system for the times when Angelus was being disgusting, and for the next half hour they kept the receiver turned off and their eyes away from the screen. When the time was up Wesley turned the sound back on first and they went over to check the screen. Angelus was asleep, lying neatly on his side. His face was human now and he looked very peaceful. The magazine wasn't propped against the wall any more, but had fallen over onto the mattress. Wesley and Gunn looked at one another, sighed and shrugged, then turned away to get started on the day's work. Wesley was back in front of the screen within a few minutes, though, sitting in Angel's armchair with his translation work on the side-table; he wanted at least another day of checking that Angel's patterns hadn't changed with the move to the new apartment.

After another half hour, with Angel still asleep, Wesley suddenly said, "Of course, this does mean we're going to have to work out a method for washing him. It has to be simpler to take him into the shower - maybe once a week - than to try to give him a sponge-bath in his room. It would probably be enough to chain his hands behind his back. We could chain him to the faucet. Though... at such close quarters... it would be best to hobble him, too."

"How's he gonna wash himself if - Oh. He's not gonna wash himself. That kinda close quarters. I dunno. Lot to be said for sponge-baths. You really wanna go as far as takin' a shower with him? After seein' that?" Gunn pointed at the screen.

"We'd have to choose our time, obviously. But imagine trying to wash his hair in there. And if you think we won't need to... I believe he's quite capable of getting spunk in his hair."

"Jeez, Wes!" Gunn raised his arm to ward off the image, then laughed, turned his hand, and slid it slowly across the top of his head and down to his neck. "Or we could give him some real grooming. Sharp as this. Never have to think about washing his hair then."

Wesley needed several seconds to take that idea in, then he looked at Gunn's scalp, then up at Angel on the screen, then back at Gunn. Then he shook his head, smiling. "I think if we did that to him, we'd have all aspects of Angel after our blood, not just Angelus. It could even be enough to make him fight back in hell."

"You're still set on this weekly shower, then?" Wesley shrugged. "You got any swimmin' trunks?"

"No?" No, Wesley wouldn't have. If he'd brought any from Sunnydale, he'd've got rid of them in the first month or so after he lost his arm.

"Well, get yourself some when you're buyin' the new suit. Wouldn't put it past him to fake the whole vision craziness stunt just for the chance of seein' you naked. But I'm onto him." A silly joke but it did freak him out, just a bit, imagining Wesley and Angel naked in the shower, with Wesley soaping Angel all over. Not freaked-out jealous but... It was gonna be weird for all of them, probably for Angel most of all. Gunn's instincts said they'd get through easier if they used all the ways they could find to keep a distance. Swimming trunks weren't much, but one layer of distance was better than nothing.

* * * * *

Angel woke up very slowly after his neat, peaceful sleep, and Wesley had to study him carefully for several minutes before he was sure of his state. Angel didn't seem aware of his surroundings, not of the magazines or the chains or the door, just of the fact that he'd woken up half-naked. Angelus would have enjoyed that, thought it was funny or sexy, but

Angel acted shocked; he dressed himself quickly, acting panicked, then he turned to the wall and shivered. So he was in hell, and it would be safe (if not kind) to go in and take the coat.

Gunn unlocked the door while Wesley stood behind him watching the screen. Gunn had only opened the door a few inches when it snagged on something on the floor (the coat, he realised later), and then he heard Wesley's shouted warning at the same time as the vampire's snarl. Gunn jerked the door closed, slid the bolts, then turned to look at the screen. Angelus was showing his human face but he was halfway across the room - and then he was out of view, come directly under the camera. They heard his rage and frustration at the protection on the door, but then a thud and a brief sound of burning, and another thud and worse burning - and then a long howl of pain and fury. Silence for maybe ten seconds, then - so unexpected that Wesley and Gunn turned to stare at one another - ragged, exhausted breathing. Angelus never sounded like that: so human. Like he had hopes that could be bruised or even drowned. After maybe a minute there was a long, shaking sigh, and then slow, dragging steps away from the door. Wesley and Gunn looked back up at the screen, saw a bowed, beaten figure appear, and watched it make its way to the far side of the room and then slump down against the wall with its back to the windows and the mattress.

Gunn was the first to speak. "What's your guess? Who the hell was that? Call me a sap, but that wasn't Angelus."

"No, I..." Wesley was shaking his head, then he shrugged and sighed. "I'm sorry, I really thought he was in hell."

Gunn glanced up at the screen. "Well, he ain't on vacation. Maybe we just found out that sometimes he does fight back. Lucky for us he was too angry to be smart about it."

A slow nod. "Yes. I've seen him angry often enough as Angel. It's... recognisable. But does it mean we should be chaining him after all, if we're not even safe when he's in hell?"

Gunn shrugged. "Bit drastic, when he didn't even get close. Sure we look out for any sign of him gettin' smarter, but that don't look like the direction he's headed."

They went training that evening. They'd done very little training since Angelus had appeared that Sunday, and they were going to have to train every day from now on to get and keep in shape for Yan and her colleagues. This meant they would be leaving Angel alone for at least two hours every evening. As far as Wesley knew, Angel had only ever had four visions while he was on his own, and those had all been in the early days, when he was lucid much more often, and when he could give a full account of a vision afterwards, analyse it, even drive to the address. Now, if they missed the reverberation phase, if Angel didn't manage to find the drawing pad on his own, then they might not even realise he'd had a vision, they might mistake it for a hallucination. Yes, they'd already had to leave him alone several times since he'd got so much worse - for over eight hours on the night of the Hollywood-and-Wilcox vision - but leaving him for hours every day, that was asking too much of their luck.

Wesley put the problem to Gunn on their way to the training session, and Gunn immediately suggested getting a voice-activated recorder and setting it next to Wesley's audio receiver whenever they had to leave the apartment. Wesley had had the same idea, so they simply agreed to buy one the next day, after Gunn had done some research on features and prices.

After training Gunn dropped Wesley off at the apartment and went to Caritas: his first Thursday there in nearly a month. The boys were very pleased to see him and the first half hour was solid catching-up. They asked about the move, about the new apartment, about how Wesley was doing and Wesley's sick friend. Gunn told them some of the truth about Angel, using Wesley's story about the head-injury and the violence and mood-swings.

"But we're... We're gettin' better at predicting his moods. And the way we've got his new room set up, with the bars on the windows and the locks and everything, well, we don't have to worry about him nearly as much. Or about the neighbours bein' bothered by the noise."

From the amount of questions the boys had, you'd think they'd never met anyone before who'd ever moved apartments in L.A. OK, maybe Piriti and Matt hadn't ever moved, but Grouw certainly had, and he was acting just as curious as the others. Suddenly, looking around the table at the three very-different faces, all with the same alert expression, Gunn got the feeling that there was really only one question that they wanted to ask: is the apartment a two-bedroom, or a three? They'd been talking about it, the three of them. Must've decided they couldn't ask outright, would just wait for Gunn to let something slip.

So. Was it time to tell them? By the look of them, they already thought they knew, and it wasn't gonna freak them out. They never talked about sex, the four of them, which was kinda odd, now Gunn thought about it. When he was alone with Matt or with Grouw and the duals, then, yeah, the subject of dating had come up, like it would in your average conversation. So the difference when it was the four of them, was that because of Piriti, the way he was with his brother? Or because the three boys hadn't all figured out before, what they thought about Wesley and Gunn?

So again, was it time to tell them? Maybe. After he'd come up with some general comment to make about three-bedrooms, seen if they looked surprised enough that he could be completely sure about what they'd been thinking. Gunn soon decided that his best approach would be to ask something about Grouw's apartment (since Grouw was the one with the two roommates), but he got no further before the boys got their song called. "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" was their newest song and this time they did want to talk it over afterwards, or talk it over with Gunn anyway, not so much between themselves. Maybe they'd missed having him as an audience, though they weren't short of people now telling them what they'd done right with the song, and those were all people who sang, which you'd think would mean more.

When the visitors had stopped coming to the table and there was a proper gap between songs, Gunn said, "Y'know, I've just now thought... You guys've never asked me when I'm gonna sing somethin'. Was me, I'd'a made it a runnin' joke."

All three looked surprised, then looked at one another, and then Matt said, "We just figured you didn't wanna be read."

"Red? Not like I'm gonna turn beetroot, am I?"

Matt looked even more surprised, blinked hard. "You hadn't heard about the host?" He gestured towards the bar, where the host was standing talking to the previous singer. "How he can read people's futures when they're singing?"

Piriti said, "Well, it's more guiding them to the right path. Giving warnings. Or if it's worth sticking with something. He never acts like it's cut-and-dried."

Matt nodded, agreeing Piriti had put it better. "And some people just never want him doin' that, so they don't sing. We guessed that was you."

"But you don't mind?"

Grouw shrugged. "We never tick the box. Don't care what he sees, long as I never hear about it."

Piriti again: "There's a box when you fill in the request-sheets for the songs. Whether you want him to tell you afterwards what he's seen."

"Oh!" Gunn pointed to the bar, but without looking around. "And I was thinkin' he was giving singin' tips."

Matt said, "He does that too, but not for free and not during club-hours. So when are you gonna sing?"

Gunn shook his head. "Nah, never thought I would, now I know I won't." He already had his share of vague warnings, he had no doubts about his "path", and he didn't want anyone making judgements on him and Wesley for what they were doing to Angel - because that's what it would come down to.

When Gunn arrived back at the apartment, Wesley was in the armchair with a book and a glass of Madeira, and Angel was having a hallucination about being tortured. Wesley had turned the sound off, but they didn't need a microphone to hear this one.

"Or it may just be a nightmare. I'm not sure. He definitely dreams, I've been seeing it. This started fairly quietly with just some muttering and twitching, and I'm not entirely sure that he's woken up."

"This is from hell?"

Wesley shrugged. "Or his imagination."

Gunn put his hand on Wesley's shoulder, standing nearly behind him, having to be careful of the side-table. "You OK, Wes? You know you don't have to watch."

Wesley turned to look up at him. "I haven't been. This only started a few minutes ago. And..." A shrug. "I have nightmares myself. I think it's just a nightmare. They never really last long. Whatever it feels like when you're inside one."

The nightmare was over by the time they went to bed, and the end seemed to prove that it had been a nightmare. Angel had come awake in a flurry of panic, and then when he saw where he was he sank into an exhausted despair, too exhausted for him even to try to hide. Wesley found that sight much more difficult than the nightmare, and Gunn closed Wesley's book, finished Wesley's wine, and took Wesley quickly to bed.

On Friday morning, Wesley waited for Angel to fall asleep and then went out to buy the recorder and return the video tapes, expecting that Angel would still be asleep when he returned so he wouldn't miss anything except a few quiet signs of dreams. Gunn was working on some research at the table, and with the receiver over on Wesley's desk, he didn't realise that Angel had woken up until he glanced at the screen and found that Angel wasn't lying on the mattress any more, but was standing a few feet away from one of the windows, hand held up like he was testing the barrier. Gunn left the table and went to stand in front of the screen, and he saw Angel turn his head sharply at the sounds of movement. Angel stared at the door for a long time, and Gunn couldn't see terror, or rage, or calculation - more... troubled thought, uncertainty. Was this Angel? Was he finally lucid? Gunn decided not to try to talk to him to find out, but to leave that for Wesley; Angel hadn't known Gunn in weeks, and an approach from a stranger was about the surest way to drive Angel into retreat.

