

# The Assistant

by  
Witling

## Part One

Basically, the world's about to end again, and this time Wesley doesn't have the language comprehension skills to stop it. There's a scroll that has to be translated in order for a spell to be cast, but the scroll's in Sayvu, a language with no known speakers on this plane. He has almost no texts; there hasn't been a demand. In desperation, he contacts the Council.

The conversation is brief, staticky, tinny. For some reason, transatlantic calls to Council extensions always are; it's as if centuries of being hidebound and intransitory have stalled even their phone lines in the early part of the century. But as it turns out, they've got someone. A specialist, or the nearest thing to it-- someone who's studied with native speakers. There's an interdimensional language exchange program now, apparently. It takes a minute for that to filter through Wesley's exhausted, panicked brain. They must have upped tuition since he was in training. He doesn't ask

questions, though--he hands the phone off to Harmony and lets her arrange the details. In the meantime, he buries himself in the library, under piles of vellum and paper and the occasional cured skin. At some later point, Harmony beeps him.

"He'll be here tomorrow."

"Is that the fastest you could manage?" He sits with a sheaf half-lifted in one hand, calculating as he speaks. Three days till the rifts meet. Not enough time.

"He's in Tokyo--apparently that's where the portal is, or something. In Tokyo it's already tomorrow. Or...yesterday." Harmony sounds doubtful, and he can imagine her turning to Google.

"Fine." Tomorrow will have to do. "Send him in as soon as he arrives."

"Okey-dokey, boss."

Wesley bends his head again, and tries to forget about the clock.

Some time later--tomorrow, he supposes--the door to the library opens and Wesley looks up to see a ghost standing there. Not a literal one. Just Xander Harris. He's not dead or reported dead, but for some reason Wesley thinks of him as belonging to a long-gone era. It's bizarre and disorienting to see him standing in the doorway, wearing a sloppy-looking jacket and carrying a duffel bag. He's taller now, or something. Maybe just thinner. He looks old. They all must.

"Xander." It's instinct to be polite, to stand up and shake the man's hand, ask him how he's been. Instincts like that are little luxuries he can't afford right now. "Why are you here?"

Xander raises his eyebrows and lets his duffel bag fall. "You called, I came. Or, you know. They sent me."

Wesley's brain has spent the last thirty hours in overdrive, parsing and reparsing, cutting back to mysterious roots, attempting to tease out conjugations. As a result, it simply swings free for a few seconds, and Wesley himself sits in a trance, his fingertips pressed to the table in front of him. Xander lets the silence stretch out. He's uncomfortable, Wesley realizes finally. Of course he is; there's been some kind of mistake.

"I'm sorry," he says, trying to kickstart his brain by returning to basics. "There must have been a mistake. Who sent you?"

"The Council. Noel Corrigan, actually."

"Noel Corrigan." Corrigan's in charge of staff development, isn't he? "Why did he send you?"

Looking very unsure of himself, Xander says, "The Sayvu thing? You needed someone for the Sayvu...hey, listen, if you've already got it covered, I'm happy to go grab a room at the Best Western--"

"The Sayvu thing," Wesley repeats. "No, I don't have the Sayvu thing covered, Xander."

There's another awkward pause. Xander is looking around the room, at the long tables filled with books and papers and desperate scribbles on little slips. The detritus of a man trying to build a language from the faintest impression of an outdated blueprint.

"You know Sayvu," Wesley says, because the fact is coalescing for him now. "You're the specialist they sent."

"Hey, whoah, I wouldn't say 'specialist'. I'd say, um, more like, 'intern'." Xander gives him a quick, sideways smile.

"That's what Noel said, at least. And I'm pretty happy to stick with Noel on this one."

"I don't need an intern," Wesley says, trying not to get angry. It's not Xander's fault, and there's no time for anger anyway. "I need someone who can read the language, and possibly write a few lines. Can you do that?"

Xander gives him a bleak look. "Not really."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I can order two beers and a burrito, but you don't want me reading through your lease."

Wesley looks down at his hands. Carefully, he makes himself let go of the pencil he's gripping, and set it on the table. When he looks up again, Xander is looking more apologetic, and a little spooked. For the first time, Wesley wonders what he looks like, himself. He's been in here for two days. He hasn't slept. He's barely eaten.

"I'm sorry," Xander says. It's simple, plain, not glib. He's older now, and there's some hope in that. Or maybe he'll just die older, like all the rest of them.

"So am I," Wesley says, looking down at his own notes. His eyes are starting to fail; his handwriting blurs in front

of him. He pinches the bridge of his nose to steady things. "Would you like to stay here in L.A. for the next few days? Or I can ask Harmony to arrange for your return to Tokyo. If you go back through the portal, you may avoid dying with the rest of humanity."

"Back through--?" Xander gives him a strange, wide-eyed look. "Uh, no thanks. I don't think I'll be doing that."

"I understand." Wesley reaches for the phone, his mind already cycling ahead to the next thing--there are companion languages, dialects he hasn't tried yet, for comparison. "There are rooms upstairs; I'll have Harmony arrange for you to stay there."

He looks down to hit the button, and notices from the corner of his eye that Xander is running a finger over one of the scrolls.

"Please don't touch--"

"I think this is wrong."

Wesley hesitates, then sets the receiver down and walks over. Xander is looking at one of the later transcriptions, and at Wesley's notes beside it. Wesley looks at it too.

"Actually, that's one of the few things I'm fairly sure is right."

Xander's finger runs up the grammar tree on the scroll, and his other hand runs down Wesley's notes. He looks up. "I think it's--" Then he gargles.

It takes Wesley a second to realize that Xander's just spoken Sayvu, and to get past the brief, absurdly happy firing of scholarly synapses about those long-lost glottals. The world is ending, he reminds himself. He looks back down at the tree.

"Spell that," he says, frowning.

The upshot is, Xander stays. The gargle was indeed a mistake, right at the root of the tree, which has balled up two days' worth of work. Wesley needs an assistant to fetch and carry while he feverishly undoes everything he's done. Xander's capable: fast up and down the ladders, strong enough to hoist the books. He lost an eye somewhere along the way, Wesley remembers vaguely, when he has a spare second to think. It doesn't seem to cause him much trouble.

Angel and Spike get back after midnight, smoking slightly. They smell like ash and bile and burnt metal. There's dark

blood in the shoulder of Angel's coat, and they both look exhausted.

"Xander," Angel says flatly, past being surprised or polite.

"Hi," Xander says, barely looking up from the book in front of him.

"Thought you were dead," Spike says, without apparent irony.

"Nope."

"Any progress?" Angel asks Wesley, already on to the next thing. Wesley shakes his head, then shrugs.

"Xander has some facility with spoken Sayvu, which is helping. But I'm still very unsure about most of the forms."

"Xander knows Sayvu," Spike says flatly, slumping back against the wall and letting his hands rest on his belt buckle. Tipping his head back, he asks the ceiling, "Did we die back there, and I just didn't notice?"

"How long?" Angel asks, his eyes dark and steady on Wesley's.

Wesley shakes his head.

"The rifts are getting bigger," Angel says, turning away.  
"Do something about this, Wes."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder."

He walks out, and Wesley rubs his forehead. He's beginning to feel dizzy. He should tell Harmony they need more coffee. Or food. He's afraid to eat too much; he's relying on hunger to keep him awake. But they haven't eaten all day.

"Sayvu," Spike says, pushing off the wall and letting himself fall back against it, shoulders first. "Where'd you learn Sayvu, Harris?"

"On their plane." Xander flips a page and frowns. "It was...an exchange."

"What'd they send in exchange for you?"

"Actually, it didn't work out too well." Something in his tone makes Wesley look over; he looks a bit abashed, a bit upset. Well, the Sayvu have never been considered one of the more hospitable demon races. It doesn't matter right now. All that matters is the translation.

"I'm shocked." Spike takes a cigarette out of his pocket, produces his lighter, and spins the flint without lighting it. "So you two've been in here all day reading to each other, have you? Nice work."

"Spike," Wesley says.

"Better than fighting Risgoth demons in Chinatown, at least."

"Spike, Harmony has a message for you. From R&D." Wesley glances over at Xander's table, and adds, "Xander, I need that Imroth."

"Unless they've researched and developed Risgoth repellent, I don't bloody care." But Spike shoves off the wall and takes himself off, which is a relief. Xander delivers the Imroth, then goes back to his own table and resumes conjugating. Wesley opens the Imroth to page 382, the page he already knows he needs.

They have twenty-seven hours to apocalypse, and he plans to be awake and at work for all of them.

## Part Two

They make it through that one, just barely. Xander knows enough spoken Sayvu to growl and burble Wesley into the right branches of the grammar tree, and Wesley knows enough remotely-related languages to take it from there. Twenty-six hours later, his cell phone tells him in Angel's parched voice that the rifts are closed and the tissue is connecting again. Wesley looks up to see Xander hovering at the head of the long table, watching closely.

"It's all right." He puts the phone down with a bizarre sense that he's letting it float away into midair. He's days past exhaustion. "We've--they did it. We did it. It's all right."

Xander sits down on the edge of the table. He's still wearing the clothes he arrived in, in more or less the same condition. His duffel is still on the floor by the doorway. "It's okay?"

"It's okay," Wesley says again. Everything feels breakable. He rubs a hand over his jaw and feels the soft bristles. A shower would be good. Bed. Would be good. "There are guest rooms upstairs. I'll show you." It feels inhospitable to have Harmony do it, after the last two days. They almost died together, after all.

Xander drags his duffel along behind them, like a dog. In the elevator, he gives Wesley a sideways look.

"I...don't usually smell like this. Just so you know."

"Not to worry." Wesley is rank too, he realizes--his shirt feels stiff beneath the arms. "You did very well, by the way."

Xander doesn't smile, just gives Wesley a flat, expectant look, as if he's waiting for something. You can see the difference between the eyes now. The false one isn't bloodshot.

"So I can stay?" he asks.

Wesley's caught off guard. "Well...that would be up to Angel, I suppose."

"For the internship," Xander says, realizing that Wesley isn't following him. "Noel sold this as an internship, remember?"

"Of course. Well, but we're not really set up for interns, Xander. And I'm not sure what exactly you'd do--"

"Me neither," Xander says, with forced cheer. "But I figure it's gotta be better than whatever the Council would dream up for me."

Wesley pauses. He's too tired for this. And his loyalties are divided beyond meaning. "Your experiences with the Council haven't been...positive?"

Xander just looks at him. Wesley finds his gaze drawn to the artificial eye, and looks away.

"The Council has its flaws," he says to the elevator door. "Believe me, I understand that. But the fact is, we're often in crisis mode here, and we don't have time to supervise an intern."

"Okay," Xander says. "I get that."

They stand there for a couple of seconds in silence, while Wesley's brain torments him. Xander was genuinely helpful. There's no question that Wesley could have performed the translation alone; in any right-thinking world, Xander would be a hero now, carried about on people's shoulders. It's only the fact that they save the world almost weekly that makes him seem expendable. That's wrong.

"On the other hand, I could use an assistant. Temporarily. Perhaps." He's not sure why he's saying it, or what's happened to the notion that Angel should decide this matter. Xander shifts and says nothing. "You have fighting experience, as well--"

"Not so much," Xander says quickly. "The eye." He makes a quick, head-ducking gesture that conveys impatience and embarrassment. "Fucks with my ability to get punched in the face."

That calls for a very small pause, which Wesley allows. The elevator comes to a halt.

"I'm sorry," Wesley says, as the doors open.

Xander just shrugs, and waits for Wesley to lead the way. The guest rooms are down to the left, so he goes that way, feeling as if he's walking on someone else's legs. He's in no condition to make decisions, or promises.

"Bibliographic duties, then. And linguistics. Do you have other languages, besides the Sayvu?"

"A little. Here and there. Mostly the naughty stuff."

"I'll have to clear it with Angel, of course. But a temporary arrangement, say six weeks, shouldn't be hard to manage. This should do."

He stops by the first of the guest room doors, and pushes it open to peer in. It's clean and made up, unlike his own rooms, which are a disaster of abandoned glasses and paperwork. Briefly, he considers taking the next room over and simply falling face-first into the sheets.

"Looks great," Xander says, heaving his duffel through the doorway and looking around. "And...whatever you can do. I appreciate it."

"It's the least I can do," Wesley says. "Sleep as long as you like. Harmony can arrange breakfast when you're ready." He should probably say more, but he's half-asleep on his feet, so he braces a hand on the wall and rotates himself to go back to the elevator.

"Wesley," Xander says. Wesley turns back, prepared to agree to anything. A small business loan, a spare limb, fine, just for God's sake let him sleep. Xander is standing by the bed, running a hand through his choppy hair, looking sheepish.

"Yes?" Wesley says.

"I'm sorry I was such a dick to you, back in Sunnydale."

Was he a dick? Wesley has no idea anymore. He raises an eyebrow.

"I called you a lipless wonder," Xander says. He's exhausted too, Wesley realizes. Neither one of them knows what they're saying.

"I called you a berk," Wesley says, to even things out. "But not to your face."

"And when I look that up, I'll be retroactively pissed."  
Xander sits down on the edge of the bed suddenly, as if his legs have just given out.

"Good night," Wesley says. "Sleep well."

"Will do," Xander says, and collapses.

### **Part Three**

During the calm period that follows, Xander makes himself as useful as he can, which is either not very useful or quite admirably so, depending on your point of view. He does minor custodial work--straightening papers, reshelving books--and filters the bulk of the mail that comes Wesley's way. He's a secretary of sorts, Wesley supposes. Considering how much of a secretary Harmony is not, it's probably a good thing he's around.

He wasn't lying about his languages. He has bits and pieces of several things, most of them human, none of them remarkable except the Sayvu. High school Spanish, a passing acquaintance with Angolan Portuguese, a smattering of a Bantu dialect. He works at getting more.

When he's not chatting with Harmony or shooting hoops gamely (and with terrible aim) in the gymnasium, he sits at the long table in the library and studies. Wesley politely disguises his surprise at the sight, until it becomes so familiar that it doesn't surprise him anymore.

He never feels like he gets Xander's backstory quite in place. Xander doesn't offer much information, and after a few attempts to pry, Wesley recognizes the rebuff for what it is, and leaves it alone. He gets this much: after Sunnydale, Xander went to work for the remnants of the Council. He traced African Slayers for a couple of years, then gave that up for reasons he declines to explain too clearly. He went into Council service, took a rank-and-file job with a pension. Someone still had to open doors and answer phones, and for some reason, that's what he did.

It seems like a strange decision, for some reason. Wesley realizes that he thinks of the Sunnydale group, the former Scoobies, as celebrities. They seem larger than life, too big for L-shaped desks and rolling chairs. But even heroes need to retire. Look at Gunn and Fred, with their house in the suburbs and little Jasmine almost two now. When's the last time either of them checked in on the status of the good fight?

"Well, that's bloody depressing," Spike says, finishing his whiskey off in a single shot and signalling for another.

"God, at least when you used to be an entertaining punter. Now you're just a punter."

"A punter with a 401K," Xander says morosely, rubbing his eye. It bothers him from time to time, a fact that both Wesley and Spike notice and neither of them mentions.

"So how'd you get shipped off to the Sayvu?" Spike asks.

"CC the wrong person on the office porn spam?"

Xander just sits there rubbing his bad eye, the good one closed, as if because he can't see Spike, he can't hear him either. After an uncomfortable minute, Wesley clears his throat and starts, "I've been thinking of trying a new vendor for some of the incunabula--"

"It was a pilot program," Xander says, pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes and holding them there, then letting them fall. His expression is studied, as if he's taken a moment to think about this, and decided what he ought to say, rather than what he wants to say. "It was actually supposed to be kind of a cool gig."

Spike snorts and nods at the girl who gives him a new glass of whiskey.

"Noel asked me to do it," Xander says, looking at Wesley for the name recognition. "They wanted someone who had lots of experience with demons. And the Africa thing--they figured if I could handle Africa, I could handle the Sayvu."

"Funny thing about the Sayvu," Spike says to his whiskey. "It's not Africa."

"No kidding." Xander laughs without humor. "The Sayvu took the whole language exchange thing very literally. Except they were thinking less 'language' and more 'tongue'."

There's a pause, while Wesley and Spike frown at Xander, then at each other.

"Meaning what?" Spike asks.

"Meaning," Xander says, "that pretty much as soon as we showed up, they ripped out our tongues."

Wesley doesn't move. All of a sudden, his whiskey tastes sour.

"My God," he says, after the decent moment has passed. "That's--Xander, I'm sorry."

"Thanks." Xander drinks his whiskey.

They all sit there for a minute, processing that information. Wesley can't keep his brain from pointing out the obvious double horror--Xander has already lost an eye to violence. Losing a tongue as well is past horrific and well into a special, Wildean kind of hell.

"So what happened?" Spike asks finally, never one to let common decency interfere with curiosity.

Xander studies his glass, and again Wesley has the impression that he's developing his script, deciding how much to say. "We came back. The Council grew me a new tongue. Took about six months, and I still can't whistle."

"Just you?" Spike's watching Xander narrowly, like a gull scavenging for scraps. "Sounded like it was more than just you."

"There was a chaperone. He bled to death."

That shuts even Spike up, at least for a few seconds. A Fyarl demon takes the stage, and the intro to *Faithfully* starts up from the karaoke machine. Xander finishes his whiskey.

"And you say I'm not entertaining," he says, and spins his glass toward the edge of the table. Spike catches it before it falls, and raises his hand to the waitress again.

"This one's on me," he says. He won't meet Wesley's eye for the rest of the evening.

Xander fits into the routine, in a low-on-the-radar kind of way. Angel doesn't have much to do with him. There's bad blood there, and an apparently mutual agreement to tolerate each other in silence. Angel's busy anyway, running the business and saving the world, or select portions of it, at least. There hasn't been an actual threat of apocalypse for ages now.

Six weeks pass, and Wesley notices but says nothing. Neither does Xander. For a week or two Wesley has the sense that Xander's treading carefully, holding his breath, waiting to be sent packing. But by now Wesley can't really see doing it. He enjoys the Friday evenings at Caritas, the three of them drinking in the corner booth, talking over the week and telling stories about whatever strikes them. Spike tells good stories, Wesley has discovered. Sometimes Lorne stops by, never too busy overseeing his small business empire to spend an evening with old friends. Wesley is surprised to realize

that he misses Lorne. He misses a lot of things about those days.

It would be better if Angel came too, but he doesn't. He's the CEO now, he hasn't got time to drink pointlessly and talk about what's past. Since letting Connor go, he doesn't have time for a lot of things. He's in pain, Wesley knows. But he's made it clear he doesn't want pity, or help. Or anything.

It's Tuesday, the eighteenth of May, six forty-five pm. Most memorable of days, in retrospect. Wesley looks at the clock, frowns, and puts a slip in the book he's using. Standing up makes him feel about eighty years old.

"It's late. You should finish up."

Xander looks up at the time, registers surprise, and frowns. "I'm on a roll here. I think I'll keep going."

"If you like. But we have an early meeting tomorrow, with the Waskin people." The Waskins want to donate their tablets, but only if they get visiting rights. It's a headache.

Xander frowns, glances down at the book in front of him, then makes a back-and-forth weighing gesture with his shoulders. "I'll risk it. I think I'm about to have a breakthrough on the past perfect, here."

"Fair enough." Wesley pulls his jacket off his chair and heads for the door, rolling his shoulders. "Lock up when you're done, please."

"Jawohl, mein Fuhrer."

Smiling slightly, Wesley goes out, closes the door behind him, walks down the hall, and takes the elevator up to his rooms. He heats chicken cacciatore in the microwave, and eats it in front of CNN, with a beer. He reads three chapters of a Peter Ackroyd novel. Then he brushes his teeth, sheds his clothes, and goes to bed.

Later that same night, Angel misplaces his soul.

It's not his fault--it's never his fault, Wesley reminds himself later. It's Darla's fault, or the Master's, or the Devil's, if there is one. But this time it's really just dumb coincidence. They don't find it out for almost a month, but it's actually the Council's fault.

There's been ongoing research into the souling of vampires for years now, with all practical experiments conducted in a heavily hexed coven meeting house just

outside of Tunbridge Wells, England. The hexes are there to prevent any of the theoretical work affecting the real world. At eight fifteen Wednesday morning in Tunbridge Wells, one of the researchers suffers a stroke in the middle of a de-souling project aimed at increasing knowledge of the intrinsic relationship between soul and corpus. The stroke may have been enough to disrupt the hexes, or the researcher may have fallen outside the circle. Someone else may have rushed in to help. It doesn't matter. What matters is that the hexes are marred, and the spell is released into the world. And that Angel is the theoretical test model in that particular trial.

It all leads, far down the line, to more stringent guidelines and standards regarding testing procedures, but in the short run what it means is that Angel wakes up Angelus, that he leaves his apartment on the penthouse floor of Wolfram & Hart, and starts immediately for the White Room. The security videos show his progress, later. En route he meets no one--it's past midnight, the staff are all gone, and both Wesley and Spike have gone to bed.

When the elevator won't take Angelus to the White Room, he goes to the library. There are scrolls there, Wesley knows, and incunabuli and even books that, properly interpreted, would open the Room to him.

There is also Xander, still on a roll with his Fyarl studies at the end of the long table.

This is where the security tapes get gruesome.

He doesn't let on that he's Angelus, right away. You have to know him well to see the little alterations, and Xander doesn't know him well. They've spent two months avoiding each other, and years before that in different hemispheres. There's no reason for Xander to suspect that Angel has become Angelus--there's no apocalypse brewing. Angel's been moody lately. Abrupt and distant. And Angelus isn't wearing leather trousers.

Knowing all this, it's still hard to watch the tapes. *Come on, Wesley wants to say. For God's sake, wake up. Who do you think that is?*

"Xander," Angelus says.

Xander looks up.

"I need a hand with something." Angelus walks the length of the table, his gait betraying him. If you know him well. "Think you can help me out?"

Xander's frowning, pushing his books away, rubbing at his eye. "What time is it?"

Angelus pauses, savors the moment, then says, "Late."

Xander stretches and stands up stiffly, while Angelus sits on the table and watches him do it. It's like watching a great white shark eye a swimmer from below.

"So," Angelus says. "How about it?"

"How about what?" Xander starts stacking his books, his hair ruffled, his shirt askew. "How about ten solid hours of sleep? You've got a deal."

"I was thinking more along the lines of, you scratch my back, I scratch yours."

This is the moment when Xander starts to suspect, Wesley knows. He's watched the tapes enough now--he sees that momentary pause, that hesitation. But there's no reason to be suspicious.

"My back's not itchy," Xander says. But he doesn't walk out, because he's not sure. *Walk out*, Wesley tells him silently. *Just get up and walk out--*

"That's funny," Angelus says, standing up and walking over next to Xander. "Because you look like a man who wants to be scratched."

Xander stands there a second, then makes a break for the door. Angelus catches him easily by the arm, gets a hand behind his head, and slams his face into the table.

He takes the codex off the lecturn and drags Xander down the hallway to the elevator. When the elevator still won't take him to the White Room--Wesley never gave Xander that clearance, there was no reason to--he throws a tantrum in the hallway. Xander, just waking up, takes the brunt of it.

"Can we fast-forward this bit?" Spike asks, from the darkness next to Wesley.

Without a word, Wesley hits the button and they watch in silence as the tape skips merrily through the show. Xander jerks and writhes. Blood spatters the carpet--the same blood they've both seen, the blood Wesley asked janitorial to please remove.

"Why are we watching this, again?" Spike asks, propping his feet on the console and nibbling his thumbnail.

"To find them." Wesley doesn't look away from the screen, from Xander's curled, flinching form. He feels as though he might throw up. "We're looking for some kind of clue."

"You want a clue," Spike says, getting up and flicking on the light. "He'll send us one pretty soon." Off Wesley's skeptical look, he shrugs and says, "He's a psychopath, remember? He wants to be caught."

That's too blithe for words, and not even accurate, but as it turns out, it's also right. It's not really surprising that Spike knows Angelus that well, Wesley reflects later. They have over a hundred years of family between them. Wesley could have predicted what his own father would have done in the circumstances, too.

As it turns out, Angelus calls. In the middle of the day on Thursday, on Wesley's cell phone, from his own. It's bizarre to see Angel's name come up on the screen.

"Hey, Wes." He sounds pleased with himself. "It's Angel, just checking in."

"You're not Angel." Wesley motions to Spike, who stands up and looks alert, but doesn't have much else to do.

"Where are you?"

"I just had to take a little time away from the office. You know. Stress." There's no background noise--he could be anywhere. "I borrowed your assistant, hope that's okay."

"Is Xander all right? Put him on."

"Wes, hey, come on. That's kind of harsh, isn't it?"

"If you hurt an innocent--"

"I mean, I know he's not that bright, and he's not really your type, but you don't have to say *that* about him. I mean, he tries, right?"

Spike has better ears, so without saying a word, Wesley holds the phone out to him. Spike leans forward over the desk and listens in silence, his brow furrowed. Wesley hears a tiny, tinny Angelus-voice say, "Wes? Hey--Spike. How are things, Spike? You know, you could teach this kid a few things about Fyarl--"

"Yeah?" Spike listens intently, not saying much.

Angelus says something else that Wesley can't make out, and then Spike's eyes widen slightly. The call disconnects.

Wesley takes the phone back and stares at the screen.

"What did you get?"

"He's near a freeway," Spike says. "And Harris is...alive."

"Did he talk to you?"

Spike looks away. "I heard him."

Wesley stores that away for further nightmares, and stays on target. "Did Angelus say anything useful?"

Spike shakes his head. "He's playing games. With all of us."

"I'm aware of that," Wesley says tightly. "That isn't what I asked." It comes out sharper than he means it to, and leaves an obvious silence behind. Spike keeps his eyes down, his jaw muscles tight.

"I'm sorry," Wesley says finally, dropping the phone on the desk and covering his eyes with his hand.

"I'm...tired."

"Me too," Spike says. They look at each other. The phone lies silent between them.

## **Part Four**

Angelus calls three more times over the next five days, and each time Wesley puts Spike on to listen for clues. Angelus knows they're doing it--he can tell when Spike's on, because he can't hear Wesley's breathing anymore. Each time he calls, he lets Spike hear that Xander is still alive. But nothing else, no way of knowing where he is. It's agonizing.

On the third call, all he says is, "The Pair-a-Dice Motel, Wes. Just outside Reno, on 80. I'm leaving you boys a little something."

Xander is curled under the sink in the bathroom, in a blood-soaked T-shirt with the neck ripped open, a pair of stained and torn khakis. His feet are bare. His skin is chalky. His blood has pooled against the edge of the bathtub, because the floor isn't even. To Wesley's first glance, it looks about an inch deep.

He's already lowered the crossbow--fatal mistake if Angelus is still here, but as it turns out he isn't, he's on the other side of the state by now--and taken a step into the bathroom. He should check for a pulse; there's still a chance. There's a first aid kit in the car. But the color of Xander's skin exerts a freezing power, and after that first step Wesley just stands there, staring. No one alive can be that pale.

"Get back," Spike says, pushing Wesley aside and half out of the room. He kneels down in the blood and pulls Xander's right eye, the good one, open with his thumb. It strikes Wesley as a grotesque, unnecessary gesture.

"What are you doing?" His tongue feels numb and clumsy.

Spike doesn't say anything. He studies Xander's eye--white, off-angle, staring--then lets the lid go and pats him gently on the cheek. Xander's face is bloody and bruised, but not unrecognizable. It's what Wesley finds himself staring at, instead of the throat. The room smells strange, he realizes. Like an abbatoir.

"Come on," Spike says, still patting.

"Spike," Wesley says, saliva rushing into his mouth. "Stop it." He's going to throw up.

"Come *on*," Spike says, and slaps Xander once, on the cheek.

"For Christ's sake," Wesley says, and then Xander rolls his head to the side and lifts his hand. Carefully, woozily, as if he's just coming out of a long, drunken sleep.

The pieces assemble in Wesley's brain, and for a brief moment he wonders how he could possibly be so stupid, after all this time. Then he thinks, *I really am going to throw up.*

He walks quickly out of the room and does it in the little white gravel bed by the parking lot. It only takes a minute. Then he wonders if he's going to fall down, because the world is dark and weaving, full of the rushing of cars on the freeway and the fat battering of moths

against the lamp above his head. He stands there with one hand braced against the rough stucco, trying to catch his breath. It seems to take a very long, lonely time.

Finally he feels able to go back in without disgracing himself, and he does it. Spike is sitting on the bed, alone. There's blood on his hands and knees. The bathroom door is open, and through it Wesley can see that Xander's still in there, lying on the floor.

Spike looks pensive, as if he's trying to do a very difficult maths problem in his head.

"I'm sorry," Wesley says, wiping his mouth with his free hand. He's still got the crossbow in the other. "I...I don't know why I did that."

"Because you're not a monster," Spike says, but it doesn't sound like much of a compliment.

They stand there in silence. After a moment there's a faint sound of movement from the bathroom, and Wesley's stomach heaves again. He swallows hard.

"What do we do?" he asks.

"I don't know," Spike says.

They look at each other, obliquely. It's ironic, Wesley thinks. He's spent so many years becoming independent, becoming someone who can run things competently and without supervision, who can make decisions and call the shots. And now, when he knows exactly what has to happen next, he can't make himself say it out loud.

Absurdly, he misses Angel.

"I can--" he says, but that's not the way to say it. He lifts the crossbow and takes a deep breath. "I'll do it."

"Hang on," Spike says.

Wesley stands there with the crossbow lifted, waiting. Spike stares at the floor between his feet. After a minute he starts sorting through his pockets--the old, familiar hunt for cigarettes. It's irritating, at a time like this.

"What?" Wesley asks. "You know what we have to do."

"No," Spike says. "I don't." He finds his cigarettes in his back pocket, pulls one out of the packet, and frowns because it's bent. It takes him a couple of seconds to straighten it out, rotating it gently between his fingers. Wesley watches him, frozen like the tin woodman.

