

The Long Term

by Helen Raven

Disclaimer	Not mine, not for profit, not even a blip on the litigation radar.
Rating	NC-17. Bloodletting, dark themes.
Pairing	Wesley/Angel
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Dedication	To Kassie, whose stories first made me really look at Wesley. To Kassie and Vic, for beta-work that saved me from myself - over and over again.
Notes	Takes place from late Season One (sometime before "The Ring") up to early Season Two ("Darla").

Wesley learned much about himself between the autumn of 1999 and the spring of 2000, and he welcomed almost all that he learned. He owed his improved understanding to a series of decisions and events, some of which showed their true significance only in retrospect, while others were obviously important even at the time. For example, he knew the exact dates of the last decision and the last event, and had been planning for them at least a month beforehand; whereas for the first decisions and events, the closest he could get was "near the end of my second month in L.A., some time after the Ethros demon but before the MacNamara brothers". He was not surprised by this failure of his memory; some of the initial events had certainly been startling, but his response to the events had felt ordinary and predictable, had seemed to neutralise the entire incident. He had been left with no reason to worry about himself or about Angel, and therefore with no reason to remember the exact date.

Wesley would, however, never forget that the first events had taken place at lunchtime. He had been standing at the kitchen table, chopping cabbage for a salad. Some change in the light had caused him to look up, and he had discovered that Angel was in the room, was no more than two feet away. In his surprise Wesley had sliced two fingers open, and for the next few seconds all other thoughts were obliterated by the pain and the shock.

The cut through the pad of his middle finger looked at least three millimetres deep, and it gaped wider with a sickeningly-unnatural wrinkling feeling as he curled and uncurled his fingers to test the movement; but the shallower cuts across the inside of his knuckles were the ones that really hurt. When he relaxed his hand the wounds stopped gaping, though, and if the edges of the wounds were able to come together of their own accord, that meant that they would heal properly without stitches.

As the pain faded, Wesley became aware of Angel again. Angel did not seem to be recovering from the shock as quickly as Wesley himself had, and sounded as if he would continue apologising for at least a minute. Wesley had to interrupt Angel: "I'm sure you didn't mean to. It's not serious. Have you got any plasters, though? I mean Band-Aids." No, he meant plasters, but this wasn't the time to test Angel's command of British English; some other day, maybe, when he wasn't bleeding.

"I'll ask Cordy." Angel was already heading for the stairs.

Wesley nodded, then swore as the blood suddenly became more than the cupped palm of his hand could contain, and started trickling in several streams around the back of his hand and then down his wrist to his arm. He tilted his hand, but this only started another stream down the front of his wrist. Of course, this *would* have to happen when he was wearing his best white shirt; the sleeves were rolled up, but not above the elbow.

Angel must have heard the swearing and turned around, and then must have guessed that Wesley's priorities had just changed. He came back into the kitchen and ran to the far side of the table to grab the tea-towel from above the sink. Maybe Wesley should simply have waited, but the drops were still advancing down his arm towards his shirt, and there was no question in his mind that he had to do something about the drops while he could still reach them. He raised his arm as high as he could without tilting his palm forward again, and leaned in to stop the leading drop with his tongue.

Wesley's view of Angel was a blurred one over the top of his glasses, and it took Wesley a few seconds to notice that Angel had stopped moving; Angel was standing quite still on the other side of the kitchen

table, staring in Wesley's direction. Wesley assumed that something alarming had just appeared behind him. A demon? No, Angel would have yelled a warning, would have launched himself into battle. It was far more likely to be Cordelia, come to complain about the slow service of lunch. Wesley still had his head bent to his arm; as he straightened up he took the time for a quick look at Angel's face, wanting some clue about what was behind him before he turned to face it. But Angel was not looking past him. Angel had been staring in Wesley's direction because he was looking straight at Wesley, at Wesley's bleeding left hand. He seemed unable to look away.

Wesley had not expected this at all. He had never seen Angel react to a bleeding human with anything other than concern. He had not worried for a second about the fact that he was bleeding in front of a vampire. Why should he, when Angel had been giving him no reason to worry? When Angel had been apologising, genuinely shocked. And then going to get Band-Aids. And then running across the room to get the tea-towel. And then -

//And then he saw me tasting my own blood.//

Wesley gasped. Angel looked up, seemed to take a few moments to realise that he had been staring, that Wesley had seen him staring. Then his face flooded with unmistakable guilt and shame, and he sent one of the chairs skidding in his haste to resume his interrupted task of delivering the tea-towel. Before Angel had even rounded the first corner of the table, Wesley thrust out his right arm, palm raised to hold Angel off. The gesture was instinctive, though not made out of shock or rejection; Wesley just wanted time to think. To Angel, though, the gesture must have suggested the worst; he stopped immediately, then backed away until he came up against the cooker.

"Wesley, I won't - You don't - I'm -"

Wesley shook his head sharply, gave a grunt that was intended - and taken - as a command for silence. He was no longer looking at Angel, was not really looking at anything; his eyes were focussed on some point above the table, and he frowned at that point in fierce concentration. Blood was dripping from his knuckles onto the floor.

//Think. And quickly. The blood has to get cleaned up. Somehow. No use to me. Go to waste otherwise, but - You can't just - Who knows what a vampire - Think. Think.//

He thought that there really was no sense in wasting the blood, not when he had already lost it and there was someone right in front of him who had a use for it. He thought that whatever Angel did with the blood, it would probably be quick and simple, maybe even clinical. He thought of how embarrassed he would feel if he did not offer the blood to Angel and he knew how awkwardly the embarrassment would make him behave; he would be painfully self-conscious about not trusting Angel enough, and he would make that awareness more obvious to Angel with each stupid word.

//But you *can't* trust a vampire. Not with this. Can you?//

He could almost imagine himself making the offer. After all, a cut hand was such an ordinary thing, so trivial. How could it ever matter what you decided to do about a cut hand? But when you've spent years of your life learning about vampires... No Watcher on Earth would do it. Not even with Angel. And not even with something as innocuous as a cut hand. It was too dangerous.

And then his memory presented him with an image from his first week with Angel Investigations, and this image caused the balance of his judgement to shift, just a fraction, and the decision he had been about to make suddenly turned inside out. The image was of Cordelia, of the moment during the tour of the building when she had dropped down on one knee beside the kitchen table to show him the cross that she had taped to the underside. Wesley moved along the table to the location that Cordelia had showed him, dropped to one knee himself, and put his hand on the cross as soon as he felt underneath the table. Cordelia had been very thorough in her use of duct tape; the sound as the tape let go was surprisingly loud and Angel reacted to the sound with a start, which Wesley saw as a blur over the top of his glasses.

Wesley felt alert but perfectly calm as he walked towards Angel, his bleeding hand stretched out, the hand with the cross tensed and ready down by his thigh. Angel didn't look alarmed or offended to see

Wesley with the cross; if anything, he looked relieved, though that was probably at the fact that Wesley was now prepared to approach him. He folded the tea-towel in four and held it out ready in both hands.

“No.” Wesley shook his head and lifted his bleeding hand well above the cloth.

“Please. You can let me help you. I won’t -”

“No. It’s for you.” Wesley took a step forward, which brought his hand within inches of Angel’s mouth. “I don’t need help. Take it.”

Angel gave another start, one which looked less like surprise and more like an attempt to get away from Wesley. He was still backed against the cooker, though, so he could only pull away by arching his spine. It looked painful. “No! No, Wesley. No.”

“You need it. I’ve already lost it. I don’t see any point in wasting it.”

Through gritted teeth: “You can’t trust me. You can’t.”

“I don’t have to trust you.” He brought the cross up, level with his other hand. “I trust this.”

Angel stared at the cross for several seconds, radiating anguish and disbelief, and then looked up, his eyes pleading with Wesley to stop. Wesley ignored the plea, entirely confident that he was right to be making the offer. He felt justified and detached, out of reach of any twinge of sympathy for Angel.

“Wesley...” A note of despair, there. Angel started inching away, along the edge of the cooker.

It was obvious to Wesley what he had to do if the blood was not to go to waste. “You need this.” He took a step back in order to give himself more room to lean forward. “Look,” and he bent his head again, this time towards the overflowing palm. He had long enough to try to analyse what it was that made the taste of blood so unpleasant, and to doubt that anyone could really *want* to drink it; and then Angel groaned, seized Wesley’s wrist and clamped Wesley’s hand tight around the curve of his mouth. Throat working audibly, he sank to his knees, pulling Wesley’s arm down.

Wesley could not see Angel’s face, could not find an angle where he could even keep watch on the forehead. But he had several good options for slamming the cross against exposed skin and he held it poised at the best position, waiting for the teeth, wondering if he would feel the mouth change under his hand.

Angel’s mouth did not change, and it could not have been more than a minute before his grip eased and he raised his head. Wesley smiled to himself, thinking that it had been quick, it had been simple; he had been right about everything. But then Angel drew his right hand slowly along the back of Wesley’s hand to the fingertips and leant in again, pressing his open mouth to the wrist, the jumping pulse. Wesley took some seconds to realise what Angel had now started: a leisurely removal of every trace of blood from the inside of Wesley’s forearm. The sight and the sensation had an immediate effect on Wesley’s cock, and at the touch of the cool tongue to the crease in his elbow, Wesley felt a surge of sexual excitement so strong that he felt almost dizzy for a second. He nearly let go of the cross, and caught it only by clapping it to his chest. When Angel moved back to his hand, his fingers, the sight was too much, and Wesley had to close his eyes. Wesley had thought that he had his sexual response to Angel completely under control, that Angel would never find out about it, even if they worked together for years. But this was so unlike his fantasies about Angel - it was so simple, almost tender - that all his well-planned, reliable defences suddenly seemed useless.

Was this feeding? Proper feeding? The blood must be cold by now, must be drying, stiff on the hair on his arms. Was the heat of his skin enough to make it seem fresh, enough to make it worth taking this amount of care to collect? Was this thoroughness a measure of the vampire’s appetite, more so even than that groan, those first loud seconds? Or was this something else?

Wesley felt a light pressure in the centre of his palm, and then Angel’s mouth lifted away, and Angel seemed to be finished. Wesley took a ragged breath and opened his eyes, to find that Angel was still kneeling in front of him; Angel was turned away, reaching back with his left hand to open a drawer by

the sink, but keeping his right hand steady as it cradled Wesley's. The sight of Angel on his knees was enough to bring Wesley's hard-on to the point of urgency, even without the sensations of the feeding. Wesley forced his attention away from Angel and onto his cut hand, trying to calm himself with ordinary, practical thoughts. The cuts looked as if they were still bleeding, though it was hard to tell since Angel had not removed any of the blood from the two fingers with the cuts. Wesley flexed the fingers and discovered that they were still bleeding, though only slightly.

Angel turned back to face Wesley, with a clean, folded tea-towel in his hand; he must have dropped the first one, probably when he seized Wesley's hand. He wrapped the tea-towel carefully but loosely around Wesley's fingers and tucked the ends in at the sides. Then he sat back on his heels and looked up at Wesley, his expression showing clear concern, and something that Wesley thought was probably disbelief.

Angel seemed to be waiting for Wesley to speak first, but Wesley had no idea what he could or should say. He was breathless with arousal, his heart pounding, and Angel must have noticed, given his proximity to Wesley's crotch. In all of the hours that Wesley had spent fantasising about Angel, and in constructing the defences that kept the Angel of his fantasies entirely separate from the real Angel, he had never let himself think about what he would do if Angel ever found out. What *could* he do, though, except stare, and remember the coolness of Angel's mouth against his wrist, and fight the urge to touch himself and give his cock what it was demanding from him?

No. No. There must be a way out. There must be some trick, some key that would let them treat their behaviour as simple and natural, that would let them both act as if it had never happened.

Well... if he had to deal with the real Angel, maybe he could keep the separation if he adopted a different persona, became a fantasy version of Wesley Wyndham-Price. A creature of confidence and easy charm, impossible to embarrass. Could he do it? Could he become someone else for five minutes? He rather thought he could. After all, he was *good* at concocting fantasy versions of people; these versions had been a crucial component of his sex life for many years. They always served their purpose, they always kept him safe; they stopped him from humiliating himself, from asking too much of real people. He had reliable techniques for concocting these fantasy versions, and all he needed to do was apply the same techniques to himself.

Within a matter of seconds, the fantasy version of Wesley was ready to start work. He relaxed, smiled at Angel: "You missed some there." Teasing. This version was actually teasing Angel. Wesley would not have guessed that any aspect of himself was capable of that.

"Because I didn't want to hurt you." Angel was definitely not teasing. "I didn't?"

Wesley shook his head, still smiling, oblivious to Angel's concern; they had done nothing out of the ordinary, and neither of them could be in need of reassurance.

Angel's look of concern persisted for a few seconds longer, and then he relaxed slightly. He still looked serious, though, and after a brief pause he shook his head and said, "I might not have hurt you, but I do seem to have left you with a problem." He lowered his gaze slowly and deliberately to Wesley's crotch, his meaning unmistakable.

Wesley gasped, horrified, and the confident, teasing version of himself disintegrated in a storm of panic. For some moments he was scarcely able to think, let alone say the right words, the words that might make this stop, erase this as if it had never happened.

Angel looked up, and Wesley flinched, but Angel was smiling. The smile held reassurance, with maybe a touch of amusement. "Don't look so worried, Wesley. I'm not going to fire you for having sensitive skin on your arms."

"No?" Wesley had at least managed to say a word, though it was probably not the right word. He was fighting to bring back the confident Wesley, to construct some form of defence for himself.

Angel stopped smiling. He frowned, seeming briefly uncertain, as if he wasn't entirely sure how to deal with the situation. "I thought... I might help you with that. If you'd let me." He laid his hand lightly on the outside of Wesley's thigh - a casual touch, not overtly sexual.

Wesley leapt back with a strangled cry, dropping the cross in his shock. His retreat took him out of Angel's immediate reach, but the movement also increased the pressure of friction on his cock; he stood panting helplessly for a long time, with his eyes closed and his face averted, and with his hand held in front of his crotch in a desperate, instinctive effort to hide it, to ward off any other touch or pressure. He willed himself to become invisible, he prayed for Angel to leave. But Angel stayed, not moving, apparently waiting.

Wesley finally found the control and courage to look at Angel again. "You..." He shook his head, panting again. "You don't really want to."

"Wesley, do I get to *do* what I *really* want? You're going to have to do *something* about that." He gestured with his head towards Wesley's crotch. "And since I'm partly responsible..." He sighed, then gave a brief, impatient shake of the head, and got suddenly to his feet. "Stop shivering and come into the bedroom." He reached out, grasped Wesley's injured arm just above the elbow, and started pulling Wesley forward; the pressure was gentle, just enough to lift Wesley's arm by a few inches.

Wesley didn't try to shake Angel's hand off, but looked at him, pleading. "Angel..." He could see no escape, find no argument.

"Come on, Wesley. Get it over with. Hasn't the worst already happened?"

What did Angel mean when he said that the worst had already happened? The worst thing that Wesley could imagine would be finding out that Angel had always known about Wesley's sexual fantasies, that Wesley's best, most-trusted defences had always been transparent to him. Did Angel mean that? Was he saying that Wesley had no choice now but to admit what he felt, to live with the consequences?

No. No. Angel didn't mean that. Nothing he had said pointed to that. Nothing. He probably just meant the hideous embarrassment of being caught with an inappropriate erection. And Angel had experience of Englishmen, of English reserve. Wesley's reactions had probably looked to him like nothing more than the agonies of English embarrassment.

Wesley had been holding his breath as he tried to guess what Angel had meant by the worst. When he found his answer, he let out his breath in a ragged sigh, and felt weak with relief. Angel obviously saw the change in Wesley, the release of tension, and clearly took it as a sign of capitulation, a sign that Wesley was going to do as he was told. He tugged slightly at Wesley's arm, looking decidedly pleased with himself.

Wesley did not like the smug look on Angel's face, and he did not like being pulled around. Yes, he was going to go into the bedroom, but he was not going to be dragged there as if he had no will of his own. The worst *was* over. His thoughts were still hazed by lust but they were no longer boiling with panic, and he felt able to take back some control, to make some choices. He remembered what he had done earlier to concoct the confident, fantasy version of himself, and found that it was easy for him to do it again.

The confident version of Wesley resisted Angel's pull on his arm, not pulling back and trying to fight, but calmly, with a shrug to suggest that persuasion was no longer needed. "And even if the worst hasn't already happened, you've seen it all before, anyway?"

"Once or twice." Angel released Wesley's arm and took a step towards the bedroom. His smile seemed genuine now. "Come on. It'll be fine."

By the time they reached the bedroom, Wesley had gained even more control over himself. He was able to take his share in the practicalities of closing and locking doors, and he was also finally able to look properly at Angel, and then to decide what he should do about what he saw.

“You seem to have something of a problem yourself.” They both looked down at Angel’s crotch, and the bulge in the black cloth.

“It’s... It’s not you, Wesley. It’s not about you.”

“I didn’t think it was.” Wesley would never imagine for an instant that Angel could be attracted to him. Angel’s hard-on was a response to the situation itself, not a response to Wesley as a man. Angel was excited by the blood, the physical contact, the tension; and who knows how many memories and associations, accumulated over the centuries? “But...” Wesley sighed, and gestured with his head towards the closed door that led to the kitchen. “... everything you said out there. It goes both ways. I... I have an obligation to help. If you’ll let me. And I’ve seen...” He closed his eyes briefly, gasping as his own arousal built again. “I’ve seen enough, anyway.”