Over the next ten or fifteen minutes, Gunn watched Angel slowly explore the room, heard him give a grunt of recognition when he found the protection on the door, heard him run his hands over the walls. This Angel saw the camera and the microphone, touched and tested the rings and the chains, moved the mattress. He looked often towards the door and the camera, and his expression of puzzled apprehension was always the same. Gunn decided the search must be finished when he saw Angel return to the books and the magazine. Angel picked each one up in turn, smelled them, felt them inside and out, exactly like he'd done before, about five minutes earlier. But then he knelt on the floor, his knees nearly touching the edge of the mattress, picked up the magazine and opened it so it was half on his knees, half on the mattress, and then he started to read, from the first page, and with great concentration.

Gunn watched the reading for a couple of minutes, saw that Angel was reacting to what he read, bending closer over the pages, getting puzzled enough to need to drag his hand over his head. But it was obviously going to be more of the same for a long time, so Gunn went back to his research and checked the screen less and less often as it just kept on showing him that he'd been right.

"I think he's lucid."

Wesley dropped his bag on the couch and hurried over to the screen. "He's reading! With both hands. How long has he been awake?"

Gunn joined Wesley and brought him up to date with what Angel had been doing. Angel was reacting strongly to the sound of them talking, turning to stare at the door, then half-rising so the magazine slid off his knees then onto the floor. He looked afraid, and sad, and resigned. Gunn thought he saw Angel's lips move, but it must have been less than a whisper. Maybe a minute of the staring, then Angel sank back to his knees and picked up the magazine, but with his body turned now, angled away from the door.

"You haven't tried to talk to him?"

Gunn shook his head. "Your department. Definitely."

Wesley took a deep breath then knocked on the door. "Angel? It's Wesley. Can I come in?" No response. "I know you're busy reading, but can I come in?"

A long pause, then Angel slowly put the magazine down closed on the mattress, then got to his feet and turned to face the door, all in a single, smooth motion. "Will you bring Doyle in, too?"

Wesley recoiled in shock, but recovered quickly. "Doyle isn't here, Angel. He's gone. I'm sorry."

“Just you, then.” The tone was forbiddingly flat, but it still sounded like permission. Wesley unlocked the door, opened it slowly, took one last look at the screen, then stepped inside. Gunn had moved away from Angel’s line of sight, and on the screen there was just Angel staring, forlorn, with Wesley not yet in view of the camera.

“I’m sorry, Angel.”

“I heard him at the computer. He was always at the computer. How long has it been?”

Wesley swallowed. “He died over a year ago. Fourteen months.”

Angel nodded several times. “And you?” A slight frown. “You must have died after him. But... it’s not as clear.”

“You -” Gunn saw Wesley take a step backwards, staggering like he’d been hit, but then he caught himself, stood straight again. “You think I’m a ghost?”

“No. No, I know this is a hallucination. And him. But - No, it can’t be only a year. Of course you don’t really know. But I think it’s much longer.”

Wesley was walking towards Angel, hand held out. “No, I do know that it was fourteen months. Because I’m real. I’m not dead, Angel. I’m here.”

Angel didn’t touch the hand Wesley was offering, but instead seized Wesley by the upper-arm - hard, judging by Wesley’s yelp - then buried his face in Wesley’s shirt, far too close to Wesley’s neck. Gunn grabbed the holy-water and ran into the room, but Angel was already drawing back.

“You still use the same detergent. And that lemon soap. And you still eat too much pepper. But there’s someone else. A man?”

“Yes, that’s Charles.” Wesley pulled his arm free and turned towards Gunn. “Charles is always at the computer. It was him you heard.”

Angel looked at Gunn without any trace of recognition, just for a few seconds then back at Wesley. “He thought I was attacking you.”

“Sure looked that way.”

“Would I do that?” Still to Wesley. “I can’t... I know I’m not... who I was. But I’m not Angelus, am I?”

“Not right now, but sometimes you are. That’s why we have to have the room like this. I know it’s terrible. I’m sorry.”

Angel looked at the room, to right, then to left. “How long have you had to keep me here?”

“This is our new apartment. We only moved in two days ago.”

“Two days?” Angel looked stunned. “Not ten years?”

“We moved in on Wednesday the 14th of February. Today is the Friday.”

“And the year?”

“2001.”

“So that magazine... I thought that must be... I thought that didn’t mean anything.”

“No, it’s the latest issue. Angel, you must be hungry. I’ll go and get you some blood. It’ll only take a few minutes. We’ll shut the door, but I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Angel nodded, and Gunn and Wesley left the room together and locked the door.

“I’d’ve got the blood for you.” Gunn had followed Wesley to the kitchen.

“I know. I needed to get out. My brain’s still reeling from the ten years.”

Gunn nodded. “Did he hurt you? Your arm.”

“I’ll have bruises. But I was expecting to have to spend the next half-hour arguing with him about whether or not I was a hallucination. I think I got off lightly.”

Angel had gone back to kneeling with the magazine. He didn’t stand up when Wesley returned, just reached up to take the beaker. Wesley knelt too, along the edge of the mattress closest to the door.

“Thank you.” Angel handed the empty beaker to Wesley, who put it on the floor.

“You’re welcome. Would it be stupid to ask you how much you remember?”

A sigh. “That I’d been getting worse. Much worse. Dangerous. Hallucinating. I knew there’d been Doyle. Then you. But I - I didn’t know who’d come after you. How many, or - Are we still in L.A.?”

“Yes, we’re in Lawndale. The Thomas Guide’s down in the car, but I’ll show you tomorrow. We’ve only moved five miles.”

“Lawndale...” Angel was shaking his head. “I can’t even - I should know Charles. Shouldn’t I?”

“He’s been with us since October. But there’s no ‘should’. I don’t expect you to remember anything.”

“But what about this?” Angel pushed the magazine at Wesley, across the mattress. “Should I know all of these people?”

“God, no! It’s a celebrity gossip magazine. You - find them funny sometimes. It was a stupid thing to give you now, I’m sorry.”

“So I don’t know...” Angel reached over for the magazine, flicked through it and found the page quickly. “So I don’t know this... ‘Cordy’?”

“Oh, Cordelia! Yes, you do know her. You knew her in Sunnydale for several years. Before she got famous.”

“In Sunnydale.” Angel was nodding. “Yes, I can see...” He trailed off then pushed the magazine at Wesley again. “So all this is real? Everything in there?”

“Um... It’s a very selective view of life, and presented in a deliberately misleading way. But it’s not a hallucination. Or a trick. Was that what you thought?”

“Something like that.”

“I’ll bring you our newspaper instead.” Wesley put the magazine on the floor next to the beaker. “Unless you’d like something else. I can get different books.”

Angel turned to pick up the books and looked at them front and back. “I need to know where I am. When. Will these be good books?”

“Probably not. I’ll get you some books about the last few years in L.A. I’ll get them for tomorrow if that’s alright. If you’ll be OK with the newspaper for now.” Angel nodded and Wesley picked up the magazine and the beaker and got to his feet. “I’ll go and get it.”

Wesley took Angel all of the sections of the L.A. Times, and Angel ran into problems from the headline of the first section. “Bush? Bush is President? But wasn’t there... I remember Arkansas.”

Wesley explained, and that took some time. The other articles on the front page were about proposed tax cuts, poisoned whales, a coalition in Israel, and grocery chains hiring union labour. Angel coped with those fairly smoothly, but then page three had the California energy crisis and Wesley was into another long explanation, and Angel was frowning and looking to Gunn like he was getting a headache. And then there were three stories in a row about legal disputes - over

trying juveniles as adults, over distributing money among 300 high-schools, and over placard fees for disabled drivers - and Gunn wasn't surprised when Angel didn't turn over for page four, but sat back shaking his head.

"I can't. There are too many... pieces. I can't put them together. With the magazine I didn't - That just had one story." Gunn thought Angel had that right. Dresses and parties and who's hot and who's doing who. That one story. Same on every page.

"Yes, it must seem fragmented. You don't have to read every article, though. Just what interests you."

"I don't know what interests me. I hardly recognise anything. Just you. And Cordelia. And Doyle's computer. I want the magazine back."

"Of course. Charles? Could you bring us the magazine that's on my desk?" Gunn handed the magazine directly to Angel, who wouldn't quite look at him but did thank him.

Wesley said, "I hope that will help you remember, if you're not sure where you are the next time you wake up."

"Will I know you're real?"

"I don't know." Gunn could hear that Wesley was smiling. "I'm not in any magazines like Cordelia. I don't know what proof I could give you."

Angel was looking at Wesley, from head to knees and back again, very serious. "Your shirt? I remember your shirt."

"My shirt? This shirt?" Gunn could imagine the bemused look on Wesley face, exactly; also knew to the second when Wesley was going to give that shrug. "Well, yes, maybe that would work." Wesley lifted up slightly to pull the shirt out of the waistband, and then started undoing the buttons. Gunn had to close his eyes. Not jealous. Not quite jealous. But he remembered how much it had meant to him when Wesley was ready to let him see. Angel had already seen, though. Seen everything. Angelus too. And of course Wesley would never blame Angel for what Angelus had seen.

Gunn opened his eyes just as Wesley lifted the shirt off his left shoulder. Wesley didn't try to deal with the last stage himself, but held his right arm out to Angel, and Angel took the hint and pulled at the cuff. When Angel had the shirt in his hands he pressed it briefly to his face, then nodded at Wesley and put the shirt down on top of the magazine.

Wesley stood up. "I'll just be next door. Call me if you need anything. Want to ask anything. I'll leave the newspaper. You might find something. I don't know, maybe a review of a book you'll want to read?"

"Don't get me any books about the energy crisis." Not a joke, but an urgent order. Gunn guessed he really didn't want to feel that headache coming back.

Another smile. "I won't." Then Wesley left the bedroom, closing and locking the door behind him.

When Wesley came back into the living-room with a fresh shirt on, Gunn said, "I could do you the book of all time about nightmare roommates. 'I saw him sniff my boyfriend's shirt'. God, they'd love me on the daytime shows with that."

"If they'd believe you. And wouldn't they want the two of us along for you to shout at? How much shouting would you need to do?"

"Dunno yet. Later. When we're done with work. Before training."

Later was when they were walking down to the truck. Wesley said, "Is it time for the shouting, then? About Angel and the shirt?"

Gunn shook his head. "I'm not angry. Turns out. Just feel... Don't even know what I'd call it. Of course you have to... Course you do. Just hard to watch."

"I can imagine. It doesn't mean anything to him, you know? Probably less than those pictures of Cordelia. He's beyond being able to understand how it would seem to a human."

“Yeah. Wes? If somebody gave you a ring, would you wear it?”

Wesley looked thoughtful. “I’ve never worn a ring. I used to have nightmares about industrial machinery.” A lopsided smile. “Which could be called misdirection.”