"You want to use that?" Spike asks, nodding at the crossbow. Wesley glances at it and grimaces.

"For God's sake, Spike, how can you ask me that?"

"Seems like you're pretty ready to, that's all."

"Do you think he'd want me to do anything else?"

"I think if you go in there and ask him if he wants a piece of wood jammed through his heart, he's going to say no thanks." Spike pulls his lighter out of his jeans and strikes the flint, lights the crumpled cigarette, and drags deeply. As an afterthought, he holds the packet out to Wesley.

"Smoke?"

Wesley stares at the packet. Spike waggles it. "Take the taste of puke out, at least."

With a sense of things becoming rapidly more surreal, Wesley takes a cigarette. His hand is trembling. Spike has to dance the lighter around to catch up with him.

They smoke for a couple of minutes in silence. In the bathroom, there's a soft dragging sound.

"The important thing," Spike says, with greater force in his tone, "is not to do anything stupid. Angelus's playing us."

"I'm aware of that," Wesley says dully.

"Right, so we play him back. Don't do what he expects."

A tide of frantic disbelief is rising in the corners of Wesley's mind, and he recognizes it as hysteria. He's a hair from breaking into yelps of laughter, or just yelps. Grimly, he forces it back down.

"I hardly think," he says, "that strategy figures in to this situation."

"That's where you're wrong," Spike says, pointing a finger at him. "With Angelus, strategy always figures in. He expects us to stake Harris. So I say we don't."

"And do what instead?"

Spike takes a long drag of his cigarette and regards Wesley narrowly. "Take him home."

Wesley forces himself to look at the bathroom. Xander's managed to pull himself a few inches further in, as if he knows what they're talking about and is trying to escape.

"I can't believe we're discussing this," Wesley says, standing up. He has to do something--if he doesn't do something he's going to yell, or hit Spike, or throw up again. "He's been turned, Spike. The conversation is moot."

"I was turned too," Spike says. "I think that makes it pretty bloody far from moot."

Spike was turned too, and so was Angel, and for centuries they murdered and pillaged and brought agony to innocent people. But here he is in a substandard motel room, outside Reno, Nevada, smoking a cigarette with William the Bloody. And somewhere out there, Angelus is still at large. Doing God knows what, to God knows who.

"He might be able to help us," Spike says, as if he's had the exact same thought as Wesley, at exactly the same moment. "And frankly, I think we owe him one."

Wesley stands there holding his crossbow and his cigarette, feeling sick, wishing for home.

Spike loads Xander's unresisting body into the back of the car. Wesley wipes up the mess as well as he can, with the hotel towels. No point in traumatizing the housekeepers.

They drive for L.A. with the needle holding steady at ninety, and by the grace of God, they aren't pulled over on the way.

## Part Five

There are holding cells in the basement of the building, designed for demons of various sizes and strengths. They put Xander in one. Spike carries him in, folded over his shoulder like a sack of oats, and lays him carefully down on the bunk.

"We should give him some blankets," Wesley says numbly, from the door of the cage. He's got the crossbow ready, in case of surprises. Xander's barely moved since Nevada, but he's conscious now. When Spike puts him on the bunk and steps back, he lies there for a few seconds, then lifts a hand and slowly feels his own face.

"He needs blood," Spike said, studying Xander with a critical eye. "If we want him to talk, he needs to eat first."

"I'll see what's in the stores." Wesley trudges off to the refrigerators, some part of his brain still stuck on repeat: *I'm getting blood for Xander Harris. Xander Harris is a vampire.* He's passed through several kinds of shock on the drive home, and by now he's well into self-blame.

Xander Harris survived to adulthood on the Hellmouth. He lost an eye to evil, and a tongue to stupidity. Who knows what he saw in Africa, what made him give up the field and ask for a desk. And after all that, he still died. Because he was using the library. Because he was there late that night, instead of Wesley.

It's pointless to think about it, and so of course he does, over and over, from different angles. He's still weeks from learning about the incident in Tunbridge Wells, the bizarre non-reason for Angel's transformation. Taking two pints of blood from the refrigerator and checking their dates, he wonders what he missed. There must have been a portent of some kind. Souls don't just go missing.

He takes the blood back to the cages, and finds Spike sitting on the bunk with his back to the door, a hand on Xander's shoulder. Xander's eyes are open, and he's staring at the ceiling. It's a scene from an emergency room--the friend comforting the injured party. But in this case, the injured party is well past dead, and there's no comfort to be offered.

"I found these," Wesley says, hesitating at the door to the cage. For some reason it feels intrusive to enter. Perhaps because he's the only one here with a heartbeat.

Xander's eye rolls sideways and down, until he can see Wesley standing there. He blinks.

"Hi," he says. His voice is paper-thin, barely viable. It's disturbing to see the throat wound move when he speaks.

"Hello," Wesley says. Then there's nothing else to say, except *I'm sorry*. But it would be the demon he'd be apologizing to--Xander himself is gone. So there's no point.

"Let's have it, then." Spike turns halfway and holds out a hand, and for a moment Wesley thinks he's been crying. Or close to, at least. That's surprising, and he tosses the blood bags without thinking. Spike catches them and turns away. "This bit's not going to be pretty. I'll come find you when we're done."

That's an uncommonly polite dismissal, and Wesley frowns. "I don't think it's safe for you to be alone here."

"I'm not alone," Spike says.

"With him, I mean."

"It's safe," Spike says.

"How do you--"

"Angelus's still running around out there, isn't he? Better go do some research."

"Are you sure?" Again, Wesley has the strange sense that he's an extra, an uninvited guest. That's absurd, given that he and Spike are now the only two people who can bring Angelus to bay.

"I'm sure," Spike says. He lays one of the blood bags down on the floor, and raises the other to his teeth. "Off you go."

Wesley lingers a moment, then walks alone down the darkened hall to the elevator.

"Did you find the surprise?" Angelus asks.

Wesley sits gripping the phone, seeing nothing, his mouth clamped shut. Somewhere in front of him, Spike is smoking a cigarette. He can smell the smoke. Shouldn't do that in the library.

"The crackerjack surprise," Angelus says. "The gooey center of the Tootsie Pop. Did you get it?"

"We got it," Wesley says. His throat is dry, it's hard to make words. He can see again now; Spike's standing up from his chair, his face fixed, reaching for the phone. Wesley frowns and doesn't hand it over.

"What'd you think? Pretty great, huh?"

"I think you're a sadistic fucker."

"Wes!" Angelus laughs. "Language, Wesley. I'm shocked."

"I can't imagine why. It's what you want to hear, isn't it?"

"Can't say I'm disappointed, that's true. But it's not really the language I'm after, Wes. I'm more interested in the way you breathe when you're really wound up, like right now. Sounds like...well, it kind of sounds like how you sometimes get when you remember you're in love with me."

"We're going to find you."

"I love to hear that little pitter-pat, you know? It's a great feeling, being the object of unrequited affection."

"You disgust me."

"When I'm not turning you on. So tell me, what'd you kids do with the piñata? Or should I ask, who got to whack it with the big stick?"

"This conversation is over," Wesley says, and hangs up.

Spike's still standing there with his hand out, a look of faint disbelief on his face.

"Keep looking," Wesley says, going back to his book. Spike sits down slowly and goes back to his pages.

After a minute Wesley picks up the phone and checks the call registry. It wasn't Angel's cell this time; its battery must have died. It was an L.A. number.

Down in the basement, there are two flattened blood bags on the floor of the cell, looking disturbingly like organ meats. Xander lies on the bunk on his back, one hand over his throat, staring at the ceiling. He needs a bath, Wesley realizes. A change of clothes. It's not humane to make him lie there in the clothes he died in.

"Did he say anything else?" Spike asks, rolling his forehead against the bar in front of him. He hasn't been without a cigarette since they found Xander's body, it seems. The one dangling from between his fingers now is almost half ash. The smoke is a blue thread to the ceiling.

Xander rolls his head from side to side on the mattress. When he swallows, the throat wound makes a wet clicking sound and Wesley flinches. "I don't...remember."

"Nothing about where he was going? Did he mention anyone he wanted to see?" It was hard to imagine who Angelus might want to visit, but any lead was a start. The phone number had been a dead end, unlisted. Probably a cell phone he'd stolen. Wesley tried to stop thinking there.

Xander rolls his head again, his eyes still on the ceiling. As Wesley watches, Xander frowns and seems to concentrate--his face slowly melts into demon. He blinks at the ceiling and tests a finger against his own fang. Then the demon subsides, and he's just Xander again. Covered in blood and bruises, but Xander.

"Please stop doing that," Wesley says. Spike looks at him.

"Why?"

There's no good answer to that question, except that it's making Wesley ill to watch it. So he turns his back, taking a careful step away from the cage bars.

"If you can think of anything at all," he says to the empty cage along the far wall, "it could help us. Did he have any maps? Did he seem to be on any kind of timeframe?"

"No." Xander swallows again; Wesley hears it, and winces.

"He's going to go for the White Room again," Spike says. "We know that much."

"He must know he hasn't got a chance. I doubled the protections as soon as we knew what happened." Wesley pauses. "We'll discuss that later."

"Discuss what later?"

"I don't think it's wise to talk in front of...Xander." It's strange to call him that--it feels as though he should say something else now. 'The demon,' or 'that soulless monster masquerading as our friend.'

Spike is giving him a sharp, unfriendly look. "Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why shouldn't we talk in front of him?"

Wesley stands there with his mouth ajar, trying to order his thoughts. "Spike, Xander has been turned. Angelus is his sire. There's every possibility that he would betray us and use whatever he learns here to help Angelus."

There's a brief pause while both Spike and Xander look at him. Xander actually lifts his head an inch off the mattress to do it.

Then Spike gives a sharp, barking laugh, and drags hard on his cigarette, knocking its ash to the floor.

"Oh, that's rich," he says. "That's brilliant. God, sometimes I wonder how any of you lot ever make it past Go without getting your head staved in."

Xander lets his head drop back onto the mattress, and fishes with his free hand for the deflated blood bags on the floor. Wesley watches blankly, not sure what he's supposed to say.

"Angelus," Spike says, very slowly and very clearly, "spent three days torturing the poor bugger, then ripped his throat out."

"I'm aware of that. Thank you."

"Hey, Harris." Spike doesn't take his eyes off Wesley, and for the first time Wesley notices that there's something knife-sharp in Spike's gaze. Something more than just grief and anger for a friend. "Angelus shows up here tomorrow, you going to give him the keys and show him around, bring him a nice canapé platter?"

There's a ghastly wheezing sound from the bunk; after a moment, Wesley realizes Xander is laughing. Bitterly, miserably. His fingers find one of the spent bags, and lift it slowly up to his mouth. He stops laughing to suck out a few last drops of blood.

"Still hungry," Spike observes, dropping his cigarette and crushing it with his heel. "I'll go see what's left."

"Angelus tortured Drusilla," Wesley says, knowing it's a bad idea but needing to make his point. "He drove her insane, then turned her, and she never wavered in her devotion to him. He tortured you, too."

"And I hate him."

"How do we know Xander will be like you, rather than Drusilla?"

"You could ask him," Spike says simply, and walks away.

## **Part Six**

"There's a great deal I don't understand about this process," Wesley says later, when he and Spike are sitting at the long table in the library with the bottle of whiskey between them. Library rules are a thing of the past--Spike smokes over ancient manuscripts and Wesley doesn't blink. Somehow he can't bring himself to care about sole copies anymore. And they both need the whiskey.

"There's almost nothing you understand about this process," Spike corrects him, but his tone is muted now. They're both exhausted, which is part of it. But they've also had some time apart, a few hours to shower and eat and think in private about what's happening. Wesley's abandoned a few more of his certainties, and Spike appears to notice and appreciate that. It makes things easier.

"Xander's weakness," Wesley says, as a for-instance.

"Why isn't he stronger?"

"Half-starved. And still leaking when we found him. He'll be better tomorrow, with that blood in him."

"Will he be hostile?"

"Would you?"

"What I mean is, will he be dangerous? Is it safe to keep him in the cage?"

Spike shrugs. "Don't go walking in covered in shaving cuts, but he should be all right. The cage'll hold him."

Wesley thinks about that for a while--Xander testing the cage, trying to escape from it. It's a bizarre, horrible image. Xander still looks like a friend, after all. You can't see the demon unless he lets you.

"Why isn't he bound to Angelus? I thought that when a vampire sired a person, there was a...link of some kind. Like family."

Spike gives him that level, blue-eyed gaze, the one that says, *You are not very bright*. "You get along with your father, Wesley?"

Wesley purses his lips. "I understand. But...I have obligations to my father. Don't you?"

"Don't have a father." Spike smirks without enthusiasm, and spins his glass with his thumb. "But if I did, I might consider that my obligations ended when he ripped my throat out."

"Indeed." Wesley takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes. "He seems...well, he still seems very much like Xander Harris."

"Bingo," Spike says. "But from now on, you don't go near him unless I'm there too."

At four a.m., Wesley admits his limits and goes to bed for a few hours. At seven he wakes up in a cold sweat. He goes to his office and checks the security cameras. Nothing is amiss. They've cut the staff to skeleton, in order both to keep prying eyes out and to protect as many people as possible if Angelus returns. The cameras show empty hallways and cubicles.

The camera on the cage shows two bodies in the bunk, spooned and still.

Wesley studies the image in silence for several minutes. He's not sure what to make of it--he can't shift his paradigms fast enough to keep up. A week ago, the sight of Xander and Spike in bed together would have been laughable, inconceivable. But there it is in front of him. Idly, his brain wonders whether he's seeing simple

comfort, or something more. Idly, his brain tells him that of course it's something more. It's whatever dead men have in common, once they've passed through that gate and met on the other side.

Finally he turns away from the computer and goes to find a cup of coffee, because his brain is still idle but it won't shut up, and he doesn't want to hear any more about the twain never meeting.

"And then what?" Wesley is sitting in a metal folding chair, the crossbow discreetly laid behind him on the floor, trying not to feel sick. He could use a cigarette, but he's the only one here whose lungs still actually need to function, so he's the only one who doesn't get to smoke.

"Then he beat on me some more." Xander takes a long drag on his own cigarette, as if he knows what Wesley is craving, and wants to rub it in. "Messed up that carpet something fierce."

"Arizona," Spike says, just to clarify. "You're sure."

"Saw the phone book on the bed, yeah."

"Why the hell was he in Arizona?"

Xander shrugs. "Voted number one state to be a bug-fuck psycho asshole in?"

Wesley frowns. "He was buying time, that's all. Drawing it out."

"Or that," Xander says mildly, flicking ash to the floor.

"He got some pretty serious joy out of calling you guys up every other day."

"Like I said," Spike says. "He's a psychopath."

"And he's loose," Wesley reminds them. "Xander, anything at all that you can remember--"

"About being tortured, murdered, and turned into a vampire? Let me plumb a little deeper, yeah."

"Don't be a dick," Spike says.

"I'm a dick? Me? I'm the guy who got abducted doing his homework, remember? You want to talk about a dick, let's talk about the guy I worked for, who left me manning the desk alone with a psycho on the loose--"

Spike reaches over and smacks Xander across the mouth with the flat of his hand. It's not that hard, but it's sudden and sharp, and Xander shuts up. He sits giving

Spike a sullen look, one hand massaging the corner of his lip.

"And don't be a poof, either," Spike says. "Barely touched you."

"Dick," Xander mutters. Spike ignores him.

Wesley realizes he's sitting on the edge of his chair, his muscles tight and strained, his hands in fists. It bothers him that Spike's in the cage with Xander, even though he has no doubt that if Xander tried anything, Spike could easily squash him. The blood's brought Xander around a great deal, but he's still weak. He's also a brand-new vampire, and Wesley knows from experience that new vamps are mostly show. So it's probably safe enough that Spike's in there, but it still makes Wesley nervous.

He has the distinct sense that of everyone in the room, he is the one with the least understanding of what's going on. It's not a pleasant sensation.

"We may have to accept," he says, "that Angelus left no clues. Or at least none that Xander can provide us with."

"So, what?" Spike leans back in his chair and puts his feet up against the edge of Xander's bunk. He's acting, Wesley realizes, as if nothing has changed. As if Xander is still a mutual friend, a colleague, a drinking partner. No, he's

not. He's acting as if Xander is something more than a friend. Something far more familiar and intimate than a friend. "So we give up looking?"

"If we have no clues," Wesley says, "we have no way even to begin looking."

"Locator spell?" Xander says. "Hello?"

"We tried that immediately. When he took you from the library, he also took a codex with a large number of wards in it. He must have used one."

"Shit." Xander smokes moodily, still thumbing the corner of his mouth. "Where's Willy when you need him, huh?"

"Too right," Spike says, and the two of them share a brief, rueful smile.

It's ridiculous for Wesley to ask who Willy is. It's also ridiculous to feel left out of Spike and Xander's conversation, when it so clearly doesn't figure. In fact, it's ridiculous for him to be there at all, so he picks up his crossbow and goes back up to the library and tries again to find the answer. To anything.

## **Part Seven**

"Clothes," Wesley says unnecessarily, handing them through the bars. "And to clean up..." He has a bottle of hot water from the tap and a stack of soft towels. They're too big to fit between the bars, so Spike walks over to the door and punches in the combination, shielding it from Xander with his body.

"I could use a shower," Xander says, without much hope. He hasn't bothered to get up off the bunk; it's hard to imagine him trying to force his way out. Still, Wesley feels a frisson as long as the door's open, and relief when Spike closes it again.

"Later," Spike says, without specifying exactly what that means. "Here." He tosses the clothes over, and Xander catches them neatly. The movement of his hand is fast and accurate. Wesley remembers watching Xander try to shoot hoops, once upon a time. He'd been awful.

"I don't know if it's what you'd prefer," he says, stepping away from the bars. "I just took what I found first. If there's something you'd rather have--" He can't imagine going [back up](#) to Xander's room again right away, but he still feels he should offer. It would be unbelievably childish to let his own emotion stand in the way of any small comfort for Xander.

"Nah," Xander says. "This is fine." He yanks his shirt off over his head, and for a moment Wesley just stares at what's beneath. Xander's side and back are a mass of bruises and welts. He looks like he's been beaten within an inch of his life. Which is a ridiculous thing to think, when in fact he's been beaten well past that. Wesley's throat closes up, and he turns away.

"Here." He can hear movement, little exhalations of effort and pain, the creak of the bunk, clothes falling. The cap comes off the bottle. He can't turn around just yet. His vision is blurring. And it seems wrong not to give Xander some privacy while he washes. Spike isn't intruding, he's helping. Wesley knows that without looking, because he's starting to understand some of the broad outlines, even if the details still escape him.

"A shower isn't out of the question," he says hoarsely, hating himself. How noble of him, to offer the dead man a shower.

"Later," Spike says again. "This'll do for now."

"Easy for you to say," Xander says. "You're not the one smelling like three days inside a dead horse. I could-- goddammit, ow."

"Sorry."

"Take it easy on the flesh wounds, will you?"

"Any more blood in the fridge, Wesley?"

Wesley comes back to himself, trying to remember.

"I...don't know. I'll go and see."

"I'll take whatever you've got," Xander says. "Because frankly, if we're thinking Angelus is going to show up here again sometime soon? I want to get back on my feet a little faster than this."

That makes Wesley turn around. Xander's standing with one hand clamped to the cage bars, holding himself upright. He's naked. His clothes lie in a crumpled, blood-stained heap at his feet. It's easier to look at them, as awful as they are, than it is to look at his body. His body is a garish record of everything Angelus did to him. Dried blood and bruises and little cylindrical burns, cuts that look as if they were made by a razor in a patient hand, strange dents where no dents should be.

"You're gonna have to feed another quarter into the slot," Xander says, ignoring the fact that Spike is swabbing dried blood off his belly. "The show's not free, you know?"

"I'm sorry," Wesley says automatically, dropping his eyes.

"I'll see what kind of blood we have left."

Walking away, he hears Xander say in a low, conversational tone, "I could get used to this, you know?"

"Hold on," Spike says grimly. "This bit's going to hurt."

There's nothing left in the fridge but a few pints of ferret, which Spike dismisses as the weak tea of mammal blood. "Like drinking rat."

"Mmmm," Xander says, from his bunk. "Rat."

Wesley puts in an order for delivery, goes to the library, and stares blankly at the wards he can't figure out how to counter. After a while he gets up and wanders through the halls to his office. On the security camera, he can see Xander sitting on his bunk with his back against the bars of the cage, facing Spike. Spike is sitting in the metal folding chair, his feet on the bunk beside Xander. They're both smoking. Xander appears deep in thought. As Wesley watches, Xander's face shifts from human to demon, then back. Spike doesn't seem to notice.

Wesley checks the security logs, finds nothing unusual, then goes to the labs and collects a needle, a length of

tubing, and a blood bag. Lying on the examination bed while the blood feeds into the bag, he tries to see what he's been missing. There must be something. There always is.

When it comes to him, he sits bolt upright and feels a wave of dizziness. He's still bleeding, he realizes. Stupid.

It only takes a minute or two to disengage from the bag, clean the puncture, and seal it with a neat wad of gauze and a strip of tape. Then he picks up the bag, barely noticing its disturbing warmth, and starts for the elevators.

"This is for Xander," he says, passing the bag through the bars. Spike takes it, starts to hand it to Xander, then stops short and pulls it back. "Spike, I need you in the library." He's already turning to go, his mind running ahead of his body.

"Hang on," Spike says, staring at the blood bag. "This is--"

"Library," Wesley says, walking away.

"That wasn't very bright," Spike says, pulling out a chair and surveying the books Wesley has pulled to the long table. "Last thing we need is you keeling over with Angelus in the lobby."

"I have an idea," Wesley says, walking back to the table with the second volume of Ffolkes in his hand. "Will those cells downstairs hold Angelus?" Spike frowns. Wesley hands him the Ffolkes and says, "Page one hundred and eighteen."

Flipping pages, Spike says, "Not much room at the inn, down there."

"There are several empty cells. Would they hold him?"

"In theory, yeah." Spike spins Ffolkes around and pushes it across the table to Wesley. "But who's going to put him in there?"

"He is," Wesley says.

Semper and Riegel's Fifth Achievement is a complicated glamour to cast, but with Wolfram & Hart's labs and library to call upon, it's also remarkably quick. They use

some items from Angel's apartments to focus the illusion--a glass taken from his night table, a few hairs from the carpet. There's a tenth-century astrolabe in stores that Wesley takes no pleasure in burning, given that it's irreplaceable and quite beautiful. When the ashes are cool, he says the words over them and seals them in a clear glass vial with the elevator key.

"Abracadabra," Spike says.

The waiting is the most difficult part, in a way. Wesley sends everyone home, even the security staff, and weakens the wards on the main entrance. Not too much, not enough to cause suspicion. Just enough to make that the easiest way in. To stack the deck in their favor.

"What if it doesn't take?" Spike asks, lighting yet another cigarette and staring at the bank of security screens. They're all empty except for the one trained on the cage in the basement. Xander's in his bunk, unmoving. Asleep, or lost in thought.

"Then we seal the building," Wesley says, more calmly than he feels. "In fact, I'll be doing that as soon as he enters. We're not letting him loose again."

"So we get sealed in with Angelus."

Wesley doesn't bother to answer that. He's adjusting camera angles, not because there's any need but because there's nothing else to do.

"Don't love this plan," Spike says, fidgeting with his lighter and staring at the screen showing Xander's still body.

"Then give me something better."

Silence.

He arrives around midnight, straight through the front doors without hesitation, the weakened wards snapping under the force of whatever he's cast on himself. It makes the security screens jump, but doesn't blow them out, thank God. It also sets off the little alarm clock Wesley's spelled into the system, the one on the long

table between him and Spike. They both sit bolt upright and stare at it.

"Angelus," Wesley says, and shoves his chair back.

They go straight to the security consoles, and spend a taut few seconds searching the screens for any movement.

"There," Spike says, pointing at the main hallway, down on the first floor. Angelus is just walking into frame. He smiles up at the camera, and sketches a little wave. He's heading for the elevators. "Seal the building, right?"

"It's already done," Wesley murmurs, staring at the screen. The moment the wards over the main entrance were broken, the no-exit policy fell into place. The only way for Angelus to leave now is for Wesley to remove the policy. He has no plans to do that.

"Right," Spike says. "When does he start seeing things funny?"

"He already is," Wesley says, watching Angelus pause at the elevators, study the panel, and hit the call button. He's pressed the down button.

"Could be just doing something new. Something we don't expect."

"Yes. He could be."

The elevator arrives, and Angelus waves good-bye to them on the lobby camera, then steps inside. He smiles up at the camera in there, fishes something out of his pocket, and holds it up so they can see what it is. It's a key.

"What's that?" Spike asks.

"A key to the elevator," Wesley says. "To take him to the White Room."

"Where'd he get that?"

"I have no idea." Wesley leans closer to the screen, as if that will help make the next few seconds more bearable.

"It doesn't matter."

"It'll matter if he uses it," Spike says.

Angelus puts the key into the elevator slot, turns it, and presses a button. It's the button for the basement level. The elevator door closes, and the car starts down.

"He's going to notice he's going down," Spike says.

"It doesn't matter," Wesley says again. "It's part of the glamour."

"You know that, or you think that?"

"I know that," Wesley says, with more conviction than he feels. In fact, he doesn't know it, and he watches Angelus with his fingers wrapped tightly around the edge of the table, unable to make himself let go. If it doesn't work, and they really are sealed in here with Angelus... He doesn't want to think about that.

The elevator stops at the basement level, and Angelus grins up at the camera. *Hi*, he mouths.

"Sound?" Spike asks.

"Not in the elevators."

"What about in the cages?"

"Yes."

This is it, the moment that will decide everything. What is Angelus seeing, when the elevator doors open?

Impossible to say. If the glamour works, he sees a long hallway leading to a single door. Not what the White Room actually looks like, Wesley knows, but appearances aren't fixed. If Angelus thinks he's used his key correctly, he should believe he's in the right place, no matter what it looks like.

The elevator doors open, showing a slice of the basement hallway. Angelus pauses a second longer, then steps out. Spike cranks the knob on the basement sound.

There's no carpet down there, so they sit listening to Angelus's footsteps walking slowly down the hall toward the cages. He should see only one door. Nothing else. Not the empty cells he walks past, not the metal folding chair, not Xander sitting on his bunk in his own locked cage, watching Angelus approach.

"Fucking sadistic," Spike says, watching Xander's screen.

"He's in no danger," Wesley says. "Angelus can't reach him as long as he's in the cell."

"Angelus doesn't have to reach him."

"Just a few more seconds," Wesley says, keeping his eyes on Angelus's screen. That's all they need. Angelus walks straight down the hallway without speaking, without pausing. He walks past Xander's cell. Xander shrinks back against the bars.

"What did you tell him?" Wesley asks, not looking up.

"That Angelus wouldn't see him. And that if he did, I'd get down there."

"You can't go down there."

Spike chooses not to answer that. They both watch Angelus pass Xander's cell and continue on to the larger cage at the end. The door to that one is ajar, but not locked. Angelus stops in front of it. The camera only shows them his back.

"Wes," he says, "it's been great working with you all these years. Looking forward to bringing you into the family, just as soon as I take care of a little business with the Powers."

He opens the door to the cage, steps inside, and swings it shut behind him. The lock engages with a loud click.

On the table between Wesley and Spike, the clear glass vial cracks in two.

Angelus stands stock-still for a moment, then whips around and throws himself against the door of the cell. It sounds like a large animal being hit by a car. The bars don't bend or break. He does it again, and again, and again.

In his own cage, ten feet down the hallway, Xander tries to disappear into his sheets.

"Wesley!" Angelus is bellowing, game-faced, bull-like.  
"Spike!"

"Turn that down," Wesley says, nodding at the volume control. His palms are sweating, and he feels clammy all over. He pushes off the table and starts to collect his things.

"It worked," Spike says, in a tone of mild amazement. He dials the volume down, so they can't hear the things Angelus is shouting at them. "Actually fucking worked."

"Yes," Wesley says. "And now we have to decide what to do with him."

## **Part Eight**

"I've got to hand it to you, Wes, that was clever." Angelus runs a finger along the crossbar and examines it for dust. "I'm going to have to kill you for it, but still. Pretty clever."

"You're not going to kill anyone," Wesley says, not bothering to look up. "You're going to shut up and play nicely, or you're going to start losing body parts."

Angelus laughs. "You're turning me on."

"Think he's serious," Spike says to Angelus. "You might want to shut your gob for once."

"It's going to be interesting," Angelus says, "seeing what happens when I turn you again. I mean, can a vampire *be* turned? I figure there's a fifty-fifty chance you'll lose the soul. Or you'll just be dust. Hard to say."

Wesley opens the holy water and tosses a dash across Angelus's hand and wrist. There's a curl of blue smoke, and Angelus yanks his arm back with a snarl.

"You were saying?" Wesley holds the bottle ready, at face height.

Angelus holds his hand tight to his chest, his eyes yellow and hateful. For a moment Wesley has the distinct impression that he's being marked for death. Oddly, it doesn't worry him. It's starting to feel old hat.

"Sorry," Angelus says, smiling and lowering his gaze to inspect his hand. "I forgot who was in charge for a minute."

"Sit down," Wesley says. "And shut up."

Angelus strolls to the back of the cage and hops onto the bunk. He blows on his knuckles, his expression cheerful.

Wesley goes back to his book, looking for counters to some of the wards Angelus may have cast on himself. It's easier work with Angelus physically in the room, but there are still so many he can't be sure about. And there's something about Angelus in the flesh, something he'd forgotten or blocked from his memory. He has a way of putting everyone on edge, of making it hard to think straight, even when he's just sitting quietly. Especially when he's just sitting quietly.

"So what happens next?" Angelus asks, in an elaborately civil tone.

"Next," Wesley says, "we sort out what happened to you in the first place. Or rather, what happened to Angel."

