

Kungai
by Helen Raven

a novel in six parts

Part Four

Two or three times a day over the weekend, Gunn had his phone in his hand, about to dial Matt or Rondell. He was gonna ask what they were doing, if there was room for one more - and then he'd remember that he couldn't go out to Caritas, he couldn't join any game of pickup. Didn't matter how bored he was with his own company, he had to stay with Angel. And he was halfway through calling Matt to see if the boys might want to come over for movies and pizza when he remembered they didn't know Angel was a vampire. So of course he couldn't ask them over. Not for their sake, it wouldn't bother the boys for a second (would it?), but for Wesley's sake. Wesley would imagine the word getting out, spreading from the boys to half L.A. - and then he'd be counting the days till the vampire-hunters broke down the door. Wesley had never told the truth to anyone except Gunn.

Yeah, but there was no reason he had to tell them about Angel being a vampire. No reason they had to find out at all. Gunn could turn the screen off, and if Angelus appeared and started talking, well, the boys already knew that Angel got violent, that he had bad mood-swings. But now Gunn was picturing the three of them standing in the room, looking round and seeing the screen, the bolts on the door, hearing the muttering, the growling and he realised he didn't want them in the apartment after all, he didn't want them to have to face the raw truth about how he and Wesley were forced to live. Probably, from what he'd told them about Angel, the truth wouldn't be any worse than the things they must have imagined for themselves, but knowing for sure, that would have to change their whole attitude towards him. They'd still be friends, but not in the same way, not as simple, and he didn't want to lose any of that. So he went to Blockbuster and he rented some movies just for himself, and he left the screen on and wondered what he'd have thought himself a year ago, if he'd somehow come across a room like this.

Angel didn't seem to notice that Wesley was gone, acted with Gunn just the same way he acted with Wesley, like he couldn't even see any difference between them. The colour of their skin, Wesley's glasses, Wesley's missing arm - no difference. Wesley's words of reassurance, Gunn's silence - no difference. Gunn was surprised at first, kept looking for some flicker of reaction, some sign that Angel knew it was a big deal, Gunn being there instead of Wesley. But then, like Wesley had said, Angel had spent a century learning what the guards were like in his hell, must have figured there was never any real difference between them, they were all monsters. A big deal to Gunn, Wesley being gone, but nothing at all to Angel.

"You haven't asked about him." The second time Wesley had called Gunn: Sunday afternoon and Wesley was about to settle in for an hour's reading in a quiet courtyard in the Hotel Del Coronado. He was getting a kick out of being in the hotel from "Some Like it Hot", but was also indignant that the film had been lying when it said the hotel was in Florida.

"I know you'll tell me. If there's anything I need to know."

"Yeah." But Gunn knew as he said it that he wouldn't tell Wesley if Angel had been lucid. Wesley might think he needed to know that but he didn't, and Gunn wasn't going to let Wesley start all that again. "He's been just the same." And that was the truth.

Wesley was sounding so much better by Sunday, Gunn could tell almost from the first word. When Wesley had called on Saturday morning, just after he'd checked into his hotel, he'd been tired and distracted, with vague ideas about what he might do with the rest of the day, but sounding like he'd have to force himself to get back in the car again. But he had forced himself, and he'd done a few museums and got something out of each of them, and he'd eaten some good seafood and been to see "Enemy at the Gates", and he'd slept very well. He'd decided to spend his Sunday staying close to the ocean and doing very little, and was thinking about going to the Wild Animal Park in Escondido, if he could get the proof he needed that it wasn't like a zoo.

"People friendly? You get much of the 'English' thing?" The closest Gunn thought he could get to saying: "Haven't you been lonely on your own? Have you missed me?" He didn't even know if he should say it himself, that he was missing Wesley, because that might sound like he wished Wesley hadn't gone.

"I haven't really talked to anyone. I don't get the English thing these days. I think the arm puts people off. Which is quite useful at the moment. Do you - Do you ever have days when you don't want to have to pretend to be interested in other people?"

Gunn laughed. “Not whole days, no. Had a few tough hours since I first met you. Y’know, people to deal with when all I can think of is gettin’ you alone again.” Back when he was with his crew, really. The time they spent having to deal with Angel, that was different. Much more complicated.

Wesley was smiling. “I wish you were here. But you’d be bored.”

“Well. Yeah. Be tryin’ to drag you off to hire Jetskis, or something. ‘n’ you don’t need that, you need to do your boring museum, hotel, walking thing.”

“I do. I need to put in at least another two days this year. The British Boredom Council has already served me the written warning. If I don’t make my life significantly less interesting, I’ll be at risk of deportation.”

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Wesley arrived home just before nine on Tuesday morning, much earlier than Gunn had expected. They kissed at the door and Wesley was half-hard right from the start, hungry and demanding like he’d been thinking about this since Irvine. Gunn was nearly as relieved - and pleased, and excited - as he had been the first time they’d kissed. Back then he’d wanted to get Wesley away from the front door, into the bedroom, to make it real, official. Now he just needed to get Wesley’s cock in his hand, to press himself against the heat of Wesley’s skin. They were noisy and urgent and clumsy, no co-ordination. Gunn took them down to the floor and tried to match their paces, but Wesley had too much of a head-start. No complaints, though. God, no.

“Gonna send you away every weekend, you come back like this.”

Wesley shook his head. “I nearly came back last night. I was in a bar and... every other man who came in had something that reminded me of you. Just enough.”

“A gay bar?”

“Just a bar. Marines, I think. If I’d had less to drink, I’d have checked straight out of the hotel, been waking you up around three. Instead, I just had to imagine it. You were remarkably tolerant. In my imagination. Only made me apologise for five minutes for not calling to tell you I was on my way.”

“Um... Yeah, I don’t like surprises. Rather have the chance to plan. Five minutes sounds about right.”

A smile, full of good memories. “I learned my lesson.”

Wesley didn’t do more than glance at the screen until he’d unpacked, freshened up, and started a fresh pot of coffee. Angel was sleeping, on the floor near the foot of the mattress. “No visions?”

Gunn shook his head. “A fake one yesterday. About Angelus.”

“Fake?”

Gunn shrugged. “Figured they’re not messages. Quicker than sayin’ ‘a hallucination that looked a lot like a vision’. He was trying to get out the door. To get out and stop the thing happening. He still had the burns when I fed him last night.”

“He’s been difficult?”

“No. No surprises. Boring few days up here, too. Really glad you’re back.”

The training session was tough. It was their second session with Ain and Storra, and this pair were quite a lot different when Yan wasn’t with them. Not mean or anything, but you could tell now that they knew each other very well, and they had their own ideas about the worst type of opponent that Gunn and Wesley might have to face. Painful, and not really fair - in every mission so far they’d managed to keep the advantage of surprise. But life wasn’t fair and it was painful, and sometimes you would get beat to the ground. And you could stay there frozen with the shock and humiliation, or you could work out which limbs still had a useful range of movement and make yourself get up to face the next round.

Over the meal the duals said they wanted to try out Dargo Darkot, another demon bar.

“Yeah, it is close. But we can’t go in there, Wes ‘n’ me.” Dargo Darkot would not admit humans, no matter how many duals were there to vouch for them.

“No, I know.” A slight pause. “Look, we’re not trying to ditch you, but that is where we wanna go tonight.”

Wesley said, “But... you still have to get back to the portal.”

A shrug. “We can get a cab. No point in waiting on us. I was you, I’d go home and get a rubdown before you stiffen right up.”

Was that a dig? Or a couple of digs: about how hard they’d found the session, and about the two of them and sex. Or was it just sensible advice?

“We’ll pay for your taxi.” Wesley was getting his wallet out.

“No, man. It’s just a cab.”

They were home by ten thirty. Gunn said, “Y’ know, rubdown sounds pretty good.”

“Um. I’ll do my best. You’ll have to be patient. I think I’ll be falling over onto you more than once.”

They decided that Gunn should get his rubdown first; no point in Wesley going first, if he was then going to get another set of aches and bruises falling over onto Gunn.

Wesley just managed not to fall over, by keeping down very low, and by leaning on Gunn as often and as hard as he needed. He started with the neck and shoulders and worked down.

At first Gunn was enjoying the rubdown just as a rubdown, but then Wesley’s hand moved down below his waist, and suddenly Gunn’s skin was turning every touch into sex. The feelings went to his cock first, but soon he was pushing his legs further apart, arching his ass up towards Wesley, nearly groaning with the need to have Wesley’s fingers inside him. “Put them in me. Dammit, don’t bother with - Put them in me.”

Wesley was breathing nearly as hard as Gunn but he wouldn’t do what Gunn was asking, he was insisting this was still a rubdown. “No. I need to work on your thighs.”

“Wes. Wes. D’ you wanna relax me? Or d’ you wanna make me really tense?”

“I want this.” Wesley’s fingers dug in just above Gunn’s knee and slid slowly upwards until they just touched the curve of Gunn’s ass. “I missed your thighs. All last night. I wanted this.” Down again to the knee, then kneading and pushing, trying to cover every inch.

“Just - That’s all you missed? In the whole weekend?”

“I always miss your thighs. From the moment you get dressed.”

At that Gunn sighed, and flexed his leg to push against Wesley’s hand. “That’s - I miss your stomach. Always wanna... push my fingers through the gap between the buttons.”

“I like that. You should. More often.”

“I will if you... Never mind missing my thighs. Think about missing my ass. Usually act... like you do.” Then he sighed again as Wesley’s hand relaxed its grip, very suddenly, moved quickly up, then spread itself wide around the curve of his ass; the thumb was in the crack, barely parting him but as exciting to Gunn as if it was already deep inside him.

“I don’t - I’m not ready to fuck you yet.” But the hand tilted and the thumb rubbed, and Gunn groaned. “I want your weight first. The bed was so empty. I need to be back with you.”

“You want your rubdown.”

“No, I’m...” A pause. “I wouldn’t last two minutes. But I need those two minutes. To feel... whole.”

“Now?”

“Soon. Please. After...” And the hand shifted, and Gunn gave a long sigh as a finger pressed slowly into him, eased slightly by the oil from the rubdown, but only slightly. Yes, it was about sex, obviously it was about sex, but the feeling of satisfaction, that seemed quite separate from the surge of heat in his cock, and stronger. He desperately wanted Wesley to fuck him, right now. He wanted to have Wesley under his hands, for minutes... hours... as long as they could last. He wanted whatever Wesley wanted.

“More?” Gunn wasn’t sure what this was doing for Wesley. Something, yes, but maybe not for the usual reasons, and maybe Wesley didn’t plan yet on giving him more. No response from Wesley for three seconds, maybe four, and then Gunn had two fingers inside him, sliding against one another as they pressed deeper. Gunn’s mouth filled with saliva, hot and sweet, and he was suddenly aching, aching to be able to hold Wesley. He turned over onto his side, nearly onto his back, reached up to support Wesley then lower him onto the bed. They took some moments then to fit themselves properly to one another, sort out the tangle of their legs, and then Gunn rolled on top of Wesley, and it seemed they both had all they wanted.

Afterwards, then they were back on their side, legs tangled again, Gunn said, “That was... Didn’t that seem like the first time? Like we’d only just met?” Except with the lights on. And with Gunn already knowing how much he loved being fucked.

“I suppose we... After everything I put us through in the last few weeks. Maybe we’ll need weeks to recover.”

Gunn smiled. “Fine by me. Like it when I feel I know you. ‘n’ when I know I don’t. You recovered most other ways, though?”

Wesley nodded. “You saved me from... I don’t know what. Going nearly as mad as him. If you weren’t here...” A long, unsteady sigh.

“You’d’ve worked something out. It’d be different.” Not believing that, except that, yeah, it really would have been different. That Sunday, probably, when Angelus had just walked out of the room - Gunn couldn’t see them both surviving that. Maybe Wesley was thinking the same thing. But Gunn didn’t want Wesley being grateful to him, not like that. Too much like how Wesley had been grateful to Angel.

Wesley kissed him and it was a grateful kiss, too light, too short. “So when do you want a break? Where do you think you’ll go?”

Gunn was surprised. “Get stuck in a strange town on my own? C’n you see it? Got L.A. Got you. Everything I like’s right here. Why’d I need a break?”

Wesley stared at him, frowning slightly - then suddenly, with a smile: “You have a talent for being happy.”

Gunn laughed, mostly amused, but maybe just a touch bitter, thinking of Alonna, the hard words between them in her last days. “I dunno, Wes. You’ve only seen me when I’m with you. You need that? Time away on your own?”

Another frown. “San Diego was... time away from him. Not from you. I would have preferred you there. If it was possible. I don’t need time on my own as long as I’m getting enough time to read. And you’ve always given me that.”

“But you don’t get bored on your own. You figure out ways to enjoy it.”

Wesley shrugged. “That’s from a lifetime of practice. And it is useful for thinking. Being stuck in a strange town. It’s useful for getting new ideas. And for being able to think them through without distractions. I spent nearly three hours sitting in the courtyard at the Hotel Del. Not reading more than a few pages.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“About how much my views on demons have changed since you came to join us. Since you found Caritas and met Grouw and Piriti – and you saw the possibilities and made me see them too. Before that... Well, you saw the list I did for Grouw and Piriti of all the demons I’d met, the circumstances in which I met those demons. I used to think that ‘demon’ was synonymous with ‘evil’. And everyone I knew thought that, and every vision seemed to confirm it. So what do we make of the demons we’ve started to meet through Wyndham Gunn? What do we make of Grouw and Piriti and the duals?” Wesley shook his head. “I cannot see them as evil. And of course I have a vested interest in not seeing them as evil, since I want to go on being able to take their money. And able to accept their help. But it really does seem to me that most of them are...” A shrug. “They’re normal. Like the people you’d find in the grocery store. They’re just getting on with their lives. They don’t want to hurt anyone. Or if they do, they hold back from acting on it. Like people. Like most people.”

“Yeah. Big change for me too. Takin’ up nest-buildin’ ‘n’ all. Guess we’re like cops been workin’ Homicide. Suddenly got put on Community Relations.”

“Exactly! I think the idea must have started when I was reading that cop novel with Angel. So now I’m wondering... just how unusual are the demons who feature in the visions? And I mean I want statistics. How many demons are there living peacefully in L.A. compared with the number who are dangerous? And what makes them dangerous? Were they always like that? Or do they turn? And what were they doing with themselves before we were sent after them? Especially if they were always like that?”

“Huh.” Interesting questions, put like that. Gunn had stopped wondering how many demons there were in L.A. as soon as he got confident that there were enough to keep Wyndham Gunn in business. “You think you could find out? They got an electoral register or something?”

“I don’t know. But I’m going to ask. I want to do a systematic survey. Collect and analyse the answers.”

“Do a survey? They’re gonna think you’re from the IRS. Or the INS or worse. You go in handin’ out forms, you’ll never be seen again.”

“I know. We’ll need to take a very careful approach. Find something... subtle and imaginative.”

“‘We’?”

“‘I’. I know you’re busy already. It’s just that I can’t stop worrying at puzzles.”

“Was messin’ with you, English. ‘s a good puzzle. I’m in.”

Wesley made a start on the survey the next day, calling on a range of Wyndham Gunn clients and asking if they would talk to him to help him plan his research. Wesley didn’t use the word “survey”, said he simply wanted to satisfy his own curiosity, but about half of the demons he called were openly suspicious, asked if he was working for the government, maybe suspecting even worse. Most of the suspicious demons didn’t want to talk to him, but one did agree to a meeting - which made four meetings arranged, and Wesley decided that was enough for a first stage.

Wesley really was fired up by the idea of this survey. Gunn had never seen him with so much energy and enthusiasm, or at least not in a way that lasted day after day. Gunn could see now that Wesley had been taking their work far too seriously. Of course you wanted to be proud of what you were doing, interested, involved. You wanted to give the client a good result, for a fair price. But you could still relax and let yourself enjoy the work, it wasn’t like the clients were watching you every second, marking you like it was some test. Or it wasn’t for Gunn. Gunn was guessing, though, that Wes must never quite believe he’d done enough. If only he’d worked harder. Or quicker or longer. Then he could have done something more.

But with the survey there was nothing to take seriously, no client except maybe Wesley himself and so Wesley was finally free to relax. He was even enjoying making all these new phone calls. Hell! he was halfway to turning into an extrovert.

Gunn wondered if this was Wesley’s normal state, how you’d’ve found him if you’d met him back in England. Before he came to California. Before he met Angel. Which would mean that he’d been putting half of his energy into dealing with Angel. More than half. One thing to see that he was exhausted, but this change, coming almost overnight after he’d finally accepted that Angel was gone... What was he like before he met Angel?

No. No, Gunn was sure Wes hadn't been anything like this. Not from what he'd said about all the stupid crushes he'd had, about wondering, any time someone hit on him, whether it was on a bet. Wesley had never had any time in his life when he'd gone into everything thinking, "And that's what I'll do when this guy says yes..." Being positive, being optimistic, that was Gunn's own sign that he was back to normal, not Wesley's.

"Back to normal." OK. So he'd been trying to fit Wesley in with himself and Alonna, how he'd bounced back to being "the old Gunn" again, just days after she'd died. He hadn't come even one step closer to understanding that, even after nearly a year. If he could think that Wesley had snapped "back to normal" in the exact same way, then his own reactions wouldn't seem so wrong. So unnatural. Like Alonna had been a burden. Not the person who'd known him best. Loved him longest.

No comparison. Alonna and Angel. Nothing to learn there. Nothing. Wesley had given Angel more than he deserved. And Gunn had given Alonna less - so much less. Like they'd been nothing to one another.

"You ever... see someone you knew get turned into a vampire?" Sunday morning. They'd gone out training very early, showered, then gone out again to have breakfast. "I mean, so you saw how they were afterwards?"

Wesley shook his head. "There was someone I knew. But I didn't see him. What about you?"

"Alonna. My sister."

Wesley looked shocked, took a few seconds to process. "Was that why you started fighting? Organising the patrols?"

"We'd been doin' that for years. Long before. It was a year ago. Couple of months before we met."

Surprise, even more than shock. "You - I didn't know. Only a few months? Is she still... Is the vampire -"

"I staked it. The same day. They turned her to use against me. Against the whole crew. But we got them all."

Wesley nodded slowly. "Did they send it in undercover? Was it able to pretend?"

Gunn shook his head. "Wasn't like that. It didn't pretend. It tried to... sell me on being a vampire. How it was easy. Simple. Could leave my despair and rage behind."

"Despair and rage?" Wesley was truly puzzled. "You?"

"You didn't know me then. Been a bad few years. I... I got lost."

Wesley looked at him, really looked at him. After a few seconds: "I'm sorry."

