

Kungai
by Helen Raven

a novel in six parts

Part Five

Wesley was having sex with Angel, Gunn was sure of it. He was sure enough by the end of August that he knew he couldn't just think about it any more, he had to do something about it, and when he looked back at all the signs, he couldn't believe how slow he'd been to suspect that something was going on.

Gunn thought he had it tracked back now. That kiss with the lemons, that must've been the start. Must've left Wesley wanting more so he'd gone back in afterwards. The kiss had been on a Thursday, hadn't it? So Wesley would only have needed to wait till Gunn was out at Caritas - if Angel had been awake then, and safe. Gunn couldn't remember how Angel had been that night. But with Gunn out working for most of every day, Wesley wouldn't've had to wait more than a couple of days. And since then Wesley and Angel had been sharing a secret: they'd both been making sure that nothing important between them happened in front of Gunn. When Gunn was there it was almost like they ignored each other, hardly even talked. Been weeks now since Gunn'd seen them reading together.

You could say that them ignoring each other wasn't any sign of a secret, it was just Angel finally got himself over his crush on Wesley, left wondering what the hell he'd ever seen in him. Except it had never been a crush, it had always been love. Or close enough, anyway, that Gunn knew it was something real. A crush would have been Angel having some fantasy idea about Wesley, nothing behind it, would topple over with hardly even a push. But Angel saw the real Wesley, he saw him like Gunn saw him, and that meant Angel would have months to get through before he'd be able to think of anything except how it could have been between him and Wesley. More months before he could even think of pretending like he didn't care. Gunn knew how it'd be, he could imagine. And he knew that whatever was going on with Angel, whatever Angel might be pretending about, it didn't have anything to do with making himself accept that he'd never have Wesley. Some days he'd hand the beaker back to Wesley with just a nod, but all the time he was thinking something that kept him quietly happy.

Angel had got like that within days of the kiss with the lemons, and that was how he'd been ever since, whenever he was lucid. The next vision had left him dazed and stupid for a week, too stupid almost to be properly frightened, but then he'd recovered practically overnight, wet dreams, happiness, ignoring Wesley and all. He'd hardly asked any questions, he hadn't made any move on Wesley.

Well, Gunn had figured out now that Angel hadn't needed to ask any questions, because Wesley must've gone in and told him, Wesley must've been the one who'd made the first move. Wesley must've explained how Gunn knew everything but how they had to pretend. Because it was such a complicated relationship. They could do anything they wanted, they just had to wait until Gunn was out of the apartment. Did Wesley give Angel a signal with the blood? "Not today." "Very soon." "In an hour." But how would Angel understand an hour? "In the time it would take us to read half the book"?

Before the vision - and still sometimes afterwards - Gunn trusted in Angel's damaged brain as reason enough for the changes, for Angel's obvious contentment: Angel thought his dreams were real, he thought Wesley had become his lover. No need to talk or argue or accept less, when his next sleep might bring him everything he wanted.

But then the vision and that overnight recovery - and Wesley had shown no interest in that recovery, not a trace, just shrugged it off. Hadn't even got low during that lost, dazed week. Like... like he knew exactly how to get his Angel back, was just waiting until Angel was ready.

Angel spent a lot of time now lying on the mattress, on his side near the edge, like he was facing someone. And why wouldn't he? He was enjoying his memories, waiting for sleep. But soon after the recovery Gunn realised that Angel always lay on his left side - like Gunn did himself when he was in bed with Wesley, because Wesley had to lie on his right side or he couldn't balance or raise himself up. Maybe that was obvious about Wesley. But it hadn't been obvious to Gunn until the first time he lay down with Wesley for real. Before then... Well, he'd had his reasons for wanting to block out the idea that some things might not be possible. Angel must have reasons like that too, even more than Gunn. But Angel had got it right.

Gunn knew how Angel had got it right: he hadn't guessed, he hadn't imagined, he'd been shown. Wesley had been there, in the space next to him on the mattress. It wasn't just memories that drew Angel back to the mattress, it was the scent of Wesley in all his stages of sex. If Gunn had a vampire's senses he'd be able to smell it too. He'd have proof.

And then what would he do?

Because for all Gunn could see the two of them had a secret, and Angel was finally and regularly getting something that satisfied him, Gunn's mind went spinning into a skid at the idea of his Wesley taking even the first step in what he was suspecting. Not Wesley, when Gunn had seen more than enough to know how much Wesley would risk for himself rather than lie. Sure, Angel might have grabbed Wesley again, might have got further without Gunn there to pull him off. And if Wesley let it happen, Gunn wouldn't blame him. When you had someone as beautiful as Angel pleading to get into your pants, what was your cock supposed to do? Wesley would have known he'd understand, Wesley would have told him straight after. Unless...

No, Wesley wouldn't lie to protect himself, but he would lie to protect Angel. So he might not tell Gunn, but he wouldn't let it happen again, he wouldn't go in again on his own, knowing what might happen. Not Wesley. He'd never play such a stupid game, he'd never forget what he had with Gunn.

Gunn believed that, he believed that, but then there was Wesley no longer talking to Angel, never talking about Angel, there was Angel on the mattress... And somehow Gunn found himself wondering if Angel had really had those dreams about waking with Wesley next to him, or if Angel really had any complicated theories about them being a dual. Maybe the dreams were Wesley's cover-story. Maybe the theory was all Wesley's work, what he'd told Angel to make him be more careful in front of Gunn. Then... had it started so early? So soon after the kiss?

* * * * *

On Friday evening they got home by ten after training with the duals, and Wesley headed straight for the fridge to get a couple of beers. As he was opening them, he suggested that they take the beers through to the bedroom and give each other a rubdown.

Gunn shook his head, though Wesley wasn't looking at him, still busy with the bottle-opener on the far wall. "I - I don't -" Gunn didn't feel like he should be taking the beer either, but his hand reached out as if by reflex.

"Really don't need it?" Wesley looked surprised then shrugged. "Is there something on TV?"

"I don't -" Gunn took a deep breath. "I have to - I think there's something going on between you and Angel. You're having sex."

"What?" Wesley dropped his beer. They could hear it gulping out onto the carpet but they ignored it, stared at one another. Wesley looked stunned, sick - Gunn couldn't tell yet how guilty.

"You go in there when I'm not here. You've been doing it ever since that time he kissed you."

"We're not having sex. Charles!"

"What else would you have to hide like that? Jeez, you can't even trust yourselves to talk normally in front of me. Not any more."

"We're not having sex. Of course we're not!"

"You do go in to him?" A slow nod. "How often?"

"I suppose... Every day if I can. If he's lucid enough."

"And if you know I'll be out for long enough."

A pained shrug. "It's not... It's not..."

"So what is it? The thing you've been doing every day? Knowing I'd stop you."

“He’ s...” Wesley swallowed. “He’s been starved of physical contact. Apart from torture. He can give himself sex. But he can’t give himself...” Wesley looked away for several seconds, to the side. “Simple... Simple affection.”

“So you give it to him. On his mattress. Right?”

“Sometimes. If he doesn’t want to read. If he just wants to talk.”

“Does he get you naked?”

“No.”

“Does he try to kiss you?”

“Sometimes.”

“Does it - Does it get him hot?”

A pause, then Wesley nodded. “But he knows we can’t. He knows I can’t. He does accept.”

“What about... him thinking you’d had sex? Why d’ you tell me that? If he knows you can’t.”

“I can’t... without your permission, that’s what he thinks. Sometimes you give it but - He knows not to ask.”

“One of his theories about us?” A brief nod. “Damn, what were you thinking, man? Maybe you didn’t lie, but – What, you reckoned I’d never notice?”

“I thought it would be over in a week. That he’d change again. I never imagined that it would help him so much. And...” A quick shake of the head, almost a shudder. “I suppose I started to think like him. To think that you already knew.”

Gunn was shaking his head. “Been spendin’ way too much time with him.” He thrust his beer into Wesley’s hand then gave Wesley a push in the direction of the bedroom. “Go and get ready for the rubdown. I’ll be through in a minute.”

He dealt with the carpet, treading a towel down and leaving it there to soak up what it could, and then he got another beer. Wesley was naked, stretched out on his side of the bed, cock about half-risen. He looked very apprehensive, like he had some bad ideas about what Gunn might want. He must have some other ideas too, though, because look at his cock. Or maybe it was all mixed together for him? Because of what had happened with that boy at his school, the way he’d ended up working it in with the things that got him hot?

“We’re not gonna have the rubdown, are we? We’re gonna go straight into the fuck.”

Wesley swallowed. “It’s up to you.” Very tense. But not like he was dreading it, like he’d have to force himself to go along with it. Just like he couldn’t start to guess what it was going to be.

Turned out that was exactly as much guilt as Gunn needed to see. He shook his head and reached straight for Wesley’s cock. “Feels to me like it’s mostly up to you.” He was still fully-dressed, hadn’t even taken his jacket off since they got in from training; he liked that sometimes, Wesley too, and this time he went as far as stopping Wesley from pushing his T-shirt up. The minimum - yeah, the bare minimum. Afterwards he did let Wesley help, starting with his shoes, so they could both get under the covers.

“How long had you been thinking that I’d been having sex with him?”

Gunn shrugged and sighed. “Since he came out of the vision like that. I knew you had to have been talking to him.”

Wesley swallowed, then, after a few seconds: “Thank you for telling me, for giving me a chance.”

“What else would I do?”

A shrug. “Try to catch me out. Come back early. Examine me for bruises. Ask him trick questions.”

“I couldn’t live like that.”

“No.” A hand pressed to Gunn’s chest, then laid gently against his throat. “You couldn’t, could you? What do you want me to do? Should I stop? Or... Just tell me.”

Gunn wanted Wesley to stop; he didn’t want him on that mattress with Angel. But then... who was it harming, where was the danger? And what was Gunn losing? Did he really have enough jealousy in him to say that Angel couldn’t ever have his one friend hold him? A few moments to hold against some of the memories of centuries of torture. It was helping Angel, really helping him. Keeping him calm, making him easier to manage.

“I - D’ you have to go in every day? Could you - make it less?”

“Once a week?”

Gunn nodded. “Yeah, like Thursdays when I’m out at Caritas? Or next time he’s lucid after that. I’ll go out for an hour. Can always find something to do.”

“You don’t want to be here?”

Gunn shrugged. “I like his theories about us. Stops him hassling me. No point messin’ with’m.”

* * * * *

Wesley explained the new rules to Angel on Saturday morning, while Gunn was out getting groceries and videos and catching up with Anne. Wesley blamed the change on Gunn, and Angel took the news very badly and was angry with Gunn; he was huddled in his corner for the rest of the day, alternating between muttering furiously and rocking and hugging himself, just radiating self-pity. Wesley had turned the screen off.

“ ‘s the downside of givin’ him somethin’, Wes. When y’ have to take it away.”

Angel seemed better on Sunday - out of his corner and back to the books and the mattress - but then Gunn left to join the crew at the beach and Wesley found out that Angel had not accepted the change but simply forgotten. He’d been listening for the sound of Gunn leaving, and when Wesley didn’t come to him after all, he was so disappointed and angry that he vamped up, ripped one of the books to shreds, and threw the mattress halfway across the room. Wesley put his earplugs in and shut himself in the bedroom to read, and he was still there when Gunn got back. Wesley said he’d forgotten about Angel, seemed surprised to see him so deeply asleep on the floor. Gunn didn’t want to leave again after that, not after seeing the state of the room, but Wesley just laughed and said he’d rather deal with Angel in a tantrum any day, rather than a bored, cooped-up Gunn.

Wesley bought a couple of new books, took them in on Monday evening, and then sat and looked through them with Angel for about half an hour. Angel was restless and distracted, paying far more attention to Gunn than to the books or to what Wesley was saying. He jerked his head up towards the door every time Gunn typed a new search term or put down his pen or mug; and when Gunn walked over to the kitchen Angel got so excited, he was almost shaking with it. He was waiting for Gunn to leave, and so Wesley had to explain again, in a whisper, while Gunn was in the kitchen waiting for the water to boil. Gunn saw Angel ask a question, Wesley give a patient answer and then Angel frowned down at the floor for a long time, even after the water had boiled and Gunn had gone back to the computer. Gunn was about to give up on watching when Angel suddenly put his hand on the book, turned the page – ten times harder than necessary, making it crackle and leaving it creased – pointed at something on the new page and grunted a question, and so they were back to reading. Angel’s hand stayed on the book, always close to Wesley’s, maybe touching sometimes, especially when they turned another page. Angel wasn’t paying attention to the book, though, any more than he had before; his eyes were closed most of the time, even while Wesley was pointing something out to him. Shutting down, or drifting away. Slowly. Very slowly. Wesley carried on talking until he couldn’t turn the page because of the weight of Angel’s hand, and then he carefully eased himself out from under the book.

That was Angel for all of the next few days: some shade of angry, watchful or withdrawn. He was always glad to see Wesley, always welcomed him, but then he didn’t seem to know how to talk to him; Wesley had to do all the work. Angelus was just plain angry and horny, and Angel’s dreams were somewhere in-between, full of impatient or puzzled sounds.

* * * * *

Angel was lucid on Thursday night, and was sitting in his corner reading when Gunn gave Wesley a long kiss and then left for Caritas. Wesley hadn't tried to explain the new rules to Angel; "once a week" would mean little to Angel, and "Thursday evenings, if you're lucid" would probably get Wesley thrown across the room. Gunn hadn't decided yet how much he was going to ask Wesley about Angel's reaction, how pleased and surprised Angel had been.

Matt was the only one at the table when Gunn arrived and Gunn didn't go straight to the bar to get beers but went over to ask about the others. Matt said it looked like they weren't coming.

"Both got problems at home?"

Matt shook his head, pulling an unhappy, resigned face. "Problems with me. We had a big argument, um... Tuesday."

"Yeah?" The boys arguing about more than top-10 songs or films or games? "Buy you another beer if you tell me about it?" A smile and a nod from Matt.

"So what's up?"

"I've got a girlfriend. She doesn't know about any of this..." A gesture round the bar, at the stage. "And I'm not gonna tell her."

"Why's that?"

"'cos it might freak her out. I don't wanna make it like this big test for any girl who ever dates me."

Gunn shrugged. "Doesn't have to be. Meet a girl here, she already knows."

"Man, you must not notice girls at all. Couldn't meet more than thirty new girls here, not in a year. And a girl I want to date. Who wants to date me... Been comin' here for three years – I've figured out now it's never gonna happen. And the same three years there've been four, five girls from, y' know, classes, the beach. 'n' I never did anything 'cos I just couldn't see how to fit them in."

"Yeah. OK." Gunn nodded slowly, seeing Matt's point. "So why're the guys pissed at you? You took them through the math, right?"

Matt looked really unhappy. "Well, there's more math. Like... what happens with the tours and the singing and Piriti's nest when I'm seeing Holly two, three times a week. I wanna –" A sigh. "She came over on Monday for the day. First time. She surfs. She's at UCLA. She's into... what different animals do with their energy. What they have to do to get it in the first place. She really sees things."

"Sounds cool." Gunn was remembering his first real evening alone with Wesley, realising for sure what he'd only guessed before: that he'd never met anyone like this. Exciting. God, yes. Big difference with Matt, though, was Matt had someone he could tell it to.

"Yeah. So she asked about the weekend 'n' I said I had a family thing. So we're doing Monday again. But we've only got vacation for another couple of weeks and then – There's not enough evenings. There's not enough Sundays. 'n' I don't want to be lying to her, anyway. 'bout the other evenings. Not like we're a couple or anything, not like she's lookin' to move in, but I don't wanna feel like I'm always... keeping her over there." He made a chopping movement with his hands, one hand over the table, the other far over in the space to the side."

"Y'know, maybe you should tell her, man. If she sees things, like you said. Hell, what sort of energy would she see here? The guys'd like her, wouldn't they?"

All of a sudden Matt was really angry. Maybe not at Gunn personally, but definitely at someone. "Knowing about demons isn't the only thing about a person. It isn't that important. Y' know I love the guys, but – I'm not gonna spend the rest of my life waiting for the one girl in ten million to walk down those steps. And jerkin' off over –" A deep breath, then he shook his head hard. "Not gonna do that. Just because someone brought me here as a joke, when I was still practically a kid, 'n' I got hooked on karaoke for a couple of years."

“So you’re what...? Done with karaoke? Droppin’ the tour business? Just like that? You’ve only been datin’ for a few weeks. Not even a couple, you said.”

“Yeah, but I been thinkin’ about this all year, ‘specially since... you told us about you and Wes.”

“What about us?” What the hell had he told them? Jeez, not about leaving his crew? No, course he hadn’t. And that was different anyway. He’d known by then that he was in love with Wesley, they both did. And he had to, because of Angel. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Well, ‘cos... you used up your one in ten million chance. Hundred million, maybe. Yeah, fair bet that you’d meet soon enough, I know there’s fifty guys, max, do anything like you do. So let’s say five of those’re gay ‘n’ – C’ mon, how long’d you been looking?”

“Wasn’t like that. I wasn’t looking. We weren’t. We just found that... it worked.”

“I know. Y’look like it shouldn’t but –” A sigh. “So. Yeah. Been thinkin’ more and more that somethin’ was missing. Still havin’ a blast with the guys but... I want someone I can talk about the way you talk about Wes. Dunno yet if that’ll be Holly. Done the right thing, though, in making a start.”

“So how d’ you tell them? On Tuesday. You told them about her before?”

Matt shook his head. “Made it sound like I’d been bowled over by her out of nowhere. Didn’t tell them any of that stuff I’d been thinkin’ Nothin’ ‘bout you ‘n’ Wes. Said I didn’t know what evenings I’d have free from now on. Or not until I’d figured out Holly’s routine. Y’know, round her classes, other friends. Guess I made it sound like she was pushin’ me around and she’s not, it’s me who’s... Man, I am so out of practice at dating, figurin’ out the give ‘n’ take with someone I barely met. But yeah, next month or so it all fits around her. And even after that I don’t see how I’ll be able to take on any tours. Not with those hours. But they just need someone who can drive. Who’s cool with Hull demons and Chachaspe demons.” A sigh. “And who’d do it for ten bucks and a bowl of noodles.”

“Hey!” Gunn acted indignant. “Who’s been showin’ you my resume?” They laughed but Matt soon turned serious again.

“Would you really wanna do it? It’s just driving. I know you’re used to more. Money, too.”

Gunn shrugged. “I’ll help out. Least I can do. While they look for someone else.”

“God, that would – I know I’m really lettin’ ‘em down. Piriti...” Matt was shaking his head. “Grouw’s just pissed at me, thinks I’m being a gutless, selfish jerk. But Piriti... Grouw ‘n’ I knew the tours were just a game. Like workin’ on a new song. Teachin’ Piriti to surf. Might not have much at the end, but...” A shrug. “Got some great stories. Never realised Piriti saw it as... Dunno about ‘his ticket out’ but... Some kind of big chance to prove something, him and Solito. Don’t see him forgivin’ me.”

Gunn nodded. “I’ll call Grouw tomorrow. They’re really not gonna show tonight, are they?”

“No.”

“Guess you don’t wanna sing?”

“God, no.”

“Wave-Race sound any better? We could get pizza, if you haven’t eaten.”

Matt was already nodding and draining his beer, and ten seconds later they were on their feet and heading for the door.

They got close to breaking into Glacier Coast. It was that stupid, bending tunnel in Port Blue – they could neither of them handle the curves except by sheer luck, and it kept knocking them out of the game. If they could just sit down for two hours (or four) and do nothing except run that tunnel... But they could only get to it by running the rest of the course. Next time, they’d crack it next time – Matt said he’d call when he knew he had an evening free. Matt hadn’t said anything about introducing Gunn to Holly some day – was Gunn too hard to explain without bringing in the “D” word?

Gunn didn't get home until gone midnight. The apartment was nearly in darkness, and Angel and Wesley were both asleep and dreaming. Angel was enjoying his dream, but Wesley was fighting something, and hard. He fought Gunn when Gunn tried to hold him (fighting like he thought he had two arms) and then suddenly he was awake, looking up at Gunn and gasping.

"Some dream, English. What were you fighting? Anything I know?"

"I – I – I can't remember. I think it had tusks. Did I wake you up? I'm sorry."

Gunn shook his head. "Just got in. Ended up 'round at Matt's, playing that racing game."

"Oh. At Matt's. I thought they must have been singing everything they knew. Maybe got into a competition. They have those, don't they?" Wesley was reaching over to get his glasses. He sounded tired, not really awake.

Gunn shook his head, pulling a face. "Won't be doing any singing for a while." And he told Wesley about what Matt was doing. It was meant to be the short version but Wesley asked questions and Gunn did want to talk. He hoped that Grouw and Piriti would calm down, that they'd find a way to stay friends – like he had with the crew (eventually). He'd help out with the tours, keep in touch with Matt.

Wesley was smiling at him. "I'd never imagined you as a matchmaker. That's probably why you'll be perfect."

"A matchmaker? God, maybe I would've if I'd know Matt was looking. I just don't like to think of them stayin' mad at each other. They're a good team."

Wesley nodded. "Good to us, too. You should definitely call Grouw tomorrow. Maybe he'll meet you for a drink after training."

Gunn lay and thought for a while about how things might go with Grouw, how much he should sympathise, how much he should put Matt's side. Grouw probably wouldn't listen, not this soon – especially not to one human trying to put the case for another human.

"Wes? D' you think Matt is being a selfish jerk?"

Wesley didn't reply for at least five seconds – maybe thinking, maybe dragging himself back from sleep. "No. Not really. I suppose he could have told the others sooner. Before he met this Holly, as soon as he decided it was that important to him. It would have been better if they hadn't started the tour business. But I can sympathise. Most people go through their entire lives without needing to find out about demons. That doesn't make them stupid or weak. There's no need to hold it over them as a test, as if they have a duty to know."

Would help Gunn to figure out how to talk to Grouw if he knew what Grouw's attitude was about humans knowing or not knowing about demons. Gunn had never once heard Grouw or Piriti joke about humans being clueless about demons, not like you'd hear in the crew – about the wrong types of humans, anyway. (Yeah, yeah, OK, about humans who looked and talked like Wesley. But Gunn bet the crew thought twice about that now.) Maybe he'd get further with Wesley's first idea: ask Grouw how Matt could have handled things better.

Gunn went in a few lazy loops and circles, knowing his plans could all change with the first word out of Grouw's mouth. Might not need any "matchmaking" at all – they might just find they missed each other enough to do all the work themselves. Yeah, enough planning and thinking. Forget it. Leave it until tomorrow. Go to sleep on something else.

Gunn closed his eyes and cleared his thoughts, imagining his mind as a clear tidal pool. With barnacles. And anemones and birds overhead, and kids playing on the next beach over.

Was Angel's good dream anything like this? Maybe even with the sunshine on the rocks. Did he dream about being human? Like Wesley dreaming about his arm. Probably too long ago for his mind to be able to make it real. What about dreaming that he was free? He must do that at least sometimes.

"How was he tonight, Wes? Has he got any new theories?" No reply. Wesley was asleep.

Wesley was up and dressed when Gunn woke the next morning: at his desk deep in a translation, tracking down an idea that had suddenly come to him while he was dozing. He'd made the coffee but hadn't fed Angel yet, so they did that as soon as Gunn was dressed. Angel was in a good mood, seemed somehow glowing with energy, like they'd caught him in the middle of a workout. Did vampires even have hormones like that? Or was everything – breathing, erections, everything – just faked up by the demon?

Gunn waited for Grouw's lunch-break before calling, just in case Grouw was looking for any excuse to be pissed at a human, but Grouw was pleased to hear from him. "I was gonna call you at the weekend. Ask for your take on what's going on with Matt." They arranged to meet at the noodle place at half past nine; Wesley would take the duals someplace else, if they wanted to be taken.

For the evening's training, Wesley asked for some practice in hand-to-hand combat. Obviously his chances in hand-to-hand weren't good but they might not always be able to avoid it – he might lose his weapon, or get taken by surprise and have to go in unarmed – and there must be something that the duals could teach him that would take his chances from "pitiful" to just "discouraging". The duals agreed but they insisted on leaving the hand-to-hand till the last half hour of the session, and then at the very end they admitted they'd known Wesley would take so many knocks in the hand-to-hand that he wouldn't be fit for anything else afterwards.

Wesley drove himself home for a bath, and Gunn dropped the duals off at a bar and went to meet Grouw. As Matt had said, Grouw thought Matt was being a gutless, selfish jerk, but it was more like "callous, unrecognisable traitor". The way Grouw told it, Matt had more-or-less said, "I've finally met a really cool person, so I don't have to hang out with you losers any more." Like the only reason they'd ever been friends was because he'd been too lazy to look for anything better. Had they ever really known Matt, if he could act that way?

Gunn said he was sure it hadn't been like that, that he thought Matt had probably hated having to make the choice and maybe there'd been times when he'd made the choice the other way, over other girls he'd liked. Gunn tried to make it sound like he was just guessing, but Grouw asked if Matt had told him that. Gunn shrugged. "Y' read between the lines, don't you? But it's – Think he came across cold 'cos he didn't know how to handle it."

Grouw shifted about an inch in admitting that Matt might have acted weird because he felt weird rather than because he felt nothing, and then they left Matt and moved on to Piriti and the tours. Grouw thanked Gunn for the offer to drive, but said they'd probably never take him up on it.

"We've got nothing booked. We talked about what we could do, with just the two of us." A deep sigh, and Grouw shook his head. "One minute Piriti's talking about pushing the human market, people like Matt used to be, who won't be freaked by a Chachaspe hanging out with a Hull – 'cos they just don't know. Talking about working up ten more types of tour, about putting the leaflets everywhere. And then the next minute he's saying it's hopeless and pointless and we should go round and take all the leaflets back 'cos he doesn't want to get a call from some Chachaspe kids and have to tell the kids we can't do it. You don't wanna get messed up in that, believe me."

"Whadda you say to him? And whadda you want to do?"

"I say, 'Let's just wait and see. No need to do anything just yet, either one way or the other.' Yeah, I'd be happy to drop the whole thing. Can't see it being fun anymore. But drop it quietly, 'cos... we decided we already got what we wanted out of it. I'm not going to let him do it his way, try and make it like it never happened. Or not yet. It's too soon."

"What if some of those kids do call? D'you want me to say I'll drive them? Loan them Wesley's car or something? Or isn't that the help he needs?"

"Oh, I dunno. Maybe the kids'd say something that'd help him accept. Or they'd be assholes and he'd be glad to give it up. We're digging tomorrow. You wanna come and see what you think?"

For the second night running, Wesley was asleep when Gunn got home, though this time Gunn was home before eleven and the lights were on, including Wesley's reading-light in the bedroom: Wesley had fallen asleep over his book.

Wesley didn't wake up when Gunn was taking his glasses off or sliding the book out from under his hand, but he must have woken at some point during the night and pulled the pillows down flat. He was covered in bruises. Gunn wasn't sure at first how to touch him, if he should even try, but Wesley soon put him clear. Afterwards – and it was a long gap because Wesley was in a very lazy mood – Wesley said, "I love the way you touch me. Even in the few hours of the year when I don't particularly want sex, your hands always say... 'Everything is right.'"

“Yeah?” Gunn slid his right hand slowly down to Wesley’s hip, still gentle because of the bruises, though Wesley didn’t seem to feel them, just acted like he was stiff in his muscles. “Well, from where I’m looking, everything is pretty-damn good. Somethin’ botherin’ you? Is it Matt and the boys?”

A pause, then Wesley nodded. “A bit. I’ve been thinking of the reasons someone might give up his closest friends. I don’t think I’d ever have the strength. It must take a lot of courage if you’re doing it for a real reason.”

Wesley had been ready to give up Gunn for Angel’s sake. Maybe he’d forgotten. Or maybe it was just so different from what Matt had done.

They got up late, far too late to go training. Angel was asleep, and was still asleep when they came back from buying groceries and renting videos but by then he’d moved on to a passionate wet dream, full of moaning and grunting and sudden movements. They turned the screen off for half an hour, and when they turned it on again, Angel was awake.

Gunn took Angel into the shower while Wesley vacuumed the bedroom and then laid out clean clothes. Angel was still in a good mood: not spectacular like the day before, but good enough to want to talk to Gunn for most of the time they were in the bathroom, starting with “soap vs. shower gel and which Gunn preferred” and ending with a discussion of whether there was any accurate way of describing a man’s musculature, or whether the best you could do was compare him with someone else (“We’re similar, aren’t we? You could compare us?”). Gunn didn’t have much to say on any of Angel’s subjects, but he tried to act interested, not stomp on Angel’s good mood.

After Angel dressed himself, they fed him, and then Wesley stayed to read with him while Gunn went to do his usual Wyndham Gunn searches online. Wesley had been too busy to spend time with Angel the day before, but you couldn’t tell if Angel remembered, if he’d noticed something missing; probably meant he didn’t remember, or he’d’ve been sulking and blaming Gunn.

“No, it doesn’t. I told you to stop that.” And the sound of the book slamming closed. By the time Gunn had turned to look, Wesley had dropped the book and was pushing himself away from the wall, getting to his feet. Angel was still sitting in his usual reading position, looking bewildered. Wesley presumably looked furious, but he had his back to the camera.

“Can’t I tell you what I see?” Angel had picked up the book and was holding it out to Wesley, asking, not arguing.

Wesley snatched the book and threw it backhand hard enough that it hit the wall, near the door. “It’s not a joke!”

Angel and Gunn both stared at Wesley, then both stood up (Angel in a scramble, Gunn slowly) and took cautious steps towards Wesley. Wesley backed away from Angel and Angel stopped, and so Gunn stopped too, still several feet from the door.

“I’ve hurt you.” Slow. Almost a whisper.

“You know you did.” Almost a shout.

Angel reached out again, but of course Wesley moved back again, and this time it looked like he had flinched. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to... Stay. Let me...” Angel shook his head. “I won’t do that again. Please. Stay.”

“No. I told you to stop. More than once. But you always just do what you want. You can say anything, I won’t believe you.” And Wesley turned and left, slamming the door closed.

“Jesus! What the fuck did he do?”

“Oh.” Seemed like Wesley didn’t want to be near Gunn either; he’d barely looked at Gunn before heading for the kitchen. Gunn followed, taking four feet as his safe distance. Just a guess: he’d probably get yelled at, anyway. “He kept on saying that things in the book reminded him of me. Stupid things. A mandolin. A group of trees. He was being stupid. Stupid and more and more insensitive.” Wesley was making himself a mug of tea.

Insensitive? “You mean... about your arm?”

A shrug. “About anything he could find to be stupid about.”

Gunn moved closer, right up to the doorway. “And he wouldn’t stop.”

“Sometimes he doesn’t. He doesn’t listen. He acts as if you don’t matter.”

Gunn thought about how Angel had hurt Wesley in the last few days when he’d been truly lucid. When he’d known exactly what he was saying. But Wesley was different now, he was stronger: this time he’d gotten angry.

“Must’ve been something in his dream set him off. He was kind of like that in the shower. Asking me about shampoo. Conditioners. Guess he’s never bothered to look above my eyebrows.”

Wesley laughed, then nodded. “Yes, that sounds like a warning. I wish I had a test. Something to ask him first thing to see if it’s one of his stupid days. Would you like some tea?”

Gunn said yes and they took their teas to the couch and talked about work and about beer for that evening, and about training early on Sunday and which beach they’d go to afterwards. Angel wasn’t on the screen but they could hear pages being turned very slowly; he must be over by the door. Was he waiting, hoping for Wesley to change his mind? Or was this the sound of Angel over all that, showing he didn’t care?

Gunn hadn’t been looking forward to the digging – sounded like Piriti was going to be really hard work – but he was glad to get out of the apartment and then glad to be out in the sun and to have something to keep him busy with his entire body. Seeing Wesley shout at Angel, slam the door on Angel, when Wesley was never more than exasperated. Gunn still felt the shock, almost like Wesley had been shouting at him too. What the hell had Angel said? And why the hell had he said it? Had he really meant it as a stupid joke, like Wesley thought? Angel didn’t know how terrible it had been for Wesley to lose his arm. It had been a different Angel who’d known Wesley with two arms, who’d seen the blood and the pain. This Angel probably thought Wesley was exactly the way he was meant to be. So maybe Wesley had reacted too hard, but he had told Angel to stop, he’d given him a chance and Angel had to learn somehow, not to be stupid, not to joke about that.

Piriti wasn’t hard work, hardly mentioned the tours at all after thanking Gunn for his offer of help. They did a lot of singing, Piriti and Solito starting off with “Looking for the Heart of Saturday Night”, and then finally getting Gunn to join in with “It’s Still Rock and Roll to Me”. Gunn wondered if they were hoping he’d take Matt’s place at Caritas but there was no hint; never meant to be a hint, they just liked singing.

The end was odd, with everyone acting like it was normal for them all to just split up back to their own homes. No beach-house now, no place for them to hang out and watch TV and do normal “friends” stuff. Matt might have given them a set of keys but then he’d probably be there right now with Holly.

“How’s he been?” Gunn’s first question when he got home. Angel was somewhere out of sight of the camera.

Wesley shrugged. “Noisy. He kept on talking to himself. Doing a lot of banging and scraping. And then nightmares or possibly hallucinations. I think he’s asleep now. He’s scarcely moved away from the door.”

“Yeah, I’d’ve taken bets on the nightmares. You gonna stay mad at him?”

A sigh. “I don’t know. If he shows that he did listen... The way I still feel now, I’d want to ask you to feed him for me tomorrow. But I do have to see how he behaves with me.”

Gunn smiled. Not knowing if he was going to stay mad. Needing more information before he could decide. That was his Wes. “You don’t sulk.”

A harsh laugh. “Oh! I sulk to an Olympic standard. But I do it by getting pompous and self-righteous. I don’t think anyone has ever recognised it for what it is.”

Wesley had made a special sauce for the pizza, and the rich smell seemed to fill the apartment. There were anchovies in the sauce but Gunn was OK with that because Wesley had promised he’d only use one and he’d shown how finely it would get chopped, so after it had been cooking for an hour it would be pulp, nothing to suddenly bite into.

They started watching the first movie, but Gunn stopped the tape when it was time to eat. “Y’know, it must be near-on a year since the first time you cooked pizza for us.”

Wesley nodded. "A week next Tuesday."

"God! I'd never looked forward to a date more. Not in my whole life."

Wesley's half-smile. "Not that I knew it was a date. The most I was hoping for was to keep you entertained all evening. Not have you bored. I'd been telling myself that you probably didn't hug your friends goodbye like that every time you saw them."

Gunn laughed hard, then shook his head over and over. "Don't they do that where you come from? Not at all?"

"Not with me. People don't see me like that."

"Oh, man. I didn't at first. But getting close to you... Jeez, it's addictive."

Very quietly: "I don't deserve you."

Gunn just shook his head and pulled Wesley into a kiss.

* * * * *

They were up at seven on Sunday to go training. Angel was awake and they decided to feed him first. He must have heard them getting up and then the sound of the microwave, because he was standing waiting for them just a few feet inside the door. He had his sketchpad in his right hand and he held it out to Wesley, looking as uncertain as the day before, with the book.

"I can't take it, Angel." Impatient. "I haven't got a free hand. Why don't you give it to Charles?"

Angel studied Gunn for about five seconds before he offered him the pad. "I'm sorry. I thought he was... I don't know how else to see him."