"Can't help you there. I just woke up and found I had a serious urge to rip some throats out." Off Wesley's look, Angelus raises his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm trying to help, Wes."

"Then shut up," Spike says. Quite sensibly, Wesley thinks.

"Is it just me," Angelus says, "or does it seem like one of these things is not like the others?"

"What?" Wesley marks his place with his finger and looks up. Angelus is smiling.

"Everyone here's family, Wes. Except for you. That must feel kind of weird. Kind of like, I don't know. Being the only one in the room who doesn't speak Chinese."

"I don't speak Chinese," Spike says flatly.

"You used to."

There's a faint sound from behind them, and Wesley jerks around before he can catch himself. It's just Xander, shifting a step to the side, trying to get a better view of what's going on. He's standing with his forearms on the crossbar of his cage, his hands hanging through the bars. He looks a little better now, a little stronger. His face has some color, and the bruises are fading. His throat's healed considerably.

"Now that," Angelus says, pointing at Xander, "is unexpected." He looks at Wesley. "Did you notice that he's a vampire now, or should I go ahead and point that out?"

"We noticed," Wesley says, through gritted teeth.

"So what's the plan there? I'm curious, because frankly, you got me with the glamour, Wes. Obviously." Angelus taps the bar behind him without rancour. "You got an extra soul kicking around that you're gonna shove down his throat?"

"Perhaps," Wesley says, staring at the page in front of him. There's no harm in trying the counter-ward that he's looking at, so he puts the book carefully down on the chair, makes the motions, and mutters the words beneath his breath. Angelus shivers, then smacks the side of his neck, as if he's been bitten by an insect.

"Dammit, Wes. A little warning next time."

"Not if I can help it." Encouraged, Wesley goes back to the book and flips the page.

"Getting late," Spike says. "What next?"

Angelus assumes a listening posture. Wesley checks his watch, then closes the book, puts it on the chair, and drags the chair a few more feet from Angelus's cage.

"We'll discuss it upstairs."

"Oh, come on," Angelus says, leaning forward. "I won't tell."

"If you do anything to upset Xander while we're gone," Wesley says evenly, "I'll stand at a safe distance and shoot you with bolts dipped in holy water, until you beg his forgiveness."

There's a brief pause. Angelus looks impressed.

"Wes," he says, "I think you're finally catching on to how this works."

"Come on," Wesley says to Spike, and starts back toward the elevator. Spike hesitates, then follows. As they pass Xander's cage, Xander reaches out and grabs the shoulder of Spike's shirt. It's not an attack; it's a plea.

"It's okay," Spike says, not looking too certain. "Won't be for very long."

"Don't leave me down here," Xander mutters. His eyes are fixed on Angelus, Wesley notices. Angelus waves brightly. "Please don't leave me down here with him--"

"Xander," Angelus says. "Son. You wound me."

Wesley turns and raises the crossbow, and Angelus puts one hand over his own mouth, the other raised innocently.

"Let go," Spike says, shaking his shoulder free. "I'll be back in a little while. Just don't talk to him."

"Please," Xander says, more quietly and more urgently. He looks at Wesley. "Wes. Come on. Please."

For a moment, Wesley looks at Spike, wondering if they can chance it. But Spike won't look back, won't open that door.

"I'm sorry," Wesley says. He turns and heads for the elevators, and Spike follows. There's silence from the cages behind them, until the doors of the elevator are almost closed. Then Angelus starts to laugh.

"Don't like leaving them down there," Spike says, as they walk quickly down the hall to the library.

"Oh, really?" Wesley asks. "I think it's wonderful. It fills me with joy."

"It's fucking heartless, for one thing."

"Spike." Wesley stops with his hand on the library door, and takes a deep breath. "I understand that your

relationship with Xander has...changed. And that you feel strongly for him. But we don't have time for niceties."

The stony look Spike gives him is fairly eloquent, Wesley has to admit.

"Xander is my friend as well," he goes on. "And I feel responsible for what's happened to him. I have no intention of allowing him to be hurt any more, if I can help it. He was a good man."

"Still is," Spike says. Wesley just looks at him, and Spike looks down and amends, "All right, still could be."

"But at the moment he's a vampire without a soul, and that means we can't have him walking around loose."

"Leaving him tied up next to Angelus, though, that's not going to help anything."

"Tell me where else we can contain him, in this building."

Spike shrugs. "Vaults, probably. Not that that's any better, all alone in a vault. Just another way to make him go crazy."

"Right, so unless you want to chain him to your wrist for the foreseeable future, our course is clear."

Bizarrely, Spike looks thoughtful. Wesley raises a finger in retraction. "I wasn't serious."

"Throw a few chains on him, he might be all right."

"We can't afford to take a chance."

"I'd keep an eye on him."

"You have other problems. We both have other problems."

"What?" Spike raises an eyebrow. "Angelus's in the can, isn't he? Now it's just following the trail, figuring out what happened, how to fix it. You can do that."

"Not by myself."

"I can help, sure--won't matter if I've got Harris on my wrist for that stuff."

"We can't have him listening to everything we say, Spike. It isn't safe."

"Why, because he's going to run and tell Angelus? Were you downstairs five minutes ago? He can't get far enough away from the bastard."

Wesley shakes his head. "It doesn't matter, Spike. I won't agree to it."

"Toff," Spike snaps. "Bloody glacial fascist toff. Got your tie knotted so tight you can't feel a fucking thing below the neck."

Taken aback, Wesley doesn't know what to say. He drops his gaze and opens the library door to go in. Spike walks away down the hall without another word.

They're in over their heads, and the sensible thing to do would be to contact the Council, call for reinforcements. But Wesley's tried the sensible thing, and nobody's picking up. The phone rings and rings, then patches through to the general voice mail. It's strange and disturbing, although it turns out in the end to be nothing more than a temp on the front desk, who's set the foreign incoming line to spiral into the ether. The Tunbridge Wells incident hasn't been reported to the head office yet; in London, everything operates peacefully and in blissful ignorance.

With a sense of things unraveling around him, Wesley pulls books from the shelf. Bufwulder, Ranganathan, the Raven King, anyone he suspects might be able to help him figure out what to do with the warded, soulless

master vampire in his basement. Or the hapless, newly-vamped former friend down there with him. The one who is no doubt currently being terrorized into psychosis. Spike is right, it's a bad idea to keep the two of them in proximity. But it's a worse one to let Xander out of the basement. If he got loose, if he injured anyone else--the Xander Harris that Wesley used to know would rather suffer.

Spike comes back in, heaves a delivery cooler onto the table, and starts unpacking blood bags.

"I'm sorry I called you a toff," he says to the bags, before Wesley can say anything.

"It's...all right," Wesley says. "You're right, it's a dismal arrangement."

Spike unpacks all the bags, checks their dates, then packs them all back into the cooler and puts the lid back on.

"So, what's the plan?"

"As you said, it's mainly research. We need to learn what happened to Angel in the first place, and try to recapture his soul. If that's even possible. I have a call in to the Council, and I'm doing what I can with this library, but..." He shakes his head. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Xander needs to eat," Spike says. "I'm going to take him some blood."

"That seems dangerous," Wesley says immediately. "The situation is volatile enough--introducing blood into it seems like a very bad idea."

"And you were thinking of what, starving him?" Spike hoists the cooler and turns to go. "I'll keep my fingers and toes clear."

"Spike." Spike doesn't stop. "We still don't know what wards Angelus has cast on himself."

Spike walks out, letting the door fall shut behind him.

With a mounting sense of frustration, Wesley grabs the crossbow and follows.

## **Part Nine**

The moment the elevator doors open, Wesley has the sense that they've walked into the middle of something.

The basement is silent, but the air feels electric. He's felt this same kind of tingle at boxing matches and in brawls. Anywhere violence was being done. He's never felt it in silence before.

Without thinking, he raises the crossbow, and Spike lifts an eyebrow.

"What, you thought they'd be practicing for the pub quiz?"

Wesley doesn't know what he thought, but now that they're down here, he feels underprepared.

Spike leads the way, the cooler up on his shoulder, like a man negligently carrying supplies to a picnic. For some reason he doesn't seem bothered by the charge in the air, or maybe he's just steeled himself against it.

"Here comes the cavalry," Angelus says, as they start down the hall. "That was fast."

"We're not rescuing anyone," Wesley says. "We're bringing blood for Xander. If you're lucky, I won't put a bolt in you for his lunchtime entertainment."

"No blood for me? Spike, hey, remember Budapest?"

"Here," Spike says, setting the cooler down beside Xander's cell and pulling out a bag. "Couple of these ought to make you feel better."

"I don't think you ever paid me back for that dinner," Angelus goes on, speaking to Spike's back. "And those were very well-endowed meals, if I recall correctly. Tell you what, you toss me one of those bags and I'll forget all about it."

"Come on," Spike says, pushing a bag between the bars of Xander's cage. "Just ignore him."

Xander is sitting in a small heap against the farthest wall of his cage from Angelus. He's in game face, but it's the most miserable game face Wesley has ever seen. His posture is textbook submissive. When Spike puts the blood bag on the floor in front of him, he looks at it but doesn't move to pick it up.

"Go on," Spike says quietly. "Take it."

"It's good for you," Angelus says. "You're a growing demon, Xander. You need your blood."

"Shut up," Spike says.

"I'm helping. Xander, hey, remember your first meal? You were pretty happy about blood then, remember? I

thought you were going to eat my arm off, you were so happy about it."

Xander reaches out and touches the bag with one finger.

"Ignore him," Spike says.

"Kind of took me by surprise," Angelus goes on. "I mean, you were the Slayer's right-hand man, and I have to say, you took the torture pretty well, so I almost expected you to spit in my face, you know? But when it came down to it, you sucked so hard I thought I was going to--"

Wesley raises the crossbow sight to his eye, at the same moment that Xander picks up the blood bag and whips it through the bars of his cage. It throws Wes's aim, and he knows as soon as he's squeezed the trigger that the bolt's slightly wide. Angelus knows it too, and simply pulls his body to the side. The bolt hits the wall behind him. The blood bag clips his shoulder and explodes.

Wesley keeps the bow up and his eye in the sight.

Angelus sits shaking blood out of his shirt with a look of faint disgust on his face.

"This was a good shirt," he says, with irritation.

"Please keep talking," Wesley says. His finger tightens on the trigger.

From the corner of his eye, he can see Spike staring at Xander, and Xander staring at the floor. There's some kind of stand-off going on down there, which is not good.

"I was only kidding," Angelus says. "You weren't the Slayer's right-hand man."

"Fine," Spike says sharply, like a parent concluding an argument with a child. He drops the extra bag back in the cooler and fits the lid back on. "Waste of time."

"You've gotta be strict with them," Angelus says. "Kids love boundaries."

"We're leaving," Spike says, hoisting the cooler and standing up.

"Must be hard," Angelus says. "You get a soul, you get a boyfriend, everything's great, then suddenly--" He makes a *phht* sound, and shrugs. "Boyfriend's soul goes right out the window. That's tough, Spike."

"I'll survive."

"You two make such a cute couple, though. You're like--" Angelus pauses, and Spike looks at Wesley.

"I thought you were going to shoot him."

"Mutt and Jeff," Angelus says. "Laverne and Shirley. Shari Lewis and Lambchop."

"I'll follow you," Wesley says, keeping his eyes on Angelus.

"He seriously thought you were going to find him," Angelus goes on. "Right to the end. That's love, Spike."

Spike is already walking away, back to the elevator. Wesley considers pulling the trigger a few more times, just for satisfaction, but that's a bad idea for several reasons. He walks backwards down the hall, never lowering the bow.

"I'm serious, Spike!" Angelus raises his voice as if Spike can't hear him all the way to the elevators. "This one's a keeper! You might want to reconsider that soul of yours!" The elevator is waiting; they step inside. Spike pushes the button for the twelfth floor, for the library. Wesley waits until the doors close, then turns the key to hold them there.

"Is that true?" he asks, trying to keep his breathing normal.

Spike's staring at the floor, fishing for his cigarettes in his back pocket. "Is what true?"

"You and Xander. Were you..." He doesn't quite know how to say it, he's so taken aback. "You were lovers?"

Spike gives him a startled look, then barks a laugh.

"*Lovers?* That's very nineteenth-century of you, Wes." He reaches for the key, and Wesley knocks his hand away with the end of the bow.

"It's very stupid of you," Wesley counters, "not to have told me."

"None of your business. Besides." Spike's expression shifts to the *You are not very bright* look. "Wasn't like we hid anything. You just never lift your head out of those fucking books."

"I'm sorry it didn't occur to me that two of my friends were having sex during off moments while we saved the world from apocalypse. I can't think why I was so blind."

"Me neither." Spike reaches for the key again, and Wesley knocks his hand away again.

"The point is not that you've shown astonishingly bad judgment, Spike. Although you have. The *point* is that Angelus knew, and I didn't, and if there's anything else I should know about, I'd appreciate your telling me now."

Spike makes a show of thinking it over. "Nah. Pretty much just the sex."

They stand looking at each other. Wesley changes his grip on the crossbow, because his hands are sweating. Spike pulls a cigarette out of his crumpled package, and straightens it moodily.

"Sorry," he says at last, flicking a bit of tobacco to the floor. "I've had a few things on my mind lately."

Wesley shifts his stare to the wall behind Spike's shoulder, and engages in a fierce internal debate. He's not afraid that Spike will try to lose his soul, as Angelus suggested. No matter how bad the timing, no matter how cruel the twists of fate, he can't see Spike doing that. But he keeps thinking of what he saw in the security monitor--the two bodies spooned silently in the narrow bunk. That, and what Angelus said about Xander's last hours. Once upon a time, a million years ago, he'd been in love with Winnifred Burkle. If he'd had to think of her waiting for him, trusting in him, and dying horribly anyway, it would have ripped his heart in half.

Spike reaches for the key again, and this time Wesley stops him with a hand.

"There are chains down here," he says, verifying. Spike looks puzzled.

"Yeah. Sure."

"Heavy ones."

Spike studies Wesley's face. There's a faint glimmer in his eyes, a look of growing understanding. "Yeah."

Wesley takes a deep breath, settles his shoulders, and hopes to God he's not being an idiot. "All right. We'll take Xander up with us."

## **Part Ten**

Riding in the elevator with two vampires, one of them unsouled, is more than a little claustrophobic. To his credit, Xander is clearly making every effort to seem harmless, to the point of pressing himself against the far wall and staring at the floor between his feet. Or maybe it's not for Wesley's benefit; maybe he's just that demoralized. Coming out of the cage, he almost tripped over his own feet, he was in such a hurry.

Spike stands holding the end of the Xander's chain, watching the numbers light up on the panel above the door. As if he does this kind of thing every day.

For the first time, it occurs to Wesley that Spike is handling things very well. Better than Wesley is himself. Especially considering...well, everything. He has a flash of Spike tearing into him outside the library, half-yelling into his face. It still stings, but at least it makes better sense.

The elevator comes to a halt and dings gently. Wesley's crossbow finger is starting to cramp.

When the doors open, Spike walks out and Xander falls in behind him without hesitation. There's slack in the chain, as if they've already worked out exactly how to do this. Wesley allows himself a moment to feel extremely odd, then follows them out.

They walk single-file to the library, Xander in the middle. Spike in front, the crossbow behind. Xander's still barefoot, Wesley realizes. He forgot to find shoes, when he went up to Xander's room.

"Right," Spike says, as he opens the door to the library and walks in. "Ground rules. First of all, nobody bites anybody. First person to bite gets a nice piece of wood right through the heart. Understood?"

Xander says nothing. Spike looks at Wesley, then back at Xander.

"Wesley understands," Spike says. "Do we all understand?"

"Yeah," Xander says, staring a hole through the floor.

"Yeah, I get it."

"Good. Don't think I'm joking, Harris."

Xander lifts his hand to scratch his nose. The chains clank.

"Well," Wesley says, laying the crossbow carefully on the table, "perhaps I'll get back to what I was doing."

"Rule number two," Spike says, looping his end of Xander's chain around the leg of the long table and taking the padlock out of his pocket. "No funny looks. No threats. No eyeing anybody's jugular. You get hungry, you tell me and I get you a bag. I see you thinking about drinking from the source, I drop-kick you right back downstairs."

Xander sits down slowly in a chair, and nods. He seems strangely subdued, almost preoccupied. He hardly seems aware of the fact that his hands are bound at the wrists, or that he's chained to the table. He doesn't even watch as Spike snaps the hasp home.

"Any other rules?" Spike asks, and Wesley takes a moment to realize that's directed at him.

"I suppose there's no point asking him not to use anything he hears against us."

Spike gives Xander a considering look. "Want to go back downstairs?"

Xander looks startled. "No."

"Then don't use anything you hear against us."

Wesley purses his lips and turns away. "Thank you."

"Read a book," Spike says, skimming a volume of Bufwulder across the table at Xander, who catches it automatically. "Make yourself useful."

Xander doesn't open the book, but sits with his hands on it, studying the room. His eyes are shadowed, and everything about him seems troubled and tentative. It's the room Angelus attacked him in, Wesley realizes suddenly. The room he was taken from.

"Perhaps Xander would be more comfortable in the offices," Wesley says quietly, catching Spike's eye.

Spike gives Xander a quick look, and shrugs. "Not safe to leave him alone. He'll get over it."

Wesley hesitates, then goes back to his end of the table and starts thumbing through pages. Spike opens his own book and props his head on his hand.

Xander scratches his nose again, and his chains clank.

Four hours later they're no further ahead than they were, and Wesley is beginning to recognize signs of exhaustion in himself. His eyes won't stay in focus, and his mind is wandering. It's foolish to keep on, so he shuts the book and stands up, wincing at all the aches.

Xander and Spike lift their heads in eerie unison, like dogs catching a distant whistle. Wesley clears his throat.

"I'm...I need a few hours of sleep. Will you be all right without me?"

Spike shrugs. "I could use a kip, too." He leans down, unlocks Xander's chain, and starts unwinding it from the table leg. "You should eat something. When's the last time you had a sandwich?"

Sorting papers, Wesley doesn't realize Spike is talking to him for a moment. Then he can't think of the answer to

Spike's question. Suddenly his stomach is a black and bottomless pit.

"You're right." He pauses, not sure what the social niceties are in this situation. "I'm sure Xander could use a meal, too."

"Cooler's in the hall," Spike says, wrapping the chain around his fist. "You going to throw it at anyone this time?"

Xander gives Spike a steady look that could not accurately be described as remorseful. Spike twitches the chain, which clearly means *stand up*. Xander stands up. It's disturbing.

"I'll be back here by ten," Wesley says, and walks out.

He goes to the break room and takes a cup of dehydrated noodle soup from the shelf above the sink. It takes less than a minute to microwave, while he draws a glass of water at the tap. He carries it all down the hall to the security room, and sits down wearily in front of the screens.

Angelus is sitting on his bunk, whistling *Danny Boy*. There's a dark spray on the wall behind him, which it takes Wesley a minute to recognize as the blood Xander threw at him. While he watches, Angelus reaches a hand

above his head and casually tests the strength of the crossbar. He pulls hard enough to lift his body slowly off the bunk. The bar holds. He lets go and examines his fingernails, still whistling.

With a shudder, Wesley checks the other screens. No movement on any of them, except for the one in the hall outside the library. Spike's standing watching, holding the end of the chain, while Xander sucks blood out of a bag. There's already one bag lying empty on top of the cooler. Spike's got a lit cigarette in his free hand, and an unlit one tucked behind his ear.

With a strange sense of guilty fascination, Wesley rests his forehead on his hand and watches them.

Xander finishes the bag and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Spike leans over and thumbs Xander's neck critically. He's saying something, Wesley realizes. He reaches for the volume, hesitates, then turns the dial.

"--looking better." Spike turns Xander's face to the side and inspects the throat wound, simultaneously dragging on his cigarette. "That scar'll be gone in a couple of days."

"Great. I can wear scoop necks again."

"You done?"

Xander folds the top of the blood packet neatly over on itself, drops it on top of the cooler, and nods. Spike takes the unlit cigarette from behind his ear and holds it out. It's strange to see Xander take it, strange to see him lean into the flame of the lighter and blow a stream of smoke toward the ceiling. Even with his wrists chained, he does it absently and comfortably. Wesley wonders if he picked it up in Africa, or somewhere else along the way.

"Come on," Spike says, transferring the chain to his cigarette hand and hoisting the cooler onto his shoulder. "We'll chuck these in the fridge and get to bed."

Wesley leans back in his chair, rubs the heels of his hands into his eyes, and drifts for a couple of minutes. The room is so dark it's like being in a velvet-lined coffin. It's restful. Finally he sits up again, picks up his fork, and starts in on the terrible noodles.

Angelus is walking the perimeter of his cell, inspecting the bars. Spike and Xander are in the elevator, heading upstairs. There's no sound in the elevators, but they don't seem to be talking anyway. They're standing on opposite sides of the car, the chain strung between them in a black arc. Spike is watching the numbers light up. Xander is staring at his feet.

They get out on Spike's floor, and walk down the hall to his apartments. He keeps hold of Xander's chain while he unlocks the door. Then he gestures Xander inside, and looks back over his shoulder, directly at the security camera.

For a moment, Wesley has the strange impression that Spike is looking straight at him. He leans back in his chair, heat flushing his face.

Spike goes into his apartment and closes the door behind him. Inside, he's long ago shut the cameras off manually. Nothing but black screens from those feeds.

The noodles are mealy and oversalted. Wesley drops them in the rubbish bin and leaves, the back of his neck hot and his palms damp.

## **Part Eleven**

Sleep is a bully, knocking him down and holding his head under until he breaks free with a violent jerk. The alarm is beeping placidly, and must have been for some time.

He set it for nine forty, and it's past eleven. He's covered in cold sweat.

Chewing ibuprofen tablets in the shower, he remembers vague details, like distant contrails floating apart from their centers. Angelus leaning over him. The lonely, depressing certainty that he deserved whatever he got.

He dries off in a hurry, wipes a clear strip in the mirror with his forearm, and studies his stubble and bloodshot eyes. He looks like death warmed over. It's appropriate, really.

It's strange to walk into the library and find Spike and Xander already there, hard at work. Spike gives him a cursory glance and goes back to his book. Xander's eyes latch onto him and don't let go. He looks better--more alert, less overwhelmed. There's gauze taped over his throat wound, which is a relief. The bruises on his face have faded almost completely. He doesn't look pleased to see Wesley, but he doesn't look hostile, either. He looks...interested.

"I'm sorry," Wesley says, going to his chair and pulling it out. "I overslept."

"You're exhausted," Spike observes, making a note on a piece of paper beside the book he's using. "Might as well go back to bed for a few hours."

"I'm fine." There's a cup of cold coffee on the table in front of him, untouched. "Is this for me?"

"If you like it two hours old, yeah."

With a sense of complete surreality, Wesley picks it up and tastes it. It's cold. "Thank you."

Xander is still watching him in silence. Wesley feels a faint prickling along the back of his neck, and tries to ignore it. He sits down and pulls over the nearest sheet of paper with Spike's handwriting on it. "Any luck so far?"

"Lots. Mostly bad, though."

"Hm." Wesley skims the list of counters Spike's made. In fact he seems to have made quite a bit of progress. There are several in the list that Wesley might not have thought of. "This is very good--the Hausa funerary rite is a very good idea."

"That was Harris." Spike nods sideways without looking up. "Not as stupid as he looks, apparently."

"Oh, well--" Wesley pauses, a little unnerved by the dark stare Xander is still giving him. "Thank you, Xander. That will be very helpful."

"No problem," Xander says flatly. Spike glances at him, frowns, and sits up, pencil in hand.

"You want to go back downstairs?"

Xander turns his flat gaze on Spike. "No."

"Then stop looking at him like that."

A faint smile touches the corner of Xander's mouth.

"Sorry. Daddy."

Wesley freezes with the coffee cup halfway to his mouth. Did he just hear--?

"Cut that out," Spike snaps. Xander makes a *moue* of affected apology, widening his eyes and pursing his lips.

Wesley puts his cup down carefully and steadies himself with a deep breath. Again, he has the feeling that he's an intruder here, the tolerated child or village idiot. He's too literal, he has to keep reminding himself that Xander has no soul now, that everything has shifted. He's briefly, fervently grateful for Spike, who's keeping things under some kind of control.

Then he notices Spike's throat.

"That's very funny," Spike is saying grimly, while Xander bats his eyelashes. "You done now?"

"Sure." Xander drops his gaze back to his book, discarding the coquettishness suddenly, as if it's become boring. Spike looks back at Wesley.

"Sorry, he's a bloody--" Seeing Wesley's face, he stops. "What?"

Wesley looks down. "Nothing." There are bite marks in Spike's throat.

There's a pause, and then Xander chuckles. Wesley hears a sharp clank and a thump. "Fuck, ow!"

"You shut up," Spike says, his tone darker than it was before.

Wesley keeps his eyes on the page in front of him. The library is silent.

On the security screen, Angelus is a silent lump on the bunk inside his cage, no more than a bundle of very large

clothes. Even evil sleeps, Wesley reminds himself, gripping the crossbow a little tighter in the elevator, heading down. Still, he's ashamed of how unnerved he feels. They have everything they need for the counters, and Angelus is locked safely behind bars. There's no reason for the cold sweat that's dampening his palms and upper lip.

"Seriously," Xander says, "just tie me to the table, I swear to God I won't go anywhere."

"No," Spike says, for the third time. He's got Xander's chain in his hands, and he's staring at the elevator doors, like an overtired parent. "You'll be fine, just shut up and do what I tell you."

"This is ridiculous." Xander rests his head sideways against the wall, then gives a sudden involuntary shiver and looks at Wes. His face is an open appeal. "Wes, come on. This is ridiculous, right?"

"It's the best we can do," Wesley says, glancing at the back of Spike's neck for support. "I'm sorry."

"Stop whinging," Spike adds. "I spent twenty-something years with the bastard, you think I like doing this?"

"He didn't spend three days cutting vents in you."

"Sure he did."

"Nobody likes this," Wesley says, as the elevator comes to a stop. "We're going to try to get it over with as quickly as possible. Xander, do as Spike tells you. And stay out of the way."

They walk down the hallway the way they go everywhere now--Spike in front, Xander in tow, Wesley bringing up the rear with the bow in his hands. Wesley wonders if he could bring himself to use it, if Xander did something violent or unexpected. He's slightly more than halfway sure that he could.

"Great timing," Angelus says, slipping off his bunk and coming to meet them at the bars of his cage. He's always taller than Wesley remembers. "Breakfast, right? I am *starving*."

"Take Xander back there," Wesley says to Spike, nodding at the cage Xander used to occupy. Spike nods and starts back that way, but Xander plants his feet. The chain draws tight.

"I'm not getting back in that thing," Xander says. "No fucking way."

Spike yanks the chain, and Xander's wrists jerk up, but he doesn't move his feet. "Harris, if you don't get over here right now--"

"Lovers' quarrel," Angelus says fondly to Wesley.

Wesley ignores him. He sets the crossbow carefully down on top of the metal folding chair, then takes the folded paper out of his pocket.

"I don't need a menu," Angelus says. "I'll have...let's see, I'll have the eggs with two strips of bacon, and a side of that sweet blue vein you've got running up the side of your throat, Wes. The one that throbs when you're excited."

Wesley starts the first counter, making the hand motions as well as he can with the paper still in his fingers.

"Like now," Angelus says, grinning.

"*Omnia*," Wesley concludes, and there's a pop in his eardrums, like being in a plane losing altitude. Angelus frowns and steps away from the bars of his cage. He seems just a little smaller now. Maybe just a little less self-assured.

"What was that?" Spike asks, still negotiating with Xander a few feet behind Wesley.

"That was Jagdash Neel's third ward, disintegrating."

Angelus rubs the back of his neck and says nothing. Wesley chances a look back over his shoulder. Both Spike and Xander look impressed.

"Spike," Wesley says, "I really don't care how you do it, but please get Xander back to a safe distance."

Spike tightens his mouth and yanks the chain so hard that Xander is jerked almost off his feet. Advantage gained, Spike drags him back to the far cage and chains him to it.

"Thank you," Wesley says, when they're done. He turns back to Angelus.

"You see those holes in Spike's neck?" Angelus asks, working back up to a smile. "What do you think those two were up to all last night?"

Wesley looks back down at the paper, and raises a hand in the formal gesture of undoing. "*Utinam ne id accidisset.*"

Angelus grips the bars of his cage, and pulls hard. They don't move.

Forty-five minutes later, Wesley's voice is starting to fail, and he's having trouble concentrating on the words in front of him. There's a smell in the air, like ozone. His eyes may be exhausted, but he thinks there's also a faint fog accumulating. So much casting in such a small space, with no reprieve. It's not wise--the aftereffects can linger and interfere with each other. And the caster can become too depleted to be useful.

Still, he's accomplished a great deal. The wards are like clothes. It's as if Angelus has dressed himself up in a hundred different shirts, each one offering him anonymity or protection from something. Wesley's managed to peel half of them away, and now Angelus is just sitting on his bunk, smoldering. He isn't trying to provoke anymore; he's not amused. In a way, he's becoming more frightening, the nakeder he is.

"*Omnia erant agenda nobis,*" Wesley intones, and there's a tingle in his forearms and groin. Angelus straightens slightly, as if someone has poked him with a pin. He gives Wesley a look of unconcealed hatred.

"I'm going to wrap your guts around your throat and pull hard," he says quietly.

Wesley realizes that the paper in his hand is fluttering; his hands are shaking. He folds the paper and puts it back in his pocket, then takes his glasses off and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"You okay?" Spike is suddenly beside him, slipping a hand under his elbow and pulling him back a step. That's intelligent; if he's going to faint, he shouldn't do it in reach of Angelus's cage.

"I'm fine," Wesley says, waiting for the world to right itself beneath his feet. "Just a little tired."

"Take a break." Spike hooks the chair with his ankle, scoops the bow up off it, and helps Wesley sit down. He's very thoughtful, for a vampire. For a few seconds, Wesley just sits still and tries to order his thoughts.