"Don't know how I let it get that bad. Stay that bad. Before I was always the one who could see a way to get things done. Was a reason it was my crew, really mine. Hundred reasons. Enough to make them stay, even when..."

"I know. I saw."

"No. You saw me after. Way I was then, I'd've torn your card up 'fore we even left the store."

Wesley was frowning like he was remembering, thinking hard. "I find that difficult to imagine. But then I... I can't imagine half of what you've been through." Pained: "Your sister. I didn't know."

Gunn nodded. "Hadn't said anything before because..." He sighed. "'s almost like I don't believe it yet. I miss her. But just like I missed you this weekend. I haven't even felt it yet. Not the way I should. That she's gone, that we'll never... That I didn't look after her like I said I would."

Wesley swallowed, and reached out to put his hand over Gunn's. "Maybe it's because of what you had to do at the end to protect yourself."

A small shrug. "Y'd think that'd make it worse. Dunno. I do miss her. How we could speak in code. From all we'd seen together. I'd say, 'Hey, it's like...' and she'd be nodding, and she was always right, she knew exactly what I was gonna say. 'n' that's gone. Those things we'd seen together don't seem half as real now that there's just me."

Again: "I'm sorry." And Gunn could tell that he really was. Alonna would have liked Wesley. She'd have laughed at him, at the idea of her brother teamed up with all that English reserve, those shirts and ties. But she'd've liked him.

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"Lilah Morgan asked if we'd like someone to sit with Angel. When we're out training. Or working on the survey. Or just working." Wesley said it almost as a question, like he didn't quite believe what he was saying.

"Someone like who?"

"An intern from her company. She said there are three or four. We'd just need to give them a day's notice, not always that."

"She knows what he's like now?"

Wesley nodded. "She always asks now. Since we got the eviction notice. She knows how long we've had to lock him in. How we've been using the tape-recorder. The intern would call us if he had a vision."

"And then they'd - what? - bill us at the end of the month? I know Lilah's helped us out, but that firm's gotta be all about money."

"Money and predictions. And apparently limitless curiosity about the vampire seer. I told her that he looks like any other mad vampire when he's sleeping or cowering or gloating. And that they'd soon decide that there were better ways of using their interns' time. But she said they'd all volunteered for a minimum of three months. It would be worth that much to their careers just to say they'd seen him, even sleeping. She wants me to meet them."

"We could go out on a lot of dates in three months."

"Yes. I thought that too. Not that we'd use their cover for that, but it's an enjoyable idea, just to toy with."

"We wouldn't? We'd rather stay in? Enjoy some frisky ideas?"

Wesley smiled, but then shook his head. "We mustn't forget it's a gift. The interns volunteering. We have to use it responsibly. I can justify covering the training sessions. Maybe some of the work on the survey, if that does go ahead. But we can't get into the habit of just leaving him. He's our responsibility."

Gunn nodded, not surprised. Wes and responsibility. Never apart for long. "Be good to have them for Tuesdays and Fridays. She know about the duals?"

"No. She knows we have training sessions with other people, but she's never asked anything more. She's not interested in that aspect, in what we have to go out and do. Just in Angel and the power he's in touch with because of his visions." A sudden half-smile. "She's about as subtle as Cordelia would have been. Do you want to come along to this meeting with the interns?"

"Nah. Go better without me. s'obvious you're the expert on Angel and the visions."

Wesley met the four interns on the Friday, and early in the evening on the following Tuesday, Lilah Morgan brought the first intern around to the apartment. Gunn knew from Wesley's descriptions that this tanned, blond, straight-from-the-gym one must be Philip Moyes; a year ago it would have been work to remember the four names, but human names got so easy once you'd had to start dealing with demon names. Lilah wasn't staying, but she wanted to hear the briefing, and of course the privilege of seeing the seer couldn't be limited to a group of interns. Angel was awake and in hell, and visibly terrified of the new voices. Not just as new voices, but as new voices that were talking about him; Gunn knew that Angel was listening, from the angle of his turned head, the shudders of reaction.

The briefing was very short. Wesley pointed out the coffee, the tea, the sodas, the bread, cheese, salad. The bathroom. The cellphone numbers on the desk by the phone. The monitor and tape-recorder, which mustn't be turned off. No need to warn Moyes not to go into Angel's room, because Wesley had taken the key away. He'd locked the door to their bedroom, too, and locked his desk and the filing cabinets. Moyes had brought some work along, and was setting out the papers on the coffee table when they left.

Friday's intern was called Julia Kepler and she arrived alone, while Angel was asleep. The next Tuesday's was Thomas Li, and he got to see (and hear) Angelus. Seemed like Lilah Morgan had only needed the one look, but she definitely got the interns to report straight back to her, because she mentioned Angelus to Wesley when they met in the library on Wednesday morning. She offered more of the interns' time, said they'd all be happy to do twice as much, but Wesley had said he didn't want to take their time for granted, would rather save it for an emergency.

The fourth intern was Newton Robbins, very young, slightly awkward, and enough like Wesley that Gunn had to work hard not to imagine what he'd find if he slid his fingers between the buttons of that white shirt. Skinny white guys with glasses - the last kink he would have chosen for himself, if he'd been given a choice.

The duals must have been comparing notes, just the same as Lilah Morgan and the interns. Now they were all starting to ditch the humans, sometimes straight after the training session, not wanting a meal, just a ride to the night's bar. Yeah, you had to take it personally, but Gunn could see why they'd want to be free to do their demon thing. They weren't getting bored with Gunn and Wesley, but they saw all they needed in the two hours of training. That Friday Gunn and Wesley got ditched just after nine, and they decided that young Newton wouldn't begrudge them a quick Vietnamese meal.

They had just finished the soup when Wesley's cellphone rang. Angel was having a vision, and Newton was excited and impressed and flustered. Wesley got him to hold the phone by the monitor, and within seconds Wesley was asking Gunn to deal with the bill.

"Lafayette Park. By the fountain. 'Out of the car.'" Not a fake vision. Gunn knew the list of old visions almost by heart, and Lafayette Park wasn't in that list. "'Two to turn. The rest for food.'" Wesley was frowning in concentration. "'Moving up. Out of the green.'" A shrug, then, muttered: "I think that's what he said." More listening, then Wesley got Newton back, thanked him, and cut the connection. "Lafayette Park, definitely. Probably vampires. I don't know how many."

There was only one vampire, and Wesley got him with the crossbow. "'Out of the green.'" Wesley was holding up a green robe, shaking the dust out of it. "This is probably not what he had in mind."

"That's one cheesy-lookin' robe. Someone tell him it was the new black cape?"

The rescued couple had decided they'd been caught in some fraternity prank, and the frat-boy must have run off. They were angry now, not scared. They wanted to know who was going to pay for the damage to the car, and they drove off without one word of thanks - if anything, they blamed Gunn and Wesley for letting the frat-boy go and not getting his name.

So back to the apartment, taking the robe as a souvenir for Newton. Angel was lost in the vision. He was striding round the room, standing tall, gesturing, repeating, "Two to turn. The rest for food," like he expected to reach even the deaf couple upstairs. And then he was suddenly calling desperately about Lafayette Park, stumbling towards the wall, nearly slipping on sheets of drawing paper, and banging on the wall, dragging his hands over it.

"I think he's trying to draw on the wall." Sounded like this was the best night of Newton's life. Was that gleam pure ambition? Raw curiosity? Or was he enough like Wesley to be thinking that this was the most important thing he'd ever done? "He used up all of the pad. And the board." There had been at least ten sheets left. "The crayon broke when he started on the wall. So he's been doing this. Has he always drawn or only since he got this bad?"

Wesley gave the basics about Angel and the drawing and the visions. They all had a beer and Newton gradually wound down. He asked what had happened in the park, which should have got him all impressed again. And yeah he was angry with the couple for being so ungrateful, but the more Newton said, the more it sounded to Gunn like he thought the fights were easy, like the vision was some kind of guarantee. No real danger 'cos they had the Powers standing guard over them from start to finish.

No, Newton wasn't as bad as that, but he wasn't making nearly enough of the right noises, not to suit Gunn. And he didn't seem to have any reaction to Angel except fascination - like they were lucky to be locked in with this creature and its shattered mind. Gunn wasn't looking for hero-worship, that would be creepy, but a normal person would have to...well, know that it would be normal to notice. Newton Robbins was an over-ambitious jerk, and Gunn wasn't going to be troubled by any more thoughts about the buttons on his shirt.

Or maybe Newton was just young. He was thrilled by the robe, assumed it was the mark of some ancient vampire line, and that Wesley must know all about it, including the exact meaning and history of the symbol on the triangular patch. Wesley said he'd look in his books and get back to Newton (it was a puzzle, so of course he would) and while Wesley was drawing the symbol for reference, Gunn asked Newton about the internship. What else did they have him doing, did he work mostly for Lilah, what were his other plans?

"I'm sorry. I can't talk about that."

"What? It's a trade secret who you fetch lunch for? Bring down the whole firm?"

Newton shrugged and smiled, looking suddenly years older, much more in control. "It's just the rule. We can't say anything."

"Man. And you wanna work for this firm?"

"Oh, yes. You wouldn't believe the opportunities." The gleam again. Gunn shrugged, and glanced at his Wesley, and wanted the intern gone.

An hour or so later, in bed, Wesley said, "Do you think we'd have gone for the meal tonight? If we'd left Angel alone?"

"Probably. We'd planned on being gone till past midnight. We still need to eat. Duals or no duals."

Wesley nodded, slowly. "We would have come back to what he said on the tape. And when we got to the park it would have been too late. And we would have known, because the car would be there with the windows broken and the doors hanging open."

"And we'd never eat Vietnamese again. Not even to go."

Wesley sighed, frowning. "I don't know. Allowing ourselves a quick meal after training. I think we've earned that. I'd feel bad that we'd missed the vision. I'd feel terrible knowing we could have saved the couple if we'd gone straight home. But I don't think I'd feel that I'd done something wrong personally, that I needed to punish myself. I think I'd be able to accept that some parts of life are just luck, and that couple had hit bad luck, as hundreds of other people do every day. I wouldn't have said that a year ago. Back then I'd be fully occupied with finding some way to exorcise the guilt. I have changed."

"A year ago it was just you and Angel. Him gettin' worse. Guess you would be be thinkin' 'bout punishment. 'bout the visions as punishment for him, I mean. But it's you 'n' me now. 'n' yeah we got room for luck."

By morning, Angel was out of the vision and in hell, and Wesley took the blood in as soon as he was dressed. He started collecting drawing pages while Angel was drinking, and immediately called Gunn in.

"Look, this isn't the park. It's a theatre. Boarded up? That does say 'Palace', doesn't it?"

"And this looks like people in a cage. Could be anywhere. But I guess not the park."

Gunn collected the rest of the pages and then they stood over Angel, who held the half-empty beaker out to Wesley. "Finish it." Angel did, in a single messy mouthful; they were going to have to shower him again, and it had only been three days.

Gunn booted up the computer and searched for the Palace Theatre. He found it quickly, in Westwood, but kept on looking through the search results for any hint about the connection to Lafayette Park. The connection was on the third page of results, in a Department of Justice report on Doug Sanders, a motivational speaker who was wanted for his involvement in pyramid schemes and who'd been missing for months. The report said he'd done a lot of his speaking out of the Palace Theatre and it also showed the logo for one of his schemes, which was the exact same symbol that Wesley had copied from the patch on the green robe. So... a vampire wearing that logo and talking about "moving up". And Angel striding round, making those big gestures, hammering that slogan, over and over: "Two to turn, the rest for food." They could assume Doug Sanders was a vampire now, but running the same scam in much the same way.

The theatre was locked up tight, but Gunn knew five people who could deal with that, and one of them (Scott) was there in half an hour, and then Gunn and Wesley were creeping in with all the crossbows and stakes they could carry. The

cage that Angel had seen was on the stage, about twenty people inside, most of them curled on the ground asleep. There was a vampire standing guard. Well, sitting guard, probably also asleep. But there was a massive chain and padlock on the door of the cage and there were probably more vampires in the building. Was there a smart way of doing this, that would save all of those people and put a final stop to Sanders' career? They backed out of the building and returned to the truck to talk.

Their lock-breaker Scott was having a coffee around the corner, waiting to lock up the theatre again. They could take him in, kill the guard and open the cage, all quiet enough that the other vamps should sleep right through. But when the vamps found the empty cage... No chance of a surprise attack after that.

Well, they couldn't leave those people in the cage. Of course they couldn't. They'd have them out within an hour, no matter what.

But what if they replaced them with another group of people, all with weapons and training? The vamps wouldn't notice the difference, it was just a crate of food. Scott could fix the chain and the padlock so the cage could only be opened from the inside. Be an even better surprise if they had other people hidden all round the theatre. Maybe Sanders would hold a meeting that night, reel off his slogans, dole out rewards, get his team all motivated. Or maybe there'd just be him and his henchmen, coming down to feed. Either way, it'd be a good haul of vamps.

"Would your crew do it? Would any of them be willing to go in the cage?"

"Think they'd be fighting for the chance." Gunn called Rondell, who loved the idea and brought in all of the crew who were at the base when Gunn called. This gave them twenty-six people including Gunn and Wesley; they'd put twelve in the cage and the rest around the building.

As soon as they'd agreed on the plan and handed out roles, the rescue party went in. Wesley and George stayed in the theatre after everyone was out, on watch for any other vamps appearing. Rondell talked to the people from the cage, learned that there was a meeting on that night, could bring in up to a hundred vamps. And add the gang of seven or eight who ran the meetings... A very good haul.

Gunn and his cage-crew went in first, with the idea that they'd provide a diversion if any of the snipers got into trouble while moving into position. The snipers were organised in four teams, each with its own zone of the building; they went in a team at a time, in order of their distance from the back door. Scott fixed the door so it would seem locked to the vamps but would open to the crew with a simple trick, then he went home and they were left to wait.

At around two in the afternoon a small, dark-haired female vampire was suddenly on the stage near the cage. She must have come from the wings, to be able to get there so quietly. She looked around for the guard, wasn't at all worried not to find him, just muttered "Typical," then gave a broad, jagged smile as she turned to the cage. Her arm thrust into the cage, lightning-quick, and she caught Taye's wrist and pulled so he slammed against the bars - and then she was dust. Worth every second of the wait, and the cage-crew couldn't help letting out some of their feelings of triumph. They heard themselves immediately, though, and cut it dead. Maybe it had sounded like a cry of panic... but was that normal from the cage in the middle of the afternoon? The people hadn't said anything to Rondell about the days, just about the nights.

The sound must have been fairly normal, because the next vampire took ten minutes or more to arrive, and she was just wondering what "Lisa" was up to. But this one didn't think it was "typical" to have two missing vampires. She looked properly, and she saw the sprinkling of dust around the chair and by the cage, and she didn't really believe it but she looked at the humans in the cage, testing out the wild idea that there might be something in there other than terrified food. And maybe someone met her eyes, or maybe she saw a stake or maybe she could just smell the difference. She ran for the wings, shouting that something had happened to the food. They stopped her with the crossbows, but too late: the other vamps were on their way.

The fight was over quickly and then they all went for ice-cream. The ice-cream was Rondell's suggestion, and Rondell also took charge of organising the new plan: picking off any vampires who showed up for the night's meeting. He chose the four best shots (including Wesley), with eight others on reloading duty (including Gunn). The meeting started at nine, so they'd come back at eight-thirty and take up their positions.

The crew was going to Venice Beach for the rest of the afternoon. All agreed they needed a game of pickup to let off steam after all that waiting.

“You play pickup?” George to Wesley. Not a surge of curiosity about English customs, but an invitation. To Wesley. From a member of the crew. Gunn couldn’t let himself smile, couldn’t look at either of them - too close already to having a stupid, happy glow.

“I - Uh. No. No, I don’t play.” Wesley too surprised to manage to sound pleased. Would George manage to hear it as more than a flat no?

“Guess y’ don’t watch it, either?” Still friendly. Maybe even a joke.

Wesley smiled. “I don’t really watch anything except films.”

“Yeah? Hey, you seen ‘Minority Report’ ?” Quickly, like he’d just been reminded of something.

Wesley hadn’t, since it was Tom Cruise (and, anyway, it wasn’t out on video yet), and George hadn’t seen it either, but they traded what they’d heard; and steadily worked out how to talk to one another about something other than ambush tactics.

Rondell asked Gunn if he was coming to the park, but Gunn shook his head. “Things t’do.” Get back to Angel, mostly. “Next time.” When there was a ‘next time’ that wasn’t an emergency.

Angel was asleep. They could have gone to the beach. They talked about heading out again, wanting some sun after those hours shut in the theatre. But when Wesley asked if Gunn wanted to go and find the crew, Gunn realised that he didn’t need sun nearly as much as he needed to be alone and naked with Wesley. Not for sex - or not immediately, anyway - but listening to Wesley and George had made him feel so close to Wesley. So glad to be with him. And when he felt like that the first thing he needed was to close the gap, to be touching Wesley.

Wesley wanted the sex, which was how Gunn put the suggestion: that he was in the mood for slow, very slow. Wesley was far enough behind Gunn, though, that he was still thinking about wanting sun. Not a difficult choice, but he couldn’t hide the fact that it was a choice.

“We’ll go out tomorrow. Or... Look. Is that enough there to give you your L.A. feeling? Enough for today?” There was sunlight coming through the blinds in the living room, making a grid on the carpet a few feet from the window.

Wesley laughed, said it was perfect, drew Gunn into the light and started to undress him. It wasn’t quite the first time they’d had sex in that room, but the first time they’d really made the choice. The first time they’d been naked. Angel woke up about twenty minutes in: they heard sudden movements, low snarling. The screen was angled away but Wesley didn’t think it was Angelus, since Angelus usually talked. Angel angry then, for some reason, or hallucinating. They lay quietly and listened for a while, not disturbed, just curious; until Wesley raised himself up and they started again with a kiss.

That night, Gunn was in a team with Jackson, the marksman, and Jed, the other loader. Jackson had been with the crew for two, three years, and Jed had joined a couple of weeks after Gunn had last seen him at the shelter, which had been the night of Angel’s first fake vision. They were busy for the first half hour, taking their share of the twenty prompt vamps, but in the next hour there were less than half that number in stragglers, and they passed the time in talking and in playing games with lists. Jed knew, now, exactly how Gunn had come to leave his crew; not that he talked about it directly, but Gunn could tell that he had the full background. Or the chilled-out version of the full background, anyway, where the shock and the anger were fading memories, and the crew had come out fine, and Gunn hadn’t changed so very much, after all.