Gunn took the pad, looked at Wesley and they both shrugged, and then Wesley made Angel take the beaker. "What do you want us to do with the pad, Angel? Is there something wrong with it?"

Angel didn't seem to want to look at Wesley now – he made his reply to Gunn. "I don't know. He said... I couldn't. But I had to do something."

"Well, we'll check it out for you. And I'll go and get you a new one while you're finishing that." Gunn left the pad on Wesley's desk and got a fresh one from the drawer. A new crayon too, in case that was the real problem. They'd check the pad when they got back after training. They knew he hadn't had a vision, so there couldn't be anything important in it.

They went straight out for training and Wesley forgot the last of his stiffness in a good long swordfight. They got breakfast from Starbucks in Manhattan Beach and took it down to the beach. They didn't talk about Angel.

The pad was full of drawings of Wesley. No, not full, just three, but Angel must have been working on them all night. Wesley in profile, head bent, mouth open like he was speaking. Wesley's hand on a book, about to turn the page. And from the waist up, full-face, and naked. So Angel remembered when Wesley used to shower him, he could draw the scars from memory. And he'd noticed Wesley's ring: it was in both of the pictures that showed Wesley's hand.

Angel had no other way of showing he was sorry. There was nothing else he was able to give.

Wesley turned the pages slowly, saying nothing, showing no reaction after a first gasp of surprise. He turned them back even more slowly, then closed the pad and opened the drawer where they kept the stack of blank pads.

"Don't, Wes." Gunn put his hand over Wesley's, stopping him from picking up the pad. "Keep it somewhere safe. You give it back to him, you know what Angelus'll do."

Wesley looked at Gunn, still almost expressionless, then nodded and pushed the drawer closed with his knee. "I'll put it with my books. Most of them have survived a hundred years. I think that's a guarantee of some sort."

After Wesley had put the pad away, on a bottom shelf, Gunn said, “So’d he do the right thing? Or’d he make it worse? Lookin’ at you, could be either.”

A deep sigh, which still could have been either, then: “I’ll go in when he wakes up. I’ll thank him.”

“You want me to leave the apartment? Just say how long.”

“What?” Finally, a reaction: surprise. “Why would you leave?”

“What you gonna do? Stand at the other side of the room and say, ‘Thank you. I can see that you’re sorry.’ Have to do more than say it. With me, with him, with anyone. If he’s still got the same theories, then I need to get out. Don’t want to mess with those theories.”

Wesley really couldn’t decide, looked almost stupid for about ten seconds there. Finally, shaking his head, “I’ll just read with him for a while. That should be enough contact. But thank you. It was a kind thought.”

They had a meeting with the survey committee scheduled for that evening, so they prepared for that then caught up on paperwork. Angel started to dream, talking in his sleep, then the dream turned into a fake vision: of Doyle, probably about how he died. Angel shouted out Doyle’s name, over and over, pleading. The drawings were confused, just snatched details, impossible to tell what was happening, except that there was a man in pain, and a spine-faced demon snarling.

“He took on the demon, right? That’s how he saved Angel’s life?”

Wesley shook his head. “That’s a Brachen demon. Doyle was half-Brachen. That must be him. Maybe he always fought like that. I don’t know.”

Angel stopped shouting quite quickly (maybe ten minutes?), and then he huddled and shivered and muttered. Sometimes he cried out, but just a few words at a time. Doyle’s name must have been Francis; Wesley hadn’t known that.

Angel was still stuck in his vision when they left for the meeting, but was asleep on the floor when they got back. He woke lucid around ten, when Gunn and Wesley were sitting on the floor around the coffee table, drinking beer and playing a game about naming movies and cities and songs and food.

Angel looked exhausted. He was propped against the wall near his corner, head bowed, facing away from the door. He looked around and up when Wesley went in, but then let his head roll back almost immediately, with gravity doing all the work.

“Angel? Can I talk to you?” Wesley had crossed the room and was kneeling a few feet from Angel. The head turned again, slowly, then nodded. “I wanted to thank you for the drawings. You put a lot of care and thought into them.”

A long pause, then: “I thought you hated them. I thought it was worse.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t look at them immediately. But we were very busy this morning. You’d gone to sleep by the time I was able to look at them or I would have thanked you sooner.”

“This morning? No.” Shaking his head. “It was much longer. I don’t... What are the drawings?”

“Some drawings of me, that you must have made last night. You’ve been asleep for most of today, and dreaming. That may be why it seems longer. You have vivid dreams.”

Another long pause. “You liked them?”

“Yes, very much. No one has ever done that for me before.”

Angel sat up away from the wall, exhaustion suddenly gone. He reached out towards Wesley’s arm, though Gunn couldn’t see if he touched. “Will you stay?”

“I can stay and read. For a while. Is there anything you’d particularly like to read?” Angel nodded and pointed, and Wesley went to get the book and then sat down next to Angel – right next to him, closer than usual – and Gunn moved away from the door and lay on the couch and read the paper.

When Wesley got up to leave, Angel got to his feet too, which was unusual. He walked with Wesley to the door, not like he was showing him out, but like he couldn’t bear yet for him to leave. To Gunn it was obvious: the angle of his head, the tension in his arm, the way he kept looking Wesley up and down – he needed to put his arms around Wesley. And Wesley realised; he was being too brisk, too oblivious, almost like this was the end of a meeting with a client. He’d been like that with Gunn, after the Mexican meal.

“Go ahead, Wes. It’s OK.” Gunn didn’t raise his voice, spoke like Wesley was sitting next to him, and for a few seconds he wondered if Wesley had heard. But then Wesley turned to face Angel and stepped forward, and Gunn looked away from the screen. He heard Angel sigh, then murmurings from each: questions, and discouraging answers. Ten seconds, twenty at most, and then Wesley was closing and locking the door.

“Did he say why he’d been such an asshole yesterday? Did he know?”

“Not really. I think... he thought I wouldn’t mind. That he’d made jokes like that before and I’d joined in. But he shouldn’t forget now.”

Wesley wanted music, put on one of his classical CDs, but just at background level; Gunn had heard it before and liked it, but not enough to ask what it was. When Wesley finally sat down – after clearing away beer bottles, emptying the dishwasher, tidying the kitchen and fetching more beer – Gunn said, “Does he still have those dreams? About waking up with you next to him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not recently. He still knows he had them. But of course he couldn’t tell you when.”

“Was he confused by me being here? Obviously knowing?”

Wesley shook his head. “Didn’t seem to notice.” He closed his head and leaned his head back.

“You’re tired?”

A long sigh. Wesley opened his eyes and looked down at his beer. “It’s hard work. Not knowing who he’ll be next. I suppose afterwards it seems obvious but...” Eyes closed again. “I never seem to learn what to expect and it can’t be good for him when I let myself be surprised.”

Gunn put his hand on Wesley’s wrist, fingertips just touching the bottle. “You know you just have to say. You need to get away. San Diego. Wherever. Any time. This weekend coming?”

A pause, then Wesley looked at Gunn, very serious, and then he smiled and shook his head. “It’s just tonight. Because of this weekend. If he’s easier by tomorrow then by next weekend I’ll be complaining that he’s so predictable. About having to have the same conversation with him ten times.”

* * * * *

On Tuesday Gunn started to think about what he’d do on Thursday evening, when he’d promised he’d get out of the apartment so Angel could have his “physical contact”. Grouw and Piriti had said on Saturday that they probably wouldn’t be going to Caritas, not for a while – didn’t want to deal with the questions, for one thing. Gunn called Grouw on Tuesday to check and it was definite, but they were digging on Saturday, or meeting at the nest anyway, and then digging if they couldn’t agree on something else to do.

Gunn didn’t want to go to Caritas on his own. He wanted company – people rubbin’ off each other, talking shit for two, three hours. The crew. Maybe the crew and a movie. He’d call, see who was up for “Planet of the Apes”.

They’d already done “Planet of the Apes”, but George said he’d ask around about “Rush Hour 2” or “Akira”, and when Gunn turned up at the base on Thursday, the group had settled at six people, and on “Akira”. Over Mexican in Jefferson afterwards, they decided on “Rush Hour 2” for next Thursday.

Seemed like it was Gunn's week for being told other people's decisions. He turned up at the nest with suggestions ready for finding a video arcade, or going exploring in some of the tunnels, maybe finding somewhere down there that would be a new place indoors for them to hang out. But Grouw and Piriti were doing a tour that evening – their first together, and they knew it might be their last – so now they didn't want to do anything new, just stick with the routine and slowly psych themselves up.

Piriti had found their customer on Thursday night, when he'd actually been out working on closing down the business by taking leaflets out of the hotels; he hadn't told Grouw that he was going to do that, but apparently neither of them had a problem with that now.

“So I came out of the Marina Hotel – at Torrance and Victor – and I dumped the leaflets in the nearest trash bin. He saw me do it, wondered why I was so down – he's an empath demon, said he'd seen that about me a block away – and he took one out of the trash to see, thought it might be we'd had to cancel a gig or something. Read what he needed in a few seconds and he caught up with me just before I got to the Wilderness Hotel. It's him and this human friend of his. Hank. In town for a couple of weeks lookin' to set up a new business. Dunno what sort yet.” Piriti laughed. “They want a tour that's half the Chachaspe one and half the Hull one. He'd got one of the Chachaspe leaflets, but then he was asking about the human driver, so I told him about the whole setup. He called Hank and then we called Grouw, and we booked it right there. Should be fun.”

“That's cool.” Gunn grinned. “So when's Grouw's night for trashing your leaflets?”

The demons both laughed, then shook their heads, and Piriti said, “We'll see how it goes tonight.”

When they took a break for soda and donuts, Gunn said, “Y' know, Wesley was trying to save an empath demon when he had the fight with the Kungai. The fight where he lost his arm. The Kungai was after the demon's empath powers. Going to steal them. Wesley'd tracked them both from San Antonio. He thinks the empath got away. Looked like the Kungai was still on the hunt when it attacked Wesley. And Angel killed it and saved Wesley, so...” He shrugged.

The boys were shocked and impressed, asked more about Wesley and Angel, then wondered how many empath demons there were, what were the chances that Barney knew the demon that Wesley and Angel had saved.

Barney was the exact same demon that Wesley and Angel had saved. Piriti had wanted to call as soon as they found out, but that would have been weird and kinda rude in the middle of the tour, and it was past two when they finished; he knew it was still too early when he did call (8.30 on Sunday morning), but he just couldn't wait and he knew Wesley would want to know. Well, it was early if you didn't have a training routine: Gunn and Wesley were having breakfast in a diner in Venice. Gunn passed the phone to Wesley and heard Piriti tell the story again to Wesley, in exactly the same way.

Wesley was uncomfortable, though Piriti probably thought he was just being English. He didn't say much beyond, “Goodness. That is a remarkable coincidence,” and, “Well, that's very thoughtful of him. Yes, I'll remember that for when he calls.”

Gunn waited until they had refills of coffee before he said, “What's he wanna do? The empath demon?”

“Take me out for a meal.” Wesley shook his head. “I don't want to talk about what happened. I'm glad for him. Of course. But I don't want to hear... what he saw. Of what happened.”

Gunn was definite. “He won't. Empath demon, he'll pick that up 'fore you've even parked the car. You c'n talk about the boys, the tours. Caritas. Y'know. Grouw's sister 'n' the duals... Course he can't leave town without thankin' you, can he?”

“I know. But I don't need it. That's not why I...” A shrug, and he'd suddenly accepted. “I've never met an empath demon. I wonder what I'd ask. Piriti found him good company, anyway. He said that, if that was the last tour, then it was the perfect one to end with.” Just what Grouw had been hoping for. Thank you, Barney.

Barney called about two hours later. He was leaving L.A. on Wednesday. Was Wesley free on any of the evenings before then? Wesley checked with Gunn and agreed on that evening, and suggested a mid-range restaurant that he'd heard about through the survey.

He wore his suit, and he looked so controlled, so English. And yes, he was, but there was more, and had anyone but Gunn ever worked out how much more? Gunn helped him with his tie, enjoying all the details of smoothing him down, while getting half-hard from thoughts of mussing him up; he loved the feel of Wesley in a fresh shirt, just loved it.

Wesley and Barney did talk about the boys and the tours and Caritas, but mostly they talked about the survey. Piriti had mentioned the survey to Barney, along with the committees and all of the meetings. Barney was fascinated by the organisation, how Wesley had got L.A.'s demons to co-operate, and then by all the politics with the review board, how Wesley's designs (and Gunn's) were working out in practice. He was interested for practical reasons since an important part of his business involved selling a line of specially-processed shellfish products to Kekulei demons, and it would be a big help to know the likely market and the best locations. He didn't have time on this visit to make the application to the review board, so for now he was just hoping for some tips on how the board worked so he could avoid making a stupid mistake when the time came. Wesley was happy to explain, and the more Barney heard, the more he wanted to know, now just out of curiosity – which was a big thing with him, the reason he'd followed Piriti and then booked the tour.

Of course Wesley offered to help Barney with the application for the board, but then when he got home he decided he might as well spare Barney that extra trip from New Orleans. He got the information about Kekulei demons from the database, broken down by district, indications of income, mode of transport, and internet use, and added a note to the printout saying what he'd picked up in passing about favourite hangouts (for food, sports, grooming, worship...), and what Kekulei demons were likely to read. He dropped the information off at Barney's hotel the next day, just leaving it at the desk and not asking if Barney was in; Wesley already knew how Barney expressed thanks (at exactly the right time, in exactly the right amount), and it was enough for Wesley to imagine.

* * * * *

Late on Thursday morning, while Wesley was in talking to Angel, Gunn took a call for Wyndham Gunn from Swift, one of the community leaders on the review board. She needed someone who could deal easily with any type of human, to help investigate the murders of a family of Kekulei demons (parents and eldest daughter). The bodies had been found in a storm-drain in Burbank, and the three had last been seen alive leaving a church in Hollywood Hills on Monday night, eight miles away. They had all been bound hand and foot, and their throats had been cut lengthwise and the spiral larynx had been removed from each of them – not as a trophy, Swift thought, but as the entire object of the murders. The larynx of the Kekulei demon, if held suspended and played with ice-cold air, produced sounds that could make an emotion condense out of the air, so it could be collected and transported and used as a weapon. With one larynx only, the playing required great skill to produce the required emotion, but if more larynxes were added – and especially if their tones were related – then the necessary level of skill dropped sharply.

Swift wanted Gunn and Wesley to speak to any humans they knew who might have heard any talk (no matter how vague), about Kekulei demons or about strange musical instruments or about artificial emotions. Or about hiring a van or parking a van or anything at all about a van, because the murderers must have had some way of getting the three Kekulei demons out of sight in less than a minute.

Wesley had put Barney's card in the index box on his desk; Gunn would have known it was there even if he hadn't watched Wesley emptying his pockets on Sunday night. Gunn dialled the number, and the number did not exist. He tried again, but no, he had dialled it properly the first time. He had to tell Wesley. Now. Wesley wouldn't want to be left talking about dreams with Angel while this was happening out in the world.

“Wes? You need to come here. There's something... You need to come here.”

Wesley came out prepared for bad news, but not nearly prepared enough. He clutched at his throat, seemed to be struggling to breathe, and his voice was thin, hardly recognisable, when he asked which church. Gunn told the story quickly, and then found nothing, nothing to say, hardly anything to think except, “No. Please, no.” Wesley had closed his eyes after Gunn had nodded towards the index box, and when Gunn finished speaking they were still closed, and the shudders were getting more violent and more random.

Wouldn't be enough just to step forward and hold him, probably close him in worse with his hand still up at his throat and his lungs working like he was trying to breath concrete. But get behind him, hold him from behind... Be able to help him breathe. Be like... supporting him from the inside. Reminding him of what he already knew about how to get through this.

Gunn had reached Wesley's side, was turning, about to reach out, when Wesley suddenly moved away, almost at a run, for the desk. Gunn heard him pull another card from the index box, and then he was dialing.

"Swift, it's Wesley Wyndham-Pryce." His voice sounded normal. Urgent, but normal. "Yes, I think I know who did it. There's an empath demon who calls himself Barney. He was staying in Hawthorne, at the Ocean Hotel on Rosencrans and Ramona. That was on Monday." A pause. "Yes, very little chance, I know. But in case we do get a lead there, can we be ready to –" Another pause. "I think he has at least one accomplice. The one I know of is human. So, yes, as many as you can. A block away? The street behind the hotel? Charles and I can bring a net. And restraints." Gunn was heading for the chest in the closet. "Yes, and a range of weapons. Twenty minutes." A brief pause and then Wesley's voice was suddenly thin again, terrible. "No. No. You don't – I'll... I'll... When there's time." A deep, shuddering breath, and then he was in charge again. "Twenty minutes. As many as you can."

Wesley and Gunn were the ones who went in to ask for Barney at the desk, with Gunn carrying the crossbow and their swords in a sportsbag. The six demons (three of them Kekulei demons) waited around the corner.

Barney had checked out on Monday, though he'd been booked in for another week. Before midday he'd gone, maybe an hour after he'd got Wesley's envelope. Come down and said he was checking out, and his human friend already out there in the van, waiting to pick him up. (A blue cargo van. Maybe a Ford. Maybe a Chevy.) No mention of where he was going. The address in the register was the same as the one on the card. The room had been cleaned several times since Monday, there was a couple of Hmba sisters in it right now – and what the hell was this, anyway? Wesley stepped out into the street and called for the demons, and Swift did most of the talking after that.

They searched the room, looked under everything, behind everything, took the notepad, the magazine, the pack of brochures, in case there was something tucked away, some impression made of a message taken, a number.

Nothing.

On the stairs on the way down to the lobby, Swift said to Wesley, "Who told you about this empath demon? Take us to him and we'll see what else he knows."

Wesley's voice was perfectly steady, clear enough to reach Gunn at the very back of the group, two flights up. "No one told me. I already knew. I was the person who told the empath whereabouts in L.A. he could find Kekulei demons."

A frozen silence for maybe three seconds, with Gunn trying to push past down the stairs, desperate to get to Wesley. Then a roar, and a rush that knocked Gunn off his feet, and Wesley was crushed against the wall on the next landing, being promised death in four different languages. Gunn scrambled for his bag and hauled out his sword, and prayed that he could take down three of them while he had the advantage of surprise. And would Wesley even fight? Was he on his own?

"Wait!" Swift, from just around the corner, out of Gunn's sight. "We have to ask him. While he can still talk." They backed off, leaving just Swift with a hold on his arm and a Kekulei demon holding fast on his shoulder.

Gunn was still up on the stairs, still poised to jump down swinging, and he could see Wesley now, over their heads. Wesley was crying. Not noisy, not pleading, not out of fear. But quiet, hopeless. Heartbroken.

Unbearable. And Gunn could do nothing. He could do nothing. He couldn't change what Wesley had done.

"So why? Why did you tell him?"

"He'd heard about the survey. He invited me out for a meal on Sunday night. He said that he was going to open a business in L.A. With Kekulei demons as the main customers. And he'd be back in L.A. in a month, to start the process of applying to the review board. He asked me about the board, what he should expect. He didn't ask me if I had a copy of the database, if I could give him the information directly. But when I got home I printed it out. And I added what I'd heard about the main meeting-places, including churches. And I gave addresses, including the one in Hollywood Hills. I brought the list here on Monday morning and I left it at the desk."

Another eruption. The Kekulei demon had dug his claws under Wesley's padding, and had dragged it – with the shirt – half-off Wesley's shoulder. Wesley didn't seem to notice, had his eyes fixed on Swift.

“For a meal? You came with all those speeches about procedures and safeguards, and all the time you’ll sell it for a meal?”

Now Wesley reacted, shaking his head. “No. No. I thought he was safe. I think... I think... Because I’d helped him before.”

“Before? To find Kekulei demons? When? What have you done?”

Gunn took a step down the stairs. “Wesley saved his life two years ago. When he was being hunted by a Kungai. The Kungai took Wesley’s arm and Wesley nearly died. But the empath got away. The meal was to thank Wesley. That’s what he said. They’d never even met when Wesley was tracking the Kungai. But he... He’s an empath. I think he said all the right things to make Wesley feel like he knew him. Like they really had a history.”

The demons looked at one another, then one of the Kekulei demons said slowly, “Are we sure it’s him? That he’s the one who did it?”

The Kekulei demon at Wesley’s shoulder shrugged, then stepped back and let go. “The van. The way he took off after seeing the list. All the lies. You know empaths. You know how they operate. This one smells of hunter. He’s done this before. Maybe he tried to do it to that Kungai.”

The others nodded, and Swift released her hold on Wesley’s arm. “So we start looking for an empath demon. Get a description from him.” A nod towards Wesley. “And carry on looking for the empath’s customer or any sign that he’s using the larynxes himself.”

Gunn said, “We can do that. On the human side. Like you asked before.”

They looked at him. After a couple of seconds Swift (and only Swift) took a glance at Wesley, and then she said to Gunn, “Yes. Do that. But first you drive home and we’ll follow with him. I want to see where you live before I let you go.”

“Wes?” Gunn could see Swift’s point, but this wasn’t a decision he could make. Not when it might involve Angel.

“You can see us to the door of the apartment. You can see us open it but you can’t come inside.”

A pause, then she nodded, not looking at Wesley, and led the way down to the lobby. They put Wesley in the back seat of Swift’s car, with the largest Kekulei demon guarding him, and they had another Kekulei demon in with Gunn. Gunn’s ride was in complete silence, and from what he could see in the rearview, so was Wesley’s.

Angel was lying quietly on the mattress, made no sound even at the new voices, and you couldn’t see the monitor from the corridor. The demons didn’t try to enter the apartment: one look at the desk and the bookcases and anyone could see that this was where Wesley lived. They left almost immediately, after Swift had given Gunn orders to call in at midnight to report what he and Wesley had done and what they were planning to do next.

Wesley and Gunn started by looking in Wesley’s books for descriptions of the spell for capturing emotions, in case there were any details that might give them more leads. They found three descriptions, all much the same, all with illustrations of a larynx held in the middle of a cage, and the first with an illustration of Kekulei demon. Wesley started crying again as he read the first description, but it was almost like he didn’t know that he was doing it: he just went on talking through it, making notes, having ideas.

One idea was to call Lilah Morgan – because if the empath demon did have a customer, it would have to be someone very, very rich – and Wesley did that next and left such a brief, controlled message on her voice-mail that she’d think it was just another case.

They needed descriptions of Barney and Hank (yes, they’d call them that, until they knew better). Wesley found a good picture of an empath demon and made copies. He couldn’t say much about Barney except how he’d dressed (aggressively casual, but maybe that was just another lie, shrugged off minutes later). Gunn called Grouw and asked for a description of Hank, anything he or Barney might have said about places they knew, things they did. “Tell you later, OK?” And he’d have to. He’d have to tell Piriti, too. Tomorrow. Or... Or... After they’d found Barney, once they knew who he really was.

They agreed that Wesley would take the bookstores and the magic-users, Gunn would take the internet and the street, they'd share out any others as they thought of them, and they'd call in every hour.

Gunn found nothing, and not many people who'd care, either. He soon stopped mentioning the murders, asked mostly about Hank and the van, and about things from the spell. He would probably have checked with the crew anyway, but having to drop out of the movie trip moved them a few places up his list; they assumed he was working on one of Angel's tip-offs and wanted to be in on the fight, but Gunn said it had to be small this time, really low-key.

Wesley did better with his bookstores, discovering that Barney was a regular in L.A., seemed to come about once a year, which meant he might come back. He'd bought one book this time, on Tuesday last week: a 1983 Radnor, for \$45 cash. It was a solid general reference, Wesley had twenty like it. Barney had known what he was looking for, had seemed pleased to find it, but didn't want to go on the mailing list, didn't want help or suggestions. No one could remember exactly what he'd bought in other years, but they agreed that he acted like a professional, on a routine check for something new or improved to make his life easier. The stores said they'd look through their sales records, get back to Wesley if they remembered what Barney had bought. They hadn't heard anything about Kekulei demons or about the spell.

Wesley got the idea of talking to their competitors in the demon-expert business, and he and Gunn met back at the apartment to look up names and numbers. And what about some of the weirdos that they'd met through cases and visions? Like those demon-worshipping twins. Anyone who saw demons as an "opportunity", they should put on their list.

They finished making the calls around eight. They'd talked to about half of the names on their list (got nothing), and for the others Gunn would keep trying the no-answers, and they'd follow up the messages in the morning. It was late enough now for Wesley to start making his visits to the magic-users, but Gunn had ordered Chinese and he made Wesley wait until it arrived and then got him to eat – not much but something. They hadn't talked yet about what had happened, or not about their part in it. Maybe if they found enough new calls to make, new people to see, they still wouldn't have talked a week from now.

Gunn spent the evening searching online, harder and stranger than he'd ever searched before. Angel was unsettled, probably just from the tone of their voices, because how would he make sense of the words? "Church", "family", "van", "hotel". They only made sense in the world beyond the window, which didn't exist for Angel. He'd have nightmares later, Gunn was sure, with a strong chance he'd wake up as Angelus.

Wesley called in near midnight, when he got done with the first magic-user (the same guy who'd helped them with the zombie cops). He'd found nothing directly about Barney or the Kekulei demons, but maybe something about the Kungai: a rumour from a year or more back, about someone killed by a stab from a Kungai's Tak horn, with the body just collapsed like nothing but a Tak horn could do, and with no Kungai within a thousand miles. When Wesley had been tracking the Kungai, he'd been following a trail of mutilations across three states. Now it was looking like that was all Barney's work, starting with the Kungai. Wesley had made a list of the mutilations, with places and dates, and he read it out and Gunn copied it all down.

Wesley had three more magic-users to visit, and he didn't know when he would be home. He wouldn't call in again, or not unless he needed Gunn's help. Gunn called Swift exactly at midnight and told her about the bookstores and the (possible) trail of mutilations, and she said that she had put together a similar picture, also by following the clue of the Kungai. The empath didn't normally hunt in L.A., they were fairly sure. So when he came to L.A. it was for another reason. If they could work out the reason, that might be one way to find him. Another would be to look outside L.A. for the signs of his hunting, try to follow his path backwards. They'd already started to send the word out, but Wesley's list would help.

Swift wasn't exactly friendly (and who would be, when running a murder investigation?), but she wasn't angry either; she treated Gunn like a person, with information and opinions going both ways. They arranged that Gunn would call in at six the next evening, and Swift was about to hang up when Gunn said quickly, "C'n I ask you something? How many people know now what Wesley did? Where we live. What're we lookin' at in terms of payback?"

A brief pause, then: "What he did... We'll tell anyone who asks. Or needs to know. And then tell them that he came to us as soon as he knew. We could have made the same mistake with the review board, if the empath ever really was planning on making that application. No one's thinking of payback."

"What about the Kekulei demons? They gotta want someone."

“They want the people who did it.”

“Yeah, but if you don’t find ‘em...? Wesley’d be next, right?”

A sigh that sounded like agreement. “We’ll try to get them... I’ll warn you. If the mood starts to change, I’ll call you and I’ll warn you that you should get out of town. And I’ll tell you when it’s safe to come back.”

Wesley didn’t come home that night, and he didn’t call in. He’d made it very clear to Gunn the last time that magic-users were precious little pricks who’d take any excuse to get offended – like a visitor taking a phone call from a boyfriend who was still worried about Kekulei demons and payback. Yeah, Swift had meant what she said, she would warn Gunn, but Gunn knew it would only take one Kekulei going after Wesley, just one who hadn’t read the memo, hadn’t got with Swift’s program.

But Wesley would have told the magic-user that this was about murder. Cold-blooded, planned, probably for money. You let up on your dignity when life got real, didn’t you? So if Wesley’s boyfriend got worried enough to have to call... Just one call, with maybe ten words. You’d understand, wouldn’t you? You wouldn’t get so offended you’d tell Wesley to leave. But they might be in the middle of a spell. Five seconds from getting a fix on Barney. Needing total concentration. And maybe no second chance.

Gunn held out until nearly four, and then he decided that it couldn’t, it just couldn’t, take four hours to ask three magic-users a few simple questions about Tak horns and emotions in bottles. Something else had happened to Wesley, and Gunn had to know where he was.

Wesley’s phone was switched off. Which had to mean a spell, right? And those could take hours. So... OK. Probably he was OK. Nothing Gunn could do, except try again in an hour. Should get some sleep: might be his last chance in days. Angel was quiet now, or quiet enough to sleep through. Angelus had been and gone, and he’d been easy to ignore this time; no different, but suddenly irrelevant.

Gunn left the lights on and the door to the bedroom half-open, and lay down on the bed with just his shoes kicked-off. He closed his eyes and he saw the demons surging down the stairs towards Wesley. And he tried to think “stupid”, and “brave”, and “honourable” and he tried not to think “suicidal”.

He’d call Grouw at midday – Oh, God, training in the evening. They’d have to cancel, too dangerous with them both so strung out. Could Grouw get a message to his sister in time? Or Gunn could just meet the duals at the portal and drive them straight to a bar.

But Grouw and Piriti? He’d tell them tomorrow before they heard it somewhere else. Tell them what Swift had said about payback: that Wesley would be OK. A mistake. A mistake that anyone could have made.

* * * * *

When he woke it was past nine and Wesley still wasn’t back. Angel was awake and deep in hell – first time in months, so those were some vibes he’d picked up – and he didn’t know Gunn at all, trembled all the time he was drinking, the beaker knocking against his teeth.

Gunn made coffee for two, and his search for breakfast found only the fortune cookies from last night. He threw the papers away without reading them, not in any mood to play the game of looking for good news, matching up silly hints with silly hopes. There was nothing to hope for here. Not really. Yeah, they might find Barney, put a stop to his hunting, but this wasn’t a mistake that could be put right. Whatever the fortunes might have to say, they were too late by nearly a week.

And never mind the fortune cookies, what about a vision? What sort of “Powers” would know about the Kungai and miss out on Barney? Just one drawing of Barney with a knife. Or not even a drawing: Angelus saying “The empath demon. He’s killing them! He’s cutting their throats.” Any time before Sunday evening, and that would have been enough.

But the Powers didn’t save demons. And look at Angel, at what serving them had done to Angel. They didn’t care. They saved Wesley and so he was theirs, and that was all they’d ever thought about him.

Gunn called Grouw, arranged to meet him during his lunch-break, and got the number of Piriti's pager. Grouw should be able to send a message to his sister over lunch, but he couldn't guarantee that she'd get it in time to pass it on.

Wesley called at ten, on his way to a meeting with Lilah Morgan. He'd shown the list of mutilations to the other magic-users and got more rumours, all pointing to the idea of some rich customer, maybe rich enough to leave no trace of himself in the real world. Would Lilah give up a client? One way to find out.

"So you were talkin' rumours all night? These guys know when you usually sleep?"

"Ellison gave me – I don't know. There was... time."

Jeez, he sounded like Angel. "Wes. I think you're too tired to be driving." Or too stoned. "Where are you?"

"No. No, I don't need to sleep. I'm not tired. I've got a meeting."

"Well. Be careful. You know you can leave the car at the library. Get a cab home. You're comin' home after, right?"

Wesley didn't know. Lilah might give him some new leads. They couldn't wait. They couldn't give Barney more time.

"Wes. You have to allow some room. Remember the dumpster?" No reply, and Gunn sighed to himself and closed his eyes for a few seconds. Then he shrugged and: "I've cancelled the training for this evening. Asked Grouw to get a message to the duals."

"Oh. Yes. Yes, they wouldn't – Of course." Slurred, vague, like he was only half-there. He shouldn't be driving. He definitely shouldn't be talking. Gunn got off the line in just a few words, then went straight down to the truck and drove to the library. He'd planned on staking out the corridor outside the study carrels, but he got lucky and found Wesley's car while he was looking for somewhere to park; and he sat in the driver's seat and used the time to follow up the no-answers and left-messages from the day before.

Piriti returned Gunn's page at around eleven, and Gunn arranged to pick him up at a quarter of one, and they'd meet Grouw near his work, and Gunn would tell them both some bad news. No, not about Matt. No, no, he wouldn't be able to help them with the tours now, but that wasn't it. No, he couldn't say now, but it was bad.

Wesley didn't see Gunn waiting in the car. Looked like it was taking Wesley all of his concentration just to deal with his keys. When Gunn opened the door, Wesley cried out – in fear, open fear – and jumped back, slamming into the next car and dropping his keys.

"Charles! Charles. You were at home. What are you doing?"

Gunn was picking up the keys and using them to lock the car. "I'm taking you home. If you'd heard yourself on the phone... You're not fit to drive." He put his hand on Wesley's arm and started leading him towards the truck. Wesley resisted, not fighting Gunn exactly, but acting desperate to get back to the car.

"No. I have to – I can't –"

Gunn got very firm, controlled him with an arm around his waist that kept Wesley's arm clamped between their bodies. "You need to see a mirror. You're going home. Christ, didn't Lilah offer to call you a cab? Didn't she say anything?"

"She said... she doesn't know." Wesley was hardly struggling at all now. Given up, or distracted.

"Hadn't even heard the rumours?" Wesley shook his head. "So you rest now, Wes. Need you thinking straight. That's what's important now: get you ready to work out our next lead."

Wesley let Gunn lead him into the bedroom, let Gunn undress him and take his glasses off, and ease him under the covers. He was shutting down, withdrawing somewhere; he'd be asleep in minutes.

"Have you eaten? I mean real food." A shake of the head, eyes half-closed. "I'll get you... Will you drink a glass of milk?" A pause, then a grunt that wasn't a no. Gunn thought Wesley would probably be asleep when he got back from the kitchen, but he'd stayed awake and he pushed himself up to sitting when Gunn told him to – very slowly, all very slowly – and he took the glass and he drank.

Three mouthfuls, with his eyes drifting shut again, then suddenly: “Angel!” Urgent, panicked, thrusting the glass at Gunn and scrabbling to get out of bed.

Gunn pushed him back with a hand on his shoulder. “Angel’s fine. I fed him this morning, same as usual. There’s nothing to worry about. Here. You just need to finish this.” He put the glass in Wesley’s hand.

“What did you tell him?” Apprehensive. Making no move to drink.

“He was in hell, Wes. I told him to drink.”

“That’s –” A ragged sigh. “He never questioned about the Kungai. What had happened. He just accepted what I told him.”

At the beginning. Wesley was back at the beginning. “What he’ d seen. Same as you did.”

“But he knew I couldn’t be – He’ d seen what I – He felt sorry for me. He shouldn’t have felt sorry for me. He should have made me...”

“Wes. Don’t do this. You think he’d blame you if he knew? Barney... Barney’s been doin’ this for a long time. He gets away with it because... he knows that normal people can’t imagine what he does. How he thinks. Must’ve got away with it with hundreds of people. Until now. Until you. When you put your life on the line to stop him. That’s what Angel would see. If he knew.”

But Wesley was just shaking his head. He pushed the glass towards Gunn’s hand. “I don’t want this.”

Gunn put the glass on the nightstand then took Wesley’s hand. “Will you sleep? You look – You’d scare Angelus.” No, Angelus would just want to fuck him. Drink him and fuck him. But he’ d scare Angel and he scared Gunn.

The stubble. How did it make him look so tough and so breakable, both at the same time? Gunn had never worked it out, not in a year, it still grabbed him, the same as that first morning. And now... There was something in Wesley’s eyes that reminded Gunn of Angel, how Angel always looked when he woke in the gag and chains. The despair, the pleading. Trapped, with no possible place to run. But Angel would be frantic with fear while Wesley... Wesley was somewhere even worse, held in pure pain.