"Getting tired, huh?" Wesley can hear Angelus get up off his bunk and walk to the bars. "That's okay, Wes. I'm still ready to go. You just keep tossing those spells at me, and when you're done, you know what you're going to find?" Wesley looks up blearily; Angelus is smiling at him, with just a hint of fang. "Me."

Spike shoots him.

It happens too fast for Wesley to even understand what's happened at first; one moment Angelus is grinning, the

next he's snarling, game-faced, and there's a dull brown shaft protruding from his shoulder. He yanks it out and snaps it in his fist, turning on Spike with a basso growl.

"I'm getting really tired of you," Spike says, letting the bow fall to his side.

"*You*," Angelus says, "I'm going to keep around for a while. You and your boy toy. It's gonna be fun, kicking you around." His eyes flash yellow, demonic inspiration. "Hey, maybe I'll break your back again, and you can watch like you used to with Drusilla. You like watching, right, Spike? I bet you'd love to see me bend that pretty boyfriend of yours over--"

He stops short, staggers back a step, and grabs his throat. His expression changes from fury to panic. His whole body convulses.

Baffled, Wesley turns on Spike. "What did you do?"

Spike's shaking his head in confusion. The bow is still lowered at his side. "Nothing."

"What's wrong with him?" Wesley stands up and starts for the cage, but Spike grabs hold of his arm and keeps him back. "What's going on?" Angelus is making choking sounds, but that's impossible, a vampire can't choke.

"It's a trick," Spike says, dragging Wesley back. "He's trying to get you in reach--"

"I'd like to leave now!" Xander yells, his chains clanking nervously. Angelus coughs, and flecks of white foam hit the floor.

"Spike, something seems seriously wrong--"

"One of those spells, then. Something backfired--what did you cast?"

Clumsily, Wesley paws the paper out of his pocket again. "A lot of things. Thirty, forty different counters. But none of them could do this to him."

"Any time!" Xander yells.

"Shut up!" Spike yells back.

Angelus isn't choking anymore; now he's wheezing, sounding like a man whose airway has closed down to a pinhole. A man who's gasping desperately for breath. He stumbles back and sits down hard on the bunk. One hand clutches at his throat; the other makes a fist and slams into the bars beside him. Blood flies.

"He's going to--" Wesley starts to say.

Then the wheezing stops, as suddenly as if a finger has come off a valve. Angelus's hands fall away from his throat, from the bars.

"What the hell?" Spike raises the bow again, warily.

Angelus lifts his head and gives them an astonished look.

"Wes?" He looks around. Lifts his bloodied hand and studies it. "What's going on? Why am I in here?"

Wesley sits frozen, staring. Angelus looks at Spike, opens his mouth, and then doesn't say anything. A shadow crosses his face--the look of a man remembering.

"Angelus?" Wesley hears himself say.

Angelus looks at him, his eyes widening in horrified confirmation.

"That's not Angelus," Wesley says numbly. "That's--"

"We're leaving," Spike says, and hauls him out of the chair before he can say another word.

## Part Twelve

"That's Angel," Wesley says dully, staring at the security screen.

"That's what he wants you to think." Spike leans forward and drops his cigarette end into an old cup of coffee with a hiss. "You go back down there and open the door, he's going to say *thanks Wes, how about we go up to the White Room together and sort all this out?*"

"I'm not an idiot."

"Neither is he."

Silence. Wesley studies the body slumped on the floor of the cage. He started out on the bunk, then seemed to slowly melt to the floor, like a man under an intolerable, invisible weight. Now he's half-lying against the bars, one leg sprawled bonelessly out in front of him, the other tucked under at a strange angle. He appears to be staring at his own hands. He may or may not be in tears.

"You can't tell?" Wesley asks, for the third time. "You can't sense whether the soul's in place?"

"I can tell he's a big fucking vampire with a lot of spells on him and some nice sharp teeth in his head."

"Do you think Xander could tell?"

"Before or after he wets himself?"

Wesley rubs a hand across his mouth and stares at the screen some more. Angelus is turning the crossbow bolt over and over in his hands.

"All right," Wesley says at last. "We'll rest a little while longer, then go back down and start the counters again. We'll proceed as though it's Angelus, to be safe."

Spike raises his palms in a *thank God* gesture, and shoves his chair back from the desk. "Good."

"How's Xander?"

Spike is already halfway out the door; he pauses to glance back. "He's dead, soulless, and chained to a refrigerator. I'd say he's had better days."

"I mean how's he holding up?"

"He's not the one who looks like he's been sucked through a jet engine. Take a nap, will you?"

"That's a very good idea."

Spike lingers a few seconds longer, as if he's going to say something else, then leaves.

Wesley goes back to staring at the man in the cage.

### **Part Thirteen**

"I do not dig this," Xander says, watching the numbers light up in descending order. He's standing with his back in the corner of the elevator, instinctively guarding himself. In just the couple of hours since Wes last studied him, he seems to have healed more and taken on a leaner, more predatory look. His teeth seem very white, his eyes very dark. It's unsettling.

"Nobody's asking you," Spike says, without turning around. "Your job is to shut up and keep out of the way."

"So leave me upstairs, I'll be out-of-the-way-guy in the extreme."

"What part of 'shut up' do you not get?"

"I'm just saying--"

Spike turns around and hits Xander hard in the face. It's so fast Wesley barely sees it, although he startles and half-raises the crossbow in automatic self-defense. Xander's knocked back against the wall.

"Shut up," Spike intones, his tone so low it's almost a growl. Xander glares up at him, his teeth beginning to

lengthen into fangs. Spike sees it, and wraps the chain around his fist an extra time. "Try me."

Wesley finds himself pressed back against his own wall, the crossbow tight in his hands, his heart beating double-time. For the first time, Spike seems to be fraying. For the first time too, Xander seems prepared to challenge Spike's authority. It seems like a very bad moment to be in a small metal box with the two of them.

The elevator stops, and the bell dings. Spike doesn't break Xander's gaze. For a little eternity, while the doors open and wait patiently for them to exit, they all stay where they are.

Finally Xander drops his eyes and wipes his lip with his knuckles. There's no blood, Wesley notices with relief. More blood seems like a bad idea for everyone.

"Right," Spike says, rocking back onto his heels and settling his shoulders. The little hairs on Wesley's neck lie down flat again. "Let's go."

They walk down the corridor in single file, Xander in the middle. It's silent except for their footsteps. Spike stops at the first cage and threads Xander's chain through the bars, then locks him in place. Wesley continues on to the end.

Angelus is still on the floor, still in the same awkward, disjointed position he's been in for over an hour. His head is lowered, but he lifts it when Wesley nears the cage. His face is pale and puffy and expressionless.

"Wes."

Wesley stops and tries to decide whether he can hear anything useful in that tone. After a moment, he decides he can't. He hooks the metal folding chair with his toe and drags it back until he can put the crossbow on it. Angelus watches him do it. Then his gaze shifts, to just over Wesley's right shoulder.

"Spike."

Spike doesn't say anything, just walks up and stands there with his left hand hanging down more or less near to the crossbow. Angelus studies him, studies the crossbow, then drops his eyes back to his hands. He's turning the bolt over and over.

Wesley pulls the paper out of his pocket again, glances at Spike, and begins.

*"Mihi parendum est--"*

"The Verran Cycle," Angelus says dully, staring at the bolt. "That's the big one."

Wesley pauses. Again, he looks at Spike, who's looking back at him narrowly. "Pardon me?"

"The Verran Cycle. That's the biggest ward; if you counter it, the others should break on their own."

Wesley lowers the paper. "You cast the Verran Cycle on yourself?"

Angelus presses the bolt against one fingertip, and nods. Spike's shaking his head, but Wesley ignores him for the moment.

"The Verran Cycle is an extremely powerful ward," he says. "One of the strongest. Countering it can be dangerous for both the caster and the subject."

Angelus looks up, a hopeless smile at the corner of his mouth. "I know, Wes. I'm sorry."

"Handy, that." Spike lets his hand rest casually on top of the chair. "Too bad for us if the Watcher gets his teeth knocked out, I guess."

"If there was any way to make it safer, I'd do it."

"There isn't." Wesley folds the paper neatly over on itself, and creases it hard between his fingers. "But you know that."

There's a clank behind them, and they all look back at Xander, who's watching them intently from the far cage. He's half in game face, Wesley realizes--it gives him a disturbing, distorted look. He seems unable to control his features while he's around Angelus.

Seeing them all looking at him, he says quietly, "I really think this is a bad idea."

"Noted," Wesley says, and turns back to Angelus. "Why are you telling me what wards you've cast on yourself?"

Angelus gives a hollow laugh and latches a hand through the bars above his head. Slowly, as if he weighs a ton, he pulls himself to his feet. "Wes," he says, leaning on the cage like an exhausted man, "you know why."

"I don't."

"You know who I am."

Wesley pauses, then wets his lips and says, "I don't."

Angelus lifts his head and looks at Wesley. He looks awful. He looks like a man in the last stages of a terminal illness, one who's given up his hold on life and is simply waiting for his body to do the same. He seems past grief. Though not, perhaps, past pain.

Wesley drops his eyes. "If I counter the Verran cycle, will Xander be able to sense whether your soul is in place?"

"I don't know."

"I'm not sensing any souls, here." Xander calls helpfully.

"Shut up," Spike says.

"If countering the cycle injures me, you'll have gained an advantage."

"Not really." Angelus's expression softens slightly. "Wes, it's me. Angel."

"Angel would understand why I can't believe that."

"Yeah. But think about it, Wes. I just told you how to break the wards--why would Angelus do that?"

"Because you're stuck in a cage," Spike says.

"Angelus would bide his time. He'd bait you and try to force your hand. He wouldn't help you expose his weakness." Angelus turns his head and studies Spike. "He taught you that much, didn't he?"

Spike rolls his eyes. "Angelus taught me to never trust Angelus."

"If you counter the cycle," Angelus says, turning back to Wes, "I'm still in the cage. But the wards will be gone. You can cast whatever you want on me. And you'll know I was telling the truth."

Wesley stands still, trying not to betray anything with his expression. His brain feels overloaded, thrust into fifth gear at a crawl. There's a flaw in the logic somewhere, he's sure of it, but he can't see it. He looks sideways to catch Spike's eye.

Spike sees him do it, and his own eyes narrow in frustration. "Conference." He turns, grabs the crossbow up off the chair, and stalks back down the hall toward the elevator. Wesley follows.

When they pass Xander, he raises his hands and pulls the chain taut. "Hey, whoah, where are we going?"

"Stay," Spike says, walking past.

Xander's eyes widen and turn gold. "'Stay'? Where the fuck are you going?"

Spike ignores him, and slaps the button for the elevator. The doors open, and he steps inside. Wesley does the same, and when the doors close, Spike turns the key.

"Fuck this," he snaps, as soon as the doors are shut. "This is bloody ridiculous."

"Yes," Wesley agrees, pulling his glasses off and rubbing his eyes. "I agree, the situation has been well out of hand for some time now. But countering the cycle may help in one major respect."

"What, in getting your head ripped off?"

"Determining whether that really is Angel in the cell."

Spike laces his hands suddenly behind his head and pulls hard, as if he can't stand to be still. "I'm not keen on being the only one left standing with a soul."

"If the counter goes wrong, it probably won't kill me. It may knock me out temporarily, but as long as I'm at a safe distance from Angelus, that won't change anything."

"You said 'probably'."

"There are two cases on record of a Verran counter turning fatal, and in both of them, the caster was an underprepared junior."

"As opposed to you."

"I'm not a junior, Spike. I've studied casting since I was in training at the Council--"

"Studied it. Not done it."

Wesley shrugs and puts his glasses back on. "The difference is academic. I can do this, and I can probably do it without getting anyone hurt." As he's speaking, he's relieved to feel their course of action become clear to him. "We have to try this. If it works it will be a huge step toward putting things right again."

"It's going to bring Harris back to life and give him his soul back?"

Wesley says nothing. After a second, Spike grabs his own hair in fists and pulls from the scalp. "Sorry."

"I'll need your support," Wesley says, reaching past Spike to turn the key. The doors slide open. "It's relatively simple to set up, but you may need to help me after it's done."

"Help you how?" Spike asks, following Wesley out and hesitating when Wesley turns right instead of left.

"Where are you going?"

"To the refrigerator. I need blood. Go back and make sure Xander is securely chained, please."

Spike's feet pause a moment longer, then go the other way down the corridor. Wesley goes to the refrigerator

and pulls out a bag of blood at random. It's like carrying a dead spleen back down the hall toward the cells. Slick and cold and heavy. He notices it with the part of his brain that remains devoted to minor physical details, while the rest of his attention is on remembering the sequence of the counter. Every first-year student learns the Verran cycle and its counter; it's a classic. It's strangely reassuring to hear the sequence in his head, as if he's back in school and is going to be tested. He always liked being set tests. He always did well at them.

Xander stares as Wesley walks past, his face more human now but his hands twisting uncomfortably in the chains. "Did I already say this seems like--"

"A bad idea," Wesley says, without breaking stride. "Yes, you did. Please don't interfere."

Spike is standing by the wall with the crossbow cradled in his arms. He's moved the metal folding chair out of the way, leaving a wide bare stretch of floor in front of Angelus's cage. It's dramatic, but unnecessary. The circle only needs to be big enough to encompass the caster's feet. In this case, Wesley plans to make it very small indeed.

"Be careful, Wes." Angelus has moved back to the middle of the cell, and he's standing with his hands dangling

loose at his sides, watching closely. "Don't make it big, okay? A small circle works just like a big one."

Wesley pauses, the blood bag held out in front of him. Angelus looks slightly embarrassed.

"Sorry. Go ahead."

"Thank you." Wesley has a pen knife in his pocket; he takes it out and uses the tip of the small blade to puncture the bag. Blood wells out, and he balances it carefully so it doesn't fall, while he wipes the blade clean and puts it back in his pocket. "*Vereor ut amicus venerit.*" He takes a deep breath and glances at Spike, who's straightened up and has the crossbow pointed more directly at Angelus. Good.

Wesley turns the bag and lets the blood fall to the ground. "*Timeo abire. Tibi impero ut venias. Venite mecum.*" He moves the bag to the left, counterclockwise around his body, undoing. Blood patters to the floor, drawing a solid uneven line. In the back of the room, Xander's chains clank. "*Tu, quicumque es. Antequam finiam, hoc dicam.*" He transfers the bag from his left hand to his right and continues the circle behind his back. There's a strange sinking sensation in his feet and legs, as if he's being pulled down into the floor. "*Mihi parendum est.*"

The circle is complete now, and he turns the bag over in his hand, neatly stopping the flow. He looks up; Angelus is still standing in place as if he's rooted there. His mouth is downturned in a scowl of pain or fear. In the corner of Wesley's eye, Spike is at full attention, clearly wanting something to shoot.

Wesley lifts the bag. "*Verere.*" He twists his wrist sharply, and flicks blood through the bars and into the cage. It hits Angelus across the face and chest. He's already closed his eyes in anticipation.

For a second nothing else happens. Then Wesley recognizes the heat building in his stomach. He braces himself; accounts say the stronger the cycle, the greater the heat. He won't be burned, it's not that kind of combustion. He tells himself that several times--it won't burn him, it's not real.

It feels real. In a few seconds it's white-hot, like a shovel of coals in his gut, climbing into his chest. He feels himself stiffen, feels his eyes widen and his hair lift. The circle holds him in place; it's a safety. Through the wash of tears in his eyes he can see Angelus straining inside the cage, suffering the same effects.

It isn't real, he tells himself again, as the fire spreads down his arms and legs and up into his brain. It's not real

heat; from the outside he looks like a man having a seizure, nothing more. He isn't smelling his own guts charring, he isn't going to faint, he isn't going to die. He just needs to stand it for as long as it lasts. The stronger the cycle, the longer it lasts.

It goes on for hours. He arches up on his toes, trying desperately to get away from it, step out of the circle, anything, but he can't move. That's why the safety exists, because no one would complete the counter without it. He'd give a million dollars for it to stop. He'd give years of his life for it to stop. He's being roasted in an oven, burnt from the inside out. He can't think, can't see. All he feels is pain and terror that he's been foolhardy and wrong, that he's going to die.

Then it stops, and he hardly feels the floor when he hits it.

He loses track of things for a minute. When he comes back, he's lying on the concrete in front of Angelus's cell, covered in blood from the burst bag. Spike is somewhere, yelling. For some reason, there's a large hole in the bars of Angelus's cell. It's the first thing Wesley sees, even before he sees Angelus slowly picking himself up off the floor in front of him.

He has a sense of movement, something approaching him fast from behind, and with a last feeble effort, he rolls to face it. It's Xander. He's in game face, leaning over, grabbing Wesley's arm. It's like a dream of being taken by monsters. Wesley tries to yank himself free, but he's made of lead and he's sinking.

"Hey," Xander says, and then Wesley has the sense of being lifted easily, like a sleeping child taken from its bed.

## **Part Fourteen**

He comes to with a disorienting sensation of weight traveling down his body and centering in his feet. He's in the elevator, he realizes. They're going up.

"What--" He finds strength in his legs, and reaches for the wall to support himself. Someone's holding his elbow, keeping him upright. "What happened?"

"Fucked if I know." That's Spike. Wesley turns his head and finds that Spike is standing beside him, looking taut

and holding the crossbow. "The building's still sealed, yeah?"

The building... Wesley realizes he can't feel his hands or feet. He's beginning to shiver. The wards sealed the building as soon as Angelus entered. The only person who can remove them is Wesley, and they're still in place, but for some reason it's freezing in the elevator. His blood is turning to ice. He's going to faint.

"Wesley." Spike sounds very far away, and angry. "Is it still sealed?"

He thought he'd said so. He nods.

"Fucking hell...*Watcher*. Is it sealed or not?"

He didn't nod; he only meant to. He's floating inside his own body, unable to make the connections work. It shivers on its own. He can hear a quick clacking sound, like teeth chattering. Suddenly, he remembers the hole in Angelus's cage. But the building is sealed, he can't get out.

Something smacks him in the face, which brings things back in a roar. He opens his eyes and finds Spike standing in front of him, the elevator doors open behind him, everything blurry and familiar.

"It's sealed," Wesley gasps.

"I *know*," Spike says, looking concerned. "You said that."

"Then why did you...you hit me."

"You wouldn't bloody shut up about it."

Wesley blinks dumbly. Spike's gaze moves from his face to a spot over his shoulder. "Come on."

"Where are we--what--" Wesley tries to make his legs work, without success. He's shivering so hard he can barely speak.

"And don't be stupid," Spike says, walking out of the elevator and down the hall. "Or I'll drop you down that shaft and let Angelus have you."

Wesley turns his head. Xander is standing behind him, holding him up by his waist and elbow. It doesn't appear to cost him any effort to do it.

"Jawohl, mein Fuhrer," he mutters, and glances at Wesley. "Nice job, Wes. Way to liven things up around here."

"Where I can see you!" Spike yells from the hallway. Xander rolls his eyes and hauls Wesley out of the elevator before he can say anything to defend himself.

They go to the security room. Spike flips switches until everything's online, then stands back and studies the screens. Xander drops Wesley into a chair and goes over for a look.

"Where's the basement?"

Mutely, Spike points at the screens. Xander frowns.  
"They're dead."

"I see that." Spike tries the switches again, then shrugs.  
"He killed them. Or they went out when the Watcher blew everything up."

*Blew everything up?* Wesley tries to ask, but his mouth still isn't working. Spike looks over at him anyway, his expression assessing now.

"You going to live?"

Wesley concentrates on making his mouth work properly. He's getting some feeling back in his fingers and toes. Pain, mostly. "Yes."

"Good." Spike looks back at the screens, running a finger over them in rapid sequence, then coming to a sudden stop. "There--what the hell is he in, a service elevator?"

"That is some crappy reception." Xander leans in and studies the screen, then runs a hand nervously over the back of his head. "So, we're leaving, right?"

Spike gives him a *you idiot* look. "The building's sealed."

Xander stands up fast, his whole body tensed. "Wait, whoah--you mean *nobody* can leave?"

"We need weapons."

"We need to unseal." Xander turns to Wesley, his face a little askew, his eyes wide. "Wesley, hey, how about a little unsealing? For old time's sake?"

Wesley wraps his arms around himself and squeezes, for warmth and to make the shivering less obvious. He's covered in blood, he realizes. From the bag he used to counter the cycle. It's wet and cold, and it stinks. "I can't."

"Weapons," Spike says again, starting for the door.

"Fuck weapons!" Xander snaps. "You already shot him once, and notice him enjoying the Muzak. Wesley--" He

turns and leans over to give Wesley a direct, pleading look. "Come on, Wes. There's gotta be some way to do this."

Even Spike seems to pause, listening and hoping. Wesley shakes his head. "It doesn't work like that. I'm sorry."

"Don't be such a nance," Spike says to Xander. "Come on. And bring him."

"Where?"

"The training rooms." Spike's halfway out the door. Xander grabs Wesley under his arm and starts to follow. Wesley forces his jaw to unclench enough to let him speak.

"No--the library."

Spike and Xander pause. Spike raises an eyebrow.

"There are...weapons there. A few. And I need books." His fingers are cramped into hooks against his ribs. He has no idea how he'll turn the pages.

"Nice thought," Spike says, mind-reading. "But you're not in any shape to do more mojo."

"Xander's right. Weapons won't help."

"They will if we use them right."

"Spike. We don't have time."

They stand looking at each other, Xander holding Wesley up, glancing anxiously back and forth between them. Spike looks worse than Wesley's ever seen him. He supposes he must look about the same.

"Okay," Spike says at last. "But you'd better have some really good books."

They run. Xander carries Wesley, awkwardly but with no indication of difficulty. Spike makes slightly better time, carrying only the crossbow. As they pass the door to the training rooms, he pauses long enough to bend the handle into a silver tangle.

"What the hell--?" Xander stops short, staring at it.

"You want him in there, picking and choosing?" Spike starts off again, full tilt. Xander lingers a moment, Wesley dangling off his arm.

"We have to go," Wesley says. Xander gives a single, full-body shudder, like the one he gave in the elevator a millennium ago. It feels like a horse, shaking off a fly.

"If this doesn't work," he says, turning his head and meeting Wesley's eyes, "I'm going to try to kill you, okay?"

Wesley swallows. "Xander--"

"Yeah, thank me later."

They set off again.

The library door is standing open; as soon as they cross the threshold, Spike barks, "Shut that!"

"Shutting! Jesus." Xander kicks the door closed, slaps the deadbolt on, and heads for Spike, who's rifling the drawers of Wesley's desk. "Where to, Wes?"

"German, fourteenth century." He tries to nod at the shelf, but Xander's already walking. Of course he knows the floor plan. It seems like years ago that he worked here, but it was hardly more than a week. "The Schwarzhund girdle book."

"Check." Xander lets Wesley fall into a chair, and continues on to the shelf. Wesley feels himself sag

inward, like an old man propped up and abandoned. The pain in his hands and feet is the pain of feeling returning after frostbite. It tingles and aches. He's still shaking, but his mind feels more orderly now. The girdle book has an offensive that might work, if he can make the gestures properly. He's not sure he can. He tries flexing his fingers, and the pain brings tears to his eyes.

"Here." There's something shiny in front of his face--a flask. Spike's found whiskey in the desk. Gratefully, Wesley takes it. "Got a blanket around here anywhere?"

He shakes his head, then tips the flask up for a drink. Whiskey spills down his chin, but some goes down his throat, half-choking him. His sinuses feel scalded. He coughs, wipes his mouth on the shoulder of his shirt, and waits. Warmth blooms in his belly. Better.

"There's a coat--" He gestures vaguely at the wall behind the desk. The closet there has a few leftovers, mainly things of Fred and Gunn's that he's never had the time or heart to throw away. Spike roots through and comes back with the heavy old pea coat. It was Gunn's, once upon a time. Spike helps Wesley get his arms into the sleeves.

"Schwarzhund girdle book, who gets it?" Xander slides the book onto the table in front of Wesley, and undoes

the leather ties with fast, trembling hands. "Okay, Wes. Work your magic."

"Turn to the diagrams--" Wesley reaches out, but Xander's already flipping.

"Not going to blow up again, is it?" Spike's keeping a wary distance, still holding onto the crossbow. Wesley looks at him.

"What happened down there? What did you see?"

"You went spastic, Angelus went spastic, then suddenly there's a big hole in the floor and everyone without a soul gets out of jail free."

Wesley frowns. "I don't understand."

"Harris's chains fell off, and the cage blew up."

"Blew--" Wesley stops short, realizing.

"Um, not to interrupt." Xander's pushing the book at him. "But could you maybe get on this?"

"It was the blood," Wesley says. "The blood is the key, it creates the breach."

"Uh-huh." Xander inches the book closer. "Casty-cast, yeah?"

"There was blood on the bars of Angelus's cage," Wesley says to Spike, already turning to consult the diagram.

"From the bag Xander threw. The counter uses blood to break the ward. The bars must have broken as well."

There's a pause. When Wesley looks up, Spike is giving Xander a narrow look. Xander is studying his feet.

"If we get out of here in one piece," Spike says heavily, "We're going to have a little talk about impulse control."

"There must have been blood on Xander's chains," Wesley says, going back to the book. "From his wrists, or..." He trails off, absorbed in the offensive. "I need your lighter, Spike."

Spike drops it onto the table without asking what it's for. Wesley fumbles it up with numb fingers, and strikes the flint experimentally. The first try doesn't work, but the second one catches. Good enough. He needs--

"My knife. In my pocket. And a bullet, I need a bullet."

"In my desk," Xander says, heading for the smaller desk against the opposite wall. "I had a few in the drawer."

"You had bullets in your desk?" Spike asks, rooting through Wesley's pocket without hesitation. "What the hell for?"

"They were cool." Xander jerks the desk drawer open and rummages through. Then suddenly he stops. His head lifts, and he looks toward the door. The skin of his face rumples.

At the same time, Spike draws his hand out of Wesley's pocket and stands up. He puts the pocket knife quietly down on the table, and picks up the crossbow. His eyes are trained on the door.

"Sorry, Watcher," he says. "Looks like you're not going to get your chance after all."

Wesley swallows. In the thin space between the floor and the base of the door, he can see a patch of darkness.

"Get over here," Spike says softly, and Wesley realizes he's speaking to Xander. "Get the Watcher behind me."

Xander doesn't move. Wesley forces himself to put his hand out and pick up the pocket knife. It's small and heavy, warm from his own body heat. That's strange, when he feels like he's freezing.

There's no possible way to complete the spell in time now, but he bends his head anyway, and starts making the gestures.

There's a knock at the door. Three solid taps. Xander jumps.

"Get *over here*," Spike hisses, taking a step forward.  
"Harris. *Xander*."

Xander whimpers.

Beyond the door, Angelus says, "Hello?"

That starts Xander moving, back across the floor to where Spike is, dropping the bullet on the table in front of the book. Wesley tries to ignore both of them. He's halfway through the gestures, and he can feel the building energy.

"Wes?" It sounds like Angel. He ignores it. "Wes, Spike...open the door. I'm not...I'm not Angelus. I'm Angel."

"There's a stake in the Watcher's desk," Spike mutters.  
"Get it."

Xander gets it and comes back.

"I don't know what's going on," Angelus says. "I don't know what happened. I'm sorry. I can't even... Wes, I don't know what happened. I swear to God, it's me."

It's distracting, and he can't afford to be distracted. He glances at the door. It's just wood; Angelus could have broken it in by now. Why wouldn't he? Why would he stand in the corridor, begging for entrance, when he knows they must be laying plans against him?

Wesley's hand pauses, and he stares at the door.

"What?" Xander's voice is rough, demonic, fearful.

"What's going on, why are you stopping?"

Wesley frowns and picks up again. "I'm not." It's hard to make his hands do what he tells them to. The coat helps, but he's still freezing. He might be botching it anyway, the way he's shaking. No point in thinking like that, though. "Give me the lighter."

Spike reaches down and hands it to him. Wesley takes it on the gesture of supplication and strikes it neatly, miraculously, changing weakness to strength. Then it's useless, and he drops it. "The knife."

He uses the knife to cut the air in the direction of the door, three times each direction. Little precise strokes, amazing if you know how little he can feel his fingers. Behind him, Xander shifts anxiously.

"Wes. I don't know what I can do to convince you. I told you it was the Verran cycle. I don't know why the bars broke. I didn't plan it. I swear to God."

"The bullet," Wesley whispers. Spike gives it to him. Wesley puts it in the air, pointing at the door. It hangs there, building force.

Now it's just a matter of a few words, a final gesture. Wesley takes a deep breath, glances up at Spike, and calls, "Angel?"

There's a long pause. The air seems to shiver.

"Wes." He sounds defeated, exhausted. "Please. Let me in."

"I'm injured," Wesley calls. "I can't move. Break the lock."

Xander gives a low, bubbling snarl. Spike smacks him in the back of the head, and he stops. The doorknob turns, then stops.

"Okay," Angelus says. He sounds like a man who's accepted the terms of a long, damning contract. "Okay, Wes. Whatever you want."

The doorknob turns again, and keeps turning. There's a loud crack. Then the door opens with a jerk, and Angelus

is standing on the threshold. He looks at Wes first. His face is white, drained, miserable. He looks at Spike, then at Xander. The sight of Xander seems to give him intense pain.

Then he looks at the bullet, hovering in midair. His expression changes to something like gratitude.

It's Angel. Wesley knows it is. But he can't know it is, not really, so he says the final words and makes the gesture, and the bullet becomes a blinding spear of light, hurtling into its target.

## **Part Fifteen**

It takes three days for Wesley to recover full feeling in his hands and feet, and another week to lose the deep ache in his bones. Still, he recovers faster than Angel. The offensive gouged matching black circles into Angel's chest and back, so that at first glance he looked as though he'd been impaled on a red-hot spike. Effectively, it cooked him from the inside out. No one but a vampire

could have survived it, and there were a few bad moments, in the first couple of days, when it seemed as though not even a vampire could.