There couldn’t be anyone left in the crew who needed to talk of Wesley as a freak, or ask what it said about Gunn that he’d choose a man like that over his own kind. Maybe there were still some who thought it but they kept it to themselves now, even when someone like Jed appeared with his questions and new stories about Gunn and Wesley. Just confirmation, really, of what Gunn had seen earlier that day, but Gunn could take any amount of that kind of confirmation.

* * * * *

Wesley was going to get to do his survey. Not really the survey he’d hoped to do and it might not even go halfway to answering his original questions, but it would still be a damn good start. Their main support was coming from the

demon business-community, who had no problem at all with Wesley doing their marketing research for free. They gave him any introductions that he asked for, and about half of the ideas that he ended up using.

Wesley used the computer for a lot of his work on the survey. Gunn offered to type in the information from the forms, but a lot of them weren't in English, and anyway Wesley wanted to be able to deal directly with his own survey database. He really was quite possessive about it; not in the way of wanting Gunn to back off, but anything Gunn could do with the database, Wesley wanted to be able to do just as well.

There were more demons in L.A. than Wesley would ever have guessed, and many more demon languages, as he discovered when he started asking what languages were spoken inside the household. He made a second database for the languages, and by the beginning of May he'd decided that there were at least eighteen main groups. For some groups, he knew three or four languages (well enough to issue an invoice, at any rate, or to decide if a particular document was about jam-making or about ritual sacrifice); but about half of the groups were a complete mystery to him, and of course he wasn't going to leave it like that. His next project, when he'd finished the survey, would be to reach at least an invoicing level for one language in each of the missing groups.

The first week in May also saw their first practical use of the survey database: to identify the most-likely place to find a Haklar demon that Angel had seen in a vision. Haklars were not the form-completing type, but several other demons had complained to Wesley about the Haklar that had forced people out of the North Shore of Lake Hollywood, and Wesley had put it in, marked as "hearsay".

That was a busy week. Not just the Haklar (and the survey and training and work), but also Rondell calling them in to help against some vampires who were stalking homeless people in McKenzie Park. They were up for most of Friday and Saturday night, doing more of that waiting; and with the four interns on emergency duty with Angel for the first time. The interns were all very matter-of-fact about taking their four or five hours of nightshift. Newton took the first half of Friday night, including training, Philip Moyes took the second half, and then Julia Kepler and Thomas Li did Saturday. Maybe they were used to doing nights, Lilah making them live on London time one week, Tokyo time the next.

Wesley got George out of a tight spot in the park on Saturday night. Not that either George or Wesley was saying that Wesley had "saved George's life" against the vampires, but George was obviously very, very glad that Wesley had been so close. George didn't really know how to thank Wesley, though, since he'd seen - practically from that night at the thrift shop - that Wesley didn't do high-fives or back-thumping, so instead he kept doing things to include him. Wesley said "no" or "I don't know" about half the time, but he said it the right way.

Angel had a vision on Sunday evening, of a young woman with long hair and glasses, standing in a library reading from a large book, with a mist demon rising behind her, about to attack her. Or maybe it was a type of water demon? Something swirling and obviously threatening. Angel talked about the "public library", that the demon was going to "swallow her".

The central library had shut about an hour ago. Wesley said Angel used to know an underground route into the library; he'd gone there to do research back before Doyle persuaded him that they needed a computer. But he'd never taught the route to Wesley. So... they could go down there and try to break in aboveground, or they could wait until it opened on Monday. Why would the girl be there on a Sunday, anyway? Unless she'd broken in herself, and she didn't look like the breaking-in type. They'd been given some warning for a change, maybe to give Wesley a chance to read up on how to kill a mist demon.

They made photocopies of Angel's drawing and cut the demon out, then they shared out the list of departments and went around the library asking if anyone had seen the girl in the picture. Gunn was the one who found someone who recognised her: the woman at the desk in the Science Department. The girl was Winifred Burkle (or "Fred"), and she'd disappeared from the Foreign Language Department five years ago. There had been flyers all over the library, but no one had ever found even a single clue. She'd been studying physics, working part-time in the library. She was supposed to be shelving books on the morning she disappeared. And why was Gunn asking? Where did he get that picture?

"I'm a private detective. Been sent to look for her."

"Oh! Has there been... Is there any hope?"

Gunn shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "There's always some hope, yeah? But after five years, you... Mostly you think about knowing."

The librarian found him a copy of the flyer, and he wrote his name and number for her on the back of another copy and then went out into the corridor to call Wesley.

They met at the nearest coffee stand and then took their coffee into the gardens. "It's a fake vision. That far in the past." But Wesley was frowning as they spoke.

Gunn nodded, seeing the problem just as well as Wesley. "Yeah, but how did Angel know about it? 'cos he never saw it in a vision. Unless... he had something to do with it?"

Definitely: "No. He was in New York five years ago. He must have seen the flyers when he came to the library. Maybe they're still stuck up in some of the corridors he used. Maybe she looks like someone who Angelus... She does look a lot like Drusilla. But why he would imagine her being attacked by a mist demon... Maybe it's a pun. I don't know."

Gunn shrugged. "Y'know dreams. 'And then there was this mist demon. Only it wasn't really a mist demon, it was that guy who used to park cars at the Italian place.' Dream, hallucination, s'all just stirred in together." Wesley laughed and agreed, and they finished their coffee without hurrying and then went home.

That evening, over dinner, Gunn said, "Who's Drusilla? What did Angelus do to her? 'n' I know I'm gonna wish I never asked."

"He tormented her until he drove her insane. Killed everyone she cared about and then he turned her into a vampire."

"Is she still alive? Or - Y'know what I mean."

Wesley nodded. "Angel met her again quite recently. But she's supposed to be in South America now. She's still insane."

"Well, y'don't get over..." Gunn swallowed. "I thought... When you said, I just thought she might have been his sister."

A long, pained pause, then Wesley said, "He did have a sister. He killed her. He killed all his family." Another pause. "He didn't turn them."

"I figured. That he killed them. You think there's somethin' tells a vamp to start with family?"

"I don't..." A sigh. "Maybe it's part of discovering that you don't feel guilt any more. The ultimate proof. I don't know how much they get from instinct."

"Yeah. Makes sense." Gunn's turn to pause. "You've never... What about your family? You got any sisters? You'd've told me already if they'd been -"

A very difficult question for Wesley: guilt, pain, embarrassment, and more, all tightly-drawn. But not grief. Gunn wished he'd found a better way to ask. But now he was really wondering, he really did want to know.

Eventually, gaze fixed on his hand around his glass of water, Wesley said, "I never had a sister. Although I was always going to have one, until it was finally too late. A particular type of sister, of course." A deep sigh, then Wesley raised his head. "I was supposed to be a girl. They were so certain. The right type of girl."

Supposed to be a girl? Wesley? Gunn shook off the idea briskly and said, "What type? Like... Liz Hurley or something?"

"A slayer. A vampire slayer. It's..." Wesley closed his eyes briefly, dragged his hand back through his hair, and then started to tell Gunn about ancient prophecies and forces in balance, and this one-and-only superchick. Who was in Sunnydale and wouldn't you know it?

Wesley supposed to be a superchick? Nope, idea still bouncing straight off. "So that's why you came here? To... I dunno... take her back to meet your family? Guess it's a big deal over there."

"In my family it is. The last two English slayers were both in my family. And a large proportion of potential slayers. It gives my family... It gives them a position to which they have become accustomed."

"And you were letting the side down?"

"Not so much that as... irrelevant. Though, yes, there was a lot of planning done for 'the girl'. For when she arrived. When they got good luck."

"Man. Finally gettin' why you were OK with bein' sent to that school. That's wrong, Wes. That's so wrong."

Wesley shrugged and sighed. "I tried to make up, but... how do you make up for being the wrong person?" He sounded sad, but calm, like he'd sounded sometimes in the last lucid days with Angel. When Angel had said he didn't want Wesley "either", had he known about all this? Gunn wasn't going to ask.

"But you went to Sunnydale for them?"

"Not for them. Not directly for them. But definitely because of them. Their influence got me the job. I was qualified. On paper. But hardly suitable. I knew that but... I didn't know what to do about it. I never have known."

Angel had thought he was useless. That's what Wesley had said about him and Angel and how they'd known each other in Sunnydale. Apart from the crush on Cordy, that was almost all he'd said about the time in Sunnydale. "Well, why would you even want the job? Being around one of those girls after what you'd grown up with?"

"Because I believed in what we were all doing. I'd always believed in it. It was... a privilege to be involved, as it is here with the visions. I didn't see myself on the front line then, I was happy doing research. Studying languages wouldn't... I was good at it. The people there even liked me. But my family didn't... It was just like when they moved me from my school to the Watcher's Academy and used their influence. When it was obvious..." Wesley shook his head, voice becoming ragged. "How do you convince people that you're not a management spy? That you know you don't deserve... You want to do better and you want to ask for help, but they've all agreed not to talk to you." A long sigh. "I shouldn't even have cared about that, when you consider what a slayer faces."

"Course you should care!" Gunn reached across the table and clamped his hand around Wesley's wrist. "Did Angel treat you like that? In Sunnydale?"

"Angel didn't really talk to anyone except Buffy. And he didn't know about my family, none of them did. They might not even have cared. They gave me more chance than - It could have been a fresh start for me but I did everything wrong. You would have... disowned me."

Gunn swallowed. "Y' can't go home?"

A shrug. "They fired me but they didn't get my Green Card cancelled. I don't know how they've been dealing with my failure between them. How much it's damaged... It was my father's birthday on Thursday. Last year I sent a card but this year... I think I did believe that I would call him. But then I couldn't imagine him even letting me get the words out. I should have asked you to make me call him."

"Y' wanna call now? Few days late is better than nothing." Part of Gunn wanted to tell Wesley to just forget about his family, that they didn't deserve him. But you didn't badmouth a man's family, even if he was standing there begging you to do it. You'd never come out of that clean, 'cos it always went deeper than you'd ever guess. And if you loved him and believed in him more than his family did (more than anyone had?), there were a hundred better ways of proving it. If Wesley needed to try to make things right, then Gunn would help him; and help him too if that family still wanted things to stay wrong.

"It's five o'clock in the morning. Yes, I could call tomorrow. I'll be awake all night, though, trying to decide what to say."

Wesley did call the next day but Gunn never knew what Wesley managed to say, because they'd agreed that Gunn would go out to buy breakfast while Wesley was making the call. Wesley didn't look up from his translation when Gunn got back, which pretty-much answered Gunn's question but he went ahead and asked it anyway.

“Oh. He had a speech prepared. Quite short. He must have used it on half the council already. So routine he hardly even raised his voice. ‘After all they’d done for me.’ ‘They’d always spoiled me.’ ‘If only he’d done more to teach me some real character.’ As I said, it was short.” A shrug and a brief sound that might have been a laugh. “But before he hung up he did remind me about my mother’s birthday in July. And told me to send a card and to call on the right day. She’ll probably give me the same speech.”

Gunn put his hand on Wesley’s shoulder. “You did a brave thing, Wes.”

Wesley shook his head. “I’d heard most of that before. The Council gave me a backlog of sixteen years of bad reports. With detailed comparisons. I was expecting the other sixteen years.”

Yeah, that was why it was brave. “Be easier next time. You tell him about the survey? How much you’re doing here?”

“I mentioned that I was calling from L.A. He didn’t really ask anything. He assumed I’d be staying away indefinitely.”

Gunn nodded, then tightened his grip on Wesley’s shoulder. “You OK?”

“Shaky, even if most of that’s relief. I’ll be better after a few hours’ hard work. Especially if I can look forward to a date this evening.”

“You can choose the dinner and the movie.”

Gunn wished he could ask Angel what Wesley had really been like in Sunnydale. Had it been that obvious that he’d spent most of his life with people who didn’t trust him, that he’d learned to expect that he wouldn’t be wanted anywhere? And had Angel seen him change? The change must have come with getting fired. Finally free of all that slayer crap that he’d been born into, that he’d really believed in, the poor bastard. Finally able to make some choices of his own. Well... able to make them till the Kungai had taken his arm, and the Powers had given him to Angel. But that was only how Angel had seen it. Wesley had had a choice, and he’d made it. And then he’d chosen Gunn.

It was kind of a pathetic story. Spoiled rich boy. Parents didn’t care enough but they still got him chances other people had been trying to earn for years. Yeah, you could drown in the tears at that Support Group.

But Wesley didn’t tell it like he was sorry for himself. Sure it’d been tough and he wouldn’t wish it on anyone, and he didn’t hide from Gunn how much it could still hurt him. But he didn’t think it made him special or gave him an excuse. He hadn’t made any habit of dragging around all the things that would’ve been better “if only”. He’d decided what he believed in and he’d done what he could with what he’d been given. Like Gunn with his family and then with the streets and the crew.

Gunn didn’t like to think how lonely Wes must have been. Not totally lonely for every day of those sixteen years - he’d been happy, hadn’t he? when they’d left him alone to be with books and book-people - but bad enough for long enough to drive most people crazy. That was all over, thank God, it was long past. Wesley was happy now, and from much more than just books.

* * * * *

Angel was going through a phase of complaining about his food. Pig’s blood wasn’t good enough for him any more, and by the middle of May he was refusing more than half of his meals. Even with Wesley ordering him to drink (and Wesley could be chilling when giving orders), he’d take at most two mouthfuls and act like it was choking him. Wesley got him some calves’ blood then some goats’ blood and then some lambs’ blood, but Angel was anything but grateful for the change.

They already knew, though, that Angel wasn’t just looking for some variety. No. Angel was yearning for human blood. They’d suspected from the way he’d started staring at the veins on Wesley’s wrist, from the way he was following their scent; but they knew for sure on the day Wesley went in with a paper-cut on his hand. Yearning really was the word: a hopeless longing. Even when the sight or the smell made Angel vamp up, he didn’t act threatening or demanding, he acted like he knew he was never going to get anything. But the animal blood was so much less than what he needed, and since he had no memory, he had to experience the same tragic disappointment over and over again. “Tragic” was Wesley’s word, added after the lambs’ blood (which had been expensive and not exactly easy to find).

They had to assume he'd get over it when he got hungry enough, but that might take months and they also had to assume he could turn dangerous at any moment. Angelus seemed to be going through the same phase, though the effects were less obvious since they never tried to feed Angelus and he was always openly thirsting for blood; but since Angel had started this yearning, Angelus had been savage, loud enough to wake them some nights.

Wesley thought it must be the interns: having the scent of new people in the apartment after his world had closed down to just Wesley and Gunn. Wesley watched Angel on the screen while Gunn opened the door to the night's intern, and there was definitely... an awareness. Quiet and hopeless from Angel, loud and demanding from Angelus. And wasn't he at his worst on the days immediately after?

On the third Tuesday of Wesley's watching, when it was Newton at the door, Wesley saw Angel vamp up, and he and Gunn spent the drive to the portal wondering if Angel would ever adjust and take the new scents for granted, or whether it would be safer (and kinder) to stop using the interns. Wesley didn't think it would be awkward telling Lilah they'd changed their minds; he'd tell her they'd realised that new people made Angel disturbed and they'd offer to take them all out for a meal, as a small way of thanking them.

That evening's duals were in a sociable mood, enough to talk at length over noodles and then to choose a bar that tolerated humans. Wesley asked them about their experience of prisoners adjusting to new guards, and they soon guessed he was asking for a reason, and asked him in turn what was happening with his sick friend.

Suddenly: "Is he a demon?" Gunn thought Wesley had been doing a smooth, blood-free translation, but maybe they'd picked up something about Angel's sense of smell.

"Half demon." Still smooth. "He's half Brachen. He usually appears entirely human except in times of stress."

"So you know he's stressed-out by these people?" Wesley nodded, and the duals spent most of the rest of the meal trying to find a fair comparison to Angel.

"Why'd you make him a Brachen demon?" It was nearly eleven and they were on their way home, with the duals still in the bar.

"Doyle was half Brachen. I learned something about them. And in a way Angel is half demon. It seemed the simplest way to explain him."

Newton wasn't at the apartment when they got home, and instead they found themselves talking to a man twice Newton's age who introduced himself as Holland Manners and looked like he should've been playing the kindly uncle on some hokey sitcom. Turned out he was the head of Lilah's section but he'd been glad to help out when Newton had called around ten to say his mother had just been rushed to hospital and he needed to find one of the other interns to cover for him. Manners said he'd just arrived and he'd been about to call them to tell them what had happened.

"He could have called us. We would have come straight back." Wesley wasn't happy, but Manners seemed to hear it as concern for Newton.

"I don't think he was thinking clearly. In fact, I told him not to call you. I thought his tone would worry you, when there really was no need." Manners apologised again for the intrusion but without any hint that he would ever have handled things differently. Still the kindly uncle, but easier now to imagine him as Lilah's boss. "So that's Angelus." Manners nodded at the screen, though Angelus wasn't in view at that moment: he was at the door, and his snarls sounded like he had teeth all along his throat. He was clawing and kicking and using his full weight and they could hear that he was getting burned and that he didn't seem to care. "How long did it take you to get used to this?"

Gunn shrugged. "Nothin' to get used to. Door's bolted. Windows're solid. Complainin's the most he can do."

Manners soon left and they showered and went to bed. Wesley was really annoyed about Newton and Manners, seemed tense enough that he'd be losing sleep over it.

"We'll have to wait for... oh, at least another two weeks now. Until well after Newton's next shift. Or it'll look as if we're stopping it because they screwed up. Lilah's intern and Lilah's boss. We can't afford to end it like that. We can't afford to put her on the defensive."

“I know, Wes. But it’s only a couple more weeks. Angel’s not gonna starve. Not even showin’ his cheekbones yet. Day Five of the diet. Max.”

When they got up on Wednesday morning they found that Angel was naked; looked like he’d torn his clothes off and shoved them under the mattress. He was either hallucinating or in hell, and either way he was extremely angry.

They weren’t going to try to feed him, but they would prefer him dressed again, so they decided they’d give him clean clothes and hope he’d soon put them on. Gunn dealt with the door then stood guard with the holy water while Wesley went in with the clothes. Angel was crouched at the far side of the room but he leapt to his feet with a growl when Wesley stepped into the room, kept on growling while Wesley was placing the clothes on the floor, and then the moment Wesley started to tell him to get dressed, he launched into an attack. Wesley was ready and got out cleanly, Gunn pulled the door closed and slid the bolts; and then they were listening to Angel burning again. Attacking the door while he was naked: that was a new definition of angry.