“But would you wear one now?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Yeah? OK.”

After training Gunn dropped Wesley off at the nearest Barnes and Noble and went to Blockbuster (“Terminator 2” and “Limbo”) and then to get beer and curry to go. Wesley was waiting for him outside the bookstore, well into the first chapter of the twenty-year-old cop novel that he’d somehow come away with.

“Thought the idea was to bring him up-to-date.”

Wesley shrugged. “I don’t think he’ll notice. And I think he’ll like Wambaugh. I didn’t realise until tonight that they were all set in L.A. I would have sworn blind that ‘The Choirboys’ was New York. But that’s too violent for him, and very fragmented as well. As far as I can remember ‘The Delta Star’ is quite tame. And it’s held together by a detectable story-line, which seems to be what he wants.”

“What else you get?”

“A travel book on L.A. by an English writer. From ‘93. The girl recommended it. Maybe because of my accent, but she wasn’t pushing that aspect. We’ll see.”

The tape had recorded only a few minutes: some mutterings and sounds of restless movement, then shocked or panicked gasps followed by scurrying, and then the gasps became muffled and must soon have dropped below the level for the recorder. The tape confirmed what they could see from the screen: that Angel had woken up in hell and gone to hide in the corner. There had been no vision.

On Saturday morning Wesley went shopping again, this time for a new navy-blue suit and some Speedos, and, again, Angel woke up lucid while Wesley was gone. With the shirt and the magazine right there under his hand when he woke up, Angel seemed to know immediately where he was. He rolled off the mattress and onto his feet, looked up into the camera, and called for Wesley.

Gunn opened the door and saw Angel’s smile turn instantly to a frown, first of puzzlement, then of concentration. “Wesley had to go out, Angel. He should be back in half an hour. I can get you your blood if you’re hungry.” Angel nodded slowly, still frowning, and Gunn closed the door and went to the kitchen.

Angel had retreated to the far wall and that damned magazine. “I’m not in there, Angel, if that’s what you’re looking for. My name’s Gunn. I live with Wesley.” Charles was for family and for Wesley, not for Angel. “Look, I’ll write it down for you.” The pad was half-hidden in the jumble of newspaper; looked like the whole pile had been thrown at the window. Gunn waited until Angel had finished drinking before he passed him the pad. “See: ‘Gunn’, with two ens. D’you want me to take the newspaper away? Wesley got you some books about L.A. Maybe you’re ready for those.”

A pause, then: “I think so.”

Gunn got rid of the newspaper then came back with the books. “There’s a cop novel and a travel book. Wesley should be back soon.”

Angel didn’t seem able to settle to anything. Each time Gunn looked up from searching for a ring for Wesley, he found Angel doing something different: drawing on his pad, or examining one of the books, or looking out of the window, or running Wesley’s shirt through his fingers. Finally Angel went back to the pad and to his favourite corner, and was asleep there, propped against the wall, when Wesley came back.

Gunn was out digging with the boys all afternoon. Wesley was supposed to be treating himself to some reading but when Gunn got home he found Wesley hard at work at his desk, surrounded by old case-files and by sheets and sheets of neatly-written lists.

“Hey! New case come in? Or you had an idea for gettin’ Angel Investigations some more work?”

Wesley shook his head, looking discouraging and grumpy. “He had two more of those message visions.”

“Two? Jeez. Same message twice?”

“No.” Wesley got up and walked over to the table, where he’d laid out sheets of drawing paper, arranged in two groups. “This is the first one.”

A young man at a card-table, candles on the table and metal tankards. The same man coming out of an old house at night, face surprised as he looked out of the drawing, like he’d just seen something unexpected; and in the house, a woman just turning away from the window. And then the man dead, eyes open, throat torn, arranged sitting-up against the door of the house... for that woman to find?

“It’s Angelus, isn’t it?”

“It must be. I think it’s Ireland; his accent got very strong. Probably around 1820. He was asleep when the vision hit. And also when the second vision hit about four hours later. He’s still feeling the effects of the second one. I turned the sound off.”

On the screen, Angel was pressing himself to the wall, shaking his head, whispering urgently. Gunn could hear the rhythms of Angel’s voice, but none of the words. The second set of drawings showed the outside of an ordinary house, number 25, looked like L.A. to Gunn; and then the inside, where there hardly seemed space in the living-room for the huge egg and the hungry mass of slime and claws and fangs erupting out of it.

“This is now, right? I mean, this was a mission once.”

“A Tahval demon at 25 Cabrillo. I didn’t see it, or the house. He refused to let me go with him. But I remember the address. I found pictures of the Tahval.”

“Why’d he refuse?”

“I’d just have got in the way. I still had my stitches in. He wouldn’t have trusted me to wield anything heavier than a stapler.”

“So he went on his own?” Hard to imagine now.

Wesley nodded. “He came back drenched in... Tahval fluids. Clawmarks right through his coat and his shirt. Said that if I could learn some basic moves with an axe... If I convinced him I’d know the right time to use the moves... Then maybe it would be worth taking me along. So that’s how it started, really. Anyway...” Wesley turned back to his desk. “I decided to make a list of all of his visions. With the address, and the other things he might say or put in the drawing. Details of the location. Description of the demon. The victim. So if he has one when you’re here on your own, then you should be able to recognise it. I’m sure I’ve forgotten some.” A quick smile. “But he’ll probably have them again just to remind me.”

“OK. Good idea. And you haven’t tried to guess for a second about the messages, have you?”

“Not for a second. No.”

“Hmm. Angelus leaving one of his... surprises. Think we’re already pretty-much primed for that. And then the vision that got him to start training with you. Telling us to be careful with the duals?”

Wesley shrugged. “Take as long as you like over that. I’m going to get showered and changed for our date.”

They ate at the table, with the computer moved onto the floor. Angel seemed to be slowly falling asleep and they both ignored him easily. Over coffee, with a switch to Gunn’s choice of music, they held hands and argued about whether they should have saved “Terminator 2” for this proper date, rather than taking a risk on “Limbo” which neither of them had seen. Gunn had needed winding down the night before but he didn’t now, and besides he’d chosen “Limbo” because it was by the same director as “Passion Fish”, so it was obviously a Wesley-date movie.

Suddenly Wesley flexed his fingers against Gunn's then drew his hand back slightly. "You're sizing me up for a ring, aren't you?" Not turned self-conscious, just curious.

"Um... Didn't know I was, not just then, but yeah, been thinkin' about it a lot today."

"What type of ring?"

"A signet-ring? Really simple, hardly know it was there. I'd show you first."

Wesley gave a slight smile and pushed his hand back towards Gunn, right over Gunn's palm until his fingertips were stroking Gunn's wrist. "Should I get you one too?"

Gunn shook his head firmly. "I don't need one from you. And I'm guessin'... you don't feel like you need anythin' from me, either."

Wesley frowned slightly, thinking, then shrugged and nodded. "I'll be very glad to wear it, but I already know how you feel about me."

"Yeah. Same here." A harsh sigh. "Thing is, it's not about you and me, me and you, it's about Angel. And -" Another sigh. "And how I can't settle on any one way of lookin' at him. Just can't seem to. 'specially where you're concerned, how he acts with you. I get - I dunno, whenever he does somethin' new like with your shirt. Or makin' us think about how we're gonna havta shower him. That'd be bad enough, freak me out for the rest of the day. But on top of that I get half the other stuff comin' back, from the last times he freaked me out. So I got six different feelings churnin' round and I dunno what they're gonna end up makin' me do."

Wesley's hand had tightened around Gunn's wrist, and he looked very watchful. "Like the time you asked me if I ever wanted to kill Angelus?"

"No, I - Damn, that seems a long time ago. Angelus, I got sorted. Turn the sound off him, shut him out. It's Angel. Where we havta be in there with him. Havta be close so we c'n help, but... God, he wants the weirdest kinda help. Your shirt. Seein' him with your shirt..."

Wesley had relaxed his grip and was nodding. "Of course. How are you supposed to react to something that? To decide how to react. But why a ring? How would that... help you deal with him?"

Gunn shrugged. "Hopin' it'll stop me from yellin' at him to back off, get the fuck away from you. 'cos... 'cos I got there first, I got somethin's always closer to you than he's gonna get. So that's the first thing I'll think when he freaks me out, and it'll slow me down, give me time to stop from doin' somethin' stupid."

Wesley smiled, and slid his hand back down to link his fingers with Gunn's. "Your mantra. So it would be the focus for your mantra."

"I guess. Not like I thought it through like that, I just - Well, I was thinkin' at Christmas that someday I'd like to get you a gift you wouldn't drink up, somethin' you'd always have. On your hand would be best 'cos God, I love your hand. But I couldn't see you bein' glad to wear anything like that, just didn't seem like you. 'n' then Angel's suddenly too close 'n' wham! Somethin' in me's goin', ' The ring. Get the ring. You need the ring.' " He laughed and shook his head. "Now that, that's the mantra."

A brief smile, then slowly: "No, it wouldn't have seemed like me. Not back then. But now... I think that could work for me too. My version of your mantra. That I've always got you that close to me. Keeping him at a manageable distance." A pause. "Do I make it more difficult for you? To decide what to think about him. Am I... being inconsistent? How often am I being thoughtless with you?"

"Man, you're bein' totally consistent. You take care of him, you havta take care of him. 'n' bein' you, you have to do everythin' you can. I'd hate to see you any different. Would help, though, if you'd go into a jewellery story and find out your size."

"Monday. I'll do it first thing on Monday."

Gunn lifted Wesley's hand and kissed his fingers, and then they were getting to their feet and heading for the bedroom. They sucked one another off, on the bed but still dressed, then lay mostly in silence, just a few stray remarks about the ways the date would have been different if they'd been able to go out.

"Limbo" was set in Alaska, which mostly meant lots of white to Gunn, in every sense. He'd never seen the point of "Northern Exposure", couple of times he'd half-watched it, but he somehow kept coming across kids who thought Alaska was the answer, where they could really get their start. Weird. Because it was the opposite of L.A.? Seemed almost to see it as a bonus that you couldn't sleep rough up there.

At the start, Gunn was seeing the movie mostly as a background for those kids, but then there was a scene with the woman singing in a bar, and he was surprised to recognise the song: it was "Looking for the Heart of Saturday Night", which Piriti would usually start at some point in the digging, but Gunn had never heard it all the way through before, or with music. After that the movie was still slow, but Gunn had got properly interested in where it was going.

"Wesley?" The receiver was on the coffee table. Angel was looking up at the camera, all four books in his hands.
"Wesley?"

Wesley got up immediately, and Gunn stopped the movie and followed him. "Make sure it's him, first. Don't just go in there."

"Angel, I'm here. Do you need something?"

"Wesley." Angel held the books up. "Did you give me these? What do they mean?"

Wesley opened the door. "They mean that I know you sometimes like to read. For interest and to pass the time. Is there something you'd prefer?"

Angel looked down at the books. "Which one would pass the time?"

"Well, they all would. 'The Delta Star' would probably make it pass most quickly. Are you bored?"