Angel survives, but he spends almost two weeks in limbo, drifting in and out of consciousness on an infirmary bed with dampened sheets. The door to the room is kept double-locked, and Wesley and Spike are the only ones with keys.

Wesley visits when he can. He sits on a metal folding chair and studies the man lying in front of him, trying to decide how to feel. The first couple of visits are simple; he feels mostly numbness and panic, alternating as Angel's condition swings up and down. Then Angel begins to heal, slowly but steadily, and to sleep instead of simply fainting. Wesley begins to feel more complicated emotions. Anger is chief among them.

He's angry without focus until the Council finally sends a cautious, oblique email inquiring about possible difficulties on or around the eighteenth of May. Wesley spends two days on the phone with a series of increasingly highly-ranked Council bureaucrats, forcing himself to speak calmly. Yes, there were difficulties. Yes, the difficulties concerned Angel's soul. Yes, the

difficulties were serious. Very serious. Extremely goddamned serious.

No one has clearance to tell him what's happened; instead, he's transferred steadily, relentlessly up the line until he's speaking to people who rank higher than his own father. His fury builds to the point where he keeps a box of pencils by the telephone, and snaps them methodically in two while he talks. Spike comes in a few times, sits on the corner of the desk, shakes his head, and leaves. He has Xander to worry about.

Finally, on a conference call with six of the highest-ranking Council administrators in the western hemisphere, Wesley gets the full story. Tunbridge Wells, de-souling research, stroke, momentary mayhem. By this time he's worked some of it out for himself. He sits stroking an index finger down one of the last pencils left in his box, feeling a momentary vacuum of emotion. On the other side of the Atlantic, he can hear six uneasy silences.

"What about Xander Harris?" he asks at last. They know about Xander's turning. Wesley supposes that it's one of the reasons he's got such relatively prompt answers.

"The situation is under review," Tazzio says. And that's it, for a good long time.

Sitting by Angel's bedside, watching him moan and mutter in his nightmares, Wesley feels highly focused anger. Downstairs, in the basement cells, Xander waits to hear what they're going to do with him. Wesley's already decided that he won't obey an order to stake. Re-souling isn't out of the question. And there are other options too, ones he's devising in his off hours in the library, between visiting Angel and conferring with Spike and running Wolfram & Hart. There are spells that could be altered for the situation.

"You all right?" Spike asks, on a rare occasion when he drops by Angel's room and finds Wesley there. Spike doesn't visit often, Wesley knows. He appears to have come to terms with whatever pain Angel is suffering, and to have ranked it lower on his list of priorities than Wesley can do. It's hard to blame him, really.

"I'm fine," Wesley says, his eyes on Angel's sleeping profile. He isn't, really--he's barely holding himself together and he knows he doesn't hide it well. But he doesn't want to have a conversation about it.

"You look like shit." Spike pulls his own chair up, sits down, and produces a flask. He drinks and holds it out. Wesley takes it with a nod.

"How's Xander?"

"Getting very good at Scrabble." Spike pulls out his cigarettes, and props his feet carelessly on the edge of Angel's bed. "Is 'qat' really a word?"

"Yes."

"Bugger." For a couple of minutes they sit in silence, Spike smoking his cigarette moodily. Angel jerks and frowns. In all his nightmares, he's never gone to game face. Wesley wonders if that's usual, or if even in his delirium, Angel is too afraid to let the demon show.

"Poor twit." Spike rubs his temple thoughtfully and blows out a stream of smoke.

"I find," Wesley says, still staring at Angel, "that I hate the Council of Watchers more than I ever hated any of the demons they fight against."

Spike lets that sit. Wesley remembers he's still holding the flask, and passes it back. He hasn't drunk from it.

"If it's any consolation," Spike says, "I ate half a dozen of the bastards in my time."

"Good," Wesley says, without remorse.

Wesley visits Xander, too. Not as much as Spike, who spends the better part of every day in the basement now, but as often as he can. He takes the elevator down with an eerie sense of déjà vu, carrying small token gifts with him each time. Blood bags, cigarettes, comic books. It's like visiting someone in prison, he thinks. In fact, it is visiting someone in prison.

Spike is usually there, inside the cell, reading a book or leaning over a Scrabble board propped on a folding chair, with Xander leaning in from the other side. They play with casual intensity, mocking themselves and each other but paying close attention to each new tile laid down. It would be amusing, Wesley thinks, if the circumstances were different.

"*X-Men*, cool." Xander takes the comics out of the bag, fans them out on the bunk, and nods. "Thanks, Wes."

"Not at all." Wesley stays outside the cell, for all of the obvious reasons. The metal folding chair is still there, and he takes it gratefully. He tires easily now, and his legs ache if he stands for too long.

"Geek." Spike's head is bent over the board, and he has a cigarette burning between his fingers. It looks as though it's been burning for a long time without movement.

"As long as there's no judgment in the relationship." Xander props his chin on his hand and yawns. He's cross-legged on his bunk, wearing an orange T-shirt and jeans. The marks on his neck are gone now; he looks like himself again. "Are you planning on playing, *ever*?"

Spike chews his lip, frowns, and takes several tiles carefully from his rack. He lays them down on the board and sits back to stretch. Xander peers at them.

"It took you twenty minutes to spell 'cheese'?"

"Took me twenty minutes to block out your fucking yammering and think straight."

"God, I hope the attention span doesn't run in the family."

That's a little disturbing for various reasons, and Wesley shifts and clears his throat. "I thought you'd like to know that Angel's doing much better."

The temperature drops a sharp thirty degrees. Xander sits up straight and turns to look at Wesley. His expression is flat and hostile.

"Fantastic," he says, and turns back to the board.

"He's awake," Wesley says, persevering despite the look that Spike is giving him. "He may be able to walk in a day or two."

"Good for him." Xander grabs a couple of tiles and drops them onto the board almost haphazardly.

"What's your point?" Spike asks.

"My point is," Wesley says, "that Xander and Angel will encounter each other sooner or later. I thought Xander would like to know that the time may be getting nearer."

"Right," Xander says. "Because I'm pretty much on display whenever he's ready, right? It's not like I can go anywhere."

"If you don't want to see him, I'm sure he--"

Xander reaches out suddenly and flips the Scrabble board off the chair. Tiles fly. Spike jumps back in his chair, almost dropping his cigarette.

"Game over," Xander says, leaning sullenly back against the bars.

"You're fucking picking that up," Spike snaps, brushing ash off his forearm. Xander ignores him, staring at a spot somewhere up the middle of the far wall.

Wesley leans down and retrieves a fallen S from the floor beside his feet. Standing up makes his thigh bones ache.

"I'm sorry," he says, placing the S on the crossbar of the cage. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Neither Spike nor Xander acknowledges that, which Wesley takes as his cue to leave.

"I don't get it," Angel says, staring at the sheets over his knees. "How could they do something like that?"

"Stupidity," Wesley says. "And foolhardiness. The Council has always had too high an opinion of its own abilities."

"*I killed Xander,*" Angel says, and the statement is so bald it's almost funny, in a hysterical, desperate kind of way.

"You almost died," Wesley says, to restore perspective.

The look Angel turns on him is easy to translate: *I should have died.*

Wesley turns away and pours another glass of water. Simple tasks, he's found, are the polestars of overwhelming grief.

He goes down to the basement with a bag of otter blood and a double espresso, peace offerings. Some part of his brain notices the faint sounds coming from the direction of Xander's cell, but he hasn't slept in thirty hours and he pays no attention. He gets almost to the cell before he realizes what he's walked in on.

They're both in the cot, Spike on top of Xander, a pile of clothes on the floor beside them. Xander's head is tipped back, his throat on display. There are marks in it, little dark holes with petals of blood running out. His eyes are closed in ecstasy. Spike's head is bent, biting or kissing.

Wesley stops short. Spike raises his head and looks at him, heavy-lidded. There's blood on his mouth and his hips are moving slowly, rhythmically, beneath the blanket. Xander's eyelids flutter.

"Get out," Spike says, without embarrassment or anger.

Wesley sets his gifts down on the floor where he's standing, and leaves.

Angel checks himself out of the infirmary and retreats to his old apartments. He's weak, barely able to walk, and mentally he's still far from well. Wesley continues to run the company to the best of his ability, putting off whatever he can and having Harmony cancel everything possible. The ship is drifting, but it's still afloat, and that's what matters. They all have more important problems.

A packet arrives from England, addressed to Wesley, with a return address of the head Council office in London. He opens it at his desk with the door closed, the security camera turned off. Inside there's a terse, formal letter from the Director, apologizing for the recent difficulties without actually accepting any blame. There's also a packet of official instructions for dealing with "the current conditions of Alexander Lavelle Harris."

Wesley takes the elevator up to Angel's floor, and walks down the hall with the packet in his hand. It takes Angel a long time to answer the knock on his door.

"Wes." He looks awful, as if he hasn't slept in days, which is probably the case. Wesley is torn between pity and impatience. Life goes on, after all. Things remain to be done.

He holds up the packet, making sure Angel can see the return address. After studying it for a second, Angel holds the door open and lets Wesley in.

They sit in the deep, soft armchairs in Angel's living room, Wesley staring out the window at the tops of the buildings, Angel reading through the packet. When he's done, he slides the papers back into the envelope and rests them on his knee. The knuckles of his right hand are raw and scabbed, Wesley notices.

"Spike should be in on this," Angel says, tapping the packet.

"Yes." Wesley pauses, wondering if he needs to mention what he walked in on, and decides he doesn't. Angelus knew how things stood there, so Angel must know too. Angel remembers everything Angelus said and did, after all. It's one reason they're both sitting in a darkened apartment right now, instead of downstairs where business proceeds as usual.

"It's an interim solution," Angel says, as if he's trying to convince himself of it. "We'll get him souled."

"Of course," Wesley agrees, standing up and accepting the packet back. "It may take some time, but it will happen."

"Good." Angel doesn't make any movement to stand up, so Wesley turns to go. Halfway to the door, he turns back.

"I know you're not ready yet, but when you are, we need to discuss regular business matters."

Angel just looks at him. His eyes are dark and stony, like a reptile's.

"When you're ready," Wesley says, and leaves.

"Fucking pathetic," Spike says, dropping the papers onto the table and shoving his chair back violently. "Harris lost his fucking *soul* and they want to put a leash on him and call it good?"

"Nobody's calling it good," Wesley says, as gently as he can. "It's not a permanent solution, it's only to keep him in check until we can retrieve his soul. It will mean he can leave the cage, at least."

"It's the same as the bloody chip--he's going to want everything a vamp wants, but he won't be able to do it. It's like torture."

"He won't be able to hurt anyone, Spike. Surely that's what we're most worried about?"

"I'm worried about his soul, actually."

"Of course, but in the short term--"

"Fuck the short term!" Spike barks that, then gets hold of himself suddenly and sits back in his chair, his jaw jumping. "All I'm saying," he says carefully, lining his fingers up along the edge of the desk and squeezing, "is that a magic zap every time he tries to bite someone is a pretty shitty solution when you think about how he got to be this way."

"Agreed."

There's a tense pause. Spike examines the tips of his fingers. Wesley collects the papers, orders them, and slides them back into the packet.

"I want to talk to him first," Spike says grudgingly, and Wesley nods.

"So...is this going to hurt?" Xander's standing in the middle of his cell, his hands in his pockets, looking forcedly casual. "Because if it is, I'll just drop to my knees now and get it over with."

"It won't hurt," Wesley says. He holds up the packet of herbs and tries to smile. "In fact, it's designed to feel quite pleasant."

"Oh." Xander looks nonplussed. "Okay, good."

"Just do it," Spike says. He's leaning against the bars of Xander's cage, studying the floor. He's clearly not happy with the arrangement, but then again, none of them are. Wesley opens the packet and spills dried blossoms into his palm. There's a faint smell of mint and cypress, with an understorey of guano that he decides not to think about too closely.

"Ready?" He holds the herbs in front of his mouth and meets Xander's eyes. Xander nods. Wesley takes a deep breath and blows the herbs through the bars. They cover

Xander in a fine chaff. He stands very still, as if he's bracing for impact.

Wesley lowers his hand and brushes flower dust off his palm. Spike frowns.

"Now what?"

"Nothing," Wesley says. "That's it."

Xander blinks. The corners of his mouth have turned up in a slightly dopey smile. He takes his hands out of his pockets and rubs them over his face, then laughs. "I'm-- whoah. Hey. Wow."

Spike raises an eyebrow at Wesley. Wesley folds the paper packet carefully over on itself, and slips it into his pocket.

"There may be some...side effects," he says, stepping back from the cage. "Euphoria, mainly. Also, occasionally...arousal."

"Arousal?" Spike repeats the word as if he's never heard it, then suddenly looks into the cage. Xander's dropped onto his bunk, and he's lying on his back, running his hands over his chest and belly. His smile is blissful.

"I'll be upstairs," Wesley says, starting to beat a hasty retreat.

"Don't you want to make sure it took?"

"Later," Wesley calls, heading for the elevators.

Standing in the elevator, he hears the creak of the cage door opening, and the happy, unfamiliar sound of Xander laughing.

"This may not be a good idea," Wesley says for the third time.

"Not our decision. Harris wants to do it, so we do it." Spike hangs up abruptly, and Wesley stares at the receiver for a moment, then puts it back in its cradle.

Spike's less tense and angry these days, now that Xander's out of the cage and up in the apartment with him, but he can still be a pain to deal with. He's become remarkably single-minded in his protection of Xander, for one thing. Considering Xander's condition, it's hard to blame him, but it's still irritating at times. Now, for instance. Angel's only recently emerged from his

apartment, and Wesley's fairly certain he's not ready to confront Xander. But if Xander wants it, Angel will do it. If Xander wanted to set the building on fire, Angel would probably do it.

Few things are less rational than survivor guilt, Wesley has learned.

They all defer to Xander in varying degrees, so now they're all scheduled to convene in the main board room. It's been two months since Angelus walked into the library and dragged Xander out of the world. The two of them haven't seen each other since Wesley roasted Angel alive in the same room a little over a week later. Wolfram & Hart is a big place; there are plenty of ways for them to avoid each other, and that's what they've done. Until now. The board room is neutral territory, but walking down the halls toward it, Wesley feels more than a little nauseated.

Angel is already there, sitting not at the head of the table but at one of the chairs down the side, as if he's trying to fade into corporate anonymity. He looks up quickly when Wesley comes in.

"Hi, Wes." He looks better these days. He's taking care with his appearance again, and he's lost some of the haunted look in his eyes. It's not as hard to face him

across the table as it was a few weeks ago. But he still looks ready to jump at sudden movements, and that fear and uncertainty have translated into a beseeching look he never used to have.

Wesley sits down and smiles as well as he can. "Hello. Do you mind if I ask you about the Li Po suit? There are a couple of points I'm not sure about--"

He came with the topic prepared, in case of exactly this scenario. Angel jumps in gratefully, and they talk about insubstantial details as if they were urgent matters of company welfare, while the clock ticks on. Xander and Spike are late.

After fifteen minutes, Wesley glances at his watch and raises his eyebrows. "Perhaps we should--"

Angel looks at the door, and it opens. Spike walks in, expressionless in dark blue jeans and a white Oxford shirt. He nods at Angel, neither friendly nor unfriendly, and sits down in a chair on Wesley's side of the table. Behind him, Xander stands unmoving in the doorway.

"Xander." Angel glances at Wesley as if for help, then half-stands up. "Hi."

Xander stays where he is. He's in khakis and a T-shirt, like a college student. His hair's getting long. Overall he looks

almost exactly as he looked when he first turned up, fresh from the Sayvu, sent by the Council to help stop the end of the world.

"Hello, Xander," Wesley says, to help fill in the silence. Xander still hasn't said anything. He's studying Angel with a look of fascinated disgust, the way he might study a bug on a pin. As Wesley watches, his forehead ripples and his right eye flickers gold.

"Not unless you want a headache," Spike says casually. Unlike the chip, the spell covers not only humans, but demons as well. It was a safeguard, from the Council's point of view--they wanted to ensure that Xander couldn't attack Spike or Angel. It was hard to argue against the logic, but even now, feeling his shoulders rise around his ears, Wesley feels sympathy. Until they find another solution, Xander is literally helpless.

"I know," Xander says, still staring at Angel. Angel meets his gaze for a few seconds, then looks aside. Xander frowns. "Don't you want to say something?"

Angel's jaw clenches. "I'm...sorry."

Xander laughs and walks into the room. "Right. Okay." He pulls out a chair and sits down on the edge of it. "I'm sorry too."

"If there's anything you want," Angel says, "I'll do it. Anything, Xander."

"I want to deep-fry Angelus's balls. But he's kind of left the building, hasn't he?"

Angel stares at the conference table in silence.

"You look like him," Xander goes on, leaning forward and clasping his hands between his knees. "But you're not him. You're just a sorry excuse in a big suit. You're nobody."

Angel says nothing.

"I just had to see for myself," Xander says, and stands up. "I'm done now."

He starts for the door, and Spike gets up to follow him out. Halfway there, Xander turns around again.

"I almost forgot. I don't want to run into you, Angel. I don't want to see you. If you want to tell me something, tell somebody else or send a carrier pigeon or something. Okay?"

Angel swallows and nods. "Okay."

Xander stares at him a moment longer, then flicks a wave at Wesley and walks out. Spike follows. The door falls almost shut behind them.

Angel puts his hand over his eyes. Wesley stares past him, out the window, at the blue sky dimmed by smog. Far down the corridor, he can hear a telephone ringing and ringing, with no-one there to answer.

**The End**

## **The Middleman**

*Notes: I still owe Spander to aimeelicious. Actually, she asked for either Mal/Jayne or Spander, but I'm like a coin drop that way--you put the penny in and there's only one way to the bottom. Spander it is!*

*I'm taking this opportunity to do a follow-up to a previous story, [The Assistant](#). Because you can never have too much Vamp!Xander, and because I'm kind of curious to know exactly how those two crazy kids worked things out. The answer, you won't be surprised to learn, is: angstily, with bad puns, and at great length..*

**Part One**

The most disturbing thing about the situation was how quickly it began to feel normal. Wesley would have been willing to bet any odds that he'd never again feel comfortable sitting down to breakfast across from Xander Harris, and Wesley was not a betting man. Yet here he was, drinking a cup of tea and sharing sections of the paper with Xander, who was drinking from his own cup. Which happened to be filled with blood.

"Will you look at that," Xander said, propping his cheek against his fist and reaching for a pen. "Whites sale at Macy's. And somebody doesn't know an nine-letter word for 'horny coney.'"

"It makes no sense," Wesley murmured, most of his attention on the riots in Dakar. "A coney is a rabbit."

"And a horny coney is a...?" Xander paused, pen hovering, eyebrows raised. When Wesley said nothing, he shook his head and started writing. "Clearly you've never been to Wall Drug."

"There's no such thing as a horned rabbit," Wesley said, with some irritation. "It's a hopeless puzzle."

"Says the guy who recently ran off in pursuit of a giant,

sentient sponge."

"I hardly think the local paper is going to ask its readers to know 'spiny soft death star' in order to complete its crossword."

"No," said Xander, dropping the puzzle in the middle of the table and shoving his chair back, "but apparently 'jackelope' is fair game."

Wesley leaned forward and peered at the puzzle.

"I'm going to bed," said Xander, tossing the pen down next to the puzzle. "If you see Captain Dickhead, tell him I'm low on blood."

"Of course," Wesley murmured, drawing the paper over with one finger, already filling in blanks in his mind.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Captain Dickhead appeared some time later, smelling of sewers and ichor. Wesley tried not to wrinkle his nose too obviously.

"Where's Harris?" Spike asked immediately, the way he always did--getting the lay of the land. Over the course of the last few months, Spike had become a finely attuned instrument, calibrated to the extreme weather of Xander's moods. As far as Wesley could tell, Xander spent ninety percent of his time abusing Spike mercilessly, and the rest cajoling for blood and sex. It didn't seem very fair, but it wasn't Wesley's place to pass judgment. It was no doubt difficult to sustain an equal, mutually respectful partnership when you lacked a soul.

"He's gone to bed," he replied. "And he said to tell you he's low on blood."

"He's always low on blood," Spike grouched, but he sank into the other chair and leaned over the table, glancing without interest into Xander's abandoned blood cup. "Drinks like a bloody fish."

"Your hunt was successful, I take it?" Wesley nodded at Spike's boots, which had left ichor tracks across the kitchen floor. "The Fleuvag demons have been ousted?"

Spike nodded, dug out a cigarette, and lit it behind a cupped palm. "Thanks," he said, waving vaguely at the table, the papers and cups and the crossbow sitting on

the counter behind Wesley's head. "For, you know. The usual."

"My pleasure." Wesley stood, stretched, and rolled his head on his neck, wincing at the crunch. "No troubles, obviously. And you'll be pleased to hear I got a letter from Noel Winterbottom, promising some action within the month."

"The month," Spike repeated, staring at Xander's cup. "Wonderful."

"Considering the Council's usual rate of speed, that's quite dramatic. Noel must be working very hard on our behalf."

"Remind me to send him a gift basket," Spike said, sounding tired. Wesley paused, gathering up his own cup and plate.

"He's going to be all right," he said. Spike glanced up at him, his eyes weary and bloodshot. "He is, Spike."

"Good," Spike said, touching his finger to a drop of blood spilled on the table, then putting it to his mouth.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

They'd closed down all the offices on the floors directly above and below what had been Spike's room. It was now Spike and Xander's room, and though there were no security cameras in there and Wesley had never visited, he understood that it had undergone some radical redecoration. He'd seen lengths of chain going in, and heard some of the hammering and drilling that it apparently took to outfit a suite for a soulless, helpless, furious new vampire. He'd also heard some of the screaming, and the sounds of breakage, that had caused them to close down all those offices. Too many employees coming quaking to his office, eyes downcast, asking for reassignments.

"Try to keep it down to a dull roar," Angel said to Spike. Spike curled his lip and walked away.

Wesley's own room was on a different floor entirely, but he still heard Xander screaming, later that afternoon. He called Spike terrible things, things that might have made sense for Angelus, but that made no sense at all for the man who'd taken him in, who cared for him. The pure

shrill hateful fury of it raised the hairs on the back of Wesley's neck, made his hands clench over his keyboard. More than once he'd had to stop himself from taking the elevator down to give Xander a piece of his mind. Laughable, really. He could just see himself down there in that ruin of a suite, shaking his finger in Xander's ridged, fanged face while Spike glowered in the background. More likely Spike wouldn't even let him through the door.

Anyway, it always ended abruptly, spiraling up to a fever pitch that finally made Spike decide enough was enough. Some small mean part of Wesley loved that moment, when the horrible screaming cut suddenly to silence, because he could imagine Spike's forearm around Xander's throat, choking him into submission. It was terrible, he knew, to feel the slightest bit of satisfaction at that image. None of this was Xander's fault. The tantrums were to be expected. They were all doing the best they could under the circumstances.

Still, when the hail of abuse finally reached that precise level of intensity that made Spike react, and was unceremoniously silenced, Wesley heaved a sigh of relief and pressed his fingertips to his eyelids. The whole building seemed to be standing still, listening. There

might have been one muffled thump, no more.

Wesley opened his eyes and went back to reading his email.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Earlier on, they'd made the mistake of introducing Xander to some of the others. Specifically, to Cordelia and Fred.

"Hi Xander," Fred said uncertainly.

"Hi," he said, with a friendly smile. They all thought it was going well, so they didn't keep close watch and nobody heard exactly what he murmured to her in the corner of the room. All Wesley knew was that Spike's head whipped around as if he'd smelled blood, and that Fred's face was a white blur, her eyes big and horrified.

"Oh, I don't think so," Cordelia said, standing up with her chin outthrust. "I don't care if you're vamped, you're one letch away from getting the tip of my Fendi up your ass."

"Sounds awesome," he said, grinning. "Then we can

trade, and I'll plow that sweet peach of yours so hard you'll taste cream for--" That was all he had time for, before Spike punched him in the chin and his head snapped back with a crack, spilling him over a chair. He landed on the other side with a thump, already laughing. "I can see up your skirt, Texas! My, ain't that a pretty little puss!" Spike was around the chair by that time, hitting him again, and Fred was fleeing in the direction of the labs, where she remained for almost three days, refusing to admit she was upset.

They debated making him apologize, but decided it wasn't worth it. After that, the only people he saw were Spike and Wesley.

If one of them mentioned Angel's name in conversation--they never mentioned Angelus--he fell silent, and sometimes refused to respond to anything else they said.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

It was really an untenable situation, or a situation made tenable only by the fact that they knew it wouldn't last, that the Council was going to deliver a solution--that they were, by hook or by crook, going to get Xander Harris's

soul back. In his lowest moments--when he was fatigued beyond reason, when Xander was being more than usually irritating even with Wesley, whom he usually treated with more civility and respect than anyone else, when the halls had been filled with screams and curses and sounds of expensive breakage and violence--Wesley tried to remember that Xander Harris was a hero, many times over. Sometimes it helped. A little.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

"It's a takeover bid," Angel said, in an *enough-already-we're-cutting-this-short* tone of voice. "They're trying to take over Wolfram & Hart."

"Not quite," Wesley corrected him, trying not to sound impatient. "They're proposing a merger, with joint ownership."

"Come on, Wesley. These guys aren't interested in being one big committee. They want to take us over, but they want to do it without a fight."

"Which makes sense," Cordelia put in, "since, as far as we can tell, they're the good guys."

"It's so weird," Fred said. "I mean, angels. Cherubim, whatever. With MBAs." She looked around. "Am I the only one who thinks that's weird?"

Wordlessly, Cordelia and Spike held up their hands. Wesley acknowledged them with a nod.

"Granted, we find ourselves in an unusual situation--as proprietors of Wolfram & Hart, we appear to be on the side of darkness." Tactfully, he left out the fact that they currently counted three vampires among their inner circle.

"I don't care what the situation appears to be," Angel said, pushing his chair back and standing up. "This is my company, and they're trying to take it over. In my books, that's a hostile activity. So if these cherubim people want to do this thing, they're going to have to bring it."

"Did you just quote that cheerleader movie?" Cordelia asked. Angel frowned.

"I'll tell them you're not interested in the offer," Wesley said quickly.

"Meeting adjourned," said Angel.

## **Part Two**

The angels took the news rather well, he thought--they seemed to be decent types, if a bit leaden in the prose department. Their emailed response was heavy on the 'heretofore's and 'thereunto's, and frankly when it got into the begats he skipped to the end, but overall they seemed civil. If only all their business dealings went so smoothly, he reflected, filing it all away and moving on to the outstanding lamia issue.

Later that afternoon, he looked up from his laptop to see Cordelia standing in the doorway, wearing her coat.

"Apparently you don't read your APBs," she said.

"Incoming cyclone? Battening the hatches? Hello?"

"What--" Confused, he switched over to his email, and saw at once the message she was talking about. There

was an extreme weather alert--whatever that was--for the entire downtown area. A massive storm front coming in off the water, carrying gale-force winds, rain, and hail. The local news station seemed as baffled as anyone, but businesses all over the downtown core were expediently shutting down, hammering plywood over the windows and chaining the doors closed.

"We're sending everybody home," Cordelia said. "I'm leaving five minutes ago. You want a ride?"

His flat, still nominally his because he paid rent although he hadn't visited in months, was on the east side, out of the worst predicted path of destruction. He gazed in fascination at the red line the weather map traced through the heart of the city. If it was accurate, the storm was headed straight for Wolfram & Hart's offices.

"No thanks," he said absently. "I'll be all right."

"You boys are all the same," she said. "You love playing *White Squall*. Keep away from the windows, okay?"

"Yes, thanks," he said, his eyes still on the screen. There was something strange about the storm--something almost familiar--but he couldn't pin it down.

Ten minutes later the sky outside his window was greenish grey, and the wind was hitting the glass so hard he could hear it inside the office, irregular petulant wallops like an invisible body hurling itself against the surface. He reached for his phone without looking.

"I'm not liking this," Angel said. "Are you liking this?"

"No. It's highly unusual weather for Los Angeles. Particularly at this time of year. Particularly in this pattern--" He studied the television screen, showed the great blue sweep moving in across the water. As he watched it, the screen flickered.

"Call me arrogant, but it feels personal."

"It's possible," Wesley allowed. "The storm *is* headed directly for us."

"Like I said. Do we have any outstanding prophecies I should be thinking about?"

"Prophecies, no. I'll start researching other possibilities."

"Get Spike working on it too--he's the only one still here."

Let me know when you've got something. And keep away from the windows."

"The glass is reinforced," Wesley said. "I hardly think we're in any danger of--" He was cut off by a blast of wind hitting the glass with a bang.

"Keep me posted," said Angel.

Wesley hung up and dialed Spike's mobile. Unlike the rest of them, Spike didn't deign to occupy an office. He picked up on the third ring, sounding harassed.

"What?"

"Where are you? I need your help researching this storm." The television flickered again, and Spike's first few words were cut off.

"--love to lend a hand, but I'm kind of busy keeping Harris from tearing the place apart--" He broke off again, but this time Wesley clearly heard him, yelling away from the receiver. "Fucking put that down. Put that--Harris, I swear to Christ I'm going to kick your head right down your fucking throat if you don't--" There was a crash, a quick fumbling sound, and Spike was back. "Yeah, got my

hands full here, sorry." The connection broke, and Wesley stared at the phone in his hand, then set it carefully back in the cradle.

He was halfway to the library when the lights went out. For a moment he was plunged into blackness, then the emergency floods kicked on with a snap and a buzz, and everything was bathed in a dim orange glow. He fumbled in his pocket for his mobile: no bars. He tucked it back into his pocket and started for the library again, walking instinctively close to the wall. The skin of his palms was damp, and the back of his neck felt tight and vulnerable. He could hear the wind howling outside the building, scaling up to what must be a ferocious pitch. Cordelia had called it a cyclone--perhaps she'd been right. For the first time, he began to worry about the windows.