“He already had burns over half his face. Did you see any of that?” Gunn shook his head. He’d been watching the monitor so he’d only seen Angel in greys. “His hands looked raw and there were deep marks on his arms. He must have bitten himself too, I suppose when he was throwing himself against the door. There was blood on his chin. He looks worse than after the roughest session we ever had with the nets and the pikes.” Angel had finally had enough of the door and was snarling and protesting somewhere out of sight.

“Guess he knows Angelus was here last night. Angelus actin’ really hungry over someone new.”

Wesley nodded. “He probably thinks that Angelus killed Holland Manners. Assuming he’s still able to get the scent today. Angelus must have... entertained himself lavishly after we went to bed, if Angel couldn’t bear to stay in the same clothes.”

They talked about their main cases over breakfast, but Wesley must have been doing some extra thinking in the background, because a few minutes after they’d sat down at their desks, he turned to Gunn and said, “I am going to stop the interns. I’ll tell Lilah today. I don’t particularly mind heating blood that he won’t drink. But if I think I know a way to stop him going through all this, then I am going to take it. It is getting worse. I don’t want to know what he’d do next.”

Manners had, of course, talked to Lilah Morgan about the night before, and Lilah did a lot of Wesley’s work for him by asking if he thought that Angel would ever really adjust to having new people in the apartment. They agreed that the interns would stop immediately. Lilah seemed touched by the idea of a meal to thank them all and suggested lunch the following Wednesday. Newton might not be able to make it; the signs were that he would be spending most of his time at the hospital for many weeks to come.

Angel did get dressed during Wednesday, but he also stayed angry, even after several long intervals of sleep and an afternoon as Angelus (possibly hallucinating). The first time he seemed calm was when he woke late on Thursday morning, and they decided to test him first with an approach and a few words from Wesley.

“You must be hungry, Angel. You haven’t had anything for at least two days.”

Angel looked at Wesley, wary, frowning, then slowly shook his head.

“Well, if I bring you half a measure, will you drink it?”

The same stare. Gunn decided after a few seconds that Angel wasn’t even going to nod, but Wesley had at least five times his patience with Angel. But then: “You tell me.” Gunn was so surprised he nearly let go the door-handle: Angel never spoke.

“I - ” Wesley took another step into the room, and Angel didn’t draw back. “Do you mean you’ll drink it if I tell you?”

Now Angel just nodded, very slightly.

“Good. Then I’ll go and get it right now.”

Angel drank slowly, frowning at the blood in the beaker in the same way that he’d been frowning at Wesley. Not one of his yearning days, but not back to normal either. The burns had faded, though; his body, at least, was predictable.

“It’s not what you want?”

Angel looked up, seemed startled by Wesley’s question. After a few seconds: “He wants.” Angelus, probably. And he couldn’t be saying Angelus wanted pig’s blood.

“I see. But he’s not here now. Will you be able to drink a full measure tomorrow?” Like Angel could promise anything. What was “tomorrow”, in his mind?

“Will you tell me?”

“Yes.”

A strange shudder then Angel went back to drinking, but with his head turned now from Wesley. When he was finished he sat down against the wall and put the beaker on the floor without looking at it, and he didn’t look when Wesley bent to get the beaker.

There was blood on the clothes that Angel had shoved under the mattress, blood dried brown and stiff. The largest patches were at the neck of the shirt, but there were drops and smears all down the front, and on the trousers too. It must have been at least a minute before Angelus had even noticed that he’d bitten his tongue. Half the buttons were missing from the shirt, too, torn out so hard there were holes left in the cloth. Best to throw the clothes away; they’d never get the blood out properly, and Angel would probably know it and refuse to wear them. Better find all those buttons, too, not leave Angel anything to make him think of Angelus.

Angel seemed calm enough that they’d be able to shower him, so Wesley changed into his Speedos and his robe. Gunn waited in the doorway with the chains slung over one shoulder while Wesley went in to talk to Angel.

“Angel, it’s time you had a shower. You need to get properly clean.”

Again that shudder. Angel looked up at Wesley, suspicious and uncertain, then suddenly turned away, hunched to the wall. Had he finally got angry with Wesley for making him drink the pig’s blood?

“Come on, Angel. No one enjoys this but you know you’ll feel better once you’re clean.” Angel was slowly shaking his head. “Angel. We’ll make it as quick as we can. Come on. Start getting ready. Take that shirt off now.”

Angel did get to his feet, but then edged away along the wall. Gunn took a step forward, expecting Wesley to follow Angel, but Wesley hadn’t moved.

“You know I’m not going to force you., but I’m just asking you to undo a few buttons. Or do you still have those burns on your arms? Are they hurting you?”

Angel half-turned his head towards Wesley, then turned back and lifted his right arm. He stared at the palm, held up by his face, then down at the forearm, then across at the shoulder. Suddenly: “You’re trying to -” Angel had whirled around to face Wesley - fast and urgent, but still keeping his distance.

“I’m trying to get you clean. I’d like to do it before you fall asleep again. But I am prepared to wait until you realise that you need it. You should know I won’t force you.”

Angel looked as suspicious as ever, frowned and shook his head sharply; but then he started to undress and he was almost casual about it.

Gunn dealt with the button problem while Wesley and Angel were in the shower. No time to go searching (no point, either), good enough just to take the vacuum over the floor. Five or six times the vacuum met something large enough to give a rattling sound, and three of those had to be the missing buttons. The others were probably gravel that he and Wesley had tracked in on their shoes.

Angel was still casual, standing there quite patiently, watching while Wesley finished drying himself and then while Gunn helped Wesley back into the robe. Wesley didn’t even have to tell Angel to lie face-down on the mattress: he went straight over and knelt down. Not so casual, maybe, the way he turned his head to keep Wesley and the holy water in sight while Gunn was unlocking his wrists, but there was nothing to tell from his expression.

“Your clean clothes are right here. You do feel better now, don’t you?”

A slow nod then Angel opened his mouth and then something happened and they lost him. A frown, another of those shudders, and then he was kneeling up and sorting through his new set of clothes and most definitely ignoring them.

By the next Wednesday, when Wesley took Lilah and the three interns out to lunch, Angel’s appetite for pig’s blood had returned to normal, and Angelus had stopped disturbing their sleep. The five of them talked about the survey (around 80% complete, Wesley thought, from his current guess of how many more demons would be willing to talk to him), and they talked about the news, about travel, about museums and San Diego. Gunn was glad he’d decided not to go; outside work or training, he hadn’t met a single person yet who knew what to make of him and Wesley together. Angel had probably come closest, mostly by seeming not to care.

Now that the survey was winding down, Wesley got to start on his new demon languages, and Gunn got to catch up on some serious time-wasting with Matt, Grouw and Piriti. He’d tried to drop in to Caritas most Thursdays, even if he could only stay for half an hour, but it had been far too long since he’d been able to join in one of the nest-building sessions at the weekends. He hadn’t seen Anne in months either, since before they’d moved apartments.

The boys had told him at Caritas that they’d be working on the nest for most of Saturday. Gunn and Wesley went training early on Saturday morning, then Gunn met Anne for breakfast, and then he went over to the nest. Anne had heard from the crew that Gunn was doing fine, but she hadn’t heard about the move, and she wanted to know about Angel. The boys wanted to know about the survey, about the training with the duals, about the latest cases and missions. Gunn wouldn’t tell them anything about cases, but he did tell them about the pyramid scheme and the raid on the theatre - and then they wanted to know about the crew.

Around five Gunn and the boys started talking about their plans for the evening, not that there was a huge amount to say about going back to the beach-house to watch TV, play video games and order pizza. The plans sounded good to Gunn, but he’d told Wesley that he’d be back by six so he’d have to call first to check on Wesley’s plans.

Wesley hadn’t made any start on cooking and sounded quite glad to have even more of the day to himself. While he was talking to Wesley, Gunn saw Piriti’s brother Solito whispering something to Piriti. Piriti shushed Solito, looking annoyed, and then took a quick glance at Gunn. OK. Looked to Gunn like he’d just outed himself by checking in with Wesley like that.

To Grouw, since he didn’t want to put Solito on the spot: “So d’ you guys have any bets placed on whether Wes and me were livin’ together? Or’s it too obvious for that?”

Grouw looked around at the others, then nodded. “Yeah, got pretty obvious.”

Matt said, “I’d’a won the bet if we’d had one. I told them, from the way you two argued.”

Gunn laughed then turned serious. “How many people’s it obvious to? Wes’s always been worried it’d hurt our business.”

Matt, Piriti and Grouw shrugged. Solito was just staring at Gunn, eyes bulging so he looked more like a gecko than ever. Grouw said, “People talk like they assume, if they talk at all. Nothing to worry about. Not like it’s the weirdest thing about you, not even close.”

They set off for the beach-house soon after, and Gunn took the two Chachaspe demons in his truck. Solito had come out of the staring and eye-bulging and sat quietly while Gunn and Piriti talked. But about halfway there he said something to Piriti in their own language - it sounded like a question - and then they were into a serious argument. After a couple of miles Piriti seemed to give up; he gave a deep sigh, turned to Gunn and said, “He wants to ask you what it means about you and what you want about having a brood. You being with Wesley. Are you with him because you don’t want one? Or what will you do when you have to have one? Tell him it’s absolutely none of his business.” And then something extra to Solito, in the same tone but more so.

Gunn laughed, and kept his eyes on the road as he said, “No, it isn’t any of his business, but it doesn’t mean anything about me and whether or not I want a family. Never even thought about it.”

“Your elders... How did you tell them?” Finally, Solito himself.

“My - My parents have been gone for a long time. There’s no one left for me to tell.”

“Oh!” A long sigh of realisation - from both brothers, Gunn thought, and he checked their expressions and it did look like both. “Thank you, Mister Gunn. Please excuse me for asking such a thing.”

“No problem.” Gunn reckoned he’d got off lightly in the way of questions from a sheltered kid who didn’t understand the first thing about humans and sex.

Matt was in the mood for a jetski game and dug out his Nintendo64. He showed them round the courses explaining some of the tricks, and then they worked out a competition that meant they all raced each course in turn. They tried out all the different modes, mastered at least one stunt-move each, failed narrowly to break into the last level (which meant that Matt had still never seen the Glacier Coast course, and that was bugging them all now). Gunn left around eleven, with next Saturday as a firm date.

Wesley was stretched out on the couch with a book and a beer. He wanted a kiss, and then he wanted to hear about the beach-house. Gunn told him about the outing first, and Wesley was mildly concerned and then just amused.

“But we don’t argue.”

“Feels like that to you, English. You always win.”

“So we do? When?”

Gunn shrugged and smiled. “Last I can think is when you went in and unchained Angel on your own. ‘bout the only time I’ve been pissed at you. Matt’s full of crap, even if he did get it first.”

Wesley nodded, returning Gunn’s smile, then quirked his eyebrows and said, “Guess what Angel did today, when I went in to feed him?”

“Hmm. Asked for a green salad instead? Glass of wine?”

“Nearly as good. He thanked me.”

“That’s... Well, that’s good.” Gunn frowned, not sure if he should ask his question. “Was he... Where was he?” Really: was he lucid? Are we going to go through that again?

“Oh, he was in hell. He was scared of me but - I don’t think he said it to try to appease me. It was more as if...” Suddenly, as if he’d just worked it out: “Actually, it was as if he was trying to test me. But when I told him he was welcome he looked horrified and promptly ran away, so I got zero on that test.”

Gunn turned to look at the screen, then shook his head and sighed. “If there’s a Mad Vamp Olympics and they’ve got a Hiding Event... He’s got the gold, just on style.”

Wesley laughed, then also sighed. “He’s had a bad day since then. Some very disturbed dreams, violent hallucinations. For the last hour he’s been deep in hell and flinching at every sound.”

“Oh? Damn.” Gunn put his hand on Wesley’s stomach, fingers rubbing over the two lowest buttons. “What I been plannin’... Like it best when you get loud.”

“Some large percentage of fucked?”

Gunn nodded, then groaned long and low when Wesley reached up to take hold of the neck of his T-shirt and pull him down into a kiss. Signs were, they were both going to get loud.

Afterwards, when Wesley’s voice had recovered enough to put together a full sentence, he asked again about the beach-house. Gunn told him far too much about Wave-Race, starting it as a joke to see when Wes would make him stop, but Wesley’s limit must be set way past his own.

“You should come along next time. You steer, I’ll do the throttle, we’ll be doin’ backflips down the glacier.”

Wesley's laugh was obviously a no, even before he said he had to stay in with Angel. "And I haven't really changed my mind about them being too young and boisterous for me."

"But you love hearin' about it."

"I love hearing about it from you."

They got hot again for a while then eased back, and Gunn thought about himself happy out with his friends and Wesley happy alone with his book; and about fucking and how it got him hot to think that Wesley was the only man who'd ever done it to him, and how it also got him hot to think that he wasn't the only man who'd done it to Wesley.

"Wes? Who was the first man who fucked you? Was it one of your language friends from college?"

Wesley shook his head. "That would have been the fourth or fifth. It was a boy at school."

"Oh, right." Yeah, Wes had said they were young. "Hey, was it your friend with the computer? You used to play those old games?"

"Ellison?" A thought that Wesley had never had before. "No, no, we wouldn't - I mean, we were in Lower Fifth then. It was a boy in Lower Sixth."

"So that's a friend you made later? Was he into books 'n' research 'n' stuff?"

"More than most, I suppose. But we weren't friends. I said he was in Lower Sixth. You wouldn't make friends with someone even one year different."

"But he was your first. You must've..."

"He wanted sex. He chose me."

After about five seconds, Gunn said, "You're saying it was rape. That is what you're saying?"

Wesley shrugged. "In that there was very little question of my saying no. But he wasn't trying to hurt me, he just didn't know how not to hurt me. That makes a difference. It got easier. And he was kind to me. More than once."

"Wes. Wes." He wasn't going to ask how old Wesley had been. What was the point in making himself angrier? When Wesley just seemed to want him to see how this was different. "That shouldn't've been your first. I thought... I thought it was you and a friend like me 'n' Luke - and you wanted each other so much you had to try it together. Together. Y'know."

"I know. I'm glad it was like that for you. But I don't want you to... He was kind to me. I knew there was much worse. Even at the time... There were many things I dreaded but that wasn't one of them."

So that was the main thing they had in common: their childhoods had taught them to get by on almost nothing. Give Gunn a group of friends and a direction to lead them, and he'd find his own roof and food and services and clothes. Show Wesley a trace of kindness and he'd forgive you almost anything. Gunn had never seen Angel being kind to Wesley, except maybe in how smoothly he'd adjusted when Gunn moved in. But there must have been some times in the early days, when Angel brought Wesley home from the hospital.

"Do you - D' you ever think about him? That boy? Does it ever get you hot?" When he'd started asking he'd been looking for a buzz, and now he felt kind of lost. Should be much worse than lost, should be facing a sleepless night of imagining, and of feeling guilty for imagining and for asking. But you'd think that Wesley hadn't even noticed the question; Wesley acted like it was a simple fact, like who'd won at Wave-Race. So Gunn was left thinking about... the strange things that can happen when you go looking for a buzz.

"Not really about him but... I've been through hundreds of fantasies that use aspects of the situation and I'm begging you not to ask for details. I know they're anything but healthy." Wesley didn't sound worried, more like resigned.

Gunn smiled, and slid his hand up around Wesley's waist. "Hmm. Only if you buy me off by tellin' me a healthy one. You got any?"

"Oh, just as many. Since I met you. But there's not much to tell. There aren't any... gimmicks. No costumes or - It's just... the things I think about you that make me lose track of time, of where I am. The things I remember."

Making Wesley lose track of time. Gunn liked that. "Yeah? So what'll you remember about this? About tonight?"

"Probably... what I'm feeling right now. Very sore and rather sticky and hoping for more."

Gunn groaned and pulled Wesley on top, held tight in a kiss - while his other hand was already testing that soreness. They were louder than before, maybe louder than ever before.

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On Tuesday morning Angel thanked Wesley again, and this time Gunn was there to see it. Yes, Angel was frightened, he was expecting something terrible to happen. He didn't seem "horrified" when Wesley told him he was welcome - nothing as bad as that, but very confused and upset, anything but normal as a reaction to Wesley's smile. Wesley thought the guards must sometimes have forced him to thank them and then punished him for not doing it properly, and he must have been remembering that recently for some reason. He certainly seemed to be having a lot of nightmares about his time in hell, and about one day in three he'd wake up acting like the demons who tortured him had only just left his cell. Another phase, like the yearning for human blood. Wouldn't be the last, God no.

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"This was not a happy pig." Angel to Wesley, in a mournful tone after two slow mouthfuls - and on a day when Angel had woken all hunched and closed-in, not likely even to look at them. Gunn did a double-take, saw the same from Wesley; and then Wesley laughed, and Angel tilted his head slightly, smiled, and took another mouthful.

"Well, when you consider the circumstances... You can't be saying that they're usually happy at that time?"

Angel shook his head. "This one had been worried about something for a long time. I think... about losing weight." Nearly straight-faced, but not quite. There was something in those eyes. Angelus! Could it be Angelus? A new phase where he'd somehow got smart enough to pretend? Gunn moved up right next to Wesley, eyes fixed on Angel. Angel gave no sign of noticing Gunn. And was that natural, with Wesley laughing again, or was that Angelus?

"Or maybe about going bald? If it really tastes that bad I can get you another pack. Although I can't guarantee that it will be from a carefree pig."

Angel shook his head again, smiling openly now. "There's nothing wrong with it. When you consider the circumstances." And he lifted the beaker and took a very long drink.

"So how long have you been planning that joke?"

"Since... I think since the last time." The last time for what?

"Well, I appreciate the effort. Thank you."

Angel drained the beaker and handed it back. "You're welcome." Then his expression suddenly turned serious. He looked hard at Wesley for three or four seconds and then dropped his head so he was staring at the ground.

Quietly: "Angel? What's my name? Do you know my name?"

A shake of the head, but so hard and so quick Gunn thought it could be "go away" just as soon as "no".

"My name is Wesley. You can call me Wesley."

Angel raised his head, but to look at Gunn, not Wesley, and not meeting Gunn's eyes. But then Angel gave a split-second glance across at Wesley, a more-direct look at Gunn; and then he closed his eyes, nodded twice, and turned away.

Gunn slid the bolts, then: “What the fuck?”

Wesley nodded then shrugged. “I am not going to make any guesses. Raise any hopes.”

“So... not going to guess it was Angelus?”

Wesley looked stunned, then kind of sick. “We’d be dead or wishing we were. He wouldn’t waste his chance like that. And... the way he admitted he’d been joking. I know how Angelus smiles, it’s never like that.”

“Yeah. Was just a first guess. But he was after something, ‘n’ that’s more Angelus than it is Angel. Worth bein’ careful. ‘s all I’m sayin’.”