Angel’s expression was hard to classify. Mild exasperation, probably, with some amusement and some surprise. Finally he shrugged and started unbuttoning his shirt. “All right, then. If it’s the only way to make you get it over with. No point in arguing about it all day.”

As it turned out, Angel didn’t finish unbuttoning his shirt. Neither of them undressed properly, they just pushed their clothes down or out of the way. This wasn’t a sudden surge of helpless desire, just “getting it over with”, and they got it all over with quickly.

Afterwards they lay sprawled on their backs across the bed, with at least the width of a hand between them. For a while they were breathing almost in unison, and then Angel stopped breathing altogether, leaving Wesley to take the last, slowing sighs on his own. Wesley was startled at the change, then annoyed with himself that he hadn’t noticed when Angel’s breathing had started. With the feeding? Or even before that?

The fantasy version of Wesley had shattered in the moment that Angel first touched Wesley’s cock. Or maybe from that moment, when Wesley had lost the capacity for speech, there had been little to choose between the two versions. Wesley had no idea which version of himself might be needed now. He should wait for Angel to speak, choose the version that would give Angel whatever he seemed to need in the way of reassurance. Or of apologies. Or of outright denial. But that approach would only work if Angel actually said something in, say, the next ten minutes.

Wesley let about five minutes elapse after Angel had stopped breathing, and then decided that they couldn’t afford to wait any longer. With a small amount of arching and wriggling he restored his clothes to order, then shifted up onto an elbow. Angel had not yet moved; he was no longer smiling, but his expression gave Wesley few other clues.

Wesley tried saying the first thing that came into his head, feeling that it could have come from either version of himself. Quietly and seriously: “You’ve got blood all over your face.” Just on Angel’s right cheek, really, but the outline of Wesley’s fingers was still very clear.

Angel gave only a slight nod of acknowledgement. Well, of course he knew that he had blood on his face. This watching, this silence was probably a heavy hint for Wesley to leave him in decent privacy so that he could collect every last trace of A negative. However, Wesley had decided that he was not going to take any hint about privacy, about leaving Angel alone, no matter how heavy. He and Angel could not just assume that there would be no repercussions; they had to make sure of one another before they could treat this incident as closed.

Wesley sat up and checked the state of his cuts. They were still wet but not actively bleeding, and he could safely leave them uncovered for a few more minutes. He took the tea-towel in his other hand and got to his feet. “I won’t be a second.”

When he came back from the kitchen after dampening the tea-towel under the kitchen tap, he saw that Angel still had not moved, was still lying there with his trousers pushed down, his shirt pushed up. Wesley knew that his mind would be retrieving that image frequently, and not necessarily at the most appropriate moment.

Angel didn't seem annoyed or disappointed at being deprived of the blood on his face, and co-operated in turning his head to whatever angle would make Wesley's task easier. Wesley had imagined the hint about privacy. Or misread it. But Angel was definitely waiting for something: holding off, or holding out.

"I thought you might change." Wesley had finished cleaning Angel's face and was sitting back on his heels, his hands resting on his thighs. "Out there. When you were..." He gestured with his head without breaking eye-contact. "Change into -"

"So did I."

"Why didn't you?"

A slight shrug. "It wasn't enough." Not quite a statement. Not quite a question. "And I was thinking too much." A glare. "Wondering about you. About whether I'd ever had any *evidence* that you had a grain of sense."

"Was it - Was it worse than having nothing?" Wesley felt that he had to ask, though he knew he wasn't ready to hear the answer; he had been so sure that he had been right to make Angel take the blood.

Quietly: "I don't know." A sigh. "Ask me again tomorrow." Then a quick shake of the head. "No. Don't."

"I didn't mean - I just thought - It seemed a waste."

"And you hate waste." Detached, but mild. "Don't give me any more surprises like that, Wesley." Still mild. "Do your best to be boring."

Wesley laughed, and started to get off the bed. "I can't promise anything." Angel smiled and nodded, and Wesley felt that they understood each other. There would be no repercussions. Everything would be fine.

He went upstairs, where Cordelia called him an idiot, and then announced, as if giving herself a reward and depriving him of a treat, that she was going out to get Band-Aids and lunch. She did not ask him what he wanted for lunch, and she did not get him his favourite (chicken salad with goat's cheese and doughballs, which she'd seen him have at least five times), but she did get one of the runners-up. When Angel joined them they were deep in an argument about the distance to the nearest branch of Soup Plantation.

"You found it?" Cordelia nodded at the book in Angel's hand.

"No, they'd sold it. This is something else."

"Wesley cut his hand. On some cabbage."

"Well, not *on* the -"

"Yes, I saw the state of the chopping board."

"Oh, he'll clean that up." As if making a promise on behalf of a four-year-old.

"It's done. You OK, Wesley?"

Wesley raised his hand casually, displaying his fingers in their Band-Aids. "Thanks. Yes." Wesley had to wonder what exactly Angel had included in his cleaning up. Throwing away the cabbage - probably. Scrubbing the drops of blood off the floor - possibly. But what about taping the cross back underneath the table? Wesley found it hard to imagine that, except as farce, and he hated the idea of Angel seeming clumsy or ridiculous. So he wouldn't try to imagine Angel with the cross, he would simply make a note to check for the cross the next time he went down to make tea.

Actually, up here with Cordelia and the filing cabinets and the sunlight on the blinds, the entire incident was already starting to seem unreal. Give it a few weeks, and even the image of Angel on the bed would find a proper and harmless place in his repertoire of fantasies. Angel would probably regard the incident in a similar way, as a harmless curiosity.

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Wesley could not stop thinking about what they had done. If he were to describe it honestly, he would have to say that it was the most haunting erotic experience of his life, and, if pressed, admit that he was currently obsessed with the idea of the feeding.

The sex itself had been very welcome, very much needed at the time, but it had been quick and basic, whereas Wesley's passion was for details. His fantasies about Angel were full of details; not details of the real Angel, but details that were full of significance to Wesley himself and to his fantasy version of Angel. All of Wesley's fantasies were constructed to that high standard, whether they were about Angel, or about a woman whom he had seen once on the street in 1994. Wesley regarded himself as a master craftsman of the sexual fantasy - or as a chronic serial fetishist, if one must take the clinical view - and this attention to detail could sometimes make him quite impatient with the crudeness of reality. He would treasure the memory of sex with Angel, but there was no possibility that it would ever make him feel that his fantasies were not enough.

But the feeding... There were so many details in the feeding that it was almost overwhelming, even for Wesley and his appetite for details. Every feature was distinct, unique. He could almost believe that he was the first person ever to feel a cool mouth opening against his wrist. To feel the brief pressure of teeth in the wake of a slow tongue. To feel the joints of his hand and arm manipulated to present first this surface, then that. Each time he examined the details of the feeding, they became richer and more fascinating.

Thinking about the feeding excited him, but the sexual excitement felt almost incidental. He never treated the thoughts as he treated his fantasies: nudging them, shaping them to increase the thrill, and he never lost interest after he had brought the thrill to a peak; the thoughts themselves offered all of the satisfaction that he could want. It was like being newly in love, able to devote measureless hours simply to gazing at the fact that your beloved existed.

Wesley never imagined for a second that he was in love with Angel. In awe of him, devoted to him, definitely, but Wesley could not love without hope, and there could be no glimmer of hope with Angel. What could it mean, though, that he was having thoughts about being in love with the idea of Angel drinking his blood? In love with an idea. And with such an idea. How could he reconcile that with his belief that he could not love without hope?

Well, of course it wasn't really love, so there was no question of him wasting years of his life on the pathetic yearning that he despised. It was just an obsession, so there was no need for him to worry about hope. If he insisted on having something to worry about, it should probably be about when exactly he was going to come to his senses and have the option about thinking about something normal. The obsession was not causing Wesley difficulties in any of his dealings with Angel, but he was aware that it was a peculiar preoccupation, especially for someone with his background; and even with all of his experience of his libido's appetite for the exotic detail, he had never known it this insistent or quite this perverse. Wesley imagined that most men would find the experience very disturbing, but he knew exactly what to expect from his libido: the fixation would burn out sooner or later, probably within the week; and then he would either discard the detail entirely, or let it find its place with the rest of the material that he used for his fantasies.

Wesley did wonder if Angel knew what he was thinking; he *had* to wonder, during the moments in each day when he thought he caught Angel looking at the Band-Aids and felt a jolt of arousal, always with the same heat, the same force. Angel gave no sign that he knew, that there might be anything about Wesley to notice. However, Wesley now assumed that Angel's vampire senses were aware of every surge of a mortal's blood, so surely he must know, and the lack of reaction must be a sign in itself.

//Angel knows the effect he's having on me. And he trusts me enough to know that neither of us has to worry about it. He trusts me.//

Their actions of that lunchtime had brought no apparent consequences, though most people would surely consider those actions as extreme. Had they been lucky that they had come out of it still able to work together, to act normally with one another? Or was that not a matter of luck, but instead a matter of intelligence and good management? Would it all have been different if Wesley had said just one wrong thing? If he had not had the protection of that simple, confident persona? He would probably have left L.A. already, proclaiming... something grand about the life of a Rogue Demon Hunter.

Angel should probably take some of the credit. The consequences would certainly have been different if he had not seemed to take all of Wesley's sexual reactions for granted, as a simple combination of stimulus and response. The consequences would probably also have been different if Angel had not made it so immediately clear that he was not attracted to Wesley. After that, they had both been able to treat the sex as an impersonal arrangement, and Angel must have been left quite confident that there was no need to warn Wesley not to get serious, that there was no hint of risk to anyone's soul. Angel's indifference made it almost easy for Wesley to ignore the state of his body while he was at work.

Wesley felt that he had currently achieved (or been granted) a very pleasing balance between his work, his friends, and the parts of his life that were entirely private. He was spending his days productively with people he liked, and then he was able to go home knowing that his cherished obsession would be waiting for him. The obsession wasn't love, but it felt so much like it, like love at its most simple and enjoyable; before the jealousy and the cruelty and the loss of illusions. He knew that he would not be winning any awards for mental health, but then nothing that he did - or stopped himself from doing - would make him normal; and he was determined to welcome happiness in whatever form it was offered to him. The obsession would be over in a few weeks, and he knew that he would always would look back on this time with fondness.

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Wesley had very strict rules about the conduct of his fantasies, especially about the type of person he was allowed to involve: the person had to be fictional, a complete stranger, or suitable for adapting into a fantasy version with a radically different personality. Real friends (or real enemies) were not permitted.

Whenever Wesley deliberately dwelt upon his memories of the feeding, he was fantasising about the real Angel, and he was breaking his strictest rule. However, Wesley did not even remember that he had any rules until the morning of the ninth day after the start of his new obsession. On that morning he was lying in bed waiting for the alarm to go off, and he started thinking about how he had adopted that artificial, confident persona once the feeding was over. He had thought about his use of the persona before, but he had somehow always avoided seeing the obvious implication: the implication that during the feeding he had been the real Wesley, gasping and sighing at the touch of the real Angel. This time he saw the implication, and he opened his eyes, pushed the covers half-off the bed, and swore at himself.

He should not have let himself remember the feeding, not have let himself enjoy remembering, not even once. There was no point in feel guilty about the fact that he had forgotten the rules for so long, but no credit to be taken either from the apparent lack of repercussions. He had been lucky, that was all, and there must be no excuses; he would not indulge himself again in thoughts of the real Wesley and the real Angel.

Giving up those forbidden thoughts did not mean renouncing his obsession. He would simply start treating it properly as a fantasy: as something to be managed and controlled, to be kept separate from reality. All material would be carefully chosen, including the participants. With proper management and casting, he might even produce something better than the reality. However, this work would require leisure and concentration, and he should not try to start it in the twenty minutes before he was due to get up; it would have to wait until the evening. And he might as well get up immediately, since he had just lost his favourite reason to lie in bed.

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Wesley arrived home that evening in a state of pleasant anticipation: he always enjoyed seeing how his libido responded to a challenge. He quickly ate dinner, opened a bottle of wine, and then sat down to apply the techniques that would bring his obsession with feeding back within the rules.

He started with the obvious approach: replacing the real Angel with his simplified fantasy version. But this was a failure, because the fantasy version did not react properly to the blood: he treated it as an aphrodisiac, right from the beginning. There was no attempt to fetch Band-Aids or a tea-towel, not a second of surprise or guilt. He seized Wesley's hand and drank straight from the wounds; but while he was drinking he was also groping Wesley, pulling Wesley's trousers down, and with at least the fervour that he brought to the feeding. This Angel would never lick the drying blood from Wesley's wrist, never waste time on such a minor detail when he could be having sex.

This behaviour was entirely in character for the fantasy version of Angel, and Wesley wondered afterwards how he could ever have expected the fantasy version to give the proper attention to the feeding. Well, he had thought that the fantasy Angel would share his obsession; he had thought that anyone must, who understood even part of it. But no, the Wyndham-Pryce libido must be stranger even than he had realised. And this meant that he would have to try a different approach for his fantasies, find some character closer to himself, another strange creature who was also in love with the idea of feeding.

Later that evening he tried imagining the real Angel with the confident version of Wesley. But that Wesley was incapable of a sincere reaction, never let himself be surprised. He was suspicious of even the gentlest moment of the feeding, far too busy assessing and planning to surrender himself to wonder and desire. Wesley gave up on the fantasy before Angel had finished feeding, and decided not to make another attempt that evening. He had obviously underestimated the scale of the challenge; and he should allow his libido a pause for contemplation, not force it into yet another failure.

By the evening of the next day, Wesley had decided to replace Angel with Miles. Miles was fictional, taken from a British TV series that Wesley had seen only twice. Wesley chose him because over the years Miles had shown himself willing to try almost anything; he might sometimes comment on Wesley's choice of exotic details, but was usually able to accept them, and with enthusiasm. In addition, he had moments of surprising tenderness - very surprising, given his brash exterior - and should be able to satisfy Wesley in every aspect of the feeding and the aftermath.

Miles performed perfectly - except that he didn't really want the blood. He drank from Wesley's palm without hesitation, was quite as thorough as Angel in removing the trails of blood from Wesley's arm. But it was clear that he did it only because he wanted to please Wesley. He wasn't reluctant, not in the slightest, but could only treat the feeding as another of their sex games; he kept pausing to savour Wesley's reaction, sometimes even wanting to talk. And he couldn't understand why Wesley was impatient and distracted. And his mouth was too warm.

Well, why should Miles be able to pretend that he really wanted the blood? He wasn't a vampire, and Wesley himself couldn't truly imagine what it was like to want blood, to want it so much that the sight of it could make you forget where you were. He had never tried to imagine, not in all his years as a Watcher; vampires could be known entirely through their actions, and no one wasted time guessing at their deeper motivations.

All of Wesley's other characters were human, and Wesley was now sure that no human would be able to give him what he wanted. The obvious implication was that he needed to construct a new character: a vampire. But his characters always needed a starting point in a person he had really seen, really found worthy of attention; he needed the body-language, the tone of voice, the exact contours of the knowing smile, or the precise balance between challenge and recognition in the direct gaze. He had never met a vampire that he wanted to add to his collection, that he wanted to get close to. Apart from Angel. And it couldn't be any version of Angel, either real or fantasy - so it seemed that Wesley was out of options, and he would have to renounce his obsession with feeding.

The renunciation would not be easy. He would have to work very hard to distract himself, keep his thoughts fully occupied. Well, how had they been occupied before the incident in the kitchen? Ah, yes - with clunky boots and short skirts and with Darlene and Darlene's boyfriend (both fictional, both from

American TV, and both giving him a very hard time). The details were apparently still effective for him despite the weeks of neglect; they should keep him occupied at least for a few days.

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Darlene was delicious and invigorating, as ever. Really. Wesley was confident in his own judgement in these matters, and there had been no detectable decline in his sexual response. But even good sex with Darlene now left him with the feeling that there was something missing. Not for a second had he thought he was in love with the texture of Darlene's panties, or with her wicked questions; and he didn't want to be, not exactly, but he did want to feel something more than lust and amusement. He wanted to feel as if he were melting inside, he wanted to feel the glow of unreserved happiness.

The happiness was still there, waiting for him. He was aware of it as a presence just behind his left shoulder, close enough for him to feel its warmth. Any time he chose, he could take what it offered, if he could just convince himself that the rules were not important. He could turn to face it, and welcome it with a smile, and feel happy.

He was not going to break the rules. He was not even tempted. The happiness would last only a few weeks, whereas Wesley's libido would presumably remain bizarre and demanding for the rest of his life. Wesley found his own libido fascinating, endlessly entertaining, but he knew that any other person would find it frightening and repulsive; and he regarded the rules as entirely responsible for whatever capacity he had for dealing normally with real people. The rules and their long-term integrity were far more important to him than a few weeks of happiness-on-demand.

Even without the additional burden of temptation, the close presence of the happiness was difficult to bear. Next to it he felt cold and deprived and inadequate, and he wouldn't feel truly warm again until he woke up one morning and discovered that his libido had finally got bored with the details of the feeding. The hours at work were easiest, when distractions were plentiful and externally-generated. At home, he tried other details, other characters, hoping to chance upon a combination that offered something new, some way forward. But each attempt just showed him more clearly that good sex, even with the best of his fantasy characters, was not enough.