He had to haul the library door open by force; it had swung shut automatically when the power had cut out. Inside, he took the big torch from the bottom desk drawer and carried it through the stacks, skimming the spines. The wind hammered at the outer walls, and some part of his mind called up the old Biblical references: cymbals and gongs. Over the sound of the wind he heard a distant crash, then another. He paused, his hand poised over the third volume of the Eternal Diamond Fortune.

Then the door to the library banged open, and he jumped and almost dropped the book.

"Oi, Watcher," yelled Spike. Wesley put his head out the end of the aisle and was afforded the bizarre sight of Spike attempting to haul Xander into the library at the end of a length of chain. Xander, in jeans and a T-shirt with the collar ripped halfway to his shoulder, was trying with all his considerable strength to resist being pulled in. His feet were planted on the threshold and his arms, yanked straight out in front of him by the force of the chain, were corded with muscle. In full game face, he reminded Wesley of nothing so much as a brutally strong, recalcitrant dog.

"Harris," said Spike, wrestling with his end of the chain, "I'll break every limb you have, I swear to Christ."

"What's going on?" Wesley asked, stepping out of the aisle. Neither of them looked at him. Harris had managed to hook his leg to the outside of the door, and was using the leverage to brace himself. The wood creaked. Spike, Wesley noticed, wasn't gaining any ground. "What are you doing here? I thought you were staying--"

"So did I," Spike gritted. "Till the lights went off and

Harris tried to make a run for it."

"Make a--" Wesley stared at Xander, who'd at some point bitten his own lip, causing it to bleed down his chin. His expression, in the orange emergency lights, was distorted and wild, almost bestial. "What's wrong with him?"

"Don't ask me," Spike snapped, looping his end of the chain around the leg of the big table. "He's got a wild hair about the storm. He's not making any sense, and he won't--" He cut off with a grunt as Xander jerked suddenly at the chain, then jerked it savagely back, slamming Xander into the door but not dislodging him. "Won't fucking listen to reason."

"Xander," Wesley tried, resting the torch on the table. "It's all right, you're safe here--"

Unfortunately, Angel chose that moment to appear in the hallway behind Xander. Xander registered it at the same moment Wesley did--he reacted by whipping around and striking with snakelike speed at Angel's throat. The spell dropped him to his knees, and Spike took advantage of the situation to drag him into the library by his still-chained wrists. All in all it hardly

seemed fair, Wesley reflected. But now was not the time to contemplate just outcomes.

Angel hesitated at the threshold, watching with a troubled expression as Spike wrapped Xander's chains around the leg of the table.

"Is he okay?" he asked, over the still-rising howl of the wind. Spike didn't reply. He finished securing the chain, then pried up one of Xander's fluttering eyelids. After a moment or two he let it go again, his mouth tight.

"Right," he said, climbing to his feet and clapping his hands against his jeans. "What're we dealing with, exactly?"

Wesley pulled his gaze away from Xander, who was rolling clumsily from his back to his side, his hands pawing for purchase. "So far," he said, laying the Eternal Diamond Fortune on the table, "just a storm. As far as we know."

"It's hailing baseballs," Angel said flatly. "It's more than just a storm, Wes." He stayed close to the wall, giving Xander a wide berth on his way to the head of the table. "Somebody's trying to tell us something."

"Quite possibly," Wesley said. He had to raise his voice to hear it above the storm, he noticed, with a frisson of alarm. "The question is, who? And what?"

Xander said something, too low to make out over the storm. Spike toed him in the ribs. "What's that?"

They all looked at Xander, who ground his forehead against the floor in silence. Wesley gave it a minute, then flipped to the index in the Fortune and started looking for references to storms. There were dozens. He frowned and tried the first.

"Wes, I need to know what's going on." Angel was at his elbow, peering at the page. "There's got to be some way to short-cut the book stuff."

"There is," Wesley said, without looking up. "It's called the database. However, since the network's down, we can't use it."

"Some other way," Angel said. "What about the White Room?"

"No power," Wesley reminded him. "The elevators won't

take us there."

"Whatever this is," Angel said, "it's ripping my building to pieces." As if to underline his urgency, the building gave a long, low creak. They all fell silent. Wesley wasn't certain, but he thought he felt a faint, deeply unpleasant sense of movement beneath his feet.

"Who the hell is doing this?" Angel barked. There was a startled clank from beneath the table, and he mastered himself with visible effort. "Wes, I need answers."

Very clearly, Xander said: "You're so fucking stupid."

Even the wind fell silent for a moment. They all stood looking at each other. Then, as one, they all crouched down and looked at Xander, who was curled around the table leg, trembling visibly, every muscle taut. The manacles were digging cruelly into his wrists, but he hardly seemed to notice them. He stared back at them, one eye golden and the other dull brown, sweat running down his throat.

"Xander," Angel said quietly, and even that was enough to make Xander flinch, before he caught himself and shook it off. He met Angel's gaze with a combination of

terror and disdain. "Do you know what's going on here?"

"You're all so fucking stupid," Xander repeated, and let out a short, involuntary laugh that showed his fangs and the red lines of his gums. "I'm the only one who gets it, right? Because I'm the only one who's really bad, now."

Wesley looked at Spike, asking with his eyes: *What's he talking about?* Spike shook his head, made a vague gesture with his hand: *More of the same, it's all bollocks.*

"It's the good guys," Xander said, panting through half-open lips. He was so pale now he looked waxen. "Act of God, right? Put that on your insurance claim, you dick."

"Xander," Angel said, just as they all felt an awful, seismic shift in the building around them. There was an explosion, a sound of hundreds of industrially reinforced windows exploding all at once, and then a snapping sound, a quick, rank, electrical whiff, and all the lights went out. Even the torch died in Wesley's hand.

They stayed where they were, crouched in the darkness. The wind was gone, Wesley realized dimly. He could hear Xander breathing in quick, gasping pants. He could hear the clink of the chain.

"Aw, fuck," Xander said softly, and in the darkness he sounded so much like the old Xander Harris, the good man forever backed into a terrible corner, that Wesley wanted to reach out and touch him. "Here they come."

"What the--" Spike started to say, and then the door to the library bloomed with a blue-white light. Wesley's eyes immediately began to water. He heard himself make a choking sound, and realized Angel's hand was on his shoulder.

"Are you all right?" Angel asked, his mouth close to Wesley's ear, as if there weren't a host of angels standing in the door to the library. Wesley, afraid he'd vomit if he opened his mouth, nodded.

"Lie down," Angel said, pressing him gently to the floor. "It's easier if you don't look at them."

But Wesley couldn't look away. He lay on his back and stared through weeping eyes at the giant figures. They each had multiple faces, and they gazed around the library with expressions of kindly interest that were at the same time furious and supremely, transcendently uninterested. When one of them turned its eyes directly

on Wesley, he felt that he was simultaneously burning alive and resting more deeply than he'd ever done. It was more pleasurable and painful than anything he'd ever felt, and it only stopped when Angel stood up between them, cutting off the thing's line of vision.

"You're in my house," he said flatly, and Wesley spent a flickering instant amazed that he could stand up, let alone speak. "I didn't invite you in."

"This place is unclean," said the angel, searing the room with its gaze. "It has been an unholy house for many years. We offered peace."

"You offered a buyout," Angel said. "We said no."

"And so," said the thing. "We are here."

Remotely, Wesley became aware of Xander lying on the floor to his right, underneath the table. He was shaking uncontrollably, clattering his chains against the floor and the table. He'd sweated through his shirt, and there was a bloody froth on his lips. Spike crouched beside him, one hand on his shoulder, but Xander didn't seem to notice. His head lolled, and his eyes met Wesley's blankly. His face was more elongated, his fangs longer, the ridges of

his head and neck more ferociously pronounced than Wesley had ever seen them. Here was a demon, Wesley thought dimly, trapped in the presence of avenging angels.

"This house isn't as unclean as you think it is," Angel was saying. "You know who I am. What I am."

"A demon," said one of the angel's faces. "A man," said another. "With a soul," said a third. They turned to Spike, who ground his jaw but gave them a steady glare in return. "And this one, too."

"This one is a man," said another, and Wesley realized faintly that it was talking about him. "A good man. Our soldier."

"Yeah," Spike said, getting to his feet with some effort. "Be nice if you could tone things down a bit, for his sake."

There was a pause, and then Wesley realized he could breathe without pulling at the air, that he could stop making the whooping-cough sound he hadn't even realized he'd been making. His muscles released their death-grip on each other. He was cold. He could see his breath in the air.

"That one," the angels said, "is a child of Morning Star."

Wesley turned his head and found himself looking into Xander's eyes again. Silently, they gazed at each other. Xander's wrists worked incessantly, bloodily, in the manacles.

"Not really," Spike said. "More of a red-headed stepson, I'd say."

"Unclean," said the angel, and the word was so singular, so pure and irretrievable, that Wesley's heart sank. He felt tears fill his eyes again, and spill down his face to the floor. "This one, and the others who are not here. The low and unclean ones. We shall smite them."

"No," said Angel. "You shall not."

There was a pause. Wesley had the distinct impression that the angels were conferring, although none of them moved or spoke.

"Here's how this is going to go," Angel said, turning his back on the angels and walking to the weapons case against the wall. He opened the door, spent a moment

perusing the contents, and chose a longsword. "You're going to leave now." He weighed the sword in his hand, glanced at Spike, then reached back into the case and withdrew a battleaxe. With his foot, he eased the case door closed. "You're going to go tell your boss this isn't the den of sin he seems to think it is. And if I hear of a single one of my people being smitten?" He walked back over to the table and held the axe out to Spike, who took it and swung it experimentally. "I'm going to come over to your place and start breaking furniture."

The silence drew out. Wesley tried to raise his head, and couldn't.

"I don't know," Spike said. "They're busy people. Maybe we shouldn't wait for the Christmas rush."

"Fine with me," Angel said. "These assholes broke my building."

Things happened very suddenly after that. All Wesley was sure of was that Angel raised the sword, and that Spike turned and swung the axe in an impossibly fast arc, that the blade passed through the air with a zipping sound and through the leg of the table with a single decisive *whack*. The table itself jumped, then stood still,

then started to slide woozily to the floor, spilling the Eternal Diamond Fortune to the ground beside Wesley's head. He blinked. Spike had attacked the table. Why had-  
-?

Then he heard the clatter of chains and a hurried thundering of feet, and realized that Xander was escaping out from under the far end of the collapsing table, heading for the back of the library and the door to the tunnels.

In the front of the library, Angel seemed to be doing battle with three columns of light. Something struck him in the head, he staggered, and Spike stepped in behind him, swinging the axe in a silver circle. They fought well together, Wesley reflected, as he slid down the warm slope toward the waiting darkness. It was a shame there was no possible way for them to win.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

He woke up to the embarrassing, ammoniac sting of smelling salts. He was under a blanket, lying on the floor of the library. The ruined table knelt beside him, the Eternal Diamond Fortune was still splayed open next to

his head. Spike was sitting back on his heels, the open salt vial in his fingers, looking around the room with an expression of weary bemusement.

"What--" Wesley's voice came out creaking, and he had to clear his throat. "What happened?"

"Draw," Spike said, without looking at him.

"They kicked our asses," Angel said. Wesley raised his head with an effort, and saw Angel standing behind the desk, his mobile phone pressed to his ear. The lights were on again, Wesley noticed. There was a twist of blackened metal on the floor by the doorway; after a moment, he recognized the cruciform handle of the longsword. Beside it was a cold puddle of solid steel-- Spike's axe.

Slowly, Wesley sat up. Spike offered him the salts, and he shook his head.

"Where are they?"

"They left," Angel said shortly, hitting the cutoff and punching in another number. "But they'll be back. We need to get hold of someone who can deal with these

people. A mediator."

"A...priest?" Wesley asked. Spike gave a rude cough.

"Then who?"

"A mediator," Angel said again, and turned to face the wall, one hand rising to rub the back of his head.

"You all right?" Spike asked. Wesley blinked at him.

"Xander--where did he go?"

"Fucked if I know," Spike said, with a bitter laugh. "I checked the route down to the tunnels, and he's not there."

"But it's not safe for him to leave." Wesley had the vague sense that he still wasn't thinking very quickly. "He can't-- he can't fight. He's helpless. He knows that."

"Sure," Spike said. "He also knew he was going to be a tiki torch if he stayed here." He smiled grimly. "Ladies and gentlemen, Xander Harris has left the building."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Had Wesley been in any state of mind to make predictions, he would have assumed that finding a mediator would take more time and effort than finding Xander. He would have been wrong.

The mediator was a small, red-faced man with a bulbous nose and prodigious tufts of hair growing from both ears. "Marcel Pagnol," he said, presenting a business card with a weary flourish. "No, not that Marcel Pagnol. Although I knew him, would you believe it? I could never stand those movies. Everything so slow, everyone so *troubled*, where's the action? Where's the--" He clapped Angel's lapel. "You have a problem with divinity, yes? Tell me more."

"We've got activist cherubim," Angel confirmed. "Watch your step."

Pagnol touched a checkered handkerchief to his lips, stepping lightly over an overturned chair. "I can see," he said, nodding at the blown-out windows. "So, where do we talk?"

"My office is still standing," Angel said, ushering him that way. Over his shoulder, he said, "Spike, you want me to

call someone to find Xander?"

Spike was sorting through a handful of pages that had blown off someone's desk; he didn't bother to respond. Angel glanced at Wesley, a request in his eyes. Wesley nodded, and Angel closed the door on his conversation with Marcel Pagnol.

"Where do we start?" Wesley asked, dry-swallowing the aspirin he'd found in Fred's desk drawer. Spike gave him a narrow look.

"You've got a building to put back together."

"The building can wait." Xander, he omitted to say, probably could not. "I want to help, Spike."

"I can handle it."

"I'm sure you can, but it'll go faster with two of us." Spike's gaze was flat. "He's my friend. Or, he was before all this happened. It's partly my fault he's in this situation."

"Well," said Spike, turning away, "we all get a share in that one, don't we?"

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

They compromised; Spike did a first sweep in the tunnels while Wesley got the network up and running again. They kept in touch over their mobiles while Wesley printed out maps of all the tunnels connected to the one Xander had fled to.

"What about the angels?" he asked, collecting the sheaf from the plotter and glancing out the window at the darkening sky. "Will they be looking for him too?"

"Dunno," Spike said. "Dunno what put this bug up their ass in the first place. If Angel's mediator is any good, he should be working on backing them off a bit."

Privately, Wesley hoped that Marcel Pagnol was a very good mediator. Out loud, he said, "Tell me where to meet you."

Spike paused. "It's dark out, yeah? I'll come up at Figueroa and First."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

The streets outside the building were empty, the traffic lights burnt out or blinking red. All the smaller businesses were shuttered with metal gates. In the lobbies of the big ones, the office buildings and banks, he glimpsed security guards standing around in the gloom, studying the broken windows. Occasionally he heard sirens. The streets were slick and shining, the gutters full of slush. Los Angeles, in the wake of a hurricane, was an even more unnerving city than usual.

Spike was a thin dark figure on the windswept street corner, his hands thrust deep into his pockets and his collar turned up, looking like the ghost of James Dean. He got in, bringing a waft of cold, smoky, slightly sewerish air. Wesley cracked his window.

"Sorry."

"Not at all." Conscious of the absurdity, Wesley drew the folder of maps from the back seat, and passed it to Spike, who was swigging from a flask. "Where should we start?"

"You sure you're up for this?" Spike gave him a close look. "You look knackered."

"I'm fine." In addition to the aspirin, he'd taken four of Fred's caffeinated Midol. He'd have to remember them as an antidote to angelic visitations and other depleting encounters. "Where would he go, once he was able to travel aboveground?"

Spike spent another few seconds scrutinizing him, then pursed his lips and started shuffling through the maps. "Depends."

"On what?"

"On whether it's Harris or the demon running the show."

Wesley considered that, while the engine purred. Spike took another swig from the flask, and held it out. Wesley shook his head.

"Right," Spike said, settling into his seat with an air of resignation. "Let's start with the brothels."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Harris, thank God, wasn't in any of the half-dozen vampire brothels they visited. Wesley wasn't sure, but he

thought that was a positive sign.

"All right," he said, settling back behind the steering wheel and trying to forget the last two hours of his life. "What's next?"

Spike thought, unscrewing the cap of his flask. "Bars, I guess."

"Demon bars?"

"Maybe." Spike swigged, and this time Wesley took the flask when it was offered. It was rough, unwatered bourbon, and it was excellent. "He might try human ones, though. Might think his chances were better."

"His chances of what?"

"Of not getting dusted."

Wesley turned the key in the ignition, then paused. "Perhaps we're going about this the wrong way. In his condition, mightn't he look for the safest possible place to hide? Somewhere isolated?"

"The Virgin Islands, yeah." Spike repossessed the flask.

"He's got no money, doesn't know anyone. And he's panicked." He slouched deeper against the passenger side door. "Harris is a drinker, and so's the demon. Bars next."

Wesley tried to think of something to say to that, but quickly realized that there really weren't any good options. He put the car in gear and pulled out.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

They gave up a couple of hours before dawn, and Spike insisted on driving them back.

"You look like shit," he said, lifting the keys from Wesley's fingers. "Last thing we need is for you to plow through a bus full of nuns. Bloody angels'd skin us all alive."

"Indeed," Wesley said, too exhausted to put up much of a fight. The angels seemed like a lifetime ago; the last few hours had turned to an indistinguishable slurry of smoky back rooms, grim stares, and John Cougar Mellencamp classics. He'd smelled too many rancid bar floors, and brushed up against too many sticky, unseen

substances to really believe that God existed anymore. He slid into the passenger seat and massaged his temples, trying to think. "It'll be daylight soon--he'll need somewhere to go to earth. We should try some of the warehouses on the other side of the river."

"You need sleep," Spike said, staring straight ahead, his legs sprawled loosely in the footwell, but his fingers tight around the wheel. "We're going back to the office, maybe he's turned up there."

If he had, someone would have called. But Wesley didn't argue; he allowed himself to slide down the walls of his own consciousness, and was asleep before they hit the freeway.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Marcel Pagnol had left, taking with him a sizeable check and a detailed description of the angels in question. They found Angel alone in the lobby, considering the Pagnol business card amid the splintered remains of most of the office furniture.

"He said there's been a lot of this lately--random

crackdowns." Angel paused, giving Wesley a second look. "You okay?"

"Fine." In fact the muscles on either side of his spine had begun to stiffen and fuse, and he was having trouble keeping his eyes focused. "Did he say what...why they're doing this?"

Angel continued to stare at him, until Spike walked past and said casually, "He's a mess. Better get one of the womenfolk to fix him up."

"They're not here," Angel said absently, reaching for Wesley's arm. Irritated, Wesley drew it away.

"I'm fine," he said again. "What kind of crackdowns?"

"You should sit," Angel said. He took Wesley's arm in a firm grip and led him to the battle-scarred leather club chair in the corner of the lobby. At the same time, he turned his head to follow Spike, who was heading for the elevators. "Any sign of Xander?"

"Not a one," Spike said, slapping the buttons and frowning at the floor lights. "Bugger's gone to ground somewhere. Or he's dusted."

There was a brief silence, while Wesley sank into the chair and Angel looked at Spike. Spike slapped the buttons again, then muttered, "Fuck it," and started for the stairs.

"Spike," Angel said. "I want to talk to you."

"That's nice. I want a shower and a pint."

"Come see me in my rooms."

Spike gave no indication that he'd heard; he just straight-armed the emergency door and disappeared into the stairwell. Angel added, "Or I'll come find you."

The door closed with a crash. Wesley winced; his head was pounding. Angel turned back to look at him. "Do you want help getting to bed?"

"No, thank you." He planned to sleep in the chair. "Why crackdowns? And why us? Surely this firm is on the side of right for the first time in hundreds of years. Why attack us now?"

Angel looked thoughtful. "I don't think it's anything

personal. The way he explained it to me, it's like...well, kind of like the Council, only bigger. With more bureaucracy."

Wesley squinted.

"Yeah," said Angel. "That's what I said, too. I'm going to go get you a cup of tea."

Wesley laughed. "All right," he said. He could still feel the pressure of Angel's hand on his arm. He let his head fall back against the chair and watched Angel walk away through the wrecked lobby. Behind him, the eastern sky was just beginning to turn pink.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

He woke up under a blanket, with a cup of cold tea at his feet. The sun was bright outside the shattered windows. A faint breeze stirred the papers scattered across the floor. His neck was kinked and his temples felt tight, but he wasn't teetering on the edge of complete exhaustion anymore. He stood beside a shattered window and drank the tea with the bag still in it, the little paper tag fluttering in the wind.

In the security room, he took a quick look around the building. All of the windows on floors eight through fourteen appeared to be blown out, but the others seemed intact. Angel's suite, on the top floor, was still glassed in. From what he could tell, the White Room was still there, although the elevators didn't seem to be working yet. He'd brought the office network up on the backup generators, but everything else was still down. A quick look out the window confirmed it--the power was out for blocks.

His mobile had service again but the battery was low, so he took the stairs up to Angel's suite. By the time he got there he was breathing hard and he could feel the prickle of perspiration at his hairline. He needed a shower, he realized. He could smell the lingering traces of his own rank sweat in his clothes. Unfortunately, his room was on one of the floors that had been hardest hit by the storm: so far as he knew, he had no windows, no electricity, and probably no plumbing. Glumly, he considered the prospect of driving back to his flat for clean clothes and a shower. It seemed impossible, given all that he had to do here.

Angel opened the door in pajama bottoms, nothing else.

It was and would forever be a point of painful embarrassment for Wesley that he couldn't look directly at Angel unclothed. He felt his eyes slide immediately to the side, and tried not to acknowledge his own blush.

"I'm sorry," he said, automatically. "You were sleeping, I'll come back--"

"No," said Angel. "I'm up. Are you okay?"

"Fine." Wesley tried to remember what he'd come for. "I was wondering--well, most of the windows have been broken, it's not safe for you on those floors until the sun goes down. And I was wondering about the staff, whether we should contact the department heads, start bringing people back in--"

"I don't want anyone coming back until we're sure it's safe." Angel hesitated, then stepped to the side. "You should come in so we can talk this through."

Wesley nodded automatically. "The mobiles are working again. We should call Spike, he could take the service corridors to get here."

Again, Angel paused. "I'll fill him in," he said, closing the

door quietly. "Hang on, I'm going to put some clothes on." He started across the room toward the bedroom door. "There's water in the fridge."

Wesley took out a warm bottle and drank it staring out the treated glass of Angel's window, trying to collect his thoughts. He was just beginning to formulate a list of priorities, neatly ordered in descending order of importance, when he realized he could hear voices in Angel's bedroom. A moment later, he realized whose they were: Angel himself, and Spike.

For a moment he stood staring blankly out at the silent city, at the broken windows of the high-rise opposite, at the single plume of dark smoke rising from somewhere across the river. He turned and looked at the room. The couch, the deep leather chairs--it was all familiar. Across one of the chairs lay Spike's duster. On the low table were two glasses of whiskey dregs, like a pair of puzzle pieces. Wesley gazed at them, while the low, almost inaudible murmur of discussion went on behind the closed bedroom door. After a minute or two, it stopped.

Wesley turned back to the window, and drank his water.

After another couple of minutes, Angel came out of the

bedroom and closed the door behind him. He was dressed in a dark shirt and trousers, and his hair was worked into a semblance of its usual shape. He went to the fridge and took out his own bottle of water.

"Our first priority," said Wesley, "is to determine how negotiations are proceeding with the...cherubim."

"Agreed," said Angel.

"Once we understand the situation better, we can hope to prevent another attack, or answer it better, should it occur. In the meantime, we need to find Xander. It's still light out, but I can start searching if Spike provides me with a list of locations."

"Okay."

"Full power will have to wait until the city grid comes back up, but in the meantime we have the generator to run the basics. We should put Fred to work on getting the network back up to strength."

Angel said nothing. Wesley turned to face him with a small smile.

"I'll need to take a side trip," he said. "To my flat. For a change of clothes, a few other things."

"Sure," Angel said. "Of course. Whatever you need." His eyes were intent on Wesley's face. "Listen, Wes, I think I should say--"

"Tell Spike to send the list to my mobile," Wesley said. "I'll charge it in the car along the way."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

He took the Land Rover, gunning it out of the basement garage too fast and driving it hard, with grim satisfaction, through the rubbish-strewn streets. He knew he was being ridiculous, and some part of his mind watched his own behavior with chagrin. That didn't stop the burn of anger in his stomach, or the sick feeling he got when he thought back to the sound of their voices. They were vampires, he reminded himself. These things didn't have the same meaning for them. And besides, it was none of his business.

His phone buzzed and he checked it, saw it was a text from Spike, and tossed it back onto the seat without

looking at it. He wanted to get as far as possible from that bloody building, from the whole maddening, awkward, painful situation. Perhaps after this was all over, the current crisis averted, he'd move back into his own flat. It was his own fault, he'd let himself fall into the same old traps all over again, living at the company, spending all his time there. Playing the role of faithful manservant, slavishly grateful for the slightest show of affection. It was his own fault for expecting things to be other than they were.

### **Part Three**

It was past two o'clock by the time he got to his flat, and he had three more messages on his phone. The first was from Fred, saying she was on her way to Wolfram & Hart. The second was also from Fred, saying that she was there, and that because there was no air conditioning in the server room she was going to have to take most of the network down again. The last was from Cordelia, something about a check written on an overdrawn account. He was listening to it as he walked up the stairs to his floor of the building. He turned the corner in the stairwell, and stopped.

"Hi," said Xander.

Wesley stared at him, slowly lowering the phone from his ear. Xander was still wearing the ripped T-shirt and jeans he'd had on in the library, but somewhere along the way he'd picked up a zippered, hooded sweatshirt. It was too big for him; the cuffs covered his hands, and he'd pulled the hood over his head so his face was half-concealed. From what Wesley could see, he didn't seem to be injured.

"Hello," Wesley said. The hairs on the back of his neck had prickled up. He was startled, that was all. It was the first time he'd seen Xander outside Wolfram & Hart since Xander had been turned. Even knowing he was harmless, it was strange to see him here, at Wesley's own flat, without Spike standing guard in the background. "Are you--how long have you been here?"

Xander shrugged. "A while." His expression turned momentarily shamefaced. "I kind of forgot I couldn't get in on my own."

"Oh." Wesley remembered the phone in his hand. "I should call Spike and Angel, they're looking for you."

"Um." Xander took another step back, into the shadow by the wall. "If you could hold off on that just a little.

That would be awesome."

Wesley lowered the phone. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine." Xander flashed a self-conscious smile. "I was just hoping I could crash here for a while."

Wesley said nothing. For a few seconds, Xander met his gaze. Then he ducked his head and said, with a tight grin, "Or not."

"Xander, I'm sorry. It isn't safe for you here."

"Right, right." Xander nodded amiably. "Unlike the impenetrable offices of Wolfram & Hart. Where I could never be chained to a table and fried alive."

"We're working on discovering the motivation for the attack. Angel has engaged a...mediator." Wesley raised the phone again. "At the very least, I should let him know you're alive."

"Wes," Xander said. "Please. Come on."

Wesley hesitated.

"I'm kind of not in the mood for Angel right now," Xander said. "Or Spike. Or...anyone. I was thinking of just holing up and feeling like shit for a while." There was a catch in his voice, Wesley realized. Beneath the hood, he looked pale and fatigued. Perhaps there was an aftereffect to being in the presence of the angels--certainly Wesley himself had felt one. He thought of the headache pounding behind his temples in the hours before he'd slept, and felt a new wave of sympathy.

"Or," Xander went on, "how about if you just lend me a hundred bucks, and forget you saw me?"

"What? No--of course not." Wesley put the phone back in his pocket, and took out his keys. "Look, it's not safe for you to be out in the open right now. My flat isn't optimal, but under the circumstances, it may be our best option."

Xander said nothing, watching him sort through the keys. Wesley felt a faint prickle at the base of his neck, and glanced up. There was nothing unusual about Xander's expression--he looked hopeful, a little fearful, and very tired.

"You can stay here," Wesley said, passing him and

continuing up the stairs. "For a short time. Until we work out something better."

"Great, thanks." Xander sounded sincerely grateful.  
"And...you won't tell Angel yet?"

Wesley thought of the voices murmuring behind Angel's bedroom door. It was none of his business, he reminded himself. Still, he felt the sting of it as if it were very much his business, as if he were the one betrayed. "No," he said, opening the door to his hallway. "Not yet. You can stay here tonight, and I'll call Angel in the morning."

"Wesley," said Xander, following him through the door and waiting while he found the long-disused key to his flat on the ring, "if you repeat this I'll deny I said it. But you are a *mensch* among men."

Wesley paused, letting a smile touch the corners of his lips. He could always cast an uninvite spell, he reminded himself. "Come in," he said, and swung the door open.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Xander was a quiet, extremely appreciative houseguest.

He ghosted along behind Wesley for the short tour ("Towels are in here, I think. Tea in the cupboard, that clock used to work, I don't know what's gone wrong with it, this folds out, I need to throw that ficus away,") and said little, gazing around mutely at the few sparse furnishings under their layer of dust.

"Are you tired?" Wesley asked, remembering that for Xander it was effectively the middle of the night. "You can sleep if you'd like."

"Sure," said Xander, but there was something about the way he said it that made Wesley pause.

"I think there's still some blood in the freezer," he said with a frown. "Would you like something to--"

"Yes," Xander said immediately. Then he laughed, his expression self-mocking. "Jesus, sorry, manners much? My mother would kill me."

Wesley raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. "You must be hungry. I'll see what there is."

Xander hovered near the microwave while the bag defrosted, and burnt his lip biting into it when it came

out. He drank fast, wincing, from the mug that Wesley gave him. Wesley occupied himself with finding a backpack, and tried not to pay too much attention. Of course Xander hadn't fed since the day before, he realized--he'd had no opportunity. The ordeal with the angels must have exhausted him. And unlike Wesley, he'd had no one to put him in a chair to sleep off the effects, or make him a (not very good) cup of tea. It was ridiculous, but Wesley found himself angry all over again with Angel.