Wesley nodded. “We shouldn’t go in without holy water. Until we’re sure.”

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“This was not a happy pig.” Thursday evening, and Gunn had been waiting for Angel to wake up before he could leave for Caritas. Angel’s delivery was exactly the same as on Tuesday morning, though he hadn’t been nearly as closed-in beforehand.

“No?” Wesley sounded concerned and alert, like he was thinking hard what might have gone wrong. “Was it one of those pigs that worry too much about losing weight?”

Angel seemed frozen with astonishment - and, yes, Gunn did believe now that it was Angel; Angelus would have felt a surge of rage when Wesley had spoiled his joke and his plan, and he wouldn’t have been able to hide it. Eventually: “Yes. But I - You know.”

Wesley smiled. “It was a lucky guess. But I think I do know your sense of humour. There isn’t really anything wrong with the blood, is there?”

Angel shook his head, then concentrated hard on drinking.

“Thank you.” Wesley took the empty beaker. Angel nodded, very serious. “I’m sorry I stepped on your joke. You would have told it much better than I did. I promise you I won’t do that again.”

Angel looked like he’d never heard an apology before, was gonna need the rest of the day to work out what it meant. Some long moments of frowning, then he slowly raised his hand toward the beaker, frowning even more deeply. Taking it back so they could start again? Gunn wouldn’t be surprised if Angel was confused enough about time that he thought he could rewind it. But Angel stopped a few inches short of the breaker, then let his hand drop back. “You... You shouldn’t be...”

“We shouldn’t still be here now that you’ve fed? I know. We’ll leave you alone until tomorrow.” And maybe that had been what Angel had meant, because as soon as they left he went to lie curled up on the mattress, went straight there like he’d been thinking of nothing else all the time they were with him.

The boys had started to wonder if Gunn was going to show at Caritas that evening, and they were very glad to see him because they wanted to tell him about this idea they’d just got for the summer: running tours of L.A. for demons, using the tour that Wesley had designed for them as their starting-point - if that would be OK with Wesley. They also wanted to use Wesley’s survey to help reach their market, and they didn’t know anyone who’d do better than Wesley when they were ready to put together new tours. Of course they’d pay, whatever Wesley and Gunn thought was reasonable.

Gunn didn’t think they had a chance of earning enough to be able to afford Wesley, not with nearly half the summer already gone, but he said he’d ask Wesley. Of course they’d give as much help as they could, even if it was Gunn doing the research instead of Wesley. And it might end up as a good way of advertising Wyndham Gunn.

Wesley was lying on the couch again. Angel was still on the mattress, but asleep now. Wesley agreed that they’d help the boys: work something out with the survey, set them a special rate, probably give them a few hours a week for nothing, depending on how much work the boys themselves seemed to be putting in. But Wesley wasn’t showing as much interest in the boys as usual. He was preoccupied.

“ ‘s up? Somethin’s buggin’ you.” And Gunn had his answer just from the way Wesley turned his head to look up at the screen. “You handled that fine, Wes. All we knew, it coulda been Angelus. Next joke, ‘s all his.”

“What? No, that was...” Wesley swallowed. “We’ve moved on since then. We talked for a few minutes.”

“Yeah, when? What about?”

A shrug and a grimace. “I’m not really sure. About half an hour after you left he knelt up and was looking at the door. I thought I’d better go in, in case he needed... I don’t know. He was truly frightened when I first opened the door. Almost panicked. And then I asked him if he needed anything and he looked so relieved. He came closer and after a while he asked me...” Another shrug. “What I needed. What I was like with the others. Whether they let me meet him. Meet Angelus, he must have meant. I tried to answer properly but whenever I asked him what he meant he seemed to take that as the answer itself and then he’d say something that I couldn’t understand even well enough to...” A sigh. “I told him my name again. And then I think he ran out of questions. I asked him again if he needed anything. He shook his head and then he turned and went back to the mattress. And he’s been like that ever since. But he seemed... He acted as if it was his idea of a normal conversation. With a natural end. When he went back to the mattress it wasn’t because something had suddenly made him want to run away.”

“He’s decided he likes you.” A joke, to avoid the idea that Angel might be clawing back some lucidity. How long had it been since the last vision? Three weeks at least, Gunn thought. The longest gap since Gunn had known him. Long enough for his mind to start to heal? Maybe that would be good news, maybe Angel would even recover enough to be able to join them on missions again. Seemed more likely, though, that it would be bad, very bad: that he’d just heal enough to be able to break again. And there was nothing to say he’d break in the same neat patterns, with Angelus kept at a safe distance by sleep.

Wesley laughed. “Well, he did only say that there was nothing his guards could have done to make him trust them. It’s all-too-possible to like someone you don’t trust.”

“God, yeah. So that’s why he’s been runnin’ away. He remembers all the times you stood him up. Stuck him with the check. Just ‘forgot’ to invite him to the party.”

“Of course. I suppose I did take advantage. I knew he couldn’t resist my rakish charm.”

They both laughed then, but by the next time he went to Caritas, Gunn had decided that Wesley had, in fact, achieved both miracles: he’d made Angel like him, and he’d made Angel trust him. Some days were bad days and Angel didn’t know Wesley at all, but on his good days you could see him coming back again and again to the question of what Wesley really meant, and returning with fewer doubts each time.

Gunn had also decided that Angel wasn’t becoming lucid, not really. You couldn’t call him lucid when his mind was still broken apart in the same way, even if he was talking to Wesley again. Angel still thought he was in hell, he didn’t know he had visions, and he didn’t know his brain had been damaged, that he could hardly trust anything it told him.

Over the weekend Angel had asked Wesley over and over why he was so different from the other guards (“Didn’t they tell you about him? You don’t know what I’ve done?”). Wesley had tried to tell him the truth, thinking he might be close enough to lucid, that it might be what was needed to bring him back, but instead it showed how far Angel had gone in accepting his place in hell. He thought Wesley was answering his question with a lie, an obvious, glaring lie, and that this was also Wesley’s answer: that he wasn’t different from the other guards, not at all. Angel had vamped up and thrown Wesley towards the window - towards the view that had never bothered him before, that he’d recognised from the start as a meaningless illusion - and Gunn had blasted him with holy water and dragged Wesley out.

Angel had howled his fury and betrayal for hours then had a series of terrible nightmares about the other guards and probably about Wesley too. When he woke he was wary of Wesley though he didn’t seem to know why, and the next day he’d forgotten everything and was asking the question again like it was the first time (“I don’t know, Angel. I don’t know anything about the other guards.”). Wesley’s shoulder was still stiff from being slammed against the barrier on the window, and the huge bruises there were still solid purple.

All of Angel’s nightmares over the last few weeks must have been anxiety dreams about trusting Wesley. Made total sense to Gunn now. Of course Angel saw that Wesley was different: it was in everything Wesley said, how he said it, how he listened. And of course Angel would think this had to be a lie, another round in his torture. So he was still

fighting, but Wesley was going to win. When the door opened and he saw it was Wesley, you could see the relief and the welcome, even on the screen.

How sick was it to be comfortable, more than comfortable, with the idea that Angel would never get out of his hell, that he would never be in a state to take in the truth? Gunn knew he would never like Angel, but he didn't hate him now. He used to think there was nothing Angel could do to make up for that terrible time he'd hurt Wesley. Not properly, not to make the words go away like they'd never been spoken, never even been thought. Wesley deserved so much better from Angel and maybe Angel didn't even know that, and Gunn had thought he could never forgive him. But now... Wesley did deserve for Angel to learn to trust him in hell. He did deserve to be the centre of all the good thoughts that this Angel had. He deserved to know it and this Angel told him every time they met: not in words, but in that look of welcome.

Wesley, being Wesley, wouldn't accept any credit for himself - he talked of the change as an accident, pure chance - and Gunn didn't argue, just teased him about his "rakish charm". Wesley was so happy, though, he could hardly stop talking about how good it was to see the difference in Angel now that he had days in his hell when he knew he was safe. And Gunn would never argue with that, because it was good to see.

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About a quarter of Wyndham Gunn's current cases had come to them through contacts they'd made in doing the survey, and they expected the proportion to get larger. Some were from the businesses that had supported the survey, some were from demons who'd filled in the forms, and the latest was from a newspaper that had contacted them to ask for information from the survey and then had hired Wesley to assess their archives. They got the work from the newspaper even after Wesley had told the journalist that he couldn't tell her anything about the survey results until the security precautions had been agreed, which wouldn't be for at least another month.

The security precautions were to ensure that survey results would only be released for purposes that would benefit the demons who had contributed: it must never be used to track down enemies or prey (except for visions, of course, like the one with the Haklar demon). There would be rules, an application procedure, background checks, and a properly-representative review board. Wesley had asked the committee of businesses that had supported the survey to design the security precautions while he was working on the survey itself, but they didn't really get very far. Yes, they accepted Wesley's argument that the survey database should be public property (the community as a whole had made it possible, therefore the community as a whole should own it), but they'd really much rather keep it to themselves, for the business advantage. They had held meetings, and they'd produced a design for the security precautions that they seemed to think was good enough. Gunn and Wesley spent two evenings sketching out and typing up a better design, and then another two evenings working out how to present their design so it looked like a tribute to the committee's design rather than a demolition. The tact had worked and now they were making real progress, but they'd be lucky to get the system in place by fall.

Of course Gunn and Wesley weren't making the boys wait until fall, the boys were another exception (and this time one that the committee didn't need to know about). The committee members were probably making their own exceptions all the time, using their own copies of the database: doing favours for friends or just plain selling the information. So their security precautions were already shot full of holes but it was still worth doing. The day would come when they were gonna need those rules, they were both sure of it.

* * * * *

Angel was ignoring Gunn. He'd never paid Gunn much attention since Gunn wasn't the one who carried the blood, but when he'd been scared of both of them he'd at least bothered to track Gunn's movements. Didn't need to, anymore; he knew he was safe from anything as long as Wesley was there. He didn't even look at Gunn when Gunn was about to chain him for his shower. He looked at Wesley instead and said, "You don't have to chain me. I know I can't escape."

"No. You wouldn't get very far. But we do have to chain you, Angel. You get angry sometimes, without warning. You change. We have to take precautions."

"I thought... I thought he couldn't get out without... You wouldn't call him."

"It's not just him. As I said, you get angry sometimes. I know you don't remember."

“L.. I remember being angry. I remember what -” He shook his head. “Have I been angry with you? What did I do? Did I-”

“You taught me to be careful. That’s all. You need the chains, Angel.” And Angel nodded and raised his hands behind his back.

How did Angel know he couldn’t escape? How many times had he tried and failed? And how angry had he got with the guards? He’d attacked them, sounded like. Probably done some damage. Yeah, they probably made sure he remembered that.

Angel had gradually stopped asking Wesley why he was different from the other guards. He didn’t seem able to learn Wesley’s name, but the same number of repetitions had drummed into him the idea that Wesley didn’t know the other guards. And Angel had added his own ideas, which emerged fragment by fragment: not so much at feeding times, when Gunn was usually there, but when Wesley needed a break from work and would go in and keep him company for ten minutes.

“He thinks we don’t know that we’re working in a hell dimension. He thinks that the demons in charge have somehow hidden everything unpleasant from us.”

“Boy! How stupid does that make us?”

Wesley shrugged and nodded. “He doesn’t see it like that. He doesn’t need us to justify being here. He doesn’t want us to change anything in how he’s being treated. How he was being treated. He just keeps telling me to ‘be careful’. That they must have plans. That they’re using us. And he’s...” A brief, fond laugh. “You should hear him struggle to warn us that we’re in the wrong place. While avoiding telling me anything about what kind of place it really is. I shouldn’t laugh, he’s... Of course he has his pride. But he’s so transparent when he’s being evasive.”

The warnings didn’t come every day - they probably depended on what Angel had been dreaming about - and Gunn had to wait several days before he could hear one again, and this time listen properly.

“Isn’t pride. The reason he won’t say. He’s worried you’ll run to the boss and get fired. Or worse. Wants to keep you here. ‘n’ keep you safe.”

“Oh. Of course. He’s taking a risk, then, in warning us at all.” A sudden smile. “Unless he’s relying on us being stupid.”

Gunn shrugged. “Thinks he could lose you if he doesn’t warn you. ‘s a tough one. He does OK, you ask me.”

“I’ll tell him, then, that we will be careful. And we won’t do anything to let them know that he’s warned us. If he stops warning us, that will presumably mean that we’ve stopped him worrying about it.”

Angel looked so relieved when Wesley gave him the reassurance, more relieved even than he’d looked when he’d first started trusting Wesley; Gunn thought for a moment that Angel was going to hug Wesley. The warnings stopped very quickly: within a week.

* * * * *

Wesley cut his hand badly during a session with the duals one Tuesday: a deep, ragged gash right across the palm and up the side of his index finger. The Ehiba half of Tarrag had wrenched his sword away and raked him with a claw in the same motion. It had been an accident: Tarrag had every reason to expect Wesley to react more quickly. Gunn took Wesley to the emergency room and kept him company while he had a shockingly-painful painkilling injection and twelve stitches.

Gunn thought he knew why the accident had happened: Wesley had been distracted because something had reminded him of the sex they’d been having recently during their own training sessions. He’d told Wesley it could be dangerous (OK, no, he hadn’t - but he’d thought it, afterwards, he was going to tell him). They’d had it under control before, never even talked about it, somehow blocked out the sight and smell and feel of one another, managed to concentrate on the body as an instrument, all science and numbers and repetitions. Second-nature to Wesley, Gunn had thought. Wesley taking everything so seriously, no room to admit you were having fun, and Wesley’s brain did love to concentrate. But recently Wesley’s body just had too much energy - or that was how it felt to Gunn. And it felt good, so... Gunn had

been letting himself wait until he saw the right time for saying they should stop, instead of just saying it as soon as he thought it.

Still, this really wasn't the right time, with Wesley miserable and annoyed with himself and hardly able to do anything what with the stitches and the dressing; he couldn't hold a pen, he could barely make a cup of tea. Gunn took them to Blockbuster on the way home and rented some low-key movies (just enough action, just enough laughs), and they lay together on the couch. Wesley kept on thinking of things that he wouldn't be able to do for a week. Wash his face. Drive the car. Carry a pint of blood. Gunn made soothing noises (properly soothing, from Wesley's reaction), and kept his hold tight on Wesley's waist.

The local anaesthetic had worn off by the end of the movie and Wesley got really annoyed with himself when he was getting ready for bed. "Believe it or not, it doesn't hurt that much. I know I look as if I'm - It's because it's my hand and there are different ways of trying to do things. I keep on trying to find the way that hurts least. It would be easier if I didn't have a choice."

"I get that. Hand's gotta be the worst that way."

Wesley was in a much better mood by morning and had decided that he could carry a half-pint of blood (and another, as soon as Angel asked for it). He didn't carry any during the morning because Angel was asleep, and instead he worked out how to use the tape recorder to make notes on translations and research, since using a pen hurt too much.

Angel noticed Wesley's bandaged hand immediately, and was disturbed by it, and unable to take his eyes off the hand. "You're hurt."

"Not badly. But I'd be grateful if you'd take this beaker now. I am starting to feel the weight."

Angel took the beaker, drained it in a single motion, then threw it aside, stepped forward, and lifted Wesley's hand in both his own. Gunn picked up the beaker, set it outside the door, then went back to stand guard.

"What did they do?"

"They didn't do anything. I was fighting - I was learning to fight - and I made a mistake."

"Why - Why did you have to fight?"

"I learn to fight so that I can help people. This was an accident last night, during a lesson."

Angel had been exploring Wesley's palm with his fingertips, but now he was tugging at the edges of the dressing. "Show me."

"That hurts, Angel. Wait." Wesley pulled his hand away then turned to Gunn, face asking a question, which Gunn guessed was: "Should I show him?" Gunn shrugged, Wesley frowned for a few seconds, then glanced at Angel, shrugged back at Gunn, and held his hand out for Gunn to remove the dressing. The dressing was fresh on that morning and there was no blood - or no spot bigger than a pinhead.

Angel traced the line of the wound, first to one side, then right along the stitches. His touch must be more careful than it looked, because Wesley didn't make a sound.

"It's hot."

"Yes. It's healing."

"What... What were you fighting with?"

"I had a sword. But I caught my hand on a barb. Like a hook."

"A sword? I -" Angel let go of Wesley's hand and stepped back, then looked hard at Wesley, up and down. Then - surprising - he turned and looked Gunn up and down too. He looked thoughtful, like he was trying to work something out. A slight, quick shake of the head, and he turned back to Wesley, stepped forward, even closer than before, and fastened his hands about Wesley's shoulder and upper arm, fingers dug in, half-kneading, half-clawing.

“Hey!” and “Ow!” - ignored by Angel.

Gunn moved in and Wesley must have heard the water sloshing. Quickly but quietly, eyes on Angel’s face: “No, let him. He’s not being... I want to know.”

A few more seconds and the fingers relaxed, and then stroked over the same areas, maybe in apology. “It isn’t natural.”

“Now, really. I’ve been fencing for most of my life. I was considered quite promising.”

Slowly, hands still moving: “This isn’t fencing. You’re fighting to kill.”

“We - have to be able to. Yes.”

Angel nodded and took his hands away, but stayed at Wesley’s right side, couldn’t be an inch between them.

“Would you kill me? Would you kill him?”

“No. Because you’re not going to harm anyone. Either of you. You can’t, now.”

Should have been reassuring but Angel backed away, shaking his head hard. “You don’t know. They didn’t... He does. He still does.”

“No, Angel, That stopped a long time ago. Before you came here. I know you think it’s still happening. But that’s just a trick.”

“I - I felt him.” Angel swallowed. “I tasted...”

“It was a dream. You have strong dreams here. You remember some things too clearly.”

“A dream.” Angel closed his eyes for a few seconds, then, with a tilt of the head: “Do I dream about you?”

“I think you used to. But not recently.”

“I don’t remember.”

“I know.” A pause. “Would you like me to bring you the rest of your blood? That was only half a measure.” Angel shook his head then wandered away to sit in his corner. “Well, if you get hungry later, just call. I’ll be listening.” But Angel wasn’t. Not ignoring, exactly. Gone somewhere else.

Gunn locked the door then turned to Wesley, arms folded. “Wes. Gotta say this. This was really a prison, I’d be askin’ for reassignment. Reportin’ your clueless ass. You so do not get this job.”

“He was just... He needed to do it. There was no harm.”

“You don’t let the prisoners check out your muscles! Don’t care what they think they need. You got limits. And that’s what he needs more. Look!” At the screen, with Angel now curled in on himself. “How’s that helped him?”