Angel looked at Wesley like he didn't understand the question. Then: "What's the delta star?"

"It's just something in the story. You're not expected to know. You find out as you read the story."

Angel let the other three books fall to the floor and opened the cop novel. After a few seconds, frowning: "When was it Mother's Day? Do they know I - What's the bad check? It says everyone was watching it."

"The bad check is a police officer. The other cops are watching him because they're expecting him to lose his temper. But I only know that because I read the same chapter yesterday. Again, it's something you find out as you read the story."

Angel frowned down at the page again then dropped the book. "I want something I know."

"Well... come and see what you can find on the bookshelves. But if you already know it, maybe it wouldn't be very interesting for you to read. You wouldn't know anything in the hardback books. There's no point in looking at them. Just try the paperback books like this one."

Angel took out six books in turn, read the first page, and then would have dropped the book if Wesley hadn't been standing ready. After those six Angel suddenly seemed to lose focus, reached for a seventh book without looking at it, and turned abruptly and went to his room. Just like the good old days. Gunn locked the door and he and Wesley returned to the film.

"Wesley. Tell me about the bad check." An order. Looked like Angel hadn't lost focus, just taken a five-minute sulk.

Wesley sighed. "Don't wait for me. I think this could go on for hours."

Gunn let the movie play on but he was watching the other screen instead, was tuned in only to the sounds from the receiver. Angel wanted Wesley to read with him, explain every last fucking detail of that stupid cop novel. Wesley was a saint. Or a sucker. Or both. Eventually Gunn turned the receiver off. He tried to watch the movie but soon gave up and

rewound it, channel-hopped for a while, then turned the TV off and went to set the computer back up on the table. Wesley and Angel didn't seem to hear any of the clattering from the living-room, laughing too hard at some cop-joke; well, Wesley was doing the laughing, Angel was just smiling slightly. They were sitting together against the wall, right knees raised at exactly the same angle, and with the book spread open on Wesley's knee. Busy day for Wesley's new suit.

At 10:22, Angel had yet another vision - a new one, about a pair of vampires working a nightclub on La Brea, going for couples. Identifying the vampires was easy, getting them away from the crowds for an inconspicuous staking was more difficult, since Gunn and Wesley were not the type of couple they were looking for, and since Wesley seemed to have no idea how to behave naturally in a nightclub. Of course, with that empty sleeve he was always going to look out of place, but couldn't he find some middle-ground between acting all stuffy and disapproving (OK, pompous) and acting like he couldn't believe his luck? Gunn could see that it was kind of funny (and Wesley a smooth operator? no way), but he was glad that he'd first met Wes far, far from a nightclub.

They went training first thing on Sunday morning then watched the rest of the film over a very slow breakfast. Strange film. A bummer, really. Failure after failure, everything getting worse. And then refusing to give you an ending, just cutting it off, leaving you hanging - in Limbo, as Wesley pointed out. Gunn didn't hate the movie but he thought they'd have had a very different fuck the night before, going to bed after seeing that. Maybe Angel had done them a favour, sending them out to get covered in vamp-dust.

Rondell called at midday to say that the crew would be going to Venice for the game of pickup, and Wesley nodded at Gunn to go ahead. There were no digs about coming back to the crew and a couple of the kids even asked how he was doing ("keepin' busy"). It was a good game.

Wesley and Angel were reading again when Gunn got back to the apartment, sitting in the same position against the wall, but Angel was losing focus by then and Wesley soon left.

"How is he today?"

"The same. He's following the story quite well, though he keeps on forgetting things. I have to remind him or explain at least twice every page."

"Not gonna be readin' on his own, then?"

"Not this week."

"You talk about anything else?"

"Not really. I told him about the visions but... the book seems more real to him at the moment. And the 'message' visions... I shouldn't have bothered. Far too confusing."

Later, they watched Angel wake up for a brief hallucination that Wesley said came straight out of the book - a dead dog in a grocery bag, sent as a threat. After Angel had switched off, Wesley went to make a pot of tea, and once he'd settled again on the couch he said to Gunn, "Have you ever noticed how all of the 'message' visions hit while he's asleep? I can't think of a single 'mission' vision like that."

"'nother part of the message?"

Slowly: "I don't know. I'm almost wondering if they're actually another type of hallucination. Brought on by his dreams. When he dreams about a vision, it triggers the seer part of him."

"Yeah, but what about Angelus? Those were never missions. Nothing there for the seer to remember. Helluva message, though."

"I think... his feelings when he remembers what Angelus did are the same as his feelings when he's having a vision. That he's desperate to stop it happening. And it's as urgent and immediate as the visions because in both cases he's right there. He's inside it. It's not impossible that his brain could take those feelings and generate a vision out of them. I'd like to think we did get sent a warning about Angelus, but it might just have been an accident, caused by his brain-damage. In the same way that Angelus was able to appear like that - because of the brain-damage. It might not be a message. Not a coincidence, either. More, inevitable. We were just lucky in the order in which the effects occurred."

Gunn shrugged, not in any rush to get rid of the idea of the messages. Especially not for blind luck. “Don’t see how you could tell either way.”

“No, neither do I. But I’d take any bet you want that no message vision will ever start when he’s awake. Or if it does, it will be directly connected to what he’s just been reading.”

“No bet. The two of you’d fake one and spend the money on more books.”

* * * * *

Their first training session with the duals was on Tuesday evening, and the portal from Ussur opened at West Century and Crenshaw on the dot of seven on Tuesday evening, and Grouw’s sister Yan and the other two duals walked through it like they’d done this a hundred times before - which probably they had. The portal was a fifteen minute drive from the warehouse where they trained, and Yan and Su’son got in the car with Wesley while Tarrag rode in the bed of the truck.

Yan had said she wouldn’t be telling them in advance what type of duals she would be bringing to each session, or even whether they were able to split in this dimension. Eventually (in a month or so) they would get to know all of the duals who had volunteered, but while the duals had the advantage of surprise, they might as well use it to make the training just that bit tougher.

For all three duals, the first priority was Wesley’s injury - as an obvious point of vulnerability, something that they would all target in a fight. Was the injury tender, how hard a blow was required to disable him with pain? Then he must wear padding, either over his clothes or under; over would discourage the attack, while under might allow them to invite the attack and use it to their advantage. How many moves and formations had the two of them developed to minimise the effect of the missing arm against different types of adversaries, in different situations? Yes, the crossbow was excellent, they would build on that and there was little wrong with their individual techniques, but they could get much better value out of those techniques, increase their margins of safety, if they all used these sessions to concentrate on their tactics.

Both duals were able to split - which wasn’t much of a surprise in itself - but Gunn would never had guessed the types of the demons from the combined forms. Su’son split into a bristly warthog thing and a woman who looked almost human apart from the grey skin - until she flexed her long legs and sprang ten feet into the air, straight over their heads. Tarrag split into a chunky blue Hull, like Grouw, and something like a grizzly but with armour plates instead of fur. If the fights had been for real, Wesley and Gunn would have been dead ten times over; if they turned themselves into masters of tactics with the technique to match then they might get that down to three times over, but then nothing in the visions had ever been a fraction as versatile, organised or prepared as the duals.

The session ran over so they didn’t go to the noodle place as planned, just took the duals for a quick drink in a demon bar close to the garage where Grouw worked (Yan’s choice: Gunn had never dared go in there before); and then got the duals back to West Century and Crenshaw with ten minutes to spare before the portal opened at midnight. The duals had mostly talked amongst themselves in the bar, not ignoring Wesley and Gunn, just letting themselves into their usual after-shift habits; Wesley and Gunn had listened, and Yan gave them odd scraps of background, and when they had questions all three duals joined in answering, briefly but willingly.

Back home, the tape had recorded several minutes of Angel calling for Wesley, saying that he wanted to read, and then about half an hour of Angelus enjoying a violent hallucination, which the screen showed as sexual as well as violent. Angel had probably tried to read on his own; Wesley had left the book against the wall, but now it was on the floor halfway to the door, and the tape seemed to show that Angel had called twice, the first time slowly realising that Wesley would not come, that he must be out or asleep, and the second time asking questions about things in the book, saying he wanted to understand. He sounded puzzled and frustrated. When had he taken Wesley’s shirt from the mattress and put it by the wall, where Wesley normally sat? Before he’d called that second time, or after? Did he think it had magical powers to help him remember and understand?

Gunn and Wesley both needed a shower and Gunn suggested they take one together, which they’d never done before. Gunn said it would be quicker, but of course it wasn’t. He kept thinking about Angel, about Angelus with his trousers open, about how soon Wesley would have to use those new Speedos. Probably not a good idea to give Wes any reasons, any memories to make him think about sex when he was in this shower; but there was already enough that was just Wesley and Angel.

Gunn woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of voices: Wesley and Angel and that book, coming from the receiver, which was on the chair by Wesley's side of the bed, turned on very low. Wesley was reading: a conversation between these L.A. cops, probably, but he was just doing it in his regular Wesley voice. Angel asked questions ("Who said that?") but also made comments that showed that he was following the story. Gunn turned the receiver off after a few minutes. He could still hear the voices but just as a murmur, less than the noise from traffic. Gunn woke again around dawn to find Wesley back beside him and asleep; the receiver was on again, but was silent.

"He says he wants to get clean, and to have a change of clothes."

"He said that last night, you mean?"

Wesley nodded. "He asked for a shower last night, but I said we'd have to wait until you were there to stand guard."

"Better have your Speedos on ready, then, for the next time he wakes up. Not gonna be easy."

Gunn was right, though he hadn't gone far in imagining how it would be difficult. Angel woke shortly past ten, in hell. They took him in some blood and a change of clothes, and after he'd drunk, Wesley told him they were going to take him into another room and give him a shower, and asked him to get undressed. Angel backed against the wall and glared at Wesley, muscles working in his jaw.

"Don't you want to get clean? We're not going to hurt you. You know you need to get clean. Please, Angel." Wesley reached out for the top button of Angel's shirt, and Angel snarled and threw Wesley off, halfway across the room. Gunn had the chain draped over one shoulder and he leapt in, swinging the chain as a weapon, and caught Angel about the head and back.

"Wesley, are you OK? Can you get the holy-water? Help me get out of here."

"I'm getting it." Gunn could hear Wesley running for the door. But Angel wasn't making any attempt to come back at Gunn; instead, he'd retreated along the wall, out of Gunn's reach. He was still furious, but it was a broken fury; he knew he couldn't stop them, he knew what they would do to him now he'd tried to fight back.

Gunn said, "Take your clothes off, Angel," and Angel dropped his head, turned away, and obeyed. Through everything, he kept his head lowered, couldn't have seen anything of the living-room except the carpet in front of his feet. He closed his eyes when Gunn started chaining him to the faucet, and he didn't see anything of Wesley at all. They left him kneeling on the mattress with the pile of fresh clothes beside him, and with an order to get dressed.

"That was truly horrible." They were not looking at the screen, probably wouldn't look for at least another half hour.

"Yup. How's that sponge-bath looking now?"

Wesley shook his head slowly, then sighed. "Better. But we'd still have to make him get undressed. We'll try this one more time. I suppose we'll get hardened."