“I –” Wesley swallowed. “What will you do?”

“I’m still makin’ the calls. When that’s done I’ll try the streets again. See how it looks now we know more.”

Wesley was nodding. “Swift. What have they found? Would she tell you?”

Gunn gave Wesley most of his conversation with Swift, not including his question at the end about payback. Wesley was calming down, forgetting Angel, and after a certain point his exhaustion seemed to fall on him: his eyes started to flutter closed, and by the end of Gunn’s next sentence he was asleep, still sitting up from when he’d been drinking. Gunn half-lifted him, got him lying flat, then bent over him and kissed him, then, against his cheek, in a whisper: “We’ll get through this. You’ll see. No one’ll blame you, no one who knows.”

Grouw was waiting outside the garage, and he’ d already sent the message to his sister. Gunn drove to a quiet street, parked, and then turned in his seat and went straight in and told them, starting with the meal and Barney asking about the survey. They were puzzled, listening with a “yeah, so?” look, and then Gunn got to the call from Swift. Piriti started to gag when Gunn was describing the spell, and Grouw got the door open in time and hauled him out so he threw up into the street. Gunn got water and a cloth, expecting that Piriti would need minutes to recover, but he just rinsed his mouth out once, looked up at Gunn, and said, “Why? For... Power?”

“For money. Or that’s how it looks.” Gunn told them about the bookstores and the Tak horn and the trail of mutilations, and then Grouw asked how Gunn had told Swift all this without telling her everything about Wesley, and Gunn was back to Thursday morning. He told the rest right through, and with just the fact and none of the feelings, it was much quicker than he’ d thought – because they’d found almost nothing.

Piriti said he'd call Swift, tell her about the tour. He borrowed Gunn's phone, and Swift told him to come to her office immediately, so Gunn started the truck.

"You told her like it was just you. We should both go."

Piriti shook his head. "You have work. I'll give her your number if she asks for it. You know I talked to him more."

Piriti said he'd get a cab home, no need for Gunn to come back for him. Swift's address was about five miles from where Grouw worked. Silence for the first mile, then Grouw said, "Why'd he do it? Wesley. Give the empath all that. I know he bent the rules for us, when we were starting the tours, but... When they were his rules?"

Gunn sighed. "I don't know. He's – I can't ask him yet. But... When you've saved someone. Lost as much as he did to do it. You – I guess he had this picture in his mind of who he'd saved. How the guy'd been worth it. Maybe Barney picked up on that. Played to it. He sure played it right. Wes told me what he was doing. When he got home and went to the computer. He told me all about the meal. And I never said, 'Woah! This guy's workin' a con. He's set you up for this.' Because I didn't think it. He sounded... like a regular guy."

Grouw nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah. That's how he acted. With us. Is it –" He swallowed. "What's worse? If he's a monster who knows how to fake it? When he needs to fool people. Or if he is a regular guy? Who can still do these things and... shrug them off like it doesn't matter."

"Oh, man. It's all bad."

Silence again, until they got to the garage. Grouw was about to open the door, then paused and turned to look at Gunn. "How's Wesley? How's he dealing?"

Gunn just shook his head, over and over.

"I'm sorry."

Gunn set his jaw, gave a fraction of a shrug. "Mistake. s'a mistake."

Grouw nodded, then left without looking back.

* * * * *

Gunn wanted to get back to Wesley. He needed to get into their bed, press himself along Wesley's back – like he'd been about to, a day ago now – and hold Wesley tight. If he held him right, he'd be able to make things better. He'd smooth down Wesley's pain. The worst of it, the sharpest edges. Breathe it into himself and make it melt away into nothing. And when Wesley woke up (gradually, peacefully), and then turned in Gunn's arms to see him, that look would be gone. Just normal guilt, normal grief. Not that terrible despair.

But he'd told Wesley he'd be checking the streets again. Asking about the Tak horn and the other mutilations. And he should because there was a chance. He didn't need to sleep. Yes, half his thoughts were about wanting to hold Wesley, but that still left him enough that he could work. Holding Wesley would have to wait.

Gunn was home by four; taken a third the time of yesterday, because no one had anything new to say. Wesley was having a nightmare, as bad as one of Angel's, and Angel was huddled in his corner, curled tight, with his arms wrapped around his head trying to hide from the sounds.

Wesley let out a cry like a scream when Gunn was waking him, and then lay gasping, looking shocked and exhausted. But he recovered quite quickly, especially once he had his hand on Gunn's arm, holding tight, steadying. He looked better. "I was dreaming..." He swallowed and sighed. "Charles. You're dressed already? What time is it?"

"Around four. I just got in. You don't have to get up, just tell me when you'll want dinner. What you'd like."

Wesley wasn't recovered, he'd just forgotten what had happened; for those first few seconds he'd thought it was a normal day. Gunn saw the memories slam into him, and then Wesley was pushing Gunn away and hurrying to get out of bed.

Gunn got him to shower and shave, and he made tea while Wesley was getting washed and dressed. Wesley sat at his desk and Gunn on the arm of the couch, and they talked over what they could do next. Wesley thought Hank might live in L.A.; he definitely hadn't been on the trail with the Kungai, so maybe he was just Barney's contact for whatever kept bringing him to L.A. Not much to go on, though, apart from "blue van". And the best chance of finding him would be if some demon had seen him, and Swift was handling the demon side of the investigation so there was nothing for Gunn or Wesley to do. Also, apart from the bookstores, they'd seen no sign of Barney having dealings with humans, so, again, all the leads they might try next were really with Swift. All they could probably do was look for ideas and pass them on. Wesley would research the different demons who'd been mutilated, see if he could find any patterns, and Gunn would look for any mention of them online: if he knew how the attacks had been reported, then he might be able to recognise others.

Wesley made more tea and Gunn made them both a sandwich, and then they settled down to work. The urgency was gone now, it felt almost like working on a normal case; they made comments and asked questions in their normal tones, and Wesley was the one who started reading out items that couldn't really be relevant, but were interesting enough to share with Gunn.

There was a scratching sound from Angel's room, right by the door. Gunn looked up and the screen was empty, and Gunn grunted with surprise because he would have taken any bet that Angel was still trembling in the corner.

"Can he – If he could tell me... I don't – But when he... If he could." Very quiet. Almost a whisper. But sounding lucid. His sleep couldn't've been longer than ten, fifteen minutes. Very short.

Gunn stood up and went over to the door. "What's wrong, Angel? Do you need something?"

A long silence, then: "Can I see him?"

Wesley had already come over. "I can't read with you right now, Angel. I'm very busy."

A strange sound, choked, then a burning – for maybe two seconds. "I thought... They had you. I thought... You escaped? I – I know what they do."

Gunn said, "Sounds like you had a bad dream, Angel. But Wesley can't read with you now. I'm sorry."

"No! No, I wasn't – I heard him. They had him."

Wesley's nightmare? Which would mean he'd been lucid the whole time.

"No one did anything to me, Angel. But I can come in for a minute if you do need to see. You have to move away from the door, though. Move back as far as your mattress."

For the first half of the minute Angel just stood and stared at Wesley, then he reached out to touch his hand, then up to touch his face. Very, very brief. Testing. He nodded, trying to smile. "They didn't have you. I didn't hear it. You're busy now."

"Yes. But I'll see you tomorrow. Why don't you read on your own?"

Wesley left the apartment while Gunn was calling Swift. Didn't say where he was going, just took his keys from the bowl and walked out. Gone to the grocery store, Gunn thought, then remembered that Wesley's car was still at the library –and Wesley never drove the truck, didn't have the keys for it in his set. Too late to follow by then, so Gunn took the phone to the window, where he could see the front door. Wesley came out, went over to the truck, and then just stood on the sidewalk next to it. He looked like the kid who always got picked last for the team, standing looking at the ground, trying to pretend that he wasn't even noticing it had happened again. What was he doing? Had he forgotten about the car too? And gotten too embarrassed to come back in and admit it?

Swift agreed that Barney and Hank would probably not be found through their dealings with humans. She would call Gunn if her investigations took a different direction, but she didn't need him to call in any more, not as a matter of routine. "Although... This financial firm... I don't suppose they'd give you an in to Wolfram and Hart? They must move in the same circles."

"Wolfram and Hart? That's the law firm, right?"

“If there’s a customer in L.A., he’d be rich enough to afford them. And has probably done things that mean he needs them.”

So Wolfram and Hart dealt with demons? Knew about them, anyway. It sounded like Gunn should already have known that. “You think they’d help you, if you did have an in? You got somethin’ to offer?”

Swift sighed. “Well... We don’t want their client. Or...” A pause, then definite: “No. Even if the client placed an order, Barney’s the one we want. So if they could persuade their client to give Barney up. But, no, we don’t have anything to offer. Nothing to make them take the risk of even asking the client.”

Gunn said slowly, “I might have an in. I haven’t met the guy but he’s helped a friend a couple of times. I’ll ask her to call him now. Maybe if he has the weekend to think about it...”

Gunn called Anne on his way down to the truck. If he and Wesley left now, they’d have time to pick up Wesley’s car and be ready at the portal in case the message hadn’t got through to the duals. Wesley was still standing by the truck.

“You look like you forgot what you came out for, Wes. You OK to swing by the library ‘n’ get the car?”

During the ride they arranged that Gunn would go to the portal and Wesley would get some dinner in, and then they’d carry on with the research. At the car, when Wesley was about to get out, Gunn said, “Why d’ you go down to the truck back then?”

Wesley shook his head and didn’t meet Gunn’s eyes. “She wouldn’t have wanted me to be there.”

“Eh? Who wouldn’t have wanted you? Where?”

“The demon. When you were talking to her.”

“You left the apartment because I was on the phone to Swift?” A nod. “That’s kind of crazy, Wes. Where’d you get that?”

“I can’t... be with demons. Any demon would have to – If it knew I was – I can’t.”

“Oh, man. That was the heat of the moment in the hotel. There’s no one gonna go after you. I asked her last night. They know they could’ve made the same mistake. And what was she gonna do over the phone, anyway?”

“No. They shouldn’t have to – even think about me, whether I might be there. I can’t be there.”

“Well... OK. I c’n take all our meetings. No problem. Till you see there’s no need for you t’be thinkin’ like that.”

Gunn waited for half an hour and the duals didn’t show. Anne got back to him while he was waiting, said she’d got through to Lindsey at the office. He’d been weird about the demon stuff, sounded like he wanted to deny it completely and say she was crazy, but he’d already put too much into taking her seriously and they both knew it, and he hesitated enough to give her a chance to say something of what she’d seen on the streets, and in the end he’d just said this wasn’t a good time, he had to go into a meeting, he could see she was set on this, but it would have to wait.

Anne was annoyed but not surprised. She’d been disappointed in Lindsey when he’d blown her off over the zombie cops – just given her the same line as the precinct, blaming it on her kids. “God. Now I’m even wondering if he knew what was happening, all along. Just thought... I dunno... that it was OK, all in the name of law and order.” She laughed. “Like they have daily briefings in there on what’s happening in Precinct 87. Yeah, that’s worth their time, that’s what pays for those offices downtown.”

“Well... Y’know. Lawyers. Guess you can’t get through the week without having to cover up for at least one scumbag. No matter where you work or how you started out.” They needed Anne to stay cool with Lindsey, if Lindsey was ever going to help. Disappointed, sure, why not? But not all-out angry.

Wesley had been to Trader Joe’s and got lasagne. Smelled good. Gunn had a beer and ate about three fourths of the dish, and Wesley had water and struggled with each mouthful of food. Gunn let him be, let him give up when he

himself finished his last helping. They talked about lawyers, and innocence, and things you couldn't afford to know, and they left the dishes to soak and they went back to work.

By ten that night there was simply nothing more they could do, and they'd both been agreeing on that for the last half hour. Gunn turned off the computer and went to stand behind Wesley's chair, put his hand on Wesley's shoulder. "Wes? It's been a day and a half now and we haven't talked about it. Not really. You gotta let me help."

Wesley shrugged out from under Gunn's hand and stood up. Looking down at the seat of his chair: "There's nothing to talk about." Then suddenly up at Gunn, eyes hard and fierce: "Everyone knows what I did."

How had Gunn imagined Wesley was going to react, after what he'd been seeing all day? But Wesley didn't have to keep going any more. He could let go. Gunn had to show him he could let go. "You think? So whadda they know?"

Wesley flinched but didn't look away. "That I'd betray them for a meal. I'd betray myself. I was feeding them a lie, right from the start."

"That's bullshit! You got them way past that before we even left the hotel. You made a mistake. Hit the worst kind of bad luck, and made a normal mistake."

Wesley was shaking his head. "I lied. I was scared then. And I lied. Of course I –" He swallowed. "You don't know. You don't know me."

"Oh, you –" A pause. "No, I guess I don't, 'cos I sure as hell don't get why you're lying to me now. You think I'll forget what I saw?"

"You never understood what you saw. I've done things... What I am –" Shaking his head again. "You'd be ashamed you'd ever been seen with me. Ever trusted me."

"Wesley!" Gunn made to grab Wesley's arm, wanting to shake him, but then stopped himself and took a stumbling step back, even before Wesley did. "Wes, don't do this, don't make me do this. Let me – God, what I've been needin' to do since – Let me hold you and – Just let me hold you."

"No." Almost spat out, and Wesley moved back halfway to the door.

Gunn clutched at his head then reached out, unable to stop himself. "Wes... Wes... You any idea what it's like to see you like this? You let me – You let me when Angel hurt you. Oh, man, you have to let go."

Wesley sighed, and most of the tension and hardness went out of him. "Charles. I'm sorry. I know you want to help. But there is no help. There can't be. I can't let you... I can't." Hard again. "I don't want - It."

Not want your boyfriend to hold you when you were hurting? More bullshit. And Gunn would call him on it. But not now, that was as much arguing as Gunn could take for now. Tomorrow. Yeah. He knew how he'd start, with Angel needing to be held, and Wesley practically lying to Gunn so he could give Angel what he needed.

"There anything you do want? Anything I can do?"

A long pause, then a shrug. "Watch some television. Play one of your games. Have a beer. It's Friday night."

"You want to watch T.V.?"

An abrupt shake of the head. "I'm going to bed."

"OK. Didn't get much sleep last night either. Yeah, we'll go to bed."

Impatience, in a frown and a sigh. "I want to be alone for a few hours. Can you do that?"

"Uh. I guess I'll play Quake, then."

"Thank you." Wesley went into the bathroom.

Gunn got a beer and was setting up the joystick and headphones when Wesley came out again. “You don’t have to use the headphones. The noise won’t bother me.”

“I’ve got used to playing with them. Helps me concentrate.”

A slow nod. “Good night, then. Thank you, Charles.”

Gunn was seriously tired by midnight, but kept going for another hour. Wesley was lying on top of the covers, hadn’t taken off anything except his shoes. And he was on his left side (which he hated to lie on, just hated), so his back was towards Gunn’s side of the bed. He was awake; not that he gave any sign of being aware of Gunn, but it was in his breathing.

Gunn got undressed and got properly into bed, and lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling. This was what Wesley wanted, wasn’t it? Layers between them like they were strangers, stranded in some nameless town, told how lucky they were to get to share the last room in the motel.

Wesley had coped for too long alone. Gunn had said that to him, a year ago. But it wasn’t just the coping with Angel. It was with his family, too, and with everything they’d set him up for. What had he said? People treating him like a management spy. For years. Yeah, he’d let Gunn help before, in the bad times with Angel. But this, it had driven him far, far back, to worse times. When there was no help. Like he’d said.

Gunn turned onto his side, towards Wesley. Time. This was going to take time. If he could, he’d pick Wesley up in his arms, carry him forward by a week, a month. However long Wesley needed to forgive himself. To stop needing to say those things about himself. Love ought to be enough. To be able to go to the Powers (to something), and say, “I love him. You know how much I love him. So he doesn’t, he doesn’t have to go through this. It’s my right.”

But maybe Wesley did just need time on his own. Like his weekend in San Diego. He’d let Gunn help, but really he’d sorted himself out. And he’d done it quickly. So maybe Gunn shouldn’t push, shouldn’t try to break through. He should give him space. Ask if he wanted to go away again. Yeah, he’d coped too long on his own, but he’d gotten good at it.

“We have to stop our work. We can’t do it anymore. I – We’ll send them their files. Refund everything they’ve paid.”

Gunn took his time figuring out what he should say. “Give ‘em the option, yeah. It’d look drastic, though, if they ain’t even asked. Look like we’re dissin’ ‘em. Gotta count against us when the time looks right to start up again. Be better, anyway, to try to keep going. Keep the momentum. Bein’ drastic... People’ll watch it on T.V, but they don’t wanna do business with it.”

Wesley sighed and rolled onto his back. “Charles. You talk as if... How people see us. What people want. That’s – the least. I can’t work with demons any more. I’ve lost the right. I’m not an expert. I don’t know anything. How can I... tell any demon anything? I don’t trust myself. I never will.”

Now that was drastic. And what could you say except, “You’ll change your mind. Eventually.”? “OK. I get it. I’ll call ‘em all. Explain. Just sendin’ stuff back... We wanna treat ‘em like people, right?”

“I – Would you? I can’t talk to them. But I wouldn’t ask you to.”

“I know.” Gunn wanted to talk to the demons. Was gonna be tough. Explaining. Listening. But if enough said they did still trust Wesley... Wesley wasn’t in a state to hear that, not now, but maybe in a month. “I’ll start tomorrow. I’ll do it from the truck. Go somewhere. S’ you don’t have to be there.”

“Thank you.”

“What if there’s a case I can do on my own? ‘n’ they still want it done? How’d you be with that?”

Very quietly: “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I told Piriti that you’d saved an empath demon. From the Kungai. So he told Barney.”

“You didn’t know.”

And neither did you. “What about the duals? You want me to stop that too? Find some humans to train with. We still have to deal with the visions, right?”

“I don’t know. About the visions. I suppose... we’ll see. But, yes, we have to stop the duals. And we have to train.”
Tense: “Does Grouw know yet?”

“I told him this afternoon. And Piriti. They’re helping Swift. She thanked me for sending them.”

“Good. That’s good.” On an exhausted sigh, and then Wesley got himself back onto his left side. After a while he did fall asleep, and then Gunn slept too.

Gunn woke to the smell of coffee. Wesley was in the same clothes, and he hadn’t shaved. He was sitting on the couch – no book, no mug of coffee, just sitting – but he got up and said he’d got some pastries from Trader Joe’s, he’d put them in to heat now.

Wesley said he’d eaten, had one of his yogurts, and he didn’t want any more coffee. Gunn took his breakfast to the couch, and Wesley sat down again and watched him.

“You gonna change? Those clothes look like you slept in ‘em.”

Wesley shrugged. “After training.”

“OK.”

It was a terrible training session. Wesley would be fierce in the attack, and then suddenly lose all conviction. He admitted that the attack was for Barney, and then he’d remember the Prio Motu, what would have happened without Gunn.

Not surprising. “We gotta work on it. Try again tomorrow.” Wesley agreed. Gunn thought Wesley might want to give up, say he knew already that he couldn’t do it. But he must still have some faith left in himself. Though it was only training, no one to get hurt apart from himself.

Back home, Wesley took about ten minutes to choose his change of clothes – just stood in front of the wardrobe, staring. In the end he got a pair of chinos and (really weird) one of Angel’s black sweaters. He still didn’t shave. The sweater hung so loose on him. He looked so thin. Gunn offered to help him pin up the arm, but he didn’t need help, not with something he’d done a hundred times before.

Gunn got all the files for their cases. Time to go and make some calls. “What you gonna do, Wes? Read?”

Wesley shook his head. “I don’t know. What do you want to eat? For dinner.”

“How about a curry?” Gunn smiled. “I’ve been having the dreams about the roasted eggplant.”

Wesley didn’t smile back, but he nodded. “I’ll go out to the store. We’ve got nothing in. How long do you think you’ll be?”

“Couple of hours, at least.” Wesley wanting time on his own? “When d’ you need me back?”

“If you’re back by four, then I’ll go to the store after that, so I won’t leave Angel.”

“Should be fine. I’ll call if it looks like being later.”

Gunn stopped in a Pollo Loco to get a couple of burritos and a large soda, and then decided he’d just stay parked in the lot, make all the calls from there. Private as anywhere else. He called Grouw first, and Grouw wasn’t surprised about the duals. He’d spoken to his sister the previous evening, and she was coming in a few hours to spend the rest of the weekend with him. Grouw had spoken to Matt, too – not to spread the misery, not to say, “Look what happened when you dumped us.” – but because he knew that Matt would want to be told. Grouw was going around to the beach house on Sunday evening. Piriti hadn’t returned his pages yet.

“What did Yan say?”

“She has some prisoners like Barney. Not empaths. ‘Collectors’, she said. Most do it for fucked-up personal reasons. They talk about it all the time. The others... They could pass themselves off as regular guys. She said she’d look in their records. Maybe there’s something. She said she wouldn’t be able to sleep for a week if she found out she’d met one by accident. It’s bad enough when they’re locked up.”

“Y’couldn’t sleep?”

“I was in a car with him. I was joking with him. I must have been there when he started planning... for the Kekulei demons.”

Gunn swallowed. “Wesley can’t eat.”

“A meal alone with him. God.” A pause, and Gunn thought he heard a door close. “My roommates’ve heard about what happened. About Wesley. I’m telling them, but – They don’t know any humans. Not to speak to. They think it’s... That he could’ve worked it out about Barney, if he’d wanted to. But since it was just demons... He didn’t really care. And someone’s started a stupid story about the whole survey.”

“How stupid? We gonna be lynched on sight?”

“They don’t really believe it. But they want to believe something bad about humans. They won’t do more than talk but you should be careful.”

“The both of us?”

“You weren’t part of what happened. The way they told it. I mean, you weren’t in the story at all. But when I told them what I’d heard straight from you, then... they came up with their own stories about how you were nearly as bad. ‘You were just protecting him.’ ‘You must have known.’ So if there’s someone who wants him, I think they’d take you as a start.”

Gunn wanted to call Swift, remind her of her promise to warn him to get Wesley out of town. But she wouldn’t have forgotten, and she had enough to deal with.

They had eleven cases, and Gunn got through to nine of the clients. Two hung up on him as soon as he introduced himself, two shouted at him and then hung up, one shouted and then let him give Wesley’s side, and the other four hadn’t heard at all so he told the story starting with the murders and working back. None of them wanted to deal with Wesley any more, and for most it wasn’t because they were angry or disgusted – they’d met Wesley, they knew he was too honest, too serious, they could imagine exactly how it had all happened – but because they just couldn’t face him. And they didn’t want to have to explain to anyone else why they were still dealing with him. Because it was going to look like a statement, earn you some enemies, whatever you argued about Wesley’s innocence. Two said they’d deal with Gunn, no problem explaining Gunn, but the others said yes, they wanted to close the case and get the refund.

Nearly two o’clock. Gunn drove till he saw a place he knew he could buy a pack of envelopes to post the files, sat in the truck and addressed the seven envelopes, and then decided to get another soda, have a walk in Alondra Park, and get home some time past three. He called Rondell from the park. No real plans yet for Sunday afternoon. They might have a game of pickup. Or there was still the movies. Gunn would turn up at the base after lunch. Maybe they’d just hang out for a few hours.

Wesley had moved his main bookcase from beside his desk, across the room to behind Gunn’s computer chair, to the left of Angel’s door. He’d put it right in front of another bookcase – “Angel’s bookcase” was how Gunn thought of it, though a lot of the books were Wesley’s. Gunn suggested they move Angel’s bookcase over to the gaping space beside Wesley’s desk, but Wesley said he didn’t need any of those books now. Looked like he didn’t need anything except his language books.

While Wesley was out at the store, Gunn typed and printed the covering letters for the files, and then did the refunds (nearly a thousand dollars). He put the envelopes and the four open files away in the filing cabinet, out of sight. Angel was asleep – or, no, it was Angelus, and maybe that wasn’t sleep, more like a hallucination. He was pressing himself against the floor, growling, arching with pleasure, and talking about killing and drinking and how he’d “make him beg to die”. Exactly like he acted in a vision. Gunn turned the screen off, thought about gagging him, but that would be too dangerous without the guarantees of a real vision.

Wesley was away for much longer than the usual trip to the store, and Gunn guessed he'd decided to shop for the week, not just for the curry. When he heard the sound of the car, he went down to help carry. There were four bags, but only two were groceries; the others were much lighter than Gunn was expecting, and full of clothes.

Thrift-shop clothes. Gunn couldn't believe it. He took the bags into the bedroom while Wesley was unpacking the groceries, looked inside just out of curiosity, and ended up pulling all of the clothes out onto the bed. Three T-shirts, in washed-out shades of green, brown and grey, labels all faded to nothing. A baggy grey cotton sweater. A canvas jacket, looked almost army-surplus. Two pairs of light-brown pants, one canvas, one corduroy.

This wasn't Wesley. Wesley dressed like an accountant. Always. He had his business-meeting shirts, and his research shirts, and his beer-drinking shirts, and his fighting shirts, and his fuck-me shirts. But all of them button-down shirts, because it was so difficult for him now, to pull something over his head. Street clothes from a thrift-shop. That wasn't his Wesley. His Wesley wore his best suit to a meeting with homeless kids.

"What's with the clothes?" Gunn had joined Wesley in the kitchen. "They for Anne's kids or something? She call while I was out?"

Wesley shook his head. "I had to get... something different. I can't wear – I'm not that person any more."

"So you – Some other guy's T-shirt? And another guy's jeans? So who are you, then? Hell, Wes! You gotta wardrobe full of clothes I love you in."

Wesley closed his eyes and turned away. His voice was shaking. "You shouldn't. You shouldn't have. That was... a shell. I never had – There was nothing there. Now..." A deep sigh. "I won't pretend. I can't."

Gunn couldn't speak, for how long he didn't know. Finally, on a whisper: "That you loved me?"

Wesley turned back in a jerk, mouth and eyes wide with shock. A pause, then he started to reach out, and then pulled his hand back with another jerk. Now his look was Angel's look, beaten, and he said slowly, "That I was worth anything. I don't know..." Shaking his head, over and over. "I can't feel."

Oh, God. Gunn took the two steps and pulled Wesley into his arms, held him tight, tight. "Wes. Wes. Don't talk like that. Please. God, don't. It's the shock. You're – You're half-crazy with shock. I know why. I know. But I can't – Even just telling you, 'You're wrong. You're not what you said.' Don't make me say it, what you said. Don't make me even think it. We're gonna get through this. All we've been through with Angel, course we'll get through this. But don't – Don't talk like that. It's the shock. It's – It's just the shock."

Wesley had been tense in Gunn's arms, was still tense. But then his hand came up, pressed on Gunn's back. "No. I won't. I'm sorry. I know you – I'll stop it. I'll stop."

"I'll help, Wes. It will. You too."

Gunn could feel Wesley nodding, but then Wesley was pulling back – just slightly, not pushing him away. "I should start the curry. There's a lot of chopping." Gunn let go, and moved back to the doorway.

"You want to rent a movie? I think 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' is just out."

"I won't watch it. So you should get whatever you want."

"What'll you do?"

"I'll go to the bedroom. And – you're not driving me out. I want you to enjoy your film. I'll be glad to know you're enjoying it. I just – I'm not in the mood to do anything."

Gunn rented "Thirteen Days" and "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" from Blockbuster – not too obvious as movies to change Wesley's mind, but not what Gunn would have chosen just for himself – and he got more beer on the way home. He put on one of Wesley's classical CDs and lay on the couch with a travel book (maybe originally Angel's) – and after a few pages he started to feel horny. Nothing to do with the book. Just... Saturday night, and Wesley busy in the kitchen, and the smell of spices, and the Blockbuster cases stacked on top of the T.V. A date. His body knew all the signs of one

of their dates, and it would not listen to reason. It didn't even care about the chill that still gripped it from seeing the clothes, from all those things Wesley had said. Wesley was close, there was the evening ahead, it wanted sex.

Boy, but it was going to have a long wait if it wanted anything more than Gunn's hand. Wesley saying he couldn't feel... Gunn remembered, in the bad years for him with his crew, that there'd been times when he hadn't thought about sex in two, three weeks. Like the connection had just been cut, shut off like it had never been there. And his heart, too, clenched solid, biting down on rage, pressed down with despair. Warmth, lightness, openness didn't belong there, had no chance of forcing a way in. He was surrounded by people he knew he liked, some he knew he loved, but he didn't feel it. And then that would be past and he'd forget what it really felt like, how those bad times took you over. Until the next bad time, maybe six months later. Two weeks must have been the longest one of those bad times had lasted. They'd been short at first, a few days, but by the end - and he remembered this from what Alonna would say to him - by the end each bad time always lasted at least a week.

And Wesley now was worse than Gunn had ever been. Much worse. He'd never talked like Wesley was talking. Never. Alonna would get sick and tired of him picking apart all the ways the odds were stacked against him, he'd seen her exasperated, bored, annoyed with him - but never scared for him like he was feeling scared for Wesley. A month for Wesley? Two, even?

No. No, he wasn't going to try and guess. He wasn't going to say, "Well, he's five times worse than I was, so..." One day at a time. One movie, one bag of worn clothes, one hard-on with nowhere to go (except maybe the bathroom, because the music had shifted and now Wesley was working in time to it, and Gunn could see Wesley's reflection in the T.V, just clear enough to show the stubble - and Wes with stubble on a Saturday evening, with all the signs of a date...).

Again, Wesley drank water and ate a third of what Gunn ate. But he smiled when Gunn thanked him for the meal - too brief, more of a tremor, but still the first time since Thursday.

Wesley didn't go to the bedroom when Gunn started watching "O Brother, Where Art Thou?", but went down to laundry instead, including the thrift-shop clothes. Gunn got caught up in the movie very quickly, and it was more than half over when he paused it to get another beer and realised that Wesley hadn't come back.

The wash-cycle must have been finished for at least half an hour but Wesley hadn't moved the clothes to the drier. He was sitting in the battered plastic chair, near the washer, but turned away from it, his back to the door. He looked around and started to stand up when Gunn came in, then paused, looked like he was going to sit down again, then gave a sigh, pushed the chair out of the way, and started to unload the washer. He'd been crying. Not much, and he looked again like he didn't know he'd been doing it; the tracks were so clear, he couldn't have even tried to wipe them away.

"Was it a good film?"

"Not done yet, but yeah, you'll like it. I'd watch it again, any time. You gonna stay down here 'n' guard the drier too?"

"I might as well."

"I'll bring you some tea." All he could think of to offer.

A pause, then Wesley frowned and smiled at the same time. "No. I'm fine. I'm sorry I made you interrupt your film."

"When you're done, then?"

Gunn sat with the remote in his hand for maybe ten minutes before he could bring himself to press play. Watching a movie, drinking a beer - knowing that the man you loved was sitting alone in a bare room, crying because... because he hated himself. What kind of man could do that? Well... the kind of man that Wesley wanted him to be. Or wanted him to pretend to be.

What did Wes want? Not to have to think about him. To be sure that he wasn't going to come downstairs again worrying, asking questions. Nothing would stop Gunn from worrying, but maybe he'd be able to hide it better if he gave himself the movie to think about too.

After Wesley had drunk his tea he went straight to bed, saying he was leaving Gunn to watch the film. Again, Wesley didn't take his clothes off, and he didn't get properly into bed. He was lying on his back, though, not turned away, and

he lay and watched Gunn get undressed, and he reached up and touched Gunn's hand on the pillow and wished him goodnight.

Gunn was woken several times in the night by Wesley having restless dreams. Not nightmares; he kept on saying, "No," but then he said, "That's not hurting me," so Gunn stopped wondering if he should wake Wesley up.

On Sunday morning Wesley still didn't shave, and he dressed in clothes from the thrift shop and looked grim and determined, which Gunn had seen before, in the early days when Wesley was coping with Angel on his own. And that was reassuring, really. Because Gunn knew that person, that grim Wesley, knew Wesley must have been coping like that for months, maybe getting grimmer every day. But when that Wesley laughed he looked like a different person, and Gunn had been able to make him laugh. Not deliberately (or not at first), but still he'd done it, and now he could imagine this Wesley laughing. Some day, when neither of them was expecting it.

Training was terrible again. Afterwards they went for brunch at Soup Plantation (Gunn's idea), and Wesley did eat. Just salad, but no one looking at him would think there was anything wrong, not like seeing him struggle at home. Maybe that was the answer: taking him out to eat.

Anne had been repainting the shelter, and she'd had some paint left over and had given it to Rondell, so Gunn got handed a brush as soon as he arrived at the base and got made part of the big team painting the main bedroom. He would've worn different clothes if he'd known – his digging clothes – but no big deal. In one of their breaks he got enough time alone with Rondell to ask him what the crew was doing for training now, and whether there was room for him and Wesley, a couple of times a week. Sure there was. When did they want to start? OK, Wednesday. Around eight.

"Wes... Y'might need to go easy on him. At first. He – He had somethin' go wrong. Took it hard. So he's... he's been actin' like he's lost his nerve. He'll get over it, but..." Gunn shrugged. "Haven't figured out yet how hard to push him."

"Like Eladio, right? And Donnie?" Guys who'd had bad near-misses, two, three years ago. Gunn nodded, 'cos, yeah, that was as much as Rondell needed to know. "Then we'll get him through. We'll figure it out"

When Gunn got home, Wesley wasn't working at his desk like Gunn had expected, but then Gunn saw that the door to Angel's room was open, and a glance up at the screen showed him that Wesley and Angel were sitting together in their usual place against the wall. Wesley reading: that had to be good.

Gunn got himself a soda and was going to go change into clean clothes when he realised that there wasn't any sound coming from Angel's room. He took another look at the screen, and then dropped his soda and leapt to grab holy-water and a crossbow; Wesley wasn't sitting next to Angel, he was lying against him, held half-upright against Angel's chest, like he'd fallen across Angel's thighs and Angel had caught him. Wesley wasn't conscious, Gunn could see from the way he was lying; and Angel was curled around Wesley, hiding Wesley's face as well as his own.

"Put him down! Put him down, vampire. Get away from him."

The vampire raised its head. Its face was human, and there was no blood, not on its mouth or on Wesley. And Gunn saw Wesley breathe. "He needs to sleep." Angel was acting like he didn't see Gunn's weapons, like Gunn had just come in to ask his opinion.

Gunn's heart was still pounding, not even starting to slow, and now it felt like his brain had just stopped working, might never work again. He had to do something, he had to say something – but Angel's hands were cradling Wesley's body, Angel's arm was crooked to support Wesley's head, and Gunn's thoughts tore apart, and there was heat and a roaring, and pressure in slow, uneven waves. Finally (and his voice sounded normal, how did it sound normal?): "He can't sleep here. It isn't safe for him. You're too dangerous. We never know what you might do."

Angel looked down at Wesley, then back at Gunn. "I won't kill him. He doesn't want me to kill him." A roaring again, but different, sharper. A different disbelief, a separate area gone to overload. "I guess you won't. But Angelus would. If he found him in here asleep."

Angel looked alarmed, and he must have tightened his hold because Wesley grunted and sighed, and rolled his head a quarter turn over the curve of Angel's arm, and then slowly sank back. Almost a whisper: "Would he find him? Would they let him find him?"

“He was here yesterday. Angelus. I saw him. They don’t care. They wouldn’t do anything to stop it.”