“I suspect he has other things on his mind than my muscles. And this isn’t a prison. Or only for Angelus. For Angel it’s... I think it’s a hospital. Treatment... doesn’t have to be rigid.”

“You sayin’ it’s a cure? What book you read that in?”

“Not...” Wesley sighed. “I mean ‘the way we treat him’. Charles, please let me... Let’s wait for him to prove who’s right.”

“Don’t wanna see the proof I think we got comin’. Hospital... Prison... You better know you’re both of you on probation.”

Gunn was out working for most of the afternoon and evening, while Wesley stayed home and did bookwork. When Gunn came home Wesley was still at his desk.

“You’ve eaten, right.”

Wesley nodded. “I heated something.”

“What about him? Did he call?”

“No. He left that to Angelus. I should have insisted on giving him both half-pints at once. He’s never liked asking.”

“You mind if I watch TV?”

“Go ahead. I’ll go and read in the bedroom.”

“Jeez, don’t be like that!”

“I’m not being like anything. You want to watch television, I don’t. I’d be able to concentrate while it was on if I was able to make written notes, but I can’t write. So if I want to concentrate I have to move to another room. I’m not sulking, you’re not driving me out.”

“Hmm. But that’s the same as what you’d say if you were sulking.”

Wesley stood up and tucked the book under his arm. “Yes, but if I was sulking I wouldn’t be asking you to make me a tea during the first commercial break.”

Gunn had to laugh. “OK. You go.”

Wesley had taken Gunn’s side of the bed, to have the nightstand next to his arm. Before Gunn had moved in, that used to be Wesley’s own side of the bed. “Thank you, Charles.” Wesley touched his hand, just for a second. “What are you watching?”

“Rerun of ‘Cordy’. Just caught the last half. News next. Or I’ll just surf. Yeah, know that drives you crazy. You’re Mister Concentration.”

“I was born in the wrong century. Charles. I’m sorry about earlier. Of course you think I should be more careful. But remember it was just him and me for nearly a year. I’ve dealt with him in a hundred different moods and in some ways he’s hardly changed at all. I think... I take fewer risks than you give me credit for.”

Gunn nodded and sat down on the bed, and put his hand on Wesley’s thigh, just above the knee. “I guess. Was hard to imagine by the time I met you. But I still think you’re... Thing is, he really thinks he’s in prison. ‘n’ we know he doesn’t like it when you try to mess with that. You treat him too much like he’s in a hospital and... What if he stops trusting you? Slowly, so we don’t realise?”

“Alright, I’ll...” A sigh and a thoughtful frown. “I’ll try to behave in the way he’d expect me to. If he seems disturbed by today, then I’ll... I’ll make a point of stopping him the next time he does something like that.” Wesley relaxed suddenly and tilted his hips to move his leg against Gunn’s hand. “I wish I could touch you. I’d try to keep you from going back to the news.”

“You can touch me.”

“It hurts too much. Everything I want to do would hurt too much.”

“Hurtin’ right now?” Wesley nodded. “You tried taking anything? Tylenol or anything?” No. “I’ll go and get some. And turn off the news.”

Wesley swallowed two tablets with tea while Gunn put his hand back on Wesley’s thigh, but further up. Wesley smiled and shifted his hips again, but then shook his head. “It’ll still hurt too much.”

“I know. I was planning on doing all the work.”

A sweet end to an argument. They were so good together. Falling for the strange, reserved man, so quickly, after just one lunch and two beers - something in Gunn had known what he should have been looking for. No point, though, in looking earlier. Wesley had been on the other side of the world.

The next day Wesley went in with the dressing already off: less for Angel to ask about, less reason for him to come close. Angel had forgotten that Wesley was injured, but he remembered that Wesley fought, and with a sword. He was very serious. Not puzzled, though, not showing any sign of questioning because of the day before.

While Wesley was in the kitchen heating the second half-pint, Angel said to Gunn, "You were apart. When he fought."

"Kinda. 'bout halfway across the room."

A nod. "You fight too."

"Yeah."

"With a sword?"

"Sometimes. I like an axe or a stake."

"Is it halved when you're together? Or is it the same? Can you make it heal?"

"Wesley's hand? It is healing. Itches a lot. Aches if he does the wrong thing."

"He'll fight again?"

"Oh, yeah. Soon. Soon 's he can, I bet."

"Do you fight without him?"

"No. Sure, I would if I had to. But, no, we train as a team."

Angel nodded, then turned his attention from Gunn to the doorway. Gunn wondered if Angel could tell anything from the sounds. Had he worked out his own ideas about where the blood came from, what the hum and beep of the microwave meant?

When Wesley held out his hand to take the empty beaker, Angel took hold of the hand by the fingers and lifted and turned it so he could examine the wound. "It is healing. The blood is inside."

"Yes. I should be able to bring you a full pint tomorrow. The stitches have nearly stopped pulling."

The next day, Friday, Wesley was able to carry a full pint comfortably, but Angel was having one of those days when he was terrified of them. He wouldn't come near Wesley, so Wesley had to kneel down and put the beaker on the floor, which was awkward for him and put stresses on the wound that he'd normally avoid. When Wesley ordered him, Angel did come forward to take the blood; he drank on his knees, eyes closed, and when he'd finished he put the beaker down behind his back and then edged away along the wall.

You could argue that he was in this state because he was confused by Wesley not setting the right limits, but Gunn wasn't gonna do that. OK he wasn't an expert like Wesley, but he could see that this Angel came from a different part of Angel's brain, from a part that couldn't have any thought about Wesley except that he was a guard.

Over the weekend Angel knew that Wesley had stitches in his hand, but he didn't know that he'd seen them before. "I thought I might not see you. That they might not..." A glance at Gunn, dismissive, then back to the hand, especially to the stitches. "And you should be. Did they make you work? What did they do?"

"They didn't make me do anything. This isn't nearly enough to stop me working." A smile. "And no one would ever have to make me look after you."

Angel looked self-conscious, didn't quite manage to smile back. He looked down at Wesley's hand in his own, then lowered the hand and let go. When he raised his head again, it was to look at Gunn. "Are you in a religion? Have you been given a duty?" He was speaking to Wesley, though: it was in the tone of his voice.

"No. Not 'given'. But it's important to us... to make things better where we can."

Angel turned back to Wesley, looked hard at him, then nodded. "Yes. I - I wanted... But I just hid. I even tried to go back. I wasn't good enough. I'm not. I couldn't do it alone. But you're different." And his hand on Wesley again, this time on Wesley's chest.

Gunn bent to pick up the empty beaker from the floor by Angel's foot. "Wes, I want to get going. They're expecting me with the books." Gunn was spending the day at the beach-house with the boys, helping with research, ideas for marketing and (probably) the assault on Glacier Coast.

Until that morning, Gunn had been planning on telling the boys about Wesley's hand, probably tell them a few stories, like Wesley being annoyed about having too many choices. But now it felt like all stories led to Angel - to Angel's hand. And what could he ever tell them about that?

There wasn't a vampire sense of touch. Was there? Yes, Angel noticed heat, blood heat, but he would notice those, being cold as death. When he touched Wesley he would have felt warm cotton, the solid curves of muscle over ribs, but nothing distinct, nothing really personal. Nothing he could claim later as a way of recognising Wesley.

Stupid. Stupid to be jealous. And of course he wasn't jealous, just thrown. In the time he'd known Angel, Angel had freaked him out at least once a week - some weeks, at least once a day. You'd think the vamp would run out of surprises, but no.

The boys already knew about Wesley's hand, as it turned out, because Grouw had spoken to his sister the night before. They'd been out and got a Get Well card for Wesley, and a dragon finger-puppet. The finger-puppet wasn't a gag gift - they were very pleased with themselves for finding something they were sure Wesley would have chosen for himself.

Wesley just wasn't capable of playing silly games with a finger-puppet - he did not do cute - but he was pleased almost speechless to be given a silly gift; that the boys had thought of him, and that they could see him like that. He put it on the tallest pencil in the pen-jar on his desk and kept sneaking looks at it and smiling to himself.

Wesley still couldn't touch Gunn with anything more than fingertips and lips, but tonight he refused to let Gunn do all the work. Gunn couldn't believe how exciting it was, how satisfying - like "slow and serious" (which they hadn't done in months), but electric with the sense of something held back, just out of reach. When Gunn tried to touch Wesley in the same way, he found he couldn't hold himself back from using his whole hand; he'd start properly with just fingertips and then Wesley would give a moan or a sigh, and Gunn would be clutching and pushing. After the third time (or was it the fourth?), Wesley told him to use only his mouth; later he'd be allowed to use his hands, but only on himself, and only to touch himself the way Wesley told him. At the end, though, Gunn forgot everything and grabbed for Wesley's hand, squeezed it so hard he made the ring move by nearly a quarter-turn.

"Wes. Wes. If I don't say this now I think I'll never be able to say it. You'd only have to... Sex when we're training... We gotta stop it. Maybe it isn't why you got your hand cut, but - No way it helps us focus."

Wesley was nodding, no sign of surprise. "We'll stop. I know. It was -" A long sigh. "If you could try... to look like everyone else when you move. When you pick up a sword."

Much later, when Gunn was on the point of falling asleep, Wesley said, thoughtful, "I think I might give him some books again. A magazine, at least."

"Oh, Wes. Not another bar scene over and over. And then he'll tear it up after a week. God, Wes, what's the point?"

"I'm not... I won't give him anything with a story. Books about art, I thought. About drawing. Even an auction catalogue would be better than nothing. He must be so bored, I hate to think how bored."

A long pause, then Gunn said, "He starts callin' you in to read with him... He shows any sign he can't handle it, gets angry just once..."

Wesley nodded. "It's an experiment. That's all."

Gunn drove Wesley to Barnes and Noble on Sunday morning, and Wesley bought some paperback books on architecture, landscape painting and still-life painting; he didn't think it would ever be a good idea to give Angel pictures of people. Angel was still asleep when Gunn went to play pickup with the crew and the kids from the shelter. Gunn asked Wesley not to take the books in on his own, but he expected that Wesley would find some excuse while Gunn was gone, given that it was books ("He heard me turn the pages. He asked for them.").

Wesley didn't give Angel the books, because Angel woke up with a fake vision of Angelus about half an hour after Gunn left, and he was still lost in the vision when Gunn came back. The vision was full of sex, and Angel got an erection even while he was frantic for Angelus to be stopped. His body seemed to deal with the erection all on its own, the hands acting as if by reflex while Angel's mind felt and added nothing: no sign of guilt, or really of pleasure.

A long vision, over three hours, and then a long sleep, until past nine at night - and then there was guilt. Wesley offered Angel a shower immediately, before the blood, and Angel got ready in record time. Wesley was fully dressed and Gunn was the one in the robe, but Angel clearly didn't realise that this shower was going to be different, not until the moment when Gunn stepped into the bath with him. Gunn saw shock and bewilderment, and then Angel turned towards Wesley, as fast as the chains would let him.

Wesley raised his hand to show Angel the palm. "I can't make any kind of rubbing motion, Angel. The stitches make it too painful. Charles will get you clean just as well as I do. In fact he'll do it better, because he has two hands."

Angel shook his head several times, but then he slowly turned back towards Gunn. His eyes were closed and he was slumped, and he stayed like that throughout the shower, and wouldn't look at either of them as they were getting him back to his room.

Getting dressed seemed to help Angel, steady him, since he was able to meet Wesley's eyes - just for a second - when he took the beaker of blood from Wesley's hand.

"I'm sorry." Angel's voice was very quiet, just above a whisper.

"Well... I know you don't like change. Charles knows that too, he knows not to take it too personally. And it was worth it to get clean, wasn't it?"

"I've tried. I've... I don't know how to stop him." The guilt again, and shame. "They let him out and I find... I find what he's done. I'm sorry."

"Ah. You were thinking about Angelus. What you found when you woke up. Angel, I'm not shocked by knowing that a person has sexual fantasies. It's natural. Even for him. A fantasy can't harm anyone else. There's no need to feel guilt. Or to apologise."

"But - If you knew what he thinks. The things..."

"I do know. And I'm still not shocked. We all have some unhealthy thoughts, some reactions we'd rather not describe to someone else. But I don't judge people on what they think, not even him. He's a monster because of what he's done. And it doesn't matter how many more unhealthy fantasies he has, because he'll never be able to act on them again, not now we have him in here. Don't worry about that, Angel. Drink your blood now."

Angel drank, then returned the beaker. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Wesley washed the beaker then decided to go in again with the books. Gunn thought it would have been better to give Angel the books first thing in the morning, keep watch on him during the day. But then again if Angel was going to react badly, they'd find out one way or another.

Angel was puzzled by the books. "What are they for? What do you want me to do?"

"I'm hoping you'll get some enjoyment out of them. That is, I'm hoping I chose some subjects that you'll enjoy. I know you draw. I thought you might find these interesting."

A long pause. Angel slowly shuffled the books two, three times round without opening any of them. "I'll try."

"That's the spirit. Goodnight, Angel. We'll see you tomorrow."

Wesley thought it was funny, and his mood during their beer-session on the couch was probably better than if Angel had been properly grateful. "That'll teach me. He's not sane. He's not human. And he's not me."

Angel laid the book out against the wall between the two bolt-plates, and he must at least pick them up from time to time because they changed positions; but there was no sign that he was reading. Wesley decided to leave him for a few weeks and then ask if he'd like something different. No hurry.

Wesley got his stitches out on Thursday afternoon and he and Gunn had a long training session in the evening. Wesley was very glad to be able to fight again; he said he hadn't realised how much his body had come to enjoy the daily challenge. Watching him, listening to him, Gunn felt the need to hold him as an ache solid from his throat to his balls; the need to soak up some of that body's happiness. He told Wesley, and they switched to doing something tough and repetitive that didn't involve looking at one another; and neither said anything about "when they got home", because it was too obvious, and because saying it would bring it too close.

The scar was still unsettled, still hot. Gunn could feel the heat against his lips, and a smell like smoke. He found himself thinking of the first time Wesley had shaken his hand, how he'd remembered the feel of the palm, those calluses all of the rest of the day. The scar gave him so much more to feel: the way the ridge crossed all of Wesley's fingers and nestled under his thumb. If it had been there that day, he wouldn't just have remembered the feel of Wesley's hand, he would have dreamed about it.

"Your hand... is skin." Angel, about to give the beaker back, frozen at the sight.

"Yes, I got the stitches out yesterday." Wesley turned his palm upwards.

Angel dropped the beaker, seized Wesley's hand and wrist, and then sank to his knees and pressed his open lips right over the scar.

"Angel!" Wesley jumped back, or would have but Angel held tight. "No. Let go. This isn't right." Gunn was ready - whenever Wesley gave the signal. This was Wesley's decision, against Wesley's limits.

Angel had raised his head, but not because he'd heard Wesley. The hand on Wesley's wrist was still clamped fast, and Angel was watching his thumb as it traced circles on Wesley's palm. "Skin." Almost a sigh.

"Angel. Let go. Stop this. Have you forgotten where you are? This isn't right. This isn't how you show - You have to let go."

Angel was looking up as Wesley, faintly puzzled. "But didn't I...? I thought you let me. You wanted me to..."

"You were concerned before. It was new. I was willing to help answer your questions. But this... This doesn't help you. You mustn't forget where you are. What I am. Now be sensible and let go."

Angel obeyed, but stayed on his knees looking stubborn.

"You dropped the beaker. Could you please pick it up and give it back to me? Thank you. Angel. If you try to do that again, Charles will make you let go."

Angel was angry now. Not about to lash out, but resenting them hard.

"We'll see you tomorrow. Try not to forget this." Wesley turned and left while Gunn stayed to cover Angel and then backed out.

"Woah. Guess I saw somethin' comin' but - You OK?" Wesley nodded but looked shaky. "He hurt you? Helluva grip."

Wesley looked down at his arm and hand, turned them back and forth. "I didn't... All I noticed was... how cold he is. And I should know from training with him, being in the shower with him."

“Creepy?”

A pause while Wesley tried to decide on the word. “Startling. Just as startling as... what he did.”

“The skin thing’s new?”

A shrug. “New to me. He didn’t show any sign of that the last time I had stitches out.”

“Or you’d’ve - Well... you’d’ve laughed different that day in the restaurant. When I asked about you ‘n’ him.”

Wesley laughed, very briefly. “I’d have run home.” A frown. “You think it was sexual, then?”

“Oh.” A pause. “Dunno. Y’know how I am about your hand. He’s... Well, he’s not me, either. Way he acted when you warned him off... Could’ve meant anythin’ ” No clues from Angel right now, except that he was angry in a grouchy, personal way; he was out of sight somewhere near the door, muttering and grunting, and laying the odd kick or punch on the wall or floor.

“Oh, that’s awkward.” Wesley sighed and dragged his hand through his hair. “You were right. I confused him. I should have stopped him the first time. Of course he’s angry. He must think... it’s a trick.”

“He’s not that angry. He’s just... Wanted something. Been told he can’t have it. He’ll deal. Like we all do.”

“I hope so. I hate threatening him. It’s sick. To use his fear of the other guards.”

“You had to. He was way out of line.”

* * * * *

The duals said Gunn and Wesley were both better for the break from training, and it was true, they were. They’d got stale, they’d stopped feeling the commitment, really feeling it. (Five weeks now, since the last vision.) But being forced to take a break had shown them they enjoyed the training for its own sake – so they should focus on that from now on, not look for their motivation in the idea of the visions hanging over them.

Saturday. Angel had thrown the books around the room but hadn’t torn any pages out, and he might even have started to read the landscape book. Wesley was out having a language lesson when Angel woke up, so Gunn took the blood in on his own. After a first quirk of surprise, Angel treated Gunn like a piece of blood-carrying furniture and gave all his attention to the doorway, expression slightly puzzled, but hopeful. Looked to Gunn like Angel had forgotten all about the day before - or he thought it was years in the past. He hardly seemed to notice Gunn taking the beaker and leaving, and he kept on watching and hoping for at least five minutes afterwards. Gunn got caught up in searching the news on the computer and didn’t see Angel give up, how he took it; but Angel was sitting on the mattress with the book the next time Gunn checked, and he looked absorbed and content, not like he was trying to console himself.

When Wesley returned Angel looked up from the book. He was obviously pleased to hear Wesley’s voice but he didn’t call or anything, and after a few minutes of listening he went back to the book.

Gunn and Wesley went out for dinner. A date, with Wesley in his suit and all. Compensation (or something) for the night they were going to spend apart, with Gunn helping the boys check out night-time access for some attractions they wanted for their tours. There wasn’t nearly enough street in those three - hell, Wes had more, Wes had a sensible, practical attitude towards breaking-and-entering.