Wesley might have persisted, might have continued to look to his libido for a solution, but on the fourteenth evening after the incident in the kitchen, it showed him that it could not currently be trusted. He had just made another unsatisfactory attempt, this time with Bridget (a stranger, real name unknown, seen once in a Cambridge pub). He was lying with his eyes shut, feeling cold, feeling the presence at the left shoulder close enough to make his skin prickle.

And he heard his own voice in his head, saying clearly "I want to do it again."

He knew exactly what the voice meant: not with Bridget, but with Angel; and not in fantasy, but in reality. The idea was so shocking and gratuitous, it was like an assault, leaving Wesley feeling ill and shaken.

He took a cool shower, which helped to calm his stomach, and also signalled a fresh start; there would be no more fantasies, not about anybody, not until this current obsession was finished. He would ignore his libido during his leisure hours, exactly as he ignored it during his hours at work: by keeping busy. It wouldn't be difficult to find projects, not even if he had to keep busy for months. There was his article on demon language isolates. There was the accountancy course. And, for those dangerous stray half-hours, there was always Word Puzzle 3-D.

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Wesley had been successfully keeping busy for about a week when the word "experiment" appeared as an answer in Word Puzzle over breakfast, and then that evening he started a new ledger-book for his accountancy exercises. He was filling in the headings for the columns on the first page when he found himself remembering another book in which he had written long columns of numbers: his school logbook for chemistry practicals.

The workings of memory were very odd. He hadn't thought about chemistry experiments in... ten years? Probably since his last chemistry exam. And now when he was trying to think about them, there was almost nothing there for him to retrieve. Hours, possibly weeks of his life spent at that bench, titrating and filtering for all he was worth, and barely three seconds of that time had been stored in his memory. But the image of the logbook, open to an experiment on... "reaction constants"? If there was such a thing. "K" something, anyway. He could see his drawings, see each smudge and watermark. He could even smell the pages. And how many cells was his brain squandering on keeping that image? The whole system - memories, priorities, judgements, timing - everything was clearly so arbitrary as to be indefensible.

Indefensible, but offering frequent compensation in the form of sheer surprise: in the next second Wesley was laughing out loud as his mind presented him with an idea of such ingenious stupidity that no rational system could have produced it. Well, maybe "stupid" wasn't the word - more "preposterous", "ludicrous". In a properly-designed universe, it would be literally unthinkable.

What had his subconscious been doing back there, that it had come up with the idea that Wesley should conduct an experiment with Angel, get Angel to feed from him? And working out so many details, too, not just one big preposterous idea, but a swarm of smaller ideas, all equally ludicrous. The idea that there could be hundreds of different experiments. The idea Angel could bite his hand or his arm or his thigh - but not his neck because even Wesley's subconscious apparently realised that that would be ridiculous. The idea that he could cut himself again. The idea that Angel could take different amounts, could be forced to stop, or could be allowed to choose. The idea that it would all be very professional, very business-like. Very strict and organised. And the idea that Wesley would write it all up in a crisp new logbook.

Outrageous. But a classic. Far too good to forget. Some jokes were best as one-liners. Others deserved to be elaborated. Not right now though; he'd promised himself that finish all of the accountancy exercises from Chapter 4. And it felt like a joke that should be allowed to set its own pace, given time to ferment.

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So how would you do it, if you were the experimenter? If you had no intention of giving your life in the cause of science? You would have to limit the amount, say to a pint. But how would you know the amount when it was disappearing down a vampire's throat, not collecting in a transparent bag? Well, they weighed the bag, didn't they, as you were giving blood? A pint was twenty ounces. A pound and a quarter. If you weighed yourself before and after you would know. If you had scales that were accurate to a quarter of a pound or less. Of course, you would have to be very cautious in the beginning, keep the duration of the feeding short. A minute maybe, for a bite from the arm, if it took four or five minutes to lose a pint through a hollow needle in the same location.

The idea was still preposterous, of course, but it was a fascinating intellectual challenge, and Wesley couldn't stop himself from trying to work out the details in his imagination. Wesley could now see that he had been getting stale; it must have been years since he had last forced his brain to tackle something genuinely new. And he wasn't breaking any rules. He wasn't thinking about Angel at all, just about "the vampire" - a harmless abstract. Everything that he was imagining about the experiment was a harmless abstract. And even if he had been thinking about Angel, that would also have been harmless, since Angel would not have been with Wesley but with "the experimenter" - a creature of pure, chilling purpose, aware of Angel only as the vampire subject.

If the duration was critical, then the experimenter would have to be able to time the feeding to within a second. Easy, given a watch with a countdown timer. And he would have to be able to stop the vampire from feeding, also to within a second. A cross should be sufficient there, but a cross that couldn't be dropped in a moment of surprise. Tied on to the palm? Yes, that could work.

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Wesley felt that he had gone as far as he could with the theory of the experiment; the next step was to test some of the practice. Just for his own satisfaction, to see how well he had managed to think the details through.

The best accuracy he could find from bathroom scales was a tenth of a pound, at \$150. He preferred to think of pints in terms of fluid ounces, but if he could not find ounce-accurate scales in L.A., then he could be sure that they did not exist. There were hundreds of watches with countdown timers, and he made his choice on price, then ease of use. The cross, he liberated from the stock at the office; but he had to buy a small hand-drill to make the holes; and then a selection of buckles and fasteners and a couple of yards of dressmaking tape. He already owned a sewing kit.

He started testing the scales by drinking pints of water, and was very impressed; they even had a memory and could work out for themselves the difference between two readings. The stopwatch was easy to program, easy to start, and had an alarm that would be impossible not to hear. The cross required an hour of trial and error: the first version did not survive the stress test; he ripped a fingernail trying to remove the second version; but the third version was robust and almost comfortable.

When everything was ready, he acted out a simulation of an experiment. He measured out a pint of water and put it by the bed; fitted the cross to his right hand; then weighed himself and put the value in memory. He lay on the bed, held out his left arm as if for the nurse's needle, then started the countdown and drank the pint of water. When the alarm sounded he called out "Stop!" - not in his own voice but in that of the experimenter, who had never been disobeyed - and at the same time he brought the cross over to touch the crook of his left arm. The scales showed a difference of 1.2 pounds. Very impressive, all around.

He wondered if he could justify keeping the scales. There was no sign that they had been used so he could probably get a refund, and it wasn't as if he was about to go on a diet. But it had been so nice to have a shiny new toy to play with. And wouldn't it be even nicer to allow himself one pointless luxury? Other people did - he'd read about it in Cordelia's magazines. He would see how he felt when the rent was due.

Was it interesting that he hadn't found the simulation erotic, not in the slightest? Of course, he had been occupied with practicalities. And he hadn't tried to imagine that the vampire was present, let alone feeding. But he would have expected his libido to make the connection between its obsession and the simulation, to see the potential in a detail (or six). Maybe he had been too much in character as the experimenter; and Wesley had seen no sign yet that the experimenter had any libido.

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Wesley couldn't remember any more why he had initially found the idea of the experiment so laughable. Yes, it sounded absurd if you tried to sum it up in a single sentence, but that was hardly a fair test. If you were faced with an idea that was difficult to think about, you had to break it down into smaller ideas, ones that you could think about. And if all of the smaller ideas made sense, and if each connected properly to the next, with no half-truths and no gaps, then the idea as a whole made sense.

Wesley was convinced that the experiment was worth trying, even if only once; he was extremely curious to find out what would happen, to test his predictions and preparations. The arguments against trying seemed weaker every day. He was sure he would be able to defend himself, that he would not be in any real danger. He knew that there would be no repercussions for his working relationship with Angel; he and Angel had already proved their resilience after the incident in the kitchen; and the experiment would be so much easier because it would be scheduled, they would know exactly what to expect. Just once, to see if it would work; that was all he needed.

Angel was the problem, of course. Wesley could imagine every aspect of the experiment except Angel agreeing to take part. Wesley did think there could be a real benefit for Angel, something that he wouldn't be able to obtain in any other way: a greater understanding of his appetite, and about his capacity to control it. But that would only come with time, if the experiment worked well enough to be continued over months. In the short term, the idea of the experiment would probably make Angel very uncomfortable. Almost threatened. Wesley would just have to reassure him that everything was under control, that the experimenter had thought everything through; and that they could stop at any time.

Wesley rehearsed his argument and reassurances until they were flawless, although he was certain that he would have no chance to use them: Angel was going to say no, and he was going to say it

immediately and decisively. Still, Wesley would rather hear a definite no than wonder for the rest of his life what would have happened if he had had the courage to ask the question.

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From the fourth day after the simulation, Wesley started taking his satchel full of experimental equipment into the office with him every day, wanting to be ready whenever chance offered him an uninterrupted hour with Angel. His opportunity came on the morning of the seventh day after the simulation, when Cordelia had an audition for a commercial.

“You remember a few weeks ago, when I cut my hand?”

Angel was at his desk, reading, and he looked up at the question. He gave no obvious sign of surprise or wariness, but there was a definite pause before he raised his eyebrows; and he was clearly not going to show any more interest than that.

“It got me thinking. About the different levels of control you have over your appetite. In different situations. And about how one might measure that control. And then maybe increase it.” Wesley was firmly in character as a mild form of the experimenter: the experimenter in front of a funding committee, perhaps, doing his best to respect other people’s priorities - or at least doing his best to appear as if he respected them.

Angel was frowning, but appeared to be puzzled rather than displeased, as if he hadn’t understood Wesley’s words well enough to form an opinion. “What?”

“I want to perform an experiment. A series of experiments, if possible. You would drink, from an agreed location...” Wesley touched his fingertips briefly to the crook of his left elbow. “For an agreed time. Sixty seconds, for example. And we’d see how difficult it is for you to stop at the agreed time. And see if we can work out what factors make it difficult. And what factors make it easier.”

Incredulous: “You want me to *bite* you?”

Wesley had prepared himself for many possible reactions from Angel, and felt particularly well-prepared for this reaction. He did not have to pause to choose his words, could devote his full attention to monitoring their effect. “I know it sounds strange, put like that. But what happened when I cut my hand would also sound strange. And I think the two of us coped with every strange aspect very well indeed. Which makes me think that we are very strong candidates to do this experiment.”

Angel still seemed to be struggling to believe what he was hearing. “Why would you want me to bite you?”

“Because it’s necessary for what I want to learn. What I think we can both learn. It won’t be more than a pint. No more than when I used to give blood.” Again, he gestured towards the crook of his arm, though not touching it this time. “I’ve set up the equipment to measure how much I lose. It’s all in here.” He put the satchel down on Angel’s desk, undid the strap, and held it open, tilted so that Angel could see the contents. Angel could doubtless identify the cross, stopwatch and box of Band-Aids, but what was he making of the logbook and scales?

Angel looked up at Wesley again after about ten seconds. Wesley closed the satchel and took a step back from the desk, and started the next part of his argument. “I think we can do this safely. I mean... after the time when I cut my hand, I’m guessing that you had some dreams that you wouldn’t ever want me to know about. But I’m also guessing - from everything I could see - that you weren’t ever close to advising me to leave town for two weeks. To stay away if I wanted to be safe from you. And I think if I cut my hand again, that we would both do exactly the same. Only we’d do it without any of the hesitation, because we’d know we didn’t have to worry.”

Angel looked as if he had just worked out exactly what Wesley was up to. He pushed his chair back from the desk and crossed his arms. “This is about getting me into bed again. I know what *you* were dreaming about afterwards.”

Wesley had prepared for this reaction too. He shrugged, shielded from any trace of embarrassment by the character and thoroughness of the experimenter. “As I said, it was a strange thing to happen. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a sexual side-effect for some of the experiments. Depending on the amount of contact. The level of adrenaline.” Another shrug. “And I wouldn’t be surprised if I dreamed about it again, sometimes. Why? Do you think it’s important?” This was the experimenter fielding a question as the acknowledged expert in his field: brisk, trying not to be dismissive, but confident that he had given the issue ten times more thought than his critic ever would.

Angel stared at Wesley in silence for some time, then shook his head slowly. “Why are you doing this, Wesley? Don’t you understand what you’re suggesting? It’s - It’s insane.”

“I’m suggesting that we do something very similar to what we’ve already done. And if either of us feels uncomfortable at any point, feels that it’s damaging, that it’s something we can’t deal with after all, then we stop immediately.” He sighed, and held his hand out briefly in a gesture of appeal. “Angel, I don’t know what will happen. I’ve made some guesses, based on the last time, and I think it could be *important*... to find out where I’m wrong. And where I’m right. So *anything* you’re prepared to help me with will tell us *something*.”

“I don’t want to.”

Mildly: “I didn’t think you would. I would probably be alarmed if you did.”

“So you were right about *that*.” Abruptly, Angel stood up, pulled the satchel across the desk, and yanked it open to look inside. He let go of it after a few seconds and it fell over with a thud, and then he raised his head, changed into his vampire aspect, and glared at Wesley, teeth bared. He must have been hoping to shock Wesley, because Wesley’s well-rehearsed look of alert interest clearly infuriated him. “Once. And then you come to your fucking senses. And you had *better* be able to deal with it.”

Wesley nodded. “Tonight? After Cordelia’s left?”

“As *soon* as she’s left. I want you out of here.”

Wesley wasn’t sure if Angel meant “out of my office, immediately” or “out of this building, as soon as possible tonight” but decided to assume that he meant both. “Thank you.” He collected his satchel and left quickly; he did not look back to see if Angel was still in his vampire aspect, though he was very curious to know how long Angel would stay like that.

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Wesley took the satchel downstairs and stowed it out of sight, behind the couch; then he sat heavily on the couch and gave a short, exhausted sigh as he finally allowed himself to come out of character. The experimenter was amazing: what a cool, manipulative bastard. Wesley had to admire him, but was very glad that he would never have to face him in an argument.

Wesley could hardly believe yet that Angel had said yes, that the experiment was actually going to go ahead. What had persuaded Angel? The reminders of how well they had coped before? No, Angel had probably agreed because he hadn’t believed a word of the experimenter’s arguments; and had decided to go along with the experiment as the best way of finding out Wesley’s real reasons. And probably as the best way of bringing Wesley to his senses, which meant that this first experiment was also likely to be the last.

If there was only to be one experiment, then Wesley should aim to make the most of it, use it to answer as many questions as possible. He wouldn’t get Angel to drink from his arm after all, but from his thigh; Angel had already drunk from his arm, after a fashion, but the thigh should offer a useful contrast. Would sixty seconds still be appropriate? Wesley would prefer to reduce it to forty, but sixty was the number he had given Angel, and he didn’t want Angel to see him changing his mind. Sixty should still be safe, if he was only going to lose that amount once.

Would there be sex? Very possibly, Angel permitting. The conversation with Angel had shown Wesley that the experimenter did have a libido after all: it was slow-burning, and it was attuned principally to

the dynamics of power. The experimenter was contemptuously indifferent to the aspects of the feeding that still held Wesley in thrall: the concentrated need, the strange, haunting tenderness. But the idea of having power over Angel, the knowledge that he would soon be exercising that power... Wesley shivered, and his breath roughened almost to a growl as he felt the echoes of the experimenter's anticipation.

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That evening, Cordelia started making preparations to leave shortly after half past six. "You coming, Wesley? You know that demon will be just as extinct tomorrow." She tapped the page, just above the largest illustration. With this book, the chance was about one in ten that a randomly-tapped demon was extinct, and chance had favoured Cordelia.

"I'm going to see a film in Manhattan Beach. I'll stay on here until it's time."

"Oh! What are you going to see?"

" 'Magnolia' ."

"Oh, God! It's, like, eight hours long! It practically has subtitles."

"Only 'practically'?" Wesley shook his head, produced a throat-rattling sigh of disappointment.

"Well... I'll still give it a try."

"They just don't make enough films for compulsive readers." Angel, deadpan, from the doorway to his office.

"Yeah, 'cos *that's* the way to get rich." Cordelia made that her exit line.

As soon as the door shut behind Cordelia, Angel headed for the stairs, without a word or a glance at Wesley. Wesley followed him, keeping several steps behind. At the bottom of the stairs, Angel turned to the right, towards the bedroom, while Wesley went to the left, to retrieve the satchel from behind the couch.

"Where are you going, Wesley?" Angel was waiting just inside the doorway to the bedroom. His tone was a challenge.

"I'm going to the bathroom. To get ready."

"Which involves what?"

"I have to weigh myself. So I can work out afterwards how much I've lost." A shrug. "Get undressed. Fit the cross onto my hand."

"If that's all, then you can do it in here. Or not do it at all."

Wesley nodded, unperturbed, took the satchel into the bedroom, and set up his equipment near the chair by the foot of the bed. He weighed himself dressed, recorded the value in the logbook as a backup, stripped to his Y-fronts, and fitted the cross to his right hand. Whenever he glanced towards Angel, he found him still standing in the same position in front of the wardrobe, still watching with the same tense, hostile expression.

The last item out of the satchel was the stopwatch, and then Wesley walked past Angel to lie down on the bed. He positioned himself to present the inside of his left thigh towards Angel, raising his right knee to make space between his legs. His erection had not yet breached the containment of his Y-fronts, but was well beyond concealment.

"Could you take your shirt off, please?"

Angel complied without hesitation, though his progress from button to button was very slow; he still seemed intent on studying Wesley. "And you need my shirt off because you want to learn ... what...? about vampires?"

Wesley lifted his right hand from the bed, showing Angel the cross. "Because I need to be sure of reaching bare skin."