"If you'd like to shower," he called, discovering a pair of corduroy trousers he'd forgotten entirely, "feel free. There should be...soap, the basics." He couldn't remember what there was, in fact, but at the very least there was hot water.

"Thanks." Wesley jumped; Xander was standing in the door to the bedroom, watching him work. "Whoah--sorry." He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand, and glanced ruefully down. "Little cat feet, here."

"Indeed." Wesley smiled, but again he felt the faint prickling at the back of his neck. Xander was completely harmless--in fact, he was completely vulnerable. It was Xander who should feel threatened in the current

situation, wandering the city without protection. It occurred to Wesley that he shouldn't leave Xander here alone. If the angels found him here, no amount of explaining could justify the results.

"I'll go take that shower," Xander said, easing out of the doorframe. "I smell like five mile of rough road."

"Where did you spend the night?" Wesley asked, pausing with an old shirt in hand. "Spike and I searched the sewers and the bars." He forbore to mention the brothels.

Xander shrugged. "Mostly I spent it trying not to get noticed. Which is another way of saying, you don't want to know."

Wesley gazed at him, fingering the shirt. Xander rubbed the back of his neck briskly with his palm, and exhaled loudly. "Okay," he said, stepping out of the doorway with a self-effacing grin. "I'm gonna go test-drive that soap."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Wesley made himself a salty, execrable cup of soup, and

ate it sitting at his own kitchen table, feeling like a guest. Xander stayed in the shower for a long time. He'd rinsed out his blood mug, and put the empty bag, neatly folded, into the trash. Twice during the time he sat there, Wesley almost picked up his mobile to call Angel with the news. Both times he let it go. Nothing could happen until nightfall anyway--Spike and Angel couldn't reasonably get there, and Wesley couldn't take Xander back to the firm. And Xander's desire for some time and privacy was entirely understandable, under the circumstances.

Xander finally emerged from the bathroom, fully dressed but with his hair dripping water onto the shoulders of his shirt. He hovered briefly in the kitchen doorway. "Okay if I grab a nap?" He looked half-asleep already.

"Of course." Wesley had moved on to a few of the tomes he kept at the flat--minor works, most of them duplicates of copies in the firm's library, but still better than sitting on his hands. "Do you need anything?"

Xander shook his head, his gaze dropping to the books. "Boning up on angels," he observed.

"Trying to. We've focused our collection efforts on demonologies, I'm afraid--I don't have much about

the...other side, as it were."

Xander's eyes were dark and meditative. He pursed his lips, pressing a palm to the door frame beside him.

"What about the spell?" His eyes flicked momentarily to Wesley's face, then down again. "Did Nigel ever get back to you on that?"

Wesley released a careful breath. "I'm sorry, Xander."

"Nah, it's okay." He shrugged, already turning away. "Just thought I'd check in, that's all. Night."

"Good night," Wesley said automatically, to the empty door frame. In the tiny front room, the springs of the pull-out bed squeaked and were still.

## **Part Four**

Wesley made a cup of tea, read half a chapter of theoretical extrapolations from Milton, and realized he

was exhausted. He took the book to his bedroom, slipped off his shoes, and lay down on top of the blankets, his mobile on the night table. Through the half-closed slats of the venetian blinds, the sun cast a long, late-afternoon light. Half an hour, he told himself. He was used to grabbing sleep where he could get it, and waking on a schedule.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

His first conscious thought was: *Something's wrong*. The room was dark and foreign--for a moment he couldn't remember where he was. Then he recalled his own flat, his own bed, his own stolen half hour of privacy and rest. But it was dark now, and there was a strange smell in the air, and when he tried to move his hands, he found them bound together at the wrists, fastened to his waist.

"Unh--" He was gagged, he realized. Something soft had been tied across his mouth. His heart kicked over and he sat up abruptly, tried to get off the bed, and found his feet tied at the ankles. His head swam, and he had a bad moment of nausea, the gag going damp between his teeth.

For a moment he just sat there, trying to figure out what was happening. He'd been in his flat, he'd let Xander in, they'd both fallen sleep-- A stone dropped into his gut. Xander.

As if on cue, the door to the bedroom opened, letting in light from the hallway. Xander was wearing an old jacket of Wesley's now, ovetop of the hooded sweatshirt. He was just closing a mobile phone, slipping it into his pocket. His expression was somber.

"Hi," he said. "And just for the record, I'm sorry."

Wesley stared at him, breathing heavily through the gag.

"I like you, Wes," Xander went on, walking to the bed and leaning over, getting a hand under Wesley's arm. "You're a decent guy, and under normal circumstances I'm pretty sure I would totally spare your life. At least, I wouldn't go gunning for you or anything. But right now?" He pulled Wesley to the edge of the bed, and gave him a rueful smile. "Things aren't exactly normal."

Wesley jerked his arm free, and tried to lean out of reach. Xander caught hold of him again without any apparent irritation. One hand curled around the back of

Wesley's neck and held his head straight, firmly but not painfully. The other fished in his pocket, and produced a small bottle.

"I can't hurt you," he said conversationally, holding up the bottle. There was a label, but Wesley's vision was swimming too much to read it. "But I can chloroform you again if you get on my jock." He looked momentarily apologetic. "Not that I blame you, obviously, but come on--we both know who's going to win here, right?"

Wesley worked the gag between his teeth, trying to get enough freedom for speech. Xander gave him a long, steady look, then tucked the bottle away again and hauled him forward to the edge of the bed. Their faces were inches apart.

"You're a good guy," he said, "and you're also kind of hot, in a fucked-up, obedience-school kind of way. I'd be pretty okay with turning you and scampering off into the night together to drink Chianti and hump co-eds. Or vice versa." His gaze was momentarily contemplative. One finger stroked the bone behind Wesley's ear. "But." His expression firmed; he gave Wesley a quick, tight smile. "That's not going to happen. So."

He leaned forward the last few inches and pressed his mouth to Wesley's through the gag. He smelled of Wesley's toothpaste, his old forgotten aftershave. His lips were cool. Then he stood up, and in the process pulled Wesley with him, up and easily over one shoulder, like a bag of laundry. Wesley's glasses fell off. He couldn't breathe.

"What *is* going to happen," Xander said, carting him unceremoniously out of the bedroom, and sweeping the Land Rover's keys off the mail table, "is that I'm going to follow up on a good idea about this fucking spell, before my ass gets flame-broiled by the Jeebus Squad." He opened the door to Wesley's apartment, paused to glance out, then stepped out into the empty hallway and started for the stairs. "And you're going to...well, actually, I didn't ask too many questions about what you were going to do. But don't worry, I'll send Nigel a thank-you card. For all his hard work on our behalf."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

After that, things got confusing for a while. Wesley remembered being dumped across the back seat of the Land Rover, then rolled gently into the footwell. He'd

been bound with his own neckties, he'd discovered by then--the knots were cinched tight. The gag was torn from one of his shirts.

"Whoopsa-daisy," Xander said, tucking his feet in with a careful hand. "Hang tight down there, okay? Take a nap." He shut the door and got into the driver's seat. The engine started.

Wesley tried to remember the sequence of turns they took, but his brain was shrouded in fog and his head was splitting. He lost track almost immediately. He'd started to sweat. He couldn't reach the door handles, couldn't do much more than squirm out of the awkward position he'd fallen into and try gradually to work his way back up onto the seat.

"How you doing back there?" Xander asked at one point, sounding genuinely concerned. "You want music or anything?"

Wesley paused, gasping for breath, and allowed himself to heartily wish that the angels had smitten Xander when they'd had the chance.

They got onto a freeway and drove for twenty minutes or

perhaps an eternity. Wesley had made it back up onto the seat and was sawing his wrists against the ties to free his hands when they swerved down an off ramp. He glimpsed warehouses, possibly factories, through the tinted windows. The car slowed and he kicked at the door handle by his feet.

"Hey, now." Xander pulled into a parking lot, cut the engine, and glanced back over the seat. "You want another hit of this stuff?" He had the chloroform in his hand. "Might take the edge off."

Wesley lay still, panting, staring at Xander and thinking as clearly as he could, *Stop this now. It's not too late to stop this. For the love of God--*

"Hokay," Xander said, and got out.

He opened the back door, dragged Wesley casually out by the ankles, and slung him like a bag of onions over one shoulder. When Wesley fought, he got a smack on the ass.

"Wes, at times like this, you want to hang onto your dignity. Don't make me take you in there all pathetic and teary-eyed. This isn't summer camp."

Wesley hung for a moment, gathering his breath, staring at the pavement swimming darkly beneath him. He could hear traffic on the freeway and some kind of industrial machinery in the distance, which must mean they were still in the city. He'd gained enough free play in the ties to work his hands around and grab the fabric of Xander's coat. He twisted it in his fist and tugged, trying one last time to communicate.

Xander ignored him. He kicked the door closed, locked it with the remote, and started walking. Wesley twisted hard, his hip connecting with Xander's head, but it did no good. "I know what you're thinking," Xander said, shifting his grip amenably. "You're thinking, 'Aaaaaaaagh!' And you know what? You're right."

He thumped on what sounded like a heavy metal door-- Wesley felt the vibrations through his body--and stepped back to wait. After a few seconds he started whistling an off-key version of *The Way to San Jose*. Wesley heard footsteps approaching, then the screech and clang of a heavy door opening on an unoiled hinge.

"Domino's delivers," said Xander. "I got a three-cheese pepperoni, who gets it?" He was already walking

forward, stepping through a metal doorframe and into darkness. The temperature dropped a couple of degrees, and the air smelled of rust. Wesley hung in total blackness, a drip of sweat dangling from his nose.

"He's awake," someone observed, in an unpleasantly deep voice.

"Uh-huh."

"He's not blindfolded."

"And this matters why?" Xander kept walking. "It's not like you guys are operating a catch-and-release outfit here."

There was no reply except the extremely final-sounding clang of the door closing somewhere in the darkness behind Wesley's head. He flinched automatically, and Xander patted him on the back.

"Don't worry, it'll all be over...uh, soonish."

The blood in his head was forcing stars through Wesley's vision, but he still made out a faint light somewhere in front of them. He closed his eyes and shook his head,

trying to clear it.

"Hi," Xander said. "One Watcher, as ordered." He shifted his grip on Wesley's waist and lowered him slowly, without apparent effort, to the ground. Wesley blinked and struggled to make his eyes work. He was looking at a small circle of men standing around the opened hood of an El Camino. A bare bulb hung from the hook beneath the hood. Most of the men were looking pensively into the engine. They were all Hispanic. As he stared, the one in front reached into the engine and fiddled with something.

"And so," Xander went on, as if the situation were completely normal, "one de-spelling, in return. *Muchas gracias, por favor.*"

A couple of the men looked at him. They weren't friendly looks, Wesley realized. There was a pause.

Then the man in front pulled his hand out of the engine and wiped it on a blue bandanna dangling from his pocket. His face was round, pockmarked, and mournful. He had a thin moustache and a nearly shaved head. He studied the grease on his fingers, then unhooked the light bulb from the hood and walked over, trailing the

cord, to where Wesley sat. The bulb came so close Wesley felt the heat against his cheek. He closed his eyes and turned his face away while the man studied him.

After a minute, he heard a derogatory exhalation, and the light retreated.

"Okay," the man said. Wesley opened his eyes; the bulb was going back on the hood, the man's attention was on the engine again. He licked his thumb, adjusted the light, and muttered something in Spanish. Immediately, two men stepped out of the group. One walked straight to Wesley, hooked an arm under his shoulders, and dragged him across the concrete floor toward the car. Wesley went rigid and tried to plant his feet, and the man cuffed him across the back of the head.

"Oh good," he heard Xander say. "If undoing this feels anything like doing it did--" Then he gave a sudden gasp, and Wesley twisted around to see him breathe in a faceful of dust blown from the palm of the second man, standing in front of him. Bizarrely, illogically, Wesley's first thought was, *Don't be stupid, that could be anything.*

But it was clear, a moment later, that it was in fact what Xander had apparently bargained for--an agent to lift the

Council's no-harm spell. The symptoms were all too obvious. He stumbled back a step, smiling foolishly, his hands traveling over his chest and belly, a faint movement in his trousers that Wesley immediately tried to forget. A moment later, Xander was in game face, flexing his shoulders and popping the muscles in his neck. He made a playful grab for the man standing in front of him, who ducked back and came up in his own game face, snarling.

Xander laughed, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Hey, hey, no hard feelings. First one's free, right?"

The man with his hands in the engine looked up and fixed Xander with a steady gaze. Xander grinned at him.

"Okay," he said. "So that's that. Good luck with the car, guys." He turned and sketched Wesley a little salute.

"Wesley, for what you are about to experience, I am truly sorry. But hey, if you make it out alive, look me up, okay? We can hang."

Wesley gave a throttled half-yell, and the man behind him hauled him to his feet. For the first time, Wesley saw the cage sitting in the shadows behind him. It was made of iron bars, about four feet square. A pair of manacles

dangled from an iron ring in the top. Behind it sat a forklift, already in position to pick it up.

Wesley's heart kicked up. He twisted around and yelled wordlessly after Xander, who was walking away into the darkness. Xander turned back and held out his hands in a *what can you do?* gesture.

"Let me give you some advice about being in a cage, Wes. Keep your head down. And don't drop the soap."

Wesley yelled after him, his throat bursting behind the gag, until the man holding him upright punched him in the side of the head to shut him up. Xander disappeared into the darkness, and they all heard the clang of the door closing behind him.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Wesley went into the cage. He had no choice in the matter--his head was reeling from the chloroform and the punch, and the man holding him was brutally strong. Before Wesley even knew what was going on he was on his knees with his hands locked above his head, and the padlock was clicking into place on the cage door. The

man gave him an assessing look, then went back to the little circle around the El Camino's front end. Wesley sank down as far as he could onto his knees and tried to catch his breath.

Being kidnapped and sold as fresh meat to a vampire gang was, unfortunately, a fate that he'd actually had the opportunity to contemplate before in his career. Oddly, he'd never imagined that the main components of the experience would be thirst, muscle cramp, and a strange, terrified species of boredom. The men ignored him. He stayed quiet, trying to think. Angel and Spike didn't know where he was. As the night wore on they might try his flat, but that would lead nowhere. And if the men who'd kidnapped him planned to move him, it was even less likely he'd be found. He tried very hard not to dwell on his own stupidity, which seemed more colossal with every passing moment.

Sometime later they started trying the engine, at first with a series of abortive clicks and then, endless adjustments later, with a more promising throaty cough. Wesley shifted to ease the pain in his shoulders. He was trying to come up with something to bargain with. Money seemed irrelevant. Perhaps magic--clearly they had a use for it. He was trying to approximate the street

value of a Valan impotence curse when the El Camino's engine roared into life. The men unhooked the light bulb and slammed the hood. Then they started toward his cage.

He tensed, readying for some kind of assault, but they walked right past him. One got into the forklift and started the engine. He turned, blinking at the sudden noise, and heard a series of car doors open and slam. Headlights blinked to life around him--one, two, then a dozen pairs. The cage gave a little jump as the forklift kicked in. Then he was lifted off the floor, and a truck with a high cap over the bed was reversing toward him, and after a little back and forth he was in the cage, in the truck bed, and they were slamming the back gate closed.

He crouched in the darkness, sweating anew. He could hear tejano playing in the cab, and if he twisted around in the manacles he could see the dashboard lights glowing faintly through the tinted back window.

Hopelessly, he jerked at the manacles. They clanked and held. The truck started to creep forward, following a procession of tail lights toward a square of dark blue light that he realized was a door in the warehouse. They were leaving, taking him with him. Panic soured his mouth.

There was nothing he could do except save his strength and try to keep his head. He counted slowly to a thousand while the truck carried him up onto the freeway and on to parts unknown. Briefly, he wondered if Xander had felt like this in his own cage, in the basement of Wolfram & Hart, with Angelus just outside. He found he didn't really care.

The drive lulled him into a dazed, semi-torpid nightmare state, and he only fully emerged when the truck pulled off the freeway, took a few turns, and stopped. How long had it been? He had no idea. His chances of surviving the night were dwindling at an alarming rate.

He heard the driver get out of the cab, walk around to the back gate, and open it. They were behind a drab, squat building, under the ubiquitous sodium arc lights of every parking lot in Los Angeles. Music was coming from the building--it sounded like very bad rock and roll. The sky was a paler shade of blue than it had been at the warehouse; even without his glasses Wesley could see rubbish bins against a back fence, more cars parked in the lot. Something about the scene was strangely familiar.

The man--a giant really, long-haired, blade-nosed, with arms like tree trunks--reached in and snagged the front bars of Wesley's cage, dragged it easily to the back of the truck bed, and heaved it onto the pavement. Wesley was thrown against the bars, his wrists twisting, his shoulder smashing the metal. He scrambled with his feet to get his balance back, smelling cigarettes and cheap beer, and thinking with some small part of his mind, *What is so familiar about this? How do I know this place?*

He heard a shrill, female laugh and in a blood-freezing instant he had it. He'd visited this building two nights before, with Spike. It was a brothel. A vampire brothel.

He yanked automatically, with renewed strength, against the manacles, and got nowhere. His wrists were raw by now; there was blood on his shirt cuffs. The man slammed the truck gate, locked it, and turned to grab the front of Wesley's cage. Wesley kicked at his hand. The man swore, drew back, and kicked the cage over onto its side, spilling Wesley hard onto his back against the bars. Before he could move he felt the cage grating over the pavement, heading for the back door of the building.

His panic was in full force now, clambering over him, knocking away any thought of strategy, practically any

thought at all. He yanked at the manacles, not caring that he was tearing his wrists and losing skin on his back against the pavement. He couldn't believe that it had come to this, that he was going to be sold into a brothel, molested and drained or God knew what worse fates awaited him, all because he'd been so unbelievably fucking stupid as to forget that Xander Harris no longer had a soul.

"Hi," said Xander.

The man stopped dragging Wesley's cage, straightened up, and looked back over his shoulder. Inside his cage, Wesley craned his neck. Xander was standing just behind him, his hands in his pockets, smiling amiably. He still wore Wesley's jacket, the same jeans he'd had on for the last couple of days. There might have been something slightly different about his stance, though.

"I was thinking," he said, rolling from his heels to the balls of his feet and back again. "About that deal we made."

The giant glanced down at Wesley's cage, reached out a foot, and tipped it casually over onto its top. Wesley, chained and bound, tumbled with it, landing with a

crunch on his shoulder and ear.

"Wow," Xander said. "That was uncalled-for."

"He's not yours anymore," said the giant. "He belongs to us."

"Right," said Xander soberly. "We had a deal, I remember."

"Maybe you forgot." The giant cracked the knuckles of one enormous hand meditatively in the other. His eyes glimmered orange.

"Maybe I think you're wearing mom jeans." Xander shrugged. "Whatever, I want him back. We can do this the easy way, or we can do it--*urk*" The giant had tackled him across the top of the cage; they hit the pavement together and skidded. Wesley rolled inside the cage, twisting his shoulders painfully to try to keep his eyes on them. Xander was on the bottom, punching the giant ineffectually in the back of the head--then the giant was rearing up on his knees, punching back. Wesley heard the crack of bone hitting bone. He jerked frantically at the manacles. When he looked back they'd separated and were finding their feet. Xander looked a little shaky, with

blood running down his chin. The giant looked indomitable.

"I'm thinking," Xander panted, and the giant took a stake from inside his coat and danced it over his fingers. "Okay, hey, hang on now--" He broke off, skipping backward as the giant came at him stake-first. "Fuck, what is your problem?" He kept retreating, dodging stake-blows, until he was backed up against the rubbish bins at the back of the lot. His hands searched frantically in his pockets, and Wesley thought, *Oh my God, he's brought a stake and he hasn't got it out, what a complete and utter idiot--* It occurred to him that he was about to be molested and drained not because Xander Harris had no soul, but because he couldn't plan ahead.

The giant stepped in, his stake raised, and Xander's hand came up, clutching something small that was clearly not a stake. Wesley closed his eyes. He heard a yell--not Xander. The giant was staggering back, his hands clapped over his face. The stake clattered to the ground, and Xander scooped it up, stepped forward, and plunged it into the giant's chest. A puff of dust settled gently to the ground.

Xander brushed off his coat--Wesley's coat--and tucked a

small canister into his pocket. Then he jogged over to Wesley's cage, leaned over, and eased it gently onto its base. Wesley scrambled to follow.

"Hey," said Xander. His face was human, battered and cut, and his real eye was flickering yellow. "I know macing a guy is kind of offside, but you have no idea, and I mean seriously *no idea*, how good that felt."

The sound that Wesley made in his throat was intended to convey how much he really did.

"Okay," Xander said, wiping blood off his chin and flicking it absently to the ground. "Let's see if I can get this thing open before someone comes out here and makes me an offer for you." He paused, giving Wesley a sharp smile. "I figure one rescue, I owe you. Two's pushing it."

Wesley rattled his manacles.

"Uh-huh." Xander was examining the bars closely, testing them with the tip of his tongue protruding from between his lips. "Okay, this looks pretty easy, I think I can bend this and you can just--" He stopped short, raised his head, and stared toward the front of the parking lot. "Oh, shit."

*For the love of God, Wesley thought wearily. What now?*

He'd barely had time to finish thinking it when a black SUV pulled in hard, tires screeching. A Wolfram & Hart car. Xander was already on his feet, in game face, backing away.

He tried to run, but he was cut off from the street. Behind him was nothing but rubbish bins and razor wire. The SUV drove him practically into one of the bins. The doors flipped open and Spike and Angel got out. The cavalry, Wesley realized, sinking down against his chains. Thank God.

"Oh, hey," Xander was saying, backed against the bins with the headlights in his face, trying to smile. Angel glanced over his shoulder, saw Wesley in the cage, and said something to Spike, who looked back too. They both turned on Xander, who raised his hands in surrender or self-defence. "Whoah, no, hang on, this is *not* what it looks like, I mean it's, okay, it's sort of what it looks like, but really it's not--"

Spike punched him in the face, and Xander reeled, then caught his balance and snapped an elbow into Spike's

belly. Spike whoofed, and then there was a moment's pause while Spike and Angel watched Xander expectantly--waiting for the spell to knock him out, Wesley realized. When he didn't drop, they exchanged another look.

"Oh, um, ow!" Xander said, one hand to his forehead. "I, uh, I'm defenseless against you!" Spike punched him again, bullied him back against the bin, and he lunged fruitlessly sideways, then started fighting back in earnest. Angel stepped back and let Spike take it. As soon as it started, Wesley could see it was no contest, and he started yelling, trying to force sound through his raw throat and the wet gag, to tell them to stop. Angel came for him at a near run.

"Wes, Jesus." He was on his knees in front of the cage, fumbling frantically with the bars. "Hang on." The metal parted in his hands, the cage bent, the chains snapped. Wesley was too exhausted to feel more than the faintest embarrassment and relief. He worked the gag down to the sound of Spike kicking the guts out of Xander on the other side of the lot.

"Stop it," he rasped, as soon as he could speak. "Tell Spike to stop."

Angel was pulling him out of the cage, examining his wrists, touching his shoulders and back. "Is anything broken?"

"Tell Spike--"

"Jesus, Wes, what happened?"

"*Angel.*" On his feet for the first time all night, he was woozy. The lot spun around him and he had to lock his knees to keep from falling. The thought of fainting into Angel's arms was beyond horrible. "Xander didn't do this. Or, he didn't--" He gestured faintly to the other side of the lot. "For God's sake, stop him doing that!"

Angel gave him a wary look and took hold of his arm. "Let's get you into the car, okay?"

"Honestly, you have to listen to me--" He didn't have it in him to fight Angel's grip. "Please. Tell him to stop hitting Xander."

"Okay, Wes. I will. But first let's get you in the car." It was so ridiculous and awful--his raw wrists, the twisted cage behind him, the terrible sounds of Spike releasing pent-

up rage and frustration on Xander in the background-- Wesley couldn't help it. He started to laugh.

"Really, please, listen to me--" Laughing, he was bundled into the SUV, which was warm and unbelievably roomy after a night in an iron box. Angel closed the door behind him and he sank down into the leather seat, watching through the tinted window as Angel walked none-too-quickly across the lot to say something to Spike. Who stepped back to listen, inclined his head, glanced back at the SUV, then stepped forward again and kicked Xander once more, hard, in the belly. Xander was folded on the ground by that time, clutching himself.

It wasn't funny anymore. Wesley sat in silence while Angel walked back to the SUV, got into the driver's seat, and looked at him with eyes like burnt holes.

"I'm sorry," he said, his big hands touching the steering wheel lightly, as if it were something he was afraid to damage. "Wes. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," said Wesley, out of habit.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Wesley sat quietly in his chair, looking at the cup of tea on the table in front of him. He was very tired.

"Sorry about that," Angel said, coming into the room and closing the door, sliding his cell phone into his pocket. It was the eleventh time he'd apologized since bringing Wesley back to the office. Wesley had begun to keep count. "It was Pagnol. He thinks he's got something worked out with these people."

"With the cherubim." Wesley studied the curls of steam rising from his cup. The angels seemed a hundred years ago.

"Yeah. He wasn't clear on the specifics, but it sounds like the message got through. They're not out for Xander anymore."

"That's good." It was also ironic, he supposed, given that Xander had just managed to remove the no-harm spell, and may have done any amount of damage during the time he'd been alone.

"Yeah." Angel slid into the chair beside him, looking too big for it, the way he always did with the furniture

outside of his own rooms and offices. Wesley had taken a vacant suite until his own rooms were repaired; he recognized everything he saw in it, but it was all strange and anonymous at the same time. He was very tired.

"He's okay in the basement for now," Angel went on, his fingers folding clumsily over each other on the table between them. "Spike's got him in one of the...cages." Too late, he realized the faux pas, but carried on regardless. "It's a short-term solution. We need to cast the spell on him again."

Wesley nodded. There was a pause.

"You're tired," Angel observed. "I'm gonna go." He stood up, his fingers touching the table lightly. "Is there...can I get you anything?"

Wesley looked up, studied Angel's face with the feeling of studying a well-known work of art--of Classical sculpture, perhaps--then realized he should respond. He shook his head. "No, thank you. I'll be quite all right."

Angel nodded, started to turn away, then turned back. "Listen, Wes. About before. In my...when you came up to my room."

Wesley said nothing.

"It's...complicated," Angel said. "It's...don't take this the wrong way, but it's like...the way family is complicated."

Wesley smiled and looked down at the table. "It's none of my business."

For a moment Angel said nothing. Then he put his hand on Wesley's shoulder. The pressure was gentle but firm. "You're family too, Wes."

*But not like that.* Wesley nodded, preserving the smile. "Thank you for saying so."

Angel lingered a moment longer, then did the only thing he could reasonably do, and left.

## **Part Five**

Wesley took more ibuprofen, adjusted his bandages, and went to bed for ten hours. When he woke up it was dark outside his windows. Los Angeles had begun to flicker back to life; he could see the lights over the main arteries

again, and some of the office towers were back in business. He sat up, groaned, and almost fell right back into the sheets again. His entire body felt bludgeoned.

The water pressure in the shower hadn't come all the way back up, so he stood for a while under the hot trickle, then dragged himself out and studied the damage in the mirror. He was bruised all over--vivid, impressive smears of purple and blue that were raised and tender to the touch. He'd taken more than one knock to the head, and had the marks to show it. He still didn't have a working pair of glasses.

He dressed again in the clothes he'd been wearing, took more ibuprofen, and shuffled down the hall to the elevator. The camera room was up and running; he could see Fred in the server room, Cordelia in the front office, and Spike down in the basement, facing a cage with Xander in it. Angel was nowhere in sight, which meant he was probably in his rooms or out of the building.

For a long while he sat studying the view in the basement. Xander was slumped on the bench in his cage, his knees to his chest, his arms propped on top. Spike was seated in the folding chair outside the bars, smoking. While Wesley watched, he smoked three cigarettes, and

didn't offer Xander any. They only spoke once or twice, as far as Wesley could see. A few words at a time, and Spike seemed to begrudge even that. Xander wore a strange half-smirk, which might have been the look of a man admitting fair punishment for his misdeeds. Or it might have been the effect of the bruises. He was very bruised.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~

There was work to be done, a building to be put back together, and Wesley was grateful for the immense distraction it represented. He went first to the front office, and found Cordelia on her knees on the floor, pawing through piles of paper. She stopped when she saw him.

"Oh my God." She'd been crouching in the wreckage of Harmony's desk, but she stood up automatically, her eyes wide. "'All right,' my ass. You look *awful*."

"Yes, thank you." Stiffly, he walked over and gestured at the wad of papers in her hand. "Can I help?"

"I can't believe I ever dated him." She was still staring at

his face, shaking her head. "And I felt sorry for him because Spike kicked his butt! Well, I can tell you one thing--" She pointed at him with the wad of papers.

"Xander Harris is off my pity list. I don't care how soulless you are, you don't put people in cages, and you don't sell them to pimps. Also, hello, you don't do any of that in a lojacked company car. I mean, how totally stupid--Oh my God, what if Spike and Angel hadn't found you guys in time?" Her horror seemed fresh, as if she hadn't contemplated that possibility before now.

"I was...the situation was under control." He smiled a little tightly, and gestured at the papers again. "May I?"

"What? Oh. Sure." She handed them over. "Angel wrote a bad check to this Maurice Pinole guy, and I can't find the right ones. Harmony had them in her desk." She surveyed the remains of the desk. "The really sad thing is, it probably looked like this before the storm even hit."

Wesley spent the next half hour helping Cordelia search the front lobby for the right checkbook, which turned out to be a more exhausting process than he'd anticipated. By the time Angel walked in with his mobile phone clamped between his ear and shoulder, sorting through a stack of disheveled file folders, Wesley was ready to give

up, cancel the entire book, and start fresh.