Gunn got about three hours sleep at the beach-house, then drove straight to the warehouse to meet Wesley for training. After training they had breakfast in Santa Monica, and then they went home to bed. Gunn fell asleep afterwards and woke to find Wesley still with him, sitting up reading.

A few hours later, halfway through lunch, Wesley said, “It was sexual. With Angel. It is.”

Gunn stared at him, then said, “He’s done something else.”

Wesley pulled a face, looked embarrassed. “He tried to kiss me last night.”

“Tried how? Why were you in there?”

“Angelus had been there. He’d been doing some drawing. I went in to take the drawings out before Angel could see them. But I was too late and so we talked about the drawings and about Angelus. And after a while he... got this look and he tried to kiss me.”

“ ‘ n’ this isn’ t your hand?” No. “Jeez. How d’ you get him off? Or d’ you have the water?”

“He wasn’t - He was... quite gentle. He was asking.”

“How ‘bout taking no for an answer?”

Wesley nodded. “He argued for a while. But he wasn’t aggressive. He didn’t try again. When I asked him what he thought of the book, he went back to talking as if nothing had happened.”

“How long’d you stay after?”

“About ten minutes. It seemed the best way of playing it down.” Wesley shrugged and took a forkful of salad. “I wonder who he thought I was. Who he was seeing.”

“Wha’ d’ you mean?”

“It’s Angel. He wouldn’t look at me. He likes people who are... solid. Who know how to take up space. Like you.”

Gunn snorted. “Yeah, like he looks at me! Course he’s seein’ you. He loves you. Or close as makes no difference.”

Wesley was shaking his head. “It’s Angel. He couldn’t.”

“You’re the only good thing he’s got. You treat him like a person, you talk to him, like a person. Far as he’s concerned, you’re the only body that doesn’t want to hurt him. So where’s he gonna draw the line?”

“A way of thanking me, you mean? Yes, he might think like that. That would fit.”

Well, Gunn hadn’t meant that, and he hadn’t said that, but it was no loss to him if that was what Wesley chose to hear. Be a waste of words telling Wesley about Angel staring at the door all those minutes, nothing in his head except that Wesley might be on the other side; Wesley would say that was just Angel’s way of feeling grateful, that he might have been waiting to say thank you for the books, or something.

They had a committee meeting for the survey early in the evening, so they prepared for that, and then after the meeting they got Chinese to go and rented a movie. Gunn didn’t have much of his mind of the movie; he kept looking down at Wesley leaning against him, and he kept looking across the room to the other screen, which showed the same thing each time he looked: their prisoner fast asleep, still as death.

Gunn finally had a real reason to throw a jealous fit, and turned out he didn’t know what to feel. A beautiful man had made a pass at his boyfriend. He’d probably do it again, with Gunn right there in the room. No, not a beautiful man. A beautiful vampire. More than two hundred years old and one of the worst, and in love with Gunn’s boyfriend. If you could be “in love” when you couldn’t even learn the person’s name. But wanting to be close to him, wanting more, wanting to have everything he was willing to give. Gunn could sympathise. For the first time he could almost imagine Angel as human.

On Monday morning Gunn was looking hard for signs of Saturday night. There was nothing in the welcome or during the drinking, but then Angel paused while he was handing the beaker back to Wesley and he said, “Can you stay? Stay and talk.”

“What do you want to talk about, Angel?”

A small smile and a shake of the head. “I don’t mind. What do you like?”

Wesley swallowed. “I can’t stay. I have to work.”

Angel looked disappointed; but trying to accept. "I thought... It would be good if I could see more of you."

Gunn folded his arms. "Which we all know means: 'I want to have sex with you.' "

"We do?" Now Angel was looking grateful, straight at Gunn. Then immediately to Wesley, free hand reaching out to Wesley's waist: "Can you stay? We don't have to talk."

Wesley snatched the beaker from Angel and stepped out of range, shaking his head hard. "I'm not going to have sex with you. I can't have sex with you. You're a prisoner under my care. Of course we're not going to have sex."

Angel took a step to follow Wesley, but Gunn moved in with the water. Angel backed off, not taking his eyes off Wesley for a second, then started shaking his head. "You shouldn't be worrying about their rules. They never made the rules for this. And there's no reason they'd ever find out."

"It has nothing to do with them. It's wrong. It would be terribly wrong."

"No!" Passionate. "Not with us. The way we both want it. We want it... to be more. How can that be wrong?" Suddenly, to Gunn: "Tell him. If you tell him what he feels..."

"Man, you heard him say no. You need to get over this and soon. There's nothin' for you in this."

Angel was shaking his head at both of them. "I don't understand. When we could... There's no reason."

Reason and sex. Since when? "We're going now, Angel. Like Wesley said, we got work to do. Look, know this is rough. We don't blame you but you gotta accept that it's no. Even if you don't understand. You hear me?"

Staring, then Angel turned and went to lie face-down on the mattress, without even taking a last look at Wesley. Stubborn sulking or crushed resignation? They'd find out soon enough.

"Jeez, but he does go for the classics. 'We both want it.' 'I'd like to see more of you.' Give me two hundred years, I'd come up with better than that."

"He's s..." Wesley's gaze slid around Gunn's for a few seconds. "You really shouldn't blame him for that. When he -" A ragged sigh. "You know I have a reaction to him sometimes."

"Oh!" Gunn gave a sharp laugh of surprise, mostly at himself, that he hadn't thought of it. "Like just now?"

Wesley closed his eyes hard, then nodded. "It must come straight through in my sweat. He knew last time, too."

Gunn laughed again, more gently, then pulled Wesley into a hug, rubbed his cheek against Wesley's. Feeling Wesley's arousal wasn't important; feeling Wesley's sigh of relief, that was crucial, and the moment when Wesley started to return the pressure. "Well... guess he's not gonna get over it until you get over that. How long'd you give it?"

"Oh, a week. Now I've told you. I'll just... I'll think about you laughing." A pause, then, hushed: "I love you, Charles. I don't know how you do this. I couldn't. If it was you."

"Wes. You make it easy."

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Angel spent all of the next few days jerking off - or that was how it seemed to Gunn. Every time Gunn looked up at the screen there Angel would be on the mattress with his pants down near his knees and his shirt wide open. Most times he was quite slow and deliberate, almost loving, but about once in each day he'd be urgent and desperate, crying out so you'd think a vision had hit him. Whenever he started they'd turn the screen off for half an hour, using Wesley's old method for ignoring Angelus.

No sign of shame or guilt, even when he was waking up after Angelus had been there; instead he'd smile and look towards the door, and then get his clothes back in order.

A shower would have been out of the question, and the effort wasted, anyway, in a couple of hours. From the second day they decided to let him do his own sponge-bath, and after feeding him they took all the equipment in, and a change of clothes. He behaved very well when they were in the room: casual but friendly with Wesley, distant but civil with Gunn, but as soon as they left he'd throw himself down on the mattress and they'd have to turn the screen off again. He didn't know they could see him; he couldn't know.

Gunn and Wesley added a new guess every day as to what Angel was building up to; because there had to be thoughts accumulating in there, and this pace just couldn't last. None of their guesses was right - or not right enough to be at the top of the stack when Angel reached his limit on Friday afternoon. They'd gone in to collect the dirty clothes and the equipment, and they were hardly in the room when Angel placed himself in front of Gunn, set solid for a confrontation. "I know it's you. Let him."

"Not makin' sense, Angel. And back off. Y'got your own space, get into it."

A sharp shake of the head, no backing off. "You haven't got anyone. So you don't want him to have me. You're stopping him."

Gunn turned his head. "Wes? You wanna take this?"

Wesley nodded, and crossed behind Gunn to stand at his left side. "Charles does have someone, Angel. He has me." Wesley placed his hand on Gunn's arm; they looked at one another, then back at Angel. "Even if you weren't a prisoner under my care. Even if we could meet... as friends outside here. I'd still be saying no, and yes, that is because of Charles. But not because he makes me. Because he's everything I need. I belong to him. Do you understand now?"

Angel had started out looking suspicious and ended up glaring. When Angel stopped talking Gunn realised that he could hear Angel breathing - a rasping though a clenched throat - and he slowly reached behind his back and unhooked the water-spray from his belt.

"Angel?" Wesley was either prompting or warning - or both.

Two more breaths then Angel gave a loud, harsh laugh and took a big step away from them, almost like he'd been driven backwards by the force of his derision. "You think I know nothing about duals! Or you honestly think you're the only one who fucks himself. And you even think it's real. It isn't sex! Any other dual could tell you that. It isn't real. You should be looking for more."

Wesley was about two seconds slower than Gunn in taking in what Angel had said, what he must have been thinking. "Angel. You are completely wrong. We are not a dual. We are two separate people. We were born eight thousand miles apart. And eight years. Or course we're not a dual. Please. Be sensible. Accept... Accept what we are."

No. Big no, judging by the muscles working in Angel's jaw. Suddenly: "Get out." Cold, and steady. "If you think you can - I thought you were special but you're worse than a coward. Get out of my sight."

A brief pause, then Wesley shrugged. "Well, Angel, it's your room... We'll just collect what we came in for and then we'll leave you."

Angel did a lot of angry pacing over the next half hour. Then he focused on the books and kicked them over to the wall by the door, out of sight of the camera. Maybe he'd meant to tear them all up, but he started reading instead. Each page brought a reaction, some shade of indignation or hurt, and he did rip some pages out, but slowly, and not when he sounded angriest. Eventually he fell asleep there, and they were not at all surprised when he had nightmares and then woke up back in his old hell. Could be days before he'd talk to them again, weeks, maybe.

They took the duals out for noodles after training, and near the end of the meal Wesley said, "Do you mind if I ask you something personal? Or - It's not because I've been wondering about you. It's something I read."

"Well, you can ask."

Wesley cleared his throat. "Do duals - How common is it for a dual to have sex with himself? While he's split apart?"

A blink then a shrug. "Pretty common, I suppose. First few months after you arrive, when you're getting used to being a dual... If both halves find the other attractive enough. But..." Badueen pulled a face and shook his head. "I've never heard anyone admit to preferring it to real sex." To Epwor: "Have you?"

"No, never. The subject does come up sometimes, and what you get is a list of the reasons why it's boring. Or depressing. Not even as good as regular jerking off. Finding out afterwards exactly what the other was thinking. That's reason number one for most people."

Badueen laughed. "Though there's some people you wonder about."

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Angel did let them in the room the next day, but he wouldn't let them get close - gestured to Wesley to put the beaker down and move back - and he watched them intently the whole time. He wasn't scared, he didn't seem angry; but he didn't know what they were and he wasn't about to trust them. He stayed like that for most of the next few days, braced in his corner, doing some hard thinking.

His expression when he watched them was different from day to day, moving fairly-steadily from suspicion to puzzlement to speculation to a sort of wary sympathy. He differed, too, in who he watched most: one day it would be Wesley, the next Gunn, and the next he'd need to check back and forth between them both. There was no jerking off now. Had he lost all interest in Wesley? Or did he have no thoughts free for any fantasies?

He'd come out of his corner to drink, and then he'd go back and he'd nod to Wesley to come forward to get the beaker. On Thursday, though, he stood just watching them after he'd emptied the beaker, and then he didn't bend to put it on the floor, but brought it over and placed it in Wesley's hand.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

A few more seconds of watching both of them, then, to Wesley: "Could I have a shower?"

"Of course. We'll need a few minutes to get ready. Why don't you get undressed while we're doing that?"

They decided that Wesley would give him the shower, in the hope that it would help ease him back to normal, back to the time before Wesley got the stitches in his hand. Because since then Wesley hadn't showered him: there had just been that one shower with Gunn, and then having himself wash himself in his room. And him asking for a shower, that was a sign, wasn't it, that he did want to get back to normal? He'd got undressed ready for them, and he turned immediately and held his arms back for the chains. Gunn had to stop himself from saying, "Good boy, good boy" - like Angel was a dog.

Wesley washed Angel's hair first, like he always did. Next came Angel's arms, then his sides and back. But Wesley had hardly started on Angel's back when he suddenly stopped, took a step back, and then all three of them were looking down at Angel's erection.

"I'm sorry." Angel sounded like he was willing himself to die. He was talking to the wall. And then he turned his head with a jerk and he was talking to Gunn. "I'm sorry."

Gunn shook his head then leaned forward to shut the water off. "Hey, man. Happens to all of us. Not like there's a switch. But you need to go back to your room, yeah?" Angel nodded, so relieved, so grateful. Gunn looked over to Wesley. "Take him straight back? Give him the towel?" Wesley nodded too, looking nearly as relieved as Angel.

"No, Angel. Don't lie down on the mattress. Just stand right there. Wait while Wesley brings your clean clothes."

Wesley placed the clothes on the corner of the mattress, then stood back while Gunn let Angel out of the chains. As they were leaving Wesley told Angel to call if he wanted them to come and collect the towel when he was finished, but of course he wasn't going to call, not after that. Wesley turned the screen off and Gunn was slid the bolts, and they agreed they'd get the towel and the dirty clothes when Angel fell asleep.

Angel did call, though, and only twenty minutes later, while the screen was still off. "Can you - Can you come in?"

He'd folded the towel and put it on the mattress, with the clothes in a neat pile beside it; but he moved in to block them before they'd taken more than three steps in that direction.

"I'm sorry."

"We know, Angel. Don't worry about it. You've really been very good."

Angel was shaking his head. "I thought I'd be able to – Since you made me understand." To Gunn: "I know how you need him." To both of them: "I know you need to be together. I know how important that is. I wasn't trying to... I won't do it again. I'll make it stop. I will." He made to touch Wesley's shoulder, struggled visibly for several seconds, then slowly lowered his hand. "I know you've stopped wanting to talk to me. I've made you –" Two slow, dragging breaths. "But could you want to again? If I can prove that I have made it stop. Could you want to come in and talk? Or have I made you –"

"Angel. You've made me sympathise with your situation, that's all. I'll be glad for both of us when you do make it stop. I've missed being able to come in and talk to you."

They went down to start a load of laundry. Gunn said, "So it's taken him nearly a week to accept that we're a couple. And that he's got no chance."

Wesley shrugged. "That would have taken me months when I had one of my ridiculous crushes. Of course I'd never make a move, so I wouldn't get anything like the decisive rejection that we gave him. I think he's being brave. In his terms, he's giving a lot up. Well, not that I'm –"

"He never had it to give up. But yeah, y'don't see it like that at the time. Your dick sure doesn't. What was he thinking, asking for a shower?"

Wesley sighed and nodded. "That he wanted a fresh start? He's never been very good at thinking ahead."

Angel worked hard at accepting, at controlling his feelings for Wesley, keeping himself as busy as he could with the books and the drawing-pad. But his subconscious kept letting him down, revealing through dreams and hallucination and Angelus how many thoughts about sex and prison and guards were getting stored away in the course of every day. So he was waking in need of a shower, and not thinking for a second of blaming Angelus; he knew immediately that he'd failed, that he was as far as ever from earning those talks with Wesley.

They decided to let him shower himself. Gunn chained him up as usual, then released one arm once he was in the shower. Wesley stayed out of the way: dealing with the clothes and towel while Gunn and Angel were in the bathroom, and then heating blood or doing the dishes while they were crossing back to Angel's room.

"He's disgusted with me." Gunn was just about to unlock the chains.

"Course he isn't. He knows exactly what you're going through. You gotta think - Ain't easy for him, either. He doesn't wanna... confuse you."

Angel nodded. "I want - everything to be right."

"Yeah. Be good, wouldn't it?"

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"What would you think... if I went in to talk to him? He is trying so hard." Sunday breakfast by the beach, just after they'd placed their order.

"And you miss talkin' to him."

A very brief shrug. "I'd explain that... he's proved to me that he has accepted the situation. And that's the most important thing to me, no one would expect him to control every single thought. I'll explain that I don't want to make things more difficult for him and he should tell me if it is worse. If it would be easier for him to have me stay away while he's still... got his crush on me. I think he would tell me if it was worse. Don't you?"

“Your vampire, Wes. Your call.”

Wesley decided that he would go in, using the excuse of taking Angel some more books. So they stopped at Barnes and Noble on the way back, and Gunn had another coffee while Wesley picked out books on seascapes and on trees. When Wesley offered to stay for a few minutes longer after he'd given Angel the books, Angel shook his head and said he knew he hadn't earned it, he knew what he must have been dreaming. But Wesley explained, just like he'd planned it to Gunn over breakfast, and Angel listened and stopped arguing. The next day Wesley stayed after feeding, with Gunn taking the beaker away.

When Wesley asked if the visits were difficult for Angel, Angel always said no; and he never tried to touch Wesley, never showed a single sign of expecting anything more. Angel kept on working just as hard at keeping busy with reading and drawing, and his sub-conscious continued just the same. Could take months for this to be really over, as bad as one of Wesley's dumb crushes. Angel's clothes would be faded to a pale grey from all the washing.

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“Can you give him a shower?” Gunn had just got back from an evening at Caritas, just walked in the door. “He woke up about half an hour ago. I told him you weren't here.”

“Yeah, sure.” Not a surprise, since Angelus had been there when he'd left. Wesley couldn't manage the chains on his own, and felt more strongly even than Gunn that they would never try to move Angel without the chains.

Angel had his back to Gunn in the bedroom, during the walk, and during all the preparation in the shower, and he must have had the erection from the beginning. He'd probably been planning this since Wesley had told him he'd have to wait: how he'd turn, that confident smile, the hand placed at an angle at the top of his thigh, perfect framing.

“Oh, for God's sake, Angel!”

“What's wrong? Charles?” Wesley arrived in the doorway and Angel's erection leapt at the sight of him - or so Gunn guessed when he followed Wesley's stunned gaze and saw the difference that those seconds had made; and it wasn't over. Watching the way that cock jerked higher, higher, you'd think the body still had a pulse. How did it feel to Angel, did it feel like turning hot, like with real, living blood? Like Gunn was feeling now, the rush to his face, and the throbbing, the pressure between his legs.

“Oh, Angel. No. After we'd -” Wesley gave a deep sigh. “You should have asked for a sponge-bath. We have to take you back. Turn around and let Charles get your arm.”

Angel was shaking his head, still confident. “I realised. I wanted to show him first. Because I knew he'd...” He turned to Gunn and reached out, and Gunn jumped back, well out of range. “All of us. If it's all of us. You too. So you'd stay together. You'd be the same. But I could - be with you.”