Angel showed no reaction, just continued unbuttoning his shirt. After he had hung the shirt in the wardrobe, he turned back to face Wesley. "Just how sure do you want to be?" One hand was holding the wardrobe door open, the other was hooked under his belt, starting to pull it free.

Wesley shook his head. "That's sure enough. Thank you."

Angel shrugged, closed the wardrobe door, and then was still again, watching.

"You can drink for sixty seconds." Wesley turned his left hand so that Angel could see the stopwatch, then moved the hand down and rested it against the inside of his left thigh. "And I want you to drink from here." He brought his hand up again, and held his index finger poised over the countdown button. "You can start whenever you want."

Angel closed his eyes briefly, and Wesley saw and heard him swallow. Wesley did feel some sympathy for him, but mostly he felt impatience. They'd been through this already, dealt with it long ago, and it was time for Angel to move on to the next stage: to get onto the bed, and accept what he was being offered. Involuntarily, Wesley tilted his pelvis towards Angel, a wordless invitation.

The attack came without warning: in one moment Angel was standing by the wardrobe, and in the next he was crouched by the side of the bed, holding Wesley down and sinking his teeth into Wesley's thigh. Wesley cried out, more in shock at the speed and sureness than in pain, and then the knowledge that he had screamed hit him as a second shock. It might have been five seconds, ten seconds before his brain was able to process anything beyond the shock: such as the memory of a dull clatter behind the scream, or an anomalous absence in his left hand. The stopwatch was somewhere on the floor, and Wesley was sure that he had not triggered the countdown.

//One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand.// Wesley's lips moved as he counted, and the fingers of his left hand flexed in rhythm in the bedding.

The experimenter had recognised the possibility of calling an immediate halt, or of making some allowance for the late start; and had dismissed both possibilities instantly. A departure from the plans did not mean that the experiment was automatically ruined; it could still have value as long as he was rigorous. "At least sixty seconds" had a meaning he could respect; "nearly sixty seconds" did not. He started at one, and he would proceed to sixty.

//Twenty 'n' thousand, twenty one 'thousand, twen -// He broke off as Angel changed his grip and arched upwards from his crouch by the side of the bed, pushing, pulling for something better, deeper, and growling as he found it. As an image of concentrated need, it was many times more powerful than the image that had haunted Wesley for the last month; and even though there was pain, and even though there was no tenderness, Wesley felt seared, inside and out, by a rush of elemental fire, and he gave a long, raw cry of revelation.

After another gap of unknown length, he started counting again, but this time he counted out loud. "Twenty... one 'thousand, twenty two 'thousand." It seemed his best chance of keeping control, assuming that he could count and moan at the same time.

He could, or at least he could maintain the rhythm. The numbers themselves suffered badly towards the end, when Angel made a sudden, rough adjustment in his grip on Wesley's right thigh, and his forearm came down to press hard on Wesley's cock. Wesley's whole body surged in reaction, flexed and twisted in a separate, slower rhythm around the fulcrum of Angel's hands and teeth.

Articulation was lost, but not control. In the final seconds, he gathered himself, sat up, and held the cross ready. "... 'ty thousand. And stop." The command was not necessary, as Angel had started to

withdraw on the last 'thousand'. Wesley was almost disappointed; he had been fully prepared to use the cross.

Maybe he would still have to. This wasn't over. Angel had not raised his head, was too still. Wesley could feel the cool breath against his wet skin. He waited through ten, maybe twelve slow breaths, then said, "Thank you. That was rather impressive."

"Really, Wesley? Is that what it was?" Angel had straightened up as if pulled by an external force. He was still in his vampire aspect. Wesley flinched, startled again by the speed, and unprepared for the sight of so much blood, his blood, there inside Angel's mouth, held by surface tension over the contours of the cruel teeth. "Aren't you just *easily*... impressed?" On "easily", Angel had pushed his right hand hard against Wesley's thigh, which increased the pressure from his forearm on Wesley's cock, and drew a pained groan from Wesley. The vampire smiled, and for the first time Wesley was truly frightened of him.

"Not. Really." Wesley was panting. "I have a kink. It seems. It doesn't affect my judgement. That *was* impressive." Whenever Wesley was forced to discuss the workings of his libido with someone else, he always talked in terms of "a kink", always suggesting that there was only one, the one that the other person had discovered. He never had, and never would, say the word "fetish" out loud.

"And so is this." Angel let go of Wesley's right thigh, then drew his left hand over the wound and turned to hold it out in display. "As a kink for a Watcher." The briefest of pauses, and then Angel started freeing Wesley's cock from the Y-fronts, using the same bloody hand.

"Ex. Watcher. Ex." A gasp between each word. He was trembling all over, longing to abandon himself to the sensations, but far too wary of the vampire.

"You think they'd fire a Watcher for this?" The movements of Angel's hand on Wesley's cock were slow and clinical, as if he was making a demonstration, not a promise. Wesley gave a grunt of protest, clutched at the bedding and at the cross. "Then what about this?" Wesley brought the cross up before the vampire's mouth got to within three inches of his cock, easily beating his best time from any practice session. Angel let go of him.

"No. It shouldn't need saying. No!"

"No? But, Wesley, every man with your kink says yes to that. It's part of the deal. It's the way you're all made."

"Then you've never met a man with *my* kink. Because I say no. Always no."

The human appeared, a transition as smooth and casual as shrugging into a coat. "Always?" Also smooth, the return of the hand to Wesley's cock, now partly a promise.

Wesley gave a deep, shaking sigh, but let the hand with the cross back to the bed. "You could change."

"I can change whenever I want. You know that. Right now..." Angel's right hand joined his left, its grip tighter. "...what I want is to get this over with." Angel lowered his head again, parting his lips as before.

The thought of Angel sucking him off just minutes after swallowing his blood... A new thought. Several new thoughts. Was it instantaneous, whatever the demon did with blood, or was it more gradual? By the time Angel swallowed his semen, would that blood already be more demon than human? Wesley shivered, startled rather than repulsed, but with his mind made up, at least for this experiment. The evening had already given him quite enough to think about; he was not obliged to overload himself with new experiences. Maybe in another experiment, if there ever was another.

Shaking his head: "No." This time he brought his left hand up to stop Angel, the hand without the cross.

"You want it."

“I’m not ready for that. It’ll have to be the same as last time.”

Angel stood up, clearly propelled by a surge of anger. “Then get rid of that.” A gesture of the chin towards Wesley’s right hand. “Or leave. Now.”

Wesley shrugged and nodded, and immediately started loosening the straps on the cross. His hands were shaking with adrenaline, and by the time he had removed the cross and placed it in easy reach on the nightstand, Angel was already undressed and waiting.

* * * * *

The sex was almost exactly the same as the first time: just as quick, just as basic. And Wesley was just as certain that he was... well, maybe not the *last* person Angel would choose to have sex with, but definitely low on the list. The feeding excited Angel, that was all, left him wanting sex; and wanting it enough that he could overlook the fact that the body against him was Wesley’s. He was enthusiastic and reasonably generous, but impersonal; they weren’t lovers, they could never be lovers, they were just two men helping each other to come. And that was fine. Perfect, in fact. Wesley didn’t need to make love to Angel. But he did need to have Angel feed from him again. At least once more. And if the feeding excited them both in the same way, then didn’t that make it easier? Easier for them both?

Angel did not appear to want to talk after sex. Or not after sex with Wesley, at least. As he had the first time, Wesley waited for some minutes after Angel stopped breathing, then propped himself up on an elbow.

“I think we can count that as a success. For a first experiment. Apart from the stopwatch, of course.”

Angel took some moments to reply. His expression was grim. “And I think you’ve forgotten that you screamed, Wesley. Whenever I hurt you.”

“You didn’t stop when I screamed. When you thought you were hurting me. You were enjoying it too much. But you stopped the instant I told you to. Don’t you think that’s interesting? Don’t you think that needs further investigation?” Wesley had moved back into character as the experimenter almost without conscious effort.

“Your head is what needs investigation. Didn’t I tell you to come to your senses?”

“Where am I wrong, Angel? This is important, and I’m willing to do it, and we can clearly both cope with it. This wasn’t any worse than when I cut my hand. Was it? You could do this again. You know you could.”

“*What* are you willing to do? Not much in bed, judging by this evening.” Angel had presumably never before had anyone turn down the offer of a blowjob, and he seemed to be taking it personally.

Wesley shrugged. “More than we’ve done so far, if the circumstances are right. But not very much more.” Oral sex, yes, when he felt more certain of Angel. Anal sex, never; Wesley enjoyed it in fantasy, but had long ago given up on it in reality. “And again, isn’t it interesting that when I said no to that, you stopped? Twice.”

A long, frowning scrutiny, then: “You have *done* more than this with men, though?”

“One man at a time rather than ‘men’. But, yes.”

Angel nodded slowly, several times, then rolled over and got off the bed. “Wait.” He left the room and went into the bathroom. There was the sound of running water.

Wesley hauled himself into a sitting position and checked the state of his puncture wounds; they were still bleeding, but not heavily. He got slowly to his feet, using the nightstand for support, and monitoring himself for any sign of dizziness from loss of blood. He did feel weak, and would be very careful for the rest of the evening; but he didn’t seem in danger of collapsing in front of Angel.

He returned the cross to the satchel and took out the box of Band-Aids. He had just chosen two strips of a suitable size when Angel came back into room carrying a dampened washcloth and a towel, and with all traces of blood removed from his mouth and hands.

“I told you to wait.”

“I was bleeding all over your sheets.”

“Another minute wouldn’t make any difference. Sit down.”

Wesley sat down on the edge of the bed, legs apart so that Angel could reach his inner thigh. Angel was gentle but impersonal, as if he too were treating the procedure as a scientific exercise. Wesley unwrapped the Band-Aids in readiness, and Angel put his hand out for them without a word, and without looking up.

They got dressed in silence, and then Wesley weighed himself, wrote the result in the logbook, and put the scales and logbook away.

“It was one point four pounds.” Angel had not looked as if he was going to ask, but he probably did need reassurance. “A bit over a pint. At sixty seconds, it would probably have been very close indeed.” No reaction from Angel. “Do you know what happened to the stopwatch? You haven’t seen it?”

Angel quickly found the stopwatch down by the side of the nightstand. Wesley packed it away, buckled his satchel, and slung the strap over his shoulder.

“So are you going to that film, or did you just say that for Cordelia?”

“‘Magnolia’ was for Cordelia. I saw it months ago. I *was* going to see ‘Return to Me’.”

“‘Return to Me’? Isn’t that a -”

“Chick flick.” Wesley shrugged. “I like Minnie Driver. But she can wait. I want to get home and write this up. Before I forget the details.”

A flicker of apprehension passed over Angel’s face. Or maybe it was revulsion. Wesley would have preferred admiration for his professionalism, but there was probably some advantage in leaving Angel to think serious thoughts about the experiment and about the experimenter. Let Angel prepare himself for the next time. Because Wesley was almost sure that there would be a next time. If Angel had decided that they must never do it again, he would have said so by now; for whatever reason, Angel had not found himself brought to the point of saying no. There was nothing more for Wesley to do for now; he said goodbye and he left.

* * * * *

Experiment 1, 6th March:

Experimental Procedure. Wesley recorded the mishap with the stopwatch, and estimated the duration of the feeding at seventy to eighty seconds. He also recorded the experimenter’s “uncontrollable sexual response” and gave a brief description of the sexual activity that had followed the feeding.

Observations. This was mainly his assessment of the subject’s state of mind at different stages in the procedure. He discovered that he had already forgotten the details of their conversations; he remembered that they had talked a lot about his “kink” and that it was Angel who had used the word first, but the exact sequence was now very vague. For this particular experiment it wasn’t important, since he was confident in his recollection that the subject’s state of mind had barely altered throughout; between them, the terms “actively hostile”, “passively hostile”, “resigned” and “absorbed” captured the essentials, and a verbatim account was not necessary.

He didn’t think that a verbatim account ever would be necessary, but he had to assume that Angel’s reactions would sometimes be more complex. He had to accept some distortion from his memory.

Unless... Should he tape the experiments? He shuddered, remembering (clearly, if not accurately) some of the sounds from that evening. No, no, Angel would never agree to it. And some things could not be caught on tape. There were techniques for improving memory; best just to read up on those.

Comments. He discussed possible improvements for the stopwatch, and the implications of the sexual component for the experiment as a whole.

Conclusions. It was a clear demonstration that the subject was able to stop feeding on command, apparently without difficulty. The experimenter had some doubt about the level of the subject's appetite at the time of the command; he appeared to be feeding strongly, with little awareness of his surroundings, but the subject's vampire aspect was known to have a greater appetite for cruelty than for blood, and might have been dissimulating for reasons not yet known.

Recommendations. He would hang the stopwatch around his neck - and why hadn't he thought of that before? The next experiments would be of sixty seconds from different locations, starting with a repeat of the inner thigh. After this calibration sequence, he would take the same locations (possibly in the same order), adjusting the time to that which should give a pint. He should also establish the details of the subject's diet.

* * * * *

Wesley could barely remember any more what it was like to have an orgasm that wasn't fuelled by thoughts of feeding. All the effort and imagination that he'd spent on sex - just sex, on its own. Why had he bothered? How had that ever been enough for him?

He made no attempt now to stop himself from thinking about the feeding. For the first few days he limited himself to Experiment 1, since he was still very conscious of his rules. Experiment 1 was within the rules because it had been conducted by the experimenter, not by the real Wesley; but the objections to the incident in the kitchen were still valid. However, after three evenings and two early-mornings of radiant satisfaction from Experiment 1, he realised that it was pointless to keep the distinction. His feelings about Experiment 1 were more intense even than his feelings about the incident in the kitchen; but that had not made them more difficult to contain and control. Obviously, his obsession was never going to cause any problems between himself and Angel - the experiment was the perfect protective shield. The incident in the kitchen could be regarded (or maybe "recognised") as an early, unplanned experiment, and thus with its own protective shield.

He contemplated them both for hours on end, as he had at the beginning, marvelling at the intensity of one, and the subtlety of the other. Between them, they seemed to encompass everything that was worth knowing about yourself, or wanting from someone else. He did not try to imagine any of the experiments to come; he had learned already that the reality would be a revelation, beyond the reach of any imagination.

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Wesley weighed himself every evening. His weight varied from day to day more than he would have expected, but by the second week after Experiment 1, he was positive that he had made up the blood that he had lost. He could start making preparations for Experiment 2.

"I'd like to do the next experiment next Tuesday, if that's convenient."

A long pause, then Angel crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows. "So what film are you going to see this time?"

Angel was probably hoping to embarrass him, but Wesley just responded with a smile and a raised eyebrow of his own. "I'll find something at the weekend." Then he switched off the smile and got down to business: "Between now and then, can you keep records for me of what you drink each day? I'd like to know the type - I mean the animal - the amount, and the time of day."

"What?" Mid-range hostile. "Why?"

“I want to know if it makes any difference. For the experiment.”

A swift transition to puzzled impatience. “Or you could just ask me how hungry I am.”

Wesley nodded slowly. “That’s a very good point. I’ll do that as well. But we’ll learn much more if we also have the details of what you’ve been drinking in the days beforehand.”

Now surprise, more than anything. After a pause: “I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you.”

* * * * *

Experiment 2. 25th April.

Experimental Procedure. Under this section he included the question that he had asked at the beginning: “Can drinking a vampire’s semen turn you into a vampire? Is it like blood that way?” He had wondered whether that part of the experiment was more of an Observation, but then decided that any deliberate action of his own that could affect the course of the experiment was part of the Procedure. The answer was a definite and convincing no.

Observations. The subject reported that he was “slightly hungry” and would normally have eaten in an hour. This was consistent with the list of feeding times, that he had apparently started keeping the day after Wesley had asked. Wesley taped the list directly into the logbook. The experimenter’s weight before and after showed a difference of 1.2 pounds, i.e. just under a pint.

Most of the observations about the subject’s state of mind dealt with the first few minutes. He was uncomfortable being asked about his hunger and when handing over the list. And he was very surprised by the question about vampire’s semen. The idea had clearly never occurred to him before so the experimenter had taken the initial, abrupt dismissal as a reflex action and had persisted, explaining the grounds for concern. There was then a long silence with an unfocussed gaze and much frowning, in which the subject appeared to be searching his memories. He came out of that with a flinch, then raised his head to meet the experimenter’s eye and give his final answer. Thereafter he was co-operative, even relaxed. He undressed at the same time as the experimenter, and without being prompted. He seemed to choose the location of the bite with care, after a lingering inspection of the area and especially of the existing scars. He did not start breathing before he changed. His semen seemed slightly warmer than his skin, though still shockingly cold. There was little conversation.

* * * * *

Experiment 3. 9th May.

Experimental Procedure. The location was the inside of his forearm, just below the elbow. At the subject’s suggestion, they moved the nightstand out of the way and the experimenter sat propped against the pillows. This gave the subject a better choice of angle, and allowed the experimenter to rest the stopwatch on the bed.

Observations. The loss was 0.8 pounds. Other aspects were similar to Experiment 2, except that the subject seemed to show more awareness of the experimenter during the feeding. That is, he had used his free hand to stroke and hold the experimenter’s body in a manner that didn’t relate directly to the feeding; it was some way short of a caress and probably more for his own benefit than for the experimenter’s, but still, it was new.

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Experiment 4. 20th May.