"Wish he'd warned you last night."

"So do I. Maybe... Maybe he can't imagine his other states anymore. He hasn't asked about them in weeks. We don't talk about them. Or... not about any state except Angelus."

* * * * *

On Thursday night, while they were out training between themselves, the tape caught Angel calling for Wesley again, but this time the sounds went on for much longer. The actual calling was mostly in the first minute, getting more and more anxious and then Angel clearly realised that Wesley wasn't going to come and read with him, and that he would have to read on his own again. This time, however, he went back to the very beginning of the book. He didn't read out loud, not exactly, but he did talk to himself as he read, explaining who the Bad Czeck was, who Jane Wayne was, that no, he'd never met them, that this wasn't happening right now, that it wasn't Mother's Day, that there was just an ex-cop telling a story to pass the time. He wasn't quoting Wesley word-for-word, but he wasn't leaving much out from what Gunn could remember.

He seemed absorbed and content, though his way of enjoying the story must be a million miles from what this Wambaugh guy had intended. After about half an hour he started to lose focus, not explaining any more, but making remarks that probably came at first from something in the book but drifted further and further away, and became slower and quieter until he must have shut down or fallen asleep. He was lying on his side with his back to the wall, the book face-down between his knee and his hand.

Friday was their second session with the duals: two new demon-names they'd have to remember. Gunn made a chart to put on the wall, with pictures copied from Wesley's books. They'd sorted out the padding for Wesley on the Wednesday so that was now part of their morning routine: Gunn helping Wesley strap the padding on before he got dressed, making him ready for whatever the day might hold in the way of training or vision.

On Friday morning, Gunn had just started adjusting the fit when Wesley said, "I want to come straight home after the training. I don't want to stay out for the noodles and the beer."

"You bored with duals already? Hope you got some other idea for payin' em back."

"I didn't -" Wesley sighed. "I should have said, 'Would you mind going without me? Just for tonight.' Or until Angel's settled in properly. Right now... I don't want to leave him for any longer than I have to."

Never mind "right now": wasn't that the story of Wesley's life? Main difference with "right now" was that tape-recorder: the sound of Angel all hurt and bewildered when it turned out Wesley had a life of his own. Five to ten days, that email had said from the jewellery site; next week, it had damn well better be next week. "Course I don't mind. Better sound Yan out first, though. Could look bad, comin' this soon. Hafta keep 'em sweet, Wes."

"I know. I'll talk to her. Try to present it as... just an idea."

"Or me. Depends who has the best chance to get her on her own."

This time all three duals could have fitted in the car, but Yan said she'd ride with Gunn. Turned out Grouw might be joining them after training; they'd need to call him when they knew when and where they'd be going. Perfect opening, seemed to Gunn. "You know Wes's got this sick friend needs looking after? Guessin' Grouw told you, 'cos he's who we used to train with."

"A head injury, Grouw said. Makes him violent."

"Sometimes, yeah. Well, since we moved apartments he's been gettin' weird when he's left on his own too long, and -"

"You need to get back. Sure. Grouw'll come and pick us up. Say nine, nine-thirty?"

"No, I'm still good, it's just Wesley. He's the one Angel gets weird about. You're all OK if he drops out?"

"No problem. I thought there must be more than Grouw'd said. He made it sound far too easy."

"Easy enough for me. Different for Wes. Guess you'd know how bad it can get, with violent and weird?"

"Up to a point. Their cells are moved out of our section when they seem to have gone insane."

Angel hadn't called for Wesley, not when they were out training or after Wesley had got back. Gunn was woken, though, at three in the morning, by Wesley coming back to bed, turning the receiver back on even before he took his robe off.

During the day on Saturday, Angel was lucid twice, and Wesley wouldn't let them just pick a time for their training session. Instead, they had to wait for Angel to fall asleep and then wake up again, to try to be sure they wouldn't miss a lucid period. And, yes, Angel had remained awake and in hell all the time they were gone, so they were obviously gonna do more of that, fitting their lives around the chance that Angel might be lucid. Nah, they'd settle down in a few weeks; Wesley would get hardened, decide that having to re-read a chapter on his own was not the worst thing that could happen to a brain-damaged vampire.

Gunn went out again on Saturday afternoon, spent a couple of hours visiting the sites of some of the visions and some of the Angel Investigations cases, looking for any signs that trouble might be coming back, and also looking for people

to talk to, just to see what he could pick up. Another hour or so doing the occult bookstores, listening in, asking what people had been buying, buying a couple of serious books for Wesley, and a book for himself about demon dimensions. The book was by one of their competitors in the L.A. demon market, who claimed that he'd visited at least twenty of the dimensions, had been lucky to escape with his life, but had still left fabulous demon-women pining for him in every one. Gunn had already guessed that the guy had even less of a grip on reality than Angel, but it was worth five bucks to see the full proof. And then Blockbuster for "Hollow Man" and Trader Joe's for lasagne and key lime pie; they weren't making it an official "date" this time, just an evening of winding down.

Angel called when Gunn was about to serve out the lasagne (smell of food woke him up, maybe) and he didn't even bother to call for Wesley by name, just stood there by the wall with the book open, saying, "They're ready. They want to start now. Villalobos won't want to wait." Gunn put the lasagne back to keep warm and used the time to start his own book. They'd probably finish their two books at about the same time, since Gunn couldn't ignore Angel's questions and comments any more than Wesley could.

"No. No, it's not the same person. That was Leery, in the bar. Lester is someone different. This is the first time Villalobos has met him. They just have similar names."

A pause, in which Angel studied Wesley. "They have names. Do you have a name?"

"Yes. My name is Wesley."

Slowly: "Wesley." Then: "Did you have a name in the school? When you were in the library? Or were you someone different then?"

"My name was Wesley then, too. Just the same."

"And when I was lost? When I couldn't come near them? Did he know your name? Angelus. Did Darla know it before?"

"I - I don't understand what you're asking, Angel. My name is Wesley. You've always known me as Wesley."

Angel nodded several times. "I've always known you. As Wesley."

"That's right." A smile of encouragement, then Wesley got them back to the book.

There was no call during the night and Angel was asleep when they woke. They got up quickly, to be ready to go training as soon as they knew they could leave Angel, but Angel woke up lucid (and knowing Wesley's name), so they didn't get out until nearly midday.

Angel had a vision while they were gone, and the tape suggested that it had hit during a mercifully brief hallucination about being tortured (probably in hell, possibly involving a pair of demons and being taken to a different room). The tape had caught the words from the reverberation phase very clearly. Angel was still repeating some of the words when they got back from training, and from his mutterings and the drawings they would probably have been able to work out that an Aabaxes had dug its tunnel somewhere on the beach, they would have known to look for the big sandcastle with the turrets and the rows of tiny shells and the arched gateway scooped out so deep you'd almost think the castle was hollow. They would have known the name of the child that was going to vanish into that gateway, but without the tape they wouldn't have known which beach to go to.

Afterwards they gave themselves a shower and then an hour in bed. They'd been filthy, sand everywhere, just stripped themselves in record time, then helped get each other clean. There were marks on Wesley's skin from the padding and the straps, very slight, where it had rubbed or pressed in. Gunn traced the marks, almost absent-mindedly, as they lay, quietly, during the middle of their hour in bed. Would Wesley get calluses there, to match those on his hand? And what did it say about Gunn that the idea turned him on? That he already enjoyed undoing the straps, the same way he enjoyed undoing the buttons on Wesley's shirt? Nothing, Angelus. It said nothing. Except that he was in love with Wesley, he was in love with Wesley's body. So it was natural, it was totally natural, that he was in love with everything that was different and personal and private about Wesley's body.

Gunn read some more of the demon-dimension book during the evening and then found himself lying awake after Wesley had gone to sleep, thinking too many messy thoughts about crazy people.

Angel was slowly waking up. Gunn heard him sighing and shifting, then getting to his feet, moving around. Gunn was waiting for the sound of pages being turned, and there it was, and then seconds later: “We need to read. We have to read.” Angel’s voice was quiet; he seemed to be talking to himself, not calling for Wesley. But that wouldn’t last.

Gunn gave a deep sigh, hauled himself up on his elbow, and shook Wesley gently by the shoulder. “Wes? Wes, you should wake up. He wants to read.”

Wesley had turned the receiver off before he got out of bed, but Gunn turned it back on after Wesley had been gone for about a minute; he wasn’t going to sleep, so he might as well know.

Angel had forgotten almost everything about the story. Wesley started like he usually did, by giving a quick reminder of where they’d got to last time and Angel must just have stared at Wesley, maybe shaken his head, too lost even to ask questions.

“No? Well, maybe it’s been too long since we read all that. And maybe it wasn’t interesting enough for you, anyway. We could look for something better.”

“No.” Definite. “This is the book.”

“OK. That’s good. I like this book. It’s a good book, right from the start.” Gunn heard the sound of Wesley finding his place in the book with one hand, and then they were back in the bar on Mother’s Day, with everyone looking at the Bad Czech, waiting for him to lose his temper over what he was reading in the newspaper. Angel clearly thought he was hearing the story for the first time, but he only asked a fraction of his usual questions, and he guessed that the ferocious cop Ludwig was in fact a dog, well ahead of the punch-line.

Wesley was leaving some stuff out, like he always did; he’d told Gunn that he was simply too embarrassed to read out the description of the drunk dog having a wet dream on the pool table, so he skipped several lines and said that it drooled instead. And, being Wesley, he announced each change clearly in the tone of his voice, including some changes that he had not discussed with Gunn: no way that red-haired cop had said that his wife was fucking a “black man”.

Angel seemed to start drifting off shortly after the detective Villalobos arrived at the bar. His comments became fewer and stranger and then stopped. Wesley carried on reading, but getting slower and quieter, until he stopped too; and then after about ten or twenty seconds of silence, Gunn heard Wesley put the book down on the floor and get to his feet.

“The book!”

“It’s right there, Angel. You can read it whenever you want.”

“You read it. You...” The sound of Wesley sitting down heavily, like he’d been pulled back. “Read it.”

“Of course I’ll read it. Let me know if you feel you’ve heard enough.”

Angel wasn’t hearing a word about Villalobos drinking his vodka and getting the worst feeling about the gooned-out vice cop with the eyes like bullet-holes, and Wesley’s voice was quite different now he was reading to himself, quicker and much flatter, and he was getting bored and tired. Eventually he must have seen some new change in Angel, and he slowed and stopped again, and put the book down again, and this time was able to leave.

“Oh, God, we kept you up. I’m sorry.” Wesley looked nearly as exhausted as he’d been when Gunn had first met him, when he’d been coping with Angel on his own.

“Couldn’t sleep, anyway. Y’ must know that scene in the bar off by heart.”

Wesley nodded his head, then shook it over and over. “Why didn’t I get a simple book? ‘Look, this is the hero. He looks like this, and he sees this, and he does that.’ No jokes. No tricks. And absolutely no Rottweilers on pool tables.”

Gunn laughed and pulled Wesley into his arms. “Yeah, but you’d be bored readin’ that even once. How much you think he’ll remember tomorrow?”