“What, you're -” Gunn swallowed. “You're saying some kind of threesome?” Angel nodded. “In here?” Gunn pointed at the three of them in turn, then again - had to force his hand to stop with the pointing.

“If you want. You can - Wherever you want. Here... I knew I could show you.”

Gunn opened his mouth to say, “Are you fucking crazy?” but Wesley had already recovered enough to give a proper answer. “Angel.” Inhumanly patient. “That's a very sweet idea but it could never work. Charles and I are... a very possessive and exclusive couple.”

“I know that.” Much less patient. “That's why I - I wouldn't change anything. I promise. Why are you - You both know you want me. You'd both have more.”

“We - Yes, we sometimes have fantasies about you. We've always thought you were beautiful. But... I don't know if you remember how we talked about this a while ago. That it's one thing to enjoy a fantasy. And something else altogether to put it into practice. I'm sorry, Angel, but it could never work.”

“I promise.”

“You can’t make that promise. You don’t know. That’s the - Angel. Think. If we tried it even once and it went wrong... We can’t get away from one another. Not here. I know it’s difficult now, but if we made a mistake like that the situation could become unbearable.”

Angel closed his eyes for a long time, and when he opened them he looked first at Gunn, and then at Wesley. “You can’t leave here.”

“No.”

“You’re a prisoner. Like me.”

Gunn raised his eyebrows, struck by the idea, and was starting to nod his head (just thinking about it, just thinking about it), when Wesley said, “No. We accepted a duty.” Angel saw Gunn’s reaction; Wesley probably didn’t.

“Did you know it would be me? Are there others?”

“Other prisoners?” Wesley smiled and shook his head. “You take up all our time.”

“And you’re kept apart from the other duals?”

“Completely.”

Angel nodded several times, then turned to face the wall and raised his arm behind his back till his hand touched the chains. “I made a mistake. I have to go back.”

“You understand the mistake now. We can give you time to get yourself clean. We’ll leave you alone for...” A glance down at Angel’s erection. “How long do you think you’ll need?”

A frown. “Can I think about you?”

“You can think about anything you like.”

“Then I’ll need enough for... what you were like.”

Wesley looked at Gunn, fighting hard against a smile (or possibly against hysterical laughter). “We’ll call that ten minutes, shall we? Charles, could you turn the water on?”

Wesley snatched up the keys from the bowl by the door and led the way down to the laundry room, breaking into a run halfway down the stairs. When the door was closed he finally let out that hysterical laughter, and he was helpless with it, slowly sliding down the wall, hand clutched to his ribcage. Gunn laughed from the pleasure of watching Wesley, but nowhere near as hard, and when he dropped to his knees it was from choice. He reached over and put his hand on Wesley’s waist, and Wesley stopped laughing almost immediately and then they were kissing, and falling sideways onto the concrete floor.

Before they went back upstairs they washed as well as they could at the sink in the corner. Angel would still probably be able to smell the sex on them, but it would be too cruel if they didn’t even try. They dusted each other off, but then paused at the door for a long kiss.

Angel was waiting for them with his face turned to the wall, arm ready for the chains. He wouldn’t look at them, barely managed a nod when they wished him a good night - not hiding, Gunn thought, not desperate to block them out, just had enough and needed to be done. Wesley and Gunn got a couple of beers and took them straight to bed.

“Were you thinking about him? Downstairs?”

Wesley pulled a face then quickly shook his head. “Not really. Much more about you. When I was thinking at all. Were you?”

Gunn moistened his lips. “Him gettin’ hard for you. Kept seein’ it.” A deep breath and he closed his eyes briefly. “Still am.”

Wesley shook his head. "It was the situation. For him, I mean."

Gunn laughed. "Where you been all this month? Not much of a 'situation' the last fifty times."

A brief shrug of concession, then Wesley frowned, and worried at his lower lip with his teeth. "I wonder what it would be like. What he'd actually want."

"Me out of the way, for a start. I'd have to get to fuck him just to remind him I was there."

"Or you could fuck me. That would work just as well. As a way to remind him."

Angel seeing Wesley like that. On Angel's own mattress. Oh, God, but Gunn would show Angel how he did give Wesley everything he needed. How Wesley was his, by right. Hot, but hotter still to imagine Angel loving the sight, loving the sounds. Not wanting anything more, 'cos there couldn't be anything better than watching them.

"English. English. You are wicked." Gunn was almost panting. "You look... so buttoned-up. And then you say things. You make me imagine."

"Imagine? How could you possibly imagine anything from something as simple as that?" The smallest possible smile. "You'll have to explain. Though I suspect I'll be shocked."

Afterwards Gunn found he was still thinking about Angel, but different thoughts now - about Angel locked away alone in his room. Listening to them, probably, having to listen to them having sex. God, that'd be hell. Gunn couldn't even imagine it for himself, what he'd be feeling about the two who'd turned him down, who wouldn't let him in. And he couldn't start to imagine it, because he couldn't imagine Wesley not loving him.

A different evening for Angel from the one he must have promised himself. The one he must've been sure of when he acted so confident in the shower. Did he think they'd be lovers by now, the three of them, that he'd make it so good they'd none of them want it any other way? Maybe he even thought they'd be sleeping together? Yeah, like... Wesley wouldn't want to leave when he was so comfortable in Angel's arms, and Gunn would go and get the quilt from their bed, and they'd all lie together on Angel's mattress, and maybe they'd fuck some more and eventually they'd sleep. Something like that. He must've thought something like that. About how everything would change. That's what Gunn would have been thinking, if he was Angel - because sex with Wesley, waking up with Wesley, that felt like the biggest change in Gunn's life.

But he wasn't Angel, and that meant he knew things Angel didn't know. The main thing: that Angel couldn't ever have a lover who'd be close with him like that, who'd feel safe enough with him to sleep in his bed. Angel was too dangerous, the damage to his brain made him too dangerous, and the damage also meant he'd never understand that he was lost forever, he'd have to be alone forever. They could never have slept together. However good it had been, no matter what they'd all wanted, it would have ended with Gunn and Wesley getting up, walking out, and locking Angel in.

Maybe that was Gunn again, though, trying to imagine. Lying with Wesley quiet and happy in his arms and thinking, "If I couldn't have this... If I was hoping for this and the truth was I couldn't ever have it..." Maybe Angel just wanted the sex. Maybe he'd've been glad when they left, so he didn't have to talk and act nice, he could just turn over and go to sleep. And what sign had they seen, really, that the thing Angel had for Wesley was love? OK so he was in the mood to want sex now because of Wesley, because Wesley had shown him he didn't always have to be scared. But it wasn't any kind of tragic, to be wanting sex you wouldn't get. Nothin' like tragic, when you were jerking off as much as Angel. Yeah, he'd get over it. More than that, he'd forget it had ever happened.

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Angel was still subdued the next day. He was back to watching them and thinking serious thoughts, but not back as far as the corner; he was prepared to approach them and to take the beaker from Wesley's hand.

While Angel was drinking, Wesley said, "Angel, I'm not going to stay and talk. Not today. Not for the next few days. We know... you haven't been finding it any easier to control your feelings even though you've been trying very hard. I think it might be easier for you if I keep away. It's not because I'm angry with you or disappointed. I want to make it easier for you to forget."

Angel nodded without looking at Wesley, acted like Wesley couldn't expect him to spare any concentration from the slow, difficult task of drinking.

For the first couple of days after that, Angel looked like he'd given up, and then he started working again to distract himself. Some of his dreams seemed to be about both of them. Difficult to tell since he didn't use their names, but you could take Angelus as a guide, and Angelus was definitely getting a lot of his thrills from the possibilities available with two people. Seeing Angel getting hard in his dreams - even seeing it on Angelus - Gunn now immediately imagined himself fucking Wesley and Angel getting hard like that from watching. Wesley teased him about this new kink, made a big show of pretending to wonder about earlier signs; all while he was getting his trousers down and urging Gunn on.

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On Saturday evening Angel had a vision, and it hit like it had been accelerating towards him for all of two months. He cried out in pure surprise, and they heard the book hit the wall and then drop to the floor. A longer cry, half-strangled, rising at first but falling by the time they got into the room - and that was Angelus. Gunn immediately ran out to get the chains and gag while Wesley stayed in case Angelus started to speak. The cries took over a minute to become openly hungry, recognisable as Angelus, then they slowly settled to moans of pleasure and the moans continued throughout the chaining.

Gunn and Wesley started to wonder if he was going to speak at all, if he'd been driven into a reaction so primitive it hadn't any use for words. But the moans finally stopped, and then they learned about the nest of vampires underground at Veteran and Rochester, how they'd collected (would collect?) ten blondes, and the things they'd make the girls do to be the one who got to survive.

There were four girls in the cell, all snatched in the last two hours. The two vampires on guard heard Gunn and Wesley getting into the tunnels and the fight was hard; could have ended very differently if the vampires had known even a tenth what Gunn and Wesley knew about fighting together.

The other vampires (four, the girls thought) were out looking for more girls. They would definitely come back to the tunnels, so it would be enough to lie in wait. Gunn called Rondell, asked for help in getting the girls to safety and in joining the wait for the other vamps. They were home by two and Angelus was still there, still lost in the vision.

Angelus stayed for all of the next day, persisting through several sleeps. He seemed to enjoy the restraints when he was asleep, like he did during the vision as something to bite and stretch against; but he hated them and fought them when he was awake.

Angel, on the other hand, simply endured them - no stretching, no fighting, so it was obvious at a glance on Monday morning that Angelus was finally gone. It wasn't obvious from looking at the screen that he was deep in hell, but they heard him flinch when they opened the door so Wesley went in already making his soothing noises. Angel was beyond reach, panicked and terrified like they hadn't seen in months, probably not all year. Wesley had to order him to drink, and the drinking hurt him because his mouth was rubbed raw from the gag. They got out as soon as they could, and left him to hide.

He was the same the next day, when his mouth had healed, and the day after. No more wet dreams. Nothing but nightmares. They seemed to crowd in on him with every sleep, and they were all so loud.

Gunn and Wesley hadn't been thinking of Angel as "lucid" in the last weeks - not since the day he'd thrown Wesley at the window for trying to tell him that he wasn't in hell. Obviously Angel hadn't been lucid, he'd still been walled off in some strange region of his mind. But that region was gone now, crushed to rubble by a vision. And they'd seen that before, when he'd been losing his real lucidity, seen him stripped back to this same state, where he was so deep in hell it was painful to watch. Didn't seem important any more to tell themselves how he hadn't really been lucid; he'd been close enough, in his terms, and they didn't hold back from using the word now. Looking back, they could see he'd been building something for himself, claiming something for himself in those weeks without a vision - but now it was gone.

So it turned out they could have had sex with him that night. They could have taken him from the shower and found out what he was like, what he really wanted. No matter how badly it might have gone wrong, two days later and it would all have been wiped out.

Wesley took it hard. Not sleepless and obsessed and needing to be sent off to San Diego, but sad, almost mourning. That nearly-lucid Angel had given them some hard work, a ridiculous number of awkward moments; but you couldn't

be grudge him any of that when you saw him now. The books frightened him and Wesley took them away; he threw out the two damaged ones and put the others in the bookcase near the door, ready for his next visit to a suitable second-hand bookshop.

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The boys had decided to target their tours at Hull demons, Sas Vanna demons like Yan, and young Chachaspe demons (and similar nest-builders). They'd developed different versions to cater to different interests and different schedules, and had left leaflets in hotels, shops and cafes all over town. Their first customers were a pair of Chachaspe demons from New Mexico, and Piriti and Solito helped them sneak out of the hotel and got them back just before dawn. Very satisfied customers, and new friends for Piriti and Solito; and maybe Piriti was right and Grouw and Matt were wrong, and there were plenty of young nest-builders willing to spend half of their allowance on a guided tour of L.A. Not that Grouw or Matt had ever said a word to discourage Piriti - they kept all their doubts for Gunn.

Their second set of customers was a family of Hull demons. All of them in the family were weird at first about having a human drive them but then seemed to forget Matt was there - until the very end when the father made a big deal of giving him a five-dollar tip. The boys laughed about it, but then agreed that they needed to widen their market once they'd got enough experience at dealing with people, had figured out what people were really looking for in a tour and in their guides. They accepted the fact that Piriti couldn't go on tours with Hull demons, or that a Chachaspe would never get into a car with Grouw, but they wanted to have at least some tours where they could work properly together as a team, as they always had with the singing and the nest-building. They needed to figure out how to reach the type of demons who either wouldn't care about the mix or would regard it as a bonus. They asked Gunn for suggestions, asked him to ask Wesley.

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Two weeks after the vision, Angel didn't take the beaker back to his corner but stood to drink it just where he'd picked it up. When he'd finished he held it out towards Wesley, not very far, and not looking at Wesley but at a point in front of Wesley's face. He went very tense when Wesley started walking towards him, and Gunn thought he could hear the plastic of the beaker creak in that grasp.

"Thank you, Angel." So much warmth in Wesley's voice, such genuine pleasure, of course Angel looked up; and of course he was too surprised and bewildered to respond, even with a nod.

Two weeks gone by since the vision. Had it been two weeks from a vision the last time? Gunn couldn't remember.

"Would you like us to leave you alone?" More surprise, and no response, or not in the few seconds before Wesley nodded and took a step back. "We'll see you tomorrow."

Angel stood staring at the door, and then at some point he moved out of sight, maybe on a line towards the door.

He was serious and thoughtful this time, no sign of suspecting a trick, no nightmares. Gunn thought Angel remembered that he'd already been through this. Not the way normal people remembered, not realising that this had happened before. But the moment Angel started to think that maybe Wesley could be trusted, then everything he saw made it seem obvious. So he didn't need to test Wesley, or wonder why Wesley was different. He knew that Wesley had been sent to look after him, that Wesley couldn't leave, that Wesley was kept completely separate from the other duals, and that Wesley liked to stay and talk to him.

Gunn and Wesley took bets about when he'd start on the sex again, and how. Gunn thought it would be in the shower (they always let him shower himself now, but he fretted if Wesley wasn't there), and Wesley thought it would be in the bedroom, while they were sitting talking, probably over one of the books.

They were both wrong, though Gunn was closest on "when". The wet dreams started again, and then two days later, after handing back the beaker, Angel said, "You were in the shower. You smell of lemons," and he put his arms around Wesley and he pulled him into a kiss.

Wesley gasped, dropped the beaker, and was trying to push Angel away when Gunn ran up and took an arresting-officer's grip on the arm that was around Wesley's waist. "Let go, vampire. Or I'll burn you to the bone."

Angel did let go, but slowly, like it was his own idea. Wesley pulled away and stumbled back nearly to the door, and Angel turned to look at Gunn. “He smells of lemons. We have to.”

“You fucking do not. You have to learn right now that you are never going to have him. You’re a prisoner under his care - he’d never betray his duty like that. And he belongs to me. There’s nothing he could make himself accept from you.”

Angel wasn’t impressed - thought too little of Gunn even to be angry at him. He stared at him, eyes narrowed slightly, then said, “You don’t smell of lemons. You were separate. You haven’t been together.”

Gunn snorted. “Lemons, for God’s sake! We sleep together. Most of the time I’m the first thing you smell on him. What you usually say.”

Frowning: “So when were you together?”

Wesley answered. “An hour ago. Then we got up and, yes, I had a shower. Charles likes something different. So he smells of the ocean.”

“An hour?” Angel was very puzzled, and suspicious like they were trying to cheat him. He looked at Gunn then back at Wesley. “Was it - Do you - Is this something you’ve agreed?”

“Well...” A long pause. “We agree on most things, Angel. You’ve seen that, haven’t you?”

Slowly: “Yes, I - I understand.” He slumped, all the energy and fight gone out of him. He took a couple of shuffling steps towards the wall, saw the beaker just before he kicked it, picked it up, was about to take it to Wesley, but then changed his mind and held it out to Gunn instead. “I’m sorry. I won’t do that again. You need to - I know.”

“OK, man. Just... Look. Find something else to think about.”

Angel nodded, then shambled off to sit huddled in his corner with his back to them.

Over coffee they agreed that Angel was much easier to deal with this time; he might even get all the way over his crush on Wesley before the next vision struck. Of course it helped that the two of them knew even more that he did about how his mind worked in this.

“I’m sorry, Charles. I didn’t - When I was trying to -” A sigh. “Well, I knew there’d be times when you’d have to pull him off me, but never like that.”

Gunn smiled and quirked his eyebrows. “So how was it? What’d we miss before?”

Wesley closed his eyes, shuddered, and blushed. “I could taste the blood. And it had done nothing to warm him. It’s a shock.”

“All that about lemons. Wonder what else he notices about you. Think he could draw you from memory?”

Wesley shook his head. “He draws women. Not now but... overwhelmingly, in the past. He sees men differently. That’s why... It’s not about me. I’m just the nearest warm body.”

Not true. But Wesley already knew what Gunn thought, and anyway this would be over soon. Nothing could last, not with Angel.

A few days later, when they’d just got back from one of their training sessions on their own, Wesley said, “He thinks we’ve already had sex. That’s how he sees it this time.”

“Who’s ‘we’? The three of us? Or the two of you?”

“The two.”

“Oh.” A pause. “So what I told him about you and me... How he didn’t have a chance. Guess that went straight over his head. Won’t even hear it when you tell him?”

Wesley shrugged. “He’s convinced we’re a dual. He’s got...” A sigh. “I don’t know if it’s one single theory. Or five that shift from day to day. But he thinks you know everything. And that we have an agreement that you pretend that you don’t.” Another, deeper sigh. “In all of his theories, you and I have a very complicated relationship. Whatever I tell him, he just adds another layer to his theory. Because in his mind, he knows we’ve had sex. If I say it was a dream, he thinks I’m teasing him.”

“What sort of dream? Really hot? What does he want?”

Wesley swallowed. “Well... it seems he wants me to come into his room and lie down next to him while he’s asleep.”

“And then beg him to fuck you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think he sees me like that. He just talks about waking up. Seeing that... I’d decided. That I knew it was what I wanted too.”

Waking up with Wesley. Exactly what Angel couldn’t have. Except he thought he did have it. Maybe every day, even?
“Huh. So what’s he want next?”

A shrug. “Nothing. He thinks it’s happened several times. He’s sure it’ll happen again. You know how he is with time. Anything could be... ten years in the past, or yesterday.”

“Or right now.” Gunn nodded towards the screen. “You think it looks like that?” Angel was just starting a wet dream. Looked slow, lazy, very welcome – like Angel had found a way to give himself love, as well as sex.

“They all look the same to me.” Wesley checked the time then went over and turned the screen off.

“He’s really stopped asking, then? If he thinks he’s got what he wants.”

“There are some advantages to his condition.”

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