Experimental Procedure. The location was the experimenter’s left thumb, and he made the cut himself with a fresh razorblade; bite-marks on his hand would be too conspicuous. He needed his right hand

free to deal with the razorblade and the stopwatch, so had prepared a second cross with a system of straps that allowed him to wear it along the side of his right hand instead of on the palm.

Observations. The loss was 0.2 pounds. The subject had started breathing as soon as the experimenter had taken the razorblade out of the packet, and had changed to his vampire aspect while the experimenter was cutting himself. He had waited for the nod of permission before moving in to feed, though he did not wait patiently. During the feeding he had kept a hard, restless grip on the experimenter's hand and forearm. His teeth pierced the skin of the experimenter's hand several times, though this was probably accidental; the wounds were very shallow, and he seemed unaware of them.

The subject did not change back until the very end, after the sex, and then he was silent and withdrawn. After the feeding he had tried to remove the cross from the experimenter's hand by pulling at the straps at the point farthest from the cross. The experimenter had stopped him, stating that he would not remove the cross until the subject had changed back. Earlier experiments had suggested that the subject would withdraw from the experiment under such conditions, but on this occasion he stayed. He provided manual stimulation for himself and the experimenter, and showed no obvious sign of resenting the experimenter's decision.

It became apparent during the sex that the subject was intensely aroused by the idea of the experimenter drinking his own blood. The wound had continued to bleed after the feeding, and the subject barely looked at anything else during the first minutes of the sex. Then he had suddenly let go of his penis, lifted the bleeding hand from the bed, and pressed it to the experimenter's mouth. The experimenter used the cross to stop him, inflicting a large but superficial burn to the forearm, but the subject seemed simply amused by this and soon resumed the manual stimulation. For the remainder of the sex he gave most of his attention to the experimenter's mouth, which had become covered in blood despite the brevity of the contact, and he reacted strongly to the experimenter's attempts to remove the blood from his lips.

Comments. Many aspects of the subject's behaviour were completely unexpected, and might even have been a surprise to the subject. Were they caused by events in the subject's past, by specific associations? Were there local factors that had contributed, events during that day, say, or minor, unconsidered aspects of the experimental setup? Would the subject have changed back earlier if the blood-loss had been greater? This is, did the vampire persist out of frustrated hunger? The experiment would have to be repeated. Some earlier experiments should also be repeated, in case there had been a permanent change in the subject's responses.

Additional Observations. 21st May: the subject's grip during the feeding had left many bruises on the experimenter's forearm. There had been no bruising in other experiments.

Not recorded in the logbook: the details of the subject's "strong reaction" to the experimenter's attempt to remove the blood from his lips, which had occurred towards the end of the experiment. Wesley found it impossible to prevent himself from trying to lick the blood away; the layer along the line of his lips was so thick he could hear it pull apart whenever he opened his mouth, and feel it as a hardening ridge when he closed his mouth again. He didn't want to encourage Angel, didn't want him to take the action as any sort of concession, but the sensations were unbearable. However, Angel clearly did regard the sight of Wesley licking his lips as a concession. No. As a series of concessions. The first groan held a note of satisfaction, the fourth, triumph. Wesley was determined to deny him a fifth, and when the sensations again became unbearable, he didn't use his tongue to wipe the sensations away, but instead used the back of his cut hand. There was no blood on the back of his hand, no one could think he was tasting his blood, but maybe to Angel it was the ultimate image of victory. With a roar, Angel threw himself full-length on Wesley, clamped his right hand tight in Wesley's hair, and pressed his mouth to Wesley's. It wasn't a kiss - that was obvious almost immediately, while Wesley was still struggling to refill his lungs - but another method of making Wesley drink. Angel used his tongue to push the blood from Wesley's lips into Wesley's mouth, onto Wesley's tongue. When there was no more blood on Wesley's lips, he moved outwards to the cheek, then the jaw. Wesley could have clamped his teeth shut, closed his mouth, used the cross again. He didn't.

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"I've made up the blood I lost in the last experiment, and the cut's completely healed. I'd normally leave at least two weeks, but I think we can do the next one at any time. Maybe tomorrow?"

"No. Go away."

Wesley took a step back, but had no intention of leaving. "Something's bothering you about last time."

"You're a genius, Wesley."

Wesley had known that this was going to be difficult. Angel's recent degree of introversion wasn't exceptional, certainly not by Angel's standards, and it was impartial, applied equally to Wesley, Cordelia and that week's client. However, Wesley had seen the moment when it started, had watched it continue, unchanging, and had decided that Angel could not be relied upon to finish it on his own. He would have to be careful, though, not to give Angel an opening to call an end to the experiments.

Mild, serious: "Was that a kink you didn't know you had?"

For several seconds Angel looked as if he was about to change into his vampire aspect, but then the surge of emotion slowly drained away, leaving him looking very tired. "One I hadn't thought about since a long time before you were born."

"Ah." Wesley nodded, trying to look as if that was the answer he had been expecting in the first place. By the time he stopped nodding, Angel had returned his attention to the newspaper. The experimenter wanted details, had six more questions ready, but Wesley ordered silence. Wesley already knew what Angel was thinking; he had been almost certain before he came into the office, and Angel's reaction had confirmed his suspicions in full.

//You've been thinking about killing me, haven't you? At least once a day, every day this week.// Wesley stared openly at the averted face, confident that Angel would not suddenly look up. //It's your reward to yourself each night: turn out the light, close your eyes, and invite me in for the final experiment.// Did Angel make it different each time? Or had he known from the first exactly how it would be with Wesley?

A year ago just a hint of the idea would have horrified him, would have had him on standby for the first flight home. Now... Thoughts were only thoughts. Anyone who claimed to be able to control them was fooling no one but himself. Actions were what mattered, and there, in Wesley's opinion, Angel was beyond criticism. He felt privileged to be a witness, let alone a participant.

"I'll leave you alone."

Angel nodded, but did at least watch him leave. Wesley knew that it could have been worse, and that it had been the right thing to do. He would see if there was any change in Angel, and try again in a week.

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Two days later Darin MacNamara staggered into the office with a bruised face, a severed finger in a box, and the tale of little brother Jack kidnapped by demons. They fell for it, and Angel became the new name in the lineup at XXI. It was another two days before they got him out.

Once they got home, Cordelia assigned herself the task of dealing with Angel's wounds, and assigned Wesley the task of clearing away the books on alchemy and the electrical equipment that Wesley had used when looking for the way to unlock the cuffs. Wesley set himself a very slow pace, and Cordelia had finally refused to wait for him and had left. As soon as Wesley heard the door close, he stopped pretending to clear up and went into the bedroom.

"Did they feed you? In there?"

Angel gave a very slight shrug. "Gruel. Bread. Twice a day." He was sitting at the foot of the bed, leaning against the bed-frame, probably exactly as Cordelia had left him.

"If that was all, you must be starving."

"I probably am. Hasn't got through yet. Other priorities. Might notice tomorrow."

"You need to have something. I'll give you a pint. That should see you through the night, shouldn't it?"

A slow nod, with closed eyes. "If you... Please. Forty seconds. You'll need to set the microwave for forty seconds."

"I meant give you a pint. Not get it for you. As in sixty seconds from the thigh. No microwave." At Angel's puzzled, questioning look, he shrugged. "I can spare it."

Angel frowned at him for a while longer, then started looking vaguely around the room. Wesley made a guess as to what he was searching for. "It's at home." He tapped the face of his watch. "But this has a second hand."

"You need..." Angel blinked, rubbed his hand over his face. "Under the kitchen table. And use the scales in the bathroom."

"Oh. But it's not -"

Angel was shaking his head, now noticeably more alert. "Don't short-change me, Wesley." A raised eyebrow and a small, complicated smile. "Give me the whole performance."

Giving Angel the whole performance would mean getting into character as the experimenter; and although Wesley knew that he could do so in a matter of seconds, he found himself strangely reluctant, and he tried to analyse his reluctance while he was making his preparations.

Of course Angel was right that they should treat this feeding as another experiment. Wesley had accepted the argument as soon as Angel had insisted, and had realised that he hadn't been thinking very clearly when he had made the decision to give Angel the blood: he had been thinking of Angel's needs rather than his own, and he hadn't considered the full implications. But he had been reminded now that he did have needs, and that they would be present and active at every feeding; he would always need to maintain the distance, even on the occasions when his initial motive was entirely selfless.

Angel deserved better, though, after all he had done in the last two days, than to be left to the cold scrutiny of the experimenter. That was the reason for Wesley's reluctance; he had found it now. Wesley almost wished that he was not in love with the feeding; because then he would have been able to offer the blood as a sincere, selfless tribute, and he would have been able to offer the tribute in his own person. Angel had earned the tribute, a hundred times over. But it was not possible, and when Wesley emerged naked from the bathroom after weighing himself, he was in character as the experimenter.

It was a strange feeding. Sixteen seconds in, Wesley realised that Angel had changed back to his human aspect; he was still drinking deeply, but slowly, almost languidly, as if he might stop at any moment. Wesley wondered if he should start counting out the seconds, give a reminder. Or should he just observe, and do nothing? At twenty-three seconds, the vampire returned with a rush, and as if intent on making up for the time that the human had wasted. The second bite seemed to be directly over the first, or so Wesley guessed from the difference in the nature of the pain: not piercing, but raw, inflamed. Sixty seconds should still be safe, then, assuming that there was still a single set of puncture wounds, and that the bleeding was the same.

At around thirty-five seconds the feeding started to become slower again. Wesley was ready and watching when the human reappeared at thirty-seven seconds, and almost ready for the third bite at forty-nine seconds. The next change occurred while he was counting out the last five seconds and making sure of his grip on the cross. "Fifty-nine. And sixty. Stop. I said -" Angel had never before continued beyond the set time. Wesley had thought he knew the meaning of that human face, but it seemed that he did not.

Angel raised his head almost immediately, but then knelt motionless for some time, eyes closed, lips parted and glistening. Wesley stared up at him and thought confused thoughts about certainty, about

what we can really know. Certain: that Angel would soon stop breathing. Unlikely: that Wesley Wyndham-Pryce could ever stop Angel if Angel did not want to be stopped. Unknown: where this was leading, where it would end.

“Wesley.” Not a question or call for attention, but a greeting more than anything. Angel’s smile was uncomplicated, affectionate - if any smile could be uncomplicated under a coating of blood. He had stopped breathing.

Wesley nodded but remained serious and watchful, wary as never before of Angel at his most human. And this Angel seemed almost drunk with wellbeing and confidence, impossible to discourage; he just flashed a broader smile and nodded in return, as if he knew exactly why Wesley was being difficult, and exactly how to bring him around. His left hand, which had been down by Wesley’s knee, moved the short distance to Wesley’s inner thigh, squeezed once, slowly, then slid steadily upwards. Wesley groaned as Angel’s hand passed over the wound, less in pain than in rare protest at himself: at the sheer perversity of his libido, at the vast difference between himself and normal men. When Angel’s hand reached his balls, Wesley closed his eyes and kept them closed. He preferred to imagine Angel’s smile, to guess how pleased with himself he must be at the writhing, gasping proof that he had been exactly right about Wesley. Exactly.

However, the experimenter was still present, was still keeping watch. The instant that Angel’s other hand touched Wesley’s forehead, the experimenter recognised the danger, and took evasive action. “No!” Wesley turned his head sharply to the side, and Angel’s kiss landed on his cheek instead of on his lips. “No.” He pushed Angel away, although Angel was already retreating of his own accord.

“OK.” Angel was breathing again. “What’s going on, Wesley?”

“We mustn’t do that. This isn’t -”

“Since when? Isn’t this good enough for you?” He held his hand up briefly next to his face. “Do you want *him* back? Does it have to be like the last time?”

Like the last experiment? With the razor-blade? When Angel had remained in vampire aspect throughout, and had used his tongue to make Wesley taste the blood. Did Angel think that Wesley was refusing him now because of his human face, that Wesley would have accepted the vampire? “No! That isn’t - That was feeding. This is...” He sighed. “This isn’t a romance, Angel. This is an experiment with unavoidable side-effects. We have to keep clear about that.”

Angel sank back onto his heels. He was looking at Wesley as if seeing him properly for the first time, seemed amazed by what he saw. After about a minute he stopped breathing, and in the long silence which followed Wesley finally realised that Angel was exhausted, that he had been exhausted throughout. Well, of course. What else would he be?

Wesley got off the bed. “Go to bed, Angel. You’re asleep on your feet. Knees.” Angel had tilted his head to keep Wesley in sight, but otherwise showed no response. Wesley pulled the bedcovers back. “Go to bed.” He headed for the bathroom, passing behind Angel and pausing to lay a hand on his shoulder. “Go on. Go to bed.”

Would Angel try to follow him into the bathroom? That didn’t seem very likely, but Wesley locked the door anyway. He dealt with his erection first, then with his wounds. Two of the bites were very close, crossing one another at a slight angle; the third was further out. The loss was still only a pound, as far as he could tell from Angel’s scales, so the bites must all have hit the same veins. Had he been lucky, or were those the rules of anatomy?

Angel had gone to bed, after a fashion. He was sprawled face-down, shoes still on, and looked as if he had simply hauled himself up directly from where he had been kneeling, and then passed out. Wesley took the shoes off, then fetched a washcloth from the bathroom and cleaned the blood from Angel’s hand and face, thinking of Cordelia, how she would be sure to come downstairs first thing the next morning. He should probably get Angel’s trousers off as well, get him under the covers, but that felt like a lot of work on only seven pints of blood and Angel could quite easily have put himself to bed like that anyway, after Wesley had left.

Before Wesley left he finished clearing away the equipment from the kitchen, and it was gone one in the morning by the time he got home. He wrote up Experiment 5 in the logbook ("The subject fell asleep immediately after the feeding.") and finally got to bed himself just before two. How much would Angel remember of what had happened? Would the exhaustion make him forget even about the feeding, make him think it was a dream? In the dream, would he be smiling afterwards, would he want to kiss? And in the dream, would Wesley smile back?

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Wesley thought that Angel would be awkward with him afterwards, probably very reserved. Wesley would have to confront him at some point, as he had after Experiment 4, when Angel had reacted so strongly to the razor-blade. How direct should he be? //"You know, I don't think you would have spoken to me like that a month ago. Is this something to do with the last experiment? After we got you home from XXI. Is that what's wrong?"// Angel would probably just deny that there was anything wrong. //"I've been wondering... How much do you remember about the last experiment?"// Then Angel would at least have to say something.

However, it seemed clear even the next day that there would be no need for any confrontation. Angel was almost relaxed, as untroubled as Wesley had ever seen him. Which probably meant that he remembered nothing. So how long would it be before Wesley had to put him right again about "romance"? And how would Wesley prevent himself from feeling insulted (no, hurt) with each experiment that went by without Angel making the move that Wesley must then forbid?

Actually, it probably wouldn't be long at all. Maybe the very next experiment. The week after Experiment 5 and its conversation about romance, he and Angel were presented with a challenge that drew them together more surely than any of their other shared experiences: Cordelia was cast as Nora in "A Doll's House", and it became almost impossible to do or say anything at Angel Investigations that was not related to the play.

Wesley was the one who came up with the idea of the two of them working shifts, actively planning the day's load of coaching, listening, and congratulating. Being off-duty didn't mean that you were free to leave: you were required to provide regular interruptions and distractions. At the beginning, this mostly took the form of criticism of the other's reading, but this just gave Cordelia the opportunity to tell them what she had said to the *real* Torvald during their last rehearsal of that scene - and that could continue for a long time, and was very difficult to interrupt. It was a casual remark of Angel's about seeing one of the first London productions that gave them the key to making the experience bearable: sustained literary analysis. It gave them a genuine and deepening interest in the play, and it was guaranteed to exasperate Cordelia.

Each evening after Cordelia had left for rehearsals, they would meet in the kitchen to savour the highlights of the day's interruptions and to set priorities and research assignments. They drank tea, they laughed at Cordelia, they wondered what the rehearsals were really like. They never discussed Cordelia-as-Nora, except to agree that they had never seen her so happy and that this could be a solid start for her. It didn't need to be said that she must be different on stage, with actual actors; of course she'd save her energy, wouldn't think of squandering it on a couple of civilians. She was their Cordelia, she was something special.

"Are you close to making up the blood you lost last time? If you're still weighing yourself. I never asked how much it was, did I?" So Angel did remember. That Experiment 5 had happened, at least. This was the first time that he had been the one to raise the subject of the experiments.

"It was about a pint. I made it up a while ago. It seems to take around two weeks. We could do the next one now, but I'd rather wait until tomorrow. When I can bring the proper equipment in with me."

"That would be better. What do you have planned?"

//Telling you why we won't kiss. And working out why you're suddenly showing this interest.// "It's another calibration session. Sixty seconds from here." He raised his arm, ran his hand over armpit and pectoral muscle.

“That’s going to hurt. It’s a tender area. You’ll really feel it afterwards.”

“Probably. But I want a fourth calibration. And there aren’t many other places that will give you a good angle, and where I can reach you properly. If it causes me problems afterwards we won’t use it again.”

Angel shrugged. “You’re the boss.”

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Experiment 6 had the briefest entry yet in the logbook. Even if the expected conversation about Angel’s romantic impulses had taken place, Wesley would probably not have recorded it, but he was surprised how little he could find to say about the session. The loss had been exactly a pound, there had been more physical contact than usual during the feeding - which was to be expected given the location - and the subject’s manner was casual, amiable, almost talkative.