Angel stared at Wesley for a long time. Then, still looking at him: “Where can he sleep? He needs to sleep.”

“You have to wake him up. Make him leave. You can’t let him sleep in here.”

Angel was frowning, shaking his head. “Where does he sleep? You. Where do you sleep? I could take him there.” He shifted his left arm off Wesley’s waist, and made to get to his feet and pick Wesley up.

Gunn hesitated. Angel needed to learn to wake Wesley up – no exceptions, no “but if I’m here, it’s OK for you to –”. But Christ did Wesley need to sleep. Looked like he’d sleep through an earthquake.

“Is it near where we go for the shower? Is it there now?” Angel had got to his knees, very smooth - impossibly smooth when you thought about how he was having to hold Wesley steady in his arms the whole time. Not human, that strength and control. A cat, Gunn had thought long ago. A panther.

A different bedroom then, and Wesley naked in the bed, and sleeping and sticky from sex.

“No. You can’t.” Not a panther. Nothing natural. A demon in a corpse. “You can’t see where he sleeps. I told you to wake him up.” Gunn hooked the holy water into his pocket and slung the crossbow over his shoulder, stepped over, right in Angel’s face, leaned in and shook Wesley by the shoulder, hard enough that he felt the padding shift under his hand.

“Charles? What? What was...?” Groggy, confused. Then Wesley seemed to notice that he was being held off the ground, and he started fumbling to get to his feet, very disoriented and unfocused. Gunn was reaching out to steady him when Wesley looked up and saw that it was Angel holding him, and he went rigid with horror. Angel let go almost immediately and Wesley fell heavily to the floor; Gunn had no chance of catching him, just managed to jump back so Wesley didn’t fall against his legs.

Wesley landed with a yelp of pain, and didn’t try to get up like he would have in a fight, but just lay gasping. “Oh, God, Wes, I’m sorry. He was – I told him to put you down, but I – I should have made him. Are you OK? You hit your head?”

Wesley nodded, then slowly rolled over onto his knees and clambered to his feet. Gunn helped him up then kept him close with an arm around his waist, and Wesley did lean on him, really seemed shaken. Not surprising. This was Wesley’s near-miss. Missed by an hour, maybe, not the seconds that Rondell would mean. But if Wesley had gone in an hour earlier, if Gunn had come home an hour later... They both knew what could have been waiting for Gunn.

“C’ mon. Let’s get you out of here.” Wesley was following Gunn’s coaxing, making for the door. Angel was edging along the wall towards his corner; Gunn could hear each dragging step and the rasp against the roughness of the wall. The sounds stopped before Gunn and Wesley reached the door but Gunn didn’t think that Angel had got to his corner and he took a look over his shoulder to check. No, Angel was still a couple of yards short. Slumped against the wall, his back to the corner. Very withdrawn: sulking, or maybe guilty about hurting Wesley. He was looking towards where they’d been sitting, and Gunn turned his head to look too, and saw a drained beaker, right against the wall on Wesley’s side, like Angel had given it back to Wesley and Wesley had forgotten it. Gunn would get it after he’d seen to Wesley.

“Thanks. I’m OK now.” Wesley had pulled away but he was leaning against the table, still not holding himself right.

“How’s your head? Thought I heard it bounce.”

A smile, and Wesley looked more like himself, much more awake. “I haven’t got concussion. You must have heard my glasses trying to decide where to break. Fortunately the vote was split.” Wesley didn’t want to sleep – well, he did, he kept on yawning – but he shouldn’t, or he wouldn’t sleep again at night. He’d do some translation; the effort of concentration should wake him up. And a strong tea would help.

While Wesley was putting the kettle on, Gunn went back into Angel’s room to get the beaker. Now Angel was in his corner, hunched over. After he’d got the beaker Gunn stood looking at Angel for a while, then went over and knelt down at his level, at a safe distance.

“Wesley’s OK, Angel. He was just kinda shaken. Surprised. I know you just wanted to help him. ‘n’ I wanted to keep him safe. It’ll be easier next time. You just wake him up straight away and tell him he has to leave.”

Angel slowly raised his head, stared at Gunn, expressionless, then lowered his head again. Gunn shrugged and left.

Gunn decided to have a bath. He needed to chill out, let the adrenaline soak itself away, and there was the paint and dust and sweat he’d got with his crew. He took the travel book in with him but didn’t read more than a page; just lay and listened to the sounds of Wesley working, clear through the half-open door, and with only a wall and a linen-closet between the desk and the bath.

There hadn’t been a book. Not where they’d been sitting, not where they could have reached. The books were all in their stack in the corner, neat like they hadn’t been touched in a week.

(A week. Last Sunday. Wesley dressing for his meal with Barney. Smart and impatient in his suit.)

So they hadn’t been reading. They must just have been talking. Yeah. Angel must’ve given the beaker back to Wesley and said, “Stay and talk. Sit down here right next to me. Talk to me.” And Wesley hadn’t said, “I can’t.” He hadn’t said, “I’m not in the mood to talk to you. And there’s nothing to talk about.” Nothing like he’d said to Gunn. So natural and comfortable to be talking to his vampire he must’ve leaned heavier and heavier against him until he fell asleep. And then Angel got to hold him. Angel got to know, with each slow, peaceful breath, that he was doing this right, he was doing what Wesley needed.

And then Angel got to see that Wesley really didn’t want to be touched. Would Wesley have looked at Gunn like that, if he’d woken up in Gunn’s arms? Yes. Probably. So Gunn almost felt sorry for Angel. But Wesley had stayed and talked to Angel. Wesley had acted like he wanted to talk to Angel.

“What were the two of you talking about before you fell asleep?” Gunn hadn’t dressed yet, was still in his robe. Maybe he’d stay like this; act out through clothes, like Wesley.

Wesley frowned. “I can’t remember. He said I looked different. Smelled different. He could still smell something of the men who’d worn my clothes before. So he asked about them. But after that...” A shrug. “I can’t remember.”

“So – You tell him why you’re not shaving? About what happened?”

Wesley flinched, just slightly, then shook his head. “I told him I’d made a mistake.”

The exact truth. Angel got to hear the exact truth. “Did it help? Talkin’ to him. How long’d it take you to fall asleep? I know you weren’t reading.”

Wesley sighed, looked over at Angel’s door. “He knows a great deal about making mistakes. We – We’ve always been similar in some ways.”

“ ‘n’ I’m too different? Just won’t understand? You must’ve sat down there wanting to talk to him. What’s that from? You say you can’t talk, you can’t do this, you can’t do that. You mean just with me. So... what’s he do?”

Wesley closed his eyes, looking exhausted, and dropped his head back. A deep sigh, then another, even deeper. When he raised his head to look at Gunn, it was with a visible effort. “Nothing. Nothing you’d want to do. Nothing I’d want you to do. It’s more... what he’s done. That makes him worse than me. Much worse. Where you’re better. I feel – I feel like a disease. I don’t want you to be near me. I want you to stay safe. But him...” A shrug. “I can’t make any difference to him. I don’t love him. He’s never loved me. It’s... It’s simple.”

Angel curled over Wesley, facing down Gunn and the crossbow for the sake of Wesley’s sleep. But Wesley hadn’t seen that, so he didn’t know as much as Gunn did about what Angel felt. “I ain’t better. Wes. Wes.” He put his hand over his eyes for a couple of breaths, then dragged it slowly back over his head. “Guess you know everythin’ I’m thinking to say to you right now.”

A small nod. “I think so.”

“Be wasting my breath?”

Another nod. “This wasn’t my first mistake. Not by any means. I—” He swallowed. “I can’t. I can’t bear to tell you. I know you’d have to —” A long, shaking breath. “All this time I’d been hiding from them. From my mistakes. I’d been hiding behind you. Behind Angel. Letting myself think that I’d changed. When all the time... So — I know I’m being selfish. That it must be —” Shaking his head. “That there’s no reason you’d understand.”

Gunn shrugged. “Well... I c’n guess why it’s simpler with Angel. He’s never got jealous, has he? Of me?” Wesley shook his head and mouthed a no. “I wanna hold you like that. Know you didn’t let him, not on purpose, but... Jeez, I’m even jealous that he got to sit that close to you! But that’s just —” A small smile, just a twist. “Didn’t even know I got jealous till I met you.”

No joke to Wesley, anything but. Frowning, pained: “I’ve no right to — To that attention. From you. I never — You shouldn’t. You shouldn’t.”

OK. So add a couple more months to the time for Gunn to have to take his “attention” to the bathroom. He leaned forward, took Wesley’s hand, and rubbed his thumb back and forth around Wesley’s ring. “You got the right. A hundred times over. Hundred and one if you’ll pretend you never saw me get stupid over bein’ jealous. Yeah, it’s simpler. Course the two of you talk.” He sat back. “But you gotta promise you’ll never fucking fall asleep in there again. I’ve told him ten times now he’s got to wake you up. Now you tell him another twenty. Christ, man! First few seconds, you looked like you could be dead.”

“I’m sorry.” Wesley put his hand on Gunn’s knee, bare through the gap in the robe, and Gunn had to close his eyes for a moment at the punch of heat to his heart and his cock, blood urgent to the point of pain. “I’ll tell him every time we sit down.”

* * * * *

On Monday morning Gunn went out in the truck to call the two clients he hadn’t reached on Saturday. One hung up, the other said he’d been going to call later in the day: he’d heard four different stories over the weekend (including one that had Wesley breaking down in the hotel, on his knees to a Kekulei demon, begging for forgiveness), and he hadn’t really believed any of them. He didn’t want to close the case, though he didn’t see how Gunn was going to be able to do the work, not with what he’d seen of people’s attitudes (“Hey, I was homeless, livin’ on the streets since I was twelve. People lookin’ though me, prayin’ not to have me speak to ‘em... Didn’t hold me back then. Won’t now.”); so he’d give Gunn two weeks to see what he could do, but then he might have to take the case somewhere else because he did need results.

Three cases left out of eleven. Not bad. Really. Gunn had brought along envelopes and covering letters for both of the clients (reckoning they’d both hang up), so he was able to go straight to the Post Office and send back the files for all of the eight other cases.

While he was waiting he got a call from Matt. Matt said he’d spent all Sunday evening talking with Grouw and they were both really worried about Wesley and Gunn. Gunn couldn’t talk, not in line at the Post Office, and Matt was about to go into a class, but he had a couple of hours free for lunch.

Gunn told Matt some of what was happening with Wesley — not the terrible things Wesley kept saying, nothing about Angel — but about the clothes and the eating and not getting into bed and refusing to let Gunn near. Gunn had needed to talk to another human, someone who’d know what he meant if he said he loved Wesley. And Matt was his only human friend who knew about Wyndham Gunn, who understood that Wesley’s mistake had changed everything. Matt listened properly and quietly, and when Gunn asked, said he couldn’t think of anything that Gunn could do different. Just had to wait, like he was doing, remember it was shock, it had just been a few days, only felt like forever. Wesley would get better, gotta focus on that. He’d find his way out of the shock.

God. Good to hear that from someone else. And Matt hugged him goodbye — because he needed it, they both needed it — and no one seeing it would guess that this was a straight guy hugging his fag friend for the first time. Matt wasn’t thinking “straight” and “fag” (and he had to sometimes, didn’t he?); he was just thinking “friend”. Like Gunn with Wesley, their first night of beers and talking, with Angelus still snarling in the next room. Wes had needed to be held then, and he’d known it, he’d wanted more. Of course he had. People needed to be held.

Matt invited Gunn over to the beach-house, too, if he needed to give Wesley some of that time alone.

“What about Holly?”

A shrug. "You mind if she's there?" Gunn shook his head. "I'll tell her you've got stuff goin' on at home. Need to get out and chill. Know she'll be OK with that."

"How'd we meet?"

Through a guy Matt used to know. Taylor. Who'd been into self-defence, been on some course with Gunn.

"Taylor. OK." He'd come over on Thursday, probably. Which had been Caritas night just a month ago.

Time to get down to work, time to keep those three clients. Have to go very carefully, treat every talk with a demon like a raid on a nest of vamps, always keep a clear line to the exit; but keep everything casual, like you'd never think of being scared, 'cos you know you've done nothing wrong. He wanted to call Swift first, get a reading or something from her before he went in. But that was just avoidance: putting it on someone else; wasting time. Anyway, people knew where she stood on Wyndham Gunn, so she wouldn't get to hear the worst. Gunn just had to see for himself.

A tough few hours, but after the first three demons, Gunn knew that he could deal. Like a raid on a nest of vamps, it was a hell of a challenge, and it needed doing, and damn! but it was the best feeling in the world when you saw them start to fall back, when you knew you'd carried it through. Didn't matter what they said about him or even about Wes, just ran straight off him 'cos none of it was true.

Anne called in the evening, when Gunn and Wesley were about to go for training. Lindsey had got back to her, and the news was much better than she'd expected: Wolfram and Hart were going to ask the clients, all the clients. The partners had made the decision very quickly, stated the firm's position very clearly. A person might consider buying a Tak horn if told it was an antique, like buying an ancient ivory chess-set. One accepts the cruelties of the distant past – what else can one do? People were different then, though ignorance. But to find that you'd been tricked into taking part in such a crime, into bringing it into your own home... Yes, Wolfram and Hart knew that their clients would want to know.

So Lindsey needed a full list of the items, as much detail as possible; he'd be waiting for the call or the fax from whoever was running the case. Gunn called Swift and gave her Lindsey's details, and took the chance to remind her that she'd promised to warn him if he needed to get Wesley out of town. She acted like she thought he was joking – a lot had happened since she'd made the promise, and no one she knew had thought of Wesley in days. Of course she'd warn him, but she wouldn't ever need to.

Training was better. Gunn was still fired up from his afternoon of work, and he thought that made most of the difference; he was in-the-moment, forgetting to worry about Wesley and Wesley's imagination, and he drew Wesley in too.

Back home Wesley cooked, then he went to the bedroom and Gunn watched TV and played with the computer. Wesley wouldn't read, nothing except the newspaper and his translation books. He said Angel didn't want to read either. Gunn would wait a week, then see if he could bribe Angel into wanting to read.

Wesley wasn't sleeping well. No surprise. Some of his nightmares were noisy, frantic; others a long, low moaning and there were some where he snarled like Angelus. Wesley never wanted to tell Gunn what he'd been dreaming, and he didn't even want Gunn to wake him up. "It's only a nightmare. It's not going to kill me. Obviously, if it's stopping you from sleeping... But I think you'll get used to it, like we got used to Angel."

Yeah, he probably would, and wasn't that sick? He could feel it settling into place, their new routine. Every day (every night) looking the same for Wesley. Except for his meetings with Lilah on Wednesdays morning when he'd shave and wear his chinos and a sweater. And the training with the crew on Wednesdays and Sundays, when he'd be so normal, laughing with George, taking in all the news and gossip, talking his share of crap during the breaks – and then shutting down the second they were out of sight in the truck, blank and withdrawn like Angel huddled in his corner. He wouldn't speak until the next morning, and once not until the next afternoon.

But he didn't say those terrible things any more, he didn't cry (or not that Gunn could see). He seemed to enjoy the training – no, not having to act normal for the crew, but he enjoyed the fighting, would talk about it when he was ready to talk. And he liked cooking, wanted Gunn to think about what he asked for, really care about it. Gunn started looking through Wesley's cookbooks, not knowing how to describe many of the dishes he liked, and they talked about food more than they ever had. Strange, with Wesley still leaving at least half of most meals. But then Wesley was a strange man.

* * * * *

Angel had his next vision on a Saturday night, when Gunn was on his way back from the beach-house. A group of five or six vamps were crashing a party at Wilson College. Gunn was less than ten minutes away, Wesley more than twenty. Room 918, Bonner Hall. Gunn would go straight in – he had crosses and holy water in the truck, enough for the college kids to hold the vamps off until Wesley arrived. The leader of the vamps was a blonde female. Elizabeth, Wesley thought. Low-cut blouse, heart-shaped locket. She had the invitation, she'd get the others in.

Gunn arrived just after the vamps, though it took him several minutes to be sure of that (working hard to blend in, to look like any other student with a heavy sports bag), to find someone who'd seen the blonde chick turn up, saying she'd met Jude at the pier, and she knew he hadn't said, but friends were OK, right? Well, the blonde was over there with Shep. The others... Dunno. Looked like they hadn't stuck together. Wow. Actual mingling. At a party and all.

That wasn't mingling, it was infiltration. They were all around the room. Gonna be difficult. Gunn wanted to warn the kids, hand out crosses and holy-water, but the moment he tried there'd be someone yelling, "Vampires? Oh, man, what a joke!" and then that had to be five kids dead.

Wait for Wesley? But Wes would blow their cover for sure, Wes would never blend in here, even without the crossbows. So be ready to use the surprise? Get to the back of the room, between the two vamps who were closest together. Keep track of the other three. And when Wes appeared in the doorway, stake the first two from behind, and then keep the others too busy to have time to feed. He sent a text message to Wesley to go straight in with his crossbow, and then he started to move into position; casual, grabbing two beers on the way like he was threading through to join a friend.

He got his two vamps like he planned, and that and Wesley put the other three enough off-balance. So even with all the kids in the way, a whole roomful of hostages, the vamps never got close to playing it smart. Wesley got the blonde and the other nearest the door, and Gunn took the last.

Some of the kids had bruises, cuts from glass broken in the panic. And some were talking about suing Wesley and Gunn, and their asshole friends in the masks, who couldn't have gone far. Who was it who'd put them up to such a fucking stupid stunt? Who?

Nothing they could do except offer to take the kids to hospital, then shrug and walk out. No one really tried to stop them (Wesley was slung with weapons), and no one followed them down to get the number of the truck or the car.

Wesley thought it was funny, the kids all so clear on what they hadn't seen, no one, not even on an evening of beers, saying, "But how did they do that? I mean, where it looked like she turned to dust?" Stupid stunt, not worth thinking about. They lived in such a safe world and they'd been able to stay there, and Wesley wouldn't want it any different.

Gunn laughed too, but as they were maintaining and restocking their weapons he felt like he was counting down the minutes, waiting for Wesley to close down again, like he did after training. But no, Wesley stayed relaxed, even said yes when Gunn offered him a beer. They sat on the couch and talked about college kids: what they were like in England, the Greek system, Matt.

Wesley had got back to normal. That was what he'd needed, not time or the right word from Gunn, but the chance to kill a couple of vamps, save a roomful of people. That simple. All he needed to remind him of all the other visions, how he'd devoted his life to saving people, risked his life over and over. Enough of that crap about feeling like a disease: he should feel like a cure, hundreds of people could tell him that, Gunn should have told him but Wesley remembered for himself now. And he was laughing and drinking beer and wanting to sit and talk to Gunn; and Gunn could feel the heat in the air between them, his skin buzzing with the pull towards Wesley. You'd think he'd be hard immediately, the wait had been so long, but instead it was a slow simmer, like the last stages of a good date.

"Another?" Wesley had drained his beer and looked about to get up.

Gunn had started planning for this five minutes ago. He turned to half-kneel on the couch and put his hand on Wesley's stomach; and then his cock caught up, at the thought of the skin under the T-shirt and sliding his hand under. "I'd rather take you to bed."

Wesley sighed and sank back and closed his eyes, but it wasn't an "Oh, yes" sigh. Not an "Oh, no" sigh, either. Maybe "Oh, I don't know". And "I wish I'd had warning." His cock knew, though, suddenly standing out plain against the corduroy.

Gunn rubbed with his fingertips, just slightly, feeling the skin of Wesley's stomach yield and shift, and seeing the effect between Wesley's legs. Wesley gave another of those sighs and jerked his head, frowning deeply. Impossible to tell what he was thinking, except that he was thinking hard.

"Or I could take you right here." Almost a whisper, and Gunn slid his hand down and covered Wesley's cock; and tasted sweet saliva gathering in his mouth: for kissing, for sucking, anything.

"No. No. Not here." Wesley was pushing Gunn's arm away. He was breathless.

"So say where. Anywhere."

"Oh." A long sigh, and Wesley stared at Gunn for five, ten seconds, then: "Get ready for bed, will you?"

"Don't have to ask me twice." Gunn was already off the couch. He took Wesley's beer and put both bottles on the coffee table, then reached out for Wesley's hand, to pull him to his feet.

Wesley shook his head. "I'll get ready after you."

When Gunn came out of the bathroom, Wesley was standing a few feet from the bathroom door. He was looking up at Angel on the screen, and he didn't turn round for Gunn. Angel was stuck fast in the vision, same as he had been since they got back, calling out warnings about the female, trying to hide, then the next second throwing himself into the attack, roaring with fury.

Gunn put his hands on Wesley's waist. Lightly, not pulling Wesley back even a fraction, making his cock keep a good inch away from Wesley's ass. "English?" No response from Wesley. "You know he'll still be there tomorrow. Y'got me ready now."

Wesley put his hand over Gunn's then slowly turned, like he was pulling himself around on Gunn's arm. "You've been ready before, haven't you? What have you been doing?"

What any guy would do. But maybe Wes wanted to hear him say it. "Jerking off." A nod of the head towards the bathroom. "In there."

"What do you think about?"

Gunn shrugged. "Stuff from here and there. Depends. Gettin' you naked. What it was like when you had the dressing on your hand. A long rubdown. What if we'd said yes to Angel that time."

"Do you think about... being angry with me? Wanting to... show me?"

"'cos it's been so long?" Wesley shrugged, and Gunn shook his head. "Been through it myself. When things were bad with the crew. How'd I be angry? 'n' when I was jerkin' off... Wouldn't think it then anyway, defeat the point. What d' you want me to think about?"

A long sigh, and Wesley looked away for a few seconds. Very quietly, voice tense: "Loving me."

"Hell, you got that," and Gunn was pulling him close and then they were kissing. Wesley tasted of beer, and Gunn knew he must taste of mint to Wesley, and he liked that difference: the reminder of the evening, how they'd earned the wind-down on the couch, and the promise of bed.

"Here?" Gunn had his hand at the buckle of Wesley's belt, thumb starting to ease the leather through, fingers pushing down between the trousers and the T-shirt. "Feels like we're both ready."

"No. No." Wesley pulled away, panting, then nodded towards the bedroom. "In there. I need – In there."

Gunn went in first, sat on the edge of the bed, and had his clothes off within half a minute. Then he turned the bedside light on, and knelt up on the bed to wait for Wesley.

“No. Please. Turn it off.” And Wesley had just drawn the drapes, too.

Gunn didn't hesitate, but when the light was off and Wesley was sitting in his chair and unlacing his shoes, Gunn said, “What's wrong? With the light.”

A pause, then: “Seeing you. It would be too much. I need... less.”

Gunn laughed. “Well, you're damn fine yourself. Yeah, don't need more than a tenth what you got.”

Wesley didn't laugh back, just lay down on the bed. He'd only taken his shoes off but now he was releasing his belt, and now pulling the zipper down. Gunn felt his way over to kneel on either side of Wesley's right leg, put his hands on Wesley's hips ready to pull those godawful pants right off as soon as Wesley arched himself up.

“No. That's enough.” Not even to mid-thigh. Just enough to let his cock out – which he was doing for himself. Gunn put his hand between Wesley's legs, moved it up till it met Wesley's hand; and at the first touch of the moist, tender skin, so yielding, over such hardness, he gave a tearing groan and threw himself down, sucking, licking, and dragging his teeth, too, over Wesley's knuckles as he forced his tongue under Wesley's fingers, needing to reach more, needing everything.

Wesley was making small sounds, half-surprise, all pleasure. He slowly pulled his hand away, over Gunn's lips then up to his cheek; kept it there for a long time, like he needed to be near Gunn's mouth, ride the movement of Gunn's jaw, and then, when Gunn's finger started pressing into him, he suddenly grabbed for the back of Gunn's head and held tight. He was calling Gunn his darling, his love, his good, good Charles.

Gunn came very soon after Wesley, rubbing himself against Wesley's leg, with Wesley still half-hard in his mouth, and Wesley's ass (so hot, so eager) still clutching at his finger.

Wesley wouldn't get undressed, he wouldn't get into bed, not even when Gunn got cold enough to shiver. So Gunn got up and put on his robe, and then they fitted back together into the same kiss.

* * * * *

Wesley wasn't in the bed when Gunn woke on Sunday morning – he wasn't even in the apartment. The car was out where he'd parked it the night before, his cellphone was on his desk. He hadn't made coffee, and there was no beaker drying on the rack so he hadn't fed Angel, either – though Angel didn't look able to be fed, crouched in his corner, tearing at himself, banging his head against the wall.

So Wesley had either gone for a walk – just possible early on a fresh Sunday morning – or he was downstairs doing laundry. Gunn checked the laundry basket, and then headed straight down to the laundry room.

Not even the chair this time: Wesley was sitting on the floor with his back to the drier, hunched like Angel when Wesley was mad at him. He hadn't been crying, but god it looked like he'd been hating himself. Angel did that loudly, enough to shake the room, but Wesley did it so quietly.

Gunn stood in the doorway for about a minute. He only had one new idea for what to say: to remind Wesley about all the people he'd saved, and he couldn't imagine launching straight into that. Finally he went over and knelt down next to Wesley and said, “Are you thinkin' what you're usually thinkin'? Or's this somethin' else? You were – more like you used to be, last night. I thought maybe you'd worked something out.”

A long pause, then quietly, hard like a splinter: “I forgot. I let myself forget.”

“Wha'd' you forget?”

“What I really am. What I was – made for.”

Made for sitting on a cement floor. Getting up at dawn to wash his boyfriend's come out of his clothes. “Sounds like you are thinkin' the usual.”

A nod that was partly a shrug, and a turning away; all slight, like it didn't matter to him, couldn't matter to Gunn.

"So what're you sayin'?" Gunn tried to keep his voice quiet, like he was asking some harmless question about English college kids. "That I'll be jerkin' off in the bathroom from now until... I dunno... we're gettin' sent out to save the grandkids of the guys from that party." He took a deep breath and tried again for quiet. "Know that sounds like I'm... It's not about me. 'n' of course you've took it hard, don't wanna meet the guy who could just shrug it off, but..." A quick shake of the head. "I don't think you forgot, last night, I think you remembered: that you're a good man." Wesley flinched and brought his hand up to his face, held it like he was shielding his eyes from Gunn. "You're good, Wes. You're brave and honest and you never count the cost, not to yourself, and you worry about the strangest shit – when it comes to keeping yourself straight, keeping other people straight. And everyone can see that. You're well past due for givin' yourself a break, for swearing off that crazy shit you been talkin'. And last night... Yeah, you were still kinda fucked up but you coulda made it a start. You don't have to do this, man." And then he sighed, shrugged, and stepped back to lean against the door and wait for Wesley's reply. He'd give it five minutes, and then he'd go make coffee.

Less than half a minute, and Wesley slowly got to his feet. He turned, rested his hand on the top of the drier, and then started talking to some spot on the wall just above the washer. "I'd be glad to suck you off. Whenever you needed. But I couldn't do it like a lover. So you might prefer to imagine..."

"Imagine!" Gunn had jerked away from the wall like it had given him a shock. "What's it mean, then, when you call a man your 'darling'? That he knows how you take your coffee? Or – What happened to you last night? What the hell've you been thinking? Why would you say that?"

Finally Wesley looked at him. Very slowly: "I can't have... pleasure. I shouldn't be – I shouldn't have that freedom. When I look at what I am. What I've always been. The cost of that, to other people. If I count that cost..." He shook his head, over and over. "How could I let myself take anything?"

A long pause, then Gunn said, "What're the three most fucked-up things about what you just said? That I'm thinkin' right now? Know you're smart enough to find ten, but I just want y'r best three."

Wesley sighed and looked down at the washer, which was reaching the peak of a spin cycle. "That it doesn't do anyone else any good, if I live like a monk, it doesn't make up for anything. That I'm making you live like a monk too, when you're the last person who deserves... And what about all the people I've helped, who'd be sending cases of champagne to our door every day, if only they knew our address." Gunn had them in a different order, but he wouldn't mark Wesley down for that. "That doesn't..." Eyes back to Gunn. "Charles. I woke up. And I heard a car pull up outside and the doors slammed. And I imagined... If there'd been a trial. For me. They'd finally organised it, they'd finally decided I had to be – And they'd met, and they'd heard everything. I could imagine how they'd been when they passed judgement: hardly even angry, just sad. That I'd been allowed to –" A shudder, then he shook his head and swallowed. "That I'd been allowed to do so much damage for so long. And the sound of the car pulling up, that meant it was over, they were coming to take me away. To somewhere... where they could make sure there was nothing more I could ever do. Not just this morning. I imagine that almost every morning. At almost any sound from the street. And I'm always..."

"Disappointed. When they don't break down the door."

Wesley nodded. "I'd have to explain, anyway. About Angel and the visions. That they couldn't take me. But it's what – It would be right. On so many levels."

He'd fallen asleep in Gunn's arms, and woken up wanting to be beaten senseless in a demon jail cell. So what else would you do, then, but get up and do laundry?

Gunn sighed and shrugged. "You made a mistake, Wes, but..." Another sigh. "I'm sick of saying that and you're sick of hearing it. I'm going back up to make the coffee. And I'll bring you one, don't care if you want it or not. And sit in the chair, for God's sake."

A small smile, and Wesley nodded. "Thank you."

* * * * *

Wesley said the vision hadn't hit Angel particularly hard – not like the first vision he'd had after he started to become lucid again – but to watch Angel you'd think his mind had been thrown in a blender. Even Angelus was having

hallucinations: of being surrounded by willing victims, and he had moments of seeming genuinely confused about how to deal with them.

They still hadn't been able to feed Angel by the time they went to bed on Sunday night. Gunn was woken around two by the sound of Wesley moaning in one of his bad dreams. Gunn decided not to wake Wesley up but to wait for five minutes, see if the dream played itself out, and while he was waiting Angel started up too, yelling something about, "No, no, you don't do that! You don't make me," and then he was banging on the wall by the door. Could take an hour for that to stop, so Wes could moan twice as loud now about being locked away, he still wouldn't be the one keeping Gunn awake.

And then Angel screamed, in real, shocked pain, and there was a crackling sound before the scream that couldn't have been made by Angel's lungs or his fists, a sound that was wrong. Gunn leapt out of bed and ran into the living room, grabbing his robe on the way. Angel wasn't on the screen. "Angel! Get away from the door. Go over and stand by your mattress." Angel didn't move. Gunn could hear his gasping breath, right by the door.

"What's happening? What's he doing?" Wesley had just come out of the bedroom.

"Think he's burned himself. Sounded bad. Like he's... I guess he thinks there's guards in with him, like to hold him against the door. I told him to get back but he's just standin' there."

"Angel. Can you hear me? You should go and lie down. It's late. You should try to sleep."

More breathing, then slow scraping noises against the wall, and finally, a muttering. "It doesn't – He'll pretend. They pretend. He won't – It won't stop. Just in here." Then he shouted, "You stop!" and he seemed to throw himself against the door. He held himself there, screaming, through the time it took Wesley to slide both bolts and yell at Gunn to get the net and the pikes and the chains and then Angel staggered back and fell to the ground.

"What we gonna do?" Wesley was waiting with the key in the lock, crossbow slung over his shoulder.

"Chain him between the plates. If we can get him over there. Otherwise... just chain him. We might have to wrap him in a blanket if we can't stop him crawling back to the door."

" 'n' if it's Angelus?"

"You go in with the net. I'll cover you. He won't get out."

Angel was slowly getting to his feet, giving small grunts of pain and effort. Wesley made ready to open the door and whispered, "Now. While he's off-balance." Gunn kicked the door open, which knocked Angel sprawling, threw the net over him then backed off nearly to the door to give Wesley a clear line and to size up what they were dealing with.

They were dealing with Angel naked, and if there was a break in the line of burns that stretched between his collarbones and his thighs, well, Gunn couldn't see it. He'd burned both sides of his face, the right much worse than the left, and Gunn guessed that the left had been the first scream.

Angel's cock... with the rough twine of the net lying across it, a knot, two knots. If Angel tried to get up, pulled the net taut... "Holy Christ." Gunn breathed the words, trying not to imagine, and feeling the skin over half his body shiver and twist like it wanted to hide inside his bones. The guards had done this to Angel in hell. They must have. Even made him do it to himself, take his own clothes off? Which would mean that they'd had a threat of something worse.

Angel wasn't trying to get up, he wasn't struggling against the net; but he wasn't lying rigid, trying not to move because of the pain. Instead he seemed... Relaxed couldn't be right. Relieved? Like he knew it was over now, nothing more the guards could do to him. So he must know Wesley, even this deep in hell.

Wesley had come into the room, keeping the crossbow trained on Angel's chest, and now he was standing a few feet from Angel's head, just past the edge of the net. Angel had turned his head slightly towards Wesley, but not to look at him – couldn't seem to look away from the open doorway. Ideas about escaping? Or was this another part of his hallucination: watching the guards leave?

"What do you think, Charles? I think we still need to chain him unless we want to stand watch over him all night. But you'd be the one who'd have to take the net off and get in range of him. What do you think of the risk?"

Gunn shrugged and took a step towards Angel. “Angel? How you doin’ with those burns? You know you’re safe now, don’t you? It’s over.”

No sign that Angel was hearing Gunn, but then he gave a long sigh and closed his eyes. Relief. Yeah, it was relief.

“That risk’s OK. But we gotta get him between the plates. Stop him gettin’ back to the door, like you said. No way I’m wrappin’ a blanket round those burns, not a sheet, nothin’.”

Wesley nodded. “So how do we move him? I don’t think –” In a different voice: “Angel, can you stand up? I know it will hurt but Charles will help you. We need you to move so we can take proper care of you.” Nothing. Wesley pulled a face and said, “I suppose we’ll have to put a chain around his neck and drag him.”

“Yeah. I’ll bring everything in. Get it ready first.” Being out in the living-room gave Gunn another idea, but he didn’t say anything about it until he’d finished setting up the chains. “I just thought... If he’s not nauseous from the pain, he might be hungry enough that he’d follow me across to get fed.”

Gunn couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Wesley so relieved. When Lilah Morgan had called about the apartment, maybe. Or when Gunn had started finding them clients.

Angel was hungry, and the smell of the blood reached him, when he couldn’t even seem to hear his own name. Still a very tough few minutes, though: trying to stop him from hurting himself against the net; expecting the worst with every movement, for the pain to turn him savage. His hands were raw and blistered so Wesley held the beaker for him while he drank, and that was when Gunn fitted the chains to his neck, wrists and ankles, leaving enough slack between his wrists that he’d be able to lie easily on his back.

“It stopped. I made it stop. I can. In here.” A pause in his drinking, near the end. He did seem to be speaking to Wesley.

“Yes. It stopped. I think you’ve learned how to make it stop.”

Angel’s clothes were in a pile in the corner by the door, where he must have been standing when he was banging on the wall. Wesley gathered them up and put them in the laundry basket while Gunn was folding the net.

Angel didn’t like it when they left and closed the door, was complaining hard before Wesley had finished washing the beaker. “No. It has to be in here. With me. I can make it stop.”

Gunn thought they should leave Angel alone, at least give him a chance to settle down, but he didn’t argue hard when Wesley wanted to go back in and sit with him for a while. Angel was lying there with seeping burns on his cock, for Christ’s sake. And he’d been incredibly tough about all that, not one sign of feeling sorry for himself. So whatever was bothering him now, yeah, he deserved some attention, even Wesley stroking his hair. Gunn watched the screen from the kitchen while he was waiting for the kettle to boil for tea, wondering how many hours it would be before Angel would let Wesley leave.