Thoughtful: “I don’t know. I think it was the vision that wiped it out. We’ll see if it... just erased a few lines on the page. Or ripped out half the sheet.”

“Not like there’s a whole lotta sheets left.”

“No. Not many.”

* * * * *

The ring arrived on Monday morning. Gunn pushed it slowly and carefully onto Wesley’s finger, then held Wesley’s hand hard, closing his eyes as he felt the band of metal still cold against the warmth of Wesley’s skin.

“So this is what it’s like to have a possessive boyfriend.” Wesley was smiling, a half-smile, with a raised eyebrow.

“What is it like?” Gunn was still very serious. He knew he was being too intense. Was he possessive? Did that say it, what he’d been feeling about Wesley with Angel? If you could even feel possessive when you hadn’t had a moment of feeling jealous.

No, not feeling jealous, but... Angel acted now like he didn’t know Wesley had a lover. Or like it didn’t matter, like Wesley might just as well have been alone. Nothing in Wesley’s life except to be there when Angel called for him. Yeah, weeks of that now, and maybe the main thing Gunn was feeling was that he’d been blanked out – and by the person they lived with, who’d even once seen them in bed together. So here he was wanting to set some real, hard sign that he did have a claim on Wesley, that he was right there in Wesley’s life. And of course he knew Angel was crazy, it didn’t mean anything that Angel was forgetting how Wesley had Gunn – but that didn’t change the feeling, of needing to do something to put himself back in the picture.

Wesley had stopped smiling, had turned nearly as serious as Gunn. “It’s... exciting. And calming at the same time.”

“Yes.” On a breath, and Gunn moved in to touch his lips to Wesley’s. They stood very still, just barely opened to one another, then Gunn stepped back and released Wesley’s hand, and they returned to work.

Angel did recognise the scene in the bar, but as something he’d read (or witnessed?) many years ago. He needed Wesley to read it all again, and this time he didn’t interrupt with questions, but with opinions based on his memories, and most of his memories were badly messed up. For the first couple of opinions, Wesley tried to set Angel straight, but Angel was too definite so Wesley just agreed and carried on reading. Angel stayed with the story nearly until the end of the scene, long enough to get concerned about the gooned-out vice cop, who he didn’t remember (“Is he going to hurt someone? Was he talking about hurting someone? - “Just himself, Angel. There’s always a suicidal cop in a Wambaugh novel.”); and Wesley went about ten minutes into the next scene before he saw whatever it was that told him Angel wouldn’t notice him leave.

By Tuesday evening, when they were about to set off to meet two more duals, Wesley said he felt as if his head would explode or his brains would leak out of his ears if he had to read that chapter one more time. Angel’s memories of the story never got any clearer, and they were never the same twice; kinda interesting, for about a day, and then you worked hard on not listening to him. The next time, Wesley was going to pick up where they’d left off before the vision, act as if he expected Angel to be able to follow, as if this was actually the start of the story, and let Angel’s memories take their chances.

“Wha’d you think he’d do now, if you weren’t there? D’you think he’d read on his own?”

“I don’t know. I’m almost tempted to put it to the test. I’ll stay for the meal tonight, at least. I need a break.”

“Yeah, y’do.”

Wesley came to the bar as well, which surprised Gunn. The effect of the ring, maybe, making him give more weight to the parts of his life that weren’t Angel. Or helping him get some distance from Angel. Angelus was there when they got home and the tape showed that Wesley had chosen a good night to take a break. Wesley even left the receiver off when they went to bed.

When Angel’s shouting woke them at about four in the morning, they thought at first he was having a vision. But no, it wasn’t a vision, or even a hallucination - he was definitely seeing what was in front of him, and for some reason he was outraged and disgusted by the cop novel, and he was tearing it to pieces. They watched him tear up all four books and the magazine, and then he picked up Wesley’s shirt and took a grip to rip it up the back. Wesley looked away then, but

Gunn saw Angel shake his head, looking pained, bend to clear a space on the littered floor, and place the shirt carefully in the space.

The outrage was over. Angel stood for a long time with his head lowered and turned to the side, then knelt and slowly started pushing the scraps of paper across the carpet, to hide them under the mattress. The shirt went too, and when all of the evidence of Wesley was out of sight, Angel staggered towards the corner furthest from the mattress, off the screen.

Wesley turned the receiver on, put the volume up high, but Angel was silent.

“I should never have turned it off. Or - I should have stayed up until Angelus went to sleep. How long must he have been calling?”

“Well, he’s fucking spoiled. If he hadn’t snapped out of it with the shirt, I’d’ve - I dunno, he’s already been sent to his room. I’d’ve made him drink his blood cold for the rest of the month.”

“I suppose he had his reasons. I wonder how long he’ll stay angry with me.”

Angel was back in his usual corner and in hell when they got up. Wesley was still upset - very low, and talking like he was dreading the next time Angel would be lucid. Gunn kept wanting to try to joke Wesley out of it, but what if Angel was just as bad the next time? Better not to act like it’d be fine, but watch instead, and work out how to help Wes once they saw what they were up against.

Early in the afternoon, they heard waking-up sounds, and when they looked at the screen they saw Angel sitting up. He was looking confused and alarmed, and then he was acting like he’d lost something really important, searching urgently on the floor around the sides of the mattress. They saw him giving up, and then he turned his attention towards the door, and he stepped forward like he was about to call out. Wesley stepped forward too, taking a deep breath like he was bracing himself, but Angel suddenly stopped, looking stricken. He closed his mouth, and then he started looking from side to side around the room in a vague, jerky manner.

Wesley waited and watched for about half a minute, then took another deep breath and went to knock on the door. “Angel, are you alright? Do you want me to come in?”

Relief, but then that stricken look again, and slowly: “I don’t know you.”

“My name’s Wesley Wyndham-Pryce. I’ve been -”

“Wesley! Wesley. It’s Wesley.”

Wesley opened the door. “You recognise my name?”

Angel looked at Wesley and nodded over and over. “Wesley.” A deep sigh. “I couldn’t - I thought everything had been taken away. I thought...” He turned and looked towards the mattress.

“Are you looking for your books?”

“Yes. There should be books, shouldn’t there? Books and... you. But there was nothing.”

Wesley moved further into the room to kneel down by the nearest corner of the mattress and lift it up by about a foot. “That’s because you did this last night. I think I must have done something to make you very angry with me.” He set the mattress back down.

Angel was shaking his head. “Why? Why would I do that? The books help me - They help me hold on.”

“I thought that you must have woken up when I was asleep, and I didn’t hear you asking me to come and read with you. So you got angry with me. About the books. You do get angry, sometimes.”

“Yes, I...” Angel frowned, lifted his hand to his head, then leaned down and hauled the mattress out of the way, which revealed about half of the area underneath, including the shirt amongst all the paper. “Your shirt. It was your shirt.” He

reached in to take the shirt, now deeply creased, raised it to his face for a few seconds, then let it drop onto the mattress. "But why would I hide what I'd done? Wouldn't I want you to see? Are you sure it was me?"

Wesley shrugged. "You seemed to... regret what you'd done at the end. You couldn't bring yourself to tear the shirt up. It looked like you. It certainly wasn't Angelus."

"I can't imagine being angry with you like that. I think I'd be disappointed. Lost. But I know you have to sleep. I know you have to go out sometimes. How could I get that angry?"

"You weren't just angry, you were... disgusted. Maybe you thought I was... I don't know."

"Disgusted?" Angel looked thoughtful, then said slowly, "Was there any sign that I thought I was back in hell? Was there anything about the room to suggest that Angelus had been there recently?"

"Well... Angelus had been there immediately before. I don't know what sign he would have left except of sex. I wouldn't have said you were in hell, though you do... protest sometimes. Yes, actually, that is when I've seen you angriest."

Angel nodded. "I thought I was in hell, and that the books and the shirt were trophies from someone Angelus had killed. I don't know how they did it, but I often felt as if they'd let him out. As if we were separate for some of the time. They told me he'd been free. They told me what he'd done. And there seemed to be evidence, I seemed to remember... I don't know if it was real or another torture, but either way it... disgusted me. I wouldn't have been able to stand... looking at his trophies."

"Oh. So you weren't angry with me."

"I'm sure I wasn't."

A slight smile in Wesley's voice: "I'll get a trashbag. We'll clear this away."

After Wesley had fetched the trashbag, he went to the bedroom and changed his shirt, and he took the shirt that he'd been wearing in to give to Angel. When they'd cleared up and Wesley had set the bag and the crumpled shirt outside the door, and Angel had pushed the mattress back into place, Wesley said, "Do you want to read something now? I'll get another copy of 'The Delta Star' when we're out training this evening, but we could read something short right now."

"That was the brown book?"

"That's right. That's the book we've been reading for the last week and a half. You've been quite insistent sometimes about reading 'The Delta Star'. And not any other book."

"A week and a half. Have we nearly finished it?"

"Um... We got about a quarter of the way through. And then you had a vision and afterwards you couldn't remember what we'd read. And since then we've been re-reading the first chapter. You enjoy it, but you never remember enough of it to get any further."

Angel stared at Wesley, looking bleak, then nodded his head, a small nod. "I think I knew. Not that, but... how little I have left. It's slipping away. I can feel it slipping away. You -" Gunn saw Angel swallow. "I won't know you for much longer. What will I be when I don't know you?"

Wesley put his hand on Angel's arm. "I'll always be here, Angel. Even if you don't know me."

A grunt, could have meant anything, then Angel said, "You said you'd find something short. If we're going to read."

"I've got some volumes of short stories." Wesley came out and seemed to just take the first book he found. "These are set in New York a hundred years ago. Is that alright?"

"Was I there?"

"I think you were in Europe. I could check the dates." Angel shook his head, and they sat down against the wall.

“Don’t leave the book in here.” Said abruptly, while Wesley was still getting ready.

“Oh? You don’t want to be able to read on your own?”

“If I thought I was in hell again, I might tear it up. I don’t want to - I don’t want to do that.”

“OK. I’ll keep it in the living-room.”

The new book was much more Wesley’s type of book than the cop novel, very Masterpiece Theatre, nothing in it that Wesley was embarrassed to read out loud - but then Wesley liked the cop novel (except for the first chapter), Wesley liked “Dumb and Dumber”, so it was more that the new book was closer to the ideas of Wesley that Gunn had lived with for longest. Angel found the book easier to follow and he stayed with it for nearly twenty minutes. When Wesley finished, he left the book on the floor at first, and then he remembered what Angel had said and he went back to get it.

Gunn had just got to sleep that night when he was brought wide-awake by Angel shouting Wesley’s name, sounding desperate. Gunn helped Wesley into his robe, then dragged some clothes on and followed a few seconds later; though he knew he wouldn’t be able to do anything except watch and wait.

“Apartment 206. Thinks he’s hunting it. Wesley! No idea. Apartment 206. Thinks he can - In pieces. Not like that!”

A vision. Angel was scrabbling for his pad now, starting to draw. Wesley turned away from the screen, face deathly pale, and went straight back to the bedroom. He let the robe drop on the floor beside the bed but Gunn picked it up, then turned the receiver off.