Maybe in retrospect it would all acquire great significance, and he would wish that he had recorded every word and expression. Or maybe the experiments had already taught the subject such command of his appetites that little could now trouble him, and all future experiments would be like Experiment 6. Well, that was good, wasn’t it? Very good to have achieved so much, so quickly. Not what he had expected at all.

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Cordelia *was* different on stage, with actual actors: she was ten times worse. It would have been easier to endure if one could have felt embarrassed for her, but since she obviously didn’t feel embarrassed for herself, the best one could do was to sit there and try to keep hold of the conviction that she was not doing any of it deliberately.

Finally it was over, and then there was the search for something, anything to say. “Well, your projection was excellent.”

“Yes, I could hear every word, and we were way in the back.”

“OK, so I was loud, but was I any good?”

Oh. God. Gods. //Please, don’t make me do this.// This was why one should never have friends. Or why one should always give deities the benefit of the doubt, since he and Angel were rescued moments later by the need to rescue Rebecca Lowell.

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“How long are we going to leave him like that?”

Cordelia shrugged. “How long do you think he deserves?”

“Somewhere between five minutes and fifty years?”

Another shrug. “The chains will rust through eventually. We don’t have to decide right now.”

Wesley looked at his watch, sighed. “I’ll go down at ten. Let him out before lunch.”

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“This doesn’t say much for your experiment. When you think about it.”

Wesley had been kneeling by the bed; usually Angel’s position. He let go of the padlock and got to his feet. “What’s... any of this got to do with the experiment?”

“You said it would control my appetite. Did I look in control to you last night?”

Wesley folded his arms. “You didn’t feed from Ms Lowell. Not really. From everything I could see, it wasn’t about feeding, it was about cruelty. I admit, it’s controlling your sadism that *really* needs work. But I’m not going to volunteer for that experiment. Maybe without the experiments you *would* have fed. We’ll never know.”

“You think I’m a sadist?”

Exasperated: “Angel.” A sigh. “You’re also many other things, but I haven’t time right now to give you a list.”

“Do you want to stop the experiment?”

“Of course not. Any more than you want to stay here all day.” He returned his attention to the padlock.

Later, when they were loading the chains back into the chest: “Wesley, Angelus really doesn’t know you.”

“Well enough for his purposes, I suspect.”

“He’s only interested in... in what will hurt. He doesn’t notice anything else.”

“Where is he during the experiments, then?” Not a rhetorical question. Wesley was genuinely curious.

“I... I think he thinks I’m dreaming it. Or that he is. He - It’s flashes, images. No order, no - Nothing else.”

“Is it worse than what he normally dreams about? Is it different?”

“You’re alive. You’re still alive.”

And that was worse? No. No. That wasn’t what Angel meant at all. Different. He’d just meant different.

At the foot of the stairs, very quietly: “Wesley? We should leave a longer gap this time. I know it would normally be next week, but... It would be too soon.”

“Do you want to tell me when you think it’s been long enough?” At Angel’s sudden frown: “Or do you trust me to be able to guess?”

“I trust you.”

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Wesley had decided to let three weeks go by before he even tried to guess about whether or not it had been long enough. During the first week he wasn’t ready himself to think about Experiment 7, during the second week he decided that Experiment 7 would be a pint from the left arm, and during the third week Faith arrived in LA. For most of the two days after he got out of the warehouse building, he assumed that there would never be an Experiment 7; it hadn’t been like making a decision, more like finding himself thrown into a new world.

He got very little sleep during those two days after the warehouse; he was not kept awake by the pain from his injuries, but by his thoughts and feelings, which surged and seethed and would not be calmed. Who would have guessed that he had managed to retain any delusions at all about his own significance? Or that he had managed to forget the thorough lessons of his childhood? But he understood now, and he remembered everything, and he saw himself clearly: he saw that he was nothing. Nothing to anyone. No one had ever altered their plans on account of Wesley Wyndham-Price. No one ever would. They all understood - at a glance - that he was beneath notice. Where he featured, it was by default, because he happened to be in the same room as the people who mattered.

The first night, the feelings keeping him awake were outrage and indignation, glowing more fiercely with each iteration. Day brought distractions, but also further proof and provocation; and his new understanding was made clearer still by the familiar setting. //How many murders would I have to commit, Angel, before you would argue about *me*? See something worth saving in *me*? And if she had chosen to torture anyone but me, would she still be getting doughnuts?//

The second night, the main feeling was resignation. Angel had done the right thing. All of the people who mattered had done the right thing. Knowing what mattered, who mattered, that did count for something. If you knew you were going to spend your life fitting in with other people's plans, then the best you could do was make sure they were good people, good plans, and then make yourself useful often enough to be tolerated. You would know what your choice meant, you would see that it made a difference. Shouldn't that be enough? Shouldn't it?

Well, only time would show him if that was enough. Time and work. The next day he went into the office as if it was a normal day, ready to start dealing with the damage to the skylight. Someone needed to arrange the visits from the management company and the insurers and the glazier, someone who could take them up to the roof during the daytime. Someone needed to clear the glass up and, let's face it, that wasn't going to be Angel.

In fact, it was Angel: he had cleared up the glass during the night. He had also called Cordelia, left a message saying it was safe to come back. There was little for Wesley to do except sit at Cordelia's desk making calls, waiting for calls, and reading Cordelia's magazines.

Wesley took a long time waking up, and a longer time remembering what had happened, and working out what must have happened. He must have fallen asleep at Cordelia's desk, and Angel must have carried him downstairs, placed him on the bed, covered him with a blanket. Taken his shoes and glasses off, too. So what time was it? And where was Angel?

The time was about 9.20, according to his watch. It must be the evening, not the next morning; he surely couldn't have slept through an entire day. "Angel?"

No reply. Silence throughout the building. Wesley sighed, reached over to the nightstand for his glasses, then sat up to look for his shoes. It was hard to believe he had slept for most of the day; he felt more tired now than he had in the morning.

There was a sheet of paper on the kitchen table, anchored by a bottle of red wine. According to the sheet of paper, Angel had gone to Sunnydale, Cordelia would be away until Monday, and a Mister Ellison would be around at eleven the next morning to see the skylight. There was food and there was white wine chilling. Wesley was to make himself at home.

Angel had provided a choice of food. Wesley chose the chicken salad with goat's cheese, and opened the white wine. Angel must have asked Cordelia, when she called, what Wesley's favourite food was. Or maybe he hadn't needed to ask; maybe, despite appearances, he did listen sometimes when his employees were filling their time with mortal trivia.

Wesley took his second glass of wine into the bath with "Generation X" (and when had Angel gone through his Coupland phase? He could match Wesley for every book except "Girlfriend in a Coma"). Then back to the bedroom with a refilled glass and a slightly damp book. He stripped down to his Y-fronts and got under the covers, and was asleep again within half an hour.

The next time he woke up it was just past six, and he was sharing the bed with Angel. Angel's back was turned, and he seemed to be deeply asleep. Wesley lay and thought about chicken salad with goat's cheese, about his one proof that the most important person in his life ever continued to think about him once he was out of sight. And about the fact that having this proof made him feel happy; almost in the way that his obsession with feeding made him feel happy.

Happiness and Angel. Famously incompatible. Just the idea made Wesley uneasy, even when he was sure that there was no danger whatsoever. Yes, Angel liked him more than he had a few months ago: he showed signs of trust and affection, maybe even signs that he had started to look forward to the experiments, that he had found some aspects of Wesley's body that he could enjoy for their own sake.

But that was all. Wesley could make him annoyed or puzzled, could make him reveal some aspects of himself that he usually kept hidden; but Wesley would never be important enough to Angel to cause him either despair or joy. That has surely been obvious to both of them; the experiment would have been unthinkable otherwise.

As for Wesley... His feelings for Angel were much stronger than they had been before the experiment, but they still weren't love. Angel could hurt him, but not break his heart. What if they continued the experiment for years, though? What if there were more evenings of favourite food and good wine, more mornings of waking up in Angel's bed? And what would happen when Angel realised that Wesley's response to the feeding was more than just a "kink", that it was an all-encompassing passion? This could not end well. So should it end now, while it was still a success? While there was no damage to either of them beyond a collection of fading scars?

Yes, he probably should bring it to an end. He would, at the slightest sign of any real damage. But not now. Not right now. Not while he was still less than three days away from Faith. He had recovered from the worst effects, thanks to sleep and Angel's attentions, and he could see that his initial reaction had been excessive; he did have some reason to feel sorry for himself, and many reasons to feel insignificant, but he was not nothing. The torture was still too close, though, and the long hours he had spent in hating his friends and in despising himself. The memories of the past few days were still raw and corrosive, and he didn't feel strong enough to deal with those memories on his own. The memories would lose their power, with time, but until then he needed the experiments; he needed to be something more than just Wesley.

"What are you doing with your heart, Wesley? I'd be able to hear it if you were across town in your own bed."

Wesley gave a start that made the bed creak. "I - Did I wake you up?"

"Probably." Angel rolled over to face Wesley. He was smiling. "That or one of the other signs that *you'd* woken up with... a problem. I think I got the scent when you were still dreaming." He reached out under the bedclothes, placed his hand flat on Wesley's chest, and started to move it slowly downwards.

Wesley stopped Angel's hand almost immediately, before it had even reached his navel. "We can't - We don't do this."

Angel seemed to have been expecting a refusal. "I think we do. Almost regularly."

"For a *reason*. Not just because one of us wakes up with a hard-on."

"You want a reason? Aren't we entitled to..." He shrugged. "A delayed reaction to Faith?"

Wesley flinched, and finally pushed the hand away. "I'm not *that* much of a masochist. You think I'm going to take the dressings off for you? Have you make it up to a pint?"

Pained: "Wesley." Angel raised himself up on an elbow, and looked hard at Wesley for a long time. "Have you ever let anyone apologise to you? I don't care what reason *you* need. *I* need to be sure that you're still here. I need to know that we can get back to normal."

"I'm not going anywhere. But this isn't normal. Not for us. It would - It would confuse things."

"How, if it's something we've already done? How, Wesley? It may be a side-effect, but I don't think you hate it."

A sigh, and a long pause. "It would be an indulgence. Since there are other ways of dealing with a hard-on. There's no other way of doing the experiment."

"Do you never indulge yourself?"

"Not with employers. I hear that can also confuse things."

A flicker of reaction then Angel visibly gave up the attempt, and moved with no trace of resentment on to simple curiosity. "With who, then? Or what?"

"Books, mostly. Wine. That was a nice rioja, by the way. Thank you."

"Good. What about 'who'? You've got to have more than *one* kink."

If they were talking kinks, Wesley had about a thousand, although they had all been rendered obsolete by the one kink that Angel thought he knew about. Wesley shrugged. "Nothing that would interest a blackmailer."

"I *have* met other people with your kink, you know."

They hadn't talked about that since the very first experiment, when Angel had seemed so determined to suck him off. Or maybe just determined to test him. Wesley was surprised that Angel remembered. Did Angel sometimes think about the experiments, then? Puzzle over them? "I expect you have."

"You're really not typical."

Wesley did not want to know, had never welcomed comparisons. He could imagine all too easily the others that Angel had met: beautiful, brave, bold, unforgettable. They wouldn't scream, they wouldn't need rules or reasons. All clearly born with life enough to spare. "No. I'm probably not."

The look of curiosity faded from Angel's face, leaving him frowning down at Wesley, almost awkward. He opened his mouth, frowned more deeply, made as if to lift his hand, then rolled heavily onto his back.

Just realised who he was talking to. Obviously. Wesley checked the time and decided he had finally had enough sleep. Might as well get up, read and drink coffee until the man came to see the skylight. He put his glasses on and drew back the covers.

"You're getting up? It's still dark."

Wesley carried on gathering his clothes and did not turn around. "I'm going to read. I'll use the sitting-room if that's alright."

"What do you want for breakfast?"

At that, Wesley did turn around, surprised. "I'm going to put the coffee on."

"No toast with that? Eggs?"

The idea of sitting alone at the kitchen table, Angel fussing over him. And at 6.30 in the morning. Cordelia had obviously been able to cope with the idea, when it was just her and Angel; but then Cordelia was able to take almost anything for granted. For Wesley the idea was too strange. "It's too early for me. You probably have some sleep to catch up on. Don't worry, I'll be quiet." He closed the bedroom doors on his way out.

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The first experiment to be conducted in Wesley's apartment was Experiment 9: a standard sixty seconds from the thigh, designed to reveal any differences caused by the change of venue. For the purposes of the experiment, there were no differences; during the feeding Angel seemed oblivious to his surroundings, as always, and for the rest he had been matter-of-fact and co-operative, as he had been since Experiment 6. Afterwards he showered and changed, and they had a glass of wine and talked about films and being human and money and finding a new office. He left at around eleven, presumably to return to his current lair (wherever and whatever that was), and Wesley sat and had another glass and listed all of the things that had made Experiment 9 disappointing.

Relatively disappointing, to be fair. Not terrible, not even mediocre, just... not exhilarating, not really what he needed. It had been predictable. And it was becoming apparent to Wesley that he had strong feelings about predictability, at least in this area.

Familiarity, that was the problem. In retrospect, it had started to be a problem even before Vocah had blown up the office, but with Experiment 7 the continuation of Angel's casual manner had seemed like a compliment, a deliberate reassurance after everything that had happened since Experiment 6; and then by Experiment 8 Wesley was deeply immersed in his jealousy of Lindsey, and Angel's every gesture was laden with ten times its usual significance. At the time he saw only the differences, not the similarities, but with Experiment 9 the sense of routine finally caught up with him.

Yes, familiarity was the problem, but it was about far more than a series of unsurprising experiments; those three experiments on their own could never have been enough to change so many of his perceptions of Angel. The familiarity and the changed perspective, they came from having Angel's clothes in his closet, Angel's hair-gel in his bathroom, Angel's blood in his fridge; and Angel's future very much in his mind.

Angel had moved into Wesley's apartment while Wesley was still in the hospital, and had stayed, sleeping on the couch, during Wesley's first week out. There had never been any suggestion that he stay with Cordelia, though her apartment was far larger. After that first week he found somewhere else to sleep but he returned to Wesley's at least once a day. He would never tell them where he was sleeping, just stated flatly that it didn't matter as long as they could reach him by 'phone.

The two of them never bothered with a schedule, and sometimes they missed one another for days at a time, but Wesley never had any sense that they were avoiding one another. Angel was easy company: tidy, considerate, and a good breakfast cook; Wesley had accepted the offer of breakfast in the first week, and it hadn't felt strange after all. If Angel was there in the evening they sometimes watched a film. They'd drink tea or beer or wine. They'd talk.

That evening was only the second time that Angel had raised the topic of his eventual reward. Of course, the three of them traded oblique references to the coming battles and Cordelia was still getting mileage out of Wesley's mistranslation, but then it was always handled as a joke. Was Wesley the only person who had heard the other version, who had seen how the slightest serious discussion of the prospect made Angel glow, as if already filled with warmth and life? It was a remarkable sight, and Wesley gave himself a lot of the credit for it. When he had first realised the true meaning of "Shanshu", he had found it difficult to imagine Angel as human, but that had changed with just a few weeks of cohabitation.

Angel would be a good friend, as a human. If Wesley stayed in California, if Buffy could learn to tolerate him, he hoped that they would still meet for evenings of films and wine, that they would still find something to talk about when they were no longer working together. Would Wesley still have fantasies about feeding, or would they stop when Angel ceased to be a vampire? He wouldn't be surprised if they did stop, if they were unable to coexist with the reality of a happy, human Angel. Presumably Angel would still be unfeasibly beautiful, and Wesley would still be astonished by it each time they met; but the beauty alone had not been enough to challenge Wesley's rules, had not driven Wesley to invent the experimenter. He could see no reason why he would have fantasies about sex with Angel, once the feeding was over, so Angel's beauty would become simply a fascinating natural phenomenon, as impersonal as a winter landscape.

What was the justification for the experiments, though, if Angel was going to become human? And if they were all producing the same result. Wesley - the real Wesley - had become steadily less concerned about justification, since the effort required to convince Angel had been so much less than he had expected; it was the experimenter who was asking awkward questions about the future of the experiment. Until recently (yes, until Experiment 7), the experimenter had been as uncritical as Wesley, but the experiments no longer had anything to offer the experimenter's libido; the dynamics of power were over, and the experimenter could summon no sexual interest in a co-operative Angel, even if Angel was still beautiful, and still drinking blood. Freed from the distraction of sex, he was approaching the experiments as he had at the beginning: as an intellectual challenge. There could still be sufficient thrill in that challenge to keep him involved, but only if he started putting real effort into the design of the experiments, if he managed to repair the damage from the months of neglect. In the beginning, he

had felt as if he had more ideas than he could possibly use. And he had written most of them down. So that would be the start: he would go back and read those early entries in the logbook.

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Experiment 10 showed that, whatever success the experiments had achieved with the subject, they had left his response to razor-blades untouched. In form, the experiment was very similar to Experiment 4, the only previous experiment in which the experimenter had cut himself with a razor-blade. The only difference in the procedure was that in Experiment 10 the experimenter raised his bleeding hand to his mouth of his own accord. There was a lot of noise, more than in Experiment 4, and over the next few days the experimenter discovered and recorded bruises in large numbers and in surprising places. The subject showed no signs afterwards of introspective withdrawal.