It turned out to be less than ten minutes. Gunn had just decided that he would go back to bed, that Wesley would be safe even if he fell asleep in there, when Wesley came out with his tea not even started, saying that Angel had fallen asleep very suddenly, might even have switched off.

Gunn wanted to be held: he wanted help in calming himself down after seeing those burns and hearing those screams. He could ask Wesley, Wesley probably wouldn’t say no. But he might say “not as a lover”. Or something worse, something even more fucked up. And God knows what state Gunn would find him in the next morning. So he thought of Alonna, like she’d been three or four years ago. Imagined telling her what he’d just been through with Angel. And her going, “Woah!” and “You mean he was -?” and then “Oh, Charles, you must be...” and hugging him and hugging him, like she needed it too, just from hearing the story.

That helped, did give him some of what he needed. Made him miss her, remember how they’d been able to tell each other everything - until the vamps had moved in. Strange sort of comfort, to be remembering all that. And how long had it been since he’d done any serious thinking about anything except Wesley and Angel?

“Helluva way to wake up, eh, Wes? Come out of a nightmare and find him like that. He’s just beat my worst ever dream.”

“You were having a nightmare?” Wesley sounded concerned, was raising himself up to look at Gunn, though he wouldn’t see much in this light.

“No. You were. Something about being locked in somewhere, I think. Y’ don’t remember any of it?”

Wesley slumped back down. “I must have woken you up. I’m sorry.”

Gunn shrugged. “Wouldn’t have lasted long. Sounded like one of your short ones. I da been asleep again in half an hour.”

A pause. “Could I have woken Angel too? Was I making that much noise.?”

“Man. Who knows what he hears? What he sees, even. Don’t wanna know, anyone’s offerin’ me a choice.”

Angel was in hell for all of Monday. Gunn gagged him on Monday night before they went to bed, because he knew from what they’d heard during the day that he and Wesley could forget about sleeping if Angelus appeared. The burns had healed a lot – maybe ten times faster than with a human – but they were still frightening. Gunn put thick gauze between Angel’s face and the gag, and he was as gentle as he knew how to be, with Wesley holding up Angel’s head and making his soothing noises. They didn’t speak to one another as they were getting ready for bed, didn’t meet each other’s eyes, but when they’d been in bed for about ten minutes, both on their backs the same as Angel, Wesley’s hand moved to cover Gunn’s hand – just a faint pressure through the bedding – and Wesley said, “We had to do it, Charles. The burns will be healed by the morning. And he’ll forget it all just as quickly.”

“Yeah. Just wishin’ I could forget.”

Angel was lying quietly when they got up the next morning, awake but not cringing. Possibly lucid, definitely able to be fed, and Gunn went in to remove the gag while Wesley heated the blood. Now Angel just looked like he had bad sunburn plus maybe an allergy to a soap or something. The gauze lifted away smoothly, no sticking or snagging.

“Thank you.”

Gunn nodded. “Good to see you’re OK. Don’t wanna do that again, someone with those burns.”

“What did he do? Did he try to escape?” Angelus. He thought it was all punishment for Angelus.

“Looked like that. He didn’t get far.”

Gunn started unlocking the chains, taking the neck first, and he was dealing with Angel’s hands when Wesley arrived with the blood. Gunn was kneeling with his back to the door and had all his attention on reaching over Angel to free his left hand, but he knew the moment that Wesley came into Angel’s field of view, because Angel gasped and the next second Gunn felt something cold and hard pressing against his forearm, and that was Angel’s cock. Gunn gasped himself and dropped the keys as he jerked back; the keys landed on Angel’s stomach, just above his navel.

“What’s – Oh.” Wesley had seen and was blushing, and Angel was rolling onto his side to hide against the wall. The keys slid onto the floor but Gunn was over the shock of that touch now, and he reached in, found the keys, then unlocked Angel’s left hand by feel.

“Nothing to worry about, Angel. Y’ know we’ve seen it all before. More you help me with this, quicker we can get out and leave you alone.” Angel didn’t roll back, but he did let Gunn have his right arm.

Wesley put the beaker down on the floor. “I’ll get you some clothes, Angel.” He came back when Gunn was gathering up the chains, and he’d brought Gunn’s robe as well as a change of clothes. “This might be easier on your skin. Just for today. Call when you want us to take away the beaker.”

Wesley turned off the screen then made coffee while Gunn was putting the chains away. “I’m sorry about your robe. I just got the idea and then...” A shrug. “I knew yours would fit him.”

“No problem.” Not really true, but his problem wasn’t with Wesley, and he’d deal with it smooth enough. Angel wearing his robe, jerking off and thinking the horniest, red-haze thoughts about Wesley the way he looked right now:

six-days growth of beard, and needing a haircut, and the bad sleep showing in his face, and those clothes that looked like they'd never been new. Gunn envied Angel for that instant reaction he'd have had himself a month ago. Envied Angel for having no idea how much it hurt these days, to be in love with Wesley, and for being someone that Wesley would bother to pretend with, to try to be normal with. Angel was in there wearing Gunn's robe, maybe thinking he'd do better for Wesley than Gunn, that Wesley just needed to sleep.

When Gunn came back that evening from a couple of hours of legwork, he found Wesley in with Angel, reading, and learned that his robe was drying downstairs. The next morning, Wesley got a haircut for his meeting with Lilah Morgan, and on Thursday, while Gunn was at the beach-house with Matt and Grouw, Wesley started reading again, properly: one of Angel's books, some deadly-looking European history thing. Gunn, personally, would rather stare at the wallpaper but Wesley was reading on the couch, and not even with a notepad near to pretend he was reading for work.

By the next week, he was asking real questions about Gunn's cases, not just his schedule for the day but more and more details and soon he was making suggestions, though always like he was asking Gunn's opinion, getting clear on something Gunn had just said, and Gunn worked his ass off to play along, act like Wes was some clueless civilian who didn't even realise these clients of Gunn's were demons. The hardest part for Gunn was keeping the affectionate smile off his face and stopping himself from going over and kissing Wesley. It felt like flirting, all the hints and sighs, the thing between them that they wouldn't name, had agreed not even to look at, all their attention focused on steering each other close enough that they could feel it brush against their clothes. And Wesley was so good at this, he took it so seriously.

Gunn kept the smile off his face mostly by making a list in his mind of that day's evidence that Wesley still had a long way to go. He still slammed shut after training with the crew, he'd been buying more of those damn thrift-shop clothes, but the surest thing every day was the dreams, which were getting more and more violent. Gunn hadn't taken any damage yet, not with the layers of bedding between them, but he'd started sleeping with his back towards Wesley because his face had been feeling very exposed.

The dreams were usually short and Gunn couldn't tell much about what was happening. Wesley fought back in about half (with grunts and snarls, but no words), and in the others he was trying to escape, sometimes from Angel (or with Angel?), and Gunn thought that some of the dreams were about being in Angel's chains, and some of the screams were about burning. The rest must be from Wesley's past, or from nowhere. The times he shouted, "You know it's rape," Gunn knew he was back as far as that school (but finally angry about it, and Gunn thought, "I taught him that."). His dreams about Gunn came from nowhere and were almost peaceful, never above a moan ("No, Charles. You don't want to hurt me. It's wrong. Stop. You can't.") And the Gunn in Wesley's dream always did stop.)

Wesley said what he always said now: that he didn't know he was having nightmares. Even when he fell off the bed trying to escape, he said he didn't remember anything, had no idea why he'd woken up with his heart pounding. Gunn described some of the most violent dreams (not the rape, not the ones with him in them), but Wesley just shrugged and said it sounded like a vision, and offered to sleep on the couch.

"No. Ain't that bad. Not every night." A lie, like Wesley was lying about not remembering. Would be good, to sleep right through the night. But if he let Wesley go to the couch, when would he ever get him back?

* * * * *

Angel was watching Gunn. He didn't usually do more than glance at him during feeding, but now he was staring, though trying to be subtle, make it part of the drinking and take no more than a few seconds at a time. That must be for Wesley, because he wasn't subtle at all when Gunn was standing guard on him in the shower. The staring in the shower would give Angel an erection (or a start on one, anyway), but Gunn knew Angel too well to take that personally; Angel was planning something, or working on a new theory to do with Wesley, like the time he'd had so much to say to Gunn about shower-gel and muscles, and then had got Wesley mad by making stupid jokes about the book and Wesley's arm. After the second shower, Gunn thought of warning Wesley, but what would he really be saying? "The next crazy, unpredictable thing he does... Might be a few days earlier than if he wasn't staring at me."? You lived with Angel, you were always expecting something.

* * * * *

On the first Wednesday in November, Angel didn't wake up until after Wesley had left for his meeting with Lilah Morgan. Gunn hadn't fed Angel on his own since Angel got lucid again after the vision of the vampires and the college

kids, and when he went in with the blood Angel looked surprised and disappointed, and then like he'd just worked something out, something serious.

"Are they talking to him?" Angel had taken the beaker, but hadn't made any move to drink.

"He's got a meeting. Yeah."

Angel nodded slowly, took a step back and then drank very slowly indeed, doing his usual feeding routine of glancing at Gunn for about two seconds in every ten. Gunn put his hands in his pockets and waited.

Angel finished and Gunn held his hand out, but Angel shook his head, frowned, then said suddenly, "Don't leave him. You're the only one who's ever made him happy with sex."

What? What the fuck? "What the – Where'd' you – Where the hell d' you get that? You thinkin' he told you?"

Angel just shook his head again. "Don't leave him."

"Who said I was ever gonna? Where d' you get that? 'n' what the fuck d' you think you know about... Leave him? Why would you think that? Couldn't've got it from watchin' me. Why d' you say that? You even know why?"

A long pause, with Angel looking wary but determined. "I know he won't let you. You want – more."

"What, you smell that?" Gunn wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or not. He took a moment to weigh both sides, still wasn't sure, and gave a deep sigh. "So you asked him and he told you it was none of your business. But that's never stopped you when you're dreamin' up theories." Helluva theory, though, Gunn about to leave and somehow having great sex with Wesley at the same time. "H've you been botherin' him with this? Tellin' him I'm gonna leave?"

Angel looked like he didn't know what to say, and he shrank back slightly. Gunn gave another sigh, exasperated, then snatched the beaker from Angel's hand. "I'm not going to leave. How could I? You don't say that again. I don't wanna hear it, and you never say it to him."

Gunn expected Angel to resent the order: he was looking for that as the sign he'd got through. But instead Angel nodded, smiled just a shade and said, "He'll get better. He thinks he won't, but he will."

"Yeah." Gunn wanted to say, "We'll help him," but he didn't know how they would. He and Angel looked at one another for a few moments, then Gunn turned to leave. At the door he said, "He'll be back in a couple of hours," and when he next looked up at the screen he saw that Angel had settled himself against the wall with the books.

Don't leave him. That must have been what was behind the staring. Angel sizing him up. Trying to guess how close he was to packing his bags and getting turned on because... then he might have a chance with Wesley?

But he didn't want Gunn to go. He wanted Wesley to get back to having sex with Gunn. That was what he'd been saying, wasn't it?

Don't leave him. Gunn shook his head over and over, part of the amazement that he was even trying to guess how Angel's mind that thrown that up. Angel couldn't have got it from watching Gunn, because Gunn knew he'd behaved just the same as usual in front of Angel. But maybe from listening to Wesley's nightmares or to Gunn telling Wesley he was fucked up. Or from noticing they hardly talked any more, they never laughed together. And if that was gone then what did they have?

Yeah. Maybe. Maybe Angel could have got it from that. When he had nothing to do but listen and imagine and think about the change in Wesley. Ask Wesley about his new clothes, and you could read a lifetime of bad news into that expression.

Angel had started the staring over a week ago, once he'd got lucid again after the burning. He would have told Wesley his new theory in that time, wouldn't he? Told him indirectly, at least, through asking strange questions about him and Gunn. And Wesley would have said... Well, obviously not enough to reassure Angel.

Angel didn't want Gunn to leave, he didn't want Wesley all to himself. He wanted Gunn to stay and make Wesley happy. Like he'd said right at the beginning, when Gunn had still thought he was human. It wasn't important if he liked

Gunn or not, if Gunn was making his life more difficult. “Wesley smells different.” “He’s happy.” Angel had lost all of his memories of that time, but he was still the same person.

Wesley came back with lunch for both of them, and with another thrift-shop bag (a grey, long-sleeved top with a couple of buttons at the neck, and a pale-green cotton sweater). Angel seemed to be asleep again, lying on the mattress with a book open under his arm.

“He’s been reading while I was out? Did you manage to feed him?”

Gunn just nodded then, but they sat down and ate their lunch together, and towards the end he said, “Y’know Angel’s been starin’ at me the last week? Y’seen him sneakin’ looks during feedin’? Well, today he said...” Gunn paused and frowned. “Been wonderin’ what he’s said to you. If he’s tried to warn you. ‘n’ how you’d...” A shrug. “Did you know he thought I was gonna leave you?”

Wesley looked shocked, then swallowed. Almost in a whisper: “What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Don’t leave him.’ Said it more than once. ‘n’ said some stuff about the sex. Like... that’s why I’d leave.” Wesley was frozen with horror. Gunn reached out and touched his hand, about to tell him how wrong Angel had been, but Wesley snatched his hand away, and now Wesley was looking even more wary than Angel had looked. “Wes, what’s...” Gunn shook his head, out of ideas about what was going on. “You never even thought it before? Or he did warn you but he was never supposed to bring it to me?”

Now Wesley had another of Angel’s expressions on his face: of having no idea what to say, which was how Angel had looked when Gunn had asked if he’d been warning Wesley. It wasn’t guilt, and he’d seen guilt from both of them often enough. It wasn’t being stubborn, it wasn’t stonewalling, it was blankness. Not able to find any reaction because the question just didn’t connect – it was too far from the truth.

So... Wesley had thought it before, about Gunn leaving but not because Angel had warned him. And the way Wesley had looked wary, the way he’d asked in a whisper what Angel had said...

“You told him, didn’t you? You told him I was gonna leave. You told him weeks ago.” Guilt, a flood of guilt. And not wary any more: downright scared. “When, Wes? When d’ you tell him? ‘n’ for Christ’s sake why?”

Wesley closed his eyes hard. “I can’t remember.”

“Don’t make me tell you to stop fucking lying. Or d’ you want me to wait and ask him?”

Wesley looked up at the screen, then quickly down at the table. “I really can’t remember when. Maybe a few days before the vision. But – It was always obvious that I should make you leave. That you shouldn’t waste yourself. But I’m not strong enough. I couldn’t face...”

You’d die if I left. The visions would kill you. Words that Gunn could never speak, would never want to. And of course that wasn’t what Wesley had meant about being strong.

“You know I love you?” Wesley nodded, gaze still on the table. “Then you know why you’re wrong with all of that. But why’d you tell him? You didn’t try to sort it out with me, find out my side. But you told him. Is there anything you wouldn’t tell him?”

“He – He understands.”

And I don’t? “So what did he say? About me leaving.” Probably not that it was fucked up, or that Wesley was half-crazy from shock and guilt. Restful. Angel played it restful.

“He asked what we did together, what we talked about. What you had left, now that I was... If we weren’t really together.”

So Angel knew about the jerking off in the bathroom. Another explanation for his hard-ons in the shower. A long conversation that. A serious conversation between close, close friends. Gunn imagined them sitting against the wall, the book on Wesley’s knee forgotten almost immediately. And other days when they didn’t even need to talk. They were alike in a lot of ways, they understood.

“Do you let him hold you?” Not jealous, just wanting to know how much difference it made to Wesley, whatever it was that Angel managed to do. Gunn expected Wesley to sigh and shrug and say “Sometimes” – like the time Gunn had thought they were having sex – but instead Wesley blushed and shuddered and closed his eyes.

So that was “Always”. At the very least, it was “Always”.

“OK, Wes. Guess I asked the wrong questions again. Landed way short. What should I have asked, to be dead on?” More blushing, and then some squirming in which Wesley pushed his chair back. “It’s as bad as it looks?” Angel, seeing Wesley for the first time since the vision, gasping and turning rock-hard in seconds.

Wesley turned his head sharply to the side, then opened his eyes and looked at Gunn past the sides of his glasses. On a sigh: “Yes,” and he swallowed hard.

Gunn clenched his jaw over and over, taking five deep breaths. Finally: “You got an excuse? ‘It’s all for his sake, poor Angel.’ ‘n’ of course you thought it would be over in a week. Y’know, all the excuses you can’t find for fucking me!”

“He – He hurts me. I can ask him to do that. It’s simple for him.”

That was an excuse? That was supposed to be telling Gunn it was OK? There was too much Gunn needed to say (needed to shout), but he started with, “What does he do?” and his voice was tight and low.

“Now he just holds me down. He’s rough.”

“He rapes you.”

“That’s what we call it. What we both call it.”

“Every day.” Gunn had been out for at least two hours every day. Wesley nodded. “Since when? When did it start?” Gunn couldn’t imagine how it could ever start. Not his Wesley.

A long sigh, and Wesley turned his head back to look properly at Gunn. “The Saturday. The Saturday after. You’d gone out to call all our clients. He heard me crying. I told him not to worry, that nothing was wrong but he wouldn’t accept that and he took his clothes off and threatened to burn himself to get me to open the door. I went in and I told him what I’d done, what I knew I was, and he offered to kill me.”

“He what?”

Wesley carried on like Gunn hadn’t spoken. “I said no but talking about it excited him, and he was still naked so we could both see how he was reacting, and we talked about what he was. After a while he did make a move to hold me, and when I told him that it had to be rape, he – That wasn’t a problem for him.”

The first Saturday. When Wesley had gone out to the grocery store for Gunn’s curry, and had come back with two bags of second-hand clothes. Saying the man who Gunn had fallen in love with was a shell, saying he couldn’t pretend any more.

“You saying you’d let me fuck you every day if I called it rape? Made it rough enough?”

Wesley shook his head. “I don’t want to see you like that. You’re not like that. You’re good. Angel and I... we’re lost, it doesn’t matter what we do.”

“It matters to me! You ever think about me? Or you just think, ‘He’s gonna leave, anyway. Nothin’ holdin’ me back.’ God! Can’t be a minute goes by when I don’t think about you, want what’s best for you.”

“I know. I see it and I admire you more than ever, I love you more than ever. But there’s no best for me, Charles. I need to be treated for what I am and that’s what Angel does. It gives me... It gives me faith in the world. That there might really be a balance of natural justice.”

“ ‘Treated for what you are.’ You’re out of your mind with guilt, that’s what you are. You’re crazier than he is, right now. ‘n’ you’re that way ‘cos you want to be. There’s a way to make it worse, you’ll find it, you’ll fucking write your

name on it. ‘n’ you think he’s different from me, that he agrees with the shit you come out with, but he’s just going along with it, it’s his way of keepin’ you close while he waits for you to get better. Yeah. He told me you’re gonna get better. So he knows y’re fucked up right now.”

“Yes. We’ve talked about it. About his experience of avoiding the world. He tells me the stages in the hundred years that it took him, the different ways in which he fought the distractions. Sometimes I think he’s waiting. At other times I think he’s warning me.”

There was nothing Gunn could say that would make any impression on Wesley. What could you do with someone who wouldn’t even really defend himself, who didn’t want you to believe that he was still a good person? – if you’d just give him a chance to prove it, he’d make up for everything. Wesley hadn’t even bothered to think of what would happen when Gunn found out.

So what would happen?

Well, Gunn would have to do something to both of them, he would have to. If he didn’t, what would that make him? God, after all those times being jealous over almost nothing, the hurting he’d felt then, the twisting anger. He should be in there now, holding Angel against the door, not gonna stop until... Until he reached the screams that said that Angel simply couldn’t believe that this was possible. Until Wesley’s voice was broken from pleading for his vampire. Gunn was entitled after what they’d done. But instead...

He got up and went over to Angel’s door. Wesley gasped and jumped to his feet, and was only a second too late in trying to stop Gunn from taking the key.

“No! You can’t blame him. He wanted – It was me.”

“Yeah. I’ll remember that. For when I’ve stopped counting to ten.” Or a thousand. Or a million. However long he was going to feel just sad and sidelined and out of his depth. He put the key in his pocket. “It’s over. You don’t get to see him again.”

A pause, then Wesley nodded slowly. “Of course. Thank you.”

Gunn shrugged. “Yeah. I’m going out. Had enough of the both of you.”

“What if he gets a vision?”

Another shrug, while Gunn was picking up his jacket. “He talks, doesn’t he? ‘s enough with Angelus.”

Gunn drove to the beach, walked for a couple of miles, then sat for a long time, mostly with his eyes closed. Would he leave? If there weren’t any visions, if he could leave, would he?

No. No, he probably wouldn’t. Not over this. Wesley thought he didn’t understand but he did. He understood the guilt and the despair, and that it might be easier (yeah, even restful) just to give up on yourself, think nothing but the worst. He couldn’t agree, he had to put the other side, but he did understand. And it meant something to him that Wesley had been trying to protect him, that Wesley had gone to Angel because he didn’t want to take that need to someone he loved. That must be why he didn’t feel jealous, or like he was being used, made a fool of. A bad time, a terrible time, but this was still where he was meant to be.

On the way back to the truck he remembered there was training that evening, and he called Rondell to say not to expect them.

“You got a tip-off?”

“Somethin’s come up, yeah. Should be OK for Sunday, though.” If he was gonna suddenly get mad with Wesley, it should’ve happened by Sunday. Till then... He didn’t trust himself to watch Wesley at his trick of putting on a front for the crew, not while he had a sword in his hands and too many questions about the front that Wesley had been putting on for him.

“Cool. Hey, we’re startin’ a new class for Anne. You got any time for it? Can see you’re comin’ up with more ideas than ever. Good to keep things fresh.” Yeah, he’d learned a lot in the year, more than the crew. Some from Angel, some

from Wesley (but Wesley had learned everything from Angel), but mostly from the duals. Gunn said sure, he'd do the class and they talked about times and plans. When they were done Gunn was about to hang up when Rondell said, "'s weird to have you back. Y'know, first few months was sure we'd never see you again. Took some bets on where you'd move to when it didn't work out. 'cos, hell, look at him!" Then quickly: "Back then, man. This is back then. When we thought we didn't know you at all."

"Yeah, I – I coulda played that smoother."

"Nah, clean break. But turns out we did know you, you're just the same, and he – I could kinda see his cool, I guess, after the theatre, even when he was still actin' so damn British. But now you got him to loosen up, dress like he's finally, y' know, in the same time-zone... Never thought I'd say it about a white guy with glasses, but he's definitely cool."

Gunn managed to laugh. "You want me to tell him that?" But that was a no.

When Gunn had hung up, he had to fight the urge to throw the phone at the nearest rock. Loosen up! Jesus! Saying that he'd got Wesley to "loosen up", like he'd dragged Wesley along to the thrift shop and pushed him inside. Rondell was looking at a nervous fucking breakdown (near as dammit), and he thought what he saw was "cool".

It was past five and Gunn wasn't nearly ready to go home. There was a movie theatre in Manhattan Beach, there had to be something he could watch. "Memento" was the next film starting, and he didn't hate the idea. He got a soda and a hotdog, and just before he went in he called Wesley and told him that he'd cancelled training. He hung up before Wesley could ask where he was, when he'd be back, if Wesley would even have tried.

Strange film. Kept him thinking, didn't try to make him laugh – which was good. And maybe anything he'd seen right then would've reminded him somehow of Wesley and Angel, but the guy did look like Wesley. Such a thin face, and so uptight. And the stubble. Afterwards Gunn couldn't remember if the guy had been wearing glasses or not, which said to Gunn that he should have been. A haunted man, too. Something in his past that wouldn't let him go, that shut him off from everything else in the world. Gunn had wanted to hold him, to bring him back into the world for just five minutes, show him that there was more. It would mean something, even if he knew throughout those five minutes that the damage to the man's brain would make him forget what Gunn had showed him, and almost immediately. And that was Angel, that was what Wesley went through with Angel.

Gunn thought about the Mexican restaurant, Wesley explaining why Angel couldn't go on patrol with the crew ("Sometimes he doesn't know who I am."), and Gunn thinking they must be lovers, and Wesley laughing so hard ("He'd never think of me like that."). It should probably make him feel bitter, like he'd been tricked, but instead it reminded him again why he wasn't going to leave. Wesley was worth it; and whatever he and Angel had together, it wasn't nearly enough to make Wesley happy.

After the film Gunn thought he might go home, maybe read or something for the rest of the evening, depending what mood Wesley was in. He was near the beach-house, though, and he hadn't seen Matt for weeks, so he called to invite himself around for just half an hour. He caught Matt on his way out, but he was on his way out to Caritas, and to meet Grouw, so Gunn should definitely come along.

Matt and Grouw were friends again. Not in the same way, because it wasn't the same without Piriti. They didn't sing, or not while Gunn was there, but they did talk a lot about what they might sing, when they felt right about it. Grouw had seen Piriti at the weekend – that is, he'd seen him turn and dive into the nest at the first sight of Grouw's car. Solito had told Grouw that Piriti had gotten rid of his pager, that he didn't want to talk to anybody. More than that: he started shaking at the idea of meeting anyone new, having any stranger even see him, because anyone out there could be another Barney.

"I said I just wanted to help, we all did. But he's not ready. Solito thinks he'll be like this for months."

Gunn said, "How's Solito doing? 's tough on him?"

Grouw shrugged. "I guess. Seems older. Acts older than Piriti now, when he was always..." Another shrug. "Wes still bad?" Gunn just nodded, and neither Grouw nor Matt asked anything more.

Gunn got home just before eleven. Wesley had turned the armchair to face the door, and looked like he'd done nothing for hours except sit and wait. He was getting to his feet when Gunn opened the door, and his expression said that he'd do anything, as soon as he had the first clue about what Gunn wanted.

Angel was in his corner, starting to stand up, moving very slowly like he was preparing himself for something bad.

"You tell him what happened? Tell him it's over?" Wesley nodded. "So what'd he say?"

A pause. "He wanted to know what you were going to do to him. If you would do it yourself or have the others... I said it wouldn't be the others but he's... He's been having the hallucinations."

Good. He should. "What about the door? He try to make you open it? He got burns under that shirt?"

"He – I managed to make him believe me in time. That I couldn't open it."

About what Gunn had expected. He gave a grunt and went straight to get the chains. He wasn't going to let Angel disturb his sleep again.

"Go in the bedroom. Shut the door. You don't get any chance to see each other." Wesley went, looking almost relieved, and then Gunn took the key from his pocket and unlocked Angel's door.

Angel was afraid of him. Gunn liked that. Though Angel had to know he was stronger than Gunn, faster. If he decided to put up a fight, there would be no contest.

"Move your mattress over by the wall." The wall with the bolt-plates. "Not right against it. Leave about a foot."

But Angel never did fight. When they had confrontations – and there hadn't been many, not really – the most he'd do was flare up for a few seconds, and then he'd retreat. Angry, but never with a plan.

Well, he knew it was hopeless. He'd never get out, and anything he tried, he'd pay for hard. The guards from his time in a real hell had made him give up hope, and Gunn just got the benefit of what they'd done to him.

"Lie face-down with your hands by your sides. No, not behind your back, you're not getting a shower. Down by your sides."

He was only chaining Angel's hands, not his feet or his neck, and he gave him room enough to lie however he wanted, to draw if he got a vision, or even to sit up. Gunn had no idea when or how he might decide to let Angel out of the chains. Maybe once Angel had shown that he'd learned (or forgotten?); and there was nothing he could do to force Wesley to open the door. Or maybe there'd be a point where Gunn would start to feel pity, when he'd be willing to take on the work of chaining him again every evening, gambling on his state of mind.

Gunn got off the mattress and picked up the gag from the floor. He wasn't going to use it after all; if Angel got a vision, Gunn wanted the option of being able to deal with it without having to open the door. "You can move now if you want."

Angel lifted his head slightly towards Gunn, then shifted onto his back, almost in one movement. They looked at one another. Angel wasn't scared any more.

"Y'think I'm gonna go easy on you? 'cos I've only done y'r hands? You don't know me."

Slowly: "You'll do what you need to do. What you should do."

A long silence, then Gunn said suddenly, "What's the worst thing about what you did with him?"

Angel frowned and sighed, dragged his head from side to side, and got an erection. Finally: "I never tried to make him stop. I acted as if... It was."

"You said you'd kill him. You think about it."

Angel closed his eyes for several seconds, then: "I'd break his neck."

“And then you’d fuck his corpse!”

Supposed to be too much, supposed to provoke, but Angel had got here long before Gunn, and forgotten the view from the other side. He just shook his head. “Afterwards... There wouldn’t be... I don’t know.”

Gunn fought hard not to imagine. His breath and his hands shuddered, and the gag creaked in his grasp. “Is this... Do you love him?” Meaning: is this the only way you love? Is this all you know how to do?

“I can’t.”

Angel couldn’t love Wesley. So the things Gunn had thought he’d seen, they hadn’t meant anything. Another shaking breath, then: “Have you ever thought you could?” Not just asking about loving Wesley now, but about loving anyone.

“He knows I’m a monster.”

“Yeah. I guess he does.” A long sigh. “OK. You want to know what I’m going to do?” A flicker of fear, and Angel nodded. “I’m not going to gag you, I’m going to leave you. I don’t know when I’ll be back. You can imagine anything you want.” Dream, that is, or hallucinate, but Angel wouldn’t know that.

Wesley was sitting slumped on the edge of the bed, just opposite the door. He didn’t stand up when Gunn came in, maybe he slumped even lower. Gunn sat next to him, put a hand on his shoulder then slid it slowly down to his waist, then took Wesley’s hand, put it on his own thigh, and held it there.

Wesley sighed and leaned against him, gripping hard on his thigh. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I know. So what’s gonna change, Wes, now it’s over? What you got for me?”

On another sigh: “I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever known.”

“I want you in our bed. I want to get to hold you. ‘n’ I know why that bothers you, but this isn’t about what you want and think you shouldn’t have, it’s about what I want and fucking deserve. You gonna do that?”

A pause. “I don’t know about sex. About our kind of sex. It makes me feel too much. I couldn’t convince anyone that it was just about you.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t say sex, because right now I’m too angry with you. Don’t trust myself to – Don’t wanna be like him. ‘n’ don’t tell me I couldn’t or he wasn’t angry or... I don’t wanna know, don’t wanna think about what he was, what he wasn’t. It’s too close, he’s too close. Hafta at least wait until he’s forgotten it ever happened. Know you’ll still be – But that’s what it’s about when it’s about me. So you saying yes to the rest?”

“Yes.”

Gunn turned both of the bedside lights on as soon as he came in from the bathroom, before he started getting undressed. He wanted to see as much as he could of Wesley from the moment that Wesley came in. Maybe they hadn’t agreed on that exactly, but that was what Gunn meant by having Wesley back in their bed: having everything like the way it used to be.

Gunn had never seen Wesley getting out of his thrift-shop clothes before. Jackets and shirts used to slide easily off his arm under gravity, but the cotton sweater was a long sequence of wriggling and tugging, and he had to take his glasses off, and at the end he had to use his teeth. Gunn offered to help, but Wesley grunted a no.

Gunn had been concentrating on Wesley’s face and on Wesley’s hand clutching the sweater, and he didn’t see the bruises and scratches until Wesley was sitting on the bed and bending to take off his shoes. And then the chinos were off and Gunn was kneeling up and swearing, and fighting the urge to reach over and fit his hands to the clear prints on Wesley’s hips. Another clear print on his thigh, and that was probably another, nearly faded, half-hidden by a long scratch. Yes, it had been every day. Angel didn’t just hold him down, he slammed him against the wall, against the door. Didn’t hit him though. Probably. Didn’t bite him.

“ ‘n’ I thought you were livin’ like a monk. Actin’ like you were always on duty. You were just coverin’ up.”

“It was all...” Wesley sighed. “It was all part of the same thing.”

Wesley covering up. Wesley making him put the light out, drawing the curtains. Wesley planning, to keep what he wanted, when he talked like there was nothing left for him except waiting for the worst to happen.

“Would you have stopped? If he’d made you?”

Wesley looked surprised, then puzzled. “I wouldn’t have had much choice.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know.”

Which made that a yes, but fair point. He didn’t want to know, he shouldn’t be asking. He lay down again and pulled back the covers on Wesley’s side. “Come on. Get in.”

Wesley settled against him, head on his chest. Gunn hardly ever thought: “If Wesley had a left arm...” but now he found himself thinking that and: “... how would he be holding me now?” It would be a way of telling if this was any kind of relief for Wesley, if he could admit that he needed this. Wesley was tense at first, but then so was Gunn. Wesley was the first to speak, after about ten minutes. “Did it help to go out today? To get away. Did it help you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it helped.” He told Wesley where he’d been, about the film, seeing Matt and Grouw; but he didn’t give any hint of the things he’d been thinking during those hours. Wesley asked about Piriti and about how they’d treated Gunn at Caritas. “Didn’t do more than watch me, see how I handle myself. Then they forget me.” Gunn thought he knew how Wesley had spent the day: talking to Angel, listening to Angel, and wondering if Gunn was going to come back at all.

Angel was moving in his chains. Just trying to get comfortable, Gunn thought, not struggling. At each sound he imagined what Angel might be doing – and he was imagining him naked. And then he was imagining Angel’s hands on Wesley, and knowing exactly where, because of those bruises.

Too angry. Far too angry to do more than hold Wesley like this. Not gripping, not stroking; because that was sex, that was Angel.

Wesley’s bruises. They were as bad as the bruises he’d got from hand-to-hand with the duals. As bad as being beaten up by four demons. Did Angel make Wesley scream? Make him beg? Of course he did, it was in Wesley’s dreams. It was what Wesley wanted. When Wesley had said, “That’s not hurting me,” he hadn’t been reassuring, he’d been complaining.

There had been hand-prints in the bruises from the duals. On his hips and his legs and his arm. Along with twenty, thirty other kinds of marks, and they hadn’t stood out at the time. But now Gunn knew what it looked like: the evidence that Wesley had been held down for sex by a very strong man.

He’d had those bruises before the training session. He’d asked for the hand-to-hand to cover up, to get some more bruises, normal bruises, so Gunn wouldn’t suspect the next time he saw Wesley naked.

That must have been two months ago. Well before Barney. So he’d been right when he’d suspected before. And did that mean that he knew his Wesley, or that he didn’t know him at all?

“It wasn’t the first time, was it? The Saturday after. What’s your story for what happened the day you got the duals to beat you up?”

No sign of surprise. Maybe Wesley had been lying there thinking about the same thing. A long silence, and then Wesley raised himself on his elbow and looked down at Gunn. “You have a very good memory.”

“So that happened?”

Wesley sighed and sank back down again, but onto his back, leaving a long line of space between his body and Gunn’s. “You were right. The problem with giving him something is when you have to take it away.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It was... It was after you asked me if we were having sex. And you said I couldn’t go in every day. But you’d leave us alone once a week. He was very angry about the change, and that was when you said –”

“Yeah. I remember.”

“It was kind of you to be willing to leave us alone. It was very generous. But I shouldn’t have gone in that first Thursday when you left us and went to Caritas. It was too soon.”

“He really did rape you.” Gunn had turned his head and he saw Wesley nod.

“It didn’t matter what I said. He wouldn’t stop.”