“Wes? I’m going to get you a glass of your wine. ‘less it’d be wrong for now, make you feel sick?”

“I - Yes, I need something.”

Gunn poured a small glass, but brought the bottle in. Most of Angel’s words were quite clear, even through the two doors. Those neighbours had better be stone deaf. They sat up against the pillows, with Gunn’s arm tight around Wesley’s waist.

“OK. Not a message. We know he’d been thinking about you. About... losing sight of you. So he’s sleeping and dreaming about it, and, yeah, this happens.”

Wesley nodded. “I can’t look at the drawings.”

“Christ! Me neither. I’ll throw the pad away, get him a new one.” After a pause, much quieter: “I think it’ll be easier, Wes, when he’s forgotten. Should stop him doin’ this. You won’t have to worry about making him angry. Having him disappointed ‘cos you’re not there.”

Wesley took a long drink. “I don’t want to be looking forward to that. He’s dying. In a way, he’s dying. I can’t... I can’t want him gone.”

“No.” So Gunn would try not to wish Angel gone, for Wesley’s sake.

* * * * *

Wesley had about twelve books of short stories, and he looked them out and put them in a stack by the door, and took a different book in each time. Angel was lucid about once a day. He never called for Wesley by name, acted sometimes like he thought the mixture of scents on the shirt was Wesley’s name. He didn’t even talk about reading, or about books, probably because the books weren’t there in his room any more. When he called, it was for Wesley to “tell him”, to “show him”. He did recognise Wesley and he accepted Wesley’s presence completely, and he became absorbed in the stories, but in a way that seemed to make him less lucid the more he concentrated. By the time he was two pages in, he thought the story was real, happening now, he thought the people in the story knew about him and Wesley reading the story, and he thought that he and Wesley were somewhere in the book.

“What does it say first? Does it say why the library made you different? Why you were kneeling? The bed still smells of pain.”

“No, that isn’t in here.”

“Why not? They know.” Stabbing at the page. “I want to see it. Properly. Like this.”

“Well. Maybe they’ll tell you. But not until you know some more of their story.”

Angel had a vision on Saturday evening, while Wesley was in the middle of cooking a curry. The vision brought out Angelus - the first time with a vision in the new apartment - and they chained and gagged him. The restraints probably weren’t necessary here, and God knows they were coping well enough with Angelus loose; but they knew the restraints worked so they might as well keep on using them.

Gunn looked up at the screen as soon as he came out of the bedroom on Sunday morning, but he didn’t see what he was expecting. “He’s loose! You let him out! When did you let him out?”

“At about five. I heard him wake up. I thought he might be lucid. But he was deep in hell.”

“And you still let him out? On your own. You know how he gets! He could have torn you up and shoved you under the mattress.”

“I could see he wasn’t like that. I took the gag off first. He was just frightened. He seemed more frightened because I was on my own. He kept looking for you.”

“You know you should have woken me up. Did you feed him?”

Wesley nodded. “I know it doesn’t make any difference. But I have to give him something.”

“You gotta wake me up, Wes. Don’t do that again.”

A long shrug, conceding but not repentant. “I thought he might be lucid.”

Angel wasn’t lucid at any point that Sunday, and by the time they left for training on Monday evening, Gunn was starting to wonder if that Saturday’s vision had been the end, and then to wonder if he should tell Wesley what he was thinking, or wait for Wesley to bring the subject up.

Back home, Gunn played at the computer while Wesley read the newspaper and then that first book of short stories that he’d read with Angel. After about an hour Gunn paused the game to go and get a soda, turned to ask Wesley if he wanted anything from the kitchen, and saw Wesley getting to his feet, looking alert and relieved. Gunn looked up at the screen, and yes, Angel was awake, standing with Wesley’s shirt in his hands, and handling it with the care he only showed when he was lucid. Wesley started to cross the room, but then Angel let the shirt drop to the mattress, and there was something very wrong with the gesture, with the way Angel then turned his back. Dismissal. A chilling indifference. Nothing like the way Angel behaved when he was about to call for Wesley. Gunn and Wesley looked at one another, concerned and puzzled, then Gunn went to wait for Wesley, to work out what was happening with Angel.

Angel was in a low place, slumped, looking almost hollowed out. He turned to look at the door, moving very slowly, like he was pushing all the time against some great weight. His expression was empty, stayed empty as he looked up at the ceiling, then out of the window, and then as he backed up against the wall. A long pause after he’d reached the wall, then he very slowly folded in upon himself. Was he lucid? Or could he be in hell, maybe... showing another type of reaction to the trophies he thought Angelus had left?

He was speaking now. They could hear the murmur from the receiver a few feet behind them on the coffee table, though on the screen they couldn’t see his face or any sign of movement. Again they looked at one another, then over at the receiver, and then they left the screen and went to turn the volume up.

“They should’ve... They should’ve... They should’ve told me. I knew it was time but... they should have told me. I would have... They didn’t want him. They didn’t want him any more. He wasn’t - So they got rid of him. Like... Like... They sent him away. They must have said... it was like firing him. He’s been - That’s what - What did they tell him? Did he - He wasn’t what they wanted. They must have... They should have told me. But they just took him. He wasn’t... They took him.”

That seemed to be all. And now that Angel was silent, he seemed to be sinking deeper and deeper into that slump.

“Who the hell’s ‘they’? Is it the guards? You think they... let him have a friend there? But he acts like he almost expects them to play fair. Where is he?”

“I m - I m not sure. He might... He might be talking about the Powers. Their plans for him. He might... He might be talking about what happened to Doyle. He doesn’t have a normal sense of time any more. Anything can seem like yesterday to him if he still has strong feelings about it. He might have...” A shrug. “...been looking for Doyle on my shirt. I don’t know.”

“We leave him like that?”

A very difficult question for Wesley. “I don’t know what I could say to help if it is Doyle. And my shirt was - Maybe he doesn’t know me now. But then we could be as wrong as we were about why he tore up the books. I think I have to find out. Assuming he is lucid.” They went over to the bedroom door. Wesley knocked, but Angel showed no reaction at all. “Angel? Can I come in? Is there anything I can do?” A sharp movement of the head. Not a “no”, more like he’d turned watchful. Suspicious.

Almost in a whisper, Gunn said, “Looks to me like he’s thinking you’re not real. Like you’re a hallucination again. Y’know, he could’ve been talking about you with all of that. Just as much as Doyle.”

Wesley paused with his hand raised to knock again, frowned deeply, looking very uncomfortable. Eventually: “Maybe. But he still... Maybe.” He glanced up at the screen then turned the key in the lock. “Angel, I’m going to come in.” He opened the door, bent to take the next book off the stack, and then stepped in to the bedroom. “Angel, do you know who I am? Do you know where you are?”

Very slowly, Angel raised his head, looked at Wesley, eyes cold, then brought himself to sitting upright. “You think they’ve changed. That they’ll let you back if you...” Shaking his head. “You don’t have a place here now. Watcher! They’ve taken it. Can’t you feel that?” Impatient, like Wesley was being deliberately stupid. “This is just... This is just because I said... They want me to...” Shaking his head again. “But I know what they’ve decided. I know what they’ve done with you.”

Wesley moved closer, hand held out slightly. “I don’t quite understand what you’re saying, Angel. But no one’s done anything with me. Did you think... I’d left?”

With no warning, quicker than Gunn could follow, Angel was on his feet, right in front of Wesley. Wesley flinched and dropped the book. “Don’t do this, we all know you shouldn’t be here. It’s already... Go and tell them what -” An abrupt shake of the head, and then he turned away. “Tell them I don’t want you either. I never wanted you.”

Gunn was in the room; to do what, he didn’t know, but he couldn’t just stand and watch.

“No. I know.” So quiet. Wesley just accepting. “I’ll go. I won’t - I’ll leave you alone. When you get hungry... If you ever want a different book... Charles will bring you anything you need. Goodbye, Angel.” Really goodbye, like this was the end. He’d never even try to speak to Angel again.

Gunn was waiting to put his arm around Wesley, but Wesley pushed past him, shaking his head and not meeting Gunn’s eye. By the time Gunn had closed and locked the door and slid the bolts, Wesley had already shut himself in their bedroom. Or pushed the door hard closed, at any rate; if he’d turned the lock or slid the bolts on the inside, he’d done that much more quietly.

Gunn tried the handle and the door opened. He stepped in quickly, then closed the door. “Wes?” The room was in darkness. Gunn couldn’t see Wesley, but he could hear the small, choked sounds coming from the far side of the bed. Wesley was crouched down, face buried in the crook of his elbow, which was propped on the hard seat of his bedside chair. Gunn knelt beside him and held him by his shoulder and his waist and said nothing, not even his name.

What could he say? It wasn’t alright. It never could be. He wished... He wished... That Angel could be sane again, for however long it would take for him to understand what he’d done, and then to make it right. To do whatever Wesley needed. But now Angel could never make it right, even if, when he was sane, he would have wanted to. And Gunn didn’t know Angel, he didn’t know what Angel wanted or what Angel felt, he just knew what Wesley deserved.

Gunn hated Angel now. Wanting to kick Angelus bloody: that was nothing. He didn't even know yet, what would be enough punishment. Make him take a wound right through, in a way that wouldn't heal.

After a few minutes Wesley raised his head, not recovered exactly, but controlled. He put his hand on Gunn's thigh, leaned against him, and Gunn kept the same hold, but tightened. "I'm sorry. I - I'm sorry." Wesley's breathing was still very unsteady.

"You - He didn't know what he was saying, Wes."

"Oh, Charles." As quiet and sad as his last words to Angel. "He knew exactly what he was saying. He knows me as... He knows me. He's remembered everything important."

"Don't say that. Don't. Look, I'll - I'll run you a bath. Then we'll share a beer and talk about stupid movies or something while you're in the bath. Forget about him. I'll turn the screen off. I'll turn the receiver off. We'll forget about him."

A deep breath, with only a slight shake, then, slowly: "That sounds good. I do need to get warm."

"Yeah. I'll start now?"

Gunn felt Wesley nod, then draw away. "I'll change into my robe."

When he moved back to Wesley after topping up the hot water for the second time, Gunn said, "How long's it been since you took a bath without bringin' a book in with you?"

Wesley laughed. "Longer than I can remember. I even started looking for one just now. Out of habit."

"Guessed you did. Know that sound a mile off. You lookin' for a book?"

"It seems strange to..." Wesley swallowed. "I'll never read with him again. It's over now. I can put all of those books back."

Gunn shook his head. "He'll change his mind. First look at me, he'll be sorry."

A small smile. "I wonder what he'll make of you."

Gunn got a wicked idea. "Think I'll mess with him. Tell him I've had him for twenty years. Denzel's president. On his second term 'n' all."

"Who's Vice-President?"

"Uh. Y'right. Hard work. I'll put Alka-Seltzer in his blood then. Somethin' like that."

Quietly: "You don't have to be angry with him."