Experiment 11 took place a week after Experiment 10. Again, it involved razor-blades, but with the difference that the experimenter insisted that the subject could only feed while in human aspect. The subject complied, with visible and audible resentment, but returned to vampire aspect for the sex. He was still in vampire aspect when the experimenter told him that Experiment 12 would be a week later, and would require him to remain in human aspect throughout. He was not pleased.

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Wesley half-expected Angel to stand him up for Experiment 12, but Angel arrived promptly, and had apparently used the week to bring himself to smooth acceptance of Wesley's rules. Wesley felt cheated, but kept to his plans: he let the cuts bleed for sixty second while he held Angel at a distance, and he kept his hand raised so that the blood ran down his arm, and tilted it this way, then that, to force the drops to change their course.

"You can have up to ten minutes." He held out his hand. "But if you change into the vampire, I will stop it immediately. It won't make any difference how quickly you change back."

"It won't bleed for ten minutes." Angel had dropped to his knees, and was looking up at Wesley while he took his grip on Wesley's fingers and wrist. It was a comment, not a complaint.

"Probably not. It's up to you."

Angel used most of his ten minutes, though Wesley would have allowed him more (while saying it was less). It was similar to the incident in the kitchen, as expected, though Angel was more deliberate, and did not avoid the wounds. The sex also was similar, from the first touch of Angel's hand to Wesley's thigh, to the quick and basic end.

Wesley was aware almost immediately that Experiment 12 was a mistake, a series of mistakes. Yes, it was logical to ban the vampire aspect for once, and yes it was fair to give Angel warning, but a day would have been sufficient. And he should have had a second plan, a third, even. He should not have assumed that Angel would be difficult, that it would be a challenge for both of them.

The feeding had been... sweet. That was the word that kept presenting itself to Wesley, that or "charming", and on balance Wesley preferred "sweet". The feeding had been affectionate, careful, knowing; it had been everything that added up to "sweet". On some level of course he did appreciate it, he did respond, but it was all wrong, it was all thoroughly disturbing.

If Experiment 12 was similar to the incident in the kitchen, then the incident in the kitchen must also have been sweet. Yes, there were allowances to be made for surprise, for the fact that Angel was almost a stranger then. But still, hard to understand why something so... well, *ordinary* should have made such an impression on him. What had he found in those minutes that had made him fall in love with the idea of feeding? He was still very much in love with the idea, thinking about it still brought the same glow of happiness. But the list of thoughts and memories that could produce that glow had just become shorter; he would never again be able to lose himself for hours in contemplation of the incident in the kitchen. So what would happen if he tried to repeat Experiment 1? Would that also be revealed as sweet? Would he start to suspect that, through all these years, his libido had been harbouring a secret taste for the ordinary?

No. The problem was familiarity. And the fact that he had become stale and complacent. The experimenter was right: it was time to put some real effort into the design of the experiments.

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Over the next week, Wesley spent at least an hour a day working on his long-term plan for the experiments; at least three hours a day if you counted thinking time. He judged each idea strictly by what it could teach him about Angel, not by what it could teach him about himself. The experiment was supposed to be about Angel's appetites, and his own appetites must not be allowed to limit what they could learn. Of course, there were limits to what he would endure in the name of research, but he shouldn't have to think twice about accepting and incorporating moments of disappointment and stretches of boredom.

At the end of the week he sat down with his sheets of notes and typed up the plan. It was a complete list of the experiments that he intended to perform, with a small set of rules for their order and grouping. For now, the schedule was fluid, but whenever he chose an experiment, he would have to justify his choice in terms of the plan. The full plan would require a minimum of 30 weeks. Assuming no great change in the level of chaos at Angel Investigations, Wesley thought they would be finished in about a year. And then? Write it up for a suitable journal (not necessarily ever submitting it), give the logbook to Angel, and carry on counting off the demons to Angel's Shanshu.

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"For this experiment, I want you to choose what we do. You can't take more than a pint. And you can't take it from anywhere visible, or from anywhere that wouldn't heal easily. You have to tell me what you're going to do, and if you start to deviate from that I will stop you. This isn't about surprises."

Well, not about surprises for the experimenter, anyway. Angel frowned, opened his mouth, closed it, then stood motionless for some time, looking quietly baffled. Wesley crossed to the armchair by the window, sat down, and waited.

"It wouldn't feel right." Angel had moved to sit on the bed, at the point closest to the armchair.

"Why not?"

"It just wouldn't."

"Is it the responsibility? That comes with choice. Or is there simply nothing that you would choose, given the restrictions that I've set?"

Angel was shaking his head. "'Wesley, I want to drink from your thigh and then fuck you.' Can you really imagine me saying that? I shouldn't choose. I don't have the right."

"It's not about..." Wesley shrugged. "... fairness. Right and wrong. It's about conducting a thorough experiment. Trying to remove some assumptions. And if I could imagine you saying that, I'd have to imagine myself saying no. I can't allow that second item."

Half-hostile, half-curious: "Is that where you Watchers finally draw the line? The one thing you won't do with a vampire?"

"I wouldn't allow it from anyone. I don't enjoy it. Call it an anti-kink."

Angel looked as if he had just been rescued. "That's what I was trying to say. That's how I feel about... what you're asking me to do."

"I don't believe you. If you felt like that, you'd have died of starvation. A very long time ago."

"I have to *see* you again, Wesley. Every day. And what would it tell you, anyway?"

“Maybe not very much this time. But each time would tell me more.”

“You want me to take over? What’s happened to you?”

“Nothing like that. This is just another part of *my* experiment. But it’s the part where, once in a while, I ask you what you want. It won’t be very often, if that makes it any easier for you.”

It appeared to make it slightly easier. Angel was still studying Wesley, but thoughtfully now, not in disbelief.

Wesley gave him about half a minute. “So... is there anything you can imagine yourself saying?”

A pause, then slowly. “I keep thinking about your tongue.”

“Interesting. But it wouldn’t heal without stitches.”

Another pause. “How many has it been so far?”

“Stitches?” Even deeply in character as the experimenter, Wesley flinched as his thighs remembered Faith. He shook his head sharply. “No, experiments. Twelve.”

“What if I just pull a number out of a hat? Choose whatever we did then.”

“If that’s how you want to do it. Or you could pick a card.” Wesley stood up. “I’ll get a pack and the logbook.”

Angel picked a three, and Wesley turned to that section of the logbook. “That was the arm.” Wesley pushed his sleeve up and pressed his fingertips onto the faint scars.

“What about the sex?”

Wesley skimmed the entry. “It doesn’t really say. It must not have... reflected in any way on the feeding.” He was about to close the logbook when Angel took it from him.

Angel read for several minutes, starting with Experiment 3 and then turning pages and stopping here and there for the space of a paragraph. Wesley went back to the armchair and watched the flickers of reaction, some surprised, most cynical.

“‘The subject’?” Angel had raised his head, but still had the book open.

“Of course. What would *you* say?”

“I’d say more about the sex. I’d say more about *your* reaction. No one would ever guess that this ‘experimenter’ had a kink. He’s... how many miles above all that?” He closed the book with a snap and dropped it on the bed.

“It isn’t relevant. It’s a side-effect.”

“What do you think it does to your blood? How can that not be relevant?”

It was Wesley’s turn for a long, thoughtful silence. “I’ll say more about it in future.”

“Show me the next one you write.” He picked the book up again, tilted it at Wesley, then put it away on top of the nearest bookshelf. “I’ll be doing this one.”

“That’s a good idea. I should have thought of that.” He stood up. “If you’re ready, I’ll go and weigh myself.”

* * * * *

Angel did not write up Experiment 13 after all. When Wesley reminded him, suggested that he'd forget too much if he left it until the next day, he gave a dismissive shrug. "No one can read my handwriting. It had better be yours. But show me."

"I'll do it after you've gone. You can check it tomorrow."

Wesley was partly relieved, and partly disappointed. It would have been interesting to see an experiment from the subject's perspective. Would he have gone into detail about the night's blood, marked it up or down in comparison with other experiments? And which aspects of the experimenter's reactions would he regard as significant? The gasps and moans? The state of his pulse, his sweat, or his erection? Or only his words, his deliberate actions? It would surely have been revealing: what he noticed, what he remembered. But Wesley hated reading about himself. Just the possibility that he might be about to come across his own name made him feel sick with tension, no matter how many times he told himself that it would be proof that he had been noticed.

How much did Angel expect him to say about himself, though? Should he be thorough, try to make amends? Or should he do as little as he could, short of defiance, and see if that made Angel say more about what he wanted? In the end, he chose the minimalist approach, though more from reticence than as a tactic; he recorded the level of his arousal at the beginning, any noticeable changes and their apparent cause, and the actions he had taken that indicated his preferences. It seemed the only way he could possibly handle it, given who he was, but when he read it over he felt the tension gathering in his guts, and discovered the price he had to pay for being able to write with convincing third-person detachment about things that were important to him. From now on, reading the logbook was clearly going to be an ordeal. Unless, of course, the experiments became predictable again, or started seeming "sweet"; in which case there might no longer be any reactions left to observe. What would Angel make of that? Would he still want the sex when the dominant note in Wesley's blood was the chill of intellectual curiosity? The long-term plan had been designed with the assumption that some experiments would be like that. Maybe most of them, by the end.

Wesley left the logbook propped against the door of the microwave, knowing that Angel would have to move it at some point during the next day. When he came home from seeing "Hollow Man", the book was back in its usual place on the shelf. Wesley had thought that Angel might add a comment, give him marks out of ten, but no.

* * * * *

Wesley had been getting better at dealing with uncertainty, but if it was within his power to obtain an answer to a question, then he always preferred to obtain it sooner rather than later. He decided on a date, spent the week before preparing himself, and gave Angel no warning whatsoever.

"You can save that until tomorrow. We're doing Experiment 14 now."

"Oh? OK." Angel nodded, closed the fridge and put the blood-pack on the counter, then opened his cupboard and took out a second beaker, as he always did when he was only going to use part of a pack.

"I don't mean we're doing it this evening. We're doing it right now. You can put the whole pack back."

"Now? On a Sunday morning?" Angel picked up the pack but made no move to return it to the fridge. "You've always been able to wait until the evening." He surveyed Wesley from stubble to shoes, then treated him to a conspiratorial smirk. "You going to tell me about that dream?"

"Never." Wesley's smirk was more secretive, and with a hint of malice. He had been up all night poisoning himself with caffeine, and he felt like a lump of suet that had been injected with itching-powder. He had half-expected Angel's vampire senses to detect the difference in him, but maybe they were fooled by his sweat. Or maybe Angel had some secret purpose of his own. "Please put it back."

Angel shrugged and complied. "So what is it that can't wait?"

Wesley rolled up his crumpled sleeve. "A pint from here." He opened a drawer, brought out the cross and stopwatch. "Right here. Right now. And no sex."

A beat, then Angel lashed out and sent both beakers flying across the room; it was startling, even though the beakers were plastic and (apparently) shatterproof. “I *knew* you were going to do something like this. You’re a Watcher who likes to be bled, Wesley. Fucking face it. It’s stupid, it’s fucked up, but it’s not a crime. Accept it for what it is, and stop jerking me around.”

“You’re saying no?”

Angel’s glare intensified into open dislike, then he yanked the fridge open, scooped up a handful of packs, slammed the fridge shut, and was gone from the flat in a matter of seconds.

Interesting. Wesley wrote it up as Experiment 14 (“The subject refused to participate. He stated that the proposed procedure was unreasonable, and that the experimenter’s behaviour was neurotic.”), and then spent the rest of the day trying to get rid of his jitters.

Angel was offhand with him for the next couple of days, and didn’t return to the flat until Wednesday morning. Wesley was woken at 6.09 by the sound of the shower, and dragged himself out of bed and into his dressing-gown. He went through to the sitting room, and took up watch in a chair that had a view across the corridor to the bathroom. Angel emerged naked, and showed no surprise at seeing him. “Morning, Wesley.”

“Angel.” Wesley got up and crossed to the corridor, where Angel was choosing clothes. “Would you be able to come around for a drink tomorrow evening? I do want to talk about Sunday, but I’m hoping we can make that short.”

Wesley had spoken to the back of Angel’s neck, while Angel continued to push hangers around. It felt as if Angel made him wait for a long time afterwards, but it was probably only a few seconds. “I was going to leave a note saying something like that. But for this evening.”

Wesley nodded. “Around nine? This evening.”

* * * * *

“You’d just convinced me yourself that the sex did make a difference. Is it *really* unreasonable to try to find out how much?”

“You enjoy... making me jump through your hoops, Wesley. Or did you think you’d been subtle?”

Wesley took some time to process Angel’s answer, since it was so different from any of the answers he had been expecting. “So it wasn’t - If I said I wanted to try again next Sunday morning. With the same thing. You’d consider it?”

“I would. But I’d also have money on you coming up with something else by then. Anything to keep the subject on his toes.”

Slowly: “How should I have asked? On Sunday. What *would* have been subtle?”

Angel shrugged. “You’ve seen me often enough since you said I convinced you. You could have told me you wanted to see the difference. Isn’t it obvious you’d get a better result if you let me in on that one?”

“I thought you wanted *me* to be the one running the experiment. Wouldn’t that be like choosing?”

“That was when I had some idea what you were thinking. Now... I know there’s something new going on in there. I don’t like the waiting to see what colour the next hoop’s going to be.”

Wesley thought for a few seconds then said quietly, “I can understand that. I’m sorry about Sunday.” He got up, took a slim folder from the shelf that held the logbook, and handed its contents to Angel. “That’s the full set of hoops. I haven’t fixed the order because I - I think we should have some

flexibility. But those are the only colours you need to be prepared for.” He waited for Angel to start reading before he returned to his chair.

“So... this is what you’ve been working from since the middle of August?” Angel had read the five pages thoroughly, and was now back at the first page, pointing at the date near the top.

“Yes.”

“I didn’t have to convince you, did I? It’s already in here. ‘No sex’. Just after ‘sex *before* feeding’. With half a page of notes and guidelines.”

“It seemed an abstract idea when I put it in the plan. Something I ought to look at sometime. You made me think about it properly. Decide to get an earlier start.”

“Like first thing Sunday morning.” He leaned forward and passed the plan back to Wesley. “Carry on, Wesley. You can keep it flexible.”

Wesley returned the folder to the shelf then put some music on, and they talked for a while about music and associations. In the lull while Wesley was choosing the second CD, Angel suddenly said, “What about the next set of hoops? Will you show me those before you start to use them, or am I going to be swearing at you again in a few months?”

Wesley shook his head. “There won’t be another set. We have to call an end sometime. And I think that -“ He nodded towards the bookshelf. “- contains all the worthwhile ideas I’m likely to have.” Angel looked sombre, as one would if contemplating an unrelieved diet of pig’s blood. “It should also catch the scar-tissue before it reaches critical mass. And you won’t be a vampire forever.” And there was Angel’s glow of anticipation, right on cue. Two months on, and it still made Wesley catch his breath, it still made him feel honoured that he was allowed to witness it.

* * * * *

Wesley had made an appointment with himself for Saturday morning. Agenda: decide how to prepare for Sunday morning. For the previous attempt, he had thrown in all the ingredients he could find for a casserole of exhaustion, distraction and depression. It would probably have worked, but now it struck him as disorganised, almost desperate. He didn’t want to hunt about for ingredients again, and he really didn’t want another round with the jitters.

He lay in bed with his glasses off, staring up at the pink and cream blur of the light-fitting, and drifting in slow circles around the thought: “I don’t want to do it like that.” This could take hours. And that was fine. It had been long enough since he’d last given himself permission to waste time.

He closed his eyes and sank smoothly back into sleep, taking the thought down with him. When he woke, he knew immediately that something was different, that something was wrong, and it took only the briefest survey to find the problem.

//I don’t want to do it at all.//

The problem was nothing to do with the sex or the lack of sex. Or it probably wasn’t. As far as he could tell, he had lost interest in the entire experiment. The experimenter could see no challenge in it any more, and the real Wesley had apparently fallen abruptly out of love. This was probably no coincidence: the experimenter was not the opposite of the real Wesley but only an isolated aspect of him; the opinions and feelings of one could be taken as a good indication of the opinions and feelings of the other, even if they had different priorities and social styles.

Wesley sighed heavily and reached out for his glasses. He shouldn’t have shown Angel the plan. That had lost the experimenter, right there, as his body had tried to tell him by presenting him with the sensation that his viscera had plunged into free-fall. But at the time he had seen that as a natural reaction to the end of four days of tension. And as for the nagging regret, that was obviously over the fact that he had just committed himself to a plan that had been devised with an assumption that was now out of date: the assumption that Angel would not see the plan. But it was too late now.

His obsession with feeding might have ended at the same moment. He wasn't sure. In the past, there had never been any obvious moment when a particular obsession had come to an end. Sometimes, though, if it lasted long enough - longer than a week, say - there would be signs that its power was fading. But he wouldn't know that the obsession had burnt itself out until the next time he tried to use that detail in a fantasy, and found it an embarrassing irrelevance. The obsession with feeding had lasted an extraordinarily long time, but it seemed obvious to him now that it had been just another obsession. Of course it would end like this eventually, and there was nothing to be done about it.

How was he going to tell Angel? Was there some excuse that would leave them both with their pride intact? He did not want to provoke a frank discussion of the history or purpose of the experiment, but that discussion seemed inevitable unless he got a truly inspired idea for an excuse, and built on that idea with quite as much preparation and rehearsal as he had used when he was trying to start the experiment. There was no point in even thinking about it for now; he could tell that his brain wasn't ready, might not be ready for a month or more. He would have to continue the experiments in the meantime.