"You'll have it by noon," Angel told someone, then hung up the phone and nodded at Wesley. "You doing okay?"

"He looks like *hell*," Cordelia supplied, putting her head up from behind the pile of smashed chairs in the corner. "Your definition of 'okay' is pretty broad, mister."

Angel looked cowed, and gave Wesley another once-over. "Um, maybe you should take it easy for a while, Wes."

"I'm fine," Wesley said, without looking up from the papers he was sorting. "Was that Pagnol?"

"Yeah. He wants money. We have money, right?"

"The bank has money," Wesley confirmed, "which belongs to us. However, we appear to have lost the company checkbook in the storm."

"Remind me not to give that thing to Harmony anymore." Angel looked around the room, kicked a potted plant, and sighed. "Okay, fuck this. Cordy, see if the cleaning company will send someone to take care of

this. Wes, we have cash on hand, yeah?"

Wesley thought. "About ten, twenty thousand. In the vault."

"I'll take it to him. One thing about these mediators, they have powerful friends. I'd like to not piss this guy off."

"How much do you need?" With a wince, Wesley got to his feet. "I have the codes, I can get it out."

"I'll take care of it." Angel was already heading to the elevators. "Get some rest, Wes."

Wesley stood holding his handful of papers, watching Angel disappear around the corner. In her corner, Cordelia flipped open her phone.

"Is it just me?" she asked, mid-dial, "or is he getting bossier?"

Wesley gave the papers in his hand a last glance, then let them fall and walked over them without another look.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

He resented being handled with kid gloves, but he had to admit he needed rest. He also needed to eat. The staff room refrigerator was warm and silent, but he rummaged in the cupboards for some biscuits and a dry soup mix. The kettle worked. He was pouring hot water into the little paper bowl when Spike walked in.

They both stopped short and stared at each other. Spike, Wesley observed, looked awful. His eyes were sunken and his face looked drawn, as if he hadn't eaten in days. He smelled strongly of cigarette smoke.

"Hello," said Wesley. Spike flinched. Then he nodded curtly, as if Wesley had told him some unwelcome but undeniable piece of news. He dropped his gaze and gave Wesley a wide berth on his way to the cutlery drawer.

"How's Xander?" Wesley kept his eyes on the soup as he set the kettle carefully down. There was a pause. Spike opened the drawer and rummaged through it.

"He'll live."

Wesley put the spoon into the soup and pressed one of the little dehydrated bits of...foam rubber, apparently, to

the bottom. "I'm glad to hear it." After a moment's consideration, he added, "It was my fault as much as anyone's."

Spike said nothing. He rattled around in the drawer a bit more, then found whatever he was looking for and banged it closed. Wesley turned--he was holding a small knife and a flexible plastic straw. Off Wesley's look, he shrugged.

"For the bags. It gets messy, otherwise."

"Ah."

Spike flicked the straw with the end of his thumb, glanced at the door, then seemed to resign himself to a few more words of conversation. "Angel find the checkbook?"

"No. He's delivering the payment in cash."

"Good. Sounds like Pagnol's already pissed off enough as it is."

"Indeed." Wesley fingered one of the biscuits from its wrapper, tapped it on the counter, then just stood

holding it. "Spike, I'm sorry I didn't intervene sooner at the...when you and Angel found us. I tried to make you understand--"

Spike's eyes had widened slightly. "Understand what, that Harris was a choirboy? Just happened to drive by and see you locked in a cage?"

"No. He wasn't innocent, but the situation wasn't what it seemed, either."

"Yeah, it was." Spike snorted. "He's got no soul. He's a monster. That's how it seems, and that's how it is."

"Of course."

"Don't kid yourself, Watcher." Spike was watching him closely, Wesley realized. "You think him coming back makes it all right? You think he was just going to turn himself in after that, come quietly back and sit in the basement while we fished the mugwort out to redo that spell?"

"No."

"No, he wasn't. He was going to let you go, maybe, then

skip off and murder fifty people before breakfast."

Wesley said nothing. Spike raised the knife and leveled it at him with a hard look.

"I *know*," he said. "Believe me, I bloody well know what he was going to do."

The biscuit was hard as a rock, and the soup looked awful. Wesley pushed them away and wiped his hands on his trousers.

"Could I come down and see him?" he asked.

Spike stared at him.

"Please," Wesley added.

Spike looked down at the knife in his hand, then shook his head and slipped it into his pocket. "Yeah, all right," he said. His voice was raw. "Why not?"

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

It was bizarre, visiting the basement cages again. Riding

the elevator down, Wesley couldn't help remembering the last time he'd done this, battered and exhausted, with Spike in a wretched fugue state beside him. The last time, Angel had been Angelus and they'd all been afraid for their lives. So why didn't it feel any better this time, when there was no clear or present danger, when Angel was himself and contractors' bills were their biggest concern?

The elevator hit the bottom floor, and the doors slid open. Spike held out one hand in a parody of a gentlemanly gesture. Wesley went first.

Xander was already standing up, leaning against the bars of his cage, as they walked down the hall toward him. His skin glowed almost white under the fluorescent lights. His teeth, when he smiled, looked unusually sharp.

"Hey Wes," he said, with a nod. "How you doing?"

"Fine, thank you. And you?" Wesley tried not to let his gaze linger too long on the bruises on Xander's face and throat, or on the blackened cut running across his forehead. One of Xander's fingers looked wrong, somehow, as if it had been bent out of shape and then halfway repaired. He didn't seem bothered by it. He

nodded at Spike without malice.

"Hey. Thanks."

Spike was cutting a neat hole in a blood bag, then passing it through the bars with a straw already in place. Xander took it carefully, and started drinking. There were already two or three spent bags piled in the corner of his cage, Wesley noticed.

"So," Xander said, around his straw. "What brings you down to the Pit of Despair?"

"I--" Wesley paused. He wasn't entirely sure, himself, why he'd come down, except to show that he didn't hold Xander solely responsible for what had happened. If they didn't blame Angel for what Angelus did, surely they should have some sort of mercy for Xander too. "I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Mm." Xander sucked on the straw, his gaze unswerving. "That's nice. You're a nice guy, Wes."

Wesley said nothing.

"It's funny," Xander went on, stepping back from the bars

and easing carefully, with obvious pain, onto the bench. "I keep thinking, if I hadn't gone back to get you, I'd totally have gotten away. I'd be in Acapulco by now."

"You'd be dead by now," Spike said flatly. "I'd have staked you myself."

"No you wouldn't," Xander said, without even glancing at him. "I'd have ditched the Jeep, borrowed a few sets of credit cards, and I'd be scot free."

"You'd be a murderer," Wesley said. Xander raised the blood bag as if in a toast.

"How do you know I'm not already?" He smiled, showing blood-covered teeth. Wesley didn't smile back.

"Yeah," Spike said bitterly. "He's a real saint, isn't he?"

"Come on in here and say that," said Xander. "I'll bleed all over your party shoes."

"We'll have to recast the spell," Wesley said, with a sickening sense of deja vu. "I'll start gathering the ingredients tomorrow."

"I'll just get it taken off again." Xander chewed on the straw, studying them both with a sober expression. "I mean, you can't really think I'm going to just lie around sucking Spike's dick for the next hundred years--"

"I'll let you know when I have what we need," Wesley said, turning quickly away. Spike's face, he noticed, was taut and frozen.

"It's creepy," Xander went on, in a conversational tone. "He doesn't even want me, he wants some angst-ridden, witch-loving, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing manboy. He's all-- look at him, he's practically wearing a mourning veil. *Jesus Christ.*"

"Shut up," Spike said, in a low voice.

"For fuck's sake, Spike, get over it already. I *died*, okay? You guys screwed up and I got killed, and hey, I'm sorry I'm not the lovable Zeppo I used to be, but there's no going back. What you see is what you get. Asshole."

Wesley quickened his pace, feeling very strongly that it had been a mistake to come down here in the first place. He'd somehow forgotten that abusing Spike was Xander's favorite pastime. And of course Xander was right--there

was no going back for any of them--but there was no pleasure in hearing him say it.

Spike said something too low to make out, and Xander barked a coarse laugh, and Wesley finally reached the elevators and hit the button to ascend. With a small part of his mind, he noticed that the button felt warm.

Then the doors split open in front of him, spilling out a silent white sun that knocked him back against the wall. He hit it with a soundless *whuff* and slid to the floor. There was no pain.

Vaguely, he saw the angel step over him and carry on down the hall toward the cages. Everything was silent. From the floor, he saw the raised arm, the finger pointing. At the same time, the angel turned one face back to smile at him. He felt warm and light, as if he were levitating inches above the floor on a cushion of air. The sound of Spike's voice, yelling, seemed unimportant. Xander, crying and choking, didn't bother him at all.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

For the first time in a very long time, Wesley woke up

feeling well-rested and happy. He was somewhere dim and warm--still fogged by sleep, he wasn't sure where. The uncertainty didn't bother him. He slipped easily back down into sleep.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Someone was shaking him. He woke up all at once, sitting up, reaching for his glasses and not finding them. He was, he realized, propped against the wall in the basement of Wolfram & Hart, in front of the elevators. Cordelia was crouched beside him, watching him anxiously.

"Wesley?" She patted his shoulder, the way she patted the computer when she was trying to coax it into doing a better search. "Are you okay?"

He remembered the angel, and scrambled to his feet. "There was--where's Xander?"

"An angel," she filled in for him, standing up and following him down the hall. "I know, I had to take the service elevator down here. Fred's freaking out--it blew half the fuses she just fixed."

"Where's Xander?" He was remembering the yelling now--Spike and Xander both, back in the cages. The angel, raising its hand and pointing. "I thought Pagnol said--"

"So did I. All I know is, it came back and did something down here, and I'm guessing it wasn't a little light cleaning. Although you actually look a lot better."

Wesley barely heard her. He was preoccupied with what he was seeing in the cage room: the door to Xander's cage standing open, Spike crouched inside over a collapsed body. Xander. Not dusted, not...smitten. But something, clearly, was wrong.

"What is it?" Wesley asked, stopping short at the open cage door, superstitiously unable to make himself step inside. Spike eased back onto his heels. Xander lay on his back with his arms outflung, his eyes closed, his face peaceful. Not breathing, but not ash. "What happened?"

Spike looked back over his shoulder, and seemed to notice them for the first time. "Bloody angel," he said. Then, more thoughtfully: "Not a fucking clue."

## Part Six

Xander didn't wake up, not even when Spike slapped him. He seemed to be in a deep sleep, or possibly a coma. Spike pulled up the eyelid of his good eye, and found it brown and gold at intervals, the pupil unresponsive. The skin of his face seemed strangely mobile, as if game face were trying to emerge but not quite managing to do so.

They carried him upstairs, all four of them jammed into the creaking service elevator. Spike and Xander smelled of ozone. Wesley felt strangely fearless, almost giddy. He told himself it was shock, but it felt more like happiness. There was no reason for it--under the circumstances, it was practically offensive. Helping Spike lug Xander's body through the dim hallways, he had to stop himself from whistling.

"I called Angel," Cordelia said--she was the only one with any sense, Wesley realized. He felt half-drunk, and Spike

seemed dumbstruck. "He said he's tied up right now, but he'll be back as soon as he can."

"Tied up?" Wesley shifted his grip on Xander's arm with a frown. "I thought he was going to pay Pagnol."

"He was. Apparently Pagnol tied him up."

Wesley tried to make his laugh sound like a cough. Spike gave him a strange look.

"I can take him," he said, shifting more of Xander's weight into his own hands. Wesley shook his head.

"I'll help. We're taking him to your room, yes?"

"Which means I'm not coming," Cordelia said, stepping back abruptly. "I have *no* desire to see the West Elm dungeon, thank you."

"I've got him," Spike said again, ignoring her and trying to take Xander across his shoulder. Wesley shook his head.

"The angel could come back--you shouldn't be alone." The thought of the angel filled him with a strange mixture of fear and delight. Part of him hoped it would

come back, and knock him out of himself again. "I'll come with you."

Cordelia gave them a terse, *enjoy yourselves* smile, then started back down the hallway to the stairs. "I'll see if I can get the power to come back on *for the millionth time this week.*"

Wesley and Spike stumbled down the hall with Xander slung between them like a drunkard. Outside Spike's door, they paused.

"I don't mind," Wesley said, meaning that whatever he was about to see, he wouldn't be shocked. He'd understand. Xander was a vampire, he didn't have a soul. Spike was doing the best he could.

"'s not that," Spike said, rooting in his pockets with his free hand. "Can't find my keys."

Wesley ended up taking Xander's full weight while Spike fished a hundred oddities from his pockets--string, guitar picks, an eraser, a suspicious-looking ball of foil, three packets of rolling papers, an intact fortune cookie still in its plastic wrapper. Finally he produced a single key, absent a keyring.

"What did it do to him, exactly?" Wesley asked, watching Spike fit the key into the lock. He had the feeling that he wasn't firing on all cylinders yet. All his responses felt delayed and unreliable.

"Don't know." Spike kicked the door open, dropped the key back into his pocket, and turned back to help haul Xander inside. "Pointed at him. Then he went spastic, and next thing I knew he was out cold."

"But he isn't injured." Preoccupied with the problem, Wesley nonetheless noticed that he was stepping over a broken flat-screen television monitor and then a length of heavy chain, coiled on itself like a snake, the final link twisted and snapped in half. The rooms had been spared the worst of the winds--their windows were still intact--but clearly there had been some other kind of turmoil. Clothes and bed linens were strewn across the floor. There was an alcoholic stink in the air, which seemed odd until Wesley noticed the mound of glass shards on the opposite side of the room, as if the entire contents of the bar had been systematically smashed. There was blood on the carpet, a foot-long gouge torn in the wall. The door to the bathroom hung on one hinge.

"Just put him here," Spike said, and Wesley realized they were carrying Xander to the long sofa in the middle of the room. Something savage had happened to its top--it was hemorrhaging white stuffing through a series of ragged tears. Spike kicked an empty glass off the cushions and together they lowered Xander onto it. They stood back to look at him, sprawled limp and white, dead to the world. After a moment Spike pursed his lips, patted his pockets automatically for his cigarettes and, while glancing around the room, muttered, "He's bloody well cleaning all this up."

Wesley spent a moment trying to imagine the scene that had left the room in this condition, then gave up and walked away to look out the tinted window. Los Angeles was getting back on its feet, by slow degrees. He studied the few streetlights flickering off and on through the downtown core, the blinking tail lights of the cars moving carefully through the streets. It filled him with a sense of quiet euphoria, a spontaneous compassionate love for the world and all of humanity.

"Do you think they'll come back?" he asked quietly, without turning around. He could still feel the warmth of the angels' touch in his bones.

Spike said nothing. When Wesley turned around, he saw that Spike was sitting on the edge of the sofa, beside Xander's outflung arm. He had one hand on Xander's face, pulling up his eyelid to study the eye. He'd raised his head, though, to look at Wesley. His expression was thoughtful.

"You liked it," he said, not accusingly but in a tone of gradual comprehension. "Whatever they did to him--it felt good to you."

Wesley felt a strange mixture of shameful defiance, as if he were being called to account for some secret perversion. "Yes."

"Hm." Spike considered him a moment longer, then went back to Xander. "You look better. He looks worse. And what the hell does that add up to?"

"I could start researching," Wesley offered, feeling that it was a vague and empty gesture. Spike snorted. Then he put his hand experimentally over Xander's forehead, the palm down. He frowned.

"Feel this."

As if in a dream, Wesley drifted forward. Xander's forward was cool and smooth--then, without warning, it felt warm, and seemed to pulse against Wesley's hand. He drew back, sickened.

"That's disgusting."

Spike gave him an odd, sidelong look, then reached out and pulled Xander's lip up to expose his front teeth. They were normal, blunt and white--and then the canines seemed to grow and sharpen. A moment later they'd retracted.

"What are you doing?" Spike murmured, apparently to Xander himself. Xander made no reply.

"I wonder," said Wesley, backing away until his spine met the wall beside the window, "if they might have...if it might be a way of restoring him?"

The look Spike gave him was so immediate, so taut, that it was clear he'd already thought of this.

"It seems possible," Wesley murmured, feeling his eyelids grow heavy and his knees soften. Without meaning to, he'd begun to sink to the floor. "He was a

good man for a long time, not like Angel--perhaps a reprieve--"

"What are you talking about?" Spike's voice was loud and sharp; he sounded as if he were much closer than he was. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," said Wesley. "I'm fine." He felt wonderfully calm, light, warm. There was white light behind his eyelids, a feeling of home.

"You're snoring," said Spike.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

Sometime later, he woke up in the same spot he'd fallen asleep in, propped against the baseboard of Spike's room. A blanket had been laid across his legs. The room was dim now, almost dark--the only light came from the overhead spot by the front door. Most of the other lamps, Wesley realized, had been broken. The haze of alcohol hung like a bitter perfume in the air.

Wesley blinked, assessed the status of his limbs--warm and painless, not stiff at all--then looked over at the sofa.

Spike had fallen asleep in the armchair, his hands laid neatly one on each arm, his chin sunk onto his chest. He looked like a man who'd just been electrocuted. Xander lay on the sofa, on his side now, his back pushed to the ripped back cushions. His eyes were open. He was looking at Wesley, both eyes brown and still. In a moment, Wesley realized the truth of it--the angels had cast the demon out.

"Welcome back," he said--his mouth was dry and the words came out in a whisper. Xander started, and his eyes fixed on Wesley as if he'd just seen him sitting there. Wesley smiled, and after a moment Xander smiled cautiously back.

Then his face froze, as if he'd just seen something terrible over Wesley's shoulder. There wasn't even time to ask him what was wrong before his left eye flickered to gold, and the ridges appeared on his forehead. His hand flew up to touch them. He made a short, guttural sound in his throat, and Spike's head snapped up automatically.

"What--"

Xander's face was human again, and horrified, his eyes flicking to each of them in turn. His fingers pushed hard

against the skin of his forehead, as if he were trying to push an evil thought back inside.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

There was no reprieve, but neither was there total collapse. Wesley was given healing and sleep--for the next few days he fell asleep easily, gratefully, and at unpredictable intervals until he'd finally shed some bone-deep weariness he hadn't even realized he'd been carrying. By the time the episodes stopped and the memory of the warm white light behind his eyes had faded, he felt like a new man. Younger, calmer, happier. That was what the angels gave him, casually and in passing, like a coin tossed to a peasant--they gave him back some measure of himself.

To Xander, they gave exactly one half of his soul.

Not all of it, according to the psychics Angel brought in, one after another, to confirm what Marcel Pagnol had already told them. Half of it. Enough to sit like a grain of sand under the demon's tongue, chafing and burning. Enough that he'd spend the rest of his life both horrified by his evil acts and repulsed by his good intentions. But

over time, Pagnol told them, with a shrug, he could earn the rest back, as certain other nightbreed had done. Look at it in the right way, and it was a gift. He told them this with the satisfaction of a professional who'd done his job well, safe in the knowledge that if Angel cut off his head there'd be a century of storms in the heart of L.A.

Looking at Xander over the weeks that followed, it was hard to see the half-soul as a gift. He spent the first days locked in the room he shared with Spike, from which Spike only rarely emerged.

"How is he?" Angel asked every time he crossed paths with Spike.

"How're your hands?" Spike shot back. Pagnol had had Angel chained to a crucifix by his wrists for seven hours-- a lesson in financial management. His hands had been burnt black almost to his elbows by the time Pagnol's men had cut him down and sent him back to the office, relieved of his payment in cash.

Wesley went back to work. The building was in ruins, the business in disarray. He spent six hours recovering billing records from the crippled server, under Fred's direction, then another four listening to Cordelia detail the damage

that the storm had done to the boutiques and salons of L.A., while they sorted through a mountain of half-destroyed confidential client records. He may have slept through some of that part.

Within a few days, the whole thing had begun to feel like a kind of dream. The office operated at half speed, muted and subdued. Angel was healing in his rooms, Spike and Xander were never around. In moments of abstraction, Wesley found himself doubting his own memories--had he really been in a cage? Had there really been angels in the library? It seemed impossible--surely if it were true, there'd be some kind of follow-up, not this sense of desertion and inertia.

It was both a surprise and a relief, then to walk into his room one evening, put down the armload of folders he was carrying, and notice Xander sitting silently in the armchair beside the window. He was in a white shirt and dark jeans, his hair black and messy, his face leaner and more sober than Wesley remembered.

"Hello," said Wesley.

"Hi," said Xander.

They gave each other faint half-smiles, and then Wesley didn't know what to do or say. He'd been planning to eat something quickly, shower, and go to bed. Lately his dreams had been good.

"Spike let me in," Xander said irrelevantly, then added, with a bit more anxiety in his tone, "I hope that's okay."

"Of course."

Xander nodded, and folded his hands together on his knees, in a deliberately casual gesture. "I wanted to apologize."

Wesley felt his smile turn rueful, but he didn't reply. He'd accepted so many apologies from Angel that one more felt superfluous, even meaningless. "How do you feel?" he asked.

Xander's face tightened. "Like total shit," he said, and gave an abrupt, barking laugh. "Sorry."

Wesley pretended not to notice. "Pagnol said you can...earn back the rest of it."

Xander smiled bitterly at his hands. "Yeah. Right."

"You don't think that's possible?"

"I think every time I slip up I'm going to go deeper into the hole. And it's a pretty deep hole." Xander shrugged. "But it's not like I don't deserve it."

Wesley, as familiar with self-recrimination as he was with apology, said nothing. He went to the galley kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Will you join me for a beer?"

Xander laughed again, more quietly, then said, "Sure."

They drank in near-silence, looking out over the city's lights.

"I really did come back to save you," Xander said at one point. "I wasn't going to leave you with those guys."

"I think," Wesley said slowly, "that we can safely consider that topic of conversation closed."

By the time Xander drained his bottle and got up to leave, the quiet in the room felt distinctly gentler, Wesley thought. He was surprised to find that he felt no ill will toward Xander--the days of sleep must have washed it

out of him. He wanted to let the whole episode go and carry on. There were so many things to do.

Setting his own bottle aside half-finished, he got up to walk Xander to the door. "I appreciate your coming by," he said, and then, trying to convey some of how he felt-- the importance of moving forward, not looking back-- "What will you do now?"

Xander hesitated, his thumb rising up to rub his lower lip. "I'm thinking...I was hired to be an assistant. So I guess I'm going to assist."

Wesley waited.

"I think I'm going to be hired help for a while," Xander clarified. "You know. Cannon fodder." He flashed a smile. "I'm good at that."

"I'd think you might consider looking for something a bit safer."

"Wesley." Xander gave him a steady look. "I was in the *library*. It gets no safer."

Wesley acknowledged that in silence. He watched

Xander reach for the doorknob, then asked, on impulse, "What about Spike?"

Xander's expression turned troubled. "I think that's...I think I have some damage control to do there. Or not."

Wesley considered the wisdom of holding his peace, then said, "He stood by you."

"He yanked me around on a length of chain. But again, it's not like I didn't deserve it." Xander opened the door and paused. "I think I still do, sometimes." He looked at Wesley, and his right eye flickered gold, then brown.

Wesley didn't look away. He put out his hand, and after looking at it in apparent confusion, Xander shook it. His palm was cool and dry. He left, and Wesley closed the door and went to bed.

## **Part Seven**

Six months later, Wesley reflected that on the whole, the episode had probably turned out to be a strangely good thing. Angel had healed, the building had been restored, reinforced, made stronger than before. Wesley himself felt calmer, as if something in him had been smoothed over, leaving him less porous, more centered. He didn't feel a sting when Angel passed him without a look, or as much of a thrill when they walked together down a hall. He felt as loyal and fond, in some ways as passionate, as ever--but it was as if some ragged inner space in himself had been filled in, and he no longer felt the pain of its absence.

Spike and Xander, too, seemed changed. Xander was raw-edged, volatile, at times self-hating, at times furious with everyone but himself. He contacted Willow and Buffy, drove to Sunnydale to see them, came back and locked himself in his rooms for three days and never mentioned it again. He took out his anger on demons and vampires, until Angel began to rely on him as a heavy hitter, part of the front line like Spike and Angel himself. He wasn't as strong, and the false eye caused him some problems, but he had a frightening reserve of rage and an insensibility to injury that let him pummel creatures twice his size.

Spike kept an eye on him, from a greater distance than before. They didn't share rooms anymore--sometime after his visit to Wesley's apartment, Xander had quietly moved into his own suite on another floor of the building. Spike seemed unaffected. He supervised Xander with the same short-tempered, eye-rolling attention as before. The difference now was that Xander didn't shout or threaten--when Spike told him to do something, to pick up his abandoned blood bags or get out of the way of the crossbow, he did it right away, with no argument. The two of them still moved closely together, Xander taking his cues from Spike, each always aware of the other's whereabouts, but they didn't touch. As much as it was a relief not to hear Xander hurl bitter, ugly, deeply personal insults at Spike, Wesley felt a sense of hollowness, even sadness, that he assumed would fade over time, as he got used to their new realities.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

He was crouched behind the overturned bed frame, frantically reloading the crossbow, when someone yelled that the building was on fire. He cursed--fire was the last thing they needed. Angel had already been shot in the back ("I'm fine," he'd insisted, staggering to his feet. "It's

just been a while.") and Fred had very nearly been brained with a pry bar by a panicking vampire punter. Clearing out the brothels had turned out to be a more laborious and time-consuming task than they'd anticipated.

But it was worth it, Wesley thought, sneaking a look over the top of the frame and pegging a fleeing vampire neatly through the open door. Every punter he ashed felt like another chip struck from an immense, vile monolith. It might be petty, to feel such personal satisfaction, but if so he'd take the remorse later. For now he was just trying to work as quickly as possible.

He smelled smoke, considered the window, remembered the sheer drop to the parking lot pavement, and made for the door. Halfway out, he ran forcibly into someone running in. The air was hazy now, and his eyes had begun to sting and water. He got a stake up, and felt his wrist seized in a hard grip.

"It's me, Wes." Xander was in game face, blood on his mouth, his eyes mismatched and glowing. He looked wild, disheveled, delighted. With a kind of rough fondness, he shook Wesley's wrist and snatched the stake from him.

"Behind you," Wesley gasped, and without a pause Xander turned and punched the stake into the throat of the approaching vamp, then slammed him into the wall and tore into the wound with his teeth. Wesley, choking and coughing, felt cold blood spatter his arm. He backed away and started down the hall, only to be grabbed again, this time by Spike.

"Where's--" Wesley pointed back with his thumb and kept moving as soon as Spike released him. In a minute he was stumbling down the stairs, through piles of ash and a wall of smoke, then veering left toward the side door as he realized the fire was in the kitchen. Someone stumbled past, on fire and screaming--no one he knew. He kept moving, through the heat and flying cinders, then out the demolished door and into the cool night air, where he took in great whooping gasps and spat out a mouthful of ash.

Angel appeared, grabbed him one more time, and walked him to the far end of the parking lot, where Cordelia and Fred were waiting with pale, dirty faces and watering eyes.

"You okay?" Angel asked, his eyes on Wesley's face.

Wesley nodded, wiping his mouth. Angel looked fine, if you ignored the blood dripping from the back hem of his coat.

"That was not our finest hour," Cordelia observed, sniffing her sleeve. "And if I never smell a burning grease trap again, that'll be just fine."

"Where are Spike and Xander?" Fred asked, her eyes on the building. Wesley turned back--they all did. The brothel was fully alight now, its windows shattering, flames streaming out.

"We have to go," Angel observed, even as Wesley had the same thought. Being found at the scene of a barroom arson would be a headache, to say the least.

"They were inside," Wesley said, grimacing at the sting of smoke in his throat. "Upstairs--I saw them."

There was a moment of silence, while they all watched the brothel burn. Angel's expression changed from taut to uncertain.

"I'm sure they're all right," Fred started to say, just as Angel took a step back toward the building, his brows

knitting. He stopped as the broken, smoking door opened and two figures ran out, half-crouching, stumbling, clinging to each other for support. Xander in front, Spike behind, the tails of his duster actually alight. They staggered around the lot beating at each other with the flats of their hands and convulsing with what Wesley took at first for asphyxia but then recognized as laughter.

"Those idiots," Cordelia said, in a tone of derisive relief.

Angel gave a sort of combined grunt and groan, and let his hand fall back onto Wesley's shoulder. "You okay to drive?" Wesley nodded. "You take them back in the Rover. I'll take Cordy and Fred."

"I want a shower," Cordelia said, already walking away toward the cars. "I want a shower that lasts for a *week*."

Fred lingered a moment, smiling apologetically, to say, "Drive safely, okay?" She'd been solicitous lately. It was her way of showing that all was not forgotten between them, he assumed--or perhaps it was an attempt to open that door one more time. Either way, he supposed he appreciated it. He gave her a weary, watery smile.

"Keep an eye on Angel," he replied. "He's been shot."

She nodded and hurried off, leaving him to stand and wait while Spike and Xander slowly stood upright and heeled their hands into their eyes and shook their heads, spitting dust and ash onto the sizzling pavement. He waited as long as he could, then, when he was afraid they weren't going to sober up before they started hearing sirens, he began walking back toward them.

At almost the same time, Xander turned and caught Spike around the neck with one hand, pulled him in, and kissed him. Spike didn't resist or hesitate. They pressed together, Xander's hand cupping the back of Spike's head, Spike's hands finding Xander's ass, kissing desperately while behind them the flames broke the building down and a fountain of sparks shot into the air.

Wesley stopped where he was, and looked politely away. He felt a small familiar ache, but it was duller than it once had been, and less important than the silly, inexplicable, angelic warmth that he felt as well. By the time Xander and Spike broke apart and came over--Xander grinning, Spike swaggering--Wesley knew he had a small, ridiculous smile on his face.

"Thanks for waiting," Xander said, as the faint sound of

sirens ribboned through the night.

"Not at all," said Wesley, and led the way to the car.

**The End**