Something else now from Gunn’s memory, that he would have sworn was weeks apart from that Thursday (which, again, he wouldn’t have said was the day before that training session with the hand-to-hand). “That day he was being stupid when you read to him. When you yelled at him and threw the book. You said you’d warned him to stop. That wasn’t about any stupid jokes about your arm. Was it?”

Wesley shook his head slowly, over and over. “He was joking about what he’d done to me, he thought it was...” Wesley swallowed. “Not a joke, he didn’t think it was a joke. But he thought it was something good that we’d shared. Because he’d got what he wanted. I couldn’t let him treat it like that even if – I thought you might guess. I knew it must look strange.”

“How did you stop me from guessing on Thursday night? I don’t remember any night round then that could’ve been different enough.”

“It was the night Matt told you about his girlfriend. You were preoccupied. I’d gone to bed early so I wouldn’t have to undress in front of you but I didn’t think that would be enough. I’d hidden the key but I couldn’t think beyond... But you were preoccupied and by the morning I’d thought of what I could do in training.”

What could you do with them? What could you say to them? Or about them? Gunn thought, “You deserve each other,” and he thought he could say that a hundred times and each time it would come out different. Always said to wound, to expose. And always a waste of breath because there were too many ways in which it was true.

“Does he remember?”

“I don’t think so. Not really. He remembers making me angry. Or he remembers when he’s worried about doing something wrong. He assumes...” Wesley shrugged.

“Did you forgive him? Before he forgot, did you forgive him?” Angel had done those drawings of Wesley. Gunn remembered just before he could stop himself from asking the question. Wesley’s face kept so blank as he looked at the drawings. And Gunn had made him put them somewhere safe, and made him go in and thank Angel with a hug.

“Yes and no. He needed me to, so –” A shaking sigh. Gunn reached over and put his hand on Wesley’s chest, Wesley took a fierce, awkward grip on Gunn’s wrist, and they pulled themselves towards each other, closing the gap. “Still... I could hardly pretend that I didn’t know what he was. So I put the rest away to deal with later. I’ve forgiven him now because I brought it back out and used it.”

Gunn sighed and rolled towards Wesley. He put his leg over Wesley’s, and felt a jolt of warmth all through his body when Wesley immediately brought his left leg over to anchor Gunn. “You got a strange way of dealing with things, Wes.”

“Fucked up. I know.”

“Guess we’ll work on that. You got anything else you been hidin’ from me? Somethin’ even worse you been dealin’ with your way?”

No, and Gunn was suddenly exhausted, like he’d had the longest, hardest fight of his life. He surfaced enough during the night to know that Wesley was having his usual difficult dreams (disturbed tonight, rather than violent), and to hear

about himself (as “the black one”) at the peak of Angel’s nightmares. But each time he shrugged it off like it was some harmless street-noise, the wind rattling a sign; he’d made things happen, he’d made things change, and he knew now that he could do better for himself than just listen and wait and worry.

They used the bathroom together in the morning, and then dressed together. They didn’t touch, and Gunn didn’t even offer to help Wesley with the long-sleeved top, though he watched every moment – but Gunn felt almost as relieved and happy as he had the very first morning they’d woken up together. Being close to Wesley; so simple, but this was how much he needed it.

Angel was in hell, trying to hide in the gap between the mattress and the wall, and while they were having breakfast Angel started pulling the mattress over himself, working slowly like it was took him minutes to build up each inch of fear (or courage). Still, he was completely hidden by the time Gunn took the blood out of the refrigerator then nodded towards their bedroom. “Like you went last night, Wes. Close the door.” He still didn’t want them to have any chance to see each other. If they’d had anything like normal lives then Gunn would have thrown Angel out. Broken some furniture and spilled some blood ‘cos they’d both have needed to fight, and then he’d’ve thrown him out. But they had this life and Gunn was making it up from moment to moment: what had to change now that Gunn had found them out.

Angel was trembling. If you were sick enough you could see it all as funny: the way the mattress was trembling; a vampire terrified of the sound of two humans talking over breakfast.

Kindest thing would be to let him go hungry until he got lucid, just leave him alone. Gunn didn’t feel kind. He put down the beaker, grabbed hold of the handles on the side of the mattress, and pulled hard. The mattress landed on the floor with a thud, leaving Angel lying on his back. He seemed frozen at first, just staring at Gunn, then there was a rattling, frantic retreat to the safety of the wall.

This Angel didn’t know Wesley. If you said to this Angel, “I found out last night that you raped my boyfriend,” he’d think it was a trick, some twisted excuse for a new form of torture. “And you treated it like a joke.” Or he’d think you meant Angelus, and he’d be guilty and ashamed, and he’d take whatever came as fair. Because Angel knew as well as Gunn did that Angelus wasn’t some random stranger; Angelus and him, they were made out of the same stuff.

“Are you a monster?” Gunn was expecting Angel to start trembling again, but instead Angel frowned and stared at him in a different way, like he was trying to remember something about him. “Are you? Say it.” Angel never spoke to them when he was in hell, he just spoke to himself – but Gunn wanted to get something out of him, even if it wasn’t words.

A whisper: “Yes.” Then he swallowed, and summoned his whole voice. “Yes.”

“Do you deserve this?”

“Yes. I deserve it.”

“Am I as bad as you?”

Angel looked away, towards the door. More frowning, then he met Gunn’s eyes again and said slowly, “I don’t know. I don’t know where you learned to enjoy it. Who you – If it’s only for me then you’re no worse than despicable.”

He sounded like Wesley. And that had come straight from one of their rapes, hadn’t it? Evidence as clear as the bruises. They’d fought and they’d cursed each other, and through it all they’d be snarling or moaning how they were both lost, they were both damned.

“I learned it from you. I met you two years ago, I’d a staked you on the spot. Like every other vampire thought he could mess with me. Now... what I heard ‘bout you, what I seen... I know why you don’t get to die. Seein’ you pay, yeah, it’s a pleasure.” And it would be, to unchain him and then beat him down again. But not this Angel, he’d want him lucid, he’d want him to know exactly why.

“Two years?” Sounding bored, but with an edge of challenge. “I thought you were born to it.”

“Like I said, I learned it from you.” He picked up the beaker. “You’re lucky. You got me so I don’t wanna come near you. Keep that up, you’ll be safe till the next shift.”

Wesley must have heard Gunn lock the door, but he didn't come out of the bedroom. Gunn poured the blood away and rinsed out the beaker, and then went to get Wesley.

"What you gonna do today, Wes?" Wesley had been standing looking out of the window.

"Lilah... She's brought someone else in."

"She fired you?"

Wesley looked away and shook his head. "Not yet. She says she's still assessing him. That she'll probably use us both." He sighed and shrugged. "There was a prophecy that didn't quite happen the way I'd translated it. So she was looking in the wrong place when it happened. The other translator doesn't say I was wrong. Not over that. But she's had him do his own versions of a lot of my work. She says... She says it's not a comparison, she just wants to understand more. For the risks."

"So what's she got you doing?"

"She's done a report. I have to consider more options. Explain everything. It's reasonable."

"Man, you love options. Gettin' to explain. Course you love it, you're the best."

"I thought I was. I don't know where she found him. She won't tell me anything. But I think he's... I suppose I am too academic. And she's only been paying for one reason."

"She c'n afford to pay for ten of you guys. 'n' her next report'll say how she had it right the first time. ' This is the man who deals with the vampire seer. In the business of prophecies, those visions are as tough and as vague as it gets.' "

Wesley smiled, and put his hand on Gunn's arm. "There is Angel. An unfair advantage over the other translator, but we have it." And that was all that Wesley needed to want to get back to the living-room and get down to work. "What are you going to do?"

"Some stuff to check out online, then I'll hit the streets."

Angel was lying quietly. He'd probably be asleep soon. Wake up lucid while Gunn was out working.

Gunn didn't want them talking to one another. Really, he didn't want them within ten blocks of each other, he wanted them to act like they'd lost the right even to say each other's name.

But he had to go out, he had to leave them together. Only a door between them, and he bet they could still talk for hours about how they were both damned. Just asking each other what Gunn had said, what he'd done – that would be too much.

He could gag Angel.

No. No, he couldn't. He'd been right the first time: Angel had to be able to speak because of the visions. And even if Angel was gagged, Gunn could imagine them working something out. He could imagine Wesley sitting on the floor by the door and reading to Angel for hours.

So he'd tell Wesley not to talk to Angel, he'd get him to promise.

But he just didn't trust Wesley any more, not where Angel was concerned. Wesley would understand why Gunn needed to keep them apart, he would think it was reasonable; but it would just take Angel acting confused and pathetic about the chains, acting like he'd forgotten, and Wesley would be lying to Gunn, same as before.

Don't leave it to trust, then. Get some guarantee. Like... Like... Well, they had that voice-operated recorder, that they used in case Angel got a vision while they were out training. If he put it in Angel's room, near the door... He'd be able to check up on them every time he got back.

Yeah. That'd be enough for him. A couple of weeks, maybe, of Wesley proving that he could do what Gunn wanted. He should know he was lucky: that Gunn didn't need more than a few new rules, after the huge deal of what he'd done with

Angel. Every day they'd done it, in Gunn's own home, while Gunn got nothing except the job of worrying about Wesley.

Gunn couldn't concentrate on what he was looking for online. He needed to get out right now, get Wesley started on working off what he owed. He got up, went over to Wesley's desk, opened the second drawer and took out the recorder.

Wesley looked surprised, then interested. "You need to tape a meeting? Is it the Gorhan case?"

Gunn shook his head. "It's not to take with me, it's... Wes, I can't have you talkin' to him when I'm out. I gotta know that you can act like he's not here, like it's just you and me."

Shock, and Wesley's pen clattered to the desk. "Of course you... But you don't have to use that. Haven't I – All you have to do is tell me."

"He keeps on surprisin' you, Wes. How many times you said that? I don't - I can't take any more surprises, not now. So this is goin' in his room any time I leave. 'n' I'm tellin' you your voice ain't gonna be on it. You don't even say, 'Charles won't let me talk to you.' He needs anything told, I'll do it."

Wesley looked away from Gunn, down at the desk. He picked up his pen, took a long, shuddering breath, then nodded slowly. "Yes, I understand."

Wesley looked like he was going to carry on with his work, so Gunn opened the door to their bedroom. "I'm going out now, Wes. We got a new routine. This is how it starts." He pointed, and the expression on Wesley's face was nearly as bad as in the first days after they heard about the Kekulei demons, and he nodded again and swallowed hard, and he went.

Angel did seem to be asleep, and telling him wouldn't have done much good anyway, since he'd forget it again in a couple of hours. Gunn took a blank pad and wrote on it in thick black marker-pen: "It is over and he is not allowed to speak to you. Do not try to get him to speak. I will know if you make him break the rule and I will gag him." He propped up the pad where Angel would have to see it, and where he couldn't reach it and tear it up. Half the time Angel wouldn't know who "he" was, but he'd get the warning whenever he was lucid.

Gunn locked the door and glanced up at the screen and then thought that Wesley shouldn't be able to look at Angel either. Not a good idea to take the screen down, or to cover the camera, because Gunn still needed the screen for his own protection. But he could unplug the screen, wrap the lead around the stand so it wouldn't reach the socket, and use a padlock or something to keep it in place. A padlock and a strap, as it turned out, and he found a way of covering the plug so that even if Wesley got an extension lead he still wouldn't be able to plug the screen into it.

He didn't mention the screen when he let Wesley out, but he did tell him about the message he'd left for Angel, including what he'd said about the gag.

Wesley looked sick. "Would you?" Almost a whisper.

Gunn shrugged. "Hafta do something." Course he wouldn't gag him. No harm, though, in havin' him and Angel both think about it.

"What if he got a vision?"

Another shrug. "You could text me. Done it before. Guess you'd have to stay here. Be me handlin' it 'n' maybe the crew."

Wesley should his head, over and over. Gunn saw his lips move, probably "No" and "I won't". Yeah, that was the idea. He touched Wesley's shoulder then went to get his case files from the table.

"I'll be back in a few hours. Just act like he's not here. OK?"

A small grunt from Wesley, who had made himself busy looking for a book, and was still giving all of his attention to that when Gunn left.

* * * * *

Wesley was sulking at Gunn big-time, just wouldn't accept that he had to give Gunn proof. On Thursday and Friday he wouldn't speak to Gunn above a whisper, and on Saturday he wouldn't speak to him at all. He'd nod or shake his head (mostly shake it), and sometimes he wouldn't look at Gunn for hours, not even when he was ordered.

He'd sulk extra-hard after Gunn had come back and checked the tape, and Gunn got more and more disappointed in him. The way Gunn had planned it, when he'd listened to the tape and found it was OK, he'd go into the bedroom and Wesley would be waiting looking all "What did I tell you?" because of course he already knew it was OK. And Gunn would have a story ready about his day, with a couple of chances to ask Wesley for advice about the case. He'd have suggestions about take-out food if Wesley didn't want to cook, about a movie to rent, about a programme for that evening's training. They'd have forgotten the tape within a minute because it wasn't important, Angel wasn't important, not compared to what they could give each other. And when he wasn't angry any more, when he and Wesley both knew that he was the first, last and only person Wesley would turn to for help, then the tape wouldn't be important at all, and they'd work together on making everything better.

Yeah, well, in the plan Wesley had taken it like a man, managed to act like he was sorry for longer than just one night. They did less together now than they had before Gunn had found out. Wesley wouldn't eat with him, definitely wouldn't cook, refused to go training with the crew, wouldn't even sit on the couch and read while Gunn was playing his games on the computer. They had their training sessions on their own and they shared a bed; that was all.

Gunn was out for more and more of each day, keeping busy, spending his time with people who'd talk to him. Wesley seemed to be either at his desk or in the bedroom; after a while Gunn gave up looking in the bedroom after he'd checked the tapes, and by the time he gave up Wesley had gone as far as hunching up on the floor on the far side of the bed, and he had to know that he looked just like Angel going for gold in that Hiding-and-Sulking event.

Obviously Gunn needed another plan. But he'd told Wesley what he thought of the sulking, and Wesley had just turned away and shook his head, and for now Gunn was out of ideas. Maybe he could count "giving up" as his new plan. Wesley wasn't that difficult to live with once you'd decided just to ignore him and spend your time the way you wanted (the way you hadn't been able since Angel had been well enough to go training with them, and, God, that had only been back in March). Wesley had to get bored eventually, try a new approach of his own.

* * * * *

Gunn knew why Wesley was sulking, and he knew why he was going to keep on with the tapes, but he had no idea why he and Wesley were having sex. Shouldn't they be lying with their backs to one another, jaws clenched so hard their teeth might splinter? Gunn had gone to bed like that the first night, but then when Wesley had got in he'd slid straight across to fold himself against Gunn's back, his knee between Gunn's knees, like nothing was wrong between them.

It could have seemed pathetic, or manipulative, or just plain annoying, and at first Gunn didn't react, didn't turn to look at Wesley because Wesley didn't deserve that attention. But then Gunn took in Wesley's sighs of contentment, the relaxed weight of him, and he knew it was real and then he didn't turn because he didn't need to. He reached back and put his hand on Wesley's hip, and pushed and stretched to get Wesley's knee up between his thighs, and they both sighed. Wesley's body. Gunn couldn't be angry with Wesley's body.

Even with the sighing, Gunn had assumed that would be all, since it had just been one day – one bad day – since they'd been telling each other why they wouldn't have sex. But then he felt Wesley get hard against him, and he couldn't think about being angry, he couldn't think about anything. Wesley's cock wanting him... and within seconds all the thoughts and doubts and complications belonged to someone else.

Here, now, he was a screaming cock and a starving, pleading hole; and a heart that might tear loose, and a wordless moan that was an open begging. And then he was fingers scrabbling desperately for the tube of lubricant, and an elbow pushing Wesley roughly out of the way to make space for a dripping hand. When he'd made himself ready he took hold of Wesley, pushed him in as far as he could manage, then put his hand back on Wesley's hip and pulled. He gave a growl of triumph as his hole got the fill that it had won by force of need, and then in the next breath he was moaning again, but with huge satisfaction, not need, and with amazement at the depth of that satisfaction.

While his hole had been aching and empty, it had been simple and savage in its orders to Gunn: to get it a hard fucking. Gunn would have said that it would never even have wondered who the cock belonged to, or have allowed the slightest pause in the wild ride.

But that was before it remembered. In the moments of stillness after Gunn pulled the cock full in, his hole absorbed the feeling that they made against each other, the fit – and in the next moment all of the greed and urgency fell away. It knew this cock, and the feelings the cock gave it meant far more than the promise of a good hard fuck. When it had this cock, then it knew beyond doubt that everything in the world was right. The world contained this fit between them, and so nothing in it could be wrong. There was kindness, there was loyalty, there was peace, there was safety and there always would be.

Gunn thought, “That’s love. That’s like the sweetest feeling of being in love,” and there was amazement in his moan because he hadn’t known before that his body could hold feelings about Wesley that were quite separate from the ones he’d been living with and working with for all the rest of the day.

Wesley was panting and shivering, almost shuddering against Gunn. He could hardly move, the way he was lying on his side, and he could only rock against Gunn, and only do that by pushing against Gunn’s hand on his hip. Gunn slid the hand down to Wesley’s thigh and stroked slowly and gently, trying to soothe him, but that just made Wesley more desperate. So Gunn carefully eased himself onto his stomach, holding Wesley as tight as he could manage to keep him inside.

The next night Gunn got into bed facing Wesley’s side, and Wesley came into his arms and they started with a kiss. They didn’t usually do much more than rub against one another. Wesley never gave any sign that he was wanting to be fucked, and Gunn would have pretended not to see the sign anyway; Angel was still much too close, and Gunn still didn’t trust himself. They never spoke.

* * * * *

On the tapes, Angel never tried to talk to Wesley. Gunn could never be sure if he was truly lucid, but in the times when he seemed closest he would be calling out to Gunn, telling him not to be angry with Wesley, taking all the blame on himself. He didn’t refer to Gunn’s message, or not directly. “You know him, you – Maybe he does need that, to have you – To have you take over. Stop him... thinking as himself. Let him... start to forget. But don’t – Don’t make him do the opposite, don’t make him join in. I know you want to show him, but – You can’t guess what they’re like. You think you can use them. To shock him. To stop him – But you’d never get clean. Your new prisoner... No, you can’t be kind now but – You can be nothing. Don’t make him – You can be nothing.”

Was that lucid? Lucid with a thick layer of Angel-style theories, maybe. Like them having a new prisoner. If there were times when he was clear enough to know that there was no new prisoner, just Wesley next door without a key, there was no hint of it on the tape. So either he never woke lucid or he saw the message as soon as he opened his eyes, and lay there as silent as Wesley.

Angelus definitely saw the message, and it made him want to meet Gunn; he liked Gunn’s style, wanted to hear more about the gag, about how Angel had got himself into trouble, thought he could make it worth Gunn’s while to bring the man in for sharing with or without the gag. Gunn hit fast-forward as soon as Angelus appeared – after all, Wesley would never try to talk to Angelus – but he heard enough to feel guilty about Wesley having to sit and listen to the whole thing. He tried to offer sympathy when he went into the bedroom after the first time of hearing Angelus on the tape, tried to bond over a year’s experience of Angelus being loud and descriptive but Wesley just frowned at him, like he was wondering why Gunn wouldn’t just shut up and go away.

Mostly, though, the tape caught the sounds of nightmares and hallucinations, and it was rarely easy to tell which was which. The fake visions, OK, no mistaking those; and they also meant that the sounds beforehand must have been a nightmare. Not that it mattered – what difference could it make to anyone? – but after a few days Gunn was making a game of trying to guess: how many states would there be on the tape? and what would they be? His rules for scoring were tough, and any points he got for being right could be wiped out completely if there was a state that he couldn’t identify. When he reached a hundred points he was going to buy himself a new computer game, and this gave him the incentive to go right into the room when he was leaving or taking the tape-recorder, because then he could see whether or not Angel was awake. Was that cold-blooded? Was that like something the real guards would do? But he wasn’t treating it like a joke, he was just... Maybe trying to remind himself that the tape made it sound worse, all run together. Angel’s mind did let him be quiet sometimes, it did let him sleep. The game was just about dealing with listening to the tape.

* * * * *

“You’re not feeding him. He was lucid this morning, I think you could have fed him. We still have ten pints of blood.” The first words that Wesley had addressed directly to Gunn in three days. Gunn had gone out to have a Sunday breakfast by the beach, and when he got back Wesley was waiting for him, standing just inside the door. Wesley was pretty calm, just stating a fact – but an important fact.

“Y’re right, I’m not. He been complainin’?”

“When are you going to feed him?”

Gunn shrugged. “When I feel like doin’ somethin’ for him. No sign’a that yet.” And Wesley nodded like he accepted that, like it was another simple fact but then he took one of his books and went into the bedroom, and as far as Gunn knew he stayed there for the rest of the day.

* * * * *

Soon Gunn found it difficult to imagine Wesley talking to him again, or talking to anyone. In his sleep, in the first few days, he’d whisper and shush himself (“It’s him. You know what he’d do. He’s not... We keep him out.”). And then he did this thing of gabbling, too fast for Gunn to catch more than one word in ten; the words would pour out for ten, twenty seconds, and he’d go tense enough that he’d almost be sitting up in bed, and then the words would cut off and he’d sink back until the next one hit. Yeah, it was kind of like a vision; that urgent, that random. Now, in the last few nights, he’d started talking normally, but not in English. A demon language, Gunn thought, something that flowed and swayed. It was easy to sleep through, and Gunn’s guess was that he’d never find out how long they lasted, those calm, serious conversations. Sometimes Wesley still gabbled, but now that wasn’t in English either.

The demon language must be something that Wesley was translating for Lilah Morgan. Gunn worked that out on Wednesday night when the tape had Wesley getting a phone call, and then answering it entirely in that language. Angel reacted so strongly to the sound – shaking in his chains, and panting – that Gunn’s first thought was, “Angel understands what he’s saying. Wesley called himself from the cellphone. He’s talking to Angel, that’s who.” But he used *69, and that was Lilah’s number, calling an hour ago. Probably the other translator or something, calling from a late-night meeting in Lilah’s office, put on to pick holes in the work that Wesley handed over that morning. Yeah, no wonder he was obsessing, dreaming in that language; he’d played it super-cool, though, during that call. And Angel probably hadn’t understood anything, he’d just recognised Wesley’s voice – and it made him pant and quiver like an eager dog.

* * * * *

On Thursday evening, when Gunn was getting himself a second beer, he pulled out the drawer just to look at the blood stacked in there, just to freak himself out about having got to this state over a vampire, and there weren’t ten pints, there were only seven.

So Wesley had figured out how to pick the lock.

Yeah, he could’ve got the tools on Wednesday, when he was out for his meeting with Lilah Morgan. He was going in there, and stopping the tape, and... Well, how far was he going? Was he talking to Angel? Was he touching him?

There weren’t any new bruises, so the sex he was having with Angel must be a lot like the sex he was having with Gunn. OK, if he was having it. Angel wasn’t chained right for them to lie on the mattress and kiss; he could only lie on his right side, and Gunn simply couldn’t imagine Wesley lying on his left side for sex, not even for Angel.

And talking... Would they really both be able to forget about Gunn’s message, right there in front of them? Especially Wesley, when his sulking was all about how far Gunn had gone to show that he didn’t trust Wesley.

Yeah, right, when now Gunn knew that he hadn’t gone far enough. This time he wasn’t going to give Wesley the option of confessing, he was going to catch him in the act. He thought of setting up a second tape, maybe hidden next to the camera, or of some booby-trap for the lock or the door so Wesley wouldn’t be able to close it afterwards, and the proof would be all over him.

Tempting but too complicated, and still not “in the act”. He’d got too used to the idea of leaving them alone, setting himself free to do his own thing. For something like this, you had to be prepared to sit it out. He’d use the monitor. He knew the signal would reach as far as the street, so he’d take the receiver and sit it out in the truck at the corner of the

building. If he left the apartment when Angel was lucid, then Wesley would probably go in to feed him straight away, and there wouldn't be long to wait.

Would Wesley be listening for the sound of the truck driving away? Maybe. Gunn didn't forget things, had never had to come back for something, but Wesley must have heard that sound so many times, some part of his brain would go on alert if a part of the routine went missing.

So he'd drive away for a few blocks, come back as quickly as he could. Be even better if he could swap the truck, maybe for a car from the crew, but – No, not enough time, too many questions.

Wesley was already asleep, already in the middle of one of his conversations. A relief, really, because Gunn had been ready to push him away, tell him “not tonight” (brain firmly in charge, body stripped of its vote) and that might have given Wesley too much warning that Gunn was planning something.

The next morning Angel woke around eleven – Gunn heard him sitting up – and he was quiet enough that he might be lucid. Gunn sent Wesley to the bedroom, and yes, Angel knew who he was, and knew that he'd written the message, only today he wasn't in any mood to plead, he was in the mood to stare at Gunn and at the message and hate them both.

Gunn had put the receiver with his files the night before. He took a couple of sodas and a bag of cookies and yelled to Wesley that he'd be back some time after two.

Silence. Not even the sound of the chains. How did Angel keep so still? Maybe he didn't know that he was about to see Wesley. Maybe he thought he'd dreamed it, or that it was years in the past. Yeah, if Angel knew, then why would he act like he hated the message? If he knew, he'd act like it was a joke, like Gunn was a joke because Gunn had said that he'd stop Wesley, he'd made threats and now Wesley had made him look like a fool.

So Angel didn't know or... Or Wesley was still showing some respect. He had to break some rules to get in and feed Angel, but maybe he didn't even want to take advantage. Maybe he just shook his head when Angel wanted to talk. Wanted to give him some new bruises. Maybe he just pointed at the message.

Gunn would find out.

And then what would be do?

No, he wouldn't go in the room. Catching them with the door open, that would be enough. He'd yell at Wesley to get his clothes back on and come out, and then... No, he didn't know what he'd do, not if he'd heard more than feeding.

Fact was, the nearest thing he could feel wasn't rage, it was despair, like if he had just two ounces less pride, he might end up on his knees, asking Wesley if there was anything he could do that would make him as important to Wesley as Angel was. Even one tenth as important. But he wasn't going to do that. And he wasn't going to leave, so...

They had to work together, they had to agree on the new rules together. So he wouldn't start by telling Wesley, he'd start by asking him. Asking him how quickly he could stop sulking if that would change Gunn's mind about feeding Angel. He'd say, “Immediately,” and Gunn would say, “How many days would you need to see that before you believed it? If you were me?” And they'd agree on a date (four days, maybe, a week?), and Gunn would do all he could to make the waiting easy on Wesley, have him want to act normal for his own sake not just for Angel's.

Yeah, focus on that, on the feeding. For the talking and the fucking... he'd promise himself here and now that he wouldn't do anything, no matter what he found, not for at least a day.

Angel was moving. Lying down, it sounded like. How long would it take a vampire to go weak from hunger? And what the hell was Wesley waiting for? If he left it another half an hour Angel might be asleep again.

At 12.22, Angel started talking to himself, very quietly, in an ordinary dream. “I thought I'd ask him to come in. When I saw him in the corridor, I thought, ‘You were in my bed.’ But he says he can't.” That was all Gunn could make out and then there was silence again – until 12.49 when Angelus appeared, very, very hungry and dreaming about having too much choice about who to take first.

Gunn had thought his stakeout wouldn't last more than ten minutes. If he'd been planning around covering the full three hours, he would probably have let himself go get a burrito as soon as he heard Angelus. A twenty-minute break. That would have been safe. Wesley would never go in that close to Angelus.

He finally gave up at two, when Wesley would start expecting him back, and he ate his burrito while taking a walk in Alondra Park. Wesley must have heard the truck or noticed the receiver was gone. He'd need another plan. Probably have to leave it a couple of days. Push Wesley away for a couple of nights until he knew for sure.

He got home around 2.40. Angelus was still there but awake now, and Gunn didn't even step into the room, but opened the door enough to reach down and take the recorder. He set it to rewind then went to get another soda, and discovered that there were six pints now, when there'd been seven that morning.

Wesley had not gone into Angel's room. Gunn knew for a fact that he hadn't. So what had Wesley done? And had he done the same with the other three pints?

Gunn waited for Wesley to come out of the bedroom, but didn't give him the time to sit down at his desk. "What are you doin' with the blood? What're you doin' while I'm gone? We're down to six pints now."

Wesley looked surprised, like he'd forgotten about the blood and couldn't imagine why it was any of Gunn's business. Then he gave a short, bored sigh, and turned his back on Gunn to go to his desk. Gunn wanted to shake him, really wanted to fuck him, wanted to say something to make him admit that it was absolutely Gunn's business. Something like... if Wesley was trying to guilt-trip him into feeding Angel, he'd made a big mistake with the ultra-British, super-subtle bullshit. "Man, you'da done better to hire a singin' telegram." But Wesley would just blank him, leave him looking twice the fool he'd felt before.

"Yeah, why'd I ask? I'm the one you won't talk to. Guess I'll just have to watch, see what you do when you run out."

He put the recorder back in Angel's room then went back to the park and ran until the light started to go. After that he dropped in on the crew to see if he could get a good sword-fight or any kind of fight, and he ended up staying until gone eleven, when they went out on patrol. Of course he couldn't join them, because of the visions, but God he missed that: the territory, the daily purpose. He'd had that with Wesley, when they'd been Wyndham-Gunn. So he went on a patrol of his own – well, a tour, really – of places they'd been sent on visions. Not trying to be complete: not as far out as Montebello where those kids had been trying to raise a Havelte as a pet, and it was enough to drive past the power site, he didn't have to go down into the tunnels. At Hermosa Beach, around one, he decided he'd had enough (so many memories of Angel getting worse), and he turned around and went looking for a diner.

He should be relieved right now. He should be happy. Wesley picking the lock, sneaking in to see his vampire: that had only happened in Gunn's imagination. Now he knew Wesley accepted how he was treating Angel, he knew Wesley respected his rules. So what if Wesley had this thing of slowly throwing out pig's blood? For all Gunn knew, it had the same reason as the demon language that Wesley talked in his sleep. Just Wesley being Wesley. He should be relieved.

You'd think he wanted to see Wesley guilty and ashamed. That he couldn't get enough of hearing Wesley say that he didn't deserve Gunn. No, he wanted Wesley happy. In the end, that was all he wanted.

How was that going to happen, though, if Wesley wouldn't even talk to him? For a few hours there he'd thought he had the answer: the feeding. He'd thought that Wesley was desperate to get Angel fed, enough that he'd agree to anything – and so they'd get a new start. But instead he'd found that Wesley had accepted, and where was his leverage now?

OK, if he wasn't going to agree with Wesley on the date for feeding Angel, then he'd agree it with himself. A week from tomorrow. Or the day that Wesley threw away the last pint. Whichever came first. He'd go out immediately and get some fresh blood, and he'd tell Wesley what he'd decided. Maybe Wesley would come with him to the butcher's. Maybe Wesley would thank him. That might be their new start.

* * * * *

Wesley didn't take any of the blood over the weekend, but he took a pint on Monday and two on Tuesday. He was sleeping a lot, going to bed hours before Gunn. He never woke up when Gunn settled against him, but he always nestled closer. Sometimes he pressed his lips against Gunn's skin, or whispered in that language. The sex, though, that seemed to be over for now.

* * * * *

On Wednesday morning Wesley got up and left the apartment while Gunn was still asleep. Gunn's first thought was that Wesley must be doing laundry, probably got it into his head that the other translator had, like, blindingly-clean chinos, and pressed so fresh you could cut yourself on them. But the laundry-room was empty, and the car was gone, and so were the stacks of papers on Wesley's desk. Lilah must have asked for a breakfast meeting, then. Gunn was curious about where they'd go, when the library didn't open until ten; and he'd have to stay curious, because Wesley wasn't going to answer that question any more than the others.

An emergency meeting. Was that a good sign for Wesley, against the other translator? That his work was so important it just couldn't wait? Or was it a bad sign, that they thought he would (and should) put up with anything? Or was it nothing? Just fallout from Lilah having a crappy week? A crappy couple of weeks, if she'd been working past nine the other week with the other translator.

Just past ten thirty the phone on Wesley's desk rang. It was Lilah Morgan and she was calling for Gunn. "You're at home. Good. I'm driving Wesley over. Expect me in twenty minutes. I'll call for you to come down."

"Hey, what's goin' on? What's – What's he done?"

"He, uh – He was taken ill at our meeting. He's in no state to drive." She wouldn't tell him anything more over the phone.

Gunn went straight down and waited out the twenty minutes on the kerb outside the building. Wesley was in the passenger seat, with his head turned towards the window and his eyes closed, and the words that came to Gunn's mind were "propped up" (not "sitting"), and "unconscious" (not "asleep"). He hadn't shaved for the meeting, maybe hadn't even brushed his hair. His lips usually looked so red to Gunn against the stubble but today they looked grey, and he suddenly looked so thin.

Turned out Wesley was semi-conscious. Gunn had been ready to carry him but when he slid his arm around Wesley's back, Wesley turned to him and held onto him – eyes still closed, sluggish, and muttering like he was dreaming – and Gunn managed to get him to his feet, guide him into the building, and haul him up the stairs. Lilah took Wesley's satchel and went on ahead and waited in the apartment, and Gunn could hear her making calls and rearranging meetings for most of the time he was on the stairs.

He lowered Wesley to the bed, on his own side, nearest to the door, took off Wesley's shoes, laid his hand briefly on Wesley's head, and then went back out to talk to Lilah.

"What happened?"

A sigh. "The short answer: he collapsed in the stairwell a few minutes after he left our meeting. For the longer version..." She lowered her voice slightly. "I've been concerned about him since our meeting last week, and he was much worse today."

"Worse how?"

"The way he spoke. That was immediately obvious. And then I saw what he'd done with the translation."

Jeez, she'd fired him, hadn't she? Get him up before dawn, pick his work apart for two, three hours straight, fire him – and then act like she's Florence fucking Nightingale! "I saw him work on that translation. He was – There's no one could have worked harder."

"You saw him work on it, but I didn't think you ever tried to read his work. I'm sure he was working hard, he gave me at least fifty pages, but none of it's in English. It could take me the rest of the day to find out what language he was using, though I doubt that what he wrote was related in any way to the manuscript I gave him. Has there been any language that he's mentioned recently? More than others?"

Gunn shook his head, and started to be frightened for Wesley. It was like the thrift-shop clothes or something: he'd sabotaged himself. If he didn't have Angel to hurt him, then he'd do it to himself.

He glanced towards the bedroom, and when he looked back at Lilah he found that she had followed his gaze, though the half-open door showed nothing more than carpet. “What did he say about it? He wouldn’t tell you himself?”

“That was even more disturbing. He acted as if he didn’t know what he’d done. He showed me the papers as if I should be able to read them, and he talked me through them as he usually does, except that he wasn’t speaking English, and I could tell that he didn’t know that I couldn’t understand him.”

“What did you do?”

Lilah shrugged and shook her head. “I let him talk. He obviously wanted to. And he’d been so withdrawn at the beginning of the meeting, even worse than the last time...” A sigh and another shrug. “He came alive when he was speaking this other language. He stopped whispering, he looked me in the eye. Whatever he was talking about, he was interested in it. I didn’t want to find out what would happen if I tried to interrupt. So I nodded whenever I was supposed to, and I let him get through to the end. When he’d finished he straightened the paper and put them back in the folder for me, and I thanked him and put the folder in my briefcase with the manuscript, and by the time I looked up he’d withdrawn again.