"I do, Wes. Being crazy... 's a piss-poor excuse. Anyone else hurt you like that, I'd -"

"No. It's a reasonable excuse. Going crazy, especially. Knowing it. So he's... past the point now where I can help him. It had to happen."

Wesley's patience was unbearable. Fiercely: "He was lying. You know he knew he was lucky."

A shrug. "I'm not what he would have asked for. That's not... I don't care what he wants. What he doesn't want. Not that much. It was -" Wesley swallowed. "It was saying that he didn't want me either. The 'either'. Because I have so many things I'm ashamed of. And he knows about all of them."

"No." A pause. "Like what?"

Wesley shook his head. "Not now. They'd seem... You wouldn't... It doesn't matter."

Like hell it didn't matter. And Gunn knew he would understand, whatever Wesley thought. He wanted to prove that, but not now, not by trying to force Wesley to talk. He laid his hand over Wesley's wrist, drew it down to Wesley's fingertips. "You can tell me, y'know. When you're ready." And Wesley nodded.

Angel probably wouldn't be lucid again for at least a couple of days, but Gunn slept with the receiver next to him on the nightstand. Angel wouldn't know his name. How would he call? Would he still want to do the reading thing?

"It's empty. The room's empty. Where is he?" The time was 3:18. A hallucination. Probably. Gunn got out of bed without waking Wesley, and took the receiver with him.

Not a hallucination, but a dream. Angel was lying on the mattress, moving restlessly. "No, that's wrong. Get a doctor here. You knew I'd be coming today. He should be here ready. Wyndham-Pryce. Room 129. You know this is his room. Why would you move him?" The voice had been impatient, now it became angry. "Taken away? No, he hasn't. He's in this hospital. Look again. Type it in again. He should be here ready. Find him." A pause. "You're lying. He's here. I'll find him. He's in one of these rooms. Wesley? Are you ready to leave? Where are you? I've got everything ready. Your books. And your clothes. You'll have the bed. I've found a good sword. Come on." Becoming anxious. "Where are you?"

How many rooms had Angel searched in dream-time? Five? A hundred? It didn't matter. Not in this type of dream. You never found what you were looking for.

Now protesting: "He should be here. He's supposed to be here. It's wrong. Taken away. When was he taken away? When did you... see him? A long pause, then very subdued: "That was yesterday. I should have been here yesterday. I would have... It's too late. But his books. I have his books. We're supposed to... What happens? If he's been taken away, what happens?"

Looked like no one knew. Angel became even more restless, but he was done with speaking - just grunts and sighs now. Gunn went back to bed and lay awake for a while trying to figure out how to describe the dream to Wesley. ("He wanted you to be there, Wes. He did.") But maybe Wesley really didn't need to hear that. Or maybe it would bring up all that other stuff, make it worse. Gunn hadn't decided by the time he fell asleep, and in the morning he said nothing to Wesley about the dream.

Angel wasn't lucid on Tuesday or Wednesday, but halfway through breakfast on Thursday morning he was there with the book in his hands, and he was calling for Wesley. "You are there. Aren't you? I can hear you." He sounded hopeful. Relieved.

"Yes, I'm here, Angel. Is there anything I can do for you?" Wesley was wary. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really. Are you going to come and read?"

"If you want." Wesley unlocked the door and went in.

They sat down and Wesley opened the book, but Angel interrupted him after just a few sentences. "I thought you were gone. Not that I really thought it but as something hanging over me. It seemed true. I felt it."

"Where did you think I'd gone? Back to England?"

"No, you weren't anywhere. It was as if you'd been lifted out. Someone had... cancelled your right to exist. There was just the space where you used to be."

"It sounds like a hallucination. Though you don't usually remember them."

Angel nodded. "I knew it didn't make sense. But I was - I couldn't quite believe it when I heard your voice."

Wesley was smiling. "I'm glad you didn't believe it. I'm not ready to be cancelled." And they turned back to the book.

Wesley's coffee was going cold, and Gunn poured it away and made a fresh pot. Angel was in a good mood, very talkative, by his standards. He interrupted the story several more times, didn't seem to be making much effort to follow it. He was talking about the future, and not on his usual "What will I be?" track, but talking like he wouldn't always be locked in the room, like he and Wesley had received some guarantee that he'd get better. Wesley didn't question him,

just went along with wherever this new assumption led, which wasn't very far: driving to Torrance to buy weapons, keeping up a contact in the Police Department (long gone, as far as Wyndham Gunn was concerned).

Wesley was out again after less than half an hour, bringing the book with him. Angel had drifted off very quickly at the end, just short of shutting down.

"Sounds like it was a new type of hallucination on Monday." Gunn held out the fresh mug of coffee to Wesley. "Should've realised. He'll say anything."

Wesley nodded, also in a good mood, though a quieter one than Angel's. "Maybe he is getting better. If he can remember his hallucinations and realise that they couldn't be real. I wonder how quickly we'll recognise the next one."

For the rest of the morning Gunn kept on looking up at the screen, not to check what Angel was doing (very little), but to stare at him and try to decide how much he still hated him. The same amount, probably, but with a different type of hate. No satisfaction, now, in imagining the punishment he might inflict; the Angel who'd hurt Wesley just didn't exist any more, he'd been a jagged fragment thrown out by the madness, fallen to dust some time that same night.

But that fragment had come from somewhere, from somewhere deep inside Angel, and it had known Wesley, and it had known exactly what it was saying. The Angel that was still with them, that was so glad to see Wesley again... Well, that Angel had to have his roots in the same deep place, and that place was full, wasn't it?, with the cruellest thoughts about Wesley. Should their Angel escape completely, be forgiven, completely, just because he'd been lucky enough not to be tempted to let those thoughts out?

Yes, because that was the easiest answer to live with. Because Wesley was happy to forgive. Because it made Wesley happy, to forgive.

Angel had a vision that night while Gunn was at Caritas. The mission was relatively easy since they got to the house in Montebello before the raising ceremony for the Havelte had even begun. The three roommates had been after an exotic pet, company for the girl's monitor lizard, and they'd got (or been given) quite the wrong idea about the size, temperament and intelligence of an adult Havelte. They didn't put up a fight, seemed to think that Wesley and Gunn and the weapons and the whole idea of the mission was cool beyond words, way better than having a demon for a pet. They insisted on helping to carry the books and equipment out to the truck, were all wide-eyed and nodding when Wesley gave his speech about keeping track of them through all the magic stores in L.A.; but Gunn wouldn't be surprised if they tried it again and soon, not to get the demon, but to be part of another mission. Gunn didn't have a speech ready to deal with that danger, so he gave each of them an Angel Investigations card. Better to give them an easy way of getting disillusioned with the demon-hunters, even if it meant ten or twenty stupid calls or emails. Gunn went back to Caritas afterwards, and finished his beer and heard the boys' third song.

* * * * *

The vision of raising the Havelte destroyed the last of Angel's lucidity, although Wesley kept watching and waking for all of the next two weeks. Angel might go back to thinking that Wesley had gone, and if he didn't hear Wesley's voice, then he might not call. So Wesley tried to be there every time Angel woke, to talk to him as proof or reminder. The only direct response he got was from Angelus, who invited him in but who was clearly working from his own ideas about who this Wesley was. Otherwise Angel ignored him, or showed wordless fear or hostility or mistrust. Wesley would persist for minutes when ignored, just in case Angel was hearing him after all.

Gunn guessed that Wesley was waking at least four or five times a night. If he woke when Wesley was going to check on Angel, or woke to find the bed empty, then he'd get up as well. One night towards the end of the first week, Gunn discovered that the bed was empty because Wesley was asleep on the couch, lying full-length under a blanket, and with the receiver next to him on the coffee table, volume turned up very high; Gunn carried Wesley back to bed, and then won the argument about where Wesley would be sleeping in future, no matter how guilty he felt about waking Gunn.

In the second week, Wesley stopped shaving and started falling asleep at his desk. He also lost all interest in sex; he liked holding and he liked kissing, but nothing raised his pulse, and Gunn decided it was better not to try, than to try and fail. Gunn wouldn't have believed that he could have the all-day sight of Wesley with stubble and manage to think of anything but sex but they were both too exhausted. Gunn looked at Wesley and had the same fierce, tender feelings, but they stayed in his head and his heart, and what reached his cock seemed only an echo.

On the Wednesday and the Thursday, Gunn rented movies and got the food, but Wesley barely ate, not even the curry on the Thursday, and he saw less than half of the movies, partly because of Angel, mostly from falling asleep. Wesley woke of his own accord for the last few minutes of “Meet the Parents” on Thursday, looked curious about what was happening, but at the end asked only if Angel had shown any change while he’d been asleep.

Gunn shook his head, turned the TV off, and said, “Wes. Gotta be a way we can accept it’s over. With Angel. Been two weeks now.”

Wesley nodded, kept on nodding, frowning like he was in pain. “I know. I know. But I don’t know how to stop. To stop imagining if there was one last time. And I wasn’t there.”

“He wouldn’t know it was the last time. Any more than you would. He’d probably think it was just hours since you were in there reading with him. He’d know you wouldn’t be gone long. You’d be there the next time.”

A long, shaking sigh. “I know. But it’s not like when you made us give up on Hollywood-and-Wilcox. You can’t just pull the truck out and take us home. We’re already home. You could take the receiver away from me but we need the screen for our own safety. And I don’t know how to make myself stop watching.”

Gunn frowned, thinking, then said, “What if I made you go away for a few days? Not tomorrow ‘cos we got training, but from Saturday. Stay away till the next training on Tuesday. See if you can make your peace. And when you come home, treat it like it’s a new home.”

Wesley dragged his hand back over his head, then said slowly, “Yes, it’s my best chance. But what if he has a vision?”

“My crew. Kickin’ some demon ass. Havin’ me askin’ for help. I’ll check with Rondell tomorrow, but I know ‘em just fine. Where you gonna go?”

“Um. I think San Diego. The museums should keep me occupied.”

“ ‘n’ the zoo.”

Wesley shook his head. “I wouldn’t have gone even before...” A gesture towards Angel’s door. “I can never forget that they’re locked in.”

“Yeah. Course. You’ll call in the evening? Tell me ‘bout the museums. All you been doin’.” Smiling: “Pretend you’re missin’ me?” Knowing Wesley wouldn’t have to pretend, but curious how Wesley would say it.

Wesley slept with the receiver turned off that night, and he did sleep, and in the morning he shaved. Angel was in hell first thing on Saturday morning, but quiet, and Wesley was able to feed him and say goodbye to him. Gunn carried Wesley’s backpack down to the car, helped Wesley put the top down, and was startled and then delighted when Wesley turned the embrace by the door into a kiss, and not a short kiss; there was no one to see, but still, they were definitely in public.

After the kiss, Wesley held Gunn even tighter, then whispered in Gunn’s ear: “My love. My love. I’ll be more worth living with when I come back. I promise.”

“Wes. We all will. And you weren’t – Was difficult to watch, that’s all.”

Gunn stood on the sidewalk looking in the direction the car had gone, until it must have been halfway to the 110. Then he turned and went up to the apartment, to start finding out what it was like to have sole responsibility for a vampire seer.