At least he had solved the problem of how to prepare for Sunday morning. He doubted that his libido would have moved on to a different obsession by then, and even if it was still capable of some response, he would easily be able to subdue it. He would simply focus on the cold knowledge that he didn't need to be there, that he was looking for a way out.

* * * * *

"So what *does* it do to my blood?" It would have been strange not to ask, but it seemed that he could not keep the indifference out of his voice.

"It does a lot." Angel shook his head slowly, looking puzzled. "It was... empty. How did you do that? I would have said..." A short pause. "Wesley, you may be the only person I have ever met who might be *safe* as a vampire. I used to think I couldn't imagine you like that. But now I think it doesn't need imagining."

"Are you saying I tasted like a vampire?" Wesley was outraged, and too surprised to consider hiding it.

"No! Nothing like that. It was... I don't know..." A deep frown. "Transparent? As if nothing could ever make you have feelings you shouldn't have."

Wesley had never heard Angel making less sense. "Transparent? Like a glass of L.A. tap-water? Last Sunday I was the fucked-up Watcher with a kink. That's a long way to come in a week."

Angel shrugged, apparently no longer much interested in the puzzle. "It is, and I don't know how you did it. That's all I'm saying."

"Oh." Wesley's turn to shrug. "I just thought about the experiment. I saw... today against the rest of the plan."

"Oh. So what's next? Not more of this."

"I haven't decided yet. I'll let you know closer to the time."

* * * * *

Wesley made the decision about the next experiment as soon as Angel left, using a variation on Angel's method, and picking a number (7) out of a salad bowl. This was one of the experiments that look at the effect of introducing pauses in the feeding: three twenty-second feedings, with a break of a minute between each.

Strictly speaking, the plan allowed him to experiment with the permutations for the sex independently from the permutations for feeding, so he could have drawn a second number and avoided all decisions. However, Angel clearly had a preference, and Wesley had to be able to deal smoothly with the sex

while he was still waiting for inspiration over his excuse, and it wasn't going to get any easier if he was trying to avoid it.

Not wanting to have sex with Angel. A strange concept. An incredible one, during the moments in each day when Angel's beauty and presence caught him by surprise, and the flare of heat was as strong, as piercing as ever. But then in the next moment there would be a reminder of the scale of the complications that accompanied that face and that body, and the flare was extinguished by the flood of reservations and associations.

The complications must have been what had killed his obsession with feeding. Especially the complication of having Angel practically living with him, of feeling that Angel was already halfway to being human. Wesley had told himself that the feeding had just been another of his obsessions, that there was no point in analysing it now that it was over; but of course that had been nonsense. It had been the most intense emotional experience of his life, strong enough to propel him out of the safe world of his fantasies and into his employer's bed. He didn't regret what he had done, would treasure the memories forever; but he did now want to understand more about what had happened. What it meant.

Had anyone else ever felt the same passion for feeding? //“I've met other people with your kink.”// That could mean anything. Angel had said that those people weren't like Wesley. And that could also mean anything. If only there was something that he could do to find those people who Angel had met; assuming that any of them were still alive. But what could he say to them if he did find them? What questions could he ask that would help him to understand himself? Maybe, though, he could learn something just from seeing the ways in which they were not like himself. He might find that Angel had been right; that, for better or worse, he was not typical.

* * * * *

“Thank you for meeting me, Mister Austin, and at such short notice.”

“John. Well, David made it sound urgent. He said you had a problem with vampires.”

“I'm sorry if I gave Mister Nabbit the wrong impression. I'm simply gathering information at the moment. This area has received almost no attention. Whereas even back in England, I heard enough about Madame Dorian's that I think I could have drawn you a floor plan.

“They don't have vampires at Madame Dorian's.”

“Yes, I heard that. But Mister Nabbit said that you –”

“Yeah, I asked, some guys there heard me ask, gave me some names. I only really asked –” He shrugged. “- for a joke, because I'd *been* this vampire in our last campaign. But then I thought about it and it sounded safe enough, and Mike and Lupe were into it, so...”

“How... do they make it safe?”

“Depends what you want. What the vampire will put up with. My first time, the vampire was in a cage. Well, sort of a cage. My last time, I just kept in range of the panic button. Didn't even have a crucifix.”

“How many times did you go? And the other men?”

“I went four times. Lupe just the once. Mike's still going.”

“How often?”

“Probably as often as they let you. Every two months? I thought at first... c'mon there's guys here wanting to give you *money*. But it's all about the long term.”

“Did you meet any of the other customers?”

“A few. Didn’t talk to anyone much there. More at this bar everyone seemed to go to.”

“Were all of the customers men?”

“Yes, but that’s how they run it at the Kingswood. Women go to the Gordon, couple of blocks away. They’d go to Caritas too. That’s the bar. Probably one for gays somewhere. You know L.A.”

“Was it – Did the vampires offer sexual services as well?”

“Hand jobs, definitely. Otherwise... it depends what you both agree on. You know it’s not a brothel? It’s an agency. The vampires also pay. And they vet *everyone*.”

“I wasn’t clear on that. So you talked to the vampires? If you wanted more than... um...”

“Not the first time. And not much at any time. God, I had questions, but... They’re pretty intimidating. I always chickened out.”

“Were they menacing? Threatening?”

“No, just very cool. Focused. Acted as if they saw straight through you. Not rude just... not going to pretend they *hadn’t* seen it all before.”

“Were they all like that? Did they seem...” Wesley shrugged. “...different from each other in any way.”

“Well, at the time I really picked up on the intimidating thing. It was why I stopped going. I mean, you’re there with this immortal chick drinking your blood, and all you’re thinking about is all the things you’d be doing differently if you actually knew how to talk to girls.”

“I know the feeling. But you thought afterwards that there were differences between them?”

“It was hearing other people talk about it. Mike and the people at the bar. I guess there are people who *like* the intimidation, don’t try to see anything else, but they’re not the ones who go to Caritas two, three times a week, and want to swap stories about the cutest things their pet vampires have done.” He sighed and shook his head. “It’s not that bad, but when you’re feeling out of it... Anyway, apparently when you get used to them they are not all the same. And they always tell you that the vampires who go to the agencies are very unusual. They’re the clever ones. They’ve done the math. Yeah, they *want* to rip your throat out, but it’s better in the long term if they don’t. And they’ve got the self-control to keep the long term in mind all the time. So if they *do* have that in common –”

“Then it’s not surprising most of them come across as intimidating.”

“Yeah.”

“Could you tell me more about the people at the bar? How attached do they *get* to their pet vampires?”

“Not *stupid* about it. Not that I saw in person. They’d have an arrangement with their vampire, book appointments together at the agency, maybe have a drink at Caritas before or after.”

“So they’d meet outside the agency?” Wesley was surprised, and realised that he was still thinking in terms of his own rules, his own instinct for separation; impossible to imagine taking Angel to a bar afterwards.

A dismissive shrug. “Caritas is safe. That’s not a big deal. But there were rumours about people going overboard, thinking they were in love. I mean, even moving *in* with the vampire.”

“And then getting killed?”

“Actually, no. I never heard anything worse than: ‘Of course, it didn’t last, and they were both blacklisted by the Kingswood.’ And everyone would look scared at the last part.” He laughed. “And about half an hour later they’d be spooking themselves with stories about non-agency vampires. Those

really didn't end well. But by then I wasn't believing much of it. That they were right to be scared, yeah, but that they knew any details, no."

"Your friend Lupe. You said he only went once?"

"He didn't like being bitten. Couldn't get past the shock. I still don't understand why it didn't bother me." He pushed up his shirt-sleeve, stretched his arm out so Wesley could see, very matter-of-fact. "Oh. You've not seen that before? What did you think it would look like?"

Wesley blinked, shook his head sharply, and prayed that his erection would subside before he had to stand up. "I'm sorry, I – I must have been expecting... two neat little holes. That really is a bite."

"Dog at the beach. That's what I tell people. Serves me right for wearing sausage-flavoured sunscreen."

* * * * *

Wesley had learned something about himself by meeting John Austin, but it was not what he had expected to learn: he had learned that his obsession with feeding had not been extinguished after all. Of course, if he wanted to, he could tell himself that anyone would have reacted in the same way to the sight of the bite-marks on the man's arm, that such scars were inherently erotic. But no, his reaction was not normal, and it was not what it would have been before the incident in the kitchen; this strange phase in his life was not over.

What had he felt when he had seen the scars? What had he wanted to do? He had wanted to look at them. To be allowed to look at them properly. Not to have to hide his fascination. That was all. And what else could he do, when the scars were the only detail that he knew? He didn't know the Kingswood, so he couldn't imagine where it had happened. He didn't know any of Austin's vampires, so he couldn't imagine the feeding itself. His libido had nothing to work with except the sight of the scars and the knowledge that the man had been bitten by a real vampire, but it still managed to produce powerful effects.

A real vampire. A vampire without complications. And what did it mean that he was only now realising that he had never met a real vampire? Not met one to speak to, that is. Nothing beyond standard threats, standard pleas.

What would a vampire be like who would choose to go to an agency? Who would occasionally choose to appear in public with a human, as if they were friends? And what would a clever vampire be like? Would sex with a real vampire be quick and basic? Or would that depend on the vampire?

Wesley couldn't imagine these clever vampires. Couldn't really imagine that there could be anything between humans and real vampire except the standard threats and the standard pleas. But he couldn't leave himself with just the image of Austin's scars. He had to know more.

* * * * *

Austin had somehow not thought to mention that Caritas was a karaoke bar. Or that humans were firmly in the minority. Wesley had expected to find half the tables taken by patrons of the Kingswood and the Gordon, and he had also expected better conditions for eavesdropping.

There was a seat free at the end of the bar, with a useful wall to lean against. No mirror behind the bar, though, so he had to swivel around in order to survey the room. Now that he was settled in, he could see that the mix was fairly even - maybe 50/50 demons and humans. That suggested that he found demons at least four times more noticeable than humans. Which was probably typical. For a human.

He was on his second drink when he realised that the couple at the second table over was exactly what he had been looking for. Indeed, they were more than he had been looking for: he had the bites, and she had the pallor, and they looked very pleased with one another. They didn't care who knew. Was this a couple gone overboard? Or were these the normal effects of a visit to the agency? He watched them

kissing, touching the bites together, talking; and felt a surge of envy that turned his stomach cold, forced bitter saliva into his mouth.

"I *know* we've missed each other at the Kingswood. And I don't *think* I've seen you here before."

She looked about nineteen. Round features, pointed chin, dark eyes, curly mahogany hair tied back. She looked very like Darlene, one of his favourite fantasy characters, who he had not seen in... six months? Yes, she was very like Darlene, including the direct gaze with the spark of devilment. A woman who would give you a very, very hard time, even if she wasn't a vampire. But you would never be bored.

"No. You haven't."

"So where did you get that? Or *those*, I think." She nodded at the crook of Wesley's left arm. Wesley's sleeve was dark-blue cotton and the cuff was down at his wrist. She could not possibly have seen the Band-Aid. "The Scott's the main place in London, isn't it?"

"I -" Normal mental service was suspended while an alternative version of his adult life ricocheted around Wesley's skull.

"You hadn't heard of it." Mild surprise. "Where *have* you been, then?"

Wesley shrugged. "Here and there."

"A private operator?" Distinct disapproval. "You don't look like the type."

"What does the type look like?"

"Unreasonably indignant in its coffin. What are you drinking?"

Her name was Sarah (she said). She told him about the bar: the protective spell, the host's precognitive sideline, the bartender's strengths and weaknesses, the theme nights. As they talked about L.A., about London, about moving to L.A., about films and books and Minnie Driver, she added an unobtrusive commentary on the regulars, usually as they arrived or stepped up to sing. Wesley knew about four songs that he had found a second place in L.A. where he felt at home.

"This is from... three days ago?" Sarah's hand had already been on the bartop, she had simply moved it the few inches to bring her fingers lightly but precisely on top of Wesley's wound. Wesley nodded. "How much did you give your vampire?"

"Fourteen ounces."

"Then what do you say to booking a room with me at the Kingswood for five weeks' time? Any type of room you want."

For a long, long time, Wesley could only stare at her, overwhelmed not by surprise, but by the intensity of his longing. He was aroused, but more than that, every drop of his blood was urging him towards her, yearning for a future that he could see so clearly. He had to clear his throat before he could speak. "I can't."

Mildly: "Why not? We both know that you *know* what you want. And I have to assume that you're not getting it from whoever gave you that, or you wouldn't *be* here."

"No, but -" He sighed and swallowed. "I'm still seeing him. If he - He - I don't know what he'd do." Apart from giving Wesley his second firing in a year.

"You're afraid of him?" She had absorbed the pronoun without a ripple. "Has he got you -"

"Believe me, that's *not* the problem."

"Then it doesn't need to stop you. I would have thought."

Wesley shook his head. "It's more than... I work with him. I want to carry on working with him. Neither of us could cope if - I can't. I'm sorry. I've been wasting your time."

"Normally a hanging offence, but I'll let you off with a caution. Working with your vampire? That's a new one. But you didn't come here tonight specifically to waste my time. Did you?"

"I'd only just heard that this existed. He's the only vampire I've ever been with. I wanted to know more. If it was just him or..."

"Well, I think you know, now. But you knew the second you clocked Stuart and Natasha over there. So there was something else. You weren't having second thoughts until just a minute ago."

"I hadn't thought it through. I hadn't realised that he would know. I'm sorry."

"So am I." She stood up. "If things change with this work of yours, you can find me through the Kingswood. Are you going to bring him here?"

"I don't know." Unwise to assume anything of life with Angel Investigations.

"Then I'll leave you alone if I see you in here again. I enjoyed talking to you." Wesley watched her leave.

He forced himself to make his drink last until the end of the song, then summoned all of his powers of casualness for the walk to the men's room. He imagined the Kingswood, imagined showing her his scars for the first time, and found that he didn't need to imagine beyond that.

* * * * *

Experiment 16 was conducted a week after they moved into the Hyperion. Wesley had no anxieties, either before or during, about dealing with the sex; he simply had to push his thoughts about the Kingswood to centre-stage, rather than trying to keep them quiet in the wings.

Wesley was very glad that Angel had moved out when he had, and not, say, a month earlier. If it had been earlier, he might still be trying to give the experiments a fair chance, he might have convinced himself that his disenchantment could be explained entirely by the domesticity, and that he would recover, given time. Add to that Angel's unaccountable and growing regard for the detestable Gunn, and Wesley would have committed himself indefinitely.

But now... He did not care. It did not matter. He had made his choices, his life was now almost simple, and he regretted nothing. Should he be feeling depressed, frustrated at having to turn his back on the Kingswood? That would have been the obvious reaction, one he would have predicted for himself at most times in his life, but instead he felt elated. He had discovered, in the space of a few hours, that his response to Angel had been only a faint annotation on the map that showed the hiding place of his true tastes. And he had broken the seal and opened it to the light, and it had not controlled him, either through fear or shame or desire. He thought it was fascinating, an understanding to be treasured, but it was also unimportant, and he had stowed it with the rest of his luggage and moved on. He was free.

He was still waiting for inspiration on his excuse, but that was also unimportant. The moment or the idea would arrive, and he would recognise it.

* * * * *

Wesley chose the method for Experiment 17 as soon as he got home from Experiment 16. The number out of the salad bowl was 2: Angel to choose the procedure, with at least 24 hours warning that he would have to choose. Assuming that Angel would want to refer to the logbook, Wesley would have to carry on writing up the experiments.

Wesley had set himself a date for giving Angel the warning, but by then Angel's behaviour had become very strange. Wesley would have required at least a week of Angel at his most tame and predictable in

order to be able to dismiss the near-throttling, so it took only a few more days of bizarre sleeping patterns and disorientation for him to give up on any ideas about a firm date for Experiment 17.

When they finally found out that it had been Darla in Wolfram and Hart's box and could make some better-informed guesses about Angel's state of mind, Wesley felt as if he had had an especially lucky escape with Experiment 17 and the move to the Hyperion. If it *had* been a month earlier, if it had still mattered to him... He might have ignored all of the signs of danger, might even have decided that the experiment would help Angel get back to normal. And the result might have been very unpleasant indeed. The matter of the excuse had become more urgent. It wasn't likely that Angel would bring up the subject of the experiment, not at the moment, but it wasn't impossible, and Wesley wanted to be prepared. He wanted to be sure that their next conversation about the experiment would be their last.

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"I'm stopping the experiment. Because of Virginia. I wouldn't be able to explain fresh bite marks to her." He had told her that the scars were years old, a legacy of his initiation as a Watcher. If she was surprised or interested, she hid it very well.

"Already know enough about vampires, do you?"

"Can you ever know *enough* about anything? I know *more* now, at least."

"You're just giving up? We can't even be halfway through."

"The situation's changed. I think I'm allowed other priorities."

"What about -" A long silence, then a heavy sigh. "Oh, do what you like, Wesley. You always did, anyway. Go and - Plan for what you're going to say when you change your mind again."

"You can wait for that if you want. But the best sources suggest that you will grow old in the process."

No glow, but a grudging smile, soon simply a smile. "You're right. Forget it ever happened?"

"Yes. Thank you." With a fervent nod: "*Thank* you."

Angel returned the nod, then sat down again in the armchair and took up the drawing pad and pencil from the side-table. "OK, Wesley." Wesley closed the door behind him, and went downstairs to continue the contingency planning with Cordelia.

The End