“I couldn’t make him speak at all. He wouldn’t look at me. I’d known since the first few minutes that I couldn’t let him drive home, and I should just have taken him down to my car right then. But I’m afraid...” Another glance towards the bedroom door and she swallowed. “He kept looking at my briefcase. And I knew he must be waiting for me to bring out the next manuscript, so I told him that I didn’t have anything for him. I was going on to try to soften that when he just stood up and walked out. He didn’t even take his bag. The people in the stairwell said he staggered through the doorway as if he’d had his whole weight against the door. And then he was heading for the support of the wall, but he didn’t manage more than two steps. Half of them thought he was a drunk. They were about to call security.”

Gunn closed his eyes, seeing Wesley falling, and then lying there with the people arguing over him.

“Where did it happen?” His voice was shaking. And she’d be thinking, “Yeah, that’s a fag,” but he still couldn’t keep himself steady.

“On the third floor.” The library, She had to be talking about the library. Just a normal meeting. Starting at the normal time. “I did send someone for security. To help carry him down to my car.”

The fear. Like when he’d looked at the screen and seen how Wesley lay in Angel’s arms. But that had been a single punch to his heart and then he’d known what to do. This... All he was sure of now was that the next blow would hit some way that he could never brace himself.

“Thank you. I—” Make her go. Leave them alone. “I’m sorry about the translation. Could you give it to someone else? Is there enough time?” She wouldn’t try to sue them, would she? Even if her firm lost millions over the prophecy... Well, she had to know that the sum total of everything that Wesley owned didn’t come to a quarter of what she’d paid for her car.

“There should be plenty of time.” She lifted her briefcase onto Wesley’s desk, took out the folder with those strange pages, and gave it to Gunn. “I’m not going to try to read this. I don’t know if you should show it to him, if there’s any point.”

Gunn shrugged. “Guess not. When he’s the only one who can read it.”

She looked at her watch and made ready to leave, but then at the door she paused, looked at him hard, and said, “He must have been so different with you, if you didn’t realise that he was having a nervous breakdown. If you thought he was just working too hard on the translation. Do you think he knew what was happening and tried to hide it from you? Though I don’t see how he could know, from the way he must have kept on writing in that language.”

Wesley trying to hide it from him. God, she had no idea. The relief, for now, was stronger than the guilt. Was she going to worry that she’d made it worse, putting him under pressure with this other translator, not checking up when she’d seen the signs at the last meeting? When if she knew... She’d barely register on the scale. He owed her. Of course he owed her.

“The mistake he made. Over the Kekulei demons. He’s...” Gunn swallowed. “Never seen a person take anything so hard. He has times when he just... When he just...”

“He withdraws?”

“Yeah, like he needs to hide. I never found out anything to do about that but just wait. Be ready when he did come back. Knew it'd been a long wait this time but I didn't realise it was different.”

She nodded slowly, stared at the floor for a long time, then turned her head to look towards Angel's room. She had to notice that the screen wasn't plugged in. Angel was protesting about something, testing the limits of his chains but quiet enough that he was probably dreaming.

“I would imagine you'll be dealing with the seer on your own until Wesley gets better. Or maybe you have been since he started to withdraw? That can't make things any easier.” She nodded towards the locked door, and Gunn couldn't tell if “that” meant “coping with Angel alone” or “having to listen to a vampire being violently, unpredictably insane day after day.” Didn't matter.

“Yeah, they – Wesley can't go in there. Angel really messes him up.”

Very slowly, as if the idea was just forming: “Do you think it would help to take him away for a while? Away from that?” Another nod towards the door. “Frankly, I think you're long overdue for respite care, even without what happened today.”

“You know any nursin' homes take in vamps? Got a squad of demon-hunters on call? Sure it'd help, but it ain't gonna happen.”

“It could happen by the end of the week. I can get a squad together. They could move in here, watch in shifts. I know it will probably disturb the seer. But if I were you I would take that risk.”

Gunn's chest felt tight. Of all things, he got a sharp ache in his jaw. Hope. Damn, but it hurt. “Y'know he doesn't get half the visions he used to? Chances are you won't see nothing.”

She just ignored that. “How long do you think you might want? A week? Two weeks?”

A week? He'd never been away from L.A. for a week. Where the hell did people go? What did they do? Somewhere on the coast. Hafta have the ocean for Wes. Probably somewhere small and quiet. But then too small and they'd notice Wes, that he wasn't right. And small meant the middle of nowhere, meant less choice in things to do – meant taking more of a gamble about what Wes needed, what was best for him.

“A week. Yeah, a week'd be good. I'd hafta check your squad out first. No offence, but – And they'd be goin' in to feed him so there's stuff they gotta know. I'd need a couple hours, explain the setup to the whole crew.”

Lilah said she'd call at nine, tell him what day he could plan for leaving town; should be Friday, certainly no later than Saturday morning.

She had the door open and she'd turned to back out when she paused again. “Gunn, the security guards assumed that he'd fainted from hunger. The woman said that his bones were hurting her. Of course, I don't know what she's used to, but... He certainly hadn't been gaining weight in the last two months, has he?”

While Wesley had been sulking Gunn hadn't even been wondering what Wesley had been eating, hadn't seen him swallow anything except tea and come. Again, the relief that Lilah could have no idea, but the guilt now much closer behind. He was used to Wesley thin. He loved Wesley thin. He'd stared at those bones so hard that first evening, when he'd been thinking that this was just a strange new friend. Was that an excuse? And that month of not being allowed to see them, and getting them back covered in Angel's marks. Was that an excuse for thinking nothing beyond, “He's mine.”?

“Yeah. That's gonna stop.”

He could hear Lilah walking away down the corridor, but he stayed by the door, not moving, feeling he was scarcely breathing, until he heard her get into the car and drive away.

Wesley's eyes were half-open, and he'd turned his head towards the door. He tracked Gunn as Gunn went in and knelt by the bed, but then closed his eyes when Gunn took his hand. The hand was cold, the bones felt cold. Gunn tightened his grip, felt the bones move – so long, so fine – and then he suddenly pressed himself hard against the bed, fastened his other hand around Wesley's elbow, and clamped the length of Wesley's forearm between both of his own. He was breathing hard.

Two long breaths to steady himself, then he said, "Do you know what happened?"

Wesley opened his eyes, frowned like he was thinking, then shook his head with a slight tilt to the side. More "not really" than "no idea".

"You went to the library for a meeting with Lilah Morgan. You collapsed. She brought you home." A nod, not surprised, and Wesley's eyes started drifting shut again. "You scared her, you're scaring me. Wes, Wes, will you talk to me?"

A long, serious silence, with Wesley wide-awake. Then he looked from Gunn towards the living-room, suddenly started writhing with tension, and abruptly shook his head.

"OK. OK." Gunn had let go of Wesley's elbow and was stroking slowly downwards from his chest to his stomach, trying to calm him. "I get it. I get it." He managed to smile. "Hell, I can't make you, can I?"

A pause, then Wesley gave a shuddering sigh and slowly relaxed under Gunn's hand. He stared at Gunn, that serious look again, then gave a very slight nod, and a very slight smile. He eased his hand out of Gunn's grip, but just to lay it on top of Gunn's other hand, on his stomach, and then he sighed quietly and closed his eyes.

Gunn thought that Wesley might fall asleep in a few minutes, but he didn't, and that meant that Gunn had to figure out what to do next when it looked like almost everything he'd done up to now had been the wrong thing.

"Wes? Can I lie next to you?" He'd meant: "along your left side, the way you're lying now" and he would have gone on to say that but Wesley was already moving over to make room. Wesley lay against Gunn's left side, his face pressed against Gunn's chest, and Gunn held him tight.

Wesley still didn't sleep, though he lay like he was completely drained: no energy, not even any thoughts. Gunn had thousands of thoughts, seemed there were never fewer than three at once, and there wasn't one that managed to hold itself together for more than five seconds. A thousand thoughts about Wesley going crazy and about how it must have been obvious for at least a week. Obvious to anyone who didn't just think Wesley was still sulking. Would Angel have done better? Would Angel have realised? Was there any vacation in the world that would be enough to make him better? Or... how much worse would he get if Lilah couldn't do what she'd said?

The same fragmented thoughts, over and over. Remembering the writhing and the tension – and how could that man ever talk to him again? Wasn't that too crazy, wasn't that man lost? But then Wesley's hand on his hand, with Wesley made calm again.

Gunn started to get hungry. Must be around midday. Angel had woken up in hell about twenty minutes ago.

"I dunno about you, Wes, but I hafta eat lunch. I'll get a buncha salads, OK? Some good bread?" Gunn started to pull away. Wesley did not look happy, though he wasn't shaking his head. Gunn was going to ignore any head-shaking anyway; speaking might be optional here, but eating wasn't. "I'll go to the butcher's too. To get some fresh blood." Now Wesley looked confused and anxious. "To feed him, Wes. Soon as I can today." And Wesley swallowed and nodded, and rolled away onto his back.

Gunn's wallet and keys were in the bowl on top of the refrigerator. While he was there, he took out the old blood and threw it away to make space and avoid confusion. Better go and say goodbye to Wesley. He hadn't done that in weeks, just been saying nothing or saying, "I'm going. I've had enough of you." Had to show Wes he'd changed, that he'd be safe to talk to now.

Gunn didn't get out even the first word, because one look at Wesley showed that the tension was back, and this time he was rigid with it. He'd turned onto his left side with his arm up, covering his face, and he was holding the pillow so tight his tendons had to be aching. Gunn sat on the side of the bed and put his hand on Wesley's back.

“Is this because you don’t want to eat? You haven’t been eating, have you?”

Stupid to ask more than one question at a time, but he was pretty sure that was a no to both. Something else then. Maybe nothing to do with talking, or Gunn, or Angel, or the blood. Where the hell did you start with this? Could take hours and Gunn really was hungry, but he couldn’t just leave Wesley in that state.

He slid his hand up to Wesley’s shoulder, waited for two slow breaths, then slid it back down. Didn’t feel like Wesley was going to ease up this time. “Y’wanna come with me? Y’not feelin’ too shaky, still.”

Disbelief, and at first Gunn thought that was “hell, no!”, but then Wesley was pushing himself up, and Wesley was so pleased, and so surprised – like he’d looked the very first time that Gunn had hugged him. Gunn got him to go slow, and kept close to him all the way down to the truck. “You feel shaky, you just grab onto me.” And Gunn could tell that he would. Must remember enough about the library not to want that again.

The grocery store was first, and once he’d got parked Gunn said, “Wes? How d’ you feel about waiting here? Maybe save doing a big place with a crowd till tomorrow or something? Be quicker. Y’trust me to pick what you like?” All fine with Wesley.

Gunn got six different salads, and two breads, and crackers and cheese and pasta and roast chicken and chips and dips and yoghurt. He was getting in line for a till when he saw a body-building magazine in the racks, and that sent him off for the pharmacy section to look for the tubs of weight-gain powders, and from there back to Dairy to get more milk. He didn’t know what problem Wes had about eating this time – the same one as before, about “pleasure”? – but he did know that Wes would still drink. And “pleasure” wasn’t going to be an issue with this stuff.

Gunn was expecting Wesley to come with him into the butchers, thought it didn’t need saying since they both knew the shop would be quiet. But Wesley stayed put and shook his head when Gunn asked; and everything was still fine.

Wesley had a few mouthfuls of each of the salads, but it looked like really hard work. Gunn would try one of those drinks on him in a couple of hours. When Gunn had finished they put the food away, then Gunn put the kettle on to make tea and said, “D’you think I’d be able to feed him now? How’s he sound to you?”

He’d managed to surprise Wesley again. Wesley stared at him for a couple of seconds, then gave one of his half-smiles and turned to fetch a beaker down from the shelf. Wesley stayed in the kitchen while Gunn was heating the blood, but as soon as Gunn took the beaker out of the microwave he headed straight for the bedroom.

“You don’t have to do that.”

A frown and a shrug, then a nod – looked like “sure I do”.

“I was... I hadta make a point. Got a new one now: I trust you. Y’re not gonna take advantage.”

No, Wesley wouldn’t even think of doing that, but he still preferred to wait in the bedroom.

Angel knew there was something horribly wrong with the blood, that he’d be in agony for days if he drank it, but he was so hungry he either didn’t care or he couldn’t stop himself. He vamped up almost immediately, but he didn’t start reaching out for the beaker until Gunn had put it on top of one of the books and was pushing it within range. After he’d drained it, he wiped the inside with his finger and licked them, and then he tore the beaker apart to get at the last traces down at the bottom. When there was no more he dropped the broken plastic onto the mattress and immediately focussed all of his hunger towards Gunn’s neck. Gunn didn’t think he even knew he was threatening a guard; he didn’t really see Gunn at all, he just smelled the blood.

“There’ll be more tomorrow, Angel.” Probably more today, depending on Angel’s state, but “tomorrow” was always safest with Angel. Gunn didn’t try to retrieve the beaker, but he did take the drawing-pad with the message. No more threats. He still didn’t want them to talk, he didn’t want Wesley to see Angel, but there had to be another way.

Gunn went to the kitchen to finish making the tea. He’d just torn the message out of the pad and put it in the trash when the bedroom door opened. Wesley came straight over and held Gunn tight, rubbing his face against Gunn’s and pressing his lips to Gunn’s cheek. It felt like “Thank you”. Gunn wanted to say that he was sorry but that was complicated – much too far from yes/no territory.

“I’ll feed him again in a couple of hours. Give him a chance to calm down.” Angel was making noises like Angelus stuck in a vision; feeling the richness of the world outside, the blood calling to him. Wesley murmured an agreement and kissed Gunn’s cheek again, but soon he pulled back and took over making the tea.

They sat together on the couch, with Gunn’s arm around Wesley’s waist. Felt like a date – at three in the afternoon.

“We could get a movie tonight.”

A no, with a very slight flinch behind it.

“What if I found something really boring or stupid that you wouldn’t enjoy at all?”

Wesley burst out laughing, had to put his mug down, but it was still a no.

Slowly: “So it’s not because you can’t let yourself enjoy a movie? It’s not that anymore?”

Not really. Wesley shrugged and frowned, like he was trying to decide on something, then he turned till he was half-kneeling on the couch, reached out and touched his fingers gently to Gunn’s throat, then shook his head, face tense.

Gunn had no idea what Wesley was trying to tell him. He covered Wesley’s hand with his own, to keep it there, and laid his other hand on Wesley’s forehead, to smooth away the tension. They stared at one another and Gunn finally said, “You don’t want me to talk?”

No, no, that wasn’t it. Wesley jerked his head in the direction of the television, then closed his eyes and shuddered.

Gunn needed a few more seconds of staring, then: “People talking in movies? You can’t –” Wesley was nodding, over and over, and sighing like he was exhausted. “That’s bad, Wes. That’s really bad.” Wesley knew it. “I... I thought you were just sulking, because I was making you prove...” No. “But this is because of what I...?” A shrug. Not important, or Wesley didn’t know.

“But it doesn’t bother you when I’m talking?”

Wesley didn’t shake his head but instead took his hand away from Gunn’s throat and knelt up, tilting his head sideways to press his lips over Gunn’s larynx; and Gunn gasped and sighed, and thought, “It’s worth it. This is why I can’t leave him. It’s not for him. It’s for me.”

They kissed, and Gunn’s cock was wanting him to pull Wesley down full-length onto the couch, to get his hands inside Wesley’s pants; but Wesley wasn’t ready for that, he just wanted a long, sweet kiss.

“You’re still really tired, aren’t you? You wanna go and lie down again?” Yes, and so they went back to the bedroom.

At first Gunn was thinking only about Wesley, but then he remembered the car still at the library; and he should call Rondell to drop out of training that evening; and how was he gonna test this squad, if Lilah could do what she said?; and where the hell could he take Wesley where there wouldn’t be people talking?

Maybe he got restless, enough for Wesley to tell. Gunn would have said that Wesley had sunk back somewhere, that he wasn’t really thinking anything, but then Wesley shifted up to bring his head next to Gunn’s, and the whisper was straight in Gunn’s ear. “You don’t have to stay. I know you’re not tired. You must have things planned.” A voice that was trying not to exist.

A pause, then Gunn said, “I’d worry about you, if I left you alone. It helps, doesn’t it, me being here?”

“It helps. But you’ve showed me that you want to be here. That’s enough. You don’t have to stay.”

“OK.” Gunn raised himself up on his elbow. “What if I went out to get the car from the library? How’d you be with that?” Slight hesitation, but then coming down on “no problem”. “I’ll bring your phone in. You need me, you call, OK? Don’t have to say a thing. You need me to come in from next door, anywhere.”

Understood. Agreed.

“Y’can’t stand to read either, can you? Not if it’s in English. Or only if it’s work?” Gunn was wondering about keeping Wesley busy, find him something to do apart from struggle to eat and lie on the bed. And no, Wesley couldn’t read.

Gunn called a cab to take him to the library, and once he had the car he drove to Blockbuster, just in case they knew of a movie without any words at all. The clerks seemed to think he was a student with a paper to write, and they sent him to the arthouse section to look for himself; but then after a couple of minutes Gunn heard one of them say, “Oh, yeah!” and then the guy came over and showed Gunn to a French nature documentary. “It’s all this close-up stuff of this one field during this one day. Beatles ‘n’ snails ‘n’ birds ‘n’ ... everything. No voice-over, nothing.” So Gunn rented that, and the racks of video games had given him another idea. There were plenty of games without words – like most of the games on his computer. OK, so the shoot-em-ups didn’t interest Wesley, but he might enjoy that pipe-laying game, and maybe the card-games. And what about games they could play together at the coffee table, or in the hotel? Gunn went to Toys ‘R’ Us and came away with a set of half-size playing cards, a dice-game, a board-game with numbered tiles and complicated rules about making and keeping sets, and a starter-pack for some dungeons-and-dragons card game. The D&D game definitely had too many words and would definitely involve talking, but it seemed closest to the type of game Wes had enjoyed at school so Gunn was going to bring that out once Wes was well enough.

Wesley and Angel were both asleep. Gunn got a load of laundry going, then moved the computer over to the coffee-table so he’d be able to keep nearby on the couch while Wesley was playing. He didn’t want Wesley sat on his own at the other side of the room, and he especially didn’t want him sat just a few feet from Angel’s door. Then he got a soda and one of Wesley’s notepads and started making lists of what he’d need to ask Lilah’s squad, and what he’d need to tell them.

The laundry had been almost all Gunn’s clothes. Nothing of Angel’s, since he’d been in the same clothes since Gunn had chained him. And Wes... You could see how he’d just given up. Stopped noticing. Or stopped caring. Gunn went in to put the clothes on the bed and found that Wesley had woken up. He offered to bring Wesley a glass of the supplement drink and Wesley accepted, but then Wesley came out to join him while he was using the blender. The powder had been a good call: Wesley drank it easily, no reaction to the taste, not even a pause or a blink. He washed the glass and then Gunn showed him the computer and the games and the movie, and explained what he’d been thinking and why these should be OK. Wesley looked surprised and impressed, but he also had one of his half-smiles, like Gunn had done something unbearably cute. Gunn could ask what but he might not have gotten an answer even on one of Wesley’s best days.

“So I thought we’d have the pasta around seven, then watch the movie. Then try out the games.” Wesley nodded and gave a full smile, then rubbed at his stubble and gestured towards the bathroom, which turned out to mean that he was going to have a bath and get neatened up.

Gunn was on a roll with the good calls. Wesley’s first few rounds with the pipe-laying game were truly lousy, but he kept going back for more; and he laughed and gasped and got thoughtful at the movie, right along with Gunn; and a couple of times in the games Gunn was sure he’d been about to swear and argue. Yes, Gunn would get him better.

Lilah Morgan called on the dot of nine. She had a squad of six, to work in two teams. She’d email their details to Gunn, and she’d booked a workout room for two hours the next morning, for Gunn to put them through their paces.

“I want to ask how Wesley is, but he’s probably standing right next to you.”

“Yeah, but we’re doin’ OK.”

“He’s speaking?” Almost breathless, like she’d been worrying all day.

“Not really. But it’ll happen.”

Wesley had no problems with the idea of leaving Angel with the squad, and he trusted Gunn to handle all the details. He must know how much he needed to get away – a hundred times more than when Gunn had made him go to San Diego – and he also trusted Gunn to decide where they went.

Gunn hadn’t gotten to feed Angel again by the time they went to bed: he’d woken up during the evening, but as Angelus, and he’d torn the beaker and the book to shreds, raged for an hour or so about the savour of his kills, and then quickly fallen asleep. In the quiet after their second fuck, Gunn became aware of the sound of movements, repeating but not quite regular.

“I’ll go and check. If it’s safe to feed him. Be easier on the squad if we can get him back to normal.”

Angel was gathering up the scraps on paper and pushing them under the mattress. He knew that Angelus had been there; and he recognised Gunn. “You’re letting them. You’re letting them do it again. Did you make him watch?”

“I’m not letting them do anything. Angelus didn’t hurt anyone, if that’s what you’re thinking. He just found the book in here and tore it up. Look, I’ll clear it away.” Gunn went to get a refuse-bag. Best to deal with it while Angel was calm, because he might not be safe after he’d had his blood. Gunn hauled the mattress out of the way, and Angel helped with as much as he could reach.

Gunn hadn’t stood this close to Angel since he’d chained him up, and he’d been listening to him more than looking at him when he’d gone in to deal with the recorder. Gunn was shocked by the sight of Angel up close, shocked and freaked out, because Angel looked like a corpse. His skin was a fish-belly white, his lips were a blue-grey, and his eyes seemed sunk back in their sockets. No one would ever take him for human, the way he looked now. It was from hunger, wasn’t it? It had to be. How much blood did he need, then, to make him look alive? And how long had he been this bad?

Angel vamped up again when Gunn took the blood into the room, and Gunn used the same method with a book to push the beaker towards Angel. This time, though, Angel didn’t reach for the blood. He stared at it, shaking as he held himself back, and then he changed back to his human face and looked up at Gunn. “How long has it been?”

“Two weeks.”

Angel swallowed. “Was that them? Or was it you?”

“It was me.”

“Because of him.”

“Yeah. And you better tell yourself you got off lightly.”

“Is he... Is he better?”

Gunn looked away, down at the mattress, then back at Angel. “He’s different.”

“I wouldn’t know him.” Angel sounded very sure. Like he finally understood the problems with his memory. Could he do that?

“Yeah. Well. Be better if you forgot him. Forgot everything.”

Angel had seemed so resigned, Gunn thought he’d accept, even agree, but instead his control broke and he vamped up and lunged at Gunn. “Then you don’t show me the sex! We both know you make him different.”

Gunn put his foot on the book and started to pull it out of reach, just in case Angel was angry enough to throw the beaker; and maybe Angel would have been but there was the hunger; and from the first touch to his lips Gunn could see that there was nothing in Angel’s world except the taste of blood. Gunn pulled the book further back, picked it up, and then left the room and locked the door.

Showing him the sex. Like Gunn had made him look at pictures. And Gunn hadn’t gone straight in from their bed, he’d cleaned himself before he went to unlock the door. What was he supposed to do, have a shower and get a robe fresh from the laundry? All ‘cos this is the one vampire who can’t figure out that humans don’t know how they smell? He went back to bed and got to work immediately to get Wesley’s smell back on all the parts that he’d washed.

* * * * *

In Lilah’s squad, each team had a demon-expert and two fighters, all local to L.A., and they worked well as a team. Gunn tried them on demons, L.A. landmarks, tactics and techniques, based on a combination of old visions, old street-battles, Wyndham Gunn cases, and training sessions with the duals. They were good, and much better than he’d expected at picking up the clues in the visions and putting together a solid plan, and fast.

He'd spend the day putting together the briefing and the set of instructions, and taping samples of Angel in his different states so they'd know when they could go in and feed him and when they should stay out. Angelus was the priority, obviously, but even if he didn't appear during that day, Gunn was sure he had samples already on the tape. Assuming Gunn got that ready, then the squad would be able to move in at an hour's notice any time from Friday morning, to stay until the following Sunday. Gunn wanted to leave on Friday, and before he wrote any instructions he was going to get out his roadmap, stick pins in three "possibles", then get online and make sure of their hotel.

By the time he arrived home, he'd decided not to bother with the map and the other two choices: he was going to take Wesley back to San Diego, because he already knew that San Diego suited Wesley. And this time it would be even better, because they were going to stay in that fancy hotel from the Marilyn Monroe movie - if Gunn could get them a room. Something really special, something on the level of what they deserved. And a course of shock-treatment for Wesley's guilt-ridden hangups about pleasure 'cos Gunn was guessing that most of those were still there, lying in wait under the nervous breakdown. He wouldn't tell Wesley about the hotel. He'd just tell him San Diego and give him the name of some mid-range hotel, one near the ocean.

There were rooms available in the Del Coronado, but the cheapest was more than \$300 a night over the weekend. Even with the rate dropping by \$100 in the week, if they stayed until the Sunday, that would be nearly \$2,500 just for the room - and that was about half of what they had in the bank, and it could take years (and a few miracles) to make that back, because they hadn't come close to covering their bills since they lost most of their clients.

But it was still the right hotel; Gunn could see himself checking in there with Wesley. So what could they afford? Say half that. So they stay in the Del Coronado for five nights, until the Wednesday (Wesley should be speaking by then, shouldn't he?), and then they move somewhere cheaper. He made the reservations and printed out a list of the cheaper hotels; they could decide on that once they got there.

* * * * *

Gunn wanted Wesley to pack his suit but Wesley refused, even when Gunn said that the vacation would be like a whole week of dates, and wasn't that part of the package, when you were lucky enough to get a date with Wesley Wyndham-Pryce? Well, it took more than one "no" to make Charles Gunn give up, and he packed the suit and the shirts himself at the last minute, while Wesley was packing the games and some beer.

Gunn didn't talk much during the drive. Sometimes a sight along the road would remind him of something that seemed worth telling, and Wesley nodded and acted interested, and laughed when he should. He hadn't spoken, though, since that time in the bedroom; guess Gunn hadn't done anything since to make him need to talk.

They got to San Diego just after four, which was the check-in time at the hotel. Gunn was watching Wesley's reaction as carefully as he could from the moment he took the exit for Coronado, and, really, it couldn't have been any better, not if Wesley had been giving a running commentary. From the sudden alert interest ("Oh, I remember this"), to the grunt of the first thud of suspicion ("Surely not?") to the gasp of realisation.

While he'd been imagining checking into the Hotel Del with Wesley, he hadn't forgotten there would be a clerk looking at the two of them, knowing the keys were for a room with a kingsize bed. Thinking "Fags". Thinking "Freaks". And feeling so superior for all the rest of the day, just from knowing he wasn't one of them. Gunn was prepared: he was going to act like he'd checked in with Wesley to a hundred hotels better than this; and it turned out the clerk was a Hispanic girl and she was good, not even a flicker over Wesley's arm. Must be telling herself, over and over, that their money was the same colour as anyone else's.

Wesley spoke about half an hour after they checked in, when they were having their first walk along the beach. He kept on stopping and turning to look back at the hotel, and after one especially-long look he said, "We're really on holiday. We're really here." Not a whisper, his normal voice, and then he turned to look straight at Gunn. "And we really can't afford this."

"Nah, we can't. But we're here anyway. Least till Wednesday. I say we make the most of it." He was expecting Wesley to ask about Wednesday, but Wesley just smiled, reached out to touch his arm, and then carried on along the beach.

After the walk they explored the hotel, with Gunn all the time thinking ahead to dinner. When he was sure they'd seen all the restaurants and bars, he asked Wesley where he wanted to eat. "Or we could get room service?" A difficult question for Wesley. He looked up at the beams in the ceiling of the enormous lobby and his expression said, "We're really here," and then he looked over at the group of couples standing a few feet away, just arrived and launched into

three or four conversations and he was tense again, like Gunn hadn't seen since Wednesday afternoon. The hotel was getting busy, the weekend starting for real.

"Y'know, let's make it room service. Maybe come down for a drink later? See what the beach is like late at night."

The beach was cold, and they had it almost to themselves. They held hands, and Gunn listened to the soft crunching of their footsteps and the long exhalations of the waves, and he wasn't worrying about Wesley, he wasn't trying to think of the next thing to do or say. The bar was still too noisy for Wesley; Gunn got two glasses of bourbon and they took them up to their room.

They'd decided to spend Saturday morning at Balboa Park, maybe longer depending on the crowds. They arrived just as the museums were opening, and seemed to be the first through the door at the Folk Art Museum. Gunn got interested in the range of materials: from paper, to leather, to wood, to wool, to clay, to bone; and he started looking for patterns and differences in what the different people had done with the same material. Something else had caught Wesley's attention, judging by his slow pace and look of concentration, but Gunn couldn't tell what.

They kept close, though not often together, and in the Russian section it took Gunn a while to realise that Wesley was waiting for him, definitely wanted him to see this yellow wooden duck with the huge, smooth body and tiny pointed head.

"What is it about ducks, do you suppose? I can't imagine that they've ever been essential to any peasant economy, and yet you find ten ducks to every pig and every goat."

Gunn nodded and looked around for ducks. "Maybe they're just easy to draw. Y'don't even have to bother with the feet less you feel like it. Leave 'em off 'n' say it's swimmin'."

"That's a good point. Even I can draw a duck. Or a fish. I would never attempt a goat."

Gunn pointed at the other end of the case. "Lot of frogs, too. Y'know what you were sayin' 'bout peasant economies. Go double for frogs, wouldn't it? Though kind of blows a hole in the easy-to-draw thing."

Wesley looked thoughtful. "Don't ducks eat frogs? Maybe the connection – and the importance – would be obvious if we were peasants. We just don't have that relationship to animals, have never met anyone who does. What's more striking than the ducks is that there are hardly any images of people here at all. And yet the animals don't really have any personality. They're not portraits. Maybe you don't make portraits of animals you know you're going to kill."

So when did people make portraits of animals? They discussed that while they were wandering through the rest of the museum, not really looking at the exhibits any more. Then Wesley brought in children's books: full of animals, like the museum, with hardly any people. Wasn't it fascinating that children spent so much of their childhoods identifying with animals - or with characters that were labelled as animals, because of course they were nothing to do with real bears or hedgehogs or mice? And were the animals there because children found it difficult to identify with people? Did they recognise so early on that people were complicated and demanding? And treacherous. Whereas animals were simple. You could build up almost anything about an animal, and you'd never be proved totally wrong. A bear might rip your face off, but it wouldn't turn around one day and tell you everything it had always found annoying about you, including most of the things that you thought made you friends.

They went around the Museum of Art looking for portraits of animals, and then they had a late lunch in a Thai restaurant in the Gaslight District. They were still talking about children's books and Gunn suggested they go to Borders because he wanted to show Wesley the Richard Scarry books that he'd grown up with and that they didn't seem to have in England. Wes loved the drawings and bought one of the books, a really basic word-builder without even a story, though crowded with incidents in every picture. There were nearly as many monsters and imaginary creatures as animals in the books, and that led on, over coffee and then back at the hotel, to what Wesley knew about demon folk-art, and about books and toys for demon children.

They had dinner in the hotel restaurant, with a view of the ocean, played dice and drank beer, had the midnight beach to themselves again, and drank their bourbons in the bar. Wesley fell silent sometimes: in the car, on the beach, or when people moved too close, or seemed to notice them, or suddenly stopped talking, or suddenly started talking. The first few times Gunn thought he might have lost him for the day and that would have been OK, but it was even better to get him back, and to learn that he would be back, that he'd make his way to the surface again after maybe ten minutes, maybe half an hour.

* * * * *

They had breakfast in their room on Sunday morning, with the plan of spending the whole morning in bed (maybe the entire day). Around eleven Wesley made them some more coffee, and when they had their mugs and were settled against the pillows, Gunn said, “I’ve missed you, Wes. Didn’t realise how much till maybe a few hours ago. Before then...” A sigh. “Hadn’t been thinking much past all the ways it tore me up to see you so bad. Main thing I was thinking about gettin’ you better was how seein’ that would stop me feelin’ torn up. Never got as far as... how good it was gonna be for me to have you back.”

“I’m sorry.” Wesley was frowning so hard, like all he’d heard was “torn up”.

Gunn shook his head, meaning they were past that, the two of them. “D’you know why you got so bad? What’s the best thing I should do if you get that way again?” Wesley was still frowning, but now it was like he was trying to think what to say. “Wes? Do you know why?”

A sigh, then Wesley nodded, several times. He’d gone very tense.

“It’s happened to you before?” Gunn was making a sudden guess. “Way you get when... it’s too much?”

Another sigh, a long one, then Wesley shrugged slightly and tilted his head to the side a couple of times.

Gunn waited about five seconds then said, “Can’t tell for sure if that’s ‘kind of’ or ‘not really’. Or whereabouts in between.” An even longer wait. Wesley was looking hard at him, but Gunn couldn’t read the expression. “ ‘s OK, Wes. Y’don’t hafta pin it down for me. Just... when you’re ready... give me something that’ll help me for next time.”

Wesley shook his head sharply, gave a sound like a grunt, then took a deep breath and said, “No. It’s both. It’s ‘not really’ in that... I’ve never had a breakdown before. But a very large part of it was because...” He swallowed. “Because so many things that I thought were in my past... They seemed to be happening again.”

Like being raped? Had that been the start, even before Barney? “Things you’d told me about? Or – Or other things?”

“Things that –” Wesley closed his eyes tight for several seconds, tense almost to the point of writhing. When he opened his eyes, he shook his head hard then said, “Whatever I’d told you, I would have said it as if it didn’t matter any more. Because I thought I’d changed. I’d left it behind.”

Slowly: “Wes. The things you’ve told me about your past... Well, they all sounded just fucking terrible. Not like they didn’t matter, more... like you hadn’t even figured out yet how to get angry enough about them.”

“Oh.” A pause. “What did I tell you about what I was like before I arrived in L.A.?”

“Like in Sunnydale?”

Wesley shrugged, like Sunnydale would do as well as anything else.

“You never told me much. But it sounded like you must’ve been lonely as hell.”

Wesley closed his eyes again, then turned his head hard away from Gunn. Very quietly: “I was useless. I’ve always been useless.”

Gunn shifted onto his side, to be able to put his right arm around Wesley’s waist. “There’s nothing you could tell me that’d make me believe that. Only thing you’ve always been is... with the wrong people. Who never had the sense to see what they could’ve had. What they could’ve learned from you.”

A thin moan, and Wesley was trying to pull away from Gunn, like he was Angel trying to hide. But Gunn clamped his hand around Wesley’s shoulder and forced Wesley back to lie flat on the bed, and raised himself so he could see more of Wesley’s face.

“Wes. Wes. God, I know it still hurts you fierce but... Look, haven't I always made it better when you've let me close? When you stop tryin' to do it all on y'r own? Tell me what... I dunno... what Sunnydale's got to do with why you got so bad. With what happened with Angel. With the speaking. Tell me now. Just get it done.”

Wesley slowly turned his head back and looked up at Gunn. Wesley's bleak, accepting look, that Gunn knew too well. “I know I have to tell you. But I've been so scared of losing you.”

The last thing Gunn expected to hear. It'd felt to him during those long, terrible weeks like Wesley hadn't thought of him more than maybe ten times – and then only when he had to. Quietly: “Because of what happened with Angel?”

Wesley shook his head, very definite. “Because of what I am. I know you don't want to believe it but... I'm ashamed of almost everything I did with my life before I came to L.A. And of how I did it. Everyone who met me soon found themselves wishing they hadn't. Within minutes, for Angel in Sunnydale.”

“And then he changed his mind. When he got to know you properly.”

“No. No. He – He gave me the chance to change. Almost before he started teaching me to fight, he was acting as if he'd forgotten what I used to be like. He was taking me for granted as... someone who was worth the effort to have around. Who'd generally make himself useful.”

Oh. Of course. So that was why Wesley would face anything for his vampire. Why Angel would always come first. Gunn saw it now. Angel hadn't just saved Wesley's life, he'd saved him from hating himself. Had Angel known that, when he'd been lucid? Did he know how he'd earned himself that total loyalty?

Gunn stroked Wesley's arm, trying to think what to say, but Wesley had only paused for a few seconds.

“And then I met you. And having you want me, and finding out that I was able to make you happy... I knew then that I really had changed. It didn't even hurt to think of what I used to be like, because I felt as if the worst had been cancelled out.” A long breath in, and then out. “And then there was Barney. And I learned that I hadn't changed at all. I'd never changed. I'd just... managed to put on a shell. So really I'd been deluded as well as useless. And Angel should have seen through it. The way I'd trusted his judgement, he should have seen through it.” Wesley's voice was getting more and more ragged. Gunn wanted to soothe him, wanted to hush him, but he was sure he'd been right before: Wesley did have to tell him, Wesley did have to get this done.

“ ‘n’ you were thinkin' worse about me? ‘bout my judgement?”

Wesley shook his head. “The man you'd fallen in love with, he'd been real for you. He was... what I would have wanted to be. But now I knew I couldn't be, I couldn't hide in the delusion any more. So I didn't... have any right to your love. And I knew that one day you'd realise what you were living with, and I'd see it, the moment when you stopped being able to love me. I couldn't try to keep you, of course I couldn't, I had no right to you. I knew there were things I should be doing to make you go, but I wasn't strong enough.” Wesley was blinking hard, like he was just managing to fight back tears.

Two months Wesley had been living with that, two months. Gunn got choked himself, swallowed, then took a deep breath. “You tried to tell me, didn't you? ‘bout feelin' like a shell. Kept on tryin' to tell me. ‘n’ I couldn't stand to hear it. Told you to stop talking. Is that... why you got so bad you couldn't talk at all?”

“No. That was something else. A separate breakdown. I think I might have been having at least four of them, all at the same time. I'm probably eligible for some sort of award.”

Gunn smiled, just for a second. “Well, I know you're better on the talking one. How ‘bout the first one? You still feel like I'm gonna see through you? Like you're stuck back in your past?”

A shrug and a sigh. “I think I'm going to keep on having bad days for a long time to come. I can still feel it dragging me down. It's... relaxing in some ways just to give up on myself, to let it drag me straight down to the bottom. To tell myself that it's fate, this is what I was always meant to be.”

Gunn nodded. “So that's how you were thinkin' whenever you took yourself off to the laundry room. That's how it started with Angel. I thought you were just... makin' things worse every way you could.”

“Well, I was.”

“Yeah, but I get it now. I thought you were making it all up from nothing since Barney. Which looked scary-crazy, Wes. Looks different when I know you’d been there before.”

“I’m sorry I scared you.”

“I know. But you’ve found a way of fighting back now, right? Like... you have times when you know you’re never gonna lose me? Wes, you’re the exact same man I fell in love with. Even when you were acting craziest, I never for a second thought, ‘Jeez, who is this guy? Think I been suckered. Palmed off with somethin’ in the wrong box.’ It was still you, every fucked-up step of the way. The exact way my Wes would go about having four or five breakdowns.” He moved his hand up and threaded his fingers through Wesley’s hair. “Yeah, it’s hurt like hell to be in love with you these last weeks, not gettin’ the first clue what I could do to help. But you already made me happy again. Even before we got here, you made me happy enough to cancel out all the hurting. Act like you want me with you, like you want more of me, that’s all you gotta do.”

Wesley pulled him down, and they kissed for a very long time. When they finally pulled apart to just lie and look at one another, Wesley said, “This is the reason I’m determined to get better. Why I’m going to fight every inch against the temptation to give up on myself. So I can earn this. Because I want it so much.”

All Gunn could manage to say was “Good. Good,” and then they were kissing again.

* * * * *

It was lunchtime. Gunn was only aware of how much time had passed when he heard the clattering of crockery starting from the restaurants down below.

“You hungry?” Wesley shook his head. “Me neither. Still kinda feel I should make you eat but... don’t wanna move.” Wesley just smiled. Gunn didn’t think he’d sunk back into not speaking – looked like he was just feeling lazy and peaceful, even more than Gunn. But Gunn started thinking about the bad days that Wesley was going to keep on having, and wondering if some of them were going to be bad enough to bring in all of Wesley’s breakdowns – whatever the other breakdowns had been about. Gunn wished he could leave Wesley to be peaceful, but they both knew now that he’d been right to push Wesley to tell him about the first breakdown. They needed to get this all done. And why not get it done quickly?

“Wes? D’ you want to tell me about the other breakdowns? Tell me why you got so you couldn’t speak. Till last Wednesday I thought it was ‘cos you were sulkin’ with me. But I got that totally wrong, didn’t I?”

Wesley took a very deep breath and closed his eyes tight for a second, but he was already nodding, getting ready to tell. “It was about Angel. About what happened when you found out what I’d been doing with him.”

Gunn frowned. “I took away the key. I stopped feeding him.” That was all he’d ever found to do. Apart from walking out and staying out for the rest of the day. But how could that leave a man scared rigid of any kind of talking?

“It wasn’t what you did. It was what you said you’d –” Wesley swallowed. “It was the idea of being gagged. If I tried to talk to him.” Wesley spoke quickly, and then immediately looked down, away from Gunn’s face.

“The idea of – You – You never figured I was bluffing? You were really thinking I’d do that?” Gunn felt cold all over.

“You said you would.” Wesley was still looking away. His voice had gone thin, battered. “You left that message for Angel. You said you would. You... You were expecting to do it every time you listened to the tape.”

“No, man, no. I was bluffing. I never said it to you direct. I know I didn’t. I just said, ‘Here’s what I’ve told Angel.’ So if I ever did catch you then when I didn’t follow through I’d still be open to make it something else. Not have it look like I was backin’ down. Him, yeah, I wanted him to believe it, leave you alone, but I thought you must’ve figured it out inside ten minutes. Didn’t ever mean to do more than shock you. No way I could’ve gone through with it. Jeez, I can’t even make myself say that word! Not when it’s about you. That’d be sick.”

Wesley had closed his eyes. He was frowning deeply, breathing hard. A long pause, then he reached out with his eyes still closed, slid his hand down Gunn's arm to his wrist, and gripped tight enough to make Gunn wince. Almost a whisper: "You would have had the right. If I'd tried to talk to him after what I'd—"

Gunn put his hand over Wesley's and stroked his thumb across the knuckles. "No one's got that right, Wes. Not for anything. You saying you wanted to talk to him? Wanted it bad?"

Wesley shook his head. He slowly eased his grip on Gunn's wrist, and then he looked at Gunn. "No. We'd talked enough. More than enough." A brief frown, looked like pain, and Wesley dropped his gaze again. "He was always in there listening. With your message to tell him – It was the idea... if I did say anything... that he'd hear everything, he'd hear you doing it. And that made the thought of the gagging seem ten times worse than if you and I were the only people who knew about it. But then if he woke to see the message and he didn't hear me speaking, then he'd probably think that you'd already done it. He'd imagine me at my desk like that or – or – or – He'd imagine it. I could feel him in there listening. Waiting to hear you do it or to find out if you'd already done it. And if I spoke, to show him I wasn't gagged, then I would be talking to him. Whoever I spoke to, whatever I said, it would really be meant for him. So my voice..." He shook his head, over and over. "Making the decision to speak." A shaking sigh. "It seemed like an impossible responsibility, for me to make that decision. Just thinking about it... I'd go frozen with panic. It got worse every day. My throat felt sealed up. Full of stones. I couldn't use it. I couldn't let myself use it."

Gunn remembered Wesley lying on the bed after Lilah brought him back from the library. Gunn had asked Wesley to speak to him (begged him, almost), and Wesley had looked at him so seriously – he'd been wanting to speak, hadn't he, for Gunn's sake? – and then Wesley had looked towards Angel's room and he'd started writhing with tension. Panic. God, yeah, that was panic. Wes scared so bad he'd locked himself down to just one rule. So that was the second breakdown. And Gunn had made it happen.

Gunn brought his hand up very slowly, brushed his fingertips down Wesley's cheek, then touched them to Wesley's throat – the lightest touch he knew how to give. Wesley looked at him, as serious as he'd been after the library, then started to stroke the inside of Gunn's wrist, his touch as slow and careful as Gunn's. They knew how to reassure each other. They knew how to trust each other with touch. They always had.

Gunn was the first to speak, brought back again to thinking about Wesley having bad days, about finally starting to help Wesley through this. "Is it being so far away from him here? That's why you got your voice back? You know he can't be listening? It's safe?"

Wesley nodded. "I would have thought I'd need a month away from him to really believe it. To feel safe enough. But then I would never have guessed that I'd react like that to the idea of the gag. I – I suppose it's seemed like my real mission in life for so long: to try to imagine what he's thinking. These days we've had here... I think this is the first time in the year and more that I've been in love with you that I've been able to spend enough of my thoughts on you as a worthwhile partner should. As I know you've always done with me, even when I've been doing least to deserve it. Here... Angel's finally far enough away that there's nothing I could possibly do. He'd finally not my problem. I hadn't even realised until now how much of my attention I was always... holding in reserve for him. Or how much more I would like myself when I was spending it properly on you."

Gunn smiled but shook his head. "I like you both ways, Wes. I don't need you to think about me just like I think about you. I'm not keepin' score. You could give me half of this, a tenth, I'd be happy. 'n' it's not like... you got me so starved, I'll take any scraps. Doesn't feel like scraps. Even when you're doin' your craziest stuff with him I know I'm the only one you'd be choosin' to think about if you had a normal life."

* * * * *

They finally started to get hungry around two, and Gunn volunteered to get dressed and go see what the hotel had in the way of portable food. He came back with a couple of wraps, a salad, and some orange juice. He also got a newspaper, though he wasn't sure if Wesley had recovered enough to be able to read properly. Seemed like Wesley was fully recovered, and after the headlines he went straight to the movie listings, and they soon decided they'd spend the rest of the afternoon walking around the island, go to the 7 p.m. showing of "Ocean's Eleven", and then find the seafood place that Wesley had enjoyed when he was in San Diego on his own.

Over their late-night drink in the hotel bar, Wesley said he was getting the restless feeling that went with not having any proper books within reach – where "proper" meant enough to get him through a six-hour delay in an airport – so they'd go to Borders in the morning, and then Wesley would settle somewhere and read for a couple of hours in the afternoon.

Gunn wanted to check out some of the hotels for Wednesday, just to get it out of the way. No need to make reservations, he was pretty sure; there wasn't going to be a sudden rush on hotel rooms, not between a Monday and a Wednesday, so they wouldn't lose anything by keeping their options wide open.

Gunn said, "Damn, it's good to have you reading again. To watch a regular movie with you again. That not-speaking... It really dug in deep."

Wesley pulled a face, which Gunn had been expecting, then quickly glanced around the room, shook his head sharply, and frowned even more deeply. "My problems with reading and with..." A sigh. "And with speech from other people. That was... a descent into an all-consuming paranoia. Whereas my problems with my own speech were in the form of a paralysing state of panic. It was connected to my past, but... in a different direction from my conviction that I was going to lose you. But I'd rather tell you when we're back in bed."

Gunn nodded, laid his hand briefly over the back of Wesley's hand, and Wesley smiled and brought the conversation back to George Clooney.

Wesley wanted to kiss first, though he warned Gunn that he probably wouldn't want sex that night. "The paranoia... I think it's closest to me still than any of the other problems. And it makes me feel very... disconnected. As if none of my nerves really belong to me. Even with you here saying all the right things, I'm going to be in a strange state by the time I've finished telling you about it."

Gunn shook his head. "Back in L.A., when I was figurin' out where to take you, I never thought you'd even be talkin' by now. You're workin' so damn hard, Wes, t'get y'rself better. 'n' it feels like most of that's for me."

Gunn thought Wesley must have been planning since the bar how he was going to tell it. When he pulled back from the kiss, he only paused for a few seconds. His voice was quiet, but it was steady, determined. "It was the tape. Having the tape set there in Angel's room. It took me back to a time in my life when the people around me refused to speak to me. Anything I tried to -" A sigh. "They wouldn't trust me. They'd never trust me. They'd all decided exactly what to think of me. They'd act as if I didn't exist, and when they talked about me, it really was as if they didn't know I could hear."

"That's when the bastards were treating you like you were a management spy? That's the time you meant when you told it to me like that?"

Wesley nodded then swallowed. "I felt like a thing. As if I truly didn't exist in the same world as them. And having the tape in there judging me. Not trusting me. And the way that whenever you came home you'd go straight in there and listen to what it had to say about me, while I was..." A deep breath. "While I was shut away somewhere else so you didn't even have to look at me. And I know that wasn't why you had me go to the bedroom. And I know I'd betrayed you, I'd given you so many reasons not to trust me. Everything you did was entirely reasonable. The rational part of me truly wanted to give you anything you asked, and was astounded that you were asking so little. But that rational part just couldn't get in control of what was happening in my mind."

"Sounds like... tryin' to hang a picture straight while there's an earthquake goin' on."

Wesley laughed. "Yes. And while you're standing in quicksand."

"So you thought I was like one of those 'management spy' guys? Really feelin' that hard about you? Like you'd never get me to trust you? I'd never really give you a chance?"

Wesley shook his head hard. "That would still be giving me too much credit for rational thought. In my mind, the tape itself was those people from my past. It was the tape that was listening to me and judging me and deciding that I had no place in the world with the... with the real people. And it was right. I couldn't pretend that it wasn't right. And all around me there was the proof of how real people took up their world together. Speaking to each other and hearing each other and seeing each other as real. And it was... And it was sinister and pathetic for me to keep on trying to spy on them. It was time for me to... It was long past time for me to take myself off to the place that had been set up for me. Or - that didn't have any choice except to take me. It was time for me to accept. But it - it hurt. Seeing the real people so busy talking to each other. Writing things for each other. And knowing that in the place I belonged... That I was the only thing that would ever be sent there."

A hell dimension. That was how Wesley was thinking, wasn't it? He thought he belonged in the cell next to Angel - but where the guards would lock the door and then never think of him again.

“It hurt you just to see a book?”

Wesley nodded slowly. “A book in English or... in a language that living people spoke. But if it didn’t belong in this world either – because it was dead, or because it was spoken by demons – then it wasn’t spying and the book...” A long sigh. “It felt as if the book wanted me to read it. Had been waiting for me. And I thought that... I might manage to accept my place if there were books like that there. I could use their thoughts, I could fill my mind with them. I’d never have to find myself alone, to have to look at my own thoughts.”

“I’m guessin’ you even stopped thinking in English.”

Wesley nodded. “After about a week. My mind... fitted itself to Dirkou. I don’t know why it chose that.”

“Yeah. You started speakin’ it in your sleep. Started speakin’ somethin’, anyway. First few days you’d been whisperin’ in English. Shushin’ yourself, really tense. Really needin’ to speak, c’n see that now, but back then... I wasn’t gonna give an inch, I wasn’t gonna spend one more second thinkin’ ‘bout what was goin’ on with you – not till you fell in with every step I was set on for how you were gonna pay me back over what you’d done with Angel.”

“Oh, Charles. I wanted that as much as you did. With every part of me. There’s no part of me that’s so... deranged that it wants to give you one ounce less that you deserve. I never lost sight of what I should be doing. But there was a wall between the person I wanted to be, the person you should have, and I made myself so many promises but I couldn’t seem to control... I only seemed to have one way of reacting. Even when I could see it hurting you.”

Gunn pulled Wesley close and held him tight, and made himself promises about the ways he’d do better by Wesley in the future. Christ, he couldn’t have done much worse over this. He’d told Lilah that Angel messed Wesley up, but that was nothing to what he’d done himself with the gagging and the tape.

“How long’d you think we’d’ve kept on like that? Another week? Another month, even? If Lilah had kept on givin’ you work in your dead languages. That’s what pushed you over, wasn’t it? When she told you she wasn’t gonna give you another one.”

Wesley nodded. “I don’t remember much about what happened at the library. I don’t think I really knew who Lilah was. She was just... the method that the pages used to reach me. So they could turn themselves into my thoughts, and then into more thoughts and more pages. I remember the feeling that... they’d given up on me and that I – I had to get away from myself before...” A shrug. “I don’t know. I think I had some idea of going looking for more pages. Finding another supply.”

Gunn told Wesley what he knew about the meeting in the library – all the reasons Lilah could never have given him the next piece of work. “She said you came alive when you were speakin’ that language. When you couldn’t even look at her before. So she just let you talk, she couldn’t bring herself to stop you. You were like that with me when you were talking in your sleep. Been whisperin’ in English, actin’ really messed up. But then when you switched to that language, you were havin’ normal conversations. Yeah, you came alive.”

Wesley was nodding. “I’ve never gone so far before that I couldn’t bear to read English, but finding another language to think in has always been my surest way of escaping. Of making myself indifferent to... the judgement of the people around me. I was... I was probably quite close to a breakdown in the first three months after my family got me – I’d been happy doing research. I was good at it. I knew what to do. And the people... they were happy to have me working with them. Being moved from that to – I did try to break through, I did. But it just seemed to give them more to -”

He closed his eyes, then shook his head hard and took a deep breath. “But then I found that books would still talk to me. And that a new language would put me in a state of total concentration. I could shut out everything for hours, I could forget what I’d felt during the day. I’ve always had that but now there was... When I stopped thinking in English then it was like being in a different world, with different rules. Different values. Where I could speak and they were outside. Not that they wanted to be inside, but the few times they showed me any respect, it was because of my work on linguistics; they admitted that I did work. And with other linguists, I started making contacts again. Not really friends, I – I seemed to have lost that. But when we kept to our languages then there were always things we could talk about. So the languages were a refuge for me on every level. Back then I felt as if they saved my sanity. This time I think... they allowed me to pretend to function for long enough to... give my diverse collection of neuroses the chance to really bond as a creative team.” He was shaking his head, looking exasperated. “You’d asked me what I was doing with the packs of blood. Would you believe I was drinking it? I was drinking it cold. I was trying to live on it.”

Yeah, Gunn could believe that. “Was that ‘cos I wasn’t feedin’ him? Was that another way I messed you up?” He wasn’t ever going to tell Wesley the other things he’d believed about the blood, how he’d spied on Wesley from the truck.

“No, it wasn’t to do with him. Or with you. Except that... he’s not a real person either. And that’s what he drinks. So it was part of... accepting where I belonged. Normal food... I thought it would turn to ashes if I tried to put it in my mouth. In a way, I simply didn’t believe in it any more. Not as something that had any meaning for me.”

Gunn frowned and pulled a face, trying to push away the thought of the taste: the ashes, and the cold blood. “Yeah, man. You gotta break up that team. Stop ‘em creatin’. Or send ‘em to work writin’ some off-the-wall cult sitcom. Just get ‘em out of the house.”

A brief laugh. “I’ve booked a cab to take them to the airport. And I’ll definitely be changing the locks. And I think they’re all too self-conscious and inhibited to come back and yell abuse up at our window in the middle of the night.”

Gunn’s turn to laugh. “I’d be straight down there, seein’ ‘em off.” Then he turned serious and reached up to lay his palm along Wesley’s cheek. “What d’ you feel now, Wes? ‘bout that idea that you don’t belong. What sort of hold’s it got on you?”

Wesley looked thoughtful. Slowly: “It’s similar to the idea that I’d never changed after all. That you’d fallen in love with a shell. They’re very closely related. And my answer to both is that I want to change, I want to belong. For you first of all: to deserve you, to be less of a burden on you, so you only have to worry about me... a normal amount. But also because I think it’s wrong for me to keep on trying to hide. With the exception of... the mistake I made with Barney, I’ve done most good in the world in the times when I’ve been most contented with myself. And I’ve done most harm in the times when I’ve despised myself. So I’ll leave other people to hold out for the ideals of natural justice. As they might apply to me. And I’ll concentrate instead on... the approach that seems most likely to produce positive results.”

Had he even started to believe what Gunn had told him: that he’d been with the wrong people? But then Gunn had told that to him just once, and those other people had been telling him their things for most of his life.

* * * * *

Wesley got a couple of history books in Borders (on religion and on salt), and after lunch he took the salt book down to the courtyard. Gunn spent an hour in the fitness centre, then bought coffee for both of them. He’d meant to stay just for a few minutes, but the courtyard really was peaceful, like he and Wesley were the only people who’d ever found it, and he fetched a deck of cards from their room and sat crossways on a bench and played solitaire. Wesley read him odd facts from the book, and Gunn wondered how long it would be before he’d be taking this for granted: the ordinary quiet-evening-at-home stuff of being a comfortable, well-matched couple.

They stayed nearly until sunset, when most of Wesley’s light for reading was coming from the hotel rooms above him. As they were leaving to watch the sunset from the beach, Wesley pointed to a chair on the far side of the courtyard.

“That’s where I was sitting when I got the idea for the survey.”

Gunn felt a jolt of shock – at just the mention of the survey, at the idea that he’d forgotten. Two days ago the shock would have been bad enough to make him want to take himself off to bang his head against a wall and mutter “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” - because he never would have brought Wesley to this hotel if he’d remembered. But then two days ago he’d still had no clue what had gone wrong with Wesley, and he’d been working on sheer hope that he’d be able to put it right. And two days ago Wesley wouldn’t have felt strong enough to say that word.

“Was a good idea, Wes. Lot of people thought so. For the right reasons.”

Wesley nodded, serious and thoughtful. “Of course I’d want it undone but... I didn’t know. Back then I didn’t know. I couldn’t know. It would have been alright if I’d just thought properly about Barney. Or about the Kungai. I was so wrong about the Kungai. We should have been working together. It shouldn’t have died.”

“No one was thinking properly about Barney, Wes. He probably thought you’d never admit to anyone about your mistake. ‘stead he’s on Wanted posters in every demon bar in the country. He’s gotta be wishin’ he’d left you alone. Didn’t sound to me like he was lookin’ to retire on this one.”

Gunn felt like he’d put that point to Wesley a hundred times, but this time Wesley was letting himself think about it. Maybe that was even a nod, though as small a nod as you could get. Eventually Wesley said, “We should find out what’s happening with the investigation.”

“Yeah. We’ll call Swift when we get home.”

* * * * *

Gunn fell asleep very happy that night, but he was awake again a few hours later, and there was a cold weight in his guts and it turned out that was about a lot of things, but first of all it was about running out of time at the hotel. Only one more full day, and then they’d have to leave, and Gunn was dreading every part of packing up and checking out, how they wouldn’t have their space there anymore.

Stupid, because the next hotel would be fine. OK, it might not have a bar but they could buy a bottle of bourbon. And it might not be on the beach or have four restaurants and twenty shops, but they’d have just as good within a ten minute drive. And Wes could sit and read by the pool. It would be fine. Yeah, on that first day Wesley had needed the Wow! effect of the Hotel Del to believe he was really on vacation, he was really that far away from Angel, but was Gunn really scared that Wesley was about to get dragged back into his silence and his panics and his paranoia, all because he’d had to move to an ordinary hotel?

No, he couldn’t imagine that for a second. Sure, the new hotel would be a major comedown, you’d expect some sort of adrenaline crash after the stuff they’d dealt with since Friday, but that would go for both of them, and they’d just go to a movie, drink too many beers with the dice game, and get over it. Dreading having to leave: that was something else.

OK then. Imagine you’ve got another \$1,250 to spare, imagine you can stay after all.

And he found that he went straight to imagining how he’d be lying awake on Friday night, knowing that Saturday was their last full day, and the lobby would be swarming on Sunday morning when they checked out with everyone else and drove back to L.A. and he put his hand over his face and pressed hard, as his guts clenched to the point of nausea.

So. Nothing to do with the new hotel, then. Everything to do with going back home. Moving to the new hotel... Guess his gut must know what that meant about how their time was running out.

Back home. Which was back to Angel. Back to another mammoth shift of wall-to-wall Angel. Who wouldn’t be dreading that?

He was gonna have to let them talk to each other, wasn’t he? Sure, he could tell himself he knew how to do it now: no tape, no threat. Just trust Wesley because Wesley understood that Gunn needed them not to talk, Wesley wanted to make everything up to Gunn. But Wesley’s mind had too many tricks, Wesley had too many issues about talking and words and trust (and God knows what else), and once they were back there he’d soon work out another way to go crazy, another way that Gunn would be the last to recognise.

“Angel messes him up.” A whisper, almost without breath. The main argument against letting them talk: that Angel would say things that brought up even worse problems (“I won’t kill him. He doesn’t want me to kill him.”).

Yes, yes, but that was only a possibility, whereas it was definite that Gunn had got himself nothing, made nothing any better by trying to tell Wesley what to do. So he had to leave Wesley free to choose for himself, and hope that Wesley didn’t want to be messed up, not any more – that he’d walk out, that he’d yell at Angel to stop – and that he’d turn straight to Gunn for help, for comfort, he wouldn’t think for a second of covering up. Well, Wesley knew now that there wasn’t any need to cover up: Gunn wouldn’t really do anything, nothing more than letting Angel go hungry for a few days. Gunn still felt that he’d failed himself there. He should have taken Angel on, evened the score, his first chance that first day he’d found out. He’d have to keep telling himself that it was a good trade: a few points off his pride (and no one but him knew they were gone), and he’d won back the chance that Wesley would start telling him the truth about Angel.

Giving up on telling Wesley what to do... That didn't just mean giving up the tape, making himself not care if they talked. It meant giving up any idea of controlling what could and couldn't happen in that apartment. If he tried to hold anything back, then he'd have to answer to himself for sabotage. So he'd put the key to Angel's door back on the hook, and what happened between them... Well, it wouldn't be any of his business.

Not even if Wesley still had days that were bad enough that he wanted to get hurt?

He couldn't decide that on his own. He couldn't decide it cold. He and Wesley would have to talk that through – before they went home, while Wesley was still thinking clearly. Might as well be tomorrow. Put Wesley's mind at rest, if he'd been worrying too about going home.

* * * * *

They ordered breakfast in their room, and while Wesley was pouring the coffee Gunn got the padlock keys from the bag. He sat down, pushed the keys across the table towards Wesley, and said, "They're the keys to Angel's chains. And to the lock I put on the screen. You can do what you like with them. And with him. I should never have tried to stop you. It was never gonna work."

Wesley slowly picked up the keys, then held them in his palm like he was waiting for some proof that they were real.

"You trust me that much?" Hoping, but not daring to believe.

Gunn shrugged and sighed. "Oh, Wes, I dunno. Doesn't matter. I need you to be happy with me more 'n' I need to trust you. I know y'always want more of me. Keep me believin' that and..." Another shrug. "I'll deal with the rest. Won't tell you what to do no more. Can't make you live like that."

Wesley put the keys down and in the next moment was kneeling by Gunn's chair, sliding his arm around Gunn's waist and pressing his face to Gunn's chest. Gunn held him, very loose, just the weight of his arms.

"Charles. Charles." Wesley's voice was tight, almost shaking. "You're more than good. After all that's... It's heroic."

"Well..." Gunn tightened his hold on Wesley's shoulder and began stroking the back of Wesley's neck. "'s like what you said about results. If it's not workin', then you gotta make yourself stop doin' it. Can't say it's gonna be easy. But nothing's normal here, Wes. Him bein' crazy, with whatever ideas it is he's got about you. You bein' in such a bad way. How we can't get away from each other. Nothin's normal. I don't get to act like you see on Oprah. I don't get even half of what I want. But what's worst is... Wes, how d' you feel now about when he was hurtin' you? Is that part of the shell thing? The not-belongin' thing? You able to handle it the same way? Or you gonna need some extra help? There's somethin' else you need to tell me?"

Wesley raised his head. "It was the shell thing. It was every part of the shell thing all mixed in together. I wanted to be punished. And I wanted to think the worst of him because... he'd been wrong about me, he'd been taken in by me. He'd been the one who could have worked it out about Barney and the Kungai, but he'd been stupid and he'd believed me. He'd never been... what I'd thought. He'd been another shell. And he knew exactly what I was thinking and feeling about what I was, what I'd done. He agreed with me. He could bear to hear it, when you wouldn't put up with it, you wouldn't let me talk like that..." A long sigh, and Wesley closed his eyes for several seconds. "I couldn't stop myself from thinking like that, Charles. I was always thinking like that. And he... I could say it to him and know I wasn't hurting him. Indeed, I was giving him... a chance to compare notes."

Gunn gave a long sigh then shook his head slowly. "Still don't know that I can bear to hear it. What we gonna do about that, Wes? If you have days where you're wanting it again?"

"I'll tell you. That I'm having one of those days, not the details of what I'm thinking. You should hide the key from me. It would probably be a good idea if we went out for some hard training. Not to get me hurt, I'd never involve you in that, but to... take me out of myself. The less leisure I have to think, the better."

"OK." Gunn was nodding. "OK. You gonna tell him it's never gonna happen again?"

"Of course. As soon as we get back."

"Yeah. You think he's gonna be difficult? Angry 'bout havin' it taken away?"

"I'm not sure. I'll be very careful until I've seen..." A sigh. "I'm sure you don't want to know this but it really wasn't what he wanted from me. He knew perfectly well that I was using him to get my punishment. And he could do it, he could enjoy it because he does have that side to him. But he never said anything to suggest that he was... making anything of it. I mean that he was... telling himself stories about it, planning things he could do to – to heighten the experience for himself." A wince – almost a flinch. "I'm sorry, I – But I don't want you to be... more angry with him than you need to be."

Gunn shrugged. "I'm angry with all three of us. Think we all needed droppin' on our heads. We gotta stop actin' on bein' angry. Actin' on bein' scared. Gotta start sayin' to each other, 'Look. I know how you're feelin'. I hear it. I get it. But what you're doin'... It's never gonna make things any better.' Wish you could've said that to me about the tape. And him... maybe he was even plannin' how he could make you stop."

* * * * *

They'd agreed days ago that they'd have dinner in the hotel on their last night – with cocktails and wine and everything, and no issue about driving. When they went up to their room to get ready, Gunn brought out the suit and asked Wesley if there was any chance that he'd changed his mind.

Wesley looked between Gunn and the suit, frowning hard. Gunn was about to shrug, put the suit back like it was an impulse thing, but then Wesley said, "It means a lot to you."

"You look so fine like that. Gives me a kick, seeing you on show. 'n' lookin' so English, like there's a forcefield round you. 'n' all the time you're mine, 'n' I c'n walk straight through."

"I'd like to... I'd like to..." Wesley's fingers brushed the lapel; maybe he hadn't even meant to touch, but his hand was shaking. "I wish I could think of another way of looking like that for you. But – I feel ill at the idea of putting it on. It was with me that Sunday. For the meal with Barney."

"Oh!" Gunn took a step back in recoil, stood frozen for several seconds, then practically threw the suit into the wardrobe and then slammed the door. "Jeez! How'd I forget that? Damn, I shoulda seen it. Just.. freaked me out so bad when you'd come back from the thrift shop. Couldn't see past how you were in these other guys' clothes."

Wesley stepped forward, grabbed Gunn by the wrist and pulled him close. "I'm glad you forgot. And you were right to be freaked out. You weren't seeing a guilt-stricken man having a direct visceral reaction to a particular painful reminder. You were seeing an instrument of fate indulging in a dramatic gesture of renunciation. I was disgusted by all of my old clothes. Now..."

"It's just about Barney. It's just about the suit."

"Exactly."

"So you'll throw out those damn, fuckin' cords when we get home?"

Wesley laughed. "We'll have a ritual burning."

But while Gunn was in the shower, Wesley went and got dressed in the suit. Gunn stood in the doorway to the bathroom and stared and stared, while his cock jerked higher and higher.

"It's as good as you remembered?" Half-smiling, half-anxious.

"Yeah, but –" A brief sigh. "OK, I'm not even gonna guess what happened. Just convince me you're still somehow gonna enjoy the meal."

"It's because I know I am that..." Wesley closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. "You're more important to me than what happened with Barney. Yes, I have that memory for this suit but I won't let it take away the good memories I have from you. Or scare me out of ever dressing for you again the way I want to. If I'm going to start again, then there couldn't be a better evening." He swallowed, and his tone changed. "And Charles, if you can face giving me those keys, then I can certainly face a few minutes of feeling queasy. Until the gin-and-tonic arrives and you start making me laugh."

Gunn had always felt cheated out of a beer the few times he'd been somewhere they only had wine. And he could have had beer but Wesley really liked good wine, and really missed being able to open a bottle of it with a meal – open it and enjoy it properly because there was no idea of being on call for the visions. He couldn't drink a whole bottle, and Gunn wanted to drink the same as Wesley anyhow. Wesley chose a white wine, very smooth, tasted kind of like melons; Gunn found it too fussy at first, not clean like beer, but he'd got used to it by the time their entrées arrived. He did make Wesley laugh, and Wesley made him laugh, and their hands were touching in some way across the table for about half the meal. Wesley even joined Gunn in having a dessert (if you could call a fruit salad a dessert, without even any cream).

Over coffee and liqueurs Wesley said, "Let's go home tomorrow. Anything else is going to be a sad anti-climax. Let's save the money and go home."

Gunn had not seen that coming. He looked down at his cup, moved his hand away from Wesley's to play with his spoon, spinning it, rocking it back and forth. Finally, sitting back in his chair: "You want to use those keys."

Wesley sighed and sat back also, and ran his hand slowly through his hair. "I'll be glad when he's free, yes. But if I'm in a hurry to get back to him, it's for the same reason that I put on this suit: because I'm very apprehensive about dealing with him, about the state he'll be in. I don't know what he'll remember, what he's imagined, what he'll want. I have to make him manageable. And I'm as ready now as I'll ever be. I don't need any more time here. Not right now. If we can save our money for something else, save Lilah's goodwill... A couple of days away maybe, every few months... Wouldn't you rather look forward to that?"

Good reasons. Gunn didn't think they were the real reasons, but there wasn't much he could argue; he'd just have to get home and see how Wesley acted with Angel and then... Well, probably see that he'd been right but why start another argument? "I'll call Lilah. When we're somewhere more quiet."

They called from the beach and Wesley made the call since it seemed the simplest way of letting Lilah know they were coming back because he was fully recovered, not because their vacation had gone wrong. He gave his apologies and his thanks, answered her questions about what they'd been doing, and said they'd be back between two and four on Wednesday afternoon. He didn't ask anything about Angel.

They made the walk long, their longest yet; and slow because they kept stopping and turning to look or to kiss. The sex was long too; slow where they wanted it slow, but also fast and surprising and noisy. Gunn slept a perfect sleep, no 3 a.m. dread, no thoughts about Angel.

In the morning they showered together, had breakfast in the restaurant over the L.A. Times, had a last walk on the beach, a last coffee in the courtyard, and checked out around eleven. Wesley insisted on driving, like he'd insisted on taking the suit in his own luggage; he was all better now, and he wanted to get home.

* * * * *